From Nightmares to Dreams

by spankingfemme

Summary

It's been several years since the Guardians defeated Pitch, but they are bound to cross paths again, and when they do, the Guardians have decided that things between them have to change. As with pretty much all of my fics, this contains nonconsensual spanking of an adult, so consider yourself warned!

Notes

This lovely fic is a co-written piece by myself and the lovely WindChimeGhost! I'm writing for Pitch, Sandy, and Bunnymund where she is writing for North, Jack, and Toothinia.

Edit: I just found out the awesomeness of Archive allowing you to add art into your fics! Sweet! So, I'm planning to add in a few here and there to go with the fic for fun sake, so maybe something to look forward to? =D
Alone

Chapter one

Alone

The terrifying neigh of one of his fearlings echoed across the cavernous expanse as Pitch ducked to hide in one of the many shadows his lair afforded. How did this happen? He was, and had been, being hunted by his own essence since his defeat at the hands of the Guardians. After taking a hold of Sandy’s dreamsand and manipulating it to create these nightmares to be his personal army; they had so readily turned on him!

After his downfall, they had feasted on his personal torment of failure and continued to do so. There was still so much fear here deep within him that Pitch just couldn’t shut out, and he hated himself for this most. They kept him here... running... constantly lurking and hiding. If he were mortal, his heart would have given out some time ago. But as it was, these creatures only seemed to give him peace long enough to give him a false sense of security before reemerging to send him into a whole new wave of panic and terror... after all, they fed off of fear, and as it was, his was quite palpable and readily available.

How long had he been down here running from his own fears? It wasn’t fair! This was HIS domain! Why should he have to wallow in these feelings? He should be immune to them, but the truth was that there was so much more to fear than there was to hope for wasn’t there? He knew the true horrors that went bump in the night, the fears that kept man and child awake. There was so much to be afraid of, and wasn’t fear important? After all, fear was instinctual, it kept many alive. But of course the Guardians never saw his use in the world. How could they when they were so convinced that he needed to be extinguished! Such arrogance! His failure had spurned his already burning hatred of the Man in the Moon and his champions, the Guardians, but even this faded over time as the years melted into one another.

Anger had turned to despair over time as Pitch felt himself giving in to the idea that this would be his existence for the remainder of eternity, or at least until the world moved on and no longer needed any of them. Would he fade away then? Would his torment finally end like this as he just ceased to be? His heart ached at the thought as his loneliness surged to a new high and a single tear receded down his cheek. Dealing with the fear he could stand, but the isolation tore at his soul in a way that only seemed to amplify over time.

A light illuminated in the distance, and Pitch’s brow furrowed. Was it a trick? He cautiously moved towards it trying to keep his anxiety in check that this was in fact just another terrible nightmare waiting to dash any strand of hope he may have. His heart quickened as he drew near, and snorts of recognition resonated off the walls. The nightmares could sense him acutely now, and it would not be long before they were upon him he knew.

But the light; the light had not vanished as he had expected it to. No, straight above, the night sky could be seen passing through the cracked boards of the entrance to his lair. It has to be a trick! His mind screamed at him that he was a fool for even contemplating the notion. After all, this entrance had been sealed under compacted dirt so long ago that Pitch had almost forgotten what it had looked like. The light did not fade away as he had anticipated though, and the starlight above seemed to shine an ever brighter hue beckoning him.
Pitch clamored to the top, his powers had been severely diminished since his last bout, and his weakness in this manner was not lost on him as he gritted his teeth with the effort. He half predicted that he would just be grabbed by the nightmares currently hunting him as soon as he touched the surface, to steal this small victory from him and squash his spirit that much more, but to his amazement instead the ground rumbled sinking in on itself and pulling the broken remains of the wooden bedframe into the depths to return to a smooth patch of dirt as if the hole was never there to begin with.

His eyes darted around as Pitch backed away from the anomaly he was experiencing. Was this some new level of cruelty to think he could have finally escaped that nightmare? He backed away quickly hiding holding his breath as he listened. He could hear his own heartbeat pounding in his ears, but nothing happened.

He stayed that way for long minutes just waiting… still, nothing. When he finally felt he had the nerve, he moved from shadow to shadow gliding through the trees to a hilltop where the night sky illuminated its beauty. He stared now at the moon a look of puzzlement crossing his features as he shouted, “Why? Why now? Do you think this makes anything different? You’re wrong! Nothing has changed! Do you hear me! Nothing!” Pitch raged, but what he said was a lie, he had changed. Expelling many of the fearlings from him had weakened him yes, but it had also given him a newfound clarity. Suddenly his thoughts were more his own now, his anger had dulled somewhat, and what he felt more than anything was confusion and at a loss for the purpose of all this. Was the man in the moon showing him pity? The thought revolted Pitch, the last thing he ever wanted was ‘his’ pity! He got no response though, and after a time, Pitch wandered away lost in his thoughts. What was he supposed to do now?

Time passed, Pitch wandered the Earth at first avoiding the Guardians at all cost and trying to regain a bit of the previous power he held by what he saw to be parlor tricks to scare children by elongating and changing the shapes of shadows in children’s bedrooms. This elicited a few screams of terror, but the swell of power he gained from this was most often quelled as quickly as it came by a caring parent that came to comfort the fear away and encourage the child into believing his hold was not real. This of course only enraged Pitch, but it was nothing he wasn’t already used to, and so he moved on.

Pitch’s seclusion was only matched by his curiosity as he would see the Guardians like
Toothinia and Sandy going about their routines, and his fear of them subsided slightly as he now took time to watch them from afar. He often told himself that they bored him, and he was only studying them to find any weaknesses he might later exploit, but the truth of the matter was that all Pitch really had was time. And time had a way of distorting the way you thought, and without much of anything better to do, it was as good a task as any to spend his nights. At least they were like him even if they couldn’t stand each other, there was some level of relatability there.

So it was that Pitch watched Jack Frost now bounding about spreading layers of frost across the houses he flitted past and pausing here and there to lay his fingertips into intricate designs on window panes, a signature pleasure it seemed for Jack. Pitch merely frowned of course remembering that of all the Guardians, Jack was the one that he had underestimated. It was this little imp that had given the little boy, Jaimie the power to stand up to him, (who was now a grandfather spreading the sickening tale of his defeat and bolstering the belief in the Guardians to his eight grandchildren much to Pitch’s disdain.)

Shaking this distasteful memory from his thoughts, Pitch returned his gaze to the sky to find Frost, but the boy had seemingly vanished. His eyes scanned the streets now realizing he’d lost sight of him. Pitch was about to focus his efforts elsewhere, after all, there was much better things to do with his night than follow that miscreant around. A cold chill ran up Pitch’s spine as a voice cleared behind him, and he stiffly turned around to see Jack staring coolly at him.

Pitch cringed momentarily at the realization of finally being caught after all this time following the Guardians and what that would mean for him, but then, this was Jack, and Pitch was confident that he could outmaneuver him by himself. He would just have to go in hiding for a time until his sighting had blown over. Regaining his composure, Pitch rose to his full height narrowing his eyes at the boy, “If it isn’t the neutral party. I see that you’ve become quite chummy with the others. Did they give you an honorary title to become their little toady?”

“Maybe,” Jack shrugged nonchalantly. “Although, I really don’t see that it’s any of your business, especially since you aren’t even supposed to be here. Why are you here? I thought we imprisoned you underground years ago. Coming out to cause more trouble?”

Pitch balled his fists at his sides his eyes darkened with his anger. Cause more trouble? The audacity of Jack Frost of all people to accuse him of such! Pitch grit his teeth and seethed, “Not supposed to be here! Why… and what makes you think that you are? Any of you for that matter!? I have just as much right as you do…” Pitch trailed off relaxing in both posture and tone, “I wouldn’t worry about me; I have been out of that hole in the ground for quite some time, and try as you might, I’m never going back.” Pitch’s scowl returned to his face as he turned away from Jack. He wished that he’d had enough power to just disappear or even better to summon a scythe blade to cut the half-pint in two, but in his current weakened state briskly walking away was the extent of his defiance as he spat, “Consider this the last you’ll see of me.”

Before Pitch got far, the crook of Jack’s staff hooked onto his shoulder, jerking him back and spinning him around to face the winter trickster.

“Not so fast.” said Jack. “You know, I almost pity you… almost. First of all, we're Guardians. That gives us every right to be here. We protect children from threats like you, in case you’ve forgotten. Secondly, I have every reason to worry about you--we all do--seeing how our last encounter went. You’ve been out of your hole for a long time? I… don't like the sound of that.” Jack tapped the bottom of his staff on the ground, causing a frosty coating to cover the area between his and Pitch's feet. "Actually, I think North would like to hear about this."

Pitch’s eyes widened as he was snagged and spun about like a ragdoll, the sheet of ice Jack
had created beneath their feet made Pitch struggle to keep his footing as he was swiftly slid into close proximity of the boy once more. Once his situation fully registered, Pitch narrowed his eyes summoning all the power he could muster to spew out a blast of inky darkness between the two as he stated matter-of-factly, “I think not!”

As the darkness spread out in all directions to cover a 30 foot radius, Pitch scrambled to make it to the wood line and slip into the shadows. If he could make it to the multitude of shadows there, he could disappear from Jack’s sight easily as hiding in shadows was still a definite skill set for Pitch. Unfortunately, between Jack’s staff hooked around his shoulder and the sheet of ice, it slowed him considerably. Pitch slipped and slid in a comical fashion across the slippery surface feeling quite ridiculous as the shadowy substance he’d emitted began to fade, and he’d only made it about 20 feet away. He cringed at the thought of how he must look to the Guardian. If the boy hadn’t known he’d lost most of his powers before, he would surely know now.

Jack quickly raised his arms to shield himself from whatever attack Pitch had in mind, but lowered them again when he saw the black shadows fizzle out like a dud firecracker. An amused smile formed on his lips as he watched the nightmare king slip and slide on the ice in front of him, a few of his brief positions being quite undignified. Finally Pitch could no longer control his feet. Both of them gave out from under him at the same exact time and he sat down hard on the ground.

Jack winced. "Ooo, that's going to smart in the morning." he mumbled to himself. Unhooking his staff from Pitch's shoulder, Jack leaned against it and placed a hand in front of his mouth to stifle a giggle as he watched Pitch attempt to get up.

"What was that all about?" Jack said with a faint hint of a laugh. "Aw, did poor Pitch hurt himself?" the boy smiled down at the dark man. "Wow! Years of being confined must have taken a lot out of you."

Pitch jerked angrily as he clamored to his feet still shaking with the effort to remain upright. He growled, “Of course my struggles would be your amusement!” A slight pout crossed his features as he momentarily felt sorry for himself. He supposed he knew this day would come, but he’d hoped to not look so ridiculous when it came about. As it was, this display was shameful, and he sighed in defeat rubbing at his temples, “You couldn’t possibly begin to know what I’ve faced. No matter.” He turned a congenial smile on Jack now as he clasped his hands together, “It has been many years by your own admission, as it is, I’ve stayed out of you and your fellow Guardians’ way, so how’s about you return the favor,” he lost his smile now as his face took on a brooding seriousness, “…and leave me be. Only ill will come otherwise, so I suggest you not raise my ire.”

Jack studied Pitch for several minutes, weighing his decision. Letting him go seemed like a stupid thing to do. After all, he had proven dangerously powerful the last time they faced him and came close to ending all of them. It had been a very close call—a little too close. In the midst of it, Jack had discovered secrets about himself that he never knew and unlocked powers he never knew he had. But Pitch had grown beyond even them, and it had taken more than Jack’s power to stop him.

A look of seriousness washed over Jack’s face as he remembered back on it all. The fact that Pitch had come out into the real world again was enough to send up signal flares in the young boy’s brain. But… then again, Pitch seemed to have lost most of, if not all of his power. The lord of nightmares was helpless, unable to do any real harm. It almost seemed cruel to imprison him again, especially since he hadn’t done anything threatening. What was the harm of just letting him wander?

One of Tooth’s little fairies, appearing to materialize out of nowhere, quickly flew up and hovered next to Jack’s head, bringing the boy out of his thoughts. The little baby tooth squeaked
something in his ear and he nodded in reply. The hummingbird fairy turned and suddenly let out a piercing squeal when she finally saw Pitch standing before them. She darted behind Jack and poked her head up over his shoulder.

“Yes, I know,” Jack said with a sigh. “There’s no need to worry, though. He has no power.” Jack said to the fairy.

The fairy squawked in protest, however.

“Of course I’m sure.” Jack replied. “He tried using his powers just a few minutes ago and failed.”

Baby Tooth moved up to just a little past Jack’s shoulder and nervously twitched as her tiny eyes studied the dark form before her.

Jack turned his attention back to Pitch. “Okay, Pitch. I’ll let you go, just this once.” he pointed a warning finger at the nightmare king. “But I’ll be keeping a close watch on you. If you so much as step out of line, we’ll be coming after you. So I suggest that you think hard about that dark hole you crawled out of every time you get the urge to spread your fear around, because if you ever give us a reason to come after you we’ll put you back there.”

Pitch had grown wary that Jack was not in fact going to let him go, and in his current state, the boy may have actually been able to prevent him. When the squawking fairy came to interfere, Pitch grew rigid that Toothina would soon show, and then there would be two of them against just him. But Jack’s words lifted his spirits as the only words he really heard was that he was letting him go.

Pitch let out a laugh of triumph his toothy grin spreading fully across his face as he exclaimed in his exuberance, “Of course not! You can trust you’ll never see me again…” He backed away off the ice, and once he had a sure foothold into the snow, Pitch quickly backed into the nearest shadow as his mirth and confidence grew. He let out a soft chuckle as he became one with the shadows disappearing from sight, “Yes, you’ll never see me coming.”

Jack watched as Pitch vanished seamlessly into the darkness shaking his head, “Come on Baby Tooth, we’ve got better places to be.”

Jack Frost leisurely walked into the room where the rest of the Guardians were gathered around a grand fireplace as only the North Pole could afford. As usual, he was lost in his own thoughts and half took in everyone else around him. Baby Tooth fluttered energetically around his head, eventually flying off to join Toothiana, who was busy chattering about the newest teeth she had acquired through the night. Her excitement was lost to the wind, though, since no one else but her cared.

Bunny was complaining about his frozen feet as usual. Sandy was asleep. And there was a mixture of yetis and elves running around doing a number of different jobs at once, that is if you considered what the elves were doing to be actual ‘jobs’. Rudely drinking out of everyone’s mug of hot cocoa hardly seemed like a promising career, but Jack chuckled at the action. North, aka Santa Claus, was in a deep discussion with one of his yetis. Something about one of the toys they were making, from what little of it Jack overheard.

Jack glanced up at the moon through the skylight over him and shook his head, wondering why it was that the man in the moon had felt that he needed a family like this. He was glad, though. He wouldn't trade any of them in for the world.
"SO!" North turned around, clapping his hands together once, his business with the yeti finally resolved. "Report. What goes on in world? Anything I should know about?"

"Nothing new since the last time we met." Tooth replied first, cupping some of her newest teeth in her hands like they were precious jewels. "My night of gathering teeth went smoothly. Although, there was one incident where a child almost came close to waking up and seeing me."

"What about you, Sandy?" North turned to the little sleeping golden man hovering beside him. "Sandy!" he nudged him.

Sandy blinked awake his eyes still lulling dazedly before shrugging and emitting a gust of sand that shaped itself into a question mark.

"Report," North repeated. "Anything unusual happen last night?"

Sandy shook his head before smiling and forming a thumbs up hand above his head.

Smiling, North nodded. "Glad to hear it." he turned to face Jack. "What about you, Jack?"

Jack was silent a few minutes. He had been secretly dreading this moment. Ever since their last run-in with Pitch, North had insisted on having weekly meetings where they all gathered at the North Pole and each of them reported happenings out in the human world. It was North’s way of keeping an eye on things, to make sure the children weren’t threatened again by evil. Naturally, the ones doing the most reporting were Tooth, Sandy, and himself, since they were out and about the most.

Clearing his throat, Jack straightened up from where he had been leaning against his staff. He shrugged, looking down at the floor.

"Nothing much to report." he said, rather slowly. Baby Tooth immediately began squawking, flying up to his face. Startled, he took a few steps back.

"What?" Tooth’s eyes grew wide, obviously understanding Baby Tooth’s squeaky language. She flew closer to Jack. "You mean…” Tooth’s words trailed off.

"What? What is it?" North said, concerned. Tooth turned toward him, shaking her head, words failing to come out of her mouth.

Jack sighed, rolling his eyes up towards the moon. "Okay, okay, I saw Pitch last night."

Toothiana dropped her teeth.

Bunnymund had been laid out in one of the many comfy rocking chairs covered in a homemade quit while warming his enormous feet in the fire’s warmth, but the mention of Pitch had him clamoring to the point of almost tripping as he tossed his blanket aside, "What was that you say?! Pitch! And you’re jus’ now mentioning this ta us mate?" Bunnymund was now standing beside Jack his ears peeled back in obvious agitation that Jack had not brought up the matter much sooner.

Sandy was no longer half asleep as he reflected worry of the newfound news.

"WHAT?" North bellowed. "What do you mean Pitch is loose? I am with Bunny. You just now tell us this? And what did you do with him?—let him go?"

The whole room suddenly erupted in one huge uproar as everyone started talking at once and tried giving their opinions at the same time.
“Relax! Everyone, relax.” Jack held up a hand, attempting to calm his comrades. “He’s harmless now. Years of being confined to that hole we put him in has taken all of his powers away. He tried using them to escape from me, but they didn’t work.”

“They… didn’t… work,” North repeated, shaking his head, forcing a smile. “He couldn’t have been playing you for fool?”

“North is right.” said Tooth. “How do you know he wasn’t pretending to be powerless? You can’t trust him Jack. You should know that.”

“He told me that he’s been out wandering the world for years. I just figured that if he’s been loose that long he would have done something by now if he did have his powers.”

“He’s been loose for years and we did not know?” North couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“There, you see,” said Jack. “Isn’t that proof enough? If he was still as powerful as he was when we put him in that hole, we would have known about it before now.”

North began to pace. “It is still not good.”

“He could just be biding his time,” Tooth mused, “Planning something.”

“Tooth is right. Pitch is too smart to try something without plan. We must find and capture him before he does damage.”

“Bu—but he’s harmless.” Jack protested. “It seems cruel to lock him away when he hasn’t done anything.”

“Not done anything? HA!” North stopped pacing and spun around to look at Jack. “Have you forgotten what he did years ago? He still has lot to pay for. You seeing him last night means he has broken out of his prison. We must find him before he does damage.” North thought a moment shaking his head, “If only there were other way.”

Tooth flew up to North. “Maybe we could punish him another way that wouldn’t require him to be locked away in that old dark hole. I… sort of agree with Jack. Even though Pitch has done a lot of bad things, it does seem… well… cruel… to keep him locked away for so long, alone.”

Bunnymund wrinkled his nose, “Are you serious? We’re talkin’ about Pitch here! Have you forgotten how close he came to throwing us all back in the dark ages?” He gave a humorless laugh, “No way we can let him just wander about all willy nilly. I say throw him back down a hole and leave ‘im to rot in the dark where he belongs.” He made a motion of washing his hands of the conversation as if he’d finally brought reason to the table.

Sandy whom had been quietly taking in the scene rose into the sky now with an uncertainty plastered on his features. He held up both hands as if he were waiting to have them filled. His dream sand formed into shapes within his cupped hands depicting a scene of Pitch’s nightmares galloping in circles with a rising laughing Pitch growing larger in the center. The dream sand shifted as a strand of sand whipped circles around the nightmares and the two coalesced into a whirlwind to bind the sand as the struggling form shrank under the binding.

“Ha! See, Sandy agrees with me!” Bunnymund threw his hands towards the mime to indicate another vote of confidence.

Sandy frowned shaking his head no as he held up the trussed figure now sitting in the palm
of his hand shaking his head yes. Sandy then pulled more sand depicting a wave that covered the
prone figure burying it as all the sand dissipated he wagged his finger in disapproval shaking his
head no.

Bunnymund gave him a look as if Sandy had gone mad, “What, you want us to put a leash
on him? What are we supposed to do when he starts hatchin’ another one a his plans ta destroy us
and everything we stand for? Spank him? I mean seriously, we’re better off just throwin’ him back
down that hole believe me!”

Tooth cringed. "A leash? He’s not an animal.”

“You have to admit, though, it’s a pretty good idea.” Jack chuckled. “We could put him to
work around here. You know… like community service, or something like that. It would keep him
busy and keep him out of the darkness at the same time. Not to mention, it would make it easier for
us to keep an eye on him.”

North had been standing in the middle of the room, stroking his long white beard in thought
while listening to his fellow Guardians discussing Pitch’s future. Finally he stepped forward and put
a hand on Bunny’s shoulder.

“You know,” he started. “Bunny may be on to something.”

North nodded. “You know,” he started. “Bunny may be on to something.”

North turned her attention to North.

Jack’s eyebrows lifted as he gave the large man a curious look. “You… agree that Pitch
should be put back into the hole?”

North waved the idea off. “Now that I think about it, I am in agreement with you. Pitch being alone down in that hole,” North shook his head, “gives him too much time to hatch plots. Even though he is being punished, it does break my heart to think of him being alone and dwelling in
so much blackness. There must be better way, and I think Bunny has given me idea. We will find
Pitch and bring him back here to work, as Jack suggests. And if Pitch tries any funny business, I will
spank him.”

The room was silent for what seemed like forever as all eyes turned to North. The only
sound came from one of the elves dropping the mug he had been busy lapping cocoa out of. Jack
couldn’t contain his amusement any longer and a loud laugh burst forth, earning him a startled look
from Bunny.

“You serious?” Jack said, sucking in a gulp of air before trailing off into more laughter.

“What??” Tooth's pink eyes blinked, struggling to understand. The look on her face was a
mixture of confusion and concern, like the thought of North spanking Pitch was worse than stuffing
him down a hole.

It took a moment for what North had said to really register before Bunny also hooted,
“No that is rich! The thought of Pitch getting spanked is just too much!” He all out laughed wiping
tears from his eyes before getting himself under control, “No really North, that’s the funniest thing
I’ve ever heard you say!”

Sandy observed the others taking in their responses before gliding up beside North and
giving his arm a pat before looking out at the others as a sign that he agreed with his robust friend.

“And Sandy agrees.” Jack said, still laughing. “Oh, come on, you’re kidding right? I mean,
I don’t disapprove of it or anything, but… spank Pitch? It seems… I dunno… a little weird, I guess?”
he stifled more laughter that was fast coming out.

    North shook his head. “I am not kidding. It’s been long time since I delivered such a punishment, true, but I cannot think of a more fitting one for Pitch.”

    “But…” Tooth fluttered up to North. “Don’t you think that’s a little too harsh? Hitting him… and all,”

    North turned a surprised look to the fairy. “This coming from someone who knocked Pitch’s tooth out with right hook?”

    Toothiana forced a shy, guilty smile. “You’ve got me there. But… spanking…”

    “Is not hitting,” North finished her sentence. “Not if done properly. Believe me; I have no intentions of permanently harming him. I’m Santa, after all.”

    “I don't agree with this,” Tooth shook her head. “There must be another way.”

    “Nonsense,” North waved her away. “My mind is made up.” he turned. "Bunny, Jack, since you two find so much amusement in all of this, I'm electing both of you to go out and find Pitch and bring him back here."

    Jack stopped laughing, turning a serious face to North. "Us? How are we supposed to get Pitch back here?"

    "How do you get him back here?" North shrugged and waved a hand toward Bunny. "You will have Bunny. Throw him down a hole."

Jack gripped his staff tighter and glanced nervously at Bunny. It all sounded like a good plan, but... one part of him was still worried that something would go wrong. Even if Pitch didn't have all of his powers, he still didn't know how the nightmare king would react or what sort of fight he would put up if he knew he was being kidnapped by a boy and a six foot rabbit. Finally, he nodded.

    Bunnymund straightened finally noting the seriousness of the situation, “Alright ya crazy bugger, if’n you really think bringing Pitch here is a good idea, I’ll help catch the slippery wisp. I don’t like thinkin’ of him lurking about in the shadows left to his own devices either, and I’d rather he be here than out there. I have ta say though I think you’re out of your flippin’ gourd.”

    Sandy floated over to Jack and Bunny looking to both of them before looking back to North with a worried glance. It seemed the golden man was deliberating whether he should join them or stay at the Pole.

    "I still don't agree with this, North," said Tooth. "I think we can handle it another way, without violence."

    North turned a scowl to her. "Who said anything 'bout violence? It is not violence! Is just smacked bum. Hurt for short time, then he will be good as new."

    Toothiana, face turning the slightest red, opened her mouth to comment further, but decided not to say anymore and shut her mouth. She turned a flustered glance at the rest, then quickly flew out of the room, Baby Tooth following after her. North shook his head, not fully understanding the Tooth Fairy.

    Jack sighed. "Well, I guess we'd better get going." he glanced at Sandy hovering in front of them. "You coming too? I hope so. You're the only one who could probably restrain him long
enough for us to get him here.

Sandy gave Jack a broad smile as he nodded lightly.

Bunnymund whipped a boomerang out mumbling something under his breath about not understanding why sticking Pitch down a hole wasn’t the best solution, but no one was paying him any mind anymore. Turning to the others, he asked, “So where do we start looking? We should probably go back to the last place you saw him ta see if’n we can pick up a trail… how the heck we’re going to track a shadow though is beyond me.”

Jack told the other two the whereabouts he’d last seen Pitch, and Bunny nodded grimly, “Right. I’ll see ya there in a jif. We can regroup and start scouring the area.” As he said this, he thumped a foot on the ground opening a hole that he quickly disappeared through.

Sandy smiled forming a cloud under his feet as he floated out of North’s skylight, and Jack followed as the two made their way back to where Jack had last seen Pitch.

For his part, Pitch was in a sour mood having been made a fool of by Frost. He had hidden, but as the night had waned on into the next night, he saw no one coming for him, so he relaxed thinking to himself that the flippant boy had likely forgotten about him the moment he flew away. Could he really see him as that little of a threat? The hatred and anger for the Guardians blossomed anew as Pitch fumed that he would in fact find a way to put the fear they should have for him back in their hearts.

No more of this, whatever this was where he moped about nursing his wounded pride. He had to start taking action to build up his power, so the next encounter they had, he would be much more formidable. So it was that Pitch took the opportunities to invade every child’s bedroom that he glided upon in an attempt to plague their dreams with nightmares.

When he saw the tendrils of dreamsand arching out across the sky, Pitch scowled, “Of course you would show up to fowl the lovely little nightmares I’ve worked so hard on.” No matter, he’d just steal them back he thought bitterly as he ducked under the child’s bed he’d been about to scare.

This happenstance had happened many a time before, and normally Pitch would move on to haunt another child’s dreams, but feeling indignant over his recent failures, he lay in wait to infect Sandy’s dreamsand with his own touch once the child had begun to smile obviously enjoying the dreams Sandy had emitted.

Unlike previously where when Pitch had touched the sand it had corrupted and turned black and jagged, this time the golden sand seemed to attach to his fingertips. Instinctively Pitch pulled away as if he’d been bitten, but the dreamsand was like an angry swarm of bees amassing through the window and whirling around first his arm and then the rest of him as Pitch swatted madly at the sand terrified of having the reverse of what he’d done to the Sandman in their last battle happen to him, but his efforts were in vain, and he was quickly engulfed in the sands coated in flecks of gold that adhered to him.
He went to jump into the nearest shadow, and his heart skipped a beat as a new terror filled him when nothing happened. He was still standing in the shadow, but now he was no longer able to travel through their darkness. He scrambled now out of the bedroom window running as fast as he could towards the tree line and away from the now dissipating sand. It had settled into his skin, and as he ran, he scrubbed in vain to remove it, but the sands had no substance. They were in fact shards of light he realized and as long as they were upon him, he would be unable to use his powers of shadow.

Jack Frost and Bunny walked out of the trees, into the open, cutting Pitch's escape off.

"I don't think so Pitch," Jack said immediately hooking his staff around Pitch in case the nightmare king decided to make a run for it in another direction. Not that he would be able to get far. Jack just didn’t feel like spending the night trying to chase him down.

“Well, that was easier than I thought it would be.” said Jack. “Nice work, Sandy! That was great thinking doing… uh… whatever you did with your dreamsand.”

Sandy dropped down from above with a smug smile on his face as Pitch’s face reflected surprised horror.

Pitch back pedaled as far as Frost’s hook yielded sneering at the object before glaring from Guardian to Guardian, “What is this?”

Bunnymund’s eyes narrowed as he stepped forward flipping a boomerang casually through the air to land swiftly back in his hand, “What do ya think it is mate? You’re coming with us.”

Why had he let himself act so brashly? He’d taken their bait he realized belatedly. If he’d just left Sandy’s dreamsand alone, he’d have been more than able to slip away unnoticed from the Guardians, but no, he had to try and one up Sandy out of petty vengeance, and now he realized instead they’d turned the tables on him.

Pitch contemplated a moment before straightening and trying his best to look imposing before them. He stared coolly down his nose at them, “You can lock me away, but as always, I’ll find my way back to the surface, and the next time we meet, I will destroy you.”

Bunny’s smile grew as he pulled out a large bag giving the dark man a sarcastic, “Sure ya will,” before unceremoniously scooping the lithe figure into it in one fluid motion.

Pitch let out an undignified yelp as he was flung over the massive rabbit’s shoulder. He screamed, kicked, and punched within the bag, “How dare you!”

Bunnymund laughed looking purposefully to Jack as he thumped open a portal, “Well now this seems awful familiar doesn’t it?” Without waiting for a reply, the Easter bunny jumped into the hole while Pitch’s inarticulate screams of rage followed.

Sandy blinked watching the scene before the hole disappeared leaving behind a lush patch of green in its wake. He turned to Jack now giving him a raised eyebrow and a soft sideways smile.
Jack waved Sandy off. “Yeah, well… The yetis… they brought me to the North Pole that way the first time.” he chuckled, running a hand through his hair, mussing it up. "Anyway, you did great tonight. I'll race you back to the North Pole." Jack bounded into the air and the wind carried him away before Sandy realized he was gone.

Catching on quickly the little golden man burst off in a determined streak of light hot on Jack’s heels.
Bunny arrived first erupting out of the ground looking not unlike Santa with the large bulging red sack containing a still kicking frantically and caterwauling Pitch. North was there working in the shop as they arrived and all commotion currently going on around them ceased to take in the new arrival. Bunnymund hefted the bag in an arch to come around his shoulder to land roughly between he and North.

Pitch grunted in pain at the sudden impact before tearing himself through the opening of the bag seething angrily, “You’ll pay for that!” he shrieked as he kicked the bag as hard as he could at Bunny who deftly side-stepped it.

By this point, Jack arrived with Sandy trailing not far behind. Pitch glared at them as they dropped in from the skylight his chest still heaving from his distress. He barred his teeth denoting his obvious resentment of all in the room, “You brought me here? To what purpose?”

“Ah! I see our guest has arrived.” said North cheerily walking over to where everyone was now gathered.

Toothiana fluttered around the crowd, stealing quick glances in-between the yetis and the other Guardians but otherwise stayed to the back.

Jack landed a few feet in front of Pitch and looked up at the dark man with a hint of compassion on his face, “So you won’t have to go back to that dark hole.” he replied simply a hint of a smile lifting the corners of his lips.

Pitch scrutinized the white haired Guardian steeling himself for an attack as he backed away looking to all of the others that had by now encircled him. His eyes were wild and worried, “So then what? Are you planning to end me here and now? The world needs me too you know!” His words were tighter than he’d wished them to come out making him sound on the verge of tears. He was quite panicked realizing that if they truly did wish to snuff him out, this would be their best opportunity to do so. It made sense he thought, if he’d had the prospect to take any of them out of the picture when they were this vulnerable, he would have not hesitated.

“Who said anything about ‘ending’?” North said, a bit insulted at the remark. He stepped closer to Pitch. “You worry too much. We are Guardians, not barbarians. We only brought you here to help you. You still have much to answer for, as you well know. But instead of putting you back in hole, we’ve decided it best that you serve the rest of your time here. You should be thanking Jack Frost; otherwise we would have thrown you back where you came from.”

“I’m sorry, Pitch,” said Jack. “I had to tell them you were loose. But… I thought it would be better that we brought you here to keep an eye on you, instead of you spending your days alone in that darkness. I see now that we were wrong for doing that to you. You’re right. The world does need you. That doesn’t make what you did right, though.

Pitch’s face was blank as their plans were relayed to him, and then he laid his head back and let out a long hardy laugh, “Oh what fools you lot are!” The humor left him as he straightened growing rigid, “You won’t keep me here you know, you may have me now, but mark my words that
you’ll regret ever taking action against me!” Pitch began to pace as he spoke his rage building. Who did they think they were to give him edicts after all? He was the nightmare king! He had walked this earth three times as long as any of them, and as such he saw himself as their better by leagues.

“We’re the fools eh?” Bunnymund huffed as he continued, “You’re lucky the others wanted you here as I sure as heck have no problem dumping ya back in the ground mate, and I still don’t.”

Without saying a word, North suddenly lunged forward, closing the short gap between himself and Pitch within a few quick steps, he grabbed hold of the nightmare king, bent him over forward, and applied three hearty smacks to Pitch’s backside before letting him go. "We won't keep you here, huh? We'll regret, huh?" North glared at Pitch, shaking a finger at him. "That is what you get if you ever cross line. Consider it warning. Either you stay here, or you go back to hole."

Jack stood stunned trying to grasp what had just happened while Toothiana looked horrified, like she might cry.

Pitch gasped looking positively mortified as he shrank away from the burly man, “How dare you! You… you can’t do this to me!” His face felt hot with embarrassment that North would humiliate him in such a way and his mouth still hung agape from his unrecovered shock.

North crossed his arms over his chest and grunted. “I just did. I suggest you watch what you do, if you do not want more.”

An amused smile formed on Jack’s lips as he stole a few quick glances at his friends.

Toothiana had been silently watching everything from behind one of the nearby yetis. Finally, she inched her way out into the open and fluttered up to North’s side. She timidly reached out and touched his arm, “Please; North,” she said, “can’t we do this a different way?”

“Now, Tooth, we’ve been through this already.” North turned to the fairy.

“You know I don’t agree with it,” she stated with concern.

“You’ve already made that clear.” North said. “But I am in charge here. I make rules. If you do not agree, you don’t have to take part in it. No one is forcing you. Would you rather I put him back in hole?”

Tooth fell silent as she turned her concerned gaze to Pitch then back to North. Not saying another word, she floated backwards out of the way.

Pitch blanched at North’s affirmation that he actually planned to continue punishing him in such a ludicrous manner and doubly so upon hearing that they had purposefully discussed amongst themselves that spanking him was an actual method proposed for dealing with him. His stomach flipped at the notion. His anger resurged as he narrowed his eyes hatefully at Santa, “You…you’ve actually planned this! No! I’d rather be returned to my lair and face the nightmares destroying me than put up with you and your ideals for rehabilitation!” He really didn’t want to be returned to the formidable dread that he’d left, but the thought of being brought so low as to do the Guardian’s biding or be spanked for not complying insulted him to the core.

Bunny chimed in, “Oh that can be arranged bucko! You heard him North, he wants to go back in the hole, and I’m itching to put him there.” As he spoke Bunnymund puffed out his chest closing in on Pitch to which Pitch darted out of his close proximity eyes wide in obvious fear of going back.
North silently studied Pitch, not missing the fear that washed over his face. Perhaps Jack had been right after all, he noted. A caring smile formed on his lips.

“That’ll be enough Bunny,” said North, “He’s not going back right now. Not until we have given other options try. If they do not work, then he can go back. I think we all need to rest now, and approach this again when we’ve all cooled down.” North motioned one of the yetis over. “Take Pitch to the room we have prepared for him, and see that he is well guarded.”

The yeti nodded and walked forward, taking Pitch by the arm. Before the yeti could escort Pitch out, North bent down and peered Pitch in the eyes with all of the seriousness he could muster, “I think you have been alone for too long,” he whispered, “I want you to know that I only wish to help you. We all do. I don’t think you want to go back to the darkness, so I suggest you think about what has transpired here and the opportunity that has been offered you. I will be in later to talk more.”

Pitch thought to violently yank his arm from the hold of the furry beast, but the yeti had a firm grip on his arm, and he really didn’t want to risk the thought of any further defiance having the Guardians decide to seal him away again after all or worse having North demonstrate further how easy it was to spank him. North had only landed three quick swats, but the tingling sensation still radiated across his rear letting him know that he really didn’t want to push the fat oaf. North’s words hit him like a brick though as he watched him intently trying to discern his intentions. His eyes full of skepticism searched the jolly face for signs of a lie, signs that there was some secret mirth to imprisoning him here like this, but all he saw was genuine concern, and this quelled the bitter words he might have replied. Instead he lost eye contact letting himself be led away as he tried to comprehend what had just happened and what was going to become of him. It was probably best that he have a moment to collect himself and assess his situation further before acting. There were too many Guardians to contend with at the moment, and he’d be better suited to escape with only North or his yetis guarding him.

The yeti holding his arm garbled some string of syllables that were gruff, bear-like, and totally incomprehensible to Pitch, but the others of his kind understood and several of the yetis left their posts to join Phil in escorting Pitch down the softly lit hallway that glowed with strings of Christmas lights and banisters of well-crafted oak intricately designed with such care. Pitch noted every turn as his eyes took in the scenery in disgust. It was all so… Christmassy, it was enough to make him want to wretch. The yeti gave him a rough push into the room and quickly slammed the door shut although from the shadows cast under the door, Pitch could see there were two sentries standing guard on either side to prevent him from leaving.

Pitch now left to his own devices began wandering about his new prison cell inspecting it meticulously. The room he was afforded was like the rest of the building with its wooden designs and glittery baubles. There was little furniture outside a small nightstand, a dresser with a small mirror, a bookshelf, a rocking chair, and a large bed in the center. The bed did have very fluffy pillows and comforters that looked soft enough to disappear in, and the mattress would likely be equally as comfortable. That was about the only plus Pitch recognized in the room though his eyes scanned for anything he might be able to exploit, but he found nothing of merit.

Pitch frowned noting the windows were three small portholes with stained glass depictions of Santa Claus. The holes were far too small for Pitch to squeeze out of especially now that he was unable to move through shadows. He peered through them to see that from this vantage point, the building was built atop a sheer mountainside. This of course made North’s home a veritable fortress, but for Pitch, it meant escaping from here would be near impossible. Of course North likely scoped out the room he thought Pitch would be contained best far before he’d arrived Pitch mused sourly.
Sighing he moved over to the bed touching the material to see that it was in fact as soft as it looked. Having nothing else to do, he climbed into the bed covering himself fully as it was the closest he was going to get to shutting out everything around him. He had to admit it as much as he loathed North, the man had good tastes in linens.

Bunny shook his head as Pitch had been led away, “Ya know he’s not gonna change right? I can’t be the only one who has to be thinkin’ we’re wastin’ our time here no?” Bunny looked around the room quizzically.

Sandy shrugged giving Bunnymund a small smile and a soft pat on his hind leg before padding over to Toothinia who still seemed to be distressed about what her and North had discussed.

North shrugged. “Maybe you’re right, maybe you’re not. All we can do is try. Who knows? Pitch may surprise all of us in time. But even if he doesn’t change, at least we can say we tried. And who says we waste time? Time spent helping someone is never waste, regardless of outcome.”

“I still say there’s a better way of punishing him,” Toothiana said timidly. “He’ll never change as long as you continue hitting him.”

“You let me be judge of that.” North scowled in the fairy’s direction, and then his face relaxed. “Look, Tooth, I appreciate your concerns. Really, I do. But my mind is made up on matter. Believe me; it will produce better result than you think. Give it try.”

Tooth sighed and turned her head aside.

Bunnymund grimaced not really having anything more to say to comfort Tooth since he would do a lot more to Pitch than spank him if given the choice. He mumbled, “I hope you know what you’re doin’ bringing Pitch here North. Just... don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He made sure to address North seriously now as he thumped open a portal, “Ya know how to get a hold a’ me if ya need me mate.” Not waiting for a reply, Bunny disappeared.

Sandy looked to the remaining members of their party with curiosity before lifting himself into the air with a gust of dreamsand to be eye level with Toothinia and pulled her into a soft hug. When he pulled away, he gave her a warm smile as he stroked her shoulder as a means of consolation.

Toothiana smiled and nodded to Sandy patting him on the shoulder, and then she turned to North. “If you want me to help in any way, I’d me more than happy to.”

“I’m glad you brought that up. It so happens that I would like to have some help.” said North. “I would like you, Sandy, and Jack, if he wants to, of course, to stay here to help keep eye on Pitch.”

“Yeah, sure, I’ll help,” said Jack with a shrug. "But, can’t the yetis do that?"

“Yes, they can, but I think it would be less intimidating if we kept eye on him ourselves. Pitch might still be prisoner, but if we ever hope to change him we need to earn his trust. As it is, he sees us as the enemy. We need to change that. We need to show him that we only want to help him. The yetis will still help, of course, but I think it would do him good to have us make appearances too--show him that we care.”

“But some of us have nightly jobs.” Jack pointed out, glancing at Sandy and Tooth.

“Yes, of course.” North said. “During the times when you can’t be here, the yetis will fill
in. But when you don’t have much to do, I would appreciate it if you would stick around for a while. Interact with Pitch a little bit. See what you can do to help him.”

“What about Bunny?” Toothiana asked.

North lifted his eyebrows, his eyes rolling upward to the ceiling before turning his gaze to the fairy. “He can help too, if he wants, naturally, but I think it best we don’t bring him in on this right away, if you know what I mean. I think he would do more harm than good.”

Jack Frost and Tooth nodded that they understood.

Sandy had a wide smile on his face as he nodded his enthusiasm obviously wanting to help as well.

Pitch lay under the covers straining to hear anything. It had felt like hours, although it was likely his mind playing tricks on him he realized. He’d been imprisoned before… numerous times he’d been defeated actually, and he was certainly no stranger to being alone. But this was disquieting in the fact that unlike before where he’d been left alone to his own devices, he was instead taken from everything he knew and pushed into an alien situation that he was both curious about and dreading.

Unlike the murky desolation of his nightmare realm where cold winds blew eerie creaks and groans down long dark and lonesome corridors and cobwebs lined the corners of every structure, this place was a steep contrast that gave off an almost peaceful serenity that made something deep within him listless. It was too quiet, too comfortable, and the movements and noises that were heard were of live creatures not figments of his imagination or hollow voices to which he felt heartache for but had no recognizable understanding why.

How long had it been since he’d been around other people? A sense of anxiety replaced his anger as he contemplated actually having to interact with them all. Deep down, he didn’t want to be alone, and the thought of companionship was exhilarating and distressing.

A simple knock came to the door.

As if slapped in the face, Pitch came back to his senses. He thought to meld into the shadows behind the door, but the motion was only made in his mind since his physical form betrayed him remaining where he was. This of course shot a stab of fury through him as he quietly seethed about what was taken from him by Sandy. He scowled, the flecks of gold still remained embedded within his flesh as a reminder of his further subjugation.

Another knock came to the door; and Pitch, not wanting to seem vulnerable, rose from the bed moving to the back of the room to stand in the far corner. He did not make a motion of inviting the visitor in though and instead stood rigidly in anticipation for their inevitable entrance.

A third knock sounded, and when no answer was made, the door burst open and North stepped inside. A hard frown was etched on his face as he scanned the room eyes eventually falling to the disheveled bed in the center.

“Pitch?” he called. “You had better be in here.” he closed the door behind him and stood in front of it now arms crossed over his chest waiting, "I wish only to speak with you."

Pitch clasped his hands loosely behind his back stepping forward just enough to have the harsh white light that reflected off the snow through the portholes cast an outline on his figure obscuring the majority of his face as he sneered, “Well I don’t wish to speak with you.”
North silently stared at Pitch, not moving from the spot he stood. Finally, he grunted and waved a hand toward the bed, "Sit," he said.

Pitch’s frown deepened as he stated flatly, “No. I’m not interested in having a heart to heart with you North. Say what you will and leave me be.” Pitch’s frustration at his current situation gave him no compunction to play along, and he wanted North to know he wasn’t planning to bow down to him.

Miffed, North finally moved, unfolding his arms and stepping forward. He balled a fist and placed it into the palm of his other hand, cracking his knuckles.

"I told you to take seat on bed, Pitch." he said, calmly, though his voice had an edge to it. "I came here to talk face to face. Do not push me to do something else."

Pitch prickled at the demand. North’s threat was not lost on Pitch, but not wanting to be told what to do either, Pitch passively remained defiant as he moved forward into the light to show some level of acquiescence but did not sit, “You have me, face to face; now spit it out.”

North continued to eye Pitch in silence, his anger and annoyance over the nightmare king’s lack of obedience rising every second. He decided to let it slide, for now. After all, it was Pitch’s first day with them. He couldn’t expect everything to be perfect. He knew Pitch would learn in time. Sighing, he turned and dragged the rocking chair over and sat down in it, facing Pitch.

"Like I told you earlier, I think you have been alone for too long." North began, leaning back in the chair. "You have been left alone in darkness and gloom, and have forgotten what is like to be around other people. I wish to change that during your stay here. It's true that you will be prisoner. But I also want your time here to be one of learning and rehabilitation."

Pitch glowered as he paced his anger coming off of him in waves, “Rehabilitation… indeed. What audacity you people have! You think because you get an idea in your pretty little heads that you can just take me, the nightmare king, out of the picture? To what, act like one of you? I am fear! I don’t need anyone!” Even as he said this, Pitch’s heart ached at the reminder that it had been so very long since he’d actually shared a conversation that didn’t entail impending rivalry.

Slowing now, Pitch finally paused Antarctica coming to mind, and he recoiled from North shaking his head as if to clear it when thoughts of Frost and how he’d rebuked his offer flashed vividly through his head. He had been so honest with the boy, why? Was he really that sad of a creature that he’d have clung on to the hope that another would want to share in his triumphs when deep down he knew the boy had already chosen a side? Yes, he had chosen, they all had hadn’t they? Why then now did they think he could change?

North sat, his face frozen in a contemplative stare that was fixated on Pitch, his eyebrows slowly moving upward.

Pitch caught the look North was giving him, it was unreadable and left Pitch feeling uneasy. “What?” Pitch spat, “Why are you staring at me like that?”

Despite Pitch’s outrage, North remained calm, casually sitting in his chair as if he were carrying on a discussion with an old friend on a porch on a Sunday afternoon, “Oh, no reason,” he shrugged. “Just waiting until you are finished venting.” he unfolded his arms and began rocking in his chair. “Even though you are prisoner, I just want you to know that you are free to move about the place whenever you wish. You will be watched at all times, of course, so do not think of leaving.” Here he gave Pitch a warning glare. “Tomorrow, I will give you list of chores that you will be expected to do to keep you busy during your stay here.”
Pitch was stunned by the rotund man’s words turning fully to regard him with disgust, “What? What do you take me for, a servant? I’m not going to perform chores for you! Have your walking fur bags or annoying gremlins do your dirty work.”

North shot up out of his chair and walked toward Pitch, stopping a few feet in front of the dark figure and looming over him, "I do not consider you a servant, Pitch!" he bellowed. "You are prisoner! The chores you will be doing are part of your punishment. Since you spend time in your dark old hole spinning plots and conjuring dark dreamsand, we thought you need something worthwhile to keep you busy. And you will perform them, or so help me I will tan your hide until it glows in dark. You have choice, Pitch. Either you remain prisoner here and work and accept rehabilitation, or you go back in hole and darkness."

Pitch backed away feeling trapped in the tiny confines that pinned him between the bed and the lumbering man in front of him leaving him no further space to retreat now as North closed in to stand in front of him like an impenetrable force. He snarled like a cornered animal, “Fine. Go ahead then. Throw me back in that hole! It’s what you’re going to do any way! If not now then tomorrow or the next day! Why bother with these trivialities, we both know how this is going to end!”

He was shaking with his fury as he spoke hoping to call the Cossack’s bluff and have him back down or commit to follow through with his threat to banish him. At least back in his lair he was his own man capable of making his own decisions. The nightmares were awful, but at least they were of his own making. If he was to be brought low, he’d rather it be by his own hands than these Guardians.

Without saying another word, North stepped forward, wrapped a large hand around Pitch’s arm, and pulled him along with him back to the rocking chair.

Pitch’s eyes went wide as he yanked uselessly against the hand pulling him inexorably forward. His efforts only afforded him to be dragged like a ragdoll in the direction North was taking him. Understanding now dawning as previous threats came to mind, Pitch squalled, “No! Unhand me! You… you can’t!”

Santa sat down in his chair again, continuing to hold Pitch in place by the arm, “Yes, I can!” he shouted, giving Pitch’s arm a yank, pulling him closer. He peered into the other man’s eyes. “When I came here to talk, I was not planning on doing this, but you now leave me no other choice because it is clear we are not getting anywhere with this conversation. I grow weary of your attitude, Pitch. You are stubborn, haughty, and cocky. Maybe spanking is just what you need to bring you around.”

Sensing that he’d pushed North too far, Pitch attempted to backpedal, “Alright! Fine! I’ll do lists! Let’s just take this back a notch. Perhaps I was being a bit… overzealous!” Pitch’s mouth was drawn tight in a stricken frown, and he looked paler than normal now as his wide eyes stared back his fear that North might actually spank him.

North’s eyebrows lifted slightly. He was pleased at seeing the sudden change in Pitch’s behavior, but he knew he was probably only saying it to get out of the impending spanking. He regarded the nightmare king a few minutes, and then proceeded to yank Pitch over his knee, “I am not convinced.” he stated bluntly.

“Wha-what!? No!” Pitch gasped as he was upended over the big man’s knees feeling a flush fill his cheeks as he scrambled desperately to remove himself from North’s lap, “Don’t you dare!” He squealed as panic began to streak through him like lightening. This couldn’t actually be happening to him!
Grunting in frustration, North grabbed onto the scrambling Pitch and positioned him over his right knee, swinging his leg over to pin Pitch’s legs in place. He pulled Pitch’s robe back and began pelting his rear with heavy swats—much heavier ones than what he had used on Pitch before, “You have been thorn in our side for years, and I aim to finally do something about it.” he said, laying down another heavy smack. “You will learn in time that you have no control here.”

As North worked to subdue Pitch, the lithe form fought as if his life depended on, and once his legs had been pinned and his robe moved aside without further recourse, Pitch let out a blood curdling scream, “No!” The bursting pain that erupted across his rear end had Pitch arch up like a fish on a hook. He yowled in both indignation and pain, “I’ll destroy you and everything you hold dear for this!” As he said this though, North’s words rang through to him loud and clear. He didn’t have control, he hadn’t had control in a very long time. The fact that North was even able to do this to him spoke volumes of his place in the world. His chest felt tight at the thought of how easy this was for North even though he still struggled with all his might.

"And for that you get harder swats." North complied, bringing his hand down harder. "You learn right now that I will not put up with your threats, taunts, and vile words. You are still being punished for your evil deeds. We brought you here to show you some mercy. The least you could do is act like you are thankful for it." North brought his hand down swiftly in repeated slaps to the underside of Pitch's rear. "Because I don't think you want to go back to hole. I'm right, yes?"

Thankful! Was he serious? Pitch thought cringing at the new onslaught to his backside as he began to let out small squeaks of pain that he’d been holding back. He twisted and turned as best as he could, but the steel grip held him firmly in place. Realizing that he wasn’t going to avoid this in the slightest, Pitch turned his wide eyes to North as his mouth worked to formulate thoughts past the burning in his rear, “Yes! I’d rather suffer there than here! Please! Stop! I’ll go willingly!” The truth was, Pitch knew the darkness and what to expect there, this on the other hand, this, was becoming an emotional overload. He wasn’t even sure what rehabilitation meant only that they planned to change him on a fundamental level, and that thought terrified him more than the prospect of suffering the way he’d become accustomed to.

North stoppedspanking and pulled the smaller man to standing, keeping a firm grip on his shoulder. He stood up himself, turned around, took out a snow globe from his pocket and threw it into a corner of the room. Immediately a portal opened to show a dark cavern with hundreds of swarming nightmares, one of which stopped at the other end of the portal to look at them… waiting. North regarded it for a few minutes and then turned his gaze to Pitch. He waved toward the portal, “Is that what you really want to go back to?” he asked. “Darkness and loneliness? …fear?”
Pitch was relieved the spanking was over as he reached back to rub at the pain scowling at North hatefully for doing it in the first place. When North cast the snow globe into the corner, and it opened up to reveal the torment he knew so intimately, Pitch was transfixed on the image of the
nightmare watching him. His heart skipped a beat as the remembered pain and loneliness became a dominant reminiscence, and a troubled expression of indecision worked its way on to his face. He swallowed hard, he had said he would prefer to go back, but now that he was confronted with the real possibility, the thought of going back made his knees feel weak. Pitch found he couldn’t respond just giving a small shake of his head no.

North studied Pitch’s reaction silently, not taking his hand off his shoulder. He looked back at the portal just in time to see one of the nightmares about to walk through it. Quickly he closed it up before the creature could come out onto this side, “That is enough of that.” North said. He gently pulled Pitch over to the bed. "Now, I trust I will have no more trouble out of you."

Pitch winced as the nightmare verged the opening visibly relaxing to see the portal closed by North before it could escape. As if in a haze, he let himself be led over to the bed his mind was still in the depths of the nightmare realm. It wasn’t until North started speaking to him did he shift back to the conversation. He felt like he’d betrayed himself in his flippancy, no, this man was using his own fears against him. His gaze shifted back to North his eyes betraying confusion and awe, “Why are you doing this? What do you hope to gain?”

“Why do I do it?” North left Pitch next to the bed and returned to the rocking chair where he sat down again, focusing his full attention on the nightmare king. “I’ve already told you I wish to help you. I do not hope to gain anything from it, except, in time, maybe friendship.” North answered, giving a slight sigh. “If you will ever have us as your friends. I just want to help you find your former self. Pitch, you need help. You cannot go on the way you do now. You live in darkness and misery. You waste your time and life dwelling on these things when you could make big difference in world. You want to be believed in again, yes? You’re going to have to be willing to change something first. You are not fear as you believe. You have allowed fear to come in and control you. It’s corrupted you, Pitch, to the point where you’ve forgotten who you are. Jack Frost does not know it, but he’s helped to open these eyes to see that perhaps we were wrong to imprison you alone down there for so long. Instead of pushing you away, we should have helped you then. But what’s done is done. I only wish to correct mistake.” he paused long enough to study Pitch a few seconds. “I do not want to force you into anything you do not wish to do. But from where I sit, I don’t think you have much choice. You either spend rest of life in hole with nightmares, or you stay here and try to change your life. Judging from your reaction a while ago, something tells me you don’t want to go back. And you don’t have to, Pitch.”

Pitch listened to North fully now his eyes imploring his unrequited desire for all of what North spoke of. Could he have friendship with the Guardians? They would never accept him, they couldn’t, could they? They were diametrically opposed in so many ways after all, but Pitch wanted the dream that North was spinning, longed for it even. He sank down to sit gingerly on the bed slumping into defeat as all the fight left him. His eyes dropped to his hands that now laid folded quietly in his lap as he spoke softly now, “I don’t think I want to go back there.”

A smile formed on North’s lips. “See. You already make headway. You’ve admitted aloud that you do not wish to go back. Was that so hard?”

Pitch scowled not meeting North’s gaze as he responded curtly, “Yes.” His mood soured a little as he thought back to the fact that only minutes ago the large man had had him pinned over a knee. His face flushed in embarrassment, “You could have found a better approach to talk to me you know.”

North raised an eyebrow. "I doubt you would have listened. I tried talking to you when I first came in room, but you weren't going to have any of it. You were acting too much like spoiled brat. I only gave you what all brats deserve." an amused smirk curled his lips when he saw Pitch's
embarrassed scowl. "No one said this road would be easy. It rarely ever is. There will be hard times at first, but it will get better. Besides, pain in bottom will not last."

Pitch shot North a glare, "What brats deserve!" his voice raised an octave at the accusation, "I’m not some wayward child that you can... you know..." Pitch was becoming flustered at the thought as he folded his arms turning away from North to glower angrily at the wall as he collected himself. "If friendship is something you want to work on, then we have to be able to have civilized discussions without threats of you... getting physical."

Anger flashed in North's eyes as he straightened in his chair. "Then don't act like wayward child. We will have civilized discussions without me threatening when you decide to act like civilized man instead of wayward child you claim to not be. I wish I did not have to threaten, but you leave me no choice. You bring this on yourself, Pitch. You have no one to blame but yourself. It's time you woke up and realize that. Maybe you being here will help clear your mind to see reason. It's clear to me now that you spending time in hole does nothing for you. It only makes you worse and more bitter. That is why I have decided to use other methods." North sighed, leaning back again. "This road will be long one for all of us. We must take small steps. It is true that I hope to make friendship with you, but first you must face consequences for your wrongdoings, as you are still prisoner. You must straighten yourself out first. If you do not like me doing it, then I can always call Bunny in here to do it."

Pitch scooted back on the bed under the Cossack’s glare as he watched him carefully not wishing to provoke the man further, but the more North rattled off about how he planned to continue this line of action, the more Pitch frowned until his face held an angry pout. Of course the mention of Bunnymund being given a go at him had Pitch’s eyes widen in alarm. Then he had an idea, the fairy had protested this treatment he remembered, he did his best to hide the small smirk as he added, "The rabbit hates me, but perhaps Toothinia..."

North waved Pitch's suggestion off. "Actually, all of us will be taking part in your rehabilitation. The other Guardians will keep eye on you during your stay here. Well, except Bunny. I shall have talk with him first before he comes near you, lest something bad happen. But that will be later on. For now it will be me, Sandy, Tooth, and Jack. The yetis too of course, when the rest of us have work to do." North lifted himself out of the chair and walked to the door. "You are free to do as you wish, as long as you behave yourself. Rest. Tomorrow I will come by and give you list of chores."

Just as North opened the door, Toothiana shrank back, "Sorry," she said with a sheepish grin. "I wasn't eavesdropping. We... uh... came to drop off food." she pointed at the yeti beside her, who was holding a tray.

"Ah! Splendid timing!" said North glancing behind him at Pitch. "We were just finishing up our little chat."

Pitch flushed looking away from Toothinia’s gaze wondering if she’d heard the last thing he’d said about her being the one to do it or overheard any of what they’d just been talking about or the sure to have been loud cacophony of squalls he had let out following what felt like deafening smacks from the heavy handed North. The thought of her thinking that he’d even want her to be the one to discipline him or that she could have heard him being spanked already was quite embarrassing. Feeling self-conscious, Pitch grabbed a hold of the comforter and sheets and pulled them up so that he was now sitting against the headboard with his legs and waist under the covers wishing to sink under the sheets and cover the rest of himself in short order. He couldn’t bring himself to look in their direction as he muttered awkwardly, “I... uh, I don’t need any food..."
North walked out into the hallway and stood there while the yeti entered the room. Toothiana darted around the creature and hovered near the foot of the bed, looking at Pitch with concern, “Are you sure?” she said.

Pitch glowered now his embarrassment growing as she prodded, “Of course I’m sure,” he spat, “Why would I want your food? We have no need for sustenance, so it’s a waste of time.”

The yeti annoyingly set the tray down on the nightstand, turned, and left the room. At hearing Pitch’s rude reply, North stepped into the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest, “Oh,” Tooth said, “Santa eats cookies, so I thought... Well, it’s there, in case you want something.”

It did smell good Pitch noted as his eyes were drawn to the tray. Even though they didn’t need to eat, it didn’t mean that the act of doing so couldn’t be enjoyable. Pitch’s eyes drifted up now to see North in the doorway, and his eyes widened realizing North likely heard his remark and wasn’t pleased with it. He stuttered out, “Uh, well, uh maybe a look see,” as he said this, he tentatively reached over to lift the lid.

Tooth smiled as she studied Pitch, looking like she was holding something back. Suddenly, without warning, she flew forward and pried his mouth open and looked at his teeth.

Taken off guard Pitch dropped the lid as his head was tilted back and her hands went into his mouth. He shook his head violently fanning his hands in a swatting motion, “What! What are you doing!? Get away!” He balked ducking away from her with a look that was both surprised and annoyed.

“Sorry,” she said, backing away. “I just... had to look at them. You don’t floss?”

His brow crinkled as his face took on a look of aggravation as he grumbled, “My teeth are perfectly fine... jagged and pointy, but they’re not rotting or yellow thank you very much.” Pitch huffed giving her a sideways sneer that she’d ask him a question like that.

“Sorry,” Tooth repeated, giving him a shy smile. She quickly turned and flew out of the room, North stepping aside to let her pass.

North gave Pitch another glare, before closing the door and leaving.

Pitch’s face remained in a grimace as North closed the door, and he was glad to once more be alone. He envisioned himself taking the tray sitting next to his bedside and flinging it against the door in an angry huff, but after North’s recent reaction to his outbursts, Pitch didn’t dare. His bottom still chafed as a current reminder that he didn’t wish to anger the man.

Sighing at his self-imposed impotence to react, Pitch’s gaze moved to the tray that had been left for him. There was a small plate with a cinnamon frosted pastry of some sort, a couple of varied cookies, and a hot cup of chocolate with whipped cream sprayed on top with a sprinkle of nutmeg. Gingerly, he took the cup in hand feeling the heat of it on his hands as he stared down at it with mixed feelings of curiosity and disgust. He brought the cup up to his face inhaling the aroma before timidly tasting it. His eyes opened wide, this was wonderful!

Having been locked away for so long, it had been centuries since he’d actually eaten or drank anything, so long so that he’d forgotten what the sense of taste held and had just never thought to bother. His eyes fluttered as he took small sips of the chocolaty goodness savoring every last drop and feeling slightly disappointed when it was gone. Of course his eyes moved back to the tray now with the other savory looking goodies. He paused a moment looking about as if someone were waiting to burst in on him to catch him eating them. Satisfied he was still alone, he placed the small
plate on his lap and took small nibbles off of each cookie eating them in their entirety as well as the
pastry which quickly became his favorite of all the proffered items.

Feeling satisfied in a way he hadn’t in a very long time, Pitch placed the plate back on the
tray and just sat in the welcomed silence. He lay against the headboard for several hours just trying to
digest everything, and when his head hurt from thinking about it, he allowed the comforts of the
fluffy bed sheets to draw him in as scooted deep within them to drift off for once in a very long time
a dreamless, or for Pitch, a nightmare-less sleep. Little did Pitch know that Sandy had felt the broach
of his nightmares, as Pitch had them anytime he slept, but as he watched over Earth’s children,
tonight he watched over Pitch as a strand of his dreamsand had drifted in through the crack under the
door touching the nightmares Pitch had started to have effectively nullifying them, so that Pitch could
for once just rest.
Chapter Three

The next morning, the door to Pitch's room burst open with enough force to rip it off its hinges, the door itself swinging back and banging against the wall, "Good morning!" North bellowed, waving one of his cutlasses around as if fencing with an unseen opponent. "I trust you slept well?"

Pitch's eyes shot open, and he jumped at the sudden intrusion. Remembering where he was, he settled back in to the bed not wanting to rise from the sanctuary that he found under the sheets. He peeked out from the covers scowling at North as he grumbled, "I WAS sleeping well until you so rudely interrupted me."

Sleep was another unnecessary pleasure that Pitch didn't often partake in unless he was extremely bored and in need of an escape from his personal reality. Being the Nightmare King meant that when he did sleep, he was plagued by his own personal fears, so that was typically reason enough to avoid it since it left him feeling more miserable than usual. This was the first time though that he could ever remember waking outside of a cold sweat, and as rude of an awakening as North had given him, he'd definitely felt worse, not that he'd tell North that.

"Ah! That's nice to hear." North said with a grin, not really paying too much attention to what Pitch had said. "Here is list of work I expect you to do." He stopped waving his cutlass around long enough to hand Pitch a piece of paper. "You may begin it any time. If you have questions, one of the yetis will help. Or you can come to me."

Pitch glanced at the long list scowling in distaste with the myriad of items North had listed, tidy up the toy stations, replace burnt out light bulbs, bake cookies… the list went on and on with a number of useless tasks that Pitch saw himself to be well above, but not wishing a confrontation he replied, "I don’t think such simple tasks require questioning, but I'll keep that in mind." What Pitch did pick up on was the clause ‘you can begin anytime,’ to which he planned would be never since there had been no set time limit.

"Good!" North replied cheerily. "Now, if you excuse me, I have great deal to do myself." he said as he exited the room.

Pitch watched North depart, and as soon as the man had lumbered down the hall and out of earshot, he crumpled up and tossed the lengthy list onto the plate from the night before as he threw the blankets back up over his head not wanting to get out of bed.

He lay there under the covers awake for several hours just listening to the bustle of North’s manor until finally deciding he was bored and rose from the bed. Might as well take in the grounds and see all points of access for a future escape because although Pitch didn’t wish to go back to the nightmare realm, he also had no plans of staying at North’s to be his slave. Certainly he couldn’t really expect him to do such inane duties to appease some sort of made up balance to make up for his past ‘misdeeds.’ Preposterous. The elves and yeti tended to eye him warily, their nervousness around him brought a smile to his face as he passed, hands clasped behind his back and head held high. He was tempted to scare them, it would be too easy, but no, that could come later.

Pitch spent several more hours moving about North’s premises surprised by the vastness of
the place. He was careful though to avoid North’s personal offices finally heading back to where he’d been designated a room. He froze though when he realized the tray that had been brought to him last night was now gone… along with the list. That wasn’t good. A small panic began to stem within him as he was sure that not having the list at all would denote that he’d had no intention of ever doing any of it, and asking for a new list was out of the question. He had to find out where they would have taken it and fast!

Not looking at where he was going, Pitch backed out of the room and quickly turned around, slamming right into Toothiana, “Oh!” the fairy cried in surprise, regaining her balance and fluttering higher up in the air. “I’m sooo sorry!”

Pitch had jumped nervously thinking he had bumped into North, but upon spinning around and only seeing it was Tooth, he snarled in annoyance, “Watch where you’re going.” He straightened starting to ignore her and move down the hall when it hit him that the fairy might be of some use as he turned back towards her and asked her pointedly, “Did you see who took away my tray?”

Tooth nodded. “One of the yetis took it. I thought you were done with it.”

“Well you shouldn’t make assumptions,” he huffed his worry starting to build, “I… I left something on top of that plate I need to get back, if I’ve lost it, it’s your fault,” he snapped.

"Wait!” Tooth cried out. It was too late, though. Pitch was already halfway down the hallway.

Pitch stormed down the stairs towards the kitchen bursting in through the double doors fuming at the staff as he barked, "Alright, which one of you flea bags cleared my dishes.” His eyes shifted around the room as the yetis stared blankly at him and then each other finally shrugging in confusion. A couple of them seemingly taking offense to Pitch’s name calling and throwing their arms up growling out their irritation to which Pitch couldn’t care less about.

Pitch began scanning the kitchen over now looking for the specified plate and cup he’d used, but there were so many dishes that it was an impossible task. Grabbing up one of the elves by their pointy hat, Pitch held it up to eye level giving it a look of disdain as he brought the elf to the big trash bin where all the plates looked to be dumped before getting washed, "You there; sift around for a crumpled piece of paper, and don't stop until you find it.” With that said, Pitch tossed the elf none to nicely into the bin standing over the bin as he watched on impatiently.

Toothiana finally caught up with Pitch, stopping outside the kitchen door and looking inside. She was both horrified and puzzled when she saw what the nightmare king was doing, “Pitch,” she cried out, “what are you doing?” she fluttered up behind him, her eyes darting between Pitch and the elf.

Not really seeing Toothinia as a threat he replied dryly, "I'm making use of the help. It's not like these nitwits are good for much else."

Tooth continued to look gravely worried, apparently thinking Pitch had gone madder than he already was. “But… what are you looking for?”

He narrowed his eyes as the elf stopped to look up at her pitifully, and Pitch growled making the little elf jump, "Get back to looking!” He then turned to Toothinia annoyed with her interference, "What business is it of yours?"
Tooth looked from the elf to Pitch. “Well, I found this on your plate right before the yeti took it away.” She pulled out a piece of crumpled paper that had been smoothed out and folded over. “Is this what you’re looking for? It looks like North’s handwriting, so I was going to give it to him.”

Pitch’s eyes widened as he snatched the paper from her, “You had it all along and didn’t tell me?” He scowled at her as if she’d done so on purpose to vex him.

“I was going to tell you, but you ran off before I could.” she scowled back. She nodded at the elf. “Now, get him out of there.”

Pitch gave a sidelong look at the elf sneering at the thought of putting his hands in there before smirking at Toothinia, “No. They’re spry, he can get out on his own, and if you’re so concerned, you can do it yourself.” Taking his list and tucking it in his robe, Pitch started towards the double doors to leave the kitchen.

Huffing, Toothiana flew over and grabbed hold of Pitch’s shoulder and pulled him back, “No, you put him in there, so you take him out.” she said, turning him around to face the bin.

Pitch prickled at the suddenness of her twisting him bodily back to face the bin, he brushed her off, “Don’t touch me.” Looking at the elf scrambling ineffectively to get out of the bin brought a smile to his face as he turned back to Toothinia a glint in his eye as his smile broadened. He reached out for the bin tipping it over violently which sent it rolling across the floor to hit the wall across the room where the elf that had been trapped inside tumbled out stepping in dizzy circles, “Done. Now leave me alone,” Pitch remarked coldly as he proceeded to once more leave the kitchen.

“Hey, that wasn’t nice.” said Tooth, flying over to once more grab hold of Pitch. The yetis watched as she pulled him over to an empty corner of the kitchen. Here she shoved him forward so that his face was pushed into the corner. “You stay there until you learn to behave.”

It took a moment for her action to truly register to him as he was pushed into the corner, and then the brimming irritation he had had turned to white hot anger as he whipped back around looking positively livid, “I’m not nice in case you haven’t realized! I’m the boogeyman! And you,” he pointed at her heatedly, “will back away, or so help me, I’ll make you regret it!” as he said this, he lunged forward to intimidate her.

Toothiana flew backwards, almost bumping into a table. She was about to say something to Pitch when another voice filled the room, “What goes on in here?” North’s booming voice came from the doorway of the kitchen. All of the yetis immediately pointed to Pitch.

Hearing the bellowing man quelled Pitch’s anger in short order knowing this wasn’t going to go over well with the big man. He glowered at the pointing fingers, but recovered quickly as his face paled at being caught like this. He cleared his throat kneading his hands in his nervousness, “It’s nothing. We… just had a bit of a disagreement, but everything has been worked out now… isn’t that right Toothinia,” he gave her a strained smile now hoping that she’d stick to her earlier stance surely knowing what North would do to him from last night’s group discussion.

North studied Pitch a few moments, and then turned to Tooth. “Is this true?”

When Toothiana gathered herself together again, she cleared her throat. “Uh… No, not exactly. I mean, yes, we did have a disagreement. But he started it when he put one of the elves in that bin of trash and refused to take him out. When I told him to do it, he turned it over. So I put him in the corner, and… then you came in.”

North turned a scowl to Pitch. “And why did you put elf in trash bin?”
Pitch cringed when Toothinia gave North all the details especially the corner bit which made him flush in humiliation, at least she told the story mildly, he could recover from this. He let out a small tense laugh, “Uh, the little guy was helping was all… I… thought it would have been more fun for him to roll out of the trash… like a roller coaster or some other amusing ride you people seem to enjoy so much.” He wondered if it sounded as lame to North as it did to his own ears, but he didn’t really have any other excuse on such short notice.

“He’s lying,” Tooth said, shaking her head. “He put the elf in there because he was looking for…”

He spun in front of Toothinia, so that his face was hidden from North as he grabbed her hands giving her a nervous smile, “…For my list! I misplaced it, but I found it with Toothinia’s help. Thank you my dear, I’m quite grateful.”

Toothiana looked momentarily confused, then she smiled and nodded her head. She wasn't sure why, but she couldn't resist responding to Pitch's sudden gratitude, not to mention change in attitude.

"You're welcome," she said, patting Pitch's cheek. "That's it, North, he was looking for the list. But I had it. Pitch didn't know that."

North looked at Pitch suspiciously, stroking his beard.

"I am glad you found it again," he said with a smile. "Speaking of which. You should be almost halfway done with work, yes?"

Pitch visibly relaxed when he heard her going along with him grateful that she hadn’t fed him to the wolves, although his relief was short lived when North questioned about the status of the chore list. He swallowed hard turning back to North with an air of surprise, “Actually I… was thinking about asking Toothinia about baking those same cookies from last night.” He wasn't about to admit he'd never even started on the list. He supposed that he was going to have to bully some of those ankle biters to do the chores for him when none of the Guardians were there to rat him out or get in his way.

North's face relaxed and a large smile spread across his lips. "Ah! That is good. When you finish list, you come to my office." With that, North turned and left the kitchen.

Pitch let out a breath he hadn’t realized he'd been holding as he watched North leave. Good riddance he thought as the scowl returned to his face. He pulled out the wrinkled list looking over the contents once more; he had to make progress on that list especially if North expected it to be halfway done and report back to him after its completion. It was already early afternoon now as he'd squandered most of the day doing nothing.

He would work to get the elves going as soon as he got Toothinia making the cookies. He turned to Toothinia now expectantly, "You do know how to bake cookies I hope."

"No, I'm afraid not." Tooth replied, shaking her head sadly. "The yetis do. But... aren't you supposed to do it yourself? That IS a list of work North gave you to do, isn't it?"

He gave her a withering glare, "I don't speak gibberish. Besides, there was never any stipulation I couldn't get help." He didn't add that he had no intention of doing any of them but just delegating the task to someone else.

“Why don’t you do the other things on the list first and come back to the cookies?” Tooth
Looking down his nose at her, Pitch gave Toothinia a side long glance without remarking further before turning to leave. Pitch moved towards the kitchen door as the wheels in his head began to turn on how he was going to get North’s list done. He’d just have to come back later when Toothinia had left to intimidate one of these ingrates to make the cookies for him, in fact, he needed to lose the fairy quickly if he was going to make any progress on this list. Pitch was sure that she would get in his way actually expecting him to do the chores himself, as if that was going to happen!

Toothiana flew up beside Pitch, still smiling. She followed him down the hallway, hovering at eye level, “So what are you going to do first? I mean, instead of the cookies.” she gave him a big grin. “You know, you might want to think about tidying up the toy stations. I’m pretty sure they could use your help over there right now.”

Pitch cut eyes at her glowering at the fairy’s persistence, and when she was still following him by the end of the hallway, he stopped addressing her coolly, “Don’t you have somewhere else to be? Some teeth to collect perhaps?”

Tooth shook her head, “No. It’s day right now. We finished collecting teeth early this morning.” she flew in front of him. “I have the whole day to do whatever. Isn’t that great? I can spend it with you! We could chat, or something. After you get done with the work North gave you to do. So how far along are you?”

Pointedly ignoring her question he clipped, “It’s night somewhere; besides, I’m busy. I don’t have time for social gatherings, so it’d probably be best if you find somewhere else to be other than bothering me.” there was an edge to Pitch’s voice now trying his best to drive her away. He wasn’t going to make any headway forcing the chores on to Santa’s little gophers with her buzzing over his shoulder like this.

“I have my little fairies taking care of that. I do, after all, have to rest sometime.” her smile dropped. “Well, if you feel that way about it, I’ll leave you to your work. But when you finish, find me,” she cautiously leaned forward and lifted Pitch’s top lip to look at his teeth again.

Pitch stiffened when she grabbed his lip shaking his head forcefully, “Will you stop that!” He gave her a look of wary annoyance, “What is it with you probing around in my mouth?” He was relieved that she planned to leave him be, and he had no intention of finding her once he’d finished getting North’s chores completed.

“Sorry,” she grinned sheepishly. “I’m the Tooth Fairy. I just… can’t help it.” Feeling slightly embarrassed, Tooth said nothing more and flew away in the opposite direction.

Pitch took out the list once he was out of line of sight thinking back on what Toothinia said about the toy room. He supposed that would be the most noticeable to North and should be tackled first while North was still quite busy and out of the way. Moving down to the toy room, his lip curled looking about to see stuffing from teddy bears and other stuffed animals littering the floor as well as miscellaneous parts and scraps left over from toy construction. The room bustled with loud noises that struck a chord of irritation to hear them over and over again. How could these creatures stand this level of noise and chaos on a daily basis?

He glided into the room looking about the masses working diligently only glancing up at him but otherwise not deviating from their already set course. He frowned, obviously he couldn’t use them, and he was growing frustrated until he saw several elves scampering around one of the work benches chasing each other obviously not of any foreseeable use to the workshop. He stuck his foot
out tripping the one in the front, and the three running after him piled up in succession into a heap as they all collided falling into one another and staring up at him curiously. He gave them a malicious smile, and they quailed eyes wide with fear.
It hadn’t taken Pitch long to scare the elves into running about picking up all the debris around each of the benches as he watched on diligently, hands clasped behind his back as he paced the length of the room until the task was completed. He shooed the elves out of the room once they’d finished the task panting and bedraggled as Pitch was quite the task master hot on their heels whenever they started to slow or become distracted. They moved along the hallways completing tasks as they went, and when the elves that he was using grew too weary, Pitch intimidated a different set of them to create a refreshed crew as he moved through the list quite pleased with his progress. The added benefit of causing these poor creatures quite a bit of fear just by his imposing nature brought Pitch a little comfort despite the fact that he was effectively still a prisoner.

He was quite pleased that within five hours’ time, he’d managed to complete the entirety of the list outside of the cookies, and his success lifted his spirits as he moved back towards the kitchen merely grabbing an assortment of cookies from the cooling pans eating one himself as he made his way to North’s office. The door was ajar and the room seemed quiet as he moved to the door to peak his head warily inside North’s office, “Hello?”

North turned around in his chair, a wide smile appearing when his eyes landed on Pitch. He set aside the pieces of paper he held and motioned for Pitch to come in. "I was just about to check on you. You have completed your tasks, yes?"

Pitch moved fluidly into the room dumping the plate unceremoniously with a loud thump on the desk in front of North before reaching into his robe to pull out the list as he tossed it with disdain next to the plate, “Everything on your not so little list has been completed.” He wrinkled his nose, “Now that your quotas have been met, I trust I can retire to my room to get away from all of…,” he motioned with a wide arch of his arms to emphasize the surrounding areas, “this.”

North looked at the cookies skeptically, picking up one between his thumb and index finger to put back on the plate. He brushed the crumbs off his desk and reached to pick up the list, looking it over and nodding approvingly, “I am pleased.” he said at last. “Yes, you are free to do as you wish, but I think Tooth looks for you.”

A streak of nervousness ran through Pitch as North hesitantly examined one of the cookies; could he tell the difference? Or did he just think he’d contaminated them? A small smile tugged at his lips at the thought that North should have been glad Pitch hadn’t made him the cookies personally as he’d have had to add a little something extra like yeti hair… for that extra special Christmas flavor.

The mention of Tooth made him subconsciously roll his eyes; what was it going to take for her to stop pestering him? He had been quite rude to her, but it served her right for getting in his way. She must have had a laugh at his expense while he’d been frantically looking for that blasted list.
This made him frown again ready to depart from North’s presence, his oppressor and jailer. He planned to shut himself away in his bedroom that had become his sanctuary from everything else in this wretched place. Seeing North was looking at him as if awaiting a comment, he muttered dryly, “Hmm… yes; well if that will be all, I’ll be on my way.”

“Ah, ah,” said North, picking up and handing Pitch a new piece of paper, “Here,”

Pitch sneered taking the piece of paper, “What’s this?” he turned it around to scrutinize it.

“It is your list of work for tomorrow.” North replied, pushing the plate of cookies to the side.

Pitch’s frown deepened, of course North wanted him to labor away his days here. It was a task in itself to keep those little ignoramus elves on point, and Pitch didn’t relish the thought of having to do so daily. His hand gripped the list in barely contained rage as he growled, “So this is to be my life here… daily servitude as if I were one of your underlings?”

North scowled dangerously at Pitch. “I thought we already talked about this and came to understanding. It is punishment set in place to take place of you going back to hole.”

Pitch gulped taking a step back at the look North afforded him, "No, I merely meant that every day would be the same… no breaks in the routine… You were perfectly clear." Pitch lowered his eyes not able to meet North’s gaze as a spark of last night's humiliating experience flashed through his mind.

“I do not expect you to do same work every day.” North waved toward the list. “It is different tasks.” he studied Pitch closely. “We all have jobs that are expected of us, Pitch. It is life. Besides, the work you do does not take all day. When you’re not working, you are free to do as you wish. If you choose to spend time moping in your room and feeling sorry for self that is your choice.”

Pitch narrowed his eyes at the mention of moping, which he’d never see himself as doing, seeing it more as escaping his situation and venting his frustration in private. Feeling on the verge of losing his temper, Pitch spun on his heel growling under his breath as he stormed out the door, "I know what my job is fat man, but it is apparent that you don't."

Quick as a flash, North was on Pitch before he got halfway down the hall. He grabbed onto the other man’s arm and dragged him back into the office, slamming the door shut behind them. North pushed Pitch forward into the room and stood motionless between him and the door. It was clear that he was giving himself a few minutes before addressing Pitch.

Pitch was taken off guard by the suddenness that North had grabbed him and the manner in which he’d so quickly dragged him back to his office. When he was released, Pitch stumbled backwards into the heavy desk as North slammed the door. He wore a startled expression as he shrank back further across the length of the desk to put distance between himself and North. He couldn’t have possibly heard him could he? Pitch was almost certain he’d said it low enough to keep it to himself. Maybe slamming North’s door had been a bit much, and so Pitch held up a hand in supplication, “Now North, I may have gotten a bit carried away with the door, but I didn’t mean anything by it!”

“It wasn’t door.” North shook his head, and pointed at his ears. “This ‘fat man’ has good hearing.”

Pitch quailed letting out a nervous chuckle, “I was just letting off a little steam… it was a
hard first day and all. Surely you can cut me a little slack for a bit of venting?"

North remained standing in the same spot, silently regarding Pitch. Finally, he unfolded his
arms and pointed a finger in the nightmare lord's direction. "I will let you go this once. But just know
you tread very thin line. If I hear more backtalk..." North wagged his finger.

Pitch shook his head straining a smile, “No! No more backtalk!” Pitch was relieved to hear
North was going to let his outburst slide, and he made a mental note to keep his thoughts to himself
in the vicinity of the Cossack. Smoothing his hair back Pitch cleared his throat as he pushed himself
off the desk, “I’ll... let you get back to whatever it is you need to be doing now.”

North gave a nod, turned, and opened the door for Pitch, waiting to the side for him to pass.
Just as Pitch was about to walk out into the hallway, North brought his hand down in a sharp swat
across Pitch’s backside sending him stumbling forward, “Consider that a reminder of what will
happen if you ever forget.”

Pitch had begun walking forward with his head lowered to avoid eye contact and hide the
glare he had etched on his face, but when North’s hand connected in a stinging slap, his head shot up
and his back arched as he jetted forward covering his rear to avoid any more potential swats as he
looked over his shoulder mortified. He balled his fists at his side biting back the furious comment he
wanted to yell and instead stormed off towards his room wanting to get as far away from Claus as he
could manage.

By the time he made it back to his room, he was seething. How dare he treat him like this!
He had managed to hold his temper in check when one of the elves passed by although the mental
image of punting it across the hall did cross his mind. It didn’t do much to quell his anger, and when
he’d finally made it back to his room, he slammed the door grabbing one of the wooden ornaments
off the dresser and flinging it at the wall. He hadn’t expected it to break apart into several pieces of
splintered wood, but he supposed the force he threw it at was palpable to the rage he was feeling. His
rage quickly dissipated at the sight of the broken object, and he moved over quickly sweeping up the
contents into his hands and wildly trying to fit the fragmented pieces back together, but the ornament
was not going to comply. Looking around for a trash can and not seeing one, Pitch instead shoved
the pieces under the mattress of his bed. He’d have to get rid of them later and try to find a
replacement before anyone noticed it was missing.

Pitch leaned against the far wall letting himself sink to the ground now as he pulled his
knees to his chest. How did he become this unlucky? He had thought the loss of his powers was bad
before, but this was an all-new low even for him. He laid his head on his knees and sighed feeling
quite sorry for himself.

A tiny knock sounded on the door.

Pitch raised his head a moment before yelling, “Go away!” He wanted to be left in peace,
and these guardians plagued him at every turn. He pulled his knees in tighter resting his chin on his
knees as he continued to smolder over his predicament.

“Pitch?” Tooth’s voice came from the other side of the door.

It was the annoying fairy, Pitch had assumed from the light tapping it had been her, and as
such decidedly ignored her. Maybe if he just stayed silent she’d wander off, and so a long pause
ensued.

"Pitch?" Tooth again called. "Are you all right?"
He scowled at her persistence continuing to ignore her. Surely she’d take the hint and finally leave.

Tooth knocked again. "I know you're in there. I saw you walk in."

Letting out a frustrated sigh Pitch stood making his way over to the door and opening it a crack. He peered through the crack with his brow drawn down in frustration, “I don’t want any company; this is my time, and I want to be alone, so please flitter off somewhere else because you’re not welcome here.”

Tooth looked at Pitch with concern, and then without a word she held up a tray of cookies and hot cocoa.

He was about to say another nasty remark, but he hesitated face falling as he regarded her carefully, “Why do you want to be around me so badly? I’ve been nothing but terse with you. After everything I’ve done to you in particular, I just don’t understand why you’re being so nice to me.”

She shrugged. “Maybe because you're a guest? Maybe because I feel sorry for you? There are many reasons.” She smiled, offering the tray again. 'I'll leave you alone, but I just thought you might want this. You were walking down the hall a while ago like something was wrong, so I just wanted to see if you were okay."

Pitch frowned; the last thing he wanted to hear was that she felt sorry for him. He wasn’t that pathetic was he? He stiffened, “You don’t need to worry about me; I’m just fine! But if you must know, there is something very wrong with you people, you have no right to keep me here like this no matter what you think I might or might not do. Your stupid man in the moon was the one to release me to begin with, so who are you to go back on what your master has already decreed?! Keep your gifts!” He slammed the door in her face breathing heavy with the emotion he felt.

Toothiana looked stunned as she continued to flutter outside Pitch’s door. The rudeness she had expected. It was Pitch, after all. But she hadn’t expected to hear him say that it had been the moon that released him. She wasn't sure what it meant, but she knew it had to be important. Quickly, she flew off.

Hearing the beat of her wings finally trail off into the distance, Pitch relaxed as he leaned into the door closing his eyes. Finally, he was alone to contemplate. He pushed off the door and began pacing thinking about what he’d do next. There had to be a way to get out of the North Pole as one day of this was enough for him to know there was no way he could deal with this kind of existence. He’d walked quite a bit of the grounds, but the place was a veritable fortress. He’d have to bide his time he knew as they would surely be watching him closely for a while.

Suddenly feeling trapped in the confines of his room, Pitch decided to leave to traverse the area a little more while he could do so without being expected to perform menial tasks. He sneered thinking about the new list to which he wanted to pull out and rip into a million pieces, but he fought the urge after the last fiasco had been more burdensome than the venting had been worth. Besides, he’d need to play along enough to keep North and the others at bay.

He continued down the hall now pleased that the majority of the noise within the building had been reduced to the chattering of passing elves and a few garbled barks from the yetis who also seemed to be unwinding. Pitch moved to the banister now looking down at the large Christmas tree that grew out of the center of the floor. During the daylight hours, the skylight had made this part of the hallway near unbearable, but now with the starlight shining in, the soft mesmeric glow of fading in and out lights cast shadows on the scene that Pitch found quite lovely to look at. Being in the dark for years and being unable to see anything at all other than sharp contrasts of light and dark bouncing
off the walls of his lair made the light harsh and unforgiving. These lights were soft and comforting, and although Pitch would never admit it out loud, he found he could appreciate the beauty in it, if only for the way the shadows added to the scene to blanket the light just enough to remain welcoming.

"Penny for your thoughts."

Pitch was taken out of his momentary trance, “Wha?” He turned to face the voice addressing him.

“Well, actually, Tooth would probably give you a penny for them, but you know what I mean.” said Jack Frost, coming out of the shadows to lean against the banister next to Pitch.

Pitch watched the boy following to turn back towards the tree and lean back over the banister, “Hmm; where to begin… nothing good I can say with certainty. You know, you could have not told them about me. Out of all you guardians, I thought if anyone could understand me, it would have been you. How very wrong I was."

"Who says I don’t? What did you want me to do?--lie?” said Jack. "Ever since our last run-in with you, North made it mandatory for us to report everything happening out in the real world. Sort of his way of making sure evil didn’t raise its head again." he nodded toward Pitch. "No offense,"

Pitch grimaced rolling his eyes, “Well I gather if I’ve given him any form of discomfort I should be pleased.” He sighed, “I don’t want to be here Jack,” he turned to look at him fully now a look of misery etched on his face, “You know I wasn’t causing any harm out there, you could bring me back… no one would have to know. I could make it look like I just escaped; no one would be the wiser.” Pitch was hamming it up playing him of course, but he hoped that he seemed sincere enough to touch a chord in Frost.

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Really, Pitch? You think you can win me over that easily? I’m a master at trickery."

Pitch looked hurt, “Trick? Does it look like I’m happy here? Would you be if you were me?” Pitch’s tone grew volatile, “You’re free Jack, I was, and now I’m not because of you! It’s your fault that I’m here now! How can you not want to help me?"

Jack thought about Pitch’s words for a few minutes, and then he turned to look at the dark man, “Are you sure it’s my fault? Or are you just looking to blame someone else because you can’t face the fact that you might have put yourself here?”

Pitch bared his teeth, “If memory serves me correctly, you, the jackalope, and the essence drainer threw me into a bag and brought me here!” Pitch’s voice raised to a yell, “You gave me no choice!”

"Pffft, join the club,” Jack rolled his eyes. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but… weren’t you supposed to be in a hole… or something? And we put you there because of your bad choices. Seems to me like you aren’t capable of making good ones.”

Jack’s words gave him pause causing Pitch to blanch as though he had been hit in the face, “Why you…” Pitch narrowed his eyes hatefully at Jack now, “I’m capable of making my own choices, whether you believe they are good or not is not of consequence.” He shook his head, “Why am I wasting my time debating my actions to you. I don’t really care what you think.” As he said this he turned back towards his room deciding he was tired of the scenery and the unwanted interruptions
to his peace and quiet.

Jack watched Pitch leave, sighing and shaking his head sadly, "Maybe Bunny was right." he said to himself.

Pitch made his way back to his room feeling worse than when he'd left it. How dare Jack insinuate he was incapable of making good choices! Just because he wasn't a 'guardian' or wasn't falling in line with their ideals didn't mean his choices were wrong, they were just... different.

Pitch had said he hadn't cared what Jack thought, but that wasn't fully true. He had heard what the boy had said as he'd walked away, even though he'd pretended not to. The words had stung since he had seen he and Jack to be kindred spirits, but now he felt more alone than ever.

He made it back to his room and shut the door with a soft click staring around the empty space. Not having anything else better to do, Pitch climbed into his bed curling into a ball as he let the day's events play back through his mind.
The next morning, North burst through the door of Pitch’s room like he had done before, “Rise an’ shine, Pitch!” he said cheerily. “Is new day! Time to get up!”

Pitch narrowed his eyes at North, he hadn’t gone to sleep, and North's exuberance only served to irritate him, "The sun is just now coming up. Does your day always start at the crack of dawn? I'm not exactly a morning person."

North regarded Pitch a few minutes, and then he smiled. “In that case, I give you another hour. Then I expect you up and starting on work.” With that, he turned and left, closing the door behind him.

Pitch watched him go the sour look on his face never leaving. The thought to just remain in bed occurred to him, but since North had come in, the thought of him coming back to make sure Pitch was getting going was more unappealing than just getting up to remove himself from any potential conversations. Besides, it seemed like North was busiest in the morning, and Pitch wanted to get his elf crew together and be done with the list well before the big man came lumbering about looking for him.

This time however the elves were scarce learning to avoid Pitch due to previous encounters. Even so, Pitch was able to scare together a crew and doggedly pushed the group he had to finish the chores in three hours leaving the rest of the day for Pitch to do as he pleased. He was quite satisfied that he'd been able to move through the list with such ease even though the little morons had to be corralled and threatened on a constant basis. It was almost more exhausting trailing after them than it would have been to just do the chores himself, but Pitch had no intention of getting his hands dirty doing work for North. It was the principle of the matter after all. They were equals, and Pitch refused to lower himself to the level of a servant for that fat man.

Having ample time meant that Pitch could now explore more of the grounds in search of escape routes and an overall understanding of the place’s layout. He walked about now casually taking in the sights and mentally taking note of what he saw.

Shortly after North left Pitch’s room; he called a meeting of the Guardians. After Toothiana told him she had something important to say, he felt all of them needed to hear it at the same time. North walked around his office, looking from Jack to Sandy and then to Tooth, who was nervously hovering near his desk, “Where is Bunny?” North said aloud. “He’s late.”

As if hearing his summons, Bunnymund came pouncing in the door that had been opened by one of North’s yetis. He was shivering from head to toe giving a quick shake to release the speckled layer of snow that stuck to his fur, “Jeez la wheeze! I’m freezing my tootsies off!” He hoped directly to the fire holding a foot out as he addressed Toothinia, “I REALLY hope you calling us out here was important. I was in the middle of mixing my next year’s batch of dye.”

“Is it,” Tooth answered. She glanced around the room to see everyone was present, then looked at North. He nodded, waving for her to continue. She fluttered to the front of the desk. “There’s something you should know about Pitch. He told me last night when I visited his room. He said that the Man in the Moon released him from the hole.”
North's eyebrows shot upward.

"What?" Jack gasped.

Sandy formed a question mark above his head as he looked around the room.

Bunny waved off the news, “Ya mean you called me here because of something Pitch said? Pfft! He’s probably just lying through those pointy teeth of his. Come on, do ya really believe the man in the moon would release him? I mean, why would he?”

“He sounded sincere,” said Tooth.

“Practiced liars often do; am I right?” Bunny countered looking around the room to get a gauge on everyone else’s opinion on the matter.

Sandy looked up quizzically at the moon, and it seemed to be shining brightly, but offered no answers.

"Now, let’s not be hasty,” said North, holding his hands up. “What if Pitch is telling truth?”

“If he is telling the truth, then… what does that mean, exactly?” Jack’s brow furrowed as he struggled to understand. “Did the moon choose him to be a guardian?”

"Don’t know, but it is interesting,” said North as he became lost in thought.

Bunny shook his head, “No. No way mate! Manny is not that foolish!” He was looking around the room incredulously, “A guardian! Seriously?! I mean with Jack, I had my doubts,” He turned to Jack apologetically, “No offense mate,” before turning back to the others, “But Pitch? How can he be a guardian when all he does is try to undue everything we work so hard to uphold?”

"None taken," said Jack, a smirk forming on his lips.

“If the moon didn’t choose Pitch to be a guardian, then why was he released?” said Tooth. “Assuming he is telling the truth. It’s not like the moon to do something like that without a good reason. I mean, after all this is Pitch we’re talking about.”

"It is curious," North continued to ponder.

The moon shown brighter now shooting moonbeams in through the skylight that touched each of the guardians. Those beams moved across the floor to depict a silhouette of a heart; the strands of light moved from each direction where it touched the guardians towards the heart that took the shape of Pitch as North had seen him that morning curled in a ball before the light waned and finally faded.

Bunny seemingly confused barked at the sky, “What is that even supposed to mean?”

Jack shook his head, not having a clue. Tooth shrugged.

"What do you make of it?” North said, turning to Sandy.

Sandy looked unsure placing a heart over his head and a question mark before shrugging and depicting a picture of the Guardians giving Pitch a hug.

Bunnymund frowned as his ears laid down, "Love Pitch? As if anyone could love him.”

Sandy shook a chiding finger at Bunnymund a look of strong disapproval etched on his
A smile played across North’s face when he saw Sandy’s guess. It seemed like the right interpretation of what the moon was saying, “Perhaps Sandy is right,” he said. “Maybe Man in Moon wishes us to love him. It’s only explanation that makes sense.” he turned a playful look to Bunny. “And you will be first to give him hug.”

Bunnymund's eyes went wide jaw dropping as he shook his head vehemently, "Oh no, I don't think so! You can get all lovey dovey with Pitch, but that ain't gonna be me!"

North chuckled.

Jack burst out laughing.

Sandy smiled brightly and dropped down to give Bunny a hug of his own.

Bunnymund accepted the hug and gave one back, "I'll tell you what mate, I'll give you one, and you can pass it on," he sighed slumping a bit, "I guess if Manny wants me to have hope for Pitch, I'll try not to... think so negatively about him."

“It will be rough road for all of us.” North nodded. “Pitch is not easy to love, as we well know. But I think we need to keep going with all of this. If Moon wants us to love Pitch, then it reassures me that we are on right track.”

Toothiana nodded. “But… what if he doesn’t want us to love him? I’ve tried spending time with him and talking with him, but he has nothing to do with me. He just locks himself up in his room and sulks.”

“Give him time,” said North. “We must first break walls he has put up. That in itself will take time. Right now it’s best we take it slow. We have to keep in mind that Pitch has been alone and kept people away for very long time. All of this is new to him. Yes, he will be rude, he will be hateful. This is Pitch. Just don’t let what he says get to you.”

Bunny scowled as he huffed, "He'd better not be rude ta me, I can get rude right back. Manny says he needs love, but the majority of it is likely going ta be tough love if'n you ask me. Speaking of," Bunny looked up to North, "how's all, "he held up his paws making quotations, "that going?

North’s eyebrows rose and his lips displayed an amused smile. “It is going good.” he nodded. “He didn’t like the talk we had the first night, but I think I got through to him a little. I don’t expect it to be last time. I’m sure he will have to go through more before we are done with all of this.”

Toothiana rolled her eyes and shook her head, turning away from the current conversation.

“Sooo… you’ve actually… done it more than the warning you gave him in front of us?” Jack asked, he was trying hard to hide his amusement.

“Yes,” North replied. “He was being difficult during our chat.”

Sandy looked curious lifting a brow but otherwise made no further gestures.

Bunnymund however did not hold back as he burst out with a laugh, “Oh man ta have been a fly on the wall for that conversation!” He shook his head still tittering from the hilarity of the thought of North spanking Pitch afforded him.
North cleared his throat. “I should remind you that we are doing this for reason.” he turned to look at each Guardian with seriousness in his eyes. “Let us not lose focus or let our amusement show while we are around Pitch. This situation is sensitive. If he knew some of us were laughing over it, it would do great harm.”

“I understand,” Jack nodded, stifling another giggle. He glanced at Bunny.

"You won't have to worry about that when it comes to me." said Tooth. "I still fail to understand what's so funny."

Bunnymund frowned losing all his mirth as his ears laid flat in his shame, “Alright, alright, I get it. It's hard not to find it funny imagining it, but I suppose it isn’t going to be helping the cause and all.” He straightened now ears shooting up right as he gave a curt nod, “No more funny business from this point on.”

An awkward silence followed. Then North clapped his hands once, “Well! If no one has anything more to say, I think this meeting is over.”

Bunny seemed to sigh in relief, “Glad that’s all settled; I’ve got to get back to my dye project. If it doesn’t keep flowing properly, it’ll cover me eggs with a horrible consistency come next Easter.” He gave a wave, “I’ll see myself out,” as he left, Bunny was muttering to himself about not wanting to brave the snow again anytime soon.

Sandy's eyes were starting to droop now that the seriousness had left the conversation and giving a yawn, he stretched giving a small wave as he floated towards the skylight to depart himself.

North smiled as he watched Sandy leave, and then he turned to open the door. Without saying a word, Jack Frost and Tooth exited the room to go about their own business, "Hm," North said to himself as he hesitated at the door. "I think I shall look in on Pitch. See how he is doing."

Pitch had made his way to the upper deck where it seemed industrial sized windmills generated the power structure of North’s shop. He studied the construction of them quite in awe of their massiveness and power. This must have taken years to perfect he thought admiringly. Of course he did have a veritable army Pitch thought sourly. If he'd had so many minions, he was more than sure that he’d have snuffed out the guardians by now, but his minions had taken centuries to construct and gather through tiresome nightly efforts of gathering small bits of Sandy’s dreamsand. Everything had to be so much more difficult for him he thought a pout forming on his face.

Moving back to regain focus on the windmills, Pitch studied their structures trying to grasp how they generated the power supply and more so when the time was right, how he could disable them long enough to form a distraction to aide in his escape. It was obvious that Frost would be of no help and that North had no intentions of setting him free any time soon, and this was simply unacceptable.

As North walked down the hall, he came upon a curious sloshing sound, and upon further inspection one of his elves was seen bobbing on a sponge tiredly holding on for dear life having obviously been bobbing for quite some time.

North's brow furrowed. "What IS this?" he said.

The elf splashed about lifting his arms as North pulled him out of the bucket and the little elf panted in exhaustion before sitting up and grumbled out a string of obvious irritation.

"Calm down, calm down." North said as he grabbed a towel to dry the elf off. "Who did
this to you?"

The elf made a theatrical show of imitating Pitch scaring them and then cracking a whip before pointing at the bucket and pressing his hands against his back as he pouted at Santa in an obvious show of being sore.

“I see…” North said, a spark of anger showing in his eyes. “Worry not, the problem shall be dealt with.” he put the elf down on the floor and stormed out of the room and down the hallway. “Pitch! Where are you?” he bellowed as loud as he could, looking down one side of the hall and then the other before he continued walking in the direction he had been headed in. “Pitch!” he again shouted.

Pitch had been moving back down the stairs when he heard North bellowing for him. He rolled his eyes letting out a sigh. “Oh what on Earth do you want now?” Pitch muttered in agitation as he made his way slowly down the hall rounding the bend casually where North came into view. “No need to shout, I’m right here North,” Pitch stated dryly as he glided towards North with his hands clasped behind his back and his chin held high.

North stopped in front of Pitch. He glared at him and struggled to keep his temper under control, trying to act as casual as he could under the circumstance, “Where have you been?” he asked, calmly.

Pitch frowned, “I was walking about the grounds in my free time. You did say that getting your list finished meant I could do as I wished, so that was what I was doing.”

“Is that so?” North looked at Pitch skeptically, knowing full well he was lying. “Then why did I just see elf in one of the rooms down hall doing a job I assigned to you?”

Registered shock played across Pitch’s face momentarily, as he was quite sure they had finished all the chores before moving on to another one. Looking back to North, he forced a strained smile pulling out the list, “I… I don’t know what you’re talking about. The list has been finished! If there was an elf doing one of them, he must have been doing it of his own accord. They’re not very bright after all.” Pitch had grown tense and rigid now as he watched North carefully.

"They might not be bright, but they are still smart enough to know when they are being used." North leaned forward, and grabbed a hold of Pitch’s arm, and dragged him down the hallway to the room where the elf was still standing in the middle of the floor looking quite grumpy. Stopping in the doorway, North pointed to Pitch as he addressed the elf, “Is this him?”

“Wait!” Pitch called out lamely and was ignored as North grabbed him. Pitch grew more nervous by the second as he was tugged down the hallway, and when he saw the drenched elf he gave it a menacing glare in hopes of intimidating it into silence, but the fact that he was being hauled along by the bicep did nothing for this attempt as the elf glared right back shaking his head vigorously as the bell jingled enthusiastically.

Pitch’s throat went dry as he stumbled to stand, “Now wait a minute! You’re just going to blindly take his word? How do you know he’s not just trying to get you upset with me?”

North turned an angry face to Pitch. "I know my own elves, Pitch. They would not do such thing." he turned to address the elf. "You may go." When the elf walked past them and disappeared down the hallway, North turned his attention back to Pitch. "Now, I want you to go to your room. I will be there shortly to deal with you. And remember... no tricks. You had better be in room when I get there." He let go of Pitch's arm.
Pitch just stared dumbfounded at first as the implications of what North stated sunk in. He of course kept his mouth shut as the big man trundled off, but he most certainly had no plans of ‘going to his room’ to await punishment. Was the man insane? He had to be insane, but where was he going to go? Without any of his powers, there was nowhere to hide, and he hadn’t seen enough of the grounds to have a solid idea of where he could even attempt to escape. This was looking grim, but then he saw a flash of green zip down the corridor. It was Toothinia! Knowing that she was against the idea, Pitch hoped to persuade her to help him as he quickly moved towards her, “Toothinia!”

Tooth stopped abruptly at hearing her name being called and looked around to see who it was. She flew back down the hall she had come from and turned the corner to see Pitch running toward her. She looked on with concern, wondering what had happened to make Pitch so frantic, “What is it? What happened?” she asked.

Pitch licked his lips all of a sudden having second thoughts as to whether involving Toothinia was a good idea, but at this juncture he didn’t have many options, so it was a risk worth taking. Hopefully her convictions on the matter would save him from North’s fury. “It... It’s North, I think he plans to do me bodily harm,” he swallowed, “Perhaps I can go to the tooth palace with you until he calms down enough to see reason?” he gave her pleading eyes hoping that she would take him away from the Pole and get him far away from North before the burly man could get a hold of him again. Pitch did not want to go through that unpleasantness ever again, and from North’s tone, he had a feeling it might be worse than the previous time. These thoughts left him with a sinking feeling in his gut like a swarm of butterflies were nesting there.

Tooth studied Pitch as she contemplated his words, “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea.” she mused. “Even though I don’t agree with the method of punishment North has chosen to use, he must have his reasons for doing it. If I took you to my place to hide you it would mean I agree with whatever you did and make me just as guilty. What have you done, Pitch?”

Pitch seemed a bit panicked that she hadn’t readily agreed as he took a glance around making sure North wasn’t in sight before he continued, “That’s just it, North called me over to him on a mere accusation without proof. One of his elves told him I’d done something, and without hesitation, he believed the little cretin. I’m not asking you to hide me, all I’m asking is that you give me sanctuary until North and I can speak with level heads as all he wants to do right now is beat me. Won’t you help me? Please Toothinia, I need you.” He let his fear show to her in hopes that it would play on her already set ideals towards the matter, and seeing him so distraught would make her finally acquiesce to his plea. Of course once there, Pitch hoped to have a chance of escape in the open terrain that was Tooth’s palace although the height of it might be something to contend with.

Unknown to Pitch, Toothiana was wise to him. Even though she felt sorry for the guy, she still knew how he worked, and thus was determined that she wasn’t going to give in to his pleading. She could tell, by the way he was acting that he had done something wrong. Not only that, but she knew North. She knew he wouldn’t punish anyone without a good reason. What’s more, he would never falsely accuse anyone of wrongdoing. He was, after all, Santa Claus. He categorized good and bad kids all the time, so he had a lot of experience with the job. She also wasn’t about to let Pitch loose in her realm. Maybe North didn’t mind him hanging around the Pole, but after the whole incident of him stealing her teeth and fairies, there was a part of her that still didn’t fully trust him, “Come with me,” she finally said, leading Pitch down the hallway and glancing back to make sure North wasn’t around.

Pitch’s heart leaped; she was going to help him after all! He visibly relaxed a small smirk playing across his face as he followed her eagerly.
Tooth led Pitch to an empty room and shut the door before she turned on him, “Do you think I’m stupid?” she said angrily. “I’m not about to take you into my realm. You stole my teeth and fairies the last time you were there, remember?”

Pitch seemed genuinely surprised by her outburst, but upon hearing she wasn’t going to help him, he glowered at her, “I remember well enough, but I thought we were moving past that… if you weren’t planning on helping me, why bring me here?” He motioned to the empty room in obvious annoyance before adding snappishly, “You could have just said your peace in the hallway instead of wasting my time.”

Tooth sighed and rolled her eyes, not exactly sure what to do with Pitch. Then she got an idea. She’d just punish him a different way and tell North she took care of it already, "We are moving past it, but you've got a long way to go before you earn back our trust." she said irritably. "That's why you're here, going through rehabilitation." she sighed again. “Now tell me. What did you do?”

It was Pitch’s turn to roll his eyes, “Yes, I know, forced rehabilitation.” He straightened now rolling his shoulders as he gave her a spiteful grin, “What did I do? Of course you would side with North, I don’t know why I even bothered talking to you.” He leaned closer to her now trying to bully her, “Even if I did do something, you’d be the last to hear about it. Now do us both a favor and move out of my way.”

“Okay, fine. Be that way then.” she huffed. She was about to tell him she was planning on helping him, but decided not to. He’d never allow it anyway, so why bother?

Seeming appeased he pushed past her opening the door as previous worry returned on how exactly he was going to avoid North. The thought of going back to his room to face the man made him gulp. No, he couldn’t do that. He had to try and escape this place, and until he could find a way to escape he needed to hide now before North came looking for him. He darted further down this corridor, this place was huge, he was sure that he could find somewhere to hide until nightfall where he could move about without detection far easier than now in the mid-morning.

“Hey, what’s the hurry?” Jack said as Pitch pushed past him.

A thrill of fear moved up the boogeyman’s spine as Jack bumped his shoulder. Seeing Jack he sighed pushing past the boy without looking at him further, “I don’t have time for you right now.” Pitch stated flatly starting walking faster trying to think of where he could go to ditch Jack now that he’d gotten rid of Toothinia.

“Whoa! Hold up.” Jack grinned, running after Pitch.

His apprehension began to coalesce with his agitation as he finally stopped with a start snapping at Jack with tightly balled fists at his side, “I want to be alone!” he stamped his foot angrily, “Now Shoo!”

“Okay, okay,” Jack held up both hands. “I get it. Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed.”

Pitch looked nervously behind him before glancing at Jack a hint of fear seen there before he bounded forward again. He knew by now that North would likely be looking for him, and that thought had his heartbeat quicken. Why did he bother trying to get help from that air-headed hummingbird! It had cost him valuable time, and bumping into Jack now only served to slow his progress further.
Jack chuckled as he ran along beside the nightmare king. “What’s wrong, Pitch? You look as though one of those nightmares of yours were chasing after you.”

Pitch glanced over to him giving him a look that was a mixture of uneasiness and contemplation. It was clear Jack wasn’t going to leave him be, and maybe as a last ditch effort, Frost might decide to help him. It was unlikely he knew, but it was worth a shot, so he confessed his voice tinged with a waver, “I… may have angered North a little, and I really would rather not see him anytime soon. I… I need to get away from here.”

“Ahhhhh,” Jack nodded, smirking. “That explains it. Judging by your reaction, I’m guessing he’s going to tan your hide pretty good if he catches up with you.”

Jack’s words stopped Pitch in his tracks like a slap to the face. His eyes widened, and his cheeks flushed at the mention of the act on the boy’s lips. Not taking too kindly to Frost making light of his situation his face took on an angry pout, “You think getting a beating is funny?” Growing frustrated he sneered as he started moving at a faster pace, “Just go away already!”

Jack shrugged, pulling himself to a stop, and looked down the hallway where the sound of heavy feet was fast approaching.

“You’d better run faster, because I think North’s coming this way.” Jack called to Pitch. He couldn’t help but smile. This was the most excitement one of their realms had had in years, except for that one year where something went wonky with one of Bunny’s new egg coloring machines and he had come to them for help while being colored head to toe in bright pink dye. It had taken a long time before it finally wore off.

“Where is he?” North’s booming voice called. Jack leaned against the hall wall and pointed in Pitch’s direction.

Pitch’s face reflected utter horror as he gasped, his terror now taking hold as the loud heavy footsteps grew closer and North’s voice thundered down the hall. He all out ran now looking behind him to see how fast North was gaining on him.

“Pitch! Stop!” North called, not really caring who was within earshot. “I told you to go to your room! The longer you run, the worse your punishment will be!”

Pitch had been so busy staring behind him that he ran smack into one of North’s yetis that hearing North call angrily down the hallway triggered its defenses as it now laid heavy hands on the light frame trapping Pitch. The yeti held Pitch with his arms to his sides as the creature lumbered forward towards North while yelling out a string of garbled barks to let North know he’d caught Pitch.

“No! Let me go you hairy ape!” Pitch all but screamed kicking at the yeti ineffectively as his attacks seemed to bounce harmlessly off the creatures thighs.

“Ah, thank you!” said North, coming to a halt in front of the yeti. “I will take him now.” He latched onto Pitch and pulled him up to standing, keeping a firm grip on both of his arms, pinning them to his sides. “That is enough!” he gave Pitch a firm shake.

Pitch was almost hyperventilating staring wide eyed at North’s dark expression. His mouth moved to reply coming up short as he was shaken. He croaked, “Okay, okay! I’ll… I was going to go back to my room. I… I… just wanted to wait long enough for you to calm down.” His forehead broke out in a beaded sweat as his fear of the man culminated with his capture, “Co… come on North… Please…” he couldn’t say it out loud especially seeing both Jack and Toothinia watching
the scene as his face flushed in embarrassment.

"I sent you to room so I COULD calm down! Now you anger me more!" North glared down at Pitch. Not bothering to say anything else since the hallway was fast filling up with curious onlookers, North turned and stormed past Tooth and Jack, dragging Pitch along with him. When North arrived at Pitch's room, he opened the door and pushed the nightmare king inside. "I am too flustered to deal with you properly now. You will stay here until I return later. And don't even think 'bout escape. You will not get past yetis." With this, North slammed the door shut.

Pitch shrank away from the door his fear had escalated to the point his heart felt like it was in his throat and his stomach was in tight knots. Once he’d heard North’s heavy footfall disappear down the hall, his hand hovered over the door knob shuddering as a wave of cold ran through him like an ice river. He leaned lightly against the door listening intently, and he could hear the soft grunts shared between the yetis that now stood guard in front of his door now. So, we’re back to this he thought worriedly thinking back on his first night. He’d only been here two nights and already North was finding a reason to punish him in this way again.

There was nowhere to go other than to just sit and wait for him to return Pitch realized as he backed timidly away from the door feeling an overwhelming sense of dread taking hold of him. North’s face was livid he remembered acutely being the last thing he saw before the door slammed closed, and it caused a shiver to course through Pitch knowing this most certainly was heading towards a very distasteful outcome.
Inevitability

Chapter five

Inevitability

It was after midnight when the door to Pitch's room slowly opened. The big, bulky form of North filled up the doorway, casting a rather large shadow over Pitch's bed. Silently and gently the man walked in and pushed the door closed behind him. He walked over and eased himself down in the rocking chair in the corner without saying a word.

It had been early in the day that Pitch had been deposited within his room to await North’s return, and within that time, he had gone through a myriad of emotions from fear and anxiety to anger and rage at his situation back to trepidation before finally a sullen acceptance that he wasn’t going to be able to do anything about it, so he was just going to have to face the music. This melancholy realization left him feeling defeated and weak, and as such he had crawled into his bed burying himself deep within the covers as he waited.

He had begun to think North wasn’t going to come, but when he heard the slight creak of the door, and the soft pad of feet leading to the groan of the rocking chair, Pitch gulped back a hard lump. He was wide awake acutely listening as his breath quickened and he tried his best to remain still. Maybe North would think he was asleep and leave him be until morning? Would that be worse than just getting it over? No. That was preferable he thought as he secretly willed Clause to leave.

North didn't move from his place in the rocker. Instead, he began to slowly rock. The gentle creak of the chair being the only sound in the room.

Each creak ran a cold chill up his spine, and Pitch found the time between each sound to take an eternity. Why wouldn’t he say something? Did he think he was asleep and was waiting for daybreak? This feeling wasn’t an unfamiliar feeling for Pitch he realized as the fear gripped him not unlike many of the many nightmares he had on a nightly basis. So thick he could taste it, ever present, and all encompassing.

"Pitch," North finally said. His voice sounded calm and normal. "I know you are awake."

Pitch shifted into a tighter ball before finally peeking out his head from the covers his gold and silver eyes shining in the moonlight depicting his fear of North. He didn’t speak for several moments before he finally sat up drawing his knees in as he frowned studying North, his fear turned into anger as he spat, “Well, you’ve got me here. Exerting your control over me. I hope you’re happy.”

There was a heavy sigh followed by more silence.

Pitch watched North continue to rock as they both stared at each other in silence. Finally Pitch could stand it no more as he hissed, "You never said I couldn't be resourceful. All you told me was to complete your stupid lists. Why wouldn't you expect me to employ your little trolls to assist me. You have them assist you, unless you're trying to say that you hold a higher station as a spirit than I do just because you're a guardian! I am still the nightmare king, and I deserve some respect!"

North stopped rocking. “So, you admit to using the elves?”

Pitch paused now his eyes widening as the realization that he’d basically admitted to North that he had in fact been exploiting the elves and that perhaps North hadn’t been on him yet because
he was waiting to hear the truth instead of just assuming so. Pitch’s jaw worked as he hesitated, “Well… not, not in the manner you accused me of. I had rounded up a few… helpers… to aid me, but I never left any of them behind to do any chores on their own.”

North started rocking again, nodding. “Pitch, you know very well what I expected of you when I gave you those lists. I made perfectly clear when we had our little talk the first day you were here. It is punishment—your punishment. No one else’s. When you’re assigned work as punishment, it is your job and your responsibility to fulfill without help from others. How do you expect to learn anything if someone else does it for you? It would not be punishment. I could tell the elf I saw was not doing that work because he wanted to. You were making him do it. So you can stop lying.”

Pitch found himself chewing on his bottom lip as North chided him. He did in fact know full well what North had expected, but the guardian had never spelled it out in specific terms, and so he’d hoped to use the elves as a technicality. He visibly pouted now as he responded, “It wasn’t a lie! You were never clear in your intentions! You can’t blame me for making my own assumptions… I’m… I’m not used to doing things ‘your’ way.”

Despite everything, North felt compassion for Pitch. He knew it had to be hard on the boogeyman to adapt to this new way of life and new way of doing things. He understood and even expected that there would be slip-ups and misunderstandings and blatant disobedience. It was expected of someone who had spent thousands of years wallowing in evil. Santa was willing to cut him some slack occasionally, but he wasn’t about to give Pitch an edge and allow him to walk all over him.

“Enough!” North snapped. “Perhaps is true that I wasn’t completely clear on all terms. But that doesn’t make what you did right.” North’s voice had an edge to it. “I understand this is all new to you, but I also know you still have brain in your head.” he sighed, massaging one of his temples. “I want you to answer one question for me.”

Pitch was staring at North defiantly ready to defend his actions as he spat, “And what would that be?”

“Did you do any of the work yourself?”

Pitch’s face dropped. It was work getting those little heathens in line… did that count? He faltered, “Well… we worked as a team… I coordinated the effort.” His face felt heated now knowing that his answer wasn’t going to please North.

Being Santa Claus, North knew Pitch was lying and had been lying from the beginning. He wanted the boogeyman to openly confess his own wrongdoings, but it was perfectly clear that he wasn’t going to do it without some persuasion. A pity, North thought. He had planned on being lenient on Pitch if he had but answered his last question correctly. But since he still insisted on lying about it, he knew he had no other choice but to give Pitch a full dose.

“Pitch,” North said, his voice having a hint of sadness to it. “Please, come here.”

Pitch knew where the next step was going, and he was fully unwilling to put himself into a position for North to give him a spanking! His eyes darted back and forth even though he knew there was nowhere for him to go. Swallowing hard he shook his head, “No! Are you daft? I’m not going to come over there to you, so you can beat me! You… you’re abusing your power over me just because you’re stronger than me now! I’ll not submit to you!” His anger was a recourse to the trepidation he felt, and on some level, Pitch knew he was likely making things worse, but he just couldn’t bring himself to willing partake in this level of shame. Maybe North would grow weary of fighting him and just give in or they would talk longer and delay the inevitable. He was breathing
hard now gripping the sheets tightly as his anxiety built.

North scowled dangerously in Pitch’s direction. “Beat you? I am not going to beat you. If I wanted to beat you, I would hand you to Bunny. I aim to give spanking. Is different than beating.” North leaned forward in his chair. ”You will come here, if you know what’s good for you. You have dragged this out longer than need be, and I am tired! Here! NOW!” He pointed to the floor directly in front of him.

Pitch’s mouth hung agape losing all of his defiance in the wake of the building tempest that was North bellowing at him. Pitch was now frozen in indecision as North’s countenance was intimidating, and ignoring his requests seemed increasingly more foolish, but his massiveness and the fact he was now yelling at him made it difficult to move towards the obviously very angry man. Pitch wrung his hands together a moment before holding them out defensively towards Santa, “Now, now North; you, you might need to calm down again before we go any further don’t you think? You… you are getting very upset!” Pitch’s voice was unsteady now quite terrified now of what North had planned for him.

North pushed himself out of the rocking chair and started forward toward Pitch.

Pitch’s pupils dilated as North rose a whole new level of terror ringing through him as he scrambled backwards into the headboard still holding his hands up as if the mere gesture would halt North from coming, “Wait! Wait! Wait!” Seeing North was moving incredibly fast, Pitch gasped moving to roll off the bed and remove himself from North’s vicinity.

Quickly, North snatched Pitch by the back part of his robe, sitting down on the bed at the same time. Without saying a word, he calmly and gently dragged Pitch into position over his left knee and pinned his kicking legs between his own.

Pitch screamed out, “No! North stop!” as he clawed desperately at the bed spreads tearing the comforter out of its neat hospital corners, but unable to stop Clause from his decided task. Once he was secured, Pitch began bucking as the true terror of being pinned triggered further that he couldn’t escape this particular decree. He felt sick with anxiety as he stared back at North over his shoulder, breathing heavily from his exertion, a pleading look on his face as he rasped, “Please don’t do this to me! I… we can talk this out!”

"I'm through talking, Pitch." said North, grabbing Pitch's robe and yanking it back. "I've tried already to talk with you, but you do nothing but lie and blame everyone but yourself and make excuses and smart aleck remarks. No, time for talk is over for now. Maybe after spanking we will talk." He pointed at the 'Naughty' tattoo on his right arm. "You are on naughty list." Not saying anything more, he raised his hand back and brought it down swiftly on Pitch's rear with one hefty smack. Then he repeated the action, and kept on repeating it until his hand was a blur.

Pitch cringed as he saw North raise his palm and squeaked out an undignified yelp as the meaty paw connected spreading an exacting pain that seemed to spread deeper with every swat. Pitch did his best to put his mind anywhere but here as he clenched his teeth holding back the noises that threatened to escape from the pain and squeezing his eyes tightly to shut out the visual of this happening to him.

North continued to bring his hand down in fast, even swats, studying Pitch's reaction. Without pausing his hand, he tilted Pitch forward a bit and moved the swats to the underside of his rear.

Hitting the more sensitive area caused Pitch to jerk in surprise as his legs slammed into the back of North’s calves in an attempt to block the onslaught. Pitch’s mind raced as he tugged his
upper half in vain to move his rear out range of the constant swats that assaulted him. The fact that
the pain continued to build upon itself was maddening as Pitch felt himself beginning to meet his
threshold for pain.

Shooting North a desperate look he pleaded now, “Okay, okay! I am sorry! I promise I’ll
never go near another one of your elves! Just stop! You’ve made your point!”

North grunted, shaking his head. "And why do you think I'm spanking you for going near
elves?"

Pitch began to emit small grunts as North’s hand continued to connect with areas that were
growing tender from the repetitive smacks. He twisted with all his might, and when it hadn’t budged
him even slightly, he began to panic as he yelled out, “No! Enough! Okay! I… I didn’t do any of
your stupid chores! I made the elves do them! I’ll do them now! I’ll do them! Just stop hitting me!”

North nodded approvingly. "Now we get somewhere. Yes, you will do them... tomorrow.
For now, you still have much to pay for over my knee." North's hand came down harder. He paused
only for a moment to pull Pitch's pants down in one quick jerk, landing one of the swats on his bared
underside.

Pitch hated the sound of his own voice pleading to North, it was degrading, but hearing that
Santa had no compunction of stopping even after Pitch had given him what he thought was what
North had wanted to hear sent a tremor of panic through him. The feeling of his pants getting pulled
down though was a whole new level of shaming he hadn’t realized he could attain as he gasped in
mortification, “What! No! What are you doing!” His head spun around as if he’d needed to affirm
the fact that the rush of cool air had in fact not just been in his imagination. He writhed now
desperately trying to reach around North’s massive arm. But as before, the most he could reach was
the small of his back where he could prevent nothing as his hand flailed uselessly attempting to cover
himself only making him feel like he must look ridiculous. This level of helplessness stirred
something deep within him, and he roared out an inarticulate cry of both rage and humiliation. He
couldn’t endure this treatment much longer without demeaning himself further he realized as his
groans of pain became more vocal from the intensified pain of flesh on flesh contact.

North’s eyebrows lifted slightly. He remained silent and calm and allowed Pitch’s pent-up
anger to vent itself as he continued bringing his hand down in steady slaps. He moved from the
underside to the cheeks and back again, evenly covering every inch of Pitch’s bottom with pain.

As the punishment continued the pain was undeniable and Pitch couldn’t help but to call
out as North’s hand made contact again and again. All of his fighting to get away from this proved to
exhaust Pitch, and he finally found himself unable to struggle anymore as he turned to towards North
with an imploring look, “Stop! North please! Please let me go now! Surely your point has been
made!”

North stopped and regarded Pitch with a serious face, “One thing you should know, Pitch.
When you are receiving punishment, it is not up to you to determine when it stops.” he gave Pitch’s
rear another hard swat. “It will last for as long as I feel you need.” Another swat came down.

Pitch jumped at every swat his mouth hanging agape in his shock as North’s words sank in.
He whimpered pitifully now, “North please have mercy! I… I’ll do as you ask. I can’t… I can’t take
this anymore.” Pitch’s voice was beginning to crack, as he felt tears welling in his eyes. Don’t cry!
Don’t cry in front of… him! Pitch turned away willing himself to be strong, but the more he thought
about it, the harder it was becoming to hold back the welling tears.

North stopped, but continued to hold Pitch in place over his knee, his pants still pulled
down. He sadly and silently eyed the boogeyman.

Pitch went rigid taking in deep breaths now, and when it was clear that North had paused the punishment he dared to look back his eyes wide and attentive. Could they be done? Pitch inwardly cheered that he could have barely made it through this punishment without North breaking him. He tentatively lifted himself cringing at the redness of his rear end his mouth formed into an angry pout as he grumpily stated, “Can I get up now.”

“Depends,” North stated simply. “I should do it longer, but I will show mercy this once.” He reached and pulled Pitch’s pants up in a single jerk and helped him to stand. “You will do work I give you tomorrow without help.” he waggled a finger at Pitch. “If I catch you using elves again, you will get a repeat of what I just gave you, only it will be worse. Do you understand?”

The feeling of North pulling his pants back into place caused Pitch’s face to flush, but he was glad that the punishment was officially over. As North wagged his finger at him chiding Pitch, his frown deepened, but he held his tongue in check. The thought of doing the work himself now coming to mind as he glowered irritably looking at the floor to avoid eye contact. “Yes, yes, I understand! You’ve made yourself quite clear on your demands.” He wanted nothing more than for this humiliating encounter to be over with.

North peered at Pitch a few minutes, studying his face and wondering if Pitch really learned something from the spanking, or if the nightmare king was just faking. It was hard even for him to tell sometimes. Finally, he moved to stand, placing a gentle hand on Pitch’s shoulder and giving it a light squeeze. ”Get some rest.” he said softly. He walked to the door, opened it, and left.

Unknown to both North and Pitch, Toothiana had been standing outside the whole time, listening. Now that North was gone, she silently moved closer to the door and put her ear to it, trying to decide whether or not she should go in.

Now that North was gone, Pitch pulled his robe aside and his pants to see the damage left there. His bottom was covered in red hand prints that shown starkly against his already very pale flesh. It hurt, and thinking of the pain that still radiated there as well as the fact that he’d just been spanked like a child made his lip tremble. How much more could these guardians humiliate him? If word got out in the spirit world that he was being kept as an errant ward by North and spanked when he didn’t behave, he’d be a laughing stock. He adjusted his pants back into place, and the unshed tears that he’d held back finally broke like a damn as he sank to the floor on his knees and sobbed heavily for his loss of pride.

Hearing Pitch’s cries, Tooth pushed lightly on the door and peeked inside.

Pitch was so caught up in his own misery, he didn’t hear the door open as he sat folded in on himself cradling his face in his hands his shoulders shaking as he wept.

Tooth quietly entered and fluttered over to Pitch, her face showing grave concern and pity. She eased herself down next to Pitch’s curled form and put a hand on his shoulder.

Not realizing she was there until she was touching his shoulder, Pitch jumped in surprise spinning his tear stained face to her. He wiped frantically at his face now feeling highly embarrassed that she’d seen him crying like this, “What… what do you want?” he hitched trying to get his emotions under control. His cheeks turning a hue of purple denoting his shame at her seeing him like this.

Tooth didn't say a word. Instead, she smiled lovingly at him and moved to wrap her arms around him, giving him a hug.
Pitch froze at the connection not used to affection but feeling in deep need of it for longer than he could remember needing it. He tentatively reciprocated the hug which only caused the tears that he worked so hard to hold back to come forth full force as he cried heavily into her shoulder.

"It'll be okay," she cooed softly, beginning to rub a hand over his hair.

Her affection made him clutch her tightly not wanting to let go. How long had it been since he’d shared something as simple as a hug? It made him feel weak and scared as he clung to her now crying out not only his pain but his loneliness. He reveled in her warmth drenching her shoulder in his tears. He found he couldn’t bring himself to stop wanting so badly to just feel a connection with another person and having it now, he didn’t know how to handle it as a swirl of emotions fought to come to the surface.

Toothiana didn’t know what to do. She hadn’t expected this sort of reaction. She continued to stroke Pitch's hair in silence and allowed him to vent his emotions for however long he wanted. She was upset with North and partly blamed him for everything that had happened. He should have appointed someone to look after Pitch to make sure he did the work properly instead of leaving him alone and expecting him to do it. There were the yetis, but they had their own work to do and couldn’t keep an eye on Pitch every moment. She would speak to North about it in the morning, and volunteer for the job if he was willing to go along with it. Maybe if Pitch had someone to look over him, he wouldn't get himself in trouble.

After he’d let himself cry for some time he seemed to realize what he was doing and felt another level of shame for letting himself be so vulnerable in front of his enemy of all things. He released her shrinking away and folding his arms around himself as he stared at the floor, “I… I don’t know what came over me,” he shuddered as he worked to get his breathing under control wiping frantically at the tears that were still cascading down his cheeks disgracing him further.

Toothiana smiled and patted his shoulder. “You don’t have to feel embarrassed. Everyone has to vent sometime.” she smiled wider, “Would some cookies and cocoa help? I could bring you some.”

Pitch looked away from her gaze still highly embarrassed that she would see him like this. He sniffled back the tears that he was finally getting control over as he moved to stand finding the hard wood floor to be rather uncomfortable to sit on. He absentely rubbed at the swollen feeling still radiating from his posterior. He pouted; sitting on hard surfaces might be a bit of a nuisance for the next day or two he realized. Toothinia had offered him more cookies and hot cocoa which sounded comforting. She had been kind when she could have made fun of him, and even now she stayed giving him that same sympathetic smile. He peered back at her cautiously now his eyes searching hers afraid to give her anymore of himself than he already had, but not trusting his voice, he found himself giving her a small nod.

“Great!” Tooth piped. “I’ll be right back.” she quickly flew out of the room.

He watched her go wringing his hands as he looked outside his room. There was a yeti sitting on the floor sewing a teddy bear. He glanced up at Pitch and gave him a serious look that spoke to the tune to not even think about stepping foot outside of his room. He grimaced turning back towards his disheveled bed and nervously fidgeted with fixing the corners to make it more presentable for his returning guest. Not that he thought it really mattered, but the act helped to direct his energies while he waited for Toothinia to return.

Tooth returned after about ten minutes. She fluttered in, carrying a tray with a plate of cookies and other goodies and a mug of steaming hot cocoa. She set it all down on the night table.
“There you go,” she said, smiling. “If you need anything else, just let the yeti outside know and he’ll tell me.” As quickly as she had come, Tooth was gone.

Pitch held up a hand as he muttered almost inaudibly, “Don’t go…” But she was already gone, and he felt stupid for wanting her at all. Why did he want her to stay with him anyway? He shook the feeling from his head as he quickly closed his bedroom door to regain his privacy.

Turning back to the tray, Pitch frowned no longer wanting anything to do with the items because they now reminded him of Toothinia and the moment they’d just shared and the fact that she was now gone. Of course she didn’t want to spend actual time with him. Why would she? He pulled back his sheets crawling into his bed, and twisting angrily, Pitch curled into a ball facing away from the tray. He thought about the entirety of his day and how much of it had been spent in anxiety and high intense emotions that left him now feeling very drained mentally. He sighed willing himself to sleep if only to erase this horrible day.
“Rise and shine!” Toothiana cheerily called when morning arrived. She grabbed onto Pitch’s bed covers and pulled them back. Due to the events that happened the night before, North had allowed Pitch to sleep in later.

Pitch had had horrible nightmares of North and all the other guardians reflecting the past day but in a much more malicious light where they all had laughed at him and found joy in his suffering. He had had a particularly biting segment with Toothinia where instead of being kind she had been cruel and hateful to him telling him that no one could ever really care about him. He had woken with a start clutching his pillow tightly to himself unable to go back to sleep.

The nightmare had left him in a sour mood, and Toothinia busting in to his room and snatching his covers off didn’t help as he snatched them back in a huff and pulling the comforter to himself tightly he grumbled, “I don’t ‘shine!’ Why can’t you people just walk in and address someone without making it a theatrical event.”

Smiling, Tooth flew up to Pitch and pinched at his nose and cheek. “Aw, come on, grumpy. You can’t stay in bed all day.”

He swatted her away, “Cut that out!” Thinking further on her words he grouched, “If only I could stay in bed all day and avoid all of you.” He sighed now, “So North has you bringing me my ‘list’ now,” he hissed the word list in obvious disdain.

“Yes,” she replied, pulling out a piece of paper and holding it up. “He also appointed me to watch over you to make sure you do everything on it... without the elves’ help. I had a long talk with him earlier, and we both came to an agreement that you need someone to oversee you. So I volunteered for the job.”

Pitch’s face darkened in both shame and anger that the two had decided that he’d need a chaperone. He sat up against the headboard wincing a little as his sore bottom chafed against the bed which only embittered him further as he crossed his arms tightly against himself squinting hatefully at the bedsheets as he snapped, “I can do the list on my own; I don’t need …a babysitter!”

“Oh, I’m not going to be a ‘babysitter’. I’m just going to be your… uh…” she searched for the right word. “Supervisor! Yes, that’s it!” her eyes wandered to the tray on the nightstand. “You didn’t eat your cookies last night?”

Looking at her now with scorn he complained, “I don’t need you to watch over me.” Glancing back to the tray his frown deepened, “I decided I didn’t want them after all.”

“Oh…” Tooth sounded hurt. “Well, it doesn't matter. I'll take the tray to the kitchen.” She fluttered over and picked it up. “Meet me there and you can begin today's work.” With that, she flew out of the room.

Pitch sneered watching her leave and not wanting to follow her, he sat there, arms crossed and pouting, for some time before deciding he also didn’t want North to come and give him a physical reminder that he needed to do his chores either. Tossing the blankets aside angrily, Pitch slid out of bed and stormed down the hallway towards the kitchen.

He made it to the kitchen and moved inside looking around for Toothinia wearing his deep
frown in an obvious show of his unhappiness, as if anyone around could guess any different by the way he blustered about.

Toothiana was hovering by the large sink near the back wall. When she caught sight of Pitch, she waved him over, smiling like the whole thing was a grand adventure.

Pitch made his way over to where Toothinia beckoned a very unenthusiastic look plastered on his face as he waited for her to tell him what she had planned for him.

She finished filling the sudsy bucket that was setting in the sink and lifted it out with some difficulty. “The first job on the list is scrubbing the floors in these rooms.” she handed Pitch the list.

His lip curled and he glared at the bucket as if it had personally offended him, “Hmm. And what exactly am I supposed to scrub it with? I hope you don’t expect me to get down on my hands and knees to wallow in this filth!”

“With these,” Tooth offered him a sponge and a scrub brush. “And, yes, you will have to get down on hands and knees, unless you know of another way.”

Pitch bared his teeth, “That one chore will take hours! And I am not going to do it with those!” He pointed furiously at the sponge and scrub brush, but his indignation disappeared with a shrill yelp as one of Sandman’s dreamsand whips lashed out to strike Pitch with a solid snap that caused Pitch to jump a foot off the ground grabbing his bottom, eyes wide as he spun around in a flash.

Sandy wore an admonishing glare as he waged a finger at Pitch pointing to Tooth obviously not liking the tone Pitch had been taking with her.

Pitch blanched backing away nervously. His face still wore a look of surprised shock and awe.

Sandy pointed next to the tools in Toothinia’s hands and folded his arms as he watched the bogeyman reproachfully.

Pitch’s lip quivered, but he timidly reached out to the tools and grabbed them. His face flushed, and he looked at the floor now knowing this was not a fight he was going to win. Kneeling down on to the ground, he placed the sponge into the bucket and sloshed some of the water onto the floor as he began scrubbing in unenthusiastic circles.

Even though Tooth was relieved that Pitch finally obeyed, she still turned an annoyed glare at Sandy. She flew up to hover beside him, “You didn’t have to do that.” she whispered.

Sandy seemed confused not understanding what he’d done wrong. He waved a hand towards Pitch who had his head down scrubbing aphetetically as if that was enough to show that he was doing what he was told without backtalk which was what Sandy thought to be an ideal condition.

Pitch avoided eye contact as he scowled at the work in front of him. He scrubbed in silence looking both angry and on the verge of tears for being publically humiliated again. He hated them for doing this to him. It seemed like every time he thought he’d fallen to his lowest, something like this would happen and prove him sorely wrong.

"There's got to be another way of doing it without... spanking.” she said.

Sandy frowned looking at a loss. He tilted his head forming a question mark over his head
and then a picture of Toothinia and Pitch to hear what she thought was a better idea concerning Pitch.

Pitch had been slowly making his way across the kitchen floor as they spoke, but at this rate, he would literally be doing it for half the day.

Tooth shrugged, rolling her eyes. “I don’t know! But there’s got to be something that isn’t so cruel.” She gave Sandy a curious look. "Did North send you here?"

Sandy looked at her curiously obviously not in agreement but unhappy that Tooth was so bothered by North’s decided learning path for Pitch. Registering her question, Sandy shook his head yes and depicted a picture of Toothinia gathering teeth to tell her he would relieve her for a little while to take care of what she needed to. She had plenty of minions to perform her tasks without her, but Toothinia liked to be hands on these days since their last encounter with Pitch showed her what she’d been missing.

Sighing, Tooth relented. She looked down at Pitch again, watching as he painstakingly scrubbed around the base of one of the kitchen counters, “Alright,” she nodded at last. “Thanks,” With a smile, she patted Sandy’s shoulder and flew out of the room, dodging one of the yetis.

Pitch lifted his head as he heard Toothinia flutter towards the door before glancing back to Sandy worriedly wishing fiercely that she hadn’t left him alone with the dream weaver.

Sandy examining the progress Pitch had made grabbed the list that Toothinia had left next to the sink. Unrolling it, Sandy grimaced. At this rate, Pitch would never finish the list. Sandy pointed to the list and formed the picture of a sun setting and the moon coming up to signify Pitch was moving much too slowly.

Pitch glowered at the little yellow man, “What do you want from me? I’m going as fast as I’m going to do menial work for you people.”

Sandy lifted an eyebrow, rolled the list up, and conjured a dream whip.

Upon seeing what Sandy was meaning to do, Pitch picked up his pace considerably, “No! No! Okay, I’ll move faster!” Pitch sighed dejectedly, not only was he going to be forced to slave away, but now he was going to have to do so in a timely fashion to satisfy his wardens.

The day went on as Sandy oversaw Pitch’s work, and any opposition Pitch made was quickly brokered with a quick swat or two until Pitch didn’t test Sandy any further trying to hurry through the chores just to get away from him. He breathed a sigh of relief when all the chores were finally finished.

Once they were done, Sandy ushered Pitch to North’s office to let him know that Pitch had completed his list for once on his own.

North sat behind his desk, perusing a long list of names. He looked up when he heard his office door open, and smiled at seeing Sandy and Pitch enter, “Ah! Come in!” he put the list down. “So how goes everything?”

Sandy came in handing North the list and giving a thumbs up.

Pitch didn’t speak standing with slumped shoulders and staring at the floor feeling rather downtrodden and cornered by the two people that seemed to have no problem taking him in hand with a quickness.
Sandy frowned looking at Pitch before turning towards North depicting a picture of Pitch working really slowly and Sandy giving him a lash and Pitch moving much more quickly as a reason Pitch might be acting so sulky.

Pitch would have been mortified to see the mime’s work if he hadn’t been staring at the ground still hoping to be dismissed in quick order to get away from them.

North smiled and nodded at Sandy's explanation, "Good to hear that work has been done." he looked in Pitch's direction, raising an eyebrow, "And done properly this time." he looked back at Sandy. "Will you be available tomorrow?"

Pitch inwardly raged at the ‘done properly’ remark as he shot a glare North’s way, “Yes, you’re slowly beating my spirit down to do you’re bidding. Congratulations.”

Sandy looked Pitch’s way momentarily before rolling his eyes and turning back to North with a sigh and a sad look shaking his head no. It took a lot for Sandy to come over to volunteer to monitor Pitch being he had a lot more on his plate than the rest of the guardians having to not only work nightly, but he was the only one doing his job.

North scowled at Pitch. "One more remark like that and you will regret it. A good trip over knee should help that spiteful tongue of yours." He turned back to Sandy and nodded. "I understand. Thank you for helping out today."

Pitch scowled wanting to say much more, but instead asked sulkily, “The work has been done, can I go now?” He was careful to hold back from saying anything else that might be deemed as reason enough to spank him. He was more tired now than he ever remembered being having never had a need to really do physical labor throughout the past three thousand years of being a spirit, but Pitch planned to dedicate himself to turning North’s manor upside down to find a way to escape in his free time. He had decided after one day of this drudgery that he would go mad if he had to do it for any amount of time, and the thought of facing another spanking for something as little as voicing his opinion was just too horrible to imagine as an existence.

"No, you stay here." North said to Pitch. He turned a smile to Sandy, who was already beginning to fall asleep. "You may go, if you like."

Sandy shook awake before giving North a tired smile and materializing a hat to say his goodbyes as he saw himself out.

Pitch was aghast that North wasn’t letting him leave, and after Sandy had left he approached North’s desk, “But why? You said I could do as I wished when the work was done?” His voice was tight and heavily laced with disappointment.

North rolled his eyes upward at the ceiling and sighed. "Pitch,"

“What!? Sandy just told you that I finished your list, why do I have to stay here?” Pitch exclaimed heatedly not understanding why he was being held back from leaving.

North glowered at the boogeyman. "If you must know, I AM going to let you go. I was keeping you longer because I want to congratulate you on completing a day's work. I'm proud of you for doing it honestly this time."

Pitch scoffed at North’s remark of honesty as if toiling away in North’s manor was really something to be proud of. Pitch’s lip curled as he responded sarcastically, “Yes. Well then I’m so happy I could make you proud of me. May I go now?”
North scowled. "I was going to let you go, but now I wonder if you don't need trip over knee, seeing that your attitude needs some adjustments."

Pitch’s grimacing expression dropped quickly as he shook his head looking quite contrite, “No, no. That won’t be necessary!”

North was silent a few minutes, contemplating. Finally, he nodded for Pitch to leave.

Pitch let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding as he quickly turned to flee North’s office.

Pitch had no plans of going back to his room anytime soon having finally gotten his freedom and wanting to continue exploring. It hit him then, North’s office. The fat man likely had blueprints stored in there somewhere as he seemed to be fastidious in that way. Pitch’s mind worked thinking of all the possible ways he could gain his freedom. He had noticed several drawn out plans for various toys and even for a new sleigh. There was also the sleigh, if he could get down to wherever Santa’s sleigh was kept or even better, he could just grab one of the flying reindeer! Pitch was an experienced rider, how difficult could riding one of them be? So that was what he would do, search about for the entrance to North’s stables, and by the time they had woken he’d be long gone.

“Sooo I hear you actually did some work today.” Jack’s voice came from behind Pitch.

Having just about all he could stand for one day, Pitch spun on Jack sneering, “Why you little ingrate! What would you know about work? Other than flitting about giving people frostbite, what is your purpose? Fear is at least beneficial to mankind, can you say the same? Now, for the last time, get away from me! I don’t now, nor will I ever wish you in my presence!” Pitch stormed away saying this last bit simply to cut since the boy seemed so bent on making his life miserable.

Jack stood, scratching his head and watching as Pitch walked down the corridor. "What did I say?"

Pitch glared at him as he continued down the hall, “You enjoy my plight don’t you? Find it funny even? Let me tell you that you wouldn’t be laughing if you were going through it!” Pitch was feeling very sore and sorry for himself. Every day here just seemed to get worse for him. All he could think about now was getting away to anywhere but here.

“What did I say??” Jack repeated, shouting it louder where Pitch could hear.

Baring his teeth, Pitch stopped to look at the winter sprite as if he had two heads, “Are you really that daft?” He strode up to him pointing a finger in his chest now as he spoke, “Your little comment about me actually doing work! You think I deserve this kind of treatment don’t you! Let’s all have one big laugh at the Boogeyman’s expense! Well let me tell you now; it won’t last, and when I get the chance, you’ll all pay for what you’ve done to me!”

Jack’s eyebrows rose and he backed up next to the wall. “Okay, okay, I didn’t mean anything by it. Chill!”

Seemingly appeased by Jack’s apology, Pitch straightened composing himself, “I’m sure you didn’t.” Thinking the boy might be useful by knowing his way around Santa’s workshop much better than he, Pitch smiled, “I’ll tell you what, you can make it up to me by giving me a tour of this place. I’m sure you know where all the best spots are to see here.”

“Oh, shouldn’t North be the one to do that? I mean, this is his place and all. I’ll admit that I don’t know as much as he does.” said Jack.
Pitch gave him a side long glance looking rather aloof now, “Oh, you know North is always so busy, besides, didn’t you mention that you were all about ‘fun’,” Pitch quoted the word before continuing. He had begun to pace around the youth as he spoke now, “I figured if anyone could show me a good time around here, it would have to be you right?”

Jack studied Pitch as he thought over his words.

“Well? What do you say? I’ve got the rest of the day free,” Pitch gave him his most winning smile now.

When he thought about it, Jack didn’t see any harm in it. A simple tour around the place might just be what Pitch needed to get his mind off things. Plus if he was going to keep doing work for the big man, he would need to be familiar with the layout. Besides, North wanted them to keep an eye on him. This would be a chance to do all of the above.

Finally Jack shrugged and smiled. “Why not?”

Pitch’s smile broadened, “After you.”

Jack led Pitch around to many of the different areas that Pitch had already explored and others that were of no interest, finally after two hours of moving about listening to the boy yap on about his adventures with bringing kids ‘joy,’ Pitch felt they were going nowhere fast and worked to nudge Jack in the direction he needed, “You know what would be exciting? I’ve always been interested in seeing one of North’s reindeer up close. Can we go to the stables?”

Jack lifted an eyebrow, thinking Pitch’s request to be odd, "Are you serious?" he let out a laugh. "You've always wanted to see Santa's reindeer?"

Pitch frowned looking slightly flustered, “Is that really such an eccentric idea? Will you take me to see them or not?”

“Yeah, I will, but it just never struck me as something the boogeyman would want to do.” Jack continued to smirk.

Pitch crossed his arms as he spat condescendingly, “Yes, yes, because you know me oh so well.”

Jack held up his hands. "Relax. No need to be so touchy. Sheesh." Jack continued walking, leading Pitch to the stables.

Pitch was grateful the boy finally acquiesced to his plea as he took note of the directions to get there as well as making sure to look over Jack’s shoulder as he punched in the key code that unlocked the inner hallway that led to the stables. The snorts of the huge beasts could be heard now as they approached the stalls and Pitch’s grin grew.

This was going to be a piece of cake he thought. Pitch marveled at their size as the reindeer finally came into view. He hadn’t remembered them being so big, but then again, he hadn’t really paid them much mind before. He did really like horses though, and these creatures didn’t seem much different he thought as he reached out a hand tentatively to touch the creature’s snout. Surprisingly the reindeer walked toward the boogeyman with no fear leaning its head down over the stall and allowing Pitch to caress it. He actually genuinely smiled now as the reindeer nudged in to him, “Easy boy, easy,” he whispered softly as he continued to caress its muzzle.

“You seem to have a way with animals.” said Jack, mesmerized by the sight before him. “Who would have thought it of the boogeyman?”
Pitch shot Jack a glare, “Not all animals, I’ve just always had an affinity to the equine.” The reindeer seeming to enjoy the affection and perhaps sensing some deep seeded need for reciprocated affection laid its head lower to allow Pitch to get closer. Pitch’s brow furrowed wondering now why in particular he seemed to bond with equestrian creatures as he had no recollection of spending time with these animals in particular where he’d been able to bond whereas most other animals steered clear of him. He laid his head against the beast now just stroking it gently as he pondered.

Maybe this is what Pitch needed, Jack thought as he continued to watch the nightmare king bond with the reindeer. He leaned against his staff, deep in thought. There had to be a shred of good still inside Pitch, but it was going to take a lot to bring it to the surface. First of all, Pitch was going to have to be willing to change. After everything that had happened so far, that didn't seem possible. But then Jack got an idea, "Would you like to take care of the reindeer? As part of your work?" Jack asked. "I mean, I'm not in a position to give you that job or anything, but if you want me to I can suggested it to North."

The last thing Pitch wanted was for Frost to tip North off that he’d been out here to see his reindeer. He straightened giving the animal one more caress before backing away shaking his head, “No, no. Just coming out here to see them was nice enough. We… we can go back now.” They had spent enough time out here for Pitch to lay eyes on where the reins were kept, and the night would be falling in a few more hours which Pitch thought would be a perfect time to sneak back out here.

“Alright, suit yourself.” Jack said. “I just thought it would make your stay here a little better.”

Pitch was actually sincerely touched as he gave the boy a small smile, “I appreciate the gesture, but shoveling manure doesn’t exactly sound like something that would make me feel better.”

Jack rolled his eyes and shook his head. Always the negative Pitch, "Come on, then. Let's get back before North comes looking for us."

Yes, Pitch definitely didn't want North to discover them here of all places especially since he meant to head back within hours once the sun had set and darkness covered the area.

The two of them made it back, and Pitch was relieved that no one seemed the wiser. Having gotten what he needed from Frost he commented off-handedly, "Well it's been interesting Frost. I'll be taking my leave now." As he said this Pitch started walking off towards his room to wait until the workshop had quieted down enough for him to make his move.

Jack Frost stood in the middle of the hallway and watched as Pitch disappeared. His face was frozen in an expression of thought as he pondered the strange adventure he had just had with the boogeyman, "I wonder what he's up to." he whispered to himself before turning to walk off in the opposite direction.

Pitch paced back and forth as he waited, and as he waited, a nervousness began to build in him thinking on whether or not he should wait longer or go now. No one else had come by to see him, and of that he was glad. The night waned on, but Pitch stayed in his room waiting until the wee hours of the morning. He had planned to go much earlier, but every time he’d get the nerve up to go, something held him back, some niggling fear that he might get caught, and how he most assuredly did not wish to get caught!

When he was certain that he would not be seen, he crept out of his room and moved carefully down the halls. The occasional yeti or elf moved about, but nothing that Pitch had no trouble sneaking past. He had lived in and out of shadows long enough that even without his ability to disappear into them, he could still navigate in them almost unseen.
The trickiest part was sneaking past the yeti that guarded the entrance to the stables, but through careful maneuvering, Pitch slipped by undetected punching in the access code and moving into the stables. He strode confidently now up to the stalls calling to the one he had seen earlier that afternoon to come to him. He took a couple sugar cubes out of his pocket that he’d grabbed from the kitchen on the way back to his room, and the reindeer ate them gratefully. He smiled at it as he cooed, “How would you like to go for a little romp my antlered friend?”

The reindeer merely snorted its indifference looking for more sugar cubes. Pitch patted its neck warmly before heading to the wall and unharnessing a bit with a set of reins on it. Coming back to the beast, he worked the bit into place, tightening it, before he pulled out another sugar cube for the reindeer as he then unlatched the gate to lead it carefully out of the stall. He walked it down the hall finding a bucket to stand on and used it to jump on the back of the reindeer which startled it, and it began to buck, “Woah! Woah there!” Pitch tried to comfort the beast before it took off with him on it racing down the tunnel at top speed.

The creature was being unmanageable Pitch realized much to his dismay. Of course they were, these creatures had never been ridden before and were not tame in that manner. Still, Pitch steadied himself letting out a whoop of joy, “Yes! Run! Keep running!” It didn’t matter that he wasn’t in control of the creature now as long as it was leaving the North Pole.

Bounding down the long narrow tunnel, Pitch could see it opened into some sort of docking area, but instead of continuing to run, the creature instead slowed casually walking up to where they would normally await getting attached to Santa’s sleigh. Yeti guarded this entrance as well, and upon seeing Pitch on one of the reindeer barked out pointing fingers at him. Pitch’s eyes widened as he kicked the beast’s sides to spurn it on, and to his luck, it was enough to startle the creature to bolt once more heading out of the docking area and launching into the air with him!

Pitch screamed in triumph as he held on for dear life. The reindeer darted across the sky at an even more impressive speed than one of his nightmares, but unlike one of his nightmares, once the creature had made it to the great wide open, it seemed to realize that it wasn’t attached to its master’s sleigh and decided it needed to return home. As it spun back around Pitch shouted out, “No! Stop you stupid animal!” But the reindeer did not heed his commands and instead bucked violently causing Pitch to lose his grip as he fell off of its back. He screamed as he plummeted back to the Earth at such a velocity that the impact knocked him out cold, face first in the snow.
"Hey! He's waking up!" the youthful voice announced. It sounded foggy and far away, though, like something in a dream.

The first thing Pitch saw when he opened his eyes again was North towering over him, arms crossed over his chest. His face displayed both anger and concern and then relief when he saw that the nightmare king was waking up.

"Is he all right?" Toothiana asked, fluttering up beside North. Jack Frost appeared on his left.

"He has regained consciousness, so that is good sign." North replied. "When it comes to everything else, it is hard to tell just yet." he bent over and peered at Pitch. "Can you hear me, Pitch? Do you know who I am?"

Pitch gasped as his eyes shot open and he sat bolt upright clutching his chest. It took a moment for his head to clear and for his brain to catch up with everything that was going on around him. He realized in quick order what had happened kicking up snow as he backed away from the guardians, "No! No! I... I was so close." He stopped now curling over to sit in a ball as he stared at the ground shaking his head in his defeat. He had failed, and worse there was no possible excuse he could use to state anything other than what this was, an escape attempt.

"Take it easy," North said. "You can explain later. And you will." North’s voice had an edge to it as he had said that last part. "But for now, we must get you back to bed so you can rest." he motioned for one of the yetis to pick Pitch up and take him back to his room.

Pitch was still a bit disoriented, but otherwise he was fine. The tone in North's voice made him think better than to actually voice the fact he was okay just because he didn't wish to face the man's ire anytime soon.

The yeti made quick work of scooping Pitch off the ground surprisingly gently for such a massive creature. Pitch nonetheless let out an undignified yelp at being picked up, "Put me down! I want to walk on my own!" The last thing Pitch wanted was to be cradled like a baby all the way back to the Pole.

The yeti seemingly confused as to what he needed to do when regarding Pitch gave North a quizzical look and a grumbled word in yeti.

"Take him back to Pole." North answered the yeti. "Have doctor make sure he is okay."

Folding his arms, Pitch pouted. He couldn't even win in this, but knowing he was likely already in enough trouble, he only sighed unhappily letting the yeti continue to carry him back to the Pole. All he could keep thinking was that he had thrown away his likely best attempt at getting away as the guardians surely would ensure such endeavors would be put to a halt if they didn’t just decide to toss him away back to his nightmare realm for being too much of a headache.

"I think I’ll go with them." said Toothiana, flying forward to catch up with the yeti.
“I had a feeling he was up to something.” Jack Frost mumbled when Tooth had left.

“What do you mean?” North turned to the boy.

“Pitch wanted me to give him a tour of the Pole earlier today.” Jack shrugged. “I didn’t think there would be any harm in it. Since he’s doing work for you, I thought it would help him if he was more familiar with the place.”

“And?”

“Well, when we finished with the tour he said he wanted to see the reindeer stables. I thought it was odd, but I went along with it anyway, just to keep him from blowing up. He bonded with the deer so well, North. It was incredible. They weren’t afraid of him at all, and Pitch actually looked happy for the first time since he’s been here.” Jack shook his head as he thought back on it. “I told him if he wanted to take care of the deer as part of his work that I would talk to you about assigning him to it, but he refused. I thought it was a bit strange since he seemed to get so much enjoyment out of being near them.” Jack sighed. “Now I know that he was just scouting out the place for an escape. He used me! I’m sorry, North. I really am. If I had known I would have never--”

North patted Jack’s shoulder. “It is not your fault. Pitch is cunning and devious, even for you. Let us all be glad that reindeer do not leave unless they are hitched to sleigh.” North chuckled. Jack’s lips turned into a smile. “Come; let us go back to Pole. Pitch has much to answer for once he recovers.”

Jack couldn’t help but laugh amusingly, knowing full well what North meant.

The yeti was making good pace, and seeing Toothinia flutter up next to the yeti with obvious concern for him on her face made Pitch blush as he ducked his head to avoid conversation.

Luckily for Pitch, they were already approaching one of the entrances to the Pole, and as they were moving through the doors Tooth had stopped seeing Sandy coming from the opposite direction obviously having also been looking for Pitch. He seemed relieved that Pitch had been found once the reindeer had come back without a rider, and all the guardians except Bunny had set out a search party to find him.

The yeti continued through a set of double doors and into a medical wing with several beds to which most housed elves since they tended to find a myriad of ways to hurt themselves it would seem.

Pitch looked about curiously having never seen this particular wing before as the yeti that held him brought him over to a bed and another yeti that obviously worked in the ward due to its strange dress and face mask, moved to pull down the sheets for the yeti holding Pitch to set him down.

Pitch watched on inquisitively as he was settled into the bed as gently as he was picked up. The truth was, he was very sore and slightly bruised from his fall. He’d suffered worse, but with the fact that his powers had been so significantly diminished, this fall really had taken quite a lot out of him.

The yeti that had brought Pitch harrumphed back and forth with the nurse yeti as they glanced here and there at Pitch.

Nodding, the nurse yeti walked over to Pitch’s bed and brought up the metal sides of the bed latching them in place, and it was then that Pitch grew weary as he noted the sides had wrist
cuffs, and the nurse was grabbing his wrist preparing to insert it into the cuff.

“Hey! No! Get your grubby hands off of me!” Pitch screeched yanking at his wrist violently trying to wrench it free from the creature with no success as it latched the cuff and moved to strap his other wrist to the bed. He twisted now fighting to get off the bed as the nurse worked to get him under control.

“Pitch!” Toothiana yelled over the yetis’ grunts and Pitch's screaming. She was fluttering this way and that around the bed as she spoke. “It’s okay! They’re just trying to help you. You need to remain calm and let them look at you to make sure you didn’t break anything in your fall.”

“They’re tying me down! I don’t want to be chained to this contraption!” Pitch raged and thrashed, but the nurse yeti was finally able to lock down his other wrist. Pitch still writhed shouting insults at the nurse as the yeti looked him over opening up his robe to reveal a lot of nasty bruising on his shoulders, chest, and abdomen. Pitch’s eyes darted around nervously as his body shook with tremors of barely contained anxiety and fury.

Tooth rolled her eyes and flew down around Pitch’s head, putting her hand on his shoulder. “Just relax, okay? They’re trying to prevent you from hurting yourself. And… they probably don’t trust you that well either.”

Pitch did calm enough taking in short shallow breaths while the yeti pushed and prodded against his wounds although Pitch growled angrily at the nurse whenever he pressed against a particularly sensitive area. Having seen enough, the nurse took the bed sheet and covered Pitch as he moved to write down his diagnosis on a clipboard.

Having the yeti finally finish its work Pitch let out a long sigh closing his eyes trying to wrap his head around the mess he’d created for himself. This was messy. He’d botched his escape horribly, and he was nervous what would come next. He found his gaze drifting up to Toothinia now more than a hint of worry painting his face as he asked, “Is he really mad?” He swallowed hard, “… Do you think he’s… he’s going to throw me back to the nightmares?”

“He is pretty upset,” Tooth said, fluffing up and fingering Pitch’s pillow. “But I don’t think he’ll throw you back to the nightmares.”

The worry didn’t leave his face as he frowned thinking of what else North would do to him. His eyes flitted back to Toothinia now looking rather nervous, “I… I don’t suppose you could talk to him… calm him down maybe?”

“I can try,” she answered.

Pitch pouted looking away. “That doesn’t sound very reassuring.”

Sandman, North, and Jack were finally making their way over to the hospital bed, but Pitch only glanced at them briefly before looking back to Toothinia imploringly.

Tooth nodded at Pitch and patted his shoulder.

“So how is he?” North asked as he walked up beside the bed.

“I’m not sure,” Tooth replied. “From what I saw, he has a lot of bruises. But other than that, I don’t know.” she quickly glanced around. “None of the nurses have given us news yet.”

North nodded. His facial features still showed a hint of annoyance and anger as he looked down at Pitch.
"Um... North, you aren't going to send Pitch back to the nightmares, are you?" Tooth timidly asked.

"Send him back?" North repeated. "No, I'm not going to send him back. He has much to answer for, but I have no plans to send him back."

"North, you know I don't agree with your methods, but I suggest that you wait until you calm down to deal with him." said Tooth.

"Oh, I think I will be calm enough by then. I do not plan to deal with him until after he is well."

Pitch gulped not liking the sound of that at all, but what he did hang on to was the ‘after’ clause as Pitch contemplated how long he could play the unwell card to keep North at bay.

Sandy noticed the chart the yeti had left on Pitch’s bedside holding it up for North to see. Thinking about his wrists still being manacled he looked at Tooth asking, “Now that they’ve done their examination, would you mind...” he shook his hand lightly not really wanting to call attention to them while North and Sandy had their backs turned looking over the charts.

"I wish I could, but I don’t think I’m supposed to." Tooth's eyes studied the straps. "The nurses will do it when they come back."

Pitch looked disappointed, but with North and Sandy in such close proximity he didn’t dare say anything rude. Instead he sighed deciding to play up his level of pain for the benefit of deceiving North later as he groaned pitifully, “I... I think I need to sleep now.”

Tooth reached out and ran her hand over his hair.

Pitch inhaled deeply closing his eyes. He’d wouldn’t say as much, but Toothinia’s touch radiated something inside of him that made him ache for more. Her contact was always soft and delicate leaving the hint of her natural smell which to Pitch reminded him of a mixture of the sea and lilacs.

North turned around, placing a hand on the side of the bed. “His charts say he has bruising and possible internal damage.”

"Wow, that must have been some fall." said Jack.

"It says possible internal damage. Is not clear that he actually has it."

“Is that why my insides feel like they are on fire?” Pitch exaggerated with a wince. “You know… you keeping me here like this… away from what I need to do has left me weak. You have believers to strengthen you… all I have is the small stipend of fear I was able to squander. Now what do I have? You keeping me here like this just might be the death of me.”

North shook his head wearily, turning a look to Sandy.

“I am in pain?” Tooth asked with concern.

Pitch nodded weakly trying to keep his eyes closed for the most part only glancing at Toothinia feeling she was eating his act up, “It...is quite agonizing.”

Sandy’s brows raised as he shrugged unable to offer any advice.
Concern on his face now, North patted Pitch's shoulder. "It is okay. You are in good hands here," he waved one of the yeti nurses over. "Pitch says he is in considerable pain. Give him something that relaxes him and takes pain away. He needs rest."

The yeti garbled an affirmative as he trundled off to get Pitch something for the pain.

“Yes, rest…” Pitch whispered doing his best to look on the verge of passing out as he closed his eyes turning his head away from North. Inwardly he was smiling, not only would this give Pitch an opportunity to evade North but also maybe come up with another means of escape not to mention not having to do any bothersome chores. Now he just needed to work on getting Toothinia to take these cuffs off of him.

“Where does it hurt?” Tooth asked. "Is there anything I can do to make you feel more comfortable?"

Pitch was eating up the attention Toothinia offered, “My whole body aches. But maybe some of that lovely hot cocoa might warm me up.” He had to fight hard to keep the smile off of his face as he stared into her eyes.

A broad smile appeared on Tooth’s mouth. “You bet! I’ll run and get you some right now.” Tooth flew off in a flash, nearly running into North.

A few moments after Tooth left, the nurse yeti returned, walking up to Pitch’s bedside. It grunted as it held up a syringe, stabbing it into a bottle to draw out some liquid.

"Uhhhh... you know... I think I'm going to go now." said Jack, smiling nervously as he backed away from the bed.

Pitch did smile as he watched Toothinia race off to go fetch him hot cocoa. He could get used to this he thought happily. Those happy thoughts melted away in an instant when he felt the yeti nurse rummaging in his sheets and gently turning him on his side. Annoyed he looked back behind him, but the big hairy arm and shoulder left him blind to what the yeti was doing. Alarm registered on his face though when he felt the yeti tug a corner of his pants down leaving one of his cheeks exposed, “What the? What are you doing back there?”

Pitch twisted more adamantly to see, but the restraints on his wrist gave him no leverage. He felt a dab of wet and cold from a moist wipe swabbing his flesh and then the explosion of pain came that caused Pitch to squeal like a girl as the large needle was jabbed unforgivingly into his hind quarters. “YeeaaaAAAHH! OW! You! You! I’m being viciously stabbed!” Pitch was jerking to get away now, but the medicine in the syringe made his vision blur as his head hit the pillow and he let out a small whimper his eyelids fluttering. Whatever was in that syringe was pretty powerful. It helped that Sandy was right beside him now sprinkling a bit of dreamsand over him to calm Pitch as the yeti moved the now limp form of Pitch back into place on the bed. It only took moments before Pitch was out like a light.

Jack put a hand in front of his face to hide his laughter. "Boy, would Bunny have loved to have seen that."

"There, he will rest now." North smiled. "I think it best that we all leave."

Jack nodded and followed North out of the room.

Sandy seeing Tooth coming down the hall with a cup of hot cocoa made a depiction of Pitch sleeping, and she nodded in understanding turning to follow the others out.
Road to Recovery

Chapter Eight

Road to Recovery

Pitch slept for hours as the yetis continued to sedate him for the next twenty-four hours straight unbeknownst to Pitch, so that they could do more extensive tests with a more willing patient as well as having a way of keeping Pitch from being able to hurt himself since the closer to waking he became the more he would thrash about as his nightmares tended to plague him quite severely when he hit REM sleep. At one juncture the nightmares were so bad that the yeti had to hold him down while Sandy used his dreamsand to neutralize them. It concerned the golden man as he watched the tears run like rivets from Pitch’s tightly closed eyes all the while as he called out for someone that he obviously cared deeply for. This made Sandy’s heart ache to see the nightmare king so distraught even in sleep.

When Pitch finally was weened back from the sedative he was still quite loopy as his eyes lulled about the room unable to really focus as he went in and out of consciousness. At one point he remembered all the guardian’s faces speaking to him throughout this blotted time although he couldn’t remember what they said, or remember ever speaking back to them. He did recall one time that he had woken seeing Tooth sitting by his side, and he had given her a big goofy drugged out smile as he slurred out a, “Salutations! Fancy… lady meeting you here I… oh my, I feel very dizzy,” with that said his head had fallen back onto his pillow, and Pitch drifted back to oblivion, but before he slipped away her cute laughter had followed him, and he smiled to hear it.

Upon waking the next time, his senses were clearer, and she was still there next to him semi-dozing. He just watched her for a long while and when she finally stirred looking his way, he averted his eyes momentarily before looking back at her to see she was still watching him. He cleared his throat feeling horse from the drugs and sleeping for so long as he looked at her with a mixture of curiosity and affection his voice cracking as he spoke, “You… have you been here all day?”

"Of course," she answered.

Of course she had been, Pitch thought admiringly as he gave her a small smile, "That was... unnecessary you know. You... you don't have to watch over me," Pitch stammered slightly embarrassed now.

“You were chewing at your bedcovers and mumbling something about bread. I was concerned.” she replied.

"I don't know whether to be concerned or laugh," Pitch smiled tiredly before frowning at his still bound hands, "I thought these would have been removed last night." Pitch hadn't realized he'd actually been in that bed for three days sedated, and the results had already come back that there in fact was no internal damage much to the guardians’ relief.

“Uh… Pitch,” worry etched across Tooth’s face as she looked down at the restraints and back at Pitch. “You’ve been here for three days.”

His eyes widened in shock, "What? What do you mean?” It was then that he realized the bruising on his chest had faded considerably and that his soreness and body aches had decreased to a mild irritation outside of his flanks that had been jabbed several times over to keep him sedated
throughout the three days. He paled slightly realizing what his recovery meant.

“Take it easy,” Tooth said, flying up and putting her hands on him. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Pitch's eyes narrowed, "You mean other than that nasty beast rudely stabbing me with a needle!? Not much really." His expression softened as he looked back her way, "Well, I... I remember you to..." He flushed a slight hue of purple averting his gaze as he spoke. Why was he feeling like this towards her? For some reason, he actually cared what she might say or think of him.

Tooth looked at him expectantly, but when he refused to say anything else, she cleared her throat and changed the subject.

“Good news is that you’re doing very well. They were able to run some tests on you when you were… sedated... and there were no internal injuries. Just minor cuts and bruises,” she smiled. "Isn't that great? You'll be up and about again in another few days."

“uh... yes... wonderful,” Pitch stated unenthusiastically as he grimaced thinking that his ability to milk being unwell was now a moot point which meant that North would soon wish to ‘address’ his escapades with him trying to leave. He wondered if he could pass the stunt off on only wanting to ride the reindeer but losing control of it causing the incident, but he quickly dismissed the idea knowing that such a blatant lie would likely only make things worse on him.

He sighed dejectedly hating his predicament before looking back to Tooth, “Well, since I’m getting better, we don’t need the cuffs to keep me safe anymore right? They are rather uncomfortable. Can you please take them off of me?” If he could at least get free of this bed, he might be able to do something about his situation.

Tooth shook her head sadly. “I’ve already told you that I can’t. The nurses have them on for a reason. They’ll remove them when they feel it’s necessary.”

This incensed Pitch as he grumbled, “I can’t speak to them, and I don’t think they’d listen to me anyway.” Getting an idea he turned a smile onto Toothinia, “But, I bet they’d listen to you if you asked them.”

“Well... um... I’m not the best at it,” she said, nervously smiling, “but I can try.” she fluttered away from the bed in search of one of the nurse yetis. One just happened to be walking by at that moment and she caught his attention, explaining what she wanted him to do the best she could, using hand gestures to help her communicate. The yeti walked over to look at Pitch. After a few minutes, the yeti nodded and grunted out a stream of growls and reached down to undo the restraints.

Pitch was elated rubbing at his wrists once the cuffs were removed wanting to spring out of the bed but he thought better on showing how healthy he was with Toothinia still here. The last thing he wanted her doing was telling North he was up and about well enough to clear the air with him as well as get back to doing menial tasks. That certainly wasn’t appealing at all. He did however roll over on his stomach though just to be able to change positions.

He was genuinely thankful as he practically cheered, “You did it! Thank you my dear, this is much better.” Tucking his pillow under himself, he lay now propped on his elbows as he studied her a moment before sighing and looking away feeling a deep seeded guilt for everything he’d done to her and the continued kindness she still showed him, “You know, for what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I mean about the teeth... your fairies, and you know trying to destroy belief in you. I know it wasn’t the best way to go about it, but I just wanted to be believed in to.”
Had she heard him right? Did Pitch just... apologize? Toothiana’s face looked stunned, her pink eyes searching Pitch for any hint of deception, eventually coming to the conclusion that Pitch was still drugged up from the sedatives. She blinked a few times, not really knowing what to say.

"I..." she gave a slight laugh and waved him off, "It's been so long ago. All's forgiven. Will you... forgive me for knocking your tooth out? I... sorta got carried away with that."

He smirked at her now, “I suppose I had that coming. At least I should be happy it wasn’t one of my front teeth eh?” He grinned widely at her now as a show that his smile didn’t show the missing tooth.

She nodded. “Yeah, and you’re fortunate that your fall didn’t knock one out.”

He wondered absently what ever happened to that tooth after he’d been dragged away back to his nightmare lair. That thought put a frown on his face as it brought back to mind punishment and the fact he was still and would be for the foreseeable future a prisoner. He had to ask her now trying to keep the edge from his voice but not being able to do so entirely, “So... how long are you guardians going to keep me here... against my will?”

“You mean here in the medical room?” said Tooth. "Probably a few more days. But then again that's up to the nurses."

Pitch lowered himself to hug his pillow now as a scowl worked its way on his face, “No, I meant in general. What kind of sentence term am I looking at here? When will I get my freedom back?”

“Oh,” Tooth’s smile dropped. “Well, that all depends on various things. But really, that’s North’s decision. You should ask him.”

Pitch snapped, “If it’s up to that blow hard, I’ll be here scrubbing his floors for the rest of eternity! His very presence irritates me, and I’m sure if I were to ask, he’d have some predictable catch phrase of what he wants to call wisdom to depart.” As he spoke, Pitch was growing more volatile clutching his pillow now tightly.

Tooth was a bit taken back by the sudden outburst, but then she relaxed, shaking her head. Pitch was still Pitch no matter what, "I would be careful what you say. North is not a bad person. He means well. He's trying so hard to help you; if you could just see it. Can't you understand that you're only making things worse for yourself by your disagreeable attitude?"

Pitch began to work himself into a rage listening to Toothinia defending North, “Trying to help me! Ha! He’s exacting revenge on me is what he’s doing! You’ve said it yourself that you don’t agree with his methods! What is there not to be disagreeable about?! He has no right to treat me like this! If I never see that fat buffoon again it would be too soon.” Pitch was squeezing his pillow so tightly now that it looked about to burst.

Tooth's face went pale and her eyes moved upward, looking at something standing behind Pitch. A sheepish, nervous smile appeared on her lips. Before she could say anything, a booming voice rang out through the medical bay, "Fat buffoon, huh?" shouted North.

A cold thrill shot up Pitch’s spine as he gasped eyes growing impossibly wide and jaw hanging agape as he spun his head around to see the imposing Cossack standing over him. “North! I... I... was just venting! It’s the drugs!” The drugs had worn off quite a while ago, but Pitch was hoping North didn’t know that.
North was skeptical as he glared down at Pitch, hands on his hips. Tooth, on the other hand, was too stunned to even speak as she continued to watch whatever was about to happen unfold in front of her.

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't." said North. He pointed at Pitch's wrists. "I see they have taken off restraints."

Pitch nodded dumbly, “I uh, Toothinia spoke to them about taking them off for me… I was uncomfortable,” he spoke now in clips carefully moving to his side wanting to get his rear out of swatting range as he shrank into the bed clutching his pillow nervously.

North nodded slowly, still staring dangerously at Pitch. "I hear you have been given clean bill of health and have made recovery."

Pitch gulped, “Well, uh actually… I… I was speaking to Toothinia, and she… she was saying that I should be here to rest another few days.” He turned back to Toothinia now, “Isn’t that right Toothinia? You think I need more rest; don’t you!?” He was hoping that she would save him from North since he seemed ready to snatch him up right then and there, and Pitch was not at all prepared to face the burly man this soon.

She removed her hands from in front of her face, not sure what to say, "Well, I... Yes, I did say that, but if you're feeling fine, then you can leave anytime, I suppose."

Pitch visibly winced at her reply; that was not what he was hoping she would say for certain. He spun back to face North as he nodded nervously, “I think another few days rest is definitely a good idea!”

"Indeed," North mused. "I think it's excellent idea."

Pitch breathed a sigh of relief hearing North seemed to agree with him needing more rest, “I’m... I’m glad you agree. I… I should probably get to that now… resting I mean.” Pitch strained a smile although his eyes were still impossibly wide watching every move North made.

Before Pitch could lay back down, North wrapped a huge hand around his wrist, "Get out of bed." he said simply.

A hard lump formed in Pitch's throat as he stammered, "Wha-what? Why?" He looked at North with a growing terror depicting that he knew exactly why, Pitch just silently prayed he was wrong.

“I think you know why!” said North, giving Pitch’s wrist a tug. By now, North’s voice had drawn the attention of the yeti nurses around them.

Pitch jaw worked to say something, but North's sudden action left him stunned silent outside of a sharp intake of breath as he was yanked forward shaking his head no vigorously.

“I’ve been lenient on you for too long!” North continued as he pulled a nearby chair up beside the bed, sat down, and yanked Pitch out of the bed and over his knee. “I showed you some mercy by waiting until you recovered. But now it is time.”

The shock wore off as Pitch was roughly yanked over North’s knee, “What!? Here! No! Wait! Not like this!” Pitch squirmed like an animal caught in a trap now.

North grunted as he positioned Pitch so that his legs were restrained by his own. He grabbed hold of Pitch's flailing arms and pulled them around to the small of his back and held them
in place there. "I don't see why not. You apparently have no shame about insulting me out loud here."

“No! No!” Pitch shouted as North manhandled him. Nothing he did seemed to help his situation as he felt North remove all avenues of recourse to get away or block his intended purpose.

Once Pitch was secured into place, the fact that this was happening right in front of Toothinia and the ward’s staff sank in as Pitch strained, “I… I’m sorry! That was a bit tactless I admit!” He turned a pleading eye to Toothinia, “Toothinia! Make him stop! Please! Don’t let him do this to me!” Maybe her words would set him free here as she had managed to get him free from the bed’s restraints earlier. As it was, Pitch knew North most certainly wasn’t going to listen to him.

Finally, Tooth got her senses back and moved, “Um… North,”

“What?” said North turning his gaze to her.

“Maybe we could approach this in a different way.”

“There is no different way,” he said, pulling Pitch’s robe back. “I have had it. It is time Pitch learns lesson. If you don’t want to watch, leave.”

Toothiana sighed and looked down at Pitch sadly.

Pitch grimaced feeling North pulling his robe back, and upon hearing Toothinia’s pleas fall on deaf ears, he whimpered becoming quite desperate now, “North! Please! There has to be another way! Hear her out at least!”

North stopped and regarded Pitch a few minutes, “Pitch, if there was, I would use it, because I do not enjoy causing you pain. I know this is hard for you, but I want you to know I do this for your own good so you will learn lesson. I do this because I care about you and wish to help you. I do not do it so that you fear or hate me. I knew that keeping you here would be difficult, but if I can help you change your ways then it is worth it.”

“My own good! It’s for your own good! You just want to control me because you fear me and what I’m capable of!” Pitch’s lip quivered his anxiety growing, “You couldn’t possibly care about me! None of you could, I’m an affront to everything you are! Why would you even want to?” Pitch was breathing hard now his body trembling as he stared at North his eyes searching for reason.

A hard smack came down on Pitch’s backside. “I do not want to control you. I try to save you from yourself.”

He ducked his head as North’s words echoed through him just as his heavy handed swats did. To save him from himself? No! He couldn’t really want to help him! Could he? That seed of doubt was growing within him as Pitch knew enough about North to know that he wasn’t known to be a cruel man, and the thought that North would think that the only way to help him to learn a lesson was to spank him of all things because he was incapable of being reasoned with was humbling in and of itself.

Pitch grit his teeth trying his best not to make a sound, but as the sharp smacks connected and repeated again and again spreading a pain that was becoming all too familiar he realized that wouldn’t last long. He yelped now as the swats began to move over already sensitive skin, his body jerking and twisting violently as North laid into him. Pitch did his best to brace himself against the pain and displace what was happening to him, but he found he couldn’t especially with all of them watching him strewn over North’s knee kicking, yelping, and squirming like this.
Not letting up on the spanking, North continued talking in a calm, even voice, “I want you to know that you bring pain and misery on yourself, Pitch. You have no one to blame but self. You see me as being cruel? Fine, go ahead. But just remember that when you do so, you are only denying truth. You are putting blame on someone else because you can’t face truth that you have brought yourself to this point.” He brought his hand down harder. “The choices you make and your actions always bring consequences. You make poor choices and do bad things, you get punished." At the mentioning of 'punished', North landed an especially hard slap to Pitch's underside to get his point across. "Your rear suffers now because of poor choices on your part. I know it is hard for you to understand, but in time you will." Another hard smack. "And I will make sure you understand, even if I have to tan your hide all night."

Pitch hated hearing North chide him like this and shook his head as if he could stop hearing his words. The pain was becoming insufferable he realized as he twitched exaggeratedly letting out soft gasps and high pitch cries as North’s hand continued its work. Not wanting this to go on any longer he screamed out, “Okay! Stop! Please! I get it! I… I shouldn’t have tried to leave! I… I’m just so miserable here,” he felt himself choking on his words as the past few days and all that he’d been through melded into an emotional wave of sorrow. What hurt more was the fact that it hadn’t been all bad. The time he spent with Jack and Toothinia especially had awaken something in him that wanted companionship, but knowing who he was, he couldn’t bring himself to believe that he could deserve any form of happiness in that way. Not having their friendship left nothing to lose, and so he had pushed them away afraid to let them get close because all it would leave was a deeper cut. He’d just disappoint them, and then he’d be all alone again.

“I accept your apology for trying to leave. But as I told you before, you do not decide when your punishment stops.” North brought his hand down hard again before grabbing the waistband of Pitch’s pants and pulling them down in one swift motion, picking up where he left off by bringing his palm down swiftly. “Like I said, I have been too lenient on you up till now. I will correct that mistake.” North’s hand came down in a blur as he peppered Pitch’s bared butt with stinging swats, turning it a bright red. He made sure that Pitch never forgot the moment, but at the same time made sure he did not permanently harm him. “Are you miserable here, Pitch? Or is that lie you tell yourself? Part of your problem is you deceive yourself. You are your own worst enemy.”

Too lenient! Pitch gasped in mortification as he felt North bare his flesh, “No!” he cried out mournfully. He couldn’t help but to glance back and see his further shame mirrored by the fact that they were not alone and everyone else in the room was also seeing what he saw right now. His bottom was already quite red and splotchy with North’s palm prints painting its surface, and he didn’t seem to be letting up any. “Please!” he whimpered, but the big man gave no indication that he planned to stop anytime soon, and Pitch was reaching the end of his strength to struggle against the immovable force that was North. No, just as North had warned him, Pitch wasn’t going to stop this, couldn’t stop this even though he wished it so with every fiber of his being. This fact broke him, and the tears that had begun to well in his eyes now spilled down his cheeks. North was right of course, he was his own worst enemy, “I… I can’t!” he lay limply now as he cried openly, “I… I don’t know how to change.”

North lessened the swats, but didn't stop. "First, you have to want to change. Nothing can happen until you take that first step. Then you have to commit to it. It will not be easy, but I believe it is possible. I have feeling there is good still inside you. You just have to find it. You may need help along way. And that is where we come in. We are here to help you on journey. You are not alone, Pitch. We are not enemies as you seem to think.” North stopped spanking and leaned down close to Pitch. "Do you know why Man in Moon released you? Hm? He released you so that we could help you. You say you are miserable here, but you are where you are meant to be."

Toothiana had been fluttering in mid-air the entire time, horrified by the sight before her.
But try as she might, she couldn't bring herself to move or say anything to interfere with what North was doing. So she remained silent and watched Pitch with sorrowful eyes.

Pitch sobbed breath hitching at the mention of not being alone. How desperately he wanted to believe North. The thought that the man in the moon would release him so that the guardians would save him from such a fate was hard to swallow, but he found himself wanting to believe it. Pitch sobbed now not from the spanking but from the forgiveness he was being granted. The thought that North could see any shred of good in him when he doubted its existence in himself struck a chord, “I’m sorry. Please forgive me!” Pitch wept deeply now, “I… I’m very tired of being alone; I… I want to try! I do, I’m just afraid to fail.”

North stopped the spanking, letting go of Pitch’s arms. Gently, he pulled his pants back into place and gave Pitch time to get himself under control again.

"You know I forgive you, Pitch." North said.

Toothiana took this moment to finally move forward. She put her hands on Pitch's wet cheeks, lifting his head up slightly to plant a kiss on his forehead, "Everyone's afraid of failing at some point, Pitch." she said softly. "It's normal. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't try. I was afraid of failing once too, when I first became the Tooth Fairy."

Pitch was so relieved that North had stopped, and as he pulled Pitch’s pants up his body quivered at the sting that radiated there. The tears still poured from Pitch’s eyes as he sniffled trying to get his breathing under control, but he found the more he tried to stop crying the harder he cried. It poured from him, his fears and anxiety, his doubts and anguish, he wept hard letting it shed from him, needing to be rid of it, and by the time he had started to calm, it felt as if his soul had been cleansed by the act.

He had barely registered that Toothinia was still there until her delicate tiny hands were lifting his face to hers. The kiss she left filled him with warmth and hope. He swallowed hard finding it hard to meet her eyes now as the onset of everything that had just happened, that she’d witnessed happen, and the fact that he was still over North’s lap made him blush furiously as he let himself slide off of the Cossack’s lap. Pitch landed gently on his knees wrapping his arms around himself and staring at the floor as he whispered tentatively, “I’m… I’m going to try.”

“Come,” North said gently as he helped Pitch to his feet. “I will take you to your room, and you can get rest you need.”

Pitch complied wordlessly feeling spent emotionally as he rose to his feet keeping his head down to avoid eye contact with the yeti that still watched on curiously. His face burned with his humiliation, and he was still in awe of what had transpired between them and subsequently what he had agreed to do.

Pitch couldn't help but glance over at North. He wanted to be angry with the man, he should have been, but for some reason that he couldn't fathom, Pitch wasn't. He was just glad the whole ordeal was over and he could finally move on.

North walked with Pitch as he led him back to his room. Toothiana fluttered a few feet behind them, remaining silent. Once they arrived at the door, North quietly mouthed something to Tooth and she flew off down the hall.

“Here we are,” North announced, opening the door.

Pitch sighed slumping his shoulders as he walked into his room. It was just as he had left it,
and the familiarity was both comforting and saddening representing his recent failures, but also a
place of belonging.

He felt so confused and at odds with himself now as part of him warred to rebel against the
situation he’d found himself in while the other half longed for the companionship staying here gave
an opportunity for. Pitch stood now inside the confines of his room and looked to North, his face was
a wash of the inner turmoil he felt.

North smiled, pointing a finger at him. "You rest." Turning, he disappeared out the door.

Pitch watched him go, and once he was alone, he glanced down at his bed with a frown.
He’d been strapped down to that hospital bed for who knew how long, so the urge to lie down was
the last thing he wanted to do, and well sitting… he absentely rubbed at the tenderness radiating from
his seat deciding that this too was an activity that he didn’t wish to partake in any time soon. He
instead glided over slowly to one of the portholes to look outside glad that the stained glass shut out
the harsh light of the day enough that Pitch could just stare out the window and think.

I light knock came to the door.

Pitch was torn from his thoughts turning his head towards the door, “Come in,” he
announced flatly before turning back to the window to watch the snow flurries whip across the
 glacierside.

Tooth slowly entered, peeking around the door until she caught sight of Pitch. Smiling, she
came into the room, carrying a tray in her hands.
"Sorry to intrude, but I thought you needed a little cheering up." she offered her tray and the mug of
hot cocoa on it. "You... er... probably wish to be alone right now, but yeah... I'll just set this down
here." she put the tray on the night table.

Pitch turned to regard her. Of all the guardians, she had quickly become the one he felt
closest to, and after what he’d just gone through, he didn’t really want to be alone. As she put the
tray on his nightstand, he held out a hand, "N... no don’t go. I mean, if you want to, you can stay.”
He looked away before glancing up at her once more as if afraid that she would already be gone.

She came back into the room, "I can stay if you want me to. Do you wish to talk?"

He was somewhat nervous now as if tongue tied, “I... well, I thought you'd like to share
the treats you brought...” he moved over to the bed quickly fixing the covers and fluffing the pillow
for her to sit, “I don’t have a chair,” he said lamely feeling socially inept.

She smiled, pointing to the rocking chair in the corner.

He wrung his hands together, “Oh, oh yes.” He was hoping she hadn’t seen the rocking
chair that he’d hidden in the corner after North’s last use of it had left the mere sight of it as a bad
memory. He had secretly hoped she’d have sat next to him on the bed, but he wouldn’t dare voice it
out loud.

She laughed lightly. “That’s fine, though, I’ll be content to just stay here where I am.”

He blushed giving her a small smile before awkwardly climbing onto the bed and laying on
his side propping himself on one of his pillows to carefully avoid sitting. He subconsciously hoped
she hadn’t noticed his carefulness surely able to put two and two together. He cleared his throat, “So
uh; what did you bring?”
“Cookies and hot cocoa,” she said with a nervous smile, fluttering over to the tray. “But I’m not really in the mood for anything, to be honest. So I’ll leave this here for you. And we can just talk...”

She was unsure what to say to Pitch, especially after everything she’d witnessed. What was one supposed to say? Sorry you got your butt tanned? She noticed that Pitch was having a hard time getting comfortable and flew over beside him. "Um... are you comfortable? You want me to get you some more pillows or... something?"

He covered his face as an all new wave of embarrassment washed over him, “Uh no… I’m fine. Really.” Well this was getting awkward he thought trying to shake off the memory that she’d been present throughout his recent punishment. Pitch desperately wanted to change the subject, but he had no idea how to start a conversation with her he realized, but he tried anyway, “So, uh… are you, are you going out to collect teeth tonight?” Wow, that was lame he thought silently chiding himself as he reached over for the hot cocoa to occupy his hands and subsequently put something else in his mouth other than his foot.

“Actually, no,” she replied. “I took some time off whenever you had your fall. I felt like one of us should be around for you so you’d have someone there that wasn’t, you know, a yeti. Since I have my fairies that can do my work for me, I figured I was the best one.”

He grimaced, “Yes… that was rather unfortunate. I… I hope I didn’t disrupt your routine too much.” Pitch was touched that she had stayed with him even though he had been unconscious the majority of the time, he had no doubts that she monitored him the majority of the time he’d been in the hospital bay. Thinking on the fall saddened him as he doubted he’d ever be let near the reindeer again, and he had really enjoyed the beast… that was before falling off of it of course.

“Oh, not at all! Like I said, I have my fairies to take care of everything when I’m not there. So I can take off whenever I need to.” she smiled. “Since you’re feeling much better now, I can start back collecting teeth anytime.”

“Oh,” Pitch’s face fell at her admission as he sighed, “I suppose so.” It saddened him to think of her leaving again so soon. He took smaller sips off of his hot cocoa now staring inside of his cup.

"Aw, don't be sad. I can always come by anytime."

"Sad! No, no I'm not sad," Pitch lied waving her off, "I... I was just curious is all." He smiled sheepishly, "It's not like I have much else to do here," he grimaced as he didn't much care to think on that fact.

"I'm sure North will allow you to go back to doing your chores within the next few days, after you recover." she replied. Then her face brightened. "And after you get through, we can visit!"

His mood soured more at the mention of going back to doing chores as he replied wryly, "I can hardly wait to return to indentured servitude." He pouted angrily, "So you're going to leave me with those task masters to oversee me?" He didn't like the idea of having to deal with Sandy or North watching him work since they were a lot less flexible than Toothinia.

Tooth looked at him a moment, her smile fading, "You'd better watch how you speak about them." she said, all hint of mirth leaving her voice. "I'm in agreement with them when it comes to you doing work to help pay for your wrongdoings. You have to pay some way, Pitch. Better to do work than going back to the pit."
Pitch narrowed his eyes at Toothinia all out glowering now, "Or what? Are you going to rat me out, so they..." He couldn't find it in himself to finish the sentence before shaking his head in disgust. "Am I not allowed to speak my mind now? I should have known you'd side with them. You say you don't agree with how they treat me, but you're more than willing to stand by and let them force me to do their bidding. It almost makes you worse for doing nothing at all when you know it's wrong!"

Tooth backed up against the door, "I... hope you enjoy your cookies and cocoa." she softly said as she left the room.

Pitch yelled after her angrily, “Fine! Just leave then!” He began muttering to himself agitatedly, “I didn’t want to spend any time with you anyway!” He glanced back towards the door sighing, why did it always boil down to this? Every time he thought he and Toothinia were getting along so well, she had to start putting herself and the guardians on a pedestal as if they had the right to punish him anyway they saw fit! He slammed the cocoa cup back down on the tray ignoring the cookies as he laid on his stomach pulling his pillow under crossed arms to lay his chin on them while his eyes were boring a hole into his headboard as he fumed.

Another knock came to the door, louder and heavier this time.

Pitch jumped at the abruptness of it. It was definitely North he was most sure. The man boomed and bellowed everywhere he went. His eyes widened fearfully as he thought to slink off the bed and hide under it. He of course only imagined this knowing it wouldn’t do much for him other than likely anger North. “Co... Come in?” Pitch squeaked timidly. Did she actually go tell North what he’d said? He wouldn’t come back to spank him again so soon would he? That consideration was absolutely awful especially since he was so very sore already. Pitch cringed not even realizing he was now clutching his pillow to himself in anticipation.

North entered, “Is everything okay?” he asked. “I saw Tooth fly down hall like she was mad.”

Pitch swallowed hard still staring at his headboard and keeping his head propped on his arms his whole body growing tensely rigid. He was afraid to look the big man in the eye for fear he’d read his guilt, “Uh. Yeah, everything’s fine. I think she had to go back to the tooth palace or something like that,” Pitch stated tightly.

"Ah!" North nodded. He continued to look at Pitch, his face showing that he was deep in thought.

Pitch found himself glancing worriedly towards North feeling rather uncomfortable with the man standing in such close proximity. He’d grown quite fearful of the man’s quick recourse and worried now if the man knew he was lying about how he and Tooth’s conversation went.

"I would like for you to come with me," North said at last. "If you feel up to it.”

Pitch turned to face him studying North’s face and almost afraid to refuse, he gave a short nod, “Sure;” he replied lightly.

North led Pitch through the halls until they came to the reindeer stables. Here, North took pitch inside, "I understand that you like my reindeer." said North at last.

Pitch had been wary as they had made their way to the stables wondering if North had another point to make regarding the reindeer, but his words helped Pitch to finally relax as he nodded cautiously looking up to see that one had moved to poke it’s head over the stall at them.
"In that case, I put you in charge of them." North raised an eyebrow. "If you want the job."

Pitch seemed unsure as he looked between the reindeer and North stepping up to the reindeer that lowered its head to be touched. Pitch couldn’t resist the urge and reached out to touch its muzzle tenderly closing in to let the creature nuzzle his cheek as he closed his eyes enjoying the feel of the creature’s warmth and contact. Pitch opened his eyes again staring at North now perplexed as his eyes searched North, “I… I don’t understand? You, you’re trusting me to care for them after… after everything?”

"Let’s call it second chance." North answered "I'm trusting you won't make same mistake again."

Pitch shook his head no; that ordeal was more than enough of a lesson to know he had no plans to try and ride a reindeer again… or runaway for that matter. His bottom twinged at the recent memory; no definitely not anytime soon!

He couldn’t understand why North would be so nice to him after he’d disobeyed him so thoroughly. Pitch gathered North felt he’d already addressed the matter, so they could move on, and Pitch was grateful for it. He’d assumed that North would make him suffer for quite some time with horrible additional tasks, but this small boon had surprised Pitch. The reindeer seemed content to be rubbed now, and Pitch as before drew its head in close continuing to pet the creature lovingly as a small smile broke on his lips. Yes, he would enjoy caring for these creatures very much so. He looked back up at North replying softly, “I’d like that very much… thank you.”

North nodded. “The job is yours. I expect you to brush them, bathe them, and water and feed them. And you will need to take them outside for exercise.”

Pitch nodded eagerly thinking of any kind of work to be made to do, this work would be ideal for him. His excitement at being given this particular detail he didn't hide as his smile widened with genuine joy, "I can do that!"

He started to observe the stables more analytically to notate where all the various supplies to complete the chores were. He wondered what exercise included, but the thought of riding one of the beasts just for fun was an exciting prospect. Perhaps he could get the chance to train one if North would allow it. Of course that would be a conversation best broached another day.

“I know you wish to rest,” North continued, rubbing the nose of one of the deer. “So you can start when you feel up to it. If you have questions, come to me.”

Pitch watched North curiously now, for once not seeing the man as strictly an obstacle to overcome, "I'll start tomorrow," Pitch voiced confidently not really liking the idea of being cooped up in his room for days recuperating, even if he should take a day or two to heal fully, it just seemed rather dull and boring to his new tasks in comparison.

“Excellent!” North said. “I will leave you to get acquainted with deer, then. Unless you have questions?”

Pitch shook his head no, he was still in awe of the fact that North was giving him this as he stared back up at the massive animal, "I'll try not to let you down,” Pitch stated quietly almost to himself as he continued to pet the deer’s muzzle.

North nodded, studying Pitch a moment before turning to leave.

Pitch watched North go deciding to stay with the reindeer a while longer as he pulled one
of the brushes off the wall and made his way back to the reindeer. The deer grunted in satisfaction knowing well what the brush meant. Smiling, Pitch climbed up on one of the rails to bring himself closer to the animal and began methodically brushing the underside of its neck.

He spent the next hour there getting lost in grooming the animal before wandering back to his room feeling somewhat satisfied. Tomorrow he would start early tending to them.

These thoughts pleased him, but for now he was weary from the day's events and his body still ached from his bruising from the fall, so he curled up in his sheets to rest. Pitch contemplated the fact that even after everything he'd just endured and the fact he was still a prisoner, he had to admit to himself that he wasn't as unhappy to be here as he had been when he first arrived.
The next morning, Toothiana curiously poked her head into the stables, knocking lightly, "Hello? Pitch?"

"Toothinia," Pitch stated dryly from beside one of the reindeer that was outside of its stall tethered to a pole. The animal was steadily plowing its head greedily into a bucket of grains that Pitch had set before it while he painstakingly worked to scrub the beast while it was distracted and less likely to give him a hard time bathing it.

Tooth was stunned to see Pitch actually doing work. She eyed him a few minutes, thinking she was dreaming, and then a smile formed on her lips, "Um… I stopped by your room, but you weren’t there. North said you were in the reindeer stables."

"These beasts require sustenance and get quite ornery if not managed properly, so I wanted to tend to them early," Pitch of course stated this matter-of-factly as if it were common knowledge how to care for reindeer.

Pitch’s reply shocked the Tooth Fairy even more, but she didn’t bother to question. At least Pitch was doing something without protest, and she found that to be a good thing, "I just wanted to see how you were doing."

The fact Toothinia felt the need to check in on him irritated Pitch especially after the way they had parted ways the night before, and so he snapped icily, "Yes, well as I told you before, I don’t need a babysitter."

"You don’t have to be rude, Pitch." she replied.

"You’re right, I don’t," Pitch was purposefully being rude now mostly because he knew he could be with her, and it was his way of getting her back for angering him the day before. He knew he probably shouldn’t treat her that way, but she always seemed to accept it and move on, so he’d made her his verbal punching bag to vent his frustrations on. It was rather therapeutic.

Pitch's blatant rudeness greatly annoyed Tooth. She knew he was doing it for spite to get back at her for what happened between them the day before, which she actually couldn't understand since everything that had happened had been Pitch's fault. He had been the one to act like a brat and hurt her feelings. Maybe North had been right in choosing spanking for Pitch, she thought. Perhaps the disciplinary action had its place after all, "So, North gave you the job of taking care of the deer?"

Pitch finished his scrubbing backing away from the animal to take a better look and seeming satisfied dumped the scrub brush into the bucket of sudsy water before turning to address her, "It would seem so… you appear surprised to not see me with a warden. Were you thinking I’d try another escape attempt or shirk my duties if you hadn’t came? As I told you, I don’t need you watching over my every move. Even North trusts me this much.” He knew he was getting on her nerves by the manner in which she stared at him now, and this brought a smirk to his lips. Getting under her skin was too fun, and getting a rise out of her was becoming a small form of entertainment for him. He was bored after all.

"Like I said, I came to see how you were doing. I didn't come to see if you were trying to
He smiled at her deciding he’d give her a small break if she was indeed just coming to see him, “I’m doing better. This is an improvement from scrubbing floors and baking cookies which I’m not really cut out for,” he said with a tint of disdain thinking on the memory. “I thought you wouldn’t come by again until after I’d finished for the day… I’m surprised to see you here this early.”

Tooth remained silent, not knowing what to say.

He peered at her curiously, “What? You look upset. I haven’t offended your delicate sensibilities now have I?” His smile widened maliciously. She really was too easy he thought as he pulled the grain bucket away from the reindeer returning to the stable to fill it again, “So what would you like to talk about? Surely you didn’t just come here to watch me work? Or did you?”

Tooth continued to stare at Pitch. Then she shrugged. "We could talk about a lot of things. Like your apparent need to spend more time over North's knee, among other things."

His face registered shock as he spun back around, “Wha-what!?” Pitch’s brow drew down sneering angrily at her as he pouted, “That’s not funny!”

"I... didn't say it to be funny, Pitch. I meant it." Tooth fought to get the words out. She couldn't believe she was saying them, but at the same time it felt good.

Pitch couldn’t believe the words that were coming out of her mouth; how could she say that to him? He blinked his eyes expressing hurt, “I thought you were against that sort of torture! Were you just lying to me?”

Tooth sadly shook her head. "I was against it... I still am... sorta. But the way you acted yesterday and the way you're acting now has opened my eyes to see that maybe North was right all along."

His lip twitched as he fought to control the anger that welled in him that even Toothinia who was staunchly against what North was doing at first now seemed to agree with it... at least concerning him. He growled, “I don’t need to hear this from you! Just... just go away!” He began throwing supplies around in a huff kicking over the grain bucket next to his feet as a way to physically vent his frustrations with Toothinia. He didn’t need her friendship or her stupid opinions!

"Fine!" Tooth quickly flew off, stopping halfway to the door. "I felt sorry for you at first. But now I see you're nothing but an arrogant brat." She turned and left.

Pitch clenched his teeth and balled his fists watching her leave kicking the stable door violently and startling the reindeer in the stall next to him. Looking down at the mess he’d created, he sighed tiredly. Maybe that wasn’t the best of ideas. Now he’d have to clean this up to.

It could wait until he’d finished taking care of the reindeer he decided as he trudged back to the reindeer still tethered to the pole. It had shaken off the majority of the water, so Pitch brought it out to the main running area where he’d brought the others to romp after bathing them. There he stood leaning against the fence line just watching them run about and bump heads as he thought about Toothinia. He hadn’t really wanted her to go away, but he also felt betrayed with her knowing how much that remark must have hurt him to hear her of all people say about him. Could she really see him like that or was she just trying to anger him? His cheeks darkened knowing Toothina wasn’t the type of person to say hurtful things out of spite; that was him. Maybe he’d gone a little overboard with teasing her. The thought to apologize came to mind although to actually do so might be painstaking.
Sandy saw Toothina come zipping down the hallway looking quite unhappy, and he stopped signaling a question mark above his head as she approached.

"Oh, Sandy," Tooth said, taking a deep breath, "It's Pitch. He's such an arrogant, stuck-up brat. I see now that North was right all along in his method of discipline. If you ask me, Pitch hasn't had enough yet."

Sandy's brow drew down looking Tooth over to see if she’d been hurt before looking worried and flashing a picture of North and a question mark over his head.

Tooth looked at Sandy, not quite understanding him. She shook her head, "I'm sorry, I'm not following."

Sandy sighed before depicting a picture of North followed by an arrow pointing to a picture of Pitch and then another question mark.

"Do I want North to spank Pitch?"

Sandy nodded with obvious concern for her.

Her shoulders slumped. "I don't know. He said a lot of rude, hurtful things to me, last night and a few minutes ago. Some of it I think he only said it to make me mad. I don't understand. I thought I was making headway with being his friend, and then he just suddenly acts like he doesn't even care anymore. I mean, this IS Pitch we're talking about. So it's normal, right?"

Sandy shrugged before his eyebrows lifted as he tilted his head to the side lifting a finger with a lightbulb portrayed over his head. He pointed at her and made a picture of Pitch raging and then of her spanking Pitch.

"Me spank Pitch? I… no… I couldn’t…" Tooth said, looking nervous. "I wouldn’t know how. He’d get away from me."

Sandy's smile broadened as he patted her shoulder. He pointed to himself then formed a question mark.

Tooth thought about his offer a moment, and then slightly nodded her head. "Yeah, I would like that."

Sandy nodded giving her a smile and a gesture to lead the way.

Tooth led Sandy to the stables, entering first and looking around for Pitch, “Pitch?” she called out when she didn’t see him nearby. "I wish to talk with you."

Pitch had still been leaning against the rail watching the reindeer when he heard Toothinia’s voice; he didn’t bother turning around but called out his location with a hint of scorn, “I’m over here.”

Tooth nervously hesitated, glancing at Sandy.

Sandy gave her a thumbs up before fashioning a dreamsand whip as if to say he was already ready to take Pitch in hand if need be.

Tooth gave him a half smile and fluttered forward until she found Pitch, “Uh, Pitch…” she really didn’t know how to approach this, “We need to talk.”
Pitch glanced over at her as she flew up next to him before turning his attention back to the reindeer, “Go on then, talk.” He tried to act disinterested, but he was listening quite intently and very curious as to why she’d come back so soon. Maybe she’d regretted that her words had upset him and had come back to apologize.

Toothiana held back a few more minutes, trying to gather nerve enough to do what she had to do. Suddenly, a look of determination appeared on her face as she flew closer, “Pitch, I’m tired of your attitude.”

No, this wasn’t an apology, she’d come back to berate him! He turned towards her now glowering, “Oh really? Well perhaps I wouldn’t have an attitude if you weren’t so wishy washy with your supposed personal convictions! Perhaps if you…”

Pitch was cut off though as Sandy’s whip arched out snapping him squarely on his backside.

Pitch let out an undignified yelp spinning around to face Sandy his jaw dropped in mortification as his gaze flitted nervously from Sandy to Toothinia, “You… you brought him back here so you could talk to me?” He would have backed away further, but he was already against the fence, so he instead pressed himself against it rubbing fiercely at his bottom as it still smarted quite a bit from the day before where North had done a number on him. Just the one lash was enough to ensure Pitch’s rapt attention.

“No,” Tooth answered, shaking her head, “I brought him here to help me put you back in your place. Your attitude towards me these past few days has been inexcusable. I’ve put up with your rudeness up until now, but I’m not going to put up with it anymore.”

Pitch’s mouth worked into a pout as he looked down. He knew that he’d been disrespecting her for some time now, and he guessed eventually it would have come to this through one of the other guardians reprimanding him as Sandman had done in the kitchens, but it still hit him like a kick in the chest that Toothinia herself actually went so far as to fetch Sandman to come ‘deal’ with him like this. He didn’t know why, but this act hurt him more than he’d expected it to mostly because he had realized that he pushed an otherwise passive person into thinking this way. He stated somberly, “Alright… point made. I… I guess I let my anger get in the way sometimes. I’ll… work to control it.” He glanced back up at her a moment before looking back down feeling wholly embarrassed by the conversation to be chided in such a way and for his immediate reaction to buckle to it.

“Alright... point made. I guess I let my anger get in the way sometimes. I’ll... work to control it.” He glanced back up at her a moment before looking back down feeling wholly embarrassed by the conversation to be chided in such a way and for his immediate reaction to buckle to it.

Tooth peered at Pitch and then glanced over at Sandy, wondering what she should do next.

Sandy shrugged not knowing if she wanted him to make more of an impact to go with her words by lifting the sand whip.

Pitch had glanced up his eyes going wide as Sandy lifted the whip, and Pitch realized quickly what the golden man was asking her. He spun towards her now grabbing one of her hands becoming quite penitent, “I’m sorry! Really! It... it won’t happen again okay? Just please don’t have him...” he trailed off a worried glance flitting to Sandy and back to her.

Tooth searched Pitch’s eyes, wanting to believe him. She still wasn’t sure if he was being truthful or faking to get out of the current situation, “Are you going to act better towards me and the other Guardians from now on?” she asked.

Pitch’s eyes narrowed at her words, but he didn’t dare glare at her directly instead choosing to stare at his hand that was busily picking at the splinters of wood in the fence. He barely contained
a hiss as he spoke, “Yes.”

Tooth thought a moment, studying Pitch’s movements, and then turned and gave Sandy a quick nod for him to give Pitch another reminder.

Sandy was on him like a flash lashing out a strand of dreamsand to wrap around his wrist and yank him forward before whipping out a new strand to capture both hands in front of him with one strand as Sandy rose in the air. Pitch spun on tip toes as he was led back towards the fence and dragged over it beside Toothinia. Sandy then whipped out another strand of dreamstrand through the hole in the gate to wrap around Pitch’s knees affectively pinning him straddled over the fence bottom high in the air.

Pitch for his part gasped in surprise having fully expected the conversation to have ended with the one strap as a warning, but realizing that was not going to be the case, he squalled, “Wait! No! I said I would act better! Please no!” Sandman was like lightening, and before he’d realized it, Sandy had him trussed up and immobile as Pitch pulled desperately to get away.

Sandy now held both strands in one hand preparing a third strand to start lighting Pitch’s rear up when he glanced to Toothinia and motioned to her to see if she wished to make the point herself or have him continue to do it for her.

Tooth looked at Pitch’s rear and then to her hand then she looked at Pitch, “Were you telling the truth?”

Pitch raised his head looking back at her his eyes reflecting uneasiness; he practically shrieked, “Yes, yes! Toothinia! I said I was sorry didn’t I?” A knot was forming in his stomach as he breathed heavily trying to back off the fence without being able to budge.

“Sandy, you can let him go.” Tooth suddenly said

Pitch visibly relaxed, “I’m glad you’ve come to your senses,” he breathed thankful she wasn’t going to actually go through with it.

"I came to my senses when I realized North had been right all along in the method of discipline he chose for you." said Tooth with a sigh. "I accept your apology, but I expect your attitude to greatly improve from now on."

His insides froze at hearing her words as he looked away sulkily. Sandy relaxed his hold on Pitch’s legs and hands until the dreamsand melted away. Pushing himself off of the fence to finally stand upright, Pitch wanted nothing more than to leave this horrible encounter, “I… I have to put the reindeer back in their stalls,” he spoke in an almost whisper as he moved quickly to unlatch the gate just to get away from the two guardians.

He felt defeated on a whole new level now. It had been bad when North had spanked him as well as Sandy, but on some level he’d come to expect harsh treatment from them, but not from Toothinia. Toothinia had been the one person he could rally to his side concerning his severe treatment, and now here she was saying that she agreed with it fully and worse was about to carry out the punishment herself. It made him both angry and sad as his emotions swirled within him impossibly to the surface causing tears to well in his eyes. He felt disgusted feeling them standing there waiting to fall, as he moved to storm off across the field.

Tooth sighed and looked at Sandy, still wondering if she had done the right thing. She didn’t want Pitch to fear her, but yet she now understood that she had allowed Pitch to get out of control around her, and that she needed to do something to put him back in his place.
Sandy's eyes followed Pitch a moment before turning back to Toothinia and floating down to her. He lay a comforting hand on her shoulder as he smiled sadly in understanding. Pitch needed to be shown he had to respect them, and unfortunately, he didn't ever seem to make it easy on them or himself.

Pitch sighed as he made his way across the field to one of the first reindeer he came upon. He grabbed its reins pulling it to him and reaching out to pet it absently as he got his emotions under control.

What was wrong with him? He hadn't even really been hit, but here he was on the verge of tears over what? He sneered cursing himself inwardly and feeling weak. What was he becoming? He wasn't sure, but all of these uncontrollable feelings were getting to him, and perhaps it was because it had been so long since he was actually forced to feel at all made these feelings so hard to deal with now. Either way, he had to get himself together.

Pitch straightened now taking in a deep breath as he worked to cut his emotions off. He trudged back with the reindeer and doing his best to keep the beast between he and the other two guardians as he walked it back to the stables. He kept his head low only cutting furtive glances their way to avoid speaking to them further.

"Do you think I did the right thing?" Tooth asked Sandy.

Sandy tilted his head looking at her curiously before his eyes wandered to Pitch moving swiftly into the stables. He turned back to her now giving a vigorous nod.

Toothiana visibly relaxed, even though the air around them still felt tense, "I guess I'll just leave him alone for now and visit him later when everything has calmed down."

Pitch skulked in the shadows of the stables watching as Toothinia and Sandman made their way back to the entrance of North's workshop. He didn't want to see them again after that whole scene and was glad they had decided to leave him be. He felt a mix of anger at Toothinia for doing this to him as well despondency having lost her respect. He was cross at himself now for ruining their relationship and twisting it into something else where she obviously thought less of him. Why should he care what she thought of him? What any of them thought of him? This was all temporary; wasn’t it? Was it?

These thoughts made Pitch brood as he moved back out to the field to pull the reindeer in one at a time and finish caring for them. The work out here with just he and the reindeer was soothing he found, and not wanting to return to his room any time soon, Pitch took his time completing the rest of the chores just to eat up time. Once all the reindeer had been thoroughly tended to and he grew bored of the stables, he trudged back to his room moving through the least populated areas to avoid everyone.

Once he'd made it to his room though, this too was lackluster, but having nowhere else he’d rather be at the Pole, Pitch decided to climb into his sheets. The bed really was comfortable, definitely cozier than anything he’d slept on in centuries, and between its sanctuary and solace, Pitch found it to be one of his preferred places to be even if he wasn’t sleeping. Pitch sighed laying his head on his pillow just staring off at nothing in particular. He really had to find something else to do with his time he thought listlessly.
An all too familiar light knock suddenly sounded at the door.

Pitch blinked taking a few minutes before answering dejectedly, “Come in.”

The door opened slowly and Toothiana poked her head in, "Pitch?" she called. "Is it okay if I come in?"

He thought to ask if he had a choice but then thought better of it not wanting to come across as being rude so soon after their last meeting. Pitch instead merely nodded not moving to get out from deep within his covers. He liked the way the comforter surrounded all but his face in its dark folds which was about as close as he was getting to being one with shadows these days. The gold flecks of light, Sandy had attached to him that first night they’d brought him here, had never faded much to Pitch’s dismay, and when he was in the light, it almost looked like he had been sprinkled in small specks of glitter. This was also something that bothered him that he was unable to address, but out of the long list of grievances he had, it was rather minor.

Oddly enough, although he wouldn’t admit it out loud, he was glad Toothinia still came by. He had half wondered if she would give up on him entirely after that morning’s debacle. His eyes, wide and curious, followed her every move now as she entered.

"If you're asleep, I can come back tomorrow..."

He hesitated a moment before responding, “I'm not sleeping; I’m just bored.”

"Oh," Tooth said, coming into the room. She smiled. "What would you like to do?"

Again, Pitch had to fight off his immediate want to respond with, ‘Be free from the lot of you,’ and instead sighed heavily, “What really is there to do here that’s not chores for North or annoyingly Christmas?”

“Ummm...” That was actually a good question, she thought.

Her lack of an answer only served to solidify to him the scarcity of anything to do at the Pole, “Your ample suggestions are titillating Toothinia.” Pitch hadn’t meant to air the comment out loud, but his sarcasm won out before he had thought to curb it.

"I could always call Sandy in here." She said, lifting an eyebrow and placing a hand on her hip.

Pitch’s eyes widened, “No! It… it wasn’t meant to be rude. I just… I’m sorry,” he finally finished sulkily not knowing what else to say to make his comment better.

Tooth forced a small loving smile, then fluttered up to the side of the bed, "May I sit down?" she waved toward the bed.

Pitch nodded lightly his eyes never leaving her.

Tooth sat down on the side of the bed. Instead of looking at Pitch, she kept her gaze down
as if intently studying her hands in her lap, "I hope I didn't come off as really... harsh earlier," she began softly.

Pitch was torn between telling her that she most certainly was harsh because he didn't ever wish to go through anything like that with her again, but knowing that he'd been treating her badly, he also knew she had been justified by her actions. He'd had a lot of time to think on the matter, and he knew he was wrong, but he wasn't about to tell Toothinia that, "I'll admit it surprised me; I never took you to be brutish."

Tooth hesitated a moment, trying to digest Pitch's words, “It’s not brutish, Pitch.” she slowly said, surprised at her own words, “You deserved a lot more, I now realize that. Be glad I was merciful.”

Pitch frowned hesitating in his response, “Can… can we talk about something else?” He blushed in deep embarrassment not liking to be reminded about their earlier ‘conversation’ and her continued support of North’s idea that he needed spankings to behave.

Tooth thought a moment or two. "Well, why don't we talk about you?"

Pitch peered over at her curiously, “Me?”

"Yeah!" Tooth smiled. "Tell me about yourself. I know there's more to you than you simply being the boogeyman."

Pitch considered her before looking away his brow drawing down as he thought on her words, he was fear, he was… wasn’t that what he’d always been? He tried hard now to think past this life, but the more he focused, the cloudier it became as if some part of him refused to acknowledge he’d ever existed before, but he could not deny there was also a part of him that panged this was not true. This scared him deeply. It made him feel acutely aware that she was staring at him now, so he cleared his throat, “I am the nightmare king, what else is there to tell? You know well of my exploits as you and your ilk have fought me the whole way… although I suppose now you’ve finally decided to ensure I’ll never rise to power again.” He grimaced now thinking that this current existence didn’t hold out much hope to have a chance to find new ways to cover the world in shadow and defeat the guardians although now his heart wasn’t fully set on this goal as he had been prior to coming here. Something inside him was changing as he grew to see these other entities as more than just sworn enemies. He had to wonder if they would ever really become friends like North had proposed; it was a pleasant idea if almost unimaginable.

Tooth’s brow crinkled in concern. “All of us were someone before we became what we are now. I just thought… maybe you had been someone else too?”

“I… I don’t think so,” Pitch spoke ever so softly now withdrawn into himself as his heart rate quickened and something deep within him now stirred fighting to come to the surface. The fearlings that had possessed him so long ago had sank into the very fiber of his being and corrupted the man he once was tearing everything he’d stood for asunder and robbing him of his past, but there was still traces of that man inside him that wanted to be heard.

Tooth reached out and put a hand on his shoulder, worry etched on her face.

He reflexively recoiled from her touch so lost in thought was he before he relaxed again turning back to look at her with a mixture of sadness and confusion before looking away quickly. That overwhelming sense of weakness that blanketed his innermost fears took hold then as he spat angrily, “It was so long ago; it doesn’t matter now anyway.”
"Why wouldn't it matter? Wouldn't you like to know who you used to be?"

Pitch rose from laying down now unable to contain his nervous energy, the comforter falling to his shoulders where his head poked out leaving his face to be clearly seen along with the stricken grieving look he wore. His eyes flitted nervously to Toothinia and back to staring at the bed spread, “I don’t know. If we’re all a manifestation of who we once were, would you really want to know that person?”

Tooth shrugged, “Sure, why not?”

His eyelids lowered into a half closed state as he plucked now absently at a loose thread in the comforter. He seemed distant now thinking inwardly once more before turning to regard her sadly, “I don’t really remember, but sometimes in my nightmares I have fleeting moments where all I remember is feeling…” he shook his head. Why was he telling her this? He was giving her too much, she's going to use it against me! Pitch thought his anxiety growing as more fearful thoughts poured over his subconscious mind trying to pull him away from Toothinia. You’re so weak! Look at you simpering to her after what she just did to you! You are pathetic! It’s no wonder why you’ll never be believed in again, you lack conviction! His face hardened as the fearlings within his core worked to subvert his thoughts once more although their hold was much weaker now, they still knew Pitch’s greatest fears and had spent centuries turning those fears on to himself to guide him to their personal whims.

Tooth raised an eyebrow. "Feeling what?"

Her voice brought him back and his eyes moved to hers searching her soul for true intent. His eyes depicted his fear now, he was holding back for so long, but something inside him snapped just then, and he spoke against the rising tide of dread he felt swarming within him, “Loss,” he stated it simply enough, but saying it out loud caused a tremor in his chest as that very feeling now overtook him and tears welled in his eyes. Pitch looked away quickly taking in slow deep steady breaths to contain the emotion that now threatened to spill out of him in waves. He willed himself not to cry now as never in waking did he let himself dwell on these feelings because it tore at him like razors.

Toothiana's brow furrowed as she tried to understand. Loss? What did Pitch mean by that? She put her hand on him again, "There, there, it's okay.” she cooed softly.

Pitch was quiet for long minutes unable to speak past the lump in his throat. He had closed his eyes working to clear his mind.

Toothinia's hand lay on top of his, and at some point he had let it slip into his own hand and realized belatedly that he was gripping it tightly running his thumb softly across the length of her hand. His eyes opened traveling down his arm to rest on the sight of their hands clasped together, and where he would normally have pulled away from her, the contact was welcomed, needed even. Her hand was warm and gentle, and the feel of it sent a sense of calm through him. He was afraid to look at her now as he'd worked too hard to regain his composure, and this form of companionship was still so alien that it threatened to undo him all over again.

Tooth felt like she needed to say more, but she couldn’t think of the right words for the moment. So instead she just sat there and allowed Pitch to hold her hand.

Pitch released her hand feeling awkward now as he pulled it away quickly. His face flushed with a rush of embarrassment for having expressed any form of vulnerability to her, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize..." He trailed off only glancing at her with uncertainty before averting his eyes back to the comforter.
"It's okay," she said, her face still showing concern.

Wanting to change the subject, Pitch rattled off distractedly, “I’m sure there’s better things to talk about, why, why don’t you tell me more about you?"

“Well,” Tooth cleared her throat. “I don’t know what’s to tell, that you don’t already know.”

He gave her a small smile feeling a little better now that the conversation had turned to a lighter note and was directing away from him, “Oh I’m sure there has to be something you’re willing to share. Surprise me.”

Tooth rubbed her arms with her hands as she stared at the floor, "N—no, there's nothing. Really,"

Pitch frowned then feeling as if she were holding out on him. Why would she want to share anything with him? Here he was letting her in, and she was holding him at arm’s length. He supposed she was wary of him for good reason, knowledge was a powerful weapon, and it wouldn’t be the first time he’d used what he’d learned about them against them. Still, it hurt that he had trusted her enough to tell her something so sensitive about himself for her not to reciprocate at all. He felt foolish now for telling her anything as his anger welled within and he spat, “What is this? Are you grilling me for information?"

The Tooth Fairy’s head snapped around to look at Pitch, confused over his sudden change in mood, "What? Why would I be doing that?" she looked at him closer, "Are you feeling well?"

Her seeming ignorance only seemed to incense him further as he stood shaking his finger at a scolding manner at her as he growled, “I see what you’re doing here! You want to make me weak, so you can manipulate me! Well, I’m on to you! You’re not going to play me for a fool!”

Tooth reached out and slapped Pitch across the face. She didn't know why. After the action had been done, she realized it was more of a reflex than anything else. She sat there, staring at him, more in shock than he was.

Pitch backed away from her his own hand going to his cheek to feel the sting her small hand had caused. The action had stopped him dead in his tracks surprising him fully as he blinked jaw hanging agape, “You… you struck me!” His face darkened now as he screamed at her, “How dare you!”

Ignoring him, Tooth fluttered off the bed, her eyes growing dark tinged with sadness, “Fine!” she yelled. “You want me to tell you about myself? You want me to tell you what it feels like to suddenly sprout feathers and wings? You want me to tell you what it feels like to be considered a freak? You want me to tell you how it feels to be hunted like a wild animal? You want me to tell you what it feels like to have your parents murdered? You want to know what it feels like living all of these years with the memory of that dreadful moment when you couldn't save your parents?” She was breathing heavily, her eyes watering, when she finally stopped. She hadn’t realized she’d been shouting. She shrank back, putting her hands over her mouth.

Pitch’s eyes softened, he’d mistaken her lack of sharing to be because she lacked trust in him not that what she had to share was too hard to speak about easily. His brow furrowed as he grimaced, “I… I was hasty in my words. I didn’t mean to assume…” he trailed off regretting his outburst now.

"Do you know what it feels like to not belong anywhere?" she said slowly and softly.
Pitch looked at her with anguish now as he all but whispered, “Every day.”

Tooth kept quiet, the air feeling awkward again. She turned her eyes to the floor, hoping no one had heard them screaming at each other.

Pitch sighed shaking his head feeling flustered by the situation, “You’re right, I don’t know where you were, but I see where you are now. It hurts to hold on to those memories, but that’s your thing isn’t it? Why then? Why hold them so dear when all they do is bring you pain?”

Tooth searched for words. “You don’t hold all memories dear. There are different types of memories. There are those that are fun and happy, that are comforting to look back on. These are memories people cherish and hold dear. Then there are bad memories that are painful to remember. We hold on to them, not dearly, but so that they can teach us lessons or remind us of where we’ve come from and how strong we were to make it through them. Sometimes they serve to remind us to not make the same mistakes again. A lot of people try to forget them and put them in a mental box, not wanting to remember them. Sometimes they try to deny they ever happened. But that does more damage than they realize. They don’t understand that each of our lives are made up of good and bad events that eventually turn into memories. It’s okay to remember the past, to see where you’ve come from, even when it comes to the bad parts, but you have to also keep moving forward. You can't dwell on and allow the bad memories to rule and control you and drag you down.”

Pitch’s eyes looked her up and down studying her now and thinking on her words, “I don’t have any memories beyond this life. All I remember is the darkness and what it is to be it. There is no comfort to look back on, but there have been many lessons. Tell me then, at what point did you find you were able to move forward? At what point were you able to surpass the pain you feel?”

Tooth shrugged. "When I became the Tooth Fairy. I finally found a place I belonged, and I finally found my purpose. As North would say... I found my center: guarding the memories of childhood innocence and happiness so I can remind those that have forgotten. Seeing the children on my nightly flights helped to ease the pain overtime."

Pitch sneered now as he paced, "Yes, you lot gave the entirety of your existence over to their belief in you. Fickle creatures, children." This note hit a pang of fierce jealousy in Pitch since more often than not his undoing rested wholly on the fact that children refused to believe in him like they did the guardians.

"I don't really see it as giving my existence over to them," said Tooth, calmly. "I want to do what I do. It's my purpose. In fact, I started doing it before I even became the Tooth Fairy. It's more of a love and a passion."

"T'd like to do my purpose as well, but that doesn't align with you and your fellow guardians’ goals. Thankfully even without me playing a part, fear does its job. Although it would be nice to have just a fraction of the belief that you guardians covet," Pitch scowled quite embittered now the more they spoke. It served to acutely remind him that he was very much still a prisoner here.

Tooth looked at him a moment, thinking. Her face turned very somber as she studied his gold eyes, "IS fear really your purpose?" she asked softly.

Pitch looked hesitant, fear was all he knew, but was it his purpose? That he couldn't really say. But Pitch did know that it wasn't happy and joyous and therefore was seen as bad by the guardians. Of course, they didn't understand it like he did. All the guardians saw was the fact that it made children afraid, so he tried to explain, "I know you think fear is awful, but you seem to forget that without fear, your precious children wouldn't know not to walk out into the street without looking both ways or not to be wary of strangers or other dangers that lurk in their waking world. I
can motivate them to weigh the consequences of cheating on that test or to think twice about jumping off that roof or exploring an abandoned mine shaft... all you see of my work is a nightmare, never any purpose. I'm not going to say that everything I delve in or even most of it is as sugar coated as what you do, but it can be used to protect children to."

“You speak of some truth.” said Tooth. “However, when we last fought, you were hard bent on shrouding the entire world in darkness and fear. That is not good. Turning children’s dreams into nightmares is not good. People cannot live in a world of constant fear. You claim to be the boogeyman, Pitch. The fear you mostly delve in goes far beyond rational fears.”

Pitch shrugged, “Well, as I said, sugar coated isn’t usually what I do mostly because it doesn’t give me much in the way of power or belief. I have had to work so much harder to attain a smidgen of belief, not that you would know anything about that since you practically get belief handed to you,” he stated this last bit with obvious annoyance.

“We work to earn belief.” Tooth corrected. “If we stopped doing our jobs, we would no longer be believed in. If you want to be believed in again, then maybe you should think about doing something that rightfully earns it in an honest way, instead of frightening people and forcing them to believe in you through power. You said yourself that rational fear can protect children.”

“Earns… yes. Are you planning to give me that opportunity then?” Pitch thought this might be an excellent window for him to get away from the Pole, “I could go with you when you plan to collect teeth next, and you can even watch me work.” This would be a good way to get a small source of power Pitch realized, and maybe even a window for a real escape.

A look of concern washed over Tooth's face. "That's something you will have to discuss with North. And something all of us will have to decide on."

Pitch scowled, “All? Can’t you speak to North on my behalf? I’m sure he’d listen to you,” Pitch hoped to sound convincing now.

Tooth approached Pitch as she would a child, “I think it would sound better if it came from you. This is your responsibility and your second chance. It’s up to you to make it happen.” she smiled. "Talk to North and if he seems okay with the idea then... well... we'll have a meeting about it."

Pitch looked at her with a hint of worry and disbelief, North would never fly with that he thought, but maybe if he could convince Toothinia to stand at his side, he just might. He smiled mischievously at her now, “Would you go to talk to him with me? I’d like you at my side… you know as support.”

She smiled at him. "Of course I will."

So it was that the two made their way to North’s office. The closer they got though the more introverted Pitch became as he worked to think on what exactly he would say to North once they actually were in front of him.

North was speaking with a group of yetis about something or another when they finally approached, and after several minutes Pitch was growing impatient. He stood there stiffly with his hands clasped behind his back as his eyes darted to Toothinia again, and when he felt he could wait no longer, he cleared his throat in hopes of getting the big man’s attention.

North and the yetis stopped talking and looked in Pitch and Tooth's direction, at first looking somewhat offended that they had been interrupted. North's face relaxed when he saw who
had entered. After quickly sizing up the two and obviously deciding that Pitch was a more serious topic, he turned and told the yetis that they could resume the conversation later and the creatures left. North walked back to his desk and seated himself there.

"So, what brings you two to my office?" he finally said. Being late at night, his voice sounded tired.

Toothiana gently urged Pitch forward.

Pitch cleared his throat again feeling a knot starting to form in the pit of his stomach as Toothinia’s hands pressed into his shoulder to get him to move forward and speak, “Um, well, Toothinia and I have been talking… and well, we thought that maybe I could make a productive mark in the world using my abilities… to… to help children stay safe. That I… we, could go out nightly to do so when Toothinia goes out to gather her teeth.” Pitch wrung his hands behind his back as he spoke watching North intently as the man sat in his chair spinning to face them fully now.

"What?" said North, looking from Tooth to Pitch. "Use your abilities to keep kids safe?"

This of course pleased Pitch to see North’s immediate reaction, “Well yes, to use my abilities to instill fear where fear is needed… you know, to get children to think unpleasantly about things that they could do that would bring them harm,” he allowed himself to smile as he looked to Toothinia to have her help give North reassurance that this was actually his goal.

North frowned, not entirely understanding or liking where the conversation was going. He turned a questioning look to Tooth, hoping she would better explain Pitch's intentions.

“What he means,” Tooth flew forward, “is that he would like to use his abilities for good, as in instilling rational fears within children that will help protect them. He could go out at night with me when I collect teeth.”

North remained silent, a hard glare fixated on Pitch.

Pitch’s eyes darted back and forth between North and Toothinia while she spoke on his behalf, and as North’s steely blue eyes locked back on him, he couldn’t help feel a pang of nervousness as if the man could see right through him to his true intentions. He couldn’t know that he was just looking for another way out, but he was sure he suspected it, and this had Pitch inching a little closer to Toothinia as he awaited what North had to say on the matter.

“No,” North stated simply. Tooth’s smile dropped. “Absolutely not. Is good idea, yes, but Pitch has done nothing to earn trust yet. He has refused to do work, made escape attempt, and has been disagreeable on all accounts. Until he shows that he is trustworthy, he will not be leaving Pole.”

North’s words were not unexpected, but it still served to anger Pitch considerably as his brow drew down and he argued heatedly, “I worked all day today without even being asked! If you don’t give me a chance to prove I’m trustworthy, how will you ever know!”

“Pitch,” North said, trying to keep his temper in check, “I know is hard for you to understand. Believe me, I appreciate you doing work without being asked. I’m happy to see you found work you enjoy doing. But one day of work is not enough to earn you freedom. Things like this do not happen overnight. Your time and rehabilitation here at Pole will be handled in small steps. You want freedom and chance to prove you’re trustworthy? Then earn it by showing me you are serious about changing and are willing to handle responsibilities given you without complaint and show of bad temper and trying to escape.” he leaned back in his chair. “Moon might have put you here, but I am not convinced yet that Moon meant for you to be Guardian.”
Pitch narrowed his eyes hatefully at North as he spat, “Of course you couldn’t believe anything I could do could be considered ‘guardian worthy,’” Pitch quoted these words as a testament to his exasperation before balling his fists at his sides as he continued to show his resentment of North’s choices, “You’re keeping me enslaved here doing your bidding already, and you plan to do so for who knows how long! I’ll continue doing your menial tasks as required. I’ve already agreed to do so, but how can you not expect me to complain about my situation! I’m not exactly thrilled about it or anything.” He muttered now as he crossed his arms, “Small steps indeed, this would be a small step since I’d still be on a leash with Toothinia at my side. That should account for something I would think!”

North stared dangerously at Pitch. Toothiana noticing this, cleared her throat and shook her head, motioning for Pitch to shut up.

Pitch’s frown only deepened still annoyed by North’s flat refusal and an ambiguous sentence of ‘small steps’ that could take who knew how long to surpass. He sighed heavily in his agitation gritting his teeth, “Fine. Have it your way. I suppose since there’s no brokering any form of leverage with North that this conversation is pointless. Come on Toothinia, I’m done here,” As Pitch said this, he spun around to leave in a huff.

Tooth drew her hands up to her chin, not really sure what to do or say as she looked between North and Pitch. North rolled his eyes and sighed, shaking his head. He wanted to say more, a lot more, but he felt exhausted. Not because of it being late, but because Pitch had pushed him to the point of not knowing what else to say. He already felt like he was repeating himself. And nothing he said seemed to sink into Pitch’s head.

Pitch continued to storm out of North’s office as he fumed brooding over the conversation. Why did he ever hold out any hope that the fat man would even consider his request? Looking behind him, Pitch realized Toothinia had not followed him out staying behind to obviously speak to North. Maybe she might be able to work out something better than he could, and so Pitch lingered by the door attempting to eavesdrop and hear what they might be talking about.

“He is impossible,” North sighed, “If only he could understand he brings it on himself. He makes situation harder than it is simply because he’s so arrogant and prideful.”

“He’s trying, North,” said Tooth.

“I know he is. But he should be grateful we care enough about him to let him stay here. I am close to taking Bunny’s advice and throw him back in hole.”

“You wouldn’t…”

“No, but I am tempted. But something has to be done, or he will push all of us to jumping in hole ourselves from losing minds.” North frowned. “Pitch does not know how much mercy I have shown him. I’m this close to taking him over knee again.”

Tooth glared at North, “He needs help, North…”

"Help! We are all aware he needs help. What do you think I have been trying to do since we embarked on this madness?!” North forced a laugh, "Pitch refuses all help I try giving. And refuses to understand seriousness of situation."

"He can’t be made to understand everything overnight," Tooth spoke calmly, "I mean, he’s spent years dwelling in darkness and fear. You can’t expect a person like that to change at the snap of your fingers."
“I understand that, Tooth. I do not expect him to change overnight; that is why his time here at Pole must be approached in small steps. But he should understand that he is prisoner. He will stay here until he has paid for his crimes. It is either here or hole. We cannot risk him going back out in world yet. If we let him out there, and he turns against us, we will have to fight him again. Then that will leave us no other choice but to put him in hole again. That is, if he doesn't destroy us all and himself in the process.”

North's words weighed heavily on Pitch as he listened. Was he really that difficult to deal with? Pitch sunk back away from the door now more than a little disheartened to also hear North planned to keep him from being able to leave the Pole until he'd served out whatever term North deemed sufficient for his crimes against them. Pitch swallowed hard, that was a very, very long list to contend with, and as such, he knew it was going to be a very long excruciating wait.

“So what are you going to do?” Tooth asked.

“I don’t know.” North shook his head sadly. “For now, we will be patient and wait. Let Pitch work in stables. If he doesn't show signs of changing by end of year, I can honestly say there is no hope for him.”

Pitch gasped at the finality of North’s words as they sent a spiraling feeling of both horror and despair through him. What if he couldn’t change enough for North’s standards? Would he throw him away like refuse? His heart ached as this thought brought on a whole new wave of sadness to think that even Santa Claus could be convinced to give up on him.

Not wishing to hear anymore, Pitch darted down the corridor now. He didn’t go back to his room though choosing to find a darkened nook he’d passed before when he’d been forced to clean with Sandy. It was a simple indention in the foundation that could have once been used as a storage space, but as of now it was empty and, for Pitch, thankfully dark and inviting.

Looking about to see he was alone, Pitch crawled into the space scooting back into its darkest recesses where he sat drawing himself into a ball. He most certainly didn’t wish to be found or bothered as he wept now feeling more than a little desolate at his inherent lack of belief in himself as well as North’s.

Tooth continued to hover in front of North's desk, thinking over everything. She didn't like what North had to say about the matter. She knew Pitch had the potential to change. She could feel it. And what's more, she had seen evidence on occasion while talking with him. There was definitely something there, under the surface, which wanted to come out. Or had he just been tricking her and stringing her along? It was hard to tell with Pitch sometimes. Her thoughts then drifted back to the tooth she knocked out of Pitch's mouth. The tooth! Her face brightened and her smile returned when she remembered that she had kept it.

"Tooth, is something wrong?” North asked, noticing the look on Tooth's face.

"N—no, nothing's wrong. In fact, everything might be right.” she quickly flew out of the room and down the hall.

North shrugged and turned his attention back to the papers on his desk.
Memories

Chapter eleven

Memories

Down the hallway, Toothiana flew as fast as she could. "Pitch!" she called out. "Pitch, where are you?" He couldn't have gotten far she thought.

Hearing Tooth call out his name, Pitch raised his head listening to her, but he didn't want her to see him like this, so he sniffled burying his head in his arms and trying his best to remain as quiet and still as he could. Little did he know the indentation was not near deep enough, so even though he was tucked in as far as he could manage and quite well hidden as far as he was concerned, a small corner of his robe had managed to protrude from the cubbyhole giving his location away to anyone that was actively searching for him.

"Pitch!" Tooth shouted as she flew close to where Pitch was hiding. She was about to fly on past when the tip of Pitch’s robe caught her eyes. Confusion momentarily washed over her face as she tried figuring out if it was Pitch or not. She swooped down, grabbed onto the piece of black cloth, and yanked it hard. Much to her surprise, Pitch came tumbling out with it.

Pitch was too shocked to react as he was pulled inexorably back to land roughly on his rear with an, "Oof!" The surprise left him open as his face jerked up to see his would be assailant. His eyes were still red rimmed and puffy from crying as he stared up at her in first shock and then looked away quickly as he frowned deeply. She kept finding him this way. It was humiliating and made him feel like he must look very weak to her as he spat out angrily, “I want to be alone! Just go away!” He hoped North didn’t come out to investigate he considered belatedly since they weren’t very far from his office, and he’d yelled a little too loudly in his embarrassment.

Still confused and in shock, Tooth just stared, "What were you doing in there?"

Pitch huffed scrambling to his feet as he made a point to avert his gaze in hopes she hadn’t seen the tears in his eyes. Growling angrily in his frustration he seethed, “Nothing! I just wanted to be by myself without getting interrupted by anyone! You people don’t know the meaning of privacy after all!”

Tooth lifted an eyebrow. "We do knock before we enter your room. If you wish to be left alone, just say so." she looked closer at him. "Have you been crying?"

Pitch's cheeks burned to know that she had noticed, but he denied it anyway as he looked away from her gaze to stare at the wall, "Of course not! Just... just go back to North or one of your other fellow guardians." The hurt in his voice was evident as he physically withdrew from her now.

"I was looking for you, actually. That's why I was calling your name."

"Well, you found me. What do you want," he muttered tiredly.

She looked down the hall then back to Pitch. "Come with me," she took his hand and started flying toward Pitch's bedroom.

Instinct told him to pull away from her, but unable to resist the gentleness of her hand, he instead followed wordlessly. He was curious as to why she seemed so insistent.
When they arrived at the bedroom, Tooth pulled Pitch inside and shut the door. She turned an excited, smiling face to him, "Listen," she said, "I have a wonderful idea! You know when I punched you in the face and knocked your tooth out?"

He looked at her fully now as if she had gone crazy, "You are getting this excited over having punched out one of my teeth years ago? You're not getting any ideas are you?" He started to look nervous backing away from her warily.

"No, no, no, no! Just hear me out." she took a deep breath. "I kept that tooth. Why don’t I go get it and bring it here? Maybe you can unlock some of your memories with it!"

Pitch looked worried now his eyes noting his concern, "I… I don’t know. I’m not sure I want to know because all I’ve ever remembered was an awful feeling of pain. To know fully what that pain is…” he swallowed hard as he wrung his hands nervously.

Tooth’s eyes studied Pitch. "Wonder if that pain isn’t what you think it is?"

Pitch was afraid, terrified even, as those remnants he’d experienced he knew deep down had to only be the tip of the iceberg, and to open himself fully to it was more than a little overwhelming to consider. Pitch’s eyes drifted back to hers now, "What, what if it’s not for the best? What if those memories make me unable to change? I… I don’t want you to throw me away to the nightmares again,” his eyes brimmed with tears now, “Please don’t let North give up on me,” his lip trembled now as he looked back down again.

"What?" Tooth was confused, then her eyes widened, "Did you overhear our conversation?"

Pitch’s voice cracked, “I… maybe. I was waiting for you to come out, but then I heard what you and North… it doesn’t matter. I don’t want to cause any more trouble for you,” he shook his head trying to un-hear the words that were said between them as his mind drifted over the past few days since he’d arrived. It had only been a week’s time, and he’d driven most of them to wit’s end. If getting his memories back made him worse, then the guardians would surely cast him out.

Tooth put a comforting hand on Pitch's shoulder. "Pitch, no one's going to send you back."

"You say that now, but North might decide to with or without your consent. Maybe he’s right.” His eyes drifted back to her, and her comfort mixed with his insecurities left the standing tears he held to fall silently now, “Maybe you’re wasting your time and there really is no hope for me.”

"Don't say that." Tooth scolded. "Let's give the tooth a try. Who knows? It might help. You'll never know until you take a chance."

He nodded then stated softly, “Okay. I’ll do it,” he agreed although his words sounded hollow and unsure.

Tooth remained silent a few moments, and then spoke. "Get some rest, Pitch. I'll bring the tooth by tomorrow. If you change your mind, you don't have to go through with doing it. Okay?"

He blinked taking in a deep breath, “Are… are you going to tell North? He might not agree with it.”

"No, I'm not going to tell him. Not now anyway." she smiled. "This is something that will be just between you and me until we see if it works."

Pitch smiled gratefully, “Okay. Good. I’m a little nervous. Are you?”
“Now that you mention it, yeah I am a little,” Tooth laughed. “Okay, I’ll bring the tooth to you tomorrow after you get your chores done. Between now and then, you’ll have plenty of time to make up your mind if you want to go through with doing it.” With that, Tooth left the room.

Pitch found he paced for most of the night after she’d gone. Rest was the last thing on his mind as he weighed what fragments of memories he’d had when he’d regained some form of control of himself. Everything had been as if in a dream for centuries as he’d rode across the galaxy plaguing the world with nightmares. He’d fallen to Earth and was long forgotten trapped within a seemingly endless nightmare of his own, but once he’d awoken, those previous thoughts had diminished into rage and an incoherent drive to snuff out those good dreams that thwarted his efforts prior to his imprisonment leaving those shattered memories to fall into the past.

Now though, the very real concept of seeing who he had been brought back to be incorporated into who he was now had him worried that it would irreparably fracture his being.

Pitch had left his room far before the sun had risen to tend to the reindeer trying his best to get lost in the work just to keep his mind off of the offer Toothiana had made. It had helped, and he found he could relax a little although the reindeer got the best of the deal having been groomed twice as long in his efforts to be distracted.

"How many times are you going to brush those things?"

Pitch’s head shot up to see Frost gliding towards him, “Frost?” He’d half hoped and half dreaded it were Toothiana, but seeing the winter trickster had surprised him as he’d not spoken to him since he’d been in the medical bay, and even that meeting he hadn’t remembered much other than the sprite sounding betrayed by him. Pitch had assumed Jack would have nothing to do with him anymore after their last venture here at the stables.

“You look a lot better than the last time I saw you.” Jack said with a smirk.

Pitch blushed as he gathered the reins of the reindeer from the pole he would tether them to for grooming and led it back to its stable, “Uh… yes. The bruising is gone now for the most part.”

“Bruising… From the fall?—or when that yeti jabbed that needle in your… well… you know…” Jack’s smirk turned into an amused smile. "Boy, did you scream."

Pitch sneered his face turning a shade darker at the memory as he spat, “I swear it’s your goal in life to find ways to embarrass me! What do you want Frost!”

"Um..." Jack scratched the back of his head. "Tooth sent me here. She said something about you bringing back some memories with a tooth? ...but were nervous about it. I guess she thought maybe I could be of some help, since I've gone through the whole remembering memories thing before."

Pitch’s face paled as his expression dropped, “Oh… yes. I... I didn’t know she was going to tell anyone else, but I gather if anyone might have some advice, it would be you. Would you tell me… what was it like? To remember I mean? Did… did it change you?” Pitch stared at him intently now with more than a hint of curiosity and worry plaguing his features.

Jack eased into a sitting position on one of the beams of the stable’s ceiling, clearly lost in thought. It had been so long ago since the event had happened to him, but it was still fresh in his mind as if it had happened yesterday.

"Yeah, it did," he finally answered, still sounding like he was far away. "But in a good
way. It helped to remind me who I am and why the Moon chose me to be a Guardian. Some of the memories weren't pleasant, I'll admit. But then again not all memories are."

Pitch swallowed hard as that rising fear began to take hold of him and he exited the reindeer’s stall, “The moon didn’t choose me. I... I don’t know if this is a good idea,” Pitch shook his head as he began to pace now his nervousness needing an outlet.

Sensing Pitch's anxiety, Jack's face softened, "Doesn't matter if the Moon chose you or not. Don't you want to see if there was some good in you at some point? I mean, come on. No one's born evil. There had to be a time..."

Pitch stopped pacing looking at the boy now slightly perplexed as he thought on whether his words were true. Would his memory reveal there was goodness in him? Or would it show something truly awful to solidify in him that there really was no hope for redemption? He’d never know unless he took the plunge he supposed. He blinked responding wearily, “I... I want to know, and then I’m afraid to know. It’s hard to discern which feeling is stronger. Both are a tremendous weight to bare. It’s almost easier to not know at all, but I suppose that’s the coward’s way out isn’t it?”

Jack gave a quick shrug. "I wouldn't say that. I was kind of afraid at first too. I think it's only natural--not knowing what you'll find there and all. There are many possibilities. Who knew that I died? Heh," he turned his gaze away from Pitch, lost in his own thoughts again, "But then again I also learned I had a family at one time, and a little sister..."

The word 'family' wrung through Pitch as both a pang of longing and dread. He knew without knowing that that was a significant factor for his greatest fear in discovering his past. Pitch lowered his gaze as he considered Jack's comment, "I am wary of who I was and what knowing that side of me will do to change the person I am now, but I don't think it's helping me to avoid it any longer. I'm going to do it for better or worse, as not knowing, when I can know, is tearing me apart. It's all I've been able to think about since Toothiana suggested it last night."

Jack tilted his head to the side, regarding Pitch. "Seems to me that you would welcome change. Don't you ever get tired of living the way you do? All of that darkness and fear. It can't be healthy on a person. I know you're the boogeyman and all, but still. Seems like even you would get tired of that drab life after a while."

Pitch's brow furrowed as he looked off into the distance, "It's easy to say, but when you've existed in such a way for so long, change can be formidable. I... I admit I'm not happy; I don't really remember a time I have been. I never achieved the ultimate goals I sought, but if we're being honest, I don't think attaining those goals would have made me happy either without anyone to share it with."

“Yeah, change is never easy,” Jack agreed, “But having the chance of maybe finding something good and happy about your past should make you a little bit excited, right? What if it opened up the opportunity for you to attain goals that are worthwhile?--goals that would make you happy? I'm pretty sure I'd jump at the chance if I were you. It'd beat going back to that hole, and even beat spending years here with North."

Pitch had lost most of the rest of Frost's points in the conversation as he pondered the thought of years stuck at North's workshop, and that brought more than a grimace to his face, "Years!? Do you really think North would keep me here that long?" The past eight days felt like forever, Pitch couldn't imagine that times an infinite amount longer. That thought was enough to convince Pitch to go through with Toothiana's idea whether he doubted the results or not!
Frost frowned, lifting an eyebrow. “You really don’t understand, do you?”

Frost’s comment only served to anger Pitch. Why did everyone keep saying that to him? Sneering he growled, “Yes, Yes! I get it! You all want me to change! I’m trying to, but this hasn’t exactly been a bucket of roses you know!”

Frost shook his head. "That's not exactly what I meant. You really don't understand that you being here at the Pole is the equivalent of you spending time in the hole. Naturally you're going to spend years here, unless you decide to change."

This logic frustrated Pitch to no end as he spat venomously, "I can promise you, I'm not spending years here being told what to do and harshly punished for having my own opinions! I'll change if it kills me!"

Jack smirked, shaking his head.

Pitch narrowed his eyes at Jack as he shook his fist at the flying boy, “You know you’re infuriating! Just… just stop shaking your head like you know something I don’t!” Pitch was finished with his chores, so having had enough of the winter sprite working him up, Pitch waved him off, “I’m heading back to my room.”

"You're unbelievable, you know that, right?" Jack called to him, still smirking.

Pitch was unable to walk away from Jack as he spun back around and screamed in annoyance, “I’m unbelievable! You’re the one that’s working so hard to get under my skin Frost! You and your …your smug face! I can’t have a conversation with you without you exasperating me!”

Jack rolled his eyes and smiled. "As I said," he whispered under his breath.

Pitch huffed turning back around before taking a deep breath. Why was he letting himself get so bent out of shape? He was letting the boy get to him… and this place. It wasn’t really Jack more so than the thought of facing what was soon to await him. Last night and the entirety of the day had seemed so excruciatingly long, but now that the time to face Toothiana’s offer to help him regain his memories was upon him, it seemed to all be happening too fast. He sighed tiredly looking back at Jack, “Okay …maybe …maybe I’m a bit tense, but you aren’t helping the situation.”

"What did I do?" Jack asked. "Tooth just sent me here to talk."

Pitch smirked at Jack now, "I suppose just being yourself. Do you think Toothiana is here now?" This last bit was tinged with both curiosity and unease.

Jack shrugged. “I dunno. She said she would come by after you finished up in the stables.”

Jack frowned, “I… I started a little earlier than normal, but I’ve been done for a while. Maybe I should go to the workshop to see if she’s arrived,” He was muttering his words now as he fretted once more about proceeding to the next step, but he’d made up his mind. He wasn’t going to turn back now, so he moved back towards the main hub of North’s workshop with purpose.

Jack followed after him. "Pitch!" he called out.

Pitch stopped turning toward him an expression of deep concern painting his features now as he waited silently to hear what Jack had wished to say.

"I hope you find something in your memories that will bring you happiness." he nodded.
Pitch’s face softened as he gave Jack a small smile, “Thank you; I hope so to.” He took in a deep breath then turned back towards the tunnels that led to the gate’s entrance to find Toothiana. Never did it seem so long to traverse North’s estate Pitch found as he made his way into the main hall and down the corridors finally coming to a stop near the banister that overlooked the massive Christmas tree. It was still mid-day, so yeti and elf alike still bustled about running from place to place to finish their varied tasks. Pitch stood there looking about fervently now for any sign of the feathered guardian.

"Hey, Pitch!" Tooth called out to him from across the room.

He had spotted her before she’d called out to him having been anxiously awaiting her arrival. He hadn’t waited long, and as he made his way to her now he tried to hold himself with confidence, but his gait seemed stiff as his anxiety seeped off of him in waves. He gave Toothiana a strained smile now, “I… I’m glad to see you.”

She smiled down at him, glancing around the area as if she expected someone to be watching them. "We’ll do this in your bedroom." she said, motioning for him to follow, "Come."

Pitch did so wordlessly glad to be away from the hustle and bustle of the main hall as they moved into the quieter hallway and down to his bedroom. His heart was hammering in his chest now, palms sweating, and throat dry. They were almost to that fateful moment, and it was all Pitch could do to contain himself but to hurry after Toothiana who thankfully was moving at a steady clip.

Tooth stopped outside Pitch’s bedroom door, opened it, and quickly ushered Pitch inside before entering herself and closing the door. She took a deep breath, letting it out. Then she turned to Pitch, seriousness in her eyes, "Have you decided to go through with this?"

He nodded vigorously now not unlike a child awaiting a long promised surprise.

Tooth slowly reached into some unseen pocket and pulled out one of her tooth cylinders. She hesitated a few seconds, and then carefully handed it over.

Pitch watched her fastidiously, and as she proffered the item, he took it gently into his hands. He backed up to the bed now lowering himself to sit as he just stared at the shiny box and its intricate designs for a long moment before his eyes wandered back up to Toothiana asking a silent question to proceed as he was unsure now if he should take the final step to enact the box.

She smiled at him. "Just do it whenever you feel you're ready."

Pitch swallowed, "I think I'm never going to be ready."

"You don't have to do it now, if you don't want to." said Tooth. "You can keep it and do it whenever you wish."

Pitch shook his head as he brought his gaze back to Toothiana, "No, I think I've waited long enough. What do I need to do?"

"Well, I usually look at the memory myself when I first obtain the tooth, and from there my magic does the rest." she answered. "But I didn't do that with yours, knowing... who it belonged to... and all."

Pitch merely nodded as he looked back down at the box and ran his hand over the top of it, and the diamond shaped etchings separated to reveal his tooth inside.

Toothiana fluttered closer now as she landed beside Pitch reaching in to the container to
gently pluck the tooth from its casing. Taking the container from Pitch’s hand, she placed the tooth in his palm keeping her thumb and index finger on it as she poured her energies into the tooth now. Because this tooth was not a child’s tooth, it did not hold the same properties that were as easily activated. Toothiana had to work extra hard to ignite the held memories from within, and only memories from the time it had come in would be able to be accessed.

The tooth glowed faintly as Toothiana’s magic coursed through it opening up the channels for the memories held within to activate, and with it, their hands both began to glow from where the tooth touched.

Pitch closed his eyes as the memories began to flood through him now. They were still fragmented, but there was enough there to gain some semblance of the man he was and what touched his life.

The laughter of a little girl echoed through his mind as he saw her now, her long black hair whipped about in the wind as she bounded across the field arms outstretched and screaming happily, “Daddy! You’re home! Oh I’ve missed you!”

Pitch was not Pitch here, in this vision, a man stood tall and noble regaled in a military uniform. He dropped to his knees to catch his daughter as she jumped into his arms, and he squeezed her in a fierce hug, “I’ve missed you to pumpkin.”

“Don’t leave again; I hate it when you go away,” the girl squeezed him tighter now as if by doing so, she’d be able to keep him rooted in place.

“You know I have to go back Emily, they need me, but not today. Today we can do whatever you want,” Pitch carried the little girl now in his arms towards a manor of sorts where a woman stood on the steps waiting to greet him with a loving smile. The swell of love he felt for these two women surged through him as all three of them hugged now and the little girl’s laughter rang out her joy to have her family whole once more.

This memory faded replaced with a dark corridor where Pitch in his human form walked with a torch. He was alone here except for the sound of wailing moans that seeped out of the walls. They whispered in an eerie hiss, “Set us free… we can give you untold treasures!” Pitch ignored them walking on, but the memory distorted as hatch marks left on the wall were seen too numerous to count. In his hand, Pitch held a locket, and here he opened it to stare at the lovely smiling face of his daughter. A surge of profound pain tinged this memory now as deep seeded longing filled his heart.

Sensing this pain, the voices shifted, and Emily’s voice now called out to him, “Father? Father! Where are you! I’m scared!” Panic was the first feeling that registered then weariness as the truth that these creatures behind the gated iron door now toyed with him once more. So many times now that he’d buffeted their attempts. But the voices did not stop, “Daddy! Please daddy! Help me! They’re hurting me!” These torments had been going on for years, but never did the shadow men, now withered into spirit husks of what they once were since their capture a decade ago, ever use his daughter in this manner. He’d been alone for so long away from his family that the thought of not saving her was too much to bare now, and in a temporary moment of insanity, he ran to the iron door wrenching the bar free to fling the gate open.

Of course as the maw of the darkness was opened before him, the overwhelming feeling of failure poured over him realizing what he had done. The wave of darkness crashed into him then invading his senses and leaching to him inwardly and outwardly as the shadows now clung to his subconscious and the voices of a thousand fearlings inhabited his body drowning out his conscious mind to be dimmed into an inexplicable wash of rage and want for revenge. The burning hate was
palpable as Pitch’s memories began to fade and blot out into obscurity and the shadows oozed into every fiber of his being.

Pitch gasped dropping the tooth from his shaking hand as his eyes went wild and he backed across the bed breathing heavily. A look of pure horror was etched on his face. He was too overwhelmed to speak as he tried to comprehend what had just been revealed to him and how he felt about it.

Tooth remained silent, fluttering in place beside the bed.

“I… I have a daughter! And I’ve lost her,” his voice was broken now as the reality of how long ago this memory was sunk in. “I… failed her. I failed everyone.” He was still now his eyes working back and forth as his heart still hammered from the memory of being engulfed by the fearlings. He felt them now wreathing within him, their voices still ebbing at his conscious mind, but now that he was made aware of them, they would never fully have the hold on him they once had. Still, they were a part of him, more than a part, they had also become him and he them. They had made a union of osmosis that could not be torn asunder now he knew not without his total annihilation. But still, his mind raced now and his stomach heaved enthralled within the loop of memories that now played through his mind.

Toothiana slowly floated over to where Pitch was, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. She wanted to say something, but, not knowing what, chose to stay quiet for the time being until Pitch regained his senses. She knew this part of the process was always the hardest.

He looked at her now, a shadow of the man that he used to be shining through. A noble man beaten and defeated. His mouth curled into a stricken grieving frown as he cried out, “What have I done Toothiana? I’ve doomed so many… I’ve become a plague… I deserve the nightmares. You should destroy me.” He curled into himself pulling his knees to his chest as his sorrow built and he thought about not only the loss of his daughter but of all the atrocities he’d made a reality.

"No," Tooth shook her head sadly. "Don't talk like that. There has to be a way to set things right. Maybe there's a way of getting them out of you."

Pitch looked very tired now, “It doesn’t work that way. We aren’t a separate being anymore. We haven’t been for a very long time. Without them, I’ll cease to exist.” He was silent as he stared at the wall feeling apathetic.

Tooth stared at him silently, a mixture of concern and horror on her face, not knowing what to say.

Pitch sighed wanting to lay down now as he crawled to bury himself in his covers seeping into despair. This wasn’t at all what he had expected to see. On one hand he was grateful that the man he was wasn’t a monster as he’d feared, but to understand the ramifications of the man he’d become? What he’d lost in the process? That in itself was a lot to contend with especially when he felt like he had no direction anymore. So lost was he, he couldn’t even cry for the grief he now felt as he lay his head on his pillow just feeling numb.

"I'm sorry," Tooth said, "I never should have suggested the tooth to you."

“No; don’t say that,” Pitch’s voice wavered as he spoke, “I’m… I’m sorry I’m not taking it well. It’s still better to understand where these feelings I’ve had… these constant nightmares that dissipate whenever I do dream, come from. They can’t rob that from me anymore. It’s mine to cherish and morn, and that does mean so much you can’t even possibly imagine.”
"Perhaps there is a way that we don’t know about..." she whispered, her brow scrunching up in worry. She refused to believe that it was impossible to separate Pitch from the fearlings.

“I… no. It’s my fault they escaped to begin with. It’s my burden to bare now. To release them, means they’ll just possess someone else. I can’t have that on my conscience. I am their prison now, and they are mine,” he stated this last bit with both regret and conviction.

"But what if there's a way to imprison them elsewhere? Like before they entered you? Wouldn't you go back to normal?"

Pitch blinked at her. To be normal? Was that even possible? He knew on some level that separation would be the end of him because the fearlings had infused and melded with him to the very core. They now had a symbiotic relationship, and as guilty as he might feel, he still couldn’t bring himself to want to cease existing, so he shook his head, “I can’t separate myself no more than you can separate the two halves that make you what you are.” He looked at her forlornly, “I honestly don’t think there’s enough of just me left to survive a split.”

“Maybe there’s another option?” she said, her voice sounding sad. “Perhaps a way to suppress the fearlings?”

Pitch thought on that, and in his current state, depowered as he’d been since he’d left his hole and deprived of draining fear from anything since being at the Pole had suppressed the fearlings more than ever, but there was a problem, fear was not unlike an unnerving addiction for Pitch now. He craved it, needed it even. The thought of depriving himself of it entirely was out of the question, and so he merely lowered his gaze to Toothiana’s suggestion unable to tell her the truth but also not wanting to lie to her and so he chose to simply omit saying anything at all.

A knock came to the door and Toothiana turned to see who it was. Jack Frost poked his head in, grinning sheepishly and giving a small wave.

"Hey," he said, "Mind if I come in? I was just... you know... curious to see how everything went." Taking in the saddened faces of Pitch and Tooth, his smile dropped. "Wow, both of you look like someone died. What did you see?"

Pitch glanced up at Frost before his eyes wandered back to the wall. He hoped Toothiana would placate the boy unable to bring himself to respond as he curled further into the blankets now for much needed comfort. Having just gone through it, the last thing he wanted to do was relive what he saw again so soon.

Shaking her head sadly at Pitch, Tooth turned and ushered Jack out into the hallway, closing the door behind them.

Pitch's eyes moved to follow Toothiana and Jack now although he didn't say anything. It was still quite early in the day, but Pitch felt like he could just lay here until he needed to tend to the reindeer again not motivated to do anything he wasn't being made to do.

His mind was full of imagery now both beautiful and bleak but mostly haunting. He had known he had a daughter for so long, at what point did her memory become obscured, drowned out, replaced? He had sentenced himself to that prison planet after the news of losing his family as a penance for leaving them vulnerable in the first place. They were his light, his being, and somehow he'd been made to forget them. It sickened him to the core, and he closed his eyes against the pain he now felt as he forced himself to relive every moment he could remember now determined to never leave these memories to only become nightmares ever again.
After about ten minutes, Toothiana reentered the room, closing the door behind her, "I told him," she announced, flying up to the side of the bed. She looked at him with concern. "Is there anything I can do?"

Pitch just shrugged lethargically, "I'm kind of tired. I think I want to rest," he stated in a monotone drawl. He was sinking fast into a deep depression now where his senses just seemed to shut down, and all he wanted was to be alone with his thoughts.

Tooth nodded. "Okay," she turned to leave. "You rest. I'll come back later to check on you." She opened the door and flew out.

Pitch didn't move from his spot on the bed as he thought and thought until he willed himself to sleep just to escape having to think anymore.
Chapter Twelve

All Consuming

Jack slowly opened the door and peeked in to Pitch's room.

Pitch still lay where Jack had last seen him although his face seemed twisted in anguish as his eyes darted back and forth under closed lids while his fists gripped the sheets so tightly that his knuckles had turned white.

Jack Frost silently walked up to the bed, peering down at the boogeyman, "Uh... Pitch?" he said softly.

Pitch's eyes shot open as he gasped; his head shot back to look at Frost as if the boy was about to attack him. Realizing he was just having a nightmare, Pitch breathed out relaxing a bit as he let his head sink back onto the pillow. He glanced at Jack now looking very tired before letting his eyes drift away to nothing in particular as he responded dryly, “Frost. What do you want?”

A look of concern momentarily washed over the boy's face. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I just thought you'd like to talk. Tooth told me everything. I'm sorry,"

Pitch only blinked and sighed. He didn't wish to speak to anyone especially when they were taking pity on him. A long moment passed before Pitch stated gloomily, “I don’t feel like talking Frost. Just let me go back to sleep.” He could feel himself withdrawing into a numbness and even though he had no intention of going back to sleep, he just wanted the boy to go away, so he could go back to the lull he’d found between waking and sleeping where he was devoid of most thoughts and feelings.

Jack raised an eyebrow and nodded. "Okay, if that's the way you want it." He turned and walked through the door. "When you feel like talking, look me up." he said before leaving.

Pitch didn’t even acknowledge Jack now as he continued to stare at the wall. The fearlings within him roiled like a churning wave mentally pulling at his conscious mind inviting him to fall back into oblivion and leave such pains behind, and for a moment he was tempted because hurting this badly was all encompassing, but knowing what they’d taken from him set a fiery fierceness to that part of his will that he would never be denied his memories again. It built a rage against them and himself, and for this, the fearlings were pleased. Rage was an emotion they could work with, so they quietly stoked these flames to roll through his core to harness whenever Pitch was finally able to surpass the melancholy state he’d allowed himself to permeate in to.

Later that evening, Tooth came back to Pitch’s room and knocked. "Pitch?"

He heard her, but he chose to ignore her now. Why couldn’t they all just leave him alone? He didn’t want to talk about how he felt. He didn’t want to dwell on it at all. It was hard enough to think about on his own, and to talk to any of them about it left him feeling vulnerable and exposed. She had seen them though, some of his most intimate and sacred memories. He felt stripped bare by her now afraid of what she might say to him, to any of them. It made him reluctant to speak as if he could avoid that pain simply by ignoring it, but that was not the case. Instead, that pain was swelling in him and being pushed down to settle alongside his anger as it built into a volatile mix.

Not getting a response, Tooth flew off through the hallway. She had to tell North... or someone. She
zipped by several yetis, turned a corner, and almost slammed headfirst into Sandy.

Sandy smiled tipping a hat to her in salutations, but his warm demeanor changed to that of worry seeing that his friend seemed determined and troubled. He signaled a question mark over his head furrowing his brow.

"It's Pitch," she said. "He's not answering his door. I'm worried." She went off into a lengthy explanation about her giving Pitch the tooth and the memories he saw after she activated it. "If I had known it would throw him into a depressed state, I never would have given the tooth to him." she said after finishing her story. She sighed heavily. "I feel like I messed everything up instead of making it better."

Sandy listened looking quite enthralled as she spoke nodding along, but before he could respond, Bunnymund’s voice wrung out from behind her, “Wow, wow, wow. I was coming by to see how everything was going, and I heard the tale you’ve been spinning ta Sandy. Did you talk to North about this? Giving Pitch back his memories? What were you thinking lass? Don’t you remember how Jack getting his memories back made him strong enough to beat Pitch the last go around, what if you’ve given Pitch the same edge against us? This could be dangerous mate,” Bunnymund was staring at Toothiana looking slightly miffed that she could have put them all in danger just to help Pitch.

"I don't think it's working like that with Pitch," she said. "Like I said, it's thrown him into a deep depression. He doesn't want to see or speak to anyone."

Bunnymund shrugged, “Maybe that’s a good thing since usually when his mouth is running; I want to shut it for him. Besides, who cares if Pitch is depressed? After everything he’s done before he came here, heck since he’s come here! Oh yeah, North and I just spoke in depth about your boyo, and he caught me up on what he’s been up to,” Bunnymund rolled his eyes as he huffed, “Cry me a river already.”

Sandy just stared blinking as he looked between his two friends who had very different stances on the situation.

"I know you haven't been in favor of all of this, but we still must try to help him." said Tooth. "It's the nice thing to do. Besides, if we don't try to help him and change him, we'll be fighting him again. And the next time might not go as well as the last time."

Bunnymund’s ears flattened as Toothiana spoke a grimace plastered on his face as he didn’t really agree with helping Pitch and was more of the idea of just containing him, but the others seemed to think that it was the man in the moon’s plan to help the big jerk. Bunnymund wasn’t too sure about it, but he did trust his friends. He sighed acquiescing, “Fine, Fine. Let’s go talk to North and see what he suggests to help the bugger.”

Tooth, Bunny, and Sandy walked to North's office, picking up Jack Frost along the way. Once they were standing outside the door, Tooth was the one to knock.

"Come in," North's voice boomed from inside. Tooth pushed open the door, entering. "Ah! And may I ask what brings all of you here?"

Bunnymund frowned folding his arms, “Why don’t you tell ’em Tooth.” He was sure if he told North, it would come out in a manner his other friends might not appreciate, and as much as he was apathetic towards Pitch, he did care about his friends and didn’t wish to upset them.

Tooth sighed and flew forward, stopping in front of North's desk. She retold the story to North—
everything from her giving him the tooth up until present.

"He's retreated into a state of depression now, and refuses to speak with anyone or see anyone."
Tooth sighed, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, North, I didn't mean to mess things up."

North said nothing as he leaned back in his chair, his mind still digesting everything Tooth had said.

Sandy floated forward making an image of Pitch and pouring dreamsand over him to make him sleep
and dream as he had no other recourse to battle sorrow as a mute.

Bunnymund knew hope might be inspiring, but he had no thoughts on how to make a being like
Pitch hopeful. It didn’t help that he had a hard time wanting to make the spirit hopeful after all the
trouble he incessantly had caused them.

"That's a good idea, Sandy." Tooth smiled.

Jack Frost finally spoke up. "Did it show in Pitch's memories what happened to his daughter and wife?"

Tooth shrugged and shook her head, sighing again.

"What are you getting at, Jack?" asked North.

"I just thought that maybe... I dunno..."

Bunnymund tilted his head thinking hard before looking to Sandy, “Maybe if he can find a light of
hope in his dreams, it might snap him out of it.”

Sandy smiled liking the idea but still feeling unsure if it would be enough. He turned to look at North
who had stayed silent about the situation since Tooth had finished her explanation.

Finally, North sat forward. "I can't say I'm happy with what you've done, Tooth. But what's done is
done. I know you meant well. I just wish it could have gone better.” he sighed, looking around at
everyone. "Hard to say what to do next. Although I think Bunny and Sandy have something." he
turned to address Bunny. "What hope do you speak of? What could possibly snap Pitch out of
state?"

Bunnymund grew still as he thought over everything that Tooth had told them. The first time he’d
heard her explain to Sandy about Pitch’s memories he hadn’t really fully listened as all he’d cared
about then was what perils they could have faced if Pitch had turned on her. But, as she retold the
tale to North, he was ashamed that he had been so heartless. Their mission was to find a way to
redeem Pitch, and Tooth had been trying to do her best with the tools she held dear. Perhaps they all
should be using their gifts in a similar fashion to pull him back from where he was over pushing him
further over the edge. “That’s hard to say mate. There has to be something that he wants that he can
attain. The memories Tooth described are diametrically opposed like a yin and yang. The problem is
that they’re both a manifestation of the family that he lost. I don’t think we can bring them back for
him. Hope comes from the heart, it’s about new beginnings. Maybe we need to show him that he can
have one to.”

North nodded. "Good point,"

Tooth nodded in agreement. "That's good, Bunny. I never would have thought you had it in you."

Bunnymund gave her a soft scowl, “Alright, I gather I deserved that one. So where do we begin?”
Sandy just smiled arching a cloud of dreamsand to flow out and run along the hallway as he gently glided after it. The sand cascaded softly down the halls ricocheting off the walls and occasionally felling an unobservant elf along the way that dreamed of cookies and candy canes. Sandy continued to follow the wave of sand towards Pitch’s room.

Pitch had not moved, but his eyes registered the tendrils of dreamsand that first lit up his door frame and then wispèd under the door in light flurries not unlike freshly fallen snow. He stared at them with an odd mixture of apathy and curiosity. Sandman was always a formidable foe, but on that first night he’d been brought here, Pitch had remembered his nightmares had been quelled and he’d had a dreamless sleep. He knew that Sandman had had to be behind it as there was no other explanation.

Now, he was curious if that was what Sandy had come to do now. He wasn’t sleeping though Sandy may have believed it to be so. Pitch welcomed the sand and the thought that in his state of apathy it would take him away from his pain for just a little while as there was a solace in feeling nothing.

Pitch closed his eyes, but something different happened this time the sands drizzled down to blanket him. Every other time before, Pitch’s memories had been buried so deeply that Sandy’s dreamsand only acted to neutralize his nightmares, but now they touched something altered as the sand made his eyelids fall shut and for the first time since he’d become the nightmare king, he began to dream and actually enjoy it. His memories pieced together moments of happiness that he’d shared with his family, and although they were tinged with the sadness of longing, Sandy now hovered over him and poured his energies into Pitch to dissipate every attempt the fearlings made to corrupt them. It was taxing and it took all of Sandy’s concentration, but he kept them at bay long enough to see a smile crease Pitch’s lips even though silent tears still spilled from his eyes.

Jack remained standing in North’s office, thinking over everything Tooth had said about Pitch’s memories. Something bothered and nagged at him, but he couldn’t explain why or what it was. He thoughtfully tapped his staff on the floor and looked around the room as the other Guardians engaged in conversation.

Bunnymund’s perfect ears flicked as he picked up the tapping of Jack’s staff, but as he turned, he saw the troubled look on Jack’s face which gave him cause for alarm. He stepped over to Jack now looking concerned, “Ya all right Jack? You look like somethings bugging you.”

Jack turned an annoyed look to Bunny. "Just thinking about the subject that's been on my mind since all of this started, that I asked about earlier but no one knew the answer to. What happened to Pitch's family? Is there any way of finding out? Maybe if we knew more about his past, we could use it to help him somehow." he held up a finger to Bunny. "And before you answer, no, we are not going to go in there and knock the rest of his teeth out."

Bunnymund couldn't help but to give a soft chuckle at Jack's statement, "I won't suggest it; scout's honor," as if to make it official, Bunnymund drew his fingers to cross his heart before continuing, "I don't think him not knowing what happened to his family is making him like this, I think it's just the opposite." 

Bunnymund frowned now his shoulders slumping. He knew well what it was to lose everyone you cared most about. He was the last of his kind after all, "When he's more stable, you might ask him, but I'd let him be the one to initiate that conversation. We can't change the past mate. That said, I don't think us knowing his past is relevant as it is to him knowing his past. Now that he does, all we can do is help him to build a better future with the knowledge that there is more out there than darkness."

Jack nodded. "Maybe you're right."
Bunnymund's nose twitched as he laid a paw on Jack's shoulder, "Everything will work itself out." He turned back to look over his shoulder at Toothiana and North, "Ya think everything is going alright with Sandy?"

North was still having a hard time grasping everything that was currently going on. He shrugged, "Is hard to tell. I expect we will know soon enough."

"Maybe after Pitch gets a good sleep he'll be better," said Tooth with a smile. "And will be ready to talk with us."

Sandy stayed with Pitch until the dreams melted into his subconscious and his mind had moved into a compartmentalized state of sleep where he no longer dreamed or had nightmares, he just slept peacefully taking in slow even breaths. The little golden man watched Pitch now carefully, and when it looked as though he would not wake from this restful sleep for some time, Sandy rose into the air and drifted out of Pitch’s room back towards the others.

The four were now huddled around North’s desk discussing the situation as Sandy quietly reentered the office.

Bunnymund scratched at the back of his head nodding his accent, “It’s possible he might just need a little time to adjust. Either way, I know I said I thought it might have been a bad idea to give him his memories, but the more I think about it, the more I think Pitch needs to be whole if we’re ever going to fix him. I’m sorry about my outburst earlier; you did good Tooth.”

"Thank you," Tooth nodded. "It's nice to know that I didn't make a mistake after all." she looked over at Sandy. "Sandy! How's he doing? Did it go well?"

Sandy’s small smile he wore broadened and his chest swelled with an obvious feeling of accomplishment being quite pleased with his efforts as he nodded vigorously. Sandman had never before been able to turn the tide of Pitch’s mind from nightmares to dreams which was always vexing when he had tended to Pitch in the medical bay, but it was not unexpected since the two were polar opposites and Pitch had always remained guarded or at least the fearlings within him had remained strong enough to keep the golden man from intruding where he didn’t belong.

Pitch had continuously shut himself away from Sandman so thoroughly that he’d never actually been able to touch into what Pitch had been thinking while he’d slept, but Pitch had wanted the dream that Sandy was spinning so desperately that his will to have the dream overrode the fearling’s defenses allowing Sandy intimate access.

Over Sandman’s head, he displayed a picture of Pitch sleeping and over the sand-made Pitch’s head, an image of a little girl twirled in a carefree dance that denoted the child was happy and so was Pitch.

Tooth fluttered up to him, clapping her hands in glee. "That's wonderful! Now we just have to wait and decide what we're going to do whenever he wakes."

“Excellent!” North said, nodding to Sandy. "I know I haven’t said much since all of you came in here with story of what has happened. Truth is, I did not know how best to respond. I was little upset at first, when Tooth told me story. But we're all here to help redeem Pitch in whatever way we can. And Tooth has done what she sees best. Now that I think about it, I think she did right by giving Pitch his memories. Though, some parts of this are troubling. These... fearlings... that are inside him... They may pose problem for him as well as us. If it is true that he can never separate from them, then how do we go about redeeming Pitch? How can you redeem someone if they will always have evil in them? It is hard problem."
Bunnymund straightened looking at North fully, “We all have our own inner demons to face mate; granted they aren’t literal as in Pitch’s case, but they are still there. He’s driving the bus so ta speak, so the biggest hurdle Pitch is going to have ta face is gonna be Pitch. If you’ve demonstrated anything while having Pitch here is that it’s a matter of willpower for him to keep them in check… or for us ta get him to want ta keep them and himself in check. Now whether that motivation is going to come from a want to do better or from a fear of consequences… well again, that’s going ta be up ta Pitch. All we can do is try to put him on a path that encourages him ta want what we want, but ultimately, it’s going ta boil down ta being his choice.”

North nodded in agreement. "You speak truth, Bunny. It is Pitch's choice and his choice alone. I hope he makes right choice, for all our sakes and his."

Bunnymund shook his head, “With that one, you’ve got a hard road ahead of you North… not saying it can’t be done, but Pitch always seems to make things much more difficult on himself and everyone else around him than he needs to.”

North again nodded, his brow scrunching in thought. "I think it is time we include him in our daily activities. Make him feel accepted and needed. He seems to like tending to my deer. We must allow him to keep doing that. And if there is other chore he wishes to do, encourage him rather than make him feel like slave. His words, not mine."

Bunnymund crossed his arms, “I’m not bringin’ him to my warren. No way. No how!” His shoulders slumped, “But maybe when Easter is getting close, I can get him to help paint some of my eggs… maybe.” He was still frowning at the notion not really sure he wanted Pitch messing with his eggs.

North frowned. "He is not to leave Pole, unless he proves by then that he can be trusted, which I'm doubtful will happen. But I do like idea of egg painting. Maybe you could bring them here for Pitch to do."

Bunnymund smiled amused now, “In the meantime maybe you can get him some practice painting your toys.”

North pondered that for a few minutes before nodding. "That is excellent idea, Bunny! I will make note to suggest that to him when he starts coming out of depression."

Sandy looked concerned flashing an image of Pitch working with a sun coming up and down a few times over before changing the scene to depict Pitch with the rest of the guardians assembled in a circle followed by a question mark.

Bunnymund frowned, “Yeah, I gather we should try to do something social with Pitch that’s not having him doing chores. Although with his attitude, he’ll likely ruin the event.”

"Both of you bring up good points." North mused. "But what social thing do you suggest where Pitch would feel accepted?"

Bunnymund shrugged, “Leave that up to Mr. Fun,” he pointed at Jack now smiling at the boy knowing he’d likely make a good suggestion.

Jack perked at the mention of his name. "Me?"

Sandy glided up next to Jack giving him an encouraging thumbs up.

Bunnymund smirked, “Well you and Toothy have been spending the most time with him; I sure as heck have no idea what Pitch would find fun.”
"A walk through the graveyard might do it." Jack smirked.

Bunnymund laughed, "T’m sure the creeper might like that frostbite, ‘cept North ain’t got no graveyards here at the Pole… least none I know of."

"No, no graveyards here." said North.

"I was just kidding," said Jack, laughing. "It's going to be hard knowing what Pitch would enjoy doing. From the time I've spent around the old grouch, there isn't much he cares for except for spending time in the reindeer stables and staring off into the gloom and doom."

Sandy’s face lit up and a picture of a cake illuminated above his head.

“A party? Hmm… I don’t know Sandy. Pitch doesn’t strike me as the type to like parties, but hey who knows, it might just be what the grouser needs,” Bunnymund shook his head having nothing else to add.

"A party?" said Jack.

"Ooo! That sounds like a good idea!" Tooth squeaked.

Bunnymund just rolled his eyes slapping his forehead, “I have a feeling this is gonna be a disaster.”

"A party sounds like grand idea!" said North, "We could have it near Christmas tree, and invite all of yetis, including Old Bill. You remember Old Bill, yes? Only yeti that can play Jingle Bells on washtub."

Sandy was beaming at the idea shaking his head enthusiastically.

Bunnymund just sighed but couldn’t help smiling just to think of his friends trying so hard to please Pitch of all people, “So when do you guys want to do this?"

"Soon as we can get ready." said North.

"This is going to be exciting!" said Tooth, darting around the room.

Jack shook his head. "As much as I'm liking the party idea, I'm just not sure Pitch is going to."

Pitch slept longer than he normally would due to Sandy’s dreamsand, but because of the fact he’d been lying in bed since the early afternoon, he woke in the very early morning hours which was more ideal for him anyway being that the workshop was quiet, devoid of others, and the night would always call to him as being more calming as it was his natural time to move about after all.

Feeling listless now in his room; Pitch rose pacing the length of the room slowly to pause once more in front of the portholes that the moon shone so brightly through. He observed the glacier walls and the wind whipping flurries in gusting bouts to dance across them thinking that he wished he were on the other side of the wall. His somber thoughts from earlier that day flooded through him once more, but they had been softened slightly by the good dream that Sandy had mercifully given him. The dream had left a twinge of sad longing, but it had lightened his heart from the despair he’d been feeling overwhelmingly lost in before it. These memories weighed on his soul making him feel his humanity acutely, and it left Pitch more confused than ever as the human part of his nature warred with the aspect side of his nature. He understood why the fearlings would drive this part of him away from seeing the light of day because it made him hesitate against their obvious choices for him. He wasn’t their puppet any longer, and that in itself was reassuring as he’d already lost so much control lately; to regain a little of it within himself was bolstering.
Leaving his room now to wander down the hall, Pitch was grateful that there wasn’t anyone watching out for whether he had left his room. This note of confidence made him feel a minute amount of freedom as he glided down the hallway back to the main hall where the massive Christmas tree lay. It was even more enchanting in the quiet of the night Pitch found as he moved once more to the banister to peer down at it for long moments before deciding to descend down the spiral casing to get a closer look.

Everything was set just so, and there were hand carved baubles that he’d not noticed before, one in particular caught his eye. It was an intricately whittled ornament in the shape of a schooner. Pitch delicately pulled the trinket from the tree now cradling it in his hands as he studied it carefully kneeling down in front of the tree. His daughter had had a similar looking ship that she would tear across their homestead much to her mother’s dismay, but Pitch loved this about Emily as it showed her wild and adventurous heart, and he’d always turned a blind eye to her antics in that manner. As he thought about her now, he stared down at the ornament and tears welled in his eyes. Since he’d regained these memories, he’d shut down all his feelings about them refusing to feel anything more than the numbness of shock. But now as he sat crumpled in front this enchanted tree meant to evoke the feelings of togetherness and family Pitch clutched the trinket to himself finally letting the sob that had been crawling up his throat escape in a sorrowful wail. His shoulders shuttered violently with his mourning now letting himself fully feel the anguish of losing her as he wept uncontrollably.

North quietly came up behind Pitch and gently put a massive hand on the smaller man's shoulder.

Pitch barely registered the warm hand; he still gripped the bauble tightly as the tears refused to stop even in the face of North. The shame of crying in front of the man did nothing to help him regain his composure as he hitched, “I …I don’t want to feel North, It’s so much easier not to, but I can’t… I can’t stop it.” Like a tide he continued to shutter the burden that lapped at his soul as his mind turned over so many ways he could have maybe done just one thing different to have stopped the avalanche of his life that robbed him of his family.

North remained silent, not feeling the need to speak just yet. Gently, he turned Pitch around to face him. With a compassionate smile on his face, he knelt down and pulled the nightmare lord into his arms, hugging him.

Pitch stiffened at first not wholly sure how to feel about North hugging him, but there was something inviting to be enveloped by the huge man’s massive arms leaving Pitch to melt into them to cry his misery into North’s chest.

After a few minutes, Pitch finally calmed feeling spent from the experience but better within this newfound comfort North had offered him. Pitch was afraid to move now just inhaling the scent of North which was a peculiar mix that smelled faintly of gingerbread spice and freshly cut wood.

His hug was different than that of Toothiana. Both were comforting in their own unique way, where Toothiana’s was delicate and soft with a gentleness that was touching and sweet. North’s was strong and encompassing. It was an odd sensation because the man towered over him leaving his hug to feel like that of a father’s protection and security. It was a sensation Pitch couldn’t even remember feeling anymore as his many years had erased the impression.

Pitch finally withdrew to stare up at North with a small bit of wonder that these guardians still would extend so much kindness to him when he surely didn’t deserve it. And not only kindness but caring which had become so alien to Pitch. He stared back down at the schooner figure in his hands now as he spoke softly, “She used to have one similar to this… it was one of the things that made her smiles the brightest.”

North continued to stay silent, just listening and being there, as he looked down at the ornament,
nooding.

“I… I'll put it back on the tree now. Sorry,” Pitch almost whispered as he ran his fingers over the indentions on the wooden figure thinking North probably didn’t appreciate him taking things off of his sacred tree.

Before Pitch could move, North reached out and took his hand, carefully folding the nightmare king’s fingers around the ornament and pushing it toward Pitch's chest. He shook his head, smiling, "Until now, it is just ornament. The fact that it holds beautiful memories for you makes it something special."

Pitch blinked looking from the Cossack to the ornament, “You… you’re giving it to me?” It was a momentary question before it was a realization as Pitch looked back up to North’s warm smile as if seeing the man truly for the first time, the gesture brought further tears to his eyes as a sad smile creased his lips and a small choked, “Thank you,” escaped his throat.

He looked back down now at the trinket more so to hide his face and the tears that still silently leaked from the corners of his eyes than anything. He felt like he’d cried more in this week here with the guardians than he’d done since becoming the Nightmare king. He’d been so very good at pushing his feelings down, swallowing them, using them to fuel his anger, but in his current state, these feelings only served to overload him with these repulsive emotions that he felt ill equipped to maneuver through. It was a sea of uncharted awareness that had begun to spring up within him forcing Pitch to see what he’d previously adamantly denied himself with these simple interactions with another person.

Most had felt reviled by Pitch’s presence, for what he stood for, what he’d done, and this was an understood state of being. He’d accepted this centuries ago even if it didn’t settle with him well. He knew what he was and his place in the world. That life steeled him against feeling pity or remorse, it deadened his humanity, and Pitch was just fine with that because one has to preserve if they are ever to move forward. But now, he was being forced to endure simple acts of kindness towards him or just the gentle touch of another person. He’d gone so long without them that now these acts intimidated and confused him, leaving him vulnerable. On some level he kept telling himself that he didn’t deserve them and never would because deep down, he was still a monster, and no monster deserves forgiveness let alone kindness and affection.

North nodded. "It is yours." he continued to smile. "Take care of it. Cherish it." He walked a few steps forward to stand in front of Pitch, gazing at the Christmas tree before speaking again. “Pitch, it is never easy to feel. Sometimes it can be hard—one of hardest things in life. But it is most wonderful, beautiful thing. It is one of the things that make us who we are. One of the things that gives us pleasure.”

Pitch was silent now just thinking about what North had said. Feeling wasn’t giving him pleasure now, but he knew that thinking of his family had. Even if it was a memory tarnished with sadness, he understood the implications of why it was sad was that he no longer had them and that when he did have them, they made him understand what true happiness was. He stood to look up once more at the tree feeling much lighter in heart and spirit. North would not know how much he had helped by just being there when Pitch was feeling so distraught and alone. Pitch peered back up at the man now taking in his visage where it normally would have intimidated Pitch to stand so close to North when he hadn’t the strength to fight him, now it was almost comforting to bask in the other man’s potency because for once he didn’t fear him and actually felt comforted by his presence. “I… think it’s been a lot to take in. Sometimes I have a hard time seeing things… like you… you guardians do.”

North nodded. "Is understandable. You have allowed fear to take control of you and have lived that
way for very long time. Fear is feeling that blocks out all other feelings if it is not held in-check."

Pitch looked away slightly ashamed by the accusation since the statement was more true than North could know, “Fear… it has its merits, but yes, I can’t say that I’ve wielded it wisely at all junctures.” It was very hard for Pitch to admit this to himself let alone North, but the man had given him something to digest mentally, and at this moment he was willing to confess some small failing on his part.

"Very true,” North nodded again, "Fear does have its merits. In certain circumstances, fear can be good thing. We all fear at some point, and that is okay. It keeps us alive. But fear is also like fire. It can be dangerous, and if out of control, it will feed and consume. You have taken right step in admitting that you have not wielded it wisely. It takes courage to admit mistakes."

Pitch was silent for a long moment thinking that what he’d wanted most as an aspect was to be believed in, so it was easy to feed the need for fear in simple justification that the more he’d spread the closer he’d come to being believed in again. That and it had felt ever so good to bask in it as it made him swell in power; he’d been a glutton for power. And spread fear he had, he’d worked so very hard, centuries even, to carry out his last efforts, and when it was down to only one child, he had lost everything in a moment like blowing out a match. Thoughts returned to that child, Jaime, and his words, ‘I do believe in you, I’m just not afraid of you.’ His brow drew down now as these considerations went through his mind and he pondered aloud, “If I can harness fear to use it like you use your powers, do… do you think I could ever be believed in like you and your guardians?” He was afraid of North’s answer, but he stared at him now to see his every reaction.

North was quiet for a long time. He reached out to poke at a few ornaments, sending them twirling, “Maybe,” he finally said. "Though, do you know how to use fear in that way? Do you know how to harness it to use for good?"

His eyes followed North’s hands watching the baubles spin and how the light caught them, “I… I don’t know. I’ve used fear for good as I spoke to you earlier about, but I don’t think fear can become a figure like you, Toothiana, and… the rabbit,” Pitch still wasn’t much of a fan of Bunnymund and sneered mentioning him at all. It grated his nerves that that flea bag even was capable of being seen by children easily and not himself.

North chuckled. “It already has become figure.” he turned to look at Pitch. “You are the Boogeyman, are you not?” he raised an eyebrow. “You said that you cannot separate yourself from fearlings. So you are still Boogeyman. You will always be Boogeyman. But maybe you can change how world perceives Boogeyman.”

Pitch frowned, “Belief in me is fleeting and not enough to resonate tales that you guardians have attributed to you, oh everyone loves and believes in the guardians, but they used to believe in me; they used to tell tales of me far and wide in the dark ages. I was respected then not swept under the rug as a bad dream like now.” Seeming a bit miffed now Pitch grumbled crossing his arms, “And what way exactly would you see me perceived as that would fit your perception of what fear should be that would actually get me believed in?”

“I thought you were going to harness fear for good.” North studied Pitch. “Boogeyman is figment of stories parents tell to children to make them behave. Who says Boogeyman has to be like stories?”

Pitch scowled, “You’re suggesting I reinvent myself? In this day and age? Do you even know how hard it is to inspire fear in children at all these days? …even if I could, I don’t see how that’s getting me any closer to being believed in,” the conversation was souring his mood, and he didn’t suspect North would give him any suggestions he actually wanted to hear.
North lifted an eyebrow. "Okay, then. If you do not wish to reinvent self, then what do you suggest?" he waved a hand. "This is your chance to redeem self--to save yourself. What path do you think you should take? What path do you want to take? How do you think you should go about earning belief that does not involve consuming the world in fear? If you can harness fear and use it for good, how exactly would you approach it?"

Pitch blinked as he listened realizing he didn’t really have any good suggestions either. He shrugged looking away now. “Well, I… I could… oh I don’t know! You’re not exactly fond of the idea of me spreading nightmares even if those nightmares are harnessed to encourage children to stay safe or behave.” His eyes lit up and he held up a finger to make a point, “There is Halloween! That’s a holiday to many children that fear is seen as fun, but… it’s only once a year,” Pitch looked stricken to think of only gorging himself on fear once a year and with only a pale comparison of fear that would be laughable to him contrasted to a blood curdling scream. Sure the fat man and the rabbit seemed to be fine with one day a year, but they didn’t seem to get the same fulfillment Pitch did, that he needed or at least told himself he needed.

North’s eyebrows perked, then he nodded his head once. “We shall see. You have long way to go yet before you earn freedom. In mean time, I think it is part of your job and responsibility to come up with way you wish to spend your life. As well as practice harnessing your fear and getting it under control. We can only help you in so many ways. It is up to you to make your own life choices. And I hope they are good ones this time ‘round.”

Pitch hated when North made mention of his lack of freedom especially in conjunction with ‘you have a long way to go’ which was very disheartening and frustrating. Edicts that North, of all people, would give to him about learning to control fear was insulting to say the least, but Pitch kept his anger of North’s words down to a simmer now as he knew letting it be known at this point would not serve to help him get out of being a prisoner at the Pole. It would in fact hinder him more than anything. He would bide his time… he didn’t have a choice but to.

Not wanting to get riled up further by the current conversation, Pitch excused himself from North telling him that he would think on what he had said, but for now he wanted to rest a bit before tending to the reindeer which seemed to be a good enough excuse to North who merely wished Pitch a good night as he watched the nightmare king depart.

Holding the schooner, Pitch stared at it turning it over in his hands actually considering North’s words about life choices now over just being annoyed by them. Could he really offer anything truly good with fear? And at what cost to him would conforming to such a life mean?
Pitch went back to his room, but he did not rest like he told North he would. He instead sat on his bed for a time just thinking about he and North’s encounter while holding his gift. The little ornament created mixed feelings in Pitch about the man as in some ways he had wanted to just despise North as his jailer, his tormentor, the bringer of his greatest humiliations, but tonight he was a much needed confidant. North’s hug had shown Pitch more than anything that the man was not just holding him here out of malice to keep him trapped and incapable of affecting the world, he truly did care enough about him to want to see him become better. It was touching and gave Pitch a small amount of hope that maybe with the guardians’ help he could be something even his Emily could be proud of.

He placed the trinket on the dresser now among the other baubles that the room afforded and remembering what had been in its place made Pitch blush as he bent down and reached into the mattress to pull out the broken figurine that he’d smashed in a rage several nights before. He needed to find a way to fix it he decided now feeling guilty. He would take it with him to one of North’s workshops after finishing up with the reindeer he decided tucking it into his robe before heading out to tend the reindeer. It was still quite early, but he doubted the reindeer would mind eating a bit earlier than normal, and he wanted to repair the figurine before anyone would know to look for him.

Pitch moved through his chores rather quickly today wanting more time to do the task he had planned, but as he was heading back inside from the stables Sandy floated up to him looking quite happy to see him. Pitch regarded him curiously wondering what he was going on about with all those flashing symbols over his head. It was obvious though that the little golden man was trying to get him to follow him. Of course Sandy would harass him now Pitch thought begrudgingly as he dejectedly followed him towards the main hub of the Pole now.

Toothiana and her fairies circled the large Christmas tree and quickly darted to every corner of the room, hanging last minute streamers and strings of Christmas lights and other decorations. Since they were at Santa’s house, most of the decorations consisted of Christmas themes. So they had to make do with what they had to work with. The other Guardians rushed around sampling the food, making sure the band was in-tune, and other little details that needed their attention before Sandy arrived with Pitch. North was discussing something with the yeti that was head of the band, and Bunny was in a heated argument with one of the yeti chefs concerning one of the foods on the buffet table. Jack Frost and one of the yetis worked to make sure the Christmas tree looked its best. Halfway through they became frustrated with the task when some of the elves felt need to undo everything they did. After running around the tree at least four times, Jack finally caught the runaway elf that had snatched one of the low-hanging balls.

"This is so exciting!" said Tooth with a squeal, "Pitch is going to be SO surprised when he sees all of this!"

"Yeah, I just hope he appreciates it and doesn't fall into one of his moods and ruin everything." said Jack. The yeti beside him grunted in agreement, kicking one of the elves out of the way before it had a chance to snatch a candy cane off the tree.

Pitch had been in his own thoughts about how best to evade Sandy, so he could get to work fixing the broken figurine when he looked up to see an array of lights and streamers running in all directions. There was a big commotion going on at the bottom of the stairwell that held the massive
Christmas tree. Pitch looked to Sandy now who was zipping back and forth happily as he waved Pitch forward.

“What is this?” Pitch’s brow was furrowed in confusion as they continued to make their way across the main hub to the top of the stairwell. There were yeti, elf, and guardian alike all gathered about talking and laughing. It looked like they were having a celebration of sorts, but it was May, there wasn’t any holidays that Pitch could think of that would merit this was there? He honestly didn’t keep track unless it’d belonged to a Guardian just because knowing your enemy was key, and of course he knew Halloween because it was too close dealing in his domain not to take some joy from it. He started to wonder if he would be intruding now, but Sandy had obviously wanted him to take part in this event as even now the little golden man urged him forward with a gentle push since Pitch had stopped cold at the top of the stairs still staring at the scene like a bystander.

“Hey, everyone, he’s here!” Tooth suddenly shouted out after catching sight of Sandy and Pitch. She flew up to greet Pitch, grinning. “Surprise! I hope you like the way everything’s decorated. We couldn’t find any non-Christmas decorations so we had to make do with what North had in storage.”

Pitch looked flummoxed as he walked down the stairs just looking around at everything in awe, “This… this is for me? But why?”

"Yes!" Tooth squeaked. "Isn't it great?"

"AH! Here he is! The guest of honor!” North shouted over the noise. He made his way through the crowd of yetis to get to Pitch and Tooth. He took Pitch by the arm and pulled him forward with him. "Come! You can tend to deer later. Right now is cause for celebration!"

Pitch was speechless as he took everything in and was dragged across the room feeling overwhelmed with the sensory overload finally stumbling over his words, “Uh, the deer? They… I have already tended to them. What… what are we celebrating exactly?” Pitch was curious now as he stared up at North.

“We are not celebrating anything in particular,” North waved his question off. “Just a time to have fun and relax and put everything else behind us. All you’ve done is work and stew in misery in your room. We thought that it might be good to take break and have party. Coming to think of it, it might help all of us.” he glared over at Bunny, still in a deep discussion with the chef, “Bunny, that is enough. Pitch is here.”

Bunnymund looked over their way as if just now realizing it, “Oh! Right, right, cake is coming up!” He hopped over to the table taking the lid off of a huge five layer cake that was decorated with a myriad of Halloween type items like ghosts and skeletons with black icing.

Pitch took it in before giving a small chuckle, it looked like the elves had eaten part of one side and frosting was dripping off the edges. Pitch couldn’t help but to smile at their efforts as he looked about the room at all of them, “This is very nice. Thank you.”

“You really like it?” Tooth asked, her pink eyes looking at him expectantly.

Pitch nodded smiling brightly for the first time since being at North’s workshop, “I really do. Although I’m not used to being around so many people.” Pitch had backed up against North steepling and tapping his fingers with nervous energy.

"Oh, good," Tooth relaxed. "Jack was kind of afraid you wouldn't like it. To be honest, I was kinda worried myself."
"Is okay, Pitch," North put his hand on Pitch's shoulder. "If you want, we can gather in corner over there. Just you and us Guardians."

“That sounds good,” Pitch was relieved to hear North had an area a little more secluded as the constant flux of noise had him a little on edge. Milling around this sort of thing wouldn’t have bothered him when he knew no one else around him could see him, but with everyone staring at him now, it made him feel a bit embarrassed by the attention.

North nodded, leading Pitch away. “Then we shall go.” he turned. “Bunny, bring the cake, please.”

“Or whatever’s left of it,” Jack mumbled, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. He and Tooth and Sandy followed North to a quiet area that was set up away from the main activities and yeti chatter.

“Please, have seat,” North said to Pitch, waving at one of the chairs.

Pitch moved to the furthest chair in the back that was cast in shadows feeling much more comfortable sitting delicately and still smiling widely as he looked back and forth between the guardians. His eyes lit up even more so as Bunnymund set a huge slice of cake in front of him making Pitch practically beam as he swiped a finger in the frosting to taste it finding the cake to also taste exquisite, “That’s divine,” he practically chirped, “Thank you Bunnymund.”

Bunnymund seemed surprised that Pitch was actually using manners, but he didn’t remark on it only saying “Welcome mate, dig in.” He plucked a fork in it before turning back to cut more cake for the others.

Sandy had already procured his slice and was settling down in one of the seats across from Pitch as he looked around at his other friends nodding that things seemed to be going better than they had expected.

North took a bite of his cake and leaned back in his chair. "You know, Pitch, I have been thinking. Since you enjoy taking care of reindeer so much; how would you like to help in workshop?"

Pitch was savoring every bite of the delicious cake and stopped to look at North now considering his question carefully. He did like taking care of the reindeer, but slaving away in North’s hectic shops was not on his agenda. Besides, he kind of rather have more time to himself, but curious, he asked, “What kind of help?”

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Bunnymund had brought the last piece for Toothiana, but she seemed a bit reticent surely weighing the sugar to cavity potential. Bunny shook his head sadly as he chuckled at her, “It’s not going to rot your teeth out to have one slice of cake you know.”

“Ummm… okay…” said Tooth hesitantly, taking the slice out of politeness.

“Nothing hard,” said North, “I just thought you’d be interested in helping to paint some of the toys.”

Bunnymund sat now to join the table interested in Pitch’s reply since it might pertain to painting his eggs at a later date.

Pitch dug his fork back into his cake slowly now almost playing with the food as he grimaced slightly at the thought of assembly line painting. That sounded too much like work, and Pitch wasn’t really interested in being another one of North’s ‘helpers.’ “You did? Why ever would I want to do that? It sounds dreadful.”

Bunnymund’s face fell, but he refrained from saying anything since North was the one talking to
Pitch at the moment. Painting consisted of about 70% of what he did, so he couldn’t help but take a little offense.

North took another bite of cake, shrugging his shoulders. "Suit yourself. Though, I can't imagine what's dreadful about using paintbrush to paint toys in bright colors. If you want, I can have toys sent to your room."

Pitch frowned taking another bite of his own cake thinking his room was already small enough without any more clutter to add to it, but painting might not be that bad as an activity in and of itself. He could like a solitary task that he could use precision at. He was rather bored at the Pole, so maybe doing a little painting here and there would help the time pass. He shrugged, “Is there any other small room it can be done in? I might find painting a few things to be interesting, but the smell and the mess in my living space isn’t exactly desirable. Perhaps something intricate and in need of a steady hand I could do. I’m not interested in painting the same thing over and over; you can leave that to your yetis that are more than happy with mundane tasks.”

North suppressed an eye roll over Pitch’s pickiness and kept himself calm and collected, knowing that he was trying to get somewhere with Pitch. The fact that the nightmare king expressed some amount of interest in his suggestion gave him hope that he was going in the right direction. But he felt like all of them were walking on thin ice when it came to this dark man. One wrong move and Pitch would be pushed back into the way he used to be.

“I think a separate room can be arranged. I do not ask you to be one of yetis. Since you seem to be bored here I thought you would enjoy doing something that would work your mind and keep you active, since tending to deer only takes up small amount of time.”

Pitch blinked surprised that North was looking to give him a form of entertainment when he was thinking that North was only angling to get him to do more work. He shifted looking back at his cake, “Well, I do like to read. A good book always helps to quell boredom I find. I imagine you have an extensive library around here somewhere.” Pitch knew that North was an accomplished wizard in his own right which had led to many of his amazing inventions. It would be quite fortuitous to find any spell books to study especially since Sandy had effectively nullified his powers for the time being.

North looked up, smiling. “As a matter of fact, I do.” he nodded. “I will show it to you later. I am glad to hear that you have interest in reading. I agree with you. No better way to pass time.”

Jack quietly eyed Pitch. For some reason the nightmare lord didn't strike him as the reading sort. But then again, Pitch was full of surprises as all of them had discovered since bringing him to the Pole.

This pleased Pitch, and he seemed to visibly perk up, “I look forward to it! Speaking of activities of interest, would it be completely out of the question to tame any of the reindeer to ride? Um… not off the compound of course, but even though I had a rough ride with the first one I tried to ride, I have no doubts that they can be ridden. If you would allow it of course,” Pitch took another forkful of cake then peered up at North to gauge his reaction to this question. He had known he had a great love of the equine for a reason, and remembering riding and the freedom of it was one of these reasons.

Bunnymund’s ear twitched unable to contain himself any longer from commenting, “You know, you’re unbelievable! You’ve only been out of the hospital what three days, and you’re already ready to try and jump on the back of one of those things again? For what? …some supposed fun? That’s something I’d expect out of Jack more than you.”

Pitch’s eyes narrowed at Bunnymund more than a little displeased the rabbit’s words might influence
the Cossack’s decision, “No one was asking your opinion rabbit!”

North made a disapproving face at Bunny, gesturing for him to shut up with his hand. He knew the rabbit meant well, but sometimes his mouth had a bad habit of making matters worse. North then turned to Pitch, “I have no problem with you training reindeer to be ridden.” he replied. “But Bunny does have point. Maybe you should wait until you heal more and feel you are ready.”

Bunnymund sat back in his chair in clear agitation of being shushed by North and insulted by Pitch. He shot Pitch a glare folding his arms, “I have a name Pitch, and I’d prefer you use it over calling me rabbit.”

Pitch ignored Bunnymund though fully focused on North now really wanting this. He spoke eagerly, “I’m perfectly fine! I may be in a weakened state through courtesy of Sandman, but I’m more than physically capable of handling a fall off of a reindeer… as long as it isn’t at extreme heights… but that’s not really an issue since I’m not able to leave the Pole now is it?”

“He feels fine!” North gave a shrug, “You can start anytime you wish, then. Just be careful.”

“Yes, be careful!” said Tooth, looking gravely concerned, "We don't want you falling off again. You might hurt yourself worse than before.”

Pitch couldn’t help blushing at Toothiana’s concern for him, “I… yes; I will be.” He ducked his head momentarily feeling rather embarrassed he’d managed to hurt himself that badly to begin with. The excitement of riding again overrode his embarrassment though as he practically beamed now taking bites of cake as he went on, “I think Prancer is going to be the one I try to train first; he’s the most docile and is highly motivated by sugar cubes I’ve found.”

Sandy nudged Jack smiling and formed a picture of him riding a reindeer thinking the boy might find it fun as well.

Jack shrugged. “Sounds like fun. I might give it a try… after Pitch trains them. I may be careless sometimes, but I’m not that careless.” he laughed. “I don’t have any plans to end up in North’s medical ward.”

North let out a hearty laugh at Pitch’s mentioning of the sugar cubes. “Don’t overfeed him or he will be too big to get off ground.”

Agreeing with North, Pitch shook his head, “Oh no, I wouldn’t give him too many or it might make him sick…” his thoughts were cut off at Jack’s comment as Pitch turned to glare hotly at the boy, “You? Not careless? Now that’s a joke! Your whole existence is based around being careless! Besides, even if you had the astuteness capable of learning to ride, the fact that you can fly nullifies any real danger for you fool.” Pitch was already discredited enough by the folly of how he’d ended up in the medical bay, to have Frost of all people rub it in his nose infuriated him.

Bunnymund was becoming more ruffled by Pitch’s insults as he pointed at the nightmare king, “Hey nip the nasty remarks already; you don’t have to take jibes at everyone just because ya made a fool of yourself trying to run off and got yerself hurt!”

Pitch sneered at Bunnymund, “I’m only speaking the truth; why, do you think he can’t handle the truth rabbit?”

“Hey, it’s okay,” said Jack, holding his hand up to Bunny. “I was just joking, but it’s clear that Pitch can’t take a joke.”

North was glaring at Pitch, one of his eyebrows lifting in silent warning. “Actually, I am in
agreement with Bunny. Pitch, you need not be so rude. We are all here to have good time. Let us keep it that way, hm? Jack said he was joking. You need to learn to loosen up a little. Don’t take things so personally or as excuse to bite someone’s head off.”

“And for the last time; don’t call me rabbit!” Bunnymund huffed hoping up and turning to leave as he grumbled under his breath and moved over now to talk to Phil to control his rising temper with the shadow man.

Pitch cut eyes in Bunnymund’s direction watching him go as he spat, “Good riddance,” turning his attention back to Jack he scoffed, “I can take a joke, but I didn’t appreciate the insinuation that I could be more careless than you of all people. Indeed.” Pitch grimaced stabbing at the remainder of his cake feeling wholly irritated by the conversation.

North sighed, rolling his eyes over to look at Sandy.

"I wasn't insinuating that." said Jack. "I was just... oh, never mind." he turned away from Pitch. The man was impossible to have a conversation with, he thought.

Sandy just lifted an eyebrow looking slightly uncomfortable as he rocked back and forth.

Having cast a dower mood over the crowd Pitch’s eyes traversed their little group before lowering his gaze to his empty plate as he pouted. He hadn’t meant to cause trouble, but now everyone seemed unhappy with him. He mumbled, “Okay. Maybe I did take it a little too personally. I’m just used to… it doesn’t matter. I didn’t mean to ruin your little party.”

“You are used to being alone and not used to being around other people.” said North, looking straight at Pitch. "That is why we have party. So you can get used to being around others and feel a part of us. We will excuse your rudeness for now, but I expect you to work on restraining it.”

Pitch kept his eyes averted to the table still frowning but he didn’t comment. He realized he had a habit of snapping at others, but he didn’t want to acknowledge North putting one more restriction on him. Sure, he may have been a tad rude, but it was the only way he’d been allowed to vent his frustrations here. Trying to change the subject Pitch looked up at North, “The cake was pretty good. Did you make it?”

“No, I did not make it. I am horrible cook, actually. My skills have gotten rusty over years.” North waved a hand to the yeti behind the buffet table. “My chef made it.”

Pitch smirked thinking North might be thinner if he did do his own cooking, but he kept that remark to himself, “They are quite talented at a lot of things. You’ve done well finding good minions, although I’m not overly sure the purpose of the elves,” Pitch remarked distastefully watching one of them dive bomb off the Christmas tree getting strung up within a strand of Christmas lights.

"Yetis are not 'minions'," said North, not appreciating Pitch's chosen term. Although, it wasn't surprising to him, seeing as Pitch was evil. "They are my helpers and friends. They do this because they choose to." he turned to look at the elf still hanging from the lights. "The elves... they are here because world expects Santa to have elves. So I have elves. They do help out from time to time.”

"Help... if you call always being under foot and getting into everything helpful. And if the yetis are such good friends, then why do they wait on you hand and foot? That doesn't seem like much of an equal relationship if you ask me," Pitch's smirk grew as he challenged North, mostly just to get a rise out the man by his chosen terminology of 'friends' since North seemed so annoyed by Pitch calling them minions.
The air was tense after Pitch got through talking. Toothiana’s eyes quickly fell down to the slice of uneaten cake in her hands. She nervously, repeatedly mashed at it with her fork just to keep her hand busy. Jack and Sandy both eyed North, awaiting his answer. Jack thought that it was probably a good thing Bunny left before this subject came up. He could just hear the ranting the rabbit would be doing right about now.

“Who says they wait on me hand and foot?” North said calmly. “Do you see them waiting on me?” he waved his hand to take in the whole room and the yetis standing around laughing and talking and snacking on food from the buffet. “As I recall, Bunny served us cake because I kindly asked him to. The yeti chef over there, he cooks for all of us, even fellow yetis because he wants to. We all have to eat.” North set his plate down to balance on his knee. “And who says I do not do things for yetis too? Yes, I help with making the toys. We all work together here. We do things for each other. We are all one big family. Just because yeti brings me something I have asked for does not mean he is waiting on me hand and foot. Sometimes politely asking someone to hand you something or help out or bring something to you is way of making them feel accepted and wanted. It gives feeling of being needed.”

Pitch chuckled mirthfully sitting back and crossing a leg as his smile widened. This was too fun to toy with North, “Yes, they must be very, very good friends indeed to take so many tall orders of building nonstop toys for you, cooking, cleaning... well pretty much all of the actual work here at the Pole. But, you do need time to eat cookies and invent new toys for them to make next year and all.”

“That is enough!” North suddenly snapped. He glared hotly at Pitch.

Pitch’s eyes widened in surprised shock. He hadn’t expected North to become this upset. Still smiling, he raised his hands in supplication, “Temper, temper North. Now who’s taking things too personal hmm?”

“Pitch!” Tooth hissed through gritted teeth. When Pitch’s eyes turned on her she frowned disapprovingly at him, shaking her head for him not to push the subject further.

Pitch’s brow drew down. Of course Jack could have fun at his expense, but when he pointed out a truth that ruffled everyone’s feathers then it was a double standard. He crossed his arms over his chest as he snapped, “What? I’m not allowed to have an opinion now? It’s not rude if it’s true.

By now, the room had gone quiet. All of the yetis, Bunny, and even the elves had stopped what they were doing and were looking toward the corner where the other Guardians and Pitch were. North glanced around at the audience he had hoped to avoid and sighed.

“Pitch,” North began, still remaining calm but it was obvious to everyone near him that annoyance was bubbling under the surface. “Having and voicing opinion is one thing. Continuing to push yourself after someone has already given explanation for what you do not understand is edging towards rudeness.” North shook a finger toward Pitch. “Do not think for moment I am moron. I know that you are pushing on purpose in order to get reaction out of me. You are not merely voicing opinion; you are toying with me,” he leaned back in his chair. “You say it’s true because you do not fully understand. You do not understand relationship I have with yetis because you have not lived here long enough or know my history with them. Not very many do, because that is my business and no one has ever questioned it, not even other Guardians. I have already told you that we are big family. We do things for each other. I can tell you that I speak truth. I am, after all, Santa Claus. If you doubt my truthfulness, then that is up to you. This is first warning I give you. I suggest you do not push me further and ruin party for everyone.”

Ruin the party for everyone? Wasn’t this supposed to be his party? Pitch rolled his eyes, “Fine, fine. Have it your way. You don’t have to get so serious about the matter. It was after all just meaningless
chatter. I’ll do my best not to refer to your elves and yetis as minions and more as… ‘helpers,’” Pitch was sure to draw out the word, “We wouldn’t want anyone getting their feelings hurt knowing their place after all.” Pitch shook his head rising from the table no longer liking how everyone was staring at him now as he spat, “You can all go back to what you were doing; show’s over!”

The yetis and elves went back to what they were doing, albeit a little quieter. The chef yeti tended to the food on the table, even though it really didn’t need tending to, just to make himself look busy.

North sighed, shaking his head wearily and massaging his temples. “We have to remember that he is Boogeyman.” he said to the other Guardians. “He cannot be expected to fit into society overnight. He still has walls up that need to come down.”

Jack nodded, not feeling the need to comment.

“Yes,” Tooth said softly, agreeing. “If he could just get rid of his arrogance, I feel that some of the walls could come down.”

North nodded, not bothering to look up at the fairy. He sat there, his eyes closed.

Bunnymund watched Pitch storm off a scowl painted on his face as he shook his head moving to rejoin the table, “Even without his powers he casts a shadow wherever he goes!”

Pitch made it to the top of the stairs and just turned to glare down at Bunnymund having heard his comment, “Not to worry rabbit, you won’t have to bask in my shadows, but best believe if I had the ability that I cast the darkest one over you. Until then, you can choke on the leftover cake.” Pitch’s lip curled as he said this, and as he finished, he turned and disappeared down the hall heading back to his room feeling quite disgruntled by the affair.

Bunnymund not taking too kindly to Pitch’s remark hopped up as quickly as he had sat lunging to run up the stairs to have it out with the Nightmare king, “Why ya little!”

Sandy whipped out a quick strand of dreamsand to wrap around Bunny’s waist to halt him from hopping after Pitch as he shook his head sadly.

“Relax, Bunny,” North said, waving a hand at the rabbit, not bothering to open his eyes. “Let him be. Saying anymore will only provoke him and make him madder. When he gets in these moods, it’s best that we not rile him.” North sighed heavily. “I think we had party too soon. He still needs time to get over shock that memories have brought to him.”

“I’d like to give him a shocking memory or two!” Bunnymund growled his ears flat now as he let himself fall back in his chair obviously still fuming about Pitch’s last words, “If he calls me rabbit one more time I swear yer gonna be able to find some more memories for him once I get done with him!”

Sandy floated back into his own seat looking about the party and his unfinished cake with a small frown unhappy that their good intentions seemed to have been dampened quicker than it took to eat a piece of cake.

The noise from the party faded as Pitch made his way back to his room. He reached into his robe pulling the mangled little mannequin out and sighed thinking of it as a representation of he and the guardian’s relationships, not easily fixed. Reaching his room, Pitch opened the door slipping in and closing it behind himself. He flopped the broken figurine down on the night stand as he sat on his bed with a frustrated sigh. He felt a mix of anger and weariness over the event. He had been quite surprised and genuinely happy, but then everything had digressed into a horrible scene that left him
feeling quite bitter. He didn’t fit in here, and he probably never would he thought, and this fact only made him feel more tired as he lay on his bed now staring at the portholes wishing more than ever he were somewhere else.
“I just wish there was something we could do for him.” Tooth sighed. “I feel so bad.”

“We’ve tried just about everything, Tooth,” said Jack. “It’s not our fault; it’s his.” he nodded in the direction Pitch had disappeared. “Until he breaks down walls, like North has said, nothing’s going to help him. And the only person keeping those walls up is him. Believe me, I know. I was there once. Only I wasn’t evil.”

Sandy grimaced signaling a picture of Pitch’s memories where he was hugging the little girl and then it faded into a wicked looking Pitch with horns and a question mark?

Bunnymund sighed finally simmering down a bit from his previous anger. As annoyed as he was with Pitch, being a bringer of hope he knew that in order to bolster a person to want to do better, they had to believe it in themselves, “No. I don’t think Pitch, per se, is evil, but his actions have been. None of us are inherently evil or good as that too is a choice. We got ta stop thinking of things in black and white and instead in layers of grey. If Pitch still feels like he’s not able to be one of us, he’s never going ta even try.”

"So what do you suggest we do to make him feel like one of us?” North asked, opening his eyes to look at Bunny. "I am open to suggestions, seeing that everything we've tried has not done much good. In fact, I call meeting right here and now. It is time we get to bottom of this, because I grow weary. Just when I think we've broken through to him, we end up falling back two steps. I am currently open to any suggestions. Party has failed. Painting toys is up in air, but not something he seems highly interested in so I don't count it lasting long. So what else?"

Bunnymund frowned, "Well he's not gonna like everything he has ta do, and that's just the breaks. This isn't the Pitch show, and he needs ta realize that sooner than later. Everything else will work itself out."

Sandy's eyes blinked his face had been contorted into a look of concentration since North spoke, but now he glanced up ready to contribute to the discussion signing over his head a moon and a table with all of them and Pitch followed by the sun following the moon again and the group of them in the same scene around the table.

Bunnymund shook his head, "I don't have the time ta come babysit Pitch every night ta make him feel better, but I get what you're going for. Maybe once a week I can make an exception ta come visit ta try and get him to be more social. We could probably take turns ta make a point of a few of us or at least one of us making a nightly get together with him to keep up interaction and maybe force him out of his shell a bit. But something has got to give with his attitude because no way, no how am I putting up with that every time I come by!"

Sandy grimaced nodding in agreement. One of the biggest obstacles to getting to know Pitch was his volatile and often unyielding need to be rude to all of them. It certainly was making the task of being friendly towards him harder on all of them.

Jack Frost had been listening in silence to the conversation and the suggestions being thrown out, his brow furrowing in both concern and concentration.
“And maybe we’re going about this the wrong way,” he said finally. “Maybe Pitch is different and needs a different approach. You can’t force someone into being sociable, because not everyone is. And that’s okay. Some people enjoy the company of just their thoughts or just one or two other people,” he looked from each Guardian. “Maybe some of the way Pitch acts is caused by there being too many of us around and trying too hard. I—I think this is my job—I think it always has been. I know he’s not really that fond of me, but maybe I can help a little. I think we need to go ride some reindeer.” he looked at Bunny. “When it comes to his rudeness, I think that’s something we’re just going to have to overlook for now. One step at a time.”

Bunnymund considered Jack for a long moment before nodding, "You might be right, the party did seem to intimidate him now that I think about it, but that's still no excuse for him to be a big jerk to us; that kind of behavior isn't acceptable, and I refuse ta let him treat me like that. Now if you wanna let him dog you out Jack, that's on your head, but just remember, it's hard to be a friend without mutual respect. But yeah, maybe in the future we'll make it just us guardians ta visit with, no big crowds. I do think Sandy is right though, we should have at least an hour or two a day that we check in on him to also get him used to us and get to know each other better."

“Oh, I agree,” said Jack, smirking amusingly at Bunny. “If he gives me very much flack, I’ll just call North or Sandy and let them deal with him.”

North nodded in agreement with everyone. "Sounds good to me. We will all move to take these next steps. If Pitch does not come around then, I do not know what to do."

"Don't forget to show him the library." Tooth put in.

"Yes, I will do that." North replied.

Bunnymund smiled at Jack, “So are ya gonna go out there ta help Pitch train the reindeer then? Maybe him being able to impart something on someone over just being told what to do might do him some good, but ya better expect to get the full brunt of his ego if you do.”

Sandy was looking to North giving a small shrug with a half frown.

"Yeah, I'll help him train the deer." Jack's smile turned into a smirk. He turned to Sandy. "You know, Sandy, I might need you to come with me for our first training. Just to show Pitch what will happen if he gives me any trouble."

Sandy smiled sheepishly before giving a delicate nod.

Bunnymund chuckled, “Hearin’ how that turns out is gonna be entertaining I have a feeling.”

Jack continued to smirk.

“Can I say something?” Tooth asked timidly, clearing her throat. North nodded. ‘I’ve been here thinking, and I feel like I need to say a few things before we continue on. Whatever we do to help Pitch, we all need to keep in mind that he, like us, is centuries old. He can’t be expected to change quickly or easily. When we took on this job, we all got carried away at first and expected a little too much. We were counting on him changing in a matter of a few weeks, maybe months. But this is going to be a much bigger job and responsibility than we thought due to the fact that Pitch is very old and set in his ways. And since he’s allowed the fear inside him to overtake and rule him for so long, it’s even worse. We need to also keep in mind that we aren’t just dealing with Pitch himself, but with the fearlings inside him. I know that some of it is just Pitch being Pitch, but we don’t know what influence those things are having on him. If you want my opinion, I think Pitch has changed in some small ways since he’s been here. It hasn’t been a drastic change, but he has changed a little, in small
bits. So it gives me some hope that we’re headed in the right direction.”

North sat silently, chewing on Tooth’s words. Finally he nodded. “Yes, I think you do speak truth, Tooth.”

Sandy also nodded in agreement as he looked among his fellow guardians.

Bunnymund looked a little abashed, “Well, uh I wouldn’t really know since I haven’t been around this week… still doing a lot of clean up from this past Easter and trying to get things going for next Spring and all.” He scratched the back of his head, “I’ll try ta make a more consorted effort ta be around and help in the future although being in close proximity with Pitch might drive me ta be a little cranky meself.”

“Ha! Make you cranky? What about me?” North groused. “I think is safe to say Pitch has gotten under all our skins since he came here.”

Bunnymund shook his head slowly in sympathy, “I don’t envy you mate, I don’t envy you one bit!”

Pitch had lay on his bed just thinking about the party now listening to the sounds from down the hall carry up to his room as he sighed resignedly. Perhaps he could have been a bit more civil to them; they did after all throw him a party. Why then did he have to ruin it by getting under North’s skin? Yes, it had been amusing at the time… until it wasn’t anymore, and then it had swiftly spiraled into… this, a pity party table of one. Pitch hated being all alone, but he constantly found himself right back where he started. The situation vexed him, and he wasn’t sure how to change it and be happy.

A few hours went by, and the party seemed to die away and sounds of the normal hustle and bustle of the workshop resumed. Pitch turned glancing back to the broken figure on the night stand feeling determined to do what he’d originally planned to, if done right, North would never be the wiser that the figure had ever been broken. Pitch scooped the doll and all of his many fragments back up stuffing it into his robe and moved stealthily out of his room and down the opposite wing away from the main hall. He’d walked these halls now so many times, he was beginning to know them well.

Pitch continued down the hall making his way to the woodworking shop. It was relatively quiet comparatively to the normal noise level and busyness of the shop around this time, but Pitch supposed North gave the yetis the rest of the day off for the party, and the couple that milled about now were just workaholics. Good, they were better at this sort of thing than him anyway, “You there,” one of the yetis that was gluing together a nutcracker doll peered over at Pitch now to see what he wanted. Pitch pulled the broken figure out of his robes thrusting it forward, “I need you to fix this.”

The yeti blinked looking down at the broken splintered object curiously before harrumphing and grabbing a bottle of wood glue and setting it in front of Pitch before turning back to the doll he was already working on when Pitch walked up.

Pitch snarled, “Didn’t you hear me? I need you to fix this; it’s far more important than that thing you’re playing with!”

The yeti looked back up at Pitch raising an eyebrow as he set the nutcracker doll down and held out his hand.

Relaxing a bit Pitch placed the figure in the hairy hand as the yeti pulled the pieces over to his work station and laid out the numerous fragments beginning the very slow process of gluing them back together. After about thirty minutes of watching and seeing the yeti was painstakingly slow and had only glued about a fourth of the parts back together, Pitch was beginning to get impatient as he
grumbled tapping his foot, “Can’t you pick up the pace? You do this all day don’t you? One would think you’d be a little less slow at it.”

“What is problem, Hector?” said North, walking out from behind a tall shelving unit full of teddy bears to stand beside the yeti. He caught sight of Pitch and stopped. “I thought I recognized familiar complaining.”

Pitch jumped hearing the burly man’s voice. Spinning around to face North, Pitch visibly paled quickly stepping between Hector and North, “I… I wasn’t complaining! I… I was just watching Hector work is all.” Why didn’t he just take the glue and bring that stupid bauble back to his room to fix it himself? He cringed wishing to distract North as far away from the project as possible as he stuttered pointing behind North, “Wha-what have you got going on over there? Are you making something special?” Pitch tried to look curious and not guilty hoping to distract North away from seeing what Hector was working on.

"No, not making anything special. Was just putting these bears on shelf.” North lifted an eyebrow and looked down at Pitch. "I do have to say, Pitch, that if you broke it, you should fix it, hm?"

Pitch seemed surprised by North’s reply. Could he have known already that he’d thrown the figure against the wall splintering it to pieces in a rage? Of course not, he doubted North would be this calm if he did. He likely thought if anything that Pitch was just fixing something he accidently broke. The latter was much less condemning, but if North saw the shape the figure was in, he’d know immediately that it was no accident, so Pitch lied, “Uh, I’m not proficient with such things and was just interested in seeing how it was done is all.”

“Pitch,” North chuckled, shaking his head. “You forget who you are talking to. I deal with naughty and nice children all the time.” he turned to look at Pitch. “I have a sense for these things. It is part of job. Do you think you can hide little thing like this from me?”

Pitch scowled not liking the comparison at all, “I’m not a child North, I wish you’d stop making references to me in such a way,” he grumbled.

North raised an eyebrow. "You misunderstand, Pitch. I was not comparing you to child. I was merely saying that I have special sense of telling who has been naughty or nice. It does not matter what age person is. Though, in my business, it is usually children. But same sense also works on adults too, since all adults were once children."

“Oh… I see,” Pitch blushed averting his gaze. That was awfully inconvenient he thought and would likely work against him if he ever did anything in the future he wished to keep to himself. “You… you’re not mad then?” Pitch took a tentative glance up to look at North’s face to see his expression.

"Why should I be mad?” North replied. "Accidents happen. Though, I trust that you be more careful from now on, yes?"

He didn’t know! Pitch visibly relaxed feeling much better now that North believed it was an accident over purposeful intent. He smiled nodding his head vigorously, “Oh yes! Of course! Definitely more careful,” he almost laughed in relief.

"And be sure to keep temper under control so accidents like this don't happen again.” North added, eyeing Pitch.

Realizing North was on to him, Pitch paled letting out a nervous titter as he rocked back on his feet,
“Uh… yes. It… I didn’t mean to break it,” he finally confessed looking away again. Admitting the fact sent another streak of embarrassment through him. He was glad North didn’t call him out for lying in the first place thinking he should have probably just admitted breaking the figure to begin with. Pitch was comforted that the truth was actually out now though and North wasn’t mad at him after all.

“You do know you could have just told me, right?” said North calmly.

Pitch grimaced thinking that he didn’t wish to anger North and most definitely wasn’t going to risk telling the man something that could bring down the man’s potential wrath, but only shrugged, “I figured I’d just fix it and be done with the matter. No sense in bothering you right?”

North regarded Pitch a few moments, and then turned to leave the room, gesturing for Pitch to follow. "Come."

Pitch glanced back at Hector who was meticulously still fixing the figure before his eyes followed North whom was walking out the door. He hesitated a moment in indecision but finally moved to follow behind North curious as he asked, “Where are we going?”

North refused to answer Pitch’s question and remained quiet as he led Pitch through a number of corridors. Finally he stopped in front of a door that was snugly placed in a quiet and secluded corner. Giving it a push, the door swung open. Stepping inside, North reached out and turned on a lamp that was placed on a side table near the door. The light illuminated rows upon rows of shelves, housing books of every size and color.

"This is the library." he said at last.

Pitch followed silently worried, but when they entered the library, his eyes widened at the large array of books that lined the multitude of shelves. His jaw dropped as he silently regarded the many tomes, “This… this is quite impressive.”

He moved to the shelves as his eyes traversed the many titles seeing one that was titled ‘The Golden Age,’ his eyes softened as his fingers touched the binding, “This is very old indeed,” he said almost sadly in remembrance of an age long gone.

“Yes, it is impressive.” North smiled proudly. “There are some very old books in this part of Pole.” he walked over and carefully lifted a book off one of the nearest shelves. “You are welcome to come here to peruse them any time you wish. Although, I do ask that you be careful with the more fragile ones.”

“Of course; I will use the utmost care,” Pitch stated as he moved closer to North to see the book he had pulled off of the shelf. It was one of the most famous Christmas tales that still circulated even in this day and age: A Christmas Carol. Of course Pitch had never actually read it for obvious reasons, but the book appeared to be an original copy by Charles Dickens. He had to smirk and roll his eyes wondering how many of these books centered on the big man’s holiday. Pitch commented dryly, “So what is that one about? Let me guess, a dashing tale of how you save the day?”

North let out an amused laugh, turning to Pitch. “Not every Christmas book is about me, Pitch. There is far more to Christmas than old man pulling sleigh.” he turned his eyes back to the book. “This particular book is about redemption.” he turned to regard Pitch thoughtfully, imagining a chain wrapped around the nightmare king that would make even Jacob Marley’s pale in comparison. “It’s about ghosts, fear, darkness, and creepy stuff. You’d love it.”

“Really?” Pitch seemed intrigued now as he looked at the book curiously, “Maybe I’ll read it then
just to see how those aspects could possibly relate to your holiday.”

“I bet you didn’t know that Christmas has darker side, did you—or of old tradition of ghost stories at Christmas.” North smiled as he took a book of old ghostly Christmas tales from the shelf and handed it to Pitch. “It seems you didn’t die out with Dark Ages after all. The Victorians were quite intrigued with supernatural and invoking fear amongst themselves. It was an age of ghostly tales and stories and folklore.”

“A darker side? What can possibly be dark about Christmas with all your feel goods and gift giving?” Pitch took the book looking at it with a scrutinizing stare.

“You’d be surprised,” North mused as he walked around, examining the book titles. “Unfortunately, not everyone has happy Christmas. There can be sadness and gloom even at Christmas. But the world is curious place sometimes. People feel need for thrill and adrenaline rush, regardless of time or place. Something I can appreciate, but why they choose to scare each other, I do not know. But there is something about ghost stories that continues to thrill and entertain the human race, even at a joyful time such as Christmas.”

Pitch stood up straighter; he did know the answer to this and was more than happy to expound upon the merits of fear, “Scaring someone to get a thrill of fear is exciting; it can make you feel more alive and vivacious then some of the other mundane emotions you feel in every day to day encounters.” Pitch smirked, “It’s definitely less boring if you ask me.”

“Does it, Pitch? Or does it just give you the feeling of power over another?”

North’s remark soured Pitch’s good mood on the subject as he growled, “Not everything that fear deals in has to be about a power exchange. I was actually speaking of the person being scared not just the person doing the scaring, but if you must know, I do miss the rush of feeling a surge of terror ride up a child’s spine when I put a flash of fear through them that makes them want to run and hide.” He of course said this last bit just to make North feel uncomfortable.

North ignored him as he continued to scan the book titles on the other side of the shelving unit. He knew that Pitch had a penchant for rambling, especially when it came to using words to try and strike fear into people.

"I'm surprised you would say such a thing.” North said at last, his voice sounding preoccupied. "As I recall, you seemed to experience a lot of fear yourself when you were confined to the hole. Tell me something. Do you really get that much pleasure out of scaring people when you yourself know what it feels like to be frightened?’’

Pitch opened his mouth to say something before looking down at the books in his hands as he scowled, “It’s a little different in that hole don’t you think? When there, it’s an almost unending fear. I’m only extracting a small thrill of fear prolonged for no more than a few minutes. That’s harmless comparatively.” In truth, Pitch didn’t like to feel afraid, more than half of his existence felt like it was spent in a dichotomy of the struggle between giving fear and being consumed by it. But he needed that feeling of power that surged through him whenever he did reciprocate fear on another. It made him feel just a little less afraid himself.

“Ah! There you are.” North suddenly said, apparently finding the book he had been searching for. He felt like he needed to say something else to Pitch, but at the same time he knew that if he continued he would only anger the man further. “I hope you enjoy the library.” he said, now addressing Pitch. “I’ve been so busy lately that I’ve forgotten what a cozy feel this place has. I need to get back to spending more time here.”
Smiling Pitch nodded, “Oh I’m sure there are many wonders to discover here,” he was of course curious to see what North had been looking for in particular and strained to look at the cover now. Later he would come back when he was alone to peruse the books and see if any of them happened to be spell books. He knew North had to have a stash of them somewhere to exploit.

North walked to the door. "I will leave you now, then. Need to get some sleep. Some of yetis and I have inventory to do tomorrow." With a yawn, North waved 'good night' to Pitch and disappeared through the door, leaving it open.

Pitch watched North go listening carefully for his footfalls echoing down the corridor before turning back to the massive rows upon rows of books, the task before him seemed daunting. He sighed tiredly remembering how long it had taken going through the substantial stack of Toothiana’s tooth casings to find Jack’s teeth. So it would be a needle in a haystack, but what else did he have to do with his night? The sun had just set, so he had plenty of time to himself now Pitch thought as he set the books North had given him down on the table to begin scouring the titles.

After twelve hours of frantically searching for any trace of magic within the myriad of shelves, Pitch was on the verge of throwing in the towel; that was until while he was perusing through one of the back shelves, his hip bumped a peculiar desk, and he heard the sound of a latch unclick. Curious to where the sound came from, Pitch’s attention was drawn to the desk. It had a roll top lid drawn down over the front of it as an obvious note of being private. This of course did nothing to deter Pitch as he pulled at the now unlocked lid to roll it up. Inside were several loose pieces of parchment in an ancient language Pitch hadn’t seen in over five hundred years. Intrigued, he carefully thumbed through the pages doing his best to read what he could make out from the faded pages. Oh there was definitely magic here! He smiled greedily. It would take many more hours that he didn’t have at the moment to decipher the dead language, but he was more than sure whatever he did find here would at least prove to be interesting if not useful.

Gathering up all the pages into a neat stack, Pitch pulled the roll top back down carefully and quietly made his way back towards the front of the library peeking around the corner carefully to make sure no one was around to see him with the pages before he swung back by the desk to grab the books North had originally given him stuffing the pages in between them and scurrying back to his room. A thrill of excitement went through Pitch thinking he’d found something here he otherwise wouldn’t have had access to before. To be a being as old as Pitch and have the prospect of truly learning something new that he found of interest was a rare occurrence, and the added fact that it came from a locked desk meant it was forbidden fruit which only served to make the prize that much more enticing.

Pitch would of course have to tend to the reindeer before he had the opportunity to even begin looking over the pages, and as much as Pitch enjoyed spending time with the reindeer, today he wished he didn’t have to. No matter; he’d rush through his chores and hurry back to his room he thought.

Finally after making his way down the many hallways that led from the library, Pitch had made it back to his room and started looking about for a place to stash the pages away. It wouldn’t do to have North find them and most likely take them away from him especially after he’d worked so hard to find them in the first place! Searching about, Pitch finally found the perfect spot. There was a layer of wood placed on the back of the dresser’s mirror, and Pitch found he could jimmy the backing off to which he lined the many pages and sealed it back once again. He cringed slightly as he did so, mentally seeing North’s disapproving glare for treating the pages so recklessly. Not that it mattered as the man was never going to find out he had the pages in the first place Pitch reassured himself.
Giving the back of the mirror a thorough once over, Pitch was satisfied that there looked to be no tampering and no sign of any of the pages sticking out. Smiling Pitch made his way to the reindeer stalls rushing about as quickly as he could to finish all the necessary work, and much to the disappointment of the reindeer, Pitch cut their roaming time in half only brushing them for as long as it took for them to get done eating and drinking. He was too excited to get back to his new discovery and figured they could get the express treatment for one day. He made a silent promise to the reindeer that he’d make it up to them tomorrow.

Having finally loaded the last reindeer back in its stall, Pitch strode back towards his room wearing a cocky smile. He felt he’d finally managed to get a small win here at the Pole. As much as had been taken from him, he was finally able to take something back.
It was still quite early in the morning, and some of the yeti and elves hadn’t even begun their day. Pitch realized as one of the many annoying coo-coo clocks rang out the time as 8AM. Still, Pitch was careful being sure to avoid notice as he made it back down the back hallway to his room door. He paused looking about carefully before noting the coast was clear and opened his door with a sigh of relief.

“Hey, Pitch!” Jack Frost called out as Pitch entered the room. He was seated on the side of Pitch’s bed, playfully swinging his feet.

Pitch was taken aback to see the winter sprite in his room especially this early in the day. He regarded him not unlike one would stumbling upon a roach in their food, “What? What are you doing in my room?”

“Yeah, sorry for coming in uninvited,” Jack said. “I just wanted to let you know that I’m interested in helping you train the reindeer for riding. And I wanted to know when you were planning on doing it.”

Pitch blinked surprised, “Really? Well, um… maybe later. I... I just got a few books from North’s library that I was wanting to read.” Pitch pointed to the books on the nightstand as if he’d needed proof. The prospect of Jack helping him train the reindeer would be advantageous to controlling and guiding the beasts. If Jack had come at most any other time, Pitch would have been amused and welcomed the help if just to see Jack fail at the task. But there was no way he could study the texts he had hidden in the mirror with Jack here, there was little doubt the boy would likely run and tell North the first wind he got of it. No, he had to get rid of him for certain.

Jack looked from the books to Pitch. He gave a slight shrug.

“Okay by me. When do you want to train the reindeer? I’ll meet you in the stables.”

Pitch thought about it, he would probably be studying the texts for quite a while before he was able to do anything with them, but if he avoided the guardians too long it might cause suspicion. “How about tomorrow, you can come by to help take care of the reindeer to get them to trust you, and then we’ll see where it goes from there,” Pitch smiled. This was going to be entertaining. Pitch could use the boy to get through the hard parts of riding the beast since Jack could fly and could easily evade falling and in turn getting trampled which Pitch was a bit nervous about now with having his powers diminished as they were. It left him entirely too vulnerable for his liking.

Jack shrugged again. “O-kay. Those must be some books. I never thought I’d see anything drag you away from the deer.”

“It’s been a really long time since I’ve read a good book; if you weren’t illiterate, you might understand,” Pitch scoffed annoyed the boy was questioning his decisions.

"Who says I'm illiterate?” Jack lifted an eyebrow.

Pitch shrugged stating offhandedly, “I just assumed. You don’t seem overly educated.”
Jack smirked. “You’d be surprised at what all I know. Some of us actually hang around humans.”

“Yes, well that doesn’t necessarily say anything good in your defense,” Pitch derided. Knowing Jack was trying to make a point about humanity struck a nerve in Pitch since unlike Jack, he’d couldn’t remember the last time he held belief in any child for longer than a fleeting moment, “Have you ever thought maybe you depend on them too much Jack? I mean, what have they ever really done for you? Oh wait, I forgot, you got to be believed in… for a while anyway. How’s that going these days Jack? Isn’t your friend Jaime almost in the grave by now? Does he still see you? Or did he forget you when the memory faded?”

“No, he didn’t forget me.” Jack drew a leg up to his chest, choosing his words carefully. “As a matter of fact, a lot of people believe in me now. I provide fun.” he looked Pitch up and down. "Maybe you need to find your center. Surely you have one besides fear."

Pitch narrowed his eyes at Jack his frown deepening at hearing the boy still had believers even now after sixty some odd years since they’d had their battle. He’d figured by now, the boy’s small meager following would have died away to nothing. Once children grew up, they tended to stop believing, and since Jack wasn’t like the other guardians that bribed the little brats, he had to wonder what he was doing to keep them believing, “Pfft. I don’t buy it. How would you maintain a following? Do your fellow guardians bribe them to believe in you with little gifts like they bribe them to believe in themselves? And this whole talk of centers you keep bringing up, if mine isn’t fear, than what would it be? I’m the nightmare king, I bring fear, that’s what I do. I don’t apologize for it. I won’t.” Pitch was becoming passionate now as he leaned in closer to Jack, “You and your fellow guardians don’t understand that underlying all fear is a story of caution and awareness. One can’t be happy and flippant their whole life Jack! Trust me, I know! Sooner or later you learn what it is to have everything you hold dear taken from you, and you’ll realize you’re all alone in the world! You learn to cope with it and let that fear show you what to avoid to keep you safe, so you can stop hurting and move away from the things that continue to bring you pain!” Pitch was breathing hard now, and his eyes widened slightly realizing he’d went on a bit of a tangent. He straightened and backed away from Jack now looking a bit uneasy with the fact he’d let too much of his emotions seep into the conversation. It was one of the downfalls of never being around anyone else; it left no reason to hold back, so Pitch didn’t. Lately he was beginning to regret it more and more as these guardians seemed more than capable of digging these feelings out of him. It’d be much easier to just bottle them up and bury them.

Jack remained quiet, pursing his lips and nodding. "Pitch, I am alone. My family, everything I once held dear, died a long time ago. The Guardians are the only family I have now. But I’ve never let that stop me from enjoying life and having fun. Sooner or later you have to let the pain go and move on. If you don’t, it’ll destroy you. In case you haven’t noticed, the Guardians are trying their hardest to make you a part of this family so you don’t have to be alone anymore. The only one that's stopping it from happening is you. You're holding yourself back." Jack jumped off the bed and walked to the door. Stopping, he looked back at Pitch. "By the way, the Guardians don’t bribe kids. They work to bring them joy and wonder, just as I work to bring them fun. We work to make their lives a little more magical. But then again, you wouldn't know anything about that." Jack turned and left the room.

Pitch watched Jack go, a small pout forming on his face. He knew Jack had suffered; his suffering was one of the things that Pitch had related to, but then Jack became a guardian, and all bets were off. Pitch had been jealous of him; it was part of the reason he lashed out at Frost so readily.

Jack’s words sat with Pitch now as he reclined back on the bed. Could it be true? Was he holding himself back? No. They didn't really want him here, Pitch convinced himself. How could they? He was everything they stood against after all. The truth that Pitch refused to admit to himself was that
what he was really afraid most of was rejection. It was easier to deny a family than it was to have one and lose it all over again. He'd had that pain once, and it had scorned him so badly that he'd let the fearlings bury it. He wasn't sure if he could handle that level of emptiness again especially now when he'd already lost so much. The guardians were eternal like himself, if he did accept them, and he disappointed them, where would that leave him? They'd throw him away, and he'd be more alone than ever. What was worse is that he would have to continue to face them throughout the entirety of their existence, so he'd never be able to hide from it or them. That would be too much to contend with, so Pitch continued to lie to himself keeping up the walls that he worked so hard to build.

What Pitch didn't realize was that his resolve had been shaken the first day that the guardians had taken him in. Little bit by little bit those walls he'd so meticulously built were beginning to crumble even against the nightmare king's best efforts. He did want a family, and subconsciously he was starting to unravel to the concept that he might actually be able to have one.

Pitch shook his head coming out of his own reverie. Glancing at his door now, he worried about further intrusion. Toothiana would knock, but obviously Jack did not, and North was in the air as to whether he would knock or not. Pitch was sure he would, but he was unsure after the initial knock how long the man could be held at bay on the other side of the door.

Considering this fact, Pitch decided that he would only take out one page from behind the mirror to decipher at a time as it would be far easier to hide one page within one of the books he'd borrowed than trying to hide several.

So it was that Pitch began the arduous task of trying to comprehend the dead language. He poured over just the one page for hours wishing he'd been a better study at this sort of thing. That was one of the perks of a few lifetimes of being utterly alone, one grew quite bored and found ways to occupy their time. The problem was that it had been so long since he'd learned and read the language, Pitch barely remembered any of the phonetics of it. How was he supposed to decipher it, if he couldn't fully understand it? He knew he'd get it eventually as over the four hours Pitch had spent so far on studying the page, it revealed enough for him to know this particular spell was a minor cleaning spell of sorts for polishing, washing, or scrubbing an object or mending of small holes in clothing. That could be a helpful spell Pitch thought. Who needs elves to do your chores for you when you have magic?

Washing the reindeer was Pitch's least favorite chore when it came to caring for them, and the thought of using this spell brought a wide grin to his face; he'd finish the task in half the time with very little effort on his part. This fact fueled his studies on as he continued fervently to work out the words to what he felt was well enough to practice.

Pitch was surprised when he'd looked up at the clock on the wall to see that almost the entirety of the day was gone now. He'd been in his room for almost nine hours undisturbed. He folded the page in half now sliding it in between the pages of his A Christmas Carol book feeling quite mentally exhausted now from the past day and a half’s efforts as he laid the book on the night stand and curled up in his sheets to let himself get some much needed rest.

Pitch barreled across the sky on the back of a nightmare steed over a black sea that churned a tumultuous tide. This was freeing at first until Pitch realized that as he tried to get his bearings, in all directions there was no land to be seen. As far as could be seen there was nothing but an angry ocean that wreathed as if it were in the bout of a hurricane storm.

This was the first prick of uncertainty Pitch felt as he pulled back on the reigns now whipping his head about taking in the scene fully as he tried to remember how he’d gotten here and why he would be here to begin with. The nightmare released a wicked eerie sound that sounded like a tortured
scream instead of a neigh; this however didn’t bother Pitch as it suited him to have his beasts call out in a symphony of horror, but what did bother him was that the beast seemed spooked and bucked nervously now. Looking down to the waves beneath, Pitch watched as the surf began to roll at a greater velocity reaching toward the mare and its rider.

Pitch spurred the beast upward, and for a moment they ascended only to falter suddenly unable to gain altitude. The waves thrashed them for their efforts, and the nightmare sand that held the mare together began to melt under the breaks of water. It whinnied sensing its own demise and jetted as fast as it could in the current direction it was facing racing to who knew where. Pitch held on tightly worried himself as the swells of water ate away at the beast with every wave that crested towards them. Finally, the mare could run no more as its legs disintegrated, and it gave one last defeated wail as it lost cohesion entirely leaving Pitch to tumble head first into one of the rising waves.

His senses blurred as the water collapsed on him in hard slaps, and he sputtered as if he had to actually breathe. The torrent pulled him further down into the inky blackness until there was nothing. No light. No sound other than his own panicked chocked scream that bubbled out of his lungs. He was stuck in a stasis of sorts where the only thing he did feel was that he was continuously sinking further and further down to an endlessness that he couldn’t fully comprehend other than the feeling that there was no escaping it. This of course made him struggle violently against this fate until realizing that there was no changing it as his limbs finally gave up their fight and his panic coalesced into despair.

It was then that Pitch saw a sparkle of light in the far distance, then another and another. They dotted the unlit canvas now growing closer at an accelerated rate. Golden dolphins darted towards him, and Pitch just watched them as a spark of hope crept into his heart. They came to him streaking across the blackness and leaving trails of light in their wake.

Pitch was terrified they would pass right by him and leave him to his fate which would have been more damning then to have never seen them at all, but as Pitch reached out with the last of his strength, he felt the spongy texture of the dolphin’s dorsal fin, and he hung on for dear life. The dolphin sped upward at an electrifying rate, and as they reached the surface, the sky was alight with a multitude of stars that shone brightly. The landscape was shifting and shaping into something beautiful as mountains erupted from the depths of the sea creating an alcove to an island that the dolphins led Pitch to. Pitch couldn’t help but let out a strangled cry of relief as he climbed and stumbled lamely onto the beach collapsing to roll over and stare up at the sky now. It was not unlike what he’d remembered seeing so long ago in a time before he was the nightmare king. A time when this beauty reigned, and to look at its magnificence now left Pitch with a pang of sadness. He didn’t deserve to see this since he’d been largely the reason it no longer existed now, but Sandy deigned to save him from the torture he deserved to give him something he didn’t.

Pitch sighed, and Sandy seeing Pitch had finally leveled from the nightmare he’d been engrossed in moved his hand from Pitch’s forehead to slide down his cheek.

Reflexively Pitch nuzzled his cheek into Sandy’s hand’s caress. What the man craved in waking and would not allow himself sought it out desperately now subconsciously.

Sandy gave him a sad smile brushing his hand tenderly across his cheek to gently brush the wild strands of hair back behind his ear.

This seemed to soothe Pitch as he sucked in a deep contented breath finally stilling.

Sandy had come to spend time with him as the guardians had discussed, but Pitch had been sleeping when Sandy had arrived and as par usual, he had been having a nightmare. It was a wonder Pitch ever slept on his own accord knowing what awaited him on the other side, but Sandy supposed he
was likely desensitized to it by now to a certain extent. As much as one could be to having night terrors on a regular basis. It still left Sandman feeling unhappy that he nor any of the other guardians could ever help Pitch to not have to suffer them in the first place. The only thing Sandy could really do was damage control, but it was better than nothing at all Sandy contented himself with, and that would have to do. Sandy stayed for a while longer before finally leaving Pitch sleeping soundly.

Pitch woke hours later blinking slowly awake. His mind still imprinted with the images of starscapes. He lay there now just thinking about the dream and enjoying the allure that it left in his mind to return there. If only he could he thought absently. His eyes drifted to the clock; it was close to midnight now. Of course his eyes then fell on the mirror, and a niggling guilt started to formulate in the pit of his stomach. Pitch didn’t like this feeling; he wasn’t used to feeling it. He wanted to tell himself that he wasn’t doing anything wrong. He planned to return the pages, he didn’t steal them because he had all intentions to return them …just, not right now. The more he thought about it though, the unhappier the situation made him until he had an idea. He’d just record the pages onto his own paper to study at his convenience, and then he could sneak the pages back into the library. That was a win-win Pitch thought. He’d have the pages, and the originals would be back where they belonged. This idea satisfied him, and he rose out of bed now deciding to go search for some parchment and a pen.

The hallways were quiet as they normally were around this time of night, so Pitch glided confidently towards North’s office. He was bound to be asleep by now, and Pitch knew there had to be plenty of supplies he could use to record the pages there. Approaching his office though, Pitch froze at the door a slight chill moving up his spine as he reached for the knob. The office was dark, so he doubted North was in it, but this also felt like it might be wrong to trespass into North’s private sanctuary without the big man being present. He stood there for long moments before steeling himself that he wasn’t doing anything wrong, and in fact he was trying to right a wrong that he’d already done. It’s not like North would mind if he grabbed some paper, an ink well, and a quill right?

Pitch cracked the door open peering around the corner seeing that there was in fact no one in the office as he had suspected. Still, Pitch swallowed down the lump in his throat that had formed as he took a tentative step into the way too silent office. His heart was skipping beats now as Pitch’s eyes darted around quickly looking for what he had been seeking. The ink well and quill was easy enough to find on North’s desktop, but Pitch wasn’t too sure where North kept his parchment and had to rummage about in his drawers looking for it until he found a stack. He had twelve spell pages, so Pitch grabbed fifteen pages in case he needed to redo any of the pages. Closing the drawer, Pitch breathed out a sigh of relief heading towards the door. Pitch was glad he’d finally acquired what he’d needed and could now leave North’s office post haste.

Heavy footsteps sounded just outside, and the door to the office suddenly creaked open.

Pitch was almost to the door and froze in mid step wondering if he should hide. Thinking that would likely look very bad, and most definitely guilty, he resisted the urge. He worked to look nonchalant now assuming the person coming through the door would be North being it was his office. Pitch couldn’t help clutching the papers to his chest a little bit too tightly in his nervousness. He hated being caught in North’s office like this regardless if what he was grabbing was innocent enough; he still felt guilty for what he’d already done.

North stepped through the doorway, flipping the light on as he entered. He paused when his eyes landed on Pitch. The two locked eyes for a few seconds, then North’s stare fell to the items Pitch was holding.

“Why are you in my office, Pitch?” North finally asked as he ended the sentence with a large yawn. He knew the answer to the question was in Pitch’s hands, but he wanted to hear the answer coming
“Well, I… I was just looking… for this,” Pitch proffered the items out weakly, “I… I wanted to do a little writing, and I didn’t know anywhere else to get supplies. I didn’t think you’d mind, and it being so late, I didn’t want to disturb you,” Pitch stood stiffly now only glancing at North doing his best to avoid eye contact.

North lifted an eyebrow. He was too tired to argue with the man, so he nodded and waved Pitch out, "Fine, fine," he said, another yawn working its way out. "Just go," He lumbered over to his desk chair and heavily sat down.

Pitch wasted no time arguing with North or prompting any further questioning as he scurried out the door and down the hall back to his room. His heart was hammering in his chest from such a close call, but he had successfully managed to get what he came for!

Feeling quite elated, Pitch was relived as he closed his bedroom door sliding down the door to sit on the floor to let his mind stop reeling from the close call. Once he had collected himself, Pitch got to work on the pages recording them as carefully and quickly as he possibly could. It still took him almost four hours to complete the 12 pages, and once he’d finally completed them, he let out a triumphant laugh. Yes, he was quite proud of himself! Once the pages were dry, Pitch carefully placed his newly made pages behind the mirror for safe keeping and gathered up North’s pages to bring back to the library.

It was still the wee hours of the morning as Pitch peeked warily out the crack in his door and made his way into the hall to head in the direction of the library. The sooner he returned these pages the better! He managed to make it the library undetected, and even made his way back to the roll top desk. Listening intently and not hearing anyone coming, Pitch quickly rolled the top up and tossed the pages back into the desk breathing out a sigh of relief as he rolled the top back down.

Pitch made his way back down the corridors from the library strolling confidently now that any incriminating evidence was far away and back where it belonged… except the page he’d left folded in half within the A Christmas Carol book! He slapped his forehead; in his haste to get the pages copied and replaced, Pitch had forgotten to retrieve the original page he’d studied. No matter he thought; one page would be quite simple to hide. The sun was starting to rise, and instead of returning to his room, Pitch made his way to the reindeer stables. Jack would be coming soon, and Pitch was more than a little interested in seeing how the boy and the deer would react.
On Prancer, on Vixen!

Chapter Sixteen

On Prancer, on Vixen!

Jack Frost arrived at the stables about ten minutes after Pitch. At first he couldn’t find the nightmare king.

“Pitch?” he called. He walked forward, peeking into one of the stalls. “Pitch?”

“Jack!” Pitch came out of the stall pulling Donner with him on a tether, “Perfect timing!” Pitch practically sung. He sauntered out of the stable with pep in his step in a very good mood after having accomplished so much. He wore a broad smile now as he tossed the rope to Jack, “Catch!”

Jack caught the rope and led the deer with ease, talking gently to it. Being near the animal reminded him of his earlier days as Jack Frost when he spent most of his time in the woods. Back then, his only friends and companions had been the forest animals, since they were the only ones that could see him.

Pitch strode next to Jack now just watching the boy interact with the reindeer before pulling out a sugar cube and popping it into Jack’s hand getting an immediate reaction from Donner as the reindeer’s eyes lit up, and it trundled forward quickly to retrieve the sugar cube. Pitch just laughed patting the deer’s face as Donner slobbered all over Jack’s hand.

Jack laughed; scratching Donner behind the ears. “You know, I’m really going to enjoy this. It’s been awhile since I last rode a deer.”

Pitch’s eyebrow rose, “Oh? So you’ve ridden before have you? This ought to be interesting indeed.” Helping guide Jack and Donner over to the tethering pole, Pitch helped Jack secure the deer before giving a few sugar cubes to the beast himself and placing another couple in Jack’s hand closing it before Donner caught on what he’d done. He peered into Jack’s eyes a hint of genuine glee there as he whispered, “Just one at a time until I get back… and don’t tell North, he doesn’t want me feeding them too many, but they really do love those cubes, and North has more than he needs to eat anyway.” Pitch gave a small laugh and patted Jack on the back, “I’ll go get the feed.” Pitch turned away then and strode off towards the stable.

“Of course I’ve ridden before.” Jack mumbled to himself after Pitch left. Jack looked in the direction Pitch had disappeared, then back at Donner. He didn’t need sugar cubes to train a deer for riding. Being a sprite of nature, Jack knew there were simple whistles and commands you could use to tame deer. He wanted to tell Pitch he was going about it the hard way, but he knew by now that you couldn’t tell Pitch anything. There was a part of Jack that wanted to show off his knowledge of deer taming, just because he wanted to shove it in Pitch’s arrogant face, but he held himself back. These deer were highly important to Pitch, so Jack didn’t want to come off like knew more about it, even though he did. That might anger Pitch and make him retreat even deeper into his shell. He would have to tread carefully.

Pitch came back a few minutes later hefting two buckets, one of grain and the other a sloshing bucket of water. He grunted dropping the buckets in front of the deer, and Donner went to town. “As soon as we get them fed and brushed, we can put them in the pen and try to work with them. Hopefully getting fed and brushed will make them a bit more amiable to being ridden,” Pitch remarked.
Jack lifted both eyebrows and nodded like he agreed, then he smirked as he watched Pitch.

Pitch was happier today than normal because everything seemed to be going right for him. He had his copied pages to look forward to deciphering, all but the one original page in his book back in the roll top desk where they belonged, and this new project with the reindeer. He had really been looking forward to training to ride them, and Jack coming along for the journey was an added bonus although Pitch was unsure at the moment in what capacity. Jack would either be truly helpful or just comic relief. Either way, Pitch was pleased to have his company even if he’d never let the boy know he’d actually wanted him there.

Pitch grabbed a brush for each of them now handing one to Frost, “This is their favorite part of our exchange... outside of eating. Okay, maybe it’s my favorite part instead,” Pitch smiled at the reindeer warmly as he began methodically brushing down the neck of the beast.

Jack took the brush and began running it down his side of the deer. An awkward silence fell around them as they worked. Jack glanced over at Pitch occasionally, feeling that he needed to say something, but not really knowing what. He felt like he had said enough already.

Pitch didn’t seem to mind the silence getting lost in the work of feeding and grooming the reindeer one by one and loading them into the pen to roam. Blitzen was the last of the reindeer that they tended to, and as they set him in with the others to graze and mill about, Pitch leaned against the fence to watch them a moment before turning a satisfied smile on Jack, “I think they like you. Now then are you ready to see how much they really like you?” There was a jovial tinge to Pitch’s voice now as he was quite eager to begin the training process.

Smirking, Jack waved toward the reindeer. “You first,”

Pitch lifted a brow thinking that Jack would have wanted to go first, but he only shrugged indifference, “Suit yourself.” Pitch pushed off of the fence line and went into the gate moving towards Prancer. Prancer had shown to be the most docile of the reindeer from what Pitch could see from the time he’d spent among the reindeer, which admittedly wasn’t long enough to know for sure.

Prancer was lazily munching away along the fence line, and Pitch approached him cautiously as he bent to take the reins that had been fastened on him much earlier. Taking his time now, Pitch spoke to the beast softly as he caressed its cheek. Prancer twitched his ear lifting his head as if truly listening to Pitch.

Grabbing a sugar cube from his robe, Pitch gave one to Prancer who immediately turned his attention to Pitch fully interested in the Nightmare Lord and the little cubes he often offered. Pitch smiled giving a soft chuckle as he whispered, “Now then, how’s about we give a little to get a little eh?”

Pitch climbed to straddle the fence now, and Prancer followed readily to his side. Pitch gave the reindeer another sugar cube as he leaned his arm out at an angle to have Prancer line himself up next to him now. The reindeer complied, and Pitch carefully placed his leg over the beast now to sit on Prancer’s back. The reindeer didn’t seem bothered by the action, and Pitch quickly gave it another sugar cube as a reward. He turned an elated grin to Jack now feeling pretty good that Prancer seemed okay with him on his back.

Now was the moment of truth, Pitch carefully pulled the reins around in front of him so as not to startle Prancer and gently gave a pull to one side of the rein to guide the reindeer back into the field. Prancer seemed willing enough, and when he’d accepted the command, Pitch was sure to reward him with another cube. As Prancer lazily made his way towards the field with the Nightmare King sitting on his back, Pitch couldn’t help but laugh joyfully feeling pretty good about the current progress. He beamed proudly turning to Jack, “Alright; your turn now.”
“Kids’ stuff,” Jack mumbled, flying up and over the fence to land on the other side. “The idiot hasn’t even gotten up in the air yet.”

Jack approached the nearest deer, Vixen, while making low whistles and clicks with his tongue. He ran a hand over her back and up her neck to scratch at the back of her ears. “That a girl,” he cooed. Vixen moved restlessly and he quickly uttered a few soft sounds in her ear to make her relax. He carefully reached out and unlatched the bridle and reins, letting them fall to the ground. “We won’t need that, will we?” he smiled. Slowly he floated up, put a leg over the deer’s back, and sat down gently. Vixen snorted and took a few steps backward. All the time Jack talked softly to her and made whistles and unexplainable noises, stroking the neck of the deer. He grabbed hold of her antlers and urged her forward, toward Pitch. He gave a nudge to her sides with his feet to make her gallop forward and up behind Pitch, then finally past him. Jack let out a holler, enjoying the rush that brought back good memories of his days in the forest.

Pitch was impressed and somewhat miffed that the boy seemed capable enough even without bribing the animal. Pitch made a click of his own giving Prancer a nudge with his heels to spur the reindeer on towards Jack and Vixen. Prancer seemed agreeable enough lifting his head and trotting towards the other rider. Pitch tested his control of the beast giving it another small kick to send it trotting at a faster pace as he sidled up to Jack and pulled back on the reigns attempting to stop Prancer. Prancer trotted past Jack, and Pitch yelled out, “Woah there! Woah Prancer!” The deer finally complied and even backed up a few steps.

Pitch let out a vivacious laugh patting the reindeer on the neck affectionately as he leaned down to give Prancer another cube. Turning his head, Pitch looked excitedly back at Jack like a kid in a candy store, “Excellent! You’re doing great Jack! Do you want to see how they’ll take to a gallop?”

Jack gently pulled back on Vixen’s antlers and she came to a stop beside Pitch. “I thought I was doing a gallop.”

Smirking Pitch gave Jack a side long glance teasing him, “Oh, you called that little jaunt a gallop?” As if needing to demonstrate what a true gallop was Pitch decided to test his control over Prancer as he gave him a swift kick to the side. Prancer bucked upward and jetted off as Pitch whooped holding on tightly glancing back at Jack, “Come on Jack! Show me what you got boy!”

Jack had never ridden any flying reindeer, but he had no problem urging Vixen forward and then upward with a few whispered noises in her ear. He held on to her antlers to steady himself.

“I have to admit that you’ve been doing a pretty good job.” He shouted to Pitch. “I was half expecting the deer to buck you off the first time you got on him, knowing how it acted when you attempted to escape.”

Mention of his prior escape caused Pitch to flush a bit especially considering the horrible affair that followed the fall. Definitely not a shining moment Pitch thought as he averted his eyes from Jack momentarily not wanting him to see his embarrassment, “Well, uh, yes. I tried to take the deer out of the Pole, and it spooked the beast… lack of familiarity not lack of riding skills,” Pitch affirmed.

Prancer seeing Vixen climbing into the air then followed suit, and for a split second, a thrill of fear went through the Nightmare Lord as he gasped and gripped the reigns tightly hunkering close to the beast to have the best grip as he quickly remembered all too well the pain of the fall Jack had just mentioned. He recovered quickly enough though not wanting to seem afraid in front of Jack as he straightened and spurred the reindeer to climb higher and faster.

“Ahh, yes, I see.” Jack smirked. “You know, Pitch, I’m glad I decided to do this. I haven’t ridden a deer in so long. I’d almost forgotten how invigorating it is.”
“It is; isn’t it!” Pitch replied cheerfully. He was grinning so wide that his smile threatened to split his face. This was fun, and enjoying it with Jack by his side gave Pitch a feeling of comradery. He gave Jack a mischievous look now, “Since you seem to be so experienced Jack, how’s about a race?”

“You’re on, old man!” Jack replied.

Pitch laughed heartily giving the reindeer a kick racing off without further warning as Pitch yelled out, “Eat my dust Frost!”

Jack urged Vixen forward, picking up speed as he tried catching up to Pitch, “What’s the finish line?” he yelled when Pitch was within earshot.

Pitch laughed, “I hadn’t gotten that far!” He took a moment to survey the area as they barreled along. He honestly didn’t care as long as they were running. This was freeing in so many ways to Pitch, and for a moment he closed his eyes and just got lost in the feel of the wind whipping through his hair and across his face. Regaining focus finally, Pitch yelled and pointed, “To the glacier wall and back to the front gate!” Of course having given the destination, Pitch spurred Prancer on to take the lead because he really did want to win.

Jack smirked as he kept the pace he was currently doing. The race needed more obstacles, he thought. Turning around, he looked behind him at the other reindeer. He emitted a shrill whistle through his teeth. The deer immediately lifted their heads to look toward him. He let out a different pitch whistle and the deer took off running, catching up with and shooting past Jack to join Pitch in a matter of a few minutes. They darted around the nightmare king, zigzagging in front of him to block his path. Jack laughed at the scene as he spurred Vixen forward.

Prancer reared up and jetted forward to join the reindeer that had passed them, and Pitch had to brace himself so as not to be bucked off. He glared at Jack before prompting Prancer with a kick to the side to get back on course as he shouted back to the fast approaching Jack, “Oh you cheeky cheating brat! Well, two can play at that!” Pitch let out an impish chuckle as he dug in his robe pulling out a handful of sugar cubes and flinging them in an arch behind him. Of course the deer that saw the cubes including Vixen turned and darted in the direction of the falling cubes eager to claim their prizes.

Jack jumped off Vixen as she veered away to get at the sugar cubes and gently hopped from deer to deer until he came to Comet. He whistled and made a weird noise in the animal’s ear, somehow persuading him to keep flying forward. Jack laughed, “You didn’t say anything about no cheating.” He grinned.

Pitch reaching the glacier pulled roughly on Prancer’s reigns, and the reindeer bounded off the wall’s surface turning in an arch to race back towards Jack. “I must say that you’ve surprised me Jack. Are you that afraid of losing to me?” Pitch hooted giving Jack a determined stare as he sprinted right at Jack in an effort to spook Comet causing the other reindeer to reflexively veer upward to avoid a collision as Pitch and Prancer tore past them.

“I’m not afraid of losing, Pitch.” Jack shouted as he quickly regained control of his deer, urging the animal forward. When they got to the wall, Jack turned Comet around to head back the other direction. He continued to urge the deer forward, fast closing in on Pitch. “You forget that I’m a trickster.” Jack shouted when Pitch came into listening range again. “It’s within my nature to make any challenge interesting.” He grinned.

Pitch smiled back at Jack, “Interesting… yes, I knew there was a reason I liked you Frost.” Having spent much time riding his nightmares, Pitch worked to guide Prancer under the current pushing the beast hard to keep the lead. Perhaps a bit too hard he grasped as the reindeer started to veer off
course deciding it no longer wished to be controlled. Pitch realizing he no longer had control wrestled to maintain his hold as he gripped Prancer’s neck tightly pulling desperately on the reigns as he screamed out, “Whoa! Prancer! Prancer stop!” The reindeer paid him no heed now though racing on faster than it ever had. Pitch closed his eyes holding on for dear life now not wanting to see how this ride was likely to end.

Jack saw that Pitch was in trouble, but he thought it had to be some sort of trick to get back at him for what he had done with the deer. It wasn’t until Prancer suddenly bucked hard enough to throw Pitch off him that he realized the seriousness of the situation. Jack quickly flew off Comet and into the air and dove toward Pitch. Faster than the deer could fly, he swooped and caught the nightmare king, setting him safely on his feet on the ground, “Are you okay?” he asked.

Luckily for Jack, Pitch was not unlike the shadowy substance he was imbued with making him light and easy to catch without making the both of them plummet to the ground. Feeling himself lose his grip on Prancer’s reigns, the only thought that ran through Pitch’s mind as he plummeted to the ground was, ‘Oh no. This is going to really hurt!’ All he could physically let out was a shrill scream though as the ground rushed up at him. He’d closed his eyes bracing himself for impact when he felt his body lurch up suddenly. He opened his eyes at the sensation taking in the scene and processing what happened as Jack dropped him gently on the ground.

Pitch spun around panting hard from the exhilaration to face Jack his eyes wide still registering what had happened before he howled grabbing Jack by the elbows and spinning him around in his excitement, “That was amazing!” Realizing he was twirling the boy about like a dancing partner, Pitch blushed letting the boy go and straightened, “Um, thank you; that could have been quite unpleasant if you hadn’t caught me there.” Looking about nervously now to make sure none of the other guardians had seen what had transpired Pitch added, “Uh, do you think we can keep that last bit between us?” The last thing Pitch wanted was any of the other guardians chiding him about safety or worse telling him it was too dangerous to ride the beasts yet.

Jack stepped away from Pitch, not liking the feel of the nightmare king touching him, remembering what he had done to Sandy, “You’re welcome,” Jack smirked. “And you don’t have to worry. Your secret is safe with me.”

Sensing the boy withdrawing from his touch, Pitch also withdrew feeling self-conscious that he’d pushed their boundaries. He nodded looking down feeling awkward now from the exchange, “Thanks… uh, I need to round the reindeer up and get them put back in their stalls.” He glanced at Jack with a slight uncertainty before retreating to grab the nearest reindeer to them, Dasher, by the reins to pull him back towards the stables.

Jack watched Pitch, wondering if he’d made a mistake. He couldn’t help it, though. It had been a reflex. Ever since they brought Pitch to the Pole he’d been careful not to let him get too near, remembering what he had done to Sandy back when they had last battled. He knew Pitch was grounded and somewhat powerless thanks to Sandy, but he was still leery.

Pitch moved quickly gathering each of the reindeer and placing them in their pens without saying another word. He was ready to leave the stables now as his mood had been dampened even though the experience had otherwise been fun. He guessed he couldn’t blame Jack for his reaction. The boy had no reason to trust him. He shouldn’t trust him Pitch reflected, none of them should after everything that had transpired between them. His resolve hardened as he reminded himself, he didn’t belong here. Maybe the spells he’d found of North’s would grant him a way to escape this… whatever this was.

The thought of running though just reminded him that he would be alone again, and considering that
fact made him feel somewhat sad and hesitant. These thoughts of course only served to anger him as he regarded the emotion as a weakness that he needed to quell.

“Hey, Pitch,” Jack called, “I had a really great time today. Maybe we could do it again sometime.”

Feeling as if he should distance himself from Jack, Pitch regarded him coolly, “What, so you can try to show me up by cheating again? If I had the full spectrum of my abilities I assure you that it would have been a much different race.” His anger and hurt tinged his words now as Pitch scowled putting the last reindeer in its stall and slamming the door. Ignoring Frost to the best of his ability now, Pitch worked to hastily put all the supplies away, so he could retreat to his room to get back to work studying the pages.

Jack Frost stared, not really knowing what to say to Pitch’s abrupt change in mood. Sometimes he couldn’t figure the man out.

Pitch didn’t comment further having said all he’d wanted to say as he finished putting up the last of the supplies. He couldn’t help but to glance back at Frost now his anger gone and replaced with something more forlorn and unsure before he turned away heading back towards the compound. Pitch wouldn’t admit that he did really have fun, more fun in fact than he’d had in ages. It was a pure feeling of happiness that hadn’t come at anyone’s expense, and that had been uplifting when he’d needed it most. But now Pitch was full of doubt once more as he considered his place in the world and thinking this had to be a charade he was playing at. He was starting to wonder if he was developing some form of Stockholm syndrome because he actually wanted to stay in their captivity if only to share in these new experiences he kept having with them. These feelings of course had him questioning his sanity.

“Pitch, wait,” Jack shouted after him.

Against his better judgement, Pitch found himself coming to a stop. He didn’t turn to face Jack thinking he should have just kept going, but he couldn’t help being curious to what Jack wanted to say to him.

Jack flew up to Pitch. “That’s it? You’re just going to walk away without me? After all of the fun we just had?”

Pitch blinked looking back now to study Jack with an analytical gaze. Did Frost really have fun with him, or was he just toying with him? “Did you?” He questioned lamely his insecurity on the matter showing through with the slight lift in his intonation.

Jack lifted an eyebrow, not understanding as he studied Pitch. “Well, yeah. I thought both of us were having fun.”

Pitch averted his eyes, “I did. I… I don’t know,” his shoulders slumped a bit in defeat as he wrung his hands. “I know you still fear me. One thing Sandy couldn’t take from me is my intuition in that way, and for once in this existence, it was the last thing I wanted to see coming from you.” Pitch’s eyes lifted to look at Jack now imploringly, “I… I know it probably doesn’t mean much coming from me, but for what it’s worth, I’m sorry… I’ve learned to regret a lot these past few days…”

“I’m sorry, too,” said Jack. “I… didn’t mean anything by what I did back there. It was just… a reflex. I’ve never liked for people to touch me.” He sighed. “It’s going to take time, Pitch. This whole process is going to take time. But the fact is we were having fun back there, and I really would like to do it again. I’m sorry about the cheating.” He shrugged. “It’s just in my nature. I can’t help it. I really didn’t think you would mind, since it was all in fun and we were making up the rules as we went.”
Pitch’s smile returned as he gave a small chuckle, “I do want to do it again. I didn’t really mind the cheating either… I think it made the whole thing a little more fun. I guess I was just angry with myself that I still evoked those feelings in you when I touched you.” He sighed, “It’s a reminder of everything I’ve done, and what I can’t take back. I know it’s going to take time… try to be patient with me as well. I… sometimes I don’t know how to take all of this, and before I realize it, I’ve messed everything up again.” Pitch grimaced as he said this feeling a bit ashamed that he had gotten so moody with Frost.

Jack snorted. “I think we all feel like that sometimes. And if it makes you feel any better, I would have reacted the same if North had hugged me. It’s not just you… it’s… everyone. I’m not the touchy type.”

Pitch’s smile broadened thinking of North’s hug from the day before, “It does make me feel better actually, although a North hug is pretty formidable to fight against,” Pitch blushed realizing he’d admitted getting hugged by the Cossack and quickly added, “But don’t ever mention that I said that… ever!”

Jack smirked amusingly. “Pffft, you haven’t felt his bear hugs. You’re lucky if you get out of one without any broken bones.”

Pitch’s smile softened liking the thought of seeing Jack in a North bear hug, “I imagine so. The man is a giant.” Pitch looked off back at the stables going silent for a moment as he contemplated about the conversation Jack and he had shared in Antarctica. He turned back to Jack now regarding him curiously, “Tell me Jack, when you became a guardian, did it make you feel like you belonged here? Or did that come later?”

Jack’s eyes suddenly looked down as he gave a light shrug. “I don’t really belong anywhere, even as a Guardian. I don’t stay here at the Pole all the time. Just sometimes. I’m a free spirit, a loner… I’m just here, there, anywhere. But it does bring a certain comfort and security knowing that I have friends and family here whenever I need them.”

Pitch frowned, “So after all this time, you still feel like you’re on the outside looking in...” He said it more as a sad statement than a question.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. Not really. I do feel like I belong here to a certain extent, I guess. Like I said, it’s comforting to know I have friends here. But as a free spirit, I’m not going to feel like I belong anywhere specific. I wander too much. My job isn’t like the others’. I belong wherever I can bring fun, which is anywhere. I can’t tie myself down to just one place and feel like I belong there. The Pole is nice to visit on occasion, but I... belong... out there.” He waved his hand to mean the whole world.

Pitch considered Jack’s comment, wondering if that were true for Jack, what did the guardians except for him? Surely not to stay here at the Pole forever. “I want to be out there to,” he stated longingly, “How long do you think North is going to keep me here like this? Surely he can’t expect me to just stay here locked away without going anywhere. I’ll go stir crazy. Maybe you can talk to him about going out with you sometime?” Pitch seemed hopeful, but deep down he knew that his chances were likely slim. It was worth a try though.

“Pitch,” Jack sighed, trying to find the right words, “You can’t seem to understand the severity of the situation, even after we’ve explained it to you multiple times. You did some horrible things the last time we encountered each other. You’re currently paying for those crimes. North will let you go once you’ve finished paying for them. I can’t say how long or short that will be, because it isn’t up to me to decide. You’re going to have to work hard and show us that you can be trustworthy enough to be let loose on your own. I’m sorry to say, but... you’ve got evil living inside you. From what you’ve
told us, you can’t separate yourself from it. One thing you need to work on is getting that part of
yourself under control. Only you can do that.” Jack gave a shrug. Who knows? Maybe in time you’ll
be allowed to go out with me.”

Pitch scowled knowing what Jack was saying was true, but the truth was still a bitter pill to swallow,
“I know you’re not going to let me leave here anytime soon… I was thinking in the future with more
of just an outing every now and then... a taste of freedom. I mean, does it have to always be
punishment with you guardians? How can I begin to prove myself, if I’m not even allowed the
opportunity?”

“Oh... You’ve been given plenty of opportunities.” Jack forced a small smile. “I think North’s
intentions are for you to prove yourself here at the Pole first, and then you move up to the bigger
outings. I don’t claim to be an expert with these things, but I think I understand North’s logic
enough. When you make mistakes or do bad things, you sometimes have to go back to the
beginning. You have to start at the bottom and work your way to the top again. Think of it as
rounds... like in a tournament. You have to get through the first round before you can move on to the
second one. The first round in this case is the Pole.”

This logic served to frustrate Pitch as he was sure if that were the case he’d likely be at the Pole for
an eternity. He seemed to perpetually be on the wrong side of North. At least he’d managed to get
past being spanked on an almost daily basis. Those first few days were humiliating rough, and
thinking on it alone caused Pitch to flush as he looked away responding, “I... I think I’ve been
getting progressively better. I don’t know at what point will be good enough for North though.”

Jack shrugged. “I wouldn’t worry about it. Just be patient and keep on North’s good side, and I’m
sure you’ll get there soon enough.”

“Yeah,” Pitch stated slightly deflated, “Patience. That’s easy to say in your shoes.” Pitch sighed
wishing to change the subject because discussing his continued captivity was depressing him, “So
you’re pretty good with the reindeer I see. What were those strange noises you were making that got
their attention so well?”

“Oh, that,” Jack smiled. “Just something I learned while living out in the woods when I first became
Jack Frost. For a long time, animals were the only ones that could see me. So I had to create some
form of communication.”

Pitch nodded, “Most animals are naturally afraid of me because of the fearlings essence within me,
but with the equine I had a connection to them before becoming who I am now.” He paused a
moment a small smile spreading across his face before he continued, “I used to train horses for the
soldiers when I first joined the military. I… I was pretty good at it, and I preferred it to what
followed.” Pitch seemed strained now as other less pleasant memories came to mind, but he didn’t
elaborate further.

“That’s very interesting,” said Jack.

Pitch blinked, thinking now of racing across battle fields when he’d battled what now roiled within
him. He shook his head not wishing to think on these memories as he looked back to Frost seeming a
bit tired and sad as the recollections leched some of his happiness away, “Do you think North
would let us take the reindeer along the glacier wall? Technically it’s still the Pole isn’t it? And I was
thinking racing down there might present a bit more of a challenge... without flying... since some of
us can’t fly,” Pitch smirked.

“I dunno. It’s something you’d have to ask North.” Jack answered.
Pitch rolled his eyes, “If I ask, the answer will be no…” he turned a mischievous look to Frost, “But if you ask…” his grin widened hoping Frost would catch his drift that he had more pull with the big guy than he did.

“Ooooh, no,” Jack held up his hands. “You aren’t getting me to ask for you. You need to learn to do things for yourself, Pitch. Quit depending on others to do them for you. I’m pretty sure the answer will be no, regardless of which one of us asks.”

Pitch folded his arms pouting angrily now, “I’m not depending on others to do things for me, I just know the probability of a yes is far more likely if you asked the question instead of me.” Pitch looked pleadingly at Frost, “Come on Frost! You won’t even try?”

Jack rolled his eyes and shook his head, not believing Pitch’s logic. Did Pitch really think he was that gullible?

“I’ll go with you, but you are going to ask.” He said, pointing a finger at Pitch. “It was your idea, so you’re asking.”

Pitch’s smile widened as he nodded, “Excellent! As long as you… you know chime in that you think it’s a good idea!” He nudged Jack playfully, “The worst he can say is no right?”

“I’m not going to say anything you tell me to say.” Jack frowned.

Pitch grimaced cutting half lidded eyes at him, “I’m not asking you to say anything other than it’s a good idea Jack. Lighten up. I’m just trying to make this a little more fun for the both of us.”

Jack sighed, walking forward. "Whatever. Come on, let's get this over with."

(Sorry to those waiting on a spanking, the story has been skirting it it would seem! XD)
Jack Frost and Pitch walked to North’s office, only to find that he wasn’t there. The small note taped to the outside of the door informed anyone looking for North that he was helping the yetis with inventory in the storage rooms. So Jack and Pitch made their way there, Jack in the lead since he knew whereabouts the storage rooms were. When they got there, they found the rooms full of yetis and boxes. North was standing on the farthest side of the second room, a clipboard in one hand and a pencil in the other. A box of unused baby doll heads was setting in front of him.

When Jack and Pitch approached, Jack shoved Pitch forward.

Pitch’s eyes widened as he was pushed in front of North, and when the big man turned to face him, he backed up a step all of a sudden feeling awkward and unsure of asking North for anything especially after the last time he and Toothiana had approached him for a similar reason. His mouth worked to speak now as he stared up at the imposing man, “Uh… North! Sorry to bother you; Jack and I were wondering if we could speak to you for a moment?”

“Sixty! HA!” North said after tallying up some figures on his paper. “I knew Clarence was wrong.” he turned to Pitch and Jack, smiling. “Ah, yes, what can I do for you?”

Pitch steepled his hands as he cleared his throat, “Well, as you know, Frost and I have been working with the reindeer. It’s been good, however a bit cramped. Is it possible if we ran them along the glacier wall outside the complex?”

North thought a few minutes, his eyes wandering to Jack and then back to Pitch. He gave a shrug. “I don’t see why not.”

“Really? …I mean great!” Pitch exclaimed looking back to Jack with a triumphant smile.

“On one condition,” North added.

Pitch’s face fell; of course there would be stipulations he thought as he turned back to North, “Oh? What would that be?”

“I want Bunny to go with you.”

Pitch blanched, “Wha-what? Bunny? But he’s not going to want to ride reindeer? What about Toothiana?” At least Toothiana wouldn’t be such a stick in the mud. Pitch hated the idea of Bunnymund coming along; that sounded like no fun at all!

North shook his head. “Tooth is busy. Something about backlog of teeth during times she was staying here.”

“I have to agree with Pitch.” Jack cut in. “I’ll be with him. So why does Bunny need to come along?”

“I have reasons,” North glared at both Pitch and Jack. “Now, are you going to accept my terms or not go at all?”
Pitch folded his arms over his chest a little irate that North was making them have Bunnymund come along, but it was better than not being able to go at all. He grumbled, “Fine. He can come along, although surely he’s going to be disagreeable to the idea as well.” He added under his breath, “We need a nagging babysitter tagging along like a hole in the head.”

Jack Frost huffed, crossing his arms as well. But then he smirked at the idea of Bunny coming along. Bunny might end up being a ‘nagging babysitter’, but he would be fun to poke at.

“When do you wish to do this?” North asked, beginning to count something else in a box near him.

Smirking now, Pitch replied, “Tomorrow afternoon maybe? We’ve already been to the stables today, but after getting the deer taken care of tomorrow would be ideal.” Jack didn’t know it, but Pitch was also thinking along the same lines as him about making poor Bunnymund miserable enough to not want to tag along again.

“Fine,” North nodded, part of his mind still busy counting toy car wheels in the box beside him. “I will talk with Bunny tonight.”

“What? Ya called me all the way out here for that! Ah come on North! What’s wrong with them running the critters in their pens? I swear every time I come over here, Pitch is getting another inch with you. He throws a tantrum at his party two days ago, and now he’s getting to leave the Pole to? Are you going to start taking him for sleigh rides next?” Bunnymund huffed his hands on his hips as he tapped his foot in agitation.

“He is not leaving Pole.” North corrected. “He and Jack just want to take deer for ride in wider area. They just want to have little fun, which I'm not opposed to. It is good sign that we are moving in right direction with Pitch. While I trust Jack to look after him, I still would feel better if someone else went along. Just, you know, in case Pitch becomes too much for Jack to handle." He smiled. "And just between you and me, Jack can still be a bit of a rascal, too.”

Bunnymund fumed, “Aye, ya don’t have ta tell me that!” He growled spinning on his heel, “I’ll come tomorrow afternoon ta do this, but you owe me one North!” Bunny shook his head mumbling as he left about how he managed to let North talk him into this.

Pitch had gone back to his quarters practically skipping with excitement for what awaited him the next afternoon. Oh the fun they were going to have! Well, he and Jack anyway, the rabbit on the other hand was likely going to be a problem. Pitch grinned devilishly, he was sure it wouldn’t be too hard to lose Bunnymund though, and he doubted Frost would interfere with his penchant to cheat from their previous race. Yes, Bunnymund would be given Blitzen the most unruly of the reindeer; the thought had Pitch chuckle since the ornery reindeer would most definitely give the rabbit trouble.

In the meantime, Pitch soaked up the rest of his night practicing annunciation of the words for the first spell he’d been working on. He applied his new knowhow on a rag to try and get it to do the simple task of dusting the furniture in his room, but the rag instead turned into some creepy looking pile of sludge. “Now that’s unfortunate,” Pitch stated in disdain pokng at the glob of goop that the washcloth had become. Taking another rag, Pitch scooped up the mess and brought it to the kitchen to throw it away once he knew it was late enough for the kitchen to be empty. Of course while he was there, he loaded up his robe with as many sugar cubes as he could carry. These reindeer were going to be diabetics by the time Pitch was done with them.

As Pitch moved back down the hallway to his room, he missed the lurch within the trashcan as the sludge that was once the washcloth gurgled and began to slowly devour the trashcan’s contents.

The next morning, Jack Frost opened up the doors to the stable and walked inside. "Pitch, you
Pitch had been busying himself since the early morning hours to finish tending to the reindeer and had left the stables to mill about by the pens since he’d already finished the chores. He cleared his throat seeing the boy had totally missed the fact that the reindeer were already grazing in the field. When Jack turned in his direction, he wore a haughty smirk, “Oh I see how it is, come to get all of the benefits of riding with none of the hard work put into to caring for them.” Pitch’s smile grew though obviously jesting with the boy. He had needed something to occupy his time in the morning, and although he liked the help, the solitude of the act was a form of meditation for Pitch, so he hadn’t really minded doing it alone.

“Hey, this is your job, not mine. North assigned you to it.” Jack said, holding his hands up.

Pitch rolled his eyes, “Semantics. Enough of the pleasantries; are you ready to get your frozen tail handed to you Frost?” Pitch gave the boy a cocky smile as he straightened to stand a bit taller now.”

Bunnymund had seen Jack heading down towards the stables, and he was just now dragging his feet to the scene obviously quite disgruntled for having to be there in the first place, “Alright. I’m here. Let’s get this over with already!”

Jack turned to Bunny. “Are you sure you don’t need a coat or something?”

Bunnymund scowled, “I’ve got a bloomin’ coat already. What I need is less snow and wind! So… uh, you are okay riding those things already?”

Pitch’s smile turned malicious, “Oh yes, they’re all rather tame it seems as long as you stay in the vicinity of the Pole. I’ve already got the reindeer ready to ride,” Pitch motioned over to the pen, “Frost doesn’t prefer reigns, but I thought you might Bunnymund, so I already have Blitzen ready for you.” Pitch had tethered the deer lightly, so if they got moving at an extended pace, the bit might fall out of Blitzen’s mouth. Pitch was interested to see how the rabbit would control the reindeer without the use of reigns! This was going to be quite comical!

Bunnymund’s face softened a bit, “Ya did? Well… uh thanks Pitch. I guess we can go ahead down to the glacier then.” Bunnymund was surprised the man would do anything to make this outing more pleasant for him. Maybe North was right, and he should give Pitch a break.

Jack looked from Bunny to Pitch as he walked over to mount Vixen. He secretly hoped the day would go smoothly, without any upsets. He knew Bunnymund wasn’t fond of Pitch, so he hoped Pitch behaved himself and wouldn’t do anything that would send down the rabbit's wrath on the both of them.

Pitch led Bunnymund over to Blitzen giving the reindeer several sugar cubes quickly to keep it distracted and tame enough for the time being. The last thing Pitch wanted was for the deer to act out before Bunnymund had even mounted him. Pitch was sure to keep Blitzen calm now as Bunnymund surveyed the beast and finally took a giant leap to land on Blitzen’s back.

Seemingly subdued, Blitzen was only interested in the sugar cubes allowing Bunnymund to hop up on the beast without an issue as Pitch took the reins and led them over to Donner who Pitch had determined was the fastest of the reindeer and therefore the one he wished to race with.

Bunnymund quaked doing his best to hang on, “We need to get saddles for these buggers!”

Pitch only smirked at Bunnymund as he led both Donner and Blitzen out of the gate. He used the gate to propel himself on top of Donner still holding the reins of Blitzen as they trotted down the
glacier side to get into the crevice that they had wished to race. Pitch wanted Bunnymund to have a hard time, but he didn’t want him to actually get hurt, so he waited until they were in the alcove of the glacier wall to toss the reins back to the rabbit. “So here we are!” Pitch announced, “Now then, to make things clear… Frost,” Pitch annunciated his name to ensure the boy was listening, “We follow the glacier wall to the front of North’s fortress and under the bridge. Once we make it to the bridge, we turn back, and whomever makes it back to this point is declared the winner. Clear?”

Bunnymund grimaced already shivering from the cold and wholly wishing he wasn’t a part of this adventure, “Got it, let’s hurry up and be done with this, so we can get back to the fireplace!”

Pitch moved Donner into place as he gave a devilish smirk over to Jack and a small chuckle, “No other reindeer on the tracks to manipulate this go around Jack. Cheating is going to be oh so difficult! However do you expect to win this time?”

Jack shrugged. "Win or lose, it doesn't matter to me. Just so long as we're having fun."

Pitch clicked at Blitzen holding out a handful of sugar cubes, and Bunnymund’s mount quickly trundled forward much to the rabbit’s dismay, “Hey! Woah!” Bunnymund’s eyes widened as he held on to the reins stiffly.

It was evident that the rabbit was not fond of the activity and was in no way a threat to winning the race. Pitch chuckled mirthfully at Bunnymund’s discomfort with the beast as it jostled him about. Pitch tossed some cubes to the ground to satisfy Blitzen before giving his own reindeer a few to keep Donner from going after Blitzen’s cubes.

Turning back a winning smile to Jack, Pitch dug in his pockets to throw a handful of cubes down for Vixen as well ensuring the beast would be distracted for the start of the race as Pitch responded gleefully, “Ready for some fun then Jack?” As Pitch said this, he kicked Donner’s sides leaving Bunnymund and Jack at the starting spot both of their reindeer still munching on the sugar cubes he’d purposefully left.

Bunnymund kicked the sides of Blitzen to go, but the reindeer promptly ignored him as it continued to grab the last few scattered sugar cubes. He scowled shaking his fist at Pitch’s retreating form, “Hey! That’s cheating!”

“Hey, easy, Bunny, easy,” said Jack. “Just relax. We’re all here to have fun. He’s trying to get me back for when I cheated yesterday. Although, to be honest, it wasn’t exactly cheating. I was just trying to throw some obstacles in his path. But if you’re going to ride a deer, you’re gonna have to relax. Any sudden movements are going to make them nervous and jittery.”

Bunnymund stiffened nervously looking down at the reindeer once more, "Fun? You and I have very different ideas about what fun is Jack!"

Quickly, Jack jumped off Vixen and grabbed a handful of snow, mashing it together to shape a snowball. When it was shaped to the way he wanted, he threw it, hitting Pitch squarely in the back of the head while his deer was still gaining on them.

Pitch’s head rocked forward with the impact of the snowball. Whipping his head around to glare at Jack, Pitch spat, "Oh don't be a spoilt sport!" Knowing he still was beating Jack, Pitch smiled mischievously before turning back to the track giving Donner a kick to get more of a lead before Frost could have the chance to catch up to him.

Jack just shook his head as he mounted Vixen again and spurred her forward. He looked back at Bunny, “Just relax and be gentle!” he shouted.
Bunnymund watched Jack take off, and not wanting to be left in last place attempted to nudge Blitzen to catch up with the others, but the reindeer stood stubbornly in place refusing to budge no matter how Bunnymund pulled at his reigns or kicked at his sides. Getting frustrated, Bunnymund yelled, "Ah come on ya flea bitten excuse for a reindeer!"

Pitch hearing Bunnymund's gruff tone chiding the reindeer only made him laugh heartily. He glanced back at Jack now, "Well now, that takes care of the rabbit. It looks like it's just going to be you and I... and you're falling sorely behind my dear boy!"

Without stopping, Jack leaned down and scooped up another handful of snow, fashioning it into a snowball. He hurled it at Pitch, "Bunny is so going to get you when this is over I hope you know."

Pitch dodged skillfully the smile never leaving his face, "With his atrocious riding skills, he can't blame me. You're not going to tell him anything are you? I thought you'd want to ditch the rabbit to. Now we can race without a chaperone."

“I admit that he can be a pain sometimes, but I’m sure North had him to come along for a reason. You forget, Pitch, that I’m also a chaperone.”

Pitch scowled his brow drawing down at Jack's comment. He didn't like to think of Jack in that capacity, and to have Jack play that card on him served to annoy Pitch, "You know, for the guardian of fun, you're doing a poor job at it now. Do you really want to deal with sir nag back there, or do you want to race me?"

Jack only shook his head as he gently pushed on Vixen’s antlers, urging her forward. It was hard work and took about five minutes, but he finally got within a few feet of Pitch. He scooped up another snowball and threw it at Pitch’s back.

"Am I?" he shouted, grinning. "Or do you just have a poor sense of fun?"

Pitch shivered as the snowball hit him, "Hey! Look who's talking! Is it only the right kind of fun when it's something you do?" As a recourse, Pitch dug in his pockets to throw sugar cubes at Frost who seemed to anticipate the move and kept Vixen distracted enough to ignore them. Pitch veered to the side and around a jutting rock to cut part of the path diagonally and make up for lost ground.

Bunnymund's mount finally decided to start moving towards the other reindeer, and within moments, Blitzen was galloping to catch up to them all the while as Bunnymund hollered in trepidation trying his best just to hang on.

“Aw, come on Pitch; lighten up.” Jack shouted, pulling up beside Pitch. “Stop taking everything people say so personally. Part of your problem is that you haven't learned how to tell when someone's kidding with you. You see everything as an insult.”

Pitch huffed, "Who says I wasn't kidding to? Maybe you can't see as much as you think you can Frost," Pitch grinned devilishly at him as he steered Donner into Vixen's side to cause the reindeer to slow down enough for him to jet by.

Bunnymund could be heard still yelling in the distance as Blitzen charged forward at an alarming speed for Bunnymund to handle. It became even worse for him as the bit became loose, and Bunnymund's reins flew off. Bunnymund's screams became shrill now as he clung to the antlers.

“Sometimes it’s hard to tell!” Frost shouted. He shook his head in frustration as he again urged Vixen forward to catch up to Pitch.

Pitch saw the bridge in the distance and the winds whipped against the riders violently now as the
tunnel became narrower funneling the gale directly at them. Pitch pulled himself tightly to Donner
now to reduce any resistance as they sped along towards the fast approaching bridge. As they rode
closer, Pitch absently wondered where he’d end up if he just kept going. He was far enough away
from Bunnymund now for him to present a threat against an escape attempt, and out of all the
 guardians he feared Jack the least. He could ditch Frost easily enough he assured himself. The
fearlings deep within him were coaxing him now, begging him for a chance at freedom. Part of Pitch
deeply considered following the suggestion as he wanted freedom to. As Pitch made it to the bridge,
he ignored these feelings burying the incessant plea of the fearlings and jackknifed Donner back in
the direction needed to complete the race.

Frost was hot on his heels, and Pitch gave him a wink, “Looks like second place for you Jack!” Pitch
laughed enjoying himself greatly now.

Bunnymund was holding on to the antlers solely now as his feet flailed behind him as if he were a
flag whipping in the wind.
Pitch’s eyes widened at the sight unsure if he should stop to help Bunnymund or laugh… maybe both? He didn’t really want to help Bunnymund, but he supposed that he’d created this mess, so he should at least attempt to help him. Pitch sighed pulling back on Donner’s reins and spurred the reindeer back in the direction of Blitzen.

“We’ll see about that.” Jack mumbled as he made the sharp turn and started off after Pitch. He whipped out his staff and urged Vixen forward. He raised the crook end of the staff into the air, taking control of the wind and commanding it to carry him and Vixen faster.

Pitch raced towards Bunnymund now as Blitzen bucked violently flipping the rabbit, so that he had summersaulted landing backwards on the reindeer with his arms hooked by the elbows on Blitzen’s antlers. All the while Bunnymund squalled in terror.

The sight alone was too hilarious for Pitch, and as he got closer, he couldn’t help laughing uncontrollably at how ridiculous the rabbit looked. Finally passing Blitzen, Pitch cut in front of the reindeer holding out a handful of sugar cubes in an attempt to distract the beast, but Blitzen wasn’t interested having been spooked by Bunnymund’s caterwauling.

As Blitzen barreled by him, Pitch stopped laughing realizing how serious the situation had become as he fought to have Donner catch back up again yelling out to Jack, “Frost! Blitzen won’t stop! Cut him off!”

Jack had been completely focused on catching up to Pitch. So he hadn’t noticed what was going on ahead of him, until Pitch’s yelling pulled him back to reality. That’s when he saw the run-a-way Blitzen with Bunny. His eyes widened. There was no way he would be able to stop now. He put down his staff and cut off the wind. But Vixen was still running too fast to suddenly pull to a stop. "Bunny!” Jack shouted. "Take hold of the antlers and gently pull back!"

Bunnymund spat back between yells, “I’m flipping backwards! How the heck am I supposed to grab
anything like this!” Bunnymund’s butt bounced precariously off the reindeer’s shoulders threatening to spring the rabbit off its back.

Pitch had brought Donner in front of Blitzen as he loosened the bit in his mouth to slip the leather free. Holding on to one end of the rein, he shouted to Jack, “Frost! Catch!” If Jack could grab the other half of the rein, Pitch hoped they could effectively create enough of a barrier to deter Blitzen enough to slow down and get Bunnymund off his back before he hurt either of them. That would be bad. Pitch was worried now as he’d never meant for this to escalate into such a situation thinking the fact that they were just racing on the ground meant they had less chance of anyone getting hurt by rigging Bunnymund’s reins.

Jack shook his head, motioning for Pitch to get out of the way, “I can’t stop!” he shouted. “Vixen is moving too fast. Move out of the way!” he veered to his left, trying to steer Vixen as close to Blitzen's side as he could. He steadied himself and gripped his staff with both hands, waiting for just the right moment.

Deftly moving to the opposite side of Blitzen, Pitch braced against the deer as he worked to unhook Bunnymund’s arms from the reindeer’s antlers while not getting knocked off his own reindeer now that he no longer had reins himself. Thankfully, unlike Bunnymund, he was a much better rider. Unfortunately, Bunnymund’s lack of trust in Pitch and his fear were causing the efforts to be moot.

“No! Get offa me!” Bunnymund panicked fully as Pitch worked to wrest his arm from the antler and jerked away from his touch violently. It didn’t help that the rabbit’s fear sent a thrill through Pitch as the fearlings pulsed and consumed the fright as they whirled inside Pitch in the wake of Bunnymund’s terror. Pitch’s eyes dilated as a sense of euphoria raced through him causing him to smile slightly making Pitch appear to enjoy Bunnymund’s predicament when in reality it was just the rush of power.

Realizing the fearlings were getting a bit too much control, Pitch shook his head yelling to Bunnymund, “I’m trying to help you, you dolt! Let me already!”

“Bunny,” Jack shouted as he was getting closer, “you’re gonna have to let go! I’m going to snatch you off as I ride by. But you’re going to have to be ready, otherwise I might hurt you.”

Bunnymund turned towards Jack trusting his friend much more than Pitch. He nodded as he moaned, “O-okay!” Squeezing his eyes shut, Bunnymund did just that letting his arms slide loose of the antlers as he was promptly bucked off the reindeer towards Jack.

Pitch took the leather strap and hooked it around Blitzen’s antlers wrapping the other side around Donner’s antlers as the two yanked at each other getting tangled. Pitch took the opportunity to roll off of Donner’s back to safety as the two circled around each other bucking and kicking each other angrily but otherwise remaining contained.

Jack knew he only had one shot at this. He had to perfectly time it, which sent a rush through him. He gritted his teeth and when he came within a few feet of the chaos, he reached out his staff and hooked it around Bunny, swinging him over to sit behind him on Vixen.

Bunnymund let out an undignified squeal as he was yanked clear of the reindeer and flung behind the winter sprite. He clung to Jack with a death grip shaking all over from the experience, “Crickey! That was a close one!” Realizing he was finally safe, he breathed a sigh of relief relaxing, “Aw man! Thanks mate, I don’t know what’ve happened if you weren’t there!”

Pitch backed further away from the aggressively fighting reindeer now. His eyes were wide as he took in the sight glancing over to Jack and Bunnymund, “Is he alright?” Pitch asked his brow etched
Jack gasped, trying to free himself of the rabbit’s tight hold on him. “He’s fine!” he finally managed to shout out. "Easy, Bunny. I need air."

Bunnymund realizing he’d been choking the boy out loosened his grip. Having also realized that they had come to a stop, the rabbit quickly hopped off the reindeer backing away from it, “That’s the last of that I’m doing any time soon!” He still wobbled a bit from the previous jostling as he worked to get his bearings storming back towards where they had brought the reindeer down into the glacier.

Donner and Blitzen seemed to have worked out whatever beef they’d had and now stood complacently looking over at Bunnymund marching away.

Pitch looked a bit nervous now wondering what Jack was going to say as it was obvious that Bunnymund had no idea it was his fault, but Pitch knew that Jack was more informed about the reindeer than Bunnymund. He swallowed hard as he lurked over to the reindeer giving them a few sugar cubes to calm them further before hoping back on Donner’s back. He wondered if he looked as guilty as he felt. Pitch glanced over at Jack now to see his expression.


Pitch averted his eyes down to look at Donner’s head. He blushed slightly wondering if he should admit to Jack that he’d rigged Bunnymund’s reins or just that he’d given him the worst tempered reindeer. No. That wasn’t a good idea at all, he doubted Jack would understand it wasn’t meant to cause any harm. Most importantly, Pitch worried he wouldn’t keep it to himself, and the last thing Pitch wanted to do was get into trouble after he’d been doing so well. Pitch grimaced, “Uh, I don’t really know. I saw he’d lost control over Blitzen and… and well, you saw what happened. Why are you asking me?” He spat defensively.

Jack rolled his eyes, not believing Pitch. “Why am I asking you? Because you were the first one to see there was a problem!” he shouted. “I just figured you’d know! Did Bunny spook the reindeer and lose control?”

Pitch glanced back at Jack tensely, “Uh… I’m sure that’s what happened… It’s obvious that he didn’t know the first thing about riding. Who knows what he did to agitate the beast. We… we should probably get the reindeer back to the stalls.” Trying to make light of the situation and make himself feel a little less guilty Pitch commented offhandedly, “I don’t think Bunnymund is going to want to come back out here with us after this, so no more nagging chaperone… there’s that eh?”

Jack lifted an eyebrow, staring at Pitch. Finally, he gave a nod. “Yeah, I guess.” He mounted Vixen again and steered her in the direction Bunny went. He glanced back at Pitch once, thinking that something wasn’t right about everything that had happened.

Pitch kicked Donner’s side getting the deer to take off in a trot to remove himself from the scene not wishing to dwell on the situation any longer.

As Jack nudged Vixen into a trot, he caught sight of Blitzen’s reins ahead of him, half buried in the snow. He slowed down when he got to them and bent over and picked them up to take back to the stables. He kicked Vixen into a trot again. On his ride back, he quietly examined the reins closer, noticing that they didn’t look entirely right—almost like they had been tampered with. He quickly looked back at Pitch and then back at the reins, his face twisting into a frown. He briefly thought about confronting Pitch about the matter, but he figured he’d better wait until they got back to the stables. Bunny was probably freezing.
Bunnymund was hoping as fast as he could through the glacier and kept pace with the trotting reindeer, and as soon as they’d made it back to the stables he remarked, “I’m heading in to the fireplace; you two can put those blooming flea bags back in their barn without me!”

Pitch frowned at Bunnymund’s retreating form as he dismounted and muttered, “No more a flea bag than you rabbit.”

Jack slid off Vixen, allowing the reindeer to go her separate way. He marched up to Pitch, extending his hand and the reins out toward him, a frown on his face, "Pitch, you didn't have anything to do with what happened out there, did you?"

Pitch blanched being confronted with the reins. His eyes cut nervously over to Bunnymund who had almost disappeared from sight before focusing back on Frost speaking in a harsh whisper. “I… I may have played with them a little, but I didn’t mean for anything bad to happen! It was just meant to be a bit of fun Jack. Honest! How was I supposed to know that ornery reindeer would become that unstable!” Pitch looked worried now, “You… you’re not going to tell anyone are you?”

"You may have..." Jack rolled his eyes, trying to get himself under control. He sighed. "I should tell North, or better yet Bunny. I think he has the right to know. Pitch, Bunny could have gotten seriously hurt out there!"

Pitch cringed, "Don't you think I know that?! It was an accident Frost! I didn't mean for Bunnymund to almost get hurt, and look! He's fine! A little bit ruffled, but no worse for the wear. Please Jack, just keep this between you and I! If you tell... it's going to get me in trouble. You don't want to get me in trouble, do you?" Pitch gave Jack a pitiful look in hopes the boy would feel sorry enough for him to let the incident slide.

Jack studied Pitch. “I might be an unruly rascal that holds a record for being on Santa’s naughty list, Pitch, but I still have sense enough to know this is wrong. Holding something like this back is only going to snowball into something worse—for both of us. Do you want to get me in trouble, too?”

Pitch pouted, "No. I don't want you to get into trouble either, but... nothing bad actually happened. Just please can't you be my friend, and let it go this once? Bunnymund already hates me, and North was just starting to be nice to me. If they find out..." Pitch paled looking quite anxious.

Jack sighed, giving Pitch an annoyed look. Finally, he pointed a finger at him. “I’ll let it go, just this once. But this better not happen again. I may be a trickster, but I’d never stoop to doing what you did. And if North or Bunny ever ask me, I can’t guarantee you that I won’t tell them the truth.”

Pitch's face brightened, "You won't regret it! It'll never happen again I swear!" Pitch's mood lightened considerably now feeling a lot less guilty that the truth came out at least to Jack. No one else ever need be the wiser, and business could go on as usual.

“I really don’t like this, Pitch.” Jack shook his head, tossing the reins down on the floor. “You know that it’s usually good to come clean right away instead of trying to cover something over. Otherwise it may come back to bite you later on.”
Pitch’s brow crinkled, ”There was no harm done, and as long as the rabbit doesn’t have a clue, this whole thing should blow over in a day or so. Try not to think about it too much.” Pitch tried to sound reassuring although the boy’s wavering convictions gave him cause for concern.

Jack gave Pitch one last hard look and said nothing more on the subject as he turned and headed back to the main part of the Pole.

Pitch watched him go as he wrung his hands. Would Jack keep their little secret? He was regretting admitting the truth to Jack now. He may have been better off just keeping that little bit to himself… no, Jack was already suspicious, and if he’d brought the reins to North’s attention, Pitch most assuredly would have gotten in trouble. At least this way the chances were severely diminished.

Trying to work away his nerves, Pitch loaded Vixen into her stall and cleaned up the area more than necessary before moving back to his room for sanctuary. Once there he settled on to his bed picking up the ghost story book North had handed him when he’d brought Pitch to the library. Pitch ran his hands over the cover settling back to try to read some of them, but he found his mind was too distracted to get into it. Instead, Pitch just sat against the headboard hugging the book to his chest as he played the day’s events back over in his mind. Wishing wholeheartedly that he’d never tampered with those reins.

Jack leisurely walked into the room where Bunny was busy warming himself by the fire, appearing to be lost in his thoughts. A pang of guilt welled up inside him when his eyes landed on the rabbit. Bunnymund sat on an ottoman with his feet propped up towards the fire, but his hand held an icepack to his ribs as he breathed laboriously. He glanced over to Jack, his ears had been laid low, but seeing the winter sprite one twitched upward as the rabbit gave him a tired smile, “Hey there bucko.”

“Hey,” Jack pointed at the ice pack, “Are you okay?”

Bunnymund winced as he turned to speak to Jack, “Aw yeah, yeah. Just a bit sore is all. That bloomin’ deer did a number on me ribs. Nothings broke, so no needs ta worry.”

Jack had a pained, guilty look on his face at hearing Bunny had gotten bruised up quite a bit. He turned to stare at the fire, thinking over everything that had taken place. Was it right for him to keep what Pitch did a secret? Or should he tell someone? Pitch wasn’t exactly on the right path yet, so he had to watch that he didn’t get dragged into his schemes. He didn’t want North coming down on him like he had done to Pitch lately. Jack winced at the thought of getting spanked by the big man. Unlike Pitch, he had the other Guardians’ trust. Keeping this from them might damage that trust, which would be far more painful than a spanking.

“Y’all right there sprite?” Bunnymund saw the look of consternation on the boy’s face. It looked odd on the usually playful and happy face.

Jack sighed, hesitating. “Bunny,” he started, walking closer to the fireplace, “what would you do if something bad happened as a result of something someone did, and you found out about it, but the person begged you not to tell anyone?”

Bunnymund’s brow drew down thinking of only one person Jack’s question could pertain to, but playing along, he answered ambiguously, “If it was something bad, I would advise against listening to that person since they are already in the wrong.”

Jack nodded. “Yeah,” he answered, sounding preoccupied.
Bunnymund planned to get to the bottom of this, and unlike the other guardian’s, he took the kid gloves off quickly. “What did he do Jack, that sneaky snake in the grass! Don’t protect him! He sure don’t deserve it I’m sure.” He was becoming angry at the thought of Pitch manipulating their boy. Jack was three hundred years old, but he still had a naivety about him that worried the rabbit especially when it came to dealing with Pitch Black.

Jack nervously ran his hands up and down his staff. “H—he tampered with the reins of your deer.” he turned to Bunny. “But he said what happened out there was an accident. He didn’t mean for it all to happen that way, and he never meant for you to get hurt.” Jack sighed. “I found out about it when I picked up the reins as we were returning to the stables. I noticed they had been tampered with, and I confronted Pitch on it. He begged me not to tell anyone because he didn’t want to get in trouble with North. But I feel guilty about it all. I don’t want to be dragged into his mess and get in trouble, too.”

Bunnymund was practically seething now as he hoped up throwing the icepack down, “He did what! Yeah, I’m bloody sure he didn’t mean for me ta get hurt! Wait till I get my hands on that wiry no good wisp! He shouldn’t worry about getting in trouble with North, after I’m done with him, North can pick up the scraps!” Bunnymund was bristling now obviously ready for a fight.

“Look, Bunny,” Jack sighed again, “I know I would have done wrong by not saying anything about this, but I still feel like a tattletale. If you go doing anything to Pitch, he’s going to know I told on him, after I told him I would let it slide just this once.”

Bunnymund pointed angrily at Jack as he spoke, “That’s not tattling Jack, Pitch is using you to cover for him, and I’m not gonna let him s*aw ya like that. I’m sick of everyone around here getting’ wrapped around his finger; first Tooth, then North, now you? He’s bad news, and if it were up ta me we’d bury him back in that hole and never let him see the light a day again.”

“I guess you’re right about the tattling part, but I still feel uneasy. Maybe we should just… go talk to North about all of this, see what he says.”

Bunnymund twitched his nose in obvious disdain wanting to just give Pitch what for himself, but knowing he’d likely go overboard because of his dislike for the dark man, he acquiesced to Jack’s request. Shaking his head he sighed, “Okay Jack. We’ll go see North.”

The two made their way through the globe room and down the hall to a lounge that North often sat in a comfy plush chair surrounded by his many gadgets and other things the Cossack found to make him relax.

“You or me?” Jack asked as he stared at North.

Bunnymund folded his arms replying tartly, “Well that depends on how much trouble you want your boyo ta be in cause if I tell em’ you can best believe it ain’t gonna be pretty.”

Jack gave a smirk as he walked forward. “Uh… North?”

North turned to face them, a smile appearing when his eyes landed on the two. “Ah! What pleasant surprise. Come, sit.” he waved to the empty chairs around him.

“So how did the inventory go?” Jack asked, seating himself in one of the chairs. Bunny took the other one.

“It went pretty well,” North nodded. “Had few arguments with yetis, but it otherwise went smooth.”

“That’s good,” said Jack.
“How did riding go?” North asked.

Jack cleared his throat, throwing a glance over at Bunny.

Bunnymund huffed folding his arms and displayed a very disgruntled expression, “Not as well as you’d have liked I can tell ya, but nothing less than I expected!”

Jack moved restlessly in his seat as North looked from Bunny back to him.

“What is problem?” North asked.

“Well, Pitch, for some reason or another, tampered with Bunny’s reins, which led to other problems once we got out there.”

North’s face turned into a scowl, not liking where this was leading. “Go on,” he said.

“The reindeer he gave Bunny to ride went out of control. Bunny lost the reins and nearly got himself killed in the process. Okay, the reins fell off the deer.”

North turned to Bunny, concern in his voice. “Is this true?”

Bunnymund was scowling now digging his nails into the chair, “Oh yeah, the bugger was laughing so hard when he rode up, I wanted to kick him in the face! He even had the nerve to act like he was concerned when he couldn’t stop the reindeer. He made out like he wanted to help me, but that was probably just ta get me ta fall offa that thing! I’m sure he was finding the whole thing so amusing! I told ya this was a bad idea North! Nothing good is gonna come having him here! He’s even corrupting Jack!”

Jack’s eyes widened. “Bunny, I wouldn’t go that far. I did tell you about everything that happened. And Pitch might have been sincere about helping you. He seemed like he was telling the truth when he told me he didn’t mean for you to get hurt. He seemed shaken up.”

Bunnymund scowling now digging his nails into the chair, “Oh yeah, the bugger was laughing so hard when he rode up, I wanted to kick him in the face! He even had the nerve to act like he was concerned when he couldn’t stop the reindeer. He made out like he wanted to help me, but that was probably just ta get me ta fall offa that thing! I’m sure he was finding the whole thing so amusing! I told ya this was a bad idea North! Nothing good is gonna come having him here! He’s even corrupting Jack!”

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Jack sighed, shaking his head. “I think he’s just trying to fit in, but doesn’t know how. So he’s doing it in his own ways, not understanding that his ways are sometimes harmful. I guess he thought tampering with the reins would be his idea of a joke in order to please me, since I’m a... trickster... and all.”

Bunnymund seemed undeterred, “I don’t buy it; but nothing I say matters when it comes ta Pitch, so I’m gonna let ya all play house with him. I’m outta here.” Bunnymund hopped to his feet thumping a hole in the floor and jumping into one of his many tunnels.

Jack sighed. That could have gone better than he had hoped. He turned back to North, who had been silently listening and regarding everything, his fingers steepled in front of him.

"So now you know." Jack said. "Pitch begged me not to tell anyone because he didn't want to get into trouble. I must confess that I went along with it at first. I told him I would let it slide just this once. But... I just couldn't keep quiet, especially after seeing that Bunny was nursing his side when I came in here. Keeping something like this a secret just felt wrong. So I told Bunny. I suggested
talking to you about it because Bunny was about to go pound on Pitch himself, and I know that would have not turned out good."

A small smile formed on North's mouth. He nodded. "I appreciate your honesty, Jack. And I appreciate you telling me. You are right. It would have been wrong of you to do."

A nervous smile inched the corner of Jack’s mouth up. “If you… approach Pitch on this, please don’t tell him that I told you. I don’t want to be a part of this anymore.”

North smiled. “I do have one question.”

Jack looked at him.

“How did you find out? About Pitch tampering with reins, I mean.”

“I found the reins lying in the snow on our way back to the stables, where Bunny’s deer dropped them. I picked them up to take with me and saw something wasn’t right. I asked Pitch about it when we got back to the stable.”

North nodded. “I will speak to Pitch about it later, once things simmer down. I will get his side of story.”

Jack got up from his chair. He turned a serious look to North, “North,”

“Hm?”

“I just want you to know that…” he shook his head, “Never mind. I’ll stick around here for awhile in case you need me.” Jack walked away, pulling the hood of his hoodie up over his head.

It had been over two hours since they’d finished up at the stables, and Pitch was just finally starting to be able to relax thinking that everything was going to smooth out until he heard a knock at his door.

Pitch’s eyes traveled to the door now raising hackles on the back of his neck. Be cool; Pitch told himself taking in a deep breath and pretending to go back to reading he said, “Come in.”

The door opened and North slowly walked in. He lifted an eyebrow when his eyes landed on Pitch. Gently, he pushed the door closed. Moving his hands to clasp behind his back, he walked forward, toward the bed, “Did you have good time with reindeer today?” he asked.

Pitch gulped that guilty feeling coming back over him as he stared up at North willing his face not to emit the apprehension he was feeling having North coming up to stand next to him, “Uh… sure. We… we had a bit of a mishap, but otherwise everything went well.”

“A mishap?” North raised both eyebrows, faking his shock over hearing the news. “What sort of mishap?”

Pitch visibly relaxed seeing North’s reaction and assuming he had no clue, “When we were out on the track, Bunnymund lost control of his mount. But nothing bad happened,” Pitch was quick to reassure although he couldn’t keep eye contact anymore.

“I see,” North mused, sitting down on the edge of Pitch’s bed. “But from what I understand, Bunny got hurt a little.”

“Hurt?” Pitch’s head shot up in surprise as he shook his head no, “Frost and I made sure he didn’t
fall off of Blitzen, and he didn’t say he was hurt to us.” His face denoted concern towards North’s words though as another pang of guilt rode up his spine. Why did he care so much? Who was Bunnymund to him other than a cranky guardian? He didn’t care much for the rabbit, but he really had no intentions of him getting hurt during his prank, and more so the thought of upsetting North was weighing heavily on Pitch. He really didn’t want to take steps backwards after they seemed to be doing so well.

North studied Pitch, noting his obvious nervous state. "Is there something you wish to tell me, Pitch?" he said, calmly.

North had chosen his words carefully Pitch realized. He already knew, Pitch was almost sure, but some part of him wrestled with the fact that maybe he didn’t know the full truth. Glancing up though and looking into North’s eyes reaffirmed the wily man was on to him. Pitch’s stomach felt like it was lined in led now so sick he felt with these emotions. North wanted Pitch to admit fault, it wasn’t hard for Pitch to understand this, but coming to terms with it and actually admitting it out loud was easier thought than said, “Um… well…” his heart was racing now as a mix of emotions from fear to uncertainty warred within him. It had felt good to get the truth off his chest when he’d told Frost, but with North there was the very real indication that the truth would not just be freeing but also condemning in the way of consequences for his actions.

Pitch didn’t want to be punished for his prank. It was just a joke gone awry after all not malicious intent! But would North believe that? Would it matter? Pitch didn’t want to find out, but he had to tell the big man something. He swallowed hard, “There isn’t much to tell… Blitzen… he…” Pitch paused closing his eyes as he let out a deep sigh. Who was he fooling? Lying to North now wasn’t going to do him any favors, and trying to lie was just making him feel worse because he knew the act itself was just working to estrange himself further from the guardians. Pitch lowered his head pulling his knees to his chest as he spoke softly in an almost defeated tone, “I… I didn’t mean for this to happen. It was just supposed to be funny… I… I even made sure the reindeer made it into the glacier safely, but I didn’t think Blitzen was that unruly. I’m… I’m sorry.” Pitch had buried his head into his arms now not wanting to see North’s look of disappointment he surely held.

North sat quietly, thinking. It was hard knowing what to do in this situation, "You gave Blitzen to Bunny?" he finally said, leaning forward.

Pitch peeked out from behind his arm wearing a grimace. Of course North knew the temperament of his reindeer well enough to know Blitzen was the worst behaved of them far better than even Pitch had known. But enough to know that Pitch should have known better than to give that particular reindeer to anyone. He tittered nervously, "Uh… yes. To my credit, I didn't realize the extent of how stubborn he was." He smiled sheepishly at North.

"You said it was supposed to be funny. What was supposed to be funny? You giving Bunny unruly deer?" North questioned.

Pitch found it harder to speak now as he decided to just nod omitting anything else as he was unsure just how much North was actually aware of, and he didn't wish to add more grease to the fire.

“And what made you think giving unruly deer to Bunny would be funny?”

Pitch frowned, he couldn't tell North it was mostly so he and Frost could ditch Bunnymund to go have actual fun without admitting he was attempting to blatantly undermine North's decree to have the rabbit along in the first place. That would not go over well at all. He answered delicately, "I was just wanting to give Bunnymund a hard time since he wasn't much of a rider," this was a half truth at least as Pitch did also want to give the rabbit a hard time just for the fun of harassing him.
North raised an eyebrow, sensing Pitch wasn't telling the whole truth.

Pitch glanced at North now wondering what the Cossack was fishing for, but he sure wasn't planning to tell on himself any more than what he had an inkling that North was already aware of. Did Frost betray him? He said he might say something if asked, but Pitch sorely hoped he didn't.

“Pitch,” North heaved a big sigh, “I will tell you now that you only make matters worse by not telling full truth.”

Growing frustrated Pitch deduced Jack must have told on him for North to be grilling him like this, “Alright fine. I... I tampered with the reins, so Bunnymund would fall behind. I just wanted to race with Jack... I didn’t think Blitzen would become so obstinate. I just thought Blitzen would stop on the tracks, or if he did run, that we could easily stop him. I didn’t mean Bunnymund any harm; I swear it!”

North remained silent, nodding when Pitch finally confessed. “Why would you not want Bunny to race with you?”

Pitch blushed as he sat back against the headboard, “He’s... he’s kind of a stick in the mud,” Pitch admitted without adding the fact that the last thing he wanted was a babysitter. Jack was fun, and although he was technically a chaperone as well, Jack never made Pitch feel as such. Bunny on the other hand was very much a reminder that he was still a prisoner here, and Pitch had wanted to spurn him just because of that fact. It hadn’t helped that he and Bunnymund had had it out at the party the last time they’d spoken.

“I see,” North nodded his head. He continued to think while stroking his beard, not knowing how to approach Pitch on this.

“You… you’re not mad at me are you?” Pitch peered at North anxiously. This whole conversation had him on edge, and with how calm North was approaching him, he was unsure exactly what North planned to do now.

“No, I am not mad.” North shook his head. “Disappointed, yes,” Pitch grimaced looking away as he stated softly, “I... I’m sorry; I really didn’t mean for this to get so blown out of proportion. I can assure you that I’ll take better care in the future to be less... reckless.” He hoped his heartfelt apology and promise to do better would be enough to assuage North’s disappointment.

“I accept your apology, Pitch, and I believe you are sincere. But you still will be punished.” North finally said.

Pitch’s face fell not liking the sound of that at all. Maybe there was a chance that he could at least avoid a spanking though he thought as he suggested, “Perhaps I could do extra chores to make up for it this time?”

“Actually, I was thinking that very thing.” North nodded.

Pitch breathed a sigh of relief, “Excellent! I’m glad we could sort this all out,” Pitch now smiled feeling much better that North had agreed to take his suggestion.

“After you spend some time over my knee,” North added.

“Wha-what?” Pitch paled, “But... but we just...” Pitch was stunned at a loss for words. Did he just manage to talk himself into more than just a spanking? This wasn’t fair at all!
“We will discuss extra chores later. Although I will say that it will be something for Bunny, not me. But right now, we are going to deal with you. Don’t you think you deserve spanking for what you did?” North said, seriously, staring intensely at the Boogeyman.

Pitch’s lip quivered as he croaked, “No! It’s humiliating! I’m not a child North; you should reconsider your methods to be more befitting the fact I’m centuries old! Besides, I already told you that I didn’t mean to cause anyone any harm. Doesn’t that count at all?”

North sighed wearily, “We have already been down this tired old road too many times, Pitch. You may be centuries old, but you act like child. This is why I have chosen spanking.” he glared back at Pitch. “I would advise that you do not push yourself. And you might not have meant anyone any harm, but you still put Bunny in danger. For this I cannot let you get away with. What you did was reckless and irresponsible. For someone who has dealt with equine creatures as much as you have, you should have known better than to give untrained rider an ornery deer. In doing what you did, you did mean harm to Bunny.”

Pitch shrunk as North rattled off his offenses until he couldn’t even look at North any longer his eyes falling to his hands as his mouth twisted into a deep seeded frown. He couldn’t argue with North’s logic. He really did know better, it was the reason he’d felt so guilty after it had all went down. “I’m sorry… I wasn’t thinking…” Pitch whined now knowing it likely didn’t matter what he said at this point, he was going to be spanked and that was that.

“That is why you get spanked. It is incentive to make you think next time you are tempted to do something foolish.”

North’s comment offended Pitch’s sensibilities, and he crossed his arms responding defiantly, “I already feel bad about it; you don’t have to rub it in you know.”

“I am not rubbing in. I am explaining to make sure you understand.” North’s face relaxed. “I know you feel bad. That is good. You need to feel bad. But I need to do this to accompany it to make lesson stick.”

“I really wish you wouldn’t. I can say with all certainty that the lesson has already stuck,” Pitch pouted sullenly.

North sighed, shaking his head. “Believe me, I do not wish to do it, but I must, because you leave me no choice. It is your own doing.” He patted his lap. “Now, come. Let us get this over with.”

There was no running away from this, but Pitch still wanted to with all his will. He just stared in indecision now at North’s lap already feeling on the verge of tears from the emotions all of this was bringing on. North was sitting right next to him, but the distance was yawning to willingly submit to. He pushed himself forward on the bed bringing his knees down onto the mattress where he was kneeling next to North’s thigh. All he had to do was lean over to fulfill the Cossack’s request, but actually doing it was like a knife to his pride cutting it to ribbons. Pitch bleated, “I can’t… Please don’t make me do this!”

“Yes, you can, and you will.” North said. “If I have to wait here all day and all night, I will.”

Pitch slumped there for long minutes before finally taking the plunge and extending his long form across North’s lap. The act caused him to choke back a sob as a part of his dignity shattered to actually submit to North in this way. His whole body stiffened as he grabbed the corner of the mattress. North’s lap was wide enough, and his frame was slight enough that Pitch’s whole body was still draped across the bed this time verse dangling off the side. This lent for no distraction Pitch noted almost as an afterthought that he would be comfortable in every other manner except his soon
to be sore posterior.

North grabbed hold of Pitch and pulled him forward, positioning him over his left knee. “I look forward to the day when we no longer have to have these… discussions.” North said, pulling Pitch’s robe back.

Pitch whimpered in reply his whole body beginning to tremble as North shifted him and moved his robe. He was starting to breathe heavier as his anticipation of what was soon to follow overrode all of his senses.

Eager to get the spanking over with, North wasted no time pulling Pitch’s pants down with one yank and bringing his palm down in a swift blow.

Pitch yipped as the smarting palm connected arching his back dramatically more from the anticipation than from the pain of it. He hated that North felt the need to pull his pants down as if the spanking wasn’t enough, coupled with it being on his bare flesh only made it that much more personal and shaming.

North brought his hand down in swift fast blows harder than previous swats he remembered causing Pitch to start jerking with every connecting swat. Pitch clenched his teeth doing his best to ride through the slaps, but he really had no tolerance for this concentrated pain and found himself howling out disgracing himself further, but he just couldn’t help himself. Of course he had to further embarrass himself as he actively worked to block North’s efforts now throwing his feet and his hands back in a desperate attempt to protect his rear from any further barrage, “No, no, no! It hurts too much! Please! No more!” Pitch pleaded frantically.

Not saying a word, North moved Pitch forward on his knee and pinned Pitch’s legs between his own. He then reached to pull Pitch’s hands to the small of his back and held them in place there. When Pitch was properly restrained, he continued the spanking. “It is supposed to hurt, Pitch.”

Pitch struggled like a wild animal as he felt North attempting to restrain him. He screamed and bucked in his panic, but North subdued him anyway. Once he had no recourse but a slight wiggle as North resumed spanking him Pitch wailed out, “No! Ow! Ow!” He wrenched at his arms violently, but he didn’t budge. He panted as his exertion only proved to leave him lying flat on the bed outside his bottom which was prostrated at just the right angle that all of North’s swats were aimed on the cleft of his cheeks and the bottom of his thighs guaranteeing that where he was most sore would be the area of his butt he sat on the most. The irony was not lost on Pitch as he couldn’t help but glance back and cringe at the sight he saw. North was thorough in his work as his bottom was well coated in his hand prints. The sight alone was enough to break him as the tears he’d worked so desperately to hold back burst like a dam, and Pitch openly cried now.

“Do you understand why you are getting this spanking?” North suddenly asked, not letting up but laying down harder swats on Pitch’s underside.

He sobbed, “Yes! Yes!” Pitch had gone rigid as the barrage of swats hit very tender flesh burning the feeling into his mind. His body shook now as he cried his guilt and sorrow for what he’d done pouring out from him now, “I… I… could have hurt Bunnymund! I’m so sorry! Mercy!”

North nodded but didn’t stop. He continued bringing his hand down at a steady pace. “I accept apology. However, the one you should be apologizing to is Bunny. You will do this after the spanking.”

“Yes! Of course! Just please stop!” Pitch wailed pitifully. He’d agree to just about anything at this point, but the thought of apologizing to Bunnymund right after getting spanked sent another pang of
humiliation through Pitch. He imagined North telling Bunnymund how Pitch had been well spanked on Bunnymund's behalf for his crimes against the rabbit, or even worse he'd make Pitch tell the rabbit what he'd earned himself just like North had made him willingly bend over his knee to further break his inflated ego. Pitch imagined Bunnymund would likely be wearing that smug smile he hated so much.

These thoughts mixed with the incessant sting being applied by North's heavy calloused hand to his very sore backside sent Pitch into uncontrollable weeping. Pitch was lost in his own self-pity, brought this low by not only the guardians but even more so his own bad choices. This was all his fault he knew, and it could have been avoided if he'd just exercised a little restraint. Never again! Pitch solemnly vowed to himself that he'd never be so foolish as to find himself in this position again, but this made him wail even harder as he knew how very unlikely it would be that he would actually be able to keep that vow.

Feeling that Pitch had been broken, North applied ten final swats and ended the spanking. He let Pitch lay across his knee a few minutes to regain his composure, then he gently pulled the Boogeyman's pants up and allowed him to stand.

When North had finished the spanking and released his hands, Pitch quickly covered his face heaving sorrowful tears into them. He had cried that way for several moments before he felt the fabric of his pants covering his exposed and very swollen and tender bottom moved gently back into place. The act of covering him worked to send another wave of fresh sobs to escape his throat as the sheer reminder of the level of humiliation he'd just endured was renewed within him.

He hadn't realized exactly when North had lifted him to standing, but he found even as he stood there between the legs of the sitting Cossack, the tears wouldn't stop cascading down his angled cheeks. His breath hitched and his frame shook as he fiercely wiped at his eyes. It seemed the more he fought to regain control over himself the further away from attaining it he was. Pitch couldn't bring himself to look at North now as he spoke in a hoarse broken voice, "I'm sorry I... I disappointed you. I'm ...I'm trying to do better; I'm just not very good at this." Pitch's face had contorted into a picture of agony as he said this feeling like an utter failure.

He couldn't even manage to make it more than a whole week before ending back up in this situation, and Pitch had to wonder if he couldn't get it together how long it would take for even Santa to throw in the towel concerning him and abandon this mission and in turn his hope in Pitch. The thought of North giving up on him or any of the guardians now made his chest feel tight as even he hadn't realized how much he'd longed to have anyone simply just care about him in any capacity. The thought of being all alone again threatened to break him in a way he'd long since forgotten he'd already endured centuries ago and didn't think his psyche could handle a repeat of.

North smiled lovingly at Pitch, reaching out a large arm to wrap around the Boogeyman. He pulled the smaller man toward him and gave him a warm, tight hug.

Feeling North's arms wrap around him sent an electrifying jolt through Pitch that made his heart flutter in a slight panic as his insecurities swelled, but as quickly as they'd risen, they melted away in the strong arms' loving embrace. It made Pitch shiver before collapsing delicately against the man's chest. He needed this, ached for the estranged touch as more unbidden tears poured from his tightly shut eyes and a small almost unnoticeable satisfied sigh escaped his throat. Pitch laid limply against the big man's chest just listening to the vibrant pounding heart within. He was afraid to pull away from this moment as North was making him feel grounded and secure, but most importantly, loved and forgiven. These feelings confused him, but he knew that he wanted to keep feeling them.

"Pitch," North finally said, "I know it has been hard for you to understand, but I want you to know
that I take no pleasure in spanking you. It hurts me when you make me do it. But I do it because I care about you, and I want to see you set on right path so that you can do something useful with life than just dwelling in evil. I know it’s hard. No one said it would be easy. Life is never easy. You will have bad days and good days. You will mess up and make mistakes. Even I make mistakes. Like that one year I accidentally gave cat to little allergic girl.” North’s face turned sad. “She is doing okay now, but she had to go to hospital. It was long time before I forgave myself. I even questioned if I was right person for job.”

Pitch listened quietly disengaging from the embrace to stand next to North. It was hard to think of North spanking him because he cared about his future, but Pitch also didn't doubt the Cossack. North wasn't one to spread false words, and he appreciated that North would share a failure of his own to make the nightmare king feel better about his own lack of progress.

Pitch had stopped crying now, but his eyes had remained staring at his feet as North had spoken. As he finished, Pitch commented shyly, "You are. The right man for the job I mean. You of all people have no need to doubt the validity of your place in the world." He paused a moment before continuing, "I know it might not seem so, but ...I’m grateful that you want to help me... even if I don't always act it. Help can be hard to accept when you're as stubborn as I am,” he looked up now his eyes shimmered a reflection of gold and silver that were dilated from many fallen tears contrasted now with a small quirky smile touching his lips.

North smiled, putting a hand on Pitch's shoulder. “The fact that you admit you are stubborn is sign you are moving in right direction.”

Pitch dipped his head with a soft chuckle, "Yes, well if I could just recognize it better and learn to bend a bit, then I might call it progress. Until then, it tends to... make things difficult for me.” His cheeks reddened slightly as he glanced up and back down again. He took a step back to give North room to stand now as he’d been in such close proximity the man likely couldn't rise from the bed. Pitch wasn't looking forward to facing Bunnymund again anytime soon, unlike North, he doubted the rabbit was going to be as forgiving.

“You rest,” said North, getting up. “I will call Bunny over here later today and all three of us will talk.”

Pitch grimaced shaking his head slowly in agreement of North’s decree even though he was dreading the confrontation. He was happy that North planned to at least give him a reprieve long enough to rest. He felt drained now, and even though he was still quite sore, he felt better about where he and North stood regarding what he’d done. North had helped erase a lot of the guilty feelings that had been eating at him since the whole incident had occurred. He’d answered for it, and a finality to move on from the debacle had been reached… at least with North. Bunnymund on the other hand… well that was left to be seen, but for now, Pitch didn’t have to contend with the rabbit, and for that he was grateful.

Pitch crawled on top of his bed now grabbing his pillow and laying down on his side gently so as to avoid the soreness radiating through his rear end, Pitch curled in to a ball. His eyes remained open not really looking at anything as his mind tried to sort out the feelings he now felt and how best to process them.

North walked to the door, looking back at Pitch one last time before leaving the room.

Pitch glanced up to watch him go, and unlike any other time where this exchange between them had occurred, Pitch didn’t feel any anger towards the man. In fact, he wasn’t really sure what he felt other than everything was going to be okay.
Chapter Nineteen

Pitch wasn’t sure how long he had been left to his own devices before a knock came to his door, but it must not have been too long as the sun had waned lazily in the sky signaling the close of day only a few hours past welcoming the early hours of night. Pitch had been laying on his stomach reading Christmas ghost stories finding the tales interesting enough to have drawn him in that he’d not realized how much time had gone by when the knock had finally came. He frowned knowing what was to come and stated solemnly, “Come in.”

North entered the room, smiling. “Bunny is waiting. I believe you have something to say to him, yes?”

Pitch looked away slowly closing the book and setting it on the night stand before carefully climbing off the bed and heading towards the door with slumped shoulders. He really wasn’t looking forward to this.

“No need to be glum.” North said. “I have already told Bunny that you have paid for wrongdoings. And I will be there to see that he does not…” he paused to chuckle, “strangle you.”

Pitch flushed at the mention of Bunnymund being told what had become of him, but he was secretly glad that he wasn’t there to have to have heard it said about him first hand. He gave North a weak smile before turning his eyes to the floor; he still wasn’t feeling any better about having to go see the rabbit now.

Walking down the hall made Pitch acutely aware that his bottom would be feeling North’s ministrations for some time as even the light fabric that he wore still managed to chafe the sensitive areas with its friction. This of course made Pitch frown unhappily as he continued to follow North back to his lounge where Bunnymund was waiting for them.

Bunnymund sat in the same chair he’d occupied earlier that day, his one leg propped on a knee with his foot shaking with his pent up energy. The dark shadows of the night and the moon shining through the skylight contrasted nicely with the fireplace and typically made the room comfy looking, but with the exception of this conference, the air managed to be tense and unpleasant.

Pitch followed meekly behind North now feeling very uncomfortable and unsure as to how to approach the obviously still very angry Pookan.

“Here we are,” North said, moving to the side to reveal Pitch behind him. “Bunny, I think Pitch has something to say.” He waved Pitch forward.

Bunnymund fixed Pitch with a withering stare.

Pitch shrank under his gaze as he moved towards Bunnymund. Keeping his eyes averted, Pitch only glanced at Bunnymund as he came to stand before him shifting uncomfortably. After a long silence, Pitch finally found his voice, “I… I wanted to say that I’m sorry Bunnymund. I didn’t mean for you to almost get hurt.”

“Look me in the eyes!” Bunnymund growled as he moved to the edge of his seat, his body rigid and his ears plastered to his head.
Pitch’s head rose with a start at the aggressive nature he’d addressed him. His face wore a blank expression as he blinked looking fully at the Pookan.

Bunnymund stared at him skeptically, “So you say you’re sorry, but the real question is, are you sorry for what ya did, or are ya just sorry ya got caught and spanked?”

Pitch’s lip twitched and he couldn’t help but avert his eyes at Bunnymund’s admission of what happened to him.

Bunnymund was swift standing and bounding over to him in a flash as he grabbed his chin forcing Pitch’s eyes to lock back on his own, “I said eyes here! I want ta see for myself how truly sorry ya are.”

Pitch’s eyes darkened as he yanked his face away from the rabbit’s grasp, “Unhand me vermin!” He didn’t appreciate the way that Bunnymund was approaching him, and after everything he’d just suffered, he wasn’t going to let the rabbit push him around, “I said I was sorry, and I meant it! If you can’t accept that, than that’s on you,” he spat as he stared daggers at Bunnymund.

Bunnymund sneered narrowing his eyes at Pitch before looking back to North, “I don’t think you spanked him long enough with the way he’s talkin’ ta me.”

This angered Pitch even more as he balled his fists at his sides beginning to yell, “Oh you insufferable windbag! I was sorry, but now I’m starting to have second thoughts! And you wonder why I wanted to ditch you in our dust!”

“That is enough!” North bellowed. He eyed both Pitch and Bunny with a look of warning, stepping forward.

Pitch backed away reflexively his anger melting away under the Cossack’s imposing visage. He knew what could come out of upsetting the man, and after so recently being punished, he was quick to snap back in line with no want to provoke a negative reaction from the man.

Bunnymund on the other hand only puffed out his chest as he stood up straight his ears raising attentively. His brow furrowed in his agitation, “Me? You’re the one supposed ta have control over him, but look at the way he’s talkin’ ta me! He doesn’t sound sorry at all!”

"He was behaving himself until you provoked him." North snapped angrily, glaring at the rabbit. "He comes here with apology and you accuse him of faking it. Now, I have had enough of this. Do you accept his apology or not?"

Pitch's jaw dropped; Did North actually just yell at Bunnymund in defense of him? He couldn't help a small satisfied smile creeping on to his face, but not wanting Bunnymund to misinterpret the gesture, Pitch worked to keep his expression neutral. If the rabbit thought he wasn't contrite, it would only serve to create more chaos. Normally Pitch would have taken delight in Bunnymund's frustration, but Pitch also knew that he would have to make it up to the Pookan through chores, so he didn't want to vex Bunnymund enough to in turn make himself miserable.

Bunnymund scowled looking from North to Pitch. He was one to hold grudges, and oh did Pitch have a lot to account for on Bunnymund's personal record! But, he was also a guardian, and learning to forgive came with the territory. He sighed tiredly, "Alright. Maybe I did come off a little harsh. It's hard ta take an apology from Pitch seriously. I was just trying ta be sure he's being sincere." Bunnymund's eyes traveled back to Pitch scrutinizing the dark man once more for good measure.

"Believe me, he is sincere." North sighed, turning to Pitch. "Now, you offer Bunny another apology
for what you said just now."

Pitch frowned not wanting to apologize for what he'd said especially after how Bunnymund had treated him. He snapped looking quite indignant, "I have to apologize to him for what I said, but he doesn't have to apologize to me? That's rather one sided!"

“And you, Pitch, are too quick to make accusations, which is partly what gets you into deeper trouble,” North glared at Pitch, shaking a finger at him. Getting tired of the situation, North reached out and grabbed Pitch by the back of his robe and Bunnymund by the scruff of his back and dragged them closer together. "Now, I want both of you to apologize to each other before argument gets worse. I have had it with both of you. Some kids I visit each year act more mature than you are acting now." North turned to Bunnymund. "Pitch did wrong and has paid for it and now he offers apology. You did wrong by lashing out at him and accusing his apology of being fake. Both of you owe each other apology. And you will apologize so we can move past this."

Pitch crossed his arms giving Bunnymund a disdainful glare, "I already did once. You first rabbit."

Bunnymund's eyes went wide, "How many times have I told ya ta stop calling me that!"

Bunnymund twisted in North's grip becoming rather flustered by the situation.

North rolled his eyes, his face contorting into a dangerous frown. He shook Bunnymund a little bit, clearing his throat.

Pitch couldn't help but to smile broadly; it was about time someone else felt the Cossack's ire than himself.

Of course Bunnymund seeing the glee Pitch was getting from North's chiding had dropped his jaw in disbelief motioning to Pitch, "Unbelievable. Ya want me ta apologize ta him while he stands there gloating like that? He thinks this is a big joke!"

Pitch smirked, "Now, now rabbit, no need to get so hostile. I'll apologize... again, after you do. Surely it's only fair that you can give an apology to get one?"

"He! Gah!" Bunnymund's anger was getting to the point he couldn't speak. He bristled as his face contorted in his rage ready to launch at Pitch and pummel him with balled his fists.

Pitch had to hold back a laugh at how ridiculous Bunnymund looked now as if the rabbit were on the verge of a seizure.

North’s moustache and beard seemed to bristle as his anger rose at how silly these two were acting, especially Bunnymund. He knew all too well that the Easter Rabbit had a disagreeable attitude and temper sometimes, but he was going too far this time. It wasn’t helping the situation at all, especially since the situation involving them trying to rehabilitate Pitch was already setting on thin ice as it was, “I should take both of you over knee!” North finally burst out, shaking both Pitch and Bunnymund.

Oh what Pitch wouldn’t give to see the rabbit get his due! If the threat hadn’t included himself, he may have angled to anger the rabbit more. But then again… Pitch smiled devilishly, “I’ll be the bigger man rabbit and apologize again, just for you. I’m so very, sincerely sorry.” Of course Pitch was grinning ear to ear as he said it knowing that doing so was only infuriating Bunnymund further, but the rabbit had no recourse without making himself out further to be the uncooperative one.

Bunnymund reeled at North in shock that he would actually threaten him with a spanking as well. What was this? Pitch following then with his most insincere apology he’d ever heard left Bunnymund stunned silent that this was even being allowed to go on. He stared back up at North
shaking his head, finally deciding he was tired of playing this game. Pitch was getting entirely too 
much enjoyment out of riling him up, so begrudgingly he swallowed his pride if to only get North to 
put him down again, “Alright Pitch, I apologize for my statement earlier. If North says ya meant it, 
I’ll drop it.”

North gave a curt nod, relieved that the tense situation was finally at an end. Of course, he had no 
plans of actually going through with spanking Bunny, and he hated that he had to be pressed into 
giving the threat to his furry comrade, but he didn’t know what else to do to get the two to stop. 
“That is better,” he said, slowly releasing his hold on the two. “Now, if you both will take seats, we 
will approach this as civilized adults.”

Pitch seemed quite satisfied with the outcome although he would have preferred seeing the Cossack 
unleash a bit of his fury on the rabbit that he’d had to painfully suffer. That would have put them on 
a more even playing field, but that perhaps would be a win for another day Pitch decided.

Bunnymund stormed back over to the seat he’d been sitting in before and sat staring back at North 
now in order to keep his temper in check.

Pitch glided over to stand about five feet away from Bunnymund clasping his hands loosely behind 
his back. Sitting was not something he really wished to do at the moment.

North eased himself down in the chair closest to him. The room was silent for a few minutes before 
North spoke again.

“As I’ve already said, Pitch has paid for wrongdoings at my hand. But the crime was not targeted at 
me. It was targeted at you, Bunny. And I think it would be good if Pitch did chores for you as 
compensation.” He raised a hand before Bunny could say anything. “Before you reply, I will add 
that if he goes to your realm, I will accompany him to keep eye on him. Or you can bring work here 
for him to do. Either way, Pitch will do work for you.”

Bunnymund scowled thinking he didn’t want Pitch anywhere near his warren, and he also didn’t 
want him near anything he cared about. He did want Pitch to suffer more for what he’d done to him 
though, so Bunnymund considered it carefully. He studied Pitch watching the shadow move back 
and forth from foot to foot standing in place and obviously not overly comfortable standing there 
awaiting Bunnymund’s decision. Bunnymund smiled finally realizing why Pitch had chosen to stand 
there during their meeting over sitting in one of North’s many comfy chairs, North had tanned his 
hide well enough that he didn’t want to sit. Bunnymund decided he knew exactly what Pitch would 
be doing for him and how uncomfortable he would be doing it. Bunnymund nodded, “Alright, I 
know what he can do… if he can sit still long enough ta do it. Ya say ya like intricate work Pitch? 
Well, I tell ya what; you can sit where all the googies come ta be inspected for cracks. Ya will need 
the magnifying glass I finely crafted into my special workstation ta spot cracks and inspect them for 
any dye inconsistencies, and there are a LOT of them to inspect! But I have it set up so that they can 
line up and move one by one up a ramp onto the processing desk and back into the warren. It’s a 
pretty elaborate process if I do say myself! It’ll take ya about two days to move through the current 
batch, but if you’re doing that, I can tend to the vats of chocolate like I’ve been meaning to get a start 
on.”

Pitch didn’t like the thought of doing any chores for Bunnymund. He still felt that having to pay for 
his crimes twice over was wholly unfair, but North had insisted, and he knew that there wasn’t going 
to be any getting out of it. The idea of sitting at some desk for long hours at least any time soon was 
troubling. It chafed to just have the fabric of his clothes move across his backside, the thought of 
sitting in one place for long hours sounded very uncomfortable indeed. Wanting to avoid doing the 
job until he was less sensitive Pitch lied, “Well, I… I have a time sensitive project I’m working on
with the reindeer at the moment, so we can set this meeting up for the end of the week then?”

North suddenly slammed his hand down on the armrest of his chair and glared in Pitch’s direction.

Pitch visibly jumped at North’s reaction hoping he wasn’t going to call him out for lying on the spot. His eyes were wide as saucers as he stuttered, “Or… or not. I… it can wait I suppose.” Pitch was pouting now looking quite unhappy.

“That is better.” North said, still glaring at the Boogeyman. He then turned to Bunny. “That sounds like excellent idea. I will tag along to make sure everything goes well.”

Bunnymund smiled feeling much better about the situation. Pitch doing this task would save him several hours within the coming weeks of having to do it little bit by bit himself. The added benefit that Pitch would be dually unhappily squirming throughout his term in the warren seemed payment enough for his transgressions, “Right then. Do ya want to start tomorrow morning? I can get a desk for you ta work on your own gadgets while yer there North; no sense in you being punished alongside Pitch. I know you like ta stay busy, so it might help pass the time for you.”

Tomorrow morning? That was less than ten hours from now, and if he were truly unlucky less than that depending on what Bunnymund and North denoted as ‘morning’ for him. Either way, it wasn’t nearly enough time Pitch thought miserably.

“That sounds good to me.” North nodded, smiling. “What about it, Pitch?”

Pitch grimaced not bothering to look at them as he rolled a corner of the rug with his foot complaining, “I don’t have much of a choice do I?”

North raised an eyebrow. “No, you don’t. And you have no one to blame but yourself.”

This comment only served to annoy Pitch as he scowled hissing back, “So I’ve been told over and over!”

North leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. He ignored Pitch and turned his attention to Bunny. “So it is settled then. By the way, how are you feeling?”

Bunnymund regarded his friend with a tired smile, “Better. Sore, but nothing serious.”

Pitch not wanting to be a part of their long drawn out conversation interrupted with no small amount of scorn, “If everyone is done deciding my future, may I be excused?”

North tightened his mouth and let out a small sigh. “Why not join us?”

Pitch was sure hanging out with Bunnymund and North was going to be a mostly one sided conversation between the two of them with him just listening to them talk which was not appealing at all, but then the fact that North wanted him to join them made him want to stay in some capacity. He wasn’t really made privy to many of their conversations, so he was curious despite himself. Pitch looked at North earnestly now as he considered and finally decided, “Alright.” He moved over to the sofa next to North having second thoughts but not voicing them as he did his best to mask his pain by gingerly draping himself across the couch to distribute his weight so as not to cause any pressure to sensitive areas. He grabbed one of the many large pillows on the couch and propped it on the sofa arm to casually lean across it like a languid cat. He looked at the two of them now his inquisitiveness shining in his expression.

North sighed wearily, “It has been long few days with inventory.”
Bunnymund nodded, “It never seems to end; preparations for next year. I always think there might be something more to add to the pot for next Easter, and sometimes I get an idea or two, but lately I feel like I’m lacking something to spice it up. Kids these days are so hard to inspire with all the video games and other distractions out there.”

Pitch smiled, “Maybe changing your color scheme from pastels might help.”

Bunnymund balked at the idea, “Ta what?”

Pitch’s smile widened, “Oh I don’t know… grays… blues… purples… it’d make finding the eggs much more of a challenge if you ask me.” He gave a small laugh thinking of the eggs blending into the shadows and the little ankle biters passing right by them instead of finding them.

“Pitch may be on to something.” North frowned. “Although I don’t think gray would be appropriate color.”

Pitch deadpanned, “Let me guess, you’d paint them red and green…”

North shrugged. "Red, green, blue, yellow.” He turned a smile to Bunny. "Have you thought of adding glitter?"

Bunnymund’s mouth hung open as the two spirits spoke a slight hint of disgust and horror on his face, “Uh no. Both of ya just stop while you’re ahead. My googies are not going to look like personifications of Pitch or North thank you very much.” He shook his head thinking on his poor eggs being discolored in such a fashion tragedy.

This of course made Pitch’s grin broaden, “Oh rabbit, where’s your sense of adventure?”

Bunnymund cut eyes at the nightmare lord, “Pitch, this is the last time I’m gonna ask ya ta not call me rabbit, or I’m gonna spank ya myself!”

Pitch blanched at the threat immediately frowning as he squinted his eyes angrily at the Pookan replying heatedly, “You will do no such thing!”

North frowned in annoyance. “Please, we are here to have relaxing conversation. Can we not have conversation without it turning into yelling?” He turned to Bunny. “I don’t see what harm would be to add little bit of glitter. Imagine little pink eggs with shiny glitter all over them. It would make some little girls happy to find on Easter morning.”

Bunnymund actually thought on North’s suggestion turning to him fully, “Ya know mate, that ain’t a half bad idea actually.”

Pitch was still brooding over Bunnymund’s threat and being chided by North for his small amount of fun as he muttered something under his breath about the Pookan being way too temperamental.

North frowned. "Did you say something, Pitch?"

Pitch looked up taken out of his own reverie merely giving a noncommittal shrug, “Nothing anyone wants to hear. Please do go on though; don’t let me stop a riveting conversation about pink eggs and glitter,” he mocked.

Bunnymund’s ear twitched in agitation, but he said nothing only glaring at Pitch.

North looked at Pitch out of the corner of his eye. “I don’t see what would be harm of taking Pitch’s suggestion as well. Darker colored eggs might pose fun challenge.”
Bunnymund rolled his eyes, “I’ll tell ya what, why don’t ya let him wrap some of your presents in his gloomy colors, and I’ll let him paint some of my eggs in the same way.”

Of course Bunny’s words were said in jest in spite of North’s reply, but Pitch looked almost offended by them. His colors weren’t gloomy! Blacks, grays, Silvers, blues, and purples could be quite lovely if cast right he thought defensively feeling the need to reply in kind if only to defend his chosen colors, “You know, a present could be wrapped in black paper speckled in silver and trimmed in gold, and an egg could be colored grey with a light highlight of blue or purple… maybe a mix of both even and be quite captivating I would think. Not that I’ve painted any eggs or wrapped a Christmas present, but I think it could be enjoyable… to someone.” After he said this, Pitch felt a little silly thinking the other two guardians likely thought his ideas to be ridiculous and not anything they wanted expressed in their particular holiday.

Thinking seriously now on the color blend Pitch suggested Bunnymund smiled, “Ya know Pitch, my river paints from the imagination; ya can try out your idea tomorrow to see it in reality.”

Pitch blinked in surprise, “Really? You’d… you’d really let me paint one of your precious eggs?”

Bunnymund nodded, “Yeah mate, I’d like ta see what you can do.”

Not knowing how to respond, Pitch just gave Bunnymund a small shy smile of appreciation for not shooting his idea down and for giving him the opportunity to actually paint one of his well-guarded eggs that Pitch knew meant so much to the rabbit.

"I think it is excellent idea." North agreed. "To be fair, gold and silver are colors of Christmas, too. In fact, there are some Christmas wrapping papers that are blue and purple. All colors can be for any holiday. You don't have to stick with tradition."

Pitch contemplated the two guardians' holidays now in the capacity of them including himself, and it left him to feel a disquiet to think of himself actively participating in them over trying to destroy them.

It was an odd sensation to feel like he could actually be a part of something so against his nature. It also scared him more than he’d like to admit wondering how realistic it was to imagine this kind of life. It was true that his presence was not needed in order for fear to propagate; if that were the case, he would have faded from existence long ago from the myriad of times he’d found himself locked away for decades of loneliness in the darkness. This did not quell the want and need to fulfill his aspect's purpose. And as much as he wanted what the guardians were offering him, he knew he was going to need to address his own needs in this fashion eventually. It left him feeling troubled as if two parts of his whole were being pulled in opposite directions, and he felt helpless to distinguish between which side would win or lose this internal battle. Pitch was unsure how these two very different wants he had could ever coexist together, and more importantly he was afraid of choosing fear and losing this newfound companionship because the guardians would be unable to accept that fundamental side of who he was.

Bunnymund cocked his head at the nightmare king seeing he'd become gravely quiet and had a forlorn look cast across his face, "What's the matter Pitch?"

Pitch blinked taken out of his thoughts, "Hmm? Oh... nothing. I was just thinking."

Bunnymund wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that, but he didn’t prod further deciding it was getting late, and he still wanted to set up an area for North to work on his gadgets before their get together in the morning, "Alright you two; I'm gonna head out. Just come on by in the morning when you're ready North." Bunnymund rose with a stretch tapping the ground to open a hole as he readied to
The air was quiet after Bunny left. North continued to sit, staring into the fireplace until Pitch wondered if he had fallen asleep.

"I can't wait to see what you come up with tomorrow." North finally said.

Pitch thought on this now, and it was a much happier reflection. The thought put a small smile on his face as Pitch responded, “Me to. I’m surprised that Bunnymund even suggested it outside of the jest he’d originally made honestly. I didn’t think he’d let someone like me ever get near a paint brush and one of his eggs.”

“Bunny can be temperamental sometimes, but he has side you don’t see too often.” North smiled.

Pitch nodded smirking, “He and I tend to grate on each other, but I can see there are other attributes he carries that are less annoying.”

“If you'd stop poking at him and gave him chance, I think you would really come to like Bunny.” North said.

“But he’s so much fun to poke at,” Pitch’s smile widened in obvious enjoyment of giving the rabbit a hard time.

“He is, isn’t he?” North chuckled. “I got big kick out of it at first, too.”

This admission amused Pitch, “It’s amazing the two of you were able to become so close with the way you covet your personal holidays.”

North smiled. “When you are as unique as we are, you become family. We are all different, true, but that’s what makes us unique and special. We sometimes joke with each other about our holidays, but it is all in fun.”

North’s remark on being different brought Pitch’s mind back to his previous thoughts as he frowned, “Yes… we are all very different. Some of us a little more than others.”

North lifted an eyebrow. “Yes, this is quite true.”

Pitch studied North now unsure what to say. He wanted to speak to him about what was bothering him concerning his particular ‘differences’ and how they related to the guardians and his personal future with them, but he didn’t know how to approach it. He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear what the big man would say concerning his needs either, in fact he was afraid the Cossack would find it a step in the wrong direction that he had these needs at all, or a ‘level down’ as Jack had so aptly put it. So, Pitch said nothing as he laid his head on the pillow turning to stare at the fireplace in silent contemplation.

"Something bothers you, Pitch?" North said, his voice sounding sleepy and relaxed.

Pitch’s brow furrowed, “I… uh… no. You look tired. I should let you get some sleep,” Pitch stated more as an excuse to avoid the conversation than as a courtesy as he gingerly rose to his feet.

“Alright, then,” North said. “Good night, Pitch.”

Pitch smiled sadly at the chosen departing words North had used as he responded softly in kind, words ironic coming from the nightmare lord, “Sleep well, North.” Pitch moved gracefully towards the door grimacing as he was reminded again how sore he was but trying not to dwell on it as he was
sure he’d have plenty of time for that in the morning to come.
Chapter twenty

Eggscellent!

Pitch didn’t sleep choosing to read through the better half of the night and just trying to relax. Not wanting the reindeer to be neglected, Pitch made sure to make a very early visit to them if only to brush and feed them before letting them graze an hour and replacing them back into their pens as he was unsure when North planned to fetch him for Bunnymund’s expedition. He was kind of excited to be leaving the North Pole to go to the Warren if only just to be somewhere new.

He had been heading back from the stables when he saw North was already up and about coming from the hallway where his bedroom was. He hoped he hadn’t kept him waiting too long lest North think he was avoiding the visit. Although to be honest any less time sitting to Pitch sounded preferable even if the delay was not intentional, “Looking for me?”

“Yes, I was,” North replied, his face relaxing when he saw Pitch. “Tending to the deer?”

Pitch nodded, “I didn’t want them to get overlooked,” he said honestly. He had started to develop an affection towards them, and having personal loneliness issues, it reflected in his care for the deer and not wanting them to get disregarded.

North smiled at Pitch. "Well, if you are through, let us be off." He reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a snow globe, which he tossed to the side. It instantly created a portal to Bunny’s domain, revealing lush green grass, hills, and springtime flowers. North waved a hand toward the opening. "After you,"

Although the landscapes were pretty, Pitch had to dart into the shade of the trees, “It’s entirely too sunny over here,” he complained lightly.

North stepped through the portal, the portal closing up behind him. He chuckled at Pitch’s reaction. “Better get used to it, Pitch. You will find a lot of sun here.”

Pitch blanched as he shrunk back further into the shadows, “Used to it? There’s no getting used to it! Have you forgotten I’m made up of shadow and darkness? I swear you guardians are going to be the death of me.”

Having sensed their arrival, Bunnymund bounded out of the lush undergrowth to come up beside North with a winning smile, “Welcome to the warren mate! I’ve got ya all set up down below.”

“Is there darkness and shadows down there?” North asked. “Pitch needs darkness to work properly.”

Bunnymund laughed, “Crikey, it’s underground, so I hope so.” Looking over at Pitch skulking in the shadows Bunnymund’s smile broadened, “Don’t worry Pitch, you’re not gonna melt I promise. Believe it or not, I’m not that cruel.” Bunnymund leapt over to the shade trees where Pitch had retreated and opened a hole beneath them in one quick thump.

Pitch bellowed out as he felt the ground open up underneath them and the feeling of weightlessness took over as they plummeted downward into one of Bunny’s tunnels. Of course sliding down one of the bumpy tunnels to the bottom was more than a little uncomfortable for Pitch, and by the time they landed and Pitch had scrambled to his feet, he was more than a little upset.
He rubbed fiercely at his backside as he snarled, “You did that on purpose!”

Bunnymund only shrugged a knowing smile on his face, “Of course I did, it’s the fastest way to get here, and I wanted to make sure you didn’t have to contend with the overbearing rays of the sun. Ya should be thanking me.”

Pitch bared his teeth, “Thank you! You make me want to skin you!”

“Pitch, that is enough,” North scolded, scowling at the Boogeyman.

His jaw dropped looking over at North incredulously, “What?! That flea bag thinks my pain is funny, and I’m the one getting reprimanded?!”

“Hey there! Watch it” Bunnymund pointed a paw at him, “Enough with the name calling. Yer alright, besides, that’s how I always travel. It’s not my fault ya earned yerself a tender tush making it hard for you ta travel this way.”

Pitch glowered at Bunnymund quite irate with him, “You could have found another… less bumpy means of travel rabbit!”

Bunnymund’s ears plastered to the back of his head, his fists balling, but he pulled back his anger knowing Pitch was just jabbing him now in an effort to get him back. He wasn’t going down that road again, “Come on. I’ve got ya set up for work over here,” Bunnymund grumbled pointing down the long tunnel.

North sighed, his eyes rolling up toward the ceiling. He shook his head and walked forward, following Bunny. He stopped, looking back at Pitch. “Well? Are you coming?”

Pitch crossed his arms and scowled a moment longer at Bunnymund’s back. He didn’t respond to North but stormed after the two miserably.

Bunnymund led them through a maze of winding tunnels lined with poking roots and trails of moss lined with patches of glowing blue mushrooms. The dampness of the tunnel left the scent of rain and spring flowers to waft through the airy caverns carried throughout by a gentle rustling breeze. The gust carried dandelion seeds and the scattered dusting of pollen that swayed in and out of the myriad of openings in the ceilings leading to the sunny surface.

Pitch was sure to avoid the smatterings of sunlight beaming down through the ceiling, but otherwise his eyes traveled about taking in the natural scenery of the tunnels mixed with the archaic looking totem sculptures that were embedded within the walls. He found he kind of liked their creepy eyeless stare thinking they would make a perfect complement to a nightmare. He’d been looking back at one of these sculptures and not paying attention to where he was going when he walked right into the back of North falling backwards from the impact. He was about to retort with a scathing remark as he scrambled to his feet when his eyes took in the reason they had stopped.

The tunnel had opened into a massive dome shaped room the seemed to be made of twisting vines, rock, and treetops tightly woven with little inlets that led in countless directions that branched out into the forest surrounding the warren. The holes reminded Pitch of looking at an ant farm except much greener and three dimensional. Along the walls where these outlets dotted, thin lined bridges and ramps crisscrossed across the expanse leading to other inlets or sectionals to go in many directions. All of them had routes that led down to this surface though, and hundreds of tiny legged googies scampered about the area here.

Peeking past North and Bunnymund, Pitch could see that the center of the room held a massive lake
that flowed in to the room from the back wall and winded down to the left out of the massive dome to some other part of the warren. It filtered into the room through a set of three small waterfalls close to the base of the wall that bubbled mildly into small pools that spattered into a long ago impressed ravine. Several strands of ivy hung down here creating a sort of elaborate curtain as butterflies twirled about the strands ducking in and out of the sunlight as if in their own private dance.

In the center above the babbling stream sat a network of ramps that led to a large desk of sorts shaped out of the roots themselves and, just as Bunnymund had described, had an elaborate tangle of links and slides leading down on to the desk’s surface where a huge magnifying glass had been weaved into the contraption and diamond reflectors had been artfully angled to catch the sun and create a concentrated lighting to where the googies could pass over and be thoroughly inspected. The desk stood high to capture these lights of the sun, and an equally tall slender stool made of a winding twisting set of vines was incorporated into the desk and spiraled in a swirl to set in perfect order next to the desk.

Pitch grimaced looking at the design of the desk and stool knowing he was going to practically have to climb to sit at it, and the sunlight shining in concentrated doses was sure to be annoying and frustrating. Thankfully the light was focused solely on the surface of the desk where the magnifying glass was positioned for inspecting, so Pitch would be able to avoid actually being in direct sunlight which would burn him if exposed in it directly for any extended periods.

To the side of the stream was a more customary desk with a wide surface brought in specifically for North and had an assortment of tools and materials that Bunnymund had dragged out in hopes that the Cossack would be able to work his magic with them. Of course a huge velvety chair was placed next to his desk that looked finely crafted and comfortable. Pitch also took note of this frowning hard at the fact that North’s comfort was obviously being so well tended to unlike his own.

North nodded in appreciation as his eyes still gazed around him at the sight. "Impressive!" he said at last. "Most impressive."

Bunnymund beamed in appreciation, “I built it meself! It took years ta get it worked out just so, so that the googies didn’t keep runnin’ into each other during the process. Eh, they still do on occasion, but if’n they fall, the vines’ll catch em and deposit them gently on the ground or the river will sweep them back into the warren unharmed.”

Pitch pointed at the desk irritably wholly not wishing to sit hunched over that contraption for hours. Just looking at the stool and its wooden knotty surface promised pain, “And you want me… up there? Why can’t I inspect them down here next to North’s desk with a plush velvet chair of my own? Surely if you’ve got one extra chair and desk you’ve got another down in this dank hole.”

"You have done fantastic job, I must say." North nodded again, walking forward to get a better view of the construction.

Bunnymund regarded Pitch shaking his head in frustration, “Ta inspect the googies ya need ta be where the magnifying glass is. Besides, even if I did have another desk… which I don’t, it would be utter chaos ta try and work out another process ta get the googies in line for inspecting and cleared out of the way for the next ones in line.”

Pitch rolled his eyes as he fumed, “It’s absolutely preposterous that you need to inspect them for cracks so dutifully with a microscope anyway. Aren’t they just going to get hidden, found, and eaten on Easter anyway? The children that gather them are only going to crack them open themselves, and I doubt they would even be looking to see if there were any cracks!”

“Pitch!” North said, turning around to give Pitch a scowl. “You are to do work for Bunny. This is
job he has chosen for you. You do it or we have another talk in private.” North raised an eyebrow. “I
don’t know why you complain. All you have to do is check for cracks. If you can care for my
reindeer without complaints, surely you are not too lazy to look for cracks in googies.”

Pitch flinched at the mention of a private talk, but the indication of laziness set him off, “I’m not
being lazy! There’s a big difference between this job and caring for the reindeer! The deer actually
need my assistance and care, looking over these two legged freaks for infinitesimal lesions is an utter
waste of time!”

North lumbered over to stand in front of Pitch, his face a dangerous scowl. He put his face into
Pitch’s face, their noses inches away from each other, “It may be waste of time to you, but it is not to
Bunny. One of these days, Pitch, you are going to learn that not everything revolves around you and
your wishes. The sooner you learn that, the better off you will be. Right now, you have job to do,
and whether or not you see that job as waste of time does not matter. You are still going to do it. If
you don’t, we will have private talk and I guarantee you that you will be checking googies for cracks
kneeling on that stool.”

Pitch withered as North’s imposing form stood over him his eyes widening impossibly big. He
gulped feeling the hackles rise on the back of his neck as North boomed down at him. Arguing his
point fully wasn’t worth the impending consequences he decided as he groused rebelliously not
being able to help giving a small quip to assuage his feelings on the matter, “Fine. I’ll do this futile
work. I never said that I wouldn’t… not that I wasn’t going to be forced to do it anyhow! Although if
we’re being completely honest with ourselves here, you have to admit I have a point.” Pitch huffed
his agitation as he moved to back away from North not liking the other man so close in his personal
space. Pitch side-stepped the large man to begin ascending the ramp to get to the desk when
Bunnymund moved to stop him in his tracks.

Bunnymund was fuming staring at Pitch with folded arms as he griped, “Ya better take good care of
me eggs Pitch! Against my better judgement I’m trusting ya here!”

Pitch smiled maliciously, “I’ll do my best. I’d hate to see one of your precious eggs accidently fall
and get smashed to smithereens on the rocks below.” As he said this he made a mocking hand
gesture of walking and falling off of a ledge before turning back to Bunnymund, “That would be
very unfortunate wouldn’t it?” He stated with a dramatic woeful expression. Pitch enjoyed the instant
look of horror that played across the Pookan’s face and the swell of fear that coursed through the
rabbit. He had to take in a deep breath just to savor it.

North pointed a warning finger at Pitch. “Yes, it would.” he said darkly. “Just remember that I am
watching you.” He turned to Bunny, lowering his voice. “Do you happen to have…” he shrugged,
“a switch of some sort?—for me to keep around.”

Bunnymund’s eyes widened at the insinuations behind North’s query before he grinned cheekily
responding, “We’re surrounded by trees mate, I can go ahead and fetch ya one right quick if ya’d
like, or I can watch him while you pick one of your own liking.”

As the two guardians whispered conspiratorially, Pitch had stormed across the small bridge leading
to the center of the room and stared up at the elevated desk as he muttered crossly, “Stupid rabbit and
his infuriating senseless tasks!” Pitch had to tentatively step on the vines and grab the edge of the
desk to climb onto the stool which was just as uncomfortable as he had imagined it would be. He
shifted his weight around a bit realizing there was going to be no happy medium and grumbled,
“Let’s hurry this up already!”

“I will leave it up to you to choose.” North smiled. “Since these are your googies he will be
handling. You probably know where the most flexible branches are, anyway.”
“That I do mate,” Bunnymund smiled at North no lack of amusement on his face as he leapt off to the left disappearing into the thicket of trees.

As if sensing that there was someone ready to inspect them, the eggs had started to funnel up the ramp and move across the table pausing in front of the magnifying glass and wandering about aimlessly awaiting direction to proceed. Pitch’s frown deepened as he leaned in to look closer at the egg. Such odd things he thought as he had to wonder what became of their legs once they had found their intended hiding spot. Realizing it was waiting for him, Pitch waved it on, “Next,” he stated unenthusiastically. Pitch took the next one and spun it on the table getting some small amount of joy watching its little legs kicking futilely in the air as he did so. He wasn’t really examining them at all but simply watching them march onto the table to toy with them by picking them up by their feet, spinning them about, or otherwise finding some other means to pass the time as they processioned through.

Bunnymund had returned to North with a thick whippy limb that he was quite sure would leave an impression and laid it on the desk before hopping over to the ramp to peer up at Pitch.

Of course seeing Bunnymund bounding up the ramp, Pitch all of a sudden took the duties of egg handling seriously and pretended to scrutinize each egg carefully.

Seeming satisfied, Bunnymund announced more for North’s benefit than his own, “I’m a gonna head on down ta the vats then. I’ll come back after I get the first one going in an hour or so ta check on ya.”

North nodded. "Thank you for that certain item." he said.

Bunnymund’s smile broadened, “Any time mate; any time.”

Pitch now curious twisted his head around curiously to see what North had been talking about, but from the distance away he was and the fact that North’s desk was shrouded in shadows, he was barely able to make out North’s features let alone anything on his desk. Deciding it was likely some gizmo or another to make North more comfortable, Pitch turned back to his work with no less than mild annoyance.

Bunnymund sprang off down one of the many tunnels, and once the rabbit was out of sight, Pitch went back to the droll task of sending the eggs through one by one. Of course North couldn’t tell what he was really doing this far away Pitch was well aware, and so he continued on playing around in the same fashion as he’d started finding the task quite mind numbing. His eyes fluttered from the boredom he was feeling now, and if he’d actually been paying attention to the eggs, he would have seen that one of the googies had a horrible split in its shell over just waving it on back down the ramp to cluster at the bottom with the other hundreds of eggs that had amassed there since he’d started this venture.

Bunnymund returned close to two hours from the time he’d left bringing chocolate snacks freshly set from the vat he’d been churning and working with. He was about to call Pitch down to join him and North, who had managed to make an array of wondrous items with the materials he’d left the Cossack, when Bunnymund noticed the googie sporting the horrible crack. He scooped it up, “Whoa there bugger, how did you get over here in this pile?” Bunnymund looked to see if he’d been mistaken to where the inspected eggs were heading, and his expression darkened when he realized this was in fact the inspected batch.

He vaulted up the ramp hotly as he held up the cracked egg, “What are ya doing up there? This egg is so badly cracked ya’d have ta be blind ta miss it!”
Pitch spun around looking at the egg in Bunnymund's hand with disdain, “Hmm. So it is. It must have wandered in from somewhere else,” Pitch shrugged thinking there’d be no way to tell one way or another.

Bunnymund’s whiskers twitched, “They know to stay in one area until I dismiss them Pitch; this egg is not one of the uninspected ones!”

Pitch sighed responding indifferently, “Well, I must have missed that one. What can I say rabbit? This isn’t exactly my forte.”

Bunnymund was more than angry now as he spat, “Are ya serious? The gap in that egg is comparable to the Grand Canyon!”

“What goes on here?” North asked, lumbering up the ramp and approaching Bunny.

Becoming nervous now Pitch spun around and interjected quickly, “Uh, one of the cracked eggs managed to make its way in to the inspected batch, or… it somehow got past me.” Pitch’s brow beaded with perspiration now trying his best to pass off the bold faced lie he’d just told.

Bunnymund practically shook with rage, “That is NOT what happened Pitch! Ya aren’t doing squat up there but passing the googies through! The past two hours of time you’ve been up there have been a total waste!”

“Let me see gooie,” North said, offering his opened hand out to Bunny. A small thrill of fear went up Pitch’s back as he watched Bunnymund hand over the flawed egg. He was very much fully regretting his lack of assiduousness in actually doing this chore now. If he’d even been halfway paying attention, he’d have spotted the dreadfully noticeable fracture in the egg’s shell. He just hoped North would find he could have by chance over looked the damaged egg somehow.

Bunnymund wasn’t helping matters as he vastly exaggerated the blemish on the gooie to North while the Cossack looked the egg over. "Could it be that he just overlooked it?" North said in a low voice to Bunny, handing the egg back. "After all, he is new at this. You can't expect him to do perfect job first couple hours."

Bunnymund glared disbelievingly back at North, “Overlooked! We don’t even have a magnifying glass down here and this crack is painfully obvious! Heck, I spotted it passively on the ground not even looking for a mistake from ten feet away!”

Pitch had spun fully around now wringing his hands, “North’s right! You can’t expect perfection for my first time doing this job. I’m not as skilled as you at seeing such defects clearly.”

Bunnymund whipped around angrily to look at Pitch, and instead of addressing him, he turned back towards the crowd of eggs and began randomly picking them up to inspect them himself. After only a couple minutes he had another six eggs that should have failed inspection, “And what about these ones Pitch? Did ya miss all of them by chance? No. You aren’t taking the job at all serious. I’m gonna have to go back and recheck all of these eggs all over again.” Turning in frustration to North Bunnymund sighed resignedly, “Ya might as well bring him back to the Pole mate, it’s obvious this chore is not gonna get done properly by Pitch. He’s wastin’ all of our time if’n I’m just gonna have ta inspect them all over again.”

"It will if I have anything to say about it." North said, turning to glare up at Pitch. He said nothing, but motioned with his hand for Pitch to come down.
That look the Cossack gave him promised pain, and Pitch was not at all ready to endure that! He stammered unable to move as the blood in his veins ran cold, “Wait! I can do this! I… I… was just a bit distracted! It won’t happen again! Just give me another chance!” Pitch was feeling panicked now. The last thing he wanted to endure was another spanking so close to the last one! Oh why didn’t he just take this chore a little more seriously! If he’d even put the smallest effort into the task, he’d not be getting reprimanded now.

Bunnymund scowled at Pitch, “Oh now ya want ta do it right! What about the two hours of time ya already wasted? I’m sure North would rather be back at the Pole working on gadgets in the comfort of his home than down here. Not that it isn’t quite lovely, but that’s beside the point. Ya took us back ta square one with this project, and now I’m gonna have ta spend extra time getting the googies back in line ta be processed all over again… more wasted time!”

Pitch paled the more Bunnymund spoke; he was really mad! He gulped, “I… I get it. I’ll take the inspections seriously. It won’t happen again I swear it. I… I should probably get back to work.”

Bunnymund squeezed the bridge between his eyes, “Ya can’t until I clear these ones out of here, or they’re all just gonna get mixed back up.” He sighed tiredly as he bent down ushering all the googies to start moving single file off the platform.

“I want you here, right now, Pitch.” North said, again pointing to the floor in front of him. “I wish to speak while Bunny gets googies prepared again.”

Pitch shivered involuntarily looking quite stricken at the prospect of getting down from the stool and going to North, but he found himself timidly climbing down as the Cossack demanded and moving sullenly over to stand beside him. He’d already lowered his gaze to the floor knowing he'd gotten himself in a world of trouble. He hoped North might feel generous and only give him a severe chiding. Needing to justify his actions, Pitch pouted, "I'm sorry. I know I should have done better, but the work was so tedious my mind drifted. I see where I can improve, so once Bunnymund has everything back in order, I feel I can do the job without error."

North stood without moving or talking and scowled at Pitch. Finally, he reached out and took the Boogeyman by the hand and pulled him over to his desk where he snatched up the switch. He spun Pitch around and gave him three quick swats across his backside with it before letting Pitch go, “That is only taste of what you will get if you do not do the job expected of you.” North shook a finger at Pitch. "You are right. You should have done better, but the work was so tedious my mind drifted. I see where I can improve, so once Bunnymund has everything back in order, I feel I can do the job without error."

Pitch had followed tautly as he was pulled inexorably forward by North. A part of him was screaming to pull away and fight this, but he was sure if he did, it would only make things worse on himself. He wasn’t really interested in fighting a battle he could in no way win.

Pitch was looking down flushed with embarrassment as they walked past Bunnymund who surely knew what North had meant when he’d stressed ‘talk.’ So caught up in thinking about his humiliation, it hadn’t registered that North planned to use an implement on him until North’s meaty paw had snatched the switch off of the desk and spun him about. Pitch gasped about to protest when the explosion of pain erupted across his rear and his body jumped onto tip toes, his posture going rigid on contact. Pitch let out an inarticulate cry hands swiftly darting to cover his already very tender flesh. Wow did that smart! It was a mind reeling sting that radiated long after the swats had been initially applied. He rubbed fiercely at the tortured flesh trying his best to remove the awful bite as he stared wide-eyed in disbelief at North still trying to comprehend what had just happened. Pitch was glad it was already done and over, but it didn’t leave him feeling any less mortified as he ducked his head unable to respond to North’s statement.
Bunnymund continued getting the gookies marching back around to the other side of the lake without taking obvious note of what North had done to Pitch, and Pitch was silently grateful the rabbit hadn’t chosen to gloat over North taking him in hand over his precious eggs as Pitch had more than half expected the rabbit would have.

“Now,” North continued, setting the switch back on his desk, “I want you to get back up there and show Bunny you can do job right.”

Pitch’s eyes followed the implement as North placed it on the desk before he glanced back at the Cossack his cheeks flushed with his shame. He swallowed hard trying to work past the lump that had formed in his throat to no avail. Not trusting his voice, Pitch gave a small nod of silent agreement as his shoulders slumped and his face took on a picture of misery.

There was nothing left to say, so Pitch bowed his head and moved sourly back towards the desk letting out a deflated sigh as he stared up at the stool knowing his previous difficulties were about to be dwarfed with North’s new reminders for him to cooperate. He supposed he had no one to blame but himself, but he couldn’t bear to tell himself that. Instead, he blamed his lack of diligence on sheer boredom and the uselessness of the task at hand. He of course was in no way willing to voice this opinion more than he already had. It did make Pitch feel slightly better defending his actions at least to himself silently for why he’d truly gotten in trouble since it made the guardians out to be unreasonable bullies over what it truly was, Pitch trying to shirk his responsibilities to Bunnymund.

Bunnymund was able to get the gookies back in line within twenty minutes, and the line moved once more, except this time Pitch sat somberly shifting about uncomfortably, but nonetheless performing the task expected of him. Bunnymund watched on for several minutes and gave a slight nod of approval before turning to look over at North with a serious expression, “I’m impressed North. I honestly expected to see him fight ya or at least complain about having ta get back ta work on the gookies. Whatever you’re doing, it’s working. I’m sorry I doubted ya. If we’d have known bringing Pitch into the fold would have benefited all of us way back when, we could have saved ourselves years of fighting each other.”

“Yes,” North nodded. “But I have to say it has been hard on all of us. There were a few times when I questioned my decisions. I still have moments of questioning them. Sometimes Pitch seems to be changing, but then other times he seems to be taking steps back.”

Bunnymund’s gaze traveled back to watch Pitch a moment before responding, “What’s that old expression? Rome wasn’t built in a day? I think it’s only natural he’s gonna take some steps back, but what I see before me now, and what I saw the day we brought him ta us three weeks ago, he’s changed. He’s changed a lot North! Honestly, I expect the road ta get bumpy before it gets smoother. He’s always been as stubborn as a mule! We just need ta make sure we’re keeping his best interests at heart, or he’s gonna rebel, and that is a day I don’t wanna see. For him or us,” Bunnymund stated gravely.

North nodded in agreement. “You are right, Bunny. You are right about everything. And thank you for reassuring me. It means a lot coming from you, since you were against it from the start.”

Bunnymund smirked pointing to himself, “Hey, guardian of hope over here remember?” He patted North on the back, “I think we got everything sorted concerning Pitch and the gookies, so I’m gonna head over ta get the second vat going. It’s the cookies n’ crème vat, so you’ve got something ta look forward to!” Bunnymund’s smile was impossibly wide now knowing how much his friend always enjoyed that particular chocolate from him.

Pitch hadn’t heard the conversation shared between Bunnymund and North, but he’d seen the rabbit bound off once more and North move back over to the desk he’d been given to use. He sighed
already quite bored of the task once more, although he didn’t let that stop him from actually inspecting the eggs this time. Bunnymund didn’t return again until about three hours had passed, and begrudgingly Pitch noted that the rabbit surveyed the googies well before giving a satisfied nod of approval to North. Pitch wasn’t sure if it made him happy to have the rabbit’s endorsement or irritated that the guardian had gone behind him to recheck his work as if Pitch hadn’t gotten the point the first time.

Bunnymund handed a bar of chocolate to North before glancing up at Pitch, “Pitch!” Bunnymund called out taking the nightmare lord out of his self-pity induced state as Pitch turned a melancholy look the rabbit’s way. Bunnymund held up a bar of chocolate, “Why don’t you come down and take a break.”

That sounded like more than a good idea Pitch thought so very tired of sitting on this stool and leaning over this desk inspecting googies. He climbed down and made his way over to Bunnymund scrutinizing the bar, “What’s this?”

Bunnymund smiled, “Just try it.”

Pitch took the chocolate carefully and took a small nibble his eyes lighting up by just how good it tasted. No one made chocolate like the Easter Bunny, and Pitch was discovering just how tasty it was.

Bunnymund’s grin grew, “It’s good isn’t it?”

Pitch nodded his head vigorously as he’d stuffed much more of the chocolate in his mouth making him unable to speak past his chewing.

North laughed from where he sat at his desk. “Careful, Bunny, you’ll get him addicted.” he said, taking another bite of his own chocolate bar.

Bunnymund sat on the desk, “Ah, I got plenty. I was thinking we could call it a day for now and head out ta the stream before ya two head out, so Pitch can try out painting one of the googies. That’s saying ya still want to eh Pitch?” Bunnymund looked over at Pitch curiously now.

Swallowing the chocolaty goodness Pitch blinked thinking he was more than happy to be calling it quits for the day, and on some level he was surprised Bunnymund was going to still let him paint one of the googies after what had happened earlier that morning. He nodded to Bunnymund that he was still interested before looking over to North for approval.

"I think it is excellent idea!” North said, finishing his chocolate. "I have been waiting to see what you can do with eggs."

Pitch blushed, he was interested to paint them as well although to say so made him feel sappy.

Bunnymund took them up to the surface and into a shady part of the grove where he handed both North and Pitch a paint brush and an egg pulling out a brush for himself. Hopping over to the edge of the stream Bunnymund grabbed an egg and dipped the paint brush into the river drawing the brush down over the egg as colors akin to a pastel tie-dye pattern emerged on the shell of the egg, “And it’s just that simple,” Bunnymund explained showing the egg as he finished painting it.

Making his way over to the river now, Pitch sat and delicately tipped the brush into the waters as he drew the tip across the egg, and an indigo blue coated the base of the egg, and a pattern that looked like ice blue lightening streaks designed the top layer. Pitch looked horribly concentrated as he did so more than a little interested in the fact that the river painted anything he thought of.
Bunnymund peered over his shoulder, and Pitch looked back at him expecting ridicule, but the rabbit only kneeled down taking his finished egg in hand studying the designs and colors as he gave the nightmare lord a smile, “That looks good Pitch. Did ya want ta paint another?”

Pitch felt a warmth from the rabbit’s approval as he nodded lightly, “Yeah, I think I’d like that.”

North dipped his brush in the water and began painting his own egg, a look of concentration on his face. He painted it in a hot pink, and then covered it with a light coating of sparkling pink glitter. Smiling, he held it up for Bunny to see. “There! That is what I was thinking of. You could do it in all sorts of colors.”

Bunnymund laughed taking the egg from North looking the egg over with an admiring smile, “Blimey mate; that would make some little girl happy.”

The three stayed painting eggs for about an hour just enjoying the peace of the grove and making small talk about nothing in particular. Pitch looked over the dozen eggs he’d painted now all of them different shades of gray, blue, purple, and black, and he felt an almost inner peace to look at them feeling content with the way the day had ended.
Bunnymund waved his goodbyes as North used one of his snow globes to transport himself and Pitch back to the North Pole.

It was still early afternoon by the time they arrived, and Pitch wondered what he’d do with the rest of his day. He looked over at North wondering what he had planned, but Pitch didn’t want to make the man feel smothered by his presence. He’d already been babysitting him most of the day after all. Pitch grimaced now thinking back on what had happened with the googies. That little bit was embarrassing on a lot of levels. He scratched at the back of his head awkwardly now, “Well, uh I guess you’ll want a bit of time to yourself now that we’re back.”

“I do have work that needs tending to.” he replied. “Can you manage on your own?”

Pitch nodded excusing himself to let the Cossack take care of what he needed to as Pitch exited the lounge and made his way back to the hub of Pole. He looked about watching how the yetis and elves bustled around completing their daily routines. Pitch sighed; he was bored now, and he didn’t feel like going back to his room. The thought to go back to see the reindeer occurred to him, but Pitch found he didn’t feel like that either. He wanted company, and it wasn’t lost on him how the longer he was with the guardians the more he was craving a connection with them.

“How’s everything going?” Jack’s voice came from behind him.

Pitch brightened as he turned to face Jack happy to see him, “Frost! Hey! Going? Uh… better I suppose,” he blushed remembering where they’d left off at the reindeer stables. Pouting he averted his eyes to the ground as he continued bashfully, “I… I got a visit from North not long after you and I spoke last… and I’m working in the warren to make it up to Bunnymund now.” He was glad the boy had come back to see him as Pitch had been secretly worried that Jack might have been mad at him after what had happened at the glacier wall.

"Really?” said Jack. "He found out, huh?"

Pitch nodded unenthusiastically, "Yeah... he wasn't too happy about it." Pitch flushed an even deeper hue knowing without saying it that Jack would know exactly what he meant by his vague statement.

Jack smirked, deciding it was probably best that he didn’t tell Pitch how North really came to find out about everything. “So where have you been all day? I stopped by your room earlier, thinking you might like to ride the reindeer again, but you weren’t there. And you weren’t in the stables.”

Thinking of riding any time soon brought a sad frown to Pitch’s face. The last thing he wanted to do at the moment was sit on a jostling reindeer, “I took care of the reindeer this morning before North came to fetch me to go to the warren. I’ve been inspecting the rabbit’s eggs for most the day.” Pitch remembering the eggs he’d painted and that Bunnymund had let him keep one reached into his robe to pull out the one he’d kept. It was the first one he’d painted, and he held it out to Jack as if it were something precious, “Bunnymund let us paint some of his eggs and said I could have this one.”

Jack’s eyebrows flew up and his eyes widened when he saw the egg. “Oh, wow,” He pointed at it.
“You really painted that? It’s beautiful. I’m gonna have to let you help me paint leaves sometime.”

“Well… the warren stream painted it, but Bunnymund said it takes your imagination to do it. I don’t know how good I’d be otherwise,” he smirked holding the egg out for Jack, “I… was thinking of you when I painted this one, so… I… I thought you should have it. If you want it of course.” Pitch was reticent now wondering if the boy would even want the gift.

“For me?” Jack gently reached out and took the fragile gift, cupping it in his hands. “Thanks,” He smiled. “Actually, painting leaves isn’t hard. Just haphazardly do it.” He shrugged, a crooked smile forming on his lips. “Why do you think the trees look like they were painted by a trickster in the fall?”

Pitch smirked, “You know, freezing splotches of life out of something to change its color isn’t exactly painting, although it is definitely art in my book,” he gave Jack a bigger smile as he said this.

Jack gave him another smirk, somewhat amused by Pitch’s cluelessness. “Actually, it’s not what you think. I paint the leaves in the fall. You know… golds, browns, reds, yellows.” His eyes lowered to the floor. “It’s… a side of Jack Frost not very many people know about. I’m not just about frost and cold.”

Pitch seemed intrigued, “I hadn’t noticed. I do like the change though I had simply thought it was Mother Nature that was responsible for that,” mentioning Mother Nature sent a twinge of foggy remembrance through him that gave Pitch pause as if he should know more about her than a casual happenstance meeting as the spirits often had over the course of hundreds of years. There was something there locked away that even now Pitch felt the need to shy away from. Why? He had to wonder, but after the previous bout of memories Toothinia had unleashed within him, he was almost certain they would also be painful, so he shook the thought from his mind turning back up to Jack.

“Anything wrong?” Jack asked with concern, an eyebrow lifting.

Pitch conveyed worry himself momentarily because he wasn’t really sure what he was feeling. He just simply shook his head, “Uh… no,” not wanting to engage further on a topic that made him feel off-balance, Pitch changed the subject, “So do you use your staff to change the colors then, or do you use some other method?”

Jack smiled. “I have other methods. Let’s just say Bunny isn’t the only one around here who has magic paints.”

“Oh?” Pitch lifted a brow in skeptical amusement, “Do tell. This ought to be interesting.”

“I don’t have it with me, obviously, since it isn’t fall yet. But I have a special palette and brush I do it with.”

“How does it work? Is it like the rabbit’s brushes that paint what you’re thinking?” The thought of his color scheme coating a forest brought a big grin to Pitch’s face. How spooky would that be? He imagined just the color scheme alone would have children shrivel away in fear.

“Um, no, not exactly,” Jack scratched the back of his head as he searched for words to explain it. “Painting leaves is a lot different than painting Easter eggs. I have specific colors on the palette, and when I dip the brush in them and paint a surface, the colors just sort of... magically cover everything and blend together to create the colors of fall.”

“Oh.” Pitch deflated seeming wholly disappointed that his initial idea could never come to fruition, “Well if you have no real control over it, that’s rather mundane comparatively.”
“Who says I don’t have control over it? I’d have to have some amount of control over it or it would paint everything, not just the trees. But, unlike Bunny’s eggs, painting leaves doesn't really require much imagination. There are no patterns, except for blending and mixing colors."

Pitch mused, “What about the mix of colors then? Can you alter the blends to create something… a little less unconventional and boring?”

Jack lifted an eyebrow again. By now, he was pretty used to Pitch’s rudeness and let most of the words roll over him. But currently, he was pushing himself. “Yeah, I can alter the blends a little bit, but not much. The palette was given to me by Mother Nature. She's put limits on it, because she wants the trees certain colors in the fall.”

Pitch frowned there she was again popping into the conversation filling him with an overwhelming myriad of emotions but at the heart of them all was dread. Had he done something to offend the Nature spirit? He couldn’t fathom what, but supposed given his nature, it wasn’t wholly impossible that he’d managed to offend her while not even directly, but that would not explain the level of suppressed guilt that roiled within him to think of her, “Mother Nature gave it to you? Why? Why not just do the job herself?” He questioned cautiously about her curious to learn more about her than why she cared to give the proposed task to Frost.


Pitch rolled his eyes at the narcissistic remark, “Of course. So, she just met you one day and said ‘here, take this job off my hands?’ That sounds rather flippant.”

“As actually, I’ve never met her.” Jack’s smile dropped. “I just found the brush and palette and a note lying under the tree I used to favor.”

Pitch’s face fell at this admission, “That’s… odd.” He wasn’t sure why the lack of knowledge about her seemed to dampen his mood. Strange, he thought compartmentalizing the emotion as he was prone to do when he felt beset and flummoxed by them. Pitch convinced himself that it was actually the mention of freedom that was what must have been depressing him as he turned back to Jack, “Let’s get out of here. I’m feeling claustrophobic. Maybe a walk outside… inside the walls of course. If you’re up to it that is.”


Pitch reflexively shivered before snapping, “Is it hard to believe that I wouldn’t want to feel closed in and trapped? I’ve only felt that way for decades in the dark after all.” The remark opened up old psychological wounds, but Pitch fought to remove the inching fear that collapsed over him like a thunderclap to remember where he was when he had truly felt so entombed.

"Relax. I was just joking with you." Jack held up his hands, not wanting Pitch to go into one of his rants. "It's understandable. Being closed up in that hole for as long as you have would make anyone claustrophobic."

Pitch’s expression softened realizing belatedly that he’d unleashed too much aggression towards Jack. He looked strained now as he spoke, “Sorry. I got a little caught up in the moment,” he blushed slightly for his lack of control over his emotions. When did he get this horrible at keeping a lid on them? It wasn’t always this easy to push him to react was it? He wasn’t sure anymore, the only interactions he seemed to ever remember were ones where he’d been facing off against the guardians. Now he wasn’t fighting them but trying to understand them and get along with them; these guardians were doing a number on him he decided.
Jack nodded. “It’s okay.” He motioned with his hand for them to start walking.

Taking the cue appreciatively, Pitch started to move fluidly down the hallway darting quickly out of the way of the elves bumbling about. He’d actually become quite adept at avoiding them and found himself snickering to himself when he silently observed North constantly tripping on them still even after all these years he’d spent with them. Jack of course flitted through the air after him, so he had no need to worry about stepping on any of them. It didn’t take them long to make it to one of the open-faced elevators that led down to the outer perimeters. The yetis regarded Pitch warily as he wasn’t allowed outside the compound normally (excluding the area that was closed off for the reindeer and very well fortified.) Pitch recoiled from their glares shifting closer to Jack as an indication that they were together and he was not in fact trying to escape. His eyes darted to Jack as he muttered, “Uh, you might have to tell them I’m allowed to go outside with you. They don’t trust me.”

As if an affirmative to Pitch’s exclamation, one of the yeti barked a halt in its gibberish sounding language stepping in front of Pitch and holding a huge hairy palm out to stop further advancement of the nightmare lord.

“It’s okay. He’s with me.” Jack reassured them.

The yeti seemed cross wagging a chiding finger at Pitch and then turning a disapproving glare at Jack but otherwise moving out of the way to let them pass.

“That’s right Igor, step aside!” holding his head high, Pitch sneered his contempt at the ever watchful yeti before striding towards the door with a new found confidence. He was glad to be able to tell someone off without reproach for once.

Jack rolled his eyes at the yeti and shook his head, shrugged.

Pitch’s face was alight with obvious pleasure as they walked out of the hold’s entrance; he practically pranced as he looked about to get a good look at the area he’d previously been denied access to. There was a small thrill to getting his way now, not unlike a toddler being told they could stave off their bedtime and stay up an hour later. He turned those joyful eyes onto Jack now as they moved further away from the still glaring yeti that watched them both with folded arms of disapproval. “Oh this is nice; yes?” Pitch practically bubbled now.

Jack gave a silent signal to the yeti to keep watch, then he whipped out his staff and allowed the wind to carry him along over Pitch.

“Yeah, it is,” Jack grinned. “I do prefer the outdoors over indoors.”

Pitch closed his eyes taking in a deep breath just enjoying the fresh scent of crisp snow without the hint of anything else polluting the smell of it. He took long strides forward now sashaying across the winter scape in gentle steps that barely left an impression even in the newly fallen snow. The wall seemed to stretch on as far as Pitch could see and along the inside of the walls, sculpted out of the ice itself, several mechanisms, obviously created by North, were embedded within the walls as a magical ward of some sort. Pitch peered closely at the moving gears and the slight green glow that emitted from the whirring contraptions, “Hmm. Isn’t that interesting?” He bent down to get eye level to it lifting a finger feeling compelled to touch it.

Jack’s staff came out of nowhere, hooking Pitch’s arm. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Jack said, pulling the Boogeyman’s arm back with the hook of his staff.

Pitch’s eyes widened in surprise as he stared up at Jack, “Oh? And why not?”
Jack shook his head at Pitch. “Those things give off a nasty shock. Trust me.”

A gleeful smile overtook Pitch’s face now as he eyed Jack inquisitively, “Trust you? Is that a ‘for your own good’ or an ‘I know from experience’ trust me?”

Jack tilted his head to the side. “Both,”

His answer only made Pitch’s smile widen, “Really?!” Pitch’s words tinged on over excited now as he prodded, “Oh I sense a story here Jack! Tell me, what were you up to trying to break into the North Pole?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I was. North installed those things to keep me out. It was a long time ago, before I became a Guardian. Way before our last battle with you, even.”

Pitch giggled mirthfully, “So you’re the reason North felt the need to fortify this fully? Oh Jack! What were you up to I wonder?” Remembering an earlier conversation Pitch added, “Oh wait, you did mention something about being at the top of the naughty list; you really must have been bad to even surpass me on that list!” Pitch jested tilting his head at Jack his expression showing pure amusement at Jack’s expense.

Jack rolled his eyes, averting Pitch’s gaze. A small smirk tugged at the corner of his lips. “Yeah, well…”

Pitch huffed in disappointment after a moment longer realizing the winter sprite wasn’t going to give an inch, “Fine Frost; don’t tell me then.” Pitch pouted at him to show his unhappiness with the boy’s stalwart silence as he stood fully once more and began walking away. Pitch turned his gaze to looking at the spires that reached up into the skies. The fortress was quite elaborate and held far more levels of Santa’s workshop than Pitch had initially realized or had the ability to explore as of yet. They walked for some time until they came upon an indentation in the solid foundation. Pitch took pause as he neared it; barely imperceptible by the level of camouflage it had been made with, but there was no mistaking it now, it was a door. Intrigued Pitch walked over to it curiously looking back at Frost with a hint of mischief dancing in those eclipsed pupils, “What do you suppose is behind here?”

“I don’t know,” Jack replied, “but we’re not going to find out. Come on, let’s go back.”

Pitch’s expression reflected frustration, “What? Seriously? Just like that?” Pitch practically danced in front of Jack now to stop his returning Pitch back to the closed doors of a bastion he was wholly dreading being confined to once more so soon, “Come on! Where’s your sense of adventure Jack?”

“Yes, just like that.” Jack said in return. “My sense of adventure is still there, but I almost got in trouble because of you once. I’m not going to make the same mistake again.” Jack turned an amused smirk to Pitch. “And I’m very doubtful that you want to make the same mistake again so soon, too, am I correct?”

Being reminded of his most recent bout over North’s knee made the nightmare lord falter in indecision for a moment before he decided that this particular venture wasn’t causing anyone any risk of getting hurt, so surely it couldn’t be that bad could it? Pitch pleaded with Jack now, “That was different! No one is going to get hurt here, this is just a bit of exploration! You can’t tell me that there isn’t even one small part of you that wants to know what’s behind that door?!” Pitch gave Jack his most earnest persuasive grin, but it came off as more desperate than anything.

Jack sighed. “Oh, there’s a part of me that would like to know, alright. But I’m here to look out for you Pitch, to make sure you don’t get into trouble. What the Guardians think of me and the trust we
share is far more important than seeing whatever is behind that door. While it’s true that no one will probably get hurt, I’m very doubtful that North will appreciate us treading into his private places. I’m sure he has the place well-guarded anyway.” Jack smiled at Pitch. “If you want to explore it, then why don’t we do something totally unexpected? Like ask North permission to go inside it.”

Pitch scowled; that didn’t have the same level of undertaking as just going forth here and now to investigate the mystery, and if North had it under lock and key, it was highly unlikely he’d give them permission to go in it. Deciding Frost was not going to cave, Pitch sighed dejectedly, “Fine, fine. We’ll go to North and ask permission, but he’s probably just going to say no,” Pitch moped.

"NO!" North bellowed. "Absolutely not! Is too dangerous."

Pitch rolled his eyes giving Frost an 'I told you so' glare before turning back to North, "Too dangerous? Now I'm curious; what's so dangerous that you have to keep under lock and key North?" He hoped North wouldn't brush them off because now Pitch was more curious than ever to know what was behind that door.

North fixed Pitch with an annoyed stare. "None of your business. And if both of you know what's good for you, you will keep noses in your own business and keep away from door."

Pitch scowled deeply; if it was one thing he hated, it was being told what he could and couldn't do without even an explanation as to why. Now he needed to know what North was hiding just to satiate his own curiosity. Of course not any time soon since the Cossack would surely be on high alert.

Sighing Pitch stated sarcastically, "Well that's awfully informative. I suppose we'll stop bothering you now North. Are you ready to go Frost, or would you like a list of places we can't go for future reference?"

Jack gave Pitch an annoyed look, but then he turned and walked out of the office and waited in the hall for Pitch.

"Now, don't you feel better?" Jack said when Pitch had joined him and shut the office door. "Asking first saved both of our rears a world of pain."

Pitch pouted, "I suppose so. I have to wonder what's down there that he's keeping secret. You can't tell me that it doesn't eat at you a little bit. What would North have that could be dangerous anyway?"

Jack said nothing as he pulled the hood of his hoodie over his head and turned to leave.

Pitch looked surprised by Jack's reaction as he moved in front of the boy before he could take off, "What? What did I do?"

"You're going to find a way to get inside that door, and I don't want to be anywhere near you when you do.” he said.

Pitch's brow furrowed, "I never said that I was going to open that door," even though that was exactly what Pitch wanted to do, "I'm just curious what the big man is hiding. Can't I mull it over out loud without getting a broach of disapproval from you? We did what you wanted coming to North, but that doesn't mean I'm not still curious about it. Is there something so wrong about that?"

Jack lifted his eyebrows. "I know you never said you were going to open the door, but I can see it on your face." He smirked. "No, there's nothing wrong with being curious. But just be sure to use your common sense. I know you have ill feelings for North, but I don't. I've grown to respect him over the
years, and I don't want to do anything that would disappoint him. But I can't expect you to understand that."

"Aren't you an assuming brat?" Pitch sneered. "I have common sense! And believe it or not, I don't wish North ill... anymore anyway," Pitch's face lost the scowl it wore being replaced with a pout, "I do wish he were a little easier to talk to... without the constant threat of violence."

Jack scowled. “Don’t call me a brat, Pitch, until you've looked in a mirror. Maybe he would be easier to talk to, if you were a lot better behaved.” He managed another smirk. “And smacking your dark behind is not an act of violence.”

Pitch's head snapped back a look of shock passing his features before being replaced between a mixture of shame and annoyance as he muttered defensively, "It is violent; you haven't been on the other end of it! I can be reasoned with without physical recourse, North just refuses to try any other method of dealing with me when he feels I've... not met his standards of behavior. It's completely unfair and barbaric."

"Can you be reasoned with by any other way? Would you actually listen and learn by any other way?" Jack questioned. “And who says I haven’t been on the other end of it?” Jack shifted uncomfortably, not wanting to dwell on that subject any more than he had to. Feeling he'd revealed too much information, he pushed past Pitch and began walking down the corridor, although he could feel the Boogeyman following him.

It did make Pitch feel slightly better to know that he wasn’t the only one to suffer North’s wrath in such a way, and now he wanted to rub it in and make Jack as uncomfortable as he’d made him if not more so as he asked with mock astonishment, “No! Really? What ever could you have done Jack?”

Jack pulled the hood tighter around his face. “Go away, Pitch.”

Jack’s irritation only served to spur Pitch on as his smirk now grew into a wide grin. Pitch kept stride with Jack flitting carefully behind him trying to keep the glee from his voice as he spoke, “Oh come now Frost; you can tell me. I swear I won’t tell a soul! In fact, perhaps your experience might help me to better understand the trials and tribulations you’ve felt trying to fit in here eh?” Pitch really just wanted ammo for later of course to tease Frost if the boy annoyed him or to shut him up if Jack ever mentioned Pitch getting spanked again.

Jack Frost knew what Pitch was trying to do. After all, he was a trickster. Suddenly, the boy stopped and turned to look at Pitch. “A lot has happened since we put you down in that hole,” he started, “Even though I became a Guardian, I did some foolish things and made some mistakes, and I paid for them. What I did is of no concern now. I learned from them, as well as learned from the consequences. I suggest you do the same.”

Pitch’s mood soured realizing Jack wasn’t going to give him anything to work with as he responded tartly, “I was only trying to get to know you better. I figured since we both had a hard start here that sharing might shed more common ground between us.”

Jack sighed, rolling his eyes. “Some things are personal. You should know that by now.”

Pitch spat, “Oh, I see how it is. You’re allowed to drag out the fact that I have been… have faced dire consequences, but you’re above speaking to me about it happening to you? Okay fine; I never want to hear you mention it having happened to me again then either… because it’s personal!” he said this last bit crossing his arms with finality as a deep scowl painted his face. He didn’t have to know Jack’s dirty little secrets! But now Pitch could manipulate Jack’s own clause against him to not embarrass Pitch in the future if he made Jack feel guilty enough to agree to the terms.
Jack rolled his eyes again, shaking his head at how petty Pitch was acting. He mouthed a silent ‘brat’.

“What was that?” Pitch strained to make out what Jack had said, “If you’ve got something to say to me Frost then spit it out,” he growled becoming more than a little perturbed by what Pitch saw as the boy’s apparent elitist attitude.

“No, Pitch, I don’t have anything more to say to you.” He turned to look at the Boogeyman. “Maybe I’ll tell you more, but not right now. Not here.”

Pitch calmed a bit to hear the boy was at least considering telling him, and that was enough for now he decided giving Jack a small smile and a nod, “Okay then. Another time.” As he walked away from Jack, his smile grew thinking he really did enjoy teasing Jack and bantering with him most times they spoke especially when the conversation dipped out of the red and into mellow ground again.

Was this what friendship was? He wondered now if Jack saw him as a friend or just someone he was forced to spend time with on occasion as mandated by the guardians. Pitch’s brow creased as he speculated now the connections he was forming and his perceptions of them and what the guardians’ perceptions of him were. Did they all see him as a nuisance? They seemed to get upset with him on a regular basis, and most of the time they treated him like an errant child which vexed him to no end! But then, they also gave him cookies, hot cocoa, and chocolate bars, and they also let him paint eggs with them and raced reindeer with him. What had mattered most to Pitch though was the tenderness and dare he say it love? …that had been shown to him mostly by Toothiana, Sandy, and North who consequently treated him most like a child. It was almost as if he couldn’t get the benefits without also having to receive the detriments.

He was glad to see he’d finally made it back to his room and breathed a sigh of relief as he collapsed upon the bed his mind drifting now in worried contemplation. All he knew was the more entrenched he became with the guardians the more confused he seemed to feel about where his place was especially concerning them. It made his head hurt to think on all of this circular logic, so he decided to try and drown it out by grabbing up his ghost story book and disappearing into their pages.
Chapter Twenty-Two

Fine-Tuning

The next morning, North lumbered into the reindeer stables in search of Pitch. He peered around him, nodding in approval at how well the Boogeyman had kept everything in tiptop shape.

"Pitch," North called out. He walked forward, peeking into one of the empty stalls.

Pitch poked his head warily out of one of the stalls he'd just been putting the last of the reindeer away in, "North! Uh, just one moment!" Pitch hurriedly pulled the reindeer the rest of the way into the stall before locking it behind him to make his way over to North, "Sorry. You're up earlier than I expected… and I got a little lost in that book you lent me. I had to finish it, so I got a bit of a later start than I intended to here," Pitch flushed. He was surprised to see North here; the big man never really ventured this way.

North nodded, moving to inspect one of the deer. "I am very pleased with work you are doing here. I can't remember a time when my deer looked so healthy and happy."

This was not something Pitch had expected and he beamed feeling honored that North would complement him in such a way, "Well thank you North. I think we have an understanding… and they really appreciate a through brushing and an occasional sugar cube." Pitch didn't mention by occasional sugar cube he meant a handful a day.

North moved on to several of the other deer, nodding his approval each time. "Yes, I'm proud of you, Pitch. And I'm glad that you found your place here, for now anyway."

"For… for now?" Pitch reflected worry now. What did that mean? Was North going send him somewhere else?

North smiled. "No need to worry, Pitch. You can care for deer as long as you wish, until you decide what you want to do with your life once you have paid for your wrongdoings. I figure that someday you will want to move on from this job, when that time comes."

North's assurance seemed to ease his mind although the mention of 'paying for his wrongdoings' did nothing but trample the previous good feelings he'd mustered from North's praise. "Yes well at the rate I'm going that will be sometime next to a cold day in hell it would seem," Pitch's mind once more returned to Frost's words of varying levels of approval noting that it had only been yesterday since the last time North had felt the need to take him in hand and a world away from any imaginable release.

North raised an eyebrow at Pitch's remark as well as the snarky way he had said it. "Keep acting in the way you are doing, and it will be longer." He sighed. "I know this is hard on you, Pitch, but it is the way things are."

The whimsical nature of amorphous time spans elongated further only served to nettle Pitch more, "Why must you insist on telling me at all then? I don't like to hear it, and I'd prefer it not be said at all over just insinuated," Pitch snapped now letting his irritation on the matter bleed into his words.

North only sighed, shaking his head warily. He decided not to say anymore on the subject, seeing that Pitch was in one of his moods. "If you are through here, we best get over to the warren."
Pitch nodded, "I am. Might as well head over to the warren now although I'm not looking forward to sitting at that desk again. It really is quite an awfully boring task," Pitch complained.

North said nothing as he regarded Pitch. He pulled out a snow globe and threw it, opening a portal directly in front of the desk Bunny had set up for him at the warren. North took a giant step forward, walking through it.

Pitch was glad that they hadn't been transported out in the sun again, but he was a bit disappointed they hadn't taken the walk they had through the tunnels to get here as Pitch had rather enjoyed that portion of the tour yesterday. He slumped walking through the snow globe portal with a dull sigh, "So straight back to work it is then. I suppose we would have to ring any of the joy out of getting here through the walk. Wouldn't want any wasted time on our hands," he stated sarcastically as he stared up in dread at the desk wholly not wishing to do this for so many hours every day. The rabbit had said two days' time, but he'd cut him some slack yesterday meaning that there was still a day and a half of this torture (if not more if it were extended) left for Pitch to finish the said task.

North suddenly reached out and grabbed Pitch by the bicep and pulled him over to his desk where he picked up the switch that still lay there. It was still quite early, so Bunny hadn't arrived yet, leaving North and Pitch the only ones there.

Pitch quailed realizing what North had grabbed. He gasped and scrambled to point his rear as far away from the horrible instrument as possible, "I never said I wasn't going to get started! I'll get right to work!" His voice rose an octave from the fear that pulsed through him at North's unsaid threat.

"This is not for that. This is for your bad attitude and snarky remarks on the way here!" North said, calmly, turning Pitch around so that he could easily get at his rear. Once he had the Boogeyman's rear in sight, he gave him seven quick swats with the switch before letting him go. "I am tired of attitude. I have let you get away with it too many times. But no more."

His heart leapt into his throat as he felt himself spun around and the whippy horrible branch connecting on his still quite tender flesh, that it would seem if up to North would never fully be able to be sat on comfortably again. He yowled stepping in a heated dance to avoid the switch unsuccessfully by the grip North held on his bicep. He even reached a hand back once to interfere, but getting caught in the fourth lash was enough for Pitch to know he didn't want to do that again. The pain was fierce and so acute like a blossoming fire that had layers of pain to it. It took all of his senses away as he gasped for air tears instantly springing to his eyes.

North had struck him more than twice what he'd received yesterday, and as he was let go, Pitch was quick to turn around backing into the desk to get a small amount of distance between the two. Although North only loomed forward as he chided the smaller spirit. Pitch was frozen by North's words; he'd been warned about his attitude a few times and harshly so at the party, but he hadn't really taken any note to the threat until now. Pitch looked wounded both in spirit and pride as his lip quivered and he held back a sob. This wasn't happening to him again! Could he not even make it one day without having to endure this humiliation? Against his wishes silent tears spilled down his cheeks as he hitched to control his torrid emotions and speak. He averted his gaze instantly in his shame, "I… I didn't mean anything by what I said. I… I was just unhappy we didn't walk through the tunnels this time," his voice had become soft and laced with a watery tinge as he sniffled wiping at the tears streaking down his face.

"Before that," North said. "What you said at stables." He straightened up, tossing the switch back on his desk. "But if you wanted to walk through tunnels, you should have said so!"

The harshness of North's response and the fact that Pitch grasped he had multiple offenses to which North was referring to made more tears cascade down his cheeks as he slumped a bit against the
weight of his words, "Oh. I… I hadn't realized I wasn't allowed to speak my mind now," Pitch worked to keep the sarcasm out of his voice not wishing to anger North further by thinking his words were meant in contempt. He didn't understand how he was supposed to communicate his distaste in something if he didn't just say so, and this way of speaking had become very much an automatic way of response for him that he knew was going to cause him no end of problems even if he did work to keep his attitude in check. It was easier said than done.

"You are allowed to speak mind." North said. "You can speak it all you wish. Just watch how you speak it in future. Because I will not stand for attitude, snarky, or backtalk."

Pitch nodded still wiping away tears as he let out a sobbed stilted, "Okay." He felt wholly pathetic now hearing how his voice broke under the weight of his emotions; was this all it took now to break him down? Sure, the physical pain was shocking to the senses and hurt like the dickens, but not so much as to make him break down into seemingly unending silent tears as he trembled under the current of them feeling left so fragile and vulnerable.

No, this was something deeper moving him back through several shared moments had between himself and North as well as the other guardians. He had dwelled on his place among them just last night after leaving Frost's company, and now here he was being made aware that he was once more being 'unpleasant' enough to raise North's ire to the point of him feeling the need to respond negatively to Pitch to correct his behavior. Seeing North's disappointment in him was the most crushing although Pitch couldn't fathom why he would care so fully what North thought of him especially after he had caused him so much pain.

The fact he would want to please the man let alone not despise him for forcing change in the form of an ultimatum that brokered further penalties than he'd already been informed he'd suffer was no less than astounding to Pitch to comprehend. They kept changing the rules and molding him to better suit their terms of civility, and his inability to please them hurt because deep down he really did want their approval if only so that he could remain among them. His chest had swelled with pride with North's compliments on his care of the reindeer, and the mention of him no longer doing the job had struck him like a knife in the heart as if to not be doing it meant severance and detachment. All of these feelings were swelling in him now mixing into a confused amalgam of emotions that settled heavily like a stone in his gut leaving the nightmare lord unable to do more than look back up at North with swollen hurt-filled eyes riddled with insecurity.

North smiled down at Pitch, reaching out a large hand to gently squeeze his shoulder. "I look forward to day when I no longer have to do that to get through to you. I look forward to when we can speak on adult terms without pain involved." he said in a low voice, as if he was afraid someone might be listening to their conversation. "Please do your best to make that day come for both of us."

Adult terms? Oh that stung worse than the switch had reaffirming once more to Pitch the light in which North saw him. He wanted nothing more than to get away from this situation as he numbly nodded in acquiescence to North thankful when he was released and able to slink away to climb up to the desk and start working (that he truly did not wish to be painfully sitting at, but which was better than to continue confronting North's quiet contemplation of him).

The googies knew nothing of Pitch's turmoil and only began bumbling forward upon recognition that their was a presence at the desk. Pitch began scanning them in short order still silently sniffing back the tears that didn't have the sense to stop.

Bunnymund hopped into the room waving to North a look of surprise on his face that the two were already started without him, "Why hello! You two beat me here! And here I thought I was the only one with a bushy tail." This was of course meant to get a laugh, but the room was solemn leaving the
smile to drop off the rabbit's face. He looked at Pitch who had his face turned to the side apparently heavily into his work, and from Pitch, Bunnymund turned back to North a look of bewilderment etched on his face as he twitched a long ear and shrugged uncertain what to say now but looking to North to clear the matter up.

North finally came out of his thoughtful state and realized Bunny had spoken to him. "I am sorry, Bunny." he said, moving to walk toward his desk. "I just got through..." He found he couldn't find words for it anymore as his sentence trailed off into a number of hand gestures, finally picking up the switch to show Bunny before tossing it back on his desk and sitting down, heaving a big sigh.

Pitch was straining to hear what the guardians were saying knowing it concerned him, but he didn't want to draw attention to the fact he was eavesdropping, so he kept his head turned fully away. Hearing the switch clanging back onto the desktop though made him cringe deciding on second thought, he really didn't want to hear what they might say... not that he could stop trying to listen anyway.

It didn't take much for Bunnymund to get what North was getting at, and his eyes wandered about the room assessing that it didn't have anything to do with his eggs or warren. He shook his head looking back at Pitch a moment before turning back to North somewhat wary, "Should I ask?"

"Pitch has got a mouth." North simply said. "Sometimes I think he says things to spite me. I have let it slide for too long."

Bunnymund gave a slow nod, "Yeah, I kinda remember a discussion along those lines... a couple of conversations actually, so the hammer finally hit the nail I gather. Can't say I didn't see that one coming. Uh, if'n ya want North, ya look a bit flustered, I can keep an eye out if ya want ta take a walk in the meadow for some fresh air." North looked tired, and Bunnymund hoped to give the man a small reprieve.

North nodded. "That sounds like good idea." He got up from his desk, pointing at the switch. "If he gives you any trouble, feel free to do honors."

There were no jokes nor smiles of amusement at Pitch's expense from Bunnymund whom had by now truly grasped the severity of the situation. Where once Bunnymund might have thought he would have liked to see Pitch getting throttled by North for the strain he put on the guardians, the previous day and this morning sobered him to the reality of what gravity these punishments held. Bunnymund nodded gravely, "Just... take yer time mate; I got this." North nodded his approval seeming relieved as if a weight had been lifted off of his shoulders. The man ambled towards one of the tunnels that led up directly to the meadow and Bunnymund watched him as we went shoulders sagging. Having to continuously tan Pitch's hide these past few days was obviously taking a toll on the man Bunnymund could see, and he hoped for both Pitch and North's sake that Pitch would wise up.

Pitch bit his lip listening to the two guardians wanting so bad to comment about 'his mouth' being his, and that he should have a right to express himself, but hearing Bunnymund go on to say that the guardians had discussed his attitude on several occasions made him gulp down his words further than he already had hating to think they'd actually had not just one but multiple talks about his attitude. Maybe he did need to think more about what he said to them? It was a foreign concept for Pitch to care about others reactions to what would tumble out of his mouth, but he decided he was going to at least try to be more cordial. He needed to be if he was going to get past getting spanked by North on a daily basis which he surely could not abide. He shifted about uncomfortably in his seat, yes, change sounded like a good idea.

Bunnymund watched Pitch work methodically for close to thirty minutes, and although he tried to
hide his face, Bunnymund could see that Pitch was sulking. Finally he smiled jumping up onto the platform and speaking gently, "Hey, Pitch."

Pitch froze looking down at Bunnymund curiously to see what the rabbit wanted, "Yes?"

"Here," he held out a piece of chocolate to him.

Pitch now turned fully regarding Bunnymund with a blink before gingerly reaching out to take the candy with a small smile and a soft, "Thank you Bunnymund."

Bunnymund was surprised to hear Pitch actually call him by his rightful name; his smile widened, "Yer welcome. I thought ya might need a little something ta brighten your day."

Pitch had begun to take small nibbles off of the chocolate doing his best to savor it this time as he studied Bunnymund with inquisitive eyes. His small smile grew at the admission; he really did need something to brighten his day since it had started off rather badly. Bunnymund was being surprisingly kind he found, and after what had just happened, it was sorely welcomed. He sighed looking down at the chocolate in his hand as he spoke despondently, "I can't stop making messes it seems."

Bunnymund's ears twitched as he considered Pitch's face. It was soft and contemplative, a far cry from the cruel and malicious face he remembered battling so many years prior. That in itself gave him hope for the man, "Well… lately ya've been on a bit of a streak, but overall not so bad I'd say. Eh… it's gonna take time ta change Pitch. No one expects ya ta do it overnight. Ya just need ta make your best effort, and the rest will work itself out."

Pitch's eyes rose to meet Bunnymund's something unspoken there but definitely hopeful to hear the rabbit believed in him still even if his own belief in himself was beginning to falter, "Do you really think I have it in me to change?"

Bunnymund smiled gently, "It's not up ta me if ya got it in ya, it's up ta you, but yeah, I do Pitch. You already have."

Pitch mulled over his words as he continued to munch on his chocolate.

"There's a lot more to you than I thought I'll be the first ta admit. You're not what I expected, and I think we're not what you expected either am I right?" Bunnymund queried.

His eyes drew away from the chocolate once more to stare fully at Bunnymund, "I… I didn't expect anything but scorn from the guardians honestly. We've been fighting on different sides for so long… it's hard to take back everything that's happened through the years… North has made clear it'll still be quite a while before I settle those scores," his cheeks colored a deep hue of purple as he thought carefully on his words now, "I… have a hard time thinking I'm making any headway towards tipping the balance of that scale with all my recent… transgressions."

Bunnymund could tell this was something that bothered Pitch deeply, and he grimaced unsure of what exactly to say. His lack of reassurance was reflected in Pitch's stance as Pitch's head lowered a little more in obvious despair, so Bunnymund quickly found the words he wanted to say, "I don't really think they're on the same scale Pitch. There's the stuff you've done before we knew you, and then there's the stuff you've done since we've taken ya in."

This didn't seem to be helping much as Pitch stared at him in confusion.

Bunnymund sighed scratching his head as he contemplated the best way to explain to Pitch what he meant, "The stuff ya'd done before was bad okay. I'm not gonna sugar coat it for ya, but the stuff yer
being punished for now is more learning curves ta being part of the family. Yer getting better all the
time… there's just a few kinks ta work out still. Does that make sense?"

Pitch nodded lightly smiling brightly at the word family. The fact it came from Bunnymund's mouth
had shocked him as he'd assumed Bunnymund would be the last to ever consider Pitch worthy of
being a part of their group. The fact that he did gave Pitch hope.

Bunnymund of course sensed his center within the other just as surely as any of them did when their
center was present. He smiled giving Pitch a soft pat on the leg and a wink before turning back to
hop over to the desk. Once there he added, "Hey when North comes back, I'll finish up the next vat
and bring ya some primo chocolate covered cherries."

"I like the sound of that," Pitch beamed having finished the last of the scrumptious piece of chocolate
licking the residual melted chocolate off his fingers. Feeling content now, Pitch turned back to the
googies on the desk and returned to processing them, except now he was wearing a small smile as he
worked.

It was about three hours later when North returned to his desk and seated himself in the big chair. His
features looked rested and calm, a smile on his lips. He seemed to be lost in his own thoughts as he
hummed a simple tune.

During the time that North had been gone, Bunnymund had been moving the googies that Pitch had
processed back out into the warren trusting Pitch to keep working for the small amount of times that
he had left him to his own devices (which he'd mentally counted the googies remained before he'd
left and when he'd returned), and Pitch did not disappoint him. He was pleased that Pitch was
actually quite amiable throughout the length of time that North had been gone, and Bunnymund was
sure to report these things to North as North sank down into his chair.

"How is everything?" North asked as Bunny approached him.

Bunnymund beamed, "It's actually been going rather well. Pitch has been moving through the
googies pretty quickly. Quicker than I'd have expected, but his work has been spot on. I left him to
inspect on his own for a bit since it was getting a little crowded on the platform. He's made up for the
work we didn't do yesterday, and I'm pretty confident that we'll get the batch completed by the end
of the day even! He might even finish before I get the next vat done at the rate he's going,"
Bunnymund leaned in conspiratorially as he half whispered, "He even said thank you Bunnymund…
not rabbit eh?" This last bit was what Bunnymund was the most impressed with obviously.

"Excellent!" North smiled wide as he glanced up at Pitch. "That is good to hear, indeed. Maybe we
can color some eggs again today."

Bunnymund nodded enthusiastically, "Yeah, I think so. Let me head on out and get the black cherry
vat going, and once I get that one set up, we should have plenty of time to finish up with a little
painting of eggs. Pitch should be done today though, so ya won't have ta worry about coming back
tomorrow. I know ya got enough on your plate already." Almost as an afterthought Bunnymund
offered, "Uh, ya know, if ya ever need a break… with Pitch an all, I can come take him off yer
hands for a day or so." Bunnymund hated seeing his friend looking strained, and after his heart to
heart with Pitch he was feeling amiable to the idea although his sentinels might not be as wary as the
yeti were for North's liking.

North nodded at Bunny's offer. "I will most definitely take you up on offer. But… are you sure about
that? You think you will be able to handle him?"

Bunnymund's ears went flat not fully sure as he shrugged, "I don't honestly know, but I'm pretty sure
I can handle him. The warren's pretty secluded and quiet, and I'm a good tracker if he did try ta jet."

North's brow furrowed as he gave a nod. "Pitch trying to escape is what I am concerned about. If he ever got out in real world again, it would be hard for us to find him. I know Sandy weakened him, but we do not know what else he is capable of."

"I think he was already weakened by the time we found him, but yeah, that little trick of Sandy's ta keep him from shadow jumping has been quite helpful in containing him. Ya think if he gets access ta giving nightmares he'll escape Sandy's influence and we'll be back where we started?"

Bunnymund pondered.

North shrugged. "It is hard to tell, but I don't wish to find out the hard way. He feeds on fear. In a sense, we are starving him by keeping him here. Or rather, we're starving the fearlings that live inside him. If Pitch ever got loose, there is no telling what he might do. That is why we must take extreme caution while he is within our care." He pointed a finger at Bunny. "If I ever do let him come here, you must take extra precautions. It is not that I don't trust Pitch. I don't trust fearlings. They have sort of an… influence over him at times that I cannot explain. I just wish there was way to separate the two and free Pitch."

Bunnymund grimaced, "He told Tooth that they've become a blended entity, so that's probably not an option. That said, we can't keep him under lock and key forever North. For now, sure. While we're rehabilitating him we need ta keep him under a watchful eye and monitor what he has access to and can do, but at some point in the future we're gonna have ta trust him ta be constructive with his powers and know he's gonna be able ta control them himself. It might be wise ta start considering it now before it becomes a problem for the future."

"You are right, Bunny." North said with a nod. "I know we cannot keep him forever, and this is what concerns me. Pitch is only one that can get control of his power and turn it around for good, but it is going to have to be up to him to do it, as well as up to him to find his purpose. But first he is going to have to want to change. This whole process has to be approached in small steps for it to work. Right now, Pitch needs to sort out his own feelings, which I think he is doing in his own subtle ways."

Bunnymund nodded, "He is. It's funny ya mention change as it was something we talked about in depth while you were gone. He actually asked me if I thought he could change. He wants to North; I actually sensed hope in him when I told him I thought he could. That speaks volumes in my eyes."

North smiled, a twinkle appearing in his eyes. He turned to face Bunny fully. "That is what I wanted to hear. It is encouraging to know we are headed in right direction at last."

His smile was infectious, and Bunnymund's own grew to see it on North's face. He placed a paw on his shoulder, "If anyone could turn Pitch in the right direction, I knew you'd be at the top of that list." He pointed to the tunnel to his right, "I'll be back in about an hour." He turned to leave, but before he sprang off he added, "It's good ta see ya smiling again mate."

Pitch had seen North return, and perceiving the big man in better spirits put Pitch's mind at ease. He'd sensed the man's distress before he'd left which had compounded into his own sullen mood. As the hours had ticked by, he'd had a lot of time to think in between points where he and Bunnymund had spoken about a myriad of topics mostly concerning Easter but occasionally about more interesting topics, at least to Pitch, but his mind kept going back to North's forlorn expression as he'd left and the uncomfortable feeling that Pitch had caused it. As Bunnymund left now, Pitch found himself throwing furtive glances North's way to catch a peak of what the big man was doing now.

After Bunny had left, North leaned back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest. He stared off in
the distance, contemplating things. Hearing Bunny's report and encouraging words about Pitch really helped to lift his spirits in more ways than one. Up until now, he had found himself slowly becoming discouraged and worn out, since it seemed like he wasn't getting anywhere with Pitch, or seeing any big changes for that matter. Oh, sure, he realized and understood that it was going to be a slow process, but still... it always helped to see results of some kind. The way Pitch had been acting, he wasn't sure if he was going forward or backward. But now he had been reassured that he was going forward.

Pitch continued to work at a steady pace his nerves concerning North making him pour his energies into the googies, and he had to blink and look about when they stopped coming across the desk. It had been about forty minutes or so since Bunnymund had left, so it might still be a little while before he returned leaving Pitch no further work. He wanted to remove himself from the desk either way feeling stiff and sore as he carefully stepped down. He was hesitant to approach North now since where they had left off had been rather awkward, and the man seemed busy building some sort of contraption that reminded Pitch of a jellyfish with its fragile tendrils that flared out like rays of the sun. He stepped a little closer silently padding up far enough to get a better look without disturbing him now.

"Have you finished work?" North simply asked, not taking his eyes off the thing in front of him.

Pitch looked unsure as he nodded even though North wasn't looking at him, "Uh, yeah. It's done... as far as I know anyway since no more of the eggs are coming to the desk now." He took a step closer now just watching North work. It was amazing what the man could make out of bits of inconsequential parts that otherwise had no business being combined, but North found some new and imaginative way to make them work. It fascinated Pitch. He'd watched North on occasion since he'd been at the Pole here and there since the man always seemed to be tinkering with something when he'd approached him, "What... what are you making?" Pitch tested carefully.

"A doodad," North replied, his attention focused on twisting a screw in place with a tiny screwdriver.

"A doodad?" Pitch was unfamiliar with the terminology, "What will it do?"

"Hmmm..." North said, thoughtfully. "We shall see," He picked up another piece and began carefully attaching it to the contraption.

Pitch didn't say any more only inching closer to watch North work. He'd never actually stayed long enough to see what North finished, and without having anywhere else to be, Pitch found himself transfixed on the object in quiet wonder.

"Ah! There we are!" North said at last, tossing his screwdriver down on the desk after he had finished with the last piece. He reached across and picked up a glass full of clear liquid solution, opened up a small hole near the top of the device, and poured it in. "Now we see..." He said, setting the glass aside and pushing a button under the top part of the toy. It vibrated a few seconds, and then gently moved its tendrils, lifting itself up into the air with delicate grace as if it were a living creature. As it ascended, a steady stream of tiny bubbles came out of nozzles on the tendrils. It moved its tendrils in and out and up and down, seeming to be performing a sort of bubbly ballet.

Pitch watched in amazement as it rose into the air rotating in a fluid dance. He couldn't help the smile that erupted from watching it twirl around as he exclaimed, "That's fantastic North!"

North smiled, giving an appreciative nod. He continued to keep his eyes on the toy as it soared higher and then dipped, coming back down. Finally, he turned his eyes to Pitch, studying the Boogeyman thoughtfully.
"Have you ever thought about making something, Pitch?"

Pitch's face went slack, "Make something? Me? I... I don't really have your talents, although I am
envious." His eyes returned to the weaving contraption in the sky, and Pitch watched it in awe as the
bubbles caught the sunlight creating iridescent colors. He muttered softly, "It's... it's beautiful."

North shrugged. "You never know until you try."

Pitch clasped his hands together still mesmerized by the gliding motion of the creation stating shyly,
"I... I wouldn't even know where to begin."

"Would you like to give it try?" North asked, pushing a few miscellaneous pieces and tools toward
the Boogeyman.

Pitch finally pried his eyes away from the wonder to look down at the tools and objects that North
had moved in front of him. He gingerly hovered his hand over the screwdriver before delicately
picking it up and manipulating it in his hands. It felt strange and awkward. His brow drew down in
concentration as he picked up one of the screws testing the fit of the tool by imitating how North had
combined the two before placing both back down on the table carefully. His eyes now traversed the
many items in front of him feeling a bit overwhelmed by the possibilities as he pawed through them
placing them together not unlike a child presses together Legos to see if they combine. He seemed
frustrated though because he didn't understand the fundamentals of building, "I... I don't know what
I'm doing," he groused feeling wholly inadequate as he pushed the items away from himself.

North gave Pitch a loving smile. "Perhaps you just need to start small and simple. When we get back
to Pole, I will give you something that is easier." He turned his eyes back to the toy still flying over
them. "It can be relaxing pastime."

Pitch blushed at the attention North was showing him, "I'd like to learn to build something from you.
Small and simple might be for the best... at least until I get the hang of it," admitting his overly
novice state concerning building made Pitch feel a little deficient, so he found himself averting his
eyes as he said so. Still, he wore a broad smile quite excited that the big man would even want to
take time out of his busy day to teach him to build something. Pitch was doing his best to keep this
excitement contained from bubbling out just to think on it, but he couldn't help feeling a bit bouncy
and much lighter of spirit to consider it now.

The sound of Bunnymund's heavy feet could be heard pounding down the tunnel as he ran into the
room now coming to a stop between North and Pitch as he looked about in amazement at both the
milling googies on the platform and the new device that North had made. Standing up straight he
stated joyfully, "Well now you two have been a might busy haven't ya?"

Pitch beamed turning to Bunnymund now, "I think I'm done!" The smile he wore brightened his face
with his sense of accomplishment.

Bunnymund turned back to the googies nodding, "It looks so Pitch ... and right this time," he
stressed with a soft smile, "I gather I'm gonna have ta make ya a little basket of goodies ta take with
ya."

Pitch didn't care about the soft chiding though, all he greedily thought about now was getting a
whole basket of Bunnymund goodies, "Really? But I thought this was a punishment? Not that I'm
complaining!"

Bunnymund laughed, "It was; now it's not. Ya did the job like ya were asked ta do, and ya finished it
efficiently and without being a spoilt sport about it today, so I figured a little reward couldn't hurt."
Pitch ducked his head kicking his foot at a pebble a moment before looking back up at Bunnymund feeling both embarrassed and appreciative of the praise as he stated softly, "Thank you Bunnymund."

Bunnymund nodded giving him a pat on the shoulder before looking over to North with a big smile.

North smiled back at Bunny, giving him a wink. "And now I think it is time we had some fun, yes? Like painting more eggs."

Bunnymund nodded pulling out a brush for each and handing them to them, "Why don't ya two go on up to the river and get started; I'm gonna make you both a basket of goodies ta take with ya, and I'll meet ya by the river."

Pitch was grinning from ear to ear, "That sounds great!" Who knew punishment could end so well?

North and Pitch made their way up to the banks where several googies darted in and out of the tall grass. They bumbled about to catch them to be able to paint them in the first place. They looked absolutely ridiculous as one ran through North's legs, and Pitch dove to grab it almost toppling the big man on top of him. Thankfully North was more agile than he looked. North and Pitch settled back in the grass by the river laughing once they'd managed to catch a couple of them. They started to dip their paint brushes in the river now to paint their eggs sitting so close they were almost touching now to the point Pitch could feel the warmth that the body radiates when sharing space so close to another person. This was probably the closest in proximity the two had ever shared that wasn't involving a spanking. It felt nice, and this too made him smile. Pitch was absolutely astounded by how this day could have started off so poorly and end so well thinking he probably didn't deserve it, but his heart swelled from the sheer bliss of it. He was truly happy in this moment, and it transcended anything he'd felt in a very long time.

"Mmm… Ah!" North said, turning a huge smile to Pitch. "How is that?" He showed Pitch the egg he'd been painstakingly painting for a few minutes. It was green and red swirled with sparkly gold glitter.

Pitch chuckled warmly, "It's very… Christmassy North." Finishing painting the egg he'd been working on as well, Pitch handed it to North, "I made this one for you."

The egg had an intricate motif of bubbles, gear shapes, and red swirly wispy lines that resembled North's most recent invention, "I was thinking of what you made today," Pitch gently cleared his throat as he stated reservedly trying not to stare at North, but definitely observing the man through his long lashes as he picked up another egg nestled in his lap. Pitch tentatively dipped his brush back in the river to paint again as he watched North from his peripheral to see his reaction almost afraid the man wouldn't see the resemblance at all.

North smiled wide as he looked at the egg. Finally, he nodded his approval. "It is very good—very good likeness. Thank you," He turned his smile to Pitch. "Now I paint one for you." He dipped his brush in the water again and reached to take another egg in his hand. He spent several minutes painting in silence. When he was finished, he handed the egg to Pitch. It was colored in a swirl of dark blues and purples and covered in silver glitter.

Pitch had stopped painting his own egg too curious of the prospect of North painting an egg for him. He was straining to peak over the big man's arm to see, but even though he'd caught a few glimpses of the colors he painted the egg, it wasn't until North had finished it and placed the egg gently in Pitch's hands did Pitch get a chance to really see how artfully North had designed the egg. His voice was full of emotion, "It's lovely North! Thank you. The glitter really is a nice touch." He sat now hunched over his egg just taking in every splash of color quietly contemplative and rotating it slowly
as if it were his most treasured possession.

"Yes, I think so, too." North held up the Christmassy egg to examine it again. He turned his eyes to look at Pitch. "So, I suppose you still find painting to be a lot of mundane work?"

Pitch smirked, "Maybe not as much as I thought it would be. This is kind of nice actually."

Bunnymund vaulted across the meadow now a flash of grey bobbing through the rich fields of green. It didn't take him long to come skittering to a stop beside the other two spirits. He held two fully packed baskets of assorted chocolates, painted googies, and other candies. Bunnymund placed one in front of each, and each were very tailored to the person who received it; whereas Pitch received a variety of different things because he hadn't ever had the chance of experiencing most of Bunny's delights, North's basket catered to the man's professed favorites that Bunnymund knew well by now from the many years they had been friends.

Looking at the eggs the two had painted, Bunnymund bent down to pick them up and admire them, "Adorable mates! Ya two are definitely going ta have ta come back to paint some more! I like the variety you add ta the pool."

Pitch's face was filled with a child-like delight as he perused all the goodies his eyes wide as saucers and mouth hanging agape, "Oh these look wonderful Bunnymund! Thank you!" he squealed in delight, "What's this? Oh stars, this tastes good!" Toothiana would have a heart attack he decided if she ever saw how many sweets were packed into this basket for him. Pitch cradled the basket in his lap now digging greedily through it and giggling enthusiastically as he pecked through the basket taking small nibbles off of a variety of the items wanting to try them all at once.

North laughed merrily at everything going on—Pitch's reaction, the treats, the beautifully painted eggs, the happiness in the air. For the first time since they had brought Pitch to the Pole, he felt like he could just relax and enjoy life. "Well, then, Pitch, if your opinion on painting has changed, the job of painting toys in my workshop is still open, if you want to keep yourself occupied with something. It is slightly different than painting eggs, of course, but I'm sure you will find it enjoyable nonetheless."

Pitch had stuffed so much chocolate down his throat that by the time he'd swallowed and was able to talk again, he was on a sugar high, eyes dilated, and talking a mile a minute, "Yes! I think painting would be grand! Wonderful! Absolutely fantastic! These are sooo very good Bunnymund; I just want to eat them all right now!"

Bunnymund laughed watching on amazed at how animated Pitch was being as well as how quickly he was devouring the candies, "Hey there, ya might want ta slow down just a little bit there Pitch." He chuckled looking back to North, "Oh mate, I'm sorry. He's gonna be bouncing off the walls from that sugar high he's got going."

"He's yours now, Bunny," North chuckled, dipping his brush in the water to paint another egg. "You wanted him to help, you have him until it wears off."

Bunnymund stuttered, "Uh, Pitch? Can we lay off the sweets just a little?"

Pitch pouted grabbing his basket tightly before realizing Bunnymund had a point feeling bit of a nervous twitch from the amount of sugar he'd consumed. He gave a quick nod rattling off with a mass of pent up energy, "Sure. Sure. I'll just set it down, and eat it later tonight. Little bits at a time. Unlike now, where I've almost polished off the basket, but then it won't be too much by then I suppose?"
Bunnymund covered his face chuckling, "Alright North, my bad. We can paint a few eggs ta wind it out of him."

They spent another two hours painting eggs while Pitch talked their ears off about anything and everything feeling rather excitable he found about most things which was quite the change to his normal dour or quietly unyielding nature of response. By the time the candy was wearing off, Pitch's eyes were drooping tiredly feeling the opposite reaction of coming down from the sugar high.

"We wanted Pitch to change." North said, still eyeing Pitch, one eyebrow rising in anticipation of a relapse of endless chatter. "He has changed. Though, I would have never guessed someone could talk for thirty minutes about socks."

Pitch hadn't even noticed the comment looking about with a serene placated smile. He'd eaten way too much candy, and his stomach ached the tiniest bit from the amount of it he'd ingested. Why had he eaten so much of it at once he admonished himself. But oh stars, it was so very good! He sighed his appeasement collapsing on his side in the tall grass to lazily pick at the blades as he listened to the sounds of the birds tweeting and the rustle of the leaves above. He took in a deep breath smelling the sweet scents of cherry blossoms and honeysuckles; all of this gave him a feeling of inner peace.

Bunnymund and North continued to chat quietly between themselves, their voices were carried off on the wind fading into the background as Pitch relaxed in their company. He was on the verge of just fading into a comatose sleep from the sheer level of contentment he was feeling, and after several undisturbed minutes in this way, Pitch did let himself fade into unconsciousness.

Bunnymund's ears twitched when he'd heard Pitch's breathing level out into deep rhythmic inhalations. He hopped to his feet peering into the grass somewhat alarmed before giving a soft chuckle and pointing with his thumb, "He crashed pretty hard there. He's out like a light mate. I guess ya should get him home. If'n ya wanna go by way a snow globe, ya can scoop him up and go, and I'll bring by your baskets of goodies, the eggs you painted, and your invention tonight once I do a little cleaning up around here."

"Sounds like good idea." North nodded, getting to his feet. He took out a snow globe and tossed it, opening a portal directly to Pitch's bedroom. He walked over, bent down, and scooped Pitch up in his arms, cradling the limp, sleeping form of the Boogeyman close to his chest as if he were his own son. Pitch mumbled something incoherent in his sleep, and curled himself around to snuggle next to the warm body of Santa, a smile forming on his lips. Smiling at Pitch's actions, North turned to say goodbye to Bunnymund, the rabbit returning the goodbye with one of his own. When North had stepped through the portal to the other side, the portal closed behind him. He walked the short distance to the bed, where he deposited Pitch gently on it and covered him over with the covers.

Had Pitch really changed that much since that morning? North contemplated this as he watched the dark man sleep. Perhaps one of Pitch's walls had crumbled at last, and this marked a new path that all of them would be traveling down soon. The prospect of it gave North a new hope. He smiled, then turned to leave the room and left Pitch to sleep off his sugar rush.
What's in a Dream?

Chapter Twenty-Three

What's in a Dream?

Pitch started awake his nerves jumping in alarm upon realizing he was no longer where he'd remembered being. At first his thoughts went to assume he was having a particularly vivid nightmare until he realized that he wasn't feeling in the least bit unnerved or unhappy.

Blinking he laid his head back down now sinking in to the soft pillow. Had he fallen asleep and his experience had all been a dream? It would make sense he decided thinking from how the day had started, it was most definitely a nightmare, and most likely Sandy had helped shift the nightmare into a wonderful dream.

He sighed softly thinking it was a nice dream, and it wasn't until he spotted the Easter basket Bunnymund had given him propped up on the nightstand did Pitch realize that it in fact wasn't just a dream. He beamed pulling back the covers excitedly to notice not only was the dream a reality, but the basket was refilled as if he'd never eaten any of it. A note was attached reading: 'Pitch- Some more treats for you, but eat in moderation. -E. Aster Bunnymund.'

Pitch's smile grew impossibly wide as a warmth spread across his cheeks and feelings of elation coursed through him. He saw beside the basket laid carefully in a decorative see-through casing was the egg that North had painted for Pitch as well as the bubble flying toy that North must have also decided to gift to him. These acts of kindness made his heart clench in a way he didn't easily comprehend as the feeling had been made alien through a millennia of time to forget it. Its presence was not unwelcome, but it made him blush heatedly.

It was already dark, and Pitch had to wonder how long he'd been asleep. He wandered out into the hall after taking a handful of chocolates, he had hesitated possessively not used to having possessions, but he ultimately decided they were safe as no one had disturbed the little schooner ornament as of yet, and the elves were forbidden from going in his room.

The clocks said it was only a little after 6PM, so only a few hours had passed, although the sudden shift from day to night was playing havoc on his inner time clock making it feel far later than it was.

Making it out to the main hub, Pitch was suddenly hit with the realization he didn't know what to do with his time. He thought to seek out North wanting some company, but he fidgeted now wondering if he shouldn't just leave the man alone for a while. Surely he was tired of being around him after having spent almost the whole day with him? This was of course Pitch's insecurities tugging at him, but they were hard for him to ignore. So Pitch just stood there idly unsure what he should do.

As if on cue, North rounded the corner and started walking down the hallway toward Pitch. The big man smiled when he caught sight of the Boogeyman, “Ah, Pitch! You are awake. What pleasant surprise.” he said. “How are you feeling?”

Pitch smiled winningly his uncertainties put to rest in the wake of North seeming pleased to see him. He responded cheerily, “Much better. I… I don’t know what came over me. One minute my brain was everywhere, and the next I found I was slowing down feeling really tired before suddenly waking up under my covers. I didn’t even realize I’d fallen asleep,” he stated sheepishly.

North nodded amusingly. “You had reaction to sugary treats. I brought you back here after you went
to sleep.”

Pitch’s cheeks turned a darker hue of purple, “Uh… yes. I’ve never eaten that much sugar at a
time… other than the plates of cookies and cocoa and the slice of cake from the party I’ve eaten here,
I haven’t really consumed that sort of thing.” Pitch shrugged, “Honestly, I stopped eating anything
for the most part after the dark ages, and none of the foods I ate back then did I ever remember
tasting so good or do anything like that! I didn’t think that sort of thing could really affect beings like
us, but then, it is Pookan chocolate, so I guess I learned something new today.” He smirked.

North chuckled. “Now you know why I have to keep eye on elves when there are sweets in room.
You do not want to know how sugar affects them, believe me.”

Pitch grimaced looking a bit nonplussed at the thought, “Is that how I was acting?”

“No,” North continued smiling, “The elves don’t ramble about everything.”

“Ramble?” Pitch looked offended, “Was I really?” Pitch realized he probably was now that he
thought back on the conversations they shared wincing at the reminder, “Oh I must have looked
ridiculous!”

North laughed. “Oh, come now, Pitch. We all have our moments of looking ridiculous. There is no
shame in that.”

Pitch pouted folding his arms looking slightly miffed, “Speak for yourself; how is anyone supposed
to take me seriously if I look ridiculous!”

“You have a lot to learn about life.” North said, still chuckling. “People don’t have to take you
seriously all the time. Sometimes you have to loosen up and have fun and act silly. It is normal.”

Pitch’s shoulders slumped a little considering the fact that he did like to let loose every now and then,
but he’d always done his best not to let the guardians see that side of him. Pitch smirked chuckling as
he remembered back when he’d been dancing across North’s globe. That was fun and silly, but he
doubted North would have thought so, especially then. He had to wonder if North’s yetis and elves
ever reported that particular stunt to the big man, and what he must have thought about it if they had.
He beamed, “I’ve been known to relax a little here and there.”

“Glad to hear it.” North beamed. “Speaking of relax. I have something for you. Come,” he motioned
for Pitch to follow him.

Pitch was quite interested now especially with the promise of North having something for him. He
followed curiously behind North now walking with a pep in his step as his excitement to see what
North was talking about built. He was really beginning to like these surprises, and if most of the day
was any indication, Pitch had a feeling he was also going to like this surprise.

North eventually led Pitch to his office. He grabbed up a box from his desk and showed it to Pitch.
“Here is something simple for you to build.” he said, taking the lid off and reaching in to drag out
pieces of a wooden toy of some kind. He put them back in the box and set it on the desk again. He
then reached out and picked up a wooden toy train engine. “This is what it is supposed to look like.
Before you put it together, you may paint each piece whatever color you wish it to be, and then
assemble it when it dries. You may use this as reference to go by.” He set the completed train down
in the box of pieces.

Pitch looked the pieces over interestedly; his eyes examined the completed train and then the pieces.
He pulled each piece out of the box now and lined them up to see each of them individually figuring
out how it correlated with the already built train. Finally understanding fully where all the pieces went a smile creased Pitch’s face as he put the parts back in the box turning back to North, “I think I got it! Where do I go to paint it and put it together?”

“I have set up your own private work table in workshop.” North smiled. “I will show you.” He led Pitch out of the office and to the workshop where he stopped in front of a small table that was placed in one of the areas having very little activity, so that Pitch could have his privacy. On the table were a couple of paintbrushes, a cloth, a glass of water and some wood glue. “Here it is.” North said, proudly. “Through that door is paint room, where we store our paints. You may go in and pick out what you need. Just be sure to replace lids and return them when you finish.” He picked up the glass of water. “This is for cleaning brushes. If you have any questions, feel free to ask.”

Pitch nodded watching North depart before looking about the table at the supplies and laying his box of train parts down. He silently glided back towards the paint room, and his eyes lit up as he walked in taking in the vast shades of every color possible. There was over thirty different shades of grey and ten shades of black Pitch noted with glee taking them all down along with the darkest blues and deepest purples. He brought them all back to the table and meticulously lined the bottles up by shade.

He moved through the paint brushes deciding on a wide-brushed paint brush and the darkest black. Pitch then proceeded to paint every piece fully in that particular color deciding it would be the base, and once it dried he would use the other colors to paint on top of it. Several hours later Pitch had placed many different layers of the colors he’d brought to the table on to his train, He painted the edges with the dark blues, filling in the windows with the deep purples and using the greys to highlight the train cars with an almost ghost like smoke that crept along the entirety of the train making the train look as though it were barreling at a harrowing pace. Pitch used the silver to accentuate the metaled areas of the train and really bring each part to life. He found as he worked each piece through in detail the others had time to dry, and by the time he was finishing the last car, he was ready to assemble the rest of it. Finally slowly gluing it together and letting it set, Pitch was quite delighted. His nightmare train was complete with golden orange haunted eyes peeking out of many windows and screaming faces and hands imaged lightly like an imprint in greys into the cars and the engine of the train. It was very spooky if he did say so himself! He was quite proud of the train once he put it fully together beaming down at it happily.

Having finished the project, Pitch moved to replace all the paints in to the paint room and clean up the brushes. Of course as he was doing so, he couldn’t help but to keep looking over admiringly at his freshly painted and constructed train which he saw as much more interesting than the boring trains he’d always seen around the workshop and across the Earth. His train had style, and giving the train qualities of horror placated a deep seeded need to give nightmares that always niggled at him especially not being able to do so at all for close to a month now. The paint helped to express the craving even if it didn’t satiate it. He wondered what North would think of his train; would he like it? Or would it repulse him? Pitch frowned as he pondered this taking his newly constructed train now to find North to see what he thought of his finished project.

North sat in a chair in front of the fireplace in the lounge, fast asleep to the point of breathing faint snores. An opened book lay face down on his stomach, his hand still resting on it.

Pitch brought his train first to North’s office, and after seeing Santa was not there, he moved down the hall towards his lounge hoping to find him there.

When he did find North sleeping as he was, Pitch glided forward to study him silently. He looked down at the train in his hand and the images inscribed on it. His outward reflection of these nightmares didn’t help the urges he felt, and as Pitch watched the man gently snoring in front of him, he thought that it wouldn’t be so bad to influence his dreams just a little would it? Silently Pitch
moved closer now his heart fluttering as the air around the two of them grew thick, and the fearlings within Pitch thrummed to his fingertips and reached out with invisible tendrils to swirl up North's arm and into the sleeping man's nose. North's brow creased now as his subconscious mind began to turn towards the steady pull Pitch was creating. The taste of fear after being deprived of it for some time always tasted sweeter Pitch thought in heady satisfaction breathing in deeply. North was starting to shutter and small beads of perspiration doted his forehead cueing Pitch that he needed to withdraw before he woke North. Pitch exhaled as he reluctantly receded away from the sustenance he'd wanted to greedily continue to consume. His eyes fluttered from the sensations of satisfaction he now felt, and he closed his eyes to take in long drawn out breaths of air relishing the electric jolts it sent through him.

Getting control of himself once more, Pitch noted North's brow had once more relaxed, and Pitch suddenly felt guilty as he looked about nervously. It was then that he noted his hands wore a slight trail of shadows momentarily and the glittered flecks of light had faded slightly. The implications this wrought were not lost on Pitch as he backed away now feeling the need to depart North's presence; Pitch fled the lounge quickly leaving behind his finely painted train on the couch beside North.

North's eyes flew open, and he jerked sitting bolt upright. He frowned as he looked around him. He sensed something different, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He set his book aside and started to get to his feet when his eyes landed on the train. He reached out and carefully picked it up, looking it over. It wasn't hard to guess who it belonged to, especially since no yeti would paint a toy in such colors. He looked around the room again, curious as to why Pitch had left it.

"Pitch?" he called. When no reply came, he shrugged, got up from his chair, and made his way to Pitch's bedroom.

The guilt Pitch had felt was immediate and sharp. Why hadn't he just resisted those impulses? North had been just lying there so peacefully, and after everything nice that they had done for him today, North specifically even, Pitch still had struggled against his nature and lost. Granted, he could have kept feeding off the delectable flavor of phobia that had been swirling about in North’s head, but he hadn’t. His desires now felt wrong even though he’d wanted it SO very badly. Why was it so wrong? Wasn’t giving nightmares his purpose? Why should he feel wrong for doing what he was constructed to do? He hadn’t hurt him had he? Nightmares weren’t pleasant, but he suffered them almost every time he slept, and the ones he suffered were far worse than the mild hint of anxiety he’d planted into North’s mind. Surely he hadn’t been that bad to take a small infinitesimal tidbit of fear to tide his desires. The high was addictive, an instant euphoria saturating his entire being. He was afraid now mostly because he wanted to do it again and again, and if confronted with the possibility he was almost sure that he’d be unable to refuse it.

Exiting the lounge, Pitch’s eyes darted about canvasing the area and assessing who was there. The Pole had quieted considerably going on 10PM now, and this relaxed Pitch a little, but he had to walk, something to ride out this overwhelming feeling of remorse that weighed on him. He made his way up to the upper deck now where the windmills resided. He sat on the edge of one of the bases to stare at the big machines while silently watching the blades whirl around only making a soft whump, whump, whump noise. On his walks in the past, he had come here just to stare outside the small slits in the walls where the windmills pulled their energy from and relax in the fact that no one else ever really came up here. It was a good place to be alone and just gather his thoughts he had found. Now it only served to make him feel ill for what he’d done. North had trusted him, and even though he had not specifically told Pitch that he could not feed off of his nightmares, it was undeniably off-limits Pitch knew.

North knocked on Pitch's bedroom door, and entered when he didn't get a reply. "Pitch?" he called. But Pitch wasn't there. He exited and closed the door, wondering where the Boogeyman could have
gone. He sighed, looking down at the train in his hand, then walked off toward his office.

Pitch stayed sitting there for a good hour before his feelings of culpability faded and he’d built a new resolve that brokered it was only because he was being divested of what he deserved and needed that he’d done what he’d done, and it wasn’t right of the guardians to rob him of what he was entitled! After all, no one was making them not collect teeth, give out good dreams, make presents, paint eggs, and create snow days! Why shouldn’t he be able to revel in what he did best?

It was only fair wasn’t it? Wasn’t it? In the back of his mind this didn’t settle well especially as he’d pulled out the chocolate Bunnymund had given him while he’d contemplated this and slowly worked the small bites around on his tongue to get the most enjoyment from the taste before it dissolved. It helped to calm his nerves enough Pitch supposed as he sighed trudging back to his room finally. There on his night stand he glanced at his beautiful gifts from North and Bunnymund, and to look at them now made him feel slightly ill. Wishing to escape this resurfacing guilt, Pitch climbed in his bed and buried himself in his covers. He didn’t sleep; he just laid this way under the dark folds ruminating on his feelings and trying to convince himself once more that what he’d done wasn’t in fact wrong.

North had searched all of the obvious areas for Pitch as he made his way back to his office. When he still couldn’t find the nightmare king, he called Bunny and the yetis to help him search the Pole, fearing that Pitch might have gotten the urge to make an escape. While they searched, Pitch had made his way back to his room without any of them ever knowing it. It was about thirty minutes after he lay down when heavy footsteps sounded outside the door and the door itself swung open. The bulky form of North filled the doorway. The big man thought it would be best to recheck the bedroom to see if Pitch had returned. So he was more than relieved when he saw Pitch’s form lying in the bed, “Pitch!” North shouted.

Pitch jumped at hearing North’s bellowing voice standing over him, and he couldn’t help flinching with a slight thrill of fear coursing through him before recovering and opening the covers enough that only his golden and silver eyes shown out of the darkness highlighting his large pupils. He stared out warily at the big man, “North! Uh… hel…hello. Did… did you need me for something?”

Bunnymund came in behind North now seeming relieved to see Pitch was in fact still at the Pole, “Oh good! Ya found him! Crisis averted!” Turning to Pitch he chuckled, “Ya had the big man worried Pitch, he’s been looking for ya going on an hour now,” Bunnymund said lightly feeling much better now that everything was well once more.

“That I have,” said North. “I came in here earlier looking for you and you weren’t here. I looked elsewhere and you were not anywhere. So I got worried. Where have you been?”

Pitch remained under the covers feeling safer with his whole body shrouded like it was, “Well… I… I finished painting and assembling the train you gave me, but when I went to find you to show you what I’d done, I saw that you were sleeping.” Pitch paused a moment, “I… I didn’t want to wake you, so I wandered about the grounds to work some energy off before coming back to curl up here.”

Bunnymund patted North on the shoulder feeling tired and ready to retire. Turning now to head back to the warren he remarked with a stifled yawn, “Alright North, now that that’s all settled, I’m a gonna be on my way.”

North gave Bunny a nod, watching as the rabbit disappeared down one of his holes. He then turned back to Pitch. “I saw your train on the couch.” He looked at Pitch, rather puzzled. “Why did you just leave it there? I would not have minded if you woke me up.”

Pitch gulped, “I didn’t want to disturb you. Did you… did you like the train?” Pitch avoided the why
he’d left the train wanting to focus the topic elsewhere. He truly was curious to hear what North had thought of his train, and as such peered a little more out of the covers to get a good look at North’s expression now.

North nodded, smiling. "Yes, I liked the train. You did a wonderful job on it, both painting and assembling."

Pitch smiled to hear this as he gave a weak, “I’m glad you like it.” He found he couldn’t keep eye contact now though as the thought of what he’d done weighed down on him more than ever. He wanted to get it off of his chest. He’d been wanting to speak to North concerning how he felt about his cravings for a while, but he was afraid North would be angry with him now because he’d had so little control over himself.

He couldn’t bear to create another rift between the two of them so soon after they’d just had such a great time. That, and the thought of North punishing him… yet again made a ripple of disgust go through him. He remembered how North had left the warren after what had happened, and as much as he feared the pain, he feared that reaction even more.

“Something troubling you?” North asked, looking at Pitch with concern. He had to admit that Pitch was acting a bit odd, even for Pitch. He thought for sure that he would be rambling in excitement over the train.

“Um… I guess I’m still a bit… tired from the chocolate,” Pitch lied disappearing back into the folds of the blanket to keep the expression on his face obscured. He knew he had a bad habit of expressing his feelings too easily, and North seemed to be getting wary now. The last thing Pitch wanted was to have the big man questioning him because he really did just want to get it out in the open if just to settle this horrible feeling that was growing in the pit of his stomach the longer the man was in his presence.

North continued to study Pitch. His special senses told him the man was lying, but he decided not to say anything. Instead, he pulled Pitch’s train out and set it down on the night table next to the Easter basket.

Pitch watched North lay the train down, and had to bite his lip now. This feeling was horrible, and already he could feel the tenuous relationship between them growing thinner. Pitch was wrought in indecision, so he just stared quietly in the tense silence waiting to see what more North would say.

"If you ever wish to build more things, let me know." North said. "You did good job with train."

With that, North turned and walked toward the door. "Have good night, Pitch."

North started to depart, and against his better judgement, Pitch called out to him, "Uh… North?"

North stopped and turned toward Pitch. "Yes?"

"Can we... I need to talk to you," Pitch stated carefully. His heart was racing now, but this wasn’t something that he was going to be able to keep secret from him without it damaging their relationship Pitch knew.

"Oh?" North closed the door and walked over to the bed again and sat down on the side. "I thought something was troubling you."

Pitch was silent a moment having to work up the courage to speak now, “I… I kind of did something you might not have approved of.” He swallowed hard now as his mind worked to piece together exactly how he would tell North and hopefully not anger the Cossack too much.
North raised an eyebrow, not saying a word as he moved his arms to cross over his chest.

Pitch cringed at the motion North made feeling reticent to speak further now, but knowing he didn’t have any other real option anymore. “Please… don’t be angry with me. I… I didn’t really mean to do it. It just sort of happened…” he trailed off feeling terrified to reveal the truth now in fear that every good thing they had just shared would evaporate like ash in his mouth. Would North be able to forgive him?

“Go on,” North said, “I am listening.”

Peeking out of the blankets to get a better read on North’s face, Pitch continued, “Well… you… you know when I said I went to go find you earlier… and I found you sleeping?” Pitch halted a moment carefully considering his words, “I… I may have invaded your dreams a little bit.” He recoiled as he spat it out watching North warily.

North nodded slowly, his eyebrows lifting. “So that explains it, then.”

Explains it? Pitch wondered what he meant by that, but the only words he could find to say were, “I’m… I’m sorry. I know I keep disappointing you,” Pitch sounded deflated now.

North wasn’t sure what to say. He had sensed something wasn’t right when he woke up. Now that Pitch had told his story, it all made perfect sense.

"I appreciate you being honest and telling me, Pitch." North said at last. "I am disappointed that you would try something like that with me, but I'm glad that you have told me instead of covering it up and lying."

“I didn’t mean to… not the telling you about it part, the giving you a nightmare part. I… I couldn’t help myself. When I saw you lying there… sleeping… it was like second nature to want to reach out to you. I… I hope you’re not too mad at me,” Pitch’s words were strained, and it was obvious he was having great difficulty even admitting this to North for a multitude of reasons.

“No, I am not mad.” said North. “Disappointed, yes. Also a bit worried.”

Pitch was glad to hear that North was not mad although his disappointment was still unsettling but expected. Worried? That he had not expected though and voiced his concern, “Worried? I don’t pose a threat; I… I only gave you a mild nightmare to get a smidgen of a taste… you should have barely registered I had even given you one.”

North turned to Pitch. "Don't pose a threat? The fact that you gave in to feeding is grounds for concern." His voice sounded somewhat sad. He wanted to say more, but he didn't want to hurt Pitch. Instead he sighed. "Pitch, you must learn to get your fearlings under control."

The tone North was taking troubled Pitch, and he finally brought his face out from the depths of the covers to speak in earnest, “I… I know. I’m sorry. You must understand, it’s… it’s a need I have. I know the fearlings call for it, but it’s a part of who I am. I… I can’t help what I am North. No one is asking you to stop being Santa, or Bunnymund to stop delivering Easter, but you’re asking me to stop being who I am. I didn’t want to hurt you, and I was afraid to tell you because I know how you guardians think of me and what I do,” Pitch’s voice wavered under the burden of guilt he felt.

"It is not who you are, Pitch," North snapped. "Yes, you are Boogeyman now, but you weren't always." he pointed a finger at Pitch. "Part of your rehabilitation here at Pole is you getting your fearlings under control and doing good with your powers. I suggest that you try doing that before you get self in more trouble."
The hair raised on the back of Pitch’s neck as North became animatedly agitated. Pitch nodded vigorously at North’s last statement to ensure not to raise the man’s ire any more than he accidentally had, “Of course, of course; I want nothing more than to use my powers in a way that will make you happy with me believe me!” Pitch was adamant, but he felt unable to figure out how to make such a compromise with the skillset he had and still get what he wanted out of it as well. He did not voice this though as he felt it might further upset the man. The last thing he wanted to do was upset North more. He was hoping to escape any further punishment just by the fact he’d actually fessed up for his wrongdoing in the first place. Getting North more upset though would not help in that cause.

North nodded. “Good. Glad you understand. You are only one that can do it, since it is your power and your responsibility. Only you can get them under control and then choose for yourself what you do with it.”

Pitch sighed as he nodded, “I know. I’m working on that. …I’ll continue to work on that,” Pitch was sure to sound sincere for North’s benefit to let the Cossack know he took his words seriously.

"Pitch, I am unsure what to do with you." North suddenly said. "Concerning this matter, I mean. I accept your apology, and I am also pleased with your honesty in telling me about what you did. But as I said, I am disappointed. You came very close to breaking my trust, and this hurts me.” North’s brow scrunched up as he pondered the situation.

Pitch swallowed hard as he listened to North’s words; he could tell North was deliberating on whether or not to punish him further, and if he did, Pitch couldn’t really blame him as he knew he’d brought this on himself. Since North was on the fence though, Pitch was going to do his best to sway him that he’d learned enough of a lesson already, “I did come out and tell you without you having to ask. That should count for something shouldn’t it? I mean, if I’d never told you, you’d never have known right?”

North nodded. “Yes, it has helped to cut down on your punishment a lot, but I still feel you need something to help this lesson stick so that you remember. Am I right?”

“I won’t forget! Believe me! The lesson has stuck more than you could ever know! I couldn’t stop thinking about it; that’s why I told you!” Pitch protested. He was really hoping the fact that he had felt so bad would be punishment enough, so he gave North his most pleading face to show just how sorry he was.

“You felt guilt,” said North. He was very pleased to hear Pitch admit it openly. It was definitely a good sign that all of them were moving in the right direction. “That is good. But, come; let me help you put closure on that guilt.” He patted his lap. “I will only give you six swats. Had you not told me about this, it would have been a good deal more.”

Pitch wanted to say he didn’t need any more closure than for North to tell him he’d been forgiven, but he didn’t dare say this out loud as he reluctantly climbed out of his covers and slunk over to North’s lap with a sullen frown plastered on his face. He didn’t argue as he tentatively made his way across the man’s lap feeling wholly shamed that he had become so accustomed to this sort of punishment that he just accepted it now as a willing participant. How very far he had fallen he thought absently as he settled over North’s lap, and his body quivered uncontrollably in anticipation. He was holding his breath now clenching rigidly as he waited anxiously for this all to be over.

The gold flecks in Pitch's skin being somewhat faded did not escape North’s eye as he peered down at the Boogeyman. This concerned him greatly and he made a mental note to talk with the Sandman about it when he returned from his work. Just wanting to get this part over with, he remained silent as he pulled Pitch’s robe back. He decided to show Pitch a small amount of mercy and leave his pants in place this time and immediately set to work, laying down six swift, hard swats to the nightmare
Pitch was grateful for any small leniencies North afforded him although the first slap had come as a surprise because of it. He squeaked out an undignified yelp and twitched about uncomfortably as North peppered his backside with the stinging hard swats. Tears flowed from his eyes before North had even started hitting Pitch as the guilt for what he felt mixed with the humiliation of what was to come. It caused a catalyst of sorts to bubble over within him now as he worked to stay silent through the remainder of his punishment.

The fact that the smacks had been laid over already tender flesh still made the sting quite unbearable, but Pitch did his best to contain himself and take the punishment stoically. If you could call the way he was wretching about and kicking his feet stoic. Still, he did manage to stay in place on North’s lap fighting the urge to roll away from the intensity of the blows he received, and other than small grunts of pain, he did not call out like a madman as he’d done the last time he was draped over North’s knee a couple days ago. As the sixth blow landed, Pitch wordlessly praised the fact that North was finished and fought the urge to bolt off the man’s lap to hide back under his covers. He found himself turning a sulky tear streaked face back toward North now unable to speak for fear of breaking down into sobs as he silently awaited release.

"Now, all is forgiven." North said, helping Pitch to his feet. "I expect you to exercise self-control the next time you feel urge to enter my head, or head of one of other Guardians."

Looking down, Pitch’s eyes blurred over again as he sniffled and gave a quick nod of affirmation, “I will. . . .I’m really very sorry. I won’t let it happen again.” He really hoped that were true; this had managed to be his best and worst day with the guardians. He’d been switched in the morning, everything else positive that had followed, then to give into temptation that ended with being spanked for a second time in one day! It was a new personal record Pitch realized begrudgingly. It did a number on his ego to repeatedly rack up offenses like this. This of course made him reflect about what the other guardians would think of him if they knew he’d done this to North. His eyes shot back up to North as he clasped his hands together in supplication, “You… you're not going to tell the others what I did are you?”

North said nothing as he stood to his feet. He gave Pitch a gentle squeeze on the shoulder and walked to the door, opening it. He looked over at Pitch again, “Get some rest, Pitch.” he simply said before leaving the room.

Pitch wiped his eyes dry and ran his hands through his hair as he watched the big man leave. He had started to pace but stopped as quickly as he’d started feeling the chafe of how sore he once more was. He reached back to cup his inflamed backside rubbing tenderly at the sensitive flesh and thinking sourly that at the rate he’d been going, he was never going to sit comfortably again. The fact that North had said nothing regarding his concern left little in the hope that the other guardians would not be informed of his breech, and this brought a fresh wave of shame to cover Pitch’s face. On some level, he wished he hadn’t told North what he’d done although Pitch was sure if he hadn’t told North that the man would have ferreted out the truth eventually, and the mild spanking he’d just received would have been ten times worse.

Pitch sighed staring down now at his collection of gifts and toying with one of the tendrils on the bubble machine before picking it up and winding it as he’d seen North do. The contraption floated in to the air distributing streams of bubbles as it paraded across the ceiling. Pitch watched it move about no less fascinated by it now than when he’d first seen it in all its wonder at the warren. He had regretted that telling North what he had done had earned himself another spanking, but he hadn’t regretted the relief he now felt having the matter off of his chest and knowing that North had in fact forgiven him when Pitch had fretted he may not for such a grievance against his person. Pitch could
now look at the offerings on his night stand and once more feel that genuine joy he’d received when he’d been given them in the first place over that tainted wretched tug at his conscious he’d felt those several hours after the incident had occurred. That had been awful.

This however did not change the sorrow Pitch felt regarding his powers and how North expected him to conjure some supposed good way to use them. North had turned down his previous suggestions, and this left Pitch feeling at a loss. Self-control… that was what North had stressed, but this too left Pitch restless to ponder the lengths of his own ability to avoid indulgence. He’d never had to before, and having made promises that he would, left Pitch feeling melancholy and doubtful. He supposed if it ever came up again, he’d see how well he could keep that promise. For now though, Pitch decided to grab a handful of his chocolates, climb on his bed, and complacently observe his bubble machine to help soothe the tensions he felt.
Sandy glided in through the skylight a hint of worry on his chubby features. He had raced to the Pole as quickly as his dreamsand could carry him when he’d seen the Northern Lights alarm raise. The sun was just now coming up on the horizon as Sandman drifted down to see all of the other guardians waiting on his arrival looking at North anxiously. He glided up to the gathering now a large question mark trailing over his head.

Bunnymund had arrived moments earlier, but after having been assured there was no immediate threat seemed placated but nonetheless apprehensive to hear the news North felt the need to call them all to the Pole to hear.

Toothiana stretched and yawned, exhausted from a night of gathering teeth. Jack Frost took a seat in one of the chairs, his hood covering his head.

"So what's up, North?" said Jack.

"Something that troubles me." North said when he saw that everyone was present. "Earlier, when I was sleeping, Pitch tried to manipulate my dreams and give me a nightmare."

Toothiana gasped and Jack gripped his staff.

Sandy's face drew down in obvious anger.

Bunnymund, whom everyone expected to be raging mad only shook his head sadly, “I guess it was only a matter a time before we were gonna have ta address this happening. Did this happen after I left last night?"

"Actually Bunny, no," North said grimly. “It happened before I called you. I awoke and sensed something odd, but I could not put finger on it. It was only after I approached Pitch and he told me that I put two and two together. That was after you left, Bunny."

Bunnymund blinked in surprise, "Wait what? You forced Pitch to admit it to you and you didn't tell me earlier when we were looking that he'd done this, or he actually told you voluntarily that he gave you a nightmare?"

Sandy was quite curious to hear what North would say as well.

“I did not know at the time we were looking. He told me on his own after you left.” North replied. “I was going to leave him to sleep, but he called me back and confessed the whole thing. Seems he was feeling guilt.”

Bunnymund snorted, "That's new... and it's good. I'd never have thought he'd actually tell on himself without being under duress to do so."

North nodded in agreement with Bunny, and then turned to Sandy. “There is something else that disturbs me. I noticed that gold specks you put in Pitch were somewhat faded after this happened.”

Sandy looked concerned but gave a nod of acknowledgement. He signed a picture of Pitch followed
by his sands whirling around him as indication that he would reapply the light shards.

Bunnymund looked lost in thought a moment before speaking, "That little bit of knowledge is good and bad mates. On one hand, it's a great way to know whether he's making anyone have nightmares if he does decide not to be as forthcoming next time, but if by giving nightmares he's negating Sandy's handiwork means we're not going to be able to keep tabs on him if he can jump in and out of shadows again. Did he even know that Sandy's influence had been diminished?"

“If he did notice, he didn’t say anything.” North said with a shake of his head, his brow furrowing. He shrugged. "As long as Sandy keeps him full of gold flakes, we have nothing to worry about. Although him getting urge to feed on fear and give out nightmares has me worried. I've, hopefully, discouraged him from giving in for the time being, but this little incident has left me wary."

"I guess we're just going to have to be careful where we fall asleep around here.” said Jack. "Unless you take to locking his door at night."

North frowned. "I hate doing that, Jack, especially since we're trying to make him feel like he fits in."

Bunnymund sighed, "Jack has a point though; Pitch’s freedoms shouldn’t outrank our own. If he’s proving that he can’t be trusted to wander about unattended then maybe you’re gonna have ta put some restrictions on him North. Maybe not this time since you’ve already addressed the issue, and he confessed ta it, but if'n you have any further instances where he breaks our trust we just might need ta put him under lock and key for his own good if not just as an added punishment."

"I will keep it in mind, Bunny." said North. "Hopefully it won't happen again. But if it does, I may have to stoop to doing as you and Jack suggest.” North shook his head and sighed. "And here I thought we were finally making progress."

"Sounds to me like you have.” said Tooth. "He did confess what he'd done, after all. The old Pitch wouldn't have done that."

"She's right," said Jack. "I have to say that I'm impressed. The Boogeyman’s feeling guilty."

“Ya shoulda seen him yesterday when I gave em’ too much chocolate! Oh nelly I ain’t ever gonna forget that!” Bunnymund laughed. “I never would have thought he coulda changed or woulda wanted ta change, but these past couple days has proven me wrong. Numerous tannings aside, he does seem to actually have a desire ta change. Although it seems the bottom warmings have been great motivators to pushing him in the direction we’ve needed him ta go that he may not have veered toward on his own.”

North smiled at remembering the fun he had had with Bunny and Pitch. He wished they could spend more times like that. He hoped they would. He hoped that what Pitch did wasn’t the beginning of something unpleasant that they would have to deal with in the future.

“He was doing so good.” North mused. “Why did he end the day like this?”

“Hey, this might be the only time.” said Jack. “You can’t create problems where there are none yet. We're all just going to have to keep a closer watch on him and be careful where we fall asleep.”

Bunnymund mused, “I think he wants ta do good, but we’re gonna have to direct those dark urges somehow. We need ta help him figure out a way ta get them under control because I don’t think he knows how ta do it on his own.”

"I would help if I could, but even I don't know.” North said. "Pitch is only one who has powers like that. Only he knows them on personal level."
Bunnymund’s ear twitched as his face became gravely serious, “Well then, maybe we need ta start getting at the source and have him tell us about it, so we can know what he knows. Then maybe we can help him help himself. What do ya think?”

“If he will tell us,” said North. ”And tell us what we need to know. I'm not sure he wants to get them under control.”

Bunnymund’s brow furrowed, “We won’t know if he’ll talk unless we ask. Ya think he wants them ta run rampant? Why? Maybe we should call him in here and start asking questions. I mean we are all here now. Might as well get it out of the way eh?”

Sandy shrugged before nodding that he could stay.

North shrugged. “Might as well. We have to restore Sandy’s dust flakes in him anyway.” He really didn’t feel like dealing with any of this.

Sandy pointed at his chest and made a depiction of Pitch over his head before heading in the direction of Pitch’s room.

Pitch had been heading down to the reindeer pens when Sandy flew in front of him halting Pitch in his tracks. He looked up at the golden man curiously, “Sandy?”

Sandy wore a displeased expression as he wagged a finger at the nightmare lord and pointed towards the globe room.

Pitch’s countenance faltered as understanding registered, and he frowned turning towards the globe room. What if North really hadn’t forgiven him? Pitch was worried now as he hadn’t been in the globe room since he’d first been brought to the Pole. To be heading there now felt like a funeral march. It unnerved him even more as once he’d turned towards the globe room, Sandy had sent a wave of dreamsand under Pitch to lift him in the air hauling him along bodily as Sandman sped back towards the globe room.

Sandman soared back into the globe room carrying a very nervous looking Pitch and coming to a halt where everyone was gathered. He lowered Pitch to the ground in a swirl of sand that also re-saturated Pitch with the light shards that had faded from his body.

Pitch took a few steps back standing very rigidly as he looked around at the group. He hadn’t seen Toothiana and Sandy since the party, and by the way they were scrutinizing him, Pitch knew they were not happy with him. He swallowed hard as he smiled weakly at the group and gave them a halfhearted wave hello bringing worried eyes up to North in a silent question.

"Do not worry, Pitch, you are not in trouble.” said North, noticing the look on the Boogeyman's face. "We only wish to have discussion to try and solve a problem that we feel needs to be solved as soon as possible. It is about you taking control of your powers."

Pitch grimaced looking down in embarrassment at the reminder of his lack of self-control, “Oh. I… I see,” he said quietly.

Bunnymund got right to the point, “Do you have control of the fearlings or do they control you Pitch?”

Pitch refocused his eyes on Bunnymund as he fidgeted uncomfortably, “Um… well… both sort of? I… I can control them, but… what they offer is a little… difficult to resist,” admitting this shamed him, and he flushed noticeably to admit it.
“Pitch, in light of recent events, this topic comes as great concern to us.” said North. “I trust you when you say it will never happen again. But you and I know that fearlings are unpredictable. It would make me feel better if you learned to gain full control of them.”

Pitch frowned folding his arms as he scoffed, “Don’t you think I want to? They don’t control me as much as… put temptations in my way. I feel what they feel when absorbing fear, their more like a pheromone than a separate entity.”

“Well, then, you will have to learn not to give in to their temptations.” North sighed. "Whatever it calls for, do it. We cannot afford repeat of last night." He looked over at Bunny.

Bunnymund moved toward Pitch, and Pitch on high alert tensed at his approach. Bunnymund shook his head, “I’m not gonna hurt ya mate, try ta relax okay?”

Pitch nodded, but he couldn’t help but to watch Bunnymund carefully as he moved into close proximity and laid a paw on his shoulder looking Pitch squarely in the eyes sizing him up a moment before he spoke, “Ya need ta get control over the fearling influence in ya; we already know this. But, yer telling us that the fearlings aren’t the real problem, the real problem is that temptation is your weakness right?”

Pitch reluctantly nodded looking chagrinned that he had to take the lion’s share of the blame for his actions.

Nodding, Bunnymund continued, “Have ya ever tried ta deny yer urges?”

Pitch’s frown deepened; he didn’t like this line of questioning. Being confronted fully with what he was and the guardians’ opinions of him made Pitch feel uneasy, but he answered truthfully because he realized on some level that he did want help if just to find some understanding for what he faced, “Honestly, I never really had reason to try. I remember… vaguely when I was first imbued with the fearlings, I was lost within their strength, but the longer we inhabited the same space, the more we melded and became unified in thought and body.”

Bunnymund seemed reassured by this news rather than discouraged, “That’s about what I expected ya’d say. So, that being the case, if you’re having trouble controlling yourself, maybe we need ta put you in training ta work on that eh?”

Pitch regarded him as if he had three heads, “What?”

“Training, ya know ta get yer powers under control,” Bunnymund said matter-of-factly as if this was a no-brainer, “I know, I know, it sounds crazy, but maybe if you can practice controlling yourself under supervision, you can get a handle on those temptations.”

Bunnymund motioned to Sandy and Sandy pointing at himself in surprise realized Bunnymund was including him in his plan and floated over beside him looking between Bunnymund and Pitch curiously to hear what more Bunnymund had to say.

Continuing, Bunnymund explained, “Sandy has the power ta put any of us out in an instant, this can be useful twofold. See, if Sandy can put us under, you can practice controlling yourself, and if ya get out of hand… well, we’ve got Sandy ta make sure the fearlings don’t influence ya too much.”

Pitch blinked thinking on Bunnymund’s words before answering with more than a little astonishment, “Are you… are you telling me you want me to practice giving nightmares to one of you to learn how to control my urges?”

Bunnymund nodded looking back up at North, Toothiana, Sandy, and Jack, “What do ya guys
think? Do I sound crazy, or does it sound like a good plan?"

Sandy was unsure and shrugged glancing back at the others to see how they felt since Sandy wouldn’t be the one subjecting himself to nightmares.

"I don't know..." Tooth said, worry etched on her face. "It sounds risky." She looked around at the others.

"I have an idea," said Jack. "If Pitch gets an urge to fall into any temptations, he can slap himself in the face."

Pitch’s eyes narrowed at Jack as he spat, “Really Frost? How about I just slap you in the face?”

Bunnymund frowned, “Alright you two. Seriously though, I will volunteer to be the first victim, and with Sandy observing and anyone else if they think they can add to the process I don’t see the risk being too high. What do you think North?”

"I have to agree with Tooth. It does sound risky." said North. "But if you are willing to take chance, then it is your choice.” North didn't like the idea at all. It sounded dangerous, like playing with fire. What if Sandy wouldn't be able to stop and contain Pitch? What if things got out of control? He knew something had to be done, and done soon, but surely there was a better way that didn't risk Bunny. The rabbit was brave, North had to say.

Bunnymund smirked, 'I've got hope this is gonna work, or at least I got hope in Pitch that we can get closer ta figuring out what we need ta do in order ta help him get a better grasp on those temptations," Bunnymund glanced over at Pitch as he said this with a warm smile.

All of this was still sinking in for Pitch, but the one thing that had surprised him most was that Bunnymund of all people was willing to trust him so implicitly to try and help him get in better control of his powers, and this faith in him was touching. Although the others were wary, they were also not adamantly opposed to the idea either, and this gave Pitch hope that he could perhaps use this opportunity to try and harness a better grasp on his powers over just riding the flow of them and gorging himself like he'd always done. He looked up at North now feeling like he needed his vote of confidence most after being his last victim, "I'm going to do my best not to disappoint you again."

"I'm glad to hear that." said North. He then turned and gave Sandy a silent stare that seemed to say, 'I don't like this. Keep a close watch on him.'

Sandy was quick to catch the hint North was sending him, and he gave North a swift curt nod of affirmation.

"Since we're all here now, we could try it out to give the idea a test run," Bunnymund offered looking to North to decide.

North hesitated, then finally sighed, waving a hand to give Bunny the go-ahead.
Bunnymund beamed apparently pleased, "Well, I guess we should go over there to the couch?" Bunnymund pointed to a far off corner where a small set up to relax lay, but it was not really made for entertaining guests like North's lounge.

The suddenness of the request left Pitch feeling a bit flustered, "Wha? Here? Na-now?" Being put on the spot and expected to 'perform' left Pitch feeling an akin likeness to stage fright.

Sandy bore a soft smile extending a hand gently towards the sofa for Pitch to follow as Bunnymund was already making his way over to it.

Pitch had never had an audience, and the thought of them all quietly observing, judging, and evaluating him while he enacted something that was normally intimately private felt like he was being stripped bare in front of them. It was an unnervingly uncomfortable feeling, and suddenly he was having second thoughts. He looked back to the remaining guardians settling his eyes on North almost wishing the Cossack would have said no because he'd had no time to mentally prepare himself for this. "Are... are you sure North?" Pitch knew that the man was at odds with the plan, and Pitch didn't want him to feel conflicted with the decision and regret it later.

North gave a slight, nervous shrug. "If you are ready and Bunny wants to go through with this, then go ahead."

Pitch nodded although his own nervousness shone through as he slunk over to where Bunnymund lay prostrated on the couch his head propped on a cushion, arms crossed lightly over his chest, and oddly relaxed Pitch noted. Pitch on the other hand was not, especially glancing at Sandy who wore a look that was a mix between a glare and feigned indifference. Pitch swallowed hard leaning over Bunnymund whispering, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Seeing Pitch's anxiety to go through with giving him a nightmare made Bunnymund feel even more assured that he was going to be okay under Pitch's influence. He did his best to not show that he was in fact nervous about this venture, it might be detrimental to the cause, so Bunnymund put on a brave face, "Just do it Pitch. I trust you."

Pitch grimaced but nodded and moved behind Bunnymund's head, "Alright. I'm going to do my best to make sure you don't feel much," Pitch tried to reassure as his eyes traveled to Sandy giving a small nod to show he was ready.

Sandy floated over to Bunnymund sprinkling dreamsand over the rabbit's face, and Bunnymund's eyes fluttered as instant imagery of frolicking googies appeared over his head. Sandy was watching Pitch intensely now.

Pitch withered under such scrutiny. He could feel all of their eyes on him, and where his hands would normally be fluid and explorative as he reached out to touch another's dreams to turn them into nightmares, now his hands trembled uneasily in staggered resistance. His heart was hammering in his chest, and he withdrew slinking away back onto his heels and bowed his head in defeat, "I... I can't. There's too much distraction. I can't concentrate with you all watching me like this. I don't want to hurt him." Pitch felt an acute sting to his pride at this level of impotence to give them what they were waiting to see.

North nodded in understanding. “Would it help if we moved to another place, with less watching eyes?”

Pitch brought woeful eyes up to meet North's eyes showing clear indecision, "Maybe. I... I've never done this with someone watching me... it... it feels... odd."
"Well, what do you suggest, then?" North asked. "Do you want to do it now, or wait?"

Pitch sighed still looking down as he shook his head, "I… no, let’s just get it over with. I just need a minute to get my head right to focus."

North motioned for Jack and Tooth to leave, thinking it would help. Jack didn’t want to go, but was finally ushered out by Tooth, who was more than glad to leave, even though the situation made her curious.

Pitch remained crumpled on the floor for long minutes with his eyes squeezed tightly closed in an effort to regain his concentration. Finally getting up the nerve, Pitch fixated on Bunnymund working to override his own fears in lieu of searching out Bunnymund’s.

He breathed deeply now as a weighted invisible fog settled and Pitch began to feel the pin pricks of panic spin a euphoric dance across his nerves. Caught up in the moment, Pitch became lost in the sensations, and he had to actively will himself back to take control as Bunnymund had begun to jerk, one leg kicking about from the heat of being lost within the nightmare Pitch was weaving. Pitch took an active role to alter the nightmare now, and where Bunnymund had been dreaming about being chased by a raving drooling mastiff, the nightmare lord changed the landscape giving Bunnymund distance from the creature even though it was still bounding after the rabbit. Now, Bunnymund was able to keep leaping ahead giving small shudders of fear only as the dog got close to catching him. Pitch changed the features of the dog making it less threatening in size and physical menace to take down the level of panic Bunnymund was feeling.

Bunnymund was now mostly feeling exhilaration and excitement tinged with the fear of being caught, but mostly the thrill of the chase itself. Pitch was pleased that he was keeping a steady stream of balanced fear with minor spikes. It tasted so good! He could feel the excitement of the chase now his eyes closed shifting back and forth rapidly, heart pounding from the buzz, and oh stars, he didn’t want it to end! But something was tugging at him now to push deeper, take more, and he wanted to, started to as it was close to an orgasmic need to keep pushing. He was starting to lose control he realized and withdrew sharply with an audible gasp.

Bunnymund having been wrenched from the dream awoke with a startled wheeze eyes popping open as if he’d heard a gunshot.

North’s eyebrows shot upward, his eyes widening. His arms, which had been folded over his chest, fell to his sides as he took several steps forward. He looked from Bunny to Pitch to Sandy.

Sandy moved forward sands swirling out ready to coat Pitch in light shards to keep Pitch from escaping if he’d hurt Bunnymund.

Pitch looked up in alarm ringlets of shadows emanating off of him like faint smoke trails, “I… I’m sorry. I pulled out too abruptly.” His brow furrowed as he spoke a little more subdued now, “I… was starting to lose control, so I severed the connection.”

Bunnymund sat up spinning to a sitting position on the couch breathing heavy, but oddly enough, he was smiling, “Wow! That… that was actually not what I expected at all.”

"Are you all right?" North asked, looking at Bunny with concern.

Pitch stared at Bunnymund with no small amount of trepidation waiting to hear his reply.

Bunnymund looked at all of them holding out his paws, “I’m okay; I’m okay.” He started talking adamantly now, “It started off a bit rocky, but as it got going; it got less scary and more… exciting? I
mean the anxiety was still there, but it wasn’t dread like how it’d started. It was more like the fear you feel when you’re doing something dangerous that could get you hurt but you’re doing it anyway. Like riding the razor’s edge of fate where one wrong move could be disastrous, but as long as you’re in the moment and everything is okay, it’s invigorating and empowering!”

Pitch blinked a smile widening impossibly big on his face to hear Bunnymund say as much, “That’s fantastic! I was aiming to make the nightmare stimulating over scary.” Pitch had been hoping to taper back the fear enough for the nightmare to feel galvanizing over crushing, and hearing that he’d managed to do so, and that Bunnymund had seemed to enjoy the thrill he gave him boosted his confidence.

Sandy seemed stunned as he looked from Pitch to Bunnymund and finally settling his sights on North to see what he thought on the matter.

North let out the breath he’d been holding, relieved it was now over and the Pole and everyone living there were still in one piece with nothing disastrous happening. He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender, smiling. "Well, Pitch, it looks like you did it. I never would have guessed it would go this smooth." He motioned for Sandy to come closer to him. "How do you feel?" he asked Pitch. "Was it easy to keep control?"

Pitch was ecstatic as he clapped his hands, “It was riveting! There... there were a couple of points I found my mind drifting, and my control faltered, but when I felt like I was actually unable to maintain control, I pulled away and ended it.”

North nodded slowly, still not entirely sure about all of this. When Sandy approached his side, North walked away from the others, motioning for the gold man to follow him.

Sandy also wore an expression of uneasiness as he turned dutifully towards North to follow the big man.

Pitch was still bouncing animatedly talking with Bunnymund about his experience as the two guardians moved away.

“Did you monitor Pitch through it?” North whispered to Sandy. “What about the dust flakes in his skin? Did they fade when he gave Bunny bad dream?”

Sandy nodded vigorously a deep frown etched on his face. He twirled his hand in a swirl of sand before pointing to Pitch as unnoticeably as he could, a silent question as to whether to cover Pitch again in light shards right then.

“That is what I was worried about.” He looked at Sandy. “Yes, you’d better replace flakes.”

Sandy nodded an affirmative whisking a wave of dreamsand that pulled Pitch off the ground adhering more golden flecks to him.

Pitch had been in the middle of carrying on a conversation with Bunnymund when it had happened, and he was taken a bit off guard by the action. Getting his bearings once more, he looked down at himself seeing the brighter hue of the shards now and what Sandy had done that he’d not taken note of earlier in his nervousness. Realizing what it meant though sent a pang of hurt through Pitch as it was a blatant show of mistrust in him. His face fell and he grew quiet after the action backing up and looking over at Sandy and North on the other side of the room. He turned back to Bunnymund forlornly, "Uh... excuse me Bunnymund. I... I think I want to go back to my room now.”

Bunnymund's smile faded seeing the hurt in Pitch's eyes, and he gave him a lame nod out of
Not waiting for Bunnymund to comment further or for Sandy and North to rejoin them, Pitch darted towards the door and out of it as quickly as he could.

As Pitch exited, he saw Toothiana fluttering and Jack standing next to the banister talking amongst themselves, and not wanting to have to talk to them, he ducked his head and hurried to the left towards his bedroom doing his best to avoid them before they noticed him.

North lifted an eyebrow at Pitch's quick exit. He sighed, turning a look to Sandy.

Sandy looked guiltily back at North with a slight shrug. Bunnymund rose moving over to join the other two guardians now.

“Well, we do have problem.” North finally said. “Sandy's dreamsand flakes in Pitch's skin fade whenever he gives nightmares.”

Bunnymund looked a little irate with the two as his eyes moved between them and settled on Sandy, “Ya couldn't have waited ta do that? Ya really upset him.”

Sandy wrung his hands grimacing with a slight shrug before glancing at North and back to Bunnymund.

“It was not his fault. I told him to do it. I was not aware that it would upset him so. After all, he is still prisoner here until he convinces us he has changed.” North patted Sandy on the shoulder to let him know it was fine. "I am not fully convinced that all of this is good idea. I do not want Pitch getting his powers back and escaping into world.”

Bunnymund grimaced turning away from North and Sandy and thumping a hole into the floor before addressing them both, “Ya say ya want ta be convinced he’s changed North, but ya know, that means you have ta do a little changing to. Ya can't build trust if'n yer not willing ta give any.”

Bunnymund shook his head and jumped plummeting down the hole. The ground quickly reshaped itself in the wake of his exit no sooner than he’d disappeared.

Sandy stared after the rabbit a perplexed look on his face before he turned back to North.

“I never thought I would hear it coming from him.” North said, after Bunny left. “And he will probably be first to complain if Pitch ever gets loose.” North sighed wearily, “What have I done, Sandy? It’s not that I don’t trust Pitch. It’s just Pitch is still prisoner, like I said. Until he gets fearlings under control, I do not want him getting any ideas about possible escape.”

Sandy shook his head vigorously and swiped his hands with a picture of Bunnymund over his head making it very clear that he disagreed with Bunnymund’s argument. Having been a victim of Pitch’s previous malice, Sandy was in full agreement with North’s stance that Pitch needed to be kept contained whether it hurt the nightmare lord’s feelings or not was inconsequential.

North perked at Sandy’s gestures. "So you disagree with Bunny?"

Sandy’s brow drew down crossing his arms as he nodded adamantly.

"Nice to know at least one is on my side.” North smiled. At that moment, Tooth and Jack entered the room.

"Sorry to bother you but..." Jack stopped, looking around. "Where's Bunny and Pitch?"
"They left." North’s brow furrowed. "You did not see Pitch out in hall?"

Toothiana shook her head. "No, we didn't."

"Anyway, Bunny got mad and left." North continued.

"Got mad? Why?" Tooth questioned.

"Because I told Sandy to replenish gold dust in Pitch’s skin. Both he and Pitch seem to think that I don’t trust the Boogeyman."

“Well… was the whole thing a success?” Jack asked.

“Yes, it was, I’m surprised to say. But problem is dreamsand specks in Pitch’s skin fade whenever he gives nightmare.”

“So Bunny got mad because you replenished the specks?” Tooth questioned.

“Yes, afraid so,” North said.

Tooth shrugged. “I wasn’t here to see everything for myself, so I can’t give an honest opinion. But… I think you’re in the right by replenishing the specks. We might be trying to rehabilitate Pitch, but it’s not like we can give him free reign yet, right?”

Sandy motioned to Tooth giving a curt nod of agreement.

Jack shrugged. “I think you did right, too. After all, he’s partly here because he’s a prisoner. I might trust Pitch a little more than I used to since he has changed a bit, but I can’t say that I trust him enough to give him that much freedom yet. I mean, he’s tried getting me in trouble a few times since he’s been here.”

Tooth nodded. "And we can't forget that he hasn't gained full control over the fearlings yet."

Hearing this made North relax.

Sandy blinked tiredly waving a goodnight to Jack and Toothiana and patting North on the shoulder. Sandy made a motion to the switch on the globe dashboard to call him while depicting a picture of Pitch and his sands swirling around the nightmare lord in an obvious show of needing to reemerge Pitch in light shards if they still planned to let Pitch practice giving nightmares.

“Pleasant dreams, Sandy,” North called after him. He turned back to Jack and Tooth. “I guess I need to go find Pitch and explain things.”

Tooth and Jack nodded and turned to leave also.

Pitch having made it back to his room thirty minutes earlier had spent the time sulking in the middle of his bed hunched over and clutching his Easter basket in his lap as he ate one piece after the other, moderation be damned.

He had been so elated to have had such a successful undertaking with Bunnymund especially considering the rabbit had even enjoyed the experience! It was everything that Pitch could have ever hoped for! Then, not unlike a slap in the face, Sandy took it all away from him. He showed Pitch that even though he had worked so hard to give the guardians what they wanted, it would never be good enough. Stupid star was just jealous he’d been able to give happiness in a nightmare. He would never be one of them; Pitch fumed as he continued to brood over his quickly disappearing chocolate.
A heavy knock sounded on the door.

Pitch was not in the mood for company, and so he plaintively ignored the knock hoping that whomever was on the other end would take the hint and go away.

The knock came a second and third time. “Pitch, are you in there?” North’s voice finally sounded. “I think we need to talk.”

Pitch groused, “I don’t want to talk! I just want to be left alone!”

“I think you gathered wrong impression.” North said. “I would have explained if you had not run off so fast.”

Pitch squinted his eyes angrily grabbing another chocolate and popping it in his mouth as he grumbled, “Oh I understand plenty! You and Sandy didn’t need to speak, I got your message quite clear!” Pitch was glad that North remained on the other side of the door as it allowed him to yell and vent his feelings on the matter.

North pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Pitch’s head spun around mouth hanging agape to see North busting in his room before he scowled at him quickly turning away from the man in an obvious show that he was unhappy, “Of course. Stars knows I can’t get any privacy around here.”

“You are behaving like juvenile, Pitch.” North scowled. “I think you need to hear what I have to say, because this behavior has gone on long enough. I did not tell Sandy to put dreamsand in your skin because I don’t trust you. And it had nothing to do with what you and Bunny did. I told him to do it because you are still prisoner here. For what it’s worth, I am pleased with progress you did with Bunny. I am proud of you for handling it so well.”

Pitch glowered at the word juvenile hating when North used words like that to describe him. He spat in defiance his anger growing the more he spoke until he was practically shouting, “I know I’m your prisoner! Don’t you think I know that every day I spend here?! What are you so afraid of? That I might actually be able to meet your expectations? You say it isn’t because you don’t trust me, but you’re lying! That’s exactly the reason why you had Sandy do what he did!”

“ENOUGH!” North shouted, glaring at Pitch. His nostrils flared, a telling sign of the level of anger Pitch had pushed him into.

Pitch flinched under the thunderous eruption his eyes staring wide in recognition that he’d goaded the man to a hair’s line of losing his temper. Pitch immediately went silent knowing North would not broker anymore of his wrath. Feeling quelled, Pitch laid his chin on the handle of his Easter basket cradling it tighter as he squeezed his eyes shut tightly. Withdrawing into himself and feeling quite miserable; he sniffed back tears that brimmed from the awful ache he felt in his heart. He felt betrayed and wounded from the action, and even though North said it was not a matter of trust, that was all Pitch could focus on and believe.

It took North close to ten minutes of remaining silent and staring down at Pitch before he calmed enough to speak again, and his red face started fading to pinkish. He sighed wearily.

"Pitch," he began, his voice sounding calm. "I am sorry if you got wrong impression. As I said, I am proud of you and pleased with progress you and Bunny made today. I will admit that I was secretly against whole thing from start and had doubts, but I allowed Bunny to go ahead and do it because something has to be done to get your powers under control. I was expecting whole thing to not work,
but you proved me wrong. You did well, Pitch. But just because you succeeded this one time does not mean you have won favor of whole Pole. You seem to have this mindset that once you've done something pleasing and good, you think you have earned freedom. It does not work like that. You will earn your freedom in time, but only through steps. You have come a long way already.” North couldn't help but smile at the Boogeyman. "You have changed in ways that even Bunny did not expect when we first brought you here. That speaks a lot."

Pitch had turned his head, so that his cheek lay braced on the handle of his basket as he’d rocked in the silence. His brow remained furrowed, eyes closed, as he’d waited long fretful minutes for the Cossack to affirm what he felt.

Hearing North’s words now though, kind and rewarding despite the gentle chiding for his impetuous expectations made the tears that he’d been holding back cascade silently in rivulets from his eyes tracing the angular arch of his cheekbones to drip onto the handle of the basket discoloring the lightly colored wooden weave. His mouth twisted in his sorrow as he shuddered quietly. He liked hearing that North thought he’d done well; he’d been so proud, and he needed reassurance so badly. He was afraid to speak now feeling a sob arching its way up his throat, and he fought to keep it down since crying like this over what he felt was something he shouldn’t be crying over was a kick to his ego. He felt helpless to the emotions that now roiled through him, tearing him asunder despite his most adamant inner protests. The more he railed against these feelings, the more they seemed to well to the surface, so Pitch clenched rigidly to his basket just trying to ride out the wave of emotions and calm himself.

North reached out and put a hand on Pitch’s shoulder. "Earning freedom is going to take time. You must have patience. But I will say this, you are headed in right direction. You just have to keep going."

Pitch croaked out a watery, “I know. I … I don’t even really care about my freedom anymore,” admitting this brought the spike of his newfound dependence to the guardians out, and the sob that had worked its way up his throat finally escaped and he heaved brokenly ducking his head away in shame as he covered his face in his hands.

North turned a puzzled look to Pitch. "You don't?"

Pitch only answered with a shuddered sob unable to further incriminate himself to save some vestiges of his pride. He was broken, a remnant of a shattered person so divested of the simplest connections with another person for so long that to have them now, he was willing to do almost anything to keep them including remaining a powerless prisoner. The act of ensuring he had no choice in the matter served to cut him deeply by forcing Pitch to confront this as fact within himself which was very humbling to say the least.

The guardians would never know it, but to be shunned by them or just the thought of simple dismissal to be cast out to once more wander the Earth alone had become one of Pitch’s greatest fears.

North reached out and gently took hold of the basket in Pitch's hands, picked it up, and set it aside. He then wrapped an arm around the Boogeyman and pulled him closer to his bulky form. Hugging him in silence.

Pitch didn't resist as he was pulled physically over and into the embrace. He leaned into North's chest timidly. On some level he felt like he shouldn't indulge in letting himself feel any comfort; that he should contest in some way, pull away. But he didn't, couldn't leave the solace North offered him. Instead he cried small whimpers that were barely audible from the effort that Pitch tried in vain to silence. He wanted nothing more than to just be held and feel the warmth of another person, and this
need left him immobile outside of the tremors that coursed through his small frame in unspent tears.

North continued to sit silently and allowed Pitch to vent his pent up emotions and frustrations for however long he needed to.

After several minutes, Pitch was able to get himself mostly under control, but he remained leaning against North as he spoke softly, "I don't want to leave... I don't have anywhere else to go where I won't be invisible... where I won't be all alone," he shook with fresh tears as he said these words out loud feeling the despair they encompassed within him and his fear to feel it again.

"Why do you think we work so hard to see that you change?" North finally said. "Sooner or later, you will want to leave Pole. You will want to go out into world. And I want to make sure you have purpose out there where you don't have to be alone."

Pitch was silent sitting back up as he thought on North’s words. He gave a small nod of acknowledgement feeling embarrassed for breaking down like this as he wiped at his eyes to hide the indication that he’d been crying, as if North hadn’t already known. Sighing heavily, Pitch murmured, “I feel like I’m constantly on edge to change. I’m looking for a silver lining that will grant me the purpose you keep telling me North, but I’m afraid with what my powers do that I’ll never fit the mold you guardians want for me. I am trying though, believe me I’m trying!”

North nodded. "As long as you try. That's the important part. Things like this will take time. You cannot rush it or expect it to happen overnight. You need to accept fact that it may take long time. But no matter what happens, I can assure you that you will have home here at Pole for as long as you need or want. I will not send you back to hole."

It was reassuring to hear North say this, and Pitch seemed to visibly relax as he nodded, “Maybe with more practice giving nightmares, like I did to Bunnymund, it will keep showing positive results. I rather liked having that effect on Bunnymund; seeing that he also liked what I did… adrenaline spikes can be exhilarating.”

"You keep practicing." North patted Pitch's shoulder. "But I would feel better if you did it while Sandy and either I or one of other Guardians are nearby."

Pitch nodded unenthusiastically, “Yes. I suppose mostly when Sandy is there… so he can… do his thing and make everyone feel… safe.”

North did feel bad for Pitch, but he didn't know of any other way to insure the Boogeyman would stay put and not get the temptation to escape. He squeezed Pitch's shoulder. "It is not that bad. You have freedom to go most anywhere you wish. Be glad we do not keep you in prison cell.”

Pitch raised his head with a start at the mention of keeping him in a prison cell, “Yes, I am grateful that you do not. And I do appreciate that I’m allowed access to most places here at the Pole.” As if in recognition Pitch’s eyes widened, “The reindeer! Oh! I… I need to tend to them!” In everything that had happened, Pitch had forgotten he’d been heading over to care for them when Sandy had stopped him. He looked over at North a little ashamed for having forgotten them in his earlier despondency.

North nodded. “It is fine. Go tend to them.”

Nodding Pitch crawled off the bed looking back up at North a hue of purple coloring his cheeks, “Uh… sorry about… well all of this,” he weakly gestured in a haphazard circle to indicate the scene that they’d just shared. He was glad for the consolation and the bond they had that North knew when he needed something as simple as a hug, but it still left Pitch feeling shamed to have gotten so distraught in front of the other man to have made North feel that he had needed it.
"It is quite all right." said North, getting to his feet. "There is no shame. We all have to break down sometimes."

Pitch winced at the comparison shifting about uncomfortably, “Eh... uh, yes. I suppose so,” he stepped to the side watching North rise, “I... I should go tend the reindeer,” Pitch floundered feeling a bit awkward now as he moved to the door. He lingered for a moment looking back at North. When he caught the other man’s eyes, Pitch gave him a soft smile, “Thanks.”

North nodded, smiling. “If you want, we can go to warren later to color eggs.”

Pitch did really like the warren, but after going back and forth there the past couple days, Pitch was feeling a bit home sick. Also, the recent experience with all the guardians and giving a nightmare to Bunnymund left him a little socially frazzled, “Maybe tomorrow. I think I just want to hang around here today... after everything earlier, I’m feeling kind of drained.”

“Fine,” North nodded in understanding. “Well, I will get some work done, then.” He walked forward, opening the door.

Pitch watched North trundle off feeling better about where they stood now. His thoughts went back to the events of giving Bunnymund a somewhat pleasant nightmare and North’s words of finding a purpose. He’d liked thinking that he could use his nightmares in a positive manner, but they still felt difficult to control in such a way. If it was one thing he’d realized from this little experiment was that he had a lot less control over his powers than he’d thought he had. Sure, he could manipulate and conjure nightmares to his heart’s desire, but it wasn’t until he actually really tried to take the fear and reign it in to cutback the level of effect and intensity did Pitch realize how difficult it was to deny himself the full fill of what he normally greedily stuffed himself on. He could do it of course, it was just more challenging. He would have to actively always puppeteer the fearlings that extended from him to a far greater extent than that part of him really wanted, so he was also having to control his own desires far more. Which was much more difficult than directing the fearlings. It was going to be a difficult road to pave, but Pitch always did like a challenge.
Pitch continued to think on the future of giving controlled nightmares as he made his way to the reindeer stables. They were more than eager to see him several hours behind their normal feeding and grooming schedule especially since he’d been coming earlier the past couple days going back and forth to the warren. Pitch was content as he worked now taking his time grooming them once he’d laid down hay in all the stables to make up for the fact that he’d belatedly arrived to feed them. They seemed pleased to accept this peace offering and gave Pitch no trouble.

He enjoyed the quiet of just watching the reindeer frolic now. He’d decided to give them a longer bout to run since he kind of owed them.

Toothiana fluttered into the stables, a look of concern on her face as she searched around for the Boogeyman. “Pitch?”

Hearing the melodious tune of Toothiana’s voice brought a smile to Pitch’s face as he whipped his head around discerning where she was and began moving toward the front of the stables calling out to her, “Toothiana!” He glided over to her as she zipped out of the stall area following the sound of his voice. He was happier to see her now that the whole business in the globe room was finished. Out of all the guardians, Toothiana had been the first that Pitch had ever opened up to, and as such, she held a special place in his heart.

“I’m really sorry I haven’t been around these past few days. That tooth backup was horrible to sort out.” she said as she fluttered toward Pitch.

Pitch had crossed his arms behind his back, and ducked his head at her mentioning a backlog knowing he’d been the one to cause that by her spending so much time with him, and the fact that he’d been getting punished with chore detail working in the warren for the past few days meant he wouldn’t have been able to see her anyway. He of course didn’t expound upon the subject not wishing Toothiana to know much about what had happened the past few days leading to him getting in trouble four times in three days. Pitch had to wonder absently now if North freely divulged such information to the other guardians as North seemed prone not to have tact in this way by seeing that the matter should be kept more private like Pitch wished he would.

He turned a bright smile on her now, “It’s good to see you again. I missed you.”

Tooth smiled down at him. “I’ve missed you, too. I see you’ve been keeping yourself busy.” She looked around her.

Pitch perked at her taking note of his progress, “Well yes, I’ve built a pretty solid routine for them, and while they graze, I’ve done a little organizing here and there for ease or process. It’s… calming.” He stared off back at the reindeer, “I should get them back to their pens; can you give me about ten minutes?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding. She hovered and smiled as she watched Pitch go about leading the reindeer back to the stables.

He made quick work of the task, and the reindeer still having hay in their pens were more than willing to clamber in to fill their gullets. Once finished Pitch brushed his hands off coming back to
Toothiana, “Well, they’re all settled in for the day, and I’m free to wander about. Do you have much
time, or do you have other pressing matters?” Pitch wanted to visit with her, but he also didn’t want
to create any further hang-ups for her gathering teeth like he had.

“I think I can take a little time off.” she fluttered down to be at eye level with him. "So how have you
been doing?"

He liked it when she hovered this closely, and he could study the shimmering qualities of her radiant
cerise pupils. She’d always been captivating to look at, like a jungle flower, and since being at the
Pole, he’d gotten to see those eyes reflect so much more than determination and grit as he’d come to
have always associated her with in the past through many battles. Now those same eyes shined with
a brightness and kindness that put him at ease to just be in her presence.

He bobbed his head playfully, “Well, I’ve done a bit of travelling believe it or not. North and I went
to Bunnymund’s warren to help out over there, and after all was said and done, we painted some
eggs and Bunnymund even gave me my first Easter basket!” His excitement over the Easter basket
was a little more amplified than he’d meant it to come out, but he really was quite joyful with getting
it even now it made him feel a bit bubbly to have it.

Tooth’s face beamed. "Oh, that's wonderful, Pitch! Sounds like you’ve made a lot of progress while I
was away. It was fun painting eggs, wasn't it?"

Her smile was infectious, and Pitch’s smile brightened that much more to be with her, “It was! We
painted quite a few actually. The first one I painted for Jack almost by accident because I had been
thinking of him when making the design, and the second day we spent at the warren I painted one
for North, and he painted one for me,” his face lit up his smile growing impossibly wide as he
clapped his hands, “I have to show it to you! Oh! And this brilliant little flying device North made
and gave to me! It’s wonderful!” His excitement was brimming now thinking of presenting her all of
his new possessions and wondering distractedly if she’d want a piece of chocolate.

Tooth noticed right away that Pitch seemed different from when she last left him. And it did her heart
good to see the change. She had been worried that their efforts to rehabilitate him weren’t going to go
as they had planned. But seeing Pitch now helped to reassure her that they were indeed doing the
right thing, "Let's go see this egg and flying device!" Tooth giggled. "I do know that North can make
many wonderful things."

Having taken North’s words to heart about not needing to always be so serious, Pitch was letting his
more playful side out as he bounced down the path chattering away about the marvels of the warren
and how fascinating and wonderfully creepy the eyeless statues were. He spoke on the river and
glossed over how he’d managed to eat too much chocolate and pass out, and as they made it down
the hallway, Pitch expounded upon how North had let him paint and build his own train to which he
was also quite thrilled to get the chance to show her. He had been prattling nonstop to the point poor
Toothiana hadn’t had a chance to get a word in edgewise!

“All of it sounds exciting, Pitch!” Tooth finally said when the Boogeyman took a break. “Maybe we
could go the warren sometime and paint eggs together! It’s been awhile since I last did it.”

Pitch was delighted, and it reflected in the intonations of his voice as he spoke now, “You’d want to
go to the warren to paint eggs with me? I think that’s a splendid idea although we’d have to clear it
with North and Bunnymund of course.” As he finished speaking, the two arrived at his door, and
Pitch opened it for Toothiana giving a dramatic bow and a charming smile for her to enter first.

“Of course I want to go paint eggs with you.” she said, smiling at him and entering the room.
“Maybe we could all go there—you, me, North, Jack, Sandy. We could make a day of it. Or if you
just want it to be the two of us, I'm pretty sure North would give permission for us to go."

Pitch beamed; he liked that idea, “Either way sounds great. And Bunnymund will likely bring out more chocolates!” This of course had Pitch leaning down to pick his basket up off the ground where North had laid it down. It was nearly empty again after Pitch’s recent binge eating. Still, he held it out towards Toothiana in a gesture of wanting to share with her, “Chocolate?”

Tooth brought her hands up to her chin, forcing a smile. She looked at the candy like it was diseased. "Er, no, thanks. You go ahead and enjoy those."

An uncharacteristic giggle erupted from the boogeyman’s throat at her reaction as he grabbed a piece of chocolate popping it in his mouth, “Don’t mind if I do!” He set the basket back down on the dresser and gently picked up the bubble making toy putting a fresh splash of the fluid into the holes North had shown Pitch and began winding it, “I think this will be more to your liking my dear,” he finished winding the toy, and it came whirring to life. The contraption bounced in an effort to be free of the hands holding it in place, and Pitch let it go. It jetted into the air now swirling about and spraying bubbles as if showing off for Toothiana.

Tooth's eyes and smile grew wide as her eyes followed the toy around the room. "Of all the toys North has made, I've never seen anything like this." she giggled, fluttering up to follow the gadget. She ran her hands through the thick wave of bubbles that came out of it and laughed.

Seeing her joy with the toy pleased Pitch even more than just watching the machine itself, and he found himself just standing there gazing at the scene, hands folded loosely behind his back with a small smile on his face, "It was made in the warren with miscellaneous parts Bunnymund had brought out for North specifically to tinker with. Maybe a mix of both of their ingenuity served to make something greater? After I'd finished inspection of Bunnymund's eggs, North had asked me if I'd wanted to try to build anything out of the parts, but I couldn't make heads or tails out of any of it... a builder I am not! North was kind enough to set me up to build and paint this though when we came back from the warren," Pitch reached over to grab the train he'd made off of the nightstand running an exploratory thumb over the images he'd painted on it. The train now created a dichotomy of emotions both happy and sad from the memories associated with it.

Tooth flew down to Pitch, gently taking the train from his hands and looking at it. Something inside her cringed at the theme he had chosen for it, and the faces, but she didn't say anything.

"You made and painted this?" she asked.

Pitch's smile widened, "I did! North had a model for me to follow, so I would be able to figure out how to put it together. It came out alright for a first go I think. Do you like it?" He blinked looking up at her curiously.

“I do!” Tooth said, smiling brightly. “You did a real good job on it, especially the paint. Very creative. Do you plan on building anything else?”

As she complemented him, he could feel the blood rush to his face becoming a little embarrassed to hear her gush about what he'd made. He liked praise for the things he did, it motivated him to want to do more just to feel the warmth of seeing their positive reactions to it. Pitch smiled shyly, "I... I think I might. I did enjoy painting it. I know the motif is probably not much to your taste, but I’m glad you like it anyway."

Tooth handed the train back to him. "Maybe in time you can get to the point where you can build something from scratch like North does.” She pointed to the bubble machine.
"Maybe... although building toys might not really be my forte. I do think I like painting though. Egg painting gave me a taste of using my imagination to create images, and I really liked that. I don't think I will be able to replicate my own imagination like the river in the warren does, but it's made me curious to try," Pitch fidgeted as he spoke not really used to talking about his interests.

“There are lots of ways to paint.” said Tooth. “Maybe you could take North up on his offer to paint some of the toys, or help Bunny with his eggs. Or… or maybe you could paint pictures!” She beamed. “You know, like on canvas or paper.”

Pitch nodded, "I think that would give much more room to be creative. Would you... would you want to do something like that with me?" He hoped she would. Toys were a bit mundane, and although painting eggs allowed for a magical means of getting an idea out, the canvas was limited.

Tooth shrugged. “Yeah, sure! I can’t say I’m much of a painter, but I can try, I guess. I mean, I’ve painted some of Bunny’s eggs before, but there’s nothing to that, as you know.”

"Oh, I think you’d be a natural. Do you think North has any canvases to paint on? We may have to acquire them elsewhere.” Pitch hadn’t remembered seeing anything like that at the Pole, but that wasn't to say North didn't have some stashed away somewhere.

“I don’t know. You could always ask him. I’m sure he’s got some artist supplies somewhere. I mean, this IS the North Pole and Santa’s workshop, after all.”

"You're probably right; perhaps the next time you come to visit I'll have those supplies, and we can set up somewhere out of the way and see what we can do. Maybe North would let me go to the Tooth Palace with you to do so? The view itself would be a marvel to paint don't you think?” Pitch mused. After all, if North had allowed him to go to the warren, why not the Tooth Palace? Of course, he’d gone to the warren to do chores, but it had gone so well that Pitch had high hopes that North might allow it now. Toothiana not likely knowing he'd only gone to the warren as a punishment might also be less reticent to agree to the notion.

A look of worry washed over Toothiana’s face for a split second, then she smiled. She wasn’t sure she wanted Pitch coming into her realm again. True that he’d changed, but was he trustworthy enough to allow around her teeth? If Bunny trusted him enough to let him come into the warren, then perhaps it would be okay. “That sounds delightful!” she said. “We’ll talk to North about letting you come to the Tooth Palace sometime. Until then, you might need to practice first to see how well you can do.”

Pitch shrugged, “Does it matter where we practice? I was more thinking that the view would have made it nice regardless of skill.”

Tooth hesitated, not really sure why Pitch seemed so desperate to go to her realm. “No, I guess it doesn’t matter where you practice. But I just thought it would be nice if we could paint here first, just to see what we can do with it all. Besides, you have to get North’s approval to go to my realm.”

Pitch grimaced thinking that asking for permission might bring to light more than he’d want Toothiana privy to, but the thought of further travels outside of the Pole at a later date was far too tantalizing not to risk asking, “Uh… sure. North should be caught up with the work he was going to look in to, so if you want, we could swing by his office now to see what he says. We could also ask about art supplies while we’re there.”

“Well,” Tooth idly played with her fingers as she hesitated. “I’m not ready to have you come by the Tooth Palace yet, since I’m still pretty busy. We can ask him for art supplies right now, and then later on you can ask him about stopping by my place. How does that sound?”
Pitch caught her hesitation a delicate frown moving over his features, “Uh… yeah. That sounds fine. I wasn’t meaning right away you know… I was speaking about the future and just getting it out there to North to see what he thought.”

“Oh! Okay,” she smiled. “That works. I thought you meant going there right away, which is out of the question, since we’re still trying to get things sorted out when it comes to the teeth backup. And having more pouring in every night.”

Feeling guilty for having caused her so much work Pitch found himself offering, “I… I’m sorry I’ve caused you so much grief coming out here to see me. Maybe… maybe I could help you catch up? I don’t know, maybe sort some of the teeth with you?”

Tooth smiled lovingly at him. “Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s not your fault. I chose to come here. And thank you for offering to help me, but I think my fairies and I can manage. We’ve almost got everything sorted out.”

Pitch ducked his head giving a small nod. He was starting to get the distinct impression that she didn’t really want him to come out to the Tooth Palace, so he didn’t say any more about it, “Well, we can go check with North on those supplies, or we could just relax here although I don’t have much in the way of entertainment,” he shrugged feeling at a loss.

Tooth flew down and grabbed Pitch by the arm, pulling him forward. “I thought we were going to ask North about art supplies.” She smiled.

He hadn’t expected her suddenness and his eyes widened in mild surprise as he was pulled forward by her. Pitch just nodded at her words with a small smile letting her lead him down the hall towards North’s office. He smiled cheerfully looking down at her hand and liking the lightness of her gentle touch pulling on his forearm.

Pitch and Tooth soon arrived at the door to North’s office, Tooth stretching her hand out to knock. “Come in,” North’s voice boomed from inside. Tooth opened the door and entered, followed by Pitch. When North looked up, he smiled.

“Ah!” North said. “And what can I do for you?”

Tooth smiled at Pitch, nudging him forward.

Pitch grinned stepping forward, “I was talking to Toothiana about the past few days showing her the train I painted, and we got to talking about painting and were wondering if you had any supplies for canvas painting?”

North thought a few minutes, stroking his beard. Finally, he nodded, holding up a finger. “I think I might have some somewhere. I remember seeing such items when doing inventory. I keep some on hand in case young aspiring artists ask for them for Christmas. I will go look.” North got up and walked past Pitch and Tooth, and down the hallway. His face beamed at hearing Pitch ask for such materials.

After North had left, Tooth fluttered down next to Pitch. “I guess we should wait here.”

Pitch nodded his eyes moved about North’s office as they waited. He hadn’t been looking for anything in particular, but he couldn’t help noting on the back wall tacked up with several other papers was a smidgen of a blue print. Having spent enough time at the Pole now, Pitch realized, from the part that was visible, that the blue print was one for the Pole. He moved casually behind the desk towards the back wall glancing mostly out of his peripheral so as not to draw attention that he was
snooping as he spoke, “I was thinking maybe we could bring the supplies out by the reindeer fields. Just to have a little space to work without all the noise of the Pole… that was another reason I’d suggested the Tooth Palace.”

“I think the reindeer fields sound wonderful.” Tooth said. “And you’ll get to come visit the Tooth Palace sometime. I’m sure North will allow it. You can ask him when he comes back and see what he says.”

Pitch turned to her hearing her state that she was actually amiable to him coming to the Tooth Palace, and this brought a smile to his face, “Alright. I’ll ask him.”

Pitch had moved close enough now to get a better look at the blue print on the wall, and his eyes lit up to see that he was correct in his assumption, it was a detailed schematic of the Pole, and Pitch almost guaranteed that he’d be able to investigate that secret door Jack and he had discovered a few days earlier. Having been barred access to it without even so much as an explanation to why had left Pitch more curious than ever. Surely there wouldn’t be anything that dangerous lurking within Santa’s workshop?

Tooth hovered in the air on the other side of North’s desk, not exactly sure what to say. “There really isn’t much to do at the palace,” she said, finally. “No eggs to paint or toys to assemble. Just teeth. I hope you won’t find that too boring when you get to visit.”

Pitch tilted his head to the side giving her a smirk, “Why would you think your realm would be any less interesting than the rest of the guardians? I’ve been to the Tooth Palace, and my dear, it is a marvel in itself with its tall spires in the sky… I imagine to see the stars from one of those platforms would be one of the most serene sights one could see. Other than the chittering chatter of the baby teeth, I imagine it to be quite a peaceful place to be.”

"I've never thought about stargazing. I guess I've always been too busy with my teeth to notice that part of my realm."

Pitch tutted, “Really Toothiana? You’ve been living out there for how long now? Five hundred years give or take? Have you been that distracted? If so, you need a break more than you know.”

“You’re probably right. But we Guardians don’t get vacations. I guess that’s why I spent some time here, visiting you. It helped to just get away from things for a while. Not to mention, I felt you needed someone, too.”

Pitch blushed averting his eyes a moment knowing how true her words were. He nodded, “I did… I do,” he brought his eyes back up to hers giving her a warm smile, “I didn’t think I needed anyone, and when I did, I was terrified… I still am. It’s something I’m still trying to wrap my head around.”

Tooth nodded, giving him a loving look and smile. “It’s understandable, I think. I mean, you’ve been living alone for so long, and at war with us. It’s only natural that you suddenly being thrown into the middle of us would make you feel… well… a bit odd and uncomfortable. You’ve basically been trying to get used to things that are otherwise common to most people.”

He swallowed hard nodding, “It’s been… difficult. I know I’ve come off as brash or rude at times, and North and I had a… discussion about that,” he flushed lightly remembering all too well the details that ‘discussion’ at the warren had entailed. “I’ve been working hard to be less… volatile and to be more considereate. Forgive me if I slip on occasion as you’re correct, not being around other people for so long has made me a little less aware of how others perceive me or what I say, but… I’m working on that too,” the sensitivity of the subject had Pitch fidgeting restlessly.
"Looks to me like you're on the right path now. I can see a great improvement in your mood and attitude since I was last here." Tooth smiled. "I have to admit that I was a bit stunned at first."

"Stunned? Was I really that bad?" A small frown creased Pitch's lips. He had known that his attitude needed amending, but he hadn't realized how badly.

"Wellll…" Tooth's smile faltered. She didn't want to sound rude or say something that would make Pitch mad, but she also couldn't lie either. "Let's just say that you weren't the easiest person to be around."

Pitch pouted crossing his arms, "Well neither were you guardians," he sighed, "But... things have been much smoother as we've... adapted to each other."

Tooth nodded in agreement. "We've had a rough start, but I think it's going to get better now."

Pitch beamed, "I would like to think so."

"Soooo, what do you plan on doing, now that you're starting to find your place here?" Tooth questioned. "Are you going to continue taking care of the deer, or is there something else you have in mind?"

Pitch looked away shrugging, "I like the reindeer... I don't want to stop caring for them. They need me," Pitch needed them more, but he liked to tell himself that only he was giving them the best attention, and he didn't like thinking of anyone else taking the job over.

"As long as you're happy doing it." Tooth said, smiling.

He nodded looking up to see North's shadow cresting the door. Pitch moved from behind the big man's desk not wanting to cause suspicion for what he'd gone back there for.

"Here we are!" North said as he entered the room. "Sorry it took so long." He set down several canvases on his desk, along with paintbrushes, paints, and a palette. "I hope this will suffice."

Pitch brightened as he looked over the items nodding happily, "This looks great! I'm sure it'll be perfect!" Pitch turned his smile to North, "Thank you North."

"You are welcome," North smiled. "I am glad to see you taking interest in something creative. If you need more supplies, let me know. I will get more for you."

Pitch gathered up the supplies balancing them precariously and looking slightly overwhelmed by the bulk whereas it had been much less cumbersome for North, "Um... Toothiana, do you want to grab the canvases?"

"Oh! Sure," she said, flying over to grab them off North's desk. She turned to Pitch, clearing her throat and motioning to North with her head.

Realizing that he'd been about to rush off without asking North the other half of what they had come to see him about Pitch laid the supplies back on the table and began to organize them better while he spoke to North. He did so more to occupy his hands and make it easier to ask the man since he still was on the fence as to what North would say, "Oh yes, North, um, Toothiana and I were talking about painting, and we were wondering if I could go to the Tooth Palace to paint some time?"

North lifted an eyebrow at Pitch’s question, looking up at Tooth. He noticed the fairy looked hesitant and nervous. Clearing his throat, he turned back to Pitch. "Um... Well, I will give it thought, I suppose. But... Why would you want to go there to paint? You can paint here at Pole."
Pitch had a sinking feeling where this was going, but he told North his reasoning anyway. He shrugged, “Well… mostly for the quiet and the view. It’s a beautiful outlook that far up, and it just seemed like it would be a serene place to paint.”

North nodded. "I will think about it." He again looked at Tooth.

North’s response wasn’t a no, it felt like one though, so Pitch’s mood soured a bit as he grimaced grabbing the supplies freshly stacked and turned leaving Toothiana and North behind as he headed out of the office without further comment.

North opened his mouth to say something, but Tooth silenced him with a shake of her head, remembering how Pitch had listened at the door the last time they spoke.

“We can speak later.” she softly said. North nodded. Tooth turned and disappeared down the hallway, hurrying to catch up to Pitch.

By the time Toothiana had caught up to Pitch he was already halfway across the hub moving at a quick pace towards the reindeer pens. His mouth was etched in a thin line as he stared ahead determinedly.

“Pitch, wait up!” Tooth shouted.

Hearing her call out to him, Pitch stopped abruptly. He had lost a lot of his previous cheerfulness, and his body slouched a bit deflated now. But as she came up, he gave her a small smile, “I figured I’d just head over to the reindeer stalls and you’d catch up to me. Sorry I left so abruptly; North didn’t say no, but his demeanor did, so I didn’t feel like sticking around to hear a lecture. It’s okay. I didn’t really have my hopes up to go anyway.” Pitch tried not to sound melancholy about the situation not wishing to bring Toothiana down too.

“You don’t know that.” Tooth said. “He might feel that your trip to the warren was enough outing for right now. He might say yes to you coming to my palace later on, if he decides on yes.”

Pitch just gave an unenthusiastic nod, “Yeah… maybe.”

He was quiet for the rest of the walk down to the reindeer pens. Once there, he began surveying the area before pointing to a patch of land that faced the fields, “What about there? I could put the reindeer in the enclosure while we paint to let them run around. I was thinking of trying to paint one anyway.”

Tooth looked at the spot of land Pitch had pointed at. She nodded. “Sounds good. Although I’m doubtful I will be able to do much.” She giggled.

Pitch smirked as they brought the supplies to the spot he’d suggested, “I have a feeling you’ll do just fine. Besides, the whole point is to be able to relax and enjoy each other’s company right?”

"Right," Tooth nodded. She set down the canvases next to the other supplies. She was actually curious to see what Pitch would paint on a canvas, knowing how he’d painted the toy train. Would he paint what was in front of him? Or would it come out being a dark and twisted version of it?

After setting down the supplies, Pitch brushed himself off, “I’ll be right back,” he said heading off to the stables and as stated prior, Pitch began bringing the reindeer out one by one to let them run in the fields.

After Pitch left, Tooth fluttered down and began setting up the art supplies. She was grateful that North had supplied them with the items, but there was only one palette. They would have to share it,
she thought. One side for her, and one side for Pitch. At least he had given them two easels. She unfolded the legs on each and set them in place, putting a blank canvas on both. When she was finished, she rose into the air and hovered, watching Pitch as he continued bringing out the deer.

Pitch had become quite adept at getting the deer in and out of their pens, so by the time Toothiana had finished setting up all of the art supplies, he was also finishing up putting the last reindeer into the enclosure. He took a moment just to watch them at the gate before making his way back up to Toothiana. He was in a better mood now; the act of setting the reindeer to run free helped to relieve some of his earlier stress. He adjusted his easel a little higher looking down at Toothiana with a smirk, “Some of us aren’t that short Toothiana,” he teased her.

“Sorry,” she smiled. “North only gave us one palette, so we’ll have to share it. I was thinking one side for your choice of paints, and the other side for mine.”

Pitch looked at the size of the palette thinking it was too small to have an array of colors, so he decided to try something new, “How about you load up the colors you need, and I’ll improvise with what you use.”

“No, that’s okay.” said Tooth. “You load it up with the colors you want to use, and I’ll use whatever you choose. After all, you’re the one who really wanted to paint. So you should choose the paint colors.”

The fact that she was willing to let him pick the colors to please him made Pitch decide to stick with mostly natural colors of Black, white, and brown with splashes of blue, red, and yellow, so she could make any color she desired. He handed the palette to her before bending down to get one of the big brushes, the black, and the white tubes. He squirted a small amount of black onto the middle of the canvas before squirting an excessive amount of white on top of it. Seeing Toothiana just staring at him in wonder, he smirked, “I’m going to cover the entire canvas with gray as a background… it’s easier to add black… not so much to take it out.”

“Oh!” Tooth said as she continued to watch. “I’ve seen paintings in the houses I’ve gone into to collect teeth, but I’ve never actually tried it myself.”

Pitch mixed the combined paint adding a tad more black until he got the shade of grey he wanted before slathering the entire canvas with the color. He was curious to see what Toothiana was painting to see that she was just watching him. He smiled at her, “You’re not painting? You’re just watching me paint; that can’t be much fun.”

“I thought I would watch you for a while first, so I can learn.” she replied, hovering near Pitch’s right shoulder.

Pitch studied her a moment as she handed him the palette and decided he really liked what he saw, so if she was going to just watch him, then he would in turn paint her. He took in her iridescent colorings and he set to work first doing his best to replicate her radiant eyes. His own gold and silver eyes moved rapidly from looking at her to the canvas mixing the paint fervently and painting passionately to capture every detail.

Tooth laughed as she watched him, looking between him and the canvas. “What are you painting? Me?”

He smiled impossibly wide giving her a gleeful nod, “I figured if you just planned to watch, I might as well. Besides, you’re a much more interesting subject to paint than a reindeer.” He found as he continued to paint her that he was surprised at how well it was actually coming out. Sure, he was no Picasso, but he seemed to have a knack for this, and he absently wondered if it were from the hand
gesticulations he always made while weaving a nightmare, the wrist movements felt similar anyway.

Toothiana giggled, her cheeks turning the slightest red. “Oh, Pitch, I’m not that interesting.” She realized she was moving about a lot. “Um… I guess you want me to stay still? Sorry, I’ve been moving around so much. Here, I’ll just sit on the ground. Is that better?”

He beamed, “Perfect my dear,” Having her sit still did help immensely, and Pitch worked quickly to get the details of her form down on the canvas. She truly was beautiful; he’d known it before, but trying to capture the essence of what she was here opened his eyes further to see so much more that he’d simply overlooked.

Suddenly the drab grey background would no longer do, and Pitch thought back to the warren and the beauty that he’d seen there. Taking those images, he painted an array of multicolored flowers around her that complimented her natural colors. He filled in a ruddy red and bronze to surround her and the bed of flowers circling her to bleed out the drab of the grey almost completely. He brushed in light highlights to accentuate her soft features, and finally he added a baby Tooth presenting a pearly white tooth in every corner to accentuate her in the center knowing that they were as much a part of her as gathering teeth to collect memories was her calling.

Feeling the picture was finally complete, Pitch stepped away giving the painting an appraising nod, “Your painting is finished.”

Tooth flew up to look at the canvas, and gasped. “Pitch, it’s beautiful!” She exclaimed as she hovered and stared at it. It truly was beautiful. Toothiana was stunned at the use of colors as well as the fact that Pitch, for quite possibly the first time, had painted something that wasn’t dark, morbid, or tinged with nightmarish images. It was a shocking contrast to the toy train.

Pitch’s chest puffed out from the praise, “I was only replicating what I saw in you. But since you like it so much, it is yours Toothiana.” He was quite proud of it and frankly surprised that he’d painted something so colorful and honestly very not like him at all, but then he supposed it was because he had wanted to imitate Toothiana not just make her in his own imagery. What Pitch didn’t know was that what else had come out of him in this painting was a little more of the person he’d originally been before his possession, Kozmotiz Pitchiner.

“Thank you, Pitch!” she said. “I’ll be sure to find a special place for it in the palace. Oh, and we must show North when we’re done here. Won’t he be thrilled?”

Pitch blushed at the thought of parading the painting around, “Uh, you can go ahead and show him while I get everything cleaned up here and put the reindeer back in their stalls. I’ll meet you up there when I finish up.”

“Okay!” Tooth said, before she carefully took the wet canvas and flew off. It didn’t take her long to reach North’s office. The door was already open, so she flew right in.

“North!” she called. “Look what Pitch painted!” She handed the canvas across the desk. “Careful, it’s still wet.”

North carefully took the painting in his big hands as if he were handling a delicate flower. His eyebrows lifted and his eyes widened when he saw the brilliant colors and likeness of Toothiana. “You are kidding me.” North said, looking up at Tooth and then back at the painting. “Pitch painted this?”

She nodded, her grin expressing the excitement she felt.
“It is unbelievable. There are such bright colors. No darkness or disturbing things.”

“I know!” Tooth squealed. “Isn’t it wonderful? Maybe it’s a good sign!”

North nodded. His face suddenly turned serious as he set the canvas aside. “Tooth, would you mind closing door?”

“Sure,” she said as she flew over and did just that. She came back to hover close to the desk.

“I would like to talk to you about Pitch going to your palace.”

Tooth’s smile dropped a little. “Yeah, that,”

“You seem unsettled by idea.” North looked at her, lifting one eyebrow.

Tooth hesitated.

“It is okay. You can speak. Pitch did not follow, no?”

“No, he’s putting the reindeer away.” Tooth said. She sighed. “Truth is, I don’t really like the thought of Pitch coming into my realm. Not after what he did the last time he was there. I mean, don’t get me wrong. He seems to be changing, but… I…”

“There is part of you that does not trust him?” North finished for her.

“Yeah,” Tooth cringed. “He seems so desperate to go there. It bothers me. But then again he did say that he went to the warren to help out and also paint eggs with you and Bunny, so I guess everything went well with that.”

North let out a sharp laugh. “Yes, it is true that everything went fairly well with that.”

Tooth looked at him, a bit curious. “Is there more?”

“Is there more?” said North. “Pitch did not tell you why he went to warren?”

“Well, no,” said Tooth. “I just assumed it was to help.”

“He went there as part of punishment.” North replied. He then went on to tell Tooth everything that had happened. How Pitch gave Bunny the worst reindeer and tampered with the reins and harness, leading to Bunny almost getting seriously hurt. He filled her in on Pitch’s stubbornness and unwillingness to do the job Bunny had given him to do at the warren, which led to spankings. Pitch’s attitude problem. Everything.

Tooth was silent when North finally finished.

“Naturally, it is up to you whether or not Pitch visits Tooth Palace. It is your realm, after all. I am willing to give him permission to go if you want him to. But mark my words; he will need a keen eye watching over him. If you do decide on allowing him to visit, I will come with him like I did at warren.”

Tooth nodded, forcing a smile. She hadn’t expected everything North told her. What’s more… She was a bit miffed and hurt that Pitch had kept that part from her. “I’ll give it some thought.” she finally said. Turning, she left the office and floated lazily down the corridor.
Between You and Me

Chapter Twenty-Six

Between You and Me

Pitch had watched Toothiana leave with the painting before turning back to the multitude of paint tubes splayed all over the ground. They were capped, but Pitch realized he’d still managed to make a mess. His hand looked like a rainbow had exploded at his fingertips. Pitch had to chuckle thinking of yelling ‘boo!’ at a child and how very not scary his rainbow colored fingers would be. He looked down at the smatterings of bright colors decorating the palette he’d used to mix and paint Toothiana’s picture. This was definitely a sharp contrast to who he’d always seen himself to be, and for once, he realized that he kind of liked this change. He didn’t have to be just one aspect of himself. He was and could be much more than just fear.

He brought the messy supplies into the stables and to the back room where he normally filled the water buckets. He made quick work washing the palette, the brushes, the tubes, and his hands. Once he was cleaned up, he packed everything away and organized it to carry back to his room before moving on to the task of putting all the reindeer back in their stalls.

It took him about twenty minutes to finish everything before he was stumbling back through the Pole with all the supplies wishing he’d asked Toothiana to take at least the easels back with her. He was thankful that the yeti, Phil, had seen him struggling and offered to take his belongings back to his room for him. Phil of course took all of it under one arm carrying the whole load with ease. Pitch just frowned watching the yeti trundle off a bit miffed at how easy the yeti made it look. No matter, now that his hands were free, he could just go straight to North’s office.

He was about to go inside when he saw Toothiana floating down one of the halls. He hurried to catch up to her as he called out, “Toothiana! Hey!”

Tooth looked up to see Pitch. She forced a smile as she waved at him. "Hey!" she called. "North loved the painting!"

Pitch beamed, "He did, did he? Excellent! Where are you going?” He was wondering why she would have left North's office so soon and without waiting for him to return.

"I was... going to find you." she said. "I figured you would probably be done by now, so I thought I would just wait around your room instead."

His face fell at her hesitation. She wore a smile, but he could tell there was something wrong. "Did... did you want to go there to talk still?” He was worried now, but they weren't far from his room, and if Toothiana had something important to say, the two would have their privacy.

Tooth shrugged, still smiling. "Not unless you want to.” Actually, she wanted to talk to him about so many things, but she wasn't sure how to approach him on it where it wouldn't embarrass him or make him upset.

What did she mean by that? He looked her over curiously, and he could tell something was weighing on her, and he was becoming anxious now. Did he do something wrong? He ushered her forward, "Well, we're already practically to my room. Might as well sit and get comfortable eh?”

Tooth nodded. She flew forward, quietly following Pitch down the hallway.
They walked the rest of the way in silence, and once at his door, Pitch opened it for Toothiana and the two filed in much less cheerily than the last time Pitch noted with dismay. He closed the door lightly before turning back to motion to his bed, so she could have a seat as he climbed on it himself to settle himself against the headboard. In his nervousness, he grabbed the pillow as he'd moved into place putting it in his lap to knead his fingers into it awaiting what she would say to him.

Tooth hovered beside the bed, smiling. “You said that you had a really good time at the warren?” she said suddenly.

Pitch’s brow furrowed in confusion, “Well sure. We spent the afternoons painting eggs and enjoying chocolates and what not. Why?”

“Just wondering,” said Tooth. “You never showed me the egg North gave you.”

Tossing his pillow to the side, he slid tenderly off the bed and moved over to the nightstand grabbing the glass casing holding his egg painted by North and carefully proffered it to Tooth, “He painted something in the colors I like; he has the one I painted for him. It was themed off of the bubble contraption North built,” Pitch spoke stiltedly as he watched Toothiana with concern. She was acting different, and he didn’t know why, but her demeanor had changed from the light and happy mood they had just shared to this guarded off-put stance she now held. She was almost cold and detached now. He had to know what had caused this sudden change, “Is there something wrong Toothiana? You seem… I don’t know, not yourself.”

Tooth took the egg, smiling when she saw the beauty of it. She found herself intensely studying it like she had never seen an egg before as she thought of how to answer Pitch. Finally she sighed. “I talked with North a while ago, while you were putting the deer away.”

“I’m guessing from your change in mood, whatever the two of you talked about wasn’t good,” he sighed backing away to sit on his bed lightly folding his hands in his lap. He glanced back up at her wearing a small worried frown on his lips.

Tooth shrugged. “He just told me the whole story about how you ended up going to the warren.”

Pitch grimaced, “Oh… that. I… may have taken a prank a little too far. I hadn’t meant to put Bunnymund in danger rest assured if that was your concern. Even Bunnymund has forgiven me, and that’s saying something. Besides, North and I spoke on the matter and worked it out with Bunnymund to make it up to him. I hardly see why that matters now,” Pitch was scowling now. He didn’t like thinking of North and Toothiana talking about him behind his back.

Tooth couldn’t believe Pitch. She shook her head in disappointment. "Maybe it doesn’t matter now. But the fact is you failed to tell me everything about that little adventure. I thought you trusted me enough to confide in me as a friend."

“Failed… failed to tell you?!” Pitch’s frown deepened as his eyes squinted angrily at her, “Why would I need to tell you about that? It wasn’t something I cared to share! I told you the parts I enjoyed and that I thought you would enjoy hearing about!” He stood now his anger rising, “What are you, my mother now? I didn’t know I had to report back to you whether I have a mishap or not! Not that it matters since obviously North is just going to blab it all over the dang Pole anyway!”

Tooth gently set the egg down on Pitch’s dresser and shrank back. She felt her anger rising, but she was determined not to make the situation worse than it already was. At the moment, she wasn’t sure what to say or how she should say it. Instead, she just continued to hover, not saying a word.

Her judgmental stare set him off, and he pointed at her heatedly, “Don’t look at me like that! I don’t
"I wasn't asking you for an explanation. I just thought I was your friend, someone that you felt comfortable confiding in." she said, softly. "Even when it came to the personal things."

Pitch rubbed at his temples in frustration, “I am your friend, and… and I do feel comfortable confiding in you.” He raised his hands in defeat sighing as he sunk back on to the bed. He hated the feeling of disappointment she radiated towards him. He shook his head sadly looking at the ground as he spoke, “I didn’t want to tell you… about that part. I just wanted you to be happy with me, and I don’t really like talking about how I seem to continuously fail everyone’s expectations for me. I certainly don’t want to talk about North manhandling me in order to express how upset he is with me!” His face flushed, and he shrank into himself at the mention of North, feeling freshly shamed now.

Toothiana didn’t know what to do. Her anger was slowly going down. Now she just felt sorry for the man. Slowly, she fluttered over next to the bed and put a gentle hand on Pitch’s shoulder.

“Pitch,” she said, softly, “No one's perfect. You're going to make mistakes and you're going to fail sometimes. There's nothing wrong with that, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. It just means you're trying. I am happy with you. I would have still been happy with you if you had told me all of it." She sighed. "I didn't mean to sound like I was being nosy and prying into your business. But I was disappointed and hurt that you didn't tell me the whole story, especially the reason why you went to the warren in the first place. I got the impression that Bunny had invited you there for a fun afternoon."

Pitch sighed, “Every time I think I’m doing well, I end up… slipping. It’s… disheartening to say the least.” He turned wide imploring eyes up to her now, “I meant no deception by not telling you the whole story. I … I was just embarrassed that it happened at all. Surely you can understand it wasn’t meant to keep secrets from you can’t you?”

“Of course I understand.” Tooth smiled down at him. “But thinking you're doing well and then slipping... That’s normal for anyone, Pitch. Like I said, no one's perfect. Yeah, it is disheartening, but you're going to have to expect to have ups and downs. That's just part of life, even for us legendary figures.”

Legendary figures indeed! He wasn’t legendary… maybe once, when he’d been believed in… but not anymore, and not for a very long time now. Pitch had turned away from her gaze as these thoughts rolled through his mind, but he responded lightly, “I expect to make mistakes… I guess it’s just the regularity of occurrences can be… alarmingly frequent.” He moved about uncomfortably thinking of the fact that he still chafed from North’s many ministrations that served as a humiliating reminder to his consistency of staying in trouble.

“Maybe you should work to insure that you don’t make as many mistakes.” Tooth said, rather cautiously. She didn’t want to risk Pitch becoming upset again.

Pitch snorted, “If only it were that easy! Half the time I don’t realize I’ve really done something wrong until North is giving me a painful reminder to not do it again,” he grimaced at this admission half wishing he hadn’t mentioned it, not that Toothiana didn’t already know what discipline he faced whenever he did get in trouble, but discussing it made him feel slightly squeamish.

Tooth shook her head. "Pitch, you're a grown man. You should already know right from wrong. I know you have the fearlings inside you and you've spent decades wallowing in evil and fear, but all of that aside. You're still an adult, a man. You had common sense at one time in your life... before... before you became the Boogeyman."
He gasped looking at her in first shock that quickly shifted into rage. He couldn’t believe she would say that to him! He stood balling his fists sneering at her, “I know right from wrong! My definition of it just isn’t necessarily the same as yours! How dare you make assumptions of what I should know to conform to and what not to! You’re not being forced to do anything! You don’t know what it’s like to go through what I have to endure on a daily basis! I am an adult! It’s you guardians that need to learn to treat me like one!” He was seething now as her insult rose more truth to him than he was willing to see.

Tooth rolled her eyes up to the ceiling, shaking her head again. “We will start treating you like one when you start acting like one.” she said, struggling to keep her own temper in check. She marveled over Pitch’s talent for always proving their point.

He was huffing in barely contained rage, “I’ve heard enough! Out! Get out!” he stomped his foot for emphasis before crawling on his bed, grabbing his pillow, and violently shifting on his side curling into a ball as a means of shutting her out for upsetting him so fully.

Tooth wasn’t at all surprised this time. Actually, she was all too happy to leave. Perhaps she had been wrong in thinking Pitch had changed. Without saying a word, she turned and flew out of the room to go back to her palace, stopping by North’s office to pick up the painting Pitch had given her. She’d made up her mind now. Pitch wasn’t going to be allowed in her realm until she knew for certain that he truly had changed. Or would it help him to change if she invited him there? Her mind was confused. She needed time to think things through. Pitch would just have to throw his tantrums. Sooner or later he’d learn that he couldn’t get his way whenever he wanted it.

Pitch fumed kicking viciously at the sheets until he could climb under them aggressively snatching them and pulling the comforter over himself as an avenue to vent his anger and frustration. Oh! He hated when she would do that! Toothiana had a way of being the most pleasing and the most aggravating person he knew! He was still panting in his anger as he settled into the bed. Of course the longer she was gone, the more regret crept in. Pitch didn’t know how he always managed to find ways to fight with her. This argument was clearly her fault though! She just had to be nosy! Or maybe North had just blurted it out? Either way, what exactly did she expect of him? He lay there feeling uncertain now just pouting and feeling at a loss.

A heavy knock sounded at the door.

Pitch stiffened. What if Toothiana told North about their little argument? Suddenly he was feeling nervous for having gone off on Toothina so harshly. He pulled the comforter tighter now as he stated meekly, “Uh… yeah! Fa… fine! Everything’s great North!” His eyes were wide, and Pitch was praying the Cossack stayed on the other side of the door.

North opened the door and stepped in, looking around the door at Pitch. "Are you sure?" he questioned. "The reason I ask is Tooth came by my office a few minutes ago to pick up the painting you gave her and she acted upset. Did not say word, only took painting and flew off."

"Is everything all right, Pitch?" North’s voice came from the other side of the door.

Pitch cringed hunkering down further into his sheets as he stammered, “Uh… yeah! Fa… fine! Everything’s great North!” His eyes were wide, and Pitch was praying the Cossack stayed on the other side of the door.

North opened the door and stepped in, looking around the door at Pitch. "Are you sure?" he questioned. "The reason I ask is Tooth came by my office a few minutes ago to pick up painting you gave her and she acted upset. Did not say word, only took painting and flew off."

Pitch’s whole body froze hearing the whoosh of the door opening and North stepping into the room. Pitch was glad his back was turned as he swallowed hard his eyes shifting back and forth trying to decide what to say, “…Um… she was… she was a little unhappy about the news you shared with her… that I didn’t.”
North sighed, "I see," He looked at the floor, then back at Pitch. "So she told you?"

This response elicited a grumble of irritation from Pitch, "Was she not supposed to? Or do you two often talk about me behind my back?"

North glared, suddenly realizing that Pitch was in one of his moods again. "What Tooth does is her own choice. And for your information, we were not talking behind back. What we discussed is no secret."

“No, of course not. My business seems to be everyone’s business around here. I’m not afforded any minute amount of privacy.” Pitch snapped bitterly; although if he’d been looking at North to see the man’s glare he might have held back any further comments.

North’s glare turned dangerous. "Do I need to get switch? I can make that your business and your business only."

Pitch jerked at North’s words quickly spinning around in the comforter so that he was facing North with wide apologetic eyes, “Wha? No!” He shook his head no vigorously in his adamancy, “I… I didn’t mean… no, please don’t.” Pitch grew quiet hating the nervous flutter that instantly cropped in his stomach and the way the Cossack could instantly drain all the anger out of him with nothing more than a simple statement that gave him an ultimatum to curb his attitude or have it curbed for him.

North crossed his arms over his chest, still continuing to stare at Pitch.

Pitch shrank back from North’s gaze as he gulped. He spoke hesitantly now, “I know I can’t stop you from discussing… well… how you discipline me… or when you do, but… can… can you maybe just keep it between you and me? Please?” It was horribly humiliating thinking about the fact that they all knew North spanked him, but having them actively having conversations about it made his head swim to the point he felt like he was drowning in shame.

One of North’s eyebrows rose. "I see no reason to keep it between us, especially since others know already. I have also given some of them permission to spank you as well, if I am not around to do it myself."

Some? Pitch didn’t think this conversation could get any worse. He was very wrong. He’d heard North give Bunnymund permission in the warren when he’d left Pitch in the rabbit’s charge, but he’d assumed it’d only been under the special circumstances and not as a going forward rule. “You… you what? No! Why?! Who?! There’s no way I’m going to let any other guardian…” Seeing North’s brow draw down, Pitch whimpered in self-pity as he hid his face in his covers moaning, “Oh stars! I hate my life!”

"Why is that surprising? You’ve already been swatted by Sandy." said North. "We are all here to see that you change, Pitch. It is job shared by all. I see no reason why disciplining you should be strictly my job. If others think you’re deserving of it when I am not around, they have every right to do so. I will not stop them."

“I… don’t you think… what you’re doing to me is so unfair! There should be some boundaries! That… that task shouldn’t be shared! I swear I’m going to have no pride left by the time you’re through with me!” Pitch complained quite sullenly unable to fathom any of the other guardians actually taking him in hand like North did. Sure Sandy had struck him a few times, and it was enough to give Pitch a wakeup call, but actually having to submit to any of the other guardians to be spanked was unthinkable.

North secretly doubted that anyone but himself and Sandy would be the ones to do it, but he wasn’t
about to say that to Pitch. If Pitch knew all of them were capable of it, then it might help to
discourage some of his attitude and ridiculous behavior.

“Life isn’t fair, Pitch. You already know this.” North continued to glare. “Might I offer some advice?
If you don’t want spanking, then don’t do things that earn it.”

What kind of advice was that? Pitch harrumphed, advice indeed! He scowled beneath the sheet
giving North his nastiest sneer only because he knew the man couldn’t actually see it. This didn’t do
much to assuage the irritation he felt at North’s words though, but it was the only defiance he could
muster at the moment. Life really wasn’t fair Pitch thought bitterly, but this to he kept to himself
knowing to voice it would only make North more likely to scold him further. Instead he muttered
quietly to himself, “Of course you’d say that.”

North sat down on the side of the bed. “Pitch, you were doing so good up until today. Is there
anything bothering you that you wish to talk about? Earlier you were coming into office to ask for
painting supplies and were excited about creating something. Now you are back to being grump. I
can’t figure you sometimes.”

Pitch pulled the sheet away to look at North with a pout, “I did like the painting… I still do. It made
me happy, but I can’t be expected to be happy all the time can I? I would have remained happy to,
but Tooth surprised me with her… intrusiveness.” His face soured remembering their argument, “I
really don’t like you two talking about me in that way… it’s… upsetting and… humiliating.”

North’s face relaxed into a loving smile. “No, you can’t be expected to be happy all time. But I don’t
think I have seen someone who can bounce between two in such short time, except for maybe
Bunny.” North gave a chuckle. “You need to learn not to let every little thing bother you. Believe
me, you will be much more happy. You are going to have arguments and disagreements. This is also
part of life. But you shouldn’t dwell on them to point where it turns you bitter and hateful.”

Noting North completely ignored his gentle comment about his feelings on them talking about him in
such a fashion, Pitch huffed, “I’m not dwelling, and I’m not being hateful… well, maybe a little bitter
I’ll admit… but I’m also being expected to do a one eighty to change the ways I’ve always known. I
know what you want for me, and you know I’m trying to change, but that doesn’t mean that all the
changes you want me to do to I have to be fully on board with does it?” Pitch reasoned.

“No, I suppose not.” North shook his head. "But if you want to change, then you're going to have to
make effort and be serious about it. You're going to have to learn to start disciplining yourself."

“Disciplining myself? I thought that’s what the whole training thing with Bunnymund was supposed
to accomplish,” Pitch snorted.

“That is part of it, yes, but it takes a lot more than just that. You have to train and discipline your
mind, Pitch. You have to tell yourself, I am going to change, and be willing to accept that challenge.
You have to set goals for yourself and work toward them. And when you find yourself veering off
course and heading towards choices that will earn spanking, you have to stop, think it through, and
choose to make right choices.”

Pitch's frown deepened, "Yes, well I've done quite a bit of changing, and it doesn't seem to have
lessened the degree of how many times I end up on your ...bad side."

“It only looks like bad side to you, because you refuse to admit you have done wrong and refuse to
accept consequences for your own actions. You say it like it is my fault, Pitch.” North sadly shook
his head. “No, it is not my fault. I do not spank you because I am being mean or enjoy seeing you
suffer. Like I have said in past, I do not want to spank you. I wish I did not have to. You force me to
by your own actions and stubbornness. Whether you like it or not, spanking is part of helping you change.”

Pitch hated listening to what North was saying, he’d heard it one too many times from the man, but North seemed to want to drill it into him. Of course he understood consequences! How could he not when he had to face them every time he turned around! He didn’t need spankings to change! If the guardians would just work with him more; he was sure he could change of his own accord. Pitch didn’t want to face the truth that the consequence of a spanking looming over his head did in fact make Pitch think twice before acting.

Pitch just stared at North as he spoke with a petulant pout refusing to comment neither willing to admit any truth to North’s statement or get himself in trouble by saying something he’d likely regret.

North continued when he saw that Pitch wasn’t going to say anything. “Consequences are never fun —does not matter if it’s spanking or otherwise. You call it unfair that I use spanking on you. But I am certain that if I used another method that you would still complain and whine that it is unfair, because I will still look like bad guy.” said North. “Spanking is not cruel. When done correctly, it serves to teach and also gives you an incentive to change.”

Pitch perked at the opportunity that North presented, “You said I’d complain that another method is unfair, what other method could you use? Maybe we can try it instead and forego spanking?”

North’s eyebrow rose. “We are sticking with spanking.” he said, flatly. “Since you dislike it and fight against it so hard, it proves to me that spanking is good punishment for you.”

Pitch’s brow drew down in frustration as he felt his temper flare; he of course said nothing on North’s statement but twitched noticeably as fought the urge to spit out a venomous reply. It was obvious, Pitch could talk himself blue in the face, but there was going to be no talking North down out of this particular vein of punishment he’d so unwaveringly decided upon. It vexed Pitch to no end, but he had no other recourse but to submit to North’s decision. Pitch sighed in defeat averting his gaze to the bed and doing his best to change the subject, “Toothiana mentioned you liked my picture?”

So be it, North thought. He nodded. “Yes, I did. It was very beautiful. I am proud of you for doing such good job.”

Liking this topic much better, Pitch smiled, “I was surprised it came out so well. It felt familiar to paint, although I can’t remember ever doing so. Maybe it’s one of the things I used to do before… before I became the boogeyman.” He was quiet a moment thinking on the bits and pieces of who he used to be and how much he still didn’t remember. “What do you know about Mother Nature North? Have you ever met her?”

North turned a puzzled look to Pitch, thinking his question a bit odd. “No, I can’t say I ever have. And I don’t know too much about her.” He stroked his beard. "What is it that you would like to know?"

Pitch’s face contorted into a picture of concerned worry, “I… I don’t know exactly. I just feel like there is something I’m not able to remember about her. I have mixed feelings that give me a sense… that I wronged her somehow? My memories are blotches of time between right before I was possessed, what had transpired up until I came to Earth, and somewhere in between then and now. I’ve lost gaps of time. All I know is that deep down I feel I should know her, but I don’t know in what capacity… I can’t even imagine what she looks like. It’s rather disconcerting.”

“Ah,” North now understood. “I am sorry to hear that. But I am sure your memories will come back
Pitch glanced back at North his eyes conveyed uncertainty, “I just hope they are something I want to remember,” he pulled his pillow in front of himself crossing his arms on top of it and resting his chin on his folded arms. He stared ahead now pondering his memories and if what North had said were true when and if they might resurface.

After Toothiana had enacted the memories locked within his one tooth, it had opened his mind to see memories before his possession, and since the time that she had done it, he’d remembered bits and pieces of times before he’d been possessed in the nightmares that he would succumb to when he did sleep, but they were still only fragments here and there. He felt the pain and the joy the memory held, but he couldn’t connect otherwise to who he had been. It was enough for Pitch to know that the man he’d once been was no longer the man he was now, and to look at those memories was akin to looking at another person altogether even if he was able to feel for the people in these memories, the man he used to be was a stranger to himself.

North put a gentle hand on Pitch’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “I wish I could help you.”

Pitch let his eyes close as he took in a long full breath before looking back at North. His eyes reflected warmth at the consideration North afforded him, and Pitch gave him a small sad smile, “You have. Even if I’m too stubborn to admit it most of the time,” he smiled a little wider thankful for the comfort North offered him without question and truly appreciative that he wasn’t alone in times like these where thoughts of his past plagued him, and Pitch felt lost within himself needing help to become grounded once more.

A smile formed on North’s lips as he peered down at Pitch. “I can drive that stubbornness out of you.” he teased.

Pitch had to roll his eyes at that comment giving North a sour look. Even if the statement was true, it was one of the last ones Pitch would ever want to be reminded of, “Don’t push it North.” Pitch couldn’t help shaking his head and giving a half smile at the audacity North had. He swore the man knew no restraint for the things he said to him.

North raised an eyebrow at Pitch’s remark.

Pitch gave North a nervous chuckle running a hand through his hair hoping his comment was taken lightly and not too seriously.

“Just to let you know. You dance fine line sometimes.” North said.

Pitch grinned sheepishly a faint blush coating his cheeks, “It… it was meant in jest not offense. I know full well that you can, without doubt, drive the stubbornness out of me, believe me!”

North gave a quick nod of satisfaction at Pitch’s answer. “Good, I am glad you understand.”

Pitch scoffed, “You know, you get more flies with honey than vinegar works both ways right?”

“This is true.” North raised an eyebrow. “But if you are trying to get out of future spankings, the answer is no.”

Pitch looked offended, “I didn’t even! Gah! You are unbelievable!” Pitch fumed kicking indignantly in his sheets to vent his frustrations with North as he grumbled, “I get it! And you call me stubborn! Can we not talk about spankings anymore please? It makes me feel uncomfortable,” Pitch pursed his lips sulkily.
North marveled at the tantrum the man threw. He says he’s no child, yet he throws a child-worthy tantrum. But North didn’t say anything. “Alright,” he chuckled. “What do you wish to talk about?”

“Anything except spanking!” Pitch groused hating just the mention of the word because it elicited entirely too many bad feelings and memories especially with North. He sighed, his mind going back to Toothiana and wishing he hadn’t said what he had to her before she’d left. Pitch had to wonder how long it would be before she came back again, “Was Toothiana really upset when she left?”

“Afraid so. She just flew into my office, grabbed painting, and left. She didn’t even respond to me calling her.”

Pitch stated softly, “Oh,” before growing quiet as he looked down at the bed. He was glad she hadn’t filled North in on all the details though as the Cossack and he may have been having a very different conversation. He would have to find a way to make it up to her he decided, he just was unsure in what capacity to do so.

“Pitch, I would not get hopes up to visit Tooth Palace anytime soon. Unless Tooth gets over whatever happened between you and her.”

Pitch sighed deeply, “I know. She and I always seem to be riding a roller coaster; one minute we’re doing well, and the next minute we couldn’t see eye to eye if our faces were glued together.” He grimaced, “I can tell she doesn’t really want me to go to her home… she thinks I’m going to do something, or maybe she’s still resentful for what I did over sixty years ago,” he shrugged, “I can’t take it back; she knows that. Even though I’m here trying to make amends, I have to wonder if I ever can make it up to her, or is she always going to think I’m going to hurt her.” His face reflected a mixture of sorrow and regret as he thought on this.

North wanted to say, ‘I wonder why?’, but thought better of it. “Tooth is timid and delicate. She can be easily hurt, and it can take while for her to trust again. You just have to give her time.”

He turned back to North giving a slow understanding nod. He brightened, “Maybe I could paint her another picture? Do you think that would help her to forgive me?”

“That could work.” North smiled. “But make sure you apologize with mouth, too.”

He grinned, “Yeah, that to.” He chuckled splaying a hand out dramatically, “I’m thinking a canvas filled top to bottom with teeth of all types; does that sound like something she’d squeal her heart out over?” Pitch was beaming now propping himself up on his elbows and looking wistful at the thought of Toothiana’s reaction to his idea.

It didn’t sound appealing to North, but he knew that Tooth would probably love it. "Yes, it does sound like thing she would like."

His smile widened thinking of her smiling, and of course in his mind’s eye her forgiving him right away and maybe even giving him one of her gentle hugs. Pitch really liked these thoughts, and it motivated him into action. He scrambled out of the blankets excited at the prospect of seeing her happy with him again and climbing off of the bed, he started frantically looking through the art supplies to pick out what he would need, “I should get to making it! Never know when she’ll show up again!”

North’s face shone with pleasure at seeing Pitch excited again. He enjoyed seeing this side of Pitch. It helped to encourage him and remind him that Pitch was capable of change. There were still a lot of rough edges to smooth out, but with time he felt it could be accomplished.
"You know," North said, "I think I have book of teeth in library that you can use as reference if you need to. It was gift from Tooth long time ago. She insisted I needed it in library."

Pitch laughed mirthfully as he gathered all the supplies he would need to paint this particular picture, "Why doesn’t that surprise me at all? That would be helpful; I think I’ll need some sort of reference as I have a feeling she’ll notice any inconsistencies!” Looking back at North, he smiled appreciatively, “Thanks. I’ll head over to the workshop and set up, if you want to meet me over there with the book, or I can swing by your office for it after I get everything together.”

North got up off the bed. "I think I will get book and meet you over there. I just hope I remember where I put it." He chuckled. "It is not book I read often, as you can imagine."

Pitch feigned mock shock as he gasped, “No! But… it must be a riveting read! I can’t imagine putting it down,” he promptly giggled giving North a smirk.

"Oh, shush," North said with a chuckle, waving Pitch off. He walked to the door, opened it, and disappeared into the hall.

Pitch was still beaming as North headed out of his room. He continued to gather the supplies he would need feeling rather confident his idea to please Toothiana would play out in his favor; how could she not love a painting of teeth? Yes, he was quite assured this was going to please her and win him back her favor.
Chapter Twenty-Six

What Lies Beneath

Pitch moved down the hall quickly toward the workshop where he’d painted the train. He was excited at the thought of seeing Toothiana’s face once he gave her his gift. Of course he would have to give her an apology as North had stated. A humorous idea came to him while he was setting up the easel and canvas to write ‘I’m sorry’ in the teeth as cavities, but he doubted she’d like an apology like that although it did have him cracking himself up hysterically to think about it.

It was fifteen minutes later when North finally arrived. He held up the book. "Here it is. It was on bottom shelf in back" He handed it to Pitch when he neared the Boogeyman's workstation.

Pitch had already gotten the background for his canvas painted in rose tinted pinks and purples when North had arrived. He smiled, “You found it! Good! Just in time!” Pitch clapped his hands before reaching over to clean the paint off of his fingers and grasp the book.

North grabbed a chair and set it to the side and sat down. He was excited about watching Pitch work. This new found hobby of his made North very interested. "I hope you do not mind if I watch." he said.

“Not at all!” Pitch beamed liking the attention as he turned back towards the canvas. He flipped through the book studying the shapes and colorations until he felt he had them down well enough. He then prepared the palette with the mixtures of paint he’d need and got to work. His mind focused on the canvas as he imagined what he wanted to see. Pitch started with a crown in the center and then began to flower out in symmetric circles from the middle of the canvas with the teeth he painted all tilting as they worked their way around in a spiral. He placed them meticulously to look like falling dominos leaving barely any gaps of space in the canvas. Pitch seemed caught in a heated enthusiasm, painting without stopping for more than enough time to replenish the paint he needed and to glance at the page of teeth he'd set up for a reference. It took him nearly three hours, even working non-stop, due to the amount of detail he put in to each tooth. He wanted it to be perfect, Toothiana would be impressed he assured himself. North had remained quiet throughout the entirety of the time leaving Pitch to fall completely into the task. When he was finally finished he turned a winning smile to North brimming with pride, “Well? What do you think?”

North sat back and studied the piece, stroking his beard. Finally he nodded. “It looks good. You have a surprising talent for this, Pitch. I am proud.”

Pitch’s chest swelled enjoying the praise, “Thank you North! I just hope she likes it.” His eyes shifted down the piece with a small frown. What if his effort didn’t matter, and she still remained mad at him? No, she would forgive him; she always did after all. Well, no, that wasn’t true either. She obviously hadn’t forgiven him for her fairies from so long ago, but then, this was a minor infraction comparatively. He would sit down and write her a note to go with the painting, and hopefully it would be enough, “North? Can I get a blank card and an envelope? I want to write a little something to Toothiana to go with the painting.”

“Sure,” said North. “But don’t you think it would be better to tell her in person yourself when you give her painting?”

"Well... yes. I planned to say something in person, but I thought that maybe a little more on the side..."
where my own mouth couldn’t... ruin the sentiment behind the gift might be advisable,” Pitch blushed.

“Ah!” North nodded, giving him a smile. “Yes, understandable. I will hunt up a card for you later. Right now I wish to examine this piece of work closer.” he said, getting up from his chair to move over next to the painting. He was still puzzled by the fact that Pitch had now painted two pictures, and not once did they come out looking morbid in any way or dark as the toy train had. He pondered this.

Pitch watched on curiously as North examined his work wondering why the man seemed to study it so intently, not that it wasn't pleasing to see him doing so. He decided that out of all the painting he'd done, canvas painting pleased him the most. "I think I really like painting, it's like weaving a dream instead of a nightmare... which technically isn't my forte, but I suppose is as close as I'll get to weaving something without fear since with this I have full control of the outcome." Pitch didn’t say what he’d liked most about painting was the way he saw it pleased North and Toothiana.

“I am glad, Pitch,” North said at last, turning from the painting to give the Boogeyman a smile, “I hope you keep it up. I will be sure to supply you with whatever you need.”

Pitch found himself smiling even wider at North's generosity, "I appreciate your kindness; I suppose I'll need to paint you something fittingly Christmas as payment for the supplies," he smirked tilting his head playfully.

North laughed. “You do not have to pay for supplies. But I would appreciate painting.”

“Done! Besides, it gives me a direction to focus on when creating my next piece. I think I'll try to make one for each of you guardians just to see what I come up with… specifically with your themes in mind of course. Then maybe I can paint and decorate my own room with paintings to… That’s not asking too much is it?” Pitch was amassing all of these ideas for paintings in his mind that he had to take a mental step back wondering if that might be a bit too greedy.

"No, I don't think so." North beamed at Pitch. "As long as ideas flow, paint as much as you like."

“Well alright, I will!” Pitch exclaimed happily.

The next few days saw to Pitch finishing his chores with the reindeer and setting them in the fields to run while he set up to paint. He had an occasional visit from North who watched him work on the pieces he’d produced, but the other guardians seemed to be busy, and Toothiana much to Pitch’s dismay had not come by.

He had written an apology card for her, and since the whole card was blank, he’d decorated the front with a myriad of the phrase ‘I’m sorry’ scrawled across it in arching waves haphazardly placed all over the front of the card with the font changing sizes and shapes to make it more fun for Pitch to write it. He chuckled thinking that she couldn’t say he didn’t apologize to her. Inside the card he’d written:

‘Toothiana-

I wanted to make an attempt to give you a formal apology where words tend to fail me. I never meant to lose my temper with you, and I hope that you can accept this gift that I have made with you in mind as a sign of sincere regret for upsetting you.

I am truly sorry,

-Pitch Black’
He’d hoped that she’d come back again within the next day, but as a whole week had gone by, and Pitch had created twelve paintings all of differing styles. The first ones, as stated to North were guardian themed, Jack’s had snowflake patterns and happy children playing in the snow throwing snowballs, building snowmen, and sledding.

Bunnymund’s was a depiction of spring, and the canvas had been covered in spring flowers and butterflies along with a detailed rendition of the colored river complete with googies dancing all around the river, some of them hanging precariously off branches and bobbing down the river mainly to make the painting amusing for Pitch.

North’s painting had the big Christmas tree detailed in as much beauty as Pitch could take in and replicate. Under the tree he painted in an array of Christmas gifts and of course there were bothersome elves running amuck as he’d seen at his party and even yetis carrying toys depicting the hustle and hustle that was the North Pole. Pitch had gone to the main hub to paint it. Much to his annoyance he’d had many of the Pole’s denizens stopping to look and garble or chitter something at him about it. Once he’d finished that one, he’d decided never again would he paint in the vicinity of that rabble! Still, Pitch wouldn’t admit it, but the attention from the crowd had thrilled some small part of him that ate it up greedily even if the creatures tended to annoy him greatly, praise was praise.

Sandy’s was probably the most difficult to decide what to paint for Pitch because it went completely against his grain to paint anything dream that he didn’t want to taint into a nightmare, but then it hit him, and he knew exactly what he would paint for the little golden man. He thought back to the nightmare Sandy had turned into a good dream for him when Pitch had felt he was drowning in it. He painted magnificent mountain peaks, the island cove that Sandy had created for him, and golden dolphins racing through the waters. This was all just a backdrop though as most of the canvas was taken up with an expansive depiction of the star systems that he knew well the star man missed as much as he did. They were from a different time and space, and these constellations were long gone. Still, these stars had been burned into Pitch’s mind with the regularity he had traversed through space, and this painting was a silent apologetic mourning for their loss.

He had done one more painting that he kept for himself where Pitch made an array of snow globes that portrayed a small window into all of the different aspects realms in the center for Jack, Pitch had painted the town of Burgess because the boy was a free spirit and had no established realm. Burgess was where he’d met Jack, and where he’d become a guardian, so Pitch associated this place as being the closest to a realm for Jack. The rest of the paintings tailored more to Pitch’s personal taste since they were meant for him, and he made many nightmarish scenes that he fancied. Many of them ideas he’d claimed from North’s Christmas ghost story book.

After a week of painting though, Pitch’s interests were waning slightly, and he went back to studying the magic pages after he’d retired for the night as North rarely bothered to visit him after a certain hour. Pitch was starting to fully learn the man’s routines. He’d practiced the cleaning page again after studying it far longer this time. He still had the original page he’d realized guiltily. That was something he was going to need to take care of, and deciding he needed to return the ghost story book as well, he made his way to the library to deposit both the book and the page back where they belonged. To Pitch’s dismay, the roll top desk was now locked tightly, and he wasn’t able to get the page to slide under the lip of the locked top. Wanting to get rid of it, Pitch grabbed a random book off of the shelf, folded the page in half, and placed it in between one of the books pages before slapping it back on the shelf. Breathing a sigh of relief, Pitch quickly retreated from the library.

Over the course of the next few days, Pitch practiced and practiced. Several dust cloths later (He’d gotten a trash can to dispose of the ruined ones, and he’d deposited them in the kitchen’s waste bin promptly to get rid of the evidence. Of course the first creature he’d absently created had been thrown away into the landfill out behind the fortress without notice, but now there were close to
thirty making their way through the landfill and growing in size slowly.)

Finally Pitch mastered the technique, and he gleefully watched the dust rag move about and dust the miscellaneous objects in his room. Feeling he’d perfected the spell, he moved to use the spell at the stable first doing small tasks, and over the course of the next week, he was using it to practically do all of his chores successfully. He watched on in admiration as his spell scrubbed away at Blitzen’s fur, directing the scrub brush carefully with his hand. He was definitely proud of his progress!

Jack Frost flew into the stables and up into the rafters, his eyes growing wide when he saw the inanimate objects moving about on their own. “Wow!” he said. “How are you doing that?”

Pitch practically jumped out of his skin not expecting any visitors at this time in the morning. Pitch had been getting down to the stables especially early to avoid any run ins with any of the guardians since they tended to visit him in the later morning to early afternoon, and for the past two weeks, other than North and occasionally Sandy and Bunnymund, Pitch was mostly by himself. He hadn’t seen Jack or Toothiana since the day he’d given Bunnymund the nightmare nearly two weeks prior. That had been a sore subject, and Pitch had asked to withhold from the practice for a while for everyone’s sake. North seemed pleased enough with this as well as Sandy whereas Bunnymund had seemed a bit disappointed since it had been his idea and all. Either way, visits had been scarce.

As the week had drawn into the next week, Pitch had become bolder with his usage of the spell he’d mastered. He had originally been quite careful only using it in his room, and then in the depths of the stables where he was sure no one could see, and it wasn’t until today that he’d decided to use them out in the open. Figures one of the guardians would show up now!

He spun around to face Frost, “Jack!” he grabbed at his chest, “Don’t sneak up on me like that!” The scrub brush of course no longer having his full attention thudded to the ground lifelessly. Looking around nervously and assessing there was no one else around Pitch strained a smile, “Oh that! Do you like it? It’s magic!”

"Sorry I startled you.” said Jack. He nodded to the object that had stopped. "I figured it was magic. How are you doing it?”

“It’s uh… a well-practiced spell! I could teach you if you’d like?” Pitch thought if he did teach Frost, and the boy would likely jump at the chance, he might also in turn be able to keep the fact he was practicing North’s magic under wraps.

“No, thanks,” Jack lifted an eyebrow. “I wasn’t aware that you were versed in magic.”

Of course not, Pitch thought disdainfully. He frowned, “I’m not well versed… this is a simple spell. Just for small bits of cleaning here and there. I don’t usually use it, and I thought it best to keep it to myself especially since I wasn’t sure what you guardians might think of it… it does help with the chores though. Do you mind keeping it to yourself? I don’t know if North would find using it as a breach of doing my chores myself,” Pitch was wringing his hands nervously now realizing this could go very badly for him if Jack decided to bring it up.

Jack wasn’t sure what to say. Seeing the inanimate object moving around on its own had amused him, but at the same time he heard faint alarm bells going off in the back of his mind. Some part of him had to wonder how and why Pitch was suddenly using a spell. He finally sat down on the ceiling beam. “I guess I can keep it to myself for now.”

Pitch remembering the painting he’d made for the winter sprite snapped his fingers and perked brightly, “Oh! I have something for you Frost! Let me finish up here with Blitzen, and I’ll show you.” Pitch went about hurrying to finish the reindeer and placed him into the fields with the rest of
Curious now, Jack floated down to wait for Pitch. “Oh? What is it?” He smiled.

“Oh, ah, ah,” Pitch wagged a finger impishly at Jack, “It’s a surprise!” He grinned broadly in barely contained glee, “But… you’ll see soon enough.” Pitch sauntered towards the main building looking over his shoulder at Jack mischievously, “Are you coming?”

Jack raised an eyebrow and smirked. “Sure,” he said, following.

Pitch practically skipped back towards his room with Jack in tow, and when they made it back to his room, Pitch popped the door open gracefully. He motioned for Jack to go inside, “One of them was made for you, I’m sure when you see it, you’ll know which one it is,” Pitch beamed.

Jack blinked when he walked into the bedroom and saw the paintings. It was unexpected, and the paintings Pitch made for himself were a bit disturbing. Jack’s brow furrowed as he slowly walked around and looked at each painting. He turned to look at Pitch.

“Did you paint these?” he asked in awe.

Pitch delightedly nodded, “I did! Now then, were you able to discern which one of them I made for you specifically?” Pitch watched him keenly now excited to see his reaction when he’d discovered which one was meant for him.

Jack looked around and finally spotted the one Pitch had painted for him. He walked over to it, smiling and admiring the kids and snow. “This one,” He turned back to Pitch. “These are beautiful, Pitch. Since when did you start painting?”

Pitch’s smile grew as the boy recognized the painting meant for him and even more so at the compliment. He did so very much adore the attention he got from this newfound skill. It was a nice feeling to have the others look at him with approval for something he could do well in their eyes that was also pleasing to them and himself. He acted nonchalant as he made his way over to Jack, “Why thank you Jack! I actually just started a couple weeks ago. And yes, you choose wisely, I gather that means you get to keep it.” He gave Jack a winning smile.

“Thanks,” Jack said, grinning. He looked back at the painting. "You're actually very good at this. I would have never guessed." He walked on to examine the rest of them closer. Finally, he got around to the snow globe picture. He studied it a few minutes, then pointed at the snow globe in the middle. “This place is familiar to me.”

Pitch chuckled gliding over to where Jack was, “It should be, it’s the sleepy little town of Burgess… where it all started. Of course it’s been a long time, but I thought you’d recognize it immediately since we had quite a battle there. But… that was the past, and not the reason I chose it here for this painting. As you can see all the guardians are represented by the place they call home… their realm. Eh… you don’t really have a realm, so when I went to paint this, I thought it was where you became a guardian, so it was as close as I was going to get to a representation of a place you belonged in that regard.”

“Ah, I see,” Jack nodded, smirking. “Well, you did a really great job on all of it.”

“Thank you,” Pitch smiled lightly thinking back to the reindeer still cavorting in the fields. He turned back to Jack as his smile turned mischievous, “It’s been a while, maybe you’d enjoy a bit of a ride with the reindeer? I have to go back to the stalls to put them back in their pens regardless; it could be fun if you’re up for it.”
Jack took the painting that was his and tucked it under his arm. "Are you sure you want to do that again? I mean... after what happened the last time?"

Pitch frowned, "No racing this time; let's just keep it casual." Pitch had to fight the want to snap at the boy whenever he would remind him of instances he'd just as soon forget. He hadn't wanted to ride after that fiasco (including the days that followed at the warren) for almost a week. There was no way Pitch planned to put himself in a situation like that again! Not that he wasn't sure he couldn't give Jack a run for his money. Outside of painting, Pitch had spent a couple hours each day training the reindeer after his return from the warren. (Mostly Donner since he'd decided he was the fastest and would be the one to win any future races should Frost challenge him again; Pitch was still quite competitive after all.) Even on days he wasn't riding, Pitch could still spend time with the animals to get them more pliable to his instructions. It wasn't like he had much else to do with his days at the Pole.

Jack smiled. "Sounds good. Let's go ride, then."

Perking at Jack's ready compliance, Pitch's lips curled into a toothy grin, "Excellent!"

It didn't take long for the two to make it back down to the reindeer that seemed more than pleased to have been left unattended. Pitch growled a curse under his breath, Dasher was no longer in the pen. In fact the deer was nowhere in sight. Pitch darted into the stables hoping that the reindeer may have found its way to the grain stores, but there was no such luck. Pitch's face grew ashen as realization that he'd lost one of the reindeer fully registered. Turning a worried look to Frost, Pitch announced, "Well... maybe not so casual after all. I hope you're up for a little search and rescue mission."

"Has this ever happened before?" Jack questioned as he set his painting down and helped Pitch search the stables.

Pitch shook his head, "No. But I have to get it back before North notices it's missing! I don't want to look incompetent," Pitch groused.

“I’m sure he wouldn’t think of you as incompetent. You aren’t perfect.” said Jack. “Everyone loses things sometimes.”

Pitch huffed, "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather him not have to know at all. Besides, this just makes our ride a little more interesting right?"

“Whatever you say,” Jack shrugged. “Where do you think it went off to?”

Pitch sighed, "I haven't the faintest idea, but I want to corral the rest of them outside of Donner and whichever reindeer you plan to ride. It won't do to have more come up missing while we're looking for Dasher." Pitch's mood had soured quite a bit from the sudden bad news as he stormed off towards the gate to start hauling in the other reindeer.

Jack nodded in agreement, following Pitch. "I'll take Vixen again."

Pitch nodded acknowledgment grimly as he and Jack worked to get the remaining reindeer quickly penned in their stalls so that they could commence their search for Dasher. Once the other reindeer were secured, Pitch moved along the gate line looking for any clues. Seeing tracks in the snow at the far end of the field, Pitch pointed to them, "It looks like he jumped over the fence here. Let's hope he kept trotting and didn't decide to fly," Pitch grumbled as he looped some rope over Donner's neck and climbed up on his back giving the reindeer a swift kick to the sides to send it vaulting over the fence. Pitch didn't wait for Jack as he jetted across the arctic plain following the tracks.
Jack looked back toward the main part of the Pole, briefly wondering if he shouldn’t tell North what was going on. He shook his head and mounted Vixen spurring her forward to follow after Pitch. Halfway there, he whipped out his staff and kept it ready.

The tracks headed along the fortified wall and over a hilltop crest, off in the distance Pitch saw the silhouette of the missing reindeer. He breathed a sigh of relief as he yelled to Jack, "There he is! Quick! Circle left, and I'll cut him off from the back!"

Without saying a word, Jack nodded and spurred Vixen in the direction Pitch ordered.

The two worked in tandem arching across the snow towards Dasher whose head rose with a start to hear the galloping hooves heading his way. Pitch swung around to the back as Jack cut expertly around to stagger the deer in its tracks. Dasher backed away from Pitch snorting in defiance before turning and running towards Jack. Pitch smiled knowing the winter spirit would be able to hop on his back, and Pitch would be able to collect Vixen and make their way back to the stables without further trouble.

As if sensing Pitch’s plan, Jack waited until Dasher got close enough to him. Then he took a flying leap from Vixen's back and landed perfectly on Dasher, gently pulling back on the deer's antlers to stop him and get him under control. All the time, Jack made his unusual noises to the deer to help soothe him. Once he felt the animal was in control, Jack waved to Pitch. "I think he's ready to go back home!" he shouted.

Pitch whooped joyously, “Fantastic! Great job Frost! That was a bit of unexpected fun wasn’t it?” He laughed riding up beside Jack a huge cheese eating grin plastered on his face.

“Yeah! It was.” Jack laughed.

Pitch chuckled noticing Vixen was lumbering off in the opposite direction. He tutted, “Vixen is trying to make a break for it to, I’d better go grab her before we’ve got another reindeer to chase down. Go ahead and take Dasher back to the stables, I’ll meet up with you in a minute.”

"Will do,” Jack said as he turned Dasher around and pushed him in the direction of the stables and the Pole.

Pitch turned Donner around lazily trotting towards Vixen whom seemed to sense she was about to be pulled back to the stables and rebelliously picked up her pace to move away from him, much to Pitch’s annoyance.

His lip curled as the smell came up to him from downwind, “Disgusting,” Pitch complained wrinkling his nose at the rank smell of garbage wafting up to his nose, and something else… what was that? Sulfur? Rotten eggs? It was wretched! Of course Vixen continued to trot in the direction of what could be seen now as a huge landfill where a chute high up attached to the main building of the Pole emptied the trash into the landfill in an intricate mechanized manner that chopped up the garbage to condense it in even spreads across the pit. Hundreds of years of garbage had been accumulated within the hole, and if it weren’t for the fact that no insects were found in the temperatures of the North Pole, Pitch was sure it would have been infested with bugs.

Vixen continued on oblivious of the smell, and Pitch sighed kicking Donner’s sides to spur the animal on and catch up to Vixen. He didn’t want to spend any more time here than he needed to! As Pitch neared the cusp of the hole though, what he saw made him gasp in horror. Within the garbage pit, something writhed, and slurped in amorphous form. It looked like an over bloated slug, and Pitch recognized immediately the carapace of the creature had interwoven fibers that were colored in the mixture of the dish cloth he’d used the very first time he’d practiced the cleaning spell. The creature
now turned a bloodshot thoughtless set of six eyes in the direction of Vixen (whom had moved far too close to the creature.) The organism bubbled and began to lurch towards the unsuspecting deer. Beside the slug creature were several other similar squirming mirror images of the beast, but they were just much smaller in size. They gathered around the bigger creature and all turned towards Vixen in what would seem was a hive mentality.

Jumping into action Pitch pulled the rope off of Donner’s neck and spurred the reindeer on with another quick kick. He jetted towards Vixen who nibbled carelessly at a patch of grass sticking through the snow. Pitch was quick to wrap the rope around the unsuspecting deer’s antlers and yank it as hard as he could startling the reindeer to burst forward just as the creature slapped a tentacle down where Vixen had been. The tentacle oozed back into the depths of the murky trash, and the dull eyes of the creature stupidly gazed at the spot where the reindeer had been thankfully not quite registering the reindeer was no longer there.

Pitch had squalled with a high pitch yell at the near miss racing both reindeer up the hillside panting in terror, wide eyes staring in shock behind him. That was way too close! Oh stars! What had he done! Pitch blanched looking back at the creature with a mixture of panic and wonder. The thing would definitely be made a vision of some poor child’s nightmares that was for sure, but right now, this thing was Pitch’s personally made nightmare. He had to get rid of it! How? More magic? Stars no! North? No! No! No! Any of the other guardians? No… he was in deep trouble. He had to find a way to eliminate this creature discretely. It was already in the landfill, which was keeping it contained, but for how long?

This was too much! He wanted to cry from the level of dread he was feeling; the stress had his stomach in knots. Pitch ran a hand through his hair; think dang it! Okay, didn’t North say he had something dangerous in that secret hold of his? Maybe he could find something in there to defeat this monster he’d created! He needed to do something, and he needed to do it fast!

His heart was in his throat as he spurred Donner and Vixen back to the stables doing his best to regain his composure. The last thing he wanted was for Frost to have any inkling of something amiss. So Pitch sucked in deep breaths closing his eyes and doing his best to put on a calm façade as he rode back up to the stables where Frost was standing outside waiting on his return.
Pitch gave Frost a strained smile, “Got her! Uh… she really didn’t want to come back to the stables,” he tittered nervously doing his best to keep the smile on his face when all he could do was think about that horrible abomination he’d left back at the landfill.

Jack looked up when he heard Pitch return to the stables along with the two reindeer. He smiled, until he saw the look of horror on Pitch’s face. He raised an eyebrow, looking quizzically at the Boogeyman. “Anything wrong, Pitch? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Wa-? Wrong? No!” Pitch forced a laugh, “Of course not! Vixen just gave me a bit of trouble along the way is all, and I’m feeling a bit worn out from the stress of the situation.”

"Ah," said Jack, studying Pitch a few minutes. He turned to look at the stalls, waving a hand toward them. “I went ahead and put Dasher in his stall. Hope that was okay.”

Pitch nodded vigorously, “Yes, yes, quite fine! Uh… did you still want to ride more, or do you think we’ve had enough of an adventure for one day?” Pitch wasn’t sure if riding would help to ease his nerves or not, but he needed to get himself together fast since Jack had noticed off the bat that he’d been quite rattled even though he was working to hide it. He did feel like he had worked a good veneer of calm to wash over his features and disguise any further alarm he may have originally registered when he rode up to meet Frost.

“I’m still up for a ride, if you want to.” Jack smiled. “I wouldn’t necessarily call what we just did, a pleasure ride, even though it was very adventurous.”

It was probably a good idea to ride just to get his mind off of what had just happened and have a chance to think, Pitch decided as he gave the boy a smile, “Well then, let’s get to it!” Pitch made sure to ride in the opposite direction of the landfill not wanting to be anywhere near it especially with Jack in tow.

Jack rode up beside Pitch and kept pace, “Soooo, are you going to keep on painting?”


Jack lifted an eyebrow. "That's good. It's nice to know we have another painter around here!"

“Another?” This got Pitch’s attention as he turned to Jack curiously, “Do you paint on canvases as well Jack?”

"Well, no. I've never tried. But I told you that I paint the leaves in fall. And, of course, there's Bunny and his eggs."

Pitch smiled fondly, “And don’t forget North and his toys. It would seem poor Toothiana and Sandy are the odd balls out… unless Sandy can paint. Can Sandy paint? I know Toothiana said that she had no skill in that department.” Pitch had to wonder absently now if Sandy could paint and how that would miff him if the golden man could and could also do so better than Pitch! The little golden man was already so much more powerful then him as an aspect in their chosen fields, for him to best him
at art as well would be crushing.

"Yes, North. How could I forget?" Jack laughed. "Um... I don't know about Sandy, to be honest. If he can, he's never revealed that side of himself to the rest of us."

“Good,” Pitch said reflexively before blushing slightly knowing that comment likely wouldn’t be well received by most of the guardians, and he moved to make the statement a little less offensive, “I mean, Sandy is so talented in dream... uh, it’s nice to be able to have something I’m better at than he is.”

Jack smiled. “Maybe you could ask him sometime. See if he paints. Someone with his imagination is bound to be artistic in more than one way.”

Pitch snorted responding derisively, “And here you said you were surprised that I had that talent earlier. What exactly are you saying Frost? Did you think I had no imagination?”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “No, I wasn’t saying that at all. I was talking about Sandy, not you.” He frowned, looking Pitch up and down. “Is there something bothering you?”

Pitch huffed, “Well, you seemed so astonished to see that I had any talent, but you expect Sandy to just be pouring with it! How can I not take offense to that?” Pitch swore he was always playing second fiddle to the dream weaver!

Jack leaned away from the Boogeyman, not understanding why the man was getting so worked up. “Pitch, I meant no offense, I can assure you. I was just surprised by your talent because you never mentioned before now that you could paint on canvas, even when we were talking about painting before. For someone who’s normally dark and gloomy and enjoys scaring children, it was just sort of surprising to see such cheerful paintings coming out of your hands.”

Pitch was scowling feeling rather judged by the guardian of fun, “The cheer was for you guardians; I just painted it because I thought that’s what you would want to see most. The point was to make you all happy Jack; it was a gift after all.” His tone turned bitter, “Stars know you don’t wish to see anything that’s actually of me. You should know by now, I don’t do cheer!”

Jack frowned. Seeing that he wasn’t going to get anywhere with Pitch, he said nothing more, nudged Vixen, and veered away from the man to ride off elsewhere.

Pitch sighed rolling his eyes to the sky before trotting back over to Jack as he huffed, “Okay look, I’m sorry. I… I didn’t mean to get into a mood back there. I just… I don’t know. For once I just wanted to not be compared to Sandy. Before you say it, yes I know, that’s not what you were doing. I get that now… I was just getting the wrong impression. It can be hard to always walk in a man like Sandy’s shadow… even if you technically are of the shadows,” Pitch chuckled softly at his own joke looking back hopefully at Jack that he’d accept his apology, and they could start over. He’d already upset Toothiana, he didn’t want to upset Jack as well.

Jack sighed. “I accept your apology, Pitch. And, yes, you’re right. You did get the wrong impression. I wasn’t comparing the two of you at all. I really don’t know how you even came to that conclusion based on what I said.”

Pitch lowered his gaze, “I… I guess I’ve always been a little jealous of Sandy. He’s my polar opposite. The Yin to my Yang, but I’ve always felt so hopelessly outmatched by his abilities. That was my fault reading into what you said and letting my own insecurities fuel something that wasn’t really there.” Pitch sighed heavily to admit this to Jack or anyone, but he wanted Jack to understand why he felt the way he did, and he just wanted to make amends for the slight between them in an
effort to move past it. He did really like Jack even if the boy was able to get under his skin at the drop of a hat.

“I dunno. I thought you did a great job creating those nightmares, even if they were dark and evil. With a little more practice, I think you could become as good as Sandy.”

Pitch smiled at Jack, but he didn’t look confident as he gave a halfhearted, “Thanks Frost. Are you about ready to head back?” Pitch was feeling much more relaxed, but his current predicament was making it hard to enjoy this outing. He needed to start thinking about a contingency plan to deal with his problem back in the landfill, and although this was nice, it wasn’t helping his situation.

"I guess,” said Jack, giving Pitch a puzzled glance, wondering why the man was in such a hurry. He turned Vixen around without saying another word and headed back to the stables. Probably for the best, he thought, seeing that Pitch was obviously in one of his moods. If he stayed any longer, he might get upset over something he said again.

The two rode back in silence. Pitch could tell that Jack hadn’t really been ready to come back in, and Pitch would have preferred to have stayed out and ridden for hours if it had been any other day. As they put the reindeer away, Pitch saw Jack’s painting propped up on one of the rafters and pointed to it giving the boy a small smile, “Hey. Don’t forget your painting.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jack smiled. He flew up and got it, coming back down. “Thanks again for this. It really is great.” With that said, Jack waved a goodbye and flitted off up and over the glacier wall.

Leaving Frost’s company, Pitch moved back down the hall to his bedroom, and he began to panic all over again. This was bad; this was very, very bad! Pitch bit his knuckle as he contemplated how screwed he was.

Pitch made it to his room without interference, and he spent the better part of the night pacing back and forth terrified that North would pick tonight to pay him a visit, but much to Pitch’s relief, the Cossack had not come by this night leaving Pitch to his own devices.

He had of course taken all the pages he’d copied out from behind the mirror in desperation of seeing if there had been any spell that would help him destroy the creatures left lurking in the trash heap, but North wasn’t the type to keep destructive spells, and these ones in particular were all rather mundane spells that only served small purposes that sided with helpful or pleasant conjurations (when cast correctly apparently.) None of them were in the slightest bit helpful to his current plight, so Pitch was going to regretfully have to look elsewhere.

This was one of the longest nights he’d ever spent at the Pole, minus the first severe spanking he’d received from North where the Cossack had shoved him angrily in his room with a promise to be back later once he’d calmed down to deal with him. North had left Pitch to await impending doom literally from that morning until midnight! The waiting and dread he endured this night felt very akin to that one.

Waiting until after two in the morning when Pitch was almost certain that North as well as the majority of the inhabitants of the Pole would be safely tucked away in their beds, Pitch crept carefully out of his room and darted down the hall towards North’s office. He could feel his blood pumping in his veins and his heart palpitating impossibly loud in his ears the closer he neared North’s office. Every sound made the nightmare lord jump or silently shudder. The fearlings contained inside him roiled through the entirety of his nervous system sensing his own fear and wanting to devour him from within.

He paused taking a deep breath to steady himself listening intently outside the door before daring to
open it. The door creaked unbearably loud, and Pitch’s blood froze as the creak moaned his arrival. After a minute of just listening for any kind of signal that there was anyone else in the room and being assured there was not, Pitch cautiously moved into the office shutting the door behind him.

Quickly he made his way over to the desk drawer he knew there was paper in and withdrew a piece, and grabbing a quill from the top of the desk, Pitch quickly folded the miscellaneous pages covering the blueprints away to reveal the schematics in their entirety. Pitch was glad he could see in the dark now as his eyes traversed the page taking in the details, but mostly looking for the spot where he knew the secret room would be on the plans. It took him a few minutes to find it (and every minute in North’s office felt excruciatingly too long!) Pitch kept expecting at any moment North was going to walk through the front door, and he would have to try with great difficulty to explain himself. There really was no good excuse he knew especially once he’d finished scrawling down the specifics to get to the secret room (which Pitch was in luck had another entrance from the 5th floor of the workshop that seemed to be an attic entrance and most likely less fortified than the outside wall had been.)

Pitch breathed a sigh of relief as he carefully latched North’s office door closed and hastily retreated from the vicinity of the office. He darted into a dark alcove to look over the rudimentary map he’d created on the folded piece of paper he held. It was scrawled messily in his rush to remove himself from North’s office, but it was good enough Pitch decided as he moved down the corridor towards where the stairwell was located.

Pitch traversed the steps as quietly as he could and managed to avoid detection from the yetis that watched over the Pole while everyone else had slept. Pitch too knew their rounds as he’d made a point long ago when he’d first been brought to the Pole (when he’d formally been planning to escape) what the guard yetis routines were so as best to evade discovery from them. This forethought was definitely a boon now Pitch found as he easily maneuvered past the passive perception of the unwitting guards.

The floor that the attic entrance was on was not a common grounds area, and it was in fact for all intents and purposes blocked off. Pitch had to move and climb over several crates to get to the entrance, and once over the crates and boxes, he found the top was locked with a heavy chain. Pitch had to dig around within the many crates until he found a piece of a broken machete blade that he used to pry at the bolts holding the frame of the door in place. He got the door open, but he managed to cut one of his hands deeply in the process. Pitch grimaced in pain as he ripped a piece of sheet from one of the crates to wrap around his wounded hand and proceeded to lift the latch and peer down into the room.

The room was hallow save for a metaled robotic looking thing. Pitch dangled from the top and worked his way down the small inlet of steps that led to a very small walkway even for someone as thin-framed as Pitch. The room was lined in cobwebs and was what Pitch found to be delectably eerie. He moved down to the ground looking about to see if this was truly all that was housed in this otherwise empty room. Pitch peered up in awe at what had to be a twenty-foot tall mechanical man.

This thing definitely looked dangerous Pitch decided as he smiled up gleefully at the robot. The mechanical man had several gizmos worked in to the metal casings of its arms and chest. The intricate detail was amazing Pitch noted as he looked over the entirety of what he could physically reach. Now all he had to do was figure out how to open the side wall and how to turn the blasted thing on to control it. He didn’t see any controls? Strange, most of North’s gizmos had controls of some sort he’d noted from meandering about the workshop and inspecting its oddities.

Pitch shrugged deciding that he’d worry more about that in a minute. It was dusty down here, and it reminded him too much of being stuffed back down in the darkness of his lair, shut away and
imprisoned. Thinking a little fresh air would be good, Pitch moved over to where the indentation in the wall was that led to the outside and began working his hands over it to find the release mechanism to open the door. It took him several pushes and prods, but he’d managed to find the right combination within the stonework and cheered as the doors began to slowly slide open. What Pitch did not see, that would have alarmed him greatly, was that as the door opened, the mechanical man’s visor drew up, and its head swiveled in Pitch’s direction.

The metal man creaked with rust joints as it shifted and a mechanical voice boomed down at Pitch, “Intruder alert! Intruder alert. Breach has been made! Neutralize the target!”

Pitch spun around letting out a shrill scream as the twenty-foot tall machine lunged forward smashing a fist into the stone where Pitch had been standing moments ago. Luckily, Pitch’s ability to react quickly paid off in this instance, but without his ability to disappear into the shadows, he was as good as a sitting duck out here.

Yelling at the top of his lungs, Pitch dashed outside skittering in the snow as the mechanical man tore through the door after him breaking apart chunks of the wall as a loud siren blared throughout the Pole signifying a violation of the integrity of North’s semi impregnable fortress.

Pitch ran as if his life depended on it, because at this moment he was fairly sure it did!

The robot lumbered after Pitch much more quickly than Pitch thought possible; its arms whirred as gadgets within them came to life and clicked and clacked preparing some automated reaction.

The wall was bending to the left, and Pitch rounded it just in time to see a flare of flame erupting past him as he gasped in terror at the sizzling patches of snow. He was going to seriously cease to exist if this thing got a hold of him. Pitch clung to the wall for half a second before barreling towards the landfill, if anything, he hoped the horrible creature within would make for enough of a distraction to allow him an escape. He was so close! He just had to make it!

The mechanical man shot several more bursts of flame as Pitch barely dodged and rolled out of the way finally making it to the landfill panting grievously. Pitch saw the creature lurking, and he backed up dangerously close watching and waiting as it staggered forward sensing his presence. The robot now stood over him as well, and its arms were heard powering up as it lifted them to fire, “You will be eliminated!”

Pitch could sense the tentacle before it reached out of the depths to grab him, and as it swung up to crash down on him, Pitch dove with all of his might in between the legs of the robot as the robot’s fire ignited the trash, and a horrible screeching filled the air as the monsters were incinerated. The robot swiveled quickly now to face Pitch who had nowhere left to run having been effectively backed into a wall.

Powering up to fire once more, the mechanical man announced, “Threat neutralized.”

So, this is it, Pitch thought sadly as he covered his face and crouched against the wall awaiting disintegration.

“STOP!” North’s voice rang out over everything else. “Deactivation code: fruitcake!” At the mentioning of the word, the robot turned to face North, then powered down.

Pitch still cringing shuddering against the wall in terror for several moments before realizing that he was in fact not dead. Elation filled him as he jumped to his feet patting his body and laughing hysterically at how close of a call he had, “Oh thank the stars! North! You saved me!” The laughter of course quickly died out as Pitch sobered looking around at the carnage. One of the smaller slug
creatures limply slithered up out of the inferno still on fire and screeching as it collapsed finally shriveling in on itself and dying. Pitch was struck silent by the chaos that surrounded him, his jaw worked to say something, but no sound would come forth.

North stood quietly, cutlasses in his hands, as he stared around them, his eyes finally resting dangerously on Pitch.

Pitch had turned white as a sheet tugging at the makeshift bandage on his hand as he stuttered, “I… I can explain!” Pitch backed up two steps coming up flush against the wall. He swallowed hard as he stared with no small amount of fear at North. There was nothing he could say that wasn’t going to earn the Cossack’s wrath at this point Pitch sorrowfully realized.

“You will… later.” North said, his voice sounding like he was doing his best to hold back the anger that was bubbling just under the surface. “Right now, I suggest you get back to your room as quickly as you know how.”

Pitch paused wanting to say more, but seeing the look on North’s face, the nightmare lord decided it was best to just do as the man stated. Pitch shrank against the wall before slinking away eyes wide as saucers and fixed on North as he passed him. Once Pitch had taken about ten steps along the wall, he did as North had commanded and scurried off hastily not wanting to upset the Cossack more than he already had.

He kept looking back at North as he ran, but the Cossack seemed to still be surveying the scene. A hard lump was forming in Pitch’s throat now as he made his way back towards the fortress entrance. Several yetis and elves were now gathered outside. Many of them glaring daggers at Pitch, and all Pitch could do was lower his head and do his best to hurry back to his room to avoid their scathing stares.

It was a long walk of shame that even though he was moving at a relatively quick pace, it seemed to take much longer than any other time he’d made the jaunt. He was terrified of what was to come. He’d really messed up this time, and he knew without North telling him that this was going to likely be his worst punishment to date. That was to say that North didn’t throw in the towel and send him away for unleashing a deadly robot and setting fire to his landfill… of course then there was also the reason why all that came about. Pitch pulled at his hair fighting back a sob of frustration. He’d finally made it to his room, and as he entered it, all the energy fell away from him as he slowly walked over to slump onto the bed.

The minutes ticked by as Pitch waited for North, but he didn’t come. After twenty minutes passed, Pitch began pacing nervously, and as time went on, Pitch found himself staring out the port holes, pacing the floor, and sitting on the bed rocking with his head in his hands as the anxiety built upon itself. The waiting was torture! North had to know this on some level?

Pitch finally stopped just standing, peeking outside of his door, and jumping at any and every sound dreading it to be North coming to finally deliver his punishment. Every time though, it was only a random yeti or elf walking by. Everyone that was normally asleep had been roused by the commotion he’d caused, and many were grumpily complaining, and after realizing everything was alright were slowly dissipating back to their rooms.

Hours passed, like this, and it got to the point that Pitch could no longer stand to stare and wait. Part of him screamed to make a break for it. No one was guarding his room, he could have run when he was outside, but instead he’d done as he was told and came back here like a good lap dog to await chastisement in the most horrible of ways he knew. Pitch couldn’t understand why he stayed in this room, like a man awaiting the gallows, but he did. He moved back to the wall to stare out of the portholes it had to be late morning by now. The sun was well in the sky, and the sky was coated in a
golden bright glow. Pitch’s eyes moved around his room now taking in all of his paintings and the rest of his gifts given to him by the guardians. How had he managed to mess up this badly?

Pitch slumped against the back wall and dropped into a huddle in the corner. He pulled his knees into himself and covered his face not able to bear to look at any of it anymore. It wreaked of disappointment and failure. As he thought on this and the mounting anxiety over flowed within him, Pitch began to weep.

A light knock came to the door.

“Come in,” Pitch’s voice wavered as he swiftly wiped at his eyes to dry the tears from his face. He knew it had to be someone other than North because he doubted the Russian would deign to knock at this point.

The door slowly opened, and Toothiana fluttered in. She looked around the room until she spotted Pitch. Her face displayed concern and worry. Without taking her eyes off the Boogeyman, she closed the door.

Pitch was a picture of misery. His eyes took her in somewhat hopefully, he wanted her to save him, but he knew that wasn’t going to happen. He shuddered doing his best to control his cracking voice, “Hey Toothiana,” he tried to sound welcoming, but he came out just sounding afraid.

"What happened?" she said, softly. It had taken her awhile to actually speak. She hovered in the air in front of Pitch and looked down at him with pitying eyes.

Pitch paused staring at her a long moment before looking down, “What didn’t happen. Everything went so wrong! I… I tried to fix it, and I just ended up making it worse!” He was shaking his head woefully as he spoke.

"Maybe if you started at the beginning." said Tooth.

Pitch sighed laying his chin on his knees feeling quite resigned and tired. There really was no point in lying, and so, he told her, “The beginning… well, It’s a funny story actually. North brought me to the library about four weeks ago, and left me to look about… I did, and I found something rather curious. A spell book page; of course I was curious… who wouldn’t be right? Well, I decided I’d test it out. It didn’t work at first …so …the mess I just cleaned up and threw away. I never realized…” he shook his head taking in a deep breath to get the strength to continue, “I didn’t know the spell was making some …monstrosity. I found out today when one of the reindeer got loose. Frost and I went to track it down, and that’s when I saw it. I knew I had to clean up the mess I had made, and I swear that’s all I wanted to do!” Pitch paused covering his head in his knees unable to face her any more as he continued, “I …I heard North say that that secret room held something dangerous, and I planned to use it to take out the creature I’d unwittingly created… and well… you know the rest…”

Tooth silently and slowly shook her head, her face still showing a mixture of sadness, concern, and worry. She let out a heavy sigh. "I'll let you know that North is not pleased."

“I know,” Pitch wined on the verge of tears again, “I didn’t mean for anything bad to happen! You believe me; don’t you?” He brought his forlorn eyes up to meet Toothiana’s.

"Of course I believe you, Pitch, but it still doesn't make what you did right. You might not have meant for bad things to happen, but you still did wrong by taking that spell page and dabbling in something you shouldn't have been.” Her voice sounded almost motherly.
Pitch averted his eyes back into his lap. He felt so stupid now. He knew better when he took the pages in the first place; he knew that it was risky. He wasn’t versed in magic, but the subject had always intrigued him. With North being a well renowned wizard, Pitch had known the man would have something magical that he’d be able to dabble in, and he’d also known that North would have almost definitely refused to teach him any of it. In the end, curiosity and pride had won out over common sense, and now Pitch was going to pay for it. He grimaced bringing his eyes up to meet hers once more stating in resignation, “I don’t suppose a heartfelt apology is going to do much for me here is it?”

Tooth sadly shook her head. "It took North and the yetis a good part of the morning to clean up the mess and get the fire under control. And once the rest of us were informed of what had happened, we, too, came to help. North and some of the others are still working on it even now. The fire has mostly been put out. Now North and the other Guardians are making sure whatever those things were are completely destroyed."

Pitch cringed, "Everyone is here?" The thought of all the guardians being involved made the whole situation that much more shaming. Pitch was in awe to hear that the fire was still going even after four or more hours... well, there was a lot of trash there. His thoughts now wandered to the mechanical conveyer system that carted the trash out wondering if that too had been damaged by the licking flames. He was in so much trouble! Pitch pulled at his hair in his apprehension, "He's going to kill me, "Pitch moaned feeling a wave of self-pity.

A small hint of a smile tugged at the corner of Tooth's mouth before disappearing. "I doubt that."

"No, but I have a feeling I'm going to wish I was dead by the time he's through with me," Pitch whined.

Tooth looked at him with pity. "I wish I could help you, Pitch. But I have to confess that I think you do deserve some form of punishment."

"Some form of punishment yes, okay, but does it always have to be that form of punishment?" Pitch pouted. His gut was twisting to think of it, and ghost pains panged through him knowing what he could expect North to do to him from these current escapades of his.

“That is not for me to decide.” Tooth said. “But… seeing how mad North was earlier, I can almost guess that it will probably be that punishment.”

Pitch's face flushed as he stated almost inaudibly, "I know. I messed up pretty good this time. I... I should told him when I discovered those abominations, but I was so afraid to get in trouble, I thought I could fix it; I don’t know how I managed to do so much damage instead. I'm so sorry Toothiana; believe me, I am. “Pitch curled further into himself as tears brimmed in his eyes and silently spilt down his cheeks. He felt absolutely awful knowing the carnage he’d caused and the disappointment he was sure North now held concerning him.

Tooth floated down and put her arms around Pitch to try and comfort him.

Pitch closed his eyes taking solace in her embrace nuzzling his chin over her shoulder and just letting her hug him. He sniffed, "I swear I seem to spend more time apologizing than anything." Pitch laid his head back against the wall looking up at the ceiling as he let out an ironic laugh considering the fact he had not given Toothiana her card and painting, yet another apology.

Tooth said nothing, only hugged him closer.

He finally let go of his knees and tentatively reached out to embrace her as well, sinking into her hug
as he mumbled a soft, "Thank you."

Tooth still didn’t speak. She lifted a hand to run over and through his hair, just allowing him to get out everything that he needed to get out.

He couldn't help but to lean into her touch closing his eyes as he breathed a soft contented sigh. To be touched in this way was soothing and almost electric to Pitch. His eyes opened in to half lids as golden eyes surveyed her carefully. He let his hand gingerly reach out to touch her cheek exploratively afraid that she would cringe from his touch. He was glad she had not. His hand lingered only a moment on the soft surface before letting it slide away. "I... I wanted to give you something, and I want to do so before... before it's no longer just you and I here." He was pensive as his eyes shifted nervously.

Tooth pulled away, smiling. "Really?"

Pitch wished he could share her enthusiasm, but all he could give her was a small forced smile as he backed up the wall to stand once more and moved over to the far corner of his room where his dresser met the back wall. There he picked up the painting and grabbed the envelope off the dresser. He carefully turned it to her looking down at it as if he’d forgotten what it’d looked like himself, “I… I made this for you the last time you were here… the day I… chased you away. I wanted to make it up to you and tell you I was sorry.” He lamely lifted his arm out to give her the card now still unable to meet her gaze.

“You made this for me?” Tooth looked at the painting as she reached out to take the card. “Oh, Pitch, it’s wonderful! Thank you!” She leaned forward and placed a small, light kiss on his forehead.

He had been looking down, but at the gentleness of her kiss, he had glanced back up at her shyly unable to help an actual smile getting through his otherwise melancholy mood. He was happy to see her happy even with such impending circumstances looming over him.

She backed away and held up the card. “I’ll read it later.”

He nodded; his hands were shifting across the top of the painting in his uneasiness. Realizing what he was doing, he handed it to her carefully, “Here; I… should give this to you before I ruin it to.” Once she’d taken the painting he steepled his hands and thrummed his fingers together to find some way to expel the building tension he felt that came with the inexorable task of just waiting.

"It's beautiful and will look lovely on one of the walls of my palace." she said after examining the painting closer.

Pitch placed his hands behind his back now as he began to pace, worry once more etching his brow, “I hate this,” he lamented, “I feel sick with the waiting, but I don’t want him to come either!”

"If it makes you feel any better, I can assure you it won't be anytime soon." she said. "Once they get everything cleaned up and under control, North already said that he's going to take some time to cool down first before he sees you."

“Oh,” Pitch gulped. His whole body went rigid, “I imagine he’s rather upset with me. If he’s going to be a long time, I… I should probably go tend the deer then. They’ll need to eat… and, and stretch their legs,” Pitch stated wanting to do something other than pace around his room. The closed in space was starting to drive him mad.

Tooth's mouth twitched nervously. "Did North say you could go out of your room?"

Pitch pouted, “He didn’t tell me I couldn’t leave it… and I didn’t say I wouldn’t come right back. I
just want to make sure they are getting cared for… in light of my colossal failure, they shouldn’t be made to suffer as well.”

Tooth nodded. "Just to be safe, I'll go with you. At least it'll seem like you're under my watch, just in case some of the yetis wonder.”

Pitch relaxed slightly, “Thank you Toothiana. I appreciate you letting me check on them. It puts my mind at ease.” He opened the door peering tentatively out before moving stiltedly out into the hallway. He knew North likely wouldn’t want him out of his room, but he was glad he was able to convince Toothiana to not only let him go but to also come with him in case he met with any resistance.

It felt good to leave the confines of his room after having paced it for several hours in his anxiety. This was good, the walk allowed his mind to clear a bit and focus elsewhere, so he didn’t have to think so much about what was to come. He desperately needed a distraction! Pitch took the opposite hall that led to the back side of the Pole not wanting the glares he’d received earlier when he’d made his shameful march back to his room hours previously. He wanted to avoid as many other residents of the Pole as he could muster. He felt bad enough already without having to lump on their accusatory glowering.
Toothiana quietly followed along behind Pitch until they arrived at the stables. Once there, she hovered near Pitch while he went about taking care of the deer.

Pitch, in no rush to get back to his room, plodded along in the chores once the deer were actually fed. He couldn’t stop thinking about his situation though no matter how much he tried. It didn’t help to glance across the way and see that there were still yetis milling about going back and forth from the landfill site. Pitch frowned thinking back to the killer robot and decided to vent to Toothiana, if just to distract himself further, “Why would North even have a death machine like that? You know, it almost incinerated me!”

Toothiana shrugged. “Who knows? North is mysterious sometimes. He builds things that not even the rest of us know about.”

Pitch huffed as he shoveled some hay into one of the stalls, “Yes, Santa Claus bringer of militant war machines was not a title I ever imagined for North.”

Toothiana frowned. “He doesn’t deliver everything he makes to children, Pitch. I’m sure there were reasons behind why he made that thing.”

“It was awful! I mean why make something that dangerous in the first place? I never would have gone done there to see it for myself if North would have just been upfront about what was in there you know?” Pitch tried to justify to himself more than Toothiana his reasoning for venturing into the secret room.

“North doesn’t have to tell you everything, Pitch. Don’t you think you’re shifting the blame? Seems to me like you were being too nosy. You didn't have to know what was in there, and you didn't have to open it up.”

Pitch scowled, “I’m not shifting the blame! All I’m saying is that a lot of this situation would have been avoided if he had told us. Frost and I discovered the entrance to that place, and of course we were both curious, I mean hello secret door! Who doesn’t want to know what’s behind a mysterious locked door?”

Toothiana raised an eyebrow. “Out of you and Jack, who actually went and opened it up?”

Pitch shrugged, “Well technically I went in through the attic and only opened the door after I was in the room…” Pitch didn't like where she was going with this conversation and frowned moodily as he moved one of the reindeer from out of their stalls to the tethering pole to groom.

Toothiana decided not to press the matter further as she watched Pitch take the deer out and begin grooming them. She knew everything involving the recent disaster was tense and touchy, so she didn't want to risk angering the Boogeyman and make the situation worse for him. Although, it did concern her that he seemed to disregard the fact that everything had been entirely his doing and his fault.

"Hey, Tooth!" Jack's voice came to her ears. Tooth looked up to see the boy float into the stables. "Wow, I didn't expect to see you here." he said when his eyes landed on Pitch. "I didn't think North
would have let you out of your room. Hey, you know, it's a good thing we got that ride in when we did, because I'm doubtful you're going to want to ride again for a good loooooong while."

"Jack!" Tooth frowned.

"What?" Jack shrugged innocently.

Pitch was surprised by Jack’s appearance, and as the winter sprite commented on his being there at the stables and their recent jaunt with the reindeer likely being their last for a while made him blush fiercely, "That's not funny Jack! And don't you worry about whether or not I'm allowed out of my room! It's none of your business!" Pitch pouted feeling very sorry for himself and awash once more with a pang of dread. Jack was right he knew, and thinking on the fact only served to remind him once more what he had to look forward to.

"What?" Jack laughed. "What did I say?"

“How dare you make fun of me for what I’m about to have to endure!” Pitch spat angrily as he untethered the reindeer leading it off towards the field gate in a huff, “I’m glad my suffering amuses you so much Frost!”

Jack and Tooth watched as Pitch disappeared outside.

"Jack, that wasn't nice." Tooth scolded.

"Sorry," he said, trying to hide his smile. "It was too tempting."

"He's been through enough already without you teasing him." Tooth angrily said.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry,"

"Don't tell me, tell him." Tooth pointed in Pitch's direction.

Jack's smile withered as he looked toward the doorway, hesitating. Suddenly pain shot through his left ear.

"OW!" Jack shouted, wincing and struggling to look to the side. He saw that Tooth had grabbed him by his ear, using it to spur him forward.

"Go on and apologize before I spank you myself." Tooth said irritably.

"You wouldn't!" Jack whimpered, his eyes widening in shock at the threat.

"Try me," she said, letting his ear go.

Jack quickly bolted forward, partly sliding when his feet hit the snow outside. He ran a few feet, and then stopped, quickly glancing back toward the stables. He cringed at seeing Tooth hovering in the doorway, watching. Jack continued walking until he got to Pitch, trying to act as casual as he could.

"Uh... Pitch," he began, rubbing his sore ear. "I'm sorry for what I said back there."

Pitch was just latching the gate as Frost sidled up next to him. He had been about to say a scathing remark until the boy apologized. His expression changed to dejected as he sighed, “It’s okay. I… I can’t say you’re not going to be right.” He bit his lip, his features etched in worry now, as he whispered, “You should have seen how infuriated he was with me Jack… I’m… I’m really frankly terrified of what he’s going to do to me. I’ve never seen him so mad!” Pitch gulped looking on the verge of tears again as he fiddled nervously with the gate latch.
Jack couldn’t help but feel pity for the man, “I wish there was something I could do, but… I’m sorry to say but this is your mess.”

Pitch shifted looking down, “I know, believe me I know, and what a mess it is! I’ve never felt more of an urge to melt into a shadow and disappear as I do right now,” Pitch sighed looking back out at the deer. That was the last one to go into the pen he knew. It was only a matter of time before he’d have to go back to his room now that the excuse of chores were finished. He planned to stall as long as he could… for the reindeer’s sake to keep running in the field… or at least that’s the excuse he planned on using.

Toothiana floated up to the two, clearing her throat. "I hate to dampen the moment, but I really think we should get back to your room as soon as possible, Pitch. I think you've been out long enough. I really don't want North seeing you out, just in case you aren't supposed to be out of your room."

She had a point, but Pitch really didn’t want to go back to the excruciation of pacing and waiting. North was going to tear his behind up one way or another, the least he could do was push off the inevitable right? “But… Toothiana, the reindeer just got put into the field, they need at least twenty minutes to get some exercise… preferably an hour to make sure they’re fit.” Pitch pleaded.

"I'll watch them for you." said Jack. "And put them back in their pens when they're done."

Pitch’s face fell knowing he didn’t have any other excuses, “Oh… thanks Jack,” he stated a bit deflated now as he set mournful eyes on Toothiana and started moving, regrettably, back towards his room. He rubbed absently at the wound on his hand now that had started to throb in irritation caused by the chores he’d just done.

Tooth followed after Pitch, noticing his injured hand for the first time. She wasn’t sure how she managed to overlook it before. "Pitch, is your hand okay?" she asked.

Pitch looked down at his hand and unwrapped the make shift bandage. It wasn’t grievous, but the cut was an annoying slice across the middle of his hand. It had stopped bleeding now and had started to scab over. He showed it to Toothiana, “I cut myself last night… popping the bolt off the attic door,” he blushed as he said this, more destruction of property to add to his long list of offenses.

"Aw," Tooth said, her brow wrinkling in pain at seeing the cut. "Does it hurt? Do you need to stop by the medical ward?"

He was about to say it was fine, but the medical ward could be a nice detour from his room, and Toothiana seemed more than willing to pamper him over it, so why not? He shrugged, “I gather it could use a little tending to, or at least a real bandage,” he said giving her a small smile.

Toothiana nodded and led him to the medical ward where a yeti nurse greeted them and tended to Pitch's hand.

The whole ordeal took far less time than Pitch would have liked before the two were silently making their way back towards his room. Every step felt like his feet were laden in led, and the knot in his stomach tightened further as they neared his room. Would North already be inside? Angrily awaiting him? His heart caught in his throat as he twisted the knob, and he breathed a small sigh of relief to see the room was still empty.

"Pitch, I need to go." Tooth sighed, fluttering over to pick up her painting and card. "Sorry, but I've stayed as long as I can."

He turned back to her looking not unlike a lost puppy as he gave her a small nod stating softly, “I… I
understand. Thank you for coming by... it helped... a lot.”

Tooth gave Pitch a pitying look as she lowered herself to plant another small kiss on his forehead. "I'll try to see if I can calm North down a little." she whispered. "But I can't make any promises."

Pitch closed his eyes enjoying the tender kiss finding it sent a warmth down his spine. Under any other circumstances the gesture would have brought an immediate smile to his lips. As it was, Pitch looked stricken because he could only dwell on the consequences he was ever nearer to facing.

Pitch watched Toothiana fly down the hall, and he was once more left alone to be consumed by his own trepidations. He spent the next few hours pacing about and looking fretfully out of his bedroom door until the strain of the situation left him curled in a ball in the middle of his bed restlessly staring at the wall. Pitch almost wasn't sure which was worse, the punishment or the waiting for it to come. All Pitch knew for sure was that he just wanted it to all to be over now.

Before going back to her realm, Toothiana flew down the hallway until she came to North’s office. The door was standing open, so she peeked in. She really didn’t expect anyone to be there, but sure enough there was North sitting at his desk. He looked tired and haggard, not to mention dirty and sweaty. She thought for sure the man would have taken a shower by now and changed into some clean clothes, but his appearance told her he had come here straight from the battlefield. She remained hovering in the doorway a few minutes, noting that North was casually working at some project that she couldn’t exactly see from where she was. Whatever it was, it was in his lap. Every so often he would cut a piece off with the pocket knife he held in his right hand. At first, she thought he was whittling at a piece of wood for a new toy, because she knew he enjoyed doing that to calm his nerves. Suddenly, North placed what he had been working on down on the top of the desk, and she could see clearly that it was a thick strap made from a supple leather.

Tooth still wasn’t sure where she stood on spanking. She was starting to realize that the punishment did hold its good points, and she admitted that Pitch needed something stronger this time, but as her eyes rested on the strap, she couldn’t help but feel deep pity for the man.

“Um… North?” she said, softly, coming into the room. North looked up at her.

“Well? Did you get whole story out of him?” he asked, his voice a tad hoarse.

Tooth nodded. “It seems that all of this started when he found some spell pages in the library and attempted to master one of them.”

North’s brow drew down in a scowl. “My magic spells?”

Tooth nodded. “Something went wrong the first time he tried one of them, and he says he cleaned the mess up and threw it away, not realizing what it was breeding.” she sighed. “When he found out about it, he wanted to try and patch up things himself, only it snowballed and ended up making things worse.”

North went back to work on the strap. Tooth looked from it to North, feeling the air suddenly become thick.

“North,” Tooth began again after several minutes of silence, “he feels a lot of guilt for what he’s done.”

“Good,” North said flatly. “He needs to.”

“North, I’m not going to stand in your way of what you’re going to do to him.” she continued. “I’ve already seen that he’s trying to put the blame on others and hasn’t fully accepted that he and he alone
did it. I agree that he needs a… firmer… punishment this time.”

North nodded and continued working.

“But please, before you go in there, be sure that you’ve calmed down enough. And… show him a little bit of mercy.”

North stopped, heaving a big sigh. “Tooth, I am tired of showing mercy. I’ve showed mercy to him up until now. He has taken things too far this time. He is going to learn this day that I will not tolerate anymore.” He looked up at the fairy. “I will not permanently hurt him, if that’s what worries you. You know I would never do that. But he is going to learn a deep and hard lesson after I am done with him.”

Tooth nodded and turned to leave. Whenever she left, North pulled himself out of his chair, threw the strap down on the desk, and reached to pick up a hammer and a nail. He stiffly lumbered out of his office and down the hallway until he came to Pitch’s room. Not even bothering to knock, he pushed the door open and walked inside.

Pitch snapped up from where he was laying on the bed. His wide eyes went to first North and then to the objects in his hands. His brow scrunched in confusion. Pitch found it was hard to speak as thrills of fear ran up his spine like a freight train, but he managed a stumbled, "Na-North?" Pitch wasn't even sure what he would say to the Cossack as he pulled his pillow into his lap nervously clutching it to himself.

North said nothing—didn’t even acknowledge that the Boogeyman was even there—as he made his way over to the wall opposite Pitch’s bed. He placed the nail up to a spot on the wall and gave it several quick hits with the hammer until it caught. Taking his fingers away, he gave it several more deafening whacks that pushed it in farther and secured it. Still not paying Pitch any notice, North turned and walked out of the room again, closing the door behind him.

Pitch watched on in morbid curiosity afraid to speak further to the man since he still seemed quite angry. His eyes followed the Cossack warily, and as North struck at the nail in the wall, Pitch found his body shuddered with every swing of the hammer. Pitch’s eyes did not leave the man until he'd exited the room, and when he had, Pitch’s attention was drawn to the nail placed in the middle of the wall. What on earth? How strange? Pitch was confused by the action, but he had a bad feeling the reasoning behind the action wasn’t going to be something he was going to like.

It was at least three hours later when a heavy knock sounded on Pitch’s bedroom door.

Pitch had remained clutching his pillow sitting in the same spot on the bed for close to forty minutes before resuming to lay back down the way he had been before North had come. Of course since the man’s visit, his level of anxiety had increased tenfold. He had just started to relax again when the knock came.

Pitch’s mouth felt like a desert as he squeaked, "Come …come in?" As he said this, he scrambled up pressing his back firmly against the headboard. Pitch stared fearfully at the door as he sat rigidly with his legs tucked snugly against his chest trembling in anticipation.

A few minutes passed before the door creaked open, and North stepped inside, shutting the door behind him. He looked better this time. He had cleaned himself up, put on clean clothes, and looked like he had squeezed in a couple hours’ nap. In his right hand, he held his newly crafted strap.

Pitch had been watching North’s face to see his demeanor as the man entered, and he was slightly relieved to see he seemed to be in a much calmer state. It wasn’t until North had fully entered the
room did Pitch's eyes fall to the strap, and he gasped in terror, "What, what! You, you aren't going to hit me with that are you?" Pitch shrank away feeling more than a little panicked. He'd expected to be spanked, but he certainly wasn't expecting this!

North didn't speak. Instead, he moved slowly and quietly to the side of the bed and roughly sat down.

Pitch's heart was racing, and the fact that North refused to respond only served to scare the nightmare lord more. He gulped frozen in place as he pleaded, "I...I know you're angry North, and I know I made a huge mess of things. I get that you feel the need to punish me, but...but isn't that," he pointed at the strap in horror, "...a bit extreme? I didn't do this on purpose! It was an accident!"

“Pitch,” North finally said. “I am tired. I am tired from cleaning up your mess. I am tired of your 'accidents'. You have gone too far this time. So I suggest that you think carefully what you say."

Pitch had to plead his case wisely, so crawling over on all fours, Pitch moved close enough to make eye contact as he spoke earnestly, "I'm...I'm sorry! I'm so very sorry! Please take a day to cool down at least! I think you're in an irrational state, and it's got you taking this whole thing out of context. You see, I was actually trying to make things right... granted I made them worse, but that wasn't my intention!"

North raised the hand with the strap as he glared down at Pitch. “Silence!”

Snapping his mouth closed, Pitch skittered back across the bed away from the man’s close proximity as if he'd been bitten.

North sighed, “I know everything, Pitch. The spell pages... everything. It might have been accident, but what you did is still wrong. You were playing with something you should not have been playing with—something you had no understanding of.”

Pitch grimaced as if every word that North said was a nail in his coffin, “I... I know. I... I should have left them alone. I should have come to you when I realized what I’d done, I know! I know! I... I was just curious! I didn’t think a little cleaning spell could cause so much trouble! And... and I was afraid okay! I didn’t... I didn’t know what to do, and I chose poorly. Please... North, I...”

“Pitch, you are not stupid.” said North, cutting Pitch off. “Spells are tricky. Any spell is tricky—does not matter what that spell does. One wrong move and you could bring about disaster, which you now know. On top of everything else, you completely disobeyed me by going in a place I distinctly told you not to go... and made things worse, as you’ve already said. I am glad you understand what you have done and the size of the mess you have made."

“I... I do! It was stupid, and I’m sorry!” Pitch moaned pitifully. He knew he was just talking in circles now since North had said his peace, and if Pitch had perhaps come to North for help and not disobeyed a direct order, he may have still been spanked, but he doubt he’d have raised the ire of the man so greatly as to fashion an implement to leave a more lasting impact. Still the weight of actually enduring it was rather intimidating, and Pitch hoped he could at least talk North out of such a level of harshness by showing him he truly was remorseful.

“I am glad to hear that you are sorry. And I accept your apology. But you are still getting this to help this lesson stick.” He held up the strap. “And after you get this, you will aide yetis in repairing the trash conveyor, which got damaged in your little escapade. When work is complete, you will be grounded to your room for one week.”

“Grounded?” He said the word like it was an alien concept. Was North serious? Pitch didn’t think he
could blush any deeper, although at this juncture, he was in no place to argue with the man. Shaking his head to refocus his thoughts Pitch croaked out flatly, “Of course …I’ll …I’ll help fix whatever needs fixing.” He didn’t want to upset North further by offering resistance. Pitch knew to fight this was only going to earn him a much more severe spanking. It was a losing battle, and knowing this had tears springing to his eyes as he slumped in his defeat.

North closed his eyes, sighing heavily. He really didn’t want to carry out the next part. He felt like he had been doing things on purpose all day just to hold it off as long as possible.

Pitch knew North would want him to come to him and lay himself over his lap, and as much as Pitch just wanted to get this over with, he found he just couldn’t bring himself to do so on his own accord especially not now with the fear he felt towards this new unknown element. Instead he sat there cringing and wallowing in self-pity that he’d have to suffer such a fate.

“Pitch, I think you know what to do.” North finally said, his eyes still closed.

North was forcing him to do this; Pitch knew he would, but it didn’t make it any less hard to comply to. Stiffly Pitch jerked his body into motion as he whimpered in dismay that he was going through with it. His face felt hot and his limbs felt numb, but he found himself moving into place pausing halfway across North’s lap to look back at him in a silent plea for mercy before he muttered a watery, “Please… I’m sorry!”

“Yes, I know,” said North. “But don’t you think you deserve this? If you are truly sorry for what you did, you will fully accept the consequences.”

He didn’t answer, couldn’t answer. Unable to face North any longer, Pitch let out a choked sob as he lowered himself the rest of the way across North’s knee. He was shaking like a leaf, his whole body going rigid in anticipation. There was no turning back now he knew.

At feeling Pitch on his lap, North opened his eyes and moved Pitch into place over his left knee, securing his legs between his own.

His stomach lurched as the bigger man’s bicep easily moved him about like a ragdoll. The all too familiar feeling of this loss of control had Pitch gasping in short breaths as his trepidation grew. He hated knowing that the way North had placed him left him so vulnerable and unable to avoid the pain he was about to feel. His legs reflexively strained against the backs of North’s thigh as Pitch couldn’t help pushing his hands against the mattress to lift his torso, so he could see past North’s beefy arm. This of course only made him feel ill at the sight of seeing his rear end prostrated just so over the other man’s knee so as to insure the most sensitive parts of his bottom were angled to receive the most direct blows. Pitch whimpered hoping the other man would at least spare him the thin layer of clothing that remained.

“I will show small mercy by giving you only twenty swats.” said North.

Twenty?! Twenty still sounded like too many Pitch thought remembering how much seven quick swats with the switch had felt unbearable. He didn’t argue only staring back unable to tear his eyes away from the scene.

North moved the strap to his left hand long enough to pull Pitch’s robe up and out of the way. He then grabbed onto Pitch’s pants and swiftly yanked them down to his knees.

His stomach dropped and Pitch bit his lip as North shifted the awful piece of leather into the hand that held his waist in place. It was finely crafted as were most things that North took the time to make. Pitch cringed to look at it knowing without a doubt that the heft of how it had flopped casually
between hands promised exquisite pain that would linger with deep impact. Of course seeing this, golden eyes darted back to North’s right hand making quick work of divesting him of his dignity. Pitch’s fingers dug into the comforter as he sucked in air breathing out a weak drawn out, “No!” It sounded more like a wounded animal than a word. His body convulsed in a shiver as the black garments gave way to light milky ashen flesh unmarred save a rash of goosebumps that rippled across his skin. The constant tremor that wracked his body was quite discernable now as Pitch visibly clenched his muscles tightly in preparation for the first blow.

North took the strap in his right hand again when Pitch was properly positioned for punishment. He sighed heavily and wearily. “You do understand why you’re getting this? I want you to tell me so I can hear it from your own mouth.”

Pitch squeezed his eyes shut the standing tears fell silently down his cheeks. He hated that North always made him admit his faults before proceeding as if he needed to rub salt in the wound. His chest tightened as Pitch turned his face away now for the shame he felt. He shifted uncomfortably his nakedness signifying preparedness to begin once Pitch had laid his sins bare before the both of them. Pitch sobbed now, “…I dabbled in something I had no business dabbling in… and… and I disobeyed you by going in your secret room,” as Pitch spoke, he slowly sank into the mattress burying his face into the comforter.

Satisfied, North raised his hand and landed the first slap across Pitch’s cheeks.

As the strap connected, even though Pitch was bracing himself for it, the pain was so remarkably exact that Pitch’s whole body arched upward, and he released a blood curdling cry. The sting erupted across his skin like a thousand angry bees, and the bulk of the belt left a radiating pain that dug deep into the tissue and remained refusing to dissipate once the leather left his skin. It didn’t help that the width of the strap covered almost the entirety of the surface it aimed for, its supple form expertly molding itself to his backside to catch the most flesh with every bite it took.

Pitch panicked, this was only one, and by stars it was awful! He was expected to endure another nineteen?! As the second one came down, Pitch let out a banshee scream, eyes bulging, as his body writhed and twisted in the very small capacity it was allowed fighting on its own accord to avoid another blow. The pain from the first swath still resonated presence, and the second one only amplified the pain that was already there and added a fresh layer of pain over already tortured flesh. Pitch spun back around to face the Cossack as cried out in desperation watching in suspended horror as North raised back his arm to deliver a third lash, “North! No! I can’t! I can’t take this! It’s too much! Please! Oh stars it hurts so badly!”

“You can, and you will.” said North. "Maybe you will think twice next time."

Pitch moaned, “I’m more than thinking twi-IEE-AH!” Pitch’s words were halted abruptly as the third swath laid a scathing brand against his rear. Pitch frantically bucked trying to wriggle and move away from the horrible onslaught of agony as North methodically placed timed slow stripes over the entirety of the underside of his bottom and thighs. Pitch couldn’t stop the cacophony of high pitched wails that escaped his throat every time the strap made its mark. The anguish was seared in his brain, and he found himself begging after the twelfth strike, “Mercy! No more! Please! I’ll do whatever you want! IEE YIE! YAAAH!” Pitch sobbed heavily now repeating a mantra of, “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” in rapid succession, his body convulsing in tremors of anxiety.

"Do whatever I want?" said North, a bit surprised. "This is not something to make you submit to me, Pitch. It is punishment. It’s supposed to help you think about actions you’ve done to deserve it and to give you something to remember so you will not repeat wrongdoings. We still have little bit to go. I suggest that you think hard about what you did that put you here."
North finished his statement by bringing down the next heavy swat, and the short pause only made the renewed pain bristle and ignite in a horrible wash of remembrance over the ache that still emitted a combined symphony of suffering. Pitch screamed at the top of his lungs bucking wildly and squalling until he was hoarse finally collapsing on the bed bawling uncontrollably and only wriggling and kicking out at a fresh swat was applied but otherwise remained limp on North’s lap accepting the punishment and praying for the last strap to fall.

"This is no one's fault but yours." North continued. "You put yourself in this place. You brought this suffering on yourself."

Pitch only cried harder in response, but the sobs took on the tone of regret as they hitched miserably in his throat. Finally the last swat fell, and North made sure that it was the hardest of all of them leaving Pitch to scream out girlishly at its application before returning to hitching sobs that caught in his throat as he tried to reign them back without success. He didn’t think he was ever so appreciative just to know that he’d made it to the end of his punishment and that that dreadful implement was no longer going to strike him.

North placed the strap on the bed beside him and released hold of Pitch’s legs. He continued to sit there in silence, allowing Pitch to gather himself. He put a massive hand down on the man's back and gave it gentle pats of comfort.

As soon as North released his hold on Pitch, the nightmare lord’s hands shot back cover his heated flesh gently rubbing as he hissed pitifully at the uncomfortably that still radiated from his throbbing bottom. He sniffled and hiccupsed breaths as he fought to stop crying. He whined as he rubbed fiercely trying to remove the burn, “Oh that stings! I’m surprised you didn’t flay my flesh off with that thing!”

"It is punishment, not torture. I would never permanently hurt you." North said in a gentle voice.

Pitch whined gently grazing the swelling left from North’s ministrations, "It sure feels like torture!" He arched his back to look at his backside and pouted, "It looks like torture to!"

North said nothing as he shook his head at Pitch’s griping.

Seeing North’s look of disapproval, Pitch frowned tentatively asking, "May I ..get up now?" Being draped across the man’s knee still with his well spanked bottom on display as a testament of what he’d just been forced to endure was more than a little shaming.

"You can get up anytime you like.” North replied. “I just thought you would like few minutes to recover.”

Pitch hissed as he reached down and carefully pulled the fabric back in place and crawled from North’s lap back on to the bed. He was still sucking back tears wiping fiercely at his face with the back of his hand as he regarded North warily. Every movement he made chafed against his sensitive skin and was a reminder that he was going to be feeling this application for quite a while.

Now that the whole thing was over, all Pitch felt outside of his soreness was guilt and embarrassment that he’d pushed the man so far as to feel he needed to fashion a tool to get his point across. Pitch’s eyes fell to the instrument now with a fierce glare and thoughts of seeing it burn in the fireplace.

North stretched out his arm and put it around Pitch pulling the smaller man to his side, “I wish you would stop making me have to do this. And it saddens me that you push me so far as to have to make this thing.” He held up the strap with his other hand. "I never thought it would go this far."
Pitch was stiff at first, but as North pulled him closer, he found himself slumping into the embrace. It was enough to know North was no longer angry with him which helped to alleviate some of the guilt he was feeling. Pitch lowered his head as North spoke, and when he’d finished fresh tears spilled down Pitch’s cheeks, "I don't know how I manage to make everything such a disaster. I was doing so well until that spell went sour... I actually did manage to perfect it though," Pitch stated off handedly.

North looked down at Pitch at hearing he had perfected the spell, “If you wanted to learn magic you should have asked.”

Pitch's head shot up at North's admission, "You... you would have taught me?" His face reflected surprise and shock.

North raised an eyebrow. “Maybe I would have, maybe not. But the fact is, you should have asked before dabbling.”

Pitch sighed looking back down, "I know. I... was curious, and I didn't think you'd let me to be honest..." Pitch grimaced as talking about this only made his thoughts draw back to the soreness he'd earned and was still acutely feeling due to his said curiosity and attempts to thwart North’s will.

“There is nothing wrong with being curious. That is way we learn about things. But you must learn to exercise common sense along with it. Like I said, you are not stupid, Pitch. Don’t act like you are. You should have known beforehand that magic is risky and dangerous to mess with, especially if you have no knowledge of subject.”

Pitch scowled, he most certainly wasn't stupid! He'd managed to learn how to work that spell all by himself, granted he’d botched it incredibly by doing so, but still! Okay maybe it wasn’t the brightest move he'd made. Pitch sighed, "I was thinking more pride was my downfall over stupidity, but perhaps lack of insight also played a role in this instant. I'll admit, I can let boredom influence my decisions... on occasion."

“And this is why you need things to keep you occupied, like your painting,” said North.

"I do like painting, and you're right, I need something to keep me... occupied. I just... I don't know North, I need something more. Like you said, I need to find a purpose. I need to find my place," Pitch’s eyes made their way up to North’s eyes searching for guidance.

“I agree.” said North. “How do you think you will find out?”

Pitch looked frustrated; he didn’t really know what he needed to do, and he was too proud to ask for help.

"How about getting back to what you were doing with Bunny? Hm?" North continued. "Since you were getting somewhere with it."

Pitch was surprised North had suggested he go back to training with Bunnymund since the guardian had seemed against it. After everything that had happened, Pitch was left feeling unsure about that avenue and at odds with the guardians (which was most of the reason he’d told Bunnymund to decommission the idea having lost faith that he’d have the self-control to stop himself from going too far.) Pitch blinked looking skeptical, “You want me to go back to training with Bunnymund? I thought you didn’t think it was a good idea?”

North nodded. “Yes, I didn’t think it was good idea. I still don’t, but I never said for you to stop. You were the one who fell into a mood and wanted to stop. You proved me wrong on it, and I am proud that you got somewhere with it. If you think you can really make something of it, then you
may continue. I will not stop you."

“I think I would like to,” Pitch still seemed hesitant obviously held back by North’s own reticence but not enough to abandon the idea entirely.

North sensed hesitancy in Pitch’s voice as he sat and studied the dark man. He knew that Pitch was confused and frustrated over everything that had happened, as well as his current life in general. He knew the man had no self-control and even struggled to control his fearlings. North smiled lovingly at him. "Before you think of continuing with Bunny. Would you be interested in learning some magic?"

Pitch’s eyes lit up at the prospect, “You’d teach me even after everything that just happened? I mean yes! Yes I would,” Pitch smiled brightly. He had still wanted to practice magic, and after the current incident had regretfully decided that would be the last of his dabbling in that department as his rear end couldn’t take another bout like the one he’d just bore. To hear North would teach him left Pitch excited anew.

"It will be a while. You first have to help repair damages and then go through your grounding. If you can show me that you will go through rest of punishment without any more upsets, then we can start your training after that."

This news made the happiness leech from the conversation for Pitch as he visibly deflated. Repairing the damages would likely be a dirty smelly job that Pitch didn’t want to do, but it wasn’t as if he hadn’t already been cleaning out reindeer stalls, so he’d manage. The grounding though felt too much like the imprisonment he’d been subjected to being sealed in the hole, and after just half a day in the tiny room waiting for North was driving him stir crazy, a whole week of it sounded altogether painfully boring. He decided he’d just take extra-long taking care of the reindeer, so it wouldn’t feel so much like confinement. Pitch still didn’t like it and muttered, “Isn’t grounding a bit… not unlike suffering in the hole?”

"It's not going to be forever, Pitch. Just a week. And you will be here in room." North waved a hand at the room. "I will bring you plenty of paint supplies and books, if you wish, to keep you occupied. I will ask Jack Frost to take care of reindeer during your grounding. So not to worry about them."

Pitch gasped at North's admission that someone else would be tending to the reindeer other than himself. It was a punishment in itself since taking care of the creatures was an activity that brought him joy. The fact that Jack, the reindeer whisperer, was going to be the one to tend to them in Pitch’s absence sparked an immediate flash of jealousy to course through him. If it had been the yetis or anyone else for that matter, Pitch would have been disgruntled, but he otherwise would have gotten over it. But Frost! Jack could speak to the deer in a way that Pitch could not, and the reindeer liked Jack and listened to the winter sprite. Pitch imagined Frost riding them as well, and all of these thoughts made him instantly bitter, "But... but tending to the reindeer is my job! I need to make sure they're getting cared for properly! Frost is so flighty, he might just forget to check on them! Besides, it's a chore, shouldn't I still be keeping up on them daily? I could always do my chores in the morning and come back here straight afterward." Pitch regarded North with a tinge of desperation.

North turned an irritated stare to Pitch. "Grounding means you will stay in room. Jack may be flighty, but he can be responsible when it calls for it."

Pitch had felt the tension in North’s arm that was still placed loosely around his shoulders, and he caught the note of aggravation in the man’s face, so Pitch thought it best to just nod solemnly lips pursed in a small frown.

"I'm sorry," North continued, "but it is your own fault. Just remember that whenever you get urge to
"I'm not putting the blame on anyone else!" Pitch huffed in annoyance. Why did everyone assume he was going to blame someone else? It nettled Pitch greatly seeing himself as having already taken the blame since he'd suffered the consequences.

"Just making sure," said North.

Pitch wanted to talk about happier things since he had already gone through the worst of this day, "When this punishment business is over, and we can start practicing magic, what spells do you plan to teach me?" Pitch was quite curious to know what he could look forward to.

"Well, at first we will start off with simple ones, like one you already know. Once you have mastered those, we will move up to more complicated ones."

Pitch's eyes glittered with excitement, "I'm looking forward to it! I can imagine you've amassed quite a numerous amount of spells by now," Pitch was smiling widely as he stared off thinking of himself wielding this new knowledge. It wasn't often being as old as he was that Pitch would encounter something new that he was extremely interested in.

North nodded. "That I have. I will go through them during your grounding time and pick out ones I think we can use."

Pitch was excited to see what North would pick, but the reminder of further punishment was souring his mood, and he had to take a moment to control the immediate retort he'd wanted to lash out with. Deciding quickly that any kind of negative response might invoke an equally negative reaction, Pitch remained quiet a moment before resolving to just change the subject. He was curious about the robot still, so he figured now was as good as any time to ask about it, "I've been wondering ever since I discovered that death dealing relic you had stashed away in your secret room, why ever would you of all people have something like that?"

North was silent a few minutes. "I built it to defend against the abominable snowman." he simply answered.

"Abominable what? That myth actually has some bearings to it?" Pitch perked with a start, there had been rumor of such a creature, but Pitch had assumed that some mortal had just seen one of North’s yetis and had greatly exaggerated a story out of the sighting.

North nodded silently. "Afraid so."

Pitch was very curious now to hear the story behind what the abominable snowman had done to cause the Cossack to go to extremes enough to build something so deadly, "You have to tell me this tale!" Pitch shifted now to stare up at North with rapt attention.

North shrugged. "What is to tell? World was different back then. I was still in process of building Pole and my fortress here. Abominable snowman came out of nowhere and attacked me and yetis. We fought and eventually won, but not without casualties. There were two more attacks after that. So I decided to build robot as part of defense."

The abominable snowman raised a great deal of interest in Pitch as he rattled off questions, "Really? Is it still out there? Did the robot defeat it? Or did it just disappear?"

“No one knows.” North replied. We never saw it again after third attack. The robot was never used, which is why I locked it away. I kept it in case snowman came back.”
Pitch looked wistful, “So it could actually still be out there somewhere! It must have been quite ferocious for you to have built such a machine in defense. How is it I never heard of this creature?”

North was silent a few minutes. “I do not know. The abominable snowman arrived shortly after we defeated you. And it disappeared by the time you broke free again.”

Pitch had a vague recollection of when North had been building his fortress, one of the many times they’d battled, and also one of the many times he’d been locked away for decades at a time, so it wasn’t hard to believe he’d missed such events. So many years wasted Pitch thought sulkily. “Well, I’m glad you never built anything like that to do battle with me,” Pitch stated thankfully.

North held up the strap. “Well, I did have to build something.”

Pitch blanched mortified by North’s brazen statement his cheeks flushing deeply feeling the need to quietly wriggle out from under North’s arm and remove himself from the Cossack’s vicinity as he sputtered, “Well… uh, that… that really wasn’t necessary.”

“I think it was.” North said. He got up from the bed and walked over to the wall. There he hung the strap on the nail he had hammered into it earlier. “It will stay here for any future use.” He turned to Pitch, giving him a warning glare. “And it had better remain on this nail.”

Pitch skittered backward away from the big Russian watching on as North lumbered forth and hung the dreaded strip of leather on the wall. Pitch visibly paled biting his lip as he listened to the Cossack’s words and absently reached back to rub at the soreness in his posterior that still made itself well known.

Realizing now what the nail had been placed for, a sick foreboding tossed in his stomach and chest. North had draped it on the wall like a morbid decoration, and Pitch was more than sure he’d done so as a reminder to behave rather than just for easy access, although that too was a troubling thought. North was making it clear that the kid gloves were officially off, and Pitch could expect any further insurrection to be followed up with the use of that ghastly weapon. Pitch gulped, a cold chill rising up his spine at the thought of ever facing another spanking like he’d just faced. No, he was going to be at his best behavior from now on! He promised himself this, but deep down, Pitch knew he likely wasn’t going to be able to keep that promise to himself. Heck, he’d only barely made it two weeks without ending up back over North’s knee, and with the numerous times he’d already managed to make trouble for himself, Pitch knew that his chances of avoiding another spanking at a future date was remarkably slim. This in mind, Pitch’s face had drawn down into a sad frown, his eyes reflecting worried concern.

Satisfied with Pitch's reaction, North walked over and sat down on the bed again.

Pitch’s eyes lingered on the wall a moment longer before moving over to North as he timidly queried, “Does it… does it have to hang there? Can’t it just… I don’t know, go in the nightstand drawer?” Pitch really didn’t want to be forced to look at it on a daily basis. The immediate thought to use one of his paintings to hang over it sprung to mind then. That wouldn’t be removing it from the nail, but it would effectively make it disappear from sight.

"It stays there." North replied. "It serves as reminder of what will happen if you ever test me again."

Pitch grimaced his eyes shifting away as his hands worked together nervously; he was afraid that North would say something along those lines, and hearing so made him sigh dejectedly, “So… when do I start repairs on the conveyer systems?” Pitch very much wanted to escape this particular conversation and North for that matter as he could swear the Cossack worked to make him feel uncomfortable.
"Day after tomorrow. We will need a little time to gather supplies." North answered.

“So… so then …the grounding, it doesn’t start until after the work is finished you said. Does that mean I can tend the reindeer and move about freely until then?” Pitch was careful in his questioning as he planned to get in as much roaming as he could if that were the case, and he planned to stretch the work out on the conveyer belts for quite some time. As long as he could manage to keep Frost away from tending his deer!

North sat in silence, seeming to contemplate Pitch's question. "Yes, this is true. You cannot properly start grounding until after work is finished."

Pitch nodded lightly taking this fact in before relaxing a bit as he tested, “May I go for a walk then? I’d like to… remove myself from these four walls while I’m still given the opportunity.”

North nodded. "You may, if you feel up to it."

Pitch really wasn’t, but the narrowing window of freedom was enough to spur him to want to avoid this room as much as possible just to move about freely, “Uh… yes. I… I think a walk would do me well about now.”

"Fine," North nodded, getting up off the bed. "I will go with you. When you are finished, you will come back to room. Until your grounding starts, you are not allowed to wander about unattended."

Pitch’s jaw dropped, “What? But…?” This was not at all what he wanted! The whole point of the walk was to get away from North and this room! To hear that he was basically being grounded without being grounded served to ignite an indignation in Pitch as he scowled, “I thought you said I wasn’t going to be grounded until after the repairs were finished! Now I have to have a chaperone to walk me about, or I can’t leave my room? I might as well already be grounded!” Pitch complained.

North raised an eyebrow. "Grounding is when you are confined to room without setting foot outside of it. I am showing you small mercy now by allowing you to go out. But I am not going to allow you to wander about unsupervised. Not after what you've done. You are still being punished even though true grounding hasn't started. I am granting you some leeway so that you can work to repair damages."

Pitch crossed his arms as he spat grumpily, “If that’s the case, why don’t you just start the grounding now. Stars knows I’ve already been confined here all day! With today and tomorrow, I can work off a couple days of this grounding business before the repairs start and finish out the rest of the week once the repairs are done.”

"Have it your way." North said, walking to the door. "I will come back later to see if you want to go on walk then. But you are not to leave room without escort."

Pitch watched on silently with balled fists as North walked out of his room shutting Pitch’s door with a soft click behind him. Pitch wanted to kick the door in his mounting fury, and no sooner did the thought occur to him, his eyes moved across the room to regard the strap that silently mocked him from across the room. His lips pursed in his anger, but it dissolved into a pout as his lip quivered and his eyes gleamed with fresh tears to be reminded how little control over anything in his life he had these days. He wearily crawled under his sheets to lay on his stomach (Stars knew he couldn’t lay on his back and be at all comfortable!)

Every time Pitch thought he’d reached the height of what North could do to put him in line, the Cossack managed to tweak and twist Pitch to conform to more than he would have possibly dreamed he’d ever willingly submit to. He knew he couldn’t refuse though, so instead, Pitch silently cried his
sorrow into his pillow. It was too hard not to feel mounds of self-pity for all he had to continuously tolerate and suffer through. He’d been so happy, and now he’d managed to create a living nightmare for himself.
Pitch cried, hitching sucked in breaths that led to quiet whimpers and sniffles as he thought mournful thoughts to the tune of, ‘Why me?’ or ‘Why didn’t I just…’ many versions of what he could have done differently played different scenarios through his mind of ways this could have gone so much better for him if only he’d (insert option A through Z) instead of what he’d chosen to do. Hindsight is twenty-twenty after all. These thoughts plagued Pitch as his silent woeful tears continued to leak unerringly into his pillow. He finally grew too drained to cry drifting into a listless state and eventually succumbing to an exhausted dreamless sleep.

It was an hour or two later when a heavy handed knock sounded on Pitch’s door.

Pitch’s eyes shot open, and it wasn’t until the second knock came that his senses returned to him, and he stuttered, “Ca… come in!”

North opened the door and poked his head in to look at Pitch. “You ready for walk?”

Pitch’s head rose from his pillow, his yellow eyes glinting from under the covers regarding North as he nodded. He didn’t want to waste the chance he had as Pitch was most certain this may be the last chance he might get to leave his room today especially since it was getting close to sun down, and North would be retiring to his lounge or office for the evening.

Pitch slid out of his covers and off the edge of the bed backwards so as to avoid any direct contact of harder surfaces to his much punished posterior. As Pitch had rested, he’d managed to forget the pains in his rear, but now as he moved about, the sensitive skin on his backside prickled and chafed to the point he was aware of every fold in the loose fabric of his clothes and the feel of the light weight of the covers. He felt the stiffness within his muscles as he stood knowing that he would also feel the dull ache scorched into him with every step. Pitch scowled as another wave of self-pity washed over him. Life was so very unfair to him.

He turned now towards North unable not to wear a small sad pout on his lips as a testament to his own misery coming off of him in waves.

North stood, waiting for Pitch to go first. “Any place in particular you wish to go?”

“I want to go check on the reindeer,” Pitch’s answer was immediate as he’d been thinking on and off about the deer since North had remarked on Frost tending to them. His jealous mind more so just wanted to assure that Frost was not there with them, so he could find a little solace in the familiarity of ‘his’ stables.

North nodded. “Alright,” He stepped out of the room and followed behind Pitch.

Moving quickly through the hub, Pitch noticed with disdain the ill regard that the yetis and even the elves afforded him. His eyes fell to the floor a mixture of shame and sadness working over him as he pouted muttering softly to North, “If looks could kill… They didn’t like me before, I suppose they hate me now.”

“They will get over it, in time.” North replied. “It will be quicker if you gave them reason to trust you again.”
Pitch huffed in annoyance, “It’s not like they had to confront that foul machine or the magical beasts! I may not have eliminated all of the nasties, but I neutralized the threat, and you shut down the robot, so what do they have to be so angry about?”

North purposely put a heavy foot down right next to Pitch's heels to spur him forward. "YOU caused it in first place! Or have you forgotten?"

Pitch jumped the scowl falling off his face with deafening immediacy, “No! Uh… no! Of… of course not!” Pitch visibly shrank turning to face North fully in fear that the Cossack might otherwise surprise him with a painful reminder. “I… I didn’t mean it like that!” Pitch’s eyes had grown wide with the fear of North thinking he may have not yet learned his lesson.

North lifted an eyebrow. “Good. Glad to hear it,” he said, pointing forward for Pitch to move. “Pitch, this is our home. When something gets damaged, we have to stop and fix it. Problems do not fix and clean themselves up.” North continued when the Boogeyman began walking again. “When your little ‘accidents’, as you call them, made mess, it is my job as well as yetis’ job to clean it up and repair it. It will cost us time—time we could be spending on toy making. When you do things you shouldn’t do, you make everyone suffer along with you.”

Pitch walked rigidly at first making sure to scuttle to the side of North far enough to be out of swatting range. He didn’t know why he felt so on edge now regarding the man, but North had instilled a newfound respect and wariness in the nightmare lord making Pitch watch his words much more carefully for fear of upsetting the man. Still, North’s words stung Pitch, and he felt guilty all over again for causing everyone so many headaches, “I… I know. I am sorry… I never meant to cause any strife for any one else,” Pitch looked down at his feet as they walked the small frown on his face trembled a moment as Pitch fought to control the roiling of emotions that bowled through him. In the past, such situations he’d look on with amusement or indifference, but now, he had to endure what his actions had caused on a level where the displeasure of others with him actually mattered to him and created these feelings of remorse. It was especially hard to cope with he found.

North regarded Pitch in silence as they walked, noting that his words apparently had hit home.

Pitch took in a deep breath as they left the main building to exit into the outside air. It wasn’t quite dark, but the sky was tinged with the fading light of the sun leaving layers of baby blues to coat the heavens and shades of reds and purples to illuminate in the clouds. Pitch had always liked this time of day seeing it as the night coming to snuff out the light’s last embers of fight to die in a continuous battle as the dark overtook it. It was pleasing and peaceful.

The stables seemed quiet, and much to Pitch’s relief, the winter sprite was nowhere to be found. Pitch glanced back up at North thinking on what he’d said about asking Jack to tend to his deer, and he had to know if he had now, “So… did …did you speak to Frost about the reindeer then?”

“Not yet,” North replied. “I will speak with him tomorrow.”

They moved into the stable, and Pitch moved over to Donner’s stall. The reindeer was quick to lower its head and nuzzle his cheek. Pitch’s pout deepened as he stroked the reindeer lovingly holding back a noise of displeasure lurking to escape his throat. The longer he stood here though reminiscing on this particular enjoyment now tinted in the despair of having it ripped away from him, the harder it was not to voice his distress concerning it, “Why can’t I take care of the deer! I don’t want Frost subverting everything I’ve worked so hard to foster within them! He’s got that weird …thing he does! They need me, not him!” Pitch’s voice rose into a whine edging with his frustration.

North scowled at Pitch’s griping. “Because you are going to be busy with repairs and then grounded. Jack doing your job with deer is not permanent. It is only for one week.”
“I can’t care for them between repairs? That’s more than a week! The grounding alone is a whole week! And with Jack it could take only a week to change my reindeer irreparably! What if they no longer listen to me and …and start following him!” Pitch railed hotly his jealousy rearing its ugly head formidably as these thoughts began to once more run rampant. Pitch couldn’t stand it, and being in such close proximity to Donner now made these thoughts cut him like a dagger.

“They are my reindeer, Pitch,” North corrected. “You are caring for them. I suspect that you will be too busy to care for them during repairs.” He looked at Pitch. ”Why are you so afraid of Jack filling in for you for short time?”

Pitch fumed not wanting to answer and waved off the question with a curt retort, “It doesn’t matter how I feel; you’ve made that abundantly clear. Let’s just go. I don’t want to be here anymore.” Pitch gave Donner’s muzzle one more pat before spinning away to quickly leave the stables. He’d thought coming here would ease his mind, instead it served to upset him more Pitch found.

North rolled his eyes and followed after Pitch, glaring at him.

Pitch felt North’s glare on him, and although it sent a thrill of alarm through the boogeyman, he steeled himself not to reply further thinking on where else he wanted to go. It was hard to find peace when he was used to doing so alone. Having North walking around as his shadow was irksome to say the least. It made him feel like he couldn’t do anything he wanted to do (even though the places he may have gone would not have mattered to North so much as to have been private alcoves that Pitch had found and carved out as secret to him.)

Pitch didn’t want to go back to his room and just sulk the rest of the night away (although inevitably, he would end up doing just that.) Finally Pitch glanced back carefully at North who still followed silently behind him as Pitch walked along the base of the outside wall wanting to see for himself the carnage that he’d wrought now that the fires had all died down. “How long do you think it will take to fix the conveyer systems?”

“Hard to say,” North replied with a shrug. “Depends on how fast you and yetis work. Could take several days, could take a week.”

Pitch nodded soberly. Originally he had planned to stretch the job out, but when it became clear that he would be subjected to this semi-punishment before his actual punishment left Pitch wanting to make sure he finished as swiftly as he could just to get back to his regular routine.

Coming upon the landfill now, Pitch looked out at the desolation of the burned hole and the charred remains of many of the parts of the elaborate mechanism that North had created and installed. “Well… at least it doesn’t stink as badly having most of that aging trash burned away,” Pitch offered lightly with an apprehensive half smirk.

North found no humor in the jesting. He stood next to Pitch, gazing out at the sad scene.

Pitch’s smile faded as he cleared his throat looking down and kicking absently at a piece of the wreckage, “It… it looks pretty bad; I know.”

“It can be repaired to be like new again.” North said, simply.

Pitch brought his eyes back to take the vision in as he sighed and nodded; his curiosity had sparked a want to see what had become of the landfill once he’d been shooed away, but now it resonated regret as he stated softly, “I… I am really very sorry North. I never meant to cause this much havoc… this many problems for you. I’m surprised that I didn’t automatically assume that you’d toss me back to the nightmares although I can’t say I would have blamed you after the level of destruction I caused
you.” Pitch was staring at the ground once more his shoulders slouched in misery as his guilt hit a crescendo now to fully see the folly of his actions here.

“Do you really think I am that cruel, Pitch?” said North. “That every time you make mistake or do something wrong, I will throw you into abyss?”

Pitch shrugged unable to look at North, “I… I don’t know. It’s the way we have always done things… before recently. I… I guess I thought eventually you’d grow weary of me,” Pitch’s voice sounded despondent with a hint of troubled worry. He was afraid that one day his ‘accidents’ would be the last straw, and the man would eventually lose patience with him and see him as a lost cause. Pitch did want to do better, but honestly, the man’s standards were challenging to adhere to for Pitch even if they seemed simple enough. Pitch was a stubborn man; he’d always been stubborn to a fault, and in instances like this, it worked against him horribly so.

“I have grown weary of you.” North confessed. “But just because you grow weary of someone, it does not mean you give up on them.”

North’s words stung Pitch more than he’d admit. He was happy to hear that North didn’t have plans to give up on him, but the truth that he had grown weary of him weighed on his heart. Pitch only nodded lightly, “I… I understand.” He wanted to leave now to escape this horrible feeling that tugged at him as he turned back towards the main building quickly heading back to his room to leave these feelings behind with the wreckage.

North turned and followed after Pitch as quickly as he could, knowing that what he had said was taken the wrong way by the man.

Pitch did not speak as he glided silently along with his head down and a small pout on his face. He made his best efforts to avoid the busiest parts of the hub as he darted around the yetis and elves trying to make it back to his room as swiftly as he could being quite finished with the outing and only wanting to be alone once more.

After losing sight of Pitch, North made his way back to the Boogeyman’s room, thinking that’s where he was most likely headed. When he got there, he knocked on the door. "Pitch?"

Pitch had retreated back under his blankets, laying on his stomach and pulling his pillow into him wanting to shut everything and everyone out. He had hoped North would have seen him go into his room and been done with him. After all, he only put a strain on the man he thought bitterly. Hearing the knock he spat, “I came back!” He thought the man was just making sure he’d done as he was told and returned to his room.

“I would like to come in, Pitch.” North softly said.

“I’m not stopping you,” he stated with melancholy undertones. He hoped he hadn’t upset the man now that he thought about it taking off across the hub as he had went against North’s edict for having a chaperone. Pitch now felt slightly anxious as North opened his door. Pitch kept himself buried under his covers as he clenched his pillow tightly curling in a ball around it as if it would keep him grounded.

North walked over and sat down on the side of the bed. "Pitch," he said, softly. "What I said back there... I think you took it wrong way."

Pitch remained silent although he was listening rapely.

"Yes, I have grown weary of you. I will not lie. I've had a lot of moments where I've thought I did
wrong thing by taking you in, and I wondered what it was that I was supposed to do with you." North sighed, "But I have seen change in you, and it gives me hope that I am traveling down right path."

Pitch didn’t know what to say to that, and so he remained silent. What North remarked left him with a mix of negative and positive feelings that made Pitch more confused than ever! He felt like such a burden now as he squeezed his eyes shut gripping his pillow a little tighter. Out of all the guardians, Pitch would never admit it, but he needed and sought North’s approval most. He was akin to a father figure to him now, and any form of indifference or displeasure North directed towards him tore at the very fiber of his being.

"Whatever you may be feeling right now," North said, softly, "I want you to know that you are not problem. We have had ups and downs and we will probably continue to have ups and downs. But whatever happens, I want you to know that you are not unwanted. Don't ever feel that you are not welcome here."

Pitch sighed working to hold his tears back, it did make him feel better to hear North say that he was wanted although now he wasn’t sure if he did so just to placate him into behaving for the betterment of everyone around him. It was a dangerous precipice in their relationship to teeter on. Pitch was vulnerable in so many ways now that his fragile ego always seemed to feel threatened by his standing within their little circle where he was a part of it yet still outside looking in. He wasn’t a guardian, and he likely never would be leaving holes of inadequacy to well within him and lodge in his throat now like shards of glass. He muttered a barely audible strained, “Okay,” because he didn’t know what else to say.

"We really do want you to become part of family." North continued. "You are a part of it now, regardless if you want to accept us as part of yours or not."

Family… what did that even really mean for him? He wanted one, and he wanted to be accepted more than he or any of them understood. He always felt so lost in this way. He responded tentatively, “I do want a family… I just don’t know if I’ll ever make the cut to be a part of yours,” as he said this a wave of sadness passed though him.

"Make the cut? Pitch, being part of a family is not the same as putting in for job. You are accepted in this family no matter what."

“No… I’m not,” his voice wavered, “I know I’m not. It’s a constant struggle. I’m not like any of you, and even when I try, I don’t think I can ever reach your expectations.” Pitch was trying hard not to let the tears that now glazed over his eyes to spill, but he was hard pressed to do so. He took in a deep breath willing his emotions to pull back and ebb into a state of calm. Why did he have to get so worked up? He didn’t understand why these feelings came to him so quickly begging for validation. It was an odd sensation that he rode like the wind in a storm whipping him about with no real direction tumultuous and uncontrollable.

North placed his hand on Pitch’s back. "You do not have to be like us to be part of family. Many different people make up family. If it makes you feel better, you are not the only one that I've had to take over knee."

Pitch was curious now, anyone else having to suffer his fate meant he was not alone in that regard, and it was something he wanted hear, “Oh?” Pitch found the nerve to part the blankets enough to see North’s face now although North could only see the glint of silver eclipses reflecting off his pupils.

North smiled lightly. "You already know Jack Frost holds record on naughty list."
"Jack had mentioned that he’d gotten in trouble with you once. He must have done something colossal to get you on to him," Pitch mused.

"Colossal would be good word." North nodded.

"Well now, don’t leave me hanging! What happened?" Pitch poked his head out of the covers now with a renewed exuberance to hear his tale.

North turned a look to Pitch, an eyebrow rising. “You seem awfully eager.”

Pitch frowned not wanting to say that Jack hadn’t told him the story for whatever reason (which of course had peaked his curiosity ever more!) He instead justified, “Eager isn’t quite the term I’d use, just curious is all. Who doesn’t like an interesting story?”

North hesitated a few minutes, as if it took a lot of effort to gather his thoughts together. “It was prank gone wrong.” he started. “Jack froze some of the gears to one of toy making machines for whatever reason connected with his prank. Something went wrong, whole machine went kabooie. Did a lot of damage and badly injured a lot of yetis.”

Pitch winced thinking the fact that there were injuries likely added to North’s fury. “That does sound rather bad. I’m glad my accident had no casualties. Although I doubt you fashioned a horrible instrument of torture for Frost,” Pitch added bitterly.

“What I used on him is no one’s business but our own.” said North.

Pitch caught the fact North mentioned he had in fact used something making Pitch smirk, “Well, I gather as long as he got what he deserved.” Pitch couldn’t help but look smug knowing that Jack had messed up worse than he had. Oh was he planning on giving the trickster a hard time now!

North turned a look to Pitch. “Just like you,” he reminded.

Pitch’s smirk faltered into a grimace as he grumbled, “At least what I did wasn’t intentionally orchestrated.” Pitch wanted to feel he at least one upped the boy in some degree to make himself feel better.

North wanted to comment on that, but he thought better about it. While Pitch’s mishap might have been due to accidents, it was still brought about by highly questionable means that were intentional.

Pitch seemed mollified by North's silence; Frost was definitely going to get Pitch's opinion on his escapade. That was going to be amusing! Especially since Frost had so adamantly refused to tell Pitch. This thought made Pitch smile once more thinking on the hard time he planned to give the boy.

“Just remember that yours was the result of intentional actions.” North finally said at last, noting the look on the Boogeyman’s face, “And there could have been casualties, including your own. If I had not been there to stop robot in time, we would have been cleaning you up along with everything else.” He pointed a finger at Pitch. “That is also why you get spanking. To help protect you from yourself.”

Pitch blushed fiercely at North's admonishment especially the need to mention spanking him was also to protect him from himself. That was a bit of a low blow Pitch thought scowling now. He didn’t want to comment on this as his mouth worked to direct the conversation elsewhere, "You... you said you would bring me books, maybe we should take a trip there, so I can pick some myself?" Pitch was worried North would end up bringing him awful choices for him to read.
North nodded. “Sure, why not?” He got up off the bed.

Pitch followed North to the library, and deciding it'd likely be best to give North back his spell page, so he could put it away back in the roll top desk where it belonged rather than to find it later folded between the pages of the random book Pitch had thrown it in. Pitch pulled the page out, smoothed it out, and sheepishly grinning, he handed it back to North, "Uh, I thought you might want this back."

North took the page from Pitch’s hand, not saying a word. He walked over to the desk, unlocked it, and put the spell page back with the rest of the pages before closing and locking the desk again.

Pitch breathed a sigh of relief as North walked away with the page. He was glad North hadn’t been mad about the condition of the page after the warning he'd given upon their first visit to the library on how Pitch needed to care for the books especially the older ones.

“Pick out as many books as you like.” said North, walking around the shelves and scanning the titles while he waited.

Pitch took his time now wanting to pick enough books to keep him occupied as well as something he’d actually find interesting.

"Take your time." North added.

Pitch was pleased that North didn’t rush him in this endeavor and actually kind of enjoyed the shared space now even though the two weren’t speaking. North had picked up a book and was reading while Pitch continued to peruse the books finding more than he’d suspected to find interesting in North’s library. After having spent almost three hours moving through the tomes, Pitch had picked out ten books that he found to be of the most interest hoping between these and his painting that he wouldn’t get too bored in the week he was destined to be restricted to his room. The thought that North would even tack that on as an additional punishment to his spanking still nettled him. As if he hadn’t already suffered enough! “Alright North, I think I’ve got a few good ones here to keep my interest.”

North closed the book he’d been reading and got up from his chair. The man spent long enough, he thought. But then again he had told him to take his time. "Are you sure you have all you need?"

Pitch smirked, “Oh I don’t know, I suppose I could look around on some of those back shelves over there,” Pitch was surprised North would even ask. Pitch didn’t really need any more, but then, he also didn’t relish the idea of getting put back in his room for the remainder of the night. If he could stretch it out, he could spend most of the night here in the library.

North seated himself again, opening up his book. “You are free to do so, but I will tell you that I will only wait here another hour, then you are going back to room. I have business to attend to later.”

Pitch pouted at the time limit, but he was happy enough to get another hour. Pitch was sure to use the whole of the hour North granted (since he wasn’t planning on going back to his room any time sooner than when North announced they had to go.) He continued to look through the shelves in a laxidasical fashion finding another two books to add to his pile along the way.

"You have fifteen minutes left.” North lazily announced.

Pitch sighed, “Has it really almost been an hour?” Pitch knew it had likely been longer, but thinking he might guilt North into staying a little longer was worth the attempt.

“Yes,” North said simply, not looking up from his book. “Hurry up and finish.”
Pitch scoffed his lip quirking slightly at the request. Pitch never liked to be rushed. Not that it mattered he thought, they had been here long enough he supposed, so until North had decided their time was up, he’d just continue meandering about browsing the books.

When the fifteen minutes passed, North closed his book and got to his feet. “Pitch, time’s up. Let’s go.”

“Yes, well,” he sounded almost put-off as he moved around back to his stack of books slowly and picked them up. “So then will you be coming by in the morning, so I can take care of the reindeer?” Pitch asked off-handedly.

“I can if you wish.” North replied, opening the library door and motioning for Pitch to go first.

Pitch smiled, “I would!” This could work out pretty well Pitch thought as they were walking back to his room. If North wanted to accompany him around when he went to take care of the reindeer then perhaps this whole escort thing wouldn’t be so bad. It’d almost be like having an entourage. As long as North was willing to go where he wished, Pitch could have company as he wandered about, and he could go back to his room when he was tired of having company.

North nodded. "At what time you wish to take care of deer?"

“Oh I usually like to start a little before dawn. I prefer to work before the sun comes out,” Pitch stated pleased that North seemed amiable.

“Fine, I will stop by to pick you up.”

“Perfect!” Pitch stated perkily as they finally made it back to his room.

"And you’d better do your chores this time instead of changing mind when we get there." said North.

Pitch’s brow raised as North opened the door for him to enter, “Changed my mind? Oh no, I just wanted to see the reindeer, I’d already done my chores this morning.”

North raised an eyebrow. "You mean to tell me you were out of room after I told you to stay here?"

Pitch’s eyes widened. It hadn’t occurred to him when he’d said it that he was disobeying North’s orders and admitting to it now. He sputtered, “Uh, well not exactly. I… I only came out to take care of the reindeer, but …but it was with Toothiana’s permission! I thought I should make sure the deer didn’t get overlooked with… with everything else that was going on. I came right back afterward I swear it!”

Hearing that Toothiana had been Pitch’s escort helped to quell some of the anger that had been rising in North. After studying Pitch a few minutes, he nodded. "Okay. Since Tooth was escort, I will let it slide."

Pitch breathed a sigh of relief visibly relaxing. He had quickly backed into his room away from North at the first hint that he may get in trouble for what he’d done, and now that everything was okay, he moved over to the bookshelf in his room and set the books on one of the shelves. He softly remarked back to North as he did so, “Thank you for being understanding. I didn’t want the reindeer to suffer on my account.”

North eyed Pitch silently, gave a quick nod, and closed the door, leaving Pitch alone in his room.

Pitch watched as North evaluated him momentarily before leaving. He wondered what the Cossack had been thinking. The sudden thrill of fear he’d felt moments ago had Pitch looking back up at the
wall now with a scowl to see the strap once more, a horrible reminder of a few hours earlier. It was
enough for Pitch to decide now to take one of his paintings to hang on the nail and effectively cover
the strap from his view. That was much better Pitch decided as he backed away from the wall to
appraise the view.

Now that he was alone again, Pitch moved back to his bed and crawled on top of it with a sigh.
Normally he'd have been content to be here relaxing on his comfy bed after so many hours
wandering about, but the fact that he wasn't allowed to leave was grating on him. It was the principal
of the matter that nettled him so greatly. He'd already been punished, why did North want to make
him so miserable? It wasn't as if he wasn't already a prisoner! Pitch fumed now in impotent rage, but
after a short while abandoned it in place of resignation as his thoughts drifted back to the carnage at
the landfill site. His thoughts returned to that cold realization when he'd looked up to see death
looming in the face of that machine, Pitch had never been so happy to hear North’s booming voice.
He really had brought this down on himself no matter how much he wished he could deny it, he had
to at least partially acknowledge he'd gotten what he'd deserved, and punishment aside, he was glad
he hadn't become a smear on the wall.
Pitch found he couldn't sleep spending most the night milling about his room, looking out the portholes as the dawn broke, and the sun began flooding across the sky. As the morning drew on, Pitch had started to wonder why North had not shown up yet. Hadn't he told the man he liked to work with the deer before the sun had come up? Had he forgotten, or was he just making him wait on purpose? Either way, it served as an irritant now as Pitch paced about with a scowl occasionally opening his door to glare outside of it as if that would bring North faster.

It was another hour before North came to Pitch's room and knocked on the door.

Pitch snatched the door open looking quite incensed as he spat, "It's half past nine! Where have you been?"

North's face turned into a displeased frown as he glared down at Pitch. "Don't use that tone with me, Pitch."

Pitch frowned back his anger getting the best of him enough not to take heed of North's comment. "You're leaving the reindeer to starve! They normally have eaten close to five hours ago," he replied hotly.

North's hand quickly shot out and grabbed Pitch by his bicep, pushing him forward and into the bedroom, leaving enough space where he could squeeze into the room himself and shut the door behind him.

Pitch realized quickly enough his mistake as he stumbled back holding his hands up in supplication, "I... I'm sorry! I... I was just concerned about the reindeer! I didn't mean to be brash! I'll mind my tone! I'll mind my tone!"

North silently regarded him a few minutes, the hard glare never leaving his eyes.

Pitch bit his lip fidgeting now looking more nervous than a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs, "I didn't mean to get testy... I... I've just been waiting for you for so long. I got a little impatient. It won't happen again."

"I admire your dedication to the reindeer, Pitch, as well as your knack for keeping on schedule." North said at last. "But you need to learn that everything, including time, does not revolve around you. If you are a little late, it is not going to hurt. I still see hint of selfishness surging through you. You need to learn to be more understanding, especially towards others. Maybe I was late because of emergency. Had that ever occurred to you?" The truth was, North had been late on purpose in order to teach Pitch a lesson, but he wasn't going to ever tell the Boogeyman that.

Pitch shifted uneasily; his nerves were on pins and needles. It was taking all of his will to contain himself and not rush North further. Intent on getting down to the reindeer no matter what North’s supposed emergency. Pitch didn't know for sure, but he suspected that North was just giving him a hard time to be difficult. Still, even though he was roiling inside, Pitch nodded demurely lowering his head, "Of... of course; I understand." He lifted his head now eyes darting from North to the door, "Now that we've got that settled, might we be on our way?"
North continued to stand between Pitch and the door, moving his hands to put on his hips. He could tell that his lesson was not working on the dark man. The only thing Pitch cared about was his own goals, which at that current moment was getting to the deer. He knew Pitch could care less about what had happened to delay everything.

Seeing North take on a stalwart stance, Pitch backed a step away regarding North in confusion, "What... what are we waiting for?"

North shook his head, sighing. Finally he moved out of the way to let Pitch pass. "We will go now."

Finally! Pitch thought peevishly; this whole ordeal had already taken much too long! His silent worry of course was that Frost had already been by the stables to take care of his reindeer! Pitch was quick to lunge forward and tug the door open more than ready to depart.

North kept his annoyed glare as he followed after Pitch in silence.

Pitch had darted out of the door storming off and leaving North behind in lieu of making it to the reindeer at a steady clip. It wasn’t as if the man didn’t already know where Pitch was going. The brisk walk helped Pitch to relieve some of the tension he was feeling from being trapped in his room all night. He’d never seen the room as so small before …well at least not since the first couple days he’s arrived here at the Pole.

Pitch gasped halting in his tracks when he saw a shadow milling about within the stables and realized a couple of the deer were already in the field. Someone was already here doing his job! A flash of rage ran through him as he charged into the stables now to see who would be usurping his detail.

Jack Frost caught sight of Pitch, smiling and waving toward him as he approached. "Hey!"

“What! Why are you here?!” Pitch exclaimed, “You’re not supposed to be here until after the repairs are made! Until then, I will be taking care of these reindeer!” Pitch hit his chest with his fist angrily as if he needed to emphasize to Frost how he felt even though his voice had steadily been rising as he spoke to the winter sprite.

Jack only looked at him with confusion, not understanding why Pitch was so mad.

“PITCH!” North bellowed as he quickly lumbered into the stables. Even though he had shouted the Boogeyman’s name, the volume of it made Jack wince and step back.

Pitch recoiled spinning around to see North quickly approaching. His anger washed away like ash in water, and Pitch’s eyes widened as he cringed at the man’s tone. His jaw worked to speak, but Pitch was stunned silent from the menacing glare the Russian was giving him.

“That is enough!” North said as he approached. “I have had it up to here with attitude, Pitch! You are in enough trouble as is. Doesn’t that mean anything to you? If I was in as much trouble as you, I would take care to watch what I did!”

Pitch paled at the Cossack’s words swallowing hard. Pitch had thought he was still quite a ways from North, and he hadn’t realized that the big man would have kept stride with him so well. He nodded dumbly, “Yes, yes! I… I was just… coming in here to let Jack know he didn’t need to bother himself with coming by the stables yet.” He turned to Jack with a look of urgency that spoke that he wanted Frost to either leave or back up what he had just told North.

Jack looked between Pitch and North, finally holding up his hands and backing up, silently saying that he wanted no part of the drama.
Pitch spun back to North warily before turning his head to look back at Frost repeating this a few times to judge where everyone stood before he made his next move. Deciding Frost was more than willing to back off, he inched his way over towards the harnesses silently, not letting his eyes leave North as he did so. Pitch grabbed a harness off the wall as casually as he could muster, although with the tension in the air, he was moving a tad jerkily. Pitch hoped if he just started doing his chores that North would back off and find somewhere to fade into the background, so Pitch could work with the reindeer unbothered by him or Jack. Quietly he willed the boy to take the hint and just go away.

North continued to stand silently in the middle of the stable, not moving. He crossed his arms over his chest and eyed Pitch, watching his every move.

Jack said nothing, deciding it best that he slip out quietly.

Pitch was happy to see Jack leave loosening up a little to know the boy was done meddling where he didn’t belong. Satisfied now, Pitch straightened and moved over to Donner’s pen trying his best to ignore North now, so he could enjoy tending to his favorite of all the reindeer. Pitch was relieved that Jack had not tended to Donner before he was able to make it to him. These thoughts had Pitch frowning thinking on how North had caused this mix-up. Pitch would have already been done looking after the deer hours ago if he’d not moseyed about doing who knew what with his morning and wasting Pitch’s time! Pitch was all out scowling now as he dragged Donner over to the tethering pole to tie him to it. Every now and then, Pitch would throw North a cursory glare as he secured Donner (although not enough to actually lock eyes with the man.)

“I cannot read your mind,” said North at last. “But I can tell by your actions that you still have attitude problem. Just to let you know. Jack is going to fill in for you whether you like it or not.”

Pitch squinted his eyes hatefully and sneered as he stalked over to the wall to snatch a grooming brush. He was doing his best to ignore North and pretend he didn’t hear what he was saying although the man’s words were eating at him making him livid to think about.

Finally, North moved. He walked over and picked up a stool and set it down where he’d been standing, seating himself on it and crossing his arms over his chest again.

Pitch huffed watching North out of his peripheral wondering how he could have entertained the notion that having the man breathing down his neck could have ever been considered enjoyable company!

He began grooming the reindeer, and as he worked, he wore a thin lined frown, a mark that he was still brooding over the fact that Jack had been here already cutting in on his tasks. After ten minutes of festering, Pitch’s rationale towards the whole event had steadily worn away, and he growled, “If we would have gotten out here sooner, Frost never would have felt the need to come over here to check on the reindeer! Even ‘he’ thought they’d been out here untended for far too long,” Pitch quipped as if this were justification enough for Pitch’s own feelings.

“Pitch, you walk thin line.” North stated simply, an edge to his voice. “You are acting petty and childish over this whole thing, and I do not like it.”

Of course you’d think that; you pompous ignoramus! Pitch fumed but didn’t dare say out loud. He scowled as he spat, “I am not! I just have a system of how I do things, and you’ve severely interrupted my routine! Why can’t I have any feelings on the matter? I do almost everything you tell me, but it’s never enough for you!” He groused feeling tired of the tight rein that he had been recently restricted to. It had had him nearing the boiling point several times over, but North’s continued pecking at an open wound and finally stepped on Pitch’s last nerve.
“That’s too bad,” said North, flatly, “And I suppose you think that activating my robot and torching the garbage conveyor didn’t interrupt my routine nor routine of yetis.”

Pitch only frowned deeply knowing better than to open his mouth regarding that subject. Instead he went back to silently grooming Donner. He decided to just focus his energy on the reindeer, so he could fight back the prickles of irritation he was feeling. He’d just be sure to take an elongated amount of time grooming each reindeer as payback to North for making him wait so long this morning. Pitch smirked thinking on this; now you can spend some time waiting on me fat man!

North regarded Pitch in silence for a long while, watching as he brushed the deer. He didn’t want to take the strap to Pitch again, but he had a nigging feeling that Pitch was going to earn time over his knee again before long. It was his attitude that was the biggest problem right now, North thought.

“You are allowed to have feelings on matter.” North finally said. "However, I don't think you have right feelings."

Pitch’s lip curled momentarily as he fought back a venomous reply. After a moment he stated in a barely contained snarl, “You don’t… why doesn’t that surprise me. Then again, the shoe is not on the other foot is it? I wonder how you would fair if you were in my position slowly getting all your freedoms whittled away.” Pitch kept his tone even and certainly gave off an air of passive-aggressiveness.

“And I don’t think you have fully understood how much trouble you are actually in or seriousness of situation. After everything that has happened, I would have thought you would be more mindful of that mouth of yours lest it get you into more trouble with my strap.”

Pitch blanched at the mention of the strap wishing to mollify the situation quickly, “Uh… it’s… it’s just banter North. I am fully aware of how dire my situation is. I didn’t mean to offend… we’re just talking here… about feelings. Nothing more,” Pitch untethered Donner feeling the urge to vacate the premises and the conversation.

“Yes, we are talking. But your words are more than just banter. I can tell they are laced with venom.”

Pitch muttered crossly as he moved toward the field, “Well maybe if you didn’t threaten to beat me every five minutes, I’d be much better company!”

“What did you say, Pitch?” said North, his dangerous glare returning.

“Uh… nothing North! I was just talking to Donner here!” Pitch grimaced pulling on the deer to move a little faster through the doorframe. Pitch set the reindeer loose watching him a moment before turning regrettfully to return to the stables. Pitch avoided eye contact with North now working his way over to the next stall to bring Dasher out and tether him to the pole as he’d done for Donner.

North sat and silently watched Pitch take each deer out. He sighed, closing his eyes. Pitch was doing so well about changing, now it seemed like he had taken the greatest step backward that he had taken so far.

Pitch continued to groom the reindeer, and as the time went on, he slowly simmered down taking joy in the simple pleasures of grooming the beasts. As his anger dissipated, he’d felt a little badly about giving North a hard time, but it was hard not to want to take a jab or two when he felt so limited as well as pushed into such extremes.

This prolonged punishment made it hard for him to not let all the littlest things bother him and build
upon each other. He realized he needed to get it together, but he just couldn’t stop feeling so mad all of the time now. It wasn’t like when he was getting regular visits from the other guardians, riding reindeer, painting, or wandering about the Pole. Now he couldn’t do anything he really wanted to do… well anything he wanted to do in the means that he wished to do it and when. His whole little world was getting turned upside down again, and for the worse.

North sat silently. Sometime during Pitch’s outing with the deer, he had pulled a book out and began reading. Every so often he would look up to make sure Pitch was still in sight before turning his attention back to reading.

Pitch took as much time as he could span between each deer stretching a two hour job into almost four hours. North had finished his book, and Pitch was still shifting about aimlessly doing little things here and there in the stables and taking long pauses out by the gate in between each reindeer. He was finally placing the last reindeer in the field, and their coats gleaned with the length of time that Pitch had spent grooming them. The reindeer were certainly happy.

North was a bit miffed at first that Pitch was taking so long, but then he shrugged it off and let it slide, knowing that Pitch had a week’s worth of grounding ahead of him. The man probably needed as much time as he could get outside of the bedroom he’d be confined to.

Once finished with the reindeer, Pitch found himself leaning over the gate just staring out and watching the reindeer romp about. He did enjoy watching them, it brought him a sense of peace. He needed it right now more than ever. He inhaled the crisp air closing his eyes as the breeze branded his face with its icy kiss whipping his hair about carelessly. He liked this, he’d have liked it even more if he were up to riding. Pitch frowned, as Jack had mentioned, he wouldn’t be doing that for a while he thought sourly.

Pitch sighed, the repairs would be starting tomorrow, and as much as he wasn’t really thrilled to do the work, he was kind of looking forward to having a project to do that would pass the time, and more than some small part of him wanted to fix what he’d destroyed to assuage his niggling guilt. He wondered restlessly how long it would take to recover from this particular stunt of his. It brought his mind back to Jack’s words on moving on to a new level where the North Pole was its first level. He had to wonder then if it was possible for him to go into negatives in such regards. It was a depressing thought. He wasn’t getting anywhere, and it served to demoralize his spirits now as he slumped on to the rail a small pout forming on his face.

North slowly walked up to silently stand beside Pitch.

Pitch glanced at North a moment before looking back out at the field, “I… I guess you’re ready to go,” he stated gloomily.

"No," North replied. "We can stay for however long you need to."

Pitch snorted softly, “I don’t think I’ll ever want to leave,” he stated dryly. He really didn’t want to go back to his room now. Pitch knew it was almost ridiculous how much he fought this, but having been confined so much in his long life, the thought of enduring it at all even in small amounts rose great levels of anxiety in him. There was scar tissue left from years alone that pushed him to dreading it and fighting it irrationally so just because it hit deep seeded triggers within him that even he didn’t fully realize.

Confinement raised the threat of loneliness within him as well as abandonment. He didn’t think that the guardians would banish him in such a way, but the mind plays funny tricks when it has been conditioned to be branded in such a way. It was hard to shed those feelings no matter how much the rational mind posed the truth of the matter.
"It will all be over with before you know it. And you will be back to old routine." North said. "Just keep looking forward."

Pitch harrumphed from the lack of empathy, "You know, instead of the whole solitary confinement bit, you could always manage more projects where I could actually be productive for you over just wasting away in my room," Pitch offered trying to sway North into reanalyzing the edict he’d decided on.

"I have reasons for doing what I do." North said with a hint of warning to his voice. "You are not in control of your punishments."

Pitch grimaced snapping, "It was just a suggestion. I’m not arguing. You’ve got the say; you’ve made that painfully clear," he complained.

"Pitch, I am tired of your attitude." North said. "Keep on going the way you are going, and I can easily make your grounding two weeks instead of one, not to mention more time over my knee to go along with it. I know you are disgruntled over punishment, but it is not end of world. Once you get through it, you will be allowed to return to your life as it was prior. A little change in your routine is not going to kill you."

Pitch looked wounded, "What? I’m not doing anything other than expressing myself! I’m not happy about all of this; am I not allowed to feel unhappy about being punished without a threat of getting punished even more? That’s unfair! I swear you expect me to walk around here all smiles and cheer even though I’m miserable!" he smoldered.

"Pitch, I have nothing against you voicing your displeasure. Do it all you wish, but I do ask for you to drop your snappish and smart-aleck attitude. You are going to help with repairs and afterward you will be grounded for week. This is final. I do not ask or expect you to like it, but this is way life is. Once you get in your room, you can throw pity party all you wish. Or you can finally decide to approach it like a man and accept the fact that you messed up and brought all of this on yourself instead of trying to make me out as bad guy."

Pitch sneered at North’s comment, “I’m not making you out to be the bad guy, and I’m definitely not throwing a pity party! I’ve already accepted your decrees; I don’t have any choice but to; do I?”

North just raised an eyebrow.

Seeing he was getting dangerously close to upsetting the man, Pitch moved away from North opening the latch to the gate, “I …I suppose I’d better get the reindeer back to their pens.”

North grunted and gave a quick nod. "Good idea,"

Pitch trudged along putting the reindeer away lost in thought thinking about what North said about his attitude. It was hard not to have an attitude, and snappish was his nature, or as he liked to refer to it as, witty. He did need to stop projecting his feelings and reel them back before they ended up getting him in trouble again he realized. Horrible flashbacks to the second day at the warren assured Pitch he needed to tone it back a bit or risk a repeat of such awful events and maybe even a longer sentence tacked on. He didn’t want that, so taking a deep breath, Pitch affirmed to himself he’d keep a cool head and just get through this, so he could get back to better times.

North waited for Pitch in the stable, watching as he put the deer back into their proper pens. He figured enough had been said, so he chose to remain quiet.

Once Pitch had finished the task he moved over to North looking at him hopefully, "Where to next?"
Pitch didn’t want to go back to his room, but he didn’t really have anywhere else he had in mind to go. He figured he’d give North the call to see where he wanted to go next.

North sighed, “I have work that needs doing. You either come with me or go back to room.”

“What kind of work?” Pitch figured it was better to ask now rather than not know what he was getting himself into.

“ Mostly sitting in my office looking over my list and other important papers. I plan to take a walk to the workshop later to oversee how the new toys we’ve come up with are turning out.”

That didn’t sound overly fun, but poking about North’s office was likely more entertaining than sitting in his room. Besides, maybe some of the other guardians might come by to provide a better distraction Pitch decided. ”Sounds like loads of fun,” Pitch stated sarcastically.

“ Well, if you are done with deer, we can make our way to my office.” said North.

Pitch smiled, “ After you.” Pitch followed after North quietly now content to move along at North's pace now that he’d fully tended to the reindeer.

North quietly led the way to his office, opening the door and stepping inside once they had arrived. He waved toward a chair. “ Make self comfy.” he said as he walked around behind his desk and sat down.

Pitch wasn’t interested in sitting of course and instead started to poke about while North busied himself in paperwork. Finding interest in the elaborate train set, Pitch pushed the train into motion watching it careen down the tracks doing impossible loops and turns. Pitch found the scene pleasing as a small smile formed on his face.

North looked up at him and smiled. He offered the Boogeyman a long sheet of paper. “ Would you like a look?” he asked. “ Due to recent circumstances, you have made first place on naughty list. Congratulations, you knocked Jack Frost down to second place.”

Pitch looked up as North held out the paper and then grimaced at North’s comment. Of course he would manage to beat out Jack at being the naughtiest. Pitch had to look now curious as to what the long list held, “ Funny, I thought this list only accounted for the acts of children? Otherwise I’d have thought I’d have made the top of that list ages ago.”

North smirked. “ You would think,” he said, turning his eyes back to another list in his hands. “ Actually, I think the question is, ‘I thought this list only accounted for mortals?’ But if that were the case, then Jack would not be on there.”

Pitch couldn’t help but glance through the list now just to see what it covered. He paled to see some of the offenses he’d recently done such as purposefully taking as long as possible with grooming the reindeer just to make North wait on him. He hoped North didn’t plan to read over this list any time soon! Interestingly enough all of his bad deeds weren’t on the list. In fact it seemed only the most recent ones that were less bad and more, bad choices were on the list and nothing that had been malicious intent. It appeared the criteria (at least for his list) had to actually be considered ’naughty’ and not nasty.

North continued to look over the list in his hands. “ Find anything interesting on there?” he casually asked, not looking up.

"It's uh... strangely selective... how does it even know everything? Are you casting a spell to generate this list?" Pitch was baffled to conceive how the man could even keep up with all these lists.
He supposed that's why he spent so much time in his office pouring over them. It seemed rather daunting.

North let out a small amused laugh. "Something like that, I suppose. It is very old magic I set in place long ago, when I first became Santa Claus. It has since become a part of Pole and just automatically does what it was meant to do. I've become so accustomed to it that I sometimes forget it is even there."

Pitch hoped that meant he'd avoid looking over his deeds as easily and see them just as forgettable. He rather didn't like a magical record of his wrongdoings especially spelling out things he'd done that had yet to be addressed. It did still fascinate him on its methods of writing down what was considered to be naughty, and he had to ask, "I noticed that this list only lists mostly minor offenses, not that the recent mistakes I've made are minor," he rectified so as to have no qualms that he thought what he'd done with the spell page and the robot would have been considered not noteworthy violations, "I just noticed that this list doesn’t include some of the worst things I’ve done comparatively, well like trying to throw the world into darkness for one. Rather odd that something like that wouldn’t make the list isn’t it?"

"How many children do you know who have attempted to throw world into darkness?" North asked with a chuckle. "The magic was set up to monitor the naughty deeds of kids, not malicious and evil deeds of the wicked people of world."

This explanation only drew a frown to crease Pitch’s face, “Preposterous! There you go comparing me to a child again North. I swear you just want to goad me now. As far I know, since I’ve come here, I haven’t been transformed into a kid for your list’s sake! If you didn’t want to tell me how the list worked, than you should have just said so,” Pitch huffed slightly miffed by what he saw to be a load of hogwash on North’s part.

North finally took his eyes away from the list in his hand, looking at Pitch. A scowl appeared on his face. “Excuse me, Pitch?” he said. "I did tell you how list works. It is not my doing if you end up on it."

Pitch scowled back giving North a look that said that he clearly wasn’t buying what North was selling him before turning back to the list once more and scanning all the deeds the list had chosen to scribe. There were several he found that had occurred outside of the Pole, but they too hadn’t been vindictive. There were deeds like giving a child a nightmare of being bullied for bullying another child or the first time he had discovered that touching Sandy’s dreamsand had corrupted it and the fun he’d had changing those dreams into nightmares. At that point, doing so was just for the sheer fact that he could do it and it was a magical moment even if it wasn’t nice. This was of course before he’d made such grand schemes to use the sand as an opportunity to plunge the world back into the dark ages.

North regarded Pitch in silence for a while before speaking again. “It is not a bad thing to have one's actions and misdeeds counted as naughty instead of evil. And just because you do naughty things, it doesn't necessarily mean you are child. Even adults do naughty things sometimes." Although, as far as North was concerned, Pitch was extremely immature and childish, but he figured it best not to say any more about that subject.

Pitch peeked up from the long list seeming to perk at this rationalization liking it much better than North’s first account, “Oh? So then that’s better right? Does that mean I’m on the nice list at all? And if I am, does that mean I’ll also get presents from you? If not, you can skip out on the coal.” Pitch was grinning mirthfully now having read enough Christmas stories to understand a little more about what to expect from North’s holiday.
North raised an eyebrow. “You cannot be on both lists at same time. You end up on nice list if you do nice things instead of naughty, Pitch.”

Pitch pouted, “That’s not very fair! I’ve done nice things, so you’re saying that they don’t even show up until I’m off the naughty list?” Pitch soured thinking, ‘I’ll never get on the nice list at this rate.’

“Precisely. If you do more naughty than good, you stay on naughty list. You get on nice list when you stop doing naughty things altogether.” North calmly replied. “And it is not my fault if you stay on naughty list. The magic of the lists only show what is truth.”

“Oh don’t tell me these brats you service presents to every year have stopped doing naughty things altogether,” Pitch scoffed indignantly, “Believe me, I’ve been around long enough to see what children get up to, and I assure you they don’t go all year being nice to be able to stay on that little list of yours.”

“Of course not,” North replied. “They are just children, after all. I can’t expect them to be perfect. I have bent rules a little bit every now and again. You, however, are not a child and should know better.”

Pitch wrinkled his nose, “Oh I see. You can give me a child’s punishments but none of the leniency. Well now that’s double standards don’t you think?”

"If you don’t shut your mouth, you're going back to room.” North glared at Pitch.

Pitch sneered in disdain at North’s statement tossing the list back on North’s desk with a slight harrumph as he turned away to move back over to the train set to get away from North’s presence. Pitch didn’t care about North’s stupid list anyway. It wasn’t like the fat man was going to be giving him a bunch of Christmas gifts and a stocking full of candy, so why should he care?

"And that is why you are on naughty list.” North whispered to himself, shaking his head at Pitch’s tantrum. He focused his attention back on his work, grateful that Pitch took his warning and shut up.

Pitch was frustrated from the conversation; it could be so hard to talk to North when he was being so rude to him! How dare he tell him to shut his mouth! This rankled Pitch to no end especially since he wasn’t allowed any venue to retort verbally without risk of a very negative follow up. Fuming he moved around the side of the train set no longer as amused with the toy’s expert maneuvering. He’d only moved over here because he was left with little recourse but to vacate the area he was in lest he make more trouble for himself. North’s office wasn’t huge, and after a few moments of standing over here, Pitch moved to the big stain glass window and gently sat on the large sill leaning delicately against its frame to just stare outside. He could be doing this very thing from his room Pitch mused grumpily, but at least here, the view was different.

North glanced over at Pitch. "Care to look at more of list?” he said, handing Pitch a small stack of papers.

Pitch turned a confused look up to North, “What?”

North shrugged. "You look bored. I just thought you might enjoy looking through other pages of list.”

Pitch reached out taking it in his hands wondering why on Earth he’d care about some other miscreant’s deeds when his face lit up remembering Jack was in second place now, so his numerous deeds most likely were also all over this list!

There were several bits and pieces Pitch noted on Frost's record, mischief causing a car wreck here, a
little boy’s tongue suffering severe swelling from getting stuck to a pole there, a snowball causing a bloody nose, oh, these were going to be fun to rub in the winter sprite’s face! Guardian of fun to children ha! The poor boy would be feeling horribly guilt ridden by the time Pitch was through with him! Pitch couldn’t help but titter gleefully as he absorbed the multitude of offenses.

"Something amuses you?" said North, glancing up and noting the smile on Pitch's face.

Pitch smiled a little too gleefully flushing a tad at his intentions as his eyes flicked up to North, “Oh! Uh… nothing much… just amusing little read to see all the things these… rascally kids can get up to.” Pitch couldn’t contain the mischievous smile that now painted his face.

Smiling, North gave a chuckle. "I thought maybe you might find it worth your time." He picked up another stack of papers and handed them to Pitch. "Why not read some of nice list, too?"

Pitch wasn’t at all interested in this list, there wasn’t going to be any dirt to gather on Frost, and even without Frost, at least some of the antics some of the children wound up on the naughty list for was at least entertaining. Pitch doubted the nice list would have anything worth reading, so he held a hand up stating flatly, "I think I'll pass."

“Pity.” said North. “I thought maybe it would give you some inspiration.”

Pitch rolled his eyes as he spat sarcastically, "Somehow I doubt reading about how little Tommy walked old ladies across the street is going to spark some born again renewal in me to do good deeds."

North shook his head, turning his eyes back to the paper in his hands. "I cannot force you to be good, Pitch. Changing and doing good will have to be your choice."

Pitch scowled, "Do you really think reading a list of good deeds is going to help me become more prone to do good deeds? I mean, it's only a list, it's not osmosis."

North looked up annoyingly, cocking an eyebrow. “No, I don’t. I never said it would. You are one who brought up that subject. But it never hurts to read the good that others do so it might inspire us to do same.” He turned back to his paper. "Like I said, choice is yours to make. I cannot force you. But just remember that no one but yourself holds you where you currently are."

"Pfft! That's funny, and here this whole time I thought I could leave any time I wanted to... oh wait, that's right, I can't. I really am being held where I currently am, and oddly forced. I guess that blows that theory out of the water now doesn't it?" Pitch smirked haughty.

North rolled his eyes. He pointed a finger at Pitch. “See, your attitude. It keeps you from stepping forward. Like I said, you are holding yourself where you currently are. You were doing so good not long ago when you were painting eggs and experimenting with Bunny and dreams. You were stepping forward and changing. Now look at yourself. Just take a few minutes to button that mouth of yours and examine yourself. You say that you are not treating me as bad guy, but your mouth and attitude speak differently. Every time you open up to say something, nothing comes out but haughtiness and bitterness directed towards me like you secretly blame me for the bad that has happened to you. I think you lie to yourself without even realizing. You still cannot see that you and only you have been the one to bring downfall on your head."

Pitch sighed, of course he was the one with the attitude while North just told him repeatedly to stop talking never allowing him to let him speak his mind, “I don’t have an attitude, I just have a differing opinion. Never once did I disagree that I made mistakes, and I have even been made to admit them fully. Perhaps you just see it as bitter or haughty because there’s a bit of truth in what I said? Did you
ever consider that for once you might actually be wrong on something, or can the great Nicholas St. North never err?”

North grunted. Typical, he thought. Of course Pitch wouldn’t see that he has an attitude problem. Anyone with his kind of attitude never stops long enough to realize they have a problem. He sighed. “And what exactly am I wrong about, Pitch? Enlighten me.”

Pitch snapped, “Well, for starters, all I did was say I wasn’t interested in reading over the nice list, and suddenly I’m giving you an attitude and blaming you for what has happened to me. Perhaps it’s just that I think reading a litany of drab deeds that get a pat on the head sound about as fun as plucking my eyes out. That doesn’t mean that I don’t want to get back to normal the way things were before you put me on a leash.”

North shrugged, remaining calm. “All I did was offer you list to read. You chose not to. I am not mad about that. For records, you have been giving attitude before we even came in office. That part had nothing to do with me giving you list to read.”

“I told you, I’m not happy with this new arrangement, so it isn’t easy for me to just act like I am. I’m doing my best to contain any ill feelings, but I can’t help if they seep out every now and then. It’s a testament to the misery I’m having to cope with,” Pitch complained.

North nodded. “Alright, you are not happy. That is understandable. I have already said that I do not expect you to like it, and I do not expect you to be happy all the time. What more do you want me to say? What is it that you wish me to do? Already I feel like I am repeating myself with you. I am trying my best to help you, because I want to see you change and do something good with your life, but you are making my job very difficult.”

Pitch saw North was looking strained and was earnestly trying to work with him, and he felt a little bad for giving him such a hard time. But didn’t North see this was also hard on him to? “I’m not trying to make things difficult for you. I just… find it hard not to project how I feel sometimes. If you were having to deal with what I’m on the end of, even with it being my fault, you’d understand. It’s not easy to just pretend to be happy when I can’t go the places I want to go and take care of the reindeer as I see fit. This… further imprisonment after I was already so harshly punished just feels a bit like overkill don’t you think? I mean what is the purpose of it? I’m not going anywhere already, so why can’t I move about without a babysitter? Do you think I’m going to take off or something?”

“Pitch, we all go through hard times. It is way of life. You are not only one that has faced difficulties and hardships. The rest of us have faced difficulties, too, and have gone through times where it has been difficult to be happy. But we have overcome them and we are here now.” He heaved a big sigh. “As for your grounding… You have proven to me during all of this that you cannot keep your nose in your own business and cannot keep away from places you are not allowed to be, even after you’ve been told not to go there. Due to this, I feel need to put some restrictions on you for a time. Your grounding will be time for you to reflect deeply on the things that put you there. It will also be time to test your ability to obey a simple order. If you so much as sneak out of your room during the grounding, you will face my strap again. If you do not like grounding, I suggest that you learn to ask permission first before you go into some area that might be off limits.”

A small pout formed on his lips as Pitch stiffened at the mention of the strap. It was apparent North did in fact plan to use that vicious device at any juncture he deemed called for a spanking now. He of course had no plans on upsetting North any further as he silently squirmed under the man’s serious glare and the well-remembered chafing of his most recent strapping. It echoed a firm warning to heed North’s words. As the Cossack spoke, Pitch’s eyes had fallen away due to the embarrassment North was making him feel. He could manage not to go places he wasn’t allowed! That whole terrible
event was enough to teach him to stay away from any mysterious locked doors at the Pole most
certainly! He didn’t need to be grounded to learn that lesson! But, Pitch didn’t comment further on
the subject since the answers North was giving him tended not to be to his liking. It was better just to
drop the subject Pitch decided. He’d just soldier through this and by the end of it, he could put this
horrible incident far behind him. “I… I will. I’ll ask permission from now on,” Pitch said softly still
not raising his eyes up to meet North’s as a familiar burning shame raced across his cheeks and ears
to say this to the man.

“Good to hear.” North’s face softened. “Pitch, I don’t do this to make your life harder or miserable. I
do it to teach you and to help you. You have been alone for so long that you need guidance, whether
you want to accept fact or not. I told you to stay away from the area that housed the robot to keep
you safe. But you disobeyed and went there anyway and almost got self killed. Do you see now how
important it is to obey?"

Pitch folded his hands in his lap now and nodded lightly, “I… I do.” North’s words wrung through
to him as Pitch thought once more on the near death experience.

North nodded. "This is what I want you to think about while you are spending time in room."

Pitch wanted to pipe in that he had in fact thought about the event quite extensively, but that too he
was sure would not go over well, so he only let out a disheartened sigh. Some things were just better
left unsaid.

North continued to eye Pitch a few more minutes before he turned his attention back to his work.

Seeing North return to his work, Pitch just watched him for a while before turning back toward the
window to lay his head on the frame. He wasn’t really staring at anything in particular, but the high
view did lend vast room for thoughts as Pitch ruminated on his day thinking on how he’d fallen to
this point. He hadn’t even realized how far he’d come regarding his progress with the guardians until
he was put in the position he was in right now.

He’d actually had it pretty good before, he realized belatedly. He let out a soft and humorless dry
laugh thinking back to when he’d first came to the Pole and how very angry and indignant he’d
been. The hate and malice he had carried then. It had been washed away with both firmness and
kindness combined where he’d started to flourish and was even gaining respect and encouragement
for his actions. Now he had slipped back to some weird place in between that was almost
undefinable in regards to his station among the guardians.

He knew they still cared about him, and he found he cared about them too, and this was a good
feeling. What he didn’t know was what he needed to do to stop finding himself in these dire
situations that he kept managing to slip into. It was both perplexing and troubling.
North looked over at Pitch at hearing his laugh, but he said nothing returning back to his work and leaving the nightmare lord to his thoughts.

An hour or so passed before a knock sounded on North’s office door.

“Come in,” North called. The door opened, and in came Toothiana.

“Hi!” She waved at North, then she caught sight of Pitch. “Oh, hey, Pitch.”

Pitch immediately brightened as he stood to greet her with a smile, “Toothiana!”

“How’s… uh… how’s everything going?” she said, nervously, remembering the implement she’d seen North making on her last visit to the Pole.

Pitch cleared his throat feeling awkward now since the last time they’d seen each other, she’d been leaving to go speak to North on his behalf knowing what he had coming, but she’d come the next day to obviously check on him. He gave her a sheepish smile, “Well, uh… I spent a lot of time at the library yesterday picking out some interesting books and took care of the reindeer this morning. Other than that, North and I have just been holed up here going over his lists.” He chose to leave out the fact that he’d made the top of the naughty list.

Tooth smiled, a bit relieved. “Sounds good,” She looked over North’s desk, then back to Pitch. “If you’re up for it, maybe we could go for a walk? That’s saying you don’t have business with North of course,” Pitch tumbled out before glancing back at North and giving him a pleading look to the tone of ‘May I please!’

“That would be nice.” She smiled. “Actually, no, I don’t have anything important to talk over with North. I was just stopping by to ask how you were doing.” Tooth said.

North looked at Tooth then back to Pitch. He nodded to Pitch.

Pitch mentally cheered as an impossibly wide smile whipped across his face, “Excellent! Let’s go!” Pitch darted to the door opening it for her quickly all too eager to leave the confines of what had become a severely on the edge visit with North.

North gave Tooth a silent look that told her to keep an eye on Pitch. She understood and nodded before turning to leave the office.

Pitch was ever so grateful to see Toothiana and had exuded a vivacity now that was a sharp contrast to the lethargic demeanor he’d been exhibiting for the past couple hours of sitting restlessly in North’s office. He turned a winning smile on her, “Thank you for coming to rescue me!” He let out a soft chuckle, “I think I was slowly starting to perish from boredom in there.”

Tooth laughed. “Surely it’s not that boring.”

Pitch grimaced his countenance faltering as his shoulders sagged a bit, “It could have been better… but with things the way they are at the moment… everything’s a bit… tense.”
Tooth nodded. “Yeah, tell me about it.” She rubbed at her arms as if the thought alone made her uncomfortable. “So... uh... what has North decided to do... about... well... you know.”

Pitch was puzzled as he quirked a brow up at her, “About? ...about what?”

“Everything that’s happened.”

Pitch blushed, “Oh… that. Uh... well ...I’m sure you know what followed our last meeting,” he couldn’t keep her eye contact now as he found something incredibly interesting to roll his foot over on the carpeted floor, “And... uh... I’m going to fix what I destroyed. That’s promised to take a few days to a week. Let’s hope not too long eh?” He lifted his head to give her a weak smile before looking back down. He didn’t mention his grounding because he’d hope she’d come by to visit him. North never said he couldn’t have visitors after all, but he didn’t want her questioning the matter either in case it influenced North to say no.

Tooth nodded. She didn’t bother to comment on what had happened to Pitch after their last meeting. She already knew and she figured it’d be best to remain quiet so as not to embarrass him. “I hope nothing like this happens again.”

He huffed as he muttered, “You and me both!” He looked back up then as if he were telling her a secret, “I don’t think I could stand for anther encounter like that. He’s really gotten quite ruthless with me!” Pitch whined.

Tooth raised an eyebrow. “Can you blame him? Sorry to have to say it, Pitch, but you haven’t exactly been the easiest person to be around.”

Pitch looked wounded that she would say something like that, “Are you going to gang up on me too?”

Knowing how Pitch had blown up at her the last time they had a deep talk, Tooth was now cautious. “Gang up on you? No, I’m just telling the truth.”

She wasn’t granting him any sympathy, and this made Pitch scowl, “Well, have you ever thought that maybe I’m not that easy to be around because of everything that I’m going through? And before you say it, yes! I absolutely, positively, have been drilled with the fact that I’ve brought this atrocity on myself! So just don’t even utter the words out of your pretty little mouth!” He muttered irritably now, “You wouldn’t believe how tired I am of being told that!”

Tooth said nothing. Instead, she just lifted her eyebrows and rolled her eyes.

Noting this reaction in her only served to upset Pitch, but he had to have a chaperone (even if that hadn’t been expressed to her) so Pitch just growled, “Let’s just... just be on our way!” He was getting angry now having expected a much nicer Toothiana, not this self-righteous siding with North Toothiana. Pitch started moving with arms placed tightly at his sides now as he stormed in the direction he wanted them to go.

“Go wherever you wish to go.” Tooth said, following after him.

Those words pleased Pitch that she was more than willing to conform to wherever he wanted to go. He wished she had come earlier now, “I was thinking that we could walk up to the upper decks. It’s quiet there and peaceful. You might like it actually. It’s been one of my favorite places to go to think.” He didn’t know why he was sharing this with her, it was one of his secret places. But he supposed out of all the guardians, he was willing to share it with her. This of course was mostly because he was craving to go there, and he didn’t really feel threatened by Toothiana in any way that
he should regret showing her.

She nodded, smiling. “Lead the way.”

The two were quiet as they continued; Toothiana zipping after Pitch as he artfully darted to and fro down the halls. Avoiding elves and yetis in this fashion had almost become a vague game for Pitch as he’d whoosh past the elves and would come just close enough to the yetis to often startle them to stop in their tracks (but not close enough to collide.) He enjoyed that stutter stop panic they elicited when the yetis came close to bowling him over. It gave Pitch a momentary glean of fear from them that acted like a jolted pick me up of energy. It was savory and about as much fear as he was going to get these days.

The workshop was still in full swing only being early afternoon, but as they continued up the stairs and back around the side of the building to where the line of huge powerful windmills stood, the grounds had grown silent enough to barely hear the muffled commotion of the work progressing three flights below them. Pitch inhaled deeply as he straightened hands crossed in a loose fashion behind his back as he steadily walked toward the silted windows the windmills sucked air in from.

This was a good time of day to come up here as the sun had dipped to the other side of the building leaving long shadows to trace along the floor. Pitch regarded them longingly. He really missed jumping in and out of shadows… yet another freedom taken from him he thought bitterly. It never did him well to dwell on these things since they made him resentful, and that cynicism pushed him back from his ultimate goals he and the guardians wanted him to attain to be a part of their group. Besides surely one day the guardians would let him have his powers back… wouldn’t they? With the way things were going, a seed of doubt was starting to grow within Pitch. No. Stop it! He shook his head willing these thoughts away. Those were the thoughts that led to him making bad choices… which led to other bad things like what he was experiencing now, and he needed to put a cap on them like he promised himself he would.

He turned tired eyes to Toothiana now, fighting himself was likely his most wearisome battle he faced, “So… what do you think? Do you like it?”

Tooth nodded. “I always did like it here.” She replied. “Although it’s been ages since I last came up here.”

Pitch looked surprised, “So you’ve known about this place? And here, I thought it was one of my secrets.” He smiled at her, “I like the solidarity of the place. It’s often much too… busy below for my liking.”

“Of course I know about it.” Tooth said with a chuckle. “North built this place, remember? Not much of it is a secret.”

He snorted replying softly as he moved to stare out the window, “Well, not a technical secret Toothiana, just… private. It’s one of my private places I’ve found to be alone and just think.”

“Oh,” Tooth nodded. She flew over to hover next to Pitch.

“I feel much better up here,” he sighed turning away from the window to face her. He gazed up at her earnestly now, “I… I’m sorry. About downstairs. I didn’t mean to lash out at you. I’m… I’m feeling a bit cloistered, and it’s got me on edge.” He found himself averting his eyes now as he tilted his face towards the window, “I’m having a lot of difficulty processing what I’ve done… what I’m facing. I feel like I’ve fallen as far as I possibly can, and I’m not going to be able to get back to where we were a few days ago. …I” He sighed regretfully, “The weight of this is crushing, and I haven’t been taking it well,” as he spoke Pitch had brought his chin to his chest to look down at his
hands that had clasped together at his sternum effectively making him visibly shrink into himself.

“Don’t say that,” Tooth said, looking concerned. “You’ll be able to get back to the place where you were. It might take some time, but you will. The thing is, will you learn enough from this mistake to ensure you don’t repeat it and put yourself back in the same place in the future?”

Pitch looked uncertain. If his track record said anything, it was that he seemed to be on a downward spiral. He brought his eyes up to glance at her carefully. They were opened wide with a touch of doubt, “I… I don’t know honestly. I want to say no, but… well, I seem to get caught up making stupid mistakes. I don’t even know how I manage to get myself in the trouble I do. I confound myself I swear. One minute I’m promising myself I’m going to stay on track, and the next thing I know I’ve done something horribly wrong and am having a regrettable show down with North,” Pitch’s pout deepened.

“Perhaps this is a part of yourself that you need to examine closer and try to work on adjusting.”

Pitch’s brow furrowed, “I have been trying… just not very successfully. Not that you couldn’t notice my epic failures lately if you were blind.” Pitch turned his face back to the window, “I …I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I know what I need to do; I just often lack the willpower to deny myself… although I’m getting better about some things. It’s the newer things I tend to encounter that have me tripping all over again. I will say in my own defense, this recent screw up was actually a cumulative effect from a month ago… not that it really matters of course,” he gave her a partial uneasy quirky smile out of the side of his face.

“I would think that the… well… the spankings you’ve gotten would be enough to strengthen your willpower.” Tooth replied. “After all, the purpose of discipline is to keep you on the right path. I know you don’t like hearing stuff like that, but… you have to face the truth, whether you like that truth or not. You’ve gotten spanked because you lack the willpower to keep yourself in check. To me, the fear of getting spanked should be enough to encourage you to want to do better.”

The fear of spanking did keep Pitch in line more than he was willing to admit, but having Toothiana mention it like she had made Pitch involuntarily cringe. He tried to use the logic in her statement to back up his own point, “Yes, well then it clearly shows that spanking isn’t working for me. You should tell North that it doesn’t seem to be doing what he intended, so he can find a different tactic. Stars knows he won’t listen to me.”

A small smile tugged at Tooth’s lips. She knew what Pitch was trying to do, so she kept quiet. She had been against spanking from the start and even tried to sway North’s decision, but he went ahead with it anyway. Now, after all of the recent events concerning Pitch, she was beginning to think that spanking had been the right choice after all. It seemed to leave a positive impact on the nightmare lord. She knew Pitch was extremely strong-willed, so spanking was the only thing that would probably get through to him in the way it needed to. North had known that all along, even during the times when she had been blind to it.

“He won’t listen to me either.” Tooth finally replied. That was the truth, and the only thing she felt she needed to say on the subject lest she rile Pitch up again.

Pitch frowned pitifully; he thought at this sullenly, North was never going to stop putting him over his knees if he couldn’t straighten out. Just the thought of the act made him blush fiercely, “Eh... North is rather hard headed in that regard. He really won’t listen to reason,” Pitch whined.

Tooth shook her head over Pitch’s comment. She was tempted to say a few things like, ‘You shouldn’t point fingers until you look at yourself in a mirror.’, but she chose to keep quiet. Pitch was determined not to listen to anything or anyone, and trying to bring Pitch’s problems to his attention
only served to make him madder. But she felt she needed to say something. “He’s not the only one,” she said, and left it at that.

Pitch grimaced, he supposed she was right in that regard, “I... have been known to be a tad stubborn on occasion.”

More than a tad, Tooth thought, but she didn’t say anything. “Pitch, North really does mean well. He’s trying his best to help you because he’s concerned about you and cares about you.”

Pitch pouted as he shifted uncomfortably, “I... I know. I just wish he had better ways of showing it is all. What he does is... highly embarrassing to say the least.”

“I... think that’s part of the idea of it.”

Pitch glowered but said nothing more on the subject as getting spanked accomplished that goal tenfold, and he definitely had no plans of endorsing its use on him!

Pitch wanted desperately to get away from the subject of getting spanked. It seemed to be a popular revolving topic he was unable to avoid talking about these days no matter how he tried to maneuver away from it.

Thinking on punishment though had Pitch considering that he was going to be rather lonely during the week of his grounding, and he was hoping to ensnare Toothiana’s company if he could manage it. It would make that time go by much less painfully. “Will you be coming by more often now? You disappeared for a while there, and I had thought maybe we could paint more together. I’ll paint something else for you; anything you can think of!”

“It just depends on what my work looks like. I don’t always know when I’ll have free time.” She said with a sigh. “But I can try to come by a few times.”

Pitch looked down saddened by the lack of commitment she assured him, but he nodded, “I would like your company if you are up for it. When you can make it of course,” he added.

Tooth reached to put a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll try.” She said. “From what I understand, you’re going to be busy with repairs for a while. So I’ll try to get caught up on work and then we’ll see what happens after that. Sound good?”

Pitch perked to hear this; it would be better after all if she came when he wasn’t going to be out and about anyway, since that was the time he would want her company most, “That sounds fantastic!” He flashed a winning smile on her, “North said the repairs should take a couple days up to a week, so maybe we’ll both be caught up around the same time.”

Tooth grinned and nodded. “Hopefully.”

He smirked, “Well, I’m not going anywhere, so I suppose whenever you are ready to visit, you’ll have a captive audience.” It was meant as a joke, but it was a bit too close to reality and had Pitch falter in the smile he’d offered her. He cleared his throat, “That is neither here nor there though. Why talk about tomorrow when we have today? How long can you visit? Maybe we can take a walk on the outer rim of the perimeter? I... I can’t go there by myself, but if you’re with me, the yetis should let us be.”

“Sure, I’d love to.” Tooth smiled. “I can stay most of the day. But I need to get back before nightfall, since I go out to gather teeth tonight.”

It was still pretty early in the afternoon, so this all sounded good to Pitch, “Yes, we can go for a
walk, and before you leave, if you feel like eating anything, the yetis like to make stroganoff on
Tuesdays… I don’t tend to eat as many of their sweets anymore, and I’m fairly certain you’re not
interested in them. Of course after having Bunnymund’s chocolate most every other sweet thing here
pales in comparison,” he brightened at the memory feeling a pang of nostalgia and something more
for the time spent with the rabbit. His eyes were bright and cheery now as he regarded Toothiana
feeling much less babysat as he had with North, and it was a relieving change of atmosphere, “What
do you think?”

“Sounds good. We can think about food later, though. Right now we can go on our walk.” She
smiled.

He nodded enthusiastically more than ready for a nice jaunt to stretch his legs after several hours
cooped up in North’s office. The two made their way back to one of the many elevators that brought
them back towards the front of North’s fortress. Pitch had asked Toothiana how she had been since
they last saw each other, and he quietly listened to her go on about the teeth that she had collected the
night before. The teeth hadn’t interested him much, but the vibrancy that she exuded while she talked
about them made her happiness infectious within him. It really did brighten his day to see her like
this, and his joy in her joy was reflected in the warm smile that Pitch wore now as they continued to
make their way towards the front of North’s bastion.

“So what about you?” said Tooth after she exhausted her chattering about teeth. “Have you thought
anymore about what you plan to do? Are you going to try that... thing... you did with Bunny again?”

Pitch’s countenance shifted when she mentioned the training with Bunnymund to a look of slight
apprehension, “Uh… eventually,” his eyes then took on a spark of joy as he beamed at her, “But
North did promise to practice magic with me once everything is said and done with my current
punishment. Can you believe it? I never would have thought North would be willing to train me how
to use his spells. I’m rather excited to see what he’ll teach me.”

Tooth looked concerned. “You’re going to learn magic after everything that happened?”

Her lack of confidence made his smile abate, “Well, with North’s guidance this time. I’m … I’m not
going to try to learn and practice spells on my own anymore,” his attention to the remembered pain in
his rear end attested that at least for the time being, he had enough of a lesson learned to know that he
didn’t want to mess around with magic outside of the purview of North any time soon.

“Ah,” Tooth nodded. Hearing that made her feel better. “Well, I hope it goes well.”

Pitch’s smile returned although now it was a pale imitation to how he had felt when he’d originally
expressed his intentions with learning magic to Toothiana, “Me to. He uh… mentioned he planned to
start off with simple spells and we could go from there,” he shrugged, “It could be fun.”

“You’ll have to show me what you learn some time.” She smiled.

He brightened at her interest, “I’ve perfected the one spell I originally horribly botched actually. I
could technically show you that one, but I think it’d be best if I show it to you in front of North…”
he said this last bit almost inaudibly his shoulders drawing up as it shamed him to think of the man’s
ire should he not ask, “…with his permission.”

“That’s fine,” Tooth held up her hands. “I can wait. I’d rather you show me when you have more
knowledge of the subject. Don’t want anything else happening.”

Pitch frowned a bit miffed, “It wouldn’t. I told you I mastered that one, and with North there… it
doesn’t matter,” he shook his head; it had irked Pitch though as he’d wanted to show off a little of
what he considered to be a neat trick. Even Jack had thought so, but Toothiana was always the mother hen he realized and said no more.

“Why do you wish to learn magic?” Tooth asked. “I don’t mean to pry or anything, but I’m just curious.”

Pitch peered up at her curiously as if it were one of the oddest questions he’d ever heard, “You wouldn’t?” Seeing she still wanted an actual answer, Pitch thought a moment before continuing, “I’ve been around for countless years, but magic is something I’ve yet to understand. I guess to learn something that can affect the world in a different manner than I’m accustomed I find to be fascinating. It’s a force of will, and that in itself is enticing to want to play with to I suppose.”

“That makes sense.” Tooth replied.

They were nearing the entrance to the Pole, and the yetis were on very high alert after everything that had just happened at the landfill. The four that guarded the entrance scrutinized Pitch with hands on hips forming a fury line that barred the door. One of them garbled some angry barks at Pitch wagging a finger as it did so before pointing in the opposite direction a note of finality in its tone.

He snarled back at the yeti that had obviously told him off. Pitch sneered, “Move out of my way throw rug; I’m allowed out there as long as I have an escort.”

“Pitch!” Tooth said, a bit annoyed by the tone he was using with the yeti. “He’s only doing his job. There’s no need to get nasty.” She turned to the yeti. “It’s okay. I’ll keep an eye on him.”

Pitch scoffed squinting hatefully at the yeti that still very much forbid his passage, “He got rude with me first!”

The yetis looked from Toothiana to Pitch and started arguing among themselves. They knew the Tooth Fairy could come and go as she pleased, but they also knew that North had left explicit instructions that Pitch was not to leave the Pole. One garbled that they would verify North’s wishes as it trundled off towards the elevator while the other three shook their heads a firm no.

“You don’t have to be rude back, Pitch.” Tooth scowled.

Pitch ignored Toothiana focusing on the yeti shaking his head no. Pitch fumed now quite tired of restrictions as he spat, “This isn’t the first time I’ve walked outside with one of the guardians. Jack and I took a stroll on the back side of this hovel a few weeks ago even.”

Pitch moved to step past the giant only to have a massive arm jet out in front of him to stop him in his tracks.

Growing heated at the yeti’s continued stalwart refusal to let him pass now, Pitch began poking the yeti in the chest as he railed at him, “I see what this is! This is just a show of power because of what happened yesterday night and nothing more! You’re just wasting our time because you can! Get out of the way!”

“Stop it!” Tooth shouted. Before she realized what she was doing, she flew forward and smacked Pitch’s backside hard with her hand.

Pitch was taken by complete surprise jolted from his thoughts and tirade at the sharp slap that may have otherwise only been mildly annoying compared to North’s heavy calloused hand. But, applied to his still very sore and swollen rump; her lightning quick hand stung quite profusely with a bite that rang through him like a shot. His immediate reaction was to gasp a choked yelp and jerk at the pressing pain. He stiffened like a rigid board jarred as if momentarily frozen before the realization of
who had struck him sank in.

He quickly took several steps backward away from the yetis and away from Toothiana no small amount of shock playing across his face mixed with a hint of betrayal, “You... you...” Pitch found no words now, but the fire of his fury was snuffed in an instant by her action. Pitch clasped his hands bringing them up to his chest in a nervous gesture as he stood staring at her looking both hurt and confused.

“I... I’m sorry, but I didn’t know what else to do.” Said Tooth. “You were getting too out of control.”

Pitch reeled at the notion; Toothiana, sweet Toothiana, who had been so adamantly against such things had thought he’d gotten so far out of line that she felt the need to step in and correct him in this way. His face flushed deeply, and a pang of sickness welled in his stomach. He glanced over at the yetis who made no comment but seemed satisfied with the results before he glanced back at Toothiana a small pucker forming to his lips as if he might cry before he looked away, “Uh... you’re right, I... I lost my temper. I’m... I’m sorry.”

He was afraid now. What if she told North how he’d behaved? The Cossack would surely tan his hide for upsetting the fairy enough to do that to him! He still was in a state of disbelief that she’d raised a hand to him in this manner at all. He would have been able to cope better with a slap to the face, that would have put them both more on equal footing of lashing out followed by a response versus this where she took the mantle over him to actually punish him.

Tooth was a bit surprised by the reaction. She had expected Pitch to get mad and start screaming at her or something before storming off to who knows where. She gave a quick nod of approval. “I’m glad you’re able to admit it.”

He swallowed hard trying to fend back his shame as he asked almost timidly, “Did... did you just want to go walk elsewhere?” His eyes darted from her to the floor hoping she’d acquiesce, so the two could quickly make their way away from this juncture where the incident still hung thick in the air. He wished he could melt away now, but he’d accede to just getting as far away from what he saw was the smug looking yetis watching him as possible. No doubt this little show would make its way around the Pole as a running joke Pitch thought nauseatingly.

“You’re the one who wanted to go for a walk. You choose.” She replied.

Pitch nodded darting away from the front entrance and down a side hall away from all mocking stares. Pitch felt on the verge of tears from not just the humiliation but how he’d managed to change the dynamic of his and Toothiana’s relationship. He wanted her as a confidante, someone he could seek solace in, not to be a ward to like that of North. He glanced back with worried eyes at her now looking to see if she was angry with him. He really hoped not.

“Is there something wrong?” Tooth asked, softly. Worry etched her face now. She hoped she had done the right thing.

He shook his head, “Na-no. You... you’re not mad at me now are you?” Now that the two of them were alone, he stopped, turning back to look at her earnestly. He was afraid he may have damaged their bond by pushing her too far.

“Mad? I was never mad at you.” Tooth replied.

That was good. Pitch seemed to visibly relax at that admission before asking her tentatively, “You’re... you’re not going to tell North... about... about what happened back there are you?” His face took on the connotations of deep apprehension in obvious fear of what North would do to him.
“I hadn’t planned on it. Although I don’t know what the yetis will do.”

Pitch gasped in horror; he hadn’t even considered the flea bags telling North what had happened. His face paled as he thought on this biting his knuckle as he digested this new probability. He half whispered with no small amount of desperation, “Do you think they will?”

Tooth shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s hard to tell with them sometimes. Most of the time they keep to themselves, but there are some that do report things back to North if it’s important enough.”

He had to wonder then if it wouldn’t be better to admit it to the Cossack first over having the man be informed by a random yeti. He was more than sure that would most assuredly not go over well. He glanced back up at Toothiana now openly fretting now, “I really hope they don’t! Do you think they’d have seen that as something important to report?”

Tooth actually had to suppress an amused smile over how Pitch was acting. She gave a shrug. “Don’t know. Probably not.”

He nodded thinking she was right, the yeti were a quiet lot over all, so they most likely would say nothing to North. He took in a deep breath smoothing out his robe as he regained his composure although he seemed at a loss now where to go and just stood there aimlessly. Feeling rather silly now, he gave her a quirky smile, “I… I don’t suppose you have any suggestions where we should go? You’ve probably seen more of this place than I have with the many years you’ve known North.”

He watched her carefully now to see how she would interact with him. He was still a little off kilter from the scene in the entry way.

“I don’t know. We could go back to your private place if you want to, unless you just feel a need to walk around.”

Pitch smiled liking the sound of that, “Why not. It’ll be a quiet atmosphere for us to relax.” Pitch was happy as the two made their way back across the Pole towards the windmills, and he and Toothiana carried on as they normally did. It was as if the happenstance at the entry way had never occurred, and Pitch was ever grateful.
Toothiana and Pitch were carrying on their conversation crossing the hub when Pitch cringed hearing North bellow out his name. His eyes flashed with fear as he looked nervously up at Toothiana and then watched as the crowd parted revealing North storming their way.

North pointed straight at Pitch. "I have had it with your rude, disrespectful attitude! I have put up with it until now, but being rude to one of yetis is last straw."

Pitch gasped wondering how North had been informed so quickly especially since none of the offended yetis had left their posts as far as he could tell. For a split second Pitch considered fleeing in terror to get away from North, but it would be a futile gesture that would likely only severely anger the Cossack, so Pitch merely shrank as the imposing man strode forward leaving Pitch frozen in place. "No! I... it was a misunderstanding!"

"Oh? Then explain," North said, stopping in front of Pitch.

Pitch’s mouth moved trying to come up with something suitable to say, but he didn’t know what he could say that wouldn’t be an all-out lie, "I... he... I thought, it wasn't meant to come out like that. He was being just as rude!" Pitch whined pitifully knowing he didn’t really have any excuse.

North regarded Pitch a few minutes. “That is no excuse. Just because someone is rude, it doesn’t mean you have to be rude back. A good strapping should remind you to think before you speak next time.”

“What! Over that? Isn’t that a bit much? I wasn’t the only one at fault after all! But… but I’ll go apologize anyway! Please! I’m… I’m sorry,” Pitch’s stomach rolled and his chest tightened. The thought of having to endure another strapping after only a day’s time had him on the verge of tears.

“North,” said Tooth, “I have to agree with Pitch. That’s a bit much. Besides, it… it won’t be necessary. I—I already gave him a swat for it and he’s behaved for me.”

North’s eyebrows rose. “You swatted Pitch?”

Tooth nodded timidly.

Pitch burned in embarrassment hearing Toothiana and North discuss the fact that Toothiana actually smacked him, but he refrained from speaking in the conversation since it seemed Toothiana had at least given North pause, and Pitch didn’t want to work against her progress. He merely nodded enthusiastically to affirm her statement to North in hopes that it would cool the Russian’s exasperation with him.

North stood unmoving, glaring down at Pitch as if he were trying to decide what to do.

Pitch feeling acutely aware of the way North was staring at him took two cautious steps back behind Toothiana peering at him behind her shoulder. He was wringing his hands nervously now looking quite stricken with the obvious threat North exuded.

Finally, North waved for Pitch to follow him. He turned and started walking in the direction of his
Pitch gulped looking at Toothiana and back at North’s retreating back. The strap was in his room, so this fact had Pitch relax a little thinking that perhaps North was just going to make him go back to the drudgery of wasting away in his office. He sighed stating sadly, “I guess this means our walk is officially over. Sorry to put you in the middle of all this Toothiana… I do appreciate you speaking up for me on my behalf.” He turned back to North’s office, the Cossack had just passed the threshold of his office, and Pitch didn’t want to leave the man waiting especially after Toothiana had managed to mollify him. “… I better go,” Pitch whimpered as his shoulders sagged, and he moved quickly to make up the difference to catch up to North. The last thing Pitch wanted to do was set the man off again by not obeying him now.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Tooth asked.

Pitch glanced back at Toothiana nodding vigorously. She was definitely a boon in his favor at this juncture he knew. He thought she may even serve to distract the Cossack through conversation, so North wouldn’t see Pitch as much of a target for the ire the man still obviously held.

Tooth sighed and fluttered forward, following Pitch.

Pitch skulked into North’s office now looking up warily at him as he scurried back over to the window sill. He stared at North with woeful eyes looking quite contrite with a small pout plastered on his face. Pitch clasped his hands nervously in front of him shifting from foot to foot and waiting on the sure to be lecture to come.

North was seated at his desk, eyes closed and a look of annoyance on his face. When he opened his eyes, he looked over at Tooth. He seemed bothered by her being there, but he didn’t say anything. Instead he turned around to face Pitch. “I see now that I am not going to get work done today for having to constantly deal with you.”

Pitch’s pout deepened as he spoke demurely, “I’m… I’m sorry that I’ve made things difficult for you. I… I can just return to my room if my presence is bothering you.”

North turned to Tooth again. "Leave us, please." he said.

Tooth hesitated, looking toward Pitch, then nodded. She turned and left the room.

When she was gone, North turned his focus back to Pitch. He reached for a piece of paper on his desk, picked it up, rolled his chair over to the end of the desk, and handed it to Pitch. It was Pitch’s naughty list, "I suppose you wonder how I knew so quickly."

Pitch took the paper, and clearly written on the page was the offense and whom the offense was done against. Pitch’s eyes lingered on the page much longer than he’d needed to read the offense as the weight of seeing what he did spelled out like this had a wave of cold flash through him. He swallowed hard as he quietly stepped forward to lay the page down lightly on North’s desk. He didn’t know what to say. Everything was clearly written on the page, so there was nothing to argue against. His eyes flitted up to North as he laid the page down a grievous guilt washing over him, “I… I didn’t mean to speak to that yeti in such a fashion. I was… I just let his rudeness influence my own attitude, and that was wrong. And… and Toothiana already punished me to make sure I won’t make that mistake again,” he was sure to add in the fact he’d already been punished even if what Toothiana did would have been considered a joke in North’s eyes. He was of course not present, and so, he hadn’t known the extent of his punishment at her hands.

Without saying a word, North reached out and took Pitch by the arm, pulling him over his knee.
Pitch moaned his heart leaping into throat, “But… but wait! I… I was already punished!” Pitch was squirming trying to remove his bottom from being in swatting range.

"This is for giving Tooth reason to swat you!” said North. "It is also for you taking longer time with deer on purpose, of which I also saw on naughty list."

He couldn’t believe it! Here he was, once more being pulled over North’s knee for a spanking! Pitch whimpered to hear North had also read about the reindeer infraction, that list was going to cause him no end of troubles! Pitch decided then and there, he was going to have to find some way to get rid of it. It was bad enough he managed to find too many ways to end up right where he was at this moment without the use of a list to record infringements that North would have otherwise not found out about.

Pitch was being adjusted now where his flailing kicking legs were easily being placed under North’s massive thigh, and his bottom was positioned and ready for his sit spots to take the brunt of North’s calloused palm. Pitch swore that the Cossack knew where all the most sensitive areas to spank him were. His aim was sure to hit just so, so that wherever Pitch sat, he’d have a firm reminder of the lesson North planned to teach him!

His robe and his pants would be the next to go Pitch knew, and he clenched now trembling in anticipation for North to bare him and humiliate him further. It hadn’t even happened yet, but the thought of having it to come made tears quickly prick his eyes. They had done this dance so many times, it was beginning to become a dreaded routine where Pitch knew what to expect in successive reaction. And for this reason now, Pitch couldn’t help but sob out pathetically, “No! Please don’t North! I’m still so sore! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

North said nothing as he finished restraining Pitch. He pulled back Pitch’s robe, choosing to leave his pants in place, and immediately went to work bringing his hand down on the Boogeyman’s backside.

There was a small relief to have his pants remain in place although the thin material didn’t do much in the way of stopping any of the pain from seeping through; it was however a little less humiliating. Pitch immediately began caterwauling as each stroke was applied. He was going a tad overboard letting all of his anguish out immediately in hopes that North might feel guilty for spanking him so soon after his latest bout and grant him a small reprieve to think that he was so pained he had suffered enough.

North paid no mind to it, even spanking him harder.

As the harder swats began to fall, Pitch jerked at the increased pain calling out in a shrill squeal noting the difference immediately as he cried, “Ah! Ow! No more! North please mercy! You’ve already hurt me so badly! This is abuse!” he whined piteously hoping that some part of North would feel regret for doing this to him. This was awful!

North paused. "The harder swats were for you trying to make me feel sorry for you just now. I saw it appear on your list. Be glad I don't use strap. If you do not wish to have more, then I suggest that you take care not to earn yourself more." He continued to swat Pitch's backside, applying ten more swats before stopping. He took his leg off Pitch’s legs and allowed him to stand.

North had continued the steady stream of harder swats, and as North spoke, Pitch instantly regretted trying to make the Cossack feel sorry for him as North was sure to repay his rear end in kind to the tune of making sure the show Pitch had been putting on was more than real by the time North’s palm stopped cresting his backside.

As Pitch was pulled off of his lap, Pitch couldn’t help but reach back and clutch his very sore
backside that throbbed not only from the current attention North had given his bottom but the previous ache of the strapping. The two combined coupled to throb so very uncomfortably for him. He sniffled still hitching back tears as his lip now quivered. His eyes laid on North now looking so very aggrieved to have suffered so.

North leaned back in his chair, silently eyeing pitch. A saddened, almost pained, expression was on his face. "It pains me that I had to do this twice so close together. I hope after all of this you have learned lesson."

North’s words stung his pride and something deeper within him that stirred some greater emotion of regret; it shamed Pitch considerably causing the nightmare lord to lose eye contact with the Cossack for fear of being branded by the swells of disappointment that still radiated throughout those tired blue eyes.

Pitch couldn’t understand how he seemed to go through these bouts where he was doing so well only to then have a streak where he found himself screwing up every time he turned around. It made him feel like he couldn’t make any progress at all. He choked back the hurt this caused as a fresh wave of tears cascaded down his cheeks, “The …the lesson’s been learned!” As Pitch hitched this, he regrettably rubbed at his very sore posterior; the lesson was learned, the only problem was how well.

"Glad to hear it." North said with a tired sigh.

Pitch could hear the weariness in the man’s voice as he brought his tear stained face up to regard North, "I...I know you're tired of hearing it, but I really am sorry. My intention was never to make you unable to get any work done." Looking back over the day, Pitch realized he had been rather petty and rude on several occasions for selfish gain. Of course as the day had progressed, Pitch hadn’t given the actions more than a second thought until North had fully brought it to his attention in this way. Why did it take getting yanked over a knee to get the point across? It was shaming to know now that this punishment actually did work on him to the degree North intended to make him consider what he'd done and to feel regret for doing it.

"Pitch, I know some of yetis can be disagreeable, but the ones you encountered were just doing job. I’m sorry if one of them got rude with you, but that is no reason for you to be rude back."

Pitch’s pout deepened, “I know; I just let the frustrations I’ve been feeling push me over the edge into responding poorly. I… I’m not very good at containing my anger in that way.” One of the most difficult things he found to do was control what came out of his mouth; his emotions often spurred him to react, and in the case of negativity directed at Pitch, it was almost assured that Pitch would have an equally negative retort. He needed to work on that he knew.

North looked at him curiously. “Do you need help and guidance in trying to rein in your anger?”

He did. Pitch flushed looking down at the desk, “I… I’ve been working on it… just not overly successfully.” It seemed the only way these days he was getting his anger in check was when he was getting threatened to have it curbed with a spanking. That was definitely an unacceptable means of control Pitch quickly decided although his efforts to restrain it himself had thus far been negligible.

"Perhaps we will work on that when we practice magic." North replied. "Until then, just know that you will get swat if you act out of line again."

Pitch gave a small nod of acknowledgement knowing without North having to say so that he should expect as much although he was worried now that North meant to do so more consistently to ensure quicker compliance.
“You may go.” said North, nodding toward the door with his head.

Pitch glanced back up at North taking a moment to wipe the tears from his face before inquiring, “Go? …back with Toothiana… or… back to my room?” He hoped North would let him go back to Toothiana, but he wouldn’t be at all surprised if he was getting sent back to his room after his recent behavior.

North smiled. “I believe Toothiana is waiting outside door.”

His lip tugged into a small smile, as he gave an appreciative soft, “Thank you,” before he moved back to the door rubbing at his face one more time to make sure no tears were present, although to look at him, it was obvious that Pitch had been crying.

He opened the door glancing back one last time at North before departing back out into the main hub. He felt an acute pang of shame as he exited now thinking the way he’d been carrying on in there must have echoed outside the room and into the main area. It was no secret at the Pole by now that North spanked him, so it left little to the imagination. He was sure it was easily ascertained what had been going on behind that closed door. His eyes darted shyly now around the mass of moving elves and yetis looking for Toothiana hoping to find her and leave this area swiftly.

It didn’t take long for Tooth to see Pitch, since she had been keeping an eye on the door ever since North had ushered her out. She quickly flew up to Pitch, giving him a small smile.

He looked up to see her, and his eyes glazed over with tears again awash with knowing that she too surely knew what had just happened to him making his humiliation on the matter spike, “Uh… are… are you ready to go back to the windmills?” his voice was cracking under the strain of trying to keep the tears from coming as he felt them swelling anew which only compounded the emotion making it that much more difficult to keep at bay. He didn’t want to cry in front of her now, but something in him wanted her comfort, and his want for this was driving the tears to the forefront. Feeling the tears begin to spill out, Pitch couldn’t stay still any longer pushing himself to dart away from the moving traffic and Toothiana and into a quieter alcove where he wiped these new tears away quickly.

Toothiana followed after Pitch, struggling to keep up with him. When he stopped in the alcove, she approached him cautiously. “Is everything okay? I thought you wanted to go where the windmills are.”

He kept his face turned away from her as he nodded vigorously, “Uh… yes. I’m fine. Let’s go,” he sniffled in a deep breath as he moved down the hall towards one of back sets of stairs that would bring them the long way about to the windmills. He was doing his best to hide his face from her now knowing that his tears were on the verge of breaking once more, and if he did look at her, they most certainly would fall.

Tooth fluttered along beside him, not bothering to say anything. She really didn’t know what to say, and she hated commenting on what had happened since she knew it would do more to embarrass Pitch.

At the clip Pitch was walking, it didn’t take them very long to make it back to the windmills, and he was quick to move to the window if for nothing more than to avoid the feelings that were culminating within him.

Tooth flew up behind him, hesitating a few minutes before wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him into a hug.

Feeling her warmth press against him made his chest tighten as he let out a shuttered gasp before
turning into her his tears coming unabated now as he tentatively reached out to hug her back.

She wrapped her arms tighter around him leaning her cheek on his head.

Pitch didn’t speak as the ache for her comfort overwhelmed him and he whimpered his tears coming fast to leak on to her shoulder.

Tooth began stroking Pitch’s hair with a hand. “Everything’s going to be okay.” she said, softly.

Her reassurances only served to make him cry harder grateful for the embrace and the ebb of caring in her voice. This tenderness she afforded him by stroking his hair left him stripped bare and lost within the confines of her touch as an unbearable sense of craving for affection surged through him. He sobbed out a muffled and broken, "Thank you."

Tooth smiled as she continued to run her hand over his head.

He hiccupped in air as the ministrations of her gentle fingers calmed him to the point he let out a soft sigh letting himself lay his head on her shoulder. The only thoughts that dominated his mind now was the feeling of her stroking his scalp and the odd sensations it thrilled through him as he took in her scent enjoying the closeness they were sharing.

“I… I don’t know what came over me when I swatted you,” Tooth said, softly. “I know it’s the last thing you want to think about right now, but… I just feel a need to get that out. And… I’m not ashamed to say that I’m glad I swatted you. I mean, I’m beginning to see that it has its place and purpose.”

Hearing Toothiana say this made a fresh wave of silent tears cascade down his cheeks. He hated to think she was not only okay with swatting him but glad she had. It was crushing that even Toothiana now agreed punishing him this way worked well for him.

She was right, he didn’t want to hear it, but he was starting to wonder if he didn’t deserve this treatment since it was painfully obvious that everyone around him seemed to think he needed it. This thinking brought on a wave of self-pity as he moaned, "I'm sorry I made...made you feel the need to do it at all."

She squeezed him tighter. “It’s okay. Like we’ve told you before, we all make mistakes. You're just still trying to adjust.”

He thought on this remaining silent for long minutes as he closed his eyes just letting himself be petted by her before finally slowly withdrawing from her shoulder to bring shining eyes up to stare at her inquisitively. His face fell flaccid his mouth parting slightly as his golden and silver flecked eyes blinked searching hers now deeply. He looked at her as if he’d never seen her before just studying her features and emitting a mix of fear and wonder as he took her in. He was afraid to speak for dread of ruining the peace he was being granted within the solidarity the moment held. Finally he could hold her gaze no longer letting his eyes fall to his chest in a note of unworthiness. He didn’t deserve her benevolence even if he yearned for it.

Tooth smiled at him, choosing not to say anything. She figured he needed some quiet time to think over everything and to pull himself together.

He brought his gaze back to her as he tried to smile and failed; it looked pained and forced, and he let it fall away before his eyes flitted to and fro unsure of what to say to her. Finally he found words for what he’d been thinking, “This… was probably not how you wanted to spend your time off. I… I do value your company though. Thank you for putting up with me. I know that I can be… difficult to be
around.”

She shrugged. “Not everything turns out like you planned. Although I would like for this to be the last time I have to spend my time off like this. I'm hoping the next time I come by, we can actually do something fun without it going sour.”

Pitch blushed shaking his head, “Me too. We… we might still be able to turn the afternoon around.” He looked up at her now able to give her a genuine smile, “We can go down to the kitchen and grab some of that stroganoff and take it on to the east wing balcony to eat. It’s usually quiet there until the yetis and elves finish up for the day. That’s still a couple hours away when the sun sets. It has a sky light there, but at this time of day the sun has already waned enough that it’s coated in comfortable shadows,” he said this as if the sun might be as bothersome to her as it was to him.

Tooth nodded. “It sounds great, but I’d rather stay here for a little while longer, if that’s okay.”

“Yes, yes of course,” he smiled brightly at her before turning his attention back to the window to see the peaceful scene that greeted him. He closed his eyes as a fresh billow of wind crested through the window leaving the smell of crisp fresh air to filtrate through his nose in a deep inhale. He liked this. He was feeling much more sedated now having disclosed some part of the pain he’d been carrying within him to Toothiana. She really was too good to him he ruminated as he continued to stare out of the window.

"Sooo... are you going to begin practicing magic as soon as you get done rebuilding the conveyor?" Tooth asked.

“Uh… North plans to start teaching me once my punishment is complete,” Pitch omitted the grounding skirting the subject delicately enough to not lie to her although he wondered now if he should tell her about it. He really didn’t want to risk her not coming back by in a few days’ time. The last time she left for almost two weeks, it had left him worried she wouldn’t return and missing her horribly. Of course they hadn’t exactly parted well either. These thoughts left him frowning in quiet contemplation.

Tooth nodded. Then she noted the look on Pitch’s face. "Is there something wrong?"

He gave her a small smile, “Can you miss somebody when they’re not even gone yet? I …I was just thinking I was going to miss you not coming by… it…” he trailed off feeling selfish for wanting her to come see him all the time. He knew she was very busy, but not seeing her made him long to see her.

He didn’t understand why; he liked Jack, and he liked Bunnymund now, he even liked Sandy and North, but none of them made him feel the way Toothiana did. If they were gone for a time, sure he thought about them and wondered what they might be up to, but not seeing her left him feeling a little empty. She sparked a happiness in him that he just couldn’t describe, and she always left him feeling serene when they were getting along like they were now. He needed the gentleness she granted him and the understanding, and her hugs… yes, he really yearned for that level of affection. North gave him hugs, and although he’d never admit it, he liked those to, but Toothiana held her own brand of hug that encompassed him in a comfort that was unlike any he could ever remember feeling. It radiated compassion and left him feeling light of spirit.

“I guess,” Tooth replied with a shrug. “Aww, don’t be sad. I’ll come visit you sometimes.”

He gave her another small smile. The thought of not seeing her did make him feel sad, but he didn’t want to dwell on it while he had her here and now, “I’ll always look forward to your visits,” he stated softly.
Dynamics

Chapter Thirty-four

Dynamics

Pitch stared back out the window just enjoying the soft hum of the windmills and the silent presence that Toothiana gave him. He found they didn’t need to speak in order to enjoy each other’s company. The silence shared with another person like this held a unique quality. Prolonged bouts of silence still left him feeling restless no matter how familiar, but this silence left a fog of comfortability to be able to enjoy the serenity of the quiet but also to know that there was someone else there he could speak to if the desire arose.

He didn’t like being alone, but he did enjoy the stillness of it. Having spent so much time by himself made him irritable and anxious to the hustle and bustle of the Pole just because it was almost too much to observe at once. Having abhorred the soundlessness before from suffering alone, Pitch had still grown uncomfortably used to it over thousands of years of enduring it. It became an expected state, and his mind had grown to cope with it and eventually embrace it in order to not go completely insane.

Now, there wasn’t a day that went by that he didn’t communicate with someone on some level, and it was a welcome change to the silence. Having spent over a month with the guardians, Pitch had started to covet the company he was granted realizing that these types of interactions were helping to ground him (even if they did make him an emotional mess half of the time.)

New experiences socially were creating a bloom of interest in him, and Pitch was starting to broaden his scope of thought to encompass how others around him felt over just their relation to him. He was wanting to get to know them better, so he could relate to them. He peered over at Toothiana now seeing she seemed lost in thought herself, “Quarter for your thoughts?” Pitch gave her a cheeky grin, “I would have said penny, but you don’t deal in those any more right?”

Tooth gave a light laugh. "No," She continued to stare out the window. "I wasn't thinking about anything in particular."

“You looked lost in thought… but if not, are you about ready for some stroganoff? If it is one thing the yetis around here excel at, it’s cooking," Pitch beamed looking over at her with a warm smile.

"I guess it's possible for one to look lost in thought but not actually be lost in thought." she replied. "Okay, if you want to eat so badly." She chuckled.

“I’m practically wasting away over here,” he gestured at his lithe form grinning at his own joke, “Although, if you don’t want to… I mean it’s not like we need to eat or anything,” he floundered a moment before gesticulating his hands about as a sign of indifference, “It was just a suggestion. Before coming to the Pole, I never took much stock in flavor, but now… I kind of enjoy it.”

Tooth's brow wrinkled in thought. "Do you remember eating before... before you became..." she made a motion with her hand to mean his current form.

He grimaced shaking his head no, “I know I did it, but it was so long ago, and those memories have become scattered cobwebs at the back of my mind,” His eyes reflected sadness, “I barely remember my own family… trivialities such as food and the taste of it weren’t momentous enough to take any hold over me.”
Tooth nodded, sadly.

“But… that doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy it now,” he forced a smile as he nudged her not liking the look of sadness on her face.

She smiled. "So what foods have you tried? Besides the stroganoff and sweets.”

Pitch’s smile became legitimate now as his eyes fluttered looking down almost bashfully. “Oh… I don’t know. A couple things here and there. I don’t eat most days as the feeling of it in my stomach still feels odd, but I do like tasting things. I’ve tried entirely too many candies and treats… that seems to be most what the elves subsist off of,” as he said this his lip curled in disgust to think of eating candy canes all day long, “But, there have been a few things I’ve tried that I really liked! The stroganoff… stroganoff Tuesdays…” he giggled mirthfully liking the familiarity of it, “There’s also lasagna… oh is that ever good! And… and there’s meatloaf! And… tuna casserole,” Pitch was starting to get a wistful look as he thought on all of these foods before nodding and turning his bright smile on Toothiana, “What about you? What foods do you like?”

Tooth shrugged. “To be honest, I haven’t eaten too much since I became the Tooth Fairy. I’ve tried some sweets, of course, but being the Tooth Fairy…” she smiled and chuckled. “Yeah, you know how I feel about that.”

Pitch rolled his eyes playfully, “Bor-ring! Oh come on Toothiana! There’s,” he gestured quotations, “Healthy for your teeth foods like carrots and celery… which… I’m not overly fond of those,” Pitch wrinkled his nose thinking of the raw vegetables when he’d tried them. He had been quick to discard them getting a scolding from the yeti as he’d done so.

Tooth laughed. “Yeah, I know, but, like I said, I haven’t eaten too much since becoming immortal. I guess when you… change… you just forget about doing things that were once commonplace.”

Pitch snorted, “Tell that to North! That man eats a mountain of food along with plates and plates of cookies, and milk, and stars knows what else. More than half of the time I’ve seen him, he’s stuffing his face. I have no idea where he puts it honestly.”

“Well, that’s kind of a tradition with Santa Claus. You know, kids putting cookies and milk and peppermint sticks out for Santa on Christmas Eve, and carrots for the reindeer. There aren’t any traditions where kids leave food out for the rest of us, except for maybe carrots for Bunny. Kinda funny, isn’t it? Santa gets food and I get the part that chews the food.” Tooth chuckled.

“I doubt the reindeer see those carrots,” Pitch jested, “Out of all the different jobs out there, yours is definitely… uh…” Pitch held off realizing he was likely already being rude making fun of North’s propensity to eat a lot and about to say something mean about Toothiana’s profession. He paused flushing a bit knowing he’d just been spanked for rudeness, so it would probably be wise to reign it back a tad, “Uh… messy… and uh…” he wanted to say disgusting and unhygienic, but he probed to say something much less offensive now, “taxing.”

She gave a quick shrug. “Yeah, it can be a bit messy sometimes. But… I won’t go into that.”

Pitch silently was thanking the stars she didn’t go into that! He was interested in eating after all, and hearing a detailed description of how revolting Toothiana’s teeth could be was the last thing he wanted to think about before diving into a bowl of stroganoff, “So, will you try some with me? Stroganoff I mean?”

Tooth gave a light laugh. "Sure, why not?"
Pitch beamed, “Great!” He was much happier now wearing a bright smile as the two talked making their way to the kitchens.

Huge pots of food were cooking as yetis rushed about cutting up last minute items but mostly working on deserts which would follow dinner. Meal time was quite the affair at the Pole.

Pitch and Toothiana made their way over to where Alla, the main yeti chef, directed a small team that were bustling about making preparations for the masses that would soon be trickling in within the next couple hours. It was an unorganized event where elves and yetis came and went as they finished up their tasks. They usually came in small groups, but as the hour drew on, more and more would fill the balcony space as they often spent a good two hours sitting, eating, and enjoying each other’s company.

Alla seeing Pitch put her hands in the air rumbling out a welcome, he was typically one of her first customers, if and when he decided to venture into the kitchens. She was one of the few yetis that Pitch was actually rather civil with as she lumbered up to him barking something he couldn’t understand, but the soft pat to his shoulder to lead him over to the side where there were bowls was enough of a direction, and Pitch smiled at her, “Don’t mind if I do,” he gave her a warm smile as he grabbed up a bowl for both himself and Toothiana and proceeded to scoop out a small helping for the both of them.

Alla scolded him halting Pitch in his tracks and turning him lightly back around to put another scoop into each bowl before seeming satisfied and setting him loose again.

Pitch didn’t protest to her manhandling him and only smiled sheepishly at the yeti’s persistence that he eat more. He scuttled back to Toothiana handing her the bowl he’d made for her, “She is quite insistent that I eat more,” he whispered then, “Don’t let her see you throw any of it away. It will upset her, and you’ll get scowls for days!” Pitch warned her with a wry smile.

“Alright,” said Tooth, accepting the bowl. She couldn’t help but smile at the yeti and Pitch. And she shook her head, not really understanding how Pitch could be so gentle and polite one minute and extremely rude and disagreeable the next.

"Come on," Pitch motioned jerking his head to the left, "We can get a good seat near the end of the balcony where there’s the best shade and view of the mountainside.” He led them through the side door and out onto the balcony. The balcony was encased in a stained glass design of assorted Christmas scenes and snowflakes. The tables were of varying sizes meant to seat big and small groups. Pitch led them to a smaller table where he looked up to get her approval, "This good for you?"

Tooth nodded.

There were a couple yetis and elves sitting at one table already, but other than them, the room was pleasantly empty as far as Pitch was concerned. All of the tables were set with silverware and pitchers of ice water. Pitch poured them each a glass after he’d picked a seat to set his bowl down at.

Looking at the hard wide bench of the circular tables brought about a grimace as Pitch gingerly sat. He’d stayed standing up until now, and forethought had him thinking maybe they should have taken their meals back to his room where sitting would have been much more comfortable. He tried not to draw attention to it even though his back had gone rigid to sit, and he shifted awkwardly in an attempt to get comfortable. He grabbed up his fork to pluck a forkful of food silently cursing North for taking some of the joy out of his meal with Toothiana.

Taking in a deep breath he looked up at Toothiana to see her reaction to the food as he took a
tentative bite himself.

Tooth had been watching him shift in his seat, her cheeks flushing slightly when he finally looked at her. She cleared her throat and quickly grabbed up her fork to stab at her food, more or less to look busy.

“It’s good isn’t it?” Pitch queried taking another bite. He hadn’t noticed that Toothiana had been watching him wriggle about, or he would have been severely embarrassed, but as it was, he was blissfully unaware and amiably awaiting her opinion on the food.

Tooth took a bite, chewed, and swallowed. A smile appeared on her lips. She nodded. "Yes, it is very tasty." She took another bite. "I had almost forgot how enjoyable it is to eat."

Pitch beamed replying excitedly as he grabbed another forkful, “Me to! It is a nice change of pace is it not?”

“Yeah, it is.” she answered.

Pitch was a slow and methodical eater taking very small bites and just savoring it as he watched the clouds roll by through the lightly stained glass.

Tooth ate silently, occasionally looking up at Pitch. She still couldn't get over the drastic change in him. He seemed like a totally different person from the way he was when she had had to swat him. Maybe the spankings did help, she thought.

Pitch smiled at Toothiana as they ate, “If… If you like, Saturday they have lasagna. I think out of all the dishes made here at the Pole, it’s probably my favorite. Maybe… I don’t know, if you’re not busy, we can come by and grab a plate?” He wanted to share that experience with Toothiana as well he thought happily, but then regretted the offer because he was unsure if he’d be finished with the repairs by then. If he was, then he’d already be on restriction to his room and wouldn’t be able to leave it. This brought a momentary pout to his face, but his brow drew down in determination as he stabbed another forkful of stroganoff thinking he’d just have to make sure that the repairs stretched at least until Sunday, so as not to interrupt his plans with Toothiana.

Tooth frowned. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to make it then. I can try, but won’t you be working on the conveyor?”

Pitch shook his head, “Not all day. Besides, I’ll need to give most of my help when the mountainside and glacier walls are covering the area in shade. I can’t exactly work out in the direct sunlight and all. It’s a high cliff, but during the peak sunlight hours, even it can’t create enough shade to protect me. During those hours, I can’t be out there without it directly hitting me and doing me physical harm. You could come around noon, the sun usually dips off to the other side of the building by two, so I’ll have a two hour window… saying you’re not busy.”

Tooth nodded. "I'll have to wait and see. Uh... North does know all of that about the shadows, right?"

Pitch blinked never having thought about the fact since he’d never been asked to do anything in the direct sunlight, so the occasion had never come up to bring it to the man’s attention. Pitch had been quite thankful that the design of the many spires of the Pole and the multiple floors as well as being surrounded by impossibly high sheer cliffs created a pretty well shadowed area for him to visit the reindeer at most junctures during the day as the stables themselves also added an extra layer of protection. The landfill though was not in the same vicinity of the Pole and although seemed well shaded enough, Pitch hadn’t spent much time in that particular area to know for sure. His eyes
shifted to Toothiana looking a little chagrinened, “Uh… no. I guess I just sort of assumed he knew.”

Tooth gave a nod. “He probably does, but I would check with him just in case.”

Pitch grimaced at the thought of having a safety talk with North not really wanting to bother with such formalities, “I doubt it’ll be necessary, but if the need arises, I’ll address it.”

“Alright,” said Tooth, looking a little concerned. She took another bite of her food.

The two continued to eat in silence for the most part until Pitch had had his fill and rose not wishing to sit on the hard bench any longer than necessary. He’d only eaten about a third of the food; he’d enjoyed it, but unlike North didn’t find the need to gorge himself on it. If it had been some of Bunnymund’s chocolates… well, that was an entirely different matter altogether.

Not wishing to waste it, he walked over to one of the tables where several elves cringed to see him darken there table. The way they shrank from Pitch elicited a malicious smile to bear his lips, “Here; one of you eat this,” he demanded dumping the bowl in the middle of the table.

The four elves stared first at him and then each other and then back at him.

“Go on, what are you waiting for?” Pitch growled having done this a number of times in the past since the severe scolding he’d gotten from Alla previously had made him not wish to return to her kitchen with nothing less than an empty bowl.

Tooth scowled when she saw what Pitch was doing. “Pitch!”

Pitch was taken off-guard by Toothiana’s tone as he spun back towards her looking surprised that she’d be calling his name in such a fashion, “What?” He asked quizzically.

“That isn’t nice.” she shook her head. “If you don’t want the food, just throw it away. Don’t force the elves to eat your leftovers.”

Pitch frowned as he tried to explain, “I’m not forcing them. They’ll eat it; stars know they continuously are munching on something at all times. I’m just making sure there’s none wasted.”

Tooth sighed, shaking her head. She pointed at Pitch’s seat in a gesture for him to return to the table and sit down.

Pitch didn’t like the manner in which she was addressing him now, but he grumpily moved back over to the table. He was agitated, so he didn’t sit (not that he wanted to sit anyway), and he left the bowl on the elves’ table giving them a glare before he left to intimidate them into eating the leftovers. One of them shakily took the bowl and began shoveling the food in its mouth, and Pitch smiled darkly before turning to return to Toothiana feeling quite vindicated. He now stood next to Toothiana with a scowl painted on his face feeling the need to argue his point as he huffed, “I thought you’d be happy that I was doing my best not to throw it away! One of them always eats it! Look, one of them is eating it right now!” He motioned to the elf that was painfully shoving the food into his mouth for fear of the nightmare lord’s repercussions.

“I said to sit down, Pitch.” said Tooth, still pointing to Pitch’s bench.

No, he didn’t like this side of Toothiana at all! But, reluctantly he obeyed not wanting to upset her further. He carefully lowered himself back onto the bench to sit, adjusting himself as best he could. His mood had been severely dampened though, so now he sat with slumped shoulders sulking darkly to show his unhappiness.
“I wish you wouldn’t be so mean to the elves,” she said. “They might not be the brightest, but they’re still living beings. They aren’t your toys to kick around.”

Pitch nodded looking away from her disapproval, “I… I know. I wasn’t trying to kick them around. I… I’ll try to ask more nicely in the future,” he sighed not wanting her to be upset with him any longer.

"I'm glad to hear that. Kicking around, ordering around--it doesn't matter. It's all the same. You're displaying dominance over someone who's weaker than you are. That's bullying, Pitch. And don't try to lie about it. I saw how that elf was shaking as he ate that leftover food. You've been forcing them to eat your leftovers all this time so you won't have to face that yeti." A look of disappointment washed over Tooth's face.

When she said it like that, it did sound kind of mean, but they were just elves! All they did was scurry about and run amuck, Pitch was just making use of them. Alla on the other hand always served him some of the best portions of what she made. For whatever reason, the yeti had taken a shine to Pitch and had seen it as her duty to make sure to ‘fatten him up,’ so Pitch having taken to the special treatment aimed to please in the manner he knew best. This wasn’t acceptable to Toothiana obviously.

He wanted to get up from the table now feeling irritable over the scolding he was receiving, but for some reason or another, Pitch bore it only deepening his frown in response.

Tooth sighed, looking down at the table.

Seeing her expression made his falter as he screwed his mouth first into a tight line and then into a pout. He couldn’t win with her, “Okay fine. I won’t order them to eat it anymore. I was just trying to get them to do something functional for once,” he grumbled.

Tooth turned an exasperated look to him. "Pitch, it's still wrong. You can't force someone to do something against their will. They might be elves, but they still have freedom to choose. If they don't want your leftovers after you've kindly asked and offered, don't force them to eat them."

He rolled his eyes at her exasperation didn’t he just agree with her? What more did she want from him? His temper was rising, and he stood, “Alright! Fine!” he stormed over to the table of elves and snatched the bowl away from the terrified elf bringing it back to the table and letting it clatter with a loud thud in the middle of the table as he groused, “Done!”

Tooth nodded, ignoring his rising temper for the time being. "That's good."

His irritation had spiked, so he gave her a smoldering look as he crossed his arms remaining standing over her peevishly and waiting impatiently for her to finish as he grumbled, “I hope your happy now.”

"Yes, as a matter of fact I am. I'm happy that you corrected your behavior and mistake without throwing a tantrum or making a scene." She smiled. "But there's one little thing you forgot."

His lips parted wanting to make a retort that he didn’t throw tantrums, when her last statement caught his curiosity, “Oh? And what’s that?”

"You haven't apologized to the elves."

Apologize to elves? Seriously? If it would make Toothiana happy, he supposed he could do it. He turned toward the elves, and they immediately froze to stare at him terror stricken. Pitch sighed, “I doubt you’ll comprehend the sentiment, but I’m sorry for forcing you to be useful. It won’t happen
again,” Pitch ground out.

"Now, that wasn't so hard, was it?” said Tooth.

He turned back to her replying flatly with an equally unamused look plastered on his face, “Incredibly so, but to appease you; I think I can manage it.”

"It's not to appease me, Pitch. It's to help you learn some manners." Tooth replied. She studied Pitch a few minutes. "Or would you rather I tell North and let him deal with your rudeness?"

Pitch blanched eyes going wide as he shook his head vigorously, "Na-no! I... I'm sorry! Please don't tell North!" He wore a look of wild-eyed desperation now well aware of how such news would be received by the Cossack.

Tooth nodded. "Okay, then. You either learn by my methods, or I take you to North. Just to let you know, I won't spank you unless I absolutely have to. And I would appreciate it if you wouldn't push me into having to do it, because I know it's not pleasant for either of us. There are other ways of learning, and I would like to use them if possible, but you're going to have to be willing to go along with them without giving me difficulties."

Pitch winced wearing a worried expression now. He didn’t want to be taken to North, so he hesitantly agreed, “O...okay. We can do it your way. I... I won’t give you any trouble.” She’d mentioned she’d spank him now, and that sent a sick feeling to run down to the pit of his stomach. Now, not only was she onboard with North, she also intended to apply it if he angered her enough? His whole face burned with the thought of her even contemplating the idea let alone threatening to do so. He had to wonder what other learning methods she planned to use; he was morbidly curious in that he wanted to know, but deep down, he had a feeling he really didn’t.

Smiling, Tooth nodded appreciatively. “Good to hear,” she gave Pitch a loving look. “I’m sorry it has to be this way, but I’m tired of you taking advantage of me.”

He sulked, “I ...I didn’t mean to make you feel that way.” Pitch was confused not understanding how the way he treated the elves correlated with her, but he thought better than to expound upon the topic for fear of her thinking that he hadn’t learned some lesson or what not that he had managed to overlook.

Tooth nodded, not exactly sure what else to say.

Pitch studied her a moment unsure if she was still eating but knowing he was through with sitting at the table, so he stood idly by looking slightly displaced over their recent conversation. He couldn’t help but to dwell on what possible ‘other methods of learning’ she could possibly be talking about. He almost wanted to ask her just to satiate his curiosity, but to know what she planned most likely would upset him he was most certain. It was after all supposedly some other means of punishment, and what wouldn’t be upsetting about that? Why did she feel the need to punish him at all? Wasn’t he facing enough punishment at North’s hands? Why couldn’t she just be there for him? These thoughts had his brow drawn down in a stormy expression as he started to absently pace.

"Is there something wrong?” Tooth asked, noting Pitch’s pacing.

Having grown a bit unsettled by her words and eventually flustered as he weighed her declarations, he replied a little more snappishly than he’d meant, “I finished some time ago, so now I’m just waiting on you.”

Tooth sighed, shaking her head. She took her bowl and fluttered off her bench. "I don't have to eat
unless I want to, remember? If you want to go, we can go.”

He hadn’t meant to interrupt her meal. He was being rude again he realized as he frowned holding out a hand to halt her progress, “No, no, I… I wasn’t trying to rush you. I… I was just distracted by what you said is all. Please do finish. I won’t disturb you.”

She lowered herself down on the bench again. "Pitch, if there's something bothering you, just say it. You torture yourself further by holding things in to the point where you blow up. I’m here to listen, you know that."

He might as well get it out, letting the question fester in his mind was only causing the both of them strife, and if they were going to get into an argument about it, it’d probably be better suited while he was still somewhat capable of keeping a lid on his temper, “I… I can’t help thinking on what you just said… regarding alternatives… to North. What exactly are you planning to have me do?”

Tooth looked at him like he'd grown another eye, not really understanding his concern. Finally she shrugged. "I don't understand your question, Pitch. You obeyed me when I told you to apologize to the elves, and I'm proud of you for doing that. But if you had refused to obey me, I would have had to do something to discipline you, either put you in a corner or... spank you... or something. I can't have you taking advantage of me anymore. Part of that was my fault, though, I've come to realize that."

Pitch drew back like he’d been slapped in the face, “Put me in a corner? Seriously? That’s ridiculous nonsense; you’d really want me to do something like that?” He was awe stricken that she’d even had the audacity to suggest such a ludicrous punishment for him. And then of course there was that mention of spanking him again, so what, was he supposed to just let her spank him? North didn’t give him a choice in the matter, but with Toothiana, they were much more evenly matched even though he was depowered quite a bit comparatively now where she was quite well believed in, he didn’t think she’d be able to hold him down if he fought hard enough… at least he hoped not. That would surely be much more humiliating to bear. Her statement served to confound him as he stared at her clearly offended.

Tooth’s brow drew down in a scowl. “Would you rather be put in the corner or spanked?” she asked. “And don’t think I won’t, because I will if you push me far enough.” She suddenly reached up and grabbed hold of Pitch’s ear, jerking him forward. “You think you can get away with things around me because I haven’t believed in spanking up until now. Like I said, you’ve been taking advantage of me, and I’m tired of it, Pitch. I want to be your friend, I really do, but we’re going to have to come to some understanding. I’m not going to let you walk all over me anymore.”

He gasped shocked by the sudden pain and wholly not expecting such a reaction from Toothiana towards him, “Ow, ow, okay, okay!” He was quickly tilting in the direction she pulled on his ear until he was bent weirdly shifted to his side from where she’d tugged his head down to be face to face with her. He held up his hands in a defensive gesture his face reflecting the surprise and astonishment she had elicited in him, “I… I’m sorry! Truce!”

Tooth glared at him a few minutes, then nodded, seeming to be satisfied with the reaction. She let him go. "Alright. I'm glad we understand each other."

Once she’d released him, Pitch quickly straightened and backed away a couple steps as he held a hand cupped over the wounded ear. His eyes were still wide in disbelief trying to fully absorb what had just happened. His mind was racing over the impact this encounter encompassed, and he pouted regretfully now as he stared at her with sorrowful eyes. He was hurt that she had once more shown him that she was willing to get forceful with him to get him to comply with how she felt he needed to behave. This new structure within their relationship had him mentally floundering, and he found
himself just staring at her unable to speak.

"Pitch," Tooth sighed, "Please understand that I don't want to punish you. And I hope I never have to. I don't want this to ruin our friendship or change it in any way. But I'm just... tired of the way you've been treating me and the way you've been acting overall. It ...saddened and shocked me when I saw the way you treated those elves. You can act so nice and act like a changed man, but then you turn around and treat the elves like they're nothing to you."

Finally composing himself, Pitch dropped his hand to clasp his other in front of himself as he shifted uneasily listening to her with lowered eyes. His mouth worked as she spoke, his lips puckering as he struggled to control the emotions that she was fostering in him. He didn’t want to ruin their friendship, and he most definitely never wanted her to feel the need to actually punish him. Yanking on his ear and swatting him once previously was enough for him to know that it made him feel awful inside. Pitch couldn’t stand the thought of her this unhappy with him, it hurt his heart and he whined, “I… I didn’t mean anything by it. I understand though. I will do better. I swear it,” he brought his face up to gaze at her earnestly to show he took what she said very seriously.

“I believe you,” she said, softly. “I know you see the elves differently than I do, but it’s like I said… they’re still living beings, as are my fairies. It hurts me when I see someone treating someone else like that.”

He nodded his understanding. Pitch still found it hard to consider the little gremlins on the same tier as the two of them, but he planned to do his best to treat them better for Toothiana’s sake. He really didn’t want to see that look in her eyes again. It seared him like a lance to think of her being so disgusted with his behavior. He felt awkward now as he moved tentatively toward her to stand beside her now. His shoulders sagged dejectedly as he whispered softly, “I… I really am sorry Toothiana. Please forgive my behavior. I don’t have an excuse for what I did other than ignorance.”

Tooth smiled as she fluttered forward to wrap her arms around him and hug him. "I forgive you.”

He buried his neck into the wedge between her neck and shoulder closing his eyes and bringing his hands around to clasp the middle of her back right below her fluttering wings. Her embrace filled him with an immediate warmth that radiated to Pitch’s core, and he carefully squeezed her back in a gentle hug taking in another deep breath as he nuzzled into the nape of her neck as if he could disappear into her.

Whenever she offered him comfort like this, it took him somewhere outside of himself, and if he could, he wished he could just get lost in that place and this feeling forever. Fearing to make her feel uncomfortable, he released her withdrawing carefully. His eyes flicking up to hers a moment before looking down bashfully. These intimate types of touches shared with another person always left his heart hammering in his chest and a spike of emotions that he still didn’t quite understand.

Toothiana seated herself on the bench again. "So... um... What do you wish to do now?"

Pitch shrugged, all he really wanted was to be around her. Everything else was just white noise as far as he was concerned. His endorphins were still kicking in high gear after the hug they’d shared, so he was feeling happy for the most part, although some small portion of him railed against what he was letting himself conform to in order to make her happy. He didn’t care about that side of himself right now still in the throes of the affection that had quelled his deeper insecurities. She forgave him and left him feeling cared for even if he did manage to upset her endlessly, and Pitch still marveled at this.

Tooth continued to eye Pitch. Even though she forgave him, she still couldn't understand how someone who felt so much affection for North’s reindeer could be so heartless towards the elves. She
hoped that Pitch understood and would keep to his word.

Feeling her eyes studying him left Pitch feeling a tad uneasy as if he were under a microscope. What was she thinking? Whatever it was, it left her looking somber and speculative.

Deciding to suggest something in order to move past this unpleasant silence, Pitch gestured back towards the kitchen, "When you're done eating, we could always spend the rest of the time before you have to go at the wishing fountain." Normally Pitch avoided the fountains, not because the fountains themselves were not pleasing, but because many of the elves and yetis traversed the area to spend time there leaving it rather noisy and annoying to Pitch. He was of course offering this particular site for Toothiana's sake feeling she would enjoy the scenery. With it being dinner time, the place should at least be less active being most of the denizens would be in the dining hall or heading that way, and with Toothiana getting close to leaving, Pitch knew he wouldn't have to endure it long either way. He hoped she liked the proposal.

Tooth nodded. She again grabbed her bowl and fluttered off the bench. "We can go now. Although, you might want to pick your bowl up."

Pitch frowned looking at the bowl; it wasn't empty, and he considered dumping the remaining contents in a nearby plant basin, but decided after everything else that had just happened with Toothiana, he didn't want to take a chance at upsetting her. Pitch did however glide as sneakily as he could over to the trash bin to empty the bowl thankfully without Alla noticing.

Tooth fluttered up beside him, casually dumping the remainder of her own bowl into the bin.

Dumping their bowls into the dish depository, the two made their way towards the fountains on the ground level. They boarded one of the many elevators and descended the three flights in silence. Pitch had been watching her as the elevator fell, and since they were stationary a moment, he felt the need to ask, "Is everything alright? You've seemed rather distant since we left the cafeteria." She hadn't spoken a word since they left the table in fact, and he wondered if it was that she was just tired or still unhappy with him and keeping it to herself.


“Thinking? May I inquire what about?” Pitch asked inquisitively as they exited the elevator moving towards the wishing fountains.

Pitch had to admit the fountain area was a rather artful design. It was set in the center of the south wing with lattices of finely crafted woodwork that closed the area off from the open grounds to give some semblance of privacy to its guests. Several benches lined the outside of the lattices; spots were drilled into the ground to give large circular mounds of earth where trees grew in the design of a star with five points where the fountain acted as the center. The trees served to give a fresh scent of pine to fill the area and something pleasant to enjoy in the confines of the Pole where outside the building was a bitter cold winter all year round.

The spruces of life patterned around the fountain created its own peace of mind as birds like sparrows, cardinals, and blue jays flitted in and out of the fifteen foot tall bushy pine trees. Little networks of birdhouses were worked to hang down from the lattice framework decoratively like Christmas ornaments as well as bird feeders with honeyed seed-sticks for them to eat. One had to wonder how the birds had arrived so far north, but Pitch had never cared enough to inquire.

The fountain was a four-tiered marble bowled statue, and the base was a large goldfish pond that had a sizable surface for visitors to sit and relax. Instead of coins, there were several dispensers with fish food wafers that could be broken into crumbles to feed the fish or tossed in whole to be nibbled away
"You," Tooth said. Might as well go ahead and get it out, she thought. "Just... trying to figure you out."

As they entered the framework of the enclosed fountain area, Pitch tilted his head to look at Toothiana questioningly, "Me? Am I that much of an enigma?" He said playfully.

"Actually, yeah, you are." Tooth replied.

He smiled cheekily, "Well, I have been known to be mysterious," his grin broadened obviously amused to think this before he continued more seriously, "What are you trying to figure out? I am the source after all, maybe I can enlighten you?"

Toothiana shrugged. She fluttered over to sit on the edge of the fountain. "I was more or less just thinking heavier about the events that just happened. How you... seem to be two people crammed into the same body."

Pitch moved over to stand beside Toothiana placing his hands behind his back as he regarded her looking more than a little confused, "What do you mean two people?"

"Just... the way you can flip back and forth between your changed self and your old self, and sometimes you seem to be both at the same time... like you were just a few minutes ago. The way you were so kind to me, yet you bullied those elves." She shook her head, looking at him. "It's like you have two people in you that are constantly struggling with each other," Tooth explained.

Pitch took her words in mulling them over a long moment before responding carefully, "I... I'm changing to the best of my ability, but sometimes what I think you want from me doesn't always correlate into an understanding I automatically get. The elves... it's true, I hadn't really considered them as... uh... people? They are rather... simple... and annoying... and I know that is not the case for you, and I'm well aware now how you wish me to treat them, but I still find it hard to see them as... I don't know, equals as you all do, so I have... trouble denoting the level of respect you want me to give them. I will though... as I promised you," he watched her now to gauge her expression on how she felt about what he had said knowing that parts of it, although honest, were likely discomforting to hear.

She nodded, simply. "I guess I just have a hard time understanding how you can devote so much care, love, and attention to North's reindeer, but you can't see the elves as being people who should be respected. It's true that the reindeer are animals and the elves are not, but they're both living creatures. I know that the elves are not entirely bright, but that doesn't make them any less a person."

Pitch took in a deep sigh slouching a bit. Toothiana always had a way of making him feel a bit like a heel when she wanted to. He supposed he did treat them poorly, and maybe it wasn't right, but it was also hard for him not to respond that way since it was almost second nature to do so with minions. He supposed that was why he was here though, many of his automatic responses to things seemed to be rather socially unacceptable, "I... I know. You're right. I shouldn't see them as such. I get that. I have a habit of reacting before thinking sometimes, and that bit in the cafeteria... I've been doing that for a while now without an issue, so it just hadn't quite occurred to me that it was wrong since there hadn't really been a complaint over compliance on their end."

Tooth lifted an eyebrow. "It hadn't occurred to you that it was wrong? Pitch, any time you treat someone in the way you were treating those elves it's wrong. You should have learned that when you were caught making them do your chores when you first arrived here."
Pitch rubbed at the back of his neck giving her a sheepish grin. He had known it was wrong on a deeper level, he'd just ignored the ramifications of his actions affecting the elves and validating it as okay because he was simultaneously preventing the waste of food (which was good) and had weighed the deeds as counterbalancing each other. Now of course, it clearly was brought to the forefront for what his forcing the elves to eat his leftovers really was (which was bullying the elves to clean his plate to make the yeti chef think he was finishing everything he’d been given to further ingratiate himself to her and in turn get better treatment in the future.) “Uh… well… yes sure. You’re right technically,” he gave a nervous laugh, “But eating that food wasn’t exactly an unpleasant task that I was asking of them… not like the chores were right?” He justified, if just to make his case sound a little less bad than the picture Toothiana was painting.

"Pitch," Tooth sighed, "If the elves didn't want to eat the food, then, yes, it was unpleasant and wrong."

Pitch shifted under the weight of the topic, his eyes darted away from hers in the presence of the guilt of his actions that she was forcing him to observe fully. He gave a small nod and replied demurely, “I know it was wrong. I… I shouldn’t have done it. It won’t happen again; you have my word.”

"I know you won't." Tooth replied. "But I just want to make sure that you fully understand that what you did was wrong."

Pitch was confused looking at Toothiana with a furrowed brow, “What do you mean? I just agreed with you and gave you my word. What more do you need?”

Tooth nodded. "Yes, I know you did. That's why we're having this talk. I just wanted to make sure."

“Alright; are you sure now?” Pitch queried tilting his head with a quirky smile.

“Yeah, I'm sure.” Tooth replied.

“Glad to hear it,” Pitch purred pleased that everything seemed to become smooth once more between them. She created a balance in him that he hadn’t quite realized before; when she became upset, it affected him on levels he didn’t understand. All he really did know was that he just wanted to see her happy with him because it in turn made him happy. Pitch would keep his promise to her, or at least he would do his best.
Chapter Thirty-Five

It All Comes Back Around

Pitch and Toothiana spent the next hour commenting on the visual beauties that surrounded them at the fountains among many other passing topics of the goings on at the Pole that Pitch could actually weigh in on. Pitch had propped his lanky body over the fountain base’s width crossing his legs so that his feet dangled kicking playfully in the air while his chest leaned partially over the crest of the fountain. He poked at the waters dipping tiny crumbs of fish food into the pond between his forefinger and thumb giggling mirthfully at the feeling of the fish taking the pieces of food from between his fingertips as he and Toothiana talked. This simple act seemed to amuse him to no end as he swayed rocking back and forth on his hips and peering into the water as the massive goldfish bobbed to the surface to retrieve the food and darted away just as quickly as it emerged.

"You know, I really need to go." said Tooth, suddenly. "It must be getting late by now, and I'm going to need to head out to collect teeth soon."

Pitch glanced up from his activity his smile faltering. He knew this was coming, but it still made him unhappy to know his fun with her was at an end. He'd have to go back to North's office now. Of course Toothiana didn't know this, so he threw the last of the crumbs into the pond and pushed himself back up and off the fountain's base stretching as he did so, "I understand; I'll walk you back to North's office. I'm sure you'll wish to say your goodbyes to him as well," Pitch stated as he smiled at her warmly.

"Well, I really don't have to. North knows that I sometimes come and go as I please. But if you want to walk back to North's office, we can." Tooth floated off the fountain.

Pitch needed her to accompany him back if to just keep up the ruse he'd so delicately laid with Toothiana by not telling her that he'd needed a chaperone. He strained a smile feeling slightly guilty for keeping secrets with her, but what she didn't know wasn't exactly hurting her. This omission would really only affect him if knowing about his grounding meant she wouldn't come back by until his punishment was over, so what did it really matter whether or not he told her? He was quick to start moving out of the fountain's gardens and towards the elevator, "Oh you know North likes to say his goodbyes. Uh... besides, it gives us a few more minutes to enjoy each other's company."

"Alright, we'll go." Tooth said with a smile. She followed Pitch to the elevator and both of them rode it to the main part of the Pole where they made their way to North's office.

Pitch was happy to have a few more minutes to spend with Toothiana even if keeping her company wasn't his true intentions of walking with her. North's office door was open, and the man had moved on to tinkering with some toy that had many small parts. He was leaned over one of his crafting desks looking full of concentration while using a magnifying glass to glue the pieces together.

Pitch watched on slightly curious as he glided into the office over to the side of North's desk to allow Toothiana to pass him and speak to North to say her goodbyes.

"Ah, I was wondering what happened to you. It has been too quiet." North said with a chuckle. "I'm glad to see you brought Pitch back, Toothiana."

"Brought him back?" said Tooth, a bit confused.
Pitch blushed furiously as he backed away praying that North didn't go into detail! He had backed away to the other edge of the desk, and while he was looking down to monitor that he didn't run into the desk, Pitch saw his naughty list partially unraveled, and bold as day was the newest offense with the elves at the very top. He barely contained a gasp as he slapped a hand over his mouth, and his eyes went impossibly wide registering the connotations behind this new revelation. His knees went weak as panic gripped his heart. He had to hide that thing!

"Hm? Yes, brought him back to office." said North, not looking up from his work.

"Ah," Tooth nodded, even though she still didn't fully understand why that was so important. "Yes, I'm about to head out since it's getting close to time for me to collect teeth. Pitch wanted us to stop by your office to say good bye."

While they were talking, Pitch quickly pilfered the parchment tucking it into one of the deep pockets in his robe as he stepped forward distractingly to draw the conversation away from any further explanation, “Uh yes! I told Toothiana you’d definitely wish to see her off of course!” His heart was hammering in his chest now; he was so terrified of the consequences he'd face if he was caught trying to hide his naughty list from North.

North turned a puzzled look to Pitch before turning to look at Tooth. "Uh, yeah," He nodded. "Good bye, Tooth."

Pitch felt more than awkward now caught between a well-placed deception with Toothiana that was so very close to unraveling and trying to stay smooth in the face of North after so willfully stealing from the man evidence that showed he'd somehow been stupid enough to manage to get another line added to his list.

How was it that he created such a mess for himself so easily? It was like a snowball effect; one little mistake led to more issues he had to find ways to deal with that made the whole situation that much worse. A shiver rocketed up Pitch's spine; he'd already sealed his course of action now. There was no turning back as he'd already insured he was in pretty deep water by instinctually snatching up and hiding the page out of self-preservation.

More than a small part of him screamed that he was an idiot for grabbing and hiding the page in the first place; sure he likely would have gotten another spanking from North, but he may have gotten the Cossack to have a little mercy for the extenuating circumstances. There would be no pleading his case now he knew regrettably, so he just needed to do his best to destroy the page as soon as he could get away from North to do so.

"Yeah, good bye," Tooth replied. She felt awkward, wondering why they were even having this conversation. Finally, she turned and flew out of the room.

North shrugged and turned back to his work.

Pitch remained quiet watching as Toothiana left and feeling like he'd at least dodged that bullet. North seemed pretty distracted by his work, and Pitch thought now might be one of the few times that he could get away with not having an escort, "Uh... I was thinking of retiring to my room; you look like you're busy, so I can just make my way back on my own if it's all the same to you North."

North put down the pieces he was holding and turned to Pitch. “I will escort you back. I am not too busy to do that.” He waved for Pitch to go first. “So how was your time with Toothiana?"

Pitch stutter-stopped, “Uh... well... uh... good! It... it was rather nice,” he darted through the door avoiding eye contact with North in case the man somehow was able to discern something was amiss
by looking at his face. Pitch babbled now in his nervousness as they walked, “We… we went quite a few places just traipsing about the Pole, you know… talking… and walking… and… we actually just came from the fountains. I… I was feeding the large goldfish,” Pitch started to calm a bit now as they continued walking feeling he’d gained more of his faculties back as they moved towards his room.

“Is there something wrong?” North asked, noting Pitch’s stuttering. “You seem nervous.”

Pitch paused a moment needing to refocus before responding, “Na-nervous? No! Stars no! I… I am just still a little excited from my visit with Toothiana. We… I like spending time with her,” he said this last part a little forlornly as he frowned knowing it’d be a while before he saw her again.

North smiled. “I am happy to hear that.”

Pitch nodded solemnly, “So… uh, when will we start work on the conveyer tomorrow?” This was important as it would dictate when he could be expected to be gathered. Pitch wondered if North planned to be involved in that project as well, or if he planned to just have him work by himself.

“The earliest possible hour, whenever you think you will be ready.” North answered. “I’ve been overseeing the supplies all day. Yetis have cleaned out most of wreckage and have been getting things prepared.”

“I can be ready when the sun goes down, but I suppose that’s not the ‘early’ you had in mind,” Pitch mused. If they could work through the night, Pitch would be very pleased, but he doubted that North or his yetis would be comfortable working through the night since they primarily did everything during daylight hours.

North scowled. “No, it isn’t. You will be ready in morning. And I will not hear any backtalk on the matter.”

Pitch opened his mouth to say that he hadn’t actually been serious, but the assumption that he would give backtalk only caused him to frown bitterly. “Then why bother asking me when I’ll be ready if you just plan to roll over me like a dictator?” Pitch groused.

“You know very well what I meant, Pitch. The earliest hour in morning that you can be ready.”

Pitch was irritable now responding with a derisive, “Just come by whenever you’re ready. Stars knows I won’t be going anywhere to not be ready for whenever you deem to come fetch me.”

“Good,” North said with a nod. “I will pick you up about six.”

Pitch wore a scowl, but he didn’t comment further as they continued down the hall finally making it to his bedroom. Pitch was relieved, now he had a time to expect the Cossack, and knowing that gave him a window of time to destroy the page and get rid of it.

”Here we are. Sleep well,” North said, opening the door for Pitch.

The kind words wiped the scowl from his face as he turned back to look at North feeling a tad bit guilty now. He walked through the door watching North as he went inside before glancing at the painting on the wall that was effectively hiding the strap. Pitch was really glad he’d placed that picture there now, but even so, a ghost pain washed across his rear end knowing what he’d just done by stealing the page and the reality that he was most likely not going to get away with it one way or another. He never did get away with anything it seemed, and this fact was rather unnerving as his mind once more raced. No, if he got rid of the damned list, everything would balance out once more, besides, North hadn’t even noticed the list until recently, why wouldn’t he forget about it as easily?
Pitch tried in vain to reassure himself now. He gulped hard before turning stiffly back to North, “Uh… Sa… sleep well too,” he stated a little shakily as he worked to quell the fear that had momentarily overtook him.

North nodded, turned, and left.

No small amount of relief came to Pitch as the Cossack closed the door allowing his shoulders to slump while his lungs exhaled deeply a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. Pitch clutched at the page in his robe now unable to will himself quite yet to bring it out to see the light of day, as if North would throw his door open as he pulled the page into the light to catch him red handed. This of course was just his ridiculously over active imagination at play. Pitch knew this to be true, but he couldn’t fight the want to just wait a good ten minutes… just in case.

Ten minutes passed, and as it did so, Pitch wore a hole in the floor pacing and thinking about the ‘what if’s’ of North looking for the list and somehow knowing he’d taken it. He couldn’t know that! Could he? No, the man didn’t read minds, and without the list to tell him what he’d done, there was no way he could actually know for certain! Pitch just needed to relax. If anything, his behavior would tell on himself if he wasn’t careful and didn’t get a handle over his nerves.

Feeling the Cossack had been gone long enough for it to be safe, Pitch pulled out the list briefly unraveling it just to make sure he didn’t somehow botch horribly and grab the wrong list (that would be a bit of irony he thought humorlessly.) Of course now written on the top, it showed up in bold print, his newest offense of stealing the list which immediately erased all doubt that it was in fact his list.

Pitch sighed looking over the list one last time with a grimace; he would be more than pleased to see this thing ripped into a million pieces. That was his intention anyway as he yanked to tear it down the middle to no avail. He tried to rip it from several different angles, but the paper seemed impervious to his efforts! A small alarm started to course through him at seeing the page refuse to be damaged in the slightest, no matter how much oomph he put behind it. This was bad. He’d have to find some other means of getting rid of it he thought worriedly as he rolled up the list and deposited it back into his robe.

He waited, that sickening ‘I can’t wait to get this over’ wait, as the time ticked away the countless hours of the remainder of the day and then the night. Pitch had books, but he couldn’t concentrate his mind enough to read, and he had paints, but after spending almost an hour staring at a blank canvas, Pitch gave up and just laid on his bed wondering how he’d managed to yet again make so much trouble for himself. He whimpered in self-pity hating the fact that he was still being punished for his last offenses, and here he was actively screwing up all over again! What the heck was wrong with him? Was he a glutton for punishment? He sighed, a small pout forming on his face as he promised himself that he wasn’t going to get caught for this, and once the dust settled, he was going to get back on track. This would be the last time he’d end up in such a state.

Scampering down the hall, Pitch froze in indecision hearing heavy footfalls as he pressed himself carefully up against the wall sucking in a breath as if to do so would flush him against the wall that much tighter. He needed not to have worried though as the yeti guard had only briefly headed in his direction before disappearing down another corridor.

Pitch breathed a sigh of relief as he dislodged himself from the wall and hurried down to one of the many crackling fire pits around the Pole. Of course the pit held nothing but hot embers having burned down hours ago. Heat still radiated here though, and Pitch knew it wouldn’t take much to get it going again. If he couldn’t rip the paper, he’d burn it! Carefully Pitch unhinged the guard that covered the bed of ash from accidental fires breaking out and pulled it far enough over that he could
add a bit of kindling before blowing on the twigs to ignite them. As he did this, Pitch took momentary fearful glances back behind his shoulder to ensure he didn’t hear or see anyone in the distance that might catch him here. There was no one, but throughout this whole procedure, Pitch felt like his skin was crawling with his anxiety, but maybe that was the fearlings within him excitedly feeding off of the apprehension coming off of Pitch in waves.

The fire was ready enough, and Pitch pulled the scroll from his robe watching intently behind him now as his hearthammered away. He placed the parchment on the flames and waited for the sight of the paper shrinking in on itself like a dying spider with holes eroding through it to consume the page and disintegrate it to ash, but nothing happened. Pitch’s blood ran cold at the sight of this as he quickly snatched the page from the flames carefully ensuring none of the embers were trapped within it before shoving it back in his robe.

Pitch scrambled to replace the guard and soundlessly made his way back to his room. More than a little panic now stewed within him as he contemplated how to get rid of the page. His first thoughts were to skillfully bury it in the trash when he had a free moment at the landfill site, but North and he would be working side by side, and that was much too risky to be spotted especially since he had no idea what the Cossack planned to have him be doing while he was working on the conveyer belt. He wasn’t exactly a skilled laborer, so he expected he’d mostly be doing clean up. Either way, it was a threat he didn’t want to contend with. As he made it back to his room, Pitch finally decided that the back of the mirror was as good a place as any to hide it. The magic pages he’d scrawled out a while back were still hidden there, so it would do just as well to hide the naughty list Pitch decided much happier once the page was securely hidden.

It was after 3AM now, and Pitch knew to expect North in a few hours, so feeling quite weary from all of his worrying, Pitch climbed on his bed to rest easily finding himself passed out, curled in a ball, on top of his sheets in a matter of minutes.

"Pitch! Is time to get up!" North's voice bellowed over the Boogeyman as he shook him. Pitch practically jumped out of his skin feeling the man’s hands jarring him awake. He let out a shrill yelp of surprise gasping in terror as he spun his head up to face North before realizing the man was just waking him. He clutched his chest, “Oh stars! Don’t do that to me!” He huffed still clearly startled by the action. Although North would not know it was more the dread of getting caught that had him so jumpy rather than the surprise of being woken abruptly. He swiveled his body into a sitting position immediately regretting his lack of ease to his posterior having temporarily forgotten in the haze of sleep how sore he still was.

Hoping off the bed quickly and giving a quick rub at the offended area, Pitch scowled a moment before his face softened and he looked up at North apologetically, “Sorry, I must have dozed off.”

"Well, I should hope so. You will need rest for day of work ahead."

Pitch rubbed absently at his bicep pulling himself into a sort of self-hug as he regarded North and nodded, “Uh… right. Work. I guess we should get going then?” Pitch looked up to follow North now.

North’s eyes had been quickly glancing around the room as if searching for something. He nodded, turning to walk toward the door. “After you,” he waved.

Pitch was still rubbing sleep from his eyes and hadn’t noticed the cursory glance only stepping wobbly forward to move out of the door and down the hall unable to help a yawn from escaping. He was still feeling a bit dragged out he realized, but he was sure the morning air would wake him soon enough.
North followed after Pitch as he rambled on about the day’s work that was ahead of them.

Pitch wasn’t really listening to North letting what the man said move through one ear and out the other as they walked across the Pole’s hub and towards the tunnels that led outside. Pitch couldn’t help looking about slightly annoyed by all the cheery faces of yetis and elves that gave their way too sugary good mornings to North as they moved about to start their day.

Of course Pitch was hit with a state of longing as they exited the building to see the reindeer stalls. This sad feeling erupted into immediate jealousy though as Pitch stopped in his tracks growing rigid. He could clearly see Jack busying himself away tending to his reindeer. Pitch huffed crossing his arms at the sight and scowling so hard that if looks could kill, the winter sprite would have collapsed from the sky and died on the spot.

North looked from Pitch to the stables, a hint of a scowl appearing on his face. "Keep moving, Pitch."

Pitch had to speak his mind waving a hand out at the sight he saw as he groused, “I could have already taken care of them by now; just… just look at the way he’s grooming them? He’s brushing them in swirls! They are going to look ridiculous!”

North grunted. "They may look ridiculous, but they will survive.” He grabbed hold of Pitch's robe and urged him forward.

Pitch growled snatching his robe back and stomped off towards the landfill prickling with irritation at both Frost for tending to the reindeer and North for not letting him do so before starting work on the repair job. He could have finished the tasks with the deer twice over before North had planned to even start work!

North knew Pitch was mad and jealous over Jack. It didn't take a genius to figure it out. He gave an approving nod as he trudged along behind the Boogeyman. Pitch had no one to blame but himself, North thought. Everything Pitch had done had brought down consequences of every form on his head, including someone else temporarily taking care of the reindeer. He could only hope that Pitch learned a valuable lesson from all of it.

Pitch wore a scowl now his mood instantly soured by the sight he’d left. His fists were balled as he raged across the field to the landfill site at an increased clip just as much to get away from what he saw with Jack and his reindeer as much as not having to walk next to North. Once they reached the landfill, Pitch stood looking down at it with a snarl as he crossed his arms once more staring hatefully around at the scene as he waited for North to catch up.

North walked up to stand beside Pitch. He pointed at a yeti wearing a hardhat. "That is Dave. He will show you what you need to do. If you cannot understand what he says, I will be here to translate as well as oversee your work and progress.” North decided to leave off that he was also staying there to make sure Pitch actually did the work and also to make sure he didn't try anything else that would cause problems.

“You might as well just translate here and now since I can tell you that I won’t understand gibberish,” Pitch snapped looking over at Dave with contempt. He was still thinking of Frost laughing about doing summersaults in the air. Oh he was just having so much fun doing his job!

North frowned. "You know I can't do that until he speaks to you! Now, get moving." He gently pushed Pitch in the direction of Dave. "Do not make me take you back to room for discussion with certain piece of leather."
Pitch's face flushed at the mention of the strap, and the push was all he needed to propel him in the
direction of Dave without further comment other than a wary glance behind him. He made his way
over to Dave now standing in front of the yeti still scowling as he grumbled, "Alright, go ahead and
spit out what awful task you're going to bestow on me."

North held up a hand for Dave to wait as he turned his attention down to Pitch. “First, I just want to
remind you that faster you do this work, faster you get it done, faster you go through grounding, and
faster you get back to caring for reindeer. It is up to you to determine how long or short this work is
carried out. If you are worried about how deer are cared for, then you will make effort to get all of
this done and behind you as quickly as possible. The longer you drag it out, the longer you take
getting back to deer."

Pitch huffed, "I realize that, so let's just get on with it already." Thinking on the reindeer was just
making his anger go from a simmer to a boil.

Dave nodded and pointed at a small pile of thin metal beams, then pointed toward the wrecked
conveyor.

Pitch grimaced moving to the pile of beams before bending down to grab one and march it over to
the emphasized area, "Alright, now what?" Pitch sneered.

Dave motioned from the beams to the wrecked conveyor then back again several times, emitting a
few grunts.

"He wants you to carry all of beams over to the conveyor." said North.

Pitch sighed muttering as he dumped the beam on the ground to go retrieve the next beam, "So, pack
mule it is. How pointless to have dropped the beams this far away anyway! One would think that
you did this just to make extra work!"

North allowed Pitch to say whatever he wanted as he watched the Boogeyman pick up the beams
and pack them to the conveyor. He secretly motioned to Dave to ignore Pitch's words.

It took two hours for Pitch to move the pile of beams from one side of the landfill to the point where
Dave had instructed. Pitch wasn't one to perform manual labor, so by the time he was done, he was
looking rather tired. It hadn't helped that he had only rested about two hours prior.

He leaned against the beams now as he watched some of the yetis weld parts together and prepare
for lifting the connected pieces into the air.

Dave grunted, nodding in approval at Pitch.

"He says good job and that you may rest a bit." said North, walking up to inspect the work.

Pitch was still annoyed, but the two hours of work had lessened the degree having been separated
from the scene with Jack and the reindeer long enough to have let his mind drift to less unhappy
thoughts. He tried to keep his mind turned towards calculating how much work actually needed to be
done to stretch it to Saturday. There definitely was plenty to do he realized with a pang of guilt. He
really did make a huge mess out here, and it was going to take at least a few days to fix what he’d so
recklessly done. Pitch just stood watching the yetis and North work now. Until he was given another
task, Pitch figured he could use the rest.

Dave walked up to North and grunted a long stream of gibberish before walking off. North took a
break from his work long enough to address Pitch. “When you’re done resting, you can help yetis
erect the frame.”
Pitch wasn’t overly interested in working over just watching the yetis work, so his eyes only flicked momentarily to North taking in what he said before going back to just watching the work being done deciding a bit of an extended break wouldn’t hurt.

Thirty minutes had passed when North walked up to Pitch. He was mopping sweat from his brow with a candy cane printed handkerchief. “Break’s over, Pitch. Time to get to work.”

Pitch merely shrugged noncommittally choosing to just move away from North in the direction of the work. He wasn’t really interested in being told how he should be working, and to have North feel the need to tell him as much served to annoy him. He glided to stand by where the yetis were diligently doing a multitude of tasks to the framed track before sending the finished piece up with a wench of sorts to two yetis that were expertly securing the pieces to a basic skeleton structure they were working to build. Of course not really sure what to do and not overly interested in asking, Pitch was just spinning about looking around at the goings on and getting more in the yetis’ way than helping them.

Dave angrily grunted at Pitch, waving his arm and pointing to where several yetis were still doing welding.

“Pitch! He wants you to help them hold the beams in place while they weld them.” said North, scowling.

Pitch scowled back at North snapping, “I may not know what he’s saying to me, but I can tell whatever he’s saying, he’s not asking politely! Dave here better find an appropriate tone of addressing me; I don’t take orders from minions!” Pitch snarled turning back to Dave folding his arms to stare up at the large yeti defiantly. How dare this yeti boss him around! Pitch planned to work, but he wasn’t going to put up with this kind of treatment!

“Pitch!” North yelled over the noise going on around them. “You have a lot to learn about working. Dave is your boss. You obey whatever he tells you, or so help me we will be having different conversation.”

What did North expect from him? Pitch didn’t appreciate the manner that the yeti was lecturing him. It wasn’t fair that these hair balls could speak to him in any way they wanted, but let Pitch respond in kind, and he was getting threatened with a strapping! Pitch really didn’t want that though, so he didn’t comment further. Skulking over to do as North had told him, Pitch held the beams in place. He wore an incredibly grouchy expression as he did so making it clear that he was doing the work, but he was definitely unhappy with the situation he was enduring.

North just shook his head at Pitch’s pathetic display. But then again, he should have expected it. After all, it had been a very long time since Pitch did any actual work.

This particular task wasn’t difficult, but it was horribly boring, so Pitch found his attention drifting as he looked about watching the yetis do much more complicated tasks that Pitch thought he’d be much more suited for, but he stayed dutifully doing this particular chore for several hours. He had been repositioned as they worked from the base of the building leading out towards the landfill. The sun was starting to crest higher into the air eroding the shadows on the field and creeping toward them. Pitch noticed with slight worry as he worked to maneuver himself to avoid the patches of sun that stabbed through the clouds and reflected off the metal.

Dave was getting frustrated with the dark lord’s weaving about commanding in gruff barks to remain where he’d been expected to hold the beams in place, but the sun was starting to become painful as it singed Pitch’s skin feeling like acid. He snarled snappishly, “I’m doing the best I can for you! Be glad I’m standing here at all!”
Dave had no clue the affects the sun was having on Pitch and grumbled a scolding thinking Pitch was just being disagreeable again.

To this Pitch became enraged letting the beams go as he stormed off, “If you don’t like the job I’m doing than do it yourself!”

North, having caught sight of the last part of the scene, quickly turned from what he had been doing and walked over to where Dave was and where Pitch was walking away. “What goes on here?” he said as he reached out to snatch a hold of Pitch’s arm before he got far.

Pitch hissed as North yanked him by the arm back towards Dave and unknowingly into a direct patch of sun. The exposed flesh began to burn like an instant sunburn on his pale skin, and Pitch jumped with the sudden pain as he writhed uncomfortably, “Let me go! Let me go!” Pitch squalled as panic and pain prickled through him, and he desperately wrenched to get free from North’s grasp.

North frowned at the fit Pitch was throwing. “What ails you, Pitch?”

Pitch whimpered jerking madly as his exposed flesh now began to blister, “The sun! Please! You’re hurting me!” Pitch pleaded almost hysterically as the sun’s direct rays penetrated his skin more fully without his ability to escape it.

North quickly jerked Pitch into the shadowed area, a bit taken back by the situation. "I am sorry, Pitch. I did not know."

"You never asked!" Pitch squirmed uncomfortably staring at the back of his hand. He whined, "Oh that smarts!"

North heaved a hefty sigh. "Pitch, it was your responsibility to tell me before we started. Do not wait for or expect people to ask. How should I know to ask if you have sun allergy?"

"Allergy? You could have killed me!" Pitch huffed dipping back further into the shadows of the constructed framework, "I'm a master of shadow and darkness; what would you think direct sunlight would do to me? I mean honestly North," Pitch groused heatedly.

North rolled his eyes. "Do you need to go to medical bay?"

Pitch frowned, he didn't want to look weak in front of North, no more than he already had, but the burns really did hurt. Through a tight lipped frown he mumbled almost inaudibly a sharp, "Yes!"

North turned and explained to Dave what had happened and that he would take Pitch to the medical bay. When Dave nodded that he understood, North took Pitch and headed back to the Pole.

Pitch followed quietly behind North thinking back on the conversation he'd had with Toothiana. She'd warned him that he should have had a talk with North about his vulnerability to the sun, but he didn’t really think North would have pulled him into the sun and actually put him in danger. He would have otherwise told him, and now Pitch felt a little foolish that he hadn't.

North and Pitch soon arrived at the medical bay, North stepping aside to let Pitch walk in.

Pitch moved timidly forward to meet the yeti waving him into the medical ward. The yeti pointed Pitch to a small section compartmentalized for individual processing where a single chair sat next to a hospital bed. Pitch was about to sit in the chair but since North was following behind him, he gingerly climbed to sit on the bed. He was staring unhappily at his hand now touching the scorched flesh tenderly.
North spent a few minutes talking to one of the yeti nurses about what had happened before walking over to stand beside the bed.

"Not to worry. They will get you fixed up." he said.

Pitch frowned, "That's good to know, I'd like to get this over with, so we can make up for the lost time. You can inform foreman Dave to give me work that I can do in the shade, I'd like to avoid anything like this in the future." Pitch was worried that this little accident would interfere with getting the repairs done in a timely fashion. He was thinking of Frost now and just wanted to get back to tending the reindeer as soon as possible.

North nodded. "I will speak to Dave when we return."

Pitch sighed feeling a bit embarrassed now, "I... I guess I should have told you. I wasn’t really expecting you to pull me into direct sunlight like that."

"Pitch, you know full well I wasn't trying to pull you into sunlight on purpose. I saw you walking away from job, so I was pulling you back to your post." North replied.

Pitch complained, "Well, if you didn't feel the need to yank me about, I may have been able to explain beforehand!"

North lowered his face down into Pitch's. "Then don't give me reason to yank you about."

Pitch's eyes widened, and he blanched with the gesture of North moving to be face to face with him. He watched the man intently looking slightly apprehensive. Pitch went quiet now holding his wounded hand to his chest wearing a pout.

North drew back, crossing his arms over his chest.

At that moment, one of the yeti nurses walked over, depositing a few items on the bed before stretching a hand out toward Pitch and grunting.

Pitch didn’t immediately reach his hand out, looking on curiously at what the yeti had brought and placed on the bed. It was some cleaning swabs, ointments, and a gauze wrap. She motioned again for him to extend his hand to her a little less gruffly, but Pitch was still hesitant feeling wary now that the yeti might be too rough on his sensitive skin. Studying the yeti a long moment, Pitch decided he could trust her and finally outstretched his hand to her.

The yeti took his hand gently studying the damage there before nodding affirmation and setting the hand down gently on the mattress. She began opening up several packets of antiseptic and unwrapped the gauze to prepare it for use before gently slipping a massive hand under Pitch’s hand to begin cleaning the wound.

As the alcohol made contact with his hand, his eyes widened in alarm as the burn was immediately painful, and he hissed angrily, “Ow! Are you incompetent?!?” He snatched his hand away quickly sneering at the nurse and wishing he’d not trusted her as the topical solution was still actively stinging his hand.

“Pitch, give her your hand.” North said. “It is antiseptic to clean wound. The pain you feel is normal.”

Pitch’s brow drew down stubbornly, “I think not! Here,” Pitch waved his hand in a ‘give me’ gesture towards the supplies, “I’ll just do it myself!”
The yeti nurse’s brow also drew down and held out her hand for Pitch to give her his hand once more.

Pitch gave her hand a sneer as he quipped, “No.”

“Give her your hand, Pitch.” said North. "We don't have all day."

Pitch looked offended, “Why? I don’t want her dressing my hand, I’d rather just do it myself; why can’t I?”

The yeti nurse scolded Pitch, and of course he had no idea what she was telling him, but it was obvious she wasn’t pleased with his decision.

“Because you don’t know proper way of doing it,” North replied. “And you only have one hand to do it with.”

Pitch grumbled finally extending his hand once more, “Fine. But be more careful!” Pitch snapped.

The nurse sighed grasping his wrist this time to ensure he wouldn’t pull away again and began to apply the antiseptic once more.

Having his hand locked in place only served to upset Pitch as he jerked, pushed, and pulled cursing the nurse.

The yeti only ignored Pitch continuing to finish sanitizing the burn.

North reached out and grabbed hold of Pitch on both of his upper arms with his large hands to hold him still.

Pitch stopped struggling knowing he wasn’t going to make any headway to fight against North, he only trembled now from his heightened anxiety. He seemed to relax once the yeti nurse moved to putting the cooling ointment gently across his hand and then carefully wrapped the flesh that could be covered with the gauze.

Once finished, the nurse backed a step away picking up the supplies but leaving one tube of ointment barking out to keep his hand well lubricated once the hand was healed enough to remove the gauze.

Pitch had withdrawn his hand to stare at the yeti looking perplexed due to the lack of understanding, but was nonetheless happy the whole ordeal was finished. He wore a frown now still rather flustered by the experience as his gaze moved to North, “Can we go back now?”

"Don't you think you should rest?” said North, concern on his face.

Rest? That didn’t sound very productive… worse it sounded like the rest of the day being spent in his room. That also was rather unappealing, so Pitch shook his head no, “Nonsense,” he held up his wounded hand, “It’s not that bad really. I can work just fine!”

"Alright,” said North, waving for Pitch to follow him. "I will find you something to do in shade.”
Pitch seemed appeased moving into step behind North. He was grateful that on the return trip, all the reindeer had been placed back into their pens, and there was no Frost in sight. The yeti had continued work in the time that North and Pitch had been gone, although not much other than a few frames had been completed in their absence. The sun had crested high into the air, and Pitch was sure to cling to the wall of the building as they walked back to the landfill site and to quickly move under the already built structure of the conveyer belt to stay clear of any further exposure. In this particular area, it was a bit difficult to remain out of direct sunlight since the conveyer’s structure had several holes where the sunlight bled through like dangerous laser beams.

North put his hands on his hips as he peered down at Pitch. "Is there any job that you prefer to do?" he asked. "I will be merciful on you and let you choose job you feel you can do in shade. But it has to be something to do with rebuilding conveyor."

Pitch blinked unsure of what he could really do that would also keep his hand or himself from getting further injured. He shrugged, “Uh… I don’t really know the process of what I really can do. Any suggestions?"

North looked around, reaching to grab a broom that was propped against the nearest beam. “Why don’t you start by sweeping. I will talk to Dave and see what he can come up with."

Pitch’s brow rose, “Sweeping? At a landfill? What am I supposed to sweep?” Pitch didn’t find the task to be deemed useful at all and had to wonder as with all the other tasks he’d been made to do how it was really helping to erect the conveyer system any faster over just being a waste of time.

North pointed down at the clutter and scraps from the construction. "Just sweep it out of way so no one gets hurt." he said before walking away to find Dave.

Pitch grumbled as he began sweeping the scraps in a lethargic manner not overly committed at all to the assignment he’d been tasked with. Why couldn’t the yetis just watch where they were going? This was all so pointless! Pitch fumed as he moseyed along.

After several minutes of being in deep conversation with Dave, complete with pointing and other hand gestures, North lumbered over to Pitch, “Dave says you can help paint sides of chute and also inlay screws within whole thing to secure it.”

Pitch dropped the broom unceremoniously, “Well… the screws at least sound useful; I can’t say the same for the painting. What does a garbage conveyer need paint for anyway? It’s not like anyone cares to look at it for any form of aesthetic value… it’s a garbage chute for stars sake!” Pitch crossed his arms looking disdainfully at the structure as he criticized the work he was being given.

North frowned. “That is not for you to question. You are here to do work—work that is result of your so-called accident. If I were you, I would watch how you complain. If you had not released robot, none of us would be here right now.”

Pitch frowned to be reminded of the robot incident, "Fine. It doesn't matter I guess; busy work or actual work, it doesn't seem to make a difference since the things you're giving me to do are the epitome of simplicity and don't really seem to have any actual contribution to the rebuilding of the
conveyor belt.” Pitch stated unenthusiastically feeling like his role in the reconstruction was a farce. An imbecile or a toddler could do what he was being asked to do, and he felt insulted to say the least.

“Yeah, you would say that.” said North. “When you’re ready to start actual work, Dave has already set out what you need over there.”

Pitch’s eyes followed where North had pointed, and he moved begrudgingly towards the tools he was going to use. There was a work belt that had three compartments, and in each compartment there were screws, washers, and bolts separated for use. Pitch picked up the massive belt wrapping it around his waist, but it was apparently tailored to fit someone with much wider hips like North or a yeti. Pitch tried to get the belt to work, but after several minutes ending in frustration, Pitch buckled the belt and flung it across his chest like a slung bow looking quite ridiculous with the oversized belt draped across him awkwardly while he stormed agitated back to North. He spat angrily, “How am I supposed to even use this?”

North shook his head, sighing. “Never mind, Pitch; you do not need to have it on you to use what’s inside.”

“No, but it would be a lot more convenient… but that’s right; we don’t want anything to be convenient for me do we?” Pitch growled as he trudged off towards the structure.

North ignored Pitch's complaining as he walked over to give some nearby yetis a helping hand with the beams.

Pitch sighed as he looked over the framework not exactly sure where the screws were supposed to go and a little reticent to ask, so he just stood idly by awaiting instruction. He could ask he supposed, but since he didn’t really feel like he was actively contributing, Pitch figured it was just as well to be doing nothing and watching the others work since it seemed the whole point was for him to be out here, and the others to fix the conveyor while he was in attendance.

Pitch observed that North seemed to be doing the most work, it was impressive to see how fast the man could move and the amount of weight he could heft as he picked up huge steal columns that were used to stage the base of much of the structure. This construction was going to be far superior to the previous conveyor that much was obvious. North was an inventor after all, so it really wasn’t surprising he’d come up with all new improvements to his previous design.

Dave grunted irritably from behind Pitch.

Pitch turned toward Dave sizing him with a simple raise of his brow, “Oh, I suppose you’ve come to assist me?” He stated cheekily with a small smirk at the yeti’s annoyance.

Dave walked over, picked up a screwdriver and a screw and demonstrated to the Boogeyman exactly what he was supposed to do. Then he shoved the screwdriver into Pitch’s hand and stepped back, crossing his arms over his chest.

Pitch squinted his eyes in disdain at the yeti’s bold posturing. Dave stood over him like he thought he was North or something! This irked Pitch greatly, and he sneered, “Thanks for the demonstration; I think I’ve got it now, so you can scamper off,” he made a shooing motion with his hand.

Dave grunted, pointing from Pitch to the beam, obviously wanting to see Pitch do it before he left.

Huffing Pitch put his hands on his hips, “I’ve got nothing to prove to you! I think I can screw in a bloody screw without supervision!” What did he think he was incompetent? I mean really, how difficult did he think screwing in a screw could be? Pitch had only been unsure what part of the
structure needed screwing not how to use the blasted tool after all.

Dave again pointed, wanting to see Pitch do the job before he left.

“Persistent aren’t you?” Pitch mused humorlessly. It was grating on his nerves the way this yeti wouldn’t leave, but not wishing to get North involved, Pitch finally acquiesced snatching a screw from inside one of the pouches and violently screwing it in just to vent his frustrations before turning a fuming glare back to Dave as he spat, “There; are you happy? If so, do us both a favor, leave me to my work, and go away!”

"What is matter?” North asked, turning to look at Pitch while he held a beam in place for the yetis to weld.

Pitch sobered hearing North’s voice boom across the field as his eyes darted in his direction, “Oh nothing, nothing at all North. Dave was just checking out my work; he'll be heading back your way in a moment.” He looked back up to give Dave a glare speaking under his breath, “Won’t you… Dave,” Pitch drew out the yeti’s name with a hint of malice. He wanted to just be left alone now, and he hoped the yeti took the hint.

Dave gave Pitch a withering glare, then pointed from his eyes to Pitch in a silent gesture of ‘I’ll be watching you.’ Then he walked slowly away to join North.

Pitch merely smirked lifting a brow as he chuckled, “Indeed.” He watched the yeti leave with no less than a little amusement. He might have to do something extra special for Dave he decided as he went back to work casually thinking on how best he could get under the yeti’s skin. Oh this was going to be fun!

When Dave stopped next to North, the two engaged in conversation a few minutes, occasionally glancing over at Pitch. One of the times, North gave Pitch a scowl before turning back to Dave.

Pitch never noticed the exchange as he’d moved to begin screwing in the bottom tier foundations. As with all the tasks he took on, Pitch plodded along halfheartedly showing no real interest in the work he was doing, but with a lack of anything else he was allowed to do, he got lost in his head as he did this mindless task. Pitch couldn’t help thinking that as soon as this task was over, he could finally get back to some semblance of normalcy… at least what passed as normalcy for his life these days. It was disheartening to see how far he’d fallen, as he thought on it, it hurt deep down. He felt he was falling further and further away from the path he needed to be on, and it made him feel lost at sea because he couldn’t really fathom what he needed to do to get himself back on track other than to just get through this hell he was currently suffering. That was a hard pill to swallow.

When the yetis finished welding the beam in place, they decided to take a break. So North walked over to where Pitch was, taking out his handkerchief to mop his face with.

Pitch glanced at him seemingly unimpressed as he carried on the placement of screws slowly and meticulously, “I see the renovations are coming along …swimmingly,” he smirked at North letting his eyes graze over to him before turning back to his work to continue on drearily.

“As well as can be expected,” North answered.

Pitch’s brow rose, “And what was your expectations,” Pitch asked tilting his head curious to know exactly what North had meant.

North just shrugged, stuffing the handkerchief back in one of his pockets. He waved to Pitch to carry on what he was doing.
After three hours of screwing these screws in and silently observing North and the yetis work, it had
given Pitch time to simmer down and eventually reflect on his current behavior. The Cossack and the
yetis had taken another break, and North not saying a word came up to sidle up next to Pitch once
more.

Pitch watched North a moment before turning back to his task, his mind drifted on the reasoning
behind doing this in the first place once more, the reason why any of them were out here toiling
away, and he felt a pang of guilt resurface. He sighed glancing back to North, “You know…” Pitch
didn’t really know what to say he realized. He looked back to the structure considering a moment, “I
know I haven’t exactly been the most cordial lately… and… and I’m sorry.” This whole punishment
had gotten under his skin, and he felt like it was affecting Pitch and North’s relationship negatively.
He was to blame for this Pitch had realized, and as much as all of this was grating on him, he wanted
to at least attempt to make amends while he was feeling amiable enough to do so. With his mood
swings as of late, he never knew what state he’d find himself in from moment to moment. While he
felt the urge to apologize, he wanted to go ahead and act on it.

North nodded. "I accept your apology."

Pitch was glad to hear North so readily accept his apology, but this made him somehow feel the need
to explain himself further as he stared up at North imploringly, “Please understand… I’m not trying
to be difficult. Honestly, I don’t know why I let my anger get the best of me so often. I know this,”
he waved around the landfill site, “…this is all my fault. I do feel bad about having been the one to
orchestrate its making, and I try to tell myself that when I feel my anger welling up inside me. Just…
often times, it gets pushed down in the throes of whatever I’m feeling at the moment. I’m not saying
this as an excuse for my actions… I’m just saying that I can see where I’ve been in the wrong. I’m
trying to get better at controlling myself, but… it can be …challenging to say the least under such
circumstances.”

North silently listened, nodding when Pitch had finished. "I am glad you understand that this is your
fault. I was beginning to wonder if you had learned anything at all from all of this. Sometimes it is
hard to tell. As for anger, I have already said we will focus on this when I teach you magic. You
need to learn to control temper and get control of anger. I suspect that fearlings cause your anger
issues."

Pitch wished he could blame it on the fearlings, and in part he could, but through the eons of having
them housed within him, they had become more of a backdrop to his own feelings over controlling
him like they once had when they were a stronger entity within their own right. Since his possession
though, their hold on him had been severely diminished mostly because becoming Pitch hadn’t been
wholly disagreeable to Kozmotis Pitchiner.

Kozmotis wasn’t easily denied, and while in his grief, he had allowed the fearlings to reign over him
and bury much of who he was just to let his anger run rampant as a conduit of their planned
destruction. He had wanted nothing more than to just stop feeling, and the fearlings eagerly gave him
this respite from his own despair using his body to enact atrocities across the galaxy while letting him
hide deep down within his own subconscious watching it all as if in a dream state.

When he’d crashed to Earth so long ago and had been trapped for what felt like a thousand years, the
control of the fearlings began to fade. They were a much weaker entity to the man that retained them.
In time, countless years that passed, their presence had dematerialized into more of a reaction to his
own impulses. When he was angry, they fueled it, when he caused fear, they thrummed enjoyment
through his senses, and when he felt sorrow and desperation, they lapped against it like a wave to
help him sink further. In some ways, Pitch had become a worse prison for them than the one they
had broken free from to originally possess him because even though they were able to gain the
devastation they had craved for, now they had been reduced to nothing more than a hormone or endorphin within their host. They did however have their own secret revenge upon him in the moments when he slept as they plucked and prodded his strings in the only way to torment the man that they could through horrendous nightmares.

So yes, the fearlings were somewhat to be blamed for their encouragement, but Pitch was for the most part in full control of his actions these days especially having been deprived of much of his sustained power sources. Pitch stared up at North warily as he considered his statement only remarking, “They don’t help the way I feel,” he looked away after saying as much feeling slightly shamed in his half-truth more so because he knew how truly at fault he really was. Pitch was unsure how truthful he wished to be concerning the fearlings to North since they did make for a rather convenient scape goat.

North regarded Pitch a moment. "Either way, we still need to work on reining in that anger of yours."

Pitch hesitated a moment before nodding lightly in agreement, “Uh… yes,” he said sheepishly looking around at their progress before continuing, “From what we’ve accomplished today, how much longer do you see these repairs taking?”

North glanced over everything. "Is hard to say. We’ve got to finish with new frame, then paint and put siding on, then repair damages to conveyor belt, not to mention other minor details. How fast we get it done depends on how fast we work and how much we get done in day’s time."

“Do… do you think it’ll run past Saturday?” Pitch tried to question offhandedly, but his concern that they wouldn’t leaked through in his tone.

North lifted an eyebrow. "I certainly hope not."

“Oh…” Pitch replied regrettably before going quiet as he thought on the fact that he most likely would not be able to have that dinner with Toothiana then.

"I would like to get it done as soon as possible. I am losing valuable time I could spend on my normal work." North continued.

“Well… maybe I can help you catch up with some of the work you’ve fallen behind on… uh… just to get you caught up as soon as we finish the conveyor system?” Pitch was hoping that he could worm a few more days of work out of North to keep him from having to start the grounding before Saturday, so he might still be able to eek by spending that evening with Toothiana, and if he played his cards right, he might even be able to tend to the reindeer during that time. This was of course hopeful thinking on his part he knew.

"I appreciate offer, but no. You have grounding to start as soon as we finish with this, remember?” said North.

Pitch grimaced, of course he remembered… how could he forget? He swallowed, “I… I know, I was just thinking that I might help you first… for a couple days, and then I could commence with the grounding… to you know… get you back up to speed and all.”

"No, Pitch,” North shook his head.

Pitch sighed feeling defeated by the flat no, but he knew better than to push any further, “Okay then… can’t say I didn’t offer.” He turned back to the structure a dismal look plastering his features now as he silently went back to working. Several of the yeti had switched out during the course of
the day, and Dave had left for a couple hours in the afternoon to presumably eat lunch. Now the sun
was waning in the sky, and Pitch had to ask, “When are we going to be done for the day?”

"We can be done now if you have finished work Dave gave you to do."

Pitch looked down the line, he hadn’t exactly been working at any sort of diligent pace, “Well… the
job he gave me is going to take days to complete since the whole structure hasn’t even been built
yet.” Pitch failed to mention the fact that he could have kept pace with what had been built, but as of
now he was several hours behind them.

"I wasn't referring to all of it. I was talking about what has been built today. The part of structure that
has been rebuilt in today’s time is your job right now."

Pitch pouted, “But that’s still hours of work! Why can’t I just do it tomorrow when everyone else
comes back to work.” Pitch pointed at all the yetis finishing up putting their tools away while others
were already trudging back to the entrance. Pitch scowled now thinking that if North did make him
stay, that he would also have to stay, and Pitch could make the chore take much longer out of spite.
The fact that his naughty list was locked away in his room would at least ensure he’d get away with
it this time.

North scowled. "So? It is not my fault if you didn't keep up with pace of others and got behind. No,
you will not do it tomorrow. You were expected to do it today! You will have more to do tomorrow.
Right now, you will stay later and get it caught up." he pointed a finger at Pitch. "And if you even
think of dragging it out longer than it needs to be for vindictiveness like you did reindeer, we will
have discussion when you get back to room."

North must have gotten some inkling of what Pitch had planned from the smug look that had crossed
his face thinking on the deed, but that smirk fell quickly away at the promise of impending
punishment. Pitch scowled angrily spinning back to his task as he fumed visibly. He snatched screws
from the bag violently (or as violently as on can snatch something diminutive from a pouch) and
ground the screws into their respective holes. His fury helped him to work faster for the first ten
minutes, but as it simmered, Pitch just preformed the work with a tight lipped frown. Pitch hated that
North seemed to threaten him with ominous trips to his room quite regularly now. It was unnerving,
and it always sent an immediate flush of embarrassment to hear those words coupled by the
instantaneous gut reaction to behave or 'else.' Even if he really didn’t want to cooperate, Pitch knew
that he would do as he was told in order to avoid North’s painful promise that would come to call if
he didn’t.

“And I suggest that you take time to do job right, otherwise you will be here longer to redo it.” North
said, seeing the manner in which Pitch was ramming screws into the structure. “I will tell you that if
this structure falls due to your shoddy work, you will be rebuilding it on your own.”

"It's a blasted screw for star's sake!" Pitch hissed in a barely contained rage. "I couldn't mess this job
up if I tried, but that was the point of giving this task to me wasn't it! We both know you don't trust
me to do anything else... or should I say, foreman Dave doesn't," Pitch rolled his eyes as he quoted
the yeti's name spitting it out in clear disgust.

Despite the tone Pitch was using, North stood perfectly still, his temper calm. “Pitch, if I didn’t trust
you, you would not be putting screws in structure and you would not be taking care of reindeer. And
you would not have freedom to wander about my home as you do. When you are given job, whether
that job is pleasant or unpleasant, it is your responsibility and duty to do it right and do it with care.
All jobs have potential to be messed up. It may be just screw to you, but it helps to insure this
structure does not fall! And you are putting screws in it because you cannot handle being in sun. I
have shown you small mercy by finding work that you can easily do that will keep you as far away
from sun as possible! Regardless of the amount of whining and protesting you do, you are going to help rebuild that which you destroyed!” North’s voice rose a little. “You just got through saying a few hours ago that you do not try to be difficult, and I accepted your apology. Don’t contradict yourself and prove your own words wrong. Your anger is flaring again, and if you don’t work to get it under control, you will find yourself in very bad predicament.”

There it was again, and just as every other time he’d been given a warning that he was approaching a point of no return, his anger quelled and retreated to fester deep down. His jaw worked with his contained fury, but he knew better than to release the bitter insults and snappy retorts that clawed across his mind to yell at the top of his lungs. A mental image of hurling the screwdriver and belt pack into the landfill site was all the venting he granted himself as a twinge of remembered pain flared across his backside that still wore the remnants of the strapping he’d received two days prior and the hand spanking he’d received on top of it yesterday afternoon. It was enough for him to know it was best to shut his mouth now.

Instead, he let out a small mewl of unhappiness and a wavering, "I... I'll do it right!" His frustrations were becoming so great, it was hard to contain his emotions, he was on the verge of tears just to find an outlet to how badly he wanted to rage, and his lip worked up and down displaying how close he was to losing himself as he pushed himself now to just fall into the work in front of him and not burst out screaming.

North nodded. “Glad to hear it,” he put a hand on the structure and patted it. “If you have hard time dedicating yourself to task, just think of it as reindeer. Think of it as living thing that needs caring for. You would not half do your job with deer. No. You care too much for them. Instead, you take your time and you make sure you do everything right. Why can’t you do same with this?”

Pitch found it hard to speak now as he listened to North just taking in long breaths to ebb the vexations he was still feeling. He ground out carefully so as not to let his anger take hold as he spoke, but there was a definite hardness to his words, and the longer he spoke, the more venom tinged his words, “I like the reindeer; they are worth my attentions. This?” He pointed viciously at the structure, “Is something I’m being made to do. I’ll do it because I do want to make it up to you for what I’ve done, but make no mistake that I in no way am dedicated outside of getting this done and over with! This in no way compares to working with the reindeer, so of course I’m not going to view it as the same! It’s ridiculous to even think I could.” Pitch grumbled finishing his tangent going back to fastening the screws in roughly as a point that he was still quite upset with the conversation.

“Fine, have your way then,” said North, waving a hand, obviously done with Pitch’s negative attitude. “You are doing this as part of punishment, Pitch, and also to teach you responsibility. You broke it through unruly actions, so you are being made to correct it. I am glad that you at least want to make it up to me. But I also hope that you learn something through it, too, and not just stand there and stew in anger and dwell on how to get even with everyone around you. One of these days, and I hope it is soon, you will suddenly wake up to realize that everything you have been made to suffer has been brought down on your head by yourself. You can be bitter toward me or Dave or whoever else all you want, but in end, you are hurting no one but yourself.”

Pitch scowled as deeply as he could muster listening to North’s words and squinting his eyes hatefully at the scaffolding as a new level of wrath built within him. North was on his high and mighty horse again, and Pitch quickly tuned him out not wanting to hear his words of wisdom as they only served to raise his ire even further than he possibly thought he could contain. The last thing Pitch wanted to hear was that he’d brought this on himself mostly because he knew it was true, and he hated to be reminded of the fact. He was actively baring his teeth now from the aggravation he was holding in. He wasn’t bitter at North or even Dave! They just continued to nettle him! They were egging him on for star’s sake! Pitch continued to seethe letting his rage out through his task
now as he jammed the screws into their fittings ferociously tightening them as he worked to finish as quickly as he possibly could if only to escape North’s self-righteous speeches.

North sighed wearily and turned away from Pitch. He could only hope some of what he said stuck in between Pitch's ears and didn't go in one side and out the other. He was tired of lecturing the man, but he didn't know what else to do aside from taking him outback and wearing him out until he couldn't sit for a month. North didn't like the thought of doing that. There was such a thing as overdoing spanking, and he definitely didn't want that to happen. What's more, he couldn't force Pitch to change. He could try his best to see that Pitch did change and even encourage good behavior, but it was going to be Pitch's choice and his choice alone to commit himself fully to change. North could only do so much on his end. The rest was Pitch's responsibility.

Pitch worked as fast as he could, and after an hour’s time he’d managed to, for the most part, work off the pent up irritations he’d been feeling on and off through the day. It didn’t help that he was deliriously tired from lack of sleep, the work, and the burn that constantly chafed and itched. At some point, Pitch finally found some semblance of inner peace as he worked in silence just moving from point to point along the structure. Sometimes he just needed to be alone with his thoughts to sort through the rash of emotions he was feeling. What did North expect from him? Pitch understood that this was punishment, and he knew what he needed to do make it right. This all sounded easy in his head, and he was even agreeable to doing so, but as he went through actively having to face these consequences things became warped and twisted. He wasn’t exactly a team player to begin with, but North expected him to face these punishments with an air of optimism that he simply didn’t have. He was moody and self-serving, and as much as he wanted to be what North expected him to be, he didn’t know how to emotionally bring himself there. It was definitely a work in progress.

Once the anger had died away, the last hour of his work he was melancholy. Sinking into a depressed state, Pitch ruminated that no matter what he did, he just didn’t seem to be able to get it right. He sighed tiredly as he finally turned the last screw. The sun had gone down an hour ago, and Pitch was drained both physically and emotionally. With slumped shoulders depicting just how dragged out Pitch felt, he glanced up to North before looking back down despondently stating, “Everything is done now… you can check my work if you wish. I didn’t mess up your framework with my horrible workmanship I promise.” His tone was sullen and defeated now with no trace of the anger that had previously dominated their conversation.

North nodded. “No, I am not going to check it out. I trust that you did job well. Besides, that is for Dave to do.” he waved Pitch to follow. “Come, we will go back to Pole.”

Pitch didn’t lift his head and only nodded wearily as he trudged behind North.

North led Pitch back to the Pole and eventually to his bedroom. “I will have some food brought to you if you wish.” he said, opening the door for Pitch to enter.

Pitch turned to North as he entered looking at him pitifully like a condemned man. Pitch knew he was about to be closed in his room for the remainder of the night. It was only around 7PM, and he was primarily a night owl. He was exhausted and truly needed rest, but he didn’t want to just go to sleep after having spent the entire day toiling away. The thought of that being his entire day was rather dismal. He just stared wordlessly at North unsure what to say since saying, ‘I don’t want to be left here all alone for the rest of the night,’ just sounded juvenile even if it was how he was feeling. He looked away then shaking his head, “Uh… no. I don’t need any food,” he said softly.

North lifted an eyebrow, giving a curt nod. "Alright."
Pitch absently rubbed at his wounded hand, and as North answered, his eyes darted up with a surge of anxiety as he sputtered, “Will... will you be coming back?” He needed some affirmation that what he feared was true. He hated the way he sounded so desperate. It was sickening; he mentally chided himself for even asking the question at all. He doubted North wanted anything to do with him now though, and on some level, he couldn’t really blame the man if he didn’t. In fact he more than expected to be abandoned post haste after the day that they had shared where he gave the man nothing but problems.

“I need to catch up on my work before calling it a night.” North replied. “However, you are welcome to come to office if you want. Although I do ask that you let me work this time.”

Pitch seemed to visibly relax to hear this and a small smile graced his face as he nodded, “Sure. That sounds great; just give me about ten minutes to freshen up.” Since his stay at North’s, a few weeks back, North and his yetis had taken the back closet of his room and had turned it into a quaint bathroom with a shower and a sink with a small toothbrush holder (which was Toothiana’s request and who regularly checked the condition of the brush and toothpaste levels with North to make sure Pitch had a steady supply for good hygiene.) It was a nice addition to the room and saved having to watch out for yeti hair clogs and all other sorts of awfulness of using a public bathing station at the North Pole.

North nodded, walking into the bedroom with Pitch. He sat down in the rocking chair to wait.

Pitch queried, “If you’d like, you can grab a shower as well, and just come back by to pick me up on your way to the office? I... it might take me a little longer with this,” Pitch held up his bandaged hand. He assumed the big man would also likely want a shower especially since he had done a lot more physical work than he had.

"That is good idea." North said, getting up and walking to the door. "Do you want me to bring new bandages for hand?"

Pitch nodded, “That would be great; all the nurse gave me was a tube of the ointment,” as Pitch said this, he dug the lotion out of his robe and placed it on the dresser.

North smiled. "I will be back then," he said as he walked through the door, closing it behind him.

Pitch was feeling much better now just to have seen North smile and to know he was coming back for him. After North departed, Pitch shed his clothes rinsing them out in the shower and ringing them out to hang on the door like a pair of pantyhose since that was about the lightness of the material.

Pitch climbed into the shower groaning as the warm water pelted his skin. As an entity of shadow, his skin wasn’t porous like North or Jack, and as such, he didn’t sweat like they did, but the modern conveniences of a shower was a remarkable invention, and it was just comforting to feel clean. He had to be careful with his hand and left the bandage on until right before he got out of the shower lightly cleaning the wound and discarding the bandage. It was already looking much better be was pleased to see. The warmth of the shower had relaxed him too much, and Pitch’s eyes fluttered as he wrapped the fluffy robe that North had given him on.

He was feeling so tired! He sighed walking over to the bed to lay down to relax a moment, and then he would get dressed he decided. Pitch laid his head down on the pillow just taking in deep breaths and feeling the aches in his muscles before curling his knees into his chest. Maybe he’d just shut his eyes for a minute, and then he’d get dressed before North came to fetch him. These were the last thoughts Pitch remembered before passing out breathing in and out soft snores, a testament to how exhausted he was. It had been a rigorous day.
About twenty minutes later, North came back to Pitch’s room to find the Boogeyman fast asleep. He hesitated, wondering whether or not he should wake him. Finally, he walked over and shook Pitch’s shoulder. “Pitch,” he called, softly.

Pitch sucked in a breath lifting his head, “Okay …five more minutes,” he mumbled his lashes fluttered revealing glassed over eyes that lulled back in his head before he collapsed back onto the pillow mumbling something incoherent followed by more heavy intakes of breath. He had not actually awoken, his body had just reacted and synapses fired to react, but no one was piloting the aircraft it was apparent.

North shook his head and smiled. He didn't want to wake Pitch fully, knowing he was exhausted after the day's work, so he set about dressing his hand in the fresh bandages. When North finished, he pulled the covers over Pitch and tucked him in, turning out the lamp and exiting the room.
Chapter Thirty-Seven

Pitch blinked rubbing at his eyes tiredly upon hearing North calling his name. When he’d passed out, he had really passed out! And at the request of North, the added help of Sandy aided Pitch to remain sleeping peacefully through the night. Of course Pitch was none the wiser as he blearily took in the covers laid over him and finally North standing above him. His eyes finally focused, “North? Oh… sorry, I must have passed out. I’m up! I’m up! Just give me a moment, and I… I’ll get dressed, so we can get to your workshop. I didn’t mean to fall asleep on you.”

"Pitch, it is morning. Time for another day of work." said North. "I trust you slept well."

His senses hadn’t fully caught up to speed, but as he digested what North said, Pitch reflected surprise as he slowly sat up, “It… It’s morning?” He finally took in the comforter that had been draped over him and then his wounded hand that had carefully been tended to, “I… I didn’t realize I was that tired,” he stated in awe that he’d actually slept all night long. He did feel well rested though, and with a good night’s rest, his mood was much improved.

"I tried waking you when I brought bandages, but you were out like light. So I bandaged your hand and left you to sleep." said North.

Pitch looked down once more to his hand, North had done a fine job wrapping it, “Thank you. I can barely feel the bandage by the way you wrapped it. It… my hand, feels much better today. I feel much better today.” He thought on the way they had left off at the landfill site and decided to add, “I… I’ll be sure to keep up today, so we won’t have to stay late.” It embarrassed him to say this, but some part thought he owed it to North as a silent apology and a promise for a better day.

"You're welcome," North nodded. "And I am glad to hear that."

It was so cozy under these sheets, Pitch almost hated to leave them or his soft bathrobe that North had given him, not yet wanting to get dressed and start the day. The robe was a stark white of the finest cotton that plumed around Pitch in its fluffiness; it was an odd contrast to his ashen gray skin and normally sleek black attire. Pitch was thankful for the warmth it provided as he folded back the sheets to climb out of bed and meet the cool morning air.

He mused at the simple pleasantries he'd started to find he really enjoyed now. He'd neglected these kinds of modest pleasures having always gone without them while living alone in a dank hole for over a millennia. Little things, like the feeling of his new bed with its ultra-soft downy comforters that radiated warmth brought him prickles of joy; he also delighted in modern comforts too like bodywash that left his skin tingly and shampoo that left his hair feeling silky instead of stiff (even though it still stood up impossibly having a life of its own.) These things he could always do without just like the warm home cooked meals that left a fondness for taste, but now these things gave something more that Pitch couldn’t put his finger on other than that they made him feel good, happy even.

These thoughts absently floated through his mind as his bare feet met the cold wooden floor. He shakily stood, his body working to find its equilibrium through a sleep addled brain that had him stumbling for his clothes in a semi dream-like state (Sandy had given him a little more dreamsand than necessary.)
Pitch was unaware that these thoughts had come about to settle pleasingly into his subconscious mainly because of Sandy’s handiwork. That night, Sandy had gently coiled his dreamsands around a practically comatose Pitch; this fact made it very simple to poke and prod about to find happy thoughts within the nightmare king’s subconscious which usually was a rigorous task for the dream weaver, but had notably been getting easier Sandy had perceived as time went by and Pitch let his guards down more. It was even easier tonight. Sandy was grateful for the welcomed ease of pulling things to the surface that Pitch could find unburdening contentment with. He had found the fact that such small items of comfort would create such good dreams for Pitch amusing and in some regards a little sad. They had however worked wonders to give Pitch a cheery disposition as he dressed and readied himself to start his day with North on a positive note.

He gave North a bright smile, "I'm ready when you are. Lead the way."

North led Pitch to the landfill, this time taking a different exit and path so Pitch wouldn’t have to see the reindeer stables and Jack Frost caring for them. Once they arrived, Dave was already there, waiting.

It didn’t go unnoticed that North had taken the time to go a different route, so Pitch would not have to face the fact that Jack was caring for the reindeer. He thought on this quietly as they walked, and when they made it back around to the landfill site to stop and await instruction from Dave, Pitch sidled up next to North and quietly stated, "Thank you."

North simply nodded in reply before turning to engage in a lengthy conversation with Dave. When it ended, North turned to Pitch. “You will resume your work with screws, following along as they rebuild frame.”

Pitch nodded moving over to where the belt pouch was, and deciding since he only needed the screws that the pouch was unnecessary. He grabbed a few handfuls of screws and pocketed them as well as grabbing the screwdriver. He was in a much calmer state today having had a great night’s sleep followed by the pleasant waking by North. He didn’t feel so weighed down now without having to carry the bulky belt pouch, and everyone was leaving him to do his work in peace which he found he liked best. The breeze was blowing away from the landfill to help mask the smell, and the sky was gray and cloudy, so even the work environment was a little nicer.

Pitch was sure to keep up as the yetis and North worked now, and having done so, he was able to observe them as they progressed along at a fairly quick clip. This was much more interesting than before since he could get a good look without also getting in the way and angering the working yetis like he had the day before. He even got a thumbs up from Dave as the yeti did a quick inspection of his work.

This wasn’t so bad, Pitch thought, feeling much better about the prospects of finishing the reconstruction as long as the rest of the time was spent as agreeably as today. Surprisingly, Pitch even found a smile to grace his face on occasion when he saw something particularly amazing. North had so many odd gadgets to use as tools to lift things or suspend yetis into the air to progress the work efficiently that it really was quite fantastic to witness.

Dave announced that it was time for a break, and North lumbered over to sit down on a crate next to Pitch’s work area. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his face. “So how’s it going?” he asked the Boogeyman.

Pitch beamed, “Rather well. I’m keeping up this time, so I suppose I’ll join you,” as he said this, Pitch pulled himself up to sit on a nearby crate as his eyes moved about the site watching everyone a moment before turning a smile onto North, “We’re moving right along! At this rate, we’ll have the structure to the landfill by the end of the day,” he said promisingly.
“Yes,” North nodded, inspecting the work. “It is encouraging. Tomorrow, I am sure you will begin painting sides of conveyor.”

Pitch agreed, “I wouldn’t doubt it; although I’m not fully sure the process to know what stage we’d be at in the building construction. I’ve been rather impressed to see the usage of all the different doodads you come up with. You never cease to astonish North. Either way, we are going much faster today than yesterday.”

North chuckled at Pitch’s enthusiasm. He seemed like a totally different person from what he had been the previous day, which was a great relief. Of course, they were going much faster. Pitch wasn’t in a soured mood. But North kept that remark to himself.

Pitch seemed pleased enough just looking about and taking in the scene before turning back to North, “Will you wish to eat today when the yetis break for lunch? I think today they are supposed to have pizza,” Pitch brightened at the prospect, pizza was another food that Pitch had grown fond of as was most of the Pole’s residents, so there was always plenty of piping hot slices getting put out to devour.

North looked at Pitch. “I didn’t know you cared for food.”

Pitch ducked his head as if to admit this to North was a dirty secret, “Well… I didn’t know I did, but… I like to try things now and then. Just …I don’t know. It’s not really necessary,” he chuckled softly as the small smile he had been wearing was tugged into a wider one, “But… it can be … different I suppose, and that’s kind of nice.” He had been getting attached to taste these days, but after eating with Toothiana, he’d also kind of enjoyed the act of doing so with another person. It was comforting and just felt right in an unexplainable way. He had liked it (the part before the elves of course not what came after which he very much did not like!)

After yesterday, Pitch had wanted to feel better about his relationship with North, so the idea had just come to him that the two of them might enjoy such a thing, and the yetis would be breaking then as well, so it gave a perfect excuse. Not to mention North definitely enjoyed food!

North eyed Pitch curiously, finally nodding. “Sure, we can have pizza for lunch, if that is what you want.” He smiled. "I think that will be enjoyable." Whatever made Pitch happy, North was willing to go with it.

Pitch seemed to brighten all the more as he nodded his agreement. Things were going much better he decided. He moved off of the crate on his own volition, “Looks like everyone is coming back,” Pitch didn’t want to be told to get back to work feeling content enough to return to work quietly on his own. He wasn’t in a need to hurry, but getting a few more screws in now would mean he could spend a few minutes later just observing without worry of falling behind. The task was mindless, and yesterday when he was feeling disgruntled it only fueled his irritation. Today though, it served as a window to just think, and that was what he had been doing. He really was making this all much harder on himself than it needed to be he’d decided finally accepting fully this part of his punishment and just trying to make the best of it.

North regarded him proudly; marveling over how much Pitch had changed overnight. He finally came to the conclusion that Pitch had been overly exhausted the previous day. If only Pitch could stay on the path he was now on, he thought.

The next three hours seemed to fly by as the crew pounded out section after section. Pitch had to work a little more diligently just to keep up with their pace, but Pitch didn’t mind since it made the time until lunch come go by that much faster.
Dave harrumphed out a loud call for lunch, and yetis began climbing down from the scaffolding and placing their gear down readying themselves to go eat.

North had disappeared shortly before the call for lunch came. And now he was returning, walking down the path that led from the Pole, carrying two covered plates in his hands. He sat down on a crate, motioning for Pitch to come and join him.

Pitch gladly moved over to where North was and quickly settled down on one of the crates looking curiously to see what North had brought, “It smells wonderful!” He stated already sensing his mouth start to water which was another odd sensation that he’d not experienced much of until lately. All these sensations although superfluous were unwittingly bringing Pitch closer to his sense of humanity. It did Pitch well to share and enjoy simple pleasures that he’d so easily discarded previously because he had seen them to not serve any purpose once the memory of such things had been long forgotten and the act considered to be a waste of time, but now it served to bring him quite a bit of happiness.

Smiling, North handed Pitch one of the plates, removing the cloth from it to reveal three large slices of pizza. “You said you wanted pizza, so I brought pizza. Enjoy!” he said, taking the cloth off his own plate to reveal the same.

Pitch’s eyes bulged, “That’s a lot of pizza! Uh, do you think you can eat two of these? I… I think if I ate that much I’d never get back to work saying I could eat it all to begin with,” as he said this, Pitch looked through the three available slices hungrily picking up the one slathered in assorted meats as he delicately nibbled and savored the first bite. Cheese, meat, sauce, and bread… who ever had invented putting these wonderful things together in such a way was a genius Pitch decided as he greedily took another bite.

North shrugged. "If you do not want them, I will take them. I did not know how many you wanted."

“Sorry… I still don’t eat much, but this slice will be quite heavenly and hard to finish on its own. Thank you for going to get them. I always dislike moving through crowds, and I can imagine it’s quite full down there at this time. I usually go as early as possible to avoid the noise and mobs,” Pitch mused quite pleased that the cloud cover had remained as well at the steady breeze leaving this a rather serene meal to share.

North watched Pitch as they both ate. He couldn’t help but be fascinated over the Boogeyman’s sudden desire to eat. Of course, he had seen him wolf down Bunny’s chocolate, but he hadn’t realized that Pitch had been eating other foods. It sent an excitement through him that he couldn’t explain.

Pitch pulled at the cheese as the melted bits tried to remain with the other part of the slice of pizza, and he played with it slurping it up in delight and enjoying its texture as well as the flavor. Yetis really were good at this cooking thing! He’d only finished half of his slice before North was grabbing the remaining two from his own plate. Pitch let out a mirthful chuckle, “How do you even taste it to devour it so fast North?” Pitch teased playfully.

North lifted his eyebrows. “Oh, I taste it perfectly.” he simply answered. "But then again, I'm used to eating."

Pitch thought, ‘Oh believe me I know you can eat!’ But he was tactful enough to keep that to himself. Instead he smiled giving a nod, “I would suppose your memory serves you well in regard to flavor then. Food still settles oddly in my stomach like an uncomfortable lump if I intake too much at a time. I can’t even tell you how badly I suffered after gorging on Bunnymund’s chocolate! My stomach protested its presence for hours! It was so very worth it though,” Pitch beamed as his eyes
moved upward his face taking on a wistful glee at the memory, “That was … fun. I look forward to getting back to that.” Pitch said looking down a hint of sorrow shading his words and features even though he tried to hide it. He didn’t want to dampen the mood by thinking about the fact that it wasn’t going to be happening again anytime soon.

North let out an amused laugh. "Oh, believe me, I remember how you were after eating chocolate. I have never seen sugar rush like that in my life."

Pitch's face flushed at the mention of the sugar rush; he'd been bouncing off the walls! He vaguely remembered talking up a storm on a jittery high followed by a crash so hard that he'd passed out and North had carried him from the warren to his bed to sleep it off. Pitch cleared his throat, "Uh... that's not one of my proudest moments." He quickly took another bite off of his slice of pizza to hide the awkwardness he felt to be reminded of how ridiculous he must have looked that day being carried to bed by North.

It was comforting to remember how good he'd felt waking up to see a refilled Easter basket as well as the bubble contraption and the painted egg that North gifted him. Thoughts on these memories and the time the three had spent painting eggs in the warren brought a warm smile to his lips and an even warmer feeling to grow in his chest. One of the best alien feelings he'd encountered having come to live with the guardians was this growing warmth, and even though it often times confused and scared Pitch, it was probably the most significant emotional response spearheading his want to fight his nature and to change for them.

North smiled. "Having moments you are not proudest of means you have lived. And that is something you should be proud of. It means you are moving in right direction."

Pitch smirked, "Perhaps, although I think in the future I'll heed Bunnymund's warnings. Those chocolates are a force to be reckoned with!" He took another bite chewing thoughtfully noticing North had demolished the last of the pizza on both plates.

"That is good idea.” North nodded. “Perhaps you would like to try some of my own candy sometime.”

Pitch regarded North curiously, "You make specialized candies? I've tried quite a few of the things that the elves get their hands on, if those are the candies you're speaking of."

"Of course I do.” North said with a chuckle. "What do you think I put in stockings along with toys?" He waved Pitch's words off. "Nah, the stuff the elves get a hold of isn't the real thing. I have yeti specially make candies for them to keep them appeased and away from real thing. If they ever got hold of real thing, they would be tearing doors down."

Pitch nodded all the more intrigued now. He hadn’t seen candies circulating, so Pitch assumed that they must get made on one of the upper tier floors that were off limits to him, "Really? Is it made in secret in one of the forbidden zones then?"

"Yes," North replied with a chuckle. "So the elves won't find it."

“Or me it would seem! But… uh, I won’t go looking for it without you,” Pitch added quickly his face flushing at the memory as he thought on how his last venture for hidden rooms had ended more than a little poorly.

“Good,” said North. "After your punishment is over, I will show you."

Pitch smiled brightly, “I think I’d like that.”
The two continued to chat about the structure of the new conveyor system, and North launched to a highly technical explanation of his plans to which Pitch was lost a few minutes into the conversation but still politely nodded in interest since the man seemed more excited the longer he spoke to the point that by the time he’d finished the description, the Cossack had jumped up onto his crate, hands splayed out grandiosely, and bellowing animatedly.

Pitch didn’t have to understand what he was talking about to enjoy North’s enthusiasm. He chuckled standing having finally finished most of his slice of pizza. “By the sounds of it, my horrible tragedy became a great excuse for you to reinvent this contraption,” Pitch jested.

"I wouldn’t put it that way." North replied. "True that some good came out of it, but I wish it could have come about differently. What you did was very dangerous."

Pitch grimaced losing eye contact as he scuffed a foot on the ground, “Believe me, I know. If you hadn’t come when you had…” Pitch shuttered at the thought, “Let’s just say I fully understand the ramifications of those poor choices now.” If he hadn’t learned from the experience alone, North’s strap most certainly had engraved it into his memory well enough not to disobey North in that regard.

The yetis were starting to trickle back on to the site now picking up their tools and returning to work.

North slowly nodded. "Whelp, I guess we need to get back to work."

Pitch picked up their garbage and tossed it into the landfill before grabbing up his screwdriver and returning to work himself. The next four hours proved to be just as productive, and as predicted, the crew had built the structure almost up to the landfill opening. Feeling encouraged, the workers agreed to put in an extra hour to go ahead and knock the remaining distance out and complete at least this part of the conveyor system in its entirety.

There was a sense of accomplishment to screw in the last screw in the structure Pitch found as he looked on to what they had put together proudly. Even if he hadn’t actually done much in the building of the frame, it still felt good to see it fully erected and to know he’d done his part to help secure it into place. The fact that the he’d also continued to keep a good pace and finish with everyone else also helped to lift his spirits. Having to stay after hours yesterday while watching everyone leave had been frustrating to say the least. Today though, he could feel fulfilled with his personal contribution because he had done his best.

“Are you ready to head back?” North asked, walking past Pitch.

Pitch hadn’t realized North had walked up on him as he spun around to face the man. He nodded, “Uh… sure. I… I don’t suppose last night’s offer to come to your office after a shower still stands does it?” Pitch was tired, but he was nowhere near as exhausted today after having such good rest as he had gotten the night before.

“Sure. If you can stay awake this time,” North said with a laugh.

Pitch laughed lightly his cheeks coloring. “I think I can manage for the rest of the evening and then some,” Pitch was feeling rather good deciding that once North decided to retire for the evening that he might spend most of the rest of his night reading or painting depending on his mood. Since Pitch often went days without sleep or rested very little, the eleven hours he’d gotten the night before could last him the remainder of building the conveyor he’d reasoned. He’d have plenty of time to sleep when he was locked up in his room for a week’s time he’d decided. Stars knew sleep would make for at least a partial escape from the loneliness and boredom that being grounded was sure to bring. He hoped if he hung out with North long enough, that maybe one of the other guardians might come by and entertain him for the remainder of the night until he had to come back out to the landfill site.
the next morning. This was ideal to spending time alone in his room of course, but the likelihood that they’d see anyone else was a low probability, not that Pitch didn’t have his hopes up.

“Alright. Let us head back, then.” North led the way back to the Pole, and eventually to Pitch’s room.

When North dropped him off, Pitch went on hurriedly getting his shower and redressing his hand. He was pleased that the ointment had seemed to help the wound heal enough that by tomorrow he would be able to discard the bandage entirely. It did itch horribly as it healed though, but that wasn’t overly concerning him among things that should be concerning him. As he waited for North to return, his eyes drifted to the mirror and the secrets held behind its frame. This brought on an instantaneous guilt and a tad bit of worry, but it faded as he assured himself that obviously the naughty list hadn’t been missed since North never mentioned it once. Still, the fact it was there niggled him. Pitch decided once he was finally off restriction he’d find a way to get rid of it more permanently.

A knock suddenly came to the door. “Are you ready?” North’s voice came from the other side.

Pitch had been standing by the dresser toying with his possessions in deep contemplative thought when the knock came. He put the painted egg North had given him back in the middle of the dresser where he’d artfully placed it to showcase the best points of the color scheme North had chosen to represent Pitch. In the month and a half that he’d become a resident of this room, so much had changed in his life, and those changes and memories of when and how they had changed him were mirrored throughout his room.

“Coming,” Pitch stated absently turning to take in the room one last time reflecting on the contrast a moment longer as he looked at the many paintings that cluttered the room, the stack of books on the bookshelf that he’d gathered from North’s library, the fluffy bathrobe that hung on a hook next to the entrance of his newly fashioned bathroom, to the dresser holding the mirror where all the previous baubles that had decorated the room had been slowly removed and found new homes at North’s behest all to make room for his own treasured belongings that now decorated the dresser’s surface. The schooner ornament had been tied to the lamp chain to dangle by his bedside, the Easter basket that Aster had given him, long since devoid of chocolate now served to hold all of his paint supplies, and the bubble contraption with all of its colorful tendrils had been neatly coiled beside the basket on the far end of the dresser. This really had become home Pitch realized, and not just in the manner of where he was being forced to live. To look at and encompass all of the subtle changes made within his room painted a bigger picture of his life here and now. Pitch brimmed with an inner happiness to take it all in leaving him to exhale contentedly, a bright smile now painting his face, as he made his way to the door to join North.
Bad Penny

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Bad Penny

Pitch was jubilant now having a spike of energy course through him to know that work for the day was over, and now it was all his time to spend doing as he wished within the confines of his current restrictions until the next morning. He peered at North and saw that the big man seemed to be feeling quite chipper himself, “So, what have you got planned to do tonight big man?” Pitch asked exuberantly.

"First I will catch up on some work in office. Then later, I might take walk to workshop to see how things are going." North replied. "Working at landfill has put me behind on a lot of things."

“Is there anything I can help you with?” Pitch asked feeling no less than a small amount of guilt for his part to play in that fact.

North shook his head. "No, not that I know of."

“Oh… okay,” Pitch stated softly feeling a bit inadequate as they moved down the hallway towards North’s office.

The hub was quite busy now with elves and yetis leaving their perspective work areas. Most were heading to the dining halls while others were just leaving, but either way, it made the area obnoxiously noisy Pitch found as he maneuvered through the crowds trying to avoid being run over. Pitch was glad to make it to North’s office having realized belatedly in his rush to avoid the mob he’d left North far behind. Pitch peeked his head back out of North’s office to see where the big man was and noted he was still a good eighty feet away. Of course every few steps he took, North was stopped by a yeti who wanted to ask a question or just converse or almost tripped by groups of elves which left Pitch to sigh impatiently. He leaned lazily on the door frame a smug smile on his face as North finally caught up, “It’s no wonder you can’t get any work done, and here, I thought it was mostly all my fault.”

"It happens," said North, closing the door and walking to his desk to sit down. He spent several minutes thumbing through papers until he found what he was looking for. "Oh, Pitch, maybe there is something you can do after all. I seem to have misplaced a certain part of my list--your list, in fact. Perhaps you can look through stacks of papers on floor and see if I overlooked it." He pointed down on the floor beside his desk where the stacks lay.

Pitch went rigid at the request, but quickly recovered as he moved over to the stack and stumbled out, “Uh… sha…sure.” He quietly picked up the first stack clutching it to his chest as he skulked over to the windowsill to sit and look busy. His hands trembled slightly now as he moved through the pages his eyes buried within the pages as if he were intently looking through them. He swallowed hard his thoughts a blur jumping from the once very happy feelings he’d just had to this new anxiety and guilt over what he had done with his list. Well, this was going to be a good two or so hours wasted he thought bitterly knowing exactly where his list was, but knowing he certainly wouldn’t be telling that to North, so instead, he would go through all twenty some odd stacks that littered North’s office floor in a fake attempt to ‘find’ his missing list.

North subtly glanced over at Pitch, studying his movements before looking back at the papers in his own hands.
After finishing the first stack in obvious failure, Pitch quietly replaced it grabbing a new stack and mumbling regretfully, “It... it wasn’t in that stack.” Pitch sighed bringing the next stack over to settle down and repeat the same process with this stack of papers.

North grunted. "Very well. Keep looking.”

Pitch continued stack after stack, and after moving through five stacks, he regarded each page dully sighing here and there in his boredom as he tried to at least maintain the appearance he was looking for the list. It had taken longer than two hours by the time he’d gone through every stack, and his eyes fluttered depicting his tiredness of the chore and ebbing fatigue from a full day’s work. He groaned replacing the last stack in its place as he stretched his back having gone a bit stiff from leaning over as he replied blandly, “Not in that one either,” Pitch had said this with every new stack gaining a little more apathy for the given task every go around. Although this time there was a hint of relief in his voice as well.

“Well, that 'is' odd then.” North mused.

Pitch huffed just happy to have an excuse not to have to sift through another page! North seemed content enough that the page wasn’t found, and that in turn allowed Pitch to relax a little as he slumped into the chair opposite of North looking slightly ragged from the tedium, "So... what do we do now?” Pitch asked curiously.

A small knock came to the door, and Sandy not waiting for a response peered in cautiously with soft blinking eyes and an instant bright smile as he gave a small wave.

North looked toward the door and smiled. “Sandy! Come in,” he waved.

Sandy quickly floated into North’s office closing the door behind him with a soft click. Landing on the ground, Sandy padded across the floor and pulled his diminutive form up on top of the desk to sit on one of the few corners where there was free space. He settled himself cross legged looking between the both of them cheerily as he shot an image of the garbage conveyor over his head and a question mark. After Sandy and North’s previous conversation the night before, Sandy had decided to check in on North and see if today faired any better.

Pitch only watched Sandy climb onto the desk and address North with mild interest. The two hadn’t really had much contact outside of when all the guardians had been present at meetings, his party, or when he’d been asleep.

There was that one horrible day, a couple days after he’d first arrived that he had been giving Toothiana a difficult time doing chores. Sandy had taken over the job of him completing all the tasks on North’s list, and Pitch had learned quickly that the little golden man held no punches when it came to getting him in line. It was quite sobering and humiliating to say the least how fast Sandy had snapped a stinging blow that had him jumping and scrambling to do as he was told. He had to wonder on some level if Sandy had enjoyed using those sand whips a little too much! He supposed the Sandman needed to work out the past aggression he may have held against Pitch for having been almost annihilated at Pitch’s hands. Either way, Pitch had quickly learned to respect Sandy not wanting to anger the little star and as such had dared not to test him further.

That felt like a long time ago now though, and the two had both become more amiable to each other finding some kind of understanding without ever having to have actively communicated. Now Pitch had to wonder being that they were a yin and yang of one another’s power what it was to truly know the star.

North nodded. “Work went much better today. We actually got frame done.” He turned a smile to
Pitch. “And I am proud of Pitch for his dedication and the hard work he put in.”

Pitch perked at the praise, “Well I …thank you North. It was a much better day all around I think.” He smiled a hint of color hued his cheeks from North’s kind words.

Sandy also seemed quite pleased as his smile widened and he swelled sitting up a little taller. He flashed a string of ‘Z’s’ above his head nodding vigorously at North with an expression that said ‘I told you so!’ Sandy was ever the advocate of sleep thinking Pitch’s better day was linked to him getting enough rest and of course having his sweet dreams added in the mix. He was ever so proud of his abilities to give sweet dreams coupled with sleep; he was after all the foundation of all of their beliefs. By giving children good dreams, it allowed them the joy and rest to imagine and for belief to flourish.

“Yes, you told me so.” North chuckled, leaning back in his chair.

Pitch looked on trying to discern what the two were talking about now since he’d not been paying Sandy any mind. Being a mute meant poor Sandy often was overlooked. Pitch shifted in his seat, so he could catch both sides of the conversation now, “Told you so?” Pitch wondered aloud looking to North for further explanation.

"Oh, Sandy told me last night after I left you that you needed good night's sleep to take crankiness away." North said, waving it off.

Sandy made numerous depictions in a flurry of sand over his head on the merits of good sleep.

Pitch frowned looking at Sandy’s smug smile, “Crankiness? I wasn’t being cranky because I needed sleep, it was just a bad day,” he justified.

“Lack of sleep can contribute to it sometimes.” said North. “No harm in getting good night’s sleep. You have been using more energy since beginning work on conveyor.”

Pitch shrugged, “Perhaps, but by the looks of things, one more day of work is all it’ll take to finish the conveyor. I don’t plan on wasting the last day of my freedom dwindling it away on sleep,” Pitch sighed thinking on the grounding to follow.

Sandy grimaced not seeing how anyone would want to forsake sleep.

The expression on Sandy’s face amused Pitch and he chuckled, “Oh don’t give me that look Sanderson. There’s far better things to do with one’s time than sleep it away. Not everyone wants to spend their existence staring at the back of their eyelids.”

“Actually, it’ll take at least two more days to complete. You will be helping to paint sides of conveyor tomorrow. They will have to dry before they can be connected.” said North.

Pitch pouted, “Well, today is Thursday, and if we finish up on Saturday, like you’re predicting, the work will be officially over most likely before the end of the day. Lasagna won’t be getting served until later in the evening for dinner, so we shouldn’t even be at the landfill site by the time she comes!”
“Saturday will be a full day’s work, Pitch. You will be helping yetis attach sides that you will paint tomorrow. Then you will help them construct the belt part after that.” said North, his voice tinged with a warning edge. “I suspect that by time you get done it will be too late to see Tooth since she goes out on her rounds after certain hour. I will instruct lasagna to be made earlier in day so the three of us can eat it for lunch break. And I will tell Tooth to stop by landfill.”

That worked out well actually Pitch thought knowing it would save him from having to manipulate events to ensure Toothiana remained ignorant of his restrictions… although if North was joining them, there was more of a chance for the man to blurt out something embarrassing. Still this scenario was far better than could be expected, and Pitch nodded in agreement, “That actually sounds perfect… as long as she won’t be too against eating by a landfill… at least with the structure up, sun won’t be a problem.”

“I’m sure she won’t mind.” North turned to Sandy. “You are welcome to join us too, my friend.”

Sandy tilted his head nodding yes.

Pitch’s brow drew down, this intimate gathering of two to then three, and now four was disrupting Pitch’s idea of a pleasant quiet meal, “Well Sandy will likely be sleeping at that time North, you wouldn’t want to drag him all the way down here just to eat. I think he’d prefer sleep anyway wouldn’t you Sandy?”

Sandy considered Pitch a moment and getting the hint he wasn’t welcome made his whole frame dim slightly as he gave a soft shrug.

“Nonsense,” said North, reaching over to pat the gold man on the back. “If Sandy wishes to come, he is free to join us.”

Pitch rolled his eyes, “Why not just invite the whole crew then, Maybe Jack and Bunnymund will also want to squeeze in a meal at the landfill,” he stated sarcastically. It wasn’t that he necessarily had anything against Sandy, he’d mostly just wanted to have a little time to spend with Toothiana. There was no getting around North, he was a necessary evil within the equation. Pitch finally sighed thinking it shouldn’t really even matter being the fact the golden man was a mute anyway.

“Pitch, don’t be rude.” said North with a frown.

Pitch scowled, “I was merely stating a fact, it doesn’t really matter if he comes or doesn’t to me honestly. It’s not like he can really be disruptive…” he gave Sandy a smirk.

Sandy frowned letting fly a string of symbols to show he didn’t appreciate Pitch’s comment to make fun of the fact he didn’t speak.

North rolled his eyes. "Pitch; that is enough. You have been so good today. Please do not end on bad note.”

Pitch folded his arms and huffed at North’s terminology of being ‘good.’ He sighed responding dismissively, “Fine. It was only a jest, it’s not my fault he took it the wrong way.”

Sandy frowned at Pitch’s response but decided to ignore him now and turned to North as he made a sand scene of the list and then a question mark. North had explained his suspicions last night to Sandy that he thought Pitch may have taken his list, and he was curious to see if he’d found it.

North sighed, silently wishing Sandy could speak and Pitch could be the mute sometimes. He turned to Sandy. "No, haven't found it. Looked through every stack. Nothing.” He locked eyes with the man. "Pitch even helped me look for it, isn't that right, Pitch?” He turned to Pitch.
Pitch’s eyes widened as his adrenaline pumped at the mention of the list again; he really wished it would stop coming up! He blinked regaining his composure, “Uh… yeah. Hours looking for it,” he let out a slight nervous laugh as he scratched at the back of his neck, “It seems to have just…uh, up and disappeared.” The way North’s eyes were boring into him made Pitch carefully sit back in his chair trying to act casual now as he shifted his gaze over to Sandy just to get clear of North’s penetrating stare, “So… Sandy, I was thinking you and I could go on a walk before you go out on your runs tonight if you’re interested. I know North has so much to do, he’d likely welcome the quiet.” Pitch had to plaster a grin on his face to seem like he had genuine interest as the heat of this conversation had the hackles on the back of his neck rising. He thought now would likely be a good time to vacate the premises if at all possible.

Sandy lifted a brow blinking before turning to North with an expression that said, ‘Oh yeah, he has it.’ Sandy could see with ease that Pitch was squirming like a worm on a hook, and he couldn’t help the grin that tugged on his lips as he wondered how long North planned to let him wriggle.

"You wouldn't by chance know where list is, would you, Pitch?" North calmly asked. "Or maybe you could suggest place it could have gone."

Pitch refocused on North now mouth hanging agape a moment before he cautiously ventured, “I… I looked through all of these stacks… uh, why would you think I would know where it was if I didn’t already find it here?” He was dangerously getting close to lying (which he really didn’t want to do, so he was artfully dancing around the subject.) His hands were gripping the sides of the chair now tightly as his worry of where this conversation was going grew.

"I don't know. Why don't you tell me?" North said, looking straight at Pitch with expectant eyes. His heart quickened and his mouth went dry as Pitch worked to remain calm, "Wha-what are you saying?" Pitch questioned weakly barely controlling the tremor working its way through his core out to his limbs by gripping his hands tighter to the chair.

"Pitch, do you take me for a fool?" said North. "The longer you sit there denying and lying, the worse this situation gets."

He swallowed hard. Pitch was afraid now, and the fearling essence within him swirled raucously in the form of jumping electrified nerves. No! North was bluffing! There was no way he could know! The anxiety was mounting, and Pitch turned his fear into anger responding defensively as he sprang from the chair backing away as he spat, "So, it's like that is it? You can't find it, so you automatically assume I stole it? Why doesn’t that surprise me! It figures that even without proof, I'm the first to blame!"

North rolled his eyes and turned a weary look to Sandy.

Sandy lifted both brows making a silent whistle as he stood looking from both Pitch to North obviously curious to see what would happen next but standing in case he needed to make a move.

Pitch shifted further back behind the chair now as if putting the chair between the two could prevent North from grabbing him.

“Pitch,” North sighed, “I wasn’t sure at first, but I had my suspicions. Mainly because list was there before you came in room with Tooth the other day, then it was no longer there later that night when I reached for it. My list never leaves this room, and no one else touches it but me. Besides, I think you are giving way enough proof by your actions right now.”

"You’re boldly accusing me! Of course you’ve got me on edge! How could I not be? Besides,
you’ve… you’ve got so many lists!” He spun around motioning to the multiple piles of lists all over North’s office, “How do you know you didn’t bury it somewhere?” Pitch’s eyes were wild shifting from Sandy to North hoping his words struck a chord with North.

“You searched through each stack of lists. You said it wasn’t here.” North said, calmly. "When I last saw list, it was right here." North pointed to the corner of his desk. "I was keeping it handy, since new naughty deeds seemed to appear the night you were spending time with Tooth. Something about bullying my elves."

Pitch’s jaw dropped in surprise, “You… you knew about that?” Pitch had assumed North would have gotten on to him promptly and punished him without haste after having just punished him for being rude to the yetis. He was feeling even more foolish now to know that he may have not even been punished for the offense originally if he’d just left the list alone. A sinking feeling began to work its way through Pitch as he realized he’d worked himself into a hole now that he likely wasn’t going to be able to dig himself out of.

North nodded. "Yes, I saw it right before you and Tooth arrived."

Pitch cringed shifting nervously, “Uh… about that, I hadn’t really meant to bully the elves. I… It was just an attempt to create less waste. Toothiana explained it wasn’t okay, and I promised not to do so again. I really wasn’t trying to bully them, I swear.”

“Don’t explain it to me. I trust that you and Tooth worked it out between you.” North said. “But my list is still missing.”

He wasn’t going to let it go, Pitch was realizing, and it was boiling down to him either telling North the truth about the list or taking the next step from omission to actually lying to North.

Pitch went quiet, if he admitted what he’d done, he was most likely going to get a spanking, and Pitch really didn’t want to get spanked, again, after only two days! It seemed he couldn’t manage to stay off the Cossack’s lap these days which only served to make him more reticent and embarrassed that he’d managed to make another horrible mess for himself. If he lied to North, he knew that the damage would be irreparable though. He had been so happy when he’d left his room to head here with North, but now like a bad penny, trouble kept turning up at his doorstep. He didn’t have anyone to blame but himself he knew, but it didn’t make it any less easy to admit or cope with.

He didn’t want to fight this fight any longer, it was a losing battle he knew well. Finally conceding, he sighed wearily as he lowered his head, “I… I took it. I know I shouldn’t have, but I was afraid!” His lip twisted in agony as he continued, “I… I saw the entry about the elves, and… and I panicked! I didn’t want you to be angry with me, so I took it before I even fully considered what I’d done. By the time I had it, it was already too late. I… I’m sorry,” as he spoke, his anxiety and guilt coalesced into a tumultuous wave of fear and regret, and he sniffled as tears quickly sprang to his eyes in his immediate shame, “I really just wanted to have a good day,” he mourned his propensity to find himself in these situations. He couldn’t find the courage to look back up now and face North as he clasped his hands behind him, and his shoulders shuttered in silent cries of remorse.

North sighed shaking his head, and giving himself a moment before responding. "You were afraid I would be angry, so instead you took list and made things worse. Makes a lot of sense."

Pitch couldn’t stop the tears from flowing only making him feel that much worse as he nodded, “I know I shouldn’t have taken it! It …it was a gut reaction! But… but after I took it, I didn’t know what else to do to make it right! I know, it was stupid, believe me! I spent most of the night yesterday trying to get rid of it,” he all but sobbed now feeling horribly guilty.
"You didn't know what else to do to make it right? There was only one thing you could do. Bring it back to me and tell me." North replied. "You cannot destroy it. It is enchanted. Only I have power to destroy it."

Pitch shifted from foot to foot as he spoke, his eyes remained downcast and his voice wavered, “I… I realize that. I… I should have brought it back, I know, Believe me I know! I… I was afraid to face you, afraid what you might do to me when you found out what I had done. You must understand! I never meant to keep it from you, just once I took it… and tried to get rid of it …it kept adding line after line! I… I knew I couldn’t get rid of the new lines, and I’d only managed to make it worse! I… I should have come to you or admitted it sooner, but… I didn’t want to you to be disappointed in me, and I… I really didn’t want to get punished again.” Pitch openly cried as he spoke all of his fears splayed out in his words and his worries laced his concerns at his failures to do what needed to be done. Admitting what he’d done and knowing what it was going to lead to, sent a wave of self-pity through him as he hoped North might see his guilt and feel some form of mercy for him to grant him a reprieve.

North sighed leaning back in his chair, "Well, I am disappointed in you. Not only because of what you did, but because you still have not learned to make right choices. Pitch, if you had simply come to me and returned list and faced whatever consequences awaited you, you would have made it a lot easier on yourself. I would have let you off with scolding."

He pouted, “You… you could still let me off with a scolding…” he stated looking up hopefully although doubt lined his words.

North shook his head. “You know by now that you are not the one to choose your punishment. Not only did you take list, but you also lied about it and led me on to believe you had not taken it.” he sighed, massaging his temples. “Pitch, I have had it with you. You are currently in middle of being punished, and you go and do something else to heap more punishment on yourself. If I didn’t know better, I would think you enjoyed being punished. And what’s worse is that you never take responsibility for actions and even beg mercy and light punishments from me, even when you do stuff bad enough to earn spanking. If you do something wrong, you should be prepared to face consequences regardless of what those consequences are.”

Pitch felt nauseous as the words North spoke grated into him. He hated to hear the disappointment ringing through the Cossack’s voice. He thought to add that he technically never lied to the man even though he’d omitted the truth, but he doubted that it would earn him any less ire since he most definitely had tried to redirect accusation up until this point which he assumed was the same as lying in North’s eyes.

Pitch dropped his head once more unable to continue facing the steely fierce blue eyes that reflected more than a little weariness, “I… I’m sorry. I know you want me to boldly face whatever consequences I’ve earned, but that’s easier said than done when your head’s on the chopping block! I… I didn’t mean to make things this bad! I …I didn’t want this,” he whimpered wiping at the tears making their way down his face. He couldn’t believe that he had been crying throughout this whole exchange, which in itself was a humiliation in the deepest regard. He couldn’t help it though; the tears welled out of him from the emotional overload he was experiencing knowing how much he’d failed North and knowing what he was likely going to face, namely that awful strap again. He’d built up enough anxiety at just the thought of getting caught, and deep down, he knew it was irrational to have thought he would have gotten away with it at all. It was Santa’s magical list after all. The man would have likely just used magic to find it again eventually, and he would have been right back here in this horrible, becoming all too familiar, situation.

“Sorry, sorry. All you ever are is sorry. I will always accept your apologies, Pitch, providing they are
genuine, but I grow weary of hearing apologies, as it is becoming an all too common thing with you as of late. You do something bad and then are quick to say sorry, hoping it will get you out of mess. It would do my heart good to see you actually improving. I know it is hard to boldly face consequences. It always is. But that is part of life and learning. As I’ve said before, if you do not want spanking then do your best to see that you don’t earn them. When you are tempted to do something wrong or make a bad choice, stop and actually think of what the consequences will be if you go through with doing it. Ask yourself, ‘Is it worth it?’ You have intelligent brain, Pitch, use it once in a while. I do not ask for you to be perfect. No one’s perfect. But I do wish you would start showing me that you actually care.”

Pitch frowned pitifully, "I... I do care, and I am sorry! I don't want to keep making stupid mistakes! You don't think I feel foolish enough? Believe me, I do! I want nothing more than to stop having these ...talks with you. I wish I had had the courage to face you sooner, but I failed you. I should have known better to take that list; ...I did, and I didn't think until it was too late. Once I'd taken it, I let my fears rule me into reacting poorly because I didn't want to face the consequences of my actions. I know you don't believe me, but I really do want to be better ...for you... and for me... All I can do is promise to try harder in the future, and I will. By the stars I will!" His face was the picture of misery now. To hear just how disappointed North was in him tore at Pitch’s heart. All he wanted was to move past this stage in his life and prove he was doing better without giving what felt to him and everyone else like endless apologies.

North nodded, leaning back in his chair, turning a look to Sandy to see if he had anything to put in or any words of encouragement.

Sandy looked surprised glancing from North to Pitch. He’d never seen the nightmare lord appear this distraught in front of him before. He supposed what North was doing definitely was having an effect on him, but to look at Pitch, once so haughty and arrogant, and now crying with obvious distress and shame over what he had done had sobered the little golden man into feeling a little sorry for Pitch. He knew Pitch had brought this on himself, and he also knew North had needed to stay strong and firm in the face of dealing with Pitch in order to remain consistent. It was a sad sight to behold, and Sandy gave North a sympathetic pout and a nod when North looked his way to give the Cossack his support.

North sighed, not really knowing what to do next. He hated having to spank Pitch again so soon, but he had to stand firm and stick to his word. He couldn’t back down and let Pitch think he could get off so easily. He would never learn that way. He sighed again as he sat there, studying the Boogeyman.

Pitch glanced up at North looking quite penitent with the tears that still streaked his face and the small pout he wore that trembled slightly in his anticipation. He wanted to say more, something to derail what was going to come next, but Pitch had no words left. North was tired of hearing his apologies, so Pitch did not offer any more verbally but continued to project his regret physically.

Sandy patted North’s hand depicting a sand figure of himself taking Pitch back to his room to give North a little time to gather his wits. He turned back to Pitch and floated up beside him to gently take his hand.

Pitch didn’t resist as Sandy led him to North’s office door and out of the man’s office. He wished the Sandman would use his powers on him now to knock him out, so he could stop thinking about what had just happened and what was going to happen.

After Sandy left with Pitch, North sat alone in his office, thinking. He really did hate having to spank Pitch again. It had been such a good day for all of them, and now they had to end it like this. He
shook his head.

Sandy pulled Pitch down the hall, and Pitch trudged behind him sorrowfully. He was doing his best to keep his head down and avoid eye contact from the passing yetis and elves that only glanced at the two curiously as they moved down the hallway and back to Pitch’s room. As they walked, Pitch could only think on the fact that he was so very tired of not only disappointing North but also himself. Every time he landed himself in this same predicament, he would tell himself, never again! But here he was, two days later with a literal list of new offenses to get spanked for. Pitch let out a vocal sob of self-pity as these thoughts seared a new wave of shame through him.

Sandy opened his door allowing Pitch to trod in; he paused a moment at the door wondering if he should leave, but seeing how Pitch flopped down on his bed dejectedly made him hesitate and decide to keep Pitch company until North returned.

Thirty minutes passed before North wearily trudged down the hallway and knocked on Pitch’s door.

Pitch sat slumped on his bed with his hands folded in his lap looking rather grave.

Sandy had sat on the bed next to him giving his knee a light sympathetic pat.

Neither communicated more than this as Pitch had been lost to his own self-pity and frozen in a sick anxiety only sniffing and wiping at the further tears that slid down his angular chin. It was hard to think of anything else now, and his body took on a slight tremor when the knock finally came and Sandy floated over to open the door.

Pitch’s eyes stared at North now swallowing hard at the lump in his throat. He’d hoped the man would have stayed gone for hours this time, but then, they had a long day of work ahead of them, so Pitch supposed North wanted to get it over with. To be honest with himself, for as much pain as the waiting caused, Pitch also rather it just be done and over to, he just wished he could skip to the end now.

North stepped inside the room, turning to regard Pitch in silence.

Sandy floated back over to Pitch touching the side of his face sweetly as he used a thumb to wipe away the tear that spilled to greet his hand.

Pitch drew his attention away from North now eclipsed eyes with dilated pupils shifting to stare at Sandy in wonder of what he wanted.

Sandy flashed an image of the list and a question mark.

Pitch blinked eyes half lidded in understanding, “Oh… yes. I… I hid it behind the mirror,” he stated demurely as he lowered his head once more.

Sandy ran a hand through his hair floating up and planting a soft kiss on his forehead before sliding his hand from his cheek and moving to check behind the mirror.

Pitch watched on dully as Sandy moved his little hands about and finally figuring out how Pitch had opened the frame up; he popped the backing and pulled out first the list, and then when seeing there were more pages, he pulled the other eleven pages of magic Pitch had scrawled out previously and had left hidden behind his mirror. Pitch’s eyes bulged a little when he saw Sandy digging the rest of the pages out as well, but figured he couldn’t be in any more trouble than he probably already was. Still it made his heart skip a beat when the little man floated over to give all the pages to North now.

North took the pages and began sifting through them, his brow drawing down. “What is rest of this?
They look like spells, but I thought you put them back in library.” he asked, holding up the pages.

Pitch gulped, “I… I did! Those were… uh,” he rubbed at the back of his neck nervously as he squeaked, “copies? I… I had made copies of the spells back when I found them, and I stuck them back there for safe keeping. I did return all of the originals though! Just as I told you I had!” Pitch’s face blushed fiercely having not even considered if North would have been angry about him keeping copies of the spells even though he’d never actually practiced them.

North nodded his head several times, inhaling and exhaling. “No harm done.” he finally said. “We have already dealt with that problem anyway.” He walked forward, stopping beside Pitch and handing over the naughty list.

Pitch reached out tentatively taking the list. He looked to North now with no small amount of confusion painted on his face, “Why…? I don’t …I don’t understand.”

“I want you to read it.” North replied. "Go on, take it and read over it."

Pitch’s frown deepened as his eyes dropped to the scroll in his hands. It was quite lengthy. He didn’t really have to read it to see all of what he’d done, the newest of course was trying to hide the fact that he’d stolen his list from North. Pitch couldn’t help letting out a wry humorless laugh that turned into a to a choked sob as the irony wasn’t lost on him that out of all the new offenses that had been added to his list, five in all, all but one encompassed just trying to hide the fact that he’d taken the list in the first place. He whined, “I… I’m a fool. I know. I wish I could take it back, but I… I can’t. I’m not going to pelt you with a litany of I’m sorries. I am, but it’s pointless now isn’t it? The damage has been done.” His hands were shaking as he clutched the page and his tears dropped like scattered raindrops on its surface.

"So do you agree that you need to be punished for these wrongdoings?” North asked calmly.

Pitch sniffed, and after a long pause nodded letting out a barely audible, “Yes.” The word hurt to say, and he crumpled in on himself to say it. He meant it, and that fact caused more tears to stream from his eyes in bitter self-loathing.

North turned to Sandy. "Wait out in hall."

Sandy gave a quick solemn nod as he drifted out the open door and closed it with a soft click behind him.

Pitch cringed feeling the finality of the door closing as he peered up at North fearfully. His whole body awash in a wave of cold chills as he waited for North’s next move. He silently prayed that North would leave the strap behind the picture and just use his hand. One could hope anyway.

North sighed and sat down on the bed, patting his lap. "Let us get this over with."

Pitch only hesitated a moment staring at North’s lap despairingly before doing as instructed and climbing over North’s knee with a shuttered sob.

Without saying a word, North pulled Pitch’s robe back and tugged his pants down, laying a hard smack across his rear.

No matter how many times they did this, Pitch never could brace himself well enough to not react to the pain as North’s heavy hand crested his backside. He gasped jolting up with a jerk as his feet jerked up to cover his rear instinctively. He let out a pitiable whimper as he fought to drop his feet and not interfere with his punishment. It wouldn’t last long he thought dully, he didn’t have a very high tolerance, and he had even less control.
North stopped swatting long enough to throw his leg over Pitch's legs, pinning them in place. Then he recommenced with the spanking, bringing his hand down several more times.

Pitch hated when North pinned him down feeling acutely the loss of control in his limbs and the helplessness that shrouded him to have even more of the control he'd already had taken away increased to no longer even having an option. It almost made the pain of North’s swats amplify to know he could in no way stop the steady barrage that was quickly heating his flesh as Pitch writhed and bucked uncomfortably moaning out yelps of anguish with every connecting swat.

North had decided not to spank Pitch very long. So he laid down fifteen more hard swats before ending it.

Pitch wailed out as North's hand landed viciously on his already tenderized bottom. The back to back spankings made these smacks feel like North had been spanking him for some time reigniting the sealed in pain that still radiated from underneath the top layer. Much of the tenderness had healed leaving behind a dull ache from the strapping three days ago, but as North’s hand moved across these familiar areas, the muscle remembered the throbbing and clenched reflexively as Pitch bobbed to and fro in a valiant attempt to avoid the blows.

In one fluid motion North had simply pulled Pitch’s small frame forward onto the bed propping the cleft of his bottom high on top of his thigh and securing a tighter hold around Pitch’s waist to keep his movements restricted to a small ineffectual wriggle.

Pitch couldn’t help but to look back mournfully as he was adjusted to be spanked more fitfully on North’s lap. North was always so technical even in this, and as such, it seemed he became more aware of exactly where Pitch was the most sensitive and concentrated his efforts in those particular areas to make sure he wouldn’t be sitting comfortably for a little while. His sobs of self-pity wracked through him to see his backside propped up tautly only to jiggle and twitch as the impact of North’s palm crashed down in even sweeps. The flesh prickled with the sensation of every stinging blow, and Pitch cried lost in a wave of regret. He was surprised and grateful when North stopped deciding to grant Pitch some clemency for whatever reason. Pitch still hiccuped in breaths having worked himself up terribly by this point and feeling rather ridiculous and weak that he would shed so many tears over a child’s punishment, but he supposed the spanking was only a small portion of the reason he cried so hard. The real pain within came from the feeling of disapproval from the guardians and a loss of faith in himself to be able to get on the right track and for once stay on it.

North pulled Pitch's pants back in place and removed his leg, allowing Pitch to right himself. "Now, I hope this is last time we have to go through this for a while."

Pitch feeling the fabric pulled back in place quickly clambered off North’s lap to sit lightly on the bed wiping away the tears as he hitched in a ragged breath, “I… I hope it’s …it’s the last time.” He wanted to believe this could be the last time, but he really wasn’t that hopeful. Still, now that the list had finally been returned, he felt like a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He had nothing else to hide, not even the magic pages, and that left him feeling like he was better equipped to make a new start.

"I would like for it to be very last time I have to do it," said North. "But I'm sure it won't be, unless you end up surprising all of us."

This statement jarred Pitch like a slap in the face to have North show so little faith in his ability to change. A fresh wave of tears welled and fell at this consideration as Pitch felt his chances of not ending up over North’s knee again now to be rather bleak if even North seemed to have no doubts that he wouldn’t be able to avoid this fate. He sniffled miserably, “I… I would like to believe it to be so… but, I do seem to be rather hopeless don’t I?” His words took on a note of despair as his face
twisted in his distress.

“You are not hopeless, Pitch.” North said. “Although I would like for you to take this whole situation to heart and make more of effort to change, if not for our sake but for your own sake. You will still be spending a week grounded, and during that time I want you to reflect on everything that has happened.”

Pitch’s shoulders slumped to be reminded of the grounding, he was sure reflection would mostly mean boredom and loneliness which reminded him of Toothiana coming to visit him, “When… when I’m here… confined to my room, will I be allowed visitors?” Pitch questioned. It wouldn’t be so bad if he didn’t have to suffer the whole week without any contact.

“Depends on what you mean by visitors. I plan on popping in on occasion. And Sandy will be around to make sure you get good sleep when you need it. But other than that, no other visitors.” North said, sadly. “Grounding means you are grounded. No stepping outside room. No visitors, other than me and Sandy. I will make sure you have plenty to occupy yourself with.”

Pitch’s frown deepened and he gave North a wounded look, “Not Toothiana? I… I think she’s been really good for me; don’t you think? I mean, nothing against Sandy, but I think Toothiana’s guidance would do me much better than a cloud of dreamsand. I don’t really need to sleep while I’m in here anyway. It’s not like I’ll have anything I’ll need to do.” His voice was cracking a little under the strain of how upset the concept of being restricted was making him. This was no nightmare realm, and one week was nothing from what he’d suffered in the past, but the thought of it was already making him feel claustrophobic. Maybe Sandy wouldn’t be so bad after all if he could just knock him out for the entirety of the week, but he doubted Sandy would do that even if he could since it would go against the whole point of the punishment.

North shook his head. "Besides, Toothiana has work. She can't be here all the time."

Pitch huffed disdainfully, “Well, so does Sandy. I would think Sandy has more on his plate than Toothiana since she’s got little helpers to do her job for her.” It felt like a copout to Pitch, and he didn’t like part of what North had said about Sandy ‘making sure he got a good sleep when he needed it.’ What did that even mean? Was he going to have Sandy make him go to sleep? What if he wasn’t in the mood to sleep? It was starting to niggle him, so he had to ask, “You… you aren’t planning to force sleep on me are you? I’m not like you, I don’t need sleep every day.”

North scowled. "Of course not, Pitch. Don't be ridiculous. When did I say that I was going to force sleep on you?" He pointed a finger at Pitch. "I tell you what. If you can prove to me that you will be good through your grounding and go through it without complaining, I may let Tooth visit you for one day, on toward end of week."

“I... okay,” Pitch said forlornly. It wasn’t what he’d wanted fully, but it was better than not at all he conceded. He doubted he’d make it through the week without complaining, but he’d try to at least keep from doing so in front of North. He could complain to the creampuff though, with Sandy being a mute, he could use the man as a sounding board. He doubted he’d go out of his way to express to North he was complaining anyway, and Pitch would need some way to vent.

North eyed Pitch a few minutes before pushing himself to standing. He walked over to the door, opened it, and stepped out into the hallway to address Sandy, closing the door behind him.

Pitch watched North go with a long sigh, he had really had a good day up until going to North’s office, until he had managed to mess it up with his previous mistakes. Pitch had to wonder what it would take for him to just have a good day all around.
As the door opened, Sandy who had been standing outside listening anxiously to the cacophony of cries of pain from Pitch and the hard slaps of flesh on flesh seemed grateful that North had finished as he floated over to North looking at him with concern and a question mark to see how the man was faring.

“He is doing fine. As fine as can be expected.” North said wearily. “After he finishes up work with conveyor, he is going to face a week of grounding for everything he has done up until this point. I plan on just the two of us being the only people he sees during that week. I plan on spending some time with him, and I would like for you to be handy in case he needs good night’s rest. I told him just now that if he is good and goes through grounding without complaining, I might let Toothiana visit him near end of week. During times when you are with him, be sure to remind him of this if he ever starts complaining.”

Sandy nodded vigorously. He hadn’t really been around much other than to give Pitch a good night’s sleep, and after seeing Pitch tonight, the little star was feeling neglectful as though he’d been letting North shoulder too much of Pitch’s care. He was all of their responsibility after all. Sand images of the letter Z danced across Sandy’s head as he pointed at North to see if he’d like the dreamweaver to help him get some rest as well. Sandy already planned to go visit Pitch to help him rest before leaving for his runs. He could stop by nightly to perform this service for both Pitch and North since a rested Boogeyman was a much more pleasant to be around for everyone Boogeyman.

North thought a moment, then gave a curt nod. “Yes, I think we can both use it. I will go get ready for bed while you take care of Pitch first. Might as well go to bed since I am in no mood to do work now.”

Sandy nodded waving to North as the man lumbered down the hall looking more than a little dragged out. It saddened Sandy to see him as such, and his brow drew down resolutely with solid plans to pull his weight here and now as he gently popped the door open to Pitch’s room and glided inside.

Pitch was sitting on his bed leaning against the headboard when he saw Sandman enter. He sighed looking down in embarrassment knowing Sandy had likely heard everything that had happened. Suddenly recalling Sandy had been there to witness practically everything had his cheeks flushing horribly. He must have looked quite the sight to the little golden man.

Sandy floated over to Pitch reaching out to gently stroke his hand through Pitch’s unruly locks of hair giving him troubled eyes and a gentle smile.

Pitch blinked turning towards him with a look of misery plastered on his face. The touch felt good though, so Pitch tried to reassure Sandy’s worried expression away with a tired attempt at a smile of his own, “I’m… I’m okay Sandy,” he found he couldn’t stare into those deeply set imploring eyes for too long without feeling guilt for trying to kill the man years ago, so Pitch ducked his head, “I… I’m sorry you had to see that. I seem to have a bad habit of finding trouble for myself.”

Sandy floated closer now moving behind Pitch and wrapping his arms around the Boogeyman’s neck lightly and pressing his cheek against Pitch’s cheek giving him a gentle squeeze.

Pitch chuckled softly as Sandy’s wispy hair tickled his nose and he rubbed at it. Pitch could feel the star’s warmth radiating through him, and the dusts that drifted off Sandy like a pollenated breeze had Pitch drowsing instantly. He jerked his head in a motion to wake up, but he felt so very tired now.

Sandy released Pitch floating backwards and gently rolled the sheets and comforter back as Pitch watched on dazedly. Once he’d moved back the sheets, Sandy used a current of dreamsand to smoothly slide under Pitch to lift him gently in the air and settle him back in the bed on his side.
Pitch whined halfheartedly, “No… Sandy! I wasn’t…” he couldn’t even finish his sentence as he fought to keep his eyes open only letting out a long sigh at the fact he was quickly losing this battle.

Sandy pulled the sheets and comforter up around Pitch and gently tucked him in. Sandy didn’t knock Pitch out right away instead letting the man drowse while he settled down beside his head and just gently pulled little fingers through Pitch’s hair to neatly smooth it behind his ear.

Pitch blinked blearily at Sandy as his thoughts started to drift, and all he could think about was how comfortable his bed was and how nice it felt to be tucked in and to be touched like this. The kindness, the persisting gentleness, it brought more tears to his eyes. Pitch didn’t understand why something that felt so good would make him want to cry, but as Sandy continued to caress him compassionately, tears streamed silently down Pitch’s cheeks as a buried longing for this kind of touch seared his soul.

Sandy frowned feeling an acute sadness to see Pitch cry not from pain or fear but from receiving affection. He leaned forward lightly wiping the many pooling tears away and kissing the Boogeyman’s cheek sweetly. As Sandy did this, more sand dust floated down easing Pitch into the sleep he’d tried to avoid but easily wanted to succumb to. Sandy watched as Pitch’s dreams took shape now and not too surprisingly, they reflected what Sandy had just been doing, tucking him in and stroking his hair. Sandy smiled as he watched this dream proud that he’d been able to not only give a good dream to Pitch but create a memory for a good dream. Sandy waited for Pitch’s dreams to settle into subconscious REM sleep before rising from the bed and planting one more soft kiss on Pitch’s forehead, turning off his light, and heading out to go tuck in North.
Interpretations

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Interpretations

After leaving Sandy, North had made his way to his private chambers that were tucked away in a remote corner of the Pole, almost as well hidden as the library. When the place was built, he had seen to it personally that his room was far enough away from the main hub so that he wouldn't be disturbed by any noise.

North changed into his nightclothes and rolled into bed, picking up a book from the night table to read until Sandy arrived.

Sandy knew well where North's bed chambers were having stopped by to give the Cossack plenty of good dreams in the past. Some of North's dreams had surprised Sandy from his former years as a bandit king. He was definitely a force to be reckoned with.

Swooping in on a wave of sand, the Sandman glided fluidly in to North's room to settle on the pillow beside North giving him a warm smile.

"Ah, Sandy," North sleepily said, closing his book to put away on the night table. He settled back against his pillow. "I trust our grumpy family member is now sleeping soundly."

Sandy depicted a sand scene of Pitch tucked in his bed with a small smile. It swirled away into a new scene of flashing suns and moons with each moon showing Sandy next to Pitch's bedside as a promise that he would be sure to come nightly from now on to help in the way that he was capable.

"That is good," North smiled. "And I am also glad to hear that you are willing to help during next week." He sighed. "I really don't know what to do with him. He seems determined to do something to earn punishment. It is almost like he is testing me, or trying to make me miserable. I do not know. What he can't seem to understand is that he makes himself miserable. It is sad sight."

Sandy frowned depicting an image of Pitch sitting sadly with legs folded to his chest and arrows surrounding him. The sand figure looked at all the directions and buried his head in his arms. It was Sandy's way of telling North that he didn't think Pitch was testing him but that the Boogeyman was trying to figure out where to go with too many options to decide. Sandy had seen Pitch's dreams and was beginning to understand that the man was severely emotionally underdeveloped from so many years of being alone without other people, but he didn't know how to express this to North very well, but he tried anyway.

He formed a picture of Pitch now followed by a heart the Pitch figure reached out for the heart pulling it close to himself possessively then he showed a picture of the guardians surrounding him and Pitch clutching the heart tighter as if he was attempting to hide it from them. Toothiana's sand form reached out to touch him gently, and the Pitch figure shrank away, the second time the Tooth figure touched Pitch he tentatively reached out a hand to her letting the Tooth figure touch the heart he still held tightly to his chest causing the Pitch figure to retreat again. Pitch was afraid of the connections they were creating, and Sandy believed it was creating more stress and further anxieties pushing the Boogeyman to often be rude and volatile. Sandy looked up to North to see if any of his thoughts were translating.

North nodded. "I think I understand what you are saying. But... what do you recommend? I
appreciate advice, seeing as I am lost as to what to do."

Sandy sat back against one of North’s pillows flashing a picture of a clock ticking with the dials moving around as an indication that it would take time. He sighed looking sad now as he showed a picture of Pitch’s face laying on his pillow and Sandy petting his hair causing him to cry. He seemed quite disturbed that Pitch was so far removed from affection that it would evoke such a reaction, and Sandy now believed Pitch needed this most to direct him to a better path.

It was as the moon had told them before on their first real convergence as guardians to talk about what Pitch needed from them, love. It was an affront and a confusion to most of them at first to think they could ever care about someone that had acted as vile as Pitch Black had. Sandy hadn’t understood then, but it was finally becoming clear what the moon had meant. The longer Pitch had been around them, the more layers were slowly getting removed to reveal the true vulnerability that lay at Pitch’s core. He was lonely and hurt, and after so many thousands of years, he’d forgotten most of his humanity, but the deeper the guardians dug, the more they were able to pull to the surface. It was promising. North thought he was failing, but it was perhaps because he was so close to the issue that he hadn’t seen just how much change he’d already pushed into the man.

North nodded. "I understand that it will take time." He sighed.

Sandy nodded regarding his friend and how exhausted he looked as he created a loop of arching sand to lightly sprinkle over North’s head as the man inched down under the covers to get comfortable and Sandy smoothed out the sheets to make North cozy. He smiled down lovingly at his fellow guardian now working to ease him into a tranquil slumber.

Dreams of children playing with some of his newest inventions took shape above North’s head, and Sandy felt satisfied enough seeing this and hearing the deep rumble of the Cossack's snores as he floated out of the room to start his nightly runs.

The next morning, North eagerly walked down the hallway to Pitch’s room, opening the door. "Rise and shine, Pitch! Is new day!" he bellowed cheerfully. Thanks to Sandy's dreamsand, he had spent a wonderful night in a deep sleep and was feeling quite rested and eager to start a day's work.

Pitch had woken a few hours prior also feeling quite rested. He was happy enough when he rose, but he stayed in bed a long while afterward just thinking on the day and night before; it left him feeling insecure of his placement at the Pole ruminating on what was said the night before. When he’d left his room after returning from a good day’s work, he’d felt at home more than he ever had, but now, he felt disjointed. He kept thinking on North’s demeanor towards him the night before, the strain was obvious; the man was tired, tired of him.

The thought of this pained Pitch terribly, and as such he stayed within his sheets disquieted in the silence of his room and feeling slightly displaced and more than a bit of a burden. The weight of these thoughts left Pitch feeling despondent like he might have broken something in their relationship that he couldn’t readily repair.

It was a surprise when North had come to fetch him so cheerily. Pitch quietly slipped out of bed carefully avoiding his still quite tender posterior from having any weight placed on it as he did so. He peered up to North warily as he offered a soft, “Good morning. You …you’re right; it is a new day …I’m glad it is,” Pitch stated soberly. He couldn’t shake the pang of sadness he still felt as he readied himself to start their day as quickly as possible so as not to upset North while he was in such high spirits. He liked to see the man this way, it made him feel a little better to see his face radiating happiness. He planned to do his best to make sure he didn’t offend the man today as he hated the feelings that were eating at him now. He had to wonder if he may have driven a wedge between them due to his inability lately to not be able to stay out of trouble.
“Today we will be painting sides of conveyor, so it won’t be hard work.” he continued.

Pitch merely nodded his acquiescence stepping beside North and bowing his had as a sign of deference that he was ready to follow the man when he was ready to go.

“Come on, Pitch, you can smile. You were so chipper yesterday.”

Pitch forced a smile to appease North, but he didn’t really feel like smiling. “We should probably get to the site before Dave starts to wonder where we are,” Pitch offered just wanting an excuse to drown himself in a task at this point.

North eyed Pitch a few minutes, then gave a nod. "Alright. Let us go.” He led the way down the hall, looking back every so often to make sure Pitch was following.

Pitch walked along lost in his thoughts but otherwise keeping step with North as they made it to the landfill site. He didn’t broker any conversation as they went remaining unfrequented in his mind as the wheels spun jostling about his emotions towards how he now felt and deciding it best to just withdraw into himself rather than leave himself open to wound like he had been. He would do as North wished to the letter, and then the man would be happy with him again, and if not, Pitch would continue to weave a protection to push out any feelings that could hurt him in that regard, so when the man did reject him, he could remain unfretted.

North led Pitch to the landfill in silence. When they arrived, Dave already had the section sides to the conveyor laid out alongside buckets of paint.

Pitch didn’t wait to be told what to do wanting to show he had the initiative to do what needed to be done without being instructed to do so. He grabbed up a bucket of paint and began throwing himself into the task now. He couldn’t stop feeling unhappy though as his thoughts reflected on one of North’s last words to him repeating like a mantra in his head that they’d all be surprised if he could get along without another screw up anytime soon. He’d lost faith in Pitch, and this was a toppling discouragement on so many levels. Those words still ate at him now like daggers of despair etching out a path in his heart that he wasn’t really worth the effort that they were investing in him. He tried to drown these feelings out in his work now as he concentrated on the wood panel in front of him staring at it intently, but in actuality he could have been staring straight through it.

North pulled up a crate, picked up one of the panels, and began painting along with Pitch.

“You know, I have been thinking. During your grounding, I thought maybe we could spend some time together.” North finally said. “Maybe play games or read together or something.”

Pitch paused glancing over at North depicting reticence and longing. Did North really want to spend time with him? “You… you would want to do that …with me?” He couldn’t help the look of disbelief that flashed across his features thinking he and North hadn’t really done anything like that before, but is sounded nice.

North looked at Pitch, cocking his head to the side. "Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

“I… I don’t know,” Pitch trailed off as he looked away back to his panel and resumed painting.

North didn’t say was that he didn’t think North would really want to spend time with him because his presence seemed like a tedious task.

"Is there something you wish to talk about?” North asked.

Pitch’s strokes slowed as he thought, was there anything to talk about? He didn’t want to anger North or annoy him with such trivialities as hurt feelings. It was weak and pathetic he told himself as
he shook his head swallowing hard, “Uh… na-no.” Pitch couldn’t look at North as he spoke now focusing his eyes on the panel, but he was hurting, and talking like this now was only making his emotions roll through him like a wave that caused a small tremor in his hand expressing a touch of what had been eating at him all morning.

North regarded Pitch a minute before focusing on his painting again. "Alright. Just know I am always here if you feel need to talk."

Pitch couldn’t help but glance at North his eyes soft and vulnerable as a swell of what exactly he wasn’t sure laid heavily in his chest making it feel hard to breath. He hated these feelings! They pulled at him illogically, and he did his best now to ignore them and just continue painting, but the man’s near presence and his offer to spend time with him now conflicted with the walls he was trying to build leaving him feeling like a mess inside as his lip twitched and his eyes glassed over. He needed to get away from here and get himself together he decided quickly dumping the paint brush in the bucket and moving to retreat pausing because he didn’t know where he could retreat to in the current situation he was in. His eyes darted around the work area before he made a b-line for the water keg.

North looked up, turning a puzzled look to Pitch.

Pitch didn’t stop to regard him afraid that if he did, these damnable emotions might erupt the wellspring within him of tears fighting to come to the surface. He couldn’t understand why he couldn’t just ignore his feelings. They had been dead within him for centuries… millennia even, but now ever since these guardians pulled him into their world, he was forced to endure the pains of disappointment and desire for approval. He didn’t want this! He just wanted to go back to not feeling anything for anyone, it was so much easier then. He made it to the water keg grabbing one of the paper cups in a shaky hand and filling it mostly for a reason to have come over here in the first place. He looked down at his cup of water that he now clasped gently in both hands just taking in a long trembling breath as he worked to get himself under control again.

"Are you sure there is nothing you wish to talk about?" North called to Pitch.

Pitch stilled, closed his eyes, and pretended not to hear North. The tears that had been pooled in his eyes spilled quietly down his angular cheeks. He was torn between wanting to shut North out to guard against the pain of possible rejection and longing to stay close and become closer to do the things that North spoke of because if it was one thing the Boogeyman had very little of was friendship. He was going to need to go back to his station to resume his work, and he hoped that letting a little of his emotion out over here would help him steel against releasing any more of it when he returned. He wiped at his face with the back of his hand glad the wound that had been there was now for the most part healed although his salty tears made the dry skin itch. He could stand here and collect himself a few more minutes, and then he would be able to bury these emotions effectively Pitch decided.

"Pitch," North called again, a little louder.

Deciding he was only going to get a minute reprieve, Pitch tossed the water cup in the trash, exhaled deeply, and turned to go back to his station. He kept his face downcast because he didn’t want North to see he’d been crying as he sidled back up next to the man busying himself with picking up his paintbrush to return to work. Not wanting to seem like he was ignoring the Cossack, Pitch stumbled out, “Ya-yes North?"

"Is everything okay?" North asked in concern. "You are acting awfully peculiar today. At first I figured it was due to last night, but now you are starting to worry me."
That wave of concern for him shattered the defenses he was trying to build as another trail of tears broke free to cascade down Pitch’s face. He bit his lip trying to stop the frown contorting his face as he blinked at the steady flow of tears. Gripping angrily at his paintbrush for his lack of emotional control, he grit his teeth now as he growled low, “I… I don’t understand you! You… confound me greatly!”

North’s brow furrowed as he reached over to gently put a hand on Pitch’s shoulder. "What is wrong, Pitch?” he said in a soft tone. "I am confused as to what ails you. If you would only talk with me and help me understand, perhaps we will be on same page."

He let out a watery, “I… I don’t know.” More tears rolled in quick succession down his cheeks as he did his best to keep his face titled to the side away from North. He gripped the paintbrush now in both hands as he sniffed, “I… it’s not rational, and I wish I could stop feeling like this,” he whined pitifully.

“Feeling like what?” North asked, still confused as to what Pitch was even talking about.

He warbled, “Unhappy… I… you’ve told me that you’re weary of me, and that you don’t expect me to do better! And… and I try to accept that I’m likely going to fail you,” he was crying openly now as these feelings of self-loathing bit into him, “Then…then you tell me you want to spend time with me. I… I don’t understand why you would want to when I am such an affliction to you.”

North’s mouth tightened as he listened to Pitch. He stayed silent for several minutes after he had finished.

“I am sorry that you got that impression out of what I said. And I am sorry if words came out of my mouth in that way.” he finally said. “I will not lie to you. You have tried my patience quite a few times until I am weary. But that does not mean I care less for you or want to give up on you. I know that all of this will take time. I think both of us need to put past behind us and start all over again. And I hope to do that during week of grounding.” He squeezed Pitch’s shoulder lightly. “Pitch, you will fail—you will fail me and you will fail yourself. There is no getting around that. You are not perfect and you will make mistakes along way, some of them will even be failures. But failures have to happen because they are part of learning. How you approach failures is up to you, though. You can allow them to discourage you and get you down in dumps, or you can learn from them and make up your mind to do better next time. The choice is yours to make. While I would like for last night’s… discussion… to be our last, I know it probably won’t be because you are still on learning path. You will probably slip-up on occasion. Although I do hope that you learned something from your recent failures and will make effort to prove me wrong on that. You have made great improvement over time you have been here, regardless of the times that you have taken steps backwards. I can see a great change in you, and I hope you will keep on improving. I hope you get to point where you can keep moving forward without stumbling backwards. I know you can if you try hard enough.”

Pitch wiped at his face sniffling before tentatively turning his face up to look at North silently assessing North’s words for validity. He did want to start over. And he supposed he would have to accept the fact that he likely would fail again even though he didn’t like to think like that, he had to admit he was far from perfect. He took in a deep breath, “I’m sorry… you …you’re right. I don’t know what came over me. I …I don’t understand myself anymore half the time,” he ducked his head in shame hating how easy it was for him to have these emotional upsets these days.

North smiled lovingly at Pitch. “Perhaps it is sign that you are changing.”

Pitch slumped his shoulders giving a small insecure nod, “I …I hope so,” he stated in a small voice as he tried to give a hopeful smile and another set of tears streaked down his face.
North patted his shoulder "Cheer up. We have painting to do. It will be just like painting eggs, yes? Then later on we can have pizza for lunch. I requested pizza today, just for you."

Pitch smiled a little brighter, "You did that for me? …Thank you. It means a lot that you would do that for me… even after everything last night. Sorry for the waterworks …I don’t know why my emotions seem so out of control lately. It… it’s rather embarrassing," he sniffed ducking his head a moment before looking back up bashfully, “I …I think I’m okay now.”

North dipped his brush in the paint and began painting his panel again. "I think it is part of you changing. Sounds like emotions that have been buried deep inside you all of these centuries are starting to come out."

Pitch dipped his own brush and began drawing it across his panel digesting what North had said. He was silent for a long moment before he responded, “I… I don’t recall them. These feelings and emotions… I don’t remember ever having them… before.” He studied the panel a moment in thought before continuing, “I didn’t care before,” he stated lightly, “About… about anyone else… or, or what they thought. And… and now that I do…” He shook his head as if to dislodge the words, “I feel confused all of the time. I …I don’t know who I am any more or who I’m supposed to be. I don’t know if that’s changing or just… being lost.” There was a pang of doubt that rang through his last words as he hesitated a moment feeling vulnerable to have admitted this much. Pitch began painting again to ease his own awkwardness as the blush crept across his cheeks.

"You had them.” North assured. "At least, before fearlings entered you. But sounds to me like your old self, before fearlings, is trying to come through. It is best that you allow these feelings and emotions run their course. If you try to suppress them, it could push you back into the state you were in previously."

Pitch swallowed hard thinking of where he was before he’d come to the Pole isolated and bitter, “I… I’ll try not to. Suppress them too much. I… it makes me feel …exposed …and weak not being able to control them like I should, and …and that bothers me greatly,” Pitch admitted.

"There is nothing to be shamed of.” North smiled. "It's not weird. Everyone goes through it."

Pitch looked puzzled, he didn’t see anyone else getting so easily derailed by their emotions, or maybe they just didn’t around him? He was no stranger to seeing others cry as the nightmare lord, he’d seen plenty of children’s tears as they gasped awakening to run to their parents’ arms after a particularly good night terror he’d created. He’d always observed these reactions passively like a job well done on his part that he’d twisted their dreams so thoroughly that they couldn’t sleep through the night. To watch these, expressions of affection that followed from the parents, always made Pitch feel uncomfortable, and most times enraged since what had usually followed was a firm stamping out of any belief in him. He hadn’t really thought any more about it other than a reaction to the fear he’d caused them, but now he was starting to understand the longing for comfort and validity from someone who would care about them was why they ran to their parents. Fear was just the catalyst to seek it. He didn’t speak on these thoughts as he painted and continued to quietly contemplate the emotions he had begun to feel now and what they meant to him and for him.

Pitch was glad that he and North had finally spoke about what he’d been bottling up for most of the morning. Having addressed it and to have gained an understanding renewed his faith that he and North were still on good terms. He had needed to hear it because he had been highly doubtful. Now he knew that North did still care about him, and that he hadn’t lost any of his affection. Pitch was appeased now and able to move on. He smiled cheerily as the two carried on like they had the other day. North’s reassurance helped to chase the dark clouds away leaving behind a calm satisfaction that the two truly had a fresh start, and Pitch knew that this would be a better day than the last.
As the day drew on, North and Pitch continued to work in relative silence only optimistically commenting on things around them pertaining to the progress of the conveyor system and the panels they were painting. It wasn’t the awkward heavy silence from earlier that morning but more of a contented lost in their work as they moved through the panels kind of silence. North of course managed to whip through twice as many panels as Pitch, no matter how hard Pitch tried to keep up. The Cossack was much more experienced at this sort of thing, and his prowess at the job was shown to be quite evident.

Dave announced lunch then, and the smaller group of workers that were left (not as many were required for this part of the project) they all moved merrily toward the cafeteria to get an early bout of pizza having been quite delighted to hear about North’s change in the menu.

Pitch looked to North, “Were you wanting to go to the cafeteria or eat out here again?”

“I thought we would eat out here. It is much nicer than cramped cafeteria.” said North as he looked up, toward the path that led back to the Pole. “Ah! Here comes our lunch now.”

One of the yeti cooks was walking toward them, carrying a covered tray in one hand and a fold-up table tucked under his left arm. When he arrived at the place they were to be sitting, he swung the table around and set it up between North and Pitch. Then he set the tray down on top of it. With one swift motion, he pulled the cloth off the tray to reveal two plates of pizza—one slice for Pitch this time. There were also two glasses of soda and a cupcake a piece.

Pitch smiled watching the yeti set up the table, "It is much better away from the crowds I'll always agree you know." Pitch saw that the slice of pizza was even a meats slice like he preferred, and the cupcake was chocolate with chocolate sprinkles. Pitch smiled wider, "You remembered my favorite flavor and even added sprinkles," Pitch’s voice reflected that he was touched by the attention to detail.

He blinked quizzically now realizing that there were no chairs, "Uh... where are we going to sit?"

“I'm glad it pleases you.” said North. “As for chairs...” North walked over and picked up a crate and set it down for Pitch, then picked up one for himself to set on the opposite side of the table. He seated himself down on it. “We improvise as we have done before.”

Pitch gave a strained smile looking down at the crate as he absently rubbed his rear thinking that the last time he sat on the crate it wasn’t overly comfortable then, it was going to be a lot less so now. He moved to gingerly sit at the setting North had placed for him.

North was indifferent to Pitch’s discomfort as he turned his attention to the three slices of pizza on his plate, picking up one to eagerly take a huge bite out of, savoring the flavor as he reached out to take a second bite.

The rough planks of wood on the crate were more than just a little uncomfortable Pitch found as he moved from left to right trying to put more or less weight in one area or another to find the least uncomfortable position to sit in, but Pitch found North had done a very thorough job, and there was no comfort to be found. Instead he was privy to every groove, dip, and jagged patch in the wood's
Pitch pouted as he shifted about coming to the realization he was just going to have to endure it.

Pitch moved his focus to his pizza picking off a piece of sausage and plucking it into his mouth. He savored the rich spices in the meat before picking up his slice and taking another small bite. North was watching him he realized making him feel slightly awkward. Pitch cleared his throat, "Uh... it's good. Thank you."

North smiled and nodded before taking another bite of his own pizza.

Wanting to save room for the cupcake, Pitch just ate the cheese and toppings off the pizza, which to him was the best part before moving on to the cupcake where he licked all the frosting off first before eating half of the cake and feeling sick with it and slightly wired from the frosting and casual sips of the soda. Soda was still really new, and although he liked it, the bubbles always settled oddly in his stomach and tickled the inside of his nose every time he took a sip. Of course North was done with his whole meal within fifteen minutes where it took more than twice the time for Pitch. It felt slightly odd to Pitch to have the Cossack just staring at him as he carefully licked his frosting off of his cupcake (which he’d spent half of his time eating doing.)

“I am pleased to see you enjoying yourself.” North said with a smile.

Pitch smirked, “I do like this… not just the eating part, even though that’s why we’re doing all of this, but …this, this is nice. Spending time together. I always wondered why people would spend hours doing this around a table. The food is good, but I understand now that it’s not the food that they do it for.” Pitch had contemplated the act before thinking it a waste of time, but now, he had come to see that the companionship shared in the presence of another person doing an enjoyable function gave a wave of pleasure to him.

North’s smile widened as he gave a satisfied nod, pleased to see that Pitch was slowly learning about life’s simple pleasures as well as actually appreciating and enjoying them. It did his heart good.

The two enjoyed the remainder of their lunch, and the rest of the work day that followed went smoothly to where the panels were all painted and hung to dry. The yetis had finished the technical rigging of the conveyor belt installing all the rolling pins and other specifics that needed a specialized hand, and all the work for the day was finished up more quickly than expected seeing to everyone packing up by the early afternoon.

Pitch looked around at the many panels that had been set out to dry along with the near finished construction of the conveyor belt. All that was left to do was install the panels and the belt itself along with all the other aesthetic aspects North had planned to affix to the structure followed by the final stage of cleaning up. The realization of this made Pitch frown knowing what that meant, he had one more day of semi freedom left from his room before the grounding would begin.

He glanced over to North who was washing out his brushes in the clean-up station. It had been three days since he’d spent time with the reindeer, and Pitch hoped since they’d finished up much earlier than expected, North might grant him a request to see them. Pitch wandered over next to North now waiting for him to finish his task, and once the Cossack straightened, Pitch blurted out dancing from foot to foot, “Uh… North? Do …do you think… uh, since we’re done for the day here and all, would it be possible to stop by the stables for a little bit?” If he could, Pitch would check on and tend to them a little, if not, just a brief visit would make him happier than no visit at all.

“I don’t see why not,” North answered. “Although it just depends.”

Pitch’s face lit up at North’s permission, but then it fell in confusion, “Depends? Depends on what?”
He asked urgently.

"Depends on how you act," said North. "I am not taking you there if you are going to be jealous of Jack and complain about how he cares for them."

Pitch’s jaw twitched before he answered, “Of course! I … I won’t complain about Jack’s methods.” Pitch was glad that it was the afternoon since Jack should at least be gone by now. He hoped he was gone by now; it would make it much easier to keep his opinions to himself he knew if he didn’t have to actively see the winter sprite having a good time with his deer.

North stared silently at Pitch a few minutes before turning to finish cleaning up. Once he had put all of the brushes and supplies back in their proper place, he motioned for Pitch to follow him. “Alright, let us go to stables.”

Pitch seemed a bit antsy and was quick to fall in line behind North excitedly as the Cossack started lumbering towards the stables.

"Here we are." North announced when they approached the stable doors. He stood to the side, allowing Pitch to do whatever he wanted to do.

Pitch’s senses were on high alert looking for Jack, and when he didn’t see him, he visibly relaxed pleased to not be confronted with the frost spirit. He quickly assessed that Jack was in fact doing well with the reindeer. He’d worried the boy might take to the duties capriciously and the reindeer may suffer negligence. Deep down he knew this too was the thoughts of a jealous mind wanting to paint reasons that the boy would fail in his absence to tending them, but he was pretty sure North would not have asked Jack to help in such a capacity if he hadn’t believed the boy capable. Jack had been with the guardians now going on sixty years from the time that Pitch had first encountered him, and he’d matured quite a bit.

Pitch sighed inwardly as he moved over to Donner’s stall. It did his heart well that the reindeer recognized him, immediately dipping his head to nudge at Pitch’s arm and giving his shoulder a gentle nip. Pitch gave a soft chuckle pushing at the deer’s neck, “Hey! Cut that out,” he stated affectionately. He encircled the beast’s head from under its chin guiding its head closer, so he could lean into the reindeer in a light hug. He felt tears brimming in his eyes knowing that this was the last they were likely to see each other until the end of his punishment, but he was able to hold the tears back just closing his eyes and petting the side of Donner’s neck.

It was only a week, Pitch kept telling himself. One week, and everything could start to get back to normal. Besides, North would come visit him and Sandy too. His mind was put a little more at ease to see that the reindeer were in fact being cared for (even if Frost made these ridiculous swirls into their fur. Just utter cockamamie! Pitch would at least fix that right now! He hauled the reindeer out of its pen to the tethering pole, and Donner was more than ready for another grooming as he trotted eagerly beside Pitch.

Pitch worked in silence as he grabbed a brush and got to work smoothing out the reindeer’s fur. This time though, there was no scowl on his face, instead, Pitch beamed with affection and radiated a sort of peace as he groomed Donner. Pitch was just happy North was letting him come here at all, and he’d learned to appreciate what he’d been given in this regard not wanting to take it for granted.

Seeing that Pitch was going to spend some time at the stables, North moved to sit on the bench that was placed against one of the walls.

Pitch spent about an hour grooming Donner and then put him back in the stable, replaced the brush, and moved over to North. He didn’t want to be rude keeping the man there all day as he’d done the
last time they had come to the stables. Pitch knew North had other things he needed to catch up on, so he didn’t want to be selfish and keep him at the stables all day, “I… thank you; I feel much better now after coming here. I know you’ve got a lot to do, so I appreciate you bringing me here regardless of that fact.” Pitch gave North a warm smile of appreciation.

North waved him off. "It is no problem. I said that you could go anywhere you wish as long as you have escort until your grounding starts." North pushed himself to standing.

“You mentioned checking out the new toy line yesterday… I uh, I know that those plans got kind of derailed,” Pitch blushed deeply knowing well the reason as he scratched at the back of his neck, “Did… were you interested in grabbing a quick shower and then getting back together to check them out now?” Pitch offered not wanting to stay in his room but also wanting to go somewhere that would simultaneously gratify North’s wishes from the day prior. He was doing his best not to think selfishly; it didn’t come easily, and Pitch found he had to work at it.

"Sounds like good idea." North smiled. He led the way back to the Pole, and back to Pitch's room.

Pitch took his time washing out his clothes and then showering. He hadn’t worked particularly hard today, but he found he enjoyed the feeling of a hot shower pelting his skin. Ever since the shower’s installation, Pitch found he’d sometimes just sit in the shower for close to an hour just enjoying the rhythmic patter against his back and neck loosening the taut muscles. He of course knew that North would be back soon, so Pitch settled with a generalized shower where he was in and out within ten minutes so as not to make North wait when he did arrive.

Pitch was dressed and ready, laying on his stomach on his bed, feet kicking lazily in the air and head propped up on his elbows as he relaxed waiting for North to arrive.

It was about twenty minutes later when North knocked on the door.

Pitch was quick to slide off his bed and open the door with a big smile ready to head out.

“Let us be on our way,” said North with a smile, leading the way down the hall and into the toy factory. Some of the yetis that worked in the factory still milled about, trying to finish up as much work as they could before calling it a day. North walked over to a corner of the room where toy prototypes were designed and assembled, some of them being North’s own designs.

Pitch had never been to this area of the Pole’s workshop, but as they entered, he looked about curiously. He poked and prodded at a few of the toys to see how they worked. Pitch jumped as one of the toy cars unknowingly had a traction pull on the wheels that moving it caused it to jet forward to crash on the floor noisily. "Uh, sorry..." Pitch cringed blushing at the racket the car made and rushing to pick it back up.

North turned toward the sudden noise and watched as Pitch picked up the car. “Be careful. Prototypes are very fragile.”

Pitch frowned putting the car carefully back onto the podium it was originally set on and backed away from the displays pulling his hands to wrap around his waist feeling rather clumsy now.

"This is prototype area of workshop.” North explained. “Designs for new toys begin here. I contribute to it a lot with my own designs. Once the designs are complete, a prototype of it is made, which is what you see here.” He reached out to carefully pick up a remote control dinosaur.

Pitch moved forward to look keeping his hands wrapped around himself to discourage his want to reach out and touch everything, "If they are toys, why are they so fragile?"
"They are prototypes, Pitch. They are models that are constructed to give idea of what finished toy will look like. At this stage, we can look it over and see if there is anything that needs to be modified or adjusted, and we can test out different materials, paints, and colors. It also helps us to locate flaws that might pose danger in finished product."

"I guess I can understand that logic," he said this, but Pitch looked a bit miffed that he felt he couldn’t touch any of them without the threat of breaking it.

"Logic? It is just one of many steps that is normal in this line of work."

Pitch nodded his understanding even though he didn’t have the first clue when it came to the physical creativity of toy making. It was an interesting look into North’s every day activities he had to admit as he studied the detail of the toy in North’s hand.

North put the dinosaur back where it had been setting and walked around, examining some of the other prototypes and making notes.

Pitch followed timidly behind not wanting to interrupt as North worked. He found it difficult as they went along not to touch anything since so much of it caught his interest if just to see what it did. Pitch did resist though distracting himself by looking over North’s shoulder to see what kind of notes he was writing. It was obvious though that Pitch was getting antsy from the lack of interaction with all the wonders surrounding him.

North glanced at Pitch. "You may touch prototypes if you want. But be careful with them. They are more fragile than finished product."

"I can?" This came out a little more excited than Pitch had intended, but he didn’t let the momentary surge of elation embarrass him too much as he glided over to look at the toys more closely. There was a large robotic spider that had caught Pitch’s attention earlier, and he gathered it off of its podium and gently placed it on the ground grabbing the controller and kneeling down next to it trying to figure out how to work the machine. He wasn’t overly adept with technology it was painfully obvious, but he’d seen the yetis working with mechanical toys before and pushed on the buttons and pulled on the toggles looking horribly disappointed that it wouldn’t move. “I… I can’t get it to work!” He pouted.

North suppressed rolling his eyes, settling instead for giving an amused smile. “You might want to turn it on first. Look for a power button. That usually works.”

Pitch studied the controller turning it over in his hands and finally saw an indented panel that had a switch that said on and off, “Oh…” he let out a soft bashful chuckle as he flipped the switch to on and the spider jolted to life when he pressed one of the toggles forward. He let out a small gasp of glee as he watched the intricate leg joints move in a fluid motion very much like an actual spider. Pitch’s eyes widened in silent wonder as he pushed one of the buttons on the device, and the spider raised its two front legs in an explorative gesture, “Fascinating!” Pitch exclaimed enthusiastically as he learned to better operate the controls. His eyes remained impossibly glued on the mechanical moving spider as he manipulated its movements to scuttle around in a figure eight looking quite proud of himself that he’d managed to learn to work the toy.

North smiled as he watched Pitch play with the toy.

After about ten minutes of maneuvering the robot spider around, Pitch turned the controller off and placed the toy back on the pedestal as carefully as he’d removed it and began moving around testing out a plethora of other toys seemingly captivated by the myriad of designs and what they could do. After an hour had passed in this way, Pitch blinked looking at the clock on the wall as it chimed five
O’clock. Looking back up at North from the floor where he was testing out a specialized ramp jump for toy cars, Pitch stood dusting himself off looking apologetic. “I… I’m sorry. The time seemingly got away from me. I didn’t realize I’d spent so much time …testing out your inventions (he avoided saying playing with your toys although his cheeks reddened as it was most apt and the first thing that had come to mind.)

North waved him off. “It is no problem. I am glad to see our prototypes getting such a good testing.” He also was glad to see that Pitch was thoroughly enjoying himself. He eyed Pitch a moment. "Would you be interested in doing this again?" he questioned carefully. "As in like job? It could be something you could do alongside caring for deer."

A bright smile lit up Pitch’s face at the prospect, “Really? You… you aren’t afraid I might accidently break something?” He looked unsure remembering how very not technologically inclined he was and thinking how he’d accidently sent the one car jetting across the workshop when they’d first entered the room. He wouldn’t admit it, but Pitch had never played with toys, but he did find manipulating them and just kind of getting mentally lost with them was actually kind of fun. Having spent plenty of time by himself, he was readily able to slip into a state of mind to just use his imagination while he tested them out. The workshop had literally hundreds of prototypes, and Pitch had barely touched the tip of the iceberg concerning them. He knew that if he was allowed to, he’d also not feel so rushed and could take his time exploring each new type of toy and what it had to offer. As a job, it definitely wasn’t a bad one, and with new designs coming in all the time, it’d take quite a while to get bored with it.

“I trust you will be careful.” North replied. “But there is lot more to job than playing with prototypes. You will need to study each one and take note if they develop any flaws. If you see something not quite right, you will have to take notes.”

Pitch nodded eagerly, “I can do that!” That sounded pretty easy actually, “Do you have a special report to write for each new toy?” Never having studied a toy, Pitch thought it would be nice to have some kind of direction.

“Actually, yes, we do.” North turned and rummaged through the papers on the desk to his left until he found one of the forms. "Ah! Here we are." He handed it to Pitch. "You will have to fill in name or description of toy and write down any flaws or glitches it might have. Such as... non-working parts, pieces that can easily break off, faulty wiring, stuff like that. Anything that would pose danger to child. Then you just slip this piece of paper under toy when you put it back on shelf."

He took the slip of paper looking over all the different fields neatly spaced for ease of filling out. Pitch grinned, “Sounds simple enough. I think I could do this job,” he gave a satisfactory nod as he studied the page a moment longer before handing it back to North. A smile touched his lips thinking on a couple of the toys that were meant for more than one person that Pitch had to pass over, “I saw that there are quite a few toys that require more than one person to use, do you think Jack would want to test some of those out with me?” Pitch was sure it would be an activity he could share with Jack and that both could enjoy with him being the guardian of fun and all.

North was surprised to hear Pitch request Jack, considering he had been jealous of him not more than a few days ago. He gave a shrug. “I do not know. You can always ask him.”

Thinking of asking Jack made Pitch grimace as he thought on the last time he’d seen Jack and how he’d treated the boy. He felt bad now realizing how jealous he’d been and how he had acted in the face of such intense jealousy. Looking back on it now made Pitch a bit embarrassed; Jack hadn’t deserved that. Pitch had been made to wait on North until late in the morning that particular day, and it was just before the work on the conveyor had officially started, so it had surprised Pitch to see Jack
already there tending to the reindeer; it hadn't helped that Pitch was still getting adjusted to having to have an escort along with the weight of the entirety of his punishment. It had all blended to make for an incredibly volatile and quick to temper Boogeyman that had lashed out at Jack without provocation. Jack had flown off in a hurry to leave the atmosphere that Pitch had created, and at the time, Pitch had been grateful because it gave him time with the reindeer by himself. Pitch looked down feeling even more shamed the more he thought on his horrible behavior as he replied hesitantly, “Uh… I… I need to apologize to Jack first I think.”

North nodded in agreement. "Yes, you do."

North’s ready agreement made Pitch cringe, “I… I was that bad was I?” Pitch had known he’d acted badly, but he hadn’t known exactly how badly he looked through others eyes until now.

North nodded again. "Jack is just trying to help. I could have had one of yetis take care of deer during your grounding, but I chose Jack because he is used to being around animals. He knows what he is doing. He may not do the job same as you, but he does it well. And you had no need to treat him as you did. He is not taking job away from you."

Pitch’s shoulders sank, “I know,” he replied demurely lowering his head, “I …I don’t know why I got so upset…” he sighed, “Okay, maybe I do. I just hated seeing him taking care of the reindeer over me; I got jealous when I didn’t need to be. I know Frost doesn’t want to take over my job, I just kept thinking the reindeer were going to take to liking him more. It’s ridiculous… believe me, I know! It… it’s more of those irrational emotions I keep having that I can’t seem to get a handle on. I really don’t mean to get so out of control… I just can’t help it sometimes,” Pitch pouted hating to admit this level of inability to manage his outbursts but needing to give some sort of justification for his actions.

North raised an eyebrow. "I could always give you swat when you get out of control." he said casually.

Pitch's face flushed at the notion, "Na-no, that's not necessary! I... I think I can manage on my own actually!"

"Make sure you do." North said, a hint of warning in his voice. "Because I will start giving warning swats to help remind you. In fact, it is actually good idea. Probably something I should have been doing all along."

Pitch groaned inwardly, of course North would think it was a good idea! Why did he have to mention not being able to help his mood swings? He'd said it as an explanation for his behavior thinking North would give him a little more understanding and a bit of a break, but instead it worked against him to ensure North would help him nip any bad mood in the bud before it had a chance to get bad enough to create a scene like what had happened with Jack. Pitch frowned pitifully thinking about how embarrassing North doing that in public would be. He definitely was going to be watching out for any slips that might rise the Cossack’s ire in any way, "I …I'll be sure to keep myself in check," Pitch stated quickly.

“Good,” North said, giving a curt nod.

“I… I’d prefer just a verbal warning. I’m pretty sure that will work just as well…” Pitch hoped to avoid actually getting a physical reminder if at all possible.

“I’ll be the one to decide that.” said North.

“You’ve made that painfully clear; I have no say in my own rehabilitation,” Pitch muttered under his
breath feeling no small amount of self-pity to be reminded how little control he had over the way North decided to punish him. “What have you got planned to do now that we’ve inspected the new prototypes?” Pitch worked to change the subject not enjoying the current topic.

North regarded Pitch. He then shrugged. “Don’t know. Is there anything you would like to do?”

“Well, it’s a little after five now, maybe we could go visit Bunnymund? Isn’t he usually winding down around this time?” Pitch didn’t really want to get holed up in North’s office while the man went over lists and also didn’t want to go back to his room anytime soon while there was still the ability to wander about freely.

North shook his head. “No, Pitch. You haven’t done anything lately to earn trip outside of Pole. Besides, I have a lot of work to do.”

“Oh…” Pitch pouted, “O-okay, well, I guess we can do whatever you need to get taken care of I suppose,” he didn’t sound overly enthused by North’s edict on visiting Bunnymund.

North thought a moment. “There is one thing we can do. I was going to save it until after your grounding, but I suppose we can do it now.”

Pitch perked, “Oh? And what’s that?” He asked curiously.

“We could go look at my candy factory.”

That sounded promising! Pitch beamed, “You did tell me about your specially made candy! I would love to try it! Uh, if you were offering some of course,” he amended shyly.

North laughed heartily. “A tour of candy factory is not complete without free samples.”

Pitch nodded enthusiastically as he clasped his hands rubbing them eagerly in anticipation, “I do like the sound of that!”

"Come on, then," North led the way to the elevator. He looked around them to make sure no elves had seen them, then he pushed the button. When the elevator opened, he waved for Pitch to go first.

Pitch was quick to board the elevator looking rather excited now to know not only was there candy in his near future, but he was also traveling to some unexplored part of the Pole.

North pushed a button to go up and the elevator began moving. When they stopped on the third floor, the doors opened again. North walked out and led the way down a quiet hallway that was devoid of life save an occasional yeti that lumbered from room to room. North led Pitch a good distance before stopping at an elaborately carved wooden door that was missing a doorknob. He patted at his clothing until he found and fished out a wallet, pulling out a key card. He quickly swiped the card through the reader. It beeped and a light on it turned from red to green and a loud click of an opening lock was heard. North smiled at Pitch, then pushed the door open. He gestured for Pitch to enter.

It amazed Pitch how much modern technology that North incorporated into his workshop, but he supposed having to keep up with technology was essential when it came to keeping children content with the gifts he gave. He doubted the same toys he gave to children fifty years ago would sate the ingrates now, and the man couldn’t use magic in their toys, no; that would be too dangerous. Stars knows they couldn’t be happy with something simple! Children were always so demanding! Pitch was stunned honestly that the man could deliver so many presents in one night let alone keep up with the constant flux of change in wants from year to year. From the small amount of time that Pitch had observed the guardian of wonder working, it seemed quite exhausting to say the least.
Pitch finally walked through the door. Just as many places throughout the Pole, this section had a life of its own, and Pitch had to pause as he walked through the entry way to take it all in. Several yetis moved back and forth to different stations checking the whirring machines that churned and thumped as it mixed some form of candy. Along the ceilings, rods moved quickly back and forth stretching taffy that led out from several vats while yetis carefully cut stretched out strands as the rods pushed the taffy strips to lower down on to a table from an automatic feed continuously moving the candy forward from the vat to the table. Several conveyor lines moved up and down with machines and yetis working in tandem as different candies were spit into a mold to cool and moved down the line for packaging such as little chocolate Santas, gumdrops, and of course candy canes.

Everything was all so well timed Pitch observed trying to track the myriad of motion. The floor was colorfully painted in rich green, red, and white stripes to look like the design of a candy cane. The stripe design was making Pitch dizzy from the slight vertigo of looking at the spirals around and on everything especially on vats that spun to keep certain candies in motion.

Along the walkway were several barrels at the ends of each conveyor belt, and as one filled with finely packaged candies, a yeti would sweep by and switch out the full barrel with an empty one. Everything seemed so fast paced up here! It was wise of North to keep the elves out, even if they wouldn’t have gone crazy for the candies, they would have surely been unable to traverse this floor without the medical ward filling up daily with accidents just from the severe precision of the working crew and the multitude of moving parts around the majority of the workshop.

“This… this is remarkable North! There’s so much variety, and intricacy you’ve got going on here that my eyes can barely keep up!” Pitch was quite staggered by the display. Unlike any of the other floors in North’s workshop where the yetis and elves seemed to mosey through their work, this area was very fast paced and almost tiring to watch the yetis work.

North beamed as he nodded and smiled. “Yes. Even after all these years, it still amazes even myself.”

Pitch moved to the side to let the Cossack lead them through the workshop, “It’s more extensive than I had imagined when you mentioned it earlier.”

"It wasn't always this large." North said. "We added on and updated equipment some years ago. Made it bigger and better."

Pitch nodded as he followed North looking at all the various controls and dials the yetis were examining as well as all the shiny colorfully wrapped pieces of candy littered at every juncture of the tour. “I’m surprised you’ve been able to keep this a secret from the elves with how elaborate this set-up is, but then again, they are not exactly very bright I suppose. I’d imagine this whole wing would get shut down if they blundered in here,” Pitch scoffed as he thought on the air-headed pint-sized denizens.

“That is why I installed the lock you saw on door. If they do ever make it up here, they won’t be able to get in without keycard, which is only given out to yetis that work here, and myself.” said North.

Pitch nodded, “Speaking of the reasons to keep the elves out, may I?” Pitch pointed at one of the barrels with a chocolate wrapped Santa. He was eager to see if North’s chocolate was anywhere near as tasty as Bunnymund’s.

“By all means,” North said cheerily. He reached over and plucked one of the chocolate Santas out and handed it to Pitch.

Pitch greedily unwrapped it to pop it in his mouth. It was good! Unlike the majority of candies that made their way around the Pole, this chocolate had a richness that was worth savoring. The
chocolate was good, but not on the caliber of Bunnymund’s chocolate, but unlike Bunnymund’s candies, North had a different variety of candies that Pitch had yet to ever try, and seeing how good North’s chocolate was had Pitch eager to try these new candies even more, “It’s quite tasty North! Definitely better than the stuff floating around downstairs. Can I try some of those?” Pitch pointed at a barrel of plastic wrapped see through gumdrops.

North nodded.

Pitch took one of the packages opening it and popping it in his mouth. The textures alone were fun Pitch noted as he chewed it. He smiled, “These are pretty good to! Can I try all the different types of candies?” Pitch’s eyes were growing wide at the prospect as he looked around the factory and back to North wanting to taste them all.

"Go right ahead." North answered. "Just be careful of machines."

North didn’t have to say anymore as Pitch nodded quickly gliding around to all the different barrels to take one sample to eat then and sticking one in his pocket to eat later. By the time he’d made his way through the factory and stopped at every different table and barrel, his robes were bulging with candies and he was on a definite sugar high with eyes dilated and bubbling with barely contained energy.

Pitch was nibbling a piece of cotton candy as he returned from the other side of the factory exclaiming, “This stuff just instantly dissolves on your tongue! And oh stars! The chewy stuff,” he held up a piece of taffy in his other hand, “This stuff you can chew forever! I took pieces of each for later,” he looked down at his bulging robe, “I hope that’s okay?” Pitch was of course speaking excitedly at a mile a minute trying to spit out everything at once.

North shook his head, smiling. “Only if you eat it in moderation. Right now, I think you have had too much again.”

Pitch pouted at North’s admission but knew from the way his hands were already jittering that the man was probably right. He looked at the two pieces of candy in his hands, “Okay, I’ll finish these last two pieces and will hold off eating anymore.” He smirked adding as an afterthought, “You know if Tooth saw me with all this candy she’d likely have a heart attack. She was surprised my teeth already weren’t rotting out of my mouth.”

North lifted his head, smiling. “Are you sure eating those two pieces is wise?”

It wasn’t, but Pitch wanted to eat them anyway regardless, “I’ve already started eating them, and besides, it’s only two more pieces,” Pitch reasoned.

North lifted his hands and shook his head, showing that he was done with it. "It is your stomach."

Pitch smiled greedily willing to take his chances as he gobbled the cotton candy and then the taffy quickly. The cotton candy alone was enough to send Pitch off into another babbling tangent as he went on about the different types of candies and how much he’d liked specific ones (namely the gummy varieties) and the pop rocks that he had originally thought were acting as some sort of acid in his mouth, but once he’d realized that it was just a specialized texture, he enjoyed the shock the candy had elicited. Thinking on this sent him into a bout of giggles, “We HAVE to get Toothiana to try them! Can you just imagine her reaction!” Pitch gushed at the thought of pranking the poor fairy.

"Indeed," North muttered. "I think you have had enough for one night."

Pitch never liked limitations, but he smirked replying, “Sure, sure,” but all along he was thinking to
himself that he still had oodles of candy to munch on later within his robe one way or another, and he
planned to munch on them later after North had dropped him off at his room for the night. It would
help keep him going while he read another chapter of the current book he was reading.

“Are you through touring my factory?” North asked. “Or is there something else you wish to see?”

Pitch took a moment to glance around once more; the two had been up here close to two hours, and
Pitch was pretty sure he’d seen everything the factory had to offer, “I think I’ve seen it all, that is
unless you’ve got any secret areas not readily accessible I’ve yet to discover here,” he jested as they
made their way back to the elevator.

“No, can’t say I have.” North replied.

“Well then I gather we’re done here for the moment,” Pitch chirped as he bounced into the elevator
shifting about not wanting to stand still from the effects of the sugar high, “Where to now!” Pitch
exclaimed springing over to North’s side once the man had entered the elevator and keenly looking
over his shoulder at the elevator panel to see where North planned to take them next.

“You are going back to room.” North said, pushing the down button to go back to the main floor.
“And hopefully will sleep off sugar.”

Pitch’s face fell, “But it’s still early,” he protested not ready to go back to his room yet, “Why can’t I
just stay with you? I won’t be a bother; I promise!”

"Because I have work to do before calling it night." North said with a frown.

It was Pitch’s turn to frown, “What, you can’t perform work in my presence? Surely I’m not that
much of a distraction,” Pitch complained crossing his arms. As if he could prevent North from doing
his work by just being there! Pitch thought sourly. In reality, he just didn’t want to be dumped back
in his room for the night. Going to North’s office would serve as a distraction for himself, and if any
of the other guardians showed up, he could use it as an excuse to meander about the Pole untethered
to his room. He only had one more day of freedom after all, and he didn’t plan to waste it if at all
possible!

"You are hyped up on sugar. Believe me, you will be distraction. Besides, I thought you didn't like
spending time in boring office."

Pitch huffed, “It’s better than my boring room!”

"Of which you are going to."

A surge of anger swelled through Pitch at North’s finality as he stiffened growling with a deepening
scowl, “Fine! I’m not even supposed to be confined to my room yet, but you’re making me feel like I
already am,” he hissed drawing his brow down and staring hatefully at the elevator door.

"There you go, getting angry again.” said North.

"Of course I’m angry! I’m getting shoved in a box after I’m no longer amusing,” Pitch spat
complaining in indignation. Maybe North would change his mind after seeing how upset he was
making Pitch by isolating him like this!

North reached out and gave Pitch's rear a hard, quick swat.

Pitch gasped jumping at the contact on his already sore bottom. Not having expected such a
response, he side stepped quickly turning to face North with a hung open jaw of surprise as he
rubbed at the newly radiating pain in his posterior. He pouted then realizing he’d been getting a little
carried away, “I… I didn’t mean to…” he went quiet knowing that he did in fact mean to influence
North’s decision, so instead he dropped his gaze, “Yes, of course… I …I’ll go back to my room.”
There was no point in arguing as it was clear North had already made up his mind.

"Good to hear," North said.

The elevator came to a stop as North said this, and Pitch exited quickly shame faced as if those
facing the elevator now had seen what had just occurred. Thankfully North had chosen to swat him
in the elevator over on the hub floor. Still it didn’t make Pitch feel any less lousy for having received
it in the first place. North had warned him that he planned to take a more active approach, Pitch was
just so caught up in the moment that he had not heeded North’s subtle warning. He was going to
have to get better about paying attention to such signs in the future Pitch decided as he followed
behind North silently contemplating what had just happened.

Sighing he moved up next to North, “I… I’m sorry I got a little upset back there. Ma-maybe it’s the
sugar and maybe just a little bit of disappointment to have to go back to my room so early. I… I get
bored easily you know, and… and I just didn’t want to be stuck in my room for the rest of the night
when I’m feeling so wired with the sun just setting and what not. Surely you can understand right?”
He explained more to justify his actions to himself than to North.

"It does not matter what excuse you choose to give. You acted out of line, and that is that." North
said. “But, yes, I understand about boredom. However, not everything revolves around you. I can’t
always be with you. I have life as well. You must learn to entertain yourself when others cannot be
with you. And by entertain, I mean in good way, not getting into trouble. You have things in your
room to keep you entertained. I have provided you with art supplies and books. If you need more
than that, then I can always have some of the toys brought there for you to paint.”

“I… I’ll find some way to occupy myself,” Pitch stated dejectedly. Pitch knew he was going to
already have plenty of time to reacquaint himself with finding things to do without the company of
others. He also knew North had other things to do than to entertain him through the night, and Pitch
supposed he was acting a bit selfish to demand so much of the man’s time as he did seeing North
was already having to spend each day this week organizing the construction of the new conveyor
belt when he could have been doing many other activities associated with his Christmas preparations.
All of this considered, North still went out of his way to take Pitch to his prototype lab and his candy
factory to amuse and entertain him. Pitch ruminated on all of this silently as they made their way
back to his room.

“Alright, here we are.” North said, opening the door to Pitch’s bedroom. “Perhaps, if I get work
done early, I will stop by later tonight. But I will make no promises.”

Pitch nodded his acceptance, “O-okay, and if you can’t… and any of the other guardians show up…
and uh, they feel like visiting…” Pitch scratched at the back of his neck trailing off feeling a bit
pathetic now as he sulked into his room.

“I doubt other Guardians will be around. Tooth and Sandy are out on rounds by now. Jack…well, I
never know when he’ll show. Bunny usually only shows when he has to.”

Pitch moved to sit on his bed tentatively, “I know,” his shoulders slumped, and he clasped his hands
in his lap as he spoke looking rather melancholy.

“Good night,” said North, closing the door.

Pitch huffed, good night indeed! It was only half past seven! Pitch flopped on to his pillow feeling
the bulge in his robes and remembering all the candy still stuffed in his pockets. He rose opening the
drawer on the nightstand and deposited the candies in the drawer. He’d gotten quite a bit of it!

A couple more pieces wouldn’t hurt… thirty minutes later he was moaning his discomfort on his bed
having eaten half of the candy he’d brought back. Why didn’t he stop himself! He moaned pitifully;
it had tasted so good though! He wasn’t sure if it was worth it now as he felt a wave of nausea sweep
through him, and he ran to the bathroom to empty the contents of his stomach. His whole body was
shaking not having done this in a long time either, although this sort of nostalgia he’d had been more
than happy to have forgotten.

He felt awful! His head was swimming and his body felt like a limp noodle. He stripped leaving his
clothes on the floor as he crawled into the shower turning the water on to blast him with a hot
bombarding stream of water. He sighed; the steam rose around him like a warm blanket as he leaned
into the cold shower wall and crumpled into a ball in the corner. His head lulled to the side as he let
the heat of the shower pacify his mind until he passed out.
Chapter Forty-One

Just a Spoon Full of Sugar

It was two hours later when North came by and knocked on Pitch’s bedroom door. “Pitch? You awake?”

Pitch did not hear him having fallen asleep to the cascading waters of the shower and the sickening thrum in his head from entirely too much sugar coursing through his body.

The bathroom was open, and enough water had spattered on the floor from the open shower door to begin pooling at the point where the door frame to the bathroom met the entrance to his bedroom.

North knocked a few more times, calling the Boogeyman’s name. When Pitch failed to answer, he took it upon himself to enter. At first, a surge of anger coursed through him as his only thought was that Pitch must have snuck out of the room. He stepped into the room and immediately heard the water running. “What is this?” he said, his anger replaced with concern. Then he saw Pitch. He rushed over and turned the water off, grabbing a towel to toss over the puddle on the floor. He then turned his attention to Pitch. He shook the Boogeyman. “Pitch? What is wrong?”

The jarring elicited a moan of agony from Pitch as he lurched forward dry heaving over the drain, “Oh stars North! What…?” His convulsions eased thankfully not giving way to anything more having already voided his stomach of everything earlier. His body still quaked from the aftermath, and his head hurt terribly, “Ow…” he muttered feebly rubbing at his temples now and trying to orient himself.

“What is matter?” North repeated, concern in his voice and on his face.

Pitch wavered blinking up at North. That’s right, he’d come into the shower to feel better. He went to stand on coltish legs and stumbled back into the wall awkwardly as he pulled at the towel on the shower door and wrapped it around his shivering limbs, “I…I’m alright. I just …I climbed in the shower to …rest a moment.”

"You are not all right. You look ill.” said North reaching to help Pitch stand.

Pitch was grateful for the support as his knees wobbled and he clutched North’s coat with a trembling hand close to falling, “Uhh… maybe. Just a little.” Pitch’s vision felt blurred. He’d already had too much candy at the factory eating close to fifty pieces to top it off with another twenty or more when he’d gotten back to his room. North’s candy was even more sugary then Bunnymund’s chocolate had been, and to have saturated himself with so much concentrated sugar had his body working overtime to expel it now. He staggered a step forward wanting to get out of the shower and dry as his body now shivered from the cold and the shock to his system.

"Well, what is wrong?” North asked, his voice a bit stern. He was growing impatient that Pitch wouldn’t come out and say it. "Do you need me to take you to medical ward?"

“Na-no! I …I’ll be fine!” Pitch wobbled to the hook on the wall holding his bathrobe to unsteadily sweep it over his shoulders grateful for the warmth even though his body still convulsed with tremors. “I… I may have had a bit too much candy,” Pitch admitted lightly.
“Too much candy?” North’s brow drew down, trying to understand. “You were not this bad when I left you here. Besides, I have not seen candy do this to a person before.”

Pitch flushed, "I... I kind of ate uh... half of the rest of the candy I brought back with me after you left. But... I'm feeling better now,” Pitch reassured as he stumbled towards his bed. He left out the fact that he was likely feeling better now because he'd thrown up the pound of sugary items he'd ingested.

North looked dumbfounded. Now it all made sense. His mouth worked a few minutes before he finally found his voice again. “Pitch, candy is not to be eaten in that way. Greedily gorging yourself on any type of food is not proper way of eating. We’re going to have to work on your ability to eat, I see. I never realized it was this serious an issue.”

Pitch frowned, "It... it's not! I just... I didn't think it would do that! It won’t happen again,” he huffed as he crawled haphazardly on top of the bed to curl in a ball. He still felt the waves of sugar induced chemicals churning through his veins making his heart race and his stomach lurch uncomfortably.

“I’m glad to hear that you have learned lesson from this. But I am curious what you expected from eating that much candy.”

Pitch made a low grunt and a small shrug feeling quite sorry for himself in his current state. He honestly hadn’t considered the effects of food since he so rarely ate it. He had satisfied himself with only enjoying the taste, although after the first time he’d felt the much milder effects of Bunnymund’s chocolate, Pitch really should have known better.

“I know eating is new experience for you and you have lot to learn.” said North as he pulled the covers of the bed over Pitch. “Something you should remember. No matter how good some foods taste, you should always eat in moderation. Only eat until you are full. No more. When it comes to foods like sweets and candy, eat even less. They are pleasure foods and treats to be eaten in small quantities, otherwise you get tummyache.” He stood to the side, looking down at the pitiful form on the bed. “Have you thrown up?”

Pitch vaguely recalled North leaving as he lay stock still trying his best not to move now. He felt like death warmed over; no, he could guarantee that he was never going to do this again! He sighed shutting his eyes and letting out small miserable whines when a particularly bad cramp roiled through him, but otherwise he remained quiet. He was still pulled into a ball albeit a little looser one now that he was under his covers and not feeling as cold.

Thirty minutes passed and North returned, opening the door and stepping inside. "Here you go," he said, walking up to the side of the bed and offering a steaming cup of tea to Pitch. "Drink this down. It is special blend of peppermint and ginger tea I concocted ages ago. It always helps when I have stomachache."

The smell of peppermint made Pitch want to gag now as he groaned. He wanted to feel better, but he
felt so drained now that he just laid there peering at North through half-lidded eyes as he worked to push himself to sit up unsuccessfully; letting out a pitiful moan he let his head collapse back on to the pillow, “Maybe in a minute,” he whined deciding he didn’t quite have the energy when laying here just like this felt preferable to trying to move anymore.

“Alright,” North nodded, setting the cup on the night table. “But you need to drink it. If not, I will take you to medical ward and let them give you something.”

Pitch complained into his pillow, “It… it smells awful! I… I don’t want it! I just want to rest! Can’t I just sleep for a little bit instead?” He felt absolutely terrible, and just the smell of North’s concoction was making him want to wretch all over again. All he felt like doing now was slipping back into that comfortable oblivion he’d found in the shower until he could wake up feeling normal again.

North felt like saying something in reply to Pitch’s comment, but he decided not to. Pitch was already punishing himself enough. "Fine. Have it your way. If you do not wish to feel better, then don’t drink it."

Pitch whimpered, “I… I do want to feel better,” He groaned as another sharp pain panged through his gut, “Do… do you have anything less… peppermint? The smell of it is turning my stomach,” he sulked.

"Peppermint helps to soothe your stomach. I can take you to medical ward and they can give you some medicine that will taste worse than this smells."

Pitch let out an inarticulate sound of complaint not wanting to go to the medical ward. Finally deciding the tea would likely be the less of two evils since North did threaten to bring him to the medical ward if he refused to drink it, Pitch painfully pulled himself up to lean against the headboard enough to try and drink the tea. He grunted several times as his stomach protested the jostling. Pitch did NOT like these new feelings at ALL. He’d been hurt in the past, he’d been hurt plenty! But this was a whole different level of hurt that was not just physical outer pain. This was internal and left him feeling physically and mentally incapacitated and lethargic. He moaned piteously feeling on the verge of tears, “Okay… I’ll …I’ll drink it.” He said this, but Pitch felt no compunction to move his limbs his face the picture of the misery he was feeling.

North reached over and picked up the cup, moving it closer to Pitch. “Want me to help?” he asked.

Pitch’s eyes flicked up to meet North’s looking apologetic for having to have the man help him before leaning towards the cup and sipping the tea. His lip curled in disgust, “Oh stars North! You said this didn’t taste that bad!” Pitch bellyached turning his face up away from the cup a moment and giving an undignified huff before turning back to the cup with an impossibly scrunched face as he took another sip, “Awful! Just awful!” He stated finding he had to retreat once more with a whimper.

"Or maybe we just have differing tastes.” North said with a slight chuckle.

“If I never taste another peppermint anything again it’ll be too soon!” Pitch pouted as he begrudgingly took another sip. It took another ten full minutes of Pitch sipping and then complaining about his horrible predicament before taking yet another painful sip until the concoction was finally gone (or at least low enough North decided it wasn’t worth giving him anymore and put the cup one fourth full to set gently on the nightstand.)

"Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?” North smiled. "Definitely better than the awful medicine they would have given in medical ward. That is why I created this tea."

Pitch’s lip was pooching in disdain, “That remains to be seen,” his face softened then as he added
lightly, “But… I …I am feeling slightly better. Thank you,” Pitch blinked lifting his head to give the Cossack a small smile of appreciation although it was apparent Pitch was still not feeling well by the abnormally darker circles raising a slight swell of exhaustion to highlight his normally bright golden eyes that glittered with a sheen of silver to look almost dulled like worn copper and nickel.

“Good,” North said. “Do you need me to contact Sandy and have him come by to give you sleep?”

Pitch grimaced but regretfully nodded. He felt so foolish now, North had come to spend time with him scant hours after he’d left! If he’d just read his book like he’d planned, and not decided to angrily stuff piece after piece of the candy North had let him take back to his room in his mouth partly out of greed because the candy did taste so good, but also partly out of spite because North had told him he’d had enough candy for one night. Pitch didn’t ever like being given edicts (even if they were for his own good.) After dropping Pitch off in his room, North had no reign to tell the Boogeyman no, so Pitch had passively defied the man. Pitch was severely regretting his decision now having unwittingly caused his own downfall in a most unsettling way.

North nodded. "Sandy promised to come by every night after rounds, but if you need him now, I will fetch him for you."

Pitch sighed leaning his head against the headboard. The cool surface felt good against his heated flesh. He really didn’t want North to have to call Sandy back earlier than he’d planned to come visit him, "I ...don't worry about me. My stomach isn't cramping like it was, so I think I'm well enough to just rest here until he returns." Pitch curled in on himself huddling lamely against the headboard now too ill to want to budge enough to climb back under his sheets. He didn’t want to be left alone like this, but he was sure North wasn't going to be interested in just standing around next to him since Pitch felt ill equipped to carry on a conversation at the moment.

“Alright,” North said with a small nod. He walked over and pulled the rocking chair up to the side of the bed and sat down in it. “I will stay here till he arrives."

Pitch seemed surprised lifting his head and looking over at North, You... you will?" To hear North say so and to see him pull up the rocking chair next to him elicited a small smile and a soft contented sigh from Pitch as he settled his head back against the headboard.

North cocked his head. “Why wouldn’t I?"

Pitch frowned, "I'm not very good company at the moment."

North gave a shrug. “People do not have to talk to be company. You are sick. I stay here until Sandy arrives."

Pitch mumbled a barely audible thanks as he closed his eyes a moment pulling his covers back up to wrap around his lithe form as he worked to scrunch back down to lay on his pillow once more just wanting to lay down.

North nodded toward the book lying on the night table. “Would you like for me to read to you while we wait?

Pitch smiled brightly, "That sounds rather nice," he admitted as he snuggled his pillow getting comfortable.

North reached and picked up the book and leaned back in his chair. He found the place Pitch had left off and began reading.

Pitch just stared at North with a slight awe to see that he would be so kind as to sit with Pitch reading
to him for no other reason than to keep him company. Despite the sickness, Pitch found himself wearing an elated smile. His eyes glazed close to tears reflecting the happiness he felt as he quietly squeezed his pillow listening to the timbre of North’s voice melodiously flow through the words of the story. Pitch felt very loved in this moment, and he let his eyes close all the while beaming a contented smile from the warmth he now felt inside.

North continued to read, becoming involved in the story himself and jumping to his feet and waving his arm during one of the more intense moments as if he were acting out a scene in a play.

Pitch chuckled softly as he lay watching North’s reactions and enjoying the theatrics. Time passed quickly, and Pitch was almost sad to hear the soft click of his door opening and to see Sandy floating lazily into the room.

Sandy carefully made his way to Pitch’s bed pulling the comforter up to Pitch’s neck before settling down to sit behind Pitch. Sandy leaned lightly on Pitch’s side like a propped up ledge doing his best not to disturb North as the Cossack, so caught up in his reading, seemed to not have even have noticed Sandy’s entrance.

Pitch couldn’t help but to give Sandy a loving smile as the golden man tenderly adjusted his sheets and gently leaned against him. The Sandman’s warmth felt like a heater against his back, and the sensation of the subtle rise and fall of his chest against Pitch’s back caused Pitch to sigh in content. Pitch positively radiated with bliss having both North and Sandy giving him such attentions.

“And—” North stopped mid-sentence and finally turned to look at Sandy. He smiled. “Ah! I did not hear you come in.”

Sandy gave a shy wave ducking his head and beaming with a smile. Both Pitch and Sandy cuddling on the bed looked the picture of a yin and yang with twin smiles.

“He has been sick.” North explained. “Ate too much candy.”

Pitch averted eye contact feeling wholly embarrassed as a hue of purple flushed his cheeks, “Uh… yes, I did. But … I’m feeling much better now,” Pitch assured. He really was feeling much better now that the sugar had had the chance to equalize through his system, and the worst of the stomach cramping had finally faded into a dull lurch that as long as he stayed lying still remained peaceable.

“I took him on tour of my candy factory, and he had to test everything, and then brought extras back to his room.” North continued. “He gorged himself on extras after I left him alone.”

Sandy lifted a brow shaking his head chidingly as his lip pulled into a dissatisfied frown.

Pitch frowned looking quite ashamed as he ducked his head, “Trust me, I think I’m done with candy for a good long while.”

North chuckled. "Remember, Pitch, it can happen with any food. You must learn to eat responsibly. Don’t gorge yourself.”

Pitch didn’t answer, he merely huffed thinking that he only ever had gorged himself on sweets, but now the thought of eating them turned his stomach.

Sandy slid over closer to Pitch’s head now propping his body up on one arm and gently laying his head on Pitch’s shoulder grinning down at him like a Cheshire cat.
Pitch’s eyes flicked up to Sandy’s face with a knowing pout, “Can… can’t we listen to the rest of the chapter before we call it a night?” Pitch whined. He was enjoying himself and didn’t want to go to bed just yet.

Sandy turned his smile to North to see what his answer would be.

“Sure!” North said with a smile. He turned back to the book and continued reading.

Sandy being in such near proximity to his head though had Pitch’s eyes drooping after a couple paragraphs as dreamsand particles drifted lightly in the air around the Sandman and were casually inhaled by Pitch. Within less than ten minutes Pitch was asleep dreaming of North reading him a story and the depictions of the storybook coming to life in his dream.

Sandy watched the sand dream proudly turning to North to point and silently giggle at his jolly sand form animatedly telling the story in Pitch’s dreams.

North slowly stopped reading and smiled at the scene in front of him.

Sandy leaned down planting a soft tender kiss on Pitch’s temple, and the glow from Sandy’s face illuminated a small smile to crease Pitch’s lips at the contact as he sighed in contentment.

Floating above Pitch now, Sandy peered down at their charge lovingly before turning a broad knowing smile to North before gliding to the door. He stopped for a brief moment giving a small wave before quietly departing to start the next set of rounds he needed to attend to.

North waved back. He yawned and closed the book, putting it back on the night table. He stood up, grabbed the rocking chair, and put it back in its place. Turning out the light, he walked out into the hall and closed the door.
Pitch yawned stretching out languidly under his covers as he blinked the sleep from his eyes. His mind was still foggy as he pieced together the last things he could remember. Oh yes, North had been reading to him, and presumably, Pitch had passed out (no thanks to his little golden friend) sometime in the middle of the chapter. How pleasant it had been; Pitch reminisced now with a gleeful smile on his face. His stomach was finally back to normal he noted, and the early rays of morning were letting themselves be known as a soft knock came to the door. “Come in!” Pitch announced in a melodious tone still riding the high of happiness from the night before to greet North with a very cheery bright eyed expression as the man entered. He practically sang, “Good morning!”

“Good morning, Pitch,” North said. “Ready to finish up work on conveyor?”

Pitch’s smile faltered a little, but he nodded, “Yes. I think it’s going to be another early day, but hopefully not before lunch. Were… were you able to get a hold of Toothiana?” Pitch really hoped North had; he really wanted to see her once more before he was grounded. He hoped she didn’t offer to come see him during that week around North since it would alert the fairy to his further restrictions. Why had he not just come out and told her about it? Having to possibly face her about it now had Pitch a little worried; he’d angered her after the warren incident revolving around similar mistruths that had come out.

North gave a nod. “Yes, she will join us for lunch. And so will Sandy.”

Smiling, Pitch seemed satisfied with North’s answer as he moved to dress. His clothes were still littering the bathroom floor like the discarded shedding of a snake’s skin. He threw them on quickly enough hanging his bathrobe on the hook near the entryway to the bathroom on his way back to meet North. Pitch ran a hand haphazardly through his hair looking down, “Uh… I… I have a favor to ask.”

“Hm? What’s that?” said North.

“I… I want to stop by the stables…” there was a long pause before he continued, “I need to speak to Jack… I need to apologize.” Pitch had lowered his head throughout this admission still clearly affected from the conversation that he and North had shared at the factory.

North studied Pitch several long minutes before giving a nod. “Alright, we shall go to stables first.”

The two made their way through the hub and towards the stables. All the while Pitch worked to steel himself to the sight of Jack grooming and caring for the reindeer. It was so hard to push himself to do, but he’d had time to think, and he knew he owed it to the boy to apologize. Pitch wanted to make things right before he entered into his stint of grounding if for nothing else but to put the winter sprite’s mind at ease that he really wasn’t angry with him.

North suddenly reached out and grabbed hold of Pitch’s shoulder, bringing him to a stop. “I will take you to stables if you are serious about apologizing. Do not try anything foolish.”

Pitch was taken back by North’s statement feeling hurt that the man thought he had been up to something. He looked almost on the verge of tears by North’s words as he responded with a pout, “I… I won’t. I just want to make things right.”
North nodded. “Was just making sure. Please do not take it wrong way.”

Pitch nodded lightly looking down, “O-okay.” Pitch had of course taken it the wrong way, but he was working to push those negative feelings aside to refocus on what he’d wanted to say. Now his confidence was staggered though as he had to second guess himself and his true intentions to ensure he was in fact going to be able to handle being mature about this situation when even North felt the need to pull him aside before they had even arrived.

“Let us continue on our way.” Said North, waving Pitch to continue walking forward.

Nodding Pitch swallowed hard moving towards their destination. As they breeched the entrance to the tunnels leading outside, Pitch withdrew inwardly bracing himself. It was easy to see now coming out into the clearing, Jack was pulling Blitzen into the outside pen to roam. Pitch stood a little taller moving purposefully towards the boy.

North kept his distance behind Pitch to give him some space to do what he needed to do, but he kept close enough to the Boogeyman to break up anything if Pitch ended up getting out of hand. He kept his eyes on him as he walked toward Jack.

Pitch held his hands behind his back standing tall and proud, but the closer he got to facing the Frost spirit, the more his back bowed to dictate how very not proud he was at this moment. Still he kept his head up approaching Jack, “Uh… Jack? May I,” Pitch had to clear his throat as it felt restricted now, “May I have a word with you?”

Hearing Pitch’s voice, Jack Frost turned around, somewhat surprised to see Pitch and North. He gave a nod to North, then turned a frown to Pitch. “What do you want?”

Pitch cringed, “I… I guess I deserve that. I just wanted to…” Pitch paused taking in a long breath, “I know the way I acted the last time we saw each other… it …I was wrong. I was jealous, and I took it out on you. I… I just wanted to apologize.”

Jack’s frown melted into a surprised expression, his eyebrows rising. He looked to North then back to Pitch. He nodded. “I accept your apology.”

Pitch looked up tentatively at Jack breathing out a held breath that he hadn’t even realized he was holding seeming to visibly relax. He gave a small smile, “I… I know I can get a bit possessive with the reindeer. That said, I came by yesterday, and I saw you’ve been doing a good job with them… and uh… I guess keep up the good work.” Pitch found it hard to keep eye contact still feeling a bit ashamed of himself even though Jack had accepted his apology, on some level Pitch thought he hadn’t deserved it.

Jack gave Pitch a crooked smile. “Thanks,” he said. He was having a hard time believing the words coming out of Pitch’s mouth.

Pitch nodded only glancing up before turning back to North with pathetic sad puppy eyes, “Well, I… I guess we should go.” It was hurting Pitch to be so close to the reindeer now knowing he couldn’t interact with them, so he just wanted to leave now before it saddened him further.

“You know the way.” North replied, gesturing toward the landfill.

Pitch nodded gloomily and began moving quickly away towards the landfill.

“I am proud of you for what you did back there.” Said North when they had walked out of earshot of Jack.
Pitch peered back at North studying his features a moment before nodding, “I… I needed to say it. It’s… it’s been eating at me,” Pitch admitted brow drawn down with a very serious look holding his features.

North smiled down at Pitch. “Another sign you are changing.” He said.

Pitch’s face softened as a small smile tugged at his lips, “Do you really think so?” It did Pitch’s heart good to hear such encouragement.

“I would think so. What you described is guilt. It is sign you are developing a conscience, which is something you did not have prior.”

Pitch blinked as he assessed himself thinking on who he was and who he’d become. It had been only a month and a half’s time, but his outlook on life had gone through a kaleidoscope of changes in perception of the guardians, of himself, and simply nothing was the same anymore. He couldn’t go back to the person he’d been, of this much he was certain. Last night filled him with a joy that still left him feeling light of heart and happy. Apologizing to Jack added to this jubilation as well as North’s words leaving Pitch to perk with a delighted smile, “I do feel like a weight has been lifted to have spoken to Jack… although I’ll admit to apologize and wonder how he would respond was a dreadful feeling. I’m glad he wasn’t mad at me; we’ve had several instances in the past… I’m surprised all of you have forgiven me so many times. I seem to have a knack for making others angry with me,” Pitch admitted with a grimace.

North smiled warmly. “Apologizing usually leaves you with that delightful feeling. And it is common to worry over how other person will react. Apologizing is never easy, but it does leave you feeling good.”

Pitch nodded looking around the work site that had now been reduced down to Dave, three other yetis and themselves, “So… uh how are we going to do this?” Pitch asked looking at the now dry planks that the yetis were stacking on some sort of lift.

“You will help yetis attach them by getting on these special air lifts that will take you up there.” North waved a hand to the highest point of the conveyor that had needed to be repaired.

If it were possible, Pitch paled, “I… I’m not going to be able to up there long. The sun is going to be cresting over the mountainside in a couple hours. Do you think we can get that part of the conveyor finished by then?”

“I doubt it,” North shook his head. “Which is why this will be all day job. We might have to break until sun goes down.”

“It’s too bad you can’t invent a shade bubble,” Pitch joked. “Well, let’s get to it then shall we?”

North laughed and helped Pitch onto one of the lifts and closed the safety gate. It took a little while for the yetis to finish loading the plates onto another lift. When they were finished, the yetis boarded a third lift and together all of the lifts were carried into the air by special flying machines that North had invented. They stopped at the highest point and for the next several hours the yetis and Pitch worked to bolt the metal plates in place to the sides of the conveyor to make a chute. North and Dave oversaw the progression from the ground, shouting up whenever someone had a question or something wasn’t right.

They had made pretty good progress, but North was right, it was going to take at least another three hours once the sun had crested over the mountainside. Pitch thought they could have gotten another thirty minutes work in, but after the burns Pitch had suffered the first day, no one wanted to take any
Pitch sighed. “Well, we’re going to have about three hours before the sun moves over the Pole and far enough to get back up on top to finish up. And we’re not due to see Sandy and Toothiana for another hour for lunch. What did you want to do in the mean time?”

“Dave says you and yetis will prepare the belts and have them ready to attach once you finish putting the siding on.” North answered.

Pitch nodded working with the yetis as much as the language barrier allowed although Pitch was starting to lose patience, “What? What are you trying to get me to do?” Pitch grumbled as one of the yetis pointed back and forth from the rigging to the other side of the work area. Pitch wasn’t overly helpful in this task even though he was trying, his lack of skill in this way was only exasperating the yetis who were just trying to get him to stand to the side and out of the way, so they could get some work done.

“They want you to move out of way.” North translated.

“Move out of the way? How am I supposed to help then?” Pitch pouted unhappily as he moved over to where the yeti had been pointing and crossing his arms looking rather affronted.

North only rolled his eyes. “You know. If you are going to stay here at Pole, it might benefit you to learn yeti language. Ever considered it? It would give you something else to help pass the time, since you seem to get bored easily.”

Pitch scowled walking away from the yetis and coming to stand next to North, “I only get bored easily because I have such a limited scope of activities to do. Besides, I know fourteen other languages, I’m just not overly interested in learning gibberish garbling.”

“As I said, it would be another activity to keep you occupied. It only sounds like gibberish garbling to you because you do not know language. I only suggested it because I think your stay here would be more pleasant if you got along with yetis better.”

“And who’s supposed to teach me?” Pitch said sarcastically not overly enthused but curious nonetheless.

“Myself and yeti teacher.” North replied.

That could take up time during his grounding Pitch thought, “Perhaps while I’m in my room once we’re done here… it might be a good way to spend my time… being productive.”

North smiled. “I will arrange it then. It would give us something good to do together.”

“It will certainly help pass the time,” Pitch mused feeling pretty good about finding ways to eat up his grounding to not make the week so boring for himself.

“It will not be easy. It takes years to master yeti language. But we can teach you basics. Enough where hopefully you feel a little less frustrated.”

Pitch smirked, “I gather we’ll see about that. I’m a pretty quick study believe it or not… although I can’t promise I won’t get frustrated trying to understand grunts and growls. It’s not exactly a real language.”

North grunted. “If it is not real language, then how come I can understand what yetis say?”
Pitch rolled his eyes, “Well, I’m not saying you can’t communicate with them, but I don’t exactly see you speaking it or anything just like one can understand the motives of a dog through their yips and barks. They’re communicating to, but I wouldn’t call what they’re doing speech by any standard. Not to say the yetis are on the same tier as a dog mind you, but they’re communication skills lack finesse and development.”

North’s eyebrows rose. Then he proceeded to speak a long stream of grunts and growls like the yetis. Several of the yetis nearby looked in his direction. North waved them off, pointing to Pitch.

Pitch’s eyes widened in surprise to hear the gruff tones coming from North’s throat. Seeing the motions and reactions North had made followed by the attention of the yetis and North pointing at him, “What? What did you just tell them?”

“I wasn’t talking to them. I was talking to you.” North answered. “I just motioned to you to let them know that this conversation didn’t concern them.”

“Talking to me?” Pitch looked offended, “Did you expect me to understand that?”

North rolled his eyes. “No, I did not expect you to understand. I was merely demonstrating to you that I can speak language, since you were so sure it wasn’t a language.”

“Correction, not a sophisticated language is what I meant. Something akin to a heathen tribal speak is what I was referring to,” Pitch huffed in disdain.

North shrugged. “Call it what you wish.”

“I’m not averse to learning to understand it, I just don’t plan to speak it,” Pitch sniffed sticking his nose in the air.

“You do not have to speak it.” North said, ignoring Pitch’s haughtiness. “But learning language will help you to better understand when a yeti speaks to you. Then maybe you will not get on their bad side all the time due to lack of understanding.”

Pitch’s mouth twisted into a sneer, “Their bad side? I don’t see them making an effort to speak any proper languages, but then I’m probably giving them too much credit to think them even capable I suppose.”

“You are teetering on edge, Pitch.” North scowled. “Remind me to address your rudeness later when we start practicing magic.”

Pitch paused assessing what North said and then frowning he made sure to back away before responding, “I didn’t think having an honest opinion was the same as being rude. What does that have to do with learning magic anyway?” Pitch questioned curiously.

“In case you haven’t noticed, Pitch, the yetis are my friends and family. I do not take kindly to people speaking about them in such a way as you have. How would you like it if someone talked to Toothiana in same way?” North’s scowl darkened. “You are entitled to an honest opinion, but some opinions you should keep to self out of respect for others. In time, you will learn.”

Pitch sighed, “Toothiana can defend herself, but I’ll try to keep my opinions to myself so as not to offend you at least.” In actuality Pitch was really only being so rude because the yetis had excluded him when he’d been trying to help, and he was the one who had been offended. Saying such rude comments may have been his opinion, but saying it aloud was only a means to lash out at the yetis.

“That may be true, but what if someone said something against Tooth when she was not around to
defend herself? As her friend, would you stick up for her?” said North.

Pitch’s eyes flicked over to North. Would he? He’d never had a friend to defend before, so he’d not even considered it. He supposed he would, but Pitch didn’t respond not wishing to further validate North’s point. Instead, he averted his eyes and let out a huff as he frowned.

“Ah!” North pointed. “Dave is motioning for you to go and help with conveyor belts now.”

“For how long I wonder,” Pitch grumbled aloofly, “Are you coming to translate?” Pitch added derisively as he walked back towards Dave arms crossed with a scowl plastered on his face.

North walked past him and up to Dave, where they had a small conversation, North speaking perfect yeti language. Finally, North turned to Pitch. “He wants you to help unroll belt and lay it out here on ground.”

Pitch didn’t reply only cutting Dave a bored glance before moving to comply with North’s request still feeling a bit put off by the earlier incident.

“Do you have something to say, Pitch?” North asked, catching the look Pitch gave to the yeti. He really was getting tired of the attitude Pitch carried with him these days.

Pitch smirked looking from North and then to Dave as he scoffed, “Obviously not, I don’t speak Yeti remember?” He turned his attention back to the task the smirk still playing across his lips.

North reached out and quickly swatted Pitch.

Pitch jolted up with a yelp backpedaling away from North an immediate flushed and shocked expression crossing his face as he looked from North to the yetis and back to North, “What? What was that for!”

Dave crossed his arms over his chest, looking very approving of North’s choice of action.

“It was for your smart-aleck attitude.” North replied. “The one you’ve had since we carried on conversation about yeti language.”

Pitch’s brow furrowed as he pouted looking close to tears from the humiliation of North doing such a thing to him in front of the yetis. He looked down at the ground speaking softly, “It... that last remark was just a jest... I ...I didn’t think it was offensive.”

Pitch wanted to curl in on himself and disappear seeing all of the yetis staring at him now.

“It might have been jest, but the way you carried it out was not funny.” North chided. “We will continue this discussion later. Right now you best get to helping.”

Pitch jerked his head up in alarm at the ‘continue this conversation later’ comment, he was slightly nervous about the connotations behind what more they might need to discuss, but he didn’t want to give North any reason to think he wasn’t doing his best now as he hurried back to the task making sure he gave no hint of a bad attitude while he worked with the yetis. He hoped his improved behavior would make North pleased enough to forgo any need for further discussions.

North stood off to the side and watched the yetis and Pitch work, nodding his approval at both the work being done and Pitch’s improved attitude.

Once the belt was laid out, and the rollers were all set in place, some of the yetis went back to placing the panels, and Dave suggested Pitch clean up around the structure to keep him out of the
sun which seemed a preferred task for Pitch to be working by himself rather than with the yetis.

Not long into the clean-up, Sandy arrived floating up to North and giving a wide grin and a wave hello.

North smiled and waved back. “Sandy! It is always good to see you. Is it almost time for lunch already?”

The little man nodded vigorously licking his lips.

Pitch noticed Sandy quickly and smiled looking around for Toothiana as well.

“I was so involved with this work that I almost lost track of time.” Said North.

Toothiana had not arrived yet, but Pitch seeing Sandy took it as reason enough to stop working as he moved over to join the two guardians.

Sandy beamed down at Pitch a mural of images moving across his head asking how he slept and how his morning went.

Pitch glanced up at North shamefully remembering the last incident where the Cossack had swatted him, but Pitch chose to reiterate the good parts of the morning, “I slept rather well, and before coming out here, I had a chance to have a well meant conversation with Jack. Other than that, as you can see,” he motioned to the conveyor, “We’ve gotten most of the leg work done here and are about three hours away from finishing up the entire project.”

Sandy looked on with amazement out at the conveyor and watched the yetis still working away installing the panels.

“Yes, I will actually be glad when this is finished.” North said, turning to look at the conveyor. “It has taken up enough of my time.”

Pitch cringed at the remark knowing full well that he held full blame for that statement, “Uh… I should get back to finishing picking up the scraps,” Pitch stated absently as he moved to return to his assigned job while waiting for Toothiana to arrive.

Sandy watched on curiously as the Boogeyman retreated with his head hung low before looking back to North with a question mark over his head to see Pitch slink away as if he’d done something wrong.

North gave a shrug. “It is his fault we are here. I think he still feels guilt over everything that happened.” He whispered to Sandy.

Sandy gave a slow nod of understanding as he turned back to watch Pitch working diligently to pick the remaining scraps off the ground and deposit them in the landfill handful by handful.

Toothiana suddenly fluttered up behind Sandy and North. “Hey! Sorry I’m late. At least, I’m assuming I’m late. You haven’t had lunch yet, have you?”

North turned a smiling face to her. “No, we haven’t had lunch yet. We will as soon as Pitch gets through cleaning up scraps.”

Pitch had practically dropped the armload of debris he’d been carrying seeing Toothiana and picked up his pace to hurriedly dump the trash in the dump and glide back over to the three guardians with a huge grin on his face, “You came! It’s good to see you!” Pitch still had a few more trips to make to
finish the task at hand, but seeing Toothiana arrive had him quickly forgetting his duties in light of coming to see her.

“It’s good to see you too.” Tooth smiled.

“I… I was afraid you may have been too busy to come,” Pitch admitted, “But now that you’re here,” Pitch looked to North, “Should we start setting up some seats for our lunch?”

“As soon as you pick up rest of scraps.” North said, pointing to the unfinished work. “You need to learn to finish work.”

Pitch frowned not wanting to spend the limited precious time he had with Toothiana picking up trash, “Can’t I finish after lunch? I mean, it’s not going anywhere, so what’s the difference?” He groaned.

“Pitch, you have job to do. You finish it before you take break.” North scowled. “Tooth and lunch are not going anywhere either. We will wait until you finish task you were given to do.”

Pitch wanted to say more but only pouted sulking off to hurriedly finish the work so as not to waste anymore of the time Toothiana had available to spend with him.

Sandy couldn’t help a wry smile at Pitch’s reluctance to leave Toothiana’s side. He looked at Toothiana silently giggling at how enamored Pitch seemed to be with her.

While Pitch finished cleaning up, one of the yetis walked up and began unfolding a table and chairs while one of the yeti cooks came to set plates of lasagna at each place.

Pitch hadn’t done as thorough a job as he should have, but he didn’t really care as long as he was able to get back over to Toothiana more quickly. It was done enough Pitch thought to himself exasperatedly. He doubted North would even notice what he’d missed.

Unknown to Pitch, North was still watching him, arms crossed over his chest. “Pitch, do it right.”

Pitch growled angrily when North pointed him back to the work site, and he turned huffing as he punted one of the mostly empty paint buckets towards the landfill to release some of his rage. Pitch hadn’t seen one of the yeti had descended from the tops of the conveyor to get himself some lasagna from the cafeteria when the paint can came hurtling through the air.

The yeti let out a surprised harrumph as a spray of peach paint splattered his coat. He looked down at the mess holding his arms out to the sides as if still digesting what had happened before yowling out a string of gruff barks that were obviously meant to chew Pitch out.

Pitch jumped in surprise seeing the yeti virtually come from out of nowhere, and he gasped when he saw what the results of giving in to his temporary agitation had caused. He raced over to the yeti trying to appease him quickly, “I… I didn’t see you there! I’m… I’m sorry about that!”

The yeti did not seem pacified though as he let out another stream of angry grunts pointing down at his paint colored hair.

North sighed shaking his head and turning a weary look at Sandy and Tooth.

Sandy raised a brow giving North a sympathetic look. Silently sighing, Sandy went off to grab some paint rags to help the yeti get cleaned up.

Pitch still seemed to be trying to pander out an apology to a very unhappy yeti as Sandy brought the
towels over to the two.

The yeti snatched the towels still harrumphing growls as he wiped himself off partially and finally decided to storm off towards the entrance.

Pitch watched him go seemingly at a loss for words as he turned to Sandy, “He… I didn’t mean to hit him with that paint can! It was an accident!”

Sandy gave him a stern glare pointing to the remaining rubbish to clean up, then pointing to the landfill, and then finally back to North.

Pitch nodded dropping his gaze to the floor understanding Sandy wanted him to finish what North had told him to do and then go back to report to the man. Pitch was no longer in as much of a hurry as he finished his task as Sandy made his way back to North and Toothiana.

“I should make him help with cleaning yeti off.” Said North when Sandy returned.

Sandy looked back at the yeti that was still visibly trudging back towards the hub entrance obviously upset and turned back to North with a doubtful look as if to say he didn’t think that the yeti would agree. He then looked to Toothiana for her opinion.

“You’re probably right.” She answered as if Sandy had actually spoken, looking toward the yeti.

North nodded. “Yes, perhaps,” He sighed.

Pitch didn’t have much to clean up, and he was done within ten minutes even though now he had stretched finishing the detail out so as to stave off North’s ire. But, he did still want to see Toothiana, so he sighed preparing himself for the berating to come as he approached the three looking rather sheepish, “All the scraps have been disposed of,” Pitch stated in a barely audible whisper.

“Good,” North said with a curt nod. “And I hope you learned something from that incident.”

Pitch nodded, “I hadn’t meant for that to happen.” his mouth twisted into a frown of regret, “He wasn’t exactly keen on accepting an apology from me.”

“If you had kept temper under control, it would not have happened.” North huffed.

Pitch scowled darkly thinking, ‘If you had just let me wait to finish this nonsense, it wouldn’t have happened in the first place!’ He of course didn’t say this out loud as he moved past North to sit beside Toothiana. He gave her a small smile, “Sorry to keep you waiting so long.”

“It’s okay, Pitch.” Said Tooth. “Although I do wish you would learn to control your temper.”

Pitch found himself ducking his head, “I’d like to think I’ve gotten better with momentary lapses.”

“That might be so, but it still needs work.” Tooth replied, taking a bite of her lasagna.

Choosing to ignore that remark, Pitch asked, “How do you like the lasagna?”

“It’s really good,” Tooth nodded.

Sandy floated into the seat next to Toothiana grabbing up a fork to take a bite from his own plate.

Pitch took a bite himself, but after everything that just happened, he was feeling a bit distracted as his eyes shifted to North now.
“This is quite good.” North commented, taking another bite.

Pitch was pleased that everyone seemed to be enjoying the chosen dish he’d picked, and it felt good to have them all to have come to the Pole to join him in this way.

He looked back to Toothiana, “Were you able to get all caught up, or are you still running behind?”

“We got caught up for the most part, I guess. But we’ve got more teeth coming in every day.” Tooth replied.

Pitch smirked, “Well business is booming then, but it’s good to hear you’re not behind anymore. Perhaps you’ll be able to visit more now that you are,” Pitch stated hopefully.

“Yeah, I should be able to. At least, until I get behind again.” Tooth smiled.

North’s eyebrows rose. “You will not visit until after next week.”

Pitch’s mouth dropped open at North’s admission. Why did he have to mention that! His face flushed as he averted his eyes hoping she wouldn’t question why. He remembered belatedly then that he’d managed to avoid ever telling her about the fact he’d ever even been on restriction let alone about to be grounded. He had to try to salvage the well tapestried omission, “Yes, North and I will be spending a lot of ...one on one time together when he has the time. But you’re likely going to need a little more time to get in a good position to come visit anyway.” Pitch let out a strangled laugh.

Tooth looked from Pitch to North, not entirely understanding. She shrugged. “Okay, that’s fine with me.” She smiled, glancing at Sandy.

Sandy was glaring with a disapproving frown at Pitch seeing that he’d obviously been lying to Toothiana.

Pitch squirmed under his penetrating gaze doing his best not to look in the golden man’s direction. Pitch cleared his throat changing the subject now afraid what further conversing on the topic would expose, “Yes, we’ve gotten the majority of the work on the conveyor done. In fact, we should be finished hours after our lunch concludes! It’s quite a marvel to behold now eh?”

Tooth looked toward the conveyor. “I suppose so. If you can call a trash conveyor something to behold.”

Pitch frowned as he snipped, “Well of course it’s not exactly impressive as a structure overall, but we’ve put a lot of hours into restoring it! It looks better than it did before... I mean before I helped destroy it,” he amended a bit peeved by her response. He was somewhat proud of the work they’d done, and to hear her write it off as nothing special irked him. He knew it wasn’t a marvel, but he hadn’t exactly poured much effort into anything else lately either, so her statement was seen as an affront to what they had accomplished in Pitch’s mind.

“I still can’t believe you destroyed it.” Tooth shook her head.

Pitch prickled at the comment, “Technically, I didn’t destroy it, North’s death machine did. I... I just made the mistake of unleashing said death machine,” Pitch corrected his eyes flicking over to North to make sure his statement wasn’t taken poorly.

“Regardless, you were still one who destroyed it, Pitch.” Said North, not looking up from taking a bite. “You had hand in orchestrating whole thing. Do not shift blame to an inanimate object that would have otherwise been harmless had you not turned it on.”
Pitch scowled, as he muttered, “I didn’t turn that thing on, it was predisposed to kill when I opened the door.” Pitch’s mood had grown very sour now as he stabbed angrily at his lasagna.

“Of which you were not even supposed to be doing in first place.” North replied, pointing at Pitch with his fork. “I thought we already discussed this. If you are still not able to accept that you were one to do it without making poor excuses, then perhaps we need to go back to Pole and have another little discussion, hm? Everyone knows you did it. There is no need to keep dancing around truth.”

Pitch’s patience was growing thin. He was tired of hearing how much he’d screwed up, he spat his irritation, “I’m not shifting blame! Everyone knows I did it, how could they not when they’re reminded without a shadow of a doubt any time the subject comes up! It’s not an excuse either, it’s a product of the entirety of the circumstances! Yes! I never should have done what I did! Yes, I was to blame for the events ever happening, but I never built a mechanical killer that if it hadn’t been lying in wait would have never caused such massive destruction under the commands that you left for it!”

“No one is saying that you built the robot, Pitch, nor are they blaming you for its existence. But if you say that you are not shifting blame, then why is it that your side of argument always comes back to robot?” North said calmly, lifting an eyebrow. “It sounds to me like you are trying to put some blame on me for merely owning the thing, which is partly shifting blame.”

Pitch fumed, “Or maybe you’re just feeling a little guilty that I mention it at all?” Pitch rolled his eyes frowning deeply as he stared daggers at his food and viciously cut into the pasta.

“Why would I feel guilt? There is no law saying that I can’t own robot. It is object like the toys I make, like the cutlasses I own.” North took in a deep breath. “Pitch, if I put one of my cutlasses in a drawer and locked it up where no one could get hurt on it, it’s not going to harm anyone. It’s still a dangerous weapon able to kill if placed in right hands, but as long as it remains in drawer no one will get cut. Now, if you sneak into my room, broke the lock on drawer, and took the cutlass out and sliced off a finger, whose fault is that? Would it be your fault for deliberately going in room and breaking lock to get at cutlass, or would it be my fault for owning cutlass?”

“A cutlass isn’t about to chase me down and cut my finger off for me. That robot on the other hand, well let’s just say it didn’t exactly have the safety on,” Pitch quipped.

“A cutlass does not have safety either!” North’s voice rose slightly as he glared at Pitch. “You know full well what I mean. That robot was locked up for everyone’s safety. It’s been that way for hundreds, even thousands, of years. You were the one who broke the lock and set it off. Now, I will hear no more about this subject. I can tell that you have problem with pride, Pitch. If you do not do something about that, it will get you in more trouble one of these days.”

Pitch ground his teeth seething inside, “I know full well what you meant to be sure, and by the stars please let it be the last time we ever speak on this subject! I would ever be so grateful!” He growled never looking up from gouging his lasagna. If they never spoke about the accursed incident again it would be too soon!

“Pitch,” Tooth whispered, scowling and shaking her head.

North studied Pitch a few moments before turning to his meal again. He would grant Pitch’s wishes, but he doubted that the subject was far from being over.

Of course she’d take North’s side! “What!” He whispered harshly knowing exactly what she was admonishing him for but lashing out anyway. He was feeling ganged up on. This lunch that was supposed to be enjoyable, but it was being anything but. No longer in the mood to eat he growled, “I’ve lost my appetite!” Deciding he no longer wished to join them in this way, Pitch pushed his
plate aside with a sharp shove getting up from the table and storming away. He was done being patronized!

North heaved a big sigh, rolling his eyes.

Pitch continued to the far end of the work site finding a crate next to the conveyor and climbing on top of it. He pulled his legs into himself resting his chin on his knees with a firm pout as he wrapped his arms tightly around his legs. Pitch was sure to face away from them not even wanting to look at them now. He didn’t know why he’d wanted to have this lunch to begin with! If it had just been Toothiana, the whole event would have been much more pleasurable, even Sandy would have been welcome, but North was just ruining everything!

Sandy watched Pitch bluster as he rocked in his seat looking slightly uncomfortable by the scene as he glanced back and forth from Toothiana to North and took a sip of his soda.

Without saying a word, Tooth got up from her place and floated over to Pitch, hovering a few feet behind him. She shook her head and sighed at the pathetic display.

Pitch’s frown deepened, “Did you come all the way over here to berate me further?” Pitch quipped never turning around to face her, “He’s always got to make my life miserable! I don’t understand it! One minute, he’s great to be around, and then another he’s …he’s being like this!” He flung a hand up in the air as a sign of being fed up before tucking the hand back around his legs.

“Pitch,” Tooth said as gently as she could, “you’re the one who’s making yourself miserable. You’re taking what North said and are twisting it around and seeing it as a personal attack. It’s not an attack. He just wants to make sure that you understand that the whole incident was entirely your fault and that you have no one to blame but yourself. I hate saying this, but North was right about it all. But that’s all I will say about the matter, since it obviously annoys you for us to talk about it. Although I will say that you could have handled the situation without being immature about it.”

“Immature!” Pitch did wheel around to face her now, “I left so as not to cause further irritation to anyone! Leaving the situation was my way of not letting things get out of hand!” He stood then squinting his eyes angrily, “Why do you always have to take his side! I know I was at fault for what happened! That doesn’t mean I want to get it thrown in my face every time the topic comes up! Is it always going to be you all against me?!" He was balling his fists tightly at his sides as he practically yelled at her now.

Tooth reached out and slapped Pitch’s face hard. “Do not raise your voice to me!” she said as calmly as she could, her teeth clenched. “So you admit now that you were fully at fault? Why couldn’t you have just simply said that to North the first time? The way you kept wording your responses, it did sound like you were subtly trying to push some of the blame on him, when you knew all along that it was all your doing. Were you purposely trying to taunt him?” Tooth’s brow drew down in a look of confusion. “And for your information, I am not taking anyone’s side. I am perfectly capable of making up my own mind and forming my own opinions. It just so happens that I agree with what North was saying about the situation. Do you honestly think everyone should be on your side and always agree with you, even when you’re in the wrong? Just because I agree with North’s point of view does not mean I’m against you or care about you any less.”

Pitch backed away from her gripping his face and just shaking his head in disbelief that she’d struck him. His mouth worked and tears brimmed in his eyes, she’d hurt his pride and she’d also hurt him deeper to have taken such a stance with him. His gut tightened as he stated through clenched teeth, “You don’t care for me at all it’s obvious! None of you really do! All of you think you can just strike me whenever I don’t fit into your mold, and I’m sick of it! I’m sick of you! Just go! I’m done with you and your righteous indignation!”
Tooth shook her head sadly. “I struck you because you were getting out of line. And if we didn’t care about you, you’d still be rotting in that hole we put you in oh so long ago. But then again, that’s something you’ve heard before too.” She gave a curt nod. “Alright, I’ll go. I hope you’ll be happy dwelling in your conceited little world.” With that, Tooth turned and flew off, not even bothering going back to the table.

Pitch watched her fly off, and his heart sank as the tears he held back finally spilt down his face. He wiped them away. His resolve hardened then, he wasn’t going to suffer this any longer. He was fooling himself thinking they cared about him, they didn’t really care about him; they only wanted to control him! He was such a fool! Of course they didn’t really want him, who would? All he was to them was a thorn in the side they were trying to placate, so he’d be less of a thorn. Why didn’t he see it before? He sat back down on the crate pulling himself into a ball once more and burying his face in his knees.

Back at the table, North and Sandy had witness the whole thing, even though they couldn’t hear everything that was said between the two. When Tooth flew off, North scowled, turning a puzzled look to Sandy. “I wonder what he has done now.” He grumbled.

Sandy sighed deciding the lunch had been fitfully ruined he floated up from his seat patted his friend on the shoulder in a sign of sympathy before turning to leave himself.

Pitch for his part did not move from his spot just waiting to get back to work. He wanted nothing more now than to be done with the work detail, so he could go back to his room and wallow in his own self-pity.
Pride Goes Before a Fall

Chapter Forty-Three

North was saddened to see Sandy leave. A part of him had hoped that he would stick around to give support at least. He sighed, pushed himself to standing, and slowly walked over to stand behind Pitch, not bothering to say anything.

Pitch had remained sitting on his crate, and feeling North approaching from behind, he let out a sad sigh, “Let’s get the conveyor finished since lunch is obviously quite over.” He slumped his shoulders looking down at the ground tiredly.

North cleared his throat. "We can't, unless you wish to get out in sun. We still have a while to wait."

Pitch hunched a little, “Well… is there anything else I can do to move the job along from the ground?” He asked dejectedly just wanting to finish the conveyor once and for all.

"Not at the moment, no." North replied. He gestured at the table. "Please, come back to table and finish lunch. I wish to talk."

“I don’t feel like eating anymore, so if you want to talk feel free to say what you have to say here and now,” Pitch huffed.

"Fine!” North snapped. "You do not have to eat. I would like to finish my meal, though. So I would appreciate it if you would join me at table." He grabbed Pitch by the arm and pulled him to standing.

Pitch gasped as he was bodily yanked by the arm to his feet wobbling a moment from the sudden change. His whole demeanor shifted as the sneer fell from his face replaced by a wary attention, “Of …of course! We …we can sit at the table,” he stated hurriedly.

North gave Pitch a hard glare before he turned and walked to the table, taking a seat in his chair again. He picked up his fork and stabbed at some of the food on his plate.

Pitch gulped carefully walking a few steps behind him and quietly returning to his own seat across from North. He looked miserable as he stared down at the table arms crossed across his stomach and slouching in his chair.

North ate silently for a few minutes before leaning back in his chair and taking a long swig of his soda. "So what did you say to Tooth to make her leave? I find it odd that you managed to run her away, especially after you were so desperate about seeing her."

Pitch shrugged, “It doesn’t matter now; she’s gone, and I doubt she’ll be coming back again anytime soon. It’s just as well,” Pitch’s eyes never left the table, but there was a simmering hurt lingering in his words.

North knew that Pitch was at fault for whatever had happened between the two. His inward annoyance for Pitch's ever present attitude problem was constantly growing. He wanted to say something, but he held himself back, instead, choosing his words carefully.

"Oh, I am pretty sure she will be back. If not for anything else but so you can offer apology for whatever it was you said to her. And you will be apologizing to her once you come off grounding."
Pitch snapped heatedly, "Apologize to her? For slapping me across the face! The way I see it, she should be apologizing to me!"

North bolted up from his chair and glared down at Pitch. His nostrils flared as he struggled to keep his temper in check. When he spoke, his voice was calm but had a dangerous edge to it. “I’m pretty sure that she had good reason for doing what she did. I trust her judgements. I should let you know that you are teetering very close to me slapping the other end of you right now. So if I were you, I would think carefully about the next words that come out of your mouth.”

Pitch shrank back in his seat his eyes going wide with obvious fear of angering the man. He didn’t want to get spanked especially after the loss of pride he’d just suffered; he didn’t need to add to it with getting put over North’s knee as well. He swallowed hard as he squeaked, “I …I’ll apologize.” He dropped his gaze back to the table fresh tears welling in his eyes and spilling down his cheeks from the shame he felt. He had no recourse but to agree here he knew even though he was feeling horribly wronged.

North slowly lowered himself back into his chair, never once taking his eyes off Pitch. “Now, maybe Tooth does need to apologize to you as well. I cannot say since I was not privy to your conversation outside of hearing you raising your voice to her. If it turns out that she needs to apologize to you, I am sure she will feel need to do so when she has cooled down. She is good person who will right whatever wrong she feels that she’s done. But I can already guess that you and your horrendous attitude were instigator in it, so you will be apologizing to her for whatever wrong you have done to her. Pitch, she is your friend. I can tell you two share special bond. Do not let your pride and attitude rip that apart. You have come too far to take that many steps back.”

North’s words pulled at Pitch. He couldn’t speak merely shuddering with a fresh bout of tears at the grief he was feeling from how badly things had gone. He folded in on himself as a cloud of despair closed in around him. No matter what he did, he was never going to fit in. There was always going to be some obstacle in his way from just being himself.

North reached across the table to put a hand on Pitch’s shoulder. “Pitch, I know you are frustrated and annoyed by situation you are in, but you do not have to take out anger on the rest of us. We are not your enemy, even though you continue to make us such. I wish you could see and fully understand that we are trying to help you be a better person and someone that you can be proud of. You and I both know that you are against wall right now and that this is your only chance for redemption. I wish you could realize that you only hurt yourself by continuing to backpedal.”

Pitch wiped at his eyes hating how easily he cried over such things. His mind locked on the words last chance for redemption and backpedaling, had he fallen that far back? He pondered on this silently. What was he doing? He felt at a loss as he stared up at the conveyor. The clouds had turned gray, and a heaviness clung in the air, "The sun has gone behind the clouds, “I think it might rain soon,” Pitch stated unwilling to address the real issues that North spoke on, "We should probably get back to work before we no longer have the chance to finish the job.”

“The work on conveyor can wait.” said North. “I would like to get your problems worked out first.”

Pitch huffed frowning fiercely while his eyes bore holes into the table, “There’s nothing to work out! You’ve told me what I have to do, and that’s all that really needs to be said I would think.” He didn’t want to talk about his feelings now, he was festering in anguish and anger, and the volatile mix would only get him into trouble he knew from countless times before.

North leaned back in his chair. “Are you sure of that? I can tell that you hold in things. It would probably help you if you got them out in open. If you don’t, you will be taking out anger on my conveyor. No, the conveyor will wait. Right now, we need to get over this bump in road.”
“There is no bump in the road! I have nothing to say!” Pitch seethed now, “And don’t worry, I won’t take anything out on your stupid conveyor belt! Now can we please just get back to work!” Pitch crossed his arms defiantly unwilling to budge on the subject.

North continued to sit in silence, determined not to give in to Pitch’s wishes.

Two could play at that game! Pitch sat stubbornly silently glancing occasionally back at North knowing that the man was playing a waiting game with him, but he didn’t want to fold to the Cossack’s demands.

The yetis filed back in to work after they had been sitting in silence a good twenty minutes looking at the two curiously as they made their way back to the site.

Pitch used this as an opportunity of course, “Looks like the work crew have returned, they’ll be finished with the work by the time either of us gives, so let’s just call it a draw shall we? I promise not to ruin anything else and just work as expected. Alright?” He stood to make the motion that they could follow the yetis back to the conveyor.

“Sit down.” North said darkly, scowling. “You are not going back to work just yet.” He leaned forward and picked up his fork to eat the last bit of his lasagna.

Pitch growled flopping down in his chair as heavily as a man as little as he weighed could (which barely caused a groan in the chair, but the action still visibly stated Pitch’s internal exasperation.) “Why are you pushing this!”

“And why can’t you just sit there for a while and calm down?” North threw back.

“I am calm!” Pitch fumed feeling more riled by just being made to sit like this.

North looked at Pitch for several long minutes, then he waved Pitch off. “Go and get work over with. But we are going to have talk later, once you are finished.”

Pitch practically vaulted out of his seat just wanting to get away from the conversation. If North thought he was going to back down, then the man had another thing coming! Pitch was not going to give an inch he decided then wanting just for once to have the upper hand between the two. North could force him to do a lot of things, but sharing his feelings was not one of them, and Pitch felt slightly empowered in that way.

The sky rumbled Pitch noted as he boarded the lift, and the machine jerked lifting him into the air to where the yetis were already busily working having also sensed the storm that was brewing. Pitch fell into line doing his best to get through the work now as quickly as they could. His irritation was ever present in the scowl on his face, but he didn’t let it affect any part of his work more as a point that he kept to what he had told North that he would not let his agitation come out in the job that he did.

North watched as Pitch went to work. He knew all along what Pitch was trying to do, which is why he had kept Pitch seated a little while longer. He wasn’t about to let Pitch think he could get his way and walk all over him. He had been sorely tempted to give the Boogeyman a few swats, but he decided not to, figuring it would only work against rather than help the situation. Pitch needed to cool down. He hoped he would do just that during the length of time it took to complete the conveyor. If Pitch came out of it with the same attitude he went in with, then he would take the next step.

The conveyor was close to being finished by the time the sky broke into a light sprinkle the yetis
looked like they were getting ready to pack it in. To be so close to being finished just to be stopped by the rain had Pitch goading them on, “Wait! We’re almost done! Don’t stop now! I doubt you can even feel the rain under that pelt of yours! Another twenty minutes, and we’ll be done, and you won’t have to work with me again! Wouldn’t you prefer that?”

The yetis barked amongst themselves seeming undecided. What Pitch suggested was tempting. They were all quite tired of working with the dark man, but the rain was starting to pick up. They looked down to North to make the final decision.

North shook his head no. “It is too dangerous!” he called up. He pointed up at the lightning. “All of us need to get back to Pole.”

Pitch let out an incensed inarticulate growl, “We’re almost done!” He stomped his foot angrily as he felt the lift begin its slow descent down to the ground. He muttered, “Unbelievable! To be this close and not finish!” It was infuriating as all Pitch wanted at this point was a sense of completion since he was feeling aggrieved in every other sense.

“It is not worth it, Pitch.” North shouted. “Yetis will finish it tomorrow.”

“The yetis will finish it? But what about me?” Pitch seemed almost hurt that he wouldn’t be able to see the last of the conveyor constructed. He sneered seething angrily, of course North would rob him of even that little accomplishment. Pitch was still churning with pent up frustration from the day, and being so close to finishing just to be told that the yetis would finish up without him to witness it left Pitch rather bent out of shape by the time the lift made it to the ground. He tramped out onto the soggy ground rigid with rage. A bolt of lightning flashed followed by a roll of thunder then as the sky ripped open a tide of rain upon them sending the yetis scurrying for the entrance to get out of the weather.

North grabbed onto Pitch and pulled him along as he quickly followed after the yetis.

“I …I can walk on my own!” Pitch growled at North’s choice to snatch his arm and drag him about. As if the weather hadn’t already dampened his already sour mood, now North was yanking him about like a ragdoll!

North ignored Pitch’s grousing as he continued running, past the stables and finally into the Pole. He let Pitch go after they entered through the doors and closed them.

Pitch was drenched looking like a drowned rat hunched over with crossed arms and a deep frown. His hair was flat with the weight of water, and Pitch pushed it out of his eyes and back with a swift brush of his hand sending a spray of water behind him. It was cold outside, and having been soaked to the bone left Pitch shivering now with the light articles of clothing he wore. He gave North a dark glare still feeling quite insulted from his recent treatment being dragged across the field.

North shook the water out of his beard and clothes. He waved forward for Pitch to walk ahead of him. “I will take you back to room so that you can dry off.”

Pitch nodded wanting nothing more than to get dry. He walked wordlessly in front of North as they made their way across the hub and down the hall to his room. He let out a sigh of relief never feeling so glad than to see the familiar four walls.

Pitch nodded wanting nothing more than to get dry. He walked wordlessly in front of North as they made their way across the hub and down the hall to his room. He let out a sigh of relief never feeling so glad than to see the familiar four walls.

“I will leave you to clean up while I go clean myself up.” said North, closing the door after Pitch entered the room.

Pitch went straight to the bathroom stripping and ringing out his clothes to hang on his door. Once
finished with that, he climbed in the shower planning to take a very long hot shower in hopes it would wash away the bad day he’d had.

Thirty minutes later, North walked up to Pitch’s bedroom and knocked on the door.

Hearing North knocking on his door Pitch sighed, North would pick now to be punctual he thought darkly. No matter, Pitch thought, I’ll still enjoy my shower until I deem I’m finished. Pitch yelled out, “I’m still in the shower, but feel free to let yourself in!”

North looked puzzled. Pitch had been in the shower for half an hour? He gave a slight shrug, turned the knob, and walked into the room, closing the door behind him. He sat down in the rocking chair and made himself comfortable as he waited for the man to finish.

Pitch had no intention of finishing anytime soon as he really didn’t want to have the talk North was wanting to have. He knew the Cossack planned to pin him into a conversation discussing the events of the day, and right now, all Pitch wanted to do was forget them. He did so enjoy long showers, and just because North had arrived earlier than he wanted to finish didn’t mean Pitch planned to cut it shorter than he wished, and just because the man was waiting on him, Pitch planned to take a wee bit longer.

North made himself comfortable, pulling out a book he had brought and beginning to read as he gently rocked back and forth in his chair.

Pitch stayed in the shower about another thirty minutes just melting in the warmth and comfort. Finally he shut the water off drying himself casually with his towel before gliding out of the shower slightly surprised to see North was cozily rocking away reading one of the books he’d placed on his shelf from the library. He only lifted a brow deciding not to say anything as he checked his clothes. They were still a bit damp, so he decided to just sit on his bed in his towel as he buried himself under his sheets for warmth.

“You stay in there long enough you’ll wrinkle like a raisin.” North said, not looking up from his book.

“Perhaps, but it’s a great way to just forget everything else around you for a while,” Pitch quipped. It was comforting too, and he just enjoyed the relaxing feel of a shower since it was also a modern convenience he hadn’t had the chance before living at the Pole to experience, and it was a slice of heaven to be sure! It had helped to calm his anger, and that was something at least.

“True,” North nodded, gently closing his book. He rocked in his chair for several minutes before he spoke again. “Pitch, I will allow you to go out and finish up conveyor early tomorrow morning, if that is your wish. But you will be brought straight back to room afterward to start your week of grounding.”

Pitch frowned, “It doesn’t really matter I suppose,” he said one thing, but he felt another. He did want to see the conveyor finished, but the mention of getting marched straight back to his room soured the thought. He might as well just stay in bed and do his best to sleep the day away he thought bitterly.

North shrugged. “Have it your way then.” He put his book down on his lap. “I am glad to see you are in better mood now.”

Pitch really wasn’t, but he nodded anyway letting himself drop down further under the sheets until he was lying flat on the bed. He was hoping to avoid any further talk on what had happened earlier at lunch or earlier still with the yetis. Pitch thought maybe if North thought he was tired that he would
just leave him to rot in his personal miseries. He pulled the blanket up now to cover his face as he settled in to the bed.

North sighed. "I told you earlier that we would have talk." he began. "I hope you know, Pitch, that you came very close to getting another strapping this afternoon."

A strapping! Pitch cringed, he hadn’t realized he’d upset North that thoroughly. He was careful with his words now, "I ...I've had a pretty rough day, and I'm sure it was equally hard on you. I'm sorry if we weren't exactly seeing eye to eye."

North nodded. "I accept your apology. But I do wish you would work harder on controlling your temper and attitude."

Pitch was silent for a long while contemplating his ability to manage creating so many problems for himself by barely even trying. He sighed tiredly, "I know; I'm not very good at that it would seem." He was glad that his face was covered, and that North couldn't see the look of misery he now carried.

"You could be if you actually tried."

Pitch snapped, "You automatically think I'm not! You have no idea!"

North's eyebrows rose at Pitch’s tone of voice.

Pitch stayed under his covers silently fuming. He knew better than to express any further animosity he was feeling. The last thing he wanted to do now was upset North further after his previous threat.

"Very well. I will not press matter anymore." North said.

Pitch was thankful North was granting him a small reprieve. The whole day had worn away at him emotionally, "I think I want to sleep now if you don't mind," he stated although there was a hint of sadness in his voice.

North nodded, getting up from his chair. "Alright. I will leave you to sleep then. Good night." He walked to the door and opened it.

Pitch glanced from outside of his sheets to watch him leave. His face forlorn.

North stopped. "If you have changed your mind about working on conveyor, better let me know so I can wake you up in the morning."

Pitch shook his head no looking away. He’d already decided that by the morning he wouldn’t be at the Pole any longer. It was tearing him asunder, but he had to stop fooling himself that he actually could ever belong here with the guardians, that he could ever keep their friendships or their love. Today had shown him that no matter how much he tried, he wasn’t ever going to make the cut. Even Toothiana had turned on him in disgust. He was a hindrance to them, and if he cared for them at all, he’d take himself out of the equation entirely. It was better to cut ties now before he couldn’t. He didn’t want to now, and the thought of leaving was wrecking him, but he had to. He’d escape tonight before Sandy could come by to put him out for the night like he knew the little golden man would.

North watched Pitch a moment longer before giving a small nod and walking out the door closing it softly behind him.

Pitch took a deep breath as he watched North leave; he laid in bed for the next several hours just staring at the wall blankly. He knew what he had to do, but now he was lacking the courage to do it.
He tried his best to conjure every bad thing he had ever felt for the guardians, but the thoughts evaporated into tears as Pitch cried at the grief of losing them already. He didn’t want to go, but he didn’t want to keep moving through perpetual cycles either. North had already told him he’d backpedaled to the point he was basically back where he started, so why was he still here if he didn’t know how to move past where he’d been? He was a lost cause just wasting their time. He obviously wasn’t salvageable he decided.

When night fell, the storm had finally died, and Pitch knew it was finally time to act. Pitch pulled open his nightstand drawer pocketing some of the candy, he would need that later. Looking at his lamp, he carefully removed the schooner and placed it in his pocket looking over at his other possessions longingly. He wanted to take them all with him, but he knew he had to leave them behind, just like he had to leave the guardians behind. It was for the best for everyone’s sake.

He slipped from his bed and dressed quietly; creaking his door open he listened for long minutes as thrills of fear ran up his spine. When he was sure the hallway was clear, Pitch darted out creeping from shadow to shadow until he came upon some sleeping elves. The ingrates were always napping wherever they saw fit to fall out, and because of this, Pitch knew they’d be a prime target to regain enough of his powers when he could pull enough fear from them to be able to meld into the shadows once more.

There were three piled together snoozing away, and Pitch went to work twisting their dreams subtly into nightmares. The electrifying sensation rolled through him so intense that he couldn’t move. Stars! It had been too long since he’d felt the glorious taste of fear this rich! He had to pull back, or he’d wake them. That would do him no good especially if they ran to tell North. He withdrew with a deep exhale, exquisite! Pitch moved on and repeated the process another four times to various sleeping elves until he’d finally ebbed enough power to bounce about unhindered.

It was exhilarating! Oh how he’d missed this! Pitch leaped from shadow to shadow down the halls of the Pole feeling unconstrained in so many ways. Still, he didn’t have enough strength to make it away from the Pole through the shadows alone. The elves were not children, so their fears although were enough to grant him access to his shadow powers, once he’d erased Sandy’s hold, weren’t enough to really foster more power than it would take to jump more than twenty feet at a time. He could only jump to a shadow that he could visibly see as it was, and being this drained meant he had a much more limited scope. He was going to need a little help.

He shifted in and out of the shadows finally conjuring outside and over to the stables. He moved to Donner. The reindeer was quick to amble over to him and nuzzle Pitch. He dug in his pocket pulling out a few gumdrops, “It’s not the sugar cubes you’re used to I know, but hopefully it’ll be enough,” Pitch offered the gumdrops to Donner, and after a moment’s hesitation, the reindeer ate them quickly eager for more.

Pitch chuckled, “I thought you’d like that.” He carefully opened the gate to the pen placing a set of reins he’d snagged from the wall firmly in place upon the reindeer’s head and guided Donner over to the gate, so he could hop on his back.

Donner wasn’t fazed at all by Pitch mounting him by now, and this time Pitch knew that the reindeer would listen to his command, or at least he prayed that their bonding was enough that the reindeer’s predisposition to return to the Pole could be overridden. Pitch nudged Donner forward down the tunnel; his heart was hammering so hard at the thought of getting caught right now. He’d been afraid since he’d left his room, but now he was at the point of no return.

The reindeer clopped down the tunnel, and as they moved further down, Donner moved from a trot to a run. Soon they were barreling so fast that Pitch was clinging tightly in fear of falling off, and as
they cleared the tunnel and launched into the air, that moment came where Donner went to turn back, and Pitch pulled his rein directing him back the other way as he quickly gave him another gumdrop.

Donner’s resistance melted, and he allowed Pitch to guide him back in the opposite direction. Pitch hooted for joy; he’d done it! He’d actually done it! Of course the victory was short lived as he rode Donner further away from the Pole, and the realization that he was leaving everyone behind. He was all alone again, and this time he’d done it to himself. His heart ached now as he willed himself to be strong. He wanted to go back already; but it was too late now.

He rode Donner into the night unsure where to go until finally deciding on the sleepy town of Burgess. It’d been over five years since he’d been to his old layer, and he suspected… hoped that the nightmares that once roamed there had left to haunt some other place. Of course, after several hours of traveling and finally arriving, Pitch realized that the hole was still sealed over. He got off Donner to inspect the entrance, and too late to stop the reindeer, Pitch shouted, “No! Donner! Stop!”

The reindeer spooked by the poison that seeped from his old lair had reared his hind legs and bolted jumping into the air to likely return back to the Pole.

Pitch watched him go feeling even lonelier now than he had. He needed to get away from here. This place reeked of regret and despair, and Pitch knew that to have come back here, of all places, was a mistake. So where was he to go then?

Pitch leaned against one of the nearby trees and sank to the ground hugging his knees to himself. He pulled the little schooner ornament out of his pocket turning it over in his hand. The tears welled in his eyes; he was such a fool! He wept despairingly; he’d forsaken his new family and his chance at redemption. They wouldn’t want him back now. They always say hindsight is twenty-twenty, and it was now that he’d given up trying that he realized what exactly he was truly giving up. He wanted to go back home, and this wasn’t it.

Up above the moon shone down brightly on Pitch as the man in the moon observed.

Pitch had been gone several hours by the time that Sandy came to visit him. The golden man hadn’t gone to see North before stopping at the Boogeyman’s room, and when he floated into the room and saw that Pitch was not present, he had just assumed he was with North in his office. It was late, but not necessarily so late that North would not be still be up tinkering about.

Sandy glided down the hall and through the hub towards North’s office, when he saw the lights were off. The first hint that something was amiss went through Sandy now as he moved in a flash of golden sand towards North’s personal chambers.

North was snoring loudly as Sandy darted forward tugging at the man’s beard. North wasn’t waking after several attempts, and finally Sandy landed with a flop on the Cossack’s stomach, and the man sat bolt upright eyes still crossed with sleep. Sandy was whirling through pictograms at a mile a minute showing Pitch and an empty room.

North shook his head to wake himself up, yawning. “What it is it, Sandy? Slow down.”

Sandy flashed a picture of Pitch alone now while urgently pointing towards the hub shaking his head vigorously no.

North held up a hand for Sandy to stop. “Now, start from beginning and go slow.”

Sandy’s brow drew down in his frustration; it was often difficult to express himself being a mute. He took in a deep breath forming a picture of himself coming to a door and opening it to float inside. He
moved to a bed with a depiction of Pitch in it, and the Sandy's sand version flipped back the sheets to see the sand Pitch disappear.

North scowled, “You mean Pitch is not in his bed?”

Sandy nodded solemnly.

North quickly threw off the covers and got to his feet, slipping on his house shoes and throwing on his robe. He turned to Sandy. “Have you looked for him? Or have idea where he went?”

Sandy shrugged depicting a picture of Pitch’s room and then North’s office. Sandy made another picture of the other guardians and a question mark.

North nodded. “Yes, call other Guardians. I will round up some yetis to help look.”

Sandy gave a hard nod and dashed off towards the globe room to activate the Northern Lights and alert the other guardians that they’re presence was needed.

Within thirty minutes time, all of the guardians were at the Pole and looking in every nook and cranny.

After an hour of looking, Bunnymund was shaking his head discouragingly as they all met back in the globe room, “I haven’t found a thing mates.”

North didn’t say anything as he stood in the middle of the room, stroking his beard.

“I don’t understand why he would run off.” said Tooth. “All of us had a huge disagreement yesterday, but we’ve had disagreements before and he’s never done anything like this.”

Sandy shrugged shaking his head turning a glance back to North since North was the last to see him.

North shrugged. “Nothing happened when I last saw him. I waited until he finished showering. We talked a little bit, then he wanted to go to sleep. So I left him.”

Bunnymund frowned, “Well, I don’t care what the reason he ran off, we gotta find the wisp and bring em’ back.”

Sandy grimaced giving a nod.

At that moment, Jack floated into the room and landed, walking up to the group. “I just got through checking out the stables since I figured he might try sneaking out there. No such luck. But I did notice that Donner was loose, outside where the deer usually graze.”

"Loose?" North frowned.

"Yeah, I must have accidentally left his stall door unlatched or something."

Bunnymund looked skeptical and then worried, “Ya don’t think the bugger coulda tried ta take off on one a those reindeer again and got himself hurt again do ya?”

“It is quite possible.” North sighed. He turned to Jack. “Did you see Pitch outside anywhere?”

Jack shrugged. “No. Not anywhere near the stables anyway. I would think if he’d been out there and saw me, he would have called for help.”

"Unless he knocked himself out again." North mused.
“He could be practically anywhere if’n that’s the case! It’ll be like looking for a needle in a haystack!” Groused Bunnymund.

“He did seem upset about not finishing work on conveyor when we had to cut it off due to rain.” said North. “But when I told him he could finish it if he wished in morning, he turned down offer. He’s full of pride, so he could have gone out to landfill to finish work by himself. I’d like to think he is not that stupid, but…”

Sandy made a pictograph of the lifts that Pitch would need to operate and a question if he had the ability to do so.

Bunnymund looked confused, “Do ya think he’d have been trying to fly up to the top of the conveyor with the reindeer? That seems unlikely mate. We need ta start thinking where he’d go, and from there send out search parties like we did the first time he went missing.” Bunnymund ran a paw down the length of his face, “Crikey, I thought we’d gotten past this kind of thing with Pitch. Ya said ya had a disagreement yesterday Sheila, what were ya arguing about? Maybe it’ll give us a clue ta where he’d go.”

“No, he would not be able to operate lifts by himself. But it is possible that he thought he could ride deer up there.” North said. “Even if it is not possible, Pitch will still try to do it out of spite.” He turned to Bunny. “I thought we had gotten past this too.”

Tooth shrugged, sighing. “Pitch was in a bad mood as usual. He let his pride get in the way of something he and North were discussing. Basically he wasn’t fully admitting that he was the cause of destroying the conveyor, and was trying to push some of the blame on North’s robot, subtly accusing North of being partly at fault for it all, even though it was Pitch himself who set the robot off. Anyway, he got mad and stormed off while we were having lunch, so I followed him. He accused North of making his life miserable. I told him he was making himself miserable. I told him that I agreed with everything North said, then he blew up and accused me of taking North’s side and that we’re all against him. He started raising his voice to me and getting out of line, so I… I slapped him across the face. One thing led to another and before I knew it, he was telling me that he was sick of me and told me to go.”

Sandy blinked listening to the whole story now gave reasoning why Tooth had reacted so harshly, and it also gave a window into why the Boogeyman may have left if his pride felt wounded enough.

Bunnymund nodded, “That’s … that’s surprising that he’d tell you that since he seems to stick to ya like white on rice. Did he mention anything about the fight to you North?”

“I brought up subject after Tooth left, but he closed up like clam. Said it didn’t matter. I told him that he was going to apologize to Tooth for whatever it was he said to her, but he got huffy again and said that Tooth was one that should apologize to him.” North said, rolling his eyes.

Bunnymund shook his head, “It sounds like he may have run off over ya alls little tiff cause ya hurt his pride. It doesn’t right matter I suppose, what we need to do now is drag his rear back here. He may be having some slips and falls, but he’s still a heck of a lot better than he was. The longer he’s out there, the more of a chance he’s got ta fallen back into old habits.” He turned to Sandy, “Ya had your sand keeping him subdued, is there any way ya can pinpoint him through your sand?”

Sandy shook his head no sadly.

Bunnymund turned to North, “What about you North? Do you have any kind of spell or what not that can find him?”
North frowned, shaking his head. “I do have old scrying mirror, but I haven’t used it in very long
time.”

Sandy tilted his head to the side curiously at the suggestion.

“It sounds worth a go; let’s have a look see,” Bunnymund nodded liking the idea.

North motioned for everyone to follow him as he led the way down the hallway and eventually to his
bedroom. He closed the door after everyone had walked inside. North walked over to his wardrobe,
opened the doors, and reached to take down a small box from one of the top shelves. "Like I said, it
has been long time since I used it." He lumbered over and put the box down on the bed, taking off
the lid.

Everyone gathered around North watching him as he took an intricately designed mirror that was in
lined with glyphs of some sort.

Bunnymund’s eyes went wide, “Well ain’t that a whimsical lil doodad! Ya didn’t by chance use that
doohickey when we had that egg hunt back in 1889 did ya?” Bunnymund teased.

North smiled. “Maybe, maybe not,” He waved his hand over the mirror’s glass. “Show me Pitch
Black, aka the Boogeyman.” For a minute, the mirror didn’t appear to be doing anything. Then the
glass clouded and swirled, the surface and the glyphs around it glowing a faint pale blue. When it
cleared again, it showed an image of Pitch huddled on the ground near his old lair.

Sandy straightened rolling back his shoulders and proceeded to bound off knowing exactly where
Pitch was and planning to retrieve him.

Before he could get very far Bunnymund snatched his foot, “Wow! Wow there mate! Hang on a sec!
We might wanna approach this delicately aye? We don’t wanna spook him and make him run again
especially if’n he’s got his powers back. We can’t catch a shadow remember?”

Sandy sighed seeming unhappy with waiting, but he floated back down to join the others to see what
everyone had planned.

Bunnymund turned back to the mirror squinting at what he saw, “What’s he doing there anyway?
Just sitting there?”

"Looks that way." North mumbled. "My guess is Donner, for one reason or other, must have ran off
and came back to Pole. Doesn't look like Pitch is happy about being back at lair, though. Even
though I am mad over this, I do hope it serves to teach him lesson. Maybe now he will be more
appreciative of us and what we are trying to do for him."

“So how do ya wanna go about snagging the bugger back?” Bunnymund asked, “Do ya wanna
sneak up behind em? My tunnels might be the way ta go if'n ya wanna go that route. Or we could
use your snow globes and surprise him, that might be risky though if he is able to react before Sandy
can douse him in dreamsand as by the looks of him in yer little mirror, he ain’t as sparkly anymore.

"Yeah, I noticed that." North said, stroking his beard. "Question is where did he get enough
nightmares to make him shadow again." North shrugged. "We will figure that out later. As for
getting him back, I plan for him to come to us. I will use globe to open portal a little ways away from
him, where he can't see. Then I will walk to where he is. Sandy, you will come with me and wait
where portal opens. I shall have talk with him first before I call you to sand him again. The rest of
you will remain here until we get back."

Bunnymund didn’t seem very keen on North going by himself, but since Pitch technically was his
ward above the rest of them with the Boogeyman sharing residence at the Pole, he let out a soft grunt
folding his arms, “Yer call mate. We’ll be here, so leave the snow globe open incase ya need us.

Sandy moved up beside North giving a curt nod to let the Cossack know he was ready.

"I will, Bunny," said North. "Let us all head to the globe room, and we can do this there."

Everyone followed North back to the globe room standing by to support their friend if he needed
their help. The room was a bit tense now moments away from confronting Pitch.

"You sure you don't want me coming along?" said Jack.

North shook his head. "I do not want too many there. I want it to be just between him and me."

Jack nodded his understanding and stepped to the side. North turned, tossed a globe into the farthest
corner of the room and a portal opened. He stepped through it, motioning for Sandy to follow.

Sandy floated up beside North signaling he was ready.

North walked through the trees for a couple of minutes before he came out into the clearing where
Pitch was still curled up on the ground. North held back his flaring anger, trying to calm himself
before he came face to face with the man. Finally he walked forward, stopping directly in front of
Pitch, hands on his hips.

Pitch had been lost in his own reverie having been sitting next to his lair for close to three hours for a
lack of anywhere else to go. It wasn’t until he heard the crunch of the Cossack’s house shoes did
Pitch realize that North was standing right in front of him.

He jerked his head up with a gasp of realized shock pressing his body against the tree behind him as
he scrambled to jump into the nearest shadow. He disappeared in a flash although his presence still
hung in the air. He hadn’t left, but his voice came from another patch of shadows, “Why are you
here? You could have been free of me once and for all,” his voice was cracked and uncertain. He
wanted to go home, but now he was afraid what going home would entail. He was pretty certain he
had cause to worry in that regard. That was saying North even wanted him to come back with him.
Pitch was afraid of this even more.

Sandy was honing in on Pitch’s voice carefully moving through the trees in an attempt to remain
hidden until he could make his move.

"I think it's obvious I came to bring you back." North answered, glaring. "Why would you think I
would want to be free of you?"

There was a long moment of silence before Pitch spoke again, "I wanted to make it easier for you...
for all of you. I know all I cause you is strife. I'm not worth the effort you're investing... I'm never
going to measure up to who you want me to be!" his voice was cracked and uncertain. He
wanted to go home, but now he was afraid what going home would entail. He was pretty certain he
had cause to worry in that regard. That was saying North even wanted him to come back with him.
Pitch was afraid of this even more.

"And just who do you think we want you to be? Hm?" North crossed his arms over his chest. “All
we want is to see you become something better than you are now. We want to see you become
someone respectable that you can be proud of and that will give you confidence. You, Pitch, should
want same, since it IS your life we’re speaking of. Just swallow that over-inflated ego and pride of
yours for a few minutes and look at yourself. Do you always want to live in this way? Don’t you
want to become someone that you can be proud of? That can do some good for world? That would
make you feel like you have purpose in life?—instead of skulking around in shadows, terrifying kids,
and being outlandishly rude. Perhaps if you became halfway decent, people would want to believe in
you, or you would at least have better chance at it. Wouldn’t you want that? Don’t you want a chance at doing something good that would gain the attention of the humans? The way I see it, you really have no choice anymore. It’s either that path or you sitting here on ground outside lair, crying and feeling sorry for yourself.”

Pitch faltered at North’s words, “I …I’m not just sitting on the ground crying and feeling sorry for myself! You think I don’t want to be better? To do better? To have what you have and be believed in? Of course I do! But you said it yourself, I’m just backpedaling all the time! You’ve already shown me that you all are just wasting your time with me! Even sweet Toothiana can’t help but to get violent with me! How do you think that makes me feel? Did you ever think, just once, that by leaving; I was doing you a favor?!” He was crying now and his voice broke like shards at the last sentence he spoke.

“Do you want to do better? Do you want what we have?” North repeated the questions back, his tone growing gravely serious with a hint of an edge. “Sometimes I’m not sure what you want. You continuously say you want to do better, but yet you turn around and do exact opposite and then yell at us for one thing and another like we are doing great harm to you, then you get punished and go through the whole ‘I’m sorry’ routine. Apologies don’t mean anything if you continuously do the things you’re sorry for, Pitch. In order for you to do better and have what we have you’re going to have to stop thinking yourself above us and better than us and knock yourself down several pegs and actually work hard for it. You’re going to have to be determined to be a better person, and that means swallowing your pride and admitting that you need us to guide you through this and stop getting your feelings hurt when someone doesn't agree with you or take your side in an argument. It’s not going to come to you overnight, and it’s not going to magically appear on your lap. Yes, you are backpedaling sometimes. It is to be expected for a short time until you gain footing. As I have said before, this road will not be easy for any of us. There will be bumps along way. But right now, you are causing yourself to backpedal because of your stubbornness and pride. Once you get a handle on that problem, then you will start moving forward. You need help, Pitch. There’s no shame in admitting you need help and accepting it from others when you need it. But we can’t help you until you allow us to help you. We’ve scratched surface already, but we can’t get further than that until you let us. You are no longer capable of making right choices. Every time you make choices, you end up back here, at hole, where you started from. Look at where you are. Who brought you back here? You’ve made such good progress up until now, but you’ve now brought yourself back to beginning. You, Pitch, are doing it to yourself.”

He sighed. “Toothiana was not being violent with you and you know it. She is your friend. She was only trying to help. You had no reason to talk to her in way you did so that slap was well deserved. The question is why were you slapped? Have you even stopped once to think there might be a problem there that led to her slapping you? Have you worked to correct that problem so that she does not feel need to slap you again? There are many ways to work out problems, Pitch.”

North was right Pitch knew, his pride was getting in the way of him moving past a lot of his problems, he sighed, he just wanted to go home and back to that happy place he’d managed to find before all of the unfurling of the issues caused by that horrible magic page! He’d been making such good progress then. He shifted into a closer shadow as he pandered, “You’re right. I know it was foolish for me to leave. I… I don’t suppose we can just pretend none of this ever happened could we?” Pitch wanted nothing more than to come out to North’s side, but a lingering fear of what would follow loomed over him like a guillotine blade.

North sadly shook his head. “No, Pitch. You have disobeyed and have admitted to doing it, now you must face consequences for your actions. When I took you into my home, I told myself that I would help you and teach you, and that includes administering discipline when needed. If I back down now and pretend none of this happened, I would be doing a disservice to both you and myself.”
Pitch let loose a low guttural moan of despair, “You’re not making this easier! Please! Just this once, I... I was confused! I made a mistake, and I ...I promise I’ll never try to leave again. Can’t you bend the rules just this time? Please?”

Sandy was hovering above Pitch unbeknownst to the nightmare lord that was so caught up in his conversation with North he’d failed to look up. In mere moments the dream weaver would lock on to his exact location, and there would be no more darting in and out of the shadows to hide from them.

“Yes, Pitch, you did make mistake, and you’re going to pay for it. No, I am not bending rules just because you demand it. Now, the longer you stay there, pleading and making excuses, the worse it’s going to get for you. Already, you have heaped a large amount of punishment on yourself, since you ran off in middle of your grounding.”

The Cossack’s words were terrifying him. He did want to go back home, but he didn’t want to face the consequences he’d wrought on himself. He was always making things worse than they had to be. He needed to face North now as much as it scared him to do so, and so he willing emerged from the shadows head down in shame and hands clasped in front of him, “It... it wasn’t a demand... it ...it was a request for mercy.” He brought his tear stained face up to look at North now, it was apparent he’d been crying far longer than their conversation, “I know what I gave up when I left, and I thought I was making things better to take myself out of the picture because all I seem to do is make everyone around me hurt!” He crumpled to the ground at North’s feet now openly weeping his hurt and anguish.

Sandy floated down behind Pitch looking to North and back to Pitch with a distraught look. He was unsure what he should do now that Pitch willingly gave himself up. He hadn’t been expecting that. He made a sign of Zzz’s and a question mark over his head to see if North wanted the golden man to knock Pitch out.

North held up a hand to Sandy, telling the man that he wasn’t finished speaking to the Boogeyman. “Pitch, I’ve been showing you mercy by allowing you to stay at Pole rather than going back to this miserable place.” He waved toward where the hole had been. “I’ve been showing you mercy by taking time out of my schedule to help rehabilitate you.” North sighed. "If you do not want punishment then get it through your thick head that behaving and obeying will take you down a road with less punishment and more praise. I can only hope that you have learned something from tonight's events."

Pitch sniffed nodding his head; he wanted to apologize, but he had a feeling North didn’t want to hear it, "I...I get it now. And I know you're tired of hearing me say I'm sorry, but I am. Please know I never meant to upset you, I acted irrationally... I knew better, but I let my feelings override good judgment."

North grunted, nodding. “And that is why you will be punished. So this lesson will stick.”

"I know," he whined pitifully slumping in defeat.

"You need rest." said North, softly. He motioned to Sandy.

Sandy needed no more encouragement as he quickly swooped above him dusting Pitch with dreamsand.

Pitch had never realized Sandman had been behind him as he raised his hands out to the sudden drizzle of shining sand. He didn’t have long to contemplate the action though as sleep took him and his body wilted to the ground.
While he was asleep, Sandy coated him once more in specks of light to counteract his shadow ability. He sighed looking down at Pitch sadly.

"Whelp, I guess we head back now." said North, bending down to scoop Pitch into his arms. He turned and walked back to the portal.

Pitch’s body sagged like a ragdoll in the Cossack’s massive arms.

Sandy floated beside North as they moved through the forest to the entrance of the snow globe’s portal and through it.

The rest of the guardians were there waiting for them having heard everything.

Bunnymund looked grim feeling at a loss for words as he watched the procession enter and the portal close behind them.

Sandy once through the portal drifted down to the ground to stare up at North and the others to see what if anything they needed to do now. North would be the one to guide them, and all eyes were on him now.

“I think we have had enough excitement for one night.” North said wearily. “I will put him back in his bed and we will discuss what to do with him tomorrow when we’ve all had sleep.”

“Shoulda we be taking turns guarding him? Or do you think what he said about not running is true?” Bunnymund asked worriedly.

North looked at the sleeping form of Pitch in his arms. “I really don’t think it will be necessary. I think he learned hard lesson tonight and won't be trying to escape again for a good long time. Besides, Sandy’s dreamsand always knocks him out until morning. But just to be on safe side, I will post a yeti outside his door.”

Bunnymund nodded taking a few steps back, “Alright then, if’n you need me, you know how to reach me.” Thumping a foot on the ground, he gave the others a nod and jumped into his hole.

Sandy floated into the air gliding over to Pitch who hung limply in the Cossack’s arms and extended another dose of dreamsand just to make sure that Pitch would in fact stay asleep. He backed away then giving North a nod before floating backwards giving them all one last look and a nod before heading out through the skylight.

“Well, I need to get back to my rounds.” said Tooth at last. “I’m going to be backed up again if I don’t.” She bid North good night and exited the same way Sandy had left.

“I think I’m going to stick around, if it’s okay.” said Jack, rubbing the back of his neck. “It won’t be long until I’ll have to see to the deer.”

North nodded. “Make yourself at home. I will put Pitch to bed and then retire to my own bed again.” As he said the last part, North yawned and made his way down the hallway toward Pitch’s bedroom. When he arrived, he nudged the door open and walked over to deposit Pitch into the bed, pulling the covers up around him. When he saw all was as it should be, he exited the room and made his way to his own sleeping quarters.
Regret

Chapter Forty-Four

Regret

Sandy had given Pitch enough dreamsand to knock him out well into late morning. Pitch blinked awake, and after a moment his stomach dropped as he remembered the events of last night. He clutched the covers to himself tightly tears springing to his eyes. He’d really messed up this time. Why hadn’t he just let such silly notions go when he’d originally conceived them? Ever since the incident with Toothiana the day before, he’d been carrying around an ill temper not wishing to listen to reason.

He’d so fully convinced himself that he knew what was best and that isolating himself from those he cared about would be the best answer for all their sakes… because Pitch knew best. When did he ever know best? Pitch thought bitterly as he glanced at the painting on the wall that covered the strap. Maybe after last night, North knowing how he’d felt and why he’d done what he’d done, maybe he’d go a little easier on him like he did last time. Pitch cringed at the thought of getting another spanking. Why couldn’t he just do what needed to be done to get himself out of a mess instead of digging a deeper hole?

Sixteen minutes passed by and then a knock on the door was heard.

Pitch hesitated a moment wondering if he should pretend to be asleep, but he knew that would likely not go over well, “Come in,” he stated with an echo of the despair he was feeling.

The door opened and in walked North. “Are you awake?” he asked. “I came by earlier and you were still asleep.”

“Yes,” he stated quietly eyes dropping to his pillow.

North closed the door and walked to the side of the bed, taking a seat at the foot. “Feeling rested?”
Pitch nodded afraid to look over at North; his whole body tensed feeling the weight of the man settle on his bed.

"I think I've already said everything that can be said. Saying anything more would only result in me repeating things." said North.

Pitch grimaced feeling a wave of fear rush through him, so that was it, they were just going to get straight to it. Pitch swallowed hard looking back at the painting on the wall and thinking maybe if he went straight into the Cossack’s lap while he was sitting, he wouldn’t even think about the strap. But then maybe North was never planning on using the strap? Stars he was being such a coward! Pitch wanted to say so much more, but he felt frozen in time and place as he whimpered, “Please North! Know that I’m truly very sorry! I wasn’t trying to escape punishment, I really only left because I was thinking it was the best for you guardians!”

"You still disobeyed. And what's more, you acted foolishly all because of your pride and a squabble that could have easily been sorted out by different means."

Pitch nodded, “I know. I promise in the future that it’ll never come to this again of this I can swear.” Pitch finally sat up his head poking out as his eyes flicked over nervously at North, but otherwise he was still buried under his covers as if they would somehow protect him from his fate to come.

North sighed wearily.

Pitch frowned sullenly the tears that had been standing in his eyes cascading down his cheeks, “Okay… you don’t want to hear what I have to say… you just want to hear me scream in pain,” he warbled slipping out of his sheets and inching towards the Cossack knowing North wanted him over his knee already. This was always one of the hardest parts to contend with, and Pitch always found it extremely difficult to submit at all let alone like this.

North scowled. "It is that smart attitude that continues to get you into this situation. You know very well that I hate doing this to you, but you continue to make me do it. For your information, I heard every word you spoke. I am not deaf. But no matter what you say, you are still getting spanking." North held out his hand to stop Pitch. "Before you put yourself across lap, I would like for you to fetch the strap for me, please."

Fetch it? His stomach lurched as he looked up mournfully at North seeing the man’s stony expression insured that there was going to be no mercy for him today. Is that why North had asked him if he’d felt well rested? He wanted to make sure he was wide awake and fully alert for just this… no distractions permitted, just full attention to the reason why he was about to be upended and punished severely. His bottom clenched in remembered pain. He looked away from the Cossack then retreating inwardly as a wave of self-pity washed over him.

Pitch rose stiffly from the mattress shuffling slowly over to the wall. He hesitated looking back at North once more with a silent plea for pity, but there was nothing there but stern resolve. Pitch whimpered pathetically as he reached up and pulled the picture down setting it on the floor gently to unveil the sinister object hidden behind it. This was a new low to have to go get the implement of his pain… to ‘fetch it’ and bring it over to North, so the man could blister his rear end with it.

It was almost too much to comprehend that he was actually doing it. It was as if he were a puppet where some unknown force was enacting the necessary means to retrieve the strip of leather from the wall. His whole body was trembling now. He’d seen the strap up close, but this was the first time he’d actually held it in his hands. It was a wicked looking thing, and to hold it gave him a wave of nausea as he felt the weight of it and further horrible memories of its terrible bite filtered through his
mind, imageries and sensations he’d wished he could forget. The pain had seared so deeply it was almost blinding. He memorized it all entirely too well.

His face was paler than normal, and his expression was marred with the anxiety he felt stricken with. The panic he was exhibiting had the fearlings that coursed within his veins thrumming excitedly sending his mind into a tide of numbness and draining much of the energy from him as they greedily pulled and siphoned fright from the core of his being leaving him feeling even weaker for it and showing in the pallor of his skin. It only meant he would feel the pain more Pitch knew because their lack of presence refused to give him strength to ignore it. If the fearlings had any kind of sentience verse being a latent endorphin, they would cheer at his personal misery.

He gripped the handle to his chest now with both hands on the verge of hyperventilating from the sheer fear of the consequences he was about to face. He bleated in his terror, “Please North! Can’t… can’t we just …can’t we just use your hand?! I …I can’t handle this again; it’s too much!” Pitch was immobile next to the wall as he shook his head absently no, not in true defiance just the inability to fully accept his circumstances.

“Pitch, I grow tired of waiting.” North simply replied.

Pitch whimpered as he timidly made his way over to North. He was sniffling his cheeks wet with a fresh wave of tears; Pitch looked quite miserable as he finally made it to North’s side. "Please North… I’m so sorry!" He held the strap tightly to his chest now not wanting to extend it out to the Cossack.

Without saying a word, North reached out and took hold of the strap.

Pitch didn’t resist North taking it, but he flinched looking rather stricken as his eyes followed the Cossack’s hand. He couldn’t help but to stumble back a few steps in his fear.

North put the strap down on the bed beside him and patted his lap.

Pitch stared down at North’s lap and back up to North with sorrowful eyes; he knew this was coming, and just like a well learned routine, Pitch knew that North would lose patience with him if he didn’t acquiesce. Hitching an inarticulate whine he inched towards the Cossack coming to his knees and reluctantly laying himself across his lap. He immediately clenched throwing his legs up to instinctively protect his rear end turning his head back to give North a pitiful pout. He was so afraid knowing he’d broken a cardinal rule by running away like he had, but he still hoped that North would see how distraught he was and take pity on him like he had before.

North wasted no time moving Pitch into place, pushing him forward so that he rested on his left knee. He pulled the Boogeyman's legs down to pin between his own.

Pitch trembled in anticipation hating that North did this all so fluidly without speaking a word to him. Pitch wanted so badly to resist, to kick and scream out his objections to this sort of treatment, but by this point, he knew such actions would only forestall the inevitable, and in the long run, he would pay far more dearly for it.

There was also the fact that as much as he hated to admit it, he should have known better. Pitch knew if he’d been caught and brought back to the Pole what he could expect, although he had hoped giving himself up willingly without a fight would have earned him a reprieve from the strap, but that wasn’t going to be the case he’d quickly realized even though he’d practically been crying since North sat on his bed. Even with all the waterworks, North was unflinching in his perceived duty seemingly not to feel one iota of pity for Pitch no matter how he carried on and pleaded.
How very pathetic Pitch now felt sniveling like a babe over getting a spanking! It was a horrible blow to his very inflated ego, and now he was feeling very, very sorry for himself for what he was sure to face with no gained sympathy from the Cossack. Pitch wouldn’t be sitting comfortably for a while he knew… at least being grounded to his room, he wouldn’t have to. No, he’d just be spending that time laying on his stomach cursing the Cossack for making him so tender.

Pitch was now involuntarily arching his back as North adjusted his bottom trying, without success, to bring his buttocks down further to avoid getting swatted so thoroughly on the very sensitive under curves where his butt met his thighs (and consequently where he had to sit), but North just hefted him easily back where Pitch’s bottom was prone to receive the strap falling most often on those very specific areas much to Pitch’s dismay. North had become an expert at placement just as he had become an expert at pinning his legs, so that he couldn’t interfere in any way. Pitch was helpless, and this elicited a cried string of, “No, no, no, no, no!” Pitch was not covering his rear with his hands, but they hovered to the sides of each cheek as a want to cover himself, barely willing himself not to obstruct the Cossack lest he be pinned further.

North casually scooped up Pitch’s hands and pinned them to the small of his back.

Pitch moaned a protest, but knew better than to actually say how unfair he felt North pinning his hands were. After all, he hadn’t actually tried to block North’s efforts. Who was he fooling? Pitch sulked knowing that he likely would have tried to stop North as soon as the first swat fell. Still, being further immobilized just caused Pitch to let out a pitiful wail, “I’m sorry North! Please!” He didn’t know why he kept apologizing like this as if it would suddenly and miraculously get through to North and he’d be forgiven without further recourse. Even Pitch knew that was never going to be the case, but the fear and anticipation spurred him on, and Pitch simply couldn’t help himself from at least trying to lessen his punishment.

Once Pitch's hands were secure, North calmly and quietly pulled Pitch's robe back and pulled his pants down. He sighed, gathering himself together for the task before him.

Pitch had been straining to look over his shoulder at North, but as he saw him casually sweep his robe to the side and tug his pants down to bare him, Pitch found his morbid curiosity fade with the way his body jittered well aware of the next step to come. He was already blushing, and now he just had to turn away on the verge of hyperventilating because he didn’t think he could handle watching that strap come up to strike him.

North raised the strap and brought it down across Pitch’s backside.

Pitch moaned as the electrifying jolt from the pain lit his nerves on fire and his body jerked involuntarily. The pain was just as horrible as he remembered it. His limbs flailed helplessly, captured as they were, and making Pitch moan in misery to be in his predicament. He was starting to regret very much stepping forward to return to the Pole after running away.

North did not pause as he continued to bring down a stream of evenly timed swats to Pitch’s wriggling rear.

The thick leather’s impact left an imprint that radiated deep into the tissue of his posterior making Pitch’s eyes bulge as he screamed inarticulately in his agony. Every strap mark seared a need to escape the pain as he futilely kicked and bucked against the impossible force that North represented. He didn’t even know why he fought, he wasn’t capable of avoiding this outcome. It was involuntary Pitch supposed as his body couldn’t help but to try to resist the punishment it was enduring, “Oh stars! North! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” He cried feeling acutely his helplessness to feel the torture of being unable to stop what was happening to him and to know it would still be continuing for some
time. North was quite upset with him for what he’d done, and Pitch was sobered by the realization he could expect no less than to leave this encounter full sore.

“So many I’m sorries, yet here we are Pitch. We are right back where we started, where you have put us. I plan to make sure this sorry will be quite meaningful whether you intend it or not,” North stated frankly.

As the strap rained down again and again, Pitch couldn’t help but retreat internally as he screamed and finally broke into sobs unable to think past the pain. It only took ten swats to bring him to a mess of watery pleas for mercy, but North seemed undeterred soldiering on in his task much to Pitch’s dismay. Pitch looked over his shoulder as the eleventh strap came down, and he whimpered to see the pink and red splotches that decorated his once pale skin and to especially see the way his flesh cringed without the ability to move away or do anything but receive what it was given. He wasn’t going anywhere he knew, but the visual confirmed it even more so.

The strap rose again, and Pitch watched as if in slow motion as it descended and crashed against already very tender flesh. He couldn’t escape this… this horrible continued play of agony in his life Pitch realized. Somehow, he always ended up here, over North’s knee, answering for his crimes. A fresh wave of tears spilled down his cheeks as Pitch sobbed collapsing limply now over North’s knee giving in to what he knew North would not be denied. Pitch would take what the Cossack dolled out bleating miserable supplications for forbearance of the punishment he’d earned himself, but otherwise only wincing as a new stripe was applied to his aching reddened bottom that shook and clenched in anticipation of the next blow.

Sensing Pitch had lost most of the fight within him, North released Pitch’s hands feeling no further need to restrain him so fully. The Russian shifted his quivering form with one beefy arm to balance once more on his knee where Pitch’s squirming and writhing had had him sliding out of the range North aimed to tan. Once Pitch had been adjusted properly, North placed a hand on the small of Pitch’s back and resumed the spanking.

Pitch sniffled thankful at first as North released his hands thinking he’d made it to the end of his excruciating punishment only to realize that no, this wasn’t the end, North was just taking the time to realign his backside. He whimpered looking back with a pitiful frown as another bout of tears rimmed his eyes.
Pitch wanted it to be over; he hurt so badly! Something had to change, he couldn’t keep going down this road and coming back to this! It was humiliating and humbling, but more so it was discouraging. Was there no hope for him? Would this be what awaited him around every corner? He wept in his despondency, “I didn’t mean to… to upset you! I thought it was for the best that I left!” And he had;
Pitch thought that his very presence had dampened the spirits of them all. He wasn’t meant to be here with them. He hadn’t deserved it from the start. The fact that North had brought him back was a kindness undue a monster like him. He blubbered now, “Why didn’t you just leave me! You were better off without me!”

North slowed setting the strap to the side as he regarded Pitch with sad eyes. He didn’t want to do this anymore, but the Boogeyman still had much to answer for. Even still, North no longer had the heart to use the strap, so he continued with his hand, “Pitch, I do not need to tell you that you are wrong; you know this already. I have already said you need help. You, you do not want to take help, so we are here to give it to you regardless of whether you agree to take it or not,” he continued to lay heavy handed swat after heavy handed swat, “We will continue to give you what you need as long as you need it. I would like that to not just be my hand across your backside.”

Pitch cringed, he’d like nothing more than to no longer be in the position of being across North’s knee. He wasn’t sure if North’s words had made him happy to hear or not from their connotations. It did his heart well to know that the guardians hadn’t given up on him even though he had in turn forsaken them. It was a light in the dark to the painful loneliness he’d felt sitting beside his lair in a fit of hopelessness. North’s words gave him strength that even though he’d been so foolish to have left his family, they didn’t abandon him and had no plans to no matter how badly he’d just screwed up.

Pitch was thankful for the small reprieve when the Cossack had switched from the strap to his hand although it made it harder not to think about each painful swath when the pain was not as intensely overwhelming to contend with. North had given Pitch twenty solid straps as he had the previous time, although this time was markedly worse as North continued the onslaught with steady hard calloused slaps to his very tenderized bottom. His eyes had promised this spanking was going to be a memorable one, and North was going to make doubly sure that Pitch didn’t forget this lesson anytime soon. Pitch was assured that he wouldn’t, by the stars he wouldn’t! He cried pitifully mourning how much he hurt and how badly he felt both physically and emotionally.

North swatted Pitch another ten swats before he stopped hearing the hiccupped cries Pitch gave in his pained sorrow. He sighed looking at Pitch draped over his knee and rocking with heaving sobs. The point had been well made, and North felt Pitch had learned his lesson. The Cossack lightly pulled his pants back into place and gently helped Pitch up to turn around and face him.

Pitch’s hands covered his face as he continued to shudder convulsive tears unable to pull himself from the internal torment he was feeling. He’d barely realized that North had finished spanking him until he felt the chafe of his garments being pulled up to cover his very enflamed flesh. He let himself be guided up off of North’s knee quietly turned to face North now. He still trembled trying to correlate what was happening now as he fought to control the many hot tears that spilled from him like a river stream. He was just grateful the horrible ordeal of coping with getting his backside blistered was finally over.

North pulled Pitch to sit in his lap with his bottom off of his knee, so Pitch was not uncomfortable. He pulled the smaller man into his chest and just held him while he bawled out his anguish.

Pitch cried uncontrollably for long minutes not just from how his posterior stung, (although that was worth many shed tears) he wept as he was pulled into the warmth of the Cossack’s forgiving arms because he felt and knew now that he was still cared for. Arms he had been so sure would be barred to him after he’d left still embraced him affectionately. He hadn’t realized just how much he’d grown to rely on the compassion of the guardians and needed their companionship.

Pitch buried his face into North’s shoulder hitching sobs and feeling pathetic for letting himself cry like this, but he was compelled as the hand that had so brutally punished him was now gently
rubbing his back in a show of kindness to extinguish his inner anguish. The benevolence only made it harder for him to stop crying. His hand clung to North’s shirt as Pitch’s tears soaked North’s shoulder in gasping shutters.

North waited patiently for Pitch to calm.

Pitch finally quieted his sobs lifting himself from North’s chest still sniffling with a tormented look painted on his face. Pitch’s eyes laid in his lap staring at his hands as his whole body slumped in his weariness feeling drained from the physical exertion as well as the emotional roller coaster.

North guided his chin towards him wanting the nightmare lord’s full attention when he addressed him further, “Pitch, I know you are upset, but I want you to listen to me. Can you do that?”

Pitch’s eyes flicked up to regard North as he nodded lightly sniffling and wiping at his face as he tried to get himself under control.

“I was angry with you before, and I let myself lose patience. So let us try to start with fresh page, both of us,” North patted his knee, “Slate is clean. You are forgiven, da? Just, no more running. We want you to stay here with us. This is not just to keep you prisoner Pitch, you belong here, with us. We are your family Pitch, and you may not realize it, but this is home for you now. Not old lair. Am I clear?”

Fresh tears spilled down Pitch’s face as he nodded hitching out a, “Ya-yes! No …no more running I swear!” North’s words were something he’d been needing to hear for some time, to feel like he not only belonged but that they wanted him here more than just to keep him from making mischief and to keep tabs on him. He’d suspected in his heart that this was true, but to hear it and know for certain sent a wave of contentment through Pitch.

North nodded, “Good. You still have grounding to go through. I thought to give you one more week for running away, but I think you have learned lesson well enough from warmed bottom. If not, your bottom will suffer far worse spanking when I catch you.”

Pitch sniffed as he nodded responding eagerly, “Yes, I …I have. It won’t happen again, I assure you!” Pitch wanted to be sure North felt his commitment as he had already suffered the bite of the strap, and he really didn’t want to also endure an extended stay in his room.

He reached back now to tenderly rub his sore backside feeling the heat radiating through the fabric of his clothes. His swollen cheeks twinged at the reminder of what he’d so recently gone through and the threat of further punishment if he were ever so foolish to run away again. He really had no desire to ever run away again not just because of the warning (although it packed enough incentive to be sure!) It was because he had felt so awful to be all alone again.

That brief stint away from the guardians opened his eyes to just how happy living with them had made him, they treated him well, save for the punishments. Although, he knew deep down that he’d brought them on himself and had deserved each and every one of them much to his chagrin.

North seemed satisfied by Pitch’s show of contrition as he reached back on to the bed to grab the strap and held the handle out to Pitch, “Go. Put back on wall.”

Pitch grimaced sliding carefully off the Cossack’s leg to take the proffered handle feeling his cheeks flush with the embarrassment as he made his way back to the wall. He stared at the nail now reminded of the day that North had originally placed it there about a week ago… when he’d last received a strapping. He hung the strap picking up the painting keen on burying the sight of the dreaded object once more.
“No.” North shook his head.

Pitch paused in surprise his eyes darting warily back to North now trying to understand what he was saying no to.

“No painting there. Pitch, I put strap on wall to remind you to behave. Putting painting over strap defeats the purpose,” North stated firmly.

Pitch looked back with a fierce pout at the strap now hanging boldly on the wall before turning his gaze down to his painting moping rather despondently now to learn he was in fact going to have to constantly be reminded of the tool North fashioned purposefully to discipline him with.

Now anyone who came in his room would also know full well the purpose of such an item hung on his wall. It was humiliating! Pitch dropped the painting unceremoniously on the floor next to the wall. He grumbled irritably as he walked back to the bed, “I don’t know why I have to physically see it! It’s not like I don’t know it’s still there!”

The Cossack was lightning fast as he stood grabbing Pitch by the bicep and giving him two harsh swats.

Pitch gasped his whole body going rigid as the calloused hand was applied reigniting the flame he already was feeling. He yelped out whipping his head around to give North a shocked hurt expression.

North frowned down with a stern glare, “I have had enough of your attitude, Pitch. This is what gets you in most trouble with other guardians. I have been lenient on you for too long. I will not tolerate any more disrespect for me or for other guardians. You will learn to consider what you say before it comes out mouth, or I will help you reconsider it very quickly. Am I understood?”

Pitch swallowed hard nodding as fresh tears welled in his eyes and the frown he wore wavered on his face. He knew he’d better heed North’s warning if he didn’t want to be getting swatted every time he turned around. North was right though, and this too made Pitch want to cry. Pitch knew that he had to change the way he spoke to others or learn to keep his negativity to himself. There was better ways to express himself, he usually just preferred directness which usually accounted to the same thing as being rude for Pitch.

North grunted giving a curt nod and releasing his hold on Pitch’s bicep, “Sit.” North sat himself as he said this.

Scrambling forward, Pitch was quick to comply climbing up on his bed and gingerly planting his butt next to North. His face was the picture of misery as he mumbled, “I …I’m sorry. It… just seeing it up there… it…” he couldn’t bring the words that he felt to light as he blushed fiercely.

“It is reminder, Pitch. If you do not see it, how will it remind you?”

Pitch whined, “But everyone else will see it too!” He knew North well enough that his plea would fall on deaf ears, but Pitch still held out some small hope the Cossack would take pity on him.

“Whose fault is this? Pitch, you brought punishment down on your head many times and strap was made because of this. Besides, all guardians already know you get spanked on bum when you are naughty. This is no secret. Why big fuss if they see it?” North queried.

It’s …it’s embarrassing! That’s why!” Pitch visibly cringed at North’s words. Of course he knew that all the guardians were well aware of the way he was punished. Almost all of them had even participated in one way or another by either bringing North a switch or physically giving him a swat
of their own. Even Toothiana had swatted him, and she’d been adamantly against it before he’d managed to change her mind on the subject (which still shamed him to no end.) Pitch needed to make amends with her once this was all said and done he knew, but the thought of confronting her now made his stomach twist into knots.

North sighed, “Pitch, let embarrassment help you learn to think before acting. You will not cover it again. If I see you hide strap, you will get spanking. No more discussion on matter.”

Pitch frowned more deeply deciding it was definitely best to drop the subject since it was obvious North wasn’t going to budge on the matter. Instead, Pitch sighed in defeat as he plucked at the stray fibers in his comforter and tried to ignore the constant throbbing pain his rear was in as he shifted uncomfortably. His eyes moved up to look at North to see the Cossack peering down at him with an unreadable expression. His brow furrowed as he grew suddenly self-conscious, “Wha-what?”

North shook his head giving Pitch a smile, “Nothing. I was just looking at you and thinking everything will be okay. Sometimes I worry, we would not get through to you, but do you know what I see, Pitch?”

Pitch’s eyes were wide with interest as he shook his head no.

“Hope. I see hope for you, Pitch,” North inched over a little closer to Pitch and wrapped a massive arm around the smaller form and pulled the nightmare lord up flush beside him.

Pitch flinched a bit from the chafing as he was bodily moved across the bed, but he easily relaxed against North thinking on what he’d just said as he sank into the Cossack’s embrace with a deep sigh. He was silent for a moment while he let the comment sink in, “Do you… do you really think so?”

“I do. For so long I had thought you needed to believe in us, but what I’ve discovered is that you need to believe in you even more,” North patted Pitch’s chest gently over his heart as he said this, “If you can find strength here; you will be just fine. And we will always be here to help guide you along the way if you should ever need us.”

Pitch’s chest tightened feeling tears prick his eyes, but these tears were not woeful tears, they were tears of joy at hearing North believed in him, “Thank you,” he said with a cracking voice.

North and Pitch sat in silence for a long moment before North finally rose from the bed drawing his arm away and giving Pitch a soft squeeze on the shoulder, “I must go tend to business, Pitch.”

Pitch nodded forlornly knowing that this moment had to come sooner or later, and as much as he didn’t wish to be alone, North had work to do.

Seeing Pitch’s sad face, North felt the need to add, “I will come back later to check on you. I have been thinking; we will make point to dine together every night. This is good for you, and I think you have liked it most times. It will be good time for us to spend together. Does this sound good to you?”

Pitch looked up as a small smile appeared on his face. He nodded, “I…I think I would like that.”

North gave a curt nod and a broad smile, “Good to hear, Pitch. I will see you tonight then.” The Cossack said no more as he lumbered to the door, walked out, and shut the door softly behind him.
Solitary Confinement

Chapter Forty-Five

Solitary Confinement

Pitch watched North leave feeling a twinge of sadness, but ultimately after their conversation, he’d felt better about his place among the guardians. Of course if he’d talked to the Cossack yesterday evening when they had returned to his room verse after he’d made the short-sided decision to run away, he could have avoided this awful strapping. Pitch lifted onto his knees hissing as he rubbed his throbbing posterior gently before pulling his garments aside to assess the damage. What he saw made him cringe with self-pity.

North had done a number on him, and the crisscrossed marks of the strap as well as many well placed hand prints decorated his flesh in raised welts and a myriad of red hues that would definitely be quite noticeable physically and visually for the next couple days. He marveled at the fact that he’d become so familiar with getting spanked that he could gauge by sight and feel how long it would serve as a reminder that he didn’t wish to find himself back on the naughty list anytime soon.

Pitch sighed feeling slightly annoyed at the thought that this was his life now, to find himself over a knee for a spanking much too often for his liking because he just couldn’t manage to do what he needed to do; he just wanted to grow past this to a point where such moments as this were a dull faded memory. He pulled his clothing carefully back into place with a pout giving his bottom one last gentle rub to alleviate his sore feelings as much as his sore bottom.

He looked around his room now, his eyes drawn first to the strap on the wall and then down to the painting carelessly laying at a slant against the wall’s surface where Pitch had dumped it angrily after North’s decree that he was no longer allowed to cover up North’s, personally made for him, device of torture. He needed to find somewhere else for his painting to go, and Pitch had nothing else better to do he realized dejectedly as he slid off his bed and moped over to the painting. Pitch had a whole week of these four walls to keep him company until North deigned to come back and visit him for a time before leaving him again to this forced seclusion; this was going to be a miserably boring week Pitch decided.

He frowned bending over to pick up the picture; it was one he’d been most proud of, the picture with the five snow globes that held a depiction of each of the guardian’s different homes. Burgess’ lake lay motionless with a thick sheet of ice highlighted with low toned dark hues of purple and blue that depicted a moonless night (Pitch’s favorite of course.) The lake was lined by woods and surrounded by the backdrop of the sleepy little town the entirety of the scene dusted with flurries of snow and the trees decorated with elaborate frost designs. It was the centerpiece of the five snow globes and was meant to represent Jack. Just as each of the other four snow globes in the picture encompassed depictions of each of the other guardian aspects.

Pitch held the picture aloft now studying its face before setting it on top of his dresser. He placed it on the opposite end of where all of his stored possessions were, so the clutter would not cover any of the details he’d painstakingly put into the painting. He touched the lake in the center realizing that even though he’d originally meant for the scene to specifically cater to Jack’s origins, this lake was not far from his own old lair.

He frowned as his mind drifted back to last night where he’d sat next to the closed in hole where his old lair had been thinking he’d never come back to the Pole or the guardians again. He’d had no one for so many years of being locked away, and although it had bothered him greatly then, it was
nothing like the desolation of missing someone on top of being isolated. It was an abysmally more acute loneliness than he’d ever remembered feeling, and he’d felt so very much like a remote island in the past while drifting through the shadowed hallways of his own broken thoughts.

Those were the worst times in the hole where the shattered remains of the fearlings, that hadn’t fully been absorbed into Pitch’s molecular structure, infiltrated his sleeping mind to afflict him with torn fragments of his own misplaced memories as an instinctual survival mechanism to keep their own essence alive within their host. They had lost any true hold of him having been evaporated into mere particles of influence centuries ago, but those subtle holds still had the ability to haunt him when he was at his most vulnerable.

Pitch was thankful for Sandy’s presence in this way as the little man supplanted their tired efforts by overriding even that lingering manifestation and keeping them dormant long enough for Pitch to rest better than he ever could alone. Thinking on Sandy’s dreamsand made Pitch wish he had some now. It would be ever so nice to slip into an undisturbed coma to ride out the time spent here by himself. Wouldn’t that be nice? If he could wake as the Cossack or Sandy came by to visit and spend time with him only to sleep away the rest of the week here. This would of course defeat the whole purpose of him being grounded though since it was meant to make him think about why he was there in the first place. North was also mostly doing it as a point to simply make Pitch learn to obey since the whole reason he was in this mess was his constant refusal to heed North’s statues.

His mind wandered now taking in his reflection in the mirror as he leaned on the dresser. There was so much to reflect on when there was no one else to talk to, not that Pitch wasn’t used to silent contemplation of course. The mind had to do something to keep from going mad although if he were to be honest with himself, he had gone mad long ago spiraling into a retreat of the sheer desires of his own powers. Coupled with his personal desolation in the past, attaining power had been the only thing that had made Pitch feel any measure of wholeness. Once the dark ages had succumbed to hope, wonder, and dreams, he’d lost almost all belief in him from the children and had craved its return fiercely. Power was all he had hoped to attain.

Having come here to the Pole though none of that seemed to matter as much anymore. Sure, he still wished to have belief and be at the height of his power. There was always going to be a want to feel that heady with belief. As an aspect it was downright invigorating to feel such a course of energy jolting through you and empowering your very essence. But for Pitch, such a reign of power had never lasted, and that Easter was the closest he’d ever come to achieving that ultimate goal. Centuries of slowly gathering and corrupting Sandy’s dreamsand just to be defeated in three days’ time. It never lasted… now he wanted something that would. He craved stability and moreover, he yearned for affection and comradery. It was something he’d never be able to attain on his own or by force; it had to be given willingly and genuinely. These feelings were greater he’d realized than any rush of supremacy he’d gorged on previously. At his core he longed for a family.

Absently digging the little wooden schooner out of his pocket now, Pitch turned back to the petite lamp that sat on his nightstand and carefully reattached the ornament. He smiled to see it dangling there even tapping it for good measure. Grounding aside, Pitch was relieved to be home again.

This happy contented feeling faded as the day drew on and Pitch grew restless; Pitch had started off tinkering around with his bubble toy and that had amused him for a time. He spent even longer still debating on whether or not to paint or read to pass the time ultimately deciding to just lay on his bed sulking for hours because he didn’t feel like doing anything productive he had available to occupy his time. It was hard to find joy in these things as he was already feeling listless. He’d only been restricted to his room for six hours; it hadn’t even been one day of the whole week he had left to endure, and he was already incredibly bored! Another wave of self-pity came over him as he released a heavy deflated sigh of defeat trying his best not to think about the tedium, but with nothing
else to concentrate on, he found that was all he could think about.

He squirmed up to the top of his bed gripping his pillow under him in agitation now as he stared grumpily at his headboard deciding to try and just sleep as an escape. He was of course not tired in the least after Sandy’s extra dose of dreamsand, so instead Pitch remained staring, first sourly, and then after several hours, dully at his bedroom door just hoping North or anyone for that matter, would come by to visit him sooner rather than later.

To his surprise, it wasn’t North who arrived next but two yetis. The first yeti had only given a short knock before cautiously opening the door to peer about. Seeing Pitch laying on his bed now staring in surprise at him, the yeti gave a satisfied nod and a grumble to his partner that the nightmare lord was dressed and awake before they then unceremoniously hulked into his room. At least this is what Pitch assumed was relayed as he rose out of his bed with an affronted scowl. How dare these yetis barge into his room so unannounced and without an invitation!

The two surveyed the area talking amongst themselves and pointing at different objects in his room. One of them was carrying a hammer and pointing at his pictures.

Now more than ever Pitch wished he could understand what they were saying and more importantly planning to do in his room! He didn’t like the purposeful look they were giving his paintings, and he became alarmed as the yetis moved to the wall and began removing them from the wall, “Hey! What… what are you doing with my paintings?!” Pitch spat uneasily.

The yetis didn’t heed him any mind knowing that Pitch couldn’t understand them, and trying to explain what they were doing to Pitch would likely be a fruitless endeavor if not also confrontational.

Pitch weaved around them nervously watching every move the yetis made with his art.

The yetis were gentle with his paintings as they took them down carefully and laid them on Pitch’s bed.

Their astute precaution with his works let Pitch relax a little knowing that his art would not be harmed, but this sudden invasion of his room as they took first his paintings down and then the nails that held them had Pitch confused and anxious. He wasn’t very fond of change, and he especially didn’t like unknown changes that he had no control over.

Pitch had wondered briefly if maybe the yetis were planning to make another extension to his room like they had a few weeks prior with the bathroom, that would not be unwelcomed. Although, when North had had his bathroom installed, the yetis had added it on from the other room as an extension by first placing the ceramic sink, toilet, and shower where North had designed to set it and built the frame around the fixtures. The electrical and water piping were then worked through the skeletal framework of the walls before they had to cut a hole into his room to link the two.

The yetis didn’t really wish to deal with the nightmare lord (having had more than their fair share of his haughty racist attitude towards them.) They had done everything in their power to make any interactions or disturbances minimal and left the last touches of closing in the walls and putting in a door to when they had no other choice but to enter Pitch’s room.

Pitch hadn’t actually had to deal with much annoyance other than the noise from the other side of the wall when he happened to be in his room and the mess the yetis made when they had cut the hole to make a doorway to the new addition, and then it was more exciting than annoying. The whole process only took two days to do, and Pitch had been out and about for the majority of the construction involved with the project having to tend to the reindeer or occupied elsewhere, so he’d not actually been privy to the work or cared to be. He’d just appreciated the fact that his domicile had
become that much bigger once the yetis had finished the work and he could use the amenity.

The paintings that they started moving though were on the far wall that led to the outside, and consequently to a very far drop to the ground, so this was not to be a new addition that was for certain. Pitch had to wonder now what exactly they would need to move his pictures for.

It started to become clear as the yetis moved to either side of Pitch’s bookshelf and carefully lifted and moved it to the far wall. They then moved over to his bed and moved this too to the back wall followed by his nightstand sidled up beside his bed once more, and placing the rocking chair between his bed and the bookshelf. By the time everything was shifted around, it effectively emptied the center of his room by arranging his furniture against the far wall. This gave the room a bigger feel by opening up another good ten feet of space; it was nice, but seemingly unnecessary.

Once all the furniture was set up. The yetis hung the art as close to where the paintings had been arranged originally before leaving his room.

How strange? Pitch thought curiously too confused by the event to be perturbed as he watched them go. Some of his books had been shifted, so Pitch straightened them as he took in the new changes with a frown. He wasn’t very happy that they had just burst into his room and decided to move about his furniture without ever asking. Pitch had moved to straightening the pictures (that were already placed well, but Pitch felt the need to move that smidgen more because it was his room and his things, and no yeti could place them exactly the way he wanted) when the same two yetis returned.

The yetis returned shortly after carrying a medium-sized square table large enough for six settings. They maneuvered the table in to the room and set it about where his bed had originally occupied. The yetis went back to barking casual conversation between each other pointing to the space between the bookcase and the wall nodding in agreement and leaving once more.

After they left, Pitch glided over to the table to inspect it. It was a finely made oak table, simple in design, but well crafted, thick, and sturdy. Pitch lifted the end with a grunt; it was quite heavy to! The surface was smoothly polished with a shiny glazed sap finish, and the coloration was a rich dark brown much to Pitch’s liking. He realized that North had likely had it sent up for the dinners the Cossack had spoken of sharing nightly earlier. The size of the table was likely for the prospect that he and all the guardians could dine together here in his room at some point, and this thought brought a small smile to Pitch’s lips.

The yetis arrived once more this time with one carrying a desk and the other carrying a tall circular stool. The yeti with the desk lumbered over to where the bookshelf had been placed and smoothly lined it up flush against the bookcase, so the front of the desk faced Pitch’s bed and in turn the stool was placed in the corner as a perfect fit to the height of the desk that was also quite tall.

Pitch wandered over to this new item not quite sure why he would need a desk but pleased that he was being given new things regardless. He opened the desk to see that inside was a stack of parchment along with various writing utensils from modern pens to quills with a corked bottle of ink. The yetis had left once more, but Pitch was no longer paying them any mind; the previous worry he’d had was abandoned for a new feeling of excitement for these new freshly acquired pieces of furniture.

He pulled up his new stool to sit at his pristine desk immediately regretting sitting on the very unforgiving hard surface. The stool was tall enough that his legs hung freely, which under normal circumstances would be novel since it was hard to find furniture that wasn’t too short for his legs with his height, but at the moment, sitting left entirely too much of his weight to bear down on his still very sensitive rear. He hopped off the stool quickly rubbing away the immediate chafing that prickled across his bottom from the harsh contact and shoved the stool backward away from him and
into the corner with a frown.

Pitch turned back to the desk now a bit soured from the stool experience but forgetting it quickly enough as he went back to examining the surface of the flip top desk to see it had a bottom ledge to keep papers from falling off and a flat bar on the top with a ribbed design to hold writing utensils easily. Like the table, it was also well crafted, and more importantly, it was obviously made with him in mind, and this thoughtfulness brought Pitch much joy. No one made things tailored for him specifically, and the fact that North had perceptibly done so before he’d ran off made Pitch realize further that even though he’d been acting like a jerk to the man half the time, the Cossack had still been thinking of him and past his awful behavior to make him something like this. Pitch felt his cheeks flush in his embarrassment. He decided then that North deserved a sincere apology from him, and one not prompted from an about to be over the knee confession.

The yetis had returned another three times to bring in five high backed wooden chairs for the dinner table and one without an open backing that had a square framed adjustable headrest for support. It was clearly designed with Toothiana’s tail feathers and wings in mind. One of the five high backed chairs’ seat was raised much higher than the rest, and was obviously meant for their shortest member Sandy.

The chairs being set around the table served to please Pitch more as he was almost able to see them all sitting at the table enjoying a meal together. It was a pleasant thought that had him grinning from ear to ear. In fact the abrupt interruption to his otherwise entirely too quiet day had become a most welcomed distraction that brightened Pitch’s mood considerably.

It had taken about another half hour after North had sent Steven and Gilbert upstairs to help rearrange Pitch’s quarters and bring in the new furniture for the Russian to put down the tools he’d been using to shape the clay of his latest creation. He let out a bellowed clap of a laugh as he leaned back in his chair lifting the horse figure into the light and turning it about to take in the details he’d crafted.

North had worked for quite a few hours to finish what was to be the centerpiece of Pitch’s new table (if Pitch liked it of course, but North really had no doubts that he wouldn’t.) The Cossack knew how much Pitch enjoyed his reindeer, and because Jack had told him that Pitch had spoken of always having a fondness for equine animals, North thought this would make the nightmare lord happy.

He had done a lot of thinking last night, and decided one of the things Pitch needed most was to feel like this was his home, so North considered that sprucing his living quarters up a bit might go a little ways to making Pitch feel more welcomed at the Pole. He’d actually fashioned the desk after the two had originally spoken about practicing magic together. North had planned to set up the desk in one of the studies when it came time to start training Pitch, but with further plans to also begin teaching Pitch the yeti language during his grounding, it just made sense to instead set it up as a fixture within Pitch’s room to give the Boogeyman a place to work more easily and conveniently in his own personal chambers.

The Cossack lifted himself to standing, and the chair he had been sitting in groaned its appreciation. The horse was ready for the kiln, and it would be fired, cooled, and ready to present to Pitch in a couple hours’ time. North walked down to the ceramics workshop and set the figurine in the care of one of the yetis that specialized in the firing of all the Pole’s ceramic pieces. Once the clay figure was in the process of getting baked, the Russian went back to his office to get some more odds and ends taken care of while he waited for the horse to be ready to give to Pitch.

When the time came to go to the kitchens to get some food packed up for their promised dinner, Alla,
the main yeti chef, personally tended to North letting him know she would ready a cart for him and insisted that she would bring the food up herself having been worried about not seeing her ‘too skinny shadow man’ as she’d referred to Pitch as.

North laughed, “Oh not to worry Alla, he has not been avoiding your cooking! He is grounded for week and was not allowed to go round Pole alone while working on conveyor. I am sure he will come back to kitchens when he is free to leave room.”

This seemed to set Alla’s mind at ease having worried she’d upset Pitch somehow since rumor had gotten around that Pitch always seemed to be getting upset with many of the other denizens at the Pole.

North heard her wing beats behind him before her voice rang out, “Uh …hey North.”

The Russian turned to regard the fairy with a genial smile on his face and wide out stretched arms of welcoming, “Ah, Tooth! Have you come to eat at cafeteria?” North really didn’t think so, but he was curious enough to ask since she’d come to find him here, so she must have been actively searching for him.

Tooth seemed a bit flustered as she zig zagged in the air her crest of feathers fluffing a moment before she smoothed them back. She shook her head no, “I- I just happened to be in the neighborhood after finishing a run and wanted to check on you… and on Pitch. Is everything going alright since you brought him back to the Pole?”

North saw something was bothering her; he gave her a warm smile, “You know, Alla can add another plate of food if you would like to come to room and see for self?”

Tooth grimaced shooting back a couple feet, “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea. The last time we all got together… well, I don’t have to tell you how that went. Besides, I don’t think I’m ready to see him right now.” She sighed tiredly as she shook her head, “I don’t know how you do it North. He’d have driven me bonkers by now dealing with that attitude and his antics on a daily basis.”

North took in a deep breath nodding, “Pitch is handful I agree, but I like to think he is also challenge. He is hard to take at times, but I see good in him when he puts attitude aside long enough to let it shine. We had words this morning after spanking, and I think he will do better from now on. I tell him that I will give him quick incentive to do better if I see he is getting out of line in future da?”

“Oh, uh good. I uh… hope that helps,” Tooth blushed uncomfortably; she was more in agreement now than she’d ever been prior that Pitch did indeed need North’s wisdom of a firm hand when the situation called for it, but talking about spanking Pitch with North could still embarrass her due to his blaring directness on the subject.

The Cossack tilted his head giving the fairy a curious look, “Well? Will you come? I know he wishes to apologize to you; I tell him after grounding he will, but eh, why not now? Is always good time to make up sooner than put off no?”

Tooth frowned. After everything that happened, even though it was Pitch’s fault that she’d lost her cool and slapped him, Tooth still felt a little guilty for doing it especially after hearing Pitch and North’s conversation at his old lair as to why he had ran away while her and the other guardians had listened through the snow globe portal. Pitch did adore her. Why, she couldn’t rightly say, but she was definitely aware that he cared for her greatly and valued her opinion. Because of this, it hadn’t taken long after she’d left the Pole to continue on her runs that she realized that her and Pitch’s altercation was likely the driving point to him feeling a need to have run away (and a driving force of her guilt now that she had let herself snap on him knowing how unstable Pitch could be.)
His deep affection for her knocked Tooth off kilter because Pitch was so emotionally imbalanced at times. It made her feel like she was out of her league trying to help care for him, but that it was equally important that she make a concentrated effort because of his formed attachment to her. She wanted to be what Pitch needed her to be, but she didn’t think she had the resolve to step up to the plate like North had. She wavered, “Now’s not such a good time. I …I have to get back to my rounds and…”

North interrupted her, “Tooth. Is okay. You need time. There is nothing wrong with that. You do not need to feel pressured. When you are ready; we will go see Pitch.”

She sighed giving North a wry smile, “Thanks for understanding North. I’m not giving up on him, I just need a little time to get my thoughts together before I can be around him again. I have to be mentally prepared in case he blows up again. You know how quick he is to temper; I don’t want to ever lose my cool like that again.”

North frowned shaking his head no, “His temper will not get out of hand like that again. I see it, and I will correct it,” he snapped his fingers, “Quick like! I have told him this already; from now on we nip in bud before it becomes big problem.”

Tooth’s smile faded, and her eyes lidded into a sullen gaze as she sunk in the air slowly. It was as if her mood was weighing down her ability to fly, “It’d be nice if we could just talk to him. I hate that we have to treat him like this in order to get any kind of positive results.”

North nodded grimly in understanding, “It will not always be like this Tooth. I can feel him changing,” he smiled grabbing his belly and giving her a wink, “Right here, in my belly!”

She couldn’t help but to giggle softly. It was good to see North’s mood had lightened up quite a bit from last night. The man had been quite dour since the lunch incident coupled with Pitch’s running away, but he seemed to have found a bit of peace now. Tooth wished that she could find that same relief, but for the time being, it made her happy to see that at least North had.

Tooth gave North a small smile, “I’d better go. I hope you two enjoy your dinner;” with that said, Tooth dipped down giving North a small nod goodbye before darting to the side and out of the kitchens.

North watched her go with a sad sigh. Those two had a lot to patch up, but he knew Tooth was still feeling hurt over the incident at lunch whether over Pitch’s words to her or what had followed, but he could tell there would need to be more than an apology said between the two to get them back on track. Perhaps once Pitch was off his grounding North could try to arrange for Tooth and Pitch to do something together to mend their differences. It was something to think on he decided as he made his way back down to the ceramics shop to pick up the figure.

After North had picked up the finished piece, he brought it back to the wrapping shop and proceeded to prepare Pitch’s gift properly as he enjoyed giving all his gifts wrapped, although for Pitch’s first actual gift received by Santa, North decided to make it a little more fun to open. North chuckled to himself; he couldn’t wait to see Pitch face!

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Not wishing to lay down again, Pitch had milled about his room for over an hour after the yetis had finally left. It was starting to get late Pitch observed as he watched the sun fade into night. Had North forgotten or decided he wasn’t going to come after all? Sighing, Pitch grabbed one of his pillows placing it as a cushion in the rocking chair and carefully sank into the seat. He rocked slowly now still looking about the changes in his room and letting the presence of the newly brought table and
Just as he was starting to lose hope, a small knock rapped on the door. The knock was an unfamiliar one that Pitch didn’t recognize though. It was hard like North’s, but it was rapid like Toothiana’s. His interest was piqued, and Pitch got up from the rocking chair and moved to the door with an air of curiosity.

Opening the door brought an instant smile to Pitch’s face to see Alla in her familiar pink apron, “Why hello!” he chirped as he opened the door more widely for her to come in looking over her and the cart she wielded into his room with interest. Once she had pushed the cart in, Pitch couldn’t help but to look out into the hallway to see if North was coming up behind Alla. His face fell a little to not see a trace of the big man lumbering down the hallway. Perhaps he wasn’t coming after all, and he’d just sent Alla to deliver him a plate of food since Pitch couldn’t leave to get it himself.

If it had been any other yeti, Pitch may have copped an attitude, but he liked Alla (even though he’d never bothered to learn her name!) Pitch turned to face the yet with a small smile.

Without warning, Alla pulled him into a fierce hug bodily picking Pitch up and squeezing him. Pitch gasped in surprise as all the air was squeezed out of him, “O-okay! I… I missed you to!” He gagged out barely audible from how tightly she’d hugged him.

Alla set him back down gently giving the top of his head a soft pat as she groaned out a rough string of words that Pitch gathered was an, ‘I missed you too.’

Pitch ducked his head shyly holding his hands behind his back as she spoke. He took a small step backwards and peered up at her with a kindness his face didn’t often reflect especially in regards to the yetis or elves, “It smells delightful,” Pitch offered, “Would… would you like me to help?” He wasn’t sure he’d be able to, but he thought he should at least offer since she was bringing him something to eat.

She petted his hair again seeming to fancy how the strands of hair always fluffed back up to its original wave. She settled her hand lightly at the base of his neck giving it a soft rub as she spoke in light reverberating tones that were pleasant before pulling out his chair for him in an obvious show that she just wanted him to sit down and relax.

Pitch was silently relieved since he really had no idea how he’d have helped her without North here to translate for him. He watched her work now as Alla opened up a segment of the cart and began to set out plates for both him and North (which set Pitch’s rampant worries to rest to know if she was setting another place, then North must surely be on his way.)

He moved to the chair Alla had pulled out for him looking down with a grimace at the hard wooden surface. He thought to place his pillow in the seat, but there was no way he wanted Alla to even have an inkling about that! Just thinking that she might find out how North punished him had Pitch glancing reticently at the strap on the wall and flushing a deep purple as he carefully worked his way into his seat trying his best not to have the yeti notice how severely uncomfortable he was through his constant shifting. With how forward she was, Pitch would die of embarrassment to have her find out and try to ‘help’ him in some excessive manner as the yeti seemed prone to.

Thankfully Alla didn’t seem to take note of his suffering or the strap on the wall continuing to swiftly set each spot and set out covered trays of food to keep the contents hot. She brought out a pitcher of iced lemonade and poured him a glass while he was waiting for North to show up.
Pitch smiled fondly up at her, “I appreciate you bringing such a lovely spread. You always treat me so well, for whatever reason I can’t fathom, but I thank you.”

The door had been left open knowing Alla would have to remove her cart, and also because Pitch had been expecting North.

North had been approaching Pitch’s door and slowed stunned to hear Pitch speaking so tenderly to one of the yetis. He’d never heard or seen Pitch treat his furred friends with anything but indifference or disdain, and to hear him speak so nicely to anyone but especially to one of the yetis was like music to his ears. The smile he wore broadened as he made his way through Pitch’s door.

Pitch perked immediately upon seeing North enter, “North! You made it!” Pitch beamed, “I was starting to think you got lost,” he teased.

North had hidden the present artfully behind his back as a further surprise and now pulled the gift from behind him presenting it to Pitch, “Eh, it took time to wrap present for you,” he gave Pitch a toothy grin as he watched the Boogeyman’s eyes grow impossibly big.

Pitch swallowed a lump that rose in his throat as he pointed at the present, “You… you brought that… for me?” Pitch couldn’t understand why the Cossack was being so nice to him especially after everything he’d recently put him through. His face fell as he averted his eyes to his empty plate, “I… I don’t really deserve all these kindnesses you’re giving me.”

North frowned to see that Pitch was still obviously feeling guilty, “Pitch, if I give to you, then you can believe that I think you deserve it. Why do you think you do not?”

Pitch glanced back up at North with uncertainty before his eyes drifted back down. He paused a long moment before answering, “I …I figured after what I did…” he trailed off feeling it to be explanation enough.

The Cossack studied Pitch for a long moment his eyes softening as he placed a large hand on the nightmare lord’s slumped shoulder, “What you did Pitch, you were punished for; clean slate now remember? We are not holding on to past anymore. You see, I realize now, much of our time these past two months has been spent dwelling in past. We get angry, we fight, these feelings, they stay, lingering like bad ghost, no? I think it is finally time we leave past where it belongs, in past, so we can move towards future.”

Pitch’s eyes flitted up to meet North’s as he searched his face for doubt in the words the man had spoken, but North’s countenance showed conviction, and Pitch nodded lightly a small smile breaking out on his face to think of truly being able to leave all their previous baggage behind. Pitch brought his gaze back up to North now in all seriousness, “I’m sorry I’ve given you so much trouble. I …I know you’ve been trying to help me, and I’ve been atrocious to you at times and to the other around here. I guess I just wanted to say thanks for …for putting up with me.”

North squeezed his shoulder lightly giving Pitch a satisfied grin, “Thank you, Pitch. Your apology is heartfelt, I can tell you truly mean it.”

Pitch gave him a quirky smirk now as he saw the proud smile that North reflected back at him. He felt unburdened to have had the chance to apologize to the man while not being under some form of duress. Now he felt like he could truly move on legitimately.

Alla who had largely been forgotten during their talk blubbered on the verge of tears at the happy shared moment.
Pitch immediately blushed feeling bashful by the tones she expressed in her barks.

North laughed giving Pitch’s back a hearty pat, “She says you are sweet! What did you do to this woman eh?” North teased.

Pitch couldn’t help but chuckle lightly as he rolled his eyes at North, “Stars knows the only time I’m sweet is when I’ve overdosed on sugar,” he turned a deeper hue of purple knowing what she had said about him. He couldn’t help but to smile wider liking the compliment.

North’s laughter died down as he looked from Alla to Pitch having an idea, he turned to the yeti, “Alla, Pitch here is interested in learning yeti language, do you think you could come by maybe help Pitch learn language?”

Alla gave an affirmative and clearly joyous muttering of syllables.

Pitch took in her name, Alla, it was good to finally have a name to place to the face. He beamed up at her deciding he’d be more than willing to learn the language with her teaching it. It would be worth the time spent to be able to understand and communicate with Alla, “I’m sure you’ll be a fine teacher, Alla,” Pitch encouraged smiling brightly in her direction.

Alla cooed obviously flattered before patting North on the shoulder and grunting out quite a few long phrases all while the Cossack nodded with a smile.

“Yes, yes, that sounds just fine, Alla. We can start tomorrow after lunch rush,” North affirmed.

The yeti walked around the table giving Pitch another pet as she rested her hand on his back and spoke something that felt tender before she turned to wave her goodbyes and head out the door.

Pitch watched her go before turning to North and asking in a conspiratorial whisper, “What did she just say to me?”

North chuckled, “She said that she looks forward to teaching you tomorrow and to have good night.”

“Oh, okay.” Pitch stated simply with a nod of understanding. The smile was still present on his face as he now thought about being able to actually understand her.

North nodded, “Alla is good woman, and I can tell she is good for you to, Pitch. I have never seen you react to yeti in such a way. It does my heart good to see.” His smile grew, “Now that that is settled, here!” North proffered the gift to Pitch once more.

Pitch couldn’t remember ever receiving a wrapped present in his very long life, and to have North give him one now had him giddy with anticipation to see what was inside. He moved the large gift into his lap just staring at the shimmery blue paper speckled in silver flecks. A festive splash of frills decorated the top of the box, and Pitch ran a finger through the twirl of ribbon playfully just admiring the artful display of the wrapping. He almost didn’t want to open it so as not to ruin the lovely presentation.

After several long minutes, North shook his head with a loud laugh, “What are you waiting for? Tear it open, Pitch!”

Encouraged by North’s words, Pitch cautiously ripped a finger though the paper. He enjoyed hearing the satisfying cut and crinkle of the paper sliding away, and as he removed the wrapping, he opened the box it had covered to reveal another box lying within.

This box was a large silver box that was finely decorated with a black-lined flip top lid; Pitch pulled
it from its resting place onto his lap and placed the trash at his feet seeming perplexed that North had
given him …a box? That was …different he supposed. It was useful, he could find something to put
in it, “It’s… a nice box,” Pitch said sounding a bit confused by the reasoning North would gift him a
box. It was his holiday, and some of the customs were definitely strange from what he’d read in
North’s books.

North ran a hand down his face, “Pitch, I did not give you box as gift; I thought eh, you don’t do
Christmas before, so I give you a little bit more surprise in your surprise. Open, keep opening!”
North chuckled.

Realizing his mistake, Pitch chuckled himself as he creaked open the lid to see another wrapped
present inside. This one was black with gold and silver streamers. Pitch smiled noting that all the
various wrappings had been in his favorite colors. He tore into this wrapping paper quickly feeling
that he’d come to the final box as he’d opened it to see that inside this big box there was a mass of
tissue paper obscuring an object in the middle. Pitch began tearing the tissue out energetically having
worked up enough suspense to want to see what his actual gift was now.

“So awestruck was Pitch that North wasn’t sure now how he’d felt about the gift, “Do you like it,
Pitch?” He asked inquisitively.

Pitch blinked; his eyes shifting over to North and shining brightly, “It …it’s beautiful! Thank you! I
love it!” He exclaimed; his exuberance laced his words as he gaped a huge amorous smile back on
the object unable, in his glee, to keep his eyes from drifting back to his gift to marvel at its splendor.

He boomed a laugh of joy, “I can tell you do! Good, Pitch! This pleases me greatly.” North didn’t
think he’d ever seen Pitch this enamored before. Pitch’s level of merriment was much more than the
Cossack had expected from the nightmare lord; it was a pleasant surprise to say the least.

Pitch ran his fingers over every groove turning it over in his hands unable to get enough of soaking
in all the details. All the while he wore a goofy elated grin.

North smiled warmly enjoying the delight Pitch was getting from his gift, “You like to paint, so I
thought maybe I will make you a gift that you can also paint. It will give you something to do while
you are grounded to room. Once you finish painting, I can take down to kiln and have glazed, so it
will not chip your paint job. After glazed, you can put as centerpiece for table da?”

Pitch nodded vigorously liking the idea as he stood and moved one of the trays of food to test out
where on the table he would place the statuette. Once he’d decided, he gingerly slipped back into his
seat to take in the full view. He was of course beaming with pleasure, “I think that’s a fine idea! I
might get started on it tonight!”
North nodded, “Might I give suggestion?”

Pitch turned his attention to North now, “Of course.”

North smiled pointing at the figure, “Wait until tomorrow, and before I start day, I will bring you special primer paint to put on first. Ceramic does not hold paint as well without base coat first. It is a spray, so I will show you how to apply properly. If you like painting figures, maybe you would also like to try hand at making them eh?”

Pitch grinned, “That sounds interesting. Maybe … maybe we can make something together? … if you’re not too busy of course.” Pitch was excited at the prospect of creating something like the horse that North had made for him. He had no idea how to go about making something like it, but he was sure North would give him pointers to guide him.

North thought it was a marvelous suggestion, “When I bring primer tomorrow, I will also bring clay and supplies for sculpting. I will not be able to do this with you until after dinner tomorrow night, but I’m sure you can occupy self with painting horse or other activity. After lunch rush, I will be here with Alla to start teaching you Yeti, so you will have much to keep you busy tomorrow.”

This all sounded like a good day to Pitch as he nodded happily, “I’m sure painting my statue will take up most the morning if I am able to finish by the time the two of you come to begin the language lesson. Today was a little… hard to get through.”

North nodded, “Yes, I think tomorrow will go more smooth for you with so many new things to take up your time. Is grounding though, so it is expected that there will be times you will have hard time. Is punishment, but I will do my best to help make it not as bad as could be for you.”

Pitch looked down giving a small nod in regrettable understanding. “I… I know. I do appreciate you making it a little less painful to endure,” he stated demurely.

“How’s bout we see what Alla packed for us to eat no?”

Pitch shifted uncomfortably, he was grateful that North changed the topic as he watched him lift the lids of the trays as steam billowed out showing what lay beneath. Alla had packed some tuna casserole, carrots, spinach, and a salad as well as a side of buttered rolls. It was of course an enormous amount of food that he would in no way be able to come close to eating (even with skipping the greens and the carrots that Pitch had no interest in eating!) Pitch stood scooping out a small spoonful of the tuna casserole and grabbed a roll where North made up for the both of them and portioned huge amounts on his own plate.

The two ate in relative silence making a few remarks about the tastiness of the food where North suggested he at least try the greens and carrots since Alla had brought them, but Pitch was in no way interested. North didn’t push the subject only seeing it as an excuse to indulge a little more by the time they were finished. Alla must certainly be quite pleased with her efforts to feed North Pitch thought with a smirk.

Sandy popped in before their meal had concluded giving a surprised wave to North and Pitch as he spun about taking in the new furniture and the redistribution of the old furniture. He gave a nod and a thumb’s up to Pitch.

“Sandy! Come! Sit! There is still plenty of food if you are interested. I think Pitch and I have about had our fill,” North said jovially as he patted his stomach as if Sandy needed further confirmation.

Sandy was more than happy to join in on the meal especially after looking at the seating and slipping
into the chair that was clearly designed for him. He licked his lips as North scooped a serving of each item onto his plate to pass over to Sandy.

“I am sorry my friend, we only had the two plates, but Pitch did not use his salad fork,” North reached over to grab the clean utensil for Sandy who wasn’t demotivated in the least by the news.

Pitch rose excitedly to lift up the statuette for the golden man to see, “Sandy look! Look what North made for me!” He was still quite excited about his gift and wanted to show it off proudly.

Sandy stopped eating to look up at the horse curiously. Once he’d taken in the details he gave a wide smile and a vigorous nod to both Pitch for his gift and North for making it.

Pitch placed the horse carefully back in the center of the table and began quietly clearing the empty dishes to place them onto Alla’s cart while North leaned back looking on the verge of a food coma and Sandy ate looking quite comfortable on the chair that elevated him up into the air high enough for the star to actually sit at the table over having to stand.

Pitch smirked then thinking he was grateful to not be that short where almost everything in the world they lived in was made for people twice his size or more. Pitch had most of the table outside of the dishes Sandy was using piled on the cart, and seeing a bucket with a cleaning rag in it, Pitch wiped his new table off liking to see the shiny finish of the amber sap once cleaned. He paused noticing Sandy was watching him with a smug smile that Pitch couldn’t help returning. “What is that smirk for you little imp,” Pitch teased.

Sandy for his part smiled wider taking another couple bites of food before motioning around the room and pointing to Pitch giving a satisfactory nod.

Pitch gathered Sandy was remarking that he was smiling at him because Sandy could see Pitch’s new furniture had made the nightmare lord happy. Pitch also smiled wider looking around his room once more thinking that this was really nice, all of this.

North began snoring lightly, the food had obviously been enough to lull him and Sandy’s particles of dreamsand dust had likely drifted North’s way and had been enough to do the trick.

Sandy of course liked to see anyone resting well enough to sleep, and he blew another sprinkle of dreamsand North’s way, and the man’s dreams came alive pulling up an image to show Christmas presents dancing around his head with elaborately flowing bows.

Pitch chuckled clearing Sandy’s now empty plates and wiping off the rest of the table, “That man’s creativity is impressive,” he regarded both the table and the statue fondly as he said this.

Sandy nodded in agreement and pointed at all the paintings scattered across the room before pointing back at Pitch as a note that he was creative too.

Pitch blushed at the compliment, “Thank you Sandy, although I feel a bit like a one trick pony compared to North’s talent.” Pitch was quite amazed by what the big man could do in so many different venues. It was intimidating to even be compared in the same breath creatively. He did have his painting, which everyone had told him he was very good at, Pitch thought proudly. It hit him then, out of all the guardians, Pitch had never given Sandy the painting he’d made for him. He would now Pitch decided as he walked over to the far wall and took the painting down.

Sandy looked on curiously watching Pitch take his painting down off the wall silently wondering what the nightmare lord had planned.

Pitch examined the piece again once more revisited by the images of the constellations long
destroyed. He’d painted it as an apology for what he had done long ago when the fearlings were much more influential in his decisions. The island landscape and the dream dolphins, from the nightmare where Sandy had saved him, was the smallest part of the canvas. The rest, covering four fifths of the canvas, was the best recollection that Pitch could remember of a once grand map of stars. These stars would mean even more to Sandy he knew as they represented so many lives lost in the great battle and fall of the Golden Age. Now, Pitch worried if giving it to Sandy would only serve to hurt him all over again.

It was too late to go back now Pitch thought with a grimace as he approached Sandy, who was still sitting and watching him intently. Pitch closed his eyes a moment taking a deep breath, “I …I made this for you Sandy,” Pitch started.

Sandy’s head tilted, and he looked surprised. He had never really looked at this painting because Pitch had kept it in the back corner of the room. Sandy had not been one to wander about Pitch’s room inspecting its contents, and Pitch unbeknownst to Sandy had purposefully kept this painting to the side because of its triggering content. Pitch hadn’t wanted the little man to see it without an explanation. Sandy’s face lit up now with a smile as he held out his hands to receive his gift.

Pitch did not pass the painting to him though and instead knelt on the floor, shifting Sandy’s chair to face him fully with one hand and still clutching the painting to his chest with the other. He peered up at Sandy with a somber expression.

Sandy was confused by this action signaling a question mark over his head and looking slightly worried.

Pitch looked back down at his painting hesitating a moment before finally looking Sandy in the eyes fully before speaking, “Do you remember that night when you pulled me from my nightmare with your dream dolphins? You created an island to bring me to safety.”

Sandy smiled and nodded, of course, he remembered that dream well; it was the first dream that Sandy had ever turned the tide of Pitch’s nightmares within Pitch himself. It was a monumental accomplishment and victory for the Sandman.

Seeing the golden man was on the same page, Pitch continued, “This painting… I made it from that dream that you created for me, and within that dream, …you shared with me something I’d long since forgotten, or maybe I just tried to hide from it,” he handed the picture to Sandy then as he continued to talk, “All those stars that were extinguished by my hand so long ago…” Pitch paused as Sandy now studied the picture.

Sandy’s soft features moved from inquisitive to grief-stricken as he took in the detail of every star. Kozmotis Pitchner had sailed many vessels before he’d become Pitch, and that memory was one that had never faded especially knowing what he’d done. Pitch had painstakingly painted the picture to the best of his and Sandy’s recollection from what Sandy had presented to him in his dreamscape’s night sky.

Sandy brought his now glassy eyes up from the painting to look down at Pitch. He didn’t need to mime how he felt; it was a simple question splayed across his face, why?

Pitch swallowed finding it hard to meet Sandy’s intense hurt-filled gaze as he continued slowly, “I … I can’t take it back Sandy. I can’t give them back, so… so …I wanted to give you the most that I could in the capacity I have available. There’s not enough I’m sorries in the galaxy to make up for what I did.”

Sandy slid the painting slowly onto the table his expression unreadable for a moment before like a
calm before a storm the silent tears rolled in rivulets of golden light down Sandy’s cherub cheeks.

Pitch felt horrible now. What had he done? He lowered his gaze to the floor in his shame, but he was met by strong arms suddenly wrapping around his neck in a hug. The surprise passed quickly as Pitch brought his arms to encompass Sandy tightly as he felt the little man’s shuddering tears soak his shoulder. Pitch hugged him tighter wanting to comfort Sandy more than ever as he spoke his voice coming out slightly frantic, “Please know, I …I never meant to hurt you with this painting. I… I just thought after so long a memory of them might be worth something to you.” Pitch felt an ache in his heart not for himself but for Sandy now. He didn’t like seeing the dreamweaver so distraught.

Sandy finally quieted letting himself pull away from the hug, but the two’s arms were still entwined. Sandy was kneeling in Pitch’s lap, and Pitch was watching him with concern. Sandy touched the side of Pitch’s face then and smiled.

Pitch felt relieved to see Sandy’s face reflecting happiness again, and he smiled gratefully back at his little golden friend.

Sandy took in a deep breath taking the other side of Pitch’s cheek and floating up off of his lap raising in the air to plant a light kiss on Pitch’s forehead at the bridge where nose met his brow. This of course sent trails of dreamsand to coat Pitch’s face.

Pitch blinked saying in what felt like slow motion, “You’re …I’m not going to be able to stay awake…” Pitch’s eyes fluttered as his body started to swivel in an unbalanced jarring motion as Pitch’s slowly fading waking mind tried to keep his body upright.

As Pitch’s body began to collapse, Sandy expertly maneuvered his dreamsand around Pitch’s limbs to lift him and guide his body in a fluid motion towards his bed. Sandy peeled back Pitch’s sheets to gently lay him down and tuck him in. Once the nightmare lord was settled, Sandy worked his power of dreams to send Pitch into a pleasant dream as he proceeded to lay next to Pitch leaning against him for a small time just watching Pitch sleep before deciding to take care of North as well.

Sandy wrote in his dreamsand, tiny print upon Pitch’s new table that said, ‘Thank You, Pitch.’ The nightmare lord would know when he woke in the morning that Sandy had forgiven him and even if it hadn’t seemed so, Sandy also appreciated the gesture Pitch had made to assuage the hurt he’d caused him so very long ago.

Sandy whipped a cyclone of gentle sands around North lifting the man’s bulk with ease to rest on a cloud of dreamsand that would carry North to his bed. Another strand of dreamsand carefully lifted the painting as well, and Sandy guided both out of Pitch’s room as he too exited the room and softly closed the door.
Reflections

Chapter Forty-Six

Reflections

Pitch woke with a startled gasp the events of last night still playing through his mind vividly. Sandy’s anguished face, something just two months prior, would have brought him a satisfied smile now made him feel like his chest wanted to cave in on itself. Pitch hoped that the little golden man didn’t suffer too much on his account although he supposed he should have been more aware of how badly Sandy could have taken the painting if it had instead angered him. That could have been very bad, but Pitch knew Sandy well enough that he didn’t think he’d have hurt him now even if the painting had angered him; either way, Pitch was glad that it hadn’t and that when everything had been said and done, Sandy had smiled at him to let him know everything was okay between them. Yet another kindness Pitch didn’t feel he deserved.

He sat up, and winced at the sudden remembered strapping he’d endured the morning before; it almost ached worse the second day after the pain had had a chance to settle into his tissue and marinate. Pitch wrinkled his nose slightly miffed to wake with such grievances as he slid out of bed quickly to put less pressure on his pulsating posterior.

The Pole sounded quiet, and Pitch realized by looking through the porthole window that dawn was just barely breaking. Sandy had put him out at around 8PM, so it didn’t surprise him he supposed that he would wake at dawn after getting put to sleep so early, still it meant the day would likely seem longer. This would have been a bit upsetting under his current circumstances if it weren’t for the fact that despite the grounding, he had so many things to look forward to, namely painting the horse statue North had made him! Just seeing it sitting on his new table brought Pitch a thrill of joy.

He took the couple steps from his bed to the table to admire his statue once more when he saw the sand-made words from Sandy thanking him. A small smile formed on Pitch’s lips as he swept the errant sand into his hand thankful again for the added notation from the dream weaver that let him know without a doubt that Sandy was going to be okay. He would have to paint the little golden man something that would truly make him smile Pitch decided then wanting to see only pleasure from the next painting he gave the little star.

He deposited the sand into the waste bin of the cart pushing it outside his room to rest in the hallway flush against the wall outside his door. It was a bit crowded in his room now, and the cart was blocking off the main walkway (not that it mattered, but it made the table less of an obstacle. He wasn’t sure when North would be coming up to see him, so Pitch decided to waste some time washing out his clothes to hang on the door and taking a long shower. It wasn’t like he had anywhere to go he needed to be dressed for anyway, and as far as he was concerned walking about for a few hours in his robe sounded comforting.

The shower had felt good, and with North having yet to arrive, Pitch decided to grab one of the many books he’d picked from the library, crawled on top of his bed to lay on his stomach, and settled himself in to start reading the Christmas Carol book he’d been meaning to read mostly because North mentioned ghost hauntings in the description.

North had also woke with the rising of dawn, but this wasn’t unusual for him, and he’d set about some of his morning routines of checking on the maintenance of many of the machines before the yetis began their day. He had rounds to check a dozen or so a day to insure everything remained in top order before moving to the cafeteria to grab a healthy helping of breakfast foods (North wasn’t
one to skip a meal.) Alla had been sure to send North with a packaged pastry for Pitch on his way out. By the time he had gathered the primer paint and sculpting supplies for Pitch, it was nearing late morning before North finally came to knock on Pitch’s door.

Hearing the knock, Pitch was quick to scramble off his bed and open the door, “North! Do come in!” Pitch had been eagerly awaiting his arrival for some time by now, and it seemed when he was waiting on his return was when it would seemingly feel like North took forever to arrive. Of course his eyes were drawn to all that North was carrying in his arms.

North calmly moved over to the table and set the armfuls of items down. He rummaged through one of the bags pulling out a bulging cloth to hand to Pitch with a hearty chuckle, “Alla thought you might like this.”

Pitch reached out gratefully knowing it would be some morsel of food as he unwrapped the cloth to reveal the cinnamon bun hiding underneath. He beamed, “I’ll be sure to thank her later.” Pitch picked at the flaky crust now pulling off little pieces to nibble on as he watched North lay out the rest of the contents of the bags he brought in.

North watched Pitch a moment shaking his head as he chuckled, “Do you not ever just eat something? It is always peck, peck, like bird. No wonder you’re so skinny!”

Pitch chuckled to himself thinking, ‘It’s no wonder you’re so fat!’ Of course he’d never say as much out loud both because he feared the consequences of saying as much, but more so now because he wouldn’t want to hurt North’s feelings. “Not all of us are as used to eating as often as you are North; the way I eat suits me just fine,” Pitch smirked.

North’s smile broadened as he gave a slight nod, “This is true; you do not need to eat like anyone else but you, Pitch. Now then, come; let me give quick tutorial for paint primer,” North waved him over as he spread out a few rags across the table and reached over to grab the horse from the middle of the table.

Pitch moved up beside North studying him with a curious stare and hands loosely folded behind his back.

“Alright; you must shake paint like so,” North demonstrated the metal ball within the can rattling about as he did so, “And then, quick burst,” he sprayed a fine line across the horse once and then twice, “Ha! Like that!”

“That looks easy enough,” Pitch nodded taking in the technique, “So then that’s it?”

North nodded, “That is it. Be careful not to spray too much or you may get drips, which is no good.”

Pitch looked on at the two strips noting the dull finish on the white ceramic.

“But, before you continue with paint,” North grabbed a special rag from the pile of supplies he’d unloaded from the bag and taking the horse in hand pointed to areas on the horse that had small imperfections in the clay, “There are bits that cannot be fixed until ceramic is fired, but with this rag, you can buff out bumps and make smooth.” North proceeded to demonstrate on the muzzle of the horse where there was a small ridge; he gently rubbed over the ridge until it faded into the figure.

“You see? Like that! Once you finish this, you can use primer da? And then paint horse. Any question?”

Pitch watched North’s hands work with rapt attention, and once he’d righted the horse on the rags and looked his way, Pitch shook his head, “I think I’ve got it; thanks.”
North nodded straightening, “Good, good. I will be back with Alla this afternoon. I must go now. I trust you will have plenty to keep you busy until I return.”

Pitch had moved over quickly to take the discarded rag North had been using leaning over half on the table now with it and the horse as he methodically began to look the horse over and follow suit with what North had just taught him.

Looking back from the doorway, North smiled down at Pitch already so engrossed with the horse project. He was pleased the gift had worked out so well not only as a present but as something to draw the Boogeyman’s interest into being creative and productive with his time. He said no more leaving Pitch to it as he walked out closing the door softly behind him.

Pitch spent about an hour and a half hunched over on the table working out the blemishes before easing back to his feet. He stretched looking over the horse carefully before he decided he was finally ready to apply the primer. He took a break long enough to change because he didn’t want to get paint on his bathrobe, and he didn’t want to still be walking around in his bathrobe by the time North returned with Alla.

Once dressed, he drifted back to the table picking up the primer can. What did North do again? Pitch thought over what he’d seen as he began to shake the can about. The first line he sprayed, he did so tentatively, worried that he’d put on too much, but as the paint sprayed, he grew more confident line after line that he applied to the statuette. Giving a few minutes for the spray to dry, Pitch handled the horse spraying every side and underneath until the figure was fully covered.

Satisfied, he went to wash his hands and prepare to paint the figure with actual paints. By the time North and Alla had returned, Pitch had painted the first and second coats of black on the horse’s flesh and had been working with the indigo paint to define the musculature as shadows in the groves of the sculpture. It was obvious this horse would be modeled off of a nightmare horse, but Pitch was adding in touches of silver highlights to brighten the figure and give a spark of the light that had brought them to fruition. They had been his own creations, but there was still a tinge of Sandy within them as the originator of the sands, and as such they held a life of their own once they had been created and were not fully at the mercy of Pitch’s whims. Another reason why after formed, he was unable to stop them from attacking him once they’d sensed his own fears.

North gave a small wrap at the door.

Pitch looked up at the sound not having realized so much time had passed, “Do come in!”

North opened the door allowing Alla to lumber in first, and he followed behind her carrying an easel, a chalkboard, and a small see through plastic bag that held a dry eraser and a box of chalk.

Pitch looked up cheerily with a wide smile as they walked in; he set the horse figure down gently sitting up then to wipe at his brow, “Uh, hello. Give me a moment to clean up, and I’ll be right with you,” as he said this, he capped the paint and moved into the bathroom with the palette and paintbrush. Pitch returned a few minutes later with the cleaned items as he set them on the rag the horse statue was laid upon to dry.

Alla had moved over to the horse rumbling out a word of praise as she leaned over to study the paint job.

North nodded, “Yes, yes, he is quite good with paint we have discovered. I would like to see him do more with many different things to paint. Is good Pitch find things to do with time that make him happy,” he grinned over at the nightmare lord as he said this.
Pitch had quietly observed the two discussing his work feeling slightly shy but also proud to hear the words North said. It was true, painting was something that he’d quickly taken to heart and was something he found a peace in that he couldn’t remember ever attaining before he’d come to the Pole. He supposed it took leaving to fully come to his senses what he had with the guardians. When he’d first been brought to the Pole, Pitch had been terrified that he didn’t want to change into what they wanted him to be, but what Pitch found was that the changes he was making in the long run were helping him to find parts of himself that he didn’t know or remember he possessed. “Painting does make me happy. I’ve had my eyes open to try new things, and it’s worked out rather well,” Pitch smiled pleased to express positive feelings on the subject.

“You are doing very well, Pitch. Are you ready for first lesson in yeti language? Alla and I talked, and we thought it best to start with basics,” as North spoke he handed the bag to Alla and began setting up the chalkboard on the easel a good distance from Pitch’s desk to make it easy enough for the Boogeyman to see what they were writing without being too far away that it could present difficulties when they moved to annunciation. Pitch may have stated he wasn’t interested in learning to speak yeti, but there were several nuances to the language that he would need to recognize.

Pitch moved around the table to watch North set up as Alla pulled out the box of chalk and the eraser.

North motioned towards the desk, “Please take seat, grab paper and pen of choosing, and we will start lesson.”

Pitch’s eyes moved to the hard stool in the corner, and he frowned as a familiar ache reminded him of the last time he sat on the chair yesterday. Ignoring the stool, Pitch popped open the desk, pulled out a piece of parchment, an ink bottle, and a nib to set up on the desk before giving a slight nod, “Alright, I’m as ready as I’ll ever be,” Pitch announced looking up at North and Alla.

North gave a nod towards Alla giving her the go to proceed.

Alla moved to the chalkboard and wrote the word ‘I,’ then she wrote two letters, ‘Ga,’ next to it. She tapped her chest and made the noise that sounded out what she’d wrote.

North explained, “This is pronoun for ‘I’ in yeti,” he followed by making the sound as well.

Pitch wrote the word and then the yeti translation on his paper as he tried the sound out. It was an easy pronunciation, and he easily mimicked the sound.

Alla let out another string of syllables.

“She says good job, Pitch,” North nodded.

Pitch smiled at the praise, but didn’t respond otherwise.

For the next hour, Alla went over a list of pronouns, ‘I, you, we, she, he, they,’ and once Pitch seemed comfortable, Alla moved to using verb tense, ‘Ga nrg,’ she wrote on the board followed by the translation, ‘I am.’

They practiced these forms for about another thirty minutes before they called it quits not wanting to unload too much information at once on Pitch.

“Is good for now Alla says. You are doing rather well so far even though you say that you do not wish to speak language, you pick up on sounds for words well,” North remarked.

Pitch frowned, “That’s it? But… but we just got started! Can’t we practice a little more?” Pitch felt
he could learn more, and more so, he knew that the lesson wrapping up meant that they would be leaving him to his room while they went off to do whatever they needed to do elsewhere at the Pole.

Alla sensing Pitch’s distress moved over to his side and said a phrase of grunts as she patted his back tenderly.

“She says that she is sorry, but she must go to start preparations for dinner, Pitch. You should be grateful that she uses time between when lunch clean-up is finished and dinner preparations must be started to go over learning language with you. This is favor for you, not necessity; do not make Alla feel guilty for not staying longer,” North grunted seeing the pout Pitch was giving Alla and the look of guilt she had in return.

Pitch looked a bit miffed that North was calling him out for his subtle tactic to get them to stay a little longer. He sighed, he still had a good couple hours left of painting to occupy his time, and he was looking forward to seeing the end results. He went about drying his nib and recorking the ink bottle to place in his desk before quietly regarding Alla, “Thank you for taking the time to teach me today.”

She patted his head gently and purred something as she moved towards the door to leave.

Pitch watched her go, and once she’d left, he glanced down at his parchment to observe all the scribbles he’d made.

North cleaned off the chalkboard and folded the easel looking around Pitch’s room before deciding to place both against the wall by his dresser, “This will be good out of way place to store for now,” he turned back to Pitch seeming satisfied.

Pitch placed the parchment in the desk now as well moving with slumped shoulders out of the corner.

North regarded him curiously, “What is matter, Pitch?”

Pitch shrugged, “oh nothing, I …I was just expecting that the lesson would have ran longer is all.” He hoped North would decide to keep him company for a little while if he made it quite obvious that he wanted company.

North sighed tiredly; it wasn’t that he didn’t want to spend time with Pitch, but there was always so much to get done before the next Christmas. He had to focus more of his efforts now more than ever after all the time spent working on the conveyor, “I know you are lonely Pitch, but I cannot stay. When week is over, you will be able to roam again freely. I will be back for dinner tonight around time sun is setting. Is not long time from now.”

Pitch let out a soft sigh and nodded, “I know. It would be a little easier to pick up the yeti language if I had more time to practice it… maybe with you later?” Pitch was of course fishing for excuses to get North to stay longer tonight after dinner.

North knew that an hour and a half was more than enough at one time without Pitch starting to burn out to a point that the mind would inevitably start to wander. Being this was Pitch’s first lesson, North assumed it was more tolerable than it would be by the end of the week and thereafter where the nightmare lord might not wish to spend as much time dedicated to learning when he was more able to do other activities. Still, North did already have follow-up material to help keep Pitch busy as well as to learn, “I have had Paul working on booklet for you to do activity to help learn intricacies of yeti language as well. It is not easy task to put together in such short time, but he is using other language learning book and changing book contents to fit for yeti language, and if he is able to finish today, I will have by tomorrow’s lesson. It will be more practice for you to do by self.”
Pitch grimaced, he wasn’t exactly looking for extracurricular work, but he seemed to be talking himself into it rather than furthering his agenda for extended company, “Oh… uh, that sounds… helpful.”

North smiled moving a couple steps closer to Pitch seeing he was reaching now to find reasons for North’s companionship; he rested a hand on his shoulder gently, “Tonight, after dinner, you and I can work with clay if you are up to it. I will bring glaze for horse tonight. I think you will be finished painting by time I come back. I will bring to kiln after you paint on glaze, and by tomorrow, I will bring back finished. Glaze always makes paint pop! You will like, just wait and see.”

Pitch appreciated that North was trying to appease him and gave the man a small smile and a nod, “Oh… okay. That… that sounds good.” He was still feeling a bit down though as North gave him an affirmative nod and turned to leave. He watched the Cossack go before turning back to the horse on the table; although now, he couldn’t find the same enthusiasm he’d had to paint it as he’d had earlier. Not that he still didn’t desire to complete it of course.

He sighed picking up his tubes of paint to dab on the palette before pulling out one of the chairs at the table tired of standing and deciding a little discomfort sitting now was better than the ache his back was getting from continuously standing and leaning across things. He pulled the rag with the horse on it over in front of him, gingerly sat, and went back to work painting the figure.

As Pitch worked, he thought on the past couple months culminating to where they were now. It was a marvel to him that he was here even doing this now. Not quite what he’d always envisioned how he and the guardians would ever settle their differences, but he was starting to realize through trial and error that he wasn’t always right just because he believed he knew what was best for him. He was beginning to accede that, in fact, he really didn’t seem to have the best authority to make some choices even concerning himself since a lot of the choices he’d make ended quite poorly and definitely not in his favor.

These feelings warred within him and tore at his sense of self to willingly admit to needing help. Being the proud creature that he was, such logic was hard to process let alone accept. Pitch supposed that’s why he kept ending up taking more steps backward than forward to land himself in constant trouble; this too was not lost on the nightmare lord even though it made him cringe in self-loathing to acknowledge it as a truth. Only by accepting the guardians’ help was he ever going to get past the hurdles he kept creating for himself. He knew he needed to actually try harder not just say he would as a convenient plea for clemency. At least since his slate had been cleared with North, he was making good strides to keeping himself in check, and he recognized that North was doing quite a lot to bend as well to accommodate him and make things easier for the both of them.

His thoughts drifted to the other guardians now, namely to Toothiana, whom he still would need to apologize to. That was saying the tooth fairy was even interested in an apology from him after their last foray. She might think he was just paying her lip service after all the many seemingly heedless apologies he’d already given her. He frowned to think that he may have pushed her too far this last time. She had slapped him once before, but this time felt more seeded in exasperation and frustration than the first time which left her seeming almost as shocked as he’d been after it had happened. Either way, Pitch was finally able to accept fault after much deliberation on the whole scene and feeling quite ashamed of the way he’d behaved with her and towards her. She hadn’t deserved his wrath, none of them had. He could paint her another painting, but he also knew that even the venue of giving her a gift as an apology wasn’t going to make what happened okay between them.

Pitch sighed trying to concentrate on his painting, but his thoughts were too scattered to focus now. He rose from his chair to pace about, but the space was too crowded to do so now, and the porthole window, which often took his mind off such things, was blocked off by the rocking chair, so he
didn’t even have that comfort without the hassle of moving the rocking chair out of the way.

He was becoming frustrated with his own thoughts and his inability to escape them here in his room. All he wanted to do was go for a walk to get out some of these pent up feelings coursing through him. They were making him restless and agitated even though he told himself now that he had no right to be after everything North had done to make him feel comfortable and entertained during this punishment (which was an added kindness he didn’t really deserve, but North afforded him with it anyway.) It left him feeling wholly ungrateful. He flopped across his bed now with a grunt of dissatisfaction; Pitch thought humorously that at least recognizing such feelings as ungrateful was a step in the right direction. He laid on his bed moping about all the things he could be doing (like tending to the reindeer, or anything other than being here cooped up in his room.) He let these desires run their course for about two hours before he deemed it was time to stop feeling sorry for himself and get back to painting his horse.

He rinsed off the brush and went back to work painting now having seemingly rid himself of the derogatory path of thinking he’d let himself wallow in for entirely too long. It took about another two hours before he’d finished painting the sculpture and felt good enough with the end results to consider the job finished. The horse had actually been finished thirty minutes prior where Pitch then had just nitpicked to fill in any lack of detail he felt was missing until he couldn’t stand to do so anymore. He stood back now looking at the end result with a satisfied nod.

Once done, he cleaned up his tools and decided to use the dresser to store all of these new supplies to ready the table for dinner. North should be coming within the next couple hours, and he wanted to clear off the table leaving only his painted figure as the centerpiece (which had been North’s intention and also Pitch’s especially now that he’d added his own touch to the creation.) He was surprised now by the magnitude of things he’d now acquired as he stuffed his drawers with the new items.

He’d always had a habit of living sparsely in his lair, he’d had a few creature comforts like a bed, but they were few and far between as he’d never really avowed himself to become immersed in the human world outside of the exploration of other’s nightmares to further his own agenda. He did this mostly to distance himself from the humanistic needs that he had still felt as a weakness, as if he could escape himself. No, he’d just buried that part of himself until it festered into a bitterness of revulsion for what he’d disallowed himself to feel all along. He had been his own worst enemy.

Things certainly had changed for him, he was changing, and they were good changes he could finally fully acknowledge (even if he didn’t always agree with the path to getting him here.) He climbed back on to his bed now to lose himself back in his book until North would return feeling content enough for now with his place in the world.
Chapter Forty-Seven

One Step at a Time

The soft knock at the door had actually surprised Pitch having gotten so lost in his book that he hadn’t realized how much time had passed. He smiled brightly throwing the bookmark in his book, slapping it shut, and tossing it on his nightstand as he slid off his bed and glided over to the door to open it.

North smiled warmly back at him pleased to see Pitch greet him with a smile of his own. His eyes moved to the table, and his grin broadened as he pointed, “I see you finished horse!”

Pitch nodded vigorously as he moved aside for North to come in leaving the door open wide for Alla’s sure to be soon arrival with their dinner. He was excited to see what the Cossack thought of his added improvements to the creation, and a small bit nervous since he’d grown to seek the man’s approval badly. North set the can of glaze down along with the sponge applicator on the edge of the table. He leaned down to peer at Pitch’s paint job nodding, “Very nice, Pitch! I like the silver highlights! You did good job. It is very beautiful.”

Pitch beamed soaking up the praise with a slight blush, “I… I was pretty pleased with the outcome.” Pitch moved about eagerly around the table wringing his hands as he’d carefully watched North’s expressions worried that the Cossack may only be saying as much to appease him. What he found though he saw no falsehood in, and for this he was grateful. The guardians had always been encouraging to him in this way, and Pitch adored the attention. North rose; his gaze moved from the sculpture to Pitch taking in the dark man’s nervous fidgeting. He smiled proudly, “You are doing very well, Pitch. Not just with painting; I was pleased with behavior with Alla today, not just with her being yeti, although this was good to see, but with learning language. You were attentive and polite without losing temper when word was being hard to pronounce. I have seen much improvement in attitude even though I know you are having hard time being in room by self.”

Pitch ducked his head feeling a flush of embarrassment although it made his heart sing to hear North thought he was doing better. That warm feeling that he enjoyed so very much returned to fill Pitch with happiness and serenity as he lifted his gaze back to North, “I think Alla is a good teacher, and… I …I know I’ve needed to have a little better outlook as well. It can get a little difficult to see the brighter side when you’re concentrating on the here and now …when the here and now is feeling bleak.” He paused finding the words he wanted to say, “When I left… I …I had a lot of time to think, and I kind of realized things could always be worse.” He dropped his sights back down to his hands. Admitting such things like knowing he was wrong always made Pitch feel acute shame being as prideful as he was. It was a little easier to acknowledge and disclose though when the topic was addressed in such a manner as praise by North bringing it about followed by a statement made on Pitch’s own. He was learning to more readily admit fault even if it still felt like pulling teeth to do so.

North laid a hand gently on Pitch’s shoulder, “Yes, sometimes it takes a journey to realize grass is not always greener. I trust you now know place is here with us?”

Pitch didn’t look up, but he gave a soft nod. Most times Pitch would hate the way North had a
propensity to reiterate points, but he didn’t mind it at all now. He’d felt so alone for so long, to hear
he was accepted and wanted meant far more to him than most any compliment North could give him.
Deep down he had known this all along, but he’d found a need to prove it to himself that the
guardians would truly want him back if he had left (even if he hadn’t realized subconsciously he was
looking for their approval.) The resulting collection and bringing him back to the Pole had assuaged
the fear that they might simply discard him to his fate if he’d left, and of course the strapping that
followed assured it would be the last time he would feel the need to prove as much to himself or
otherwise. He always did tend to make things harder on himself than they needed to be.

North smiled wider at the nod as he nodded himself, “Good. This is home for you, and in time
perhaps you may leave and seek out greener grass, but for now, I think you will find this is where
you need to be.”

Pitch shifted under North’s words. Home; the thought that he’d have ever called this place home still
astounded him, but that’s most certainly what it was. He’d known it before, and he knew so even
more now that the grass undoubtedly wasn’t greener anywhere else and especially not back at his old
lair. He decided that he was quite sure he never wanted to return there ever again. Any solace he had
ever gained from the place only reminded him of pain, sorrow, and an emptiness that he never
wished to return to now. He was ready to put that part of himself away and start a new chapter in his
life. Pitch was finally truly ready to seek the redemption he’d been brought here all along to work
towards. It was almost humorous to look back at how he had scoffed at the idea that the guardians
had had the audacity to expect him to alter his way of thinking and how venomously he’d fought to
undermine their efforts.

Pitch moved his gaze up to North once more, “I don’t need to be anywhere else… and I don’t think I
want to be. I don’t rightly know what compelled me to assume that leaving would have been a good
idea… after everything that happened the last day working on the conveyor, I’d convinced myself
that to stay would only make things harder on everyone, but if I were to be honest with myself and
you, I was mostly afraid that I’d burned too many bridges to recover from. I thought you may have
been keeping me here out of obligation over actually wanting me to be here. I thought if I left that
you’d have been glad to be rid of me,” Pitch found he couldn’t keep eye contact now as such
thoughts brought to crop a harsh insecurity in his heart that no matter what he wanted to believe now,
a seed of doubt seemed to always remain within him so deep that it felt impossible to root out.

North studied Pitch sensing his continued fear of abandonment and frowned, “Pitch, we guardians
decided before we brought you here that we would help you. You are not obligation in sense that
you believe, but it is our duty to help you. You needed us, and whether you believe it of yourself or
not, you are worth saving.”

“You… you’re not just saying that …are you?” Pitch blinked soulful eyes back at North looking on
the verge of tears as he tried to discern if he really believed as much about himself as the Cossack
proclaimed. He had a large dose of self-loathing that often prevented him from being able to look
beyond his past to see a potential future with anything good lying in wait for someone like him. In a
previous circumstance he may have believed North would have said as much to manipulate him to
behave, but the man’s eyes portrayed nothing but honesty.

“Pitch…” seeing how vulnerable the nightmare lord now looked made North’s heart ache for him
and instead of voicing the words he had planned to say, North bent down and pulled Pitch forward
into a gentle hug before he spoke softly, “No, I am not just saying so.”

Pitch was taken by surprise by the sudden hug; such comfort was usually accompanied with
emotional tears because Pitch was in a high amount of distress and North felt he needed consolation
for the grief he was feeling. He wasn’t crying or particularly upset, so Pitch hadn’t realized why
North had chosen now to embrace him. It wasn’t until the Cossack’s big arms had pulled him into his massive shoulder did Pitch realize how much at that moment he had really needed to be hugged. He closed his eyes as he laid his face against the soft fabric of North’s sweater letting his own arms extend out to enfold around North’s neck in reply. Pitch always felt so small in instances like this where their size differences (especially in width) were made painfully obvious, but he also never felt so secure and protected. “I…” Pitch choked unable to speak from feeling a bit overwhelmed in his own emotions to say anymore now other than to inhale deeply and enjoy the loving embrace the Cossack afforded him in this moment.

The Russian felt Pitch’s desire for a shared touch and gave him a little tighter squeeze happy to fulfill this need for him.

Pitch responded clinging desperately as if afraid what he was experiencing now would end too quickly. What he’d been craving and needing most all along was companionship, and small considerations like this made Pitch want to be better for the guardians if just to be able to feel like he did right now.

As he held Pitch, North absently wondered where they would be now if the guardians had thought to help Pitch in this way long ago over being solely invested in their own causes. They may have been able to save themselves a few hundred years of warring, but then Jack also would not have become one of them, so perhaps everything worked out in the timing it had needed to. Either way, North may have doubted the judgement of bringing Pitch to the Pole prior, but he did not question the validity of the decision he’d made now.

Pitch loosened his grip letting himself slide out of the hug. He felt and looked more visibly relaxed as his eyes flitted up to North, a shy smile decorating his face, “Thank you,” he stammered his cheeks flushing slightly. He was still embarrassed by the act mostly he gathered because it left him feeling exposed to express how much he cherished the feeling of being cared for.

North only beamed, “You looked like you needed hug. I was more than happy to give you one,” he chuckled. “Would you like to apply glaze? Alla was still quite busy when I went by kitchens, so she might take a bit to bring by food.”

Pitch nodded, “Sure. That sounds like a good way to pass the time.” He moved around the table to where the glaze was and picked up the can to give it a quick look over. It looked simple enough, but he still glanced toward North in case the man wished to depart any wisdom before he opened it up to start using it.

Moving the rag with the horse towards Pitch, North pointed at the applicator, “Is very thick; I would suggest dip lightly.”

Pitch nodded his acknowledgement before carefully taking the lid off of the can and dipping the sponge into the glaze. The substance reminded Pitch of honey in its consistency as he pulled a dab from the can and watched it ooze back into the can when he lifted the applicator above the lid. He was careful to apply the glaze lightly as North had warned. He was slightly nervous he would glob too much on the horse, but after a few good swipes and dabs, Pitch began to feel confident in the medium and made quick work of the task. It only took about ten minutes for him to finish the entirety of the piece. He looked over at the Cossack on and off as he’d worked, and North gave him a nod of support when he did to let Pitch know he was doing fine.

Once Pitch had finished, North rose looking the horse over, “Is good. You did not miss anything. I will bring this to kiln and be back shortly.” He carefully grabbed Pitch’s horse and moved towards the door. He turned back a moment before walking out, “By time we finish dinner, horse will be
ready. I will go fetch for you then, and you can see finished product.”

Pitch’s eyes brightened at the prospect as his smile widened in his excitement. “Wonderful!” While North was gone, Pitch carefully recapped the glaze once the applicator had been dripped and pressed out as much as could be allowed. He wasn’t sure what to do with the applicator, so he just placed it on top of the lid and moved the glaze off the table and onto the dresser to clean off the table once more. It looked bare now that the centerpiece was no longer there.

After about ten minutes of milling about, Pitch moved over to the open door looking out to see if North was coming back yet and was pleasantly surprised to see Jack, “Jack!”

Jack wasn’t expecting to see Pitch’s door wide open and hesitated in midflight when he heard his name, “Oh? Hey, Pitch. How’s the grounding going?”

Pitch gave Jack a deadpan look. What kind of question was that? How did he think being grounded to his room would be going? He had to pause as he realized it was going unexpectedly well actually. He smirked, “It’s been alright… so far as being a captive in my own room can go.” He glanced back, “Actually, I’ve got new furniture now! You can take a look; if you’d like to see?”

Jack floated to the ground to peek inside while Pitch moved to give the boy access to his room. He wore a proud smile being able to show off his new accommodations, “Look, North brought in a dinner table with six chairs for each of us. You can see there is a specialized chair for both Sandy and Toothiana…” he trailed off thinking once more of the Tooth Fairy with a small frown.

Jack was taking in the table running his hand over the finished top, “Wow. This is really nice, Pitch! So when are we all going to get together to have dinner?” He turned a winning smile back on Pitch.

Pitch blinked, he couldn’t rightly say, “Uh… soon I suppose. At least I’d like it to be…”

“Pitch!” North’s voice boomed from the doorway and both Jack and Pitch both jumped and spun back towards the door. The man was standing in the doorframe with his arms crossed and a frown plastered on his face.

Pitch shrank back at North’s tone and stance, “Ya-yes?”

“Why is Jack in room? You are grounded yes? What did I tell you about guests?”

Pitch swallowed pouting as he glanced from North to Jack and then down at the floor as he meekly replied, “I… I just saw him flying by, and I wanted to show him the new furniture.”

North sighed placing his hands on his hips as he walked into the room, “Pitch, you were told not to have visitors except for me and Sandy.” He looked apologetically to Jack, “I am sorry Jack, is not meant against you, but Pitch is being punished, and no visitors is part of punishment, Sandy comes by to help aide Pitch to sleep.”

Jack held up his hands shaking his head, “No problem! I shouldn’t have stopped; I’ll steer clear from here on out until Pitch’s grounding is over.” Jack didn’t wait for North to ask him to leave as he whisked himself out in a whirl of cold wind.

Pitch was highly embarrassed that North would make such a scene and chase Jack off like this, he frowned in his clear disapproval but said nothing as he watched the winter sprite float past North and quickly out of sight.

He glowered at North in his frustration once the boy was gone as he snapped, “You didn’t need to go to such extremes! You could have just asked him to leave when you saw he was in here over
humiliating me by thundering down edicts from across the room!”

North’s brow drew down as he took a step closer to Pitch giving the nightmare lord a dangerous glare, “You should have told him not to come in room. I would not have to raise voice if you followed rules that you were already told to obey. This is not open for discussion, Pitch.”

Pitch’s mouth formed a thin line as he straightened in his annoyance, “Of course it isn’t. Nothing ever is with you.”

North did not comment, he only grabbed Pitch’s bicep and yanked him up and across the table before bringing his calloused palm down swiftly in three successive hard swats before releasing his hold on Pitch’s arm.

Gasping, Pitch reeled as he felt his body pulled up onto the smooth hard surface. It didn’t take him but a moment to understand what was happening before the pain in his backside registered fully his suspicions. It was over almost as quickly as it had happened, and Pitch wriggled backward as he backpedaled off of the table rubbing fiercely at his rear. It smarted quite well from the three heavy-handed swats, especially since he still bore soreness from the strapping which ached dully to accompany the fresh bout of stinging that he now suffered from.

Pitch’s face portrayed betrayal as his lip quivered, and he stumbled back shakily towards the bed, “You… you hit me for having Jack look at my new furniture?”

North took in a deep breath as he shook his head, “No, this has nothing to do with Jack. I told you we would have no more attitude problem. You start with bad attitude, so I address it with spanking. That is way it will be from now on. You know how you need to behave, and you will do so, or have stinging bum for your efforts. I do not wish to spank you, Pitch, but I have met limit, and I will tolerate no longer. Understood?”

It took a moment to digest what the Cossack said before Pitch ducked his head giving a small nod of acknowledgement. His face looked positively miserable as the ramifications that North planned to now simply resort to spanking with no further warning if he responded in any manner that the Cossack deemed to be considered a bad attitude. He was going to have to take special care to watch himself to prevent unexpected swats. At least before, North had always given him warning that he was stepping over the line. Now it seemed that there was going to be no strike system, it was just going to be straight to the painful reminder.

North hated to see what had been such a promising day soured by this one incident, “You did so very well all day today. Please, let us go back to good attitude. Da? We can still have good day and better night.”

It pained him, but Pitch played the event back over in his head knowing at exactly what point North had decided to upend him was the point he’d decided to be spiteful. Yes, North had embarrassed him with Jack, but he’d done so after Pitch had tried to bend the rules to suit his favor already knowing what had been expected of him. It had stung his pride for Jack to see him get chided like that, but as much as he disliked that it had happened, he’d brought it on himself just like he had just brought the spanking that followed on himself.

He had two choices now, he could wallow in self-pity, and stay mad at North, or he could get over it and move on so as not to let the incident ruin the rest of his night.

In the past, Pitch would have fumed, ranted, and raved (even if just inwardly,) but this time, Pitch swallowed his pride, “O…okay. I …I’m sorry. I just got a little carried away.” Pitch’s eyes flitted up to North now guiltily.
North’s demeanor softened as he brought a hand up to rub lightly on his back, “Is okay; we move past now. Maybe I could have been eh… less loud.”

Pitch let go a soft snort as he smirked glancing back up at North’s admission.

“Ah! There is smile I was looking for!” North laughed as he playfully tapped Pitch’s chin giving the nightmare lord a wide smile himself as he pulled out the end chair that he’d sat in the night before and sat himself at the table.

Pitch couldn’t help a bigger smile crossing his own features as North’s smile was infectious. He took a few steps over to the table and pulled his own chair out now to sit gingerly beside North.

North began a topic covering the basics of the manipulation of making clay sculptures when Alla finally rolled the cart into Pitch’s room. Pitch gave her a happy smile always glad to see her, “Good evening, Alla,” Pitch greeted.

Alla said her hellos, and North translated, “She says there was accident in kitchen that held her up. She is very sorry.” North waved her off, “Is no problem, Alla. Pitch and I were able to get a few things taken care of while we were waiting. Pitch finished painting horse, and I brought to kiln. You will get to see it tomorrow when we have language class!”

Pitch was relieved North hadn’t mentioned anything that had followed the glaze application. He watched as Alla laid out the plates and cutlery as well as a bowl. She had brought clam chowder, garlic bread, and shrimp fettucine for dinner as well as a pitcher of iced tea to drink and a few slices of cheese cake for dessert. Alla didn’t stay long, but she’s made sure to move around the other side of the table to say a personal goodbye to Pitch with a tender pat on the head (which seemed to be a go to friendliness for Alla) and some grunts of affection.

“She says to have good night and enjoy cheese cake. She will see you tomorrow,” North smiled wishing Alla a good night as Alla gave him a quick one armed hug and a pat on the head before heading out.

Alla’s grunts could be heard in the hallway, and North laughed, “Sandy! He is just in time for dinner! Perfect!”

Pitch beamed as he saw Sandy round the corner to join them, “We haven’t even put the food on our plates yet, so you’re getting better at this dinner crashing Sandy,” of course Pitch was smirking playfully as he said as much making it clear he was joking, and both Sandy and North seemed to enjoy the humor.

“She says to have good night and enjoy cheese cake. She will see you tomorrow,” North smiled wishing Alla a good night as Alla gave him a quick one armed hug and a pat on the head before heading out.

Alla’s grunts could be heard in the hallway, and North laughed, “Sandy! He is just in time for dinner! Perfect!”

Pitch stood, “Okay, Sandy! I see you are quite ready to eat!” the Cossack chuckled as he maneuvered around the table portioning out the food to the specifics each preferred. There was still plenty left over if anyone wanted seconds.

There wasn’t much talking once the food was served only the clinking of silverware on plates and the clattering of ice cubes in glasses of iced tea as cups were drained and refilled. Alla made a special
lemon brew that was quite tasty!

Pitch observed the other two with a small smile as they ate. He thought back to what Jack had said about all of them dining together, and once he’d seen North finish his second helping of fettucine and settle back in his chair as a sign that he was finished dining, Pitch decided to ask, “So… I was thinking …uh, maybe once this whole grounding business has concluded, do you think we could have a dinner with everyone?”

North took in a deep breath looking torn his eyes moving first to Sandy and then back to Pitch. He didn’t want to set a tentative date because he knew Tooth was still on edge with the whole situation left unsettled between the two, and a sprung upon dinner might not make for the best forecast to mend their differences. “Eh… One cannot say; we will have to see, Pitch. It make take some time to coordinate.”

Sandy’s expression was strained since he’d already seen Toothiana when he’d returned to his runs last night. Most of the guardians used Sandy as a sounding board rather than to ask advice of when they were having some inner turmoil, and Sandy was just fine with this since he often didn’t have much advice to give that whomever was speaking to him couldn’t work out on their own in the long run. Toothiana had vented to Sandy for quite some time her frustrations with both herself and Pitch while he’d nodded doing his best to show her support in his own silent way. She wasn’t angry with Pitch anymore, but she also was definitely not in a place to be a dinner guest with Pitch again anytime soon.

Pitch wasn’t dull witted, and it didn’t take much to put two and two together for him to understand there was a problem with what he’d asked that had a lot more than scheduling as an issue. He was the issue. His shoulders slumped as his face drew into a sullen frown, “Oh… I guess she’s still really mad at me, isn’t she?” He stated mutely.

Sandy frowned looking at North sadly as if he might be able to help fix the situation. He really hated whenever any of his friends were fighting. Granted, Pitch was a new addition, but there were previous occasions where guardian and guardian may have had one too many eggnogs and got to bickering which led to a few week long huffing and puffing stubborn fits before all was made well once more.

North opened his mouth to speak but deflated as he sighed, “I would not say mad at you, Pitch. She is unhappy with situation. You two will need to talk once grounding is done.”

Pitch nodded, but it was hard to find the good mood he’d just had since his mind was continuously brought back to thinking about he and Toothiana’s fight and how it was still affecting their relationship now. It made him very unhappy Pitch found, and the feeling seemed to permeate around the table into a long drawn out silence. It was finally broken as North rose stiffly and began to shuffle about gathering up his dishes and placing them on the cart.

“Is anyone still wanting more?” North asked pointing at the leftovers, and both Sandy and Pitch shook their heads no.

“I… I think I’m done,” Pitch sighed pushing his half eaten plate away from him. He’d lost his appetite now as he continued to sag in his chair.

Sandy placed his silverware on his plate blowing an uncomfortable puff of air out as he glanced up at North worriedly.

North tried to lighten the mood, “We have yet to have cheese cake! Are you sure you do not wish to have a slice?”
This seemed to brighten Sandy’s mood, and he smiled widely nodding vigorously before turning to see Pitch still moping. He frowned pictographing a picture of Pitch and Toothiana squabbling before swirling an image of their table and Pitch looking depressive. A sand impression of Sandy put a slice of cheesecake in front of the sand Pitch, and the sand Pitch’s face split into a smile. Sandy then pointed at the cheese cake.

Pitch watched Sandy's display with an unenthusiastic eye before responding, “I’m sorry; it’s just hard to have a good time while I can’t stop thinking about making things right with Toothiana.”

North gave Pitch a soft smile, “It is good to see you care to make things right with Tooth, but for now, we cannot fix until Tooth is ready to talk. She will come round. Just give her time, Pitch. Until then, is not doing you any good to mope, so cheer up.”

Pitch sighed giving a reluctant nod as he let Sandy slide the cheese cake over to him. He looked up at both of them watching him expectantly and grabbed a forkful of cheese cake. It was pretty good; he gave them a small smile, “Alla would be disappointed if I didn’t at least try it.”

Sandy and North seemed pleased by his efforts and conversation resumed mostly about Pitch and North’s yeti language class and the progress made with Pitch finishing his horse statuette.

“This reminds me! I will go grab from kiln! It should be done and ready to put back on table” North stated excitedly as he finished off the last bite of his cheese cake, “I will go fetch!”

The thought of seeing his horse finally complete had Pitch fill with a flood of elation as he rose to quickly clean off the table. He wanted the surrounding area to be ready for the statue by the time North returned with it.

Sandy smiled widely to see Pitch bouncing about happily as they awaited North’s return.

Pitch had cleaned off the entirety of the table as well as pushed the cart into the hallway and came to sit back across from Sandy. Having a moment alone with Sandy, Pitch glanced up at him studying him a moment before asking carefully, “How are you doing? I know last night was a bit of a shock, and I was thinking about you this morning wondering if you were… okay.” Pitch fidgeted as he spoke running his long fingers up and down the edge of the table gracefully with an occasional glance over at Sandy to judge his reactions.

Sandy wasn’t phased though, but he could tell Pitch was worried about how the picture had affected him. He smiled depicting a picture of a sand version of himself hanging the picture in front of a sand version of his bed.

That was more than Pitch could have hoped for, and his face brightened, “I want to make you something else… but this time a little less emotionally evoking.” Pitch was sure to add.

Sandy rippled in silent laughter as he gave Pitch a vigorous nod of agreement.

North lumbered back in and both Pitch and Sandy turned to the door to see him holding up the centerpiece, “It came out perfect! You see! Just like I told you, is good yes?” North set the horse down in front of Pitch and Sandy, and both looked it over in unison.

“I really do like the look of it glazed,” Pitch nodded in approval.

Sandy gave a hearty thumbs up.

“Would you like to try hand at making clay statue by self?” North grinned.
Pitch nodded his smile growing impossibly as he hopped out of his seat, “I’ll grab the supplies!” Pitch had been looking forward to this for most of the day. He moved quickly over to the dresser and unloaded all of the supplies on the table. He nudged Sandy, “Are you going to try it out?”

Sandy blinked in surprise and shrugged before nodding that he in fact would try his hand at making something in clay alongside North and Pitch.

North gave them both a quick tutorial on how to manipulate the material as well as some techniques he’d developed that worked well for himself. Once he was finished, all three went about working mostly in silence.

Sandy chose to make a rather simple design for his first clay sculpture by making a dolphin with the base being a splashing wave it was riding.

North made a detailed Christmas wreath with several decorations mixed within the branches. It was quite intricate with many fine lines and well above the talents of Sandy or Pitch, but this was to be expected.

Pitch tried and tried to make several different things, but nothing seemed to work the way he wanted it to. It seemed to his disappointment that this was a talent that he wasn’t going to get as easily as painting. He settled on something simple, a gift for Toothiana. It was a big crown tooth that he tried to make as detailed as he could. It was a tooth, so its overall look wasn’t too difficult to capture, still, Pitch couldn’t say he was overly happy with the end results. He was half tempted to squish it into oblivion, but decided since both Sandy and North had finished before him (mostly due to the many times he restarted) it may have seemed rude to have wasted their time just to crush the finished product. Still he sighed his dissatisfaction.

North rose clapping Pitch on the back, “Is good first try, Pitch. Do not give up. Besides, I do not think that Tooth will be unhappy with gift.”

Pitch’s lip tugged into a wry smile, “Let’s hope the paint job will salvage it.”

Sandy rose gliding behind Pitch and using his sands pulled his chair back as a sign it was time to call it a night.

Pitch rose from his chair not really wanting to go to bed yet, but knowing Sandy still had his runs to do begrudgingly sighed, “Fine, fine. I’m coming.”

Sandy smirked floating over to pull back his sheets as Pitch climbed into bed.

North watched on as Sandy proceeded to tuck Pitch in putting Pitch to sleep with a gentle kiss on the forehead before Pitch had even realized he had done so. Sandy was good, and his tenderness with the way he smoothed back Pitch’s hair as he blew enough dreamsand around Pitch to pull him into good dreams that would last through the night pleased the Cossack.

He moved to the table and gathered up both Pitch and his clay figures, “Sandy,” he whispered, and once he had the golden man’s attention he motioned with a nod towards Sandy’s sculpture, “When you are finished, meet me down at kiln with dolphin, and we will put them all in to fire.”

Sandy smiled nodding his acknowledgement as he watched North teeter off with the other two. His eyes shifted back to Pitch now as he sat back and watched the nightmare lord’s dreams unfold, they skipped around to several scenes that involved Alla, North, and he. Sandy sighed happily as he observed the smile that tugged at Pitch’s lips as he dreamed. He ran a hand through his hair enjoying the fact that he no longer had to work so hard to give Pitch good dreams because these days Pitch
had plenty of good memories for Sandy to pull forward and weave into a safe place that replaced the many nightmares he’d always been plagued with.

Satisfied now, Sandy glided back to the table to grab his figurine and quietly floated out of Pitch’s room closing the door with a soft click behind him.
Sandy met North down by the kiln, and the Cossack was already carefully placing the clay objects onto the firing grate when Sandy arrived. He floated in to hand North his dolphin figure and watched on as North set the pieces carefully down.

North placed the dolphin next to the other two figures and signaled to the yeti with a thumbs up, who had been waiting to start the next batch after Sandy had brought the last figure to add to the lot. North moved away from the kiln now brushing the stray cement dust off his hands and peering up to look at Sandy giving him a small nod of acknowledgement. North was lost in thought, and once the two were walking out of the ceramics area, North addressed Sandy, “Pitch has changed so much Sandy, there are still rough edges to buff out, but he is really trying. I feel this in my belly, and belly does not lie,” he smiled up at the golden man with no small hint of amusement for any time he mentioned his belly having prophetic abilities.

For Sandy’s part, the dream weaver smiled giving a happy agreeable nod. He could see the change in many aspects that Pitch exuded but none so much as within the dreams that he sifted through when he drew out a map to keep Pitch’s subconscious in a happy place throughout the night. It had become apparent that one of the biggest reasons that Sandy had had such a hard time giving the nightmare lord good dreams wasn’t just because of the fearing presence in his subconscious mind but the lack of happy thoughts and memories he had to pull from to give a good dream. Now the task was relatively easy compared to those dreaded nights in the hospital when Sandy had labored intensively to even touch Pitch’s mind long enough just to subdue his nightmares let alone give him a good dream.

North stroked his beard, “But there is problem with Tooth and Pitch, I need to find way to bring back together. They were good friends, I need to find good happy medium for them to talk. I am racking brain but am having hard time. Any suggestion?”

Sandy’s brow wrinkled in consternation as he thought on North’s query. It was hard to say exactly what would constitute a good place for the two to talk; he flashed a picture of Tooth, the Tooth Palace, and a question mark.

North bobbed his head left and right, “Eh, she is indecisive. I ask her yesterday if she would come up to eat, so two could hash out differences, but she said no. She is not ready. With Tooth though, it is hard to say if time further away from fight will help or hurt situation. She still holds on to incident with little fairies when Pitch tried to drown world in darkness. Tooth has done well looking past much, but I know Tooth, and that skirmish will always be at back of mind for her. Tooth Palace would be bad place for meeting because of this. She needs to feel her home and fairies are safe, so neutral ground is must. Besides, I do not want Pitch away from Pole especially after recent stealing of reindeer and going back to hole. No, he needs to stay here where I can keep eye on.”

Sandy gave North a sad frown and shrugged not really sure what to suggest. With the limited parameters, it left little else to propose. Tooth obviously needed to blow off some steam, but North was right, maybe more time away from the problem might cause less of a chance to fix it. He pointed a thumb at his chest looking resolute as he made a sand image of himself with Toothiana.

North smiled, “Ah Sandy! Would you? Maybe you can help her come to terms, so we can get ugly
mess behind us. She is good influence on him. Pitch cares much for her, and I think Tooth cares for him as well even, if Pitch can be a bit hard headed and rude.”

Sandy raised both eyebrows giving a knowing nod as if North had just scraped the tip of the iceberg. He bowed giving a salute as a farewell deciding that he would move through his runs and go to visit Toothiana afterward. The two worked around the same schedule, so it would make conversing a little easier after their nightly tasks had been adhered to.

North waved as he watched Sandy dip down the corridors towards the globe room until he disappeared. Once Sandy was out of sight, North trundled off towards his own chambers to call it a night.

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Dawn was breaking over Tooth Palace, and fairies darted to and fro moving teeth into canisters with lightning speed and the highest efficiency.

Sandy took this all in with sleepy eyes as he drifted on a cloud made of sand around the many high rising spires looking for Toothiana; it didn’t take long to find her. She was in the hub of her palace directing her fairies as she zipped about to oversee their work.

Toothiana’s crest rose in alarm sensing Sandy before she ever saw him, but once his familiarity became apparent, her feathers smoothed and an instant bright smile revealed itself, “Sandy? Hey!” She zipped out of the central trafficking center for processing the teeth and towards her golden friend with a curious look. When they converged she finally asked, “You’re out kind of late; what brings you out my way?”

Sandy returned her smile patting a patch of cloud next to him as a sign for her to join him.

Tooth tilted her head at the gesture before awkwardly dropping from a hover onto her knees upon the fluffy cloud as she studied him now, “Is everything okay?” She questioned hesitantly.

The golden man patted her hand gently as he turned a warm smile on her. He paused a moment just letting the gesture hang in the air before forming a sand picture of her and Pitch sitting together with talk bubbles over their heads. He followed the depiction with a question mark.

Tooth observed the display with a small frown before she sighed tiredly, “Ah… this is about what I brought up last night…” She hadn’t really expected Sandy to seek her out and follow up over what she had said the previous night. She’d simply wished to vent her frustrations since the whole debacle was still a raw wound, and talking to North about it had stirred up several emotions within herself on the subject. She shook her head, “We haven’t talked. It might be best if I just avoid the Pole for a while.”

Sandy grimaced at her admission before flashing an image of Pitch looking despondent. He changed the scene to her floating into the picture with a talk bubble and a heart forming over the head of a much happier Pitch.

Tooth looked away torn by her feelings on the matter. She did want to talk to Pitch and reconcile; she cared for Pitch, even if much of the time he made her feel weary from trying to work with him only to have him throw a tantrum and insult her or her friends. He was an odd creature that simultaneously could be considerate and kind to her and extremely condescending or rude to another in the same breath. Of course he could easily turn those barbs on her when she said something he took offense to. This was just how Pitch was, and after the last incident she wasn’t sure if she wanted to get back on that roller coaster any time soon. Still, the fact that both North and Sandy seemed to be
going out of their way to ask her to talk to him meant they obviously felt she needed to sooner rather than later most likely for Pitch’s sake than her own.

Truthfully, she was thinking to avoid the Pole for a few months to evade how she felt like she was getting nowhere with helping Pitch, and if anything was just making matters worse. It was why Pitch had ran away, because she stepped over the line. No, this was Pitch’s fault; she warred with herself hard-pressed to find absolution from her unwarranted guilt. She knew it wasn’t really her fault, but nothing she told herself made her feel better about what had happened as an end result of their confrontation. It was really for the best that she just get lost in her work. It was one of the ways she coped with stress.

Tooth was silent for a long moment; she was being selfish she realized. Pitch’s rehabilitation was all of their responsibility, and backing off for her own peace of mind was only going to cause further issues internally for Pitch who craved the connection and for North who would bear the brunt of her decision to break away. She inhaled deeply and gave a nod, “Okay. I still think I should make Pitch stew after the way he behaved, but I’ll put my feelings aside and go talk to him if it’ll make you and North happy.”

Her words made Sandy brighten with a wide smile pleased he was able to convince her not to put it off. He could tell the thought of having to confront Pitch was still vexing her, so he patted her hand once more clasping it in his lightly for support.

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Pitch blinked taking in a deep breath as he stretched; it was still early. The sun was up, but the sky was tinged in baby blues putting the time around 6AM. Pitch sighed, unlike yesterday, he didn’t have as much planned to do with his day and waking this early only made to prolong the pain of boredom. He covered his head trying to go back to sleep, but after an hour of lying in bed tossing and turning, Pitch grunted throwing his sheets from atop his head to stare at the porthole window and see the placing of the sun, another reminder of how little time had passed. Wanting to find something to do other than mope, since the more he thought on his plight, the more he was prone to do just that, Pitch pulled himself up to sitting against the headboard and grabbed his book from the nightstand.

He lost himself to reading for a couple hours and finished the book. The ending was fitfully heartwarming with Ebenezer Scrooge realizing the joys of Christmas and changing his greedy ways. Pitch rose to place the book on his bookshelf thinking about the ending and wondering if his story could be seen as similar in regards to finding a new outlook in life. The most relatable points in the book Pitch felt tied to was how Ebenezer found a want to no longer be alone and that Christmas represented togetherness and family. Pitch did want this more than he cared to admit, and it was more and more painfully obvious the longer he stayed at the Pole. At one point in his very long life, he’d done everything in his power to rid himself of his humanity. These days, he was embracing it.

Pitch went through the other books on his shelf now looking to pick another book, but he wasn’t really in the mood to read anymore. He grabbed one anyway and placed it in the spot his other book had been for when he did find the urge to read again. Pitch grabbed some of the left over clay from what North had brought, and he tried once more to make something, but after an hour of playing with it and failing, Pitch lost interest. Everything he tried to make looked like something out of a kindergarten class he thought as he smashed all his failed attempts into one blob and chucked it back in the bag.

Feeling a tad disgruntled by his obvious lack of talent in sculpture making, Pitch slumped back into his seat folding his arms to lay his head on the table to fume.

A small knock came to the door.
Pitch raised his head in surprise. It was only a little after ten, and Alla and North weren’t due to come by until after one. The knock wasn’t North’s either, Pitch’s heart rose into his throat, it was Toothiana’s. He slipped from his seat and made his way to the door cracking it to peer out.

Toothiana hovered in front of the door and regarded Pitch’s curious look with a small smile, “Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

Pitch’s jaw hung open; he wanted to invite her in, but after yesterday night’s discussion with North, Pitch knew better. It was agonizing to turn her away, but he also didn’t want North to be angry with him. He swallowed as a pout overtook his features, “Uh… I… I want to, but I can’t. North… North’s not allowing me any visitors at the moment outside himself and Sandy.” Just saying as much hurt his pride immensely, and Pitch felt the need to look away from her steady gaze wholly humiliated now.

She nodded in understanding, “Alright. I don’t want to go against North’s wishes. Did he say when you can have visitors again?” She was honestly impressed that Pitch had even admitted his current punishment to her seeing how much it was bothering him.

Pitch blushed, “I’m… I’ve been grounded for one week since… the day after our argument. I’m not sure if North’s definition of one week is five or seven days; I… I didn’t ask,” he wasn’t positive if she had been made aware of the incident that had transpired the day of their argument, but Pitch had decided not to mention his running away, just in case she wasn’t informed, even though Pitch assumed Toothiana was well aware. The guardians seemed to keep each other up to date in all relevant issues especially concerning him. The guardians all standing around in a meeting discussing him and how he was to be dealt with came to mind then, and Pitch lightly winced at the thought. His eyes flicked up to Toothiana to gauge her reaction noting she still fixed him with a level stare. It wasn’t unkind, but it was guarded. She wasn’t going to forgive him easily, of that much he was well aware. He earned that he supposed after the way he’d spoken to her, still, she was here now, and that was a step towards reconciliation. The fact that she’d come at all filled him with hope that he could make up with her.

“That was a relief Tooth thought, she didn’t really want to hash out their argument at the moment anyway, and after coming to see Pitch, she hoped it put the nightmare lord’s mind at ease that she would be back to talk it out later. She was also kind of glad she came to see him for this brief encounter since it gave her renewed strength to want to mend things between them by erasing the horrible memory of how they had previously ended their conversation by the conveyor as the last words they’d shared. This was much more neutral and promising. She turned to leave, “Goodbye, Pitch,” she remarked as she did so.

Pitch watched her go a small smile of his own cropping on his face as he softly closed the door; he

Pitch was sad to see her go, and called out to her retreating back, “Toothiana!”

Tooth halted turning her head back to Pitch with a questioning look on her face, “Yes?”

“I’m …I’m sorry. About what I said… you were right, I …I was being immature,” he grimaced looking quite contrite. He remembered what she’d said to him, and it still stung, but Pitch also knew that he needed to put it aside and let her know that he had as well. Most of their argument had stemmed around him not taking responsibility for his actions, and this was his way of admitting fault to her as well as apologizing.

Tooth’s lips tugged into a grin and she gave him a small nod pleased by what she heard, “I accept your apology, Pitch.” She turned back saying no more as she zipped down the corridor.

Pitch watched her go a small smile of his own cropping on his face as he softly closed the door; he
felt a heavy weight lift from his shoulders. He was filled with a thrill of excitement now to know he and Toothiana had made up enough to know that she would be back, and she was giving him a chance to make things right between them.

The remainder of his morning, until Alla and North showed up for his lesson, was taken up with a long shower and some more reading. The encounter with Toothiana had left Pitch in high spirits, and he was still quite happy when Alla and North arrived as he opened the door with to let them in with a bright smile, “Salutations!”

Alla grunted a hello patting his head as she entered.

North gave a soft chuckle, “You are so chipper, Pitch! I am guessing talk with Tooth made you feel better?”

Pitch blinked slightly stunned that North already knew about their chat, “Uh… yes. I told her she couldn’t come in,” he felt the need to add as worry etched his brow.”

North full out laughed now as he reached out to pat Pitch’s back comfortably, “I know. She told me. You listened without… prompting.”

Pitch flushed deeply looking at Alla momentarily before his eyes flitted back to North. He gave a quick nod, “I didn’t want to disappoint you again… or …uh…” Pitch moved from foot to foot unable to continue the subject as he averted his eyes.

North nodded moving his hand up to Pitch’s chin and lifting his eyes back up to meet his own. North beamed a warm smile down at him, “You did not disappoint me; you did just opposite. I am proud of you, Pitch.”

Pitch’s eyes widened reflecting uncertainty at the praise; hearing North say those words to him gave him a feeling that he couldn’t have heard him right, but the way North smiled at him, Pitch knew it to be true. He found himself smiling back with an even deeper blush now as he stated quietly, “Thank you.”

“You get better every day, Pitch. You just must remember to keep this,” he tapped Pitch’s chest where his heart lay, “…leading your way. Be true to self. Heart usually knows better than the head, and I have known you long enough now to see you have good heart, Pitch. All else will fall in to line. Da?”

Pitch grimaced as he took in a deep breath thinking about North’s statement, “I hope so…”

North let go of Pitch’s chin and ruffled his hair as he walked to the wall to grab the chalkboard and easel from the floor beside the dresser, “I know so! Now, go sit; Alla is waiting.”

Pitch moved over to his desk and pulled up his stool to sit readying himself for his lesson. There was still some residual soreness in his seat, but not enough to contest sitting today thankfully Pitch thought as he shifted about trying to get comfortable. It was hard to focus on the lesson Pitch found as his mind kept wandering to Toothiana and her coming to see him again. North’s reassurance on the matter had only caused a resurgence of the thoughts that had him so ramped up only hours ago. He was daydreaming of how the scenario would go now and what he would say to make her happy with him once more.

“Pitch!” North snapped his fingers to get the nightmare lord’s attention.

Pitch started blinking rapidly and turning his attention back to the chalk board where Alla was doing a quick refresher of what they’d just covered. He shook his head, “Uh, sorry! I was just a little
distracted!"

The Russian grunted giving him a glare, “You are being rude to Alla ignoring her when she is trying
to give lesson. Do you want to do lesson today, or would you rather go back to being alone in room
by self?”

Pitch’s eyes widened as he shook his head vehemently, “Na-no! I apologize Alla! Please, do
continue. I’m listening now; I swear.” Pitch looked sheepish now as he adjusted himself in his stool
and did his best to get back on track and give Alla his rapt attention.

Once Pitch was back on track, North nodded his approval moving to the door, “I forget to go visit
Paul to see if workbook is done. You two continue, and I’ll be right back.”

Pitch’s eyes were drawn to the retreating Cossack as he watched him leave before turning back to
Alla to let her know he wasn’t ignoring her. He really couldn’t especially now that North was no
longer present to translate.

Alla was forgiving and just continued the lesson as if nothing happened. They covered the old
material, and they had started practicing sounds when North arrived once more carrying a stack of
five books and one very large notebook binder that he slapped down on the table.

“Alla got friends who helped him make several books! I did not ask so much, but he thought it was
good idea for teaching others yeti language to make good reference material, so they stayed up late
last night to make these books. He explained that they go up in level each numbered book, and
notebook is teacher’s guide to all books. It will make teaching easier for Alla,” North stated jovially
as he brought the stack of five smaller books to Pitch and the binder to hand to Alla.

Both Alla and Pitch began looking through their respective materials quite curious of the contents.

Pitch hadn’t realized before he’d started this venture that it would become so complicated. Not that
the extra material wasn’t helpful. He really had underestimated the yetis and their cognitive ability to
which he now felt slightly chagrinned to have made such derogatory comments about them to North
previously.

Alla grunted an affirmative pleased remark to North who nodded, “You are quite welcome, Alla! I
am glad Paul and friends could help you so much. I will be sure to let them know you are very happy
with learning supplements.”

Alla turned her attention back to Pitch and called out a page number and pointed to the page number
in her book since Pitch was unfamiliar with the yeti terms for numbers; that was to be their next
lesson, but first, Alla wanted to let Pitch practice what he’d just learned yesterday and was refreshed
on a bit today in his new workbook. It would give him a little hands on with the language without
having North or herself there to push him along which was always conducive to learning.

Pitch observed the page of the lesson in Alla’s book with a nod of acknowledgement as he flipped
open the book labeled with a one and put the other four books in his desk. He grabbed out a pencil
and placed the book turned to the correct page number on top of the desk. The books were all ringed
notebooks with perforated pages that were easily torn out, so Pitch tore the first page out and placed
the bulk of the rest of the book on top of his desk to give himself plenty of room to work.

Alla and North sat at the table and talked quietly while Pitch worked to give him privacy and room to
concentrate on the work.

Pitch moved through the page rather quickly only pausing a couple times to think about the question
and what it asked. He was frankly impressed that Paul and his friends had been able to create books like these so quickly since North had told him that he’d only tasked him with the project this week. The rate the yetis could produce most things really was remarkable to say the least.

It took about ten minutes for Pitch to finish the page, “Done!” he yelled out proudly picking up his paper and hopping off of his stool to bring it over to the table where both North and Alla turned to regard him.

Alla smiled warmly taking the page and looking it over and giving a nod as she rose to pat him on the back grunting a congratulations.

“She says good job, Pitch. You answer all questions correctly,” North nodded with his own approval.

Pitch beamed to hear as much before he turned to move back to his desk as he saw Alla returning to the chalkboard.

While Alla and North had talked, Alla had had a chance to look through the teacher’s guide to know where she wanted them to go next in the book. She informed Pitch what page to turn to.

He flipped to the page, and they spent the next hour going over numbers, and verbs throughout the first chapter alternating from first the chalkboard to the book, and when they’d finished for the day, Alla pointed through the chapter work pages that they had moved over of the covered material. They were practice pages; ten in all, and Alla circled each of them with a red pen rumbling as she tapped them.

“She says that she would like to see you work through pages sometime between tonight and when we meet up tomorrow,” North informed.

Pitch looked over the pages with a slight frown. What Alla was asking was going to take him no less than an hour, and that’s if he breezed through the material like he had the first lesson (which was much simpler than this newer information.) He didn’t voice his complaint though; it would be something to do he supposed, and they had gone through all the material she was asking him to cover, so it shouldn’t be too difficult. It wasn’t like he’d had any tutelage in any of the other languages he’d learned outside of watching parents teach their children and of course the dreaded spelling bee nightmares which seemed to entertain Pitch to no end with the ridiculousness of some of the words the children had been afraid to spell. Words that he’d not heard in an age if at all. Of course half the time the words were gibberish and the point of them being gibberish inflamed the nightmare since there was no comprehending it. Human children really were quite funny creatures at times with the trivialities they latched on to and feared direly.

Alla barked a question at Pitch, and he turned towards her with a look of clear incomprehension.

North grunted a translation, “She asked if you are alright with work; she sees frown and is worried she has upset you.”

Looking over at North’s obvious disapproval; Pitch shook his head as he looked back up at Alla earnestly, “It’s fine Alla; I was… uh …just surprised with the work load is all. It shouldn’t take as long as I thought initially…” Pitch grumbled under his breath, “Besides, it’s not like I have much else better to do with my time stuck here in my room.”

North replied gruffly giving Pitch a warning glare to put his attitude in check, “Is true. You don’t, Pitch. Make time in room beneficial.”
Pitch jerked his head over to North in surprise. He thought he’d said that low enough not to be heard, but apparently not low enough. He gulped knowing that look by now well enough to know he needed to curb the negativity. The last thing he wanted was that kind of reminder especially in front of Alla. Although if he were to be honest with himself, she probably already knew as most of the Pole’s denizens likely were well aware of how he was ‘handled’ by North. Still, hearing about it and seeing it were two entirely different things, and getting a spanking was definitely not what Pitch ever wanted to be a visual for anyone and especially not Alla since he really liked her. He cleared his throat, “Of course… I… I need to practice the material anyway,” he stated weakly flitting Alla a shy smile.

Alla seemed pleased enough giving him a pat on the head as she grunted, “Goodbye, Pitch.”

Pitch had recognized the sounds for what they were and attempted to repeat them much to both Alla and North’s delight as they laughed. Pitch straightened looking offended, “What? What’s so funny?!”

The Cossack continued to laugh heartily as he waved his hand back and forth, “No, no! Is good Pitch! We laugh because you tell Alla, ‘Goodbye, Pitch,’ so effectively you just say goodbye to self. Is funny no?”

“Oh,” Pitch chuckled softly, he could see the humor in that. He had originally assumed he’d managed instead to butcher the language and this was what they had been laughing about. He was pleased that it was not even though if he had butchered the language he couldn’t have blamed them for laughing at him then either.

Alla squeezed his shoulder, and when Pitch looked back in her direction she gave a shortened version of her usual grunt.

North piped in, “That is how you say just goodbye in yeti language.”

Pitch tried the sound, and Alla muttered a guttural praise with a nod to let him know that he’d said it correctly.

“Good job, Pitch. Again, you have done well today,” As North spoke, he rose from the rocking chair stretching his lower back before moving towards Pitch’s door, “I will be back later tonight for dinner.”

Alla gave Pitch’s shoulder one more squeeze before she turned to trundle after North.

Pitch always felt a sort of panic whenever he watched them go now knowing he was about to be left to his own devices once more. It really wasn’t that bad he had to admit. It made him feel foolish and silly, but he couldn’t help these feelings from taking hold of him and sending false fears through him. He watched them go with a small pout as he stood next to his desk with his workbook clutched to his chest.

Once they had closed the door and left him in the still silence, Pitch’s eyes were drawn back down to the workbook in his arms, and he relaxed his hold to just hold the book in his hands casually now. He moved over to his desk and grabbed his pencil before gliding back to the table and settling in to pull out all the pages Alla had instructed him to complete and got to work.
The concepts for the yeti language came easily enough Pitch found, and he had finished the assigned pages Alla had given him within an hour and a half. It was amusing to be doing homework so to speak. Some far off recognition rang from a forgotten life of a memory of doing just that. From the little he could remember from flash backs that still came to him even now since Toothiana had jostled loose those first impactful memories a month ago, he knew his former self was quite the academic coming up through the academy with top ranks. Of course moments of recognition in this way where he’d felt accomplished were rewarding memories even if so distant the relation felt foreign. Nonetheless, one didn’t get to become a general without the ability to discern tactics and use intelligence over grunt brute force. He was always the studious type, even now, several life times removed from who he once had been as Kozmotis Pitchner.

Pitch had self-taught himself enough without ever meddling too much within actual human affairs when learning to get by. Being alone had taught him ingenuity to a degree and over a millennia apathy for everything else. The apathy he’d once had, a tightly closed lid, somehow had the seal broken. Now, that lid could never be fully closed again Pitch knew. He cared now, and having grown accustomed to his life with others in it made him never want to go back to such a melancholy existence. Restrictions aside, his life was pretty good now, Pitch couldn’t deny. When it was just him, navigating through nightmares had been his greatest interactive teacher. Learning from others in this way, with Alla and North, was actually kind of novel Pitch found, if at times also frustrating.

The workbook did give him a distraction to help eat away time, and through the next couple days, Pitch, North, and Sandy enjoyed nightly meals where Pitch eagerly anticipated their company. He’d read another two books, painted a picture, and lounged about so much it pained him. All he wanted to do was escape these four walls, but he didn’t complain (as much as he REALLY wanted to!) He’d been so very good, Pitch thought, surely North would have noticed and would give him a break? He waited, specifically until the fifth night to see if North would consider five days a ‘week’ over seven inwardly crossing his fingers.

“So… uh, now that the week is up, I was wondering if …when I went back to my original chores at the stable, would we be meeting back here in the afternoon for lessons, or will we be moving the lessons somewhere else at a different time?” Pitch tested the waters as he twirled a forkful of spaghetti on his plate and looked to North studying his face closely.

North finished the bite he’d been chewing gulping down some milk before answering simply, “Pitch, is only been five days, week is not up. You are still grounded two more days.”

Pitch was afraid that would be North’s response, so he tactfully approached, “Well yes, technically that is a full week, but often times five days is also considered a week. I thought since everything was going so well, and I’ve not caused any trouble…”

North interrupted Pitch fixing him with a raised brow, “You thought because you have behaved in manner as is expected of you that you would worm way out of full punishment?”

“No! That’s not… I’m not trying to worm my way out of my punishment… I just… I just figured maybe a little time off for good behavior might not be too much to ask for …is it?” Pitch pouted fully discouraged by North’s statement.
North grunted as he dabbed his garlic bread in his marinara sauce and took a hearty bite. An awkward silence passed between them before he finally responded, “Okay Pitch, I will grant you this. You have been very well behaved even with such adversity, so as of tomorrow morning, you may leave room freely.”

“I can!” Pitch stated overzealously; it took a modicum of control just to hold back jumping out of his seat to give the man a hug he was so happy. He couldn’t believe it! North was actually bending to his request! Pitch had been sure North was going to shoot down his suggestion when he’d stated five days wasn’t a full week, but to hear him grant him release as early as tomorrow had Pitch floating on cloud nine.

North smiled pleased to see Pitch this happy as he held out a hand, “Yes, yes, but I wish for you and Tooth to have your discussion first. Her and I… we have spoken quite a bit since you saw her last. I would like to see you two talk while I am present.”

Pitch nodded vigorously, “Sure, sure! Of course!” He was more than happy to acquiesce to just about anything if it meant he was no longer bound to his room. He’d wanted the chance to clear the air with Toothiana as well, so this couldn’t be much better Pitch thought.

“Good!” North seemed pleased, “I will let Tooth know to come by tomorrow; it will be nice to see you both on good terms again.”

Pitch nodded, “Yes, I’d like that to.” Such thoughts put Pitch in a contented mood for the remainder of the evening. They’d finished their dinner and enjoyed a bit of sculpture painting afterward. Pitch had painted the tooth for Toothiana the night before, and from another unsuccessful attempt at sculpting Pitch had deigned that particular hobby wasn’t going to be for him. That was okay though, it was far too messy anyway he’d justified to himself.

North knew Pitch still enjoyed painting, so he’d brought a few figures for Pitch, Sandy, and himself to while away their time painting together. The activity seemed to draw all of them into concentrated silence (not that Sandy wasn’t always silent anyway), but the Cossack could tell it eased Pitch’s mind for them to spend time with him in this way. This was a good practice for Pitch to stay socialized and one that North planned to ensure they continued even after Pitch’s grounding was considered officially over.

Sandy had also made plans to keep coming by to help Pitch get a good rest since the nightmare lord tended to not have such a short fuse with the guardians when he’d not been up for days at a time. It was true, they didn’t need sleep, but that wasn’t to say that it didn’t help!

Pitch had grumbled and moaned about Sandy’s ministrations at first, but after a steady good night’s sleep several nights in a row, Pitch found he hadn’t minded as much as he’d thought he would. It really did make a big difference Pitch found to the normally broken sleep he afforded himself whenever he did try to sleep without Sandy’s aid. His dreams consisted of his last thoughts on the night of riding Donner once more. He’d really missed the deer, and Pitch found the thought of getting back to them sooner than later a rather pleasing thought to slip from consciousness with.

Sandy was pleased gliding over to North once more with a satisfied smile.

North chuckled giving the golden man a knowing grin of his own, “You are quite proud of self I see? You should be, my friend. Pitch is doing better than we ever could have hoped. This is more than I had expected from time we brought him back from beside hole.”

Sandy nodded his agreement making a pictogram of Tooth over his head with a sand version of himself making a depiction of her talking to Pitch within the sandscape.
North observed and nodded as the two made their way out into the hallway and quietly closed Pitch’s door, “Yes! That is good. You tell Tooth to come by in morning when you see her tonight, and once Pitch and Tooth clear air, I think we can all move on.”

The dawn found Pitch nervously pacing about. He’d risen with a start barely before the sun had colored the sky and had quickly showered in an effort to waste time while waiting for Toothiana to arrive, although in hindsight he’d wished he’d decided to take a much longer drawn out shower or had stayed in bed a few more hours. Tooth likely would not arrive until well into the morning Pitch knew, but the anticipation alone was far too great for Pitch to remain lying in bed. He needed to expel the nervous energy coursing through him due to the impending meeting to come. He was a lot less anxious than he would have been if Pitch hadn’t had that momentary chat with Toothiana a couple days ago, but even still, he found the formal manner in which it was arranged and the fact that North intended to sit in on the engagement had Pitch’s nerves on end.

By the time North arrived with Toothiana, Pitch had made his bed, straightened all the picture frames, cleaned his table and dresser off, and completed the day’s assigned homework by Alla. He’d been absently doodling on the inside cover of his workbook when they appeared in his doorway (Pitch had also opened his door as even though he hadn’t been allowed outside of his room, he’d found that leaving the door open had allowed more of what was going on in the outside world to filter in making him feel a little less confined.)

Pitch brightened as he set his pencil down and stood to greet his company, “Toothiana! North! Welcome!” Pitch had already been sure to pull out Toothiana’s chair prior to her arrival, and as she fluttered down into the specially made chair for her, Pitch had made an effort to push her chair in politely.

Tooth smiled graciously taking her seat, “Thank you, Pitch.” She was quite impressed with the manners Pitch used now as he took his own seat once more and closed his workbook displaying the doodling he’d spent the past hour doing.

As Pitch had helped Tooth take a seat, North had similarly pulled out his own chair making himself comfortable. He found once he’d settled himself that both Pitch and Tooth were staring at him expectantly obviously waiting on him to start the parlay since he’d originally arranged it. He gestured to the two, “Go ahead; speak! I am just here as casual observer. Do not let me interfere.”

Okay,” Tooth began turning back to Pitch. She wasn’t wholly comfortable with the restricted arrangements for their meeting since it felt overly designated and far from the casual conversations the two were used to. Her eyes drew up to Pitch now, and she noted that he was nervously spinning his pencil around in small circles on the table. He was obviously also rather uncomfortable with the rendezvous. She took in a deep breath folding her hands on top of the table, “Well… where to begin? I know from our last chat that you apologized for your behavior, and I am pretty sure you were genuinely sorry.”

This was promising Pitch thought as he nodded, “Yes, I… I was quite out of line I realize. I’m going to put forth more of an effort to ensure that I have better control in the future.”

Tooth seemed to flush now in a clear sense of uncomfortableness as she shifted in her chair looking at North and then back to Pitch. She was having a hard time working up what she needed to say next. In fact, when North had suggested it, she felt like she could have dropped out of the sky from embarrassment with the mere thought of it.

North nodded at her as a show of support to go on.
Tooth tapped her nails on the table’s surface taking in a deep breath before she continued, “We both did and said a lot of things we regretted that day,” she gave Pitch a very sincere look now, “I shouldn’t have slapped you like that; I’m sorry, Pitch.”

Pitch was surprised by the admission, and the fact that she would apologize to him gave Pitch a wariness to his own cheeks pleased that she had regretted the action as much as he’d regretted bringing her to it. “Thank you, although, with the circumstances being what they were, I suppose I brought your anger down on my own head. It is still a kind gesture on your part to feel the need to apologize to me at all after everything that happened.”

Tooth cleared her throat as her face turned another shade of red, “Uh… yeah. North and I have done a lot of talking about the incident, and we both agreed that I should have handled it better for both of our sakes. Pitch…” she was having a really hard time spitting it out especially now that Pitch seemed to be watching her very intently sensing she was trying to tell him something rather difficult to wrap her head around saying to him, “We’ve had quite a few altercations where you’ve treated me poorly, and I’ve come to realize after I did take an initiative to take you in hand that you seemed to have a little more respect with the way you spoke to me and around me.”

Pitch’s face had held a smile, but now it faltered under her words having a strong suspicion where this talk was going as his stomach churned to hear her confirm what he was silently dreading. Tooth continued now a little more confident in her standing convictions the longer she spoke, “North brought up the valid point that if I have a beef to settle between us because you say something offensive or act in a given way that might merit… uh… uh merit a spanking around me then… I…I should probably step up to the plate and be the one to deliver it.” She found it hard to keep eye contact with Pitch now who’s jaw had dropped looking utterly mortified by the words that continued to pour from her, but she steadied herself to stay strong knowing to falter now would only be a disservice to Pitch. He needed her to be strong now more than ever. Tooth knew that to keep going in the cycle they had been was only delaying the inevitability of another falling out if Pitch lashed out at her in the future, “So… so from now on, if we have a disagreement to settle… I…I’m going to be the own to strap you for it… not North.”

North chimed in resolutely, “Although, if you make sweet Tooth feel need to strap you, I will put you over knee myself to have made her feel need to do it in first place I will warn you now!”

This was almost too much to take in. Pitch sat still stunned by the things that she was telling him. Would she really use that strap on him? She’d had a mean right hook, and he knew from that experience that she could definitely swing it hard enough to do some real damage. Of course North’s following statement that he could expect a follow up spanking if he’d angered Toothiana enough to feel the need to spank him in the first place wasn’t lost on Pitch and only added to the awkwardness of the entire conversation. If he could melt through the floor in sheer embarrassment, Pitch imagined doing so now. “You… you’d…” he couldn’t even bring himself to ask if she was serious, although he didn’t have to as the truth of the matter he’d realized was clearly written on her face; she wouldn’t be saying this now if she hadn’t already decided and made up her mind that she in fact would spank him if she felt the need to.

Tooth swallowed hard, “I… I would need your word that you’d agree to accept punishment from me. I’m not sure if I could hold you down, but I also don’t think I should have to. I think if it ever comes down to it, that we will come back here, and I’ll have you lie across your bed to carry out the strapping.” She was staring at Pitch now with shoulders squared back rigidly awaiting his acceptance although it was clear the notion of asking this of him was horribly embarrassing for her to ask as much as for Pitch to agree with it.
Pitch had yet to pick his jaw up off the floor as he stared back at her with an awestruck composure. He finally closed his mouth having digested her words. Still not quite believing them but comprehending them nonetheless. He fidgeted now having dropped his hands into his lap as he mulled over her words. The thought of Toothiana taking the strap to him had Pitch turning three shades of red; the fact that she was basically asking him to agree to prostrate himself before her if ever the event occurred that she felt he’d been found lacking was a lot to ask. He felt his pride ebb in a want to lash out even now, but something deeper inside him quelled it as quickly as it had cropped within him. As long as he didn’t do anything that she found that offensive, there really was nothing to worry about, Pitch assured himself now. He’d been on a much better path, and Toothiana was always much more lenient in her attitude towards him to begin with. Was it that much to give her his word that he would comply if she did feel the need to punish him? The likelihood that she would in fact punish him was rather slim comparatively he bolstered himself. Yet, he couldn’t find it in himself to respond remaining silent for long moments not really sure he could willingly agree to such terms.

Sensing his uneasiness and understanding that to ask as much from Pitch had to be something horribly difficult to wrestle with, Tooth offered, “Do you trust that I would never ask you to submit to me in such a way if I didn’t really think you truly deserved it?”

Pitch brought his eyes up from his lap to really look at her in all seriousness. He did trust her, and unbelieving to his own ears Pitch responded, “Ya-yes, I trust you. I’ll… I’ll do it, if … if you find I’ve affronted you grievously… I … I’ll defer to your judgement against me and allow you … allow you to punish me,” Pitch ducked his head as he spoke these last words no longer able to keep eye contact with what he was agreeing to. A month ago, a week ago even, Pitch doubted this conversation would have gone over this same way, and he knew it was a testament that he really had changed for them and because of them. He’d never said it aloud, but he realized, when he’d been brought back to the Pole after having run away, that he actually loved Toothiana, Sandy, North, Bunnymund, and even Jack now. Deep down, Pitch knew that they also cared about him as well although he wasn’t sure if to the same extent as he did them now, but he suspected and hoped that the feeling was mutual. He had bonded with them, and they were his family now. In that regard, Pitch knew that he could agree to Toothiana’s request and know that she would never abuse the fact that he had agreed to her terms.

Tooth flew out of her seat now and over to Pitch wrapping her arms around his neck lightly as a gesture of comfort as she pulled his face up gently to plant a kiss on his forehead, “I’m sorry I had to address that. It wasn’t easy for me to say, but I think now that we’re both on the same page, we can leave the past behind us and start fresh.”

Pitch found he couldn’t help a small smile from creeping onto his face as he gave a small nod speaking very softly, “I’d like that.”

Tooth beamed down at him, “Well, I am pretty caught up at the moment, and I’ve got a couple hours before I go head back to the palace to get some shut eye, would you like to hang out for a bit before I go?”

Pitch’s face brightened, “Perhaps you’d like to accompany me to the kitchen to grab some sugar cubes and then down to the stables? I’m excited to visit with the reindeer and see if I can bribe myself back into their good graces.”

Both Toothiana and North laughed.

North stood looking down proudly at Pitch, and the weight of his smile shone like a beacon as he spoke, “Pitch, you have shown yourself very mature today,” he nodded as if affirming the fact to himself as well, “Yes, I think you are doing very well indeed.” He lumbered away from his chair.
pushing it back in place as he continued, “I have work to attend to, but please, come and see me in my office when you and Tooth finish up for the morning.”

Pitch’s brow lifted in curiosity as he nodded standing up himself, “Uh? Oh… sure. I… I’ll drop by whenever Toothiana heads out.”

The Cossack gave Pitch one more nod of approval before turning to Tooth, “You did well too!” He couldn’t help a jolly laugh from escaping his throat at seeing Tooth was still slightly red from his compliment. He grinned, “I will see you tonight then?”

Toothiana nodded with a big smile, “Wouldn’t miss it,” she stated knowingly.

Pitch looked back and forth between the two of them feeling a bit left out not exactly following their conversation but knowing they obviously had plans of their own to meet up later after Toothiana had left for the morning. Pitch didn’t pry though, it wasn’t like he had a claim to all of Toothiana’s time, but if he had to admit it to himself, he did feel a small ounce of jealousy brew that the two of them seemed to have something planned between them that he wasn’t to be made privy to.

Pitch took in a deep breath as he clasped his hands behind his back standing up straight, “So… are you about ready to go then my dear Toothiana?”

Tooth shot a warm smile back in Pitch’s direction as she nodded, “Let’s do it!”

The three of them walked out together and down the hall where North gave them a wave as they parted ways with him heading towards his office, and Pitch and Toothiana continuing off towards the kitchens. Pitch was smiling from ear to ear finally having been given leave of his room; it was amazing how much bigger the Pole seemed after having endured five days cooped up in his very cramped living space. They made their way to the kitchens which had quite a few yetis cleaning up dishes from breakfast and several elves running about with leftovers and trying not to get stepped on by the working yetis. Pitch knew well where to go and filled his pockets with a couple handfuls of sugar cubes.

Tooth just hovered beside Pitch watching him and noting how he bounced about clearly quite happy to be about to see the reindeer. She enjoyed this side of him and hoped it lasted. She had been truly surprised that he’d agreed to what North had originally proposed that she bring to the table. In all honesty she’d expected Pitch to have thrown a hissy fit for her even suggesting that she discipline him herself let alone somberly agree to the prospect. Also, after the fact he wasn’t carrying a dark cloud of negativity over the matter they’d discussed was refreshing. She’d almost expected that after North was out of ear shot and out of sight that his demeanor might have changed to reflect any true feelings he may not have wanted to bring out in front of North. She loved North, but the man could be a bit intimidating especially in regards to his role in Pitch’s life. Tooth was relieved though that Pitch seemed just as happy now as he had when she’d offered to stay and spend some time with him. Maybe everything really was going to be just fine she thought finally letting the last remaining vestiges of doubt fall away as the two made their way towards the stables.
Trust Me

Chapter Fifty

Trust Me

Pitch was more than happy now as he playfully dipped and darted through the throng of yetis and elves feeling a high to just be free again to move unhindered. The denizens of the Pole stumbled and stopped short in lurching motions as Pitch slid artfully between them and around them. Pitch hadn’t realized that this maneuvering had become a bit of a game for him by now that although a bit surprising to the yetis traversing through the Pole’s main hub, it was no more annoying to them than the elves that constantly bumbled about underfoot and was thus overlooked in the same manner. Pitch at least was dexterous enough to avoid getting stepped on (unlike many of the clumsy elves; this was much of the reason elves ended up in the medical wing as yetis although graceful for their size were still rather large weighing around six hundred pounds and could be rather damaging to be stepped on by.)

Tooth laughed as she zipped to and fro doing her best to keep up with Pitch and finally jetting above the crowd to hover a moment and lock onto Pitch’s weaving form before zooming in a straight line to catch him off guard as she plucked him out of the crowd and up into the air. She pulled him up with a hand under the crook of each arm lifting him neatly by the shoulders to hover well above the heads of the yetis who seemed momentarily amused by the sight before moving along to their tasks.

Not expecting Toothiana to have made such a bold move as to grab him off the ground made Pitch gasp and go ridged as he stared up at her in surprise.

Tooth just smirked at him, “You know, there’s easier means to get to the stables without almost tripping everyone you come across.” Without saying another word, Tooth sped the both of them forward through the air toward the tunnel entrance in a spinning arch.

Pitch let out a yelp as he flailed wholly unused to flight in this manner, but by the time Toothiana set him down again he was laughing alongside her as he wobbled unsteadily from the spiraling loops she’d spun, “I think you may have shifted my equilibrium slightly!”

She chuckled ruffling his hair lightheartedly, “I have to keep you on your toes now don’t I?”

“I think you were doing just the opposite actually,” Pitch teased back enjoying how carefree their conversation was now. Toothiana seemed much more relaxed around him since their exchange, and he was thankful that everything seemingly had worked itself out. He was afraid that she wouldn’t forgive him fully after how badly they had gotten into it. He’d never seen her so mad!

“I suppose you’re right on that count,” Tooth smiled brightly down at Pitch as they continued on toward the stables; she was feeling much better about their relationship over all now. She wasn’t sure what exactly motivated her shift in opinion, but she supposed a better understanding of exactly where they both stood over the consistently flippant role of guardian and friend where her undefined role as a ward set her up to have to play good cop and bad cop in the same regard where her bad cop was severely lacking teeth.

She realized belatedly that her lack of a foothold in the way she approached Pitch had given cause for dissention between them. She couldn’t expect Pitch to take her seriously if she couldn’t take herself seriously. The fact that she’d moved their relationship into this next stage to solidify each other’s roles gave her a feeling of furthered responsibility to the nightmare lord as well as something
else she couldn’t quite put her finger on… confidence? Maybe. Maybe it was the fact that Pitch had also readily agreed with her edicts without a fight that made Tooth finally agree that perhaps North really had been right all along.

Either way, she felt closer to Pitch than she had before, and she found that seeing his face light up once they had made up was enough to know that if they did find themselves at odds in the future, she wouldn’t make the same mistake of pushing him away and distancing herself. He needed her, and although North had told her as much, she hadn’t really realized until now how much Pitch’s eyes reflected a true care for her opinion of him. Her guidance could help change him she knew, and from here on, she wouldn’t waffle on her own convictions. Of course that was easier said than done especially when the two were getting along well Tooth knew deep down.

Pitch was eager to get to the stables after having been separated from the reindeer for so long, and to see that Jack was there already tending to them gave immediate mixed feelings of jealousy and aggravation. Pitch knew that he had no right to feel such emotions towards Jack, North had asked the winter sprite to care for the beasts in his absence, so to direct any animosity towards Jack wasn’t really fair. He did his best to keep his face neutral sensing the frown forming on his face and working to suppress it quickly as he moved up to Jack who was whizzing around the chained Cupid brushing the deer erratically.

Tooth had noticed the frown before Pitch could tuck it away, and although she made no reaction or comment, she took mental note tensing slightly and hoping that Pitch wasn’t going to do something they’d both regret so soon after being released from restriction.

Seeing the two of them approach, Jack smiled warmly, “Hey Tooth! Hey Pitch! It’s good to see you out and about! I’m guessing you’re no longer grounded now? Or is Tooth acting as your chaperone like North was before?”

Pitch repressed the sneer that wanted to take hold of his face at the mention of his so recent punishment and the shame it made him feel to hear Jack referring to it so casually. He supposed he had become quite the habitual offender that North seemed to find need to punish him quite often enough for it to be considered business as usual. The further recognition of this fact though just made Pitch’s stomach tighten in a knot as he forced a smile on his face, “Uh… yes, I’m free to move about now, and no, Toothiana is here not out of obligation but merely company,” Pitch was doing his best to remain friendly, but there was an obvious edge to his voice.

It didn’t help to look at the reindeer and see the boy had once more brushed those ridiculous swirls into the reindeer’s fur that reminded Pitch of crop circles. He moved over to the wall grabbing a brush then before gliding back over to Cupid as he announced, “Now that I’m here, why don’t I help?” Pitch didn’t wait for an acceptance to his invitation as he immediately began brushing the odd patterns out of the reindeer’s coat seemingly pleased by the sight of smoothing out the fur.

Jack had just shrugged with as bright a smile as ever, “Sure thing, Pitch. I’ve already brushed the others, and they’re in the pen grazing already. If you want to finish up Cupid, I’ll go ahead and finish up restocking the grain in his stall.”

Pitch glanced up to watch Jack move off to do as he’d suggested, and let out a long sigh feeling slightly guilty that he couldn’t seem to discard these emotions that easily cropped up in him regarding Jack and the reindeer. It felt so petty, and yet whenever he was faced with the same situation, every time those feelings came soaring back to him even though he knew them for what they were. Maybe he hadn’t changed? It was a disheartening thought.

Tooth floated over to Pitch and laid a hand on his shoulder, “You’re doing well, Pitch.”
Pitch was startled having temporarily forgotten about Toothiana in his inner reflection. He tilted his head to look at her, the surprise registering on his face, “What?”

She smiled warmly as her eyes traversed over the reindeer and shifted towards the back of the stables where Jack had retreated to perform the given task of refilling the grain buckets, “With Jack, I can tell that you’re still feeling bothered by the fact he’s been tending the reindeer, but you’re holding back any negative comments you may have wanted to say. For that, I’m proud of you.”

Pitch blinked not realizing he’d been that transparent, “Oh…” he found himself blushing as he looked down at the brush in his hand for a lack of wanting to look in her eyes as he began to slowly brush the beast once more. It did make him feel good that even though he knew the way he felt wasn’t acceptable, Toothiana apparently saw that he wasn’t reacting on those feelings and felt that he was doing well for it. He swallowed, “Thank you… although, it’s hardly anything to be proud of me for. I am trying to do better even if my emotions are not always on the same page,” he admitted.

Tooth nodded, “It’s like that sometimes. Feeling a certain way doesn’t mean that you are acting poorly or disgracefully. What matters most is your actions and intentions. I know you tend to wear your emotions on your sleeve, and that level of honesty has its own allure, but being able to hold back those emotions to save another’s feelings is a mark of maturity, and for that I’m proud of you.”

Pitch brought his eyes back up to look at her fully now as he took in her words; he beamed a smile at her now feeling genuinely better, “That means a lot, thank you, Toothiana.”

Her own smile grew as she gave his shoulder a squeeze and let go, “Any time.” She fluttered back a few feet and over to Cupid’s muzzle as she pet the length of his snout jumping a bit when the reindeer gave its head a shake, “These guys always did make me a bit nervous,” she confessed ringing her hands and trying to decide whether she would approach the creature again.

Pitch chuckled, “They sense fear you know,” he informed a little too gleefully as he affixed her with a smirk taking in her given reaction to the reindeer’s sudden movement that had served to alarm her.

She lifted a brow crossing her arms to give Pitch a smirk of her own, “If anyone should know that; I would have to say that it would be you.”

His grin broadened as he continued brushing and stated assuredly, “Yes, it is my domain after all, but besides that, fear in these creatures only serves to rile them, so I would suggest that you not show it to them if you wish to have any rapport with them.”

Tooth tutted, “Well, reindeer are North’s thing and apparently yours and Jack’s. I think I’ll just stick with my fairies and watch from the sidelines.”

Pitch stopped brushing the reindeer to dig a sugar cube out of his pocket and feed it to the suddenly very interested reindeer, “You know, perhaps if you worked out an understanding with them, you might not feel so afraid.” He casually dropped the brush and held out a hand to her, “Would you mind?”

Tooth’s brow furrowed not quite understanding what Pitch was wanting her to do, but she hovered forward towards him with a touch of unsureness as she put her hand in his and let Pitch guide her closer to cupid.

Pitch plucked a couple sugar cubes from his pocket and gently folded Toothiana’s hand, palm up, to place the cubes into her hand as he lightly pushed her closer to the curious reindeer.

Tooth’s eyes widened as she pulled in a gasp of air and Pitch shepherded her up to the awaiting
reindeer. She laughed in both fear and excitement as she felt the reindeer slobber on her hand as it nibbled the cubes carefully from her open palm. She’d found she’d backed fully into Pitch now and could feel the bony structure of his lithe form against her back, and she blushed slightly as she giggled and jetted up into the air where she felt less confined.

She was still laughing Pitch noted as he beamed at her, “You see, that wasn’t so bad was it?” He teased.

She floated back down and gave him a cheeky grin as she shook a finger at Pitch, “Okay, I’ll admit, it wasn’t so bad, but don’t think you’re ever going to get me to ride one!”

Pitch chuckled, “We’ll see. Maybe one day I can get you to change your mind.” Pitch was filled with a warmth now fully enjoying this time spent with Toothiana. She always had a way of calming him, and for once, he’d been able to return the favor, and that felt more than good, it felt monumental.

Having heard their last words, Jack laughed as he sprinted forward into view, “Aw come on Tooth! You know you wanna!” Jack teased playfully as he skidded to a stop beside Pitch to give the fairy a mock pleading look.

Tooth although still smiling crossed her arms and rolled her eyes, “Fat chance!” She couldn’t help laughing though at the sight of both Pitch and Jack staring up at her with expectant goofy grins, “You two are not convincing me, so just stop while you’re ahead!”

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How did she manage to let them talk her into this? She wasn’t sure, but she had a death grip on the reins as her knees hugged the sides of Donner’s neck and she stiffly leaned to keep herself upright. Pitch was braced behind her for support, and Jack stood playfully on Vixen’s back gently gripping the reindeer’s antlers and smiling the biggest cheesy grin possible at her.

“Try to calm down,” Pitch’s voice thrummed melodiously from his chest as he looked down at her with a small proud smile to have gotten her on the reindeer’s back with him at all. This was the most trust they’d ever shared, and he was surprised that Jack and he had managed to talk her into giving riding a chance (in actuality it was more Jack’s persistence and his added gentle prodding that had gotten her to finally concede.) He was glad she was willing to share this with them though or more specifically him since riding was something Pitch adored, and the thought of sharing this with her specifically gave him an inner thrill because she’d been so adamantly against it. “No sudden moves, and we’ll have just a leisurely ride… as promised,” Pitch chuckled.

Pitch’s chuckle made her a bit wary, and Tooth gave him a sour glace back over her shoulder, “You two better not pull any tricks on me,” she warned as an afterthought realizing belatedly that she’d agreed to try this with two known tricksters although she trusted Pitch a little more to not prank her in this regard. Tooth was still quite nervous she found as Pitch gave a gentle prod with his feet to the reindeer’s side to set Donner to jerk forward into a light trot.

“Just remember, if all else fails, you can fly, so you can get off the ride at any time,” Pitch reassured with a sly smile. It was rather humorous to see Toothiana so out of her element, and he’d be lying if he didn’t acknowledge that he was drinking in her fear. This fear was a good fear though as it brimmed with enthusiasm and was tinged with a layer of excitement; it didn’t make Pitch feel guilty for enjoying it, and that in itself was refreshing for him.

It was in fact that she flew that was the only way they’d actually convinced her to try riding at all. Knowing that she could abandon the expedition at any time safely and that Pitch would still have full control of the animal made the experience less frightening she had to admit, and the two weren’t
going to give it a rest unless she at least gave it a go she’s figured. Tooth took in a gulp of air trying to adjust. She found herself staring in awe at the rippling muscles and was absorbed in the sensation of the animal moving under her. She’d never really had need to ride an animal having had wings from a very young age, so to do so now was interestingly soothing she found.

Pitch noticed that Toothiana was finally starting to relax, and he leaned forward coming so close that her head crest tickled at his cheek, “Well? What do you think? Do you like it?”

Tooth was a bit unnerved by the unexpected closeness, not that it bothered her, but Pitch’s nature always left him to move so fluidly and quietly that she hadn’t realized he was leaning down to speak with her until his face was already within inches of hers. He was smiling brightly at her she noted obviously quite pleased with his efforts, and this made Tooth smile back as she nodded, “It’s nice. I think I do like it.”

“Good!” Pitch glowed, “I knew you would! You just had to give it a try,” he stated this as he leaned back swiveling his head in a cocky fashion to depict his self-confidence regarding her opinion was a given and expected response.

Tooth just scoffed playfully, “Okay, okay. You two were right, this is kind of fun.”

Jack guided Vixen closer and sat down backwards to look fully at Tooth with his ever present smirk that hinted of mischief to come as he bouncily rocked about in a carefree manner, “If you think this is fun, wait till we really get going! Trotting isn’t really fun as much as ‘fun-lite’, and trust me,” Jack pointed at his chest knowingly, “I know fun!”

Amused by the fact Jack’s words alone had caused Toothiana to stiffen, Pitch added, “You know, he’s right. What do you say we liven this ride up a bit?” His words oozed with eagerness. Pitch wanted to see her reaction to a little more speed and jostling if only to get the waves of invigorated panic he knew the event was sure to evoke in her. It was all in good fun after all.

Tooth chewed on her bottom lip looking back and forth between the two and feeling her resolve crumble a bit she cleared her throat, “Alright. I think I can handle a little more speed… not too much!” She exclaimed quickly as she felt Pitch give Donner a kick to send the reindeer into a full trot.

Jack’s laugh trailed beside them as he flipped back around and hooted in his excitement spurring Vixen into a full out run.

Donner followed suit, and Tooth screamed in her fright feeling exhilarated and rattled by the suddenness as she squeezed her eyes closed tightly. She was close to disengaging from the reindeer to fly off the beast and end the ride, but she felt Pitch’s arm then cradle around her waist to secure her, not forcibly, but comfortingly.

Of course he’d known when she was on the brink of losing it (he’d been honing in on it all along; he couldn’t help himself.) Pitch had let Toothiana ride that roller coaster until he felt her about to give in; he didn’t want her to, so in an attempt to calm her, Pitch had pulled her to him in hopes of making her feel safer. Pitch had been worried the action might have made her feel more afraid to think he was keeping her held in place, so he had done so gently to show full intent that he was not restricting her but supporting her; she still had the freedom to disembark as she willed.

Toothiana’s frame sidled against Pitch and the anxiety that coursed through her leveled out as she continued to laugh and scream out from the sheer delight of the unexpectedness the ride gave her fully confiding in Pitch to steady her.
Pitch was more than pleased when he felt Toothiana relax with him pleasantly surprised that she was confident enough in him to know he could keep her secure from harm.

The three of them rode across the snowy expanse laughing and thoroughly enjoying the ride. By the time they had made it back to the stables, they were trotting at a moderate pace once more just quietly relaxing and taking in the view.

As they grew closer, Toothiana took to the air turning back to Pitch and Jack with a wide smile, “I have to get going, but… thanks. I never would have tried that if you two hadn’t convinced me. I can say now that you were right Jack, going faster was more fun. I shouldn’t have doubted your expertise,” she giggled.

Jack perked as he gave her a salute, “Always happy to bring a little more fun to the table. Maybe next time you might want to race?”

Tooth laughed, “No. I don’t think so! But… nice try Jack.” He winked at her, and she turned back to Pitch as she regarded him fondly moving to hover at his eye level, “Thank you for helping me stick it out back there. You knew exactly when my courage was about to waver, and you helped me remain strong. That’s… that’s not something you typically do is it? I mean… I know fear is your thing, but you took the time to help me face it and made it so I wasn’t as afraid anymore.”

Pitch found himself blushing and ducking his head unable to continue staring into her bright cerise eyes. Her words were true, it wasn’t what he typically did. In fact, other than the nightmare with Bunnymund, it never happened, he’d helped quell her fear over inflame it, and that too had felt good. He chanced a glance at her now, and she was still smiling that warm inviting smile that filled him with hope and a want to do better for her and them, “Maybe that’s what I can focus my efforts on… I mean when I get back out in the world again… using my abilities. Tempering fear over causing it.” His eyes shifted to take her expression in fully now wondering how his mention of eventual reemergence into the real world would go over with Toothiana as well as his suggestion.

Tooth’s eyes glittered as she nodded eagerly, “That sounds like an excellent idea, Pitch. You should bring it up to North when you two next speak.” It was an optimistic step in the right direction to see Pitch considering the future, and his idea to help buffer fear was definitely in his range of power. It could be a positive spin for him that North might get behind. Although she was sure that North would likely not be willing to let him do so anytime soon. North was a bit obstinate in that way, “On second thought, I’m going to see him tonight, why don’t you let me bring it up.”

Pitch blinked taking in her words, “Uh… sure. If you think it would be for the best,” Pitch smiled appreciatively. Coming from Toothiana was far better than him he knew since North always seemed wary of his intentions. Maybe if Toothiana spoke to the Cossack first to put a bug in the man’s ear, Pitch might have a better chance of actually gaining his favor.

Tooth gave Pitch a small smile as she turned about in the air to look down at her friends, “Alright you two, I’ve got to head out, so I’ll see you later,” as an afterthought she glanced over her shoulder giving them a smirk, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

Both Jack and Pitch exchanged a look and gave her mischievous smiles. Tooth just shook her head and headed off towards the Tooth Palace. She had work to catch up on before coming back to see North later.

Pitch watched her fly out of sight a wistful expression taking over his features as he thought on the past couple hours and how he hadn’t wanted it to end. His thoughts moved to the last exchange about his future Toothiana mentioned, and it made him realize that he really wanted a purpose, he needed one because what he was before he was discovering wasn’t what he wanted anymore. He
could be more, give more, and still feel good about it as long as he remained balanced.

He liked the feeling that came with using his powers where the aftermath wasn’t terror. It was true that the headiness garnered from the level of fear Bunnymund afforded from his nightmare and Toothiana gave on their outing wasn’t near the level that he’d gorged on when he’d normally sought power, but it had been enough, and small amounts in concentrated doses like that would still give him enough to not only sustain but be comfortably satisfied. The guardians would be happy with him, like Toothiana was, and this too made Pitch happy.

“Pitch? Earth to Pitch!” Jack floated upside down now in front of the nightmare lord waving a hand in front of his face to get his attention.

Pitch was quick to shift his eyes over to the winter sprite as he blinked and then gave him a smirk, “Were you ready to call it quits yet, or did you still want to race Frostcicle!”

Jack’s smile broadened, “Oh you’re on!” Taking to the air, Frost leaped on Vixen’s back and made a chittering noise spurring the reindeer to jolt forward into a gallop and into the air.

Pitch laugheded snapping his reins and giving Donner a kick to the sides to send the reindeer careening after Jack as he vaulted into the air to catch up.

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