While I'm alone and blue as can be

by TheVineSpeaketh

Summary

Bunny catches a glimpse of a nightly ritual he was never meant to see.

Jack often ponders about what it would be like to lead a tactile, romantic life.

The good news is that Hope and Joy often blend together perfectly.

Notes

This is written on the fly and off the cuff--I have little to no idea if it makes sense. I hope it does!

This is me getting back into the swing of writing. Thank you for giving this a read!

* Inspired by *I'm Longing to Linger Until Dawn, Dear* by littleyounggun
Chapter 1

There were a lot of things Bunny didn’t understand.

For instance, how Jack could move like a liquid, flowing gracefully on his feet and gliding through the air with ease, but be cool enough for tears to dry on the tips of his eyelashes. Or how he could freeze water vapor and form it into silhouettes of beautiful strangers, making them spin and twirl on the small pond he called home.

Bunny had never intended to become aware of this particular habit; it just sort of happened, and once he had taken notice of it, there wasn’t much he could do to dispel his curiosity. On days when Jack was quieter than usual, he would retreat to his pond and conjure up his dancers, swaying to some inaudible song that only he could hear. The dancers were never consistent, save one particular pair, but Bunny could recognize when most of them were supposed to be from, if the vague icy outlines of their clothes were to be believed: the highest fashions of Regency and Victorian London, and the decadent ballroom wear of the upper class from the later years of Imperial Russia. There were Indian women who danced in groups of three, wearing icy saris that rippled as they moved, and couples seemingly in the midst of *laylat al-henna* that stared into each other’s eyes, smiles on their faces.

The one couple that never changed wore moderately-popular colonial garments and swayed together in an anachronistic waltz that they would have been too chaste to enact in reality. Sometimes the waltz was formal, the couple dancing a slow square together, and other times, they took up nearly the whole pond, swirling confidently around the makeshift dance floor, the occasional gust of wind blowing at the man’s coattails and the woman’s dress and sending a glittering shower of snowflakes swirling through the air.

Jack never danced, but he watched his dancers with rapt attention, smiling in an absent way. He always sat out of the way, curled into himself on a tree branch and sitting almost completely still, as if he were sculpted out of ice himself. He watched them dance, and didn’t sleep. The world seemed to fade as they moved, and Jack looked like watching them dance was all he ever needed.

Bunny didn’t understand it. The first time he had caught the show had been an accident: Phil had knitted Jack a scarf for Christmas, worrying (not for the first time) that Jack was underdressed for winter, and in the ensuing frivolities, Jack had accidentally forgotten about it and left it behind. Aster had caught a glimpse of its rainbow-y length as he had been helping North clean up, and after sorting out all the miscellaneous teacups and cocoa mugs, he’d resolved to stop by the pond and drop the scarf off to Jack before heading back to the Warren for some shut-eye.

He’d opened the tunnel a safe distance away from where he knew Jack slept, deciding it would be rude to appear right where he slept, and had walked the short distance to the pond. He’d just opened his mouth to call out to Jack when he’d noticed the dancers on the pond, and had been shocked quickly into silence. He’d watched them, and Jack, until Jack had fallen asleep where he sat and the dancers blew away in a gentle breeze, still dancing to their private song.

Bunny had gone back to the Warren in a daze, unable to comprehend this new information. Jack Frost—the same Jack who had been laughing in Santoff Clausen not a few hours before, the same Jack who had greeted him at the party by scratching him behind the ear (the cheeky bastard), the same Jack who had iced his cocoa with a snowball and had decorated the windows with little ice
murals—boisterous, happy-go-lucky, fiercely loyal Jack Frost—had gone back to his pond and created a private dance, watching until he had fallen asleep.

Jack, as far as Bunny knew, was never really cryptic; everything he did or said usually included explicit meaning. But that was when he was with his fellow Guardians. This private ceremony, which Bunny had accidentally stumbled upon, wasn’t meant for anyone else: it was for Jack alone. And Bunny couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

As he thought, he wandered around his home, his hands absently making him a chamomile tea. The scarf followed him into every room he stopped in; it sat on the counter and waited for him to finish his tea, and then appeared next to Bunny’s nest as he curled up to go to sleep. When he finally fell asleep, he dreamed vividly: the tall man in the middle of the pond spun with his partner, both of them wearing flowing clothes, and this time he could hear the music. Bunny was among them, another dancer in silhouette, spinning with a pretty Pooka made of ice. Jack was still on the sidelines, his arms around his knees, watching the dancers with rapt attention.

When Bunny woke up, the first thing he saw was the scarf haphazardly piled on his nightstand, a shock of color in the early morning light. He took it to Jack after breakfast, almost expecting something about him to be different, but Jack just laughed and swung the scarf around his neck, examining the bright colors and running it through his hands.

“Hey, thanks, Kangaroo,” he said with a smile, his eyes on the scarf, and nothing about him had changed. “I didn’t know where I’d misplaced it. You’re a lifesaver.”

“The name’s Bunny,” Bunny instinctively groused back, glad his mouth could work for him despite his brain stuttering. “And it’s no problem. Just don’t go leaving your things at North’s place too often; he might insist you move in if you keep it up.”

Jack laughed, finally looking up at Bunny, and any wistfulness that was present on his face the night before seemed to have vanished, floating away on the breeze like the snowflakes his dancers turned into. “I’m not so sure about that,” Jack replied. “With all the trouble I’d cause, I’m sure he’d at least have second thoughts, if not refrain from asking me in the first place.”

“You ain’t all bad,” Bunny said, ruffling Jack’s hair, and Jack swatted at his hand, but it was playful. There was no stiffness in his movements, no underlying sadness in his eyes, and maybe Bunny was overanalyzing everything, but he just didn’t get it. There was such a large gap between the Jack he saw last night and the Jack he was seeing now that they couldn’t have been the same person—but they were. Bunny couldn’t reconcile it.

“I’m bad to the bone, Cottontail,” Jack replied, and Bunny stifled a laugh.

“Sure you are, mate,” Bunny said. “And I’m an actual kangaroo. This whole ‘bunny’ thing is just an elaborate disguise.”

“I knew it,” Jack teased, and he dodged a swipe of Bunny’s paw, laughing in the air.

Ever since the first night, Bunny came back every night, peeking in to see whether or not the dancers spun on the lake. Rare was the night in winter where the watertop was completely still. The dancers always changed, and the dance always changed, but there were two things that stayed the same: the colonial couple always danced in the middle of the pond, and Jack was always watching them.

Bunny didn’t understand it, but he thought that maybe, if he gave it time, he might one day figure it out.
Until then, he played the silent observer, too.

Chapter End Notes

I keep forgetting to add notes to pertinent chapters! So here are the notes for this one! Correct me if the information is incorrect: I will also correct the usage in-story.

*Laylat al-henna* is a particular Tunisian marriage ceremony in which the bride and groom are tattooed with henna in patterns meant to bless their marriage and bless them with fertility and successful childbirth. Particular garments evoke this ceremony, including the *mwashma*, which is an elaborately embroidered dress.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

This chapter is hilariously titled "Total Eclipse of the Heart" in my head, because Jack is so lovesick. It's hilariously so because I recently saw the music video for that song and it seems like Bonnie Tyler is seeing demons.

I want to thank everyone who's left kudos and comments so far--this is my first foray into the Guardians fandom, and that was such a warm welcome! I can only hope I continue to entertain. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Admittedly, Jack hadn’t thought much about romance during his tenure as a spirit.

He hadn’t thought about it much before then, either. His returned memories gave him confirmation that his mind was always on his little sister, on his mother, on his father, on making people smile and helping people through the dark times. The closest he got to what one could call a “romantic overture” was when he brought herbs and berries from the woods to a girl his age to help her with her sickly mother and to keep her fed, but even then, his mind was ever on the task of making things better, making people happier.

Jack’s concept of romance was nebulous at best when he was alive, and remained as such long after he wasn’t. He recalled that state of mind—of insisting that people were happy—following him even after his death, even after he was gifted the chance to live as a spirit by the Man in the Moon.

And then centuries had gone by, and he had not long ago celebrated the new millennium. He’d caught romance everywhere, felt the joy the way one can feel a kitten’s purr when they bury their hand in its coat, and had tried his best to help maintain the mood—he may or may not have been the inspiration for “Baby It’s Cold Outside,” but either way, he’ll take that tidbit to the grave. North would laugh hysterically if he knew, Bunny wouldn’t let him hear the end of it if he found out that was Jack’s doing.

Jack’s cheeks frosted over, and he sighed, uncurling himself from where he’d gotten comfortable in a random bell tower. He was somewhere in upstate New York, having drifted north from his usual haunt (a term which he had come to love now that children could see him, but used to flinch at) to follow a suspiciously bald dog. It actually had been a Qiqirn, once Jack had gotten close enough to see it, but it looked so terrified that it had no doubt either heard its name, or figured out it had come too far south. Whichever the answer was, Jack had let it be for now; the thing could do no harm when terrified, and it seemed in a one-track mind to get as far north as possible, so it wouldn’t stop for anyone.

Jack peered out over the small town, seeing nothing but fields and a few houses speckling the landscape. The church he had stopped at was right near the heart of the town, but it petered out relatively quickly. It reminded him a bit of Burgess back when he had first lived there.

He peered at the numbers behind him; it was already five o’clock, and soon the sun would sink below the horizon. Jack needed to get back to his pond; it was still January, so the ice would still
be thick, and that meant he could indulge himself again before he went to sleep. Smiling to
himself, he crouched low before jumping high into the air, drifting a bit before the wind caught
him and hauled him south.

He’d started his little ritual shortly after he’d first gotten caught by romance. Luckily, he hadn’t
been caught by any love spirits or deities (though Xochiquetzal had once caught him frosting over
a not-so-small section of Middle America and had merely sized him up before telling him he was
quite fertile and his children would be gorgeous—he’d never been back since, it’d be so awkward),
but in a strange twist, he had been caught by movies. Specifically, The Princess Bride.

It’d been 1987, and Jack had seen, in passing, that the theater in Burgess was showing The Princess
Bride for the first time. Jack had grown up on tales of princesses, knights, and kingdoms, and had
spun quite a few himself specifically for his little sister, so the film had caught his eye and had
tugged at his nostalgia. He’d snuck inside the theater, caught a seat high in the back, far away from
the people, and had settled in for a good time.

He did indeed have a good time, but he hadn’t accounted for love. Westley and Buttercup looked at
each other the way people sung about in songs. Westley’s hands were primed for war and callused
from work, but he touched her face so softly and sweetly that Jack was left in awe. Buttercup loved
so fiercely and Westley fought so hard that Jack couldn’t help but wonder if maybe—love might
have been something—or everything—and what was it like?—and how did you know?—and how
did it feel to hold someone else’s hand—to push someone behind you and keep them safe—to pull
someone close and just hold them—just to be content there—forever?

Jack had left the theater with too many thoughts and not enough ways to expel them, so he’d sat on
top of the theater and tried his hardest not to make it snow, watching people come out of the
theater, wondering how many of them were on dates, or how many were in love. It finally came to
a point where he couldn’t hold the snow back anymore, but by then it had been midnight, so the
streets were practically bare. He’d flown back to his pond and had stared at the empty space as if it
could offer him solace, but it seemed too empty.

So he filled it. One by one he’d drawn shapes in the snow, decorating the trees with icy ornaments
that glittered in the moonlight. He skimmed the layer of snow coating the pond off to one side,
engraving a snowflake pattern in it with the end of his staff. Then, he’d coated the ice with a layer
of frost, stepped back, and watched as figures emerged from within the frost.

At first, the dancers had just been Westley and Buttercup, but as time went on, he’d gotten more
adept at making forms out of ice, and soon Inigo and Fezzik had joined the dance as well, Inigo
standing on Fezzik’s toes and holding his large hands, the pair swaying back and forth, their
mouths open in silent laughter. And as Jack traveled more, and remembered more from his travels,
he added more and more people: two nameless Parisian women got a small fashion tweak and spun
together, their bobbed hair swinging about their heads and their necklaces spinning on their chains.
An East Berliner and a West Berliner relived the relief of watching the wall come down by
waltzing and grinning. Anyone who looked even remotely in love appeared on Jack’s pond later at
night, and he caught himself swinging by wedding ceremonies, dance halls with open doors,
restaurants with large windows, and scenic overlooks, even when he didn’t need to be there.

And one night, when he’d been watching his dancers spin under the stars, he’d wondered whether
or not his parents had been in love.

Back then, he hadn’t even known he’d had parents, much less whether they were in love. But he’d
made facsimiles of what he believed his parents would look like, and they’d danced the waltz,
because Jack found it romantic. At first he’d had them wearing clothes from the Industrial
Revolution era, because he’d not been entirely sure what year it had been when he’d first woken up, and that was the time he could remember best, but after he’d gotten his memories back, he’d fixed the error.

Their faces changed, and their clothes changed (he put them in nice clothes; they would have liked it), and he watched them dance and smiled fondly at them, remembering with no small amount of joy that they were very much in love when he was alive: they always squeezed one another’s hands, and smiled at one another, finding joy in one another’s company, whether they were completely silent or if they had much to discuss. They looked at one another like Westley and Buttercup looked at one another, albeit in a much subtler way (it had, after all, been the 17th century), and they had treated their children with love and care. Jack took comfort from knowing that his parents had fallen in love with one another, and they had been happy as long as he had known them.

Jack got back to Burgess and settled down at his pond at around nine at night, and the moon was bright and full, the sky clear of clouds. Tonight, he decided, was a good night for a dance. He wasted no time in getting to work, letting the tedious preparations for his ritual get him excited for what was to come.

When all was finally ready, he took one look at the venue he’d made—he’d chosen a frost motif for the snow murals this time, and the ornaments had thick snowflakes on either side of them—before stepping out on the ice and touching his staff to the frost he’d laid here. Then, he stepped back.

All at once, a dozen or so figures rose from the ice, all in different garb, and grabbed a partner, beginning to move in a dance. As usual, Jack’s parents were among them, smiling and arcing wide in their waltz. Tonight, everyone danced in a synchronized waltz, and so the crowd moved as a unit, twirling around skillfully and not touching one another, all of them together making up the beautiful tableau.

Jack curled up on his tree, his eyes never leaving the crowd, resting his chin on his knees and folding his arms across them. He grinned dreamily, watching them smile and move. The waltz he had in mind was playing in his head, and they moved in time with it splendidly, as they always did.

Jack had never learned to waltz, but he didn’t need to. He’d watched enough waltzes over the years at winter balls and the like that he knew how the dancers moved, and could replicate it easily. Besides, he mused, he didn’t have a partner, so there was no point in trying to learn, anyhow. Nobody would really want to dance, and even if they did, they certainly wouldn’t want to do it with Jack Frost of all people.

That didn’t mean Jack didn’t think about it, though: about what it would be like to dance with somebody, to glide across a dance floor in someone’s arms, or even just to hold someone’s hand, pull them close into a lover’s embrace. To fall asleep at night feeling someone pressed against the length of his body. To be kissed, maybe.

Jack jerked his head, trying to rid himself of the mental images. He had lived hundreds of years without wanting this—how come it seemed like he suddenly couldn’t live without it? How come this sudden wish for non-platonic love in his life was eating at him more than anything else ever had?

A bit of frost shivered near the edge of the pond, and Jack knew without looking what was going to emerge. He conjured a snowball and threw it, the slowly-burgeoning figure crumpling back into snow, a shower of snowflakes drifting over the pond, adding a sweet shimmer to the scene for a
few moments.

Jack glared at the frost, as if daring the figure to try to come out again. And then there was that, Jack thought, knowing that it wasn’t the ice’s fault but still glaring anyway. That was quickly becoming a problem.

He was good at handling that particular issue when it was pertinent. Jack Frost was nothing if not the king of playing things off for a laugh; if he got too gooey, he could write it off as friendly affection, and everyone would be none the wiser. It was so easy to take the strange things he was feeling—the affection, the attachment, the longing—and bury them when he was around the other Guardians. When work needed doing, Jack was never distracted, and when things were loud and crazy, usually after a job well-done, nothing ever seemed in danger of slipping out of his control.

It was the quiet moments, usually well into the evenings after successful child-guarding, that usually had Jack scrambling for some semblance of sanity. Evenings when North fell asleep in his armchair, Tooth left to help with an influx of teeth, and Sandy had already punched in for the night were some of the worst nights Jack had ever dealt with. Those were the nights when Bunny would smile fondly at North and cover him in a quilt, hopping around tidying up the room, quietly gathering dishes and straightening everything out. He moved with such comfort and ease that it just seemed natural and right, and Jack was infinitely grateful that Bunny did that when he was around, because it meant that Jack had become something of a staple in Bunny’s life. Or at least he was comfortable around him. Either way, it meant something. And when Bunny sent soft smiles Jack’s way…

The worst was when Jack would doze on the armchair farthest away from the fire (put there especially for him), he would sometimes wake up to find a thin blanket being draped over him carefully, making sure to keep his hands and feet in the cool air—a kind and thoughtful gesture.

One particular incident always came to the forefront of his mind. It wasn’t the first time he’d been blanketed, and it wasn’t the last, but he’d awoken as he felt the fabric against the skin of his shins, hearing the gentle sound of Bunny’s fur against the fabric.

“Hmm?” he mumbled, beginning to rouse himself, but a large paw gently pushed him back down on the chair, a soft “shh” permeating the silence.

“I’m sorry for waking ya, Frostbite,” Bunny hummed in a low tone. “Please go back to sleep.”

“M’pond,” Jack said, pushing himself up on his elbows. “What time is’t?”

But the paw pressed him back down again. The other paw rested on his head, gently carding through his hair, and it felt nice. He nuzzled into the throw pillow he’d curled up with earlier.

“You’re too tired to fly off like this,” Bunny said. “Burgess will be fine for a few hours. Catch some shut-eye.”

“M’kay,” Jack murmured, drifting back into sleep, and the paw in his hair lingered. He fell asleep before he could feel it leave.

Jack’s cheeks frosted over again, and he threw another snowball at some suspiciously moving frost. It was memories and times like those that Jack couldn’t deal with. It was bad enough that he had romance on his mind anyway—but to want it with Bunny? The Guardian who took the longest to convince he was good: the last of the Guardians to accept his friendship? It was almost torture at this point. He was half-convinced that maybe Xochiquetzal had actually gotten him back for that unexpected blizzard in Middle America, and he just didn’t know it.
But still, he thought, letting his mind wander. It would be nice, maybe. Bunny’s fur was always soft and well-kempt, he was a Pooka of conviction, hard-working and dedicated, and he loved kids. And his laugh was really nice, once he heard it, and hearing the name “Frostbite” with a tinge of fondness was always a surefire way to brighten up his day—

He shook his head again. No way. Regardless of how he might feel about Bunny, he was almost certain nothing like that would ever be reciprocated. Bunny was older than almost all the Guardians combined—his age was probably exceeded only by Sandy’s. He wouldn’t be interested in an upstart, especially one he had a sordid history with. They didn’t mesh well, after all: Bunny was reliable, and stable, and dedicated to a fault, and Jack just… wasn’t.

Jack sighed, pulling his knees close and watching the figures dance, but the joy he got from watching them was hollow now. It was eclipsed by the lump in his throat growing bigger, a tingling sensation in the vague shape of a paw print on his chest, and the distant thrum of a Pooka made of ice attempting to make itself.

He wouldn’t let it; it would only be a poor facsimile of the real thing.

Chapter End Notes

Edit: I was very tired when I posted this chapter last night, and I forgot to add notes!

A Qiqirn is an Inuit spirit that terrorizes hunters. It looks like a bald dog with hair on the tip of its tail, its mouth, its ears, and its paws. People are said to have spasms when they go near it. You can usually scare it off by yelling its name at it.

Xochiquetzal is an Aztec goddess of love, fertility, childbirth, motherhood, desire, and many more. She’s probably one of the most intense love goddesses I have ever read about due to how wide her representation spreads. If it falls under "love" or "sex," she’s probably in charge of it.
Chapter 3

Jack had been hanging around with the others at North’s when he’d felt it.

He’d been in the middle of telling a joke about a white dog and a large snowbank when a wave of terror seemed to wash through the snow outside. The North Wind battered at the windows, rattling the panes. Jack stood from where he’d been sitting, his eyes wide and unseeing.

He’d long ago learned to hone his ability to read the snow for any creatures that may be abusing its cover or its power for their own uses. Time and growth into a Guardian had made it so he could more easily sense these things, especially when they were preying on children.

Like this one was.

The shock that raced through Jack spurred him into action, and he ran toward the window, grabbing his staff and pulling his hood over his head.

“What is it?” Tooth asked, rising into the air and following closely behind Jack. He perched on the windowsill, throwing the window open.

“Ijiraq,” he said firmly, leaping into the air and catching the wind. He flew as fast as he could, the Wind tugging him along with a roar.

It didn’t take long. He landed in the middle of a clearing where the smell of fear was the strongest, looking around. The moonlight was bright, but the tall pine trees obscured most of the forest floor, their jutting silhouettes silent yet foreboding. Jack kept his staff at the ready, breathing as quietly as possible, scanning the forest floor around him for any footprints.

A scream broke the silence. Jack’s head shot up, and he barely caught a glimpse of a hulking figure in the corner of his eye before it disappeared within the trees. Keeping his head turned to the side, Jack headed in that direction, gliding as often as he could to avoid walking through the crunching snow.

Another scream sounded in the night—and it was a little girl’s scream. Jack sped up his pace, always turning his head and peeking through the corner of his eye. The silhouette was always a bit ahead of him, running at a fast pace and seemingly growing faster. The tracks in the snow, when he caught a glimpse of them, were bear tracks, and if the size of the Ijiraq was any indication, it had taken the form of a grizzly bear.

No matter how often Jack tried to catch up, the Ijiraq always kept its distance ahead of him. Frustrated, Jack took to the trees, watching the Ijiraq move through the forest before propelling himself high into the air, soaring ahead of the Ijiraq and, estimating where it would be, plunging back into the trees.

His guess was correct. He landed in front of the grizzly bear, which reared up on its hind legs and roared. The child it had captured fell from its mouth, landing with a thud on the forest floor. She didn’t move.

The temperature plummeted, the trees cracking in the cold, and Jack hopped onto his staff, looking the bear in the eye.
“I suppose you weren’t intending on letting this one go,” he hissed, and the bear huffed a growl, its body swiftly rearranging itself as it shifted into a humanoid form. It still had hair covering most of its body, but its face obtained a few more human qualities.

“I might have been,” the Ijiraq replied, its voice low and dry. “If you hadn’t been chasing me, I might not have carried her so recklessly.”

“Leaving her at home wasn’t an option?” Jack didn’t move toward her—the Ijiraq was too close to her, and it could easily scoop her back up and take off again—but he kept a close eye on her. Her back was moving with each breath, but they were quick. Jack’s heart dropped into his stomach.

“She comes from an abusive family,” the Ijiraq intoned, looking down at her. “I was going to take her away to a safer place. Keep her out of harm’s way.”

“No you weren’t,” Jack said, and the Ijiraq caught his eye again. Jack was looking at it head on, which meant it wanted to be seen. “But we’ll ignore that, for now. I’ll cut you a deal.”

The Ijiraq folded its hairy arms, its claws glistening in the moonlight. “And what would that be?” it asked.

“We can play your little game between the two of us, fair and square. Let the girl go, and you can have me. I’ll come quietly, I promise: no tricks.” He put his hands up, still balanced on his staff. “But if I convince you to let me go, you have to. It’s the same game, but you stand to win a bigger reward.” He shrugged. “What do you say?”

The Ijiraq gazed at him for a moment before strolling around him, its breath ghosting across the back of Jack’s neck. As it came around to the front of him again, its eyes snapped back to his, and it turned to face him fully.

“Do we have a deal?” Jack asked, his hands still up in front of him. He looked down at the girl, hoping that one of the other Guardians thought to follow him.

“Deal,” the Ijiraq growled, and it leapt for Jack, transforming back into a bear and pinning Jack to the ground. Jack struggled instinctively as it roared in his face, grasping at his staff and sending a bolt of ice, not at the Ijiraq, but at a tree nearby the girl, freezing everything in the vicinity in a thick layer of ice, hoping the moonlight would draw attention to it.

The Ijiraq leaned low and grasped Jack’s arm in its mouth, and Jack let out a yell, dropping his staff. With Jack in tow, the Ijiraq bounded through the woods, keeping Jack’s arm secured in its teeth. Jack tried to scramble to his feet to keep his back and neck from dragging along the forest floor, but he slipped, the awkward angle making it impossible to hoist himself off the ground.

Jack’s mind raced. “Aren’t you afraid of encountering a Wendigo?” he asked, his heels scraping through the snow.

“Do I look human?” the Ijiraq replied, leaping over a fallen tree and barreling on.

Jack freed his arm from the Ijiraq’s mouth, grasping at the Ijiraq’s fur in an attempt to haul himself off the ground. “I’m no ordinary winter spirit, you know,” he said, ignoring the pain in his arm. He couldn’t move it very much.

“Then what are you?” the Ijiraq growled.

“I am a Guardian of Childhood,” he replied. “You will bring down the wrath of the Man in the Moon if you do not release me.”
“Rules and laws do not apply in the northern wilds,” the Ijiraq said with a laugh. The woods were growing thicker, and it wouldn’t be long before they were lost in the thicket.

“I have fellow Guardians,” Jack said, cradling his arm close as he leaned low on the Ijiraq’s back. “They know I’m missing. They’ll find me.”

“I know these woods,” the Ijiraq replied. “Just let them try.”

Panic flooded Jack’s gut. This Ijiraq was more stubborn than most of them; it wasn’t letting him go without a really good reason, and Jack was quickly running out of those. The pain in his arm distracted him, and he gripped the Ijiraq’s fur as tightly as he could, trying not to fall off its side. He made himself think. “I have destroyed stronger spirits than you before.” His voice wavered as his arm throbbed in pain. “It would be easy to get rid of you.”

“And you said you wouldn’t,” the Ijiraq replied. “Do you mean to tell me that our deal was made on falsehoods? If so, I can let you go and retrieve the girl right now.”

Before Jack could protest, a strong body barreled into him from the right, knocking him off the Ijiraq. He was wrapped tightly in strong arms as they twirled through the air, landing with a thud and skidding on the ground, Jack on top of his rescuer. Even half-buried in the snow as they were, Jack knew who was holding him by the ever-present smell of springtime and good soil after a light spring shower.

The Ijiraq stopped in its tracks, turning toward them and roaring, rising up onto its hind legs and towering over them. Aster spun them around, covering Jack’s body with his own, one hand grabbing a boomerang. The Ijiraq roared again, but it was cut off as North, from a tree above, jumped onto its back, grappling with it. Tooth swept down from above and used her wings to create a gale that sent snow flying into the Ijiraq’s eyes.

“Y’alright there, Frostbite?” Aster asked, and Jack looked up at Aster, his eyes wide and his pulse jumping. He was hurt, and a little upset, worried about the girl—

“The girl,” he yelled, trying to rise, but Aster grasped his uninjured shoulder, gently helping him to his feet at a steady pace.

“She’s fine,” he replied. “She’s a bit bruised, but she’s not hurt too badly. She’s in the Warren, having a cocoa with Sandy. I patched her up; she’ll be right as rain in no time.” Aster skimmed a look over Jack, and what he saw made him frown, his brows pinching. “You don’t look so good.” As if on cue, Jack wobbled where he stood, and Aster lunged forward to grab him. “Jack—”

“Get them off me!” the Ijiraq cried, turning into a deer and slipping free of North’s grip, rushing toward Jack. Aster pushed Jack behind him, growling and holding up his boomerang, but the Ijiraq collapsed to its knees in front of them, bowing its head.

“I am begging you, please,” the Ijiraq said, looking past Aster at Jack. “I believe you. You have convinced me! Please, I am begging you, call them off! I will go further into the woods, as far away from people as I can. You have my word! You are free from our bond. Please!”

Aster seemed mistrustful, but as Jack moved, his anger melted into disbelief. He watched as Jack moved toward the Ijiraq, kneeling low and pressing his hand to its forehead, ruffling the fur between its ears. It flinched, but after a moment of petting, relaxed into the sensation. Its eyes flickered toward Jack, wide and fearful as if waiting for something.

“No,” Jack said, and the Ijiraq flinched again, but Jack didn’t stop petting its head. “I want you to
promise me something else. If you promise me that you will only be helpful to lost hunters and children, then I will be a friend to you when I come here.” The Ijiraq looked up at him again, its eyes wide. “You have it in you to be kind; you’ve done it before. You can hunt as wolves and bears do, and live off the land without hurting anyone. So if you promise me to be kind, then I will seek you out in friendship forever more, and I promise you will be safe.”

“I promise,” the Ijiraq intoned quietly, tilting its head up and nosing at Jack’s palm.

“Do you have a name?” Jack asked, feeling sanguine and calm. This was his element; he’d dealt with violent Ijiraq before, and placating them was always the favorable outcome. He hated to see ice spirits and creatures die over things like this. And Ijiraq indeed have the capacity to be kind; they were only devious or tricksters when times were hard, or when they were truly corrupted by evils of the land. But this one had accepted his bargain, even though Jack could barely still be considered a child. It had proven that this was of its own free will, and so Jack had a chance to help it. To befriend it, maybe.

He knew what it was like to be lonely and afraid.

“I am Ukiuk,” the Ijiraq whispered, and Jack nodded, petting it again. Its ears quirked a little, and he scratched gently behind them, earning him a content noise.

“Ukiuk is a fitting name for an Ijiraq,” Jack said, and Ukiuk looked up at him again.

“Many thanks for your kindness, Guardian,” Ukiuk said, looking around at everyone else, who had gathered around it and Jack. “I will be a friend to you and yours. Whenever you are near and I could be of help, please let me know.” It looked at Jack’s arm. “I apologize for harming you.”

“It’s a hurt that can be undone,” Jack said, coming to a straight stand again. “You’d better find something to eat.”

Ukiuk nodded, coming to a stand and taking the form of a wolf. “I thank you, again,” it said, and with that, it bounded off into the woods, casting a few glances behind it before disappearing into the trees.

Aster moved closer to Jack, staring at the place it could last be seen. “I don’t trust it,” he murmured darkly.

“It’s an Ijiraq,” Jack replied, turning and looking at Aster. Aster at once looked back at him, his eyes bright with concern, and it took everything in Jack’s weakened body to not sway toward him.

“They’re not inherently bad creatures. They’re usually only predatory when times are especially rough, as far as I’ve found out.”

“Look what it did to you,” Aster said, gesturing at Jack’s arm, and Jack finally looked at it. His hoodie wasn’t torn, thank goodness, but it was lightly spotted with blood in some places. Ukiuk hadn’t been trying to hurt him, but it hadn’t necessarily been gentle, either. “You’re telling me that you’re going to let the thing that did that to you just walk free?”

“Ijiraq can be quite good friends,” Jack said. When they could be convinced, of course, but Jack didn’t say that part out loud.

“Whatever the case may be,” Aster groused, “it hurt you, and a little girl. Anything like that is unforgivable in my book. I’ve got a Buckley’s chance of trusting that thing. Sorry I don’t have your blind faith.”

Jack tried his hardest not to latch onto the implications of the sentence, instead quietly and subtly
pinching his injured arm to snap himself back into focus. He felt lethargic and dizzy, his body aching from the rough ride and his arm throbbing and sticky. “I’m not at all happy about it hurting the girl, either,” Jack said, “but trust me; if we had killed that Ijiraq, others would have heard and considered it personal. These are some of the more remote places in the north: if I have the Ijiraq on my side, they can help me take care of things. Like I said, they aren’t inherently bad.”

Ijiraq were useful against Wendigo attacks, and kept the Qiqirn population in check by spooking them. Ice elementals and spirits were wilder and more devious than those of other elements (which was saying something), so Jack rarely got to speak with them besides mediating feuds and keeping them away from civilizations. Considering how hostile most ice spirits and creatures tended to be, befriendng Ijiraq was a choice Jack had more than willingly made a long time ago, and hadn’t had a chance to regret.

Aster scoffed, kicking at the snow with his foot. He opened his mouth to speak, but shut it again, staring down at the snow.

“I trust your judgement, even if it is a bit hard,” North said, breaking the silence. When Jack met his eyes, he offered him a warm smile, and he stepped forward, drawing Jack’s staff from inside his coat (Jack had learned not to question it at this point) and offering it to him. “You have been among ice spirits longer than I have.”

Jack laughed, taking his staff. “Now I know that can’t be true,” Jack said, and North shrugged.

“As of late,” he added, and Jack snorted.

“How’s your arm, Jack?” Tooth said, her brows furrowed and her eyes wide, a strained frown on her lips. Bunny glanced up at it, stepping toward Jack and gently lifting it in his hands. When Jack hissed, he sent him an apologetic smile for a moment before looking back down at his arm again.

“If we can get this rag away from it, I can mend it up proper,” Aster said. “I have a few ointments that’ll do it.”

“This isn’t a rag,” Jack groused, but Aster’s paw was skimming the hoodie sleeve away from his arm, the fine hairs tickling the sensitive skin, and that along with the pain was enough to force him to swallow his protest.

“Come back to the Warren with me,” he said, and Jack dizzied. “We can check on the ankle-biter and get her home to boot.”

“Good idea,” North said, pulling out a snowglobe, and Aster tapped the ground twice with his foot, his hand still on Jack’s arm.

“Jack?” North asked, throwing the snowglobe. “You coming?”

“No way,” Aster replied. “He’s coming my way. It’s better transportation, right Jack?”

Jack sighed, feeling his heart rate return to normal. He didn’t know why his usual composure was slipping so much—it was probably due to the injury and the rough night. But in any case, he knew the sooner he got patched up at the Warren, the sooner he could get back to his pond and get back to his usual self. With any luck, he’d be able to indulge in a quick dance before catching some sleep.

So he said, “I’m going with Bun-Bun over here, if only so his pride isn’t bruised.”

“Oi,” Aster yelled, and North just cackled, jumping into his snowglobe. Tooth sighed fondly,
shaking her head, and flew in after him.

When Jack turned back to Aster, it was to find him glaring, but it lacked any serious heat. Jack raised the hand he was still able to raise. “What?” he asked, and Aster just grumbled, grabbing his good hand and leaping into the tunnel, Jack following after him.

They arrived at the Warren in seemingly no time, and Jack tried not to focus on how their hands were still linked as Aster led him to his home, instead focusing on the refreshing smell of a spring evening that permeated the Warren, his toes warming up on dewy grass and his ankles brushing against the occasional tall patch of crabgrass or flower. Tulips of a bright range of colors emerged from almost everywhere on this particular path, kissing his calves and seemingly leaning toward him as he wandered by. Jack couldn’t help the smile that came to his face.

Every time Jack was in the Warren, he tried to keep his ice in check, partially out of respect and reverence for the springtime and all of its fragile creations, and partially out of respect and reverence for the Warren’s sole resident. His instinct when confronted with the joy-inducing sight and feeling of flower petals touching his skin and small animals, like field mice and birds, watching him from where they believed he wouldn’t see them was to send out a shock of ice as a display of happiness. It was almost unconscious behavior, as if the overwhelming feeling of happiness was too great to handle and had to be expelled, similar to the feeling of laughing very hard without warning. But Jack kept that feeling, and many feelings like it, carefully controlled, making sure not to put off any chills or ice no matter what. The Warren was in a delicate equilibrium, and Jack was well aware that he could easily destroy it.

Just another reason, Jack supposed, that he and Aster were not meant to be.

Jack’s arm throbbed in pain, and he was glad for the distraction.

Aster and Jack finally neared his home, and the door was slightly ajar. Laying in the grass in front of the house were Sandy, North, and the little girl, with Tooth hovering closely over her and smiling. In fact, they were all smiling.

“How’s the tyke?” Aster asked, and North looked up at him and smiled.

“Sleeping,” North said, and Jack looked at her. She had her arms bundled up underneath her head, her body curled in the grass, and her breathing was loud and even, her back rising and falling. Her brown hair fell limply about her, and above her head danced a lone ballerina made of glowing sand. Jack sighed in relief.

North came to a quiet stand, picking up the girl. She gave a small moan, but turned into his arms, burying her face in his coat. North smiled brightly, turning to Aster. “I take her home,” he said. “Sandy said her tum is good as new—no pain. Ijiraq did not try to hurt her.” He cast Jack a glance, his gaze snagging on his hand, still joined with Aster’s. “You do not need us?”

“No,” Aster said, not noticing North’s pointed look. “Just going to put some salves on it, wash the wounds. You all go on.”

North nodded, and he threw another snowglobe. Tooth smiled and gave each of them a hug, their hands finally untangling from one another. Sandy gave them a wave, grinning brightly. North nodded to both of them, a twinkle in his eye, and with that, they were gone. Jack was alone with Aster.

He froze. Jack was alone with Aster. Jack. Was alone. With Aster.
“Let’s get you all patched up,” Aster said, walking through his open door, leaving it open behind him for Jack to follow.

Jack looked up. The stars were bright in the burrow, so far as he could tell, and birds were chirping somewhere in the vicinity. The world was thrumming with life.

“I should have let Ukiuk take me,” Jack mumbled, conflicted.

“Jack?” Aster called, and Jack looked back at the door. His arm hurt.

“Coming,” he sighed, trying not to sound defeated.

Chapter End Notes

More mythological notes! Correct me if there are any mistakes you see!

Ijiraq are Inuit spirits that are capable of shapeshifting, so they can take any form they choose, even people. The only way an Ijiraq can be seen is if you look at it out of the corner of your eye; looking at one head-on causes it to disappear. Ijiraq usually take hunters or children and steal them away, but will let you go if you convince it to. They're pretty fair sports about it. Ijiraq are also known to be guides or even guardians, so they aren't always devious--you just never know which they will be on any given day. I took liberties with how they function in terms of other spirits, so Jack befriending the Ijiraq was all me, and might be out of character for an Ijiraq. I also took liberties with Ijiraq being able to be seen when they want to be, so Jack looking it head-on is also out of character.

Wendigo, briefly mentioned, are tall, pale humanoid cannibal spirits said to be victims of a craving for flesh. They're sometimes hunters lost in the wilds that slowly go insane and eat themselves or others to survive. They're completely mindless terrors, and they are incredibly freaky.

Qiqirn, as mentioned last chapter, are bald dogs who are tricksters and like to fool (and eat) hunters. They cause spasms when hunters go near them. You can get them to run away by shouting their name, but they're also very cowardly, so I imagine an Ijiraq in the form of a polar bear would probably scare them off, hence one of the reasons Jack finds the Ijiraq useful as allies.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

A bit of a shorter chapter this time; I hope that's okay!

We are nearing the end of this narrative. I'm a bit excited about it! Just a few more chapters to go!

I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, Bunny,” Jack intoned as he walked through the door, and Aster grumbled at the nonchalant tone of his voice. Aster’s hackles had long ago fallen, his skin still tingling with the stress, but his mind was still whirling in discomfort and worry.

Jack had flown off into the night with nary a word as to where he was going, disappearing among the snow long before Aster could comprehend what was going on.

“What was that about?” he asked, turning to look at everyone else, and North had a concentrating look on his face.

“Ijiraq,” he murmured, combing a hand through his beard. “Ijiraq is ice spirit said to take children. They are very powerful creatures, and cannot be seen directly.”

“We can’t let him go on his own,” Tooth said, her wings thrumming in a rapid, staccato beat. She glanced toward the window, her violet eyes wide and her brows slightly furrowed. “Jack’s done a lot tonight—I’m not saying he can’t handle himself, of course he can, but he may not have the energy to do so right now.”

“And if there’s a child in danger…” Aster added, looking back out the window.

“We must go.”

And so they had gone, and Aster’s heart had leapt into his throat when they’d caught sight of the trees glittering in a thick layer of ice, the small head of brown hair laying in the middle of a snowflake array. They had touched down (Aster had stomached his fear of heights in order to get there faster, though he’d never admit it) and everyone had leapt out of the sleigh, coming to check on the little girl. She was breathing, but very cold, and she moaned quietly when they gently turned her over to check on her.

“We need to take her to the Warren,” Aster said, gently pulling the hem of her shirt, wincing at the sight of bruises forming along her stomach. She wasn’t extremely injured, but she was nevertheless hurt, and Aster’s stomach clenched in worry. “I have some salves that should clear that bruising up. Draw out some of the pain.”

Aster looked at North, who was bent over what appeared to be a paw print. Upon closer inspection, Aster recognized it as a bear’s paw. There were two prints in the snow just beyond where the girl was laying that looked like hind legs, and a body-shaped print marked the snow.
“Jack,” Tooth whispered, and Aster looked to her. She picked up a stick from the ground—no, it was Jack’s crook. Aster jolted, looking around the woods, his heart torn in several directions.

But North’s brow furrowed, and an uncharacteristic seriousness took over his features. “Take her,” North said, rising to his full height and staring in the direction of the tracks. “We will look for Jack.”

Aster nodded, watching as Tooth and North climbed back into the sleigh, North taking the crook from Tooth. Sandy, however, stayed by Aster’s side.

North glanced at him. “Are you coming, Sandy?”

Sandy shook his head, pointing to the girl, golden ‘z’s floating above his head. North nodded, turning toward the woods and setting the sleigh in motion. Aster watched them go, his eyes snagging on the tracks they were following.

“Let’s go,” Aster said, feeling empty, and Sandy nodded, affably following after Aster when he opened a tunnel and jumped inside. He cradled the girl in his arms, taking good care not to jostle her, and when they arrived at the Warren, he laid her gently in a small patch of thick grass, racing toward his burrow. He threw the door open, bounding to his room and grabbing the thickest blanket he had. Then he raced to the kitchen, the blanket hastily thrown over his shoulders, and rummaged through his medicinal cabinet, pulling a small bowl and pestle from the top shelf. He forced himself to slow down as he made the salve, mixing comfrey, beeswax, grapeseed oil, calendula, arnica, and witch hazel, then pausing for a moment before throwing in St. John’s Wort for good measure.

As he hopped back outside, the salve ready, a wave of tiredness fell over him. He brushed it aside, smiling a little as he caught sight of a golden butterfly circling the girl’s head. She was smiling as she slept, but her brows were pinched. Sandy stroked her hair, looking up at Aster and giving him a peaceful smile.

Aster smiled back, but it was tinged with tiredness, and he sat next to them, slowly drawing her shirt away from her stomach. Only one of her arms was bruised, too, so he worked on that first, gently rubbing the liniment into the wounds. When that was done, he moved on to her stomach, slowly drawing gentle circles over her skin, watching her face the entire time. She slept through the entire thing, and when Aster was done, he set the bowl aside, drew the warmed blanket off his shoulders, and settled it over her. She sighed, curling into it, a small fist drawing the material closer.

Aster gave a hopeful smile to Sandy, who returned it. Aster looked down at the girl again, stroking her hair. A sigh escaped him. He was relieved she was okay—she would be much better very soon, as soon as the balm took—but seeing her in pain in the first place had shaken him. The last thing he enjoyed seeing were children preyed upon by spirits, their trusting hearts and forgiving natures making them prime targets for beings that should have known better. Aster hated seeing children in pain, or children who were afraid, and he tried his hardest to keep them safe. Everyone else did, too—that’s why they were all Guardians.

Jack was a Guardian, too, and he’d put himself on the line so he could save this girl. And right now, Aster had no idea where he was.

He sighed again, and his throat tightened.

Sandy’s hand came to rest on his paw, and Aster looked up, surprised to see Sandy’s smile a little saddened. A snowflake formed over his head, with a question mark next to it. Aster nodded, his
heart thrumming a little uncomfortably for a moment before settling.

Sandy inclined his head away from him, as if saying, “Go on.”

“Are you sure?” Aster asked. Sandy gave a quiet laugh, his features blooming in happiness, and he nodded. His hand went back to stroking the girl’s hair. Aster understood his silent declaration of protection, and came to a stand.

“We’ll be back soon,” he said quietly, moving to a spot where opening a tunnel would not disturb the girl, and Sandy nodded, understanding him, too.

Aster’s memory was slightly fogged with the rest. It may have happened too quickly, or he had been too upset—he didn’t know for sure. He remembered streaking through the woods, finding the Ijiraq and Jack seemingly through pure luck, or a pure desire to find him. He remembered leaping into Jack, curling his body around him and taking the brunt of the fall, sliding through the snow. Jack had been injured, was bleeding—he hadn’t known that ice spirits could bleed. He had known North could, but not Jack; he hadn’t thought about him as battle-toughened, as having had to live his life on his own in the wilds, as being someone that could hurt, that could bleed, that could die.

And now, here they were, back in the Warren, Jack’s old hoodie staining with blood and his arm barely working and he was running his mouth off. Acting like none of it had ever happened. Not considering what tonight had done to anybody else. Pretending that he wasn’t hurt, or that him being hurt wasn’t a big deal, wasn’t something worth noticing, when it was, when he’d thrown all of them into a state of worry because he’d run off and tried to take care of it himself, almost gotten killed in the process. That meant something.

So when Jack said, “So, Bunny,” Aster whirled around and said, very firmly, “Sit down.”

Jack startled, the humor dropping from his face, but Aster stared him down until he sat down in one of Aster’s chairs. His eyes never lost their surprise, never disconnected from Aster’s. Aster was secretly glad he could at least elicit something other than laughter from Jack right now.

He turned back to his pestle, mixing another liniment, this one specifically for open wounds: St. John’s Wort, yarrow, rosemary, natural honey, beeswax, tea tree oil. He let the names of the herbs and ingredients float through his head, calming him as his hands worked. He heated some water on his stove and set to melting the beeswax more slowly than he did last time.

“Bunny?” Jack asked, and Aster flinched again, whirling on Jack. He wasn’t as angry as he was before, but he was still very upset.

“So you ever think before you act?” he asked, and Jack glared at him, immediately on the defensive.

“What?” he snapped.

“So you ever think before you do what you do?” Aster asked, leaning back against his counter and glaring just as angrily back at Jack. “I’m just curious, because it doesn’t seem like it, mate. It seems like all you do is throw your weight around to see if it does something.”

“What are you saying?” Jack asked, anger distorting his features. “I don’t understand why you’re getting so snappy with me, Bunny. I was just doing my job; why are you criticizing me for that? I saved the girl, didn’t I?”

“Aye, you did, but you almost got your own bloody self killed in the process.” He turned back to the beeswax, stirring it with a wooden spoon to get it to melt faster, expending some mounting
energy. “You didn’t tell us where you were going, or what you were doing—you were just gone, disappearing into the snow. And then you do what? Trade yourself for the girl? As if that’s the answer to everything, you dramatic little show-pony.”

“There wasn’t any time to tell you where I was going,” Jack replied bitterly. “And I don’t know if you noticed, but the Ijiraq was a bear. It could have killed her in a heartbeat if I didn’t step in the way I did.”

Aster whirled on him, his body aching with how strongly he protested at that. “Did you ever for one second think of something else you could have tried? Any other options you could have taken? It’s my turn to remind you that the Ijiraq was a bear, Jack—and no bloody koala, either. You could have been killed—you’re lucky that arm was the worst of what happened to you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jack yelled, rounding the table and glaring up at Bunny from where he stood. “I did what I had to, and it didn’t matter if anything happened to me. Nothing mattered but the girl, and she’s alright, isn’t she? She’s safe, isn’t she?”

“Of course it matters, you complete dill,” Aster yelled back. “You almost lost your arm, or worse! You can’t just do things like that, Jack!”

“Stop treating me like a child! I know what I’m doing!” Jack stared at Aster for a moment, then huffed, turning toward the door and grabbing his staff with his good arm.

“Where are you going?” Aster growled, following closely behind Jack as he walked.

“I’m going back to my pond,” Jack replied waspishly, stepping out the door and into the grass. “My arm will be fine.”

“No you bloody aren’t,” Aster said, grabbing Jack’s shoulder, and Jack shrugged him off forcefully, glaring at him with fierce blue eyes.

“What is your problem, Bunny?” Jack asked quietly, and Aster looked at him again. Jack seemed tired, too. Aster sighed, looking back down at their feet. “You frighten me when you do what you do,” he replied softly, feeling heavy. “You’re always out there, giving it your all, and I’m proud of you, Jack, I really am, but you bloody scare me sometimes.” Aster breathed heavily, his eyes fixed on Jack’s and his hands still on Jack’s shoulders, and all of the pain seemed to melt away from both of them.

Aster looked down at the grass between their feet, Jack’s white toes stark against the dark leaves, and Aster wondered whether or not Jack would have left early if he hadn’t felt the Ijiraq. Maybe he would have gone back to his pond and watched his dancers until he fell asleep. Aster felt tired again.


Aster sighed, looking back down at their feet. “You frighten me when you do what you do,” he replied softly, feeling heavy. “You’re reckless when you’re out there doing good, and I know you can handle yourself, but when you get hurt and you say it doesn’t matter… It’s not true, Jack.” He looked at Jack’s face, watching his white hair flutter in a warm breeze, those blue eyes darting between Aster’s as if trying to make sense of something puzzling. “It does matter. I worry about you, mate. You were bleeding and you didn’t seem to care.” He sighed. “I care.” His voice
softened further. “I care so much.”

Jack’s lips pinched together, his eyes turning shiny, and Aster leaned down a little to look him in the eye. “So you can’t do that to us, okay?” he asked not unkindly, and Jack tilted his head down. “Not to Sandy, not to Tooth, not to North, and not to me. We care about you. I care about you. So please think about that when you do what you do. You may not care what happens to you, and that’s fine, but we do.”

Jack was quiet.

“Please?” Aster added gently.

Jack looked up, then, tears shimmering in his eyes, a few tear tracks frozen in streaks down his cheeks. He pressed himself against Aster, crying gently, and Aster wrapped his arms around him, pulling him into the warmth of his fur. Jack grasped some of the fur at his chest, but Aster didn’t mind.

“I’m sorry,” Jack said through his tears, but Aster shushed him, carding his nails through Jack’s hair.

“It’s alright, you dill,” Aster said fondly, and Jack pulled away from his hug, a watery smile on his face.

“I will never understand your outlandish talk,” Jack teased, his voice wavering a bit. “Was that English terminology? Did you call me a pickle?”

“Dill is a plant, you galah,” Aster said, ruffling Jack’s hair.

“There it is again! Did you just call me a dance?”

Aster snorted. “C’mon,” he said, hopping toward his burrow. “Let’s get you all fixed up and back to your pond.” He stopped at the door, turning to Jack and smiling.

Jack was still standing where they’d stopped, but he was facing Aster, a strange look on his face. He didn’t seem unhappy, but it wasn’t joy on his face, not entirely. Aster knew hope when he saw it, but he wasn’t sure what to make of it here.

“You coming?” Aster asked for the second time that night, and Jack nodded, but he didn’t move.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, and Aster smiled.

“You’re welcome, Frostbite,” Aster replied. “Any time.” He jerked his head toward the burrow. “Now get in here and we’ll get you sorted out.”

Jack smiled and complied.

Chapter End Notes

No mythology this time, I don’t think!

Thank you all for commenting, reading, and leaving kudos--this has been such a wonderful fic to write so far because of your persisting support and love!
By the time Jack returned home, he was exhausted, but the moon was still high in the sky. While he had been in the Warren, he had managed to channel the last of his energy into complete focus, making sure he didn’t slip in front of Bunny, especially after their altercation. Jack had already been emotionally raw anyway, being weak and tired with both injury and fretting after the little girl, but his fight with Bunny took the very last out of him. It took everything he had left to not lean into Bunny when he tended his wounds. He let himself have a brief moment when Bunny was leading him outside the Warren, allowing himself to shuffle closer to Bunny as they neared the narrow doorway of the burrow, but he forced himself to decline the offer of Bunny procuring a tunnel leading to his pond, instead deciding taking to the air would do him some good. He could get away from any distractions for a moment and let himself think.

And think he did, all the way to the pond. Jack had seen Bunny angry in the decades they’d known each other, but he’d never seen Bunny angry specifically on Jack’s behalf. It was jarring, seeing his hackles raise and hearing him shout about something Jack had thought of as trivial. Jack’s life was potatoes compared to that of a child. That was what they were all about: they were here to protect those who could not protect themselves, and to protect the most important elements of childhood as well. The Man in the Moon could easily choose another Guardian of Joy if Jack died: the other Guardians had acted as protectors long before Jack was chosen to join them. They could easily do without them. It was something Jack had thought of a lot at first, though he had found it didn’t bother him as much as he thought it would. Now, it barely even registered when he threw himself into the fray.

Except apparently it did register. It registered with Tooth, and Sandy, and North, and… Bunny. If Bunny imploring Jack to think of them before he endangered himself was any indication, they worried about him.

Jack felt a fluttering in his chest he recognized as love. It was easy—he remembered that kind of feeling every time he thought of his little sister. It was the need to protect, the repulsion at causing any sort of harm, the unwillingness to jeopardize what was deemed most precious. It was familial love, plain and simple. North always welcomed Jack into his home, and Sandy always offered a smile and an ear if it was needed. Tooth was always checking in on Jack, asking about things he rarely even thought about himself, like how he was sleeping and where he’d been lately—little things that showed she cared.

He cherished the feeling as well as the idea of having a new family. He’d been alone for so long, invisible to everyone he had grown to know and care about, that he had forgotten how it felt to have someone always at your side, or always at your back.

The feeling he got for Bunny was vastly different, though it was still love. Love of that sort was terrifying, and Jack was more than reluctant to admit to himself entirely that he was actually feeling it. But every encounter he had with Bunny was an indication that he didn’t need to keep lying to himself, or hiding. There was no use for it: every time he had written it off as a fluke, or just a rush of happiness at seeing a friend, he would take a look at Bunny and his entire perception of himself would crash down and be rebuilt anew. There was nothing else in the world when Bunny smiled at him, his big green eyes shining with happiness and hope.

Jack always hovered between needing to throw up, needing to cry, or needing to scream into
something soft like a pillow. Love was awful, and love was absolutely brilliant. Love distracted him, but love kept him going. And after tonight, there was no more pretending: he was most definitely in love with Bunny.

And the acknowledgement was sweet, buoying him higher in the air and eliciting a smile that he just couldn’t shake. But Jack wasn’t foolish, at least not as foolish as he pretended to be sometimes. With the knowledge of his being in love came the other rational part of his brain reminding him about the flowers brushing against his skin as he walked through the Warren. About the hackles raising on Bunny’s shoulders as he shouted at Jack, angry with him. He was so entirely capable of taking everything Bunny valued—peace, hope, life—and destroying it. Jack couldn’t help that he was desolation incarnate, at least to Bunny’s entire world. But it didn’t change the fact that Jack was one of the few things that could disrupt Bunny’s equilibrium, and send everything spiraling down.

It was impossible for him to be with Bunny without running the risk of hurting him.

Jack slowed in his flight as he descended, his feet touching down on the cold surface of the pond, his eyes looking up to the sky. The gentle nudges of the Wind on his cheek were ignored in favor of taking in the white light of the moon. Manny was quiet tonight, as he was most nights, but Jack knew he was ever watchful.

After a moment, he cast his glance across the pond. It was far too empty tonight, but he couldn’t bring himself to go through the motions of meticulously decorating the space with ice and snow. Instead, he touched his staff down to the ice, watching a coating of hoarfrost build over the smooth surface. He backed off the ice, propelling himself up into a tree branch and sitting, watching as the figures rose from the frost.

Jack was very still, using all of his energy to keep the dancers moving. He watched his parents swirling around, their waltz gentle and subdued, their icy faces twinkling in the moonlight as they moved. There were fewer dancers that Jack usually had due to his exhaustion, and they all danced slower than they usually did. Jack followed their forms with his eyes, trying to siphon some sort of happiness and comfort from them.

Again, his thoughts trailed to what it would be like to be near somebody. How would it feel to have strong arms around him, twirling him around a dance floor? His memories shifted his thoughts to only a few hours prior, when Jack had been pulled away from the Ijiraq by Bunny, his entire body encased in warm fur and protective arms.

Jack shuddered, barely able to conjure a snowball in time to throw at the emerging figure rising from the frost. He couldn’t keep track of the distractions tonight. He was far too tired to have to deal with them, and the reflexive summoning of Bunny’s frosty doppelganger was not welcome tonight.

It shuffled again, as if to prove it could not be conquered.

Jack sent a glare to that patch of ice. “I don’t want to deal with you right now,” he murmured darkly. “Leave me alone.”

The frost settled, easing back onto the pond’s frozen surface. Jack stared at it for a moment more before turning his attention to the other dancers. They had slowed even further, their waltz more tired and forlorn, and it took Jack a second to realize that he was crying.

He wiped his eyes, the tears crusting on his hands, and he leaned over himself, pressing the cuffs of his sleeves to his eyes and waiting for it to stop. He remembered a quote from *The Princess Bride,*
when Westley is upset with Buttercup because he believes she had no faith in him, and had given up on him: “Life is pain, highness.” Jack supposed that meant love was no different, since love and life were so often intertwined, and so often indistinguishable from one another.

Jack let out a low sound, pressing his sleeves harder to his eyes and begging himself to stop crying, but it was no use. There were so few things he ever wanted this badly, and knowing that he could never have this—never even try—it broke him wholeheartedly.

Surely he’d get over it in time. He always did. But for now, the pain was fresh, the wound wide open. He couldn’t stop himself from crying, trying to bleed out the hurt.

He sobbed. The tree creaked, its cold-stiffened body moving, and Jack could hear the breeze sweeping the frosty figures into the air, blowing them away.

The branch next to him popped, and something quietly shuffled. A warm hand landed on his shoulder.

“Are you okay, Jack?”

Jack wiped his eyes, turning his head to look at Bunny and letting out a laugh, though it didn’t sound quite right. “I’m fine,” he replied, suspending a grin on his face. “Never better.”

Bunny only blinked evenly, not looking away from Jack’s eyes. “Forgive me if I don’t quite believe you,” Bunny replied.

Jack sat quietly, Bunny’s hand never leaving his shoulder.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Bunny asked at length.

“There’s no point,” Jack replied, glancing out over the pond. “It’s just something I have to deal with. It’s fine. I’ll get over it.”

“It really seems to be bothering you.”

“It’s killing me.” He gave Bunny a grin. “I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?” Bunny asked, his brows furrowing. He seemed at a loss.

“Positive,” Jack replied. “It’s only me letting go of a dream. I’ll be fine once it’s out of my system.”

It was somewhat easier to look Bunny in the eye and say it. Bunny’s happiness came to the forefront whenever he was around, and looking at Bunny and knowing that despite his concern he was safe and healthy was more than enough for Jack. It helped him find it a bit easier to let go, even when Bunny’s eyes were sad and his lips were drawn in a worried line.

“Are you sure it’s a dream you have to let go of, Frostbite?” he asked. “Nothing can be done to fix it?”

Jack shook his head. He was blessedly not crying anymore, but he could bet he looked a mess. “I’m afraid so,” he replied. Jack looked out over the pond again before looking back at Bunny. “Why are you here, anyway?”

Bunny froze, as if not expecting the question, and he finally let go of Jack’s shoulder, leaving Jack’s shoulder cooler than the rest of him. He glanced down at his feet, kicking them a bit where
he sat. “I can’t lie to you, Frostbite,” he said, sounding somewhat chagrined, and Jack felt a bit of worry gnaw at his stomach. “I come here sometimes to see if you’ve got your dancers on the pond.”

Jack’s eyes widened, a cold shock running through him, and Bunny finally looked him in the eye, though his head was still tilted down. “I didn’t mean to find out about it,” he continued. “I figured you would’ve told us if it wasn’t something private. But I came back here one time to return something to you and I saw them out on the ice, just dancing. I didn’t want to intrude, so I waited until the next day to give you back your scarf, but I kept thinking about them.” He looked down again. “So sometimes I check in to see if your dancers are about. I only watch, I never meant to intrude. I’m sorry.”

Jack watched him for a moment, noticing the slight droop in his ears and the way he didn’t look up at Jack again, as if he was expecting to be reamed out.

Jack raised a hand toward the pond, and the surface coated in thick frost. Bunny glanced up, looking at the still waters, and Jack made sure he was watching before he pulled his dancers from the frost. They rose all together, immediately settling into a spirited waltz that swirled them around the pond’s surface. Jack kept the music in time in his head, and the dancers followed the tune precisely.

He looked over to Bunny, smiling when he saw his widened eyes. Bunny’s gaze flicked among all of the dancers—all of them in colonial dress, since Jack had to draw them up so hastily—with wonder, a soft smile turning up his cheeks. His nose twitched excitedly, but the rest of him was very still, and Jack allowed himself a small blossom of happiness before looking back over the waters himself. The dancers kept dancing, their faces wide with near-invisible smiles, and Jack nodded his head in time with the music, bumping his staff against his thigh.

For a while, the pair was quiet, simply looking out over the water and watching the dance. Then, Bunny looked over to Jack again.

“Jack,” he asked, and Jack hummed. “Why do you do this?”

Jack’s equilibrium faltered, and the dancers faltered slightly off beat, but both made a recovery. Jack looked at Bunny for a moment, unsure of what to say. Bunny didn’t push, watching Jack carefully, and after a while, Jack spoke.

“The dancers in the middle are my parents,” he said, pointing to them. Bunny followed his gaze to the couple in the center. “At first, it was mostly about them, but then I got to wondering what it would be like.”

“To dance?” Bunny asked, and Jack shrugged.

“Yes, but that’s not the only thing,” Jack said, looking out over the water. “I mean, dancing used to be the easiest way for two people who liked one another to connect in a sort of… intimate way. I wondered what it might be like to be like that with someone else. I’ve never been… you know.” He shrugged. “This was kind of my outlet.”

“Was?” Bunny asked.

Jack shrugged again. “Giving up on a dream.”

When Jack looked at Bunny again, he looked stricken. His eyes were wide, his ears drooping again. “You’re giving up on being in love?” he asked. “Jack, you have to know that being in love
isn’t an impossibility. Even for us Guardians, love is real. You can’t lose hope, mate.”

Jack managed a laugh. “No, it’s not like that,” he replied. It was so easy to pretend it wasn’t something he was hiding, guarding closely to himself. It was so easy to pretend it was objective, and that the person he loved wasn’t sitting across from him.

“I’m already in love, Bunny,” he said. “It just won’t work out. I have to let it go.”

“Have you tried to work it out?” Bunny asked, and Jack shook his head.

“It’s not something that can be fixed,” he replied, and Bunny grew still for a moment.

“Is it because they’re mortal?” he asked, and Jack laughed, shaking his head with a smile.

“No,” he replied, noticing Bunny sag with relief. “No, they aren’t mortal. It just won’t work out, Cottontail. Trust me.”

“I have never believed that there was anything that couldn’t be worked out,” Bunny said, his gaze slightly fierce. Jack felt a strong fondness burgeoning in his chest as Bunny scooted a bit, clearly getting in a position to focus. “What is it then? What do you think you can’t work on?”

“We’re… incompatible,” Jack said, humoring him.

“I’m sure you two can talk out any of that,” Bunny said. “Is it because they don’t love you back?”

“I honestly don’t know.” Jack replied. “I mean, I know they care, but I don’t know if it’s that kind of love, you know? I haven’t asked. It’s seemed like a bad idea.”

“Because of that incompatibility?”

“In a sense. I mean, we get along fine. We bicker a lot, but it generally turns out okay. We haven’t had a serious fight in a very long time. And sure, we don’t agree very much, but we aren’t too bad at compromise.” Jack shrugged. Talking things out made it a little easier to figure out what was going on with himself, but it was pretty surreal to be talking to Bunny of all people about this. “To be completely honest, I’m more concerned about the fact that I could take everything they love away from them. I’m… dangerous, I guess.”

Bunny looked at him strangely. “What do you mean, ‘dangerous?’”

“I mean that if I ever made a mistake around them, even just a small one, I could hurt them.” Jack thrummed with distress. He shuffled where he sat. “And I’ve already done them enough harm as is. I’ve given them a lot of stress, and I’ve irritated them and made trouble for them. To be honest, I wouldn’t want me if I was in their situation, so I can’t imagine what they would possibly see in me. And because I could kill them at any given moment, destroy everything they’ve worked so hard to build, ruin everything like I normally do, I think there’s more than enough reasons for this not to happen. It can’t work out, Bunny. It just can’t.”

Bunny leaned closer. “And what if that isn’t the truth? You can’t blame all of their struggles on yourself, mate: don’t give yourself that much credit. One entire life can’t be destroyed by you, even if you think it can. And if they love you too—as much as you seem to love them—then they’d be willing to risk it, I’ll bet.”

Jack leaned fully to Bunny, his gaze beseeching. “No, you don’t understand,” he said. “If I make a single mistake, it could mean everything is gone. I’ve already failed them once; I can’t do that to them again. Winter means death, it means sleep. They can’t afford that, they just can’t.” Jack
pitched forward, trying to hop down from the tree, but Bunny gripped him tightly, pulling him instead into his chest, wrapping his arms around him in a tight hug.

Jack stiffened, his head cycling through a number of emotions; elation, fright, numbness, sadness. He hesitated before wrapping his arms around Bunny, his fingers sliding through the fur on his back. He closed his eyes, willing himself not to cry.

“You don’t know what I can afford,” Bunny murmured, and Jack’s eyes shot open again.

Panic flooded him. He tried to pull away, but Bunny held him tightly. “Uh-uh,” he said quietly. “I’m not letting you go anywhere, Frostbite.”

“How did you—what?” he asked, confused and not a little terrified, and Bunny rubbed his chin on the top of Jack’s head.

“‘Winter means death?’ That sounded a lot like you were worried about the Warren. Besides, I saw you tiptoeing through the place. It’s not going to break if you give it a frost, mate. Flowers aren’t as fragile as you seem to think. And you seem to be disregarding that I am also stronger than you appear to believe.”

“But you couldn’t have known just from that,” Jack said, unsure of why Bunny was still hugging him, still talking to him.

“I got a good hint from the ice, too,” Bunny replied, and he loosened his grip to allow Jack to look out over the pond.

The dancers were still swirling somehow—maybe fueled by his emotions, he wasn’t entirely sure—but there were two new dancers on the ice. A Pookah stood tall, his arms linked with those of a young man’s, and they swirled closest to Jack’s parents, keeping time with the music.

Jack’s stomach bottomed out. “Oh no.”

“I think they’re lovely,” Bunny replied, chipper, and Jack looked up to see him genuinely smiling. “Could’ve made me a little taller, though. Or maybe made yourself a little shorter.”

Jack leveled a gentle kick at Bunny’s side, which he chuckled at. “They’re the right sizes,” Jack replied, his emotions bordering disbelief. “You’re just too far away to see them properly.”

“Maybe I am,” Bunny said, looking back down at Jack again. “Perhaps we should get closer?”

Jack froze again. “Are you asking me to dance?” he asked, trying to sound joking and failing miserably.

“That I am,” Bunny replied. “If you’ll have me.”

Jack was stunned for all of five seconds before he managed a reply. “I’ve been worried about this for a very long time,” he said. “If this all turns out to be a dream, or just some kind of pity—”

“I’ve been worried about this, too,” Bunny replied. “I’d been thinking about it for a while now, Frostbite. I lost my mind back at the Warren believing you were hurt out there. I didn’t know where you were, or if you were even still alive. I didn’t know what was going on, only that I couldn’t stand not being there to help you.” He pulled Jack a bit closer again. “I’m done waiting and being scared. I’m done wondering what could possibly go wrong when there’s also the possibility of something going right. I love you too, Jack,” he murmured, smiling.
Jack gripped his fur, at a loss for words. For a while, they were quiet, just being near one another and watching the ice figures dance. Jack was distracted by the Pookah and the young man, but a glance at Bunny told him he was suffering from the same affliction.

Jack let the soothing warmth and happiness of the moment overtake him before drawing away gently, hovering in the air and holding a hand out to Bunny. “Dance with me,” he said quietly. “Please.”

Bunny smiled, taking his hand. “As you wish,” he replied.

Chapter End Notes

It's done!

I have a chapter that I was working on--a lot of gods and mythology in that one, it was so heavy with mythos--but it ultimately took away from the narrative, and took the focus away from Jack's tradition, which was what the story was originally about. If you'd like to see it, I can post it here as a "lost chapter," but otherwise, this story is complete!

Thank you so much for being with me on this journey. It's been such a blast, and I've had such wonderful feedback from everyone!

I'm going to try to finish some other WIPs I've left alone for a while before starting up some new stories/taking requests, so hopefully those will be coming soon!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!