Little Boy Blue

by Kayasurin

Summary

He needed someone to love, to care for, to see him. The fates saw fit to give him a baby Pooka. Jack didn’t intend to be a father, it just ended up working out that way.


Chapter One

Little boy blue,
Come blow your horn,
The sheep's in the meadow,
The cow's in the corn,
But where is the boy,
Who looks after the sheep?
He's under a haystack,
Fast asleep.
-Mother Goose

Even as young as he was, the kit knew something was wrong. How could he not? Things were not as they had been, especially not her. The voice, the light, the core of his tiny world. Once she had been happy, voice lilting and laughing. Once her touch had calmed him when he was discomforted. Now her voice was quiet, trembling when she spoke, and her soft hands held him to her chest too tightly.

And yet she was his world, and so he turned to her for comfort. Did he but know, but she tried to find the strength to give it to him, though there was little enough to be found.

Instinct kept him quiet when he wanted to shriek in fear. Even as young as he was, little more than emotion and instinct, he knew danger.

He knew fear.

There were times, of an evening, when she trembled less and would sing to him, a soft crooning that settled his emotions and let him sleep easily.

He lived for those times, when her voice was calm and he felt peace. When, if he opened his eyes he would see her; silver and white in the moonlight.

That was how he first knew her; with love, and light, and song.

In time, in fear, he had learnt darkness, and despair, and silence.

Something had changed though, very recently. A new voice had joined hers, a voice deeper and harder. Male. The he voice murmured to her, and she muffled a cry in one hand.

"Le-pe," he heard, the sounds that meant him. Had there been time, the sounds would have been imprinted on his soul. There was no time, and so instead, they were imprinted upon his memory, far less reliable.

The male voice was unrelenting, and finally the she voice murmured agreement. Restless, she rocked him against her breast, crooned anxiously to him.

Despite his instincts, he began to whimper, a thin sound that stopped her crooning. She hushed him, lifting him up to cradle his tiny face to her cheek.

"Le-pe," she said. "Le-pe."

The male voice returned. She repeated the "le-pe" sound one last time... and then, for the first time
that the kit could remember, he was placed in a new set of hands.

They were big, and hard, and strength radiated from them, but they were not her hands and so he could not be soothed. He wailed, quiet and despairing, as he was cradled to a different chest and taken away.

Even as young as he was, the kit knew he would never hear her voice, or touch her fur, again.

The male voice lowered him onto a soft surface. The voice murmured to him, sorrow and drops of water falling onto his face, claws tracing his ears and his nose. Then the male voice ceased, and the kit felt the voice pull away.

Something was placed over him, and it cut off the sounds he had been listening for. Her voice, even the new male voice.

And there was only the silence.

And, for a time, the darkness.

Then there was light! And noise! It was terrifying and he cried, and cried, and cried himself into exhaustion as his nest fell, and fell, and fell.

He woke when everything shuddered and crashed, and then everything came to a stop all at once. He fell silent, one fist in his mouth, seeking comfort from within as there was none to be found without. A breeze caressed his ears, bringing cold, something he had never felt before. When he twisted to look, to see what had touched him, he saw that the covering over him had broken, and there was a gap for air, and smells, and sounds.

He recognized none of them, and began, once more, to wail.

Eventually, he slept, exhausted from his emotions. But not for long. His nest rocked back and forth, waking him, and the covering cracked and groaned. He whimpered, and curled up.

Then the covering was pulled away, and he looked up.

What he saw was nothing like her, the she voice who had been imprinted upon his very soul. What he saw was nothing like the he voice, so brief in his life he was already forgetting it.

No, what he saw was a creature of light, silver and white and blue, the moon big and round behind it. It made some sound, quiet with distress, and then reached for him.

Strange things had threatened the kit before. He whimpered; the creature lifted him in its arms and cradled him to its chest, and rubbed one paw against the back of his head in a gesture that soothed. Slowly, the kit began to relax.

The creature barked, hissed, and chirped to itself, but quietly enough that the kit fell asleep once more.

When he woke, it was to hunger and thirst. He whimpered, instinct urging caution and silence. Barely a moment passed before the creature was back, crooning low and soft. It picked him up, and cradled him close, but that was not what the kit wanted.

Sustenance was offered, but at first the kit didn't realize what it was. The vessel used to carry it was odd, but after several tries he began to acquire some skill at the unusual method. His paws caressed the hard surface, while he sucked at the nipple to drink the liquid. It was warmer than the creature
that held him, thick and creamy and tasted good. Faintly, the kit might have remembered drinking something similar once before, but the impression was fleeting.

After a time, the kit left off feeding, belly full. The creature propped the kit against its shoulder and rubbed at the kit's back. Soon, sated and comforted, he slept.

When he woke again, it was to howling winds and the covering once more over him. The kit wailed, and thrashed in his nest. He wanted her! He wanted the creature!

His wails were not loud enough to be heard over the wind. He exhausted himself until finally, when the wind stopped, he had been silent for a time. He kept one paw in his mouth, and sucked at his fur for comfort.

The creature lifted off the covering, and made its odd, crooning sounds at him. It cuddled him until the night ended, and the kit slept once more.

When he woke again, the creature held him, pacing back and forth. Tension bled from the creature to the kit, though the creature's hands were gentle and its voice crooning. Even so, the kit whimpered and shifted uneasily, faint memories of the last to hold him like this stirring.

The creature stopped pacing, and shifted to hold him in its arms. "Des," he heard, almost recognizable from sounds he was used to. "Des," the creature repeated, and then laughed. One finger, too slender and too long but infinitely gentle, traced over his cheek. "Des!"

Then, the creature lifted him once more to its shoulder, and began to hum.

And, finally, to sing.

Content, the kit relaxed into the creature's hold, and snuffled gently at its shoulder. Soon, he would know the creature as a him, as a source of comfort and safety.

Already, though, the kit recognized the creature; knew it as light, and joy, and song.

And there was no darkness, no silence, and no despair.

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Jack held the tiny rabbit in his arms. It was so small! He could have cradled the tiny thing in one hand, but no, it'd be too easy to drop the poor thing.

He thought- guessed- that the rabbit was male. It was built somewhat differently than the critters in the forest he was used to seeing. Longer legs, for one, and a different shape to its skull that made it look... almost human. Its eyes were still infant blue, like any number of human newborns Jack had been lucky to see before.

It was also impossibly adorable. Fluffy as any kitten- more fur than flesh- and a pale silver-gray in color, with big eyes that might or might not change color as it aged... The way it kept trying to focus on Jack's face, and getting cross eyed with the effort... The way it grinned (he thought that was grinning) at him when he talked to it.

"What am I going to do with you?" he asked the little thing. It- no, enough, the baby rabbit was male. He was starting to blink and snuffle and make other little signs of exhaustion. Strangely enough he didn't seem to mind the chill Jack gave off, or maybe the fur insulated the little thing.

Jack watched as the baby fell asleep, going limp in the way only a young, trusting creature can. His heart ached, and he kept the baby cradled in one arm as he turned to look at the spacecraft he'd
found it in.

The craft was in two main parts, a top and a bottom. The top had broken partially on the landing, and was made of some shiny stuff that hid the contents from view. The bottom was of a duller material, but otherwise the same. When the two pieces were put together, it looked a little like an egg did, pointier at one end and blunt at the other.

Inside, there had been the baby, and a blanket. Jack pulled it out, frost crystals immediately spreading across the odd material. Some kind of fleece, he decided, though just how it'd been made, or what it'd been made of, he couldn't guess. It was also quite large, more than big enough for five of Jack, never mind one tiny infant.

"Maybe so he can grow into it?" he murmured, and looked up at the moon. It didn't answer, but then, it never did.

The blanket was soft and warm, and somehow managed to be a shimmery blue, green, and silver all at once. He folded it back up, one handed, and tucked it back into the bottom of the spacecraft. He had a feeling it'd be bad for locals to find the thing.

Though, it'd apparently landed at night. People would be out and about shortly, now that the sun was up, but Jack would be able to carry it off without trouble. It was only people he couldn't touch; objects and animals were fine.

Well, okay, that Houdini guy had seen him, but it'd been a couple years since the guy had died. A pity, he'd been interesting, and funny, and someone to talk to.

Jack shook his head, and lowered the baby back into the bottom of the spacecraft. It didn't wake, though it did curl up into a ball of fluff. He grinned at it, then picked up both halves, one in each arm, and flew away towards his lake.

The Wind was especially gentle, though she must have known about his fragile cargo. He wondered what she thought about it, or if she'd ever seen anything like it before, but it was hard communicating with the Wind. He could do it, but it took a lot of effort and concentration and time.

There was a small tumble of rocks near his lake that formed a kind of cave-like shelter. There was a roof, though it was of blackberry bushes and creeper vines, while the rocks were a shallow V shape. Decades of dead leaves formed a comfortable enough floor in the shade, while further out where the V widened was grass in the summer. A few hardy strands poked through the last of the snow, now.

They frosted over when Jack touched down, of course. He didn't give the strands a first glance, never mind a second. Instead, he crouched down to keep from tangling his hair in the blackberries, and nestled the bottom of the spacecraft at the very back of the shelter.

The baby would need food. It didn't look big enough, or old enough, to have solids just yet, though what did he know? He knew a little about human babies, but only by eavesdropping and peering in through windows, which was occasionally hazardous to the eyes.

There were some things a boy wasn't meant to see, and the creation of babies was one of them. Ew.

He tapped the butt of his staff against one wall, studying the curling frost as if the answer to his dilemma might be found there. He'd have to come up with something soon. The smaller the baby, the more often they had to eat, or so he'd observed. Must have had something to do with their tiny stomachs.

Well, babies drank milk. And there were bottles, right? People these days had so many things, all to
make life easier. Back when he'd first come out of the water, he would've needed a bowl and a cloth in order to nurse the baby. These days, all he had to do was find some way to lift a bottle, get some milk, and find a way to light a fire without hurting himself.

The best place to get all three things would be at the nearest corner market.

Jack hesitated before calling the wind, and then knelt down beside the spacecraft. "Alright, baby," he murmured. "I'm going to be just a little while, I promise I'll be back as quick as the Wind can bring me."

She curled into the small shelter, ruffling his hair and clothes in agreement. Jack grinned and held one hand out so she could twine through his fingers.

"Still..." The wall of ice wouldn't stop a human, but it was as thick as his hand and as tall as his shoulder, so it'd serve to frustrate, say, a hungry fox. It'd have to do until he got back.

The corner store the Wind brought him to was in Burgess, the town closest to his lake, and still closed. Well, it couldn't have been more than seven, seven-thirty at the latest, and the store didn't open until nine. Jack picked the lock with a few slivers of ice, concentrating hard to keep them from snapping against the metal.

He found the bottle quickly enough, dusty and shoved to the very back of the shelf. There, that was something no one would miss. The milk, too, was easy to find. He took a single bottle, again from the back, and concentrated hard to tell how cold the refrigeration unit was keeping it. Colder than his temperature normally was, but with a bit of effort he matched it, and tucked the bottle under one arm. Times like this he wished he had a bag, or maybe big enough pockets to carry stuff around in, but he couldn't quite give up his leather cape.

Jack gave up on the bottle of lighter fluid. The smallest of them was at least a gallon, not exactly something he could carry easily, and he'd have to lock the door again when he was finished. The old fashioned striker and steel, though, that he took. There was plenty more on the shelves, so he didn't feel too guilty.

There. That was everything. He managed to get back out the door, and get the door locked, without anyone seeing him- or, rather, seeing the effect he had on things. Floating bottles of milk and doors opening and closing without anyone about just lead to accusations of witchcraft, or poltergeists, or any number of bad things.

Door locked and his pilfered goods in hand, Jack called the Wind and urged her to hurry back to the shelter. If the baby had woken up while he was gone- by the sun it'd only been twenty minutes, but he couldn't help but imagine the worst.

He needn't have worried. When he knocked down the ice wall, the baby was still sleeping, and didn't look to have so much as twitched. That couldn't last for long, though, so Jack got to work.

Gathering wood was strangely familiar, though he had never done it before. He knew just what he wanted; nothing that'd been on the ground, because it'd be wet and cold, and wouldn't burn very well. Nothing still green and fresh, because it would be wet in a different way. Well, maybe pine, pine sap burnt well enough, but he really preferred oak or birch.

He laughed when he found a lightning-struck oak, half of it still alive and the other half dead, and stripped the dead half of branches. They were still dry, and aged after however-long, and perfect for what he needed.
An armful of branches, and then a second armful, this time of old cattail tops and a few tree branches with last year's leaves still on them, would do for a fire. Not one that'd last, but hopefully he'd have figured out what to do with the baby. Maybe who'd be best to care for the little thing, because Jack sure wasn't.

A pity, but however cute he found the baby, Jack knew he wasn't at all capable. Feeding the little thing would only get more complicated the longer he kept it, and babies needed all sorts of things. Like diapers.

Oh, he should probably check that, shouldn't he? Well, after he'd gotten the fire going. The milk needed to be warmer before the baby drank it, he knew that.

Somehow, despite never having done it before, Jack got the fire set up in a reasonable amount of time. Maybe better than reasonable. He didn't know, and honestly, didn't really care. The warmth was uncomfortable, but not unbearable; in his opinion, the feeling that his face was being prickled by thousands of burrs wasn't exactly painful. Not something he wanted to experience all too often, if ever again, but not exactly worrying, either.

The bottle, dusty as it was, needed to be cleaned off first. A bit of snow, formed by Jack's will, served the purpose. He wouldn't have trusted the stuff on the ground, but he knew his snow was pure. He filled it three-quarters of the way with milk, which left half a bottle still to go. He set the bottle aside, and then found a way to heat the baby bottle without breaking it, or setting his sleeve on fire.

When it was as warm as he could stand, he set it down on the ground some distance from the fire, and checked on the baby. He was only just stirring, so Jack scooped him up in one arm. On consideration, the baby's temperature, and the bottle of milk, was near to the same, so Jack felt safe in offering the baby a drink.

The baby managed most of the bottle before turning away. Jack laughed to himself, and gently rubbed at the baby's back until it burped. No mess on his cloak, at least.

"Okay. Diapers."

He'd watched women with their cloth diapers, and thought he could manage it. If he had a cloth. And he didn't.

"Well, the blanket can always be washed if you make a mess," Jack said, then shrugged. "But let's go for a walk first. Maybe you'll have to go while we do that. And I can think."

The baby did have to go, and Jack managed to hold it in a way that kept its fur clean, and kept his hands clean too. A good temporary solution, though if this kept up he'd have to steal some cloths for diapers next.

"Hopefully, I'll have a solution before that. Before Easter, too, it'll start getting too warm..." Jack trailed off, and laughed at himself. "Of course! The Easter Bunny! He's exactly who we should talk to, baby, he probably knows everything there is about baby rabbits!"

The baby grinned at him, all gums and two budding front teeth. It waved its little paws at him-hands? There were fingers- and he caught them and rubbed his thumb against the soft pads.

"Now, how do I get his attention? Easter's... Well, let's see, today's Saturday. So tomorrow's Sunday. And then Monday, and I think he does his work on Sunday. So, I'm going to have to do something to get his attention..."
It took a few hours to set up. Jack had to wear the baby out first, after all, and feed him a second time. Hopefully the last time. It'd be sad, but maybe the Easter Bunny would let Jack visit now and then. That'd be nice.

It was late afternoon when the baby settled down to sleep again, and Jack stepped out and began concentrating. The Wind swirled around him, picking up interest as she sensed what he was doing.

He was calling a storm. Not one of the Great Blizzards- so close to Easter? Sure, he didn't see what eggs had to do with a religious holiday, but the kids liked hunting them out, so he didn't want to ruin it for them. What he needed was enough snow to catch the Easter Bunny's attention, stuff that wouldn't make the egg hunts impossible. Good packing snow, that'd be best, it'd keep kids from slipping and hurting themselves.

Yeah, that was perfect. With the image of what he wanted in his mind, Jack raised his staff, and then thumped it against the ground three times.

Energy immediately poured out of him, like water from a bucket, and the Wind sped off to bring him the clouds he needed. A storm here in Burgess would be best- but what if the rabbit didn't show up here personally? Jack poured a little more energy into his storm, to widen the area it'd cover. Now not only Burgess, but a good chunk of the surrounding countryside, would get a freak snowstorm that'd end a few hours after dawn on Sunday.

With his storm on its way, Jack crept back into the shelter to rest. Unlike humans, he didn't sleep, but with as much energy as he'd used, he couldn't remain standing. A few hours resting in the cold would set him right as sleet.

By the time he'd recovered, night had fallen and the snow had started. It was light, but a quick mental nudge at the clouds fixed that.

He picked up the spacecraft, and thinking about the cold, put the top over the bottom half to protect the baby inside. The Wind picked him up, as carefully as before, and carried him to a hill overlooking Burgess. He settled the spacecraft in the lea of a bush where it'd be out of the way, and studied his clouds.

He gave them some more energy, and sent the Wind off to spread them out. He didn't want to dump three feet of snow on the town or anything.

Jack checked on the baby, and sighed. "Aw, poor little guy. Wake up, did you?" He picked up the baby, and grinned at how it was sucking on one paw, like human babies sucked on their thumbs. He didn't know rabbits did that.

It took a little while to wear the baby out so it slept again, but Jack wasn't too comfortable with keeping it out in the cold air right now. It was one thing when it wasn't snowing, and the Wind wasn't blowing back and forth and all around to keep the clouds spread out. It was quite another when it was storming, however gentle the storm might be.

The night passed slowly enough. Jack nudged energy to the clouds whenever the storm began to slacken. The Wind picked up closer to dawn, getting everything ready to move the clouds on when he told her to. Like a shepherd's dog, the Wind was loyal, and utterly focused on her work.

When dawn arrived, Jack waved the clouds on and let them stop snowing. There, that would do it. A good layer of snow, heavy enough that patches might linger in the shade even to tomorrow afternoon. Not bad, not bad at all... If he'd been looking to cause mischief, well, he'd have succeeded. No trouble, at least, it wasn't far enough along in the year for people to put away their
coats and heavy quilts, but there'd be some grumbling over the unseasonal weather. The kids would enjoy themselves.

Jack looked towards the spacecraft, and grinned. If this didn't get the old Easter Bunny's attention, he didn't know what would. And boy, wouldn't the rabbit be pleased with Jack's news? Who didn't like babies?

He turned to look back over Burgess, and squinted down at the roads. Even as he watched, the town began to wake up, the first early risers- the milkmen and newspaper boys- getting up to go on their rounds. No cars yet. Probably for the best, there hadn't been nearly so many road accidents before automobiles.

Maybe he'd get used to them someday. When they weren't all boxy, Ford Falcons and Plymouth Valiants. Get a little style into the things, and he'd probably end up all for them.

The sun had cleared the horizon when Jack saw the first hint of Easter Bunny activity. The little guy must've gotten an early start on things, he supposed.

"Well, better greet the big cheese properly," he said, and stood up. He leaned on his staff, unable to keep from grinning. This was going to be great!

Then a really strong hand spun him around by the shoulder and slammed him back into a tree.

Jack's head spun, and for three seconds he hung limp in the person's grasp. He hadn't felt this stunned since last time he'd goofed around in kendo practice. He had to blink several times before his eyes focused.

When they did, he sucked in a completely unnecessary breath. That was- okay, vaguely rabbit shaped, but just as vaguely human shaped, and big, very big.

Completely hacked off, too. Unnaturally green eyes narrowed into slits, ears pinned back, lips twisting like the rabbit-person was one twitch wrong away from snarling. 'Dressed' in leather belts, one going crossways over the chest, and wrist guards.

"I was expecting someone smaller," Jack admitted. Though if the baby was going to grow up to this size, that explained the blanket.

"You-" The rabbit growled, surprisingly well for something that was supposedly a prey animal. And hey, it- he- could talk. "Listen, you drongo Yank, don't you know what day it is?"

"Yeah, Easter Sunday, that's why-"

"You did this deliberately?"

Jack couldn't shrug, dangling by his neck as he was, but he made a try. "Yeah, look, I found-"

The rabbit cut him off just by tightening his grip. "I don't give a hoot what you found," he said. He eased up on his grip when Jack mimed gasping for air. "You 'bout tried to ruin my holiday, and that just won't stand."

"I don't care about your holiday-"

Wrong thing to say. The rabbit made a sound that would've gotten a rabid wolf to back off, and slammed his free fist into the tree over Jack's head. The tree didn't just shake; wood cracked and something overhead tilted sideways.
"It's what I've got, and I won't let anyone wreck it."

Jack managed to rearrange his face from 'stunned silent' to 'understanding, really'. "Okay, that's fine, but snow melts, I really have to show you something, it's important."

The rabbit released him, and stood up to his full height. His full, very impressive height. Wow, what did he eat for breakfast? "Nothing's more important than Easter," he said, voice flat. "It's spring. You should be leaving now."

"And I will," Jack promised. "You just have to see-"

"No!" The rabbit pushed Jack against the tree, his hand nearly covering Jack's entire chest. "I'm going to salvage my holiday. When I get back, you'd best be long gone."

The rabbit moved back a single step, did something with his feet, and dropped down a hole that closed up immediately behind him. Jack stared at that spot for a second, then blinked, rubbed his eyes, and looked over when a bit of movement caught his eye.

The rabbit was down where Burgess proper started. He pointed at Jack, then folded his arms and looked content to just stay there until he saw the winter spirit leave.

"Well, fine!" Jack shouted. "I didn't need your help anyways!"

He stormed over to where he'd left the spacecraft, scooped it up, and let the Wind pick him up and carry him away. Not far, just to his shelter. Out of sight would be out of mind, he suspected.

"Wouldn't let someone like him be responsible for a baby, anyways," he muttered, and cradled the spacecraft to his chest.

Bunnymund was already feeling guilty when he hopped out next to the nearest town building. He'd been harsh with the dill, maybe even too rough. The winter sprite was right, the snow would melt. It wouldn't wreck the egg hunts, just make it inconvenient for him. Maybe the sprite had been rude in tossing snow everywhere, but Bunnymund had been just as rude back.

Bit late now, and honestly, he didn't feel like taking anything more on his shoulders, not even company. The Sandman had been by; apparently he'd been in contact with other stars somehow, asking about any Pooka survivors. He'd just gotten the final, negative reply... and had been honor bound to tell Bunnymund.

He'd hoped... But hopes could be false, and when they shattered...

No. He couldn't really bring himself to care what the sprite had found, or been so determined to share.

He could just make out the blot of brown and white up at the top of the hill, and pointed up at it. Whatever it was, it couldn't be too important. Seasonal sprites tended to get excited over the most foolish of things. Probably nothing more exciting than the first frogs starting to thaw out, or failing to thaw out, whichever.

His ears were better than his eyes. With the wind against him, he could still hear the sprite yell out. "Well, fine! I didn't need your help anyways!"

Help? Bunnymund hesitated, grimaced, then popped open a hole back to the top of the hill.
But by the time he got there, the sprite was gone. Well, raise a bloke's curiosity only for nothing! Bunnymund shook his head and turned back to the town. He had egg hunts the world over to prepare, and only a single day to do it.

It couldn't have been that important anyways.

The baby was still sleeping, but Jack lifted him out of the spacecraft and cuddled him close anyways. Poor little mite. Tossed away to some other planet, alone and without protection, and now not even the Easter Bunny wanted anything to do with him. It wasn't fair. No one could see him, or hear him, or...

Jack huffed, and shook his head. "No," he told himself. "This is about the baby, not you. Godda- I mean, gosh darn it."

Though, he did sympathize, obviously. "We're more similar than I'd like," he admitted, and started to pace. "Who else can I try? I can't keep using a five finger discount to get you stuff, it's not fair and it won't last. Santa Claus? No, I can't get past his guard dogs. Guard yeti."

He rubbed the baby on the back, and muttered names to himself. No way in Hell was he letting General Winter anywhere near a baby. If he knew where the Tooth Fairy was, he would've tried her, but he could barely see her zipping about. Besides, wasn't she very busy? Not like children lost teeth on a set schedule or anything.

Same with the Sandman, though with dreams, not teeth.

The only other spirit he might consider, Higurashi-sama, was a kitsune. A Japanese shape-shifting fox. And the baby was a rabbit. Yeah, how about no?

There wasn't anyone else Jack knew of, other than a few really nasty critters that weren't even spirits, as such. Just bad feelings wrapped up in ectoplasm and hate. Definitely not leaving an infant with any of those.

"I guess it's me," he said, and paced faster. "But how?"

Babies needed things, like food, and diapers, and warmth. Jack could probably manage food and diapers, if only by stealing, but warmth? He was cold, it was astounding he hadn't given the baby hypothermia yet! Sure, he could light fires, which would probably help, but that didn't change the fact that this was a really bad idea.

"But if not me, then who?"

He'd tried the Easter Bunny. And there was no one else he could ask.

"Okay," he breathed, and stopped pacing. He'd figure it out. For- "Huh. You need a name."

He shifted his hold on the infant, so he was no longer propped up against his shoulder. Poor little guy, he didn't look at all happy. "Names are important," he said. "They have to mean something."

Jack chewed on his bottom lip, before nodding. "Desmond," he said. "For Desmond Kavanagh. I saw him, you know, before the civil war. He'd just arrived in America, managed to save two Africans from the slave trade... It's a good name."

He grinned, and lifted the baby up. "Desmond! What do you think?"
Desmond seemed to think he preferred being cuddled instead of lifted into the air. Jack propped the baby against his shoulder, and when the little guy began to fuss, started to hum. When that didn't do the trick, he began to sing.

"Far, far above the clouds, against the setting sun, a falcon flies all alone, soaring in the wind..."

Harry Houdini- Born in 1874, he died in 1926 at the age of 52. Besides being a sensational escape artist, he reportedly worked to uncover fake magicians and spiritualists. (Just how someone could be a fake magician wasn't explained, though spiritualists belong in a special circle of hell.) Among other things, he wanted to be the first person to fly in Australia, but for the records of sustained flight, was beaten by two other people. His death was sensational and (in my opinion) stupid; a university student asked if Harry's stomach muscles could take any blow, and upon being told 'yes', repeatedly hit Harry in the stomach. A few days later he died of a ruptured appendix, though the two facts might be unrelated- according to sources, he had been suffering stomach pains before this.

If anyone could have seen Jack before the guy became a guardian, it's Harry. Who was, honestly, probably annoyed by the 'ghost' that kept trying to help out all the fake-séances Harry was trying to disprove. (Jack just wanted people to stop crying, when he made stuff move they got all excited, it was great!)

So for this story I've borrowed elements from other memes that, sadly, didn't give me story ideas but did become head-canon. Such as Jack not being 'alive' in the traditional sense, until he gains (more than one) believers. Meaning he doesn't need to eat, or sleep, temperature is kind of an odd concept to him (it's like color; unless you're talking neon or some really funky combination, it's not going to hurt you) and he has no heartbeat or need to breathe if he's not talking.

According to the Rise of the Guardians Wiki, Jack's 17, so that's the 'official' age I'm using for him.

And to give you all an idea of what Jack sounds like singing, please look up Chris Pine and singing on YouTube. Damn but he's got a nice voice.
Jack hopped onto a drooping power line, and watched his frost spread out from his toes. Yeah, that was him, a one-trick pony that was nothing more than an expression. Jack Frost was responsible for the frost on the windows, Jack Frost nipped at your nose and ears and fingers and made you cold, and Jack Frost didn't exist.

If it hadn't been for Desmond, Aleksia, and Higurashi-sama, he'd have ended up crazier than General Winter years ago, he just knew it.

He shook his head, and looked around for- yup, there it was, the Sandman's dream sand. He poked at it, just to see the gamboling baby rabbits and toddlers. Times like this made him wish he actually slept, instead of the rigor mortis and lack of awareness that followed any big expenditure of energy.

Like this last week, actually. Desmond had been dropped off with Aleksia, the moment Jack started feeling droopy. It was early in the year, but he supposed he couldn't 'sleep' only in the summer.

And hey, the winter would be ending with a bang for one little boy, at least. A new friend made, an awesome sledding story to tide him over the summer, and tonight a quarter in exchange for a tooth knocked out. Jack loved playing with the kids; Frosty the Snowman had nothing on him. Did Frosty actually do anything with the kids? Hah, no, and it wasn't like there were any battered top hats floating around anymore.

Which was kind of a shame. Desmond had liked playing with the walking snowman. Maybe something Jack could try next year. The boy was a kid, right? Physically and mentally, even if he was middle aged chronologically.

And he was scowling again, that wasn't what he wanted to look like with Aleksia about to show up. She always knew when he came out of his actual-corpse state, and nice lady or not the Snow Queen didn't quite know how to handle toddlers. Being a nice lady, she'd feel obligated to stick around until he was smiling, and that meant holding Desmond, and... Yeah, no.

It was just so hard, sometimes! Jack turned and looked up at the moon. "Not like I'm asking for a guide book or anything, but maybe a pamphlet? Come on, this can't be normal."

Rabbits were supposed to grow faster than humans did, and humans didn't spend forty-four years reaching the grand old age of five. At least, that's what Jack guessed Desmond's age was. Considering everything, there was no way to tell for sure.

He shook his head, and shook it off. It wasn't like it mattered how long it took Desmond to grow up; Jack was- apparently- immortal.

Besides, he thought, and smiled. He'd always heard parents complaining their kids grew up too fast. He didn't have to worry about that.

See? Silver lining, totally-

Flash of gray, too quick for the eye to follow.

Jack froze, and then chased after the blur.
He ended up touching down in a dead-end alley, empty of everything but shadows and two dumpsters. Odd; he would have sworn he saw the blur go here. Couldn't be a poltergeist, Burgess wasn't the right territory. And not a boggart, either, and for much the same reason. Maybe a minor spirit? For some reason they didn't like Jack, but they rarely went into cities, so...

"G'day mate." Jack spun, and peered into the shadows at the mouth of the alley. Tall, furry, and long eared. Of all the... "Been a while, ain't it? Easter Sunday, '68."

The speaker stepped forward, and Jack smirked at the sight of the familiar rabbit. Oh yeah, he remembered, how could he not? "You're not still sore about that, are you?"

"Yup." The rabbit tilted a boomerang at him, and smirked. "But I'm not here about that."

"Wha-" Jack tried to recoil when a bag- a bag? Really?- dropped down over his head, but it didn't work and he was bundled up like a sack of letters waiting the mail coach. He didn't even have his staff. He felt himself picked up, and- where were they taking him?

There were some muffled sounds, and then-

Then it was like the world dropped out from under him, only to smack back with all the force of an avalanche to the face. He was dropped onto the ground, and the bag opened so he was able to crawl out.

"Wow," he breathed, looking over the assortment of characters. Yup, there was the Easter Bunny, and that had to be Santa, and that tiny guy there was the same color as dream sand so that made him the Sandman, and that was the only lady so she had to be the Tooth Fairy. And his staff! Jack snatched it up and stood, suddenly not wanting to be on his knees anywhere near this quartet.

"Jack Frost," Santa boomed, and approached with arms wide open. "So good to have you here. Yeti treated you well?"

Yeti? He twisted, and frowned at the hulking, furry shapes. Oh, those guys. "Oh yeah, I love being shoved into a sack and tossed through a magic portal."

"Ah? Good, that was my idea!" Santa laughed, and then it was introduction time apparently. "This is Toothiana, and Sandy- Sandy, wake up! I am Nicholas St. North and this-"

"Is the Easter Kangaroo," Jack said, and smirked.

"Oi." The rabbit leaned forward, whiskers twitching. "I'm a bunny."

"Didn't you know bunny rabbits are an invasive species in Australia?" Jack widened his eyes, the better to look innocent. "Figured with the accent, you'd rather be called something, you know... native?"

Santa stepped forward before the rabbit could respond. "Jack, we are bringing you here for-"

"Hey!" Jack thumped his staff against the floorboards. "Why did you bring me here? Send me back! Believe it or not, some of us can't just go traveling at a moment's notice. I've got responsibilities-"

"You?" The rabbit laughed. "You wouldn't know responsibility if it ran up to you starkers and painted bright green!"

"Single parent," Jack snapped. "I'm up to my eyeballs in responsibilities, including being there for my kid. Who, thanks to you, has been left with the babysitter. It's not like I can pay her much, so...
Maybe, send me back, now?"

Well, that left them blinking. The rabbit looked like he was about to drop the boomerang he'd been playing with, and the Tooth Fairy had actually stopped flying. Everyone else, including a few random yeti and some shoe- and horn-carrying elves, were staring.

"You... have a child?" Santa asked. He blinked several times and shook his head. "But we would know this."

"Clearly," Jack said, letting a bit of the Wind, cold and fierce, into his voice, "you dropped the ball. Burgess. Now."

And yet Santa hesitated! Jack drew himself up to his full five and a half feet, and when that was obviously less than impressive, jumped onto the crook of his staff. "If I promise to come right back will you stop being such a pill?"

"Ah, yes, of course." Santa pulled out two snow globes, and shook his head. "Bring your son, we will love to meet him!"

Maybe Jack would ask Aleksia to take Desmond a bit longer, just to spite them. "Funny," he said, and took the globes. One went into his hoodie pocket, though it had to compete for room with some of Desmond's things. "You've had forty-four years of chances already; it's kind of surprising you're showing an interest now."

"How long?" the Tooth Fairy asked, but Jack threw the snow globe in place of an answer.

Huh, look at that, Burgess Lake, right where he was supposed to meet up with Aleksia. Jack rested his staff against one shoulder, and eyed the Big Four. "Fifteen minutes to half an hour." Then he hopped through.

The portal closed right behind him. Jack glowered at the trees, the snow-covered rocks, the ground, and swung his staff in a few annoyed arcs. Stuck up, candyass, ditzy, bigshots. Didn't know you had a son indeed!

Well, no wonder Santa never brought Desmond presents for Christmas, because that kid was good as gold. Jack was always the one lifting things from stores, though that was harder now than ever before...

He sighed, and shook his head at the moon. "Whatever it is, it'd better be good," Jack told it. "If it were just me... But it's not, is it?"

"Jackson?"

For the second time in a night, he spun around, surprised. "Aleksia!" At least this time he was pleased with who he saw.

The Snow Queen wasn't wearing her official outfit, having traded out a Disney Princess' gown in silver, white, and mink for something a bit more practical. Her heavy woolen trousers were dark gray, and she wore the latest in stylish winter coats, all synthetic fibers, in white. She didn't wear gloves, though, and her head was left bare. Her white hair had been braided and coiled around the top of her head as a kind of crown; in all their years of association, Jack had only seen her hair down once, and it had reached the back of her thighs then.

Aleksia also carried a bundle of blanket, bobble-hat, gloves on a string, and slightly oversized woolen coat. Somewhere in there was a little, five year old, humanoid rabbit.
"Something has happened." The Snow Queen handed her burden over with expected speed, the motion accompanied by a delighted squeal. "On both our ends."

"You first," Jack said.

Her lips twitched, and she nodded towards Desmond. "Remove his hat," she said. "And see for yourself."

Okay... It took two tugs, and when the hat lifted off baby fine strands of silver hair seemed to float after it, static cling at its best.

Hair, not fur, Jack realized. And no long ears tipped with black.

"Desmond?" he asked, adjusting his hold.

His son looked up, and grinned, baby teeth almost paler than his hair. "Papa! Papa, look what I did! I'm human too!"

"Wow," Jack breathed. He looked up at Aleksia. "Is this normal?" he asked, and laughed. "I have no idea if this is normal or not."

"He looks like you."

Yeah, he did. Fine silver hair, almost glowing in the moonlight, dark eyebrows, pale skin- well, yeah, technically Desmond's skin had never been touched by the sun before this- and blue eyes, though Jack's were a much lighter shade.

Someone, perhaps some of Aleksia's brownies, had found the kid some proper winter clothes instead of the cast offs and makeshifts Jack had been reduced to, and someone else had gotten the kid woolen stockings that stank of magic.

"Ilmari is responsible for those," Aleksia said, sounding dangerously close to amused. "Though how a wondersmith was able to work with woolen stockings, I have no idea. They will keep his feet warm, though, and grow with him, to a point."

"Please, pass on my thanks to him," Jack said. He tugged Desmond's hat back down onto his head, reducing the visible amount of face to about... half. The kid laughed and reached up to expose his eyes.

"And you?" she asked, carefully raising one eyebrow. "Something has happened with you?"

Jack held Desmond a little closer. "The Big Four want to talk to me," he admitted. "Claus had his yeti and the Kangaroo kidnap me. They didn't even know about-" he cut himself off, but looked down at Desmond.

"They protect human children," Aleksia said gently, before the quiet could go on too long. "And Desmond... isn't."

"He's my son," Jack whispered. He touched his fingertips to Desmond's cheek.

"Aw, Papa, love you too," Desmond said. He stretched his short little arm up until he could pat Jack's chin. "Better'n Santa!"

"If you say that to his face, I promise you'll get a snow cone."

Aleksia did laugh, at that. "Do they await you still?"
"Yeah." Jack managed the difficult juggling act that was holding onto a heavy five year old with both arms while still pulling the second snow globe out of his pocket. "And I should get back. Thanks for watching him."

"May you not need rest until next year," she said, and turned to walk away. The Wind came and swirled around her, lifting and throwing about a couple buckets of snow, enough to hide the Snow Queen from view. When the Wind stopped, the Snow Queen was gone.

"Alright, Des," Jack said. "Want to meet Santa, the Sandman, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny?"

"No," Desmond said.

"Yeah, me neither. Oh, well. Once more unto the breech."

He threw the globe, and sighed when the portal opened. This was going to end in yelling and tears, he just knew it.

He wasn't feeling guilty. He wasn't. He was just...

Oh, who was he kidding? Aster sighed, and let his shoulders slump. A kid. Ol' Frost had himself an ankle-biter of his own, and none of them had known. Tooth could be excused, she only got involved with the sprogs when they started losing their chompers. But him, Sandy, and Nick?

Aster had seen Frost hanging around the edges of egg hunts before. He'd always looked distant, some strange expression darkening his eyes.

Well, maybe he hadn't known then what that expression had been, but he knew now. Envy. Not for himself, but on behalf of his son. Desmond. A forty-four year old child... Oh. Well, the math fit, he supposed. He wished it didn't.

"Bunny, did you know?" Nick asked. The poor man looked pole axed, but they all had varying degrees of the same expression.

"No, but I think..." Aster tugged at his whiskers with one paw. "I think he maybe tried to ask me for help in '68, mate. Can't say for sure. I didn't let him talk, you see."

Sandy sighed, and flashed a few images in quick succession. A rug rat in a pram, a snowflake, and then something Aster couldn't make heads or tails of, ending with a stylized Jack Frost cuddling a swaddled babe.

"Human child would not be young now," Nick said. "And we would have known. Must be spirit child."

Aster shook his head and moved over to the nearest window. The landscape outside, bleak and cold, managed to match his emotions perfectly. Didn't matter if the kid was a spirit or a human or an animal; to his people, a kid had always been a kid, precious regardless of species or relations. It was one of the reasons he'd agreed to the Moon's request, to guard the children of Earth. Maybe there wouldn't be any more Pooka children, but...

"Bunny?" Tooth hovered at his shoulder. "You... You've had more interactions with Jack than we have. Do you... Do you think he's a good father?"

One interaction was more than the rest? That was just sad. Especially when it meant he was the best
one to make such a judgment!

"He might be a hooligan, but he likes making kids laugh," Aster said. He sighed, and bowed his head. "Guess that's better than some end up with. Can't say, sheila."

Tooth patted his shoulder, then went back to discuss the situation with Sandy and Nick. He thought about joining them, but, well, a bit of solitary thought felt good right now.

Easter Sunday '68 had always nagged at him. Frost hadn't been the first spirit to try messing up Easter, he sure wouldn't be the last, but if Aster was right he'd at least had a good reason.

Made him feel even guiltier for blowing the bloke off like that.

Of course, that was only if Aster's assumption was right.

He supposed they'd find out.

Less time than he'd expected later, a portal opened up. Aster turned and watched Frost march through, a bundle of blankets and winter gear- so the kid wasn't immune to the cold- held tight in one arm, staff being used as a walking stick. The kid's winter gear was some of the brightest colors Aster had ever seen, short of neon. A bright yellow hat with a fluffy bobble on top, a green woolen coat, blue trousers, brown socks, and a red blanket.

Dark blue eyes peered out from under the hat with interest, though it wasn't possible to see much more of the kid than that. At least not with him all wrapped up.

"This is Desmond?" North asked, bending to look closer at the kid.

"Yeah," Frost said. If he'd been a cat, he'd have been puffed up twice his size. "Desmond, this is Santa Claus."

Aster smirked when North was given a once-over that'd have been more appropriate from the Yank's FBI. "You're better," the kid decided, looking up at Frost. He looked back at Nick. "Papa's my favorite."

North blinked, and managed to combine amusement, disappointment, and confusion all in one expression. "Ah, yes," he stammered, and backed up.

Tooth was next, and she went for direct. "Oh, your teeth are so white! Just like your daddy's! Oh, they're so adorable!"

The kid batted at Tooth's hands while they poked at his mouth, but she only backed off when Frost put his free hand up in front of his kid's face.

"Look with your eyes, not your hands," Frost said. "Right, Des?"

"Yes, Papa. No touching." The kid pulled off his gloves, and tugged at his hat. "I'm hot, Papa."

Frost hesitated, and then glowered at them all. "Alright, Des. Here, let's get some of this stuff off."

Aster joined the other three while Frost crouched down and pulled off some of the winter gear. Interesting to see the kid had the same hair color as his adoptive father, and was even dressed in similar clothing, down to a little blue, hooded sweater. Frost chuckled a little, so perhaps that had been, what was it, the sitter's decision?

The kid stretched his arms out, then stepped up and peered at the four of them. "What'd you want
with Papa?" he asked, his little voice piping. "You didn't want him b'fore."

"Des!" Frost finished handing off the winter gear to the nearest yeti, and scowled. "Manners."

"They don't have any!"

"And you do, so use them."

The kid huffed, and moved over to cling to Frost's leg.

Frost himself rolled his eyes, folded his arms, and arched one eyebrow. "Okay. You wanted me here, why?"

"The Moon says you're our next Guardian," Aster said, before Nick could start on his big speech. Nick glowered at him, but at least it meant they got to skip the fanfare. Elves couldn't play proper music if their lives depended on it.

Frost looked at him as if he was insane. "Have you guys even heard of me?" His kid giggled. "No. And no, and no, and no! Dam- darn, I said darn."

"Swearing's bad," the mini-Frost said.

"Which is why I said darn."

"Almost didn't."

Frost raised one eyebrow, which was either innate talent or lots of practice. "Anyways, I like spending time with kids. I don't want to hole myself up in the back of nowhere and never see them."

Aster felt himself bristle, literally, the fur on his shoulders and back puffing up. "We spend time with kids!"

Frost raised one eyebrow; it seemed to be a favorite expression. "Really?" he asked. If he'd sounded any more disbelieving, they could've bottled and sold it. "That's not what I've seen. You leave the work to your fairies," he told Tooth, "and you don't have to be anywhere near a kid for your dream sand to reach them."

Sandy nodded, and studied Frost with all the intensity of a laser beam. The Desmond kid stared right back at Sandy; Frost himself didn't seem to notice, he'd moved on down the line.

"When's the last time you talked to a kid?" he asked Nick, scowling now. "Mall Santas are all the rage, and I bet you don't spend any time at them. You just wait for the letters, when most kids prefer the 'direct' route."

He actually used air quotes. Aster hadn't seen that in a good handful of years.

Then Frost rounded on him. Frost's mouth quirked and pulled to one side, not quite a smile. "At least you watch the egg hunts."

Most of the time, yes. Aster folded his arms, and scowled. "We got work," he said. "It's not like we can just wave our hands and have ready-made presents and googies. An' Tooth has to guide her fairies."

"You two," Frost pointed from Aster to North, "have off seasons. And the yeti and elves help with the toys, don't they? And you," he turned to Tooth, "can't go out in the field yourself now and then? Really? You... Okay, I have no idea what you'd do," he told Sandy. "But parents don't talk about the
Sandman so much anymore."

Owch. Not a comfortable thought, that.

Nick tugged on his beard, and then nodded. "What you say has some merit," he admitted. "Perhaps this is why Manny wishes you to be a Guardian with us. But, other factors too must be considered. We should speak of them."

The little Frost puffed up, and folded his arms. "Papa's not being a gard- Guardian. He's mine an' you can't have him."

Frost actually started laughing at that. "Sorry, folks, my lord and master has spoken. You're plumb out of luck."

"But it is Manny's will," Nick said, and shook his head. "Come, we will speak of this, yes? Cookies and cocoa, and none of this standing around. Is too hard on the feet."

The two Frosts sighed, and looked at each other. The younger raised his eyebrows at the elder, then they both sighed again. The elder Frost gestured towards Nick. "Well, if there's free food out of this... Lead on, Claus."

Chapter End Notes

So... Movie plot is going to be followed very loosely? Tossing a small child immediately into things obviously derails other things... Although Sophie is going to enjoy a playmate when she visits the Warren. That said, I hopefully won't dwell too long on movie events, because it's what happens after that's more important to the story.
Chapter Three

Des was young, not stupid. Or oblivious. He knew Papa wasn't his birth Papa. He knew Papa wasn't "conventionally alive" like Aunt Aleksia and most other spirits and all the humans. Papa and Aunt Aleksia had explained that ages and ages ago when Des had first noticed his Papa didn't have to breathe and didn't have a heartbeat and slept at the bottom of a lake.

Other spirits, though, kept pointing it out. As if Des was stupid for calling Jack Frost Papa. Or as if Des was too young to know better. Mr. Bunyan, one of the American spirits Papa knew, even asked if Des knew his real father.

Papa was his real father. Des didn't know why his birth parents had sent him away, but Papa thought they must've had a real good reason. And if his birth parents hadn't sent him away, he wouldn't have been raised by Papa.

That was why Des had tried to look human. Those spirits, the things they said... Des had started to hate looking in the mirror. Papa hadn't known, they were around mirrors so rarely, but the first time Des saw a human face looking back at him? He'd burst into tears of joy, then hopped around Aunt Aleksia's giant bathroom, too happy to stay still.

He'd thought he and Papa could celebrate by making ice cream, the old way Papa knew that always tasted better than the stuff in the grocery stores. Only then the stupid Big Four had to talk to Papa, which was stupid. It was stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, one stupid for every one of them.

Des knew exactly how many times they'd wanted to talk to Papa before- none. And if he thought about it, he'd get angry, so angry he'd say something that'd get Papa in trouble. He didn't want to do that; Papa was the best Papa in the whole world and they had to know it. So Des would remember his manners, the ones Aunt Aleksia had taught him. She was a queen, so her manners were the best.

So when they walked through Santa's Workshop, Des kept his eyes down and didn't look at any of the toys being made. Papa gawked like a tourist seeing Manhattan skyscrapers for the first time. His face looked funny; Des had to clap one hand over his mouth to keep from laughing.

"Hey, slow down, would you?" Papa grinned at Des over his shoulder. "I tried to bust in here for years."

Santa frowned. "What do you mean, 'bust in'?"

"Don't worry, I never got past the yetis." Papa waved at one. "Oh, hey Phil. Have you met Desmond?"

The yeti, startled, stopped scowling and shook his head. Papa reached down and hoisted Des into the air by the back of his hoodie, just like picking Des up by the scruff. Des giggled and waved; the yeti waved back. Beneath all the fur, he looked very bemused, and it was a bright point for this whole stupid situation.

Santa shook his head and led them through the rest of the Workshop to what looked like an office. "Here, sit, sit." He stopped and peered at Des, frowning. Des glared back. Stupid Santa. When had he ever brought the Frost family gifts? Des didn't mind for himself, really. Santa brought things for human children, and Des wasn't human. But Papa was, and Papa deserved presents for all the things
he did.

And it would have been nice to get something. Even just once.

Of course, that never happened.

Papa sat down on the window ledge, and rummaged in his hoodie pocket. He pulled out a carved, wooden horse with a yarn mane and tail, and a wooden wolf. He handed both to Des, and raised his eyebrows. "No explosions this time, yeah?"

"But Spirit had to blow up the train, Papa, it was going to eat his family."

Papa rolled his eyes and grinned. "Never should've let you watch that movie... Grown up talk is boring."

Yeah, right. That was just Papa's way of saying 'play quietly so people don't notice you, and listen in'. You didn't learn anything without eavesdropping a little, though Papa said you also had to be careful about what you listened in on.

Des settled down at Papa's feet with his toys. Once he started muttering to the horse and wolf, he noticed three of the four adults mentally dismiss him. Only the golden man, the Sandman, watched Des. Then, when he saw Des was watching him back, he winked.

Huh. Well, okay, maybe... The other three were still really stupid, though.

"So, Jack, we call you here because now, you are Guardian!"

What?

"What?" Papa asked. It was his 'I don't know what to say but there will be yelling in the next five minutes if this isn't good' voice. He often used it when Des did something... maybe a little naughty, like the time he locked Aunt Aleksia's brownies in the kitchen, or the other time when Des had decided to give everyone haircuts.

In Des' defense, he hadn't made anyone bald, and hair grew back.

"Yes! We are wiping slate clean and you are now a Guardian." Santa laughed, and spread his hands. The Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy both ducked to avoid getting hit in the face.

"Woah, hold up- wiping the slate clean?" Papa leaned forward. "What slate?"

"Why, naughty list. You hold record."

Des sighed and rolled his eyes.

Papa snorted. "Go me. Why am I being invited to join your super special club now? Because, for the record? Not interested."

It was funny watching them splutter. Des grinned, and then blinked as he thought of something. "Papa can't be a Guardian!" He set his horse and wolf down carefully. "I'm the only one who sees him."

Papa winced, and then his face went blank. "Desmond is right. Children don't see me, don't believe in me. Joining your club would be a death sentence, and I'm not leaving my son alone."

Des scrambled to cuddle up in Papa's lap. "Love you too, Papa," he said, and pressed the top of his
head against the underside of Papa's chin. Doing that always made them both feel better.

Papa sniffed, and rubbed his chin back and forth against Des' hair. "There you go. It's impossible. Get another portal, Claus. My son and I are done here."

Des sneaked a look at the four adults. Santa looked gob smacked. Hadn't it occurred to him that Papa didn't have any believers? Des didn't count; he got walked through just like Papa. The other adults, who hadn't talked so much yet, also looked surprised, though the Tooth Fairy's fingers were twitching. Hopefully that didn't mean she'd try sticking her fingers in Des' mouth again. If she did, he'd bite her.

The Easter Bunny looked strange, though. Not all that surprised, but... wistful. Des automatically bristled on his Papa's behalf. Papa and the Easter Bunny had argued before, and the stupid rabbit probably wanted Papa to become a Guardian so he'd go away forever. Well, Des wouldn't let that happen, and the stupid rabbit could just go paint his eggs and sulk in his hole.

The Sandman stepped, or floated, forwards. His sand floated up over his head, into pictures. Des stopped pressing against Papa's chest and leaned towards the golden man. Finally he slid down off Papa's lap and walked up to the Sandman to get a better look.

It was like the old picture movies, back when they were in black and white. Only the Sandman's pictures were all yellow.

There were four Guardian shapes, and Des scowled at them on basic principle. Then the shapes looked up at a yellow ball- oh, that was supposed to be the moon- and a fifth shape, looking like Papa, joined the Guardian shapes.

"Sandy's right," the Tooth Fairy said. She was much too close for comfort, sounding right behind Des. He jumped away and glared at her, and her eyes got big and watery. Well, too bad. He bet that when he lost his baby teeth, she wouldn't give him any quarters for them.

After a moment she cleared her throat and looked at Papa. "The Man in the Moon says you're our newest Guardian. Surely..."

"And will children wake up believing in me?" Papa snorted. Then he stood up and threw the window he had been leaning against open. The frame clattered against the wall, and the Wind immediately rushed in to explore the space. She didn't normally get to go indoors.

"Three hundred years ignoring me and you think I'll jump at your say-so?" Papa yelled. He shook his fist out the window, presumably towards the Moon. "Think again, jerk!"

Des smirked, and held his hands out for the Wind to thread through his fingers. She warmed up a little for him, like she always did.

"Jack Frost!" the Tooth Fairy gasped.

The Easter Bunny was a little more practical, though still stupid. He stalked forward and grabbed Papa by the hood, and jerked backward. "You crazy?" he snapped. He closed the window. "You could've fallen out, we're three stories up!"

"I can fly," Papa said, and pulled free. "As for crazy... Jury's out!"

The Easter Bunny folded his arms. "Sit back down and we'll talk."

"Yeah? I think we've covered all the bases. Moon wants me to join your boy-band- sorry, Ms.
"Pitch Black," the rabbit said, just as Santa said, "The Boogieman."

Des flinched and hurried to grab his Papa in a hug. Not that Des was scared, because he wasn't. But Papa worried, a lot, so he needed the hug. That was it.

And he wasn't shaking; he was shivering, because it was cold.

Papa ran his fingers through Des' hair, the way he did when grooming Des' fur. "Alright," he said. "I'm listening."

"Pitch, he has been trying to return humans to dark ages," Santa said. "Had some success during cold war- do you remember?"

"Would nuclear weapons hurt us?" Papa asked.

"Yes."

Papa shivered, and cleared his throat. "I remember."

"He was seen here, in Workshop! And then Manny says we are to have five Guardians, with you as fifth."

"Clearly, Manny thinks we'll need your help," the Easter Bunny said. Des wondered if anyone else heard the muttered, "I think Manny's lost it." Probably not. His ears were very good, even human-shaped.

"This Pitch... All I know is stories about the Boogieman. They're not... nice. To children."

"No," Santa agreed. "Pitch finds the fears of children tasty."

Papa stopped brushing Des' hair, and simply rested his hand against his head. "I see."

The Tooth Fairy fluttered closer. Des peeked at her, and scowled. She was peering at Papa's mouth, and a few of her fairies were sighing and making goo-goo eyes at him. Stupid fairies. "Perhaps, in helping us, you'll get believers."

"I honestly don't care if anyone believes me or not," Papa said, in his lying voice. He cared. "But I don't want any kids to be in danger, either. On the other hand, I have my own kid to worry about. I'm not taking him into a fight."

Well, no, Papa never did. "Aunt 'Lexi will have a stroke if she needs to watch me more," Des pointed out.

"And there's no one else who can watch him."

"Ah, but my yeti, they can watch him," Santa said.

"No," Papa grinned, showing off nearly every tooth in his mouth. Wolves grinned like that. Several of the Tooth Fairy's minis sighed and fainted. They plopped against the carpet.

Des crouched down and poked one. Huh, the feathers were soft and warm, who would've guessed?

"Elves?"
"You're crazy."

"Sandy and Tooth can't watch him, obviously. Might be we could tuck him away in my Warren? Safest place for a nipper, 'long as he doesn't try to go swimming," the Easter Bunny said.

Des scowled at him. Stupid, stupid rabbit. Des looked like him, when he wasn't human-shaped. All big eyes and big ears and fur everywhere. The rabbit was an adult, of course, so he was tall and less fluffy, and he didn't want anything to do with Des... and Papa was better anyways, so it didn't matter.

Stupid Easter Bunny.

Papa tapped one finger against the top of Des' head. "He's five."

"Forty-four!"

"You shaved the brownies! And yourself!"

"Only a little!"

Papa huffed. "Des, no. You can't stay anywhere alone."

Des huffed back. "But Papa...!"

"There's sentinels," the Easter Bunny said. He sounded amused. Des glared at him, and then frowned.

"Like the TV show?"

"The what?" The Easter Bunny shook his head. "He wouldn't be alone down there. Look, we'll find out what Pitch is up to, then I'll open a tunnel and you can pop the nipper away so he's safe as houses. Won't be more than an hour or two, I'll bet."

Papa sighed, and rolled his eyes. "Obviously you haven't been anywhere near children in a long time, Kangaroo." His smile was wry, and all for Des. "On the other hand, I don't have any better ideas, other than begging Aleksia..."

"Aunt 'Lexi said she was going to have Uncle 'Mari wash her back," Des offered. He made a face. He knew what that meant. Cuddling, lots and lots of cuddling, and ice darts if anyone interrupted her. Papa made a face too.

"Okay, not Aleksia."

Someone snorted; someone else gasped. Des looked over, and blinked.

The Tooth Fairy wasn't paying any attention to him, or Papa's teeth, or anything in the room. "Something just happened at my palace," she said. "I have to go."

Then she was gone, faster than fast, so fast the door slammed shut with how fast she was going. Des gaped at where the Tooth Fairy had vanished. "Is she the Flash?" he asked, but no one answered.

"What- we must go. Jack, please, come with us."

"Horseapples," Papa muttered, and looked up at the ceiling. "Alright. Alright! Des, you'll have to go to the Easter Bunny's Warren, 'cause no way am I leaving you with yeti and elves. There wouldn't be a Workshop to come back to."
Des smirked. "There would, but the yeti would be bald and the elves would be spider-people."

"Alright, Kangaroo."

"Sandy and I will go in sleigh, meet you at Tooth's Palace."

Des picked up his horse and wolf, and then paused. "Papa, I need my blanket."

"There's blankets in the Warren," the Easter Bunny said. "And I'll show you where you can sleep before we go on." He tapped one foot against the floor, and then there was a hole. Into the ground. Santa grumbled something about 'messing with floorboards' but that was awesome. He had to learn how to do that!

"Hop in, gents."

Papa picked Des up, and grabbed his staff with one hand. "Hold on, Desmond. Down the rabbit hole we go."

"He's not white."

"And you're not named Alice."

Then Papa jumped, and the rabbit darted past to lead the way.

"Look with your eyes and not with your hands," Papa reminded him, and then pulled out the book Des was slowly working his way through. They had gotten it from a charity garbage, because it was missing the front and back cover and was warped with water damage besides. Des loved it so far; the Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents was funny.

And he liked Darktan.

The Easter Bunny walked up, and set two blankets down beside Des. "See that hollow there? Beneath the willow?"

Des turned and looked. "Yeah."

"You can kip there, since it's just one night. Nice enough spot, slept there plenty myself." He looked at Papa. "We'd better hurry. With Pitch about, don't want to think what might've happened at Tooth's."

"That makes one of us," Papa muttered, then knelt down to hug Des. "Be good, don't break anything, don't break yourself, and if I find you've got pink hair when I get back we'll be talking."

"I'll probably sleep," Des admitted. "Beat up the bad guy, Papa."

"I'll give you all the highlights." Papa stood up, and tapped his staff against the ground once. "Alright, cottontail. Let's go."

Des watched them go, and sighed. This wasn't the first time Papa had left him alone, just the first time since Des had started walking. He remembered, vaguely, being really little and not wanting to leave wherever the 'nest' was- usually a little cave by Papa's favorite lake. One week, Papa hadn't been able to put off his yearly nap, and the year after that Papa had tried to follow Winter across the ocean, to stay awake. It hadn't worked, but they had met Aunt Aleksia, so it worked out.

He picked up the blankets, and carried them over to the little hollow the Easter Bunny had pointed
out. It was perfect for a rabbit, all soft moss and gently curving sides and the willow leaning out over to give privacy with its long, drooping branches. Despite himself, he was impressed. Only Papa also knew what sort of sleeping spot Des preferred, though Papa had learnt over the years and the Easter Bunny was just guessing.

There wasn't anyone around. Des squinted at the egg sentinel things, but they didn't seem to care much about him. They kept between him and the multicolored river, and there was another bunch between him and a bunch of walking eggs (which he really wanted to go play with, except he'd promised not to touch anything) but otherwise didn't watch him.

It only took seconds to pull off his hoodie, and his pants. Aunt Aleksia had picked them out just because of that; the hoodie was slightly too big, and the pants were sweat pants. He tugged off his socks, and folded everything up carefully.

Then he let go of the shape-change. It didn't hurt, though it was weird watching his hands sprout fur and change into paws. His eyesight changed a little, too, and it was easier to stand on four legs instead of two. He could feel his ears properly, at last, and he shook himself all over once the change was finished. It felt a little like his fur was tingling.

He hopped over to carry his toys and book to the hollow, having to waddle a little on his hind legs when he had things to carry. The Easter Bunny made it look easy, but it wasn't. Maybe it was something he'd get better at when he was older. He certainly practiced enough.

Des yawned, and wrapped up in the blankets. They were soft, and warm, and even in this Warren-which was as warm as Burgess in late summer- he wanted the warmth. Papa was the best Papa ever, but cuddling with him required lots of blankets, and maybe a fire.

The warmth also made him sleepy. He thought about trying to finish a chapter of his book- but his eyes wouldn't focus on the page, so he had to set it aside.

He pulled a corner of the blanket over his head, and slept.

He woke up to a faint scuffing sound, and thrashed free of the blankets. What was that? It didn't sound anything like the egg sentinels, or the walking eggs.

Then he heard a giggle. That... wasn't right.

Des hesitated, but what could possibly hurt him here? He hopped towards the sounds, going slow and careful, all stalk-y like Papa had taught him. Just because Des was a talking rabbit didn't mean it was fair for anyone to try and make him prey.

He peeked around one moss covered rock, and gasped. There was a girl in the Warren, a human girl! How'd she get here?

The girl turned around, and brushed at the blonde hair that fell in her eyes. Des expected her to look right past him, but she didn't. She saw him- and she grinned and clapped her hands!

"Bunny! Hop, hop!"

Des grinned, and hopped towards her.

Chapter End Notes
Argh why was this chapter so hard?! I'm sorry, folks, but I don't think Des is going to have a viewpoint chapter all too often. This took much head-desking to get done. On the other hand, there is no other character in this story that can get away with calling the Guardians 'stupid', even in his thoughts. Also. Also also:

Shimmer712 made a TV tropes page for this fic. Find it on http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/FanFic/LittleBoyBlue and Shimmer? THANK YOU I LOVE YOU I THINK YOU'RE AWESOME! (Do you need any firstborn children as payment? I'll get right on that.)

Des' experience with haircuts and making himself "only a little" bald comes from personal experience. Right before picture day at school. At least MY brother was too young for school... And only let me snip a little off. (My stuffed animals never recovered, alas.)
"So this is the Tooth Palace, huh?" Didn't look anything like he'd read in books. Kind of like the Taj Mahal with more color, and less adherence to gravity.

"This is it," the Easter Bunny agreed. He looked around, then pointed... over and up. "That way."

Jack sauntered, staff yoked over his shoulders. The humidity in this place was amazing, it felt like he could call snow from the air itself, no clouds required. It'd be a pain, because hel-lo heat, Jack had not been warned about that.

"Hurry up," the talking kangaroo snapped.

Jack smirked. "The party don't start till I walk in," he said. "Nothing's blowing up, no one's screaming..."

"Move you're bleeding arse, Frost!"

"I'm moving, I'm moving..." Flying was easier. The Wind helped, and even managed to lower the temperature a few degrees.

The kangaroo raced through the various rooms and corridors. There weren't any doors, or stairs, in the place, but Jack had to admit the marsupial could jump.

The rooms were strangely empty. They looked like there should have been things- the walls were covered in shelves, but they were empty and dust was everywhere- and it was starting to creep him out a little. He kept close to the Easter Bunny, and not just because he'd have gotten lost otherwise.

The Easter Bunny took him to what looked like the Tooth Fairy's version of command central. It was completely open to the elements, very green, and had a gathering of the three Guardians.

"I just don't know what happened," the Tooth Fairy said. She whirled when the Easter Bunny entered the room. "Did you see them?"

"See... who?"

Jack smirked at how the Easter Bunny froze, one ear twitching very slightly, then floated close and blew on the kangaroo's ears.

He yelped and jumped, then turned around swinging.

Jack floated up and over him, fast enough the Easter Bunny would hopefully not lunge for him. That could be painful. He ended up all the way beside the Sandman before the oversized hare stopped spluttering.

At some point, he'd have to mentally address the fact that the Easter Bunny and Desmond were probably- 99.999% certain, in fact- the same species. That was annoying. He needed more nicknames for the bigger, annoying one of the two.

"So, hey," he murmured to the Sandman. "Can I call you Sandy?"
The Sandman gave him two thumbs up, and then turned back to the Tooth Fairy.

"They just... got frightened," she said.

Someone had been waiting their cue, Jack thought. The shadows immediately got darker, stretching out. He thought, for a second, he heard angry horses and pounding hooves.

Then the shadows twisted and rose up, falling away to reveal a man. He was almost as tall as Santa, but slender. His dark hair was cropped short, his eyes were yellow, and his teeth looked like he'd stolen them from a shark. He was grinning, hands folded in front of him in the stereotypical Bond villain type way.

"Is he wearing a dress?" Jack asked.

The man immediately stopped smiling and glared at Jack. "Oh, you."

"Pitch!" Santa stepped forward, scowling. "What have you done here?"

"Done?" The man- Pitch Black, Jack supposed, unless there was another Pitch- grinned again. "Simply... indulged my curiosity. How many fairies did you split yourself into?" he asked the Tooth Fairy. "I have... Oh, four hundred and twenty three... but I see I missed some."

The Tooth Fairy, and her seven miniatures, gasped, then bristled. "You- give them back!"

"Or what, you'll give me a quarter?"

Jack raised his eyebrows when the three male Guardians made various angry noises- well, Sandy was silent- and moved forwards. He didn't join them.

"Oh, and what will you three do?" Pitch laughed, and spread his hands.

There were... horses. Jack had seen horses, obviously, but the mortal nags he'd seen looked nothing like these beasts. For one thing, horses didn't have red eyes. Or horns. Or claws.

"My nightmares are ready," Pitch said. "Are you?"

Wow, Santa had swords, who knew?

"Not going to fight, Jack?" The Boogieman glided a step closer. "Well, I suppose I was right. You really are a neutral party. It should be safe enough to ignore you, though you seem used to that."

Jack grabbed for the Easter Bunny's ruff before he could get more than halfway through his lunge. He was dragged forward three steps before the idiot clued in that someone was trying to stop him. And when the rabbit turned and stared at him, it was all that Jack could do to keep laughing.

"Well, he is right," Jack said. "I am used to being ignored."

Pitch laughed, backed up a step- and slipped on the ice he hadn't noticed forming.

Jack snickered, and wiggled his staff. "Watch your step!"

"You!" The Boogieman snarled, and then gestured at his so-called horses. "Get them!"

Snowballs weren't effective weapons against horses. Especially not ones that flew.

Jack hit one in the face with his staff, which at least made it back off. It took him a second, but then
he saw one of the horses chase down a miniature fairy- and swallow it.

He gagged. He followed that horse, the Wind twisting through the pillars and arches, and drew close. Close enough that if he'd wanted to, he could have reached out and touched one heaving flank.

He didn't. He peered at the creature's stomach. Was that a hint of blue and purple?

The horses weren't eating the fairies, they were *trapping* them. Why?

Jack hissed, and spotted the horse's next target. Yeah, no. He poured on the speed, and managed to reach the fairy half a second before the horse. He rolled to the side, narrowly missed going headfirst into a wall, and checked the fairy in his hand.

"Hey there, Baby Tooth," he said, and smiled at the poor, disheveled thing. "It's okay, I've got you."

She squeaked at him, then turned and squeaked again. Oh, right, there was a fight, wasn't there?

Jack flew back into the thick of things, but the herd was thinning out. He managed to swipe at the last horse, and gave serious thought to following after it... But no. He floated back towards the Guardians, moving slowly. If he'd been conventionally alive, his heart would've been pounding and he would've been gasping for air, possibly even shaking. Considering his physiology and how much effort it had taken to fly in the hot and humid air, he was just thankful he wasn't feeling ready for a nap.

It would have been a bit hard to explain.

"Hey, uh, Tooth?" They'd fought together. You were supposed to call people by their first name if you'd fought together, right? Unless you were military. He held out his hand, Baby Tooth perched on his palm. "I'm sorry about your fairies."

Tooth picked up Baby Tooth, and cuddled her. Were the fairies like her babies? If anything, that made him feel worse. "They'll be alright. They're frightened, not hurt. But Pitch took the teeth!"

The teeth? "Why would he do that?"

Tooth's wings drooped. Santa put one large hand on her shoulder. "It's not the teeth themselves he wanted, it's the memories," she said. "That's why we collect them. They contain the most important memories of childhood. Later, when they're adults? We help them to remember."

"Then we'll have to get them back," Jack said. He looked around at the palace, and frowned. "What happens if... if you miss one night?"

"The children stop believing," Santa said. "And we weaken."

Yeah, that'd be bad. Maybe he didn't like these people, but he didn't want them to get sick, either. Or die. Dying would be... bad. "Okay," he said. "So first, we need to make sure the teeth get collected, right? Then we need to get your fairies and the teeth back."

Tooth nodded, and perked up. "Are you... offering to help?"

"We all are," Santa said, and grinned. "Hah! Together, we will collect the teeth. Then, we will find Pitch and make him wish we had never been born!"

"Think he already does, mate," the Easter Bunny muttered, but he was grinning.

Sandy had golden fireworks over his head. Jack grinned at him. One night. Desmond would be
asleep. Everything would be fine for just one night.

Everything was not fine. Absolutely not fine at all.

Jack slumped down on the window sill. Sandy... No. No way, no how, there was no body. No body, no proof of death, therefore he was not going to join that wake the three remaining Guardians were holding. He would hope, and when he was proven right, he'd hold it over their heads for the rest of eternity.

"That's an angry hope you got there, mate."

Jack didn't look up, even when two oversized rabbit feet edged into sight. "He's not dead."

He heard the Easter Bunny sigh, and sensed him move to lean up against the wall. "Yeah. A real angry hope."

"He's the Sandman. He turned into sand, that's all. He'll be back. He can't be dead, Bunny."

Oh, oops. Jack peeked over at the rabbit, to see if... No, apparently he hadn't noticed Jack use his name. That was something, at least.

"Jack... hold onto that hope. For all of us." Bunny's whiskers twitched as he tried to smile.

"Yeah," Jack whispered. What else could he do? Pitch couldn't just have won. No. He hadn't won. This was a war, wasn't it? A war for belief, and for the safety of the children. A single battle didn't decide the war, not this early in the game, and just because one of their people had become a- a prisoner, not dead- didn't mean they would just lie down and give in!

He looked up when Santa approached. "Jack? Come, we must speak."

Jack glanced at Bunny, but he nodded. Well, alright then. Time to talk to Santa Claus. "What are we talking about?"

The man gestured him into what looked like a cross between an ice carving studio, and an office, and shut the door. "Children will be having nightmares, I think." He sighed.

"If this is about Desmond, he already has those." Rarely, since Jack had found him, and the kid never woke up screaming or anything... Just, those nights, he needed to curl up in Jack's lap and be sung to for the rest of the night.

"No. Is about fight with Pitch. He will get stronger, we will get weaker."

"Uh, not to belabor a point here, but no one believes in me. That won't..." Jack gestured with his staff. "It's not like I can get any stronger, or weaker."

"No," Santa agreed. "Unless you find center."

"Well, I'm clueless."

The crazy man handed him one of those Russian nesting dolls. It had been painted to look like a demented Santa, all wide mouth and glaring eyes. "What am I, Jack?"

Well, if he was just going to give Jack an opening like that... "Fat."

"Hey!" Santa glared, and tapped the doll with one finger. "Jolly."
"Is this going to turn into philosophy? I can't stand that stuff." Jack set the doll aside. "Tell me what you want to say, without any of that... soul searching stuff."

Santa huffed, then took the doll apart to the smallest of them, a little, red baby with giant blue eyes. "You see this? Big eyes, wide with wonder. That is me. I guard the wonder of childhood."

"Okay..." Jack studied the doll. Well, he supposed he could see that.

"Bunny, he is hope. Tooth is memory, and Sandy..." He paused, and swallowed. "Sandy was dreams."

"Is. He is dreams." Jack let up his grip on the infant doll.

After a moment, Santa nodded. "Yes. Is. And now you. Whatever you think, Man in Moon has chosen you to be next Guardian. So what is it you guard? That," he pointed at Jack's chest, "is your center. When you find that, you will become stronger than ever."

"The only thing special about me is Desmond." Who was still in the Warren, and probably wondering what was taking so long. At least there was a lot of grass down there, so the kid wouldn't get hungry. Sure, Jack preferred it when Desmond ate apples and pears and cabbage and stuff, but the grass wouldn't make him sick. Apparently it just tasted bland.

"Why did you become spirit in first place?" Santa asked. Jack dragged his mind back to the conversation.

"I don't know. I don't remember anything from before... Before."

"Nothing?" Santa reached towards Jack. Despite himself, he flinched back.

He'd met other spirits before. Except for a very small handful- all of three, including his son- they started off by attacking him. Keeping a healthy distance was just... instinct, really.

Santa didn't need to look so crushed, though.

"Nothing from before the whole spirit thing," he agreed. "I'll think about what my center could be, but... don't hold your breath, Santa."

"Nick. Please? There is no need for formal, don't you agree?"

Jack sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Compromise with North?"

"Yes. Let us speak with the others. Easter is in two days, and Pitch will try to stop it." Santa paused in the doorway. "Do not tell Bunny, but this year, Easter may in fact be more important than Christmas."

Jack followed behind the giant man, then darted around him so he could enter the globe room first. "Hey, Bunny! Guess what North said! Easter's more important!"

North glared. Bunny beamed. And Tooth giggled.

They weren't beaten yet.
THIS chapter was much easier to write. Before anyone asks, the tooth collecting went the same way as movie. Obviously canon conversations aren't happening the same way. And Jack's motivation for helping is less "I want my memories" and more "this guy is threatening my kid."
"We're not taking the sleigh to the Warren." Aster folded his arms. "Now everyone huddle together."

Nick drew himself up- but Aster double-tapped the ground with his foot. The hole opened up right under Nick's feet, and cut the jolly old bandit off before he could start. 'Everyone loves the sleigh' his fluffy tail.

"Thanks, Bunny," Tooth said. She and her last fairy flitted down the hole, following the sound of a cranky Russian.

Aster turned and waved Jack on first. "Bet you're eager to see the sprog."

"You have no idea," Jack breathed, and floated down without protest. A few of Nick's yeti and elves toddled after him, and after a moment Aster just... let them. What the hell, the yeti were used to a heavy workload, fiddly detail work, and an important deadline. The elves... could probably be put to herding the egglets, so long as they didn't eat any.

He was tired. Unlike some, he liked his sleep schedule to be a twenty-four hour one. And now it'd been close to twenty-five hours since he'd slept, and there wouldn't be a chance coming for a while yet.

Somehow, he found the strength to run through the tunnels to the Warren.

It was quiet when he arrived, even with his guests. "Okay," he said. "Priorities. Frosty, go check your ankle biter. Then maybe he can help too."

"Child labor's illegal."

"What kid doesn't like painting?"

Jack looked thoughtful, then shrugged. "The paint's edible, right? Just in case?"

"All vegetable based."

The winter spirit grinned, then headed over to the hollow where the kid was supposed to be sleeping. Aster ignored him; Frost and mini-Frost could get their orders in a bit.

"North. Tooth, yeti and elves... Let's get the egglets moving to the coloring river for a base coat first. Don't break any."

"Hey!" Jack called. Aster felt his eye twitch.

"What?"

"Do you see Desmond?"

The three Guardians blinked at each other, the yeti and elves already heading off to work. "Uh, no?" Tooth called back.

Jack shook his head, then seemed to peer at the ground. "I've got tracks- sorry, Bunny. I'll be back as
soon as my son's clothed."

As soon as... "Why the heck would the ankle biter be running around starkers?"

"Perhaps is naked swim time," Nick suggested.

"The sentinels wouldn't let him near the rivers or the sparkle pool," Aster said. He shook his head and smirked. "Well, let's get working. At least this way I know Frost won't be frosting any of the eggs."

Tooth gave him a faintly chiding look, but then, she was biased. Jack really did have white teeth. Her fairy was a bit more vocal in her protest, then flew off to follow the winter spirit.

"She's... very attached to Jack," Tooth murmured. Aster pretended he didn't see Nick's face fall. Those two. He couldn't age, but he'd be an old man before either of them made a move! He mentally washed his paws of the situation- not for the first time, and likely not for the last- and focused on the eggs.

He was behind. He was very, very behind. This was crunch time. Sure, the year over he practiced designs, but the eggs had a three week period where they were able to toddle around. After those three weeks, they went bad, and not only smelt to high heaven when they broke, but stopped moving on their own.

Over the years, he'd perfected the art of getting the eggs hatched and painted in time to finish at Easter. Getting them changed from egg-eggs, to chocolate eggs, took the longest. In contrast, the painting could be done in three or four intense days.

It was nearing dawn on Easter Sunday. Even with the help, it'd be a close one.

The yeti were lumbering into work, taking a goodly number of googies to hand paint them. Aster normally did half a dozen every hour over the four days, which would ensure enough personalized eggs for every country that celebrated Easter. That obviously wasn't an option now; the yeti could do it. Might not be up to his usual standard, but it'd get done.

Then Tooth's fairy darted back, chirping at the top of her lungs. Aster winced; to his ears, the sound was far too piercing for him to even guess at what was being said.

"Oh! She says there's someone with Desmond." Tooth looked at him. "That way!"

Someone had gotten into the Warren? Aster lunged towards the tunnel in question, and pulled his boomerangs on the way.

He wasn't alone. Tooth flew at his left, hands clenched into fists; Nick ran at his right, swords drawn. Considering Pitch was actively trying to destroy them, it was not an overreaction.

Only it was. Aster stopped short to keep from running into Jack, Desmond, and a little, human girl. After a second he remembered to hide his boomerangs behind his back.

Jack gave him an utterly bland look, and finished pulling Desmond's sweater over the kid's head. "Wow," he said. "Don't I feel special."

The girl edged closer to Desmond. "Bunny?"

The kid grinned. If he were older, Aster would've termed it a shit-eating grin. "The Easter Bunny,"
he said.

"Bunny!" The girl clapped her hands and jumped in place. "Hop, hop!"

Jack snorted.

"Oh," Tooth cooed. "Isn't she adorable?"

"Lady?" The girl tugged at Desmond's sleeve. "Who that?"

"That's the Tooth Fairy," Desmond said. "She sticks her fingers in your mouth."

The girl giggled. "Lady pretty!"

"Aw... And you're so cute..." Tooth moved closer, and pulled out... teeth? "Just as cute as these incisors... Look, you can still see the blood and gum!"

Aster cradled his face in his paws. Even so, it didn't render him deaf to the girl's whine of disgust, or Desmond's "Wow, way to upset her."

"Did I do something wrong?"

Jack snorted, and Aster risked looking. Well, the winter spirit didn't look too gleeful at Tooth's mishandling of the situation.

"Unless you're talking between the ages of six and ten, kids aren't that fond of blood," he said. "And even in that age range, it's mostly boys that actually like seeing blood than hearing about it. Seriously, don't you remember playing with kids?"

"It's been a while," Tooth murmured.

"We are busy," Nick said. "Too busy making fun for children to play... with children."

There was no way Jack could look any more unimpressed. "Uh huh. Well, hey, Bun-Bun, it's your Warren..." And there was the adult version of Desmond's grin. "Why don't you give everyone an example?"

Then he blew a handful of snowflakes in Aster's face.

... Oooh, blue sparkles...

Aster snorted when the flakes tickled his nose, and then chuckled. Well. Might as well use this as a chance to prove the Guardians could play with kids.

He walked over to the girl, who sniffled but looked up at him. He crouched down- no need to give her neck strain. "Hey there. Want to paint some eggs?"

She grinned, and nodded.

"Well, good. What's your name, darling?"

"Sophie!" She held up one hand, and he gently took it in one oversized paw. Then she grabbed Desmond with her other hand... by the hair.

"Ow, Sophie! Hair, hair!"
"Bunny!"

"He's the bunny, I'm a boy!"

Aster chuckled, and led the girl toward the egg fields.

Jack let the others get ahead, and raised his eyebrows at Desmond.

"Aw, Papa, I don't know where she came from." Desmond grinned at him. "And no one saw me naked."

"Except Sophie," Jack pointed out, but relaxed. At this point, he was pretty sure no one would try to take Desmond away from him, but... Well. Paranoia was hard to shake off, once it got its claws in you. "No harm done, I guess. Did you see her come in?"

"Nope, but I heard. Sounded like one of Santa's portals." Desmond skipped beside him when they followed after the Guardians. "What's going on, Papa? Where's the Sandman?"

"Sandy..." Hell. He'd never lied to his son before, and whatever age he was physically, emotionally and mentally he was a bit older. Not all the way to forty-four, but... seven or eight, maybe. Sometimes. "He got hurt, Des. Pitch got one over on us."

Jack held his hand out, and Desmond grabbed on tight. "He'll get better?"

"Yeah. But we have to make sure Easter goes off without a hitch."

Desmond nodded, and then swiped his hair out of his eyes. "I'll help. Whatever I can do, Papa."

"Go let Bunny know," Jack said.

"He's Bunny now?"

"Yup, and Tooth and North. Go on, bunny rabbit. Quick like a kangaroo."

Desmond laughed, then ran ahead to grab Bunny's free hand. Then, going by how he was bouncing and flailing one hand around his head, he started jabbering at light speed at the elder. Little Sophie seemed to pick up his excitement, because she started hopping about too, never letting go of Bunny's hand.

Tooth turned to look back at him. "You know," she said, "I don't know if that's sweet... or mean."

Jack grinned, and held out one hand for Baby Tooth. "Not both?"

Egg decorating was harder than he'd ever thought. The eggs were mobile, fast, and not too smart. Also, they climbed. Jack found himself working with Tooth to get the more daring ones off high ledges and down from tree branches, while North herded the eggs into the Coloring River.

At one point, Jack saw Desmond shove an elf into a shallow part of the Coloring River. He was about to swoop down to chide his son, when the elf climbed back out, looked at its pastel-colored self, and started dancing.

Well, no harm done, right?

Right.
"Des, no more redecorating elves," he called, and headed over to rescue three eggs that looked ready to do a belly flop onto the ground.

He kept an eye on Des, of course, but also snuck peeks at Bunny. The guy might have watched egg hunts for years, but Jack figured the last time the rabbit had spent time in an actual child's company was decades ago. Possibly centuries. Sure, Bunny had good instincts- he'd already diverted Sophie's attention from swimming in the river twice, and managed to distract her from a minor meltdown once- but no actual experience. They couldn't afford a temper tantrum at this point, from Sophie or the kangaroo.

Better to have an expert keep an eye on things. Kind of sad that the expert was permanently seventeen, but whatever.

Things were going pretty well, he decided, by the time the two kids started to droop, Sophie a bit more than Desmond. Well, that figured; his kid had gotten some sleep, while Sophie probably hadn't.

Bunny looked confused when she started to whine. Jack floated closer, and was rewarded when the rabbit turned a pleading expression on him.

"What- she's not hurt, is she?"

"No, no. Pick her up, cottontail." Jack touched down, just in time for Des to toddle over and lean against his leg. Jack hoisted the boy up on one hip.

Bunny was a little gentler with Sophie. Something about him looked right, cradling the blonde child in the crook of one arm, a giant paw smoothing over her hair in a soothing, repetitive motion. His eyes, which had been starting to look a little manic between all the eggs getting painted, and Sophie's exhausted, wordless complaining, gentled, and his fur smoothed out over his shoulders.

Sophie snuffled, rubbed her cheek against Bunny's shoulder, and got a good double handful of fur. Didn't look quite ready to fall asleep, though Jack knew what would help her on to that.

"Can you take a few minutes?" Jack asked.

Bunny looked around, and shrugged the shoulder Sophie wasn't using as a pillow. "Yeah, a couple."

"Come on." Jack led the way to a small hillock, and settled down. Desmond whined at having to move, but made himself comfortable on Jack's lap. After a minute, Bunny did his best to copy Jack's posture, though his legs weren't exactly made for sitting cross legged.

"Here." Jack rummaged through his hoodie pocket, and then pulled out The Book. He'd taught Desmond how to read with this book, and Desmond had chewed on the corners. The pages were thick and board like, and the drawings inside were big and simple. "Read her this."

Bunny raised his eyebrows, nose twitching with interest. "Where's my cow?"

Desmond cracked one eye open, and yawned. "Tha' one," he mumbled. "Goo' boo'..."

Jack ran his fingers through his son's hair a few times. "Go on, Bunny. And don't forget to do the noises."

It should have been funny, how hesitantly the rabbit cracked open The Book to the first page. Instead, with the quiet murmur of "Where's my cow? Is that my cow?" and the inexpert attempts at making sounds like a chicken, a goat, a sheep, and a hippopotamus (he wondered about the author sometimes, he really did), Jack found himself relaxing. It'd been a long, busy day, and he needed to
Bunny finished the book, and even after he'd somehow managed to drag it out to ten and a half minutes, Sophie was still awake. Not by much, she kept blinking and it took several seconds for her to open her eyes, but still awake.


Bunny sighed, but began to croon softly. "E tangi ana Koe Hine, E Hine... Kua ngenge ana koe Hine, E Hine! Kati to pouri ra Noho I te Aroha Te ngakau o te Matua Hine, E Hine... E Hari to moe moea Hine, E Hine! Marama ahua Hine, E Hine..."

Well, that was pretty. Completely incomprehensible, but pretty.

And it worked, too. Sophie yawned, turned so her face was pressed against Bunny's chest, and fell asleep.

Bunny stroked her hair a few more times, then looked up and smiled at Jack. "Well, how 'bout that?"

Wow, that was a nice smile. So much better than the rabbit's usual scowl. Jack shifted Desmond so the kid's head wasn't digging into his spleen, and grinned back. "Now we've got to take her home. I saw her, she's from Burgess. I even know what home."

Aw, drooping whiskers. Jack reached forward and brushed Bunny's shoulder. "There's no law that says you can't check up on her after Easter, is there?"

"No." Bunny looked up, and if he didn't smile, at least his whiskers stopped drooping. "Thanks, mate."

"Yeah, well. I'll take her home. She's asleep; I'll be able to carry her now." Something he'd taken advantage before. He'd always hated seeing children lost in the woods, or otherwise out in the cold and unable to get home. More than once he'd carried an unconscious kid to a house, knocked on the door, and watched to make sure someone found them. Not to say he always brought the kids to their parents'; some people, he thought, shouldn't be parents.

And some really should, but never had the chance.

When he checked up on those kids later, they were always thriving, and never seemed to remember the homes they'd left.

"I..." Bunny looked down at the little girl, then back up at Jack. "Just a few minutes."

Jack had to look away. He knew that expression, he'd seen it before. Occasionally even in a mirror. "Sure, thumper."

Behind them, in front of them, around them, the Warren hummed with activity as the last few eggs were decorated. But for them, it was quiet and peaceful. Just enjoying the trust displayed by the two children, peacefully asleep and looking to them for comfort.

"Boy or girl?" Jack asked, after a minute.

Bunny didn't pretend to misunderstand. "Don't know. I was... I was a kind of soldier, back in the day, and when I was away..."

"I'm sorry."

regain some energy.
"Me, too."

Jack snuck a peek, and saw Bunny look up at the far off sky and blink, hard.

"In ’68, was the blizzard because of Desmond?"

Jack bit his bottom lip, and sighed. "I found him," he admitted. "In this... I've still got it, maybe you'd know what it is, but it looks a little like the spaceship from the Superman comics, the one Supes was found in as a baby?"

Bunny looked utterly uncomprehending. "Comics?"

"Okay, not only haven't you played with a child in ages, you've missed out one of the best inventions ever. This summer? You and me? I've got a collection and you're going to read it." Jack hesitated a moment. "Carefully. They're real old and real delicate."

"If you say so," Bunny said, but he sounded amused.

"Anyways." Tell him or not? Later, Jack decided. "I'm kind of glad you blew me off, actually."

"Yeah?"

"Well, I wouldn't have Desmond, if you hadn't." He looked up and grinned. "Although I'd make an awesome uncle, don't you think?"

"What, get the ankle biters all wound up on sugar and excitement, then unleash them on their parents? You might have something there. Maybe I should do that to you."

"Only if you want a slush-ball to the face," Jack said.

Bunny twitched an ear at him, and then looked down at the little girl he was cradling. "Guess you should take her back now."

"Guess I should." Time zones were the bane of his existence, but it'd still be night in Burgess. Jack gently eased Desmond off his lap and onto the grass, and stood up. "Mind watching Des for me?"

Bunny chuckled, and handed Sophie over. "Yeah. He'll be safe as houses."

"I'm counting on you, fluffy." Jack shifted Sophie around until he could hold onto her with one arm, and picked up his staff. Damn, but he missed the days Desmond had been this light. At the rate the kid was growing he'd have his arms torn off at the shoulders one day, trying to pick him up.

Bunny opened him a tunnel to Burgess, and crouched down to brush at Desmond's hair.

Jack glanced back, once, and nodded to himself. He'd tell Bunny about Desmond's species after Easter. There was always room for another uncle in the family.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, things do not go smoothly. (AKA wherein Pitch pitches woo.)

The song Bunny sings is Hine E Hine, a Maori lullaby.
Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack popped the screen out, and slid the window open. He'd have to remember to put that back when he left.

Baby Tooth babbled at him. He grinned, and floated over to Sophie's bed. Kid seemed to be going through a fairy princess stage. It was all very... cute.

"Thank God I've got a son," Jack mumbled.

Baby Tooth glared at him, then looked around and shrugged. Apparently it was a bit much for her, too.

He tried to lower Sophie down onto the bed- but she clung. Like a little monkey. "Aw, come on," he said, and sighed. Okay, tug- gently- and gently tickle her side there, and- yup, a little bit of work and Sophie let go. Very unhappily, it seemed, but she let go.

Jack pulled off her slippers, and tucked her into bed. He found a stuffed rabbit on the floor, and set it on the pillow beside her head. As he watched, she grabbed on and promptly started to cuddle the thing.

He turned to leave, and heard a thud. When he looked, Sophie was on the carpet, still asleep but definitely no longer in bed.

"Sophie?"

Jack hesitated, and then floated outside the window. He closed the glass; with it being night, even if Sophie's mother looked outside, she wouldn't notice the lack of screen just yet. He watched as the young woman, looking very much like a dark haired, older version of her daughter, entered the room and picked Sophie back up.

He did wonder why there weren't any safety rails on the bed. He'd seen them before, they were detachable, and kept small children from falling out of their "big kid" beds. Maybe there had been safety rails, and Sophie was considered old enough not to sleep with them anymore.

Well, there was no way to tell, and it didn't matter much anyways. Sophie was safe and sound at home, her mother had just closed the curtains, and all he had to do now was replace the screen and head back to the Warren.

Only, when he'd finished with the screen, he heard someone call his name.

"What?" he asked, turning to look at Baby Tooth. "Did you hear that?"

She shook her head, and her babble was worried. Her feathers were fluffed up, as if to ward off a chill, but Jack knew the night air wasn't that cold. Even with him around.

"Right. Let's get back." Jack lifted into the air, and resolutely closed his ears to the next "Jack!" he heard.

Then he saw the nightmare.
It slipped out of an upper window, squeezing its body through an opening far too small for it. Faintly Jack could hear the sound of a child sobbing in terror.

That... When he got angry, he didn't see red, he saw white. He saw white now. What had North said, that there would be children having nightmares from this? One thing to know it intellectually, another to realize it emotionally.

He flew after the nightmare. Baby Tooth squeaked once, and then flew to huddle on his shoulder, pressed up against his neck and shielded partially from sight by the fold of his hood.

The foul beast didn't seem to realize Jack was following it. It trotted slowly through the street, never once looking behind at a shape that skulked from bit of cover to bit of cover, bare feet soundless on the rooftops. Instead of going into another house, the nightmare turned towards the forest.

The forest? That was where Jack's lake was. Pitch couldn't have seriously...?

Apparently he had, at least opening a portal. It was right near what had once been an old dumping ground for unwanted or broken furniture. An old, wooden bed frame, covered in mold and suffering both wet and dry rot, straddled a kind of hole in the ground.

Jack hit the last few slats with the butt of his staff, and flew down into the Boogieman's lair.

Baby Tooth shook against his neck, and it couldn't have only been from fear. Jack paused just long enough to caress her little head a few times in wordless comfort.

The tunnel was dreary, depressing, and the shadows kept moving at the corners of his eyes, like there were things shuffling along right behind him. But Jack couldn't feel the terror Baby Tooth was obviously suffering. Something to be said for not having working glands. The Boogieman's subtle knife didn't work on him very well.

Jack huffed, and continued down the tunnel.

The tunnel opened up on a scene that looked, at first glance, to be right out of a Surrealist painting, or maybe one of those optical illusions. He was pretty sure that was supposed to be the ceiling... but his eyes were insisting it was part of the floor, or maybe the wall. And the floor made him feel like he should be flying in order to stand on it.

Everything was shades of gray. There was a- a kind of fog, that he couldn't see but could definitely feel pressed against his skin. He thought it was the terror that made Baby Tooth squeak, and try to press even closer to his neck.

Poor little mite. Jack plucked her off his shoulder, despite her protests, and blew gently on her face. Just a little bit of chill, to remind her of short winter days, and winter nights spent curled up by a fire and playing games with her siblings.

Baby Tooth stopped shivering, and squeaked her thanks. She returned to his shoulder in quick order, but at least she didn't seem ready to cry.

Jack looked around the cavern again, and then squinted. Was that a flash of color? It stood out, especially in this monochrome place.

Highly reluctant to touch the floor, he floated. It took a bit less time than he'd expected to reach the other side of the room, and when he stopped he was almost sure that the cages he found were hanging 'down' from the wall.
Jack shook his head, and stared at the trapped fairies. "So this is where he took you guys."

Baby Tooth left his shoulder and squeaked at her siblings. Jack thought he was starting to understand what she said, but this was much too fast for him. Instead of trying to listen in, he peered at the locks.

The cages were old fashioned, with huge, clumsy locks a talented thief could have picked with a knife. Jack didn't even bother with lock picks or ice daggers; he wrapped his hands around the lock and smiled at the fairies inside the cage.

"You ladies might want to back away from the door. I know it's crowded in there, but this will get a bit uncomfortable otherwise."

Only when there was about an inch of clear space between the fairies and his hands, did Jack get started.

Frost immediately spread over the metal, his hands. That was easy. He narrowed his focus, bringing the lock's temperature down even further. He could feel, like a faint buzz, the metal contract and begin to warp.

It could have taken seconds, or it could have been days later, when the lock finally snapped and fell to the floor in pieces.

Jack staggered backwards, gasping for a completely unnecessary breath. His head hurt. It hurt a lot. Like someone had taken a red-hot railroad spike and jabbed it through his brain, then hooked it up to a car battery so little pulses of pain throbbed with his non-existent heartbeat.

"Been a while since I did that," he murmured, and swung the cage door open. "Alright ladies, let's get the heck out of dodge."

They all shuffled towards the open door, but didn't fly out. The one nearest the edge flapped her wings twice, but it wasn't anywhere near fast enough.

Jack concentrated, and realized the temperature in the cavern was just a bit lower than the fairies probably liked. It'd been, what, a full day since they'd been captured? Sitting in a little cage all cramped together and cold, with the terror?

"Oh-kay. Can't carry you, not enough hands. Maybe... You're probably light enough for the wind, if she can get down here. Or I can-"

"Hello, Jack."

Jack snatched up his staff and spun, weapon at the ready.

"Pitch," he said, as the man stepped forward from the darkest shadows. Those hadn't been there before, had they?

Baby Tooth practically flattened herself against the back of his neck.

"It's rude to break into someone's home," Pitch said. He examined his nails, and then looked up and grinned at Jack. As close as he was, it was possible for the winter spirit to make out every jagged point on every single tooth.

"It's rude to assault guests with halitosis as bad as yours."
"You..." Pitch chuckled. "Not bad. Covering fear with bravado, a common enough trick I've found."

Was he scared? Jack prodded at his emotions, and then shrugged mentally. Maybe a little, but with his philology being what it was, it took him a bit of a run-up to hit emotions requiring adrenaline.

"I found the fairies. What'd you do with the teeth?"

Pitch gestured towards a side-cavern, and shrugged. "Oh, just piled them up over there. I didn't do anything to them, if that's what you're asking."

And Jack belonged to summer. "Let us take them back and maybe I won't turn you into a statue."

Pitch stepped closer, and then wrapped an arm around Jack's shoulders. "You fight so fiercely for people that hate you."

What?

If he could have, he would have gone pale. They didn't-no. He'd seen them, they had fun collecting the teeth, it'd been a game, he'd played a game with people who could see him and touch him and prank him just as he pranked them.

Jack shook his head and pulled away. "Liar." He could feel Baby Tooth again, on his shoulder, tucked under the edge of his hoodie. "They don't hate me, and I'm not fighting for them. I'm fighting for the children."

"The children that don't see you, Jack?"

Jack took a deep breath. Then another. Frost stiffened his hair and the fabric of his hoodie. "That doesn't matter."

Pitch sighed, and waved one hand. "It should. Believe me, I know how it feels to be walked through. To be so... so insignificant no one even sees me." There appeared to be genuine sorrow in Pitch's eyes. "I know what you've been going through all these years. I just want to help you, Jack."

Why was he listening to this? Despite himself, Jack swayed towards Pitch. He caught himself, and pulled back, but the man had seen.

Pitch smiled, but it wasn't the feral grin from before, but a sad little curve of his lips. He pulled a gold painted box from- Jack really hoped it was from a pocket- and held it out. "I can help you as the so-called Guardians of Childhood won't. Your memories. All those questions you have, where you come from, why you... That's all in this box. Is that what they promised you? Get the teeth back, and regain your sense of self?"

Jack rolled his staff between his hands. "That's mine?"

"Mm... All your little baby teeth, tucked away so carefully." Pitch looked up from the box. "Oh. They didn't tell you?"

He shrugged, and settled into a guarded stance. "Didn't come up, actually." He took a deep breath. "Keep them."

"What?" Pitch actually stepped backwards.

"For the fairies, and the rest of the teeth."

"Oh no, Jack." Pitch stalked forwards, grip on the tooth box white knuckled. "It doesn't work like
"Worth a try." He backed away, circling around to get Pitch away from the cage full of fairies.

Pitch grinned, and walked faster. "You don't really think you can stop me?"

"Teenager. Overconfident."

"And running away."

Well, yeah. Jack wasn't alone, after all. "Let's go up to the surface, then. I'm not stupid; you'll cheat, because you're a cheating cheater."

Pitch shook his head, and then blurred. One second he was fifteen feet away, the next he was pushing Jack into a wall and leaning in close.

The Boogieman's hand burned on his chest. Not with warmth, with cold. Very strange sensation.

"Oh, my dear boy, I don't need to cheat. I've already won." He nodded to one side, and Jack turned to look.

There was an opening into one of the Warren tunnels. The ground was covered in broken eggshells.

"A pity you took so long to return the brat-"

Pitch was cut off by a flying elbow to the throat. Jack didn't waste time listening to anything more.

The Wind brought him to a park in Burgess. Figured. What, was this town on some sort of nexus? Everything seemed to be happening here!

Jack touched down and stumbled a little. He looked around and promptly groaned.

Easter Monday, egg hunt, lots of children and no eggs.

"Oh, no," he breathed.

Just over the hill he could hear Bunny. The poor rabbit sounded desperate. Well, no wonder.

When he saw them, it was pretty miserable. Bunny was hopping around, trying to give children eggs he must have rescued from whatever Pitch had done. Then a child walked right through him, and he doubled over in agony.

Tooth touched Bunny's shoulder, and said something Jack couldn't hear.

He moved forwards, fist clenching and unclenching on his staff. There had to be something he could do. Anything!

"Jack!" North strode towards him. "Where have you been?"

Jack opened his mouth, and then shook his head. "I found Tooth's fairies," he said.

For a moment, no longer, the big man looked relieved. But that passed, all too quickly. "We needed you. The Warren was attacked, the eggs-"

"I saw." Don't describe the scene again. Seeing it once was more than enough. "But surely..."
"We were overwhelmed," Bunny said. Jack turned, and blinked at the rabbit. He looked older, haggard. "Where were you?"

"I found Pitch's lair," Jack began, but Bunny cut him off.

"You were with Pitch?"

Jack had no idea how Bunny restrained himself. In his place, Jack wouldn't have just threatened to throw a punch; he'd have actually done it.

"Not willingly, believe me. There's got to be something... Can't you hide those eggs in the bushes?"

"For the entire world?" Bunny's laugh was harsh.

Tooth fluttered her wings once, and rested a hand on Bunny's shoulder.

"Why did you not come back?" North asked. "You promised."

Jack shook his head, and backed up a step. "I... I don't know."

Tooth stepped forward. "Where's Baby Tooth?"

Baby Tooth...? Oh, no. "I don't know," he whispered.

He looked around, at the children heading for their homes, shoulders slumped and footsteps dragging. At the three Guardians, looking miserable and exhausted.

"Where's Desmond?"

North rubbed at his mouth with one hand. "A child walked through him. He burst into tears and said he was going home."

"To the lake," Jack murmured. "You- you let him go alone?"

"He moved fast. None of us could catch up."

Jack grabbed a handful of hair, and yanked. The pain cut through his thoughts well enough. "Alright. Alright. So Easter didn't work out. We'll just take on Pitch directly, because so far he's been calling the shots and we've just been reacting." He looked from North, to Tooth, to Bunny. "Bet you'd like to punch him in the face."

It took Bunny a second, but then he began to smile. "Sounds like fun."

"Right. We haven't been beaten." Jack drew himself up- and promptly sagged when the other three did as well, Tooth managing a whole two inches in height over him. "I just have to get Desmond. North, your portals go anywhere? I'll take him to Aleksia."

"We will meet at North Pole," North agreed. "Will gather yeti and weapons."

He handed over a snow globe, and Jack tucked it in his hoodie pocket. "See you there," he promised, and nodded to Bunny. "When we corner Pitch? I'll hold your coat."

"I don't have a-"

"Metaphorically, Kangaroo. Get going. Weapons, remember?"
Bunny huffed, but the corner of his mouth quirked up.

Jack got back to the top of the hill and spread his arms. "Wind! Take me to Desmond!"

He looked back, once, but they had already gone through a portal. He looked forward, and breathed a sigh of relief when the Wind took him to the lake.

Their old home was even more overgrown now. The shallow v of rock was still covered over in brambles, but now filled with them as well. They hadn't lived there for a while, certainly not in at least two decades.

"Des?" Jack called. There were a few tufts of rabbit fur on some of the blackberry thorns. "Hey, kiddo."

"Papa!" Desmond rocketed out of the bushes, and grabbed onto his neck. "Papa, where were you?"

"Chasing nightmares," Jack admitted. "Come here, bunny rabbit." Cuddling was good. Cuddling was exactly what he needed right now. He turned and rubbed his chin over Desmond's forehead.

Desmond had either taken off, or lost his clothing, not that it mattered. He was a rabbit again, all fluffy, pale gray fur and paws too big for his body. He was also crying, his ears down and the fur on his face slicked down from tears.

Jack crooned wordlessly to him. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I should have been there to protect you. I'm so, so sorry, Desmond."

"I was so scared," Desmond whispered.

Jack pulled back, and wiped at the tears with his thumb. "We're going back to the North Pole, and then I'm taking you to your Aunt Aleksia. She'll take care of you until Pitch has been dealt with."

Desmond sniffled, and wiped at his nose with one paw. "Okay. Papa? Everything's going to be okay, right?"

"Absolutely. We'll stop Pitch, we'll get Sandy back, we'll get the kids believing in Bunny again- all of it. But I need to know you're safe."

Jack stood up, and hoisted Desmond onto his hip. "Ready?"

Desmond tilted his head. "Papa? Should I be human?"

"I was going to tell Bunny... If you're okay with that?"

The youngster smiled, and nodded. "It'll make him very happy. So long as I stay with you."

"I've said it before, Des. You're not getting rid of me." He pulled out the snow globe, and threw it at the ground.

He stepped through the portal- but something went wrong. A rush of black surrounded him and Desmond, lifted them up and carried them off. All he could do was hold onto his son and his staff. When the black receded, he looked around. Ice and snow everywhere, and something inside telling him they were so far south they were in Antarctica.

This... wasn't good.
So, when you have a lot of male characters, you end up writing "Name said" a lot more than "he said", or casting about trying to find a descriptive term that doesn't apply to half the cast.

Next chapter: Papa Jack.
"Papa?" Desmond curled closer. "Papa, I'm cold."

Jack bit a sliver off his tongue off to keep from swearing. "Here," he said, and pulled off his hoodie. He helped Desmond pull it on. It wasn't great, but it would be better than nothing.

This had to be Antarctica. He knew every northern hemisphere spot that looked even a little like this; windswept and ice covered plateaus weren't as common as people thought. He had no personal experience with the far south, as the equator had always stopped him before, but Antarctica was really the only option.

"How'd we get here?" he asked. The Wind curled around him, and ruffled Desmond's fur, but had no answer.

Desmond shivered, and hunched down. The cold must have been brutal to him. Jack couldn't feel it, even in an old fashioned wife beater he'd picked up in the eighties. He picked up Desmond, though that probably didn't help much. Jack tended to match whatever the ambient temperature was.

"Hello again, Jack. So nice of you to drop in."

Jack grabbed his staff off the ice, and stood up. "Hello, Pitch."

Desmond whimpered, and buried his face in Jack's shoulder.

Pitch smiled at him, and then he saw Desmond. His smile faded. "Who," he asked, his voice suddenly very quiet, "is this?"

The Wind... stopped. Jack mentally reached for her, but she slid around him. He reached again, and frowned when she evaded a second time. They needed to get out of here.

"Come, Jack, introduce me to this charming fellow," Pitch said. He moved closer, his eyes very bright. "A baby Pooka... I never thought I'd see one of those again."

"A what?" Jack asked, before he could stop himself.

Pitch stared at him. "You don't even know what it is?"

"He," Jack said, and swung his staff so the crook pointed at the Boogieman, "is my son."

Well, that was a strange expression. Kind of... Had he horrified the Boogieman? "Your son," Pitch repeated.

"Just said that."

"You... and the damned Easter rabbit...?"

Desmond's ears shot straight up. "Was that a bad word?"

"Borderline," Jack said, and wrinkled his nose. "Uh, Pitch? Kind of wondering about your eyesight right now, because I'm a guy, and Bunny's a guy, and last I checked male creatures don't have
wombs." He paused, and added, "Mammals, anyways, who the heck knows for fish and insects."

Pitch actually relaxed. "Oh, it was adoption. That makes somewhat more sense."

"And this matters to you because...?"

Pitch's smile was very pointy. "Because it means I missed one in my purge, of course."

Jack backed up, and promptly stepped on a sharp piece of ice. "Purge."

"Did no one tell you? Oh, well. It doesn't really matter, I didn't bring you hear to talk about old history." Pitch waved his hand, as if shooing the topic away. "I have an offer for you, Jack."

"An offer?"

"Of course." Pitch started walking again, beginning to circle around Jack. Desmond whimpered, and clenched his eyes shut. "I realize you say otherwise, but surely you must admit that nothing goes together better than cold and dark."

Jack blinked several times, and looked at the horizon. "Are you... trying to woo me?"

"You want to be seen. Together, we can force these humans to see us, both of us! The world will be-"

"Because you're doing this creepy stalker circling thing, and not listening to a word I say, and do I need a restraining order?" Jack raised one eyebrow. "I'm getting a restraining order vibe here."

"You are not listening to me!"

"You're not saying anything I want to hear." Jack held Desmond tighter. "I won't join you. I won't help you frighten children."

Pitch drew himself up to his full height. "They should mean nothing to you!"

"They're kids!" Jack swung his staff in a shallow arc. "They haven't done anything!"

"They're not yours!"

"I don't care!" The Wind began to shift back and forth. Finally! "It doesn't matter if a child is mine or not. I'm a father. I don't expect you to understand."

Pitch narrowed his eyes, teeth visible in a snarl. "So you will not join me."

"You are insane, demented, delusional, and stupid."

"As you like." The man started to smile. He held up one fist. "Then I can at least ensure you won't interfere."

Jack's eyes widened. "Baby Tooth!"

"Baby?" Desmond looked up, and gasped. "Baby Tooth! Let her go, you big jerk!"

"Your staff, Jack, in exchange for the fairy. Mm? You like trades, don't you? I'll even leave your son alone, and believe me." Pitch touched his chest with his free hand. "That hurts. It really does. Missing the old warrior, well, that's one thing, but a child? Extremely painful."
"Papa," Desmond whispered. "Papa, its Baby Tooth!"

"My staff," Jack repeated. "For Baby Tooth. Then you let her go, and leave me and Desmond alone. That's the deal."

"To the word."

He looked down at his staff. He needed it. He couldn't remember a time when he didn't have it. Even when he wasn't holding onto it, it was nearby, ready for him to grab at a moment's notice. There were times he thought it was like Mjolnir, Thor's magic hammer that could fly to his hand.

Could he even ride the Wind without it? Control storms?

On the other hand, how could he let Pitch keep Baby Tooth?

"Let her go, and I'll give you the staff."

Pitch shook his head, and made a 'tsk' sound. "How about this, Jack. Set the staff down, back away, and I'll let her go. Deal?"

Baby Tooth squeaked, and shook her head frantically. Pitch tightened his grip.

Jack stepped forward, and held out his staff. Slowly, he lowered it to the ground. Just as slowly, he backed up three steps.

"Ah, thank you." Pitch nodded, and paused. "What was my part of the deal again? Oh, yes..."

Jack had forgotten how fast Pitch could move. And then it didn't matter how fast Pitch could move, because there was something painful in his side, and Desmond was screaming and why couldn't he stand up?

Oh, God, it hurt.

Pitch reached down and lifted him up by the neck. "You forgot. I'm the bad guy. I- ow! You little beast!"

He threw Baby Tooth to the side, into a ravine in the ice. Jack grunted.

"Let Papa go!"

Desmond!

"Ah, yes, the Pooka." Pitch grabbed Desmond before the child could do anything. "Won't this be fun? Don't worry, Jack. I'll take good care of your son."

He threw Jack into the ravine, and laughed. The Pooka kit was struggling, but small as it was, bound up in the hoodie, it couldn't do much more than toss its head from side to side.

"Stop that," he murmured, and picked up the staff. What to do with this? He could break it... But no.

How much more fun would it be to use it?

Black sand crept over the wood, solidified. When Pitch touched the crook to the ice, black filaments spread like a mad spider's web.

"Won't this be fun?" he asked the kit. The pathetic creature whimpered, and clenched its eyes shut.

"Now, now... I'm sure there's a Guardian who'll love to see you."
Chapter End Notes

Yes, Pitch stabbed Jack. Yes, he has the staff. Yes, he has Desmond. Yes, you may all hate me now.
Nick paced back and forth in front of the globe, limping heavily. This globe, in the heart of his Workshop and home, showed the belief children had in Santa Claus. Tooth and Bunny each had a similar globe of their own, though Sandy forwent the device and simply gave children good dreams, regardless of whether they believed in him or not.

He hurt. Every old injury from his bandit days seemed to have woken into new life, a fresh pang with every light that went dark.

He was better off than the others, and he knew it, but it didn't stop the pain, or the frustration. Bunny had been reduced to the size of a toddler, what he called a 'kit', and dear Tooth could not fly. Already she had lost a handful of feathers, and he feared that the damage caused by lack of belief would send her into molt all out of season.

"Bah," he said. "We cannot wait any longer. We should never have split our forces."

Bunny sat up on his haunches, and scowled. The ferocity of the expression was reduced, due entirely too how cute the old warrior now looked. "It hasn't been that long, North."

"We cannot wait!"

Tooth walked- not flew- across the room, and rested one delicate hand on his burly arm. "We'll give it another ten minutes," she said. "Then we can go looking for them."

He thought about covering her hand with his, but... no. Instead, he nodded, and turned to look at the great globe again.

Nick thought Bunny might have muttered, but Phil's arrival prevented him from asking. The head of security looked disturbed, an expression that had crossed the yeti's face perhaps twice before. The last time had been some years back, with the great storm over the North Pole that had led to Rudolph's leading the sleigh. The first time had been just as disturbing, during one of the many fights with Pitch.

"What is it?" he asked, switching to Russian.

Phil grunted, and nodded towards the snow globe cabinet. There was an odd noise coming from the stored globes, something that had never happened before.

"I will see," Nick said, and headed for the cabinet.

It was no time at all before the other two had joined him. Phil nodded, and took the lead. At this time, if there was an issue, he was the only one physically capable of dealing with it.

Unlike the rest of the yeti, who were as mortal as the humans, Phil was a spirit, though of what it was hard to say. Perhaps, Nick thought, Phil personified the idea of the yeti, the bigfoot, the sasquatch and abominable snowman. Whatever Phil personified, he was content guarding Nick's workshop, and unlike the three Guardians, he had not been weakened by Pitch's attacks.

The snow globe cupboard was more of a closet, and was generally kept locked to keep the elves out.
Not that the elves could have used them— you needed to know where you wanted to go when you used a globe, and the elves, so far as Nick was aware, did not really know one place apart from another— but they would certainly try to eat the globes. And there was nothing worse than absentmindedly reaching for a globe only to put your hand down in a gob of elf spit.

Phil nodded to the cupboard, and raised his eyebrows.

"Aye, I hear it too," Nick said. It was a high pitched, whining keen, just on the edge of hearing. Though it was apparently worse for Bunny; the Pooka's sensitive ears were pressed flat against his head, and not in comfort.

Phil produced the key, and unlocked the doors. Then he swung them wide, growling as he did. The globes were vibrating in their stands.

"What is this?" he asked, and stepped forward.

"North!" He turned to look at Tooth, and she pointed back towards the giant globe.

He looked, and gasped. A portal began to form— only just as it opened, black sand filled the opening, hissing and slithering over itself. Then the sand vanished, the portal collapsed— and behind, in the cupboard, the snow globes all exploded.

The elves were required to get Bunny out from under the work table. Nick envied him, a little. If he could have, he would have joined the Pooka there.

Phil approached with the three surviving snow globes. More could be made, and easily; there was a reason Nick kept the elves, even at their most chaotic. Their skill at crafting fell short with the new fashioned toys, but when it came to wood and glass, metal and magic, they were unparalleled. With the elves working on the globes, there would soon be once more too many to count.

"That... Pitch blocked your portal," Tooth said. She rested one hand on Bunny's back, and stared up at North. "How is that even possible?"

"Should not be," Nick muttered. He pocketed the three globes. He could feel the faint glimmers of magic left in them; most of it had been drained. Each globe would be good for, perhaps, several hundred kilometers, no more.

Phil grunted back. Pitch's powers were at the strongest they had ever been on Earth, save the Dark Ages. And Nick had not used the globes overmuch then.

"It shouldn't have resulted in them all breaking," he snapped back, and then reined in his temper. "I'm sorry. You think Pitch interfering with the portal did this?"

He gestured at the mess of water and glitter the elves were cleaning up.

Phil shrugged. It was entirely possible. Who knew how the elves linked the portal magic to the snow globes? Since it had never happened before, they were steering blindly.

"I hate steering blindly. Can't you get Rudolph out of retirement?"

The yeti chuckled at that, and shook his head. After a moment, he snorted and suggested getting the off-season reindeer hitched up. They needed to find Pitch; they could use the globes to get to his last known location, and then track him in the sleigh. It would be faster than walking, obviously.
"A good idea," Nick said, switching back to English. Bah, what a clumsy, slow language it was, but one they all shared. "We will return to Burgess," he said, turning back to the other two. "That was Jack trying to open portal, and he was at lake, yes? Yeti are preparing sleigh."

Tooth tried to flutter her wings, and smiled. "This should be fun. And once we find him..."

"I'll kick his nose flat," Bunny muttered, and started hopping towards the stable.

Nick overtook him easily, even limping. After a minute's study, he bent down and picked the Pooka up, tucking him into the crook of one arm.

It was a mark of how rattled Bunny was, Nick thought, that the Pooka didn't argue.

It'd been so long since he'd been carried like this. Since his father had been alive, a millennia ago. Nick wasn't his father- the bloke smelt too much like his infrequent pipes, peppermint, and wood shavings for that mistake to be made-but he had the same strength radiating from him, even now.

Aster sighed, and absolutely did not regret being put down on the bench seat. There weren't any seatbelts, he noticed, and went bugged with horror.

"Oh stars, Pitch won't need to kill us. We'll crash and all die!"

"Bah, am very careful driver," Nick said. He looked over his shoulder and grinned at them. "Ready?"

Tooth sat down beside Aster, and rested one hand on his back. "We're ready."

Aster mentally rolled his eyes at the expression on Nick's face, then yelped when the mad Cossack cracked the reins and got the reindeer moving.

"Hope you like loop-de-loops!"

If he told himself Nick was punishing him for Tooth's gesture... Well, it didn't make him feel better, but he'd be less guilty about hiding a bunch of rotten eggs around the Workshop come summer.

Oh, no, motion sickness... "I hope you like carrots!"

It was cold. Jack was shaking with it; but the cold came from within, not without. Baby Tooth, huddled in his hands, didn't seem to notice anything different about his temperature, but he could.

He could also see the smear of black sand, mixed with the blood that crusted on his side. He thought the sand was actually in him. He didn't want to think about what would happen if he had a pulse or something; the sand just might be carried through his body to his heart, his brain, and after that?

No, bad thought. Put it away, Jack. No pulse, no problem.

"Well, this is a fine mess I've gotten us into, eh Baby Tooth?"

Baby Tooth looked up at him, and patted his thumb with both her tiny hands. He smiled, and held her a little closer to his chest. "It's okay," he promised. "I'll figure out how to get you back to Tooth."

Maybe the Wind would carry her.

Baby Tooth squeaked his name, and after a second he looked down at her.
"Sorry," he said. "Zoned out, didn't I."

He reached down and broke off the crust of blood and sand, and threw it to the side. When it hit the ice, it went 'chink'. Heh. Frozen blood. That really shouldn't have been nearly as funny as he found it.

More blood oozed from the wound, with another wave of cold. There were more particles of sand, though Jack thought maybe less than there had been before.

Was that a good thing? He thought it was. The blood, already slushy, froze on his skin. After a moment, he broke it off and threw it aside, only to watch the process repeat.

Baby Tooth stabbed her beak into his hand, right into the fleshy lump of muscle just under the thumb.

"Hey!" Jack sat bolt upright, the movement forcing more blood out of the stab wound. "What was that for?"

Her look spoke volumes. He knew exactly what that was for; he'd zoned out again, when they should have been thinking on how to get out of this mess! Pitch had Desmond, he was going to go after the other Guardians, and Jack was needed.

Jack grabbed a handful of hair and yanked. "You're right. But I... I don't have my staff, I've been stabbed, Baby Tooth I don't know what I can do to get us out of here. I don't even know if I can fly without my staff."

Baby Tooth shook her head, and jumped down onto the snow. Jack frowned, and watched as she shuffled back and forth, apparently looking for something. She squeaked when she found it, whatever it was...

Apparently, it was a tooth. She held it up to Jack, and nodded. He picked it up carefully, and held it between his thumb and forefinger while he looked it over.

After a moment, he blinked and looked down at her. "Baby Tooth, is this mine?"

She nodded, and fluttered her wings.

"You... That box, that tooth box, that was actually mine? You took this from that box?" She nodded twice more, and jumped up into his lap. It looked like she was almost at the point of flying again, though from the way she moved she had a sore back, and sore ribs from Pitch's squeezing her.

"What can one tooth do?" he asked.

Baby Tooth smiled at him, and gestured for the tooth. When he offered it to her, she picked it back up and then settled in the palm of his hand. This tooth, she said, held his most important memories. She would be able to show them to him, let him remember.

Jack hesitated, but... What had North said, about finding his center? Maybe this was how he'd do it.

"Okay," he breathed.

Baby Tooth had him cup his other hand over her, and the tooth.

And then...

There is a boy.
There is a girl.

There is a lake, and it is frozen.

The ice is thin in the center, and it is breaking.

The girl is frightened. She is perched on the breaking ice, too frightened to move.

The boy laughs, and makes fear into a game.

There is a shepherd's crook, and for one moment it has all the power in the world.

There is a blur of moment, and the girl is saved.

The ice breaks, and the boy falls.

And then...

Then there is a choice. YOU DO NOT HAVE TO DO THIS, a voice, gentle and terrible and powerful and so very old, BUT THE MAN IN THE MOON WISHES TO CHOOSE YOU.

Jack chooses to fly.

Jack flinched when the memory released him. "Baby Tooth... did you see that? I- who was she?" In the memory, he'd loved her. Enough to die for her. A sister, a daughter? He didn't know, but... "I saved her," he breathed, and closed his eyes.

"That's why. I saved her... and I made it fun." He looked up at the sky, where the barest slice of moon showed. "You couldn't have told me any of this before? It would've made things so much simpler."

Baby Tooth huffed at him, and folded her arms.

"Right, you're right. Enough sitting around. Time to go." Jack stood up, and brushed off the frozen blood still clinging to his side. Baby Tooth moved over to his shoulder, and once she was secure, he spread his arms.

There was only one place Pitch would go. That town really was on a nexus, he decided.

"Wind!" he yelled. "Take me home!"

The Wind roared down into the crevice, caught on his arms and his legs and his hair, his clothes, caught him and lifted and screamed as she carried him up, up, up and away.

Behind him, the blood Jack had brushed away began to melt, revealing the black sand that had been trapped therein.

Chapter End Notes

If you're happy and you know it, write some more. If you're happy and you know it, write some more. If you're happy and you know it and you really want to show it, if you're happy and you know it, write some more!
Next chapter: the last believer, the big throwdown, and the big reveal.
Jack hit the ground with rather more force than usual, and dropped to his knees with a painful crack. Baby Tooth, still clutching the molar that had given Jack a fragment of memory, flew around his head squeaking incoherently.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Jack assured her. He checked the damage, but other than a faint ache in his knees and ankles, he really was fine. "Thanks, Wind!"

The Wind ruffled his hair, then snatched up Baby Tooth and shoved her into Jack's chest. He chuckled and caught the little fairy before she could drop, and helped her back onto his shoulder. Without his hoodie, there wasn't much fabric for her to clutch.

"Let's find Pitch."

Baby Tooth nodded, and started muttering. Jack raised one eyebrow. "Should you know that language?"

She said she was older than she looked.

"Well, don't use those words around Des, okay? I'm trying to keep him innocent."

Why, Baby Tooth asked, did she think Desmond was pulling the wool over Jack's eyes?

Since that wasn't really a topic Jack was comfortable talking about, he started limping down the street. His side had stopped hurting somewhere over the equator, though that could have been due entirely too how high the Wind had to take him to get him past it. Baby Tooth had been gasping for breath, and the only good thing about the experience was how quickly it was over.

There was something depressing about Burgess this night. Jack had to fight just to keep his shoulders from slumping. At least he didn't hear any crying children, not on this street.

Baby Tooth chirped, and stared at one particular house. She told Jack to stop, and look into the second story window, the one with the light still on.

"Someone lost a tooth?" Jack asked.

No, Baby Tooth told him. Something else. Something she hadn't felt before.

Well, if she was going to put it like that...

Jack couldn't just float up to the window, he found. The Wind could still carry him- but without his ability to fly, it was a chaotic, nearly violent trip. Certainly she wouldn't be able to lift him up precisely to that window; he'd just as easily end up on the roof, or outside the city limits entirely.

Instead, he had to climb up the side of the house. It was a bit easier than one would assume; the builder had gotten decorative with the bricks, and on the corners, at regular intervals there were four rows of slightly pushed out bricks, forming a kind of decorative, square relief. There was only enough purchase for Jack's fingertips and toes, but for someone who had spent his 'youth' climbing slick ice walls that was more than enough.
He wedged himself onto the narrow ledge of the windowsill, and looked in. Someone hadn't closed the curtains properly, and they gapped open in the middle, enough to give him a good view of the room.

It was Jamie's bedroom, he realized, surprised. The kid who'd seen them at the end of the 'collect the teeth' race. Well, everyone but Jack, but he was used to people looking through him. The kid's family had a greyhound, and seeing the dog chase Bunny around the room had been hilarious.

Setting off the alarm clock had certainly been one of his better ideas. He'd have to find a way to repeat the experience sometime.

"What?" he breathed, and scraped away some of the frost that had formed on the window. Normally he liked seeing the fractal patterns spread over the glass, but not when he wanted to see what was beyond it.

"Come on," the kid pleaded, muffled but still audible. "I know I saw you. It wasn't a dream. So... So we have a deal, now. You have to show me you're real. A sign. Something I can use on my friends."

The kid was begging a stuffed rabbit, Jack realized, and closed his eyes. Poor kid. Poor, poor kid. At least he still believed...

Not for long, though. Jack could feel it, faintly, an edge of grief like the frozen scum on the edges of a dirty puddle.

"If he stops believing..." It'd be one more kid able to walk through Bunny, North, and Tooth.

Baby Tooth whimpered, and clutched the molar tight to her chest.

There had to be something... Jack's eyes widened and he started to grin. He hadn't tried this with frost on a windowpane before, but it had always worked well enough when he drew on icy metal.

It took less time to frost the window back over than it had taken to think up what he'd do. Jack pounded his fist against the window, once, to ensure the kid would look- then began to draw. He started off with an Easter egg, just to test the differences between working on glass and metal. Not so many, and the glass seemed more willing to accept his magic than the metal benches and frozen cars had ever been.

Below the egg, he drew a bunny. A bit simple, at least as a two dimensional image, but with a careful push... The transparent, frozen creature hopped around the room, glacier blue fur sparkling in the light of the lamp. Jack held it as long as he could, but had to let go when his head hurt so much he couldn't see.

Apparently he needed his staff for his ice figures, too.

The bunny stopped in place, then burst into hundreds of snowflakes. Jack mentally shrugged at the indoor snow. The kid would attribute it to Bunny, no doubt.

"Snow?" the kid asked, then blinked. And laughed.

"Jack Frost?" he called.

Jack about fell off the ledge in shock.

They were like ducklings, Jack realized half an hour later. Small children were absolutely like
ducklings, in that they followed the first thing they saw and then never stopped.

"Okay," he said, and looked over the small crowd of children. There were eight of them. They all saw him. That was great and all, but how had this happened? Seriously! "Your friends all believe again. Time to go home before you freeze."

"It's spring," Claude said. He smiled at Jack.

"And we're bundled up," Cupcake added. She didn't smile, but she was probably still too shy to.

Jack opened his mouth to reply, closed it, and wished very hard for a wall he could bang his head off of. He drew himself up to his full height, and folded his arms. "I'm taking you home now. All of you. I'll even tuck you all into bed. But you are absolutely not-

A sleigh full of screaming passengers shot by overhead and crashed in the street. The cluster of duckling-children immediately turned and ran for it.

"-staying out... Kids! What'd I just get interrupted saying?"

Absolutely no one listened to him, and Baby Tooth took off towards the sleigh too.

"Great. That's just... When Jack Frost is the sane and responsible one, there is a problem!"

He stomped after everyone, and stood at the back of the crowd, arms folded and suddenly all too aware that he was wearing nothing more than a pair of three hundred year old pants and a wife beater.

"That entrance?" he said, once North had sat up and blinked at the children. "It sucked. I've seen albatrosses with more grace than you. What the heck happened?"

"Ah, lost control of sleigh," North said. He gestured at the children. "They... see us?"

"You're welcome."

Tooth fluttered her wings, and stepped up on the front bench, beside North. Baby Tooth was cuddled up against her neck, chirping happily. "Why aren't they in their beds? It's not..." She looked around, and her wings pressed against her back.

"Because they're ducklings." He frowned, and looked for the giant rabbit. "Where's Bunny?"

"Right here," the rabbit said, and shuffled into view.

He was smaller than Desmond. Less fluffy- that might've played a factor- but still, smaller. By a little bit. The girls, predictably, all started to coo about how cute he was. Cupcake even picked him up and started to snuggle.

"What happened?" Jamie asked. "He was all tall and cool and now he's... cute."

"This is what happens when you forget to eat your vegetables and don't listen when you should go to bed, kids."

Bunny gave Jack a stink eye. "Get these ankle biters back home now, Frost."

"I've been trying, but someone decided to crash a sleigh and distract everyone." Jack frowned, and tapped one bare foot against the ground. "Come on, kids, bed time."
"Oh, do we have to?" Pippa asked.

"Absolutely yes."

"Or... perhaps not."

Jack spun, and raised his fists. "Pitch!"

The Boogieman's laughter echoed around the street, and the first nightmare slunk forward out of the shadows. "How astute, Jack. And thank you for gathering these darling children for me... Their fear will taste so sweet."

Bunny hopped in front of the small group, hackles up and ears back. "Just try it," he said, voice low.


He turned and helped the kids up into the sleigh. He looked back at Bunny once everyone was in. "Hey, Kangaroo, time to go."

Bunny glared at him, and backed up. "Would you stop calling me that bloody-"

"Language. There's innocent ears here."

One of the twins cleared his throat. "Uh, Jack? You, uh, do realize the grade school is next to the high school, right?"

"Hush, I want to stay in denial a bit longer."

Pitch's laughter echoed through the streets again. "Ah, yes. Are you in denial about your son, Jack?"

"You better not have hurt him," Jack said. Nightmares, nightmares everywhere, but no Boogieman. "If you have? There will be nowhere you can run, nowhere you can hide. I will hunt you until the end of time. And when I catch you?" He grinned, and breathed out. His breath quite literally crackled, cold as liquid nitrogen.

"Oh, he's fine enough for the moment... Come to the lake, you can see for yourself."

Jack grabbed Bunny under the arms and lifted him into the sleigh. He ignored the scrape of the irritated rabbit's claws over his skin. "Get the kids out of here, North," he murmured. "I'll go deal with Pitch."

"He has Desmond?" North asked.

"Antarctica wasn't fun, I'll tell you everything later." Jack slapped the side of the sleigh and backed away. The nightmares started to close in on him.

"Wind!"

The Wind screamed a challenge, and snatched him up. And promptly threw him right at the trees. Jack yelped and covered his face as he was dragged through the highest tree branches.

This was ridiculous! They weren't even in the forest yet, these were just the saplings planted to make the streets greener!

"A little higher, maybe?" The Wind lifted him up to about five stories above ground. "Well... alright. This will do- left! Left! The lake is to the left! My other left!"
Somehow, the Wind managed to take him almost all the way to the lake. She dropped him halfway up a tree, several minutes away, but at least he only had a short distance to go.

Jack climbed down, and promptly stepped on a pine cone. He bit his lip, and clenched his eyes shut.

That was... great. Really.

He pushed through the trees, mentally condemning the underbrush to a host of caterpillars and locusts. Only close to the lake did things ease off, turning into grass instead of blackberry brambles and young trees.

Jack had only just stumbled out of the forest when he saw North. The four reindeer somehow dragged the sleigh along the ground, on a path nowhere near wide enough, that let out several dozen feet to the side.

All the children, he saw, were still in the sleigh.

He huffed, and stomped over. "I thought they were going to be taken someplace safe!"

Jamie grinned at him. It was slightly nervous, but it was clear he wasn't about to back down. "We'd only follow anyways."

"Where's Pitch?" Tooth asked. Her nose scrunched slightly when she frowned.

The shadows at the opposite end of the lake twisted, and then parted to reveal the Boogieman. "Why, right here." He had Desmond tucked under one arm, and Jack's staff in his other hand. "Did you bring me an audience? How sweet."

Jack walked forward. The thin ice on the lake didn't crack under his weight, and proved no obstacle to his forward progress. "Give me my son, Pitch."

"Not your staff?" Pitch began to walk along the lakeshore. Jack stopped in the middle of the lake, and turned to keep an eye on him. "Well, I suppose a living person would be more important..."

He shifted his grip, and held Desmond up by the scruff. Desmond was curled up in a ball, ears down and eyes clenched shut, teeth grinding together while he shook.

"Crikey!" Bunny bellowed.

Jack hissed. "Put him down."

Pitch's eyes seemed to glow. "Make me."

Jack ran forward, and ducked a swipe of the staff. For the first time, he regretted not taking Higurashi-sama up on more than just the kendo. It would've been nice to have practiced fist fighting with another person, as compared to watching bar brawls.

It also would've been nice to know how to throw a punch properly. Jack swore when his fist connected with Pitch's shoulder- and his thumb, 'safely' tucked inside the curl of his fingers, broke.

"Language," Pitch chided, and brought the staff down across Jack's shoulders.

He went with the blow, and rolled when he hit the ground. Pitch still had Desmond- but the kid was watching now, and wasn't stupid. Jack just needed a way for Pitch to loosen his hold...

Stupid worked.
Jack threw himself into a full body tackle, and drove his shoulder into Pitch's stomach.

The man doubled over, fingers flexing as he gasped. He let go of Desmond, who promptly bolted.

He didn't let go of the staff. That, Jack realized, was a problem.

Because now Pitch could fight properly with the thing.

The staff moved in a blur, so quickly Jack only realized what had happened after he was on his back and the butt of the staff had slammed into his throat.

He didn't black out. He wasn't that lucky.

But he was pretty sure his neck might have been broken.

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Aster grabbed the kit as he tried to bolt under Nick's sleigh, and got bitten for his pains. "Desmond!" he yelled. This was Desmond. Frost's son. The silver haired- silver furred, at the moment- five year old smartass Frost had found in '68 and tried to get Aster's help with.

Well, now he knew why...

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he was gibbering insanely.

Thankfully the rest of him was adjusting really quickly, and snapping back into the proper mindset of a professional warrior. Pooka kit happened to be Frost's son. Very good. Moving on, nightmares approaching and children in danger.

Desmond whimpered and stopped trying to chew Aster's arm off. Bunny looked over at the children, and nodded to the biggest girl.

"Protect him, he's actually a kid," he said, and she nodded. Her face was pale, but her hands didn't shake when she picked the kit up and held him close.

The kit promptly started to keen, a high pitched sound that sliced through Aster's brain and jabbed at the feral, protective instincts he normally kept locked up.

The one thing his friends constantly forgot? He'd been fighting Pitch a lot longer than they had. Those had been dark and bloody days, then, and compared to that? This was peacetime.

He growled, and stood next to Nick and Tooth while they prepared to fight the nightmares.

And then...

The children believed in them. Believed that the three of them could defeat the nightmares.

Believed strong enough that, actually, they could.

Aster bolted for a nearby bush, already feeling muscles twitch and bones ache as he began to grow. No one needed to see that. A proper shape-change didn't hurt or look disturbing, but this hadn't been proper. It only took seconds, but owch.

Of course, when he left the bush, still running, he was six-foot-one and had his explosive eggs and boomerangs back.

Several of the children yelled at how cool he looked. Their voices were predominantly male. Heh,
kids.

Then he gave himself over to the joy of the fight.

He knew that after, when he was sane again, he'd feel sick to his stomach. At least these were creatures made entirely out of sand. They didn't have bones to break, or hearts to pump blood only for it to spray out of cut veins and arteries. They didn't scream.

But for the moment, blood surging through his veins, he simply enjoyed.

Until, that is, he heard Desmond scream.

"Papa!"

Aster's head snapped around, and he mentally reeled. He'd never dropped out of a battle rage so quickly before.

The kit was fine.

The kit's father was not.

Jack was down, and not moving. Pitch was laughing, the bastard.

E. Aster Bunnymund hissed.

Jack coughed, and twitched his fingers. Okay, neck not broken, just very painful.

"Oh, dear," Pitch murmured. "Not much without your staff, are you?"

Jack opened his eyes, and glared. "You," he said, breathing hard. His throat was crushed. Ow. "Are one hell of a bastard, you know that?"

Pitch grinned, and raised the staff again- and was knocked over by a gray blur.

"Woah," Jack murmured. Pitch was keeping up, but only just, and forget lessons with Higurashi-sama, he was going to have to convince Bunny to teach him... whatever that was. Violence personified.

The fighting moved back, and moved back, Pitch constantly on the retreat under the flurry of kicks, punches, and- yeah, that was a headbutt, and it actually knocked Pitch back about a foot and a half. They were almost to the trees, now, at a section of the forest where the undergrowth created a solid wall.

With no warning, Jack found himself surrounded by children and one baby rabbit. The children were a help; they pulled on his arms and pushed on his shoulders and got him more or less upright. Desmond was less help; all he did was cling to Jack's chest, dig his claws in, and refuse to let go.

"Kid, you're a menace," Jack murmured. He wrapped his arms around Desmond's shoulders, and looked around at a flash of gold.

"Sandy?"

The Sandman grinned, and lashed another nightmare with a golden whip. It promptly collapsed, the pile of sand turned yellow, and then flowed under Sandy's control.
"Huh," Jack said. "When did he show up?"

"The evil horses attacked," Jamie said. "The three guys stepped forward, and started to fight, and then the fourth guy just spun up out of nowhere and he's seriously making like Ivan Vanko, isn't he?"

"I actually got that reference," Jack croaked. "Dare you to tell him that later. Wanna see what faces he makes when he tries to figure it out."

One of the 'evil horses' swung wide of the Guardians, and galloped towards the cluster of children. Jack tried to stand up. He needn't have bothered; Cupcake ran forward and grabbed the nightmare around the neck. Gold spread from where she touched, until the nightmare had transformed into a prancing, golden unicorn.

"Uh," Jack said, and squinted his eyes almost shut. "I think that'd make more sense without a concussion."

"Probably," Jamie agreed.

Jack opened his mouth to say- something- when he heard the sound of breaking wood. And promptly doubled over in worse pain than getting stabbed, or having his throat crushed.

When he was able to see, he looked up and over at Pitch and Bunny.

Pitch must have swung the staff in a desperate arc, he thought, and hit a tree. The staff had broken, and was now in two pieces, the black sand that had covered it gone.

"I need my staff," he breathed, and tried to shift Desmond to one shoulder. "I need to stand up."

At least he had a willing gaggle of small children ready and able to help prop him up.

It was slow going. Cupcake managed to de-nightmare several more of the black horses, all of which turned into unicorns or, once, a Pegasus.

Bunny and Pitch had continued around the edge of the lake, and then onto the lake. Jack clenched his teeth, and... reached... for the ice.

It felt old, and brittle, the way it had when... Not thinking about it. He needed his staff. If he had his staff, he could fix the lake, and no one would fall through.

They made it to the broken pieces without incident, and Jack knelt down to pick them up. Frost immediately curled over both halves.

Could he freeze the two halves back together? Nothing said he couldn't try... Jack pieced the fractured ends together, and then concentrated. The frost thickened on the wood, but didn't hold the staff in one piece.

"C'mon," he muttered, and tried again.

Jamie placed his hand on Jack's shoulder. "I know you can do it, Jack."

And then, of course, he could.

Jack leaned on his staff when he stood up, and hobbled to the edge of the lake. The ice was cracking, he could feel it, and the two fighters out in the middle there hadn't noticed or didn't care. Stupid, stupid. He had to stop it.
He stopped at the edge of the lake, and rested the crook of his staff on the thin ice.

Frost immediately spread from the point of contact. Out on the middle of the lake, ice buckled- and then solidified.

Pitch cackled, and turned to wave his thanks to Jack.

Bunny smirked, and thumped one large foot against the ice.

Pitch fell through the sudden hole. He didn't make a sound, and the ice closed over in seconds.

Chapter End Notes

Fight scenes are the bane of my existence, and I didn't duck out on this one the way I did with Listen to Your Heart. You're welcome. (I considered stopping the chapter halfway through at the most wrenching point, but... I didn't. You're welcome. Again.)
Chapter Ten

Desmond flatly refused to let go of Jack. It made things complicated, especially when it became necessary to remove the hoodie. In the end, Jack decided the hoodie, already twenty years old, had lived out its life and could be cut off, because Desmond whimpered whenever anyone tried to move him.

Before his old sweater could be taken out and given an honorable burial, Jack emptied out the pocket. The Book, of course, somehow having survived the adventure; Desmond's chapter book, with the talking rats; the two carved, wooden toys; and a threadbare handkerchief.

"You fit a lot of things into one small pocket," Tooth murmured. She touched the carved horse's mane with one finger.

"Yeah, well. Kids need things."

He stroked the back of Desmond's head, and hummed. The kid sniffled, and pressed his nose a little less desperately against Jack's collarbone.

The room North had given him was empty of company. Not that Jack would have minded a crowd, but North had said something about supervising the kitchen, and Sandy was keeping Bunny company. The rabbit was currently doing little more than hiding his face in his hands and shaking. Since no one else seemed all that worried, Jack had to assume it was Bunny's usual reaction to the aftermath of a fight.

Tooth alone was keeping him company. He had to wonder why. She'd already thanked him for finding her fairies, and the boxes of teeth, and the yeti were in the process of moving the boxes back to her palace. Her fairies, with Pitch's terror no longer preventing them from flying, had gone back to work, renewing belief in the Tooth Fairy.

She didn't need to stay with him... But he was glad she had.

"So what now?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Tooth sat down, leaning forward a little to keep her wings clear of the chair back.

"Children believe in me. Desmond's safe. Pitch will be frozen until summer at the latest. What now?"

Tooth took a deep breath. "You could take the Guardian oath," she said.

Desmond shivered. Jack frowned, and started humming again. He rubbed at Desmond's ears until the baby rabbit calmed down. "That again?"

"Jack." Tooth rested one hand on his shoulder. "It's been made... very clear, that you are guardian material. You protect them, you love them..." She smiled at Desmond. "And now we know how you're to get more believers."

On the one hand, she was right. On the other... "Desmond," he said, and looked down when the boy in question moved.
"Papa?" Desmond twitched his ears, and looked up at Jack.

"Hey, kiddo. What're your thoughts on this?"

Desmond's face crumpled, and he pressed his nose against Jack's collarbone again. "No!"

Okay, that was an extreme reaction. "Why?"

Desmond didn't respond. Jack struggled to sit up, and managed it once Tooth helped. He wrapped one arm around Desmond's back, and stroked his son's ears with the other hand. "Des? C'mon, buddy, talk to me. What's wrong?"

The boy sobbed once. "I was scared, Papa. I was scared. The bad man wouldn't have grabbed me if you hadn't helped them! It's their fault."

Jack closed his eyes and hunched over Desmond. "Oh, buddy," he whispered, and shook his head. "Tooth, could I have the room, please?"

"Jack?" He heard Tooth's wings flutter, then still. "Of course. Call if you need anything."

He waited until he heard the door open, and then close, before he opened his eyes. "Hey, Des? Des, c'mon buddy, look at me."

Desmond sniffled, but complied. He was crying, Jack saw, quietly like usual. Jack wiped at Desmond's wet cheeks with his thumb, and smiled sadly.

"Desmond. It wasn't the Guardians' fault Pitch grabbed you. I chose to help them out. So that's on me. It's my fault we got in position for him to grab you."

The kid immediately shook his head. "No, Papa. No, not your fault. You saved me."

"Yeah, but if I'd done better you wouldn't have been in danger in the first place."

"But Papa." Desmond leaned forward, his eyes very big and desperate. "You're good."

"I'm your father." Jack shifted so he was sitting up straight, instead of leaning back against pillows. He rested his hands on Desmond's shoulders, and smiled a little. Once, he'd been able to hold the little guy in the palm of one hand. Never mind growing too slow; he was growing too fast.

"Desmond... I'm your father. In every way that matters. I love you. I've kept you fed and sheltered, played with you, done my best to cheer you up when you were sad, held you when you cried, took care of you when you were sick, and I've done my best to protect you whenever you were scared.

"But you were scared just now, with Pitch. And I might have saved you... but you were still scared. Because of that, I failed you. That's my fault. No one else's."

Jack had to remind himself that, chronologically, Desmond was forty-four years old. Most people that old had already realized their fathers weren't perfect demi-gods capable of anything.

Unfortunately, Desmond was really five years old, and the thought that his father couldn't do everything...

Jack pulled Desmond forward into a hug. "It's alright, son. I've got you. And I'm going to do my best not to let you down again."
North set the two bowls down on the side table, and smiled faintly. "Vegetable soup," he said, and nodded towards Jack's cling-on. "Best thing, yes?"

"Yeah," Jack agreed, and nudged Desmond's shoulder.

Desmond looked up, and tilted his ears towards Santa. "Thanks," he mumbled. "Looks hot..."

"What'm I, then?" Jack asked. "Here, pass me that bowl."

North chuckled, and did, though he kept hold of the rim. A good thing, Jack decided, since he was feeling decidedly wobbly. Chilling the liquid to just a little over lukewarm took more effort than he really wanted to think about, and if North hadn't been holding onto the bowl too it would've ended up falling when he was finished.

"There." He ruffled the fur between Desmond's ears. "Eat up, bouncy ball."

"That," Desmond said, "Was not one of your better nicknames."

North wasn't the only person to stifle a giggle. The others were entering through the door just in time to hear Desmond. Tooth grinned openly, while Sandy beamed at everyone once he'd taken up a spot at the window. Bunny lurked in a corner nearest the door, ears down and eyes all liquid and sad.

As soon as he'd gotten enough strength back, Jack vowed to shove a snowball in the oversized kangaroo's face. One chock full of his happy flakes. It should've been unnatural to look that unhappy.

Desmond smiled faintly at the Guardians, and then shuffled over to the side of the bed to start eating. Jack eyed the second bowl, which was still steaming, and shrugged. "I'll let that cool on its own," he said. Hopefully by the time it was cool, the ever present elves would've eaten the soup and no one would ask why he wasn't hungry.

With the mood everyone was in, telling them the truth about him and meals would just lead to tears. Buckets and buckets of tears.

He was so done with tears.

Jack blinked, and looked around. Everyone was just... watching. Him and Desmond. It was kind of creepy.

"Okay, the staring is because why?"

Sandy leaned forward, and gestured at Desmond. The kid stiffened, but Jack ran one hand down along Desmond's spine. That did the trick; the kid got another spoonful of soup, though his ears wouldn't stop twitching.

"Des?" he asked, just to clarify.

"Yes," North said. He glanced towards Bunny, but then very obviously dragged his attention back to Jack. "How...?"

Well, it wasn't like anyone other than Bunny had heard him the first time. "It was in '68. I found Des in this spaceship that looked pretty much like Superman's..." He trailed off at the blank looks on the others' faces. "Oh, come on! Really? None of you know? That's it, we're having a movie night!"

"Yeah!" Desmond immediately jumped feet first onto Jack's stomach. Jack clapped a hand over his
mouth to keep from yelling. "Movie! I get first pick!"

"Disney, Pixar, or Dreamworks," Jack said, and rolled his eyes when the blank looks continued. "They're film studios. Specialize in kids movies."

"Star Wars," Desmond countered.

"There's too much violence and I never should've let you watch that. Why did I let you watch that?"

"Uncle 'Mari threatened to shove your head through a wall 'cause I wouldn't stop whining."

Well. Yeah, that was true. "Anyways," Jack said, and pointed at the soup. "There will be movies. You will watch the movies. You will leave the movies at least able to recognize pop culture references. From this decade, even."

Tooth grinned, and leaned forward to pat his foot, under so many blankets it was just a shapeless lump. "We're looking forward to it."

Desmond rolled his eyes, and picked up the spoon again. "You wouldn't say that if you knew what movies you're going to watch."

"Ignore the sarcastic brat," Jack said. "Please."

"Frost," Bunny said.

Right, back on topic. "Look. The story isn't going to change. I found him, I raised him, he's my son. He just happens to be a mutated rabbit."

Bunny's ears went back when he scowled. Cool. "Mutated-?"

"Well, Pitch did call Des something else," Jack admitted. "By the way, did that guy take professional lessons in creepy? Can I file a restraining order? Because he gave me a restraining order vibe in Antarctica."

North tapped the carved, wooden foot of the bed. "Did Pitch call Desmond 'Pooka'?"

"That's the word," Jack agreed.

"I'm a Pooka, mate," Bunny said. "Not a... mutated... rabbit. And Desmond's same as me."

Desmond sat up straight, and frowned. "No we're not."

Jack... really didn't like how stricken Bunny looked at that. "Des?"

"I'm cuter," the kid said, and smirked.

Jack pinched the bridge of his nose. "Yeah, you're feeling better."

Desmond scraped the spoon across the bottom of the bowl, and hummed. "I like soup."

Right. This was his kid, ladies and gentlemen. Seriously.

Jack grinned and relaxed back against the pillows. "Oh. Des and I decided. When I'm all healed up, I'll take that oath thingy if you're still offering."

Hm, three out of four people lit up. And the still glum chum was... the rabbit-slash-Pooka. In-ter-est-
ing. Well, Jack would just have to talk to him. Privately.

"So!" he said, and pointed at the three happy Guardians. "Who wants to give Des a bath?"

Desmond's ears went flat and his eyes bugged out. "Bath?"

"Besides the soup on your face, you're covered in dirt and I can smell you from here." Well, sort of. It wasn't like he had a very good sense of smell. But Desmond had turned a little more brown than white, so bath it was.

"I don't like baths," Desmond murmured, and backed up on all fours.

"Come, they will be fun," North promised. He walked over to the door, and smiled back over his shoulder. "There will be bubbles and rubber duckies."

Then he did the stupid thing and opened the door.

Jack folded his hands behind his head, and grinned. Desmond bolted, and like the sour patch kangaroo said, you didn't want to race a rabbit. "Aw, gee," he said, once the yeti yelling had faded into the distance. "Wish I could help you catch him, but I'm kind of bed ridden. Tooth, Sandy, why don't you help North find the escape artist? I need to talk to Bunny anyways about boring diet stuff."

"Wha?" Bunny asked, before he blinked and nodded. "You got questions about Desmond."

"He turned himself human."

Bunny nodded, and waved one hand at the others. "Go on then. When you catch the ankle biter, use the yeti's shampoo, it's better for fur."

Sandy grinned at them, and urged the other two out. Only when the door was closed did Jack burst into laughter.

"They won't catch him. He'll probably end up outside, the cold doesn't normally bother him too much."

Bunny's lips twitched, like he was maybe about to smile. "Probably from spending time with you. He must be in permanent winter coat."

Probably. It certainly explained why Desmond never got any less fluffy. "Siddown, Mick."

"What'd you just call me?"

"Mick Dundee? Crocodile Dundee?" Jack sighed and added another movie to the list he'd get them all to watch. "You're hopeless."

Bunny drew himself up to his full height, brows furrowed, arms crossed, every inch a cranky bunny rabbit. "I'm the Guardian of Hope."

"And the moment I make a pop culture reference, you turn in the Guardian of Befuddlement," Jack replied. "Come on, I'm too tired to hit you with happy flakes. You'll have to deal with old fashioned poking and prodding if you're going to be in a mood."

"I'm not in a mood!"

"I can tell you're lie-ing!" Jack smirked. "Seriously, sit down. I can do this all day otherwise."
Bunny glowered, but sat down. After a minute of being cranky and glare-y, his scowl faded and he looked down at the floor.

"And we're back to the sad sack." Jack looked up at the ceiling, and made a face. "This would happen when I can't smack him with a snowball. Not fair."

"Frost!" Bunny snapped his teeth, and growled. Jack smiled as innocently as he knew how.

Bunny was the one to break first. He huffed, and looked out towards the window. "Thought you had questions?"

"Yeah. What's up with you? You that upset about Des?"

Bunny opened his mouth, and then seemed to slump all over. "They all died. Do you understand? Pitch killed everyone, and I was the only one to survive."

Jack stopped smiling, not that Bunny was looking at them. "Your... family?" he asked, remembering Bunny had mentioned a... wife, wasn't it?

"My people."

"...Everyone?"

Bunny's shoulders heaved when he sighed. "So I thought. Only... Desmond."

Desmond. Who was also a Pooka. Jack chewed on his bottom lip. "Bunny... I found him in a spaceship."

"Yeah." The rabbit- sorry, Pooka- looked pained. "You said. But he didn't just pop out of nowhere. He'd have had a mum, a dad."

Jack glared.

After a second, Bunny cleared his throat. "Sorry. Biological mum and dad."

"That's better." Jack folded his arms, and drummed his fingers against his bicep. "So... You think there's more of your kind out there?"

"...No." Bunny closed his eyes. "I think... I think if there were, they only saved Desmond."

That... was hard. "I'm sorry," Jack said. He frowned when Bunny stared at him, clearly surprised. "I am. I'm not... I still feel things, you know. Besides, I'm going to have to tell Des this, you know? Not that he's the last, because there's the two of you, but there's probably no one else."

He hesitated, and then decided to go for broke. "Though... at the same time, don't take this the wrong way, but it's kind of good news. For a long while there I thought he'd been abandoned. Not last ditch 'this better save him'."

The Pooka's glare eased, and when Jack finished, he nodded once. "Yeah. I guess I can see that. Look, Frost... About '68."

"I already told you. If you hadn't blown me off, I wouldn't have become Desmond's father." Jack leaned forward, and ignored his rib's complaints. "I wouldn't give that up for the world. And if you keep feeling sorry I'll dump you in a snow bank."

"You can't even stand up!"
"Look, Kangaroo, there is nothing in the world that would stop me from dumping you out in the cold. First you can check up on my boy, though. He really does need to have a bath."

Bunny shook his head and stood up. "Where do you and the ankle biter live?" he asked. "Might as well visit you two over the summer."

Jack shrugged one shoulder, and relaxed back into the pillows. "Wherever. Generally Burgess Lake, though we tend to wander. Why?"

"You... don't have a home?"

Jack began ticking points off on his fingers. "Des needs to eat, vegetables specifically. Only place there's snow year round, there aren't really plants. Only building material I'd be able to use requires snow year round, so. Des feels the cold. And it wouldn't really be practical to, what, make an igloo we wouldn't be able to use most of the time anyways, because we'd always be traveling back someplace warm to get him something to eat."

"That's just not right." Bunny shook his head, and sighed. "I'll give you access to the Warren. Thump your staff on the ground two or three times, it'll open right up for you. Give you and the ankle biter a safe place to kip."

Jack clenched his teeth on his automatic retort- he'd been managing just fine on his own, thank you- and forced himself to think about it. Honestly, he'd already thought about making Bunny an honorary uncle. This was just... borrowing space to sleep. Desmond would probably love it. And there'd probably be plenty of Desmond's favorite fruits and vegetables.

"I might take you up on that," he said, once he'd swallowed a few angry words. "Now, seriously. Go check and make sure Desmond's having a bath and not, you know, lost outside."

Not that the Wind would let Desmond come to any real harm, but not the point.

"Why doesn't he like baths?" Bunny asked, one hand on the door knob. "Mind you, they're not my favorite things, but I'm a shower man myself."

"Think about it. Hot springs, or barely above freezing lakes and ponds."

Bunny shuddered once, and then headed out to track down Jack's favorite midget.

Chapter End Notes

So, I've started my new job recently, which has seriously cut into writing time. (As compared to ALL DAY EVERY DAY, I now only have a few hours at night. I'm very happy about this.) As a trade off, while I might be posting slower, I'm going to try and make sure the chapters are longer.

Bunny had less gibbering than I'd expected. Maybe there'll be more later.

Anyways! We'll soon be starting the next story arc, and at some point I'm going to start writing a small collection of one-shot prompts from this universe, all related to raising Desmond. I'll take prompt ideas, things you'd like to see, and do my best to make 'em just the way you want. Drop a line with suggestions in the reviews!
(Also, I've recently commissioned artwork of Jack and Des together. When it's done, I'll post a link to the picture.)
The year passes by in a series of snapshots.

That is how it seems to Aster. Images, feelings, each memory individual and contained and not bleeding into the rest like he feels it should, like all his other memories have.

That first weekend after a ruined Easter, being hauled out of his Warren by cold hands and warm paws. They had ended up in a field somewhere in Europe, he thought.

There had been flowers.

Jack had lit a campfire (Jack was willing to play with fire? Aster had boggled, to the point Desmond was talking about catching flies) and they had settled in to roast s'mores and tofu-dogs.

It hadn't passed Aster's notice that Jack had given his s'mores to Desmond and his tofu-dogs to Aster. When questioned, he'd laughed and said he wasn't hungry. The kit had laughed too, so he'd let it go.

Then, some evening- still early on after Easter, after Jack became a Guardian- tucking Desmond into bed. Well, Jack calls it bed, Aster calls it a nest. Aster lingers in the doorway, watching Jack read to the kit from a well worn book. Then, book finished, the winter spirit lingers, brushing cool fingers over kitten-soft fur, until Desmond is asleep.

Even later that evening, when Aster is nodding off at the kitchen table despite himself, Jack laughs and threatens to tuck him into bed if he's that tired.

Aster doesn't take him up on that, but it's a measure of his exhaustion that he's tempted.

April Fool's is spent helping the terrible duo lay traps for Nick's yeti. He can't remember laughing this much in decades. Phil looks amazing, slowly turning pink and glittery thanks to a bucket, the Coloring River, and the Glitter Pool in the Warren.

He laughs even harder when Tooth and her fairies manage to superglue Jack's hands to each other. Then he steals the Frostbite's staff and Desmond and bolts for the Warren, cackling all the way.

Sandy drops by to personally give Desmond sweet dreams. Then he sits at the table with Aster and Jack, sipping at tea. Jack's goes cold while he talks. He reminds Aster of Nick in this moment, telling his story like the Vikings of old; half epic poem, half pantomime. Nick needs large amounts of eggnog or vodka to get like this, while Jack just needs a listening ear.

Every so often Jack will look over, eyes bright and mouth stretched wide in a grin, and catch Aster's eye. He'll grin, Jack will, and there will be an expression in his eyes just for Aster. It's one that's grown over the weeks and bedtime routine, through breakfasts and dinners and trusting that most precious of Jack's believers to Aster's care. It's a look that is warm, that makes Aster's heart clench and he turns his attention back to Sandy.
Jack never seems to mind. Sooner rather than later Aster will return to watching the winter spirit, his artist's eye (is that all it is?) drawn to the play of light and shadow and the animation in Jack's face.

And Jack will catch his eye, and grin, because the kid knows something Aster doesn't.

They throw a birthday party for him on Australia Day. There is a barbeque; vegetarian for the two Pooka, and for Tooth because she thinks it's better for her teeth. Nick laughs and says that means the ribs and steak are for him and Jack.

Jack laughs, and says he'll have a veggie burger, thanks. He ends up not eating much at all, too busy chasing after elves chasing after egglets. No wonder the kid's so skinny. He takes much better care of Desmond, but Aster resolves that someone needs to start taking care of Jack, too.

That night they have fireworks, green and blue and gold and silver. Desmond sits next to Aster, which means Jack sits next to Aster too, and they all ooh and ah appropriately for Nick and Sandy's work.

And later, much later that night, when the kit is asleep and Jack is cradling Baby Tooth in one hand, they talk about how to spend more time with the children, the believers. Jack promises to help, and threatens them with movie nights and poker games and capture the flag if they ignore his advice.

Aster reclines in the grass, and watches Jack talk about playgrounds and school yards and children who just need to know someone cares.

Manny was right to make Jack a Guardian.

Desmond enlists his help in making Jack a prezzy for Mother's Day. "Not that he's a girl, but Papa's been both my mom and my dad forever. I always got him just flowers before."

There are still flowers, but there's also a card with all of Aster's artistic skill going into it. A winter scene isn't quite a typical Mother's Day thing, but considering the recipient...

Then he helps Desmond scrawl his name on the inside.

Jack's face on receiving card and flowers is priceless.

There is a week where no one can find Jack or Desmond at all. Times like this where Aster regrets Desmond's not a child of earth. If he were, they could at least find him.

Tooth has her fairies on alert, and North broods in front of the globe. Sandy flits from one country to the next, and threatens to spin himself out on the wind in exhaustion.

Aster paints egg after egg, the same pattern over and over. Blue with white swirls like frost; silver with blue sparkles like stylized stars.

At the end of the week, Jack stumbles into the Warren, Desmond prancing along at his side. Desmond chatters happily to anyone who'll listen (and a few of the egg sentinels, who don't care) about the week he spent with the Snow Queen. Apparently she has a new victim- sorry, client- who needs to learn to be careful about what he wishes. Solitude and eternal winter apparently isn't what it was once cracked up to be.

Jack is surprised when he is confronted by the others, but surprise quickly changes to badly hidden
joy. Did he think they wouldn't worry? Apparently so.

He apologizes, and promises that next time, he'll check and see if one of them can watch the kit. Apparently the Snow Queen likes children, but only in very small doses. She'll be happy to give up babysitting privileges.

Aster is nearly brought to tears the first time Desmond curls up and bumps his head under his chin. It's something shared by rabbits, chinning, but it doesn't just mean a territorial claim for Pooka. It means clan, family.

Then the little nipper scrambles to stand on Aster's shoulder and tries to chin him back. He's fairly certain someone managed to get a photo of it.

"We," Jack announces, "are going to a movie."

Typically such excursions are Jack and Desmond, maybe North going along if it's something that interests him. Aster nods and waves them towards the tunnels.

"Have fun."

Desmond sighs, and shakes his head. Silver hair and silver ears flop from side to side with the energy of the gesture. "Told you he'd be difficult, Papa."

"You did, you did," Jack says.

Oh, he doesn't like where this is going. Aster holds up a pastel-pink tipped brush in warning. "I'm busy."

"Easter's not for months and months," Desmond says, and makes baby-bunny eyes. They're more effective than anyone really likes, except maybe Jack and the sprog himself. "You haven't gone to a movie with us before, and I think you'll like it."

He can feel himself wavering, and manages to resist up until Jack slings one arm around his shoulders and sighs. "It'll make Des very, very happy," he murmurs.

The kid in question works up a crocodile tear.

The movie "Crocodile Dundee" wasn't actually that bad. The drive-in theater was doing older movies this week.

"Apparently it was written by Australians," Jack tells him, once the movie's over.

"I can see that, mate," Aster replies. At some point, he promises himself, he'll have to quote the movie. Especially that knife line. It was hilarious.

He warns everyone away when a bunch of cane toads infest the Warren. They wreck three batches of eggs just by brushing up against them. He has to go searching for something long and pointy to kill 'em with. He's sure not going to touch them; the poison might not kill him but he'll end up wishing it will.

Then Jack shows up with some bloke that looks like he might be from the Outback, or might be from North America's Wild West some fifty, sixty years ago. Aster's all set to start yelling and drive them out before they fall over from cane toad poisoning, when the ravens show up.
They're Australian ravens, so they know how to deal with poisonous, tasty food. There are over five hundred toads, but the way the birds are going- flipping the beasts onto their backs, then disembowelling and eating the choice bits- the toads will be gone in a few days.

"Winter told me you could use some help from my cousins," the stranger says. He tips up his Stetson, and grins. Tooth would approve of his smile. "Bit away from my home skies, but cousins are cousins."

"And last time I tried to catch a raven, it nearly took my eye out," Jack adds.

The stranger laughs, and then turns into a giant, black bird and flies away.

A small family of Aussie ravens stays behind, once the toad infestation is dealt with.

Jack is swaying on his feet when he arrives, hair in disarray and frost melting on his hoodie. "Bunny, can... Can you... Desmond?"

The ankle biter is Pooka shaped today, and his ears are down, whiskers slicked back. "Papa needs to sleep and Aunt 'Lexi can't watch me this week. Will you?"

"Let's get the Frostbite put to bed," Aster says, and goes to help prop Jack up. The frost might be melting but he's cold, much colder than usual. He's blinking and squinting, and his eyes are clouded over. "We can tuck him in my nest."

"Just anywhere's fine," Desmond says, utterly matter of fact and relaxing now that Aster's ready to take over responsibility. "Papa doesn't worry about comfort like this. We could put him in the river, he'd come out all colors then."

"He'd drown!"

"He doesn't breathe when he's asleep."

That sounds... horrifying.

They end up tucking Jack away in one of the spare rooms in the back of what Aster calls home. It would've been in Aster's bed, except Desmond claims that no one wants to see Jack when he's asleep. Aster doesn't believe it, but goes back after a few hours to check up on the Frostbite...

Jack might as well be a corpse. His eyes are half open, but completely glazed over, like he's got the worst case of cataracts ever seen. Or, more likely, there's a layer of ice on them. He's not breathing. The way he was tucked into bed now looks like he's on viewing at a funeral home. Albeit a funeral home with curved, earthen walls and a few odds and ends tucked to one side of the room or another, but still, it's a viewing.

"This," Desmond says, sneaking up behind him. "Is why Papa prefers to sleep at the bottom of his lake."

It's a very long week- a very good week, but long. Aster has Desmond pretty much all to himself. Jack... sleeps.

He enjoys spending time with the kit, teaching him the best way to plant seeds and seedlings, telling him stories of the old Pooka society, of the various animals in Australia.
"So, in this country, everything is trying to kill you? Even the grass?"

"That's why us Aussies are such a tough breed, mate."

"Bunny! There's a black widow on the table!"

"I don't mean to put down your black widow spider, but the funnelweb spider can kill a man in eight seconds, just by lookin' at him."

"Stop quoting that movie and help me!"

"Sure it's a widow?"

"Kill it! Kill it before it kills me!"

Jack wakes up, and stumbles in on him teaching Desmond the lyrics to a few of the old Pooka songs. The ankle biter's accent is the worst, but his enthusiasm makes up for it.

"That sounds like something you sing while wasted," is Jack's opinion.

Desmond laughs. Aster decides on the better course of valor, and doesn't tell them that it is. Drinking songs are the only ones he ever learnt.

The days get shorter in North America, and Jack gets busy. Aster would be annoyed on Desmond's behalf, except the kit is enjoying himself playing with the egglets and following Aster around the Warren.

"Papa has to start earlier than any other winter spirit," he says. "He has to make the leaves change color with his frost."

"How what now?"

"It looks a bit like he's playing baseball."

This Aster has to see... and it's as funny as it sounds. Apparently frosting entire forests involves snowballs, using his cane like a baseball bat, and mock announcer voices.

They don't mention the sword-swinging fox.

Ever.

Before he knows it, North America is blanketed in white and there's noises about Thanksgiving. They end up celebrating in November, simply because at that point Jack's work eases off and he can relax. Nick hosts; he's the only one with the facilities, the staff, and the energy to throw a giant party for as many spirits as can be invited.

There were a few winter spirits on the list, but Jack took them off. The Snow Queen shows up, with her consort, and other than Jack that's it. To be honest it's a bit of a relief. It's hard to eat dinner when your neighbor keeps trying to stab you in the neck with an icicle.
Boxing Day is for Guardians only. There is a small pile of presents under the tree for everyone, and it doesn't escape notice that Jack's pile is only eclipsed by Desmond's. Apparently Aster isn't the only person feeling guilty about ignoring the two.

Previous years Nick would just send the presents to wherever the Guardians lived. There hadn't been as many, either.

This year, they have breakfast first, pancakes and fresh fruit for Aster and Desmond, pancakes and rashers of bacon for everyone else. Then they open presents in the Tree Room. There are couches, but they're mostly hidden by all the decorated trees. It's a year round thing, and the only part that changes are the decorations.

This year each Guardian, and Desmond, has their own tree. Sandy's is decorated in gold and white, with fanciful animal shapes. Nick's is decorated in red, of course, with stylized Santa Clauses in every shape. Tooth's, Aster sees, is covered in angels, which obviously doesn't mean *anything*. Nick glowers at anyone who smirks at the tree, then at him.

Aster's is covered in rabbits and, he sighs, kangaroos. How Nick even found kangaroo ornaments... Well, maybe he had the elves make them. The critters might be useless at making toys, but when it comes to clothes, decorations, or cleaning, they're unmatched.

Jack's is blue and white, and covered in snowflakes. He's delighted. Desmond's shares snowflakes and rabbits with both Jack and Aster, and he's equally excited. There's something about those three trees, Desmond's between Aster's and Jack's, that give him a pang in the heart.

Then it's time to exchange the prezzies and open them. Jack has to be reminded that he has presents of his own, while Desmond has to jump up and show off every present he's given, to every single person there. Including a few yeti that get dragged into the room and are not allowed to leave.

"Hey, Bun-Bun, want Sophie down here for Easter prep this year?"
"I'll see her the day itself. Where's the sprog?"
"North needs a tester for the day, and apparently the elves are on strike. When'd you eat last?"
"Uh..."
"Yeah, okay, no answer? Time to take a break. I'll make you a sandwich."
"I can keep working."
"I can frost your feet."
"... Lettuce and vegemite then, mate."

In all of his memories, there is Jack. Jack laughing; Jack dancing through the air, light and graceful as the snowflakes he controls.

And there is Desmond, a pale furred kit, or a pale haired human, depending on what takes his fancy. Desmond, who makes some horrible, still-bleeding wound in Aster's soul close over, without even trying.

The others are there, on the periphery, but even early on Aster realizes his world is starting to spin
around three suns. Easter, Desmond, and Jack.

For the life of him he can't figure out which of the three is most important.

Easter is a delight. After the fiasco last year, he figured he was looking at a minimum turnout, but somehow all the kids are in the parks and- thank the Man in the Moon- finding eggs. There's more hand painted googies in the pile than there've been in previous years, and it wasn't always Aster doing the painting. He thinks Desmond's 'paw print patterns' were a beaut of an idea, since the kids that find those eggs hold them up high and cheer.

There's a little boy with silver hair and blue eyes and silver rabbit ears in the crowd. He moves with practiced ease, never once getting walked through. He finds a few of the special eggs Aster's tucked away for him. There are eight children keeping a careful eye on him. Sophie skips the watching and just follows Desmond around, saying "bunny, hop, hop!" at intervals.

It's adorable.

"Good turnout," Jack says, and props his staff up against his shoulder.

"I know you and the others did something to encourage them."

"All Sandy, man, the kids had real good dreams about today."

He'll have to thank the Sandman, then.

Aster pulls out three eggs that hadn't been set out, saved special just for this, and hands them over. "Happy Easter, cobber."

Jack smiles, and holds the eggs like they're made out of gold. "Thanks, Bunny."

It's one of the best Easter's he's ever had.

Chapter End Notes

I've had this interlude planned out and written for a while. Jack's POV (with Desmond guest staring) next chapter.(And, for anyone curious about the fate of Jack's clothing... The yeti fixed everything up before the others could try to get him in something more Guardian-like. Very little drama.)
The year can't pass by quickly enough. Jack grits his teeth and grits his teeth (and, it has to be said, clutches his staff white knuckled) and plows through the worst of it. Sooner or later he'll get used to company, he knows, and he also knows the first year is the worst.

Thankfully, he's gotten better at remembering the important stuff, and forgetting the unimportant.

Desmond is always important. It's surprising that other people have become important too.

The kid insists on making the rounds. Jack doesn't have the heart to say no.

They visit Tooth first, and not just because Desmond wants to meet his new 'sibling'. Baby Tooth and baby bunny need to feel each other out, Jack knows. Not that he's going to claim Baby Tooth all for himself- she's Tooth's spawn- but they've gained a new family member. He's an uncle now. Maybe a step-father. And Desmond needs to figure out how that'll work out.

It helps that the mini-fairies mob them in the attempt to get at their teeth. Baby Tooth is the only sane one, shrilly yelling at her sisters to get back to work; can't you tell they're head shy?

Tooth has to break up the ensuing battle royal, though by the time she arrives it's turned into a snowball war. Jack sneaks happy flakes into every snowball the fairies throw.

That afternoon, Desmond is introduced to the Joys of Green Tea. Jack is introduced to the Joys of Iced Tea, which is a little ironic. He takes a few sips, but it tastes like dust in his mouth. He'd drink more, to be polite, but... Well. He knows what happens to food and drink in his stomach.

(When they leave, they pause for a little on an island Jack knows about, something barely more than a rock jutting up out of the ocean. It's dry enough at low tide, and Desmond waits there while Jack empties his stomach out. There isn't any bile, hasn't been for three hundred years, and it's better than leaving stuff to curdle and rot.)

They catch Sandy somewhere over New York State, near the border. The three of them end up swinging down (up?) to Niagara Falls. It's a sight, and one Jack hasn't actually seen before. Desmond is entranced. He starts asking questions about how the falls don't run out of water, and where it all goes, and why there's even falls in the first place-

Jack doesn't have the answers. He's not dumb, but it's been decades since he last hung around a school. Even now, he can't exactly leave Desmond alone, and the Snow Queen would scalp him if he tried having her babysit every day. He misses it, a little. There's been so many new discoveries...

Fortunately, Sandy rescues him. The guy immediately starts showing the Lifecycle of the Water Drop in sand, and Desmond falls silent. It's better than any lecture, in Jack's opinion. Sandy goes over the basic 'rain-ground water-cloud' bit, then gets creative with erosion and what ice does to rock- and Jack sees his "awesome dad" factor go up by ten at that- and the creation of the grand canyon.

Desmond falls asleep somewhere around Sandy's explanation for why hurricanes happen. Jack settles in on a dreamsand cloud, and continues to watch. It's not like he needs sleep.
It's a few days after that when they visit North. Desmond immediately runs off to be mauled by elves. Apparently the creatures enjoy petting his fur, but don't understand what 'nicely' means. Desmond, on the other hand, likes the fact that he can jump on them, shove them over, kick and head butt and otherwise do everything Jack would rather he didn't, and not get in trouble. Not hurt the elves, either, but Desmond's still at that age where his fun comes before other people's comfort.

That leaves Jack to deal with an enthusiastic Santa, and Phil. It should be awkward. It really, truly should be awkward.

Instead he's dragged into North's office, encouraged to sit down and have a cookie, don't feed the elves, they are spoiled.

Jack's very good at slight of hand. The elves are destined to love him, he can tell.

He thinks Phil catches him, but can't be sure.

It's not that important. It's much more fun listening to North bemoan the repair of Jack's hoodie and wifebeater- they're practically new- than worrying over Phil maybe having figured out... stuff. Besides, what could feeding the elves mean? That he doesn't like butter-pecan cookies?

"I like my sweater," Jack says, once North's started to repeat himself.

"But surely you would like better? Bigger pocket, less repair?"

Jack laughs, and shakes his head.

It takes them almost a full week to get around to visiting Bunny. Desmond, so enthusiastic about the other three, gets quiet when it comes to the adult of his species. Jack's not sure why. He talks with Desmond- he loves his son, he won't be hurt if Desmond decides Bunny's a friend, he's not going to leave Desmond with Bunny- but he's not sure it helps.

Honestly, Jack's not too enthusiastic about visiting the Easter Bunny either. For all his talk about being glad Easter Sunday of '68 turned out- and he is glad, he is, he wouldn't give Desmond up for the world- still. The guy blew him off.

So it's with a quiet Desmond, and a faint sense of trepidation, that Jack thumps his staff on the ground three times the Saturday after Easter.

A rabbit hole opens up, as promised. And if they don't really dawdle on the way to the Warren, they don't rush it, either.

Desmond does relax a bit once they're there, but that might be the warmth and the green grass as much as anything. Jack, on the other hand, starts looking for his host. The tunnel they took had been all cleared out, the shattered eggshells gone as if they'd never been. Bunny's probably still working, but just as likely could use a break.

And Jack can't help but think... All gone. Except for Bunny and Desmond, they're all gone.

Maybe that's why he's not surprised by what he finds.

Bunny... He's wedged himself back into a hole just barely big enough for him. He might've left some fur and blood on the sides, it's that close. If he could move, he'd be shaking; as is, he's so tense you could bounce a quarter off any of his muscles. His fur, from tip of his ears to the bottom of his feet, is standing on edge. His jaw is clenched, and his throat flexes like he maybe wants to scream but can't.
And his eyes are staring off at something horrible, something bloody, something in the past.

The two of them don't even have to speak. Jack kneels down and rests a hand on Bunny's shoulder. The Pooka starts, but he can't really move to hit him, and Jack's standing to the side, out of easy kicking range. Before Bunny can kick, Desmond moves in, cuddles up on Bunny's lap.

It only takes a minute before Bunny's seeing the here and now. Then Jack takes one hand, Desmond takes the other, and they chivy him off to a mountain meadow that's a favorite. It's light, and open, and beautiful, and that's just what Bunny needs right now.

Jack accepts the room in the Warren because of that. If Bunny hadn't been a factor- if it had been a question of accepting charity- no. He and Desmond would've kept on with their Romany lifestyle, traveling around and around and returning to favorite places, sure, but not really having a home.

Except Bunny... he's probably not always like this, but at the moment? He's balancing on a knife edge, doesn't even realize it, and it's a long way to fall.

Jack's good at catching people.

Desmond adjusts faster than Jack does. In days, he's settled into something of a routine. Oh, they still go out to random places in North America and the wider world (Burgess is their favorite, though, always and forever, and now there are children that see them). But they always come back to the Warren at night.

Jack reads bedtime stories, and once his son is asleep, he takes care of his roommate. A hot drink, no caffeine, to settle the mind; mindless chatter that will keep his attention; gentle teasing that'll send him to bed amused, not brooding.

Bunny wakes up most nights with nightmares, but he's quick to fall back asleep, and in the morning he never seems to remember them.

Jack's gone longer without needing to recover his energy, but he still feels tired. Watching over one Pooka was hard enough, and now there are two.

Bunny has a few more episodes, but none quite so dramatic. He'll just stop, sometimes, and stare off into the distance. Jack's gotten very good at noticing those moments, and snapping the old rabbit out of them. Say what you will about his methods, but they work.

Desmond's methods are just as good. The kid likes tackling Bunny, because it always ends up in an epic game of tag, and laughter, and no more staring off into the distance.

"Bunny!"

"What? What!"

"It's Desmond. Something's wrong. You gotta fix him."

"Stop pushing. What's wrong?"

"That's why I'm pushing!"

"... This is what you're freaking out about?"
"He's just staring and he won't answer me!"

"He's sleeping."

"... With his eyes open?"

"Yes."

"Do you-?"

"Occasionally."

"You know what? I think this is creepier than anything Pitch tried."

"Take that back!"

There are birthday parties and Mother's Day cards, bedtime rituals and visits to Burgess, to North, to Tooth and Sandy and odd corners of the world. There are moments when there are too many people and it's all Jack can do not to scream and drive them away, all of them, even Desmond.

He's been alone for so long... It was easier when he just had Desmond. Jack and his son can go days without talking, they know each other so well.

Everyone else needs to fill the air with sound. Meaningless, loud.

But he can't drive them away, can't take off on his own. So Jack grits his teeth and clutches his staff and forces himself to get through it.

Desmond is happier now than he's been in years. Jack is the Guardian of Fun.

He will not fuck this up.

The week comes when he feels death pulling at his limbs. He's relieved, even as he flies Desmond to Jan Mayen Island in the Arctic Ocean. Aleksia apparently senses him coming; she's waiting at the gateway of her castle, in formal robes of white silk and white ermine fur.

Desmond seems relieved too. Maybe the social whirl wore at him, too. They'll have to talk about that, later.

Jack flies back towards America, Burgess. He doesn't make it, goes down in the Atlantic.

If he breathed, he'd drown.

Good thing he didn't breathe.

A week later, he woke up, dislodged a few curious things that made the deep down ocean floor home, and headed for the surface. He surprised a shark on the way.

Aleksia was happy to hand Desmond back over, and Desmond was happy to go home.

The most surprising thing was how happy the other Guardians were when they returned to the Warren. That... was going to take some getting used to.

He knows what it means when Desmond curls up on Bunny's lap and rubs his forehead against the
older Pooka's chin. He's only raised the kid, after all, he's not ignorant.

Sandy's there, old Polaroid camera clicking away as he captures the moment for posterity and future blackmail. The former Star isn't watching Jack, and that gives him time to get his expression under control, time to stammer out some kind of excuse, time to get away before his emotions get the better of him.

Sandy finds him out over the Arctic, shattered glaciers mute testimony to Jack's emotions. Sometimes, he knows, ice grows too fast for itself. That's when it breaks apart, inside out.

The Sandman gives him two pictures. The first is Desmond nuzzling under Bunny's chin, a look of utter peace on the smaller rabbit's face. Bunny's expression is a little more complicated- sorrow and joy and a faint hint of "is this really happening" that means there'll be nightmares later tonight.

The second picture is nothing short of adorable. Desmond, balancing precariously on Bunny's shoulder, is clutching the older Pooka's one ear as he tries to jab his chin in Bunny's forehead.

"It still hurts," Jack says, once he's tucked the two pictures away.

Sandy pats his shoulder. Of course it hurts, the man signs. Change does. As long as Jack concentrates on Desmond's happiness, Bunny's painful joy, the hurt will ease.

Jack nods. But he doesn't have to tell anyone. It's stupid, anyways, being jealous of...

Everyone.

It's not long after that when his busy year catches up on him. He might not need to sleep, but he does need to recover energy, and he hasn't been doing that much. Pooka watching is exhausting, especially when one of them's an adult with the self preservation skills of a *cumquat*!

*Everyone* living needs to eat. And last Jack checked? Bunny's alive, not like he seems all too concerned with *staying* that way.

Anyways, Jack is caught completely by surprise while he and Desmond tour Mt. Rushmore. It's faster to open a rabbit hole to the Warren than try to fly to Aleksia, not that she'd babysit. Her latest 'guest' was one step short of dismembering small animals to figure out how they ticked, and people in the Ice Palace can see Desmond without trying. Until Kay the psycho's been rehabilitated (or removed entirely), all small children are to stay far away.

And Jack can't think of anyone better than Bunny to watch Desmond this week. North still thinks cookies are a major food group, Sandy is sweet but gets distracted easily, and Tooth... Well, she's busy. Otherwise she'd probably be first choice.

Halfway down the tunnel, he goes blind. He has to hobble along, leaning heavy on his staff, being guided by Desmond and barely able to stay upright.

It doesn't hurt. It never does. He can't die because he's already dead; his body's just... catching up on that fact for a little bit.

He only knows he's in the Warren when the warmth hits him like a slap to the face. He can't hear things properly, but he thinks he hears Bunny. He stammers- something, can't think, can't remember, everything is falling away- but Desmond will be taken care of. He thinks, he knows, Bunny says so.

That's alright then. Jack is so tired. He's ready to rest.
So he dies.

Its autumn, and he has to frost the plants—trees, shrubs, grasses, crops—so they get with the program and ripen, get ready for their own slices of mini-death. After the first few days working solo without Desmond, he gets into a bit of a routine, barely notices when he’s joined by both Pooka and—eventually, Tooth and Sandy.

It's fun, the way it hasn't actually been for a while. Years past, he's always been worried about Desmond. Will Jack be able to find enough food for the kid in winter? What if Jack gets distracted while working and the kid wanders off? What if Desmond gets too cold, or hurt, or, or, or.

This year, he can let himself go and concentrate and play and the trees’ dying colors show the difference. Scarlet and ocher and golden leaves fill the sky and coat the ground.

Jack has been threatened, on pain of death, not to so much as think about the time Higurashi-sama tracked him down to the Warren and found Bunny.

Even if watching the meeting between a Japanese Kitsune and space alien rabbit was nothing short of hilarious. (Jack still needs to make time for fighting lessons. He's still going to make Bunny teach him. It was nice seeing Higurashi-sama get his butt kicked for a change.)

Jack doesn't know what to think about the Christmas presents. On the one hand- it's not an attempt to buy his and Desmond's good will, it's not charity, it's nothing bad- but on the other- what the hell? Desmond went forty-four years without a visit from Santa. You can't make up for that, North.

(He doesn't care about his own three hundred years. He doesn't. It would've been nice, but he's seventeen. He's pretty sure at that age, Santa's not supposed to give him anything regardless of how naughty or nice he's been.)

Still, they get him things he sorely needs. Tooth gives him his box of teeth, so he can get his memories—all of them—back. He sets them aside for now, but he knows he'll look at them later. Now that he's aware of what he's missing...

Sandy has managed to collect sea glass and seashells and river rocks, all in shades of blue and white, with the occasional bright green, or flash of gold, in the mix. They're beautiful, and they're the sort of thing that says 'you have a home'. This collection isn't something a wandering spirit can really have; it's too bulky, too hard to carry, best displayed on a shelf or table. He even knows just where in his room at the Warren he’ll put it.

(He has a room. In the Warren. Takes him a while to get over the shock, and only Desmond's urging gets him opening presents again.)

Bunny gets him books. Some more of the Pratchett guy's work, which is awesome, because he can share with Des. A few novels for younger readers—the entire Ranger's Apprentice series, and Jack is relived because he only read the first two books and he wants to know what happens—and some adult novels, Dresden Files and a few murder mysteries and even some of Stephen King's less mind-bending works.

Judging by the looks he's getting, no one else realized he was a closet bibliophile. Which, yeah, he wasn't always, but he's got to do something when everyone else is sleeping.

He's just glad Bunny didn't get him knitting supplies. Though he would've appreciated the chance to
make things again. At one point, he could make sweaters and socks and mittens. He probably still could.

North got him the most- including, unsurprisingly, a new hoodie. Same style, but obviously new, with, yes, a bigger pocket.

"Should I change into this now?" Jack teases.

There's a sandcastle kit that can easily be used for snow-castles, games (and more clothes) and hidden at the bottom, an actual key to the front door.

Jack’s almost ashamed of the gifts he made everyone- wood carvings, nothing fancy- but the way everyone reacts over them, you'd think he'd given them their hearts' desire. A carefully done phoenix in honey wood for Sandy; a peacock in an odd, saltwater-soaked driftwood that gleamed with green highlights when the light hit it just right for Tooth; a grizzly bear, trout in mouth and two cubs at her heels for North. He’d thought about a kangaroo for Bunny, but in the end decided on a mustang stallion, clearly running full out.

First time he's given gifts to anyone outside his tiny family.

Strange thing, though. He doesn't think he's giving gifts outside his family at all.

It's only at Easter that Jack realizes- the year's over, and he's not gritting his teeth anymore.

He doesn't feel crowded. He doesn't feel watched. He doesn't feel jealous whenever Desmond wants to spend time with the other Guardians.

Most of all... Bunny gives him three carefully decorated eggs, and it makes him feel warm.

He got through it. He's used to them now.

He has friends, and that was worth all the headaches, and the two weeks sleeping.

Jack grins at Bunny, at the Easter Egg Hunt, at the moon just slipping below the horizon and the blue sky and the green grass and the children, all the children. "You know," he says. "I think I'm glad I got chosen to be a Guardian, after all."

Chapter End Notes

So Desmond actually refused to give me his POV of events. Oh well. Maybe later.

Again, everyone, give me suggestions for scenes you want to see FROM JACK AND DESMOND’S HISTORY, before the Guardians decided to shove Jack in a sack and toss him through a magic portal. I've gotten a few suggestions, but it's all for things that'll happen in-story.

Finally, again, major thanks to Shimmer712, not only for creating a TV Tropes page for this story, but updating it every time she sees another trope. The link is as follows: http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/FanFic/LittleBoyBlue

Go check it out. And, if there's a trope you want me to consider for this story, let me know and I'll see what I can do.
Jack hadn't blinked in three hours. He hadn't moved, either. He'd just... sprawled on his stomach, chin propped up with his hands, watching. The entire three hours. Without blinking.

To be honest, it was getting kind of creepy.

Aster clenched his jaw and kept working. He was out of practice; going fifty odd years not doing anything other than paint eggs and come up with new patterns would do that to a bloke.

He was almost finished the painting. He'd gone with a simple geometric pattern, no more than three colors, and was working more to get back into the feel of things than anything.

Silk painting was occasionally tricky, but well worth the effort. Aster had to ask himself just why he'd stopped.

Of course, he would have felt better about his work if Jack had just stopped staring.

... Maybe his eyeballs had dried out.

Finally he had to put his brush down and address the problem. "What?"

Jack breathed in, and blinked. So his eyeballs hadn't dried out. "How are you doing all that? The colors aren't running or anything."

"Special paint," Aster said. Rambling on about saturation and resists and all that stuff would take too long, and wasn't really necessary besides. "Want to learn how?"

"I'll stick with my carving," Jack said. "I don't..." He waved one hand in the air. "I've always been better with three-dee than two. Perspective, you know?"

No, Aster didn't really know. On the other hand, he'd never tried carving, so it was entirely possible that if he picked up a block of wood he'd bollocks the whole thing up. He knew how to get what he saw in his head down on an eggshell- or paper, or silk- but not really any other way.

"Well... Stop staring, alright? It's unnerving."

"Whatever you say, Kangaroo," Jack said, though he sat up and started twitching around again.

That was a relief. Jack was always moving. Aster didn't really know what to do when he stopped.

He returned to his painting. He didn't have to think while the brush was moving.

Half an hour later, he realized just what the problem with not thinking was. Because those were snowflakes, absolutely and undeniably, seeming to glitter on a background made up of shades of blue that somehow suggested mountains and open sky. The dark green paint had turned into trees, the conical shape suggesting pines.

None of it was that clear, of course- other than the bloody snowflakes- but Aster had painted it, he knew what it all was. Other people would only see the suggestion of the mountains, the suggestion of the trees.
"That's pretty," Jack said, speaking up now that the painting was clearly finished. Aster rubbed the back of his neck, to smooth out his bristling ruff. "Yeah, well. I'm out of practice."

"This is out of practice?"

"Don't you have a sprog to corral?"

"Jamie's having a slumber party with his friends. Sophie about died when she found out she could keep Des for a full twenty-four hours." Jack picked up his staff, and started fiddling with it. "Sandy said he'd keep an eye on things."

Leaving Jack with nothing to do but fret and watch Aster paint. The winter spirit probably would've been welcome at the slumber party, but, well, that'd be hovering over Desmond. Jack had been trying to stop that all year, and was only gaining a small measure of success now.

"Besides," Jack said, his casual tone completely and utterly false, "It's been a really long time since I've been able to sleep alone."

"You don't sleep."

"You know what I mean."

Yeah, Aster did know. Most mornings when he woke up, he found Jack reading a book or working on his knitting, curled up in Desmond's nest and playing pillow. He'd asked about it once; someone as hyperactive as Jack didn't seem the type to spend a couple hours holding still in one place, doing something as sedentary as reading or knitting. Not even if Desmond wanted to cuddle.

Jack had smiled wryly in response, the blue of his eyes darkening with some difficult emotion. "I do get tired. If I hold still, I recover my energy that much faster. And anyways, not even I can enjoy running around at full tilt all the time. You have to switch things up, fuzzy. Or you end up racing an avalanche off a cliff and parachuting to safety."

"You got some odd winter sports, mate."

"You have no idea."

Aster smiled to himself at the memory. "Well, nothing says you can't frost up the windows over in Burgess. It's still early enough for that."

Jack shook his head, and picked at a bit of frost on his staff. "Helicopter parenting was mentioned. It's better if I'm hands off for the night."

"Eh, he'll be leaping into your arms tomorrow by tea time, just you watch." Aster turned away and studied the sheet of silk stretched out. Now that it was painted, what was he going to do with it? It wouldn't do too badly as a curtain, he supposed... That was an idea. The curtains in Jack and Desmond's room were pretty basic, not at all in keeping with the personality the two had battered into the walls and furniture. It'd take a bit of doing, but curtains down here in the Warren were more for aesthetics than privacy.

Who was there to look? And what was there to see, after all?

"He's just... growing up so fast," Jack said.

Aster about gave himself whiplash, he snapped his head around so fast.
"Mate, you're sounding wistful. Is this good or bad?"

Last time Jack had sounded wistful, he'd just gotten through getting back his memories. He'd talked about his sister, Charity, and at the time no one had thought anything of it.

They'd found him on top of Mt. Everest three days later.

The only reason they'd stayed worried, instead of upset, was Desmond's reaction. He'd only rolled his eyes, muttered something about the Snow Queen warning him, and followed Jack around the rest of the week. North had been worried enough to go see the Snow Queen himself, and had come back reassured.

"I'm not going to vanish again," Jack muttered. "Jeez. It's not like I do that more than once every century."

Aster raised his eyebrows, and the winter spirit amended, "Okay, so more like two or three times a century. Not since I found Desmond, anyways, so almost fifty years since the last one..."

"Not even sure what that was," Aster admitted.

"Oh, sometimes I just..." Jack waved his hand again. "Zone out. For a couple days. And I'm more comfortable where it's cold, right?"

"But Mt. Everest?" Didn't he need to breathe?

"Seemed like a good idea at the time." Jack shrugged, and frosted a circle of grass around him. "Anyways, it's just... Desmond used to be the size of my palm. Now he's attending sleepovers and I just know he'll want to go to school and how will I manage that?"

He paused, and pointed the crook of his staff at Aster's face. "That small... Was Des a preemie?"

Aster didn't smile, though he wanted to. "Naw, mate. That's from when us Pooka used to be shorter and wilder." He tilted his head. "And had multiple kits at a time, instead of just one or two."

"Huh."

The Pooka shrugged one shoulder, and studied the painted silk again. Well, it wasn't so bad, after all. Not what he'd intended, but not so bad. He rather thought Jack and Desmond would like it, though he'd be sure not to ask their opinion. The both of them tended to get wary when offered gifts, a sad, though understandable reaction.

They'd both of them gone their whole lives not getting anything, except from each other. Meant that now, when someone offered, they wanted to know what the catch was, what the giver intended to wheedle out of them.

Apart from Christmas, these days the Guardians just slipped the gifts into place without asking for opinions or permission. Neither Jack nor Desmond got offended, or wary, and the Guardians were able to feel like they were putting a dent into their personal burdens of guilt.

Well, the silk would have to dry, now, and after that he'd have to iron it to seal the paint, then wash out the excess. Only then would it be ready for working into a curtain.

"Stay away from that," he warned one of the Aussie ravens that made the Warren home. "Don't need your beak or claws mucking with it."
The raven croaked dismissively, and preened a few feathers on one wing before flying away.

"So if you're out of practice, by how much?" Jack asked. "Are those snowflakes?"

He took a deep breath, and counted to ten. "Guess so, if you're looking that way. It's really supposed to be an abstract."

"I think they look like snowflakes. And you didn't answer my question."

"Did. One of them, anyways." Aster started packing up his supplies. After a minute, Jack helped him. It wasn't really surprising. "I guess by half a century for this. Other stuff, it varies."

"You can do more than just this?" Jack nodded to the silk.

"Used to be I'd try my hand at 'bout anything artistic. Some stuff worked out better than others." Like the soap carving and candle making. Thankfully those failed efforts were long gone, otherwise he'd still be teased about it even today. Out of sight was out of mind, when you lived as long as spirits did.

"Huh," Jack said again. "Well, I guess you were enjoying yourself."

"Guess I was."

"You're still not getting out of movie night."

Aster sighed. "Damn."

---

Movie night had been started shortly after Jack's second Easter with the Guardians. As threatened, they'd been chivied, one by one, into North's workshop and then kept in place by Desmond threatening to cry if they left.

Phil, the traitor, had set up a media room. Aster didn't know how, and didn't want to know how. It worked- unfortunately- and that meant there were no excuses and no escapes from the bi-monthly sessions.

Mind you, it wasn't all bad. Some of the movies were enjoyable. (Some were absolutely atrocious, and even if getting some obscure, Pink Panther or Austin Powers reference would one day save his life, he was pretty sure he'd rather die.) It wasn't like Jack showed more adult movies- which could be sorted into piles of "so-called romance", "so-called comedy", "so-called action", "stuff blowing up" and "bad plot trying to cover for all the sex".

It was just, well... It was one thing to get dragged out, not entirely unwillingly, to watch a movie with Jack and Desmond and no one else. It was another thing to have to sit next to Nick and Sandy while they muttered questions (Nick) or had every thought showing in golden sand over their head (Sandy). And there was no point in trying to sit next to Tooth; she had to constantly mutter instructions to her fairies. The sheila might have been able to split her concentration enough to follow the movie plot at the same time, but Aster wasn't.

Jack was no help at all. He stuck Desmond on whoever looked most willing to bolt- typically Aster- and then spent the entire movie floating over everyone's head. He'd proclaimed himself "Master of the remote control" when the whole thing started, and since at the time no one had known how to work the damn thing, no one had argued.

They really should have argued. The power had gone to the kid's head.
He absolutely wasn't amused by that, not at all.

The problem, Aster thought an hour later, wasn't Jack. Or not entirely Jack. More his reaction to Jack.

The thing was, Aster was a Pooka. An animal. An intelligent animal, but still, at the end of the day his instincts ruled more often than not. He was also a warrior, trained to be just this side of paranoid and always watching, evaluating, using instinct and experience.

The other thing was, Jack did things. Without thinking about them, clearly, because it'd just become habit. Probably because of Desmond, but just as likely because Jack had spent the better part of three centuries alone but for animals.

So Jack had picked up habits. Ways of moving, of standing, of looking at people. Ways that resonated with Aster's instincts.

The graceful stride, the way he'd crouch, the way he'd go from utterly still to a ferocious burst of motion...

It was almost exactly the way an adult Pooka would move.

And that was the problem. It'd been... a long time since Aster had seen another Pooka, let alone someone that screamed Pooka to his instincts and was attractive to boot.

There was another problem, of course- Desmond. He was a kit, one old enough to start ranging outside of the nest, and his presence made Aster's instincts scream.

Children were highly valued among the Pooka. Even if there was only one adult left. Especially, actually.

Jack moved like an adult Pooka, and had a kit old enough not to need constant nursing.

It... hadn't caused any issues yet. But it might.

Pooka didn't have seasons, as such, not the same way as Earth animals did. If a Pooka was alone, or with a nest of nursing mothers, he had as much interest in sex as the nursing mothers- none at all. It was only when the kits didn't need constant care, or when there weren't any kits, that the hormones started rushing around and procreating- and the act of procreating- became a month-long obsession, twice a year every year.

His instincts didn't care that Jack wasn't his species, that Jack was male and couldn't carry kits, or that Jack wasn't interested. His instincts only cared that Jack moved like an adult Pooka, and didn't need to invest all his energy into his current kit anymore.

Aster stared at the painted silk, and groaned. He hadn't wanted this. He'd spent all his years on Earth prior to this... He'd accepted that he was the last, that he'd never have a romantic partner. He'd never become interested in humans that way, no matter how long he'd watched them. Life as a monk hadn't seemed so bad.

And then Jack moved into the Warren, hadn't he?

Aster hadn't noticed when he'd first... But he noticed now.

Jack was too scrawny, too short, in Pooka terms all but bald. He was always cold, in constant
disarray, and smiled too damn much. Among animals, bared teeth weren't generally a friendly sign.

He also had the most vibrant blue eyes Aster had ever seen. His hair was soft, and to Aster, at least, an exotic color. Pooka generally hadn't been white, at least not all over. The closest any of them had come was a silvery blue shade, like his deceased mate.

Aster had tried to cool his hormones down by remembering Hoata, his mate, but... It hadn't really helped. He knew, he knew, that Hoata would have wanted him to be happy. He knew Hoata wouldn't be insulted that Aster was looking for... Not just for sex, but romance, intimacy, not only with someone else but with someone from another species.

To be honest, his mate would've laughed and laughed and laughed, until Aster had edged away and started talking about soothing drinks and jackets that helped you hug yourself.

So thinking about Hoata hadn't helped at all.

Except that he felt, in a way, like he'd been given permission.

Not that it mattered. No matter how lovely Jack’s eyes, or how soft, how beautiful his hair, no matter how good he smelt or how he moved or how many times he smiled at Aster, invited Aster out to join him and Desmond (it wasn't courting, it was friendship, it wasn't courting, and but he couldn't help but look for what wasn't there, what couldn't be there)...

It wasn't going to happen.

Aster traced a careful claw over one snowflake painted on silk, then clenched his fist and pulled away. He'd just... have to control himself when his season came around. It wouldn't be too hard. Pooka, unlike animals, weren't mindless. Just... a bit oversensitive to the touch, the scent, the sound, of whoever they were trying to court.

Jack probably wouldn't notice a thing.

Chapter End Notes

This was a bit more of a summary of how things stand than I really wanted, but that's how it worked out. Oh, well.

Silk painting is a lovely, challenging art that takes a lot of talent to become good at. Since I have all the artistic ability of a drunk duck, I know absolutely nothing (that you can't learn from watching YouTube videos before getting bored with talk of technique and how to hold the brushes properly and promptly switch to watching Jeff Foxworthy make fun of himself, that is.)

It's the weekend! And we've hit one hundred pages and shot right past! And a little under nine thousand words from fifty thousand. Yay!

Also-also. Question. It's not all going to be emotional challenges. What are your thoughts towards original character villains, such as bringing in General Russia or Baba Yaga or the Krampus? (What, after all, do the Guardians safeguard the children FROM, anyways?)
Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack bowed to the strange spirit watching him. It was Japanese, he knew, by the forked tail; all Japanese cat-spirits had that mark, whatever their mortal counterparts looked like.

"Aisatsu ni," he said, and smiled very carefully, teeth hidden behind his lips. Higurashi-sama had beaten that into him. It was kind of nice to be around the Guardians, because none of them thought a toothy smile was prelude to a fight. Not even Bunny. Heck, Tooth loved his smiles, even though it'd taken her an entire year to get the 'look with your eyes, not with your hands' rule.

"Many greetings," the spirit said in reply. It was even more animalistic than Bunny or Desmond; very obviously, though it was the size of a human, it couldn't stand up on its hind legs. It was a tabby, in black and gray, and in Jack's opinion, was rather handsome. "You speak the language of the sun well, for a gaijin."

Jack kept smiling, even though he knew what gaijin meant. "I have a good sensei. If it is not so rude to ask, what brings you to America?"

The cat twitched both tail tips. "One cannot travel to other lands?"

"Not at all what I meant!" Jack bowed again. "Rather, I meant what sort of things interests you here? I am an American spirit myself- perhaps I might be able to answer questions, or suggest some interesting diversions?"

The cat narrowed its eyes, then twitched its whiskers and started to purr. "How very considerate. I was invited to join hunting season with my cousins, Cougar and Bobcat. I came early, to admire the land."

Okay... Could be worse, but this wasn't a neko-youkai, it was the Neko-youkai. "I'm afraid Burgess isn't hunting equipped," Jack said. "Nothing but sparrows and rabbits, barely any deer-"

"I like rabbits," the Neko-youkai said. "But it is not yet time to prowl with Cougar and Bobcat."

"Have you seen the usual tourist sites yet?" Jack asked. "The Grand Canyon, Mt. Rushmore, that sort of thing?"

"I have. The one is dry, the other is big."

"Been to Vegas yet?"

The cat's eyes glittered. "That is near the canyon you Americans think so grand, is it not?"

Jack bowed, and shrugged once he was upright. "Will you be staying long, do you think? Bobcat and Cougar might be annoyed when you outhunt them."

The cat chirped, and purred louder. "You think I can hunt better than they?"

"Neko-sama, I have seen your mortal cousins at their work, and Cougar and Bobcat's mortal cousins. I know who is the more dangerous." Cats, after all, particularly housecats let outside, killed for fun. He liked cats, he did- but only when they weren't murdering the local songbirds just because they
were bored.

The cat smiled, the sort of way only a cat could manage, all slowly curving lips and teeth barely visible but very much there. "What flattery you offer. But I cannot keep you forever. It is late, and I grow tired. Is there anywhere one might sleep in comfort?"

Jack pointed towards the waterfall. "At the top of the cliff there," he said. "It will give you a lovely view of the countryside, and there are sheltering rocks should you wish shade, and grass to lie on if you'd rather bask."

"Such kindness." The cat blinked at him, and stretched out one foreleg. "You have many thanks from me. In return, I shall leave your son be."

He couldn't get chills, but- stiff, yes, there was a moment where he might as well have been a statue because he literally could not move. "You, ah, know about Desmond?" he asked.

"Mm. Cougar and Bobcat warned me of him, and of you, Fubuki-san." The cat twitched its ears at him, and laughed. "I have no wish for ice in my fur. May your afternoon be pleasant."

Jack didn't move until after the cat had vanished. Fubuki, fabuki- snowstorm? That was new. Okay, Jack, focus. Cats were going to be hunting- but the Neko-youkai had said it wouldn't go after Desmond.

Didn't mean the others wouldn't.

H'oh boy. Wasn't this just fun?

"Time to hide in the Warren," he decided. It wouldn't be too long. Max, two months, into summer even. Besides, it was long past time since he harassed Bunny about the comic book thing. Seriously, who hadn't read Superman and Batman and Spiderman and Iron Man, Thor, Captain America...?

Well, besides North, Sandy, and Tooth. But they had gone out on their own, once Jack had talked to them about the comics, and looked into it. (North had, briefly, called Sandy 'Wonder Woman' for a few weeks, at least until Sandy had gotten some unspecified but surely hilarious revenge.

(Or threatened to tell Tooth all about North's crush on her. You know, either or.)

Bunny was the only one who still didn't know who Superman was, why Iron Man was seven different kinds of awesome, or where Gotham was.

He did know what kind of sounds Jack made when he heard about the new Man of Steel movie being made for that year, but that was at least partially an accident.

Jack hadn't meant to squeal quite that high pitched.

Apparently the sound was painful to Pooka ears.

He sighed, and floated across the surface of the lake towards the old den. After some thought, he'd decided it was time to move a few of the more important personal artifacts to the Warren. It wasn't exactly secure, the old den, being nothing more than some rocks and some brambles to keep inquisitive people away.

It was astonishing nothing had happened to the things he'd stored there, yet.

Getting rid of the brambles was easy enough. They didn't do too well with sub-arctic cold, especially
not when they were gearing up for the summer. In minutes, Jack was able to hook his staff on some of the worst of the mass, and pull and lift and break frozen branches and get into the back of the den.

The spaceship was exactly how he'd left it.

It was dark, this far back. The brambles overhead hadn't been affected by the cold. They were as solid and leafy as ever, and blocked out the light. Even so, the metal of the spacecraft seemed to shimmer, almost glow.

Jack shoved it out ahead of him. Actually in the sunlight, there was no question, it glowed. Very subtly, but that wasn't just reflection going on.

It was small enough that he could pick it up and tuck it under one arm. So he did. It was light enough he didn't have to strain to keep it up, and bulky enough to make carrying the thing awkward. Better than leaving it behind. Also, since everything else was stored in the spaceship, it meant he didn't have to try juggling half a dozen things.

Not that he had half a dozen things to relocate. Just the spaceship, the blanket that had come with it, a dreamcatcher Raven had made him a ways back, and his wood carving stuff. Way back, he'd used rocks and ice, but then he'd stumbled across a box full of professional equipment in a dumpster, of all places, and... Well, the carrying case might have been broken, but in a way that was easily fixed, and everything inside had been just perfect.

At most, the whole thing weighed just under a hundred pounds, nowhere near difficult for Jack to carry. Heck, he'd seen Phil and Bunny, at various points, lift things several times their own bodyweight without much effort. He wasn't at that point, mind you, but he could manage a respectable enough showing.

He whistled to the Wind, and jumped onto her back. She carried him up and over the trees to Burgess.

Jack ended up leaving the spaceship up on the library's roof. Just because he was invisible to most people, didn't mean the spaceship wasn't. He suspected he'd startled a few people, flying over the town with it. They'd probably dismiss it, or submit the story to the local tabloid for a few dollars. Either way, not his problem.

He slipped his way in through the automatic front doors, and grinned when several people looked over at the, ahem, malfunctioning doors in some confusion. He didn't show up on camera, but he did make motion detectors go crazy. One of these days he was going to have to play with that. Get the museum to update its security. The stuff they had at the moment was pathetic.

The kids were exactly where they'd said they would be, quietly researching volcanoes, and the best way to make a paper mache one that'd explode on command. Jack had offered to help, then offered Bunny's services- without consulting the Pooka before hand, which might've caused a problem- but both offers had been rejected. The kids wanted to do it all themselves.

Jamie and the twins had obviously been relegated to researching the mythology of volcanoes, how they formed, and where in the world the known volcanoes were. The rest of the group were getting the librarians' help in photocopying pictures, or taking notes on the best way to make fake lava.

Desmond was sitting at their table, working his way slowly through what looked like a history textbook. Jack absolutely didn't wince. Textbooks were painful for him to read. After all, he'd watched the formation of the country and everything, and the way the books had it, everything was boring.
That absolutely wasn't true. Sure, it might've been tough, but it'd been exciting. Lots more civil wars back then. People fought over where state borders should have been, to bridges over rivers, to getting rid of forests that not even the Natives wanted the land was so useless.

Definitely not safe, but a lot more exciting than the history books made out.

"Hey, kids," he said, and grinned.

The whole table looked up and grinned, though only Desmond ran to hug him. The invisible friend thing probably wasn't the best idea in the world- certainly he understood a bit better now why the others didn't hang around their believers overmuch- but he absolutely did not mind being seen or heard.

Desmond butted his head against Jack's stomach, and ground his teeth together in a purr. "Papa, were you there when they signed the declaration of independence?"

"Huh? Well, sort of. Territorial dispute with what's his name from England, but yeah, I was in the area. Why?"

"Do you know what order they all signed in?"

Jack blinked, and raised an eyebrow at the table of believers. "Do I want to know? Top to bottom, I'd guess."

Jamie turned to Claude. "Yup. So getting Jack to help us with history papers."

Then he slid a piece of paper across the table, in Jack's direction.

"I see what this is," Jack said, and half carried, half dragged Desmond back to his seat. Little brat was getting heavy. "This is usage, that's what it is, just because I'm an old man and like hearing the sound of my own voice. Wallabies?"

"Crop circles," Jamie muttered.

"Oh. Okay." Jack grinned, and pocketed the newspaper article. "Thanks, James. This is awesome."

"Time to go, Papa?" Desmond asked.

"Yeah. Oh, kids. Don't go into the forest from now until September." Jack grimaced. "And spread the word that you saw a cougar out there, okay?"

"Something up?" Pippa asked.

"Couple spirits that don't think twice about playing rough with humans." It wouldn't keep everyone out, but the people who would go in would expect to see a giant cat lunging for them, and would hopefully have tranq guns or something for protection. There really wasn't much else he could do.

"We'll tell our parents, and the police, and animal control," one of the twins promised. "Don't worry, Jack."

"Okay then," he said, and smiled. "You guys keep having fun. We'll see you later."

The kids mumbled their goodbyes, and turned back to their work. Desmond followed Jack out the door- prompting another round of staring because, apparently, there wasn't anything there- and then held his arms up once they were in the parking lot.
"Are we flying? Or going to see Bunny?"

"Kiddo, you are staying far, far away from Burgess until I know the kitty-cats have cleared out." He helped Desmond get up on his back, a bit easier said than done when the kid's legs were rabbit shaped, then hopped up into the air.

"Is that my ship?" Desmond asked.

"Figure it's safer in our room."

"You're going to ask Bunny for help with it."

Jack grinned, and then headed for the school. At this time of day, no one would notice a random hole opening up, then closing without a mark left behind.

The trip to the Warren was pretty much exactly like always- at least until they reached the end of the tunnel. Someone or something had splashed what looked like an entire bucket's worth of paint from the Color River, onto the wall of the tunnel. It was still wet.

Jack set the spaceship down on the ground, and readied his staff. Anything down here in the Warren couldn't be dangerous- unless you counted the occasional toad- unlike the rest of Australia. Bunny hadn't exactly wanted his home to be a deathtrap even before he started doing the egg thing, apparently, but once he'd gotten guests, there'd been something of a cleaning blitz.

It hadn't escaped Jack's notice that several trees had been quietly moved to the surface. Considering what little he knew about eucalyptus trees involved heavy branches falling on people's heads, or explosive sap, well...

Jack was just glad he hadn't had to say anything to Bunny.

Desmond twitched his paws in Jack's hair, and giggled. "It's nothing bad, I don't think," he said.

"Yeah? Let's go find out."

They stepped out of the tunnel- and then had to stop, and stare.

A multi-colored elf bolted past, wailing at the top of its lungs, bell jangling.

A bright blue and orange Bunnymund charged after it on all fours, snarling.

"Is... that the elf... you pushed into the river a year ago?" Jack managed to ask.

"Looks like," Desmond agreed.

"Think it startled Bunny?"

"Looks like."

"Should we rescue it?"

Desmond sniffled, and rested his chin on Jack's shoulder. "It followed me home, Papa." Jack could just see, at the corner of his eye, Desmond's eyes go big and liquid. "Can I keep it?"

"You're a menace," Jack said, every inch the proud father.

"Go keep Bunny from eating my new pet."
Next chapter, I promise, action. Or ramping up to action, depending on how much talking needs done. We'll see. I'll give you a hint- cheese becomes a weapon of war! Insert evil laugh here.

All of your responses are lovely and that's why I'm updating so much so quickly. And I'm glad you all support the idea of more spirit OCs as villains. It promises to be very, very fun.
Jack flipped through several channels, and stretched out on the couch. Phil had done a very good job on North's media room; not only was it fully tricked out for watching movies, there was also a very nice cable package. Sometimes he wondered just how it was paid for, but it was probably the same way Jack got money. In his case, the Wind found money people dropped, and if it was in banknotes, brought it to him. If there was a sizable amount of coin, the Wind dropped him face first on it.

Before meeting Aleksia and Ilmari, he wouldn't have been able to get money exchanged from one country to the other, or keep it current, or even have a good place to keep it. Those two, however, were able to do... things, that meant Jack got banknotes of current denomination, for whatever country he wanted to visit.

Mostly that meant American or Canadian dollars, sometimes Mexican pesos if he was going to bring that part of the country a cold snap.

He shook his head, and frowned at the show currently on TV. The cooking channel? What was the point of those things? How dramatic and exciting could you make cooking? And it wasn't even like you could eat the food at the end, unless you somehow managed to be a super-chef yourself and copy the recipe exactly.

Jack rolled his eyes and flipped to the next channel.

Desmond flattened his ears against his head. "Not CSI. It makes Buttercup nervous."

"Buttercup?"

The kid sniffed at his pet's hat. "It doesn't fit?"

Jack flipped to the next channel. "Keep trying."

"But you've already rejected Tulip, and Blueberry, and Cherry Freeze, and George."

"That thing is not a George." Discovery channel. Discovery was a good name.

Bunny passed by the open door- again- ranting at the top of his lungs- still. Something about better leash control. Jack craned his neck to see if he could catch sight of the cranky rabbit again. Blue and orange were not his colors. But absolutely hilarious.

Desmond giggled as whatever show was on returned from commercial. "Stay here," he said.

"Sure, sure." Jack frowned at the door. Should he close it?

"What about Tory?"

"No, Des."

"Butterfingers?"

"Did you just make an Iron Man movie reference? Because I am proud. So very proud."
Desmond giggled again.

"Cool, we get to torture yogurt!"

"What?" Jack whipped around to look at the TV so fast, he fell off the couch and landed stomach first on Desmond and Butterfingers. Kid and elf both yelped, and squirmed out from under him.

North loomed in the doorway, and raised his eyebrows at the sight. "Desmond, is very lucky day for you. Bunny agrees you may keep elf."

"His name's Butterfingers," Desmond said, and smiled. "If I get two more, I can have a full lab."

"You'd need a yeti for Jarvis," Jack said, and stood up. "Why are they torturing yogurt? Who are they?"

North shook his head. "Perhaps you should watch less TV. Will rot brain. Come, we must speak. Others have been sent for."

"Guessing not because of Des' new pet."

They trailed down the hallway to the sitting room Jack had mentally dubbed 'boardroom one', since that was where most of the talking happened. Not that they had needed to talk about their duties much, after Pitch had been frozen in Jack's pond. Even after the Boogieman had thawed out, he'd kept out of sight.

Most of the time, their biweekly meetings, held before movie night, turned into an old lady's gossip session. After movie night, it sometimes turned into a drinking game with poker. Jack never participated; for one, he had a small child to get to bed and for another, his alcohol tolerance would kill anyone else.

Was it a tolerance when the alcohol didn't affect him?

Jack shook his head, and frowned. "North. Is this something Desmond should hear?"

North waved them into the room. "Is not pleasant, but not scary, I am thinking. Up to father."

He hesitated, but in the end, gestured Desmond towards one of the overstuffed chairs. He hopped up onto the window sill- more of a picture window ledge, pillows everywhere- and stared at the window, frost crawling over the glass just from his proximity.

Bunny joined them a minute later, and stopped dead when he saw the elf. "Desmond," he said, low and cranky.

"His name's Butterfingers." Desmond clutched the elf around the neck, and flattened his ears down against his neck. "Papa and Dedushka both say its okay."

Jack raised his eyebrows. "North's a grandpa?"

"Mine." Desmond managed to look sulky, stubborn, and cute, the way only a small child could. He tightened his grip on the elf, and looked up at Bunny. He made big eyes at the older Pooka. "Also mine?"

Bunny opened and closed his mouth, then clenched his eyes shut and growled. "Fine. But you're keeping it away from the egglets, you understand?"

"But- but it's the Easter Elf. It has to help you prepare for Easter."
"It's not the Easter Elf and it's staying well away from the googies, you get me?"

"But look at him! You're making him all sad!"

Bunny spluttered, eyes bugged out and crazy looking.

"Oh, give over, Sir Fluffs-a-lot," Jack said. "Do you know what North wants to talk about?"

Bunny scratched at one shoulder, and flakes of dried paint drifted down to the carpet. "No idea, but he's used the aurora."

Which meant it was somewhat more serious, considering North's usual method of getting everyone together involved portals, gangs of elves ordered to be as annoying as possible, and sometimes fruitcake.

"Oh, joy," Jack muttered.

It wasn't much longer before the two missing guardians filed in. Jack waved at them. Bunny didn't look away from the Easter Elf. Any more scowl-y, and he'd be giving the poor thing a death glare.

Tooth and Sandy waved back, then both turned questioning expressions on Bunny.

"leave the poor guy alone, he got a mascot. Or Desmond got a pet. Both." Jack propped his feet up along the vertical section of the window frame. "Both works."

"That thing is not a mascot," Bunny muttered.

"Apparently denial's not just a river in Egypt."

"What the- why do you keep saying that? What does it even mean? Egypt's got the Nile. It's not denial. Didn't you pay attention to your geography?"


Bunny stood up, the fur on his shoulders bristling. "I am not the Guardian of Befuddlement!"

Jack looked over at the doorway, and grinned at North. "Makes you want to never leave the room, doesn't it?"

North grinned back, and took his seat near the fire. He pointed at Bunny, then at Bunny's chair, and tilted his head.

Bunny snapped his teeth, once, but sat down.

"Called everyone here for two things. One- Jack, I do not know if you are aware, but normally we deal with..." North waved one hand in a vague, 'searching for words' manner. "There are spirits not so kind to adult or child. Very backward, very..."

"Cannibalistic?" Jack asked. "Wendigo, Jotun..." He shuddered. If he never met another Jotun again it'd be too soon. "Yeah, I've dealt with a few that type before. Makes sense you guys would too."

Bunny muttered something that sounded like "Jenny Greeneyes", his expression murderous.

North nodded. "Yes, her too. So, first I will say simply that the weather in Russia, it is being strange. If Jack, you wandered more, I might wonder if you were making mischief. There is... snow, at night."
"It's... May."

"Ja, it is, but there is the snow. It does not stay, it melts, but it is there all the same."

Jack shook his head. "I'll talk to the Snow Queen... She's the one who keeps tabs on all the winter spirits."

Tooth leaned forward in her seat. "Jack, what does the Snow Queen actually do? There are all sorts of stories..."

Sandy nodded, and a quick pantomime played out over his head. Jack didn't bother watching; he knew just what kind of stories that got spread.

"Uh, Aleksia is kind of... the third or fourth person to go by that?" He shrugged. "She... mostly she watches. Other winter spirits. Something she calls doorways- by the way? Magic beans? Apparently those are a thing, a real thing, you don't want to plant those flowers cottontail. I am under strict orders to flash freeze any I find, so." He shrugged again.

"Used to be she'd have to grab people. Men, mostly. From small villages, or small towns. The would-be serial killer types, who'd take apart their neighbors and try to... make things out of them."

He couldn't stop the shudder. After a moment, he looked over at Desmond, but the kid was very focused on the Easter Elf. Well, Desmond did spend at least one week a year with Aleksia. He probably knew all of what Jack was saying already. Still, no need to get graphic.

"Anyways, she'd... She'd fix them, I guess you could say. So they learnt... humanity. Or if they couldn't be fixed? She'd... deal with them. General Winter, do you know him?"

North nodded, and made a face. "Very argumentative."

"Aleksia was new. He escaped, became the General. Anyways, that's what she mostly does. Others were, well, not as nice. Stabbing people in the heart with ice to freeze their souls or whatever, sticking glass in their eyes so they'd only see the evil in the world. That sort of thing. Aleksia's much better."

The four Guardians nodded. "Then would you mind speaking with Snow Queen soon?" North asked. "Would go myself, but you know her better."

"Sure, no problem. End of this week at the latest, depending on the second piece of news."

North nodded, and sighed. "Well. Have you heard of Bluebeard?"

Jack hadn't. And to be honest, he wished he'd kept that ignorance. Halfway through the story, Desmond crawled into his lap, but at least the kid wasn't shaking.

Bluebeard, apparently, was a spirit with a particular hobby of marrying human women, setting them up to enter a forbidden room- filled, it had to be said, with the corpses of his previous brides- then killing them once they'd entered the room. He'd been 'killed' several times, and each time had come back with a different kind of job. He'd been a king once, then a noble, then a rich merchant- this time, apparently, he was an actor.

"When killed, he goes away for one or two decades. Sometimes as many as four." North tugged on his beard, and sighed. "But whatever kills him, when he comes back, he is immune to, cannot even be scratched. First was knives, then was clubs, then drowning... Has been long time, is long list now."
"And you can't just lock him up," Bunny said. He huffed, and folded his arms. "Each of us has tried, over the years."

Centuries, probably. Jack nodded slowly. "I... How'd you lock him up before? Ropes, rooms?"

They nodded. Well, that figured. "What about freezing?"

"Room of ice-" North began, but Jack held up one hand to cut him off.

"I mean lock him in a block of ice. Completely solid."

They all stared at him, even the tie-dye elf. Jack ducked his head, and scratched at the frost covering his face.

"No," Tooth said slowly. "No, we've never done that before. It wouldn't kill him, I don't think..."

Sandy tapped a finger against his chair arm, and showed a man freezing to death, being strangled, and then nodded as the man figure stood up and walked away.

"Could not die, would be trapped," North murmured.

Bunny continued to stare at Jack. "Frostbite... You do realize, what you're suggesting..."

Jack stroked Desmond's ears. The kid looked up at him, and sighed.

"It's alright Papa," he murmured. "I understand."

Damn, but he was lucky to have this kid. "I've done that sort of thing before," Jack said, and then looked up. "Some people shouldn't be allowed to live. They won't get brought to justice. And then they go walking in a winter forest." His grin had nothing of joy or pleasure in it.

It hadn't happened recently, not since police procedures had improved. So, forty years? Thirty-five? About there.

He didn't like it. But someone had to do it.

After a few minutes, someone cleared their throat. He looked up, and realized it was Bunny.

"Okay, so you can lock Bluebeard up good and tight, and he might stay locked up long enough for us to come up with something permanent."

"Glaciers are pretty damn permanent, if done right," Jack muttered. Antarctica, especially. Right down at the south pole, no way to go east or west... And down about a mile and a half.

"Global warming."

"Please don't remind me."

This time North cleared his throat. "But how do we capture Bluebeard in first place? He is learning all of our tricks."

"Not Papa's," Desmond pointed out. "Right?"

Jack grinned, and ruffled the kid's fur. "So, do you know this guy's habits? Because I actually do have an idea for a weapon. Oh. And do any of you have a cannon?"
"Like camera?"

"Like a field mortar."

"Ye-es," North said. He narrowed his eyes. "But no cannon balls."

"That's fine. Actually, that works just great. Also, do any of you know the best place to find stale Edam cheese?"

Chapter End Notes

So apparently "Updates might be a bit slower" means "absolutely no change in the update schedule and oh, I have another idea for a fanfic, it's going to be another epic". Cue headdesk. (Bunny, dear, get your plotbunny minions under control or I'll do something horrific to you. Or Jack. Both.)

Bluebeard was supposed to be a joke villain, until I read up on his myth. NOT a joke. Jack's response is going to be completely, totally appropriate. 100%.

The Edam cheese will be used in a historical context. The Mythbusters not only proved it was possible, but so did the history books. And finally- yes. In one episode, the Mythbusters did, in fact, torture yogurt. It makes sense in context.
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tooth hovered over his shoulder, and watched closely as Jack packed down the gunpowder, then readied the cheese. "This seems overly complicated," she said, though her lips were twitching, though she wasn't quite smiling.

"He's claiming to be from freaking Uruguay. Before it was for fun. Now it's poetic justice."

"And where did you learn how to ready a cannon?" Tooth asked.

"Oh, come on. I was born before the freaking civil war. And I'm a guy. Explosions, guns... It's a cliché for a reason." Well, more like he had an insatiable curiosity. Once he'd figured out how everything worked, he'd kind of lost interest. Then the world had sprung semi-automatics on him, and drive by shootings, and there'd been a few blizzards that decade.

Cannons being pointed at sandbag targets- or a deserving, murderous spirit- were fun. The little handheld pistols were occasionally fun, but only if they were being pointed at targets, not people.

Jack shook his head, and checked the fuse. "Okay, all it needs now is to be lit."

"And aimed," North reminded him. "Bunny will have Bluebeard in position soon."

Jack's grin was somewhat sharp, but then, he had good reason, didn't he? Bluebeard was looking for wife number two already. They'd found him just a little too late for Alice Millwright, a would-be actress who'd been charmed by the exotic, piratical killer.

According to the story, Bluebeard was on his fifth wife before he was killed. None of the Guardians wanted it to get that far.

And Jack, personally, wanted justice for Alice. Bluebeard's magic made it seem as if she'd never even existed. Eventually, her parents might remember they'd had a daughter, but there would be no police investigation, no obituary, nothing.

Unless Bluebeard was stopped. Then people would remember Alice. They'd never find out the truth, but they'd remember her.

Jack studied the cannon, and then concentrated. The ice coating the metal began to shift, moving towards his hands, then up over his wrists, then onto his hoodie. The metal barrel- and, more importantly, the gunpowder inside- was left dry.

"Ow," he muttered, and rubbed his forehead.

"I didn't know you could do that," Tooth murmured.

"Hurts. Worst headache ever." He closed his eyes, and pressed both hands to his temples. Oh, that was... Somewhat helpful. The pressure eased the spikes stabbing into his brain, at least.

Tooth rubbed at his back, then stopped. Tapped his shoulder. "Here they come..."

Jack grunted, and cautiously opened his eyes. Sunlight bad, head hurts... Right, focus. Well, well, so that was Bluebeard? "He's not ugly," Jack murmured. "And... Where's Bunny?"
Bluebeard's hair wasn't blue, whatever the name suggested; rather it was the color of a raven's wing. His outfit managed to be current and stylish while still suggesting something a few centuries older, and the knives at his belt would only be seen by spirit eyes. He had multiple earrings—three in one ear, four in the other—and a single tattoo of a rose dripping blood on his bicep.

He was talking to a young, attractive woman. There was something familiar about her, but Jack honestly couldn't put his finger on it. She was tall, probably six feet without the ankle-breaking stiletto heels she was somehow walking on, and very... fit. Toned, Jack mentally corrected himself, and scowled at how short the woman's skirt was. He'd been raised Puritan. Granted, he'd moved with the times, but something about this woman made him want to stick her in his mother's old dress, the one that covered all skin from chin, to wrists, to ground.

Tooth giggled, and leaned on his shoulder. "Jack, who do you think Bluebeard's talking to?"

"What?" Jack looked closer at the woman. Okay, yeah, the hair was an odd shade of blonde that somehow suggested a blue-gray hue, and the woman had green eyes, and those were Bunny's tattoos...

"But he's a guy!" Jack said, squeaking only a lot. Sure, Desmond turned into a human whenever he wanted, so presumably Bunny could too, but—that was a woman! And the clothes made it very obvious!

"Shape shifter," North pointed out. "Now, Sandy—yes, there is signal, everyone in resort sleeps."

Which was the only reason this would work, after all. As far as the humans would be concerned, they wouldn't remember sleeping, or cannons going off, or the woman Bluebeard had walked off with. The spirit would disappear without a trace.

Jack glowered at the pair, and then aimed the cannon at Bluebeard. The man had apparently been killed by cannonballs of all other kinds, including stone, but never cheese.

Bluebeard leaned towards Bunny, who laughed and stepped back. Flirtatiously.

"Give Bunny the signal," Jack said. His shoulders were so tense it was amazing his muscles hadn't snapped yet.

"Ja, Ja," North said, and used one of his cutlasses to flash light down at the transformed Pooka.

Down below, Bunny laughed and took a few steps to the side. Bluebeard automatically turned to keep an eye on... her... and so had his back to the Guardians up on the hill.

Jack struck a match and lit the fuse. It was a ten second line; he backed up enough that the recoil wouldn't be able to hurt him, then folded his arms and waited.

The cannon went off. The cheese cannonball didn't break up the way Jack had, briefly, feared it would. Rather, only a little slower than an iron cannonball would, it shot across the distance and hit Bluebeard between the shoulder blades.

The spirit was thrown forward several feet, hit the ground hard, and didn't move.

"Oh, nice shot!" Tooth flew up into the air, and gestured from the cannon to Bluebeard's crumpled form. "Let's get down there."

"Will have yeti come and put cannon away." North patted the cannon's base, and tossed a snow globe over his shoulder. "Jack?"
"Yeah," he said, and rolled his staff between his fingers. "Let's go."

It didn't take very long to get down to where Bluebeard had crumpled. Jack paused long enough to toe a fragment of cheese. Well, it'd done its job, and stale as it was, it wouldn't have been fit for human consumption. Or anything's consumption.

Well, maybe a Wendigo. If anything deserved to be poisoned, it was one of those beasts.

Sandy had already tied Bluebeard up in golden chains by the time they reached the downed spirit. He didn't look like he'd be moving any time soon; there was an odd crook in his spine where the cheese cannonball had hit. Not a lethal injury, but certainly not something he'd get up and walk off.

Jack smirked at the prone form, then looked over at Bunny. "What. The fuck?"

Bunny smirked at him, the expression freakishly familiar on the unfamiliar face. "It worked, didn't it?" She- no, he- pointed one toe, and scowled at his feet. "Can't imagine how humans actually stand these things. Right uncomfortable."

"Okay, we've got Bluebeard. Would you turn back now?"

Bunny looked up, and raised his eyebrows. "Problem?"

"B- Just turn back now!" No way in hell was he going to call anyone who looked like that 'bunny', name or no name. That way just led to trouble.

"Why?" Bunny asked, and folded his arms. Jack really, really wished he hadn't done that.

"Because it's weird."

"Not like you mind Desmond turning human."

"Desmond's five, and doesn't look like a stripper."

Bunny gaped at him, and then just, closed down. Expression, body language, everything. Utter blank. "Fine."

Jack grabbed a handful of hair, and yanked. "I didn't mean it like that," he muttered.

"And exactly how did you mean it?" Bunny asked. He was drumming his fingers against his arm, probably in replacement for pinning his ears back and thumping a foot.

"Puritan, the religion," Jack said, and pointed to himself.

"Wha- really?"

The other Guardians stopped pretending to ignore the argument. "You know, is making sense," North said, and stroked his beard.

"Yeah, well," Jack muttered, and shrugged. "Just- Bunny, could you please, please change back? Or at least put on pants?"

"Got an issue with a lady's ankles?" Bunny asked, but he sounded amused. Then he pulled off his shirt.

Well. Apparently Pooka didn't wear bras.
Jack wailed and slapped his hands over his face. "What're you doing?"

"Clothes don't transform with me. Thought you knew that."

"We're in public!"

"Just us, mate. No one to see."

Jack growled, and hunched his shoulders. "Puritan," he muttered again. He didn't know if it was a protest, or the last gasp before giving up and accepting the insanity.

North and Sandy were the only ones to keep him company as he put the finishing touches on Bluebeard's prison. Tooth and Bunny had both left after the first hour, because of the cold. Tooth was used to more tropical temperatures, and as for Bunny, Jack suspected any number of old injuries tightened up and ached when the temperature dipped too low. They did when it got humid, anyways, and he thought the cold did the same.

What did he know, he didn't have that problem. Injuries, sure, but he was always cold. No way to tell if they'd stiffen up or not.

Bluebeard was already buried, in a new iceberg very near the absolute center of Antarctica. He'd been dropped down a crevasse first. Jack had filled it in with ice, and was now in the process of creating a small mountain on top.

Only when the mountain was the same approximate size as Aleksia's castle, did he step back. The exhaustion hit immediately, as bad as the heat wave of '92. That summer had nearly killed him; he'd spent two and a half weeks at the bottom of his lake, Desmond hadn't let him get out of sight for the rest of the year, and the winter after he'd dragged the entire time.

He shook his head, and accepted the help North and Sandy both offered. They each grabbed one arm, and held him up between the two of them. If one or the other had tried to pick him up, he would've fought, but this? This he could live with.

"I could probably use a nap," he gasped. Come on. Already?

"We can go to my Workshop," North offered. "Have many spare rooms."

"If you... could just open a portal to the Warren?" He should've said his lake. Why hadn't he said his lake? "That'd be great. Thanks."

He thought North nodded. He knew that a portal opened up, and the Warren was just ahead through there, and why was he going to the Warren instead of his lake?

He always slept in his lake.

Except he didn't, did he? Sometimes he didn't get back in time. Last year- last year he'd woken up in the Warren.

It'd been nice.

Jack stumbled forward, and the heat hit him like a slap with a wet towel to the face. To his entire body. He gasped, and doubled over, and hit something with his shoulder. A tree? One of the egg sentinels? He couldn't- he couldn't see.

Why couldn't he see? What was wrong with his eyes?
Oh. Right. Sleep.

Where was his lake?

He hit the ground, and groaned. His nose. His forehead. He- he had to do something. Go somewhere.

He couldn't think.

Jack tried to crawl, but couldn't make his arms move.

He'd sleep now.

Where was his lake?

Desmond finally stopped giggling, and leaned against Aster's shoulder. "Bet Papa was all over ice," he said. "He gets all twitchy when he sees girls in short skirts."

Well, that was... interesting. Not exactly what he'd wanted to hear, because that meant male Pooka were right out. Except male Pooka were right out anyways, and he was just being stupid.

Although, he was a shape shifter... If that was what Jack liked, a little discomfort was worth it, wasn't it?

Stupid, Aster. No.

Aster shrugged one shoulder. "He was pretty vehement I get dressed, yeah," he said.

"You were mean," Tooth said, and giggled. "He's seventeen."

"And three hundred," Bunny pointed out. "Anyways, he was mean back."

"I bet," Desmond said. He sniffed, and smiled at the both of them. "You should hear Papa yell at guys on the beach. Especially if they're all muscled. He keeps saying the Victorian had it right. Who's Victorian?"

"Was an era," Aster told him. Jack yelled at everyone for going about 'underdressed'? Okay, maybe his chances- no, his chances were nil. He had to remember that. Stupid hormones. "Called the Victorian because that's when England was ruled by Queen Victoria."

"Weird," was Desmond's opinion. "Why'd Papa think it's so great?"

"Probably because everyone went about in suits and dresses," Tooth said. She ruffled the fur between Desmond's ears. "Go play with- what was his name? Butterfly?"

"Butterfingers." Desmond inadvertently dug his heel into Aster's stomach when he jumped to the ground, but Aster didn't react other than to grunt.

Tooth waited until the kit was out of the room, before frowning at him. "You and Jack...?"

"Getting along just fine," he assured her. "Guess I just startled him."

"I know he put his foot in it today," she murmured.

At the moment, Aster knew, he'd be willing to forgive Jack another blizzard on Easter. Stupid, stupid
hormones. "Its fine," he assured Tooth. "Anyways, it's not like he was wrong."

He'd picked the appearance, and the clothing, specifically to get Bluebeard's attention, after all. The man had very obvious tastes. Aster had simply matched them. Why should he be upset that Jack had stated a fact?

Well, other than the part where Jack had sounded disgusted.

Or maybe horrified. Aster sighed. He couldn't wait until the month was up.

Tooth studied him, like one of the baby teeth she collected for the children. "Are you sure you're alright?"

Only going through his first season in over a millennia, focused on someone not of his species and also not interested in him. "Just tired. Been a while since I've switched forms."

"Mm." Tooth, clever and observant sheila that she was, kept watching him. "It's Jack, isn't it?"

Aster's eyes widened, then he relaxed. "What about Jack?"

"Oh, Bunny." Tooth stroked his fur on one shoulder. She gave him a look, vaguely pitying. "You'll be okay."

Aster shook his head. "Nothing's wrong, so why wouldn't I be? I'm going to take the sprog back to the Warren. If Jack looks for him?"

"I'll let him know," Tooth promised.

Aster headed off to collect Desmond, and sadly, that elf. The trip back to the Warren was uneventful, which considering how the day had gone, wasn't a bad thing at all.

He wanted a shower. It felt like his fur was covered in a smear of machine oil, wherever Bluebeard had looked at his transformed self. Just- disgusting.

Desmond paused at the entrance to the Warren, and sniffed the air. "Papa's already back."

Jack? Aster sniffed at the air too, and smiled faintly. "Huh, yeah. Guess he asked for a portal."

"Why?" The kit looked up at him. "We were going to get the spaceship, Papa left it in one of the tunnels this morning."

"He can always get it from the Warren," Aster said, but he couldn't help tensing anyways. "Let's go find him."

Desmond nodded, and hopped towards the Color River at an oblique angle. That elf followed after, bell jangling with every step.

Aster clenched his teeth, and took up the end of the little train. He could've overtaken Desmond, and passed the kid, easily, but what was the point? So Jack was already in the Warren. What could possibly have happened to him?

Then he saw Jack, sprawled out on the ground and not moving. "Jack!"
And so ends the saga of Bluebeard, at least for a few centuries. He's not dead, just... very trapped. Very frozen. But not dead. (Which, for someone who can't escape until he dies, is something of a problem. Since freezing's out, suffocating is out, and I think hunger's out.)

We're gearing up for the next arc, ladies and gentlemen! I had fun planning it out, and the action will share with the romantic sub-plot(s). Yay!
Aster gave up on the comb, and simply ran his claws through the fine strands of Jack's hair. It was softer than he'd expected, even with the frost intermittently freezing chunks of it. Anytime a hank ended up stiff with ice, he detangled it patiently, as he'd done off and on throughout the week.

Jack was asleep. He had to keep reminding himself of it, that no matter how horrifying it'd been to find the winter spirit immobile and unresponsive had been, it was... normal. To be expected, really.

Desmond had handled the whole thing better, but then, the kit was used to his Papa dropping off unexpectedly. Not often. Apparently, Jack normally had warning, but now and again he didn't.

Then Desmond spent a week on his own. It'd happened twice now, he'd told Aster; once when he was very, very young, and once a few years back, after Jack had done something Desmond didn't have the details about. It'd involved fighting, that part, the kit was sure about, but otherwise he didn't know.

Aster sighed, and brushed ice off Jack's shoulders. The stuff kept trying to cover him over.

Desmond was currently terrorizing North's elves and yeti. He spent the nights at the Warren, but, well.

However calmly Desmond was handling the situation, Aster was the exact opposite.

Last year had been bad, but at least he'd seen a little of the run-up. Last year he hadn't been quite so focused on Jack, either. This year, well...

Jack was sleeping in Aster's nest. Alone, mind you, because fuck if the Frostbite didn't radiate cold like liquid nitrogen did, but still. Aster hadn't exactly left Jack alone the entire week, leaving only just long enough to get enough to eat and drink to prevent illness. He'd drowsed in a chair, though never very well. There was always the concern that Jack would stop- stop his version of sleep, and become an honest corpse.

There wasn't really any way to tell, one way or the other. Like this, Jack didn't breathe, he was colder than the Arctic wind, and whatever heartbeat he had was so faint and slow Aster couldn't detect it. Not that a Pooka's paws were very good for catching a pulse, but he couldn't even hear it, and his ears were insanely sensitive.

Aster closed his eyes, and slumped over. It'd been nearly exactly seven days, almost to the hour. Jack should wake up soon. If he didn't... Well, he had to.

This, he admitted to himself, was stupid. Of course, he'd been just as stupid about Hoata, but that'd been different. For one, Hoata had been stupid right back.

You could always tell when a Pooka couple had settled down. They stopped following each other around obsessively, in a way humans today called 'stalking'.

He braced his elbows on his knees, and propped his chin up on his paws. If he tried following Jack around, he'd be turned into an ice block. Hell, the Frostbite only stayed in the Warren for Desmond's sake. If the kit hadn't been a factor... Maybe they would still be friends, but Jack sure wouldn't spend
most days and practically every night in Aster's home.

Aster looked back at Jack- just in time to get a glowing snowflake to the face.

He blinked away blue sparkles, and chuckled quietly. "Awake, then?"

"Why the long face?" Jack asked. He blinked several times, then reached up and scrubbed at his open eyes. Ice flaked away with his efforts, until his eyes were clear. "Even frost-blind I could see the depression."

"You sound horrible," Aster said. And Jack did; if his voice had been any rougher, it would've been impossible to understand what he was saying.

Jack cleared his throat, and then coughed. "Happens. Don't dodge the question."

"You've been asleep for a week." That was a good reason to be upset. Aster scratched at the side of his neck.

"You're still not used to that, are you?" Jack asked. He began moving his fingers, his toes, looking for all the world like he was checking he still could.

Maybe that was exactly what he was doing. He hadn't so much as breathed the entire week. He had to be stiff as anything from not moving.

"Can't really say that I'll ever get used to it." It was a bad idea, but he reached over and started brushing his claws through Jack's hair again.

Jack stopped his twitching, and stared. After a minute, Aster pulled back and looked down at his paws.

"Was- were you grooming me, just now?" Jack asked.

After a pause, that all but confirmed Jack's suspicions anyways, Aster jerked his head in a quick nod. He watched Jack from the corner of his eye. The winter spirit looked thoughtful. "Huh," he finally said, and started flexing his arms. Aster could hear his elbows creak.

There was something weird about the adult Pooka, Jack decided that evening.

Desmond was normal, considering he'd spent a week at Santa's freaking Workshop. The kid was utterly wired, practically vibrating from a combination of too much sugar, too many elves, and too much stimulation from all the toys, and the indulgent yeti, and North himself.

For a kid used to, at best, two toys and maybe a new book a year, Santa's Workshop was just a little much. That was one reason why Jack kept Desmond with him, except when North needed a play tester. Testing new toys tended to be, at minimum, an hour a toy, in North's office, where things were quieter. That was fine. Letting Desmond just run loose, like he had this week?

Well, that resulted in one bouncing, vibrating kit, who had to run circles around everything in his path because otherwise he'd twitch right out of his fur.

"Hey, Des, c'mon kiddo." Jack laughed, and crouched down.

Desmond promptly spun in place, launched himself forwards, and knocked Jack to the ground. "Papa- Papa I haven't even told you about the snowmen the yeti made me an army and we had a
battle and I had Phil on my team and we won and beat Dedushka and then we tied up Dedushka with the Christmas lights and fed the reindeer cookies."

Somehow, Jack had the feeling Desmond would be staying away from the Workshop for the next few weeks.

Just, you know, an inkling. No real reason to think that way, but there you were.

He sighed, and relaxed while his son rambled. Normally the kid was serious, for a five year old, and how that'd come about Jack didn't know. He was the Guardian of Fun, king of snow days and winter entertainment.

Kind of nice to see the fluff ball all hyperactive. Though probably not something he'd be able to stand for extended periods of time.

Desmond paused in his extended monologue, and panted for breath. His eyes glittered with the mad light of a sugar high, and his ears were twitching so much they'd ache the next morning. His hands flexed at Jack's hoodie, almost kneading at his Papa's shoulders.

"Hey," Jack said, and turned to look at Bunny. The adult Pooka wasn't too far away, and was dabbing at one of his practice eggs, though he was watching Jack and Desmond. He'd already painted his thumb bright yellow. "Why don't you tell Bunny about it? I don't think he heard you."

"Bunny," Desmond breathed, going terrifyingly still for one long moment. He, too, turned to look at Bunny.

Then he exploded like a claymore mine. "Uncle Bunny!" He shot across the half-dozen feet of space, a fluffy blur that crashed into Bunny's side with an audible thud. Bunny grunted, dropped both egg and paintbrush, and immediately focused on the kid.

Jack grinned at the sight, then got up, grabbed his staff, and headed for the tunnels.

He might have slept for a week, but that just meant he was a week behind in investigating why there was snow, in May, in Russia.

Not entirely unheard of, admittedly, but North would know what was regular weather patterns and what wasn't. If he was worried about May snow, there was a reason.

There was only one person who'd know, for sure, what was behind an unusual snowfall.

It'd been a while since Jack had spoken with the Snow Queen. He wondered if she still had her "guest" from last year.

The Palace of Ever Winter was a forbidding, inhospitable place when outsiders were in residence. The air was kept chilled to an uncomfortable degree; the walls were a stark, unadorned white marble that looked like opaque ice; the floors were bare and there wasn't a cushion to be found for the metal benches.

The benches had once been ice, or so Aleksia had told him once, but Ilmari had apparently gotten bored one winter. When a wondersmith got bored, his wife ended up with several dozen benches crafted to look like they had been made out of giant icicles.

It was more comfortable to concentrate on the benches, on the tapestries missing from the walls, or the carpets missing from the floors, than think about how the young man had just walked through
him.

Jack couldn't believe he'd actually forgotten how painful that was.

It was one of the few things that could make him feel the cold. He always, always hunched over and struggled to catch his breath, and never mind he didn't need air. When he got walked through, he did, and his lungs wouldn't work for a terrifying, unending minute.

"I see you've met Kay," Aleksia said.

Jack flinched, and looked up. He hadn't heard her approach. "For a given value of met. He's still here?"

The Snow Queen smiled, and then her expression gentled. "Considering his situation when I first brought him here, he is progressing quite rapidly."

Jack raised an eyebrow, and held out his elbow. After a moment, the Queen rested one hand in the crook of his arm, and they walked down the hall.

"Kay was raised by emotionally abusive parents, brought up to see his fellow humans as little more than competition, and then only if they were worthy. Not the worst case I've had here, and in all honesty I might worry if he progressed any faster than he currently is. For the moment, I do not fear he will backslide."

"Backslide?" Jack asked. That was the first he'd ever heard her say something like that.

"Yes," Aleksia said. "Return to his old modes of thinking and acting. It can happen, when one rushes the healing process. An emotional shock might do it- or it might make a return to that way of being impossible. One must judge these things to a fine degree."

"Well, if anyone would know how, you would," Jack said.

"Indeed. But you did not come here to check on Kay." She tilted her head to one side. "Shall we retire to my personal quarters?"

"Sure."

Aleksia's personal quarters, unlike the rest of her palace, were decorated in warm browns and gold, oranges and yellows, and with carefully tended plants nearly everywhere. It was like a small section of the Warren had been transplanted to the heart of the palace.

"Ilmari is working," Aleksia said. One of her brownie servants bustled up with a tea tray. The brownie poured a cup of tea for Aleksia, hesitated a moment, then left the room.

"New helper?" Jack asked. The brownies who had been with Aleksia longer knew not to offer him food or drink. It wasn't like he saw it as rude, when it was really just practical.

Not like he'd eat or drink what he was offered, anyways.

"Not so new as that, but yes." Aleksia sipped at her drink. "What brings you here?"

"That's what I like about you, you get right to the point," Jack teased. "North's worried about some snow over in Russia."

"Snow?" Aleksia raised her eyebrows. "Russia is scheduled for a heat wave. There should not be snow."
"Really?" Well, okay then. "I just figured, Russia, snow, it's only May... But if it's supposed to have a heat wave, that's different."

"Something to do with ocean currents and El Nino, or whatever it's called." Aleksia waved one hand, as though brushing the entire issue away. "If there is snow, there is a magical reason for it."

"You're the expert."

Aleksia leveled a glare at him. "If you dared study, you would be as accomplished as I."

Jack snorted. "Maybe next century."

Aleksia's spell books were all older than she was, and she had at least two centuries on him. None of them were translated, either; that was part of the studying. The most coherent babbled on about 'male and female principles' and the least coherent read like a tortured madman's personal diary.

He liked reading. Studying those spell books was nothing at all like reading.

"We shall look in my mirror," the Snow Queen decided. "Come."

The mirror in question was in the throne room, Jack knew. It was supremely magical, so much so even he could feel the spells weaving around and through the sheet of reflective ice. Normally he was pretty much blind to that sort of thing.

When they arrived in the throne room, someone was already there. Kay, Jack realized; no one else in the Palace of Ever Winter dressed all in black. Besides, Ilmari was the only other human man- for a given value of human, considering Ilmari was as old as Aleksia- living in the place, and he looked nothing like this skinny, worn looking man standing by Aleksia's throne.

Kay looked like someone who'd once been fairly muscular, but had lost a great deal of weight in a short amount of time. Fairly common, for a guest of the Snow Queen, Jack knew. Part of their treatment involved food that was never more than lukewarm, which didn't exactly stir the appetite. They didn't starve, but they didn't indulge, either.

There was a reason for it, he knew, but he still wanted to give the man a freshly baked loaf of bread, still steaming warm from the oven.

At the moment, Kay didn't deserve that loaf of bread. If Aleksia had taken a hand in the man's story, it was because he'd been well down the path that ended in serial killers and bloodbaths.

"Snow Queen," Kay said. "I-"

"What have I told you about sentences beginning with I?" the Snow Queen asked. At the moment, she wasn't Aleksia; she was the great and terrible mistress of ice and cold, as merciless as a glacier, as unforgiving as a blizzard. "And why, " she asked, "have you left your rooms to plague me?"

Kay hesitated, then went down on one knee and bowed his head. "Your majesty, it is very... lonely, here."

The Snow Queen sniffed, and sidestepped Kay to sit on her throne. "What is your point? Is not the absence of your inferiors what you desired?"

Jack winced. Ah, so that was how it was...

He hated it when he got caught watching these sorts of scenes. Aleksia's words always cut close to
home.

He walked over to the great mirror, the better to ignore the scene playing out behind him. The mirror immediately showed him an image of the Warren, Desmond and Bunny painting on paper instead of eggs, for once. Kay wouldn't be able to see it; not until he was ready to be released back into the world would the mirror show him anything.

Not long after, he heard the throne room door close, and Aleksia stepped up behind him.

"That was less painful than some," she murmured, and smiled at the image of the Warren. "Oh, now isn't that lovely?"

Desmond held up his picture for Bunny to look at. Even without sound, it was obvious he was fishing for praise, and getting a basketful for his efforts.

"The mirror shows you what is closest to your heart, if undirected," Aleksia said.

"That is my son there, you know."

"And?"

"My friend. Probably my best friend."

Aleksia raised one eyebrow. "Jackson, if you try to convince me you think of Bunnymund as your brother, I might set Ilmari on you."

"Why would you set Ilmari on me? Bunny would make a great brother, if I wanted one."

"Oh, dear. It's like that, is it?" She shook her head, and gestured at the mirror. "Let us take a look at the situation in Russia..."

Images flickered in the mirror, too fast for Jack to decipher. He thought there were a few glaciers- and that might have been a hunting cottage somewhere in northern Germany- but they were gone before he could confirm his guesses.

The mirror finally steadied, showing an image of what looked like a cross between a modern-day, Russian military base, and an older style fortress.

"Ah," Aleksia said. "General Winter. I might have guessed."

"If you sounded any more bitter," Jack said.

"One does not like being reminded of one's failures."

Well, no, of course not.

"Now," she said. "Where is he this time? He keeps moving that fortress of his." She gestured at the mirror again, and the image began to draw back, no doubt to give a better idea of the location.

The image flickered, became indistinct-

-And then the mirror, over a thousand years old and with more magic embedded in it than North's entire Workshop-

-shattered.
This was a difficult chapter to write. I must have started it three or four times. I blame characters and general exhaustion. Self, WHY are you waking up an hour to two hours before your alarm?

And now we see villain number two. I'd talk about this more, but am tired, need sleep, will become incoherent. But, uh, hope no one minds how the Snow Queen is taking a slightly larger role in-story. She's fun.
"Alexia was able to confirm General Winter is somewhere in that region, but not where." Jack stared into his mug of cooling hot chocolate, and sighed. "Northern Russia's a big place. It'll take forever to search it all."

"Except you say Lady Aleksia was able to see Okhotsk Sea with smaller mirror, yes?"

"Right before the smaller mirror exploded, yeah," Jack agreed. "Okay, so it narrows it down. Some."

North waved one hand in dismissal. "All will help with search. Will have yeti and elves go out, time they stopped hiding in Workshop."

The yeti could take care of themselves, but the elves?

North laughed and shook his head. "Ah, Jack, what funny face you make. Elves in woods are sneaky, harder to catch than baby bunny on sugar high."

"Yeah, about that," Jack began.

North waved him off. "You will take northern-most side of Okhotsk Sea?"

He sighed. "Yeah, sure. I won't be very fast," he warned. He never was, outside of North America. Some odd side effect of being tied to Burgess Lake, he supposed.

"North side is glacier and then goes to Kamchatka Peninsula. There, I think, General Winter will be found. Is very isolated, few humans. Old military base, abandoned now."

"Sounds like a good place to start. What we saw in the big mirror looked, well, like a military base."

North shrugged his shoulders. "Phil and I will take peninsula. Hah." He stared down into his own, oversized mug of hot chocolate. He drained the last of it, and slammed the mug down on the table. "Would like to have General's scrawny neck in hands, would feel good!"

"What'd he do?" Jack set his mug aside, just in time to catch one of the ever-roaming elves' attention. Immediately the critter dropped everything- metaphorically, instead of literally, this time- and started lapping at the lukewarm chocolate.

North snorted, and pointed one finger at Jack's nose. "You make snowstorm, is for fun, for snow day. Is gentle, hurts no one. Yes?"

"Discounting a few times when I first woke up, sure." Or trips to the Arctic, but that hadn't happened in a long time.

"When General makes storm, he makes to kill." The Cossack bowed his head for a moment. "Some years back, big storm hits Arctic, hits Europe, hits all of continent and is Christmas Eve. I," he gestured to himself, "have reindeer and Rudolph, who sees way through storm, who is clever with glowing nose, and so we give joy to children who think Santa is stopped by snow and wind."

He sighed, and shook his head. "But no joy to those froze by storm. No joy to those left behind. Three of my own yeti, they go out to try and clear path for reindeer, they are not found until spring
and snow melts enough."

Jack could see it. The storm, roaring in from over the ocean, spreading out as it hit the continent, and burying everything and everyone.

He clenched one fist. "When you find him, give him a punch for me, okay?"

"Ja. Will be fun." North looked at the elf finishing off Jack's hot chocolate. "Would you like new mug?"

"Nah. I'll do a quick rush over Russia, and then drop in at the Warren. Bunny said something earlier about having an idea for Des and school, so."

Jack sauntered through the Workshop, and paused at one table, where three yetis were piecing together a complicated whirligig of a toy. A prototype of some kind, he thought. He'd certainly never seen anything like it out on the streets. The yeti had pushed aside several pots of paint- only two opened- when they'd moved onto the construction part of the building process. The pots were each the size of Jack's fist, maybe a little smaller.

When he went back to sauntering towards the door, his hoodie pocket hid three unopened pots. Don't use it, well, then lose it, Jack thought, and grinned.

The colors didn't seem to be anything Bunny already had. And the paint was sparkly. He'd probably appreciate the gift.

"Bleeding hell, Jack, you stole from Santa!" Aster stared at the three pots of paint in something akin to horror. There wasn't anything special about the paint, other than where Jack had gotten them.

The hooligan, unrepentant and enjoying Aster's reaction far too much, grinned and propped his staff up on one shoulder. "Technically, the yeti."

"Technically nothing, you- North's Workshop- you stole from- and you find this funny?"

"Uh, yeah?" Jack shrugged one shoulder. "I've been on the Naughty List forever. I've got a record to maintain."

Aster looked back at the three little pots of paint. Jack had gotten him paint. Despite himself, he had to struggle not to smile. If he smiled, he'd be encouraging the blighter, and that...

Jack had gotten him a present. Something he thought Aster would like. Not even for any real reason, just because.

"You're not going to get any presents from him this year, then."

"Technically, those were from Nicholas St. North. Not Santa." Jack poked him in the shoulder. "C'mon, smile. You know you want to."

One corner of his mouth did curve up. "You're a lunatic," Aster said, and set the paint aside. "Well, it's your hide if Phil catches you."

"He won't catch me." Jack set his staff in place, then hopped up to perch on the crook. "So, Desmond and school?"

Aster dragged his thoughts away from Jack's ankles, and over to the other topic of conversation. Before he could reply, the reason for the conversation ran up.
Desmond was an odd amalgamation of Pooka and human. His eyes were Pooka, appearing abnormally large in the human face. One ear was long and furred, while the other was human and also furred. His hands were paw-like, and he walked on Pooka feet plantigrade like a human. He wore pants, but no shirt, revealing that he was covered in patches of thin, downy fur.

"Papa, I don't need school." Desmond scowled at the both of them. "An' you're not helping, Bunny."

"Thought I was your uncle now?" Aster asked. He heroically suppressed the urge to crack up laughing.

Jack leaned forward; until it looked for certain he'd take a nose dive into the ground. Somehow, he defied gravity, and didn't fall. His staff didn't even wobble. "Des? What happened to you?"

Desmond looked down at himself, and shrugged. "Dunno. Just woke up like this an' it won't go back to normal."

"The sugar high," Aster said. "It'll wear off in a bit." Maybe a few days.

"Huh. So, this would be why you don't shapeshift?"

"I shapeshift! Sometimes. He- heck, you even saw the most recent."

Jack scowled, and muttered something about a dress and his mother. Aster raised his eyebrows, but didn't comment. Jack's religion did explain a few things; though the three centuries had obviously softened him up quite a bit.

"Does this mean I don't have to go to school?" Desmond asked.

Aster chuckled, and reached over to ruffle the kit's hair. "Not quite. Not a traditional school, I was thinking."

Jack raised his eyebrows, and got settled on his staff again. "Okay. Clarify?"

"Desmond here's a Pooka and a spirit, both. Either would make him age slow. I figure the kitling will age half-again as slow as if he were just Pooka." Aster shrugged one shoulder. "Dunno what you'll be doing as an adult, but I doubt it'll be anything a human school would set you up for. So the reading, writing, arithmetic might not be what you need to know."

"So no school," Desmond said, and smiled. Huh, his top teeth were Pooka, and the bottom row human. Had to be awkward.

"So a different school. You need to know spirits, some magic wouldn't go amiss, and history would be good." Aster raised an eyebrow at Jack. "All of which us Guardians can share about, and what we can't cover I bet your friend Aleksia could, or could find someone trustworthy."

Jack bit his lip. "Sounds a bit haphazard."

"It's going to be a couple centuries before he's going to be an adult."

"Centuries?" Desmond wailed. The two adults ignored him.

"Yeah, good point. And it's not like he's going to have to take exams or anything," Jack rubbed at his forehead. "Well, I guess. It's a good idea. I claim American history."

"Figured you would." Most of it Jack would've seen firsthand. Aster smirked down at Desmond. "And I'll handle stuff beyond earth. Sandy would, too, but he thinks he'd rather teach you a bit of
Magic." The Sandman was a former wishing star, after all.

"Magic?" Desmond asked. "What sort of magic?"

"Don't know what you'd be good at." Probably something to do with ice and snow, thanks to Frost's influence, but who knew? Desmond might grow up to fling fireballs or some such.

"That'll be interesting," Jack said, and grinned. "We'll figure the rest out as we go along. You're only five, Des."

"Forty-five," the kit said, bristling with all the injured dignity of the young. His ire passed as quickly as it'd come. "Hey, Papa? Where'd you put my ship?"

His ship? Oh, right, the spaceship. Aster looked up at Jack, ears tilted forward. "Mind if I take a gander at this ship?"

"I left it in the tunnel," Jack admitted. "Everything's that happened kind of made me forget. Good for reminding me, kiddo."

Desmond grinned, and walked awkwardly over to Aster, and held up his hands. "Papa's very forgetful," he told the older Pooka. "You're going to have to watch that."

Aster thought about replying, or maybe asking what Desmond meant, but kept his mouth shut. Jack was grinning at them, and besides, he was kind of worried just what the kit had noticed. Aster had been subtle, but Desmond was observant.

"Which tunnel?" he asked instead.

Jack hopped off his staff, and grabbed it up in one hand. "This way."

The ship was just inside the tunnel in question, tucked up against the side. Jack lifted it under one arm with no apparent effort, though it had to weigh a fair amount. Granted, Jack was a spirit, but a spirit's strength depended at least partially on how many believers they had. Aster, or Nick, both with nearly every child in the world believing in them, could do some pretty impressive feats of strength. Phil, with a yeti's already impressive strength, augmented not only by a few children, but by some adults as well, could strong arm nearly anyone and anything.

For Jack to lift the ship as he had, with only eight human believers, was actually rather astonishing. And intriguing.

Aster shook the mental images suddenly plaguing him away. Now was not the time. He walked beside Jack as they headed back to the house part of the Warren. For the first few centuries he hadn't bothered with such a human construction, but after a while he'd gotten tired of his things getting rained on, and the idea had grown on him, and next thing he'd known he'd built himself a domed, single room house. It'd grown over the years, to what it was now.

At the house, Jack turned immediately to the kitchen, for no reason Aster could figure. The sitting room would have been more comfortable, the conservatory—really just a room where he could sit and read without worrying about his books getting trampled by egglets or accidentally splattered with paint—would have better light.

The kitchen had a good, sturdy table though. Jack set the ship down on it, and gestured at the craft. "Well, here it is. Desmond's Kryptonian escape pod."
"I'll pretend I know what that meant." Aster set Desmond down on one of the chairs, and then traced the tips of his claws over the top dome. The pointed end, the front, had gotten smashed up somehow, and fine cracks radiated from the small hole.


"Bring them around and I just might." Aster pressed one hand flat on the top of the dome, and muttered a short phrase under his breath. "This is old."

"Uh, yeah," Jack said. "Almost fifty years, considering."

"No, I mean... This is from my time." He looked up at twin- well, sort of- expressions of confusion. "The Pooka home world. When it was still... there."

Jack's eyebrows nearly touched his hairline. "Desmond's not as old as you."

"Time travel. Well, sort of time travel, the physics gets kind of funny when you get something like this traveling speed of light."

Desmond stood up on his chair, and tapped one finger against the ship. "So I'm as old as you?"

"Nope. You didn't live the years. Besides that, I've got a couple thousand years yet on you."

Both members of the Frost family stared at him. "How old are you?" Jack asked.

Aster grinned at them. "Old enough. Going to open it up?"

"What, can't you?" Jack reached over and lifted off the top. The inside was a fairly shallow depression, though it'd been packed full of things.

"Papa's wood carving stuff!" Desmond tried to grab for the heavy case, but Jack snatched it away.

"Knives," he said, and set the case to one side. "Desmond no touchy."

"Wasn't going to," the kit muttered, then brightened as he saw the rest of the stuff.

Aster lifted out an odd, rough looking dream catcher. It wasn't anything like you saw in stores, or even being sold as 'made by genuine Natives'. The rawhide looked to have been chewed to soften it up, and the circle had been made by willow branches stripped of their bark, and then woven together. Black feathers dangled from cords, with a few dark beads on the rawhide cords.

"Raven made it for me," Jack said, and took the dream catcher. "Those are his feathers, even. He told me it's supposed to catch the bad dreams in the web, and the good dreams go through this circle here." He poked his finger through a circular hole in the middle of the dream catcher, then shrugged and set it on top of his wood carving kit.

It left only a blanket, folded up, inside the little space craft. Aster lifted it out with trembling fingers. He'd seen something similar, before. His mate had been making a nesting blanket when Aster had gone off to fight the resurgence of nightmares, led by the former General Pitchner. Anyone could make a nesting blanket out of chirra wool. Only Hoata's clan, the Wehi, could have made a blanket like this. The Wehi had always kept the secret to their dyeing process- which resulted in such beauties as this blanket, shimmering through blue and green and silver- behind their teeth.

"Bunny?" Jack asked, his voice quiet.

"I... This is a nesting blanket," he said. Somehow. His throat was tight, and his eyes burned. "It's
for... Mothers make them, before having their kit. It's... The chirra had the best wool. Softest, which made it proper for a kit. The chirra were a bit like sheep, only we kept them as pets, mostly. Pooka don't eat meat."

He looked up, and tried to smile. "Just... My mate's clans made blankets like this one."

Desmond reached over and brushed his fingers over the blanket. "My mother made this?"

"Yeah," Aster said. He held the blanket out to Desmond.

The kit didn't take it, though; just stroked the tight weave with both hands. His lower lip wobbled, once. "I don't remember her," he said, and burst into tears.

Jack swooped down before Aster had even comprehended what had happened. The winter spirit had Desmond up and in his arms before Desmond had even sobbed twice.

"Aw, baby... C'mere, Des. C'mere. Stop crying. Of course you remember her." Jack rocked back and forth, and rubbed his cheek against the top of Desmond's head. "Of course you do. You can't hardly forget someone that important."

"B-but I don't!"


The kit sniffed, and looked up from Jack's shoulder. "You- you think so?"

"I know so." Jack sat down. "When you think of mothers, Des... What do you think of? And don't you dare say me!"

That got a faint smile from Desmond. "Um. Light. And- and love."

"There, you see? You got that from somewhere. From your mom." Jack tapped a finger against Desmond's chest. "People can forget in their heads all the time. In their hearts? Never."

Desmond nodded- then burst into tears again.

This time, Jack only cuddled the kit close. He didn't try to soothe him, or ease the tears. He simply held Desmond until the kit wept himself to sleep.

"C'mon," he said. "Let's put him to bed."

Aster picked up the blanket, and nodded. Jack held Desmond while Aster fiddled with the blanket, getting it set up just right on the bed. Only when the Pooka was satisfied did Jack put Desmond down, and cover him with a light sheet.

Jack left the bedroom door open a crack, then led the way back to the kitchen.

"So," he said, and nodded at the spaceship.

"They loved him. His parents. This technology was experimental, and if I remember right, our scientists were only just starting to look into scaling it up. For explorers looking to travel beyond the known areas." Aster rested his paw on the edge of the tiny craft. "They wouldn't have been able to save themselves."

"What happened? Why... Why would they risk sending their son off into the unknown like that?
They couldn't have even guessed that he would've been found. Let alone by someone friendly."

"They had to hope," Aster said. He sat down, and sighed. "You don't... It was Pitch. He- he used to be a good man. A great man. A hero."

A hero that had helped usher in the golden age. A real one, who had followed up his battlefield victories by volunteering to guard the prison that held the fearlings, the nightmares, the dark pirates. "Only, something went wrong," Aster said. "He got corrupted, and became Pitch Black. And the first place he struck was..."

His throat tightened up too much to continue.

Jack let the silence go for half a minute, no more. "The Pooka home world?"

"I was away," Aster whispered. "Guarding the Lunanoffs. Pitch hated the Pooka. We'd formed the backbone of the army, rounding the nightmares and their ilk up. So he wanted to destroy us completely."

"He said something like that, just before grabbing Desmond that Easter," Jack said. He reached over and brushed Aster's arm with his fingertips.

Aster took a deep breath, and looked at him. "Thank you."

"For what?"

The Pooka smiled. It was faint, barely more than a twitch of his lips. "For saving Desmond."

Jack smiled back. "How could I have done anything else? C'mon, Kangaroo. Let's get this thing put away somewhere safe."

Aster caressed the top dome one last time, and nodded. "This way," he said, and headed deeper into the Warren.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter didn't want to end; no one would give me a clear point that made a good place. But, sometimes that happens, and you just have to go with what you've got.

Des' backstory has been revealed! At least, the escape from the Pooka homeworld part. Next chapter, we return to a bit more action. And I might work on some prompt-one shots everyone gave me a few chapters ago. Opinion time- would you prefer the prompts were all in a single story, as chapters? Or as one-shots (or tiny!stories) under a collection?
Chapter Nineteen

They were having weekly meetings now, what with General Winter. It was June, and the snow in Russia just kept going. The weathermen were having fits.

Jack kind of regretted having to leave Desmond at the Warren- or at the Workshop, or Tooth's Palace, depending- for the day, every day. Russia was a big place, and there were a lot of northern glaciers to search. The kid didn't have to say that he was starting to resent being left behind while his Papa flew off to have fun; his grinding teeth, bristling fur, and stiff legged walk said it all for him.

But there was no way in hell Jack was going to let anyone threaten his son again. Desmond would just have to deal with being protected.

This time, he entered the unofficial meeting room through the window, and dropped down with a thud. Everyone turned to look at him. Jack didn't normally make that much noise.

"Great news," he said. "Chernobyl is still Godzilla free."

Sandy raised one hand, and then let a question mark form over his head.

"Did you know Chernobyl is actually in the Ukraine?" Jack flopped down in 'his' chair, and raised his eyebrow at Desmond. The kit folded his arms and scowled. Okay, so he wasn't going to leave his spot on North's lap. Someone was holding a grudge. "Well, it is," he said, and looked up. "And still Godzilla free."

"Jack," Tooth said. "Who's Godzilla?"

As he'd hoped, Desmond smirked. "Only the coolest lizard around," Desmond chirped. All attention turned to him.

"And what does Godzilla do?" North asked.

Desmond's smirk turned into an innocent smile. "Well, first off, he's really big. And he comes from Japan. Tokyo, specifically. So he drinks lots of green tea."

Jack choked.

It was hard to breathe while trying not to laugh, so in the end, he did neither. Desmond continued telling the Guardians all about Godzilla- a fire breathing reptile with fifty feet, armed with a hockey stick- "Because it's violent!"- and ever-full pot of green tea, and a tendency to rampage through Tokyo to fight tsunamis.

"And what would this bloke be doing in Chernobyl, then?" Bunny asked.

"Vacationing," Desmond said, and nodded to himself.

"Except he's not there," Jack said, and smiled. "Which is good. Chernobyl is kind of radioactive."

"The worms glow in the dark," Desmond said.

"Uh... huh. Right." North patted Desmond on the head, and shrugged. "Anything about General Winter?"

"Yeah, that's the not so great news. Nothing on General Winter. Lots of confused snow spirits,
though." Jack pointed one finger towards the ceiling. "Any idea why the Snow Maidens keep calling me Father Frost? I get the feeling they're mixing me up with someone."

North rolled his eyes. "Do not ask."

"But-"

"No. Do not ask. Better if you do not."

Jack tilted his head, and frowned. "But I really-"

"Jack." Tooth this time. "Please. Trust us. You don't want to know."

"Why not?"

Bunny rubbed at the bridge of his muzzle. "Oh, for- Father Frost keeps trying to take over Nick's duties. Only he hasn't a clue. Doesn't give naughty children coal, gives them pneumonia. Good kids get boots full of snow."

Jack rolled his eyes at North. "Wow. All that build up, and I was expecting I'd been mixed up with someone as friendly as General Winter."

"Well," Tooth said. "He's not worse than the general."

The winter spirit blinked, and stared up at the ceiling. "Okay then. Moving on."

North shook his head. "Anyone have any luck with search for General?"

Tooth's wings dropped. She looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. "I'm so sorry, Nick. I've had my girls keeping an eye out, but they haven't seen anything but the snow."

Jack raised his eyebrow for the second time in ten minutes. Not quite a record- his small group of believers could have him raising an eyebrow so much he'd started alternating which one went up and which stayed down- but still. "Russia's a giant place. He'd definitely picked a good spot to hide out."

"Ja, is not your fault," North said. He reached over and almost rested a hand on Tooth's shoulder. He glared at his hand, and pulled back. She didn't notice.

Desmond rolled his eyes, and made a face at Jack. Jack made a face right back. How could anyone be so oblivious?

Bunny's eyes about bugged out. "Seriously? You're asking me that?"

"I mean, it's obvious." Jack swung his staff back and forth, and accidentally frosted a few rocks. "Sorry. Anyways, North keeps making goo-goo eyes at her, and she stares at him even when he's not smiling. Or flossing."

Desmond wrinkled his nose. "And all the ballerina ladies Dedushka carves, for the music boxes? Have her face."

"But they still don't do anything. Heck, I bet they're convinced that their crush doesn't like them back!" Jack gestured wildly with his staff. Desmond and Bunny both ducked. "How can you have unrequited crushes from both sides? Seriously, how?"

Bunny rubbed a hand over his face. "Really?" he asked, and sighed. "My life." He stopped walking,
and folded his arms. "Just why does it matter to you?"

"Because they're miserable." Jack scuffed at the dirt. "Guardian of Fun."

"Pretty sure it's supposed to be joy."

"Yeah, well they're not having fun, and they're not all too happy either, so either way. It's my duty as a Guardian to see that they stop making sad faces at each other."

"What're you going to do?" Bunny asked. "Lock 'em in a closet?"

Jack grinned. "Hey, that's- no, North could just use a snow globe to portal out. And Tooth could talk to her fairies, get them to unlock the door." He tilted his head. "Unless I talked to Baby Tooth first..."

"No," Bunny said.

Jack iced over a patch of the tunnel in retaliation. "They'd be happy!"

"They'd kill you for meddling." Bunny paused, and looked down at Desmond. "Kill in this case meaning 'subject him to a few hours of lecture about proper teeth brushing habits and another couple hours of sleigh maintenance'."

Desmond's ears came back up.

"You could help me. I'll get the fairies on our side, and make sure North doesn't have any of his snow globes on him-"

"Are you saying you'll pick Nick's pockets?"

"Hey!" Desmond grinned. "That all rhymed."

"Don't help," Bunny said.

"Well, yeah," Jack said. Wasn't it obvious? "Of course I'd pick his pockets. I'm pretty good at it."

"Suddenly I know why you've got the Naughty List record."

Jack huffed. It was a perfect idea. Why would Bunny not go along with it?

Oh, well. He'd try again tomorrow, after he got back from Russia. Again.

He'd never thought he'd get tired of glaciers, but what do you know. He had.

Another day, another heap of centuries old ice and snow.

Jack sighed, and looked around. The glacier was empty of life, as was only to be expected. It was a young one, by glacier standards. Small, too.

"This sucks," he said. He was spending practically all day, every day, wandering around the middle of nowhere. No snow days. No time with the kids down in Burgess. No time with his own son. No time with his friends. Just fly over, look around, half-hope he found General Winter's lair and half-hope he didn't see any sign.

He wished Aleksia would contact him, let him know that the great mirror had finally been repaired, so they could search at a distance. Just because she hadn't known what had made it shatter in the first
place- and the smaller mirrors explode- didn't mean she wouldn't have it figured out by the time it was usable again.

He poked at the glacier's surface with his staff, and sighed. He could be *doing* things. Dragging Desmond all over the US, for one, doing touristy stuff like visit the Grand Canyon (again) or hunting for gold up in Alaska. Not that they ever actually *looked*, but it was an excuse to appreciate the wilderness and romp around in the water and spy on polar bears and Inuit spirits.

Jack sighed again, and turned around. Might as well go ho-

Something hit him over the head. He saw red, then white.

And then nothing at all.
Chapter Twenty

Jack opened his eyes, and nearly panicked.

Pitch Black stood only a few feet away.

After several breathless minutes, though, he realized he was wrong. Pitch wasn't standing; he was dangling.

The Nightmare King hung by his wrists. The chains, and the cuffs, were made of opaque ice. The cuffs were too narrow for the weight put on them; the sharp edges had clearly dug into the man's flesh. Blood had dripped down the visible skin of his arms and dried brown. Likely there was more blood hidden by his close fitting sleeves. The rest of him was hardly better. His face was battered, one eye swollen shut and crusted with more dried blood; blood in his hair; blood dribbling from the corners of his lips and from his broken nose. Had he been conscious, there was a possibility he could have balanced on his toes to take some of the strain off his wrist. Unconscious, muscles lax, his toes barely brushed the floor.

Jack looked around the room. The walls were made out of ice, or hard packed snow, carved to look like cinderblocks. The floor was also snow. It was about five, maybe as much as six feet across, and square. Jack thought Pitch was hung on the west wall, while he was on the east, just like he thought the north wall was the blank, empty one while the south wall had the door in it. That was if his sense of direction wasn't wrong, of course. There were five lights in the room, one in each corner and one in the center of the room, which dispelled most of the shadows. That was for Pitch, Jack thought. The master of shadows could hardly retreat to them if they weren't there.

He studied the lights for a minute, before recognizing them. They were cold lights, powered by a spirit's energy. Technically, Jack could have made his own. Technically, he thought they were stupid. Unfortunately, they didn't tell him anything that the rest of the room hadn't. The orbs glowed a soft, white-blue, which meant it could have been any spirit from the Snow Queen herself to Pele the Volcano Goddess, to North, to... Well, it was a long list.

His staff was propped up in the corner between him and the door. Jack sighed with relief; the sound was very loud in the quiet room. At least no one had broken it, or tried to use it. The chains were made of ice. Even without his staff, he could manipulate his bonds, get free- maybe free Pitch, too, not even he deserved to hang around like that- and then go explain to whoever had whacked him over the head why that was a bad idea.

Jack looked up at the cuffs- and stopped.

They were made out of metal.

Okay. Not impossible. Not the best, because it took forever to get metal of any kind cold enough to warp and twist and finally break, but not at all impossible.

Only it seemed that whoever had captured him, knew about breaking iron and steel with the cold. No matter how cold Jack dropped the temperature- cold enough that across the room Pitch was shaking with it- only the thinnest layer of frost formed on the chains and cuffs.

It was hard to tell, in the dim light but... That had to be the stuff they made the good satellites out of,
the ones that orbited earth. Something-titanium alloy. He thought the other part was gold. Didn't that stuff have trouble freezing or something?

Either way, he wasn't breaking these chains anytime soon.

He let up on the cold, and sighed. Well, this was uncomfortable. His feet weren't anywhere near the floor. At least he didn't have to worry about his hands going numb, or losing circulation.

So. Who had captured him? And why?

Jack stared at the center light. Just going off of where he'd been... General Winter was the obvious choice. He was causing problems already, and he'd done something so that Aleksia's mirror had shattered instead of finding him. And General Winter was a Russian spirit, and Jack had been in Russia...

There was also all the ice and snow around.

But General Winter wasn't the only winter spirit. There was that Father Frost guy, who wasn't worse than the good General. And who thought naughty children should get pneumonia instead of a second chance.

There were probably others, but Jack knew more about North American spirits than the rest of the world. At some point, he'd have to rectify that. Who knew when it'd become important- like, say, now?

Of course, that didn't explain why he'd been captured. Or, for that matter, what Pitch was doing all chained up and beaten.

Pitch didn't look like he'd be waking any time soon. Jack let himself relax, and slip into an odd sort of trance, one similar to his version of non-corpse sleep.

Either the door would open or Pitch would wake up. Jack would be ready to start asking questions then. In the mean time, he would wait and gather his strength.

"Of course it would be you."

Pitch's voice was barely louder than a whisper, but it was enough. Jack looked over, his mind focusing on the here and now.

"Uh, not sure what you mean by that, Pitches. Clarify?"

The Nightmare King's lips twisted in what was probably supposed to pass for a smile. "He does so want a partner. Of course he would choose you."

"As compared to... you?" Well, obviously. "I'm not interested in a partnership."

"No?" This time, Pitch did smile, complete with visible shark teeth and fresh blood coating his lower lip. "Such a strange claim, considering."

"Um, huh?"

"You. And the Easter stew ingredient."

"Rabbit- you are a sick freak." Jack considered blowing chill air at Pitch, but... meh. "And so what? He knows about being a Pooka, Desmond is a Pooka. And you've seriously been spying on me?"
"Not I." Pitch closed his eyes, and if not for the strung up by his arms thing, looked like he would have slumped over. "Him."

"On Bunny?" Jack pulled at the shackles, and managed to lift himself all of an inch. Hm, that was something... Maybe he should try doing like an Olympic gymnast on the rings, pull himself up until he could get his feet against the wall...

Pitch curled his upper lip. "Hardly. He... was spying on you."

Bunny was spying on Jack? Not implausible, but... "For the sake of clarification, how 'bout you tell me who 'he' is?"

Pitch's head drooped. "No doubt... you'll find out soon enough."

Soon enough was at least several hours later.

It was difficult to tell time. Jack had never regretted the lack of heartbeat more. He didn't breathe. Pitch was all the way across the room, and if he had to breathe- he probably did- it was so shallow as to be unnoticeable. The light never wavered. There were no sounds. He'd tried counting, but it hadn't really helped when the cadence lulled him into another trance.

It had to be more than several minutes. Hours seemed about right.

The door opened. Jack breathed in, the first breath he'd taken since Pitch had stopped talking, and looked over.

The man could only have been General Winter.

From the top of his cliché fur hat, whatever the proper name for it was, to his highly polished black, fur-lined boots, he was covered in a sprinkling of ice crystals. Not proper frost, more like he'd gotten snowed on and hadn't brushed it all off yet.

Jack had expected white hair, like his own or North's. Instead, General Winter had dark brown hair, cut short and mostly hidden by the hat. He was clean shaven, with a square jaw and slightly pointed chin. His uniform was similar enough to the old, Soviet dress uniforms that it was clear where the idea had come from; however, instead of the dark gray the Soviets had worn, General Winter's long coat was white with dark brass buttons and braiding.

There was something wrong about the snow on the man's shoulders, his sleeves, but Jack couldn't tell what it was.

"приветствовать, Джек, к мое крепость."

Worse than when North got drunk. At least the Cossack occasionally used English. "I'm sorry," Jack said. "I don't speak Russian."

General Winter frowned, but it was less angry and more disappointed. "I am sorry to hear that," he said. He had an accent, but it was more British than anything. "We shall have to correct that, at a more convenient date. But welcome, Jack, to my fortress, your lack of understanding my language notwithstanding."

Was this a villain? Wasn't he supposed to cackle, not try and make polite conversation?

"I'd feel more welcome without the chains," Jack said, and flexed his fingers in emphasis.
The General shrugged one shoulder. "They are necessary, but one hopes not for long."

"What, you think Stockholm syndrome will help you out?"

Winter smiled. It was small, polite, and showed a minimum of teeth.

Why the hell was Jack feeling so creeped out?

"Not at all." He reached into one pocket, and pulled out... something. Jack couldn't quite see it. Whatever it was, it was small enough to be completely hidden. "I have something that should persuade you."

Not a chance in hell. "Torture won't work," Jack said. He glanced over at Pitch. The man was awake, and watching.

"You mean what happened to the former General?" Winter shrugged again. "He had information I desired. No, I shall persuade you another way. His willingness was not necessary."

Jack clenched his teeth. "How about we cut the crap? I'm not going to help you, join you, or do anything other than beat your face in once these chains come off."

"So you say now." Winter walked closer.

His eyes were black. Completely, from corner to corner, no iris, no white sclera, just. Like someone had blown his pupil up to cover his entire eyeball. It was almost enough to distract Jack from the snow on the General's coat.

He'd thought it was gray. Old, or dirty maybe, or just the light.

It was black, and it wasn't snow.

It was sand.

Considering the implications, Jack thought he kept reasonably calm. "You wanted the nightmare sand," he said.

"From Pitchner? Yes." Winter held his hand out, and opened his fingers. A handful of black sand, somehow quivering with malevolence, rested on his palm. "Pitchner had a good idea, but the execution was flawed, as ever. He sought to corrupt the dreams of children. I have corrupted the dreams of adults, and harvested the fruit therein."

That... sounded appropriately creepy to be a villain speech. "You're not a- a spirit of darkness, or fear, or..."

"And yet the sand is in my veins," Winter said. "As it will be in yours."

"Thanks, but I'll pass."

"You speak as if you have a choice." The sand began to change shape. In moments, General Winter held a black- almost like a sewing needle, if they were as long as someone's hand and as thick as Jack's thumb. "That is why you are chained, Jack."

Then he stabbed the needle in Jack's chest, right over the heart.

Aster's knee jiggled, as he struggled with conflicting urges. On the one paw, Desmond had only just
gotten to sleep, and was at that stage in time when any small motion or sound could wake him back up. On the other, he really, really wanted to pace. Nerves. He wanted to race after Jack, kick whatever the problem was into next week, and he neither knew what was keeping the winter sprite or where Jack was.

It'd been three days. The first day missing, no one had really thought anything of it, even though Desmond had sulked for several hours, and only went to sleep when Sandy stopped by.

The second day, then Aster had gotten worried. Well, he'd already been worried, but on the second day, he'd gotten seriously worried. Evening had come, and gone, and there was still no Jack. Nick had laughed it off, though the man had seemed a little, well, nervous. Not that anything could have gone wrong, of course, but, well, thing did happen... Accidents, and the like.

Discounting the possibility that General Winter, or some other hostile, Russian spirit, had found Jack.

Then they'd hit day three, and Jack still wasn't back. Desmond had cried himself to sleep.

North had gone to ready the sleigh. He'd called in the nine, Christmas-duty reindeer, including Rudolph.

"If we search for General Winter, am wanting best reindeer. Ocher, Violet, Goldenrod and Cyber are good for tests, for easy peasy trips. My eight and Rudolph are best for marathon sprint around world, and with roughest skies."

Aster couldn't even bring himself to complain about having to fly in the sleigh. If he was going to fly, he wanted to transform into a shape with wings, himself, thank you very much. Considering that, several times in the past, he'd done that- and plummeted worse than a stone- that was saying a lot.

He really didn't like heights.

His knee was shaking again. He forced himself to stop, and focused his attention on Desmond.

Poor little mite. The fur on his cheeks was damped down, and even in sleep his face was scrunched up in misery. Every so often one leg would twitch, or a paw would clench, but mostly he was too tired, even now, to move. Perhaps especially now, considering how poorly he'd slept the past two nights.

Golden sand trickled over Aster's shoulder, and brushed over Desmond's forehead. Almost immediately, the kit relaxed, his expression easing. The sand formed into an image of his dream; Jack, obviously Jack, flew down and picked dream-Desmond up, spun him around and cuddled him close. Even as he watched, a dream-Aster stepped up and wrapped an arm around the dream-Jack.

"Sandy?" he murmured. "Are you influencing this dream any?" Did his dream self just nuzzle the top of Jack's head?

Oh, if only.

The Sandman floated into sight, and shook his head in the negative. The dream was Desmond's; all Sandy had done was give him a nudge into deeper, restful sleep, with enough good feelings to promote happy dreams.

"Well then," Aster murmured, and looked away. Dreams were, all too often, a person's inner wishes. He'd respect Desmond's privacy.

Even if he wanted the same thing.
Well, perhaps on occasion a little more adult, but.

Sandy smiled, and patted Aster's shoulder in sympathy.

The study door cracked open, and then Nick tiptoed in with exaggerated care. Tooth, following behind, rolled her eyes and simply flew in.

"He's asleep?" she asked.

"Just. Sandy dosed him a bit, think we don't have to whisper."

Nick sighed, and fingered the hilts of his twin cutlasses. "Good, good. Sleigh is ready. Phil will watch baby bunny, while we go and find Papa Jack."

"Yeah." Aster looked down at Desmond, and then away. The kit was still dreaming about family cuddles, apparently.

The sympathetic looks actually hurt.

He hadn't been that obvious, had he?

Of course he had. The only person - the only individual between the ages of ten and ten-thousand - not to realize how Aster felt was Jack. Obviously.

"Right," he said, and stood up. "Where's Phil?"

The yeti in question chose that exact moment to slam the door open and start yelling.

Aster closed his eyes, and sighed. Desmond chirped, and then whimpered as he woke up and realized that the happy cuddles had been nothing but a dream.

"A-Aunt 'Lexi?" he said.

Aster opened his eyes, and stared at the Snow Queen. She was dressed in white silk and white fur, and he really hoped that wasn't rabbit fur.

"Desmond," she said, and looked around the room. "My great mirror has been repaired. Phil has told me that Jack has gone missing. I offer my mirror to you, that you might find him all the sooner."

"Well, what're we waiting for?" someone asked. After a moment, Aster realized it was him. "Let's go."

Desmond dug his claws in through Aster's fur. "I'm going too."

The Snow Queen stared at her honorary nephew, and inclined her head in a shallow nod. "But of course. You will be quite necessary. Now, let us hurry. Enough time has been spent as it is."

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer- I know nothing about Soviet soldier uniforms. Do not take anything you find here on this subject as fact. I hit up YouTube. Ergo, I might be completely, totally, 100% wrong. Just so you know.
Also, it is awesome that Russian characters, whatever the proper name for them is (crylic?) shows up on AO3.

And finally, Nike and I are co-presidents (there, I think that solves the president/vice-president debate- yes? If no- epic battle to the death?) of the Evil Authors Club. Anyone else want to join?
The Snow Queen's palace wasn't what he expected. Somehow, Aster had thought it'd be more realistic, less... Disney.

The Queen's lips twitched when she saw his expression. "You disapprove?"

"Seems a bit spun sugar," he said. Tooth gasped, and winced.

"Oh, you're right. That's- at least it's made out of ice?"

"The Palace of Ever Winter is not something a small child would wish to eat." She looked down at Desmond.

"I was three," the kit mumbled. "Actually three."

"And I thought your father would attempt killing me. Come."

The palace was empty, of everything but the most necessary of furniture. Aster picked Desmond up, and cradled the kit close.

"Uncle Bunny," Desmond whined. "I'm used to this place."

"In here," the Snow Queen said. She gestured at an open door, then looked in and sighed. "And do not mind the berserker. He's quite tame, so long as you don't poke him."

What? Aster blinked, and shoved North in through the door first.

"How very brave," the Snow Queen murmured. She gestured Tooth in ahead of her; Tooth went, but not before glaring at Aster.

The berserker was apparently Desmond's "Uncle 'Mari", or the Snow Queen's wondersmith consort, Ilmari. He was an older gentleman, with blonde hair going gray, a long beard, ready smile, and the double-headed axe he held weighed at least eighty pounds if it weighed an ounce.

They all gathered around what could only be the 'great mirror', an eight foot tall construction of ice. Magic, old and new, made the air in the room thick and heavy, and most of all, cold. Only to be expected, of course, but it made Aster wish for a scarf, a coat, gloves, and boots that both fit, and didn't hurt a Pooka's feet.

The Snow Queen gestured at Aster. "Let Desmond approach the mirror."

He sighed, but put Desmond down. The kit's fur was as flat as it could get, which wasn't much, his ears down and his whiskers back. He shook a little as he approached the mirror, then it took him a minute to actually look in it. Aster didn't push, though.

Nick leaned forward. "This is mirror that shows evil in world?" he asked.

"No." The Snow Queen shook her head. Her consort rested one hand on her shoulder. "My predecessor had such a mirror, but it shattered a long time ago. A very long time ago. Two very brave children were the cause, as can only be expected. It is not wise to try and block true love. It
never ends well."

Tooth shook her head, and edged closer to the mirror. "So what does this one show, then?"

"Whatever I wish it to. Or, if someone other than I were to look into it, that which is closest to their heart."

Desmond keened, the high sound cutting through the conversation like a knife. "Papa! I see Papa, and he's hurt!"

Then he burst into tears.

"Des!" Aster all but threw himself onto the floor beside the kit, and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "It'll be alright. That's why we're here, to fix this."

The Snow Queen knelt down on Desmond's other side. "Aster is right," she said. Aster jumped, and stared at her. How had she known his name? He hadn't used it in several thousand years now.

She looked up at him, and raised one perfectly arched eyebrow. Was that where Jack had gotten his expressive eyebrows? "Desmond, did you see anything else?"

"N-no. Just Papa. He's bleeding, he's not supposed to bleed!"

"Quite," the Queen murmured, and stood up. "Aster, are you willing to look into the mirror? Knowing that, should you see Jack, you will see his pain?"

"Might see where he's held, too," he pointed out. Still, he would have rather done almost anything than look into that mirror. "Alright."

After a moment, he handed Desmond over to Tooth, who immediately started crooning to the sprog. Then he looked.

The mirror clouded over, turned white, and then the image appeared, fading in as if a great bank of fog was pulling away. A lot of white remained; after a bit of study, Aster concluded it was snow. Rather like the Snow Queen's palace, in fact, only somehow managing to be much less friendly.

That might've been the blood on the floor.

"I see Jack," he said. He controlled his voice. There was a lot of blood on the floor. "His chest... Looks like that's where he's wounded. The blood's freezing, so I'd guess it's his. He's chained up."

"And he's not alone."

"Who is he with?" the Snow Queen asked. Her voice seemed to come from a long way away.

"Pitch."


"Very good. Can you pull away, look to see who holds them?"

Pull away? Away from Jack? But if it meant finding out who'd done this... "Yes," he said, even as his ears went back. He could.

"Then look away from Jack. Look at where he is being held. There is a door, is there not?"
"Yes." He licked his lips, and turned his attention to the door. "It's made of wood. The walls are ice."

"Go through the door, Aster. Where are you now?"

"A hallway. There's witch-orbs hanging from the ceiling." Funny, he hadn't seen those things in decades. At least decades. Possibly longer.

"Follow the hallway. Find the master of this prison."

Aster nodded, and watched the hallway go by. There were doors, spaced wide, all made of wood set in the snow walls. At first, he thought he'd chosen to go the wrong way.

Then he saw the man.

"I see someone." He was dressed in a military fashion. There was something wrong with his eyes. "He looks- Nick, those old Russian uniforms you complained about. The Soviets."

"General Winter wears Soviet costume." What, was Nick standing at the bottom of a well? Aster could barely hear him!

"He's walking towards me."

"Calm," the Snow Queen urged. "He cannot see you. Follow him."

The General walked down the hall, past Aster- past his viewpoint- and past the door to Jack's cell. Aster considered checking in on Jack, but no. No, he had to follow General Winter. He had to see where he was, so they could rescue Jack.

It would be better to see Jack in person.

First he had to follow General Winter, see where he was.

"Where is the general going, Aster?"

"Up some stairs." A lot of stairs. "There's a door. It's bigger, made out of ice. There are... people? Those aren't people. They're opening the doors."

"What are they?"

Monsters. Each one was fifteen feet tall, literally nothing but skin and matted hair stretched over bones. He saw fangs, like a boar's tushes, poking out from behind their lips. Their eyes, sunken and shadowed by heavy eyebrows, glowed red. Thankfully they wore loincloths.

They cowered at the general's approach, and scrambled to open the doors when he gestured at them.

"I think they're Wendigo," he said. Jack had mentioned them once, in passing. A list of 'things I do not want to run into in a forest', between a mama bear with her cubs and something about rabid squirrels?

"And they're... doormen?"

"Yeah, looks like."

He didn't hear anything else, so he continued to watch. General Winter walked through the open doors, to a courtyard. It was full of- people, though at least these were nearly human.
"There's a lot of... I don't know if those are sprites or constructs."

"Describe them."

"They're all wearing uniforms, like the general's only with less braid. They all look identical."

"Constructs, then."

"They're all carrying weapons. Guns."

"What else can you tell me?"

"They stand in a block, ten by ten. There are ten blocks. They don't move."

They made his fur crawl. There was something horribly, appallingly unnatural about those unmoving soldiers. He looked closer at one, and shivered. Their eyes were, one and all, completely black.

"Can you pull away from the prison, Aster? Can you see where in Russia it is?"

Yes. If it got him away from those soldiers, yes. He began to pull away, up. He reached out to the side when the compound began to dwindle, and clutched someone's arm. He felt his claws dig into flesh, but didn't look away from the mirror. He could apologize later.

The compound became little more than a spec, and then vanished entirely. He could see coastline now, and pulled back a little more. And a little more.

"He's not in Russia," he said. The fur on his neck and shoulders was all on end. "He's in Sør-Spitsbergen National Park."

He heard the Snow Queen curse, a long way's off. "Thank you, Aster. I need you to look away from the mirror. We know where he is, and where Jack is. Look away from the mirror."

"But- Jack!"

"If you do not look away, you will not rescue him. And he will die."

It hurt, looking away. Like yanking his paw off frozen metal, or clutching a chunk of ice tightly enough to drive shards into his palm. He staggered, and nearly fell. Nick caught him; Nick was the one whose arm he'd been gouging.

"Do not look back at mirror," Nick murmured. "Come, this way."

The Cossack all but carried Aster some distance away from the thing. The further away they got, the easier it was for Aster to breathe. "What- what happened?"

"You looked in mirror. Then, as if in trance, you tell us what you see."

Sand rustled, and began to card through his fur. Normally Aster would've snapped at that- it took forever to brush the sand back out again- but not this time. This time he needed the good feelings that came from contact with dreamsand, though if Sandy tried to put him to sleep he'd kick the bloke through the next wall.

That must have been obvious from his expression. Sandy smiled at him, and kept carding the sand through his fur.

"Desmond's asleep," Tooth said, and flew over. "The Snow Queen had one of her brownies take
him to his room, here."

That answered that question, and before he could ask it. "Did any of you see... what I saw?"

Nick and Tooth both shook their heads, but Sandy, Sandy looked him in the eye.

And nodded.

The blood was frozen. It fell to the ground in pieces, each one round and pitted like a hailstone. Mostly, the pieces were red, though black sand glittered throughout.

There was less blood falling now. And more sand.

"So what we've got to do is get to this national park- how'd I even know the name, anyways?"

The Snow Queen fed one of the reindeers- Comet or Blaze or Silver or something- an apple slice. 
"You obtain knowledge through the mirror, sometimes. For one untrained in such magic, you did not do poorly."

"Right, right. Why're you coming along?"

"And Ilmari." She turned and looked up at Aster. "I feel somewhat responsible for General Winter's existence. It is time, I should think, to correct my error."

Her eyes were glittering in an unnerving manner. Aster decided not to press any further.

"Well, fine. But your De Facto?"

"Jackson was right," she muttered. "You really don't speak proper English. Ilmari is coming because I am. And you may need his aid in the battle ahead. He is a wondersmith, and an old fashioned hero."

He couldn't even bristle at it, because that was all too likely. He'd seen those ranks of soldiers, armed with guns of all things. Spirits didn't work with guns; most fighting was done through the use of elemental powers or energy based attacks. Both of which were channeled far more effectively through things like swords, or staffs. Aster's boomerangs and exploding eggs were a bit of a stretch, but he made up for their lack of comparative oomph with his knowledge of tactics and hand to hand combat.

If General Winter had armed his construct soldiers with guns, then they would be using real bullets. That was the only explanation.

A gun shot by a human, who didn't believe, wouldn't hurt them.

A gun shot by a spirit, or sprite, or whatever those things technically were... would.

"Constructs are easy enough to destroy, as they are not alive. Not even as much as an elemental sprite." The Snow Queen stroked the reindeer's neck. "If damaged, they will fall apart. This I know."

"And if you're somehow wrong?"

She looked up at him again. "That, Aster, is why Ilmari is going with you."
You know, I'd probably write more if I weren't so tired all the time. That's the one real downside of my job- I get up early. (As compared to, you know, halfway to noon.) Doesn't help that I can't seem to sleep properly through the night... Oh, well. I know who to blame, too. (Yes, Guardians, look innocent- I KNOW WHO TO BLAME! Stop giving me ideas at three in the morning!)

Storming the castle's up next! (Or... is it?)
"I will admit," Pitch murmured. "I am surprised."

Jack couldn't look up. Not that he didn't want to, because the view sucked, but he could not lift his head. He couldn't even roll his eyes.

The floor beneath him was covered in blood. Some of it was liquid; most was frozen; it was all tainted with the black sand. The front of his hoodie, besides being ripped, was saturated with the red liquid, covered in streaks of sand, and otherwise destined for the trash heap. It wasn't fair. He'd managed to keep his clothes, despite North's best efforts to replace them, ever since becoming a Guardian. So... Nearly a year and a half, then.

Now he'd actually have to wear that new hoodie North had gotten him for Christmas.

That just. It just wasn't fair.

Jack had a feeling the blood loss was making him a little loopy. Which also wasn't fair, because he didn't have a pulse.

What good did his blood do him? Really!

Blood loss shouldn't have been making him loopy. It just sat there, after all, didn't take oxygen to his muscles or anything sensible like that. He was pretty sure that most of the time, it was nothing but red slush. Like a cherry slushie drink. Those were pretty good, even if he couldn't drink them.

"Jack. Jack!"

What, did Pitch actually sound worried?

Jack grunted in reply, and managed to move his eyeballs. He was stuck looking at Pitch's feet, but hey, better than all the blood.

"Frost, are you still alive?"

Was he? "Nuh."

"What do you mean, no?"

Something. There was something about... Oh, right. "Drowned."

"You... And he brought you back?" Pitch's feet twitched. "And people say I'm crazy. Jack, the sand isn't in you anymore. Why not?"

It was so hard to think. And- he didn't want to tell Pitch, did he? The man was the Nightmare King. He'd use it. Later. Against Jack, against the Guardians. But- but he sounded worried. That was worried, right? Why would he be worried?

If Jack died... Oh. Pitch would be alone again, with General Winter. And that wouldn't end well for anybody, Jack had seen the broken nose and the blood.
He was cold. Cold in a horribly familiar way.

Panic gave him a little strength, enough to lift his head and suck in a few unnecessary breaths. His lungs responded; good, for a while there, before the exhaustion hit, he'd thought the sand had sliced into a lung. Certainly it'd nicked his heart. Another reason why he was so tired.

"I get... cold," he said. "Really cold. And that, it makes the liquid in my blood expand, pushes it out through the first available hole- the injury." At least, that was how it'd worked for poison, those few times he'd ticked off Rattler. Mortal snakes avoided him when possible, while Rattler was a spirit, and vindictive.

Dump snow on a guy's head, once, when he was overheating to death, and he hated you forever.

"Thus carrying out the sand," Pitch said. "How inventive. So, you are dead?"

"I'm the only one allowed to make zombie jokes." How much of the exhaustion and the cold was from the injury? He healed, he knew how he healed, it was stupid and unnatural and nothing at all like anyone alive- obviously- and he hated it. So, was it just his flesh knitting back together, like ice melting and resealing over a crack, or had the effort of expelling the nightmare sand just pushed him to his first sleep of the year?

He could not afford to sleep now. Not here, not like this, not when General Winter could walk through that door at any moment.

Not with Pitch in the same room. Jack didn't dream when he was dead, but he had a feeling that if anything would cause it, it'd be Pitch's presence.

And then he'd have nightmares.

"Very well. No zombie jokes." Pitch licked his lips, and looked towards the doorway. "He'll come back, you know. And you won't be corrupted."

"No." Jack clenched his teeth, and drew on his energy. It felt like he'd summoned the biggest storm in history, even counting the last ice age. Still, it'd hopefully be enough for him to stay awake, though he had a feeling he'd be going into a cationic state, just to recover a little strength, sometime soon. "Did you corrupt him?"

Pitch sighed, and closed his eyes. "What goes together better than dark and cold? I was not at my best. And he seemed... eager... to join his powers with mine."

Jack clenched his teeth. "He wanted the nightmare sand," he said. "He used you."

"I had noticed." The Nightmare King glared, but it had little force with both his eyes blacked and swollen. "He was never meant to be a spirit of darkness. Of winter, and death, but not of darkness as I am."

"I know," Jack said, and let show, just for a moment, all the things he always kept locked up inside. Sometimes, the darkness didn't need to be kept out. Sometimes, it needed to be kept in. Otherwise you followed a man who'd hurt a girl, just a little girl, who'd screamed for her mother to save her while he strangled her, and then he did the stupid thing and went out into the forest at night, in winter.

Jack didn't have a working heart, but he knew he still had a soul. And some of the things he'd done had eaten away at it, even if Desmond had helped seal over the cracks.
Pitch looked away first. "Well, you've seen... It will destroy him. Eventually."

"I rather think my friends will show up first, so eventually won't have a chance."

"They won't be able to find him." Pitch closed his eyes again. "He is no longer... as he should be. Any attempts will be blocked by the sand he's taken."

That could be problematic, but Jack hadn't meant only the Guardians. "We'll see. Want to make a bet?"

"What?"

"A bet. A wager. I win, you do something for me. You win, I do something for you. We'll have rules, of course, things we can't ask for, but. You in?" Wow, raising his eyebrows hurt.

And was harder than it should have been. Jack really, really didn't want to fall asleep right now. Dead, he didn't think his body would be able to force out the sand.

Pitch stared at him, blinked, and then continued staring. "You beat me?"

"Uh, no, the face art was done by General Winter."

"I meant on Easter!"

"Oh, then." Jack tilted his head to the side, which was actually harder than it should have been, because his arms were in the way. He had to do something about those chains. "What do you mean, I beat you? I sure wasn't alone!"

"The egotistical four never would have been able to face me if you hadn't taken the lead." Pitch tried to sneer, but it only made blood start to drip from his nose again.

"I'm pretty sure Bunny's the one that wiped the floor with you. I broke my thumb."

The Nightmare King glowered, and looked away.

Jack let his head drop down so his chin was against his collarbone, and he was stuck staring at frozen blood.

Time blurred on him. He didn't feel any better when it went back to normal, but that might have been because General Winter had just entered the room.

"Каков Исландия эта?" The General hooked one finger under Jack's chin, and lifted. "You are not tainted."

Jack grinned. He was pretty sure he had blood on his teeth. "No."

The General looked down at the floor, and stirred the frozen blood with one foot. "I see. The sand would not work on you at all, would it?"

"I will not be like you." He could. Anyone could. But Jack wouldn't.

General Winter scowled. He let go of Jack's chin, and began to pace back and forth in the room.

Jack closed his eyes, and concentrated. He had nothing. He didn't think he'd even be able to set frost on the walls, and they were made of ice. He was chained up, exhausted, about to fall asleep. What he needed... What he needed was for General Winter to kill him. It'd be temporary, Jack was pretty sure
about that, because he died every single year and every single year he woke up again. So... Some wound that he'd be able to heal from, because there wasn't anything yet he couldn't, a good excuse for why he'd turned into a frozen corpse for a week, and then maybe he'd be out of the chains and able to beat the General's face in like he'd promised.

It was a stupid, crappy plan. He knew it. But what other options did he really have?

"You should just give up," Jack said. He grinned again. "Seriously, you're toast. There is no one, absolutely no one, you haven't pissed off by now. Snow? In June? They're going to drag you over the coals, then give you to some of the summer spirits to play with."

"Be silent," the General ordered. "I have not finished with you yet. I did wonder if this might happen." He gestured at Jack, and shrugged. "I felt it happen with myself, but ah, I embraced the change, my friend. I had thought you wiser, but apparently you cling to your foolishness, your attachments."

"And I had thought you'd started out as a human, but I guess you're just a semi-sentient bag of scum."

The next Jack knew, his face hurt. His cheek throbbed, where—had General Winter slapped him? Not even a punch— a freaking slap?

"You hit like a girl," he said, even with one half of his face going numb.

There was probably a reason for that. Jack didn't think you could break your thumb by slapping someone. So... yeah, girls slapped, and that meant they didn't break their thumbs, and men went around with crooked fingers because they had to punch things.

Was this what having a concussion felt like?

"My dear Jack, you need not worry." The General hooked one finger under Jack's chin again. "There is more than one way to corrupt. If sand does not work, then I simply need to work in our element, hm?"

Then he lifted up two shards of ice. They were completely clear, looked almost exactly like thin shards of glass, and Jack wanted to scream at the sight of them.

"What-?"

"I understand you are friends with Snow Queen Aleksia." General Winter's face twisted a moment. There was rage there, but also fear. "Her predecessor was much better, I think. Her mirror showed truth, and she had ice that made it possible for one to see truth at all times. Aleksia destroyed that mirror, and the ice, but what one can do, another can copy and make better, yes?"

"You made- those are-"  

"Shards of ice, that will freeze your heart and allow you to see all the evil in the world, yes."

Wow. Jack hadn't actually come across something that made him wish to be really, truly, honestly dead before.

"Don't. Please."

General Winter sighed, and shook his head. "You will be useful to me. I would rather you work for me willingly. This is how." He tightened his grip on Jack's chin. "Do not be ashamed to scream. This
Aster clenched his teeth until the muscles in his jaw and neck all hurt. The flight to the Unpronounceable National Park had been horrific, Nick doing his best to impress the two guests. The snowstorm likely didn't help, the nine reindeer having to strain to pull the sleigh in a more or less straight line.

Unpronounceable National Park? He'd been around Jack too long. Not that such a thing was possible, but still...

"There!" Nick yelled, to be heard over the howling wind. "Down there, you see? Is Sør-Spitsbergen!"

Of course Nick could pronounce the name.

He felt the touch of warm sand on his arm, and looked over. Sandy nodded to him. Right. Sandy had his back; Sandy would help him tear his way through General Winter's forces, through the fortress, until he could hold Jack safe and sound in his arms...

Aster nodded back, and turned to stare at the land they were approaching way too fast for comfort.

"Brace yourselves!"

The sleigh touched down with a jolt that threatened to toss everyone out. Only Sandy, who made rollercoaster belts out of his sand, of all things, kept them in. At the speed they were going, hitting the ground would've been worse than just painful.

The storm had things in near whiteout conditions. Aster squinted, and hunched his shoulders against the wind. It yanked at his fur, shoved at the sleigh and made the whole thing slide sideways, and even stole Nick's hat.

Wait.

"Nick! Go with the wind! I think it's trying to get us to Jack!"

Jack talked to the element as if it were a person. Maybe it was, in a way, or enough like a dog that it felt loyalty to the winter spirit. If that were so, it might cut down on hours of searching.

"Ja!" Nick hauled on the reins, and the reindeer swung in a wide arc, until the wind was at their back and speeding them along.

The sleigh hit something- a log buried under the snow, maybe a rock, maybe just a ridge of earth and stone- and was briefly and unintentionally airborne. It landed hard, and Aster was flung forward onto the floor. He snarled, and clawed his way up onto his hind legs. It'd be easier to stand, he decided. Faster to get off when they reached the fortress, too.

He had no idea how Nick could see where they were going. Trees lunged up and at them from out of the blowing snow. At any moment, it felt like they could go headfirst into a pine, and wouldn't that be fun?

"There, ahead. Do you see, Bunny? Is General Winter's fortress! Now we will give that байстроюк what for!"
Bunny smirked, and fingered the pouch of explosive eggs. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, we can."

Jack keened under his breath. It hurt. His face- his eyes-

His memories.

*never see you never hear you never touch you never ever*

He had to- had to- if he looked up, if he looked, he'd see it. Pitch. Pitch was in the cell with him he could not look at Pitch he had had he'd seen-

*they were Pooka he recognized Pooka they were dying they were dead they were gone*

-so he couldn't look at Pitch. His throat already hurt from screaming so much.

Memories. The shards couldn't taint memories. His sister, Emma, he'd *saved* her-

*dead why dead why am i dead it's YOUR FAULT YOU KILLED ME*

-NO! Not Emma, not his sister, she was tied to too much pain. He loved her-

*KILLED ME*

-but he couldn't remember her, not like that. Not like she was some desperately scheming shrew, who *knew* he'd rescue her and go through the ice- NO!

The kids, his kids, they saw him! They-

*grasping greedy always after snow after getting out of school using him*

-THEY BELIEVED IN HIM!

Jack sobbed, and shook his head frantically. The shards were interfering with him, he was drowning. He was drowning!

"God," he gasped. But there was no god, was there, not for him. Not for a murderer and a sinner and especially not him because he didn't like women like that, did he? Pastor Brown said that was a sin, and they'd stoned that man over in Berwick and Jack didn't want to be stoned, he wanted to be a *good* boy but-

"Stop it!" Pastor Brown was *dead*. Three hundred years! And times had changed! He wasn't bad!

"HELP ME!"

Desmond! There was nothing bad about his son. Nothing the shards could taint or twist! Desmond was his son, his beautiful son, who *loved* him and he loved right *back* and-

*always so hard not enough food it wasn't fair Jack didn't even eat but he had to steal and scrounge and couldn't play had to be responsible tied down by this squirming helpless thing and why it wasn't fair it wasn't fair IT WASN'T FAIR*

"STOP IT!"

HE DIDN'T WANT TO SEE ANYMORE!
Jack thrashed against the chains, kicked and shook his head and it wasn't helping none of it was helping everything was twisting he was drowning and it was so cold he was drowning there was ice water in his lungs "HELP ME!" and he was dying and he didn't want to die please

oh god please I DON'T WANT TO DIE! he couldn't stand this anymore it was all twisting and no this was WRONG PLEASE MAKE IT STOP and why wouldn't it stop he needed it to stop

his memories grasping and greedy weren't supposed to be why did it have to be him why couldn't it be someone else like this he loved his children he loved his son he loved his sister he

I DON'T WANT TO SEE ANY MORE!

needed to gouge out his eyes wasn't that in the story

*pain so much pain why was he in pain

*ice in his lungs, in his throat, in his stomach, in his veins

*screaming his name and no one heard

*believe in me believe in me why won't you believe in me i'm right here

"BUNNY!"

Chapter End Notes

This is why I'm co-president of the evil authors club. (Also? Google Translate is AWESOME SAUCE.)

That is all.
Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was too easy to kill the constructs.

They shattered when he hit them. They charged at him, with their guns, with their numbers, and didn't have the sense to run away.

He killed them, and it wasn't enough.

It. Was not. Enough.

He could not get through.

One of him against a hundred constructs, and they were still outnumbered. But there were still one hundred constructs, in his way. He had to kill each one before he could move forward, and by then there were a hundred more.

There were others (he knew them, didn't he? Surely) helping to thin the numbers, but there was only so much they could do.

Aster smashed down another construct, grabbed a second and threw it into a third. They shattered on impact with the ground, and he stepped over the uniforms and the chunks of snow.

There had been guns. Emphasis on had. The- the- Snow Queen, that was right- had done something to freeze them all so they were useless. There were still a few working rifles about, but the constructs had all the intellect of a turnip, so even those were being used more as clubs than anything.

It was good. He had the feeling that the bullets would have slowed him down too much. The fight was taking too long as it was.

He tore through another five, and snarled at the remains. He had something more important to do, and they were getting in his way. They were wasting his time, and they had to die, but that would take even more time!

Frustrating.

He snarled, and stalked towards another group of charging constructs. How dared they? How-

The ground rumbled, and he crouched down, looking for the threat.

Spikes of ice, as tall as he was and as thick as his torso, thrust up out of the ground.

Jack?

No. Not Jack. That woman, the Snow Queen. He snarled at her, she wasn't the one he wanted to see, and then charged through the sudden tangle of ice and broken constructs.

It got him closer to the enemy's fortress than he'd yet reached. Nearly to the front doors. He looked back, once. The constructs were crowding in on the others. Perhaps the two flying ones (Sandy and Tooth) could have reached him, but they were staying with their land-bound companions. Good.

This was something he wanted to do alone.
He turned back to the doors, and hissed. There were two more obstacles. Big, ugly, humanoid things. Wendigo? Sounded right.

Well, soon they'd be corpses.

"I'll give you one chance to run," he said, voice rasping in his throat.

The Wendigo lifted clubs, one each, and began to walk towards him.

"Fine." He grinned. This was going to be fun.

He dodged the first swing, then the second, and punched the Wendigo on the left. It was like hitting a tree. He cursed, and jumped back to get some space.

The buggers were fast. Fast enough that he couldn't rely on unthinking rage. He had to do more than just react to their attacks.

Annoying. Unthinking rage was great, when you didn't want to worry. When you were trying to save the hostage before the bad guys slit his throat.

Thinking meant counting the seconds. Each one a chance for General Winter to...

No. It would not happen.

He wouldn't let it.

"You're in my way," he told the two Wendigo.

The one on the left grunted, hoisted its club, and charged.

Aster threw one of his explosive googies, and ducked under the swinging club. He kicked the Wendigo in the back of the thigh, sending it face forward into the ground.

That took one out, momentarily. Number two- argh!

The club was spiked with icicles, like nails. The tip of one scratched over the back of one ear, and he was pretty sure there might've been blood.

He tossed a boomerang to one side- calculate the angles, always, this was why no one played pool with him- and leapt up.

He landed on the Wendigo's shoulders. It roared, and flailed its arms for balance. Aster hooked his paws under the creature's chin, took a breath, then twisted to the side and dropped off.

Vertebrae cracked, crunched, and finally snapped.

The headless body thumped to the ground, seeming in slow motion. Aster threw the head down beside one out flung arm, and looked at the next.

He raised one paw, just in time to catch the returning boomerang.

The remaining Wendigo had a scratch on its jaw. So, boomerang could cut, but not really do much damage. Fair enough. He'd expected that, hadn't he?

The Wendigo looked from him, to the corpse, and back. Then, instead of doing the smart thing, it lifted its club and charged him.
Aster grinned, and tapped the ground. There was too much perma-frost for the hole to get very deep, but it was enough for the Wendigo to fall in. Not headfirst, more the pity, but still. There was a crunch when the hole closed up, and that was good enough for him.

He looked back at where the others were fighting the constructs, then turned and headed for the fortress doors.

He kicked at where they joined up, and they swung open and crashed back against the walls. He huffed at the noise, and then stalked through and down the hall.

Aster remembered watching General Winter in the mirror. He knew where Jack's cell was. He just had to get there, get Jack, and get out.

Jack... Be okay. Just be okay.

If Jack wasn't okay... There'd been blood. Damn it, this was why he preferred to handle hostage situations while incoherent and unthinking with rage!

He rounded a corner, and stopped. General Winter, too, stopped, with his hand on the cell door. Jack's cell.

"Get away from there."

General Winter looked at the door, and smirked. "Итак, вы кролика. Хорошо встретиться с вами."

Aster stalked forwards, the fur on his shoulders bristling. "I'll admit, got no idea what you just said. Get. Away. From. The door." He cracked his neck. "Now."

"Ah, another incompetent that cannot understand Russian," General Winter said. His accent was Russian by way of England, just similar enough to Nick's to be jarring. He pulled a saber, iron and well maintained, and tilted the blade at him.

"Incompetent? I'm not the one who's going to be a smear on the ice."

"Indeed?" The General smiled, and Aster smiled right back. "Are you so certain of that?"

"We'll just have to see, won't we?"

General Winter charged first, caught Aster by surprise. Not by much. The Pooka bounced off a wall and hit the ground behind the General, his move far more surprising. He smirked at the General's stunned expression.

"You don't want to race a rabbit, mate."

"I do not want to race at all. Now, why don't you hold still? I would hate to be made clumsy with this knife of mine."

Aster's grin widened. "That's not a knife." He pulled his own blade, a knife called a 'toothpick' by the humans of his country. Nick had gotten it for him, for Christmas. "That's a knife."

The toothpick was sixteen inches of hardened steel, capable of carving a solid chunk out of that outdated hunk of iron the General was wielding, short enough for defense and long enough that it was almost a short sword. It was similar enough to a German or Scandinavian saxe knife that General Winter could probably recognize the design.
"At least you have an honorable weapon. So... shall we?"

Behind that cell door, Jack could be bleeding to death while General Winter talked. But if Aster didn't take him out, then he'd be stabbed in the back the moment he tried to go through the door.

So he'd have to do this quickly, then.

He didn't wait for the General to go on the attack again. Aster moved forward, and started raining down blows.

Overhand, side cut, thrust, thrust, another side cut, other side, overhand, a jab at the man's legs. General Winter scrambled to try and keep up, but by his expression he was just realizing how fast Aster could move, and how much better a knife was for this speed than a sword.

Aster drew blood on the General's wrist. Lucky hit, not something he'd actually tried for, but blood was blood and his was up.

"Ублюдок!" General Winter swung the sword at neck height. He only looked angrier when Aster swayed out of the way with room to spare.

"Language," he chided. "Didn't your mother ever teach you manners?"

"I killed her." The General moved forward, his sword beginning to spin and twirl in some complicated sword dance. It was just complicated enough Aster had to back up, in order to get a better view and keep from losing important limbs. All he had to do, though, was figure out the pattern, because this was something with a pattern, instead of-

There! He brought the knife up, and the iron sword hit the shorter, steel blade with a resounding clang.

Aster got General Winter on the chin with a beauty of a left hook. The General was actually lifted in the air and thrown back into the closer wall. He blinked, and then fell to his knees. The sword fell out of his hand, and he tumbled over onto his side, unconscious.

Aster lowered his knife, and winced. In the fight, he hadn't noticed, but General Winter had gotten him a few times on the ribs. Nothing too bad, only a couple nicks, but they'd drawn blood and hurt like anything.

"Well," he said, and slid his knife back into its sheath. "That was fun."

Jack. Enough time wasted, he had to get to Jack!

The cell door wasn't locked and good thing too. In the mood he was in, he would've kicked it off its hinges.

The first thing he saw, sadly, was Pitch. The Boogieman was chained up and looked properly frightened, so Aster felt safe enough in ignoring him.

Jack...

"Oh," he breathed, and crossed the room in three steps. "Jack..."

The winter spirit whimpered, didn't look up. His lips were moving, but he wasn't saying anything.

Aster reached over and cupped Jack's cheek in one paw. There was blood, all over Jack's face. What had Winter done to him?
Jack flinched at the contact, and then lifted his head a little. His eyes were red, and blood was steadily leaking from them, like tears. For a moment, he didn't seem to recognize Aster, then he gasped and strained his neck to lean closer.

"Bunny?" His voice was hoarse, and so quiet even Aster could barely hear him. "Bunny? You- I can look at you. It doesn't hurt."

"What'd the General do, Jack?" Aster asked. He looked up at the cuffs, and scowled. He'd have to pick them. Fortunately, it looked like the locks were something he could get with his knife, no specialty tools required.

Jack didn't seem to notice the blade wiggling close to his wrist. He was all too focused on staring at Aster's face. He was a wreck, a complete and utter wreck, and there was no way Aster would let Desmond see his Papa like this. Aster didn't want to see Jack like this. The bloke was literally covered in blood- and when he got Jack down out of the chains, he realized that Jack's shoulders were both dislocated, too, from hanging like that, and possibly from thrashing about.

"Jack? C'mon, mate, what'd he do to you?"

Jack shook his head, and pressed against Aster's chest. One hand, shaking and with barely any strength, gripped the fur on Aster's neck; the other seemed supposed to go around the Pooka's back, but Jack couldn't quite make it move proper.

"Do you," Pitch asked, surprising Aster and making Jack flinch. "Know anything... about the shards the- the Snow Queen... puts in the eye? All the evils..."

The General had put those shards in Jack's eyes?

Aster snarled, and curled over Jack. He'd find the others. In a bit. When Jack had calmed down.

Until then he'd just hold his- his friend, his best friend, and think of the all the ways he'd make General Winter hurt for what he'd done.

Chapter End Notes

You do NOT want to know how long it took for me to write this chapter. I had all day. It TOOK all day. Bleeping bleep bleep bleeping BLEEP fight scenes! -snarling- It's all one scene, how can I handle all one scene?!

Also, Google Translate? Is God.

That is all.
Chapter Twenty-Four

For the second time in as many minutes, Tooth edged closer to Jack and Bunny, and was snarled at for her trouble.

Nick wanted nothing more than to draw them all—Tooth, so downcast she couldn't even fly; Bunny, protective and desperate; and Jack, poor Jack, barely aware of his surroundings—into a hug, to protect them from all the hurts with his own body. He could not, of course. Some things were beyond even Santa Claus' ability.

In lieu of what he wished to do, he stood guard over Pitch Black, who had at last been freed from the chains of ice, only to be wrapped in golden sand. The Nightmare King did not seem inclined to struggle, or indeed do more than blink now and again. He was a broken man, in Nick's opinion. It was the perfect time to enact a plan the four of them had hammered out, some long centuries past. When Jack was better, they would have to fill him in, should it work.

General Kozmotsis Pitchner had once been a good man. Of them all, Sandy would be able to tell if there was a good man yet beneath the nightmares. If there was, well, Nick had been willing to take a chance then, and thought he was still willing now. If there wasn't... Of them all, Sandy would go to Nick, who had done that which was hard, many times before. And would again, many times from now.

He sighed, and looked over when the cell door opened again. The small space had become very crowded, not only with the two former prisoners and Bunny, but with Tooth, Sandy, and Nick himself. Any more people, and he did not think they would be able to avoid crowding Bunny. That would not go over well; the Pooka had a kick like a kangaroo, complete with potential for disembowelling by vicious hind claws.

The Snow Queen, Lady Aleksia, stood in the doorway. She glanced around the cell, her gaze lingering on Jack. Thankfully she smiled when Bunny snarled at her. Nick did not care to think what the lady would do when irked.

"Nicholas. Might we speak outside? You as well, Toothiana."

Nick glanced at Tooth, and gestured her ahead of him. They joined Lady Aleksia and her consort in the hallway, though Ilmari seemed more concerned with pointing his axe blade at General Winter's prone form. What the former bandit wouldn't give to have seen that fight! General Winter, with all his years of fighting any that stood still long enough to swing a blade at, and Bunny, a warrior longer than the Earth itself had breathed!

It would have been very one sided, very amusing to see the general go splat. If only it had not come about by such tragic circumstances.

"What do you want to talk about?" Tooth asked. Her wings fluttered once, then stilled against her back. He longed to reach over, but no, she did not need his useless fussing.

"General Winter will be taken into my custody." Lady Aleksia glanced over at the fallen man, and smiled. There was no kindness there, no gentle warmth as when she spoke of Jack, or looked at Desmond. No, it was the face of Winter itself she turned upon the man, and Nick actually shivered to
see it. "If there is aught to salvage, I will do so. However, should there be nothing worthwhile left of him, I shall strip him of his magic and let him age as he should have done centuries ago."

Without his magic, General Winter would wither and die in the space of hours, considering how old he was. It was a fate Nick would not have wished on any save his most dishonorable of enemies. Thankfully for his conscience, General Winter was very dishonorable.

It was not good of him, he knew, but the thought of the general's fate would be a warm one on nights when he could not sleep.

"That's..." Tooth bit her lip, and clasped her hands in front of her. "I suppose you'll do what you think is best."

Lady Aleksia inclined her head in a shallow nod. "There is one other matter. I am sure you have noticed how Jack is... acting?"


"I believe, and hope to shortly confirm, that General Winter used a- a weapon, one my predecessor favored."

"A weapon?" Tooth asked. "What sort of... We know about the mirror, of course, but...?"

"The stories claim they were shards of that mirror. Rather, they were slivers of ice that made one see all the evils in the world. Every dark act, even to the point of twisting one's memories. There would be no joy, no wonder-" Lady Aleksia glanced at him, "-and eventually, no hope. The victim would be reduced to gouging out their eyes to try and retain their sanity, if they had not actually broken before then."

Nick swallowed bile, and reached over to brush Tooth's shoulder. "You think this was done to Jack?"

"There is blood from his eyes and he refuses to look at anyone. I suspect, yes."

That was not quite true, Nick realized. Jack looked at Bunny, sneaky peeks that always ended in stunned disbelief and clenching his eyes shut again. But otherwise, yes, he could see her reasoning.

"Is there anything we can do for him?" Tooth asked.

"Short of making Bunnymund cry..." The lady's mouth twisted in what might have passed for a humor filled smile. "But I do not believe that is an option, even if he were to shed tears. General Winter created his own shards, and I doubt there is the same weakness. No, the simplest way would be for me to take a hand. I can remove them, if that is what he did."

"It will take me some time and effort, but I would be able to fix his eyes."

But not Jack's mind, Nick thought. That was the thing, of seeing cruelty upon cruelty. It was how he had been led to banditry in his youth, after all. To see the pain and suffering inflicted, not only upon yourself but upon others as well... Was that not the way of the world? Dog eating dog, as the Americans said? And if that were not so, then everything you did, to survive, it made sense did it not? Stealing then was no crime, murder could be waved away and laughed off, and slowly your soul shriveled and died and then...

He had escaped that fate, thanks to Manny and Katherine and discovering his core, relearning how to see the world with wonder instead of cynicism.
But Jack... What of Jack? Three hundred years had not driven him to that low; would even (hopefully no longer than) hours with such things as the shards do what isolation had not? He hoped not, but it was a thought that had to be considered.

"He is stronger than you think," Lady Aleksia said, as though reading Nick's mind. "He is an American spirit that refuses to be bound to that land, a winter spirit that will hold off his yearly slumber by simple determination, if nothing else."

"Yearly slumber?" Tooth asked, distracted momentarily.

"He has not told you?" The lady pursed her lips. "I can understand why. It is... horrific. I saw him like that, once, and pray never to again. Yes, he would wish to spare you that."

It was not an encouraging statement. Nick let his hand rest on Tooth's back, just above her wings, to give what comfort he could. "Back to subject. These shards, you would have to operate?"

"Of a sort, yes."

"Well. I do not wish to be one to tell Bunny this." No, he did not want to tell Bunny anything other than "Jack will be okay!" In his current state, Bunny would be very dangerous to the bearer of bad news.

"Fear not," Lady Aleksia said, and smiled. "I am very good at giving bad news."

Nick kept his hands on Bunny's shoulders, almost physically keeping the Pooka in his seat. It was only that, Nick suspected, and Desmond's presence curled up in Bunny's lap, that kept the old fellow even close to an even keel.

He did know about Bunny's rage in battle. Berserker, it had been called once, for the Norse warriors of old that frothed at the mouth and noticed no injury until they fell over of exhaustion and sometimes death. Such fighters as they had not known friend from foe. That much, at least, was different in Bunny. He had never, ever attacked a friend, or ally, and likely never would. There was some thought in him during the fight, though not as much as out of it.

The battle still was not won, and so, Bunny sat upon the chair, tense and trembling, clutching young Desmond like a lifeline. He was gentle with the little Pooka, who had attempted to burrow his way into Bunny's chest upon waking and had yet to let go.

Sandy had not returned from where he had taken Pitch, although North suspected the Sandman would be absent for some time. The work he would be doing was delicate and precise. It would take time, perhaps as much as months or even years, before Sandy could take leave of his island and his work upon Pitch's mind.

They all looked over when the door to Lady Aleksia's workroom opened. Ilmari strode forward, and caught his lady's arm when she staggered.

"It was difficult," she said, and looked over at the two Pooka. "He is resting now. But you may see him."

Had Manny himself told them to stay out of the room, they would have gone anyways. Nick rather thought Bunny set a new speed record with how fast he went, and on two legs and carrying Desmond!

"What didn't you want to tell them?" Tooth asked. She hovered near Nick's shoulder, the draft from
her wing-beats brushing his cheek.

Lady Aleksia sat down, and smoothed out her trousers. It was a gesture better suited to a dress, and clearly habitual. "I do not know when he will awake, for one. He was resisting his sleep- I saw the marks of grave, and recent, injuries- so I sent him under. He is of cold and ice, as I am, so it is within my power to do so."

"The injuries?" Nick prompted.

"Yes. Stab wounds, damage caused by being hung from his wrists, contusions I would assume came from hitting something. With the shards, I can only assume he thrashed about. He heals very fast, you know," she said, and stared at her hands. They shook. "But with that much damage, he would heal faster asleep. You know, I do believe it is unwise to operate on one's friends and family."

"Is it safe to move Jack?" North asked. "No- no- Что это слово в английском языке? Ah, yes, offence. No offence meant to you and your brownies, but I think that Bunny will be more comfortable if Jack is moved to Workshop. Also I think you will be more comfortable yourself, yes?"

"With Kay, and now Winter, here at the palace, yes. And yes, Jack can be moved, although it would not be wise to jostle him." She stood up, and hesitated. "I warn you, it is not a pretty sight."

"You said that before," Tooth reminded her. "Jack, he's our friend. Good and bad, odd sleeping habits and all."

"Very well, then. Do not say I didn't warn you."

It was fair warning, Nick decided, once they entered the workroom. Jack was on what appeared to be a counter, the kind found in high school science classrooms and expensive biological testing laboratories. The blood had been cleaned off, his ruined clothes removed, leaving him in nothing more than an artistically draped sheet. The injuries Lady Aleksia had mentioned, the stab wound, and a horrifying number of bruises, were all too visible. At least the stab had already closed over, though it remained a puckered line.

No, what was horrifying was the ice. It coated his hair, his skin, his open eyes. In places it was as thick as North's thumb was long, so two inches and a little bit. In other places it was barely thicker than the frost on a windowpane after Jack had breathed on it. The sheet had not been immune, and when Nick poked at one corner, it snapped off.

"Don't," Bunny said. He was all but snarling, the fur along his neck and shoulders standing on end. He stood, hunched over so he could lean on the counter, his gaze intent on Jack's face. "Leave be."

"We will move Jack to Workshop," Nick said. He risked a hand on Bunny's shoulder; the Pooka flinched, and then actually looked away from his friend to glare. "It will be easier on us all, I think."

"Should be to the Warren."

"Would not it be too warm?" Nick wondered.

Bunny snorted, and looked back at Jack. "Wasn't the last two times."

"This time is not normal," Lady Aleksia said. "Bunnymund. I ask only that you consider the Workshop as an option."

Tooth edged close to Jack, but Bunny did not chase her off this time. He glowered, true, but there
was no snarling, no threat. She reached over and began stroking Desmond's ears.

The little Pooka didn't move. He had curled up against Jack's side, his claws dug into the ice coating his Papa's stomach, his eyes clenched shut. It was another heartbreaking sight among many.

"Desmond. What do you think? Would Jack rather wake up in the Warren, or at the Workshop?"

The little one sniffed, and hunched his shoulders. "The Warren's home."

Ah, well. Nick was not surprised. He did regret it, a little. If he had known earlier, perhaps he could have been Dedushka for many years, and yes, even oreu. Now, though, that was not an option. "Then we will take Jack to Warren."

Bunny relaxed, a little, to the point where he no longer looked as though he had played with electricity, like elves. "Thanks," he murmured, and ran a paw over Jack's frozen hair. "I need..."

He didn't have to say anything else. Nick understood. All too well, he thought, and glanced at Tooth. Yes, he understood all too well indeed.

Chapter End Notes

For the record, I think even Aleksia is giving Nick and Tooth disbelieving looks, and thinking about closets and locks. Just, you know, a thought. Also, Nick's POV is fun times. (oreu means 'father' according to Google Translate.)

Jack will wake up soon- next chapter in fact- and we'll get to see how the shards have effected his mind. Also, rabbit cuddles. Just as good as cat cuddles, and without the possibility of sharp teeth sinking into your nose.
Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was impossible to pull Desmond away from Jack's side, and Aster didn't even try. The little bedroom showed signs of long-term habitation. The dishes hadn't been taken away, simply stacked on one dresser and left to their own devices.

The kit curled up against Jack's side. They'd draped a quilt over him, if only so no one would get too cold touching him. Somewhere between day two and day three, Aster had given in and joined the both of them in the nest. Not all the time, just... whenever he didn't have to weed the garden and pick that day's food, or cook dinner, or assure Nick and Tooth that everything was fine.

He resented every second spent out of that room. It was day eight, and Jack would wake up any minute now, and Aster had to be there when it happened. He had to.

When he wasn't wasting his time outside the room, he curled around Desmond, around Jack, and talked. Anything to make sure Jack knew they were there. Sometimes he read Desmond's books for the kit- they'd already gone through three- and others he'd go back to teaching Desmond old Pooka songs. Sung slow and quiet, "fuck off you bastards, you're drunk and the tavern's closing" sounded like a lullaby.

They were on a book right now. The Hogfather, by the Pratchett bloke Desmond liked so much. The mental image of Nick with a pig's tusks was almost enough to make him smile.

"Tooth fairies? Hogfathers? Little-?" he murmured. Desmond watched him as he read. "Yes. As practice. You have to start out learning to believe the little lies."

He still didn't agree with the author making the Tooth Fairy of that world a bunch of sheilas hard up for money, led by a former- well, it definitely stretched his suspension of disbelief. But when Jack woke up, he'd have to get his help in harassing Nick over the Santa Clause, or Hogfather, portrayal in the book.

Beware of baked beans, indeed.

"So we can believe the big ones?" He paused, and brushed at Jack's hair. Was it thawing? "Yes. Justice. Mercy. Duty. That sort of thing."

Doing The Voice of Death wasn't easy. Apparently Death spoke like two slabs of rock slamming together. He could only manage a deeper pitch, and even then not for very long. "They're not the same at all!"

"Are," Desmond muttered.

"You've read this before."

"Haven't."

Aster grinned, and nuzzled the kit's head. "Yeah, yeah... You think so? Then take the universe and grind it down to the finest powder and sieve it through the finest sieve and then show me one atom of justice, one molecule of mercy. And yet- Death waved a hand. And yet you act as if there is some ideal order in the world, as if there is some... some rightness in the universe by which it may be
He kept reading. It was soothing, the rhythm of the words grounding him in the here and now, with Desmond and Jack. He liked that, liked being able to focus on something other than the ice covering Jack's face, on his failure to protect... his friend.

*Just* his friend.

"No. You need to believe in things that aren't true. How else can they become?" Jack rasped, surprisingly deep voiced.

Aster about fell out of the nest in shock. He did drop the book; it tumbled over the side and thumped against the floor. "Jack?"

"Papa!" Desmond squirmed, and clawed his way on top of Jack's chest. "Papa, you're 'wake!"

"Yeah." Jack turned his head, and ice cracked and fell off him. "Where...?"


"My eyes." Jack swallowed; Aster could hear his throat click, it must have been dry. "My eyes."

"Aleskia fixed 'em. Got rid of the shards. It's just your sleep ice covering them now."

"Oh, thank god..." Jack finally raised his hands, and ran his fingers through Desmond's fur. "Hey, kiddo."

"Papa," Desmond said. He sounded half a second from tears, his ears drooped and his sides were heaving as he gasped. "Papa."

Aster shuffled closer, and wrapped his arm around the both of them. "Hey, now," he said. "Hey. C'mon, Desmond. It's going to be alright now."

Jack chuckled, and reached up to claw away the ice covering his eyes. "Yeah," he said. Once his eyes were clear, he stared at Desmond for several minutes. They were the most nerve wracking minutes of Aster's life.

Then Jack smiled. It wasn't quite the same as before, just a touch sad, but it was a smile and it was enough for Desmond.

Aster couldn't help but worry, though.

---

He was being stalked by rabbits.

Once, that thought would have amused him. He would have laughed, and enjoyed pitting his skills against Desmond, and Bunny. Competition was fun. It would've been a challenge to outfox the two Pooka, while still letting them think they could pull one over on him. Teaching moment for Desmond, too. Just because vegetables didn't run away didn't mean he wouldn't one day have to hunt down an enemy.

Now, though, all he could feel was a weary resignation. He woke up, he went to sit on one of the many hills in the Warren, and he got followed. Desmond would get tired of watching somewhere around the ten minute mark, and come over to curl up on Jack's lap. Desmond would stay quiet, not
talking, just keep pressed up against Jack's stomach, a warm, heavy presence that Jack couldn't ignore, even if he wanted to.

He didn't want to. He didn't. If he couldn't be alone, this was the next best thing, silent company.

Around the time tears started slipping down his cheeks, Bunny would show up and press up against Jack's back. Bunny would be silent, too. Just another warm presence letting Jack know he wasn't alone.

It *hurt*.

He'd thought... things. About everyone, about the people he loved the most. The worst part had been that... somewhere, deep inside, he really felt that way.

He'd died, and some part of him resented his sister for it. For straying out onto the thin ice, for needing a rescue, for *living*. Some horrible, wretched, nasty part of him had always resented her, for taking up his parents' attention, and room in the bed, and instead of the winter stores being split three ways they were split four, leaving everyone with less food, and it *wasn't fair*.

He *loved* his sister. He *did*. If given the same choices all over again, if he could have changed *anything* about his life and his death, he wouldn't. Even if it meant never becoming Jack Frost, actually dying and not coming back as he was. Of everything he had done, there wasn't much he was prouder of doing than saving Charity.

He still... He still...

And the Guardians. His friends, now. He hadn't... He hadn't thought anything of their not seeking him out those three hundred years. Why would they? What possible reason would they have to wanting to talk to him? Well, maybe North, wanting to ensure a white Christmas or something, but honestly? He might've had the record for the longest stretch of time on the Naughty List, but he hadn't done anything actually *bad*. And he'd had his other friends, Raven, and Coyote, and he talked to the other American spirits. It wasn't like he'd been alone. It wasn't like he'd been abandoned.

He'd had movies since their invention, and he'd spent years just attending lectures at various universities, and if they hadn't seen him, he'd still played with the children. He'd played tricks and sprung well-meaning traps and if he'd been alone, well, that was at least partly his choice. Coyote would've given his left front paw for Jack to stick around twenty-four-seven. Tricksters stuck together.

But... There was always a 'but'. That first time meeting all four of them. God, had they really thought he'd *want* to be a Guardian, just like that? No believers, no reason to want to help them, one of the less notorious tricksters buckling down to a lifetime of hard work and deadlines? Like asking a petty thief to give in and become a security guard for the mall.

He... He didn't think they were *selfish*. Short sighted, sometimes.

All poison came from somewhere.

It was about that time, when his thoughts had twisted and turned like a snake in its death-throes, that he started crying. Every time, Jack hunched over Desmond. Desmond, his son. Desmond, the center of his universe. Desmond, more important than being seen by human children, than his Guardianship, than winter and fun. Desmond, who he'd die for, as many times as it took to keep his son safe.

Desmond, who he resented for existing.
It just... It wasn't right! He loved his son, there was no reason to resent Desmond! He loved answering Desmond's questions, loved the off-the-wall plots the kid came up with, loved discovering what new lunacy the baby Pooka had attempted. No, it hadn't been easy. Teenage single parent trying to raise someone not his species, that'd be hard. When the teenage single parent was also dead and belonged to a season that didn't do much by way of food for baby Pooka?

But he loved Desmond.

Seeing evil had been easy. Horrific, but compared to what was in his head, easy.

He hadn't... wanted to think... he was as bad as General Winter. Inside.

He'd never... He'd protected children, as best he could. He hadn't frozen people dead just because they were there. He... he...

But he was. Where it counted, he was just as bad.

Desmond curled up on his lap anyways. Bunny held him while he cried, curled up around him at night while the two Pooka slept, stared at him with worried eyes and concern and it hurt, like standing in the middle of a fire, an incinerator, because their concern and their love burned and it melted his ice and he didn't deserve their good will.

He didn't know how long it had been since waking up. Everything was just a blur. But that night, after Desmond had dropped off, he felt Bunny nuzzle his shoulder.

"Jack?"

It took more effort to blink than he'd expected. "Bunny?"

The Pooka wrapped one arm across Jack's chest, and held tight. "This isn't helping you, is it? Just staying in the Warren."

No. It wasn't. "There's... nothing to help."

"Nothing to-" Bunny cut himself off before he could start yelling. "Jack," he said, quieter. "Jack, you... You're not in your right mind. What'd the shards do to you?"

"I saw-"

"I know what you bleeding well saw."

Jack huffed, and glared at the ceiling. "But not in you." Why not in Bunny? All the evil in the world, not in Bunny? Not even Easter Sunday '68.

Maybe that meant something, but he couldn't imagine what.

He felt Bunny's lips curve against his shoulder. "Well, thanks for that. But... what else did they do? The old ones made you cruel, apparently. Froze your heart. But General Winter's...?"

Jack brushed his fingers over Desmond's back. Such warm fur. Touching it should have hurt. Everything else did. "Showed me the truth." He closed his eyes, and then opened them because he couldn't stand the images he saw. "About myself."

"You know those things distort everything."

"It doesn't matter." If he'd breathed, he'd have started sobbing, and possibly never stopped. "Poison
has to come from somewhere."

"What sort of poison?"

Jack shook his head, and clenched his jaw. No. No, he would not tell Bunny. If he did, if he let it pour out, it'd infect the other man, and he... he wouldn't allow that. He couldn't.

"Jack." Bunny reached over and cupped his hand to Jack's cheek. He applied only a little pressure, but a little was all he needed, for Jack to turn his head and look at him.

The room was lit, barely, by the starlight outside, the moonlight, and nothing else. It was still enough for Jack, who could make out Bunny's expression.


"Jack," Bunny said again. "If you won't talk to me... would you talk to someone else?"

His useless, dead heart clenched in his chest. "Don't cry," he said. It was tricky, with Desmond curled up on his stomach, but he reached over without disturbing his son, and wiped at the wet fur on Bunny's cheeks. "Don't..."

"You need to talk to someone. Please. But if not to me..."

Jack closed his eyes. He knew Bunny was right; he had to talk to someone. Had to tell them everything. He could feel himself fade, a little more each day, and some distant part of him, buried under the poison like a skier under an avalanche, screamed and fought and demanded that he seek help. This fight wasn't one he could win.

But who... who could listen to him, who could be exposed to the poison, and still be fine? Not North, or Tooth, or Bunny, or Sandy. The bitter words Jack kept swallowed down and silent would break their hearts. Not Desmond, obviously. Who did that leave?

Somewhere out in the Warren, one of the Aussie Ravens quoarked, sleepy and complaining.

"Raven," he said. "I'll talk to Raven."

"Raven," Bunny repeated. "I'll get him for you in the morning. For now, Jack... Just, please. Believe me. We're going to make this right, all of us."

Jack nodded, and watched Bunny's face, until the Pooka fell asleep. Then, instead of looking back at the ceiling... he watched. One hand on Desmond's back, the other twisted and pressed against Bunny's chest, and the beat of the Pooka's heart.

Chapter End Notes

So, today is the first payday of my job, so that meant I went out and got books, and paid a little off my debt, and all is good. All being good apparently means Character Torture.

I gave hints as to what's wrong with Jack in this chapter. I accept all guesses, freaking out, and magical internet food. And yay, I get to bring in Raven next chapter!
Chapter Twenty-Six

The small family of ravens started cawing and flapping their wings when Raven flew over the horizon, and didn't stop until he touched down. The giant black bird had a wingspan a little wider than a semi-trailer was long. His eyes were bright blue, with gold rings around the pupils. His feathers were every color of the rainbow, shaded so dark he looked black, but for the iridescent highlights. He kept quiet, while looking over his mortal cousins, then spread his wings wide and made a sound that should have belonged to a jet engine, if jet engines cackled.

The Aussie ravens screamed back, then scattered. Jack watched them go, one hand on Desmond's back. "What was that about?" he asked, more for the form of it than because he was curious.

Raven tilted his head, the better to stare at Jack with one eye, and quorked. "Desmond," he said, his voice absurdly deep. "I must speak with Jack alone."

"If you don't want overheard, maybe you should ease up on the bass."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps we should travel outside this Warren, and have our speech outside."


"Des. I'll be fine."

"But Papa-"

"Des!" Jack closed his eyes. He hadn't meant to snap. "Des. I'll be with Raven. Don't worry so much."

Desmond slicked his whiskers back, and nodded. "Alright Papa. I- I'll go see what Uncle Bunny's doing."

Jack watched his son hurry off, and rapped his forehead with one fist. Why had he done that?

"Were I in your place," Raven said. Jack mentally cringed, and waited for the rebuke. "I would have snapped long ere this. Now come. We will fly."

"Fly? I mean to leave the earth behind, to soar into the sky, wind beneath our wings- or your arms, I should say- and travel across distances that would take months if not years to cross on foot, and in only hours." The giant corvid chortled. "Have you forgotten your own language so quickly?"

"No," Jack said, and closed his eyes. Already he felt tired. "Where are we going?"

"Oh, I thought to start into the sky. Unless you cannot?"

Cannot? Jack glowered at Raven and thumped his staff on the ground. "I'll show you can't," he muttered, and then spread his arms wide. "Wind!"

The Wind screamed down into the Warren. She blew around, not damaging a single leaf on any of
the plants, but anything not nailed down- or rooted- was picked up and flung about. Then, after Bunny was yelling something about his paint and having Jack's head for this, she slammed into Jack's back and threw him up towards the sky. He almost didn't catch himself in time, but he spread out his arms and legs and landed on her back, and was carried to the clouds faster than he'd gone before, outside of a race or a fight.

Raven screamed- well, roared, with how deep his voice was- and flapped up after Jack.

Jack all but snarled, and urged the Wind higher, faster. If Raven had been like his mortal cousins, he would have been left in Jack's proverbial dust in seconds; as it was, the immortal bird had to work, hard, to keep up.

Somewhere over New Zealand, it actually started to get kind of... funny. Whenever Jack looked over his shoulder at Raven, the bird was straining, clearly flying flat out just to keep up with what had become Jack's cruising speed. If he really tried, if he really had the Wind push it, he could've left his old friend behind- and lapped him.

His laugh sounded a bit more like a cough, but as he went, it got better.

Jack finally had to land somewhere in Punta Arenas, or fall out of the sky and go splat. Going splat would not be fun.

Raven back winged to a landing beside him, and then flipped his wings closed on his back. "You know," he said. "I think I might still be considered a god here."

"Don't let it go to your head."

"Didn't anyone warn you to be wary of tricksters?"

Jack's grin widened. "You did. Right before spiking my drink."

"Alas, that it did not work."

"Yeah, well, that's because I'm..." Jack stopped smiling. "Dead. I'm dead."

Raven shrugged, even as he shrank down to his human shape. "Differently alive, isn't that what you told the youngster?" He nodded when Jack gaped at him. "You forget, my cousins go almost everywhere. And I like you."

And ravens- and crows- could recognize people's faces, talk amongst each other... It wouldn't matter if a certain group had never seen him before, the gossip chains would ensure that they all knew what he looked like, and Desmond too. That was... creepy. And reassuring. "How long have you been watching out for me?"

"Since you tried catching a raven," Raven deadpanned.

"Okay, that bird needed help and you know it!" And he'd been ten.

"Just so." Raven shrugged again. "So. You need to talk to me. Here is as good a place as any. Your over-protective family will keep their distance now."

His... If Raven had meant only Desmond, he would have said 'son', not family. So, how did Bunny fit into things? Brother, the way he'd all but told Aleksia? That didn't feel quite right...

"Do you know about the Ice Queen's shards?" Jack asked. He tapped his staff against a tree trunk,
and didn't wait for an answer. "General Winter, he caught me. And remade them. He- they showed me everything. About myself. I... I don't hate them, Raven, but some part of me-

"Resents them?" the bird-man asked. He sat down on the dirt, and gestured for Jack to do the same. "That same part that hates it when they give you space, because there is always the concern that you'll be abandoned? Jackson Overland Frost. These feelings, not only are they normal, they are part and parcel of being human."

Jack laid his staff across his knees, and studied the wood grain. If he'd dared, he would have tried gently shaping the wood, maybe get some snowflakes in there. Well, maybe not. His frost wouldn't have looked half so good if the staff wasn't still rough wood with the bark still on.

"You're a crazy person," he said. "And no one likes you."

Raven laughed, and laughed, and laughed, until tears rolled down his weather-beaten cheeks. "Oh, Jackson."

"No sane person would resent their own child!"

"What sane person would want a squalling, clinging creature, constantly needing to be fed, and changed, and comforted, and never have a moment of peace to themselves?" Raven quirked his eyebrows at Jack. "The answer to that is 'parents'. And even they can get worn out on occasion. Single parents have it harder, of course, they cannot share the duties..."

What... it wasn't that simple. It wasn't. "But-"

"The shards took what was there, true, but instead of the boulder in your shoe it was the grain of sand, placed under a magnifying glass."

That was the worst analogy he'd ever heard. "I don't even wear shoes," Jack muttered. He rubbed his forehead. He felt better though. Why was that? "Raven?"

"Yes?" The older man adjusted his shirt collar.

"Why... In the Warren..."

"You did not move. You did not play. You did not laugh." Raven pointed one finger at Jack and almost poked the boy in the eye. "You are the Guardian of Fun. Your core is joy and laughter and those pure, shining moments when nothing-- nothing-- can make you upset or afraid. It is your greatest strength... and Jackson. It is your greatest weakness."

What? Jack shook his head. "How can fun be a weakness? Or joy and laughter? And what would that race just now have to do with anything?"

"The race was fun, was it not? Among humans, those who cease to move, to stir from their couches or from their homes, can fall into apathy and ennui. Playing gets the blood moving- yes, even in you! More importantly, in you, playing moves your magic. If your magic does not move, you cannot heal, nor can you create your snowflakes. If your magic does not move, you will one day lie down, and not get up again. It would not kill you, but Jackson.

"You would not live, either."

"That's honestly the longest speech I've ever heard you make," Jack admitted. He rubbed at his temples with one hand. "So... I was depressed?"
"And brooding upon it. Upon your perceived flaws."

Jack glowered at Raven. "Watch it."

The bird-man pulled off his Stetson, and preened his feathers with his other hand. "Had you continued on that course, you could have irreparably damaged your core."

"And... ended up like General Winter?"

"Hardly. He was merely a sociopath. No, Jackson, there is none more dangerous or deadly than the hero that falls."

"That's... not real reassuring."

Raven replaced his Stetson. "It wasn't meant to be. So. You have problems. Let's hear them."

Jack took an unnecessary breath, and then another. He- he had to do it. No matter how he felt now, he could also feel the creeping despair at his own inadequacies just waiting for him to settle down. Of course, now he could also tell that it was mostly inflicted from outside, though it had latched onto his internal flaws.

The problem was, now he felt stupid for how he felt. Was being influenced to feel.

Either way it went, now that he'd gotten up and moving and thinking again, it was just... stupid. Really.

"Jackson."

Another breath, and he started talking. About- about how he hadn't even realized he'd resented his sister, but now he couldn't stop thinking about how unfair it was. She'd gotten in trouble, he'd saved her, and then he'd died. It didn't even matter that he'd do it over again, it still hurt.

Not only had he lost his life, he'd spent three hundred years without his memories, or knowing much more than his name, or even what he was supposed to be doing. That'd been the Moon's doing- maybe not the memory loss, because Jack knew- he'd listened to enough psychology lectures, before Desmond- that the mind protected itself from trauma, and what was more traumatic than dying? But surely the Man in the Moon could have told him why... why he'd been chosen, and what he'd been chosen for. He'd had no purpose, and until he'd run into the Native American spirits... Raven had explained what a spirit was, Coyote had helped him figure out his ice powers, Magpie and Rabbit and Turtle had spoken with him. But none of them had known his purpose, or why a young, half-German, Puritan teenager was a spirit.

The other Guardians swore by the Man in the Moon. Jack would swear by God until he died a second time.

He told Raven about how his feelings had been simple, about the other Guardians, but then the shards had pulled up every last irritation and resentment. How they'd never talked to him- but why should they? Other than Easter Sunday of '68, he hadn't searched them out, either. Well, North, and trying to break into Santa's Workshop, but that had been just for fun, and getting caught had been part of the game. If he'd actually managed to get in, he'd have scored himself a point, then left and tried again.

But he couldn't stand how they kept- kept pushing their company on him now. Like there was something they had to make up for. But when they weren't there, when he went so much as a few days without talking to any of them, he got anxious and figured they didn't want to spend any more
time with him, and how messed up was \textit{that}? He didn't want them around when they were, and when they weren't around he just wanted to find them and hold on and never let go.

And the children! It'd taken so long to get even eight children to see him, to believe in him, but now they did. And it was wonderful, it was, but he felt... used, a little. They always talked about snow days with him; they squabbled over who got to have him on their team for snowball fights. They always wanted him to help their sledding. It felt a little like they were friends only because of what he could do for them.

"They are young," Raven reminded him. "Children rarely have much tact."

Jack nodded, and continued. This was harder. Desmond. Because he did love his son, every crazy inch of him. But...

"But you did not plan for a child," Raven said. "You had no one to worry about but yourself. Your concerns were few, your entertainments many, and then- you did not even procreate, you \textit{found} him."

Raven's smile was wry. "As I said before, Jackson. It is normal for a parent to feel overwhelmed, to need time alone after spending so much of their energy upon their young. Instead of having to care only for their self, suddenly there is a small, helpless, needy thing to raise and to shape and the \textit{responsibility} for this..."

He leaned forward. "How can you not feel, now and again, that you would like time alone? Or time in company more adult? In the decades since you adopted your son, I have known you to leave him alone but rarely- with Aleksia, or very recently, with one of your fellow Guardians. With Aleksia, normally you sleep. But with the Guardians, do you not feel better after your time apart? Enjoy his jokes and his games more than before the break?"

"Well, yes," Jack admitted. It hurt, it felt like he'd just pulled a thorn out of his chest- but after the initial pain, he also felt... better. "That's... normal?"

"For a parent? A single parent? Very much so." Raven scratched at his neck, and pulled free a feather. After a moment studying it, he held it out to Jack. "For one raising a child not of their own species, even more so. How can you be sure what is normal? How can you tell you're doing the right thing? And why is all this worry upon \textit{your} head?"

That... was pretty much exactly it. "Did you have coffee recently?" Jack asked. "Because you're seriously talking a lot."

"Would you prefer cryptic comments and foolish tests?" Raven shook his head. "Besides, have you seen the recent portrayal of spirit guides?" He puffed himself up, and did his best to look serious. It lasted all of a minute, before he broke up laughing. "I am a trickster. I am the trickster! I will speak if I wish, as much as I will."

He sobered, and folded his arms. "Just because there are times you do not want to be around your son, doesn't mean you're a bad person. Just because you don't always like someone, doesn't mean you don't love them."

Jack closed his eyes, and nodded. He didn't even bother to wipe away the two tears, one on each cheek. Raven certainly wouldn't mock him for them, and unlike all the others he'd shed, these felt... cleansing.

"And the rest?"
"Even the most social of creatures desires time alone now and again, and even the most reserved of beings desires communication at times. You are human, Jack. You have made new friends. They are not yet at the point of being comfortable friends, though they are good ones. Later, when they are family, you won't worry as much."

When they... huh? Jack shook his head. "I don't..."

"Friends are the family you choose."

Family... Jack closed his eyes. He... didn't feel that the other Guardians were family. Well, Bunny, but on the other hand he spent so much more time with the Pooka it was ridiculous. But North, Sandy, Tooth? No, they were friends, but- but he sure wander around their homes without his hoodie, or get into screaming arguments that scared the Aussie ravens into hiding.

Not that he'd argued like that with Bunny, but he had a feeling it was only a matter of time. And when it did happen, he'd probably stew, and storm off to rant to Raven, or Aleksia, or Coyote maybe, prank Bunny, then they'd make up and move on.

"So, you're saying that when they're pretty much family, I'll stop worrying about whether they like me or not? Or get as annoyed when they're around me?"

"Oh, you'll probably get even more annoyed- that is what family is. The people you cannot live without, and cannot sell without their being returned as defective."

Jack stared at Raven, and then laughed. "I probably wouldn't get a good price for them, anyways."

"Your son has an interesting mindset, true," Raven said innocently. Perhaps too innocently.

"Yeah? And what about Bunny?"

Raven grinned. Tooth probably would have used his smile as an example of proper brushing and flossing habits, though Jack knew Raven had been born- or created, that wasn't quite clear- long before such things. "What about Bunny?"

Jack opened his mouth to answer, and then shook his head. "Never mind about Bunny."

"As you like."


"You went from being the only child, to the eldest. Again, you suddenly were responsible for more than just yourself, and you had to share your parents, something you hadn't had to do before. As for how you became a spirit... There would have been resentment if all that had happened was an injury. You simply wouldn't feel as guilty for it, I suspect, because the price would not have been as high."

Jack froze Raven's feather in his shock. "But... But..."

Raven held up one hand, palm towards Jack. "As you said yourself, you died. You paid the highest of prices, that is why you were made a spirit, and a Guardian. That does not mean you have to be enthusiastic about it. Proud, yes, because you made a sacrifice few would be strong enough to. Because you did the very difficult, and did it well. But it is alright that you are not happy about it."

It was... alright.

... Why did he need permission to feel cheated?
"It's not fair," he said. "I- there are so many things I want to do, Raven. And I can't because I'm dead."

He wanted... He wanted a lot of things. He wanted to eat meals, with his family, with his friends. He wanted to actually sleep, like a normal person, instead of spending a week or two a year as a fucking corpse. He wanted to get out of breath, to feel his heart race, to bruise and have to actually bandage cuts because they bled instead of leaked.

He wanted, so much, to dream again.

He wanted to properly feel things. He hadn't thought about it much, because thinking about it made him want to scream and plunge the entire world into another ice age, but being dead must have caused some sort of nerve damage. Sure, he could feel things, but compared to his memories of his life? It was like he was wrapped, all the time, in thick, cotton bandages. He knew Desmond's fur was soft, that scratches hurt and tree bark was rough, but it was as much because he'd been told those things as experiencing them for himself.

Jack pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, and clenched his teeth.

Raven's hand came down on his shoulder, and squeezed gently. "I have no advice for you. This situation has not arisen among my people, that I can recall. Perhaps in smaller legends and tales that did not lead to a spirit to walk amongst us."

"Then what should I do?" he asked.

"Perhaps speak with the other Guardians? Perhaps they will know. After all, you are one of them now."

Jack shook his head, but not quite in denial. "If I tell them, they'll know. About..."

"Yes," Raven said. "But it might be the only way for you to live again."

To live again?

Chapter End Notes

No, Jack's problems aren't quite done with, but neither is he going to slide back into Depression with a capital D leading to Death with another capital D. Also, Raven is awesome. Ravens in general are awesome, and if you want to hear what one sounds like talking... follow the text link below. (The bird, Julian, cannot fly and so cannot be rehabilitated and released into the wild. Not a pet, but an educational animal at the rehabilitation center.)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zA9KTw07Ax0

Also, moving into relationships and funtimes VERY soon. Complete with Revelations about Jack's, erm... unique physiology?
Chapter Twenty-Seven

There were few places better for a winter spirit to go and blow off steam than Chenega Island. It was in Alaska, so even at this time of year it was colder than, say, Pennsylvania. It was untenanted, if you didn't count the native animals. Mostly birds and rodents. And it had already weathered an earthquake and tsunami, so an out-of-season snowstorm wouldn't even get mention. Or wouldn't, if there'd been anyone to mention it.

There were the ravens, but Jack just flipped them off and went on with what he was doing. Raven gave good advice, sure, but now it was time to be alone and think.

And, okay, create a tiny little storm. One that'd leave no traces for anyone to wonder at.

Jack had ended up agreeing to talk to Raven once a week. Someone had apparently been studying psychology or something. The Native Spirits were weird, a bit, because not only were they really old- like, really old- and set in their ways, they also grabbed every new and useful tidbit of information and used it. Or maybe that was just the tricksters, who could be distracted by anything shiny.

Coyote, for example, had a lovely collection of cell phones and iPods. None of them worked, but he was very proud. Last count had been a total of something like three hundred and ninety-two.

Either way, Jack had figured modern-day psychology wouldn't have figured in Raven's repertoire. He'd been expecting something more along the lines of a spirit quest and maybe a spirit cleansing with steam and ice water and who all knew. He hadn't paid much attention to the Natives when he'd been alive- they'd been too busy trading with the adults- furs, gunpowder, insults- to pay attention to one little boy, and he'd honestly been too bored by people who'd looked like everyone else, just with longer hair and strange clothes. After he'd become a spirit- alright, after he'd died- he'd pretty much run away the moment someone started getting mystic.

And this was why he needed somewhere a snowstorm wouldn't get noticed. Jack closed his eyes and concentrated on deep breaths, not the way the Wind swirled around him, or the tiny flakes of snow forming in mid-air.

Raven had gotten him to promise to tell the others about- about his death, about his current little problem with his emotions. Because he wasn't fixed, that was why he was going to have therapy sessions.

Healed, he reminded himself. He wasn't healed. You couldn't fix people like you could fix objects; with people, there was always a scar. In his case, a psychological one.

Part of fun, part of joy, was ignoring, if only for the moment, the fear and the pain and the sorrow. Jack had been shunting his darker emotions to the side for centuries.

General Winter's shards had let those emotions free.

"So now what?" Jack asked. The falling snow didn't answer him. "How do I tell them any of this?"

Not all at once. He didn't think he'd be able to go through with it, not completely. One at a time, though, he thought he could manage that. But who first?
Well, duh. Bunny. The adult Pooka had already handled... how many of Jack's sleeps now? One, and then two this year. Considering it wasn't even midsummer yet, that didn't bode well for next winter. It'd probably be a mild one, not so good for Jack.

So, Jack thought. He thumped his staff against the ground a few times, and admired the frost patterns that spread from the point of contact. Very nice... Focus, Jack. How was he supposed to tell Bunny that he was, to all intents and purposes, dead?

The Wind snarled through the scant tree branches. "Yeah, I don't much like it either," he snapped. She quieted down, and ruffled his hair in apology. "Yeah, yeah... I'm sorry, too."

Jack tapped a few tree trunks, and then waved the Wind away when she tried to shove some snow down his back. Well, he supposed he could start with the easier part, and go from there.

Now, how was he supposed to start that conversation?

"So, my mind's as scrambled as those eggs," Jack said, about scaring Aster right out of his fur.

"Argh, Jack!" Part of him delighted in the mischief on Jack's face. The rest of him was busy catching his gookies before they could escape their repaint. That damn elf pet of Desmond's had gotten three of them before Aster caught him at it. There was neon. How was there neon? There wasn't any neon paint in the entire Warren!

Once he had the egglets corralled again, he looked up at Jack. The bloke looked alive again, and was smiling. Not his normal, carefree smile, but not the sad little curve of his lips from before, either. "You look like talking with Raven helped."

It didn't hurt, absolutely did not, that someone else had known what to do for Jack. The important thing was that Jack was feeling better.

"I think Raven's psychology degree is going to get a workout." Jack crouched down, and leaned against Aster's shoulder. "I'm going to be talking to him once a week. Things... Those shards..." He sighed, and frosted the ends of Aster's fur.

"How'd he get a psychology degree?" Now, this egg... looked like it belonged in a rave. Not for long, googie... Aster had a paint brush and was now in a good mood, thank you. He felt in the mood for daffodils.

"Didn't come up, but probably the same way I got my masters in history. A hundred years ago." Jack grinned when Aster frowned at him. "I just listened to all the lectures, laughed like a crazy person at everything the instructor got wrong, and then when everyone else graduated I figured that meant I'd done it too."

Well, that was one way to spend the centuries. "So?"

"So what?" Jack picked up a would-be escapee, and held the egglet upside down, so the little legs wiggled. Then he started tossing it from hand to hand.

"You mentioned your mind being scrambled?" Not a pleasant mental image.


Aster cut off the words trying to form. Jack was just like everyone else, he wasn't perfect, he had
flaws. Or what he considered flaws. As far as tricksters went, he was pretty normal, although Aster could actually stand being around him. Wanted to be around him. Potential for being targeted for pranks and all.

Jack cleared his throat. "So, the thing about the shards? They, uh, they kind of made my flaws obvious, and since I'd been ignoring them for... ever... Well, you saw. It got bad. So Raven pretty much lanced that boil, but now I've got to heal up properly and that's what Raven's going to help me with." Jack glanced sidelong at him. "I've got homework and everything."

"Homework?" Maybe he could help with that?

"Yeah. How was it Raven said? 'Prank at least one person a day, and feel free to laugh'? Something like that."

Jack's homework... involved pranks? Of course it did. "That's... different."

"Apparently I'm, that is, I need to have fun. To heal. And part of who I am is the tricks, and I haven't actually been doing a lot of that lately."

Aster finished the base coat on the rave-colored egglet, a gentle green almost the same shade as the grass. "April Fools-"

"First time in almost fifty years." Jack picked up a paint brush, and a pot of yellow paint. "Funny thing about being a parent, it takes pretty much all your time and energy. But I've got help now, so I might as well pick up a few of my old hobbies."

That made sense, actually. Aster had seen that sort of thing before. He just hadn't made the connection between those tired mothers at the various parks, and Jack. "Pranks?"

"And other things. Anyways. Yeah..." Jack cleared his throat again, and turned to study the Color River. "So, there's one other thing..."

Aster sighed. "Can I say something first?"

Jack nodded, and fiddled with egg and paintbrush. "Yeah, sure."

"About... eh, the nest sharing thing. We've been doing. Recently." He painted a yellow flower on his egg. Then another. And another. And he wasn't talking, perhaps he should keep going? "I'd like to continue."

"Sharing the... nest?" Jack pointed the handle of his brush at Aster. "With me and Desmond?"

"Yes." And he'd just added a duck instead of a daffodil. Oh well, this wasn't going to be an Easter egg. He set it down and let it run off, and grabbed the next googie. This one looked like one of those abstract paintings, the kind done by a madman with a brush. It made his eyes hurt.

"Okay," Jack said. He held his egg by one leg, the better to paint it without getting his hands covered in blue. "Cuddling Desmond, I can understand why you'd want to do that. He's a cute kid, I want to cuddle him too, but, uh, me? I'm not exactly... cuddling material. Normally."

Aster hunched his shoulders, and almost dislodged Jack. "I think you are."

"Did you get hit in the head recently?"

"No! It just happens that I love you!"
Oh, he hadn't meant to blurt it out like that... And yup, there was the expression of shock and slowly forming disgust. Aster hadn't figured Jack would take the news the way he really wanted, but he had hoped the winter spirit wouldn't be too freaked out. Apparently, he was wrong.

"Okay..." Jack set his egg down, and it ran off before Aster could add to the blue coat. "Wow. Okay. This is... kind of awkward. But not for the reason you're thinking!" Jack reached over and took egglet and paintbrush out of Aster's paws, and set them to one side. The egglet ran off. "Uh..."

Jack's eyes lit up, and he grabbed one of Aster's paws, and smiled. Or it looked like it was supposed to be a smile. "Hey, you know what'd be fun right about now? A game! Let's play 'find Jack's heartbeat' and if you win, I'll be real surprised, because I don't have one!"

Then he pressed Aster's paw to his chest.

And... There wasn't anything. No heartbeat. After a minute, Aster realized Jack wasn't breathing, either, and didn't seem to be in any discomfort. "Jack?"

"I... died. Before I... I mean, I rescued my sister, I think I mentioned that before, but I drowned. The Moon brought me back after." Jack let go of Aster's paw, and looked away. "So, uh, yeah. This is... slightly awkward."

Jack was dead? Aster felt tears prick the corners of his eyes, and shook them away. No, because Jack was clearly alive, just... not the usual run of it, that was all. "Guess that explains your sleeping habits."

"Yeah..." Jack grabbed a handful of white hair, and tugged. "Yeah, it, uh, does."

"It doesn't change how I feel," Aster admitted. He stared at the pots of paint.

"It should, I'm a walking corpse." Jack slumped over to the side, and rested his head against Aster's shoulder. "Glad it doesn't, though."

Was he? Really? Aster risked a look over at Jack- and saw nothing but hair. He sighed, and poked at the winter spirit's stomach. "So I'm not entirely an idiot?"

"I don't know if I can feel like that for anyone," Jack said, and looked up. "I don't... Sometimes emotions and me, we have a funny relationship. Like adrenaline. It's not a thing that happens. But... but you're my best friend, and if I were going to feel that way for someone? It'd be you." He sighed. "Dang, but this is going to be complicated."

Unrequited love always was. "I think it's worth it," Aster said. "Do you?"

"We need rules for the Warren," Jack muttered. "Something like 'stupid questions will result in snowballs'. Of course I do!" He stood up, and grinned. "You get to explain the relationship change to Desmond, though. Where is he, anyways?"

"Why am I explaining to the kit?" Aster frowned at the small flock of egglets running about. Somewhere out there, that elf was plotting how to grab another one and wreck it. "He's off with his pet, 'painting' eggs."

"You're explaining because I want to get the rest of the talks over with. I still have to let North and Tooth and Sandy know about me and therapy and... well. That. Don't throw the elf in the river."

"No, mate, I'm going to chuck it in the glitter pool."
Jack chuckled, and lifted into the air. "Hey, can I have a bucket of glitter later on? I already know what my first prank of the week is going to be."

That... wasn't a good thing, was it? "Sure," Aster said. "Why not? It's for your mental health, after all."

Jack's cackle wasn't reassuring at all, but Aster headed towards the egglets smiling anyways.

Chapter End Notes

There will be a return of the badass Bunnymund next chapter, now that he's reassured all his worries are mostly unfounded. He may or may not get dragged into a prank war, though. Anyone have ideas for pranks?

First, though, conversations with North and Tooth.
He got all of five steps down the hill, before he had to stop and just set down on all fours. Dead. Jack was dead. Not just really cold, it wasn't that he had a quiet, slow heartbeat, he was actually dead. But still up and moving, obviously, and what was with that? Was he like a vampire, a zombie, something worse?

Aster hissed, and glowered at his paws. No way was Jack anything like a Yara-ma-yha-who, or old Dracula. He wasn't a zombie, either, or those so-called 'vampires' running around current books and movies. He was just... He just didn't breathe, is all, or have a heartbeat.

What he'd said, earlier, about possibly not being able to love another person? At least, that's how Aster had taken the comment; he wasn't too sure how Jack had really meant it. Bullpucky. Complete bullpucky, because if Jack tried to claim he didn't even love his own son, Aster would chuck him in the glitter pool, and then lock him up at a Twilight convention. Some days he wished Jack had chosen someone else to rant to about sparkly vampires.

Love was more than hormones.

The point was, Jack was more like- like those fictional vampires. None of them were actually dead, though they didn't have heartbeats or have to breathe. And they got tangled up in some of the most ridiculous romance plots he'd ever heard of, and why would Jack even read the books if he hated them?

Aster tugged on one long ear, and then nodded. So, alright then, Jack wasn't any more dead than those not-really-vampires in the books. His own... what, dhampir? That worked, he supposed, though he wouldn't call Jack that out loud. Not unless he wanted another rant on modern literature meant for teenage females. Though watching Jack stomp around, swinging that staff of his, was rather amusing.

It meant that some things were out, because you needed blood flow, but others weren't. Romance was more than just sex, and love didn't always mean lust. Though there was enough of the second going on, at least on Aster's side of things. It'd be different, but the comparative physiology between the two of them was already complicated. What was another hitch compared to all the rest?

"Papa told you, didn't he?"

Aster looked up, and blinked at Desmond. "How long you been standing there?"

The kit hummed, and hugged his pet elf around its neck. "You looked all thoughtful. And Papa flew out the tunnels for the pole. He told you he's dead, didn't he?"

"He's not dead!" Aster flattened his ears. "Can't be."

"No," Desmond agreed. "'Cept it's like those people that get froze and thaw out in the hospital all alive again. Aunt 'Lexi says the brain's the last to turn off, and Papa's brain never turns off." He grinned. "She says stuff that I'm not really s'possed to hear about that. It's funny. What's 'Deranged människa' mean, anyways?"

"I don't even know what language that's in, kit."
"I think Aunt 'Lexi's Swedish."

Aster stood up, and stretched up on his toes. Something in his back cracked. "Maybe you should ask her, then."

"Then she'd know I'd been listening in." Desmond let go of his pet, and mimicked Aster stretching. He over-balanced and toppled back. Aster was almost worried, until the kit giggled. "So. What else did you talk about with Papa?"

Well, Desmond would have already known about Jack's... unique physiology, certainly. Enough to have talked about it with the Snow Queen, anyways, though it was even odds whether Jack had said anything. Maybe it was something they hadn't had to talk about, between the two of them.

"How would you feel if your father and I shared a nest? Like we've been doing before, only when Jack's awake."

Desmond grabbed his pet again, and chewed on the elf's hat while he thought. "Would you share your nest? Or mine? Because everyone else has their own bed, and I think I'm old enough."

Oh, well, that'd make things interesting. No need to keep things G-rated if the kit wasn't there. "It'd be up to you, though warn Jack before kicking him out, yeah?"

"I can do that." Desmond sniffed. "I don't really wanna see you and Papa make gooey eyes at each other anyways. Why are adults always doing that? It's weird."

"Because we happen to like whoever we're getting gooey eyed over," Aster said. He mentally clapped a hand to his face; gooey eyed? Since when did he ever say anything like that?

"When I grow up, I'm not ever going to do anything like that. Not for any boy, or any girl either."

"Oh, just wait, you brat." Aster made a quiet vow to himself. When it came time to talk to the kit about the facts of life, he'd make Jack do it.

Well, the talk with Phil had gone over well. Honestly, the head Yeti hadn't seemed all that surprised, just sad. He'd patted Jack on the head, offered cocoa, then looked even sadder when Jack admitted that eating and drinking just wasn't really a thing he could do. He could go through the motions, sure, but digesting? Not so much.

So, now North. And Jack really didn't want to tell North, because North would get sad and Jack didn't really think he was capable of his happy inducing snowflakes right now.

Huh. He hadn't done any of those since Easter '12, actually, so over a full year. Maybe that should have been a sign. Like, a big flashing one, with lots and lots of neon.

Jack stopped in the hallway leading to North's office, and stared at the ceiling.

Bunny loved him. What the hell? What had Jack done to deserve something that good in his life? Other than taking care of Desmond... Though he had to feel sorry for Bunny, because Jack... just wasn't a good candidate for romance. He did love the Pooka, just. There were no sweeping violins or heartfelt sighs or aching hearts.

He wasn't going to help Bunny come back to his senses, though, because Jack was going to admit it now. He was a selfish little shit and Bunny, Bunny was amazing, absolutely wonderful, and he apparently wanted to be with Jack for more reasons than just sharing parenting duty. Jack wasn't
about to let Bunny go, was the point.

He shook his head, and headed on to North's office.

The old Cossack wasn't there. Jack looked around, as though North had hidden away in a corner or under his desk, and shrugged. He could wait. He'd just have to find something to entertain himself with.

Raven's 'homework' sprang to mind. Jack grinned, and immediately moved over to the windows.

It took over an hour to complete his project. That was okay, though, because North took two hours to return.

When North opened the door, several hundred frost-image elves began Cossack dancing. Very badly.

Jack grinned, and snapped a picture with the old Polaroid he'd found on North's desk. He tucked the picture away down his shirt before North could see it, and set the camera to one side. "Here comes Santa Claus, here comes Santa Clause, right down Santa Clause lane," he caroled, purposefully bad.

"Jack!" North shook off his- what had that expression been, anyways? Some kind of combination of shock, horror, and absolute refusal to believe his eyes- and strode through the ghostly elves to grab Jack about the shoulders, hoist him up, then wrap him up in a spine-cracking hug. "You look so much better!"

Well, yeah- oh. Wait. "You... saw me asleep?"

"Ja." North hugged him again, a little gentler, and set him down on the windowsill. "Is there something you wish to say? There are theories that I have, but. Theories are all that they are."

"Give me a hint?" Jack asked.

"Hibernation."

Well. "You're not wrong." Just not right. "I. When I. I mean, how did you become a spirit?"

North shrugged, and leaned against his desk. He somehow ignored the frost-image elf kicking its way through his arm, although that had to be cold as hell to touch. "I cannot say, in all honesty. Just, one year I was human, and delivering presents to all nearby villages in my sleigh, and next all the children knew of me, and I knew of them, and it was possible to get done in one night what had previously taken several weeks."

"So you didn't die," Jack said. He ducked his head. Pity his hoodie was gone. If the one North had given him hadn't been eaten by Desmond's pet elf, he would've worn it, but, well. So no hood to pull up and hide in.

"Die? No. Jack, you... died?"

Jack clutched at the windowsill. Frost spread from his fingers, turned the wood white. "The ice was thin. I didn't know, if I had maybe- I wanted to teach my sister how to skate." He looked up. "I saved her, but I... fell. And then the Moon called me."

And damn the Moon a thousand times. Why couldn't he have called Jack just a few seconds sooner? Then he'd be alive. Then maybe he could've gotten out of the lake before everyone declared him
dead, they would've expected to see him and he wouldn't remember a little girl that cried at his gravesite, before the family moved away.

They'd been his family, and he hadn't remembered them and—save it for Raven, Jack, the windowsill couldn't take that much freezing.

North actually sat down properly on his chair. "You... Please, do not tell me there is a body in the lake? Your body?"

"Huh?" Oh. "No. No, this is... me. All of me. Complete with a heart that doesn't beat and yeah, I can't actually eat, there's no..." He wiggled his fingers, searching for a word. He didn't find one.

"So, you're... dead."

"Walking corpse, yeah." Jack looked away, and dismissed the frost-images with a wave of one hand. Having his staff made them easier, but they were a drain on his energy and his head was starting to hurt. "The brain works, otherwise problems. I think that what happens when I sleep, is my brain actually turns off, then my magic kicks in again and I'm up and walking about."

North blinked, then very carefully lowered his head into his hands and rubbed his temples. "I am sorry, Jack. I have not heard of anything like this before."

Neither had Jack. And he'd asked around—well, okay, he'd asked Aleksia and she'd just given him a horrified look, so he hadn't asked anyone else. "I just figured you should know."

North breathed in, and shifted slightly so his hands covered the lower half of his face, instead of all of it. "Why? Why is it now you tell me?"

"Everyone. You, Bunny, Tooth, and Sandy."

"Not Sandy, he is... busy. Cannot leave his island."

Jack raised his eyebrows. "What's he doing?"

North frowned at him. "Is hard to explain, perhaps Bunny would be better choice. He was there."

Well, alright then... "Dude, if you don't know, you could just say so."

North rolled his eyes, and seemed to relax. "Why do you keep calling everyone 'dude'? We are not on a ranch."

"Slang," Jack muttered. These people, seriously. "Anyways. Then I'm going to talk to Tooth next. Any messages I should give her?"

The Cossack flinched, hunched his shoulders, and spun around to start fiddling with his ice carving. "Why would I have any messages for Tooth?"

Jack shrugged, and scrawled a quick message on the frosted over windows. "No reason." He opened one window, and paused. "Hey, think you could whip me up a new hoodie?"

"Oh, you will accept clothing now?"

"I don't know where Bunny scrounged me jeans and a t-shirt, but I have a feeling it was kind of an ordeal, okay? Besides, one of your elves ate your Christmas present, I never got to wear it, so you owe me another."
North waved one hand. "Fine, fine. Phil will have it ready by evening, stop by after talking with Tooth."

"We're going to discuss this at the next meeting, aren't we?" Jack asked. He didn't wait for an answer, just slipped out the window, closed it behind him, and flew off.

He wondered how North would look when he saw Jack's message on the window. *Because you want Tooth to be Mrs. Claus* wasn't subtle, and might get him in trouble, but it made him grin, so. Worth it. Totally worth it.

Tooth took the news better than he'd expected. She'd crumpled, and a couple of her fairies had landed on various body parts- Jack had three on his shoulders, one in each hand, and one clinging to his *ear*, what was this, seriously- and said that she'd suspected, ever since she saw him sleeping.

And since she'd snuck a peek at his tooth box, a few days after that.

"I didn't actually see your memories," she assured him. "You're alive, but... the fact that I got anything at all was pretty... conclusive. I'm so sorry, Jack. There must be something that can be done, but I honestly can't think of it."

"Neither can I," he admitted. "Although North will probably bring it up at the next meeting, he seemed pretty upset. Although I know the perfect movie to watch, after."

Tooth stared at him. "Movie?"

"Yeah, you know, movie night. After the meeting? Although since Sandy can't attend it'll have to be something no one will mind re-watching. Maybe Avatar, that one's a favorite of everyone's." Not that Jack was going to start seeing parallels with his whole *situation* with Bunny, and the Avatar romance. Paralyzed marine body-hopping and falling in love with an alien princess was nothing at all like a dead Puritan boy having an alien rabbit fall in love with him.

Okay, maybe a few parallels, but only if he reaches.

"Jack, I have to ask, are you okay? Movie nights? You're worrying about-" Tooth cut herself off. "Are you okay?"

"I'm going to have therapy with Raven once a week. Otherwise? Yeah. I'm okay. And I- I can't let myself get depressed over this, believe me, bad things happen if I do. So yeah, movie nights and pranks, and figuring out if it's actually possible to dye all the yeti bright orange or some other horrible color. Also, I'm going to have to figure out some way we can do the Halloween thing, maybe a party, but I really want Bunny to dress up like the Flash, he's fast enough for it."

Tooth shook her head. "Who's the Flash?"

"That's it, Justice League cartoon marathon, it has been decided."

"I don't think you can decide things like that," Tooth said, but she smiled, and her fairies stopped hanging off him. "I really don't."

"I'm the master of the remote control, watch me." Jack grinned, and slung an arm over her shoulders, careful of the wings. "Come on. I'll explain the basics of the DC-verse, you can help me decide who should go as what Justice League member for the Halloween party."
"Does Nick know he's throwing a party on Halloween?"

"Nah, I figured you could tell him." Jack hummed. "I think it'd be cool to invite a couple Native American spirits I know, they'll spike the punch until it's flammable if North doesn't get there first, and maybe a few Japanese spirits. I kinda want to see if there'll be a second round between Bunny and Higurashi-sama. That was awesome."

"Do I want to understand what you just said?"

"Probably not."

---

Jack found Bunny weeding the garden, and dropped with a sigh. He landed right behind the Pooka, tilted forward, and was draped over Bunny's shoulders like an oddly shaped, lumpy cloak before he could do much more than straighten up.

"Hi." Jack turned and pressed his face against Bunny's neck. Done with people now. "Talking is exhausting."

"Is it?" Bunny relaxed, and reached up to run a slightly dirty hand over Jack's hair. Great, now he's got dirt in his hair. "Talks went well?"

"Apparently Sandy's doing something on his island, Tooth suspected, and North makes weird expressions. Seriously, I've got a picture, it's awesome. I'd dig it out but this is comfy and I don't want to move." And he couldn't suffocate in Bunny's fur, there was a lot of fur, why was there so much fur? Because Jack couldn't breathe, he could just press against the overgrown rabbit and not have to look at anything.

"Glad I make a good rest stop," Bunny said. He sounded like he was holding back laughter. Or maybe like he'd figured out a good secret and wasn't about to let Jack in. Either or.

"You do, you really do, it's nice. Where's Desmond?"

"Off dressing up that elf." Bunny shook his head, and leaned forward to continue his weeding. He didn't seem to notice Jack's weight at all, or the staff kind of just dangling from Jack's fingers and maybe at an awkward angle, Jack didn't know, he wasn't looking.

"Dressing Butterfingers up as what?"

"Dunno, but he said it'd be awesome, and some things are just too traumatizing to risk."

Yeah, Jack could see that. "Wanna see that picture now?"

"Sure, why not."

Jack let go of Bunny's shoulders, and also his staff, and kind of slid down and to the side. He didn't hit the ground very hard, and rolled onto his back. "Here," he said, and dug into the pocket of his new hoodie. Yay, clothes that covered up his arms.

No, he didn't actually know what it was with him and clothes. Just, he wasn't a fan of showing off more than his face, his feet, his hands... And didn't really get why anyone else wanted to show off more. Probably his upbringing.

He handed the picture to Bunny, and grinned when the Pooka chortled. "I know, right?"

"What were the elves doing?"
"Frost-image elves, and I know, that needs a better name. Cossack dancing."

Bunny grinned, and ruffled Jack's hair. "And did you laugh?"

"Once he couldn't hear me." Jack tucked the picture back in his pocket. "Did you talk to Desmond?"

"I did. He's alright with us sharing a nest, but he might kick you out. Said something about wanting his own bed."

"Oh." Desmond had said that a few times before, and ended up hunting Jack down in the middle of the night to fall asleep on his lap. "Don't be surprised if he doesn't hold to it."

"Just giving you a heads up, Frostbite."

"Thanks, Cottontail."

Chapter End Notes

Mythology notes! Haven't done this for this story much yet, but...!

According to Mythical Archive (the web address is: http://mythicalarchive.com/index.php) the Yara-ma-yha-who is an Indigenous Australian vampire, that sucks the blood of it's victims through its hands and feet, though this rarely causes death. (The beastie follows the blood sucking by coming back and swallows the poor sucker whole. Yara-ma-long-name is kind of like a three foot tall frog. Even THIS doesn't kill the victim- they get regurgitated later, a little bit shorter and hopefully close to civilization, 'cause the blood loss is majorly bad.)

A dhampir (also known as dhampyre, dhamphir, or dhampyr) is Balkan folklore of a child between a vampire and a human woman. (Don't ask how the woman gets pregnant.) Basically, a dhampir is a vampire without any of the weaknesses, like combusting in sunlight. Demi-vampire, but more awesome.

Finally, I may or may not have sneaked in a bit of my headcanon as to Jack's status of dead or not in here. If you find it, I'll come up with a prize of some kind.

Argh, why is Tooth so hard for me to write?!
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He had a Pooka on one side, and another using him as a pillow. It was warm, all that fur, but- good. Just very good. He'd have swum through magma for this, he realized, and it made his chest hurt and eyes sting. This was everything he'd never dared hope for, even back before he'd become a spirit. A kid of his own, a partner- in almost every sense of the word, save Biblical- curled up with him, a home of his own...

Okay, so Bunny had made the home, and his kid and partner weren't human, and if anyone from his human days had seen him like this the priest would've been called so fast... But Jack hadn't really been interested in girls, beyond simple aesthetics. Not then, and not now. Bunny was much better to look at, even if he sometimes did stop and question his own brain. Seriously, a Pooka, a giant, furry alien. What.

Jack turned his head, and rubbed his cheek against Bunny's forehead. The adult muttered, and tightened his grip on Jack's torso. There was no physical way for them to be pressed together any closer, so Bunny rolled a little in his sleep, until Jack had half his body covered up and no way to wiggle free.

Not that he wanted free. Sure, just lying there and thinking was boring, but he didn't have to think, he could just zone out and then it'd be morning before he knew it. On the other hand, if he didn't think about things now, he wouldn't have a chance later, because tomorrow- today- was the Guardian meeting. It'd be all talk about how he was dead and brainstorming ways to fix it, as though anyone had any ideas of what was going on. At some point he'd have to interrupt and harass everyone into watching the movie he'd picked out. He'd decided on Matilda, to start weaning them slowly off Disney and Dreamworks and Pixar.

He sighed, and scratched Desmond's neck when the kid muttered in his sleep. The only downside to his life as it was now, he supposed, was how he'd effectively condemned Bunny to the life of a monk. Sex with a corpse- not fun. But what could they do?

Jack's brain very helpfully threw up several suggestions, and he had to carefully pick ice from Bunny's fur after he'd stopped blushing. Well, okay, yeah, but, eh...

Three hundred years spying on humans having sex, and he still blushed like a virgin at the simple thought of doing... anything.

Jack mentally wrenched his thoughts onto a different track. With the way he kept blushing, doing anything could be potentially dangerous- and stop thinking about it, Jack. Think about something else, now.

Bunny was an absolute slob.

He grinned at the memory, and looked around the dark room. He hadn't realized it, honestly, until Bunny's bedroom became his. The main rooms, like the kitchen and the sitting room, were all neat enough. A very weird organizational scheme, which Jack had figured was something Bunny had come up with over the course of a couple thousand years, and never questioned.

Nope. He'd realized very quickly the past week that, actually, the organizational system? Was 'pick it
up and put it down somewhere else, then tear the room apart to find it later on, and put everything else back wherever it’ll fit, then pretend it never happened’.

How he'd missed that over the past year and a half, he absolutely did not know. Probably because one aspect of the system involved being alone during the search, to prevent mocking. Jack had only figured it out three days ago, watching Bunny rummage through everything in the bedroom to try and find a wrist guard, only to discover it- for reasons known only to the Pooka- in an empty flowerpot. Bunny had then 'cleaned up' and Jack had about busted a gut from where he was pretending to be zoned out in the nest. After Bunny left the room, he'd gotten up and set things to rights, an easy task when all he really had to worry about were pillows, a couple blankets, and the odd item like hair brushes and one right shoe.

None of them even wore shoes, what was one of them doing in the bedroom?

Certainly, it explained why there were books in the kitchen and cookware in the conservatory and towels under the oversized couch in the sitting room. At least there was no petrified food shoved aside in corners, though Jack knew he would've noticed such things long before now. Bunny might have been disorganized, but he wasn't about to live in his own filth.

Even if he seemed completely unable to realize that all the fur on the floor? The stuff he shed? There was a way to clean it up and it was called a broom. Standing around looking at the loose balls and puffs of hair did absolutely nothing.

Jack grinned, and half-closed his eyes. He'd zone out now, he thought. There were a few hours left of night, and he might as well take advantage of them. He didn't need to sleep three times in a year, thank you very much.

Mornings came slowly, thankfully. Jack had time enough to get his limbs moving again, brain working, before having to get out of the nest and find his two Pooka. That was definitely a bright side to no longer being a single parent. Before, he'd been the only one responsible for Desmond, with the corresponding difficulty getting proper 'sleep' that went with it.

Bunny had taken over breakfast duty ages ago, so other than the new path to the kitchen, nothing had really changed there. Jack waved at the two of them, slouched over at the kitchen table munching lettuce and conversing in grunts.

"Neither of you are awake yet, are you?" Twin grunts in reply. Awesome.

Jack grinned at the both of them, and cleaned up the minor amount of debris from Bunny's prep work. His tolerance for mess was much lower than either Pooka's, something he'd finally stopped suppressing.

As Raven put it, "If it's annoying you, do something about it. Letting it fester won't do any good."

He certainly felt better once he'd wiped up the crumbs.

Once that was done, he chivied the two oversized rabbits outside, where they'd perk up in sunlight and fresh air. There wasn't anything he really needed to do, so he found one of the ravens living in the Warren and listened to it yell at him. Maybe if he tried hard enough, he'd learn what it was saying.

Or just provide himself with a couple hours of entertainment. Either one was good, honestly.

In the end, Bunny came and got him in time for the meeting, long before Jack had gotten the slightest idea of what the cawing meant.
"Sometimes," Bunny muttered. He shook his head, but was grinning, so Jack took it as a good sign.

"Well, what if speaking to them was the only way to save the world?"

"We'd call in Raven himself."

"Sure, be all reasonable."

Bunny slung an arm over his shoulders, and ground his teeth together in a purr. He'd been doing that a lot lately. It always made Jack smile, because, well, purring was a good thing. A happy thing.

"So what movie are you inflicting on us this time?"

"I was thinking Matilda."

Bunny raised his eyebrows. "Do I want to know how you get these things?"

Jack poked him in the side. "You're asking this now?"

"Answer the question, Frostbite."

"Movie rental places." Jack grinned. "I know how to work all the computers, I actually have money to pay for it, and I signed myself up ages ago for all the membership cards."

Computers were absolutely awesome, okay? And parenting websites were gold, except the ones that were full of crazy people. Yeah, he avoided those.

"So you break into stores...?"

"Sort of? It's not like I hurt anything. Well, except the time I found a real thief. Unexplainable patch of ice, no clue how that happened, it was just a random thing that happened."

Bunny actually laughed, so Jack gave himself ten points.

The meeting was just as awkward as Aster had feared. The moment they entered the meeting room, Jack had tensed and retreated to his preferred spot at the window. Desmond had initially sat with Jack, but then the temperature dipped when the winter spirit started doodling on the window, so the kit had relocated to Aster's side.

It hadn't gotten better when Nick and Tooth showed up, either.

Sandy wasn't there; as Nick said, the Sandman was busy dealing with Pitch.

"Yeah, that wasn't really explained." Jack looked away from his doodles. "I forgot to ask you, 'Roo."

Aster rolled his eyes at the nickname. "Bunny, Jack. Not a kangaroo. A bunny. Remember?"

"Love how you're dodging the question."

Aster grinned, and draped an arm over the back of the love seat. It was one of the few pieces of furniture in the room he felt comfortable on, and Nick had taken the actual couch. Also, okay, if and when Jack left his uncomfortable perch at the window, he'd like as not join up on the couch and there might be some cuddling. The cuddling was something he was enjoying very much, thank you.

It'd been too long since he'd been able to curl around someone so very precious, and have them curl
"Not so much dodging as gathering my thoughts," he said. Jack raised his eyebrows, so he hurried on before the sarcastic brat could get in a zinger. "Has anyone told you about the Golden Age?" He knew he hadn't said a word.

"Not really..." Jack looked over at Nick and Tooth.

Nick cleared his throat. "Long story made short, once there were many, many worlds other than Earth, in another realm. There were emperors and empresses, armies, pirates and fearlings and nightmares."

"Pitch used to be a good guy, Kozmotsis Pitchner. Only then the fearlings corrupted him, he turned into Pitch Black, and he... Well, he destroyed the planets." Aster closed his eyes. It still hurt to remember. It likely always would. "Sandy and I, and Manny, were some of the only survivors. We all ended up here, and got tied to the human's belief in us."

"Okay. So Sandy's doing... what, then?"

"Perhaps," Nick said, and leaned forward. "Just perhaps, Pitch Black and Kozmotsis Pitchner are not the same man. Perhaps instead they are two minds and one body, and Pitch has won struggle for control. Perhaps then, Sandy can remove Pitch Black, and once more the great general will be on side of good!"

Tooth bit her lip, and shot a warning glance over at Nick. "Or perhaps Pitch and Pitchner are the same person. In which case, Sandy would be the best person to find out and keep Pitch from running off."

"And if there's no way to get the good guy back?" Jack asked. He picked up his staff, and studied the swirls of ice on the wood. "What then?"

"Then... We do what needs to be done," Nick said. For a moment Aster saw the bandit he'd first met, cocky and with good reason for it, an edge of cruelty and violence to the boisterous amusement.

It was gone as quickly as it'd arrived. Quite probably no one else had noticed. Aster shook his head, and his whiskers drooped as the atmosphere quickly turned hesitant all over again.

"But that is not what we would like to speak of," Nick said. He glanced at Tooth, at Aster, at Desmond, then over at Jack. "About... how you became a spirit..."

"Papa's dead," Desmond said. "An' you want to fix it."

"Desmond! Tact!"

The kit actually grinned at that, a miniature of Jack's hell bound smirk. "Last time someone was tactful at me, you punched them."

Jack hissed, and narrowed his eyes. "I need to check with Raven on that, I think the ba- the idiot's still stuck in Grandmother Spider's web." He looked over at Aster. "By the way, if you ever meet Hare? Native American spirit, his name's actually Hare, but he's a jerk. Tried to convince Des he'd be better off with 'his own kind'."

"And that's when Papa punched him," Desmond put in. "Which was good, 'cause Coyote was right there and looking cranky. And hungry."
"Did the Native American spirits adopt you or something?" Aster asked Jack.

"Uh, maybe? It's not like there were too many... I mean there were a few European spirits, but stuffy. I think there were... three or four other Colonial spirits, and they didn't want to talk to me either, because apparently they wanted to out-stuffy the European spirits, and I am a trickster."

Aster shook his head. Well, at least that put to rest any lingering fears that Jack had been alone before finding Desmond. Maybe not always thick with company, and spending time with other spirits didn't quite ease the ache of not having any believers, not being seen by humans- it'd been yonks since Aster had felt that way, discounting Easter '11, but he still remembered.

Jack grinned at them, and hopped down off the window sill. He sauntered over to the loveseat, and curled up against Aster's side. The Pooka immediately shifted so his arm was around Jack's shoulders instead of along the loveseat's back. After a minute, he managed to stop purring.

Nick and Tooth were both doing their best fish impressions, all wide eyes and gaping mouths. Aster smirked at them, and then bent his neck so he could nuzzle at Jack's hair.

"Oh, hey," Jack said. "Do any of you know how much weight superglue can hold?"

They all blinked at him. Tooth unfortunately answered. "I think... something like five hundred pounds a drop?"

"Really? Interesting..." Jack trailed off, and started to hum.

Aster felt the fur on his arms crawl, and Desmond's giggles did not help. "Jack, mate," he said. "No. Whatever it is, just, no."

None of the pranks had been harmful. Only a few of them had been on the Guardians- one had even been on Jack when the elves had found all his whoopee cushions and run around with them screaming- and a few had been on ordinary humans. Apart from the whoopee cushions, they had all been inventive, and Aster was just waiting for the day when the yeti went on strike due to glitter bombs or something.

He'd forbid Jack from using the Color River or the Glitter Pool in any of his pranks, but... Well. A happy, laughing Jack was an attractive Jack, and Aster knew his weaknesses.

More importantly, Jack was starting to figure those weaknesses out, and would no doubt take advantage.

And that was a very happy thought.

Jack laughed, and shrugged. "Fine, fine. Back to serious, boring stuff."

"Papa's dead," Desmond repeated. He clambered up onto the loveseat, until he was wedged between Jack and Aster, and looked very pleased to be there. "Aunt 'Lexi doesn't know how to fix it, and you want to, but Papa doesn't think it can be fixed. Which is silly," the kit pointed out. He eyeballed Jack, and folded his little arms. "You can fix everything."

Jack snorted, but he didn't outright disagree with his son. "Yeah, sure. Only question is how... And cut it out with the sad faces you two."

Nick shook his head, while Tooth gathered herself. "Jack," Nick said. "I don't- how can you joke about this?"
"It's part of who I am? I mean, it's my center, Nick. Jokes and fun and laughing even when scared out of my mind." Jack waved one hand, as if gesturing at an abstract image. "It... hurts, thinking about it sometimes, but I'm still here and I'm still able to do the important things."

Aster turned and rested his chin on Jack's head. Not quite a proper chinning, but enough to get the intent across. "Yeah, yeah, happy flakes, we know."

"If I couldn't breathe, or talk? Then I'd be grumpy. But I can, so..." Jack shrugged, and played a bit with Desmond's ears. "Maybe it's not all good, but there's more good than bad. I can live with that."

"And you don't have any ideas, Bunny?" Tooth asked.

"A few, but where would we get a defibrillator?"

Jack cleared his throat. "I flew up and got hit by lightning once. A few times. It felt tingly, but didn't even singe my clothes."

"A defibrillator's more specific," Aster said, even while firmly banishing those mental images. What had possessed Jack to...?

"Even so." Jack shifted his staff, and stuck it between him and the cushions. It was angled to keep from knocking Aster in the head, something the Pooka appreciated. "Anyways, I don't really see why it matters."

Well, for one he couldn't age. Not that spirits aged very quickly- it was all very individual, and part of it was based on how much humans believed in them. Someone like Nick aged a year every century, or possibly even slower, while someone like Tooth didn't seem to age at all. A spirit like Desmond, though, young and supposed to be aging, would likely be about a year for every decade, even considering how slow Pooka grew.

Once a spirit hit their prime, in years and believers, they hit a point where things slowed right down for them. Jack would always be young, he wouldn't get any older unless the stories about him changed, but it was entirely possible that he'd finally grow into those hands and feet of his; they were a mite big for him at the moment, making him look like he was waiting for one last growth spurt.

Nick would never look any younger, though with how the kids believed in Santa, he moved and acted like a much younger man. He'd also never get rid of that paunch, though not for lack of exercise. The modern Father Time- the poor bloke had gone through a few incarnations, and was now a bit confused as a result- would never look his real age, which was much younger than Jack. The New Year's Baby would never get beyond a chubby infant, even though it was the same baby helping to usher in the new year, every year.

Aster tightened his grip on Jack's shoulders. He could think of a few other things, too, but there wasn't any need to mention them. "It's important to you," he said. "That makes it important to us."

"Maybe Sandy will have some ideas," Tooth suggested. "Then... Well, it's not like any of us are-"

"Stop!" Jack surged up and knocked his head against Aster's chin. Owch. They both rubbed at their abused body parts, but Jack continued talking while he did. "If you complete that sentence, it's just asking for trouble. So don't. No."

"I've got an idea," Aster said. "No complicated fiddly nonsense. We just call in Miracle Max and set him at the problem."

Jack twisted, and stared at Aster. "...Who?"
"Wha- did I actually make a reference you didn't get?"

"Apparently. Who's this Max guy?"

Aster smirked, and tugged Jack back against him. "Read the Princess Bride, and find out."

Chapter End Notes

Argh this chapter was very unhappy with me. I think because we're heading into another interlude type chapter, to cover a few months of time without, you know, getting bogged down with details. Also, I'm very much blushing as I write this, there will be physical intimacy coming up, though how much of it I honestly can't tell you what I'll be writing. That said, when those two decide they want to see if the raunchy side of things is even possible with some creativity, you'll know.

And I realized when writing this chapter that I pretty much came out and said Jack had company for those three hundred years of his. While that's true, most of it was fairly antagonistic- tricksters aren't often the most welcome of company, however harmless they may be. Coyote, Raven, and Magpie all thought Jack was the most precious thing ever, but they were also busy driving people up walls, across ceilings, and then reintroducing gravity on them. So... yes, company, no, not a lot of it.

Finally- in my opinion, The Princess Bride made a better movie than book. I'm probably also going to get yelled at for this, but could Buttercup be any MORE useless? Honestly...
Jack took Aster flying once. And only once. That experience was more than enough to convince the Pooka he was a ground-bound creature, completely. There was a difference, a very big one, between flying in a hi-tech spaceship, where there wasn’t a ground to fall into, and being carried about by gale force winds. Jack might have been able to ride the wind with ease, and he might have been able to carry his son with nearly as much ease, but Aster was two hundred and fifty-three pounds of muscle and fur, and so the wind had hit him with speeds of fifty miles per hour.

It had hurt. Then it had been terrifying. Then Jack had spent the next week and a half 'sleeping' outside the burrow on one of the Warren's many hills.

It would have been a full two weeks, but they discovered that, while Jack couldn't orgasm, he did feel the intense pleasure that went with it, and also he was really good at finding the best way to get Aster's eyes rolling back in his head. After that, the thought of Jack spending any more time out of reach was unpalatable, and he returned to Aster's nest.

Desmond didn't seem to notice what his parents were getting up to. He did start sleeping on his own, giving the two adults reason to bless thick, earthen walls that made the bedrooms essentially soundproof.

Nick annoyed the Snow Queen so much with his questions about Jack's unique physiology, and whether this spell or that potion might bring him back to real, heart-beating life, she banned him from her palace and then set a snowstorm on Santoff Clausen that lasted a full month. No one could get near the place, and for some reason none of Nick's portals worked to get anyone out.

In punishment for annoying his friend, Jack forced Nick into watching the worst zombie movies he could get his hands on. Anyone else could watch if they wanted to, but Nick absolutely had to. The Cossack stopped talking about ways to get Jack living again, at least where anyone could hear him.

There were nights when they all helped Tooth collect teeth. Jack and Aster always came in last. Jack complained about it, good naturedly. Clearly he didn't mind being dragged behind billboards and industrial air conditioners and casually molested. Well, he molested right back, fair being fair.

It was only when it reached autumn that Aster realized Jack hadn't slept the entire stretch of time.

"Well, of course not." Jack grinned and squinted at the egg he was trying to paint. "Do... orange and this shade of green go together?"

"No." Aster shuddered. "Absolutely not. Why of course not?"

"Uh? Oh, because I slept after Bluebeard." Jack glowered at the memory, and then shook it off. "And then I slept after- you know. With General Winter."

Aster very carefully didn't strangle the orchid he was pruning. "Guess you don't sleep three times a year, then?"

"Never have before. It's an energy thing, anyways. And I've been resting more at night- when you let me."
"Don't hear you complaining."

"That's because I'm not a crazy person, Doc."

Sometimes, the nicknames Jack gave everyone just made no sense.

A little before Thanksgiving, they ended up watching one of the Godzilla films. Jack laughed his way through the film, while Desmond grinned like the monster he was. Aster knew he wasn't alone in being utterly confused, at least until he realized they'd been had, and but good. He was probably the only one amused by the whole thing, even if he did end up battering Jack over the head with a couch cushion.

Thanksgiving itself was interesting. Instead of the big party it'd been last year, this one was quieter, for 'friends and family only'. Sandy missed it, still busy with Pitch no doubt. The Snow Queen and Ilmari came.

The Snow Queen quietly told the four Guardians that General Winter had not proven salvageable, so she had done what was necessary and stripped him of his magic. Aster had felt some satisfaction at the thought. He clearly wasn't the only one; Nick smiled, and Tooth breathed an obvious sigh of relief. Desmond, poor kit, looked a touch confused, but at the same time he knew General Winter had been the one to hurt Jack, so there was more acceptance than anything.

Jack got quiet, before he shook his off and started acting a touch like one of Nick's elves on sugar. The morning after, he was dead quiet and stuck to Aster's side like a burr. Aster had considered sending for Raven, but- but Jack was his mate, if he couldn't help with this, what good was he?

"D'you want to talk about it?"

"Is it weird to pity him?"

"I think there's better people you could pity. I also think that, if you didn't, you wouldn't be you."

"He never really had a chance."

"Didn't the Snow Queen give him a chance? He made his choices, Jack."

"I suppose. I just, I wish..."

"You wish there could've been a happy ending for him."

"Yeah. Yeah, I... yeah."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I. I'll deal."

It wasn't long after that when Aster took up a few old art projects he'd let collect dust. Jack had an endless fascination for watching the process of putting one's mental images down on paper, or parchment- or silk, canvas, and once, pale and silky skin, even if Jack complained about feeling horribly exposed the entire time. Aster had followed that up by pointing out that these days, Jack slept- or rested, whichever- without his clothes on.

Jack had blushed frost all the way to his navel, which was the most adorable thing Aster had ever seen. He privately vowed to never mention that little fact to anyone, ever.

In return, Jack offered to teach him how to carve wood. It ended in unmitigated disaster, the horrific
result being good for nothing but target practice. One good thing came from the attempt; Nick and
Jack started spending time together talking about ice carving techniques. Apparently Jack was just as
good carving ice as he was with wood, and Nick knew a little trick to keep the finished results from
melting. Jack picked it up in an afternoon, the spell being a natural extension of his own powers.

Somehow that meant every shelf and windowsill in the burrow became display space for Jack's
carvings, wood and ice both, but it prettied the place up a treat so Aster didn't much care.

Desmond's clumsy, but promising, paintings were hung up on the walls wherever there was free
space. Someone- possibly Tooth- suggested a rag rug, and Jack grabbed onto the idea with both
hands and far too much enthusiasm. Aster left it to him. His skills with fabric were only slightly
better than his skills with carving.

The rug ended up with a place of pride in their sitting room.

Then it was all gearing up for Christmas. Aster snipped at Nick every chance he got, doing his best
to deflate the man's insufferable, smug pride in his over-commercialized holiday. Most of the
enjoyment was wrecked by the crazy shopping trips and the stress of family gatherings made formal,
and the sheer greed that descended on everyone at this time of year.

Sure, Easter had become all about the candy, but at least no one got into fist fights over chocolate
eggs or had nervous breakdowns over the egg hunts.

Jack absolutely did not help the situation. One minute he'd be agreeing with Aster, like a proper
mate, then the next he'd switch and agree with Nick with every point the crazed man made. At one
point Aster was sure Jack was eating popcorn while they argued, though that was impossible. Jack
didn't eat, except for the rare occasion when he wanted to blend in with a bunch of strangers.

"Hey, Nick. What're these presents?" Jack gestured to a pile of- socks?- that the yeti were wrapping
up.

"Ah! Is last present for children who are too old to believe." Nick laid a finger against the tip of his
nose. "When you stop believing in Santa, you get underwear."

Desmond looked up at that, from where he'd been piecing together a puzzle. "Papa doesn't wear
underwear," he said, utterly confused.

Jack laughed when Nick and the yeti stared at him. Aster just smirked. That was right Jack didn't;
made things easier.

Their Christmas celebrations that year were quiet, after Nick had a successful run. Sandy even
showed up, looking exhausted but optimistic. Aster preened a bit as everyone admired their gifts.
He'd done good work, even he could look at the artwork and find only minor errors. Nick got
himself a portrait of the Workshop as it'd been back near the beginning of things. Tooth got a silk
painting of a Japanese lantern festival. Oddly enough, most of the women wore blue and green for
their kimono, while the men wore red and black and had a familiar hairstyle, even if the color was
darker than Nick's.


"Oh, like you're one to talk."

Sandy got the most complicated painting Aster had made, a depiction of the Aurora Australis, which
had been a bitch to get right. Worth it for Sandy's expression, though, because if the Aurora was the
background, the old Lunaoff palace was the foreground. It had been hard to remember just how
everything had gone together, but Aster's memory had apparently been accurate. Surprising, considering he'd only seen the place twice. Sandy had actually lived there, for a time.

Nick had gotten everyone matryoshka dolls. Desmond's had only two- "You will get more as you grow," Nick had told him- while Aster's had nearly fifteen. "Since you are oldest of us here, except perhaps Sandy."

Aster had, very maturely, stuck his tongue out at him.

Apparently Jack was rubbing off on him. Not such a bad thing. He'd been stuck in his ways a while now. Change did a body good.

Having a mate did a body very good, he thought, and smiled at Jack.

New Years was the giant party. Nick hosted it; he enjoyed the parties, Aster supposed, since he always went all out with them. This year the party was gate crashed by so-called Norse Gods, powerful spirits that had at one time been worshiped by humans. One at a time they were alright, but in a group they were aggravating and potentially dangerous.

"What we need is distraction," Nick said. "Unfortunately, what is good distraction is fighting or drinking. Fighting will result in flying limbs, and they can drink anyone under the table without trying."

"Not everyone," Jack said. "Hope you've got enough alcohol, old man."

Which was how Jack ended up being nicknamed, for the night at least, Iron Liver. The Norse spirits had to borrow a wheelbarrow to get Thor out the door at the end of the night.

It was also how Aster found out what happened to the stuff Jack ate and drank, if he didn't, eh, get rid of it right away.

"It rots. Or curdles. Not harmful, but not exactly the stuff you want going on in your stomach, and it makes my breath smell funky." Jack paused, and there was another odd gurgle as he threw up.
"Thus, toilet."

"Thus, toilet," Aster agreed. "I'm not kissing you while you taste like beer."

"We hit the tequila, actually, but I get your point."

"What's that stuff taste like?"

Jack spat in the toilet one last time, then flushed and moved over to the sink. "For me? Everything tastes like ashes."

Jack finally made good on his threat about the comments in the New Year. Aster ended up hooked on the DC line- not his fault they had good stories. Sometimes a bit simple, and occasionally there were plotlines with more holes in them than a fishing net, and you had to consider the target audience. But still good.

And if his eggs that Easter had the occasional odd color scheme, well, the Easter Bunny was acquainted with modern culture now.

"You're... kidding me with that, right?"

"I blame you."
"Bunny, we haven't even hit the eighties."

Aster just snorted, and pulled Jack in close enough to chin.

Jack's talks with Raven went down to once every two weeks. They celebrated- well, Jack celebrated, and Aster watched in horror- by loading two dozen water guns and another dozen water pistols with paint and glitter from the Warren, and gave them to Nick's elves. Jack then led a madcap attack on the Workshop, taking out yeti and unarmed elves with ease.

The yeti managed to round up the elves, but only after the 'ammo' was gone and they were swinging the water guns around as blunt objects. At that point, it was less disarming and more 'stop them from hitting themselves in the head'.

Jack hopped up onto a railing, and pointed his water pistol at Nick. "This is the day that you will always remember as the day you almost caught Jack Frost!" Then he jumped backwards off the railing.

Aster caught him.

"Good escape, mate," he said, utterly deadpan.

"Oh, just run."

It wasn't long after that, when Aster thought about how to make things more... official. He'd have said permanent, except there really wasn't any way to make what he and Jack had more binding. They were already tangled around and through each other, and even if for some reason the romantic side of things went sour, they'd be friends and family to the rest of their days anyways.

Though he doubted that it'd go sour. He loved Jack, and he had no doubt Jack loved him just as much right back, even if he hadn't said the words yet. Yes, he suspected that their lust would change, that they'd one day be able to go weeks, months, without doing more than kiss- though that'd be a long time coming- but their love would only deepen and strengthen.

But he wanted the official. He wanted everyone to know that Jack was his, and he was Jack's, and Desmond was theirs. The kit called him 'Da', now, and whined and dragged his feet and had chores to do about the burrow, because Aster wasn't going to expect Jack to do all the work.

Even if the blighter had forbidden him from doing anything other than sweep and wash dishes. He had an organizational system that worked; it'd been working for at least ten thousand years if not longer-!

Jack just laughed and shoved him outside to "paint your eggs pretty, fluffy-butt."

Spirits didn't marry, exactly, the way humans did. No church, no chapel, no priest or judge. There weren't any vows, and they didn't need rings. Just, you knew when someone was bound to another, when they were one half of a soul. That's what he wanted, so desperately he woke up aching for it.

"Uh huh," Jack said, when he'd brought the subject up. Not the 'I want this with you' part, but the 'interesting fact so you don't start talking wedding bells with Nick and Tooth' part. "And what's the catch?"

"Catch?"

"There's always a catch, Bunny. If it sounds really great, there's something that'll make it... less." Jack looked distant for a moment. "So, what's the catch?"
"None that I've ever heard of. You always know where your partner is, how they're doing. Nothing invasive, just sick, hurt, healthy. Over thataway however many miles or kilometers or whatever measurement you use. Soupspoons."

"Soupspoons?" Jack cracked a grin at that. "Sounds pretty invasive to me."

Aster took a sip of his tea. "I always thought it sounded nice."

"Yeah, well. Would Tooth and Nick have a ceremony, though? A party?"

"After they escaped whatever closet you locked 'em into? I reckon."

He didn't talk about it with Jack again. He wanted... but he didn't always get what he wanted. He'd accept what he had, wouldn't push for more if it meant staying with Jack.

All it'd do was make things official. Nothing more, nothing less.

It wasn't long after that they had their first real fight. Aster had gone off to talk to the Snow Queen, who really was the best person to talk to about things like Jack's... status of living or dead. He'd wanted to run a few ideas past her, before suggesting them to Jack. She must've gotten a message back to the Warren before he'd returned, because Jack was waiting.

And he wasn't happy.

"I need you to stop! I don't care and I can't- you're obsessing over this! I'm dead! Nothing you do, nothing anyone does is going to change it! Isn't- isn't this enough?"

"I just want-"

"And I want you to stop!"

It didn't get any better. Aster ended up storming off in a huff, stomped around Karijini National Park in Western Australia for a bit. When he got back... Jack was gone.

His carvings were still there, but the spare pair of jeans and hoodie weren't in the closet. Desmond, he found at Nick's. The kit didn't want to see him. Nick had looked understanding, which was somehow worse than if he'd been upset for him or at him.

What... what had he done wrong? What should he have said, or done, to help Jack understand? Aster didn't want Jack's heart to beat, because of what it'd mean for him. He wanted it because of what it'd mean for Jack. Not just sex- sex was actually at the bottom of the list. But everything else. Emotions the way they were supposed to be, instead of curiously dulled ("Because you need working glands for that, and I don't have them."

He'd laughed, and played with the fur on Aster's chest. "Good thing too, really. Can't get that scared if the adrenaline won't work.") and tasting food proper, actually smelling things, sleeping and dreams and no longer feeling singled out as the only ("Zombie," Jack said. "Differently alive," the Snow Queen replied. "Unique," was Aster's vote.) one like him.

Only Jack hadn't understood, had he, because he'd been so angry...

Was it only that he didn't want to hope? That he didn't dare believe he'd get a miracle, that he'd one day breathe because he had to, not because he wanted to? Was he afraid that he'd get his hope up, and then it'd break?

Stupid boy. Aster was the Guardian of Hope. He wouldn't let anything happen to Jack's.
He wiped away his tears, and curled up in his nest, and somehow fell asleep.

Desmond returned to the Warren, and the burrow, a few days later. It took Jack a month.

He was still angry when he came back, but more willing to talk, to listen. Aster had his heart in his throat the entire time.

"Sometimes- sometimes I don't understand why you even... I mean, look at me!" Jack gestured to himself, eyes glittering with a mix of emotions Aster wasn't going to even try figuring out. "I'm a walking corpse, we can't... Well, we can't. And you still..."

"I just want you to have everything you should," Aster told him. "And as for the rest, Jack-"

"I'm not a Pooka, I'm tiny, I'm young-"

"I love you."

Oh. He'd said it; he'd just out and popped the words into the conversation, again. He tried not to, because Jack got the most awkward expression whenever he did, but he always meant it.

"But...

"I don't care about that. Well, the cradle robbing isn't what I figured I'd be doing at this point in my life-" honestly, he hadn't figured on doing anything he was currently up to, but best not to mention that, "but I don't care about your species, or your size- I like the fact that I can wrap you up and keep you safe, and don't even start on your 'I'm a big, strong winter sprite, I can take care of myself' rant. I know you can. I like protecting you anyways."

"You sprawl all over me and then complain when I use your shoulder as a book rest."

"That- not the point. Jack." Aster moved closer, and brushed some white hair back from Jack's eyes. "I know it drives you mental, us trying to figure out some... some way... But it does matter to you. And there's nothing, nothing, that I wouldn't do to see you get this."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Jack said. He moved forward, and wrapped his arms around Aster's ribs, and sighed. "We're going to have to talk to Desmond, aren't we?"

"Kit's a mite bit cranky you were gone so long, yeah."

Things settled down again after that. They comforted Desmond, who accepted things finally, and then made up again, in the nest this time. Not even a day later, Aster finally - finally - told Jack his real name.

"Like the flower?"

"The flower was named for me."

"Uh huh. Whatever, daisy."

"Aster!"

"Rosebud?"

"Get back here!"

In hind sight, it might not have been his best idea. Though Nick's reaction, a classic spittake, when
Jack called him 'Petal', was more than worth a bit of irritation.

On the other hand, when Jack was sprawled out in the nest, calling his real name... Then, yes. It was absolutely the best idea he'd ever had.

He still wanted, very much, so many things. For Jack to live again. For their relationship, their bonding, to be official. For Tooth and Nick to get off their bleeding arses and in a relationship of their own, and Jack's suggestion of a closet was getting more and more attractive every month.

Surprisingly, the one thing he hadn't thought to want, was what he got.

Sandy contacted them. About Pitch.

Chapter End Notes

Um, HOW many chapters are we at? How many words? How many pages? (How many wonderful, wonderful comments- I love them all! You're all awesome, kudos to you, okay?) Wow. And I actually think I know where this story ends, though it won't be for a while yet. More things to happen! Including closets. Eventually. Yes.

And oh, god. This chapter was annoying. Like, ANNOYING annoying. But it's done, it's written, everything's good... Aster's headspace is an interesting one, even if I can't write Aussie-anything if my life depended on it. So yeah, it doesn't feel quite RIGHT to me at the moment, but the emotions do. If that makes any sense.

Next chapter, we find out what Sandy's been up to for the past... Huh. Almost two years. Unless my calculations are off. Also, food for thought, look up the "Hundredth Monkey Effect". Wikipedia has a nice summary. (Why no, I won't be referencing this in-story later on, why do you ask?)
The creature hit seven feet in height when stooped over, was covered in dark scales, and had glittering, golden eyes. Not even Tooth could find its smile appealing; there were three rows of barracuda-like teeth, each one black and the upper ones, at least, dripping a liquid that smoked faintly when it hit ground. It had claws, each one as long as Jack's finger, curved with serrated inner edges, and it looked all too willing to use them on anyone and everything. If not for the chains of golden sand holding it, at neck, wrists, ankles and waist, it would have clearly lunged for its nearest enemy and torn the individual to pieces.

"A fearing," North said.

Jack shivered. "Okay, what's a fearing? Other than, you know, scary."

"Fear itself," Aster said. He wrapped one arm around Jack, and pulled back. Jack went; most of the time he only tolerated the worrywart's overprotective nature, but this time? Yes, absolutely, protect him. Jack wanted nothing to do with that thing, it made wendigo look friendly.

Wendigo were not friendly. Wendigo were cannibals that'd eat each other if humans weren't around. Wendigo were some of the least friendly creatures on the planet, beaten out only by starving grizzly bears.

Jack got a good handful of fur, and pointed his staff at the fearing.

"Sandy?" North looked over at their friend, who looked utterly exhausted but at the same time, triumphant.

The Sandman grinned, and started flashing images over his head. Jack, two years out of practice, didn't even try to decipher the charades. He looked up at Aster instead.

"You got that thing from Pitch?" the Pooka asked, which hey, brought Jack up to speed. Yay for that.

Sandy nodded, and then eyed the monster with a slight frown. He flicked his fingers, and more golden sand rose up and added to the chains. The fearing howled, but its struggles did nothing.

"What should we do with it?" North asked. He fingered the hilts of his swords. "Fearlings are tricky to kill, and if it is from Pitch..."

Tooth moved forward and dismissed all of her fairies, but for Baby Tooth. That one flew over to perch on Jack's shoulder. "We can't just leave it here. Sandy, what about Pitch? Is he...?"

The Sandman's shoulders slumped, and he looked down at his hands. Even Jack could follow the shapes that formed. Pitch Black was no more; the fear and darkness that had infected him so long ago was now tied to the fearing there. But Kozmotis Pitchner had not fared very well at all, and Sandy was worried.

"How do you mean, didn't do so good?" Jack asked.

Sandy looked up, and showed an image of a man- inside a giant head- beating on a mostly
transient wall while scenes of horror played out on the giant eyes.

"He was trapped inside his own body?" Tooth guessed, and Sandy nodded.

"Talk about your 'and I must scream'," Jack muttered. "He saw... everything?"

Sandy nodded again, and looked down at his hands.

"Can we... I am sorry, Sandy, but can we see him? To... verify?" North reached forward, when Sandy's head snapped back up and he glared. "You are not infallible, and if even trace of darkness has been left behind..."

Sandy huffed, but nodded. He gestured towards the back of the room, where there was a second door.

As far as homes went, Jack thought, Sandy's was one of the weirdest. From the outside it looked a little like a futuristic castle, all spindly towers and arching bridges between them, windows everywhere and the entire thing floating above the ocean. Like, some fifty odd feet above the ocean. Kind of surreal. And the inside was just this giant maze, it seemed, with hallways that led nowhere, doors that opened onto walls, rooms inside of rooms, and at least three staircases that apparently wound up the outside of towers, and then right back down again the inside of them.

The fearling thing was chained up in one of the room-inside-a-rooms, which supposedly made things a little more secure. Jack wasn't too sure, since Sandy's home was made entirely out of dream sand. Just, you know, a feeling that stuff that wasn't even sandstone might not make the best prison... but what did he know. The sand-chains seemed to work just fine.

Aster kept his arm around Jack's waist. Jack kept his hand on Aster's arm, the muscles rock hard beneath his fingers.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Dunno. When I do, I'll let you know."

"You'd better."

Sandy turned and hushed them. He touched a door, and swung it open slowly. He sent streamers of sand in through first; Jack had the feeling he was warning the person in the room about them.

North followed Sandy in first, then Tooth. Jack patted Aster's arm, then freed himself from the almost too-tight grip. "It'll be okay," he murmured, and went through the door next.

The man huddled in the corner looked like Pitch, sort of. Like brothers would, just enough similarities to tell they were related. Pitch had skin that was, well, kind of gray, and short hair, and yellow eyes, and shark teeth. This guy was pale, sure, but in the 'hasn't seen the sun in years' way. His teeth looked normal, what glimpses Jack got of them, and his hair was a little shaggy, somewhat ragged, and oily. His eyes were the biggest difference. They weren't yellow, they were kind of pale brown. They could probably look gold in certain lights, but still, brown.

And terrified.

Jack immediately stepped to the side and hunched down, made himself less of a looming threat. Kozmotis' eyes wheeled as he followed Jack's movement, flicked between North, Tooth, and Sandy, then turned and he looked at something only he could see. He keened, high and mournful, and scrabbled at the sand walls with his fingers. The tips looked raw, a little bloody, like he'd been doing
that for ages.

Then Aster walked in, and Kozmotis... reacted.

He screamed, and wailed, and began smashing his head back against the wall behind him. It turned spongy immediately, but that didn't seem to stop him. When he couldn't get whatever he wanted out of the wall, Kozmotis began clawing at his face, still wailing.

Sandy flew forward, and grabbed Kozmotis by the wrists. He couldn't pull the man's hands away from his face, though; even looking skinnier than Jack, it was clear the former Nightmare King was strong. Very strong.

North and Tooth all but hurled themselves to Sandy's side to help him. Jack hung back. It was just... horrifying. Instead, he reached over and grabbed Aster's hand.

"I'm going to get Raven," he said. "You... You help them figure out what to do about the fearling."

"Other than kill it?"

"Yeah, well. You know what I meant."

"Right. Think I'd better..." Aster looked at the huddle of Guardians trying to calm a wailing Kozmotis. "I think I'd better step outside."

Jack looked at the huddle, too. "Yeah. I think you'd better."

If things didn't get better, at least they didn't get worse. Jack and Sandy- and Raven, too, though he had to take his winged shape, and shrink down to about the size of a collie dog- were the only ones that didn't set Kozmotis wailing. The fearling had been killed; Jack didn't know how, no one told him, and he was grateful for their silence on the subject.

Kozmotis was talking, at least, and except when he had one of his 'little fits' where he was reminded of what he'd done as the Nightmare King, fairly lucid. There wasn't much that didn't remind him of what he'd done, so Jack hit up the comic books.

Garfield, Charlie Brown, For Better and For Worse... Nothing with wars, or people being mind controlled, or genocidal destruction of entire races.

"You are... being very kind," Kozmotis said one day.

Jack turned the page in the comic book. "Well, yeah. Why wouldn't I be?"

The former Nightmare King, former General, shuddered and clenched his eyes shut. "After what I did? To you? To those you love? To an entire realm?"

"Ah-ah," Jack said, and waggled one finger in a 'no-no' gesture beloved by parents everywhere. "What did Raven say? I know he told you this, I was there when he told you this, it was only this morning..."

"I... was not responsible... for my actions. I was under the... control... of another being, who used... my body... for their own ends," Kozmotis said. He gasped for breath when he finished, and sweat beaded on his forehead.

"Good job." Jack reached over and patted his shoulder, quickly. "And Raven's right. No one blames you, Koz. Not me, not North, not Tooth, not Sandy.-" Definitely not Sandy, but there was a time and
a place to point out a friend's crush to the crushee, and this wasn't the time or the place, ",- and not Bunny, either."

Aster, actually, asked Jack for updates whenever the winter spirit visited. Jack would've been jealous, but Sandy had shown him stories, and North had told him a few, and Tooth had told him a lot. So he understood. It was like- like meeting Superman, in the flesh, for real.

Only this Superman had been trapped inside his own mind, forced to watch while fearlings used his body to kill and corrupt everything he loved and held dear. Friends, family, respected companions... All gone, and at his hands. It didn't matter that he hadn't been in control; he still felt the guilt and responsibility for his actions.

Raven was working on it, and Jack was doing what he could to help. Sandy was there, always, eager to help Kozmotis sleep through the night- with dreamsand, obviously, though Jack suspected snuggling might have also been involved.

He could understand that, the sheer need for physical contact to ground you in reality, the here and now.

"Hey," he said, and ducked his head to look Kozmotis in the eye. "You could talk to him, you know. He'd tell you exactly the same thing."

"I cannot." Kozmotis shook his head, and swiped at the tears that immediately started falling. "You do not understand, I killed them, I enjoyed it-"

"Okay, okay." They didn't need another episode right now, it'd make five in one day. And it wasn't even noon. "Okay. You don't have to. It was just a suggestion. Hey, c'mon Koz. Calm down, buddy, we're all good here, you don't have to see anyone, or talk to anyone, you don't want to."

Slowly, far too slowly for Jack's peace of mind, Kozmotis lowered his hands away from his face. At least he hadn't scratched himself up this time. "You do promise me this?"

"Yeah. I promise, cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye if I lie." Jack did the motions, too, and grinned.

"Horrifying promise," the former general said, huffing, but he seemed to relax as much as he ever did. "I do not- I cannot. You see?" He peered at Jack, and reached over to pluck at Jack's sleeve. "You do see, do you not?"

"Yeah," Jack said, and sighed. "I see." He saw a broken man, shattered like a mirror, but he also saw the man that had once inspired Aster joining the Lunar Army.

"Hey," he said, suddenly getting an idea. "Would you like to meet my son, then? Desmond? Pretty sure I told you about him before."

"Your son?" Kozmotis looked almost hopeful, for a second, before he went right back to beaten fear. "Would he not be frightened of me?"

"Nope," Jack said. He knew Desmond wouldn't be scared. Kozmotis was nothing like Pitch. "C'mon, it'll be awesome, the two of you could finger paint or... Oh, I know! No worries, its fun. And Sandy can join us, too."

He stopped breathing while Kozmotis considered the idea. Not that it'd fix things, and Desmond would probably have to stay human-shaped the entire visit, but the guy needed to have some fun. The comics were alright, but they weren't cutting it. Desmond, though, could help a troll have fun, if
he wanted to. No happy flakes required, which was a good thing, since the one and only time Jack had shown Kozmotis a happy flake; it had resulted in an incident.

Jack still felt guilty.

"I... yes. I would meet your son. If he be willing, and only then," Kozmotis warned.

Jack grinned. "No worries. He's been nagging me about you almost as much as Bunny."

Jack decided not to mention that Desmond's questions had been a bit more wary than his Da's. No need to upset Kozmotis with his son's youthful paranoia.

Now, where was he going to get the supplies for the sand art, anyways?

Chapter End Notes

Place holder chapter is a placeholder, and I'm sorry, but, eh, a scene from my dark fic kind of grabbed me by the brainstem and wouldn't let go. Next chapter there's more Koz, and Des gets to be cute, and the Moon is maybe slightly a dick. If that scene goes in, anyways. Also, another time jump will be involved, so I'll be sure to let you know what's going on with that.
Chapter Thirty-Two

"Now remember," Papa said. He adjusted Des' hoodie again. "Fragile, broken man is fragile and broken, so no loud noises, no sudden movements, and let's keep you being a Pooka a secret for now."

"Why? He'll try an' hurt me?" Des asked. Da made a face like he'd bitten into an apple and found half a worm wiggling in his mouth. "Well! He did before!"

"That was Pitch Black," Da said. He also reached over and adjusted Des' hoodie. "Not Kozmotis. The general-"

Was a great big friend of the Pooka before he went crazy and killed everyone, he knew. Papa had told him, and Da had told him, and Des was just finding it a little hard to believe. But he'd try, for his fathers, and because Sandy wanted his friend to smile again. He didn't have to like it.

"So are we going, then?" he asked, once Da was done his speech. Da was nervous, he could tell. He didn't get this nervous when Papa went to see the former crazy-man. Maybe it was just because Da was being left alone this time, instead of having Des around to distract him.

"Yeah, we're going kiddo." Papa grabbed a handful of hair and yanked on it, then turned and kissed Da on the lips. Des rolled his eyes. Parents. They were always being smoochy faces. Bad enough they made gooey eyes at each other, did they have to be all touchy too? Des almost preferred back before Da and Papa started with the gooey eyes, even if Papa had been all wound up from not wanting to upset anyone.

Well, there were benefits to his fathers being all touchy and gooey at each other. Des got his room all to himself, which meant he could leave his toys out on the floor and everything. Papa was a neat freak. It was exhausting.

"Okay," Papa said, and stepped back.

Da knelt down in front of Des, and frowned. "You don't have to go," he said. He rested a hand on Des' shoulder.

"I'll go. I said I would." And someone had to make sure Kozmotis wasn't still a crazy bad guy. Everyone knew adults got tricked all the time, but who'd go to the trouble of tricking a kid? Des would be able to tell for sure, and once he knew, he'd be able to warn everyone before the crazy guy started making a skull pyramid or something.

"Atta boy," Da said, and grinned. It was lopsided and wobbly. Des didn't have to think a moment before he lunged forward and grabbed Da's neck in a hug. He maybe jabbed Da in the throat with his shoulder, too. Okay, so whacked was a better word than jabbed.

Da grunted, and grabbed onto Des, and maybe wheezed a little or a lot, Des wasn't actually listening.

"Stop strangling your Da, kiddo," Papa said. He grabbed Des' hood and tugged. Whoever had thought giving humans scruffs for their parents to grab was stupid. It was bad enough when he was all fuzzy!
Well, no, he kind of liked it, getting picked up like that felt... safe. Whatever form he was in. Also like maybe Papa wanted to show him off like a trophy, which was a totally understandable desire because Des was awesome, he knew it, everyone knew it. Or like Da was impatient with Des' short little legs, but not cranky with it.

All he knew was that if his parents picked him up by the scruff, he knew exactly where he belonged and who with.

Anyone else was just going to get kicked in the stomach.

With claws.

Des let go of Da's neck, and pretended he didn't see Da rub his throat and sigh. He was not a threat to life and limb! Not on purpose, anyways.

He was just enthusiastic about showing people he cared.

"Alright kiddo," Papa said. He grinned and hoisted Des up by the hood. "Let's go."

Yeah. Time to see the crazy man and play crafts with him. "Okay. Can we see the dolphins on the way?"

"If they're there," Papa said.

Maybe they'd get distracted looking for dolphins and whales and forget all about seeing the crazy man.

He could hope, right?

Jack knew exactly what Desmond was up to, and even approved a little. He had a suspicious little brat for a son, after all. He kind of expected the poking and the prodding and the all too innocent act.

Desmond poured another gallon of glue on his paper, and then followed that up with careful handfuls of green and blue dyed sand. "You're not doing it right," he said, and eyeballed Kozmotis' artwork.

Sandy huffed at Desmond, and patted Kozmotis' arm. Sand-shapes not required, clearly Sandy thought the former general's work was pretty good.

"No, he's right," Kozmotis said. "My hands are shaking too much, I think."

Jack frowned at Desmond, who sighed and quietly apologized for being rude.

"Understandable." The former general stared down at his artwork. It looked like an abstract, colors running together in jagged lines, occasionally spilling off the paper entirely. "This... isn't what you planned, is it?" he asked Jack.

"Bits and pieces are."

"Does anyone talk to you about the Guardians?" Des asked, as if that had been the topic they were on.

Kozmotis twitched, and then shook his head. "I know of them. From memories."

"Uh huh." Des snorted, and added a glob of orange to his paper. "Betcha don't know Santa's got a
big crush on Tooth." A line of green. "And he's my Dedushka, too, so I can tie him up with Christmas lights, but Papa says I'm not allowed to lock him in the closet. That's Papa's job."

"Ah... right, What?" Kozmotis looked over at Sandy, who immediately started flashing images at him. Though, to be fair, Sandy looked a bit confused too.

"Des, no confusing people, we talked about this," Jack said. He didn't bother keeping his voice down, he'd be overheard no matter how quiet he got.

"But Papa, he's gotta be warned! The gooey eyeballs are as bad as you and Da! Only Dedushka and Tooth don't kiss so it's worse!"

"But you can't just tell him like that! You have to warn him carefully!" Jack grinned, and added mountains- well, he thought they were mountains- to his picture. Or maybe they were cat ears.

Maybe he wouldn't show his artwork to Aster. That was just asking for gentle mockery.

"Ah, Sandy?" Kozmotis asked. "Gooey eyeballs?"


Desmond huffed, and folded his arms. He accidentally got glue on one sleeve, and tried to brush it off. Jack watched the kid glare at his now-coated fingers, and proceed to try rubbing the glue off on his pants. At some point he'd have to step in, but for now he'd wait. Possibly until Desmond was covered in multi-colored sand.

"Anyways, to clarify. North- that'd be Santa- has a massive crush on the Tooth Fairy, Tooth. That'd be bad enough, except she has a massive crush on him right back. Only neither of them knows about the crushes being mutual. They're the most oblivious- Sandy, stop laughing at me. I figured it out!"

Sandy mimed Jack getting hit over the head by a two-by-four, and Jack rolled his eyes.

"I am officially one half of a requited couple, thank you very much! No weird obliviousness...ness... from me!"

Sandy just folded his arms, and flashed a series of images Jack thought boiled down to 'so who clued you in?'

"Da told Papa first," Desmond snitched. "And then Papa got all silly, but I have my own room now and Papa and Da have to share. Poor Da."

Jack rounded on Desmond. "Wha- Poor Da? Why poor Da?"

"You're a neat freak and he has to clean up after himself now."

As if Aster knew the first thing about cleaning. Or that there was much to keep clean. Jack was the only one in the family who regularly wore clothes, after all.

... He still didn't know where Aster had found that shirt and skirt back when he'd been distracting Bluebeard, but when Jack got his hands on them, there'd be a bonfire.

"You are bonded?" Kozmotis asked, right before Jack started spluttering.

Okay, spluttering for a slightly different reason now. "Bonded? Uh, what do you mean like that?"
Jack looked over at Sandy.

Sandy showed an image of a traditional wedding, only the bride looked like Jack.

"You little-" Jack cut himself off before he broke his own rule about swearing around Desmond. "Married? Bonded means married? No. We're not. And even if he did ask, I wouldn't wear a dress. I'm not a girl!"

"Would too," Desmond said. He rolled his eyes, and then glowered at the bright pink sand all over his hands. "If Da asked you would."

That was not a topic he was going to talk about with his son. "D'you need a dunk in the ocean, kiddo?"

"Not yet."

Right, Desmond would wait until he was completely covered. Jack grinned at him. "I'm so proud of my boy," he told Kozmotis.

The poor man looked confused. "I see. Ah, if I may... I think my memories might be faulty...?" He glanced at Desmond again.

"Adoption."

"But... fur?"

Ah, yes, a subject Jack had intended to avoid. He glanced at Sandy, who couldn't look more worried if he tried.

Jack shrugged. "Transformation magic."

If Kozmotis looked into his memories, he'd realize Jack wasn't telling anything close to the full truth. But Jack knew the former general wouldn't, unless absolutely forced to. So no need to go over "Desmond's kind of a Pooka, and yeah you kind of have a phobia of them now but hey, look, nobody died this time so it's all good!"

He had a feeling that conversation would not end well.

"Papa?"

Jack raised one eyebrow, and looked over at Desmond.

Desmond wasn't looking at him. He was staring out the window, and then he pointed. "Look."

Jack looked. Then he snarled.

The aurora. They were too far south for it to be natural, so... "Problem," he said, and looked at Sandy. "Do we ever get a break?"

---

They left Kozmotis in North's movie room, with some hasty instructions on how to work the remote control and a selection of light and fluffy kid's movies to watch. Then they hurried down to the meeting room. Desmond switched back to a Pooka halfway down the hall, then almost broke his neck when he tripped over his ill-fitting pants. Jack snatched him up by the hood or the scruff, he couldn't tell which, and all but ran after Sandy.
Sandy was first through the door, but Jack was a very close second. He looked around the room and immediately jumped over to Aster's side. Literally jumped; a little bit of flight might have been involved, because Aster was standing completely opposite the door.

"What's wrong?" he asked, and swung Desmond up into his arms. He promptly got red sand on his hands, thanks to his son's creative struggles with glue, sand art, and now clothing and fur.

"Dunno," Aster admitted. He wrapped his arms around Jack and Desmond both, and didn't seem to notice his son trying to gnaw his pants off. "Nick just called us in, but look at him."

Jack turned, and did. Yeah, North did not look jolly. He looked angry, and- "Is that the moon crystal thing?" he asked. "The one used to pick out new guardians?"

"Yeah." Aster tightened his grip. "Which means something bad's coming."

Jack swallowed, and shifted things around a bit so he had his staff free to hit people over the head with, if need be. "Oh, joy. Can't we just catch a break? Our lives are not a soap opera, people!"

Tooth turned and stared at him. "Jack?"

"Nothing, just..."

North cleared his throat. "Good, we are all here. Man in Moon wishes to speak with us, choose another Guardian." He looked over at the small cluster of Pooka and Jack. "Come closer?"

"We can see just fine from here, mate," Aster assured him.

"If anyone tries to make Desmond a Guardian," Jack muttered, "I'm going to give new meaning to the phrase 'ice moon'."

"Heh." Aster rested his chin on Jack's head. "With you there, but I don't think it's likely."

"I could so be a Guardian," Desmond muttered. He'd somehow freed himself from his pants. Jack wasn't about to ask.

Then the moon started to glow, and the crystal glowed, and they all shut up.

Right up until the image of Kozmotis Pitchner appeared in the crystal. Then someone started to swear, in several languages, extremely creatively.

Oh, that was him.

Chapter End Notes

See? The moon is a dick. And Des POV remains damn difficult to write, which is why he only got a short scene. There's only a bit left to go- really only two major events, though with the way the characters are talking at me, that might end up being another twenty chapters. (Okay, possibly ten or so.) We'll see.

And then I can hit you guys with my dark fic and another cute fic. Both of them are threatening to be epics, so. There's that.
"No." The once and future General stood firm, despite the trembling. "I cannot."

Sandy held out one hand. I know, he said, and tears threatened. It is too soon to ask you this.

Koz, dear Koz, who had made acclimatizing to people of flesh and bone a pleasure instead of a chore, curled his lip, and revealed four delicate fangs. The rest of his teeth had returned to a more proper, human appearance, but the fangs marked him, now and forever, as a master of fear. "It will ever be too soon. I am tainted, my dear friend. Broken of mind, weak of will..." His face crumpled, and he sagged where he stood. "You would set me to guard, when all the time the blade that kills them will be in my hand..."

No! My friend, that would never happen. Sandy's expression gentled, and he floated up to cup Koz' cheek with one hand. You have been wounded, yes, but you are healing. You are! The scars will remain, but the humans have a saying. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

He didn't think it prudent to mention Jack's, or Desmond's, additions to that saying. Both were fond of finishing the saying with 'unless it cuts your legs off, in which case you're only shorter'. Humorous, especially the way they spoke, but not apt in this situation.

By the Moon, he hadn't felt this serious in many a century. Not even in all his confrontations with Pitch Black.

"You think this is strength?" Koz asked. He glowered at Sandy, but there was as much grief as anger in it.

I think it knowledge, and that is strength. Oh, Koz. What Sandy would have done, just to lift the burden of exhaustion and guilt from his friend's shoulders. The Golden General had always blamed himself, for everything that went wrong, every soldier's injury and death. He was the leader, and so, it was his responsibility.

There was a difference between responsibility and fault, however, and that difference was one Koz never had been able to see.

"I have no knowledge that might be used." Koz pulled away, and tilted his head back. "Can you not understand, Sanderson? Will you not see? What I know, what I have experienced..."

Sandy wished he had vocal cords. Of all the things his body lacked! Ah, well, his sand did well enough. As long as his partner in conversation looked at him, which it seemed Koz was unwilling to do. Sandy floated back a touch, and was most certainly not pouting, thank you.

The door creaked open, and young Desmond peeked through. "I thought there'd be screaming," he said, and brushed impatiently at his hair. He had taken human form again, though had yet to repair his clothes. Sandy considered giving him a kilt, but perhaps seeing a half-nude young boy might get Koz' attention, even if he was dead set on ignoring Sandy.

Sandy shook his head, and gestured at Koz. He is being stubborn, he signed, though from the child's expression, his message was perhaps not as clear as he might have liked.
"Uh huh." The child finally shrugged. "Well, Da says it's getting late, so I wanted to say goodbye before they dragged me home."

Was it night already? Sandy checked outside— but perhaps it was simply a sign of the odd schedule Desmond and his family kept to. Or only that the North Pole was in the middle of a six month long day. It mattered not at all to him; his sand went out to dreamers wherever in the world they were. He could direct it, if he chose, but he had no true need. His sand was a part of him, not separate as the Wind was to Jack.

**Goodnight then, little one,** he said, and held his arms out for a hug.

Desmond bounded over, and chirred under his breath as he nuzzled at Sandy's shoulder. He pulled back and sneezed, before waving at Koz.

"Bye to you too. If you swear at the Moon, can you wait until I'm there? Papa shut up once he realized I was taking notes."

Sandy chuckled to himself as Desmond laughed and bounced right back out of the room. He shut the door with a tendril of sand, and looked back at Koz.

*If there is not fear in his life, he will jump off the cliff and crash against the rocks,* he said. Unlikely to happen in reality, true; Jack and Aster were both protective of their son, obviously, and Desmond was sensible. But without fear, without that warning at the back of one's mind, tragedies could happen. The child who knew better would get into the van nonetheless; the poisoned candy and the strangling necklace would claim their victims. Sandy never had approved of the Snow White story. How many times did you have to come near death before you learnt to stop taking things from strangers?

"My friend?" Koz asked. This time, it was he who held his hand out.

Sandy studied the man, the bravest man he knew, and sighed. *I would show you what you would guard the children against,* he said. *If you be willing. If you think yourself well enough.*

He stepped forward, and willed Koz to see his sincerity. *If you think what you saw of Pitch Black was a horror, my friend... Then I sorrow to tell that Pitch Black was nothing to what can happen without fear.*

Koz covered his face with his hands, and when he looked up again his cheeks were wet. "Show me," he said.

So Sandy did.

---

Jack stretched out in the nest, his living pillow still shaking a bit as he came down from his high. "You make the silliest noises," he said, once he was sure the ringing in Aster's ears had passed, "just so you know."

"And you don't?" Aster tilted his head up, and grinned. "Seem to remember you squeaking some there."

"Just saying. Big, badass warriors don't do that... I don't even know what that was. A squeal? On helium?"

Aster smacked him on the rear, and rolled over while Jack was busy blushing and mentally flailing. "You're so cute."
"That's cheating."

"Mm."

Maybe it was a Pooka thing, Jack thought, the way they all- well, okay, beloved and son- seemed to want to use him as a pillow. Not that he minded, really, but Aster was heavy and if he'd needed to breathe it might have been a touch uncomfortable. You know, because six feet and one inch- not counting the ears- of muscle was kind of heavy. Of the two hundred and fifty-three pounds variety of heavy.

All of which seemed to be curled up on Jack, as compared to beside Jack or spooning Jack or, for preference, acting as Jack's personal mattress.

He grinned, despite the fact that he couldn't move and hadn't thought to set a book within reach, and began playing with Aster's fur. The thick ruff along his neck and shoulders was almost long enough to get a braid in it. Well, technically it could be braided, if they were skinny little things with something like ten hairs in each section.

It could only entertain him so long, though. Jack left off his attempts, and rested his hands on his snoring mate's shoulders. Not bad snoring, just... there. Heavy breathing with the occasional grunt.

Why had Kozmotis been chosen as a Guardian? Admittedly, Jack wasn't going to give the Moon much benefit of the doubt, considering, but he didn't think even the Moon would choose a broken man right before another major conflict.

Would he?

"I guess," he muttered, and closed his eyes. "We'll just have to wait and see."

Aster grunted, and tightened his grip on Jack's ribs.

In the morning, he took leave of the Warren and headed for America. It was almost time to start changing the leaves, though he thought it'd be late this year. Things had been a little weird on that side of things, but at long as he got the snow where it was supposed to be...

He shook his head, and dropped down to land on his lake. The water immediately iced over, though if anyone else had tried walking on it, they'd go straight through.

Jack looked down, and grinned. Good thing Pitch had managed to thaw out, though he could have done without some of the after. General Winter had not been fun- although having Aster as part of his life was defiantly worth it.

He didn't think he'd tell anyone that, though. Unless it was Raven. Raven was a fellow trickster, he understood the idea that sometimes, if you were going to get something good in life, you had to bleed for it.

Sometimes, especially with spirits who had a revolving door to death's domain installed, you had to die for it.

He shook his head, and shook it off. Instead, he took a quick look at the trees in his forest. Not quite ready to change, not for a few more weeks. It'd be a late harvest, though with how mechanized everything was he didn't think anyone would notice or care.

"Since I'm here," he said, and hopped back into the air. "Let's go see the kids," he told the Wind. She laughed, rustling the leaves, and threw him up high. She caught him again and carried him into the
The kids were at the second place he checked, Cupcake's house. Her father had gone through something called 'a midlife crisis', which had resulted in, among other things, a big screen plasma TV almost as good as the one at North's. The kids all continued to play outside, so Jack didn't worry about it, though because of the TV, Cupcake's was now the place to study and hang out.

All of his believers made sure to leave a window open, if only just a crack, in case he dropped by. It meant Jack didn't have to find some way through front doors, side doors, back doors, doggy doors...

He just did not fit through the doggy door. And the dogs rarely appreciated his attempts, either.

"Hey guys," he said, and slid the living room window closed behind him. "What're you learning today?" School had started already, hadn't it? It was... yeah, early September.

He was pretty sure, anyways.

"Jack!" Jamie glomped on, followed by Pippa and Cupcake. Jack's ribs protested, but he ignored them. Useless things anyways.

"Okay, that's a bit more enthusiastic than I normally get."

Claude waved him over to the couch. "Well, we have something to ask you."

Jack grinned, and dumped the three kids onto the cushions scattered on the floor, and hopped up to balance on his staff. "Uh oh. That's never good."

"Background first," Pippa said. She grinned, and sat up. "So, we're in middle school now-"

"Already?"

"Yeah," the kids said, with varying degrees of mumble.

"Anyways. They're going to do an anti-drug rally Friday after next."

Friday after- "In two weeks you mean. A week and a half." What day was it again?

Jamie nodded, and leaned forward. "But if they hold it in three weeks, the police can send one of their officers down. But if it's in two weeks, it's Coach Robertson, and he makes clown impressions in gym class."

"Like... He's got one of those sponge noses," Caleb said.

"Very freaky," Monty added.

Jack nodded slowly. "Cop versus clown-obsessed gym teacher... Does he have a neck?"

Cupcake shrugged. "Theoretically?"

"Obsessed with weight lifting?"

Caleb held his thumb and forefinger the tiniest bit apart, while Claude said, "Only a little. Like- like Sophie's only a little obsessed with rabbits."

Jack grinned at that. At the rate the kid was going, she'd end up kidnapping Desmond and keeping him in her closet, and the kid would not want to leave. Where else would he be fed cookies and milk
every day, and never have to do chores? "Has your mom said anything about her getting a pet rabbit?" he asked Jamie.

The kid rolled his eyes, one of the many habits he must have picked up from Jack. It made the winter spirit so proud. "Mom and Dad are talking. Maybe by Christmas."

Which meant that somehow, North was going to give Sophie a rabbit, and Jamie's parents would remember buying the thing. Jack... wasn't going to question that, he suspected it was part of the magic of Santa Claus, and the idea just gave him a headache no matter how many times North explained it.

"Awesome."

"Anyways. We- everyone- really, really wants the cop," Pippa said. "Like, a lot."

Jack nodded, and raised an eyebrow. "So, how does this lead to asking me a question?"

Everyone looked at Jamie, who promptly made a face. "Oh, sure, make me ask..."

"Kiddo?"

Jamie took a deep breath. "Jack, can you make a snow day for a specific day? Like, now?"

Jack blinked, and tapped his chin. "You want me to snow out the day the assembly would normally be held?"

"My mom's on the school board," Monty said. "If Coach, for whatever reason, can't do the assembly, they'll just wait and have the cop do it."

"We thought about poisoning him," Cupcake said. She didn't sound like she was joking. "But none of us could figure out what'd get him drunk without alcohol."

"Uh," Jack said. "What?"

"We read it in a book," the twins chorused. Caleb gestured at Claude to continue. "These kids were trying to find a cure for the common cold, so they dosed their sick gym teacher's sports drink with a test drug their genius roommate came up with, only it got him drunk instead. We figured if Coach started acting drunk, he wouldn't do the assembly."

"And could possibly get sacked," Jack pointed out. Other than a few obvious stumbling blocks, it wasn't a bad idea, and he told them so. They all beamed.

"If he got kicked off staff, we might get a better teacher," Pippa said. "Anyways. Can you make a snow day? Like, in time?"

He shouldn't even be spreading frost at the moment; it wasn't quite cold enough at night for it. The leaves wouldn't start turning for three weeks, minimum, if not a little longer. There was any number of minor autumn sprites that'd be put off if he did anything even hinting of snow at this point in time. It'd take so much energy he might end up falling asleep where he stood, if he didn't manage to stagger to his lake in time. He definitely didn't want the kids to see him sleeping, that'd just be disturbing for them on so many levels...

He opened his mouth, to apologize he thought, but then he looked at them.

His eight believers looked so hopeful, like he was their only chance. How could he disappoint them?
"So what day is it today?" he asked. "And- not this Friday, you said, but the next one?"

"You mean you'll do it?" Jamie asked, his eyes bugging out.

"Of course." Jack smirked, and raised one eyebrow. "Did you really doubt me?"

Chapter End Notes

Yup, Koz is the champion of (reasonable) fear now. For anyone who could possibly doubt fear is a good thing, read "The Gift of Fear" by Gavin de Becker. Someone might give Koz a copy, who knows. (It is my fervent belief that every woman- and I do mean EVERY woman- needs to read this book.)

And Jack is going to give his kids a snow day.

Sandy's POV is haaaaard. Like, seriously. Dude, your headspace is not a place I fit.
Aster flipped through the papers a second time. They were completely indecipherable to him; some seemed to be weather patterns, maybe, and others were handwritten and seemed to involve complex math, with numbers in place of the letters. Still other pages seemed to be rough drafts of some sort, but the writer had the worst handwriting he'd ever seen, including his own, and he had paws.

"Jack," he called, and headed for the tiny closet of a study. "Mate." He set the papers down on the desk. "What."

Jack poked at the papers, grinned, and shrugged. "The kids asked me a favor."

"A favor." Aster absolutely didn't raise his eyebrows, though he did fold his arms and give his mate an unimpressed look.

"It was either I do a snow day, or they find some way to get their gym coach drunk. Or something." Jack frowned, and waved his finger through the air like a conductor leading a distracted orchestra. "Cling wrap across all the doorways and his car, maybe, I don't know. Either way."

"The leaves haven't even started changing!" It was still summer-warm in Burgess; Desmond had complained about it just two days ago after he'd visited the kids in question. Granted, the kit seemed stuck in permanent winter coat, but even so.

"Hey, it's snowed before leaves changed color before. Not always on my head, but it's happened. Come on, cottontail, I've already gotten the okay from a bunch of crazy autumn spirits." Jack grimaced, and poked another pile of- leaves? No, colored paper cut in the shape of oversized leaves, oak and beech, birch and maple. One was a pumpkin.

"You asked permission?"

Jack grimaced again. "Autumn spirits are all tricksters of some kind. I figured giving a heads up would be appreciated. Then they send replies about how I'm stupid for worrying they'd get upset, it sounds like a lovely joke, and do I want to try any of the pie? Which I don't, that Halloween guy- he's bugfuck nuts- I think he's read too many Batman comics with the Scarecrow in them."

Aster rested a paw on the back of Jack's neck, and rubbed his thumb up and down the tense lines. "So you're going to do a snow day. That's going to be a lot of snow."

"Not as much as you might think." Jack grabbed one of the papers covered in math, and waved it briefly before setting it back down. "Too early in the year for snow tires, no one's gotten the plows out, I just need it bad enough to make everyone boggle, plus a little extra in case anyone's feeling brave."

Aster frowned at the math equations. Algebra, wasn't it? He wasn't a fan of the stuff; give him solid numbers and he'd do fine; start making them hide and switch polarity, and he started finding other things to do.

"And the rest?" he asked.

Jack slumped. "Whatever I do, however I do this, I'm going to be exhausted. When it's over, I'm going to fall immediately asleep, Aster, and I..." He looked up, and smiled faintly. "Could you come get me? Bring me home? It's that or the lake, and I..."
This was home. Aster would have agreed to about anything at that point. He nodded, and yanked Jack up out of the chair and into his arms. "I'll stay with you while you do your thing," he said, "how's that?"

"Uh, yeah, that works," Jack said, and grinned. "Hey, does this mean you're going to kiss me?"

"That too," Aster said, and closed the study door behind him. There wasn't a lock, so he wedged the chair under the door latch and called it good.

When they finished, of course, there were still other details to iron out, but they took Jack's papers outside the study- why did he even have a study? No one used it, until just now- and settled down in the conservatory. Aster glanced out the window, spotted Desmond using his pet elf as a crash bag, and sighed.

"Yeah, it's a good thing elves are sturdy. Are you sure we can't steal anymore? Like, two more?"

"I actually get that Butterfingers reference, and I'm not having two more elves running around my Warren so you and Desmond can call yourselves Tony Stark and Jarvis." He also wasn't having his son call anyone 'dummy', not seriously and not as a name, but now might not be the right time to mention it.

"No, no," Jack said, and flipped through his papers. "We'd steal a yeti to be Jarvis."

Aster rolled his eyes.

"So," he said. "When is the snowstorm?"

"I actually have to get things set up about... two days before? There has to be a cold snap, and oh joy, it can't be confined to Burgess because then you just know something weird is going on, so all of Penn-state is going to have snow, more or less. They'll blame it on the lake effect, I just know it." Jack sighed. "They always do."

"It's close enough to a lake-?"

"Lake Erie, or the actual Atlantic ocean, right between the two. And anyways, people like finding reasonable explanations for the weather."

As compared to seasonal spirits, unlike even a few centuries back. If Jack had been born five centuries ago, he might have been believed in much earlier. Humans had believed in a lot more things before they realized the science beneath everything.

Perhaps, one day, they'd discover the science that allowed a spirit to exist, allowed magic to work, and was the core of everything else in the entire universe. Then, like the Pooka race had, they'd converse with spirits, with elementals, explore space...

Well, one day. He wrapped an arm around Jack's shoulders, and leaned most of his not inconsiderable weight on the fragile male. "So where will you get this all set up?"

Jack blinked, and squeaked as he was forced to the side, against the couch arm. "Hey!" He shoved at Aster, but he might as well have been pushing on a wall. Finally he gave up, and after a bit of squirming, was on his back. Perfect for a Pooka to sprawl out over, chin on his paws, paws on his mate's chest, smirk on his lips.

"What is it with you and squishing me?" Jack asked, and grinned. "I was thinking my lake. I mean, I know there's no body down there, I'm here, but it's where I feel strongest."
Aster clenched his teeth just long enough to not react to that comment. "Birthplace," he said, once he had control over his tongue. "I landed in Australia, so it's mine and Sandy... Some island that no longer exists. North was Russian before he found Santoff Clausen, and Tooth hails from India."

"And Kozmotis?"

"Pitch Black landed in Europe, or what'd become Europe, and Kozmotis will probably be bound by the same ties."

Jack shrugged, and dug his fingers into the short fur on the back of Aster's head, and started scratching. Oh, that felt good. "Interesting. Well, my lake will be the center of the storm, and since Burgess is closest it'll get the most snow."

"Storms take a lot of prep work, then?"

"Not usually, not in winter," Jack said. "I mean, it's supposed to snow. But right now?" He made a face. "Or in spring? Personally, I'd really rather not, I'm not..." he left off scratching to fail his hands, briefly. "If not for the Guardian thing I'd be pretty low on the totem pole, as far as winter spirits go."

If anyone tried anything against Jack now, Aster would happily tear them apart. The sentiment might have shown in his expression, because Jack gave him the oddest look before continuing to speak.

"Anyways, it's all good right now, other than the exhaustion going to hit like a brick thing. The autumn spirits... Have I mentioned they're crazy?"

"Something to that effect, yeah," Aster said, and rubbed one paw in circles over Jack's sternum. "Tricksters tend to be."

Jack frowned. "Thanks. I'm a trickster."

"And you raised a Pooka alone for almost half a century, then shacked up with another. Sorry, mate, but you're certifiable."

"Heh. You're lucky I like you."

Yes. He was.

Aster hummed, and twitched his eyebrows when it looked like Jack was going to wander around his own head without a map. "Heavy thoughts?"

"Not really. Just- how can anyone mistake me for an autumn spirit?" Jack asked.

Aster actually lifted his head at that. Jack, an autumn spirit? Granted, he did start his work before any of the other winter spirits, and he was one of the ones that triggered the seasonal change in the trees, and he was playful and mischievous where the other winter spirits needed a map and a compass to find a sense of humor...

"Both," he decided. "Herald of Winter or something, straddling the line between seasons. Any better?"

"You're just as weird as they are," Jack said, but he started scratching behind Aster's ears again, so it didn't matter.

There was no way to keep his eyes off Aster, so he didn't even try. God, the Pooka was just- focus, Jack, and not on your mate running through his katas. The Wind was having trouble herding the
clouds, and he had to help her as much as he possibly could.

He really needed to get Aster to teach him hand to hand.

*Focus*, damn it. He wanted snow, not hailstones, and if he didn't pay attention he'd get what he didn't want and then there'd be property damage and no. Just no. Broken windshields and chunks of ice the size of golf balls weren't what he was going for, here.

He closed his eyes, because Aster was *distracting*, okay, and concentrated on the Wind and the clouds and the temperature. He had an odd- almost like double vision- of the sky above, the clouds bunching together and scattering apart, and the Wind like a giant eagle- oh, that was why he could ride her- using her wings to herd them where he wanted them to go.

This was it, the third and final day, and he was so tired he couldn't concentrate. None of his storms previously had been anything as difficult as this. Even back in '68 when he'd snowed out Easter, at least he hadn't had to play with the temperature any. This? He'd had to take the temperature, which had been barely cooler than the middle of summer, and drop it down so the snow would not turn to rain, and would stick long enough to have the school close for the day.

Jack occasionally cheated and called a snowstorm in the middle of summer, just because the snow would melt and then yay, rain, and he always made sure never to leave traces of his meddling, but if the summer spirits weren't going to take care of things he would.

His mind was wandering, but the Wind was doing exactly what he needed her to.

The clouds didn't want to snow. He felt their reluctance, like wobbly ground that'd turn into an avalanche if the mountain slope was poked *just* right. He had the stick, proverbially and literally...

All he needed now was to poke.

Everything was in position. Jack gathered his energy, coiled it tight around his staff, and then slowly raised his staff high, crook pointing up at the swirling clouds overhead.

Just a trickle of energy, up, like the feeder line before the lightning strike...

Connection.

The clouds spun a little faster, looked a little darker. Wind swirled around and around them, keeping them centered, chasing them back when they tried to escape.

Jack slammed his staff down on the ground and *shoved* his energy up the feeder line into the clouds. He might have yelled, he didn't know. Frost spread from the point of contact, covered the ground, covered the trees, maybe covered Aster but he couldn't see, because yeah exhaustion was hitting something awful.

"Jack!" Aster's voice was a long ways away. "Jack, it's alright, I've got you. I'll get you home."

Home. Jack nodded, thought he nodded. He'd wake at home. He could sleep now, and he'd wake at home. He closed his eyes, and let himself fall into the dark.

---

It started with the kids, Jack's eight believers. They gathered in the park, laughed at Jack's success in bringing in the snow day. They weren't quiet, not really, because what did it matter if they were overheard? Just a few kids, only just in junior high and silly enough to joke about things that didn't exist.
Only then one of the younger children overheard them. "Who's Jack Frost?" she asked, eyes bright with the unexpected day off.

"He's the one who made it snow," Jamie said. He grinned, and held out his hands, a magician revealing his greatest trick. "He's the guardian of winter, and makes sure we have fun."

"Oh."

And then the child ran off to tell her friends.

It might have stayed quiet, if one of the teenagers hadn't been told about Jack Frost by his breathless sister, and if he didn't have a popular blog.

If he hadn't written about the story on his blog, Jack Frost's name wouldn't have spread quite so wide, quite as quickly.

It started with Jack's eight believers. It didn't stay only with them.

Aster settled Jack in the nest, and leaned the staff up against the side. Jack had closed his eyes this time, and the dark lashes were frozen against his cheeks. It made Aster want to get a bowl of warm water and wipe the ice off, but it wouldn't do anything. Jack wouldn't wake up, not for a week, and the ice wouldn't melt until he did. The best thing he could do for his mate now was keep an eye on things, be there for when he woke up, and not be hovering too obviously when he did.

He pulled the blanket up over Jack's shoulder, even though it wasn't necessary, and went to find Desmond and let him know Jack was asleep.

A few hours later, Jack twitched, wrinkled his nose, and rolled over.

Faintly, he began to snore.
There were dolphins. They leapt out of the water, laughing and waving their flukes as they fell. Jack laughed and floated over them, hands out to provide targets for them to bump with their noses. Only one, a little one, bright pink with great big polka dots, kept missing his hands and hitting his chest. Bump. Bump. Bump. Bu-bump. Again and again and again.

Jack tried flying higher, because it was funny the first time but now it was just- there- and the other dolphins- blue and green and tiger striped and speckled and rainbow sherbet- were doing the same thing. Bu-bump. Bu-bump. Bu-bump bu-bump bu-bump. Over and over and over again.

"Stop," he said, and flew higher. The dolphins looked at him, looked at each other, and began swimming through the air after him.

They kept hitting his chest with their noses. Just his chest. Jack swatted at them, but they swam over him, and hit him in the back, and he was falling and they kept hitting him and why wouldn't they just stop?

The ice closed over his head. His lungs hurt. Jack clawed his way up, shoved the ice aside, and gasped for breath.

And sat up in bed.

What the-? What had just happened?

And why was he still breathing?

He looked around the room, and shoved away the blanket. Odd. Very odd. He'd have expected Aster to be keeping an eye on him, or something, but maybe he'd just stepped out. He frowned; there was something off, something he couldn't put his finger on. If he didn't think too hard about it, maybe he'd figure out whatever it was.

Jack frowned more when he kept breathing. He tried stopping, but his chest started to hurt and it was easier to breathe than not. He pressed one hand to his chest, and stopped. Only he didn't stop, because he kept breathing, his fingers kept twitching, and his heart...

The bu-bump from the dream had turned into a real lub-dub of a heartbeat, a steady beat that picked up a little as he started to shake.

There were tears at the corners of his eyes, and he couldn't make himself care. No, no he did care, because his heart, but this was good, this was- everything- and he... His heart...

Jack closed his eyes, and breathed, because he had to. He kept his hand pressed to his chest, and touched the tears- wet, faintly sticky to his oversensitive fingers, what, had he not been able to feel things properly the entire past three centuries? He felt, everything- and then licked the tears off his fingers, and oh. Oh.

So this was what alive felt like.

He'd forgotten.
Aster dumped the last of the new beans into his basket, and looked over at Desmond. "I think that's enough water."

"If we used paint from the river, would the vegetables come out all pastel?" The kit hunched over, and squinted at an unripe tomato. He'd done something to his skeleton, Aster didn't even know what, but he just looked off. Almost plastic, maybe, although that wasn't exactly right. It wasn't creepy or 'uncanny valley'- and damn Jack for making them watch those movies to understand what the uncanny valley was- just... Desmond being Desmond. One day he'd figure out how to change the color of his fur, and probably give himself a foot tall Mohawk. While Pooka shaped.

"No, but we'd track odd color mud all over the house. C'mon, let's get dinner started."

The kit grinned, and hoisted his watering can while Aster lifted the basket. "Papa's asleep?"

"Big snowstorm out of season, yeah."

The kit nodded. "So I don't have to clean my room for a week."

Ah, the adaptability of the young. Aster grinned to himself, but the expression faded when he heard faint noise coming from the burrow. "Desmond. Stay here."

"I hear it too." Desmond set down the watering can, and moved closer to a thriving- huh, Aster thought the only thorn bushes in the Warren had flowers with them. Apparently he'd missed one.

"Good. Take off for North if you feel threatened." Aster set the basket down beside the kit, and pulled a boomerang free.

"Or I could find Butterfingers and chuck him at the threat?"

"No. Stay quiet. I'll get you once I know who it is."

Probably no one dangerous. But why take chances? North, Tooth, Sandy, they all asked before coming down to the Warren, several centuries of putting up with his justifiable paranoia teaching them good manners. North grumbled about the yeti never knocking, but if he threw sharp and deadly objects at them, they'd learn quick. When he'd given Jack and Desmond unlimited access to his Warren, that had been- well, good, obviously- but unprecedented.

He ducked down to keep from being seen through the windows, and crept on all three to the open doorway. Looking around the corner might make sense for a human, but not for a giant rabbit with ears a foot long.

Aster took a deep breath, then shifted in one easy motion so he wasn't crouched down, but standing in the doorway, boomerang ready.

Jack just turned and gave him an unimpressed look, mouth full of what looked like raw onion.

"What?" Aster lowered the boomerang, and- wait, this was Jack, right?

The maybe-Jack chewed the mouthful, and set down- yes, that was a raw onion, several large bites out of it- on the countertop. "Nice entrance," he said. Aster could smell the onion breath from the doorway. "What's with the look?"

"Jack?"

"In the flesh," he said, and giggled. Then he held his arms up and out from his sides, and spun
around on one foot. "Oh, wow, that actually- can you get rug burn on your feet? From dirt floor?"

"What're you doing awake?" Aster asked, deciding to focus on the important questions.

"Guess I got hungry," Jack said, and picked up the onion. "Ergo, food."

"Did you just use 'ergo' in a sentence? Never mind. You don't get hungry." Aster slipped the boomerang back onto his belt, and folded his arms. "I'm not kissing you with onion breath."

Jack wrinkled his nose. "I thought garlic was supposed to be the mood killer?" He took another large bite, and grinned around the mouthful.

"Jack! Just... How are you even awake?" He never slept longer than a week, according to everyone and Aster's own observations, but never less either.

"I told you," Jack said, once he'd swallowed. "I guess I got hungry. Where's Desmond?"

"Waiting for me to tell him it's all good," Aster said, and stayed where he was. "Jack."

Jack's expression slid from mischievous to soft and wondering. "You're going to want to hear this. Just..." He tapped his chest, and ducked his head, the better to look up through his fringe of hair. "Go on."

Aster hesitated, but, well. This was Jack. Jack, looking like he'd been given the greatest gift ever, so good he couldn't believe it was real, but hoped with all his being that it was, and he could keep it. He hadn't even looked that way when he'd realized that yes, the two of them were a couple, because he'd been too busy being happy.

Besides, he was curious.

He crossed the room in three large steps, and then hesitated briefly before Jack nodded at him. Slowly he moved, bending down to bring his ears to Jack's chest. One paw rested light as thistledown between Jack's shoulder blades, while the other cupped his hip. Absently he stroked a thumb over the sharp jut of bone there, and then he listened.

Aster caught his breath. "That's... A heartbeat, mate," he said.

"Yeah." At least Jack sounded choked up, instead of just disbelieving. "It woke me up."

It woke him up. Aster straightened, kept his paws where they were because he felt like Jack might vanish if he let go. "You... You're hungry."

"Onions taste funny. But so do my own teeth, so... Aster?"

He pulled Jack to him, wrapped his arms around his lovely mate's body and pressed his face against Jack's flyaway hair. "You're hungry," he said again, and laughed. "You- I'm making you a cake. Carrot cake. And- and I'll have to check and see if there's any peanut oil, we might have stir-fry, I've got the ingredients for it."

"Carrot cake and stir-fry," Jack said, and laughed into Aster's chest. "You'd better make extra. I feel like I haven't eaten in three hundred years."

He pulled back and smiled, then frowned. "Actually, go tell Desmond it's okay first, before he starts lobbing elves through the windows."

"What makes you think he'll do that?" Aster asked. "I told him to stay hidden, just in case."
Jack rolled his eyes, then gave Aster a look that just screamed 'you are a n00b at this'. "It's Desmond. Irrepressible curiosity. And he's peeking in through the window."

Of course he was.

Jack sat at the kitchen table while Aster cooked, and cuddled Desmond. The kit had to be chased down once he'd heard Jack's new heartbeat; the kit had listened for three seconds, shrilled high enough that Aster's ears still hurt, then ran off to jump in circles around his pet elf. Aster had stepped in only after Desmond had started knocking the thing down, running around while it picked itself up, then knocking it down again. He still twitched, his paws knocking against Jack's arms and legs, and he kept whacking his forehead against Jack's breastbone.

There was another reason for Jack to sit, too. He'd started getting wobbly about the time Aster had pulled out the cutting board. Apparently his body had to adjust to being alive again, or at least that's what the Pooka figured. Jack had just laughed and made a comment about low blood sugar, which was a good reason for cooking as fast as he could.

In short order, he set out the plates of steaming noodles and vegetables on the table, the lion's share portioned out between him and Jack, and several raw beets on the side for Desmond. At some point they'd have to break the news that eating beets wouldn't turn him purple.

Jack took a bite, and Aster watched as he chewed.

"I think my tongue exploded with taste. Taste explosion. Good, but wow. I don't remember food tasting this good before." Jack took another bite, and hummed in appreciation.

Aster told his body that that was not an appropriate reaction at this time, and smiled. "Glad you like it, Frostbite. What do you think, kit?"

Desmond took several bites of his stir-fry, and shrugged. "It's alright. Why are adults always obsessed with food, anyways?"

"Kid," Jack said. "You've eaten grass. I don't know why, but you have. Hush."

"Its edible," Desmond muttered, but grinned.

Aster shook his head, and ate a few bites himself. It was good. He'd have to make it again.

Jack was entirely distracted by the food, it seemed, as well as the textures of the table, the woven grass placemats, the wooden handles on the fork and knife. Even his own hair, though maybe it was just to check that pulling on a handful still caused pain. Aster hid his smile with a quick sip of water when Jack hissed and hastily let go of his hair.

Jack saw anyways, and actually laughed. "I can feel stuff now, it's awesome. I don't know, I think some of my nerves must've not worked before. It should be interesting later." He waggled his eyebrows.

Appropriate reaction, inappropriate place. Aster grinned back anyways.

"I've got the dishes," he said, when they were done. "I have to check on the cake anyways."

He'd set it to bake while they ate, and checked on it before filling the sink. A bit longer, he thought, as the scent filled the room. Scrubbing dishes would be just long enough, and give him time to get his reactions under control. But Jack, bright and laughing and glittering with a vitality Aster hadn't realized he'd been missing until now, could have gotten a reaction from a rock. It'd be a long few
hours until Desmond was to bed and he could get Jack in their nest, and set to showing his winter spirit all he'd been missing out on.

He wondered how much simple touching would do for Jack, right now. Probably a lot.

Aster set the last of the dishes aside to dry, then spun around when a chair tilted over and someone hit the floor.

Desmond yelped and lunged for Jack, knocking over his own chair. He was only a second ahead of Aster, who cracked his knees good against the floor getting down to crouch over Jack.

"Frostbite? Jack? What's wrong?"

Jack shook his head, eyes squeezed shut and teeth clenched so the muscles in his jaw jumped. He was curled up, clutching his stomach and making the tiniest, most horrible sounds Aster had ever heard.

He knew how to set broken bones and administer anti-venom, but nothing more complicated than that. Especially not human-complicated. North had his yetis, though, some of which were medically trained.

"Climb up on my back," he told Desmond. "We're taking Jack to North's."

He lifted Jack carefully, which still got a moan of pain, and waited just long enough for Desmond to get secure. Then he stood up, and opened a direct tunnel right beside the table. He'd sworn, once, he'd never open his tunnels inside his burrow. Vows like that were foolish, and made to be broken.

Then he ran to North's Workshop, racing fear and never quite able to pull away.

Chapter End Notes

Holy explosion of comments, Batman! Two pages of them last chapter! (Apparently you approve of how I brought Jack back to life.) Makes me wonder what'll happen with the end of this one.

In the mean time, I got bit by two fanfic ideas, NEITHER of them kink meme prompted for once, so that's something I'm also working on, and a story idea for an original novel. Since my brain is very accommodating to you my readers, I'm working on Little Boy Blue first every night- thus the quick updating schedule- while the dregs of my energy and attention go to the other stories. You're welcome.
Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was very tempting to laugh at his old friend, but if he did that, everyone in the room would try to kill him. Nick had no intention of dying today, or any day in fact, but oh! So much worry over so little a thing!

Phil turned, and gestured for another strip of tape. He also gave a mean death glare. Nick chuckled faintly, and handed the strip of tape over.

Two sharp-eared Pooka pounced on him. "Why're you laughing?" Desmond asked. "You're laughing! You're not supposed to laugh when Papa's sick!"

Aster just glowered, fur bristling along his shoulders, lips twitching as though he wanted nothing more than to show his teeth and perhaps bite. Nick made a mental note; Pooka were protective, and when it came to their family, over-protective.

Or perhaps it was only Jack that caused such feelings. He did get into trouble, though in this case, nothing life threatening.

"Phil," he said. "Complaints of tape and his fur. I'm sure you know, yes?"

Well, that mollified the youngster. Desmond nodded, and scrambled up onto the foot of the bed, only for Phil to reach over and tug him off. Again. How many times was that now, five, six?

"You know something," Aster said, his voice low and harsh. Low, because Jack was sleeping after he had been given the painkillers, harsh because of fear. Nick understood.

"I suspect why Jack had such pain, but Phil can tell for certain. Come, sit. You will wear yourself thin pacing." Nick gestured to a good chair, one with rungs instead of a cushion and solid back. Good for those with tails.

Aster huffed, but sat down. He remained sitting for a full five minutes, four longer than the previous attempt, and then stood up and began pacing again. Nick rolled his eyes and took the seat instead. He was getting too old to stand about all day. Bah. When would the children believe him strong and fit again? He could accept his stomach, though it had once been nothing more than a bit of a paunch, something anyone might develop after they started eating good meals and took a desk job. Now? Bah, again. He exercised more now than he had as a bandit, and still it did nothing.

His stomach did make a good place to rest his hands, though, and so he folded them over his paunch and watched the two Pooka, young and old, pace. Desmond lost interest in the exercise, and scrambled back up onto the bed. Phil merely shook his head, and stepped away.

"You're done?" Aster gave a little hop, and then instead of near the window, he was near the head of the bed, all but quivering. "What's wrong? Why'd he fall over?"

Nick sighed. He was happy for his friends, Aster and Jack, who were happy and together. He had won some favors off of Tooth and Sandy from it, in fact. But no one interrogated his yeti but him.

"Bunny," he said, and raised his eyebrows. "Allow Phil time to talk, Вы глупый старый кролик. Phil? I think I know, but you are certain, yes?"
The yeti rolled his eyes, and began cleaning up the detritus of medicine that had become scattered about the room. Most of it had not been needed, although none of the scalpels and little rubber hammers would have been half as upsetting as pumping Jack's stomach had been. Well, it had been a little less advanced than in a hospital, and Phil had been unable to lock Aster out of the washroom, which had likely contributed no small amount to the upset.

Phil growled out his answer, and then added that the IV would come out in the morning, when Jack would go on a fine, liquid diet. Phil would evaluate Jack's condition after two or three days, and at that point determine if Jack could then graduate to solid food.

"Good, good. You are busy, go and I will answer questions."

The yeti spirit nodded, and then took himself off before the elves attempted to get hold of the water pistols again. Jack's prank had been enough to get them addicted.

Nick beamed at Aster and Desmond, who looked rather upset. "Good news! Jack will be well. It was the food that did it."

"Nothing's wrong with my cooking, mate," Aster protested, though he looked less angry and more guilty.

Nick hurried to assuage that needless guilt. "No. It was food on empty stomach — very empty. Like starvation."

Only Desmond looked confused. Nick could see the light of realization in Aster's eyes, before the Pooka glanced ruefully down at his love. "Ah," Aster said. "Right. Forgot that."

"Huh?" Desmond leaned forward. "But Papa ate an onion before dinner."

An onion? "What I mean, внук, is that when someone goes for a long time without eating, solid food can be painful to the stomach. Papa Jack, he has not eaten food for very long time, yes?"

"Well," Desmond said, and settled down into an odd, reclining crouch that looked painful. Yet Nick had seen Aster take the same pose, so perhaps it was actually comfortable. If you weren't human. "He's eaten. But he always brings it back up again, and it's not like real puke when he does."

If Nick hadn't known Jack had been unable to digest before hearing that, he might have worried about eating disorders. Now, though, Jack could eat - indeed, had to - which had led to this problem. "Well, his stomach never worked when he ate before. Now it does. But the sudden food, it hurt, because the stomach was not ready."

"Should've started out with juice or something," Aster said. He brushed at Jack's hair, and sighed. "Stupid. I should've remembered."

"You had no reason to think Jack needed treated like starvation victim."

Aster glared, but it faded quickly. "Maybe not. Still."

Nick sighed, and held his arms out for Desmond. "I will leave you now. Hug for bed?"

The youngster chirped and launched himself headfirst at Nick. He landed headfirst on Nick's stomach, too; perhaps it was good he had so much padding there, he thought, and wrapped the youngster up in his arms. He squeezed, then let Desmond go. The young Pooka laughed, looked longingly at the door- no doubt trying to decide how best to kidnap several more elves for playmates - and then climbed into bed to snuggle up against Jack's side.
"Goodnight," Nick said, and headed over to the door. "Sleep well."

"You, too," Aster said.

Nick closed the door behind him, and nodded to Sandy. "All is well, my friend," he said. "And Kozmotis?"

Sandy shrugged, and rolled his eyes.

"Will you require any more time here?"

The Sandman's response was surprisingly concise; the number three, followed by an image of a sun rising and then setting.

"Three days? As long as you need, my friend, you know you and Kozmotis are welcome always here," Nick rested one hand on Sandy's tiny shoulder, and smiled. "But no doubt you have duties, yes?" He looked at the door. "I'll not keep you from them."

Sandy's expression was one of pure, angelic innocence, and Nick did not believe it for a second. He chuckled, patted the once-Star's shoulder again, and took himself off for the office. He had toy designs to work on, and perhaps he could think of some way to encourage the image of a leaner, fitter Santa in the minds of children. It took great physical strength and endurance to deliver toys to the entire world in a single night. Perhaps something about a diet, with the cookies on Christmas Eve a reward for a job well done...

Aster looked up when the door opened again, and felt his lips twitch at the sight of Sandy. "Hello, mate," he said. "What brings you here?"

Sandy nodded to Jack, sleeping, and Desmond, almost at the same point. His dreamsand glittered around his hands.

"Good idea. You know, I don't think Jack's dreamed since he woke a spirit?" He brushed at his mate's hair again. Jack was sleeping, and he wasn't iced over, and it was wonderful.

Sandy floated over, and patted his shoulder. A light dusting of golden sand fell over Desmond and Jack both. Desmond yawned, and tucked his face up against Jack's armpit, promptly falling asleep. He snuffled once or twice, before his breathing became even and mostly silent.

Jack snorted, once, and then his sleep became a little more natural, a little less drugged. Aster didn't look at the images that appeared over his mate and son's heads; especially not Jack's. Sandy's dreams were always good, a bit childish, but he had the feeling that even seeing Jack imagining a cuddle session, or reading to Desmond, or...

Well, he loved his mate, in all ways. No one could blame him for that.

Sandy gestured between Aster and the bed, and raised his eyebrows. What? Oh.

"I'm not much for these things, mate. Nests are more my thing. Less likely to collapse under..." It'd been a painful experience. Hadn't helped that he'd been in the old realm's version of a hospital, with multiple broken bones.

Granted, this bed was built on Nick's standards, and the only way it could have been sturdier was with magic. Aster still didn't feel comfortable at the thought of sleeping on it.
Sandy raised his eyebrows even higher, and gestured at the space beside Jack. The mattress was a big one, there was enough room for Aster to curl up and have mattress left over. He wouldn't even get in the way of the IV lines, seeing as they'd gone in the arm Desmond was curled up under.

"I told you, mate," he said, but stopped when he caught sight of Sandy's expression.

The Sandman folded his arms, and glowered. Then he pointed at the bed again, and then at Aster. No question about it, he expected Aster to go to bed, no arguments, no justifications, and sleep.

If he tried arguing, he had a feeling Sandy just might put him to bed, physically. Aster was bigger, but Sandy had his dreamsand. It'd be even odds to see who'd win, and the noise might wake the kit up. No point in it.

He sighed, and nodded. "Alright. But you're not tucking me under the covers." Because he was going to sleep on them. It was warm enough in the room for it, despite where in the world the Workshop happened to be. And hopefully, Jack being under the covers and Aster on top of them, would prevent him from forgetting in the middle of the night and letting his paws wander.

Normally, Jack didn't mind when that happened, but normally he wasn't recovering from a stomach pump and awful stomach cramps and with a body adjusting to living again. Besides, he needed his sleep.

The mattress creaked when he climbed on, and again when he laid down beside Jack. He waited for the bed to immediately collapse and dump him on his arse, and when that didn't happen relaxed a bit.

"Alright," he said, "but I can't guarantee I'll sleep."

Sandy smiled at him, and dusted his face with a bit of dreamsand. Aster bit back a curse, realizing, but then felt himself go under anyways.

It was late, at least several hours later. He woke and sat bolt upright. "Bleeding hell," he said, and glared into the darkness. "I left the oven on." And the cake in.

The burrow had burnt down, he just knew it.

Chapter End Notes

So, we're actually nearing the end- I just have a bit more to do, and then yes, it's done. Poor North, though, trying to figure out how to get his trim figure and muscles back. Hard to do when everyone believes you're really fat, though.

Short chapter is short, and I'm sorry.
Aster sniffed the air, and caught the faint, acrid hint of smoke. Well, it figured, he thought, and walked slowly down the path to the burrow. It'd been a good home. The place he'd retreated to when being the last of his kind got too hard, where he'd come up with some of his best chocolate recipes and painted his best eggs. It'd been where he'd gotten himself a family, human mate and extremely unique son, where he'd adjusted to not being the last after all... It'd been where he'd started hanging his paintings- on oil on canvas, on silk, charcoal sketches on parchment, watercolors and colored pencils- on the walls, Desmond's young artwork beside his older, more practiced works. Jack's carvings lined the shelves, and his occasional forays into other branches of craftwork, like the rag rugs, filled the rooms.

There'd be no more dishes actually washed- "You can't get these things clean just by dunking them in some water, shaking them off, and calling it good. How have you not died from food poisoning yet?" -in the cupboards, no broom leaning pointedly up against the wall near the door- "Because I can't be the only person sweeping, here. Keep this up, I'll gather all these hairballs and spin them in to yarn. Don't think I won't! I need something to knit with, here!" -it'd be gone, all gone.

He stopped, just before cresting the final hill that kept him from seeing the smoking ruin, and bowed his head. They were just things, he knew. Furniture could be replaced, he could always make new paintings, and their friends would love the chance to thrust any number of knick-knacks on them. But it'd been home. And now it was gone.

Enough putting it off. He kept his gaze down on his feet, but he walked up, and once he'd reached the top of the hill, forced himself to look.

His painted silk curtains fluttered in the kitchen window.

What? They were supposed to be burnt to a crisp- he'd left the fire burning in the oven, left the cake in there, all it'd take was one spark for the rug on the floor to catch and then it'd be all gone. All gone.

How was it not all gone?

This was a good thing, he reminded himself, and then laughed. He'd been so ready to see his home in ruins, he'd forgotten to hope that it wouldn't be. That the run of bad luck that had apparently plagued them... wasn't. The universe didn't have it out for him and his family, the things that'd happened were only the sort of thing that, well, happened with spirits. Humans had cars break down and washing machines break and medical maladies that turned out to have just been a badly cooked meal. Spirits had the same, but worse.

"Well, don't I feel foolish?" he said, and headed down the hill to his front door.

The kitchen was exactly how they'd left it, down to the toppled over chairs, but for two things.

One, the plates they'd used, the pan he'd cooked with, all the utensils, had been licked clean. Two, the oven door was open, the fire was out, and the cake that should have been baked to ashes was gone. The cooking tin was on the counter, empty of ashes or anything else. There weren't even any crumbs.
Aster closed the oven door, and chuckled to himself. "Alright, elf," he called. "I know you can hear me."

He didn't, but, well. Just in case.

After a bit, when he'd set the chairs back in order and piled the dishes on the counter, prelude to washing them, he heard a jangling bell. A familiar one, just half a tone off from North's elves.

He filled the sink with water, and got started on the washing. He did know how, but when you had fur, it took longer to dry your hands off after. Something he'd rather put off, honestly. Jack's tolerance for mess was much lower, thus, the winter spirit did most of the cleaning up.

On the flip side, of course, Aster was better at cooking. Not only more years of practice, but until very recently, Jack hadn't had to eat. Even raising a young Pooka hadn't stirred Jack into doing more than re-learning how to tell when something was ripe or not.

He looked over when Desmond's pet stumbled into the kitchen, then just stood there looking wary. "Well," he said. "Guess I've got you to thank for not having rotten food to clean up, eh?"

The elf blinked, and peered up at Aster with what was clearly shock. Then it nodded.

"Good thing, I suppose. If someone hadn't put out the oven, might've been a fire." Aster glanced down at the elf. "Was it you?"

After a minute, the elf nodded again.

"Good. Mind, I still don't like you. You're loud, you paint the eggs neon, and you're rightly supposed to be North's, and at the Workshop. No one's ever heard of the Easter Bunny having an elf of his own." Aster rinsed off the last plate, and wrinkled his nose. Humans got dishpan hands; he walked around smelling like wet rabbit. It was only a little worse than wet dog.

The elf smoothed a proprietary hand over its multi-colored clothing, and frowned. It stamped one little foot, then- Aster could barely believe his eyes- started hopping around the room. Then it looked up at Aster, and hugged itself, grinning brightly.

"Alright, I get it, you like it here. And that's fine. But you're Desmond's, mind? Stop painting the eggs neon!" Aster jabbed one finger at the elf, and then drained the sink. He dried his hands off on a dish towel, and shook his head. He had things to gather if he and Desmond were going to keep Jack company at North's. Hell, he needed to get things for Jack to do while he was convalescing, or there'd be escape attempts for sure.

He headed to Desmond's bedroom to gather some things for the kit. Books, not too many toys considering they were staying at Santa's Workshop, and he actually considered bringing the elf along for a minute. He shook the impulse off, and left the small bag near the front door to pick up on his way out.

He got Jack books as well, and some of his handicrafts, the knitting and crochet projects he was working on at the moment. After a moment of staring at the knitting needles, Aster realized that Jack needed to sleep now. There'd be a marked decrease in how quickly things like blankets and fluffy woolen scarves got made. He smiled a little to himself at the thought. They were quickly running out of places to put all the things, and you could only give someone a scarf as a present so many times.

Even though their friends did love their gifts. Now, if Jack could only just make mittens and hats...

Well, maybe he'd get around to learning how if Aster got him a book on it. Jack did like his books.
He packed the most portable, and cleanest, of his art supplies, and reasoned that he could always raid North's library, or just borrow one of Jack's books, if he got tired of drawing. Not likely. There was a reason he hadn't tired of painting eggs yet. He was, perhaps, a little bit obsessed with art.

He headed back out to the front door with his bag, and stopped. The elf stood next to Desmond's bag, looking hopeful, yet resigned. Clearly, it wanted to go with him. Just as clearly, it expected to be left behind.

Aster ground his back teeth, and mentally sighed. Well, it'd be at North's. Lots of elves for it to spend time with. Desmond. The kit would be happy to have his pet with him.

"Oh, alright," he said. "But you'll stay out of my way, and no bringing any friends back with you!"

The elf beamed, and the bell on its hat jangled with every step as it pranced its way out the door towards the tunnels.

Aster took up the rear, grumbling a little to himself, but unable to stop his smile all the same.

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Jack huffed, and folded his arms. "Phil," he whined. "Phil, if I don't get real food I'm going to die. I'm going to die and it will be all your fault. If you try to feed me another bowl of soup I'm going to throw it at your head. You are a horrible person, Phil, and no one likes you."

The yeti grumbled to himself, but it sounded way too amused for Jack's liking. He was doing something to a tray, which no doubt carried more soup, God, why all the soup? At least it wasn't gruel. Gruel was for breakfast and tasted horrible. Bland, anyways. Not something Jack wanted to eat, was the point. Why not oatmeal, like the instant packets he'd seen at the kids' houses, the flavored stuff that actually looked kind of interesting now he needed to eat.

Jack pouted, and slumped lower in bed. Desmond had abandoned him to test toys at North's insistence, and Aster had gone to salvage what they could from the burrow. Apparently it had burned down, because of cake.

Really, the explanation had been somewhat incoherent, thanks to Desmond waking up to find both parents in the bed, and hopping all over shouting 'slumber party' and 'pillow fight' and whacking everything he could reach with his pillow.

Why had he adopted Desmond again?

Oh, right, he'd been cute.

Jack doubted the burrow had actually burnt down. The walls were made of pounded earth, each one as thick as his arm. Maybe they'd lost some belongings, if there was a fire, but he couldn't really care much about it. He'd been a nomad, with only what he could carry, for so long that getting attached to things seemed a bit silly.

Aster got attached to things. And if they'd actually lost anything, as compared to Aster just expecting the worst, well, he'd feel sorry on his mate's behalf.

He sighed, and looked up at the ceiling. He really didn't think there'd been a fire. Why would there be?

Phil turned away from the tray, and produced a bowl of-

"Ice cream!" Jack all but bounced in his seat. "You are the best, Phil. Seriously, you just, I love you,
"Should I be jealous, mate?" Aster asked. He stood in the doorway, and Jack wondered if he was actually posing or just standing like that.

Wow. Being alive, having a heartbeat, he hadn't felt like this since he was fourteen, human, and saw his very attractive neighbor Derek bend over to pick up... something, Jack couldn't actually remember what anymore. Only Aster looked even better, because he was all Jack's.

And because the moment Jack could get Phil out of the room, he could probably convince Aster to join him in bed and help with a slight problem he'd just recently discovered. It was all Aster's fault, anyways.

He grinned, and lifted the bowl of ice cream. "I don't know. Should I leave him for ice cream?" he asked Phil.

The yeti just rolled his eyes, and grumbled something at the both of them. He waved at Aster to get out of the doorway, and then hurried through as if there were elves to corral or something.

Well. Actually. There were. There always were.

Aster smirked, and closed the door behind Phil. He dropped two travel bags onto the floor, then all but sauntered to stand next to the bed, next to Jack.

"See something you like, Frostbite?" he asked, all but purring the words.

"Uh, yeah." Jack took a deep breath- yay, breathing- and lifted a spoonful of ice cream. "Chocolate ripple."

Aster raised his eyebrows, then dipped one finger down into the bowl. He scooped up the tiniest amount of the treat, a gob clinging to his claw, and licked it off. "Not bad," he said. "We'll have to make our own, sometime. Proper made ice cream, proper chocolate."

Jack set the bowl aside, and casually, he hoped, rubbed one hand across his mouth to check for drool. "Yeah, okay, forget ice cream. Get down here."

His mate's smirk faded. "You're still not at a hundred percent," he protested, but he was crawling onto the bed and over Jack while he spoke.

"I'm just going to lie here. What could possibly happen?"

Passing out. Passing out could happen. Jack opened his eyes, groaned, and somehow managed to get a few brain cells working so he could talk.

"Wow. Uh. Good."

"Now you know why I'm always jumping you," Aster said. He nuzzled the side of Jack's neck, which set his skin tingling in all sorts of amazing ways, yes, more of that please. The Pooka chuckled, but complied, which meant that hey, Jack had actually said that out loud.

"Yes," Aster said. "You did."

No brain to mouth filter. Awesome.

"Now it's time for you to eat, since I distracted you so thoroughly." Aster left off his attentions to Jack's neck, and sat up.
Jack sighed, and clung when he was helped back into a sitting position. "You. You are simply the best. You know that, right?"

Aster handed him the bowl of ice cream. "So you keep telling me. Eat up. You want to get onto solids quick, right?"

"Yeah. You owe me a carrot cake. How was the burrow?" The ice cream had barely melted. Jack wondered if he should feel embarrassed at how hair trigger he apparently was, but meh. He was feeling properly for the first time in three hundred years, and more importantly, being felt up by his very sexy partner. He had reasons.

And it meant he didn't have to re-freeze his treat.

"Surprisingly un-charred," Aster said. He stretched out on the bed beside Jack, and wrapped one arm over Jack's hips. One ear wouldn't stop twitching; Jack put down his spoon long enough to stroke it, the short, soft fur beneath his fingers almost distracting him from the conversation.

"Yeah, what was with that, anyways? I didn't exactly get everything between Desmond and the pillow."

"Your son is a menace," Aster said. Fondly.

"Your son too," Jack murmured.

"Yeah."

Jack took another few bites of ice cream, to give the Pooka time to collect himself. Sometimes he wished Pitch had missed Aster's mate and child, even if it meant he wouldn't have his relationship. If Hoata had survived, if the child had, Aster wouldn't sometimes get that look in his eyes, a mix of old pain, acceptance, and mourning.

Jack thought he and Desmond helped with the grief. But it wouldn't ever go away, nor should it.

"Well," Aster said, and cleared his throat. "When you collapsed yesterday, I rushed us over here as quick as I could, and left the cake in the oven, and the fire going. If that elf of Desmond's hadn't put the fire out, might be a spark could've caught in the rug. As is..." He shrugged one shoulder. "Maybe it's useful. Sometimes."

Jack grinned, and pointed his spoon at Aster's nose. "Aw. Does this mean you might like the Easter Elf? You might be willing to accept it? Just one big, happy family?"

"Watch it," Aster growled. "Or I'll steal that bowl."

"Just the bowl? Wait, no- no tickling! Not while I'm eating!"

Chapter End Notes

Have some fluff! No, I'm not going to detail all of Jack's recovery, and we're actually going to move a bit away from the jackrabbit romance for two other pairings. (Well, one pairing and one sort-of pairing. Sandy and Koz are MUCH better at get togethers than some other people I could mention...)
Icka M. Chif did art for the story. I hope you don't mind, Icka, but I must share the awesome.


Now go give her all the kudos posible, if that's even a thing Tumblr allows.
Interlude: The Desmond Do-Not List

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1. Not allowed to steal North's elves. Santa Clause has elves. The Easter Bunny does not. The Bunnymund-Frost family (Alphabetical order, Jack, shut up) has an elf. ONE. The tie-dye monstrosity you call Butterfingers. NO MORE.

2. Not allowed to steal Aleksia's brownies. She's been very tolerant so far, but her patience will run out. Your aunt is a wonderful woman and she will likely be merciful, but that still means something like fifty years as a statue.

3. If it involves turning anything into a pet, you have to ask your parents first. While they're paying attention. What that means, Desmond, is that the Komodo dragon is right out. Now put the eggs back before they hatch.

4. If you don't know what it is, don't eat it. (Why? Just- why?)

5. If you do know what it is, check with an adult anyways.

6. Yes, we know you're chronologically 46 years old. You act like you're five. Therefore, you are not moving out. Unpack your bags. Remember, if you run away, your Papa gets your Avengers action figures.

7. You have a great deal of autonomy; this is why we let you visit your Dedushka, Tooth, and Burgess on your own. However, you have to leave a note when you go out.

8. Desmond, a note means a proper note. "Gone to assemble my army of mutant penguins" is not a proper note. (You are not The Penguin and I'll take away your Batman comics if this keeps up, kiddo.)

9. Stop quoting Discworld. Yes, Vimes is awesome incarnate. No, we don't want his running commentary.

10. If you throw Butterfingers through the window, any window, one more time...
10.a) If you absolutely have to throw Butterfingers through a window, make sure it's open first.

11. Next time you try to shape shift into a dinosaur, we're leaving you like that.

12. Stop sneaking up behind Kozmotis only to make banshee noises.
12.a) Stop sneaking up behind Kozmotis only to sneeze.
12.b) Stop sneaking up behind Kozmotis only to grab him around the leg and start sobbing about being lost.
12.c) Leave the man alone, Desmond!

13. No, you cannot dye your fur lime green. Or any shade of neon.

14. You are not Iron Man. You do not need theme music. If, for whatever reason, you do eventually need theme music, 'the song that never ends' will not be it, even if it means the world will end.

15. Phil's name is not Jarvis. Nor is he Alfred. Or Phil Coulson.
16. No, Desmond, you cannot be our marketing director.

17. I don't care who or what gave you chocolate covered coffee beans, you still ate them. If that ever happens again, you're being stuffed in a sack and sold to the highest bidder. *(That goes double from me.)*

18. If the door is locked, that means the people inside want privacy. Not "pound on the door screaming 'fire' at the top of my lungs".

19. Chuck Norris jokes don't work. No one understands them and North takes them seriously. *(Jack, seriously, who's this Norris bloke?)*

20. You are never allowed scissors again. Stop asking to play with them.

21. Helping the elves make toys is good. Helping the elves make ancient siege weaponry isn't.

22. You don't actually speak any other languages, and you should stop trying. You don't know when what you say is gibberish, and when it's a deadly insult.

23. When playing board games, you don't have to offer your opponents the chance to surrender before starting.
23.a) Speaking of board games, you don't have any mystic mojo powers at Snakes and Ladders, Monopoly, or Life. You can stop claiming you have them, and for the love of God, Desmond, stop making those faces!

24. If you're human shaped, clothes are mandatory. Not optional.
24.a) Put the clothes on *properly*, Desmond. Sock go on your feet and underpants do not belong on your head.
24.b) If you're Pooka shaped, human clothes will be too small. Stop complaining about how nothing fits.

25. NO. YOU ARE NOT LEARNING SWORD FIGHTING. NORTH STOP OFFERING LESSONS.

26. For the last time. **STOP KIDNAPPING NORTH'S ELVES!**

27. Pet cats are a bad idea. So are pet dogs. Has it escaped your notice that you're a giant, bipedal rabbit? *(I'd say intelligent, but you're making me wonder, kiddo.)* *(That was mean, mate.)* *(But not untrue. We had to write this list, didn't we?)* *(...yes.)*

28. You don't have telepathy.

29. Sandy has been called in. You will sleep a minimum of eight hours *every* twenty-four hour period. No more wandering around looking for a save point in the crisper. *(What games would those be from?)* *(North gave in and got a Nintendo Wii. Those games.)*

30. Collateral Damage Man is not an appropriate name for a superhero.

31. The running commentary in the style of David Attenborough, about your parents doing *anything*, is not appreciated.

32. Valley speak just confuses everyone. It doesn't help that you can barely talk you're laughing so hard.

33. There is no Elfish death grip, and even if there was, it wouldn't involve tongs. And the elves
wouldn’t teach it to you. Stop asking.

34. Aster doesn't have a time machine. Nor will he build you one. Stop asking.

35. If you try to take home one more elf or brownie, not only will you be grounded, but you'll be given over to Tooth for a dentist appointment. **YOU HAVE HAD YOUR FINAL WARNING!**

Chapter End Notes

So, because I got writers block (first time in this entire story) the chapter I'd been planning to write... didn't. Then I wrote the Desmond Do-Not list, and what the heck. Why not, right?
Desmond, that list we posted was not encouragement to 'be more creative'. Yes, that means there's more. No, it doesn't mean you're doing a good job. Why can't we have a son that is well behaved and sane?

36. Your name is Desmond. Not Princess Anastasia, Princess Peach, Anakin Skywalker, Obi-Wan Kenobi, or Megamind.

37. Believe it or not, you can't sing. Even so, we'd probably appreciate your vocal skills more if you didn't insist on waking us up at three in the morning bellowing "baa, baa, black sheep" in our ears.

38. I don't want to know why you wanted to find a book called "101 steps to rule the world". Hint: you're not getting it, not even for Christmas.

39. The yeti do not appreciate your 'help' in the kitchen. Leave the salt in the salt bowl and the sugar in the sugar bowl and the baking powder in its jar.

40. There is no prophecy.

41. Desmond. I am your Papa, not your Mommy. I am male and can't get pregnant. Aster is- Well, if anyone were going to be Mommy, it'd be him. (Don't bet on it.)

42. Not allowed to form the Elf Militia.

43. Not allowed to join the Elf Militia.

44. God may not contradict any of your parents' orders. Or grandparents', aunts', uncles', their minions- sorry, hired help...

45. Not allowed to let sock puppets take responsibility for any of your actions.

46. Not allowed to let Butterfingers take responsibility for any of your actions.

47. LEAVE THE RED CAPS ALONE THEY ARE NOT BROWNIES OR ELVES!

48. Addendum to 47: when your Da saves you from the red caps, and your Papa (reasonably) suggests locking you up in a tower for the next century, you're not allowed to request a funeral for your... pets. They weren't pets. Okay? Red caps are not pets.

49. You do not have super-powers. You are not Collateral Damage Man. That is the table cloth, not a cape.

50. The proper response to a parents' order is not "Why?" or "I don't want to."

51. It is better to beg forgiveness than ask permission, no longer applies to Desmond Bunnymund-Frost.

52. There are no evil clowns living under your bed. There might be rabid dust bunnies though- maybe you should clean under there?
53. You are not the Psychological Warfare Mascot. Stop telling people you are. The kids are starting to believe you.

54. If the thought of something makes you giggle for more than fifteen seconds, you may assume you must first check with your Papa before doing it. *(You are a horrible child, making me write that. Guardian of Fun, and I wrote that. I'm going somewhere to cry, now.)*

55. Photobombing is right out. For you AND Jack, so don't go running to him about me wrecking your fun.

56. I'd go over the list of all the things 'two drink limit' doesn't mean, but you're too young to drink anything alcoholic. That said- no. Just no.

57. Neither parent gets "that time of the month". If you want to imply Tooth or the Snow Queen are suffering from said time, we will not rescue you.

58. Yes, you absolutely can be Emperor of Cheese. You still have to do chores.

59. You are not allowed to sing Henry the Eighth until verse 68 EVER AGAIN. *(Aster, your eye is twitching.) (Can you blame me?) (No.)*

60. Glitter wars are forbidden.

61. You may not kidnap Baby Tooth and hold her for ransom.

62. Sophie is not 'the devil child' because she pet your fur backwards ONCE.

63. You are no longer allowed any Seran Wrap.

64. Get away from the bubble wrap.

65. Do not taunt the wild life. If you get sprayed by a skunk, you really won't enjoy it. As for what'll happen if you need rescued from a bear...

66. You are not allowed to do anything you saw the Mythbusters do.
66.a) You are not allowed to do anything you saw on TV without permission.
66.b) Permission comes from adults. Not other children.

67. Do not wake anyone up by bashing two cymbals together over their heads. Most of us wake up violently when surprised.

68. Stop going after Sandy and Kozmotis with the silly string.

69. No one wants to know where you got that many garden gnomes. Or what they're doing. North would appreciate it if you explained what method was used to glue them to the floor, though.

70. No, Jack isn't going to get one of these lists. No, you can't write him one.

71. No, we are not trying to 'suck the fun out of everything'. *(Guardian. Of. Fun. And responsible parenthood.)*

Chapter End Notes
Writer's block continues. Last Desmond Do-Not list- after this, I'm just not posting anything until I have a chapter. Sorry.
"We are pleased to see you so well, father," Mother Nature, his dear Sera, traced one finger around the rim of her tea cup. "And so happy."

"Sanderson has been good to me," Kozmotis murmured. A pleasing relationship, it was, and better than the one he'd had with his wife. With Sandy, he had love, intimacy, and no demands he perform sexually. Sanderson was a star, and Kozmotis... would not give Sera up for anything, true, but sex had been a chore.

Sandy was right. He was asexual.

"Not only Sanderson," Sera said. Her eyes, faceted gems, glittered rich gold. "Having a duty, and being free of fear."

He had thought being made Guardian of Fear was insanity. He had not remembered how important protecting was to his very nature. Kosmotis sipped at his tea, to take a moment.

"Not free of fear," he corrected her. "But no longer controlled by it."

"Master, not mastered?" Now she lifted her tea cup and sipped. When she set her cup down, she did not start speaking. Rather, her odd eyes turned and stared off into the ether, the colors of her emotions swirling over and through them.

His Sera, his beloved daughter, how she had changed. Once, she had been as- for lack of a better word- human as he. Perhaps more so; even before the fearlings had consumed him, he had been much stronger and faster than the rest of his kind. He could not remember what they had called themselves, any longer, but he had been the exception that proved the rule, the statistical outlier welcome only in the army.

It was not so anymore. He was very nearly back to his old self, though with a mastery of shadows and some limited empathy. Sera, though, was human only in shape, and that only just. The lines of her face had not changed overmuch, though it had matured. Sadly, she had inherited his nose and cheekbones, so she was handsome rather than beautiful.

Her eyes were one of the most jarring of her features. They looked for all the world like gemstones, covered in tiny facets like the lenses of a dragonfly's eye. They were no one color; instead, like the charmingly named 'mood rings', they changed hues depending on what she felt.

Sera's hair changed, too, but depending on the season. Not necessarily the season of her current location. At the moment, her hair was the rich gold of ripe wheat, and the thin vinelet wound around her head as a crown had bright red leaves. He had seen her hair pale gray, the vine a darker gray-brown; spring came with pale, almost white-blond hair with orange blossoms, and summer was a rich brown and dark green leaves.

Her clothes underwent a similar transformation as her hair, but other than color (mint green, dark green, harvest orange, and stark white and black) he couldn't have commented on the material and cut. Not reliably, at any rate.

An even greater change was to her mind, he suspected. Sera refered to herself in the plural, now, and
her attention wandered. Hours could pass, as she watched something happen on the other side of the world.

At times, he wondered if she was physically there, as well as with her conversation partner, drinking tea. It would not be beyond Mother Nature to be everywhere at once, like Death.

Kozmotis finished his tea, and poured himself another cup. Instead of watching Sera look elsewhere, he studied his... lair, to see what else needed to be changed.

Pitch Black had enjoyed optical illusions that were not always illusions. Kosmotis had found and destroyed more torture devices than he cared to think about. Most had been for show, but enough had been broken in, the sort of things that had turned his stomach. Some were even familiar, having come from Kozmotis' own world, relics from a more barbaric time.

With Pitch Black gone, the lair was- grim, yes- no longer gloomy. Jack Frost's son, Desmond, had called the lair "Batman's cave".

"See," the child had said. "Batman is a comic book hero. He's really scary, but especially to bad guys. He protects people, if they're good." The child had looked around the lair, even as Kosmotis tried to find the entrance the boy had used. "You know, all you'd need is a giant penny and a biiig t-rex statue... and computers. Lots of computers."

Kosmotis had finally taken Desmond back to North's. He still didn't know how the child had reached the lair.

At some point, he admitted, he would have to face Desmond's other father. But how could he face Bunnymund, after what Pitch Black had done? Not only killing all of the other Pooka, but the torture he'd ordered, or that he had performed with his own hands? The cruel mockery, or how he had crowed about killing Bunnymund's mate and child personally?

Only... Kosmotis put his cup down without drinking. He hated looking through his memories of Pitch Black, but Raven had walked him through the different eras all the same.

"You cannot purge the poison until you have seen what ails you. Besides," the bird had said. "There might be wisdom yet buried in the trash."

So he had watched the deaths of the Pooka, strangers and friends alike, and realized what Raven had meant. He could not mourn until he had gone through the memories. Abstract had only then become real.

He remembered, may the Moon and Stars forgive him, killing Bunnymund's mate. That one could not be mistaken for any other; he had met Hoata, a charming, silver furred Pooka he was almost certain had been female, though with the Pooka it was hard to tell and mattered little in the end. It had been during a celebration of the end of the Fearling War, one of many, and he had been looking desperately for anything that would keep him there and out of his wife's bed. Chatting with a fellow 'hero' and making small talk with Bunnymund's mate had been as good a reason as any.

He, Pitch Black, had killed Hoata. Eventually. But there had been no son.

Pitch Black had not killed Bunnymund’s child. Had, in fact, lied.

"Father?" Sera asked, once more focused on the here and now.

"It is nothing," Kozmotis said. "I just realized I needed to speak with Bunnymund."

"Yes," he agreed. This evening. Before his cowardice got the better of him.

He had never been to the Warren before. Not even Pitch Black had penetrated this far. The Warren was an odd mix of valley and cave, open sky and closed tunnels. Kosmotis stopped where the tunnel he had taken let out, and waited for one of the egg sentinels to come and inspect him.

He did not expect the glossy black bird that flapped down and perched on the sentinel. Not the Raven, surely? No, he realized, but a raven all the same. It did not seem the kind of creature that would be welcome here. Did not ravens eat eggs?

"I came to see Bunnymund," he told bird and sentinel. "Would he be in?"

The two creatures seemed to examine him. The raven quorked, and flew deeper into the Warren. The egg sentinel settled down on the ground.

"Ah. I'll wait here, then." Kosmotis leaned back against the tunnel wall, and studied what he could see of the Warren.

It was a bright place. The grass looked as thick and smooth as plush carpet, studded with the occasional, tiny flower. Climbing vines and moss covered the nearest walls, while bunches of flowers had been planted at the bases of trees that appeared scattered across the field. It was nothing but a tiny slice of what he had been told was a large place, but what he saw was beautiful.

Bunnymund truly was an artist. But then, he had had a long time to get it right.

"Batman!"

He knew who that was; his shoulders tensed automatically. Desmond was a good child, but... enthusiastic. Overwhelming.

Furry.

His breath caught; he pressed his hands against the rock behind him. It was Desmond. There was no one else it could be, not with that voice and those eyes. And yet- and yet.

Pooka.

A Pooka kit.

The child- the kit- stopped several feet away, and tilted his head. Kosmotis stared, knew he was staring, but could not help himself. He knew what those tiny twitches of ears and whiskers meant, knew that the kit was a year or less away from the first major growth spurt, losing his fluffy baby fur, and gaining adult colors and markings. The Pooka had been his friends, not at all afraid of his greater-than-average strength, because to them, it was average. They had all been stronger, faster, and for once it had been he struggling to keep up, and it had been wonderful.

A blurry memory, one of Pitch Black's, took over. Cold, and dark, and a rejection. A furry shape tangled in human clothing. Rage and then glee, plans that made Kosmotis want to tear his brain out just so he didn't have to remember, to know.

Then the memory was over, and Desmond, Pooka and beautiful, stood before him.

"Batman? Koz? Hey, hi, are you okay? You looked like you were going to fall over and I don't think
I'm big enough to catch you yet."

"You are a Pooka," he said. His voice seemed distant. Why was that? "You are a Pooka and I did not kill you."

"Wha- PAPA! DA! Come quick!"

Kosmotis felt his knees give way, felt powerful hands catch him under the arms and prop him up. A third hand, small and cool, pressed against his forehead. Someone, no, two people, talked over him. He was moved.

When he came back, to himself, to awareness, he was in a kitchen. It looked homely, somewhat old fashioned- before electricity, or even gas- and occupied.

Two Pooka, one human.

Bunnymund had not changed at all. Granted, Kozmotis had seen Bunnymund before, in Pitch Black's memories, but never so recent. Raven had helped him remember all the way to what the humans called the Dark Ages, but they had yet to go further.

His old friend- if friend Kozmotis was still allowed to be- showed no signs of the many years between the Golden Age and now. Oh, what 'clothing' he wore was very different. Then, Bunnymund had worn and treasured a green and cold coat his mate had sewn for him. Now, the Pooka wore only arm braces and a belt and bandolier. Yet the eyes, the face, the faint quirk at the corner of his mouth, it was all the same.

"Didn't figure you'd come around for a while," Bunnymund said. "Drink your water. Had a bit of a turn, seeing Desmond."

"I thought he was human," Kozmotis explained. There was a glass in front of him, three-quarters full of water. He picked it up and sipped, carefully. "A... half-Pooka?"

Was that longing, in Bunnymund's eyes? If so, Kosmotis saw only the briefest of flashes, before there was only warm amusement. "Full blood. One got slipped by you, experimental sciences."

"Two," Kosmotis corrected.

"I don't count myself in that."

"I am not counting you."

Kosmotis sipped again at his water, and watched the three from beneath his eyelashes. Desmond was the easiest to read, eager and moments away from lunging across the table to demand answers. Or something. It was hard to predict the youngster.

Jack Frost, though not yet well known, wore his emotions openly. He too was curious, though he stood with one hand on Bunnymund's shoulder. Support, love, caring; much of which he had not had from his wife, as much his fault as anything.

Bunnymund could have been carved from the rock, for all that he moved. There was hell in his eyes, a riot of emotions Kosmotis could have reached mental fingers out to and touched, and tasted. Hope, and fear of false hopes, and grief and joy and wonder and loss and memories of all that he'd had and all that had been taken from him... Yes, Kosmotis could have felt shadows of what Bunnymund went through.
He could have, but he did not.

He would not intrude upon his friend in that way.

"How do you mean?" Frost asked. It was a touch surprising. Kosmotis would have thought Desmond the one to break the quiet.

"Pitch Black killed Hoata," he said. Bunnymund closed his eyes, and Frost tightened his grip upon his mate's shoulder. So, Bunnymund had shared his history. Good. "He claimed to have killed your son."

Another sip of water. "He lied."

Kosmotis slammed back against the wall, strong hands pinning him by the throat and shoulder. "You swear?" Bunnymund hissed. Tears stood in his eyes. "You swear this is so?"

He spoke in the old language, one Kozmotis had thought he had forgotten. The language of the Golden Age.

"I do swear," he rasped, in the same tongue. "I do swear that Pitch Black lied. Hoata hid her child, and never revealed the location. No matter what was done to her. What happened of your son, I know not, but that, I do."

"Bunny," Frost said. "Bunny, let him go. C'mon, he needs to breath, let's not break Kosmotis, yeah?"

Bunnymund did let go, and staggered back. "He. He said." The Pooka gestured wordlessly, and then sank to his knees.

Kosmotis rubbed at his throat, and frowned at the faint flickers of fear teasing the edges of his awareness. Who was it that feared for their place...? Ah. Of course.

"Desmond," he said, and was gratified when Bunnymund and Frost came aware of their child again. "I am sorry you were surprised, I meant not to upset anyone by my speech."

The kit's ears were back, his eyes big as he tried to take in everything at once. "Its good news," he said, very carefully not looking at Bunnymund. "Da's baby's not dead. That's good."

Bunnymund crooned under his breath, and scruffed the kit with ease. "C'mere, you little ankle biter. You're my baby. Kozmotis here's talking about your older brother, who'd be grown by now. Someone new for you to torment, eh?"

"Yeah, just think," Frost said. He sounded an odd mix of fond, frustrated, and comforting. "Someone who hasn't fallen for the old innocent act." He paused, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Desmond? When your brother shows up- because he will- you are not allowed to dye him colors, or get him to steal you an elf or something. Seriously, kiddo, one pet."

Kosmotis felt the amorphous fear shrink, though it did not entirely go away. It would take time and reassurance for that, he knew. He cleared his throat, once more capturing their attention.

"I understand Sanderson still has contacts beyond the stars," he said. "It will be slow... but we can ask."

Bunnymund held Desmond tighter, strangling fear all unknowing. "That'd be good," he said, and rubbed his chin against his kit's forehead. "That'd be... real good."
Kosmotis bowed his head. "I will see myself out." He paused in the doorway, and looked back over his shoulder. "For what it is worth, Bunnymund. I am... sorry. For all that occurred."

Then he left, before he said something he could not take back. He would find Sanderson, he decided. That would help with his unsettled emotions. And perhaps he could then forget how delicious Desmond's fear had been.

Chapter End Notes

So, last two chapters I've been grumbling about writer's block. Apparently, there is a cure. Just have the power go out at work for three and a half hours and have nothing better to do than write longhand. For the record? I have terrible handwriting. It took ages for me to transcribe the half-written chapter.

Also, Kosmotis' POV is better than Sandy's, but only by a tiny bit. Next chapter, we go back to our usual POV and someone else plots about closets and I'm thinking Cupid should make an appearance. Bribery should be a factor.

Also-also- HOW many words and chapters is this story? None of my original stuff has even come CLOSE. (Jack, Bunny, start talking to the original characters. They need to write and they won't.)

Also-also-also- I'm writing the next story(s) I'll be posting. Do you guys want me to wait until it's all written before I start posting, or to do as I've done with this one and post each chapter as it's ready?
Aster kept his son's head tucked under his chin, and crooned absently under his breath. Desmond, while normally liking cuddles as much as the next five-year-old, didn't usually *cling*.

He was clinging now.

"Want to talk any?" he finally asked.

Desmond shook his head, tightened his grip. "No."

No, he hadn't figured. When E. Aster Bunnymund was the one person in the room most willing to talk about emotions, something was very wrong. For some people, he'd make the effort, but usually he'd just rather not. Jack, on the other hand, preferred to bleed first, and Desmond generally acted as though there was nothing wrong at all.

Maybe Raven could do for the entire family.

Or just the two-thirds that called themselves 'Frost'.

Well, Raven wasn't here, Desmond was clinging, and Jack had made dark comments about Sandy and good dreams. Aster hadn't really had a chance to process the possibility that his child—his son, his firstborn—had survived. Hoata... Pitch had gloated about torturing her, detailed a few of the things he'd done, usually before doing them to Aster. About the time North had shown up he'd tired of that sort of thing, and there'd been those willing to rescue Aster from the Nightmare King's idea of entertainment.

Hoata had hidden their child, and not told Pitch where he was.

If... If Desmond had escaped, if his firstborn had, then what were the chances that there were more Pooka out there? Hidden, maybe, transformed to look like whatever natives they were living with; Desmond had actually been somewhat late in learning that trick.

"Da?" Desmond snuffled at the hollow of Aster's throat. "Do you... Never mind."

He dragged his wandering attention back on task. "Do I what?"

"It's not..."

"If you're going to say it's not important, sprog, you've got another think coming." He smoothed a paw down over Desmond's ears. "What's the question?"

"It's stupid." The kit's grip pulled out some fur. Aster didn't twitch.

"Desmond."

"Do you... Do you rather you had your birth son? Instead of me?"

Ah. Aster tightened his grip, and sat down. "No."

He didn't. He wished he could have had his son with him through the years, that he could have...
raised his boy from kit to buck, that he could have had some small part of Hoata with him through the years. But.

"I wouldn't give you up for anything," he said. "You are my son. I do want my- your older brother, here, with me. Us. This family isn't big enough yet, even if we do apparently number four."

Desmond giggled, and Aster felt him relax. "How old would he be?"

"You know this world? A little older."

"Whoa..."

Hell, Pooka could have viable offspring with other species. He could be a grandfather by now.

"Suddenly," Aster muttered, "I feel old."

Desmond's giggles got louder. Then he stopped, and shoved at Aster's chest until he could look his Da in the eye. "Da. How come you and Papa haven't had babies yet? I'd like little brothers and sisters."

Aster did not choke. Choking implied breathing, and for a good, long moment he couldn't do that. "Ah, kiddo, you do realize your Papa and I are both... male?"

The kit poked him in the chest. "Spirit of life and new hope."

" Doesn't mean I could get a bloke pregnant!" Aster could have taken female form, if he really wanted to, but it wouldn't have worked. Just because you could shift your shape didn't mean you were automatically capable of carrying to term. He would have been willing to try, but... Jack was a winter spirit. Those sorts weren't exactly known for their fertility. Between that and the almost guarantee that there'd be a miscarriage... no.

It was possible, faintly, that he could get Jack pregnant- but for that they would have to be married as spirits, bound to each other with ties stronger than those that bound the Guardians to the children of earth. Even then, being able to didn't automatically make it a good idea. Women had a hard enough time with pregnancy, and men weren't meant to carry children.

He wanted more children. He did. He just figured it'd be through adoption that they'd get them.

"That," Desmond said, breaking into Aster's madly spinning thoughts. "Is just a cop-out. I'm going to find Butterfingers now."

Then he squirmed free of Aster's grip and trotted out the door.

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Jack spun his staff around, rather like a baton twirler in a marching band, and watched Cupid. The "world's greatest marksman" disassembled his sniper rifle with military precision, slotting each piece in the padded leather case beside him.

"I thought you did the bow and arrow thing," Jack said.

"Upgraded." Cupid snapped the case closed. "And I'm not a fat baby wearing a diaper, either."

"No, you're not." The love spirit looked to be mid-thirties, five-foot-eleven, and wore Greek military fatigues, complete with the stompy boots. "Question for you."

"This should be fun. Shoot."
"Isn't that your job? Tooth and North."

Cupid flipped him off. "Not my work, not my problem. They're already in love."

"That," Jack told him, "is kind of the problem. They're in love but they won't admit it."

"Sounds like another couple."

"Hey, I'm practically married." It would be married, except Aster hadn't asked and Jack wasn't about to presume, but they were raising a kid together. He'd asked the Pooka about spirit marriages. Had he been too subtle? Was Aster just not interested in that much permanence? Which was a crazy thought, because this was Aster, who'd made it clear he was willing to spend the rest of his life with a functioning corpse, and Jack was alive now which made things so much better. But Aster wasn't afraid of commitment, was the point, only he hadn't asked.

Was Jack supposed to ask?

"Yeah, now," Cupid snarked. "What do you want me to tell you?"

"Have you got any arrows or potions that would just lower their inhibitions a bit, so they'd be willing to actually say they like each other?" Jack stopped twirling his staff, and pointed it at Cupid. "Seriously, I'd... not sure how I'd repay you, actually."

Cupid rolled his eyes. "I know a potion that'd work. Advice free of charge."

"Hit me. Just not literally."

"It's called alcohol."

Jack frowned. "You want me to get them drunk?" He didn't have his undead liver anymore. He also hadn't had a hangover yet, and he'd like to keep that streak going. "I'm alive now. I'd kind of like to stay that way."

The marksman rolled his eyes again. "My arrows only work on people who are falling in love. All I'd be doing is poking them with a sharp, pointy stick. They're both swords-masters, and I don't need to deal with that crap, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, okay." Jack patted the air, as if that would help Cupid calm down any faster. "I get it. Alcohol. Thanks."

Cupid sniffed, and slung the case over his shoulder. "You're welcome. Get someone else to drink with them."

Jack grinned. Maybe Aster would do it- or maybe Kozmotis could be poked into the job. "I will. Hey, who'd you get? Just now, I mean?" He nodded in the direction Cupid had been aiming.

The marksman wrinkled his nose. "An utter jackass of a playboy. Girlfriend's utterly devoted- like, would die for this guy, just about. Him? Starting to look around for a new toy, because the one he's got isn't likely to leave over something as minor as screwing around. So I hit him with potion number seven. He's now destined to a life of domesticity, loyalty, two-point-five children, a lovable dog, and a mortgage. Better life than he would've had, by far."

Jack blinked. "Other than the part where I've only got one kid so far, it's a kidnapped elf instead of a dog, and there's no mortgage on the Warren, you just described my life."
"I promise I didn't get you with potion number seven," Cupid said. "Hell. I avoid hitting spirits as much as possible. Except Mother." He smirked; there was nothing nice about it. "If she's going to slut around on Father, it might as well be with those that can't help her cheat. She's fallen in love with more trees..."

Jack backed away a few steps. Get Cupid- or Eros- going on about Aphrodite's many sexual adventures and you'd be stuck all week. For a former god of love, he held loyalty in high regard. Possibly because Aphrodite didn't have any, possibly because he was the former god of romantic love, not sex. Jack had always thought real love was as much loyalty as friendship and wanting to jump your life partner's bones.

"I've got to get back. Pooka bonding time should be just about over, and if I don't handle dinner, it'll be raw carrots again." Or he could suggest Aster make stir fry again. And maybe he'd get that carrot cake, finally.

Aster was a good cook; he had to do it more often.

Cupid waved him off, and headed towards- okay, not an actual unicorn, just a white horse. "I've got a prince and peasant to get set up. Have fun, Frosty."

"Have you been watching Disney movies again?" Jack asked.

"Hey, it's the twenty-first century!"

That it was, Jack thought, and thumped the ground with his staff. A rabbit hole opened up, and he ducked in without another word.

Jack rubbed his cheek against Aster's shoulder, and sighed. Sleeping, nightly, without turning into a block of ice. Never mind the dreams Sandy kept sending him, everything was just awesome. Sleeping curled up against his lover, or sprawled over him, that was amazing. Cuddling in the afterglow was just perfect.

"Desmond seemed happier at dinner," he murmured.

"He worried I'd want my other son more than him." Aster skimmed his claws over the small of Jack's back. "Told him I didn't."

Not exactly surprising, but... "Oh?"

"They're both my sons. Desmond and... and Hoata's child." He swallowed. "It's different, between the two of them, because they're different people."

"Makes sense," Jack murmured. He took a deep breath, and breathed out slowly. "Aster?"

"Yeah?"

Why haven't you asked... no. Not tonight. "The markings." He tapped the Pooka's shoulder, as if there were any question. "Will Desmond get any?"

"In a bit. When he loses his baby fur, get's an adult coat. He'll go darker, too- brown was the most common. Gray like me was- well, like blond hair for humans."

"And white?"

Aster rolled over, until he had Jack cuddled up against his chest. Jack had no complaints. "Old age or
albinism. Real pale gray, looked like white, was rare."

Jack hummed. "And the markings?"

"Normally inherited from the father, and the fur from the mother. Sometimes it was switched."

Jack wrapped an arm around Aster's waist. "So you'll know who Desmond's biological parents are, then?"

"If I can remember, yeah." Aster looked down at him. "Important?"

Jack smiled, faintly. "I'd like to thank them. For sending him here."

After a moment, Aster tucked his head over Jack's. "Yeah," he murmured. "I'd like to thank them too."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter... I had plans, you see, but no. It went a slightly different direction than I'd intended, because Desmond you ask awkward questions. But anyways, we WILL move onto the next point, which will be the time to start this story winding down. I've got bits of the epilogue planned out, too. Promises to be sweet and fun.
Tooth loved Jack. Really, she did. He was like the little brother she'd always wanted, and then learnt why she had to be careful what she wished for.

"Do any of the countries have appropriate currency?" she asked Baby Tooth. Her tail feathers kept twitching in irritation, and at this rate she would be puffed out like a hummingbird male ready for a fight.

Baby Tooth huffed, and said that no. Even the chocolate coins- sugar-free, at least- were from different countries.

"Argh!" Tempting to pull at the feathers on her head, very tempting, but it would hurt. Worse, she'd have a bald spot until the feathers grew back. "Fine. We'll go with things as they are. Get a few of the girls off the teeth and quarters and onto fixing this mess. As few of the chocolates as possible, we want these children to take better care of their teeth, not worse."

Jack had appeared absolutely perfect, before she got to know him. Now he was a charming, funny, lovely young man, all but married to one of her best friends, a doting father, and dead set on driving her up a wall.

And across the ceiling until gravity reasserts itself, Baby Tooth chimed in. He's been going after Nick, too.

"Ni- North? Oh, what's Jack been doing to the poor man now?"

Baby Tooth blinked, and tilted her head to the side. After a minute, she said, Jack organized another revolt of the elves. This time they had water balloons filled with paint, too.

Poor Nick. It was getting closer to Christmas, and he would be going over the lists of naughty and nice children- and now, the reasons why each child had landed on each list. Ever since finding out Jack had stolen from stores to feed Desmond, Nick had considered the possibility that some children acted naughty for the best reasons. (The less said about the one girl, what was her name? Brenda, that was it... The less said about Brenda, the better. A good girl, but she really needed anger management courses and a more reasoned response to bullying. Tooth had gathered all of the girl's baby teeth before she'd turned ten, and every last one had been lost in a fist fight.)

"Baby Tooth, can you watch over things here?" Tooth asked.

Of course, Baby Tooth said. This was what Tooth had trained her for. Was she going to go out into the field tonight?

"Eventually. I thought I'd make sure North wasn't having a nervous breakdown first."

Baby Tooth gave her an odd look. Bunny was the one who had nervous breakdowns. North broke out the vodka.

"Clever girl," Tooth said, and brushed Baby Tooth's forehead with one finger. "Then I'll make sure he's not drunk, first."
Baby Tooth muttered something, too quiet to be heard properly. Tooth raised her eyebrows, but her little second in command just looked innocently up at her and said she'd get right to work.

Tooth nodded, and, with several backwards glances, flew towards the North Pole. It wasn't that far, from her palace. A nice change of pace, really, though she hadn't been nearly as manic about work ever since Jack had been made a Guardian. Considering how old she was, it shouldn't have felt nearly as long as it did. Only three years, or so? And already so much had happened. If this kept up-well, certainly life would remain exciting.

"Another reason you chose Jack?" she asked Manny. "A trickster to keep us on our feet?"

The moonbeams shimmered around her, but the Moon apparently didn't feel like answering. No matter. Tooth liked her theory. Perhaps she'd share it with the others.

She hurried a little as the air got colder. She could handle temperature extremes very well, better than anyone but Sandy. Maybe Kozmotis now, although there hadn't been any reason to check it. But she didn't like the cold, more for the ice that built up on her feathers and wings- less now that Jack had spoken with the Wind, but still an uncomfortable amount- it always made her feel so heavy. She could still remember her own childhood, the youngest daughter of the family, the only one who wore trousers because those, at least, were easier to patch than saris were.

These days, she would have been called a tomboy, an adventurous little girl forever pushing the boundaries to learn how to fight, how to climb trees, never content with the sorts of things her sisters were prepared to dedicate their lives to.

Their mother might have been a Sister of Flight, but her sisters had been ready to spend their lives grounded.

Tooth sighed, and brightened at the sight of the Workshop, coming clear through the snow. Not that there was very much of it. Enough to restrict visibility, but smog, or plain old humidity, could cause as much if not more restriction.

Nick always left at least one window open, these days. Tooth found that this time, it was the one that let into his study. She pushed it open enough to fit through, and knocked on the frame.

"Tooth!" Nick turned away from his latest project, and beamed. "Come in, come in! Is cold out. Sit by fire, warm up."

Tooth smiled, and settled down on one of the 'tail friendly' chairs that were so abundant in the Workshop. They hadn't always been, but with everyone coming here for the bi-monthly meetings-and movie nights- the yeti had quickly whipped up some new furniture. Nick would never have said, but Tooth knew it was at his order. The yeti were dears, and took wonderful care of their teeth, but they were very focused and didn't always notice when someone was less than comfortable.

"What brings you here?" Nick asked, his accent thickening. He always did that for her; she'd found it amusing the first time, and as the years had passed, well. He could speak English without an accent, now, but claimed accents were far too much fun to give up.

"Jack switched around the currency in my coin dispensers," she said. "I'm sure I'll laugh about it in a week or so, but at the moment..."

"Strong wish to strangle him?" Nick asked.

"Is this what having a brother feels like?" she asked, a touch plaintively.
"So I hear." He closed the window, and sat down next to her, instead of at his desk. "You came for the commiseration?"

Tooth fluttered her wings several times. "Baby Tooth said Jack had riled up the elves again...?"

Nick waved one hand in dismissal. "Ja, that. Small thing, easy to stop. Yeti not even annoyed."

"I suppose my fairies were amused, too... And the children will be very amused in the morning." Or confused. Who knew, it might even increase their belief in her. Not only was there a quarter under their pillow in the morning, it was the wrong nationality. Their parents certainly wouldn't pull such a trick.

She smiled a little at the thought.

"Oh! Ah, question for you, Tooth. For Christmas." Nick shifted a bit, as though worried the chair might collapse under him. "Your fairies, I have never given them gifts before, no?"

"Well," Tooth said slowly. "Not exactly, no."

"This year, I thought, little gifts for little fairies. But how many are there?"

Oh. Tooth blinked, and ducked her head to hide a blush. "Six hundred and ninety-two," she said. "I had to expand the operation again."

"So many," he murmured, and grinned. "Ah, but will be no challenge, not for me. I am Santa, hah!"

"It's very kind of you, North," Tooth said. "The girls have never minded before, really. The work you do on their houses has always been more than enough."

Tooth's miniature fairies were too small for proper rooms, which in her Palace were taken up and filled with shelving and tooth boxes anyways. Some years back, she couldn't remember how many centuries, Nick had thought up the idea of something rather like bird houses, only bigger and with more dignity. He made more as they were needed, though some of the girls couldn't stand the thought of sleeping on their own and insisted on sharing their rooms.

"I am wanting to do this," he said, and patted her shoulder. So carefully; she knew how strong he was, and how much control it took so he only brushed the feathers. "I will come by, and speak with your fairies between their work."

"Oh..." She was blushing again. Tooth pressed one hand to her warm cheek, and looked down. She was smiling, but she never looked quite right when smiling. Too many teeth showed, and she didn't have any dimples. Her oldest sister had had them, and her second sister, the middle child, had always known exactly how many teeth to show without being creepy, and no more.

"Perhaps you would like small drink before you have to leave?" Nick asked. So kind of him, pretending not to notice her warm cheeks or too-manic smile.

"Well," she said. "Perhaps a very small one." There was nothing that said she had to drink all of it, and if Nick was drinking with company, he wouldn't go overboard.

He grinned, jolly as only Santa could be, and stood up. "Wait here, I will go get vodka. Good stuff, not swill wasted on Bunny and Sandy and eggnog."

Tooth giggled, and folded her hands in her lap. "I won't move an inch."
Nick hummed as he walked over to the door, tugged on the handle- and frowned. "Odd. What is this?" He tried the door again. "Is stuck."

"Stuck?"

The old Cossack huffed. "Or locked."

Tooth moved over to the window. "I can fly out and let Phil know," she said, and tugged on the window frame. It failed to swing open, and when she looked closer... "Ice!"

The window had been iced over.

She felt more than heard Nick move over to stand behind her; she could feel his body heat from the top of her head to her toes. "Happens, sometimes," he said, and sighed. "Is way of pole, I think, and Wind, very much like Jack. I will check my desk, see if I left snow globe in any drawers."

Somehow, Tooth didn't think it would be that simple. She smiled at his back, though, and took a chance to wander over and study one of the walls. It was covered in floor to ceiling shelves, though unlike at her Palace the shelves were filled with toys, ice models and finished products.

There were several dancing ballerinas, no doubt for use in music boxes. Tooth smiled at the pretty, graceful figures, and held back her sigh with a force of will. These were the types of women Nick liked. Not battered warriors like herself.

He always used the same woman for his inspiration, she knew. The face never changed, and the body altered only in the pose. Ballerina figures, music boxes, personal carvings to decorate his living space... If Tooth knew who she was, she would have been ragingly jealous, picked a fight, and then gone home to cry. No one had been interested in her when she'd been human, either.

But she didn't know who it was, and she'd never dared to ask. For the best, really.

She turned around, just in time to see Nick move something brightly colored and glittery off his desk and out of sight. It had been small, and if her eyesight hadn't been better than human she might have missed it.

"What was that?" she asked.

"What was what?" Nick asked, with a poor attempt at innocence. The cat that ate the canary (what an expression!) could have done better, with feathers sticking out of its mouth. (And what a mental image!)

"What you just moved there. A new carving?"

"Oh, well." Nick looked away. "Not exactly. Is, ah, gift. For very special lady."

Oh. Of course. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have pried," Tooth said. Her wings drooped, to press against her back. The woman, the one Nick had all but worshiped for several centuries now. "No doubt it's very private."

"Tooth." He stepped towards her, hesitated, and then held out one hand. "Perhaps you could give your opinion?"

She forced a small smile, and nodded. "I like your work. Remember to take my comments with a grain of salt."
Nick chuckled, but his eyes glittered with nerves as he brought out... "Oh," Tooth breathed. "It's beautiful."

It wasn't a carving of ice, or a toy of plastic or wood. It was a necklace, a delicate thing of golden chains and then, a silver star with a carving of... Yes, Tooth recognized that particular facial profile. The woman. She was done as an angel, this time... Only the wings were wrong.

Tooth took the necklace from Nick, hardly noticing she'd done so. The wings were like a dragonfly's, not a bird's.

Like Tooth's.

"Nick?" she asked, her heart going almost as fast as the hummingbird she looked like. "Who... who is this?"

She didn't recognize his expression, at first- but then she did. Any number of her sisters' suitors had looked the same, when offering a gift they thought were substandard to what her sisters deserved.

That expression had never been directed towards Tooth. Until now.

"Do you like it?" he asked. "I made it... for you."

For her?

She looked down at the necklace again, and brushed her fingers over the so familiar, so hated profile. Yet, if she looked closely, didn't allow jealousy to cloud her eyes...

Still holding the necklace, she walked over and looked at the ballerina figures again. And she saw it. The hair color changed- now blonde, now red, now brown- and the costumes all differed, but the face. Now that she really looked, she saw it.

It was her face, over and over.

"Nick?" she breathed, and carefully touched one ice ballerina. It was an older one, and she remembered seeing it for the first time. Realizing that Nicholas St. North was taken with a lady, someone gentle, graceful, someone who didn't need wings to dance and not step on anyone's feet. Someone who wasn't a manic fairy, obsessed with teeth and memories, hands calloused from sword fighting, body as scrawny as a boy's because flying took energy, and being streamlined was important.

Oh, she had wanted to smash that figurine the first time she'd seen it.

And all this time...

She turned around and looked at him. "How did I not notice?" she wondered. "How- you were all but putting up a fifty-foot tall sign, and I never saw it."

"Tooth?" Nick asked.

Her wings quivered, in time with her shaking hands. "Nick," she said, and pressed one hand to her lips. "This is for me?" She held up the necklace.

He looked down at it, and then back up at her. "Yes."

"Why now?" After centuries of her obliviously looking past the obvious...
Nick took a deep breath, and leaned back against his desk. It moved several inches back. He winced. "Some years ago, I made necklace. Thought to give it to you for Christmas, but... chickened out, Americans say. It was on desk, right in open. I noticed it just now. It wasn't there before."

Tooth's giggle was quiet enough she didn't think he heard. "Matchmakers," she said. "Happy couples that want everyone else to be happy. I... I don't think they'll be disappointed."

"No?" Nick's delight, his joy, was like a sunrise. Breathtaking. He beamed, and held out his hands. "You are sure? I am old-"

"I'm older." She handed him the necklace, and raised her eyebrows.

He fumbled with the catch, and managed to get the chain around her neck. "Fat."

"Pleasingly plump, and it makes you look cuddly."

"Stubborn, grouchy Russian too fond of sweets."

Tooth reached her arms up to wrap them around his neck. Nick helped, by lifting her up. One hand could have circled her waist, easily, but he used both, just to be careful. "I'm just as stubborn, I don't mind grouchy, and you always brush your teeth."

Nick smiled, and, was he blushing? He was. "We were set up."

"I find I don't mind very much. Do you?"

"No," he whispered. He lowered his head, and she lifted hers, and then there was no more need for talking.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry it took a bit to get this posted. I (finally) watched my copy of Rise of the Guardians I only just bought. In between spluttering over how awesome it was, and crying over how I didn't remember the Warren properly, seriously, what did I DO in my stories, why... Well, let's just say I didn't get any writing done that day.

And then the next day, Jokul Frosti kidnapped my brain.

Alas, there's only one chapter left. I loved this run, am gobsmacked at how many words it ended up being (seriously, why can't my original stuff do like this?) and loved all your comments. (And oh my god, Shimmer, TV tropes page? For me? Gah!) You're all awesome.
Much to everyone's relief, things settled down after that. The occasional nasty spirit reared its head, there was an awkward moment when the Unseelige Elves of Underhill kidnapped Jack and Kozmotis to be their king and queen (just who would have been king, and who queen, hadn't been said, not that either of them wanted to know or care) and the other Guardians had come charging in to rescue them. Desmond discovered the effects on caffeine on elves and was promptly forbidden from ever repeating the experiment.

In answer, he went a little wild with smoke bombs.

Aster had wondered, during the clean up, just how Jack had managed to survive nearly fifty years of single parenthood. Desmond was a menace.

Jack had honestly and truly cackled, like the Wicked Witch of the West. "Aster, Des and I were living on the edge. There wasn't time or energy for him to get into trouble like this- ack!"

Aster let Jack and Desmond out of the Warren eventually, once he'd calmed down and lost some of the overprotective need to keep them close.

Jack just called a spade a spade, and called Aster a possessive ass.

Nicholas St. North and Toothiana were married in the New Year. Kozmotis officiated, nearly all the spirits known by any of the Guardians were invited, and Jack lost his reputation as an Iron Liver. A single cup of spiked punch was enough to have him giggling and tipsy the rest of the night. Most of his time was spent talking to other spirits about Aster, groping Aster, or snuggling in close with Aster and muttering things best left unheard.

Someone made the mistake of calling Tooth "Mrs. Claus", whereupon they were promptly put in their place. Explanations were nearly made with swords.

Later that very year, someone managed to convince certain children that North was going on a diet to look good for his new wife. The story spread, and North was finally able to slim down. Not that he completely lost the weight, but he stopped feeling like a heart attack waiting to happen.

Not long after, Jack discovered some children had managed to mix up his legend with that of Jokul Frosti's, a nasty spirit that had, thankfully, passed away some decades before. He busied himself with fixing the misunderstandings, and managed to pick up some German while he was at it.

Sandy continued to question his contacts among the more distant stars, looking for disguised Pooka. While nothing definite had been found, there were enough hints for Aster to feel very hopeful.

There were several more marriages between spirit couples, Kozmotis being press ganged into acting as justice of the peace for all of them. Aleksia and Ilmari were one of the first to insist, politely but with edged weapons, that he do so. Jack stood as best man and Desmond was the ring bearer, even if he carried two crystal daggers on the pillow instead of rings.

At one point, the Guardians discovered a recently crashed Star Pirate ship. No one had survived the entry through Earth's atmosphere, never mind the crash. The older Guardians- Sandy, Kozmotis, and Aster- eyed the Moon suspiciously, but never said anything.
After all, the Man in the Moon was as much a Guardian as they were.

Jack’s initial believers entered high school proper, and immediately got a reputation for being weird. After all, they were teenagers, and still believed in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, still went on egg hunts and wished on stars? Very weird. Too nice to cause trouble for, but too weird to befriend, either.

The children had just shrugged to each other. They knew what they knew. Public opinion wouldn’t change their minds.

Besides, they had more fun believing in the Guardians than their peers did in being rational.

Tooth was the one who brought up the question of marriage at one of the Guardian meetings. Aster nearly had a heart attack.

"The two of you are just so good together," she had said. "So why won't you marry?"

Jack just shrugged and smiled. "Well, he hasn't asked me yet."

Aster spluttered. "You never seemed interested!"

Jack rolled his eyes, and muttered something about 'borrowing' neon signs from a Las Vegas wedding chapel to show his interest. Kozmotis hurriedly stepped forward and offered his services as a chaplain. At this point, he could have performed the ceremony by rote.

It wasn't that simple, of course. Aster insisted on explaining all the potential ramifications to Jack, including the remote possibility that he could get pregnant. Jack took it reasonably well. The only snowstorms that resulted were in Antarctica. No one was harmed, though one research team got film of a rare 'snow hurricane'.

"Not," Jack told Raven later, "that I freaked out or anything. But, uh, pregnant?"

"Because you're male?"

"What if I broke the baby?"

Raven rolled his eyes. "The fact that you lack a womb, of course, means nothing."

"Oh," Jack said, and waved his hand. "Magic. But babies are fragile!"

"You raised Desmond."

"Desmond," Jack said, gathering dignity about him like a cloak, "eats grass."

He did, eventually, calm down about the idea. It was hardly likely, after all. Winter wasn't exactly known for its fertility, even if Aster was very good at his job. If Jack had been a spirit of spring, then they might have had to worry. As it was, well... Possible didn't mean it would happen.

Maybe a millennia or two down the road they'd have to decorate a nursery.

Desmond was the one most vocal about urging a marriage on his parents sooner rather than later. When questioned, he explained that they had to let him be a ring bearer again, because it'd been fun last time, only they better have proper rings and not sissy daggers like Uncle Ilmari and Aunt Aleksia.

Aster explained that Pooka used bracelets, as their stubby fingers weren't exactly suited to rings.
During the wedding ceremony, Desmond managed to kidnap five of North's elves. The ceremony itself had to be paused while Aster and Jack found them, and gave them back, much to their son's displeasure.

Jack didn't notice much of a difference between life before marriage and life after. Aster did. Knowing his mate's general area and state of health (alive, hurt, bored and looking for mischief) eased his mind. It was a relief, and he sometimes spent hours just concentrating on the information he got over their new bond.

Desmond began his first growth spurt not long after. It altered his skeleton, elongating arms and legs, making it easier for him to walk on his hind legs, and lengthened his fingers until it could be honestly said that he had hands instead of paws.

He did not, much to Jack's bemusement and Aster's surprise, loose his fluffy baby fur.

"It's Papa's fault," Desmond decided. "I'm always in winter coat because of him."

"Hey!"

After Desmond's growth settled, however, he began to shed. His stomach fur went first, becoming sleek, and turning from nearly white to gunmetal gray. After that, however, he started needing help, as he could only twist so much to brush his back.

He made an odd sight for several months, partially fluffy, partially sleek. The fur on his back was an even darker gray, like storm clouds, which meant- according to Aster- his clan markings would likely be white.

They were. Jack traced the marking, only just visible after a morning grooming session, and couldn't help but laugh. "Of course," he said, and smiled at his son. "It just figures, doesn't it?"

Desmond grinned back. "How long before Da notices?"

"Let's go find out."

Jack paused before heading into the Burrow, and looked up at the sky. The Moon was still out, barely visible in the morning sky. He sketched a quick salute, and grinned. "You just keep interfering," he said. "I'm starting not to mind."

Jack was a trickster, after all. He knew that you had to pay for the good things in life. Nearly three hundred years alone? Worth it, for this.

He went home.

Chapter End Notes

It's over. I'm sorry (not really). This was really, really fun. I enjoyed it, I hope you enjoyed it, and I hope you all look out for two new stories I'll be posting soon. One is called Fallen, and it's a dark-fic. The other is called Don't Forget Me, and should be fluffy. I also have several prompts yet to be filled for the Little Boy Blue universe (and please, may Snow Queen and the Frost Boys write, it's being a pain, I don't even know) so those should show up when the tricksters agree to play.
As for Desmond's markings... Snowflake. Yup. Absolutely a snowflake.

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