Summary

“Who are you?” Jack asks.

The man laughs loudly, echoes bouncing off of the dungeon walls. “Why, my dear Jack,” he says, leaning closer and reaching for Jack’s chin, “I am the Nightmare King.”

(A retelling of Beauty and the Beast, with far more sass, a large number of failed romantic dates and an increasingly inappropriate amount of flirting)

Notes

Written for this prompt from the RotG kink meme. To paraphrase; "Jack Frost and Pitch Black as Beauty and the Beast.”

The extra notes at the end are references for the universe this is set in etc.

(There may be some minor coding issues with some of the linebreaks, for which I apologise.)

See the end of the work for more notes.

Once upon a time, there was a kind and wonderful General. He was favoured by the King, and beloved throughout the land, for though he was a man of battle, he was sweet and gentle too.
But war came to that country; war led by a thousand thousand Nightmares, terrible beasts of darkness and fear. So the kind and wonderful General rode out to meet them, and he commanded his army with great and splendid valour, defending them to the last man. Even when his armies fell and collapsed beneath the wave of darkness the Nightmares spread, the kind of wonderful General remained, a shining beacon of hope for all those across the land.

The people rallied around him, and the slowly began to force the Nightmares back. Victory seemed to be looming ever closer until-

The kind and wonderful General had one true and perfect joy in his life. He had a daughter, a sweet kind girl, who everyone knew would grow into a woman just as kind and wonderful as her father before her. And as the General forced the Nightmares back, he thought of her and his heart lifted with joy, and the Nightmares heard it.

So they took his daughter in the dead of night, and spirited her away to a castle deep, deep in the darkness. And they waited. They did not have to wait long; the very moment the kind and wonderful General heard of his daughter’s kidnap, he saddled his best and fastest horse, and he rode out to that castle in the darkness.

No-one ever heard of him again.

With his disappearance, the Nightmares took new vigour in their battle, and they soon overwhelmed the land – and the Nightmare King took the throne for himself.

But that all happened long, long ago, and everyone knows it is just a story.

(but is it?)

Jack’s heard all the stories about the forest. Literally all of them, mostly because his parents despairs of him ever learning to stay out of there.

It was evil, all the stories said. Monsters lived in the forest, monsters and creatures of shadows. No-one has ever seen a deer in those woods – no birds, not even a moth fluttering near. Horses refuse to enter, and dogs whine piteously when they get too close their trees. Even the trees themselves hold something of the darkness – all blackened bark and tangled branches. Jack used to take acorns from the trees in the forest, but they never grew and his parents made him throw them away.

Even so, Jack goes in there. It’s quiet and calm – when Jack was little he’d been afraid of the shadows, but now he’s older, he knows there’s nothing there to fear. Just shadows. He likes the forest, especially the pond near his house. It freezes over in winter, and in the darkness of the forest it practically glows and Jack loves it there.

But today – and yesterday, and the day before – he’s not in the forest because he likes it. He’s there because he’s looking for her. He’s looking for his little sister and he’s been looking, and his parents keep saying she can’t be in the forest, she’d never go in the forest alone, but Jack knows better.

She just wants to be like her big brother.

So Jack just knows she’s in the forest, in his forest that he loves, even though he’s told her before not to go alone and he’s searched just about everywhere he can think of – the pond, the edge where the sunlight dapples the ground golden, up in the trees, down near the creek where the pond-water flows and still, nothing.
Winter’s just come and Jack can’t bear the thought of her being out here alone for one more night.

So he continues searching, calling her name, even as the sun sets and the shadows lengthen and strange creatures begin to stir in the gloom. He’s still searching even as the moon rises, and he might be hopelessly lost himself by now, but if he finds her, if he finds her-

Something flutters past him and lands on a branch, conveniently lit up by a moonbeam. Jack blinks and almost rubs his eyes – it’s a bird. A bird with long tail feathers and beautiful sparkling green plumage. It tilts its head at him and coos softly before fluttering to another branch, somewhat further away. It calls again, a more lilting sound – a *come hither* sound – and Jack shrugs and follows.

Behind him, the shadows stir.

The bird leads him a merry chase, darting through the tangled branches of the forest, past familiar and unfamiliar landmark alike, until it finally stops on top of a worn, crumbling wall. It twitters excitedly when Jack approaches – and then in fear when he reaches out to touch the glossy black gates beside it. It flutters around Jack until he reaches a gap in the wall and then it skims over towards-

Jack looks up and gasps in awe.

There’s a castle, all spires and towers, cloaked in shadows before him. He stumbles over the stones of the wall, skidding a little on the moist soil, before slowly walking towards the castle. It looms, ever larger, dark and terrifying and- and Jack feels a thread of excitement coiling in his belly. The little bird swoops around him, chattering away, but still chivvying him up towards the great dark doors of the castle’s entrance.

“Whoa,” Jack breathes. This time when he reaches for the doors, the bird just gives a sad coo and lands on his shoulder, like it’s its right and- well, it’s been nice enough so far, so Jack lets it. The doors creak open slowly, revealing only more darkness inside – not a single lamp hanging from any wall, and although Jack can just make out a chandelier hanging from the very top of the ceiling, not one candle is lit. The bird chitters and takes off again, flying over to a corridor and circling there until Jack follows.

The doors shut behind him with an ominous *thunk*. He glances back and feels maybe, just maybe, a twinge of fear. But he’s come this far already – no going back now.

The castle’s a labyrinth on the inside; all the doors look the same, and there’re shadows everywhere. It takes Jack a while to notice, but the little bird seems to be *glowing* softly in the darkness, and he’s sure that without it, he wouldn’t be able to see at all. The bird even seems to have some urgency to itself now, barely pausing at all to make sure Jack’s keeping up, just swooping down one corridor after another until they reach a set of stairs heading down, into even deeper gloom, and then it chitters until Jack reaches it.

“Is- is my sister down there?” Jack asks, not even sure why he’s only asking *now*.

The bird nods, and perches on Jack’s shoulder again. Jack takes a deep breath and starts the descent. There isn’t any railing on these stairs, but they were built against a wall, so Jack keeps his hand on that and slowly walks down, the little bird’s glow only just making it light enough for him to see.

It takes a long, long time for him to reach the bottom.

As soon as he does the bird is off again, leading Jack through the maze of passages in this- this dungeon. Every step Jack takes, he’s sure it’s getting darker, the little bird’s glow getting dimmer, but
he doesn’t dare stop – not with the bird calling him along.

And then the calls stop, and the bird flutters to land on a perch beside a great, heavy door. The wood is soot blackened and cracked, but still whole and Jack doesn’t think he can move it. There’s a grate at the bottom, not big enough for him to crawl through but big enough to see through, so he kneels down and tries to see through the gloom.

And there she is, Jack’s sister, sitting on the floor, staring fearfully at the door, her arms wrapped around her knees. The second she sees Jack her eyes widen and she practically throws herself at the grate.

“Jack!” she cries, “Oh Jack, please, you have to run, you have to get away!”

“No way,” Jack replies. “I came all this way just to get you. I’m not leaving you here.” Jack reaches up to the door handle and tries to push it, but the door is too heavy by far.

“No, Jack, you don’t understand! Please go, please run, you have to leave before he comes back!” his sister cries desperately, clawing at his legs.

He kneels down again and takes her hands. “I’m not leaving you here,” he says, with a vehement shake of his head.

She sobs and hiccups, “Please, Jack.”

He grins and tilts her head up to look at him. “Hey, look. I promise, I’m going to get you out of here.”

“How nice,” a voice sneers from behind him. Jack whirls – he didn’t even hear footsteps – and stares up into cold, dark eyes. “So now I have two trespassers instead of just one,” the man- he has to be a man, even though his skin is dead and grey and his eyes, oh his eyes-

“Look, I didn’t mean anything by coming here-” Jack begins; the shadows around the man convulse and suddenly he’s there, right in front of Jack, fingers tight around Jack’s throat.

“I don’t care,” the man hisses. “First, this girl tries to steal from me, and now you, you invade my home and my privacy!”

“Please,” Jack whimpers – and the bird shrieks and flutters into the man’s face, wings beating at his skin. The man drops Jack with a hiss and steps back into the darkness. The bird chirrups and lands on Jack’s shoulder.

“Ah, I see,” the man says. “Well then, boy, let’s hear whatever trivial explanation you have for this.”

Jack rubs at his throat, and glances between the corridor and the man. Maybe- but no, he can feel his sister clutching at his trousers, and she’s all but silent but for tiny little sobs.

“I just want my sister back,” he says. “I’m sorry we trespassed – and I’m sorry for whatever it was she did. I promise, we’ll never bother you again-”

“Not good enough,” the man snaps. “You see, dear boy, your sister – ah, well, she is so afraid,” he smiles- leers as he says it, “and we need fear, Jack.”

Jack jerks at his name, eyes widening and he wishes he had more than just a shepherd’s crook to defend himself but-
“Who are you?” Jack asks.

The man laughs loudly, echoes bouncing off of the dungeon walls. “Why, my dear Jack,” he says, leaning closer and reaching for Jack’s chin, “I am the Nightmare King.”

(blood black as pitch)

Jack could swear his blood freezes when the man says that. It’s just... something in the way he said it, like it was so absolutely true, so completely and utterly undeniable-

The bird flutters against Jack’s cheek and it’s enough to let him twist away from the Nightmare King’s hand.

“I don’t- the Nightmare King’s a fairy tale, a story made up to scare children,” Jack says, clutching at his crook with a white knuckled grip.

The man smiles – all teeth and nasty and mean, like a wolf about to snap Jack up – and shakes his head. “Oh Jack, when will you learn not to believe everything you hear?” he asks. “I can assure you, I’m quite real,” he continues. “Perhaps you would like a demonstration?”

The bird abruptly leaps into the air and flies at the Nightmare King’s face, screeching, although it never actually touches him. Instead he flinches back, deeper into the shadows until- his eyes glow in the darkness. His eyes and other eyes. The bird circles again and lands back on Jack’s shoulder, and when the Nightmare King steps forward into the little glow, he’s not alone.

Monstrous horses stand behind him. Monstrous blue-black horses, their eyes glowing like fire and their hooves sharp on the stones.

A little sob echoes from the cell behind Jack and he grits his teeth.

“Alright, I believe you,” he says. “Just... let her go. Please. I’ll,” and here Jack almost chokes, “I’ll stay instead of her. And I’ll... I’ll stay forever. I won’t try to escape, I won’t run away I'll-” He closes his eyes and tries not to think of how much pain he’ll be causing everyone back home. The bird nuzzles his cheek gently, and he opens his eyes and meets the Nightmare King’s head on. “I’ll be your servant.”

His sister sobs openly behind him, but Jack forces himself to ignore it. He’s doing this for her. He promised he’d get her out, and if this is the only way then....

The Nightmare King eyes Jack, examining him like- like Jack’s a horse he might buy, or as if he’s deciding whether Jack would make a good meal. The horses snort behind him, stamping their hooves tensely, and the bird- the bird twitters questioningly and finally, finally the Nightmare King nods.

“Very well, Jack,” he says, snapping his fingers. Two of the horses behind him scream and leap forwards – Jack flinches and raise his staff, but they pass right through him, and through the door behind – there’s another scream, one Jack knows well and he’s terrified for a second, terrified he’s given away his sister’s life, but then the door swings open and the horses step out – his sister clinging to the back of one with obvious terror.

“Jack,” she sobs, and he smiles and shakes his head.
“I’ll be fine. Don’t tell anyone where to find me, okay?” he says.

“No,” she whimpers – the horses stamp their hooves and canter away, past where Jack can see.

“It’ll be okay!” he calls after her... but he doesn’t follow. Eventually, the sound of hooves on stone fades; she’s gone.

“Well,” the Nightmare King says, “now that that touching farewell is over, perhaps we should return to business?” He reaches for Jack again – the bird puts up only a token protest – and shadows engulf them.

For a second, perhaps two, the entire world turns inside out.

And then they’re in a different room and Jack is falling to his knees to retch uselessly. Above him, the Nightmare King sniffs and stalks across the room.

“We shall have to do something about that, shan’t we?” he says, almost to himself.

Jack wipes his mouth and glances around – there are candles in this room at least, although not enough to truly light the room. The Nightmare King – clothed in black as he is – almost melts into them and- well, that’s probably not so far off the mark. Jack can barely see him, and honestly isn’t sure he wants to.

“What’s going to happen to me?” he asks, once it becomes clear that the Nightmare King isn’t going to say anything more.

The Nightmare King ignores him, even when Jack gets to his feet and staggers over to a chair. The bird chirrups softly and nestles against his neck, its feathers tickling his cheek. A wave of exhaustion passes through him, and before Jack can really stop himself, he’s falling asleep.

(turn to silvered glass)

There’s a man in the distance – a man clad in armour that glows like the sun. He’s almost too bright; Jack shields his eyes, even as he steps towards him.

He thinks he calls out to the man, but he cannot hear the name on his lips – he knows this man, he knows him and-

A girl runs past him, clad in green. She runs and runs, but no matter how much she runs, she never seems to reach the man. She’s calling him too, reaching for him, and there are tears on her face – hush don’t cry, i’m here, i’m here now sweetness – and Jack chases after her, he’s almost caught her-

And the golden man turns away from them both and darkness sweeps forward to greet him, and the little girl stumbles back, a scream in her throat and on her lips and Jack-

Wakes up with a jerk. It’s dark, too dark, and he doesn’t know where he is and oh that dream-

“Curious,” a voice says, and suddenly it all comes rushing back. The Nightmare King stares down at Jack, his face pulled into an odd expression. “Curious indeed.”

“What?” Jack snaps, not in any mood to be playing games with the King.
The Nightmare King laughs and turns away. “I can count on one hand the amount of children who have slept in my presence,” he comments. “Now, Jack Frost, perhaps we should see about your servitude.”

Jack sighs and nods, standing and following the King over to a mountain of books. The bird hops off his shoulder when they arrive, fluttering over to a perch that’s obviously been put aside for her—her? The bird sings sweetly, and Jack shrugs. ‘She’ it is.

“You will understand of course, that I cannot have a human serving me,” the Nightmare King comments. “At least, not such a weak human as you. Luckily, your name gave me an idea, and well—shall we say, a certain pond provided the rest of the information.” He turns and reveals a globe of ice—or well, not quite a globe. It’s an odd shape and Jack is curious—but he doesn’t reach out for it.

“What is that?” he asks instead.

“Your new heart, Jack,” the Nightmare King says. “Now, I wish I could say this wouldn’t hurt, but unfortunately that would be lying, and we don’t like liars do we, now?” With a motion Jack barely sees, the Nightmare King whips towards him, still cradling the ice—and he’s right—it’s a small heart, not the shape but an actual, real heart made from ice and—and he reaches out for Jack, catches him before he can flee and tilts him back, and in the seconds while Jack is disoriented, he presses the little ice heart against Jack’s chest.

He screams.

He does not stop screaming until his throat is raw and aching, his hair turned white and his blood—his blood turned to ice in his veins. And even then, it is not because the pain has ceased—instead, it is because he has no more breath to scream with.

By the time it finishes—by the time he is ice, everything is ice, ice is everything—frost has spread from his fingers, crept across the floor. Snow has crystallised in the air, fallen in small drifts around him, and the Nightmare King—he’s seated in an elegant, high backed chair, a look of deep contemplation on his face. When he sees that Jack is aware again, he smiles.

“There now,” he starts, “was that so bad?”

Jack coughs—his throat aches—and licks his lips. “Yes,” he croaks.

The Nightmare King tuts, and stands easily. “No matter. For now, I believe I can let you ah, acclimate to your new existence—and if you could stop snowing on my floors, I would be most terribly grateful—so have away with you.” He clicks his fingers and once again, the shadows move and turn everything inside out then spit Jack out. The bird flutters out of the shadows with him; she settles by his feet and chirps sadly.

At least he didn’t feel sick this time.

“It’s okay,” Jack murmurs. “I’ll be fine. I told her I’d be fine, so I will be.”

A glance around the room reveals not much else but a bed—not even a candle—but that feels like all Jack could use right now anyway, so he gratefully collapses on top of it. It doesn’t take much more than that before he’s asleep again.

(frost silver as glass)
The next day, Jack is woken by a horse. The bird cries down at them from above – she doesn’t drop near enough to touch them – but it’s the horse, with its hot, loud breath and sharp, shrieking neighs that wakes Jack.

He tumbles out of bed with a yelp and almost gets kicked by a flailing hoof. The horse snorts irritably before twisting away, slipping back into the shadows. The bird swoops down and lands back on Jack’s shoulder, chirping softly again.

“Guess that means he wants me, huh?” he mutters – Jack absently lifts his staff and heads towards the door. His hand spreads a thin frost where it touches; Jack pretends he doesn’t see it.

The bird – and he should really give her a name – flutters ahead of him, obviously knowing where she’s going, and he follows. Weirdly, it doesn’t seem as dark or as cold as it was before – and he’s lost his shoes somewhere, so really his feet should be icicles- oh.

Jack shakes his head. White hair falls across his eyes. There’s not going to be any pretending, Jack guesses. Not if the Nightmare King has anything to do with it.

He turns a corner and there’s a door – a set of double doors, more intimidating than all the rest and Jack just knows the King’s behind here. He raises his hand to knock, but at the first contact they swing wide open and Jack can see it’s the room from last night. Seated in his throne – it has to be a throne on a dais like that – the Nightmare King looks up, and his lips curl.

“Joined me at last, I see,” he comments. He gestures at the table below him; it’s laden with food and Jack is suddenly aware of just how hungry he is. “Eat and then you can get to work.”

“Thank you,” Jack replies, nodding – because he might as well be polite. It’s not like he wants to make the Nightmare King angry.

Still, it must surprise him, because he blinks, and glances away. “What use would you be if you were too weak to work?” he asks.

Jack ignores that and reaches for a piece of fruit – it’s not like any he’s seen before but it smells sweet and good. A bite reveals that it is, as is everything else he samples. There’s things he knows from home; bread and butter, and sweet thick jam, and then there are fruits and fish and large, fat eggs and Jack hasn’t even seen some of these foods before; but they’re all delicious.

It seems like a waste to give them all to a servant.

“Thank you anyway,” Jack says, once he’s finished eating. “And, I guess I should have asked earlier but- do you have a name?”

The Nightmare King snorts and stands, drawing himself up to his full, impressive height. “Of course I do,” he says, “Pitch Black – do not forget it. However,” he smiles, “you may call me sire.”

“What?! As if!” Jack snaps, also jumping to his feet.

The King – Pitch, and wasn’t that an overdramatic name – snarls and surges towards Jack, fury on his face. “Need I remind you, you are my servant, and you will address me as I order you to,” he hisses.

Jack doesn’t quite manage not to flinch, but he doesn’t sit down again. “I’m not yours to walk all over,” he replies, incensed. “I’ll work for you, and I won’t- I won’t run away, but I am not calling you sire!”
Pitch’s lip curls again, and he turns around, away from Jack. “You will take a missive to the north,” he says – the relevant paper flits across the room to land in front of Jack. “And you will, of course, be able to test out your new abilities up there – in fact, I do believe I encourage it.”

Jack picks the letter up carefully – the paper feels weird, sort of slick – and steps away from the table. He tucks it into his cloak – not that he needs a cloak now, he figures. Even so it was- it’s from home.

“Where exactly am I going?” he asks; Pitch laughs and clicks his tongue.

A shadow horse rises out of the shadows and steps menacingly towards Jack.

“She will take you there – and if I suspect, for even a second, Jack, for even the slightest, most miniscule moment that you are running away, I will set the worst Nightmares I have upon your sister. Her screams will echo across the land, Jack.” Pitch steps closer again, and cups Jack’s chin. “And once she can scream no more, I will set them after you.”

Jack takes a shaky breath and nods. “I’ll be back s- well. As soon as I can.”

“Good,” Pitch purrs, before turning away and dismissing him.

With no little trepidation, Jack climbs onto the horse’s back – it seemed to be made of sand or something, but where he touched it ice bloomed and shot down its sides, giving it some extra substance. It shudders with his touch, then trots once around the hall, before breaking into a canter and through a shadow gate.

They appear just outside the castle – the forest stretches out ahead of him and for an instant Jack wants to just go home- but that would be stupid now. Even if he hadn’t promised his sister, even if he hadn’t promised Pitch, he couldn’t go back now.

“Let’s go,” he mutters to the horse. It snorts and abruptly begins to canter – into the air. “Oh god,” Jack yelps, clutching at the horse’s shoulders. He doesn’t even have the bird with him now – just his staff and the letter and the horse, and the latter two aren’t exactly comforting.

Jack clings tighter as they ascend higher; so high they touch the clouds, and the water – water, who knew clouds were made of water – freezes as soon as it touches Jack’s skin. Even when he opens his mouth – just for a second, and he regrets it instantly – the water doesn’t melt. Instead he gets a mouthful of ice, and- it should be freezing and horrible, but instead it feels... sweet. He wants more, just maybe not blown in.

The horse rumbles beneath him, kicks at the air, and they break through the cloud and-

It’s beautiful.

A laugh escapes Jack, a wild, free laugh. The sun shines over the clouds, just slightly warm – and something tells Jack that too hot would be bad, not now that his heart is- is ice – and the clouds shine white like snow this high up, and it’s wonderful and for a moment, Jack can forget.

But then there’s a sudden gust of wind, and Jack has, foolishly, loosened his grip on the horse, and suddenly he’s spiralling down, down, down, the wind rushing in his ears and oh god he’s going to smash on the ground, smash like glass, shatter into a thousand different pieces-

He yells, a wordless cry of fear, and the wind answers. Instead of blowing past him, it pushes him up – his cry of fear changes to shock, and then the wind does it again, and again and the horse is stamping in the sky, obviously waiting for him, and as soon as he’s close enough, Jack reaches out and grabs hold of it. The wind whispers around his ears as he eases back onto the horse, and then it
slips away – for a moment, there’s silence.

“Okay,” he says. “We’re- I’m not doing that again. Not until I’m nearer the ground at any rate.”

Oddly, the horse nickers, before it canters onwards.

_(moon white as snow)_

The north turns out to be a place of cold winds and ice and snow. Jack should be freezing – should be dying in this blizzard – but instead his skin turns blue on his fingers and toes, and he feels quite... pleasant. Even when he jumps off of the horse’s back, and lands in snow several feet thick, it doesn’t feel cold. The snow crunches underfoot – and his feet are _bare_, it’s surreal – but otherwise there’s nothing unpleasant. The horse nudges his back with its nose, blinking glowing eyes and looking towards some mountains. Some _distant_ mountains.

“You want me to go _there_?” Jack asks, sceptically. The horse nods but doesn’t move. “I’m going to guess you’re not going any closer,” he comments. The horse nods again, and lies down. It doesn’t even dent the snow. “Fine,” Jack grumbles.

It occurs to him that maybe the wind might do its trick from before. He shrugs and walks a bit away from the horse before he tries calling it. For a few seconds, nothing happens. But then he hears it – like a giggle, almost – and suddenly he’s being snatched up and carried into the air, tumbling head over heels as he tries to will it towards the mountains.

It’s not the smoothest of journeys, not by any standards, but eventually Jack lands, snow covered and more than a bit frosted over before a vast, palatial structure.

“Whoa,” Jack breathes, for the second time in as many days.

It’s all wood and ice; splashes of red and glittering windows. Unlike Pitch’s castle this one seems to _glow_, and Jack is pretty sure he can smell something _delicious_ cooking. Even the doors – although just as immense – don’t seem nearly as intimidating. He can’t actually open them, but knocking seems to do something and then there’s a low grinding and the door opens a crack.

A large, fur covered face peers out.

“Uh, hi there,” Jack says, waving. The face scowls? It’s hard to tell with all the fur, but doesn’t seem to want Jack to stay outside, so he slips in and-

_Oh boy_, it is warm in here. So warm Jack shudders – when the giant furry thing goes to shut the door, Jack shakes his head and sidles back towards it. The thing shrugs and ambles off, leaning over a railing and bellowing something – an unintelligible roar as far as Jack’s concerned – at someone far below. A little thing with a bell on its hat comes scurrying out from nowhere and runs into Jack’s legs.

“Hey there little buddy,” Jack says, kneeling down to pick the whatever it was up. As soon as he did, it stomped its little foot and shook its head so much its little bell tinkled wildly. And then it ran off.

“Weird,” Jack mutters, standing up again.

Nothing happens for a while – it’s too hot inside for him to move far away from the open door, and none of the things seem to want to get too close to him – and then there’s someone big and red...
stomping towards him.

“Ah, hello!” he says, reaching for Jack’s hand. “Welcome to my workshop!” Oddly, he doesn’t seem bothered by the ice – in fact, he doesn’t seem to be freezing up at all – as he pumps Jack’s hand up and down. “What can I do for you, little one?”

“Ah, uh, yeah. I was asked to deliver this?” Jack fumbles under his cloak and withdraws the letter. The second he does so, the man’s face shutters.

“How you come to have such a letter, hmm?” he asks – when Jack offers it to him, he doesn’t take it.

“I- I’m the Nightmare King’s servant, Jack Frost,” Jack replies. “He asked me to deliver it.”

The man smiles, a little sadly, Jack thinks, and finally takes the letter. He doesn’t read it in front of Jack – Jack’s kind of thankful for that.

“Ask? I think not, yes? You are very brave young man,” he says. “I am Nicholas St. North, young mister Frost, but you call me North. If ever you are in trouble- you can always come to me, here. Yetis will let you in now,” he smiles, his eyes crinkling, “but I think perhaps a colder room for you now, hm.”

Jack grins in honest relief. “That’d be great, thank you.”

“Is no trouble, young man, no trouble. I would invite you to stay longer, but ah, Nightmare King very strict man. Best not to keep him waiting. You go on now,” North says, shooing Jack – not unkindly – back outside. “Remember, you are always welcome here – and I wish you good luck with Pitch.”

Jack smiles wryly and nods. “I guess I’ll be seeing you then,” he murmurs – North nods again and closes the door. Jack sighs, and whistles for the wind to carry him back to the horse.

It neighs when it sees him, trotting up and down in a line, not actually moving any closer, and when he lands it presses its nose against him with a snort, before nudging him towards its back.

“Okay, okay,” Jack says, “settle down.”

The horse sets its ears back as he scrambles on, and as soon as he’s settled, it turns in a tight circle and sets off in a gallop back to the castle – back to what Jack supposes will be his home for the rest of his life.

The horse doesn’t dawdle this time – there’s no time for admiring the view, or learning how to ride the wind. It starts raining a bit before they reach the forest, and no matter what Jack tries, the horse won’t go above the clouds. When they land, he’s practically frozen to the horse’s back, and his clothes are definitely frozen to his skin, and every time he breathes out sends freezing raindrops back into his face – it’s like being constantly pelted by hail.

The horse doesn’t bother actually landing on the grounds outside Pitch’s. Instead, it simply slips through a shadow on the roof – which is really jarring – and then they’re trotting down one of Pitch’s insane labyrinth corridors and coming to a neat stop before a familiar door. The horse shifts restlessly until Jack peels himself off and knocks at the door.

“Enter,” Pitch snaps from within, and the door swings open. Immediately the bird flits over, chittering anxiously over Jack’s frozen state. Pitch is somewhat slower off the mark, but when he does set eyes on Jack, he sneers. “If you could possibly not drip all over my floors.”
“Not my fault,” Jack grumbles, rubbing his arms and sending sheets of ice clattering to the floor. Pitch’s eyes narrow, so Jack does it again.

“Go and dry yourself off, boy, and when you return come suitably attired.” Pitch scowls. “None of this rustic brown cloak anymore – you are the servant of the Nightmare King; present yourself as such.”

Jack rolls his eyes and bows very lowly. “But of course, your highness, I shall immediately bend to your every whim.”

He leaves the room before he can hear Pitch’s irate response.

(twilight burning blue)

The bird leads him back to what are, presumably, Jack’s rooms. The bed’s still there, although it seems to have been remade, and a bath’s been set up over in the corner. Personally, Jack thinks it’s dumb to leave him a bath, but when he touches the water it doesn’t actually freeze – although it’s not hot at all – so he shrugs and strips off to slip in. The bird chirps anxiously and turns around – definitely a girl, Jack thinks.

“I should give you a name,” he says, leaning back in the cool water. There’s soap in the soap dish – smooth, not gritty, but recognisably soap. Still... too fancy. The bird chirrups and twitches on her perch. She sounds pretty happy so he assumes that means she’d like a name. “Or do you already have a name?” he asks – and that gets him a flurry of chirps – and an idea. He leans out of the bath (doesn’t get out yet, doesn’t want to offend her) and quickly traces the alphabet on the floor. “Hey, think you can spell your name out for me?” he asks; and she tilts her head and sees what he’s done and coos – in something like amazement, Jack thinks.

She flutters down and lands by the ‘s,’ pecking at it once with her beak. Jack nods, and then she goes on to do the rest, finally coming to rest by the ‘a.’

“Seraphina,” Jack says, “your name is Seraphina.”

She nods and hops back up to her perch, trilling sweetly. Jack can almost believe she’s saying ‘thank you.’

She turns away when he reaches for the soap, ruffling her feathers as she does so, and begins to sing. It’s a sad song, Jack thinks. Nice, but sad. He scrubs himself clean and glances around for a blanket or something – there’s black towels placed just aside from the bath, and Jack is reminded, once again, of how incredibly extravagant this is. Food he’s never eaten before, a large bed, his own bath and towels - must come with the territory for being a king, even if you just rule over Nightmares.

Nightmares.

Jack breaks into sudden laughter, startling Seraphina slightly; she turns on her perch and chirps questioningly.

“Nightmares,” Jack gasps, “King of Nightmares. The horses.” Pitch must think he’s so clever, Jack cannot even believe it.

Seraphina stares at him while he laughs, definitely giving a good – albeit, bird-like – impression of
being utterly mystified by Jack. Eventually he winds down and gives Seraphina a pointed look, that has her chirring and flying over to the wardrobe – still taking pains not to turn and look at Jack – and he climbs out of the bath and wraps a surprisingly fluffy towel around his shoulders. Not that he seems to need it; instead of freezing or soaking into his skin, the water slides off of him in sheets, pooling around his feet. A quick shake gets those dry, and then Jack goes over to the wardrobe and opens it.

Amazingly, not everything was black. *Most* of it is, admittedly – sleek black tunics and waistcoats, nestled with stark white shirts, deep blue cloaks and black leggings and trousers, and smart black boots right at the bottom. For a moment, Jack’s a bit overwhelmed – he glances back to his damp, slowly melting clothes on the bed and floor, feeling guilty – but eventually he pulls out the least fancy tunic and leggings. He forgoes the boots; his feet aren’t cold, after all, and... he doesn’t want to be heard in the castle.

He leaves all the cloaks, thick and fur lined though they are, hanging in the back of the wardrobe.

“How do I look?” Jack asks Seraphina, giving her a bit of a twirl. She coos and flutters over to his shoulder again, nuzzling his cheek. “Guess I better head back to his *highness*.” She chirps and bounces – Jack picks up his old clothes and leaves them on the bed. Hopefully they’ll still be there when he comes back.

He doesn’t really have to have Seraphina lead him back to the throne room – already his feet are learning the turns. He does take a couple of false corners, but Seraphina’s always quick to correct him. The doors haven’t been closed apparently, but Jack still knocks – mostly as a formality – and Pitch looks up from... some sort of globe.

Pitch spends a good few moments staring at Jack before lowering his eyes. “Better,” he says. “Although if you could wear *shoes* when you go outside, I’m sure I would vastly appreciate it.”

“I’ll be sure to do that next time,” Jack replies, padding across the threshold to stand beside Pitch. Not that he’s actually taller – even seated, Pitch towers over Jack, which is oddly disconcerting. “Was there anything your highness desired of me?”

Pitch scowls, and goes back to his globe. “You may wait upon me for the rest of the evening,” he says. “And because one of your obviously limited mental faculties will have trouble understanding that, it means wait where I cannot see you until I call for your presence.”

Jack pulls a face – Pitch doesn’t see it – and moves so he’s a bit further behind Pitch’s chair. Not the throne this time – but a chair at a desk slightly removed from the dais, where the table was this morning. Jack would wonder what had happened to it, but... it’s probably been transported somewhere else by a shadow gate. Pitch turns the globe in his hands, and everywhere his fingers touch, shadows appear. He murmurs something and a horse – a *Nightmare*, Jack will never get over that – appears on the other side of his desk.

“Here,” he says, pointing to a specific spot on the globe. “Three divisions.” The Nightmare neighs, and steps back into the shadows, and then a different horse appears – and another and another, and Pitch gives each one different orders and doesn’t even seem to care that Jack’s there. Even when Jack’s legs start to give out, and Jack ends up leaning heavily on the chair – even when Jack starts yawning and slipping down to the floor. Seraphina warbles worriedly, but Jack is just- tired. Tired and hungry, but it doesn’t look like he’s going to get fed again today and then-

There’s the man in armour again, just in front of him, eyes averted. Jack reaches out – *he can’t bear him to be sad, can’t bear it* – but a shadow reaches out and grabs his hand before Jack can reach him. He struggles with the shadow, hitting it with his free hand, but it doesn’t relent, gripping tighter...
and tighter and tighter, and the man rises to his feet and starts to walk away.

Then there’s the little girl in green again, reaching for the man again – but the shadows clutch at her as well, covering her in shadows; her hand breaks out and Jack can hear her scream, “Daddy!”

And then he jerks awake.

Pitch towers over him, a grimace on his face. “You are useless,” he says, turning and walking towards the door.

Jack scrubs at his face and gets to his feet. Seraphina nuzzles his cheek.

“That was weird,” he mutters, before heading for his room, and a proper bed.

(dawn grey as dusk)

It’s Seraphina who wakes him this time, with a soft brush of feathers over his face. He sits up and stretches – there’d been nightclothes on his bed when he got there, thankfully not black, and his old clothes had been hung up in the wardrobe – and pads over to the wardrobe. There’s a small table where the bath had been last night; bread and tea sits on it, and Jack’s stomach loudly reminds him that he hasn’t actually eaten since the morning before. He eats as he gets dressed, forgoing the boots once again, before heading over to the throne room.

Pitch is there again, at the returned dining table – must be nice, not having to actually change rooms to use the furniture you want – and reading a letter with an increasing frown on his face. His eyes snap up when Jack enters, and he throws the letter to the table with a huff.

“Jack,” he hisses. “How good of you to join me.”

“Sorry for being late,” Jack mutters. “You should have said if you wanted me up earlier-”

“But that isn’t the point of servants, Jack. The point is that you should be ready and waiting to obey my every whim,” Pitch continues, glaring at Jack.

“I’m sorry, I’ll do better tomorrow!” Jack replies, meeting Pitch’s glare head on. “Did you even want me for anything, or am I just going to stand behind you and fall asleep again?”

That seems to catch Pitch’s words in his throat. He is silent for a moment then, “You may eat your fill. If I require your services later, I will summon you.” He stands then – glances at the table, which abruptly fills with all the foods from yesterday and more – and sweeps past Jack and out of the throne room.

Seraphina takes off and lands on the table, beside a small dish laden with slices of fruit, and begins what must be her breakfast.

“I guess that could’ve gone better,” Jack comments, sitting down in the only other chair available. There’s a bowl of porridge in front of him, which is homely enough – it’s cold when he lifts the spoon to his mouth, but good anyway. There aren’t any hot foods at the table, which makes sense in a roundabout way. Where Jack’s fingers touch the spoon, filigree ice forms, spiralling patterns across the metal. The food doesn’t freeze in his mouth either, no matter whether it contains milk or is a sweet, fresh piece of fruit.
When his stomach finally stops grumbling, Jack gets up and offers his hand to Seraphina; she takes it gratefully, half fluttering, half climbing up to perch on his shoulder. He has no idea where the kitchen is – if there even is a kitchen – so Jack decides to just leave the table as it is, and leaves the throne room.

“I think it’s time to do some exploring,” Jack says, a smile tugging at his lips. Seraphina chirrups in agreement, and with somewhat wild abandon, Jack sets off in the opposite direction to his bedroom.

The first few doors simply reveal rooms full of shadows and covered furniture. The seventh contains darkness even Seraphina’s glow cannot penetrate, and the ninth and tenth are both full of strange spindly creatures with luminous eyes that Seraphina heckles at until Jack shuts the door on them. There’s no doors down the next three corridors which is weird, to say the least. There aren’t windows along most of them, and the few windows there are all have heavy, thick curtains drawn across them. Jack wouldn’t know it was morning at all if he hadn’t nudged one aside, and even then it’s a watery sort of daylight that pierces the darkness.

It’s the third door down the fifth corridor that actually contains something interesting – although more accurately, that would be several somethings. It’s still pretty gloomy, but this is a rare room with a window, so Jack, closes the door – doesn’t want to irritate the shadows – and throws the curtains open. It reveals what is probably best described as a pile of odds and ends – immediately visible is an old dolls’ house, populated with broken dolls, a flimsy tablecloth covering an ancient, crooked table and a wide variety of flea-bitten toys. Seraphina makes an intrigued coo and flutters over to the dolls’ house, hopping around it and tilting her head this way and that with no small interest.

But what really catches Jack’s eye is the pianoforte.

Unlike everything else in the room, it doesn’t look broken. Not quite new either – the white keys are definitely yellowing – but still... elegant. It’s not the first time Jack’s seen one – once, his parents had taken him to the big town, and there was a pianoforte in the town hall that no-one was allowed to play. This one doesn’t look like it’s been used much either, and Jack- well, it’s not like he can play it.

He presses one finger to a key, and it makes a twang that doesn’t sound quite right. His frost spreads from his finger, delicately weaving into the tiny cracks, and as Jack watches, it spreads and spreads and spreads, fanning across the pianoforte until every minor flaw glitters with ice. When Jack takes his finger away, he half expects the entire thing to shatter. Instead, it glitters in the pale light.

Seraphina makes an appreciative noise as she flits back to Jack’s shoulder.

“Guess this ice thing isn’t so bad after all, huh?” Jack asks, voice low, loath to break the quiet.

Seraphina sings a little sad song, and Jack sits and watches his pianoforte shine in the sunlight.

(silk satin and ivory)

The days continue like that for a while – Jack rather loses track of the time. Every morning he’ll head to the throne room for breakfast – after the second day, Pitch remains while Jack eats, although he doesn’t make much in the way of conversation, or eat for himself. When Jack finishes, he’s dismissed, and goes to explore. There are many rooms like the pianoforte room; in the stables, there’s a pile of horse tack, some worn and useless and some almost brand new. There’s a room only a short way from Jack’s bedroom, full of dresses, and Seraphina delights in them all. They’re mostly thin, floaty things – one heavy, brocade wedding dress near the back of the room, all gold and pearls and
ivory – for young ladies, Jack would imagine.

There’s another room, down four corridors from the throne room and up one flight of stairs, and it’s full of old farm tools, which strikes Jack as a very strange thing for a Nightmare King to have. But maybe not so strange as actually having stables – it’s not like the Nightmares ever actually go there, even though there’s hay and oats down there. Always fresh too, although Jack’s never seen anyone but Pitch actually around.

It’s really not so bad at all – he misses home, and he misses his sister but... this is better than leaving her here with Pitch. Better than going home without her. At least he knows she’s safe, and that’s all that really matters.

But eventually, Jack’s peaceful exploration is cut short.

Not by a Nightmare, although that would probably have been preferable. Instead, Pitch steps out of a shadow directly in front of Jack, pretty much scaring the ice out of Jack.

“Do you have to do that?” Jack gasps, having stumbled back a few steps.

Pitch appears to contemplate that for a moment, before smiling and saying, “Yes.”

Grimacing exaggeratedly, Jack asks, “So you needed me for something, your highness?”

Pitch grins – which is very unsettling – and nods. “Another delivery for you to make- although this time, I don’t expect you to enjoy it nearly as much.” As before, a black letter appears in his hands, and he proffers it to Jack, as he clicks his tongue. A Nightmare obediently steps forward – the same one from before, Jack is pretty sure, if the way it sparkles is any indication. “Do not dawdle,” Pitch snaps, turning back to melt into the shadows.

“Uh, hey, does this, I mean, does she have a name? The Nightmare I mean,” Jack asks.

Pitch stops and glances back over his shoulder. “Her name is Ebony,” he says, and then a shadow whiskers him away.

Jack glances at his bare feet for a moment – briefly considers just going without his boots – but the second he gets on Ebony she sets off back to his room, so apparently he doesn’t have a choice about it. They’re not even too right or uncomfortable or anything – Jack just doesn’t like them. He still puts them on, grumbling the entire time, and then goes out to meet Ebony again. When Jack gets on her this time, Seraphina chirps sadly and hops off his shoulder to go and sit by the window.

“Hey, I’ll be back soon,” Jack assures her; she just nods her little bird head slowly, and Ebony pitches them through shadows.

They come out, not in the grounds like Jack assumed they would, but in the shadows of a completely different forest. Ebony shoots upwards, Jack clinging to her shoulders for dear life – maybe he should fix up some of that tack, give himself something to hold on to – and she turns to gallop towards some mountains. But Jack actually notices all of that after one thing – the blistering, overwhelming, oppressive heat.

It feels like he’s melting.

It feels like he’s melting and if Ebony slows down at all he’ll just turn into water and get blown off her back – like the cool wind blustering around him is the only thing keeping him whole and complete and not melted.
And then Ebony does slow down, and the wind slows, and Jack shudders and for just a second, he is absolutely terrified – is this going to happen every time he goes out – and then he remembers the wind, and whistles, loud as he can.

And the wind whooshes in, catching at his tunic and his hair, dancing over his shoulders and Jack slips off Ebony’s back – as she obviously wants – and the wind catches him and carries him; there’s something glittering in the distance, and that has to be where Pitch wants him to deliver the letter, has to be, but it’s so hot –

A tiny bird, far smaller than Seraphina, bullets past Jack. The wind seems to take that as a taunt, and suddenly Jack’s being blown so fast it’s almost like the cool of the castle and it’s so good – there’s a high squeak from somewhere behind Jack, and then the glittering structure is too close, and Jack swerves, scattering more of the little birds and then the wind drops him onto a hanging platform – it doesn’t completely leave, swirling around and keeping Jack just cool enough that he doesn’t feel like he’s melting.

“Who are you?” someone shouts; a bigger shiny bird suddenly appears, flitting down to Jack’s level – not a bird, actually.

Jack waves his free hand frantically, leaning on his staff. “Hey, it’s okay, I’m here to deliver a message,” he explains to the bird lady.

She frowns and darts closer. “Are you... Jack Frost?” she asks, and her voice is a little bit tighter.

Jack nods. “Yep, that’s me,” he says, taking the letter out from his tunic. It isn’t creased at all, despite the rough ride – something to do with the paper Pitch uses, Jack is willing to bet. He offers the letter to the bird lady; after a moment, a few of the smaller birds appear and take it from Jack’s hand instead.

“I’m Toothiana,” she says. “You can call me Tooth – that’s what everyone does.” She smiles a bit and her feathers twitch. “I’m sure North already told you, but-”

“If you’re going to offer me a place to stay – I appreciate it, but it is way too hot for me here. I feel like I’m melting,” Jack explains. “And- I promised I wouldn’t run away.”

“Jack I wouldn’t–” Tooth reaches out to him. “Don’t trust him, Jack. Don’t trust him with his promises.”

Jack shakes his head. “He hasn’t exactly made any yet,” he replies, and then the wind catches him and blows him back to Ebony. She nickers to see him again, encourages him onto her back and then heads back towards the shadows.

When they get back to the castle, she drops him by the throne room – Pitch is sitting at the dining table again, and glances up only briefly when Jack enters.

“Well?” he drawls.

“I delivered the letter,” Jack replies shortly, crossing over to the chair that’s become his. “She warned me about you.”

Pitch laughs at that – not cruelly. “I am the Nightmare King, Jack. Do not forget it.”

“Of course not,” Jack replies. “As if I could ever forget that, your majesty. Will his highness be requiring me for the rest of the evening?”
“Yes,” Pitch replies, waspishly. “You will attend me,” he says, standing and heading towards the door. He breezes out, and after a longing glance at the table set with food – cold food, deliciously cold food – Jack follows.

Pitch leads him to the library – he’s kind enough to allow Jack a candle, seeing as Seraphina is... absent. Jack hasn’t actually been in the library – he knows the alphabet, and can read after a fashion, but it wasn’t exactly a practiced skill at home, for all he was the future man of the house-

Not that he’ll ever be man of the house now.

“For the sake of my own sanity, I shall assume you know your letters,” Pitch comments. “When I ask you to retrieve a book, you shall do so promptly – no dawdling, is that clear.”

Jack grimaces. “Would it be too much to ask for a bit of light in here? I can’t actually see in the dark,” he replies.

Pitch’s face pinches but he nods, and all the candles burst into flame like they were just waiting for the opportunity. “I trust this will be sufficient,” he says, in a tone that very much implies that it must be.

“Yes, thank you,” Jack replies – nothing catches Pitch more off guard than politeness. It’s hilarious.

Pitch sniffs and sits in what looks like the most comfortable chair Jack has seen in the entire castle – even including the weird, unused furniture rooms where everything is covered with black sheets – and picks up the nearest book to hand. He only reads it for a moment or two, a scowl clear on his face before he looks up at Jack and says, “Cycles of the Moon, and be quick about it.”

Jack bows exaggeratedly and hurries off towards the stacks – they don’t actually seem to be arranged in any methodical manner at all, so it takes Jack a long, long time to find the book in question; Pitch scowls when Jack finally returns with it, but refrains from saying anything else. He leans over his new book and scribbles something on some paper of his – what, Jack has no idea – and essentially ignores Jack.

This is getting to be a pattern.

At least there are chairs to nap in this time.

(red like the sky of morning)

He’s there again – the man in armour. His face in shadows, close but far, and Jack’s heart is breaking just to look at him. There’s a name in his throat, words on his lips, but no matter how Jack tries he cannot speak-

The man falls to his knees and his shoulders shake, like he is sobbing – he cannot cry, not him never him – and there is a green dress in his hands and-

Shadows spear up from the floor, piercing the golden armour like it’s nothing and Jack is sure he is screaming, terribly, achingly certain-
“Jack!” someone shouts, and Jack is suddenly awake and staring into glowing eyes and-

“Augh!” he squawks, reeling backwards. Pitch straightens – his face does something weird, something Jack might call hurt on another person but-

“Honestly, boy, I know I’m the Nightmare King, but that doesn’t actually mean you are required to have nightmares in my presence,” he says, sounding almost… pleased.

Jack rubs his head and mutters, “I could’ve sworn it was.”

“Not in my servants – it interferes with your work. Not, I might add, that you were taking your work very seriously.”

“Yessir, I will certainly do my absolute best not to fall asleep while you’re around again-”

Pitch laughs, and turns away from Jack. “You’re dismissed for tonight – there is food in your room. I will have work for you tomorrow, so,” he leers, “do not be late.”

He’s gone before Jack can reply; and seeing as Jack is only half sure how to get to his bedroom from here, he has exactly one lit candle – all the others having extinguished themselves while Jack was asleep apparently – Jack decides he is going to do something fun until he finds his bedroom.

This is what leads to no less than three corridors completely iced over, another two containing miniature snowstorms and a gigantic snow drift directly outside Jack’s bedroom door. He lands in it with a huff – barely hurts at all – and the door immediately opens to emit an irate Seraphina. At least, Jack assumes she’s irate – she’s certainly squawking enough, although that might be because Jack was yelling as he slid down the corridors, and who knew what woke those weird spindly things up.

“Relax, relax, I promise it’ll all be melted by morning,” Jack says – he’s lucky she’s actually here; he lost his candle going around the first corner, and hadn’t that been exhilarating.

After a few more distressed calls, Seraphina finally allows Jack to enter and prepare for bed – these days that means a meal, a bath and then change into the nightshirt that always seems to be freshly pressed and laid out for him. She makes a few more disapproving clucks before Jack finally slips into sleep; he doesn’t notice the other, thicker shadow lingering by the door.

He dreams of the man again – not stabbed like he was before. He’s looking towards Jack this time, but his face is still shadowed, for all that his armour shines. The little girl in green sits beside him, staring up with big, sad eyes – he doesn’t see her.

He’s sad, Jack knows. Terribly sad. It makes tears prick at Jack’s eyes; he doesn’t want the man to be sad. He reaches up and cups the man’s face – is allowed to touch – and murmurs platitudes, murmurs words to soothe pain and ease his heart. The man leans into the touch; his skin is warm but not too hot, like the sun above the clouds.

And he shines like the sun.

The little girl tugs at the man’s arm and he turns, sees her, and the shadows lengthen again and curl around the man and the girl and rip them away from each other; where Jack’s hand touches the man’s skin, the shadows sear and he screams again, yanking his hand back – there’s a noise, a familiar noise, but Jack can’t hear over the ice-blood in his ears and the screaming – he’s screaming, he can’t scream, not him – and Jack wants to cry-

He sits up in bed with a gasp – moonlight’s streaming in through the parted curtains. Seraphina tugs at the heavy drapes and twitters worriedly. Jack shakes his head and clutches at the bedcovers.
“I’m alright,” he insists, “I’m alright.”

The look she gives him implies her disbelief quite clearly enough, but she lets the curtain drop and flutters over to Jack. He gently strokes her feathers.

“I wish I knew what the dreams meant,” he murmurs; but Seraphina doesn’t have any answers to give him.

At least, not yet.

*(shadows thick as blood)*

He gets to the throne room before Pitch for once – there’s no dining table yet, just the desk, the chair and the throne, so Jack just waits. He doesn’t have to wait long at all; Pitch forgoes the doors and just *materialises* in the centre of the room. He whirls when he hears Jack’s breath hitch, and there is an honestly incredulous expression on his face for all of five seconds.

“Well,” he begins, “I see you are at last beginning to understand your proper duties.”

Jack snorts, and hefts his staff. “Don’t bet on it.”

“My dear boy, I should never bet on *anything* when it comes to you,” Pitch returns; as he sits down in his customary chair, the desk *shifts* and the dining table appears, already laden with food. “Eat quickly this morning; I have something urgent for you to do.”

Jack shrugs and nods, sitting in his chair – Seraphina goes to her breakfast – and eats what he wants of the exotic things Pitch sees fit to serve. “ Aren’t you going to eat?” he asks eventually; opposite him, Pitch freezes.

His face is carefully blank when Jack meets his eyes; “No,” he says, “it would hardly be fitting for one in my position to break bread with my *servant*.”

Jack snorts in disbelief, but doesn’t pursue the question. As soon as he’s finished, the table clears itself and his chair boots him upright. Pitch smirks, and reaches *through the table* – his arm just goes into a shadow gate and it’s weird and gross and Jack shudders to look at it – and withdraws a brightly coloured, bejewelled egg.

“Today, Jack, you will be making a *very special* delivery – it isn’t often I can contact this particular... annoyance, shall we call him. But today just so happens to be one of those days!” Pitch sounds delighted as he says it, which, Jack thinks, is probably a very bad thing. “You will give this to the... annoyance,” he continues, holding up the egg, “and then – well, it is *entirely* up to you of course, Jack, but if you could see your way to conjuring a blizzard of some description, I would be most... gratified.” He smirks again, and rolls the egg across the table; Jack scoops it up and gives it a once over.

“Will you want me this afternoon?” he asks.

Pitch pauses in his cackling and seems to consider it for a moment. “I think *not* – I shall be going out this evening, and I will expect you back before I leave, but otherwise you may remain *out* as long as you wish- provided, of course, that you recall *who* your master is.”
Jack scowls. “Look, can you stop that? I’m not going to run off and I absolutely certainly remember that you are the Nightmare King, devourer of small children’s hopes and dreams, imprisoner of trespassers and deadliest enemy of the monster known as politeness. I’m hardly likely to forget in a castle that’s more shadow than stone,” Jack snaps, folding his arms.

For a moment, there is absolute silence. And then Pitch stands – and Jack has forgotten how tall he is – and stares all the way down at Jack and says, “And you are my servant, Jackson Overland Frost; perhaps I should carve that into your skin, lest you forget it.”

He storms out, because of course he does.

Seraphina makes a chirrup very much like a laugh, and Jack sighs and heads back to his room for more appropriate wear – the dratted boots of course, and a cloak to go over his waistcoat. When he exits, Ebony is waiting for him, tossing her head in impatience; she even snaps at Seraphina when Jack climbs aboard – and he should really figure out how to make a holder for his staff, it makes riding Ebony incredibly difficult – and jumps through a shadow gate before Jack is really ready.

They don’t emerge outside the castle, or in that too hot place; instead, it’s a dull moor, and Ebony brings them out from the shadow cast by a lone tree. She doesn’t head into the sky for once, instead setting off across the grass until they come to a stone circle, and then she all but tosses Jack off before galloping away.

“What am I meant to do here?!” Jack calls after her, futilely.

He sits down on a rock to wait. It starts to drizzle, and Jack has to keep brushing ice off of his shoulders.

And then, from the direction of the stone circle, there is a pop, and suddenly a giant rabbit is hopping out of a hole that definitely wasn’t there a few minutes ago. It doesn’t seem to notice Jack at first – but then Jack gets to his feet – with a crack – and it spins around and readies a curious wooden thing in its... paw.

“Who the bloody hell are you?” the rabbits asks.

Jack shrugs. “Could say the same to you – although I figure you’re who I’m supposed to deliver this to.” Jack takes the egg out from his cloak pocket and tosses it to the rabbit, who catches it surprisingly deftly.

Its face morphs into what can best be called a scowl, although it was pretty funny on a rabbit. “You work for that ruddy Nightmare King?” he asks, ears pricking upright.

“What’s a damn kid like you doing hanging around the Nightmare King,” the rabbit blusters, “Damn fool thing t’ do there, brat.”

“You know, everyone keeps telling me that, and yet I’m still working for him.” Jack grins, and cracks some more ice off of his cloak.

“Look, kid, I don’t know why you fell in with him, but I’m tellin’ you now, get out while you still can,” the rabbit says. “Or I’ll come and get you out myself.”

Jack huffs, and shakes his head. “I appreciate the offer but- don’t. It’s not so bad working for him-”
“Are you mad?” the rabbit yells, bouncing on his feet. “He’s called the bloody Nightmare King for a reason!”

“I can handle it,” Jack insists – but the rabbit just shakes his head again and draws his weird crooked sticks and draws back and throws it-

Jack yelps as it almost hits him in the face, only a timely intervention by the wind preventing him from being struck. “Well, if that’s how you want it!”

All it really takes is one little push – and the drizzle turns to sleet, turns to snow, turns to hail. The wind whips around Jack, excited and eager, stirring the clouds into a frenzy; it tosses Jack skyward, and into the clouds. They rumble menacingly around him – his staff glows blue and the clouds rumble more and it gets colder and colder and colder, until all the water, all the water is falling as snow and ice, pelting the ground and forcing the rabbit back into his warren.

And still the snow comes.

In fact, Jack carves a swathe across the countryside, leaving snow and ice and freezing winds in his wake, until Ebony battles her way into the cloud beside him and tugs him onto her back.

“Oh,” Jack says, suddenly feeling light headed and exhausted, “is it time to go?”

She makes a noise that might be a rebuke, and they set off for home.

(dark like fire)

Jack doesn’t remember most of the journey home – he’s fairly sure a lot of it was through shadows, so he’s happy not to – but when he gets home-back to the castle, Ebony lets him slide off her back and disappears off into the darkness. Jack groans from where he’s fallen to the floor, and after a few minutes of lying there, he hears familiar worried chirps.

“Hey, Seraphina,” Jack murmurs, rolling over onto his back. “I think maybe I had a really bad idea.”

“In point of fact, Jack, I would say you had a truly excellent idea,” a deeply unwelcome voice says. Pitch looms over him, an unpleasant smile on his face. “Potentially the best idea you’ve ever had, in truth. I’ve never even seen the Bunny run as fast as he did today – most gratifying, Jack, most definitely gratifying.”

Jack groans a bit again – he feels like he’s been trampled by a herd of Nightmares. “I didn’t actually do it for you,” Jack replies.

“As if that matters, Jack. I do believe this calls for some sort of reward,” Pitch continues, sounding pleased. Or as pleased as he could be.

“Leave me here to die?” Jack asks – Seraphina chitters and beats at his face with her wings. “Alright, alright, not that.”

“Don’t be foolish, Jack, I shall choose your reward. You are just a servant after all- ah, I have it! You may accompany abroad tonight.” Pitch smirks. “Although perhaps I shall have to lash you to Ebony, hmm?”
Jack makes a face. “If it’s all the same to you, I’d much prefer to stay at home tonight, maybe have a bath and go to bed—”

“Nonsense! I’ll even have Ebony saddled for you, to prevent you falling off. You’ll enjoy it, Jack.” There’s a light in Pitch’s eyes – not a literal one but... like he’s really excited. “Listening to all those people screaming and crying- ah, it’s thrilling – and we all know how you love a thrill, don’t we, Jack?”

Jack considers protesting again, but- no use arguing with the Nightmare King. It’s not even like Jack could make his escape back to his bedroom – he doubts he could fight a newborn puppy right now, let alone Pitch.

“Whatever you desire, sire,” Jack mutters, sitting up. He has to use his staff to actually stand, and even then he’s a bit shaky – Pitch doesn’t seem to notice, and simply grabs Jack’s arm and whisks them to the stables.

Ebony and a much larger, much meaner looking Nightmare are both waiting there already. The bigger one snorts irritably when it – or she, Jack guesses – sees Jack, although Ebony just shifts on her hooves. Seraphina flutters off of Jack’s shoulder to perch in the rafters, and Pitch lets go of Jack and stalks over to his Nightmare.

“Oh, my beauty, this is just Jack. You remember Jack, hmm? Sweet, courageous boy that he was – he’s ours now of course,” he coos, stroking her nose and looking, for all the world, like a little rich girl with her first pony.

Jack stifles a snort and staggers over to the tack – there’s a mostly intact saddle in there, and an odd bit-less bridle. It’s not as if Jack’s actually going to be directing Ebony – he mostly wants the reins so he has something to hang on to. She accepts the tack with only a little bad temper – unlike the other Nightmare, which spends the entire procedure glaring at Jack with hotly glowing eyes, even while Pitch scratches behind her ears and tells her what a good Nightmare she is.

It takes Jack three tries to get onto Ebony’s back – his bones ache – and when he does he once again faces the issue of the staff. He doesn’t want to leave it behind; it’s the only thing he carries from home, and it helps with his ice. Except this time- this time Jack has reins, and he doesn’t care what Pitch says, they are much more reassuring to hang on to than whatever scruffy mane he can clutch at.

So, somewhat gingerly, Jack holds onto the reins with one hand and his staff with the other.

“Finally,” Pitch mutters. “Satisfying though your earlier display was, you remain the worst servant.”

“I’m so pleased to hear you say that, honestly, I had no idea you felt that way about me,” Jack grumbles, hooking his feet into the stirrups. Ebony shifts again, and starts forward – the other Nightmare rears and jumps in front, baring her teeth in distinctly un-horse like behaviour.

“There, there, Onyx,” Pitch comforts. “We can finally be on our way.”

A shadow gate opens before them, and Pitch urges his Nightmare – Onyx, Pitch was so hilarious – through first. Ebony follows without even the slightest movement from Jack, and then they’re-

Several hundred feet up in the air, looking down on a town full of lights.

“Let’s never do that again,” Jack mutters – Pitch seems to have gone on ahead, and there is a whole herd of Nightmares with him. Ebony canters after them, and soon Jack is in the centre of a jostling, snorting herd of Nightmares, Pitch up ahead.
He leads the herd in a tight circle down, towards the town – there aren’t many people out, for all the windows have candles and lamps in them. But then someone looks up, and screams; Jack flinches and tightens his grip on the reins as they hit the ground and surge forwards, towards the screaming man-

And then there are more screams, and candles and lamps being lit everywhere, people running for their houses every which way Jack looks, and it’s a terrible mess of Nightmares and running and poor, screaming people.

The herd chases down every foolish person who was out, and then Pitch brings them to the city square and halts them. He turns to face them and he says, “Extinguish every light.”

The herd scatters, but for Pitch and Jack, and the Nightmares just – leap in through walls like they aren’t even there and then there’s more screaming, more pleading, and the glorying sounds of the Nightmares until slowly, every single light turns out.

The herd reforms in dribs and drabs; each Nightmare looks bigger than before.

“Well?” Pitch asks. “How did you like it?” He leans over from Onyx and takes Jack’s chin in his hand. “Was it not glorious?”

Jack’s voice is frozen in his throat.

But whatever Pitch sees on Jack’s face must please him, for he smiles, knife-blade sharp, and drops Jack’s chin and leads them home.

When Jack dismounts Ebony this time, he sketches a short bow to Pitch – which only seems to please him more – and staggers back to his room.

Seraphina flutters about his head the entire way there, but Jack doesn’t say a word.

*(ice in ebon flame)*

He dreams of the man again. The man watching him from the clinging darkness, leaning over Jack – and Jack can’t move in this dream, he’s pinned and stuck, like a mouse between a cat’s paws – and touching his face. Tears fall from the man’s eyes – even though Jack cannot see his eyes, even though Jack cannot see a single detail of the man’s face. The girl in green sobs beside him, desperately trying to get his attention, but nothing she does works.

“Please, Daddy,” Jack hears before he wakes – although this is a gentle wakening, not like the past few have been.

Seraphina’s still asleep, on her little perch by the window, so Jack gets washed and dressed as quietly as he can before he slips out.

There aren’t any candles in the corridors, but Jack can see just fine. It should worry him more than it does.

He’s early to breakfast again, but Pitch doesn’t look so surprised this time. He conjures food for Jack and lets him eat in silence; no witticisms or comments on Jack’s lack of footwear. He does not even mention Seraphina, although her dish appears as per usual.
When Jack eventually stands, Pitch looks up from whatever fascinating thing he was reading, and says, “You are dismissed for the day – we wouldn’t want you to get too tired, now, would we?”

“Thank you,” Jack says, perfunctorily and turns on his heel to march out the door.

When Seraphina finds him, he’s in the pianoforte room. The ice still hasn’t melted, and the curtains haven’t been closed; it shimmers in the sunlight. Seraphina doesn’t berate Jack – he can tell she wants to – and instead tucks herself onto his shoulder, pressing her soft little feathers against his cheek and sings her sad, sad song.

“They all died,” Jack murmurs, “they all died and I didn’t do anything.” Seraphina nuzzles him, obviously trying to comfort, but all Jack can do is sit there and- and cry.

His frozen tears shatter where they hit the ground.

He spends all day in the pianoforte room, only leaving when the light fades and his stomach starts to rumble. He doesn’t usually take dinner with Pitch, but today-

Seraphina won’t let him just go back to his room. She chatters and chides, and harries him until he’s outside the throne room again, and of course Pitch is in there, seated at his desk and doing-something. With the shadows. It doesn’t look pleasant, and there are those terrible spindly creatures about – they hiss when Jack pauses at the door, and Pitch looks up.

“Ah, Jack,” he says, and waves his hand. The spindly things hiss and fade away into nothing, while the desk contorts and becomes the dining table. “Did you want to join me again tonight?”

Jack hesitates before shaking his head. “Thank you for offering, but-”

“Yes, yes, in that case you may attend me when I return- do not fall asleep,” Pitch continues. He taps the table impatiently, and food slowly flourishes across its surface. “I should be back before sun-up.”

“I never would’ve guessed.” Jack sits down and chooses the most recognisable of the food before him – soup of some description. “The King of Nightmares, back before dawn.”

There’s a flicker of something in Pitch’s eyes; “I really must take you out again someday, Jack. Your fear was exquisite.”

Jack huffs and replies, “I’m eternally grateful you find it so pleasing. I do everything in my power to please you, your majesty.” He flutters his eyelashes at Pitch, and Pitch actually looks shocked when Jack does so – which gets him to shut up at least.

He clears his throat awkwardly, and looks back at his book. It’s a fair bit better than what he did this morning, which was watch Jack eat as intently as a hawk, so Jack counts it as a success. One of his few successes.

Jack’s barely cleared his plate before the shadows whisk it away, and then Pitch is standing over him with a queer expression on his face.

“Remain here until I return,” he orders, before stepping back and melting into the shadows. Literally melting; it makes Jack shudder. Pitch probably did it on purpose as well, playing up Jack’s not unreasonable fear.

His blood is ice now, and he doesn’t feel the cold, and even the minor warmth of North’s workshop had been too much.
It occurs to him that even if Pitch lets him go – properly dismisses him from working for him, and sends him back home – there won’t actually be a home to go back to.

His sister will love him no matter what, but Jack doubts the rest of the village would be best pleased to have the Nightmare King’s former servant living amongst them. And what if he got angry? What if he called a blizzard by accident, or froze all the crops? What if he made it snow all year round and everyone starved?

What if his sister froze because he touched her?

Jack laughs bitterly to himself, and wanders over to the throne. He thinks for maybe five seconds before he sits in it; it’s too large, too ornate, too uncomfortable, too Pitch.

He still manages to fall asleep in it though.

He does not dream.

(ash roses blooming at sundown)

He’s woken by the doors swinging open, and has just enough time to sit upright before Pitch storms in. His face is pulled into a tight scowl, and when he sees Jack in his throne that just seems to get worse.

“Out,” he hisses – Jack practically falls over himself to obey, all but tripping over his own feet to get out of Pitch’s way. Pitch throws himself into his throne, a picture of thwarted ambitions, and raps impatiently on the arm of his throne. Jack holds himself still and quiet on the steps leading up to the throne, hoping that Pitch just ignores him.

An oppressive silence fills the room.

“Jack,” Pitch suddenly says. “Attend,” he orders, abruptly standing and sweeping down the stairs. He leads Jack to a spiral staircase – one Jack hasn’t yet explored – and up and up and up, into the tallest tower. At the very top there is a room, thrice the size of Jack’s, and several times as well furnished. The bed is vast, and the wardrobe delicately carved with monstrous images, and there’s a large enamel that obliging moves aside to reveal an elaborate claw-foot bathtub, which is filling itself with water.

In the time it takes Jack to notice all this – standing awkwardly in the doorway as he is – Pitch has crossed the room to the bathtub and is glaring back at Jack.

“Well?” he snaps. “I said to attend did I not?”

Seraphina makes an undignified squawk and hops off of Jack’s shoulder and back into the stairwell, while Jack sidles into the room – there are actual rugs in here, albeit black ones – and slowly approaches the bathtub. “How?” he asks.

Pitch gives him a withering look. “You will assist me to undress and then you will wash me. Do you think your limited faculties will allow you to complete both of these tasks?”

Jack almost stumbles back in shock, absolutely sure he’s turning red – or whatever colour he turns now – but he isn’t exactly given a chance to object before Pitch actually begins to take off his
clothes. It’s an elaborate outfit – cape and jacket and waistcoat, and all these other layers in between – but- He must’ve been doing it himself for a long time, because he doesn’t actually seem to require help removing it; he still glares at Jack until Jack props his staff against the wall and shifts closer to carefully start undoing buttons. He leaves little patterns of frost on the dark clothes, little etchings of rime that only last a few seconds before disappearing.

Jack has a brief crisis when it gets to Pitch’s boots and his... trousers. But Pitch waves Jack off with a snarl of, “Pick up my clothes, Jack, don’t just leave them lying on the floor,” and by the time Jack’s hung all of them up, Pitch is safely ensconced in the bathtub with his eyes mercifully shut.

Jack glances longingly towards the door – he really doesn’t want to be here. Not with Pitch in such a mood, and definitely not with him naked. Whatever happened to “it wouldn’t be seemly,” huh?

“Don’t you dare,” Pitch says, without opening his eyes. “You will wait while I soak, and when I command you will assist.”

More than a little grumpy, Jack replies, “Yes, sire.”

Pitch’s eyes open at that. “Better,” he says, “but next time, please refrain from using quite so much sarcasm.”

Jack crosses his arms awkwardly and lapses into silence. He doesn’t dare sit down, but that means he’s pretty much hovering a few feet from the bathtub with nothing to do. Pitch makes him wait for a long time, and when he does motion Jack closer, he just gestures at the soap and leaves Jack to begin.

The water seems to be enchanted like Jack’s is – it doesn’t freeze when he touches it, although the soap and Pitch’s back aren’t so lucky. He hisses at the first touch of Jack’s fingers, frost blooming at the touch, but doesn’t otherwise comment. The soap gets rid of the frost anyway, and Jack does his best not to actually touch – he can only imagine how angry Pitch would be if Jack froze him to the bath or something.

They don’t talk while Jack washes Pitch’s back; Jack from embarrassment and Pitch because- well, probably something to do with his weird notions of formality. There’s just the sound of water sloshing and the soap on Pitch’s skin, and every so often the wash of water when Jack cleans the soap off.

When Jack finally finishes with Pitch’s back, he’d like to say he’s surprised to have Pitch say, “And the front,” but that would be a blatant lie. It’s more difficult to wash Pitch’s front, seeing as Jack isn’t actually going to get in the bathtub with him, and involves a lot of leaning over and averting his eyes and pretending that he’s just scrubbing a grey wall and not a- whatever Pitch is. A Nightmare King. Jack just guesses he’s lucky that Pitch is so much taller than he is, so he doesn’t have to duck to avoid Pitch’s chin.

“Done,” he says at last, after a long and heavy silence.

“I think not, Jack,” Pitch says, suddenly standing; water sheets off of him, splashing Jack terribly, but Jack can’t even bring himself to be angry about that because he almost got an eyeful and there is no way-

He scrambles around so he’s behind Pitch, which is marginally better – this, Jack suspects, is going to make working for Pitch a lot harder – and begins on Pitch’s legs. Pitch’s very, very long legs, which seem to go on for miles and by the time he finishes with them he’s squirming just a little uncomfortably and really hoping that Pitch will dismiss him now.
“Is that to your liking?” Jack asks – he has a few seconds of panic where Pitch doesn’t say anything and then-

“It is satisfactory. You may go,” Pitch says, his voice strangely calm.

Jack cannot leave fast enough.

(splash of crimson)

The next few days, Pitch is distracted. He continues to watch Jack at breakfast – and dinner, when Jack arrives for it – but he doesn’t send him out and doesn’t give him orders; Jack turns one of the staircases into an ice slide, and manages to trick some of the Nightmares onto it briefly. Pitch must know about it, but he doesn’t say anything and things remain decidedly tense.

Jack dreams of the man in armour every night – often he’s leaning over or sitting beside Jack, usually looking at him, but sometimes Jack will turn in the dream and the man will be by the window and light will be filtering in, and he’ll look so familiar- And then the shadows will come again, cleaving to the man in armour and dragging him from the light and from the girl in green and from Jack, and for some reason it’s the last one that hurts the most.

Maybe a week after the Bath Incident – as Jack comes to call it – he finds himself in front of a pair of huge, familiar doors. Seraphina’s on his shoulder, and she doesn’t stop him when he opens them – a gust of wind immediately blows in and Jack steps outside for the first time since Pitch took him out. The doors close behind him with a soft click, but Seraphina doesn’t seem alarmed and Jack is filled with sudden, irrepressible hope.

The wind carries him up, over the trees, sends him hurtling away from the castle – he doesn’t even look back – and Jack crosses his forest in minutes. There’s smoke on the horizon, and when Jack glances down there’s a familiar pond, and then he’s landing gently in one of the outermost trees, one of the ones nearest his house and-

She’s there.

Sitting on the wall that marks the border between their house and the forest, and she looks a little sad, a little broken hearted and Jack wants nothing more than to hop down and go and tell her everything will be alright-

But there is shouting from the house, and his father storms out and yells, “It’s all your fault, woman, mollycoddling the boy like that, letting him do as he pleased!”

His mother follows him out, and she’s red in the face too and screaming, “Oh aye, come and say that to my face, you big lout!”

“I’ve had it with you! I’ll have no part of this, this ridiculous business of yours! You want to search those blasted woods, you do it by yourself and make no mistake!” And with those words, Jack’s father stomps off to the village proper. His mother harrumphs and goes back inside and his sister-

She sobs and hiccups and says, “It’s all gone wrong, Jack.”

And there’s no way he can resist leaving the trees and landing in front of her – barefoot and clad in Pitch’s finery though he is, and for a moment, Jack forgets what’s happened – and kneeling and
saying, “Hey now, don’t blame yourself.”

She opens her eyes and looks at Jack – first in joy and then in horror. A scream leaves her before she can stop it, and that’s enough to bring their mother running from inside. The second she lays eyes on Jack, he can see her break.

“Here you, get away!” she yells, stepping forwards with her broom.

Jack stares up at her with wide eyes and says, “But M-”

She grabs his sister and shoves her back towards the house. “Get away now, won’t be anything for you here!”

“Jack!” his sister says, reaching out.

“It isn’t Jack, love,” his mother warns. “Spirit stolen his face and all- not our Jack.”

Jack shakes his head standing and stepping forwards – and that’s a mistake, because the grass freezes where his skin touches it, and even as Jack says, “It really is me,” they’re going indoors and making warding signs and- and-

Jack stands there and stares; they peer at him through the window, his mother scowling. The frost at his feet spreads the longer he stands. He’s too near the vegetable patch; that’s what gets him moving. He doesn’t want them to starve, for all there’s only a few scruffy winter cabbages growing there. Doesn’t want them to freeze – so Jack shakes his head and calls out, “Wind!”

The last thing he sees before he’s caught up and carried is his sister’s tearstained face, pressed against the glass between them.

Seraphina catches up to him at the pond – he lands on the ice, feels it thicken beneath his feet and he yells out, angry and alone and slams his staff against it, almost hoping the ice will just break and let him drown. Seraphina lands on his shoulder, tries to nuzzle him, but he bats her away and ignores her protests. Part of him- part of him wants to give up.

But Jack remembers Pitch’s promise – if he should ever think Jack was running away, he would send out the Nightmares. And even if she thinks he’s dead, even if Jack can never touch her again- he won’t let Pitch send Nightmares after her.

So he stands and brushes himself off and calls the wind again and says, “Take me home.”

The huge doors open welcomingly when Jack touches them, and he walks back to the throne room, leaving ice and snow in his wake. Pitch is there – when is he ever not – and he simply nods when Jack enters and takes position behind his chair.

Jack doesn’t say a word for the rest of the day.

(rime glitter like crystal)

The next morning at breakfast – Jack still sullen and quiet – Pitch breaks their silence.

“Well? How was your... excursion?” he asks, and seems to revel in Jack’s subsequent glare. “Oh come now, Jack. You must have known this would happen,” Pitch continues, getting to his feet and
stalking over to Jack’s chair. “You promised to be mine – mine forever, don’t you recall? And surely it’s better for your parents to think you dead than to know you chose this.” He gestures at the room – at the darkness Jack no longer needs candles or Seraphina’s glow to see in, at the shadows and the Nightmares and the strange spindly creatures lingering near the edge of the room. “What parent could stand to know their child works for the Nightmare King?”

Jack turns away from Pitch and says, “Just because it’s better doesn’t mean I’m happy about it.”

Pitch lays a hand on Jack’s shoulder, in what would be a reassuring manner from anyone else, and murmurs, “I could always tell them the truth. It wouldn’t be hard, Jack. They live so very close; why, it would be child’s play to go and tell them.”

Jack whirls, standing up, his staff held menacingly. “Don’t you dare,” he yells, “don’t you go near them.”

“Ah, such loyalty – when they don’t even search for your corpse.” Pitch laughs, cruelly. “Tell me Jack, how should I inspire such loyalty in you?”

“Just stay away from my family- from my sister. Don’t touch them and I’ll,” Jack pauses, and tries not to sound too defeated, “I’ll stay. I promised, didn’t I?”

“So you did, Jack. And you haven’t been at all naughty have you?” Pitch smirks. “Perhaps another reward is in order, hmm?”

Jack tenses and shakes his head. “I’m fine without. Don’t- don’t waste your rewards on me.”

“Ah, so modest,” Pitch exclaims, circling around Jack to stand behind him. “But you see, I think I have a very special job for you – one that will require exactly your talents in fact, and if you do it well- I hardly need to explain, do I? You haven’t failed me yet, Jack.”

Jack tenses at the threat implicit in those words, and asks, “Another delivery?”

“Oh, I would wish, but no. This particular... acquaintance, shall we say? Yes, he will accept nothing from me, even if it comes by proxy – a slightly more intelligent head on his shoulders than on the others you’ve seen. No, this time Jack, all I need is for you to- to make it snow.” Pitch sounds delighted as he says it, which pretty much assures that something bad is going to happen but-

It’s not like Jack has a choice.

“Shouldn’t be hard,” he says. “I’ll be back-”

“No,” Pitch interrupts. “I will collect you when it is time to leave. And I would advise this, Jack; if you see anything happening, anything at all,” he spins Jack around and leans so he’s right in Jack’s face and then he hisses, “keep out of the way.”

Jack takes a steadying breath and nods. “I’ll be sure to remember that.”

“Excellent,” Pitch says, standing and moving away from Jack. “Run along now, Ebony will escort you to the place.”

Jack starts off only pausing at the door to ask, “Do I have to wear the boots?”

Pitch snorts and glances back at him; “Yes, Jack, of course you have to wear the boots.”

Jack rolls his eyes. Great.
Ebony doesn’t let him ride her, instead forcing him to use the wind, which is actually preferable; he can hold his staff easily when the wind carries him, unlike when he’s on the Nightmare’s back. She leads him out across the forest, past his village – which makes him flinch – and then further and further until they reach a huge, walled city. It’s almost noon by then, and the sun is just a touch too hot, so when Ebony begins to paw at the air, Jack is more than happy to make some clouds. It’s not even very hard – his very presence alone cools the air, and it doesn’t take more than an hour for several huge clouds to form around him.

By then, Ebony has long since left – no-one actually sees when Jack breathes out and the snow begins. Big fat snowflakes fall, so thick the people down people can hardly see through it, blanketing the city as fast as Jack can manage and – of course – blocking out the sun.

It doesn’t take long after the snow begins to fall for the shadows to rush in, and they’re soon followed by Nightmares; Jack can see them from above, between gaps in his clouds – heavy dark shapes wedged between snow covered buildings, or standing in the shadow cast by a laden tree. At first, there’s only a few, but the darker it gets, the more arrive, until the city is heaving with them and Jack is torn between looking away and watching to see what happens.

It’s late-afternoon when Pitch arrives; between the church and the city hall, expelled from a shadow onto fresh, soft snow. Most of the people have already gone indoors – for a while, earlier, Jack had been pleased to hear the shrieks of happy children, but now the snow is too thick for their parents to let them outside, so none of the city residents actually see Pitch arrive. It’s something Jack is glad of – he might be more used to Pitch’s appearance now, but that doesn’t mean he can’t still see the inhumanity of it.

He’s too high to really make out details, but Pitch seems to be ordering his Nightmares around, and that continues for a while, until Jack gets bored of watching. He rolls over in the wind – it feels like a comfortable cushion – and spends a while crafting elegant flurries of snow. When he finally glances back down, Pitch is nowhere to be seen – but something golden and glittering is. It’s snaked all over the city, across the spires near the centre and down into the lower parts and across to the docks, where the water is freezing under Jack’s influence.

It’s almost as amazing as the sun above the clouds and Jack half wants to drop down and examine the golden threads, find out what they are, what they do, but Pitch’s warnings echo in his head and he resists. For now.

And then the shadows shift, in the darkness Jack’s created – the sun has long since set, but the clouds keep the moon and the stars at bay as well, and he’s sure that he shouldn’t be able to see a thing and yet-

The snow seems to glow, for all it deepens the shadows, creates bigger, larger drifts to hide behind. The Nightmares have taken advantage of it, and as best Jack can tell from his vantage point in the sky, the shadows are shifting towards the golden threads, driving them back-

They all converge in the city centre, shadows and gold alike. He can imagine Pitch’s posturing to whoever the golden threads belong to, and he’s sure that the gold will disappear any second now – even the others he’s met, the bird lady and the rabbit and North, they’ve all offered sanctuary or warned him against Pitch, but they don’t dare stand up to him – and Jack’s kind of sad about that-

But then the gold explodes towards Pitch’s roiling shadows; they part to let it pass and strike back, fat lengths of darkness snapping towards the gold, and so it goes, black and gold fighting. He’s too high to see, but it looks- it looks beautiful from up here, so Jack can’t take his eyes off of the
spectacle, even as it becomes clear that the black is forcing the gold back – even as the gold floats out over the water and gets smaller and smaller and smaller.

Jack hopes Pitch won’t kill whoever the gold is.

But he doesn’t bet on it.

The gold flees before Pitch gets the chance, disappearing off over the water – the shadows chase it a little distance, before letting it go, and Jack breathes a sigh of relief. Nothing so amazing as that should be destroyed. He’s turning back to the city – he may like the cold now, but that has nothing to do with boredom – when he hears the Nightmare’s neigh. Only a short distance from him, that bigger Nightmare, Onyx, paws at the sky, staring up at him with bright burning eyes.

“I’m coming!” Jack calls down to her, slowly easing out of the swirl of clouds and wind. It’ll blow itself out, Jack figures, as long as he lets it. Might be a bit of a colder winter than usual but not too much, hopefully. The wind carries him down to Onyx – he’s careful not to get too close – and she snorts and turns back to the city centre, so he follows after her. Going down with the wind isn’t nearly as fun as going up – feels too much like falling. It anyone was looking up right now they’d probably be very confused to see him; a person slowly dropping lower and lower, flanked by an irritable flying horse.

When Jack does land, it’s slightly away from Pitch, and it’s onto pristine new snow. In fact, you wouldn’t even know there’d been a fight here, what with how fresh the snow is. It’s remarkably quiet as well – only the sound of Onyx snorting over by Pitch to break the quiet.

It feels like the calm of the pianoforte room, except better.

And suddenly Jack has to feel the snow between his toes. He doesn’t even look at Pitch, although he’s obviously waiting for Jack, he just sits down at takes his boots off and digs his bare feet into cold, cold snow and it feels amazing, crisp and soft and safe.

“Wow,” Jack groans, glancing up as Pitch walks over. “You should try this, it feels amazing.”

There’s another one of those queer expressions on Pitch’s face, before his mouth settles into a straight line and he shakes his head. “I highly doubt it – you may be immune to the cold, but that does not mean I am.”

Jack kind of doubts that – it’s not like Pitch is wearing a big heavy cloak like the ones from the back of Jack’s wardrobe – but Jack drops it. “Did I do what you wanted?” he asks.

At that question, Pitch smiles perhaps the widest smile Jack has yet seen; it’s all teeth and quite frankly worrying. “Oh Jack,” he says, “you performed exquisitely.” He reaches out to cup Jack’s face in his hands and leans in-

And Jack is petrified, certain for a moment that Pitch is going to do something terrible, but all he does is rest his forehead against Jack’s and close his eyes and breathe, and that- that’s okay.

Jack can cope with that.

“My wonderful, perfect Jack,” Pitch murmurs, so softly Jack’s not sure he would’ve heard it if Pitch was any further away. He straightens slowly and takes Jack’s free hand, and starts to lead him over to Onyx.

“Uh, hey, my boots-” Jack starts, glancing back to where he left them in the snow.
“They’ll be there when we get home, and besides which, I was given to understand you preferred being barefoot,” Pitch replies – Onyx snorts as they approach, but turns obligingly, and much to Jack’s shock, Pitch lifts him up and puts him on her back, before climbing up himself.

“Uh,” Jack says, as Pitch’s arms encircle him – not that Pitch pays any attention. He nudges Onyx into a canter, and into the air.

“I think we should go for a ride, to celebrate,” Pitch announces. “I’ve finally driven that nuisance out of here – and it’s all thanks to you, Jack. I know you said you didn’t want a reward but- well it’s hardly just you I’m rewarding now, is it?”

“How do you see that?” Jack grumbles, laying his staff over his legs and trying to clutch at what he could of Onyx – she had a tendency to slip through his fingers, like sand.

“You shall simply accompany me on my celebratory ride – you are my servant after all, and you have to do as I say,” Pitch replies, his voice easy enough. He suddenly digs his fingers into Jack’s side, hard enough for the nails- no, claws to scrape over his skin. “I would advise you to not ruin this evening for me, Jack.”

“In all honesty, your highness, we’re in the sky, over some suspect moorland, I have no idea where we are and I’m trapped on your Nightmare that seems to despise me,” Jack says, huffing. “I’m not likely to do anything that might get me thrown off.”

That surprises a laugh out of Pitch – a warm, happy one; one Jack wouldn’t mind hearing again.

“I think – and perhaps I might be wrong about this – but I think I should take you out more often, Jack,” Pitch says. “You do so excel in assisting me.”

Jack doesn’t turn to see Pitch’s face, instead just bowing his head and saying, “As long as it’s not all day in a cloud again.”

Pitch chuckles throatily, but makes no reply as Onyx slowly brings them down to land on crisp, unbroken snow. The sky is clear above them, and the wind is negligible. Pitch lets Jack hop off unaided – he lands in the snow with a crunch and a sigh. It feels as good as the snow he’d made earlier, and he’s the only person to have touched it. Onyx’s hooves leave no impression where she stands, and neither do Pitch’s when he dismounts. She snorts and turns on her haunches, still not disturbing the snow, and gallops into a newly formed shadow gate.

“And this acceptable?” Pitch asks, “A whole world of ice and snow, all for you.”

Jack’s voice catches in his throat for a moment, before he says, “I thought- North?”

Pitch frowns at the mention of the other man, and shakes his head. “No, he lives as far away from here as it is possible to be. This? This, Jack, this is yours. Consider it a gift. I will instruct Ebony – if ever you desire to leave the castle and come here, you need only ask her and she will escort you.”

Jack can only stare, wide eyed. “That- I really, this is, this is too much. I’m-”

Pitch shakes his head and steps over to Jack, taking Jack’s hand remarkably gently with his own. “Nothing is too much for you, my Jack,” he whispers.

What can Jack even say to that? He just flushes and turns away. “Thank you,” he mumbles, tugging his hand free and running off to go and roll in the snow.
He dreams again that night, of the man in armour. He’s laughing this time – *Jack knows this laugh* – and he reaches out to hold Jack’s hand, the girl in green holding his other, and for a handful of perfect, wonderful seconds, Jack is wonderfully, incredibly happy-

“*Jack,*” the man murmurs, and then the shadows return, ripping through him with frightening ease and the girl in green sob’s, and Jack yells out and tries to hold on, but the man’s hand slips out of Jack’s hand and he falls back into the shadows and the darkness-

And for a fraction of a second, Jack can see the man’s face.

Pitch’s face.

Jack jerks upright in bed, suddenly, horribly awake. “What the hell?” he asks, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Seraphina coos sleepily from her perch, settling her feathers and blinking at Jack. “Don’t worry about it,” he says, “just go back to sleep.”

She chirrups, and fluffs her feathers, but her eyes close anyway. Jack shakes his head and slips out of bed – his curtains are just open enough to let a beam of moonlight in and suddenly Jack just wants to think. He’s as quiet as he can be, slipping on looser clothes than he normally wears – most of his wardrobe is full of formal wear, but there are a few more mundane outfits. Still better quality than his old clothes – he hesitates to put them on again, sure that Pitch would view it as an offense – but better than dressing in a constraining waistcoat or tunic.

He takes one of the cloaks as well, even though the cold doesn’t bother him. It has a hood, and trails on the floor – helps to silence his footsteps and keep him from being seen, and for once, he really doesn’t want Seraphina following him. She doesn’t wake when he opens the door, or when he closes it behind himself, and Jack hurries along the corridors, thankful for whatever magic lets him see in the dark. He pauses outside the pianoforte room before shaking his head and continuing onwards, towards the spiralling staircase and the room at the top of the tallest tower.

The spindly shadow creatures are about, although none of them pay attention to Jack; whether this is due to Pitch’s influence, or because they simply don’t see him, Jack cannot say. There aren’t any near the staircase – there isn’t anything on the staircase either, each window boarded over instead of merely curtained, and no sconces on the walls. It’s a long, quiet journey to the top, and when Jack gets there he’s-

The door is shut but not locked, and gives way easily when Jack turns the handle. It’s in much the same condition as before, although this time Pitch is noticeably absent. His bed looks unused, and all his other furniture untouched.

Jack can’t resist the chance to snoop. Last time he was here he was... distracted, but today he is free to explore. Apart from the bed, bathtub and wardrobe, there’s also a padded chair set in one corner, a small washsbasin near the bathtub and a dressing table, complete with mirror. There aren’t any other effects on it – not even a hairbrush, although with Pitch’s hair, probably a hairbrush wouldn’t be of much use. Jack opens the little drawers in the dressing table, but they’re all empty but for a few grains of blue-black sand.

It’s not exactly an inviting room, Jack has to say.

“Tch, what else would it be?” he asks himself. “He is the Nightmare King.”
He’s turning to leave – maybe find Pitch elsewhere, see if his dream was- well, _something_ – but something catches his eye.

It wasn’t immediately visible from the doorway, but there’s a small table, set away from all the other furniture and tucked into an alcove. Upon it sits a small lacquered box, gilt edges glinting in the shadow-light. Jack knows he shouldn’t open it, knows he should just go but-

He crosses the room in three strides, and picks the box up; it’s light and delicate, and the catch opens at a brush of Jack’s thumb.

It contains a golden locket, nestled on a bed of black silk. The gold fairly glows in the darkness, all delicate flowery engravings. Jack runs a finger over it reverently, and the frost the immediately spreads only highlights in intricacy of it. Its chain is thin – he’s worried it might break, and who knows what Pitch would do then – so Jack cradles it in his hands and carefully unlatches the clasp.

The image inside is of the girl in green, and a man in achingly familiar golden armour – a man with Pitch’s face.

Jack takes a steadying breath and puts the locket back, shuts the box and puts it down. He has to lean on the table, wind awhirl with questions and suddenly sick with fear- Pitch can’t find him here. Pitch absolutely cannot find him here, not by the box, not now, not-

There’s a creak from outside the door, the distinctive noise of a shadow gate opening and then the door – left ajar, _why_ did he leave it ajar – begins to swing open and Jack has no choice but to hide, darting nearer to the door and wedging himself behind it, hoping that Pitch wouldn’t just immediately turn and see Jack crouching there, hoping that Pitch would let Jack escape back down the stairs-

But Jack is not to be so lucky.

As soon as he enters, Pitch glances towards the box, and the frost is still plain to see on its lovely surface.

Jack doesn’t see Pitch’s face when he realises, but he suspects he could have been on the other side of the castle and still heard his scream of _rage_.

“**Jack Frost!”** Pitch shrieks, and _gone_ is the elegant, refined appearance Jack is so familiar with; in its place a roiling mass of shadows and eyes and teeth emerges. It takes not even five seconds for it to discover Jack, and then _it_ – because he can’t see anything of the Nightmare King, of _Pitch in this_ – falls on him, clutching at his cloak and hands and dragging him out into the centre of the room. He tries to fight back – freezes as best he can – but he left his staff behind – stupid, stupid – and the shadows just _absorb_ it or melt out of the ice’s path. And then it spins him and lifts at the same time, and each horrible shadow and eye and _mouth_ retracts until it’s just Pitch again, holding Jack aloft and pressed against the bed-post.

“What gave you the _right_, Jack?” Pitch hisses, “Did you think you could just _waltz_ where you _pleased_?”

Jack shakes his head as best he can, tries to croak out, “No,” but Pitch tightens his grip around Jack’s neck, claws pricking his skin and snarls.

“**Be silent,**” he orders. “I have been _patient_, Jack. I have trusted your discretion – trusted you to deliver _important_ messages. I have given you opportunities to satisfy yourself – did you think I hadn’t noticed your efforts with the lost things? Did you think I never _knew_ about the pianoforte, Jack?” He laughs – not the laugh from before, but a cruel, callous laugh. “I am the _master_ of this
castle, Jack, and I know *everything* that happens in it,” he sneers.

Jack claws at Pitch’s hand, gasps in enough breath and says, “I’m sorr-”

Pitch snarls again, and swings Jack around. “*Silence*, I said. I should have known better than to ever-what more should I expect from a *trespasser*?” He falls silent for a moment, and when he speaks again, his voice is even more terrible than before, for all it is barely even half as loud. “I would have given you the *world*, Jack,” he says.

The shadows come again, and envelop them – the world turns inside out and then they’re in the dungeons, back where they met, and Pitch opens the door with a touch and *throws* Jack in.

“Wait,” Jack gasps, “wait.”

The door slams shut, and Pitch is gone.

(*sleek sword through blackened breast*)

Jack falls asleep on the stones of his cell. He does not dream. No man with Pitch’s face to hold his hand and smile, no sweet, beloved girl in green – just the steady *drip drip* of the ice melting where he pounded on the door, willing it to crack under the strain and let him go free.

There’s no window in his cell, so when Jack wakes up he’s disoriented and has no idea what time it is. There’s no food for him either; just a handful of thin straw in one corner and the clothes Jack was wearing when he was thrown in. The cloak he’s thankful for; it’s certainly better than lying on bare stones. He might not be able to feel how cold they are, but they’re not exactly comfortable to sleep on, especially after a-

Jack laughs self-deprecatingly. He doesn’t even know how long he’s been here, in the castle. Can’t even remember the passing of the days – it’s been more than a month, for sure. But beyond that, he can’t really say.

“I’m sorry,” Jack murmurs, “guess I couldn’t keep my promise, huh?”

There is no answer.

Jack sighs again and gets to his feet, letting his cloak fall to the floor and puddle at his feet. It was time to try some escaping – he wasn’t going to fix anything locked up down here, where Pitch could just- just ignore him. The door might have been a bust – but Jack hasn’t tried the stones yet, and with how *damp* it is down here....

He doesn’t actually assume it will be easy. Pitch isn’t foolish enough to make cells easy to escape from, but then again, he probably hasn’t locked anyway up with a heart made of ice before. Optimism, Jack tells himself, even as he scrabbles at thick, solid stones, desperate to find even the smallest crack.

It takes hours before he does – but he’s lucky otherwise, because it’s near the door, and it’s bigger than he was hoping for and all Jack has to do is blow and the water trapped there freezes and expands, widens the crack, until the stone cleaves in two and Jack can pull them out. His fingers are all scratched and battered afterwards, but it’s progress – of a sort – so he refuses to let that get him down.
Eventually, he’s too tired to continue, so Jack heads back to his cloak, and he wraps it around his shoulders and dozes off.

Jack cannot say he has a dreamless sleep, but he certainly doesn’t dream of the man with Pitch’s face. Instead it’s a muddle of horrors – slow, creeping horrors, like being left alone in the cold and the dark, forgotten and ignored until Jack forgets himself, or freezing solid when the dungeons flood, being trapped and immovable until finally someone comes, only to shatter Jack on the dungeon floor. And then there’re the others, where he spends so long in the dark he forgets, and Pitch lets him out only rarely, and sets him on the innocent and the afraid, and Jack freezes his own family in an effort to please Pitch, or where Pitch takes him out, rides with him and brings him to the bird lady’s home and leaves Jack there to melt away into nothing – he wakes more times than he can count, shaking with fear that never quite abated.

The last one was the worst – where Jack has become just as twisted and dark and terrible as Pitch, and he’s desperate and hungry to please his master, and Pitch whisks him to a village Jack barely recalls and whispers platitudes in his ear, until Jack brings frost and snow down upon the village with barely restrained glee. He snatches up a girl – and she screams and begs in his arms, but Pitch’s are the only words Jack hears – and offers her to Pitch, and the Nightmare King cradles her gently and sets fear and darkness in her heart, and she screams and screams and Jack can only wonder at such a pretty song as hers. When she stops, Pitch tosses her aside like so much waste – her body smashes on the ground with a sick crunch and it’s only when Jack wakes that he knows it was his sister-

“Pitch,” he rasps. “Nightmare King- your majesty,” he calls, scrambling over to the grate. “Please- don’t hurt her! If you can hear me- we made a deal! And I didn’t run – don’t hurt her! Please!”

His cries echo along the corridor outside, but if Pitch hears him, he makes no sign of it.

He goes back to trying to escape – but the stones are all in good condition after that first one, and it’s hard going, and Jack is hungry and thirsty. For all the water down here, it freezes the second Jack touches it, be it with fingers or lips. When he eventually stops, he collapses against the wall, shuddering.

“Pitch,” he calls again, not really expecting a reply, “please.”

And a familiar chirrup answers him.

Seraphina’s little head pokes in through the grate and she flutters over, chattering when she sees him, obviously concerned – but she’s there, and Jack clutches her and tucks her against his chest and hugs her as tight as he dares.

“Thank you,” he breathes.

She coos softly when he lets go, and flutters up to the door and lands on the handle. It gives way instantly, swinging open – and Jack isn’t going to look this gift horse in the mouth, so he scrambles to his feet and hurries out, giving only a moment’s thought to wondering why Seraphina hadn’t done that for his sister, before he runs for the stairs, Seraphina flying above him.

(rust at throat)

The castle’s darker than it was before, and Jack can hear distant noises, like hooves on stone behind him. The spindly shadow creatures are out in vast numbers as well, clinging to the walls and
skittering when they see him, spitting and hissing when he races past. His feet trace a path to the throne room, and the shadows just get deeper and darker the closer he gets – by the time he reaches the doors, it’s so dark he probably couldn’t see if it wasn’t for Seraphina’s glow. The etchings on the doors have changed, into more recognisable visions of terror – all legs and eyes and teeth and terrible monstrous things, such that Jack almost doesn’t want to touch them but he tugs his cloak up and presses his hands to the doors and pushes.

The throne room is set in darkness so deep and impenetrable, that even Seraphina’s soft glow doesn’t break it. Jack steps forward blindly, and the second his foot crosses the threshold, the shadows hiss and shift – the hiss tapers into angry horse noises, the shift and jostle of the herd and the clatter of hooves. Seraphina cries out and flies higher, and Jack doesn’t begrudge her that when the Nightmares surround him; they’re the size of draft horses, but with glowing eyes and shifting, sliding sand in place of flesh and bone. They snap at Jack, rear and kick, driving him deeper into the darkness – up above, Seraphina calls worriedly, but she doesn’t dare come closer.

“Pitch!” Jack yells, and if anything that makes the Nightmares more angry – one glances a blow to his side and Jack tumbles to the floor, only just rolling in time to avoid the flailing hooves of another. Sand though they may be, Jack isn’t going to risk being trampled. “Please! I need to talk to you!”

Jack tries again, but that only earns him a Nightmare slamming into his side and a hoof coming down unforgivingly on his bare foot. “I’m sorry!”

And with that, the Nightmares stop. The darkness recedes somewhat, and the Nightmares slowly move away from Jack – still close enough to hurt him if they wanted. The largest – Onyx, it has to be Onyx – snorts and turns from Jack, walking towards the centre of the room. The darkness recedes after her, as she climbs the few stairs of the dais and stands beside the throne.

Pitch sits there, his face blank and cold.

“You’re sorry,” he says. “You’re sorry.”

“Yes,” Jack gasps, nodding. “I- I shouldn’t have gone through your things-”

“And you think a simple apology will fix what you did?” Pitch snaps, standing. “You think sorry will mend what you have broken?”

“Better than leaving me to rot in your stupid dungeon!” Jack shouts. He glances up at Seraphina and then back to Pitch. “Let me- let me try and make it up to you.”

Pitch snorts. “And how would you go about doing that, Jack? You have nothing I want, Jack – nothing I didn’t give you in the first place,” he snarls – Onyx echoing him with an angry whinny.

Jack takes a step forward. “So what, you’re just going to sit here in your throne and brood and throw a tantrum? What are you, five?”

The noise that emerges from Pitch cannot be called human by any measure – he grows and bends, until he’s only inches from Jack’s face. “Don’t test my patience,” he roars – and suddenly Jack is struck by how absolutely, stupidly ridiculous this all is.

He bursts out laughing, honest, real guffaws, and doesn’t even have to look to know that Pitch will be staring at him in honest confusion. Even Seraphina seems shocked, warbling in question, although she refrains from flying lower.

“You really are,” Jack says, between laughs, “you really are like a kid throwing a tantrum!”

“I most certainly am not,” Pitch replies, sounding most offended, for all he’s returned to his normal
dimensions. “You will cease this at once,” he orders, striding down from the dais and grabbing Jack’s wrist.

Jack yanks himself free and dances back, saying, “No, I won’t – I’ve apologised, repeatedly, and I mean it. You’re just being a selfish brat if you don’t accept it.”

“I am not,” Pitch protests – and he sounds just like the village children when he says it, all petulant and annoyed; it startles another laugh out of Jack.

“You really are,” he replies smiling. “Now, does his highness want anything – or should I change into more appropriate clothing before serving you, sire?”

Pitch stares at him, for so long Jack starts to feel uncomfortable. “Is that... it?” he asks, eventually. “You’ve said your piece and now you assume everything will go back to the way it was before?”

Jack folds his arms, and responds, “I said sorry. I won’t do it again. The way I see it, your highness, is that either I return to my normal duties or,” and Jack swallows tightly, “or you throw me back into the dungeon. And you haven’t tried to do that yet, so I thought- unless you want me to stand here half dressed, I guess?”

There is yet another silence, this one punctuated by a rough snort from Onyx, before Pitch speaks again.

“You may go,” he says, tightly, turning away from Jack. “Do not- if you displease me again, there will be no more second chances.”

“I didn’t expect any,” Jack replies, bowing slightly – the better to appease Pitch – before turning smartly on his heel and leaving the room. Seraphina flutters down to his shoulder and nuzzles his cheek happily. “That went better than I expected,” Jack comments. She trills sweetly, and Jack sets off back to his room.

As he walks, the new shadows clear away, leaving the castle almost bright in comparison.

( hoarfrost and shadow )

Just because Pitch has – to some extent – accepted Jack’s apology, and allowed him the freedom of the castle once more, does not mean that things go back to the way they were.

Breakfasts are... awkward. Pitch watches – as per usual – but it’s a stony silence rather than an accepting one; there are no more companionable dinners. In fact, Pitch goes out of his way not to interact with Jack. He doesn’t have any more messages for Jack to take, or any requirements at all, and given how the castle cleans itself it’s not as if Jack can even do any menial chores. He’s left with exploration, and that leaves a sour taste in his mouth now.

He does not go to the pianoforte room, as he does not ask Pitch about the man in the locket.

Instead, Jack slips outside into the grounds. They’re not exactly overgrown, but any paths there once were up to the castle are now lost to the forest. The grass isn’t precisely green either, at least, not any shade of green Jack’s seen before; it’s dulled and almost withered, for all it still seems to be alive. There are even gardens – not just scrapes set aside for vegetables, but actual proper gardens full of flowers and plants, carefully arranged for viewing pleasure.
That said, all the flowers bloom in dark shades of their normal hues – roses turned blood-red, bluebells the colour of the night sky, and snowdrops turned ashy-grey. What’s more fascinating than their colouring is the fact that it’s still winter, and most of the flowers are out of season; not that that seems to mean much in Pitch’s gardens.

There’s no snow here, and Jack isn’t going to ruin the garden, but- well, he doubts he’s still welcome to go to the snow-land and with nothing else to do, Jack feels like a snowstorm.

He doesn’t think Pitch even notices for three days, and then one evening Jack’s coming indoors with snow stuck to his clothes at the same time as Pitch is crossing the entrance hall, so it’s kind of hard to miss, especially with the gust of wind that blows in half a snow-drift or so.

Pitch stops and stares.

“Uh, surprise?” Jack says, tentatively.

Pitch marches over and throws the doors wide, ignoring Jack’s “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Jack winces when a blast of what must be cold air sweeps in, carrying huge flurries of snow with it. Outside looks like nothing more or less than a blizzard of titanic proportions; from the castle to the forest edge is a swathe of white, all but unmarred. Pitch doesn’t say anything when he sees it – instead, stepping out onto the crisp new snow and walking half way across it, a lone figure in sheer black clothes.

“He definitely won’t be happy when he sees the spires,” Jack mutters to himself, before hefting his staff and hurrying after him.

“Is this what you’ve been doing then?” Pitch asks when Jack reaches him. “Covering my castle in ice and snow?”

Jack ducks his head and says, “Pretty much. I didn’t touch the gardens, if you were worried. They’re mostly snowless – there was one accident with the wind, but I don’t think it harmed the plants.”

“I see,” Pitch replies. An awkward silence falls between them and then Pitch continues with, “Did you enjoy it?”

“The blizzard? Well, yeah! They’re really fun to make and the snow- I mean it probably won’t feel like it to you, but the snow feels amazing between my toes and it’s just-”

“No, no, not the snow. The garden.” There’s something oddly soft in Pitch’s voice when he says it.

“I did,” Jack says. “It was nice – that’s why I kept the snow away. Didn’t think the flowers would appreciate it.”

Pitch nods, and sweeps back towards the castle. “I will see you tomorrow, Jack,” he murmurs as he breezes past.

“Ah, yeah,” Jack starts. “Does this mean I can keep the blizzard?” he calls – the only answer he gets is Pitch’s hand waving absently, which isn’t a no, so Jack whips the clouds into a frenzy and lets it keep on snowing.

Things are a little better after that evening in the snow; stilted conversations no longer taper out, and Pitch requests things from Jack – mostly they involve providing cloud cover here, or conjuring a blizzard there, and once, he gives Jack enough time to actually play when he goes there. It’s further north, although not nearly as far as North’s workshop, and the children there don’t flinch when they
see Jack – instead they look at him with awe and wonder, and shriek with laughter when Jack conjures snowballs and swift flurries of snow. Jack stays late to watch the Nightmares that night – and unlike the last time, when they come they don’t snuff out the lights, don’t trample those out late. They flit inside houses and- well there are screams, but they’re not outright terror so Jack goes home in a good enough mood.

He goes to the pond one day, accompanied by Ebony, and he skates alone on the ice for most of the day. Night comes with a sharp wind – it giggles and tugs at Jack’s hair, eager and playful, but Jack shakes his head and says, “Not today,” so it blows on – and a full moon. Ebony’s ears prick up then, and she gets to her feet, trotting down the incline to the pond. She whinnies loudly, and a few seconds later there’s one in reply, and Onyx bursts into view above the treeline, Pitch obvious on her back.

They land on the ground, and Jack skates over – not that he’s using skates. He could probably make some, there might even be some in the castle, but he doesn’t actually need any these days. He brought his boots anyway, but they’re tossed in a convenient snow drift while Jack skims over thick ice barefoot. He stops by the edge, resting on his staff.

“What, you want to skate?” he asks as Pitch dismounts.

“No,” Pitch replies – he looks chagrined as soon as he’s said it, like he didn’t mean to reply at all.

“Oh.” There’s a beat of silence. “What, you want to skate?”

“What? No,” Pitch replies, vehemently, taking a step back from the ice.

Jack grins and grabs Pitch’s hand, shaking his head. “It’s okay, I can teach you, it’ll be fun, promise.”

“Jack,” Pitch protests, but this time Jack isn’t taking no for an answer. “This isn’t very servile behaviour,” he continues, even as Jack pushes him down on a log and grabs Pitch’s boots. Pitch squawks but lets Jack examine them – after a few moments of contemplation, Jack presses his hand over the sole of Pitch’s boot and concentrates, feeling the ice form and shift as he wants, getting strong and hard – stronger than normal ice – until it forms a uniform blade. He repeats it with the other boot, ignoring Pitch’s undignified grumbling, and then tugs Pitch upright, leaving his staff propped against the log.

“There,” Jack says brightly, “they should hold.”

“Should?” Pitch asks, staggering forwards when Jack drags him onto the ice. He looks terrified as soon as the blades touch the ice – and okay, maybe ice on ice wasn’t the best idea Jack ever had – but he doesn’t fall over so Jack counts it as a success.

And then Jack lets go.

Pitch has a moment to look completely horrified before there’s a whirlwind of arms and legs – not literally this time – and he’s collapsed.

Jack bursts out laughing. Ebony definitely does the Nightmare equivalent, and even Onyx snorts in a decidedly amused way. Pitch sits up slowly, glaring at Jack, but there’s a smile just curling his lips, so Jack just offers his hand and gets him to his feet again.

“Let’s get you used to balancing first this time,” Jack says.

Pitch nods tightly, but still looks startled when Jack actually tries skating. “I don’t see how this will
help with me *balancing,*” he mutters.

“It’s *fun,*” Jack retorts, circling around Pitch. “I’m going to start skating now – I won’t let go.”

“Very well,” Pitch acquiesces.

It takes half the night before Jack decides Pitch is acceptable, and Pitch obviously dislikes the way Jack is skating circles around him – but that’s what he gets for giving Jack a heart of ice. The two Nightmares leave part way through – “To feed,” Pitch comments – and don’t return, but then, Ebony was only with Jack to keep an eye on him for Pitch, or so Jack assumes.

“I used to love it here,” Jack finds himself saying, “in the day. The ice was only ever thick enough in the height of winter, and it was so *exhilarating,* you know?”

“And then *I* happened, hmm?” Pitch asks.

“I made my choice,” Jack replies, “and apart from- well, you know, you haven’t exactly been *terrible.* Besides- I’ve seen all these things I never would have seen before – like North’s workshop, and the bird lady, and the sky above the clouds! Even the *rabbit* was kind of interesting.”

Pitch huffs and turns on his skates to face Jack before slowly skating towards him. “We should head home for tonight,” he says, offering his hand.

Jack grins and takes it- and there is a sudden, shocked gasp. Both of them spin and there-

There’s Jack’s father, staring at them both with wide, horrified eyes.

Jack starts forward, raises his hand – his mother might have rejected him, might have cast him out but-

“Get back, monster!” his father yells, turning to run.

Jack’s arm drops slowly, as he listens to him crash through the undergrowth.

He twitches when Pitch’s hand settles on his shoulder.

“You knew this would happen, Jack,” Pitch says. “The second you chose *me* over *them.*”

Jack sighs and bows his head. “Let’s just go.”

*(the dark is moving too)*

In the days that follow, Jack remains indoors, exploring the depths of the castle. It’s labyrinthine and often each corridor will look much like the next – not to mention the secret doors. Seraphina shows him the first; she settles on a curiously out of place lamp and as soon as she does, part of the side panel clicks open. It’s full of cobwebs – even though Jack has never seen a spider here – and seems to come out in one of the disused rooms. There’s no shortage of hidden places, and once Seraphina realises Jack wants to know about them, she leads him all over the place.

They end up playing an impromptu form of hide-and-seek; Jack hides and she seeks for the most part, but one evening they play merry havoc with Pitch, who doesn’t know he’s even playing until he catches Jack squeezed inside a cubby hole between two bookshelves in the *second* library.
It’s not exactly kingly, but it’s really good fun.

He calls the snow again, and drags Pitch out into it – there’s a terrible moment, after Jack throws the first snowball, when he thinks that Pitch might throw another fit and go back indoors. Instead he snaps his fingers – summoning half a dozen Nightmares – and scoops up some snow of his own.

“You’ll pay for that, Jack,” he says, sounding for all the world like he’s promising vengeance, and what follows is probably the longest snowball fight Jack has ever had, even if it only involves two people. The Nightmares kick up just as much snow as Pitch throws, and Seraphina makes a pretty good diversion when she wants to, and by the time the moon starts to set, Pitch is drenched but- But smiling.

At breakfast the next day – although Jack doesn’t wake until mid-afternoon so perhaps breakfast isn’t the right word – Pitch recommends a stack of honey glazed pancakes, and assures Jack that they’ve had time to cool. They’re just as delicious as the other food Jack has tried – the honey is thick and sticky and Jack probably makes a terrible mess – but Pitch nods approvingly when Jack eats it, and that’s better than the awkward silence.

Pitch gives Jack another letter later in the week, and tells him it’s for North again – the paper’s just as slick and weird as before.

“I would send you with Ebony again but I have a different task for her, and my Nightmares are quite busy enough that babysitting you would be an unnecessary further chore,” Pitch explains, “so I have this for you instead.” He holds out his hand, proffering a thin black ring. “It will guide you there instead- and do not be late home, Jack.”

Jack takes the ring and asks, “When am I ever late home?”

“That is beside the point-”

“I’ll be back before dinner, sire,” Jack says, sketching a lazy bow and leaving.

Seraphina twitters excitedly when she sees the ring, and when Jack puts it on he can see why; frost creeps over it, highlighting the minute engravings, and as soon as the frost covers the entire ring, a miniscule Nightmare appears over it, head pointing in, presumably, the right direction.

“I can’t take him anywhere,” Jack groans, pulling on one of his darker cloaks – frost immediately clings to the edges and collar. Seraphina coos at that as well, and nuzzles his cheek for a goodbye and a good luck, and then Jack opens the doors, hefts his staff and whistles for the wind to take him north.

It only takes a matter of minutes – faster even than Pitch’s beloved Nightmares – and then the wind is placing him right outside North’s impressive workshop. He knocks and, once again, one of the giant furry things – yetis, North called them – answers. It harrumphs, but lets Jack in and bellows for North. It’s just as warm as before, so Jack hovers by the door and waits. He doesn’t have to wait long before there’s a familiar stomping – someone of North’s size probably can’t help it – and the big man rounds the corner.

He stops dead for a moment, before shaking his head and continuing forwards. “Jack Frost,” North cries, “what can I do for you? You want a little eggnog or some cookies – fresh from oven!”

“No thanks,” Jack replies, shaking his head. “I’ve got another letter for you-”

“Nightmare King again? We warn you, Jack – he is not safe,” North says, clapping Jack’s shoulder.
“Bunny has been pulling his fur out over you, you know. He’s very distressed.”

“The rabbit’s name is actually Bunny, you have got to be kidding me,” Jack exclaims, only just stifling his laughter.

“It is no joke,” North replies, eyes crinkling. “Bunny, he is-”

“Annoying?” Jack grins.

North smiles back, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “A good friend, if you let him. Perhaps not now- Nightmare King has given you clothes at least, I see. Is good- are you sure you are not cold?”

Jack shakes his head. “I don’t feel the cold anymore,” he explains. “Your letter.”

North takes the letter with much the same expression as Jack would expect if he was offering him an adder. Unlike before he opens it quickly – the actual letter seems to be written on normal paper – and scans its contents, his jolly face drawing into a frown.

“Bad news?”

North glances down at him. “You could say that, Jack. But now tell me, what have you been up to? Cannot have been with Nightmare King all of the time, or you would not be so happy.”

“I wish – he’s getting better since- oh that reminds me, North, do you know anything about... well there was a man in gold armour, but he had Pitch’s face. Do you know anything about-”

North stills and his face shutters. “You saw locket?” he asks, his voice hoarse.

“Yes.”

A breath shudders out of North. “It is better that you do not speak of it,” he says. “Nightmare King- it is a wonder you survived.”

Jack frowns. “Don’t I know it- but that doesn’t answer my question. Who is he?”

North sighs and says, “I have only stories of course. Only- heh, only fairy tales. Perhaps others will know more- you ask Sandy. He was there. Sandy will know for sure.”

“Well. Thanks I guess.” Jack shrugs, and turns back to the door.

“Jack. Remember- sometimes is best not to know,” North warns. Jack nods, and slips outside. The door creaks shut behind him. Jack pauses a moment before shaking his head again, and whistling for the wind to take him home.

(shadows in light)

A month passes before Jack has any other opportunities to ask after the man in the locket. There are no more dreams – Jack isn’t sure whether he’s glad of that or not – and the days pass easily enough. Pitch seems half in a frenzy, sending Jack to the furthest corners of the world with messages for creatures and spirits he’s never even heard of. They all talk much like North about Pitch – full of warnings and trepidation, but they’ve never seen Pitch drenched after a snowball fight, or flailing on his back after slipping on ice, or- he took Jack out at night and there was a child in the dark, a little
girl with thick black hair, and up ahead there was a man with darkness in his heart.

And Jack had thought, for one horrible moment, that Pitch was going to just let the girl go and walk into danger, and he’d been ready to intervene, ready to leap from the roof and fight – but Pitch had twisted the shadows ahead of her, made them seem like her deepest and darkest fears, and she’d turned and run back home- and the man with darkness in his heart had faced the Nightmares that night and Jack couldn’t bring himself to feel upset about that.

“They forget, you see, Jack,” Pitch had commented. “Once- once I was known and feared the world over. Once I was the greatest terror this world had ever known.”

“What happened?” Jack had asked.

Pitch had simply shaken his head and refused to answer.

Jack asks all the spirits he meets about the man in the locket, but most shake their heads and say they do not know. The ones who don’t simply point him to the mysterious ‘Sandy’ North had spoken of; not that any of them knows where he is.

One, a wizened old hag, says “Chased to ground, kehehee, gone to lick his wounds – won’t be seein’ him again for a great time,” which is exactly as helpful as not saying anything would have been.

It feels like something’s coming, especially with how each spirit or monster or myth Jack sees is tenser than the one before.

He starts to wonder what is in the letters he’s carrying.

But the memory of a clawed hand around his throat and a damp dungeon keeps Jack from prying.

He spends one night, when the moon is high and full, down in the village, hiding in the shadows and watching his family. There are no curtains at these windows – his sister throws them open and peers out, but Jack can’t bear to get any closer.

“I know you’re out there Jack,” she says. “Please come home safe.”

He leaves patterns of frost on her window and hopes she understands.

When he gets back, Pitch is waiting outside the castle doors. He nods when he sees Jack, and motions to follow him; instead of leading him back inside, as Jack expects, they head around the outside of the castle, through the thick snow that still blankets the grounds – even though spring is on its way – until they reach the gardens.

“Go inside,” Pitch orders, so Jack pushes open the black gate and walks inside, boots clicking on the stones. He stops just inside and stares – everywhere he looks, there are white flowers. Tiny, delicate white flowers amongst all the darker ones; not ash-grey like the snowdrops, not blackened and tarnished like the roses or the bluebells, not dull like the peonies or half withered like the grass.

They bloom, snow-white in the moonlight.

“They’re spring snowflakes,” Pitch says. “And I could think of no flower more fitting to represent you.”

“It’s- I don’t know what to say,” Jack replies, not daring to look at Pitch’s face.
“You have been such a loyal servant this past month, Jack. I could hardly let that go... unrewarded.” Pitch’s hands settle on Jack’s shoulders, lightly squeezing. “The dark and the cold together, Jack. What union could be more exquisite?”

Jack lets out a breath and looks back over his shoulder, a wry smile tugging at his lips. “Does this mean you forgive me?”

An almost fond expression is on Pitch’s face as he says, “There is nothing to forgive – in retrospect, perhaps I was somewhat hasty in my earlier judgement.”

Jack grins and turns around, twisting out of Pitch’s grasp. “Thank you,” he simply says.

Pitch reaches forward again, his hand cupping Jack’s cheek – he looks on the verge of saying something important, and his eyes, oh his eyes-

There’s a neigh and a clatter of hooves, and then Onyx practically crashes into Jack, forcing him to leap back. She’s followed by Seraphina, who lands on Jack’s shoulder and chatters excitedly about something.

“What,” Pitch says, anger plain in his voice. Onyx whinnies and pushes her nose against his shoulder, but he shoves her off. “Not now- you’re intellig- Onyx. Do not interrupt me again.” He draws himself up to his full height and folds his arms, an expression of complete fury on his face. “Well, deal with it.”

Onyx chirrs and snorts, but obediently turns and trots back out of the garden. Pitch glares at her until she’s gone, then turns his glare on Seraphina, raising an eyebrow as if to say “Well?”

She chirrups and hops onto Jack’s head, making him laugh. Pitch sighs.

“You should attend to whatever got her so distressed,” Jack says. “I won’t keep you from your duties-”

“Yes, of course not. You may go, Jack,” Pitch interrupts, waving his hand. “I will require you early tomorrow – come to my chambers as soon as you’ve eaten. Ah, and if you could perhaps clear the snow?”

Jack blinks in surprise at that, but nods sharply and walks away. He pauses by the gate and glances back – Pitch is staring at the spring snowflakes, an expression Jack cannot decipher on his face.

Seraphina coos, and Jack shuts the gate behind him.

At breakfast, there are exotic sweet fruits. They ooze juice when Jack bites into them, and it’s sweet and fresh and cool on his lips. Seraphina accompanies him to the tower staircase, but she refuses to go up there with him, instead hopping off onto a windowsill. Jack goes up the stairs alone, and it feels so like the last time he did this – still barefoot, but now in more formal attire and forgoing the cloak – that his ice-heart starts racing in his chest, long before he reaches the door at the top.

“Enter,” Pitch calls, before Jack can knock. He’s standing before the mirror, arms behind his back, a frown creasing his brow.
“You wanted me?” Jack asks, pausing at the threshold – his eyes dart towards the little lacquered box. It sits where he left it, clean of frost and seemingly undisturbed.

“My regalia,” Pitch replies, gesturing to a new stand, set with heavy dark robes. They’re more intricate than usual; golden thread embroidered along the hems and around the collar. The collar itself comes up higher than normal, and set behind it is a thick, heavy black and gold cloak, the ends trailing along the floor. But what really catches Jack’s eyes is the crown.

It’s not huge and heavy; it’s a delicate piece of filigreed gold and ebony, with spiralling patterns and dark gems. More a coronet than a crown, but none the less eye-catching for it.

It takes Jack a moment before he realises he’s meant to help Pitch dress. Even then, he’s somewhat slow off the mark, not that Pitch says anything. He steps over to the clothes stands and gathers the heavy robe – slightly thankful that Pitch has already put on the under robes – into his arms, being as careful with it as he can. That doesn’t stop frost from blooming where his fingers touch it.

Pitch holds out his arm to help Jack – it goes on remarkably easily for such a formal piece of clothing, at least until it comes to doing it up. There are a multitude of buttons and clasps, and Pitch does nothing to assist as Jack painstakingly does them all up. There is a belt as well, a beautiful piece of golden brocade fabric that Jack has to cinch tightly around Pitch’s waist. Then the cloak – twice as heavy as any Jack has and several times as large. Jack has to get a footstool to even reach high enough to pin it to Pitch’s shoulders, and as soon as that’s done, Pitch sweeps over to the dressing table and sits before it.

“The crown,” he says, voice pitched strangely soft.

Jack carries it over with a vague sense of doom, and when he lifts it, it feels several times heavier than it should, like the weight of Pitch’s royalty was weighing it down.

It rests lightly on Pitch’s brow, offsetting the pallor of his skin and making his eyes seem brighter.

Jack’s breath catches in his throat – Pitch looks nothing less than magnificent.

Pitch stands and walks towards the door, not sparing a glance back to Jack. He pauses there and says, “You will find more suitable attire in your wardrobe; return to the throne room once you have changed,” before disappearing out into the staircase.

It takes Jack a full minute to notice that his knees are shaking.

The clothes are, when Jack finds them, not what he thought they’d be. He’d assumed more black – instead they’re white as the new fallen snow, and the embroidery is little snowflakes and frost patterns picked out in silver thread and shot through with blue. They’re light and delicate, more like the clothes he wore on that fateful night than anything he’s worn since. Instead of boots, there are simply pale blue wrappings that extend down his shin over his heel but leave his toes free; Seraphina chirps in awe when she sees Jack fully dressed. She looks like she wants to fly over and perch on his shoulder, but she refrains, instead landing on his staff.

The walk to the throne room seems longer than usual, and the shadows darker. Seraphina glows just as brightly as ever, a little green puff of feathers perched on a shepherd’s crook. She only leaves
when they approach the throne room – fluttering off to land in the entrance hall. Jack pauses to look after her, but she seems disinclined to return, so he simply pushes open the doors and enters.

There are candles everywhere, but that is not the first thing Jack notices.

Instead he sees Pitch, sitting proud and tall in his throne, looking every inch the king he has always claimed to be.

“Come,” Pitch says – his voice seems louder, or simply echoes more. The room seems to have grown since Jack was last in there, and it is considerably brighter than he is used to. Even the chandelier, long since hidden in the shadows of the ceiling, is ablaze with candles and light.

“What’s going on?” Jack asks, walking up the steps of the dais and standing beside the throne.

“A celebration,” Pitch says. “They will be arriving soon.”

No sooner has he said it than there is a noise from the entrance hall, as if the great doors are opening – and then Seraphina calls loudly, and there is a veritable wave of noise; boots stamping over stone, canes clicking, the distinctive flutter of wing beats, before the people who have come round the corner and stand framed in the doorway.

North is at the forefront, shadowed by the bird lady and the rabbit; behind them, all the spirits Jack has yet met, and some he hasn’t. A score of dragonfly winged faeries intermingle with centaurs and fire spirits, and nearer the floor scurry gnomes and mice and fat little brownies. An elegantly dressed woman with pointed ears walks beside a twisted old crone, and somewhat behind the others trots a liquid eyed unicorn.

They all pause before stepping into the throne room, and then North steps forward and towards the dais.

“Nightmare King,” he says, levelly. “We have come.”

“Yes,” Pitch replies, “I can see that you have. I expect thanks are in order – but no doubt you are eager to know why I have summoned you.”

North nods tightly – he’s like a shadow of the man Jack knows, and he can’t help but wonder why everyone assembled looks at Pitch with so much horror. True, he can be scary but- He’s not that awful, especially not recently. And even- even that first town. Jack had gone back and the people had been there still, alive and afraid but that was better than dead.

“And where’s Sandy?” the rabbit – Bunny – yells.

Pitch laughs, saying, “Oh, but that’s the beauty of this.” He stands up, towering over the entire congregation. “The Sandman is gone.”

There’s an appalled gasp from the others. Bunny starts forward, ears pricked forwards, paw reaching back for one of his curious weapons.

“Liar!” he shouts – North puts an arm out in front of him, stopping him in his tracks. “Move over, North – this is-”

“I do not think he lies, my friend,” North interrupts.

“I do not,” Pitch confirms, silkily. “Think, all of you. Have you seen him since midwinter? Have you seen even the smallest grain of dreamsand?”
And before Jack’s eyes, he sees the collected people’s all seem to give in and give up – like a great and terrible sadness has come over them; Bunny and the bird lady both turn and hold each other, unable to hide their grief.

“What did you do?” the bird lady sobs desperately.

Pitch scowls, and says, “Calm yourselves. I merely said he is gone – defeated. He is not dead- after all, what nothing delights my Nightmares so much as fear and hope together. But for now, the war is over, finished. I rule – I trust there will be no objections.” His voice turns hard and sharp as he says it, and Jack all but shudders at the implications in it.

The spirits all seem to understand as well and remain in sullen silence.

It’s Bunny who breaks it. “And what about Frost?” he asks. “What are you up to with him, eh?”

Jack glances towards Pitch and catches a look of surprise on his face before he answers with, “Are you so unfamiliar with the concept of servants, rabbit?”

“Hah, more like a slave,” Bunny snaps.

That earns a snarl from Pitch, and Jack just knows something bad is going to happen-

“Now wait just a minute,” he says, striding forward to stand just before Pitch. “I am no-one’s slave.”

“Tch, quit foolin’ yourself kid! He’s usin’ you just as much as he uses those damn ‘mares of his,” Bunny continues, angrily.

“He hasn’t made me do anything! He’s – well, maybe not asked. I agreed to be his servant. And if you think I’m anything like the horses,” Jack hops lightly down the stairs to stop right in front of Bunny. “If you think that, I will freeze you so badly you’ll be picking ice out of your fur for months, cottontail.”

“Issat meant to scare me, brat?”

“Enough,” Pitch roars. “You overstep your bounds, rabbit.”

Bunny flinches and glances between Jack and Pitch for a few tense seconds before taking a step back and retreating behind North.

“Alright, alright, don’t get your knickers in a twist,” he grumbles – by Pitch’s warning snarl, his wit is not appreciated.

“If you can hold a civil tongue, you are welcome to stay for the remainder of the day,” Pitch snaps. “I would advise leaving before nightfall, of course. And- perhaps not straying too far, hmm? I cannot promise your safety should you meet one of the other occupants of the castle.”

There’s a collective flinch at that, and Jack can’t contain his grin. “It’s not so bad really,” he says. “The Nightmares can be a bit snappy – if you see a really big one keep out of her way, but the smaller ones are nice enough. It’s just the spindly things.” Jack shudders. “If you see them, get out of their way.”


And to Jack’s eyes, the soft way he says that makes the people in the room more afraid than when he’d bellowed. Some of them even look askance at Jack, apparently worried by his ease around
“If it’s all the same t’ you, I’ll be leaving,” Bunny says, turning on his heel and loping outside. Seraphina trails after him – an escort, Jack thinks, although whether any of them know that is up for debate – only circling back when he’s gone.

Pitch snorts as he seats himself again, gesturing absently towards the shadows that still cling despite the light of the candles. A small table appears beside him, a glass of something rich and red inside it, which Pitch swirls before taking a sip.

“Well?” he says, and slowly the ‘guests’ splinter into groups and mingle, none of them quite turning their back on the dais. Jack retreats back up the stairs to stand beside Pitch’s throne, leaning absently on his staff. Pitch taps his throne once, and a separate table appears beside Jack, laden with sweetmeats and cakes. Jack grins, but doesn’t mention it, content to simply watch as those below converse quietly.

They don’t move any closer to either of them, not even North or the bird lady, although both of them keep giving Jack somewhat worried glances. He grins at them, but refrains from joining them, at least until all the other spirits have wandered out, each accompanied by Seraphina.

Eventually Pitch shifts in his throne; he glances at Jack, and inclines his head just slightly, so Jack ambles down the stairs and heads over to North and the bird lady.

“You wanted to speak to me,” Jack says, not bothering much with small talk.

“Oh, Jack,” the bird lady says, darting forwards to touch Jack’s cheek. He flinches back, but that doesn’t exactly stop her – her hand is a bright point of heat on his cheek that he’s forced to brush away. “We’re so sorry, Jack,” she continues.

“Tooth is right,” North agrees. “We- we did not pay enough attention.”

Jack puts his hands up and says, “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I mean- there was one accident. One, and ever since then his highness over there has been a perfect gentleman.”

Tooth’s wings flutter and she says, “Oh. Oh,” with a deepening flush on her cheeks. “I had no idea.”

Even North seems to brighten at Jack’s words, glancing wonderingly between Jack and Pitch. “Ah, I hope he treats you well, Jack,” he says, squeezing Jack’s shoulder reassuringly. “We will tell Bunny, he will understand. New life, eh, it is Bunny’s expertise.”

Jack laughs a bit, glad that they’re not so afraid anymore – a glance towards the throne shows him that Pitch has turned away and is looking off to a completely different part of the room – and carefully shuffles out from under North’s arm.

“You know- he’s not as monstrous as you’d think,” he says.

North looks sceptical, and Tooth shakes his head. “He has done things, Jack-”

“He saved a girl,” Jack announces, his voice loud in the quiet of the room. “She was- there was a man who would have hurt her. And he scared her home. I wouldn’t wish the Nightmares on anyone, but if it was a choice between the nightmares or what that man would have done-”

“The Nightmares are preferable, are they not?” Pitch asks, suddenly behind Jack, his hands resting on Jack’s shoulders.
“Exactly,” Jack agrees, tilting his head back to grin up at Pitch. “A little fear is healthy.”

Tooth’s expression goes tight and she says, “Perhaps.”

Pitch smiles – all teeth, and Jack doesn’t miss how Tooth recoils from them – and steps around Jack. “Delightful as it is to have you here, I must regretfully ask you to leave,” he says. As he says it, the candles snuff out, once more leaving the room in darkness – Jack can see Tooth try to pretend it doesn’t bother her, but she reaches out for North’s shoulder, and he reaches towards his belt with a start.

“Seraphina,” Jack calls, and she flits over, a little beacon in the darkness, to land on his staff. “We’ll escort you out.” Tooth and North glance at each other but nod, falling in behind Jack as he leads them out.

They reach the doors before either says anything, and then it’s Tooth who asks, “You called her Seraphina?”

“That’s her name.” Jack shrugs. “I think… I think she used to be a little girl.” Seraphina chirps sadly, and darts down to Jack’s shoulder. “The girl in the locket,” he continues. “I think that’s why he lets her stay here.”

The pair look at each other again and then North says, “We wish you luck, young Jack Frost.” Tooth nods, and turns away, while North walks off a short way to where-

There’s a sleigh on the residual snow. North whistles when he gets there, and a bevy of gigantic deer with huge, heavy racks come out of the forest, their dinner-plate sized hooves leaving clear marks on the grass. They greet North with harsh snorts of air, and he tugs them around to hitch them to the sleigh – glancing back to grin at Jack and raise a hand in farewell.

“One day I take you on a ride, eh?” he says, climbing up and grabbing the reins.

Jack grins back and waves as North sets off, the deer eager and loud as they drag him northwards; as soon as they’re out of sight, Jack feels a gentle hand on the small of his back as Pitch steps up beside him.

“You did well today, Jack,” he says. “You may retire for the night.”

“Hmm, I was really thinking I might take another look at the garden,” Jack replies. “Didn’t exactly get a chance to explore before we were interrupted.” Seraphina squawks and nudges Jack’s cheek reprovingly, but she obligingly flies back inside when he whistles for the wind. Before it can snatch him up, he turns back to Pitch and says, “Care to join me?”

Pitch has a second to nod before Jack grabs his hand and the wind carries them skyward, his formal cloak blowing wildly around them. They land just outside the gate, and Pitch wobbles a bit when they land.

“A bit of warning next time, perhaps,” he says, unbolting his cloak and dropping it into a convenient shadow.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Jack asks, grinning as he pushes the gate open and enters the garden. Pitch follows with a huff, and proceeds to tramp after Jack as he wanders through the garden. He grumbles the entire time, but continues to follow Jack, only falling silent when Jack asks after the spring snowflakes.

“The shadows reach the world over,” he says eventually. “It was no trouble.”
“If you say so.” Jack shrugs, and gets to his feet again. “I bet if they knew about this, not one of those people from earlier would be at all afraid of you.”

Pitch twitches and replies, “You’ll forgive me then, for being glad that they don’t.”

Jack laughs and turns to look at Pitch. “It’s alright – I’ll still be scared of you if you want.” He grins. “Sire.”

Pitch clears his throat and glances away. “We should go back indoors- I will be busy tonight and-”

“Did you need some help undressing?”

Pitch gives Jack an incredulous look before shaking his head. “You should- sleep. It has been a long day- dinner will be in your room.”

“If you’re sure,” Jack says, before nodding and jumping into the wind.

Below him, Pitch steps into a waiting shadow and disappears.

(snow before the spring)

It’s hard to say if things between them change in the wake of Pitch’s announcement. Certainly the other spirits are more circumspect in their dealings with Jack, and still ever more surprised whenever he manages to startle a laugh out of them – this is pretty stupid, in Jack’s eyes. It’s like they think spending time with Pitch, being Pitch’s servant, will suck all the fun out of Jack.

If anything was going to do that, it would have been the first time his mother called him a monster.

But his sister wouldn’t want him to change; she’d want him to carry on being Jack, so he will.

Also Pitch has a mean sense of humour – Jack hadn’t even meant to turn one of his normal fear-mongering excursions into a snowball fight, but the man had just been asking for it, standing by the edge of a newly unfrozen pond. Pitch hadn’t even been around while Jack was taking aim – he’d turned up just as Jack had thrown the snowball, and it had landed perfectly, knocking his unsuspecting victim into the water with a yelp. Pitch hadn’t even had a chance to stop his laughter, and then it had only been a matter of Jack passing him snowballs and lining up suitable targets – when one town all got wise and went indoors, Pitch just took them to a different one, and they began all over again.

And then when a Nightmare hadn’t quite been paying attention, Jack nailed it right on the haunch and the subsequent shocked whinny had had Pitch all but collapsed with laughter.

And then there had been the scary stories – crisp spring nights would bring out the children sometimes, and Pitch could call shadows to hide them where Jack would otherwise be seen, and all it would take would be slipping close to a fire and Pitch could revel in the fear, could make it worse with whispers and deepening shadows while Jack could make the fire sputter and send shivers scurrying down their spines.

Jack can’t say whether Pitch appreciates the laughter later, the shrieks and teasing; but he appreciates the fear and the paranoia, appreciates the startled cries in the night and maybe they’re not enjoying it in the same way, but then, who ever does?

The dreams return with a vengeance; the man with Pitch’s face watching Jack, but where before he’d
been happy, now his face is drawn and tight. He ignores the girl in green, however much she tries, and when Jack tries to reach for him, he recoils and shakes his head. He doesn’t linger as he did before, instead glancing between Jack and the shadows lurking behind him – and he chooses the shadows, despite the screams from the girl in green, from *Seraphina*. He chooses the shadows despite Jack calling him back.

Jack manages to yell, “*Stop it,*” once, and the man looks back and his eyes are full of tears.

“I’m sorry,” he says, before continuing into the darkness.

When Jack wakes, Seraphina is settled on his chest, her feathers fluffed and ruffled. She coos sadly, and tucks her head under Jack’s chin. He strokes her feathers until he falls asleep again; the dream does not continue.

He wants to ask Pitch – with the news that the Sandman, this ‘Sandy’ everyone told him to ask, is gone, Pitch is the only one he can ask. But he doesn’t dare; they might be better now, but Jack doesn’t pretend that Pitch’s earlier threats are meaningless.

Besides, he doesn’t want to make Pitch angry. He’s not nearly so much fun when he’s angry.

This does leave Jack somewhat stuck – no going forward, no going back. It could be worse. And besides, Jack has his theories. It’s just... confirmation.

Spring moves in. The snow melts in the southern reaches, and Jack keeps ever further north when he goes out. The castle remains swaddled in snowstorms – when Jack slips down to his village, hidden in shadows and think heavy cloaks, he hears them grumble about the scattered snowflakes that escape the forest. They’re all deathly certain that some new evil has grown in the forest – “Ever since the lad Jack disappeared,” some mutter, glaring towards Jack’s house – and when his father talks of the demons he saw-

“Looked like my boy,” he says, half-drunk in the tavern. “And this great creature of darkness and shadows.”

It makes his sister scared and worried; he catches her watching the forest from the windows, tears in her eyes, and he makes sure to trace little frost patterns where she’s sure to see them. He leaves her a picture of him in ice, frozen to her window, and slips away before she wakes.

His mother’s face is drawn and grey, fear and grief pulling the joy from her. Whenever she sees the frost he leaves, she frowns and brushes it away – the ground near the house stays frozen long after it should have melted, no matter how hard Jack tries to keep it clear.

If Pitch cares about Jack’s excursions, he makes no particular signal. If Jack comes back particularly upset- on the one day he does, Pitch gathers him onto Onyx’s back and takes him back to the frozen land and lets Jack go.

“This is still yours,” he says, carefully avoiding looking into Jack’s eyes.

“Will I need to ask Ebony?” Jack asks in return, and is surprised when Pitch shakes his head.

“I trust that you will not abuse this... gift.”

“Where is Ebony anyway? I haven’t seen her for a while,” Jack asks, flopping over to make a snow angel.

Pitch looks skywards and says, “With the herd. She’s grown since you saw her last; the feeding has
been particularly rich of late.”

Jack doesn’t immediately, instead hopping up and sending the snow swirling. “Because the Sandman isn’t around anymore, right?” he asks, spinning the snow into a large ball.

“In part,” Pitch agrees, “but your assistance has been invaluable.”

“If you say so.” Jack swings his staff, kicking up a flurry of snow, and it obediently heaps itself up into a mound several feet tall. He tosses the large ball on the top and quickly freezes it in place; he runs his hands over it, discarding snow he doesn’t need and moving bits he does.

Eventually Pitch asks, from his perch on Onyx’s back, “What are you doing, Jack?”

Jack grins and spins his staff again – there’s a gust of wind, and then it stands free and clear.

“Making a snowman,” he replies, smirking back at Pitch.

Onyx snorts in mock offence; Pitch remains silent for a beat, staring at, well, himself.

Himself with a big, big smile.

“Do my teeth really look like that?” he eventually asks.

Jack laughs and grins up at him. “I think they’re fine,” he says, “although Tooth pretty much hates them.”

“As if I care about her opinion,” Pitch sniffs.

“But you care about mine?” Jack asks, smirking cheekily.

Pitch averts his eyes and clears his throat awkwardly. “Would you prefer to stay here, or would you like to return home?” he asks.

“Hmm, give me a moment,” Jack replies, turning briefly away. Within minutes, he’s sculpted another snowman, right beside the Pitch one – this time, of him. He quickly wipes away snow-Pitch’s uncharacteristic smile and gives him a new expression, a more fitting one. “There,” he says, nodding.

Pitch sighs, and offers Jack his hand to help him onto Onyx’s back. “I do not know why I keep you around,” he comments.

“Because I’m so cute,” Jack replies, hopping up and settling himself astride the Nightmare.

“Whatever would I do without your relentless wit,” Pitch grumbles, urging Onyx skyward.

(darkest before the dawn)

Jack would be lying if he said he didn’t notice a change in the world; Pitch sends him out relatively frequently, as a sort of reminder of his presence, Jack guesses, so the spirits and suchlike don’t forget that Pitch is there. Mostly, they treat Jack like they did before – maybe a little more respectfully, a little more warily – but the change isn’t so much in them as it is with the people.

His village is afraid – but Jack knows why for that, knows that as long as he visits, even wrapped in
hooded clothes and veiled with shadows, they’ll be afraid. He can’t stay away for long.

But it’s the other places. Sometimes he’ll wander out alone, maybe a Nightmare or two to accompany him – Ebony came once, and she was nearly fifteen hands at the shoulder and just as bad tempered as Onyx – and wherever he goes-

He’d headed to the town in the north, where he’d played with the children, and found the people there sullen and miserable, flinching at nothing. The children couldn’t be tempted to play, even with fat snowballs, and the wind tugging at their clothes. It’s the same wherever Jack goes, wherever it’s cold enough for him to go. They turn away from him when they see him, make warding signs and curse him as a demon, a monster-

It’s like all the joy in the world is being sucked away.

And when he sees Ebony again, seventeen hands at the shoulder, snorting and snapping just like Onyx, Jack thinks he knows why.

He catches Bunny one day, out in a blustery field. There’s a ewe lambing early, her distressed bleats echoing across the countryside. Jack’s been watching for a while, not daring to get too close for fear of freezing her and her lambs. Instead, he’s been chasing off the wolves and foxes who’ve come at the scent of blood on the wind, and sent blistering gales to keep away the carrion feeders.

But it’s Bunny who slips out from the shelter of the grass, ears pricked forwards, to soothe her and help her. Jack isn’t near enough to hear what he says, but whatever it is- The ewe gives birth to twins and licks them clean; no sooner are they standing than her wayward master appears, and the second he sets eyes on Bunny, he turns clear around and runs back home, no mind for the vulnerable sheep he leaves behind.

Bunny sees them off anyway, and as soon as they’re out of sight Jack floats closer on the breeze. “Do you think they’ll survive?” he asks.

Bunny shakes his head slowly. “No way t’ tell. He’d’ve been here if it weren’t for-” He cuts himself off with a look towards Jack.

“Weren’t for who?” Jack asks, even though he knows the answer.

Bunny scowls and looks away again. “You know full well who I’m talking about,” he snaps, thumping the ground and disappearing into the subsequent hole. A flower pops up when it closes.

Jack sighs, and lets the wind carry him home.

Bunny’s hardly the last either – the spirits are understandably wary when talking to Jack about anything relating to Pitch, but they can’t hide their discontent. They kind hide their- ha, their fear.

Pitch knows – he can hardly not. But he doesn’t look worried; if anything, he looks pleased, and-

Jack wants to say that no-one’s getting hurt, but that isn’t exactly true.

There are witch hunts. The Nightmares head out in the daylight; they squabble over those most afraid, snapping at each other in their battles. It doesn’t take much to frighten the people now. The slightest hint of a shadow can be enough, and Jack doesn’t dare throw snowballs – it was fun before, but now they just scream and run inside and bolt the door behind them.

As for the witch hunts-
Jack’s never going to forget the smell of burning flesh, or the sound of their screams.

And when he goes home, Pitch takes him for walks around the garden.

Something has to give.

*(brightest in the darkest night)*

The first thing Jack is aware of, is horses screaming. He sits up in bed – there’s golden sand dissipating above him. It’s still circling Seraphina’s head and-

There’s a crash from the corridor and Ebony bursts in, eyes glowing brightly. She glances around the room and nods once before turning and clattering back out. Jack scrambles up after her, only pausing long enough to grab some trousers and his staff. There are yells from up ahead, screaming and shouting, and the Nightmares bellowing- a roar that can only come from Pitch. Jack rounds a corner near the throne room and there’s a splash of pink on the wall, the broken body of a spindly Fearling smashed nearby and the curtains torn cleanly through. Further along, there’s a smashed window and a handful of green-gold feathers clinging to it – the noise reaches ever greater levels the closer Jack gets, and then he bursts into sight of the throne room-

It’s chaos.

There are Nightmares everywhere, and Fearlings clinging to the ceilings and walls, chittering and leaping, claws outstretched. There are spirits fighting back – Bunny and North back to back, swords and- and whatever those wooden things are. Tooth flies above them, intercepting Fearlings and Nightmares alike, two curved swords in hand – the unicorn from before rears wildly and charges forward, goring a Fearling on its horn and scraping a Nightmare’s haunch.

Even higher, in the outreaches of the ceiling floats a little golden man who has to be Sandy.

And in the centre of the room, before the dais, Pitch fights alone, swinging a huge black scythe back and forth like it weighs nothing. There’s a furious snarl on his face – a yeti swipes at him and just barely dodges the return blow – and his shape- The shadows at his feet snap out and shift and Jack’s stomach twists-

No-one’s noticed him yet, so he leaps into the air, let’s the wind carry him upwards; there’s a second where the wind doesn’t come, but then it blows in with a vengeance, and the fighters below flinch back at the whoosh. Jack ignores them, spiralling higher – brushing past Tooth – and landing on a cloud of golden sand.

The Sandman looks up at him sadly and shakes his head; the sand shifting beneath Jack’s feet and sending him tumbling back down with a yelp.

“Don’t,” Jack yells – he feels more than hears the roar from below, and then there are gentle shadows cradling him and setting him down on the dais while up above, the shadow that was Pitch encircles the Sandman.

“No!” someone screams – and the golden cloud thins and the Sandman falls, no shadows to cushion his fall.

The battle slows and stops, the Nightmares shifting close to Pitch and Jack, forming a barrier
between them and the others. North and Bunny and Tooth make their way to the forefront, as close to the Sandman as they dare. Pitch seems to collapse in on himself, the shadows retreating and curling inwards until he’s in his usual form again, the scythe in his hand.

“I have been merciful,” he says, his voice ringing out throughout the room. “I have allowed you all life – allowed you to continue giving out your meagre gifts of hope, and wonder, and joy.” He snarls, “I have even allowed your most beloved Sandman to continue to live in whatever pathetic way he can.”

“You call this living?” Bunny shouts, stepping aggressively forward.

“Silence!” Pitch bellows, his voice edging into an inhuman shriek. Everyone flinches, even Jack – and the Sandman gets up from the floor, getting to his feet and staring straight into Pitch’s eyes.

It’s like he wants to be-

“No more,” Pitch snarls, hefting his scythe to swing and this is wrong, this is wrong this is wrong-

“Pitch,” Jack says.

Silence follows it, and slowly Pitch turns around, lowering his scythe. His eyes are fire and ice, barely contained fury clear in them. Jack steps closer, down the dais, pausing a few steps from the bottom, within touching distance of Pitch.

“Stop,” he murmurs, and he’s more than close enough to see the betrayal on Pitch’s face before it twists into a snarl.

“I warned you, Jack,” he spits. “I told you what would happen if you betrayed me again.”

Jack shakes his head and reaches up and says, “No,” before pressing his lips to Pitch’s.

(frost and dark)

Pitch freezes at Jack’s touch – and for a terrible moment, Jack is certain Pitch will fling him back – but then his hands cup Jack’s face and he crushes Jack to him, lips desperate against Jack’s.

It’s hard and wonderful and perfect.

“Jack,” Pitch gasps harshly against his lips, “Jack.”

Jack has to drag him back into another kiss, and this one is just as good as the first – Pitch’s hands tug Jack against his chest, holding him as close as it’s possible to be, and when he lets go it’s with a broken sob.

He stumbles back, clutching at his chest, clawing at it, an expression of agony on his face.

Jack hurries forwards, just in time to catch Pitch when he falls – he sees the Sandman step forward out of the corner of his eye and shouts, “Stay back,” before turning back to Pitch.

There’s terror in his eyes, and he croaks, “Jack,” again before a scream claws its way out of his throat. He rolls clean out of Jack’s arms and-
The grey starts to recede at his fingertips. He chokes, staring desperately at Jack – distantly Jack can hear the Nightmares neighing – reaching out for him with a shaking hand before he collapses. He screams again, and the shadows shudder with it; he tears clean through his robes, baring the stretch of skin over his chest.

The skin there is black and dark, like a scar – and the grey of his skin seems to be melting back into it, the black getting bigger and darker and then there’s a rip and an orb of darkness oozes from Pitch’s chest and falls to the floor.

Wait.

Not an orb.

A heart.

Jack steps forward and kneels beside Pitch, gathering him into his arms. The black heart beats and he reaches for his staff, almost dropping it in his rush. It only takes a touch to freeze the darkness – black shadows start to creep up his staff from even that much, and Jack drops it like it’s burned him.

For a moment, the only sounds are of harsh breathing.

“What the bloody hell just happened?” Bunny asks, breaking the silence. Even the Nightmares have quieted – and the Fearlings are just gone – not even going to intercept him when Bunny hops closer to the Sandman.

“I do not know,” North replies, following Bunny.

“Don’t,” Jack says. He looks down at Pitch at- the man with Pitch’s face. If it wasn’t for the last stray lines of grey around his heart, he’d almost look like he was sleeping. “Pitch,” Jack says. “Come on.”

The man – Pitch, it had to be Pitch – shifts and his eyes flicker open; Jack almost sobs in relief because they are Pitch’s eyes.

“Jack?” Pitch breathes, looking up at Jack with such wonder.

“Who else would it be?” Jack asks, his voice cracking slightly.

Pitch reaches up, wincing slightly; he glances down at his chest and his eyes widen. “Jack, what-”

“I have no idea,” Jack replies. “That,” he points at the now frozen black heart, “came out of you and-”

“It is not complete,” North interrupts. “The heart, you see? There is a part missing.” He pokes it with his sword, spinning it slightly so they can see. A chunk is indeed missing, and Pitch sits up and stares back down at his chest, scrubbing at the darkness there almost frantically.

“It’s not gone,” he says, breathlessly. Angrily. “It’s not gone.”

“Pitch-”

Pitch whirls to Jack and says, “That’s not my name.”

Jack blinks and reaches out for him – Pitch flinches back, averting his eyes, and Jack’s hand slowly falls. There’s another moment of silence, and then a small golden hand rests on Pitch’s – or not Pitch’s – shoulder. A handful of sand pictures flash above his head briefly, and he glances between them.
“Sandy’s right,” Tooth says. “I think some explanations are in order.”

Not-Pitch’s breath shudders out, and he stands up, slowly. Jack hurries upright as well, suddenly aware that all eyes are on him; he feels abruptly woefully underdressed for this, still in his nightshirt and all.

“My name,” not-Pitch says, “is Kozmotis Pitchiner.” He looks towards Jack briefly. “I was – and I believe I still am – the Nightmare King.”

“Well that’s helpful,” Bunny comments, “no way we’d’ve figured that out without your help.” Pitch – or Kozmotis – glares over at Bunny; that’s the same at least, Jack thinks. Even if-

“Centuries ago,” Kozmotis continues, “the Nightmares kidnapped my daughter, and when I came to retrieve her, I was trapped and that,” he gestures towards the heart, “was forced upon me. I became the twisted creature known to all as... Pitch Black.”

“You’re the man from my dreams,” Jack breathes. “The man in the locket- and Seraphina is your daughter.”


“Do you- you said sorry,” Jack all but shouts. “But. Do you remember....”

“Oh, Jack,” Kozmotis sighs, “I remember everything.”

Jack breathes out slowly, steadying himself, before continuing. “And- do you feel the same?”

Kozmotis smiles, terrible and fragile and so, so familiar. “Oh, Jack, you perfect, wonderful boy. How could I ever not?” And yet... he stays where he is.


“Fascinating as that was,” Bunny grumbles, “can we get back to the point?”

“Bunny,” North murmurs reprovingly, placing a hand on Bunny’s shoulder.

Kozmotis shrugs elegantly, for all his robes are torn. “The heart has been expelled – for the most part. I believe that I retain some control over the Nightmares,” he says, his face falling somewhat. “I spent too long a part of the darkness to truly leave it now,” he murmurs.

“Uh-huh,” Bunny mutters, voice sceptical.

Jack is suddenly angry. “What business is it of yours anyway?” he snaps. “You just came here and attacked him-”

“If you think he didn’t deserve it-”

“Jack,” Kozmotis interrupts. “Calm yourself. I am... not that person. At least, not entirely.” He looks at Jack as he says that, before turning back to the others. “Our battle is ended,” he announces. “You may all leave – the Nightmares will not follow you- and they will not roam free for a sennight.”

A centaur moves forward. “And how can we be sure you’ll keep your promises, Nightmare King?” he spits.

“He never broke his word,” Jack snaps.
“No, no, is right to ask, Jack,” North says. “Here; we four, Sandy, Bunny, Tooth and I, we will stay, and we will watch. We will be guardians.”

The centaur nods after a second and says, “Acceptable.” The spirits turn to leave, a rich murmur of noise leaving with them. Kozmotis looks levelling at the Nightmares – a slight tilt of his head, and their ears press back against their heads, before they slink into the shadows again. As soon as they’re gone, Kozmotis breathes a sigh of relief, and looks towards the guardians, absently pressing his hand to his chest.

“Perhaps we should move somewhere more comfortable,” he suggests. “And Jack- will you please find... please find my daughter?”

There’s a tight moment of silence, and then Jack nods, and leaves the throne room.

(silvered green)

There’s a familiar girl sleeping in Jack’s room – golden sand curling around her head and forming feathers and birds. A bright green dress is pooled around her on the floor; she wakes up when Jack lifts her, eyes blinking blearily.

“Jack?” she asks, and it takes her a moment to realise before she’s sitting up, and staring down at her hands. “I’m- Jack, I’m not a bird!” she cries, reaching up to hug him.

“I can see that,” Jack replies, hugging her tightly.

She gasps softly and pushes Jack back and asks, “Daddy?”

Jack grins at her, and lifts her back to the floor. “Shall we go and see?” She grabs his hand, and for a second Jack is afraid that he’ll freeze her but... no frost forms where they touch, and she squeezes reassuringly before tugging him out the door.

It takes Jack a moment to realise, but Seraphina doesn’t seem to be glowing anymore. She doesn’t even seem to notice, and it doesn’t exactly matter anyway; someone has thoughtfully lit all the candlesticks to wherever it was Kozmotis took them – they’re not in the throne room, and they lead along several dim corridors before reaching a set of widely opened doors.

“Daddy!” Seraphina cries, letting go of Jack’s hand to run into the room ahead. Jack catches up just in time to see Kozmotis lean down and sweep her into the air, an expression of such fond adoration on his face that Jack has to just stop. Seraphina giggles as Kozmotis spins her around, and she sounds so happy-

Bunny clears his throat awkwardly and stands up. “Well, I think I’ve heard enough for now. Leave y’ to it, mate,” he says, only pausing beside Jack to clap him awkwardly on the shoulder. The Sandman follows him, a bright smile on his face – he signs something that might be encouragement if Jack really squints – and then North and Tooth do the same, leaving Jack alone with Kozmotis and Seraphina.

She blinks solemnly at Jack then laughs again, and wriggles out of Kozmotis’ grasp. “Thank you,” she says, running over and all but tackling Jack, “you got my Daddy back.”

Jack flushes and looks away. “I really didn’t do anything,” he protests.
“On the contrary,” Kozmotis objects. “You have done me – and Seraphina – both a great service.”

“Uh-huh,” Seraphina agrees, reaching up to peck Jack’s cheek. “I’m so glad I picked you, Jack!”

Jack frowns. “Wait, what?”

“Well,” she begins, “I knew Daddy had to fall in love with someone, and it had to be someone really brave, because Daddy was scary, and you were the bravest person I ever saw! But I’m glad it was you anyway, Jack.” She hugs him and whispers, “You won’t leave us.”

Kozmotis looks at the askance for a moment, before his expression softens, and Jack reaches up to stroke through Seraphina’s hair.

“No,” he says, thoughtfully, “I don’t think I will.”

(snowflake and red)

The next few days are a whirlwind of activity; Kozmotis recalls every absent Nightmare. They fight him every step of the way apparently – more than once Jack finds him bent over a table, his breathing belaboured, while he clutches at his chest. Even Onyx resists him at first. It takes him turning on her with a snap, his eyes flashing, before she falls into line, and after that the Nightmares go easier.

The shadows recede around the castle – Kozmotis can still use them to travel, although with greater effort – and, only a scant three days after the battle in the throne room, Jack goes outside to find a flock of starlings scratching about in the castle grounds.

The next day, he goes down to the village and finds the children laughing and the adults happy – and his parents sitting together in the kitchen of their house, holding each other for dear life. His sister sees him, and she runs outside and catches him – his frost pinks her skin just slightly, and he pulls away regretfully.

“I knew you’d be back,” she sobs. “I knew it.”

“Just for a little while,” Jack says. “I’ll have to go back – hey now, don’t cry. I’ll come and visit before you know it.”

“Jack-” she starts; Jack presses his finger to her lips and shakes his head.

“You just wait, and I’ll be back – I’ll even bring a friend for you,” he says. “You just have to trust me.”

She sniffs but nods, hugging him so tightly Jack can hardly bear to let her go. “Is he very scary?” she asks, when Jack’s about to leave.

He grins and says, “Yep, he’s really scary! Always making me go and see horrible unicorns and giant bunny rabbits.”

His sister giggles, but she still looks worried when Jack turns to leave, so he ducks back down and murmurs, “He filled his garden with flowers for me.”

She’s smiling through her tears as the wind carries Jack away, and that’s really the best he can hope for.
At home – what with the so-called guardians around – things are a bit tense; Kozmotis eats with Jack now, as he never did before. Seraphina wants everything except fruits – “I spent ages eating my greens, Daddy, I want pancakes,” she announces, after he tries to give her apple slices for the third time in as many days – and Jack is really, painfully sure that the others are in no way able to cope with Kozmotis as he is.

Not that Jack’s doing much better – the understanding they reached hasn’t led anywhere. Kozmotis will look at Jack at breakfast or dinner, the only meals they meet for, and it will be like old times – and then, his eyes will go bright and hungry, and Jack will want to lean over and just kiss him. But Kozmotis will look away, towards the Sandman or North, and will mention clearing the forest somewhat, creating a path – “I might yet be King of Nightmares, but I see no reason why I should remain locked away here, ignored and unknown,” Kozmotis protests, much to Bunny’s obvious displeasure – out towards the village and beyond. It’s beyond frustrating and just- so unlike Pitch.

And yet Kozmotis is still Pitch.

The day before the guardians are set to leave, Jack finally gets sick of all these people in his space – and when he catches Tooth’s little bird-fairies in the garden, Jack cannot resist. The first snowball doesn’t even hit, but it’s enough to get a squeak from the bird-fairy and Kozmotis comes to investigate and Jack ropes him into another snowball fight, although it’s less a fight and more sneak-up-on-unsuspecting-targets-and-pelt-them.

And when the Nightmares are allowed out, following the eventual departure of North, Kozmotis still seems happy when they come back well-fed.

It takes slightly over two weeks for Jack to get sick of all these people in his space – and when he catches Tooth’s little bird-fairies in the garden, Jack cannot resist. The first snowball doesn’t even hit, but it’s enough to get a squeak from the bird-fairy and Kozmotis comes to investigate and Jack ropes him into another snowball fight, although it’s less a fight and more sneak-up-on-unsuspecting-targets-and-pelt-them.

And when the Nightmares are allowed out, following the eventual departure of North, Kozmotis still seems happy when they come back well-fed.

Whatever magic keeps the flowers blooming is still at work, and whatever darkness robbed them of their colour has all but faded by now. No longer are the snowflakes the bright points of shining white, but Jack can’t bring himself to care.

“You filled the garden with snowflake flowers,” Jack says, softly. “And you made it so they wouldn’t go dull, like the snowdrops.”

Kozmotis looks down at Jack, a smile on his lips. “Even swathed in nightmares, I could hardly ignore your-”

“Stop that.” Jack scowls. “Look, you said- you said you felt the same. That you remembered everything-”

“I do,” Kozmotis interrupts. “But I am not Pitch, Jack. I’m not the man you-”

“Do you even know that?” Jack shouts. “You might not be exactly the same – you might not get so angry, or you might actually need to eat, but you’re more Pitch than you think you are! I’m not blind, sire.”

Maybe it was mean to use that word, but it illustrates Jack’s point perfectly – Kozmotis recoils like
he’s been physically hit, and stares at Jack with confusion plain on his face.

“You- you knew about that,” he states, a light flush on his cheeks.

“I liked it,” Jack mutters in reply, turning to look out over the gardens. “I liked baiting you and teasing you, and I liked it when you’d react and try so hard to pretend like you weren’t.”

There’s a breath behind him, and then a familiar hand is placed on the small of his back. “It’s a foolish man who plays games with the Nightmare King,” Kozmotis murmurs, sounding so exactly like Pitch that Jack turns and drags him into a kiss before he can stop himself.

It lasts only a handful of seconds, and when he lets Kozmotis go he says, “I love you,” before kissing him again.

Kozmotis kisses Jack like he’ll never get the chance to again, hands tight on Jack’s hips, and it is exactly what Jack has wanted since he kissed Pitch on the dais.

When they finally stop, they don’t step apart; Kozmotis keeps Jack tucked against his chest, and he leans down and says, “I am never going to let you go, Jack Frost.”

Jack shudders, and replies, “Good.”

(Just a story indeed)

Once upon a time, there was a great and terrible King. He was wrapped in shadows, and feared throughout the land, for he brought Nightmares in his wake.

He brought war to that land, and to all lands; war led by Nightmares and Fearlings alike. Though people and spirits and guardians alike all stood against him, none could hold him back, even when they fought to the last man. The King’s armies brought ruin and terror in their wake, and he stood as a beacon of darkness and fear for all those across the land.

The Nightmares spread from him, and they seemed to never end. Certain defeat seemed to be looming ever closer until-

The great and terrible King had just one secret, one weakness. He had a locket, and within it contained all his deepest, darkest fears – and the key to his defeat, had one cared to look. And as the people despaired, one creature alone stood above and said, “No.”

And so the moon blessed the creature the great and terrible King most feared, and gave her one special chance to defeat the King; the moon transformed her thus, and she led a child into the lair of the great and terrible King, and when that child was caught, she lured another, this one bright and brave and loyal.

The first child was set free, but the second vowed to remain forever and for always, an eternal loyal servant to the darkness of the King. He too was given a new form, a fitting new shape, and it seemed that the moon’s champion had chosen poorly in her quest.

But the second child shone so brightly even the great and terrible King could not look away, and it was here his weakness came to light.

For if anyone should love the darkness, and if anyone should love the great and terrible King, then he should not be so great or so terrible after all. And the second child, with his bright, brave heart,
saw through the darkness to the light within, and when all hope at last seemed lost, he broke the shadows surrounding the great and terrible King.

And with the darkness gone, the great and terrible King was shown to be not so fearful after all.

And that King ruled as well as any might, the bright, brave heart of the second child guiding him forevermore.

But that all happened long, long ago, and everyone knows it is just a story.

End Notes

To give you a sense of how long the time frame is, Jack first meets Pitch in November, and Pitch transforms into Kozmotis in early April.

Seraphina's bird form is similar in size and shape to that of a Resplendent Quetzal. Her colouring is closer to the males than the females. She was transformed into a bird by the moon, and neither Pitch nor any Nightmare can touch her due to its influence.

All the Nightmares are based loosely on Friesian horses, albeit with some marked size differences. Ebony, when first introduced, is a relatively small Nightmare.

In this particular universe, Fearlings begat Nightmares - Nightmares are more numerous and find it easier to feed, so they propagated. There are still some Fearlings left, although following Kozmotis' transformation into Pitch, they became heavily dependent upon him, and when he turned back into Kozmotis, they pretty much dissipated.

Jack's powers are less closely tied with his shepherd's crook/staff in this universe because they directly stem from his body rather than any other mystical power.

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