For Want of a Phone Call

by Fishpaste

Summary

What if Mrs Pumfrey's phone call had come earlier in the TV episode 'Merry Gentlemen'?
“Marvellous beef Helen!”

“Thank you.”

“Should be enforced by law!” Siegfried declared, reaching for his napkin. “If I had my way I wouldn’t treat a horse that hadn’t been immunised.”

“Well that would be the ideal thing but I can’t see it happening.” James replied. “Not in the foreseeable future anyway.”

“Why on Earth not, James?”

“Well, ignorance, apathy. I don’t suppose one person in a thousand recognises the dangers and after all, they are pretty remote!”

“Not good enough James,” Siegfried said empathetically. “If an avoidable risk to human life exists it should be eliminated.”

“How?” Tristan put in.

“Well simply by educating the public! I mean everybody takes vaccinations for Smallpox for granted…“

“Oh, come off it Siegfried, it’s not the same thing at all! You’re never going to get an outbreak of tetanus!”

Siegfried was about to reply when the phone in the hall rang shrilly. Tristan jumped up, dropped his napkin on the table and went to answer it. Devoid of his brother for an audience Siegfried turned again to his partner and his partner’s wife.

“But the individual risk does remain! I mean, as vets we’re protected and we get our anti-tetanus injections as a matter of course.” James nodded in agreement. “But take that fellow Myatt for example. He might have cut that wound out himself; nicked himself just as Tristan did and he wouldn’t have given it another thought because he was ignorant of the consequences. Chances are he’d be dead in a month.”

Helen frowned.

“Do you think you should speak to him about it? Next time you go up there?”

“Oh I did.” James replied. “He said he’d been inoculated a couple of years ago when he caught himself on some barbed wire.”

“Well that’s all right then-ah, Tristan. Who was that?”

“Our beloved benefactor!” The youth answered, swinging back down into his seat.

“Mrs Pumfrey?”

“Who else? She seems to have had a nasty dream about Tricky Woo, wants to come down tomorrow to check on him. I told her that would be fine, you don’t mind Helen?”
“Oh no, of course not! I really do think Tricky looks forward to seeing her too you know.”

“That dog must be the most spoiled animal in all of Yorkshire!” Siegfried said.

“Well he’s not exactly being fed champagne and truffles now Siegfried.” James said.

“No, but I can’t think of any animal with a more devoted nurse! I’m sure many humans don’t get as much care and attention when they’re sick.”

“I know I don’t.” muttered Tristan, spearing the last of his beef.

“Hush Tris,” Helen reproved. “Thank you for the compliment Siegfried. I’m sure Tricky will continue to improve and he’ll be back to his mistress before too long.”

Mrs Hall came in just then to clear the table and the family split their separate ways, Helen to the kitchen with Mrs Hall, Siegfried to the armchair by the fire, James to the surgery to finish dispensing the medicines and Tristan to the drinks cabinet, before a stern look from Siegfried sent him off to the hall instead. He pulled on his coat and wandered out to find a pint.

The next few days continued smoothly, Helen discovered the mystery of the locked room and Tristan resolved to uncover it. James had an accident with a budgie and had to find an emergency replacement and Siegfried spent six hours in a frozen field helping a horse who’d managed to get his head jammed through some railings. Despite the workload Siegfried was still in the Christmas mood, eventually dragging the other men of the household out to find a suitable tree. An adventure that ended with a last minute intervention for a very sick little donkey foal and a more subdued ride back home than anticipated.

“Tetanus!” Siegfried fumed as he drove the car down the winding road. “So easy to prevent! Just one little injection.”

“Come on Siegfried, they’re gypsies! Besides, the poor things only a few weeks old. They wouldn’t have had time to get it inoculated.” Tristan said.

“That’s still no excuse! What about their other animals then? The horses and the pony? Mark my words, they won’t have been inoculated either! It’s a crying shame, waste of a good animal out of sheer negligence.”

Tristan decided not to risk his brother’s wrath further. He shifted the dog on his lap and rubbed at his neck. This car was certainly not big enough for three grown men and a dog, he mused. They couldn’t have left him behind? Christmas was delightfully festive and yes, he did understand why Siegfried was so determined to make this one special, but it was still dammably cold out here, and the donkey detour hadn’t helped. He surreptitiously edged the dog over to James, who shot him an unamused glare but didn’t say anything and rubbed his neck again. Yes, he definitely needed a pint or two to take the cold out of his bones.

They arrived back home just in time to see Helen struggling with the door. James immediately leapt out to come to her assistance, gallantly taking one of the bags and opening the door while the two brothers went to unload the tree.

“Dash it all Tristan! Will you untie that rope!”

“What? Oh, right.”

“Heavens boy, you away with the fairies? Come on; put your back into it!”

“I’m trying Siegfried! You know, you could take some of the weight too!”
“I’m doing my fair share, which is more than I can say about some layabouts!”

“Layabout? I work hard enough Siegfried!”

“Putting away pints perhaps.”

Tristan scowled, the exchange getting to him more than usual. He gritted his teeth and hauled the tree through the front door at last. Couldn’t Siegfried ever lay off? No, apparently not.

“Now go and get the holly Tristan. Hurry for goodness sakes, I’m sure Mrs Hall doesn’t appreciate having the front door left hanging open! It’s freezing!”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.” Tristan said in annoyance as he fetched the holly. “Seemed like a balmy summer morning to me.”

“Don’t be flippant Tristan, there’s a good chap.” Siegfried took the holly and vanished into the living room with it. Tristan pulled off his coat and followed him. James and Helen were just standing the tree against the wall.

“It’s marvellous Siegfried!” Helen beamed, “We’ll have to decorate it properly.”

“Of course my dear! Of course we will! But first I think we could all do with some tea. It’s punishingly cold out there today.”

“Oh that sounds lovely, I’ll go put the kettle on shall I?”

“My dear Helen, what would we do without you?”

“I haven’t a clue.” James said, looking at his wife tenderly. She smiled prettily back at him and moved off to the kitchen. The phone called shrilly from the hall. All three looked at each other. Siegfried leaned out and glanced into the hall.

“Hmmmm, I believe little brother, that you are on emergency call outs tonight.”

Tristan glared but couldn’t be bothered to argue. He stumped off to the hall and lifted the receiver.

“Darrowby veterinary surgery, how can I help?”

James sank down onto the battered old sofa and sighed in appreciation at his hot cup of tea. Siegfried reclined opposite him and Helen settled down beside him. All was well. Tristan poked his head through the door.

“That was Mr Marsher; he’s got a pig with a bad leg. I’m going up now.” He withdrew, collected his bag and headed out grumpily.

“Well, Tristan’s in a mood anyway.” Helen commented. “What have you been doing to him?”

“Oh, nothing in particular. He does get unreasonably moody at times I find. Leave him alone, he’ll get over it.”

Three hours later Tristan returned, bruised and covered in mud. Siegfried watched him in amusement as he dropped off his bag and coat and headed upstairs to bathe. He returned shortly, still bruised but sans mud and made a bee line for the drinks cabinet. Siegfried decided against commenting. Particularly when Tristan brought him over a whisky as well. His little brother slumped in the chair opposite and stared morosely into the amber liquid.
“Pigs. Why do I always get the pigs?”

“You have an inherent talent with porcines perhaps?”

“Hah. Inherent talent for ending up with the worst jobs perhaps. Bloody thing was about the size of a cow and bad tempered to boot.”

“Watch your language Tris.”

“Sorry. Where are the happily married couple anyway?”

“James got a call out to Witherby’s. His cat’s having complications. I think Helen went up to their rooms.”

“Oh.”

“Are you actually going to drink that Tristan or are you just admiring it?”

“Hmm. Oh right.” He took a sip and swallowed. Then put it down and stretched. “Bother it, I’m exhausted. I’m going to bed and praying that the rest of the animals in Darrowby manage the night with no further problems.”

“Goodnight Tris.”

“Goodnight Siegfried.”
Tristan rolled over and winced. That pig had caught him a good couple of blows in the face and chest. No wonder his jaw ached. He opened one eye and checked the level of sunlight through the curtains. Deciding he should be okay for a little longer he returned under the blanket.

Downstairs Siegfried was working his way through buttered kippers and frowning at the newspaper. James was buttering toast and Helen was sipping her tea. It was a lovely peaceful day. Siegfried finished his breakfast and went to haul Tristan out of bed, still in his riding boots.

“You have the morning surgery don’t you darling?” Helen asked.

“Oh yes, for the rest of this week I think. Siegfried wants to get Tristan out onto the farms a bit more, give him some more experience with the bigger animals.”

“Poor Tris. He does hate the cold.”

“Ah, it will be good for him!”

“Now you sound like Siegfried.” James grinned and polished off the last of his breakfast. As he poured himself a final cup of tea Tristan emerged, still looking half asleep.

“Goodness gracious Tris, what have you done to yourself?” Helen exclaimed.

“Morning Helen. That pig with a bad leg? Was about the size of a horse!” He dished himself up some breakfast and sat down next to her. “Honestly, you could see its little piggy eyes gleaming with malevolence when I came anywhere near the sty. If Mrs Bond is right and animals are reincarnated he must have been a boxer in a previous life!”

“I’m sure; you’re a lovely mess of bruises Tris!” James laughed.

“I know. Still, one can only hope for some feminine sympathy later tonight!” Tristan grinned, “I believe it is your turn to take the emergency calls tonight!”

“Off to the Drover’s then?”

“It’s been so long since I’ve been they might have forgotten me already.”

“A good customer like you? Never!”

Tristan pulled a face at James as Siegfried swept back in with the daily lists. He accepted his resignedly and pushed his chair out from under the table.

“Are you going already Tris? You’ve barely touched your breakfast.”

“Not very hungry. See you this afternoon.” He headed off out, sliding past Mrs Hall in the doorway.

The surgery was quiet all morning and James left it to Tristan in the afternoon happily. He drove out across the dales to Endleby’s farm, savouring the view. Rolling hills and moors, dotted with sheep and mist. The sky was very pale blue, showing just how frigid the air was. The veterinary shivered and wished his car had a heater. He pulled up to the farm and set to work.

The evening was quiet as well. Tristan said the surgery had been spookily silent for most of the
time and he’d ended up annoying Mrs Hall by filching her mince pies. Siegfried wondered aloud if Tristan would ever grow up which led to an argument between the two brothers that only really ended when Tristan gave up and went out to the pub.

“He’s barely touched his supper.” Helen said thoughtfully. “You don’t think he’s coming down with anything do you?"

“He’s been stealing mince pies all afternoon Helen, and he’s busy getting himself completely drunk now I’m sure. He’d better be back at a decent time; he’s got plenty of work tomorrow. James, you’re on call out tonight aren’t you? Good. Anyone fancy a drink?”

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The next morning dawned bright and clear. The only mar on the perfect dawn being Siegfried’s shouting at his troublesome little brother.

“Of course you don’t feel well! What time did you get back last night? You idiotic young layabout! If you insist on spending night after night poisoning your liver then you can just accept the consequences!”

“But Siegfried…”

“No buts! You brought it upon yourself!”

Helen and James entered the living room to find a miserable looking Tristan poking dolefully at bacon and eggs and a fuming Siegfried berating him.

“You should know better by now little brother! The devil’s drink comes with a price!”

“It’s not a hangover! Believe me; I know what they feel like!”

(Of course it’s a hangover! You didn’t get back in until the early hours. Again!”

“Morning!” Helen said brightly. Tristan shot her a thankful glance, rubbing at the bruises on his jaw. She served herself some breakfast and sat down. “How are you feeling Tris?”

“Aawful. I think I’ve got a cold or something.”

“Or something is right. Nothing but a hangover, haven’t you had enough of them to recognise it?”

“It’s not a hangover!” Tristan’s protests were cut short when Helen laid the back of her hand on his forehead.

“Oh, you are a bit warm Tris. Feeling nauseous or giddy?”

“No. Which I would be if it was a hangover. I didn’t even drink that much last night. Heart just wasn’t in it for some reason.”

Siegfried frowned at his brother and reached across the table to grab his jaw. He checked Tristan’s temperature just as Helen had done.

“Hmmmm. She’s right. You have got a bit of a fever.”

“Thank you.”

“Can’t have you going around the farms like that. Wouldn’t do our reputation a bit of good.”
Tristan looked hopeful. “James, could you take Tristan’s list today? Tris you can have the surgery. It should be quiet enough.” Tristan looked disappointed but didn’t argue. He took a final sip of tea and wandered off out the room. James finished his breakfast and took the list.

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Surgery was quiet again thought Tristan mournfully. And both Helen and Mrs Hall were out shopping. Which left him with nothing to do but dwell upon how bad he felt. It was getting worse, his head and neck were aching and he could feel the fever climbing. He sighed miserably and rubbed at a sore shoulder. Those bruises were still hurting. Peering around the door showed a conspicuous lack of customers and he sat back down in the chair. Now his legs were aching too. Perhaps if they gave up on him entirely he could collapse and Siegfried would let him go to bed. Speaking of the devil, he heard the front door open and the barking of the dogs as they poured through. The noise made him wince, bloody animals, did they have to be so loud? The surgery door pushed open and Siegfried looked in.

“How do you feel Tris? Have we been busy?”

“Horrible. And we’ve been as quiet as the proverbial grave. Which is more than I can say of the dogs.”

“Oh, they’re just excited.” Siegfried came in properly and looked at Tristan, who had to glance away under the scrutiny.

“What?”

“You really don’t look well Tristan. Tell you what, we’ll cancel afternoon surgery, its quiet enough anyhow. James and I can manage this afternoon. You go to bed, get Mrs Hall to make you some tea or something.”

“Oh, cheers Siegfried!”

“Just put those instruments away first will you? There’s a good chap!” Siegfried passed Tristan his bag and returned to the hallway, calling for Mrs Hall. Tristan winced at the noise and opened the bag. He pulled out the metal implements and went to the sink to wash them down before returning them to the drawers.

As he was halfway across the floor however, Siegfried gave a particularly stringent bellow and Tristan felt his leg spasm painfully. He dropped the tools and stumbled against the surgery table, gritting his teeth against the pain. The table fell noisily and Tristan overbalanced, ending up on the floor as well. He gripped his leg with both hands; the muscles were as hard as a rock and closed his eyes. Seconds later he heard hurrying footsteps and Siegfried burst into the room. He dropped into a crouch in front of Tristan and reached for the painful leg. The muscle cramps eased away gradually and Tristan sighed in relief. He opened his eyes to see Siegfried staring at him in concern.

“What was that about?”

“I dunno.” Tristan licked his lips, was he slurring? His jaw felt odd. “Just seized up.” Siegfried’s eyes widened in alarm and he reached for Tristan’s neck, checking his pulse and feeling the muscles there.

“Tristan, tell me the truth, is you neck stiff? Your jaw? Having difficulty swallowing?”

“What – oh.” Tristan breathed in horror. “Yes to all three.” Siegfried drew in a breath and stood up, reaching down to help his brother up as well. His face and gone tight and pale and his hands
were slightly too tight as he hauled Tristan up.

“Come on. We’re going to see Doctor Allenson.”
“Tetanus?” Doctor Allenson asked.

“He’s got all the symptoms.”

“But isn’t he inoculated? I thought, well, you are vets aren’t you?”

“I just never got around to it I guess.” Tristan’s voice sounded small even to himself and he felt Siegfried put a hand on his shoulder.

“We’ve been treating a donkey with it you see,” Siegfried said. “Tristan scratched his hand while restraining it. Probably what caused the infection.”

The doctor flipped Tristan’s hand over, the cut was long gone by now of course. He felt the muscles in the young man’s neck and jaw.

“Difficulty swallowing? Producing an excess of saliva?”

“Yes and yes.”

“Right. Well there is one surefire test for tetanus, though I’m very much afraid there’s not much doubt here. Pass me that tongue depressor Siegfried would you? No, not the wooden one.” Siegfried passed it over. “Open up Tristan.”

Tristan opened his mouth and the doctor pushed the tongue depressor in until it touched the back of his throat. Instead of the expected gag reflex Tristan felt his jaw go into spasm and he bit down hard on the instrument. His neck locked up again as well, and it took several painful minutes for his muscles to relax again. Doctor Allenson put the depressor aside grimly.

“Yes. It’s definitely tetanus. I don’t need to tell you about the dangers do I?” Tristan shook his head mutely. “Good. Siegfried, you’ll need to take him up to the hospital straight away. Pack a bag; he might be there for a while.” Siegfried nodded and went to open the door, Tristan hopped down from the examining table. Just as he stood up, Siegfried knocked against a metal basin which clattered to the floor. The noise cut through Tristan like a knife, he flinched away from it and bumped up against the table. This made him flinch again and to his horror he felt the muscular contractions come on again, much worse than they had been before.

Siegfried reacted like lightning, spinning around and grabbing Tristan before he could crash to the floor. He eased the younger Farnon down gently, holding him steady as Tristan arched in pain, every muscle stiff. He muttered soothing nonsense, vaguely aware of the doctor kneeling next to them. Eventually Tris relaxed again but remained slumped against Siegfried’s chest, looking exhausted and scared. Siegfried squeezed his little brother’s shoulder and looked at the doctor.

“I’ll give him the first shot of anti-tetanus antibodies now. I don’t want to sedate him yet. Can you get him to the hospital alright?” The doctor said, standing up and fetching a syringe. Siegfried nodded. Tristan stood up shakily and accepted the injection without complaint, Siegfried keeping a hand on his arm.

He propelled Tristen back to Skegdale house and sat him down on the sofa. Tristan still hadn’t said a word. Siegfried crouched in front of him.

“I’ll go pack a bag for you. Stay here.” Tristan nodded, looking at the floor. Siegfried pushed his chin up with a finger until they made eye contact. “We’ll get through this little brother. Don’t
worry.” There, a flash of a smile in Tris’s eyes. Siegfried returned it and stood up again. He hurried up the stairs to Tristan’s room and collected the few things he’d need, pyjamas, a toothbrush and the like. He placed everything in a suitcase and hurried downstairs. Just as he reached the ground floor the door opened and James came in, followed by Helen. They were smiling and laughing together and Siegfried hated to break their happiness.

“Not going away are you Siegfried?” James asked, nodding at the suitcase.

“Well, yes actually James. Can you hold for the fort for the afternoon?”

“Of course, is Tristan still ill then?”

“Yes.” Siegfried hesitated again. James frowned slightly; the elder Farnon looked drawn and tired, worrying about something.

“Is everything alright Siegfried?” He asked. “Are you alright?”

“What? No, I’m fine.” Siegfried took a breath. “I need to run Tristan up to the hospital. I’ll stay with him until he’s settled there.”


“It looks like tetanus. Silly idiot hadn’t been inoculated.”

“Tetanus?” James had gone quite white now too. “What, from Myatt’s donkey?”

“ Seems more than likely James.”

“Are we sure its tetanus though? I mean, it can’t just be the flu or something can it?” Helen put in anxiously.

“I’m afraid the symptoms are quite specific, Helen my dear. He went into full opisthotonus spasm when at the Doctor’s.”

“Opisthotonus?”

“Muscle contractions,” James answered. “Including an arched back. Can last for several minutes.” He nodded grimly. “I’ll get the car round Siegfried.”

“Thank you James. I just need to telephone the hospital, make sure they’re ready for a tetanus case. Helen, would you check on Tristan? He’s in the living room.” Helen nodded, all traces of cheer gone from her face as she shrugged off her coat and went to find Tristan. Siegfried watched after her for a second then turned to the telephone.

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“Tristan?” Helen asked softly. The young blond was sitting on the sofa, head in his hands. He looked up as she came in and she saw how haggard he looked. Impulsively she sat beside him and put a hand on his back. “Are you alright Tris?” A muffled snort was her only answer. “Come on Tris, talk to me!” She implored. He sighed and sat upright.

“Sorry Helen. Bit much to take in.”

“Oh, Tris, why on Earth haven’t you had your inoculations?”

“Think I was away in Edinburgh when Siegfried had his. It just never came up.” He looked at the
floor. “Stupid thing to forget I suppose.” Helen found herself without words. She held Tristan’s hand.

Siegfried entered the room quietly, holding the suitcase.

“Come on Tris. Grab your coat.” Tristan nodded jerkily and stood up. He shot Helen a small smile and followed his brother out to the waiting car. James stood next to it. He watched the two Farnons come closer. Tristan looked very shaken and Siegfried was wound tight as a drum with worry. He pulled open the door for Tristan and took the suitcase from Siegfried, placing it on the back seat.

“You take care Tris.”

“Thanks James.”

Siegfried nodded to his partner and drove off with his brother towards the hospital.

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The car ride was very quiet. Tristan had closed his eyes and put his hands over his ears, the sound and movement disagreeing with him. Siegfried kept glancing between his brother and the road, doing his best to drive carefully and not jolt his passenger too much.

“Are you alright Tristan? Do you need to stop for a bit?”

“No. M’good.” The blond muttered.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of Tristan…”

“I’m not ashamed! I’m fine. I just…” He trailed off.

“Just what?” Siegfried prompted.

“Just…Oh Lord. I’m such an idiot. I didn’t mean to…” Tristan looked up at his brother with troubled eyes. “I’m sorry Siegfried.”

“No need to apologise Tristan. I’m sure you didn’t intend this to happen. I told you, we’ll get through this. Nearly at the hospital now. I’m sure all your nurses are waiting for you.” Tristan huffed a surprised laugh.

“State I’m in now. Such a waste.” Siegfried smiled but the icy hand of fear wrapped around his heart wouldn’t let go. All the statistics he knew about lockjaw were filling his minds. Lists of cold, hard facts stating that survival after the symptoms started showing, particularly the major muscle contractions, was unlikely. Death would occur by collapse of the airway as the contracting muscles damaged the throat, or by exhaustion and malnutrition as eating and swallowing became almost impossible. He tightened his grip on the steering wheel as they pulled up in front of the hospital.

The crunch of gravel under the cars tyres made Tristan flinch again. He breathed deeply and felt Siegfried’s hand on his arm, looking at him questioningly. Tristan nodded shallowly and opened the car door. His brother grabbed the suitcase and came around, heading straight through the doors.

The reception area was tiny. Tristan knew the girl on duty, Alice, reasonable well. He gave her a smile and she beamed back sympathetically. News travelled fast it seemed. He rubbed at his neck again as Alice called for someone to take them to the private room Siegfried had requested.
Tetanus sufferers needed absolute quiet and still, and usually dark as well, Tristan thought dully as he followed his brother and the orderly along the corridor.

The room they’d set aside was basic but it would serve, Siegfried thought. There was a bed, small dresser and a table. Basic, but adequate. Tristan looked around miserably. The curtain had been drawn shut, casting the room into semi dark.

“You get changed then lad,” Siegfried said. “I’ll wait outside.” He slipped out to give Tristan some privacy. The orderly looked at him sympathetically.

“I’ll go fetch the doctor then sir. If you have everything you need?”

“What? Oh, yes. Thank you.”

Siegfried waited a few moments longer then knocked gently on the door and entered. Tristan had changed into his pyjamas but hadn’t got into bed. He was putting the last of his clothing away in the tiny dresser, moving stiffly and holding his neck awkwardly. Siegfried felt the ache around his heart increase. He pulled his brother upright again. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence; Tristan wouldn’t meet his eyes again. Siegfried sighed.

“Oh, Tris. How do you get yourself into these messes?”

“Sorry. I didn’t think, well, I just…” He trailed off.

“It will be alright little brother. You’ll pull through.”

“Siegfried. I know the numbers on tetanus.” Tristan’s voice was flat and dead, though he was finally looking at Siegfried.

“They’re just numbers Tris. Statistics. That’s all. You’re young and strong and too stubborn for your own good. You will be fine.”

“Do you really think so?” Tristan’s voice had gone small again, unable to disguise his fear. Siegfried gave into instinct and pulled Tristan in for a hug. Tristan momentarily stiffened in surprise then reciprocated, burying his face in his brother’s shoulder.

“It’ll be alright Tris.”

“M’scared Siegfried.”

“We’ll fix it.”
Chapter 4

James sat in the darkened house. Helen had gone to bed at last. She’d wanted to stay up and wait for Siegfried to come back but he’d persuaded her that it would be better to wait until morning. Not that he was following his own advice. He put down the journal he was staring at blankly rather than reading and rubbed his eyes. The sound of a car made him look up and he heard the front door opening with relief.

“How’s Tris?”

“Settled. It’s a decent hospital; they’ll take good care of him there. Half the nurses are in love with him anyway.”

“But how is he?”

“Scared. As well he might be.” Siegfried laughed hollowly. “He knows as much about tetanus as we do. He’s got every right to be scared. Why didn’t we spot it sooner James?”

“I don’t know Siegfried.” James sighed. “I just assumed he’d been inoculated. Never even crossed my mind to worry about it.”

“Little idiot.”

“Mmmm.”

They sat in silence for some time, watching the fire burn.

“We’ll need some help here, with Tristan gone.” James ventured.

“Yes. I’ll phone Griers, see if he can lend us his new student a few nights a week.”

“You don’t want to get someone in full time? As you did when he went to Edinburgh?”

“Not really, no.” Siegfried looked uncomfortable. “He needs to know his place here is still open.”

“Ah. You don’t want him to feel we’re replacing him.”

“We could never replace him anyway. Can’t think of anyone else who could be quite so aggravating and charming at the same time.”

“That’s true.”

Siegfried went and fetched another drink.

“I won’t say I’m not worried though. Tetanus is well…it’s nasty. And he’s got the worst to go through yet.”
“He’s young and fit, Siegfried, he’ll pull through.”

“I hope you’re right James. I honestly do.”

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In the darkened hospital room Tristan shifted uncomfortable under the covers. Every muscle ached and his brain was uselessly circling the same three questions; ‘Why didn’t I get that stupid inoculation?’, ‘How bad is it going to get?’ and ‘Will I be alright?’ He tried to swallow but couldn’t and instead grabbed a clean handkerchief to wipe away the excess drool. Hardly a dignified illness; tetanus, he mused, first all your muscles stiffened and you got a fever. Excess drool that you couldn’t swallow away because your throat was locked up. Then muscle spasms, including the full body, back arching he’d experienced earlier. These could often be strong enough to break bones or sprain muscles. Finally the airway would become damaged and you’d suffocate. If you didn’t die of starvation first because you couldn’t eat! Oh, why hadn’t he got that injection?

He reached over to put the handkerchief back on the little table and froze, he could feel the spasm coming…he cried out as his arms contracted, painfully stiff, the spasms froze his neck too, with his head flung back. He squeezed his eyes shut against the pain and fought back a whimper. It wasn’t fair! He’d just missed one tiny injection! It hurt!

Footsteps in the corridor outside and suddenly the doctor was there, holding his arms gently and talking in a low, calm voice like the one Tristan himself used on animals. The comparison would have made him grin, if his face hadn’t already been locked into a rictus of agony. Eventually the muscles relaxed again and Tristan slumped back onto the bed, panting.

“All right now Mr Farnon?”

“Tristan, please. And yes, thank you.”

“Very well Tristan. I’m going to give you a sedative if that’s acceptable? It should help against the muscle spasms and help you sleep as well.”

“That’s fine. I’m a vet, I know what’s needed.”

“Really? Excellent, you’ll be a model patient then?” Tris grinned at the doctor weakly. He was quite young, with red hair and glasses. “I’m doctor Garrison. Hold still.” He slipped the needle into Tristan’s arm. Tris began to relax almost immediately.

“Thanks doctor.”

“Get some sleep Tristan.”

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Breakfast was a subdued affair in Skegdale house. Even the dogs seemed quieter than usual. Siegfried offered to take over morning surgery and the evening calls. James nodded agreement and went to get his car started.

“When will you go and see Tris?” Helen asked Siegfried.

“Early afternoon I suppose, before I do my visits. I won’t be able to stay long though.” He looked guilty. “You wouldn’t be going up there by any chance though?”
“Oh Siegfried! Of course I’m going to visit. Tristan will understand about the surgery, we’re a man down remember.” The elder Farnon looked relieved.

“Thank you my dear, I do dislike leaving him up there on his own. Griers has said his new student can come and help three days a week. That should help.”

“Oh, excellent!” Helen said and left the room. She hurried up to clean her and James’s rooms and work out a quick shopping list before she went to see Tris. As she came back downstairs Mrs Hall met her.

“You wouldn’t be going to see young Tristan would you?”

“Yes, I’m just heading up there now actually.”

“Could you tell him we’re all thinking and praying about him? Tell him to get better in time for Christmas.”

“Not much hope of that I’m afraid Mrs Hall,” said Siegfried passing through on his way to the surgery. “Tetanus can last several months.”

“Oh dear.” Mrs Hall said, eyes suddenly a bit wet. “That silly boy. You tell him I’ll be up to visit him as soon as I can. And I’ll bring him some of those mince pies he’s so fond of and all!” She bustled back off to the kitchen.

“Months?” Helen asked quietly. Siegfried looked at her tiredly.

“If he survives the first couple of weeks then he’s got a good chance. But full recovery will most likely take a further month or two.”

“If he survives…” Helen repeated sadly. Then she shook her head firmly and reached for her coat and hat. “Of course he’ll survive. If he’ll need a few more weeks to recover that’s no problem!”

She left the house and walked briskly up to the hospital. It was a bit of a trek, certainly, but she’d better get used to it. The breeze was cold and nipped at her fingers as she walked. Helen dropped into a couple of shops to pick up a few things and checked she still had a couple of Tristan’s favourite books in her bag. She reached the hospital soon enough and the receptionist directed her to Tris’s room. She knocked and waited for the ‘Who is it?’ before entering.

“Oh, Tris!” Helen exclaimed as she caught sight of the occupant. Tris looked quite ghastly, his skin very flushed, rings under his eyes and his hair sweaty and sticking to his head. He was holding his neck painfully still and slurred his words out through a stiff jaw. She moved over and put her hands on either side of his face.

“’lo Helen.” He was smiling, or trying to at least. He was honestly grateful for a distraction from his own thoughts and the constant ache. She smiled back, rather weakly.

“Oh you silly boy. What have you done to yourself?”

“S’rry.”

“Hush, don’t try and speak. Just tell me if you need anything.” Tristan shook his head awkwardly. Helen pulled over a chair and sat beside the bed. “Siegfried will be up later, after morning surgery. He and James are trying to work out a schedule now we’re a man down.”

“S’rry.”
“I said don’t try and talk if it hurts you! It was hardly your fault Tris, I’m fairly certain you didn’t decide to get tetanus just to get a few days off work!” That earned her a breath of laughter.
“Grier’s said he’ll led us his new student a few days a week until you’re back home.” Tristan nodded. “Mrs Hall sends her love, she’s praying for you. She’ll be up later too, when she has some time free, and she told me to tell you she’ll save some of her mince pies for when you come back.”

“Mi’ be a while.”

“We can wait Tris. As long as you do come back. Now I’ve brought some of your favourite books with me, would you like me to read to you for a while?”

“Please.”

“Hush! No talking! Are you comfortable?”

“Mmm.”

“Good. Now; ‘As Gregor Samsa woke from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin…”’
Chapter 5

It had been a hard few days James thought exhaustedly as he pulled the car up to the hospital. Nothing like the festive season for bringing on an extra workload. Their Christmas had been a subdued affair, all acutely conscious of the missing place at the table. Siegfried was shorter tempered than ever and even Mrs Hall’s cooking wasn’t quite up to her usual standards. They’d come to visit Tris after church of course but he’d been sedated and unconscious the whole day, apparently the muscle spasms were getting worse. He’d hung on this long though, James thought as he opened the door to his friend’s room, he’d hang on a bit longer surely?

“J’m’s!”

“Tris! You’re awake.”

“Mmmm.” Tristan blinked at him dazedly.

“Rather drugged up though I think.”

“Mmmmmmmm.”

James sat down in the chair next to the bed and looked at his best friend. Tristan had lost a lot of weight; the doctors were worried about it. He was hanging on though; his fever was mostly gone though he was still trembling and convulsing frequently. His breathing still seemed fine though, for which James gave private thanks. That was the worst danger.

“You’ll be pleased to know the little donkey foal made it. So if that tiny thing can pull through you definitely can!” Was he imagining the flicker of humour in Tristan’s eyes? Impossible to tell, he wasn’t even sure Tristan was listening to him; his eyes were drifting in and out of focus. “You got your snow as well, though it’s going quickly. Oh, and Tricky Woo made a complete recovery, he’s back home now. Rather a quiet Christmas all told; we’ll have to make up for it next year, right Tris?”

James smiled but it quickly faded. He was better with sick animals than sick people; he would be the first to admit it. But Tristan Farnon was his best friend, had been ever since he’d tricked James into carrying his suitcase from the station. Yes he was irresponsible, lazy and a womaniser with a dreadful habit of getting into scrapes and dragging anyone with him down as well, but he was cheerful, kind hearted, eternally optimistic and good natured and much more intelligent and loyal than he gave himself credit for. James reached out and grabbed Tristan’s hand from where it was resting on the bedcovers. The muscles twitched under his fingers. “Just…get better Tris. We need you back home. I think Siegfried’s ready to bite someone’s head off. Daft old sod won’t admit he misses you. Helen and I want you back too, it’s not the same without you around and Mrs Hall cleans your room every day for you, despite the fact no one’s using it. So you get better, you hear me? Get better and come home, right?”

“Hear you…”

“Tris? Hello there, so you are listening!”

“Mmmm.”

“You need to eat Tris, your body needs the nutrients.”

“Can’t. Hurts.” Tristan ground out then stiffened with a moan of pain, arching back up and his muscles contracted again. James grabbed his shoulders to stop him falling off the bed and shouted
for the doctor. Doctor Garrison hurried in, followed by a nurse. He waited until Tristan had
relaxed again and checked his pulse and breathing.

“Nothing damaged Tristan.” He reported cheerfully. “Now how about eating something?” Tristan
closed his eyes and tried to twist his head away.

“No. ‘urts”

“Come on Tris,” James said anxiously. “You know you have to eat.” The blond opened his eyes
and looked at him. Then he glanced at the doctor.

“Kay. Try.”

“That’s the spirit Tristan!” The doctor enthused. “Just gruel I’m afraid, but it’s smooth, it will help
your throat.” James took this as his cue to leave. Tristan watched him go.

*****

“No it’s not good enough James! You simply must get cash payment from those sort of people!”

“I tried Siegfried, I honestly did!”

“Clearly not hard enough! You’ve got to be firm with Magister’s sort. Don’t stand any nonsense!”

“Easy for you to say perhaps!”

“Settle down boys!” Helen cut in. “Dinner is here, now let’s be pleasant while we eat, shall we?”
Siegfried stared at her then sat down.

“Oh, I suppose so. Anything for you my dear.”

“Thank you. James?”

“The lady’s wish is my command, as always dear!”

“Thank you. Tris-“ There was an embarrassed pause. “I’m sorry. I keep forgetting.” Siegfried
smiled at her but his eyes were pained.

“Not to worry.” He was about to say more when the phone rang. Helen jumped up.

“I’ll get it.” Moments later she was back. “It’s for you Siegfried, the hospital.”

“What? Tristan? Is he…?”

“He’s the same. They want to ask about his treatment.”

“Oh. Right.” Siegfried put down his cutlery and went out to answer the telephone. Helen sat
down again and looked thoughtfully at her husband.

“James?”

“Yes dear?”

“What is the treatment for tetanus? Apart from the antibiotics of course?” James grimaced slightly.

“I’m afraid there isn’t much else. Antibiotics and sedatives to control the muscle spasms. A bit of
morphine to keep any pain away.”
“But we have all that here! Why couldn’t Tristan come back, stay here with us? I wouldn’t mind nursing, I’ve done it before.”

“I know you have dear, but I’m afraid it just wouldn’t work.”

“Why ever not?”

“Tristan’s suffering from acute sensitivity to sound. That’s why he’s in a separate room at the hospital even. I’m afraid staying here, what with the telephone and the dogs and the clients…he wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

“Oh. Oh, poor Tristan. I wish he were back with us again.”

“I do too, darling. And so does Siegfried! He needs somebody to shout at again, I’m no good for that!”

As he was speaking Siegfried came back into the room, walking slowly and with rather a stooped gait. He sat down at the table again but made no move to continue eating. James and Helen looked at one another.

“What did the hospital say?” Helen ventured. Siegfried seemed to snap out of a trance. He picked up his cutlery and began cutting the meat.

“Tristan’s still not eating. He’s getting very weak.”

“Still?”

“Yes. They wanted to know if they could have my permission to start force feeding if he doesn’t improve soon.”

“Force feedi-” James looked down at his dinner, suddenly a lot less hungry than he had been a moment prior.

“Yes. He needs the nutrients.”

Nothing more was said. Dinner was a silent affair.

*****

“I’m so sorry it’s come to this Mr Farnon.” Doctor Garrison said sympathetically. They were standing in Tristan’s room at the hospital. Tristan was only semi-conscious, not responding to any voices but still reacting to pain stimulus. He was very gaunt now and trembling almost constantly. A string of drool ran down the side of his face and his skin was ghostly white. Siegfried bit back the lump of emotion in his throat and turned his attention to the doctor.

“I understand doctor. He needs the nutrients.” The doctor watched him carefully.

“You don’t have to stay Mr Farnon, I know it can be rather distressing.”

“I’m a vet. I know what force feeding entails. I just want to be here in case he wakes up. He might need a familiar face.”

“He might.” The doctor agreed quietly. He moved away and started setting out the equipment. It was brutally basic, consisting of nothing more elaborate than a thin rubber tube and a funnel. Siegfried reached out and took his brother’s hand. It twitched under his grasp but Tristan didn’t respond otherwise.
The Doctor took up his position and a nurse stepped up to assist him. Between them both they forced Tristan’s clenched jaw open and inserted the tube, gently threading it down into the stomach. Once it was in place they inserted the tip of the tube into the funnel and began to ease the gruel down into the patient. Tristan jerked once or twice and then his eyes flew open in distress. The second nurse held his shoulders to stop him sitting up and Siegfried leant across his wasted body, holding him down. Tristan struggled against the invasive tube.

“Tristan! Tris! Calm down, it’s going to be alright! Come on Tris, that’s it, gently now…” Siegfried soothed as Tristan seemed to notice him for the first time. Almost hesitantly he relaxed again, as the doctor drew out the tube. “It’s over now. We just needed to…oh Tris…” Siegfried tailed off. The Doctor shot him a glance and bustled the two nurses out with the equipment, leaving the brothers alone.

Siegfried sat down on the edge of Tristan’s bed, not even realising he was still holding his brother’s hand. Tristan blinked at him slowly.

“What?”

“I’m here. I’m sorry Tristan. I didn’t want to hurt you, but you have to eat. Your body needs the nutrients.”

“No.”

“No, you can’t say ‘no’ Tris, you’ve got to…” Tristan rolled his eyes expressively.

“I ‘no.’”

“You know?”

“Ys.”

“Oh.”

There was an awkward silence for a few moments. Siegfried stared at the collection of get well cards Tristan had amassed; they almost covered the tiny dresser and table. Tristan shifted on the bed.

“S’okay Sigfrd. Need to.” He stopped and tried to swallow but couldn’t.

“Hush, Tristan. I know. You’re going to be okay.” Tristan suddenly looked smaller and more vulnerable.

“R’ly?”

Siegfried leaned down and embraced his brother’s thin form.

“Yes.”
Chapter 6

It was dark and quiet in the hospital. Visiting hours were over and the night shift staff had all come in. Tristan lay dully in his bed, staring unseeingly at the ceiling. Well, it wasn’t as though he needed to see it anyway, by this point he knew every crack and mysterious stain, every cobweb and bit of dirt better than those in his own room. He cut his eyes to the door as soft footsteps passed by and sighed again through his locked jaw. ‘Lockjaw’, such an apt name really.

Siegfried had been by earlier, though he’d been a bit too groggy to really respond to him. Sedatives and pain killers were not the best remedy for a clear head, but when both were wearing off, as they seemed to be now, they were instantly replaced by an unceasing aching pain in every muscle he knew he possessed and some he hadn’t know about before. Tristan breathed in deeply, ignoring the dryness of his throat. What he wouldn’t give for a nice cold glass of water right now, well, that and the ability to actually drink it.

He closed his eyes again and prepared to try and sleep again. The drugs had completely thrown his sleeping patterns off. Siegfried would be sure to comment that his sleeping habits were inconsistent enough anyway but thankfully his brother wasn’t actually able to comment on his internal monologue. Good lord, he must be on a lot of drugs indeed if those were the kind of thoughts circling his brain!

Would this damnable illness never end? He’d been in the hospital for about twelve days now, give or take, and everything just seemed to be getting more painful and exhausting all the time. He had no appetite for the food everyone kept trying to make him eat, they’d had to resort to force feeding twice more already, which was one of the most unpleasant and invasive medical treatments he’d ever suffered through. Yes, he knew why he had to eat, he honestly knew all the science and statistics about it, but no amount of theoretical knowledge could prepare you for the unrelenting agony of tetanus. Eating food, especially that watery gruel they kept feeding him, was more than he could face. The doctors were beginning to despair he knew, they never said it in so many words but Tristan had always been good at reading body language.

Siegfried was worried too. Tristan had never seen his brother quite so out and out concerned for him. Pity he wasn’t really in a position to take advantage of it. He was a strange old bird though, Siegfried. When the chips were really down, when it was really important, he always came through. Had done, ever since Tris could remember. It was easy enough to overlook it though; he did rather encourage one to dwell on the less positive aspects of his character. Still, he did care, when you got right down to it. James too, and Helen. He missed them. Infrequent visits weren’t nearly the same. Tristan was tired of hospital, tired of the pain and the pressure to eat and the drugs and the soreness; tired of the whole damn lot of it. He sighed again.

As he did so he felt a sudden tickling in his throat, followed by a loosening of his jaw. Hardly daring to believe it he raised his hand to his face and tenderly felt the jaw. Yes! The muscles were relaxing! He swallowed, for the first time in months it felt like and his throat felt better too. The muscles in his shoulders were relaxing as well. Tristan felt like cheering, it was retreating! The illness was finally leaving! Oh, he’d beaten it! Yes! Finally! He swallowed again triumphantly and yawned, stretching the muscles as he’d not been able to in weeks. Oh, praise providence! Now, could he talk again? Only one way to find out.

“Doctor?” He swallowed and tried again “Doctor?” Hurrying feet outside and Doctor Garrison appeared at the door. Odd, Tristan had thought he’d have gone home by now.

“Tristan? What’s the matter.”
“Doctor.” Tristan found himself smiling in relief. “Throats b’trr!”

“I can hear! Oh that’s fantastic! Right, can you sit up? Let me check your neck again…”

*****

Helen hurried up the driveway towards the hospital, the wind tugging playfully at her hair. James and Siegfried had been arguing late last night, something to do with a misdiagnosis of a cow? She hadn’t really been paying attention. The argument was less about the content and more about Siegfried needing to vent his stress over Tristan somehow. Poor Tris, he’d been worse and worse every time she’d visited him. She smiled at the duty nurse, Rebecca, and knocked gently on Tris’s door before pushing it open. There wasn’t much point in waiting for an answer when he couldn’t speak, poor boy.

She stepped into the room and gasped in astonishment. Tristan looked up and grinned at her, his full on crooked teeth, ‘I did something good’ smile. He was sitting up and devouring a bowl of soup, with a book at his elbow. She walked over to him, unable to prevent the smile spreading over her own face.

“Oh, Tris! You look marvellous!”

“Morning Helen!”

“And speaking properly again, I can’t tell you how happy I am to hear your voice again!” Tristan flushed and glanced away.

“Yes, it has been a while hasn’t it? I can’t tell you how glad I am to speak properly again! I can even eat!”

“Tris, how wonderful!” She sat down and clasped his hand. “You’re really on the mend then?”

“Yes, finally. Nasty stuff, tetanus but I’m definitely over the worst now.”

“No more muscle spasms?”

“No. Still stiff, but it will fade.”

He smiled at her again; she drank in the sight of an awake, aware Tris, so different from her previous visits.

“Are you still sensitive to sound then?”

“No, not a bit of it! I tell you, the illness itself fades fast, it’s merely getting my strength back that will take the time.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful! When can you come back home then? I know Siegfried’s been missing you, and Mrs Hall is just longing to have you back so she can fuss over you properly.”

“Sounds promising.”

“So when will you be able to come home, truthfully Tris?”

“I’m not sure; you’ll have to ask the doctor. He’s usually doing his rounds about now, shouldn’t be too long.”

“Well, I hope it will be soon. Now, can I get you anything from home or the village now you’re feeling a bit better?”
“Could you bring me my textbooks? And make sure to tell Siegfried you have done so?” He grinned at her again, his conspiratorial naughty schoolboy smile. “And some of my books too? I’ll finally have a chance to catch up on a few of my old favourites. Well, I suppose I will, I’m not going to be out of bed for a few weeks yet.” He looked gloomy again.

“Oh, come now Tris, a few weeks in bed with people pandering to your every need? You’re going to be as spoiled as Tricky Woo by the time you’re ready to get up again!” That made him laugh she was glad to see.

“Dear old Tricky Woo! He did get over the jaundice didn’t he?”

“Yes yes, he was quite recovered before Christmas.”

“And Mrs Pumfrey sent a token of her gratitude?”

“It was an absolutely enormous hamper Tristan! She is an old dear. She asks after you regularly you know.”

“Me?”

“Yes, whenever James gets called out to see to Tricky.”

“Oh, that’s very nice of her.”

“James says the Drover’s are missing you very much as well!” He laughed again.

“What did Siegfried say to that?”

“Nothing, just frowned and walked out!”

“Heavens, he has missed me hasn’t he? To pass up an opportunity like that!”

“We all have Tris…Hello Doctor Garrison.”

“Hello Mrs Herriot, isn’t he looking better?” The doctor beamed at her, his glasses slightly askew. “He’s eating properly as well, which was the main concern.”

“It’s wonderful Doctor! When will he be ready to come home?”

“He should be up for it in a few days.”

“Excellent!” Tristan commented.

“As long as he receives proper care while he’s there.”

“Oh, never worry on that account.” Helen smiled, “I think we’re all looking forward to having him back. I’m sure he’ll be spoilt rotten!”

“Even more excellent!”

“Hush, you. Let the doctor speak.”

“Sorry.”

“Right well, as I was saying, if he continues to eat well and rest, he should be able to make the trip in three or four days. It won’t be a fast recovery though, it will be several weeks before he’s up to
walking about and a good month or two before he could possibly go back to work, particularly as a country vet!”

“Of course doctor Garrison.”

“Excellent, I’ll leave you two to it then!” He strode out, whistling cheerfully.

“Just a few more days then Helen.”

“I can’t wait. Oh, I must tell Siegfried the good news! He’s been so worried.”

“Oh, I must tell Siegfried the good news! He’s been so worried.”

“About me?”

“There’s no need to sound surprised Tris, of course he’s been worried about you. Particularly when you weren’t eating. He’s got the morning surgery today, if I hurry back now I can make sure he comes to visit straight after lunch.”

“Well, if you’re sure.”

“You’ll be alright here?”

“Oh, of course. All the nurses are making a simply wonderful fuss over me now!”

“Oh Tris. You’ll never change will you?”

“Aha, you wouldn’t have me any other way.” He yawned suddenly. “Sorry. Still rather tired.”

“Go to sleep Tris, Siegfried will be by later, and I’m sure James won’t be far behind him.”

****

Back at Skeldale house, Helen pushed open the door to the surgery.

“Oh, James? What are you doing here?”

“Well, that’s hardly an encouraging attitude Helen dear!” He smiled up at her, hands full of rabbit. The little girl at the table watched him solemnly.

“Sorry James, I was looking for Siegfried.”

“He’s gone up to the hospital. I finished my visits rather quickly today; he asked if I could take over the surgery for a couple of hours. Didn’t you see him there?”

“No, we must have just missed each other. He’s in for a surprise though!”

“A surprise? Hold on a moment…ah. There we are Polly, Biscuits should be as good as new now. Just don’t let him run off again!” The little girl took her rabbit and went out. James moved over to the sink to wash his hands. “What sort of a surprise? How’s Tristan?”

“James, it’s marvellous! He’s so much better now!”

“Really?”

“Yes, he’s eating and sitting up, and talking normally again too!”

“Oh, that’s wonderful! Good old Tris, I knew he’d pull through!”
“Isn’t it! I must go and tell Mrs Hall the good news, take care darling!” She hurried out. James dried his hands thoughtfully. Well, Tris had beaten the odds there, he would wager the young Farnon wouldn’t neglect getting his inoculations again!
Chapter 7

Siegfried beamed down at his little brother.

“Excellent Tristan! I knew you’d beat it.”

“Just about Siegfried!”

“Nonsense, never any doubt.” He sat down on the chair next to the bed. “Throat muscles relaxed then? Swallowing again?”

“Yes and yes, I am fully and truly on the mend.”

“Eating alright?”

“I feel like the fattened calf the amount of food they keep bringing!”

“Excellent! So you’ll be coming home soon?”

“In a few days, the doctor tells me.”

“Well, we’ll be glad to have you back.”

“Not as glad as I’ll be to be back. I never thought I’d want to leave the fussing nurses but one does feel a certain hankering for my own room after a while.” Tristan grinned at his brother and stifled a yawn.

“Are you still on the antibiotics then Tris?”

“Yes, well, the last of them. Sorry Siegfried, can hardly keep my eyes open.”

“No matter, dear boy, I’m just pleased to see you recovering. Your body’s been fighting a hard battle these last few weeks.”

“Mmmm.”

“Go to sleep Tris, you’ve earned it.” Siegfried watched Tristan give up and drift off again. Silly little blighter, he’d been forcing himself to remain awake there. He smoothed some of the hair out of his brother’s eyes. The tight anxious feeling in his gut was finally easing, the cold hand of fear around his heart lifting. Tristan was out of the danger period now. Granted his little brother was frequently irritating, often irresponsible and seemingly permanently in trouble but Siegfried couldn’t imagine life without his taller little brother under his feet and in his hair constantly. James and Helen were wonderful, truly wonderful people but Tris…well; there was some truth to the saying that blood was thicker than water. Siegfried offered a quick prayer of thanks that Tristan had been spared. He gave his hand a reassuring squeeze and turned to leave, unable to fight back the spreading smile.

*****

The crunch of tyres on gravel alerted James to the long awaited arrival. He hurried out of the surgery to the front door just in time to watch Siegfried positively bounce out of the driver’s seat and around to the passenger’s side. Slumped against the headrest, Tristan appeared to be asleep at first glance but stirred quickly enough when the sea of dogs poured past James to leap around the car joyfully barking. Siegfried fended them off with practised ease as he opened Tris’s door and
hauled the younger Farnon out. Tristan kept one arm around his brother’s shoulders as they made their way to the house and James hurried to add his support.

Between them they managed to get Tristan safely settled on the living room sofa, though he was very pale and shaky by the end of it, probably further than he’d moved in weeks, James thought. He hurried back out to fetch Tristan’s bag from the hospital. By the time he’d got back Mrs Hall was fussing around Tristan, who was grinning cheerfully again.

“Thanks for the tea and scones Mrs Hall,” Tristan was just saying.

“Nonsense dear, you need feeding up, no mistake. I’ll go and get started on dinner!”

“Marvellous, Mrs Hall” Siegfried called as she headed back to the kitchen. “Well, little brother? Glad to be back then?”

“Absolutely! If only for the cooking!”

“Hallo again Tris! Fed up with hospital already?”

“Hello James, yes, two weeks is a bit more than even I can handle.”

“What? All those pretty nurses?”

“Hah, strict patient confidentiality there James!” Tristan grinned smugly.

“That’s only between a doctor and his patients!”

“Well, a gentleman never tells anyway.”

Siegfried stopped short of rolling his eyes and accepted a cup of tea. Tristan was still much too thin and weak but his sense of humour seemed to have bounced back extraordinarily quickly. He watched the boy bantering with James fondly, God he’d missed having him in the house. Though he was sure they’d be back to rowing as soon as Tristan was strong enough for it. The front door opened and Helen appeared.

“Oh Tris! You’re back! How wonderful!” She bent over to give him a kiss on the cheek. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here, Mrs Wingbat kept me waiting.”

“Never fear Helen, I’ve only been back about five minutes.”

“Cup of tea, dear?” James asked.

“Oh, lovely, thank you.”

“Now I simply must hear all the gossip Helen, I’ve missed so much of it!”

“Gossip? Idle speculation boy, filling your head with all that nonsense when you could be focussing on your studies!” Siegfried said.

“Have a heart Siegfried, just wanted to know the news!” It seemed Tristan had missed arguing with his brother as much as Siegfried had. Well, Siegfried could afford to be generous and lose he supposed.

“News and gossip are very different things Tristan, there’s a great deal of difference between learning that Tim Farrowby’s got a new herd of Shorthorns and theorising on who is courting the new barmaid at the Drover’s!”

“There’s a new barmaid?”
“That is not the point Tristan, you’ve got to learn to use the right terminology at all times! It might even help if you used it in your exams!” Too far? No, Tris was still having fun; you could see it in his eyes.

“Quite Siegfried, now about this new barmaid…”

“Give up Tris!” James cut it, “She’s already engaged!”

“Alas, such a waste. Still, be a while before I can make it to the pub anyway.”

“I’m certain they’ll be heartbroken at the news dear brother. I’m surprised they haven’t declared bankruptcy with you out of the way!” Ah, now Tris was pouting, best pull back a bit. “Any calls while I was out James?”

“Nothing urgent.”

“Good. Now Tris, you are to stay on that sofa and not move for the rest of the day.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Good. Lambing season is due soon; I need you back in business by then!”

“Oh of course, eye on the long game Siegfried?” Back to smiling with his eyes. Goodness, did Tristan even realise just how easy he was to read at times?

“Of course! We are a busy veterinary surgery after all!”

“Of course!” Tristan said, watching Siegfried’s face. Yes, he was teasing, you could see it in the line of his shoulders. He wondered if Siegfried knew how easy he was to understand, you could read his thoughts in his face as plain as day. Funny that no one else ever acted upon it, James could never tell the difference between angry for a reason Siegfried, angry for the sake of being angry Siegfried and mock angry Siegfried. Really, the differences were absurdly clear!

Siegfried put his cup of tea down and moved to sit on the sofa next to Tris.

“But for now, rest little brother!”

*****

Two months later Siegfried thundered down the stairs and grabbed the shrilling phone.

“Yes…yes…right…no…someone will be straight there…yes…right…yes.” He glanced at the clock, four thirty. Right. He stormed upstairs and flung open Tristan’s door.

“Wha…?”

“Tristan! Didn’t you hear the phone! You’re on emergency call out! Get up! Get up you lazy thing!”

“Siegfried, phone? What?” Tristan’s ruffled hair emerged from the heap of blankets, eyes half lidded in sleep.

“Yes, the telephone! Now for goodness sake get up!”

“Oh, right.” Tris pulled himself upright and heaved the covers off.

“Oh, God, it’s freezing!”
“Good, that’ll wake you up faster!”

“Have a heart Siegfried! What time is it?”

“Half four, now will you get a move on!”

“I’m up! I’m up, I’m up, I’m up! Who was it?”

“Mrs Bond, one of her cats has been in some sort of fight apparently.”

“Oh, Siegfried! Mrs Bond can’t stand me! Why is she up at half four any-wait. Which cat?”

“Boris, I believe?”

“Boris!”

“‘Fraid so!”

“That’s not a cat! It’s a panther in heavy disguise!” He grabbed his clothes and pushed Siegfried out the room, still grumbling. “First night back on emergency calls and I get the hell cat. Great.”

Siegfried paused outside the door, listening to Tristan pull himself together enough to go out. He grinned at the crash as Tristan tripped over something or the other and fell over, cursing evocatively. It was nice to have life here back to normal!

He strolled back to bed, whistling a jaunty tune.

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