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Tale As Old As Time

by [Dulcinea](#)

Summary

Once upon a time, in the heart of Germany, a young prince named James lived in a shining silver castle...

Chapter 1

Once upon a time, in the heart of Germany, a young prince named James lived in a shining silver castle. Although he had everything his heart desired, Prince James was selfish, rude and unkind to all.

One winter's night a beggar woman came to the castle and offered him a single rose in return for shelter from the bitter cold. Repulsed by her haggard appearance, James sneered at the gift and turned the old woman away. She warned him not to be deceived by appearances, for beauty is truly found within.

Still the prince turned the woman away. And when he dismissed her a second time, her ugliness melted away to reveal a beautiful Enchantress.

James tried to apologize for his actions but it was too late. She had seen there was no love in his heart. As punishment, she transformed the prince into a hideous beast and placed a powerful spell upon the castle and all who lived there.

Ashamed of his monstrous form, James concealed himself inside his castle with a magic mirror as his only window to the outside world.

The rose she had offered was truly an enchanted rose, which would bloom for 100 years. If he could learn to love another, and earn love in return, by the time the last petal fell, then the spell would be broken. If not, he would be doomed to remain a Beast for all time.

As the years passed, James fell into despair and lost all hope... for who could ever learn to love a Beast like him...?

**

*December 1983
100 Years Later*

In a small village miles outside of Munich, Lars biked his way into town, dressed in warm wool clothes to handle the brisk winter morning. The large trees began to shrink the closer he arrived, replaced by taller buildings and homes. As usual, some of the townfolk gave him weird looks, while others recognized him and waved hello. His father's reputation as the eccentric antisocial tainted his own. No one knew why his father acted this way except him.

He went to the store first, picking up bread, milk and cheese, before heading for Mr. Richter's. While his father was the misanthropic painter, he was the cheerful bookworm, the one who came into town to tutor children in English as well as hoard most of the books from Mr. Richter's store. Even though he was well-liked by the children and their parents, there were still some who judged him by his father, and it hindered business for him. The town was small enough where everyone talked to everyone, and it was getting harder to convince parents to let him tutor their son or daughter.

He parked his bike beside Mr. Richter's bookstore. The bells hanging over the door twinkled as he entered, carrying five large books in both arms.

"Hello, Mr. Richter? It's me, Lars!"

"Lars! Hello!" Helpful large hands scooped up the stack of books from him. Mr. Richter leaned to the side and grinned. "I'm surprised you worked through these classic texts so fast. They're very

verbose.”

“They were but I have to prepare for the entrance exams.” He watched Mr. Richter place back on the shelves *Paradise Lost*, the entire *Divine Comedy* and *Metamorphoses*. “You were right. I did like Milton the most. His verses out-shined Dante’s.” He sighed. “Too bad I can’t afford to buy these books yet. I really appreciate that you let me borrow them.”

Mr. Richter sadly smiled as he finished restacking. “It’s not a problem. The fact that you teach the children English makes this old bookworm’s heart all warm inside. Children need to read, especially in these parts, and you’re giving them a great service. And you’re such an avid reader too! How can I not let you borrow them? Speaking of…”

Lars’ whole face lit up. “It came in? It finally came in?!”

“Just this morning.”

He followed Mr. Richter to the front of the shop and grinned like a fool as he was handed over what he waited so long for: the original version of *Yvain, le Chevalier au Lion*. He gripped the 250-page epic poem tight in his hands.

“Danke, Herr Richter. I promise I’ll bring it back tomorrow.”

Mr. Richter shook his head. “Keep it. It’s yours. Free of charge.”

Lars’s mouth dropped open. “What? Really?”

“Of course. Who would want to buy, let alone *read* a French epic poem in a German town? I don’t think anyone knows the language like you do.” He waved him off, smiling. “Now go. Enjoy it.”

He went behind the desk and flung his arms around Mr. Richter’s large frame, swinging him back and forth with all his strength. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Mr. Richter’s laughter followed him outside as he mounted his bike again, dumping the book into his basket. He couldn’t believe. It was all his. Now he could—

Lars startled when strong hands slapped down onto the bike’s handlebars, keeping him in place. He looked up into all-too familiar hazel eyes leering at him, red hair spilling over squared shoulders.

“What’s the rush, Lars?” Dave leaned in, resting his arm over the handlebars. “Aren’t you eager to see me?”

He frowned. “Go away, Dave. I have to get home.”

“Why? Dad ran out of paint again? Or did he come to his senses and decide to get a real job?”

“Piss off!” Lars yanked his bike away from Dave, pedaling backwards.

Dave slammed his hands over Lars’s handlebars again, keeping him in place. He leaned over him, his voice lowering into a growl. “Stop avoiding me and just give in.”

He glared back. “I’m not going to be another trophy for you, Mr. Savior.”

“You won’t resist me forever. No man or woman in this town has.”

Lars rolled his eyes. It was sad. Dave wasn't always like this. He remembered when he first came to this town, Dave was once a nice, quiet boy who showed him around and thought he was smart for reading so many books. But after Dave saved a few children from a large wolf, the town made him into a hero, and all the praise went to his head, inflating his ego. He became pompous, rude, a sex maniac, bedding anyone he could, using his small fame to get anything he desired. Now Lars wanted nothing to do with him at all.

“Just let me go home, okay?” He jerked his bike back with all his strength, yanking it out of Dave's grip— but he barely got a foot back on a pedal before Dave jerked out his new book from the front basket. “Hey, no! Give it back!”

Dave used his height to his advantage, pulling it up above Lars. He flipped through the pages frowning as Lars jumped up and down, trying to grab it away from him. “What do you see in these things anyway? There's no pictures.”

Lars gained enough leverage to snatch the bottom of the book and yank it out of Dave's hands. “Because some books don't have pictures, dumbass. Some people actually use their imaginations.” He threw the book into the basket and mounted his bike again. “Bye.”

Dave popped up in front of him again. “I think it's time you stopped reading books and paid attention to more important things.”

“Like what? You?”

Dave grinned. “That's a start.”

“I'd rather watch my father's paint dry.” He made sure to pedal as fast as he could before Dave got in his way again. “See ya!”

By lunchtime Lars made it back, parking his bike and locking it to the side of the house. They lived far from the town, enough to maintain their privacy, but close enough so it wasn't too far to bike. As he went to the door and fished out his keys from his pockets, he looked down and saw on the welcome mat piles of bills. Lars fingered through them and sighed. Every one was a late notice, a second late notice. *Dammit Torben.*

He came inside and found his father the same way he left him, standing in the living room in front of a canvas, covered in paint from head to-toe, brush in hand—and dripping blue onto the floor. Again. More stains to rub out of the floor so their landlord wouldn't get pissed off and threaten to kick them out. *Again.*

Lars sighed. “How many times have I told you to use a tarp, dad?”

“You're back early.”

“Hans is going to be pissed. It's fucking hard scrubbing that shit off.”

His father made a long paintstroke from one end to the other.

Lars watched him stand in silence, and then shook his head. “I'll get dinner ready.”

He went to the kitchen and sorted out the groceries before he situated the table for a meager dinner of cheeses, fruits and bread. It was all they could afford. A year ago it was a different story. They weren't in Germany, there wasn't much silence or tension between he and his father, and his mother was alive. When they lost Lone, they lost everything. First the house. She was the breadwinner. Without her, they had to leave. Lars wanted to stay in Denmark, but his father said no, we have to go elsewhere. His father changed when Lone died, and he hated it. Torben became

a recluse, shutting himself off from everything and everyone, too stubborn to get a job and let go of his pipe dream. No matter how many times he told Torben, “You’re letting your depression win,” he didn’t listen. So it was up to Lars to be the man of the house and care for himself and his father, all the while pushing his own grief—and his own dreams—behind.

“Is something the matter?”

Lars didn’t look up. He poured the two of them glasses of milk and placed the bottles in the refrigerator.

“Lars?”

“What?”

“You look stressed.”

No shit dad. “I was thinking about your trip tomorrow. Did you pack yet?”

“I will in the morning.”

“Alright.” He sat down at the table. Footsteps came close and the chair opposite him skidded back across the floor. “You gonna finish that canvas on time?”

“Perhaps. It’s fine if I can’t.”

“Mm.” Lars grabbed a few pieces of cheese for his plate. “So I was thinking. About university.”

“Yes?”

“Maybe I should get a job instead.”

“You shouldn’t—”

“Come on, Torben.” He finally looked up. There was some paint in Torben’s beard, paint splatters and drops scattered across his shirt. “We have too many bills and not enough income. We can’t make ends meet.”

“We’re not homeless yet.”

“We’re close to it.”

“We won’t be.” Torben touched his shoulder. “You are too smart and too talented to end up in a dead-end job.”

Lars sighed. “A *part-time* job.”

“Tutoring is exactly that.”

“It’s not enough!”

“Your mother wanted you to focus on school—”

“And she’s dead.” He shrugged off Torben’s hand, shooting up from his chair. “Get it through your head already.”

He ran up the stairs to his bedroom, ignoring the loud call of his name.

His stomach rumbled as he tried to read *Yvain*, but he couldn't focus. The hunger ate away at his concentration, as did his guilt. The way his father looked when he said those words, the hurt, like he shot him...

That was a low blow, Ulrich and you know it.

Lars rested the book onto his chest. He stared up at the ceiling.

"I'm sorry dad."

He closed his eyes.

I'm sorry too, mom.

Come the morning, Lars was surprised to find his father already packed and in the car, ready to go to the Munich Art Festival. He barely had time to dress himself before he ran outside to stop him from leaving too quick.

"Dad!"

Torben looked at him through the car window, his bags more pronounced underneath his eyes.

Lars banged on the glass. "Roll down the window. Please."

He didn't move. Lars fidgeted in place and only calmed when he saw his father sigh and roll down the squeaky window.

"I have to go."

"I know. I'm an ass, dad. I'm sorry. What I said was completely uncalled for—"

"And needed to be said, too."

"It wasn't right, though." He reached into the car, grabbing his father's shoulder. "You have every reason to still be grieving. I'm just worried about you, and us, and the house, and everything."

Torben sadly smiled. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't. We'll deal with the crap when you get back." He reached into the car, giving his father a tight hug. "We'll be okay, dad." He smiled. "Besides, I couldn't let you leave on a trip with bad will between us. Mom's old superstition and all that."

Torben returned the hug equally as tight. "Yes. She never sent me off angry."

"Exactly." He pulled away to kiss his father's forehead. "Can't break the tradition now, yeah?"

"Of course." Torben lingered a hand on Lars's forearm. "I'll call you when I've arrived at the hostel."

"Okay." He stepped away, crossing his arms over his chest. "Be safe, dad."

"I will."

The car was old. It took Torben three turns of the ignition for the engine to start. Large puffs of smoke came from the exhaust, and it worried Lars how it shook as it backed out of the driveway. But Torben would be okay. He'd make it to Munich. If the car could last a whole trip last year from Copenhagen to here, it could last a two hour trip to Munich.

But as he watched Torben leave the driveway and head down the road, he finally realized the gravity of the situation: it was the first time he was going to be away from his father, since his mother's death. And it made Lars tear-up, watching the car disappear into the distance, as well as alleviate some of his guilt for yesterday. *At least I made sure to apologize.*

He hugged himself tighter when he couldn't see the car anymore.

"Have fun dad."

Lars spent the morning cleaning up the mess his father left, scrubbing the paint stains out of the floor, putting unfinished canvases away, cleaning paint brushes, rubbing out dots on his father's clothes in the washer. It was too quiet in the house as he worked. Too dead. He was alone, for the first time in a year, and he regretted not going with his father to Munich when he had a chance.

By noon he was finished. And he still hadn't received a call. He didn't panic, though. *Maybe he's busy. Maybe he got a little lost. Maybe the car broke down*—and he stopped with his dark thoughts to go make himself a light lunch.

Time passed by too sluggish. He curled up in bed and kept his mind occupied with *Yvain*, but his worry grew when snow started to fall outside his window. By the afternoon, he was halfway done with the book, and the gentle snowfall had graduated into a storm, the wind rattling the windows, banging on the house walls. And still, no phone call.

Lars stared at the words in his book. He couldn't read them anymore. His mind was frantic. Munich was only two hours away. His father left in the morning, so he missed the storm definitely. And the hostel must have a phone, and Torben definitely took money with him for the trip, so he had the coins to call.

Then what's taking him?

He startled when the house phone finally rang.

Lars rushed downstairs to pick it up. "Dad?"

Static crinkled over the line.

He pressed the receiver closer to his ear, listening through the static.

"Dad? Are you there?"

More static. More fuzzy noise. And then: "*Lars!*"

"Dad!" He relaxed. "Thank God. Are you okay? What's going on?"

"*H...lp...mig...slot...!*"

Lars's worry came back triple-fold. "Okay. Stay calm. Try to speak up. I can barely hear you. What are you saying—a castle? You're at a castle?"

"*Ikke Munich...*"

"You're not in Munich?!"

More static. Lars's heart pounded against his chest. He listened closely through the mounting noise. "...10 eller 15 miles syd... bilen... stoppet..."

“The car stopped? Where are you?”

“... *Beast... et dyr...*”

Lars shook his head. “I don’t understand!”

“*Lars!*”

The line went dead.

Lars raced out of his home, clothes and hair disarray, right into the storm. Wind and snow slapped his face cold as he unchained his bike from the house, but he pushed through his shivers and pedaled down the highway as fast as he could.

There was no reason to take the train station. As it came up in the distance, he saw the “CLOSED” sign. The storm was too great. Everything was shut down. It was stupid and foolish to bike through this weather, but he had no choice. He pedaled on.

Ten to fifteen miles south. Why did he end up going south?

His teeth chattered, lips chapped and red. Snow and ice stuck to his clothes. His legs burned from pedaling, and it hurt to keep his eyes open. The further he ventured into the storm, the darker the forest became. He could barely make out the road.

He wiped snow away from his face as he came up to a marker on the road. Five miles biked. Five to ten more to go.

The snow fell harder. He was getting tired, fast.

He has to be okay. He found a phone, somewhere... at a castle. He frowned. But there are no castles nearby in South Bavaria—

The bike skidded on ice.

“Shit!”

He fell forward, skidding onto his side. The heavy piles of snow softened his fall, but he still groaned in pain as he sat up, holding his head.

Through the storm, he saw what little of the bike he could, and found the front tire flat, the handlebars dented. It was useless metal now.

“Great.”

Lars pushed himself onto his feet, staring out into the distance and the darkness of the forest. Five more miles to go. Or ten. By foot.

He lifted his scarf over his mouth, wrapping it tighter around his head and neck. *I have no choice.*

It grew darker the further he walked. Darker and harder to maneuver through the storm. His body shivered every step he took forward. He grew tired, and his legs started to give out on him. More than once he fell knees-first into the snow, and every time, he pushed himself back up.

There was no one there to help him. No cars, no other people. If he stopped now, he would die from the cold. *Why didn’t I wait at home? Or call a cab? Something!*

“Goddammit!”

He fell forward again, onto his hands and knees. The snow went up to his elbows and thighs. He could feel more snow falling onto his back. A wave of tiredness washed over him, and he groaned, wanting to give in.

I'm not going to make it...

He lifted his head—and his eyes widened.

In front of him stood a large gate with two doors.

Lars gritted his teeth around the scarf, hands crunching into the snow.

Come on, Ulrich. Get up.

His breath came out in heavy puffs of white fog, his body trembling as he made it to his feet.

"Get up."

He stood up against the storm. A powerful gust of wind almost knocked him back, but he pushed forward. His hands scrambled for the gates and he clung to the bars as he pushed one of them open. He held on for a moment, gathering up whatever strength he had left, before he let them go and walked forward. There had to be something there. Gates meant a home. A mansion. People who could help. Maybe his father—

Lars stumbled face forward into the snow with a grunt.

He drifted into a black cold haze. His heart felt heavier than his head.

Dad...

Lars closed his eyes and gave into the darkness.

The last thing he felt were strong arms lifting him up.

He awoke to warm touches grazing his cheek. He couldn't open his eyes. His body was too exhausted to function correctly.

Something touched his lips, something warm, and a gentle hand cupped his neck, lifting his head up.

"Drink."

It was a gruff voice, brooking no argument, commanding him to listen and obey. And he did. He was too tired to fight. He parted his lips and accepted the liquid, recognizing it instantly. *Chicken broth*. Lars drank as much as he could to sate his hunger before the fatigue settled in again.

The hand guided him back to the pillow. A warm palm rested against his forehead and Lars moaned, his body aching, still cold from the storm. He just wanted to sleep forever...

Something soft brushed his cheek. "Rest now."

He used what little strength he had left to open his eyes. His vision was blurry, but in the candlelight, he saw a body there, dressed in red and black, the face shrouded in shadows.

"Thank you..."

Lars succumbed to sleep finally, safe in comforting softness and warmth, and the gentle stroke of those fingers on his cheek.

Chapter 2

He woke up to the light sounds of birds chirping nearby. His head spun when he tried to sit up too fast and he flopped back onto the pillows, groaning through his clenched teeth. *Motherfuck I'm an idiot.*

Lars rolled onto his side slowly and pushed himself up. He blinked the sleep out of his eyes, running a hand over his face, yawning loud. He felt tired, sore and exhausted all over. All he wanted to do was sleep again, except those birds wouldn't stop chirping.

“Ugh. Shut up...”

He yawned again, slapping his hands onto his knees. And once his eyes focused, they snapped wide open.

“Woah.”

Gold and blue. Every piece of furniture, the wall, the ceiling and the floor was bathed in gold and blue. The curtains, the canopy around his bed—large, oak bed—the covers, the chair, the dresser and the two mirrors, a full-bodied one hanging on the wall, a smaller one attached to a dresser. The style came straight out of a nineteenth century novel, something he'd see in an art history book. Renaissance. Gothic. Elizabethian. All mixed together in one room, and despite the clashes he could catch, it all somehow worked.

He shakily came to his feet, walking around the large, ornate room. His hand skipped along the silk sheets he slept in, sliding up one of the polished bedposts. His eyes drifted, a small smile of awe twitching up, as he soaked up all he saw.

Where am I...?

He passed by the full-bodied mirror—and he stopped to gawk at himself. Gone were the wool rags he had for years. They were replaced by a gorgeous blue silk robe with gold trimmings and gold embroidery laced around the bottom hem, trailing up the sides.

“Holy fuck.” His hands smoothed over the front, gold buttons hooked into gold string hoops. “How did this...” He shook his head. *What the fuck?*

He lifted a hand to his cheek. Even now he remembered the soft touch of fingers brushing his skin. And the arms that lifted him out of the snow, saving him from the storm, bringing him here as he searched for Torben—

Lars gasped. "Dad."

The door at the opposite end of the room creaked open.

He whipped around and found a curly head peeking in, black ringlets that fell into warm brown eyes. They searched the room for a moment before they met his, and then the dark-skinned man smiled wide, swinging the door fully open.

“You're awake!” He stepped in, arms wide open, wearing a brown outfit Lars could easily find in a nineteenth century book. “Welcome!”

Lars blinked. “Uh. Hi.”

“Hello!” The man turned around, cupping a hand over his mouth. “Cliff! Jason! He's finally awake!”

“About time!”

The curly-haired man stepped to the side, bowing slightly at the waist, as a taller one charged in. His reddish-blond hair was tied back in a low ponytail, wearing a deep green outfit similar to the other man's. His sharp blue eyes surveyed Lars up and down for a moment.

“Well, he seems to be in good shape.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Should be after sleeping a whole day's worth.”

“Jason.” The curly-haired one glared at his back. “Mind your manners.”

“Jason? Manners? He'll be on his best behavior when the Master is involved.” Another dark-skinned man entered the room, dressed similar to the curly-haired man, his black hair straight and long, tied in a ponytail as well. “Isn't that right?”

“Shut up, Robert.”

“That's enough.”

The three men all turned to the door and bowed at the waist. A fourth man entered, taller than the others, red-haired, beak-nosed, dressed in similar fashion, except the colors. They were the same gold-blue colors Lars wore.

“Greetings, esteemed guest.” The man bowed deeply before him. “Welcome to our Master's home. We are here to serve you.”

“Um.” Lars blinked again. “Thanks.”

The man stood up again, the others following suit. “We are his top servants. I am Cliff Burton, the castle maître d'. Should you need anything sire, you may come to me first.”

The curly-haired man waved from his corner. “Kirk Hammett, castle authority over fashion, interior and exterior design.”

The long-haired one smiled. “Robert Trujillo, head of the castle kitchens.”

The one named Jason nodded his head. “Jason Newsted. Castle majordomo.”

“I'm... uh, Lars. Did you, uh...” He chuckled out of nervousness. “Did you all just say *castle*?” His father's word came to mind. *Slot. Castle. Beast. Animal. Is dad here?*

Jason rolled his eyes. “Duh.” Cliff pinched his hand. “Ow!”

Cliff gave Jason a quick pointed glare before he turned his attention back to Lars. “Yes, sire. This is Neuschwanstein Castle, home of our Master, Prince James Hetfield the Third. You are his esteemed guest.”

“We rarely gets any guests,” Kirk piped up. “You're very lucky the Master found you when he did.”

“I see.” *Then he is the one who saved me...* He met Cliff's stare. “When can I meet him?”

“In due time, sire. The Master likes to work at night and sleep during the day. He has an odd schedule.” He gestured to Rob behind him. “Until then, Mr. Trujillo here can cook anything you

like. I'm sure you are famished from your journey. He is a master chef in the finest cuisines from all around the world."

"And I can give you a new wardrobe if you wish, sire," Kirk said, his whole body thrumming with nervous energy. "Anything you want, I'll do it."

"Jesus, calm down." Jason made his way to the exit. "I'm going to go check on the rest of the castle staff, Cliff."

"Of course."

Rob nodded to Jason as he left the room, and then turned to Lars. "So, what would you like?"

"Oh. I guess, uh, scrambled eggs and some orange juice. Please."

"Are you sure that's all you want, sire?"

"Uh, yes. That's all for now." *And can they stop with the 'sire' shit already...*

"Very well, sire. Should you need anything at all, there are bells fixed all over the castle to call upon Cliff here, Jason, Kirk, myself or any of the castle staff."

"No phones?"

"We do, but they are often unreliable and quite outdated. Now, I'm off to perform my duties overseeing the castle with Mr. Newsted." Cliff bowed to him again as Rob left the room. "Mr. Hammett here will show you around the castle and answer any questions you may have. Breakfast should be served in twenty. Have a good day."

"Thanks." Cliff exited the room next, leaving him alone with Kirk. He smacked his lips together. "So..."

Kirk grinned and immediately jumped to his side. "Come this way, sire!" He slipped an arm around Lars's, hooking elbows together. "I have so many clothes here and they haven't been worn in forever."

"Uh-huh." Lars weakly smiled. "Right..." He gulped as Kirk dragged him to the dresser. *Oh boy.*

**

He was sure an hour had passed by the time Kirk allowed him to leave the room. He didn't look half bad, at least. He exited his room dressed in a green suit fit for a prince, adorned in gold jewelry, hair brushed and tied back in a ponytail. As Kirk guided him through the halls, his inner nineteenth century nerdishness kept making its presence known. He couldn't help gawking at the paintings and weapons on the old walls, like swords and shields and spears, the various statues and worn armor situated in different corners and areas. It was history, everywhere, all around him—history he'd find in any good novel setting, and he wanted to stop Kirk so he could enjoy everything he saw. But his stomach growled louder the more they walked, and he pushed aside his geekish need for now.

"So, uh, Kirk."

"Yes, sire?"

"Okay, first, can you stop calling me 'sire'? I'm not rich or anything."

“It is standard protocol set by the Master, sire. He will be displeased if we did not greet you by your title.”

“Er, title?”

“Of course. Esteemed guests of our Master is always given a special title.” He brought Lars around the corner, leading him to fine, large double doors with golden handles. “And here we are, sire. The South Wing dining room.”

“Cool.” Kirk let his arm go, watched him push open the doors. Lars came to his side. “So, okay. Another question. How long have you guys been here?”

Kirk touched his shoulder, pushed him forward. “Eat first, sire.”

“I will, but I mean—” He allowed Kirk to lead him in. “I’ve lived here for a year, and I never saw a castle that close to town be...” He turned his head and his jaw dropped. “...fore.”

Kirk chuckled beside him, gesturing out to the large room-length table, decorated in gold and blue. “You like?”

“Hell yeah.” The oak furniture, the silverware—*goldware*, the pillars and some of the ornaments on the wall were encrusted with sapphires and diamonds. The blue floor seemed as plush and comfortable as the cushioned seats, and from where he stood, he could smell his requested breakfast on the end of the table where Rob waited for him, next to a pulled-out chair. But he found himself drawn to the outside, to the balcony seemingly beckoning him forward, and his feet acted first before his brain did.

He walked to the open glass doors and stood on the edge of the marble balcony. His hands rested on top of its cool, smooth surface, engraving to his memory in the most beautiful view he had ever seen in his life. For miles he saw long winding rows of white trees leading up to the mouth of snow-capped mountain ranges, engulfing this valley of ice and winter. Castle walls protected this kingdom from the outside world—he could see the gates from the day before—hiding it away and what it held inside.

“Wow.”

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It’s breathtaking.” He blinked slow, a smile playing on his lips. “It must be wonderful living here.”

Kirk sighed. “It was once.”

Lars turned to him. Gone was the smile he already grew accustomed to seeing on Kirk’s face. There was a look there he couldn’t place in words as Kirk stared at the horizon, but he could feel the melancholic waves that seemed not right for someone whom, so far, acted ridiculously cheerful.

“What do you—”

“Nothing, sire.” Kirk smiled again and grabbed his shoulder, steering him away. “Come! You don’t want your food to get cold.”

Lars frowned, but he let Kirk lead him inside. His eternally inquisitive nature yelled at him to ask Kirk more questions about the castle—about this prince—but he quickly silenced his thoughts. He was a guest and he had to remember his manners, especially if this *was* the castle his father spoke

of. Maybe he was still here, or maybe they'd know where he went to. He'd get his answers eventually. And he was too hungry to begin with. He'd probably end up asking wrong or stupid questions.

Rob held the seat out for him and pushed it in when he settled down. "There, sire. Breakfast is served."

"Thanks." He reached for his knife and fork, digging into his food. "You guys wouldn't have any ketchup, huh?"

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Jason sat alone in one of the South Wing dens, a plate of gooseberry crêpes, whipped cream and a tall glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice in front of him. His special breakfast after a full hour sweeping through the castle, checking up on the servants and the day-to-day work everyone does. Now he could rest.

"Finally."

He picked up his fork and knife, making a small slice and lifted it to his lips—and then the doors busted wide open.

"Jason!"

"Ah!" His fork clanged on the plate china, the piece of crêpe falling to the floor. He growled under his breath, turning to Kirk standing frantic in the doorway. "Dammit, Kirk, what now?"

"What is ketchup?"

"*What?*"

"Ketchup! You're the one with the updated dictionary the Master took from our last visitor, so what is ketchup?!"

"Oh for God's sake, just tell him we don't have any."

"But he asked, and I said yes, and then Rob gave me that look, and I hate it when he gives me that look, and now Lars is wondering why we can't *possibly* have any ketchup and—"

"You're worrying over nothing, you know that, right?"

"But we can't screw this up, Jase!" Kirk came closer, his hands shaking. "The Master actually *saved* him. He hasn't saved anyone from anything in a hundred years!"

"Tell me about it. I'm the one who had to watch over him at night. The rest of you got the day shift."

"And James always sends our visitors to the North Tower, like they're a bunch of criminals. But this is the first time he didn't do that!" Kirk smiled from ear-to-ear. "He has to be the one, Jase... he's the one who's going to break the spell."

Pfft, please. "Okay, so, what did you want again?"

"*What do I tell him?!*"

"Urgh. Not so loud." Jason rubbed the side of his temple. He propped up chin on his hand, elbow resting on the table. "Look. You tell him that I checked the inventory and we have to get supplies

from town since we're fresh out of most things.”

Kirk finally took a long deep breath, calming down. “Okay. I can say that.”

“Good. Now let me eat.”

“Yes. Sorry, Jase.” He bowed deeply to the majordomo. “Sorry.”

“Mhm.” He waved him off, returning to his food. *Damn kid. He's lucky James found him when he did. But he isn't the one. The Master will eventually imprison him like all the rest—like he did to that old man two nights ago. I already know it.*

The doors slowly squeaked closed—Jason lifted another piece of crêpe to his mouth—and then they stopped.

Jason frowned. “What, Kirk?”

“What is ketchup?”

“Get out.”

**

After breakfast, Cliff approached Lars, offering him a tour of the castle. He was eager to oblige, the history-literature geek inside of him coming out full force, as well as the burning question that still troubled his mind: was his father here? Was this *the* castle? So far, none of them treated him unkind, or act like rude assholes. They gave him clothes, food, now a tour of their home. A fucking *large* home. Four separate wings—South, East, North, West—all decorated and designed differently from each other, connected in the middle by a Main Hall, which lead to the front door. Even sections of the gardens outside were apparently designed to match their respective wings. So why would they capture an old man like his father *anyway*? There was no point. The castle was in the middle of nowhere. Surely the prince was like the rest of his staff, probably housed him and let him go.

As they moved from South to East, Lars was continuously captivated by all of the beauty. The artwork, architecture, flora and jewelry adorned in every piece of the castle. He paid attention to Cliff telling the history of the castle almost like a first-hand account, as if Cliff had been there himself when it was first made. He nodded along, taking in all the information given, satisfying his need to know.

Once they reached the end of the East Wing, Cliff steered him to the right. “And if you follow me sire, I'll take you to the gardens.”

“Oh.” He looked down the opposite end of the hall. “What about the rest of the wings?”

“Unfortunately, sire, the West Wing is off limits, and the North Wing is very... worn down, unlike as the rest of the castle.”

“It's ugly as shit.”

They turned around. Behind them, Jason stood, arms crossed over his chest.

Cliff sighed. “Jason.”

“What? It's true. Not as bad as the West Wing at any rate.”

“Your manners, Mr. Newsted.”

“Yeah, I know.” He came forward, flanking Lars’s side. “You wanna see it? North Wing?”

Lars grinned. “Sure.”

“*Jason.*”

“Relax, Cliff. What’s he going to do? Steal something?” Jason nodded down the opposite end of the wall. “C’mon, this way.”

As they headed into the North Wing, Lars soon found Cliff and Jason’s words to ring true. Compared to the other half of the castle, the North Wing was downright disgusting. The colors changed from bright and vibrant hues to shades of dead grey. Heavy shadows clung to the broken furniture, despite the light coming in from the shattered windows. Cobwebs and glass decorated corners. Mildew ate away the walls, torn pieces of old wallpaper waving in the air for help. They walked passed a huge staircase winding up into more shadows and darkness and Lars shivered when he saw something move across the floor, like a mouse or a rat.

“What’s in this wing?”

“The Master’s undesirables,” Cliff answered. “And as you can see, there’s no reason why we should be here.” He put a hand to Lars’s back. “So if you will, sire—”

“Ah come on, Cliff. Don’t bullshit him.” He nudged Lars’s side. “You see that staircase? That’s the North Tower, where the Master keeps prisoners.”

Lars’s blood turned cold. “Prisoners? Why does he keep prisoners?”

“Well,” Cliff said, “the Master used to be quite cruel—”

“Used to?” Jason snorted. “You mean still is.”

“That’s *enough.*” He stopped walking and grabbed Lars by his shoulder, steering him elsewhere. “We should leave now.”

“Well, you wanted to show him everything, right?”

“Not here. He doesn’t need to know—”

“What, the truth? Come on, Cliff. He can be a pretty sick bastard. Besides.” He jerked his thumb at Lars between them. “Who’s he going to tell anyway?”

“The Master could hear us saying ill-will of him.”

“And then what’s he going to do, kill us?” Jason laughed. “It’s not like he—”

“Has a-anyone come here? Lately?” Lars lifted a trembling hand to his chest, fingers clinging the collar. *Please say no.*

Cliff and Jason’s heads whipped around to him. They stared for a moment, and then glanced back at each other. Lars’s heart sunk into his stomach when he saw Cliff nod.

“Yes. Someone did come two days ago.”

“And the Master was pretty pissed off—”

“But rest assured, he will be released, sire.” Cliff smiled. “He has been treated well here. There’s no need to worry.”

Lars’s vision blurred. *Oh God.* “Was he an older man? With a grey beard? And long hair?”

Cliff recoiled a little, looking confused. “Why yes, he was.”

He shook his head. *No. Not Dad.*

Cliff’s hands reached for him. “Sire?”

Lars startled and he pivoted on his heel, bolting for the staircase.

“*Sire!*” Cliff chased after him, Jason following behind. “Stop! You’re not allowed to be up there!”

He paid no attention as he raced up the steps, his heart beating fast against his rib cage. The steps circled up into the farthest reaches of the tower, the light disappearing as the shadows grew in size.

His father was here. That bastard put his father here.

"Dad!" He cried out, breathing hard as he made it to the top. "Er du der? Er du i live?" *Are you there? Are you alive?*

His feet hit the rough, jagged surface of the prison tower. Five ugly wooden doors stood side-by-side against the wall, rusted bars lined inside. And he stumbled in his running when he saw his father’s sickly, pale hand sticking out of the farthest door.

“Lars!”

“Dad!” He slid to his knees, grabbing Torben’s hand and pressing it to his face. "Jeg er her." *I am here.*

Torben looked ill-fed, sick and pale behind the rusted bars, like he hadn’t slept right in a week’s time. “It is you.”

He pushed his other hand out through the bars. Lars grabbed it as well, bringing it to his face too, his breathing labored. “Fuck, dad, you’re so cold.”

His father’s eyes watered. “I thought I had died... and you were a ghost.”

"Don’t talk like that. You’re going to be fine now." He pulled Torben’s hands away from his cheeks and squeezed them hard. “I’m going to get you out of here, you hear me?" He waited for Torben’s nod before he looked over his shoulder and found Jason and Cliff there, staring at him like statues. “I want you to open this door."

Neither one moved.

“Did you hear me? Open the door.”

Cliff shook his head no.

“Do it Cliff! You’ve done everything I’ve asked so far, so fucking let him go!”

“But sire... the Master—”

“I don’t give a shit. This is my *father* and you will release him *right now!*”

A loud roar cut off Cliff's response.

Jason backed up against the wall. "Oh shit, he heard us!"

"Fuck!" Cliff pointed to the door. "Get out of here now! Before he finds you here!"

Lars didn't budge, despite the way he trembled from whatever that inhuman sound was. "I'm not leaving without him!"

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

He cried out as his hands were yanked away from Torben's, his body tossed aside effortlessly like a doll. He slammed onto the opposite end of the tower, head bouncing off the cold, wet wall, and he slumped down onto his ass in a heap, grunting in pain. He vaguely heard his father scream his name, but that roar overpowered it.

"Master, please!" Cliff cried out. "He is your guest!"

"HE IS TRESPASSING."

"We tried to stop him!" Jason shouted. "But this man is his—"

"SILENCE."

Lars groaned as he pushed himself up into a sitting position, using the wall as his support. He leaned against it and worked against the pounding in his head, and the pain shooting up his spine, to open his eyes and see this animal of a prince.

When his vision cleared, he stared into the unforgiving blue eyes of an ugly beast.

Chapter 3

He looked like a werewolf in prince's clothing. Dark grey fur made up what would be human skin, covering face and hands—paws, large paws with large sharp claws. Large fangs protruded over his lips, drool dripping down to the floor. A wolf's nose sniffed the air instead of a human one, and wolf ears twitched in long blonde hair. The blue eyes looked human, but the gleam in them screamed animal. Feral, angry animal, pissed off someone came into his territory and wanted revenge.

Prince James. The so-called man who saved him.

He wanted to throw up.

Lars cowered against the wall shivering as the beast leaned over him, paws on either side of his head, a low growl rumbling out.

“Answer my question, child.” Spit flew onto his face. “*WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?*”

“I...” Lars struggled for the words and found none. He gulped, searching the Beast's face for something—pity, remorse—and found nothing. “I, uh—”

“*ANSWER ME.*”

He whimpered. “I...”

His father shouted, “Leave him alone!”

The Beast whipped around. “*QUIET, OLD MAN.*”

“Let him go!”

Lars's hands clenched into fists as the Beast stomped over and hissed through the metal bars, “*I SAID QUIET!*” And he stood up to his feet, his fear disappearing, when he watched his sick father cower away trembling.

“He's my father.” Lars latched onto the little courage he had and clenched his fists. “Now let him go.”

The Beast turned around, towering over him again, punching his fist into the wall. Dust and rock crumbled to the floor.

“*WHY SHOULD I? HE TRESPASSED ON MY PROPERTY.*”

“If I remember correctly, my Lord?” Jason poked his head over Cliff's shoulder. “His vehicle broke down near the castle gates and when he came inside, it was Cliff here who couldn't reject helping him—”

“Hey!”

“*I SAID SILENCE.*”

Cliff and Jason jumped in place from the power of their Master's voice, bowing their necks and backing away. Lars jumped too but he didn't recoil again. He gritted his teeth and tilted his chin up, sending the Beast a sharp glare.

“He’s the only parent I have left in this world.” He took a step forward, closing the space between them. “What do I have to do to get him out?”

The Beast became quiet. Blue eyes took him in, surveyed his face. Heavy breathing fell over Lars’s face, heating his skin. He could smell rancid breath, like wolf spit after eating a raw meal, but he didn’t back down. This monster wasn’t going to intimidate him any further.

A paw lifted up from the wall. Lars forced himself not to flinch. His shakes wouldn’t stop as he watched the Beast’s paw come close to his face.

The backs of its furred fingers brushed down his cheek.

Don’t throw up. Lars swallowed. It was the same touch as before, the one he thought was comforting and friendly.

The fingers tickled underneath his jaw to his chin. He heard the Beast give a wolf rumble as his head was tilted up, bringing him closer. The wolf ears twitched. The Beast’s eyes roamed up and down his face, as if inspecting a piece of meat.

And then: “Stay here.” The Beast leaned in. “I want you to stay here in my castle. Forever.”

He wanted to punched him, spit in his face. The ‘no’ was on his lips. But he had no choice.

“If I say yes, do you promise to let him go unharmed?”

“I promise.”

Lars closed his eyes. The Beast’s paw let him go and like Cliff and Jason, he bowed his neck, submitting to his fate. “Then I will stay with you, Prince James. Forever.”

“Done!” He stepped away and reached into his cloak, throwing the keys into Cliff’s chest. “Release him at once.”

Cliff caught them. “Yes, my Lord.” He shot Lars a quick apologetic look as he went to open Torben’s cell.

“Lars...” Torben shook his head. “Don’t do this. Don’t throw your life away for me.”

Once the cell door squeaked open, Lars rushed to his father’s side, scooping him in his arms. He felt too light, his skin too cold, and he buried his face into Torben’s neck, hugging him tight.

“I’m sorry, dad.”

Cliff stepped away from the two of them to stand beside Jason, unable to watch the scene play out before him. Jason crossed his arms and looked away as well, waiting for it to be over with. Only The Beast watched in the shadows, his face impervious, but his eyes shined.

“You shouldn’t have done that.” Torben hugged him back. “You can’t leave now.”

“It was the only way I could save you.” He stroked his father’s back. “I couldn’t lose another one.”

“No!” Torben pulled back, shaking his head, his eyes wet. “I’m an old man, Lars. You have your whole life ahead of you.”

“But Dad...”

A dark shadow fell over the two of them. They both turned and looked up at the angry snarl of the Beast. Lars hugged his father closer to him as the Beast lifted a paw into the air, claws barred.

“Time’s up.”

He swooped his paw down and snatched the collar of Torben’s shirt, yanking him out and away from Lars’s arms.

“*Ahhh!*”

“No! Wait!” Lars shot a hand out to grab his father’s outstretched hand. Their fingers touched briefly. “Dad!”

“Lars!”

He scrambled to his feet. “Give him back!”

The Beast shot a glare to his two servants. “Hold him.”

“Yes, my Lord,” they said in unison, and together they held Lars back, taking an arm each.

“No!” Lars struggled, his feet kicking in the air, twisting himself in their hold. “Dad! *Dad!*”

The Beast snarled over his shoulder. “You wanted him released, no?” And he unceremoniously dragged Torben out and down the tower steps.

“NO!” Lars stretched his neck out. “*Daaaad!*”

His scream echoed throughout the hollow tower, but he heard no sound in return. He slumped forward, his strength giving out on him.

Torben was gone.

“Dad...”

Cliff and Jason slowly released him. He collapsed onto his knees to the floor, staring in the direction where his father disappeared.

His life was over. He could never go back. Never see his father again. Never tutor a child, go to university, visit Mr. Richter, even bitch at Dave again. All of his dreams were meaningless. He belonged to the castle now—to that Beast.

I’m a prisoner forever.

A hand rested on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry, sire,” Cliff whispered.

Lars jerked his body away. “Leave me alone.”

“Sire—”

“Just go.”

He curled up into a tight ball, burying his face into his knees. Footsteps came close, circling around him, and they soon lessened in volume as they left the tower, heading down the steps. When he heard nothing else, Lars finally allowed himself to release a few tiny, choked sobs, his body shaking with each one.

**

The Beast dragged the kicking, screaming old man to the castle gates and threw him out without a second thought, watching him disappear beyond the walls. He grunted and stared out the distance and the freedom that eluded him for one hundred years. All his prisoners he ended up releasing—after Cliff or Jason begged enough—but he hated it. They had lives to return to. His was condemned here to his castle, he and his servants, until the spell was finally broken. Except time was running out. This was the 100th year. If he couldn't break the spell before New Years, it was over. He was to remain a Beast forever, and his servants were damned as well, chained to the castle, never to be free.

That boy...

“Hm.” He turned away back to the castle, thinking of green eyes and soft skin. *Maybe they are right. Maybe he is the one.*

Jason and Cliff waited for him at the base of the North Wing tower, bowing as he came close. “My Lord,” they said.

“Is he still up there?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Jason said. He stood up first, Cliff second. “He refused to come down with us. He’s a bit... inconsolable.”

“Mm.” He walked past them for the stairs. “I’ll deal with him.”

Cliff grabbed his cloak. “Ah, my Lord?” He managed a smile when the prince glared at him. “Try to be, uh, gentle. With him.”

James snorted and jerked on his cloak away, twisting it around him as he walked up the winding staircase.

Cliff shared a look with Jason. They waited until they couldn't hear the Master's footsteps any longer.

“He’s going to screw this up, isn't he?” Cliff asked.

“Very much so.”

“Ugh.”

The higher James climbed, the more he heard the boy's muffled sobs. He felt something inside his chest tighten at the sound, the sensation doubling when he reached the top and found him huddled in the middle of the room, face pressed to his knees, shaking and rocking. His ears flattened against his head as he rested a paw against the doorframe, watching the boy cry. There was a weight on his chest, a heaviness to his shoulders that confused him. He was used to seeing people cry, but this boy in tears almost physically hurt him and he didn't understand why.

He growled, squeezing his free paw into a fist. *Damn him. Why am I feeling this way?*

James stepped into the tower, his shadow cascading over the boy's trembling frame, tilting his head up. “Stop that.”

Lars slowly lifted his head, his eyes red and puffy as he glared up at him. “You didn't let me say goodbye. I'm never going to see him again and you didn't even let me say goodbye.”

“I gave you enough time to say goodbye.”

“Fuck you.”

James growled. “What did you say?”

“You heard me.” Lars wiped at his face as he stood up. “Fuck. You.”

He grabbed the collar of Lars’s outfit, yanking him forward, their chests crashing together. He snarled, “You do not speak to me that way, *boy*.”

“Then lock me up and throw away the fucking key.”

“If that is what you wish.” He dragged Lars as he did the old man to the same cell and yanked open the door, throwing him in. “Enjoy.” And he slammed it shut, locking him inside.

The boy grunted when he slammed against the wall, holding his head in pain. His chest tightened again, but James ignored it. *He needs to learn*. He turned on his heel and left the tower, cloak billowing behind him. *An overnight stay will stop this boy’s insubordination*.

When he finished climbing down the staircase, he found Cliff and Jason still standing there. Their anxiety dissipated into confusion. “Where is Lars?” Cliff asked.

James elbowed past them. “In his new room.”

“What?!”

“Knew it,” Jason muttered.

“Quiet, Newsted.” Cliff caught up with James, Jason trailing behind him. “My Lord, you can’t do this to the boy. First you save him, and now you imprison him?”

“He used derogatory language at me.” James growled. “You do *not* talk to a prince like that.”

“But he could be the one.” Jason snorted. Cliff shot him a glare and then quickened his stride, so he walked side by side the prince. “If you are to win his heart, you cannot treat him like he is some sort of animal—”

“*DON’T*.” James roared, turning to Cliff. He pointed a claw at his nose. “You. *Dare*. Say those words to me, Burton.”

Cliff backed up against the dirty wall, but he maintained his composure. “Forgive me, my Lord, but I only spoke what was the truth.”

James grunted. “I gave him what he wanted. I released his stupid father. And for that, he curses me.”

“Because you imprisoned his father.”

“He was trespassing.”

“His car was broken, my Lord. He was only asking for help.”

“And this is *my* home and he did not ask permission from me to enter!”

Cliff glared. “Then why did you save Lars, hm? What made him special?”

James gaped for a moment, searching for words he couldn't find. He then grunted and stepped away from Cliff, growling low. "I took him in myself. He is my guest."

"A guest you have imprisoned, my Lord." Cliff pushed himself away from the wall, coming close to James's side again. "A guest that could be *the one*."

James stopped his low growling. He stayed quiet, mulling over Cliff's words. The boy—Lars—*was* his guest. He did make sure he was cared for. Then the boy found his father—*against my permission dammit*—only to lose him right after, forever, without a proper goodbye. *You didn't even let me say goodbye*, the boy cried, and the fresh image of his wet green eyes, his red cheeks and the hatred and hurt he felt made his chest tighten again.

He sighed. "Maybe there is validity in your statement after all."

Jason rolled his eyes. "Right. Little boy comes out of nowhere two weeks before the spell is supposed to be broken, and he's the savior. Sure."

Cliff glared at him. "It can't be coincidence."

"So you're saying it's fate? Pfft."

"How can it not?" Cliff smiled at James, resting a hand on his shoulder. "This is your last chance, my Lord. Make it count."

James stared at Cliff, impassive, for a long moment, until he nodded and quietly turned back to the North Tower entrance. Jason and Cliff watched him go, standing side by side, Cliff smiling, Jason frowning. Again, they waited until they could no longer hear the Master's footsteps ascend the tower stairs, before Jason spoke in a hiss.

"Why do you keep leading him on like this?"

"Because of all the people who came in the past, Lars was the first one *saved*. This is it."

"That's your desperation talking. This *Lars* isn't anything special. He'll be damned like the others were." He snorted. "Like we are."

"Your pessimism astounds me, Jason."

"A hundred years waiting can do that to a man." Jason turned away from the tower and Cliff. *So does twenty-five years wasted like a fool.*

Cliff shook his head as he watched Jason leave. "Don't be this way, Jason. It's fate."

"It better be, or we're fucked."

"I know."

Jason rounded the corner and disappeared into the darkness, leaving the North Wing. Cliff stared out in the direction he left for a brief moment, and then turned back to the tower entrance to wait for James again, hopefully with Lars this time. *Seventy-five years later, and he still isn't over it.*

**

There were no sounds coming from the top, outside of his own footsteps. He ascended the last stair and emerged back inside the tower, finding Lars huddled in the corner of his cell, knees to his chest. His cheeks were wet in the dim torchlight, but he wasn't crying like he did before. His jaw

was set, his lips pursed together, his eyes shut tight. Any trace of sadness before had disappeared. All James saw now was anger.

The eyes opened, green eyes glaring at him through the rusted metal bars, when he came close to his cell door. “What now?”

James growled. “You—” He stopped himself, remembering Cliff’s words. *This is your last chance.* He shut his eyes, taking a deep breath, and then clearing his throat, replacing the venom in his words with the regality he was taught since childhood. “You shouldn’t stay here. It’s almost lunchtime and you should have something to eat.”

“I thought I was your prisoner.”

“No. Your father was. You are not. You are my guest, and guests are not treated like prisoners in my castle. Not even by me.” He bowed slightly at the waist. “For that, I apologize.”

The anger dissipated a little, giving way to wariness. The boy—*Lars, his name is Lars*—seemed to judge him in his stare, the torchlight flickering in his wet, red-rimmed green eyes.

“I..” He looked away. “I’m sorry too. Y’know. For yelling at you too. That was pretty shitty of me.”

James touched the cell door. “You did have a valid statement, though. You should’ve had more time with your father.”

Lars flinched, hugged his legs tighter. “Yeah...” He sighed. “Nothing I can do about that now.”

He frowned. The tightness in his chest returned, squeezing his lungs in a vice grip, making it hard to breathe. He hated the way he looked like this. Very... sad. In a hundred years, no one else’s sadness made him feel this awful, compared to Lars’s. The physical hurt was too much.

This is your last chance, Cliff repeated in his head. *So you’re saying it’s fate?* Jason said after. And maybe Jason was right. Maybe Cliff was right. *He has to be the one I have to love,* and James knew he had to fix this and make things right.

Lars’s head jerked up when he heard the sound of a key turning. The door made a loud bang as it unlocked, and it squeaked even louder as James pushed it open.

And then, James offered his paw out. “Let’s try this again. I’m James.”

Lars’s attention flickered between the paw and James’s face, his arms tightening around his legs. The fear, anxiety and confusion made the pain in his chest worse, and the question Lars asked in a tiny whisper almost felt like a stab. “You promise you won’t hurt me?”

He smiled. “I let your father go, didn’t I?”

It took another long, painful moment, but then, Lars rested his trembling hand onto James’s paw. “Okay.”

James gently closed his paw around it and took his time helping Lars up to his feet, steadying him with a hand on his shoulder.

They were close, as close as they had been when they had snapped and argued, except the atmosphere had changed. The tightness James felt finally unraveled when Lars’s worry began to disappear, replaced by a shyness he instantly found himself attracted to.

“I’m Lars.”

James guided him out of the jail cell to the tower steps. “It’s nice to meet you, Lars.”

Chapter 4

Lars felt uneasy around the Prince--this Beast. Though he was left to his own devices until dinner later that evening—a dinner he felt *forced* to go to—he didn't truly feel comfortable in the castle. Yes, James had changed from when he met him. He was kinder, gracious, quieter, a total opposite from the loud, rude and abrasive monster that screamed at him and his father in the North Tower. But that still didn't change Lars's opinion of the prince. His first impression left a hell of a lasting mark, and it stood the reason that he remain skeptical of the prince's changed demeanor. Something wasn't adding up. How could he be an animal one minute, and nice the next? *You are my guest*, James said. But how long would that last? Like the way he asked him to dinner. It felt off...

**

James opened the door. "This is the Sapphire Room. It will be yours for the remainder of your time here."

Yeah, the rest of my life. "Thanks." He let go of the prince's paw and walked into the old room he initially found himself in when he woke up. "It's, uh, pretty."

"Thank you." The prince smiled by the door. "I hope you like it here."

"Yeah." He sat on the edge of the bed, hands in his lap. "So..."

James stood there and... said nothing. Just stared.

Lars's fingers fidgeted. "Uh—"

"Are you hungry?"

He blinked. "Oh. Not now, no."

"Then how about dinner, tonight?"

"Sure. I'll have chicken and—"

"Oh that won't be necessary." James chuckled. "I'll have Robert prepare every type of meat available and you can choose to your liking."

"...Okay."

"Good. I will see you then."

"Wait, where?"

"The South Wing dining room, of course. I will have one of my servants come to escort you there."

"Well, I'm not sure if—"

The prince's smile turned into a grimace. "You *will* show yourself at dinner..." He took a deep breath and relaxed his smile. "Lars." He nodded to him. "Enjoy the rest of your day."

"Hey, wait—!"

The door slammed shut. Lars flopped backwards onto the bed and growled between his teeth, staring at the ceiling. "Great. Now what do I do?"

**

Thankfully the time went by fast. He remember about the bells situated all over the castle and found one in his room, ringing it over and over until Cliff came to his side. There was only one thing to do to kill the time, since he was sure by the usage of candlelight and the lack of wires that there were no television sets or radios anywhere. But that was fine. Books were his main escape anyway, and he requested to read whatever books they had. What he received were mostly Greek and Roman classics to nineteenth century literature, and the reading nerd inside him danced at all the new texts he never had time to read before.

He was leaning back on the pillows of his big bed, engrossed in the large novel, when he heard a knock on the door. He looked up from his book to see Kirk there, smiling and waving like usual.

"It's time, sire."

"Already?" He glanced out the window. The sun had set and the tell-tale signs of sunset started to fade away into nighttime purple. "Huh. I guess it is."

"Yes, sire." Kirk clapped his hands. "Now!" Two servants came into the room, bowing before Lars. Kirk gestured to them. "They will prepare a hot bath for you. Is there any scent you prefer, sire? We have a great assortment. Mint, raspberry, cinnamon?"

Lars glanced back at his book. "No, that won't be necessary."

"Oh." Kirk's smile waned. "Well then." He waved the two servants over to the bathroom next door. "While they prepare that, I'll lay out your outfit for the evening, hm?"

"That won't be necessary either."

Kirk's smile disappeared. "What do you mean, sire?"

"I won't be going to dinner."

"But... the Master said you were."

"I know. I've changed my mind." Lars turned the page. "He won't have a problem with it, will he?" *And if he does, then my suspicions are correct and there's no reason to trust him.*

"Well..." Kirk gulped. "He might."

"Why?" Lars rested the book face-down on his belly. "Isn't this my home now? Don't I have freedom to do as I wish?"

"Um, this is the Master's castle—"

"So that means I have to obey his rules, huh? And if I don't go, he's going to get pissed and what, throw me in the North Tower? *Again?*"

"But you are his guest, sire."

"I think I'm more than a guest, Kirk. If I'm going to be stuck here for the rest of my life, then I deserve some respect, and that begins with me having a little bit of freedom around here. So if I don't want to go to dinner, then I'm not going to dinner, and I don't care what he thinks." He

picked up his book again. “Go tell the *prince* that.”

“But... aren’t you hungry?”

“No.”

“Oh...but—”

“Kirk.”

“Okay, okay...”

From the corner of his vision, Lars made out the slumped dejected form of Kirk shuffling to his door. He clapped his hands and the two servants scrambled out of his bathroom, confused murmurs exchanged between the three of them. He tuned them out until he heard his door shut, and once the room was in complete silence, he walked to the door and locked it. Part of him felt bad for snapping at Kirk. It was the prince he was mad at, but it had to be done.

He settled back onto the bed with his book, a smile on his face. *Now let’s see how gracious of a prince you actually are, James.*

**

“*He’s not going?!*”

“I tried Jason! I really tried.”

“You obviously didn’t try hard enough!”

“Shh, Jason.” Cliff squeezed his shoulder, nodding to the dining room door behind them. “He can hear us.”

“Okay.” Jason took a deep breath in and out. “Okay. I’m calm. I’m calm.” He took another deep breath. “Okay. So. What happened? Why did the brat say no?”

“He didn’t want to go!” Kirk wrung his hands together. “He said he wasn’t hungry, and that he deserves freedom, so he doesn’t want to go, and I tried to tell him he’s a guest, and he said he’s more than that, and then he told me to go, and now I’m here, and he just wouldn’t say *yes!* I’m sorry.”

“Great.” Jason rubbed his temples. “He’s gonna lose it. He’s *so* going to fucking lose it.”

“Well, maybe he won’t?” Rob managed a smile. “He has been very kind lately.”

“And he is trying to keep his cool,” Kirk agreed.

“So he probably won’t.”

“Yeah!”

Jason rolled his eyes. “You two have obviously lost it.” He thumped his fingers on the side of his head. “Hello. West Wing ring any bells? The North Tower? One hundred years imprisoned here? He’s got a temper and he’s going to lose it. I guarantee it.”

“Then I’ll break it to him,” Cliff said. “Should he lose it, you of all people *cannot* handle his temper well.”

Jason glared, crossed his arms over his chest. The man had a point, and he couldn't argue with him about it. "Fine. Your funeral."

Cliff shook his head. He opened the two big doors leading into the South Wing dining room, the other servants walking behind him. Inside the long, elaborate table had been downsized into a smaller one for a more intimate atmosphere. Piles of food rested on top, two gold candelabras fixed in the middle, flanking the ends of a silver tray, hosting a fat, honey-basted turkey. And at one end of the table sat the prince, already chewing away at a turkey leg, meat and skin hanging from his furred chin, his smacking noises louder than the crackle of the fireplace close by.

Rob and Kirk stood along the wall with the kitchen staff, their hands weaving together. Cliff and Jason went to the Master's side.

Cliff cleared his throat. "My Lord?"

James paid no attention. He ripped more meat from the turkey bone and made a pleased wolf noise.

Jason nudged Cliff's side, nodded over to the prince. "Come on."

Cliff sighed and tried again, tapping the Master's shoulder. "My Lord."

"Hm?" James grunted. He looked up, his cheeks puffed out, turkey pieces sticking to his lips. He spoke between chews, "Whut?"

"I don't mean to interrupt your dinner, but your guest of honor is—"

"Lateth?" He swallowed his food finally. "I know. What's keeping him?"

"Well..."

"Well, what?"

"He's... um."

James rested his turkey leg on the plate. "What is it, Burton."

"He's, uh, well."

Jason rolled his eyes and said it. "He isn't coming to dinner."

The Master's roar was heard all over the castle.

"[b]WHAT?![/b]"

**

Lars was engrossed in his novel when he heard loud, thunderous bangs rain down on his door. "Fuck!" He startled, the book flying out of his hands onto the bedspread. He turned to the door, legs swinging over the side of his bed. "What the fuck?"

"Open this door!"

"Told you he'd lose it!"

"QUIET."

He heard Jason mutter something on the other side.

Lars smirked. *I knew it. I knew he'd get angry.* "Why should I? I'm not hungry."

"I don't care!" The prince growled. "You're coming downstairs right now to eat with me."

"I don't want to."

"YOU WILL EAT WITH ME. THAT IS AN ORDER."

"I'm not one of your servants, dick! If I don't want to eat, then I won't eat! Get it through your fucking head!"

"EITHER YOU EAT WITH ME *OR YOU DON'T EAT AT ALL!*"

"*Fine!*" Lars grabbed his book and threw it at the door hard. "Make me starve! I don't care!"

"SO BE IT!"

He heard one more heavy pound delivered to his door. The sides creaked, the hinges almost blowing off, and a large dent had formed, but the door held up against the power of the Beast. Outside he heard Cliff and Kirk's voices. They sounded calm and mellow, as if trying to reason with the prince.

They were silenced when the Beast roared, "[b]MY WORD IS FINAL.[/b]"

He heard nothing else after, except the rumbling of his stomach.

Lars stared ahead, his fists shaking on his thighs. "Fuck you. I don't want you near me anyway." His next breath was a shudder. He shut his eyes. "I hate it here."

He laid back on the bed, curled up on his side in a tight ball. The book rested beside him, forgotten for now.

**

Hours later, well into the night, Kirk approached the dent door of the Sapphire Room and knelt before it, holding a china plate of assorted cookies in his hands. Rob stood beside him, giving Kirk a smile and a nod. "Go ahead."

Kirk smiled back and then rested the tray down on the floor. It was thin enough to slide underneath the door.

He rapped his knuckles on the door gently. "Sire?" When he heard nothing, he tried again. "Sire? It's me. Kirk. I've brought you something to eat."

Nothing again. Kirk frowned.

Rob touched his shoulder. "Maybe he's asleep?"

"Maybe." He pushed the tray underneath the door. "That's okay. He can eat these in the morning ___"

The tray hit something, and then was pushed right back out. It tilted over, spilling cookies on the floor, at the base of Rob's feet and Kirk's knees.

"Well he's obviously awake," Rob said.

“Obvious.” Kirk knocked on the door again. “Sire, please. The Master didn’t mean to lose his temper in such a violent way.”

“Yeah he did. He’s a fucking animal.”

“No he isn’t.”

“*Yes he is!* He fucking imprisoned my father in a goddamn tower, conned me into staying here so I could save him, only to throw him out before I could really say goodbye to him. I mean, I’m never going to see him again, and he fucking does that. Now I’m stuck here in this stupid fucking castle where I have to obey his every single command, else I get punished like a prisoner, and yet he says I’m his fucking *guest*.” Lars’s laugh sounded watery on the other side. “He’s a two-faced hypocrite.”

Kirk’s eyes watered. “He wasn’t always like that, sire. Once you get to know him—”

“I don’t care. I don’t give a shit about him. He ruined my fucking life.” A small snuffle. “I hate him. Do you hear me?” The door shook from a fist pounding on it. “*I hate him!*”

Kirk recoiled back from the door. His lips moved, his mind trying to find reasons to prove Lars wrong—to make him like the Prince in some way—but he sighed and gave up. He could think of nothing. There was too much truth to what Lars said, and Lars wouldn’t have listened to him anyway.

Rob knelt beside him on the floor, wrapping his arm around his shoulders. “C’mon. Let’s go back.” He kissed his cheek and whispered low into his ear. “You tried.”

Kirk shut his eyes and hugged Rob’s arm tighter to him. “It wasn’t enough.” He turned his head and buried his face into the comfort of Rob’s neck. “He’s supposed to be the one.”

“I know.”

Rob helped Kirk onto his feet and led him away from the South Wing, back to their quarters in the North Wing, an arm secured around his waist.

**

In the farthest reaches of the West Wing, deep inside the prince’s private chambers, James rested the silver magic mirror down on the table beside a glowing pink vase. Inside floated a wilting pink rose, down to its last petals.

He sat in the chair next to the table, claws scraping the back cover of the mirror. He saw the whole exchange between Kirk and Lars, seeing it from inside Lars’s room. How Lars sat curled up on the bed, hugging a pillow to him. How Lars rushed to the door and pushed the tray of cookies away. What Lars had said about him, and how true those words were—how Kirk couldn’t defend him from those words.

I am an animal. He stared at the pink rose. His eyes shined. *I’m a monster.*

The rose inside glowed brighter. Another petal fluttered off the stem to rest on top of a pile a hundred years in the making. There wasn’t much time left. The rose wouldn’t survive much longer. He had to make this boy love him. He had to be the one. He already went through the four people that he felt a deep connection and need to, and they didn’t break the spell. Lars was it. If the boy didn’t love him...

“I hate him. Do you hear me? I hate him!”

James looked away. He dragged his hand from the table into his lap and bowed his neck.

“It’s hopeless.”

He closed his eyes and slept in his chair all night, dreaming of a time when things were better. When his parents were alive. When he was normal. When he had everything he ever wanted at his fingertips, and how he would never have it again, because the Enchantress was right. No one will ever learn to love a Beast like him.

Chapter 5

Two days passed, and Lars didn't eat. The prince refused to hand over the keys to open up Lars's room from the outside, and Lars consistently pushed out any food that was snuck underneath his door. Rob, Kirk and Cliff tried their best to convince someone to give in, but both James and Lars were extremely stubborn, and neither one listened to their pleas.

On the dawn of the third day, they gathered around in the South Wing den, not far from the Sapphire Room, Rob and Kirk on one side, Cliff and Jason on the other.

"We have to do something," Kirk said. "Two solid days of no food and water? This can't go on. The poor boy's probably sick by now."

"And the Master won't budge, will he?" Rob asked.

"When dogs fly," Jason deadpanned.

"He's been locked up in his room and won't come out," Cliff said. "It's impossible to talk to him."

"So let's ram the boy's door down and force feed him." Jason shrugged. "What's the harm in that?"

Rob shot him a glare. "The Master's anger for ruining one of his favorite rooms?"

"And Lars would continue to resist us if we forced him," Kirk said. "Forcing either of them into anything won't help the situation."

Jason laughed. "Well neither does talking civilly. What other option do we have left?"

"Well..." Cliff leaned back into his seat, folding his hands over his lap. He stared at the table, deep in thought. The others looked at him anxiously, waiting for his word as the leader of the castle.

"Well what?" Jason spat.

Cliff smiled. "He could feed Lars himself."

"Ha." Jason shook his head. "You know he won't do it."

"It's the only option we have left. If Lars won't take food from us, and James won't open the door, then the only solution is to have the prince come in and bring food to Lars himself."

"And who says he's going to listen to you? You said it yourself that he's ignoring you."

"I know that. So it won't be me who talks to him." Cliff clasped his hand over Jason's shoulder and squeezed. "It'll be you."

Jason's eyes widened. "Oh no. Not me."

"You're the only one who hasn't tried to convince him yet."

"For good reason." He shrugged off Cliff's hand and crossed his arms, shooting him a pointed glare. "You *know* he won't listen to me."

"The worst he can do is throw you out."

And put me in the Tower again for a few years. Jason shook his head no. "I'm not doing it."

"Jason."

"I'm not going to talk to him."

Kirk started to rise. "Then I'll go."

"No. It's fine, Kirk." Cliff stood up, his hands flat on the table. "I'll try to talk to him again. Hopefully I will be able to make him come to his senses." He glared at Jason. "You can retire to your quarters now."

Jason glared back. "With pleasure."

He stormed his way out of the den. In his wake he heard Cliff give orders to Rob and Kirk, but he tuned them out. *You're wasting your damn time. He's not the one to save us. Watch me be right.*

**

One hundred years later and Cliff still shivered coming anywhere near the prince's chambers. Torches lined the stone walls, broken furniture piled up in various corners, cobwebs and glass scattered across the stone floor. Once this was Kirk's decorative pride and glory, the most beautiful section of the castle. Now it was a perfect ruin of what it used to be.

He closed in on the prince's locked door, a large wooden slab adorned with unpolished jewelry and huge claw marks. The pink light of the enchanted rose shined from underneath. His knuckles rapped on the door softly at first. "My Lord?" When he heard nothing, he rapped his knuckles louder. "My Lord, may I have a word with you?"

Nothing again.

Cliff sighed. "Prince James. Open this door."

Nothing.

"Fine. I know you are awake, and I know you can hear me. I have no problem speaking to you from out here." He crossed his arms over his chest. "It's been three days, my Lord. I was wondering if you intend to let the boy starve to death."

Nothing. Again.

"Answer me, James. Will it make you happy, having the boy's dead body in your hands?"

Nothing... and then: "He's fine. I've seen it."

"So you intend to watch him starve in your magic mirror?"

"He's *fine*."

"How long will he *stay* fine? A week or two?"

He heard the prince's growl seep through to the outside. "He made his choice not to eat."

"For God's sake, James!" He kicked the door. "When will you stop being so stubborn?"

"*Me*?" James roared. "*He's* the one who won't give in!"

“Because the boy is as stubborn as you, and I for one don’t blame him for defying your ‘orders.’ I wouldn’t listen to you either, if you treated me that way.”

“I gave him hospitality and he spat it in my face!” A loud bang echoed from the inside, the door rattling from the force of the prince’s fist. “He should show me some respect—”

“You’re the one who has to show that first! Think about it, James. You imprisoned his father, took away his freedom, took his father away from him without a proper goodbye, ordered him to dinner, yelled at him when he refused to go, and now you’re starving him to death. If you wanted a prisoner, you should’ve left him in the Tower. Otherwise all you did was give him a pretty coffin to lie in.” Cliff uncrossed his arms, shaking in place from the anger he felt. “What is he to you, my Lord? Another prisoner? Some guest? Or something more?”

He heard nothing, again. Cliff knew it was foolish to snap at James like this, but it had to be done, to stop this childish madness between Lars and his prince. It wasn’t beyond James to imprison those who gave him too much backtalk. The prince did it before with Jason, when the majordomo crossed far too many lines for the Prince’s very little patience. Though he had never been imprisoned to the North Tower himself, Cliff was ready for the angry tirade and destructive outburst.

The door opened slowly. It squeaked open.

Cliff squared his shoulders.

There was no roar or growl waiting for him. No scream or yell. James stood in front of him, impassive and stone-walled, his emotions unreadable.

And then James whispered, “You’re right.” Cliff couldn’t hide his shock, but he stayed quiet as the prince continued. “Tell Robert to create a meal for our guest. I will bring it to him personally.”

Cliff hesitated for a moment, blinking rapidly. “Ah... yes.” He finally bowed before him. “Yes, my Lord. As you wish.”

He turned quickly on his heel, leaving the West Wing for the kitchens. The shock wouldn’t leave him. James had actually been calm, for once. Seventy-something years ago, when Jason blew up at James, it landed him in the Tower. Now the prince took the outburst without a shred of emotion. He accepted it. Took responsibility. Ate his pride.

He’s changing. He’s changing for the boy. Cliff smiled and picked up the pace. *Finally.*

**

Rob waited by Lars’s door with a small china bowl of chicken broth on a gold tray, along with a pitcher of water and a glass cup. He bowed his neck in respect to James as he came down the hallway. A smile played on his lips when he heard the small jingle of keys accompanying the Master’s large footsteps. *Everything’s going to be fine.*

“Here it is, my Lord. The food you asked. I decided to give Lars something easy to start with.”

“Thank you, Robert.” He took the tray from Rob’s steady hands. “That will be all.”

“As you wish.” He bowed again. “Should you need anything else, I or any of my staff will not be far.”

James waited until Rob was out of sight before he turned to the door of the Sapphire Room. He steadied the tray in one hand while the other reached for the keys hanging around his belt.

His heart beat fast against his rib cage as he slipped the key into the door. *Don't screw this up again, Hetfield. This is your last chance. Don't screw it up.* He turned the key. *Make this count.* The unlock of the door sounded too loud. *Make the boy love you.* He pulled the key back, placing it on his belt again, and pushed the door open. *Make sure he's okay...*

He stepped inside and found the room exactly as the mirror showed him this morning. Lars was still on the bed, laying on his side, back to the door. The sheets were wrinkled but still tucked around the bed. Lars hadn't used them. He slept on top, a pillow hugged to his chest, his body curling around it.

The fast beating of his heart didn't slow down until he came closer the bed, and he finally saw the rise and fall of Lars's stomach. *He's okay.*

He rounded the bed, maintaining grace and posture with the tray, but he stopped in place when he saw what Lars looked like. It was worse than this morning. Worse than the last two days he checked up on him. There were deep, dark circles around Lars's red-rimmed green eyes as stared out into nothing, his hair messy and unkempt, his skin pale. He looked like Death was near, or that he wished for Death to come soon. And his voice sounded as bad as he looked—scratchy, raw and lifeless—when those eyes rolled up to stare at him.

“What do you want?”

James cleared his throat and stepped closer to Lars. The grip he had on the tray became shakier. The china rattled more. There was a weight on his chest, along with the return of that tightness inside, and he realized as he stood in front of Lars now, knees hitting the mattress, that he felt guilty for doing this to him. “I've, um, brought you food.”

Lars continued to stare at him, in silence, and then closed his eyes. “Don't want it.”

James flexed his paws around the tray. “You need to eat.”

“No.”

His paws shook the tray, a splash of broth spilling over the bowl. “You *will* eat.” He thrust it out to Lars, broth and water sloshing around. “Now take it.”

Lars made no move.

“*Take it.*”

Lars laid on his side as if dead.

He snarled, “Take it boy, or...” And he trailed off, stopping himself. *Don't force him, or threaten him.* The voice in his head sounded just like Cliff. *Show some respect. Make him trust you. Is he another prisoner, or something more?*

James sighed. He knelt on the floor beside the bed, resting the tray next to his knees. Being this close to Lars, he could smell the sweat and the stench from his lack of bathing, and eating. He smelled awful. Different from the smell Lars had when he saved him.

Being this close to him, he could see the sweat on his upper lip and his brow, the slight shiver of his body. He heard the light wheeze in his breathing, the dryness of his lips. And as he leaned in, he could make out how long his eyelashes were.

He lifted a paw and brushed the back of it over his soft cheek.

“Or you’ll get sick.”

Lars shivered underneath the touch—or from how his body felt, he couldn’t tell. But those eyes opened again, focusing on him, the distrust and confusion as strong as the sickness he saw.

“Why should I trust you? You’re a *monster*.”

He suppressed the flinch, but his ears still twitched, flattened on his head, and then perked up again. They were words he found too true, an accusation he agreed with, but his pride kept him from showing no emotion.

His paw left Lars’s cheek, retreating to the bed, claws scraping the sheets. But he swallowed his pride for the first time in a century, as he whispered back to Lars.

“I know I am. And I’m sorry. I’m truly sorry for the way I’ve treated you—you and your father. I’ve shown you no respect or decency since you arrived. I don’t expect you to forgive me for the things I’ve done to you, but I promise you here and now something that I will abide by.” He looked down at the bed and watched his paw scoot over to Lars’s waist and gently cup his side. “I will never treat you like you are a prisoner again. You deserve better.” He sadly smiled. “Considering you have to spend the rest of your life here with an animal like me.” He closed his eyes. “All I ask is that you eat. Please. I’ll leave you be, as long as you promise that you eat this food here.” He sighed. “I can’t have another regret on my conscience.”

Lars didn’t react, didn’t say anything. He waited for something, and when nothing came, James retracted his paw, bringing it back to his side. *It’s useless. I never should’ve bothered—*

Small fingers grabbed his wrist.

“Wait.”

He opened his eyes. Lars’s hand barely fit around his large wrist, but it held on as tight as it could, and the frantic look on Lars’s face said more than words could.

“Yes, Lars?”

“I…” Lars hesitated, his eyes shining in the morning light. He watched him swallow. “I’ll eat. But I need help.”

“I understand. You’re weak.” He gently removed Lars’s hand with his other paw. “I’d be glad to assist you.”

He stood up to his full height, looming down over Lars, his paws coming down to Lars’s shoulders. Instantly the fear came back onto Lars’s face, the same fear James saw from the North Tower, and his chest tightened worse than the other times. *Calm him down.*

“Shh.” He held Lars’s shoulders in his paws. “Please, don’t be frightened. I won’t hurt you.” He squeezed them—Lars trembled—and he lightly purred from deep within his chest to ease his worry. “Relax…”

The trick worked. Lars relaxed enough for James to lift him up easily and settle him into a sitting position against the many pillows on the headboard. He hadn’t used that side of him in some time, when he had spent time with Cliff, thinking he was the key. He had used it on the others as well, and every time, it never failed.

He smiled. “There.” He gave Lars’s shoulders a parting squeeze before he turned to the floor and grabbed the tray, laying it over Lars’s thighs. “It’s chicken broth. Very plain but it should do well

for your stomach.” He took the pitcher of water and rested it on the table beside the bed, easing up weight on Lars’s legs. He poured some into the glass. “If you are still hungry, feel free to request whatever you like. I know Robert and his staff are eager to serve you.”

“Thank you... James.”

A warmth spread from his belly all the way up to his neck. He said his name. Lars actually said his name. It was foreign to feel something, especially a warmth, whenever someone said his name. That happened once before, a lifetime ago. But this was different. This was... nicer, somehow. More pleasant, more sincere. And unlike before where he had been afraid of reactions like this, with this boy, he could acknowledge he liked it.

“You’re welcome, Lars.” He turned to him, glass of water full to the rim, and he took his time sitting on the edge of the bed, making sure not to spill. “Here.”

Lars reached a shaky hand out to take the glass, his smile weak. James brought it forward to his lips, holding the glass in both paws.

Soft fingers brushed over his fur as Lars cupped his hand around the glass.

Their eyes stayed on each other when James tilted the glass to his lips.

Neither one moved. James watched Lars drink half the glass, and stayed still until Lars pulled away, his fingers tickling through the fur, down and off.

The warmth James felt grew in size and intensity, and he found himself smiling as he settled the glass of water onto the tray. “Feel a little better?”

“Much.”

“Good.” He picked up the soup spoon, holding it well despite his large paw. “I take it you’ll need help with eating too?”

The old spark-and-fire he saw in Lars when he first met him started to return as he watched Lars smirk. “I thought princes didn’t serve guests.” Lars chuckled. “Then again, I don’t mind being spoiled.”

James chuckled too. “It’s the least I can do.” He dipped the spoon into the bowl and brought it to Lars’s lips, his other paw hovering underneath it. “To make it up to you.”

Lars’s smirk waned. His whole demeanor changed. The playful smugness had disappeared, replaced with something he couldn’t name. But he liked it. He liked the way Lars’s eyes shined, how his lips parted, how his eyelids fluttered a little. And he especially liked the way he whispered his name.

“James...”

It was the whisper of his name that made the warmth he felt grow to an intensity never felt before, where he felt his heart beat fast like before, but it was different. It was new. He liked the way his heart was beating, how his lips wanted to curl into a smile. It felt nice. Really nice. And for once, James wasn’t afraid of it. He welcomed it.

He slipped the spoon between Lars’s lips. “Enjoy, Lars.”

They said nothing, nor did they look away, as James fed Lars the entire bowl of chicken broth, spoonful by spoonful, taking breaks in between to give him sips of water. They were so engrossed

in each other that they didn't notice the three servants peeking in, Cliff on one side of the doorway, Kirk and Rob on the other, smiling wide at the sight of their prince act at his most intimate with Lars—the most with anyone in the past hundred years.

Eventually Cliff led the other two away to give the prince needed privacy. The gentle click of the door shutting went unnoticed.

Chapter 6

It took Lars a few days to regain back his strength. The castle physician came by order of the prince, checking up on Lars's vitals and declaring him fine, once he rested from his ordeal. Cliff, Kirk, Rob and their staffs all served Lars through his recovery, chatting with him, getting to know each other better. When he wasn't sleeping, eating or talking, Lars spent the rest of his time reading books upon books. And he really enjoyed the way Cliff, Kirk and Rob kept spoiling him with desserts, savory drinks and gourmet food. It made him feel more at home.

When he finally received clearance from the castle physician to leave the room, he made sure not to overexert himself. He wandered the castle interior alongside Cliff or Kirk, talking to every servant that bowed before him. There were apparently 70 servants in the castle, and Lars wanted to know them well, since he was going to live here the rest of his life. To him, they weren't servants but future friends. Already he felt close to Cliff, Kirk and Rob—and Jason too, despite his rare appearances to his room—and he wanted the same kind of open relationship with the others in the castle.

The only person missing was the prince.

He asked too many times during his recovery, “Where’s James? Is he coming?” and Cliff answered every time, “He’s letting you rest, sire. He’ll visit in due time.” But days had passed. Almost a week. Lars had regained his strength, and the prince still didn’t come to see him.

At night his mind constantly drifted to their last time together. He remembered the prince’s blue eyes, the prince’s voice that made him listen—his paws on his shoulders. The claws had scratched his skin, but they didn’t pierce. And the way James spoke to him in that whisper made him relax, and then took his time feeding him after... it made Lars trust James more than he initially did.

And yet the prince had stayed away. For days. Giving him space. Giving him the freedom he wished for. Leaving him alone.

A week passed. He had the others with him to keep him company, and Lars came to know them all more. He caught on quick something wasn’t right about the castle and its servants. The Beast was the first, biggest indication. The way the others panicked and stumbled whenever he brought up modern things, like items and history, was another indication. The design and look of the castle was another indication as well. Something happened in the past, something that changed James into the Beast. And as the time passed, Lars started to wrap his mind around the idea that maybe, just maybe, these people came from another time all together. Maybe 40, 50 years ago or something. His skepticism told him not to give into a foolish idea, but the Beast was the best evidence he had. No genetic mutation or anything could explain the prince’s form.

Lars sat in the South Wing dining room at lunchtime, staring at his bowl of minestrone soup, watching his reflection on its red surface. He was dressed in a dark green suit with gold cufflinks, another outfit Kirk gifted him, his hair tied back and slicked down. It was quiet. Too quiet. Rob was still in the kitchens cooking, Kirk was cleaning up his room, Jason was somewhere, who knew, and Cliff stood near the door at the end of the room, smile fixated on his face like a statue.

He picked up his spoon—and he settled it back down on the table.

I miss him.

He lifted his head up, looking across the room. “Cliff?”

“Yes sire?”

“I have a request.”

Cliff came to his side. “Anything, sire. What is it?”

“I want the prince to join me.”

Cliff startled a little. “Um. He isn’t awake right now, sire. The Master—”

“Prefers to sleep in the day, I remember. But can you try at least? I’d really like to eat with him.”
And talk to him again... “If now doesn’t work, I can wait for this evening, for dinner.”

Cliff nodded his head. “As you wish, sire. I shall try, but dinner will probably work best.”

“Thank you.”

He ate some of his food while he waited for Cliff’s return. Though he was hungry, his stomach was tied up in knots from anxiety. He tried to calm himself down—*it’s okay if he says no dammit*—but it didn’t work. He wanted to see James again. It was his curiosity that fueled his need to know. He found something attractive about the mystery of the prince. Why did he become a beast? What happened? None of the others would tell him why. *That’s the prince’s story to tell*, they said, so he wanted to know. His inquisitive nature drove him crazy, needing to know. The other half of him just wanted to see him again. And talk to him again...

The doors opened behind him. Lars’s spoon clattered into the bowl as he turned around.

He broke out into a wide grin. “James.”

The prince smiled back. He seemed to wobble into the room, yawning behind a paw. “Hello Lars.” He blinked slowly, obviously still half-asleep, his outfit in wrinkles, his fur and hair sticking up in random places, and his voice was a deep husk when he asked, “You wished to see me?”

Lars felt light-headed. That voice. His sleepy eyes... “Yeah...”

“About?”

He blinked, snapping out of his sudden stupor. “Uh.” *Great, I blank out now?* “The, uh... castle?”

“Yes, what about it?”

“Um.” He shrugged. “I dunno.”

“...Oh.” James’s smile waned. “Well, if there’s no reason...” He started to get up.

“No!” He grabbed James’s forearm, holding it to the table. *Think Ulrich, think.* “I just remembered, heh. I was wondering if, uh... maybe...”

“Maybe...?”

His stomach rumbled. *That’s it!* “Eat first, then walk around the castle together?” He grinned hopefully. “Talk a little bit and stuff... I mean, I haven’t seen you for a week.”

“Understandably of course. You were ill.” James sadly smiled. “By my own doing.”

“Hey, I was a stubborn fuck too.” Lars startled, covering his mouth with his other hand. “Oh shit,

sorry.”

James chuckled. “It’s fine. Princes curse too.”

“Oh. Cool. Heh.” Lars rested the hand back in his lap. “So, yeah. It’s not really your fault. I was an idiot too. I should’ve just come to dinner.”

“I wasn’t much of an inviting host, as you know.” James grimaced. “Not the *best* first impression a prince can give.”

“But you said we’d start again, right?” Lars squeezed his hand around James’s forearm. He smiled. “So let’s do that now. What’d you say?”

James smiled back. “Very well.” He took Lars’s hand from his forearm into his paw. “If it is my guest’s wish to spend time with me…” He kissed his knuckles, mindful of his fangs. “Then I shall honor your wish.”

Lars’s cheeks turned a light pink. James slowly released his hand, resting it back on the table. Their eyes held each other—and then Lars shook out of his stupor, weakly smiling. “Uh, great. Thanks.”

“Of course.” James turned to Cliff at the door. “Tell Robert to make a cup of cocoa and a chocolate croissant, please.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Lars chuckled as Cliff left the room. “Chocolate, this early in the day?”

“Afternoon, really.” James fixed his cufflinks, looking smug. “A prince is entitled to be a little spoiled.” He grabbed a napkin cloth and settled it over his lap. “And how is your day treating you?”

As the two began to talk animatedly alone in the dining room, Cliff peaked in through a crack in the door, smiling and watching them interact. *The Master had done the right thing. Staying away from Lars for a week was a brilliant move.* He turned away for the kitchens, closing the door gently behind him. Hopefully the Master and Lars would continue getting along, and wouldn’t have anymore vicious outbursts like they originally did when they met. For the sake of the castle and for the prince’s well-being, they had to be together—had to fall in love—or they were truly doomed.

**

One croissant wasn’t enough. By the time Lars finished his meal, James had ordered from the kitchens a tray worth of pastries. Croissants, profiteroles, cookies and biscuits of all types and toppings and fillings. He asked permission to take a few profiteroles for himself, and munched on one slowly as he watched the prince scarf down his food. Pieces of pastry and chocolate were smeared across his lips, cookie and biscuit crumbs stuck in his fur. Blueberry and strawberry filling streaked his shirt, dripping from his mouth, and chunks of marzipan and more chocolate were stuck underneath his claws. And he didn’t eat proper. He ate noisily, every bite coming with a loud smack or a loud crunch, drank his orange juice in drawn-out slurps and drawn-out belches. He was a thorough pig.

Lars chuckled. *Some prince.*

James stopped eating. Food dripped from his mouth when he asked, “What’s soth funneh?”

You. Lars shook his head and resumed munching on another profiterole. “Nothing.”

By the look on James’s face and the way he dumped his utensils onto the plate, Lars knew the prince wasn’t going to let it go. “Tell me what it was.”

“Really! It was nothing.”

“If it was nothing you wouldn’t have laughed.”

Lars finished his pastry, chuckling some more. “I’m serious James. Don’t worry about it.”

“You’re lying.”

Lars’s chuckles died out. “James—”

“What, do I amuse you? Am I your monkey—”

“What? No! Stop jumping to conclusions.”

“You were making fun of me!”

“Forget it!” Lars stood up abruptly, his body thrumming with anger. “I don’t see why I bothered asking you to come when you’re such a fucking ass!”

James growled, shooting up from his chair and grabbing Lars’s wrist. “I didn’t give you permission to leave.”

“Oh, so we’re going back to that, huh?” Lars yanked on his grip. “Some fucking fresh start!”

He jerked his arm back once more, trying to get away from him. But James manhandled his body easily, grabbing Lars’s other arm and pulling him to his chest, shaking him in his hold.

From outside the door, Cliff, Rob and Kirk shared worried looks and similar grimaces, listening in to their conversation. They all had the same expression on their faces: pure exhaustion and disbelief. “Not again,” Cliff whispered, shaking his head.

James hissed and snarled down into Lars’s face. “*Why* were you laughing at me?”

Lars did a growl of his own as he snarled back into James’ face. “Because you ate like a fucking pig!”

“And that amused you?!”

“*Duh!* A prince is supposed to have manners, and you obviously have *none* of that!”

He shook Lars like a rag doll as he screamed. “*YES I DO!*”

“*THEN PUT ME DOWN AND STOP YELLING AT ME!*”

“*[b]FINE![/b]*”

James threw Lars back into his seat and crossed his arms over his chest. Lars stumbled into a sitting position, using the arms to balance himself. The shirt sleeves torn where James held him.

They glared at each other, neither one moving, nor willing to back down.

The knock on the door echoed in the room.

“My Lord? Sire?” The door creaked open. Cliff poked his head inside. “Are you two all right in there?”

Their heads snapped around to glare at him.

Cliff recoiled a little to hide behind the door. “Oh... I’ll, um... go then.”

The door closed.

They returned into their glaring showdown. James stood like a statue, impervious and solid. Lars’s hands fisted around his knees, his jaw set, his lips in a thin line.

And then another pastry chunk in James’ fur dropped onto his shirt.

Lars’s snarl broke into a snicker.

James frowned. “What *now*?”

Lars shook his head. If he answered, it’d only piss off the prince more. He learned his lesson. Instead, he walked forward to the table, picked up a napkin, and then stood in front of James. He lifted the cloth up to his mouth and took his time whipping away the pieces of food stuck in the fur. *Like a little baby... or the spoiled prince he is.*

“There... done.” He crumbled up the napkin and threw it to the table. “Now you actually look....” And he trailed off, realizing that he and James were chest-to-chest, that could smell his cologne—a rich musk that defined royalty, like how royalty should smell—and those blue eyes that seemed brighter in the sunlight filtering in from the outside. He felt heat on his cheeks and he took a slight step back away as that hazy sensation started to come back, the same one from earlier. “Um... sorry. I’ll—”

James’s paws snatched up his shoulders. “Don’t.” He cleared his throat, the anger gone from his face, replaced with the guilt Lars saw from a week ago. “I’m sorry. Again. I shouldn’t judge so quickly.” He weakly smiled. “Re-learning manners would benefit me and my kingdom.”

Lars smiled in return, as shy and unsure as James. “Yeah, it’d help... but you know when you fuck up, at least.”

James chuckled, and he opened his mouth to say something, but he stopped himself short. Lars followed his line of sight and watched the paws release him, only for James to run the back of one over the fabric tears on his left shoulder. And Lars felt something inside twist and burn, from his stomach to his throat, when he saw the prince’s guilt triple-fold.

“I did this...” His paw cupped the shoulder and squeezed gently. James sighed. “I hurt you again.”

“Hey, hey...” Lars rested a hand over James’s, fingers in warm fur. “No you didn’t. See?” He nodded to his other shoulder. “I’m not bleeding.”

“Regardless, I shouldn’t have lashed out at you.” The paws started to slip away as James stepped back. “Perhaps it’s best for us to postpone our get-together.”

“But...” He couldn’t let James get away. If he did, he’d probably not see him again for another week. So he stepped forward, their chests meeting again, holding James’s big paw in his hand as best he could. “I don’t want you to go.” He felt his cheeks burn again as he stared into James’s eyes. “I shouldn’t have laughed at you, okay? I’m sorry.”

James sighed. “Still. I should’ve let you explain yourself—”

“I should’ve told you anyway.”

“And I shouldn’t have pestered you like a child to tell me.”

“It’s okay.” Lars managed a small smile. “Besides... a prince is entitled to be a little spoiled, right?”

James chuckled and finally smiled back. “That is true.”

They shared a good laugh together, James’s head tilted down, Lars’s head tilted up. When the laughter died down, there was a moment of pause, when they should’ve stepped away from each other, but there was a palpable reluctance between them. Neither one moved for too long a time. They could feel each others heartbeats, the heat of their chests, their own breaths.

And then James slipped away, squeezing Lars’s hand before he gave them space. “Well.” He cleared his throat and then gestured to the table. “Are you still hungry? You can have the rest of my pastries if you so wish.”

“No, it’s fine... I think I’m done for now.”

James nodded. “Very well.” He seemed to fidget in place when he paused and then asked, “Do you still, uh, want to walk? Together?”

Lars nodded. “Yes. I’d like that.” He lowered his eyes to the ground as he lowered his voice. “I’d like to get to know you.”

He felt like sinking into the floor when he admitted that. The sensation doubled when he watched James’s large feet come close to his, and then felt the large paw rest underneath his chin, soft fur tickling his skin.

His face was tilted back. James was close again. He smelled his cologne, felt his breath, heard the rumble of his voice. It made him light-headed—and he liked it.

“I want to know you too, Lars. Very much.” He gently lowered his paw and turned to the side, offering his arm out to Lars. “Let us go.”

His shaky arm twined around James’s bigger one, his hand settling over his forearm. His whole face felt like it was burning up, and the swimming, light-headed sensation wouldn’t go away as he came close to James. *What the hell is wrong with me...?*

James smiled down at him, leading them out the doors. “You’ve explored most of the castle inside, yes?”

Lars shook his head yes. He didn’t trust himself to speak yet.

“Then I’ll show you some secret rooms in South Wing first. Afterwards, we must go outside. You have to see the gardens.”

When they stepped out of the dining room, they found Cliff standing on the sidelines, waiting for orders. “I hope the meal was to your liking, my Lord,” he said.

“It was. Give my compliments to Robert for another fine meal. And while you are at it...” He turned to Lars again as he spoke. “My guest and I will be exploring the castle for most of the day. See to it that we have dinner prepared and ready once we finish.”

Cliff bowed. “Consider it done, my Lord.”

They passed him by, James talking again about the different gardens, their corresponding wings and how they matched each design and look. Cliff noticed as they walked by how Lars's arm was tight around James's, how Lars listened intently to every word James said, and how James seemed relaxed—a feat, considering the Master hated to talk, unless he was around someone he trusted.

Rob and Kirk came out of their hiding spots and watched them go alongside Cliff, all three grinning from ear-to-ear. It didn't matter that they had another outburst. They had reconciled faster, and now, they were spending time together. This was now more than a promise. It was a beginning.

**

They walked the many halls of the South Wing, James showing Lars the various artworks and vegetation. Lars asked questions here and there, and James answered them all, not once losing his temper. Even though they eventually unlinked arms, they didn't stray from each other. When Lars bounded off in a certain direction, James stayed close and followed him. And Lars did the same as well, when James wandered off into a secret room. They were arm-to-arm, hip-to-hip, fur brushing skin more than once.

Outside in the South Wing gardens, James showed him the vine canopies and the shrubbiars. Most of the flowers was buried underneath layers of snow, but James brushed some away to show Lars the roses and the orchids planted there. At dinner they ate in the same dining hall as before. Lars noticed the sudden table manners James sported this time around and he smiled at him, knowing not to say anything, but was liked that James showed some effort to change.

Unbeknownst to the two of them, all 70 servants observed them from corners and up-on-high throughout the day, all of them smiling at what they saw. For a hundred years their Master sent all who came into their kingdom by accident to the North Tower, until this boy. They fondly watched the Master interact with Lars, saw how the Master stayed close to him and how Lars stayed close as well. They were caught though at dinner time, not by the Master, but by the top servants. Cliff, Rob and Kirk shooed them all away back to their quarters, to give Lars and James some needed time alone.

But the top servants all observed the Master lead Lars post-dinner from the dining room to the Sapphire Room. They stood up on a hidden balcony overseeing the long hallway, side by side, anxious and nervous as the Master opened the door for his guest.

“There you are.”

“Thank you.” Lars took a step into the room and nodded to him. “Have a good night.”

“Yes... you too.” He slowly shut the door. “Sleep well.”

James stood in front of Lars's closed door and stared for a long time, his paws itching on the sides. He wanted to say more—to ask him if he wanted this again tomorrow. But he sighed and turned away instead, heading back to the West Wing.

He barely walked a few steps when he heard the door open again.

“James?”

James stopped and tentatively looked over his shoulder. Lars stood in the doorway, a hand on the frame. He turned around fully towards him. “Yes?”

“Could we do this again? Tomorrow? Because you really know a lot about the castle, and I'd like

to know more about it, and..." Lars slid his hand down the door to the handle, his smile turning shy. "Today was a lot of fun. I'd like to do it again. If that's okay."

James was silent.

Up in the balcony, Kirk and Rob gasped, turning to each other for a moment, their hope growing. Cliff clutched his hands around the railing. "Come on, James... say yes."

The tension dissipated when the prince smiled and nodded yes. "We'll tour the East Wing tomorrow then. I'll have Kirk wake you for breakfast."

Lars's face lit up. "Great. I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Yes... tomorrow."

Lars's eyes stayed on him as he slowly shut the door. "Good night James," he whispered softly.

The door closed with a soft click. James stood in the hallway, grinning stupid and staring at the door, before he answered back. "Good night Lars." And he turned away for the West Wing, still smiling.

Rob and Kirk muffled their happy sounds as they hugged each other and then hugged Cliff. "It's happening," Kirk whispered. "It's finally happening."

Cliff hugged his two friends back, smiling as he watched James retreated back to his room. "Yes. It finally is."

**

"You're all being idiots." Jason leaned back in his seat, cradling his china cup to his chest. He crossed one leg over the other, shaking his head. "It's one day. *One* damn day. How can you be so frighteningly blind to the past one hundred years?"

Cliff stirred his spoon in his tea, frowning. "Your pessimism astounds me, Jason."

"But I'm right, aren't I?"

"Mm." Cliff tapped the spoon on the cup's edge and laid it on the table between them. "You have a valid point." He took a generous sip, and then whispered, "But can you truly blame us for how we feel?"

Jason sighed. "I do understand where you are coming from, yes, but I'm not about to join the celebrations when they're premature at best."

It was late at night. Everyone in the castle was asleep, except for its two leaders. They sat across from each other in one of the East Wing dens, sitting on plush burgundy couches with an oak table between them. In the beauty of the East Wing laid safety as well. Unless requested, their prince would never step foot near this side of the castle. Too many memories of the prince's childhood resided in every piece of furniture, every wall, every painting, every room. The Master roamed all the other halls at night, except this one.

Cliff took a few more sips of his tea before he spoke. "I think you're being too judgmental."

"And I think you're all too foolish to rely on a hope."

"You of all people know how difficult it is for the Master to open up."

“You would know too.” Jason gave him a pointed look over his china cup. “You spent the same amount of time with him as I did.”

“Then you must understand how important today was.”

“And it didn’t change anything.”

“The changes are obvious!” Cliff’s cup rattled against the china plate as he rested it on the table. “He woke up from his sleep for him. He ate lunch and dinner with him. They blew up, yes, but they eventually apologized. And then they spent the whole day together. Isn’t that evidence enough?”

Jason snorted. “Has the spell been broken? The Master back to his original form? Can we leave the castle grounds?”

“Why are you asking foolish questions like that?”

“For the same reason you people have that ridiculous foolish hope that this boy is the one.” He drained his entire tea cup and nearly broke the china as he slammed it onto the table. “Once all of that happens, then I’ll know he was it.”

He stood up and stepped away from the table, taking his leave. Cliff watched him go, shaking his head.

“Why can’t you let it go?”

Jason slammed the door behind him.

Cliff winced. The clock in the room ticked on, the fireplace crackling in the corner. He sighed and sat on the couch for a bit longer, taking his time finishing his tea. Part of him knew Jason was full of it. And yet the other part took into consideration Jason’s thoughts as well. They had worked together for years before the curse fell upon them, looking over the castle’s inner workings with James’s parents before they became the prince’s charges. While Cliff knew he was idealistic in his thoughts and approaches, Jason was his balance, the realist, the one who yanked him back to solid ground. But he knew Jason’s intentions were in the wrong as well. As right as Jason was, Cliff didn’t want to believe him. Jason wasn’t over what happened. He probably never would. Valid point or not, Jason’s viewpoint was tainted.

But as Cliff gazed into his tea cup, the liquid swishing inside, he felt that maybe, just *maybe*, Jason was right. Time was running out. It was a week and two days until the end of the year. If Lars was the one, they’d have to fall in love fast, to save them all. And he didn’t know if that could happen fast enough.

“Dammit Jason.” He closed his eyes. “Why do you have to always be right?”

Chapter 7

The tour of the East Wing went as smooth as the South Wing's yesterday. James showed Lars the decor, explaining its history and influences in style. Lars listened in, soaking up the information, asking questions here and there, and James answered them with surprising patience. Sunset arrived too fast when they proceeded on an evening walk through the gardens, James guiding Lars to a gazebo laid hidden underneath a thicket of large willow trees. There he offered Lars a white rose, and the servants watched on cheering when Lars took it, except Jason. He stayed away, observing from the shadows of the South Wing Tower with a more critical eye than the others.

The following day, James dined with Lars in the East Wing for breakfast, but their morning banter was void of its usual energy. The question Lars asked still hung in the air, and the servants peeked in at the doors, Kirk and Rob at the front, looking worrisome as their Master growled.

"No, Lars. We're not going there."

"But—"

"No. The North Wing is nothing but holding cells, and the West Wing is forbidden." James poured some melted butter over his stack of pancakes, followed by a scoop of whipped cream. "We can return to the South Wing, if you'd like. I can show you some paintings in storage."

Lars didn't touch his own pancakes. He stared at the dollop of whipped cream slipping off the sides to the plate.

"Cliff and Jason can go into the West Wing, though, right?"

"Of course. They have to, as does Kirk and Rob. It is their duty as the highest-ranking servants to be near me at all times, should I need anything."

"Because you trust them."

James froze, his fork an inch away from his plate. "What?"

"You trust them. They're your friends. Right?"

James rested his cutlery on the plate. From the corner of his vision, he saw Cliff and Kirk's heads poking through the small crack in the doors. *Dammit.* "Well." He cleared his throat. "They serve a great purpose in the castle and have been loyal to me for many years."

"So they're your friends."

He hesitated, and then finally nodded yes.

Lars frowned. "So I'm not your friend then, huh? You don't trust me going into those areas?"

James's jaw set. Part of him wanted desperately storm out and leave. Another part wanted to strangle Lars where he sat. But doing either of those would end the progress he had made with Lars so far, and he couldn't afford that. Time was running out. He'd have to do whatever it was Lars wanted.

"I'll take you, if you stay close to me."

Lars grinned. "Great—"

“And you *must* do what I say. If I tell you not to touch something, don’t touch it. If something is completely off limits, we do *not* go in. Understood?”

Lars nodded. “Got it.”

“Hm.” *Spoiled brat.* He turned to the doors. “Cliff.”

The maître d' poked his head in, looking sheepish. “Yes, my Lord?”

“We’ll be going to the West Wing for most of the day. I’ll be having lunch there with my guest. Inform the staff.”

Cliff nodded. “Yes, my Lord. As you wish.”

James watched the doors close. Across the table, Lars ate noisy, slurping his orange juice, chomping on his pancakes, like a little kid James didn’t want to eat any longer, but he made himself take a few bites. It disgusted him how he had to let Lars win, just to make the spell break and end this hundred-year misery. Hopefully he’d make Lars love him faster by giving into his wants. After a few days together though, James knew he did *like* Lars. He liked how intelligent he was, his passion and his energy. It was thrilling to have conversations with someone who didn’t always agree with whatever he said, someone who was curious to learn more and constantly fascinated by what he found. But that wasn’t going to be enough. The big question was glaringly obvious: how could a prince like himself learn to love a brat like this?

He watched Lars over the rim of his glass. *I’ll figure it out later.* He smiled. *Need to charm him more first...*

**

After breakfast, James led Lars to the West Wing. Lars babbled about Pissarro and Renoir as they walked, falling silent finally when they came to the entrance, and James brushed Lars’s hand with his claws.

“Uh, James?”

“I apologize, but I need you to hold my hand.” James’s paw squeezed his hand. “There are dips and holes in the floor. I don’t want you to fall and get hurt.”

“Oh, sure.” He smiled weakly. “Thanks.”

The West Wing was like a sister to the North. Broken furniture littered the dusty floors, the mirrors and windows cracked or smashed in. The torn wallpaper fluttered as they passed by, lit up by stone torches burning bright. But while the North Wing was defined by shadows and greys, there was one color Lars noticed as they passed by open rooms. Blue. All shades of blue, none bright though. They were as faded and rundown as the North Wing.

James steered Lars away from the dips and holes on the floor, heading deeper into the West Wing. Lars stayed quiet, observing the area. It was obvious this once used to look as beautiful as the South and East Wings. But time was unkind to this area, like the North, and Lars wanted to know why. His curiosity burned his tongue. He wanted to bombard James with questions, but he knew better. James had a hell of a temper. If he asked the prince questions about how he became a beast, he’d end up in the North Tower again, guest or not.

He glanced at James beside him. The fangs, the claws and the fur all screamed a horrid beast, one Lars should run away from as fast as he could, not befriend. But in the time they’ve spent

together, he found himself not phased by James's looks any longer. He saw the prince James was in his demeanor, posture and voice, the regal way he carried himself, his grace and poise. He was proud and sure, an intimidating leader, but gracious and kind. Ill-tempered and brash, but kind.

He did release me from the Tower after all. And he did let Dad go unharmed. He could've just killed me at any time. He could've let me starve too...

“What is it?”

Lars startled, stumbling in his stride. “Uh.” *Shit. Was I staring at him the whole time?*

James chuckled. “Do I have something on my face? Another stray fruit in my fur?”

A blush blossomed on his cheeks. Lars diverted his attention away to the floor. “Um, no. I'm sorry. I wasn't staring at you or making fun of you or anything.” *Great. Now he'll think I was staring at him because of how he looked or whatever. Shit.* “I was, uh—”

“It's fine.” James squeezed his hand. “I trust you.”

Lars lifted his head, gaping at the prince.

James smiled back. “You said it yourself, right? I trust them, since they are my friends. Which means, I trust you.” He veered the two of them to the left, turning the corner into another hallway. “Now follow me.”

Lars's cheeks burned. He couldn't look away from James as they walked together.

They came up to large double doors at the end of the hall, the wood cracked along the edges, dents and scratches on its surface. Cobwebs hung in the corners, rust littered around the golden handles. James let go of his hand to push them wide open and Lars jumped a little at the large creaking sound they made. He peeked over James's shoulder, standing on his tip-toes to see, and when James stepped to the side and ushered him in, Lars's jaw dropped.

“Oh my God...”

It was a simple room, where the walls and the carpet and the drapes were complimentary blue colors, but Lars didn't care about that. He stared at the walls littered with breathtaking paintings, instantly noticing the influences of impressionism, realism and a touch of modernism. Most of them were based in the works of the classics, mainly the Renaissance period. As he entered further into the room, he noticed the many instruments littering the floor like the paintings on the walls. A grand piano, a cello, a clarinet... and he smiled when he found three tall bookcases against the wall.

“Do you like it?” James said from behind.

“Yes. Fuck yes. This is amazing.” He fluttered around the room, gazing at each painting, touching the instruments as he passed by. *My God...* He shook his head, laughing softly, overwhelmed by the pure *beauty* in the room, and he turned around to where James still stood at the now-closed doors, staring in awe at him. “Are these yours?”

James nodded yes.

“They're beautiful.”

“Thank you.” James sadly smiled. “I had a lot of time to perfect my technique.”

“Fuck, I’ll say.” He walked around the room again, coming up to one of the paintings that captivated him first—a man keeling in a wooden boat, hands covering his face, the clouds colored a dark violet-red. “This one is amazing. I mean, the detail, especially on the boat, and the sky. Wow. It’s so real, like it’s going to pop out of the picture and come to life.” He tilted his head up, hover his fingertips over the oil canvas. “My father would’ve loved to see this.” He chuckled. “Gotta admit, you’re way more talented than he is.”

“You flatter me, Lars.”

“Flattery nothing. It’s the damn truth.” Lars stepped away, walking along the wall, his fingers skipping along the edges of the frames, stopping when he stood in front of the grand piano. “You play music too?”

James cleared his throat. “Once. A long time ago.”

Lars rested his hand flat on the piano’s smooth top. “My dad was a musician once. He taught me how to play drums. But he stopped playing music when my mother died.” He sadly smiled. “I did too consequently.”

James’s voice fell into a low whisper. “How come?”

Lars’s eyes watered as he spoke. “My mom and dad met through music. She was a singer, and my dad was a saxophonist. They met at some lounge bar in Copenhagen and he fell madly in love with her. They used to play together even when I was growing up. Mom would sing to me, dad would play the piano...” He sighed, swiping his hand away, leaving finger smudge marks behind. “I miss her a lot.”

He walked away from the piano to the only piece of furniture in the room, a soft blue couch. He curled up to the side, staring out one of the few windows. *A year later, and it still hurts talking about you, Mom.*

Beside him, the couch dipped. “What happened to her?”

“Car accident. Neither my dad or I recovered from it.” He leaned on one of his elbows, resting it on the couch armrest. “We left Denmark after that for Germany. Mom was the breadwinner, so without her we really couldn’t live at home, nor did we want to. So we came here, thanks to some connections Dad had. Or used to have really... anyway, I started tutoring and preparing for university, while Dad tried to make something of himself as a painter. That’s why my Dad was going to the Munich Art Festival. He was hoping to get some bites, network and such, you know. But he ended up here.”

“So that’s why you came here. That’s why you said...” He felt James’s paw rest on his thigh. “I’m sorry, Lars. For what I did to you and your father.”

Lars startled. *Did he just...* He turned his head, meeting James’s stare dead-on—coming face to face with a picture perfect look of guilt and shame that sucker-punched him in the gut. “James...”

James’s ears flattened on his head. “I know I’ve made you a prisoner here—”

“No. You said—” Lars turned around on the couch, facing him fully. “You said I was a guest, right?”

“I imprisoned you—”

“And that shit is in the past. You apologized. We’re over it. And a deal is a deal. You let go of my father, I’m here with you forever.”

“Yes, but...” James recoiled back, slipping his paw away. “I took you away from your only parent. I stole your life.”

Lars froze. *He’s right. You know he’s right. He took your father away from you, almost starved you to death, imprisoned you in the Tower—you know you’re no guest.* “But...”

“No, Lars. I’ve finally realized what I have done to you. I ruined what little good you had in your life by making you a prisoner here, forcing you as my guest, and there’s only one way to right that wrong.” James sat up straight, looking every inch of a proud prince, the hurt disappearing. “If you wish for tonight to be your last night here, I will not blame you or condemn you for that choice. Once the snow has melted further and there is safe passage back to your village, you are free to leave.”

Lars gasped. *No. Yes. No! But...but I don’t...* “I...”

James stood up from the couch. “I hope you have enjoyed your stay here. I did enjoy your company.” He turned away to the doors. “It was nice having someone to talk to...” Lars shook as James walked away. “The passage should be clear within another a week or so. Hopefully sooner. I’ll have Cliff come retrieve—”

“No!”

James stopped in place. Lars came up to him as he turned around and they met stares again, neither one moving.

Then, Lars said, “I do miss home. I do want to see my father again. I will take up on your offer, once the snow lets up.”

Slowly, Lars lifted a hand to James’s shirt sleeve.

“Until then... don't push me away.”

“I have not—”

“You did. You left me alone for a whole week, and I know it was avoidance, out of guilt for what you'd done.”

James looked down. “I am truly sorry.”

“I know you are.” Lars swallowed. “And I’ve forgiven you.”

“I don't see how you can.”

Lars gripped James’s shirt sleeve tighter. “Because we all deserve a second chance.” His fingers dug in. “Even you.”

When James lifted his gaze up, Lars froze, stifling his gasp. Gone was the usual glare, the empty stare he first saw when he met the prince. Instead, the prince smiled. He actually *smiled*. Smiling, his eyes glistening—watery *human* blue eyes—and his heartbeat skipped. His face burned up again. James leaned in closer, and Lars found himself captivated by his face, by him. His captor. His overlord. The man he should hate. *And yet...*

James lifted a paw.

Lars did not flinch as James touched his chin, tilting it up.

When James finally spoke, it was above a whisper. “Do you know why I brought you here?”

Lars shook his head no.

“You’re the first guest I’ve ever allowed in here. No one is allowed here. Not even my parents were. This is my sanctuary... that I now share with you.”

Lars smiled. He released his grip on James’s sleeve up to slide it up his shoulder. He hesitated for a moment, and then, he pushed his palm right on to James’s furred cheek.

“Thank you.”

Without looking away, James took Lars’s hand from his cheek, pulled it away and gently kissed his knuckles.

**

The rest of the day went by in a blur. They spent it together in the room, just the two of them. Lars attempted the piano from memory, and James guided him, enfolding his arms over Lars’s and placing his paws over small hands, showing him what to do. He showed Lars works in progress, some sketches and drawings, a few unfinished paintings, and encouraged Lars to try a drawing of his own. He helped him guide the paintbrush on the canvas, taught him how to make realistic shadows and easy paint strokes, and when they finished, James praised Lars for the half-finished waterfall he created. James summoned Cliff only once for food, and they ate on the floor like children, talking about their favorite classical pieces.

As the sun fell, they rambled on and on about books, sitting on opposite sides of the couch. “Do you know *The Count of Monte Cristo*?” James asked. “That would be my all-time favorite.”

“It’s one of mine too! Original French or translated?”

“Translated. I don’t know French.”

“It’s more beautiful in its native language.”

“You know French?”

“Oui. Je parle couramment quatre langues.”

James chuckled. “Impressive. What else do you speak aside from French?”

“English, Spanish and Danish is my native language. I’d like to work on my German next since I live here now.”

“Ich kann dabei helfen. German is my native language.”

Lars’s eyes widened like his smile. “Oh wow. Does that mean you’ve read some German authors in their actual language?”

“Of course. Goethe and Nietzsche are my favorites.”

“I prefer Kafka myself, but I did like Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Have you read those?”

James frowned. “What year did they come out?”

“Um... Kafka was the early 1900s, and that particular Nietzsche was later 1880s I think.” Lars shrugged. “I’m bad at dates.”

“Mm.”

“Anyway, I liked Kafka’s essays more than his novels. He...” Lars frowned when he watched James stare down at the floor. “What is it?”

“I’ve never read Kafka.” He shook his head. “Never even heard of him until now.”

“What?! How? He’s the most important writer of the twentieth century.”

James closed his eyes. “Exactly.”

Lars sat still.

Silence fell between them. The sound of Lars scooting across the couch was too loud in the quiet room. He stopped moving when their thighs touched.

“What do you mean?”

James’s ears twitched back and forth. They flattened when he opened his eyes again. “They’re more their contemporaries than they are mine.” He turned to him, the troubled hurt back on his face. “You see, Lars, I’m older than they are. All of us in the castle are.”

Lars stuttered, “By h-how many years?”

“A hundred.”

Green eyes widened. James’s paws curled into defensive fists.

Lars didn’t look away. Kept his voice in a low whisper when he asked, “So you’re how old?”

“A hundred and twenty-two. I was twenty-two when the spell fell over the castle from the Enchantress.” James looked away when his mind drifted to the past and his major regret. “Long ago on New Years Eve, an old beggar woman came to the castle looking for shelter. I refused to house her because of how hideous she looked. She then transformed, revealing herself as a powerful Enchantress, and she laid a curse upon my kingdom to teach me a lesson. Everyone was damned as well, never to leave the castle... and I was damned to become what she said I was inside. A monster.”

“And there’s no way to end it? You’re stuck like this?”

James nodded. “No. There is a way.”

“Well, what is it?”

“She said I had to learn from my mistakes. And the only way to do that...” *Don’t tell him the truth. Don’t say love. He’ll be pressured to love you, or he won’t do it at all.* James cleared his throat. “I had to learn how to... care about others.” *Good. Care is a safer word than love.*

“But you already act kind.”

“It’s not enough to break the spell. I still mess up.” James looked him in the eye finally. “You learned that first hand.”

Lars smiled. “Yeah. You’re right.” He laid a hand over one of James’s curled paws. “You’ll get there. You’ve got time.”

James forced a smile to his lips. “Yes. I’ll eventually learn.” *Time. Sure. Not enough time to make you... unless, I be honest.* He rested his other paw on top of Lars’s hand, cupping it. “With your help.”

That same blush returned to Lars’s cheeks. “What?”

James leaned in close. “I mean that, Lars.” Could see the small trembles in Lars’s frame. “I wish to free my kingdom finally. They didn’t deserve punishment for my actions. But I also want to grow and learn as well. I want to stop being a monster and be who I was before. But I need your help.”

“What can I do?”

“Be my friend. Teach me real kindness.” He took Lars’s hand to his lips again. *Fall in love with me.* He kissed the knuckles, watching Lars’s eyes shine, the blush turn a deeper red—and his stomach flipping at the sight. *Please Lars.* He lifted his head, the words slipping out against his will. “Make me human again.”

The sincerity of his words worked. Lars leaned in too, came closer. The atmosphere changed between them, like it did earlier. He found himself drawn to that glossy-eyed look Lars sported. The others never looked at him this way. It wasn’t blank or lost but firmly rooted in emotion. Like awe, or surprise, or...

“James...” Lars shook his head no. “I don’t know if I can. If I’m—”

“Shh.” James lifted his free paw to the back of Lars’s head, cupping it. “Friends trust, right?”

“Yes—”

“And I’ve shown you that trust today, haven’t I, taking you here?”

“Yes, but—”

“No, Lars. Trust me.” He watched Lars’s eyes flutter shut as he breathed over his lips. “You’re the one.”

Their noses brushed, and their lips hover-hesitated for a moment, before James closed the gap between them and finally kissed him. It was a gentle touch of lips, pressing enough to feel, not bruise. They didn’t move closer or away. They stayed in place, taking in the moment, James engraving it to memory—all ready comparing it to the past.

So different from the others...

Lars ended the kiss, his lips lingering over James’s for a moment. His eyes fluttered open first, James following soon after. He found Lars in a daze as they looked at each other, heavy-lidded eyes gleamed over, still not moving. The sight enticed James to touch, and he almost did, almost lifted his paw to trace those wet lips, until he remembered what he was.

He pulled away, letting Lars go. “Well... it’s getting late. Let me escort you back.”

“Uh? Oh.” Lars quickly snapped out of his reverie, letting James help him up from the couch, hand in his paw. “Sure. Um.” He looked elsewhere, the blush creeping down to his neck. “I’m pretty hungry, yeah.”

James chuckled. “I’m sure there is dinner waiting for us in the South Wing.”

“Right...”

As they left the room, James guiding Lars through the West Wing, the prince caught glimpses of Lars's blushing red, confused face, how the boy flicked between looking at him and the floor. And he smiled at the sight. *That definitely worked.*

Chapter 8

Inside the South Wing Dining Hall, James waited for Lars to arrive for breakfast. Rows and rows of food waited to be devoured on the large table in front of him, but he wouldn't eat until Lars was there with him. He had to capitalize on what happened yesterday in the West Wing. The kiss was perfect. Lars's guard went down. Now he had to further things along.

But Lars was late.

"What is taking them so long?" He turned to Jason beside him. "He hasn't been late before."

"Fuck if I know."

In the background near the door, Rob slapped his palm to his forehead.

James chuckled. "Only you can get away saying that to me."

"Indeed, my Lord. But if you want, I can go see what is keeping them."

The doors opened then, just as James was about to respond. He started to smile when Cliff entered, and he quickly frowned when there was no one else with him.

"Where is he?"

"Outside, my Lord."

"Outside?"

"Yes. He's playing in the snow." Cliff flanked James's side other side as he gestured to the window. "See for yourself. Some of the servants have come outside with him to play."

James walked to the window, Jason, Cliff and Rob coming up beside him. Down below in the South Wing gardens was Lars, giggling and laughing, throwing snowballs at some of the servants. He dashed behind trees and bushes, avoiding return attacks and making direct hits.

"He wants to see you come outside," Cliff said.

James frowned. "What for?"

"Isn't it obvious, my Lord? To play with him. He desires your company."

"Hm." He kept his gaze down, watching Lars play in the gardens. More servants came out of the castle, some participating in the snowball fight. Others started to make snow angels. Some broke out ice skates to use on the frozen-over ponds and lake. The rest watched on, hand-in-hand or side-by-side, looking content and happy.

This isn't what I planned at all.

"Cliff. I need you to stay here for a moment." He turned to Rob and Jason. "You two go outside."

Rob saluted him. "Done and gone, sir." He rushed out of there with a wide grin.

Kirk walked in at that very moment. "My Lord, my apologies—"

Rob snatched his arm. "Snow now, apologies later!"

“But—WAAH!”

Jason snorted and rolled his eyes as Rob dragged him out of the hall. He turned on his heel and shook his head, going the opposite way where Rob and Kirk exited. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be going to my quarters for a quick change.”

James sent Jason a warning look. “I better see you outside soon, Newsted. I don’t want you locked inside your room all day.”

He bowed to the prince. “As you wish, my Lord.”

Cliff chuckled hearing Jason’s grumbles as he left. He turned back to the view outside, watching everyone below. Lars tripped and flopped onto the snow. Two of the kitchen servants pounced on top of him, and they laughed together, playfully pushing each other around. Cliff grinned as he watched Kirk and Rob run outside and were immediately pelted with snowballs. Together they soon joined the fight and scooped up snow, throwing them every which way around them.

“Cliff?”

He diverted his attention away from the window to the prince beside him. “Yes, my Lord?”

“I don’t understand this.”

“What do you mean?”

James gestured to the gardens outside. “This...” His eyes fell on Lars and his voice dropped into a softer whisper. “Him.”

Cliff watched Lars hug Rob and Kirk in session, chatting animatedly with them. “What about him, my Lord?”

James’s eyes followed Lars. “I kissed him yesterday.”

Cliff snapped his attention back to the prince. “You *what?*”

“I kissed him.”

“...And?”

“Now he’s outside.” Another snowball fight started outside, Lars, Kirk and Rob together as a team. “I was hoping to further things along.”

“I see.” He caught Jason coming into the yard—and being instantly pelted by snowballs. Cliff smiled. “Well, my Lord, I think this is good news.”

“I think he’s avoiding me.”

“I think you’re trying too hard.”

“If he wasn’t avoiding me, he wouldn’t be out there.”

“Are you telling me that after constantly being around each other, where you have shown our guest to almost every part of the kingdom, *including* your restricted, private room inside the West Wing, it is all insufficient?” He shook his head. “Come now, James. Who are you trying to fool, me or you?”

Down below, Lars helped Jason out of the snow, Kirk and Rob rushing to his side to help. James turned away from the window, his back to Cliff. “I don’t think he feels for me the way I need him to feel.”

“And what if he does?” Cliff squeezed his shoulder. “If you still doubt where his feelings lie... then I suggest you do something nice for him.”

James sighed. “Like what? What could I possibly do?”

Cliff grinned. “Well...”

**

An hour later, near lunch time, Lars and the others returned into the warmth of the castle, taking off their wet clothes and hanging them near the fireplace in the Main Hall to dry. Kirk and Rob huddled under a large blanket together, chattering with all the other servants, while Jason grumbled all the way to his room, muttering about getting hypothermia after all the snow he was piled under.

Lars sat on one of the couches, grinning from ear-to-ear. He was *happy*. Playing in the snow was something he hadn’t done in some time. It helped take his mind off of the prince and what happened yesterday. He knew he was avoiding him. But he made the excuse of seeing him later... much later in the day. He couldn’t avoid it forever, but he could stall at least.

Something landed around his shoulders—something warm and soft. He looked down and found a green robe wrapping around him. *James?* He turned his head and found Cliff there. Part of him was a bit disappointed, a much larger part of him relieved.

“Hey Cliff.”

“Hello, sire. I take it you and the others had a good time outside.”

“Definitely. But I think you should have a doctor come take a look at Jason. He was complaining about getting a cold after we all pelted snowballs at him.”

“I saw that.”

“It was *so* worth it.”

Cliff chuckled. “I’m sure it was, sire. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to attend.”

“I would’ve had you on my team, we were winning the entire time.” Lars stood up, tying the sash around his waist. “So, when’s lunch? I could go for some soup and crackers.”

“I’ll have one of my staff make something,” Rob said from the other side of the room. “Shouldn’t take too long.”

“Speaking of some no-shows,” Kirk said, “where’s the prince? Why didn’t he come outside?”

Lars’s lips burned at the mention of James. But he stayed composed as he turned to Cliff. “Yeah, where is he?”

“Ah, I’m afraid he was far too busy redecorating to join you, and he expresses his deepest regrets.”

“Redecorating?”

“Yes, sire. The West Wing.” Cliff grinned. “Which is where I’ve been ordered to escort you to,

immediately. The prince is waiting.”

Lars froze in place, the blood draining from his face. Behind him, he heard Kirk and Rob’s elated dismissals. “Go, get going, don’t make him wait,” and he nodded, his eyes turning to the floor. *Shit. Can’t avoid him any longer.*

Cliff stepped to the side, gesturing towards the direction of the West Wing. “Shall we?”

“Uh, yeah.” Lars crossed his arms over his chest, walking to Cliff’s side. “Lead the way.”

**

He wasn't prepared for this. When Cliff led him down the dark familiar hallways of the West Wing, he expected a small and Spartan room, where it had a bed and a window. What the hell was James redecorating for anyway? Did that mean he wanted him to move in next door? That meant he’d be next door to James with no escape.

Instead, Lars walked into a completely finished masterpiece.

The first thing he noticed was how blue the whole room was. In the middle was the only piece of furniture there: a large canopy bed, the royal blue sheets matching the soft gossamer curtains around it. The plush carpet he stepped on reminded him of the color of the ocean. And as Lars further entered the room, he found the prince standing on a large tarp, his cloak discarded on the carpet. There were buckets of paint around him in all shades of blue and white, painting one of the walls.

“James?”

The prince startled, the paint stroke he was making jerking on the wall, creating a zig-zagged line. He turned around, blue dripping from the brush. There were paint dots on James’s fur, his white shirt and his pants. It reminded Lars so much of his father then.

“Lars! I thought you wouldn’t be inside for some time. Your room isn’t done yet.”

Lars stepped forward, closing the space between them. “My room?”

“Yes. I was going to surprise you—” James looked up at Cliff in the doorway, glaring at him. “—but someone had other plans.”

Cliff took his exit with a smile and a wave.

Lars glanced at the wall for a brief moment. “So you’re doing this... why?”

“It’s a gift. Part of a gift.”

“Oh?”

James dropped the paint brush into the paint can. He looked down to the floor. “You know why.”

Lars’s cheeks turned pink. His lips burned again. *That kiss... what the hell was I thinking? Why did I let him do that?* “I see.”

“Mm.”

Silence.

Lars stared at the walls.

James crossed his arms over his chest.

“Do you not like it?” James asked.

The slight waver in his question made Lars’s stomach twist a little. “I do.”

“But you don’t want to stay here.”

“It’s just a little unexpected is all.”

“So you don’t want to stay.”

“No!” Lars finally looked at him. “Unexpected means what it means. That doesn’t mean I don’t like it or I don’t want to stay, alright?”

James eyeballed him from the side. “So you *do* want to stay?”

Lars froze. “Well...” He looked around the room, all the open space, the furnishings, the windows. How old and beautiful it all was, like a restored nineteenth century living quarter. “I don’t think I can pass up a room full of history like this. Besides.” He smiled. “You put all this effort into it already, so...”

“You’re staying?”

“Yes, I’m staying.”

“Good.” James walked ahead, gesturing Lars to follow. “Now for the other gift.”

Lars hesitated for a moment before he trailed behind him. *What the hell did I just do? Did I just say yes?* He shook his head. *How the fuck did he get me to do that? Son of a...*

They walked to two large doors on the other side of the room. James started to open them and then stopped, quickly turning around. “Close your eyes.”

“What for?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Is it my own kitchen?” Lars grinned. “That’d be pretty awesome.”

“We’ll eat in a bit. Just close your eyes first.”

“Fine, fine.”

He did what James asked of him. The loud creak of the doors opening startled him a bit. He couldn’t think of what would be on the other side waiting for him. Maybe it was his own art room, like the one James had. Or maybe it was an observation deck. He had no clue.

The doors hit the walls. Shuffling of feet on carpet. He felt James in front of him—

Fur grazed down his cheek. Lars gasped softly.

The touch disappeared. “Sorry.”

“Uh.” Lars managed a small smile. “It’s okay.”

James cleared his throat. “Well.” He rested a paw on Lars’s shoulder. “This way.”

He managed walking forward blind, leaning against James’s paw for guidance. As they walked into the room, he heard his footsteps magnified, the sounds echoing like they were in a much larger area now.

James stopped them abruptly, squeezing his shoulder. “Okay. You can open them now.”

When he did, Lars almost fell over.

Surrounding him was the largest library he had ever seen. Bookcases upon bookcases upon *bookcases*, mountains high, lining the walls, filling up the entire room. There were couches, desks, candles and lanterns, a huge world globe—everything he could ever want, ever dream of. All of it, right here in this very room.

He turned to James, eyes wide, mouth gaping. When he finally found the words, they came out in a strangled whisper. “Holy fuck.”

“I see you like it.”

“Uh, hell *yes*.”

“I’m glad. This room—both rooms—used to be my private study, but I haven’t used either for a good while now. And I believe you told me you enjoyed reading...” He smiled, looking down at the floor. “So, this is now yours. All of it.”

His brain told him *no, he’s up to something, you know it, you feel it*. He should’ve listened to the voice telling him, *don’t you trust him, you can’t trust him, he wants something from you*. But Lars didn’t. His body reacted first, stepping forward, closing the gap between him and James, and his mind caught up too late when he hugged James tight around the waist, his head falling to James’s chest.

“Thank you.”

James was still for a moment, and then rested his paw on the back of Lars’s head. “You’re welcome.”

They stood like that in the room for a long moment, both of them quiet. Lars could hear James’s heartbeat, feel his breathing, smell his scent. His cheeks burned pink, burned like his damn lips again. He shouldn’t have done this, but fuck, *no one* had done something like this for him. An entire library for himself. Redecorating an entire room for him. Even showing him the entire castle.

He isn’t a monster. He’s truly a prince. Lars frowned. But why? Why is he doing this? Why am I opening up to him? Isn’t this happening too fast? This doesn’t feel—

“Lars?”

James’s soft voice broke his train of thought. He looked up. “Yes?”

“Do you know what tomorrow is?”

“Um, should I?”

“It’s Christmas.”

Lars startled. “Oh shit, I’d forgotten.” He pulled away from James, his arms slipping to his sides. Guilt settled in fast. *How could I have forgotten? The first Christmas without dad.*

“It’s fine. I personally haven’t celebrated Christmas since my transformation. But I was wondering...” James took a deep breath. “I know this will be a very difficult time for you, because you’re not with your father. But I...” He looked away. “I’d really like to be with you, on Christmas, if that’s okay. Unless you would prefer to be in the library alone. Anything you want.”

He ignored the *no thanks* his mind supplied, and listened instead to the pain in his chest after hearing James’s request.

He stepped in, resting a hand on James’s forearm. “I’d love to spend Christmas with you.”

James looked up. “Really?”

“Of course. As long as the others are involved.”

“Ah, right, yes. All of us. First though, I will make sure Cliff and the others move whatever you wish from your old room here. And I ensure the changes in the old den are finished post-haste.”

“You don’t need to rush.”

“I insist.” He took Lars’s hand from his forearm, bringing the knuckles to his lips. “Only the best for you, *mein schatz*.” James kissed them gently, still looking into Lars’s eyes. He smiled. “Now, enjoy your new room. I need to inform the staff about our last-minute Christmas preparations.”

Lars nodded, his cheeks pink again. “Right.”

He watched James leave, his head spinning from what James had said in German. He knew what those words were. He wasn’t fluent in German yet, but he knew those two words so well. *Mein schatz*... my dear. My precious. Terms of endearment, in James’s native language.

It’s not right, his mind said. You’re falling for a beast! A man you don’t really know! What is wrong with you? Just because he’s treated you kind, given you everything you wished for, including your freedom, that doesn’t mean he’s a good man! How can you fall for someone after a few weeks? You can’t! You mustn’t! You know he’s...!

The prince’s echoing footsteps disappeared.

Lars glanced around the library. His new room.

He’s wonderful.

He smiled and whispered under his breath, “*Min skat*.”

**

When James announced to the whole kingdom they would celebrate Christmas for the first time in a hundred years, everyone broke out into loud, wild cheers. Kirk was the loudest of them all, and the first to take charge of decorating and designing the entire castle for the festivities. Rob was next in line, dashing to the kitchens with his crew to organize an amazing menu for their prince and his guest. Cliff and Jason split the overseeing of the rest of the castle, one of them tending to the musicians, the other tending to the restoration of one of the rooms in the North Wing. James was there the entire time, giving final word about what he wanted, vetoing ideas, letting others pass. Once he was done, he bid everyone a good night, and he went back to the West Wing to check up on Lars.

He found his guest curled up in the corner of one of the many couches, two books stacked beside him, one large one in his hands. James gently rapped on the door with his knuckles before he came in. "I take it you are enjoying your new home?"

"Definitely." Lars rested the book on his lap, a hand on the page he was reading. "You heading to bed now? I was hoping you'd read with me."

"Read with you?"

"Well, I meant, read *to* you. So, sort of reading together. I used to do it to my students when I tutored, and mom used to do it to me..." Lars shrugged. "I dunno. You don't have to."

"No no, please." James came to the couch, taking the empty seat next to Lars. "I'd love to. What are you reading?"

Lars smiled. He closed the book and showed off the cover. *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*. "It's the original French translation."

James smiled back. "Where did you find it? I didn't know we had it."

"Far, far back of the bookcases."

"Heh." James scooted close, laying an arm on the headrest of the couch. "Read to me now, Lars. Let me hear the story as it should be told."

"Avec plaisir." *With pleasure.*

They stayed up for hours reading together. By the second chapter, James's arm left the couch for Lars's shoulders, and by the third, sleep muddled James's senses enough for him to lay his cheek on top of Lars's head. He tried to stay awake as best he could, but the way Lars spoke in French drew James into a wonderful, warm sleep.

Lars stopped reading by the end of the third chapter when he noticed the light snores coming from James, tickling his ear. He glanced up, closing the book, and he smiled wide. James looked better in his sleep. Less stressed, more peaceful.

The sleeping prince...

He closed the book and rested it on the floor, trying not to stir James awake. It was difficult moving the sleeping prince, but he did his best to situate him on the couch in a laying position.

Once he had the prince on his side, Lars bounded for his bedroom and came back with a blue blanket and a plush pillow. He held his breath as he gently lifted James's head and slipped the pillow under, followed by tucking the blanket around James's body.

Lars knelt down beside the couch. His hands brushed over James's sleeping face, and he froze up when he felt James murmur for a moment. But James didn't move. His ears did. They twitched on his head, back and forth, and Lars noticed too late his hand gravitating to them.

His fingers slowly slipped through James's fur, drifting them behind the right ear. They rested there for a moment, Lars too afraid to move, but he took the plunge, gently scratching a few times.

James murmured at first.

Then, he arched into Lars's hand, the ears flicking and twitching in response to his touch.

Lars smiled and kept scratching. It was odd doing this. Strange and odd, and yet, he was enjoying this. James looked happy. He smiled in his sleep, and his ears twitched like a dog's would.

He looks... cute.

Then he heard James purr in his sleep.

Lars stopped.

What the hell am I doing? What if the prince awoke and found me doing this to him? I'm treating him like I would a dog. It doesn't matter how close we are not, he would send me to the North Tower for this.

But the prince didn't wake up.

He was sound asleep.

The ear next to Lars's fingers twitched, flicked and then stilled.

James murmured in his sleep again, and then nothing.

Lars stared at the ear.

I should go to sleep too. Leave him alone.

Lars's fingers twitched.

But...

He watched James's sleeping face as he touched his ear again.

James murmured again. Purred louder. His ears twitched. The tail -- the thing he often forgot James having, because it was hidden so well by his cloak -- tapped up and down on the seat cushion.

Lars alternated between both ears. Scratching beneath. Scratching around.

In his sleep, James leaned into his hand and purred louder.

Lars smiled.

He never would've thought this could have happened to him. Finding a castle in the middle of Bavaria, owned by a werewolf-like prince, who at first seemed like the most horrible *inhuman* thing on Earth... and then gave him everything he wanted. It took some time -- *too little time*, his mind supplied -- but he came to trust James. Admire him. James took away his father and his freedom to leave, but he opened up to him. Gave him this room, this library, his whole kingdom, even showed him that room off limits. He even let Lars read to him, something he terribly missed doing.

Yes, he could have left. He could have taken James's offer of freedom. But something inside Lars made him say no. It made him stay. The same reason why he started opening up to him. Letting him do that in the room the other day--that kiss. And now, with him petting his ears and his hair, listening to his purrs, looking at him sleep in peace... Lars liked being with him. He enjoyed his company. He could be himself around James, like he never seemed to be able to with anyone else at home, aside from his father.

Lars brushed a piece of James's long hair away from his face.

I think I love you.

He froze.

No.

He pulled his hand back away from James.

I... I can't.

Slowly, he rose to his shaky feet, stepping away from the couch.

He's a Beast. He's not human. I can't be in love with him.

James's purrs. James's twitching ears. His peaceful sleeping face...

Dammit.

He finally turned away, heading to his room and climbing into his new bed. The cold sheets felt awful against his shivering skin, but he willed himself to shut his eyes and cover himself up to his chin.

I'll think about this later. Much, much later...

He missed the prince peeking an eye open to watch Lars leave, before he fell back to sleep himself.

Chapter 9

Meanwhile...

Miles away, outside the safety and the magic of the castle, Dave had enough waiting for Lars to return. It had been three weeks now. Christmas had arrived. Like usual, people around the town showered him in gifts, money and food. Women threw themselves at him along with the men. But he didn't want them. He only wanted one person. The one who was supposedly 'gone and never coming back.' *Ha!* He didn't believe that dumb old man, saying that Lars was captured and imprisoned by a beast. What *beast* could've taken his Lars? And *what* castle? There was no castle in this area of Germany!

He sat in front of the fireplace in the tavern alone, his plate of food untouched in his lap, a jug of mead empty on the floor. All around him the townsfolk were gearing for a wonderful Christmas Eve and an even better Christmas Day. People laughed, shared stories, talked about their families. But Dave sat alone and watched the flickering flames, each crackle of the burning logs as loud as he cracked his knuckles.

Lars was hiding from him.

He knew it. The boy was crazy about him. Why else would he be hiding from him? He snorted. "Beast my ass..."

He remembered what happened three weeks ago, how Lars's old man begged for help from him. "Dave! Please!" The old man had thrown himself onto his knees, right in front of his feet. "Save him! Help Lars!"

The whole bar looked at the two of them. But Dave didn't pay attention to them. He grabbed Torben up and helped him to his feet, immediately concerned. "Woah, slow down... what happened to Lars?"

"He's captured! Locked in a dungeon!"

"What?" Dave growled. "Who did this to him?"

Torben snatched Dave's shirt in his hands and shook him. "A beast! A monstrous *beast!*"

"A *what?*"

"A monster! An actual, living monster, with fangs and fur and he's huge! *Huge!* Like a werewolf! He lives in a castle not too far from here!" He shook Dave harder. "You have to help me, Dave. You killed that wolf before. You can kill this one too and save my only son!"

Dave grabbed Torben's wrists in his and yanked them from his shirt. "Wait a second. You're telling me... Lars was imprisoned by a beast? In a castle?"

"Yes! Yes, please! You have to believe me!"

He shoved Torben down to the floor and broke out into a wild, manic laugh. "Yeah *right!*"

The whole bar laughed him as well, calling Torben names. Old man, crazy bastard, wash-up, wannabe, loser. His voice was the loudest of the bunch and he made sure to kick Lars's father right into the curb, straight out of the bar, the snow flying in the air as he skidded on pavement.

Dave's mind wandered back to the present. He rested his chin on his enfolded hands, his elbows denting his thighs. Three weeks later, and still no Lars. Torben kept swearing to his story, that a beast stole his son. No one believed him, Dave the biggest skeptic of them all. He kept trying almost every day to get the truth out of the man, but every time it was the same damn far-fetched story. It was obviously a cover up. Torben knew exactly where his son was and he wasn't telling anyone. The bastard. Lars probably told him to say that made-up story, just to piss him off, just so Dave could come looking, be his savior like he was to the whole town.

He clenched his fists together and snarled. "Little bitch..."

He had to get Lars back. Get him out of hiding. But the question was how? What could he do to force him back into the town? There had to be a way...

A wicked grin spread across his face.

The images of Torben and Lars walking together through town entered his mind.

"Of course." Dave leaned back into his chair and rested his folded hands in his lap. *Who else than the only one he cares most about?*

He waved over one of the barmaids. This time he chugged down a pint of rum, celebrating his brilliance. Lars wasn't going to hide forever. Everyone in the town was a gossiper. News travelled fast. All he had to do was use his connections, powerful ones he made after he saved those stupid children from that wolf, and Lars would throw himself at him. It was foolproof.

Dave chuckled into his next sip of rum, gleaming into the fire, the light dancing in his hazel eyes.

"You're mine, Lars... and you're going to learn to *never* hide from me again."

**

On the outskirts of town, alone in his small home, Torben sat on the old couch near the meager Christmas tree. Small colorful bulbs and candy canes hung off the branches and a small gold star rested on the top, but there were no streamers, no fake snow or anything of the sort. He didn't play jazz music renditions of Christmas songs, didn't cook porridge, didn't make himself dinner at all. Torben didn't care. He didn't want to celebrate Christmas. There was nothing to celebrate. It was a miracle he brought a tree into the house in the first place. But he knew Lars wouldn't have allowed him to be a Scrooge. He was just like his mother.

In his lap was one of the many scrapbooks Lone made for them. Beside him were the scrapbooks for their marriage, Torben's life, Lone's life and Lars's life. He flipped through the one dedicated to their family life, and every time he turned the page and saw more photos, the pain in his heart grew.

They were so happy then. Christmas was the most celebrated time of the year for their little family. It was the day after Christmas Day when the greatest gift of his life was born. His fingers smudged over the photo of Lone hugging a ten-year-old Lars in front of an old Christmas tree. Time flew by so fast. Lars got so big. He had his eyes, but everything else about him was his mother. And though she got more wrinkles and white hairs, Lone stayed the same.

He flipped the page. The last photos were there, the light from the fireplace flickering over the images. It was the last Christmas they'd ever spend together as a family. Lone was just promoted at her job, given a Christmas bonus. He had made a few hefty sales and did some commission work for some big-name locals. And Lars had completed a semester worth of high marks. Everything was going so well for them...

Torben shut the scrapbook, taking a deep breath. He couldn't do this. His wife was dead and his son was probably the same way, all because of his stupidity. If only he had gone out to get the groceries with Lone, or made her stay behind in the house rather than himself... if only Lars had come with him to Munich, maybe he wouldn't have gotten lost... at least then he'd have his son. At least then he wouldn't be alone.

Now he had no idea what his son was going through. At least with his wife, he knew she was buried back home in Denmark. With Lars, he had no clue, and it was killing him. The fact that no one believed him, that no one wanted to help him, was just icing on a shit cake. The worst part was... he couldn't save him. He couldn't be a father and protect his son. Instead his son saved him. Gave up his life to save his own. He laid in bed for nights on end since he arrived home, wondering what he could do to get Lars back, and there was no answer, no solution. His son was as good as dead.

Torben closed the book and settled it on top of the stack. He couldn't do this anymore. His heart was too heavy. Starting the new year, he would find a new place to live. He kissed his fingers and pressed them to the cover of the scrapbook.

“Merry Christmas, Lars.” His eyes glossed over. “And to you as well, min elskede.”

With a heavy heart, Torben stoked out the fire and left the living room for bed. He'd have to start searching for a new place to live. Maybe his brother Jorgen could house him for a little while, until he found a new home. There was no way he could stay in Denmark for long.

The loud knock on his door stopped Torben from ascending the stairs. “Open up!” someone shouted.

He kept a hand on the railing as he turned around. “What is it? What do you want?”

“Your son, Mr. Ulrich! He's back!”

The whole room spun for a brief moment. He shook his head. *It's not true. It can't be true.*
“You're lying. My son isn't here.”

“He is! He's back in the town, Mr. Ulrich!”

“He can't have—”

“He said he escaped a gigantic Beast! A big one, from a large castle! You were right!”

Slowly, Torben inched away from the stairs for the front door, shaking from head to toe. *Could it be? Did he actually escape? But...*

“Mr. Ulrich?” Dave said from the door. “It's me. This man's correct. Your son is alive and back in the town waiting for you.”

He sobbed. His son was alive. It was a miracle. Lars had returned. Lone protected him and brought him home. She looked out for him even in death.

Torben flung open the door, coming face to face with Dave.

“Where is he? Is he okay? Tell me he's in one piece.”

Dave smirked. “You'll see.”

And then his whole world went dark.

Torben groaned as he slumped forward face first into the snow. Junior, Dave's most loyal companion, dumped the huge rock he crashed into Torben's head back into the snow. Dave motioned for the two other, Chris and Shawn, to pick him up.

"Take him to my place. Tie him up and throw him in the cellar."

"Got it Chief," Shawn said.

"Good. Get going." He then turned to Junior, as Shawn and Chris dragging an unconscious Torben to their car. "Have you started the rumors all about town?"

"Yeah, and they're spreading fast. They're sure to hit even as far as Berlin at the rate they're going. I made sure to give everyone the gory details about how the old man's gone missing."

"Then Lars will have to know. Wherever he's hiding, he will know. Then he'll come crawling back to dear old daddy, wondering where he is. Now." He poked Junior in the chest. "I want you to stay here in the house and wait for him to come back. You understand me? He's not getting out of my sights again."

Junior nodded. "Sure thing, boss. Anything you want. You got it."

"Damn right." He turned on his heel, going to his own car. "He's going to be mine, whether he likes it or not."

Junior shook his head, entering the house. *If I didn't like you so much...* He sighed. *Dammit.*

Chapter 10

Lars woke up the next morning to find the prince no longer in the library, the pillow and blanket crumpled on the floor. *Good*, he thought--and then, *But I thought he was--* He shook his head. *No! Don't even THINK about it! You don't miss him! It doesn't matter he left! It doesn't!*

When he re-entered his room, he found a set of clothes waiting for him at the end of the bed.

He leaned over, picking the overcoat up, and out of the interior fluttered a note.

“What the...”

The overcoat curled on his lap as he unfurled the paper.

Mein schatz,

I hope you like the outfit I've chosen for you. Kirk will come soon with Cliff to help you change. Could you please tell Cliff what your favorite desserts are when he arrives? Robert would like specifics for tonight's dinner.

Thank you for last night. I enjoyed hearing you speak, and I would love to do it again.

Yours,

James

His fingers grazed over the 'yours' on the letter for a brief moment. *James...*

The knock on the door startled him. “Lars! Wake up!” Kirk shouted. “Time to get ready!”

Cliff sighed. “Can’t you learn an inside voice?”

“Haven’t had a need for one in a hundred years.”

“Tell me about it.”

Lars folded the note and slipped it under his pillow. “Come in.”

The doors slammed wide open and in entered Kirk, dressed in red, green and white, a wreath of popcorn around his neck. He looked like the perfect Christmas decoration, while Cliff wore his normal attire, though the frustration he sported cracked his usual calm demeanor.

"Up, up, up!" Kirk yanked the sheets off. “We don’t have much time! The prince is already waiting.” He turned to Cliff. “You! Out! Tell the prince he’ll be there in ten minutes!”

Cliff rolled his eyes. He turned to Lars. “I assume you received the prince’s note?”

“Uh, yeah.”

"And?"

"Well, I like anything chocolate. Chocolate covered strawberries are great.”

“Anything else?”

“Cheesecake. Definitely cheesecake.”

Cliff chuckled. "A sweet tooth, I see. Anything else I shall add to the menu?"

"Mm, I don't think so."

"Very well then, sire."

Kirk grabbed Cliff by the collar of his shirt and dragged him out, saying, "Okay, great, thanks Cliff, see ya, bye." He then slammed the door right in his face and turned around back to Lars on the bed. "Now, up! Dress! Go!"

Lars shook his head. It was going to be a long day. But in a way, he was grateful for it. Anything to keep his mind off his thoughts of the Prince, for now.

**

Fifteen minutes later, Lars walked out with his hair tied behind him, wearing a green-gold dressy button-down tunic with slits up the side, long silk pants, and dressy matching shoes. Around his neck dangled gold necklaces, his wrists with matching gold bracelets.

Cliff escorted Lars down one of the dark hallways of the West Wing, while Kirk stayed behind to clean up. As they made a turn, Lars noticed they weren't heading towards the exit of the West Wing into the South, but down a hallway he hadn't been done before. Music picked up in volume the further they walked.

"Cliff?"

"Yes sire?"

"Aren't we going to the South Wing?"

"No, sire. The Master is waiting down here."

"What?"

Then, Cliff stopped in front of two large doors and opened them up.

Lars gasped when he saw what waited inside.

A room twice the size of the South Wing dining hall was decorated in red, green and gold from top to bottom. Candles were lit, and streamers and confetti littered the floor and the walls. A string quartet played Christmas carols in one corner. All around the room were members of the castle staff, dressed in festive colors. In the middle of the room stood a large Christmas tree, a star glistening on top, bulbs and streamers, angels and candy canes hanging off the branches.

And there was James, waiting for him at the base of the tree, dressed in a deep red suit with gold trimmings.

Cliff gently pushed the small of Lars's back. "Go on, sire. He's waiting."

"Uh." Lars's cheeks turned pink. He nodded. "Right."

James's smile widened as he came closer. And when Lars stood in front of him finally, James brushed the back of his paw down Lars's cheek.

"You look wonderful."

"Um. Thank you." He diverted his attention elsewhere. "You did great decorating this place."

"Hardly. The credit goes all to my staff. I wanted to include the hallways, but I will need to remodel them first."

"Well, it's amazing. Especially the tree." He touched the branches ends. "How did you get it in?"

James flanked his side. "Not certain myself. Cliff organized that."

"Not surprised."

"So." James touched his shoulder. "Do you like it?"

Lars met his eye again. James looked... happy, for once. Very happy and content. Something he hadn't seen from him before, and it looked...

Beautiful.

Lars smiled up at him. "I do."

His face went aflame as James bent down to kiss his cheek. "I'm glad." The hand on his shoulder went to his back, steering him away. "Let us eat now, shall we?"

Lars kept his attention on the floor. "Sure..."

The kiss from the night before played in his head as they sat at the table. *I can't believe I just thought that. Beautiful? He's beautiful? What is wrong with me?* And on cue, what happened the night before repeated over and over in his mind. The feel of James's fur and hair, his purrs and murmurs, his face, the way he smelled—and that damn thought. *I think I love you.*

"Lars?"

He shook his head, and then looked up at James. "Yeah?"

"Something troubling you?"

Yes. "Um, think I'm a bit tired. Not used to the new bed and all."

"Would you like your old one?"

"No, it's fine. I'll get used to it, I guess."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm *fine*, James. Drop it already."

An old look crossed over James's face. One Lars knew very well. The one that was judging him. Angry at him. Not trusting him and ready to explode, the James he recognized when he first came to the castle and threw him into the North Tower--

It all disappeared when James nodded and said, "Very well." And smiled. "Let's eat."

Lars gaped for a moment. *He let it go. He actually let it go. He didn't... he...*

James waved over one of the servants. "A glass of orange juice for me." He turned to Lars. "And for you, mein schatz?"

Lars blinked. "Uh. Yeah." Blinked again. "The same."

"Very good, my Lord," the servant said, and away he went.

Once alone, James turned to Lars. "I've learned not to pursue things which are trivial. You taught me that, you know." He reached for his napkin, folding it over his lap. "Life is too short. Isn't it?"

He gave James a once-over—how completely calm he was—and he turned back to his own plate, reaching for his own napkin. "Yes. It is."

He's different. He folded his hands over the napkin on his lap. *He's not the way he was when I first arrived...*

Lars pushed the rest of his thoughts away when the servant returned with their drinks, and another servant arrived soon after with some breakfast appetizers. *Food first. Deal with these dumb feelings later.*

They ate their breakfast right next to the big Christmas tree. The string quartet playing classical pieces Lars recognized, from Beethoven to Chopin to Vivaldi. Around them the staff members ate as well, sitting at individual tables far away from theirs. Their chatter and laughter made Lars feel more at home than ever before.

Halfway through breakfast, Lars noticed Cliff standing in the corner with Kirk, Jason and Rob. Kirk and Rob were together hand-in-hand, watching the other servants, smiling as Cliff did. Only Jason didn't smile, but Lars had grown accustomed to his grumpiness. He knew it was all an act, a way to keep people at bay, from coming close to him.

The prince was finishing off his pancakes when Lars asked, "James?"

"Hm? What is it?"

"You should invite them over."

"Who?"

Lars nodded over to the four servants in the corner. "I think we have enough room for a few more."

James followed his line of sight. He expected a yes. Instead, James turned his attention away, down to his plate. "I'm not sure they would want to."

"What? Why? They won't say no."

"I know that."

"Then why?"

"Because. I've done some... awful things to them in the past." The prince paused for a long moment, the silence filled in by the laughter and joy of the room and the string quartet playing a Mozart tune. Then: "Two years after I had changed, I lashed out at all of them. That was the last time we ate together."

"Oh... you think they still harbor some bad feelings towards you?"

James nodded yes.

"They don't."

James snapped his attention up at him, growling. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because I—” *Love you.* He stopped on his words. *What the fuck, Ulrich? Get your act together, idiot.* He swallowed hard and smiled. “I know they don’t. They’re over it. Really. You’re not who you used to be. You’ve changed.”

“But...” James cleared his throat. “I don’t know if it’ll work.”

“Then let me try.”

He sighed and waved him off. “Okay.”

Lars walked to the corner where the four servants stood. Convincing them didn’t take long. Kirk and Rob agreed first, Cliff second, and Jason, unsurprisingly, refused. But the others banded around Lars and grabbed Jason all together, dragging him to the table—all of them laughing, while Jason grumbled and shouted no.

“Dammit, I said I’m not hungry!” Jason cried.

“That’s a damn lie, I heard his stomach growl!” Rob exclaimed.

“Yep, heard it too!” Kirk chimed in.

“Same here,” Cliff said.

“That’s four against one!” Lars giggled and the four of them together shoved Jason into an empty seat, tucking him into the table. “There! Everyone dig in!”

Jason crossed his arms over his chest. “You all suck.”

Cliff rolled his eyes and grabbed a plate of waffles. “Oh shut up and eat. You’re a string-bean anyway.”

“You’re one to talk. You’re a walking stick.”

“Hey!”

Kirk nudged Cliff’s side. “He’s right you know.”

Cliff glared at him. “Don’t make me ruin your outfit with some wayward syrup.”

Rob eyed Kirk. “And don’t threaten a good time—”

“Rob!” Kirk slapped Rob’s thigh hard. “Not at the prince’s table.”

“What? It’s not like he doesn’t—”

“Children...” Cliff admonished. “Shut up. And eat. Right now.”

Jason yanked the plate of waffles out of his hand. “Then pass me some goddamn pancakes. I hate waffles.” He passed it over to Kirk who happily took the stack and piled it on top of his plate.

Lars laughed along with the others. Pancakes, waffles, french toast, syrup and butter all passed around the table, along with the juices. He caught James’s eye beside him and he felt something give way inside at how *happy* he looked.

Beautiful—and he was.

He's changing—and he had.

This was the true prince all along.

The real James inside.

The person Lars came to enjoy his time with. The person Lars didn't want to leave.

I think I love you.

And maybe Lars did. Maybe. Once Lars had some time to himself, he would think it over. He certainly did come to appreciate the prince, came to enjoy his company—*and kisses*—but really. *In love?* Making that big of a leap? Stockholm Syndrome in effect, or was it real?

His breath caught as he felt James's paw run over the back of his hand.

James's big blue eyes met his.

“Merry Christmas, mein schatz.”

He found himself smiling back. “Merry Christmas.”

The paw rested on top of his thigh. Lars turned back to the table, listening in to Cliff and Kirk's conversation over how the staff remodeled the entire room. *Later. I'll think about this shit later.*

He missed the way James's smile waned when he looked at Jason—and the way Jason glared back.

**

The castle showered Lars in gifts after they ate, everyone sitting at the base of the large Christmas tree. Lars felt guilty, wishing he had gifts to give the others, but they didn't care. They gave him clothes and trinkets, jewelry, more books to read, anything and everything. There were so many, Lars felt completely overwhelmed. It reminded him so much of how Christmas used to be before his mother passed away. Surrounded by family, exchanging gifts, his father and mother hand-in-hand...

“Lars?”

He jerked his head up. James looked concerned. “Huh?”

“Are you okay?”

“Oh. Yes.” He looked ahead again. “I'm okay.”

After the last present was opened, and the staff began to clean up the mess, James invited Lars out for a walk in the snow. Kirk had offered him some ice skates but he refused. It wouldn't have been fair to James, since there were no shoes for him to skate with.

The walk was a quiet one so far, leaving Lars to his thoughts. Being around so many people on Christmas did Lars good, but at the same time, all those memories came up; the memories of a happier time, when his mother was alive. She'd wake up Torben, push him to the living room, and then bring in Christmas goodies made the night before from the kitchen. Relatives from the countryside swarmed in almost minutes later, filling up the house, bringing more goodies, more presents...

“No you’re not.”

“Uh?” He turned to James. “What?”

“Something’s troubling you. You’ve been quiet too long.”

“It’s—”

“Don’t lie to me again. You know I don’t like it.”

Lars sighed. “Okay. You’re right. Something is bugging me.”

“What is it? The party? The gifts?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s just...” He slowed down his walk, lowered his tone. “Everything today made think about last year, when my mom was alive.”

“Oh...”

“Yeah. It brought up some memories—good ones at least. I really miss her. And my dad.”

Their feet crunched in snow, following the path around.

Then, James said, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t. Nothing did. I just miss them.”

“I know. I... feel the same way. About mine.”

Beside him, James stopped walking. He stopped as well and turned to him, finding James looking elsewhere, arms hidden under his cloak.

“My mother died when I was fifteen. My father passed away in a war three or so years after. At eighteen years old, I assumed the throne. But I wasn’t ready. I didn’t want to lead the kingdom, nor was I fit to. I was too angry after my father passed on. Cliff tried to calm me, the others too, but it was useless. I couldn’t believe my parents would abandon me like this. I know it wasn’t rational, but what did I know? I was eighteen. I felt like an orphan, and I needed them around. I could’ve asked them questions. I could’ve gone to them for help. Asking Cliff or Jason something wasn’t the same. I felt alone.

“For four years, I nearly destroyed my kingdom, because I didn’t care anymore. My anger dictated my judgment, and for everything, I felt ambivalence. I let the people do anything they wished. I didn’t uphold the laws, I didn’t attend any meetings, I let neighboring countries buy land from us... I didn’t even care about who was innocent or guilty. I thought, everyone was going to die, might as well end their life now. Cliff was the true ruler, not me. He saw fit to take care of everything I didn’t want. God, I put so much stress on him. On everyone. But I didn’t listen to reason. I didn’t want the responsibility. I wanted everyone to suffer like I was suffering.

“So when the Enchantress came, when I refused her shelter, I got exactly what I deserved. It was punishment for abandoning my people like that. For punishing my friends too. And what did I do when I became the monster I am now? I acted worse. I restricted festivities around me. I trashed

two of the wings of the castle. And anyone who was captured over the years became my prisoner. I didn't even bother getting to know them at all. I thought, 'you are trespassing, I must punish you.' I even did that to your poor father." He finally looked up at Lars, a smile on his face. "Until you."

Lars swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. "What changed? Why not me?"

James stepped in, closing the small gap between them. "I saw you brave that snow storm alone. You almost died until I saved you. You showed that same courage again when we met in the Tower. And you almost died again, when I forced you to starve."

"That was stupid of me—"

"But it showed your courage. You defied me. Time and time again. And as much as that angered me, I realized later on, I admired it too. There are only four people in this world that can talk back to me, and when one of them crossed the line, I put him into the Tower. But they know me. They have been with me through everyone, for a hundred years. You didn't. So I had to know how—how could someone be so courageous and fight for what he believed in, without fear? When he has nothing left?" His head dipped closer to Lars. "When he's alone?"

Like you were. Lars took a deep breath, fighting the heaviness weighing on his chest. "I don't know, James. I don't feel courageous. I just did it. I had to. You were hurting my father, and I had to save him."

"At the risk of your own happiness."

"Of course. I'd do anything for the people I love." *Like you.* He felt his cheeks burn. *Shit.*

James didn't seem to notice. "And when I banished him, you had nothing left. Yet you still didn't submit. You were not afraid of me."

"I was. A little bit, deep down. But I wasn't going to let you see me afraid. Maybe the fact that I lost my parents in such a short amount of time added to my 'courage,' I don't know, but I felt like I had nothing to lose. If you wanted to kill me, so be it. I didn't care. I wasn't going to let you win."

James shook his head. "That's what confuses me *and* inspires me. When I lost my parents, I stopped caring too, but I lacked the courage you have to keep going. I just became angry. You were not angry when you lost your father, correct?"

"I was, for a while. I was angry at you."

"Of course."

"Then I became sad. I don't know. The anger kinda waned eventually. I had to make due with the new situation and move on. If I did it before with mom, I could do it again."

"But you had every right to be angry."

"And what good would that have done? What reason did I have to take it out on other people? Because I lost my parents? Because I was alone now?"

James nodded yes.

Lars lifted a hand onto James's big shoulder. "James, you have to realize the same thing I did after my mother passed away—that you are never, ever alone. When my mother died, I felt the same way you did, but I remembered I had my father, and we made it through together. When you

imprisoned me here, I felt the same way again, but I had Cliff, Jason, Rob and Kirk. They were here for me, as I'm sure they were for you. I mean, they *adore* you. When will you accept that?"

James frowned. "But they shouldn't. After all I did—"

"And they were still there. Your entire kingdom was still there."

"That's because of the curse."

"Just because they're immortal doesn't mean their impervious. You still have cuts that bleed and don't instantly close up, right?"

"Yes..."

"Then immortality has nothing to do with this. Yeah, the curse forces them to never escape, but face it. They had a choice, and none of them did it. I'll be blunt. If your kingdom really hated you, they would've killed themselves a long time ago. But they didn't, did they?"

James looked away. "I don't see why they didn't."

Lars pressed closer, his hand going to James's face. Fingers slid into the fur. "Look at me, James. Look at me." He waited for those blue eyes to fall on him before he spoke again. "You're a hot-headed, self-centered bastard, but you're not the asshole you think you are. Because you care. You *do* care about them, and your kingdom. Maybe not in the past, but now? You've changed. You *have*. It took me some time to see it, and to believe it, but after talking to you, and being with you... you've proven to me, and to everyone, that you don't deserve this spell any longer. You are *not* a monster, James." His other hand came up to rest over James's heart. "Not in here."

Strong arms snapped around Lars and yanked him into James's chest. He felt the satin cloak under his cheek, his body engulfed in sudden warmth, and Lars slowly returned the embrace, wrapping his shaky arms around James's waist.

"Thank you," James whispered into his hair. It sounded shaky.

Lars smiled, patting his chest. "Nothing to thank. I meant every word."

"I know." A soft kiss brushed the top of his head. "That's why."

He felt the embrace tighten around him, and Lars mimicked James, squeezing his own arms as well. He sighed into his chest—*I love you*—and quickly relaxed. He still wanted to think it over, everything was happening so fast... but it felt right, thinking those words. It finally felt okay.

A few moments later, he felt breath and lips against his hair and scalp. Lars strained to hear it, but he missed most of the words—except the last few.

"...for not leaving me."

His chest tugged. His eyes watered.

James...

He closed his eyes and whispered back, "I'm glad I stayed too."

**

High above in the West Wing tower stood Jason, watching the prince and Lars from the window. He leaned against the cold frame with his arms crossed over his chest, his breath creating thick

condensation on the glass. His fingers squeezed around his biceps hard and his jaw set firm, watching James quickly embrace Lars. There was a smile on his face, a smile he hadn't seen in a hundred years.

The prince was finally happy.

His nostrils flared for a moment, his lips twitching.

Shit.

They pulled away smiling, gazing into each others eyes while Lars said something—something that made James laugh. His teeth grounded together when James kissed Lars's cheek, and then led them down the path again, an arm around Lars's waist, straight to the East Wing gardens. He followed with his eyes until he couldn't see them anymore.

Loud creaks echoed in the tower. Jason stayed still.

They stopped. Then: "Kirk was wondering where you were."

"Are you sure it was Kirk?"

He turned his head. Cliff stood at the mouth of the stairwell, a hand on the railing. The other was reaching out to him. "Jason—"

"Go tell *Kirk* to mind his own fucking business. I'm perfectly fine up here." He snapped his attention back to the window. "I'll go down when I feel like it."

Cliff took a deep breath. "You should say your peace to him."

"Oh sure, great. And what good would that fucking do?"

"Only you know the answer to that."

"Great advice, Cliff. Now get out."

He heard a sigh, and then the start of footsteps descending. They abruptly stopped, and then: "Jason?"

"*What?*"

"At least consider telling him, before they consummate the relationship." His eye twitched at the word 'consummate.' "It's only fair to you and to him. So you can at least move on, like you should."

Jason snorted. "Right."

The footsteps started up again and lessened in volume, until they were completely gone. He leaned against the window for a bit more, thinking of Cliff's words, of James, of Lars, and—he closed his eyes—the twenty-five years that should've been the end of the curse. The twenty-five years he always thought of, even now.

Dammit Cliff. He pushed away from the window. *Why are you always right?*

Chapter 11

While the rest of the castle bustled around preparing for the Christmas dinner, Jason relatively stayed alone. He still performed his duties as castle majordomo, but as the day went by, he slowly handed those duties over to Cliff. The maître d silently took them away, giving sympathetic looks to Jason as time passed. But Cliff didn't push. He only hoped Jason would do what he said earlier in the day.

James and Lars returned into the castle by the afternoon and separated from each other soon after to prepare for the dinner later that night. The prince went to consult Rob in the kitchens first, then Kirk later for the decorations, Cliff about the entertainment and Jason about the rest of the castle operations. Lars went to his room and immediately went to bathe. Knowing Kirk, he'd probably spend hours tailoring and fixing him up for tonight, and he needed the time alone to think over his relationship with James.

By the time the sun set and the Christmas dinner drew near, Kirk ran to Lars's personal quarters and immediately went to work. Lars was finishing drying his hair when Kirk yanked the towel out of his hand and shoved his naked body into a chair, ordering him to shut up and let him work. And Lars grumbled, letting the man do what he needed to do.

While Kirk went to work preparing Lars, James went to his next task of business: talking to Cliff about the performances for tonight. He had to know if the chamber orchestra would be a concerto or string quartet tonight, what composer they were playing and where to place them in the grand hall. He retreated to his personal chambers to fetch a few pieces of music he particularly enjoyed—and hopefully, Lars would like too—when he noticed a figure in the room, hunched over the table where the rose and mirror laid.

James growled. “What are you doing here? You're not—”

“What? Not allowed?” Jason looked over his shoulder and glared right at the prince. “How things have changed.”

“Ah.” James stopped in his march stood stupid in the middle of the room, staring blankly at him. “I...” He cleared his throat. “I usually request you ask permission, or at least tell me ahead of time —”

“What if *he* showed up here? The so-called savior of us all. Would you turn him away?”

James frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh don't give me that bullshit.” Jason turned around fully, a hand still on the desk, balled into a fist. “Him. Lars. If he showed up right here, right now, unannounced, would you throw him out? Would you yell at him like you did to me?”

“I didn't—” James stopped himself and cleared his throat again. “I mean, I didn't *mean* to yell. You startled me.”

There was a tense silence then between the two. Jason didn't move. James didn't move. He was clueless as to what Jason was obviously pissed about, and he didn't want to stress over this right now, didn't even want to think about it, when the dinner with Lars was only an hour away.

James took a step towards him. “Look... whatever it is, I didn't mean it—”

“Yes you did. You meant everything you ever did.”

“I don’t—”

“Understand? Well, understand this.” Jason lifted his fist from the table and changed it into a pointed finger, stabbing it at James. “I’ve fucking wasted my whole goddamn life here, serving your sorry ass, just like the rest of us have, for a hundred years, and you’re doing nothing but wasting it away on some idiot that is not the one who will break the damn spell. How do I know? Look at yourself! Look at what you’re doing! You’re his fucking puppy dog and it’s not doing a goddamn lick of difference. We’re nearing the end of the year and you’re still not transformed. The spell hasn’t been broken. I can tell you care for him, maybe even love him, but what says he loves you? I mean, who in the right fucking mind would *ever* love you? You’re an egomaniacal bastard who doesn’t care about anyone but himself. Do you know what you’ve done to our lives? To my life? You’ve ruined it! I’ve been locked in this castle with you, serving you, doing anything you’ve wished and for what? For you to blow it all away on some pretty little face that doesn’t care about you one iota *as much as I ever did!*”

James stumbled back a few steps from the power of Jason’s scream. He couldn’t say anything, couldn’t look away as Jason glared him down, his whole body thrumming from pure anger, his face beet red.

“He’s better off without you. We’re all better off without you. That poor kid has no idea what he’s about to get himself into. Because if he loves you, I mean *really* loves you, then God save him, because he’ll end up nothing but a shell of what he was, just like you’ve done to everyone here who has lived under your thumb for the last hundred years. You know why? Because you’re a leech. You destroy everything you ever goddamn loved, you selfish, fucking bastard. And if me saying this lands me up in the North Tower again, then go right ahead and do it. I don’t give a shit. It’ll be the first act of mercy you’ve ever shown to anyone since the day I met you.”

James found himself frozen in place. There was a huge gap between them, and he couldn’t will his feet to move closer. The guilt he felt—the guilt he tried to ignore—came up after years of being buried away, and all he wanted to do was touch Jason, hug him, tell him anything to stop his anger. In all the years he knew Jason, he’d never seen him this enraged. But he lost that privilege years ago, and he knew it.

“Do you hate me that much?” James whispered.

“Yes.”

“Have I really hurt you... that much?”

"Yes." He didn't miss the choke in Jason's voice, the way he spat out that word.

James looked away. “It was wrong what I did.”

“No shit. You *knew* how I felt.”

“That’s why I took the chance.”

“Well you shouldn’t have! With Kirk and Rob I knew it was a lost cause, they love each other to death. With Cliff I thought it would possibly work out between you two, and I would’ve been okay with that. But do you have any idea how much I was hoping it would be me? Do you?”

James shook his head no.

“Of course not. You’re always in your little fucking bubble, thinking about yourself, ignoring the feelings and thoughts of everyone else. Typical you. As long as you get what you want, who

gives a shit about other people, right?”

“I’m sorry—”

“Fuck your sorries. It’s too late for ‘I’m sorry,’ James.”

James finally looked up, the frustration building up underneath the guilt. Jason wasn’t looking at him but elsewhere in the room. “What do you want me to do then? What do you want me to say?”

Jason shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t care. I just...” He sighed, running a hand over his face. “I don’t know. I had to let it out. There. Throw me in the fucking dungeon for insubordination.”

James flinched at the accusation in Jason’s words. “I wouldn’t—”

“That’s rich, coming from you.”

James’s paws twisted into fists at his sides. “For the last time, what do you want me to *do*?”

Jason looked him in the eye, cold and heartless. “Admit that you’re wrong and I’m right. Because there’s nothing you can do. Got it? You can’t give me freedom. You can’t give that to any of us. And that *Lars* isn’t the one to end it all. Just admit that he isn’t the one, and we’ll call it even.”

He glanced behind Jason, where the magic mirror and the rose laid. The two items that the Enchantress gave him a hundred years go—two of three. And he knew then what to do then, how to make this right.

He closed his eyes. “I can give you something... but not that.”

“You have nothing that can fix this. Just tell me what I know is right, and I’ll never bring it up again.”

James walked away from him, turning his attention to the area of his private chambers that held the last item he never dreamed of using. He never cared for the third item, because the Enchantress said it was useless. He could never use its powers. But he could give it to another.

He walked to his dresser and pulled out the top drawer. Inside laid a small wrapped, blue cloth, folded in a square. He pulled it out and walked back to Jason. It looked even smaller in his large paw.

Jason glared at the folded square. “What do you expect me to do with that?”

James offered it to him. “Take it. Please.”

He snatched it out of James’ paw and unraveled the cloth.

A small gold ring rested inside.

The cloth fluttered to the ground. Jason frowned as he held the ring between his fingers.

“What is this?” Jason asked.

“When the Enchantress came, she didn’t give me two items like I said. I could only use two items. The third she rendered useless in my grasp. That’s the one you’re holding right now.”

“What does it do?”

“Give you what you most wish.” James reached out and took the ring from Jason’s fingers,

placing it into his palm and gently closing his paw around it. “Your freedom.”

Jason gasped. “What?”

“Wear it on your right ringfinger and twist it around three times. Then, you’ll be able to leave the castle walls. The spell won’t curse you any longer once you’re outside the kingdom. You can do whatever you wish, go wherever you want. And if you do wish to return one day, twist the ring three times again, the opposite way you turned, and you’ll be back here.” He chuckled. “Though, I don’t think you’ll want to come back. Once it’s used both ways, it can’t be used again.” He squeezed Jason’s hand in his paw. “The Enchantress said you could bring people with you. She didn’t specify how many. But as long as they touch a part of your body as you twist the ring, they can leave with you.”

Jason didn’t move. He watched his eyes gloss over, his lower lip tremble—and then the anger came back, Jason shoving him in the shoulder with the fist holding the ring.

“You could’ve told us about this ring a hundred years ago. We could’ve been free without the need of that damn spell. This is *exactly* what pisses me off about you! You don’t think about anyone else but yourself!”

“I know. It’s my fault.”

“Shut up. I don’t want to hear your self-pity bullshit. Just shut up.” Jason shoved him back again with both his fists. “So now you’re giving this to me because what? You found him? What have I been saying this entire time? Haven’t you been listening?” He kept pushing James back. “What if he isn’t the one? What if you do never change? What if I decide to leave tonight, and it turns out he’s not real?” He shoved James right into the wall with the last of his strength, thrumming with replenished anger. “Then you’ve wasted all this time for nothing! You imprisoned me and the others for *nothing!*”

Jason reached back and took a swing—and James caught Jason’s fist in his paw easily.

He tried again with the other hand. James caught that one too.

“Shit.” Jason jerked his arms backwards, but James didn’t move. “Let me go. Let me fucking go, dammit.”

He didn’t. He stood there against the wall and watched Jason fight. He stayed silent as Jason spat, hissed and growled, kicking James’s legs, stomping on his monstrous feet...

And then Jason slumped his head onto his chest.

James made no sound as Jason banged his forehead against his sternum, again, and again, and again.

He finally let Jason go when he felt Jason slump against him, hands twisted into his shirt and vest. He wrapped his arms around Jason’s body and sighed. It was different from Lars. Nice, but not the same. Jason wasn’t the one to break the spell—something James himself once wished for.

His paw gently patted Jason’s back, mindful of his long, sharp claws. “I’m sorry Jason.” He swallowed hard. “I’m sorry I was never the prince you waited for.” He winced at the hard punch Jason delivered to his chest, but he kept rubbing his back. “It’s not right what I did to you, or the others. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Damn right it wasn’t,” Jason hissed. He punched James’s chest again and then lifted his head up, pushing away from James, getting out of his arms. “That was on you. All on fucking you.”

Courting me, Cliff, Rob, Kirk, convincing us that because we were the four closest, one of us had to be that true fucking love, right? And you know what happened? Kirk and Rob found each other, Cliff became your father figure, and I became a fucking joke. Why did you do that to me? Why did you give me all that fucking hope, only to crush it *twenty-five fucking years later?!"*

"Because I thought it would work."

"Well it fucking didn't!"

"I wanted it to!"

"Bullshit!"

"I did! But after twenty years, nothing happened, and I just... I gave up. I had to move on and try the others. For our sake."

"Fuck you." Jason wiped at his cheeks now wet from his tears. "I hate you. I hate you so fucking much."

James nodded. "I know." He clasped the hand holding the ring in both paws, looking into his eyes. "That's why I want you to have this ring. I want you to be happy, Jason. I want you to finally get what you deserve... what everyone in this castle deserves. A happily-ever-after, away from me." His smile was small and weak. "I hope you know... I always did care for you. Very much."

Jason's tears came down his cheeks, but he showed no sadness, no remorse. "Answer me this."

"Anything."

"How many times have you kissed him?"

James's smile disappeared. He looked confused. "What?"

"How many times have you kissed Lars?"

"I don't know."

"You haven't counted?"

"No..."

"I have." His anger cracked like his voice did, the anguish seeping through. "You have given him a *lifetime's* worth. I've had two."

James's face fell. Something inside him cracked, and it spread out across his chest, starting from his heart.

Jason...

He leaned in, squeezing his paw over Jason's fist.

Jason didn't move. But the eyelids slowly fluttered shut when their lips met for the last time.

It was a gentle, soft pressure, like the kisses he shared with Lars. James made it last, brushing the back of his paw down Jason's face, from temple to jawline, and he took his time pulling away, their lips making a soft smack in the air.

He pressed their foreheads together and whispered over Jason's lips.

“And that makes three.”

Jason's closed eyes flinched, his lips pursed together.

James frowned and pulled away from him, letting go of his fist. He opened his mouth to say something, but the soft knock on his door stopped him from doing so.

“My Lord?” Cliff's voice was muffled. “Are you in here? It's time to get you ready for tonight.”

He stepped a good few feet away from Jason, trying to sound normal. “Yes. Thank you Cliff. Come in.”

They turned to the door squeaking open. “Did you choose—” And Cliff paused on the doorframe, staring at the two of them. Then James. Then Jason.

Jason glared at him. “What?”

Cliff jumped a little in place. “Um... nothing.”

“Good.” He turned to James. “Don't make the same mistake twice. Make sure this is it.”

Jason stomped out of the room, elbowing past Cliff, not looking at him in the eye as he left. Cliff watched him go, a hand reached out in his direction, but all he felt was air.

James turned his back to the door. There was an unspeakable weight on his chest now that he couldn't seem to shake off. “Cliff.”

“Ah, yes my Lord?”

“I have the pieces I'd like the orchestra to play.”

“Oh. Very good.”

“Yes. Hopefully Lars will like them.”

Footsteps came close. “I'm sure he will.” A hand rested on the small of James's back. “If it isn't so bold for me to ask, my Lord... what happened?”

“Nothing of great importance right now.” *Goddamn it.* He lifted his head and squared his shoulders, forcing his thoughts at bay. “Let me show you the music sheets.”

“Yes my Lord.”

**

Back in the safety of his own chambers, Jason sat on the edge of his bed, with his head buried deep in his hands. The gold ring rested on his nightstand, reflecting the small candlelight flicking in the cool air.

Why. He rubbed his face. *Why did I listen to Cliff? Goddamn it...*

His hands dropped away, slapping onto his thighs. He turned around and glared at the ring.

You bastard. He stood up and picked the ring up between his fingers. *You fucking bastard.* His fist closed around it, knuckles white. *Why. Why now.*

Jason growled, pressing his fist to his forehead.

Why why WHY.

Chapter 12

In the prince's chambers, Cliff helped James into his blue-and-gold outfit, one he hadn't worn since his 22nd birthday. He straightened his lapel, collar and cuffs, while James looked at the wall, his mind drifting back to Jason, again.

He was the first James courted before moving onto Kirk. The first five years were rough, James lashing out at Jason, refusing Jason to come close at all. The next ten were better. Gradually, he opened up to Jason. They went on walks, ate together, read together, talked, slept in the same bed — the same things he did with Lars, save the bed. All the same things he did with Kirk, Rob and Cliff later. The last years were the best—until the fifth year. On the twenty-fifth year, James had enough of waiting. Jason wasn't the one, and Jason didn't take the decision lightly.

**

“What?”

“It has to be done.” James stood away from the table, dropping his napkin on his empty plate. The East Wing fireplace flickered beside them, casting shadows on the wood. “This isn't working.”

“But...” Jason's eyes shined. “You can't.”

“I only have a hundred years, Jason. Twenty-five of them are already gone. I can't waste anymore time with you any longer.” He came to Jason's side of the table and kissed him lightly on the lips. “Thank you for trying though. I appreciate it.”

The smack to his cheek echoed in the room.

He stumbled backwards from the force of Jason's shove.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” The chair underneath Jason fell to the floor. He glared at James unafraid. “Twenty-five years and you're fucking doing this? You asshole! How can you?!”

“**QUIET.**”

“Fuck you!”

He roared, grabbing Jason by the throat—

**

“My Lord?”

“Uh?” He startled, shaking his head. Cliff's eyebrows were knitted together over his beak nose. “What?”

“Is something the matter?”

“No.”

Cliff nodded. He continued with his task. “I'm here to listen when you're ready.”

James sighed and closed his eyes. *Jason...*

He took Jason's chance away. It stood to logic, courting the others, but he knew Kirk and Rob

loved each other. He could've spent that time more with Jason. Maybe it took more than twenty-five years to love someone. Maybe fifty. Maybe more. And yet here he was, getting ready to woo Lars one last time, to make him say the words he needed, when Jason was ready to say them for a hundred years.

Shit.

His eyes drifted to the ceiling.

Maybe Jason is right. Maybe Lars isn't the one.

He knew he saved Lars and chose him due to the spell. If the others hadn't worked, and this boy came so close to the end of the allotted time, then fate, or destiny, *something* said this had to be the one. It helped that he liked Lars a lot. As much as he did Jason. But Jason didn't work. Twenty-five years of courtship, and the spell didn't break. Trying again would've been futile.

Maybe I should've. He sighed. *Maybe I should've—*

"I've finished, my Lord."

"Oh." He returned his attention back to Cliff. "Thank you."

"Shall I see that your guest is ready as well?"

"Yes. That'd be appreciated."

Cliff nodded and circled around him for the door. James walked to the table, the flower in the vase casting a pink glow over his body. *Damn you Enchantress.* His paw twisted into a fist. *Why must this be so confusing?*

He heard the door open and he called out, "Cliff."

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Am I'm making the right decision?"

The door shut again. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure about this. About Lars."

"Why?"

"Because..." He sighed. "Jason—"

"Whatever he said had to be said, my Lord. It was for his own good, and yours." He felt Cliff stand beside him. A hand rested on his shoulder. "But not enough to doubt your feelings for Lars."

"No, he had to. I'm glad he did." James's eyes shined in the pink light. "He loved me, Cliff, and I hurt him. Just like I hurt all of you."

"He knew what he was doing. As were you."

"And that's why I feel so guilty. I knew how he felt. I tried so hard, and then, I hurt him." Both paws turned into fists now. "So why didn't I give him a second chance?" He turned to Cliff, distraught, angry. "Why did I throw it all away to Lars?"

“Do you truly not see what I and the others do all the time whenever you two are together? You can be thick-skulled my Lord, but this is beyond excuses for oversight.”

"But Jason said—"

“Jason said what needed to be said, but his viewpoint is tainted with jealousy. He’s angry that you and Lars have what he wanted more than anything—more than freedom from the castle. Whatever he said to you was something he needed to do, so he could finally gain the peace he lacked for so long. I encouraged him to do that. But for him to have placed doubt in your heart about your feelings towards Lars is inexcusable.”

James growled, stepping away from Cliff and the table. He ran a paw over his face. “I don't know what to do. I feel so guilty.”

"I know you do." He approached him and rested a hand on the small of James’s back. "But when I see you with Lars, my Lord, I see you happy. Truly happy. With Jason there were glimpses. But with Lars? It has been every single day. I understand you are guilty, and that Jason speaks to reason, as he does at times. Maybe he is right, I don’t know. But let me say this.” He slid his hand up James’s back to his shoulder and squeezed. “I raised you, little one, with your parents, and I have waited well over a hundred years to see you this happy.” He patted his shoulder and let it go. “Look into your heart, and it will tell you what to do.”

He heard Cliff’s footsteps head to the chamber door again. It squeaked open, and James called out to him one last time before it closed.

“Cliff?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think he... loves me? Truly loves me?”

“You already know the answer to that question.” The door squeaked. “Now go and be happy. We'll be here if you need anything.”

James sighed at the sound of the door finally closing. He looked at the table again. Inside the vase, another petal fell from the rose.

Dammit.

**

On the other side of the west wing, Kirk fussed over the last bits and pieces to completing Lars’s look for the evening. The outfit was absolutely perfect. He slaved over it for hours, first picking the right fabric, the right lace, the right accessories, the make-up and hairstyle to match, and then running into Lars’s room to tailor it to his body. Now it was only minutes away from the dinner. The outfit took too much time fixing and tailoring, but at least it was perfect. He finished up Lars' hair, using the curling iron to create wonderful rolling waves that fanned beautifully over his back and shoulders, bangs framing his face.

Kirk stepped back to check and admire his work so far. The gold overcoat and gold vest shimmered in the candlelight, as did the gold pants that cinched around his leg, a little over his knees, all made of the finest silk. High white socks were tucked under the pants. The white dress shirt was a perfect choice, the frills and lace framing each wrist and decorating down his sternum, puffing under his chin. Hanging off his shoulders was the translucent gold cape that seemed to be made of the fairest, lightest silk imaginable, and the gold shoes matched completed the ensemble. All that was left was light make-up, and Lars was ready.

Lars chewed his bottom lip. “How do I look?”

“Perfect.” He picked up a brush and the rouge container, bending close into Lars’s face. “Not done yet though. So stop biting your lip.”

“Oh, shit. Sorry.”

Lars closed his eyes, standing perfectly still as Kirk applied the pink rouge to his cheeks, spreading the color around so it blended in with his skin. The eyeshadow was next, Kirk using a palette of golds, browns and neutral colors to accentuate but not take away from Lars' green eyes. The gold matched with his outfit. He took his time blending it all together before moving onto the last part of his face, the lips. A simple light pink with a base primer so it would last for the evening, and Kirk stepped away from him and dumped the brushes onto the desk, finally done.

"Okay, you can open your eyes now." Kirk grinned as Lars fluttered them open. He was perfect. All of his hard work paid off. *The prince doesn't stand a goddamn chance.*

“Can I see what I look like now?”

“Go for it.”

He followed him to the full-bodied mirror he placed in the room after tailoring the suit. As the trailed behind Lars, he could smell the lavender, sage and sandalwood he put on him.

Lars gasped when he saw himself in the mirror. “Wow.”

Kirk stood beside him, looking at Lars in the mirror. He crossed his arms over his chest, tilting his chin up in pride. “Yep. That's you.”

“Man.” He smiled. “And they said I’d look like a clown.”

“Yeah, I—WHO TOLD YOU THAT?”

Lars giggled, stepping away from the mirror.

“I’m serious! Who the fuck said that? The second I find out who it was, I am going to fucking...” He trailed off, watching Lars sit on the edge of the bed, hands in his lap. He looked sad all of a sudden. “Lars? Is something the matter?”

“Yeah. I gotta ask you something.”

“Okay?”

"Is it okay to love a beast?"

Kirk froze in his spot. “You love the Master?”

“I think so. It’s something I’ve been thinking about since yesterday.” He missed the way Kirk’s hands flew to his face, or the small squeal of delight he released. “I don’t know if I should tell him though. I keep questioning myself...”

“What?” Kirk came closer. “Why not?”

“Well, it’s just that. I don’t know. I don’t know why I love him—well, okay, I do. He’s not *that* much of an ass, number one. He’s kind of nice, once you get past the whole ‘I can throw you into the North Tower for insubordination’ stuff. And his bad temper. Number two, he’s actually very

well read and very intelligent. He likes art, music, literature, everything I enjoy. It's great talking with him. And..."

"Yes?"

"I like that he cares so much. Not just me, but everyone else. He probably won't ever admit it, but deep down, he's a fucking softie." He smiled, hugging his shoulders. "He's not a beast to me. Not anymore."

The bed dipped beside Lars. "Then why are you afraid to tell him?"

"I can't help it. I have all these doubts in my head. How can I say I love him, when we've only known each other, what, two weeks? Three maybe? How can that happen so fast? And what if he doesn't like me the same way, uh? What if it's a lost cause? I mean, fuck, he's a prince. A *prince*. I'm just a teacher. Tutor, really."

"Do you honestly think that matters? Or that he cares?"

"Probably not, but... y'know." Lars shrugged. "Those are my thoughts."

"You think too much, sire."

"Yeah, I know."

"Really, it's a bit unhealthy to worry like this."

"Wouldn't you?" He turned to Kirk finally. "I'm in love with a prince that looks like a fucking werewolf and the thing that's scaring me is not that he *is* a werewolf—it's that what if *he* doesn't like *me*. I mean, there's something wrong with my head here, right? Stockholm Syndrome? Falling for my captor here?"

Kirk chuckled, resting a hand on Lars's knee. "Oh Lars. You have nothing to fear. Not when I know the Master loves you as you do."

Lars snorted, looking away. "Yeah, right."

"It's true. I've been with the prince for over a hundred years now, and I can say this in confidence: he feels the same way you do. So stop worrying about it and love him, Lars. Love him well. It's more than fine to do so."

The hand on his thigh left him, the bed lighter again. Lars stared at the half-finished walls James painted for him. An ocean view, for him. A library, for him. An area of the west wing, for him. The breakfast, the dinners, the walks, the clothes. And everything else—everything Lars came to enjoy.

He heard Kirk rummage at the table with some items, and he whispered over the noise, "I'm scared, Kirk." He spoke his next words louder. "I'm sure I love him, and I'm scared of what that means, or what will happen. Or he figured it out himself and doesn't want to tell me he doesn't like me that way."

"What's the point of worrying like this when it will get you nowhere?"

"I can't help it. I'm afraid."

"As is he."

Lars turned his head to Kirk at the table. “Yeah?”

“Of course he is. He’s waited a hundred years for this moment. He’s petrified.”

“But I don’t know—”

“Do you trust him?”

Lars startled. “What?” *James asked me the same thing.*

"Do you trust him?"

He hesitated for a moment, and then nodded his head yes.

“Then stop doubting him. Trust that he will listen to you—and that he won’t hurt you, and everything will be fine.”

Their heads both turned to the door when they heard the soft rap of knocking. Kirk crossed the room and opened it, letting Cliff inside. “Is he ready?” Cliff asked.

“Ready as ever.” Kirk gestured to Lars. “Here he is.”

Cliff abruptly stopped, his jaw dropping when he saw Lars stand from the bed, showing off his outfit. “Wow.”

Lars grinned. “Hi Cliff.”

“Good evening, sire.” He offered an elbow out to Lars, turning to the door. “I shall escort you to the dining hall where the Master awaits your arrival.”

He came forward and slipped his arm into Cliff’s, walking out with him.

As they left, Kirk and Cliff made eye-contact. “Doesn’t stand a chance,” Cliff whispered.

Kirk chuckled. “Not one damn bit.”

**

As Cliff led Lars out of the room and down the hallway, Jason watched the two of them from above in the hidden foyer of the West Wing, arms crossed over his chest. His eyes followed them the whole way, and he disappeared back into the shadows when they rounded the corner.

Chapter 13

Inside the dining hall, James waited for Lars in front of the large Christmas tree, staring at the clock. Any minute later, Lars would arrive, and he still didn't know what to feel or think. The stress and frustration building up inside pushed him to explode, but he had to stay calm. Tonight had to work in his favor.

On one side of the Christmas tree was the small table full of food cooked for the two of them. The chamber orchestra took up the other half, filling up most of the hall. Rob stood in front of them, dressed in a sharp dark red suit. Kirk would show up soon, Cliff was bringing him Lars... and he didn't expect Jason to show up at all.

Shit. James ran a paw over his head. *Jason—*

“My Lord.”

James turned around to Rob. “What?”

“Calm down. You look like you're about to have a heart-attack.”

“I'm fine.”

“Right.” Rob rolled his eyes.

“I'm *fine—*”

The doors creaked open.

Everyone turned to the front.

Cliff entered the wide double doors alone, arms behind him. He met James's gaze and smiled.

“My Lord, your guest has arrived.”

He stepped to the side, revealing Lars standing behind him.

The chamber orchestra played the first song as he entered the hall.

James gasped, “Lars...”

Beautiful. He looked like an angel spun from pure gold. Lars glided across the floor towards him, his outfit glittering in the light, with a shy smile that weakened James's knees. *I can't believe it.*

Lars stopped in front of him and bowed deeply. “Hello, Prince James.”

He repeated the gesture in kind. “Hello, mein schatz.” He offered a paw out for Lars to take, his nervousness gone for now. “Shall we?”

Lars rested his hand in James's paw. “Please.”

Rob watched the two of them walk to the dining table, smiling when James slid the seat open for Lars and pushed him into it. He felt a hand poke his shoulder and turned to his left to find Kirk there grinning. He chuckled. “Where'd you come from?”

“Why, I am a master of disguise, a surveyor of diligence, a shadow of the marvelous—”

“Forget I even asked.” He turned back to Lars and James, shaking his head in awe. “*Damn you're good.*”

“I know.” Kirk twined their hands together. “Let's hope it pays off.”

“It will. I'm sure of it.”

They turned and left the dining hall, Rob gesturing to the other servants on the room to leave with them. Cliff followed them out last, closing the doors behind them all. He allowed himself one last peek, watching James and Lars looking at each other as they ate. *This is it.* He smiled, shutting the doors. *Tonight, we'll be free.*

**

James and Lars sat across from each other, staying relatively quiet as they ate their meals. James kept his attention down on his food, while Lars stole looks between the playing orchestra and the prince. He couldn't believe how *handsome* James looked. The nagging voice warning him *he's a fucking wolf* didn't last against the chant of *I love him* echoing in his head. It should've given him a headache. But the lull of the orchestra playing Mozart calmed him somehow. The urge to blurt out those words grew every passing moment, but he had to wait. Lars refused to be hasty. It was still too fast, falling for James, despite what Kirk said. No matter how charming, sweet and kind he was, there was a chance—

Lars gasped, dropping his fork.

James frowned. “Lars?” He rested his own fork onto his plate. “What's wrong?”

Lars didn't answer. His eyes fluttered shut. His lower lip quivered like his next intake of breath, his head moving to the music. He listened intently to every rise and fall in the song, the high notes and low notes, the sharps and flats, the emotion in the strings and the beauty of the horns. He forgot his hunger, forgot where he was. The song transported him back to childhood, when everything was right in the world, when his world was only his mother, his father and their big home outside of Copenhagen.

“Lars?”

Soft fur brushed his hand and Lars startled out of his memory. He blinked up at James standing next to him now. “Shit, I'm sorry.”

“It's fine.” He rested his paw over Lars's. “You look upset though.”

Lars looked away. “It's just... the song.” He shrugged. “Mom used to play on Christmas.”

The paw squeezed his hand. “Do you want me to stop the music?”

“Oh God, no. No, please.” He looked back up at him, rested his other hand on top of James's paw. “I want to hear it all. I love this song.”

“I didn't mean to evoke such a painful memory for you.”

“You didn't. It's a happy memory.”

“But—”

“Shh.” He smiled at him, lifting his hand to James's sleeve, pulling him down. “Just sit next to me and listen.”

The prince hesitated for a moment before he nodded. "As you wish."

He pulled over his chair and sat next to Lars, his paw staying on top of Lars's hand on the table. Together they watched the chamber orchestra play the arrangement, Lars humming along to the tune.

**

In the hidden balcony, high above in the dining hall, Rob, Kirk and Cliff quietly observed the two down below, all of them smiling. Rob and Kirk held hands, leaning into each other. Cliff stood behind them, arms crossed over his chest, noticing how the prince slowly leaned into Lars and rested his cheek on top of Lars's head.

As the song reached its crescendo, the strings working together, the cymbals crashing and the horns building, Jason peeked into the room from a secret door, hidden near the Christmas tree. He watched the two of them, saw their held hands and how close they sat. His fists shook by his sides.

Dammit.

**

When the orchestra ended on the song's magnificent finish, Lars slipped his hand out of James's paw and clapped wildly. "Bravo! Bravo!"

James chuckled and clapped along with him. "Well done, my orchestra."

The conductor and the players all rose and bowed as one to their prince. "Shall we continue with the next piece, my Lord?" the conductor asked.

"One moment," he said. "I have to ask my guest of honor an important question."

Lars smiled. "Yeah? What is it?"

James stood up and offered out his paw. "Would you like to dance?"

Lars's eyes widened. "... What?"

"Would you like to dance?"

"Uh." Lars blushed pink and looked away. "I, um." He closed his eyes, lifting his hand into James's paw. "Okay, I guess..."

James smiled. His paw closed around Lars's hand and pulled him up. "This way."

He led Lars away to the end of the hall where two big double doors stood, away from the orchestra, the tree and the table. James opened them and revealed to Lars a room he hadn't seen before.

Lars gasped, stepping inside "Wow."

A ballroom. It was a beautiful ballroom with a palette of rich gold and deep browns, the smooth floor glistening under a large gold chandelier. Large columns encircled the ends of the room, stained-glassed windows fitted between them, and the roof was a dome shape, painted with images of angels.

What are you doing James? He raised a hand to his open mouth, soaking in everything. *What are you doing to me?*

James's paw rested on the small of his back, guiding him further in. "Come." He brought him forward to the middle of the room and then turned to face him. "Do you know how to waltz?"

Lars nodded yes. "Mom taught me some dances in my youth. The waltz was one of them."

"Do you remember the steps?"

"I think so..." His eyes went downcast, shrugging. "Maybe."

James chuckled softly. "It's okay. Here." He brought Lars close to him, holding his hand out in one paw, the other pressed against the small of his back. He dipped his head, looking into his eyes. "Rest your hand on my shoulder there. And relax your fingers."

Lars felt the heat rising on his face, the room spinning a little as he listened to that soft purr whispering to him. His fingers flexed for a moment and then relaxed on James's shoulder.

"Yes. Like that. Now, you step back on your right foot... and boxstep." Their eyes stayed locked on each other as they moved. "Back-side-together... forward-side-together... back-side-together... forward-side-together." He chuckled as they moved. "See? You do remember."

Lars managed a weak smile back. From this close, he could smell his cologne, the softness of his fur around his hands, how warm he felt—*my God*—and Lars closed his eyes, falling into instinct and into the steps.

James guided him, pulled them a part, back together, spun him around, and then led him back in James's arms in the position they started in. "Very good," he whispered, his nose nudging Lars's. "You're a natural."

Lars shook his head, chuckling. "Yeah, well." He opened his eyes. "You're an amazing lead."

James stopped moving. He slipped his paw away from Lars's back to his cheek, cupping it. "And a good leader is nothing without a wonderful follower."

Lars didn't catch his soft gasp in time. Part of him wanted to sink into the floor. The other part wanted to sink into James. Instead he looked down and blushing harder than ever, unable to speak.

James smiled and let him go, stepping a few feet away. "Ready?"

No. Lars took a deep breath and lifted his head. *Fuck it.* He nodded yes.

"Good." He turned to the conductor waiting in the dining hall and nodded to him.

The conductor turned to the orchestra and cued up the song.

James walked to Lars and bowed as the intro began, the violins and cellos plucking soft notes. Lars bowed in return, and they came close, settling into position, their eyes locked back onto each other. And they moved across the dance floor as a lone violin led the song, the orchestra underneath it, holding it together.

They moved to the 3-count beat, James turning Lars as the strings swelled, before the violin took over again. As one they circled, their stares never parting. Lars's cape fluttered behind and around him, their footsteps echoing in the large ballroom.

Lars felt his body move autonomous from his mind, the room disappearing into a comfortable spin. He couldn't tell if he was screwing up or doing well. All he saw was the prince, the music and the heat between them consuming him—except that one lone voice wouldn't shut up. *I love him, I love him—*

James smiled gently. “You look afraid.”

“Uh?” Lars blinked slow. “I'm—”

“You're moving well, but you lack the confidence in your steps, mein schatz.” He leaned in, their noses touching again. “Do not be afraid. You are a natural.”

Lars's breath caught. His eyelids fluttered. “You... you think so?”

James nodded. “I used to dance with many people when we hosted balls here in the castle, and you are one of the best. And I'm not just saying that.” He dipped his neck, running his lips over Lars' cheek, the fangs slightly grazing the skin. “So relax, mein schatz. Flow to the music. Move with me. I will guide you... I won't let you fall.”

Lars's eyes fluttered shut as he relaxed in James's hold. All doubts and fears vanished as those lips kissed his cheek for one brief moment. And he fell into the song, fell into the steps and the movements, held in strong arms that he trusted.

As the song changed to a light tempo, James guided him across the floor, circling them around. They danced side-to-side, hip-to-hip, and then back in regular position. Lars let go into the haze falling around him, the whole world disappearing except for the prince.

When the song fell in its original pattern, James cross-stepped, bending Lars down, and Lars easily followed. And when the song went back to that light tempo, he spun Lars around, pulling him out, pulling him back in, their hands meeting, leaving, and then meeting again. Their feet glided across the floor, their gazes never parting. They focused on each other, the steps secondary to the sensation of being in each others arms, moving together like this.

They laughed together as James spun Lars a bit too fast, but they didn't miss tempo, falling back into place, slowing their dance down in time with the song. Lars never tensed up in James' arms at the almost mistake. He stayed calm and relaxed. *I trust you.* He sunk into the song and sighed. *I love you.*

From above in the balcony, Cliff, Rob and Kirk watched on with big grins. The way James looked at Lars, how Lars looked at him... it was perfect. Exactly what needed to happen, not just for their release, but for James himself. For him to finally be happy... to finally love, and be loved in return.

Together, James and Lars slowed down as the song did, their fluidity still intact. They waltzed around in a circle, coming together at the middle of the floor. James broke Lars away from him as the violin led the orchestra, and pulled him back in a slow spin. He caught Lars in his arms and dipped him slowly, the cape pooling on the floor. Lars's hands drifted up and around James' neck. It was a finishing move to a beautiful dance, just as the violin played its last, long notes.

And as the violin carried out its final note, their eyes drifted shut and their lips met in a tender kiss.

For a moment, Cliff, Rob and Kirk indulged in the sight of their prince finally happy, their freedom imminent. Then Cliff gently tapped Rob and Kirk's shoulders and nodded to the exit for the balcony. Rob and Kirk quietly left first, Cliff following after he threw a thumbs up to the conductor below.

One by one the chamber orchestra soon left their instruments behind, leaving the couple alone as well.

James and Lars hadn't noticed their exit. They parted lips and looked at each other, not saying anything for a moment.

Then, the prince softly whispered, "Would you like to go outside?"

Lars nodded.

James slowly pulled Lars up back to his feet. He kept an arm around his shoulders as he led the two of them towards the door and the staircase that would take them to the West Wing gardens. Lars smiled up at him, a hand over James's paw.

**

The winter cold chilled Lars a little, even with the cloak protecting him, but James's body heat kept him mostly warm. He stayed close to the prince as they walked along the pathway, past hanging flowers and other vegetation. The full moon could be seen without obstruction, as well as all the stars, not a single cloud in the sky.

James led Lars towards the back of the garden, where a marble bench rested beside one of the castle's many frozen ponds. Lars tucked his cape around him as he sat down. James kept his arm around his shoulders.

He smiled at Lars. "Cold?"

"Little chilly."

"Here." He tucked Lars closer to his side, his arm fully embracing him. He wrapped his other arm around Lars's waist. "Better?"

Lars felt the blush returning to his cheeks. "Uh, yeah. Thanks."

"Of course."

Lars's shivers slowly began to stop. Being so close to James's body did help. The fur further sheltered him from the cold. And James's paws and arms... he sighed, his head resting on James's chest, over his heart. *I feel safe.*

He could feel the rise and fall of James's chest. The steady tempo of James's heartbeat working in tandem with his breath lulling Lars into a land between awake and asleep. He curled further into James's side, his hands tucked into his lap. He felt so relaxed—and then abruptly woke up at the sound of soft humming against his ear.

James.

James was humming. He was humming the tune of the song they danced to. Lars paid attention to the low rumble against his cheek and ear, a mix of a human hum and a wolf croon. *Wow.* He sighed, breathing in James, his nose against his chest. *Beautiful.*

He felt the paw on his shoulder slip up to his hair, the claws slowly moving through the strands unconsciously. But Lars felt no fear. The humming, the soft touch, the warmth and comfort—he was too relaxed to be scared. He didn't even have a reason to be scared.

As the claws started to graze his scalp, James's paw froze mid-movement and the humming

abruptly stopped. James moved his paw back to Lars's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"Hm?" Lars lifted his head up from James' chest, the cool air hitting his warm cheek. "What for?"

"My claws." James sighed. "I could hurt you."

"I didn't mind it."

"Your safety is not something I'm willing to risk."

Lars rested his hand over James's sternum. "But I trust you."

"I know you do." James turned away. "But I don't trust myself."

You're wrong. Lars felt a soft cold breeze hit his cheek. *You're not a monster, James.* James's fur and hair moved with it. *I love you.*

"Did you enjoy the dance, at least?" James whispered.

"I loved it."

"I'm glad." James let go of his waist to slip his paw over one of Lars's hands. "Though, we did do something wrong."

"Oh?"

"Mhm. In a waltz, you're not supposed to look at your partner, but away from him."

Lars chuckled. "Well, that wasn't going to happen, min skat."

"You've said that to me so many times now, I have to ask. What does 'min skat' mean?"

Lars leaned in. "It's Danish... for 'my darling.' Or 'my treasure.'"

James's smile faltered, but Lars wasn't worried. The way James looked, and the waver in his voice as he whispered, said so much. "Do you know what 'mein schatz' means?"

Lars smiled. "I've known this whole time."

The wind rustling through the trees whispered louder than they did, as they drifted their heads closer, their eyes heavy lidded, their lips a touch away.

"Lars?"

"Yes James?"

James slipped his paw up to gently cup the back of his head.

"Do you... love me?"

Lars slid his hand up James's chest to cup his cheek.

"Yes."

He squeezed his hand as best he could around James's paw.

Green eyes fluttered shut first.

“I love you James.”

Blue eyes closed second.

“Me too.”

And their lips met as the wind brought the night song of midnight crickets.

Chapter 14

James broke the kiss and smiled down at Lars. It was over. He tucked Lars to his chest, cradling Lars's head in his paw. Any minute now, the Enchantress will show up, appear before the two of them and give him back his true form, breaking the invisible bonds that chained everyone to the castle. They could finally live. Finally be free.

Any minute now.

Any minute...

The wind rustled the trees, playing along his fur and fluttering Lars's cape. His ears twitched, listening intently for any sound or sudden movement that would signal the arrival of the Enchantress.

Nothing.

Shit.

Maybe it would be a bright light like before. Maybe they'd both be engulfed in whiteness. But she was coming. She had to. Tonight was the night. Lars professed his love, and James said it back. She had to sense it, the change in him, the love from Lars.

She had to.

There was the wind, the trees, the frozen pond, the light from the moon and Lars... and nothing else. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing supernatural.

His paw slipped down from Lars's head to his back.

Where is she?

This was true love. Equal love given, equal returned. Cliff couldn't do it, Jason couldn't do it, Kirk and Rob couldn't do it, none of the wayward travelers who came through the castle walls didn't do it—but Lars did. He cared about Lars. He loved Lars.

Then why am I still a beast? Why haven't I transformed?

James glared up at the moon.

Where the hell is she?

There was nothing else he had to do. The Enchantress would've said something. She was supposed to be here. Lars loved him, he loved Lars—the spell had to be broken now. If it relied on a kiss alone, he would've changed the first time he kissed Lars in his private study—or even earlier, kissing Jason that first time, a hundred years ago. But this time it was different. Lars *said* he loved him. He said the same thing too (sort of). And before that, telling Lars all that stuff about his past, opening up to him in the study, even taking him out of the tower to begin with—all of that, done to break the spell.

That was enough. That *had* to be enough.

Then where IS SHE?

Equal love given. Equal returned. James knew he loved Lars, that was for certain. But maybe—

James gasped. *It's him.*

Lars stirred on his chest. "James?"

"Nothing." He patted his hair absentmindedly. "It's nothing..."

It all made sense now. The fault was on Lars. He loved Lars, but Lars didn't love him that much—or not enough. Maybe the love he had for Lars was more than the love Lars had for him. Or Lars doubted his love in James, and who could blame him. He was a beast. But that was the reason. Lars was the reason she wasn't showing. Lars was holding out on him, on his freedom... on the entire kingdom's freedom.

"All his fault..."

"What?"

James startled. Now Lars was looking up at him, head pulling away from his chest. He looked confused, but Lars still smiled.

"Uh..." He slid his paw up from Lars's back to his shoulder, pushing him away. "Lars?"

Lars sat up, his eyebrows knitted together, but he still smiled. "Yes?"

"You... you *did* say you loved me, right?"

"Yes, James. I love you."

"Truly?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

Lars chuckled. He lifted his hand up to James's ears and started to play with one of them. "I think you know."

His fingers scratched behind the appendage. James resisted the urge to lean into that hand like he had before in the library. He gently grabbed Lars's wrist and pulled the hand away from his ears.

"That's not good enough."

Lars's face fell, and something inside James, near his heart, seemed to fall with it, but he ignored the small pain. "What?"

"Tell me how much you love me."

"Huh?"

"Why do you love me? I need specifics."

"I don't understand—"

"Stop ignoring the question." He squeezed the wrist in his paw. "I need reasons." He jerked Lars's arm hard and snarled. "Now *tell me.*"

Lars winced as he physically struggled for the words. Gone was the joy, replaced with cold hard

confusion and hurt. “W-What do you want me to say?”

James growled. “You don't actually *know*?”

“I—”

“Is it because you don't actually love me?”

“*I do!*” Lars clutched onto James’s shirt with his free hand. “I do love you! I just don't know how you want me to express it!”

James shook Lars’s arm in his grip and snarled into his face. “I want you to *TELL ME THE TRUTH!*”

Lars cowered beneath him—the way he had the first time James met him. But there was no defiance, no stubbornness. Only hurt. “But...” In the moonlight, James watched his eyes shine and his lower lip tremble. “James—”

“Tell me.”

“S-Stop it, please—”

He emphasized his words with a shake. “Right. Now.”

Lars jerked his arms in James’s paws. “You’re hurting me—”

“*THEN STOP THE EXCUSES AND SAY SOMETHING RIGHT NOW!*”

That pain came back when he watched tears fall from Lars’s eyes, down his pale cheeks. A voice in the back of his told him *stop, don’t, look at what you’re doing*, but he ignored it. Lars was at fault. Not him.

Slowly, Lars whispered, “Why do you need to know?”

“Because the Enchantress hasn’t shown her damn face and time is running out. I know *I* love you, so the reason why she hasn’t shown up is obviously because of you. You don’t love me enough to break the spell.”

Those green eyes searched his face. Another tear fell when Lars blinked. And in a second, gone was the sadness and the hurt, replaced by the anger James knew—the anger and spite from their first meeting, triple folded.

“I knew it. I *knew* you were hiding something from me, back in that room.”

“You wouldn't have fallen for me otherwise if I had told you the truth!”

“Then everything you did -- everything 'til now...” Lars swallowed hard, his voice strained. “This is all it was, huh? Just a way to get the spell broken.”

“OF COURSE I WANT THE SPELL BROKEN!” James shouted, shaking Lars again. “*THAT'S THE WHOLE POINT OF LOVING YOU!*”

Lars pursed his lips, set his jaw. He tilted his head up in defiance. “Then kill me like you should've in the beginning. I'm worthless to you.” He pushed his face as close as possible to James’s. “Because I *don't* love you.”

“I KNEW IT!” James roared on top of his lungs. He threw Lars out of his arms, clear across the

grass around them, close to the pond's edge.

Lars rolled onto his side and glared up at James, his face wet, grass sticking to his cheeks and his now dirty gold outfit.

James loomed over Lars on the ground. "You two-faced, lying brat. From here on out, you are banished from my kingdom."

"Fine."

They glared at each other as Lars stood up onto his shaky feet. He trembled in place, his fists shaking at his sides. For a second, James thought he'd take a swing at hi. But he pivoted on his heel and walked away sharply.

A good distance away, Lars looked over his shoulder again. James still glared at him from where he stood next to the marble bench, paws clenched into tight fists as well.

"I truly thought you had changed, James," Lars said. "But you never will. You truly *are* the beast of this castle... in *and* out."

James snarled. "Get. Out."

Lars turned around again and walked back to the castle, holding his head up high. And as Lars walked away, James turned in the opposite direction and stalked into the gardens, tearing away hanging flowers, uprooting bushes and clawing trees as he went, leaving it behind to rot in his wake.

**

Back at the castle, Jason watched the prince and Lars from the West Wing tower. In his hand, he held the violin he played with tonight. It had been a century since he last played with the orchestra—the prince's 22nd birthday, before the spell was cast. So when the conductor saw him approach them just as they were about to start the song, he ushered him into the position of the first violinist, taking his instrument and bow and settling into place.

It hurt watching them together. Seeing them eat. Listen to the orchestra. How the prince touched and kissed the boy. The way they danced, Lars leaning into every step, James gazing down at him and ignoring the rest of the world... he wanted that for so long, only to see it go to someone who didn't deserve it.

Jason sighed.

I'm a jealous old fool.

It was around James's 18th birthday that he realized he was madly in love with the prince. That love only worsened when a few months later the prince's father died and he consoled James. It didn't matter that James was younger than him. Now that they were both well over a hundred years old, age didn't matter much to them at all. But when the Enchantress said that the only way the heartless prince and his kingdom could be free was through true love, to give love and to receive love in return, Jason had this feeling it was meant to be. They were going to save the kingdom. All he had to do was make James love him, and they'd be saved. They'd have their happily-ever-after.

And it wasn't meant to be. It was probably never meant to be. They had twenty-five years to figure things out. Twenty-five years for Jason to get James to fall in love with him. Twenty-five years of abuse he put up with. But as many time as they argued and they fought, there were some

good times. The hand-holding. Eating dinners together. Talking about books. James kissing him the first time on their first date... James kissing him goodbye on their last date.

As much as he knew he'd have to move on, it still pissed him—pissed him off really, that Lars received so much more than he ever did. Lars received the numerous kisses, the numerous gifts, the hand-holds and full-on embraces he dreamt of. He even received his own personal room near the Master's, had access into James' private room that no one had permission to enter, given tours of the castle by them and by James, given anything he wanted if he asked for it, and Lars... Lars never bitched. Never complained. He thanked them all for every single thing he was given, positively overwhelmed by how much they gifted him. And as much as he wanted to strangle Lars, Jason knew he never would. Because as much as he damn well hated to admit it, he cared about Lars too, just as much as the others did. The little bastard had wormed his way into his damn heart, and Jason still couldn't figure out how that happened.

That, and James wanted him. So he had to respect his choice and let him go.

I have to.

Jason pounded his fist to his thigh.

It hurt, watching them. All day he observed, and it all led to a conclusion he didn't want to acknowledge or accept. But after breakfast, their walk in the snow, witnessing their dance, how Lars touched James, looked into his eyes and kissed him... Lars loved him, just like he did. They just had one major difference. Only one of them had the affections of the one they loved. Maybe that's what truly compelled him to perform the first violin part for the waltz tonight. He had to let go and move on, like Cliff told him to, so he could find peace and shed himself of his damn jealousy. So he could finally be happy for the prince and Lars.

It still fucking hurts.

“You did a beautiful performance tonight.”

Jason's thoughts were broken by the soft voice. He looked over his shoulder to find Cliff there. “Leave it to you to find my hiding spots.”

Cliff walked over to him at the window. “I didn't think you would ever do something as selfless as that.”

Jason shrugged. “It was just a performance.”

“It was still beautiful.”

“Mm.”

They stared out the window together side by side, watching the stars and the moon in relative, comfortable silence. Jason's fingers itched as they lightly played with the hair of the bow.

When Cliff whispered again, his voice carried a tone of memory and understanding. “I know it hurt you to do that.”

“Yeah, well, you told me to get over it.”

“Did it help?”

Jason sighed. “He loves him. I have to get used to that.”

Cliff turned his head to him. "Can you?"

"I'm not going to sabotage their relationship, if that's what you're implying. I'm jealous, not vindictive." He snorted. "I'm too fucking old for that shit."

Cliff chuckled. "I know. We both are."

"We *all* are. A hundred twenty-six fucking years and counting."

"Still older than you... a hundred and thirty here."

Jason quirked a half-hearted smile, but it soon disappeared as his thoughts weighed in again. "Hey Cliff?"

"Yes?"

"Lars... he really does love James, huh?"

"Yes." Cliff rose a hand and clasped it onto Jason's shoulder, squeezing it. "But no matter what... you were first."

"Yeah." He sadly smiled. "Just not the one that counts."

Cliff frowned. He opened his mouth to say something, but he caught something from the corner of his vision. When he turned and looked out the window, he saw Lars head back for the castle alone... and worry sunk in when he saw the tears shining down Lars's cheeks.

"Jason..."

"Hm?" Jason looked out the window and saw what Cliff stared at, and he gasped softly. "Oh shit."

Cliff ran down the steps of the tower ahead of Jason. The two of them raced for the main floor of the west wing, desperate to intercept Lars and to learn what happened. They made it in time as Lars swung open the back doors of the West Wing, and Cliff stood in front of Lars's way.

"Sire! What happened? What's wrong?"

Lars paid no attention to him. He marched on, elbowing past him.

Cliff caught up with him, flanking his side. Jason hid the violin and bow in the stairwell and quickly flanked the other side. "Sire? Where's the prince?"

"I don't give a shit."

Cliff's face blanched white. "But why? Tell us what happened, please. Whatever the prince said, I'm sure he didn't mean it."

Lars said nothing. He marched on, heading to his room. Cliff didn't know what else to try, and he looked over at Jason for help.

Jason cleared his throat and tried something he hoped would work. "Sire, just tell us what happened. Cliff is right. He didn't mean it." His next words were hard to admit, but it was the truth. It was time to say them. "You know the prince loves you—"

"*He never loved me!*" Lars spun on Jason and shouted in his face. "He only needed me for the damn spell and when it didn't work like he planned, he threw me away! He used me! He didn't

care how I felt as long as it fulfilled what he wanted! He just saw someone to fucking play with and hoped it worked in his favor! Well it didn't! And I'm glad! I hope he *never* becomes human again, because he's a fucking monster, *AND I HATE HIM!*"

Lars bolted from the two and raced down the hallway, rounding the corner where his room was. He barricaded himself inside, putting all the locks in place, and then collapsed onto the bed, holding his head in his hands.

Cliff and Jason stared after him, wide-eyed and mouths gaping for a moment, both in disbelief at what they heard, until Cliff sobered up first. He turned to Jason and shook his shoulder. "Jason. *Jason.*" When bewildered blue eyes focused on him, Cliff barked his orders. "Go to Lars's room. See if you can reason with him. I'm going to find the Master. We *can't* let this happen."

Jason nodded. "Yeah... yeah, definitely. Go. Get James. I'll go to Lars's."

"Okay." Cliff sprinted down the hall for the doors to the West Wing gardens. *Hopefully it isn't too late...*

Once alone, Jason leaned against the wall for long moment to collect himself. When Lars shouted in his face, it was like hearing an echo. Everything he felt, everything he thought, relayed right back to him through Lars. The hurt and the anger and the anguish of being wounded like that, wounded on a level no one could understand... until one had their heart truly broken.

He did it again. Jason twisted his hands into fists. *You bastard. I warned you. I fucking warned you never to do it again.*

He took a few deep breaths before he pushed away from the wall and headed down to Lars's room. He knew he could break through to Lars. Jason knew full well where Lars was coming from. Because James did what Jason warned him not to do. The prince broke another heart.

Chapter 15

Cliff easily found the prince. He followed the path of destruction laid in his wake, trees overturned and uprooted. It was stupid of him to come to the prince like this, when James was enraged beyond control. Cliff knew he would get hurt. The prince still didn't know how to control his anger and he could lash out at him. Maybe even kill him. But his desperation made him weave through the ruins of the gardens and search him out.

His shivered at the loud roars the prince released in the air, more ferocious than a wounded dangerous animal. But he worked through his fear and caught up with James near the castle wall, when the West Wing became the East Wing. He watched James tear up another tree, breaking it into small pieces from the sheer power of his paws.

“James! Stop this!”

The prince didn't listen. He continued to destroy the tree until a stump was left behind. He was on a rampage. The animal had taken over the human inside completely.

I have to stop this... but how?

Another tree laid to waste on the garden floor. Cliff shivered when he saw how hideous and ugly James's faced looked. It was lost in rage and violence. He was not his prince in this moment... he truly was the monster.

“James!”

All he received was a loud, bloodcurdling roar. "*LEAVE ME ALONE!*"

He followed James through the garden, frantic, desperate. "Dammit James, what did you do?"

"I DON'T GIVE A SHIT!" James clawed through another tree. "HE'S BANISHED! *GET HIM OUT OF MY CASTLE!*"

"How can you say that? He's back there crying because of whatever you did to him!"

"GOOD!" James snapped branches off one by one, grinding them to dust. "LET HIM FUCKING CRY, I DON'T CARE! JASON WAS RIGHT AND YOU WERE WRONG CLIFF!" He snarled, facing Cliff, foaming at the mouth. "DO YOU HEAR ME?! *YOU WERE WRONG!*"

He gasped and jumped back as James slashed at the tree besides him, tearing it into pieces. Jason. Whatever the bastard said ruined James. He shouldn't have told Jason to say anything, should've told him to keep his mouth shut *after* the spell was broken. *Damn him!*

Brute force would never work against the prince. It was useless to even find a weapon. There was only one thing he could do: talk him out of his anger. It was a long shot, and he knew he was putting himself on the line, but this was the only weapon he had. *Hopefully the animal hasn't killed all of the prince's sensibilities...*

Cliff took a few steps forward towards the prince. "James--!"

The beast sliced through two branches. "*GET AWAY FROM ME.*" He roared again and stormed for another tree.

Cliff stumbled back, hands rising up to his chest. *Shit. What can I say? What can I do? The prince*

is going to destroy the East Wing gardens at this point...

Another tree tumbled to the ground. Claw marks torn into the branches, the bark. James kicked through the stump and it cracked in half.

"ALL I WANTED WAS TO CHANGE BACK, CLIFF! TO BE HUMAN AGAIN!"

He rounded on another tree.

"I WANTED TO BE FREE! HAVE EVERYONE FREE!"

The tree slammed onto the ground, shattered into pieces.

"WHY WASN'T IT ENOUGH?"

James stomped on the branches, leaves flying in the air.

"*WHY DOESN'T HE LOVE ME?*"

Cliff's eyes went wide as James rounded on the violet rose bushes. *The queen's roses...!*

"*AND WHY DID I EVER [b]LOVE HIM?*" [/b]

James raised a claw high in the air.

Cliff raced for the bushes.

He threw his hands up.

"*NO!*"

James sliced his hand down too late to stop.

He saw red.

Red on the ground. Red on the violet roses.

James gasped.

The rose bushes. His mother's violet rose bushes. And there was... blood. His claws dripped blood.

And Cliff...

He looked down. Blue eyes quivered in horror.

Cliff kneeled at his feet. Blood stained his hands on his chest, spilling onto the ground. His hazel eyes lifted up through red hair... and he smiled. "That... was a stupid, *stupid* thing to do... right, my Lord?"

James fell to his knees. He cradled his arms gently around Cliff, shaking, trembling all over. "Oh God. Cliff. What... what did I do...?"

"What you always do, my Lord... act first, think later." He hissed, bending his neck, the pain growing. "Guess... I learned it... from you..."

"But why? What possessed you to do this?"

"Because I had to." Cliff bent backwards and landed on his butt, groaning in pain. "The rose bushes, your mothers... they're so precious to you. I couldn't let you destroy them."

The prince helped Cliff into a better sitting position, acting as gentle as possible, guilt eating away at his insides. "Please... let me see."

Cliff grunted in pain. He removed a hand from his chest to show off the wound to James--and the prince sighed in relief. It wasn't a bad wound. He sliced the skin open, the shirt ruined, and Cliff bled, but it wasn't an awful wound. He wasn't gushing blood. James didn't hit a main artery, his lungs or his heart. It didn't look like he did. He sighed in relief. *A damn miracle.*

The prince took off his overcoat and tore it into pieces. "I'm taking you to the doctor immediately, but I'm positive you're going to be okay."

"Must've... jumped back in time." Cliff snickered. "A hundred years... I still got my reflexes."

"Stop that. This isn't something to joke around with, okay? Now lift your hands." When Cliff did, James started to apply pressure to the claw slices he made, bundling the cloth over the bleeding to stop it. "Hold onto that, okay? I'm going to carry you back to the castle."

Cliff nodded. He closed his eyes as the prince cradled him in his large arms and gently lifted him up from the ground. They walked through the nearly destroyed gardens of the east wing back to the west wing, James mindful of his claws, making sure not to hurt Cliff with them... again. They were still bloody, he could feel the blood caking and he wished he could clean them.

Animal... I truly am what Lars said. I'm an animal, and I deserve to stay like this.

"No you don't, my Lord."

James gasped. *Shit. I said it aloud.* The prince faltered in his walking but he kept heading back to the West Wing. "But look at what I did to you, Cliff. I nearly killed you."

Cliff smiled up at him. "He loves you, James. He was lying."

"He was saying the truth. Look at me Cliff... look at what I did." James swallowed against the lump in his throat, tried not to clench his claws. He couldn't hurt Cliff again. He didn't want to hurt anyone again. "Jason was right too. He told me I was a monster... even Lars said I was a monster... I destroy everything I love." He swallowed again, his lower lip trembling. "I'll never learn change... and I'll never be able to make you all free of me."

"Are you certain it's him?"

James glanced down at Cliff. "What?"

"Perhaps... he said... what he said... because you hurt him."

"But I gave him anything he wanted... anything he asked. I let him go anywhere, have anything... I gave him so much—"

"That isn't love, James." Cliff sadly smiled. "That is materialism."

"But I asked him, Cliff. I asked him if he loved me. And he said he couldn't tell me, that I supposedly knew. He wouldn't even give me specifics. All I wanted was one example and he couldn't even give me one."

"I wouldn't either, if you growled like that." He shifted in James' arms as they came close to the

West Wing entrance. "Do you know what I think? You do love him... but... not like he does. Remember, my Lord... equal love given... equal returned."

James stopped near the door to the West Wing. "Then why did I save him? Why did I do all these things for him?" *Everything I felt...*

Cliff's smile disappeared as he whispered. "You're too angry to love him, my Lord. Too angry... and much too afraid."

The prince startled. "You really think so?" He tilted his head down, lost in thought. "*I'm the reason?*" *So when I attacked him... when I accused him...* James shut his eyes tight. "Oh God..."

Cliff sadly nodded and patted James's chest with one hand, the other still holding onto the bloody cloth. "You know I'm right my Lord. Give the boy another chance. Tell him you're sorry. Be open with him... truly open with him. Lars does love you, James. Don't be afraid... of that love."

The prince nodded. "Okay," he whispered, but he wasn't truly convinced. There was too much doubt clouding his mind, too much hurt and guilt and anger, all directed at himself. If he was truly afraid like Cliff thought he was, truly afraid of love... then why? Why was he afraid? And what could he do to get over this fear?

James opened the door to the back of the West Wing, walking in sideways so Cliff wasn't further hurt by his stupidity. *I'll think about this later. But I should apologize... yes. I will apologize. It's the least I can do.*

"Cliff?"

"Yes, my Lord?"

"I'll talk to him tonight."

Cliff smiled, closing his eyes. "Thank you."

James sped up his walking. *For Cliff, and for Jason. I can't make the same mistake twice... I can't hurt another person I care for.*

**

From outside Lars's door, Jason clearly heard his crying. Jason knew these cries too well. He heard them before, in the privacy of a high tower in the South Wing, far away from the Master's quarters, the servants quarters, from everyone else, so no one could hear his anguish. He understood what it was like to be on the receiving end of James uncaring bite. For James to have done it again to someone else, it enraged, hurt and wounded Jason, as if James had done this to himself once more. He was glad Cliff went after James. If he had gone after the prince, they might have ended up in a physical altercation... and knowing how enraged the prince must've been, Jason might have been hurt in the process. Maybe even killed. Maybe *then* the prince would finally realize how much of a monster he was, how he ruined everyone's lives—and everyone's hearts.

His knuckles rapped on the door a few times. "Lars?"

Lars kept crying.

Jason tried the door and found it locked. His knuckles rapped again, speaking louder.

"Lars, it's Jason. Let me in."

"Go away." Lars' voice was heavy and strained. "I don't want to see anyone. Just leave me alone."

Jason sighed. "Please let me in." He closed his eyes. "I understand what you're feeling."

"How can you? I feel like he just... just *stabbed me!* Like he reached into my chest and pulled out *everything!*"

"Because!" Jason's fists shook. His whole body shook. He swallowed against the lump in his throat, his voice tight as he whispered words that wounded himself. "He did the same *damn thing* to me."

The sobs stopped. There was silence on the other side.

A few moments later, the door unlocked, and slowly creaked open.

"Jason?"

He opened his eyes. Lars peeked his head out, his hair stuck to his wet, red face, his green eyes red-rimmed and still glossed over with tears. His make-up was ruined, his outfit wrinkled. Lars looked so much like a child then, like a little boy who lost everything he ever loved in the world, and gazed up at Jason like maybe the majordomo could help him find his way again.

"He did this to you too?"

Jason nodded yes.

Lars quietly stepped back and held open the door for him to enter, and once Jason was inside, he locked the door behind them.

They sat on the end of Lars's bed, the silk blue sheets a murky green in the lamplight. Jason sat with his legs crossed while Lars tucked his legs to his chest, arms wrapped around his knees.

"What happened?" Lars whispered.

He sounded like a little kid, needing to know the story Jason held inside. It'd hurt telling it, hurt Jason all the way through. Talking about what happened would be similar to putting battery acid on a wound—except it wasn't one major wound. It was a hundred years worth of small scabs that rotted and festered over but never fully healed, and now he was going to have to pick them all one by one until they bled all over and there would be nothing left. He'd be a shell of a man, and maybe that would be best. At least it would be all out. Maybe then he'd feel okay, no longer have this weight inside him.

Jason turned his head away from Lars, his attention to the floor. He had to do this though. It wasn't only for himself. It was for Lars too.

"When I met James, he was 13 years old. I was 17. I was appointed majordomo, working alongside Cliff, who was the most around James. We all became the best of friends growing up. James, me, Cliff, Rob and Kirk. Then, James's parents died. First his beloved mother, and then his father. It was after his father's death that prince became the beast well before the Enchantress ever came." He closed his eyes. "And it was on that night I truly fell in love with him."

Lars gasped softly. Jason sighed hard through his nose. He lost himself in all the memories that came to mind as he spoke.

"I started to fall for him on his 18th birthday, and a few months later, when his father died, I held

him in his arms, consoling him as he cried. That's when I truly fell for him. I didn't care that he was turning into a monster. I wanted to help him, because I knew deep down that he was still that boy I fell in love with. So when the Enchantress came and changed him into what you know now, I hoped it was me that would break the spell. But it wasn't meant to be. James and I tried, and after twenty-five years together, James called an end to it. And when I protested it, he threw me in the North Tower for years. He moved onto Kirk after that, then Rob, and then Cliff last. But none of us brought an end to the spell. After that, he became cold and distant. Didn't want to be close to anyone in the castle. Only the four of us could see him in the West Wing, but it was only in his chambers. We could never go anywhere else. As the years passed, he seemed not to improve. All the travelers that stumbled upon our home all became prisoners the second the Master saw them. Once the 100th year arrived, we all truly believed it was the end."

Jason rose his head and looked at Lars. "And then, you arrived. He saved you from the snow, brought you to the castle, stayed by your side through the night... something he'd never done for anyone since he became the beast. And I was so jealous of you. He gave you everything I dreamt of having. I hated you then. I kept telling everyone you weren't the one, so maybe they'd make you go, and once the spell was permanent, James and I could have each other again. By then, the spell wouldn't matter. We'd be stuck together for eternity, and I wanted that. I wanted to be his forever. For all time."

He shook his head and chuckled. "Now? I don't hate you anymore, Lars. I feel sorry for you, because I understand what it's like to love him and then to be crushed like this. And I sure as hell don't want *him* like that anymore. I'd rather leave than be with him another fucking second. Hell, I'd rather *die* than be with him, except I value my life over his. I refuse to let myself die because of him." He reached a hand out and touched Lars's knee. "And you know why, don't you Lars? You know exactly how I feel now... when he growled into your face, manhandled your body, called you names and threw you away, right?"

Lars's face blanched white. "How do you..."

"Know?" Jason patted Lars's knee, like a father to his son. "Because I know how he is. I've been at the receiving end of his cruelty many times. Do you know he used to imprison me in the North Tower every time we had an argument after we broke up? I spent more time in that tower than I did with him. He strung me along for the first twenty-five years, thinking maybe, just *maybe*, I would be the one to love him and save us all. And then for the last seventy-five years, he treats me like fucking shit."

"Oh my God..." Lars gaped for words, struggling visibly to say something. "I had no idea."

"He does this to people, Lars. You saw that yourself, when you first met him. You saw the *real* him, before he tried to fool you with his dinners and the garden tours, his chambers and everything else. You see that now, don't you? Everything he gave you—this room, the library, the outfits and the trinkets—every single *thing*... was his way of manipulating you, just like he manipulated me. All for the sake of that curse."

Lars flinched. Jason knew he hit the fresh wound James created. And it hurt, watching the way Lars shook his head, his body trembling, his hands falling from his legs, sinking into a pit of denial. He knew those signs too well. He faced them himself, seventy-five years ago.

"You're right... I know you're right. But—"

"No. You know I speak the truth." He held onto Lars's knees to keep him in place, glaring at him. "What did he tell you, Lars? That you weren't the one? That he only wanted you for the spell?" Lars flinched and Jason chuckled, sadly smiling. "That's what I thought. I told you. It's how he is. He *never* loved you. I *always* knew he never loved you. There was no way he could. And you

know why?"

Lars shrunk underneath Jason as he hovered over him, fresh tears coming to Lars's eyes.

"Because he *is* a monster. And a monster can never, *ever* fall in love." Jason snickered. "Why do you think the Enchantress made that the way to end the spell? Equal love given... equal returned."

Lars blinked up at Jason, the tears falling. It hurt to see his heart breaking like this, up close—the way his eyes glossed over, his face blanched and pale, but it was for Lars's own good. He had to break whatever pieces of love Lars had left for James.

He wrapped his arms and fixed their positions so they sat side by side, Lars resting on his chest, Jason's arms around his shoulders.

"You love him, Lars. I know you do. You love him probably as much as I did. Maybe even more. But James never loved you, and he never will. You fell in love with a complete monster just as I did... and you were hurt just the same."

Lars shut his eyes tight and he hiccuped on a sob. He wrapped his arms tight around Jason and buried his face into his chest. "What do I do, Jason?" His voice was muffled against Jason's chest. "How do I live with this?"

Jason pulled away to look Lars dead in the eye.

"Leave. Leave tomorrow morning and don't look back."

Lars tilted his head down, his hair covering his face. Jason waited beside him for his reaction. *C'mon Lars. See reason. You know that I'm right.*

Slowly, Lars shook his head. He wiggled out of Jason's hold, and Jason let him go. In silence Jason watched Lars leave the bed and stand in the middle of the room, staring at the floor. At Lars's sides, his hands turned into fists.

"Thank you Jason," Lars whispered. "You can go now."

Jason smiled. *Thank goodness.* He stood up and nodded to Lars. "Yes, sire. As you wish."

He walked to the door, making plans in his head to have Rob prepare a wonderful farewell feast for Lars, something low-key but impressionable. Then he'd have a servant go to the stables and retrieve their best horse for Lars to use to go back home. It'd be a wonderful parting gift.

"Jason?"

He startled in place, a hand on the door. Jason turned around back to Lars. "Yes, sire?"

Lars hadn't moved from where he stood, looking down at the floor. "Just... indulge me, one last time." He lifted his head. Jason caught Lars's eye. "Tell me how Prince James looked like... when he was human."

Jason sadly smiled. "Long, blonde hair... tanned skin... tall and toned... and you already know what his eyes look like, sire. Those never changed."

"That will be all."

Jason nodded and left Lars alone, slowly closing the door behind him. And he walked down the hallway at peace, knowing he did the right thing.

**

In another side of the West Wing, James carried Cliff into the doctor's quarters, settling him down onto the table. Cliff grunted in pain as he stared up at the ceiling. The doctor immediately rushed to Cliff's side, touching the bloody pieces of James's overcoat.

"What happened?"

"Accident."

The doctor gave James a look. "What kind—"

"Don't ask." James's voice brook no arguments. The doctor paid attention and removed the overcoat to survey the damage done. "Is it bad?"

The prince held his breath as the doctor took his time looking at the wounds he caused on Cliff. It felt like forever before the doctor said anything.

"No, none too bad." The doctor turned away to grab a bunch of medical supplies and lay them beside Cliff. "I'll need to clean up the blood and the wounds, apply antiseptic and bandage him well." He smiled down at Cliff. "Probably in two weeks or so, you'll be just fine."

James breathed easier again. *Thank God. He's going to be okay. He's not going to die.*

Cliff breathed easier as well. He raised a hand and grasped the doctor's wrist. "Thank you." His eyes drifted to James. "Now go do what you promised."

He wanted to protest but the glare Cliff shot his way told him to go, now. And he nodded his head like he was a child once more, turning away from Cliff for the hallway, straight to Lars's room.

Chapter 16

As James walked down the hallways to Lars's room, his mind went berserk. He had no idea what to say, how to approach him or anything. He hurt Lars badly—wounded him as much as he wounded Cliff. But he had to right his wrongs before it was too late. Before Lars left for good.

You're too angry to love him. Too angry... and too afraid.

James sighed. It made no sense, Cliff's words. Too angry to love him? Possibly. But too afraid? That was ridiculous. He had to love Lars. These feelings he had for Lars too, that meant love as well.

Right?

The dinners, the gifts, the time spent together, getting to know him, opening up in return. Everything he planned for tonight. It was all for Lars. All to ensure Lars loved him—

Equal love given, equal returned.

James growled.

I know I love him!

Cliff's pained face emerged in his purview. *That isn't love, James.*

Yes it is. James rounded the corner. *I gave him everything. I gave him my love.*

Cliff shook his head no. *That is materialism.*

That is all I had—!

“My Lord?”

James stopped in his walk, noticing who was there. “Jason. Is Lars in his room?”

“He is.”

“Good.” He walked passed him. “Go to the doctor's quarters and monitor Cliff for me.”

“What?” When Jason received no response, he called out again. “My Lord! What happened to Cliff?”

James didn't answer. He rounded another corner of the hallway and continued onto the next one. *I will apologize. I will fix this. For Cliff... and for you, Jason.*

**

As Jason watched the prince head down the hall, he followed right behind him. Concern for Cliff yelled at him to go and find out what happened, but his curiosity to see what Lars would do made his feet run forward before he could doubt himself and turn away.

You have to say no, Lars. You have to get out of here.

He caught up with James and snuck himself into a corner of a stairwell for one of the West Wing towers. From his vantage point, he watched James stand in front of Lars's door, and he held his

breath as James rapped his knuckles on the wood.

C'mon Lars. Make him pay. Jason snarled. *Make him finally understand what a fucking monster he really is.*

**

There was nothing at first, no movement from inside. James tried again and knocking harder.

Nothing.

He knocked a few times, the raps louder than before.

Nothing again.

His patience disappeared. James slammed on the door with his fist—

"WHAT?!"

The prince startled from the sudden shout. *Was that Lars?*

It sounded so different. Full of anger and bitterness. Cold resentment and hurt.

Like Jason.

James shook his head. *Don't think of that now. Focus on Lars.* He cleared his throat. "It's James."

"Go away."

James grimaced, as if Lars slapped him across the face. *Do it. Don't give up.* He leaned in close to the door. "Mein schatz—"

"DON'T CALL ME THAT."

James gasped and recoiled back.

From behind the staircase, peeking over the corner, Jason grinned.

The prince stared at the door, torn in half. He wanted to yell at Lars, but James needed him to stay. For Cliff. For Jason.

For me.

He leaned in close to the door again. "Please." He closed his eyes. "I need to see you."

"Why, so you can throw me out already? Put me in the North Tower for my last fucking night?"

"No!" His paw balled up into a fist at his side. "Just let me in."

"So you can finish what you fucking started? Didn't throw me far enough?"

James pounded his fist into the door. "Dammit Lars!" He leaned forward and rested his forehead on the wood. "I *need* to talk to you."

He almost stumbled forward when the door swung wide open and Lars stood there. The overcoat was gone, the shirt unbuttoned, the pants already replaced with jeans. His face was devoid of all make-up, his hair disarrayed, and there was no smile reaching his eyes, no familiar joy James

associated with him. There was nothing there of the Lars he came to know—nothing but utter contempt.

Lars's fingers gripped the door's side. "What, you want me gone tonight?"

"No—"

"Then *WHAT?*"

James growled. "You—" He stopped himself, taking a deep breath. *Don't. Think of Cliff. Jason. The spell.* He exhaled slow, releasing his anger with it. "You were treated unfairly tonight, and I wanted to apologize."

Lars didn't move. Didn't say anything.

"How I acted was extremely uncalled for. I shouldn't have lashed out at you, nor should I have forced you that way."

Lars slipped his hand away from the side of the door and crossed his arms over his chest.

Between them, more silence passed.

Lars's anger hadn't dispersed.

"I..." *Shit, what do I say? What do I do?* James cleared his throat again. "I didn't mean anything I said. You see, I—"

"Get to the point."

Instinct almost pushed him to lash out at Lars. But he shoved the impulse to the side and sighed instead, looking away from him, down to the floor. "I lied. I lied, because I wanted everyone to be free. If I don't have equal love given, equal love returned, before the end of this year, everyone is doomed to stay in this castle forever. They never get their freedom. I don't care anymore if I change back or not. It's them I care about." He looked up at Lars. "So, I did everything in my power to make you love me, for them. I figured, if I could make you love me, I could eventually love you too, in enough time."

Lars had unfurled his arms. But the anger hadn't subsided. "But why keep it from me? Why did you even *do* all of that?"

"Because... I was afraid." James swallowed. "I was afraid of disappointing everyone. Of making this my long-last mistake out of so many. Of failing. I didn't want to imagine a life stuck here forever, until one of us, or all of us, just... go mad and we..." He sniffled. His vision blurred over, and he wiped at his eyes with the back of his paw. "That's why I needed you to love me. That's why I've done everything I did. I did it for them. But in the process, I hurt you." He glanced at Lars's clothes, his shoulder, the old marks there and the new bruises. "More mistakes I have to bear." He looked right at Lars. "I'm so sorry I did this to you, Lars. You didn't deserve it. But know this. Despite all that has happened, despite this deception... I truly *do* have feelings for you."

The anger was gone. He couldn't pin-point what emotion Lars had though. It was unreadable.

Then Lars said, "Did you love Jason?"

James gaped. "W-What?"

"Did you love him?" Lars came forward, closing the gap between them. "Did you love him like

you love me—for the sake of the spell?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then what’s the difference between how you ‘loved’ Jason and the others, and me?” Lars peered up at him, his voice lowering to a whisper. “What do *you* love about me? What are *your* reasons?”

“I... I, uh—”

“Hard, isn’t it?” Lars glared. “When you’re put on the fucking spot.”

James growled, “But I *do* love you—”

“How? How do you love me? *Why* do you love me? Because all I know is that you did everything just to woo me and it fucking worked. Do you know how used I feel? To know that everything I feel for you is nothing but a fucking farce?”

James hissed, “I *love* you.”

“You love me because you have to.” Lars’s eyes shined, his voice turning strained and heavy. “You know why *I* love you? Because I could be my real self around you. Because I thought you accepted me for who I was, not as some poor motherless bookworm of a crazy old man, but for *me*. The *real* me.” His curt laugh sounded bitter. “I thought you of all people would understand.”

No. James felt an ache stretch across and down his chest, ripping his insides in two. *No Lars*. He shook his head. *I do understand. I do—*

“But it was all a fucking lie, huh? A fucking lie to get you what you needed, no matter what.” Two tears fell down Lars’s cheeks. “Or who.”

It’s not true. James felt the ache worsen. *It’s not true Lars. I do understand. I do love you. I had wrong intentions at first but I saw you and—*

“I wish I had never met you.” Lars pushed up on his tip-toes and hissed, “I wish I had died in that snow storm instead of loving you.”

“My Lord?” Both their heads turned to the end of the hall, where the castle doctor stood, his hands bloodied. “Cliff is stabilized finally.”

Lars pushed back James. “Cliff?” He stared at the bloodied hands and then back at James. “What happened to Cliff?”

No. James tried to yell, but he couldn’t. *Go away. Not now. Go away!*

“An accident,” the doctor said. “The prince brought Cliff to me with these wounds on his chest and—”

Lars grabbed one of James’s paws and gasped, looking at the blood on his claws. “It was you.”

James shivered. “I...”

Lars shook his paw. “What the *fuck* did you do?”

“I didn’t mean to!” He leaned back, pulling his paw away. “He was right there a-and I couldn’t stop it!”

Lars stormed away down the hall for the doctor’s room. James chased after him, the doctor on his

heels, and from behind the three of them at the rear, trying not to be noticed or seen, Jason slipped out from his hiding place and followed them too.

So that's why the prince wanted me to see to Cliff. Jason growled, full of complete rage at the prince. *Don't you give into him Lars. Don't you fucking forgive him!*

**

Lars stormed into the doctor's quarters, where he found Cliff laying on the table, his chest newly stitched up. He took his place by the table, watching Cliff struggle to sit up.

"Sire..." Cliff groaned. "What are you doing here?"

"No no, relax. Please relax." Lars pressed a hand to Cliff's shoulder. His gaze trailed down to Cliff's pale chest. He could tell it was just cleaned, the stitches brand new. *Fresh wounds.*

James and the doctor caught up with Lars. But while the doctor swooped in and came to Cliff's side, propping him up with pillows, James stopped in the doorway. *Oh God... Lars... Cliff...*

From the corner of the hall, peeking in as best he could, Jason watched and listened in.

"Sire, listen to me. Please." Cliff raised a hand to Lars's wrist. "It was an accident. Truly. James didn't mean to do this."

Lars's nose flared and he ground his teeth, squeezing his hand around Cliff's shoulder. He glared at the stitches and thrummed with anger. "He did this to you."

"It was—"

"I don't give a shit if it was an accident or not." He snatched up the bloody tatters of James's overcoat in his hand that laid next to Cliff and shook them. "This is not the evidence of a human being."

Lars spun around on his heel and stomped up to James, chest to chest. He pushed the bloody rags into his face and hissed: "You will *never* change. Spell or not. Come tomorrow morning? I'll be gone. Just like you wanted."

He threw the rags into James's face and elbowed past him.

"And I'll *never* have to see your ugly face again."

Lars didn't notice Jason as he ran back to his room to go and pack for the morning. All he wanted to was go home, see his father and forget this entire thing ever happened—that he ever found this castle, never met these people, and most importantly, that he had been so foolish and stupid to fall in love with a hideous, ugly, disgusting beast.

**

Jason watched him go from his hiding place, smiling as he went. *Good for you, Lars. He deserved every last bit of it.* He waited a few moments before he rounded the corner and pretended to rush to the doctor's quarters. *Gotta make up some excuse for being late.*

James hadn't moved from his position in the doorframe. He stood there, jaw open, eyes wide, bloody claws holding the bloody tattered overcoat. Jason ignored the pinch of hurt he felt seeing James like this and approached him warily.

"I am so sorry, my Lord," Jason apologized, rushing over to him. "Kirk called me over to help with, um, taking down the decorations, and—"

"No, no Jason, it's... it's fine." James turned away from him, entering the room. "It's... fine. Really."

Jason nodded, bowing slightly to James. *Hurts, doesn't it, bastard. You deserve it.*

James handed the overcoat tatters to the doctor. "Here. Dispose of these."

The doctor nodded. "Yes, my Lord."

He smiled half-heartedly and turned away from him. Cliff reached out to James as he passed by the table.

"James—"

Cliff's fingers weren't able to reach James' wrist. The prince yanked it far away from him, and Cliff didn't miss the wounded look in James' eyes as he went to the door, nor the way James sounded so defeated as he whispered.

"Good night, Cliff... rest well."

Cliff watched him go, his chest hurting from the fresh wound, watching James walk away like a dead man.

Jason smiled as James passed him, exiting the room. He nodded to him. "Good night, my Lord."

"Yes... good night, Jason."

When the prince was gone from the room, Cliff reached out to Jason. "Go after him. Do something. Talk to Lars, to him, anything. Please, Jason!"

Jason approached the table, shaking his head. "I don't think I can do anything, Cliff." He turned to the doctor. "I think you should give him something to calm him down for sleep, yes?"

"No!" Cliff grab his arm and pulled him down, hissing at him. "Do something Jason. You have to. They can't end like this. They love each other!"

Jason shook his head. "I can't, Cliff. I'm sorry." And as the doctor took his place at the table and gave Cliff a sedative, Jason smirked, Cliff's hand slipping away from his arm. *Nor do I want to anyway.*

**

The trek back to his personal chambers weighed on James more than the first night of his damnation as the beast. Back then, he had trashed the entire West Wing as a way to release his anger. Now he had none of that left. It was like the night his father died. He had nothing left in the world. He didn't care anymore. What was the point of being angry? His anger only hurt people. It hurt Cliff, Jason—

Lars.

James stumbled against the cold wall, resting his forehead against his fist.

All my fault.

Everyone he ever cared for. Everyone he ever loved. All wounded by his claws, his hands.

I hurt those I love.

Jason was right all along. *You're a life-sucker. You destroy everything you ever goddamn loved, you selfish, fucking bastard.*

James bit into his fist. *Jason. I'm sorry... I'm so sorry...*

Fuck your sorries, Jason snapped at him. It's too late for 'I'm sorry,' James.

And he was right. Jason was always right. He tried to apologize to Jason, tried to apologize to Lars, and it was useless. Lars was right. Jason was right.

You will never change. Spell or not.

Green eyes haunted him from behind his eyelids.

Lars...

He pushed away from the wall, finishing his long walk to his personal chambers. As much as he wanted to slam the door behind him, he didn't. James closed it gently and turned to the table where the pink rose glowed from beneath its glass cover, the magic mirror beside it. For something so beautiful, that ugly rose held nothing but his regrets, despair and hatred, all in one. And now, it was all he had left.

James walked to the table and knelt before it, his paws clasped together on the wooden surface. And he did then what he did the past few times the last hundred years. He prayed.

"Enchantress, please end this. I know I will not be changed back after tonight... nor do I deserve to. But, please... let my friends go. They don't deserve this. When the last petal falls from this rose, please, show yourself, and let them go."

You love me because you have to.

He closed his eyes and rested his forehead on his paws.

"I tried, Enchantress. I tried so hard to love him. When Lars arrived, I thought he was the one. Everyone kept convincing me he was the one, and maybe I bought into it, like Jason thought, but..."

But was all a fucking lie, huh.

"I hurt him, Enchantress. I hurt him like I did Cliff and Jason, Kirk and Rob... to everyone here who lives with me. That's why I want you to let them go. Let them go so they are free of me. I'll live an eternity here alone as long as they are free."

James sighed. He asked for this from the Enchantress almost every day for a hundred years, and she never answered. Wasn't the whole hundred years enough punishment for the others? Why couldn't they be free?

I thought you of all people would understand.

Lars appeared in his mind. Smiling. Happy. Leaning into his paw. Holding it close to his cheek. Their dinners, the dancing, the library, paintings, music, books, embracing, kissing...

I saw someone who accepted me for who I was.

All the talking. Sharing stories. Laughing. Learning about him. Letting him learn about himself. Opening up. Being himself, for the first time in a century. Feeling like someone actually *wanted* to know him. Someone that wasn't scared of him.

I wish I had never met you.

James clenched his jaw.

No Lars...

The ache in his chest intensified as more memories of the past weeks flickered by. Lars testing his patience. Feeding Lars. Eating with him. Listening to him talk. Lars petting him. Treating him like an equal. Talking to him. Touching him. Seeing his courage and his joy and—

I'll never have to see your ugly face again.

James gritted his teeth.

I love you Lars.

Tears pushed out between his shut eyes, and James had no will to stop them from wetting his fur as they moved down his cheeks. He didn't care anymore. Lars' words, the disgust behind him, the anger and the contempt all in one... it hurt worse than any wound he suffered his entire hundred years of living.

I love you. I actually love you.

James gritted his teeth hard. "Why... why did you make me learn to love, Enchantress, when it hurts so much?"

He rose his head from his paws and gazed at the rose. The pink glow made his blue eyes glisten.

"Is this why you made me learn it? So I could hurt too like you did? Because if so, you won, Enchantress. I've learned how to love. And I hate it."

James climbed to his feet and walked away from the table for his bed. He shucked off his clothes to the floor as he went.

Another petal fell to the table when he shut the doors.

Chapter 17

A somber mood fell upon the castle as news spread through the night about Lars's departure come sunrise. Kirk and Rob immediately searched for Cliff and found him being helped to his quarters by Jason. There they learned the whole story as to what happened, and before Jason and Cliff finished, Kirk and Rob dismissed themselves to their room. Cliff and Jason both winced when they passed by and heard their muffled cries from inside.

Finally in Cliff's quarters, Jason settled him onto the bed. A sense of guilt came over him, thinking about Rob and Kirk, but it had to be done. Lars was free come in the morning. Everyone would eventually get over this.

He tucked the sheets around Cliff. "Do you need anything?"

Cliff nodded, eyes staring up at the ceiling. "Yes. Water, please."

Jason walked to the bathroom and poured Cliff a glass of water. He came back and lifted it to his lips, helping him drink it. Cliff only took a few sips before he rose a hand and gently pushed Jason's wrist.

"Thank you, Jason. You can go now."

Jason nodded. "If you need anything, I'm next door."

He patted Cliff's shoulder, gave him a small smile. And as he turned to leave for the door, Cliff's hand snatched his wrist, stopping him. "Wait."

Jason turned around. The fingers held his wrist tight, and the stare Cliff gave him made him swallow hard. "Yes?"

"What did you tell Lars?"

Jason shrugged. "I didn't say much. I mainly listened to him tell me what happened." He sighed. "I had hoped James would fix things, and he didn't."

Cliff stared into Jason's eyes for a long time—and then he sighed, looked away and let go of his wrist. "Thank you for trying."

Jason patted his shoulder again. "Good night."

He turned away and held his breath until he exited Cliff's room and entered his own, slumping against his door once inside. But the weight on his chest didn't leave. It was still there, suffocating him. That guilt.

It was for everyone's good. James deserves this. Lars needed to go.

He closed his eyes and rubbed his hands over his face.

I did the right thing. I didn't lie. I did the right thing.

Slowly he pushed away from the door for his bed.

I'm not guilty, dammit. I'm right.

**

Next door, Cliff laid awake in bed, staring at the ceiling. It was over. Lars would leave, and the spell would never be broken. The prince would never be free. They would never be free. And of everything that hurt him, the worst was the fact that James was going to lose Lars tomorrow. He could see their love, just like everyone else, but they couldn't. Whatever happened between them was irreparable. There was nothing he or anyone could do.

Nothing anyone was actually willing to do.

Jason came in his purview and he growled.

I can't Cliff, Jason said. I'm sorry.

Bullshit.

Cliff closed his eyes, resting a hand over his bandaged chest. *It's not over yet. I'll think of something, dammit.* He clenched his hand into the sheets around him. *You're not going to win, Jason.*

**

Christmas morning arrived to a dead castle. No one shouted Merry Christmas. No one exchanged gifts. All the decorations were still up, but as the castle rustled awake, the servants began to take them down, one by one, and packed them away, never to be used again. Kirk ordered his staff around, wearing all black as a sign of mourning, Rob by his side in the same color, helping him along.

They stood in front of the large Christmas tree, now bare of its decorations from the night before. Kirk sighed and weaved his hand into Rob's. He leaned in and rested his cheek on Rob's shoulder.

Rob squeezed their hands. "It'll be okay."

"Is there nothing we can do?"

"You heard what Cliff and Jason said."

"But there has to be something." He raised his head, looking into Rob's eyes. "They love each other, like we do, Rob. Can't you see?"

"I know."

"Then *why* is this happening? Why is Lars leaving James? Why is he leaving us?"

"Cliff and Jason--"

"I know what they said! But don't you see? Why would Lars lash out unless he cared? Why would our Master hurt Lars that way unless he cared?" Kirk's brown eyes gleamed over. "Rob... they love each other. We all see it. And they see it too! Why are they being so damn stubborn and not forgive each other?"

Rob sighed. "Because only they can see each others love and stop this, and right now, they can't. They're both blinded by anger."

"There has to be something we can do. We can't let it end like this."

Rob saw the hurt in Kirk's eyes, the desperation to fix this. He felt the same way. But he saw Lars

that morning when he delivered him breakfast in bed. It was a look of anger and disgust. Lars made his decision. There was nothing that could be done. He'd do anything to make Kirk happy, and the Master happy, but Lars wasn't going to budge.

He leaned forward and kissed Kirk gently, lifting his free hand into black curls and weaving his fingers through them. Their foreheads pressed together as he sighed.

"I'm sorry, mi amor." He kissed him again. "I'm sorry."

Kirk let him go, only to wrap his arms tight around his shoulders. He buried his face into Rob's neck, fingers squeezing hard into Rob's clothing.

Rob returned the embrace as the sun rose higher in the sky.

**

Cliff watched them work from a distance, his chest newly bandaged by the doctor, wearing his formal clothes. He was supposed to be resting, but he had a mission to complete. He made his way down to Lars' room, knocking on the door, and paused when it creaked open.

His heart sunk to his stomach when he looked inside. The room was bare, the bed made-up, the food Rob delivered earlier eaten and resting on the foot of the bed. On one of the open doors of the closet hung Lars's gold outfit from last night. He didn't see Lars anywhere.

Oh no.

He breathed easy when he saw Lars come out of the bathroom, dressed in the clothes he came to the castle in. Lars didn't look happy to see him at first, but he quickly sobered up and managed a half-hearted smile.

"How are you feeling?"

"Decent at best, but I'm managing."

Lars nodded. "I hope you have a speedy recovery."

Cliff watched him return to the closet, pulling out a scarf, gloves and a hat and putting them on. Lars closed the closet doors and turned to Cliff, fixing his gloves.

"I'm ready."

"No bags?"

"I wasn't planning on finding or staying at a castle, remember? Besides..." His smile disappeared into a snarl. "I don't want the prince accusing me of stealing so I'd be forced to stay."

Cliff struggled for the words as Lars bypassed him, leaving the room behind. He immediately followed him out and grabbed his shoulder, turning him around. "Lars, please reconsider."

Lars shrugged off his grip. "I've made my mind."

"Whatever the prince said—whatever *Jason* said—"

"*Jason* said exactly what he needed to say. The prince only confirmed it." He gestured to Cliff's chest. "With that."

"It was an accident!"

"I don't care. I'd rather leave before he wakes up and does to me what he did to you."

"How could you say that? He'd never hurt you!"

"He already did!"

Cliff opened his mouth to protest, but the words died on his throat as he looked over Lars's shoulder and saw James standing there, peeking around the corner. The cloak was buttoned up, his arms underneath the thick material, its heavy hood over his head. Even with the shadows concealing his face, Cliff could feel the sadness radiating from the prince.

Lars followed his line of sight and turned around, frozen in place when he saw James there. His brief shock quickly turned into anger. "What do you want?"

"May I speak to you in private?"

"You're not going to change my mind."

James bowed his neck. "I know."

"Good." He turned on his heel. "Then I have nothing else to say to you."

Cliff stood in Lars's way. "Just let the prince speak, sire."

Lars glared. "Stay out of this, Cliff."

"I know it's not my place, but—"

"Cliff... it's okay." James turned away, facing the hall. "I only wished to say goodbye."

Lars snapped around, facing James. "Well, you've said it. Goodbye and good riddance."

He maneuvered around Cliff and walked down the hall. Cliff tried to grab him, but Lars was too fast, and his chest was still too fresh from the wound. He couldn't put stress to it. He could do nothing but watch him go, all of his hopes of fixing this problem disappearing as Lars did.

No. Cliff watched Lars disappear beyond the hall. *No...*

A gentle hand rested in his forearm, afraid to apply pressure. Cliff looked over his shoulder and saw James there, the shadows still covering his face.

"Cliff? Could you do something for me?"

"Of c-course, my Lord."

James retracted his paw and reached into his cloak, pulling out the magic mirror and offering it to Cliff. "Please package this correctly and hand it over to Lars. Tell him..." His voice trembled as he whispered. "It's to remember this wasn't a dream."

Cliff shook his head no. "I can't do that. You have to go talk to him. You're the only one who can."

"I tried."

"You can't just give up."

"It's out of my control."

"He has to know you love him! It can't just end this way."

Underneath the hood, Cliff saw a faint, sad smile. "It's okay." He cupped Cliff's hand in his paw, closing his fingers around the handle, careful not to hurt him. "As long as he is happy."

"But the spell--"

"Doesn't matter anymore." He squeezed his paw around Cliff's hand. "Please. Give this to Lars. It's all I wish."

Cliff's breathing labored, his chest hurting worse than the actual physical wound he sustained last night. He nodded and took the mirror, grasping the handle in James' paw. "Consider it done, my Lord."

James let his hand go. Cliff lingered for a moment before he turned away and ran down the hall to catch up with Lars before it was too late. And the prince stayed in place, watching Cliff go until he couldn't see him anymore, and then retreated back to his chambers, his head bowed.

**

Kirk and Rob stood at the entrance of the main hallway hand-in-hand, leaning against each other. All the Christmas decorations were now gone. Surrounding them were the many servants of the castle, all sharing their misery over the loss of the one they all came to care for. Some held their ground, kept their emotions at bay, but the rest gave into them, tears gleaming in their eyes or falling down their red cheeks.

Kirk and Rob stayed quiet themselves. They looked at each other briefly, sharing a look of despair, when they heard a stumbling of feet running down stairs.

Both gasped, watching Lars storm right past them for the doors.

Rob acted quicker and he let go of his hand to snatch up Lars in both arms.

Lars kicked his legs in the air, straining in Rob's hold. "Let me go! I have to get out of here!"

Rob growled. "Calm down! What happened?"

"He's going to trap me here. I have to get out!"

"Who?"

"The damn prince! I can't be here any longer or—"

"Or what?" Kirk stomped up to Lars in Rob's arms. "You already hurt him *and* all of us!"

Lars's jaw dropped. He stopped struggling. "*Me?* He's the one who hurt Cliff! He doesn't care about anyone—"

"And if you believe that then you *never* knew *our* prince to begin with." Kirk ignored Rob's glare over Lars's shoulder and turned away from him. "Go then. We were better off without you."

"*Stop!*"

Everyone in the room froze at the shrill sound of Cliff's yell. Kirk stood in place as Cliff approached, stammering for words. "Cliff... he was—"

"Doing something stupid, just like you." He passed by Kirk for Rob, who released Lars from his hold.

Lars held his ground, his face ashen white. "What?"

"Don't say anything until I finish." Cliff reached into his jacket. "The prince wanted you to have this." Out came the mirror, and he grabbed Lars's hand in his, shoving the handle into Lars's palm.

Lars closed his hand around it. He snarled. "I don't want it."

"Let me finish." Cliff's growl stunned Lars into silence, like everyone else. "He's not going to throw you into the tower for having this, nor is he going to hurt you. And what happened to me was an accident and shouldn't constitute as the reason for you to leave here. You haven't even talked to him and given him a chance to explain himself."

"He did that last night—"

"And I'm sure you didn't let him finish, since you keep cutting me off."

"He wounded you, threw *me* to the ground!"

"He's hot tempered!" Kirk came forward, Rob by his side. "You know this already! But he apologized time and time again."

"He never meant it," Rob said.

Lars shook his head no. "You're wrong. Jason said--"

"Look at what you have in your hand, Lars," Cliff snapped, squeezing his fingers around Lars's wrist. "He wanted to give this to you personally before you rudely left him. He wanted me to tell you it's yours to have, to remember that this wasn't a dream."

"You're lying." Lars hissed through his teeth as Cliff held on harder, and he pushed up into Cliff's face. "Let me go now!"

"No. You're going to talk to him."

"I refuse!"

Kirk came closer. "He loves you!"

"*I don't!*"

With all of his strength, Lars jerked his hand out of Cliff's hold, stumbling away, his back hitting the doors.

Cliff, Rob and Kirk gawked at him as the rest of the servants did.

Lars panted for breath, a snarl on his lips. He brandished the mirror to them like a weapon. "I know if I take that mirror, you'll tell him about it, and he'll have a reason to keep me a prisoner here, all so he can use me and break the spell. And I'm not going to let you do that." He threw the mirror forward. It hit Cliff's feet. "I'm not going to let you keep me here with that *monster*."

Kirk wavered where he stood. Rob's usual impervious face showed a crack of hurt. Cliff jerked in his spot.

"You actually think I would do that?" Cliff whispered. "That we would do that to you?"

Lars glared. "You've all been his servants for a hundred years, and you all had the ability to kill yourselves if you wanted." He turned away and pushed open the doors. "That's evidence enough."

They stood there as Lars walked through the doors and closed them with a loud bang.

No one reacted. For a long moment, they all stared at where Lars once was, in total silence.

And then Kirk fell to his knees and buried his face in his hands. He made no sound.

Rob knelt down beside Kirk and helped him to his feet. With strong arms around his shoulders, he took Kirk away, rubbing his shoulders as they headed to their chambers.

Little by little, in small packs, the servants left the main hall, returning to their personal quarters in the various wings. Only Cliff remained behind, staring at the door, the Master's mirror left discarded on the floor.

Footsteps clicked towards him, echoing in the silent hall. They stopped behind him. He could feel the presence there. But Cliff didn't flinch, didn't move. From the corner of his vision, he saw familiar shoes and the green clothes that only belonged to one servant of the castle.

He lifted his head. "Are you happy now, Jason? He's gone and never coming back."

"It was for his own good."

"Of course it was." He pivoted on his heel, turned around and faced Jason behind him. "Good for all of us, right? Since he never truly loved the Master. Just like you warned us."

"*You're* the one who told me to do something."

"Yes. I did." Cliff elbowed his way past him. "And I'll regret it for the rest of my life."

**

Jason stared ahead emotionless as Cliff left him, the footsteps resonating too loudly. They retreated in volume until he was alone in the great hall. He stared at the discarded mirror.

Images played back in his mind of what happened only seconds, a minute ago. Kirk's pleas. Rob's echoing sentiments. Cliff's anger. Lars's anger, outweighing Cliff's, as he threw the mirror to the ground. Anger fueled by distrust and hurt. The same rage he himself felt once before... and still did now.

A rage tainted with heavy guilt.

He shook his head.

I'm not guilty. What for? I did what I had to do to save Lars. He had to leave, for his sake. He wasn't the one to save the prince anyway. James doesn't love him—he doesn't love anyone at all! He doesn't know what it means to love. He couldn't love me, so he can't love anyone.

Jason gasped.

Cliff's question echoed in his head. *What did you tell him?*

*I did what I had to. James deserves this. I am not guilty for anything! I saved Lars! I spared him!
HE WAS HURT LIKE I WAS!*

Liar. You know the truth. You know what you did!

Jason's hands flew to his head. *I did nothing! I had to get him to leave! Lars had to go!*

SO YOU COULD HAVE JAMES TO YOURSELF.

"No!"

Jason raced forward and picked up the mirror. He pushed open the doors and chased after Lars. It didn't matter that he wasn't fully covered for the winter weather. He wasn't going to let Cliff win.

I'm not jealous. I'm not guilty.

He ran as fast as he could, kicking up snow in his wake, his breath puffs of fog. Very light snow started to fall.

I'm not jealous, Cliff. I hate James. I despise him.

His arms and legs protested as he came close to the castle gates, but he pushed through the pain. His panic quickly grew though when he saw Lars wasn't ahead of him. He was nowhere in sight.

How could he have gotten to the castle gates that quickly? Does that mean I have to use the ring
—

Jason growled, tripped a little in the snow, but pushed forward. *No, I'm not going to waste the damn ring on him. That is my freedom, not his.*

The castle walls came closer in the horizon, the golden gates open. His heart sunk into his stomach. Lars was gone—

A shadowed form was in the distance, near the big, two gates.

"Lars!"

The form stopped abruptly, a hand on one of the golden bars. All of his tension and anxiety disappeared when he saw Lars turn around. "Jason?"

He stumbled in front of Lars, panting for air. His whole body shook from the cold, his face numb and red. He tried to speak, but he still hadn't caught his breath yet.

Lars let go of the gate and came towards him. He looked over Jason, rested a gloved hand on his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Jason, still panting, shoved the mirror right into his chest. "Take it."

Lars jerked away from him and the mirror. "What? No!"

"You have to."

"I'm not taking anything of his with me."

Jason growled and lunged forward with all of his strength, grabbing Lars's bicep and holding him in place. Before Lars could say anything or protest, he shoved the mirror into Lars' jacket and pushed him towards the gates.

"Now you can go!"

Lars stumbled backwards, but his hands grabbed the gates. He teetered towards the edge of the castle walls and he sneered at Jason, pushing himself forward and coming up into Jason's face.

"You're not keeping me here." His hands reached into the jacket for the mirror.

Jason grabbed his wrists, stopping him. "I don't want you here anymore than you do. And I know you want nothing of his."

"Then take it back and let me go!"

"Look. I hate him like you do. He's a monster, but the fact of the matter is this." His stomach twisted into knots as he spoke. "He *did* save you. He *did* house you here. And, for a little while..." He sighed, his tense shoulders relaxing. "He *did* care for you. We all did."

Lars relaxed as well, not struggling to get away anymore. "Then why did he hurt me?"

"I told you. I know how he is. He hurt you like he hurt me. It's the only way he knows how to love." He let go of Lars's wrists. "And that's why you have to go. So you can be free."

"Like you can't."

Jason gasped. *Shit.* He bowed his neck, eyes drifting to the snow. *He doesn't know. Shit, no one knows. I can leave too—*

And then Lars wrapped his arms around him, bringing Jason into a tight hug.

Jason gaped down at the top of Lars's head. His arms froze by his side. Against his chest, Lars whispered to him.

"I know you didn't like me when we first met, and I'm glad I now know why. I think I became the closest to you in the end." He leaned back, grasping his hands around Jason's biceps and smiled up at him. "So, I will take the mirror, but not for James. It'll be something to remind me of you and the others, and all the good times I had here, before he ruined them. Okay?"

Jason's face was aflame, his throat as tight as his lungs. *He thinks I'm his closest friend?* "Uh." *Shit.* "Okay." He stepped out of the embrace, his shaky hands coming to Lars' shoulders and pushing him towards the gates. "You, um, better get going. The snow could get worse and there won't be a stupid monster to save you again."

Lars chuckled. "I know." He turned towards the gates and waved over his shoulder. "Goodbye Jason."

"Goodbye Lars."

Jason held his breath, watching Lars approach the gates again. The metal doors creaked open as Lars pushed the wide enough for him to pass through. Lars stepped forward—

And then stopped in the middle of the gates.

"Jason?"

Jason frowned. "...Yes?"

"Take care of James."

His jaw dropped. "W... What?"

"I know you hate him, like I do. I know you can't escape him like I can. And I know you won't kill yourself over him. You know he's not worth it."

Lars turned around. There was a soft smile on his face. He looked remorseful, sympathetic—someone who understood how Jason felt completely, but seemed to know something Jason didn't.

"But he needs someone there, now the spell won't be broken. And it should be you." His smile graduated into a sad grin. "Because I know you still care for him."

What? Jason shook his head no. *I can't.* "I can't do that." *I'm leaving too.*

Lars turned fully around to Jason. "I don't expect you to immediately. But you are both immortal, and while I know you won't kill yourself over him, I don't know about the others. Now that the spell can't be broken and he's stuck being a beast, who knows what he'll do to everyone." Jason saw himself when he watched heavy guilt come over Lars's face. "After what I said to him, and knowing what he's capable of doing, I don't want anyone to die... by his hands or by their own, all because I couldn't break the spell. I can't have that on my conscience."

Jason shivered all over from Lars's words. "But--"

"He *needs* someone there, Jason, and I need to know that someone is there to keep him in check, and who better than you? The one who hurt him most... and knows him best?"

"Lars—"

"Lie to me for now. I know it'll be truth later."

More snow started to fall. Jason blinked a few times, trying to remove the flakes from his vision, but they wouldn't go away—just like the guilt. Now there was a heavy sadness there, tripling his emotions, tripling the weight he felt.

Damn you Lars. I'm not supposed to feel guilty or sad at all.

"I promise."

Lars's green eyes brimmed with tears. "Thank you Jason." He turned around, took a deep breath and stepped out. "Goodbye..."

"Bye..."

In a second, Lars disappeared beyond the gates.

The wind picked up. More snow fell.

Jason shut his eyes.

I'm sorry.

**

High above in the West Wing, watching Jason from the balcony of his personal chambers, stood the prince, the cloak of his hood up, protecting him from the cold, his eyes red-rimmed, tears wetting the fur of his cheeks.

"Mein schatz..."

James bowed his head back and roared his pain.

**

Inside the castle, everyone winced at the sound of their prince's anguish. Rob and Kirk clung to each other on their bed. Cliff pressed his forehead to the cold window, listening to them cry.

**

Outside, Jason closed the gates, staring beyond them, where Lars had left—where he too would be soon. He bowed his neck and walked back to the castle.

**

Beyond the castle walls and the realm he could no longer return to, Lars stopped and looked back, having sworn he heard something. But he mistook the roar he heard for the wind.

His hands rested over the mirror inside his jacket. The wind picked up more, whipping his long hair behind him.

Two hot tears streaked down his cold cheeks.

"Goodbye, min skat."

Lars turned away, heading back home.

Chapter 18

Jason came back to an empty, dead castle. His footsteps echoed too loud in the Great Hall, his body warming up from the cold, but the emptiness of his home for the last hundred years upset him greatly. No one seemed to be around as he moved through the wings. Everyone seemed to be in seclusion, in mourning, and Jason couldn't blame them. It was over. The spell would never be broken. The prince would never have true love. No reason to live anymore.

Take care of James.

He startled. *The promise.*

Lars's plea. *He needs someone there, now that the spell won't be broken.*

Jason turned and looked at the entrance behind him for the West Wing.

I don't want anyone to die, by his hands or by their own...

He heard nothing. The prince was as quiet as the rest of the dead castle.

Lie to me for now. I know it'll be truth later.

Jason snarled and headed for his personal quarters.

The irony pushed conflicting emotions in him: humor and hurt. How little Lars knew what he planned on doing, that the promise he made to him was a total lie. But how much it hurt that Lars asked *him* for that help, to keep that promise.

But to take care of James? No. I would never do that. I hate him. He knew that!

Lars's smile came in his purview. A small, knowing, sad smile. *I know you still care for him.*

He snorted. *I don't care about him anymore. I don't love him anymore.*

Jason pushed open the door to his personal chamber and slammed it behind him. His back landed against the wood. He slumped down, hands on his knees, falling to his ass.

Liar.

He chuckled. That voice sounded like Cliff in his head.

His face fell. *Cliff...*

Lars asked him to take care of the others, didn't want them to die. All the servants, he didn't care about anymore. But Cliff, Kirk and Rob... his brothers, whom he grew up with, spent the last hundred years with? Would they actually die by the prince's hands? Or would they die if the prince killed himself? He didn't know what sickened him more. The fact that James would kill them, or that they so loved the prince that if James killed himself, they'd die along with him.

A mass suicide.

Jason shook his head, slapping his palm to his forehead. He rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Stop thinking like that Newsted. They wouldn't do that. They'd never do that. They had a hundred years to do that--we all had the years to do it, and we didn't."

Any chance, they could've died. Any chance, any moment, they could've ended their lives.

The image of Lars' anger and spite, all thrown at Cliff and the others, as he hid in the darkness, away from everyone's eyes. *That's evidence enough.*

Evidence of their loyalty to the prince. Evidence that they loved him.

Jason sighed.

Evidence that I loved him.

He slipped the hand down his face, tilted his head back and stared blankly at the ceiling. His arms hung loosely between his thighs.

Then why do I feel so guilty?

Jason searched for the answer above, as if it would magically come down from the heavens. He didn't put the idea past him. The kingdom was enchanted and he lived for this long...

Nothing came.

He sighed and bowed his neck. He had no reason to feel guilty. Lars was free. He would be too. Yes, he made Lars an empty promise... but it had to be done. He had to save Lars. Now he had to save himself.

Jason reached into his pocket and dug out the ring. He held it in his palm, the light from his window shining off it.

And then the images came.

Images of Kirk. Prattling on about the different designs, decor and fashion. Showing him how to act around the prince, how to get on James's good side. His confidant when he and James were together. His consoler when James threw him to the side.

Images of Rob. All the gourmet food, and his selfless, calm demeanor. Teaching him how to cook, what foods the prince liked, gardening together. The most temperate, the yin to his yang always. Always put things in perspective. Always calming him when no one else could.

Images of Cliff. The first day they met, over a hundred years ago. Cliff showing him around. Introducing him to the prince. Helping him out, giving him advice. Someone he admired. Someone he trusted. Irreplaceable, a paragon of strength, commanding and controlling but never pushy or demanding. A born leader.

Jason's vision blurred.

Kirk's tears. Rob holding him. Cliff's words. *Are you happy now, Jason?*

And then Lars— *I think I became closest to you in the end.*

Jason shut his eyes.

My friends.

He closed his fingers around the ring and stood up.

Fuck James. This is for them.

**

Jason left to Cliff's chambers. When he found no one there, he went to Robert's. And when no one was there, he came to Kirk's room, smiling when he heard soft voices from inside.

He knocked on the door. "Hello?"

The voices all stopped. "What do you want?" Cliff said from within.

"Can I come in?"

"No—"

"Go ahead," Kirk interrupted.

He swung the door open. On the bed, Rob and Kirk sat cuddled up. Both their faces were wet. Far away from them, standing by the cold window was Cliff, his eyes red-rimmed but his cheeks dry.

Cliff crossed his arms. "What do you want?"

Jason closed the door behind him. "I gave Lars the mirror."

"So? That doesn't change the fact he left."

"At least I gave him the mirror." He came up to Cliff. "I gave to him what James wanted."

"No you didn't. You let him go."

"I couldn't stop that. He left on his own accord."

"Bullshit. You said something."

Jason growled. "You told me to!"

"Don't argue, please." Kirk wiped his wet cheeks with Rob's handkerchief. "Now isn't the time. The prince needs us to be there for him."

Rob nodded, squeezed his arm around Kirk's shoulders. "He's right. We need to be a family again."

Cliff glared at Kirk. "What family?" He gestured to Jason. "*He* ruined it."

"I didn't ruin anything." Jason closed the distance between them. "Lars leaving wasn't my fault."

"You instigated it."

"*You're* the one who told me to talk to him—"

"But not drive him away!"

"Fine. You want him back?" He smiled. "Then we'll go to him."

Cliff frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Jason unfurled his palm and showed off the gold ring. Kirk and Rob left the bed and came to his side to look at it as well.

Kirk's eyebrows knitted together. "I've seen that before."

"It's the Master's ring."

Rob and Kirk lifted their heads almost simultaneously. "Did you take it from him?" Rob asked.

"He gave it to me."

"What for?" Cliff said.

He looked in each of their eyes-- Kirk first, then Rob, and then Cliff -- and looked right at Cliff as he whispered.

"To leave the castle."

Cliff gasped, as did the others.

"But... we can't leave the castle," Rob said. "The Enchantress forbade any of us from leaving."

"Too many people from leaving, that is." He looked at each one of them as he spoke. "The Enchantress told James that anyone of us could use it. All I have to do is put it on my ringfinger, twist it around three times, and we're out of the castle walls for good." He smiled at them. "And that's what we can do. All four of us. I'll wear it, you hold onto some part of me, and we'll be free. The spell won't affect us anymore. We can actually go and *live*."

Kirk lifted his head up and whispered, "What about the prince? And the others?"

Jason shook his head no. "The prince cannot use the ring, and it can't handle so many people. The Enchantress never said how many people one person can take. The four of us alone should be fine. Anymore and I don't know if it would work. Besides. I just want it to be us four alone. We all want to go see Lars again, right? It should just be us."

They were silent, all staring at him. Jason waited for the yes, waited for the 'okay, let's go,' and they'd be on their way out of there, finally free.

And then Kirk shook his head no.

"I don't want to do that to them," Kirk said, stepping away from the circle.

Rob weaved their hands together, stepping back with him. "I'm with Kirk."

"*What?*"

"They're my staff. His staff. And we're not leaving them."

"But..." He closed his hand around the ring. "Fine. Then that leaves Cliff and me—"

"I'm not going either."

Jason turned to his side. Cliff glared at him, and to his horror, stepped away from him, as Kirk and Rob did.

No. Not Cliff.

He turned to his side.

"You heard what I said." Cliff stood beside Kirk and Rob. "I still have a purpose here." He turned to Kirk and Rob and smiled. "To protect and advise the prince as he needs."

"What the fuck does he need that for? He's worthless like the rest of us. Come with me and you'll have freedom. You can live!"

"*You* can live," Cliff snapped. "We'll stay."

"As what? Living statues?"

Rob nodded. "So be it."

"You're actually throwing your lives away for a ruthless bastard! A monster with no heart or soul!"

Kirk snarled at him. "If you truly believe that, then you never knew him in the first place."

"Are you kidding me?" His whole body shook. "He ruined our lives! Everyone's lives! He's an asshole—"

Cliff stomped up to him. "That you hate because he never loved you back."

Jason recoiled back, hitting the window behind him.

Cliff loomed over him, face to face. "Stop living in denial, you jealous bastard. You loved him the most out of the four of us. But he never loved you like you wanted."

Jason hissed. "Twenty-five years, Cliff. He strung me along for twenty-five fucking years."

"He did that to *all of us*. You were nothing special."

Cliff stepped away from him. Jason noticed Kirk and Rob gaping behind Cliff.

"He gave us each twenty-five years, Jason," Cliff continued. "He thought that was enough to fall in love, but he never did... until Lars."

Something snapped inside him, and he didn't sound like himself when he shouted and shoved himself into Cliff's face.

"THEN WHAT MADE HIM SPECIAL, HUH? WHAT THE FUCK DID HE HAVE? IT OBVIOUSLY WASN'T ENOUGH TO BREAK THE SPELL!"

Cliff shoved him back. His head bounced off the window, but he didn't lose his sights of Cliff.

"He had a heart," Cliff said. "Something you don't possess. He looked past James's transgressions and appearance to find the prince inside, because he truly loved him. But you poisoned his mind, Jason. You spoon-fed Lars your anger until he had no choice to believe you. The logic was so sound, after all. Your logic is always sound. How could he refuse reason?" Cliff's face soured. "You're as ruthless and stubborn as the prince. You'll both go for your goals and delude yourself into them, no matter the cost. That's why it never worked between you two. You know what I saw, when you two were together?"

"*What?*"

Cliff tilted his chin up. "Infatuation. And infatuation does not equal love. You were obsessed about the prince. *Unhealthily* obsessed. You still are. Because you're jealous he found love in someone that wasn't you. And you won't admit it, even now."

Cliff stepped backwards until he stood next to Kirk and Rob again. Jason felt worlds grow between them within the confines of the tiny room.

"So go, Jason. Go have your freedom." Cliff closed his eyes and turned his back to him. "Out of all of us, you need it the most."

Jason stared at Cliff's back, his breathing erratic.

Rob turned his back to him next. He showed no remorse.

Kirk was the last to turn his back, the pity there in his wet brown eyes.

Their backs were to him. United together, against him. In solidarity for the prince. Giving up their freedom, for the prince.

Jason wiped the back of his hand over his wet face. He stepped away from the window and walked to the door. Over his shoulder, standing in the doorway, he gave them one last parting look. None of them looked his way. Their eyes were closed, their arms crossed. The lines were drawn. Us versus Him.

Fools.

"Fine then. Rot here in hell."

His door slammed resonated in the empty hallways, like the click of his heels on the floor as Jason walked away from his former friends and his former life, heading for the new one.

**

It was quiet again. Ungodly quiet.

The snow gathered around James and piled up on his large shoulders, sticking to his cloak, as he stood on the balcony like a statue, staring out into the distance where Lars disappeared. Where Lars left him.

Mein schatz—

DON'T CALL ME THAT.

James winced and shut his eyes.

He turned away, back into his chambers. Every step he took echoed. It was too quiet. Much too quiet in his home—his prison. He and the others were now damned here forever.

All my fault.

James stared at his reflection in the vase. The glowing rose shined pink on his face.

You will never change. Spell or not.

He swallowed against the lump in his throat and tore his attention away to the floor.

It was over. Lars never loved him, and now he was gone. They would never have freedom. He'd never be normal again. Damned to be a beast forever. Damned to his kingdom. Never to live.

Never to love.

Goodbye and good riddance.

He pressed the heels of his paws to his shut eyes.

I'll never have to see your ugly face again.

A heavy sigh escaped his lips.

"Lars..."

He pressed hard on his eyes. Colors danced behind his lids.

Why does it hurt?

James took a deep breath and lifted his head. His eyes fluttered open, red-rimmed and wet, as he ran his paws over his head, pushing the cloak back.

His paws turned into tight, shaking fists by his sides.

Why did I fall in love you?

Blue eyes glared at the glowing pink rose.

Why did I even try?

He walked out of his chambers with his head high and his jaw set. The spell was never going to be broken, but that didn't mean he was going to let Lars or the Enchantress win. He had to regain control of his kingdom. All of his subjects, his loyal friends—Rob and Kirk and Cliff—he had to set things straight and figured out what to do now that Lars was gone. Maybe Jason could save some of them with the ring he gave and get them out of here. Hopefully the ring could take a lot of people with him. Maybe if he beseeched the Enchantress once the new year began. Maybe she could free those left behind. That way no one had to go the only route he saw them take, in order to be free. He couldn't handle having more blood on his hands—the blood of his loved ones. She should be merciful, right? Punish him, not them. They didn't deserve it. They never deserved it.

Lars never deserved me.

James snarled as he stomped down the hallways. The walls rattled, small stones falling to the ground.

I hate you.

The gardens. The dinners.

Why did I bother saving you?

His private room. His paintings. His music.

Why'd I let you hurt me?

He rounded the corner. Lars's room came closer in the distance. The room he gave him. The room he was painting for him.

You will never change.

Goodbye and good riddance.

I'll never have to see your ugly face again.

James slammed the door to Lars's former room wide open and roared.

**

Down the hall, Jason stopped rounding the corner. His eyes went wide, his anger dissipated for the time being.

James?

He eyed down the hall and saw the door to Lars's former room kicked off its hinges, fallen onto its side, cracks in the wooden frame. He heard the loud tear of furniture, the ripping of clothing, the utter destruction.

Leave him alone. Don't go in there.

Jason's hand squeezed around the ring.

Cliff's words still rung in his mind. *Go Jason. Go have your freedom.*

From where he stood at the corner of the hall, he could look into the room without coming close for a better look. Feathers flung in the air with the torn mattress and pillows. The canopy collapsed. James must've sliced with his claws, or kicked it down with his feet, or both.

And then the carnage stopped.

Jason frowned.

No more roars and snarls of an angered beast. No more walls torn or furniture destroyed or items crushed or anything. Just silence. Uncomfortable silence.

Is he okay?

He shook his head. *No, don't like that. It's James. He can't have hurt himself. There was nothing in the room that could hurt him anyway. He peered into the room. Just go, Jason. You're hated here. And you hate him. Leave now.*

The room was still so silent.

The halls were so damn silent.

He could hear his breathing, hear his heartbeat in his ears.

Forget him. He never loved you. He can never love anyone.

Jason unfurled his hand holding the ring. The light shined on its gold smooth surface.

Put it on. Use it. Get out of here. Be free.

He took it between his thumb and forefinger.

Let him go.

He slipped it on the right ringfinger.

The fingers of his left hand pressed on it.

Slowly, he twisted it to the right.

Goodbye James—

A kneading cry bellowed from the room.

Jason startled in place and gasped.

His feet ran forward before his mind could catch up with what he was doing. A hundred years dictated him in his panic and shock to be there for the prince, outweighing the hate and anger momentarily.

He didn't get to damn his instincts as he stood at the broken doorframe.

His blue eyes widened and his jaw dropped.

The room was a disaster. Every piece of furniture was destroyed. The bed, now pieces of debris, useless, like the couch, the doors to the library, the closet. Wood hung from the walls in tatters. But Jason focused on only one thing.

Kneeling on the floor, at the foot of the broken closet, was the prince.

In his bloodied paws, he held tight to his chest Lars' gold outfit.

And he was crying.

James was... crying.

Jason couldn't see his face. James had buried it deep into the gold outfit. Blood stained the chiffon as he ran his paws over it carefully, mindful of his claws, even now, so they didn't pierce the fabric. He rubbed his furred cheek against the collar as he sobbed, rocking back and forth on his knees.

He hadn't seen James cry in so long. The last time James cried was when the king died, and James was forced to the throne at too young, not ready. He held James in his arms that night—and now James knelt on the floor as if in mourning.

He rested a hand on the wall outside for balance. *I have to get out of here. I have to*—but the questions wouldn't stop coming. How could he cry over someone who didn't love him? How could he give a damn? Lars just left him. He was never coming back. He hurt them all—

Just like you wanted.

Jason violently shook his head at the sound of Cliff's voice.

You're wrong, Cliff. I never wanted this. His right hand trembled. *I didn't... I wasn't...*

James pulled his face away from the fabric. He ran the back of his paw over the collar.

Jason's tears fell as the prince bowed his neck and buried his face in the outfit again with both bloody hands.

I'm not...

James muffled sobs begged two words, over and over.

"Come back... come back..."

Jason closed his eyes and twisted away from the scene.

He could barely walk away down the hall. He didn't know where he was going.

He needs someone there, Jason.

Jason stumbled in his steps. Lars's voice. Lars's promise.

I need to know that someone is there to keep him in check.

From down the hall he could still hear James' cries.

From behind his shut eyes, he could still see Lars's sad smile.

Who better than you? The one he hurt most... and knows him best?

Jason slammed against the wall, unable to walk any further. He ran his left hand over his face. The cool surface of the ring skipped over his hot skin.

Lie to me for now. I know it'll be truth later.

He pulled his right hand back from his face and stared at ring.

He needs someone there.

Eighteen year old James, crying in his arms, huddled against his chest. Crying for his father. Crying for a responsibility he wasn't ready for. Crying for the loss of his loved ones, the loss of his childhood. Crying for help. Crying for Lars.

The light from the window glinted off the ring.

He needs someone there.

James's great sobs echoed in the silent hall.

Jason clenched his left hand into a tight ball. His knuckles turned white.

Who better than you?

He slumped to his knees and pressed the heel of his right hand between his eyes.

The one he hurt most...

More tears fell.

And knows him best?

His sob matched James's next one. But it wasn't as powerful, or heart-wrenching. It was a different kind of sob. One against his will. One he didn't want to acknowledge. But he had no choice.

He banged his head against the stone wall. The ring burned his skin.

James's cries. Lars's sad, knowing smile.

I love him.

Jason slipped his left hand over his mouth and sobbed into it.

I still fucking love him.

He bowed over himself, muffling his cries, so he could hear James's.

And he loves Lars.

James on his knees, weeping into Lars's outfit. Crying for him to come back. Begging for him to come back. The way he held it, cradled the fabric. As if Lars was there. As if Lars hadn't left. Hadn't disappeared beyond the castle walls—

He loves him. Jason bit into his palm. *Like I love him.*

Cliff appeared in his mind, angry, knowing, accusing him.

Jason cried as the guilt he felt finally came out.

It's my fault. His forehead rested on his knees. *It's my fault.*

Chapter 19

Miles away, outside of the castle walls, the snow fell hard, the large trees swaying from the howling wind. Lars's legs burned from walking so far, but he had to get home before nightfall. Else the snow would worsen and he'd be stuck, left to die. There would be no beast to save him this time. No magical kingdom to house him. He was truly alone, and the reality of his situation, the fact that he was never going to see any of them again, started to settle the further he walked away.

As much as his mind told him he was making the right decision, some small piece of his heart yelled at him to turn back. But could never go back. There was no reason to. James never loved him. He only hurt him. Jason was right.

The image of James's sad blue eyes came to mind.

Lars stumbled in his walk.

Mein schatz...

He snarled and pushed forward. *No. I hate you.*

**

Back in the town, Junior walked towards Lars's old house chattering from head to toe. He held in his shaky hands a large cup of cocoa and a bag of warm soup.

"Fuck. I don't get paid enough for this." He made it inside and unraveled his scarf, shaking off the snow. And stopped. "Hey... I don't get paid at *all*." He blinked. His scarf and gloves dropped to the ground. "Man, I don't even get free food like Chris does Fucking Mustaine. What does he think I am? Some loser?" He flopped down onto the chair, digging his soup out of the bag. "I deserve a little respect here. I mean, I've spent goddamn days here, waiting for that stupid kid he keeps fawning over, who has no interest in him whatsoever, while Shawn and Chris are doing nothing but watch over that stupid old man."

He opened up the canister to the soup. Clam Chowder. Dave's favorite.

"Bastard."

He dug his spoon inside, ate a few bites, growling.

"Seriously, what does he see in that kid? That's all Lars is, a stupid kid to a stupid washed-up father. I don't get it! I've been, what, his *best friend* for ten years or so, and what am I stuck doing?" His spoon streaked lines of clam chowder on the floor as he gestured to the room. "Waiting for Lars in this place! I have a better house than this! *Ugh*."

Junior suddenly changed his mind, his appetite leaving him. He placed the bowl of chowder next to his cocoa cup and walked to the kitchen, digging under the sink for the only alcohol in the house, a bottle of red wine.

He read the label to the bottle and sighed. "See? It's not even good red wine. Disgusting." He pulled out the cork and came back to his seat. "Oh well. Take what you can get, Ellefson."

The wine, as he figured, tasted like shit. He flopped back down onto the chair, sighing. "Shit." He took another swig, red wine spilling over his lips. "Goddamn motherfucking stupid red-haired

Irish bastard." Another swig. "How long have I been there by his side, waiting for him to finally notice me? Too goddamn fucking long." He shook his head, drank more. "There's nothing else I can do but grab a fucking blinking neon sign saying OVER HERE JACKASS." He drank more. Wiped the back of his hand over his lips. "He'd still miss it." Burped. "Idiot."

Ten years. Ten damn years waiting for a sign. For Dave to look at him the way he wished, the way Dave looked at Lars. Hell, he even took the nickname of Junior, because he wanted to be Dave's. Because Dave named in that. He waited forever on the damn sidelines, growing up with Dave, watching him turn from a scrawny boy into a handsome, brave man. Sure he got a little cocky, and sure he was a bit of a dick after he saved those kids from that wolf, but dammit, to Junior, that was *his* cocky dickhead, *his* son of a bitch, *his* asshole. Lars didn't deserve his attention. Didn't deserve anything of Dave's.

One day Dave would see him that way. He was so sure of it then. He just knew that one day, Dave would see him in a different light. But as he saw Dave pursue Lars, to no avail, constantly being rejected, constantly pushed away, and Dave never letting up, becoming consumed by his desire for Lars, his obsession to win Lars... he knew then Dave would never give him that kind of attention.

Dave wanted Lars. Hell, Dave wanted Chris. Junior could see it. Always wanting everyone else—never him. Never first. Never the one. Never chosen. Never will.

Junior's hand shook around the bottle's neck. "Fuck you, Dave."

He dropped the bottle of wine, let the liquid spill to the floor. "Fuck this. Fuck him!"

Junior grabbed his coat, put it on, slipped his gloves over his hands. His hands shook as he grabbed his scarf. "To hell with *you*, Dave Mustaine! I'm not waiting any--"

And then the door knob rattled.

Junior jumped in place and stared at the door.

The door knob turned. Pushed open.

"Dad?"

Junior gasped. "Oh *shit*."

He scrambled out of the living room, right for the back door, and dove out of the house just in time, closing and locking the door behind him, before Lars saw him there.

His heart pounded against his chest as he leaned against the back door. Lars would know someone was there. The food, the cocoa, the bottle of wine... maybe he'd think the old man had been there.

"Shit I fucked up."

He sighed, bowed his head in his hands. God, Dave would be so disappointed in him. He'd never hear the end of it. *What the hell were you doing in that house Junior, jerking off? You could've totally fucked things up!* And then Dave would go and talk to Shawn and Chris, praise Chris about this and that, touch Chris' shoulder, tell Chris to go and clean up Junior's stupid mess, bring Lars over there to his house...

Junior lifted his head from his hands.

He stared out down the road. He knew how far Dave's house was from Lars's. Dave's was more inside the town, a nice place.

All those things he said only a split second earlier. All the resentments. The anger.

He smiled.

"Fuck you Dave. I'm not yours to push around anymore."

**

Lars startled when he heard something fall. He wasn't certain. The wind blew harder and Lars shivered. He came into the house, closing the door behind him.

"Dad? Are you here?"

He walked into the living room. There he found a steaming cup of clam chowder and some cocoa. He smiled, picking up the cocoa, taking a few sips to warm himself up from the cold. The food was all warm and fresh. His father must still been here, or he possibly left early to go into town—

His boots clinked on glass.

Down on the floor was a spilled bottle of red wine.

Lars frowned. He placed the cup of cocoa back and reached down to pick up the bottle by its neck.

Some of the wine had spilled on the floor, staining the carpet. But this made no sense. Why would he have wine when he was drinking cocoa and eating soup?

He ran through the reasons in his head. Maybe his father had someone come over to keep him company, a friend from Copenhagen. But no, that wasn't right. His father had lost all contact with his friends after Lone died. Maybe he had a friend from the village... but who? Who was the only friend they had?

Lars smiled. "Mr. Richter."

It still felt like something was wrong. His father wasn't the type to leave a bottle out in the open for so long, or allow a spill like that to stay on the carpet. He'd have cleaned it immediately. Lars came to only one conclusion. The wine was a fresh spill.

He put the empty bottle in the sink and bundled himself up again, heading right into town.

**

As usual around the afternoon, the town square was busy. Lars elbowed his way through crowds of people to get to his first stop, Mr. Richter's bookshop. The bell hanging over the door rang as he opened it, and he smiled wide as he saw Mr. Richter standing in front of a bookshelf, humming a tune.

"Mr. Richter!"

His old friend turned around with a smile—that quickly fell into shock. "Lars!" He dropped the book. "I thought you had disappeared on us!"

Lars chuckled. "I had for a little bit, but I'm back now."

"Well that's good to hear! I'm glad." Mr. Richter met him halfway and greet him with a big hug. "I missed my favorite bookworm. Just hasn't been the same."

Lars grinned. "I missed you too, Mr. Richter." He pulled out of the embrace. "But, my father. Have you seen him? He wasn't at the house."

"Well, no, I haven't really." He broke out into a wide grin. "Not since he came a week or so ago and told all of us this crazy story that you had been taken by a *beast!* I mean, of all stories, right?"

Lars recoiled a few steps backwards.

He was laughing. His father had told the truth-- and Mr. Richter didn't believe it.

Mr. Richter slowly calmed down from his laughter. "Heh, you know, I understand" -- he chuckled some more -- "I understand if you had to, heh, do something private, but what a sad excuse he made! And he made it seem like it was urgent too!" He shook his head. "A monster in an enchanted castle. Someone should write a story to that one!"

Lars managed a weak smile. "Yeah. Heh. They should." He quickly pivoted on his heel, turning away.

Mr. Richter sobered up. "Lars?"

"I have to find my father, Mr. Richter." He waved over his shoulder. "See you later."

The door rattled when he slammed it behind him. The ring of the bell echoed as he ran through the snow, away from the bookshop. Away from Mr. Richter's laughter over his father's incredulous story.

A monster in an enchanted castle. I mean, of all stories, right?

An enchanted castle. Neuschwanstein Castle. The unknown kingdom. The forgotten kingdom.

A prince. A monster. Blue eyes in a monster's body.

He'd never be real to them. He'd always be a dream.

James.

Lars stood next to a building. The people walked past him, like they didn't see him. Like they'd never see James.

A dream, they'd tell him. Full of it. Yeah right. Not real. You're delusional. Not real.

Lars shut his eyes tight.

Jason. Cliff. Kirk. Rob.

James...

He clutched his hand to his chest—and felt the mirror underneath.

James' last gift.

Cliff's words.

He wanted me to tell you it's yours to have...

His hand dug into the coat and grabbed the mirror's handle.

... to remember that ...

In his reflection, Lars saw his wet green eyes, pale cheeks and red nose.

This wasn't a dream.

Snow fell around him, onto the mirror. He whispered underneath the gust of wind, "Show me where my father is."

Unbeknownst to the people in the square, the green glow emerged from the corner where Lars stood with his back to them all. The light washed over Lars's face, and he held his breath when it dissipated and showed what he desired.

His knees nearly gave out on him at what he saw.

Torben, tied up, gagged and hurt. There was a bandage on his head, blood on it. He looked pale, sick—he coughed into his gag, sniffled. His cheeks were wet from crying. The room was dark. He could barely see his father.

"Dad..."

Light suddenly shined in the room, on his father. He wanted to throw up.

Dirt stains on his cheeks with the tears. Torn wet clothes. His hair ragged, unkept, more than usual. Huddled against the corner of a dirty room, between two wooden barrels of who knew what.

A shadow fell over his father.

Lars's tears fell watching Torben cower in fear.

"Who is it?" His hand around the mirror's handle shook. "Who did this?"

The mirror changed the image, as if he was physically in the room, turning around, to see who did this. And Lars gasped again.

"Dave."

The image disappeared. Lars stared at his reflection again.

You bastard.

He twisted his hand tighter around the handle.

"I'll never be yours, Dave." He slipped the mirror back into his coat "And I'll *never* forgive you for this."

Lars turned around in the direction of Dave's house and charged right for it.

**

Minutes later, Lars stood in front of Dave's door and knocked on it repeatedly. Nothing at first. He knocked again faster, harder, and then finally the door opened, revealing Dave inside.

Dave grinned. "Lars!" Lars glared as Dave came forward with his arms opened. "I missed--"

He punched him in the jaw.

When Dave stumbled backwards, he tackled him to the ground, fists flying. His knuckles connected to cheekbone, to forehead, to jawlines and temples. A shout flew from his lips, an inhuman shout, as he pummeled Dave into the ground.

"Help!" Dave yelled. "Help me!"

Lars punched him in the mouth. Blood spewed from Dave's mouth. He punched him again. And again. And again. *Break his jaw. Fuck him up.*

Bruises rose. Welts rose. More blood. Black eyes.

"Where is my FATHER?"

He missed the sound of raining footsteps pounding down the stairs and the hallway.

Lars stopped his pounding to grab Dave's shirt and shake him, bang his head against the wooden floor.

"WHERE IS HE YOU BASTARD?"

Blood and snot down Dave's nose, into his bloody mouth—and then he was quickly yanked away and restrained by strong arms.

"NO!" Lars violently struggled, shaking his arms, kicking his legs, but they held him down, kept him in place. "NO! NO LET ME GO!"

They forced his arms behind him. Two knees planted onto his back. Slammed his head into the floor, and his cheek almost cracked on the wood.

"LET ME FUCKING GO!"

Dave snarled, wiped the blood from his mouth and nose with the sleeve of his shirt. "Shawn. Get me a towel."

Boots crossed his vision, going around him. Whoever was behind him had a lot of strength to hold him down.

Lars hissed through his teeth, barely able to look up from where he was on the floor. Dave stumbled to his feet, still bleeding.

Angry hazel eyes glared down at him. Dave's blood dripped by his face.

"You little bitch."

Dave stomped a boot to his shoulder.

Lars screamed in pain, arched his head off the floor. Tears sprung to his eyes but he refused to let them go. He would never cry. Never, ever cry in front of Dave fucking Mustaine.

Dave snorted, kept wiping blood away from his mouth and nose. He glanced at his bloody sleeve and frowned. "I think you broke my nose." He slipped a finger into his bloody mouth and pulled out a piece of one of his teeth. "And one of my teeth. Probably more."

He flicked the bloody tooth down, and it bounced off of Lars' head, landing beside him.

"Good," Lars growled. "More than you fucking deserve."

Dave kicked him in the side. Lars shouted again in pain.

"Shut up." He turned to Shawn as he entered the room with a towel and yanked it away from him. "Thanks."

Shawn came into Lars' view. Long brown hair, brown eyes, no nonsense look. Lars glared up at him as he did Dave.

"Where is my father?"

Dave wiped the towel over his face, cleaning himself of the blood. The yellow rag turned red fast.

When he finished, Lars's blood turned cold. Dave was smirking.

"What makes you think he's here, hm?"

"I know he's here!"

"Who told you?"

"None of your fucking business!"

Dave glared. "It was Junior wasn't it?"

"I don't know a Junior!"

"You're lying."

"I DON'T KNOW A FUCKING JUNIOR!"

"Hm." He shrugged. "Fine then. I'll make sure whoever it is that snitched will get his." Dave threw the bloody rag at Shawn. "Go get the old man."

Shawn nodded and walked out of Lars's line of vision. Dave looked above him, to the guy holding him down. "Make sure he doesn't move, Chris." And then he too walked out of his line of vision.

Lars struggled on the floor more, desperate to get out of the hold Chris had on him, but the knees in his chest dug in hard. The weight was more than his. Chris was probably a bigger guy.

Somewhere behind him, Lars heard Shawn speak. "Come on, old man. We got a surprise for you."

His heart hurt. His chest hurt. The magic mirror rubbed against his sternum. *Shit. Did it break?*

The sound of struggling that wasn't his. Muffled voice. Muffled, old voice.

Dad.

Shawn dragged against the floor a battered lump of human flesh and slammed it against the wall.

When he stepped to the side, Lars saw the dirty, bruised, tied-up form of his father.

Tired green eyes focused on him—and flew wide open. He heard the muffled sound of his father shouting his name.

"Dad." He lifted his head as best he could from the floor. "I'm here, dad. I'm sorry."

Torben shook his head no, tried to get away from the wall, tried to wiggle his way to Lars, but Shawn shoved him back into place with a boot to his shoulder.

"Don't fucking move."

Lars growled. "Leave him alone!"

Torben moaned in pain, but kept his eyes on his son.

Lars hissed up at Shawn. "Don't you see he's sick? He's fifty fucking four years old! How can you do this to him?"

Dave walked into the room again. "Because I said so."

His nose wasn't crooked anymore, but there were bruises, scratches, welts, a swollen right cheekbone and a black left eye on his face. His anger hadn't dissipated at all from the time he left to now as he stood between Lars and Torben.

He blocked Lars's line of view of his father and smiled down at him. "A nice happy family reunion huh?"

"Fuck you."

Lars shouted in pain as Dave kicked his shoulder.

From his corner, Torben shouted through his gag.

Dave ignored it. He knelt down to the floor, grabbed Lars's hair in his hand and pulled him up slowly. Lars shouted again as his back was stretched. Chris' weight put pressure on his lungs, his kidneys, his spine—felt like he was going to snap in two.

Hazel eyes bore right into him. Along with that damn smug smirk.

"You're very beautiful, Lars."

He yanked Lars's head up further. Stretched his neck. Lars gasped and winced.

With his other hand, Dave ran his fingers, down his cheek.

Lars's eyes flew open.

James.

A thumb ran underneath Lars's left eye.

"And beautiful eyes. Very beautiful eyes."

His stomach coiled, twisted in knots.

Dave leaned in closer.

Lars wanted to vomit as he saw Dave's eyes flutter.

"And those lips—"

He spat right into Dave's face.

"Fuck!" Dave fell back onto his ass, wiping the spit away with both hands. "You fucking bitch."

Lars glared at him. "Don't you fucking touch me, asshole."

Dave whip-cracked a hand across his face that silenced him.

It was Dave's punch with the other hand that left Lars seeing stars.

Torben struggled more, but Shawn held him back against the wall again with his boot, this time to his stomach. "Keep still, old man," he snarled.

Dave staggered back onto his feet, still wiping the spit away and glared at Chris on Lars's back. "Fucking lift him up. Make the goddamn bitch stand."

Chris nodded and secured Lars in his grip before he jerked him onto his feet. Lars was still dizzy from that punch Dave gave him and was easily manipulated into a standing position, with his arms held behind him, secured in Chris's arms, his back pressed against Chris's chest.

Lars' head was bowed, his hair in his face. The room spun. His head was dizzy. He wanted to throw up. His father was sick. He was defenseless. There was nothing he could do. No friends to help him. No one could help him.

James...

He shut his eyes tight, bit his bottom lip hard.

James, please---

Another slap to his cheek. He grunted.

"Look at me!" Dave wailed, grabbing fistfuls of Lars' jacket in his hands. He hissed into his face, nose to nose. "Look at me *right now*."

He refused. He'd never lift his head for Dave.

Dave snarled. "Look at me or I'll make your father pay on your behalf."

Lars snapped his head up, just as Shawn's foot started to press onto his father's stomach.

"NO!" Fresh hot tears fell down his cheeks as he violently shook his head. "Don't do it! Fucking let him go!"

Dave chuckled. "Or what? You already tried to beat me to death. Look how far that got."

"Just let him *go*!"

"Why should I? You have to give me a deal here Lars." He came close to Lars again. "Just give me what I want."

The words hit him worse than fists. Lars sobbed again and again, all control gone, all strength gone.

He could feel Dave there. His voice. His breath.

He was alone. He had no one there to save him.

James...

Lars cried harder as he thought of those blue eyes.

James, please... please...

One of Dave's hands rested on his stomach.

Dave's hazel eyes drifted to Torben, as he trailed it up Lars' torso from stomach to collarbones.

Torben struggled but Shawn kept him in place.

Dave smirked and returned his attention to Lars. He leaned in close and whispered into his ear.

"Just give in."

Lars shivered as Dave licked the shell of his ear.

"You *know* what I want."

The words hit him worse than fists. Lars wanted to vomit. Wanted to cry out. Kick Dave. Scream *I'd rather fucking die.*

But he couldn't.

His father. He couldn't lose his father.

I have no choice.

He slumped in Chris' arms. Stopped resisting completely.

In front of him, Dave's lips twitched into a smile.

Lars steeled himself, counted to three.

Behind the darkness of his lids, he saw one image.

Blue eyes.

Those blue eyes.

James...

Lars lifted his head and looked up at Dave. He swallowed hard, fighting back to urge to vomit as he whispered, "I'll do anything you want... just let my father go in peace."

Dave broke out into a wide, triumphant grin. He cupped Lars's chin in his hand as he leaned in, their lips almost touching. "Right now? Mm." He tilted his head to the side, measuring Lars. In total control. "How about... this?"

Lars screwed his eyes tight as dry lips fell over his.

Tongue and teeth. Rough, foul tongue, rolling all over. Ugly moans, sounds that made him want to puke into Dave's mouth, but he couldn't.

Nothing like James.

He breathed again when Dave thankfully pulled away.

James...

Dave smiled down at him and patted his cheek. "Nice. Very nice."

Lars resisted the urge to spit at him again. "Let my father go now."

Dave's smile disappeared. He shook his head no. "Not until you tell me one simple thing." He growled. "Where the fuck were you?"

"What?"

He pointed to Torben. "You've been gone for weeks now and your fucking old man kept *swearing* you were at some castle, captured by some stupid beast. I'm tired of him harping about that stupid lie, so tell me the goddamn truth."

Lars frowned. "But it *was* real."

Dave rolled his eyes. "Are you kidding me?"

"No! It's the truth, Dave! Honest!"

"Bullshit!" He pointed to himself. "I'm the one in control, Lars. Not you. So don't fucking play games with me. Tell me the truth or *else*."

"IT IS THE FUCKING TRUTH!"

"*Prove it!*"

"Fine!" Lars nodded his chin down to his chest. "There. Inside my jacket. I have a mirror."

Dave frowned, as did Shawn and Chris. "A mirror?"

"I swear to you, this will work. Reach inside my jacket and take out the mirror."

Dave hesitated before he reached into Lars' jacket, finding the mirror there against Lars' chest. He wrapped his hand around the silver handle and pulled it out.

It was a regular mirror. Nothing spectacular about it.

Dave looked at his reflection and then glared at Lars. "Now what?"

"Ask it what you want to see. Say, 'Show me the beast of Neuschwanstein Castle--'"

"Neusch*what?*"

"Just do it."

Dave snorted. "Hmph." He turned and stepped away from Lars. "Mirror mirror on the wall--"

Shawn and Chris laughed. Lars didn't. "Say it right."

Dave rolled his eyes. "Alright, fine." He looked into his reflection again in the so-called magic mirror. "Show me the beast of Neuschwanstein Castle. Show me your supposed 'magic' and..."

The mirror glowed green. Their jaws dropped and their eyes widened-- all except Lars.

Green shined in the room, on the walls, on everyone, the most on Dave's face. His hazel eyes widened, almost bugged out, as his reflection changed, transformed into something else...

And when the light faded, Dave whispered, "Holy shit."

Lars smiled. "I told you I was right. I--"

The cry-whine of a wolf howl shut Lars up.

His smile disappeared.

The sound came from the mirror. The magic mirror relayed not images, but sounds as well. And Lars could hear them. Every sound.

The sound of a human cry with wolf whimpers.

No. Lars shivered. *James.*

Dave's shoulders shook. From laughter.

Dave was laughing.

Lars' breathing picked up. His chest hurt. *James...*

Dave snorted. "*This?* This is it? The great beast? Ha." He turned around and showed off the mirror.

Shawn gasped. Chris behind him gasped.

Lars didn't hear them. Didn't see anything else. All he saw was the image the mirror held. The image of James on his knees, *weeping* into his gold outfit, rubbing his face into the collar, rocking back and forth.

Human cries. Wolf cries.

Human tears.

"James..."

Behind the mirror, Dave laughed harder. "The beast has a *name* too?" He turned the mirror to look at James, hear him cry and howl. "Some beast."

And then the image in the mirror faded away.

Lars struggled again.

No, no James, please... come back...

Dave jerked the mirror back, slipped the handle into the waistband of his jeans.

"What's wrong, huh? You want your puppy?"

That smug smirk. Triumphant hazel eyes.

Lars growled, thrashed in Chris's arms.

"*Don't* call him that."

Dave chuckled. "Well, that's what he looked like to me. Not some wolf-beast. Just a puppy crying for help." He sauntered forward. "You miss him, Lars? You miss your *James*?"

Lars growled. "So help me Dave, I will make sure--"

"What? Make sure to do *what*?" He gestured to Torben in the corner. "In case you forgot, I'm the one holding all the cards. You can't do anything to me."

"James will!" The cords in his neck stretched, his face turning red, as he spat into Dave's face, straining his arms in Chris's hold. "He'll fucking *crush you*."

"Yeah. Sure he will." Dave's eyes flicked to Shawn over in the corner. "Gag him."

Lars gasped. *No*. "You promised."

Dave chuckled and stepped away. "You should know I never keep promises."

His next words were muffled by the cloth.

They overpowered him. The cloth was secured around his head no matter how hard he tried to dislodge it from his mouth. He thrashed around, but they held him together, forced him still.

Behind Chris and Shawn, Dave said, "Take him to the bedroom."

The gag muffled Lars's scream.

Shawn grabbed his kicking legs firm. They lifted him off the floor.

**

Torben did what he could to stop them. Restrained as he was, he wiggled down to the floor, trying to kick at them with his bound legs.

Dave stopped him with a kick to his legs.

He smiled down as Torben groaned in pain.

"Why don't you calm down, old man? You might hurt yourself there."

He left Torben behind him as he ascended the stairs behind Shawn and Chris.

With a hand on the railing, Dave paused and turned to Torben again.

"Or should I start calling you *Dad*?"

Torben's muffled screams were unheard over Dave's loud cackle.

**

Lars shouted again and again as Shawn and Chris ascended the stairs, dragged him up. He wiggled, thrashed, strained his body, used all of his energy to get out. But it was useless. They had won. Dave had won.

All my fault.

He had panicked. He didn't thinking right. Now Dave had the magic mirror in his hands, to get to the castle... to get to everyone... to get to James and...

It's all my fault.

They entered the room, stood next to the bed. Dave met them there a minute later, holding in his hand silver duct tape. He smiled the entire time he bound Lars's ankles together thoroughly, and he patted them when finished.

"There. That wasn't so bad, yeah?"

The gag muffled Lars's 'fuck you.'

Dave's lewd smile made Lars' stomach curl. "Mm. You really *do* sound better with something in your mouth." He stepped away, motioning to the bed. "Make him feel at home, boys."

Together Shawn and Chris dumped him onto the mattress, each restraining an arm to the bedpost. Lars kept struggling as Dave walked around, coming to Chris' side and duct taping his wrist to the post. Lars to throw up as Dave straddled his waist to duct tape the other wrist.

Dave didn't look away from Lars as he waved the other two off. "Shawn, go take care of the old man. Put him in the basement again. I don't want to see his face when I get back."

"You got it."

"And Chris? Go get our ammunition. We're going to need a lot of it."

"Okay."

Lars screamed at them as they left. Screamed at them to stop. But their footsteps rained down the stairs, his cries ignored.

No... no... He leaned his head back on the pillows against the headboard. *Fuck.*

Lars shut his eyes tight.

Don't cry. Don't fucking cry.

Dave snickered, resting his hands on Lars' heaving chest. He leaned forward.

Lars' stomach lurched as Dave's breath fell over his red face.

Go away... please... let me go. He bit down on the gag in his mouth. *Please don't...*

Dave dragged his lips up his neck, over his chin.

Hot breath fell over his gagged mouth.

The hands on his chest slipped up to his neck.

Lars yelped as they squeezed and yanked his head up from the pillows.

The headboard jerked, slammed against the wall. His arms were stretched painfully tight.

His heart pounded against his ribcage. His labored breathing came out of his nose.

Lars shivered as Dave nipped his bottom lip.

He tried to jerk his head away, but the hands kept him still. Kept him in place.

No...

"God..." Disgusting lips nuzzled his gagged mouth. "There's *so* much I want to do to you."

Lars choked on his whimper. *Don't cry. Don't fucking cry.* When Dave pulled back finally, he swallowed and chewed on the gag. *No matter what, don't fucking cry.*

One of the hands on his neck let go.

Dave ran his fingers over his cheek. "So *many* things."

Lars flinched his head away.

His green eyes flew open, and he glared at Dave, right into his smug face.

Don't you fucking touch me. I will never give into you. You won't win Dave. I swear it. You won't fucking win. James is going to kill you. I know it.

Dave squeezed his hand around Lars's neck, patting his chest with the other hand. "But... that'll have to wait."

He slipped out of his lap, off the bed, walked to the closet. When he opened the doors, and reached inside to grab something, Lars froze in place.

A wolf rug.

A dead wolf rug, with the head still attached.

Oh God.

Dave smiled as he walked over. "Here. Something to keep you warm while I'm out."

He couldn't move as Dave tucked him in it on all corners, laying the head on his chest.

Dead wolf eyes stared up at him.

Blue eyes.

Dead blue eyes.

Lars tilted his head back on the pillows to avoid looking at it. But behind his lids, he saw those dead wolf eyes. Dead blue human eyes.

He flexed his fists held back in the tape. *I hate you.*

Soft lips ghosted over his cheek. Lars grit his teeth on the gag and snarled.

James is gonna fucking slaughter you.

The lips trailed up to his ear.

A hand cupped his left cheek, pushing him closer to Dave's lips.

Dave cooed into his ear like a lover. "When I get back..."

He felt Dave's lips curl into a smile on his ear.

"You'll have a nice... new... wolf rug--"

Lars' eyes flew open in horror.

-- to sleep in."

And he kissed his cheek.

Lars *screamed*.

Dave didn't seem to hear or care as he circled the bed and walked to the door, a hand on the light-switch. He smiled sweetly over his shoulder. "Sleep well."

His hand went down, turning off the light in the room.

The door shut louder than Lars' muffled shout.

In the darkness of the room Lars kept shouting and screaming. His arms and legs strained in the duct tape, but it didn't budge, didn't break. The wolf head slipped off his chest, down to his lap, and he used the leverage of his bound legs to completely kick it off him and the bed.

He kept trying. He had to stop Dave and Chris. Had to save his father. Had to do it all by himself. No one else could help him. He was alone. He had to save the kingdom, save Cliff and Jason and Kirk and Rob...

James.

Lars slumped back onto the pillows, his energy gone.

His arms hung loosely from the headboard. His chin rested on his chest.

Min skat...

James on his knees, crying into his outfit. His whimpers. His cries. Human and wolf.

Not a beast. Not a monster.

Dave's hazel eyes. His smirk.

The real monster.

Lars sobbed.

James...

**

Outside, Dave hopped into the truck beside Chris. He pulled out the magic mirror and stared into his reflection with a smirk.

"Show me the way to Neuschwanstein Castle."

The mirror glowed a bright green for a few seconds, and when it lessened, a clear pathway showed.

Dave grunted. "Good." He turned to Chris. "Let's go. Head east out of the town. We got a wolf to kill."

Chris nodded, backing out of the driveway. "How much do you think he'll be worth once we get him in town?"

"Hm. Couple grand maybe. If we can get some of the press in Berlin down, hey, who knows." Dave's whole face turned maniacal as his mind went crazy with ideas. "Shit. Imagine all those suckers who love werewolves. We could market him as one, make a cool million if we're lucky."

"Wow. You think so?"

"Hell yeah. Some people are total suckers for those fairytales. We can make a shit ton of cash." Dave reached into his jacket and pulled out his loaded gun, the safety on. "That wolf doesn't stand a goddamn chance."

**

Upstairs, Lars heard the engine roar and leave the driveway, out of the town and off to the castle. Off to kill James.

He sniffled and hiccuped into his gag, shaking his head back and forth. *Why was I so stupid? I just handed him over that stupid mirror, all to prove a fucking point, and now...* His body jerked as he sobbed painfully hard. *Now James... James is going to...*

And Lars finally allowed himself to cry, thrashing in his bonds.

*Why did I **ever** listen to Jason?!*

Chapter 20

Back at the castle, Jason recollected himself and stumbled his way back to his room. He barely made it to his bed, but once he laid there, his head against his pillows and his vision fixated on the ceiling, he finally realized one big truth: *I fucked up.*

He closed his eyes, running his palms over his wet face. Seeing James on his knees, crying into Lars's outfit, Jason saw the boy he fell in love with—the one he was still in love with—and his heart and his mind felt like heavy rocks. He waited a hundred years to have something, anything with the prince, only for James to find love in someone else. Some... child.

Lars's smile appeared in his purview.

Take care of James.

Jason sighed.

He didn't hate Lars. His mind told him, *Yes you do*, but he knew otherwise. Jason couldn't hate Lars. It wasn't Lars's fault he was the so-called chosen true love. He doubted the entire time Lars was the one, because he happened to come so late—so close to the spell being permanent. And now, after accepting his jealousy, Jason realized that he was partially right in his convictions. Part of him was initially suspicious of Lars, suspicious of everyone's hope placed in someone who just came out of the blue conveniently before the spell was to be permanent. The other part disliked him on principle, because of how much emphasis everyone was putting on him. *Why him*, he kept asking. *Why this boy? There is nothing special about him. James can't love him!* But he did. They fell in love. And he denied it. He ruined it. But even after Lars swore he hated James, even as he walked past the gates...

Take care of James.

Jason sat up in bed, his back hunched over.

I'm a jealous old man acting like a jealous little boy.

There were many issues he had to work with, but if there was one thing Jason had, it was time. And he had a lot of time — a whole eternity — to deal with his issues. He already came to terms that he was jealous of Lars. Jealous enough to want to drive him and James apart, and he succeeded. Now that it was over, he had to take care of James, and of all the irony, on Lars's request.

James will never love me. Ever. I am damned to be in a castle with someone who will never love me.

He looked at his right hand where the ring rested, waiting to be used.

I robbed James of his love. Of his possible freedom. Of all our freedoms.

His hand curled into a fist.

And for that... I truly do not deserve my own.

Jason pushed up onto shaky legs and left his chambers.

You win, Lars.

**

Jason's steps echoed in the great, cold hallways as he approached James's chambers. Fear of James's possible wrath made him hesitate for a few seconds from knocking on his door. But he glanced at the ring one last time, and then gathered what was left of his courage to knock.

"My Lord?"

No answer. He knocked again.

"My Lord... it's Jason."

He could barely hear James's whisper from inside. "Come in."

When he opened the door, he found James sitting on the old threadbare throne, next to the table that housed the floating rose in a glass vase. In his lap laid Lars's gold outfit, where James absentmindedly stroked the edges with the back of his paw.

His eyes watered. *It's like he's in mourning.* He cleared his throat, coming to James's chair. "I wanted to give you something."

"Mm?" James lifted his head, turned around to Jason behind him.

Blue eyes widened as he watched Jason slip the gold ring off his finger and rest it on the oak table, right beside the glass vase.

James rose to his feet, gingerly laying the gold outfit onto his chair. "What are you doing?"

Jason stood proud like a statue in front of his prince. "I'm sorry my Lord, but I am completely unworthy of this gift. Please..." He swallowed. "Give it to someone who deserves it better."

He quickly pivoted on his heel and headed for the door. He couldn't be in the room a moment longer, else his emotions would be completely—

"Wait."

Jason ignored the command. He reached for the door—

"*Jason.*"

His hand barely touched the knob when he heard the prince's loud growl.

Jason shivered. His hand flinched away from the door.

He slowly turned around and faced the prince.

"Yes, my Lord?"

All the anguish and sadness Jason saw on James had disappeared. There was an anger there. An old anger he knew too well. One that meant he had to obey whatever James said or else.

"Come here."

Jason marched forward as if he was sentenced to death.

They met stares.

The tension suffocated Jason. It seemed to do nothing for James.

And then: "Give me your hand."

Jason gasped. *My prince*. He shook his head no.

James glared. "Open your palm."

"My Lord--"

"Do it."

Tears pricked his eyes. *No*, he wanted to say. *I refuse. I'm not going to do it. I don't deserve it James, why won't you fucking listen to me?*

He held out his right hand and opened his palm.

James reached for the ring and rested it in his hand.

Their gazes never wavered.

"When I give a gift to someone, I expect it to be used." Jason's breathing picked up as James slowly closed his palm with his paw. "The ring is yours, Jason. Leave whenever you wish." James sadly smiled. "I do not blame you nor hate you for getting away from me."

Jason shivered as James lifted the closed hand to his lips and kissed the knuckles.

He couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Only watch as James turned away from him and went to his chair to gather up the gold outfit, holding it in his arms as if Lars was actually in it.

No. I can't do this.

"James..."

The prince turned his back to him, heading for his bedroom. "You're dismissed."

"But—"

"Go."

Jason flinched.

An order. An order to leave. To go. To get out—out of the castle and never come back.

The prince. His prince. Walking to the bedroom, in mourning. Head bowed. Shoulders slumped.

Cradling the outfit to his chest as if holding a dying lover.

He hated it.

Eighteen year old James, crying for his parents.

This James, crying for Lars.

Always unhappy. Always unloved. Always hurt.

Why James? Why? Why don't you love me?

"I love you."

James stopped, inches away from the door to his bedroom.

Jason froze.

Outside, the sun began to set over the mountains. Dark clouds started to form around, signalling a huge snow storm.

The prince's whisper was barely heard over the wind.

"I know you do." He lifted his head. "And now, I know what you have felt like for a hundred years." He pivoted around. Fresh tears gleamed in his sad blue eyes as he smiled at Jason. "You are much, *much* stronger than me, Jason. I have dealt with this pain for a few hours. You have dealt with it for an eternity."

James looked down at the ground.

Outside, the dark clouds ate up the sun before it could set.

"Already I want to just..."

He shut his eyes tight. His paws dug into the outfit, almost tearing the fine fabric.

The hurt. The anger. Guilt, disbelief, worry, confusion, wonder, all questions, no answers, questions never to be answered, frustration, why, why this, why did it end this way. All in one. All together. Feelings Jason knew all too well. To see it on the prince's face hurt him beyond words.

As quick as those feelings arrived, they disappeared as James sighed and opened his eyes, lifted his head. And Jason wanted to sink into the floor when he saw pity in those blue eyes.

"I'm sorry that you ever loved someone like me. That's why I need you to go. I need you to be happy." He turned away. "I need to do something right for once."

Jason arm outstretched towards his retreating back, though his feet were planted firm on the ground.

"James..."

"Go, Jason. Have your freedom. You deserve it."

James shut the bedroom doors behind him.

Jason stood there, staring at the old wood.

His outstretched arm slowly fell back to his side.

Wide blue eyes glanced down at his left hand.

The ring.

My freedom...

Jason clenched his fist around it and pressed his knuckles to his forehead.

I don't deserve it.

He hissed through his teeth.

I don't deserve this.

He finally had the strength to leave the prince's chambers as more snow started to fall, the storm gaining power in the horizon, heading towards the castle.

**

Out in the distance of the castle, a red truck made its way through the powerful winter storm. Snow piled up on its hood, stuck in its wheels, and the wipers squeaked back and forth, trying to scrape the ice away. As the wind gained momentum and visibility lessened, Chris swerved on the road and Dave startled.

"Watch it!"

"It's not my fault!" Chris shook his head. "Fucking insane out here. I haven't seen a storm this bad in years."

"Well, calm down. If we lose visibility we're okay." Dave looked down at the magic mirror in his hand. "We've got all we need to see right here."

"You sure that thing works?"

"It showed us the damn Beast the old man was harping about, right?"

"What if it was just a trick or something? I mean, something like we saw shouldn't be real..."

Dave rolled his eyes. "Come on, Chris. You saw it. I saw it. And by the way Lars was acting, seeing that stupid crying wolf, it's real to him."

"I just don't like wild goose chases."

Dave laughed. "A goose chase? This is a wolf hunt." He glanced at the gun in his lap. "And we know how to hunt."

Chris wasn't convinced in the slightest, but he said nothing. He trusted Dave a lot. It was Dave who saved his sister from the wolf that terrorized their town. He was in debt to him forever. Some of the things Dave did made Chris question his integrity—this being one of those times, and the other being Lars. He didn't understand what exactly it was *about* Lars that drove Dave insane with lust, other than the fact that Lars didn't want him while everyone else (including himself) did. Lars was Dave's greatest obsession, his greatest conquest, and as much as it peeved him that Dave wanted Lars over him, he wanted to help him get what he wanted. He had a sinking feeling once Dave had Lars as his, he'd move on, and that would be when Chris knew he had a shot.

The storm raged on, visibility lessening and lessening as Chris drove. Soon the mirror became their only guide, their only way of making it through alive. Chris gripped the wheel tightly in both hands, the fear palpable on his face, while Dave showed none at all. He directed Chris, told him where to turn, where to go, all with the mirror's help.

"This is bad," Chris said. "I can't see shit."

"You're fine, stop worrying."

"All I see is snow!"

"Just stay calm!" He leaned to the driver's side, showing him the image in the mirror. It was as if Dave wiped away some of the snow on the windshield, as well as some of the storm. He could see now. "You feel better with it there?"

He nodded. "Thanks. I'd hold it myself but I can't drive this and hold the mirror at the same time."

Dave smirked. "Well, we can't all be perfect, right—" Hazel eyes grew wide as he saw the image in the mirror. "*Stop!*"

Chris's feet punched on the breaks, and he realized too late it was a stupid thing to do.

The truck spun out of control on the snow and ice road, and Chris panicked. He didn't know how to control the wheel. But Dave leapt over, kept his cool and manhandled the wheel. "Foot off the break!" he yelled and Chris obeyed. The car spun around and around, skidded onto its side and--

The truck crashed right into something solid, sturdy and tall. The rear view mirror on Chris's side was crushed, and his mirror was cracked. The side of his truck was dented, but he didn't care. He was alive and in one-piece. Bruised, but in one-piece.

Beside him, Dave held his shoulder. "You okay?"

Chris nodded. "Thanks."

"No problem." He returned to the mirror. "Okay. Magic mirror. Show me where we are."

The glass glowed green and the image changed. Dave's jaw dropped as he saw the gorgeous castle in plain view, without the obstructing snow storm. The image then tilted down, and he saw long, tall castle walls, and at the base, right beside the tall gates, was a small truck, one side of it crushed, but looking operational.

Dave grinned. "We're here."

"Yeah? Positive?"

"See for yourself." He tilted the mirror to the side so Chris could see.

Chris's eyes went wide. "Oh my God it's gorgeous."

"I know." Dave tilted the mirror back to himself. "It looks ancient."

"There's probably a lot of old artifacts in there. Maybe there's some gold and jewelry we can take."

"Yeah. On top of the Beast..." His vision drifted elsewhere along with his mind, thinking about all the money, the fame, the notoriety, the houses, the cars... Lars being his bed toy. "We'd have it made."

"Hell yeah." He frowned. "But, I'm wondering."

Dave turned to him, his eyebrows knitted together. "Yeah?"

"Well, gathering by how gorgeous and how *huge* this place is, it seems a bit too much for one person to live in all by himself."

Dave snorted. "It's not a person. It's a wolf-beast."

"I know, but still. I'm wary of us going in there with everything we've got, and the Beast has

hundreds or thousands of an army or something, waiting for a fight. We have to think smart here. I personally don't feel comfortable walking into a castle like this and think that there's only one person here."

"Hm." Dave returned to the image of the castle in the mirror. A powerful gust of wind rocked the car as he whispered, "You do have a point. Magic mirror. Show us if there are people inside."

The mirror glowed a bright green as the image changed. Green shot down the handle, crackling energy, and Dave and Chris watched together as their assumptions were proven right.

Image after image of wall to wall people, sleeping in rooms, eating together, doing chores, playing, doing things. Running a castle together. They all seemed very, very sad, but they were all doing their work, as if they had done it for hundreds of years. By the end of the last image—a man in blue with red hair and sad hazel eyes, looking out a window—Chris pulled away and leaned back into his driver's seat.

"Wow."

"Yeah." Dave rested the mirror on his lap. "You were right."

Chris eyed him. "We can't go in like you planned."

"No shit. Dammit." He slumped in his seat, bit and chewed on a fingernail. Strands of his hair fell in his eyes as he bowed his neck in thought. He was quiet for a long moment as he thought things over, and then finally gave voice to them. "If we go, barge in, kill everyone, we don't know how many people are actually in the castle. And it's just you and me and a few guns. Putting that up against hundreds with weapons of their own? We're on nothing but a suicide mission."

"Yeah..."

Dave clenched his fist. "Dammit." He pressed his mouth to his knuckles. "*Dammit.*"

Chris sighed, scratched his elbow. "I dunno what we can do, really. I was hoping to be wrong, to be honest. I just want to kill the Beast, take some valuables and get out of there."

He received no response from Dave. Hazel eyes fell shut as Dave thought over his options, thought over what they could do now. Guns were out of the question. All they had now was the magic mirror and a possibly busted truck—

His eyes flew open. "That's it."

Chris blinked. "Huh?"

He turned to Chris. "We just walk in."

"...What?"

"You heard me." He grinned. "This is the plan. We walk in, say we got lost in the storm and need some shelter for the night. We can find out if they knew Lars—and if they *did*, we can use that to our advantage to get to the Beast. We can say we're his best friends and we were hoping to see him again for Christmas Day."

"Woah." Chris shook his head. "I completely forgot it was still Christmas."

"Yes. So we can say we were driving to our home town for Christmas, hoping to see our *dear* friend Lars again, and... we'll go from there."

Chris grinned. "Damn brilliant idea, Dave."

He snickered. "I thought so too." Dave looked at the mirror again. "Now, show me the Beast of Neuschwanstein Castle once more."

The mirror glowed green, and the image changed to that of the crying wolf-beast. He was no longer weeping but those blue eyes were as wet as his furred cheeks, and he cradled the gold outfit to his chest like a lover would.

The sight made Dave sick to his stomach. The way Lars cried for this *beast*, the way this beast held that outfit to his broad chest, it all led to an answer he didn't want to acknowledge. An answer that made him want to vomit.

Lars? In love with a beast? An ugly so-called beast?

He watched the beast rub his nose into the collar of the outfit, slowly closing his wet eyes as more tears fell down. From the mirror, a soft whine emerged.

Dave chuckled. "He really is nothing but a puppy."

Chris chuckled with him. "He definitely sounds like one."

"Yep." He picked up with his other hand the loaded gun. His vision darted between that of the crying beast and the weapon he held. And he came to a decision as he let the mirror rest on his lap. "Y'know what Chris?"

"Hm?"

"I don't feel like killing him anymore."

Chris' jaw dropped. "*What?*"

"Yeah." He tossed the gun over to Chris, watched it land on his lap. "I only want to bring that as security for us. Otherwise, we don't need the ammunition."

Chris warily picked up the gun, his confused stare darting from the weapon to Dave. "Uh. Are you sure?"

"Positive."

Chris sat there dumbfounded as Dave bundled himself up well, preparing to leave the truck and brave the winter storm outside for the castle doors. He waited a few more moments before he too started to get ready, securing the gun inside his jacket holster, still feeling ridiculously confused.

"So... uh... we're not going to kill him?"

"Oh no, we are."

Chris startled. "Uh. Wait. You just said—"

"I know what I said. I don't want to kill him—" He pointed to Chris' jacket, where the gun was hidden. "—like *that*." He broke out into a wide, sadistic grin as he reached beneath his seat and pulled out a long hunting knife. The steel glinted as he twisted it in front of his face. "I'd rather skin him alive."

Chris sighed in relief, a hand flying to Dave's shoulder and he squeezed. "Don't scare me like that

again. I got worried there for a second."

"Sorry about that. Should've clarified, I guess."

"Would've been nice, yeah." Chris finished securing his gloves on and shot Dave a big smile. He tucked his beanie hat around his head. "Ready to go?"

Dave sheathed the hunting knife into its holster and hid it well underneath his jeans. He patted down his leg and fixed up his jacket. "Yup."

"Alright. We'll go out your way since my side is crushed."

"Sounds good."

They double checked if they had everything one last time before Dave got a hand around the handle. He was just about to turn it, when Chris laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You're *sure* you don't want the gun?"

Dave snorted. "Come on. I don't need a gun to kill a puppy." He chuckled, twisting the handle and opening the door. "I'm not *that* mean."

Chapter 21

Cliff watched the storm eat up the grey sky. Wind pounded on the glass. A whirlwind of white stole the snow capping trees and the castle wall from his view, the lake outside turning to ice. It was the same storm that came the day Lars first appeared; now, it arrived on the eve of Lars leaving for good.

The castle would never be the same now that Lars was gone. Their prince would never recover. There was no miracle now, no happily-ever-after. They were stuck forever.

He sighed.

Nothing to do now but move on.

He clenched his fists.

Fucking Jason.

Cliff shook his head.

No. I can't be angry. I cannot allow my emotions overrule my judgement. I have to lead the others now that we are stuck like this. The prince needs me still. And Jason will be gone soon anyway. If he isn't gone already.

He turned away from the window to Kirk and Rob sitting on the bed in each others arms. "We should tend to our duties now."

Kirk lifted his head from Rob's shoulder. "What?"

"We have no duties," Rob said. "It's over. The spell will never be broken."

"But we still have a prince to serve. I think making him some of his favorite foods will do him some good."

"I highly doubt that."

"It doesn't hurt to try." He headed for the door. "I'll see to the other servants, check on how they are doing. Kirk, go with Rob. I want you two to deliver the food to James."

Kirk blushed. "Um, I'm not good with the kitchens."

"I didn't say you had to cook. I just want you to accompany Rob."

"I don't know—"

"It's an order."

Kirk reached a hand out. "Cliff—"

"I'll see you two in the evening."

He exited their chamber, leaving the two of them stunned speechless on the bed.

**

Kirk dropped his hand into his lap, staring at the door with Rob. They eventually turned to each other, confused as to what to do, still emotional from their horrid morning.

"What do you think?" Kirk asked.

"Well..." Rob sighed. "He has a point. We have to rebuild now that Lars is gone, and the last thing we should be doing is stay stuck in our depression. Though God knows cooking is the last thing I want to be doing right now."

"I know. I don't want to see a single decoration ever again at this point." Kirk weaved his hand into Rob's. "But... he is right. As much as I don't want to do anything, we *should* go do something. And cooking does make you happy."

"Used to."

"Still does." He pulled Rob up from the bed, kissing his cheek. "Come on."

Kirk and Rob walked out of their chamber hand-in-hand. Their footsteps rang out like shots, ricocheting off the walls in loud echoes and trickling down the halls. All they could hear was themselves, their own breathing, and the storm raging outside, as they headed for the kitchens.

They passed from one hall into the next, leaving the North Wing for the South Wing. The windows rattled from the storm. Nothing could be seen outside but pure white.

Rob let go of Kirk's hand to circle his arm around his waist. "It's too quiet."

"Yeah." Kirk leaned into his side. "Some Christmas."

"Stop that. It's not your fault or mine that things turned out the way they have."

"We still could've done something."

"Don't think about it. Cliff is making us do things so we can stop being depressed over what happened, remember?"

"I know. But I can't help it."

"And what could we do, huh? Chaining Lars to the north tower and forcing them talk?"

"Why not?" Kirk stopped walking. "It could've worked."

"No good would've come of it. Lars wouldn't have listened. His mind was made up."

"We could've convinced him otherwise." His eyes watered. "We could've made him see reason."

"Not with what Lars said, and not with how he acted. There was no way wouldn't have listened to us." Rob looked away. "It's honestly for the best that he left."

Kirk gasped. "But he was the one!"

"Well..." Rob shrugged. "Maybe he wasn't."

"What?"

"I'm just saying. Maybe..." He drifted his attention away, whispering. "Maybe Jason *was* right. Maybe Lars wasn't the one to begin with."

"How can you say that?"

"By what happened today." He looked into Kirk's eyes again. "Think about it. Why would he leave if he was the one? Why did he say those things to us?"

The protest on Kirk's lips quickly died when he remembered Lars's scathing words as he left the castle, and it wounded him as it did earlier that morning.

You've all been his servants for 300 years, and you all had the ability to kill yourselves if you wanted.

"You're right... but... you heard what Jason said. What Cliff said."

"Right. Jealousy. To which I don't agree with what Jason did, and why I won't trust him again."

Kirk snorted. "If he's still even here."

Rob smiled. "Yes." He came close, wrapping an arm around Kirk's waist again. "But maybe he was right, despite his skewed viewpoint. Maybe Lars wasn't the one meant for James."

"That honestly doesn't make me feel any better. It makes me think we just wasted our time..." Kirk pressed his face into Rob's neck. "Our time and our hope."

"I know." Rob cupped the back of Kirk's head with his free hand and kissed his ear. "But at least we tried. You can't say we didn't. It's not our fault things didn't work out."

Kirk hugged Rob close to him. "I still feel guilty."

"I do too."

"Do you think it'll ever go away?"

"Maybe. One day."

"I hope so."

They held each other in that embrace for some time, until Rob broke away. He smiled and quietly twined his hand in Kirk's, leading them down the hallway again for the kitchens. Both of them felt a little better than before, though the guilt and the anguish still weighed on their hearts.

The storm seemed to intensify and worsen as they passed through the main hallway that joined the four wings together. The wind pounded hard on the great entrance to the castle, as if there were people outside trying to come in.

Rob strengthened his hold on Kirk's hand while they walked through the main hall. He eyed the door, confused by all the wild pounding. He'd probably ask Cliff to have a few servants fortify the door so it didn't crack or break during the night.

He abruptly stopped when he heard the sharp shrill of a voice.

Kirk gave him a concerned look. "What's wrong?"

Rob took a step towards the door. "I think I heard something."

"It was probably the wind."

"Maybe." He let go of Kirk's hand. "We should check the door anyway. Make sure it's holding up

against the storm."

"Okay."

The door seemed fine as they approached it, but the pounding continued. Over and over the wind slammed against the door.

Kirk squeezed Rob's hand—and he gasped when he heard something.

A voice shouting: *Let us in! Please!*

And another: *Help!*

Rob reacted first. He began to unlock and open the massive doors, and Kirk was soon by his side helping him.

Cold wind instantly pushed inside as they held the door open together, their hair whipping into their faces. They shivered in place, using all of the strength against the power of the storm to keep the door still.

Two bodies ran through and collapsed onto the ground a few feet away.

As one, Rob and Kirk closed the massive doors. Rob busied himself locking it as Kirk rushed to the two on the floor, helping one of them up into a sitting position. Rob quickly came to the aid of the other, helping him up as well.

"Are you okay?" Kirk asked.

The man's gloved hands pushed the hood of the coat off, revealing bright orange-red hair flowing over his shoulders in wavy curls. Hazel eyes glanced up at Kirk, and the man gave him a big, charming smile.

"I am now."

Rob and Kirk assisted the two men up to their feet. They both were weak, covered from head to toe with snow, their faces red from frostbite. The red-haired one looked okay, while his dark-haired companion looked worse for wear.

"What happened?" Kirk asked.

"Our car went out of control in the freezing cold," the red-haired one said. "We were trying to come home in time for Christmas, but we got lost." He coughed and sniffled. "The storm came too fast..."

"Say no more." Kirk kept a steady hand on the man's back as he looked at Rob. "Let's take them to the North Wing den. I'll go look for some new warm clothes."

"And I'll cook up some chicken soup and tea." Rob secured an arm around the dark-haired man's waist. "Don't worry now. You're safe."

The red-haired one teeth chattered as he wrapped an arm around Kirk's waist. "Bless you." He sneezed. "God. I never thought we'd find such k-kindness here... middle of nowhere..." He smiled lopsided up at Kirk through his red curls. "Thank you."

Kirk smiled in return, a light blush on his cheeks. "Of course."

Together they helped the unexpected guests to the North Wing of the castle. As they entered the

den, neither Kirk nor Rob noticed how their guests's eyes grew as wide as saucers and their mouths opening in shock at the lavishness and grandeur of the room they now inhabited. The red-haired one glanced back over his shoulder to look at the dark-haired one, and they shared a mutual smile of glee.

They helped the two men to a long, plush couch full of pillows. Kirk fussed over their clothes, taking away their wet jackets, scarves and gloves while Rob fetched many warm blankets. They tucked them around the two men, until they were bundled completely up.

"There," Kirk said. "All done."

"Thank you so much," the red-haired one said. "We're eternally in your debt."

Rob waved his hand. "Think nothing of it... Mr.?"

"Oh. I'm David. David Scott Mustaine." He smiled and extended a hand to Rob.

The other one extended a hand to Kirk. "And I'm Chris Broderick."

Rob shook their hands first. "Robert Trujillo, head of the castle kitchens."

Kirk shook their hands second. "And I'm Kirk Hammett, castle authority over fashion and design."

"Very nice to meet you." David looked around the room in awe. "And this is a gorgeous room. It's exquisite. Which reminds me." He looked at Kirk and Rob again. "I never knew such a beautiful castle stood here so close to our small village."

Kirk winced. "Uh, well—"

"Well, it *is* common for people to miss our humble home," Rob chuckled. "I'm sure you mistook it as some mountain when you arrived, hm?"

"Mm, yes, that is true." Dave frowned. "But it's so massive! How can anyone not see it?"

"It happens." Rob nodded to Kirk. "Go inform our castle maître d' of our guests. I'll tend to their food."

Kirk nodded in return, giving Rob a silent 'thank you' in his stare. He turned to the two guests as Rob left for the kitchens.

"Are you two okay now? Anymore blankets?"

"No, I think we're good," Chris said.

"Very well. Feel free to make yourself home, but please, don't leave the room without one of us to guide you. The castle is very large and you could get lost." *And knowing how hurt James is, he'd probably kill our poor guests on the spot...*

Dave gave him another charming smile. "Oh, we won't, Mr. Hammett."

Kirk felt another blush rise on his cheeks. "Call me Kirk."

"Okay, Kirk." He wrapped the blankets tighter around him. "Thank you again, so much. We'd be goners if you hadn't let us in."

"Think nothing of it. I will be back shortly."

**

Chris and David watched Kirk turn away and leave the den, shutting the doors securely behind him. They turned their heads in the direction where Rob was. From where they sat, they could see the mouth of the kitchen, the flames of the stove and two pots on top, steaming rising from the rim.

Chris licked his lips. "Damn that smells good."

"It does." He elbowed Chris's side hard and glared at him. "But keep your head in the game. We're not here to mingle and make nice-nice. We're here for one reason only and that's to skin that puppy's hide."

Chris frowned, rubbing his side through the blankets. "Yeah, yeah, I know." His attention drifted around the room again, at the gold and silver trinkets, the bejeweled furniture, the soft linen and curtains. "Gotta admit, I really wish I could've brought that big bag with me. Imagine how much all of this worth. Castle's gotta be over 500 years old or something."

"Pup first, gold later." Dave glanced down at his gold-embroidered blankets around his shoulders and fingered the gold trimming of one. "Though... that doesn't mean we can't take a few things, I guess."

Chris smirked. "Now you're talking *my* language."

Dave rolled his eyes. "Petty thief. You should aim higher. Gold is momentary value. This so-called wolf? *That* is immortality." He snickered. "And that lasts longer than gold."

"I still like my gold." He leaned in closer to Dave, lowering his voice further. "So what's the plan to get Wolfie?"

"No idea yet, so keep following my lead. We'll get to him somehow."

"Maybe you can weasel it out of that Kirk guy. He seems to have a thing for you, hm?"

Dave shrugged, smiled. "Heh. It happens."

They quickly shut up as the doors to the den opened again.

**

Kirk entered with someone else this time, a tall red-haired man with a beak nose, a mustache and a strong jaw, wearing different colored regal clothes than the others. He was also not as friendly-looking as the other two.

The man stopped in front of them, arms crossed over his chest. "You must be the two guests Kirk has informed me of. David and Chris. I am Cliff Burton, the maître d' of Neuschwanstein Castle, home of our Master, Prince James Hetfield the Third. Kirk here tells me you were caught in the storm as you headed back home for Christmas. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that is true," David said. "We only seek shelter for the night, if that is okay."

"That is not up for me to decide. That belongs to our Prince, and he doesn't take kindly to unexpected guests."

Kirk stepped in. "But Cliff—"

Cliff rose a hand in front of Kirk. He recrossed his arms. "You may enjoy the food Robert is

making while I ask our Prince his thoughts. If the decision is for you to go, then you must leave post haste. If the decision is for you to stay, then we will set the ground rules that you *must* abide by, at all costs, else the consequences will be quite unfavorable."

"I can understand of the Prince doesn't trust outsiders," Dave said, "but if you just let us talk to him—"

"That is not permitted. Only I, Ja—" Cliff stopped, cleared his throat. "Only I have authority to speak with him."

"But if he talks to us, maybe he won't see us so unfavorably? I mean, how can he judge us if hasn't met us?"

Kirk nodded. "He brings up a good point."

Cliff shot Kirk a glare. "You know how the Master is."

"But they have done nothing."

"You *know* why, Hammett."

"He could still make an exception!"

"*If* the Master decides to say yes."

"Then let us speak with him," Dave said. "Please. If we just talk to him—"

"For the last time, it is *not* permitted."

"Then tell him we would only stay one night. Just one. Please." Dave's eyes shined. "It is nightfall soon and the storm is getting worse. We couldn't survive the trip back home in these conditions. I mean, all we want to do is go *home*, so I can see my best friend Lars again."

Cliff's face fell, as did Kirk's, at the mention of Lars's name. His arms uncrossed, falling prone to his side.

"You know Lars?"

Dave's eyes widened. "You know Lars too?" He broke into a wide grin. "Oh my God, was he here? Is this the *very* castle he spoke of?" He turned to Chris. "Do you think so?"

Chris blinked, sat up, feigned a smile too. "I... I guess so, yeah. I guess it is."

"W-What did he say?" Kirk asked, his eyes glossing over.

"Oh, he called me this morning, saying he *just* made it home for Christmas, and he wondered where Chris and I were! See, we were heading towards Berlin for Christmas to see friends when I got word from Lars that he was home, and I was so shocked! I mean, he was gone for weeks, and we thought he would never come back. Not even his father said where he was. We had missed him — I missed him *so* much! He and I have been best friends since we were children, you see. He told me he had gotten lost in the snow and that he was saved from the storm by staying at this beautiful castle with a wonderful prince, and he had been there for so long, and now he was home, and *man!*" He laughed, slapped his hands on his knees. "I had no idea it was here! What are the chances of that, huh?"

Cliff took a deep breath. "Good chances, I say." He noticed Rob enter with a large tray of warm

food and gestured to him to come forward. "Eat as much as you want as I go talk to our Prince. I'm... sure he will accommodate your needs. It is only for one night."

Dave smiled the same he did Kirk before. "Thank you *so* much, Mr. Burton. It's all we want. One night only, and then in the morning... I get to see Lars again." *With a brand new wolf rug.*

Rob perked up as he laid the tray on the table in front of them. "Did... did he say Lars's name?"

Kirk nodded. "He did."

"You know Lars?"

Dave grinned. "Best friend."

"How is he doing? Did he arrive home safe?"

"From what he said over the phone, he did..."

Cliff watched Kirk and Rob drag chairs over to the couch, listening intently to Dave telling the story of how he and Lars met during childhood and became best of friends. He sighed and quietly let them be. The prince probably would let them stay, but there was a good chance he would be angry hearing Lars's name again. He couldn't predict what the Master would say. He just hoped the prince would not lash out and kill these defenseless men. Even though Lars couldn't come back anymore, he was sure Lars would hate them further if they killed his best friend David.

**

In the West Wing, Cliff's footsteps ricocheted off the walls, resonating everywhere. As he came close to James's chambers, he passed by Lars's old room and saw the destruction inside. He shook his head. Just like the old James to destroy that which hurt him. He made a mental note to deal with this mess in the New Year, when the spell was permanent and there was nothing left to do but recuperate and figure out what to do next.

The prince's door was slightly ajar when he approach James's chambers. He peeked in for a brief moment to see how James was doing.

James wasn't there.

He took his time opening the door. The metal hinges creaked for a brief moment. Once there was enough space, Cliff slipped inside.

The room wasn't in tatters like Lars's old one. He had expected the prince to destroy his chambers like he did the day he became a beast, but there was no sign of damage at all.

There was no sounds either.

No sign of the prince.

Oh God. Cliff's heart sunk into his stomach. *No. Don't think that way. Don't you dare.* He checked the table, where the light of the rose still glowed pink. He sighed in relief. *He's okay, Cliff. He's okay. Now find him.*

The next place to look was obvious: the Master's bedroom. If he wasn't there, he'd have to check the other places James could be. The library. The North Tower. Outside in the East Wing gardens enduring the storm, perhaps. He knew James was foolhardy when sad.

Cliff walked to the bedroom doors and knocked on them gently.

Nothing.

He rattled the handles.

Locked.

His knocks were harder than before. The doors shook.

Nothing again.

Dammit James. He rattled the handles harder—

"What did I say, Jason?"

Cliff startled, hearing the Master's voice through the doors. An angry, resigned, tired voice. A sad voice.

"I told you to go," James continued. "Leave this place already."

"It's not Jason, my Lord. It's Cliff."

"Cliff?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I thought..." James sighed. "Nevermind. Give me a moment."

Things moved inside. The doors unlocked. James pushed them open and there in front of Cliff stood the Prince, his eyes red-rimmed and wet, body hunched over as if the weight of the universe rested on his shoulders. He stunk of strong wine.

On the bed lay Lars's gold outfit, flanked by two empty wine bottles.

Cliff's eyes watered. *Oh James...*

"What is it, Cliff?"

He diverted his attention back to James and cleared his throat. "We have guests, my Lord. They were stranded in the storm and have asked for sanctuary through the night."

"One night?"

"Yes. Just for tonight. They wish to return home in the morning."

"Fine. It is granted. Let them rest in the South Wing, feed them well and see them off in the morning." He gave Cliff a pointed look. "But do not put them in the Sapphire Room."

"Of course, my Lord."

"Thank you. See yourself out."

Cliff nodded. "As you wish, my Lord."

But Cliff didn't move as James turned his back to him and returned to the bed. He stood there watching his prince return to a pure state of mourning, lifting Lars's gold outfit from the bed and

cradling it in his arms, like the body was still inside its fine fabric. Like Lars hadn't disappeared. Like Lars was still there. Still with him.

He came forward to James, sitting next to him on the bed. James didn't seem to notice him at all, until Cliff finally rested a long arm around his shoulders and pulled him close to his chest.

They said nothing. James didn't cry. Tears wetted the collar of Cliff's jacket, and that was all Cliff knew the prince would allow.

He sat there, holding James to his chest with his own eyes wet, staring out the window at the snowstorm outside.

Wherever you are Lars, I hope to God that you are happy. Because our James is miserable without you.

Cliff waited a long time for the prince to pull away. When James finally lifted his head and rubbed his face with the back of his paw, he smiled at Cliff half-heartedly.

"Thank you."

He smiled back, squeezing James's shoulder. "I am always here for you James." He leaned forward and kissed James's forehead, the fur brushing his lips. "We all are."

James cleared his throat, putting distance between him and Cliff. "You, uh, better go back to the others. Tend to the guests and all that."

"As you wish, my Lord." He squeezed James's shoulder one last time. "I will come by later with dinner."

"Thank you."

He stood from the bed and pivoted on his heel, leaving the prince in peace. But as he stepped outside and started to close the bedroom doors, he stopped for a moment, stared James in the eye and then bowed deeply to his prince.

"Always in your service, my Lord... to the end."

James favored him with a smile that Cliff knew was sincere, and it gave Cliff enough peace of mind to shut the doors and leave the prince alone. But for the first time since the spell was cursed upon the castle a hundred years ago, Cliff was scared. He had no idea what was going to happen. Time ran out. There was no hope left. But he knew one thing for certain: they would never leave their prince. Not like Lars did, and not like Jason. They would never, ever abandon their prince, no matter what.

Chapter 22

Jason sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the lone suitcase he packed with all of his belongings. A hundred years into one bag, and it wasn't as difficult as he expected it to be. He packed the essentials: warm clothes, undergarments and gold, the only currency he had that could be used in the outside world—maybe. He didn't have much else to pack. He was already going to look strange in the outside world wearing regal servant clothes. But he was sure Lars would help him out once he left.

All he had left now was Lars. If it wasn't so close to nightfall, and if the storm hadn't occurred, he would've left immediately for Lars's home, but he had no clue how the ring worked. Would he show up instantly in Lars's house, or outside it, or 10 miles away, or 20 miles away, or what? He didn't want to chance getting lost in the snow storm so late at night with no hope of surviving and no one to help him. It would have to wait until morning.

Jason stared at the ring on his hand.

His blue eyes glossed over.

It still hurts.

He closed his eyes and sighed, bowing his neck.

It still fucking hurts.

A knock on his door startled Jason out of his thoughts. He scrambled to close his suitcase, and then stood up from the bed.

"Yes?"

The door opened and Jason froze as Cliff stepped inside, a hand on the doorknob.

"Oh. You're still here."

Jason grunted. "And I can tell you're *so* ecstatic about that. Though I'm sure you'd be happy if I got lost tonight."

Cliff glared.

He looked away and sighed. "I'm sorry."

"Hm." Cliff gestured him forward. "Well, since you are here, you still have a duty in this castle as majordomo, so I suggest you come to dinner and greet our guests in the South Wing. After which you may retire for the evening and do whatever you like."

Jason frowned, following Cliff out of his room. "Guests? When did we have guests?"

"This afternoon. They came in seeking shelter from the storm, and they will be leaving in the morning."

"Huh." Jason closed his chamber door. "That's... rather convenient for them, don't you think?"

"Save the suspicion for your outside life, Newsted."

"I'm just saying—"

"Stop." Cliff shot another glare at him. "Tonight, we treat our guests like *guests*. Understand?"

"Fine." Jason flanked Cliff's side. A pang of nostalgia hit him as they walked down the halls together, heading for the South Wing. "I'm sorry, Cliff."

Cliff said nothing. Their footsteps ricocheted off the walls, his off-time with Cliff's. It made an awful sound, a weird sound, when before they used to walk in tandem with each other.

As they reached the South Wing, Jason heard the jovial sounds of Kirk and Rob's laughter, mixing with the foreign sounds of what he assumed were their guests for tonight. Jason's last guests to attend to, before he left in the morning.

I can't let it end this way. I can't leave my friends like this.

Jason stopped a few feet away from the dining hall's doors. A few moments later, Cliff realized Jason wasn't beside him and he too stopped, a hand on the door as he turned around to face him.

"What is it?" Cliff asked.

Jason's voice was below a whisper. "I'm truly sorry, Cliff. I shouldn't have done what I did." He took a long, deep breath. "I shouldn't have let my jealousy blind me."

"Little too late for that."

He bowed his neck as Cliff pushed the doors open.

Inside dinner was already served on table, food piled up on gold plates, the gold covers taken off and put to the side. Rob and Kirk sat across from a red-haired man and a dark-haired man, laughing over something, some joke. Their laughter petered off as they noticed Cliff come inside.

"Cliff!" Kirk waved him over. "You finally arrived!" His smile disappeared, along with Rob's, as they noticed Jason.

Cliff smiled. "Apologies for my tardiness." He gestured to Jason. "This is Jason Newsted, castle majordomo. He'll be dining with us this evening, gentlemen."

The red-haired man grinned. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Newsted." He stood up and walked to Jason at the end of the table, his hand outstretched. "I'm David Scott Mustaine, and my friend here is Chris Broderick."

Jason shook his hand. "Yes, Cliff here informed me of your misfortune this afternoon. We'll be sure to accommodate any needs you have for the evening, so you may enjoy your stay."

David chuckled. "Oh I'm sure I will."

Jason frowned.

That... didn't sound sincere.

A pinch to his hand broke him out of his thoughts. Jason winced and glanced at Cliff, meeting his glare.

"Sit down before the food gets cold, hm?"

Cliff turned away, before Jason could say anything. He saw Cliff take a seat beside Chris, and he

followed suit, taking a seat beside David.

David smiled. "Great food, huh?"

Jason weakly smiled in return. "Yes, it is."

David returned to talking with the others about whatever it was they were discussing beforehand, but Jason's mind drifted elsewhere. Something was upsetting him. Something didn't feel right as he sat next to these two men. When Lars came to the castle, he felt suspicious and jealousy. But now that his jealousy was uplifted, he only felt suspicious—and threatened.

He shook his head.

Stop that Newsted. You're being silly. They are guests. Don't make the same mistake twice.

**

The dinner went by as smooth as possible. Jason opted for staying out of conversation, instead watching Kirk, Rob and Cliff easily converse with Chris and David. He quietly ate as David talked about his past, where he came from, what his hobbies were—something about hunting, he didn't particularly care to hear about that. Kirk and Rob seemed to like David instantly, cracking up over all of his jokes, while Cliff was much more reserved.

"Tell us about Lars," Kirk said. "How is he doing?"

"Well, I haven't seen him, but I think he's doing okay." David grinned. "I can't wait to see him. Like I said, we've been best friends since childhood. Had I known he was living here with all of you I would've gone in a heartbeat! You are all so generous here."

Jason's attention drifted elsewhere as the conversation went on about Lars. He finished his meal and opted out of eating the chocolate mousse dessert Rob had made for them all. And just as Jason was ready to dismiss himself for the evening, David said something that made him stop.

"Oh yes, he said the prince was *wonderful*. Very kind and sweet to him."

Jason startled. He looked at David. "He said that?"

"Yes, a little past noon today, when he called me."

"He said the *prince* was wonderful?"

"And why not? He could've made us stay in the snowstorm, right? And yet, here we are, enjoying a lovely meal, done by you, Mr. Trujillo."

Rob smiled. "Thank you, David."

"He really did say that?" Kirk whispered, desperation in his voice. "He said the prince was wonderful?"

"Oh Kirk, he wouldn't shut up about him! He said he was so kind to let him stay here, and that he wishes he could see the prince again."

Jason frowned. *Bullshit.*

Kirk's eyes watered. "Oh God... he said that. He did..." He turned to Rob, his voice choked up. "He truly didn't want to leave."

Rob rested a hand over Kirk's. "But he's gone now. There is nothing we can do."

David's smile waned. "What do you mean? Lars could come back if he wanted to. I could talk to him, if you want."

"I'm afraid that can't happen, David," Cliff said. He turned to Rob. "Why don't you two return to your chambers for the evening? I'll have some of the servants come clean up the table later."

Rob nodded. "Thank you." He took Kirk by the hand and smiled at the guests. "It was a pleasure meeting you both. Have a good evening."

"Yes, same to you," David said, and he watched the two of them leave the dining hall, then turned to Cliff. "Did I say something wrong? I didn't mean to upset them."

Cliff sighed. "Lars left this morning on... bad terms, you see."

"Oh? He didn't talk to me about that. All I heard was praise."

"Yes, which is nice to hear, honestly."

"So why can't he come back?"

"It is against the Master's rules. Once you leave, you are not allowed to come back."

"Well that's a bit strange." David turned to Chris. "I think if we talked to him, we could convince him otherwise, yeah?"

Chris nodded. "Definitely."

"Unfortunately the Master is under the weather, so he cannot be disturbed at this time." Cliff stood from the table. "Speaking of which, I must bring to him his dinner. Jason, could you escort our guests to their room for the evening? Emerald, adjacent to Sapphire."

He nodded, standing as well. "Yes. Right this way, gentlemen."

David sighed. "Are you sure the prince can't come down to see us, Cliff? I would love to thank him for his hospitality."

"No, he cannot."

"Maybe we could help you deliver the food?"

"He said no," Jason snapped. "Now follow me please."

David gave Jason a dirty look. "Don't need to be rude."

"He does that too often," Cliff said. He offered his hand to David. "I hope you have a pleasant evening and enjoy your stay. Should you need anything, Jason will not be far from you."

David smiled and shook his hand. "Thank you so much Cliff. I appreciate it. I just wish I could say thank you to the prince myself."

"Perhaps in the morning." Cliff shook Chris's hand next. "We shall see what he says."

"That'll be great," Chris said. "Have a good night."

"And to you two as well."

As Cliff exited the opposite way of the south dining hall, Jason directed David and Chris towards the doors. "Wait here for a moment please."

"Sure, no problem," David said with a smile. "Take your time."

Jason's stomach churned. *I know there's something wrong with you. I can feel it.* He turned away and quickly caught up with Cliff, grabbing his bicep and squeezing it tightly.

"Wait, Cliff."

Cliff shook off Jason's grip. "What now?"

"Them. Chris and David."

"Yes? What about?"

"Can't you tell something is off here?"

Cliff rolled his eyes. "I have to tend to the prince."

He started to turn around again but Jason grabbed his forearm, yanking him around so they were face to face. "Listen to me."

"No. We are *not* having this conversation."

"It doesn't make sense."

"Your paranoia astounds me, Newsted."

"It *isn't* paranoia," Jason hissed. "Think about it. How can Lars change his mind so quickly in one day? After what he said to us. To the prince. And the way that David acts—"

"Enough."

"He's *way* too nice. I mean, the endless praise and the constant—"

"I said *enough*." Cliff yanked his arm out of Jason's grip once more. "I've had it with your so-called logic. Where did that get us last time?"

"That was a mistake. I was jealous. I admit it. I didn't want Lars to be the one. But you have to move past that. I know I'm right."

"Like you were before?"

"You have to believe me!"

"You lost my trust the second you hurt the prince's chance at happiness." Cliff turned his back to him. "Immediately report to the Garnet room next door to our guests. You are to stay there for the night, should they have any requests."

"But..." Jason reached out to him. "Cliff... please..."

"You are not *free* yet, Newsted. Do your duty."

"Cliff—"

"Dismissed."

Cliff walked away. The doors shut with a loud slam.

Jason sighed and bowed his neck. His hands clenched into shaking fists on his sides.

I know I'm right. I just know it.

His hands unfurled as he sighed.

And yet... I could be wrong. Again.

He ran his hands through his hair.

Fuck.

Jason quickly composed himself and turned on his heel, returning to the other side of the room. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he was paranoid, like Cliff said. Maybe deep down— a big, uneven, odds-against-it, could-be chance—that David could be the one. That Lars wasn't the right one. That David was instead. Or even Chris. The coincidences were similar to Lars's: someone arriving last minute before the spell breaks, someone that they all come to like without questioning? It was too similar. Too coincidental. Was that the reason why he was suspicious? Was he still jealous? Did jealousy still cloud his judgment?

Maybe I'm still am, in the end.

He shook his head. It didn't matter. Breaking the spell wasn't his concern anymore. Come morning, he was leaving, along with these two men.

"Is everything okay?" David asked. "I heard some shouting."

Jason smiled as he approached the two. "Yes, everything is fine. I had to ask Cliff something really quick."

"Oh. That's okay." David smiled in return. "Where are we staying tonight?"

"Emerald Room. I think you'll like it."

"If the room matches the name, I think we will." David opened the door, a sly smirk on his face. "Lead the way."

Jason ignored the clench of his stomach and the twist of his heart. His mind screamed *watch it*, and he ignored that too as he lead the two guests out of the dining hall to their room.

Behind him, David and Chris shared a look of triumph.

**

The three of them were silent as Jason led them down the halls to the Emerald Room. Behind him, Chris and Dave talked amongst themselves. They kept a good enough distance away from Jason, so he could not hear what they said.

"What's the plan?" Chris whispered into Dave's ear.

"At midnight, we move."

"Got it. Wait until everyone's asleep."

"That's right."

Chris nudged Dave's side. "You sure you wanna use the knife? The beast could make a lot of noise."

"So what? You've got the gun to hold them back."

"They could get reinforcements."

"By the time they do, I'll have skinned that pup's hide raw."

"Mm..." Chris eyed Jason ahead of them. He grabbed Dave's jacket and stopped them from following for a moment, lowering his voice further. "I really think you should take the gun. Make it an in-and-out job."

"What? Are you scared?"

"Well..." Chris nodded at Jason. "Look at him, man. Cliff was pretty intimidating too."

Dave rolled his eyes. "You have a *gun*, Christopher. Use it."

"Who says they don't either?"

"I don't believe it. You really are scared, aren't you?"

"I'm not! Look, I'm just saying--"

"That we can't fight them? We can't beat that blonde piece of shit, or that scrawny mater-dee whatever the fuck?"

"You're being irrational."

"And you're being a chickenshit."

"Is it so wrong of me to be cautious?"

"Cautious is one thing. Being a paranoid fool is a whole different matter that I just don't have time to deal with." He stabbed Chris's chest with his fingers. "Either get your act together, or I can do this on my fucking own."

"What seems to be the hold up?" Jason asked from ahead, smiling at them.

Chris startled while Dave kept his composure, smiling back. "Ah, Chris here was admiring your architecture. It's very lovely."

"Yes, it is. Each hall is different from each other. Perhaps in the morning, we can show you around." He turned back, gesturing them forward. "Follow me. We are almost there."

"Alright." Dave and Chris started to follow Jason again. As they did, he elbowed Chris's stomach hard and hissed into his ear. "You chickenshit. I'll show you. You're wrong."

Chris's eyes widened as Dave blatantly moved his hunting knife within viewing range, unsheathing it from its hidden compartment inside his jacket. "What are you fucking doing? Are you crazy?"

"I'm proving a goddamn point. Now shut up."

"He's going to catch us," Chris hissed through his teeth.

Dave smirked. "Exactly."

"You're nuts."

"Why? They're defenseless. Trust me." Dave chuckled. "You and me? We can do it. We can take him down, easily."

Chris frowned. "I thought you said you could do it on your own."

"Mm, I could, but I wanted to show you that they aren't so tough as you think they are." Dave winked. "Trust me. We can do it."

Chris threw his hands up in the air. "Alright. Fine. Whatever. I'll back you up."

"Good answer."

**

They rounded a few more halls, passing the old Sapphire Room, where it all began. Jason smiled as they walked by. Tomorrow, he'd get to see Lars again and start a new life. *Maybe it will all work out for the best in the end...*

"And here we are gentlemen," Jason announced as they stepped in front of two large green doors. "The Emerald Room."

When he opened them, Jason went inside first to lit up a good amount of candles. Once done, he invited the two men inside a large room filled with differing shades of green, black and gold. Two beds rested inside, both with canopies. Emeralds decorated all of the furniture and various other items. Chris and Dave stood at the mouth of the door, their eyes drifting everywhere.

"Wow," Dave said, "it's gorgeous."

"One of Kirk's favorite rooms that he designed." Jason walked around the room, pointing out different things. "Over here to your left is the bathroom. I'm not sure if we have running water thanks to the storm but if you wish for a hot bath I can arrange something with the servants."

"That'd be wonderful for the morning, really," Dave said. He kept his focus on the back of Jason's head as he pointed to the bed.

Chris met his eye, confused, and Dave mouthed the word, *The sheets. Rope.*

"Very well," Jason said. "In the morning it is."

Chris mouthed words back, *Got it.* He sat on one of the beds as Jason turned back to him. "Yes, morning would be great," Chris said. "I'm too tired from today."

"Of course. You've both had quite a hard journey."

From behind Jason, Chris started to knot the sheets tightly together.

"And I'm afraid that isn't over," Dave chuckled. "We still have to get back home, through all that snow. I can only hope the storm stops come the morning."

Chris quietly watched the back of Jason as he approached Dave.

"Yes. You'll be fine come the morning." Jason turned his way back to look at Chris. "Well, if there is nothing else—"

"Ah, wait, one thing." Dave grabbed Jason's shoulder, yanking him around. He gestured up to a portrait of a snow-capped forrest hanging on the wall. "Who made this beautiful painting here?"

Jason smiled. "That would be one of the prince's. He's very talented with a brush, isn't he?"

"Yes, he really is."

Dave lifted a hand up to brush his fingertips along the portrait's silver frame.

The glint of something silver caught Jason's eye.

In the soft candlelit room, Jason looked into Dave's jacket.

His smile disappeared as he made out what it was.

A large knife.

Dave smiled. His hand followed along the squared curve of the frame. "Very beautiful..."

Their eyes met.

Chris untucked a pillow from its case.

Dave's eyebrows rose. "What's wrong, Jason?"

Jason still stared at Dave's jacket. At the knife.

Dave followed Jason's line of sight. He bent his neck down, opened up his jacket, showed off the hunting knife in plain view—and smiled. Chuckled. "Ah yes. Silly me. Must've gotten out of its sheath." He grabbed the handle and slipped the knife out. Light glinted off its sharp edge. "I swear, Jason." He turned his wrist back and forth, light bouncing off the sides. "Knives sometimes have a mind of their own."

Jason shivered. "You... carry a knife around?"

Dave stopped twisting the knife. "Oh. Yes."

Chris gently dropped the sheet rope onto the floor.

Dave's narrowed hazel eyes reflected off the knife's silver surface.

"For hunting."

Jason licked his lips. "You... hunt?"

"Yes. I do."

Chris stood from the bed, pillow case in hand.

Dave lowered the knife, tilted his head to the side.

"Remember? It's one of my hobbies."

He gave Jason a charming smile. And Jason abruptly remembered and instantly calmed down,

breathing a sigh of relief.

"Oh. Oh yes, that's right." He chuckled, smiling back. "You, uh, you hunt for fun. Right?"

Dave chuckled.

Chris stood directly behind Jason.

"Yes."

Dave rose the knife close to his face.

His thumb ran close to the sharp end.

"I hunt..."

He stared into Jason's eyes.

And smirked.

"*Wolves.*"

Jason's blue eyes widened.

A chill ran down his spine.

His next word was a muffled gasp.

Chapter 23

The whole world turned black. Jason fell face forward, chest first onto the ground. A huge weight landed onto his back, pinning him down.

Pain shot up from his arms as they were held back behind him by even stronger arms. Something wrapped around his wrists, tying them together in a position position that had him wincing.

Hot breath blew back into his face from whatever was around his head, obscuring his vision. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't move. His arms were secured behind him. He was helpless.

I knew it. I fucking knew it! Why did I doubt myself? I fell right into their trap like a fool!

The arms left him, but the weight on top of him didn't leave. It worsened. He felt what was a knee on the small on his back as he was shoved into a kneeling position. Hands secured around his shoulders, keeping him in place, and he thrashed as hard as he could to save himself.

Dave's chuckle was next to his ear. "What did I say, Chris? Not so tough, is he?"

"Fuck you!" Jason thrashed his head. "Let me go!"

The cloth around his head was yanked off.

Dave stood above him, pillow case thrown to the side. The knife glinted in the candlelight. "One condition." He knelt down, running the blunt side of the knife along Jason's jawline. "You either help me get to the prince..." The knife slipped under Jason's chin and pressed against his throat. "Or don't." He smiled. "Your choice."

Jason chuckled. "Go ahead. Kill me. You'd be doing me a favor."

Dave's eyebrows rose. "Oh. Who said anything about you dying?" He lifted the knife from Jason's throat and waved it between them like a silver flag of death. "If you cooperate, then..." He bumped the blunt tip of the knife on Jason's nose. "I don't have to kill your precious prince." He tilted his head to the side with a smile. "What'd you say? Hm?"

He stayed quiet, focusing on the knife in Dave's hand, between their faces. He could see his reflection: a bruise on his chin, his hair tousled from the pillow case, Chris behind him, hands on his shoulders, knee to his back.

Jason looked at Dave over the knife's silver edge. He smiled.

Dave lowered the knife—

And Jason spat in his face.

"Ugh!" Dave wiped at his cheek with the back of his hand.

Jason snickered. "Go ahead and try it. James will fucking kill you." He leaned forward, the tendons of his neck stretching as he hissed, "*You won't win.*"

Dave glared at Jason, flicking the saliva off his hand to the floor. But his anger quickly turned into amusement, his chuckles loud and upsetting in the room. He leaned up over Jason, measuring him up with his eyes, chewing on his bottom lip.

"Hm." He stood up straight, shrugging. "I guess you are pretty worthless to me anyway."

He sheathed the knife into his jacket again.

Jason frowned as Dave started to pull something else out.

"Especially since I have..."

He gasped at the magic mirror in Dave's hand.

"This."

No. Jason saw his reflection in silver again, a perfect reflection in an intricate oval circle. *No. Lars. No...* He glared up at Dave. "What did you do?" He thrashed again, more violent than before. "*What did you do to Lars—?!*"

A sharp pain hit his head.

Jason grunted and fell forward.

The whole world blackened again one last time, as his cheek landed and scraped on the blue carpeted floor, and the last thing he heard was Dave's voice.

"Pathetic."

**

Dave shook his head, surveying Jason's prone body. "You did a shitty job with the ropework."

Chris rolled his eyes, coming to his feet. "Well they're sheets. I did what I could. It's not like he's going to wake up anyway."

"I still could've done better. But it's fine. I proved my point." Dave toed Jason's side, shoving him over onto his back. The man was out cold. "Easily subdued. See?"

"Yeah, you're right. As usual." Chris gestured to the mirror. "We going to use that finally or what?"

"So impatient." Dave gazed into his reflection as he lifted the mirror high. "Show me the pathway to the prince's room of Neuschwanstein Castle."

The bright green glow from the mirror illuminated the blue room and Dave and Chris's faces. They left the chambers and followed the path shown before the.

"You sure he isn't going to wake up?" Chris whispered as they walked down the hallway.

"Will you stop being paranoid? Of course he isn't going to wake up. You saw it yourself."

"I know. It's just... I can't believe how easy this is."

"I know." Dave smirked. "This is the easiest hunt I've ever been on."

"A little too easy if you ask me."

"And there you go with that paranoia."

"I'm just saying—"

"And here's what *I'm* saying." Dave stopped, grabbed Chris's shirt and yanked him forward.
"Shut up. Got it?"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry!"

Dave shoved Chris away. "Good."

In the mirror's reflection, green light crackled around the image like electricity. There was an image of the next pathway they should go down. Together they left the South Wing and made their way to the prince's chambers.

**

As Chris and David closed in on the West Wing, Cliff entered James's room with his dinner, as promised. James still sat in his room as Cliff left him earlier in the day, cradling Lars's outfit in his arms.

He rested the tray on the edge of his bed. "Here you are, my Lord. I made sure Robert made your favorites."

James nodded.

"Will you eat at least some of it?"

No response.

"Promise me, James."

He watched James sigh and heard him rumbled out, "I promise."

"Thank you. Enjoy your meal, my Lord."

**

James didn't watch Cliff leave. He heard his footsteps, the door opening and closing shut, and he waited a few moments more before he lifted his head and stared out his window.

The storm piled up snow on his windowsill. Ice cracked across the glass. He could imagine his balcony, the pounds of snow there waiting for him come the morning.

Lars...

His paw pressed the outfit over his heart.

Be safe.

**

As Cliff went through the halls of the West Wing, Chris and Dave began to enter it. Chris stayed close by Dave's side, a bit frightened by the amounts of destruction around them, the wet stone walls, the broken furniture, the cracked mirrors and tattered paintings. But Dave wasn't deterred. He focused his attention on the mirror, guiding him to his prize.

"Okay." Chris looked around, grimacing. "This place is spooky."

"Calm down."

"I just don't like the looks of this."

"Of course you don't."

"I'm just saying—"

Dave stopped walking and dropped the mirror to his side, glaring at Chris.

"—I'm going to shut up now."

"Good."

They followed the mirror again, rounding the West Wing's corners and halls. Their hearts pounded against their ribcages, a thumping sound coursing their their heads.

Dave gasped as the image changed in the mirror. "Shit."

"What is--"

"Shh." He pressed a finger to Chris's lips and then pointed to the mirror.

Chris's eyes widened.

Cliff was coming right their way, the next hall down.

"Shit." Chris hissed into Dave's ear, hand on his shoulder. "What are we gonna do?"

Dave rolled his eyes. "'What are we going to do?' Come on. I thought I proved my point with blondie back in the blue room."

"We jump him?"

"Precisely."

"But how?"

Dave waved the mirror. "Duh." He peeked around the corner and saw Cliff enter the hall adjacent to theirs. He kept his voice to a low whisper as he asked the mirror, "Show us the nearest area to where we are with a rope."

He shoved the mirror into Chris's hands as green light shot out.

**

Cliff startled. *What was that?*

The halls had briefly flashed light—a green light—but he shook his head, moving on. *Your mind's playing tricks on you, Burton.*

**

Dave pushed Chris away, making him stumble down the hall. "Find it and come back immediately."

Chris gave Dave a thumbs up and followed the mirror.

**

Cliff slowed down. *Voices?* He frowned. *No such thing. No one else is allowed here...* He shook his head. "Better get to bed."

**

Dave waited around the corner, watching Cliff walk down.

A smile played on his lips. *Little closer...*

**

Cliff rounded the corner.

Dave ran right into him.

Both of them fell backwards onto the floor.

"Oh shit!" Dave immediately scrambled onto his feet. "I'm so sorry Cliff." He went to Cliff's side, offering a hand. "I didn't know you'd be up at this hour—"

Cliff slapped his hand away and glared up at him. "What are you doing here?"

"Ah, I was—"

"I *specifically* told you the rules! No one is allowed to wander around the Master's castle. Especially in the West Wing!"

From down the hall, Chris picked up a long piece of rope. He could hear Dave and Cliff's voices.

"I'm so sorry, Cliff, truly. I didn't know the West Wing was off limits."

Chris grabbed a large book in his other hand, quietly making his way down the hall.

"Just be glad the Master is not wandering the halls tonight. The prince can be kind, but disobey his rules, and he is not someone you want to deal with."

He circled around the corner and peeked over the edge.

Nearby, he watched Dave plea before Cliff. "Please don't tell the Prince about this. Please! I truly didn't mean to come around here, honest. I just couldn't sleep, what with the storm and all."

"But you specifically knew not to walk around. You knew it was against the rules."

Chris walked out, book in hand, rope in the other.

"It's what I do at home, Cliff. Storms really upset me. I'm sorry. I truly am sorry."

Cliff sighed. "I understand. I'll forgive you this one time."

"So you won't go tell the prince?"

"No, I won't."

Dave smiled.

Chris stood right behind Cliff.

Dave landed a hand on Cliff's shoulder.

"Thank you, Cliff."

He squeezed it.

Chris lifted the book above Cliff's head.

"Thank you."

Hazel eyes glanced behind Cliff.

Cliff frowned.

Dave nodded.

"Now."

Cliff's last word was *oof* before it all turned black.

**

Back in the South Wing, Jason started to come to. The back of his head throbbed painfully and his blurred vision went in and out until it finally focused. He forgot for a second where he was, what had happened to him, how he got here—and he gasped when it all came back to him.

Dave. Chris. The mirror.

Lars.

The hunting knife.

James!

He struggled in his bonds, rocking back and forth across the floor until he landed up on his back. He sat up, straggling onto his feet, head dizzy still from the impact of Chris's elbow into the back of his head. But he made himself stumbled over to the mirror, turning his back to it to see what was holding his arms back.

Sheets. They tied me up with fucking bed sheets.

Jason growled. He started to wiggle his arms around, release them from the knots, but they weren't loosening fast enough and his arms were already strained.

"Shit."

He darted across the room for anything sharp, anything at all, but he could find nothing at all to cut the cloth from his arms.

"Shit! Fucking..." He took a deep breath, calming himself down. "Think Newsted. Think."

He was all the way in the South Wing. Cliff, Rob and Kirk were in the East. Dave and Chris were probably in the West by now. He had to get out of here, fast, but without his arms, he was useless.

Shit. If only Dave had dropped that knife or something—

His eyes widened.

"The kitchens."

He stumbled to the door, hoping there was no sort of furniture blocking the exit from the outside.

Jason turned around, his back to the door. His bound hands fumbled with the knob.

Sweat trickled down the sides of his face.

"Come on... come on..."

His fingers grabbed the knob.

He twisted his whole body to the right. His teeth gritted down hard.

"Come on..."

The door easily turned.

He grinned, pulling the door open.

"Gotcha."

Jason used a foot to kick it all the way open and rushed out of the room. His heart was lodged all the way in his throat and his head hurt as he ran down the halls to the kitchens to find himself a knife.

There was thankfully a few candles on as he entered the south hall kitchens. With his foot he kicked open a bunch of drawers and cabinets, searching through everything for the utensils.

"Dammit, where the fuck are they?"

He ran to the stove where the last drawers were. Jason turned his back to them and looked over his shoulder as he opened each one of them up.

"Spoons... forks..."

He beamed, opening the last drawer.

"Knives."

Behind backwards, he grabbed the largest knife he could find with his fingers and took his time situating the sharp end on the cloth behind.

His shoulders strained, shot pain across and down his back as he sliced his way through the cloth. He grit his teeth, grunted as the knife slowly cut the binds away.

A wave of tiredness washed over him, but Jason pushed it back. *Don't give up... come on Jason... come on...*

The knife made it through the halfway point.

Do it... get to the prince... save him...

Jason shut his eyes tight.

Save Lars...

The knife almost made it to the end.

Jason growled.

Do it!

The knife made its last cut.

It cluttered to the floor as Jason shook the sheets off his arms.

"Yes!" He rubbed his wrists for a brief moment, letting the blood rush back, and then quickly snatched the knife up, sprinting out of the kitchens to the West Wing.

I'm coming James!

**

Cliff slowly came back from a world of darkness. His vision was blurry at first. Against his back he felt something cool and wet. His fingers brushed whatever it was behind him, and when he felt stone, he knew it was a wall. He tried to move his arms, but something held them together. Both his arms and his legs. He saw a torch but something was blocking the light. Something round... with hair... and...

His eyes focused on a devilish smirk.

"Hello Cliff."

Cliff snapped awake.

Dave knelt above him, a knee planted into the ground, a knife in hand.

"Awake now, hm?"

Cliff growled back. He struggled to his feet, but a strong hand shoved him back into a sitting position against the wall.

He looked up and saw Chris there, shaking his head no. "Don't even try."

Cliff turned back to glare at Dave. "What's the meaning of this? What are you—"

"Shhh." Dave pressed the knife to his lips, shaking his head. "No talking."

"I demand to know—"

Dave pointed the sharp knife tip right at his jugular.

Cliff choked on his next word.

"That's better." He pulled the knife away, resting it on his thigh. "See? I'm not mean. I just like getting my way."

Cliff's upper lip twitched, but he bit on his tongue.

Dave quietly stared at Cliff. All that could be heard was the crackle of the torch and the storm's roar outside the castle walls.

Then, Dave lifted the knife and pressed its sharp tip into the carpet.

He twisted it around in a circle. Again. And again.

Cliff didn't move.

Chris kept his hand on Cliff's shoulder.

And then, Dave tutted, shaking his head. "It's such a shame I had to do this to you, Cliff. You know that?"

A few halls down, Jason picked up the sound of voices.

"You're a nice guy. I like you. All of you, really. You've been very kind of us."

Jason slowed down his pace. He listened in to the voice.

Dave stopped spinning the knife. He picked it up and pointed it at Cliff's face. "If *only* you had taken me to the prince like I asked. I mean, all I wanted to do was see him. What was so impossible about that request?"

Jason gasped. *Dave*.

"Ah well. I guess it doesn't matter anymore." Dave looked his reflection in the blade. "I just find it sad it has to be like this."

Jason quietly walked down the rest of the hall. Dave's voice picked up as he came near.

"You'd be in your room, tucked into bed, quietly asleep..." Dave turned the knife onto its side. "While I..."

He peeked over the corner of the hall.

Dave stabbed the knife into the air.

"Finish my little hunt."

Cliff trembled. "Hunt?"

Dave chuckled. "You don't remember either? Hunting is one of my *favorite* hobbies." He tutted again. "And here I thought you were paying attention, unlike Jason."

Cliff gasped. "What... what did you do to him?"

"Heh. Same thing I did to that other nuisance of mine."

He pulled out the magic mirror.

Cliff's eyes watered. "No..."

Dave glanced at himself in the mirror. "Y'know, since I figured Lars wouldn't be needing this anymore, I thought I'd come bring it back to its owner." He placed it back into his jacket as he waved the knife between them. "As well as collect a souvenir."

Jason's hand clenched around his own knife as he watch Cliff shudder and hold back tears. *That bastard. That fucking...* He lifted the knife. *I'll show him. I'll fucking make him—*

He started to round the corner—and abruptly stopped, going back to his hiding place.

No. Act rationally Newsted. You can't go in there as a one-man show. You need fucking back up. Get Kirk and Rob. Get everyone else. You're the prince's only hope.

"No..." He heard Cliff whisper down the hall. "You can't... you didn't..."

Dave nodded. "I did. Had to be done." He smiled. "How else do you think I got the mirror, hm?"

Cliff shook his head. "No... please... don't kill him... don't kill James."

"Shhh." Dave pressed a finger to Cliff's lips.

"Don't kill James."

"Shh. Don't cry."

"Not James—"

"Shh. Shh. It's okay." He leaned forward, closing the gap between Cliff and him. "I won't hurt him. I'm rather good at what I do." He glanced up at Chris. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"I'd say so."

"See?" He rested his free hand in Cliff's hair. "I'm not going to hurt him." He pressed the cool edge of the knife against Cliff's cheek. "Not like I did Lars and Jason, you see."

Liar! Jason wanted to shout, but he held himself back, biting down hard on his bottom lip. He dropped the knife to the floor, knowing it was useless now for him to do this on his own.

He ran a hand over his face. *Did he... did he actually...* Jason shook his head. *No, no way. He couldn't have killed Lars. Could he? But he has the mirror... there's no way Lars would've given up our location or that mirror unless...*

James's sad blue eyes came in his purview. The gold outfit. The prince's cries, kneeling in the destroyed room. Weeping, begging for Lars.

"Come back... come back..."

Jason slammed his head against the wall. *It's not true. It can't be true.*

"Why?" Jason heard Cliff whisper, emotion thick in his voice. "Why did you kill them?"

He peeked over the corner again.

"Same reason why I need to dispose you now." Dave shoved his forehead into Cliff's. "You're in my way."

Jason snatched up the knife.

Dave stood up over Cliff.

He rounded the corner.

His feet marched forward—Dave smiled—and Jason gasped, watching Dave sheath the knife again. "But I won't kill you now."

Time slowed down. His skin prickled. *Go back. Get out. Move!*

Cliff's eyes met his.

Dave motioned to Chris. "Let's move our guest elsewhere, hm?"

Jason dropped the knife.

Cliff opened his mouth.

Jason shook his head no. *Don't—!*

"*JASON!*"

The shout echoed everywhere.

Chris and Dave startled. They looked over their shoulders.

Jason froze in place.

Dave's shock quickly turned into anger. He pointed at Jason. "STOP HIM!"

Chris charged after him, pulling out something from his jacket.

Jason trembled.

A gun.

Cliff shouted again, "NO!"

Dave shouted too. "NOT THAT!"

Chris charged forward.

Each footstep sounded like a shot.

Jason's look down at his hands.

Chris came closer.

His left hand went to his right.

The gun lifted up.

Jason's fingers touched the ring.

He twisted it once.

Jason looked up.

Chris aimed.

Twice.

Jason met Cliff's stare.

Last time.

Jason closed his eyes.

The castle disappeared before him in a whirl of color.

**

Chris skidded to a halt, stopping in the place where Jason once stood. "The hell...?"

A pregnant pause filled the tense air.

And then Cliff screamed. "YOU BASTARD!!"

Dave kicked Cliff's side. "Shut up!"

"YOU FUCKING BASTARD! YOU HAVE ABANDONED YOUR PRINCE! YOU BASTARD!"

"SHUT UP!"

Cliff kept screaming.

Dave slapped his hand over Cliff's mouth. "Chris!"

Chris scrambled around, looking around the corner of each hall. "Where the fuck did he go?!"

"Forget it! Come over here with the damn gag before he wakes up the whole castle!"

"Right!" Chris ran back to Dave, yanking the cloth out of his pocket. He shoved it into Cliff's mouth, gagging him quiet. With Cliff now silence, Chris calmed down and turned to Dave. "What the fuck just happened? Did you see him?"

"Of course I fucking saw him!"

"Does he know what happened?"

"He's a fucking useless banshee. He's worth nothing to us." Dave yanked Cliff up to his feet by the collar of his jacket. "Open the closet. We need to dispose of him."

"Okay."

Cliff kicked and thrashed as Dave dragged him over to the closet door Chris opened. Dave unceremoniously threw him inside and Cliff didn't have a chance to do anything as Chris slammed the door shut.

"There. That's done. Let's get moving." Dave took out the magic mirror again. "Who knows when Blondie will come back. He went to get reinforcements most likely. We don't have much time."

"I just can't believe what happened there." Chris ran a hand over his face. "How did he do that? I could've sworn he was there!"

"Whatever the fuck makes this thing work probably made his disappearing magic trick work too." Dave gestured to the mirror. "But who gives a shit anymore. We have to get the beast. Now."

"Right."

**

As Dave and Chris asked the magic mirror where the prince's chambers were in the west wing,

inside the closet, Cliff stomped his bound feet against the door, screaming against his gag, damning Jason to the twelfth layer of hell.

Why Jason?! Why? Why did you leave us now? You could've stopped them! You coward! You bastard! You have abandoned your kingdom! Your prince! Damn you!

He slammed his head against the wall and cried against his gag.

DAMN YOU TO HELL!

Cliff repeatedly kicked the door as hard as he could, desperation to save the prince and stop Dave fueling his strength. But as time passed, his kicks grew weaker, and weaker, until he gave the door one last kick and they collapsed onto the floor, tingling and heavy as dead weights.

He breathed hard through his gag, his face red hot and sweaty, his eyes burning. His labored breathing echoed in the too small, too quiet closet. The only thing else he could hear was the storm outside.

Someone... anyone... He grit his teeth around the gag in his mouth. Help him... stop them...

He rolled onto his side, to relieve pressure off his bound wrists behind him. He shuddered, hiccuped on his next breath.

It's over. Tears finally fell down his cheeks. It's all over.

Chapter 24

He wanted to throw up. His body felt like it was shoved head-first into square pipe and he was being processed and digested slowly, squeezed out onto the other side. He was hot. Sweaty. He couldn't breathe.

Thoughts went astray. Images crossed his mind. The castle. Cliff. Dave's knife.

James's eyes.

No. He squeezed the ring between his fingers. *Focus Jason.*

His mind tumbled upside down. His stomach upheaved, and he felt something acidic in the back of his throat.

Magic ring. Jason squeezed his eyes tight. *Please...* He gritted his teeth. *Take me to Lars's home.*

The last image he had of Lars slowly appeared. The snow. His sad smile.

Jason let go of the ring.

I need to know he's okay!

Everything stopped twisting and turning.

His feet planted onto solid ground.

Jason swallowed back the acid in his throat. He breathed evenly through his nose. His heartbeat gradually returned to normal and the dizzy spell he felt slowly dissipated as well.

Did... did it work?

He heard the soft ticking of a clock. The creak of wood underneath his feet. The hard whistle of wind outside.

Please let me be in the right place.

Jason opened his eyes.

It was a modest room with equally modest furniture. A tarp littered with paintdrops covered the floor. Empty canvases on the couch and complete paintings rested on the wooden walls.

Is this it? Is this Lars's home?

He glanced around for any sign of life. All he found was an empty bottle of red wine and a spilled bowl of soup against a chair.

Jason tentatively took a step forward out of the room, into another. One that looked like a kitchen. He found no one.

He left and scrambled up the steps of the meager house. All the rooms were searched upstairs—one with many paintings, one with many books (definitely Lars's room), one with washing materials and one with clothes—and again, he found nothing.

"Shit."

Back down the stairs Jason went, searching the last of the rooms there, and he still came up empty. All he found inside was the same car Lars's father had used when he first came—crashed—into the castle (wall). But he had no idea how it functioned, else he'd use it.

Jason walked back to the room he started in. He leaned his arm against the wall and slammed his hand against it.

I fucked up.

His eyes drifted out the window. It was pitch black. The storm hadn't died down in the least. He could get lost out there. He didn't know where he was going, how far the nearest town was, who could help him. And there wasn't time left. For all he knew, Chris and Dave got to James, after doing who knew what to Cliff, and then...

Jason thumped his head against the wall. "I should've said where Lars was, not Lars's *house*." He slammed his other hand against the wall. "Fuck. Stupid move, Newsted." He rested his forehead against his forearm.

What the hell am I going to do now?

His attention drifted out the window again.

The storm rattled the glass.

Jason sighed.

Guess I leave it up to fate.

He ran back up the stairs to search through the closet of clothes for further protection from the storm. As he slipped on clothes, he bumped off the table a square, blue item with a see-through top. He picked it up, fumbled with it in his hand, and when he pressed a blue button—Jason jumped—out came a bright light.

"Woah..." He swung it around, shining the light on items in the room. *This is good.* He pressed the button again, turning it off. *A portable lantern for the storm.*

Once he slipped on more winter gear to handle the harsh weather, he went back downstairs and steeled himself for the hell he was about to put his body through. But he had to survive. He had to make it into town and find out where Lars was. If he could get Lars back to the castle, then he knew James would stop his mourning. James would fight. Dave and Chris wouldn't win.

And he had to know Lars was okay. He couldn't forgive himself if something bad happened to Lars, because of his stupidity. His jealousy.

Jason opened the front door.

Pounds of snow and wind greeted him as he made his way outside. He took the portable light and turned it on, shining it on the road.

Every step forward that he made went against the wind, but he pushed himself. The cold swept against his clothes, against his cheeks. His hand shook around the portable light.

Concentrate Newsted.

He stepped on branches blown over by the wind, stepped into deep pits of snow that went up to his knees. His hope for a nearby town dwindled as he found no lights ahead in the darkness.

Jason gritted his teeth.

Come on.

He made his way up a hill, the snow piling up to his thighs. He trudged his way through, grunting with every step. By now he had no idea how long he had traveled. He hoped that it was long enough.

Fatigue washed over him. Thick snow piled up on his shoulders, ice caking to his body. But his legs kept moving. His body kept moving.

Don't give up. Don't quit. They're counting on you.

He pushed his way up to the top of the hill.

A powerful gust of wind blew snow into his face. Jason hissed, wiping his gloved hands over his eyes to clear his vision.

And when it did, Jason smiled.

Lights. A town.

He pushed his way down the hill and over, heading to the town. Jason almost fell face first into the snow but maintained his balance. As he reached the town, though, his small victory quickly disappeared.

All of the buildings were closed. No one was there. He didn't see anyone in the town square or the shops. They had probably all went to their respective homes, seeking shelter from the storm. It was also late at night too. Everyone had left.

No one to help him. No one to ask questions.

No. Stay calm. There has to be someone here.

He stumbled through the small buildings, making his way to the center of the town square, crying out against the strong wind.

"Hello? Hello! Is anybody here? Somebody! Anybody! I need help!"

No one answered. No one was inside. It was an empty town.

No...

Jason shook his head.

No!

He spun in place, circling around, his eyes darting all across the town square.

Someone has to be here!

His gloved hands went to the hat on his head, pulling on the fabric. He shivered, the wind blowing against his back, but he didn't feel it. He was too frantic to feel it.

And then his eyes fell upon a bright, red sign.

The lights flashed one word: OPEN.

Jason used the last of his strength to get to the door. He slipped on ice getting there but he didn't fall. Above the door, he read a sign, and the only word he recognized was 'pub.'

All the patrons inside turned their heads as one when he yanked the door open and stumbled onto his knees.

"Someone help him up!" Jason heard someone call out, and a strong pair of arms pulled him to his feet and dragged him to a chair. He heard the door shut behind him.

"Thank you," he choked out.

Someone helped him remove his hat and scarf. "What the hell were you thinking, being in a storm like that? The four of us are stuck in here until it blows over."

Jason groaned. "Guess I need a drink."

"Well, a drink you'll get. Bartender, shot of whiskey for this crazy bastard here."

He opened his jacket and slipped it off for a brief moment, letting it hang on the chair behind him. As he took off his gloves, Jason finally got a look of the area, and the man that helped him to his feet.

The bar was pretty empty. There were only two other people from what he could tell, and then there was the man beside him: a honey-colored, hazel-eyed man wearing black and green, holding a shot of whiskey in his hand.

"You want anything to eat?" He passed Jason the shot. "They got good clam chowder here."

Jason shook his head no. "Can't. I have to find somebody." He downed the shot, slammed it on the table and glanced up at the man again. "Ever heard of someone named Lars Ulrich?"

The man's hazel eyes widened, and then quickly narrowed-- in disgust. "Shit yeah I have. Way too fucking much."

Jason sat up in his chair, grabbing the man's arm. "I'll explain later, but I desperately need your help."

"Does it have to deal with Dave?"

He gasped. "How did you..."

"Know?" The man chuckled. "Trust me. I know too much about Dave fucking Mustaine than I'd like to know." He shook his arm out of Jason's grasp, only to offer his hand out. "David Ellefson."

"Jason." He shook David's hand. "Jason Newsted. You know where Lars is?"

"Unfortunately so. And knowing Mustaine, he didn't leave Lars alone." He dropped some money onto the table counter and grabbed his own winter gear. "Suit up, friend. Dave's house isn't too far from here."

Jason grinned as he stood up. "Thank you, David. You don't know how much this means to me."

"Oh trust me. Anything to get payback on Mustaine is priceless. Especially when it comes to Lars. Fucker's been obsessed with the poor kid for years."

"So... he isn't dead?"

David double-took as he finished slipping on his gloves. "Are you kidding me? Killing Lars is the last thing Mustaine would do."

Jason's hands clenched. "Then... he lied."

"Uh, yeah. Big time. Lars is fine. Well..." David situated his head on his head as they walked to the pub's door. "As well as I think he is."

A chill ran down Jason's spine.

Please be okay, Lars.

He shut his eyes as David opened the door and the winter storm greeted them again once more.

Hold on James. I'm coming... with Lars.

**

In the West Wing of the castle, Dave and Chris stood a few feet away from a wooden door with a golden knob. They checked the image in the mirror with the image before them, finding them to be perfect matches. The dilapidated furniture scattered on either side of the door, the cracked floor, the scratch marks on the wall—and as the image in the mirror disappeared, Dave and Chris turned to each other with matching smiles. This was the room of the great beast, the prince of the castle.

Dave laughed. "Too easy. Too fucking easy."

"Don't get ahead, man. What's the plan?"

"You know how I got pissed that you almost used the gun on blondie earlier?"

"Yeah?"

Dave reached into Chris's jacket and slapped the gun into his palm. "Now you can. Guard the door. If anyone comes by, shoot them."

"What if the prince hears the shots?"

"Trust me. He won't."

"But--"

"What did I say about worrying?"

"But what are *you* going to do? You can't just walk in there expecting no resistance!"

"Heh. Yes I can." Dave brandished the magic mirror. "I have my one-way ticket to a new rug right here."

Chris frowned. "What? How is that going to help you now? There's no way that..." He trailed off as he saw Dave's glare. "Alright. Okay. You know what you're doing. I'll do my job, you do yours. I got it."

Dave patted Chris's cheek. "Good boy. Keep an eye out for me."

"Just make it quick, alright? You know Jason could come back any second."

"I know." Dave waved over his shoulder as he approached the door. "But at least let me have *some* fun."

Chris rolled his eyes and pocketed the gun back in his jacket. He crossed his arms over his chest and walked a few feet away from the door, off to stand guard.

Dave approached the door to the prince's room, slipping the mirror back into his jacket. He took his time wrapping his hand around the handle, measuring every step forward as he pushed the door open and stepped inside. Who knew where the prince was. If he was sitting right next to the door, a foot from the door, a small distance away or worse—not even in the room at all. But he had the mirror if that was the case.

The door made a slight squeak as he came in. Squeaked louder as he closed it behind him.

**

Inside his bedroom, James's ears twitched at the sound of his door.

Cliff?

He lifted his head, nose sniffing the air. He frowned.

No... not him.

**

Dave stood in the chambers, hearing no other sound, save the storm outside, and the sound of his own heart pounding in his head.

He looked around the room. No sign of the prince at all.

The gleeful look on his face quickly turned into disappointment.

Shit. I knew I should've asked the magic mirror to take me to the prince and not the prince's chambers. Son of a bitch.

"Great. Just great."

**

James stood up from his bed, draping Lars's gold outfit next to his uneaten tray of food.

**

Dave kept his rising anger under control. There was a good chance maybe the prince was in here, somewhere. But he couldn't hear or see anything in the actual chambers, outside of the storm, so it was possible the prince wasn't home either. There were double doors in the corner, and he'd have to try those out, just in case.

As he searched around the room, he couldn't believe how dilapidated everything was. For a prince's chambers, it didn't live up to his expectations. It was ugly, paintings shredded, furniture ruined, walls destroyed. The only item that caught his eye was something glowing in the far corner on a table...

He frowned.

A rose? In a vase?

Dave glanced around the room, looking for the prince, or anyone else just in case. When he found or heard nothing, he slowly approached the wood table with a throne chair next to it.

**

James went to his double doors. They made little sound when he opened them.

**

The pink rose glowed a matching light pink hue from inside its glass vase. It floated in the air, moving up and down, as if a gentle breeze was bottled inside, keeping it afloat.

Dave ran his fingers along the vase's cool exterior.

Hm... wonder if this will sell on the market. He tilted his head to the side as his fingers touched the table. *But who would want a floating rose in a vase? Maybe some silly girls who like this flora shit will.* He nodded. *Could make a pretty penny.*

**

James peeked out of his bedroom, following the scent.

Dave slipped the glass vase cover off.

He looked around his chamber and found the person—at his throne, near his table.

Hands reached for the rose.

James growled.

Dave grinned, the pink glow shining in his narrowed eyes. His fingers grazed the unprotected petals—

"Who are you?"

He gasped and twisted around.

His eyes went wide.

Standing right behind Dave, towering over him a good few feet, was a large grey manwolf in a cloak and regal clothing, fangs protruding over his lips, snarling, nostrils flaring.

The prince. The Beast.

"What are you doing here?"

Dave trembled. "I... I was..."

He leaned against the table, hands dangerously close to touching the exposed rose.

James growled.

Dave's pupils shrunk as James's claws lifted high—and ran down.

"No!"

He ducked, crouched down onto the floor, protecting his head and throat.

No claws pierced his skin.

Dave peeked up from where he shook at the base of the Beast's feet.

The prince gently placed the glass cover back over the flower.

Blue eyes glared down at him.

"Get out."

James quickly turned on his heel, cloak fluttering behind him in his wake.

Dave's teeth chattered as he lifted his head, watching the Beast walk away, towards the double doors he had seen before, now open.

He swallowed hard, his heart punching his chest, his stomach twisted into thousands of knots. He could've sworn the prince was going to strike, and he thankfully didn't. He hadn't been able to reach for his knife to protect himself. Seeing the beast finally in the flesh had blindsided him, and his rationale that kept him calm in the worst of times had finally abandoned him when he least needed it.

The double doors slammed close.

Dave shakily returned to his feet.

Fucking shit Mustaine, keep it together. You have a knife. You're not defenseless. Hell, you're smarter than him. You know what to do, so do it! Don't be afraid of some puppy. Remember, that's all he is. A puppy!

He took a deep breath. His hands flexed by his sides.

His hand drifted inside his jacket as he walked towards the double doors.

**

Once inside his bedroom, James sat on his mattress again, beside his tray of food and Lars's gold outfit. He sighed, running a paw over his face. He almost did strike that man. He already killed enough men for the last 300 years. He couldn't hurt another.

Maybe I should've listened to him, why he was in my room. Maybe Cliff gave him permission... He growled. But it is MY room! How dare he come here and try to touch MY rose? I could've imprisoned him justifiably! No one is allowed to enter MY domain without MY permission!

He turned to his side, where Lars's outfit lay.

Except... you, Lars.

His paw rested over the outfit's collar. "*Mein schatz—*"

A knock on the door startled James.

"Prince James?"

He frowned. *That man again.*

Outside his bedroom, Dave rested his cheek against the door, twisting the magic mirror in his hand.

"I want to apologize. I didn't mean to intrude on your privacy. I was given permission by Cliff to come in here. I tried to tell you, but I overstepped my boundaries. I truly am sorry."

James stayed quiet, glaring at the door.

"You see James... I was given something earlier today, by my best friend." Dave licked his lips. "Lars."

Dave smirked at the sound of James's gasp. He looked at his reflection in the mirror.

"I think you know him. He told me he spent a lot of time here, with you."

James jerked in place, a paw flying to his chest, over his sternum.

Dave lowered the mirror.

"So, he asked me to come here, on his behalf." He bent down. "To give something back."

James's breathing picked up.

"Something... he didn't want." Dave rested the mirror on the ground. "He didn't tell me why. He just said... that you'd know."

He pushed it beneath the crack of the door.

It slid under. Skidded across.

The mirror bumped against James's foot.

James's eyes glossed over.

Dave stood back up, suppressing his chuckle. "And that he's sorry."

James's trembling paw reached for the mirror's handle.

"Again, Prince James, I am sorry for intruding. But I had to do that for my best friend. I'll leave you be for the evening."

James stared at his reflection. Sad, heartbroken eyes looked back at him.

Dave walked away from the doors.

"Good night... and Merry Christmas."

He took his time walking across the room, each step deliberately slow. One of his hands slipped into the front pocket of his jeans and he counted down from five in his head, waiting for the bait to be taken.

His hand grazed the doorknob of the prince's chambers.

Doors behind him creaked open.

He waited in place as he heard footsteps leave the bedroom.

Dave heard James's broken whisper loud and clear.

"Lars... said that?"

He smirked beneath the curtain of his red hair.

Gotcha.

Chapter 25

David led the way through the winter storm, Jason trailing behind. He hoped Dave's house wasn't too far from the pub. He couldn't waste anymore time. He already felt like he wasted enough moving through the storm like this, from Lars's house into the town.

"How much further?" Jason shouted against the wind.

"Not much!" David pointed ahead down the street to a cramped two-story house. "That's it down there!"

"How do we get in?"

"Leave that to me! I used to be part of Dave's gang!"

"What?!"

"Yeah! Technically still am, but they don't know that!"

"What happened?!"

"I'll explain later!" David waved him forward. "Come on! Almost there!"

Jason followed David, but now doubted his decision to receive help from this man. He was one of Dave's men. He couldn't trust him. What if David double-crossed him? He would have to keep his guard up as they entered. He couldn't afford to make any mistakes at this point. Time was running out.

It's probably a trap. Just like Dave to set up another trap, but why did David tell me he was part of his gang? Jason grunted. *Whatever happens, I have to be alert.*

They came closer to the house, where snow piled up on the porch and its stairs. David pushed the doorbell as Jason made his way to the front. When nothing happened after a few moments, David tried again and knocked on the door as well.

"Shawn, Chris! It's Junior! Let me in!"

Jason stood beside David, shooting him a dubious glare.

Finally, they heard someone move around inside.

"Be right there!"

Their eyes met as the door rattled.

"Let me do the talking," David said. "All I need you to do is grab something heavy."

Jason frowned.

A man with black hair and a wool sweatshirt stood in the doorway, grinning ear to ear. "Junior! About fucking time! Get the fuck in here, that storm is going to freeze our balls off!"

He ushered the two of them in, pushing the door against the wind with all of his strength to shut it. Behind him, David and Jason took off their hats and jackets, throwing them onto the nearby furniture in the living room.

"Sorry about the delay, man," David said, shaking out his hair. "Had to pick up my cousin Jason here." He smiled. "Just came in from Nuremberg this morning, took us *all* day just to get back here. But you know how parents are. Gotta fulfill family obligation and all that."

"Ah, I see." He walked over to Jason, offering his hand. "I'm Shawn. Nice to meet you."

Jason managed a smile. "Likewise."

"Mind if I take your cousin to the kitchen for a second? We gotta talk..." Shawn shot David a pointed stare. "Business."

Jason nodded. "That's fine. I'll, uh, get comfortable here, if that's okay?"

"Make yourself at home." Shawn rested a hand on David's shoulder, steering him to the kitchen. "Come on Junior. I need to fill you in on some things."

"Sounds good." David smiled at Jason. "I'll make you some tea, yeah?"

"Sure, thanks."

"No problem. Got any of that green tea stuff, Shawn?"

"Yep." Shawn led him forward. "Right this way."

Jason watched the two of them go, Shawn's hand gripping David's shoulder firm. As they entered the kitchen, he stood in place, searching around the room for what David asked him to get.

Something heavy... He gasped. To hit Shawn with! Of course!

**

Inside the kitchen, David put a pot of water on the electric stove, quickly hitting it up. He turned to Shawn who stood next to the kitchen table, arms crossed over his chest.

"So that's why you didn't report this morning, huh?" Shawn asked.

"Was Dave mad?"

"Pissed doesn't even cover it. If that stupid Lars kid hadn't offered himself to us on a silver platter, he would've been worse."

David frowned. "What do you mean?"

**

In the living room, Jason unplugged from a wall a large gold lamp.

**

"The kid found out that we had his old man in the basement tied up thanks to the help of this thing called a magic mirror."

David laughed. "A what?"

"Yeah! I thought it was bogus too, but it actually works!"

**

Jason threw the lamp shade off, twisting the chord around the base.

**

"No shit?"

"No shit! We saw where he was staying, some castle, Neuschwhatever, and we saw the image of this so-called beast. A real beast! But it wasn't angry or anything. He was just crying the entire time in that mirror." Shawn chuckled. "And so was the kid. I mean it was pathetic. He begged us to leave the damn wolf-thing alone, but you bet that was the last thing Dave was gonna do."

David turned to the pot of water, steam rising into his face. His hair blocked his bitter smile. "Of course."

"Yep. So that's where Dave and Chris are now. They went off to that castle to kill that beast. Another wolf for his collection."

**

Jason came close to the kitchen, flexing his hands around the lamp.

**

David reached up over the stove, opening a cabinet. He dove a hand inside, searching for a tea box, finding it—and pushing it all the way to the back. "And what about Lars?"

"Upstairs. We tied him up to the bed so he doesn't go anywhere."

"So Dave can have fun later with him, I'm sure."

"Why else would he want Lars so much? He's just another trophy to him. But Dave's been pining after him for years! It's about time Dave gets what he deserves."

**

Jason laid against the wall, lamp to his chest. He steeled himself, his face pursed up in anger.

*

"Yeah. I guess he does deserve him." David retracted his hand from the cabinet. "Hey, I can't find the tea box anywhere. Think you can help?"

"Sure." Shawn came forward, standing beside David at the stove. He reached up into the cabinet, frowning when he didn't find it easily. "Move over a bit. It's gotta be here somewhere. I just had some yesterday..."

He easily stepped to the side, and looked over his shoulder.

Jason stood along the wall, meeting his stare.

David nodded.

Shawn stuck his tongue out, stepping on his tip toes. He reached his arm further in. "Come on..."

Jason came into the kitchen, lifting the lamp up.

David turned back to the pot. The water almost reached boiling point.

His hands furtively turned off the stove.

Shawn frowned. "Dammit, where is it?"

David smiled. "Here, I'll help you out."

"No no, it's okay. I got it."

"Nah, I insist."

David came to his side, his hands reaching for the pot.

Shawn hissed, "I told you I got—"

He gripped the handles and lunged the water out.

Shawn *screamed*. Hot water landed and soaked through his wool sweatshirt and arms. He stumbled backwards, arms flailing—

David turned to Jason. "Now!"

Shawn turned around in time to see Jason drive the lamp into his abdomen.

He tumbled to the ground head-first, landing on his knees.

Jason let him have it again to his back, forcing Shawn to lie prone on the floor.

David came to Shawn's side, rolling him over onto his back. He grinned when he saw he was out cold. "Good work." He looked up at Jason. "I'll take it from here, you go get Lars upstairs."

"Upstairs, got it!"

He dropped the lamp to the floor and immediately raced to the stairs, taking them two at a time. "Lars!" He ran into the first room, finding nothing. "Lars, it's Jason!" The second room came up empty too. He went for the last room—and found it locked.

"Lars!" He banged on the door. "Lars, are you there?"

He pressed his ear to the wood.

From inside, he could hear muffled cries for help.

This is it!

"Don't worry, I'm coming!"

He gave himself enough distance before he ran himself forward, shoulder first, into the door. Pain shot from his side when he made impact. The wood creaked, but the door didn't budge.

Second time, it didn't work. But there was large enough crack on the door's side.

Third time. Didn't break. But the crack grew.

Fourth time. Still didn't break. But the crack was larger.

Inside, he made out Lars's muffled shout of his name.

Jason punched the door. "Come on, you bastard. Break already!" He stepped a good enough distance away, wincing at the pain shooting out from his shoulder. *Come on, Newsted. Come on!*

He roared, charging forward with his whole body—

And he slammed onto the ground, falling on top of the door.

His body skidded into the room. Pain shot up his right side. *Bruised it to shit.* He scrambled to his feet in the darkness, clinging to the bedsheets for balance. *Fuck.*

When Jason finally stood up, he gasped at what he saw: Lars's arms, taped to each side of the headboard, tape slapped across his mouth, tape around his ankles, hair dirty and unkempt, wet green eyes red-shot from crying.

"Lars!" Jason scrambled to the bed, kneeling beside him. He used all of his strength to tear the tape away from the left wrist. "I'm here Lars, I made it. You're safe now."

The adhesive made a ripping sound as it finally gave way. Lars's arm flopped down to the bed. He reached over Lars's chest, doing the same to the right wrist, the second one more difficult than the first.

"No time to explain how I got here. James is in trouble."

The tape soon made the same ripping sound, releasing Lars's last arm completely from the headboard. He instantly went for Lars's ankles, tearing those apart as well, while Lars grimaced and shakily pulled the adhesive from his lips.

"Dave and Chris tricked us and we fell right into their trap." He yanked the adhesive off Lars's ankles, throwing them off the bed. "We have to get back to the castle now!"

Jason glanced back up at Lars's shaken, pale face. The trauma of what he endured sickened Jason, but Lars quickly changed, the shock and horror replaced with ready determination and pure anger.

"Let's go."

He helped Lars out of bed and down the stairs. When they reached living room, David finished coming up from the basement, carrying with him an old man with a long grey beard.

"Dad!"

Torben lifted his bandaged head and gasped. "Lars..."

Lars scrambled out of Jason's hold and hobbled his way over into his father, hugging him tight. "Oh God, Dad, you're okay."

Tears fell from Torben's closed eyes. He wrapped his free arm around Lars's shoulders. "Ja. I am."

David smiled at the sight, then turned his attention to Jason. "Threw Shawn into the basement where they had Lars's father here. We're good."

Jason nodded. "Thanks."

Lars then pulled away from his father. "I'm sorry Dad, but I have to go again."

Torben's elation and relief turned into shock. "What? Why?"

"I have to stop Dave from killing the man I love."

"Who?"

"The Beast that captured you," Jason said.

Torben gaped at him. He slowly turned to his son. "You're... in love with him?"

"Yes. I'll explain later." He kissed his father's cheek, then turned to David. "Will you take care of him?"

"Of course." David smirked. "As long as you promise to get that son of a bitch Mustaine, I'll do whatever you want."

"It's a deal."

"Okay, we have to go *now!*" Jason's fingers went to the gold ring. "No time to spare!"

"Got it." Lars hugged his father one last time. "Please trust me. I need to save him."

Torben still looked shocked and confused, but he gave in with a sigh and a kiss to Lars's forehead. "Whatever your heart tells you, my son, follow it. Just be safe."

"I will."

Lars let go of his father and immediately rushed to Jason's side, wrapping his arms around one of his arms. He looked up at Jason, determination settling on his features, permeating his body. *You're not going to win Dave. Not without a fight.*

"Ready."

"Good. Hold on tight." Jason twisted the ring once. Twice. And as he twisted it a third time: "Please try to not throw up. It's a really bad ride."

They instantly disappeared from the living room before Lars could respond.

Chapter 26

Lars's fingers tightened around Jason's arm as he felt his world tilt onto its side and then twist into five different directions. He gritted his teeth, holding back the urge to shout and the need to throw up. Colors swirled around them in bright flashes, like fifteen different kaleidoscopes locked in supernovas, and he shut his eyes, burying his face into Jason's shoulder.

Please hurry! I need to save—

He gasped, his feet hitting solid ground.

His eyes opened.

Wet walls, bright torches, broken furniture.

I'm back.

"Urgh." Jason shook Lars's grip off, stumbling a bit in place. "I'm so glad I don't have to do that again."

Lars smiled. "Thank you Jason. However you saved me."

He rose his right hand. "You can thank the prince for this—"

The ring split in half on Jason's ringfinger. The two pieces clattered onto the floor.

"—or not." Jason snorted. "Well, that's no good to us anymore. Come on!" He grabbed Lars's wrist, dragging him ahead. "Let's move it!"

Lars followed alongside, keeping up with the pace. Their footsteps echoed in the dark hallways, running towards the prince's chambers.

I'm coming James!

**

A few feet in front of the prince's door, Chris's head perked up at the sudden oncoming sound. He frowned. "What the hell...?"

He listened in closely, moving further away from James's door in the direction of what he heard. He cocked the gun, keeping it close, as he followed the sounds down the hall.

**

Lars panted for breath, trailing now a little behind Jason. "They used the mirror to get here?"

"Keep it down," Jason hissed. "Chris has a gun on him. I don't want him to hear us."

**

Down the next hall, Chris gasped. *Those voices.* He growled, taking the safety off his gun. *So that's who Jason went to get!* He went forward. *You're not getting away this time, blondie.*

**

"A gun?" Lars stumbled in his run. "Oh God. You don't think—"

"Don't." Jason glared at him. "Got it?"

"But—"

"Stop worrying and go to James!" He shoved Lars ahead of him. "Before it's too late!"

Lars nodded. "Right!"

**

Chris crouched beside the corner.

Come on...

His finger rested on the trigger.

**

Lars ran faster ahead of Jason.

Please be okay, James. His eyes stung. Please be okay...

He rounded the corner.

Chris met him head-on, gun in front.

Lars skidded to a halt, the barrel pressing against his forehead.

Scared green eyes met cold brown ones.

Chris snarled. "I don't know how the hell Jason brought you back, but this is as far as you go." He cocked the gun. "Do exactly what I say, and you won't get hurt. I don't want to damage Dave's merchandise."

**

Jason frowned. *The hell?* Up ahead, he saw Lars standing in the corner—*trembling?* He slowed down his run, coming closer.

He came to a stop when he heard Lars's shaky whisper. "Please... don't shoot."

Oh fuck. His heart seized, his stomach collapsing somewhere around his feet. *Chris.*

Lars rose his hands in the air in surrender. His voice sounded weaker. "Please..."

Fuck! Jason pushed himself against the wall. *Not now. Not when we're so close.* His eyes searched the floor, darting around for some sort of weapon. *Think Newsted. Something's got to be here.*

He felt sick at the sound of Chris's chuckle. It sounded just like Dave's. "Shoot you? And face Dave's wrath? No thank you. I just want you to sit here and shut up until Dave's done with that so-called Beast of yours."

"No! You can't!"

“Shut up.”

“Let me go!”

“I said—” Metal struck flesh. “Shut *up!*”

Jason gasped, turning to his side. He heard and watched Lars cry out and fall to the ground. Lars curled up, a shaky hand going to his bruised cheek.

That chuckle again. “I warned you.”

His fists shook by his sides, his teeth grinding together. *Damn you.* He looked around again, off to his side. *I have to find*—and he froze when he saw it hidden in the shadows a few feet away: a huge block of wood, thick and large enough to do some damage and then some. A wide grin spread across his face. *Yes.*

He inched himself down the wall as fast as possible. Down the hall, he heard Lars’s soft whimper. “Please. Let me see him. I need to see him.”

"You'll see him when Dave finished skinning his hide. Now sit down. I won't say it twice."

Jason picked up the block of wood and ran down the opposite way of the hall. He maneuvered through the West Wing’s hidden passageways, rounding corners and pushing through cobwebs, until he was on the other side, where he could see the back of Chris and how he loomed over Lars’s curled up, sitting form on the ground, gun pointed to his head.

He leaned against the wall, block of wood against his chest. *Come on, bastard. Put it down.*

Lars bowed his head before Chris.

The gun slowly lowered away, down to Chris’s side. "That's right. Be lucky I'm merciful. Like Dave won't be."

Jason growled. *Come on...*

And when Chris finally slipped the gun back into its holster, Jason leapt out of his hiding spot beside the wall.

The wood cracked against Chris's back, knocking him down to the ground. He slammed it again, right into Chris’s ribs. The gun leapt out of his holster from the force of the blow, skidding it across the stone floor, out into the darkness of the West Wing.

Their eyes met when Jason lifted his fist to Chris’s head, and his shout of pain lasted half a second, when Jason’s knuckles cracked against his jaw, knocking him out cold.

Jason dumped the block of wood to the side, breathing hard. “Bitch.” He twisted his body around to growl at Lars through his teeth. "Go now, I've got it from here."

Lars didn’t move at first. The shock was evidently still there. Thankfully, with a quick shake of his head, the shock disappeared, and Lars mumbled back an, “Okay,” before he stumbled back to his feet and raced past him, heading for the prince’s chambers.

Once he saw Lars was gone, Jason mumbled under his breath: “Please save him.”

**

Inside James's chambers, Dave lifted his head. He let go of the door knob to push his hair back

and then turned around to look at James with a sad, small smile.

"Yes, he did. I came here to see you, because Lars asked me to. I tried to make him come instead, but he said he couldn't and didn't want to."

James's claws clinked against the mirror, pressing it to his chest. "I see."

"As for me, I really did want to thank you. Not only for housing me and my friend, but for letting my best friend go. He came back to town this morning for Christmas. I'm so happy you released him. We missed him so much. Especially Lars's father."

James swallowed, his throat tight.

The struggles taking place down the hallway couldn't be heard over the power of the midnight storm outside.

Dave took a few deliberate slow steps forward. "He told us everything. About the castle..." He stopped in front of James. "And about you."

His voice trembled as he whispered, "What did he say?"

"Well..." He looked away and rubbed his arm. "They weren't nice things at all."

James shut his eyes. "I imagined so." He bowed his neck, walking towards the table and the rose. "We didn't part on good terms."

Dave stared James's expansive large back, a smirk playing on his lips. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yes. Well." He rested the magic mirror back to its place beside the vase. In his reflection, James caught sad blue eyes staring back at him. "I suppose it had to end that way."

Dave shook his head. *God this is going to be too easy.* "But on Christmas? What an awful time, I think, to lose a friend."

James winced again. *A friend?* "Yes. I agree." *That's all he said of me?*

Slowly Dave came forward, crossing his arms over his chest. A hand slipped inside the interior of his jacket. "I mean, I don't know why he said all those horrible things about you. I was shocked at what he said."

His hand wrapped around the knife.

"That you were an ugly, filthy animal."

James shut his eyes tight.

Dave slipped the knife out of his jacket. "A freak of nature."

James gritted his teeth.

Dave stood beside him. "Inhuman and—"

"No more." The prince turned to him, standing to his full height. "I've heard enough."

A gentle hand touched James's cheek. "But I don't believe a word of it."

James gasped. He looked down and found warm hazel eyes staring up at him—a gaze that held

adoration and wonder. The same look Lars had once given him.

Dave tilted his head up. "I don't know why he thought so ill will of you, James," he whispered. "I don't think I'll ever know."

He leaned in close. James tilted his head down.

"All I know is..." Dave's fingers flexed around the knife's handle. "You've been so kind to me." He tilted his head to the side. "That I don't see a beast."

James's heavy-lidded eyes shined in the flower's glow. He leaned into Dave's hand.

Dave's chest pressed against James's.

Their faces rested inches away.

"You know what I see?"

James smiled. "What?"

Dave gently pulled James's head down.

He slipped the knife out of his jacket.

James's eyes closed.

The sharp end rested above James's side.

Dave whispered into his ear. "I see..."

He lunged his arm back.

His smile turned into a smirk.

"A puppy."

The knife stabbed James's side.

Blue eyes snapped open wide.

James choked as Dave's hand lodged the knife deep.

"A pathetic..." He twisted the knife around. "Little..." Sliced it up James's side. "*Puppy.*" And yanked the knife out, shoving James back.

Another choke spilled out as James fell to his knees before Dave. Blood poured out, staining his shirt and pouring down over his pants. He wound a trembling arm around his waist, his heavy breathing filling up the thick silence. More blood spilled over his paw, onto the floor, and his paw pressed against the wound, a groan of pain slipping out between his clenched teeth.

"How pathetic." Dave tutted, flicking some of the dripping blood off his knife. "I was expecting a little bit of a fight here."

James tilted his head down. *Bastard.* His hair cascaded around his face as his breathing labored. *Shit.*

"Well. Come on." Dave snorted. "I don't have all day you know."

His paw clutched his wounded side. *So this is how it ends, huh Enchantress?* A bitter smile played on James's lips. *Only fitting, I guess.*

Dave huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'm waitiing."

James's body shook.

"Aw. Is the great beast scared? Why don't you..."

He quickly shut up as he heard the prince chuckle, raising his head up and looking him straight in the eye. He showed no sign of fear, anger or sadness. Just acceptance. Amused, bitter acceptance.

"Go ahead," James wheezed. "Finish me. You'd be doing me a favor."

"Ugh!" Dave threw a hand in the air. "Just like that stupid Jason. What is with you people?"

He kicked James in the gut, watching him double over onto the floor in pain. Another kick landed on James's chest, shoving the prince onto his side. He pushed his boot onto James's shoulder, moving him onto his back. More blood slowly spilled to the ground as Dave circled his body, shaking his head like a disappointed parent looking down at his disobedient child. He then crouched down and glared at James, knife hanging between his crouched legs.

"How's a hunter supposed to have fun on his hunt when the damn prey won't put up a fight? Huh? He doesn't! It's no fun at all!"

His answer back was a weak chuckle.

"Is that all you're going to do? Laugh like an idiot?"

James kept chuckling.

"Alright then, that answered my question." Dave straighten himself up. "Well, since you won't fight, I'll do as you ask." He gave James a mock bow. "Your majesty."

His chuckle only grew louder. *Go on.* James closed his eyes, tilting his head to the side. *Finish me.*

**

Lars rounded the last corner of the hallway, storming down to the prince's chambers. His chest hurt like his head, his lungs burning like his face. He ignored his body's demand to rest and willed himself faster.

James... please be okay...

Sweat dripped into his vision. He stumbled for a second in his run and regained control.

Don't give in. Don't listen to him.

The door came in the horizon.

Lars grimaced hard, pushing himself faster.

"James!"

**

Behind James's lids, he saw Lars the way he wanted to remember him. His smile, his eyes, his lips. He felt those lips against his, kissing him like they used to. He heard his voice whisper his name, saying it again and again—that voice getting louder, and louder, rising in volume, as if he was there.

At least, I learned to love, Lars.

Dave rose the knife up high.

At least, someone once loved me.

He aimed it right over James's heart.

James smiled. *Mein schatz...*

The knife plunged down—just as the chamber door slammed wide open.

"*STOP!*"

Chapter 27

When Lars disappeared down the hallway, Jason had expected to turn back and start the search for Cliff. Except he came face-to-face with the same block of wood he used earlier, slamming right between his eyes.

“Shit!” His hands flew up to his nose. *He’s awake!*

Another blow struck him in the solar plexus. He collapsed onto his knees, a groan slipping out. Another hit him in the side. Then another. Another. Jason curled up on the floor to protect his head, and the wood strikes turned into boot kicks to his body.

One last kick landed on his rib cage, ripping a shout from Jason.

“Stupid move, blondie!” Jason looked up in time to see with his blurry vision Chris smirking down at him. He watched him lift the block of wood up, aiming it for his head. “Say goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” and he kicked Chris right in the crotch.

The wood tumbled to the floor, followed by Chris himself, holding his crotch. He scrambled through the pain for the block of wood and once in his hands, Jason came to his feet and slammed the block into the side of Chris’s head with all his strength.

Chris fell backwards from the blow, landing on the floor, finally out cold.

Jason dumped the block to the side. Panting hard, he stumbled over and checked up Chris's prone body with a few slaps to his face. When he got no response, he turned away and headed down the hall to where he last saw Cliff.

“Cliff! Cliff, where are you?” He kept a hand on his sore shoulder, walking alongside the wall. “Cliff!”

**

Inside the closet, Cliff's wet eyes opened wide and he took an quick intake of breath.

Was... is that...?

"CLIFF!"

Jason!

He rolled over onto his back, grimacing around the gag in his mouth. He pounded his feet on the door, strength returning to him.

He came back. Oh God, he came back.

Beneath his gag, Cliff cried out: “JASON!”

**

Jason gasped as he heard a sudden sound—the sound of pounding.

"Cliff."

He followed the repeated sounds down the hall to a closet door. There he opened it and he breathed a sigh of relief, finding Cliff bound and gagged on the floor.

"Thank God." He fell to his knees, taking the gag out of Cliff's mouth. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, now get me out of this shit!" He wiggled to his side so Jason could untie his arms behind him. "We have to stop them!"

"Lars is down there already." He caught Cliff's gasp of surprise, meeting his eye as he quickly untied the ropes around his wrists. "I brought him back."

"So that's why you left..."

"Yeah. Had to make sure he was okay." He finished untying his arms and helped him with his ankles. "And to make things right again."

"Finally you make sense." Cliff batted Jason's hands away. "Nevermind with that, I'll take care of it. Go help Lars! He can't handle it on his own."

"Got it." Jason pointed down the hall. "Get some revenge while you're at it and tie up the unconscious dickhead over there."

Cliff glanced out the closet. He laughed when he saw Chris out cold on the ground, face planted into the floor. "Ha! Sure thing. Now go!"

Jason nodded and scrambled back to his feet, jumping over Chris's prone body as he raced down the hall for the prince's chambers.

**

Dave froze, his knife a few inches above James's heart. He gasped and instantly stood up, glaring at Lars standing in the doorway. "What the fuck?! How did you get out?"

Lars paid no attention to him. He stared at James on the floor, eyes watering at the horrific sight of the blood pooling beneath the prince's side. "James..."

The prince slowly turned his head, opening his pain-clouding eyes—eyes that widened in shock and elation when he saw him there. "Lars..."

"For fuck's sake." Dave rose the knife again. "Night, sweet prince."

"No!" Lars charged into the room, coming to James's side. He snatched Dave's arm up just as he was about to make the blow and gritted his teeth, yanking Dave's arm completely away. "Get away from him!"

Dave growled, struggling against Lars's strength. He shoved his free hand into Lars's face. "Let go!"

Lars took Dave's hand to his face with both of his hands and yanked him further away from his target. The huge power of his tug made the two of them stumble backwards, and they ran right into the closed balcony doors, cracking them wide open.

The storm instantly chilled their bodies, snow and wind whipping around them, as they struggled for control on the chamber balcony. Lars grunted, twisting Dave's arm around, and Dave matched his strength, running the heel of his hand into Lars's cheek.

"Why do you defend this ugly creature?!" Dave shouted.

Lars hissed against Dave's palm, glaring with his one open eye. "Because I love him!"

"You *what*?"

Lars redoubled his efforts, letting one hand go of Dave's arm to shove Dave's hand off his face. He leaned forward, their noses pressing and shouted on top of his lungs: "*I LOVE HIM!*"

James slowly sat up, grunting with effort, holding his bleeding side. His wide eyes stared out to the balcony in awe, watching Lars fight Dave. The snow and the wind came into his room, whipping his hair into his face.

Did he just say... he loved me?

Dave snarled. "I had you first!"

"You never had me! You never will!"

"You've always been mine!"

"Are you crazy? I never was! You're the one who wanted me!"

"Because I love you!"

"No you don't, Dave." Lars growled. "You just love yourself."

All the anger disappeared from Dave's face. Emotion washed over his face, followed by visible realization of shock and horror, and then sadness.

The knife cluttered on the balcony floor.

He stopped struggling against Lars, letting his arms slacken. Lars soon ceased struggling as well, pulling his arms away from him.

Dave bent his neck, hair cascading around his face. He didn't move.

Lars stood in front of him silent. "Dave—"

"Why him?" Dave's hands flexed by his side. "What's so special about that *Beast*?"

He took a step back away from Dave, turning his attention toward the chambers.

Inside, James used the table for balance, coming to his feet slowly.

Their eyes met.

A hard gust of wind blew, throwing more snow across the balcony, into the room. James breathed hard, shivering in pain. Lars stayed motionless, expressionless—and in his next blink, Lars smiled the way James remembered: without fear or hatred, only acceptance.

"Because I know he loves me too."

James's face lit up, smiling back.

Dave's hands clenched into fists. "So be it."

In one move, he punched Lars square in the jaw, sending him skidding across the floor.

James gasped. "Lars!"

Lars's head slammed against the base of the balcony's stone railing. He grunted in pain once, and then fell into unconsciousness.

Dave reached down to pick up the knife, his red hair whipping in front of his face, jaw set, eyes narrowed, teeth barred in pure anger. "You choose a mutt over me? ME? Fine." He loomed over Lars's prone body, aiming the knife over his chest. "You can die with him too!"

He stabbed down—

The sound of a wolf's howl stopped him cold.

A large paw slapped the knife out of his hand, sending it flying over the balcony's edge.

Dave choked out once, "Ah!"

The claws pierced Dave's clothing and skin, droplets of red blood pouring on the white snow beneath his feet.

Cold blue eyes glared at hurt hazel ones.

One large paw easily closed around Dave's throat.

Dave kicked and struggled in James's grip as he was lifted high in the air.

Lars groaned in pain coming to. *Fuck*. His head pounded from the hit, his back bruised and sore. He sat up, cheek rising to his face where Dave punched him. *Shit*.

He slowly opened his eyes—and they snapped wide open.

James held Dave's body over the balcony's edge.

"No!" Lars struggled up, holding onto the balcony as he came to his feet. "Don't do it!"

He froze when James's head snapped to Lars, and he found no mercy on James's face, no trace of the human inside him. There was only an animal left. An angry, bloodthirsty beast.

"He hurt you," James growled. "He doesn't deserve to live."

"That makes you no better than him."

"I HAVE MURDERED MORE MEN THAN YOU CAN EVER FATHOM. WHY SHOULD I LET THIS ONE GO?"

Lars didn't recoil. He held onto the railing with both hands, the old determination settling in. "Because you know you're not that animal any longer. You're better than that." He glanced at Dave. "Better than him." He met James's angry stare again, tears in his eyes. "Don't stoop down to his level, James. Don't let the monster win again."

A crack showed in James's anger. His eyes softened, his snarl turning into a frown. There was a shine of doubt, a small piece of his humanity that overpowered the Beast.

"Lars..."

Lars smiled. "Let him go, James."

James glanced at the floor for a brief moment. He then turned to Dave, glaring at him, his anger much less than before.

Dave's hands pried one of James's paws away from his throat. His face was now blue, his kicks and his struggles slowly weakening.

He pulled Dave away from the balcony's edge, bringing their faces close. "If you are still here come the 'morrow, I will not be merciful again." James flexed his paw around Dave's throat one last time. "Is that understood?"

Dave nodded as best he could, choking out, "Yes."

"Good."

He swiftly turned around and threw Dave across the floor, back into his room. Dave landed hard against the wall, next to the door, with a loud, audible grunt. He opened his bleary hazel eyes, staring at James standing proud in the snow, the wind making his long hair wave around his face.

Their eyes stayed locked as Dave gingerly came to his feet, one hand using the wall for balance, the other around his red throat. James kept his cold stare on Dave, watching him exit the room and turn towards the hall. Only when he saw Dave disappeared did James's body relax and he sighed.

It's over.

He groaned as pain shot up his side, bowing over a little. His paw drifted to the stab wound, where dried blood flaked against his claws and fresh blood pitter-pattered onto the snow. *Shit.* He swayed where he stood, the adrenaline rush wearing off and the pain taking over again. His head swam, dizzy from hurt, and he almost stumbled onto his side, before two arms wrapped around his body, helping him gain back his balance.

James lifted his head.

Lars stood beside him, green eyes glossy.

He weakly smiled at him. His free hand lifted up to Lars's cheek, fur brushing the skin. "Mein schatz... you came back."

Lars gave him a water smile back. "Yes. I did." He leaned into James's hand. "I'm home."

Around them, the storm's power gradually lessened. Snow no longer piled down on their bodies but trickled down, flakes sticking to their hair. And the wind soon turned into a strong breeze as James pressed Lars's cheek to his chest, cupping his paw around his head.

**

Down the hall, Dave hobbled away, hand rubbing at his neck. His whole body ached from the scuffle against Lars and James, but his throat hurt the most, his windpipe pulsing still from the strength of James's paw. He leaned against the wall for balance, leaving the chambers and out of the West Wing.

"Damn you Lars..." He coughed, hissing through his teeth. "Choosing some beast over me... damn you to--"

His foot tripped on something.

Dave frowned. "What...?"

He stepped back, glancing down.

His eyes widened—and then quickly narrowed. A sadistic grin spread on his face from cheek-to-cheek.

He bent down and picked up Chris's gun.

Dave's ugly chuckles echoed down the hall, turning back to the prince's room.

**

James slowly opened his eyes. His paw ran down the back of Lars's head to the middle of his back.

"Lars?"

"Yes?"

"What you said earlier... did you mean that?"

**

Dave slowly walked back to the open door. "Fine, Lars." He cocked the gun, taking off the safety. "Go ahead. Be with him. I'll show you."

**

Lars pulled his head away from James's chest and tilted it up.

James bent his neck down.

**

Dave finally stood in the doorway.

**

Lars smiled. "Every word."

**

Two halls away, Jason ran for the prince's chambers.

**

James smiled back. "Lars..."

He embraced Lars, his free arm winding tight around his shoulders.

**

Dave pointed the gun right at the back of his Lars's head.

**

Jason rounded the corner of the last hall.

**

Dave's finger squeezed around the trigger. "If I can't have you, then neither can he."

**

James opened his eyes—and found himself staring at the end of a barrel.

**

Jason broke out into a wide grin, finally reaching the prince's chambers. "Made it—"

**

Dave pulled the trigger.

The shot rang throughout the entire kingdom.

Chapter 28

All the servants in the castle woke up in the middle of their sleep. They gathered around, some leaving their rooms, others staying inside, all wondering what sound they just heard. None of them could explain it, but they all agreed on one thing: it sounded wrong.

Kirk and Rob both shot out of bed themselves. “The hell was that?” Rob said.

“I don’t know.” Kirk went for his clothes on the floor, slipping them on quick. “Where do you think it came from?”

“Hopefully not the Master’s chamber.”

“Don’t say that.”

Rob finished dressing first. “Come on.” He grabbed Kirk’s arm—

Their door slammed wide open. They whipped around and found a disheveled Cliff.

“The prince! Now!”

“Shit!” Kirk cried, and they followed Cliff immediately, running out the door. They raced through the halls to the West Wing, trailing behind Cliff who was far ahead of them both.

**

Jason trembled as he stared at Dave standing in the prince’s doorway, sickened by the smile on his face. *Oh God.* He braved a few steps forward, so he could look behind Dave and see inside—see what damaged had been caused. *No...*

His jaw fell open. His eyes watered.

**

Smoke rose from the gun’s barrel, pointed right at the balcony.

Horrified green eyes stared up at James. Shocked blue eyes stared down at Lars.

The gun shot’s echo finally petered off.

Lars’s lower lip trembled.

And then, James groaned.

More blood stained the balcony’s snowy floor, dripping around his large feet.

Blue eyes fell shut.

James collapsed to the floor.

Lars landed on his knees with James. He wrapped his arms underneath him, using all of the strength in his small frame to hold James close and keep him upright. His head spun. His throat was useless. He felt numb everywhere.

No. He screwed his face up tight and grit his teeth, burying his face into James’s neck. *No James,*

no...

Lars took in a trembling breath, smelling James. His hand pressed against the gun shot wound on James's back, warm blood spilling over his fingers.

Min skat...

**

Jason's tears fell, watching James and Lars at the balcony. *I'm too late*. He shook his head, the heavy guilt coming back triple-folded, weighing him down and threatening to buckle his weak, shaking knees. *James is shot. The prince is shot*. He trembled, his mind losing control under the burying frantic thoughts of *James is dying, James is dead, you screwed up, James is dead, you did this, it's your fault, you did this, you did this*—

The sound of Dave's dark chuckle snapped Jason out of his shock.

"Oops. Missed."

His wet eyes widened, watching Dave flex his hand—and point the gun again, right at Lars's head.

"Ah well." Dave's finger flexed around the trigger. "Second time's the charm."

He pulled the trigger.

Jason ran forward.

"NOOOO!"

The second shot rang throughout the kingdom again.

**

Close to the West Wing, Cliff, Rob and Kirk all gasped and stopped in their run, staring down the hall in the direction where the second shot came from.

"Oh God." Kirk rose a hand to his mouth. "No. Not another one."

"Two shots," Rob whispered. "Could it mean—?"

"No." Cliff trembled. *James. Lars. Jason!* "No!"

He immediately went back into a sprint, using his long legs to his advantage. Rob and Kirk followed him, but they trailed behind him considerably again.

**

Lars's head jerked up at the piercing sounds of the second shot, followed by a scream. And he gasped when he saw Jason tackle Dave from behind, knocking the gun out of his hand.

They fell to the floor in a large heap. Jason recovered first, turning Dave over and delivering a series of hard punches to his face. They bruised the skin, pounding shots that swelled Dave's cheek and jaw underneath Jason's knuckles. Arms soon blocked Jason's fists, Dave curling up beneath Jason's body, but Jason re-doubled his efforts, connecting shots to Dave's ribcage, sides, forearms, whatever he could reach.

On the next shot to his head, Dave blocked it, and delivered a punch finally of his own, right to Jason's jaw. The force of it was enough to disorient Jason and push him away.

They scrambled to their feet, Dave struggling out from under Jason first. Blood coating Dave's nose, dripping from his chin. Jason stood up second, his lower lip cut and bleeding.

Dave shouted, charging with another punch, but Jason ducked in time, countering with a punch to his chin, sailing him backwards. He delivered another, and another, making Dave stumble backwards, crashing into a chair. It broke on impact, and Dave landed on the floor, a cry slipping out when his head slammed into the wood.

Jason loomed down over Dave, fists lifted up to his chest. He breathed hard through his lips, waiting for the next attack.

There was no movement. Dave's eyes were shut. Purple knuckle-shaped bruises dotted his jawline up to his cheekbones.

He loosened his fists and let them hang by his sides. When there was still no movement from Dave, Jason released a long sigh, relaxing his tense body. He cleaned the blood from his lip with the back of his hand, turning away.

Behind him, Dave's hand on the floor twitched, and soon curled around the base of a metal goblet, underneath the chair's debris.

Jason walked to the balcony, coming close to Lars—

CRACK.

A choked gasp of pain slipped out. He collapsed onto the ground in a heap.

The goblet landed beside his unmoving head.

Dave stepped around Jason's prone body. "Nice try." He kicked his side. "Asshole."

Lars wrapped his arms tight around James, watching Dave walk to the table and pick up the gun again. He glared right at him when they locked stares, unafraid as he approached him and pointed the gun at his head again.

Dave spat blood onto the ground, his lips curled in a snarl. "Y'know? I was wrong earlier." He cocked the gun. "Third time's the charm."

Lars pressed James closer to him.

Jason groaned under his breath, shaking his head. It pulsed, his vision swimming, moving in and out of darkness, but he pushed himself up to his feet, looking up. And he rushed forward when he saw Dave again, with the gun to Lars's head.

Dave pressed on the trigger. "Goodbye Lars."

And Jason tackled Dave's side before the gun went off, running them right into the railing.

Lars gasped as they went over.

"JASON!!!"

**

Time slowed down.

The wind blew past Jason as he fell.

He was flying. He was falling.

Lars's scream echoed.

A hundred years were reduced to a few seconds. James as a boy. James at 18. Rob and his cooking. Kirk and his fashion. Lars dancing with James. James's kisses. Cliff and his guidance. His temperament. His leadership and his wisdom. His encouragement and his disappointment.

Cliff... Jason smiled. I tried.

He closed his eyes.

The wind stopped blowing.

And then strong arms wound tight around his waist.

Jason's eyes snapped opened. He stopped moving.

Dave let loose a blood-curtling scream, disappearing into the thicket of trees below.

The arms hurled Jason back over the railing.

Jason's heart ended up in his throat somewhere as he landed back onto solid ground. He felt white powdered snow under his hands, solid concrete beneath his legs, a chest against his back and arms around his waist.

I'm alive. I'm actually alive.

The arms squeezed around his waist. "You okay?"

Jason gasped. His shaky hands touched the arms. *Cliff*. He looked up at his savior behind him and found Cliff's worried eyes on him. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay." He cleared his throat and mumbled, "Thank you."

Cliff smiled back.

They startled at the sound of Kirk's shrill voice. "James!"

Jason gasped. "Oh no."

They broke their embrace, turning around and scrambling to James's side. Rob and Kirk were already there, helping Lars lay James down to the ground.

Cliff knelt on the snowy balcony, Jason beside him. Rob and Kirk flanked James's other side, while Lars cradling James's head on his lap. Blood kept gushing from behind James's back and side. James's chest rose and fell with great effort, his body shaking in heavy trembles, and his attention focused only on Lars.

"We have to stop the bleeding," Cliff said.

"I put some linen on his back to stop the flow, but it's not working," Rob said, pressing a rag to James's side with Kirk. "He's lost too much blood."

"We need the doctor," Kirk said. "He could take the bullet out—"

"He's on the other side of the castle!" Jason snapped. "He can't get here in time!"

"We can't just let him die like this!" Kirk snapped back.

"Then how do you propose—"

They all fell silent as James rose a shaky paw to Lars's cheek, his claws scraping his skin. He weakly smiled, blood pooling around the edges of his mouth.

"My love... I wish..."

His eyes slowly fluttered shut, his paw loosely dropping to the ground.

His chest stopped moving, his last breath sounding like a happy sigh.

Inside the room, the pink rose finally stopped glowing.

No one moved. They all stared at the lifeless, prone body of their prince, snowflakes gathering on his clothes and his fur.

Lars lifted a trembling hand to James's face. His fingertips slowly tickled down his cheek, the same way James did to him.

He quietly cradled James's head into his arms and bowed over, tucking James to his chest.

Tears welled up in all of their eyes, watching Lars rock back and forth, whispering over and over, "Come back... come back..."

Rob turned away grimacing, reluctantly removing his hand from the cloth against James's side. He helped pull Kirk's hand away, his fingers around Kirk's wrist. Their wet eyes met briefly, Kirk's face ashen like Rob's. Rob silently pulled Kirk away, scooting them from James's body until they sat against the balcony railing. There he held Kirk close, and Kirk instinctively returned the embrace.

Cliff shook his head, his body falling backwards to sit on the balcony floor. *It's not fair. It's not right.* He stared at James's lifeless body, his face, his last smile, the way Lars embraced him, and a small sob choked out. *Why? Why did this happen, when he finally learned to love?*

Again, Jason felt numb all over. He watched Lars with James and felt something break inside, leaving him bare and open. He felt an arm wrap around his shoulders—Cliff's arm—and he was pulled into a side embrace, Cliff's face burying into his shoulder. *He's dead.* Hot tears wetted his neck. Tremors and shakes vibrated against his body. But he couldn't react. He couldn't do anything. *James is dead.*

Lars pressed his forehead to James's, his cheeks wet, a hand weaved into James's hair. He kissed his cold lips once, and then buried his face into his dead prince's neck, muffling his sobs.

Dawn broke over the horizon of the snow-capped mountains, soft hues of pinks and orange pushing back the night sky. The snow stopped as morning light shined down upon them, illuminating the castle, the powered white balcony floor—and the vase inside the chambers, where the dead pink rose gave off a soft, brief sparkle.

Chapter 29

The more the sun rose into the sky, the more sunlight shined down onto the vase. None of them noticed how the brief sparkle became more frequent, like raindrops flowing off the dead rose's petals. They didn't see the pink glow return, growing in brightness, pulsing inside the glass. They were all lost in grief, shocked by the sudden loss of their prince, that none of them witnessed the rose disappearing completely inside the vase, becoming one with the glowing pink light.

Cracks started to form as the glass expanded, light seeping through. The glow grew in intensity, casting pink glows and heavy shadows on the five of them on the balcony.

Cliff felt something warm on his back. *What...?* He opened his red-rimmed eyes and frowned at the light around him, turning the snowy floor pink. His fingers touched the ground, picking up some flakes. He turned it around, the snow sparkling briefly—and he let lose a soft gasp, sitting up straight abruptly, startling Jason beside him. *Oh my God. It couldn't.*

He slowly turned around. Pink light shined on his wet face. His eyes grew wide.

It can't be.

Jason turned around as well and froze. He gaped at what he saw, matching Cliff's look of disbelief and awe.

Rob and Kirk soon felt the warm light too on their bodies, the change in the atmosphere around them. They gasped as well when they saw the growing pink light from the vase, holding each other closer.

Sparkles churned inside the vase, swirling around in a clockwise motion. They started to take shape, forming a figure, the light turning from a bright pink to pure white.

Lars finally lifted his head and froze when he saw the outline of a feminine figure in the white light, before it disappeared.

There was a brief pause of nothing—and then the vase finally exploded.

The many glass shards vaporized as the light consumed the entire castle. Lars pressed his face into James's hair, tightening his hold around his prince's body.

Rob and Kirk buried their faces into each others shoulders. Cliff brought a hand to his face, shielding his eyes. Jason grimaced, covering his eyes with his forearm.

Strong wind laced with snow picked up around them, all coming from the light source where the vase once stood. They braced themselves against the wind, grunting with effort as the warm light bathed around them.

James's body started to move.

Lars gritted his teeth, opening his eyes into tiny slits.

He gasped.

James was glowing a pure translucent color. It consumed his body, covering him like silk.

His body slowly lifted off the ground. He felt James's head leave his lap.

No! Lars redoubled his efforts in holding James to him, squeezing his arms around his body. *Don't take him away!*

But the power was stronger than him, and he felt James yanked out of his embrace.

He scrambled to his feet, a whimper hiccuping out between his dry lips. His hands reached out to grab James and bring him into his arms again. But he was too slow. His fingers grazed James's fur but couldn't hold on well enough.

From what he could make in the blinding light, James's body drifted up into the air, high above him. He used all of his strength to jump up and jerk him back down, but his fingers only grazed the side of James's pants, the edges of his cape, the ends of his bloodied shirt. He tried again and again, slamming into the side rail as James lifted higher, but he couldn't reach him. He couldn't keep his eyes open anymore either. The light hurt. The pain hurt.

Min skat... Lars stretched his hand up high, squinting in the blinding light. Kaleidoscope swirls above him, followed by ripples of white light.

No. Please. A whimper slipped out. *Come back.* Fresh tears fell down his cheeks. *Please...*

A gentle hand pressed against his shoulder.

"Do not worry, little one."

Lars froze in place. *That voice.*

Cliff, Rob, Kirk and Jason gasped, all recognizing the soft, ethereal voice of the woman that haunted their lives for a hundred years.

The Enchantress...

The hand on Lars's shoulder gently touched his cheek. All Lars could make out in the light were feminine lips and flowing hair over slender shoulders.

Those lips curled into a smile, and his stomach uncoiled at the Enchantress's soothing whisper. "He is yours."

Lars smiled in return. "Thank you."

Her fingers slipped down and off his cheek.

He closed his eyes.

The warm light reached its pinnacle. Cliff, Rob, Kirk and Jason groaned in pain, shielding their eyes again, unable to look upon the Enchantress any longer.

None of them could see what was going on. All they could hear was the varying sounds of tiny explosions, first two, then another, and another. The wind grew stronger, swirling more snow into the air. Another explosion went off, louder than the rest.

From above, they felt a searing heat radiating down like the sun itself. Sweat rolled down their faces and they hissed and groaned in pain as it seemed to grow in size. But as quickly as the heat arrived, it quickly disappeared.

Around the castle, the white light gradually retracted. The servants that woke up to the blinding light stood around confused when it disappeared.

The light retreated from the kingdom, bubbling smaller and smaller until it consumed the entire balcony. A few seconds later, it disappeared completely, as if it was never there.

Lars felt the change. A cool breeze grazed his cheek. The warmth, the light and the Enchantress were gone.

James...

He took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

Jason opened his eyes next, looking around the balcony, blinking the strain away. When he saw the direction Lars was looking in, he followed it, and he broke out into a wide grin.

Cliff rubbed at his eyes before he opened them. He gasped at what stood near the edge of the balcony, grinning as well.

Rob and Kirk were the last to see. They too gasped as well, smiling wide as they rose to their feet.

Blonde hair flowed like waves over strong shoulders. Dried blood caked the man's side and back, but the wounds were sealed. Only his heavy scars remained. The clothes he wore no longer fit him well. The shirt and the cloak hung off his shoulders like the trousers around his hips. One false move and they could easily slip off.

The man glanced down, flexing out his hands. He turned them over, staring at his bare palms. Fingernails instead of claws. Peach skin instead of grey fur. Normal hands. Human hands.

He turned around, showing his face.

Cliff's smile turned watery. A hand flew to Kirk's open mouth. Rob let loose a small laugh, his lower lip trembling. Jason hiccuped on his sigh, his eyes shining.

The prince. Their James.

No longer a beast. No longer under the spell. Their James stood near the edge of the balcony, looking the same he did a hundred years ago, but more like the boy they remembered, before everything changed. And they all exchanged looks briefly, sharing the same thought in their smiles: *we're free. We're finally free.*

Lars stared at James, frozen in place.

James walked forward to him, closing the distance between them. He rose a hand to his cheek and grazed the back of it down.

"Lars..." He turned his hand around, tickling his fingertips down his cheek. "It's me."

Lars's body trembled, his eyes shining.

His arms already wrapped around James before his mind caught up with him. He buried his face into James's neck and breathed him in. His hands rested on James's back, where the wound was, and it finally hit him: *James is alive. My James is alive.* And he reacted to the thought with a hard squeeze to James's torso, a soft whimper spilling out. *Fuck.*

James cupped his hand around the back of Lars's head. He squeezed his free arm around Lars tight in return, petting his hair in small strokes.

"I'm here, mein schatz."

Lars trembled. He pressed his face deeper into James's warm neck.

Rob and Kirk moved to Cliff and Jason's sides. All of them smiled, watching their prince finally be with the boy he loved.

James gently pulled his arms away to cup Lars's face in his hands and tilt it upwards. Their eyes met, James smiling down at him, and he finally whispered the words he needed to say.

"I love you, Lars."

Lars gave a watery smile back. "I love you, James."

James rubbed his thumbs underneath Lars's eyes slowly, before he closed his own and leaned in. Lars's fluttered shut as well, leaning in too.

Their lips met in a soft, gentle kiss.

And when their lips touched, a bright light shot up from them both, swirling around their bodies. Their clothes changed, Lars in his gold outfit again, James in his old prince regalia from a century ago.

The light soon traveled to Rob, Kirk, Cliff and Jason, also changing their clothes back to their proper attire. It also removed all the scars, bruises and dirt from their bodies.

It consumed the castle slowly again, moving through and repairing everything in its wake. The prince's room returned to its former glory, followed by the West and North wings. The East Wing and the South Wing soon followed, receiving their needed repairs, despite being the most intact.

All the servants in the castle were consumed by the light as well. Their clothes changed into new pairs, all of them deeply confused as to what was happening. A commotion rose through the castle, and the servants convened in the main hall to discuss what was going on.

James gently broke the kiss, pressing his forehead against Lars's. Their noses touched, their lips brushed, and they both smiled, losing themselves in each others soft gazes.

Rob and Kirk were the first to turn away, leaving their prince alone with Lars. They walked through the repaired West Wing, heading for the main hall. As they approached, they heard many voices, and they went to investigate.

When they found a huge gathering of all the castle servants looking at them, perplexed and confused, Rob and Kirk turned to each other, and then briefly smiled.

Kirk took a step forward. "It's over. The prince has finally fallen in love."

One servant came forward, trembling from head to toe. "Does... does that mean, we are free?"

"Yes." Kirk threw his hands up in the air. "We are FREE!"

A huge roar erupted from all the servants. Kirk and Rob laughed and joined in the festivities. Everyone embraced and danced. Some broke down into tears and cried, falling onto their knees. It was truly over. The hundred year old curse was gone. They were free.

Cliff was the second to leave the prince's chambers. He turned to Jason beside him and rested a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it, and Jason turned, meeting Cliff's stare. They shared a quiet look, smiling together, their misunderstandings now a thing of the past. Cliff then slipped his hand away and nodded to Jason, walking out of the prince's room, leaving James and Lars be.

Jason watched Cliff go, and when Cliff was out of his sights, he sighed and glanced at James and Lars for a brief moment. The old ping of jealousy and hurt wasn't as strong or as debilitating as it once was, but it was still there. He'd have to deal with it somehow, someday, for his sake.

He turned around, heading for the door. He was almost through the doorway, when a gentle hand touched his shoulder.

"Wait."

Jason frowned. *Lars?* He turned around—and grunted loud, the wind knocked out of him, as Lars tackle-hugged him. Arms wrapped tight around his waist, Lars's cheek pressing onto his chest.

"Thank you," Lars whispered.

"Heh." Jason returned the embrace, patting Lars's back. "You're welcome."

Lars lifted his head, grinning up at him, and then quickly let him go.

He chuckled, watching Lars rush back into James's waiting arms. He stood in the doorway as James tucked Lars under his chin, a hand on Lars's neck, the other resting on the small of Lars's back.

Blue eyes met his across the room.

James smiled and nodded to Jason.

Jason smiled back. There was no ping of jealousy or pain when James rested his chin on top of Lars's head, burying his finger's into Lars's hair. No guilt or hurt either.

Finally.

He sighed and left them alone, closing the chamber door behind him.

In the sky, the black night no longer existed. The sun took over, pushing above the snow-capped mountains, hues of pinks, oranges and purples hanging above. The snow stopped falling. The wind turned into a light breeze. The storm was a thing of the past now.

Lars pulled away from James's chest to look into his eyes. He ran a hand over James's hair. "What now?"

James smiled. "Whatever we want."

He leaned in, kissing Lars once more. They enjoyed the moment, their closeness, before James broke away, taking Lars's hand in his and guiding him into his chambers.

As they went inside, pink rose petals fluttered in the wind, disappearing into the sky.

Chapter 30

Three months later...

Thousands of visitors descended upon Neuschwanstein Castle from all around the world, from regular German citizens to the international elite. Actors and politicians, directors and supermodels, doctors and lawyers, businessmen and regular everyday men and women and children came to the castle this sunny March day, and it was up to David as the castle maître d' to ensure things ran smoothly.

He walked up and down the halls, moving from south wing to north wing, going through his checklist of things to do. Around him, tour guides led large groups to different areas, some discussing the architecture of the castle, some telling the history of the old Hetfield family, some directing people towards the ticket booths for the garden sightseeing and tour.

There were lines upon lines waiting to come in. So far, the guest list counted about four hundred people had passed into the castle, and it was not even midday. Because of how beautiful the weather was and the west wing's flowers in bloom, there was a good chance a thousand or more would arrive. And that didn't even account for some of the A-list VIPs coming in and out today of the restaurant. Thankfully, he had help.

David glanced at his watch and he grimaced. "Shit. I'm late."

His walk turned into a light jog as he came into the south wing, passing by the old dining hall, where another tour was taking place, right on schedule. *Kirk is going to have a fit, I just know it...*

"David!"

He came to a halt as he heard his name called. And as he turned around, following the voice, he groaned in dismay, slapping his hand against his forehead.

"Chris! What are you doing here? You're supposed to be at the restaurant!"

"I know, I know!" The majordomo rushed up to him. "I had to take care a problem in the west wing. Tour guide mess again."

"Still? Great. We'll need to meet with all the guides tonight once the doors close."

"Already schedule it."

David smiled, slapping Chris's shoulder. "You're a lifesaver. Now come on. I don't want to hear Kirk's bitch-fits again."

**

Inside the castle's five-star restaurant, *Rose de l'Enchanteresse*, co-owners Kirk and Rob waited near the entrance, hidden behind a pillar so they did not draw attention to themselves. Light classical music played, mixing with the sounds of cutlery on china and conversations.

Kirk huffed, glaring at the watch on his wrist. "They're late."

Rob chuckled. "Be patient, love. They do everything in the castle."

"Cliff wouldn't be late. Why did he have to give it up?"

"You know he had to when James left with Lars."

"So what? He could still be owner of the castle as well as maître d'!"

"Right." Rob rolled his eyes. "And end up in an early grave? No thank you."

"Well, the Enchantress could come back, resurrect another..."

"She probably used up all of her energy when she made the world remember the castle and the Hetfields existed in the first place."

"So? She's a supreme being! She could do it again."

"Let's not chance that." Rob twined his hand with Kirk's. "Besides, Cliff has much bigger things to take care of."

They glanced back into their co-owned restaurant, where all the tables were filled with A-list celebrities, politicians and the international elite. Waiters—some of them servants who had been part of the castle for the last century, some of them from this century—all worked hard with smiles on their faces, delivering food at top speed with grace and poise.

In the far corner, Cliff sat at the VIP table in a sharp business suit, talking with world-reknown art curators, art historians and art enthusiasts over warm sake and freshly-cooked sushi. He seemed to be arguing something, passionately discussing his side, while everyone at the table listened in intently. Torben sat beside him with his girlfriend Molly, nodding to his every word.

Kirk smiled. "Yeah, that's true. He is pretty busy ensuring the castle's art and architecture is preserved."

"As well as marketing Torben's artwork to collectors and galleries."

"And doing all the managerial things James left him with." Kirk shook his head. "That boy. Leaving all that on Cliff's shoulders."

"Ah, leave him be. I'm glad he got out of here. He's only twenty-two."

"A hundred and twenty-two."

Rob shrugged. "Technicalities." He squeezed Kirk's hand. "Besides, I think Cliff likes it. And it's not like he's alone."

"Heh. True."

They turned to the other side of the room, where Jason stood in his own suit, shaking hands with a man in another suit while holding a glass of champagne. When the man left him, Jason walked over to the two of them standing near the entrance, shaking his head.

"I swear, I never knew an ambassador of France could be so funny." He frowned as he looked around. "Where's David and Chris?"

"Late." Kirk crossed his arms. "You should've been maître d'. Or at least stayed majordomo."

Jason chuckled, shaking his head no. "And then who would've helped Cliff with all the slack? James made the right decision giving our old positions to David and Chris."

"Hm." Kirk sighed, glancing at his watch again. "It still boggles my mind he gave those guys a

second chance."

"Dave brainwashed people too well, love," Rob said. "They're showing they've changed their ways."

"I guess..."

Jason smiled around the rim of his flute glass. "Well, I have no complaints, though I always encourage skepticism." He drained his flute glass, passing it off to a nearby waiter. "But they have been working hard, all three of them. I have no doubt they're reformed. Or, at least, they're on the path to being reformed."

Rob nodded. "I agree. I mean, I'm glad he gave them second chances. David's done a fine job with Chris by his side, and I got one hell of a cook out of Shawn."

Kirk crossed his arms. "That's true." He sighed. "I guess I don't want any sudden surprises. I want things to *stay* okay."

"Ah, stop worrying." Jason clasped Kirk's shoulder and then Rob's. "If shit happens, then it happens. We'll deal with whatever comes. I mean, nothing stays perfect forever, right? So forget the maybe's and all that. Let's just enjoy what we have now."

Kirk smiled. "You're right." He chuckled, elbowing Jason's side. "And you totally prepared that speech."

Jason grinned back. His response was cut short as the three of them heard the sound of running feet against the carpet. They looked up and saw Chris and David make a beeline right for the entrance of the restaurant, sweat matting their hair to their red faces, panting hard for breath. They made a complete stop in front of them, bowing over, hands on their knees.

"Late again, Ellefson." Kirk turned to Chris. "You too, Broderick."

Chris lifted his head, glaring at Kirk. "Hey... at least... we made it."

"And now you've got a job to do." He pointed inside, all the way to the back, where the double doors led to the restaurant kitchens. "Get going."

Chris and David both groaned as one. They stumbled to the back.

Rob kissed Kirk's cheek. "I'll go help them out."

Kirk nodded, letting Rob's hand go. Jason flanked his side, the two of them watching their friends slip away to the kitchens without Cliff noticing their presence. "You think Cliff has any idea what's about to happen?" he asked.

"Not a chance. He would expect a surprise birthday party after castle hours. Not during."

Inside the kitchens, Rob directed Chris and David to where Shawn was in his white chef outfit, putting the finishing touches to Cliff's seven-tier birthday cake, made of red velvet, strawberries and cream cheese frosting. Together all four of them carefully pushed the tray towards the back entrance of the kitchen doors, ready to take it out into the restaurant.

Rob poked his head out and gave Kirk and Jason a thumbs-up sign.

Jason nodded, giving a thumbs-up in return. "Alright, they're ready."

Kirk pointed to the main stage inside, where a live string quartet performed classical music. "I'll go there, you get the lights?"

"You got it."

Cliff was knee-deep in a conversation about the improvement of art conservation in Western Europe, when the lights dimmed in the restaurant, and all conversations paused for a moment. Soon everyone audibly wondered what was going on, if the power was out, and Cliff rose to his feet, ready to find Jason and have them take care of the situation.

He frowned as he saw a spotlight on Kirk taking to the stage, grabbing a mic.

"I really, really apologize for the disruption ladies and gentlemen, but we have a bit of a problem, you see."

Cliff thought the worst as Kirk turned to him with a grave look on his face.

"I regret to announce..."

And then Kirk broke into a wide grin, pointing at Cliff.

"That our castle owner is now a year older! Stand up old man, take a bow!"

The whole room erupted in laughter and cheers, all the tension and anxiety in the room quickly leaving as soon as it arrived. Everyone in the room had seen the signs in, out and around the castle that today was the owner's thirty-first birthday. They all clapped, turning to Cliff in the corner.

Cliff chuckled underneath the spotlight now on him. He rolled his eyes, sighing in relief, and crossed his arms over his chest. "Dammit Kirk!"

"Face it, man, you're old. You can't hide from it anymore. As a matter of fact..." Kirk gestured to the doors. "We even commemorated the event!"

Cliff laughed. "Oh no..."

Shawn and David held the doors while Rob and Chris pushed the massive cake out into the room. The crowd clapped, soft sounds of awe rising as they gazed at how large the cake was. The four of them pushed it over to Cliff's table, where Shawn took out a single candle and put it on one of the tiers.

"We gave you one to blow out," Kirk said over the mic. "Easier on your old lungs."

Cliff laughed, running a hand through his hair, completely dumbfounded and flabbergasted that his friends did this for him, in front of dignitaries, movie stars, models and other elitists.

David took out a pack of matches and lit the candle up.

"Come on everyone, sing along!" Kirk shouted. "Happy birthday to you..."

The entire crowd in the restaurant sang Happy Birthday in unison to Cliff. He glanced out at everyone in attendance, specifically meeting the eye of his friends. Torben and Molly, Shawn, David and Chris, Kirk and Rob -- his best friends to the end, and he found in the crowd, standing far away near the doors, Jason, watching him with a smile.

But as he blew out the candle and the whole crowd cheered, Jason's smile waned slightly, and he turned away, heading out of the restaurant.

**

The cake was served to everyone in the restaurant. Because Rob made an extra cake, just in case the first cake was ruined, he had his workers send slices to castle staff members throughout the castle. He also had some slices served at the many cafes installed in each wing for the general public, even offering complimentary caffeinated drinks in honor of Cliff's birthday.

Cliff ended up with such a vast amount of presents that he decided to open them all in the privacy of his office much later in the day, once he had a few minutes to spare. He found the time, a late thirty minute lunch break, between meetings. But when he entered his office, he found a note on top, addressed to him.

West Wing, the gazebo. Come alone.

He recognized the handwriting easily.

"Jason...?"

**

Cliff utilized the West Wing side entrance only staff members had access to. He easily slipped out of the castle without alerting anyone where he was going. He was lucky this part of the West Wing gardens wasn't available to the public yet. The gardeners still had to redesign as well as restore a good chunk of the area.

Standing in the gazebo, back turned to the entrance, was Jason. He didn't wear his suit, only casual clothing: regular jeans, a t-shirt and a leather jacket. His hands were in the jacket's pockets, head tilted up, staring at the castle wall beside them, covered in vegetation.

Cliff smiled coming up the steps. "So what is it that you..."

He trailed off as he saw a large suitcase by Jason's side.

Jason turned around.

Their eyes met.

Cliff stood in front of him, mouth agape, eyes wide in shock, while Jason faced him emotionless.

"Has to be done." Jason came forward, his lips curling up into a small smile, closing the gap between him and Cliff. "I've been stalling it for some time."

He cleared his throat before he spoke. "Why now?"

Jason shrugged. "Just felt like it."

"But you're needed here."

"It's not forever. I mean..." Jason looked away. "I don't know if it is or not. If I will come back."

"And you haven't told the others."

He shook his head no. "They all have letters waiting for them in their rooms."

"They won't be happy."

"I know they'll miss me." Jason looked up, over Cliff's shoulder, to survey at the gardens

surrounding the gazebo. "And there's a part of me that'll miss this too. This has been my home for a whole century, and while some of our servants left when the spell broke, some of us didn't." He turned around to glare at the large castle wall that engulfed them as well. "But I need to leave now. I need to go."

"Like James and Lars did."

Jason turned around, facing Cliff.

Cliff smiled, no trace of anger or resentment on his face. "I know exactly what you are searching for, Jason, and I know that you won't find it here. You stayed here out of loyalty and need when James and Lars left, and for that I am grateful. We're all grateful. Your hard work did not go unnoticed. Everyone adores you. A lot of the servants look up to you, especially Chris and David. And to me, Kirk and Rob, you are our brother. Nothing will ever change that. But it isn't enough to make you stay." He sadly smiled. "Or enough to make you truly happy."

Jason's eyes glossed over. He nodded yes. "I wish it was."

"Don't be guilty. I don't blame you nor hate you. None of us will. We'll be sad that you are gone, but as long as you are out there making yourself happy, we support you." He came forward, offering his hand to Jason. "I'm not going to accept a resignation from you, nor am I allowing anyone to take your place. Instead, I'm leaving it open, for you, should you decide to come back." His eyes brimmed with tears. "No matter where you go, Jason... you will always have a home here."

Jason trembled in place, slowly taking his hand out to shake Cliff's.

They stared at one another, eyes wet, hands clasped.

And then Jason yanked Cliff to him, pulling him into a tight hug. Cliff reciprocated, holding Jason with the same strength.

They held the embrace for a long time. The reluctance between the two was evident in Jason's hands and Cliff's arms. But Jason eventually pulled away, biting on his lips, his eyes red-rimmed.

Cliff clasped a hand on Jason's shoulder, squeezing it. He managed to smile, even as he let Jason's shoulder go and stepped to the side so Jason could easily walk out of the gazebo.

Jason bent down, picking up his lone suitcase. He walked to the edge of the stairs—and settled it down again. "Oh shit. I almost forgot."

Cliff's eyebrows knitted together as Jason reached into his jacket and took out something.

Jason opened his palm between them. Inside were two halves of a full ring.

"This was the ring James gave me to leave the castle. When I used it to save Lars, it broke in half, and I found them in the West Wing shortly after the transformation. I was going to through them away but I held onto them... I don't even know why. Maybe as a memento for the past, or something that reminded me of James. Who knows." Jason lifted his eyes to look into Cliff's. "But I want you to take the other half. As a birthday present." He smiled. "A really cheap birthday present."

Cliff gave a watery chuckle. He took one half of the ring between his fingers, staring at it briefly before he glanced back up at Jason. "I'll keep it near me always, whether or not you come back."

Jason nodded. "Alright."

Cliff's fingers curled around the ring piece, the metal pressing against his palm.

Jason placed his back into his jacket's pocket.

They stared at one another again in silence, taking in their last looks of each other. Both of them smiled, despite the thick tears in their eyes.

Jason broke the moment again by looking away. He bent down to pick up his suitcase again by its handle. "I better get going. My taxi's waiting outside." He walked down the steps.

Cliff flanked his side. "At the front gate?"

"West Wing parking lot area. You know, where the drop off is?"

"Ah, yes. That's the far one. Not many like to park there."

"Exactly. None of the guys should see me since I'm going out the staff side entrance."

"Mm, probably not, but if they ask questions, I'll handle it." He frowned at Jason's briefcase for a moment. "You sure you have everything?"

"Yes. Everything I need."

"Money, tickets?"

"Have the train tickets in my pocket."

"No flying?"

"God no. One mechanical monstrosity at a time." Jason chuckled. "I'll work my way up to those ungodly contraptions... someday."

They shared a laugh together as they made their way to the staff side entrance of the west wing gardens. Again they fell into a comfortable silence, walking to the gate. There Cliff stood beside the door, while Jason stood in front of it.

"Be safe, Jason."

Jason smiled at him and then turned to the front of the door. "I will." He took a big deep breath—*here we go*—and opened the side gate, stepping out into the world.

Cliff's eyes shined, watching Jason leave the castle walls. Something broke inside as Jason walked away, heading for the West Wing parking lot. But along with the hurt came this deep satisfaction, this sense of peace, knowing Jason was making the right decision, and that Jason was finally going to be okay.

He slipped the hand holding the ring piece into a pocket of his suit pants, fumbling with it between his fingers. Jason grew smaller and smaller in the distance, walking towards a lone taxi cab waiting in the drop off zone of the parking lot.

Good luck, my friend.

**

Late at night, on the shores of Northern France, James and Lars stood together side by side, leaning on the railing that separated them from the sea some meters below. The ocean crashed and

churned against the rocks of the expansive Brittany coastline, splashing water and cool air upwards. But out in the distance, the water was calm, the full moon reflecting its tranquil surface. No one was around for miles. They could enjoy this moment alone without a single disturbance, bundled up in their leather jackets and scarves.

With all the money accrued from the castle, and the revenue from touring, all of James's servants and James himself were set for life. He indulged in his freedom with Lars, seeing the world, before they would settle down somewhere. Lars would go to university, that was certain. What James would do, he didn't know, nor did it matter. He would figure it out eventually.

The past three months, they spent city hopping, riding trains from place to place. They started in Germany, James providing the historical anecdotes and translations, and later moved northward to Denmark, where Lars led James through his homeland, taking him to the places he knew and the ones he always wanted to go to. And when they were done, spending their last day paying tribute to Lars's mother, they went down the coastline, through the Netherlands and Belgium, to where they were now in the country Lars always wanted to see.

Lars sighed, resting his head on James's shoulder. His eyelids drooped, the light ocean churns lulling him into a peaceful state, where he could only smell James and the ocean's breeze. They had spent yet another whole day discovering another part of the Brittany coastline, and the fatigue finally settled.

James's arm slipped around his waist. "Mein schatz?"

"Hm?"

"It's late. We should go back."

"Mm." He yawned, rubbing his cheek into James's shoulder. "A little longer."

"You could get a cold."

"That's okay. You'll take care of me."

James's chuckle vibrated against his cheek. "Spoiled brat."

"So says the prince."

"Former prince."

"Still a prince." Lars wrapped his arm around James's waist while he lifted his head up and gazed into blue eyes. He smiled. "My prince."

James briefly smiled, before he set his lips into a thin line, a stern look on his face. "Lars?"

Lars's smile waned, his eyebrows knitted together in concern. "Yes James?"

"Are you ever afraid?"

"Of what?"

James sighed, his eyes downcast. "That this could be taken away from you, at any moment?"

Lars turned away from the railing, standing fully in front of James, little to no gap between their torsos. Blonde hair fell into James's eyes, cascaded around his face, as if shielding James away from the world.

"Sometimes." Lars gently rose a hand to James's face, pushing the blonde curls back, hooking them behind his ear. "But you can't live in fear. Things happen. Good and bad." He ran his fingertips down James's cheek to his chin. "We just have to make due with the bad and enjoy the good while it's here." He sadly smiled, tilting James's head up to look him in the eye. "You're afraid of being mortal now, aren't you?"

James stared into Lars's eyes for a moment, saying nothing, and then sighed, his attention drifting elsewhere. He lifted his chin away from Lars's fingers, his neck bent, hair around his face, standing to his full height.

"I've thought about it for some time now, since we left the castle. Being outside, here in your world, there's so many dangers out here. So many risks we're taking. The train could derail, or I could say the wrong thing, or you could cross the street too early—"

"James—"

He lifted his head to look at Lars directly. "Let me finish."

Lars stopped on his next word. He looked into James's eyes and then nodded, resting his hand on James's chest.

James closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. And when he exhaled, he let out everything.

"I thought about all the what-ifs. All the bad scenarios. And I realized today, I'm repeating the same mistakes. I'm letting fear rule my life again, and I don't want it to. I don't want to turn into that beast. I'm tired of being afraid. I spent a hundred years behind walls, being afraid, and I don't want to do it again. I want to see the world. I want to do all the things you've told me, like fly in a plane or ride a bike or swim into the sea. I want everything. As long as I am able to spend every last moment with you, I don't care what happens. I'm not afraid. And I'll never be afraid again. So no, I don't care that I'm mortal again. I don't want to live forever. I've had that." He cupped Lars's cheek in one hand, tightening his hold around Lars's waist with the other arm. "Now... I just want to live." James smiled. "With you."

Lars's eyes shined in the moonlight. He returned the embrace, his arms enfolding James, bringing James to him, closing what little gap there was between them until their chests touched and their lips brushed.

"I love you, James."

James leaned in, their noses rubbing, forehead to forehead, warm breath over warm breath.

"And I love you Lars."

Their eyes fluttered shut.

"Forever."

They kissed as the stars fell one after the other—small, fleeting streaks of white decorating the night sky.

And they lived happily-ever-after.

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