

## All That Is Gold

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# All That Is Gold

by [cherie\\_morte](#)

## Summary

AU: Jensen is an elven prince. All his life, he's wanted nothing more than to prove his worth to his aloof father, King Alan of Gnaven. When an attempt to impress the king by battling a gryphon goes wrong, Jensen thinks he's as good as dead. Instead, he awakes in the home of a strange man named Jared who lives in an abandoned village alone. Despite saving his life, Jared has no love for Jensen or his kingdom. In order to convince his reluctant host to let him stay until his wounds have healed, Jensen offers to share a magical gift: a bard's song. Jensen's song wins him Jared's esteem, but as the two grow closer, Jensen learns secrets about his father that force him to question his loyalties and change his kingdom forever.

## Notes

This is my [spn\\_reversebang](#) for 2017, woefully late, created for [bluefire986](#)'s ridiculously beautiful prompt. Please go look at [the art that inspired this story](#) and give my artist all the love in the world for the patience I did not deserve as well as the incredible talent that went into these pieces. Thank you so much to [dugindeep](#) for betaing most of this. The last few scenes were not betaed and all mistakes are on me. I was rushing to finish this before February ended, because it was already late enough. This was largely inspired by the world of Middle-Earth and particularly the Queer Lodgings chapter of *The Hobbit*. I took a lot of my bard lore from *Dungeons and Dragons* but most especially *The Adventure Zone: Balance*. This also was largely a take on Scheherazade's stories and has a lot of Beauty and the Beast elements as well. Basically, I mixed together a bunch of nerdy stuff and I really hope it worked!

[bluefire986](#), I cannot apologize enough for how late this is. I know I missed the challenge by months, but I was three scenes away from finishing before I left for a long trip to a country without internet, and when I got back, I was completely burnt out from the trip and feeling a little disconnected from this story. You deserved much better from your author, but I really did want to get this done for you, because your art deserved a story, even if it wasn't on time. You were so lovely to work with and so understanding of the hurdles IRL kept throwing at me. I hope you really love this. <3

- Inspired by [All That is Gold Art Post](#) by [Bluefire986](#)



Jensen realizes too late that things are not going well. When his back hits the ground and the pain blinds him for a moment, spreading through his entire body and making it impossible to move—it occurs to him then. As soon as his vision comes back, he looks around and he doesn't need prior battle experience to figure out how this is going to end.

His party is scattered around him, every one of them dead or dying. A lifetime of war strategy training, and what a waste it turned out to be. Jensen is no general. He was too proud to see how many chances there were for retreat. Now, he'll live just long enough to watch his men die knowing it's in large part his fault.

The creature gives a hideous screech, jolting Jensen out of his thoughts, and when he looks up, one sharp claw glints in the sun as it rears itself above him. It'll come down in a second, talon through Jensen's heart, and that'll be it.

No. Jensen might die, but he won't die in vain. He slides the golden signet ring from his finger and drops it on the ground by his body, knowing it will be found and that once it is, there will be revenge for him and his men. This monster won't be free to slaughter much longer, even if the glory of stopping it won't be his.

Instead of pouncing, the beast's legs land around Jensen and its face draws closer, as if it's inspecting him. Jensen tries to play dead, but the creature isn't fooled as easily as he'd hoped it would be. It nudges its beak down, into an open cut on Jensen's shoulder, and he can't help the cry that escapes his lips as the blood begins to seep through.

He turns his face toward the searing pain and meets the creature's eyes dead-on. There's a mix of more colors than Jensen thinks he's ever seen in them, gold and brown and green and blue,

but that's not the most striking thing. There seems to be intelligence in the way it's observing him.

As soon as Jensen tries to draw back from it, the gryphon opens its mouth and lets out another horrible scream. The sound, mixed with the loss of blood, are more than Jensen can bear. He blacks out, certain that death is upon him.



The pain hasn't lessened any when he wakes, but he does wake.

Jensen's first thought is that he's sore all over. It takes several minutes for the whys to set in and even longer before he manages to open his eyes, sit up, and take in his surroundings.

The room he's in is nothing special, certainly not compared to the palace chambers he's used to, but it's welcoming considering that he thought he would be dying on a mountainside with a sharp, frozen rock digging into his back.

He's in a bed with several firm pillows to prop himself up on and a thick animal skin blanket pulled over him. The mattress is thin but soft and in the corner of the room a fire burns, casting a warm glow over Jensen.

His wounds have been dressed, his armor removed and propped in a chair across the room, and the thin underclothes he's in are not blood-soaked the way his own should be.

Someone rescued him, brought him to their cabin, and looked after him when he thought he was as good as dead. A part of him resents them for it. He should have died with his men. Their deaths were his fault. It's not fair to their sacrifice for Jensen to have made it out.

"You're awake."

Jensen looks up at the sound and sees a stranger in the doorway. He has a bowl in his hand, smoke rising from the top, and the scent begins to filter into the room, a delicious smell that makes Jensen very suddenly aware that he's starving.

"Who are you?" Jensen asks.

The man takes a step into the room, and Jensen is able to see him better. He appears to be human, unusually large for one, taller than Jensen even. His hair is dark and hangs only to his shoulders, much shorter than the elven fashion Jensen is accustomed to. Despite that, it would be hard to deny that there's something almost like beauty in his rugged features.

Jensen swallows hard and looks away, knowing this is not the time or the place for thoughts like that.

"Shouldn't I get to ask that?" the man says. "You're the one in my home, after all."

"Yes, you're right," Jensen replies. "I apologize for my poor manners. I'm a little disoriented."

"That's to be expected." The stranger approaches Jensen and hands him the bowl of stew carefully. "You took quite a beating."

"The monster," Jensen says as he accepts the food. "Did you kill it?"

The man frowns, then shakes his head. "It was long gone by the time I stumbled onto you."

"How did you find us?" Jensen pauses, looks around, and wonders if maybe there's another room in this cottage with others like him who somehow survived. "My companions, did any of them—?"

"Dead," the man tells him. He looks away and whispers, "All dead. I'm sorry."

Jensen nods, careful to balance the bowl in his hands as he moves. It's what he expected to hear, but having that last, mad hope extinguished doesn't make it any easier. "Don't apologize. You saved me. It's not your fault you couldn't save the rest of them. It's mine."

The man turns from Jensen and takes one of the chairs across the room, positioning it by the bed. "You were going to tell me your name."

"I don't usually need introductions," Jensen says. "Not in these woods. I'm your prince, Jensen of the House of Ackles. Son of Alan II, King of Gnaven. And you were very wise to save me. My father is going to make you a very rich man."

The man laughs, an ugly bark rather than the excitement Jensen expected. "You're not my prince. And I have no need of your father's riches. I have all that I need here. All I *want* is to be left alone. You'll go back to where you came from tonight. You should be able to walk by then."

The chair makes an awful sound as it scrapes along the floor when the man stands to leave. Jensen shakes his head, looking down at the soup the stranger brought him and wondering why someone would go to the trouble of rescuing him and tending to his wounds, cooking for him and protecting him from the elements, only to cast him out into the woods still injured, without protection, alone, when there's a monster lurking.

"I'll die," he says. "Out there in the dark and cold. Friendless. You can't be serious. At least give me until sunrise."

"I haven't done enough for you yet?" the man says, turning to face Jensen. "Do I owe you more? Tell me the etiquette. I don't usually house elven princelings."

For a moment, Jensen considers making a threat. His father would send an army to the door of anyone he heard was this inhospitable to his heir. But the man's demeanor makes him rethink his strategy. There's something here that Jensen would be foolish not to pick up on. The stranger cooled considerably when he heard who Jensen was. Appeals to authority won't do him any good.

An appeal to his humanity might.

"Please," Jensen begs. "Please, forget my status. Don't help me because I'm a prince. Help me because I won't survive a night out there in the condition I'm in. You know that. You wouldn't send somebody to their death."

"You're so sure of that?"

"You could have left me to die," Jensen points out. "Easily. Many would have. You brought me here because you're better than that. Whatever your complaints with my kingdom are, I'm still a person."

The man considers it for a long time, and Jensen watches him, knowing that his life depends entirely on the whim of someone whose name he doesn't even know.

Finally, the stranger nods. "You can stay until morning. If you can walk by then, I'll give you enough provisions to last until you reach your city. I trust you know your way, since you seem to think you own these woods."

Jensen doesn't argue, not wanting to push his luck. He nods, finally bringing the bowl to his lips and taking a sip, hoping to show that he appreciates the stranger's offerings.

The man observes him for a few moments longer, the edges of his lips still pulled into a tight frown. Eventually he turns to leave the room.

"Wait," Jensen says, and his host pauses in the doorway. "At least tell me who I owe my life to."

"You can call me Jared," says the man. "And you can stop saying you owe me anything. I don't want your gratitude any more than I want your father's gold."

Then he's gone, closing the door behind him, and Jensen is still too much in pain to go after him.



Jensen watches the next day pass in the dance of shadows across the floor of his room. He dozes on and off, and despite Jared's stated desire to get him out by sunrise, the man never comes to check on him or force him to leave.

The sun is beginning to set again, the light in Jensen's room dimming almost to nothing, when he finally decides to try to rise from his bed. He's been content to stay in his room, quiet, perhaps forgotten, and take as much time as he can to heal. But it's been a full day since the stew Jared brought last night, and Jensen's not used to being without servants to see to his every need, let alone going without so much as a bite of lembas bread to sustain him.



He finds that with some effort, a heavy limp, and several objects to support himself on, he's able to make it across the small room and lean on the wall long enough to get the door open.

What he sees on the other side is surprising. Jensen was expecting a small cabin, something to match the humble room he's been resting in since Jared rescued him. What he walks out into is no palace, but it *is* a grand hall with high ceilings and a large table stretched along one wall that looks like it could host a great feast. Jensen notices several seating areas as well, including one with two large armchairs pulled close to a stone fireplace. There's a fire casting a warm glow, which illuminates just enough for Jensen to see the top of Jared's head over the high back of one of the chairs, his robes pooling around his feet, and one hand on the edge of the armrest on the side turned toward Jensen.

"You're awake, then?" Jared says without turning to look.

Jensen nods, feeling foolish when he realizes Jared won't see it, but he's shuffling slowly toward his host and the pain of the exertion makes it hard to answer with words. After several long moments of silence, Jared does turn to see why he isn't responding. Jensen watches as Jared looks him over, assesses the situation, and sits back in his chair, apparently deciding against offering help.

That's alright, Jensen decides. Jared helped when it mattered most, and if he wishes to be unpleasant, Jensen can stomach it as long as he must.

Finally, Jensen crosses the room and falls into the chair next to Jared's with much less elven grace than he would like. Jared doesn't seem disturbed by the humiliating display the way Jensen knows one of his kin would be. It's probably about what wildmen like Jared are used to.

"You didn't come for me," he says once he's had a chance to catch his breath. "You changed your mind about wanting me gone?"

"Wanting had nothing to do with it," Jared answers. "I looked in on you this morning and you looked no less pathetic than you did last night. No less pathetic," he adds with a smirk, "than you look now. And since I've already resolved not to let you die, I didn't have much of a choice."

He swills from a cup in his hand and Jensen catches the slightest hint of the scent. It reminds him of his hunger, and that's as embarrassing as the limping had been. A prince should never feel hunger. Hunger is for the poor. Even worse, Jensen has no way to remedy the situation short of begging Jared to spare a meal, and Jensen has done all the begging his pride will allow.

Jared doesn't say anything else. After a few minutes, he takes another long sip from the cup, this time draining it, and Jensen bites his tongue for as long as he can before his stomach betrays him with an unattractive grumble.

"The stew you brought me last night was very good," he says, hoping Jared will take the hint. "I didn't have a chance to tell you that."

"I didn't care to hear it," Jared replies.

"Is that," Jensen points to the cup in his hands, "more of it?"

"This? No. This was hot brandy." Jared stares back at Jensen expectantly, and when Jensen doesn't say anything, he lets out a soft laugh. "If you have something to ask, princeling, you might as well ask it. I won't be sparing your ego by offering."

"Please," Jensen says. "I'm very hungry."

"And?" Jared replies.

"And I need food. Will you spare some food for me?"

Jared gives Jensen a nasty smile and says, "I wish your father was here to see his heir beg for a meal."

He stands then and walks to a nearby door. Jensen can't follow him, still too weak from crossing the hall, so he leans in his chair enough to see what seems to be a kitchen through the gap of the doorway before it swings shut behind Jared.

Despite his cold demeanor, Jared reemerges a few minutes later with a bowl and Jensen can immediately smell a different but equally intoxicating stew. He can see steam rising off the surface, and Jensen only worries briefly that his host is playing a cruel joke on him before Jared stops in front of him and passes him the bowl and a spoon.

"Sometimes you just have to ask," Jared tells him. "Even if it wounds your elven pride."

Jensen nods, barely restraining himself from rolling his eyes. He doesn't ask Jared just what it is that's made him hate elves so much—humans are usually in awe of Jensen's species, but the way Jared talks, one might think he was a dwarf if not for his excessive stature. Jensen doesn't really care and he doesn't want to push his luck.

When Jared tries to go, however, Jensen does notice something that interests him: Jared's gait is off. It's not nearly as pronounced as Jensen's limp, almost unnoticeable. But Jensen's elven eyes don't miss much.

"How did you injure your leg?" he asks. "Was it the monster?"

Jared pauses in his retreat and turns to look at Jensen, seeming surprised by the question. He thinks it over for a long moment until finally he responds, "Yes. A monster did this to me."

"I can help," he says.

"You?" Jared asks with a laugh. "Does your kind teach their royalty the way of the healer?"

Jensen shakes his head and his cheeks burn red. What he's about to offer Jared is something Jensen was taught as a child's diversion, never something he was supposed to love the way he did, or long to carry into his adulthood. Only marginally less humiliating to his father's



house than if he *had* chosen to go into a profession as practical and unostentatious as healing. “I can literally sing for my supper.”

For the first time since Jensen told Jared who he was, Jared seems interested in him. Surprised, even. “A bard,” he guesses. “You?”

“Not officially,” Jensen admits. “It was just a foolish boyhood dream.” He licks his lips and looks up to meet Jared’s eyes. “But my magic is real. I’m...I’m good at it.”

Jared slowly retakes the seat next to Jensen, apparently intrigued enough to give him a chance. “Alright, princeling. Tell me a story, then. But not one of your elven tales. I’ve had enough of elves.”

“I know some human stories,” Jensen assures him.

Jared shrugs agreeably. “Humans are fine.”

“Do you know the legend of the hunting brothers?” Jensen asks.

Jared gestures around at his home, grand enough to host a large family, empty but for two strangers. “Does it look like I get many human visitors to tell me their myths?”

“I thought you might have friends or family,” Jensen replies. “Though I’m not entirely surprised to learn you don’t.”

Jensen fully expects Jared’s anger in response to his insult, but instead Jared huffs with amusement and relaxes back into his seat. He waves his hand to indicate that Jensen should start, so Jensen does.

He begins weaving the history of the fabled hunters, how they lost their mother young and grew up with only each other. Despite his disdain for Jensen, Jared listens to his song, completely riveted, watching Jensen closely like he’s hanging onto every word.

It’s at least an hour before Jensen pauses. He’s gotten to one of the most exciting parts of the story, the younger hunter dead in his brother’s arms, but just before the fateful deal is struck to bring him back to life, a horrible sound rings out above them, like metal being scraped along stone.

Jensen stops singing to get a better sense of the noise, because it feels oddly familiar to him. He can’t place it, and, before he has a chance to give it too much thought, Jared has startled to attention, the spell of Jensen’s song broken.

“What?” Jensen asks. “What is it?”

“Monster,” Jared says with certainty. “It’s the monster. And it’s looking for you.”

“Me?” Jensen asks. “Does it know I’m alive?”

“I don’t know,” Jared says, a look of terror in his expression that makes Jensen suddenly realize where some of the man’s bitterness comes from. If he lives up here, so close to the

gryphon's territory, these kinds of attacks must be a fact of life for him. Jensen wonders if maybe Jared didn't choose to be so isolated after all, if this beast has forced him into the solitary life he so coldly told Jensen he wanted. Perhaps the gryphons succeeded in wiping out Jared's people the way they failed to do to the elves. If that's the case, Jensen isn't surprised that Jared might give his father some of the blame for his misfortune, for stopping the threat in time to save his own subjects but not Jared's kin. It's not rational, but grief so rarely is.

For the first time, it occurs to Jensen that Jared may not be ill-spirited. He's just sad and, worse than that, *lonely*.

"What are you doing?" Jensen asks when Jared jumps to his feet and makes quick strides toward the nearest window. "You aren't going out there, are you? You can't face that thing. I had eight trained soldiers and it had no trouble fighting us alone. And you're already hurt—"

"I'm fine," Jared insists, pushing his cloak back enough to reveal his injured leg.

The wound is nearly gone, and Jensen stares in confusion. Humans heal much slower than elves do, and Jensen's hardly recovered at all. Even if his song's magic doesn't work on him and does work on Jared, without establishing a connection through touch, an hour should have done little more for Jared than take the edge off his pain.

"Impossible," he says.

Jared sneers at him in response. "Maybe you're a better healer than you are a soldier."

"Even so," Jensen says. "My magic isn't that strong."

"The cut looked worse than it was," Jared replies evasively. "I don't have time to argue with you. I have to make sure we're hidden."

Before Jensen has a chance to ask how he hopes to do that, Jared is out the door. Jensen waits at least an hour for his host to return, but eventually he retires to his room, hoping that whatever Jared does is enough to protect them.



By the time Jensen awakes the next morning, there's an aroma of food cooking so strong that even in his room with the door closed he can smell it.

It's enough to make Jensen get out of bed, maybe faster than he should have considering the pain that shoots through his leg as soon as he puts pressure on it. He drops back onto the mattress and tries again, this time remembering to account for his injuries. Like yesterday, it takes him some time to limp his way to the door, but when he opens it, it's nothing at all like what he saw the day before.

There's broad daylight, for one thing. Outside the windows he can see old trees with leaves a bright golden autumn color, the floor littered with similar foliage in hues of orange and red as well as yellow. It strikes him as odd—he'd thought they were still in the icy Boneshear Mountains rather than any forest, but maybe Jared carried him farther than he'd realized the night he found Jensen unconscious.

He doesn't have much time to wonder at what's different outside, because the changes inside are much more interesting. Jared is at the long dining table, laying out more food than seems reasonable for just two people.

Jensen's stomach, which gives a very unelflike grumble at the sight of the lavish breakfast on the table, seems to disagree. He's only had two bowls of stew for the last two days, and suddenly he's dying to try every dish in front of him.

"What's all this?" Jensen asks as he leans his weight on a nearby chair, trying to look casual and not like he's taking a break from the effort of crossing half a room. All that does is make his shoulder twinge with pain instead, but he manages to school his features into indifference. "A parting feast just for me?"

Jared laughs, looking up at Jensen only briefly before continuing to set out food. "Quite the contrary, *your highness*. You're not allowed to leave."

"I'm *not allowed*?" Jensen asks incredulously.

"That's right," Jared says, apparently oblivious to Jensen's heated tone. "I've made a breakfast I think you'll like, though." He gestures to one of the plates. "The bread was baked in the elven style."

Half of Jensen wants to rush to the meal, but he holds his ground, raising himself up as much as possible so he can stand with a little dignity, even while clutching to furniture for purchase. "So I'm a prisoner now? Yesterday I wasn't even welcome as a guest."

Jared shifts his attention from the food to Jensen, a surprisingly anxious quality to his demeanor. "You can't go until tomorrow," he clarifies. "So you can finish the story tonight."

Jensen balks for a second, certain he misheard, and Jared seems to take his response as more anger.

"Please," Jared says. "I won't be your jailer. And I'm sure you don't want to stay. I know I haven't been a generous host." He waves his hands at the table. "I'm trying to make up for that. I just...I have to know what happens. It'll drive me crazy if we leave off where we were—the younger brother was my favorite."

His first instinct is excitement, a foolish, almost childlike thrill at the idea that he's found someone who actually wants to hear his stories. A captive audience, instead of a father who will remind him what an embarrassment it would be for Jensen to sing in front of his subjects.

But he hesitates, questioning if he should leave rather than allow Jared to keep him here against his will. The truth is that he wouldn't stand a chance if Jared tried to stop him; Jensen is already significantly injured, slightly smaller, and, in light of recent events, might not be as gifted a fighter as he'd previously believed.

His leg is badly in need of more time to recover before he undertakes the long journey home, and even if Jared isn't sincere in his assurances that Jensen is free to leave, Jensen would be much wiser to accept Jared's protection while he heals and pretend not to suspect him until he's capable of surviving in the wild alone. After all, if Jared wanted to hurt him, he could have done it several times by now.

Further clouding Jensen's judgement is his hunger and a desperate desire to believe anything that allows him to enjoy that feast.

"I'll stay," he says, trying to sound as bored by Jared's offer as possible. "Until I finish the story."

Jared smiles, looking relieved, and points to the table. "You're free to have as much of this as you want. I should be back by nightfall. You can tell me then."

Looking at the bountiful meal, Jensen asks, "You're not going to eat with me? This is too much food for one person. Too much for two, even."

Jared is mid-shrug when Jensen looks up at him. "This is what was left after I finished my breakfast. I got a little carried away preparing the food this morning. I haven't had anyone else to cook for in quite some time."

Jensen nods. The message is clear. They're not to be friends just because Jared has warmed some. He wants something from Jensen and Jensen wants something from him, and if not for that, Jared would already have thrown him to the mercy of the elements.

"Well, thank you. For sharing with me." Jared opens his mouth to say something and Jensen cuts him off before he can begin, "I know, I get it. You don't want my thanks. You didn't do anything for me and this food was all going to be here whether I wanted it or not."

Jared shuts his mouth, smiling at Jensen without teeth but looking amused. He doesn't pretend Jensen didn't guess what he was going to say, instead heading toward the door before pausing as he takes a large black fur coat down from a hook by the door.

"I have a library," he says, pointing to a small nook on the other side of the large mainroom that Jensen hadn't noticed the night before. "It's not much compared to what you must be used to, but there may be stories there that never reached your kingdom. I thought that might interest you, while you're stuck inside all day."

For several moments, Jensen considers Jared's offer and the complete change in his conduct toward Jensen. Even if he's still not exactly friendly, there's no denying that it's almost a different man entirely standing in front of him. Jensen wonders briefly if his song could really have been so good that it's caused this profound a shift in Jared's opinion of him.

As a boy, his tutors always told him he had an extraordinary gift; Jensen grew up acutely aware that subjects rarely tell royalty unpleasant truths, so he assumed their praise was idle flattery. Although Jensen's father only ever scoffed at his songs, some of his guests seemed to enjoy them when Jensen shared them at feasts. Still, they were indulging a little boy's whim. When he could get away with it, Jensen would sneak into his mother's quarters and sing for her. There were times she almost seemed to be listening. But that's the kind of thing a child's mind could easily invent, especially one that wanted to know his mother's love as desperately as Jensen had.

Sure, his songs' magic worked, but so do many mediocre bardsongs. Jensen had made himself believe, when he was forced to give up the pastime, that he wasn't very good to begin with. But the way Jared has warmed overnight is its own type of enchantment.

"That is very kind of you," says Jensen, genuinely touched by the gesture.

He thinks he sees Jared rolling his eyes as he takes his coat and leaves. Jensen waits until he's sure he's alone and then begins the slow, sloppy journey until he finally reaches the food. He's grateful not to have a witness for the lack of grace he exhibits while eating just as he saved some dignity by not letting Jared see him cross the hall. He even finds joy in the quaint little mountain retreat now that his host isn't here to belittle him as he pores over the tomes in Jared's collection.

It's true that what Jared called a library is barely a few shelves, but they're all packed with stories that Jensen's never even heard of, let alone read. Considering that he'd gone through most of the stories in his palace's archive during his boyhood, this is a treasure trove, and Jensen is so occupied skimming through the volumes, trying to decide which to focus on first, that he doesn't even hear Jared come home.

"There's dinner cooking." Jensen startles hearing another voice and then looks up to see Jared watching him intently. "I hope you eat venison, because that's what I caught."

"That will be wonderful," says Jensen, resisting the urge to add 'thank you,' since that seems to annoy Jared so much.

"I see that you enjoyed the books," Jared says, observing the chaos Jensen has created in this small library space, the way there are open works spread out over all the flat surfaces, seats, and even the floor, save for the one spot where Jensen has curled up with three stacked in his lap.

"I'm so sorry," Jensen tells him, trying to rise too quickly. He bends over to grab at the pain in his leg as the books in his lap go tumbling to the ground and feels his cheeks burning as he adds, "Um, I didn't mean to make such a mess."

"I'm even more impressed that you accomplished this by mistake," Jared replies, but his words are playful, and he waves a hand dismissively when Jensen tries to begin to tidy up. "Don't worry about it. I'll put them back after you go. It'll be something to do."

"Right. Because I'm leaving tomorrow." Jensen feels a little deflated at that and looks back at the books with unexpected disappointment. One day with all those stories was nowhere near

enough. He'd had songs he wanted to create, spells he could have woven into those texts. He won't get a chance to do that in his father's palace.

Jared nods and hitches a thumb over his shoulder. "I thought you could finish the story while I cook. There are some chairs in the kitchen, so you won't have to stand on..."

"My bum leg?" Jensen guesses when Jared trails off.

Jared frowns and looks away, apparently no longer taking pleasure in Jensen's struggles. "I understand if you don't want to dine with me, but—"

"You were the one who didn't want anything to do with me," Jensen reminds him. "I would be happy to share a meal. As long as you cook it."

Jared laughs at that as he turns away, grumbling, "As if I'd let some elven princeling try to cook in my kitchen. I leave him alone with some books and look what he does, imagine if he got his hands on the flour."

Jensen follows Jared's teasing complaints, walking slowly enough that he can't hear them after long. When he reaches the kitchen door and pushes his way in, Jensen sees that Jared has set a chair by the door with a cushion for Jensen to sit on. Naturally, Jensen does so without acknowledging that Jared did him a favor, and Jared seems to approve of that as he goes about his work.

While Jared cooks, Jensen finishes the story. Then they sit down to dine and Jared begins to speak instead. He says little of himself, but he tells Jensen about the mountains and the forest, and Jensen finds himself curious to learn more about these places, the outskirts of his kingdom. Land that is said to belong to his father on the maps Jensen admired as a child, but which he's realizing he not only has never seen for himself but knows very little of as well.

By the time they're done feasting and Jared has cleared the table, Jensen feels pleasantly full, nothing like the hunger he'd gone to bed with the previous nights he was here. In fact, he realizes that it's been one of the most pleasant days he can recall, and he laughs at that as Jared kindles a fire in the hearth.

"I suppose I should go to bed," Jensen says. "I'll need my energy tomorrow."

"So early?" Jared asks, sounding oddly put out. "I thought perhaps you might have another song."

"I guess I could do a short one, if you really don't mind," Jensen says, drawing closer to the chairs and hesitating before taking a seat in one. "What kind of story do you want to hear?"

"There have to be more about the brothers," Jared responds, his eyes bright with enthusiasm. "Even after that dreadful ending. Something from before?"

Jensen thinks for a moment, then smiles, knowing he's about to have Jared's whole-hearted attention. "What if I told you there was more *after*?"

"That's impossible!" Jared laughs. "One of them was in the Underworld. What are you going to tell me next, that he gets out?"

"Actually, yes." Jensen smirks. "And then the other one ends up trapped there—"

"What?" Jared shakes his head. "No way, no one comes back from—"

"Do you want to hear the song or what?"

Jared narrows his eyes but grins. "You better tell me."

So Jensen does. At least, he begins to. Despite Jared's interest in the story, not much time passes before Jensen pauses his singing as he realizes that Jared has fallen asleep. He smiles at that, a sign that the healing magic has helped Jared relax enough, and thinks maybe those injuries Jared had yesterday took more of a toll than he let on.

He stays up a bit longer, watching the fire burn down in the hearth, and then he retires to his room, leaving Jared tucked under a thick quilt Jensen was able to find, still soundly asleep.



Jensen is informed the next morning that he is, once again, not allowed to leave until he finishes the story he began the night before. He spends the day buried in Jared's library and when Jared gets home that night, they share a meal and good conversation. It's not unpleasant anymore, and Jensen's leg still needs the rest, so he happily goes along with his imprisonment.

They take their spots by the fire, by now set in whose chair is whose, and Jensen picks up around where he thinks Jared must have drifted off the night before. Any bard worth his salt must know how to read his audience, so Jensen has picked up on what thrills Jared most in his stories. He begins to tailor the song more toward his host. He embellishes the parts he knows will pique Jared's interest, dragging the tale on as long as he can, and just as he reaches the climax...

Jensen yawns.

Jared blinks a few times and shakes his head as if he's coming out of a daze, and then he looks at Jensen with clear confusion. "Why'd you stop singing?"

Stretching out a bit, Jensen fakes another yawn. "Too tired to continue."

"What?" Jared asks. "You have to be kidding me. It's the most exciting—"

"For you, maybe," Jensen replies. "I've heard it a million times."



“But,” Jared whines.

“I’ll just have to finish it tomorrow,” Jensen says.

For a moment, Jared looks like he may argue. Then his expression shifts, and he hides a smile behind his hand. “Yeah. You know what? I’m tired, too.”



He pulls the same trick the next night and the night after that. Jensen has managed to drag the brother’s story on so long by now that a five-hour song has easily lasted at least twelve hours, and it’s clear that Jared knows exactly what he’s up to, but he doesn’t call Jensen on it.

In fact, Jared begins to play along, finding excuses to cut Jensen off just as much as Jensen does. One night, Jared forgot something he had to check on and the next Jensen’s leg is too sore for him to focus on singing.

It becomes almost a dance, Jensen leading Jared through a willful deception. He tells himself it’s only out of necessity, that this is what he’s doing to stay as long as his injury prevents him from leaving. He pretends to believe that Jared only lets him stay for the songs.

During the day, Jared leaves and Jensen works on new odes, absorbing all the stories in Jared’s collection and making them his own. Jared is elusive about where he goes at first, but as they warm to each other, he shares bits about his day, trying to describe the things he explored and sometimes bringing them back to details in Jensen’s stories that he was reminded of.

One day, after about a week, Jared comes home with a hand hidden behind his back and won’t say anything, but when Jensen wakes the next morning, there’s a cane in his room propped by the door. It’s beautifully carved with scenes from Jensen’s stories worked into the wood.

It’s odd to think that just a few days ago, Jared seemed to take joy from Jensen’s inability to walk without support and now he’s crafted such a beautiful gift to help guide him. And it’s stranger still to admit that he would have been too proud to accept something like this from Jared even if it had been offered.

Now, he’s proud to take the cane with him as he seeks out his host to thank him. He finds Jared sitting at the table and approaches, expecting to see him finishing off his breakfast, but as he gets closer, he realizes that Jared is bent over a book of some kind, scribbling in it with a pencil.

“I never took you for such an artist,” Jensen says from just behind Jared.

Jared sits up quickly, thrusting his arm out over the page he was working on, and Jensen sees that his cheeks are dark pink. “I didn’t hear you come out.”

“That’s because I wasn’t falling over myself with every step, for a change,” he says, happily angling his head down at the cane.

Jared’s blush only deepens. “You like it, then?”

“I love it,” Jensen answers sincerely. “I think it’s the finest gift I’ve ever received.”

Huffing a laugh, Jared dismisses his praise. “You? A prince. You probably have a castle made of gold.”

“Two, actually,” Jensen replies, pulling out the chair next to Jared and seating himself in it. “And I would give them both up in a moment before I would so much as let someone hold this cane.”

Although he rolls his eyes, Jared’s lips can’t hold back their smile at the compliment, and Jensen has to distract himself or he knows he’ll be lost completely observing the rare glimpse of Jared’s dimples.

“What are you working on?” he asks, pointing at the pad in front of Jared.

“Nothing, it’s stupid,” Jared says. “I set your breakfast out over there.”

Jensen glances at the plate of eggs across the table and then focuses his attention back on Jared. “Please let me see?”

After a few long seconds of consideration, Jared shyly pushes the book toward Jensen, and Jensen sees that it’s a sketchbook, leather bound with thick pages that have taken on a yellow tint from age. Someone must have bound the book with much consideration, but by the look of it, it’s gone neglected until today.

The image Jared had been working on is of the brothers standing side-by-side in a forest, their weapons raised as a monster approaches them. It’s not nothing. In fact, it’s beautiful.

“Wow, Jared. I—”

“I’m afraid my skill doesn’t match yours,” Jared says, cutting him off. “I know I should be ashamed to have tried to do justice to your stories.”

“Are you kidding?” Jensen licks his lips and tries to think of a way to truly express how much the drawing touches him, but for the first time ever, he finds himself at a loss for words. “It’s incredible, Jared. Almost as stunning as the workmanship in my cane. I had no idea you were so gifted.”

“I haven’t...” Jared looks from the drawing to Jensen like he’s trying to discover whether Jensen is being sincere or not. “I used to create things when I was younger. Furniture, mostly. I haven’t built anything in years. And this,” he points to the sketch, “I don’t even know where

this came from. I guess I've been feeling very inspired these last few days. If the drawing has any merit, I'd say it's just the effect of a few great bardsongs."

"I will gladly take the credit for these," Jensen tells him. He grins and points to the brothers in Jared's picture, unable to resist teasing just a little. "Why do they look like us?"

"They don't!" Jared insists. "See? He has short hair." Jared lifts his hand from the page and gives Jensen's hair a tug. "You have this ridiculous long hair."

"He's the one that looks ridiculous!" Jensen insists. "No one wears their hair that short. Not even you humans. And what on earth are they wearing?"

"I don't know," Jared replies. "But it looks very comfortable."

Jensen laughs, and, after a long moment of trying to hold it in, Jared joins him.

Once they finally settle down, Jared reaches for the plate of food he'd set out and pulls it across the table to give to Jensen. "Eat your breakfast. I can't wait around for you all day."

He accepts the food gladly but before he starts eating asks, "What do you mean? Why would you wait for me?"

Jared looks nervous as he offers, "I thought you might like to go for a walk with me. Now that you have the cane. It might be good for you to get some exercise. Build your strength so you can..." His voice gets just a bit softer as he finishes, "so you can go home."

"I would like that very much," Jensen replies. He takes a bite of his meal and swallows, then changes the subject. "Would you believe that my mother used to cook her eggs just like this? Only time I ever saw her prepare anything. My father would be so mortified at the sight of his queen going into the kitchen with the servants, but she was always so insistent that she make them herself." He smiles, warmed by the memory Jared's cooking has stirred. "I remember so little of her before..." Jensen shrugs. "But I remember that."

"How odd," Jared says, though he doesn't sound very surprised by it at all. "My people have always made their eggs like this."

"Strange, the things that move from one culture to another and the things that don't," Jensen observes.

Jared clears his throat and announces that he's going to make preparations for their walk as he leaves the dining area and begins to search for something Jensen is too busy enjoying his food to concern himself with.

"I'm an elf, you dolt," Jensen says when he finds Jared by the doorway, digging through a trunk of thick animal skins for one in Jensen's size. "I don't feel cold."

Jared lifts his head from behind a pile of furs stacked in his arms, then lets them all drop back into the chest and narrows his eyes. "You couldn't have reminded me of that ten minutes ago?"

“Well, you looked very busy flinging coats around and I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Elves,” Jared mutters.

He opens the door and ushers Jensen out, allowing for Jensen’s much slower movements. Jensen looks around as soon as he’s stepped into the courtyard, surprised to find that Jared doesn’t live in an isolated cabin in the middle of nowhere. He lives in the largest house of a small village, small enough that Jensen can see the entire span of the town by turning his head in each direction.

Aside from Jared’s home, however, the village seems to be dead. Every other structure is in shambles, the roofs caved in and the sides of most of the buildings charred as if a great fire had spread. He turns to look back at the home he’s been sharing with Jared for over a week and is surprised to learn that it, too, shows signs of having burned, though considerably less than the rest. There are places where the wood changes, lighter bark on darker, as if it has been replaced.

“It was the only one still sound enough to live in,” Jared says. His mouth twists as if he’s having trouble forcing the words out. “But that didn’t matter, because I was the only one left to need a home.”

“Jared,” Jensen says, turning to face him. “What happened here?”

Jared continues casually, as if he didn’t hear Jensen’s question. “I had to rebuild most of it. That was the last time I made anything until I started working on that cane a few days ago.”

“There was a fire,” he guesses. “How did it happen?”

“Oh, there were a lot of fires,” Jared confirms. He stares at Jensen for a long time until finally he takes a step back, shaking his head. “You don’t know where we are, do you?”

“No,” Jensen says. “Should I?”

Jared’s erratic behavior only intensifies, his eyes wet as if he’s about to cry, but instead he smiles. “You don’t know. You really don’t know.”

“What don’t I know, Jared? What are you talking about?”

“Nothing,” Jared replies, blinking until his eyes clear up and the rush of emotion has left his voice. “I’m sorry, I was testing you. I shouldn’t have done that. I thought, maybe. I wanted to believe—but I couldn’t. He didn’t tell you. I was so certain he must have.”

“Testing me on what? Jared, I don’t understand anything you’re saying. And you’re scaring me.”

“Don’t,” Jared says, taking a quick step toward Jensen, putting his hand out as if he’s about to touch Jensen’s face before pulling back abruptly. “Don’t be afraid of me. I won’t hurt you. You—you’re good. I didn’t know. I just wanted it to be true.”

“I don’t—”

"I know," says Jared. "I believe you. But I can't tell you. I can't—you shouldn't have to know. It doesn't matter. All that matters is that you aren't like him."

"Like who?"

Jared turns away and gestures for Jensen to follow. "Come on. I want to show you everything."

Jensen's attempts to get Jared to elucidate on his odd comments, whether it be to explain what happened to the town or why Jared expected Jensen to know about it, all get ignored so long that Jensen finally stops asking. He'll get through to Jared eventually. For now, he's content to enjoy his first day outside in what feels like months, even if it's really only been a little over a week.

Jared *does* show him everything. He comes alive in a way Jensen has never seen, enthusiastic like a newborn puppy, running from one place to the next before he remembers that Jensen can only follow at a crawling pace.

He names every tree, seems to know the story of every stray leaf littering the forest floor. Jensen lets this go on for about an hour before finally he says, "Aren't elves, not humans, supposed to be the ones that commune with nature?"

Jared pauses and looks at Jensen with a slight smile, but there seems to be a touch of sadness lingering in the corners.

"Your people taught mine," he says. "I remember, when I was young, how elves would come to us, and we would go to your court. No one tried to own this forest then. We all understood it too well. The land and the trees, they were just another race to coexist with. And they taught us such secrets. It's amazing the things that are possible when you listen to the earth instead of trying to claim it."

Jensen shakes his head. Jared can't be more than thirty, and he remembers better than Jared possibly could. His kingdom has never had relations with any men living on their land, and if his father knew how to talk to plants, he would have shared that knowledge with Jensen. It doesn't feel worth it to take away whatever fond childhood dream Jared has confused with reality. And Jensen is too melancholy to push it, having just realized what it means to grow to care for this strange, lonely human.

Their lives are so brief. A century or less, and Jared has already used up a third of that. He's going to die eventually, and only Jensen will be left to live on, eternally, unable to forget the brief light Jared shined into his otherwise dull existence.

"What's wrong, Jensen?" Jared asks, turning from a nearby oak he'd been whispering to and apparently seeing the gloom in Jensen's expression. "Don't you like it here? We can go back if not."

"It's beautiful," Jensen assures him. He glances around, looking up at the tall canopy of golden leaves, taken by something he's seen thousands of times and not bothered to really appreciate. Then his eyes meet Jared's, and it's not only the trees that are beautiful.

Jared smiles with all his teeth and gestures for Jensen to join him. "Come," he says. "The woods say they'll talk to you. They remember that they were once friends to the elves."

Jensen obediently makes his way to Jared's side, all the while grumbling, "Jared, trees don't talk."

"Shh," Jared says, shifting his body so that Jensen can press his own to the trunk of the oak tree the way Jared had. "Close your eyes. Put your hand there on the bark. And...just open yourself to it."

He does, yet nothing happens for half a minute. His leg begins to ache at standing still so long on uneven terrain, and Jensen pulls away. "There's nothing. I can't—"

"Listen to it," Jared insists. "Really listen. Don't expect words. The whole of nature isn't going to speak your language. You have to let yourself understand it."

Jensen sighs, but he's unable to deny Jared, so he closes his eyes and pushes close to the tree again. This time, he makes more of an effort to clear his mind and truly believe what Jared is telling him.

It happens gradually. He feels a tingling in his feet at first and nearly pulls away again, thinking it's his legs about to fall asleep and give way on him. Then it spreads up through his body, not paralyzing but rather expanding him, wrapping him in something bigger than himself. Bigger than Jared, even.

Suddenly, he's aware of the forest not as if it was bending to him and telling him its secrets but as if he himself were as tall as the trees, as if he was as small as each grain of dirt. He can see what the land around him can see, can feel the weight of his and Jared's bodies standing on the roots of the tree, he can hear birds hundreds of feet above them, flying over the very top of the canopies, far beyond what even his elven ears should be able to hear.

He lets go of the trunk and stumbles backwards out of surprise more than anything, disappointed because he expects it to break the magic. Instead a branch moves swiftly, catching him gently enough to set him right without causing any pain to his injuries.

"Jared, what's—?"

Jared is standing back now, watching him with a grin on his face that at least partially seems to say, 'I told you so.'

"I don't know what to say," Jensen tells him, glancing around with what feel like new eyes. He can sense everything now, from the family of rabbits tucked into a burrow twelve feet to their left, babies digging into their mother's fur for warmth, to a bush of honeysuckle a mile away as it pulls a bee in with its scent. He can taste the juice in the back of his throat.

"You don't have to say anything," Jared assures him. "Just walk with me."

They go on for quite some time in silence as Jensen learns about the forest firsthand from the animals and the plants that live there. They reach the end of a line of trees and stand on a cliff

glimpsing out across the land, and even the rocks have something to say.

But something catches his attention that makes Jensen lose his connection to the land, if only for a moment. He recognizes one mountain out across the horizon, the strange twist of its spire, even if he's only ever seen it from the opposite side. The elves call it Starreach, the highest peak in Gnaven. His palace lies a few hundred miles to the south. He knows, because it was the unusual shape of the mountain that he'd used to guide his men on their journey.

"Jared," he says, pointing. "We were there."

"Hmm?" Jared replies.

"That's where the monster lives. That's where it attacked me. How could you have carried me all the way—?"

"Don't be foolish," says Jared. "I couldn't have."

"But I know that's where I was when I lost consciousness. I know it."

"Yes, you're right. But I didn't carry you all the way from there." Jared laughs as if that's the most absurd thing he's ever heard, and then, as if it should be obvious, he tells Jensen, "I moved the village."

"You moved...*the village*?"

"Yes," Jared says with a nod. "That first night, when your story got interrupted. It was obvious the monster knew where we were. I couldn't risk it finding the village, so I moved us."

"Hundreds of miles away," Jensen clarifies. "Just like that."

"Well, not *just like that*," Jared chuckles. "It's very draining work moving a whole village. Why do you think I was so tired the next night?"

"I don't understand," Jensen says, blushing because he's starting to feel like that's all he's said all day.

Jared moves as if he's about to take Jensen's hand, then thinks better of it and pulls himself back at the last moment. "It's just what I wanted to show you. All the things we can accomplish when the forest trusts you. It allows me to relocate when I'm in danger, if I can swing it. I can't do it often because I'm only one person and it's tiring work, but when I'm desperate enough..."

"I thought it looked different," Jensen muses, remembering that first morning Jared had cooked for him. "But I told myself it was just my memory."

Jared frowns. "I'm afraid I've made it harder for you to go home. We're much farther now than when we started. But, Jensen, I had to. You understand, don't you?"



"Of course I do," he says. "Jared, you saved us both. How could I resent you for that? Especially when—"

"When what?" Jared asks.

Jensen licks his lips slowly and shrugs. He can't tell Jared how little he actually wants to return to his old life. It wouldn't matter anyway. This isn't supposed to be permanent.

"I hate to do this, I really do," he says, turning his body and changing the subject. "But I think I have to go back to the town. I didn't realize how far we walked and my leg is killing me."

"Fuck, Jensen, I'm so sorry," Jared replies, looking down. "I forgot completely. I would have turned around sooner if I'd been thinking. It'll be dark soon, anyway. Can you make it alright?"

"I suppose I'll have to." Jensen leans as much as possible on the cane, but even that doesn't offer the support he needs to make his leg behave and the large gash across his shoulder seems to have reopened from the repeated demand of holding the staff.

"Would it be helpful if...?" Jared asks, offering an arm for Jensen to take.

Jensen imagines how good it would feel to let Jared carry his weight, to let himself drift into the softness of the fur Jared's wearing and the strength of his considerable frame. It would probably be better, he knows, if he resisted that urge.

But he notices something strange. Jared is trembling. His expression is kind, but there's something almost manic in it. Jensen thinks it might be some lingering of Jared's hatred toward elves, until he lets himself sink back into that strange connection he'd had to the land, which has been muted but not gone these last few minutes. He can sense some of what Jared is feeling through the bond they've both made with the woods and it's not hostility at all that's making Jared's body shake.

It's desperation. For whatever reason, Jared feels as if he *needs* Jensen to say yes. And Jared has done so much for Jensen. The least he can do is accept this offering.

Instead of simply linking their arms, Jensen closes the gap between them, threading Jared's arm over his shoulder so that it can support his full weight and leaning his back against Jared's chest. "Thank you," he says.

He hears Jared gasp behind him as soon as they touch, but Jared doesn't say anything. They don't start walking immediately, so Jensen tilts his head up to see why Jared isn't moving. Jared's face is a confusing mix of emotions that Jensen can't read and that even the forest can't make sense of. His eyes are wide and, again, he looks like he might cry, but he swallows hard when he realizes Jensen is watching and tries to force an easy smile.

"Let's go then," he says.

"I'll be sorry to leave the forest," Jensen tells him. "I can't believe all this is out here and we've been content to sit in our cities and—"

Jared's response is too fast, a little heated, "Conquer. Cut down the trees instead of respecting them. Your father knows. At least he did, not so long ago."

"Why do you talk about him like you know him?" Jensen asks. "My father is a difficult man, I know, but he wouldn't ignore this."

He feels Jared shaking his head, and he sounds tired when he says, "You don't know him as well as you think you do. I've never met the man, but I know who he truly is."

"I wish you would stop being so cryptic," Jensen says. "I don't doubt that you have your reasons for hating him, but it's hard to see your side when you won't tell me anything."

"It's better that way. Maybe children shouldn't know too much of their parents."

"Say what you want, but he's a good leader. He's kept our people safe for nearly a century, since his father was lost in battle. I hope the day never comes that I have to follow in his footsteps. I'll never be half the king—"

"You're *nothing* like him," Jared interrupts.

Jensen flinches, used to the insult but never quite able to bare it without a sting. He's heard a thousand times, right from his father's mouth, what a disappointment he is. Weak and cowardly, with no instinct for battle and a head full of stories instead of practical thoughts. He almost forgot what it felt like to be reminded of that in this time he's spent away.

Jared stops and turns Jensen toward him, holding him firmly by the shoulders as he searches his face. "You don't understand. It was a compliment."

"How could it be?" Jensen asks, looking away from Jared, forcing them both to continue walking despite the pressure it adds to his leg to pull Jared's weight forward. "I'm an embarrassment. I have no mind for war. He finally let me lead men into one battle and look how I botched that."

"And that's what you think a leader is?" Jared says, scoffing. "I'm not surprised that's what he's taught you."

"What is it, if not being able to keep my people safe? Instead of getting them all killed."

"Doesn't healing make them safe more so than tossing them into battle?" Jared challenges. "Is inspiring people to follow you less admirable than massacring anyone who refuses to bend their knee? That's what his strength is. It doesn't have to be yours. Jensen, I've felt how powerful you are when you let yourself be."

"At a game of make-believe," Jensen replies. "That's for children, not for princes. Certainly not for kings."

"His words again," says Jared. "If that's what being a king is, I'm surprised you want to—"

"I don't," Jensen admits. "I hate it."

He stops dead in his tracks, causing Jared to bump into him, because he can't believe he just said that. He's never even allowed himself to think it before, and yet now that the words are out, he turns to face Jared and continues, "I hate it, Jared. I hate everything about being a prince. I know how ungrateful that makes me. But I've always—sometimes I dream of becoming king just so I can do away with the whole thing. Dissolve the empire my father and his father worked so hard to build so that I don't have to live with this burden on my shoulders anymore. I don't know what's wrong with me. I wish I was born anything else but what I am."

Jared nods and gives Jensen a sad, reassuring smile. "Your secret is safe with me," he promises. "I just wish I could free you."

"Nothing can," Jensen replies. "Either my father will live forever and I'll always be his halfwit heir, or something will go wrong and I'll have to..."

Jared squeezes his shoulder after a long silence and presses his body up against Jensen's back. He clearly doesn't know how to respond to Jensen's confession, but what he offers is better. A distraction.

When he speaks, his voice is so close that his face must nearly be resting on Jensen's shoulder. "Tell the forest a story," he suggests. "Maybe it'll repay you with some amusing tales of times I tripped on its roots."

Jensen grins as he begins to sing, and the song carries them the rest of the way.



Jared hasn't left to explore or hunt when Jensen emerges from his room the next day. Instead, he finds his friend sitting at the small table in the library nook, but rather than reading, Jared has placed a worn chessboard on the surface and is apparently giving himself a very difficult go at it.

Jensen invites himself to sit at the chair opposite Jared, teasing, "For what it's worth, my money is on you."

"Don't distract me," Jared tells him, holding up a finger. "I almost have myself in check."

"I wouldn't dream of ruining that for you," says Jensen.

"Hah!" Jared shouts, moving a piece. Suddenly, his look of triumph morphs into a scowl. "Dammit. Now I have myself in check."

Jensen laughs at that, then offers, "If you'd rather play a more challenging opponent, I'll jump in on the next game."

"I don't know about more challenging," Jared tells him without looking up from the board. "But I'll humor you."

"You already know what you're going to do," Jensen says, gesturing to the board. "You could have ended this for yourself four moves ag—"

"Checkmate!" Jared declares. He seems very smug for a few moments before looking up at Jensen. "Are you sure you want to play me? As you can see, I'm very good."

Jensen huffs a laugh. "I was trained by the finest champion in three kingdoms."

"And if I was playing them," Jared replies as he begins to set up a new game, "I might be worried."

"Just don't take it too hard when I beat you," says Jensen.

Over the following three hours, Jensen learns to believe strange mountain men when they say they can play chess as well as any prince. Significantly better, even.

By the next day, Jared has learned that princes can play cards as deceitfully as any pubcrawler.

The day after that, Jensen realizes he's stopped giving Jared excuses to stay and Jared has stopped expecting them.

He ignores thoughts of his father's worry for him. Ignores the fact that his people must be mourning his loss. His leg is almost fully healed—he ignores that, too.

Jared speaks less of Jensen leaving and more of the places they'll explore once his wounds are better, of glistening lakes they'll swim in to make the muscles strong again. Jensen thinks less and less of his home, more and more of the ways that this secret mountain village is a home as well.

Neither of them is foolish enough to break the spell by talking about it.



Most mornings, Jared waits for Jensen to join him for breakfast before he goes out for the day. Jensen can't always join him—it took three days to recover from their first walk—but Jared always gives him the option.

Today, Jensen is a little disappointed to find that Jared is already gone when he enters the mainroom of the cabin and calls out for him. He doesn't find a note or any instructions, so he assumes Jared was in a hurry to get out and make his patrol.

After several days inside, Jensen is a little stir-crazy. He's been looking forward to going into the woods with Jared again, and his leg feels strong enough with the cane to depend on, so he resolves to go for a short turn in the courtyard, just to see if he can make it that far on his own. Jared has warned Jensen repeatedly against going out without anyone to support his weight if there's trouble, but he knows Jared will be happy to hear of Jensen's improving strength if he manages on his own, and anyway, he won't go far.

Jensen is hardly out the door before everything goes wrong. He notices a black speck on the horizon as he steps into the courtyard and gives it little attention. Jensen is determined to at least manage one lap of the small village before Jared gets back, and he begins at a steady pace, more interested in observing the ruins of the village Jared grew up in than in what he assumes is a bird.

Several minutes pass before Jensen notices it again. Whatever it is out in the sky, it's grown much closer in the time since Jensen first saw it. The shape is still far enough that he can't be sure, but it's considerably bigger than he originally thought, and Jensen's stomach plummets as its shape becomes clearer.

It's being carried on huge wings, which is little cause for alarm, until Jensen sees its tail swing behind it. Then he's able to decipher the rest of its form just from memory. A lion's back paws, an eagle's talons, and its head a monstrous bird with rows of sharp teeth along its beak.

The monster that killed his men. Tried to kill him. And Jared was out in those woods alone. Just the thought that this gryphon might have hurt Jared sends Jensen into a frenzy. He grabs the first thing he sees that could pass for a weapon, some kind of farming tool with sharp spikes on its end, and begins to run toward the village gates where the beast is about to land. He forgets about his leg and shoulder, the pain of those wounds nothing compared to the instinct to kill this monster or die trying if there's even a chance it might save Jared.

Jensen is nearly at the gates, charging as he lets out a loud war cry, hoping Jared will hear it and come to his aide, when the monster lands just a few feet away. It doesn't seem to have heard or seen him yet, and with its back still to Jensen, it begins to change.

The scream dies on Jensen's lips and the weapon in his hand falls to the floor as Jensen freezes mid-attack, stunned by what he's just seen. By the time the gryphon turns toward him, having apparently heard the clatter of the metal Jensen was holding hitting the floor, it's Jared's face twisted in fear looking back at him, his arms raised as if Jared is anticipating and trying to block Jensen's strike.

When nothing happens, Jared relaxes his posture enough to take in the moment. As soon as his eyes meet Jensen's, he shakes his head and whispers, "No."

Jensen takes a step back from him, and Jared just stands there watching him with those wide eyes blinking back tears the way Jensen has seen only one time before.

"You didn't see," Jared says. "Tell me you didn't see."

Jensen's leg shakes and gives out below him as his vision fills with blackness. The last thing he registers as he faints are the strong arms catching his fall.



He's back in his room, in his bed, the next time he wakes. Jared is sitting by his side with one hand held to his mouth, chewing nervously at his thumb, and he immediately sits up when he notices that Jensen is awake.

"Did I trip?" Jensen asks, feeling around on his forehead for a bump or cut. "I did, didn't I? I went out without you, like you told me not to, and I hurt myself, and I had the strangest dream. But you found me. And I'm okay. I won't do it again, I'll listen to you nex—"

"Jensen, stop," Jared says, letting his hand drop. "It wasn't a dream. You know it wasn't."

Jensen shakes his head. "No. It was. You aren't...you can't be."

"A monster." Jared's voice breaks as he says the words, but he still forces himself to lift his eyes and meet Jensen's. "Is that what I am to you?"

"You saved me from it," Jensen insists. "You rescued me. That thing tried to kill me. Killed my men. You're not that, Jared. You're good."

"I'm what I am," Jared says with a shrug. "No better and no worse."

"A human," says Jensen. "Just a man."

"Who heals faster than an elf?" Jared levels Jensen with a pointed look, but Jensen refuses to hold his gaze.

"My magic. I healed you." Jensen nods. "Some songs, that's it."

"A human who remembers things from when you were just a boy," Jared continues. "Hundreds of years ago. A human who changes his skin—"

"Don't say it," Jensen begs. "Just don't say it. We can forget I ever saw."

Apparently, Jared has decided to dig in. "You can't forget. You won't ever. Your kind aren't forgiving. And I—Jensen, how could I forget the way you looked at me out there?"

"It was a beast," Jensen says. "It just wanted to kill. I saw the way it tore through my men like it was a game. There was nothing civilized about it. How could that have been you?"

"A game? You think it was a game for me?" A tear streaks down Jared's cheek as his voice rises. "You're the ones that made a sport of hunting me. For years, one of you elves gets a hint

of where I am and the raid always follows. If I couldn't move the village in time, if they found me, what was I supposed to do? Lay down and die? I tried to spare as many as I could, but I *had* to hurt people just to escape. I've had to kill so many..." He shakes his head and looks away. "Do you think I've been having fun, Jensen? Look around. My town was burnt by your dragons. My people died on the ends of elven blades. And still all I wanted was to be left alone."

"No," Jensen whispers. "You're lying. We didn't do this. Destroy a town? We never could have imagined you had towns. We thought gryphons were animals. Creatures to be tamed or removed as a threat. Never people."

"You can't tame something with a soul," Jared replies. "Your father knew that. He couldn't force us to bow to him anymore than he could force your mother to. That's why he killed us. He knew perfectly well what we were when he gave the order to burn our children in their schoolhouse."

"What are you talking about?" Jensen takes Jared's hand and holds it as Jared tries to tear it away, until Jared is forced to look at him directly. "Why would you mention my mother?"

"I knew her." Jared wipes a tear from his cheek and gives Jensen a faint smile. "Not well. I was hardly more than a boy then. But I knew Queen Donna. She was kind, Jensen. She was so much like you."

Jensen was only a child when his mother was alive, his memories of her all haunted by who she was after...

"You want to bring my mother into this?" Jensen asks. "I may have been a boy, but I'll never forget the day that gryphon attacked our city. How it tried to drag her from the palace. She was never the same after that. She was a ghost. I had to watch her die. Not something we elves are very good at understanding, let alone for a little boy. She died of a broken heart, Jared. Do you have any idea how long that takes? How many years I watched her waste away to nothing?"

"It was a mistake," Jared says. "That gryphon made a mistake. But he didn't try to kidnap her, and that's not why she died."

"Explain yourself," Jensen demands. "For once. Stop hiding my own history from me and tell me what you're talking about."

"His name was Timothy," Jared tells him. "He was a good man, though impulsive. He loved your mother very much and, Jensen, she loved him." Jensen rears back in his bed, making a guttural sound of anger, and Jared takes his hands, looking apologetic. "I know it's hard to hear that. But she would come here often and it was easy to see that there was much love between them."

"If they loved each other so much," Jensen spits, "then why—?"

"That day he went to your palace, he meant to rescue her. To bring her to her true home. He wasn't an animal that was too stupid to know what would happen if he flew into an elven



capital and tried to abduct someone. He was just too much in love to be rational."

"My mother was a queen," Jensen reminds him. "She had everything anyone could ever want. Why would she fall in love with some—?"

"Monster?" Jared finishes for him, grimacing, and Jensen feels some guilt when he realizes his logic would make Jared unlovable as well.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I didn't mean that."

Once he's recovered from the insult, Jared explains, "The village elders used to gossip about how it started. Before she was forced to marry your father, your mother was sent here every year as a delegate from your grandfather's court. She would come with some ten or twenty other elves and they would teach us the most amazing things."

Despite the heaviness of the conversation, Jared's tone shifts to a wistful one. "Those were the happiest memories of my childhood, when the elves came. We learned to speak to the forest, to tend to each other's wounds, but my favorite thing was always the bards," Jared smiles weakly and continues, "I thought they had the most amazing stories, until I heard yours. The way they created magic with their songs always fascinated me. In exchange, we would carve gifts for the elves to take home. Much of the furniture in your palace was made by my people. When elves had business in distant lands, gryphons would carry them there on our backs. It was a good partnership that our people had, before your father became king."

"How could so much have changed so quickly?" Jensen asks. "Even if my father is an evil man, he's certainly not a foolish one. He would view such an alliance as a great asset."

"He did at first," Jared agrees. "That's how your mother was able to continue to visit us. And see her lover. When he learned that she was unfaithful, he cut off relations and forbade her from ever returning here. Some of it was probably wounded pride at being made a cuckold, but I think most of it stemmed from...even your father once had a heart to break."

Jensen reflects on everything Jared has just told him and he hates that more of it adds up than raises unanswered questions. His father was always so harsh when he spoke of Jensen's mother. Rarely mentioned her except to deride how weak Jensen was. *Just like your mother*, he would chide. Jensen learned at a young age to avoid behavior that would invite the comparison. It could explain why nothing he did ever pleased his father, at least to some degree

Jared continues, "Timothy couldn't bear to be separated from her. We told him not to go, but he wouldn't listen. He went to get her because he couldn't live without her. He doomed us all in doing so, and I hate him for it, but it was love that sent him, not bloodlust."

"She wouldn't have left me," Jensen says. "Would she?"

"I don't know," Jared admits. "I can't speak for her. I don't know whether she would have gone with Timothy or not, but I know he was sincere in his belief that she wanted to."

"So my father..."

"We tried to send emissaries explaining that it was a misunderstanding, that Timothy had not acted with our blessing, but your father was too furious to listen. He tortured the messengers to learn where we were and came with a troop and dragons. They arrived too quickly for us to move the village. They killed indiscriminately. The soldiers would have been one thing. Against our gryphon forms, that would have been a fair fight. But the dragons? The fire raining down as the army beat down the gates?" Jared shakes his head. "We never stood a chance."

Jensen closes his eyes and looks away from Jared, unable to bear the raw emotion in his friend's face when his own heart is so close to breaking. Every pleasure Jensen ever enjoyed was tainted by this, and he never even suspected it. His father's kingdom was expanded on the promise that he alone could shield the people of Gnaven from the threat of the gryphons.

His entire life, Jensen was so focused on winning one parent's love that he never wondered where the other's went. "And my mother, she died because of him? Her own husband?"

"I didn't know how she died. She was a radiant woman, she deserved much better. I'm so sorry you knew her only in her grief. You should have seen how alive she was when she danced with us children by the fire." Jared leans forward in his seat and wipes his fingers over his lips. "But if her heart broke, it wasn't out of fear from some kidnap attempt. It was because she loved this village, and my people, and she blamed herself for what happened to us."

"Do you blame her?" Jensen asks.

Jared seems to consider the question for some time before deciding, "No. I blame your father. And Timothy. And...and I blame myself."

"How could it be your fault?" Jensen asks. "How did you escape?"

"Dumb luck," Jared answers sadly. "Skinchangers like me don't shift until we become adults. It was a very big thing for my people. We would stand at the gates the first time and the entire village watched and cheered as we took flight. It's supposed to be the most liberating experience of our lives. Once we were able to fly, it was a rite of passage to go out into the wild alone and learn about our new form, how to survive as a gryphon, the limitations of that body. Of course we had guidance and mentors beforehand to prepare us, but for that week, I was on my own. We were such a close community, you see. It's the first real taste of independence any of us ever had. For many of us, the last."

"That sounds very special," Jensen says, but he knows what's coming and he wishes there were some way to stop it.

Jared nods. "It was. Until I got back. I was supposed to have become a man and instead... what kind of man abandons his home like that? The village was still burning when I returned. Some of my people were still..." He swallows hard and twists his lips as he says, "No one was well enough to be saved. Not with my healing abilities. Maybe if I'd had your talents, but I didn't. All there was to do was ease the passing for those still suffering."

"If you weren't there, how can you be so sure that my father ordered it? Maybe his army got carried away, or the dragons—"

"The commander of your father's army was named Jim Beaver, is that right?"

"Jim, yes, he was like an uncle to me." Jensen looks down at his hands. "Don't tell me he was wicked, too. He was one of very few of my father's men who was ever kind to me."

Jared reaches out to squeeze Jensen's wrist reassuringly. "He seemed honorable, Jensen. I only knew him for his last few minutes, but I believe he was a man of principle."

"How did he...?" Jensen chokes on an ugly laugh. "My father told us that everyone who had gone with him had fallen in service to the kingdom, but that they had been successful in eradicating the threat of the gryphons. I suppose that was a lie as well."

"Most of them did die fighting," Jared concedes. "Jim was one of the last living from either side of the battle. He'd been left for dead by the man who stabbed him."

"Don't tell me," Jensen says. "But Jim was loyal. He was so loyal. Why would my father have killed his own man?"

"Apparently the commander's loyalty had its limits. Some of the men saw how far your father's revenge had gone, recognized that these were people, not beasts, being slaughtered, and they tried to talk some sense into him. Your father did not like that very much."

"I can't imagine he did."

"According to the commander, the king had the soldiers who survived the attack execute those who had opposed him. And then he killed the men who were still left just to be sure they were silenced."

"I believe he could have done that. He's the most talented fighter in our kingdom," Jensen says. "Even Jim couldn't best him in a match."

"A gifted killer," Jared agrees. "Not something to admire by my standards."

Jensen looks down, head bowed in shame. "I believed everything he told us. I wanted him to be a hero so much that I didn't allow myself to wonder if he really was or not."

"It's not your fault. Who doesn't want to admire their father?" Jared puts a finger under Jensen's chin so that he'll look up. "His crimes are not yours. I made that mistake when you first woke here. When you told me you were his son," Jared closes his eyes against a wave of emotion, "all I could think was that I should have finished the job. I *wished that I had killed you*. I can't forgive myself for feeling that, however briefly."

"I was the one who was trying to slay an innocent creature," Jensen points out. "You would have been well within your rights to finish me. Or at least not to go out of your way to rescue me. Why *did* you?"

"I didn't. I didn't *rescue* you." Jared draws his chair closer to the bed. He looks half-crazed as he lets his hand drop to lightly brush over the cut on Jensen's shoulder. "Do you know how much it kills me to see you in pain and know that I did this to you? That the best thanks I can offer for all you've done is just to somewhat fix the ways I broke you? I maimed you. You were right all along. I am a monster. I just can't bear that you know it."

"You're no more monster than I am," Jensen tells him. "In fact, I'm worse. I had no reason to hate you and I still led soldiers to your doorstep to kill you, and for what? So that my father would finally be proud of me. What kind of person kills for that?"

Jared shakes his head. "You didn't know better. I did, and I still wished you dead. I swore to myself years ago that I wouldn't let myself become like him, blinded by revenge and hatred. I've struggled against the instinct to take pleasure in hurting your kind for what one of you did to me. I brought you here and dressed your wounds because I thought you were just a boy obeying orders, and I didn't think you deserved to die for that. But if I'd known who you were, I would have left you on that mountain. I would have missed out on—fuck, I'm so sorry, Jensen."

"I don't blame you for anything," Jensen assures him. "I would never have saved you if our places were reversed. I almost wish you hadn't. I didn't deserve it." Jensen chokes on his words. "I truly believed I was doing the right thing. He has our entire kingdom convinced there's one last gryphon out here in the woods waiting to strike. I would have done anything to be the one to stop it. He keeps us so afraid of you that no one questions his rule. He's using you and he used me, and I let him. So many men who survived the raids returned with stories of how brutal you had been, and none of us ever asked how they escaped if that was the case. They saw what they expected to, and the king never corrected them. He knows how to use fear to stay in power, and he's never going to stop sending people after you as long as he knows it's working."

"I know that," Jared says. "I never expected it to stop. I've been waiting all these years for one of you to finally get it right and end me." Jared reaches out to brush hair away from Jensen's face and his lips tremble. "My kind can't die of broken hearts like elves can. But I was gone in so many ways until you reminded me how to feel."

"You're not hearing me," Jensen insists. "You're in danger. You have to leave this village. Fly somewhere far away. We can go together."

"I can't leave this place," Jared tells him in a soft voice. "It's the only thing left that keeps my people's memory alive. It's all I have aside from..." He lifts his eyes to meet Jensen's. "Tell me it isn't all anymore."

"You have me," Jensen assures him, taking his hand and pressing a kiss to his palm. "I'm yours."

He hears the sharp intake of Jared's breath and glances up at him, but Jared doesn't let him go. He presses his palm to Jensen's cheek as he says, "Do you know how long it's been since anyone touched me? How much I've dreamed that someone would just let me do this?"

Jensen remembers the way Jared had gasped when he took his arm in the forest, the overwhelming need he had sensed from Jared for that small amount of contact. He hadn't understood it then, but he does now. That was the first time anyone had touched Jared without intention to harm in decades. *Decades.*

"You can touch me anywhere," Jensen says. "I want you to."

Jared hesitates, and Jensen gets that, he does. It's been a long time for Jared, and they've both been through a lot over the course of the conversation they've just shared.

"We don't have to do anything else," Jensen promises. He moves until his back is against the wall, and then he lifts the covers to show Jared that he's made room for him in his bed. "You can just hold me. Whatever you want, Jared."

Slowly, Jared moves to join him on the mattress. It's almost comically small for two men of their size, but Jared is careful not to jostle Jensen where it might aggravate one of his injuries, and Jensen smiles as he slides between Jared's arms, sure to position himself in a way that makes the fit less cramped.

It starts as a simple embrace, until Jensen dares to turn his face up to Jared's. He parts his lips and Jared moves in as if he read Jensen's mind, pressing a kiss to Jensen's mouth before pulling back.

"Was that okay?" he asks.

"It could have lasted longer," Jensen teases.

Jared grins and kisses him again, this time opening to Jensen. They kiss for as long as Jensen can ever remember kissing someone uninterrupted, until Jared pulls away and rests his forehead against Jensen's, letting out a soft sigh.

"I can't believe this is real," he whispers. "I thought you would hate me."

"I love you," Jensen admits. He takes Jared's face between his hands and laughs, because it's no easier for him to believe than it is for Jared. What they're doing should be absolutely forbidden. His lovers have always had to be screened by the court, approved by the king, and then trained on how to be appropriately subservient to the prince. He would never have received his father's permission to be with Jared. The degree to which he knows that and doesn't care is incredibly liberating. "I love you," he says again, just because he can. "It's the only real thing I'm sure of."

"Jensen," Jared whispers, gentle in his caresses as he turns Jensen onto his back. He begins to undo Jensen's shirt, slowly enough that Jensen could put a stop to it if he was so inclined.

Instead, Jensen sits up, pulling the loosened fabric off over his head. He expects to see lust in Jared's eyes when he looks again, but instead, Jared is frowning at him. He doesn't understand why until Jared reaches out, the ends of his fingers tracing the long, ugly scar on Jensen's shoulder.

"I was checking if you were alive," Jared says, as if Jensen had accused him of something. It's obviously his own guilt he's responding to as he adds, "I couldn't think of another way to make you respond to me without taking the risk of shifting in front of a stranger. An elf. I didn't care that it would deepen the cut."

Jensen takes his wrist and pulls it away from the injury. "Do you really think I care about that now?"

"I care." Jared turns his face, looking down at the fading green bruises along Jensen's ribs. "I hurt you. On purpose. I don't deserve—"

"Make it up to me," Jensen tells him, "by not making me listen to you whine about it."

Despite his brooding, Jared laughs at that. Jensen takes Jared's face in his hands and forces him to look up, kissing him once before letting go. "You've gone all these years without being touched, and yet I'm the one losing clothing."

Jared takes the hint, immediately tugging on the ties that secure the heavy fur cape over his shoulders. Once that's been discarded of, Jensen leans forward, pulling the fabric of Jared's shirt down enough to expose his chest.

"What are you doing?" Jared asks, his voice a mix of perplexed and amused as Jensen ducks his head and presses a lingering kiss to Jared's collarbone.

"In my kingdom, this is a gesture of submission," Jensen explains, glancing up but keeping his lips close enough to brush Jared's skin as he talks. "If you're taken into a royal bed, you're expected to give yourself to your superior completely, so that they can use you in whatever way they see fit."

He kisses Jared's collarbone again and sits back, meeting Jared's eyes with intensity. "I am yours, completely."

Jared shakes his head, opening his mouth to argue, but Jensen silences him with a finger over his lips.

"Please," he says. "I always hated it. I never wanted docile lovers, but I had to be kingly. My father believes it's a sign of weakness to let someone claim you." Jensen licks his lips. "I don't care about that anymore. I want so much to be yours. To be used by you. To give to you. I want to do it this way. Don't you want me?"

"Desperately," Jared admits. "If you're sure?"

"Fuck me," Jensen says—begs. He begs and he's not ashamed of it anymore. Jared is true to the promise he made that first night, it seems so long ago now. When they were enemies. *Sometimes you just have to ask.*

Their passion is somewhat impeded by Jensen's injury, and it takes several minutes of shuffling to figure out a way for Jared to hold himself over Jensen without hurting him. Jared moves, pulling Jensen's pants down with as little jostling as possible, and then he gets out of

bed, leaving Jensen naked, confused, and disappointed until Jared takes the lamp resting on the dresser across the room and begins to pour some oil into his palm.

"Oh," Jensen says, his eyes widening as he realizes what Jared's intention is. This part had always been done for him, his boys brought in already opened and ready for Jensen to enjoy. The idea that Jared is about to prepare him, to push those long fingers in where no one else has ever touched Jensen, makes his cock stiffen at an impressive rate.

"Still with me?" Jared asks as he climbs back onto the mattress.

"Very, very much so," Jensen replies.

He widens the gap of his legs so that Jared can kneel between them and then he closes his eyes, worried he might not like the sensation once he finally learns how it feels. Jared doesn't make him look, just whispers to Jensen so that it doesn't come as a surprise when his slick finger pushes into Jensen's body.

Jensen immediately likes the fullness of it, the undeniable awareness of Jared inside of him. But it's not entirely what he expected. Not the rush of pleasure his lovers had led him to expect. Not until Jared crooks his finger, causing something to shake loose in Jensen that makes him cry out.

"Do you like it?" Jared asks. "Should I keep going?"

"I will die if you don't," Jensen replies, laughing at himself and throwing an arm over his face to hide his blush. It's no use—he can feel the heat spreading to his chest. "I think I might actually die."

"You aren't going to die," Jared promises. He pulls his finger back just enough to slide another one in next to it, and somehow, that's even better.

Jensen's mind temporarily breaks trying to imagine what it'll feel like when Jared—

"Stop for a moment," he says, pushing Jared back.

He sits up and sees that Jared looks worried. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, shut up," Jensen replies. "I just need to know..."

He reaches down, sliding his palm over the length of Jared's cock, and he wouldn't be surprised if the skies opened and celestials began to sing.

"It's so much," he says, his arousal growing as he moves his hand down Jared's thigh and feels the entire hard line of Jared's dick. "Fuck, Jared, you're huge."

"What, you thought I was big everywhere except where it counts?"

Jensen huffs a laugh. "An elf can only dream so much."



Jared throws his head back and laughs at that, completely delighted, and then he leans forward, catching Jensen's lips for another kiss. Jensen doesn't waste time now. He begins to untie the fastenings of Jared's pants until he can shove them down far enough to expose Jared's cock.

"In me," he says, not even breaking the kiss. "Please."

"Yeah," Jared says, panting against his mouth. He takes his cock in hand, the last of the oil slicking it up, and then he gets on top of Jensen again, this time his need a little too intense to remember to be as tender as before.

Jensen doesn't mind the slight pain that Jared's movements cause to his injuries—in fact, he kind of likes it.

The first push makes Jensen cry out in surprise, and Jared stops once he's fully inside, giving them both a few moments to catch their breath. After the pause, he asks, "Can I?"

"I think so," Jensen tells him. "Just go slow."

"Okay," Jared agrees, nodding. Even that small movement causes a change in the way Jared's dick is settled inside of him, and Jensen loves the sensation. He feels so close to Jared that even their breaths are shared.

Jared steadies himself by planting one arm on the bed by Jensen's head and begins to thrust in earnest. Each time he fucks into Jensen, he changes the angle, until he finds that amazing spot that had felt so overwhelming just on Jared's fingertip.

It's truly staggering now and Jensen is instantly addicted to it. He tries to pivot his hips up to take Jared even deeper, and his leg makes him cry out in pain as he accidentally puts too much weight on it.

"Let me," Jared murmurs into his mouth. "Just let me take care of you."

Jensen all but whimpers his assent and then Jared wraps his hand around Jensen's cock, beginning to stroke the base of it and working his way all the way up, until he's twisting his thumb at the head. Jensen realizes how close he is after he's already started to come into Jared's fist, an explosion spreading through his body that is both too intense and too sudden to anticipate.

Jared isn't far behind, his years without contact leaving him almost as quickly sated as Jensen's previously unfucked body had been. Jensen does get a warning, just before Jared grips the back of his neck and pulls him up into a rough kiss. He spills as their tongues slowly begin to slide together, and Jensen finds Jared's seed filling him is just as satisfying as the stretch of his cock.

After about a minute of uncoordinated thrusts, Jared pulls out of him, remembering to fall to the side instead of putting any additional weight on Jensen. Jared stares up at the ceiling for a while before finally he turns onto his side to look at Jensen.

"Tell me you liked that," he says. "Because I'm going to need to do it again."

"It could have lasted longer," Jensen replies, echoing his joke from before.

Jared laughs, ducking his head so that Jensen can't see the full smile. "You're one to talk."

"Well, I never," Jensen says, pretending to be outraged and turning over in the bed so that he's faced toward the wall instead of Jared.

He feels Jared's fingers ghost over his shoulder as he moves Jensen's long hair to one side, and then there are soft lips pressing against his skin.

"You can stay here," he tells Jensen's back. "You don't have to tell stories to stay. I hope you know that."

Just like that, Jensen is finally liberated from an eternity of waiting around for a kingdom he never wants to rule. Hidden in this village, he can be exactly who he wants to be. Forever.

He smiles as Jared wraps an arm around his middle and settles in for sleep, says, "I know."



There's a strange weight sitting on Jensen's chest that wakes him the next morning. He opens his eyes, realizing it's Jared's hand resting over his heart and Jared's big, bulky body that's boxing him into his bed, restricting his movements.

That makes him marginally less annoyed about the whole thing.

Jared is watching him with a dreamy expression that makes Jensen's insides feel weak. So he rolls his eyes and shoves Jared away as much as possible without completely pushing him off the bed. "Stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?" Jared asks, huffing a laugh as he tugs Jensen into his arms despite Jensen's token squirming.

"Like *that*," Jensen says, flopping over in Jared's embrace to face him.

"It must be tiring for you," Jared muses. "I'm sure you have to put up with being stared at adoringly by all your subjects constantly. My poor little princeling."

Jensen doesn't love the nickname, but he can't help noticing how soft and endearing it sounds on Jared's tongue today compared to the way he had wielded it like a weapon the first few days Jensen was here.

He smiles and pushes himself up to give Jared the briefest of kisses on his lips. "I assure you, that's not the case."

"Well, either way, I can't very well help doing it, so don't blame me." Jared turns onto his back, releasing Jensen from his grasp as he stretches his arms out over his head. "I think I'll catch us something fresh for breakfast."

"Are you joking?" Jensen asks, flopping onto his stomach so he can hide his face in his pillow. "The day hasn't even begun yet. The sky is still purple."

"Yes, Jensen, that's called a sunrise," Jared informs him. "They're actually quite beautiful. You should try to see one someday."

Jensen only responds by lifting his head enough to glare at Jared.

Laughing, Jared runs his hand over Jensen's shoulder and then presses a kiss to it. He props his chin on Jensen's shoulder blade and murmurs, "I'm going to make you something delicious to wake up to. You go back to sleep. I know how much your beauty rest means to you."

"Hey, I'm still healing," Jensen argues, an admittedly weak defense, but he's all too glad to let Jared get away with the joke, especially since it's far from untrue.

When he wakes again, he feels considerably better rested, with a quiet hum of pleasure from the previous night's activities still running through him, muting the pains that he's become used to feeling upon waking.

He is a little disappointed not to smell the breakfast Jared promised him or hear any clattering from the kitchen to indicate that it's at least been started, so he decides to check and see what the problem is.

Jensen dresses slowly, grabbing his cane and limping out into the mainroom only to find it barren not only of delicious meals but also of scruffy werecreatures who lie about bringing their lovers breakfast in bed.

A quick glance through the window reveals that it's a beautiful day with a sunny, clear sky, and Jensen thinks, if he could fly, it would be the kind of day that would invite him to stretch his wings a bit, perhaps get distracted from whatever task might have drawn him out.

When he walks outside, his suspicion is confirmed. He sees Jared approaching from the west with an animal clutched in one claw, moving so fast that his landing is comically sloppy. No longer afraid of the gryphon as a monster, Jensen can now appreciate that Jared is a majestic beast in his second skin. But that's not really the word he would use to describe the way Jared rolls, lion's paws in the air as his eagle head hits the ground and he skids to a stop just outside the city gates. The boar Jared had clasped in his claw lands ten feet away after being unceremoniously tossed into the air when Jared loses control of his limbs.

"Smooth, smooth," Jensen says, pretending to admire Jared's form. "I give it a nine out of a possible ten stars."

Jared doesn't shift, but it's amazing how expressive his bird's face and feline bearing is now that he knows to read it like Jared's. He ducks his head and tucks it under one wing as if he's trying to hide a blush, and Jensen can't help laughing, stepping forward to give him a reassuring pat on his massive side.

"Don't worry, Jared. It wasn't the *most* pathetic thing I've ever seen. Probably." Jared pecks at his hand irritably and Jensen laughs. "At least you got us something to eat on your little adventure."

Jared turns his back to Jensen, walking off to retrieve the boar, and Jensen is so busy watching him, completely wrapped up in his amusement, that he doesn't notice the shadow that begins to stretch out on the ground over Jared until a terrible screech breaks out overhead.

That makes Jared freeze in place, but it does just the opposite for Jensen. Suddenly, several memories fall into place, and Jensen doesn't need to look up to confirm his suspicion before he breaks into a frantic run, trying to close the distance between himself and Jared as fast as possible despite the way his leg feels like it might snap with every footfall.

The familiar noise that had interrupted his story the first night, which Jensen hadn't quite been able to identify. The monster that prompted Jared to move the village, which Jensen had mistakenly assumed was the gryphon. Jared's conviction as he told Jensen: *It's looking for you.*

Jensen had orchestrated this. He'd completely forgotten his last conscious action in the battle, the ring he'd slipped off his fingers and left behind hoping that exactly this would happen.

A dragon never misses a treasure, even if it's just a stray band of gold lost on a snowy mountainside. Moving the village bought them some time, but it's no surprise that Jensen couldn't stay hidden forever. His favorite pet was always tenacious when it came to finding his master. Jensen knew he would be tracked.

Now Brazos is here, flying directly for Jared, fire already building in his throat. Ready to kill the gryphon, just like Jensen trained him to do.

Jared shifts into his human form, but it's much too late to save him from being spotted. Brazos won't hesitate the way an elf might at learning that his prey is a person. There's only one thing that could possibly stop the attack now.

As soon as he's within distance, Jensen leaps forward, throwing his body over Jared's and facing his dragon head on. It gives him a better understanding of how he could have so horribly misread Jared fighting for his life as taking pleasure in the violence during that first battle, because he knows this dragon, knows that Brazos can be as affectionate as a lapdog, but seeing him now from Jared's point of view, the monster before him is like no nightmare Jensen has ever endured.

"Brazos, stop," he yells. "Stand down."

To his relief, the dragon reels away, and the worst that happens is that Jensen's shirt gets sliced by the end of the spikes on the back of Brazos's neck as the dragon turns its face so that the fire it had been about to spit at Jared is released into the air instead.

He feels Jared's arms wrap around his chest, a jerk as Jared turns him too quickly so that they're facing each other, and he immediately begins to inspect Jensen for new injuries.

"You idiot," he yells, shaking Jensen's shoulder once he's sure Jensen isn't harmed. "You could have gotten yourself killed. How could you do that? Throw yourself in front of a charging dragon, are you mad?"

"You're welcome," Jensen says, brushing Jared's hands off his shoulders. "It was the only thing that could stop him from killing you, so you're very welcome. Now, you need to relax your body language before he sees us and thinks you're attacking me."

Jared takes a ragged breath and then nods, bringing his hands up in a gesture of surrender. Jensen turns to face his dragon and finds that Brazos has recovered from his confusion and is now watching Jensen for his cue.

"Good boy," Jensen says, stepping forward. He strokes Brazos's snout. "Good boy, Brazos. Daddy missed you."

He looks to Jared and gives him an encouraging wave. "Come pet him, Jared."

"No way," Jared says, taking a step back. "I'm not going anywhere near that thing."

"I understand," Jensen tells him. "But please, just show him that you're not an enemy, okay? For me? I can't risk him trying to hurt you again. What if it happens when I'm not close enough to stop it?" He glances down at his leg, which is sending waves of agony through his body by now. "I won't be able to run between you again."

That melts Jared's resolve some, and he very slowly takes a few steps forward. Brazos draws his head back, bearing his teeth, probably still smelling that Jared is the gryphon he's been trained to hunt.

"Shh," Jensen whispers. "Shh, boy. Jared is a friend. Be nice."

Jared holds one shaking hand up and after a tense minute of Brazos sniffing at it, the dragon lowers his face enough for Jared to pat him lightly on the snout.

"See that?" Jensen says, to both of them. "We can all get along if we give each other a chance."

He sees Jared smile, but then Jensen hears something that instantly makes his heart sink. Drums in the distance. The sound of a cavalry approaching.

Jared is still grinning until he meets Jensen's eyes and asks, "What's wrong?"

"He was a scout," Jensen says. "They sent him ahead because they knew he would find me. There's no way they didn't see where he landed. They'll be heading this way."

Apparently, Jared's hearing is no match for an elf's, but he trusts Jensen immediately, giving a sharp nod. "How far?"

"Half a day out, maybe a little more. They'll be here by nightfall."

Jared's lips twist bitterly. "They won't be giving me the chance the dragon did."

Jensen doesn't try to defend his people, not willing to risk Jared on his father's mercy. "Can we move the village? Two of us together should be strong enough, right?"

"Not with half a day," Jared says. "Not when I already expended so much energy moving it a week ago and you're still drained from healing."

"We flee, then," says Jensen. "I get on Brazos's back and we can take to the skies. We'll find somewhere that we can be safe—"

"I can't leave my home, Jensen," Jared tells him. "I can't let them take this from me. They'll finish what they started. The whole village will burn."

"But *you* won't." Jensen grabs him by the fur trim of his coat and shakes him. "You're not a prisoner here. Don't be stupid."

"It's stupid to *you*," Jared says. "You don't understand. This is just a place to you. These woods are my friends. My people's souls have flowed into this land. This is the only part of them that I can still reach. I can't abandon this village to your father. He's already chopped down Blackwater Draw to make trading roads. Do you think he's let these lands stay wild because it never occurred to him to raze them? I'm the only thing left that will fight for them."

"You can't fight for anything if you're dead," Jensen yells. "I'm sorry. I can't imagine how hard this is for you but we have to go. Now."

"Even if we could outfly your father's archers, do you think he would ever stop hunting me? Do you think I'll have any chance against him without the forest sheltering me? I'd be worse off and I wouldn't even have the dignity of dying where I should have died years ago."

"So what do you want to do? You want to give up?" Jensen shakes his head, feeling his eyes filling with tears. "You can't do that. I don't want to fade the way my mother did. Don't do that to me, Jared, please, just go. Go alone, and I'll hold him off. I'll try to save your village. Just don't make me watch you die."

"What if...?" Jared takes one of Jensen's hands in his own and squeezes. "What if, instead of running, we're ready for them when they arrive?"

Jensen scoffs. "What do you mean, try to take on an entire army with one dragon?"

"No. No more violence, just," Jared licks his lips. "Jensen, if anyone can change hearts, it's you."

"You think I can *talk* our way out of this?"

"I think you can open your mouth to sing and remake the world," Jared says. "He's your father. He has to listen to you. At least he'll give you a chance."

"You greatly overestimate the king's esteem for me," Jensen replies.

"Then we try and we fail and I die all the same." Jared shrugs. "You'll be safe and I'll die with my family, full of love instead of hatred. You'll have given me a nobler death than I ever could have dared to dream of when I thought I'd die on an elvish blade fueled by nothing but revenge."

"You're really serious," Jensen says.

Jared brings the hand he still has gripped in his own to his lips and kisses it. "Come on, my princeling. Let's prepare. And when your father arrives, we'll meet him at the gate like kings."



They're as ready as they can be by the time the army is within Jensen's range of vision. The worst part is the waiting. Another hour or so passes until Jared can hear the drums, and longer still before he sees the lines advancing. It's like it wasn't real for him yet, but once he can track the progress for himself, Jared stops trying to distract Jensen with jokes and the same anxious silence that gripped Jensen hours ago falls over him, as well.

To Jared's credit, he doesn't become a coward in the moment when the reality of the coming fight dawns on him. Jensen watches his face closely, takes note of how his jaw sets and his eyes take on a cold edge, and he worries that Jared may try something foolish if this plan doesn't go how he hoped.

His father is at the head of the troop, riding with his second in command, Jeffrey, flanking him just a few feet behind. Jensen stays at the village gates, holding firm to his position. He knows that it must be driving his father mad, his son expecting him to ride to meet him at the gates. At best, it's a break in elven tradition not to ride out to meet a king. At worst, it's an insult, a challenge of authority. The army at his father's back will be thinking the same, and a son standing at foreign gates as if he were a king in his own right is a brutal humiliation to a man like Alan.

Good. His father has most of the power here, but Jensen has won the opening gambit. He's learned a lot about chess losing to Jared these last few weeks and his father won't be expecting a worthy opponent.

Once he reaches the gates, his father dismounts from his steed, handing the reins off to Jeffrey. He tilts his head back far enough to take in the tall gates of Jared's village, sneering, and hardly passes his eyes over Jared before dismissing him and letting his gaze settle on Jensen.

"My beloved son," he says, voice free of emotion even as he holds his arms out in a welcoming gesture. "I've been so worried about you since your disappearance. We thought you dead. If I had known you were kidnapped, I would have sent scouts out sooner."

"I have not been kidnapped," Jensen says evenly. "I have been staying here as the guest of a most gracious host. This is Jared. I believe you are already acquainted with his village."

There's a spark of fire in his father's eyes that shows Jensen that the underlying message has not been lost on him. With the confirmation that Jensen is siding with Jared, his father turns to his second and says, "Jeffrey, return to the front and have the soldiers ready to advance. It seems that my son has been confused during his imprisonment. I would rather keep this from the men if possible, rather than raising the alarm, but I also need them ready to defend us should this," his eyes slide to Jared, "animal choose to become violent."

"If you're sure it's safe, my liege?" asks Jeffrey, who has obviously missed all the unspoken tension in Alan and Jensen's brief exchange.

Alan waves a hand at the general and Jeffrey leads both horses back to the ranks. Once he's out of earshot, the king raises himself to his full height and says, "Let us speak openly now."

"It would be a shame if Jeffrey learned what kind of man you really are, wouldn't it?" Jared asks.

Alan gives him a condescending smile but turns to Jensen again, making it clear he won't acknowledge Jared directly. "A king must keep many painful secrets from his subjects in order to protect them. You might have learned that in all the schooling you had as a boy, had you ever listened."

"You killed Jim Beaver," Jensen says. "A man who served you loyally. And who raised Jeffrey like a son of his own. I hardly think it was the people you were protecting when you chose to hide that."

"Ah, my poor son," his father says, shaking his head with a mocking expression of sadness on his face. "How easily you've believed this monster's lies. How you've turned on your own father."

"He's no more monster than you or I," Jensen replies, taking Jared's hand. "Less, in fact. He's a good man."

His father's expression darkens as he looks down at their tangled fingers. "Don't tell me you've taken this animal to bed. I always knew you were weak, but I'd hoped you weren't desperate."

Jensen gives his father a smile soaked in false sweetness. "More like he took me to bed."

The king flinches at the implication, and Jared takes advantage of his distraction to step forward. "Jensen and I would like a word with you in private. If you'll follow me to my home, we would like to discuss—"



"And why should I negotiate with you, a savage and a little boy who's forgotten his place? I'm the one with an army at my back."

"Because if you don't, I'll show your army just how friendly Jared and I have become. A kiss should do it. Imagine how they'll mock you in court once your son chooses the gryphon you've convinced them all is a beast over you." Jensen gestures to the gate. "Follow us inside and hear us out. At least then you'll have some privacy if you decide to spill your own son's blood."

"And how do I know you won't just try to kill me once we're there?" his father asks.

"We both know I stand no chance against you in a fight, and Jared could never hope to make it out alive with an army waiting if you don't leave in one piece. We just want to talk."

"Fine," his father replies, rolling his eyes. He shoves his way past Jensen and Jared saying, "I assume I won't have trouble finding my own way in your modest little kingdom."

They watch him stroll across the village courtyard toward Jared's home and exchange looks before following him, hands still clasped.

Once inside, Jared pushes the door closed, and they gesture toward three chairs they set up by the fire, waiting until Alan takes a seat before sitting across from him.

"Well," says the king. "State your terms so I can reject them and we can get on with this."

"All we want is to be left alone," Jensen begins, knowing his father won't even acknowledge any requests that come from Jared. "No more hunters being sent after Jared. No more propaganda about the evils of his species. No more search parties for me. And no more attacks on this forest. We wish to live in peace."

"Peace can only be bought at a cost, son," his father says. "The people stay complacent when they have an enemy to unite against. Unfortunately, your little friend has been very helpful in that regard. So unless you have a bigger evil to offer me, I'm afraid we're at an impasse."

Jensen puts his hands out, imploring his father to listen. "You could try ruling through kindness. Winning the love of your people by helping them instead of with fear. Have you ever thought of that?"

His father gives a cruel laugh. "You're so like your mother. Weak. Fully of silly ideals. No stomach for what it takes to rule. If you weren't a full elf, I would doubt you were my son at all."

"How disappointing for both of us it is to know we're related by blood."

Alan scoffs. "You didn't leave so long ago. And although you were never a son any father could be proud of, you at least knew respect. What's gotten into you?"

"I already told you," says Jensen with a smirk. "Jared has."

His father's face is so disgusted that it's almost worth the unpleasantness of this entire experience. Once he's recovered from Jensen's comment, his father lifts his head with all the regal authority he can muster. He says, "You've had your fun now. Got to play out your little rebellion. Now let's end this. I would rather not have to kill my own son, but if you plan to embarrass me any further, I'm sure my army will kill Jared without question once I tell them how he murdered my cherished heir in front of me."

"You wouldn't do that," Jared says. "Even a man like you. Surely you wouldn't kill your own child?"

"I don't plan on needing an heir," his father snaps. "I don't plan on dying. Now stay out of this. I won't have animals involved in my affairs. This is between me and my son."

"Don't speak to him like that," Jensen says, his hand curling into a fist.

"Or what?" his father asks, laughing at him as if it was a child threatening him. "I hold all the cards here, and I'm growing impatient. Will you be a good boy and come home, or will you die with your new pet?"

"I'll confess to everything you want," Jared says suddenly.

Jensen turns to him with a look of confusion, but his father seems to hear him for the first time since he arrived. "What's that now?"

"You kill me at the gates of my city, with all your men watching. Take Jensen back without hurting him. I won't fight, and I'll say whatever you want me to say."

Suddenly, Jensen has a nasty conviction that this was Jared's plan all along. Jared tricked him. He knew Jensen's father wouldn't listen. He never thought they could both be saved. He already resolved to die before the army was even within his field of vision, so he took the path most likely to get Jensen out alive.

Jensen isn't going to go along with that plan any more than Jared was willing to run.

"Finally, one of you understands the situation you're in," Alan says, leaning forward. "I would offer to shake on it, but I'd rather not touch you."

"You could take that offer," Jensen says, drawing his words out as he formulates a plan. He sees only one way that he can even hope to win at this point, and without a way to explain beforehand, he knows he's risking Jared's hatred for what he's about to say.

But at least Jared will be alive to hate him.

"It's a good offer from where I'm sitting," his father replies.

"It does the job for now," Jensen says. "But it eliminates Jared as a threat. As long as he was still out here, the people still needed you to protect them. If you kill him today—"

"That ends today," the king says.

"That's right," Jensen replies. "But if you take him alive, bring him back to Gnaven, and keep him imprisoned in our dungeons, you can drag him out whenever their love for you has lost its vigor. You can remind them of the evils you alone can contain. It's the perfect way to keep them afraid while having Jared right where you want him, neutralized as a threat."

"Why the sudden change of heart?" his father asks, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Because Jared is right that we can't beat you. And I'm your son. If I can't have my way and win, I'll gladly go along with the winning side." He looks to Jared, hoping Jared will somehow see his true intention under his convincingly cool façade. But Jared is no better at reading him now than he is when they play at cards, and instead, Jensen can see Jared's heart breaking in his expression. He doesn't let that melt his resolve. "I'm sorry. I can't die. I won't die. I'm an elf. We aren't supposed to. I won't be like my mother."

His father smiles, extending his hand. "We may be able to make a king of you yet."

Jensen swallows the bile in his throat, takes his father's hand, and closes his eyes as he bends to kiss the king's signet ring, sealing their pact.



It takes days of travel before Jensen can sneak away from his father's camp to visit Jared. As much as his father wants to believe Jensen's loyalty has returned to where he believes it belongs, he's no fool. He's kept a close eye on Jensen, careful not to leave him alone with anyone Jensen might try to turn against him. Jensen has had to play his part, hiding the crushing pain he feels when his father discusses Jared's fate.

At least this way he knows what the stakes are. Jensen has heard what will happen to Jared if he can't save him. Failing is not an option.

Finally, the army reaches the edge of the forest and in order to give the men the rest they need to finish the journey home, his father proposes a feast to celebrate the capture of the beast without a drop of blood being spilled. He praises Jensen before the entire company in his speech, regaling the army with falsehoods of how Jensen tricked the gryphon, keeping himself unharmed despite the monster's violent tendencies until they were able to track him down and allowing them to take the monster alive.

Jensen stands by him, smiling the way he genuinely would have not long ago had his father ever shown this much pride in him. The men drink heavily. His father drinks heavily. Jensen pretends to drink most heavily of all.

Once the festivities have died down, Jensen slips out of his tent and searches for the only men who sat out the feast, the guards stationed around Jared's cage. He anticipates finding them overwhelmed, Jared strong and defiant, perhaps transformed into his second skin, but instead they look bored. Inside the cage, Jared is sitting on the floor, his body bent over itself, his

head tucked down. He looks small and resigned instead of full of fury, and Jensen would prefer even anger directed at him to seeing Jared so broken.

It's worse than what he prepared himself for, and he hadn't been expecting anything good.

"I'd like a moment with the prisoner," Jensen tells one of the guards. "You're free to partake of the leftover food and wine in the meantime."

"We would never leave your highness alone with this monster," says one of the men, bowing in deference to Jensen. "Not even for the spoils of tonight's celebration."

"Uh, right," says the second guard, who had already started walking toward the feast as soon as Jensen attempted to dismiss them. "The general instructed us not to leave our assignment for anything or anyone. I see that you were testing our loyalty, but I assure you, we wouldn't choose any luxury over your safety."

Jensen gives them a thin smile, cursing internally. Without privacy, he can't tell Jared his full plan. And Jared will never forgive him unless he knows why Jensen did this.

"Very good," he says. "I'll be sure to pass along news of your diligence to my father."

"To the king?" says the first guard excitedly. "You'll tell the king about us?"

"Of course, he should know the names of all his most loyal subjects." Jensen gestures a few feet away. "Please keep watch from there. I want to be sure you can warn me if anyone attempts to come to free him."

"Who would—?" the second guard begins to ask, but the first elbows him in the stomach.

"You idiot," he hisses under his breath. "You dare question the prince's logic?"

Both guards smile at Jensen then and step away. It's not far enough that Jensen can be sure elven ears won't overhear him, but it at least gives him some chance to speak to Jared.

Once they're far enough, Jensen grabs the bars of the cage and whispers, "Jared."

Jared's head snaps up when he hears Jensen's voice, at first with a hopeful expression, but it dims almost immediately. Perhaps it's the fine elven robe Jensen is wearing now, reminding Jared of his station. Perhaps it's the cane Jensen is leaning on, one of elven make rather than the gift Jared had crafted for him. Or perhaps it's just that he hates Jensen that much.

"What do you want?" Jared asks, turning his face back to the ground.

"I want to talk to you," he says. "To explain."

"Explain," Jared repeats sadly. "Explain why I'm in a cage and you're wearing a crown made of gold? I may just be an animal to you, but I can figure that much out on my own."

There's a part of Jensen that wants to put this on Jared. Jared should know what kind of person Jensen is, that he wouldn't just turn on Jared like this for a circlet and a few kind

words from his father. But he understands all too well how easy this is for Jared to believe. He knew Jensen only a few weeks, and he's known the cruelty of elves for decades. Jensen would have given anything for another way to do this, something that wouldn't make Jared slide back into the bitterness he'd shown Jensen when they first met. He just didn't see another way.

"Listen to me—"

"Listen to you?" Jared asks, rushing to his feet. "Haven't I listened enough? Isn't that how I ended up here?" He laughs cruelly and paces in his cell, putting as much space between himself and Jensen as possible. "I knew what you were, and yet all it took was one song. I'm such an idiot."

"You're no such thing," Jensen tells him. "If you'll give me a chance to explain..."

"I don't want to know," Jared says, turning to look at him. Jensen thought he wanted that, thought he would give anything to see Jared's face again, but now that there's so much hurt clear in his expression, Jensen is the one who has to look away. "I've been sitting here trying to decide what's worse. If it was all fake, if you planned it from the start, or if everything I thought we shared was real, and it was just that easy for you to throw away."

"Jared, everything I told you was real. What I feel for you is true. I didn't throw any of it away. I did this *because* I love you. I couldn't let him kill you," he says. "I've seen what it would do to me. I can feel what it would do to me."

"Well, I'm glad you've made it so easy on yourself," Jared replies with a sneer. "I was willing to die for you. I would have gladly died for you. You knew the worst thing they could do to me was take me from my home. You knew and you *suggested* it."

"He was going to *kill you*!" Jensen says, realizing only when he hears the guards shift and turn toward them that he's forgotten how little he can say right now.

"At least it would have been over quickly," Jared tells him. "Instead of this. A prisoner for life. To help your father stay powerful. Knowing that you aren't who I thought. Why did you make me feel hope again, Jensen? Why did you make me believe in goodness? I think that's the worst part of all of this. I'd accepted how things were. And then you came and made it seem like there was so much to live for. Why? Why would you do that? If you wanted to take me broken, you could have just left me how you found me. You didn't have to fix me. Was it fun for you?"

"It wasn't like that," Jensen insists, shaking the bars. "Jared, you know me."

"Yes, I do." Jared approaches Jensen, looking into his eyes beseechingly. "You can still show me mercy. If anything you felt for me was true. Please, just end this. The guards will believe I attacked you, that you did it in self-defense. Your father wouldn't punish you, not if the people believe you. You have a sword in your sheath. Just make it quick."

Jensen shakes his head. "I could never."

Jared snakes one arm through the bars, extending it out toward Jensen's chest. "You have a heart. I know you do. I felt it. Don't make me live through this."

Before Jensen can reply, there's a sword between them, just hardly stopping as it grazes Jared's skin. Jared pulls his hand back in through the bars, stepping back from the blade.

"No touching the prince!" says the guard.

Jared keeps his eyes locked on Jensen's as he whispers, "It wasn't the prince I was reaching for."

Then he turns his back on Jensen, and Jensen knows he won't be able to talk the sentries into leaving him alone with Jared again. Instead he nods at them and wishes them a good night and he limps back to his tent to lick his wounds.



His father wastes no time making a spectacle out of Jared. It's terrible to watch the crowd of his people, people he once knew to be good, as the so-called victorious army rides through the capital city. Beautiful elven faces all twist with disgust and hatred as they hurl insults, rotten fruit, and stones at the already battered man in the cage at the head of their procession.

And yet, as horrible as it is, it gives Jensen heart. The entire city has come out to see the gryphon's sham trial and watch the king decide what the monster's punishment will be for the years he's supposedly terrorized them. The king is planning to show mercy, to convince his subjects that he's letting Jared live a prisoner as a kindness. But if Jensen's plan goes as intended, the king won't get to announce much of anything.

If his plan is going to work, he needs it to go swiftly. He has to reach as many people as possible in one fell swoop, and this is just the gathering he needs. If his plan doesn't work, at least Jensen won't live long enough to face his failures.

There's a stage set up at the city center, and Jared's cage is raised up with some effort before Jensen and his father, with Jeffrey and a few other high ranking soldiers at their back, are escorted up onto the platform.

King Alan gives a brief speech about the bravery of their men and the triumph of the elven spirit, but he doesn't waste a lot of time or effort on it. The tale is Jensen's to tell, after all.

His father gestures him forward after a brief introduction, and for the first time ever, he trusts Jensen to speak for the kingdom. Jensen knows what he's supposed to say, of course. They've spent the entire journey here from Jared's village going over the script. Jensen has been coached to tell his people of Jared's cruelty, of how Jared forced himself on Jensen, and of the joy he took in murdering the elves Jensen had at his side when he was captured.

Jensen has a script, but he gives the people a song instead. He makes the magic binding, transfixing every soul who hears it, so they don't have the option of moving, let alone not listening. Even his father is frozen in place as Jensen begins his story, but Jensen doesn't let the anger he can see in the king's expression frighten him. Because when he turns to look at Jared, he sees something that's been missing since they stuffed him into that cage. A spark of life in his eyes.

He begins with the battle and doesn't leave anything out. Not his own failures leading to the deaths of his men, or the shame of his mother's infidelity, or the history of his father's wickedness. Jensen doesn't shy away from sharing Jared's kindness or the love they felt or even the secrets of the forest. There's no room now to risk the story not carrying the full weight of what Jensen has experienced since he woke up in that dark little room in Jared's cottage.

It goes on for hours, until finally Jensen comes to the end. The last note echoes against the tall city buildings and dies out, but for a long minute, there's not a sound in the usually bustling city. He can see the spell beginning to wear off on the faces in the crowd. Some of them look angry or confused, but most of them are weeping.

The first person to move does so in anger, however. Jensen's father gives a cry, calling Jensen a liar before unsheathing his sword and jumping forward to strike. There's a blade at his neck too quickly for him to make good on his desire to kill Jensen.

Jensen recovers from the shock when he realizes his father's attack was stopped and sees that it's the king's most loyal man, Jeffrey Dean Morgan, holding the weapon.

"Is it true?" Jeffrey says. "All of it? Any of it? Did the king kill Jim Beaver?"

Jensen hesitates, looking from his father to Jared, knowing that whatever he says next, one of their lives hangs in the balance. He sees real fear in his father's eyes for the first time in his life, and it feels oddly humanizing.

There's a wrong and right here. But doing the right thing—would make him his father's executioner.

"Is it true?" Jeffrey demands again.

Jensen closes his eyes and turns his face away. "Yes, it's true."

"Jensen," his father says, and he sounds truly hurt. Maybe Jensen is as weak as Alan always said he was, because he doesn't want this to happen.

"Where's the oracle?" Jeffrey calls out.

"I'm here," says a small, red-headed elf as she steps forward, lowering the rich blue robe she wears as a servant of the temple. Her eyes are all white, her vision long-since sacrificed to the God of Truth, but they find Jensen easily and seem to stare right through him.

Ruth's divine gift is as much a curse as it is an honor, and the woman has always had a peculiar way of handling it. She can detect truth in anything and she can't tell a lie. As a result, she rarely says anything unless directly asked a question. She's probably the only person to know his father's proclamations were all lies this whole time, but nobody ever thought to ask her.

"Is the prince telling the truth?" Jeffrey asks.

"Aye," she says. "Every word."

Jensen hears rather than sees what happens next. There's a thud and when he looks, it's his father's head at his feet. He looks up just in time to see the body about to fall and turns away, stomach too weak to watch. The king was a villain, but Jensen still can't take joy in the death of a father he spent so many years loving.

He turns instead toward the cage and sees that one of the guards has already begun to unlock the door to free Jared. Jensen rushes to him as soon as he's stepping out onto the stage, and Jared opens his arms, catching Jensen as he throws himself against Jared's chest.

"I'm sorry, Jensen," he whispers. "I never should have—"

"I had to," Jensen says, wiping at his eyes. "I know it was terrible for you. But I couldn't see any other way."

"You saved me." Jared pulls him in close. "I knew your songs could fix anything. I was the one that told you that. I should have trusted you."

He shakes his head, even though he's held so close to Jared that he hardly manages to move. "I would have given anything not to—"

"Shh," he says, putting one hand in Jensen's hair. "It's okay."

Jensen pulls back and looks up at him, and Jared's expression melts. He must see how shaken Jensen is, because he amends his reassurance. "It's going to be okay."

They stand there, completely wrapped up in each other's arms for so long that Jensen forgets about the crowd. Despite the chaos happening around him, he feels like it's only him and Jared again until a hand gently taps his shoulder.

When he turns to see who it is, Jeffrey falls to one knee.

"The king is dead," he says, holding Jensen's father's signet ring up in offering. "Long live the king."

Jared squeezes his shoulder and gives him an encouraging nod. The crowd has fallen silent again, not because of a spell this time but in anticipation. They think they're about to crown a new king. To start the whole awful cycle again.

They think they want that.



Jensen takes the ring, but he shakes his head after inspecting it for a few moments and places it back in Jeffrey's palm, curling the general's fingers around it.

"I don't want to be king," he announces.

The crowd is too confused to react much, and Jensen licks his lips as he steps forward to address his people.

"You all deserve a ruler of your own choosing," Jensen calls out, addressing the crowd. "Someone accountable to the people. Someone honest. Gnaven must find a better way than with more kings. We've had enough of those. My father made us believe we needed one, but all it did was stop us from thinking for ourselves. And I don't want to rule."

He looks to Jared and takes his hand. "You belong in your home," Jensen says, lowering his voice so that only Jared can hear him. "And I belong with you."

"Always," Jared agrees, raising Jensen's fingers to his lips and pressing a kiss against them. "It's our home."

Jensen nods, then looks to the crowd again. "If any of you wish for a more removed life, we have a village to rebuild. We'll be living differently than the elves of this kingdom are used to, but anyone who wishes to join us in good faith is welcome to seek us out. Ask the forest where to go. If your intentions are good, it will tell you."

Jeffrey rises to his feet, looking reluctant but not upset. "Your majesty, are you sure this is what's best for the people?"

"You're a good man," Jensen tells him, clapping him on the shoulder. "The fact that you would ask that proves that you're a good man. The elves could use a good man's guidance right now."

"I'm just a soldier, sir," Jeffrey insists.

"Jim thought you were more special than that," Jensen reminds him. "You've been leading men since you were hardly more than a boy. They followed you not because of a crown but because they trusted you."

"But you've been taught to rule since—"

"I failed those lessons," Jensen says with a smile. "I'll be happy to give you counsel if you ever need it. And if you ever want to establish relations between our two lands, Jared and I will be happy to receive you or your emissaries. But this was never my home. I can't be a prisoner here again."

Jeffrey nods and takes a step away from them. He turns toward the crowd and begins trying to calm them, and Jensen focuses in on Jared and only Jared.

"You know the fastest way to get there, right?"

Jared grins, and though Jensen can see that he's forcing some of the lightness for Jensen's sake, he plays his part convincingly enough. "You'll look for any excuse to ride me."

Jensen watches as Jared begins to shift into his second skin, and he hears exclamations of excitement and wonder from the crowd as the gryphon kneels to him, allowing Jensen to climb onto his back. It's slow-going with his injuries, and Jensen just hardly has time to grab onto Jared's feathery mane before his tremendous wings begin flapping. Jared and Jensen rise up and up and higher up until the wind carries them home.



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