

Shelter

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/20202424) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/20202424>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Batman - All Media Types
Relationship:	Tim Drake/Jason Todd
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Soulmates , Arranged Marriage , Alternate Universe - Royalty , First Time , Fairy Tale Elements , Weddings , Fake/Pretend Relationship , Holding Hands , Fluff
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of JayTim Week 2019
Collections:	JayTimWeek
Stats:	Published: 2019-08-11 Completed: 2019-08-17 Words: 19,005 Chapters: 7/7

Shelter

by [elareine](#)

Summary

Tim walked down the aisle in measured steps. No one accompanied him—soulmates were supposed to find each other freely. The man waiting for him turned, and they looked at each other for the first time.

Prince Jason was... disappointing.

Notes

For JayTim Bingo 2019, Week Two: Soulmate, line: I'll protect you, Innocence, Arranged Marriage, Royalty, and 'Soulbond' for the free square.

Prologue

“Your Highness, I have finished the prediction for your son,” the court astronomer said.

“And I, a list of possible matches,” their first minister added.

They both bowed and presented the king and queen with the scrolls, the astronomer telling them: “Born under Mercury in the house of Neptune, with a strong influence by Venus and Uranus. He will need a strong match.”

The royal couple nodded and dismissed the two attendants. Neither of them was concerned about the infant in his cradle, which was attended to by a wet nurse in another room. This was more important.

“So few royal names,” the queen sighed as she read. “He seems intent on not making it easy for us.”

“How about Garth of Atlanta?”

“His father will never ally with us. They would swallow us whole, at best, and we’d be lucky if he won’t spit us out.”

“True. We need a strong alliance, but one of equals.”

“That eliminates most of the candidates.”

“Too true.”

The queen’s finger moved to the top of the list again, tapping on a name. “What about him? It’s a weak bond, to be sure, but Bergland would be a good ally to have in the field, even if they aren’t much use anywhere else.”

The king looked at his wife. “They say the prince is cursed.”

“I dare say he is. Does that matter?”

For their son’s happiness, it certainly would. However, these weren’t the kind of terms the couple was accustomed to thinking in. After all, they themselves had been deemed a perfect match by the astronomers, but no love had ever blossomed in their marriage (though they had to pretend otherwise to the public.)

And the next decade would be crucial, the king knew. Dark forces were rising. He did not wish for his kingdom to stand alone when the time came to defend themselves and who they were.

So what if his son’s engagement broke because of his fiancé’s curse? Rumor had it that the queen of Bergland would have no more children. The same, it had to be acknowledged, might be true of his own wife, whose labor had been exceedingly difficult. Bergland, however,

having still not secured a marriage for their prince at age four, would be thankful for the hand they reached out. They would do anything to make the engagement last, and perhaps even remember their alliance should it fail.

“No,” the king said slowly, “it doesn’t.”

Their son would know his duty. Their kingdom would be secure.

The boy that was cursed was told of his engagement to the newborn prince of Drachenlicht. As he was four years old, he didn’t care much. The future was very far away, and ‘you will marry your soulmate’ meant nothing to him yet.

He was, however, devastated when his parents sent him away. He didn’t understand. They said things like ‘a curse’ and ‘protect you’ and ‘return when you reach majority,’ but all he knew was that they had given him away.

The woman who took him in was not quite a fairy godmother.

She taught him magic, but not the kind that could destroy. A prince, perhaps, would learn how to destroy armies and wreak havoc upon his enemies. A boy in the woods learned how to encourage herbs to grow and how to track a deer through dense woodlands. A man who would one day rule two kingdoms should learn the art of diplomacy and of lying. The man she raised knew how to make a home.

She was not a fairy godmother, but she was a mother.

Still she could not save him from his curse. It was foolish to think anyone could. Curses didn’t work like that. True love, they always said, would always win against dark magic. Her love for her son had been true—and yet she died, and yet he had to face the one who cursed him. His parents love for him had been true, and still their sacrifice could only buy him time, not protection.

True love, the prince who was raised in the woods had long ago decided, was not going to protect him.

Evil found him, of course. Once evil touched you, it will always find you, in the woods, in the castle, on the battlefield. It found his mother and she died. He ran to the city, lived as a beggar, and it found him. He ran to another country, found a protector, someone else to love him, a father—and it found him.

Evil found him, but the boy came back from it. Perhaps all that love had not been in vain, after all.

In the end, the man who had been raised in the woods did return to his parents. The guards turned him away at the gates—who was he to demand to see their king and queen—but he persisted. Finally, when he entered the throne room, his parents saw their son for the first time in seventeen years. They were little more than strangers to him, but they would

recognize the marks of the curse that he bore everywhere—a white stripe of hair, carefully covered by a cap during his travels, and a sigil in the shape of a smiling face on his wrist.

The kingdom rejoiced. Then it prepared for a wedding.

Eyes Meet

Chapter Summary

I finally write a wedding scene, but no one is happy to be there.

The morning of your wedding was supposed to dawn bright and beautiful, Tim thought, but maybe it was fitting that the sky was cloudy today.

He'd been raised with the knowledge that he would marry the prince of Bergland one day. For a few years, it had seemed like that marriage might not happen. When the kingdom of Großverderben had come too close to their borders, and the prince had gone missing, Tim had let himself hope. Maybe this time, his parents would let him choose for himself. Perhaps, he'd thought, with his good friend Conner... but nothing had come of that. And then his fiancé had returned, and their engagement had been renewed.

And that was a good thing, Tim told himself. Princes weren't supposed to marry for love. Or rather, they were, in the eyes of the people who valued soulbonds over alliances. In theory. Tim thought that deep down, everyone preferred peace gained through marriage diplomacy over the private happiness of a few wealthy individuals who ruled them.

Indeed, his own face in the mirror wasn't precisely radiating happiness, Tim thought and grimaced at himself.

Maybe it wouldn't be too bad. The prince was compatible with him, after all—though Tim had *borrowed* the relevant star charts from his mother and had quickly realized that their purported compatibility wasn't nearly as high as she had made it out to be. Still.

Ideally, of course, the first step of bonding—compatible people laying eyes on each other—should have happened before the wedding, but there was every chance he would see his soon-to-be husband and realize he'd found his One True Love.

Tim didn't even believe it himself.

There was a knock on the door. It opened right away. "Tim! Are you ready?" Bart called impatiently.

Tim checked his reflection one last time. He was wearing the traditional wedding outfit of his country: a red robe with white embroidery over a black suit. Slightly old-fashioned, perhaps, but so was this entire endeavor. Then he tore himself away and nodded at his friend.

"As ready as can be."

The cathedral looked beautiful as always. As fitting for a summer wedding, Tim's mother had the place decked out in flowers, white for the stars and red for the threat that bound lovers together. His groom awaited him by the altar that was older even than the church, a piece of history that had seen kingdoms rise and fall.

Tim walked down the aisle in measured steps. No one accompanied him—soulmates were supposed to find each other freely. The man waiting for him turned, and they looked at each other for the first time.

Prince Jason was... disappointing.

Sure, he was tall, probably about a head taller than Tim, and broad in a way that spoke of strength. That was it, however. Tim was used to the 'tall, dark and handsome' type after prolonged exposure to Conner and, quite frankly, this man couldn't compete. His face was rough, his black hair marred by white streak, his hands scarred. His eyes, from what Tim could tell, were a nice shade of blue, but they weren't smiling.

That wouldn't have bothered Tim too much (he was sure his weren't either), but there wasn't a smile on Jason's face, either. *Not a very good actor*, Tim thought, his own mouth breaking into a smile automatically. That could become a problem.

He made sure to hold the other's gaze. This was meant to be *the* moment.

There was a weak recognition, an *oh hey there*, similar to the one Tim had felt when he'd met others who were compatible with him. There had been stronger pulls than this, even.

The priestess cleared her throat, and they turned towards her. "Prince Timothy and Prince Jason, your love was foretold by the Stars through which our Eternal Mother communicates with us. Today we are gathered to celebrate her gift to you. She shows us, again, that love transcends politics, nations, cultures. You are One."

Listening to her made Tim want to laugh. She obviously knew that the two 'lovers' in front of her had only met at the altar. It was more than likely that she had seen the readings foretold at Tim's birth that said they were barely matched.

All the same, her speech reminded him of what was at stake here. Their engagement had been the cornerstone to a tentative alliance between their countries that had withstood many trials. Their marriage would cement that. Tim would do a lot more than pretend to be in love with a stranger to secure his country's survival.

"Do you, Timothy, Prince of Drachenlicht, Duke of Flammstädt, Lord of Höhlenberg, take Prince Jason as your husband and bondmate?"

"I do."

"And do you, Jason, Prince of Bergland, Heir to the Woods, the Mountains and the Sea, take Prince Timothy as your husband and bondmate?"

"I do."

A little girl in a purple dress brought the cushion with the two rings forward. Tim took the larger of the two, smiling at her before he turned to Jason.

“I choose you to be my companion until the stars die and the Eternal Mother rests,” Tim told him. “I choose you for better, for worse, for dark days and bright days, but never the greyness that is life without a soulmate. May our Mother bless our bond and bestow us with a union that transcends words.”

Somehow he’d thought he’d feel *something* at reciting those words. There was nothing.

He slid the ring on Jason’s heart finger, waiting for the other’s turn. It was unorthodox, perhaps, to use different marriage vows, but their advisors had thought it wise to begin the marriage with a clear sign that their cultures would be on equal footing.

Jason took the other ring.

“I hereby promise to love and honor you for the rest of our lives. My heart is yours. My loyalty is to you. As long as I live, you will never stand alone. No burden is only yours to bear. Together, or not at all.”

Tim listened to the deep voice of his husband, felt the ring slide onto his finger, and thought: *Well, that’s it, then.*

Of course, that wasn’t it. The festivities had just begun. (Tim very carefully pushed away the little voice that added ‘as had the rest of their lives.’)

He mentally steeled himself as he rested his hand in the crook of Jason’s arm and led him back up the aisle. He’d seen his mother do this kind of walk with his father many times in his childhood. The trick was to alternate between smiling at the crowd and smiling up at his husband in seeming adoration.

His pulse quickened as they approached the exit of the cathedral and with it, the dark blue arch standing just outside. It was covered in bright jewels; a stand-in for the stars that had brought them together, it would bless their first kiss.

Thankfully, Jason needed no directions to stop right underneath it. Even as he went through the right motions—he took Tim’s hand in his, lifted the other to his face to tilt it up, bent down slowly—the frown on his face remained.

Did the man need to look so unhappy at the prospect of kissing him?

The kiss was perfunctory and dry. They didn’t hold it as long as newlyweds ought to, but Tim couldn’t blame just Jason for that. Anyway, it seemed to be enough for the people waiting outside of the cathedral, for they began cheering loudly as the congregation inside clapped.

Tim rose up for another quick peck, just for the optics, then turned to his people and waved. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Jason see the same. At least the man had the sense to finally smile, thank the Mother.

They kept waving all through the short carriage ride to the castle.

It was nice, seeing everyone celebrate. In these times of uncertainties, any opportunity to make merry should be seized. He could see stands lining the street, selling everything from memorial items to grilled food. Regretfully, he wouldn't be able to sneak out tonight and take everything in.

They arrived at the banquet much too quickly. The queen joined them there to offer her congratulations. Jason would be sitting at her right tonight as the guest of honor and newest member of her family, and Tim at her left.

It began well enough. There wasn't much conversation to be had on an event like this, and Tim and his mother had polite chatter down to an art. Jason didn't appear to be nearly as adept, but he nodded at the right times, so Tim supposed he wasn't a hopeless case.

Then the first course was served, and Jason's hand hesitated before choosing his utensil.

Tim couldn't help but frown. He was aware that there were cultural differences between Bergland and Drachenlicht, though they spoke variants of the same language. He himself had never visited Bergland; it wouldn't have been proper, with his fiancé first in hiding and then missing. He had poured over etiquette books, however, and it hadn't seemed to him that their eating cultures were all that different. Surely—*surely*—even a prince that had been raised in the woods would know which fork to use first?

As if sensing Tim's disapproval, Jason looked up and right at him. Held his gaze. And moved his hand to choose the wrong knife.

Tim had *seen* him grasping the correct one. *He'd seen it.* That—that asshole was provoking him during their wedding feast.

Jason grinned contently as he looked down at his meal and started cutting his steak with entirely the wrong knife.

Tim tore his gaze away to see his mother staring with the exact same expression he'd probably been making. Well, she might be horrified, Tim thought crossly, but at least she wasn't married to this—this. Person.

Soulmate. As if.

If Tim had thought the feast awkward, what followed was even worse.

Traditionally, the queen opened the festivities, usually joined by her son or a royal guest after the death of her husband. As this was a royal wedding, she would grant the honor to her son and his new husband. Tim really hoped someone had explained that to Jason.

Aware that the eyes of the assembled noble guests were on them, he turned to his husband and bowed slightly, offering a hand: "May I have this dance?"

Jason, cementing his status as a troublemaker in Tim's mind, took entirely too long to agree. His hand in Tim's reminded the prince that they hadn't touched at all through the banquet. That wouldn't do. The nobles here were restrained and didn't expect anything else from their superiors, but they needed to present the picture of star-fated soulmates falling in love in front of their eyes. Staying five feet apart at any given point of time would do little to achieve that goal.

Tim had already resigned himself to letting Jason lead. The man would surely expect it, seeing how much taller he was.

Sadly, Jason didn't seem to be much surer on the dance floor than he was with his cutlery. (Though, with the memory of that incident fresh in mind, Tim knew better than to show he thought that, let alone remark upon it.) The grip on Tim's waist was neither too tight nor unsure and he knew the steps, but he wasn't nearly as graceful as any of Tim's previous partners at this kind of functions.

There was a lump in Tim's throat at the thought that this would be the man he would be expected to dance with all of his life.

Then he swallowed it down and told himself, *You're not that great a dancer yourself, Tim.* Grace had never come naturally to him. They would learn together and get better at it.

To his surprise, Jason pulled him closer at the end of the dance. Maybe he too had finally realized the necessity of acting like a couple.

Instead he bent to Tim's ear and murmured: "Is everyone here lipreading?"

Tim faked a smile. "Yes."

He expected some kind of follow-up. A question, maybe, intended only for his ears, or at least some superficial compliments for the gathered lords and ladies to notice.

There was nothing. They danced for the rest of the evening in silence.

It felt like the day had gone on forever, but it still wasn't over when they retired. To distinguish this from the other pulls, the many first stages Tim had experienced in his life, and turn it into a moderately strong bond (the most that could be expected from a marriage of convenience like this), they would have to consummate the marriage.

Sadly, it didn't look like Jason was any chattier in private. Tim, once again, started the conversation by gesturing around the room: "So these are my—our chambers. I hope you like them; if not, we can always move to somewhere more suitable."

Though they would be leaving soon, anyway. One week here, a tour through the lands, then at least a week in Fuchshofen, the capital of Bergland. Afterward, the newlyweds would have to decide on a place to settle down, possibly splitting their time between the two kingdoms.

Just thinking about it gave Tim a headache.

Jason didn't seem to find fault with his rooms. He looked around curiously, but there wasn't much to see. Tim had taken the precaution of stripping away some of his more personal belongings.

Silence fell. Tim took a step toward the bed, then aborted the move when Jason just stood there, looking at him. He hadn't noticed before, but those eyes were just a little bit unsettling, now that he had their full attention.

There had been rumors about Jason. About how he was still alive. About what he had done when he came back.

Tim pushed those thoughts away and held out a hand to Jason.

Jason kept staring. He didn't move.

Tim sighed and let his hand fall back to his side. "Look, I'll go wash up, okay?"

In his private bathroom, he'd found hot water waiting. The servants must have anticipated his needs, though they probably thought he would wash up after... *after*.

Even in his annoyance, Tim couldn't help but study himself in the mirror again. He knew he wasn't very attractive. His mother had taken pains all his life to remind him. Too short, too slim for a prince, and his fashion sense, he'd been reliably informed, was a disaster. Still, Tim thought sourly, there was no reason for Jason to look so averse to even touching him, was there?

Well, Jason would have to get over himself. This marriage needed consummating, and their personal preferences would just have to take the backseat. It wouldn't need more than some mutual handjob. Surely they could manage that.

Tim nodded to himself, turned, and opened the door.

Jason was on the bed. Asleep.

For a long, long second Tim considered waking him by kicking him in the stomach.

Then his shoulders deflated. It had been a long day. Jason was in a foreign country, he reminded himself, in a role that must be foreign to him still. Tim would let him sleep.

As he crawled into bed next to his husband, he was sure of one thing: There was no way in the universe this man was his soulmate.

Thoughts Shared

Chapter Summary

In which Jason spends a week running away, causes some trouble, and finally talks to Tim.

Chapter Notes

Some mildly and mutually dubious consent in this chapter.

Jason was going to be honest here: Castle Flammstädt was not his thing. Everyone was just so... royal.

He mentally sighed at himself.

He really was a hopeless case, wasn't he? He'd been back to being Prince Jason for six months now, there was no reason to keep forgetting that he wasn't a child beggar anymore. Or to want to run away when he was the center of attention. Or to accidentally start helping the servants clean up. Or to judge everyone he met here for how expensive their clothing was.

Still, he didn't think he was entirely wrong to believe that the inhabitants of this castle seemed to be more caught up with protocol than with content. Everywhere he turned, there seemed to be a new ceremony to mess up.

And then there was Prince Timothy. Or Tim, as he had been told to call him.

Jason could fully acknowledge that he had panicked when the other man had walked up the aisle. Tim was *pretty*. Like, unreal pretty, every hair perfectly in place, lithe and graceful like a fighter while looking like everything a prince should be. It was hard not to feel large and cumbersome in comparison.

Tim was quiet. Jason hadn't heard him talk much beyond the formalities and empty chit-chat. Granted, he'd also done his best to avoid his new husband (his *husband*, by the Mother's balls, what was happening), but still, he hadn't heard him speak more than fifty words in total since their wedding day. Jason would think him shy, except he seemed to be perfectly self-composed; more competent and regal than Jason could ever be.

Maybe Tim was just cold-hearted.

Stuck-up, definitely. That little episode at the table had proven that. Jason had spent hours reading up on Drachenlichtian etiquette, just to get glared at the moment he tried to recall it? Not cool.

And then—the disaster that had been their wedding night. It was Jason's own fault, he knew. Ever since, he'd been in hiding; mostly in the library, his favorite place—most of what he knew of the world outside of the woods, he'd learned about from books first. Later, he'd lived it, but books never stopped thrilling him.

He needed some exercise, though. No sitting around all day like the courtiers for him, no sir. He'd been going down to the courtyard every morning, where there were military practice grounds. For six days, no one had been there; his luck had to run out eventually. It wasn't a surprise to find twenty men practicing formations—what was a surprise was the kind they were doing. Jason thought they had stopped using the shield phalanx years ago.

To his dismay, the soldiers stopped moving when they saw him approach.

“Prince Jason!” The commander gave a quick bow. “Have you come to study our battle formations?”

Eh. Jason knew those well enough. Whatever, he should be polite: “The Drachenlichtian Army is well-known for them.”

“That is gratifying to hear. Continue, men.”

Jason watched in silence for a while, since it seemed to be expected of him. Finally, he couldn't help but ask the commander—who had stayed next to him even while he was barking commands—: “Is the phalanx still in use? I thought it was rather ineffective against Großverderben's strike forces.”

“I'm sure that is what it looks like to you.” The officer gave him a condescending smile. “In fact, this formation has been used for hundreds of years and proven itself most valuable. I wouldn't expect you to understand, not having been at the front yourself.”

“I have, actually.” Jason allowed the corner of his mouth to tick up. “For two years. You are right, though—I wasn't an officer, just one of the ranks. I wouldn't know what it's like to sit back and let others do the fighting.”

His voice wasn't quiet. He knew the soldiers had heard him. The officer did, too, had maybe even noticed the gasps and snickers quickly stifled behind him, because he was slowly turning purple.

Oh, Jason knew he had gone too far. He just didn't care.

For a second, he thought the officer would shout at him. He knew his type. A bully, but an educated one. Always happy to show his superiority; never good at being questioned; too arrogant even for the army.

Jason didn't even consider pulling rank on him; had forgotten that he technically had one, actually. He just knew that these soldiers would be crushed if they tried this formation against Großverderben. If it needed a few shouting matches to get that through this man's thick skull, so be it.

Everyone straightened abruptly. The officer's eyes widened and saluted.

Jason turned around. Prince Tim was standing behind him.

Interesting. Not many people could sneak up on a group of soldiers like that.

"Captain," Tim said. "I need to fetch Prince Jason. My apologies for interrupting your conversation. I'm sure you will take his suggestion into consideration."

With that, he took Jason's wrist and basically dragged the other back into the castle and through the hallways.

Jason, stunned, opened his mouth, maybe to defend himself, maybe to demand to go back and discuss this—

Tim shook his head and kept dragging him. "Our rooms."

Right. His husband had told him that he should expect to be overheard everywhere but their private quarters, which were private only because Tim commanded the absolute loyalty of those around him. Which in turn meant it wasn't really private for Jason, because they would surely report everything he did to Tim. See, those kinds of things just made Jason love the place more.

Tim let himself fall onto the divan when they arrived—the least graceful movement Jason had ever seen him make. He gestured for Jason to take a seat next to him. Jason did, resigned to his fate. It had to happen eventually. At least they were pretty high up; he could throw himself out of a window if it got too awkward, and have reasonably good chances of never having to have this conversation again.

He needed to stop making those jokes, even in his head.

Just take the initiative, Jason, he heard his mother say in his mind. Talk before they can tell you no. (A piece of advice that served him well on the streets.) "I'm sorry. That was inappropriate of me—even if he was being a dickhead."

For a minute, there was silence. Jason could feel those eyes appraising him.

"I'm thinking," Tim slowly said, "that we could use this to our advantage. You're not gagged by the same restraints as I am—obviously."

Jason squirmed at his wry gaze. "I said that I'm sorry."

"So if you bring up the uncomfortable issues, we might be able to justify some reforms by selling them as 'closer cooperation' with our ally."

That was smart, Jason had to admit. Still— “Is that how you get things done here? Judge changes by who they please, not on their merit?”

There was that cold gaze again. “It’s a consideration we have to make, yes. Tradition is important. Which is why I would like to remind you that there is a lot at stake for this marriage.”

As if Jason didn’t know. He’d been considering that since he’d arrived.

From his parents, he’d learned that Drachenlicht had been an ally when most countries had turned their back; from what he saw here, he suspected that had been more out of self-interest than compassion with a country that was missing its heir. There weren’t many foreign diplomats in attendance. Even their wedding had only been graced by two dignitaries. Drachenlicht stood with its back to the wall just as much as Bergland.

“I’m fully aware.”

“Then why are you being obstinate?”

“Am I? In what way?”

Look. Jason knew that his dignity was going to fly out of the window within the next five minutes. The least he could do was take Tim’s down a notch.

Finally, the other prince gave in: “Why won’t you sleep with me?”

He wasn’t even squirming much. This wasn’t a very good trade for what Jason was going to have to admit to next.

“Because I haven’t had sex before.”

Oh, *now* there was emotion on Tim’s face. At least it was confusion, not laughter. For now. “But—you’re twenty-three, aren’t you?”

Jason kind of wanted to rant at him to stop putting a timeline on things, but he just nodded.

“Do you not feel sexual attraction? I have read that that there are alternative modes of intimacy for these cases—”

“No, that’s not it,” though that was good to know. “I just didn’t know if I was allowed to.”

Tim leaned back. “Explain.”

“My mother—the woman who raised me, I mean—she wasn’t sure whether they, uh, check before a royal wedding. Many aristocratic families in Bergland do.”

“Why would we? The hypothesis that previous sexual contact interferes with a soulbond have been tested multiple times, and the results have disproved it every time.” Tim looked faintly disgusted. Jason noted with some amusement that it mostly seemed directed at the unscientific-ness of that notion.

“Yes, well, I had all of five minutes to discuss the entire ‘oh you’re royal’ revelation with her; we didn’t go into the reasons in detail.”

“Five minutes?”

Jason was going to ignore that question. He didn’t like to think about that day. This conversation was humiliating enough without him feeling like crying. “So there was that. I didn’t know and didn’t want to fuck things up. Also, the curse.”

Tim frowned. “What does the curse have to do with it?”

He’d hoped this wouldn’t come up. Maybe one day he’d learn not to direct the conversation away from things he didn’t want to talk about by bringing up things he didn’t want to talk about.

Well. Nothing for it now. Tim would probably find out, either way.

“How much do you know about it?”

“A standard death curse, though delivered by a witch with exceptional powers. Certain death before you reach majority, specific method not widely known, potential mitigating factors not widely known,” Tim recited. “Your parents weren’t very forthcoming about the details. Since you were hidden, we assumed they were given the specific circumstances of your death, and that steps have been taken to counter them. As you disappeared, I assume there were hitches in that plan, but you did reach your majority. The curse should be gone.”

Well, look at that. Prince Timothy was talking. And knowledgeable, too. Didn’t mean he was entirely right, but he was working off of flawed information.

“It’s still there,” Jason told him. “It never actually gave my majority as a deadline. My parents just assumed.”

“They *assumed*.”

“It might be gone,” Jason reassured him. “It did work, in a way. No, I’m not going into specifics about that. But the curse mark is still there, so... we just don’t know.”

Tim’s gaze was calculating. “And you still went ahead with the wedding?”

“Well, it’s not like I could hide forever, could I? And you know the alliance was shaky at best. I figured if it strikes after we marry, you can be the ‘grieving widower’ and carry on in my honor or something.”

“There must have been some way to break the curse.”

“You said it yourself—standard death curse, delivered by a powerful with. Only two ways to break those.”

“You could kill the witch.”

“You think my parents didn’t try?” Jason asked. “I tried. Others tried. People died trying. And last I heard, he’s in the one place where the ruler refuses to kill him.”

Tim didn’t look convinced. “Still.”

“I’m not saying it’s not on my to-do-list, believe me. But I spent years trying. We couldn’t afford that anymore.”

“The other way is bonding with your One True Love.” The other man’s eyes were wide as he put the pieces together. “You gave up your chance at breaking the curse for this?”

“Oh, you don’t think I’ll find my true love here?”

Jason did his best to keep his face straight. Apparently Tim bought it because he visibly stalled: “Uh—”

“What, we’re not on our way to a fairytale romance?” Jason asked. Then he couldn’t keep it up anymore and started laughing.

Tim stared at him for a long minute. Then he visibly gave up and started chuckling, too, until they were both laughing companionably. “I don’t know what gave you that impression,” he finally managed to say, wiping away a tear. Jason noticed his shoulders were less tense.

“Nah, I’m agreeing. But who knows if I’d find it out there, right? And the curse might have run its course.” Jason shrugged, not looking Tim in the eyes. “So. You don’t need to convince me this is important. I know. Really.”

“You’re just terrified of having sex.”

“Damn, and here I thought I had done a good job of guiding the conversation away from that.”

“I don’t know what to offer you,” Tim finally said. “We have to do this. And I can’t even give you time. I’ve been avoiding the High Priestess to the point where it’s starting to get ridiculous. Also, my spouse running away from me isn’t exactly the image I’m trying to project here.”

“Yeah, no, this is quickly becoming a farce.”

“Would you like some reassurance? I don’t expect much from this, if that helps.”

Now he was just fucking with Jason, wasn’t he? (Heh. Fucking.)

“Good, ’cause that’s all you’re probably gonna get,” he blustered anyway. “So. We doing this?”

“Just... undress.” Tim told him. When Jason followed his command, he got up to do the same, then sat down on the divan, apparently unashamed of his nudity. Perversely, it caused the opposite reaction in Jason, who had never possessed an ounce of modesty but suddenly hesitated at stripping off his undergarments.

Tim seemed to notice. “That’s fine. Uh, sit down next to me?”

Jason did, and Tim scooted in until they were face-to-face, Tim on his knees between Jason’s legs. A position prime for kissing (which he *had* done before, thank you very much), Jason noted, but Tim didn’t seem to invite that.

“Okay. I’ll touch you now. Feel free to touch back or—or not, I guess, it’s up to you. All we need is to make the other come, so—” Tim visibly decided to shut up. Jason was kinda sorry about that. The babbling was oddly soothing.

Nothing could have prepared Jason for Tim’s hand on his skin. His touch was light, then grew firmer, fluttering here and there. Tim’s breath fanned out over Jason’s neck; there was the ghost of a touch—Jason shivered, unconsciously craning his neck toward it, hoping for more, but Tim was already moving away.

It felt weird, being *seen* like this by someone. Jason hadn’t trust another person to come close to him in years. Tim’s hands on his skin were doing their part to soothe him down, and yeah, to turn him on.

Jason had many scars. Tim didn’t touch any of them, nor his cursemark.

He moved his hand down, though. To Jason’s embarrassment, he was already hard, a little drunk on touches from someone he barely knew. Tim didn’t comment; he just pulled Jason’s cock out of his pants and started stroking.

Jason couldn’t help the sound that left his throat, and the one after, and the one after that. From up close, Tim’s hands looked strong and capable despite their deceptive frailness. His thumb was calloused where it brushed across the head to spread the ever-growing wetness. (Was it supposed to be that way? Mother, if only Jason knew...) This was the kind of feeling that should last forever and never would.

When Jason looked up, panting, Tim was staring down at their laps with an expression of utmost concentration.

Jason thought suddenly, wildly: I want him to feel good too.

He moved his hand to Tim’s bare shoulder. Then he didn’t know what to do next.

Tim seemed startled at the movement, too, pausing for just a second. Jason began hesitantly mimicking Tim’s movements, stroking down his arm, over to his side, and up, framing his neck... touching that naked skin was almost as sensual as Tim’s hand on his cock. Jason became a bit lost in it, mapping out the contours of Tim’s chest and back with both hands—until Tim flinched, just a bit; took one of Jason’s hands and moved it firmly down to his own crotch.

Right. This was for gratification only. To establish a stage two soulbond.

At least Tim was hard, too. Jason began moving his fist up and down, careful to keep it gentle as his movements seemed to be a bit dry (didn’t people usually use oil for this kind of

thing?), occasionally twisting a bit like he himself liked it.

Tim seemed to enjoy that, too, his mouth finally falling open in a low groan. Still, the expression on his face was almost... competitive, Jason finally placed it. It made him want to laugh—put two ambitious young men into a situation like this, and that was what you'd get. Somehow, he didn't feel like it, though.

Maybe he didn't want this to last forever, after all.

His own orgasm, when it came, was great, obviously; but Jason was distracted by the way Tim's eyes suddenly seemed to grow hotter; by how his hips had started meeting the movements of Jason's hands; by how he looked like he *needed*, too, just a little bit.

When Tim closed his eyes and came onto Jason's hand with a moan, it was the first flash of vulnerability he'd shown Jason.

Or maybe that was the soulbond snapping into place. Jason felt a bit dizzy with its force. Or was that the orgasm? Who knew. There was an awareness, now, of Tim's presence, that Jason knew wouldn't cease even if they were separated. He'd seen it likened to a compass. To him, it felt more like a tug, though attached to what, he didn't know.

Maybe to his heartstrings, he thought nonsensically.

Jason would've been content to sit here for a bit longer, entangled-but-not, enjoying the afterbuzz. Tim got up as soon as he caught his breath, though, so Jason followed his example.

They dressed in silence.

Tim smoothed his hands down his clothes rather unnecessarily, as if he was literally brushing Jason off his hands. "Well, it's a good thing we finally got this done," he remarked, "as I have lunch with the Schwätzer's in half an hour and Lady Schwätzer is a fearful gossip. Will you be alright? There is a state dinner at six which I'm afraid we'll both have to attend, as it is in honor of us leaving tomorrow morning."

"Sure. See you later."

Jason thought Tim's hands might've been shaking as he opened the door, but that was probably just his imagination. In the end, Jason was left to stare after Tim, alone and lost in thought.

This was... He hadn't expected this. Hadn't expected Tim. Not like that.

Jason was in way too deep.

Hands Touch

Tim's cheeks hurt from smiling.

This was their Grand Tour. Their opportunity to show themselves to the people, to present themselves as their future rulers, to begin uniting two kingdoms. And, of course: to sell the Love Story of the Century, which was why he had been smiling whenever they leaned out of the window to greet people.

All of which meant a long day in the carriage. It was a closed one, this time, at least, so there were hours on the road where they could be unobserved. The first stretch was the longest of their travels, a full day's carriage ride to the town of Grenzstadt, close the Berglandian border. To make matters worse, a wheel broke and had to be repaired, delaying their arrival by a few hours.

At least Tim had prepared. He'd brought a stack of documents; the boring kind of paperwork that he would only do when forced to by a deadline or lack of anything else to occupy him. Jason didn't have anything like that with him—Tim supposed he wasn't as involved in running his kingdom yet—but he seemed content to make his way through a stack of books at a rather impressive speed.

They didn't talk. Tim didn't know how he felt about that.

On the one hand, it was relaxing, not having to pretend to be a chatterbox about topics that didn't really interest him. On the other... they had sex yesterday. It felt like something that should have changed their relationship—Tim wasn't sure it had.

Thanks to the broken wheel, they arrived at Grenzstadt at past eleven at night, way too late for any welcome celebrations. At Jason's suggestion, they had sent ahead a courier on horseback to inform the mayor that nothing would be expected of her tonight. Tim was grateful for it when they were able to get to their room with minimal fuss.

They had developed a routine by now. Jason settled down on the right, Tim on the left, as much space between them as the bed would allow (considerably less in a country inn than in the palace, Tim noted.) A mumbled "good-night," Tim turning off the lamp, and then they would go to sleep.

Or pretend to. They were both terrible sleepers. Jason usually nodded off first, his back to Tim. He, at least, didn't move much in his sleep, which was a good thing since Tim tended to octopus his way across all the space available. In the beginning, it had been the fear of waking up entangled with his husband that kept Tim up for even longer than usual.

Now, he would nod off fairly quickly... and then the nightmares started.

Not his own. Jason's.

It usually began with a slight tremor. Jason didn't move beyond that. He didn't cry out; there was the occasional low whimper, but Tim could hear his teeth grind down on any additional sound. Jason kept to himself even in his nightmares, the contents of which Tim couldn't even guess at.

Tim didn't know what it was about them that woke him up. Maybe the years of trying to anticipate his mother's every displeasure that primed him to be sensitive to the tension Jason radiated in these moments. Perhaps it was their bond, weak but rearing its head. If so, he was just grateful they didn't have a stage three bond—if he was that severely affected now, a closer bond would make it much worse. As it was, Tim just counted the seconds until it stopped, and tried to get back to sleep.

Jason was up before him in the morning, as he had been for the last eight days. In a way, it was good to know that had been his natural inclination and not just him running away, Tim supposed. At least he could get ready in private. Mother knew he didn't look his best in the morning.

There was a knock on the door.

“Yes?”

The innkeeper herself entered, carrying a tray laden with food. “Good morning, Your Highness. Prince Jason asked us to send you breakfast to your room,” she told him, smiling. “The mayor and her delegation are downstairs.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

“Of course. Is there anything else you need?”

“No, no.”

She put the tray down on the small table the room provided and curtsied before leaving him to eat in private.

Tim stared at the tray in consternation. He didn't usually eat breakfast, but Jason wouldn't know that, seeing how they hadn't actually spent a morning together until yesterday when they had been ushered into the carriage before dawn rose.

Still. It was a thoughtful gesture. Once he'd sat down and begun to eat, he started actually feeling some appetite, so it wasn't a waste. Then he got dressed and walked downstairs.

“Prince Tim,” a man greeted him, smiling, “thank you for joining us. My name is Husnain Welch. I'm our town's priest.”

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Father Welch.”

“I hope you have recovered well from your travel? Your husband has told us about your carriage mishap. I must say, we all appreciate the fact that you went on regardless.”

Tim smiled at him, wondering at the idea that Jason seemed to have conversed with this man enough to share the story. “Thank you—it wasn’t all that arduous; just the typical annoyance of travel. I must say, though, I did not expect everyone to be gathered yet.”

The priest laughed. “Our mayor has been very excited about meeting you. When she got word from the inn that Prince Jason was up—the innkeeper is her sister—she immediately called on us to come over. It was, perhaps, a trifle exaggerated.”

Tim mentally winced. He’d been hoping to ease Jason into the public presentation aspect of their marriage, not leave him alone the very first time it was just them. Hopefully, Jason hadn’t done too much damage yet.

Welch must have misinterpreted his expression, for he said reassuringly: “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about waking up a bit later if I were you. It’s still a decent time.”

“I’m afraid we are used to very different schedules.” Tim managed a self-deprecating smile.

“If I may become so personal—I’m married to a soldier myself. There’s no getting them out of that habit.” Welch laughed. “That was the only reason I was awake to receive the mayor’s call at barely six.”

“I suppose I will have to adjust, too. In the meantime—could you perhaps point me toward him?” Usually, Tim would go find the mayor first, but—damage control.

“Of course. Just go through that door. Everyone is out in the garden.”

Tim thanked the man and made his way outside. It was quite strange how personable Welch had been. Usually even the clergy—who were as secure in their standing in this kingdom as royalty—stood on formality with him.

The scene that greeted him in the garden was relaxed. People dressed in smart-but-country clothing stood chatting in small groups. Some of them noticed him and bowed. Tim greeted them with a smile and a nod, but he was looking for Jason, who was standing at the other side next to the terrace. The hill sloped downwards from there, offering a view of an old church nestled idyllically between trees and flower gardens.

From her clothing and bearing, Tim suspected the woman Jason was talking to was the mayor. Oh dear. He made a beeline for them.

To his surprise, Jason just smiled widely in greeting, pulling Tim into his arms even as he kept talking to the mayor. “I agree completely. Preserving history is a worthy cause, but it shouldn’t come at the cost of the people who live here today and need assistance. Though I wonder—would a renovated church perhaps draw more travelers to your city?”

The mayor gave a short bow to acknowledge Tim’s presence, but she too seemed engrossed in the conversation. “We considered that, of course. However, the route into the heartlands is a rather difficult one, as I’m sure you noticed. It would need to be a big draw indeed for people to travel here for pleasure, and we can’t compete with the big cathedral at Flammstädt.”

Tim wanted to participate in the conversation, he really did. He was just slightly busy marveling at the ease with which Jason held him in front of him, his hands resting on Tim's belly with no sign of tension.

"I see." Tim could feel the hum of Jason's answer against his neck. It was distracting.

"We thought... perhaps... with the border opening, maybe the people from your country would venture here more?"

Jason thought. "Hmm. Honestly, with what I've seen from your fine town, it likely wouldn't need much to draw travelers from Bergland. Your religious buildings are unlike anything I've seen in my homeland."

The mayor clapped her hands. "I was hoping you might say something like that! If we could gain at least a few hundred more visitors per year, the funds for the renovation would take care of itself. What do you think, Royal Highness?" She beamed at Tim.

Tim pulled himself together and leaned back against Jason with a smile. "I think it would be worthwhile to start a dialogue with the towns on the other side of the border. After all, all future traffic to the other side will go through there."

"A guide book, maybe," Jason spun the thought further. Tim felt a gentle pressure on the top of his head. Jason was resting his head there. "Informing travelers where to seek culture and relaxation in the borderlands."

That was actually a good idea. An inexpensive way to encourage travel and spending. Tim mentally added it to the agenda of the next council meeting.

"Speaking of which," the mayor seemed to remember her duty as a host, "I trust my sister has seen to your breakfast, Your Royal Highness?"

Tim nodded. "Yes, thank you. The jam was especially delicious—is it local?"

She beamed. "My wife made it from the products in our garden."

"Please pass on my compliments, then."

"Will do." She looked back to Jason. "Would you like the tour of our town, then, Your Highness?"

"I told you—it's Jason, Miranda. What do you think, love?" Jason pulled away and looked at Tim.

Tim thought that it wasn't exactly protocol to be on a first-name basis with anyone below the rank of a Duke. "Sounds lovely."

"Thank you, Miranda," Tim said. "We appreciate you taking the time."

“Of course! It’s very nice of you, spending your honeymoon like this.” She winked. “I’ll leave you alone for a bit now. Just send for me if you need anything. I’ll see you this evening.”

And with that, they were finally alone. Well, as alone as two royals could be at a market square in the middle of a lively town.

Jason spoke first. “I’d like to see more of the town. Maybe not from the carriage this time.”

Tim felt hope grow that they might have some peace yet this day. “We could take a walk?”

“Sounds good.” Jason didn’t exactly smile, but he did gesture towards a side street that was lined with shops and said: “Lead the way.”

When Tim turned to do precisely that, he felt a big hand slip into his.

“C’ mon,” Jason murmured from the side of his mouth, without moving his lips. (Oh, *now* he suddenly possessed that skill, Tim thought a bit sourly; no need to use it at their wedding when they’d been surrounded by lip-readers or whatever.) “Newlyweds, remember?”

Tim did. He did. Didn’t make it any less weird, to have Jason suddenly so affectionate, holding his hand as if there was nothing else he wanted in the world.

Well. Two could play that game. Tim smiled sweetly up at him. “Of course, dear.”

To his amusement, Jason actually blushed at that.

They went into a few shops. Jason, of course, went straight to the one bookseller. Tim watched in bemusement as his husband decked himself out in treatises about history and the bawdier type of novels in equal measure.

“What’s tonight? Another banquet?” Jason asked when they finally left. Tim could tell he was trying to keep his tone neutral, but he wasn’t exactly succeeding. He was almost pouting, in fact.

Tim rolled his eyes. “They want to show us their appreciation.”

“Hey, I’m not complaining about their hospitality. It’s just... will the food be as bland as at the wedding reception?”

“Bland.”

“Yes, bland. You guys never heard of spices?”

Tim groaned. His husband was an asshole, and dinner was going to be a disaster.

It wasn’t that bad.

Jason stayed mostly quiet during the main courses, though he did congratulate the mayor and his wife on the excellent selection of fruits served on the table. Tim was the one who kept the conversation going, chatting about crops and rainfall as easily as passing on the latest gossip from the capital.

Then dessert was served.

Tim didn't take much notice of the cake—it was a local creation, no doubt, but honestly, as long as it was sweet, it was good in his book. Jason, though, took one bite and turned to their hosts with wide eyes. “What is this?”

The mayor's wife—Lisa, as Jason insisted on calling her—looked pleased. “That's our famous Kirsch-Quark-Kuchen. Do you like it?”

“Do I like it!” Jason exclaimed dramatically. He took another bite, visibly letting it melt on his tongue. “I haven't had its like. I can taste the cherry, and the chocolate, and the quark. But there's something else.”

“Ah, that's our secret ingredient,” she winked. “Just a hint of vanilla to make merry.”

Jason tried another bite. “Yes, now I can tell. Just the perfect amount of sweetness.”

“It is delicious,” Tim acknowledged. Not really having much else to contribute to this conversation, he added: “The cherry part is the best.”

Jason held out a forkful of cake for him. There was a cherry on top. When Tim tried to take the fork from him, Jason playfully pulled it away, lifting it closer to Tim's face. Finally realizing what he was supposed to do, Tim leaned forward and closed his lips around it, taking the piece of cake into his mouth and swallowing.

His cheeks were heating up as he pulled back, he could just tell. “Thank you.”

At least the mayor was smiling at them. That was one person less to convince of their bond.

The next day passed in a very similar way—they went on a tour of the lakes, with Jason insisting on rowing the small wooden boat for Tim.

“I know you can do it,” he said, “but you're already the pretty and the smart one in this marriage. Let me be good for something.”

Tim disregarded the compliment. “You think I'm weak?”

Jason groaned in exasperation. “How did you get that out of what I said? No!” At Tim's look of skepticism, he added: “I'm saying you should let your completely smitten husband do something in public for you.”

Better. Tim could work with that. Besides, this was relaxing. Just fresh air, the gentle swish of the oars, blessed silence from any talking.

Then Jason stopped and put the oars into the locks.

“Hey, come over here.” At Tim’s look, he added: “Please?”

Sadly, Tim couldn’t come up with a reason to deny him. Jason had done everything Tim had expected of him and more. Tim supposed he had earned a favor for that.

Didn’t stop Tim from stiffening when Jason pulled him into his lap. He knew he was blushing. They must look ridiculous like this. Tim wasn’t a child—

Jason turned his body to the side just a bit, and Tim with it. Now he saw what Jason must’ve noticed earlier: a larger boat with a party on board, the members of which were all looking over in interest.

Jason’s breath was hot on the sensitive skin of his ear. “Just relax. They’re watching.”

Annoyed and forced to stay where he was, Tim was beginning to think he’d underestimated Jason.

They crossed over into Bergland the two days later. A military delegation greeted them. Jason made sure that they left the carriage and talked to the commander, a smiling man that seemed to know him personally.

There was no question of their luggage being searched, of course. In the future, nor would the belongings of any other travelers along this border.

(They weren’t wholly uniting the kingdoms, not yet. Tim couldn’t deny that things were moving towards that. He was going to try and ignore the question of common or separate heirs for as long as he could, though.)

“Well met.”

To his relief, Tim’s minute preparations had paid off; his greeting to the soldiers in their local dialect had been greeted with approving smiles.

“Hey, Roy,” Jason added far more informally.

The commander grinned at him. “Come up a bit in the world, have you.”

“Just a bit. Somehow, I don’t miss the mud.” There was laughter from the soldiers, who seemed to know exactly what Jason was talking about.

Roy turned to Tim. “My apologies, Your Royal Highness. I’m Commander Roy Harper from the eleventh regiment. Your husband used to be one of mine.”

Tim smiled. “Then I suppose I should thank you for keeping him safe.”

Roy and Jason snorted simultaneously. “Uh. You’re welcome.”

“Are you just the welcome committee or are you escorting us?” Jason asked.

“We’re on border patrol for another turn, then we’re heading to Fuchshofen. Someone’s got to keep your ass safe at your wedding celebration.” Roy winked at Tim. “It’s a bad look, losing princes. Especially if it’s the same one twice.”

“Take this message to the king and—to my parents?” Jason handed a note to Roy, who nodded and folded it into his coat pocket.

“Have a good trip,” the commander told them, and the soldiers stood at attention. Jason and Tim waved at them as they drove off.

Tim leaned back against the seat with an exhale when they were out of sight. They were in a foreign country now. The potential for him to fuck up had just increased exponentially.

Jason was looking at him weirdly. “You can let go now.”

With a start, Tim realized that he was still holding Jason’s hand. It had only been four days of traveling—how had he become so used to it already? He quickly drew his arm back and close to his body.

They rode in silence for a while.

“So I sent a message to the palace,” Jason said apropos of nothing.

“And?” Of course Jason did. He was taking over as host here. The king and queen would need to know that they were in their territory, now.

“And I,” Jason took a deep breath, “informed them of our delay.”

“Our delay.” Tim’s voice was flat. They were perfectly on schedule.

“I grew up around here.” There was nothing but woods outside. “I still own the house. I thought maybe we could stay there for a few days. Relax. No servants.”

Tim thought about it. To be honest, it sounded nice, but: “What are people going to think if we just hide away for days?” Wait. Realizing his mistake, Tim knew what Jason was going to say before he said it. “No,” he hastily interrupted. “That’s not what I meant.”

“But that’s exactly what they’re going to think,” Jason pointed out reasonably. “And there won’t be anyone around to correct them.”

“What brings this on?” Had Jason been that unhappy? Tim was aware that the other didn’t like appearing in front of people, but Jason had been doing such a good job that—

“I’m not saying I won’t enjoy it myself, but—you’ve been looking miserable and stressed ever since I met you. Like you could use a break.”

Huh. Tim had thought he’d hidden that rather well.

Tim studied Jason carefully. He looked nervous, but there wasn't any hidden tension. This wasn't a trap to get Tim alone.

"Alright."

"Good!" Jason smiled, then visibly toned it down. "I mean. Good."

It took several hours before the carriage came to a halt and they descended. Jason hadn't been kidding when he said that there would be no one around; by Tim's estimation, they were right in the middle of the forest.

While Jason turned and arranged for their luggage to be put down, Tim stood there, looking at the cottage. It was simple. The roof was solid enough, and the wooden walls had been cared for by someone, but there were none of the frills and decorations Tim was accustomed to. He didn't think there would even be an inside bathroom.

"It's not much." Jason stepped next to him.

Tim noted that he hadn't dismissed the carriage yet. Jason wanted to give him a way out. Tim could still say no.

"It's perfect," he said, honestly.

Three days alone with the not-soulmate he never wanted to marry... all of a sudden, that didn't sound so bad.

Hiding Away Together

Chapter Summary

In which they finally have time to get to know each other without anyone watching.

Jason watched anxiously as Tim took in the interior of the house: the small living room in which Jason had slept for years, his mother's bedroom that would be theirs now, the large kitchen in which so many hours of his childhood had been spent.

Two weeks ago, he would've been defensive, bristling at the intruder. But then, after Tim had shown him such unexpected kindness, he'd come to a decision: If he had to be a husband, he'd be the best damn husband these kingdoms had ever seen.

He had no expectations that Tim would ever love him. He just wanted to do right by him.

Starting that mission with the impetus of 'feed your spouse,' Jason opened the pantry doors and began unloading the supplies he'd asked their entourage to buy. It was a decent enough stock, better than anything they'd had when he'd been actually living here.

"It's just staples and vegetables for now," he told Tim over dinner. "I'll add fresh meat and fruits tomorrow."

"It's fine, I eat anything."

There was silence. After a moment of happy chewing, Tim seemed to notice that Jason was staring at him and looked up. "What?"

"Nothing." He'd married a heathen, that's what. *Anything*. Who even said that? Jason would show him.

Sleep came easier that night. The cottage smelt familiar even with all the new sensations Tim brought with him, and it eased Jason into rest.

The calm didn't last. The door burst open and the soldiers came in, grabbing his mother, except then they weren't soldiers, they were *him*, laughing, always laughing—

There was a hand on his arm, shaking him awake. Jason blinked, then cursed. "Fuck. Sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"It's fine." Tim's voice was low and soothing. "I just—it looked worse than before. Are you okay?"

Jason couldn't look at him. 'Worse,' that implied that Tim had noticed him having nightmares before; had witnessed Jason being weak and useless in the grip of memories mixed with unseen terrors. Mother, he hated this.

"Yeah. Sorry. Go back to sleep."

Tim hovered over him for another minute; Jason could tell even with his eyes closed. Then he withdrew quietly.

Jason didn't let himself slip into more than a light daze after that, and he was up as soon as the sun began to rise. By now he had figured out that Tim wouldn't wake up at this time of the morning without someone resorting to extreme measures, so he didn't bother being especially silent as he dressed.

Opening one of the closets in the living room, he found his old bow and arrow, several knives and a selection of crossbows. His backpack was still here, too.

Jason filled his canteen with water at the stream next to the house, and then he set out.

The dawn air was crisp and clear, woven through with the smell of the woods: earthy, rich, not pleasant, but familiar. His path was still there, slightly overgrown but distinctive among the trees. Jason cataloged every change along the way: the new bird nests and fox burrows; a tree hit by lightning; a trap that was now old and rusted.

He'd been afraid, he now knew; afraid that his place, too, would feel foreign, that he would lose the last feeling of home he'd ever had. His feet remembered, though.

Jason spent that morning hunting. After setting a few traps to replace the rusted ones, he tracked down a deer, following its tracks for almost a mile before he shot it. Looking down at the dead animal, he mentally crowed. He still had it.

Then he thought: *Tim will wake up soon*, and turned back.

Jason deposited the carcass in front of the hut when he returned, then stopped by the stream to wash off the blood. When he finally entered, Tim was just exiting the bedroom, looking adorably sleepy.

"Good morning," he greeted Jason. "Let me guess—you have been doing useful things for hours?"

Jason laughed. He was fully aware that Tim had gone to bed hours later than him last night, engrossed in some documents. "Let me guess—you were up late last night doing other useful things? Good morning."

Tim looked pleased by that, as if it would have bothered him if Jason mistook his sleeping rhythm for laziness. They prepared breakfast in silence, moving around each other carefully

but without incident.

Once they'd both made headway into their portion of porridge, Tim asked: "What are your plans for the day?"

"I caught a deer, so I'll prepare that. And we need some firewood."

"Need any help?"

Jason shook his head. It wouldn't be a good idea, letting Tim see him like that, covered in blood. He might notice how much Jason didn't care.

Then he reconsidered. Splitting logs was sweaty work. "Maybe with the wood, though that can wait until tomorrow. I think it'll stay warm for another day or two."

Tim snorted. "Can you predict the weather now?"

"Just a feeling. What're you thinking for today?"

"I think that armchair is calling for me. There are some proposals I want to read—and I did bring a book!" Tim added hastily at Jason's glare. Good. He was supposed to be relaxing, not constantly working.

This was an argument they would have again, Jason could already tell. For now, he was content to settle on the couch next to the armchair Tim had claimed for his own and dive deep into one of his favorite books. Again. He knew it was a stress-reaction, but re-reading those beloved classics felt like talking to an old friend.

Gradually, Jason relaxed more and more into the silence. His eyes grew heavy, and he let himself nod off. A nap wouldn't harm anyone.

He woke up to the feeling of Tim's gaze resting heavy on him, but when he opened his eyes, Tim was still engrossed in his book. Jason didn't think he'd been out that long. His stomach was rumbling again, though. With a yawn, he got up, his back popping satisfyingly after falling asleep sitting up.

"I'll go clean out the deer, and then we can eat."

Tim nodded without looking up.

As expected, the venison tasted excellent when roasted.

Jason was considering what to do with the skin (sell it?) when Tim offered: "Want to get the wood chucking over with?"

"Sure."

There must've been a questioning note to his tone because Tim explained: "After traveling all day yesterday, I'm starting to run out of capabilities to stay still."

"Then let's go cut wood," Jason said, "and after, we can spar." He'd been itching to see Tim actually fight.

"Sounds good."

The sun was beginning its slow downward descent when they started circling each other at their impromptu training grounds. Tim had taken off his coat and was clad only in leggings and a loose shirt; Jason was similarly attired, though his pants were sturdier, more suited for trekking through the woods. Tim had produced a staff from *somewhere* (Jason didn't want to think about it too closely; those leggings didn't leave much room,) while Jason had decided he needed more practice fighting without a weapon.

Tim feigned moving forward. Jason didn't bite. Then he himself was moving, grappling Tim by the shoulder and thigh and throwing him down. Tim went way too quickly.

"Give," Tim laughed, looking up at him from where he was sitting on the ground. He clearly expected Jason to help him up. Jason did no such thing.

"So that one was for testing me?"

Tim grudgingly pushed himself off the ground and got up. "What makes you say that?"

"Oh, please."

The smile that curled around Tim's mouth was wicked. "I won't hold back then."

Jason gave a small bow. "Thank you, my prince."

Not even a second later, he was going down, Tim hooking his staff under his legs and moving in to hold it against his throat. Jason moved to block it, but too late—it was already at his windpipe. He grinned at Tim as he tapped out.

Next round, he evaded Tim's swipe and moved under to get him into a chokehold. Tim conceded the point.

Next, Tim getting the jump on him, literally, twisting his thighs to get Jason down and out. After, Jason getting them both on the ground and winning the grappling contest. Tim landing a good punch on him; Jason grabbing a rock from the ground; both of them wrestling for Tim's staff.

Every round was quick and decisive. Jason loved it. This was how soldiers should be fighting.

When they were done, Jason felt that he was starting to predict Tim's moves, and Tim his, in turn. They were drenched in sweat, panting, and had an even number of points.

“You’re faster than I expected,” Tim admitted.

“And you’re exactly as dangerous as I thought.”

That managed to get a laugh. “Food?”

Jason wrinkled his nose at him. “Clean up first. You stink.”

“Hey!” Then Tim took a moment to take stock (sweaty, clothes torn, dirty from the ground) and sheepishly grinned. “Yeah, alright. The creek, I guess?”

“Sorry, no bathtub.”

“I suppose I will have to make do,” Tim said as he followed Jason to the small stream.

Only when he took off his clothes right next to the water (all of them—no one around to see, after all) did Jason realize that oh, he hadn’t seen Tim naked since *that* time.

Was it weird to avoid looking at your husband while cleaning yourself? Jason decided that it was. He’d done this hundred of times with his fellow soldiers; he could treat Tim like another one of them. Well. He could try.

With that resolve in mind, he shucked off the last of his clothing and waded into the stream, sighing as the water cooled down his heated skin. When Tim waded in beside him, he couldn’t help but glance over. Tim had a surprising amount of scars (faint pink on pale skin) and muscles for a prince. Jason knew what those corded arms could do now. Could Tim pick him up, he wondered? Pick him up—or hold him down, maybe, make him hold still for Tim’s roving eyes—

Jason dove into the water. Good thing it was so cold.

When he came back up, shaking his wet hair out of his eyes, he noticed Tim staring at him.

“What?” he asked, suddenly self-conscious. Were his scars bothering Tim again? Was it the cursemark on his wrist?

But Tim shook his head and waded deeper into the water, away from Jason. “Nothing.”

Back inside, they both fell onto their food with gusto. Jason would need to make sure they’d spar more often if it got Tim to eat like that.

As soon as they had finished eating, Tim said: “I think I’m going to turn in early today.”

“Tired you out?” Jason teased.

Wait, why was Tim blushing?

“Uh, I guess,” his husband stuttered. “Goodnight!”

“Goodnight,” Jason called after him, confused.

Was it possible that Tim was just as riled up as he was from their little sparring-and-washing session? Jason entertained that thought with great pleasure for a minute before a much more likely possibility occurred to him. Tim was probably hoping to get in some undisturbed sleep; be under deep by the time Jason had his nightmares.

Despite Jason’s own tiredness, he stayed up as long as he could, and when he fell asleep, he did so on the couch.

“Did I do something?” Tim asked at breakfast.

“Huh?” Jason had been up for hours, but he still felt groggy. That couch had been much more comfortable when he’d been about two heads shorter.

“You didn’t come to bed last night,” Tim said stiffly. “If I’ve given offense in any way—”

“I didn’t think you’d notice,” Jason blurted out. Tim had gone to sleep before him, and Jason was usually up first, anyway.

Tim’s face fell shut.

“No, not—I didn’t mean it like that,” Jason said. “I just... fell asleep. Must’ve been more tired than I realized. I didn’t want to disturb you.”

That last one was the truth, if not all of it, and seemed to satisfy Tim, who went back to his food.

Jason still wanted to make it up to him. “Hey, want to come pick berries today? I know a place.”

They set out shortly after breakfast, each of them carrying a basket and Jason with his bow strapped to his back. They were going deeper into woods than he had on his morning expeditions, walking for over an hour through the shadows in comfortable silence.

Tim hadn’t once questioned whether Jason would find the way back. It was entirely possible that the other man had already memorized precisely how to turn where; it still felt good, though.

Finally, they reached a clearing. There they were: meters and meters of blackberry brambles.

“So many,” Tim said in awe. “Does no one come to pick them?”

“Nah. No one lives in this forest.” And there were reasons for that, Jason thought, remembering the wolves and men that had haunted his childhood. “Hunters pass through occasionally, but they usually follow the water.”

“Wasn’t that lonely?”

In retrospect, it was pretty fucked up to raise a child here, yeah. However: “I didn’t know anything else. It could’ve been much worse.”

Tim thought about that. “Your mother must’ve been an extraordinary woman to come here.”

“She was.” The thought of her still hurt; Jason let it ripple through him. “And she loved those berries. Try one.”

Carefully, Tim picked a single one and popped it into his mouth. His eyes closed in bliss. “Oh, wow. Okay, yeah, totally worth spending over a decade in the woods for.”

Jason laughed. “Right?”

They picked berries until their fingers and mouths were stained purple and they had enough berries in Tim’s basket to feed their entire entourage. Then Jason revealed the contents of his own basket: a blanket, a flask with tea, another one with coffee, and venison pies for lunch. He’d made them this morning while Tim was still out.

The smile didn’t seem to want to leave Tim’s face as he sat down and took in Jason’s offerings. Jason probably stared at his berry-stained lips for a second too long.

“I wasn’t allowed to go out much.”

When Jason looked at him, Tim clarified: “As a child, I mean. I sneaked out whenever I could, but my parents didn’t like for me to leave the palace.”

Jason winced. It would have been the same for him, had he not been cursed. “How did you learn how to fight?”

“There was a visiting knight,” Tim told him, his tone reminiscing. “I didn’t know he was also a king, so I just... attached myself to him and begged to be taken on as a squire. Eventually, he relented.”

“And your parents?”

“My father was dead by then.” Tim’s smile dimmed. “My mother approved of me fostering an alliance.”

“Two birds with one stone.” And now, here they were with their own alliances big and small. Jason had meant to talk to Tim about that, but before he could, Tim asked: “How about you? I don’t think I have the stations of your life straight.”

“You wouldn’t be the only one.” Jason considered what to say. There wasn’t a reason to hold back anymore, however. If Tim set his heart on finding out, he would, anyway. “The Witch’s people found me when I was fourteen. I—my mother died, and I left these woods. I hid for a while—living on the streets, working wherever I could, that sort of thing. Got adopted by a knight that taught me to fight. They found me, in the end, and tried killing me, but it didn’t stick.”

“How?”

“No idea.” At Tim’s skeptical glance, Jason said: “No, really, I don’t know.”

“You must have a theory.”

Tim was beginning to know him too well. “I kinda always thought it had something to do with my mother, and maybe my parents, as well. They tried so much witchcraft against the curse... maybe some of that stuck.”

Tim contemplated that. “It’s a curse broken by true love, right?” he slowly said. “Maybe it was just that.”

“Maybe.”

“Is your mother buried here?”

Jason shook his head. “I don’t know where she is. I had to leave so quickly, and when I came back...”

“I’m sorry.” Tim’s voice was sympathetic. He set down his pie to briefly squeeze Jason’s shoulder, then changed the topic: “So how did you end up in the army?”

“When I woke up, I’d been rescued by this Assassin’s guild that had been working against the Witch that cursed me for unrelated reasons. I figured—hiding hadn’t worked, so I’d better get ready for a fight, and joined them.”

“You joined the Assassin’s Guild.” Tim’s voice was flat and disbelieving.

“Just for a bit. I had barely completed my training when I met Roy at a mission, and he recruited me. I was, you know, thinking about returning to the castle at that point, and figured I should look at it from the outside first.”

Tim’s shoulders shook. “What would you have done if you found it lacking?”

“No idea. Staged a coup?”

With that, Tim burst into laughter. “Oh, Jason, you’re one of a kind.”

Said this prince that worked day and night to take care of everyone instead of resting on his privilege; this man that had the kindest touch and the sharpest eyes Jason had ever seen. Jason didn’t really know how to deal with that.

Embarrassment flushing his ears, he busied himself with the picnic basket, safely putting their remaining food out of the reach of ants and other critters. When he turned back around, Tim had piled a bunch of yellow flowers in front of him and was threading them together.

“What’re you doing?” Jason asked.

Tim didn't answer with words, just beckoned with his hand. Jason must've gotten used to following his orders, because he knew without a doubt that Tim wanted him to lean forward, so he did.

Tim placed a circlet of flowers on his head and smiled. "That suits you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Tim looked so pleased; Jason couldn't look away from his glowing face.

"How about you?" he asked once he found his voice again.

"Can't put a crown on myself."

"You could... teach me?"

Jason hadn't been sure that had been the right question, but Tim was smiling again. "Of course. Here, you start like this..."

Jason watched and then tried it himself. It fell apart. Then he tried again, and it fell apart again.

Tim giggled and took his hands to show him. "No, do it like this..."

By the time the afternoon sun began lengthening the shadow of the trees, Jason got it. Triumphantly, he placed a yellow circlet on Tim's head. "There. Now we match."

There was that pleased look again. "We do."

On the way back, Jason stopped by his traps. One of them had snagged a rabbit, which was more than he'd expected after day. He dismantled the rest of them. No point in having them up any longer; they'd be leaving the day after tomorrow.

Tim inspected one of them. "You know, you could improve on those."

Jason raised an eyebrow at him. "Could I?"

"Yes. See, the way the door mechanism is shaped, there's a good chance of the animal getting the bait without it being triggered. If you whittle the stick holding it up, and then move it to the side a bit—"

Jason listened as Tim lectured him all the way back to their hut, shaking his head. What had he gotten himself into?

In the evening, they curled up in the living room again, pleasantly tired out from their walk. Jason was growing used to this new quality of silence between them; the kind that let him

know he wasn't alone, but in a good way, one that meant he felt calm and quiet. When Tim reached out and took one of Jason's hand in his, thumb spreading out to absently rub over his cursemark, Jason hummed in contentment and shifted so he could turn the pages with his other one.

Then he froze. They weren't in public.

When he looked over, Tim was determinedly reading on, embarrassment radiating off of him in waves. Jason could swear that Tim would need to re-read that page again later. Oh, that was just too precious.

Jason looked back down, smiling, and didn't let go until it was time to go to bed.

On the third day, it rained.

Jason was in the living room, sipping tea and reading when Tim traipsed in and demanded: "How did you know that would happen?"

Jason's eyes were way too fond, he knew, but Tim was still wrapped in a blanket and more ruffled than Jason had ever seen him. He looked perfect for a rainy day.

Oh. He should probably answer Tim.

"I just guessed. It kinda feels like the woods prepare for it, sometimes? It gets hectic, and then quieter, in a way."

"I married a wood sprite." Tim let himself dramatically flop onto the couch next to Jason.

Thinking he would say or do something, Jason looked at him; when Tim seemed content to stare at the small fire Jason had lit to combat the drop in temperature, he shrugged and turned back to his book. Minutes later, he felt Tim's head drop onto his shoulder. He'd fallen asleep again.

Yesterday, it had been too hot to make a stew; today Jason appreciated the slowness of it, the art of stirring at the right time, the heat of the embers. Tim had insisted on taking care of the bread, and Jason was trying really hard not to tell him what he was doing wrong.

Finally, Tim turned around and hissed: "Okay, spit it out."

"I didn't say anything!" Jason lifted both hands in surrender.

"Your judgment is really fucking loud." Tim managed to look angry for another three seconds, then he looked down at the sad lump of dough in his bowl and sighed. "No, really, tell me."

"You killed the yeast."

Maybe Jason had gone a bit overboard in his bid to sound sympathetic because Tim looked horrified. “I did what?”

“Killed the yeast. It can’t deal with the cold. No amount of kneading is going to fix that. This is a recipe for fluffy bread, not cardboard.”

Tim sighed. “So what do I do?”

“Take another bit of that strain, keep it warm, and be careful. And add about twice the water you did.”

“I used the exact amount in the recipe!”

“Yeah, mom always changed something to make sure people couldn’t just copy it.”

Tim glared first at the offending piece of paper, then at Jason: “And you couldn’t have told me that earlier?”

Jason shrugged. “You wanted to do it on your own. It was cute how determined you were.”

Tim threw the bowl at him.

Jason would’ve been happy to pass the day like this, eating good food and reading even better books. It was their last day here, however, and there was something he needed to do.

“Can we talk?”

“Sure.” Tim took a seat at the kitchen table. Jason sat down next to him on the bench, shifting so he was facing his husband, one leg thrown over the other.

“We’re leaving tomorrow.”

“Yes.” Tim actually looked sad at the thought. Jason thought that it was more for the lack of quiet than for the time spent with Jason, but he appreciated it nonetheless. If it had been up to him, they could’ve stayed here for weeks and weeks and weeks, just getting to know each other.

Ah. Yes. That was what he had wanted to bring up. By the Mother, Tim was distracting.

“So I thought we should come up with a strategy. You know, as long as there is no one around to listen in.”

“A strategy.” Tim looked amused.

Jason huffed. “Hey, you’re the mastermind. I’m just saying—I don’t even know what you want from the future.”

“Peace” was the swift answer. “And the strength to keep it.”

“Yeah, we established that. But... you’re basically co-regent already, right?”

“I suppose.”

“I’m still learning the ropes, but I know my parents will eventually want me to do my part, too. I guess I’m just wondering how you think that will work?”

“I’ve been wondering, too,” Tim admitted. “All I’ve come up with so far is a lot of travel. Maybe spend half a year in Bergland, and the other in Drachenlicht. Or three-month rotations.”

Jason exhaled. “I thought you’d maybe want us to split up.”

“What? No!” Then Tim grimaced. “Admittedly, I did consider that. Now I’m thinking... we’re in this together. It looks bad if we’re apart for long periods.”

Right. It would look bad. Jason forced his tone to be businesslike. “Okay, rotations it is.”

“It will help us get to know the other country, too,” Tim added. “I read up all I could about Bergland, but we both know that’s not the same. I don’t want to be a stranger here.”

“And for... us?” Jason tried hard to not let his nerves get the better of him and run away. If he postponed to this conversation, he would regret it immediately. “I mean. We’re married. What do you want from this marriage?”

“I wasn’t expecting much,” Tim said. Jason tried not to let that hurt him. “But I think we could make good partners.”

“Partners,” Jason echoed. He liked that. “Sounds doable.”

“I know I’m hard to read,” Tim said earnestly, reaching out to place a hand on Jason’s knee. “My friends always tell me to stop shutting myself off. I just want to make sure you know that’s not about you.”

“Good to know.” Privately, Jason thought he knew exactly what (who) he could attribute that to. He’d met Tim’s parent, after all.

Tim smiled. “Though you seem to be doing just fine. Even when I’m actively trying to hide stuff.” There was wonder in his voice.

Jason looked at him in confusion. Apart from when he’d been running away from Tim, he hadn’t found Tim difficult to read at all. “Uh, nice. Okay. But you know that you can just tell me things, right? I’m not always going to get it right.”

“That goes for you, too. I think we don’t place the same priorities on certain things.”

‘Like table manners,’ Jason thought.

Tim’s mouth twitched as if he had heard that. “You can let me know, and we can argue about it.”

Jason grinned. "I can do that."

"We can," Tim corrected him. "Now, I know you're dying to get back to that book, so... are we done?"

"Sure, make it sound like it's me who's uncomfortable talking about feelings. However, yes. Yes, we are."

This time, Tim grabbed his hand as soon as they settled down.

The next morning Jason woke up feeling warm and more rested than he had in months. Years, maybe. He basked in the heaviness of his bones, the way he had to slowly blink the sleep from his eyes.

Tim was curled up against his back, his arms holding Jason securely against his chest. Everywhere they touched, calm seeped into Jason.

He closed his eyes and, for once, went back to sleep.

Thoughts Dance

Chapter Summary

In which Tim and Jason arrive at their destination. Last chapter, apart from the epilogue.

Tim didn't want to leave.

The carriage was waiting outside, and still Tim stood in the living room of the cottage, trying to enjoy the last seconds of quiet. He knew it was weird to complain of being surrounded by servants all day, and he would never do so. It was undeniable, though, that moments of being unobserved were rare in the castle he grew up in, and he didn't expect the one he would visit today to be different.

Jason had been right. He'd needed this. To his amazement, being with Jason hadn't made him feel observed. More... sheltered.

He thought: One day, we will build ourselves something that will be ours. All talk of alternating time at the two courts aside, Tim suddenly ached for a home.

"Tim?" Jason stood at the door.

"Coming."

The footman who closed the carriage door gave them a weird look. It took Tim a minute to figure out why, and when he did, he blushed. Right. All the way here, they'd sat across from each other, books and documents next to them, no touching.

Now? Tim had squeezed in right beside Jason without thinking about it. The bench was a bit narrow, so one of his legs was slung over Jason's, and they were holding hands. Never before had Tim felt the need to hold a book and turn pages one-handedly, but now both he and Jason had mastered that skill.

Tim glanced up at Jason, who was already wholly engrossed in his book and hadn't noticed anything.

There was a squirming feeling in his stomach, the same that had been raising its head over the last three days with increasing frequency. Tim pressed a bit closer and enjoyed it.

Eventually, they must've hit a landmark Jason recognized, for he looked up and put his book down to say: "We'll reach Fuchshofen soon."

“What’s the plan? Are we heading straight for the palace?”

“There will be a grand celebration tonight at which you will be officially introduced to my parents,” Jason said, “but until then, we can just see the city.”

“Sounds good.” Oh, Mother. Tim had sort of forgotten that this would be his first time meeting his in-laws. What if they didn’t like him? Diplomatic necessity was one thing, but they had just gotten their son back when they had been forced to entrust him to Tim. Jason had sounded cautiously fond whenever he spoke of them. If they hated Tim... it didn’t bear thinking about.

He suddenly appreciated much more what Jason had been going through that first week. At least he knew his husband was on his side. Said husband was, at this exact moment, smiling at him as if he knew what he was thinking. “They’re going to like you.”

Tim sure hoped so.

Jason had asked the carriage driver to let them out at a particular place, and when they disembarked, there wasn’t anyone waiting for them. Noticing Tim’s glance around, he explained: “I figured we could skip the welcoming committee for now.”

Some of the townspeople still gathered around them, of course. Tim was immediately engrossed in conversation with a Drachenlichtian citizen who had been living in Fuchshofen for close to a decade now and couldn’t express his support for Tim’s marriage in fewer than about a thousand words.

When he finally disengaged and turned around, he saw that Jason had knelt down to talk to a group of kids, none of which could be older than ten. Was he... was he performing a card trick? Yes, he was, and they loved it.

Tim possibly stared for too long. “Ah, that’ll be your future, huh?” someone asked. When Tim turned, an elderly woman’s eyes were twinkling at him.

“I—” Tim’s smile turned rueful. “It certainly looks like it.”

They both watched as the kids began to climb on Jason, who playfully pretended to be overcome by their might.

“That’s one that will be a good father and a good man.”

“He already is.” Tim wanted to put on his I’m-so-in-love-with-this-stranger expression when he realized that he was already wearing it, only softer, somehow; more natural.

It wasn’t difficult anymore, pretending to be in love with Jason, Tim thought. And then: Oh. *Oh.*

The woman, not knowing that Tim had just had a life-changing revelation and probably not caring, laughed and said: “Unless he gets himself strangled, the way those brats are sitting on

him.”

“I’ll go rescue him.” Tim shook his head and walked over to his husband, who looked up at him from where he was lying on the ground.

“Help!” Jason called out weakly. “Those monsters are trying to eat me!”

The monsters giggled with delight. One of them dared to approach Tim, though he looked cautious.

Tim took a step back and raised his hands. “Oh, no, don’t attack me!”

The child smiled and advanced, now joined by another. From the corner of his eyes, Tim saw Jason whisper to one of the other kids, who nodded. Within seconds, Jason had a kid on each shoulder and was advancing on Tim, too.

Thinking quickly, he grabbed one of the kids and lifted him up in front of him. “Don’t come closer, I have a hostage!” The boy was struggling with screams of delight, a girl coming to his aid by trying to pull Tim’s arm down.

Jason laughed. “What do we do now, soldiers?”

“Never surrender!” came the cry.

Sadly, before the standoff could be resolved, a woman’s voice called out: “Everyone, back inside! Your lessons are waiting!”

The kids hesitated, pouting. Jason put the ones he was holding down, Tim following suit. “Well, you heard your teacher.”

Reluctantly, the children left, waving at them all the while. As soon as they were gone, Tim swatted Jason’s shoulder in mock-outrage. “I see how it is. Barely married for two weeks and you’re already conspiring to get rid of me.”

“Yes, that’s been my master plan,” Jason deadpanned. “Assemble an army of children—to match your height—and take the throne for myself.”

“Match my height—watch yourself, or you’ll wake up a head shorter tomorrow!”

“Whatever you say, love.” There that smirk again. “Want to check out the market?”

“Fine,” Tim grumbled, following him.

As they walked, Tim looked around with interest.

Fuchshofen wasn’t that different from Flammstädt. It had begun its life as a defensive structure high in the mountains, and the walls around the castle and surrounding the town reflected that need even today. Because of the drier, colder climate, vegetation was less lush. But there was a market place surrounded by stone buildings, and people doing their everyday

duty accompanied by the sounds of a busy city, and Tim was ready to bet he knew exactly where the town hall and the church were.

Jason dragged him over to one of the stalls where the owner eyed them with interest, probably noting their expansive clothing, and smiled accordingly. Then he took a second look at Jason, and his smile grew wider. “Ah, Prince Jason. Welcome back.”

“Thank you. Tim, may I introduce you to Friedrich, the only man who knows how to make anything grow up here? Friedrich, this is my husband, Tim.”

Tim smiled politely. “Hello, Mr. Friedrich.”

Tom bowed. “It’s an honor.”

“How are the crops?” Jason asked.

“Good, good,” the man said. “Of course, it’s not been easy, with so little rain until yesterday.”

“Didn’t you try a new irrigation system?”

“Yes, but we’re still trying to figure out the usage distribution between the other farmers and us. Of course, there’s also the folks upstream, and they’re...”

Jason was listening intently. Leaving them to it, Tim wandered over to the next stall, where a selection of jewelry was on display. “All made from platinum,” the seller told him. “They’re heat-resistant, too.”

“I’m not from here,” Tim said, somewhat unnecessarily. “Who would usually wear this style?” It looked peculiar to him, all broad lines and thick lines. Unlike the jewelry members of the court liked to adorn themselves with in Flammstädt, there was nothing fragile about this.

“Soldiers, Your Highness, and anyone with a physically intensive job. I work with a witch to make them, and they’ll withstand anything life throws at them. The wristbands and circlets also offer protection against weapons.”

Tim hummed. One ring caught his eye, in particular—a simple one, silver, with a black line running through its middle. He pointed at that. “Does this one stand for anything in particular?”

“The unbroken circle. Faith, survival, strength, eternity—I’ve heard different interpretations.”

“I’d like to buy it.”

The seller looked at Tim’s hands with skepticism. “Forgive me, Your Highness, but I believe it might be a bit too large. Unless you’d like to wear it on your thumb—”

“It’s not for me.”

Tim paid, careful not to reveal the full contents of his purse to casual onlookers. Being pickpocketed would rob the day of some of its shine.

“Would you like me to wrap that for you? I have beautiful gift boxes in red and black.”

“No, thank you,” Tim said politely, pocketing the ring. “Have a nice day.”

He wandered on for a few minutes. Jason found him inspecting a stall full of spices. As he had done back in Grenzstadt, he stood behind Tim and slung an arm around his hip, resting his chin on top of Tim’s head. This time, Tim relaxed back into it.

The seller’s face brightened immensely upon seeing Jason. “Jason! Your Highness, I mean. It’s good to see you.”

“Sara, if you address me with ‘Your Highness’ one more time, I’m taking all the cloves.”

She laughed and looked at Tim. “Maybe I was talking to your husband.”

“I won’t steal your cloves either way,” Tim promised, “if only because I don’t exactly know what I would do with them.”

“Having tasted Drachenlichtian food, I can readily believe that.”

Tim groaned. “Why does everyone say that?”

Jason patted his stomach consolingly. “Sorry, babe. It’s kind of a running joke here. Because your food is so bland.”

“It’s not that bad,” the seller said. Before Tim could thank her, she added: “The sweets are good.”

“Remind me to give you this recipe I got,” Jason told her. “You’ll love it. Are you coming to the fête tonight?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

They took their leave with smiles on all sides. As they walked away, Jason explained: “I got to know her when I was, uh, living on the streets. She let me work for her and sleep at her place occasionally. Was a bit of a shock for her when she found out who I was.”

“I can imagine.” Tim shook his head, looking around.

“Are you searching for something?”

“Kind of—ah, there.” Tim finally spotted an empty alcove next to a tree. They would have some privacy there. Jason looked confused but followed obediently.

Once they were hidden away as much as they could be, Tim lifted the hand that was in his (as always) and carefully slid on the ring he’d just bought. It fit perfectly, just as he had known it would.

Jason whispered: “Tim?”

Tim looked critically at the hand in his. Yes, this was much better. Jason’s official wedding ring was way too narrow for his hands. Tim wanted something that wouldn’t break, that would mark Jason as *his*, come what may. Smiling, he lifted Jason’s hand to his mouth and placed a gentle kiss on the rings. “I like this better.”

There was so much hope on Jason’s face, it almost hurt to see. Tim knew without a shadow of a doubt that his feelings were reciprocated. Keeping his hold on Jason’s hand, he used his other one to pull him into a hug, holding on until Jason stopped shaking, and long after.

Nervous, Tim took in every detail of the room he was going to call his own for the foreseeable future, instead of considering what lay ahead. The castle here was simpler than in Flammstädt, with more roughly hewn stone and less art decorating its walls. His suit, the same one he’d worn to the wedding, suddenly seemed out of place, but he wasn’t thinking about that, he wasn’t.

Finally, Jason delivered him from his nervous pacing by leaving the bathroom and asking: “How do I look?”

He had opted for something a little less stiff: a dark blue suit with a white shirt. Tearing Tim’s eyes away from the way those colors contrasted with his skin and eyes was difficult but worth it. Those pants were *tight*.

The longer Tim stared, the more confident Jason looked. “It’s alright, then?”

When Tim looked back up at his face, he didn’t know what to say.

Tim knew that Jason looked exactly the same as he had when they’d been standing at the altar; less worried, maybe, but his features hadn’t changed just because Tim had seen them soften in happiness now. His eyes weren’t any bluer because they were smiling; his hair any less incongruous because Tim had buried his face in it last night; his hands any less scarred because they held Tim’s so gently.

In the end, he settled for “Yes,” and hoped that would convey all of what he was thinking.

Jason smiled and took his hand, whispering: “You look gorgeous, by the way.”

Tim knew he didn’t, but he appreciated the compliment anyway. Taking a deep breath, he broke the mood with: “Okay, let’s do this before I throw up.”

Jason laughed and led him out of the door and through the corridors to the ballroom. A woman who could only be the queen was waiting for them by the door. “Mother?” Jason asked, sounding as surprised as Tim felt.

She smiled, and oh, now Tim knew where Jason got that expression from. “I thought I’d ease the awkwardness of meeting in the throne room a bit. Welcome back, Jason.”

She hugged Jason, who returned the gesture cautiously, and then Tim, who had been ready to bow or shake hands or something else his own mother would have demanded. “And welcome to Fuchshofen, Prince Timothy.”

“Tim,” he offered, helpless in the face of so much friendliness, “and thank you for having me.”

“Of course. I don’t need to tell you what it means to us, politically, but I hope to be able to call you son, also.”

“Stop embarrassing him,” Jason chided her gently, apparently noticing how little Tim knew how to deal with this situation. (Did no one in this country know how to do diplomacy? Was this going to be like one of these comedies based on cultural misunderstandings the bards liked to sing about?)

She laughed. “I just wanted to make sure you knew. Come on, your father will be waiting.”

As the footmen opened the door, Jason offered Tim his arm. “Shall we?”

Tim slid his hand into the groove of Jason’s elbow. “We shall.”

Inside, the room was decorated in blazing lights, forcing Tim to blink. Those weren’t candles—candles didn’t dance. They must have but quite some witchcraft into it. Having heard that magic was much more common in Bergland than in Drachenlicht, he was nonetheless surprised at the sheer scale of it.

On the dais, the king awaited them with a smile. Once his wife had joined him, and Tim and Jason were almost in front of them, he lifted his hand, and the crowd fell silent.

“Six months ago, we received a gift,” the king began his speech. “Our son returned to us. Today is another day we will forever remember as one of the Mother’s blessings.” He turned to Jason and Tim, gesturing for them to join them. “The Drachenlicht kingdom has shown us their heart already by standing firm by our alliance for the last two decades. Now our union has been strengthened by the tightest of bonds. Please join me in welcoming Prince Timothy of Drachenlicht.”

Everyone clapped. Jason and Tim bowed. Tim wondered if he was expected to say something now (couldn’t Jason have warned him?,) but the king continued: “Tonight, we celebrate. Let the festivities begin!”

That was the cue for the musicians beginning to play. The attendees didn’t need to be told twice: there were two distinct mass movements, one towards the buffet, one to the dance floor, which was crowded within the minute.

With the attention off of him, the king smiled and turned to Tim, shaking his hand. “Welcome. Sorry for the pompous speech, but it’s not a good idea to let people wait for their food for too long.”

“Thank you,” Tim smiled back. “And I appreciated it.”

“We have much to talk about, but that can wait until tomorrow. Please, enjoy yourselves tonight.”

Jason turned to Tim, eyes bright. “Want to dance?”

Tim took his hand. “Of course.”

As they entered the dance floor among the dancers, Tim knew—he just *knew*—that Jason wanted him to take the lead. That he wouldn’t mind. The music was upbeat, though still a standard Viennese waltz, and Tim had absolutely no compunction about grabbing Jason by the waist and whirling him around. It might look a bit ridiculous to outsiders, but it worked for them—and wasn’t that the important thing?

Jason was laughing when Tim looked up at him. The fondness was rolling off him in waves. Tim could practically hear him thinking that he himself was adorably flushed.

There was no helping it. Tim leaned up and kissed him.

Jason’s mouth opened under his in surprise, and Tim took advantage of it immediately, wanting to claim what was his. Jason responded just as hungrily. For an undetermined amount of time, all Tim could feel was the heat of it; until it gradually softened, slowed, became more about their mouths gentle caressing and Jason’s hands on Tim’s hips and Tim cradling Jason’s face in his own.

Tim decided that this—this was their wedding kiss.

And then he felt Jason’s amusement at that thought, followed by whole-hearted agreement. Not through anything Jason was doing, though all of that was very nice, too. He *felt* it.

Tim broke away and thought: *Wait, can you hear me?*

Yes, Jason thought back, *why did you stop kissing me?*

Of course, that was when all hell broke loose.

Before Tim knew what was happening, Jason crumbled onto the ground. “Curse,” he ground out. “He’s here—”

But—if it was the curse, why wasn’t he—Tim didn’t allow himself to finish that thought. Jason was alive, if clearly in pain, and he would see to it that it stayed that way.

“Get him!” The queen yelled. Tim looked up to see who she was talking about.

A man grinned back at him. Tim had seen that face before on countless wanted posters distributed across their nations. It was the Witch. The one that had cursed Jason; that had almost killed him.

Well, if he thought he would get even close again, he was mistaken. Tim looked directly into his grinning face and mouthed: “No.”

There was a flash of uncertainty in those hard eyes, then laughter rang out again as the witch called for his minions. Guards swarmed out in answer.

Tim flicked out his staff. Jason, while obviously unable to stand up, had nevertheless produced two knives from somewhere. Roy, the redhead they had met before, was coming to stand right beside them, bow drawn.

Looking around to evaluate the situation, Tim noticed the king and queen had armed themselves as well, both wielding broadswords that looked decidedly battle-used. Tim thought of his own parents, who would've disapproved immensely, and decided that maybe he would fit better into this kingdom than he'd thought.

Then he turned to the witch and charged.

They wouldn't take his husband. Not today. Not ever again.

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

In which a few first steps are taken.

Jason leaned back in his seat, grimacing as his body ached at the movement. His injuries would have been much worse if the curse hadn't been diverted like it had been; if Tim hadn't given him True Love's Kiss and then fended off every assassin out to get Jason. Didn't mean it didn't hurt, though.

I told you not to overdo it...

Yes, yes, I know. Not that Jason regretted finally sparring again this morning. The enforced rest of the last week had slowly driven him mad. *We're almost done.*

Come save me after?

In just that moment, the Minister for the Interior finally ended his rather lengthy contribution to the discussion, and Jason snapped back to attention to find his mother looking at him. She was either worried or amused or both, he couldn't quite tell for all that Tim said that the family resemblance was obvious in their expressions. (How was that supposed to help Jason, anyway? Not like he could see himself. Their bond didn't go that far.)

"Thank you, Lord Redetviel," she said. "You raised some important questions, I think, that deserve consideration. We will discuss them in the cabinet meeting on Tuesday."

Everyone nodded and got up to leave. Before Jason could follow suit, his mother called out: "Jason? That purchase we talked about—it has been approved. All yours now."

Smiling, Jason thanked her before heading towards the West Wing.

He and Tim had been practicing closing their connection occasionally, both to be prepared for emergencies and to keep some of their privacy intact. Jason used that skill now to hide his pleasure from Tim as he entered the sunroom.

His husband was artfully arranged on a stool, a scroll in one hand, a quill in the other, looking very serious and princely. Jason, who had felt Tim's boredom scratching at the back of his mind, suppressed a smile as he walked up to the painter and asked: "How are you progressing?"

The man hastened to bow. "Quite well, Prince Jason. See for yourself."

He turned the sketch around for Jason's perusal. Despite making all the right noises of approval, Jason couldn't tell if there had been much progress made since he himself had been posing for it this morning.

The upside to telepathy was that you could have long conversations without ever moving. The downside to telepathy was that you could have long conversations without ever moving, and *it creeped everyone else the hell out*. Joint the wedding portrait might be, Jason and Tim had been told to sit for it separately.

"I'm afraid I am going to have to whisk my husband away from you," he told the painter gravely. "Important matters of state, you understand."

"Of course."

In his head, Tim snorted. Outwardly, his face remained dutiful as he got up and joined Jason, linking their hands as they left the room for their quarters.

Jason managed to hold it in almost all the way to bed, except then Tim remarked that the servants had tidied up his desk again, and he couldn't anymore.

"By the way," he said as casually as possible, "Remember that property near Grenzstadt we talked about? It's ours."

Tim stopped undressing to stare at him. "What do you mean, it's ours?"

Jason grinned. "I mean that our mothers corresponded and decided we should mingle with the people and help popularize the new tourism region. I suspect they want us out of their hair for a while."

Tim kissed him, quick and firm. "Our own place?"

"Draw up the building plans, love." By now, Jason knew Tim had *opinions* on architecture.

"I'm going to let you decide on the kitchen."

"How generous of you." Jason smiled, gave Tim a kiss in return. "I was thinking... maybe something small?"

"Few to no servants," Tim agreed with him, his mind radiating *excited-pleased-dreamy*. "Maybe a big garden so it looks grander."

They finished getting ready for bed. Tim helped him apply his salves and let Jason do the same to the few injuries he himself had sustained. All the time, Jason listened to the plans taking shape in Tim's mind, content to let them wash over him for now. Tim would tell him when he was ready.

Tim turned away to store the healing salves in their drawers, then crawled right back into Jason's arms with a happy smile. "I can't believe this," he confided.

Jason knew exactly what he was talking about. It was a miracle to him, too. His finger drew a gentle line down Tim's throat, then to his collarbone, feeling the faint tremors run through Tim's body. The way their bond amplified touch... Jason was tempted to sink into it, again and again, but he was tired, and his body ached.

Tim seemed to know; he gently took Jason's shoulders and pushed him to lie down. Jason went with it, gratified when Tim immediately followed, resting his head on Jason's chest. His hands drew indiscernible patterns on Jason's skin, not skirting around his scars but incorporating them into a bigger picture.

Tim's mind was as restless as always, but he pressed a gentle kiss on Jason's collarbone where the largest of his scars was, then another to his now-bare wrist, and whispered: "Goodnight."

Jason fell asleep quickly, knowing that when the nightmares came, they would face them together.

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