

## Little Monster

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# Little Monster

by [Lesetoilesfous](#)

## Summary

Nott hasn't been in prison for very long when she gets a cellmate, a human called Caleb.

This story follows the development of an unlikely friendship, and the way it saves two people who'd long since decided to give up on the world.

Or: prison is not the first place Nott imagined she'd find a family, but she isn't complaining.

## Chapter 1: Monsters

They bring in the human man three weeks after Nott. By that point, she's basically got the lay of the land. It's not complicated: she eats twice a day if she's lucky, and the food is cold and sometimes rotting. The other inmates, like her, are kept in cells with three stone walls and one made of bars. But they're not close enough, or sane enough, to make conversation with. The guards rotate in shifts, though between 1am and 4am most of them are normally asleep. There's a slight crack in one corner of the cell, and a little hole under the stone that she can fill with shiny things when she gets them. She has a small, narrow oblong window that acts as a vent in the centre of the back wall of the cell, right by the ceiling. It's cold: and Nott is glad that she's not a member of one of the warmer blooded races. She can hear human teeth chattering a few cells down for a fortnight before it starts to stop: a long, slow, agonising diminuendo that ends with the guards dragging the human's body from their cell. She thinks, at least, that they're not cold any more.

Every so often, the guards pay her a visit, dragging her out of her cell into a room with metal rings in the walls and chains. It's worse than being left by herself. Three weeks in, Nott has counted the cuts and bruises on her skin six times over. Her body aches: her stomach aches with hunger, her head aches with dehydration and her fingers ache from the cold. Mostly, she sits in the corner of her cell and tries not to think about anything: certainly not her clan, or what these guards will do to her, eventually. She tries very, very hard not to think about being forgotten. About being all alone in the world.

She doesn't really succeed.

So one day the guards bring in a human: he has a shock of copper red hair, and a haze of stubble grazing his chin. He's wearing ragged clothes and chains. His chains are little different to Nott's: she eyes them with interest. They're engraved with a strange kind of writing that seems to shift and blur when she tries to read it. The man has a large, dark purple bruise on the side of his face, and when the guards drop him he stays where he falls. They slam the cell door shut, and then it's just Nott and the human.

At first she thinks they might have overdone it: that the man is dead already. She was sure that she'd heard somewhere you weren't supposed to let humans sleep if you'd knocked them out previous. But when Nott finally picks up the courage to check for the man's pulse she finds it there, weak as a sparrow's heart but still beating. His skin is probably cold for a human's, but it's still hot compared to hers. It doesn't take Nott long to check the man's pockets and clothes for anything interesting, though she comes up with nothing. She

supposes the guards stripped him like they stripped her, and for some reason she resents them for that more than almost anything else.

When she's established that there's nothing of interest or value on him, Nott sits back on her heels and stares at the human for a moment. He has deep shadows under his eyes: she wonders whether he was on the run before they caught him. Or maybe he just doesn't sleep well. His hair is greasy and lank, not as healthy as she's seen on some humans. He smells a little, but compared to the goblins she's used to it's nothing. He looks...crumpled, somehow. It takes her a while to guess the emotion, if there even is any in his state of unconsciousness, but eventually she finds it. He looks sad.

Nott spends most of the rest of the day poking and prodding at the human whilst she waits for him to wake up. She doesn't have much else to do, and she's only really been this close to humans before when they've been marks or corpses. She's always surprised by how squishy they are. Squishy, and warm, and big, and blunt. They've got so few sharp edges: no claws to speak of, and teeth little better than a cow's. No wonder they spent so much time making so many pretty weapons. This human doesn't seem very different from the rest: he's definitely not strong, and his belly is soft but not large. She guesses he hasn't been eating much, judging by the state of the rest of him, but it doesn't look like he exercises the way other humans do either.

There are ink stains on his hands. Nott thinks these might be the most interesting thing about him. (These, and the strange chains that bind his wrists and loosely shackle his ankles). She guesses he's some kind of scholar, she can't think of any other reason for the splotches and stripes of black ink between his fingers. There's also a callous on his ring finger and a tan line. It's the one where humans keep their wedding rings, though there's no ring now. Nott narrows her eyes as she peers at it, trying to decide whether it's been gone long – whether it was the guards or something else. Eventually she decides on the guards, though it bothers her that she doesn't know for sure.

As night falls, the human finally starts to shift, murmuring words in a language Nott doesn't know. His eyelids flicker, and Nott springs back into the corner of her cell. The human's brow crumples even further and he shifts, trying to sit up. She's guessing his head hurts. She also knows exactly how humans treat goblins, and moves as far away from him as she can. Slowly, the human blinks into consciousness. He has bright blue eyes, like the sky on a clear day. The man grimaces and starts to move his hands. When he does, his chains rattle, and he looks down at them in something like surprise.

Then he takes in the rest of the cell: the high ceiling, the thick bars, the cold stone floor and the dark corridor outside. A dozen emotions cross his face too quickly for Nott to parse, but she catches the last two. First: disappointment, like he'd expected a different outcome somehow. Then, second: resignation. The human sighs, and, still wincing, moves with a rattle of his chains to sit with his back to the far wall of the cell. Nott watches him, ears pricked for any sudden movement, and doesn't make a sound.

It takes the human a while: at first he just shuts his eyes, and she thinks he's going to fall asleep again. But then he opens them, and starts to look around the cell. There's not much to see - the guards take their food trays after they eat (and sometimes before). They've got a wooden bowl for water, and a bucket in the corner for their waste. That's it. The human grimaces again, and then his eyes settle on Nott's corner. Nott always forgets how bad human eyes are in the dark. It seems to take forever for him to notice her, so long she thinks he's going to look away. But then he startles, jumping so hard he rattles his chains and hits his head on the stone wall, and he gives a loud yelp of pain as he lifts one of his hands to his head. A stupid, childish part of Nott that learned nothing from her clan feels bad for him. The rest of her is determined not to be fooled. Humans look fragile, sure, but they can be as cruel as anybody else.

After a long few moments of clutching his head, the human finally looks up again, blinking. He looks like he's trying to decide whether or not she's real. Nott doesn't move from her corner. She likes the shadows. She feels safer there. Eventually, the human swallows. He looks like he's trying to think of something to say. He opens his mouth, and coughs, and it's a wet, rasping sound. Nott hopes he isn't sick because she doesn't want to get sick and she doesn't want to be in a cell with a sick person.

But then he says, "Hello." His accent is thick and unrecognisable. Nott's a little surprised. She didn't think many foreigners came this far north. The human continues. "I'm sorry, you gave me a surprise." His Common is good, but not entirely fluent. Nott watches him and waits to see if he'll say anything else. She thinks maybe he's trying to smile. "I'm Caleb. What's your name?"

Nott almost says it, but then she remembers her decision not to be fooled, and she bares her teeth and hisses at him instead. Caleb seems a little shocked, and Nott thinks again of his stupid blunt human teeth. He should be scared. She had fangs, and real fangs too, not dumb little short ones like her uncle Davey. She was a proper goblin, even if her clan said otherwise.

Caleb doesn't talk to her after that. Nott decides that it doesn't bother her.

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Nott can take a beating. She'd grown up with one of the most vicious goblin clans in Wildemount. Getting punched by a blood relative was basically their way of saying hello. She'd grown up nervous, and flinching, and over time she'd gotten tough. Any part of her that'd wanted something softer: like the humans gave their children, or the halflings, or even the dwarves and elves with their endless teaching – that part of her died quickly. She shoved it all away and squashed it down inside her and learned how to grit her teeth and not flinch as badly when she wasn't supposed to. So now, at nine summers and a bit, she's good at getting hurt. She knows how to curl up and protect the soft parts that take longer to heal, she knows how to grit her teeth and count down from a thousand and wait for it to stop.

Still, these human guards are bigger than goblins, and they're just as mean, and they say mean things and somehow that's the part that hurts worst of all. Nott can handle a punch, or a kick, or a slap. But she hates it, hates it hates it *hates it* when they start calling her names. They call her nasty human swear words, and they call her horrible things to call a girl, and worst of all, they call her "monster". They laugh and they kick her and they call her an "it", and she's not an it she's a girl, and they call her a monster and she's not a monster she's a goblin and that's different. But they just keep laughing. Sometimes, Nott thinks that maybe there's no point being quiet, since they're not going to stop anyway. Those times, she gets angry, and she gets upset, and she shouts at them through the blood in her mouth to stop. She tells them to leave her alone. She tells them she's not a monster. But that just makes it worse.

Now every time they hurt her, they tell her what a nasty little monster she is. How they're going to cut her head off and put it on a stick to warn travellers not to bring monsters into their city. How she's disgusting and broken and doomed and deadly. How she doesn't deserve to live, how she pollutes the world around her just by breathing, how none of them can bear to look at her. How all she was ever meant to do was hurt and steal and kill. How everyone will be happier when she's finally dead, and how they'll be called heroes for killing her.

Nott can deal with the bruises. This is worse.

When they drag her back to her cell, to her fury and embarrassment, she starts crying. She can't get their voices out of her head. *Monster, monster, monster*. Tears and snot dribble down her face and she tries to scrub them away and they keep coming, and her chest is shaking as she tries to hold down the sobs and she can't and she hurts so much. Her mouth is salty with blood from a split lip and she thinks her nose is broken and it hurts and she doesn't want to cry because it makes it worse but she can't stop thinking about everything they've said and

every time she does she cries harder. What if she doesn't deserve to live? What if she isn't a person? What if she's just some broken, disgusting thing made to hurt and kill and die?

Desperately, she tries to push back against the ghosts in her mind that wear the guards' faces and too big smiles. She thinks, *I'm Nott*. She thinks, *I deserve to live*. She thinks, *I've never killed nobody, not even when I was told to*. She thinks *I am a person, I am*. But then she thinks, *I'm going to die here*. And she starts crying all over again.

The human: Caleb, has been folded up in a corner of the cell since the guards put her back. Covered in rags, he looks like nothing so much as a pile of a dirty laundry. Nott's crying is loud and wet in the quiet, empty space. After a long moment, he sits up. His voice is soft and not as raspy any more. She thinks he wasn't sick so much as hurt, when he arrived. He says, "What's wrong?"

Nott frowns through her tears and shakes her head, ears pressed flat back against her head. "S'none of your business."

Caleb lifts a shoulder in a shrug, and tips his head back so it's resting against the wall. "Fair enough." He's unfolded a little, wrists resting on his bent knees. But he doesn't say anything else. The voices in Nott's head keep getting louder. She looks behind her, through the bars of the cell, at the table where the guards sit sometimes to play cards. They're not there now. That means they'll be in the corridor. They can't hear them as well from out there.

A tidal wave of fear and anger and hate and sadness rises up inside her head and she thinks she's going to drown in it. She speaks without thinking. "Th-they, they keep calling me a monster, and I'm n-not a monster, *I'm not*, I'm m-me." It's hard to get the words out, what with the crying and her aching mouth, and she mostly doesn't want to say it, but then she has and her words hang too loud and too obvious in the cell between them.

Caleb looks at her. His brow is furrowed, and he seems thoughtful. He cocks his head to the side, and strokes his chin. Nott watches him sceptically. Finally, he says, "You're awfully small for a monster." He smiles at some kind of private joke. "One could even call you a little monster."

Nott frowns at him. "What d'you know 'bout monsters?" Gingerly, she tries to wipe the snot away from her lips and chin without brushing her broken nose.

Caleb raises an eyebrow. “More than you might think.”

Nott tells herself that it’s been one month since anyone since anyone other than guards has said anything to her, and that she’s allowed to talk to the human, that it doesn’t have to mean anything. She shifts a little closer. “But you’re just a human. Humans aren’t monsters.”

Several emotions move across Caleb’s face, like clouds in the sky on a cold day. He sighs, and it’s a long, weary thing. “I assure you, little one, humans can most certainly be monsters.”

Nott shakes her head, and it makes her whole face ache. She talks to distract herself from the pain. “But you don’t have claws or teeth or nothing.” Then, because she thinks he might try and lie to her, she adds, “I checked!”

The corner of Caleb’s mouth twitches. It’s not a smile but it could be, maybe, in a different place, with some encouragement. “Well, that’s true. But I am no ordinary human.”

Nott looks at him sceptically, and pushes some hair out of her face. “You look pretty ordinary to me.” She doesn’t try to hide the disbelief in her voice. Again, Caleb’s mouth twitches. With the air of someone who’s done it a thousand times, he lifts one of his manacled hands, and clicks his fingers.

There’s a horrible, buzzing crackle of light, like a thousand mosquitoes, and purple lightning ricochets across his body, starting at his wrists and ankles and the strange writing on his chain. Caleb spasms, choking on a shout of pain, and Nott jumps back in fear, forgetting her bruises for a moment as she tries to move out of range of the strange, hissing, burning light. It’s over after a few heartbeats, but by the time it is Caleb is pale and breathless, his skin covered in a sheen of cold sweat. Nott doesn’t say anything at first. She doesn’t know what to say.

Caleb stays slumped against the wall, chest heaving as he tries to catch his breath. His arms and fingers twitch, and he swallows a few times. Nott stares at him. “Are you....alright?”



Caleb takes a deep breath, and manages to sit up. When he lifts his hand to his hair, it's shaking violently. He says, "Yes, yes I'm fine. Old habits, and all that." Nott doesn't know what he means, but she nods as if he does. She doesn't move closer: watching the chains on his wrists and ankles as if they're going to spring up at any moment and bite her. As far as she knows, they might.

"What was that?"

Caleb looks confused for a moment, and then he follows her gaze to the chains on his wrists, and the strange, shifting writing there. "Oh." He shifts, pulling his legs closer to his chest. "A gift, from our gracious hosts." Now he does smile, but it's bitter and mostly just a baring of teeth. Nott can relate to that. She still doesn't move closer. He finally seems to notice this, and gestures with the chains. Nott flinches and Caleb pauses, looking thoughtful. "Have you ever used any magic?"

Nott frowns and shakes her head. "Never had the Knack. My Uncle Davey did. He tried to teach me once." She scowls. "He's not a very good teacher." Caleb blinks, apparently surprised at the information.

"I'm sure he wasn't. Well, in this case that's a good thing. I'm a wizard, you see." He smiles a little, and again, it's bitter. "Not a very good one. But these are to stop me from using any tricks to try and escape my current predicament." Nott takes that in. Her nose, throbbing, is something of a distraction, and she lifts her chains and to try and prod it back into place. It's not the first time someone's broken her nose. She expects it'll be crooked for the rest of her life, and she's glad that she never really cared that much about what she looked like.

Caleb watches her, apparently waiting for her to say something. Nott thinks about that. She thinks if he's a wizard, then maybe he really does know something about monsters. "So...you don't think I'm a monster?"

Wind whistles through the tiny hole in the back wall of their cell. It's cold and biting and Caleb shivers, pulling his rags closer to his body. But he shakes his head. "No, you are not a monster." Again, his mouth pulls at the corner in the direction of a smile. "A little monster, perhaps."

Nott frowns. “What’s the difference?” She feels the bridge of her nose shift, and gives it one last push. It settles back into place. It still hurts, and it’s probably not fully straight, but it’s better than it was. She grimaces at the taste of blood in the back of her mouth, and swallows it.

Caleb pretends to look thoughtful: she can tell he’s pretending because he’s exaggerating his whole expression, the way humans do with little kids sometimes. “Well, a little monster isn’t a bad thing to be. You’re just a person who makes mischief. Whereas a *monster*, well, yes, those are rather frightening creatures.”

Nott thinks about that. She still isn’t sure whether she buys it. “But can’t a little monster grow up into being a proper monster?”

Caleb purses his lips. This time, he seems to really think about it. At last, he says. “Only if you want to be.” His expression grows serious. “No one can ever make you a monster. That’s your decision, and you can always change your mind.” Nott isn’t sure that’s true, but it’s a nice thing to say all the same.

She sits back against the wall on the side of their cell, not moving much closer to Caleb, but not actively trying to stay away from him either. She nods, and pushes her hands under her armpits, hoping to warm her aching fingers. “Alright.” She shuts her eyes. She can feel sleep coming now, like a cart thundering ever closer. Her whole body is ready to rest and start working on some of the bruises. But there’s something else in her head, something she needs to do before she sleeps. She keeps her eyes shut so she doesn’t have to look at Caleb when she says it.

“M’name’s Nott, by-the-way. Nice to meet you.”

Caleb shifts, the rags around his body shuffling like blankets or packs on a saddle. Nott doesn’t open her eyes. He says, “Nice to meet you too.” If he says anything else, she doesn’t hear it. But she sleeps better, that night, than any of the nights before.

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The next day they take Caleb away. Nott sits in their cell and fidgets. The guards seem angry today, short-tempered for some reason. It's a bad day for her to take the things, even if the Itch is rising hot and sticky in her fingers, making her uncomfortable and restless. She entertains herself by practicing tricks with a brass button she'd snagged from one of the senior guard's uniforms, making it disappear and reappear in her hand, rolling it between her fingers.

When they bring Caleb back, he's bruised and bloody but still conscious. They drop him in the cell and he falls in a heap. Nott watches them, waiting to see whether they'll take her next. But they don't give her a second glance, locking the cell door with a thud and chunk of metal. Further down, one of the other prisoner's wails someone's name. Nott's ears flicker back against her head. She wishes that she didn't have to hear anything.

Once the guards have left, she moves a little closer to Caleb, though she doesn't cross into the two feet or so of personal space that all humans seem to like so much. She waits for him to sigh and slowly pick himself up. His face is all blue and red and purple, like someone has painted it. Goblins don't bruise as easily as humans do, and their bruises are a lot less obvious. Her Uncle Davey says it's because goblins have an evolutionary advantage. With humans, you always know how to hit them where it hurts, because their skin gives you such obvious instructions.

Still, even for someone who bruises easily, Caleb looks sore. Nott doesn't have anything to give him, and she's not sure she'd give him something if she did. She needs to keep herself alive, after all. But she thinks the next best thing, the thing that she wants when she's hurt, is a distraction. She doesn't show him the button, because that's one of her shiny things and besides she doesn't want the guard to take it away. So instead, after too long spent listening to Caleb's heavy breathing, she says, "I've never heard anyone talk about little monsters before."

Caleb huffs. She thinks maybe he's surprised, or maybe he's angry, and she braces herself just in case. But then he says, "How old are you, Nott?"

Nott frowns, and thinks about lying. Humans weren't very good at guessing goblin ages. Apparently some of them thought that if you were small that would tell you how old someone was, as if every race was like them! But then she thinks there's probably nothing she could gain from lying, and she decides to settle on the truth. She sticks out her chin. "I'm nine summers. And a half."

A little storm of emotions runs over Caleb's bruised face, and he coughs, saying something in a language Nott doesn't recognise. Then he coughs again. "Well, have you spent a lot of time around humans?"

"I've seen a lot of dead ones." Nott answers, honestly, not really thinking about it. Caleb seems surprised. Their bucket, in the corner, reeks of excrement, but by now Nott is mostly used to it.

Caleb thinks for a moment. "Well, it's an expression that living humans use sometimes, when they're talking about children." Nott frowns even more deeply than before, chewing on that idea. It doesn't really explain anything.

"But why would you call your children monsters?" She thinks of her clan. "Do you not like children? I thought humans did like children." Absently, she fiddles with the frayed hem of the ratty, filthy dress she's wearing.

"We do. Well, usually. It's more acceptable to be kind to children than not. Humans do not think well of people who are cruel to children." Caleb sounds like a teacher. Nott thinks it's not so bad, really. Though she does disagree with him on one point.

"Humans don't like people who're cruel to *human* children. I seen tons of humans kill goblin children. And they're bad to drow too, I hear. And orcs. And tieflings, sometimes, if they find 'em when they're small." It wasn't nice, when humans killed goblins, but Nott hadn't really been close to anyone who died, and people in her clan died all the time. Most of the races here hated goblins, and they hated them right back. It was just the way things were.

"And yet you don't think humans are monsters." Caleb doesn't really seem to be saying it to her: he's looking above her head when he says it, and he sounds bitter again. Nott thinks that he's angry about something, really angry, that deep kind of anger that never really goes away. She wonders what happened to make him that way. But then Caleb shakes his head. "Well, even so, I do not think I am alone in believing that we should be kind to all children, whatever race they belong to. So when humans call children little monsters, it isn't to be cruel. It's mostly... a game. A sort of joke: it means someone who makes mischief. Who maybe breaks the rules?"

The last part turns into a question, and Nott shifts uncomfortably. She's not about to tell him about the Itch. He might turn on her, like everyone else has, and then she'd been stuck in a cell with someone who hated her as much as everyone outside of it did. She doesn't say anything, and after a moment Caleb lets the point drop. In the silence that swells between them, Nott thinks about what Caleb has said, turning it over in her mind like a particularly nice rock. "But...if your children are being bad, then shouldn't you punish them? Why would you play a game? Doesn't them make them want to be bad?"

Caleb shrugs. "Well, there are different schools of thought." The ragged shirt and pants he's wearing have torn a little, probably thanks to the guards, and his skin underneath is very pale. The hair on his chest and arms and legs is such a dark red it almost looks brown. "But this is more the kind of behaviour that doesn't hurt anybody. And if it isn't hurting anybody, then it isn't so bad. Mischief can be a good thing, sometimes. We all need to laugh." He says it without a hint of a smile. Nott considers that.

"Humans are weird." Caleb huffs, something hoarse and short. Nott thinks maybe, with a good meal inside him and some real rest, it could be a laugh.

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Caleb talks in his sleep. Nott doesn't notice it at first: either she's asleep at the same time as him or one of them is gone. But as the weeks pass, he starts sleeping more. She's pretty sure humans need more sleep than goblins, and she knows that they sleep a lot more at night than goblins do. Since they can't really see at night, it makes sense. So Caleb starts sleeping more, while Nott is awake in the small hours of the morning, playing with her shiny things. At first, he just passes out, sleeping deeply but not for long, maybe a few hours at a time. As he starts sleeping longer, he starts dreaming. Nott sort of wishes he wouldn't.

Caleb, by the looks of things, does not have nice dreams. He frowns and grimaces and twists and turns. He makes small sounds that sound like little birds: sounds of pain and sounds of sadness. Nott crouches in the corner of their cell and watches him warily, remembering the older goblins in her clan and the battle dreams they'd have. The dreams where they'd wake up screaming and punching and slashing. It was always best to give them a wide berth, just in case they didn't recognise you when they woke. Caleb's dreams remind her of those.

After another week, he starts talking in his sleep. Despite herself, Nott is curious. She listens. He often speaks in the foreign language, the one with sharp letters and soft ones, that makes a different kind of shape in her mouth when she tries to imitate it. That language has burrs and

rolls. It's not a bad sounding thing, but it's strange, and Nott doesn't understand it. Sometimes she finds herself wishing he'd speak in Common. Then, at least, she'd be able to get something from the hours she spends awake while he sleeps so noisily.

But he doesn't, and she doesn't. Instead, all she collects is a litany of names, repeated over and over again, and often surrounded by the same strange language, spoken softly or almost shouted. *Helene. Mathilda. Luisa.* Again and again Caleb says their names. Nott can't decide whether he's scared of them, or angry with them, or frightened of them or frightened for them, or all those things at once squashed into one big mess of bad dreams.

But one day she asks, because Nott has always been curious, and it's no more likely to get her killed than anything else she does. "You talk in your sleep sometimes." She watches Caleb carefully for a reaction: waiting for him to shout or swear or hit her for eavesdropping. He mostly just looks surprised. Far off, someone is screaming, and Nott is trying very hard not to think about it. She thinks maybe Caleb is too, because he lifts one hand to the stubble that's turning into a beard on his chin. His wrists are red and raw with the metal by now. Nott thinks that humans are really pretty fragile. She's grateful for her own tough goblin skin.

"Do I?"

Nott nods, and continues, still careful, approaching this sentence as she would a particularly creaky wooden floor. "I don't know most of what you're saying. You talk in that, um. The language you speak."

"Zemnian." Caleb supplies, and that explains a lot, though it also doesn't explain a lot of other things. "I'm from the Zemni Fields." Nott nods, filing that away for further consideration.

"I don't know what you're saying, but..." She pauses, looking at Caleb. The worst bruises have faded a little, at least for now. They're stained in yellow and green patches around his face and body, like algae or tobacco. He has deep, deep purple shadows under his eyes, and his lips are chapped and splitting. His hair is dark with dirt and grease, and it hangs lank and filthy around his head. He looks very tired, and Nott wonders whether she should bring this up. But then she thinks that there's not much else to do, anyway, and she'll have to ask eventually. And she wants to ask now. "You say these names, a lot." Caleb's whole body goes stiff, like he's seen a basilisk. Nott recognises that movement: it's what you do when you're really, really scared, or when you're waiting for someone to hit you and you're trying not to

flinch. She wonders whether saying these names would be like hitting Caleb. She hopes that it isn't. "Um, mostly you just say....Helene. And uh, Mathilda. And Luisa." Caleb does flinch, then, and Nott regrets it almost as soon as she's said the words.

Caleb's pale blue eyes move away from her: looking down the cold, bare, empty corridor, lit by a few flickering torches. He swallows. He opens his mouth, but no sound comes out. Whoever was screaming has stopped now. Caleb works his jaw, like he's trying to chew something particularly tough. He blinks a few times. Then he lets out a breath: a long, shuddering thing that he held for too long, and he shuts his mouth, and he closes his eyes, and he shakes his head.

Nott doesn't ask about them after that.

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Nott really, really, really hates being in prison. It's not just the restlessness, or the cold, or the boredom, or the way her bones ache, or the feeling of being trapped, or being scared, or being angry, or being sad. It's also the food. The food *sucks*. She doesn't know if the guards have any other goblins in the cells, or if they just don't care, but she knows she isn't getting the right food. She doesn't think the guards have even considered the idea that not every race can eat or wants to eat what the humans have. Though judging by the way Caleb picks at their food, it's not good even by human standards.

Still, as she retches into the bucket at the corner of their cell, and tries not to breathe in the smell of waste in there already, because that just makes it worse, Nott hates these particular humans even more than she did already. She isn't just hungry now, and she's gone past the point of feeling numb. Her stomach *hurts*. It's a blistering, aching pain, and she can feel her insides clenching and shaking. She thinks maybe her body is starting to try and eat itself. She feels shivery and thin and cold and she hates it. When the guards shove another tray of grain and green-grey grasses under the door she wants to cry. She doesn't, and that's probably because she's dehydrated, but she wants to.

Instead, she glares at the tray of food, knowing that the green things will make her sick and the grain will do nothing to fill her. She picks at the meagre stick of jerky shoved on top of it all slowly, trying to savour the measly crumbs of salt and protein it provides. On the other side of their cell, Caleb watches her, and Nott ignores him. After a long moment, he says, "Not hungry?"

Now Nott really does want to cry, because she *is* hungry. She's *so* hungry. But her mouth still tastes sour from vomiting and all of this food is poison and her stomach is still trying to turn over in her chest and she feels like she's going to fall apart. She shakes her head, then nods. "I can't eat this."

Caleb tilts his head to the side, sitting up a little and moving closer. Neither of them has crossed the two foot radius yet, but they don't keep as much distance as they did before, either. Caleb peers at her food, his dirty hair hanging over his face. "It doesn't look so bad." She knows he's lying, and it's probably to try and make her feel better, but he doesn't understand. She clenches her fists and hits the stone slabs of their cell floor, trying to find somewhere to put her frustration.

"No, I *can't* eat it. It makes me sick. It doesn't help." She's starting to raise her voice, but she doesn't care. Other prisoners are shouting too, and the guards aren't nearby, so she doesn't feel like she needs to be silent. What she feels is desperate.

Caleb frowns at her, and his brow crumples up like folded paper. "Are you..." He pauses, searching for the word. "Allergic?" His Common is a little better these days and his accent isn't as obvious, though it's still there. Nott shakes her head, ears pressing against her head.

"No! This isn't goblin food! This is human food! We don't eat this!" She kicks the flagstones of their cell. It doesn't really do much, and she's too weak for it to be satisfying. She stomps again. Caleb raises his eyebrows.

"What do you eat?"

"Meat!" Nott is sort of shouting now, though her dry throat makes the words come out all raspy and quieter than she wants them too. "We eat meat and some oats and bread but we can't eat grasses and half your stupid roots they make us sick and I'm sick and I hate it and it hurts and I want it to stop."

Caleb nods, taking that in. He doesn't tell her to stop shouting, and he doesn't shout at her either. A breeze whistles through their cell, and he shivers, but mostly he just looks distracted. After a long moment, he says, "Let me see your teeth." Nott is a little confused,



and half scared he's only asking so he can hurt her somehow, but she complies, baring her fangs. Caleb gets a little closer, brushing their two foot parameter of personal space. He squints.

"You really are a little monster." Several feelings rise in Nott's chest at this. Part of her is suspicious, and part of her is sceptical. Part of her thinks that's probably a bad thing, even if Caleb had said otherwise. But a part of her - a very childish, small, young part of her - is sort of pleased. Because he'd said it was mischief, and he said that wasn't always a bad thing, and that people needed to laugh sometimes. Caleb says something in Zemnian, and Nott frowns.

He translates, haltingly. "I think, Nott, that you are probably more...carnivorous?" The v comes out sounding like an f, but Nott understands him and she nods to let him know as much. The sour, sickly smell of her food is thick in the air between them, and her stomach turns just breathing it in. "Than humans. You need more meat, less vegetables." Nott nods, emphatically. Caleb's mouth pulls at the corner in the same almost-smile he'd worn a few times before. A thought seems to occur to him: she watches it arrive in his head with wrinkles on his brow. "How are your eyes? Can you still see?" Nott blinks, and squints, looking around their cell. It's...mostly alright. But she thinks she could maybe see more details before.

"I think it's ok. It's a little blurry, but I'm not feeling good." Caleb nods, stroking the mess of beard that's growing untended on his chin. There's blood and bits of food in it, but both of them have been in prison long enough to stop caring about such things.

"We should watch that. Let me know if it gets any worse." Nott wonders why he would care, but she doesn't question it. She'd grown up poor and hungry enough then she didn't tend to look a gift horse in the mouth. So she nods, and Caleb does smile then: a very small, subtle thing. It's sort of nice. Goblins didn't really smile a lot: smiles meant teeth and teeth meant fighting and danger, nothing like what the other races meant. But Nott knows that it's supposed to be a good thing. A friend thing. Carefully, she tries to imitate the expression, trying not to bare her teeth too much. When she does, Caleb's smile widens. Then he gets stiffly to his feet. His joints crack as he does, quietly, but Nott has very good hearing.

Caleb turns and moves to the other side of his cell, where he'd been picking at his own food. He comes back with his stick of jerky, and holds it out to her. Nott snatches it away from him. No one has ever taught her false modesty, and she's never been particularly interested in learning. She does, however, say, "Thank you." Then she takes a bite, mouth watering at a real mouthful of meat. Around the jerky, she says, dribbling a little. "You can have my greens, if you want them." Caleb smiles at one of his private jokes, but he doesn't explain

why. Instead, he goes back to the other side of the cell, and brings his tray across. Carefully, he scoops Nott's (cold, slimy) greens onto his tray.

After that, they eat together. Caleb gives Nott the scraps of meat he's given, and she gives him her vegetables. It's still not ideal. But it's a hell of a lot better than it was before.

## Chapter 2: Books

### Chapter Summary

Nott looks at her hands. Her claws are long and black – too long, actually, she needs to clip them, but she can't do that without her knife. She scratches at some dead skin on her wrist, under where her manacles are clasped tight. Her chains shift, cold and heavy over her skin as she does so. She swallows, trying to soothe the ache in her throat, and looks up to see Caleb watching her, patiently. She says, "I guess what I'm wondering is....are books your shiny things?"

A week passes. The guards don't stop calling Nott a monster. She doesn't think they ever will. But it hurts a whole lot less now. Because every time they say it, she thinks of the warmth in Caleb's voice when *he* says it. She thinks of him giving her the meagre meat on his tray, and making quiet jokes. The guards spit, "Monster", and in her head she adds *little*, and that makes it better, somehow. They still hit her, they still bully her, but now when they tell her she was made to hurt and be hurt she thinks of Caleb saying, fiercely: "No one can ever make you a monster. That's your decision. And you can change your mind."

She thinks he's probably very clever, if he's a human and a wizard. He must know what he's talking about. So the guards tell her she's meant to die and meant to kill and it doesn't cut as deep because she just thinks that that's not the choice she wants to make. And she has a choice. Caleb taught her that.

They start talking to each other more. By this point they've been in their cell together for nearly a month. It's still cold, and bare, and both of them keep getting skinnier. They spend most days bruised or healing, but they're alive and they're not alone and that's something. Caleb's beard and hair are long and unkempt, and he smells, but it's not really any worse than anyone in Nott's clan ever smelled, and she doesn't mind it. Something about the grime makes him less frightening, anyway. It makes him look less like the humans who hurt her, and more like Caleb, her friend.

The guards' shifts are always thinner at night, and usually farther off. It doesn't take Caleb long to make this realisation, and he starts napping in the day, staying awake at night so that they can talk a little more freely and without fear of some arbitrary punishment. It's on one such night, when owls outside the castle are hooting and moonlight drips into their cell like a river, that Caleb suddenly springs to his feet, restless.

Nott, in her corner, fiddling with a gold ring she'd stolen from one of the guards, watches him but doesn't move. Caleb says something in Zemnian, he does that a lot. He scratches at his chin, and he does that a lot too. Then he starts to speak in Common, raising his voice. He almost never does that. "May we not be given *something* to do?? I would take manual labour over this. At least in the Fields we know how to treat our convicts. This is *pointless*. The fear, I can handle. The pain and the cold and the hunger but will no-one spare me of this boredom?"

There's a loud clattering in the hallway and Nott freezes, hiding the ring. Caleb stops too, looking up and squinting in the low light. Both of them hold their breath. But after a long moment, the clattering moves away. Further off down the cells, someone spits a curse in a croaking voice. Wind whistles through the little hole in the back of their cell, and Caleb shivers.

Nott waits until she hears the guard's footsteps moving further away down the corridor, and then she clears her throat, sitting up a little. "You've got me."

Immediately, Caleb softens. It's really obvious when humans do that, or at least when Caleb does: his whole face crumples like folded paper. "Of course, my little friend. I apologise. But I find my mind busy with useless thoughts and nothing to do with them." He scratches his head, as if doing so will somehow dislodge said thoughts. Nott watches him. Caleb huffs a sigh. "If only I had a *book*." There is more longing in that one word than anything Nott has heard him say so far. She recognises it, recognises that tone of voice. Something warm, sort of nervous and sort of excited, bubbles up inside her. She scratches the back of her hand.

Caleb keeps pacing, going back to muttering in Zemnian. Nott lets him talk for a while, whilst she tries to get her thoughts in order, looking for a way to say this right. She fiddles with the ring, thumb slipping over its glass-smooth surface of polished gold. Her breathing evens out. Then she clears her throat, trying to ignore the way it stings and aches. Catching a cold in here was sort of inevitable, even for a goblin. "Caleb."

For a moment, Caleb keeps pacing. Nott raises her voice. "Caleb." He stops, and turns to her, looking somewhere between confused and frustrated. A part of Nott is still scared that he's annoyed with her: that he might snap, suddenly, and be as cruel as everybody else. But that part isn't helpful right now, so she does her best to ignore it. Caleb steps closer, his chains rattling as he does so. There are dark red bruises around his wrists and ankles these days, rubbed into callouses. His bare feet are filthy with dust.

“Yes? What is it?”

Nott shoves some of her hair out of her face. It’s sticky with dirt and she wants to hack some of it off, but she can’t do that right now so this’ll have to do. She clears her throat again, mostly as an excuse to try and get her racing heart to slow down. “Did I ever tell you about the Itch?”

Caleb frowns, and steps a little closer. “The itch?” He pauses, searching for words. It’s the expression he always wears when he thinks he might have misunderstood something. He looks her over, the way humans look over their children when they’ve fallen, checking for injuries. “Are you sick? Is this a...a rash?”

Nott shakes her head and crosses her legs. “No, it’s nothing like that. It’s more like...” She thinks about it. “An itch in my head? Like. Like you know when you really, really want something? Like sometimes people want drinks, or drugs, and the like?” And she sort of wishes she hadn’t said that, because she does, as a matter of fact, *really* want a drink. Nott tries to ignore the sudden thirst and presses on. As she does, Caleb sits down carefully in front of her, still frowning.

“Well, I get this...itch in my head. And it makes me want things. Well, it makes me want to take things. Shiny things. Pretty things.” A look of understanding dawns on Caleb’s face, to Nott’s immense relief. She knew he was clever.

“So...this itch...it makes you steal things?” He speaks slowly, watching her closely, as if he’s worried that he’s going to offend her. Nott’s mouth twists a little.

“It makes me *want* to steal things. Mostly I just, I really, really like shiny things. I hate not having them. And having them makes me feel...good, and calm. Like my feet are connected to the earth and I’m me, and not anyone else. Like there’s nothing to be scared of.” Nott realises, suddenly, that she’s never really told anyone that. She waits for Caleb’s expression to twist, for him to start shouting or hitting her or just telling her she’s broken.

Instead he strokes his beard. After a long moment, in which Nott’s heart tries very hard to break out of her chest, he says, “I understand.” She’s not sure that he does, but she thinks

what he's actually saying is that he's going to try. And that's more than anyone has ever given to her before. Caleb's jaw works, as if he's chewing through what he wants to say next. Then he asks, quietly, "Why are you telling me this, Nott?"

Nott looks at her hands. Her claws are long and black – too long, actually, she needs to clip them, but she can't do that without her knife. She scratches at some dead skin on her wrist, under where her manacles are clasped tight. Her chains shift, cold and heavy over her skin as she does so. She swallows, trying to soothe the ache in her throat, and looks up to see Caleb watching her, patiently. She says, "I guess what I'm wondering is...are books your shiny things?"

For the briefest of moments, Caleb looks honestly surprised. Then he laughs: a startled, low, rasping chuckle. When he smiles at her, his eyes are bright. She thinks maybe he can't see her as well, in the low light, but Nott's eyes are good, especially since Caleb started giving her his portion of meat. He lifts his hands with a rattle of chains and scratches the side of his head. The cells up and down the corridor are mostly quiet. Nott thinks someone is crying, but she's trying not to listen to them.

Then Caleb nods to himself. "Yes. Books are my shiny things." Something like a plan appears in the back of Nott's head.

"Must be horrible not to have any, then." She says it earnestly, and Caleb's expression falls, which is really all the confirmation she needs.

"I suppose so. They're a luxury, really, but..." He stops, moving to sit back against the wall with a sigh. Their unspoken two-foot breathing space has shrunk, recently. Caleb is about a foot away from Nott now, and she doesn't mind at all. She nods, thinking about it.

"Did you learn magic from books?"

Caleb sighs, staring at the shadows just outside their cell. In the corner, their slop bucket stinks, but Nott is mostly used to it by now. "Can I trade a question for a question?"

They've played this game before. Nott nods, eagerly, and then, remembering that he might not be able to see her, says, "Yes!"

Caleb shifts to look at her. The stones where she's sitting are cold, though they're a little warmer from her having sat there for so long. It's a trick she'd learned in the few weeks before he arrived. So Nott pulls up her knees, but doesn't really move closer. "Why did they put you in here?"

Nott sniffs, a little surprised. She wasn't sure if he was going to ask. She'd mostly figured that she wouldn't ask him why, especially since he still had those dreams about the people he didn't want to talk about. *Helene, Mathilda, Luisa*. She had a horrible feeling that the two things were connected, and she figured it might be painful to talk about. Still, she doesn't really mind talking about her own so-called crimes.

"I took a stick." She says, matter-of-factly. Caleb's expression twists into anger, real anger, and Nott flinches back, waiting for him to shout at her or strike her or something. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't have done it."

Immediately, Caleb looks remorseful. He takes a deep breath, and lifts his hands in an appeasing gesture. Nott, curled up with her back to the wall, watches him carefully, eyes wide and ears pricked high, waiting for any sudden movement. Caleb says, "No, no no, I'm not angry with you, Nott. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." Nott watches him for a little while longer, but when he doesn't do anything she starts to unfold, just a little.

"But you are angry." She says, accusing. Caleb sighs and runs a hand over his face, smearing the dirt there.

"Yes. I am. I am angry that they would put a nine year old girl in a cell for a crime as small as stealing a stick." He really is, too, Nott can hear it in his voice. It's a cold, hard kind of anger that comes out in words so sharply enunciated they'd cut if they had edges. Now it's her turn to be confused.

"But I'm a goblin." She watches him, and waits for this to explain everything. Because it does. Humans are always looking for excuses to kill goblins. They think of goblins as pests. Everyone told her so. So of course they were harsher in their punishments. They probably wouldn't have locked up a human for stealing a stick, maybe, but she wasn't a human. It was just the way things were.

Caleb makes a soft, bitten off sound of frustration, and spits something in Zemnian. He opens his mouth, then shuts it again. “Yes, but even so...” He stops, pursing his lips. “This is not justice.”

*Well, yeah*, Nott thinks. *Obviously*. But she doesn’t say that, because she thinks it might be rude. Instead, she tries to find a way to reassure Caleb. After all, she knew she’d done something wrong. The mayor’s silver cane, inlaid with rubies, was very, very pretty and very shiny. But she knew she wasn’t supposed to take it. She tries to find a way to explain this. “It was a *very nice* stick.”

Caleb sighs, and rests his head against the stone wall of their cell with a soft thump. “I’m sure it was.”

Nott gets the feeling he’s missing the point. But he doesn’t say anything after that, and eventually slips into the deep, slow breathing of sleep. Nott fiddles with the gold ring in her pocket, and thinks about books and shiny things, and starts to plan.

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Stealing from the guards is not exactly easy, but it’s not too difficult either. Not for someone like Nott, who’s been slipping things from people’s pockets since she learned to walk. Still, Nott tries to do it as little as she can. If the guards realise she’s stealing, she has no doubt that they’ll be even crueller than they already are. And increasingly, she doesn’t want their anger to fall on Caleb’s head. She thinks she’d need a very good reason for that, and mostly she hasn’t had one yet, so mostly she tries hard to ignore the Itch and only steals things she thinks no one will notice. Bits of string, candle stubs, feathers and buttons. Sometimes she wants shinier things, but she keeps these tricks few and far between, despite the way it makes her skin feel hot and tight and keeps her restless.

Still, she hasn’t stopped. Not by any stretch of the imagination. As a matter of fact, Nott thinks that she probably couldn’t stop stealing things even if she wanted to. Which she emphatically does not.

The difficulty of this particular game, however, is that a book is not the kind of thing a guard keeps in his pocket. She’s seen them reading before: there’s one in particular, a portly man



with a bristling head of close cut hair like the hide of a boar, who often read by candlelight in the evenings. He's her mark. She just has to figure out how to make him bring the book closer. As it turns out, this is much easier than she'd originally worried it would be.

Caleb is gone. Nott doesn't why they take them away to hurt them: she'd expected them to ask questions, but she doesn't think that they do. Instead it just seems to happen as and when the guards feel like it. Maybe they think they're teaching them a lesson. Nott thinks of Caleb coming back, exhausted and bruised and limping, and feels suddenly, fiercely angry. She wants to break the rules.

So she goes up to the very edge of her cell, chains rattling, and wraps her hands around the rough, cold bars. "Oi! You! Whatcha reading?" The guard with the book is the only one on duty, and he ignores her at first. But Nott is not going to be so easily refused, especially not while Caleb is missing and she doesn't know when he'll come back. "Hey you! I'm talking to you! What. Are. You. Reading? Is it a dirty book? My Uncle Davey said that you can get those. But only stupid people read dirty books. Smart people get real lovers. But I guess maybe you can't do that. Is it because you're ugly?" The guard slams his book onto the table with a thump. Further down the cells, someone yelps in fear as he gets to his feet with a scrape of metal armour.

This close to the edge of the cell, the flickering torch on the wall offers some meagre heat. Nott focuses on that, and not the smell of leather and steel and boot polish as the guards gets closer, waving the battered book in his hand. His face is red and twisted up in a snarl like a dog's. Nott's stomach flips. "I am *not* reading a dirty book, you filthy little monster." Nott thinks of Caleb calling her a little monster, and it's like pulling up a shield in her head. She keeps her chin raised, defiant.

"No? What is it then?"

"Who gave you permission to ask questions?" The guard roars, spit flying. He smells like beer, too, now he's so close, but Nott doesn't back off. The book in his hands is brown and stained with soot and fingerprints, and the title is mostly faded. It's probably not as nice as the ones Caleb used to have, and Nott is pretty sure it's not magical. But it's something. She takes a deep breath. She's planned this part.

She gets up on tiptoes, and spits on the guards foot. "Who gives you the right to go around shouting at people?" Her voice is high, and squeaky with her cold, and it's not as threatening

as she wants it to be. But it has the desired effect. The guard goes so red he's almost purple, and grabs her by the filthy front of her dress, lifting her off the ground. As he does so, quick as a viper, Nott snatches the book out of his hands and slips it through a slit in the side of her dress. The guard shakes her so hard her teeth rattle, but she keeps her arm pressed firmly against her side, stopping the book from falling out of the pocket she'd made for just such occasions.

*"HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO ME LIKE THAT?"* The guard's voice is so loud it makes Nott's ears ring, and they press back against her head on instinct. The guard shakes her a bit more, and then he slams her forward, thumping her head against the bars of her cell. Nott's whole world goes fuzzy, and blood dribbles down her forehead. She blinks, somehow keeping a rictus grip on the book, and the guard drops her, stomping back to his table.

She tries to shake off the insects buzzing in her brain, and crawls to the back of her cell, slipping the book into her little nest beneath the stone as quietly and quickly as she can. The guard pulls out the chair at his table with a scrape of wood and stone, curses, and gets back to his feet, stomping over to the cell. "Oi, vermin. Where the fuck is my book?"

Nott shakes her head, gingerly pressing at the cut on her forehead. She feels dizzy. Without warning, she throws up the meagre contents of her stomach. The guard's face twists in disgust. "For fuck's sake." He comes back after a few minutes with a cloth and a freezing cold bucket of water, which he tips over her and the sick. "Clean that up."

The cold water actually helps with the way Nott's head is spinning, though she's glad she'd hidden the book. She takes the cloth and starts to wipe up the mess, dropping it in the bucket when she's done. The guard watches, arms folded, then shakes his head. "Nasty little vermin." Nott doesn't really pay attention to him, sitting back against the wall of the cell and wrapping her arms around her chest. Her dress clings to her body, and she's suddenly very cold. As the guard walks away, he starts patting his chest. "Where in all the hells did I put my book?"

Nott manages to resist the urge to smile, barely. She won.

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When the guards finally bring Caleb back, he's limping but alive. Nott watches from the corner of the cell as they shove him back inside and he staggers, blinking slowly. He moves stiffly, his already slow and clumsy human limbs slower with pain. The guards say something and Caleb bristles, but then they're gone, and he turns and slumps against the wall, sliding down to sit on the ground with a long, shuddering sigh. Nott waits until the guards are a few feet away, then moves across the cell towards him. Caleb smells of blood and sweat, though she can't really see where he's bleeding. He blinks at her in the low light, his pale blue eyes settling on the cut on Nott's forehead.

"Are you alright?" Caleb's voice is rasping, and he lisps a little – there's a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth and Nott is guessing they got one of his teeth. But mostly she's distracted because that is the absolute last question he should be asking right now.

"That doesn't matter! Are you alright?" She glances up, out of the cell: the guards are still far off, with their backs turned. Cautiously, Nott moves a little closer to Caleb. "Where are you hurt?"

Caleb shakes his head. He looks tired, and his face is red with fresh bruises. "Nowhere vital." Nott frowns. She isn't entirely sure she believes that. Caleb starts to cough, and it's a horrible, wet, rasping thing. Nott turns and grabs the bowl of water near the edge of their cell: she'd saved some for him. She knew how much it hurt to be thirsty after the guards had finished with you, especially if you'd been crying.

She offers it to Caleb, and he goes to take it, but his hands are bruised and scraped and shaking and he nearly drops it. Nott catches it, and glances up at him nervously. Caleb looks away from her. He almost seems embarrassed. Then he says, quietly, "Could you...?" It takes Nott a minute to understand what he's asking. No one has ever cared for her, but the reverse is also true. No one has ever really trusted her to care for them. Again, as far as she knows, it's not really a goblin thing. Or at least, it's not a thing her clan does.

So she's shaking a little, too, when she lifts the bowl and very, very carefully tips the water into Caleb's mouth. It's a little clumsy, and some of it dribbles over his chin, into his overlong beard. But after a moment, he makes a sound and she stops, setting down the bowl beside him. She stares at him with wide eyes. His breathing is rough and uneven. She really doesn't want him to die.

“Are you going to be ok?” Nott does not like how small her voice sounds when she asks the question, but she’s said it now, and most of her just wants to hear what Caleb’s answer is going to be. The corner of his mouth twitches in the same familiar not-smile that it has a dozen times before, and Caleb gestures for her to come closer. Nott does, still a little nervous, barely noticing the cold of the cell’s stone floor.

Caleb lifts a hand. It’s slow enough that Nott doesn’t flinch - she knows she could dodge it in her sleep if it’s some kind of blow. But it’s not. Instead, Caleb moves his hand to the top of her head and ruffles her hair. It feels...weird. Weird, but also strangely nice. Nott huffs a string of greasy black hair out of her eyes and looks up at Caleb, ears twitching. The not-smile turns into a real one. It’s slightly ruined by the blood in Caleb’s teeth, but Nott’s mostly used to it by now. Caleb smiles at her, and says, “Don’t worry, little monster. I won’t leave you alone.” Then he falls asleep.

Two days later, Caleb is up late with Nott. They can talk at night, so they do, and they’ve just finished eating when Nott decides that it’s time to share her present. Caleb’s injuries from the days before had not been as serious as she’d been worried they were, and he doesn’t seem to have any trouble settling back into their nocturnal routine, though he still has difficulty seeing in the dark. He tells her that he has a spell for that, one that makes golden lights. Nott is a little doubtful, but she’s getting to the point where she’s willing to believe most things Caleb tells her. She holds the phrase *little monster* close to her heart, these days, and it still makes things easier.

That said there are some things she’s still nervous of sharing, so she does her best to hide lifting the broken stone in the corner of their cell with her claws. It sticks a little, but she manages it, and then she wraps her fingers around the soft, battered hide cover of the book she’d stolen for Caleb. She feels nervous, suddenly. Far off, in one of the cells, someone is shouting and angry. She tries to ignore it.

Caleb, in his corner of the cell, doesn’t move. He’s murmuring to himself in Zemnian – he does that a lot. She’s asked him about it before, and she’s not sure he told her the whole truth. He’d said, *old regrets, mostly – spells and anything else I remember*. When he’d mentioned spells she’d been a little nervous, remembering the purple lightning from before. But Caleb had been quick to reassure her. *You have to do the gestures, too, and have the right ingredients. The words aren’t enough, by themselves*. Nott had nodded, filing that information away for future reference.

She slips the book out of her little nest, and tucks it into the slit in her dress. It had taken her almost two weeks to make the pocket, with a stolen needle and bits of thread and fabric, but

she was still proud of it. Even Caleb didn't know about it. As she gets closer, Caleb looks up, and gives her his usual not-quite-smile. He doesn't smile properly very often, even when it's just the two of them, but Nott doesn't blame him. He doesn't shiver as much as these days, but he keeps getting skinnier, and dirtier, and she doesn't think he likes it.

Caleb says, quietly, "Is everything alright?"

Nott nods, staying on her feet, and shifting her weight from one side to the other. One of the lower ranked guards had taken their bucket the day before, and even though the stink was still in the air, it was significantly less than it had been. Nott has learned, even in her short life, to be grateful for small mercies. She looks at Caleb, and tells herself that he isn't going to hit her, or shout at her. She doesn't quite believe herself, but she's trying to be brave. So she takes a deep breath, and slips the book out of its pocket with a practiced gesture, keeping it behind her back. Her palms are sweating, and Caleb is looking at her curiously now, noticing her nervousness.

Nott tries to swallow it, and lifts her chin a little defiantly. Then she shoves the book into the space between them, and speaks all in a rush, "Igotyousomethingyoudon'thavetolikeitandIstoleitpleasedon'tbemad."

Caleb blinks, Nott has a feeling he didn't understand most of what she just said, which, she's ready to admit to herself, is part of why she said it so quickly. But mostly he's staring at the book with a wide-eyed wonder that Nott has only ever seen before on kids too small to have learned how horrible the world is. The silence stretches, and stretches, and Nott feels it like something heavy sitting on her chest, and the book is making her wrist ache, and Caleb still doesn't move. Just when she's ready to snatch it back and pretend the whole thing hadn't happened (and kick herself, because how stupid, to think that she – Nott – would know how to do something nice for anyone), Caleb speaks. His voice is almost a whisper, though it's still loud to Nott's goblin ears. "You.....got me a book." The love in his voice when he says the word book is almost too much, and Nott purses her lips and hopes he can't see her blushing in the dark, uncomfortable and awkward now. She shrugs, a little sullen to try and hide her embarrassment, because she's suddenly feeling very soft and very exposed and she needs to be hard to survive.

"Well yeah. Are you gonna take it or what?"

Caleb does, gingerly, with both hands, very gently slipping the thing out of Nott's grip and running his hands over the cover. He squints in the dim light as his fingers trace the uneven letters embossed at the top of the book. He says the words as he reads them, "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil." He smiles: a real, soft, private kind of smile that Nott isn't sure she's supposed to see. She expects him to start reading it then and there, but instead he looks up, and moves with more speed than she thought he was capable of, and then he's wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close and *oh. This is a hug.*

Nott, who'd gone rigid as soon as Caleb had started to move, stares up at the cobwebs on the high ceiling of their cell and takes a few seconds to digest what exactly is happening. Caleb has his arms wrapped the whole way around her body. His beard is scratching her cheek. He's holding her tightly but he's not hurting her. He smells, but only as badly as she does, and his rags are soft even if his arms are bony. He's cold for a human, but warm for a goblin, and he's saying something. "Thank you. Thank you Nott. Thank you."

Suddenly, Nott's eyes are stinging. She blinks rapidly, trying to sort through her thoughts, which are all in a pile like they're a drawer that's been upended onto the floor. Then, slowly, a little stiffly, she lifts her own arms and cautiously hugs Caleb back. She's just tall enough to be able to wrap her arms around his back, though she doubts she could if he wasn't so skinny, and she keeps her movements light, still not sure what's allowed and what isn't. But as soon as she does, Caleb squeezes her a little, and that's about all the invitation Nott needs to hug him back properly, fiercely, as she feels something hard and cold in her chest fall right away from her.

Nott had seen humans and halflings and gnomes and dwarves hugging their young ones, even tieflings sometimes. But not elves or goliaths, and never goblins. She'd never really understood why they did it. She does now. She feels more safe than she ever has, which is ridiculous, because she's chained up in a prison cell. But Caleb is gently stroking her hair, holding the back of her head like she's a baby, and Nott really hopes he doesn't notice the tears on her face because that would be very embarrassing, but she feels so warm and she doesn't think it's just the body heat.

When Caleb pulls back, his eyes look a little damp too, though he doesn't make an effort to dry his cheeks. He probably thinks she can't see the tear tracks in the dark, she knows he can't see hers. But Nott doesn't say anything about it. Instead, she sniffs, and rubs her nose with the back of her hand. She clears her throat, and folds her arms, trying to keep the warm feeling inside her, despite the sudden cold of their cell. "So you like it then?"

Caleb huffs something that sounds sort of like a laugh, and pats the stone beside him. “Come here.” Nott shuffles closer, trying to ignore the rattle of her chains and the way they’re ruining the moment. She sits down next to Caleb, very aware that this is much closer than the one foot radius they’d been operating on. Still feeling a little vulnerable, she keeps her arms wrapped tightly around her chest, fingers digging into her skin. If Caleb notices, he doesn’t say anything. Instead, awkwardly, he manages to put an arm around her shoulders, holding the book between them. “This, little monster, is the nicest thing that anyone has ever given me.”

Nott frowns sceptically at the book: which is battered and stained and old. Its spine is broken, and it’s probably missing a few pages, and she thinks the print is faded in places. She doesn’t say anything though. She’s still a little bit worried that if she says the wrong thing she’ll break the moment, as if it’s glass and easily shattered, sharp when it’s broken. Slowly, reverently, Caleb lifts the cover of the book, and turns to the first page with a soft whisper of parchment. He squints at the dark, narrow print. Moonlight falls onto the page, but the window in their cell is tiny and there isn’t much. Nott glances up at Caleb, spotting the flaw in her plan. “Can you read it?”

Caleb squeezes her shoulders, and musses her hair. “I think we’ll manage.” Then, quietly, he starts to read out loud. “*Old Tom Bombadil is a merry fellow, bright blue his jacket is, and his boots are yellow. None have ever caught him yet, for Tom, he is the master: his songs are stronger songs, and his feet are faster.*”

Nott has never had a father, at least not in the human sense of the word. But she’s starting to see the appeal.

## Chapter 3: Tricks

### Chapter Summary

It's fun, and their schemes grow wilder and braver in the wide space of make believe. Sometimes, if Nott closes her eyes, she can imagine that they're not in a cell at all. She tells herself that they're on the open road, travelling together and swindling suckers, and that this whole thing is just a bad dream. Sometimes, on days when Caleb leans against the bars of their cell with a barely hidden smile, and Nott manages to get them a little jerky, or fruit, or a candle stub, she can convince herself that this is just temporary. She can pretend that neither of them are scared, or hurt, or cold or hungry. She can pretend that the guards aren't there at all.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Things get better after that. They're not always good: Nott and Caleb are still in prison, and the guards are still cruel. But things are definitely better, now, for Nott, in the company of someone she's starting to think of as a friend. (And that's strange, really, isn't it? Because she's never had a real friend before.) So things are better: Nott and Caleb share their meals, and they talk, and Caleb reads at night. It doesn't take him long to finish the book, but as soon as he does he starts it again, and often he reads out loud, in a whisper so as not to attract the attention of the guards. It gets to the point where Nott can almost say the words with him. They start to lose their original meaning, somewhat, and take on new ones. The words start saying comfort and safety and warmth, along with the images they paint in her head. Nott doesn't think she'll ever like books as much as Caleb does, but she thinks she understands a little better why he wanted one so badly now, and she's proud of herself for stealing it.

But sometimes things are less good, and Caleb and Nott don't always agree. Sometimes they disagree. Sometimes they disagree on really important things. Important things like breaking out of jail.

Nott hates prison. She hates the chains, and she hates feeling trapped. She hates feeling scared and she hates feeling cold, she hates feeling sad and angry and helpless. But Caleb doesn't want to escape, and escaping by herself is a whole lot harder than escaping with help. Besides, Nott isn't entirely sure that she could leave Caleb behind in this place, knowing what they'd be doing to him while she was free. (More than once, Nott daydreams about just knocking him out and carrying him out of the cell, but as skinny as Caleb is these days he's still a human and twice as tall as her, and she isn't sure she could manage it.)



One day, during one of their late night conversations, Nott reaches the end of her mental tether, and slams her fist on the floor of her cell as Caleb politely tells her that he thinks breaking out is a bad idea, again. “But *why* is it a bad idea Caleb? Don’t you want to leave?”

Caleb frowns at her, the way he does when he thinks he’s got his words mixed up – or, wait, no – this is the frown when he thinks she’s gotten mixed up. Nott glares at him whilst he tries to find a reply. “Of course I want to leave. Do you think I am enjoying it, here?” His accent gets a little thicker in the second sentence, rolling round his consonants, and Nott sniffs.

“If you want to leave why don’t you? We could do it together, I’m sure we could.” She’s getting a little louder in her excitement, and Caleb lifts a warning finger to his lips, glancing outside of their cage as if his human eyes would be better at catching the guards in the low light of evening than Nott’s goblin ones. Nott huffs, though her ears twitch, trying to catch whether any of the guards were on their way back. When she hears nothing but distant shouts, footsteps and the howl of the wind outside, she relaxes again. Seeing this, Caleb lets out a deep breath and pinches the bridge of his nose with his finger and thumb before passing his hand over his face, as if to rub out the wrinkles there.

“Honestly, I think that is my problem. I am not sure that we could do it, and I am not willing to risk it.” Caleb sounds very tired. He’s been sleeping a lot recently, and Nott thinks he’s more pale than he was, though it’s difficult to tell under all the dirt. She’s a little worried: she doesn’t know how much food humans need to eat, but Caleb’s been eating a whole lot less than a healthy goblin, and that doesn’t seem like a good sign. Still, she can’t let this go.

“Risk what? It’s not like it’ll be worse than this.” Nott realises that she’s sounding like a child, but she also really needs to say these things, because it feels like Caleb isn’t even giving them a chance. He gives her a sharp look, suddenly, an unusually hard stare that makes Nott flinch a little, expecting some kind of repercussion. But Caleb doesn’t do anything, because he’s Caleb, and he never hurts her, not even when she thinks she deserves it.

Instead, he takes another deep breath and shifts a little where he’s sitting against the wall. He moves stiffly, careful of his side. Nott is pretty sure that he hasn’t broken any bones, but she’s also pretty sure he was badly hurt in the last beating. He hasn’t been breathing very well since then: all uneven and wincing, and it was about when his appetite went down. Caleb clears his throat, he’d developed another cough in the last week and his throat still sounds sore. “First, it could easily be worse than this. Second, I should think the risk is obvious.”

Nott frowns, because it isn't, and shifts a little closer to Caleb across the cold stone floor. "Torture us? I mean, they're basically doing that already."

Caleb gives her a look that Nott doesn't really understand, then shuts his eyes, lifting a hand to his face with a clink of his chains and a waft of sweat and old blood. After a long moment, he lowers his hand and pulls on his dirty beard. "Be that as it may, if we try to escape they could kill us. They probably will."

Nott scowls and folds her arms, her too-long, sharp claws digging into her skin just above her elbows. "Yeah, well, I'd rather be free and dead than trapped in here."

Caleb gives her that same sharp look again, and shakes his head. "No, little monster, you do not want that."

Nott can feel her lower lip starting to stick out. The heavy footfalls of armoured guards come tramping down the corridor, but thankfully they don't pass through the doors into the dungeon, and start to disappear before long with a sound like muffled, booted thunder. Caleb watches the dungeon door: barely visible from their cell, with a naked fear that had long since defeated his pride. Nott huffs. "How do you know? Dying would be a lot easier than this. I'm hurt and I'm cold and I'm scared and I hate it. I hate it, Caleb."

Caleb's expression looks like it got mixed up somewhere between frustration and fondness. Fondness wins out, and he reaches up to squeeze Nott's shoulder. "I know what you mean. But no. As long as we are alive, we have a choice." He continues before Nott can interrupt, lifting a finger in a gesture asking for her to wait. "Admittedly, for the moment our choices are limited. But that can change, as long as we are alive to see it. If we die, that's it. There is no more choice, there are no more chances, not unless you have a personal relationship with a god that you have neglected to tell me about." Caleb offers Nott a half smile, but she shakes her head anyway, to make sure he knows that she doesn't. "Neither do I. Perhaps such a thing would have helped us escape this predicament. Perhaps not. I don't know. What I do know is that death will not allow me to live again in freedom. Only living will do that. So, no, whilst dying might be easier, I do not think it is the right choice to make. You are still very young, my friend, and you have a thousand choices ahead of you in the years to come, and a thousand shiny things. Do not deprive yourself of those and let these people win. Your spirit is stronger than their cruelty, and you deserve to live to see your victory first hand."

Nott considers this. It feels a little bit like spaghetti in her head, and there's a lump in her throat, but as she's sorting through it all one thought rises clear and loud above the rest. She cocks her head and asks the question before she's entirely thought about whether or not she wants the answer. "Do you want to die, Caleb?"

Caleb sighs, and gives her a look that is a muddle of grief and fear and kindness and longing all at once. Then he puts on his not-quite-smile and lifts one bony shoulder in a shrug. "I try not to, little one."

Nott spends the rest of the evening thinking about it, but by midnight she's made a decision. She won't keep asking Caleb to escape, at least for now, and she'll try to stay alive. He's right, these guards are cruel, and they don't deserve this victory. Of course, if the opportunity arises for them to escape without getting killed, Nott plans to take advantage of it. And she plans to bring Caleb with her, whether he likes it or not.

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As it turns out, Caleb is a whole lot sneakier than Nott thought he was to begin with. He's not as good as her, and Nott knows herself well enough to be a little proud of that, but he's not bad for a human. Not long after she'd told him about The Itch he'd offered, a little shyly, to try and distract the guards for her. He's not bad at it: he comes up with all sorts of excuses, from thirst to diarrhoea, and with the guards distracted what had been an easy trick becomes child's play. It's not like Nott really needs the help, and Caleb will need to work on hiding the shadow of a smile that appears when he starts playing his tricks, but it's a distraction, and it's a whole better than thinking about how hungry she is.

They start strategizing, too: first in terms of what Nott steals. The night she shows Caleb her nest she thinks her heart is fit to beat out of her chest, and she waits and waits and waits for him to hit her, or shout at her, or take her things away. But he just stares at the little pile of shiny things with something like amazement, like he's *impressed*, and then he says that she's clever, and incredible, and brave. The last one confuses Nott the most, though overall she's just a little overwhelmed. When she asks Caleb to clarify he gives her one of his real smiles and says, "To defy the guards in a place like this? I think that is very brave indeed."

Then he strokes the messy, dirty beard on his chin and starts asking her what she has. Nott tells him, and shows him, and Caleb starts suggesting things worth stealing: matches and candle stubs, the peanuts and tobacco the guards keep in their pockets. Little luxuries that make their late night conversations that much more comfortable: Caleb can read more easily

by the light of their little candles, and when Nott manages to steal a pencil for him, he kisses her forehead in his excitement. After that, he writes every night. Compared to what they'd had at the start, it's practically comfortable.

Caleb still won't condone an escape plan, but he is determined that they'll leave, one day, somehow. Nott is a little more sceptical: the guards don't have any reason to hurt them, they'd long since stopped pretending they were looking for information or trying to teach them a lesson. Nott had seen enough creatures caught by her clan to know that she and Caleb were essentially alive for as long as the guards thought hurting them was interesting. But she figured that would probably scare Caleb more, so she doesn't mention it. Instead, when he starts talking about when they're free, she goes along with it. Caleb says that he'll take her to the Zemni Fields, and she hopes that he will, one day. Caleb says he'll teach her magic, when he isn't wearing his chains any more, and Nott doesn't try to hide her excitement – because imagine the mischief she could get up to with spells! Imagine the shiny things she could steal. When she tells Caleb this he laughs, and it's a low, whole-hearted thing, and Nott is so pleased with herself for making him do it that she decides to start telling more jokes in future. Caleb looks healthier when he's happy, and less like he's going to fade away, and it's not like it's a proper meal but if laughing makes him hurt less then Nott is going to do what she can.

For her part, Nott tentatively suggests a few tricks, two man things that she'd never been able to do before because she'd never had someone to play with. She isn't sure how Caleb will take it at first, but as soon as he gets the gist of the first game she describes, he sits up with a grin and a twinkle in his eyes. "Ah, yes, I like this trick. It's clever."

Nott tilts her head at him, ears twitching as her dirty hair tickles her skin. "Were you a thief, before?"

Caleb snorts. "Not at all." Then he gives her a crooked smile. "But I liked causing trouble, all the same. Especially when I was young." Caleb's smile widens at Nott's expression, and he doesn't even flinch when one of the other prisoners starts shouting in another cell, too distracted to mind as much about where they are or what it means. It's a nice change. Normally Caleb these days is jumpier than a kicked puppy (not that Nott can blame him).

Nott wrinkles her nose at him with exaggerated disgust. "It's hard to imagine you being a kid."

Caleb huffs, and lifts his hands with a jangle of his chains to run his fingers through his long, tangled, dirty hair. “Believe it or not, I was once as small as you. Smaller, even.” Nott tries to imagine it, she really does: she tries to superimpose Caleb’s face on the tiny, plump bodies of the human children she’d seen before. She doesn’t know if it’s the beard, or the bruises, or the wrinkles, but she can’t do it. She shakes her head. “I can’t see it.”

Caleb laughs again, and tugs on his beard. “Maybe I will show you, some day. There is a trick I know that can create images, though I would have to learn it again.”

An idea lights up at the back of Nott’s head like a shooting star, and she smiles so wide she bares all her fangs. Caleb still doesn’t flinch. Outside, birds sing beyond the walls of their cell, and part of Nott is fiercely, furiously jealous of them. But she pushes that part of her deep down inside, because there’s nothing she can do about it, and focuses instead on their distraction. “Speaking of creating images, have you ever heard of the Spider Eyes trick?” She lifts her hands in front of her eyes and wiggles her fingers for effect, dropping them in time to see Caleb’s struggling to stifle another smile as he raises his thick, messy eyebrows.

“Spider Eyes?”

Nott nods enthusiastically, and then launches into an overloud explanation of the game that just so happens to drown out the song of the birds flying freely just outside their cell wall. Nott comes up with a lot of their tricks: Spider Eyes and Rat Food and Playing Dead. But Caleb surprises her by coming up with some of his own, like the Prince and the Pauper. He even factors his magic into them, with the Money Pot, and keeps a little list in the now heavily annotated little body of his book. Caleb’s knowledge of human customs, even foreign ones, helps them tailor their tricks to a non-goblin audience (apparently, according to Caleb, a human’s first reaction on seeing a dead body is not to try and eat it.)

It’s fun, and their schemes grow wilder and braver in the wide space of make believe. Sometimes, if Nott closes her eyes, she can imagine that they’re not in a cell at all. She tells herself that they’re on the open road, travelling together and swindling suckers, and that this whole thing is just a bad dream. Sometimes, on days when Caleb leans against the bars of their cell with a barely hidden smile, and Nott manages to get them a little jerky, or fruit, or a candle stub, she can convince herself that this is just temporary. She can pretend that neither of them are scared, or hurt, or cold or hungry. She can pretend that the guards aren’t there at all.

But then the guards take Caleb away, again, and Nott can't pretend. Every time the guards take Caleb, these days, Nott's Itch gets worse. It burns under her skin like insect bites, and gets hotter and itchier until it feels like a wildfire in her blood that's going to eat her up. She paces, and she scratches the walls. She fiddles with her shiny things and rubs her arms and tugs her hair and pulls her ears and chews on her lip till it bleeds. She watches, anxiously, as the little light through the tiny window at the top of their cell changes colour. By now she's been here long enough to guess roughly how long it's been, though she's nowhere near as good as Caleb, who always seems to know exactly what time it is.

But Nott knows how to tell the time well enough to know that it's been hours, and her skin hurts from rubbing it and scratching it and their cell is too small for her to use up her energy and her whole head is ringing with worry and stress and the need to just do something to distract herself. Night falls, and it's longer than the guards have ever kept Caleb away from her, and Nott starts imagining things, terrible things. She starts thinking about the way the guards gang up on you, the way they get careless. She starts thinking about how skinny and fragile Caleb is these days. She starts thinking about the way broken bones can rip your insides, how easy it is to break your neck, how Caleb could be dead and she wouldn't even know.

The Itch rises in her head like a tidal wave, and Nott drowns in it. She climbs up the bars of her cell, and screams insults about the guards, and the town, and the mayor until her throat is hoarse and one of them comes running and roaring to make her be quiet. The guard arrives and Nott hisses at him, baring her teeth. He slams one armoured forearm against the bars of the cell, trying to shake her off, and the clang is so loud it makes her head hurt. Nott nearly loses her grip on the shaking metal, but then the gold ring on the guard's finger catches the torchlight behind him. Nott feels dizzy and tired and overwhelmed and she doesn't even think, she just reaches, fast as a whip for the guard's hand. She grabs it and holds on, even as he shouts, scrabbling to pull the ring off his finger. She touches the warm gold of the smooth metal band and it's like having an anchor in a stormy sea, Nott breathes out and for a second she can forget the prison cell, and Caleb being hurt, and how tired she is.

But then the ring slips free and the guard shouts something so loud she can barely make out the words, and more guards come running with a clanging thumping stomping sound like an army approaching a village. Nott lets go of the bars, scrambling to the back of the cell, clutching the ring in her hands and rolling it between her fingers, playing the tricks Caleb had taught her with one of the coins she'd stolen. Meanwhile, the guards make the corridor outside the cell go dark whilst the one she'd stolen from shouts about what she'd done to the others. His face is red with anger, and then another of the guards is fumbling with the keys at his belt, and it's all too loud. Nott focuses on the cold of the stone of her cell, even as the guards march inside. Then two of them are grabbing her arms and dragging her out, and another pulls at her hand, yanking the ring away. Nott screams and hisses at them and they hit her, hard. Nott coughs, but she doesn't have time to think about it, because they're already

dragging her away, down the same corridor they've been down a hundred times. She's going to the rooms where they hurt people. But Caleb still isn't back, and Nott doesn't even care.

It's probably the worst beating Nott's ever had. She knows how to take a hit, sure. She'd known that even before she'd been caught: her clan were not known for their compassion, and they didn't make much of an effort to treat their children differently. Nott had grown up dodging punches and kicks from her caretakers, let alone the swords and spears and arrows of other races that saw her as little more than vermin. In the months since she'd been thrown into this prison, she's been beaten badly dozens of times, and as soon as the guards let go of her she curls into a ball and wraps her hands around her head, trying to protect her softest parts. But this time the guards use sticks, and Nott feels her ribs crack and give way, and she's mostly blind from the pain and she drifts in and out of consciousness, and all she can think is that she really hopes that she doesn't die because she thinks that would make Caleb sad. Then one of the guards says, roughly, "This'll stop you from stealing you little shit."

Another one grabs Nott's right arm, and then, one by one, they break all the fingers of her right hand. Nott screams, and unconsciousness washes up at the edge of her vision like a high tide, pulling her in and out of the pain like a flickering candle. She thinks, a little delirious, that she's lucky she's crooked-handed because otherwise she wouldn't be able to steal again. She'd seen fingers that'd been broken like this, it wasn't an uncommon punishment for thieves, and she'd seen the way they got stiff and misshapen after if they weren't properly healed. Somehow, it's this thought above all the others that makes her sad, suddenly, and Nott starts to sob: horrible, hurting sobs that feel tight in her chest and make her throat ache. The guards laugh at her, and she squeezes her eyes shut and clutches her mangled hand to her chest. Then, finally, she passes out.

When Nott blinks awake, she's being dragged back towards their cell. Caleb is there, and Nott thanks every god she's ever heard of, even the bad ones. He's sitting against the back of their cell, and he looks bruised but not too badly hurt. Nott has a few seconds to digest this before her own pain hits her, and she chokes, nearly throwing up. Her whole body is aching and burning and she doesn't think she could walk even if the guards let her. Her chains drag beneath her feet like a great metal snake. Caleb sits up a little as the guards get closer, and Nott sees that his eyes are wide, though she doubts the human guards can see it in the shadows. They unlock the cell door and throw her inside, shutting it behind her and locking it with a heavy clunk. Nott lies on the floor of the cell, pressing her burning cheek to the cold stone. It is very, very hard to breathe, and every time she does it hurts, and big spots of black keep blurring her vision. Caleb stays where he is until the guards have turned and walked away, and then he moves so fast that Nott would have flinched if she could move. Caleb pulls her into his arms, and as he does he speaks quickly and roughly in his native tongue. "*Oh, meine Kleine, was haben sie nur mit dir gemacht?*" Nott has no idea what he's saying, but he sounds upset, and she tries to speak.

It's almost impossible, she's lost more than one tooth, and her mouth is thick and sticky with blood. She feels bubbles of it puff over her split lip as she tries, and Caleb pulls her closer, holding her tightly enough to hurt, and keeps talking. "*Ganz ruhig Kleines, alles wird gut!*" Nott shakes her head, blinking, and one of her eyes is already sticking shut the way that black eyes tend to do, but she needs to say something because her right hand is burning and she doesn't think Caleb has noticed.

"Caleb."

Immediately, Caleb gently pats her head, smoothing her hair and rubbing circles on her back, still speaking in a rapid, rough stream of Zemnian, looking anxiously outside their cell for any sign of guards in the corridor. "*Shhh, leise!*"

Nott shakes her head, because he isn't understanding. "No, Caleb, M'hand." It's as much as she can manage, and she feels exhaustion pulling on her mind like a heavy weight. Caleb stares at her, and she watches with a distant kind of curiosity as he tries to parse what she's saying. He looks at her good hand first, and his frown deepens. Then he gently pulls up her other one, where it'd been pressed awkwardly against his side.

Caleb becomes very, very still. He's so stiff Nott thinks that maybe he's been frozen solid, as he holds her wrist and stares at her mangled, broken hand. Then his mouth twists in a grimace and he spits, "*Schweinehunde.*" Purple sparks fly around the manacles on Caleb's wrists and ankles as something bright and gold burns in his eyes, just for a second. Nott thinks that this is probably the angriest she's ever seen him. Then she passes out.

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When Nott wakes up, everything hurts. Everything hurts, but she's warm, and she's lying on something soft. For a second, Nott thinks she's still dreaming. Then the smell of sweat and waste hits her. She wrinkles her nose, but that hurts, her nose is aching and sore. She can't really open one eye, and her mouth feels blistered and dry. It tastes of sick and blood, salty and sour. Nott grimaces, and winces at how much it hurts to do anything with her face. She tries to sit up, and a warm hand gently touches her shoulder. Nott opens her good eye, and looks up at Caleb's worried face. He looks like he has been trying very hard to run away from something for a very long time. There are deep shadows under his eyes, and his dirty face is creased with wrinkles. But he gives her a small, sad smile. "Best not sit up, little one. It will hurt."



Nott takes that in, trying to take stock of the rest of her injuries. Her chest hurts something awful: she thinks maybe her ribs are broken. One of her ankles is twisted. She's pretty sure she's bruised all over, but the worst of it all is her right hand, which feels like it's on fire. It also feels stiff, and itchy. Nott frowns, and squints at her fingers. They've been given splints: roughly improvised from strips of dirty fabric and folded up parchment. But where would Caleb get parchment? Nott doesn't have to think long for an answer, and then she stares again at her fingers, feeling something like wonder rising inside her. Caleb had ripped pages out of his book. He'd done that for her. And now she's was lying in his lap, probably because he'd known it would be softer and warmer than the stone of the cell. He must have cramps by now, but he hasn't said anything. Nott tries to speak, and nothing but whistling air comes out. When she tries again, her voice is rough and very quiet. She wants to say something nice, or something clever. Instead, all she says is, "Hurts."

Caleb's face folds up like a piece of paper being crumpled in someone's fist, and Nott regrets it almost immediately, managing a roughly mumbled, "Sorry!" But that just makes the crumpling worse, and Caleb curls around her, his skinny arms pulling her closer to his chest.

"You have nothing to be sorry for, *Liebes*. I know it hurts. I'm so sorry." His voice breaks a little at the end, and Caleb shuts his eyes, and his arms shake a little where they're holding Nott's shoulders.

Nott frowns, and ignores the way it makes her face hurt. "You don' need to be sorry. You didn' do anythin' wrong." It's an effort to move her good arm, but she does, and she lifts it to try and push away some of the wrinkles that are running across Caleb's brow. "S'not your fault." Nott huffs, feeling small. "S'my fault. I shouldn't've tried to take somethin' from them. S'just, my Itch got real bad, and you were gone so long, and..." She breaks off, coughing, and Caleb shakes his head, reaching for their bowl of water.

"This was not your fault, my friend. And I am sorry. I could not protect you." Caleb sounds a little bit like he's going to fall apart at the seams, and Nott doesn't know what to do if that happens. She also thinks, if anything, that she's the one who's supposed to protect Caleb. But she doesn't want to hurt his feelings, so she doesn't say anything, and drinks gratefully when he gently brings the rough wood of their bowl to her lips. The water, stale with dust and dirt, does something to soothe the ache of her throat.

Once she's drunk the water, Nott tries to speak again. She feels so tired. "M'sorry. I shouldn't have done it. I didn't mean to worry you." Caleb is shaking his head before she's finished

speaking, and he squeezes her arm, gently.

“You do not need to be sorry. I am not angry with you, Nott, I am angry with them. Nothing you could do could justify such brutality. Nothing.” Nott thinks that’s a nice lie. Then she falls asleep.

## Chapter End Notes

Just in case anyone is wondering - this is what the german phrases mean:

"Oh meine Kleine, was haben sie nur mit dir gemacht?" = "Oh my little one, what have they done to you?"

"Ganz ruhig Kleines, alles wird gut" = Quiet little one, everything is going to be fine

"Shh, leise!" = "Shh, quiet!"

"Schweinehunde" = (literally: pig-dogs)

Thank you to [inja-y-ddraig](#) for providing translations!!

# Chapter 4: Freedom

## Chapter Summary

“First of all, I need to break the spell on these chains. And for that, I will need your help, my friend.” It’s nighttime now, the early hours of the morning when there’s barely a skeleton guard on duty, and Caleb is explaining his plan by the light of a tiny stub of candle, making notes in his book. Nott looks a little nervously at the strange, shifting writing on Caleb’s manacles, thinking of the purple lightning she’d seen not long after they’d met.

“Won’t that hurt you?”

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Nott feels calmer, after that. It takes weeks for her fingers to heal, but they mostly do, and Caleb teaches her exercises to practice to try and stop them going stiff. Her ribs heal too, slowly, though she tries not to move too much and does her best not to anger the guards. Still, she’s calmer. She thinks there’s not a lot worse that the guards could do to her now, other than killing her, and at least if she dies she’ll stop hurting.

On the other hand, Caleb is even more frightened than he was before: he jumps at everything. He jumps when the other prisoners shout, he jumps when birds get too close to the window of their cell. He jumps at shadows. Nott is worried about him, but whenever she tries to reassure him he waves her off, patting her head and telling her that he’s fine. Nott doesn’t believe him.

Then one day the guards take Caleb. Nott doesn’t know why they take him, but then she never has. He doesn’t talk about it much, and he never really makes trouble, not like she does, so she knows they’re not punishing him for misbehaviour. She assumes it has something to do with why he’s in prison in the first place, and guesses that maybe the guards are trying to get information. But she also thinks that the state Caleb is in when he gets back is rarely a state that would let him speak. Split lips and broken teeth didn’t make for easy confessions. Nott thinks, in her heart of hearts, that the guards probably just hurt Caleb because they want to. She hates them for that.

Caleb is gone for hours, but Nott doesn’t try and steal something this time. The ache in her right hand was a brutal but effective lesson, and instead she presses her back against the wall

of their cell and fiddles with a brass button from her nest of trinkets. Then, finally, the guards come back.

They're dragging Caleb by his arms. His feet are dragging on the floor, and he's unconscious, his head hanging heavy and lifeless against his chest like a sack of flour. Caleb's hair is dark and dripping and at first Nott is worried that it's blood, but then the guards get closer and Nott sees that he's dripping wet. Caleb's head and shoulders and upper chest are soaked. The water has washed away a lot of the dirt on him, though it's done nothing to help his clothes. Instead, they hang heavy, and stick to his skin in places. His skin is deathly pale, as white as plaster. Nott can't even tell if he's breathing.

Nott knows why Caleb says to pretend not to care when they're brought back hurt, she understands that the guards could use their friendship against them. But she doesn't care. When the guards open the door of their cell she rushes forward, hissing and baring her teeth. One of the guards spits at her and she ignores him. They drop Caleb's unconscious body into the cell, and Nott rushes to try and stop his head hitting the stone. It thumps against her hands instead, and Caleb's skin is colder than the cell floor. Nott scrambles over Caleb's body, trying to shield him as the guards leave. They just laugh at her. One of them makes a comment about a beast defending its prey. Nott hates them, she hates them all, but she doesn't have time to be angry right now. As soon as the guards shut the door, she turns and pushes Caleb onto his back. As skinny as he is, it's still difficult, but Nott's fear gives her strength and she manages it.

She has seen humans with lips that blue, but only ever once they're dead. Nott's heart feels like a bird that's flown down a chimney, beating madly against her chest, looking for a way out. She lightly taps Caleb's cheek, trying to wake him up. "Caleb? Caleb! Caleb, you have to wake up!" He doesn't move. Half afraid to do it, Nott leans down and presses her ear to his chest. After a long, horrible moment she hears Caleb's heartbeat, and the rough rise of his breathing.

He's still breathing.

Nott nearly falls over in her relief, but she clings instead to her fear. She needs to make sure he keeps breathing. With a great heave, she wraps her hands in Caleb's wet shirt and drags him towards the closest wall of their cell. Carefully, she helps him sit up. Then she presses the back of her hand to his forehead, the way Caleb had done when she was sick. He'd told her it was to check her temperature: that being too hot or too cold could mean that she wasn't well. His skin is icy to her touch. Nott tries very hard not to think of dead bodies, and looks around their cell for something to help warm him up, or dry him off. There's nothing. Of course there's nothing.

Caleb's eyelids aren't moving the way they do when he's dreaming. He's as still as a doll and Nott hates it. She tries again, half-heartedly, to shake him awake. "Come on Caleb. Wake up, please wake up." Caleb doesn't react. Nott pulls at her hair and squeezes her head, trying to make her thoughts slow down. Caleb needs to warm up. She can't dry him off. She doesn't know how to help him breathe. But humans aren't meant to be that cold. She knows they're not. A plan starts to form in Nott's head. She presses her forearm to her cheek. She's warm for a goblin but cold for a human. Still, right now she's warmer than Caleb, and that's better than nothing.

Anxiously, Nott climbs into Caleb's lap, wrapping her arms around Caleb's neck and pressing close in an awkward hug. "Please let this work. Please wake up Caleb. I don't want to be alone again. Don't leave me alone." Nott isn't sure exactly when she starts crying, but she does, as Caleb continues to sit motionless and cold and damp beneath her. Her tears are hot, and they're salty in her mouth, and they tickle her chin and nose. Nott ignores them. Instead she presses her cheek to Caleb's shoulder, and waits for him to wake up.

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Nott isn't sure when she falls asleep, but when she wakes up Caleb's arms are around her. He smiles, and wets his dry lips, and speaks with a voice that is quiet and hoarse. "Good morning, *Kleine*. I'm sorry if I worried you."

Nott doesn't really reply to that, because she's too busy thinking that he's alright, and he's alive, and then she's jumping up and hugging him tightly. "Caleb! Caleb, you're ok, you're not dead! I was so worried!" Caleb huffs, losing his breath in surprise, but then he laughs and hugs her back. His chains are heavy against Nott's upper back, and his clothes are still wet, but Nott tries to ignore it. Instead she focuses on the faint warmth under Caleb's skin, and the way she can feel him breathing. He's not dead. He's still there. She isn't alone. When Nott is sure that Caleb isn't going to disappear, she lets go a little and sits back to look at him. "What happened? I thought you were dead! I thought you were going to die! Why are you all wet? Why were you so cold?"

Caleb's smile falls a little, and he shifts, making a gesture. Nott gets the hint and carefully climbs out of his lap, though she doesn't move far away from him. Caleb sighs, and takes a deep breath. It makes him cough a little and it's a horrible, wet sounding cough. He looks away from Nott at the layer of dust and dirt that covers the stones of their cell. "They..." He stops, and his mouth twists, and he swallows. He opens his mouth, and shuts it, and tries again. Then, finally, he shakes his head. Nott wrings her hands.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

Caleb’s shoulders drop, like whatever had been pulling them up around his ears had suddenly been cut and fallen slack. He gives her his not-quite-smile. “Thank you.”

Nott nods, and lifts one shoulder in a shrug, and squeezes her bare feet as she sits cross-legged, mostly for something to do with her hands. “It’s ok.” She waits for Caleb to say something else, but he leans his head back against the wall of their cell and doesn’t say anything at all. In the corner of the cell, their bucket stinks. Nott wishes someone would come and take it, it’s getting hard to ignore. Outside their cell it’s raining, and inside it’s cold. Caleb shudders, and Nott gently bites the inside of her cheek. “What...what are we going to do? What if they do that again?” As soon as she asks she wishes that she hadn’t, because Caleb flinches, violently, seeming to shrink in on himself. Nott is apologising almost as soon as she’s said the words, but it takes him longer than normal to come back to reality, and when he does he’s shaking hard enough to rattle his chains. Nott wants to hit herself, but she thinks Caleb probably wouldn’t approve, so she doesn’t.

Finally, Caleb shakes his head. “No, it’s alright *Liebes*. It’s alright. The question had to be asked.” He glances up, fearfully, at the barred wall of their cell and into the torch lit corridor beyond. Nott’s ears twitch as she listens for any guards, but they’re far off, taunting another prisoner. She offers Caleb a clawed thumbs up, and he nods. “I think we have to escape.”

A whole mess of emotions explode like fireworks in Nott’s chest. Excitement, relief, fear, confusion, and frustration all at once. She isn’t sure which comes out when she speaks, but she thinks a lot of them must be obvious from the way she feels herself frowning. “Why now?”

Caleb looks at her, and his bright blue eyes are sad and scared. “Because before I thought that they only wanted to hurt us. That eventually, when we had served our sentences, we would be able to leave. Now, I think that probably they will...” He pauses, cutting himself off as he glances at Nott with something like worry. She thinks he’s probably trying to spare her feelings, and she thinks that’s kind of sweet, but it’s also not necessarily.

So she finishes the sentence for him. “They’re gonna kill us. Yeah, probably.” The rain falls softly on the muddy road outside their cell. Inside, the torches flicker and sigh with a sound

like breathing as the cold wind rushes down the corridor. Caleb looks solemn, and he reaches up to tug on his beard.

“Yes, I think so too.” He pulls on a smile, and it’s mostly just a show of teeth, and his human teeth are blunt and not very threatening but Nott still think it’s a threat that would make a goblin proud, and she grins to show him as much. “I will not let these bastards kill us.” Nott catches the words that he doesn’t say, and her ears prick up as she sits forward.

“You have a plan?”

Caleb’s smile softens into something a little more honest, and he nods. “With your help, yes. I think I do.”

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“First of all, I need to break the spell on these chains. And for that, I will need your help, my friend.” It’s nighttime now, the early hours of the morning when there’s barely a skeleton guard on duty, and Caleb is explaining his plan by the light of a tiny stub of candle, making notes in his book. Nott looks a little nervously at the strange, shifting writing on Caleb’s manacles, thinking of the purple lightning she’d seen not long after they’d met.

“Won’t that hurt you?”

Caleb smiles at her, and his face is wreathed in shadows as he shakes his head. “Not unless you use magic, which I do not think you will.” Nott nods, still nervous, and squeezes her fingers to try and distract herself from the shaky feeling. “Once the spell is broken, I will be able to cast spells, which should help us immensely...”

All in all, it isn’t a bad plan, and it’s not as difficult as Nott worried it would be to help Caleb scratch out some key letters on his chains with a knife she manages to steal from the guards. When the spell breaks, the manacles spark purple one last time with a hiss before the writing fades away in entirety. Nott glances over her shoulder, anxiously checking for guards, her ears pricked high. Luckily they’re still far off. When she looks back, Caleb is whispering in the pretty language he’d told her was called Celestial. There’s a shimmer in the air, iridescent like the sides of a soap bubble, and then the writing is back. Nott blinks, reaching out to

touch the chains. They look like they're still engraved, but the metal is cold and smooth to her touch. Caleb winks at her.

"Alright, now we can really make some trouble."

Over the next few days, Nott and Caleb work together to collect what he'll need for his spells, and discuss their plan until Nott knows it backwards. One night, Caleb sits back, and then his eyes become bright and clouded. Nott watches him worriedly. He'd told her that he was going to try and find his familiar, a creature named Frumpkin. He'd also told her that during this time he would be blind and deaf, and that she needed to shake him if she saw the guards coming. Nott hates waiting for Caleb to come back, but then suddenly Caleb smiles and says something in Zemnian. He blinks, and the faint blue light behind his eyes fades, and Nott relaxes. Caleb is still smiling when he opens his eyes. "He's alive! After all this time! I was sure that he would have been killed." For a moment, Nott feels a little jealous, but then she decides that that's stupid and pushes the feeling away.

It takes them a week to get everything they need, and another week to find the courage to actually do what they're planning to do. Nott manages to pick the locks on both their chains, which saves Caleb doing it with magic, and as soon as she has Caleb hides their freedom with the illusion of chains instead. Thankfully, the guards don't take either of them away over that fortnight: both Nott and Caleb know that this will be hard enough without injuries. They also know that the longer they leave it, the less likely they are to escape unscathed.

So one night, on a day that isn't particularly different to any other, Nott finds herself standing in their cell with a tied up guard propped against one wall, holding a knife to his throat. Nott shouts as soon as the next guard comes walking towards their cell on his regular patrol. "Hey, asshole! If you don't let me out right now I'll kill 'im." The guard doesn't seem particularly interested, probably assuming she was talking about Caleb. But then he turns and sees the other guard inside their cell, and his eyes go wide and he swears, shouting for backup as he fumbles with his keys and opens the door to their cell. It's late at night, and even with the torchlight it's a little too dark for human eyes. Nott darts forward and climbs the guard as if he were a tree, grabbing his head and slamming it hard against the bars of the cell. There's a thump and a crack, and then the guard goes limp and Nott jumps onto the floor. The cell door creaks open and, still wearing the illusion of another guard, Caleb shrugs off his ropes and stands up. As he does, the illusions of chains around their wrists and ankles fade. Nott leans out of the cell, ears pricked high. Other guards are shouting farther off, but they'd picked the night when the watch was thinnest, and they're still some distance away. She gestures, and she and Caleb walk out of their cell, creeping towards the door.



Over the past two weeks, Caleb had explored the dungeons and the castle above them through Frumpkin's eyes. Now, he and Nott run as quietly as they can down the half-empty corridors, hiding in nooks and crannies. At one point, one of the guards sees them, and Caleb doesn't hesitate before picking up Nott by the scruff of her neck and saying, with a horrible grin, "Taking this one for a walk. It won't shut up these days, and it needs to learn a lesson." Nott, playing into the game, hisses and kicks, and the other guard spits at her. Nott feels Caleb stiffen, and hopes the other guard doesn't notice. But then they leave, and Caleb gently puts Nott back down, rubbing the spit from her cheek with his thumb.

Nott pulls away from him, wrinkling her nose. "Come on Caleb, we've got to hurry." Her heart is beating so hard she thinks she's going to take off, but she grabs Caleb's hand and tugs him forward, down the corridor she's imagined a hundred times by now. They get to the servants' quarters, and finally, finally near the exit. As the door comes into sight: a low, simple wooden thing with a heavy lock, another guard spots them and starts to shout. Caleb doesn't hesitate: he turns, and his hand blackens and flakes, and then suddenly fire bursts forward from his palm, striking the guard's throat. Nott stares as the guard crumples, and then she's tugging open the door and cold air rushes over her body. She has three seconds to take in the fact that she's free, and then Caleb scoops her up and starts to run: out, over the track, and down into the fields beyond. As he runs, he drops his illusion, and a ragged orange cat starts to follow them. When Caleb's chest is heaving, he drops Nott, and she starts running too, bare feet cold and slipping in the long, wet grass. They run and run, heading for the woods, waiting for the guards to raise the alarm, waiting to be caught. The field curves uphill before the treeline, and Caleb and Nott's sprinting turns into a jog, their chests heaving as they try to breathe, muscles aching.

Nott grabs Caleb's hand when he starts to double over, and she pulls hard, and he gets up and keeps going, and then they find their way into the trees. The woods are quiet, and dark, and blessedly empty. The forest floor scratches at Nott's bare feet, and Caleb's are already bleeding. They both turn, looking back at the castle where they had been kept prisoner for months. No guards come marching out of the gates. No horn blasts. Frumpkin: ragged and skinny and mangy, meows loudly and rubs against Caleb's legs. Caleb leans heavily against a tree, breathing heavily, face red and sweaty. Nott feels something like excitement start to rise, bubbly and light in her chest.

"We...we did it. Caleb. *We did it.*" She starts to jump up and down, unable to contain her excitement, forgetting her exhaustion and the pain in her starving body as she does so. Caleb grins at her, and then he starts to laugh, wild and a little hysterical, and he bends down and picks her up and hugs her tightly.

"Yes, we did." Above them, in the treetops, birds chatter to one another. It's a little cold, and the smell of pine is thick in the open air. Nott hugs Caleb, and he kisses her cheek. "We're free."

Six months later, Nott and Caleb find their way to a town called Trostenwald. And, well, you know the rest.

## Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap. This whole fic was basically a vent/loosely how I headcanon Caleb and Nott's time in prison. If you want to chat about this disaster family, or Critical Role in general, feel free to hit me up on tumblr - it's [lesetoilesfous](#)

Special thanks also to [inja-y-ddraig](#) on tumblr, who very kindly translated the German phrases for me!!

Hope you enjoyed this story, and thank you for reading it!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!