

touchstone

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/16414235) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/16414235>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Critical Role (Web Series)
Relationship:	Nott & Caleb Widogast
Characters:	Caleb Widogast , Nott (Critical Role)
Additional Tags:	Autistic Caleb Widogast , Nott Has ADHD , Hurt/Comfort , Emotional Hurt/Comfort , Miscommunication , Dissociation , Anxiety Attacks , Fever , Disordered Eating , Platonic Cuddling , Hugs , Jealousy , but like. followed by Healthy Communication u know , entirely too many em dashes & parentheses , (i apologize in advance consider y'all selves warned) , anyway uhhhh have thing!
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2018-10-26 Words: 18,223 Chapters: 1/1

touchstone

by [fadewords](#)

Summary

Nott smothered a yawn behind her free hand, the other still loosely tangled in Frumpkin's fur. Several things clicked. The berries. The bacon. The staring, the dropped twigs, the quiet.

Nott wasn't upset. She was tired.

Stupid that it had taken him so long to notice. (Some friend.)

(or: Nott falls ill, and Caleb is useless.)

Notes

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

Caleb kept his eyes on the nape of Beau's neck as she elbowed her way through the crowd. Every few seconds they flitted away, landing on people and uneven paving stones and narrow alleys and glints of silver in pockets—but he forced them back every time and studied the space where hair met skin.

It was—not easier, but better. Better, to watch that spot, than everything else. Bad enough to hear it.

Though, really, it wasn't too bad. Not today. The odd rumbling in his ears, ja, rising sharp at random footfalls and utterly unheated bits of bartering and the clinking from Nott's pockets as she scurried a half-step behind him, ja, but no more than that. A, a mild annoyance at most.

But if paired with flashing movement and half-imagined steel and conjured faces and the brush of the crowd—

Well.

Caleb knew his limits. So he watched the spot, and kept behind Beau, and steered well clear of the bodies she kept displacing.

It was handy sometimes, having a Beauregard. Very handy indeed.

Also handy, having a Yasha. It was, after all, a little easier to breathe, in a crowd like this, with himself in front of Nott and someone the size of a barn just behind her.

(It had been tricky, sometimes, in the early days, when it had been just the two of them, to decide who should stand where, when they ran across people. Usually he'd stood just in front, to keep anyone from getting too good a look at her, but always there'd been the urge to slip behind, guard her back, make sure no one slipped a blade between her shoulders.) (He had compromised, more than once, by carrying her close to his chest, and the resulting assumptions had led to the creation of one of their best cons....)

(But now, in this group, with this—with a Yasha, it was less a concern. Nott was surrounded on all sides by people who would, if maybe not take a blade for her, certainly stick one in anyone who hurt her. That was enough for Caleb.)

Still, though, easier to breathe did not mean *easy*. Hence the spot-watching, and the constant awareness, through his rumbley ears, of the telltale clink of coins mixed with buttons, the slosh of frankenliquor, the swish of a well-worn cloak.

And the hand he found himself extending back, unthinking, the barest inch, as though he'd looked through Frumpkin's eyes on impulse and now needed to find the nearest bit of wall. He made to drop it back to his side, refocus on Beau, on maybe her shoulder, now, for a change of pace—

Something caught it before he could. Fingers, rough, small. Four of them.

Caleb squeezed Nott's hand once, soft, and stared at a spot just below Beau's right shoulder. Nott squeezed back, much firmer, and then let go.

He tucked his hands in his pockets and fiddled with a bit of string. Had half a mind to dip his hands in a different pocket, pull out the copper wire, thank her, but there wasn't any need, really. She knew. If he hammered it any further, she'd only worry, and there was no need for that.

So he kept his hands where they were and worried the string over and over and over, until finally they escaped the narrow street, moved to an emptier one, at the edges of the little town, where they could spread out and breathe.

They didn't, of course. But it was the principle of the thing.

Well. Beau walked a little quicker ahead, and Yasha a little slower behind, but neither Nott nor Caleb budged. (Something like satisfaction pricked at his teeth.)

Eventually, they made it to the very edge of town, and there were the others, waiting with the cart, having beaten them, it seemed, easily around the edges of the little town, even though the walk from the stables was easily twice the length of the diagonal they'd taken from the inn.

Stupid cluttered streets, tripling the travel time. Stupid city planners, making them so narrow. Even beyond the inconvenience, it couldn't be *safe*. What happened when mobs rose up? Did people just get trampled to death? And what did they do in emergencies, if they needed to let clerics through quickly? Or in case of fire? Surely it could leap easily from one side of the street to the other and then there was the whole thing up in smoke, and then the whole town, and the stupid streets too narrow for the crowds to get out and—

A hand on his wrist. Caleb tensed, then registered *bandages* and *small* and relaxed again and kept moving, slipping his fingers out his pocket and threading them through Nott's.

He glanced down as they approached the cart and found her looking up with half-lidded, bright eyes, head tilted in question. He shook his head and smiled, soft, but the little crease on her forehead stayed put, so he squeezed her hand once. It smoothed out, and she let go again.

Caleb clambered onto the cart and stretched a hand down to help Nott, who took it and scrambled up. Then he found a spot to sit and start wrapping string around his fingers.

A few beats later, Nott wandered over and sat beside him.

"Well," he said. "I, ah, do not know about you, but I am glad to be moving on."

She turned, eyes flitting over his face. "Yeah?"

"That town was a little bit shit." The design, the lodging (if it could even be called that, drafty and cramped as it'd been), the people (cross, the lot of them, and too fond of staring for his liking, and so many coughing it was a wonder they hadn't posted plague warnings), the food

(in itself more or less flawless, he had to admit, but utterly unappealing to his overly particular tongue), the drink (little more than swill), the. Everything, really.

“...Yeah, it was.” Nott looked away.

He faltered, words slipping. He’d expected a question, or a commiseration—and that was one, of course, of sorts, but it was too short, and now she wasn’t looking at him (Nott, who had invented staring), and her fingers tapped in rapidfire silence on her knee, and he had definitely done something wrong. He had missed something.

Something bad had happened, in the town, maybe, and he hadn’t seen. In all those close quarters, with all those staring people. Had someone noticed her? *Hurt* her?

He scanned her, and could see no blood, no bruises, no oddly held limbs. Probably not, then. (And besides, she would tell him, if someone had. Him or Jester.)

Unless someone had *said* something, instead? She had seemed fine, though, not upset, not until now, so probably not that either, unless she’d been hiding it, which she might have, maybe. (But he hoped not. He liked to think she would tell him that sort of thing, too.)

...Unless, of course, *he* had said something wrong? Had hurt her, somehow, at some point, in his frustration with the town, his thoughtlessness, bitter tongue, lack of self-control. It was possible. Probable, even.

Caleb thought back over the last forty-eight hours and came up with two dozen different instances that might have hurt her feelings. Any of them could be the culprit, or all of them, even, but he took a guess and picked the last, because she’d seemed fine until he’d insulted the town, even if she’d agreed. Took a few moments to choose what to say, and determine whether it’d been too long to pick up the conversation thread again (it hadn’t, probably), and said, “...But?”

Nott jumped a little, then sat back, glancing round. “Well,” she said. “I know you didn’t like it, and, and with good reason! It’s just...” She looked at him sideways. “Well. There were an awful lot of grumpy people.”

Caleb tucked the other twenty-three probable-fuckups aside to examine later, and smiled in hopefully not-too-obvious relief. “That is true. Tell me, friend, what did you find?”

She grinned, all teeth. “Oh, lots!”

And she pulled out her pouch, upended it on the bottom of the cart, and spent several minutes showing off the newest items in her collection: several shiny buttons, an old but well-polished brooch, a number of coins, a necklace, and two rocks, one a piece of obsidian that gleamed and the other flat and yellow-flecked gray and smooth and probably very satisfying to run one’s fingers over. (Caleb itched to take the latter and find out for certain, but kept to his string instead. Nott’s collections were her own.)

“They are very nice,” Caleb said, as she packed the lot back up again and tucked them away. “I am glad things went so well for you.”

Nott smiled, but there was something wrong with the corners of it, a disconcerting softness to her eyes. “I wish they’d gone nice for you, too.”

“Oh,” he said, utterly wrong-footed. “Nein, it. It was fine, do not worry about that.” He paused, searching for the right words. “You know, the town was a bit shit, but the company was nice.”

Nott smiled again, brighter this time. Spinier. “Yeah.”

Caleb returned the smile, less spiny, more awkward, and conversation drifted to other things: the road ahead, their next meal, what exactly the fold in Beau’s shirt looked like from this angle....

-

They stopped the cart to pick berries along the side of the road.

Caleb plucked them one-by-one and put them in Nott’s cloak, which she held out before her as they went. (He had been expressly forbidden from using his own coat for this purpose, first by Jester—“It’s too dirty *Cay-leb*, we don’t want *stinkberries*”—and then by everyone else, chiming in loud agreement—except, of course, for Nott, who loyally said she wouldn’t mind. But she’d been outvoted, and so into her cloak the berries went.)

He counted them as he went, quietly, and pretended he didn’t see the purple stain starting to grow around Nott’s mouth. It didn’t matter, he reasoned, if she ate a few as they went. He was only counting how many he put in the cloak, not how many remained. There was no inconsistency. It was fine. Good, even. It gave him another thing to count, if he tried to keep track of how many she snuck away. So, it was fine. It was fine.

And it was, once he amended the rule.

So he plucked, and Nott ate, and he counted, until all the ripe berries had been picked, and then they walked back to the cart, and he lifted her up so into it as not to disturb the berry pool. And then they set them carefully on the bottom of the cart and divided them equally.

(Twenty-three apiece, it turned out, which was only three off from his projected total. Nott, it seemed, had eaten nine berries, not six.)

He made short work of his own twenty-three, half-starved after picking over his last two meals and outright skipping breakfast, and then ignored his stomach’s rumbling as he watched Nott work her way through her own pile with start-and-stop ferocity, one minute devouring three at a time and the next rolling one under her fingers like a marble. Before long, she switched to rolling them exclusively, except for when she pressed too hard and squished them.

Which made sense, he supposed. She did usually prefer meat.

Still, though. Disappointing that she wasn’t enjoying the meal as much as everyone else (Molly, in particular, was making appreciative noises from outside the cart, and Jester

wondering out loud if she could *make ink from them maybe you guys*).

“You do not like them?”

“Oh!” Nott stuffed one in her mouth. “No, I do. I’m just not very hungry.”

“Probably cause you ate half the bush,” Beau called.

“Maybe!” Nott ate another, and then went back to rolling the rest.

“She did not.” Caleb tapped his index finger on his thumb. “She ate nine.”

“Figure of speech,” Beau said.

“Ja, I know, hyperbole, you just meant a lot. But nine is not a lot.”

“Oh my gods, Caleb.”

He let it drop and pulled a book out of one of his pockets. A few chapters in, Beau and Jester clambered inside, the others got on horseback, the cart started moving again, and Nott’s berries rolled away from her. She let them go. Caleb made a mental note to scrounge up some jerky, maybe barter with Beau for some pocket bacon, and went back to his book.

-

Caleb resurfaced, the book read twice over, to find the other three bickering good-naturedly. He tucked the novel away and listened until it petered out, and then listened to the wheels bump along beneath them, the horses rush forward, Nott rustle through her pouch.

The faint clink was even fainter than usual. Probably not looking for anything in particular, then. Just keeping her hands busy.

-

Caleb successfully acquired pocket bacon. Beau hadn’t wanted anything, just tossed it at him with a “sure” and a warning that it might’ve gone a bit stale. Hardly mattered. Nott wouldn’t care.

He offered her some with a smile, and sure enough, she took it eagerly.

But there was no flash of teeth, afterward, no spray of meat-shreds. Only slow gnawing, and then a good half of what he’d given her stored in a pocket.

Caleb took note.

-

Nott leaned against the wall of the cart, arms hanging loose off her knees, and stared at her feet.

Caleb summoned Frumpkin and spent a few minutes petting him, then told him to lick Nott's fingers.

She jumped, then blinked, long and slow, and scritchd him behind the ears, limbs falling lax again, eyes half-closing.

Good.

-

Yasha spotted a promising cluster of trees, and, after a good ten minutes' bickering, they decided to stop early for the night, on the condition that they leave just as early the next morning.

So they all clambered down off cart and horses and set about making camp, scouting the area, gathering materials for the fire they wouldn't even begin to need for another hour and twenty minutes.

By the time Caleb finished setting up the alarm spell, the others had scattered, so he went to go find Nott.

He found her quietly picking up sticks for kindling, and joined her without a word. She dropped a few on the way back, and made to pick them up again, but Caleb got there first.

"Let me."

"Thank you, Caleb."

"Of course." He added the sticks to his own pile, and they made their way back to camp and set the lot in the middle of the circle.

They arranged the firepit together, working side-by-side without a word. When they finished and she slowly pushed herself back to her feet, he half-smiled at her dusty knees.

Nott was...so good, sometimes. All the time, really, but especially so in yellow moments like these, small and quiet and utterly arbitrary and impossibly, overwhelmingly *Nott*. She was just....

He brushed against her as they walked back to their bedrolls, unable to resist tousling her hair a little.

"Mmph," she said, but didn't pull away.

-

Nott rallied over dinner, trading jabs with Beau and snickering with Jester and handing a small, somewhat wilted blossom from the depths of one of her pockets to Yasha.

"Here," she said. "I found it in the trees. Maybe you already have one, but—"

“No,” Yasha said, touching the withered petals gingerly. “I’ve never seen it before. I’ll...” She went over to her pack and pulled out her book one-handed, then carefully placed the blossom as smooth as she could on one of the pages, and closed the book and put it away. “Thank you.”

Nott shrugged, scratching the bindings on her wrist. “One collector to another...”

“Thank you,” Yasha said again. “It’s very pretty.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

Caleb couldn’t resist cutting his eyes to Beau. And sure enough, there she was, half-glowering down at her own hands. He bit back a laugh and turned his gaze on Nott again.

Found her smiling wider than she had all day, and ordered Frumpkin to rub his face on Yasha’s legs and purr.

-

Nott turned a half-cleaned bone over and over in her hands.

Caleb watched, but she made no move to finish cleaning it, or to join in the conversation still buzzing round the fire, though she was clearly listening, ears twitching, eyes flicking half-lidded from speaker to speaker. He debated a moment, tangling his fingers in the string in his pocket, and then ordered Frumpkin to curl up in Nott’s lap.

She gave him a knowing look the second Frumpkin settled down, but pet him anyway.

Caleb blinked back, not bothering to pretend innocence. She needed a cat. He had one. Simple.

Nott smothered a yawn behind her free hand, the other still loosely tangled in Frumpkin’s fur.

Several things clicked. The berries. The bacon. The staring, the dropped twigs, the quiet.

Nott wasn’t *upset*. She was *tired*.

That...made sense. It had been an early morning, and a late night before that, in a none-too-comfortable bed in a cramped room. Of *course* she was tired.

Stupid that it had taken him so long to notice. (Some friend.)

Caleb ordered Frumpkin to stay with Nott and methodically checked over all his pockets. (They didn’t, strictly speaking, need to be checked, he knew exactly what he had where, and how much of everything besides, but it was something to busy his hands.)

Over the course of his work, Nott only smothered one more yawn, but she scrubbed her eyes three separate times. Definitely tired.

But determined, apparently, to stay awake, so he left her be and didn't point out that her bedroll was right there and available any time.

-

Nott went still, from her ears to her fingertips, so Caleb wandered over and sat next to her.

"Nice night."

"Mm."

"I like a clear sky."

"You and stars." She leaned into his side.

"Me and stars," he agreed. A moment later, "Look, the Shepherd's Crook."

Nott squinted. "No, that's the Axe."

"Same thing."

"Mmm."

-

They passed twelve more minutes like that, trading constellation names, Caleb offering stories to go with the ones he knew, Nott offering fewer and fewer names until she devolved to the occasional hum.

Then he jostled her, a little. "Time for bed, do you think?"

She shrugged a single shoulder.

"Ja, okay. Bed. For me, too, I am beat." (He wasn't remotely, but if it got her to agree....)

He stood and offered a hand. She ignored it in favor of pushing herself to her feet. Stumbled a little, righted herself, and headed, a little off-kilter, for her bedroll. (If he hadn't been watching her all evening, he'd have assumed she was drunk—but he had been, and she'd barely touched her flask.)

He frowned, followed her, and settled on his own, barely a foot away. "Good night, Nott."

"Mm."

-

Nott tossed and turned, clearly still awake despite herself.

Caleb said nothing, only lay back, watched the stars, and waited.

He waited a long time. The dark deepened. Insects screeched. Jester went to bed, and then Fjord, and then Yasha, leaving only Beau and Molly on watch.

Twenty-one minutes later, Nott's breathing went slow and even at last. Caleb sent Frumpkin to crawl on her stomach, and borrowed his senses just to be sure she was truly sleeping—and, ja, she certainly seemed to be, but.

That was not right.

Beneath Frumpkin, Nott trembled.

Caleb slipped back to himself, frowning. It was not chilly enough for her to be cold. Was she scared? Having another nightmare?

He rolled over to her, pressed a hand to her shoulder to shake her awake, and. Oh.

She was warm. (Too warm, it radiated through the wrappings.)

He mentally crossed out both *tired* and *nightmare* and slotted in *ill*.

Unfortunate for his little friend, but something of a relief for himself. Feelings were tricky, nebulous, a convoluted flowchart at the best of times and a minefield at the worst. *Illness*, though. That was concrete, solid. It came with clear instructions.

Step one: medicine. But all they had were healing potions—useless, here. An illness was not an infected wound.

Step two: water. But she was sleeping, finally, after all this time. He couldn't wake her so soon.

Which left them at step three: sleep. Already fulfilled.

So all that was left, for now, was to keep her asleep (and comfortable, if possible).

To that end, he rolled away, wrestled out of his coat, laid it over her, and then moved back to her side. With such limited supplies, an extra blanket and body heat were about the best he could do. Anything else would have to wait for dawn.

-

Fjord woke him some hours later, and he narrowly avoided jolting upright. Good thing, too, with Nott curled this close. He'd have woken her.

Caleb squinted up at him. "Mm...?"

"We're heading out."

He blinked. Oh. Oh, right. The plan, two hours to dawn....

"Don't go falling back to sleep, now." Fjord walked away.

Caleb made a face at his back, then set about carefully extricating himself from Nott. Managed it without waking her, took his coat back without waking her, checked her temperature without waking her (still warm, but she wasn't trembling anymore, at least).

Debated whether to wake her at all. Maybe he could just scoop her up, and then she could sleep more in the cart?

He bent down to try, and got as far as slipping one hand under her shoulder when she snapped upright.

"What's going on."

"Nothing, nothing." He straightened up. "We are just leaving."

"...Right." She scrubbed her eyes and began packing up her things.

How are you feeling? he wanted to ask, but the words stuck in his throat. (He was tempted to leave them there. With anyone else, he would have. But this was Nott, so he tried again.)

"How, how are you feeling?"

She shrugged. "I'm all right. Why?"

Caleb mirrored the gesture, stooping to gather his own belongings. "Last night, you, ah, did not seem so well."

"Oh." She picked up her pack. "Just a little tired, was all." As she headed for the cart, she said, "It's very sweet of you to worry, though."

Caleb swung his pack over his shoulder and beat her there. Offered her a hand up, but she ignored it and scampered up on her own.

"Oho, *rejected*," Jester crowed, impossibly chipper for the early hour.

Caleb pretended not to hear, sat down across from her. Nott settled to his right.

After the cart started moving, he pulled out a flask of water, took a swig, and handed it to Nott without looking. She snatched it, drank some, made a face that he barely saw out of the corner of his eye, handed it back, and then took a swig from her own flask.

Probably not medically advisable. But then, he supposed, withdrawal wouldn't help, either. Probably just as well.

A few beats passed. "I think Mr. Mollymauk has the right idea," he murmured, gesturing.

Molly sat slumped against the opposite side of the cart, already dozing again.

"Sleep, then."

"What about you?"

"I'll be here."

"That is not what I meant." He frowned.

She frowned back. "I'm not tired."

"...Respectfully, that is bullshit. You are feverish."

Surprise flickered across her face, followed by something utterly inscrutable, and then an eyeroll as she said, "Barely. I'm fine."

If Jester had delivered that line, or maybe Molly, or even Caleb himself, it might have been believable—but fever did not help Nott's acting skills, and on top of that the bags under her eyes were countable, now. "You are not."

"Exactly!" She grinned, and struck up a much less hushed conversation with Jester.

Caleb could find no opening to continue the argument, so let it go. (And anyway, if she was feeling up to the name puns, maybe she wasn't so ill after all.)

-

But as dawn approached in earnest, the conversation died, and Nott's eyes slipped closed and she slumped sideways with her head tilted awkwardly into his armpit, so probably name puns were unreliable as indicators of health went.

He slipped an arm around her, nudged her head sideways (because maybe she did not mind the smell, but she would certainly mind the crick in her neck when she woke), and brushed the hair out of her too-warm face.

She did not so much as stir.

-

Nott coughed in her sleep.

Just once, at first. A short, squeaky sound that made Caleb jump and no one else so much as blink.

Then, seventeen minutes later, again, a little longer, a little squeakier. Then again four minutes after that, and so on, irregularly, until finally Jester (the only other one on the cart still awake, as Beau had sprawled out for a nap half an hour back, and Molly of course was still dozing, and Fjord and Yasha were on horseback and driving, respectively) looked over with a worried frown.

"Is that Nott?"

"Ja." *What did you think it was, a choking rat?*

Her eyes went a little wide. "Is she sick?"

“Ja.”

Jester made a concerned little noise that reminded Caleb, suddenly, viscerally, of his mother.

He swallowed, plowed on. “She has been since yesterday.”

“She didn’t eat very much...”

Caleb nodded, gratified that *someone* at least had been paying attention. “Or sleep much. And —” A pause, as Nott coughed again, and shifted a little, pressing her face back towards his side. “She has been feverish. Is, still.”

The little noise, again. “Why didn’t she *say* anything?”

Caleb shrugged the shoulder of the side Nott wasn’t leaning against. He had a few guesses, most of which came down to trust, but he couldn’t be sure any of them were right. (And quietly, privately hoped they weren’t. Even if she did not trust the others, entirely, he would like to think she at least trusted *him*.) “It is possible,” he said instead, doubtfully, “that she did not know, herself. She seemed surprised when I mentioned the fever.”

Jester seemed mollified for a moment, then narrowed her eyebrows. “Then why didn’t *you* say anything?”

“I...did? I told you she seemed—”

“No, no, silly, not to her. To *us*. To *me*, I’m the cleric!”

“I *did*.”

“Yeah, but earlier, though. Like *right away*, you know? I could’ve helped!”

Caleb doubted this. Jester was a perfectly adequate cleric, but spells to relieve things like this were usually a bit more...complex, in his admittedly limited experience, than her standard fare. He bit his tongue to keep from saying so (healing was far from his specialty, and it was at least *possible* Jester had a few surprises up her sleeve). Instead, he cursed his arcane priorities (not a *single* healing spell in his repertoire, not the barest chance of helping Nott, but of course so many ways to turn her to cinders), and said, “Fine. Next time I, I will wake you.”

“Good.”

-

Molly stirred and stretched, and looked round the cart lazily. “Morning.”

Jester and Beau (who’d woken a few minutes prior) returned the greeting with varying degrees of cheerfulness. Caleb waved shortly with his left hand. (His right was busy stroking Nott’s hair.)

Molly half-grinned, nodding at her. “Not the only sleeping beauty this morning, I see.”

“She’s sick,” Jester said in a stage whisper.

Molly’s glanced from Jester to Caleb, grin slipping. At his nod, it vanished. “Well, hell. How bad?”

“She has a *fever*,” Jester said. “And she’s been sleeping for *hours*, and she keeps coughing a *lot*.”

“One hour and forty minutes, actually.” Though—hyperbole, right. “The rest is true, though, ja.”

“She,” Nott said into Caleb’s side, equal parts muffled and croaky, “was trying to *sleep*.”

“Oh, you are awake.” Then, “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” She unburrowed, scrubbed her eyes, and squinted at him. “Time to be up, anyway.”

“How—” Caleb began.

“How are you *feeling*?” Jester scooted forward. “Is it *terrible*, are you *dying*? I bet she’s *dying*.”

Nott blinked, owlish. “I’m. I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine,” Jester said, blunter than a thousand-year-old spear. “You look *terrible*.”

Nott shrugged, shoulders hunched. “I always look terrible. I’m not. I know I’m not *pretty*—”

“Bullllllshit, you’re *always* pretty, I love your hair and your eyes and your whole *face*. Just right now, also, you look really really tired.”

“Like shit,” Beau cut in.

“That, too.”

Nott picked at her sleeve and didn’t answer, shoulders drawing in further.

“Nott,” Caleb said, softly.

She looked up for a beat, eyes watery in a way that made him want to take her stealing and wrap her in the finest wool all at once, and then went back to staring at her feet. “...I’ve felt better.”

“So let me heal you!”

“You can do that?” Nott sounded hopeful, and Caleb resisted the urge to smack his head on the side of the cart.

“Of course, probably! It might not work *super* good, cause I've never tried it before, but it should help!”

“Well, okay.”

Jester scooted even closer and began casting. A long beat later, she stepped back. “Well?”

Being right usually came with an edge of satisfaction, no matter how unpleasant the circumstances, but there was none of that now, only a dull, sour taste in Caleb’s mouth.

“I...I think I feel a *little* better?” Nott said, unconvincingly.

Jester groaned. “Great. It didn’t work.”

“It, it did, some!”

“Thank you, Nott, but you don’t have to *lie*, you’re really bad at it.”

“Sorry.” Nott scuffed her feet. “Thank you for trying. I...I think I’ll just rest, if that’s okay?”

“That’s probably a good idea, probably.”

Both of them looked impossibly small.

“Maybe while she does,” Molly cut in, “you could get her some breakfast? Or water?”

“Oh! I can do that!”

Jester scurried off to do just that, and Nott shot Molly a grateful smile before closing her eyes again.

Caleb shot him an awkward thumbs up.

-

Every time the cart hit a bump, Nott's face twisted up.

Headache, probably. Caleb mentally reviewed the contents of his pockets and tried to think if he had anything that might help. (He didn’t, of course. Wires and powder and incense and molasses and an intolerable amount of bat shit, but not so much as a single cloth for a cold compress.)

Jester picked up on the pattern too and pestered Nott about it until she admitted the headache, at which point Jester disappeared and came back a few minutes later and asked if maybe Nott wanted to stop for a bit, just until the headache got a little better or maybe until she fell asleep?

“Because you know I asked Fjord, and he said the road ahead looks *pretty* bad, with potholes and junk, and you know if it’s hurting you—”

“No.” Nott sat up. “No, we keep going.”

“But if it’s hurting you—”

“Keep going.”

Jester’s face fell. “Well, okay.” Then she brightened. “Oh, oh, actually!” And she dived over to her bag and rummaged in it until she found a little box. “I can probably make you some tea with these herbs, probably! It would *definitely* help!”

“That would be awfully nice.”

“It would!” Jester squirreled herself away to try.

Nott wilted the moment Jester turned her back, and Caleb shifted, ready to reach for her—

But there was Molly, moving forward with a smile on his face and the offer of a good story on his tongue, and Nott smiled, and agreed, and looked a little less like forgotten cabbage—

So Caleb stayed put, with his hands in his lap, and listened.

-

It was, in the end, a very good story. He missed the end, though, because Molly stopped telling it when Nott fell asleep.

-

She slept through lunch, and Jester’s first failed attempt at tea.

When she woke, Beau gave her bacon and Molly gave her water and Jester gave her the second attempt. (Caleb gave her a questioning look.)

She tried them all in reverse order, downing the water quickest—Jester’s tea, it seemed, tasted absolutely terrible. (She only shrugged at him.)

-

Terrible though it tasted, it seemed Jester’s tea was effective, because Nott thanked her for it, a little shyly, said her head hurt less.

Jester beamed. “Oh good, I’m so glad! I can make more now, for tomorrow, if it comes back!”

-

As afternoon wore into evening, Nott’s eyes grew glassy, her movements sluggish. Caleb watched carefully for shivering, and at the first sign of it pulled her close and tucked her in his coat. She didn’t protest.

(He made a mess of his bottom lip debating whether this was good or bad.)

-

Nott crawled down from the cart by herself when they made camp, a little unsteadily. Caleb followed behind with both of their packs.

She tried to help set up camp, but Molly laughed at her, not unkindly, and told her to go keep Yasha company instead.

As he set up the alarm spell, Caleb more than half-listened to Yasha explain which flowers she'd put Nott's blossom by, and where she'd found them. (Frowned, a little, before kicking his face back to blankness.)

-

Dinner came and went. Nott coughed all through it, more or less, and afterward everyone bullied her into taking the spot nearest the fire for an early rest. (She grumbled, but went.)

Fjord gave her an extra blanket, and Jester donated her cloak, and Caleb was about to toss his coat over the lot when Jester told him in no uncertain terms that if he put his stinky coat over her *beautiful* cloak and made it a *stinky* cloak, she was going to end him.

He kept his coat to himself, reluctantly, and lay near Nott instead, and worried at the string in his pocket as she shivered, and coughed, and shivered some more.

-

Nott stuttered awake at half-past two, eyes wide, breathing shallow. Caleb rolled over as obviously as he could, and offered his hand.

Her nails dug into his skin a little, when she grabbed it and squeezed, but he ignored the pricking and rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand instead, slow and smooth.

A minute later, Jester, kneeling beside Nott. "Are you okay?"

Caleb wanted to snap at her, tell her to *leave*, he had this *handled*—but he bit his tongue, kept his mouth shut. Nott nodded.

"Bad dream?"

A beat, and then Nott nodded again, smaller this time. Caleb swallowed surprise. (It had taken her so long to admit having nightmares to him, and here, now—)

"Do you want me to sing to you?"

A long pause, and then Nott shrugged.

Jester sang something soft, and slow, and sweet. (Caleb hadn't realized she knew any songs like this, without bawdy terms or silly puns or—any of that. It was almost disconcerting.) (And irritating, for reasons he could not quite articulate.)

By the time she finished, Nott's eyes had gone half-lidded, and her hand lax in Caleb's. (By the time she finished, his heart thudded in his chest.)

“My momma used to sing me that,” Jester said quietly. “When I had bad dreams.”

“It’s very pretty,” Nott whispered. “Thank you.”

“Oh, any time, you know.” And Jester sat, quiet as anything, as Nott drifted back to sleep.

Caleb kept his eyes half-closed until she left, and wondered if he’d been meant to hear that. If she had seen him smoothing Nott’s hand and known he was awake, or if he had been eavesdropping. If she would be angry, if he had been.

But those. Those were problems for future Caleb. Current Caleb was just relieved that the song had worked.

And pointedly glad that it had been sung at all. Because Nott had enjoyed it, and clearly needed it (clearly, his own gesture had not been enough, had not been *right*).

And, of course, because she had deserved it, too. The...softness of it, in all the ways it had been soft. That. Nott deserved that. (Deserved soft songs and fancy cloaks and thick blankets and book-pressed flowers and special-brewed tea and wild-spun stories and pocket bacon and healing spells and worried frowns and—so much more.)

(Always more.)

Caleb ran his thumb along her knuckles and thought for a long, long moment about pulling his hand away.

Didn’t, in the end, and drifted off still holding her fingers, lulled by buzzing insects and warm fire and the in-out, slightly crackly rush of her breath.

-

Caleb woke to a bundle of goblin tucked into his chest, bony and coughing.

He patted her back awkwardly, half-wishing for someone better at this to take over, and half-furious at the prospect. “No better today, then?”

“Worse,” Nott croaked apologetically, and coughed again, loud enough that Caleb’s ears rumbled.

“I am sorry, my friend.” He patted her a little more, then held her close and surveyed the camp over her shoulder. Some were just stirring, others clearly long-since awake—among them Molly, cooking something in a pot over the fire, which was, unexpectedly, still going strong.

Molly caught his gaze and grinned, motioning him over.

“Are you hungry?” he murmured.

“No.”

“That is too bad. I do not think Mr. Mollymauk is going to take no for an answer.”

-

Caleb was, of course, correct. Molly poured a little of the soup—for it was soup over the fire, albeit a rather weak-looking one (“Time constraints,” he said, shrugging)—into a flask, and ordered her to drink it.

“You don’t have to have all of it now, just try some.”

So Nott tried some. And a little more, and a little more, and then set the flask down, still over half-full, and gave Molly a thumbs-up.

“Good,” he said, “good.”

-

Nott fell asleep again forty-one minutes into their journey and slept clear through til lunch, at which point Jester insisted on stopping and making more tea.

It seemed to help. Nott coughed less, spoke more, looked a little less miserable. Drank more of Molly’s weak soup even though it must have gone revoltingly cold and greasy. (For his part, Caleb relaxed, joined her in conversation, and gnawed on the end of a stale chunk of bread.)

A handful of hours later, though, her cough returned in earnest, and she got the fuzzy look that had made Caleb chatter to her about stars, not two days ago.

He pulled her to his side, and pressed his forehead to hers for a moment. Warm. Too warm.

(They were so far from the next town. If she didn’t get better soon....)

He twisted his pocket-string until he caught sight of Nott trembling, and then put it away and wrapped his coat around her. It was no fancy cloak, but Jester was both wearing hers and busy fretting at the state of the supplies in her herbalism kit, so it would have to do.

Stars on the brain again, he traded constellation names with Fjord and Yasha. It was interesting—they were both intimately familiar with ones he’d never had the pleasure of seeing in person—but more pressing was the small weight in his lap and the motion of his fingers carding carefully through Nott’s tangled hair, so he devoted only half his attention to the conversation, nodding and speaking and storing the new information mostly on autopilot.

He ran out of words, eventually, and switched over to simply nodding and half-listening. The others carried the conversation just fine without him. (This was a relief, in some ways, but in others—)

Caleb kept his hands slow and even in Nott’s hair, and did not let them shake.

-

When they stopped for the night, Yasha carried Nott off the cart, and Caleb first watched, then busied himself with setting up the alarm spell.

Everyone placed their bedrolls close together, with Nott's more or less in the center, in the hopes of keeping her warm and warding off nightmares. (A unanimous decision, though Caleb had only been able to nod his agreement—still out of words.)

And so they bedded down for the night in what Caleb thought of as a crowd and a wall, intermittently, and what Jester described delightedly, invariably, as a *cuddle pile*.

Some hours later, Caleb decided they'd both been wrong. It was not a cuddle pile, or a wall, or a simple crowd. It was a cesspool of *noise* and *touching*.

Jester snored and Fjord and Yasha breathed too loud and Beau mumbled and Molly—Molly slept silent, but every time he twitched his horns jangled, and some nights that was pleasant to hear across the campsite, a bit like wind chimes, but tonight, mixed with everything else and so irregular, it only rankled, made his ears shudder unpleasantly.

And then there was the wind, roaring off and on, strong, then soft, loud, then quiet. Obnoxious. (That, too, might be nice another time—standing on a hilltop, eyes closed, facing it, letting it blow his hair and coat out behind him dramatically, brisk and cool and isolating in its cacophony. But not—not tonight.)

And then there was Nott, coughing far too often for comfort, making his chest tighten in sympathy (or maybe that was the anxiety), even when his ears didn't shudder at the pitch (vaccillating between unnervingly high and distressingly deep—chesty, he was pretty sure, was the word).

And then there was all the *shifting*—terrible not only for the way it rustled their clothes and bedrolls and everything else in the general vicinity, but also the way it made them, sometimes, brush up against him, or breathe on him, or not technically touch him at all but settle distressingly close, a crawling weight and heat and *presence* just outside the bounds of his body, half-tangible, all-visceral, and *wrong*.

Caleb swallowed. Dragged the collar of his coat up, shielding the back of his neck from Beau's breath, and fumbled with the fastenings, and tucked his hands into his chest, and kept still as a log (for all the good it did—keeping still did not stop the others from rolling over, or sprawling, or breathing, or being so *close*). But keeping still was something to do, so he did it.

He did it, and did not sit up, and did not stand, and did not peel himself off from the group, the *cuddle pile*, and did not settle near the edge of the circle.

He did not.

He kept still, and gripped the edges of his sleeves, and pretended to be a log until, at last, exhaustion won, and sleep took him.

Caleb sat up and scrubbed his dry eyes with one hand, absentminded. Registered a slight dullness behind them, a stretched quality at the corners.

He could probably have used a few more winks.

But, he reflected, given the...cuddle pile, it was a wonder he'd got any at all. He should not look a gift horse in the mouth. And more to the point, more pressing—

He glanced over at Nott. Still sleeping, and looking no better. But, also, no worse.

Maybe that was a good sign. Maybe she would improve today, and he would not have to suffer another pile, or another several hours of Jester looking mokey, or himself twiddling his own thumbs, or. Any of that.

And on the subject of twiddling thumbs....

He stood, glanced at the sky—five-oh-six (or, more colloquially, fuck o'clock)—wincing at the over-bright clouds, and began packing up his things.

The sooner they got moving, the sooner they would reach their destination, and the sooner they could get Nott better help, and a comfier bed for her convalescence. Maybe even a healthy supply of grumpy people for a get-well gift.

Ja. Ja, those were good plans.

-

Jester gave Nott more tea when she woke, all cheer and cheesy grin. Nott mustered a slightly wan smile in response, and shortly after fell back to sleep.

Jester chewed on her bottom lip, twisted her hands up in her skirt, and admitted that she only had enough herbs for two more small batches of tea, if she got creative. "Do you think it will be enough?"

"Ja, of course," Caleb lied, adjusting his scarf against the chill wind. "You are the cleric."

Jester nodded to herself, hands still twisted in her skirt. "I am the cleric."

-

Nott spent the day huddled on Caleb's chest, shivering and sometimes mumbling—incoherent snatches of things, mostly, garbled phrases he could make neither head nor tail of. (Twice, though, he caught the words *Yeza* and *sorry*.)

(And twice, he said nothing, only held her closer and pressed a kiss to her brow.)

-

Caleb spent the day holding Nott, and hoping for another shitty little town to appear on the horizon, and winding his pocket-string around and around his fingers until it left thin red

marks.

-

Nott's fever rose, and Caleb wound the string so tight it snapped.

He paused, fingers splayed and twitching, wanting for something to grip, to twist. But there was nothing, so he curled his hands into fists until they hurt, and then made them relax, and closed his eyes, and breathed.

If he worked himself up any more, he was going to slip sideways, and then Molly was going to smack him again (if Beau didn't get there first). And besides, he would not be able to help Nott, if he went sideways, and he was already little enough help as it was.

So he breathed, and breathed, and stroked Nott's hair, and ignored the heat behind his eyes, the dullness, and pushed away the encroaching fog.

-

Of course, not long after he told the fog to fuck itself, all the world's haze sucked itself away at once, to spite him. (Because, you know, of course it did.)

Instead of distant and muggy, the world grew closer. Just by a few centimeters, an infinitesimal amount, but clearly perceptible all the same. Colors just faintly brighter, sounds a hair sharper, shapes crisper, the air fuller, the people abruptly embodying personhood more than any people had any right to, and Caleb himself no exception, so much a person with so much agency it was, it was jarring—everything closer, realer, more *present* in a way that sucked Caleb in and spat him back out in the same breath.

He blinked hard until the vibrancy faded, until his breath felt at home in his chest.

Better. Better. His heart still thudded away, his head still felt uncomfortably full, and his skin absolutely loathed his coat—but at least they were *his* again.

-

Caleb's legs buzzed beneath him. This was, he supposed, what he got for sitting cross-legged for so long with such a weight in his lap. (Not that Nott was truly heavy, of course, but asleep like this...) He shifted ever-so-slightly, trying to slip his feet out from under himself, and—

Pain. Dull, angry, red, throbbing behind his temples.

Caleb scrunched his eyes shut. Swallowed. Breathed, slow and even, through his teeth, and then took stock.

The immediate pain, dwindling. Not to nothing, there was still a—a sort of pressure, behind his forehead, somewhere. (He could not localize it, and trying only sent a spike through his skull.)

A headache. Of course. (What else did he expect, fretting so much.) (It was far from the first time he had worried himself one, and would certainly not be the last—but what awful timing.) (No more than he deserved, perhaps, but he was not the only one affected, here—Nott needed him unhampered now more than ever.)

In any case, though, there was nothing to be done but bear it, and sleep it off when it came time to sleep. The still-prickling pain in his legs, though. That could be fixed.

So he pushed the other complaints to the side, took a careful, quiet breath, lifted Nott a little, and set his legs out straight.

Screwed up his face, instantly, as the prickling turned overwhelming, too hot and too loud and too constant, and in response his head throbbed worse than before. He breathed even through his teeth and forced his face lax again and glanced at Nott. (Still asleep. Good.)

“Uh?” Beau, an eyebrow quirked in his direction, confusion painted all over her face.

He shrugged. “Feet asleep.”

She winced. “Ah. Hate when that happens. Reason five thousand meditating sucks.”

Caleb pasted on a smile. Let it drop quickly, because it tugged at his face too much and was probably a grimace anyway and hurt besides.

“Shut up.”

Ah. The smile must have been recognizable after all, then. Good.

He offered another, small, only one corner of his mouth quirked up a little, and then glanced away, which *also* hurt, though he moved his eyes as little as possible and his neck not at all.

Caleb tried to ignore it, slip back to blissful unawareness (or at least neutral tolerance), but the more he tried, the more pains he became aware of.

His spine, stiff against the side of the cart. His shoulders, pressed awkwardly against the wood. His arms, stretched funny around Nott. His chest, stress-tight. His skin, still enemies with his coat. (So much so that he'd remove it in an instant if it weren't so cold.)

...Cold.

Caleb took stock again, cataloguing all the little complaints, and.

Scheiße.

-

It figured. Illness never came at a *convenient* time. Why *not* now, when Nott was half-delirious and needed him clear-headed, when they were still at least two days out from the nearest town on the map, when medical supplies were running low even for *one* person, let alone two, when everyone was already so on-edge. Why *not*. (It figured. It figured.)

—Caleb shook himself, mentally. Later, said a voice in his head that sounded a lot like Molly's. There would be time for that later.

Now. Now was for focusing, and keeping still, and making sure Nott was comfortable, and okay, and still breathing. (She was still breathing, wasn't she?) (...Ja, there was the rise and fall. Okay.)

So Caleb focused, and kept still, and and kept a hand feather-light on Nott's back.

-

As Nott's fever continued to climb, Caleb thought, for the thousandth time, of removing her wrappings. It would help, probably. Less suffocating, less sweaty.

But she would hate it. She would fight him on it, even mostly-sleeping like this, he was sure. (And be angry, maybe, probably, when she woke properly.)

If they'd been alone, he would have done it anyway, her protests be damned.

But they were not alone. There were others, and Nott had never unwrapped herself in front of them, and selfish as it was, Caleb did not want to discover the consequences of betraying her in that way.

So he left bandages on, and held her, and tried not to think too much about it.

-

When they stopped for the night, Beau peeled Nott away from him and carried her to their little campsite. Caleb watched, and waited for everyone to clamber down off the cart, and then pulled himself, slowly, to his feet, following on legs that only half-belonged to him and only half-worked, besides.

Set up the silver circle on autopilot, and then went, stiff, to check on Nott.

Beau's jostling had woken her, but the glazed look in her eyes said not enough.

Still, Jester seized the opportunity to get more tea down her, and chatter all the while about how good she was getting at making it, and how soon Nott would be *all better*, and a dozen other little reassurances Caleb tuned out in favor of setting up his bedroll methodically, making sure there were no rocks underneath, no uneven corners, no wrinkles. Smoothing this, adjusting that, flattening here....

(Sleep, soon. Sleep, sleep.)

—A hand, on the edges of his vision, reaching toward him.

He flinched away, turning, hands flying up to ward it off. "Nn—!"

"Hey, whoa, sorry, sorry."

Caleb flapped a hand, swallowing, and forced his aching head to cooperate. Fjord. That was Fjord's voice, his hand, himself hovering off to the side, apologetic. (Only—only Fjord.) Why, what did he need, what was wrong?

“Nein,” he said, when he could do words again. But no, wrong one. He needed—others. Groped for them, and said, too flat and too loud, “What do you want.”

Fjord frowned. “Was asking if you could take first watch. Only you haven't in a few days, and I know you've been lookin after Nott but I figured—”

“Ja, fine,” Caleb said, still too flat, but quieter now (not an improvement, he suspected he just sounded bitter on top of angry). “I will take the watch,” he added, throwing in a smile to soften things.

“Cool,” Fjord said. “Thanks.”

-

The watch dragged.

Caleb paced in a straight line to stay awake and alert, at first. Then, when moving became more trouble than it was worth (a sentry whose head swam with pain every time he about-faced was no good, after all, liable to get the group killed), he sat and bit his cheek periodically instead. Drew patterns in the dirt, staring into the dark. Counted. Tried not to shiver, because it hurt.

Found himself coughing, after a while, just a little. Tried not to, because that hurt worse.

Watched, and watched, and watched, and listened, and watched some more, until his aching eyes went gummy and his vision began to blur. Then, reluctantly, he stood and stumbled over to Fjord.

With an hour and seventeen minutes left on watch, he should wait. But a sentry who could not see straight was useless. *Absolutely* going to get them killed.

So he nudged Fjord awake and stumbled back to his own well-smoothed spot and collapsed.

He reached for Nott, felt for her breathing, her skin—cooler now, maybe, or maybe that was just his own fever, making him a poor judge—then retracted his hand, closed his eyes, and, almost immediately, slept, and dreamed uneasy dreams.

-

Awareness swept back in in fits and starts.

Pain, first. Fully-body ache, pounding head, searing spine.

Then noise. Chatter, loud, accented, quick. Jester. Jester, worked up about something.

Then, all at once—Nott, sick, fever, terribly, awfully quiet.

Caleb sat up, and wished he hadn't. That. Bad. Bad, that. But—Nott.

He opened his eyes, brushed the sleep out of them, and searched for her. Found her two feet away, sitting up, by herself, eyes heavily lined, but open and clear, for once, and Jester grinning wide beside her.

Caleb cleared his throat, smiled. "You are awake."

"Yeah."

"You are feeling better?"

She hesitated, and his spirits plummeted, and his energy with them. Maybe she noticed, because she sprang into speech. "I—better, yes, of course. I'm just. I'm still very tired, Caleb." She sounded—apologetic? Embarrassed? Worried? (One of those, probably.)

"That is okay," Caleb said. "I—you know, I wish you were all better, but these things, they take time." He paused for breath, turned words over in his head, tried to fit them on his tongue in a reasonable order. "Take as much as you need. I—" He caught Jester's eye and looked away, his head stuffed with cotton and song. "We will be here."

Nott nodded, looking down at her feet.

Caleb couldn't tell if that was good or bad, but today felt like a day with a word limit, and not a very large one, so he was not sure how much more he could say, how much he had already spent. Still—in for a penny.... "You know, we care about you, Nott."

Not what he'd meant to say, exactly, but the best he had.

Maybe not good enough. Nott mumbled "I know" without looking up, and Jester gave him a look he couldn't decipher and turned all her attention on Nott, voice and hands and face all impossibly soft. (A softness Caleb couldn't match, and not only because his voice had gone rough around the edges.)

He marked it down on his ever-expanding list of fuckups, and set about slowly, methodically picking up his things.

-

Jester set her fancy cloak on Nott's lap as she filled her in on all the gossip she had missed (and all the terribly bawdy jokes, in spectacular play-by-play, even mimicking everyone's reactions), and commandeered three bedrolls to set up a blanketpile in the cart.

"You *have* to have a nest when you're sick, it's basically the rules."

Nott raised her eyebrows. "Why didn't—" Cough. "—I get one before, then?"

Jester rolled her eyes. "Caleb wouldn't let me."

Caleb wanted to protest, because she hadn't ever even mentioned it, there was no way he could have refused—but searching for the right words was like trying to play hopscotch in a pool of molasses.

“Caleb, is that true?” Nott looked...something. Caleb couldn't tell what. (Still skeptical? Or confused? Hurt? Angry?)

He shook his head once. Not as emphatic as he wanted, because that would hurt worse, and one lance through his skull was probably enough.

“—really is, though!” Jester said, when Caleb could process speech again. “He wouldn't let go of you the whole time.”

He felt more than saw Nott look askance at him, and shrugged, picking at his sleeve and wishing for string.

“See! I told you!” Jester crowed. “But now though, you have a nest, so balance is restored! Now c'mon, get comfy, that is *also* the rules.”

Nott wiggled down and let Jester half-bury her. Caleb smiled at the bit of face he could see, and pretended it didn't feel sticky, or stretched, or hollow.

After a few minutes, he sent Frumpkin to curl beside the nest. (Almost immediately, half-wished he hadn't. Missed the weight, the warmth.) (He moved his pack to his lap, but it was cold, and did not weigh as much as Frumpkin, much less—)

-

Yasha produced a flower from her pocket and asked if she could put it in Nott's hair.

Nott furrowed her brow. “Don't you want to save it?”

“Oh. I...well, I already have one, see?” She took out her book and flipped to the right page. “But. Even if I didn't, you know. It suits you.”

“It does?”

“Yeah.”

“...My hair is pretty gross.”

“I don't mind.”

Nott's face did a thing, and she smiled, and Caleb frowned behind his scarf for no reason at all. (This was a good conversation. This was important. He was happy they were having it, it was a *good* thing, and Nott deserved good things and.)

Caleb blinked, shoving the mess away. (Later.)

“—if you want.”

“Okay. Here, let me...” Yasha tucked the flower in the hair behind Nott’s ear. “There.”

Nott twisted a strand of hair from the opposite side. “How's it look?”

“Pretty.” A pause. “It matches your eyes.”

Nott twisted her hair more. “...Thanks.”

-

Nott slept. Caleb watched.

His eyes still ached, and he wanted nothing more than the crawl over and join her, under the weight of all those pallets, and close them, and sleep.

Instead, he scooted forward, checked her fever (completely broken, it felt like, except as established he was no longer a reliable judge), and scooted back, ignoring his spine’s screaming protests (louder, for once, than the headache).

“How's our girl?” Beau asked from the corner.

“Better,” Caleb said shortly. That much, at least, he was sure of.

Beau nodded. “Good. And you?”

Caleb frowned, caught off guard. “I am fine.”

“Bullshit. You've been weird for *days*, man. Relax already 'fore you stress yourself sick.”

Caleb snorted despite himself. Winced, when it ripped at his throat, and cursed, and held his breath to keep from coughing, because that would be absolutely *terrible* timing and Beau would never, ever let him live it down. (And he would snap, and there would be an argument, and Nott didn’t need worrying about his interpersonal relationships right now—or his health, for that matter. There was her own to consider.)

“Fuck you, Caleb.”

He wasn't sure a snort merited a fuck you, but okay. He flipped her off in return, without any real venom, and pulled out a book and pretended to read.

-

Nott woke complaining of starvation.

Before Caleb could put the book away and pull the remaining stale bread out of his pocket, Beau handed Nott a few scraps of bacon. “Here. Sorry, s’all that's left.”

Nott nibbled at one first, hesitantly, looking twice as green as usual. Then, after a minute, jammed the rest in her mouth. “Fanks.”

“Anytime man.”

Caleb registered, dimly, that he'd forgotten breakfast, and also dinner before that. Might just explain a few things. Like the word limit, and the way his hands had taken to shaking if he lifted them too much.

He pulled out the bread and gnawed on one end. Utterly tasteless. Far too dry.

He ate anyway, until it became too much effort, and then wordlessly offered Nott the rest.

She shook her head, thanked him anyway, and smiled.

He tucked it in his pocket with a shrug, pulled out the book again.

-

Nott coughed.

Caleb started—"Nn!"—and dropped his book and slapped his hands to his ears, hard.

A flash of. Something, on Nott's face, caught through squinted eyes. She tried to apologize through another cough, which turned into a harsh-sounding fit.

Caleb forced his hands from his ears and held out his water flask. It trembled a little, but Nott didn't seem to notice. Too busy hacking. Then wheezing.

Caleb forced himself up, intending to go over and—and something. But there was Jester, and Yasha, already on either side of her rubbing her back and whispering probably very kind, not-at-all awkward things, like. Like assholes.

His legs shook, so he sat back down. Slid the flask over.

Eventually, the fit died down, and Nott picked up the flask with violently trembling hands. Caleb listened to the water slosh inside and wondered, suddenly, abruptly, when her last drink had been. Was this exhaustion, or withdrawal? How worried should he be? Should he suggest —?

Something slid into his foot and he forced down another flinch. Just the flask.

He picked it up and was about to tuck it away when it occurred to him that he was very, very thirsty.

He drank long and deep, but left a little in case Nott got thirsty again, and then put it away.

That was. Better, probably. His throat hurt a little less.

Everything else, though, hurt more. Angry that he'd moved. That he'd got startled. That he'd filled his stomach to sloshing.

He closed his eyes and breathed.

-

Afternoon wore into evening and Yasha took over driving and Molly came to sit in the cart with them.

He kissed Nott's forehead, called her sleeping beauty, and entertained her with cards and stories and jokes.

Nott beamed for the first time in days, and Caleb closed his eyes. (He was glad, he was, but. So tired.)

Reopened them when he felt himself drifting. (Not time for sleep yet. He still needed to keep an eye on Nott, and check in with her, when he could find a moment and the words, and. Not time for sleep.)

He sat a little straighter, tried to look engaged and not like his eyeballs were slowly dehydrating inside his skull.

A story about performing drunk (stupid), a story about the best hailstorm he'd ever seen (unimpressive), and a story about—unless Caleb was very much mistaken—eating an entire bouquet of flowers.

That one he tried twice as hard to listen to, curious despite himself—but lost half the details to a coughing fit he only barely managed to keep silent, face buried in his scarf, shoulders shaking with effort. (Because of course.)

Caleb exhaled quietly, slumped a little, and let Molly's next story wash over him. Easier to focus on, even with the words lost in the clamor of the cart, than the persistent ache in his everything.

Too easy. He dragged himself upright again and adjusted his coat to keep from dozing. (Still not time to sleep.)

-

Caleb pulled his scarf over his nose and coughed again, silently. Knuckled his chest, after, and breathed shallow through the prickling at the base of his throat. (He thought briefly, stupidly, of a small tin cup, half-burning his little fingers, and a bitter tea sweetened with enough honey to suffocate an army of flies, and a warm voice saying *careful, it's hot*.)

He closed his eyes. Swallowed. (Stupid, stupid.) And again, and again, until the lump in his throat went away and there was only, once more, the awful prickling. He tried to breathe past it, slow, shallow, as before, then to hold his breath til it passed, but—no use. The cough burst out of him rough and sharp and *loud*.

A beat, then:

“Aw, not you, too.” Molly, staring right at him.

Caleb swallowed past knives and hunched his shoulders, avoiding the tiefling's gaze. Considered denying it, but that was silly. Now the idea had been thrown out there, the group would notice the other signs (and even if they did not, Nott would, at least, and would be sure

to point them out). So instead he shrugged, noncommittal, and bit back an apology, and another cough (the latter poorly).

"I *knew* it," Beau said. "I knew you were too quiet."

I am always quiet, Beauregard, he wanted to object, but. Too many words.

Jester made the distressed sound from before, moved a little closer. "*Cay-leb*, you said you'd tell me next time. Also you look kind of warm, do you want some tea? I think there's—"

Caleb shook his head fractionally, and had to blink away dizziness. No, no tea, the supply was so limited, she'd said so herself. Some space, some rest, a moment to check in with Nott (he had not had one all day), that was all he needed.

"...gone kind of cold, though, I don't know if it will taste very good." A pause, not long enough for Caleb to respond. "It should still help though so you should drink it anyway probably. And, oh—Beau, Molly, we're going to need another nest."

Caleb pulled his knees up to his chest. Breathed. Tried to find the words for—for why that sounded very nice but also terrible. (And Nott was so quiet, had not said anything, and that. That.)

Caleb wrapped his arms around his knees, and did not wince at the way it stretched his shoulders. "...Nein. Not—" He swallowed a cough. "—necessary."

"Don't be silly, Caleb, it is *absolutely* necessary. It's in the rules. You know, rule one, you have to have a nest. Rule two, you have to take a rest." She said it slightly sing-song, like a nursery rhyme, and Caleb wondered, idly, if she'd invented it herself, as a child. (Wondered, not for the first time, how present her mother had been. She had sung her songs, and given her money, ja—but had she ever been there to rock her feverish daughter to sleep? Had she ever made her tea with honey, cautioned her to be careful?

Belatedly, Caleb realized Jester was waiting for a response, so he rewound the conversation inside his head, painstakingly, and then gestured to himself. "Ja, resting."

"You're not, though!" Jester tossed her hands up. "You're just sitting there and, and spacing out!"

"Ja," he said again, because recycled words came easier. "Resting."

A different, scratchy voice. "Caleb."

He stilled, met Nott's eyes over Jester's shoulder for the briefest second (she'd wriggled mostly free of the nest again, was visible now), registered *something* in them, alongside a general air of seriousness, and then looked back down. "...Ja," he said. "Okay."

Jester squealed, and clapped, and Caleb's ears roared in protest. "Okie! We'll get it set for you and you can drink your tea and you will feel better in no time I *promise*."

Caleb closed his eyes during the flurry of activity that followed. Did not scrub his ears, or plug them. Just sat, and hugged his knees, and coughed silently, once or twice.

Then Jester poked him in the side and he cringed away, eyes flying open. “Mm?”

“Tea.” She shoved a little flask into his hands. “And your nest is over here by Nott’s, come on.”

For several long moments, he did not move. Yelled at himself to, but stayed put. Then yelled again and up he got, and moved, embarrassingly unsteadily, over to the pile, and sat down carefully.

Barely had time to look over at Nott, grasp for words, before Jester prodded him again. “Nope. Lay down.”

He didn’t budge.

“Lay *down*, you stinky wizard man.”

He laid down.

“Good! Drink your tea, sleep, I will be over here. Shout if you need anything.”

Caleb watched her move to the opposite side of the cart, then rolled onto his side, with some difficulty, and allowed himself a few moments of self-pity—everything *hurt*—before forcing his eyes open again and looking for Nott.

He found her immediately, shuffled back down in her nest, peering at him over the fold of a blanket that came up over her nose. He laughed, a little, at the sight—at her bright, tired eyes and the blanket obscuring her face and the fact that she had been watching him, of course she had been watching him—and then he coughed, and muffled it in his arm, and when he looked up again Nott was pushing herself to her feet.

Nein, he tried to say, breath quickening, *do not trouble yourself friend, please, you need rest*. But the words would not come, so he flapped a hand instead, both *stay* and *come on brain, work with me*.

Nott hesitated, and slowly lowered herself back down.

He closed his eyes in relief, and gave her a slightly-shaky thumbs-up. After a few moments, he opened them again, and ja, good, Nott was still watching him, good. He could speak to her, now. She was waiting, would keep waiting, she always did, there was time. He could pull out the words, and she would answer, and then they could both rest. Just as soon as he—as soon as he asked. Soon as he found the words.

Should be easy. Should, he’d spent half the day thinking of them. Half the day, wanting to ask how she was. What she needed. Offer comfort (she had seemed so *frightened*, with the fever, beyond even her usual anxiety). Half the *day*—

But there was more to add, now. There were—there were more questions to ask, about why she had been so quiet when Molly had called him out, about what was going on in her head, about. Maybe some reassurances, she did tend to worry. And. And? Maybe some apologies? He had gone rather abruptly useless, even more than before, and while Nott probably didn't mind, much, she was still owed—and he'd planned, and....

And he was going somewhere, with this. Or had been. Had. He was going to tell her all this. Going to. As soon as he got it all in order enough, and concise enough, to actually *say*.

But the words just. Wouldn't form in his head, not coherently, and his mouth opened and closed soundlessly when he tried, the words caught in the back of his throat. He made a frustrated noise, scrubbed hard at his face, and gestured at her with a half-limp hand.

Are you okay? he tried to convey, with wave and eyebrows alone, because that was the main thing.

She stared back at him. "...I." She shook her head. "I'm sorry Caleb, I don't understand."

He scowled at himself. (Stupid, stupid. Just *speak*. What kind of *garbage person* can't even —) Dropped his heavy, useless hand to the nest.

Nott mumbled something. He strained to make it out, but. Nothing. Noise soup. (Stupid, stupid.)

Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes, sudden, hot. He buried his face in the nest. (Stupid.)

Three words. He needed *three words*. Three, and a yes or a no and then he could sleep. (The others would take care of her, they had been all day, all-ever-since-she-got-sick, really. She didn't. She didn't need him hovering, with them here.) (Not that he could hover anyway, really, like this. He couldn't even *speak*.)

(Stupid.)

A pull in his chest, forward, steady, slow, and tears spilled over, dripped thick and hot down his cheeks. (Because crying would fix it, obviously. Wasn't silly, pointless, over-indulgent, unearned. Wasn't only going to dehydrate him and make the fever worse and make more trouble and—)

A different sort of pull in his chest, setting off another stupid coughing fit.

He caught his breath, after, half-expecting to feel Nott's hands on his back, or maybe slipping round to his face. But of course there was nothing, only empty air and the fuzzy sense of her a couple feet away.

Just as well. He'd told her to stay, to rest. The whole point was for her to rest. (Silly, to imagine otherwise. Selfish.)

So he lay there, breathing, no longer crying. (It required energy.)

He would...he would rest, he decided. Rest, and then talk to Nott, and then sleep properly, until he woke up feeling like a garbage *person* again, instead of just garbage.

Ja. Ja, that was a good plan.

-

It was not a good plan.

Resting led to closing his eyes, which led to everything going fuzzy, which led to dozing, which led to opening his eyes still feeling like garbage, and with Nott inches from his face to boot.

“You’re awake. How are you feeling?”

He considered. Everything still hurt, and had gone heavy besides, and a bit fuzzy and cold. But if he said as much, Nott might. Might. Something. So he shrugged. Prodded for words like a sore tooth, managed one. “...Tired.”

“Yeah, you look awful.” Nott scratched at the back of her hand, laughing a little, then coughing, then wincing. “I, I know we share a lot, but I didn’t mean to share *this*.” She gestured to her chest. “So, uh. Sorry?”

He frowned, nonplussed. Dropped it, after a beat, because that had been a joke, probably. Tried to muster a smile.

“Anyway, um. What do you need, how can I help?”

He blinked, owlish. Help? No, she was supposed to be resting. That cough....

But she was still scratching at her hands, so he floundered for an answer, something to give her, some—some small task. “...Rest.” That counted as a task, if someone else asked you to do it.

Nott scratched at her hand again. “...Oh.” Tugged her bandages, adjusted them. “I...of course, Caleb. I’ll go. I’m sorry.”

He opened his mouth to dismiss the apology, ask how she was feeling (the cough still sounded awful, and she had to be anxious besides, surely, with this many apologies)—but she’d already turned, scampering back to her nest. He clicked his teeth back together.

Next time. Next time, he would ask.

-

Caleb jolted upright, heart pounding, temples throbbing, chest stuffed with clumpy wool, the kind his mother had spun, rather poorly, into yarn to make his sweaters—except soggy. He sucked in a breath through it, and another, and another, and looked round through blurry, gummy eyes, searching, searching—

“She’s fine.”

He jumped, and everything swam so much his stomach turned to water. But. Only—only Beau? (Another breath, a little shaky.) (Only Beau.)

“She’s right here, she’s sleeping, she’s fine. We’ve been looking after her.”

Sleeping. Looked after. Good. Good. (At least *someone*—)

“What else, uh. Fever’s gone, Jester thinks she’ll be up and about tomorrow?”

Gone. Up and about. Good. (...*Thinks?*)

“Y’can ask her yourself, when she wakes up, if you don’t believe me, but. She’s doing a damn sight better than you.”

Better. (Better.)

Caleb slumped back down. More chatter seeped into his ears—Beau, still talking, saying something or other, but the words slipped and jumbled and he closed his eyes.

Slept.

-

Caleb pushed his way through the undergrowth, swatting at tiny stinging insects and trailing branches, kicking at weeds that curled round his ankles, tripping him up.

He had to get back to camp. He had to get. Get back.

He leaned against a thin tree for a beat, caught his breath. Its sap stuck to his fingers. He wiped his hand on his coat, grimacing, and pressed on.

He had to get back.

But the trail twisted, grew more cluttered with shrubbery and rocks and roots the further and faster he walked. A few minutes in, he tripped over a particularly nasty root, and had to push himself to his feet, painstakingly.

His ankle twinged, but he pressed on. (He had to get back. The others were waiting.)

His head swam, and he kept stumbling, and dropping his things, and picking them up, and picking them up, and forgetting what he was doing, and picking them up, and failing to put them where they belonged, missing the right pockets, missing the right pouches, and picking them up, and walking, and going the wrong way, and dropping his things, and picking them up, and—

A stretch of haze, dropping and gathering and stumbling and turning and pressing forward, forward, forward, and—

Camp. Finally, camp. The others, Nott, the mission. Camp.

But he blinked, blearily, around the little clearing, and found nothing.

No camp. No cart. No horses no others no Nott.

Nothing to show they had ever been there. (Had they—? Had he only imagined—?)

(Had—?)

(Was he still—?)

(Was—?)

He fell to his knees in the dirt. Something stabbed him, and for a long, long moment, he let it. But it pressed like ice against his skin, and he was already so cold, so finally he shifted, scuffled until he found it, then scrabbled at the ground until his fingers found purchase, picked it up, held it before his eyes, squinted.

A length of copper wire.

-

Caleb's eyes sprang open. He tried to suck in a breath, couldn't. All the air, gone. For several agonizing moments, gone.

—And then back.

He breathed, shallow, quick, eyes darting around the—the.

Cart. He was in the cart. The cart, with the others, with.

He exhaled, shuddery, and closed his eyes tight. (Breathe.) (In four, hold seven, out eight, and again, and again—useless. Useless. Only made him cough.)

He clutched the ends of his sleeves. Did not reach into his pockets. (No more string, and no. No coil of wire.) Did not stretch a hand out behind himself, palm-up. (If—no.) Did not, did not, did not, did—

Held his breath. Listened, listened.

...There. In-out, even, and steady, and.

He listened. Fiddled with hem of his right sleeve.

This. This was okay. This was.

This was good.

As long as she—as.

Good.

-

“— *ay-leb!*”

He forced his eyes open. “Mm?”

“You didn’t drink your *tea!*” Jester, shaking a flask at him.

...Oh.

“Drink it.”

He wanted to refuse—it was still Nott’s—but. Arguments. Conflict. *Shouting.*

So he pushed himself up, leaned back against the wall of the cart, waited for Jester to press the flask into his hands. Drained it, when she did. Valiantly did not gag at the contents. (Bitter, dreg-filled, no honey at all, far too cold. Awful.)

“It’s not *that* bad. You know, *Nott* didn’t make a face like that.”

Well then you should have had Nott drink it, he wanted to say, and Ja, but Nott, she eats rats raw, she is wonderful, but she is not the best baseline. But instead. Neither.

He dropped the flask. Laid back down.

Tried to catch Nott’s eye, to say—something, he wasn’t sure what, an apology, maybe, or a joke, or both—but she wouldn’t look at him.

He closed his eyes instead, and did not sleep.

-

The sky hung purple-gray around them when they broke for camp.

Caleb blinked up at it as he slipped, woozily, down from the cart. Shouldn’t it be darker? Surely by now it must be—must be....?

He scrubbed his face. It. It was...?

He shoved all temporality-related thoughts in a box and shuffled over to the camp, shrugging off Fjord’s careful hands at his back. Knelt, just inside the usual perimeter (that, at least, he could still judge, thank the gods) and fumbled in his pockets for the silver string. Spent several long moments untangling it. Or rather, trying to, his shaking fingers slipping and tripping and nearly dropping the whole thing, fumbling repeatedly as it grew more clumped and interwoven and impossible, and—

A pair of hands plucked the string from his grip. “Yeah, no. You’re not doing this tonight.”

He protested, reaching. (He almost *had* it, they couldn’t just sleep without an *alarm*—)

“Nope. C’mon.” The same hands, pulling him up. (Thin, firm, tellingly callused. Beau.)
“Bed.”

He tried to resist, pull away—(no, he needed to untangle the string, needed to set up the *spell*, the *alarm*, it was *important*, it, it)—but no use. Beau held him firm, marched him over to a pallet, made him lay down.

“Get some sleep,” she said, not unkindly, and walked away, leaving him there on the ground, still stuck on knotted string and empty hands and no alarm, no alarm, no alarm.

Caleb drew his arms into his chest, pressed beneath him, and tried to focus on the feel of the bedroll against his slighly-sweaty fingers instead of how empty they were, how buzzing, and how very exposed his shoulders felt.

No use.

The campsite stretched. His chest shrunk.

(Anyone could walk right up to them, now. Anyone could attack, and they would have no warning, and they would all die, and it would be his *fault*, because he didn’t set up the spell, the very very simple spell, the spell he could set up in his *sleep*, any day, any time—except, except *now*, because Beau wouldn’t *let* him, because he wasn’t fast enough because he kept fumbling the string because a little fever had made his fingers *useless*, completely useless and —)

(Why did he think joining a group was a good idea, why did he ever ever think, he should have stuck just him and Nott—)

(But then if it were just him and Nott it would be worse, really, because there would be no one else to look after her, no second line of defense without his alarm spell, without his fire —)

(It was good, it was good they were in a group, it was good, it kept them safe, it kept Nott safe, when he—)

(But not safe *enough*, not without the *spell*, he was supposed to—he—)

Caleb’s head filled with static to match his buzzing, empty hands.

It stayed filled with static when the others settled down for the night, placing their bedrolls far too close, making far too much noise, touching far too much.

Stayed, and stayed, and stayed, until a small, warm weight plopped half-on, half-off his back, and a small bubble formed in his chest.

Nott?

The weight shifted, and the bubble burst.

Not Nott. Too light, and too soft. Frumpkin. Only Frumpkin, come back to him at last. (He remembered, vaguely, sending him to lay by Nott. Could not remember ever calling him back.)

Caleb swallowed, and ordered Frumpkin to lay still. Frumpkin obeyed, and purred besides.

Caleb took in a shuddering breath, and focused on the purring until the static faded out, and the campsite shrunk back down, and the ground steadied.

As it did, he became aware of an odd shape, a foot away. Squinted at it, and found it was Nott, sleeping, curled into Jester, one ear twitching in a silly pattern (one-two-three, one-two, one-two-three).

He closed his eyes again, half-smiling, and ignored the heat pricking at the corners.

-

Caleb woke from dagger-sharp dreams of blood and ash to full-body shakes and overwhelming nausea. He swallowed convulsively, and again, and again, breathing unsteady through his nose until it passed. Then he shifted, just a little, trying for a position a little less cramped, a little more warm—and froze as his hand grazed a set of familiar fingers. Thin, bony, four of them. Blessedly cool.

His breath hitched, and he smothered a cough, and laced his fingers through Nott's, cautiously. She did not budge, still fast asleep, and he sighed, let himself go slowly boneless.

This was...nice. Very nice.

Especially after. Well. After the raging shitpile of yesterday. (But there must be no hard feelings, if she had reached for him like this. She must not have minded, much, that he had been piss-poor company, and even worse help.) (This made sense. He was always those things, and she had, for whatever reason, never minded before....)

-

But the moment Nott stirred, she froze, and then peeled her hand away and left.

Caleb pulled his own back and reevaluated. (Stupid, assuming like that, assuming she'd meant to reach for him. She had curled up with *Jester*, after all. She did not want—) (And just as well. Just as well.)

-

Some minutes later, he sat up, blinked away a few spots, and made to go wait in the cart.

Yasha stepped in front of him before he got more than a few feet, picked him up, and carried him the rest of the way. (It was not the first time she had hauled him somewhere bodily, and it likely would not be the last, and this knowledge had never bothered him before, but today it rankled, so he did not thank her when she set him down, only curled small and closed his eyes.)

-

He stayed there in a lump most of the day, vaguely listening to the others talk. Better than sitting up, trying conversation on like the soggy glove of someone three sizes smaller. (It only came easy with Nott, and that was. That was best avoided.) Better than prying his eyes open every few minutes and staring at Nott. (She hadn't wanted to look at him the day before. He could think of no reason that might have changed since.) Better than trying to actually sleep. (Dreaming of more copper wire or worse, without Nott close to keep nightmares at bay—she hadn't even wanted to hold his *hand*. Asking her to tuck herself into his side was completely out of the question.)

(And anyway, avoidance or not, he was still very tired. The rest was probably a good idea.)

-

“Caleb.”

He kept his eyes loose-shut and his breathing even.

Beau kicked him. (All the air left his lungs at once.) “I know you’re awake.”

He opened his eyes, sucking in air, coughing, one hand pressing to his chest, the other the spot she’d kicked, blinked as blearily as he knew how, tried for hurt. “Mm...?”

Beau crossed her arms. “Cut the shit.”

He dropped the hurt look and settled on indifference. “Yes, Beauregard?”

“You need to apologize to Nott.”

He blinked. Tried to figure where exactly to begin processing that statement. *Beau* informing *him* that he needed to apologize, as though she were some kind of expert? Or her assuming that he didn’t *already* know he’d messed up with Nott? Or her somehow *knowing* that he’d messed up with Nott at all?

“Don’t give me that look. I know you’ve been ignoring her. You know you’ve been ignoring her. She knows. The whole group knows. You’re not exactly subtle.”

On the contrary, he was very good at subtle. Just...certain kinds of subtle. Maybe this was not one of them.

“And I know you’re sick and all in your head and everything, but it’s been ages, man, and you’re hurting her, and—”

Wait. Hurting...?

“—not gonna sit here and let you do that, so I need you to cowboy the fuck up, get over yourself, and apologize for being a royal dick.”

Caleb furrowed his brow. “She is not hurt. She is angry.”

Beau tossed her hands in the air. “Oh my fucking *gods* Caleb. You’re—just *talk* to her, asshole.”

“But—”

“Talk. To her. As soon as she wakes up.”

Caleb nodded, slowly, and Beau nodded back, more decisively, and shuffled her shoulders a little awkwardly, and then left the cart, still nodding and looking half-furious.

Caleb watched her go, and then turned to look at Nott, dozing against the wall of the cart, and frowned.

He would talk to her, of course, and apologize—whether Beauregard was right about his having hurt her or not, he did owe her that much—but there was the question of how to phrase it, and how to broach the topic, and what would happen when all was said and done, and....

-

He chewed over the questions for another hour and...and five minutes? Ten? (It was easier to keep track of time today, but still a bit hazy, if he did not concentrate. And it was hard to concentrate when there were words to gather, a conversation to plan, a conflict to prepare for.)

And then Nott woke, and he spent another sixteen (seventeen?) minutes avoiding her gaze and hating himself for it (coward, coward) before finally, finally, sticking his hand in his pocket and swallowing and pulling out the copper wire.

He wound it carefully, ritualistically, pouring as much focus as he had into the spell—normally he would not try so hard, but he still did not feel so well, and this was important, and he did not want it to go wrong, so in went the effort—and once he felt it take, he took a steadying breath and said, quietly, “Nott? I would like to speak with you, if that is all right.”

A few feet away, Nott jumped as though stung and glanced at him for a second before her eyes skittered off again. For a moment Caleb was certain that she still did not want to talk, but then, in his ears, too-quick, “Yes, of course that’s all right Caleb. What’s wrong?”

He took his time winding the wire again, trying to gather the next set of words through his unease. “Nothing is wrong. Or, I suppose. Beauregard said that I should apologize to you, for pretending to be asleep so much. So, I am sorry for that.”

Nott settled back, going still. (Very angry, or very upset. Either way, a bad sign.) “...Oh. Well it’s fine, Caleb. I know you don’t always like to talk.”

“Nein, that is not. I mean, that is true, of course, but that is not the point of this conversation.” A pause, as he collected his thoughts, caught his breath (he had not said so much at once in—days, perhaps). “Beauregard also said that I hurt you. And of course if that is the case I am sorry for that, too, but I am not sure what she meant?”

"Oh, uh. You didn't—you did nothing wrong." But she picked at her fingers, and still would not look at him.

"Nott," he said, chest constricting, and smothered a cough in his arm. "Please."

"It, it's silly, we don't need to have this conversation, you're still not well, you need rest."

"Nott."

She fidgeted with her bandages for a long, long moment. The spell dissipated.

Caleb began to recast it. Then stopped, feeling abruptly twice as ill, as Nott reached into her cloak and pulled out her own coil of copper wire and began to wind it around her fingers nimbly.

"Well," she said. "Um. And of course it's not your fault! I just, um. You told me to go away, and you weren't talking to me, so much, and, and I was probably imagining it but you kept giving me these looks and I thought, I thought maybe you were angry?"

"...Oh," Caleb said, articulately. "You. That."

"I'm sorry! It—it was silly, I know. I'm sorry."

"Nein," he said. "That is not—I, I am not angry with you, you do not need to be sorry. Nein, it actually, ah. It is just. It is, you know, it is funny, you are going to laugh—"

"Caleb."

He stopped. Gathered the words. Cleared his throat, and valiantly did not cough. "I sort of, you know, I also...thought that perhaps *you* were angry. With me."

"...Oh." Nott looked stunned. "Well of course not, Caleb! I could never be angry with you. And, and you didn't *do* anything."

Well, that was sort of it, Caleb didn't say. "Nor did you."

"Well. I got ill. And then I made *you* ill." Her ears drooped. "Still, um. Still sorry about that, by the way."

"It is fine, and not your fault. But—" His brows furrowed. "—why would I be angry about *that*?"

Her ears drooped further, the wire going similarly lax as she picked at her fingers. "You wouldn't, of course, you're very good to me. I should've remembered that. I'm sorry."

"Nein, that is not. I did not think you meant it as a, a judgment. And I do not ask as one, either. I only—" Cough. "—want to understand why you thought illness cause for ire."

A long silence, as Nott continued to worry at her fingers. Then, deliberately, she stopped, and rewound the wire to answer. "I suppose," she said, "it must be a goblin thing."

Caleb stilled.

“I suppose it’s different with big folk, but in the. In my clan, when I got sick—really sick, and couldn’t work, um. Well, you know, I was already very bad at being a goblin, but then I was even worse? And, um. They didn’t like that very much.”

“Did they hurt you?”

“No!” she said, too quickly. “No, it wasn’t like that. They just. They didn’t like it, I was—it was a lot of trouble, you know. So they sort of just, left me to it.”

Caleb added another item to his growing list of reasons to despise Nott’s clan. How young had she been, he wondered, when they began that practice. (Too young, certainly. From the sound of things, Nott had been abused from infancy.) (From *infancy*.) (—But later. There would be time for rage later.)

For now, he exhaled quietly and said, “Oh.”

Before he could offer an inadequate platitude, Nott scrambled to add, “It wasn’t so bad, though! Nice, sometimes, having space and, and quiet.”

Caleb doubted this very much, but said only, “It is also nice sometimes to have friends around, though, ja?”

“...It is. It's very nice. Everyone's been very kind.” Nott gnawed on her thumb. “I just wish I hadn’t gotten so silly, thinking you were mad and all. Then it might have been nicer.”

“I think,” Caleb said, “it was not so silly. Especially given what you have just told me. You know, I, I left you. I am sorry, for that.”

“Don’t be silly, Caleb. You didn’t go anywhere.”

“I did, I stopped talking to you, I did not check in with you—”

“Because you thought I didn’t *want* you to, right? That’s different.”

He opened his mouth to object that it could not have *felt* very different, or Nott would not have thought him angry, but coughed instead, and before he could gather the words again, Nott continued.

“*You* were different. You took very good care of me.”

“Well now, that is debatable.”

Nott frowned. “I told you, you didn’t—”

“Nein, I am not talking about that. It is just—your fever was very high, so perhaps you do not remember, but there was not much I could do. You know, I am not a cleric, I cannot cook, I cannot do feelings so well.” He waved a hand, and then had to readjust the wire. “You know

this. So, so the others, they picked up most of the slack." He swallowed. "And they were...they were very good with you, Nott. They were very kind."

"Well, so were you," Nott said stoutly.

He could not help but smile. Always so defensive, his little friend, even when there was nothing to defend from. "I do not know about that. I tried, certainly, ja. But I was little help, and then none at all, I could not even keep you *safe*, much less happy, and then I hurt you and did not even notice, and *Beauregard* had to tell me, and—" He shrugged tiredly. "—it was all a little bit shit."

Nott said nothing.

"So I—I am sorry for that, Nott, truly. And I am glad we are with this group. They might be a pack of assholes, but, you know, they are better at this sort of thing than I am. So I am glad that you had them, these last few days. They were useful."

Still Nott said nothing, and a bubble of anxiety began to rise in his chest. (Or maybe that was the cough.) Higher, higher, and then she spoke.

"So," she said. "That's why you kept glaring at me."

"Kept—?" (Abruptly, he remembered, *you kept giving me these looks...*)

"Well, them, I guess." She paused, an expression on her face equal parts shrewd and sad. "You were jealous. You thought...."

He blinked. Thought what? (She was...not wrong, he supposed, on the first point. But—)

"You know, you are very, very smart, Caleb," Nott said. "But sometimes you think too much."

Unexpected, and a little stinging, but he could not argue the point.

"I know how helpful they were, yes, of course, and I'm as grateful as you are. But I also know what you did for me, and more than that, I know what you've promised me."

That.

That was true. There was something Caleb could (would) give her, someday, that none of the others could. Proof that, however shit he might be at, at helping her in other ways, at least he could help her reach her goal, and had to, was necessary for it.

That was fact. Something tangible, solid, to cling to—none of the others could learn that kind of magic. None had the inclinations or abilities, much less the preexisting drive, the requisite fervor for changing reality. So there was that. There at least was that.

It should have helped. Did, always, to some extent, when he thought about their promise, regardless of—of things like this. Days like today, the last few days. It was a touchstone, of sorts, constant, immutable. Centering. It should have helped.

It did not.

(He was so tired.)

(He was—) His skin hurt. (— *so* tired.)

Nott was waiting for a response, so Caleb nodded. Wanted to speak, knew even what he wanted to say—*of course, you are right, I was silly, I know that you need me, even if I am not so good at all this, I know that we are something to each other which these others cannot replace, and thank you for reminding me*—but was not so sure he could force all of those words past his salted-jerky tongue.

He thought of giving her a look that said as much, instead, but couldn't manage the intensity of her gaze, so he looked down at his hands, at the shiny copper wire tangled up in them. (For a moment, another coil overlaid the first, just as tangled, but twice as dull, and dirt-covered, besides.)

He blinked, and looked away, at his shoes, instead. Shoes. Did not blink again, for fear his eyes might stay closed. (So tired.)

“...Caleb?”

Instinctively, he looked up, and there were Nott's eyes, wide and expressive and. And worried. No, anxious. (Too anxious. Another fuckup for the list.)

“What's wrong? You look—are you feeling worse again? Should I go get Jester?”

He shook his head.

“...Would you tell me, if you were?”

A small nod.

“Then what is it?” Scuffling, as she moved over to him. A pause, as she did the spell again. “Is. Did I say something wrong?”

He swallowed. Tried to find words to give her, *no, it is not your fault, I do not know what is wrong, I do not know what is wrong, I am just so tired*. Could spit none of them out. (Stupid, useless tongue.)

“Can—you can't talk right now, can you.”

Caleb shook his head minutely. (Stupid, useless—)

“That's okay,” she said. “I can talk for both of us. Unless.” She hesitated. “Unless you want space?”

Caleb would've snatched her hand if he'd had the energy. As it was, he only shook his head again.

“Okay,” Nott said, and squished herself beside him, just under his armpit. “This all right?”

He nodded.

“Good. Okay.” She turned and wrapped her arms around him, and the next word did not echo magically in his ears, only came quiet, muffled into his side. “This?”

Another nod.

“Kay.”

A few moments, and then he returned the gesture, and then let go, and so did she.

A few moments more, and then she rewound the wire again. “You don’t have to talk, and—and just jab me if you don’t want *me* to talk, either, I’ll shut right up. I just wanna say something, if that’s okay.”

He didn’t jab her.

She took a breath. “Okay. So, I know you think you haven’t been helpful. And I disagree, of course.”

Of course. Nott was very intelligent, but she never could see sense where Caleb was concerned.

“Because, you know, you held me, and you gave me your coat, and you sent me Frumpkin, and that was all awfully nice.” She paused. “But that’s not really the point.” Another pause, longer. “Do you know what I appreciated most, when I was feeling bad, Caleb?”

That he was there at all, he supposed. If no one else had ever stayed before, that alone must have been meaningful. (And it was nice, he supposed, that he could be useful simply by caring, by giving his time. It was. But it did not make him any less tired.)

“The face you made when Jester force-fed you that tea.”

...What.

The grin was audible in her voice as she spoke. “It was just...”

Funny? Satisfying, because she had wanted to make it, too? Generally spirit-lifting?

“...Very you.”

...Oh.

“D’you know what I mean?”

Caleb thought of upended piles of trinkets, and pilfered berries, and dusty knees, and twitching ears, and the color yellow, and he nodded. (And blinked rapidly. And again, and more, and.)

“Oh,” Nott said, a note of worry in her voice. “Oh, Caleb.”

He swallowed.

“I didn’t mean—is it okay if...?” She gestured vaguely, disentangling the wire and spreading her arms.

He nodded, still blinking, vision gone blurry.

A moment as she dropped the wire, and then he had a lapful of Nott and tears dripping grimy down his face and two small, wiry arms wrapping around his sides and small, soothing noises muffled into his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her, too, and bowed his head forward so that his hair fell into his face twice as unkempt as before and his chin brushed the top of her head.

And they stayed like that, close and quiet, for a long stretch of time Caleb would not have been able to quantify, if he had tried—but he did not try, only sat, and held Nott, and was held, and thought of tangled strings, and kicks to the ribs, and copper wires, and yellow, and yellow, and yellow.

-

Caleb’s breath evened out, and so did Nott’s, so much so that he wondered, for several minutes, whether she had perhaps fallen asleep. (He would not mind, he thought, if she had. The angle was starting to bother his spine, but the weight was nice, and she was warm, and it was a little chilly in the cart, and. And it was nice to have her close, there was little point dancing around that fact. He had missed it.)

But then she twitched. And then she spoke. “Caleb?”

“Mm?”

“...My foot’s asleep.”

His grin nearly split his stiff face in half. “Ja, mine too.”

“Can we move?”

“Please.”

“Oh thank gods.” She pulled her arms away, slow, and stretched, and turned round and wriggled her legs out from under her.

He slid his out from under himself, too, and winced at the pins and needles. (Far too loud to be called pins, really. Or needles. Lances and javelins, maybe.)

Nott leaned back against him, head pressing into his chest, and seemed about to settle when she stretched out a hand, without looking, and rested it on his neck, and then his mouth, and then his cheek.

“Uh,” Caleb said.

She slid her arm back down to her lap, turned to squint up at him. “You’re warm again.”

“...Oh.”

“You *said* you’d tell me if you felt worse.”

“I didn’t realize.”

“A likely story,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I’m sure you didn’t realize the first time, either. I’m sure you were completely surprised when Molly pointed it out, and you *hadn’t* been hiding it for three days already.”

“Two,” he corrected her, without thinking.

“One second,” Nott said. Then, raising her voice, “Beau, you owe me twenty gold!”

“Oh, fuck you, Nott!”

Caleb blinked. Wh—?

“Where were we. Oh, right, you’re a dirty liar.”

“One of those things is true,” Caleb said. “I, I certainly am dirty. But, honestly Nott, I—”

“Relax,” she said, patting his face. “It was a clever ploy to win myself twenty gold. Your face was too—” She made a vague gesture. “—to be really lying.”

“Oh.” He blinked again. “Well. Good.”

Nott smiled, and tugged on his hair. (Which hurt, weirdly. He supposed she must be right about the fever.) Then tugged on his coat. “C’mon. All these blankets and you’re still sitting up, it’s a crime. Lay down.”

Caleb eyed the nest. Considered his spine. Thought about how much it would probably hurt to move. Considered the soft look on Nott’s face. Moved anyway.

(It did hurt, but not as much as expected.)

“No, Cay-leb, you’re supposed to get *under* them. Didn’t anyone teach you the rules?”

He shuffled under them rather than explain that, in fact, no, or that he had grown up with different rules, which had involved not touching hot cups or making his headaches worse by reading too many books. (And then rules which had involved pressing forward, because there was important work to be done—and then more of the same, though the work had changed.)

For a beat, he expected Nott to crawl under with him, but—no.

Well. That was okay. That was fine. You know, she had just sat with him for—for how long...? (Nott was *definitely* right about the fever.) So, so it was fine. He would just—

Scraping, and then a muffled *thump* and a weight on his back. It took a moment to put it all together—more bedrolls, dropped on top of his pile—and by the time he managed it there she was, worming her way in next to him.

She tilted her head to the side, indicating the pile above them. “Good?”

“...Ja. Good.” The weight was very nice. The warmth not bad, either. “Thank you, Nott.”

“Don’t thank me,” Nott said. “Thank Jester.”

“You’re welcome!” Jester yelled.

“...Thank you.”

“You’re welcoooooome!” she called again. “Now go to *sleep*.”

He was tempted to snipe back a refusal, just for fun, but actually, tucked under like this, with Nott so close, and all the—the silliness resolved, sleep did sound kind of nice.

So instead he said nothing, and rolled over to face Nott, and closed his eyes.

He drifted off to the sound of wagon wheels and Nott’s breathing and muted chatter.

-

Caleb woke on the ground in front of a small fire, under a blanket, with Nott at his side, and shards of a dream cutting his breath short.

Nott stirred, frowned at him, and reached for his hand, sleepily. Gave it a squeeze.

He squeezed back, and interlaced their fingers, and closed his eyes again.

Nott drifted back easily, but he lay awake, counting breaths. (The hand helped, but the half-remembered dream lingered, and—)

He reached into a pocket with his free hand, searching fruitlessly for string, and his fingers brushed something hard and smooth.

Caleb furrowed his brow and pulled it out, held it up in the firelight, squinted.

...Oh.

It was Nott’s rock. The one she had pilfered from the shit-town, with the grumpy people. The one that had looked so smooth.

He ran his thumb across the back of it, and. It *was* smooth. Very.

He tucked it back in his pocket and ran his fingers over it idly. When had Nott given it to him? At what point had she slipped it in his pocket? While he slept, perhaps? Or had that not been enough of a challenge. Just now, maybe? Or even earlier, further back? He hadn’t checked his pockets in a while....

Caleb puzzled over the options, vaguely, still tracing patterns on the stone's surface, ever slower, until, at last, he fell back to sleep, and did not dream.

End Notes

this one got away from me y'all

y'can find me on tumblr at [arodrwho](#)

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