



THE DOORS OF TIME EXTRA

By

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Unplayed Piano

Timestamp, takes place at the end of Part 1, in the main story . Heavy emotional warnings.

Mac is yelling. She's yelling and crying and Jensen wishes she'd just stop.

"You can't do this," she's saying. "Why are you doing this? He's not some goddamn psycho!"

"Mac," their mother snaps but Mac won't even look at her. She's glaring at their father's reflection in the rearview mirror, tears streaming down her face.

"Dad, if you do this I will never *ever* forgive you. Do you hear me? *Never!* And *you!*" she sobs, turning to Jensen, "How can you just sit there and let them do this to you? Say something! *Do* something! Stop being their goddamn puppet!"

Jensen doesn't say anything. He doesn't do anything. He doesn't listen to Mac. He doesn't look at his mother's stiff shoulders. He doesn't meet his father's haunted eyes. He doesn't think of Jared.

Jared's confused face the last time Jensen saw him. The tears in Jared's voice as they talked on the phone and the panic that rose when he realized Jensen was saying goodbye. His quiet sobs as Jensen played for him the very last time.

No, Jensen doesn't think of Jared. He doesn't.

He closes his eyes instead, listening. The soft weeping of the strings is still echoing in his head. It followed him down the stairs and into the car, like a stubborn umbilical cord attached to the world he's leaving. Attached to Jared's heart.

His stomach clenches and he pushes and pushes until the music all but disappears into the deepest corner of his mind where it's barely audible. He tries to find a quiet melody instead, a happy one even, but no matter what he tries the piano won't play. It stays silent back home in his room, silent in his head, silent in his heart. Finally even the strings fade away, like voices stolen by the wind, and then all he hears is silence. It feels like all the music is just gone from the world. He starts to panic, thinking maybe, maybe... But he hasn't eaten anything, hasn't even had a glass of water so it can't be. She couldn't have without him noticing, could she?

"Jenny!" Mac yells, shaking him. "Come on!" She sobs and he thinks maybe he should put his arm around her, should pull her to his chest one last time. He doesn't. He doesn't do anything.

She slaps his face and he doesn't even flinch, just lets his head roll to rest against the cool glass window. He is so tired.

"Jesus, did you drug him? Mom, did you *drug* him!?!"

"Mac, be quiet. It's not like that. Jensen is going because he wants to."

Jensen's stomach lurches but he doesn't argue. He doesn't say anything. There are so many emotions trapped in the small confinement of the car, all of them choking him. He wants to scream, wants to break all the windows just to get some air in. He doesn't. He doesn't do anything.

The car stops and Mac cries as their dad gently pries her hands loose from where they're fistfisting Jensen's t-shirt, and pulls her out of the car. Her friend Myra's mom is saying that of course she can stay there for a few days. Of course and lets hope Jensen can get the help he needs. "Mackenzie, honey, calm down. Your parents are doing what is best for him." Mac cries and shouts his name as the car pulls away but he doesn't open his eyes. He doesn't look back. He doesn't do anything. The t-shirt stays twisted on his chest, the ghosts of her fists still clutching the thin fabric.

They drive for what seems like an eternity. The air is thick in the car, thick and choking him with silence. He wants to ask his dad to turn on the radio, to find him some music, any music, to listen to because not hearing anything is making everything so, so much harder. 'I think my music is gone,' he thinks. 'Dad, I think my music is gone. I don't think I can do this if I don't have my music.' His dad stays silent and Jensen doesn't say anything.

They finally stop at a gas station for snacks and fuel. His mother goes to the bathroom. His dad hesitates briefly then goes inside to pay, leaving the car unlocked with the window rolled down. Jensen can smell rain and gas and freedom. He doesn't move. He doesn't do anything.

His dad comes back before his mom does. He stops as he reaches the car and then just stands there in the rain, breathing. Jensen can hear his heart, beating, beating, beating. Too fast. 'Killing him, I'm killing him,' Jensen thinks. His dad gets back in behind the wheel. He rolls up the window. He sighs and it sounds like he's dying anyway.

His mother comes back with a bag of chips and some soda. She wants Jensen to eat, to talk, to open his eyes. She wants him to understand she loves him. That she only wants the best for him. Most of all she wants him to forgive her but she doesn't say that. He should say that he does, that it's okay. That he does understand.

He doesn't do anything.

The next time the car stops the sky is dark blue and the birds are silent. Jensen opens his eyes,

He has no idea where they are. There's a house and a garden and his dad looks a hundred years old. His skin is grey and his eyes are red and it's all Jensen's fault.

"It's going to be alright," his dad says. His voice is hoarse and his hand shakes when he lays it on Jensen's shoulder. "It's just for a little while." The lie is twisted around his neck, like a black rope strangling him.

"Yeah, dad," Jensen says, in a voice that doesn't sound like his own. "I know." He looks up at the house, grayish white in the twilight. He really has to pee.

They walk inside, his dad carrying the small duffle bag that holds everything he owns now. Clothes and books. Toiletries. No music. No piano. No Jared. For a brief moment panic wells up in Jensen's chest but he pushes it down. Not yet, he tells himself. Not while they're still here. Not while his dad is still here.

He sits silent on a chair between his parents, listening to his mother's shaky words and his dad's quiet murmurs. The woman on the other side of the desk has blond hair and wire-rimmed glasses. She's a doctor. A psychiatrist. She introduced herself, told him her name, but he wasn't listening and now he can't remember. He looks around and reads Dr. Samantha Harris on a diploma on the wall. That must be her.

They're talking about hallucinations. Delusions. Obsessive compulsions and outbursts of violence. Social inaptness. Severe depression. Jensen frowns but doesn't say anything. He knows they have to call it something and 'weird' probably isn't listed as a medical term.

His head is still silent. He starts humming under his breath but his mother gives him a sharp look so he stops. Instead he counts the collection of pens on the desk. Four blue ones, two black and one red. And a yellow highlighter. He lines them up in his mind, like piano keys, and taps them with imaginary fingers. The keys refuse to play and his head remains silent. He swallows.

Outside the sky is growing darker and darker. It's still raining, heavy drops of sorrow. He thinks maybe he should do something about that but he doesn't. He doesn't do anything.

"Jensen," his mother says and he looks over at her. Her face is flushed and she's smiling at him, looking like she's terrified he'll go back on his word. That he'll refuse to stay. It's so strange. He looks at her and he can see her sadness, her fear, and he just doesn't get it. How can she feel that way about him? Doesn't she know him at all?

"Jensen," his mother repeats and he looks at her again. Or still. He's not sure. "Do you want to say something?"

"I need to go to the bathroom," he says. His voice is slightly hoarse and he clears his throat. "Please."

They're all watching him, like having to pee is just another thing that's wrong with him.

"Of course," the woman, Dr Harris, says. She smiles at him. She doesn't look frightened like his mom. More curious, like he's a puzzle she can't wait to solve. "It's the door across the hall."

He nods and stands up. His bladder aches. He can feel them watching him as he exits the room but he doesn't look back, just closes the door softly behind him.

The hall is empty. He glances down it, the way they came. The door wasn't locked. The car is waiting outside. He could leave.

He doesn't. He finds the toilet, pees, washes his hands and returns to the doctor's office. Everyone goes quiet when he opens the door. His mother looks relieved, like she expected him to run. His dad looks pained, like he was hoping he would.

"So Jensen, how do you feel about all this?" the doctor says when he's seated. He looks up at her.

"About what?" he says, confused.

"Coming to stay here for a while." She smiles at him encouragingly and he wonders what she wants to hear.

"Okay, I guess." He hesitates then asks, "Do you have a piano?"

She frowns slightly. "I'm sorry, no. But..."

"He's obsessed," his mother cuts in. "With playing."

He turns to look at her but she won't meet his eyes.

"He plays for hours on end," she says. "We can't snap him out of it. He won't eat or sleep, just plays until he passes out. It's one of his worst compulsions. I really think it would be best if he was kept away from playing altogether."

Jensen sucks in his breath. For the first time since he agreed to do this he wants to say no. He wants to scream and yell and beg them to take him back. To take him home. He can't do this. He doesn't want to do this. He wants to go home. Please, mom, let me go home. Dad...

He looks up and meets his dad's teary eyes. He looks devastated. He looks like he's on the brink of standing up and walking out, taking Jensen with him. He looks like he'd rather die than take Jensen's music away from him. A spider is weaving a web around his heart,

wrapping it up like a fly as it struggles to beat.

Jensen's own heart is breaking but his face remains blank, his eyes dry and empty. He drops his head and mumbles, "Yeah, okay."

Of course. He does things with his music that no one should see or feel. It's not like he can tell everyone to close their eyes. Not like he can ask for an isolated room away from everyone else, just to play in. It has to be this way. Of course. He doesn't know why it never occurred to him. Why he hadn't realized that he wouldn't be able to... Wouldn't...

Dr Harris nods and writes something in her notes. Jensen stares down at his hands. His fingertips ache, missing the smooth ivory, the dry ebony, the vibration of the tangents hitting the strings. He tries tapping his fingers against his knees but there's still nothing. No music. He lays his palms flat on his thighs and waits.

They're talking again but Jensen has long stopped listening. Even if he's supposedly doing this voluntarily, asking for this because *he* wants to get help, his involvement doesn't seem to be needed. The only thing they actually do need him for is signing his name on the forms. He does, hand slightly shaking, without bothering to read them.

He says goodbye to his parents in the doctor's office, it's easier that way she explains. Less upsetting for the other residents. His mom kisses him and hugs him so tight he can't breathe. He hugs her back because it's the first time in a year that she's touched him like that and he thinks it might be the last time she ever will. He can feel her shiver, can hear the rapid beating of her heart. She smells like wet sand on the shore, like relief and guilt and his mommy. He steps back as soon as she lets him go.

His dad pulls him in and presses him to his chest, one large hand cupping the back of his head. Jensen closes his eyes, his father's soft sweater caressing his cheek. He can feel his dad's heart stutter under his ear, like it's stumbling over its own grief.

Jensen's resolve falters. He wraps his arms around his dad's waist, tight, tight. Clinging in desperation and fear. If he refuses to let go they can't leave, not without him. 'Don't leave, don't leave, please don't leave me here.' His dad shakes, puffs of air blowing through Jensen's hair and with a bang Jensen realizes his father is about to cry.

Jensen lets him abruptly go. "I'll be okay," he says as he steps back and smiles.

His dad's eyes are wet like pebbles in the rain. "We'll visit," he says, choking on the words. "We'll visit you all the time."

"Okay." He nods and smiles again. "Give my best to Mac. I'm sorry I didn't say goodbye to her."

“I...”

His dad’s face crumbles and Jensen hastily lays a palm on his cheek. ‘Listen to me,’ he thinks, gazing into his father’s eyes. ‘It’s not your fault. I don’t blame you. I love you. I know you love me. It’s okay. I’m going to be okay.’

They gaze at each other in silence and then his dad nods and Jensen reluctantly lets him go. He stands silent as the doctor shakes his parents’ hands and tells them she’ll see them next week. Then they’re gone. Dr Harris turns to him and gives him a sympathetic smile.

“Jensen. Let’s get you settled in, shall we?”

He nods and reaches for the duffel bag but she shakes her head, stopping him. “We’ll take care of that,” she says. He shrugs. There’s nothing in it anyway that he actually needs.

She walks down the hall, in the opposite direction of the door his parents disappeared through. Jensen follows her without a backward glance. He can hear voices behind the walls, mumbling and muttering. A girl comes out of a room, looking confused and lost. She turns around and walks right through him, her sadness washing over him like a lukewarm shower for a short moment before she’s through and gone.

A shape. A humanoid shape that’s lost its owner. The possibility rattles him, even more when he realizes he hasn’t seen Minna since he left home. What if he accidentally left her behind and now she’s wandering around the empty house, looking for him? It never even occurred to him that she could exist on her own.

“Here we are,” Dr Harris says cheerfully, just as he’s about to tumble into panic.

The room is painted a pale yellow color. There are two beds, each with a small bedside table. There’s a closet with shelves, half of which belong to him, and a table with a chair. He’s not sure how they are supposed to share that, he and whoever else lives here. On the wall over his bed is a painting of the sun setting over the ocean. It’s ugly and depressing. Over the other bed is a cross. He likes that even less.

A nurse comes in and hands him some clothes. Not his. A white t-shirt and light-blue pants. She waits while he undresses and puts them on. They feel weird. Too thin and not his. The socks itch. There are grey sweatpants and a grey hoodie that she puts on one of the shelves in his half of the closet.

“For now,” she says and he doesn’t know what that means. If he’ll get other clothes later, maybe even his own, or if he’ll just get more of the same.

Dr Harris waits until he’s dressed before talking again. She always says his name and then waits until she’s sure he’s looking at her. Like he can’t hear her if they don’t hold eye

contact. It's irritating.

"Jensen," she says and waits. He sighs and meets her eyes. "You'll be sharing a room with Mason. He's away at the moment but he'll be back before the weekend." She doesn't say where he is and Jensen doesn't ask. "That gives you a couple of days to settle in."

He's not sure what he's supposed to settle in to. Apart from the picture and the cross the room isn't that much different from his own at home. The windows only have regular glass though and the closet has no lock. Neither do the drawers on the bedside tables. He wonders how that's supposed to work.

"Well, Jensen, it's pretty late. We want you to sleep well your first night so you should take these."

He turns around and the nurse is holding out a small glass with two pills.

Oh. So that's how.

"I can't," he says, struggling to keep his voice calm. "Drugs give me nightmares."

She smiles at him indulgently. "Not these. We wouldn't give them to you if they did. Trust me."

He shakes his head. "No, trust *me*. They do. They all do. They mess with my head."

She takes a step forward and he backs away until he hits the small bedside table, bumping it into the wall. The cross trembles on the wall before settling down, slightly skewed. It would be funny if he wasn't so terrified.

Dr Harris sighs. "Jensen, you are here because you want to get better, right? Well, you can't get better if you don't trust me to know what's best for you."

"You don't know me," he says. "I'm not like everyone else. I'm... I'm weird."

For the first time since he got there she looks at him like he's a real person. Like she's actually sad he has to be there. "You're not weird, Jensen. This, it's not your fault. But we're going to help you get better, ok? That's why you're here."

He wants to say he's there so his *dad* can get better. That *he's* the one crumbling underneath the burden of having Jensen for a son. He wants to tell her about the colors that will fade, about the voices that will disappear and the music, the only thing actually keeping him sane, that won't be able to play. But he's so tired and he's only a breath away from crying and he knows that as soon as he falls asleep he won't be able to hold back anymore. And he can't let that happen. Not yet.

He gives up.

“Okay,” he says. “Just for tonight. Okay.”

She smiles patiently but doesn’t correct him. He takes the pills and the glass of water, feeling the slim shapes slip down his throat as he swallows. He gets into bed and stares up at the ceiling. They bid him goodnight as they leave. He doesn’t say it back.

As soon as the door closes Minna materializes from a darkened corner. She moves across the room on silent paws, looking around with disdain before gracefully jumping up on the bed. He pulls her in, burying his face in her soft fur, his breath hitching in relief. She purrs and nudges his cheek with her wet nose. ‘I’m still here,’ she comforts as he strokes her and scratches her behind the ears. Finally she settles down on his chest, paws kneading his thin t-shirt. She is warm and solid, her claws are sharp as they catch his skin. She’s as real as the wall behind him. She’s real. She is.

It’s all real. The voices, the colors, the shapes, the fairies. Jared. It’s all real. No matter what she says, no matter what will happen it’s all real. It is. The music. The music is real. He doesn’t have his piano, he doesn’t have his sheet music or CDs but it’s okay. He has plenty of music in his head. He just has to turn it on again. Somehow.

It’s never gone away like this before. Maybe it got scared. Maybe it’s angry at him for not fighting for it. Maybe...

[Gabriel Fauré: Requiem - Pie Jesu](#)

Suddenly he hears a single note, low but insistent. He’s so relieved to be hearing anything at all that it takes him a moment to realize it’s not his piano. It’s a church organ. The note rises, higher and higher, and then he hears it. A voice so sweet his heart almost stops beating.

It’s a boy soprano, softly weeping in Jensen’s head, ‘*Pie Jesu domine, dona eis requiem...*’

He lies still, listening while tears leak from the corners of his eyes and down into his ears. Raindrops fall from the leaves of the tree outside his window and to the ground. Everything smells of spring. He can hear fairy children outside, playing in the rain. They laugh and dance and pull at each other’s wings. The world is beautiful and he’s not in it.

The boy’s voice is weakening. ‘*...sempiternam requiem, sempiternam requiem...*’ he whispers, the music getting quieter and quieter as the drug seeps into Jensen’s veins. He watches the colors fade from the room, yellow walls turning sickly grey. The bitter taste of grief disappears from his tongue, the scents of his father’s guilt and his mother’s relief dissolve into thin air. And as the last note of the song fades away Minna lifts her head and

gazes into his eyes and then she too starts to fade until she's going, going, gone.

Jensen closes his eyes. He thinks of Jared. Jared, Jared, Jared... Jared's eyes, Jared's smile, Jared's laughter. Jared's small hand in his. Jared's adult lips kissing him. Jared whispering Jensen's name, breath warm in his ear. Jared playing the piano. Jared, Jared, Jared... He makes a list of every little detail, memorizing it then playing it over and over in his head to make it stick. Everything else is disappearing but he won't let Jared go. Not him. He's holding on and he won't ever, ever...

In a hotel room on the other side of town Alan Ackles stands by the window, watching the rain fall. When it slows down and finally stops he touches the cold glass lightly with his fingertips, holding his breath as he waits. The night remains quiet. Alan briefly closes his eyes. His breath hitches. He slowly turns around and goes to lay down on the bed. His wife is breathing low and irregularly by his side, her shoulders tense. Alan stares up at the ceiling. His chest feels too tight and it hurts to breathe.

This was a mistake. There is nothing right in what they're doing. Nothing. Tomorrow he will sit Donna down and tell her they're going back for Jensen because there's no way the boy will survive without his music. There has to be another way. They'll figure something out. They will.

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Teachers Of The Heart

Timestamp. Takes place between Part 1 and 2. Jensen's first day at Juilliard.

Ten seconds after Jensen's alarm goes off on his first morning at Juilliard, his phone buzzes with a message from Chris that says, *'Call me as soon as you wake up. That better be within 5 min!'*

Jensen groans, head falling back on the pillow. By his side Minna is purring as she curls up into an even tighter ball, clearly not ready to get up yet. Jensen scratches her behind the ears with one hand while blindly fumbling with the buttons on his phone with the other, too tired to keep his eyes open.

"Okay," he sighs as Chris picks up, "what's going on?"

"Have you looked outside?"

Jensen struggles to sit up in the bed and glances out the window. Oh. Fuck.

"Pretty sure it's not supposed to snow for at least a couple of months," Chris says casually but Jensen can smell his worry through the phone, like wet grass and Earl Grey tea.

"Funny," Jensen mutters, waiting until the drifting snowflakes start to melt away before he lets himself fall back on the bed, closing his eyes. His head hurts.

"So what gives?" Chris asks, his voice turning serious. "You feeling ok? Want me to come over?"

Jensen sighs. "It's nothing. Just... trouble sleeping." He cracks one eye open, letting his gaze slide over the room. The walls, pale yellow and blank. The desk, immaculately clean. The bed, too big for one man and an imaginary cat. He shudders, squeezing his eyes closed again.

"Trouble sleeping as in nightmares or as in not actually sleeping?" Chris asks concerned.

"Little bit of both," Jensen admits. He rubs his eyes with his fingers, willing the headache away. It goes, reluctantly, leaving behind a numbness that's not much better. "It's just very naked," he adds quietly.

"Uh... What?"

Jensen mentally rolls his eyes, easily imagining the look on Chris's face. "The room. The room is naked. Like... you know. *There*. Even the walls are the same color."

"Oh. Aw shit." Chris groans. "Dude, that won't do. Tell you what, we'll decorate. Dress it up 'til it's all nice and pretty for you."

Jensen can't help smiling. "I think that is the gayest thing you've ever said to me."

"Shut up," Chris says absentmindedly. He hums, thoughtful. "I should get off around five. I'll bring over some pictures, maybe a couple of posters. And you can always change the colors, man. Just do your thing."

Jensen frowns. "I don't think I'm allowed. They have rules..."

"Pfft, screw the rules," Chris dismisses. "You want me to talk to them? I'll talk to them. No problem."

"I don't know." Jensen sighs. "They already think I'm weird enough without adding 'scared of yellow' to the description." He thinks for a moment. "Maybe I can just change it back in the mornings. If I can figure out the right music for ugly yellow."

"Try Britney," Chris scoffs. "That should do it, considering her music is piss."

Jensen snorts. It's odd how Chris's grumpiness always manages to make him feel better. "Just a ball of sunshine this morning, are we?" he says, sitting up again and stretching the kinks out of his neck. He glances at the clock and grimaces. "Listen, Chris, I have to get up. We'll talk after class, ok?"

"You're still in bed?" Chris chides. "Well, get your lazy ass out of there, boy. Put on some clothes. And eat breakfast!"

Jensen fakes a dramatic sigh even if he's sure Chris can feel him smiling. "Yes, *mom*."

"Don't forget: keys, phone, whatever the hell you need for class. You have the list, right? Always check the list!"

Jensen rolls his eyes. "Yes! Shut up. I'm good, ok? Stop pestering me and go do something useful."

Chris mutters something about 'ungrateful bastard' which only has Jensen grinning wider. "I'll come by after five, ok?" Chris tells him impatiently. "Me and Steve. We'll pimp your room."

“You watch too much TV,” Jensen teases and hangs up before Chris has time to shoot anything back.

He’s ready to leave thirty minutes later, having showered, dressed, eaten breakfast and even remembered to fix his hair into something resembling presentable. The face that met him in the mirror was pale and tired but the green of his eyes shone bright with anticipation. He’d stared at himself for a while, daring the image to fade and feeling childishly exuberant when it didn’t.

Sometimes he has to pinch himself to be sure he’s actually awake, that he isn’t going to wake up in his room back home, or even worse, Inside. It’s been a year since he got out but sometimes it feels like he’s still in there. Especially right after he wakes up and he can’t for a moment remember where he is or how he got there. It scares the shit out of him which is why he hasn’t been able to sleep alone for even a single night. Until now. Now he has to.

His head is not all right, he knows that. He spaces out, sometimes for hours on end if no one is there to pull him back, and he keeps having flashbacks and what he can only describe as waking nightmares. When he knows he’s awake and where he is but everything around him starts to change; the walls closing in on him, the colors disappearing and the music fading away to be replaced with the monotonous white noise he’d gotten used to Inside. Even the slightest hint of that happening and he quickly shuts down, just in case. Chris has gotten good at keeping an eye on him, he always seems to know when he needs to rescue Jensen from the dark depths of his own head, but Chris is not here. Jensen is on his own now.

It’s what he always wanted, to be his own person and not dependant on anyone. Turns out it’s not nearly as liberating as he thought it would be. In fact it’s downright terrifying. Still, he took the first step, coming here. He just wishes he knew whether the path he’s following is leading him to a mentally better place or if at any moment he might step off a cliff and drop back into an even deeper abyss.

Jensen wakes up from his thoughts standing in front of a closed door. He blinks, a little disoriented, but a quick check shows that he’s in the right place even if he has no idea how he got there. Hesitantly he pushes the door open. And consequently hitches his breath in awe.

There’s a grand piano standing in the middle of the room. It’s black and so beautiful he feels dizzy. His old piano back home as well as the one Jared had and now the piano Chris got him, they’re all upright ones. He loves them all, like they are his siblings. But this... This is like the mother of all music, right there, waiting for him.

The first grand piano he touched was the one he played at the audition. When he walked on to the wide stage and saw it standing there, waiting for him, it was like walking into a church and seeing God in all his glory. In his nervousness for the audition Jensen hadn’t given any thought to what he would be playing *on*, only worried about how he was going to play the music without turning the auditorium into a jungle or something worse.

Then, like now, he'd walked up to the instrument, awe in every step, and laid his hand on its enormous belly, feeling it hum under his palm. He can feel the anxiety of whoever played before him as well as the hundreds of students before that. All their hopes and dreams and fear of failure and shame. And it seems suddenly absurd that he's here. That he, who's never fit in anywhere, is about to experience something so many have before him. That he is going to become a part of this amazing instrument's history.

"It's a beauty, alright," a voice says and Jensen snatches his hand away, quickly turning around. A man — tall, thin, and with intelligent looking eyes — is watching him, amusement tugging at the corner of his mouth. There's a calmness about him, like old music sheets and candles, and Jensen breathes out, relaxing a little. "I take it you're not used to grand pianos?"

Jensen shakes his head. He looks back at the piano, enthralled. "I didn't know I'd get to..." He hesitates. "I can, right?"

The man laughs. "Son, they're all we have. Grand pianos all the way. Nothing else worth playing if you ask me."

If he weren't feeling so overwhelmed Jensen would be insulted on behalf of his own piano at home. As it is he just nods, dazed.

"I'm Michael Richards by the way. And you are Jensen Ackles." Richards tilts his head, studying him thoughtfully. "I've been looking forward to teaching you."

Jensen blinks. "Oh," he says, not sure how to respond to that.

"I was at your audition. Impressive. You made the whole auditorium come alive when you played." Richards laughs. "I swear, I thought I smelled the ocean during Beethoven's 8th."

Jensen drops his eyes, mortified. Damn.

"Ah now," Richards chuckles, misreading him, "no acting coy. You know you're good. Still doesn't mean you can't improve. That's what you're here for." He waves his hand at the piano bench. "Come on, have a seat."

Jensen hesitates only a moment then walks around the piano slowly, running his fingers lightly over the shiny surface as he goes by. "I'll get to play her everyday?" he asks hopeful.

If Richards is surprised by the pronoun he doesn't show it. "Her or the pianos on your dorm floor. Both grand pianos." He grins at Jensen's stunned expression. "You didn't know?"

"I only moved in last night," Jensen says dazed as he sits down. This is actually his life now? It seems way too good to be true. He pinches his arm but everything stays the same. Solid.

Real. Amazing. “Haven’t had time to look around much yet,” he adds absentmindedly as he gives the keys a light stroke with his fingers. They’re smooth and silken under his fingertips, polished by hundreds of hands over time gone by. So *amazing*.

“Well, you’re in for quite a few nice surprises then,” he hears Richards say, voice low and far away.

Jensen nods, more to himself than anything else. Minna jumps up on his lap before gracefully tiptoeing up to peak under the slightly raised lid to look into the piano’s vast frame, clearly intrigued. “I know,” Jensen whispers with a smile. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” Minna throws him a bored look then settles down on his lap and starts licking her hind leg, all interest lost. Jensen chuckles, giving her a quick scratch behind the ears before going back to stroking the keys. He wants to open the piano up wide and touch the strings with his fingertips. Wants to watch the hammers hit the wires, from the thickest bass to the slimmest treble, and feel the wide range of vibrations run up his arm and tickle his brain. Wants to try and understand how some wood and wire can create the most beautiful music in the world.

It takes Jensen a while to notice how quiet the room has fallen. He looks up, embarrassed, thinking maybe he zoned out without noticing. He finds Richards watching him, eyes serious and concerned.

“You know, as your primary teacher I got to read your file,” he says quietly.

Jensen goes absolutely still. He pulls his hands slowly back and lowers them to his empty lap where they curl into tight fists. “Oh?” he says, aiming for casual but sounding small and scared.

“I don’t think we’ve ever had a self-taught student here. And with your special circumstances...” Richards pauses then asks, “You really didn’t play at all for two years?”

Jensen keeps his eyes on the row of keys in front of him. A drop of sweat slips down his neck and rolls along the cobblestone path of his spine. “Two years, three months and six days,” he says. His hands twitch in his lap.

Richards clears his throat. “Sounds more like punishment than treatment,” he says in a careful voice.

Jensen laughs shakily. “Felt like punishment,” he agrees, even if he knows it wasn’t.

Richards’ reflection nods in the shiny surface of the piano’s panel. “And before that you had only played for how long?” he asks.

“Two years eight months...” Jensen has to pause and think. “And three days,” he finishes.

Richards laughs a little, like he doesn't quite know what to make of that. "Well, let's hear if those five months make a difference. Play me something. Anything you want. Just to get the feel for her."

Jensen nods and closes his eyes. This is it. For months he's been practicing this, how to play music and only music, nothing else. Every session leaves him exhausted but it's getting easier. And it's all for this.

First he takes away the scent. Then the taste, the temperature and at last the images. Stripping the music bare of everything dangerous and imprisoning those parts within the borders of his own skin where he can feel them rushing through his veins in search for a way out. Everything but the emotions, those he can't extract yet but he's working on it.

Jensen breathes in. He breathes out. And then he plays.

[Schubert: Leise Flehen Meine Lieder From Schwanengesang, D 957 \(Trans. Liszt\) / Peter Nagy](#)

This time he's prepared for the magnified sound of the grand piano compared to the upright one. Something he hadn't figured into his calculations at the audition. If a little scent of the ocean was all he'd revealed then he'd been lucky.

He chooses a piece by Schubert because it starts slow and quiet, giving him time to quell any magic that might want to come out to play as well. He doesn't have to. Everything works as it should, there's just music. Music so sweet and beautiful he gets tears in his eyes. Music grabbing him by the heart and twisting his insides. Music that makes him want to shout out with glee and fall down to his knees and cry his heart out. Music, music, music swallowing him whole.

When the last note dies out he slumps, drenched in sweat and shaking. He can see Richards' reflection in the glossy surface of the piano, distorted and shimmering. They stay silent for a long time. Finally Richards walks up behind Jensen and lays a hand on his shoulder.

"Good," he says, his voice slightly hoarse. "Very good. Very... different. Still, there's always room for improvement." He takes a deep breath then pulls away, almost reluctantly. "Your playing is very fluent, almost liquid. Not much regard for timing and technique though. We'll work on that." He pauses. "You all right to go again?"

Jensen nods. His head is swimming and he sits with his eyes closed, concentrating on his breathing while Richards looks through his folders. Finally he walks over, spreading sheets on the built-in stand above the keyboard.

"Ever played this?" he asks and Jensen struggles to focus. He skims the notes quickly then

shakes his head. “Good. Let’s hear it then.”

Jensen nods, still not trusting himself to speak, and takes a few moments walking himself through the same process again. Then he focuses intently on the notes written on the pages in front of him. He hardly ever plays like this, right of the sheets. He’d rather play by ear or from memory of notes he’s already read through. At least that way he’ll know what to expect instead of just wading out into muddy waters with no shoes on and zero swimming skills.

[Leifs: Torrek, Intermezzo, Op. 1/2 / Orn Magnusson](#)

As it is the fear catches him completely off guard. He can see yellow walls within his mind, feel the crisp white linens under his cheek and smell the disinfectant in the air. Can hear the muffled sound of someone crying and taste the pills on his tongue. His eyes go wide with terror. Even if he can feel the keys under his fingertips and see his own reflection in the black surface of the piano, for a moment he thinks that he’s dreaming. That he’s still Inside and everything that’s happened in the last year has been a figment of his imagination. Panic grows in his chest, claustrophobic and desperate, and his vision starts to blur. God, breathe. Breathe, breathe.

‘Chris!’

“Jensen?” a voice says and Jensen jerks back to reality as someone touches his shoulder. “That’s enough. You can stop now.”

He pulls his hands quickly to his chest, abruptly cutting off the music. The air feels thick with his fear and he’s sure Richards can smell it, can tell how close he is to breaking. It’s still the same room though, same walls and floor with just him and Richards, and Minna watching him intrigued from on top of the piano.

“That was...” Richard laughs, a little uncertain. “Huh.” He squeezes Jensen’s shoulder. “You alright, Ackles?”

Jensen nods even if he knows Richards can feel him shaking. God, how did he ever think he could do this?

“This is why you weren’t allowed to play?” Richards asks quietly.

Jensen hesitates, then nods again. It’s as close to the truth as he can get.

Richards lets go of Jensen’s shoulder, standing silent behind him for a while before walking around to lean into the piano’s side. Jensen can feel the man’s gaze on him, heavy and penetrating, but he doesn’t dare look up, just sits with his head bowed, breathing, and waits for Richards to tell him he’s not fit for school and should quit now rather than later. There are

plenty of kids out there, normal kids that could actually be someone if they only got the chance. If he gave them his spot at the school.

“Son, you need to learn to let go,” Richards suddenly says. “It’s just music.”

Jensen looks up at him startled and Richards gives him an almost embarrassed grin. “Listen to me,” he says, “‘just’ music. We both know there’s no such thing. But, Jensen,” he continues, his voice turning serious again, “there’s a difference between feeling the music and letting it completely devour you.”

Jensen bites his lip. “I...” he starts then stops, not sure what to say. “I can’t shut out the emotions,” he finally admits. “They are too strong.” He swallows, fully aware of how crazy he sounds but Richards only nods as if it makes perfect sense to him.

“I guess we’ll have to work on that then,” he says and smiles. “A little musical therapy thrown in the mix. It will be... interesting.”

Jensen stills. The stone that had lodged itself in his throat crumbles to dust, leaving him hoarse and choking on the sudden rush of oxygen. “I can stay?” he asks carefully. “You’re not going to... I can really stay?”

The man blinks, obviously taken aback, but then his face softens and he smiles, if a little sadly. “Jensen, I wouldn’t let you leave even if you wanted to.”

Jensen barks a loud laugh before quickly covering his mouth with his hand, breathing harshly through his nose. “Thank you,” he mumbles, squeezing his eyes shut. “You don’t know... Thank you.”

His breathing is loud in the silent room, sharp and erratic intakes of air whistling through his nostrils, his palm damp and sweaty where he presses it to his lips. He keeps his other hand on the piano, feeling its soothing humming vibrate against his fingertips. ‘Sshh, sshh,’ it says. ‘It’s all right. You’re here. You made it.’

Richards takes a step forward. Jensen can feel him hovering, unsure and worried, and then his hand lands on Jensen’s shoulder again, squeezing it hard. “Son, you have a gift,” he says quietly. “An amazing wonderful gift. Don’t turn it into a curse.”

Jensen nods jerkily, still not able to open his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he finally manages to choke out.

“Don’t be.”

Richards falls quiet but he doesn’t let go off Jensen’s shoulder and after a while it gets a little easier to breathe. Jensen lets his hand fall down on his lap. The palm is slick with spit and

tears and he wipes it discreetly on the thigh of his jeans. He really wishes Chris were there.

“You know the school has a counselor you can talk to,” Richards suggests, sounding worried. “No shame in getting help.”

Jensen goes still. Then he slowly pulls away from Richards’ touch. “I’m all right,” he says stiffly.

Richards takes a step back to give Jensen the space he’s subtly asking for. “She’s not a doctor,” he says, seeming to catch Jensen’s thoughts. “Just someone to talk to.”

“I’m all right,” Jensen repeats, keeping his tone cool and polite even if he can feel his hackles rising. “I have friends. It’s okay.”

“Many students have trouble adjusting to the pressure of...” Richards tries but Jensen quickly cuts him off.

“No. Thank you for your concern but no. I can’t... No.” Jensen looks up, painfully aware that his face is still flushed red and probably streaked with tears. “Can I go?”

Richards opens his mouth then closes it again. He nods and Jensen stands up. His legs feel slightly wobbly. He gives the piano a last light stroke over the keys in thanks then gathers up his things and heads for the door.

“Jensen,” Richards says and Jensen stops, hand on the doorknob. He can practically hear the man’s thoughts, hovering in the air. ‘If you need to talk...’ and ‘You can always come to me.’

But what he says is, “I meant what I said. I think... I *really* think you have a very unique gift. And I’d love to help you nurse it into something even more extraordinary. A gift like that... It’s very precious, Jensen. Very precious and very rare. I would feel honored if you let me teach you.”

Jensen stands silent, taking in the warmth in the voice. The sincerity. The total lack of apprehension. The *words*. His heart suddenly feels light, like a window has been flung open to let in the warm sun and the sweet summer breeze. He turns around and gives Richards a real smile, not even caring that it brightens the whole room.

“It really is a gift, isn’t it?” he says, amazed.

Richards blinks, startled by the brightness and Jensen’s sudden change of mood. “Yes. Undoubtedly.”

Jensen laughs. “A gift,” he repeats quietly to himself. “A gift that *I* got.” He’s never really

thought of it like that. That someone deemed him worthy enough to give him something so precious. He gives the bewildered man another blinding smile, feeling like he'd just been given the whole world on a silver platter. "Thank you. Tomorrow?"

Richards nods, eyes a little glazed over. "Tomorrow, yes. Have something ready," he adds, trying for stern and failing entirely. "Romantic period post Beethoven. Work on those emotions!"

Jensen grins. "Will do!" He pushes the door open and walks down the hall, already trying out different pieces in his head. There's a bounce in his step he hasn't felt since back home with Jared and he can't stop smiling.

'A gift. Of course it's a *gift*. Jensen, you *moron*,' he thinks and then laughs out loud at his own stupidity. Maybe there is a God after all. Or maybe whoever – whatever – made him, gave him this to make up for everything else. It doesn't really matter. All that matters is that he has it and it brought him here. He made it. And he just knows it's only a matter of time before Jared shows up to join him. It's going to be *awesome*!

A rain of butterflies appear in the turmoil of his cheerful stride. They follow him unnoticed for a while then flutter their way through an open door where they momentarily distract a nervous girl stroking the bow of her violin before unexplainably disappearing into thin air. Outside the last of the snow is melting in the brilliant sun. No one knows it yet but the following month will be the warmest and sunniest September New York has seen in over fifty years.

fin

This Is My Tune For The Taking

Timestamp. Takes place sometime before the epilogue. Telling Sandy.

There's a kitchen table and twenty-four years of history between them. It seems symbolic somehow, all things considered. Time carved into the wood, rings of seasons they've shared and lived through, now smoothed out and polished to set the table for his future with someone else.

"It was always him, wasn't it?" Sandy's voice is strained and her lips are thin, but her eyes show more sadness than anger. "Ever since..." She swallows, tugging at the sleeves of her sweater until they cover her hands. "It was never me."

Jared looks at her and wishes he could deny it. But she's right. Of course it has always been Jensen. From the moment they first met, even sooner. Thinking back on the day he saw Jensen sitting under that tree in the park eighteen years ago he *knows* that Jensen was waiting for him, even then. A lonely ten-year-old boy, waiting for his soulmate to find him. It would be ridiculous if it wasn't so sad.

"Yes," Jared says and Sandy hitches her breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. I just didn't realize that he was... that we were..." He takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "I never meant to hurt you."

"But you did."

She sounds tired. Older than her twenty-eight years. He keeps forgetting she is the same age as Jensen. He seems younger, more childlike somehow, but still there are moments when Jared will gaze into Jensen's eyes and the depths he sees there seem to be filled with centuries of wariness.

"I thought..." Sandy's voice breaks and Jared instinctively reaches out for her hand before he remembers they're not those people anymore. He pulls back, sad and awkward, thankful that with her head bowed she fails to notice his slip-up.

"You made me believe you loved me," she finally says. The words are accusing but the tone holds only grief.

"I believed I loved you." He sighs when her face crumbles. "God, I mean, I *do* love you, Sandy, I just don't..."

She nods, quickly wiping at her eyes with her fingertips. "You don't love me like you love

him.”

“I don’t love *anyone* like I love him. He is...”

Jared stops and cocks his head, listening. The slightly nervous [Scarlatti](#) Jensen was playing earlier is getting faster, harder. Jared sighs and closes his eyes. ‘Hey,’ he thinks as loud as he can. ‘Stop it. *We’re just talking.*’ The music falters and Jared suddenly realizes it’s the first time he’s ever heard Jensen hit a wrong note. He frowns. Jensen can’t really be that worried, can he?

He opens his eyes to find Sandy watching him, looking like she’s not sure whether she should be worried or irritated.

“He is my missing half,” Jared says simply. “That’s what he is.”

Sandy shakes her head, her eyebrows pulled tight. Like she’s trying to understand and she just can’t. “He’s just a man, Jared. God, he’s not even that. He’s...” She huffs in frustration. “One day you’re going to wake up and see you threw everything away for a guy that’s... He’s not all right!”

“Sandy,” Jared warns but she won’t listen and he’s too tired to argue. It’s always the same speech. About how he’s throwing his life away. How he’s giving up everything for a guy that is not worth it. Whose mind is not all there. How restraining it will be. How imprisoning.

“Jared, what kind of life is that?” she finishes aggravated and Jared sighs in exasperation. He can’t do this anymore.

“Come with me,” he says and reaches for her hand but she snatches it away, shaking her head in anger.

“What? Why?”

“I need you to see something. Please.”

She sits stubborn for a moment but then she reluctantly stands up and follows him out of the kitchen, still refusing to take his hand.

[Satie: Gnossienne No.3 / Pascal Rogé](#)

The music coming from behind the closed door to Jensen’s studio has changed to a quiet melody, sad and weary. Dwindling hope and resigned sadness mixed in sweet notes, so beautiful they make Jared’s breath hitch. He lays a palm against the door, feeling Jensen’s emotions vibrate the wood and he wishes for the hundredth time that he could make Jensen

believe in his own value. That he could convince Jensen that it wouldn't matter what he was offered; this, *them*, will be his choice every time.

He reaches for the doorknob but pauses at the last moment. There are lines that Jensen expects him not to cross. Lines they've never talked about but Jared knows are there just the same. And what he's about to do will overstep one of those lines, a fundamental one. Jensen's magic is his secret, his to share, not Jared's.

He just doesn't know what else to do. It's not just about making Sandy see what makes Jensen so special. It's about not losing someone that's been a part of his life since the day he was born. And he *will* lose her if this continues. He thinks, hopes, that Jensen will understand that.

He turns the knob and quietly opens the door. A couple of butterflies flutter out through the crack, wings a deep indigo color that Jared doubts exist outside Jensen's world. Sandy stares after them surprised as they disappear down the hall before looking at Jared in question. He doesn't say anything, just pushes the door wide open and steps inside the room, beckoning her to follow.

She doesn't. She stands in the doorway, mouth open, eyes like saucers. Jared casts a glance at Jensen but he hasn't noticed them yet. He's sitting by the piano, eyes closed, his fingers a flurry of motion across the keys. The floor is covered in grass and above them a pale moon shines in a starlit sky. The air is crisp and clear and everything smells of autumn.

"Come on in, it's ok," Jared whispers, reaching for her hand again. After a long time she allows him to take it and then steps over the threshold, sucking in her breath when she feels the softness of the grass underneath her bare feet.

"Jared?" she asks, voice timid, and he pulls her closer, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

"This is why," he says quietly. "This is what he is."

She blinks, her breath shallow and rapid. "What is happening? Jared, what is happening?"

He smiles and whispers in her ear, "You're being enchanted."

He can feel her tremble against him, pressing in closer for protection. "Is he...? Is this real?"

Jared picks a rose off a small bush, pink and bright and perfect. He holds it out to her but she just stares at it, rigid. He smiles and puts it under her nose so she can breathe in its scent and feel the tickle of the soft petals against her skin. It makes her hitch her breath and he laughs quietly.

“Real enough for you?” he asks but as the words leave his lips the rose starts to fade into a pink-tinted mist, dissolving between his fingers. That’s when he realizes the room has gone silent. He looks up to find Jensen staring at them in shock, eyes wide with hurt. The grass and the dark-blue sky fade away and soon it’s just a room again, with green walls and hardwood floors and Jensen, shaking with anger.

“What is she doing here?” he whispers, voice hoarse. “What the *fuck* is she *doing* here?”

Jared quickly pulls his arm away from Sandy’s stiff shoulders and takes a step toward Jensen, hand raised in apology. “Jensen, it’s ok,” he says, keeping his voice low and soothing, but it’s no good. Jensen is up from the bench and backing away into the furthest corner of the room before Jared gets close enough to touch him.

“No!” He’s shaking his head, quick violent jerks that make Jared’s neck hurt just to look at them. “No, it’s not ok. Jared, it’s *not* ok!”

The air crackles and out of the corner of his eye Jared sees frostworks blooming on the windows.

“She can’t be here. She can *not* be here.” Jensen closes his eyes, fingers frantically drumming against his thighs. “Oh this is not good. This is bad. This is so bad. This is so, so bad.”

The piano does an angry key mash and Sandy jumps back, staring at it in shock.

“Jensen, calm down.” Jared steps closer and gently lays a hand on Jensen’s shoulder. “Breathe.”

Jensen jerks away from him, eyes snapping open. “Don’t tell me to fucking breathe!” he hisses and sparks of electricity rain down from the overhead light. The tangents are hammering the strings now and a flock of angry and panicked notes come flying from the cracks between the keys and start smashing into the walls and floor. Some of them hit Jared in the face, stinging like tiny shocks of electricity. Sandy gives a small frightened noise and Jared looks quickly over at her. There are notes stuck in her hair and she looks absolutely terrified.

“Okay, okay,” he says as he turns back to Jensen. Gold flickers like fire in the green sea of his eyes and it stings, seeing all that anger directed at him, even if he knows he deserves it. “I’m sorry, I made a mistake. Jensen, please.” He swallows. “You’re scaring me.”

Jensen goes absolutely still. The world seems to hold its breath, the piano stuck on a high note that goes on and on and on. Then Jensen blinks and just like that everything goes quiet. The notes hit the floor in a rain of metallic tingles before slowly dissolving.

Jared breathes out. “Thank you,” he says quietly, lowering his hand until it once again closes

over Jensen's shoulder. This time Jensen doesn't pull away but the muscles under Jared's palm are rock hard with tension.

"Why is she here?" he says in a blank voice. The effort of keeping his emotions reined in is making him shake. "In this room. This is my room, Jared. She can't... *My room!*"

A low rumble in the distance has him tensing even further and he squeezes his eyes shut. Jared glances out the window. Dark clouds are hovering over the city but as he watches they start to pull away, leaving the sky as bright as before. He turns back to Jensen and is met with grey-green eyes, carefully looking through him.

"I know. I'm sorry. I should have asked you." Jared sighs. "Jensen, I love you. Okay? I love you but she is still my friend. She's my oldest friend. But I can't stay friends with someone who hates you." Behind him Sandy hitches her breath but he doesn't turn around, his eyes fixed on Jensen. "I thought maybe if she saw *you* she would understand and things would be okay. You know? I just... I had to try."

Jensen gazes through him, his face so void of emotions it's scary. Then suddenly he breathes out, shoulders relaxing as his features soften and he raises his head, focusing on Jared with weary eyes. "You could have asked me," he says in a low voice. "I would have said yes."

Jared swallows. "I know. I'm sorry." He brushes his knuckles over Jensen's cheek, breathing out in relief when Jensen turns his head slightly to press the corner of his lips against Jared's fingers. "Are you ok?" he asks, quiet so Sandy won't hear him.

Jensen nods. He's still trembling. "Just give me a minute."

Jared nods, licking his lips. "Are *we* ok?" he asks, even lower.

Jensen laughs. It sounds a little broken. "I will always love you no matter what stupid thing you do," he says tiredly.

Which doesn't really answer Jared's question except he suddenly realizes that for Jensen it probably does. That as far as Jensen is concerned Jared can do pretty much anything and he will always be forgiven for it because the alternative, them *not* being okay, is unthinkable. It's frightening, having that advantage. Even more frightening when he realizes it works both ways. That no matter how badly this would have ended Jensen would have been forgiven. They should probably have a talk about boundaries. Soon.

Jensen breathes in and out a few times before looking up and past Jared. "Hi, Sandy," he says, wearing the patent polite smile that Jared hates. But he's trying and that's more than Jared can ask for. "I'm sorry I scared you."

Jared turns around, catching her frightened eye with his. 'For me,' he begs silently. 'Can you

please do this for me?’

Sandy lets out a shaky breath. “What are you?” she asks in a low voice.

“I don’t know.” Jensen’s smile brightens a little, like he just remembered something. “Weird?”

She laughs, a little hysterically. “Really, *really* weird.”

Jared flinches but Jensen just grins, already relaxing. “Oh, you’ve seen nothing yet.”

He makes a small motion with his hand and the door slams shut. Sandy jumps at the sound, her eyes widening in panic, and like a trapped animal she instantly backs away. Jensen’s smile drops like a stone.

“No, I didn’t mean...” he says quickly. He looks over at Jared then back at Sandy. He looks shaken. Like her fear hurts him the same way the memory of his mother’s fear still hurts him. “I was just going to... I thought maybe I could play for you,” he finally says, dejected. “If you want.”

“But...” Sandy’s eyes shoot to the door and Jared walks over, showing her how easily it opens before closing it again.

“Things can get a little wild,” he explains with a small smile, eyes on Jensen. “Better to keep it in one room.”

“Oh.”

Jared holds Jensen’s gaze, waiting until he relaxes slightly and the pressure of his worry eases off Jared’s chest. Then he turns to Sandy, relieved to see that her fear seems to have somewhat subsided as well. She’s still staring at Jensen, like she can’t quite believe what she’s seeing, but she doesn’t look like a deer in headlight anymore.

“Come on,” Jared says, taking her hand and leading her to the couch. “Sit down and just... enjoy.” He settles down on the other end, leaving as much room between them as the small couch offers.

Jensen stands for a moment, back turned and chest rising and falling slowly in forced breathing, before he sits down at the piano. He puts a hand on its panel and instantly some of the tension in his shoulders fades away. When Jared gives him a thumb-up of encouragement Jensen even smiles a little. He sits still, running his fingers silently over the keyboard while murmuring something in a voice too quiet for them to hear. Jared doesn’t know if he’s soothing the piano or Minna. Or possibly just himself.

Sandy glances at Jared, her whole posture stiff and anxious where she sits on the couch, ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble. Jared just smiles at her and leans back, settling in for the ride.

[Schubert: Op. 90, D. 899, Impromptu in E Flat Major / Jenő Jandó](#)

It starts light at first, one happy note running after another in a game of catch. Then louder and more insistent. The magic flows from Jensen's fingertips, turning the room pink as the sun slowly sinks down behind green hills. A horse raises its head, chewing straws of grass as a spindle-legged foal runs circles around it, neighing happily. A rabbit pops its head up from a hole in the ground, looking around nervously before daring to come out, tiny baby bunnies following on its heels. The air is warm and everything smells of spring. Jensen laughs, everything and everyone forgotten as he gets lost once again in the world he's creating.

Jared watches him, his heart swelling with pride and love so fierce he wishes he could fling the windows open and show the whole world what it's missing. He looks over at Sandy, at her wide eyes and her mouth open in wonderment. When he reaches across the couch and takes her hand she grabs hold of him, her heartbeat pounding in her fingertips.

Jared breathes out. Maybe. Maybe, he thinks, everything will work out after all.

fin

This Strange And Mournful Day

Timestamp. Takes place approx. a year after the epilogue. Jensen's mother shows up

They're in the kitchen, laughing at something Jared later can't remember. Jensen is sitting on the kitchen counter, eyes crinkling at the corners as laughter bubbles up from his chest. One foot reaches out to poke Jared in the side and Jared shimmies away with a yelp, almost dropping the wooden spoon in his hand. "No messing with the chef," is what he's saying when the doorbell rings and Jensen laughs out loud as he jumps off the counter and heads for the door, swatting Jared's ass playfully as he passes. The sound of his laughter echoes off the walls as he walks through the living room and to the front door and Jared shakes his head, smiling. Sometimes Jensen can be such a –

It feels like a freight train ran straight into the building. The impact has Jared staggering and the pot he'd been stirring falls off the stove, splattering tomato sauce all over the front of the ugly apron Jensen insists he wears while cooking. He stares down at it, globs of red running down and dripping on the floor, joining the puddle of hot sauce spreading in front of his feet. He hardly registers the heat soaking through his thick socks at the toes, his mind still frozen on, 'What the hell *was* that?' until suddenly he jerks out of his stupor and turns around, eyes wide. "Jensen?"

He slips in the mess in his hurry, spreading smears of red sauce on the light brown tiles. Cursing under his breath he rips off the apron and throws it to the side as he yells, "Jensen! Jen! You okay?" and runs out into the hall.

The first thing he sees is Jensen, sitting straight-legged on the floor like the force of the impact had flung him backwards, his eyes fixed on the door. The next thing he registers is the person standing in the doorway. She looks...

Oh. Oh fuck.

He turns his back on her, that wretched shaking being staring at him like he's the intruder, and crouches by Jensen's side, trying to see any signs of awareness in his eyes. There are none. They're as blank as an unwritten page; pupils shot so wide Jared can see his own reflection clearly framed within the thin circles of the irises.

"Jensen? Jensen, can you hear me? Oh Jesus!" Jared rubs a hand over his face. There's tomato sauce on his thumb and it smears on his forehead. "Don't do this, please. Jen?"

"Who...?" the woman starts but Jared throws up his hand, shutting her up without turning his head. If he looks at her he might hit her.

"You've got some nerve just showing up here," he says instead. His voice shakes, he's so angry. "Some goddamn nerve." He can feel Jensen's heartbeat under the palm of his hand, fast and erratic. His skin is pale, sweaty. His eyes skitter all over the place, unseeing and frantic. Wherever he is it's not good.

"Jensen? Come on," Jared pleads, shaking Jensen before pulling him to his chest, wrapping

his arms around the rigid form and closing his eyes as he tries to figure out what to do. "Okay, okay," he whispers. "Let's just get you to bed. It's gonna be alright. Everything's gonna be fine."

For once Jensen is not pliant. Jared hauls him to his feet but he won't move, knees locked in place, back stiff. In the end Jared picks him up, staggering a little under the weight before slowly making his way to the bedroom. He lays Jensen on the bed and then just stands there, gazing down at him. He wants to crawl in and wrap his arms around Jensen, whispering stupid things into his ear until he wakes up. Until he comes back.

"Where are you?" he asks and Jensen whimpers, a soft keening sound that has Jared's stomach turning. He has to get him out of there but he doesn't know how and everything is just fucked to hell!

He storms out of the room and to the front door, halting in his steps when he finds it closed and no sign of Jensen's mother. For a moment he stands bewildered but then he hears a noise from the kitchen and that's where he finds her, cleaning tomato sauce off the floor. The pasta has been pulled off the stove and drained, and now it rests steaming in the bowl Jared had already put aside for it.

"What are you doing? What the hell do you think you're doing?"

He spits the words out, so angry, so goddamn furious he's shaking. He wants to hit her and the realization angers him even more, that she has done that to him. He's never hit a woman in his life, never hit anyone really, but her he wants to hurt. Wants to smack the stupid and the arrogant and the goddamn nerve of her coming here right off her face.

"It was boiling over," she says, like that's what he meant when they both know he doesn't care one shit about the food or the mess. She straightens up and rinses the rag in the sink before turning around and facing him. She looks old, thin and grey with more lines in her face than Jared's own mother and father combined. "It's Jared, isn't it?" she asks. She sounds tense, like she wants to disapprove but doesn't dare. Jared doesn't really care one *shit* what she thinks.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, ignoring her question. "What the fuck were you thinking, just showing up like that?"

"He's my son..." she starts and Jared can't help it, he takes a step forward, fists raised, and she abruptly shuts up.

"You..." He stops, breathing heavily, then he starts again, each word gritted out between clenched teeth. "He may be your son but you are *not* his mother."

She flinches at that, stepping back and glancing around uncertain before looking back at him. "I never meant to hurt him," she says defiantly and Jared stares at her, completely gobsmacked.

"You what?" he says. "Are you...? Fucking Christ!"

Her face turns red and she opens her mouth as if to object, his profanity no doubt, but then

she closes it again, lips a thin red line in her face.

“I can’t deal with you now,” Jared says and turns away. “I need to take care of Jensen.”

She makes a small noise that has him stopping in his tracks. “Is he going to be all right?” she asks in a timid voice.

He turns around and glares at her. “What do you care?” he asks back. “Why the hell are you even here?”

“I...” She swallows. “I needed to see him.”

“Why?”

She stands silent for a moment but then she raises her eyes to face him. She looks even older than before. Like all her sins are finally catching up with her, dragging her down. “I have cancer,” she says.

If she expected sympathy Jared doesn’t really have any. “That’s why you’re here?” he asks, incredulous. “To what, accuse him of making you sick like you accused him of killing his own goddamn father?”

She flinches. “No! I told you, I wanted to see him. He’s my son and I... I just wanted to see him again if I...” She hesitates then reluctantly admits, “And I thought... I thought maybe he could do something.”

Jared stares at her, too appalled for words. Finally he just turns around and leaves her standing there, pale and trembling with broken pride.

Jensen hasn’t moved from where Jared left him. If anything he looks even deeper sunken into whatever pit seeing his mother had thrown him in. Jared sits down on the bed and lays a hand on Jensen’s forehead. He’s warm and sweaty and when Jared touches his fingertips to Jensen’s throat he can feel the pulse there, beating frantically.

“I’m sorry,” he says even if he doubts Jensen can hear him. “Fuck, Jen, I’m so sorry.”

He can hear Jensen’s mother out in the living room. He doesn’t know what she’s doing, why she doesn’t just leave, but at the moment he must focus on Jensen, on getting him out of whatever Hell he’s trapped in.

He wrestles the phone out of the pocket of his jeans with his left hand, the right one never leaving Jensen. He strokes Jensen’s hair, rubs a thumb over his lips, lays his palm softly against his cheek. Anything to let Jensen know he’s there.

“Hey man, what’s up?” Chris says cheerfully and Jared closes his eyes.

“You have to get here,” he says, his voice sounding shamefully small and helpless. This is supposed to be his job now but it’s only been a year and he just... Chris is the expert. Chris knows so much more than he does. “She just rang the goddamn door bell and... Fuck, he’s gone, man. He just disappeared to wherever, I don’t know, and I can’t get him out. Jesus

Christ, Chris, you gotta help me.”

“Jared,” Chris says bewildered, “what the hell are you...?” He stops and Jared can hear him suck in his breath. “His *mother*?”

“Yes! She’s here and he just froze. He looks bad, man. Really, really bad. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m on my way,” Chris tells him and hangs up.

Jared drops the phone on the bed. There’s confusion and fear and grief running circles in his head and he doesn’t know if they are his own feelings or Jensen’s, and if so, if Jensen is trying to connect with him or if it’s just bleeding out from him, all those emotions he’s not allowed to have.

“I’m here, Jen. I’m right here,” Jared whispers and Jensen starts to shake. He shakes and shakes, like he’s having a seizure, then he starts gasping, sucking in air like he’s drowning. The echoing gasp from the doorway has Jared twisting around. Jensen’s mother is standing there, hand over her mouth, eyes as wide as saucers.

Jared snaps. “*What?*” He stands up from the bed and stalks toward her, feeling grimly satisfied when she backs away, clearly intimidated. “You want to see? You want to see what you’ve done to him?” He throws out his arm, offering her a better view. “Take a good look at your masterpiece.”

“I didn’t...” she tries weakly but he has no patience for her excuses.

“You left him in that place. He was there for *two years*! Like this! Trapped in nightmares that will make whatever Hell you’re going to seem like goddamn Sunday school. Two years without his music, without colors, without anyone who cared for him. Two. Fucking. Years!”

“Don’t...” she says, her face crumbling, but he doesn’t listen. Doesn’t care how she feels because she’s got *no right*!

“You want to hear how they had to force feed him because he was too out of it to realize he needed to eat? How he almost drowned in the shower because he fell asleep with his mouth open? Or how about when some sick bastard practically *raped* him and he just let it happen because he thought he was going to die anyway?”

“Please,” she sobs, tears running down her face. “Stop talking. Please...”

“And you know the worst part?” Jared laughs coldly. “The worst part is he doesn’t even blame you! Because even now, after everything you did to him, he still loves you. *That’s* how fucked up he is.”

“Stop.” The quiet voice cuts through his anger and he turns around to see Jensen awake, eyes bleary and slightly unfocused. He’s still shaking, breath coming in small hitches like he’s fighting his panic, and there’s a sheen to his face, making him look sickly pale. “Please. Don’t.”

“Jensen,” Jared and Jensen’s mother both say in unison but it’s Jared that rushes to Jensen’s side and it’s Jared who grabs Jensen’s hand and pulls it to his chest.

“You okay?” he asks but Jensen pulls away from him, eyes darting to the door, and then he reaches out with his hand and whispers, “Mom?”

She gives a small broken sound, hand over her mouth, and then she runs out of the room, the scent of her left floating in the air like smoke over water. Jensen’s face crumbles, his hand falling limp on the bed beside him.

“Jen...” Jared says but Jensen won’t look at him.

“Why did you do that?” he asks brokenly, sounding so tired and so lost it makes Jared’s chest tighten painfully. “Why did you tell her all that?”

Jared winces, his face flushing red. “You heard. How much did you hear?”

“Enough.” Jensen’s fingers curl into fists, clenched by his side. “You lied. I wasn’t... That didn’t happen!”

Jared closes his eyes briefly before setting them on Jensen’s pale face, his empty eyes, wishing he’d please look at him. “Jensen... Come on,” he says quietly. “I know you don’t want to believe it but we both know...”

Jensen shakes his head violently. “No. You can’t just... You can’t just *assume*! If I can’t remember how the hell can you? You can’t! Because it *didn’t happen*!”

“Let’s not talk about this now,” Jared tries but Jensen won’t listen.

“There’s nothing to talk about! *Nothing* happened! I told you...!”

“You talk, ok?” Jared cuts in. “You talk in your sleep. When you’re... When you get lost. Sometimes. You talk.” Jared looks away. He never meant to tell. “You didn’t want it. Not that. You think you don’t remember but a part of you does. And that part... that part said no.”

Jensen lies absolutely still. Jared stares at the floor. He feels like shit.

“I have to talk to my mom,” Jensen finally says and struggles to sit up.

“Jensen...” Jared tries, reaching for his hand but Jensen jerks it away.

“Not now,” he says coldly. “Preferably not ever but *definitely* not now.”

He gets up, swaying for a moment before he walks out on shaky legs, leaving Jared to stare at the space he left. Just for a moment and then he’s stumbling to his feet as well and hurrying after Jensen. Even if he might not want Jared there this isn’t something he should have to face alone.

Jensen’s mother is sitting on the couch, head in her hands. She’s shaking like a leaf. Jensen is already by her side, arm around her shoulders like the past ten – hell, twenty – years never

happened. The concerned look on his face, the love and the unabashed hope shining in his eyes is like a kick to Jared's heart.

"Mom?" Jensen is saying, voice low and soft. "Mom? I'm sorry."

Jared wants to slap him. Wants to pull him up from the couch and away from her. Wants to shake him and ask him, "What is *wrong* with you? She did this to you. Why are you even talking to her?"

"Mom, please," Jensen says brokenly and she gives a choked sound, like she can't breathe so close to him.

"Is it true?" she sobs. "What he said, is it true?"

Jensen closes his eyes, his chest heaving with every slow breath. "Yes," he finally says and she jerks in his arms. "I don't know. I can't remember everything but..." He raises his head, looking up at Jared with a lost expression in his eyes. "I think, yes. Probably."

Jared has never hated himself as much as in that moment. He wants to touch Jensen, to hug him and kiss him and tell him he's sorry. That he never meant to say it. That they don't really know. That maybe Jensen is right. Maybe nothing did happen. Maybe he can't be hurt, not even when he's so popped on pills he can't feel a guy sucking him off. Maybe... But he does talk. Sometimes. And the things he says have been killing Jared for months.

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry." She's sobbing, her thin body shaking with it. "My boy. My baby."

And just like that Jensen breaks. His face crumbles, mouth opening as he fights for his breath and then the tears filling his eyes overflow until they're running down his face. "Mama," he sobs as his whole body starts to shake and he folds in on himself until he's curled up in her lap, her withered hands stroking his hair as she whispers, "Sshh, sshh, it's okay" and "I'm here now."

Jared walks out.

He stands waiting in the hallway outside the elevator for Chris to arrive, smoking one cigarette after another even if he hasn't had a drag since high school and has been pestering Jensen to throw out these, Chris's old leftovers, for weeks. When the elevator finally pings opens to cast out a frantic Chris all he needs is one look at Jared and his lips go thin.

"Where are they?" he asks through clenched teeth.

"Living room," Jared mutters. "They're... Goddamn fuck!"

His fist hits the wall with a fury that he hadn't even realized had been building in his chest. The cigarette snaps in two, ashes and embers raining down on the linoleum.

"He told her he was sorry! *Him!* And he's in there, crying in her arms while she tells him everything is okay because 'mommy's here.' God! What the hell is *wrong* with him?"

Chris's nostrils flare as he sucks in his breath. He's pale, with red dots in his cheeks like he can't make up his mind whether to be scared or angry. "Fuck." He pushes the door open and stalks into the apartment, Jared following on his heels. They both come to a stand still in the living room, watching mother and son clinging to each other on the couch.

"Jensen," Chris says. The tone is gentle but his voice is shaking with repressed anger. "Hey, Jensen," he repeats. "What's going on?"

"My mama," Jensen sobs. "She found me."

He sounds so grateful, voice bright and happy like a child's, and Jared grabs Chris's arm as he steps forward, fists rising.

"Jensen," Chris repeats. "Jensen, she can't just... She doesn't deserve you," he forces out between gritted teeth.

Jensen shakes his head. "Don't say that. She's my mom. My mama." He looks up at her, eyes filled with gratitude. "She came back for me."

His mother smiles, tightening her arms around him as she presses a kiss to his temple. Jensen hitches his breath, his face crumbling again, and she starts rocking him in her arms, whispering soothing words into his ear.

Chris opens his mouth, looking furious, but Jared subtly shakes his head and pulls Chris by the arm out of the living room and into the kitchen.

Chris wrenches free from his grip then leans upon the kitchen counter, breathing heavily, his face red with anger. "I want to kill her," he finally hisses. "Did you see how she...? That *bitch!*"

Jared nods, face grim. "She's sick," he tells him. "Cancer. That's the only reason she's here. She probably thinks he can cure her."

If anything Chris looks even more furious at that. He bangs his fist into the counter then turns around and stalks back to the living room. "Jensen," he says, his voice eerily calm. "Can I talk to you?"

"No," Jensen says stubbornly. "I'm busy with my mama."

Chris frowns, the angry look in his eyes making way for worry. "Jensen? Hey, buddy, look at me." But Jensen just shakes his head, burying his face in his mother's crisp white blouse.

She looks up then, eyeing them warily. "Can't you leave us alone? Who are you anyway?"

Chris ignores her. "Jensen," he says, voice turned soft and warm. "Hey, Jen. How old are you?"

"Eleven," Jensen replies impatiently but then he frowns and goes still. "No," he says slowly. "I'm..." He looks up, eyes wide with confusion. "Chris?"

His mother is staring at Chris, shocked. He gives her a thin smile. "Yeah, Jensen," he says. "You alright?"

Jensen looks around, seeming uncertain, and then he pulls out of his mother's tight embrace and stands up. He doesn't look at her, not even when she reaches out for him, calling his name. "Where's Jared?" he asks in a shaky voice and Jared steps into view from the doorway.

"Here. I'm right here."

Jensen's face goes slack with relief and he walks straight into Jared's waiting arms. Jared pulls him in tight, resting his chin on top of Jensen's head. He can feel him trembling.

"You okay?" he asks quietly. Jensen shakes his head and Jared pulls him in tighter. "Tell me what you need," he whispers. Jensen just shakes his head again but Jared can feel his hands twitching where they clutch at his waist. "You want to go play? It's alright, you can." He can feel Jensen hesitate so he adds, "Go on, I'll take care of everything."

Jensen nods then presses his nose into Jared's ear and whispers, "I got a little lost," against the slope of his neck.

Jared blinks as his vision goes momentarily blurry. "I know," he whispers back, voice slightly hoarse. "It's okay."

"But she's real?" The question is quiet, fearful, with Jensen's face still pressed into Jared's neck as if he's afraid to look. Jared wants to tell him no, that she's just a figment of his imagination and she'll be gone when he comes back but he can't.

"Yeah, she is. It's okay. Don't worry, we'll sort things out."

Jensen nods. He tightens his hold briefly around Jared's waist before letting go and stepping back. Then he turns around and walks out of the room, never looking his mother's way. They all stay silent until they hear the door to the piano room close. After a while what sounds like a rickety version of an old lullaby starts to play.

[Brahms: Wiegenlied Op. 49/4 / Peter Nagy](#)

Jared breathes out. "Well," he says, "that was close." He glances over at Chris. "Still might go either way. We better check on him soon."

Chris nods. He still looks furious, eyes shooting daggers at the woman who sits frozen on the couch, staring at them.

"What just happened?" she asks, seeming completely bewildered. "What is wrong with him?"

Chris clenches his fist but Jared lays a hand on his arm, holding him back. "He has trouble handling strong emotions. Especially negative ones. He goes off track, that's all."

"But he was happy to see me," she protests, sounding a little hurt.

Chris barks a laugh, lips set into a sneer. "The little kid Jensen was happy to see you because you're his fucking mama. The adult Jensen however freaked out and ran away because he couldn't deal with all the fucking emotions you suddenly showing up here brought up in him."

If anything she only looks more confused. And a little frightened. "He's schizophrenic?"

Chris throws up his hands. "I can't do this," he growls and walks out. Jared hears him in the kitchen, opening the fridge and then popping open a beer. Jared wants nothing more than to follow him. A beer sounds good right about now. Or perhaps something a little stronger. Like a whole bottle of tequila. Instead he turns back to Jensen's mother and wonders how he's supposed to explain Jensen to the one person who should know him best but never really did.

"No, he's not schizophrenic," he sighs. "He's just layered."

She just blinks, clearly not understanding the difference.

"Look," Jared says, "you coming here like this... It's probably the worst thing you could have done. It was selfish and arrogant and I wish it had been me opening that door because I would have slammed it in your face. But the damage is done and now we have to try and help him deal with it. And the first step is you leaving." He cuts her off when she opens her mouth to argue. "If and when he wants to talk you, he'll contact you. Not the other way around. You don't call any shots here, do you understand?"

"He's my son!" she bristles, red dots blossoming in her cheeks. "Who the hell do you think you are to..."

"I'm the one who is going to take care of him long after you leave," Jared tells her coldly. "Or die. Whichever comes first." He ignores her flinch. "He trusts me to look after his heart. That's what I'm doing. I'm not going to let you break it. Not again."

"His heart?" she repeats stunned. "What are you saying? Is he...?" Jared stays silent, watching her with his eyebrows raised, and he can see the moment it registers. "Oh," she says, face paling. "He's...? You're..."

"I'm his husband."

Jared's left thumb rubs unconsciously at the underside of the ring that still feels so amazingly new and wonderful. And heavy, like all his love for Jensen is anchored in that small piece of silver. Her shocked eyes are drawn to his hand and he quells the urge to flaunt it. Just wave it in her face like a red flag of petty defiance.

"You can't be married," is what she finally says. "You're... It's not even legal!"

"Funny thing that," Jared says, mockingly casual. "We took a trip to Canada, visiting my dad. It's a beautiful country. Very friendly. They don't care who you love."

He expects her to sneer, to say something about how God cares or that they're damned to Hell. Something. Instead her shoulders just slump, face settling in what Jared can only deem as reluctant acceptance.

“So that’s it then?” she asks flatly. “This is what it all came down to?” She purses her lips. “I guess I should have seen it coming. It wasn’t normal how attached he was to you. And how you idolized him.”

“I loved him,” Jared corrects her even if the other thing isn’t exactly untrue. “Because he was my friend. And the most amazing person I’d ever met. He still is.”

“You were always such an idealist, even then,” she says but it doesn’t sound condescending, just resigned. “You never saw anything but good in him.”

“Because there never *was* anything but good in him,” Jared tells her irritated. “There still isn’t. How can you not see that?”

But she just shakes her head. “He was a danger, to himself and others. He wasn’t in control of... of his problem. Still isn’t, obviously.”

Jared stares at her. “You just don’t get it, do you? You really have no idea what he is.”

Her lips go tight, a thin line of anger in her face. “I know what he’s not. He’s not the child I should have had. He’s not... He’s not *normal*.”

“No, he’s not,” Jared says, starting to lose his temper. “He’s magical. He’s a magical being, the only one in the whole wide world. *That’s* what you had, what someone decided to *give* to you and you just... You threw him away!”

She looks up at him, defiant. “I don’t know what he’s told you but it was his own decision, getting help. You can check if you want. He signed the papers himself.”

“You are incredible,” Jared says, staring at her in disbelief. “You actually believe that, don’t you? Jesus!”

She looks away, shaking her head stubbornly. “Nothing to believe. It’s right there on the dotted line. Check it.”

In the silence that follows Jared can hear Chris pop open another beer in the kitchen. He’s going to finish their meager stash if this goes on much longer.

“I think you should leave now,” Jared says, his voice strained with keeping calm. “Let me have your number. I’ll give it to Jensen when he feels better so he can decide what to do. But if he doesn’t want to see you then don’t you *ever* come here again. I will physically throw you out if you try.”

She winces, looking like she wants to object for a moment but then she pulls a small notebook out of her purse, scribbling down her number before standing up. She looks small somehow, and not just because of how thin and grey she is.

“I know you think I’m some kind of monster,” she says defensively as she rips out the page and hands it over. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I did do everything wrong. But I did the best I could. I did what I thought was best for him. For everyone. It wasn’t easy, being his mother.”

Jared remembers Jensen talking along those same lines so long ago. 'It's not easy being related to me,' he'd said. It's an argument Jared's heard many times since, from parents of teenagers struggling with all kinds of mental and physical problems, as well as from the kids themselves. One side defensive, the other ridden with guilt. And always that same anger, at a life they were not supposed to have and problems they shouldn't have to deal with.

"Being his husband isn't always easy either," he says coldly. "But it's worth it because he's Jensen. And I love him."

She looks away, pulling her coat tighter around her. "I'll see myself out," she says stiffly but as she brushes by him he grabs her arm, stopping her.

"He can't cure you. It doesn't work like that. So if that's all you're here for I suggest you walk out that door and we'll pretend you being here never happened. Better deal with it now than later when he's gotten his hopes up that maybe you're here because you actually care about him."

Her arm is thin and tense under his fingers. She won't look up at him, just stares ahead with her jaw set tight and a twist to her lips like she's fighting not to cry. "He's my son," she repeats stubbornly.

Jared sighs and lets go of her arm. "You keep saying that but you know what I haven't heard you say? That you love him. You haven't said once that you love him. Which means that him being your son doesn't mean shit in my book."

She looks startled, like she hadn't even realized. "I... I do. Of course I do. He's my..." She cuts herself off, looking away. "I do love him."

"Don't tell me, tell him. Tell Jensen."

"He knows," she says, as if it's that simple.

Jared just looks at her. "No. He doesn't. He really doesn't. It's been twelve years, Donna. You can't expect him to just take you back with open arms after everything you said and did to him."

She stands silent for a long time then says in a quiet voice, "I did come back for him, eventually, but he was already gone. I tried to find him but..." She shakes her head. "Mac only told me where he was last week. When she found out I was... sick."

She takes a deep breath then looks up at him. "I know, too little and too late. But I do love him. He scares me, always has, but I still love him. I tried not to but... He is my son. I know you don't understand why that is important but it is. Because no matter what happened and *will* happen he is still a part of me. He always will be. And I will always be a part of him."

Jared swallows. "Maybe, but for the last twelve years you've been the part of him that makes him miserable." He glances pointedly out the window. "Like now."

She follows his gaze, staring out at the rain lashing the windowpane. Then she pulls a small

folded umbrella out of her purse, as if she'd expected as much. "I know," she sighs. "You were always his sunshine and I was always his rain." She pauses. "Thank you for that. For making him happy."

Jared doesn't know what to say. "We make each other happy," he finally replies. It sounds lame and he's relieved when she just nods and then she's gone, closing the door softly behind her.

"She gone?" Chris says behind Jared, making him wonder how long he's been there, listening. Not that he cares.

"Yeah," he says, still gazing thoughtfully at the closed door.

"She coming back?"

Jared hesitates, then nods slowly. "I think so. If Jensen asks her to."

Chris huffs, clearly still angry. "He wouldn't turn her away even if she threw Bibles at him and called him a shitty little faggot, the stupid idiot."

Jared rolls his eyes and turns around. Chris is leaning against the wall, beer in one hand. It would look casual enough if his knuckles weren't white where they clutch the bottle and his jaw wasn't set so tight Jared's surprised he hasn't bitten through the bottle neck.

"It never was about religion. Not really. I mean, sure," he quickly adds when Chris opens his mouth to argue, "it figured into it but it wasn't the main problem. Not after his grandma died anyway."

Chris scowls but he doesn't argue. "Whatever," he says and shrugs. "You wanna go check on him or should I?" The tone is casual enough but he can't hide his worry. It's been almost a year since he moved out but they both know he's still struggling with letting go.

"You go," Jared tells him. "I think he's pretty pissed at me."

Chris raises an eyebrow. "Something I should know about?"

Jared can feel himself blushing. "I got pretty mad at her. Told her some things I shouldn't have. About what happened to Jensen in that place. He woke up in the midst of it."

Chris blinks. "Crap."

"Yeah."

"You told her...?"

"Yeah."

Chris sighs. "I'm not touching that with a ten foot pole, man. Gay sex, that's entirely your department."

“Gee, thanks,” Jared says sarcastic then sighs as he rubs a hand over his face. “Never expected you to anyway, jerk. But if you could just calm him down a bit, that would really help.”

Chris nods and hands Jared the empty beer bottle before heading to the piano studio. Jared hears him knock, three rapid knocks, then again, a little louder. When the music finally stops Jared breathes out in relief and walks into the kitchen. The pasta is cold in the bowl and the pot with what was left of the sauce stands in the sink. He sighs and starts cleaning up. He’s lost his appetite. If Jensen gets hungry later they can always order pizza.

Half an hour goes by before he hears the door open again. He’s in the living room, watching some nature program on Discovery Channel with the sound on mute. His heart sinks when he sees it’s Chris but then Jensen comes shuffling in on his heels, looking pale and shaken. He sinks down on the couch by Jared’s side and Jared puts his arm around him, pulling him close.

“You okay?” he asks in a low voice.

Jensen nods but then he changes his mind and shakes his head. “No, not really.” He shifts on the couch, pulling up his feet and leaning heavily into Jared’s side. They sit silent for a long time before Jensen clears his throat.

“It’s funny,” he says, casually enough if it wasn’t for the tremor in his voice, “I always thought that if I ever saw her again I would be able to stand up to her. That I would look her in the eye and tell her that... that she was wrong about me. Because she was.” He waits for Jared’s confirming nod before continuing, “Instead I just... Fuck, I don’t know. What the hell *was* that?” He laughs shakily. “I feel so stupid.”

“She caught you off guard,” Jared dismisses. “Shocked the hell out of me seeing her so I can only imagine how you felt.”

Jensen shrugs, still not looking up at him. “She’s sick,” he says after a while. “I think it’s serious.”

Jared looks at him sharply. “She told you?”

“No. I could see it. Black spiders under her skin. Did she tell you?”

“Yeah.” Jared hesitates then adds, “It’s cancer.”

Jensen sucks in his breath but he doesn’t seem surprised. They fall back into silence. Jared can hear Chris in the kitchen, moving around, trying to make it sound like he’s busy even if they all know he’s just giving them privacy to talk. Outside it’s still raining but Jared isn’t sure if it’s Jensen’s doing or just the weather. It tends to rain quite a bit in New York at this time of year. Spring is just around the corner, something they’re both thankful for. Jared knows Jensen is itching to get his fingers into the ground, to get the earth growing again. The few potted plants they bought after Chris moved out really aren’t the same. Jared is thinking of maybe building a greenhouse up on the roof. It would give Jensen a couple of extra months to play around with his beloved plants, away from Chris’s allergies.

“Is that why she’s here?” Jensen suddenly asks in a small voice, his head still bowed. “Because she thinks I did something?”

Jared closes his eyes. God. If he had that woman here right now... He shakes his head, keeping his face as neutral as he can. “No.” He’s reluctant to say more but Jensen is still holding his breath, clearly waiting for an explanation so he grudgingly adds, “But I think she thinks maybe you can help her.”

“Oh.” Jensen blinks repeatedly, making the TV screen flicker. “But I can’t. I... Fuck.” He pinches his arm, jerking as the pain calls him back from wherever he was heading.

“I know,” Jared says worried, rubbing Jensen’s neck soothingly with his fingers. He hasn’t seen Jensen this bad since he’d finally moved to New York almost two years ago. And he’d hoped he’d never have to see it again because it scares the crap out of him. “I told her it didn’t work like that.”

Jensen nods. “That why she left?” he asks after a while. He sounds tired. Resigned.

Jared swallows. He pulls Jensen closer and presses his lips to his temple then just keeps them there, breathing through his nose into Jensen’s hair. “She left because I asked her to,” he finally admits. “But I have her number if you want to call her.” Jensen doesn’t say anything. “*Do* you want to call her?” Jared asks quietly.

Jensen shakes his head. “Not... not today. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Whenever you want,” Jared tells him. “It’s ok.”

Jensen nods.

“And even if you don’t want to, that’s ok, too. You know that, right?” Jensen doesn’t answer and Jared sighs. “She lost any right she had to you many years ago, Jensen. Whatever happens from now on it’s on your terms.”

“I know.” Jensen finally raises his head. He looks tired, his skin pale and the freckles faded and grey. His eyes only meets Jared’s for a second before looking away again. “Can we talk about this tomorrow? I’m kinda beat.”

Jared nods and kisses him on the forehead. “Yeah. Sure. Jensen?” he adds just as Jensen moves to get up. “About what I said...”

“Don’t.” Jensen shakes his head. “Not now.”

Jared swallows. “But we’re okay?”

Jensen gives him a quick tired smile. “We’ll always be okay,” he says and stands up. “You know that.”

Jared stays on the couch, listening to Jensen and Chris talk in the kitchen for a while before Jensen bids them both good night.

"I'll be there in a minute," Jared calls out and Jensen gives him a little wave without turning his head as he passes on his way to their bedroom. Jared groans, rubbing one hand over his face. Man, he really screwed that up, didn't he?"

"Don't worry about it," a voice says and he looks up to see Chris watching him concerned. "He's not really angry. It's just been a fucking awful day."

"I never should have said it," Jared says, feeling so damn guilty. "He's right, we don't know what happened."

"I think we do," Chris says quietly as he sits down beside Jared on the couch. "I don't care how much in love with you he was, not even looking any other way for ten years? Man, that's not normal. And he always got really defensive when I tried to pimp him out, like just the thought of anyone touching him like that other than you was just..." He stops and averts his eyes. "Well, he didn't like it."

Jared swallows. "Still, I had no right. Fuck, man. You should have seen his face when his mother asked him if it was true. He looked so lost. Like he had no clue how to deal with it."

"But what did he say?" Chris asks. "When she asked him?"

Jared sits silent for a moment. Then he quietly admits, "He said yes. That it probably was."

Chris's eyes go wide. "Shit," he breathes out.

"Yeah. Fuck!"

"Jared..."

"No." He shakes his head. "It's all speculations, man. I don't think he really knows what's real and what isn't, not when it comes to those years. So I just gave him this fucked up piece of memory that he can't even deny because he doesn't know." Jared grinds the heels of his hands into his eyesockets. He's getting one hell of a headache. "He's got enough crap weighing him down without me dumping shit like that on him."

Chris is silent for a long time before saying slowly, "On the other hand he hates when we keep stuff from him. Better he found out sooner rather than later."

Jared sighs. "I don't know. I can't help thinking that maybe this is one thing we never should have brought up at all."

After a long time of silence Chris pats him on the arm. "You should probably get in there before he falls asleep, just in case. You want me to stay the night? It's no trouble."

Jared shakes his head. "No, I think... I think this is something we have to deal with between just the two of us." He looks up at Chris. "Thanks, man. For coming over." He laughs shakily. "I totally freaked out. Fuck."

"You kidding me?" Chris says grinning and slaps him on the back. "You were the cool one. I would have smacked her stupid face if you hadn't held me back."

Jared smiles a little. Chris beating up a woman seems as likely as Jensen getting a driver's license. "Right. Except I had no idea he'd reverted like that," Jared berates himself. "I would have just kept on being pissed at him, not realizing what was going on if you hadn't pointed it out."

"Nah, you would have caught on soon enough," Chris says. "I mean, when have you ever heard him call her mama?"

Jared thinks. "Never when he's awake. But when he's asleep... Sometimes. He cries for her."

Chris's jaw tightens. "God, I hate that woman." He sighs then lays his hand on Jared's shoulder, giving it a tight squeeze before standing up. "Call me, ok?"

"I will. And thanks."

"Don't mention it."

Jared sits still for a while after the front door closes then gets up with a sigh. He can feel Jensen's turmoil of emotions like a fist around his heart, squeezing it. It makes it hard to breathe.

He stops by the bathroom, peeing and brushing his teeth before crossing the hall to their bedroom. The lights are off and Jensen has his back turned to the door, feigning sleep. If it was anyone else Jared might fall for it but the distinct lack of magic in the room makes it obvious Jensen is awake. Jared doesn't call him on it though but gets undressed and slips under the covers, lying on his back for a moment staring at the ceiling before rolling over and laying a hand on Jensen's hip. His palm tingles when it touches Jensen's skin but that is all the reaction he gets.

"You mad at me?" Jared asks quietly.

"No," Jensen says curtly then sighs and Jared can feel him relax a little. "It's just a lot to take in, her being here and..."

He goes quiet again and Jared rubs a thumb over the groove of his hipbone, waiting for him to continue. It's still raining outside, the drops running down the glass window distorting the lights from the nearby buildings.

"What do I say?" Jensen suddenly asks. "You said I talk in my sleep about... What do I say?"

Damn. "It's nothing," Jared dismisses lightly. "Seriously, I overreacted."

"Jared," Jensen says, his voice quiet but firm, "tell me."

Jared closes his eyes. Of all the things that happened to Jensen this is what he's had most trouble dealing with. His only conciliation has been that when awake Jensen hasn't seemed bothered at all by what his subconsciousness is dealing with. Not that Jared's a big fan of repressing emotions or memories but when it comes to Jensen he can't help thinking that enough is enough. How much can one person be expected to deal with? And then he fucks it

all up by opening his big mouth.

“Jared?” Jensen repeats but this time his voice is hesitant, almost fearful, like not knowing is making him imagine the worst.

“Mostly you ask him to stop,” Jared tells him quietly. “And I don’t know if that means you did and he didn’t or if it’s just something you wish you had said and that’s why you’re doing it now.”

Jensen nods slowly. “But I don’t...?” He swallows. “That’s all?”

Jared hesitates. He lets his hand slide down until it’s resting on Jensen’s stomach and pulls him closer. He can feel Jensen’s belly moving like waves under his palm, tense and frightened. “That’s all,” he lies. “It’s nothing. It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

Jensen breathes out. “I don’t remember,” he whispers. “I can’t remember what happened after he...” He sucks in his breath. “People can’t hurt me,” he says, more to himself it seems than Jared, “so if... I must have been okay with it.”

Jared squeezes his eyes shut, burying his nose in Jensen’s hair. “I’m sure you’re right,” he murmurs, lump in his throat. “We shouldn’t worry about it.”

Jensen nods. His breathing gets more relaxed and after a while he lays his hand over Jared’s on his stomach, braiding their fingers together. “So,” he says lightly, “my mom, huh?”

Jared can’t help tensing. “Yeah.”

“Twelve years.” Jensen laughs shakily. “Twelve years and she just shows up like...” He cuts himself off abruptly, leaving the room vibrating with silence.

Jared waits for him to continue but the minutes tick by and there’s nothing. He’s starting to doze off when he feels Jensen pull in a deep breath before going completely still again. Jared hesitates then presses his lips to Jensen’s neck. His skin is hot and sweaty and his pulse is beating frantically. Jared raises himself up and nudges Jensen’s cheek with his nose. It comes away wet.

“Jen,” he says softly, his heart aching, “it’s ok. Just cry.”

Jensen doesn’t answer, just turns his head so his face is pressed into the pillow. After a long period of painful inhales and silent exhales he finally starts to relax and then his breathing evens out until he’s snoring softly through a stuffed nose.

Jared lies awake, watching as the room changes. He shouldn’t be surprised when he sees it’s the backyard of Jensen’s childhood home but it still hits him hard that this is where Jensen goes after all he’s been through today. The Jensen in his arms sleeps on but under the old oak tree ten-year-old Jensen sits with his arm around his little sister, reading out loud to her fairytales of princes and princesses that all live happily ever after. Their parents sit on a blanket nearby, soaking in the sun and smiling at their children’s laughter. Jared can’t help wondering if it’s a real memory Jensen is playing in his head or if it’s the way he wishes his childhood had been. He keeps watching until his eyes slip shut and he falls asleep, mere

minutes before the illusion starts to shimmer and change.



“Heal me,” she says. Her eyes are empty, her cheeks hollow and grey. Her skin is covered in fat leeches that are sucking her dry.

“I can’t.” He’s crying, the tears in his eyes making the whole room blurry. “Mom, I can’t.”

“You mean you won’t,” she snaps. “Don’t lie to me.”

Jared appears, staring at him in shock. “You won’t heal your own mother? What kind of monster are you?”

“Jared...” Jensen begs, reaching out for him, but Jared turns away in disgust and walks out, taking with him all the colors and all the music. The room falls into grey silence, the air thick with fog and the smell of rotten leaves.

Jensen’s mother laughs. “Guess that leaves just you and me, sweetie. And I’m dying.” She laughs and laughs as her hair falls off and her skin melts away until all that’s left are bones and blood and the echo of her laughter.

Jensen slams his eyes open, gasping for breath. Fighting to get free from the covers he finally rolls off the bed and stumbles to the bathroom.

“Jensen?” he hears Jared’s sleepy voice mumble. “You okay?”

Jensen opens his mouth to answer and promptly throws up all over the bathroom floor before he even has time to slam the toilet open.

“Jensen? What’s...? Oh shit.”

Jensen blurry gaze tries to focus on Jared where he’s standing in the doorway, seeming completely at loss.

“You’re *sick*?” Jared blurts out, voice edged with fear.

Jensen quickly shakes his head, even if it makes him want to throw up all over again.

“Nightmare. ‘M okay.” He tries to stand up and his knees won’t work. There’s vomit splattered on his legs, his arms. The room stinks of it. “Fuck. I’m sorry.”

“Wait! Stay there. I’m gonna... Stay!”

Jensen slumps down again, closing his eyes. He’s shaking, sweat rapidly cooling on his goosebumped skin, and he can’t shut off the echo of his mother’s laughter in his ears.

“Can you get into the shower? Jensen?”

He nods, forcing his eyes open and then crawling into the shower. His feet leave a trail in the mess. “Don’t. Jared…” he sighs when he realizes Jared is holding a mop and a bucket. “Just give me a minute and I’ll…”

“Don’t make me come in there and kick your ass for being stupid,” Jared chastens him mildly. “You want me to turn on the water for you? Or you can wait until I’m done here. It will only take a minute.”

Jensen nods and closes his eyes, hoping the whole thing won’t feel as humiliating if he doesn’t watch. When that doesn’t work he turns on the music in his head to block out the sounds of Jared mopping up his mess and then just sits there, slumped against the tiles, waiting. After a while he’s roused by someone taking him by the arms and then he’s being hauled to his feet.

“Dude, you stink,” Jared murmurs into Jensen’s ear as he wraps his arms around him. “And we didn’t even eat dinner. Where the hell did you get all that from?”

“Big lunch,” Jensen mumbles. His cheeks are burning and he feels about three feet tall. “Sorry.”

“It’s ok,” Jared says softly and moves to turn the shower on. Cold water crashes down on them and Jensen jerks violently from the shock, Jared’s hand only just slipping behind his head before it hits the wall. “Sshh. Sorry. It will heat up in a minute.”

Jensen nods, teeth clattering. He lays his head on Jared’s shoulder, cheek pressed into the bow of his collarbone, and lets it all wash over him. The cold water, slowly heating. The fear; for his mother, himself, them. The guilt he isn’t sure where’s coming from.

“What was it?” Jared asks quietly. “Your dream?”

“Mom.” He swallows. “She died.”

Jared exhales, as if he’d been expecting something even worse. “You think it was a premonition?”

“Not unless she’s gonna die from massive radiation exposure,” Jensen says with a grimace. “Like, fullblown post-apocalyptic nuclear war zombie falling-to-pieces shit.”

Jared winces. “Oh. Fuck. No wonder you puked.”

Jensen shrugs. It’s not the worst dream he’s had, not by far, and he expects the only reason he reacted so violently was because of the circumstances.

He lets Jared wash his hair, keeping his eyes closed the whole time. He doesn't even protest when Jared grabs the soap and continues washing the rest of him. He feels detached, half of him still stuck in the remnants of his dream, the other half thinking of his mother. Where is she now? Did she already have a hotel room or had she hoped she could stay with them? How is she feeling? Is she in pain? Is she thinking of him?

Where has she been the last twelve years?

The water shuts off and then Jared is manhandling him out of the shower and wrapping him up in one of their big towels.

"You think you can sleep some more?" Jared asks as he quickly towels himself dry then turns to Jensen, rubbing the damp towel over his wet hair. It reminds Jensen of being five years old and his mother roughly drying him off after this bath, irritated over the wet footprints he'd left down the hall from the bathroom to his room, because he was looking for his submarine. The memory has him sighing and Jared gives him a concerned look. "Jensen? You okay?"

"Yeah. Sleep, sure." Jensen nods dully. "What time is it?" he mumbles.

"I don't know. Four maybe."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Stop apologizing. Come on."

They stumble into the bedroom and Jared pushes Jensen gently down on the bed and tugs him in before going back to the bathroom. Jensen can hear him move around, probably drying the floor and hanging up the towels to satisfy Jensen's anal-retentiveness. He should tell Jared to just leave it because for once he doesn't care, but that means he has to open his mouth to talk and he doesn't really want to.

Finally Jared comes back and slips into bed, wrapping his arms around Jensen and resting his chin upon his shoulder. They lie in silence, Jensen still with his eyes closed and Jared breathing into his ear.

"Have you ever tried healing someone?" Jared suddenly asks. "I mean from other than headaches and hangovers?"

Jensen hesitates. "Mac had a rabbit once," he says finally. "It got sick and she asked me to..." He stops, remembering the limp form in his hands, so soft and warm and dead, dead, dead. "It didn't work," he finishes curtly.

"Nothing happened?"

He laughs shakily. "Oh, something happened all right. Just not..." He swallows. "You know those beanie toys? It was like that. Bones and meat and blood floating in a bag of skin." He feels sick just thinking about it. "I don't think she ever forgave me."

Jared shifts closer, lips pressing into Jensen's neck. "Sounds horrible. How old were you?"

Jensen shrugs. "Eight maybe? Not sure. I remember I was still in school."

Jared hums thoughtfully. "You're not eight anymore, Jen," he says slowly. "Do you think..."

Jensen jerks away, horrified. "No! No, I can't, Jared. What if I...?" He shudders, imagining his mother in a heap on the floor, like a human beanie bag. "No."

"Okay," Jared tells him soothingly. "Just wondering."

He's silent for a while but Jensen can feel him thinking, swirls of thoughts and emotions going round in circles in his head. It makes Jensen nervous because he has no idea what they are.

"When you do the hangovers, what are you thinking?" Jared asks after a while. "I mean, do you focus on a special emotion or a special part of the body?"

Jensen frowns. He's never really thought about it. "I'm not sure. I just find the bad feelings and... absorb them or dissolve them, maybe? It's hard to explain. But it only works on small stuff like that. I tried it on Chris's flu once and he ended up even sicker so... No. I can't risk it."

"Hmm."

Again Jensen tries to read Jared's feelings but they're too jumbled, old apples and fresh oranges on a bed of wet leaves. And even if he knows better he can't help worrying that *that* part of his dream was right, about Jared judging him.

"You think I should at least try," he says wary when the silence proves too much for him.

"What?" Jared says, sounding bewildered. "No. Jesus, Jensen, of course not."

He swallows. "You don't think... You don't think I'm bad for not even trying?"

"No." Jared pulls back, tugging on Jensen's shoulder until he rolls over on his back so they can see each other. "That's not why I asked," he says, voice serious. "I asked because I know you. And it's what you'll be thinking anyway. So I just... I wanted you to say it out loud, why it's not possible. Because then maybe you'll believe it. I mean, I could tell you you're

right but it's not about what I think, it's about what you know to be true, even if you doubt yourself."

Jensen looks up at him, blinking slowly. "Oh," he says. He tends to forget how good Jared is at reading people. Even more so now he's back at college, taking another shot at the whole psychology thing. He sometimes can't help feeling Jared is studying him, like he's the ultimate project, the kind of weirdo any psychologist would kill to get their hands on to psychoanalyze. It doesn't exactly bother him as much as it worries him. What if Jared finds what it is that makes Jensen tick and it's so bad he realizes he can't do this anymore?

"Jensen?" Jared looks down at him, obviously worried. "You know I'll stand by you no matter what you do, right? Whether you decide to see her again or not. I'll support you all the way."

Jensen smiles. "That's how I knew it was only a nightmare," he says and brushes his knuckles over Jared's cheek.

Jared frowns. "Oh? Why?"

"Because in my dream you walked away."

Jared looks at him, like he doesn't quite know what to say. Then he rolls his eyes and leans over, giving Jensen a quick kiss on the nose. "Your head is a stupid place sometimes," he tells him with a smile.

Jensen can't really argue with that but he gives Jared a small glare just the same. Which would have been a lot more impressive if he hadn't yawned at the same time. Jared grins and calls him an old man then snuggles down, one arm around Jensen's waist and a long leg thrown over his. Jensen closes his eyes.

He dreams of a desolate graveyard and Jared by his side, clasping his hand so tight it hurts. The ground is covered in red and yellow leaves and somewhere far away a raven croaks. The air smells of winter and Jensen's heart feels as heavy as a stone. He looks up at Jared and Jared smiles sadly down at him. Jensen opens his mouth, about to ask, "Was it me? Did I...?" when he sees the specks of grey at Jared's temple. He blinks, confused, and looks back down at the headstone in front of him. Oh. Oh!

A smile breaks out on his face and the cemetery is instantly bathed in sunlight. Jared looks at him surprised but he's never been able to resist Jensen's smile and soon he's smiling back, if a little bemused. He puts his arm around Jensen's shoulders and pulls him in, burying his nose in Jensen's hair and murmuring something Jensen can't quite hear. It doesn't really matter; he'll get another chance to listen in about fifteen years.

He turns away from the quartz spattered granite headstone glittering in the sunlight and together they walk through the cemetery, to wherever they live now. He'll probably wake up before they get there but that's all right. It's no fun knowing everything that lies ahead.

Guess he should call his mother. In a day or two. Or possibly twelve, that sounds like an appropriate amount of time. She has fifteen years left to get to know him, a few days waiting won't hurt. Petty as it is, he figures it's her turn.

"We should call the guys," he says. "Invite them over for dinner. Have a few drinks."

Jared looks at him, frowning a little. "Now?" he says carefully. "You know they're..."

"When I wake up," Jensen hastens to clarify before Jared lets something slip they shouldn't know.

For a moment Jared looks confused but then his face brightens and he smiles. "Please tell me I'm still young and pretty," he jokes, fingers coming up to touch the burst of grey at his temple.

Jensen laughs. He stops and tugs at Jared's hand, until he's facing him, the cold breeze blushing his cheeks pink. Jared's eyes are still as brilliant, his smile just as beautiful. "You'll always be young and pretty to me," Jensen says softly, reaching up to palm Jared's cheek.

They're still kissing when Jensen wakes up.

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Welcome To Where Time Stands Still

Timestamp. Takes place approx 18 months after the epilogue. Jensen's past catches up with him.

"Jensen? Jensen. I want you to meet someone."

Jensen slowly opens his eyes, blinking up at the shadow silhouetted against the grey light from the windows. Tall, broad-shouldered, shaggy hair. Jensen breathes out.

"Jensen? Jensen, this is..."

'Jared,' he thinks. He's smiling even if his face stays blank. It doesn't matter, Jared will know. Jared always knows.

"I'll leave you to get to know each other. Jensen?"

He nods. The shadow comes closer, the shy steps of a young man not yet grown. Has it really been that long? Is he really that tall already? Because it's not a shimmer, there are no shimmers in here. No colors, no music, no... weirdness. It's just this. Sitting. Waiting. Hoping for someone to come. His mom or his dad... No, not his dad. His dad is dead. That's what she said. "You killed him, didn't you? You killed him!" Slapping his blank face so hard the sound echoed through the room. He hadn't felt anything. Not the sting from her palm, not the heat in his cheek, no tears in his eyes. No grief.

"Jensen? You alright? Jensen? Hey..."

A hand on his arm. Then the solid pressure of a body sitting next to his, arm around him, pulling him close. Jensen closes his eyes. A hand cradles the side of his head, pressing until it's resting on a strong shoulder.

"It's okay. I'll be your friend, Jensen. I'll be the best friend you ever had."

Jensen smiles. He falls asleep.

It's a sunny Saturday in downtown New York and Dr. Benjamin Teller is feeling good. He's been attending a seminar all morning and will be for the rest of the day once lunch hour is over but for now he's enjoying the nice weather. It's unusually warm for early October and he already has his jacket draped over his shoulder and the tie hanging loose around his neck. It's amazing, he thinks, what a little sun and a change of scenery can do. He feels lighter somehow, refreshed by a happy sense of freedom that washed over him as soon as he entered the park. He loves his job, he really does, but it's mentally exhausting and to get away like this, if only for a couple of days, is invigorating.

These seminars are usually held in Boston, a city he has come to love as much as his own, but for some reason they moved it to New York this year and it's a surprisingly nice change. He's never been to New York before, it's always seemed way too stressful for his taste, but he's finding himself enjoying it far more than he expected. Right now he's strolling through Central Park, sipping from a tall cup of frappuccino as he uses the opportunity to people-watch, a hobby he's never grown tired of despite the fact that it's basically his daily job.

“Stop staring at people, dad,” his daughter sometimes hisses, fourteen and embarrassed by everything. “It’s rude.”

“I’m not staring,” he tells her, “I’m observing. There’s a difference.”

She tells him she still thinks it’s creepy and he guesses in a way she’s right. He’s just always been interested in the many faces of humanity. What goes on inside people’s heads, what makes them the persons they are. It’s fascinating how one person’s brain can be so different from the next. During his twenty years as a psychiatrist he’s gotten to know so many different personalities that he’s come to realize there are no rules to what makes a person who they are, only exceptions. He can bring up names and faces that defy every theory. And a name and face that defied them all.

Ben frowns. He hasn’t thought of Jensen Ackles in ages and he has no idea what brought him up now. Sure, Jensen is one he’ll never forget but he decided long ago that if he wasn’t going to end up like one of his patients, he had to step back and let go. He’d become pretty obsessed there for a while. First with Jensen himself, this mysterious boy that baffled them all, and then with finding out what had happened to him once he disappeared. It had come to the point that his wife had threatened to walk out if he didn’t stop. And so he had, as hard as it had been. He still thinks of Jensen from time to time but never for long because he knows it will only lead to him falling into the same obsession. So what on earth made him think of him now?

The bright sound of laughter rides on the soft breeze, making his skin tingle, like bubbles of champagne on his tongue. The same feeling of happiness he felt earlier washes over him and he looks around, intrigued. The sound rings again and this time he’s able to trace it to a young man sitting on the grass, doubled over in a fit of giggles. Presumably over his friend, who’s currently rolling on the ground, fighting over a bit of rope with a big beast of a dog.

“Get him, Harley,” he hears the man shout gleefully, almost falling over when the dog – Harley? – barks enthusiastically and consequently loses his grip on the rope, making the guy fighting it fall on his ass, arms flailing.

Ben can’t help smiling. There’s something endearing about grownups forgetting themselves in play like children. Any other day he would stop and observe for a moment but it’s about time he went back if he’s not to be late for the second half of the seminar and so he reluctantly turns away. He’s throwing his empty cup in a nearby trashcan when he hears a loud voice shout, “Jensen Ackles, you traitor! You’re supposed to be on *my* side!” and he freezes in his tracks.

What? It can’t be. He turns around slowly, staring at the two men now wrestling on the grass. The boy that had been playing with the dog ends up on top and whoops triumphantly but as he’s celebrating his victory the tables turn and he’s the one on his back, the other straddling him with a wicked smile on his face.

Dr. Ben Teller has never seen that smile. He's never heard that laughter and he's never seen those eyes light up like a Christmas tree. But that face, he knows that face. He knew it when it was pale and wooden, when those eyes were as empty as black holes and those lips were cracked and dry and hardly spoke a word. It's like watching a statue brought to life. He feels like Geppetto, discovering a flesh and blood Pinocchio where before there was only wood and paint.

"Jensen?" Without thinking he's crossing the lawn, calling out the name he can now admit has been on the tip of his tongue for the last ten years. "Jensen, is that really you?"

Jensen turns his head, smiling up until the moment he catches sight of Ben. The effect is immediate and shocking. Not just on Jensen himself, the way his face falls into a stoned mask and how the light in his eyes goes out, leaving them completely blank and empty. But the whole park seems to change, going grey and cold, like autumn has suddenly remembered its place. Ben glances up at the sky and is surprised to see thick clouds gathering where he's sure there were none before. He looks back down and finds himself face to chest with one of the tallest men he's ever met in his life. Tall and furious.

"Who the fuck are you?" the giant growls. "What the fuck did you do to him?"

Ben blinks, looking past the wall of rage at Jensen who's sitting on the grass, staring ahead at nothing. Pinocchio back in his wooden prison. The dog nudges Jensen's neck with a wet nose before sitting down beside him, whining pitifully.

"I..." Ben says, bewildered. "I just wanted to see if it was really him. It's been so long, I thought I'd never..."

"Who. The fuck. *Are* you?" the man repeats between clenched teeth.

"I'm Dr. Benjamin Teller. I'm a psychiatrist..." he starts to explain and the guy punches him. Right in the face.

When Ben comes to what must only be seconds later he's lying flat on his back on the grass and his jaw hurts like a son of a bitch. Groaning he rolls over to his side and then gets slowly to his feet. Jensen is still sitting a few feet away, frozen like before, the dog lying flat by his side, staring at him with huge worried eyes. Jensen's crazy Rambo of a bodyguard is crouched beside him, obviously trying to wake him out of his stupor. The few whispered words Ben catches are sweet and worried and leave no doubt to the nature of their relationship.

It shouldn't surprise him, after all Jensen's imaginary friend back then was male, both versions of him. There was the boy who may have been based on an old friend from back home, and an adult man that went by the same name that Jensen had clearly felt very strongly

about, more so than could be chalked up as simple friendship. Not that Jensen ever talked much about him. Or anything really. Still, it's surprising that Jensen with all his problems not only has managed to form such a strong affectionate relationship with someone but that it is with a man. In Ben's experience men seldom inhabit the same nurturing inclinations that so many women do, provoking them to take care of people they see as broken. Something that Jensen unfortunately is on so many levels.

Ben rubs his sore jaw, wondering for a moment what he should do. Turn tail and run seems like the obvious choice, followed by a call to the police to report the assault. Except that will without a doubt mean that he'll never discover the truth about Jensen and what happened to him. And he really, really wants to. The whole thing baffles him. Hell, hearing Jensen laugh baffled him more than anything else he's faced in his long career. And if he walks away now the chance to find out what he wants to know will be lost to him forever.

Of course if he stays chances are he'll get beaten up again. And Jensen's boyfriend is one huge son of a bitch. But watching them now, the gentle way he cups Jensen's cheek and the soft stroke of his fingers through Jensen's hair... curiosity easily wins over caution.

"I'm sorry," he says and takes a step closer. The dog's head snaps up, teeth showing as it growls threateningly. Ben stops. "I had no idea he would react like that," he adds, voice lowered.

"You should have," the man says coldly without turning around. "You're the one that made him this way."

Ben blinks. "What?" he asks, bewildered. "I don't understand."

The man glares at him over his shoulder. "You're from that place, right? Where he was?"

"I assume you mean Sunset Home for..." Ben starts but is cut off by the man laughing out loud.

"You gotta be kidding me. *That's* its name?" he sneers.

"Uhm... yes?" Ben frowns. "Why? What does Jensen call it?"

The man gets slowly to his feet and turns around. His eyes are still filled with rage even if it's quieter now, and Ben automatically takes a step back. "He calls it Inside," he says coldly. "Like a prison. Because that's what it was."

Ben stares at him. "I assure you, it's anything but. I'm surprised he..."

The man cuts in, irritated. "Maybe there were no cells or bars but you locked him up in his own goddamn head and that, I'm sure you know, is the ultimate prison." At Ben's confused

look he shakes his head. “Why do I bother? You have no idea what you’ve done, have you? Fucking idiot.”

With a disgusted huff he stalks back to Jensen and hoists him to his feet as easily as if he were a raggedy doll. The dog gets up as well, standing tall and protective, one eye on Ben, the other on its masters. “Ok, Jen, we’re going home now. I’ll call Chris on the way, see if he can swing by.” Jensen doesn’t answer but he follows easily enough, putting one foot in front of the other in the direction his friend steers him, the dog on their heels.

“Wait!” Ben says and hurries after them. “Just... wait. Please.”

“Stay away from us or I’ll file a harassment suite,” the man says coldly. “I mean it.”

Ben ignores him, running ahead and blocking their way. “Listen, please,” he says quickly, painfully aware of the dog baring its teeth at him again. “You’re his boyfriend, right? Can I ask you your name?”

“Husband,” the man says irritated, looking like he’s thinking of shoving Ben aside with the same force he used to punch his face earlier. “I’m his husband. And the name is Jared.”

Ben’s jaw drops. For the first time in his life, as far as he can remember, he’s completely gobsmacked. “Jared? *You’re* Jared? You’re *real*?”

Jared looks a little taken aback at that, his anger momentarily making way for confusion. “Last time I checked. Why?”

“*You’re* Jensen’s imaginary friend,” Ben says stunned.

Jared frowns. “No, I’m his *real* friend. Are you sure you’re a doctor and not one of the inmates?”

Ben can’t help laughing. “Jared, this is... You have no idea what this means. I have so many questions. Please, can we talk?”

Jared scowls and opens his mouth, clearly ready to tell him to fuck off, but then his face changes and he looks at Ben speculatively. “Were you there from the beginning? When they brought him in?”

“He signed himself in,” Ben corrects, “but yes, I was. I was his primary doctor through his two-year stay. In fact I strongly objected the decision to grant him leave since I didn’t think he was ready yet. Unfortunately I was overruled.”

Jared’s lips twitch angrily. “Careful. I might have to punch you again.” He stares at Ben for a long time and Ben does his best not to look intimidated, which is pretty hard considering the

man is a giant and one snap of his dog's jaws would probably break Ben in two. "I'll talk to you on one condition: You tell me everything that happened to Jensen during those two years."

The request catches Ben off guard. "But..." he says confused, "you said he'd already told you about his stay there."

Jared shakes his head. "Only what he remembers. Which isn't a lot. And there are some things..." He pauses, suddenly looking uncomfortable. "There are some things we both need to know."

"A doctor-patient relationship is confidential..." Ben starts and without another word Jared turns Jensen around and starts walking away. "Wait!" Ben yells and runs to catch up with them. "Please. You have to understand. There are laws..."

"You stole two years of his life, fucking him up for the rest of it. I think he's entitled to know what made him this way," Jared says coldly.

Ben hesitates then sighs. "Look, if he wants to know I'll be happy to talk to him about it. And if he wants you to be there then that's fine with me. But I can't talk to you without his consent. That's just the way it is and I'm sure if you think it through you'll realize you wouldn't want it any other way."

Jared looks undecided for a moment but then he nods and pulls a phone out of his pocket. "Give me your number," he says. "I'll talk to Jensen once he gets back and if he wants to see you we'll give you a call."

Ben breathes out and quickly recites his number before Jared changes his mind. "Thank you. I really appreciate it."

Jared's eyes instantly go hard again. "I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it for him. If knowing the truth can fix even a fraction of what you guys managed to damage then we need that."

Without another word he steers a still zombie-like Jensen out of the park and into a cab he hauls down from the street. The dog gives Ben a last glare before jumping in as well. Then they're gone and Ben is left alone, feeling ill at ease and bewildered, the whole thing so surreal it might as well not have happened. He hears a rumble and looks up just as the heavens open, with heavy and cold rain beating down on his face. Within seconds he's soaked through and cold to the bone.

There's a hand on his thigh. Too small to be Jared's and too nervous to be his own. For a long time it just lies there, sweaty fingertips dampening the thin cotton of his pants. Jensen

doesn't move.

"You're so beautiful. Why did God make you so beautiful?"

The whispered words are like a whimper breathed into the back of Jensen's neck. Jensen wants to say that God most likely had very little to do with him being here but if he talks it means he's awake and he's not.

The hand moves, sliding up and across his belly. "Tell me no," the voice sobs. "Please tell me no."

'No,' he thinks, breath stuttering. 'No.'

"Did He send you? Is that why you're here? To test me? Is that why...?"

Jensen pulls back into the shadows of his mind and disappears.

By the time Jensen finally gets back from wherever he went to Jared is going mad with worry and Chris is on the war path, loudly describing all the things he's going to do to "that fucking witchdoctor" once he gets his hand on him. They don't even realize Jensen is awake until they hear the door to the piano studio slam shut and then the piano starts playing so violently the glasses and plates clatter in the cupboards. Harley whines under the kitchen table, nose nudging Jared's leg.

[Master of Puppets / Scott D. Davis \(8:47\)](#)

"Fuck," Jared says and gets up, almost knocking his half-empty beer over in his hurry.

"Wait," Chris says, grabbing his arm. "Let him get the worst off his chest first. Might save us a few broken windows."

Jared reluctantly sits down again, flinching when a loud key mash cracks the glass in one of the pictures on the wall. "So, mister music man," he says weary, "would you describe that as pissed off, scared or considering-buying-front-row-tickets-to-Apocalypse-Now?"

Chris tilts his head, listening. "Definitely scared. And angry. But mostly confused."

Jared nods. "Yeah, that's pretty much what I got." He sighs. "Am I insane even thinking about talking to this guy?"

Chris doesn't answer at first. He's frowning, looking deep in thought, and Jared is starting to think maybe he didn't hear him when he finally looks up, eyes wearier than Jared ever remember seeing them. "No. I think we should talk to him. You said it yourself, the nightmares are getting worse."

Jared nods. "Ever since his mom came back and he found out about... yeah. Fuck."

Chris dismisses Jared's guilt with a wave. "Okay, so obviously it's bothering him big time,

not remembering. And not being able to tell the difference between dreams and reality he's possibly imagining things much worse than they were. Maybe knowing the truth will actually help."

"But what if the truth is actually worse than what he's imagining?" Jared says quietly. "Hell, Chris, for all we know he was abused for two years straight in that place."

Chris's face turns grim. "Well, if he was I have a psychiatrist to kill." He squares his jaw. "Not much we can do except ask Jennyboy what he wants. If he wants to know then we'll deal with that. And if he doesn't... then we'll deal with that." He hesitates. "Maybe we should tell him. The doc, I mean."

"Tell him?" Jared asks confused but then it dawns on him. "About Jensen? Are you serious?"

"Look, I don't like it any more than you do but if our boy wants to do this, chances are he's going to give himself away. He's a lot of things our Jensen but an actor ain't one of them. And that means we'll be on the defense when we both know that son of a bitch should be the one taking the stand. Right?" He pauses and when he continues his voice is lower, almost fearful. "There's one other thing. Jensen walked out of that place twelve years ago and broke every condition of his leave by disappearing. Honestly, I don't know where we stand if the guy decides Jensen is better off getting locked up again."

Jared stares at him. "What? He can't do that!"

Chris grimaces. "Probably not. Thing is I don't know. He could bring in the authorities if he thinks Jensen might be a danger to himself as well as others. Could have him institutionalized until we can proof otherwise. And we both know what will happen if Jensen goes anywhere near a hospital, not to mention a mental hospital."

"He'll probably blow up the place and then become catatonic," Jared says, fear making his voice unsteady. "And they're not about to let him out like that which means he'll be stuck that way unless we bust him out of there."

"Yeah." Chris sighs. "Look, it's up to Jensen but if we are going to do this I think it would be best if that fucking shrink knows what he's actually dealing with. That the guy he kept drugged up to his eyeballs for two years, trying to *fix* him, is actually *not* insane but something else altogether." He smiles grimly. "Frankly, I would love to see the look on the guy's face when he realizes he locked up Harry frigging Potter."

Jared's lips twitch. "That would be kinda awesome," he admits. "The ultimate kick in reality's face." He pauses, frowning slightly. The music has slowed down to a depressing melody that sounds so sad and weary it makes his heart clench.

Winter Story / Grigor Iliev (6:40)

He gives Harley a reassuring pat on the head then takes a deep breath and stands up. "Ok, I'm going in there." He looks over at Chris, pleading. "Do you mind sticking around?"

Chris snorts. "Kid, you just try throwing me out. I'm seeing this through."

Jared gives him a small smile. "Okay. Thanks."

The room is dark with a clouded night-sky showing only a few twinkling stars and the glimpse of a moon. There's a fog crawling along the ground, misty and cold and Jared shivers, wondering if he should go fetch a sweater. Who knows how long it will take to break Jensen out of his gloom? On the other hand, by the time he gets back the whole scenery might have changed.

Rubbing his arms he starts walking in the direction of the music. He can never quite get used to the way Jensen's magic can just 'TARDIS' what's supposed to be fixed space, turning a small room into an endless forest or even a whole universe. He's been stumbling along in the dark for almost five minutes when he finally catches a glimpse of a reflection of the crescent moon casting off the piano's shiny surface.

Jensen sits slumped by the piano, his fingers dancing a slow waltz across the keys as if he can hardly find the energy to play. From somewhere far away Jared can hear the sad sound of a single violin. It makes the music sound macabre, chilly, and again Jared regrets not having brought a sweater if not for him then for Jensen whose bare skin is covered in goosebumps. He's only wearing the t-shirt and boxers Jared put him to bed in and if he was anyone else Jared would be worried he'd fall ill.

"Jen?" Jared tries hesitantly.

Jensen nods but he doesn't turn around and he doesn't stop playing. Jared walks up to him and lays his hands on Jensen's shoulders. They feel bony and small under his large palms, the skin cold like ice. Somewhere above them an owl hoots.

"Hey, Chris came over," he says casually. "You wanna join us in the kitchen?" No answer. "There's coffee," he adds. Jensen's fingers pause for a moment but then he shrugs and continues, one sad note dragging after another. Jared sighs. "You're freezing, Jen. Come on, indulge me."

Jensen breathes out. His eyes are closed and his fingers never stop moving. "Was he real?" he asks in a low voice.

Jared hunches over, wrapping his arms around Jensen's chest and resting his chin on his shoulder. "Yeah. But he's not here. And you don't have to see him again. Unless you want

to.”

Something in his voice must have given him away because Jensen frowns and then opens his eyes, turning his head so he can see Jared’s face. “He wants to see me?” he asks wary. His eyes suddenly widen and Jared can feel the heartbeat speed up under his palm. “He can’t take me back. Right? Jared?”

“No, he can’t,” Jared quickly reassures him. “Seriously, Jen, don’t even think about that. It will never, *ever* happen, I promise you.”

Jensen breathes out. “What does he want?”

“It doesn’t matter what he wants,” Jared dismisses. “But... maybe he can give us something.”

That gets Jensen’s attention. He stops playing and straightens up, turning to face Jared. The room slowly brightens as the night sky and the forest fade away. “What the hell would we want from him?” he asks with a frown.

Jared gives him a small smile. “Oh, I don’t know. How about two years of memories?”

Jensen stiffens, his frown turning into a scowl and Jared hurries on before he has time to argue. “No, listen. I know you don’t want to think about those years but there are things... I think maybe we need to know what happened if only so we can know what *didn’t* happen.”

Jensen sits still for a long time, eyes dark and unreadable. “But what... what if *everything* happened?” he finally says, echoing Jared’s own thoughts.

Jared swallows. “Then we’ll know what we’re up against and can start dealing with it. As it is... Jensen, it’s your decision but I think leaving things up to your imagination might be worse.” He laughs, a little shakily. “Your head is a very scary place sometimes.”

Jensen looks away. “Sorry about that,” he says. “The whole... dreams thing.”

“Dude, it’s my fault we’re even talking about this. Me and my big mouth.”

Jensen shakes his head. They’ve gone over this so many times now and he still won’t let Jared own any of his guilt. “Not saying yes but *if* we decide to meet with him, what if I, you know, do something?”

Jared clears his throat. “Yeah, about that...”

Truth be told Ben never expected to hear from either of them ever again but as it is he’s only

been home for three days when he gets the call. The conversation is short and to the point as Jared gives him a time and place for them to meet, waiting impatiently on the line as Ben scribbles it down before promptly hanging up. He has to admit hearing Jared's voice was a bit of a disappointment even if he hadn't really expected Jensen to make the call himself. It makes him wonder though if he's going to get to talk to Jensen at all or if all their communication will have to go through his caveman of a husband.

The date is set for this Saturday which gives him three days to finish reading up on Jensen Ackles' files. Plus he has to take the weekend off from both family and work which will not be easy on such a short notice, especially since he can't tell them what he needs it for. Marilyn would snap if she knew he was getting involved with this case again. And Jared would surely slam the door in his face if he even suspected the home had been informed. Instead he makes up a bad lie at work about a sick relative and tells his wife he's been asked by a colleague he met in New York to give consult regarding a case that is similar to one of his own. Marilyn is not happy, she thinks he spends too much time working already, but he'll make it up to her later. Right now all he can think about is solving the mystery that is Jensen Ackles.

When the cab pulls to a stop outside a regular apartment building in downtown New York he thinks for a moment that he must have taken the address down wrong. But as he steps up to it he spots the familiar name by the buzzer to the top floor. 'Ackles' it says, with a white sticker by its side adding 'Padalecki' to the list of residents. He is stunned to realize he's being invited to their home and not the neutral ground he was expecting. Considering Jared's protective nature he'd been sure they'd want to keep their home a secret, especially since Jensen had done such a good job of hiding until now.

His hands are sweaty when he pushes the button and it's ridiculous because he can't really explain why he's so nervous. He feels like he's about to stand trial for charges he doesn't understand and that seem very unfair. The growly voice that demands to know his name and then tells him to come up does nothing to ease his mind and by the time the elevator reaches the top floor he's wondering if maybe he's getting himself into the kind of trouble he won't be able to get out of. Jared seemed anything but stable and even if Ben is far from small Jared looked only a tint of green away from being Hulk's younger brother.

And so it's a surprise when the doors slide open and he's met not with a giant but a short man with long hair and blue eyes that glare at him suspiciously. "Did you come alone?" the man asks and Ben's first instinct is to lie and say he has a couple of buddies waiting downstairs. Big ones. Bodybuilders. Ex-mob. Whatever. Instead he nods and tries for a smile.

"Ben Teller," he says, leaving out the Dr. for now since that's what got him punched in the face last time. He sticks out his hand and the man takes it, reluctantly it seems.

"Chris," he mutters, offering no last name. He nods to the briefcase. "What ya got in there?"

Ben frowns, not quite sure what to make of the interrogative tone. "Jensen's files."

"Let me see."

Ben hesitates but then he shrugs and opens the briefcase. On top of the folder lies a small recorder. Chris gives Ben a look that can only be described as 'How stupid are you?' and picks it up, emptying it of batteries before putting it back. "You're not recording anything that goes on in here. No taking notes either. You listen to what we have to say, you tell us what we want to know, and when you walk out of here you forget everything. Is that clear?"

"I'm sorry," Ben says bewildered and just a little pissed off, "but who the hell are you?"

"I told you, I'm Chris," Chris dismisses. "I'm a friend of Jensen's. That's really all you need to know."

"If you're done with the FBI act how about letting the man in?" a voice says from the doorway and they both look over. It's Jensen, looking a little amused and a lot nervous. His eyes are on Chris but they flicker every now and then to the right, not quite meeting Ben's but close enough that he can see how different they are from what he remembers. So vibrant and alive. Almost like they're glowing.

"Jensen," Ben says relieved, "Thank you so much for..."

"I'm not doing this here in the hall," Jensen cuts him off and turns around, disappearing into the apartment. Chris gives Ben another glare before going in as well, giving him no choice but to follow. He closes the door behind him, discreetly straining his ears but when he hears no bark or growl or sound of claws tipping over floorboards he relaxes a little, taking off his coat as Chris waits before following him inside.

It's not something he would usually notice but Jensen and Jared's apartment is immaculately clean and tidy. There's not a single thing out of place, even the shoes in the hall were in closed cabinets. He imagines it's Jensen's doing, he always was rather particular about how things were kept around him. Anal to the point of obsessive. Something they had been working on but has clearly reverted to what it was before. Ben silently sighs. This is what happens when people take matters into their own hands instead of trusting the doctors to do what they're actually trained to do.

He follows Chris and Jensen through the living room and into the kitchen. Jared is there, making coffee. He throws Jensen a reassuring smile, Chris a knowing look, and then his eyes settle on Ben. After everything that happened last time Ben is on guard, expecting a punch as much as a handshake.

"Have a seat," is what Jared however says, nodding toward the kitchen table. There are four chairs by it and Ben sits down on the one opposite the counter and closer to the door,

nervously placing his briefcase on the floor by his feet. “You drink coffee?”

Ben nods then clears his throat, trying to reclaim some kind of authority. “Please. And two lumps of sugar if you have some.”

Jared holds his gaze. “Yeah, you clearly don’t know Jensen at all,” he says, sounding disgusted.

“Jared,” Jensen says in a quiet voice. “Let it go.” He opens one of the cabinets – with some difficulty it seems like it’s stuck – and takes out a bowl of sugarcubes, offering Ben some before placing two by his own mug. Oh.

“You never used to drink coffee,” Ben says because for some reason his oversight in not remembering how Jensen takes his damn coffee seems to have started them off on the wrong foot. Again.

Jensen turns back from where he’d been replacing the sugar bowl in the cabinet, giving Ben a confused frown as he sits down across from him. “I’ve been drinking coffee since I was fifteen,” he says. He looks up at Jared with a small smile when he comes over to pour into their mugs then focuses on Ben again. “It helped me focus when I was sleep deprived. Hormones,” he adds with a wave as if that explains everything.

“Okay,” Ben says slowly.

Jensen frowns again. “I really didn’t drink any coffee Inside?” he asks surprised and Ben can hear it now, as clearly as if it had been spelled out to him, the capital letter leading the word.

“No. No, you didn’t.”

He gazes at Jensen, silently studying him. The difference from the boy he used to know is so startling it’s amazing. Not only the way he looks, with those vibrant green eyes and the healthy glow to his freckled skin, but how he carries himself and talks. And that smile, the small one he’d sent Jared earlier, it does something to Ben that he can’t explain. Like tasting the first rays of sunshine on his tongue on a cold winter’s morning. He has this urge to reach out and touch Jensen. Just rest his fingertips on Jensen’s knuckles where he’s clutching the mug in his hand. Anything.

Jensen seems to sense it because he straightens up, pulling his mug closer to his chest. “I don’t remember much,” he says, looking uncomfortable. “I can’t even remember your name.”

That sends chills down Ben’s spine. They talked almost every day for over two years and Jensen can’t remember him? “Ben. Ben Teller,” he says. “I used to have a beard,” he adds, in case it matters.

Jensen shrugs. "I remember your face. Just not your name." He pauses, seeming to think. "You had a daughter." He smiles a little. "She must have started school by now."

Ben swallows. "She's fourteen. She'll be in high school next year."

Jensen's face falls. "Oh." His eyes drop down to the mug in his hands. "Sorry."

"Dude," Chris growls and Ben looks up startled. He'd completely forgotten they weren't alone. "Stop it."

Jensen lets out a short laugh. "They don't like me apologizing for stuff like that," he explains, looking up at Ben with a twinkle in his eye. "Gets them all riled up."

"That's because you shouldn't," Jared says firmly as he sits down beside him. "Especially not to people like him. *Or* your mother," he adds pointedly and Jensen scowls, as if that's a touchy subject he'd rather not get into.

Ben however is itching to ask what they mean. Has Jensen's mother been in contact with them? How did it go? But one look from Jared and he suppresses any thoughts of asking and instead watches Jared stir his coffee, waiting for either of them to start. Jared's coffee is light brown but the milk must already have been put back in the fridge because Ben can't see it anywhere. Just like the bowl of sugar had been put in its place. He can't help wondering if they actually think it helps, enabling Jensen's obsessive compulsion like that. Not that he's going to criticize. He's not stupid.

"How do you want to do this?" Jared finally asks. The question is clearly aimed at Jensen even if Jared's eyes are on Ben. His voice is gentler, soft even, and Ben is struck once again by their obvious closeness. He still has trouble believing this is *the* Jared, the friend everyone had been sure was imaginary.

Jensen sits silent for a long time. Jared's hand slips casually under the table and Ben can envision it resting reassuringly on Jensen's knee. As the minutes tick by Jared's face grows worried and he glances up at Chris where he stands leaning against the counter, getting an equally worried shrug back. "Jensen?" he finally asks.

"I'm here," Jensen says immediately. "I'm just thinking."

Jared breathes out. "Okay. Just checking."

Jensen smiles but he doesn't look up. Ben isn't sure what to do. Usually in situations like these he would lead the conversation, trying to get the patient to open up. But he has a feeling Jared will not take kindly to that. So he sits silent, waiting.

"I'm not insane," Jensen suddenly says. "That's not what was wrong with me. A little crazy

maybe,” he adds with a quirked smile, “but not insane.”

“Okay,” Ben says slowly. He’s not sure where this is going. “Why don’t you tell me what was wrong with you then?”

“There was nothing wrong with him...” Jared starts angrily but Jensen grabs his hand, effectively shutting him up.

“Jared’s a bit touchy on that subject. Has been ever since he was little.” Jensen gives an annoyed and slightly blushing Jared a small smile before turning back to Ben, eyes serious. “He’s right though. There was nothing wrong with me.” He smiles a little crookedly. “There is now.” The implication is clear and Ben can’t help wincing.

“Jensen...” Jared sighs but Jensen just shakes his head.

“Oh, come on, Jared,” he says. He sounds tired. “I’m fucked in the head, we all know that.”

“Jesus, Jen, don’t talk like that,” Jared says pained but he doesn’t deny it.

“You believe being with us damaged you?” Ben asks, just to be sure. They all turn to look at him and the sentiment is obvious. “In what way?”

Jensen shrugs. “To understand that you have to understand what I am,” he says then takes a deep breath and says, “I’m not like everyone else. I’m different.”

Ben nods and smiles indulgently. This is familiar territory. Most of his patients feel that the rules of society don’t apply to them. The need to see their problems not as their own but everyone else’s is nothing new but if Jensen never managed to go beyond that there is no wonder he’s not been able to cope on his own outside in the real world.

Jensen smiles back. “You don’t believe me.” Ben starts to object but Jensen shakes his head, amused. “Bet you hear that every day, huh? Everyone thinks they’re different. And they are, of course. Each in their own way. It’s just... well, *my way* is *very* different. You could say it’s out of this world.”

He laughs a little at his own joke and Ben smiles along with him. Jared isn’t smiling though, he looks absolutely serious and when Ben glances at Chris he sees that same matter-of-fact look there, mixed with what looks like anticipation. When he catches Ben looking he offers him a small smirk. Almost like he’s waiting for a joke to begin, a joke that will no doubt be on Ben’s expense. It makes Ben shift uneasily in his seat.

“Okay,” he says to cover up his discomfort. “Tell me. Tell me what makes you different.”

“I think I’ll rather show you,” Jensen says, “if that’s all right. I’m more of a... visual person.”

He chuckles again and this time Ben can see a smile tugging at Jared's lips as well.

"All right, what would you like to show me?"

"What kind of music do you like?" Jensen asks, a small smile playing upon his lips. He's clearly enjoying himself, the nervousness Ben could detect earlier seems to have vanished with the decision to share his tale.

"Uhm... any kind really. Jazz..." Somewhere close by a piano starts playing a lively version of Thelonious Monk's *Reflections*. Ben blinks. "Or early pop..." he continues hesitantly, eyes widening when the music changes to *Yesterday* by The Beatles. Jensen just smiles mischievously.

"Yes?" he says, tilting his head.

"Uhm... classical? Beethoven..." The Beatles change to *Für Elise* and Ben sits back in his chair, eyeing Jensen with suspicion. "Okay, that's enough," he says. "What game are you playing?"

The music cuts off immediately. "It's not a game," Jensen says, suddenly serious. "This is my life."

He blows on the steam from the coffee streaming up from the mug in front of him. As Ben watches it changes until it's the shape of a flower, tinted slightly pink. He blinks. What the...?

"See, my parents didn't want me to be locked up because I was insane," Jensen continues calmly, "but because I am..." He pauses. "I guess the term is 'magical'," he says, sounding a little embarrassed.

Ben stares at the flower shaped steam. He feels a little dizzy. "What?"

"Magical. I make things happen, usually without meaning to." Jensen shrugs. "It can be very... unnerving. My parents needed a break so I agreed to go away for a while."

Jared huffs and rolls his eyes, clearly not agreeing with Jensen's account of the events but he doesn't say anything.

"Thing is they hadn't really explained to me what it entailed," Jensen continues in a low voice. "If I'd known I'm not sure I would have gone along with it." He goes silent and then slowly his eyes lose focus until he's staring blankly at some point behind Ben, clearly far away.

"Is he...?" Ben whispers, fighting not to freak out or laugh hysterically or in any way show that his professionalism is totally blown out the window. "What is he doing?"

“Dealing,” Jared says. His voice is soft and his love and concern is so obvious it hurts Ben’s heart. “See, this is what you did,” he continues, voice still low but the tone considerably harder. “You ruined his ability to safely express emotions. So he goes away for a while when they become too much for him to handle.” He puts an arm around Jensen, allowing him to lean his head on his shoulder. “He should be back in a few minutes.”

“What do you mean, ‘safely’?” Ben swallows. “What did *he* mean by ‘magical’? How did he...?” he waves his hand at the dwindling steam that has gone back to looking ordinary and innocent. “This makes no sense!”

Chris huffs, clearly disgusted. “If you’re going to go through all five stages can we please skip the depression part? We get enough of that from Jensen.”

“You’re thinking of the five stages of grief,” Ben says automatically. “This... this is completely different.”

“Is it?” Jared looks at him. “You just got the news that you were responsible for keeping a perfectly healthy teenager locked up in a mental institution for two years, consequently damaging him emotionally for life.”

Ben shakes his head. “No. That is not... *No*. I saw him first thing in the morning, day after he arrived. He was barely responsive. He hardly spoke a word. For God’s sake, he had to be monitored for bathroom breaks!”

Jared’s eyes flash and when he speaks his voice is hoarse with anger. “Yeah? Well, he left home perfectly fine. Never been sick once in his life. A brain the kind you can only dream of. Eloquent, insightful, a frigging genius. What happened between that and the morning after?”

“I don’t...”

“Sleeping pills,” Jensen says and they all turn to look at him. He’s pale and his eyes are still flickering like he’s fighting to keep focus. “They gave me sleeping pills.”

“But...” Ben says bewildered, pushing away for now that whole magic nonsense even if he has to admit that the flower trick was pretty neat, “those sleeping pills are harmless. They’re very mild, designed to wear off in a few hours. It makes no sense.”

Jensen shrugs. “I told you I’m different. I can’t even take aspirin.” He takes a sip off his coffee, grimacing when he realizes it’s turned lukewarm. “How long was I gone?” he asks quietly.

“Not long,” Jared reassures him. “Five, ten minutes maybe.”

Jensen nods before looking back at Ben. "Drugs shut me down. Don't matter what kind they are. They take away my colors, my sounds, my ability to think. And if I fall asleep... I have nightmares. The kind that would make people believe they were in Hell."

His voice is emotionless, flat, as he recounts his first day Inside, as he insist on calling it. It gets shakier, hoarser, as he goes on describing his panic the next day when he realized the drugs weren't wearing off and how it only got worse with the added drugs prescribed to him, by Ben himself. Drugs that were meant to help him but instead they trapped him for the next two plus years in a world that was as dull and meaningless as dust in an empty room. When he finishes Ben sits back, running his fingers through his hair. He feels... He has no idea how he feels.

"Why didn't you say something?" he finally asks.

Jensen looks down at the briefcase by his feet. "Those my files? Can I see them?"

Ben hesitates then nods, fetching the briefcase and pulling out a thick folder. "They're in chronological order."

Jensen nods, flipping the first file open. Jared leans in closer and together they scan the files in silence. All the while Chris stands with his arms crossed, glaring at Ben like a watchdog just waiting for the order to attack. Ben sips his coffee, eyes on Jensen. Emotions flicker over his face as he reads, anger and frustration and grief, mixed with confusion and surprise. Like what he's reading doesn't fit entirely with what he remembers. When he finally speaks his voice is tight, his anger clearly winning over.

"Patient shows signs of distress when given medication," he reads out loud then flips back to another page. "Patient keeps trying to hide pills. And here," he says, stabbing his finger at the papers in front of him, "'Patient had to be sedated after throwing a tray of medication on the floor'." He looks up at Ben, jaw set tight. "I tried to tell you, again and again, but you wouldn't listen."

"Son, that is..." Ben shakes his head. "No one wants to be medicated. We have these arguments with everyone. But that's why they come to us, because they're not capable of making those decisions for themselves." He laughs a little shakily. "Are you telling me they're all magical?"

Jensen frowns, as if the idea is ridiculous. "No, there's just me. I'm the only one."

"Of course. So lets say you're right, you are magical." Ben gives him a small smile. "That doesn't mean you weren't in need of help."

Jensen scowls. "You're still not listening," he says, sounding increasingly annoyed. "You're sitting in a box, trying to arrange the whole world into other boxes, lined up around you

according to your pattern of logic. Well, that's the thing. I'm not of this world. Or at least I don't think I am." He looks a little uncomfortable. "I've never really figured out where I came from."

"You think you're an alien?" Ben asks, indulging him for now.

Jensen snorts. "Do I look green to you?" He gives Ben a thoughtful look. "I can see I'm not getting through to you. Let's try something else. Come on."

He stands up and walks out of the kitchen. Ben searches Chris's and Jared's expressions for any clue of what's going on but they offer him nothing so he has no choice but to follow Jensen who walks past the living room and down a short hall, stopping before a closed door. When he turns to face Ben his eyes look weirdly bright in the unlit hallway.

"This is my room," he says. "Only four people have been allowed in here. I hope you understand the importance of that."

Ben nods, his curiosity starting to get to him.

"Okay." Jensen pushes the door open and walks in. "Don't step on the cat," he says and Ben looks around, making a note of the colorful room, the old piano, and the total absence of any animal, cat or otherwise.

"Oh, you started playing again?" he asks, doing his best to sound supportive when inside he's sighing in disappointment. Another wall of progress brutally knocked down.

Jensen's obsession with music had been their biggest challenge. He kept stealing radios from the common room as well as from the other residents. Radios that most often ended up being thrown against a wall in frustration because according to Jensen they only played noise and never the music he was looking for. He was always tapping his fingers, on every surface he could find and his own knees and thighs when nothing else was available, but it didn't sound like any rhythm or song they recognized and judging from Jensen's frustration he didn't find any satisfaction in it either. According to the backstory provided by his parents Jensen had been teaching himself to play the piano for close to three years before he came to the home and had become so obsessed with it he let everything else fall aside, including basic needs like eating and sleeping. From what Ben had seen he could only deduct that it was an obsession born out of aggravation, probably because despite his ambitions Jensen clearly had no talent, in fact he'd seemed completely tone deaf.

"Any progress?" he adds politely, willing for now to play along if it will help him gain any insight in this new Jensen who he understands even less than the one he knew before.

"Some," Jensen says, smiling a little. Someone snickers behind Ben. He has a weird feeling it's Chris.

“You should sit down.” Jensen points at a couch that stands by the window. The window that has thick chicken-wired glass, the kind used for storages and basements. Jensen catches him staring and says, “It gets a little wild in here sometimes.” There’s that snicker again but when Ben looks sharply over his shoulder both Jared and Chris are watching him calmly as if laughter is far from their mind.

Ben sits down on one end of the couch and Jared sinks down on the other, long legs stretched out in front of him, fingers laced behind his head. Chris stays standing, leaning against the wall by the piano, his eyes on Ben. It’s weird but Ben would almost say he looked giddy.

“Any preferences?” Jensen asks, throwing Ben a glance.

“Just play whatever you feel like,” Ben answers easily.

Jensen smiles. “Always trying to analyze me,” he murmurs, almost to himself. He sits silent for a while and then he looks over at Jared, eyes gone serious. “I want to do Rach’s 2nd,” he says.

Jared sits up, suddenly taut with tension. His long legs fold at the knees as he leans forward on the couch, firmly shaking his head. “Jensen.”

It sounds like a plea, a warning even, and Ben looks at him surprised then over at Jensen who is smiling, a little sadly.

“I’ll be okay,” he says. “I just... I need him to see.”

But Jared keeps shaking his head. “Jen, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he objects, voice uneven.

Ben recognizes it then, that tone. It’s fear, plain and simple, and he has no idea what to make of that. What on earth can be so frightening in a piece of music, however badly it might be played?

“I trust you to get me out if it gets too dangerous. Both of you,” Jensen says, looking over at Chris. “Knock me out if you have to.”

“You’re fucking insane,” Chris grits out angrily but Ben notices he doesn’t say no.

“Certified,” Jensen deadpans but the joke falls flat and Ben has a feeling his presence has a lot to do with that. “Jared, please,” Jensen adds when the silence stretches on and the way he says it, quiet and pleading, makes Ben realize that if Jared insisted Jensen would give in. It’s in stark contrast to his initial judgment that Jared and Chris are used to following Jensen’s whims, whatever they are. He’s not sure what to make of that.

Jared stands up and walks over, crouching by Jensen's side. They talk in low tones, a murmur of voices that ends with Jared taking Jensen's face between his hands and kissing him. Just a firm press of lips against lips but it's as intimate as any declaration of love Ben has witnessed and he looks awkwardly away, feeling for the first time like he's intruding. Then Jared is sitting down on the couch again, back straight and a look of resigned worry on his face.

"Brace yourself," he says in a low voice and even if his eyes are set on Jensen, Ben is pretty sure the words are directed at him. He looks over to see Chris has sunk down to sit on the floor, looking tense and ready to spring to his feet at the first sign of trouble.

The whole thing is bewildering.

Jensen is sitting perfectly still with his eyes closed and his palms lying flat on his thighs. It looks like he's holding his breath, waiting for... Ben can't imagine what. Maybe for inspiration to strike. He looks like a statue but not the one Ben remembers from so many years ago. This is more like motion captured in a frame. It almost feels like he's vibrating, in fact Ben can swear he sees the air shimmer around him, like waves of heat on a summer's day. Ben finds himself holding his breath as well because whatever is about to happen, whatever Jensen thinks himself to be, this moment of silent anticipation is filled with such beauty it seems rude to disturb the air. The man in his stillness, so contrary to the turmoil Ben knows is inside his head, is unearthly beautiful. The piano, old and worn and so clearly loved, stands there quiet and tragic, waiting in vain to be filled with music. Together they make the kind of picture photographers around the world would kill to capture.

When Jensen finally moves it startles Ben a little, like he'd forgotten there was a human being trapped in the stillness. He can hear Jared suck in his breath as Jensen lifts his hands, eyes still closed, and across the room he sees Chris gaze at Jensen almost reverently, his mouth slightly open. Then Jensen lowers his hands and Dr. Benjamin Teller's whole world as he knows it ceases to exist.

[Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No.2 1st mvt / Orchestra of the Vienna Gesellschaft ; Felicja Blumental \(piano\) \(10:06\)](#)

The wind is howling outside the window, the room is dark, the air suffocating, but all Jared feels is Jensen's warm breath on his face and the rapid beat of Jensen's heart drumming against his ribcage. He's got Jensen wrapped up tight in his arm, murmuring reassuring words of "I'm here" and "It's me, it's really me" into his ear, a feeble answer to Jensen's endless gasps of "Jared. Jared. Jared." He's vaguely aware of Chris watching them from the doorway and even with his back turned he can easily picture the look on Chris's face, torn between anger and grief and helplessness. It's exactly how he feels himself.

That and guilt. Even if it wasn't his decision to make he knows that all it would have taken was one more 'No' and Jensen would have given in and played something else. Because he'd known what it would do, was there to witness it less than two months ago, a few days after Jensen's mother came to visit. It was his fault that time, too. Him and his big mouth, bringing up memories that were for all he knew only the bastard child of their imagination.

From across the hall he hears the toilet flush for what must be the third time, the sound barely audible over the noise of the storm. Jared closes his eyes and buries his face in Jensen's neck, whispering the same words over and over again. "I'm here. I'm real. You're never going back there, I promise. I swear, Jen, I swear. Never again. Never."

Jensen is still shaking but he's gone quiet now, his ragged breathing slowly evening out and Jared can tell the moment he falls asleep. He waits, lips pressed into the hollow of Jensen's neck as he counts the beats of Jensen's heart slow down under the skin. When moss starts crawling up the bed and the air fills with the sweet smell of summer Jared finally dares to breathe out. He'd just as much expected to be thrown into one of Jensen's nightmares but it seems like Jensen's brain has decided to allow him his rest. Jared can hear a child laughing somewhere deep in the forest but he doesn't know if it's Jensen or one of the elflike children he sometimes comes across in Jensen's dreams. It's enough though to convince him that at least for now Jensen is safe and so he gently extracts himself and slips out of bed.

Chris is leaning against the wall in the hallway, right outside the bedroom door. He's pale, eyebrows drawn together in thought but as soon as Jared touches his shoulder he looks up, the familiar grim scowl back in place.

"He asleep?" he asks and Jared nods. Chris glances into the room, relaxing when he sees no hint of immediate danger. "Better not leave him alone for too long though," he adds and Jared almost asks him if he wants to go lie down, that he'll gladly handle Teller on his own. He knows just how addictive it is, sleeping next to Jensen, even if their situations aren't quite comparable.

But just then the bathroom door opens and Teller steps out. His skin is grey, his shirt is rumpled, and there's a defeated look in his eyes, remindful of a religious man that's had proof of God's absence thrown in his face. He startles at the sight of them so close, then glances across and through the doorway to the bedroom. If possible he pales even further.

"Is he...?" he whispers.

"He's sleeping," Jared says, pushing himself off of the wall. He reaches over to close the door but not before a bunny slips out into the hallway and hops happily toward the living room, fading away and disappearing as soon as the door falls shut. Ben stares at the space it occupied, hand coming up to cover his mouth before falling limp by his side.

"It's all real," he says, sounding dazed. "Everything... it's real. Oh god."

Jared glances over at Chris who shrugs, looking just as uncomfortable as he feels. Somewhere halfway through the performance Teller had started crying, tears running shamelessly down his face as Jensen's memories got darker and more desperate. Jared had heard him whisper over and over again, "I didn't know, I didn't know. I'm so sorry. God, I'm

so sorry,” and it had suddenly hit him how cruel they were being. Somehow in their anger they’d forgotten there was a human being behind the title and that they were punishing someone who wasn’t guilty of anything other than following the rules of the normal world. How was the poor man supposed to know? He seemed like a decent enough person and Jared doesn’t doubt that he did the best he could for a patient he was never equipped to understand.

“Let’s go sit down,” Jared says and puts a hand on Teller’s shoulder, steering him toward the living room. “You want a beer? Or maybe something stronger.”

“Whiskey. If you have it,” Ben says hoarsely. “I just need...” He trails off, as if he has no idea how to finish that sentence.

Jared nods. “Sure. Sit. And breathe,” he adds gently. “You look like you’re about to pass out.”

“I just...” Ben waves his hand weakly, eyes losing focus again as he sinks down on the couch.

Jared looks over at Chris who nods and goes over to one of the locked cabinets, getting out a bottle of malt whiskey and placing it on the sofa table before disappearing into the kitchen to find them some glasses.

“How is this possible?” Ben murmurs. “How...? It makes no sense.”

“Very little about Jensen makes sense,” Jared tells him with a small smile, looking up when Chris comes back with three empty glasses trapped between his fingers and holding one large one in his other hand, filled with water.

“Drink this first,” he says, handing the water over to Ben before pouring them each a generous amount of alcohol. Ben gulps down the water then grabs his whiskey and drinks down half of that as well. “Easy,” Chris warns him. “Wouldn’t want you to be sick again.”

Ben doesn’t even seem to hear him. “And the music... God, the music. I don’t understand.” He turns to Jared, tears in his eyes. “He couldn’t even follow a simple rhythm back then. I thought he was tone deaf.”

Chris slams his glass down, making them both jump. “Back then?” he says sarcastically. “You mean when he was drugged up to his eyeballs on your fucking pills?”

Ben winces, his knuckles turning white where he clutches the glass, and Jared sighs.

“Look,” he says to Ben, leaving Chris to cool down on his own, “the Jensen you knew isn’t real. That Jensen, *you* made him, you understand that? You can’t base any of your assumptions on that person. *This* is the real Jensen. This is who he actually is.”

Ben nods. He takes another big gulp then starts coughing as if he’s only now feeling the burn of the alcohol. “Okay,” he says as he gets his breath back. “One thing at a time. I need to take one thing at a time.” He closes his eyes, breathing deeply a few times before looking up again. “Even without the, the... without everything else, the music was beyond anything I’ve ever heard. The *orchestra* and, and... God, the *piano*. The piano was... *That* was self-taught?”

Jared nods. "Mostly. His parents tried a tutor at first but as soon as he started playing stuff like this happened and that was the end of that. So he just kept on by himself. Then of course, after he got away from you, he went to Juilliard."

Ben stares at him. "He what?"

Jared can't help smiling. "He studied at Juilliard here in New York. He's actually a teacher there now. Very popular, especially with the young ladies." He grins.

"But what about the... the..." Ben waves his hand helplessly.

"Magic?" Jared suggests. "He's learned how to suppress it. Drains the hell out of him every time but he loves his job so..." He shrugs.

Ben laughs. It sounds a little hysterical. "I can't believe we're talking about magic like it's actually real!"

"I'd offer you to take another peek into the bedroom to reassure yourself," Jared says drily, "but it feels creepy, inviting you to go watch my husband sleep."

Ben laughs again. "God, this is so bizarre." He drains the rest of his whiskey, shaking his head when Chris offers him another. "If I get drunk there's no way I'll be able to believe any of this actually happened."

"Fair enough," Chris says lightly, topping up his own glass. Jared still hasn't touched his. He hardly ever drinks hard liquor, hasn't really touched it since his first attempt of college when he spent most of his time drunk on tequila. These days he prefers beer or the occasional shot when they go out which isn't often. Jensen gets very affectionate when he's drunk, both physically and emotionally, and as much as Jared loves having Jensen all over him, coming in his pants in the middle of a club or bar isn't exactly comfortable.

"So magic... is real. Actual magic. That's..." Ben shakes his head. "That will take some getting used to." He breathes out. "I want to know everything. Everything you can tell me. Like what can he do?"

Jared shrugs. "Most of what he does is accidental, things that happen without him meaning them to. Like the weather for instance, it simply follows his mood but once he realizes what's going on he can usually put a stop to it."

"The weather?" Ben says incredulous. "You're joking, right?"

Jared raises one eyebrow at him. "Have you looked outside?" he says. The wind has gone down a bit but there are still hails the size of green beans melting on the window sill.

"Oh. That day," Ben says slowly, "in the park, it was sunny and warm and then..."

"And then he saw you," Jared finishes for him.

Ben shakes his head. "But that's impossible. That's just..."

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Chris mutters. “Are you gonna be like that about every fucking thing we tell you? Because that’s gonna get boring real quick.” He leans forward, eyes on Ben. “We’re not lying, okay? About any of it. So just... go with it.”

“Chris,” Jared chastens mildly, smiling when Chris scowls, almost petulantly. “It’s a lot to take in, I know,” he tells Ben, “but Chris is right. Everything we tell you is true. However impossible it might sound.”

Ben looks from one of them to the other but finally he gives in and nods. “Okay, okay. So he can change the weather. What else?”

Jared rubs his neck. “Pretty much every magic you can think of, I guess. Except turn back time. And heal people. And... what else?” he asks Chris.

“Bend spoons,” Chris mutters. “He still refuses to bend my spoons. I mean, it’s a classic! Would it hurt if he tried bending just once? For me?”

“He bends for me,” Jared says innocently. “All the time.”

Chris glares at him for a moment but then he starts chuckling. “I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

“Pretty much, yep,” Jared says smugly.

“When did you get married?” Ben cuts in, looking awkward, when they both turn to him. “Sorry, I just... You’re right. I know nothing about him, about his life. But he was... He was *my* obsession. Ten years ago. My wife almost divorced me because of him. I just want to understand.”

Jared stiffens and Chris stands up, hands curling into fists. Ben’s eyes widen and he sits back on the couch, clearly shaken.

“Jesus, no. Not like that. Nothing like that. I just... He was an enigma. I tried everything to get through to him and nothing worked. And then he disappeared. I just got obsessed with finding out about him. I sat over his files day and night, reading through them, trying to find a clue. This is like my second chance.”

Jared breathes out. He can understand that. Jensen does have a way of needling his way into people’s hearts, whether he means to or not. “We got married this April. In Canada. My dad lives there.”

Ben nods. “And you were childhood friends. So when he left us he went back to you?”

Jared shakes his head. “Looked for me but I’d moved so he didn’t find me. Chris took him in instead.” He gives Chris a grateful smile. “Took care of Jensen for me for eight years while they waited for me to finally show up.”

“Took you long enough,” Chris mutters but the tone is soft. “Thought I’d be stuck with him for the rest of my life.”

“You wish,” Jared says mildly and they both know there’s more truth to that joke than Chris would ever admit. Even if he only lives a few blocks away he’s over there more days than not.

“Did you know that he was... magical?” Ben asks Jared, clearly still having trouble grasping that whole concept. “When you were children?”

“We were hardly children,” Jared says. “Not Jensen anyway. He was seventeen when I got to know him, I was a few weeks short of fourteen. My mom wanted me to learn to play the piano and Jensen was hired as my tutor.” He smiles wistfully. “I was his first friend. At seventeen, imagine that. He’d never had a friend, never had anyone to play with or talk to outside his family. His parents kept him close, hardly letting him out of the house because they were so scared he’d do something. He never even knew what it was like to be a kid, I think. But no, I didn’t know. Not until it was too late.”

“But the music?” Ben says bewildered. “If he was teaching you...?”

“He had me close my eyes. Every time. So whatever I experienced he convinced me it was my own imagination, that that’s what music does. To everyone.” He laughs. “I was a really stupid kid. Very gullible. And the rest... I don’t know. I think I didn’t catch on because it’s not supposed to be real. I mean, I see him do stuff all the time, right in front of people, and everyone shakes it off like it’s nothing. They don’t see it because it’s not supposed to be there.”

“So you never saw anything strange in him?” Ben asks, clearly skeptical. “He was normal to you?”

“You have to realize he wasn’t like he is now,” Jared says quietly. “He was a little strange, sure. He talked funny, sometimes said things that made no sense. But he didn’t zone out the way he does now. He didn’t disappear into his own head so much. Now... If he’s left on his own he’ll just play the piano until he passes out. He gets lost all the time because he’s too deep in thought to notice where he’s going. And he has nightmares that scare the shit out of me.” He looks up at Ben. “They’re why we wanted to talk to you.”

Ben visibly blanches. “Oh,” he says. “Are they about... what the music showed?”

“That, but also other things.” Ben looks at him expectantly but Jared shakes his head. “Not without Jensen. It’s his to tell.” He checks his watch, frowning. “Actually I should get back to him. He sleeps better when there’s someone with him,” he says before looking back up at Ben. “We can continue tomorrow.”

Ben opens his mouth as if to argue but then he nods. He looks tired. “Sure. Yeah. That sounds good.” He gets up, a little unsteady on his feet. “Noon?”

“Yeah.” Jared follows Ben to the door, giving him a reassuring pat on the back as he enters the elevator. “Look,” he says awkwardly, reaching out at the last second to stop the door from closing. “I’m sorry for hitting you. You know, in the park. I don’t really blame you personally for the way he is. I’m just... angry. He never should have been in that place.”

Ben looks at him, eyes weary. “I tried to help him. For two years I tried everything to reach

him. I'm not a bad person."

Jared swallows. "I know. I'm sorry."

Ben shakes his head, sighing. "It's okay. Honestly, if that had happened to my wife, not to mention my daughter – I would have beaten the shit out of the person responsible."

"But you weren't the one responsible and I shouldn't have..."

"Not for him being there, no. But you were right, I kept feeding him different drugs, trying to find something that might help. It never even occurred to me that they might be harming him. Even if he did tell me. Repeatedly. I didn't listen because I thought I knew better." Ben rubs a hand over his face. "Christ, I'm supposed to know what I'm doing," he says, sounding defeated.

Jared sighs. "Listen, I don't really know you, and honestly this is about the worst place to have this kind of conversation," he says, waving his hand to indicate the hallway, "but I'm sure you do know what you're doing. You just didn't know who you were dealing with. He doesn't blame you so why should you blame yourself?"

"Because my job is to make people feel better, not worse," Ben says and with that the doors close, leaving Jared standing in the hallway, feeling one again like a jerk.

He walks slowly back into the apartment. The living room is empty, as is the kitchen, and he finally finds Chris in the still forest-like bedroom, standing by Jensen's bed, watching him with fond and worried eyes. He looks up when Jared comes in and quickly steps back as if he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't.

"Dude, don't be like that," Jared says, halfway between amused and sad. "You know he wouldn't mind."

"Yeah, well," Chris mumbles, looking uncomfortable. "Not my place anymore."

"He'd kick your ass if he heard you say that. You've got as much right to be here as I do."

"Whatever." Chris shifts on his feet. "I was thinking maybe I should stay over, in case things go bad. If that's all right with you."

Jared would roll his eyes if he wasn't afraid Chris would kick him. "It's always all right," he says. "You know that."

"Right. Yeah." Chris gives Jensen a last longing look before stepping back and clearing his throat. "See you in the morning. And wake me up if you need help."

He reaches for the door but just as he touches the knob the door slams shut. Startled he swirls around, glaring, but Jensen is still fast asleep, even snoring lightly. Chris goes for the doorknob again, pulling his hand back with a surprised yelp when tiny sparks of electricity hit his fingertips. "Son of a bitch!"

"I think maybe Jensen wants you to stay," Jared says with a grin. "He misses you, you

know,” he adds softly when Chris just glares at him.

Chris looks undecided for a moment but then he sighs. “Fine. But if he humps my leg I’m out of here.” He turns to Jensen, a soft and grateful look in his eyes Jared is pretty sure he doesn’t know he’s showing. “Can I at least brush my teeth? I’ve been drinking whiskey, you moron. You hate that smell.” When nothing happens he adds, “I’m gonna pee in your closet if you don’t let me go to the bathroom.”

The door clicks open.

“Thank you,” Chris sneers and walks out, muttering insults under his breath that really sound more like endearments.

Jared uses the time to strip Jensen down to his boxers before tugging him in, strategically placed in the middle of the bed. As soon as Chris returns Jared goes to brush his teeth and pee, and when he comes back Chris is lying uneasily on one side of the bed, looking ten kinds of awkward and still strangely happy. Jared just smiles and strips down to his underwear before turning off the lights and crawling in on Jensen’s other side.

“Good night,” he says lightly, grinning when Chris only grunts something inaudible. “If he gets frisky just flip him over,” he adds. The punch to his shoulder is totally worth it.



Words. Whispered into his hair. Warm and damp and frightened. “I just want to... I need to... Please. I need to know. I need to know if I’m... Jensen, please.”

‘You are,’ he thinks. ‘You know you are. You don’t need me for that. For anything.’ He keeps his eyes closed but he can’t shut out the words. And he can’t shut out the hands touching him. “If you just... If you just let me... There. Oh. Oh God. It’s so...So soft. So, so soft. I want... Can I? Please.”

It’s warm. Wet. So strange. So... So wrong. No. No! Don’t...

“Get your hands off him you sick bastard or I swear to God I’ll break every single bone in your fucking body!”

Jensen blinks his eyes open. Mason is gone. The room is gone. He’s in the forest with a strong hand gripping his shoulder. “Chris?”

“Yes!” Chris stands glaring into the forest a while longer as if daring the culprit to return before turning his eyes on Jensen, just as fierce. “Christ. I don’t need this shit. I’m trying to sleep, asshole, and you keep showing me... that! Why you letting him do that to you? Some sick creep. That’s not Jared, man. You know that right?”

A smile tugs at Jensen’s lips. “Chris...”

“Gay porn. In my own frigging head! You like people watching you, bring your boyfriend along, not me.”

Jensen laughs. He pulls Chris into a hug, ignoring his half-hearted struggle and the string of curses. “Thank you.”

Chris huffs. “Whatever,” he says awkwardly. “Where’s that good for nothing husband of yours? Why ain’t he here?”

Jensen swallows. He can hear Jared now, yelling inside his head. “I won’t let him. Not

anymore. Not to see... that. It hurts him too much."

"Yeah, but scarring me for life, that's okay," Chris mutters, clearly trying for annoyed but he sounds relieved, even a little proud.

"Well, I know you're into that kinky stuff," Jensen says lightly and just laughs when Chris punches his arm. "Come on, lets get Jared. I wanna show you something."

Chris sighs. "Is it another one of those faries? 'Cos they creep me out."

Jensen smiles and takes his hand. "No, it's something way, way better."



When Ben wakes up the next morning and the sun is shining brightly he feels stupidly relieved. Not that he's completely convinced that Jensen actually *can* control the weather but if he'd woken up to a snowstorm he might possibly have thought twice about going back there. Everything he saw and heard last night feels even more surreal now as he steps out into the slightly chilly October morning, heading for the nearest Starbucks. Everything he sees, everyone he meets... it's all so normal. Well, as normal as people in general are. His point is, there's nothing that suggests that the world contains anything or anyone that falls outside the ordinary and slightly dull normalcy of everyday life.

He gets in line to wait for his coffee, orders a cappuccino when it's his turn, then sits down to enjoy it along with a fresh blueberry muffin. All the while searching people's faces for any clue that they can feel the influence of a powerful magical being living close by. There's nothing. Sure, there are a few more smiles about than he'd expect so early on a Sunday morning but the weather is exceptionally nice for the middle of October so maybe that's not so strange.

Once he's finished eating he takes his coffee with him and walks to the park, again looking for signs that suggest things are different from what they should be. The grass is mostly green, the leaves are a beautiful mix of autumn colors, and there are still a few struggling flowers, refusing to give in to the cold. He sits down on a bench, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. After a while an old lady sits down on the other end, pulling a bag of seeds out of her pocket and within moments there's a flock of birds fighting at his feet as well as a couple of squirrels, nervously nosing around.

Ben eyes the woman speculatively and she gives him a small smile, eyes crinkling at the corners, as she offers him the bag. "Go on. Take a few."

He smiles back, groping out a handful of seeds and so they sit there, side by side, feeding the birds. Before he can stop himself Ben says, "Do you believe in magic?"

She glances over at him, looking more amused than surprised. "You don't live around here, do you?" she asks. He shakes his head. "Well," she says as she slowly gets to her feet, shaking the last of the seeds out of the now empty paper bag, "stay for a while and you'll see there's no reason to ask the people of New York that question."

"What do you mean?" Ben asks confused.

“You’ll see,” she says and winks at him. Ben watches her go, feeling strangely alone all of a sudden. He checks his watch and sees it’s still only half past ten. He’s got an hour and a half to kill before he’s due back at Jensen’s. With renewed determination he gets up and dumps his now empty coffee cup in the nearest trash can. Looking under the surface is after all what he does.



“I’m sorry about yesterday,” Jensen says as soon as Ben steps out of the elevator. He’s been waiting at the door, practicing his apology, but it still comes out rushed and awkward so he takes a deep breath and adds, “I shouldn’t have done that. It was completely out of line.”

But Ben just shakes his head and says, “It’s all right. I get it. You needed me to see.” He smiles, and Jensen can smell a whiff of wet leaves and sadness. “Some things you can’t say with words.”

Jensen swallows. “No, you can’t.” He looks over his shoulder, making sure no one is listening then lowers his voice. “I’m still sorry. I wasn’t thinking of anyone but myself.” He smiles wryly. “I’m trying to be better at that. Remembering other people.” Ben just looks at him confused. “I mean I forget sometimes,” Jensen continues uncertain, “that other people have...”

“For fuck’s sake, Jenny, stop flirting and get him in here,” Chris calls from inside the apartment, startling them both. Jensen rolls his eyes even if he’s grateful for the interruption. He has a feeling he was heading into rambling territory.

“Just having a quickie in the elevator,” he yells back, laughing when Jared shouts, “Don’t forget, safety first!” He turns to Ben and is met with a look of confusion and a touch of discomfort. “Sorry. They’re idiots. Come on in.”

“They seem in a good mood,” Ben comments in a careful voice as he takes off his coat. “You too. You look better.”

Jensen shrugs. “We had a good night’s sleep,” he says, smiling at the memory of waking up with Chris snoring in his ear and Jared flailing and falling over the edge of the bed when Jensen rolled and accidentally bumped into him. The bed really isn’t made for three grown men, especially not when one of them is as big as Jared. “Jared told me you were pretty messed up when you left last night,” he says, unable to keep the guilt out of his voice. “You feel better?”

Ben gives him a small smile but he looks a little awkward. There’s something there that Jensen can’t put his finger on. Like crumbs left on an empty plate in a kitchen smelling of

stolen cookies. "I had a good walk," he says, picking up his briefcase. "Central Park."

"Yeah?" Jensen says, smiling brightly. Ben blinks, startled, and Jensen quickly turns the smile down a notch. "Sorry. I just love the park. My second favorite place in New York."

Ben smiles hesitantly back. He looks rather dazed. "What is your first?" he asks as he follows Jensen into the kitchen.

Jensen glances back at him. "Wherever Jared is," he says surprised, wondering how that is even a question.

"Oh." Ben looks a little awkward. "How about before he found you?"

"Uhm... Inside my head, I guess." Jensen nods thoughtfully to himself. "Not all the time but... yeah. Even if he wasn't real he was still there, you know." He turns around to find Chris and Jared watching them, looking amused. "What?"

"Nothing," Jared says, laughing a little. "Just you, being you."

"Oh shut up." He blushes, quickly going over the conversation with Ben in his head to try and figure out what weird thing he might have said this time. There's nothing he can think of. "Did you eat?" he asks Ben to change the subject. "We just finished but if you're hungry..."

"I had something earlier," Ben says. "But I'd love some coffee."

"Black, two sugars," Jensen quietly reminds himself as he goes to fetch mugs. When he turns around he catches Ben looking thoughtfully at the cabinet he just closed. "You wondering about the safety locks?" he asks and Ben blinks up at him, looking embarrassed at being caught staring. "I send stuff flying sometimes so we can't really have anything lying around. Could knock someone out without meaning to."

Chris snorts. "Yeah, except when you totally mean to. Like this morning."

"It was a dishrag!" Jensen protests. "Not like it hurt you, princess."

Chris grimaces. "It was a wet dishrag and dirty and stinking of sour milk, thank you very much."

"Well, you were being a little bitch," Jensen shoots back, grinning when Chris flips him the finger. "Anyway," he continues, turning to Ben, "that's why. Not because I'm an obsessive neat freak, like I know you were thinking," he adds wryly.

Ben has the decency to look a little guilty but Jared just snorts. Jensen narrows his eyes at him. "Shut up, it's not an obsession. It's... prevention. Safety precautions."

“With a side order of OCD,” Jared persists but he’s smiling. “Jen, admit it, you are a neat freak. Gotta take that first step to recovery.”

“See what I have to put up with?” Jensen tells Ben with an air of annoyance. “No respect whatsoever.” Ben smiles but it seems a little off, like he hadn’t really been paying attention. Jensen shoots Jared a glance but he just shrugs, not sure what to make of it either.

They take their mugs into the living room and settle down. Jared and Jensen on the couch, Chris and Ben each picking a chair opposite. Jensen is starting to get nervous and he knows Jared can feel it because he shifts closer and puts his arm over Jensen’s shoulders, heavy and soothing. Ben is quiet, seeming deep in thought, but he keeps glancing up at Jensen with a speculating look in his eyes that does nothing to ease Jensen’s nerves. The silence drags on, everyone seeming to wait for Jensen to speak up but he has no idea how to start. Even if he wants to know he also doesn’t. Not at all. Not if it’s bad. Not if it’s worse than he’s been imagining.

“Did you know there’s a group of people that get together about once a week, discussing your magic?” Ben suddenly asks, startling all of them.

Jensen stares at him. “Uh, what?” he says. “What are you talking about?”

Ben nods, watching him intently. “Not *your* magic specifically since they don’t know about you, but yes. It’s a small group, maybe ten, fifteen of them. They have this idea that the park is a central spot for magical influence. It would explain all the floral phenomena that has happened there the last decade. They’re still debating the possibility of meteorological influence. Seems many think that goes beyond what magic should be capable of. Don’t worry, I didn’t tell them they were wrong.”

Jensen blinks. His heart is beating way too fast in his chest. “Fuck,” he whispers. “Jared?”

Jared jerks out of his stupor, arm tightening around Jensen’s shoulder. “It’s okay. Don’t worry. Are you sure?” he asks Ben. “That they don’t know who it is, I mean.”

Ben nods, his eyes on Jensen. He looks more intrigued than worried. “Yes, I’m sure. The few who think it’s a person and not just the park itself seem to think it’s a witch. As in a woman. Because of all the flowers,” he adds when they all just stare at him.

Jensen frowns. “What’s wrong with flowers?” he asks confused. “I like flowers. Men don’t like flowers?”

“Well,” Chris says, clearing his throat, “there’s a reason why boys aren’t named Daisy.” He shrugs when Jensen just stares at him. “I’m just sayin’, girls get the flower names, not us.”

“Huh.” He’s never thought of that. It’s not so much that he cares, more that he doesn’t quite understand it. What’s more magical than nature in all its glory? “Well, so what?” he says firmly. “I like flowers. They’re beautiful and they smell nice. Jared likes my flowers. And I know you like looking at them even if they make you sneeze,” he tells Chris pointedly then turns to Ben. “You don’t like flowers?”

Ben smiles a little, clearly enjoying Jensen’s indignant rant. “I’ve never thought much about it but sure, I like them.” His eyes turn serious. “There was a garden at the home. You didn’t like it. Didn’t like going out there. Why?”

Jensen shrugs. “It had no colors, no smell. Everything looked and felt like it was made out of papier-mâché. At least when I was inside the house I could pretend the walls were just painted grey.”

Ben nods, his gaze dropping as if he’s remembering what Jensen showed him yesterday. “So...” he says after a moment of silence, “you’ve been having nightmares. Jared told me,” he elaborates when Jensen looks at him surprised.

Jensen goes still. “You were talking about me?” he asks Jared in a low voice.

“No secrets, I promise.” Jared sighs when Jensen holds his gaze, silent. “I just told him some things about how we met, stuff like that. He was pretty freaked after your grand show, Jen. I couldn’t let him just walk out of here without explaining some things. And yeah, I told him we needed some answers because you’ve been having nightmares.”

“Oh.” That sounds reasonable enough even if he doesn’t really like the idea of being talked about when he’s not present. “Okay.” He looks over at Chris who’s staring down into his coffee mug. He looks nervous. Apprehensive even. “Chris, if you want to leave...”

Chris glances up at him, startled. “What? No. You want me to leave?” he asks, sounding unsure.

“No.” Jensen shakes his head. “Stay. Please.”

Chris shrugs, his face going slightly pink. “Said I’d see this through, didn’t I?” he mutters.

“Thank you.” Jensen takes a deep breath then turns to Ben. “I’ve always had nightmares, even before I came to you. But after I got out... they changed. Became more memory based. Just reliving those two years, over and over again. Not that I remember much but my imagination does a pretty good job of filling in the blanks. And lately it’s been focusing more and more on... certain parts of it.”

Jared shifts uneasily beside him and Jensen lays a hand on his knee, squeezing it lightly. ‘Stop it. Not your fault,’ he thinks and Jared tightens his grip on Jensen’s shoulder in return.

‘Yes, it is,’ he’s thinking and Jensen sighs, letting it go for now.

“I shared a room with someone,” he continues, his voice slightly unsteady. “A boy called Mason. I need to know what happened with him.”

Ben pulls back. “I can’t really discuss other patients...” he starts but Jensen shakes his head, cutting him off.

“Not that,” he says quickly before he loses his nerve again. “I need to know what happened to me. With him.”

“Oh.” Ben hesitates. “You think something happened between the two of you?”

“Don’t think. I know.” Jensen licks his lips. His resolve is crumbling but he keeps on. It’s too late to turn back now. “Things did happen, I know that. I just don’t remember... I need to know how long and... and to what extent. If we...” He stops. There’s a bad taste in his mouth. Like bitter onions and sour sweat and something else he’d rather not think about.

There’s silence for a while and then Ben says gently, “Okay, what do you remember?”

Jensen takes a deep breath. “He cried. I mean, he was always crying but that time... He kept begging me, saying please and that he needed to know if that was really what he was. I assume he meant being gay. And I just... I let him. Partly because I’d been wondering the same thing but mostly because...” He laughs a little shakily. “It sounds so damn stupid but God, I just wanted him to stop crying! And would you believe it, he still cried. Through the whole thing.” He pauses, swallowing. “He blew me and then he asked if he could...” He stops, fingers drumming his thighs, fast and so hard it hurts. The piano starts playing and he breathes in the music, letting it flow into him. “I think,” he whispers, “I think maybe I said no and he did it anyway. But I don’t know. I don’t remember. I can’t *remember*.”

“Did what exactly?” Ben asks. His voice sounds very far away. Jensen opens his eyes. The room is dark and damp, with puddles at his feet and the smell of the ocean in the air. He fumbles for Jared’s hand but his fingers sink into wet sand, so black and cold he feels that if he moves it might suck him down.

“Fucked me,” he murmurs. His voice is strange, distant, like he’s talking about someone else. Something else. He closes his eyes again. Jared’s hand comes up to cradle his head, pulling it closer until it’s resting against Jared’s broad chest. He hears Jared’s voice, deep like a drum’s rumble that echoes through his ribcage. He sounds angry but he smells scared and Jensen doesn’t want to be here anymore. He wants to go away and take Jared with him. This was such a fucking stupid idea.

He can hear Ben murmuring something and then the rustle of paper. Slowly he opens his eyes. The room is back to normal, bright and familiar. Ben is flipping through his files, brow

furrowed. Chris is sitting rigid in the chair beside him, jaw tight and fingers clutched around his coffee mug. Jensen can feel the tension in the air, so charged he's afraid to breathe. Finally Ben looks up at Jensen, eyes calm but serious.

"First off, Jensen," he says gently, "you need to understand that Mason committing suicide had nothing to do with whatever happened between the two of you. He'd been unstable for many years, attempting suicide four times while in our care and twice before that. And even if we'd done our best to keep an eye on him the truth is that if a person is determined to end their life it's only a matter of time before they succeed. I just want you to know that."

Jensen keeps quiet. Both Jared and Chris have told him the same thing many times. It might be true but it still doesn't change anything.

"Now, regarding what happened..." Ben pauses. "I don't know what you remember from that time, and from what you're telling me I gather it's not much. But you were friends of sorts, the two of you. Not close, you couldn't form that kind of emotional attachment then, but you liked each other well enough. He used to follow you around, never straying far from where you were. He used to call you his best friend. You, however, repeatedly called him Jared."

Jensen winces. He doesn't remember doing that but if it's true it sounds so cruel. "Why? Why would I do that?"

Ben gives him a sad smile. "Sometimes it was accidentally, just a slip of the tongue, but there were times when you seemed to think it was really him." He glances over at Jared. "I see now that there is a resemblance but not enough to account for the mix-up." He tilts his head, studying Jensen thoughtfully. "I think maybe you missed Jared so much that you altered Mason in your mind until you saw what you wanted to see."

Jensen nods. It makes sense. "Jared was the only thing I didn't lose," he says. "He was always with me, in my head. Without my music and everything else gone... He was the only thing keeping me from going insane." Ben looks away, looking slightly flustered and Jensen mumbles, "Sorry. Just trying to explain. Didn't mean to..." He trails off, not sure what he meant.

"Don't apologize," Ben says in a low voice. "You have nothing to apologize for."

There's silence for a long awkward moment and then Ben clears his throat. "Anyway, yes. You seemed to connect in some way and seeing as you were both alone and in no contact with your families we thought the friendship might do you good. And I guess... I guess we let our guard down." He pauses, dropping his gaze for a moment before meeting Jensen's eyes again. "You are a very handsome young man, Jensen, as I'm sure you know. Extraordinarily so. I think I can safely say we were all a little enthralled. Especially Mason."

Jensen can feel his face heating. People keep telling him that but he can't see what they see.

He just sees himself and it's not a person other people should want. There are too many shadows in his eyes, too many demons on his back. Looking at himself and Jared side by side in the mirror there is no doubt in his mind who is the beautiful one.

"I didn't know," he says but maybe he did. Maybe that's just one more thing he's forgotten. "Did I?"

Ben shakes his head. "No, I don't think you did. You didn't really pay much attention to other people. Or anything really. And the only man you were interested in was Jared, your imaginary friend or so we thought. Except to you he was very real." He pauses then adds, "A little too real sometimes."

Jensen waits for him to continue but Ben stays silent, just watching him intently, and that's when he gets it. Oh. Oh! Oh God. He covers his mouth with his hand, his breathing quickening into shallow intakes of air that make his head spin "Oh Jesus."

"What?" Jared asks in alarm. "What's going on?"

"It was me," Jensen whispers. "I thought he was you. I thought..." He closes his eyes, fighting to keep his panic back. "Did I hurt him?"

"No," Ben says quickly. "Jensen, listen to me. Calm down. You didn't do anything wrong. Not like that. Okay? Are you listening?"

"Then what did I do?" he asks, voice rising. He's shaking now, feeling sick to his stomach and so dizzy he wishes he could lie down. Of all the things... He never once considered that he might be the one to blame. "Tell me what I did!"

"You did nothing wrong, Jensen," Ben says firmly. "You listened to him, talked to him, sat close to him. Just small things that wouldn't have mattered if he hadn't been so besotted by you. Because all you saw when you looked at him was Jared. And he didn't realize that until it was too late and he was already in love with you."

"What happened?" Jared asks quietly, pulling Jensen closer. "Tell us what happened."

"We don't really know. Not the details. After he died we found written notes hidden under his mattress. Most of them were about Jensen." Ben looks down at the files in front of him. "He mentions getting into your bed a few times. 'I touched him and he let me,' he writes. We don't really know what he meant, how much touching went on. Or what it means that you let him; if you participated or gave him your permission or simply didn't fight back." Ben pauses to look up at Jensen. "Do you remember?"

Jensen shakes his head. His heart has calmed down a little but he still feels sick. "But I keep having these dreams where he... He's in my bed, talking and touching me, and I can't... I

can't speak, my voice won't work. So instead I go away. In my head," he elaborates, voice shaking. "That's what I did... what I do. Just go away when I can't handle things. I don't really know how to handle things." He pinches his arm hard. "Like now. I really, really want to go now." He squeezes his eyes shut, breathing in and out as he tries to hold on to his mind.

"Chris, can you...?" he hears Jared say, followed by the scrape of Chris's chair. There's a moment's silence and then soft music starts playing. Chopin, sweet and so beautiful it fills his chest with fresh air and gently blows away the clouds from his mind.

"Better?" Jared asks him in a low voice and he nods, still breathing heavily through his nose. "Take all the time you need."

He doesn't know how long he makes them wait but when he finally manages to open his eyes everyone is watching him. Chris looks like he doesn't know what to do with his hands, they keep curling into fists in his laps then uncurling again, fingernails scratching the rough denim of his jeans. Ben has straightened up in his chair, pen put aside by the files still scattered on the low table in front of him. He looks more intrigued than worried though and Jensen guesses that's how you handle awkward situations when you're a shrink, you sit back and analyze them. Jared still has his arm around Jensen's shoulders, fingers digging into the thick muscle of his bicep. He's quiet and would appear calm if it wasn't for the smell of wet gravel in his hair.

"I'm okay," Jensen tells him then looks back at Ben, trying for a smile. "Sorry. Go on."

But Ben just continues watching him. "You think this is what you did?" he finally asks. "Went away?"

Jensen nods then clears his throat. "I don't remember him doing more those times than just touch me. Usually my stomach or my hip," he says. "You know, close but not... not *there*. I think he kissed my neck. But if it was more than that I wasn't there while it was going on." He swallows. "He didn't say? Nothing?"

"No, nothing more than what I already told you. I'm sorry."

Jensen shakes his head. He hates not knowing but it would be worse, knowing and not remembering. At least this way he can tell himself the reason he doesn't remember is that there is nothing *to* remember. That what happens in his dreams is just that, dreams, no more real than all the other weird things he dreams about. "What about... later?"

"That's where it gets complicated," Ben admits. "The night he died he wrote, 'I tasted sin'. If you remember his mouth on you I assume that's what he meant." Ben pauses. "You were asleep when we found him. You didn't even stir in all the commotion that followed but that was nothing unusual. Sometimes you slept for days. But then we found his notes and after reading them we got worried. So we... checked on you."

Jensen closes his eyes. He doesn't want to hear this.

"The string on your pants was loose and your t-shirt had been pushed up. There was... semen on your stomach and thighs but without a DNA we couldn't tell if it was his or your own."

"Must have been his because I came in his mouth," Jensen murmurs into the dark behind his eyelids. "I've no idea how because I couldn't really feel what he was doing. Just heat. His mouth was really hot. But I did come. That I remember. And him asking me if he could... have me. But I can't remember my answer. I can't *remember*. But he was touching me *there* with his fingers... So I must have said yes."

"Jensen," Ben says gently, "you said no."

He opens his eyes slowly, blinking at Ben in confusion. "What?"

"You said no," Ben repeats, smiling a little. "You stopped him, told him no and so he backed off. Nothing more happened."

"Nothing?" Jensen whispers. "He didn't...? You sure?"

"Yes, I'm absolutely sure. We found the last note he'd written on the floor where it had fallen from his hand. It clearly stated that he wasn't able to go through with it. And Jensen, we checked you. There was no tearing. He stopped before it got that far. I promise."

"Oh thank God," Jared cuts in, his voice hoarse. He pulls Jensen tight, burying his face in Jensen's hair. "Jesus, Jen." Across the table Chris stands abruptly up from his chair and disappears down the hall and into the bathroom, closing the door behind him as if that might fool anyone.

Jensen sits still, blinking slowly. He's told himself for so long that it didn't matter, that it was no big deal. So the fact that it didn't happen shouldn't matter either. Should be just another detail he can file away as a product of his overactive imagination, like the phone call he'd thought he'd received from his mother while Inside or all the memories of Jared visiting him that he always knew weren't real but couldn't let go of none the same. But this, this isn't like that.

"Do you think Hallmark has a card for this?" he says flatly. "*Congratulations! You weren't raped!*" Because you should totally buy me one of... of those." His voice breaks on the last word and before he can stop himself his shoulders start shaking and then he's crying into his fist, eyes squeezed shut and hitches of breath tearing at his throat.

"It's all right," Jared mumbles, his voice thick with emotion. His arms wrap around Jensen and he lets himself be pulled into the embrace, burying his face in Jared's soft sweater. "I've

got you. I've got you, baby."

Jared's never called him that before. It sounds sort of ridiculous, and if Jensen wasn't busy sobbing like an actual baby he'd call Jared on it. Joke or feign insult because he's not a damn girl whatever the current situation might imply. But as it is he just allows Jared to murmur the words into his ears while long fingers cradle the back of his head and a large hand strokes his back.

When he finally pulls back, discreetly wiping his face with his sleeve, Ben is politely pretending to be immersed in his files and Chris is back in his chair, watching him. He looks relieved but he smells angry and it makes Jensen uneasy. He tries for a smile but if anything that only makes Chris look angrier.

"So let me get this straight," Chris says, turning to Ben. "You knew all this, about him being molested in his own goddamn bed and you never thought of talking to him about it? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Ben looks a little startled. "It wasn't like that," he says wary. "We weren't trying to cover anything up, I promise. It was reported, it's in his files..."

"I don't care about your fucking files. Why didn't you tell *him*? He had a right to know!"

Jensen sighs. He gets where Chris's anger is coming from but the truth is he doesn't really care. It's over. There's nothing to be said and done now that would change the way he's been feeling the last ten years.

Ben rubs one hand tiredly over his face. "We did talk to you about it," he tells Jensen. "Eventually. You were asleep for almost twenty four hours and when you woke up you were confused about where you were and why. Which was nothing new, that happened a lot. But it made it more difficult to get you to focus on our questions. You didn't seem to remember anything and the more we asked the more upset you got. In the end we decided to let it go and rather follow up on it later if you started to show any signs of remembering. You never did."

Chris still looks furious but Jensen shakes his head, asking him to let it go. What does it matter now? He just wants to put it behind him. Behind *them*. Finally. He closes his eyes. He feels lightheaded with relief and at the same time so heavy, like all energy has been drained out of him as far as to the marrow of his bones. He wants to sleep, sleep without dreams of a boy he can't really remember and a crime that never was. Peace at last.

Breathing in deeply he opens his eyes and looks at Jared. "I think I'm gonna go lay down for a little while. If that's all right."

Jared nods, pulling him in for a kiss. "Of course. Let me know if you need anything."

“I will.” He turns to Ben. “Don’t mind Chris, he’s just being an overprotective asshole like always.” He sends Chris a small smile and gets a grumpy scowl in return. “Thank you,” he then tells a surprised Ben, offering his hand. “And don’t take this the wrong way but I hope I never see you again.”

Ben takes his hand and shakes it. For a moment it looks like he wants to say something but then he smiles sadly and nods, still hanging on to Jensen’s hand. “Thank you for talking to me. And for showing me... well, you. I’ve spent so many years trying to figure you out but I never in a million years would have even thought of...” He stops, looking awkward, then adds in a low voice, “You’re quite a remarkable man, Jensen. And I’m really, really sorry for what we did to you.”

Jensen shakes his head, squeezing Ben’s hand a little before letting it go. “Don’t be. It wasn’t your fault, you didn’t know. If I can forgive my mother, who *did* know, it would be rather stupid to keep on blaming you.”

Ben looks like he wants to say something, probably ask about his mother, but in the end he just nods. “Thank you.”

Jensen gives him a small smile and then turns away. As he walks to his bedroom he hears Jared and Ben talking in low murmurs with Chris’s grumbling voice occasionally interrupting. Minna slinks out from the piano room and follows him to the bedroom, jumping up and curling into a ball on Jared’s side of the bed. Jensen laughs, scratching her behind the ear before taking off his jeans and crawling under the covers. He’s asleep within minutes.

Jared looks down at the thick folder in his hands then puts it down on the table in front of them. “You sure?” he asks and Ben nods.

“Files get lost. Not often but it happens. No one will question it.” He pauses. “You should find answers to most of your questions there. If something is unclear or... Well, you have my number.”

Jared nods and stands up. He waits while Chris reluctantly shakes the man’s hand before wiping his palm on his thigh like he can’t help feeling disgusted, still. Jared rolls his eyes but it’s not his problem really so he just gives Ben a small apologetic smile and follows him to the door.

“So what really happened to Mason?” he asks quietly just when Ben is about to leave. “I was watching you earlier, when you said he’d backed off as soon as Jensen told him no. You were lying. He didn’t, did he? What happened?”

Ben stands silent for a while but then he looks up, eyes wary. “He had a faint silver mark on

his shoulder, shaped like a hand. It faded away before the coroner arrived but I could have sworn it looked like someone grabbed him from behind, forcefully pulling him away. I didn't tell anyone because it seemed absurd and once it was gone I wasn't even sure if it had been real or if I just imagined it."

Jared breathes out. "So it is true. He really can't be hurt, not even when he's drugged stupid. Thank God!" He gives Ben a wry smile. "Don't get me wrong, I'm really sorry for the boy dying. But I can't be sorry about Jensen being protected. If he wasn't it would be too easy for bad people to hurt him. He zones out a lot. And not always in the most secure places."

Ben hesitates but then he nods. "I can't say I disagree with you. I just wish it hadn't happened. The boy was disturbed but he wasn't evil. I blame myself more than I could ever blame him. Or Jensen." He turns away but Jared catches him by the arm, stopping him.

"So you think Jensen did it?" he asks in a low voice. "That he made the boy kill himself?"

Ben shakes his head. "No," he says firmly. "It was his own decision. I'm sure of that."

Jared searches Ben's eyes for any signs that he might be lying but there's nothing. "What more did Mason's last note say?" he asks.

Ben frowns as if he's trying to remember and then he quietly recites, "'Forgive me Father for my trespassing. I lay my hands on Your angel, seeking to sin, and You lay Your hand upon me, saving my soul. His beauty was my downfall, Your strength my salvation. I have been purified.'"

Jared stares at him. "Seriously?"

Ben shrugs. "Most of his notes were written like scripture. Vague and at times very hard to decipher. I assumed Jensen had pushed him away but maybe something... well, magical happened that changed Mason's mind. Whatever it was it kept him from giving in to what he'd been battling with his whole life, the great sin of homosexuality. His opinion, not mine," he hastens to add when Jared frowns at him. "He was very religious."

"I thought the Bible frowned upon suicide," Jared says stiffly.

Ben smiles a little sadly. "From what I could read out of his notes I don't think he saw it as suicide. I think to him it was more of a sacrifice, offering his sinful body to God in hopes He might purify his soul."

Jared nods, lips thin. "I'm sorry, I guess I'm being prejudiced. I gave up on religion a long time ago."

"Because of Jensen?" Ben asks, sounding genuinely curious.

Jared shakes his head. "Not really, I'd started doubting before I met him, but when I found out what he was it pretty much sealed the deal." He bites his lip, thoughtful. "Funny thing is I think Jensen still believes. Or maybe more that he wants to believe that there is a reason behind him being here beyond just being a freak of nature. That he's as much God's creation as the rest of us."

“You don’t think he is?”

Jared shrugs. “I don’t know or even particularly care why we’re here, but I think he was born for a reason. Like maybe he was supposed to be a gift to us. From Nature herself. And we screwed it up.”

“Well,” Ben says, picking up his briefcase as he gives Jared a small smile, “if that’s true I think you’re doing a pretty damn good job of fixing what we messed up. When he’s with you he looks happy. Like he’s finally where he’s supposed to be. So maybe you were born for each other.”

Jared doesn’t answer because he doesn’t know what to say. It’s what he wants to believe and most times he does but then there are the moments when he feels like he’s not enough. That Jensen should have more than just a nice apartment and a good job and someone who loves him. That he was destined for more and the only reason he ended up with Jared is because Jared was his first friend. If things had been different, if his parents had been more understanding, if Jensen had stayed in school, if he hadn’t been forced to hide what he was but instead had been able to show the world there was something more out there... He could have had the whole world at his feet. Instead he has... Jared.

Jared waits until the elevator door closes on a still smiling Ben before turning around and heading back into the apartment. He picks up the thick folder from the sofa table, weighing it thoughtfully in his hand before gripping it tight and heading for the kitchen. Chris is there,, putting away their now clean glasses. “He gone?” he mutters as he hears Jared enter, back still turned as he wipes the counter.

“Yeah.” Jared sits down, watching Chris putter around in the kitchen, making sure everything is clean and in its place. “You keep your own kitchen as spotless as this one?” he asks curious.

Chris throws him a glance. “Only if I know Jensen’s coming over,” he says. “Why?”

“Nothing.” Jared purses his lips. “Do you think he’s happy enough?”

Chris turns slowly around, eyeing him. “Do you mean in general or with you?”

“Both, I guess. I can’t help wondering if this is enough for him. It somehow feels like he should want more because... well, he *is* more.”

Chris just shakes his head at him. “He wants you. It’s the only thing he’s ever wanted. Someone to love him and that someone to be you. He got both. If you think he’s not happy you’re a goddamn idiot.”

Jared raises his eyebrows, smiling a little. “Thanks. I guess.”

“You’re welcome.” Chris takes a last quick look over the kitchen before squaring his shoulders. “I’ll be going then. Might still get some use of the rest of the weekend.” He pauses in the doorway, eyeing the thick folder where it lies innocently on the table. “Those files, you gonna read them?”

Jared shrugs. "If Jensen wants me to. You want to read them?"

Chris shakes his head. "I'd rather I didn't know half of what I *do* know. Don't feel the need to add to it. But..." He clears his throat. "If there's something I *should* know you'll tell me, okay?"

"If it's okay with Jensen," Jared says carefully.

Chris huffs. "It better be," he mutters. "Just 'cos I don't live here anymore don't mean he can keep secrets from me. If he does I'll kick his ass. You can tell him that."

Jared grins. "I will."

He waits until he hears the front door close before standing up. His fingers stray over the thick folder on the table before passing it with a grimace. As much as he wants to understand what Jensen went through it's not a discovery he's looking forward to. The small glimpses he got yesterday as Jensen flipped through the first pages were enough to make him dread reading the rest.

Jared checks his watch. It's only two o'clock in the afternoon but Jensen looked emotionally drained after the whole ordeal. Jared figures he'll give him another hour before waking him up. It's a nice enough day, they could go for a walk, pick up Harley from Steve, then have some coffee and maybe visit the park. Make a few believers happy with a flower show. Jared smiles at the thought. It's going to be a good day, he can feel it.



They're walking through an endless field of red poppies, hands clasped, the sun shining warm and bright down on them. "Florian, that's a boy's name," he's saying.

"Yes, but only if you have cruel parents," Jared answers with a smile.

"What's wrong with flowers?" Jensen continues, ignoring him. "I don't get it." Jared laughs and Jensen shoots him a frown. "No seriously, how can someone not like flowers?" he says, spreading his arms to indicate the amazing beauty around them. "It's like saying you don't like water or sun or nature. Then how are you supposed to live?"

"Jen, you're ranting again," Jared tells him, laughter in his voice.

"Well, it's stupid," Jensen grumbles.

"Aww, baby, let it go," Jared laughs, pulling him in and kissing the top of his head.

"Flowers are very pretty. And very, very manly."

Jensen punches him in the arm then looks up at him with a frown. "Ok, what's with the baby talk?" he asks with a raise of his eyebrow. "You've never called me that before."

"I haven't?" Jared asks back, sounding genuinely surprised. "Huh. I guess maybe I've been thinking about it lately."

"Mushy endearments?" Jensen scoffs. "You want me to start calling you pumpkin?"

“No.” Jared snorts then glances at Jensen, looking slightly uncertain. “No, I mean babies. You know, kids. As in us maybe having some. One day. You know. Maybe.” He shrugs, face flushed.

Jensen stops. The world seems to hold its breath. “Oh,” he says uncertain. “I didn’t know you wanted that.”

“You mean, you didn’t know you wanted that,” a familiar voice says.

Jensen goes still. Then he turns and faces not Jared but himself, green eyes studying him, all thoughtful and with a slight hint of pity. Jensen swallows. “No,” he says quietly. “I didn’t know I wanted that. And I really wish you hadn’t told me.”

His other self shrugs. “Not like it’s my choice. It’s your head, remember?”

Jensen opens his mouth to point out it’s actually their head when...

“Jensen? Jensen. Hey.” Jared smiles down at him, eyes warm and happy. “Thought I’d wake you up before you dream the day away.”

Jensen blinks. He can feel his face heating. “You saw my dream?” he asks carefully.

“No. I knocked first so...” Jared palms his face, rubbing a thumb gently over his cheek.

“Anything you want to talk about?”

Jensen looks at him, at the easy smile, at the slight flush in his cheeks, at the happiness in his eyes. He takes a deep breath and smiles back. “Nah,” he says. “Nothing important. Just saw the foal again.”

Jared’s face lights up. “You did?” He shakes his head in wonderment. “God, that’s something I never expected to see. A baby unicorn, how amazing is that?” He leans over and kisses Jensen on the nose before smiling down at him. “Now come on, let’s go to the Park and freak out that cult of yours. I’m thinking tulips, everywhere!”

He looks so mischievous Jensen can’t help laughing and he lets Jared easily pull him to his feet. “You know it’s October, right?” he says as he pulls on his jeans. “Tulips are mostly a spring flower.”

Jared sighs dramatically. “Pumpkins then. Ooh, how about this? We turn every single flower in the park orange! And the trees. And the grass. And...”

By the time they make it out the door Jensen is laughing so loud every single person in New York City is smiling happily without having the faintest clue why.

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