

## Captive Crown

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/21173510) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/21173510>.

Rating:	<a href="#">General Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">Gen</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">King's Quest (Video Games)</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Graham (King's Quest)</a> , <a href="#">The Hobblepots</a> , <a href="#">Wente Fey</a> , <a href="#">Bramble Fey</a> , <a href="#">Amaya Blackstone</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">also all the royal guards</a> , <a href="#">Canon Compliant</a> , <a href="#">Kidnapping</a> , <a href="#">Bruises</a> , <a href="#">Starvation</a> , <a href="#">Sickfic</a> , <a href="#">Bathing/Washing</a> , <a href="#">Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Nightmares</a> , <a href="#">melodramatic musings galore</a> , <a href="#">it's probably not as gloomy as the tags make it sound</a> , <a href="#">probably decently angsty but hopefully not in a relentless way</a> , <a href="#">it's my favorite ch2 headcanons in story format</a>
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2019-10-25 Completed: 2019-12-02 Words: 16,494 Chapters: 7/7

# Captive Crown

by [GerbilofTriumph](#)

## Summary

Someone wanted the newly crowned King of Daventry and all his friends dead. Someone got close, once.

~\*~\*~

Despite being wracked with uncertainties, Graham struggles to pull himself and his friends out of goblin captivity--but when all is said and done and he collapses under the strain, his friends refuse to let him face his troubles alone.

# To Steal

## Chapter Notes

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

Later, when he was retelling the story and he got to the bit where *something* on the rooftops scrabbled and slid, people would always ask, “Why didn’t you just leave when you heard that noise?”

He’d always reply, “Why would I? It was just the sound of rain on roof tiles. A squirrel trying to get somewhere safe and dry. Nothing to do with me.”

---

And anyway, looking up into the skies just got rainwater in his face, blinding him. Graham hunched his shoulders and pressed on into the town, steering for the baker’s shop almost without thinking. His jaw was still set with frustration, but it had settled into frustration with himself rather than with his royal guards. They were doing their best. He was (mostly) sure of that. But he wasn’t King Edward, and they didn’t seem to know what to do with King Graham. It didn’t matter what Olfie said: Graham was wearing the wrong hat. He was on the wrong adventure. But without ideas for how to fix it, it was hard to keep his anger sharp.

Instead, he was starting to feel pathetic. He probably looked it, too—all bedraggled and soggy. Olfie had protected him from the worst of the weather as they walked together, but this was a proper late summer Daventry monsoon. The lower lavender fields might even flood if this kept up.

*And what am I supposed to do if that happens? Probably there’s a list of rules somewhere for Ruined Lavender Intake. I should have it memorized already.*

He stood under Wente’s awning, wringing rain out of his cloak hem. No one answered his first knock. Nor his second. Or third. Disappointment dripped, like the water on the ends of his soppy curls. He’d expected—*hoped*—Wente would let him in and wrap him in a big, soul-squeezing, floury hug that might taste just a little bit like sugar and berries. Like safety. Graham shifted, listening impatiently for some sound from within but only hearing the steady, rattling downpour of rain on rooftops and down drains. It was a lonely sort of sound, hollow.

Whatever anger he’d been carrying was now drowned. He stumbled away, bleary and miserable. Maybe he could go to someone else? But the other homes looked just as dark and unwelcoming. Might as well go back to the castle. Deal with the nonsense he’d left behind.

Glass crunched beneath his boot. He glanced back toward the window of Wente’s shop. Now that he was bothering to pay attention, from this angle, he could see shattered glass and twisted wood. It looked like candies and pies had been thrown all over, oozing sweet fillings into the floorboards.

Before he could even begin to process that, he heard a shrill flute from...above? He whirled, squinting past the rain.

The shapes were unmistakable. Goblins crowded the rooftops, dropping down around him. Startled, he didn't even have the time to cry out before they pounced. He stumbled back, tripped over something (a goblin crouched behind him, a nasty trick that worked just as well this time as it had not that long ago), and slammed into the cobblestones. The world went black.

---

Rain dripped on his cheek and helped rouse him gradually from insensibility. Muzzily, he realized he was lying on his side in the mud just outside the Daventry town gates, just on the edge of the forest. In the overcast gloom, the trees were blurs. The back of his head *hurt*, and he tried to reach up to it, to feel out what was wrong, but his arms refused to cooperate. For a terrible, confused instant he thought he was paralyzed, and then he noticed an unexpected pressure on his wrists—his hands were tied together behind his back.

His heart started racing, and he could see odd shapes under the trees, in the bushes, on the path, near him, and he sensed he was surrounded, and he felt stony hands on his shoulders push him into a sitting position, and he yelped into full wakefulness. Around him, the shapes, goblins, stepped back, watching.

“Wha—what is this? What’s going on?” Graham croaked, his voice thick. Shivery panic skated down his spine, and he shook his head, trying to focus. He only managed to make the ache worse. He struggled, but the ropes against his wrists held firm. “What do you *want*? You can’t do this to me! I—I’m the king!” (Or was that the wrong thing to say? Maybe he shouldn’t admit to it? The crown surely gave it away, though.)

They stared at him impassively, crouched a few feet away on all sides. At least, he *thought* they were staring impassively. Masks of stone hid every face. Mist curled around them, blurring their edges.

“I demand you release me! Untie this! *Now!*”

The pack of goblins crept closer, silent in the downpour. He swallowed his dread and stiffened as best he could, trying to look regal while covered in mud and soaking wet. “I assume you’re doing as I asked.”

From behind, one of them dropped a loop of rope around his chest, pinning his upper arms to his sides and drawing the loop tight.

“Hey! *No!* S-stop! I’m the *king!*” He fought, kicking out and trying uselessly to pull away. He couldn’t throw them off, couldn’t get the leverage he needed by himself, half-concussed and dripping and afraid. Then, with triumphant realization: “I’m not alone!” He drew in a deep breath, fighting against the restriction across his chest, and bellowed, “*Olfie! Help me!*” He forced a grin. “Have you ever tried to fight a bridge troll?”

In the distance, a low rumble started, and as one, every goblin froze. The rope around his chest slackened and slipped past his elbows as the cluster of goblins backed away uneasily.

Graham sat gloating, waiting for the huge hand to sweep down and pluck him from this nightmare. Except, the hand didn't come. Nothing else seemed to happen. The goblins looked toward the town, toward the forest behind them, and at each other, and he could see their tension evaporating. With a sick twist in his stomach, Graham realized the first sound was nothing more than a coincidence. Could have been anything. Some low thunder perfectly timed, or water dislodging a boulder in the forest, or some animal in the underbrush. Not Olfie.

*I hadn't asked him to stay. The rain, he can't hear me over the rain. He could have gone anywhere. He can't hear me without a horn. Oh, stars.*

"I...I'm sure he'll be along directly," he stammered. "Just a delay. You know. The—the rain. He's coming. I'm protected. Definitely." He paused, glancing at his surroundings—*just outside the town gates, near the workshop*—and cried, "*Help! Amay—ow!*" His plea cut out as the goblin behind him snapped the rope back up and cinched it tight. "Stop! That hurts! Let go!"

*The royal guards!* he thought as hands clutched at his clothes and dragged him forward—but no, he'd been so *angry*, they wouldn't come after him for *hours*. He'd ordered them to stay in the castle, and they'd been too happy to comply, to stay in the warm and the dry rather than trek out into a monsoon with a cranky king, and now he was in *so much trouble*.

"You'll be in trouble!" he warned, pouring as much fury into it as he could. "This is assault against the entire kingdom! They're coming to find me as we speak!"

No one listened. Instead, they flung him up into the air and caught him by arms and legs, holding him above the mud.

"No, wait, *stop!* Put me down!"

They did, sort of: they threw him forward, and he landed on something soft, bouncing. He rolled onto his side and was entirely baffled to discover that they'd tossed him onto a damp mattress, mostly sheltered from the rain by the dark tree canopy.

Hands pulled and tugged and managed to get him sitting, and then they all stood around him for a long, silent, and speculative moment. He had the sense he was being judged, and he had the sense he was found lacking. Their shoulders hunched with what looked like disappointment, and several made dismayed hand motions above their heads.

"What are..."

Graham heard an excited cry from the town, and he twisted in time to see yet another one join the pack, clutching Edward's crown. Graham hadn't even noticed the crown's absence. The goblin launched forward like it was about to win a game, and it slammed the crown down, hard, in its proper place. He yelped, but around him, applause broke out.

"That's enough!" he snapped, crown sitting almost jauntily across his forehead and pressing his wet hair flat against his face, making him look entirely unimpressive. "*Help! Olfie! Amayaaaaahh!*" It turned into a proper scream as a spearhead jammed up beneath his chin,

sharp edge threatening to cut. “Okay, okay,” he whispered, hardly daring to breathe. “I get the point.”

*In so much trouble.*

Two goblins sat down on either side, the one with the spear looking rather menacing. Then again, they all looked menacing, looming over him like this. He shrank beneath gazes and weapons, not at all sure what they were going to do next.

The answer came soon enough. They clustered around, hoisted the mattress on their shoulders, and darted off into the trees. His two guards clutched his arms to stop him slipping off while they moved.

## Chapter End Notes

A million thank yous to [MiladyDeWinter](#) for encouraging me to brush all the dust off this fic and finish it. :3

# To Hide

## Chapter Notes

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

There was a city beneath Daventry.

This wasn't surprising. Graham had heard stories about all kinds of things living in the tunnels beneath his country. Elves and leprechauns and dwarves and giant spiders and more. He'd even met some of them, back when he'd been looking for the kingdom's lost treasures.

Still, the leprechaun city had been positively tiny compared to this city's sprawling chaos. The goblins hurried him along meandering streets overshadowed by drunkenly teetering buildings. Lights sparkled in odd places, lamps and a wild assortment of colored fungi illuminating the cavern darkness like little stars.

It might have been pretty, from a distance, were he not distracted by the ache in his shoulders and wrists and head, and were he not shepherded along by spears, and were it not so gloomy and the company not so grim and...well, all told, it wasn't pretty at all.

They moved from the open caverns into something that felt much smaller and contained. This new area was guarded by thick, heavy doors—which slammed behind them the instant the last goblin was through.

Startled, Graham whirled, but he tripped over the nearest goblin's foot, and he fell hard, unable to throw his hands out to catch his balance. He groaned, trying to sit up and finding it difficult with his hands tied like they were behind him. Over his head, his captors grumbled a brief conversation that he didn't understand, filled with lots of irritated pointing at him, at the room, at the doors. After a minute, they reached for him—he flinched back, alarmed—but they only untied him. He rubbed and rolled his aching shoulders and wrists, curling forward. One of the spear-holders gestured, and hands clamped on his arms and yanked.

"Wait a second," he muttered, swaying to his feet. A sharp twinge in his hip made him gasp, and he pressed a palm to it, leaning into the pain.

Another gesture, this time with spear prodding into his side. Graham raised his hands. "Please." They pointed toward the tunnel on the far end of the room. "I—I understand." He wasn't sure they understood him back, but once he started walking, arms wrapped tight across his chest, they calmed down.

He tried to focus, tried to memorize details that would surely help later. Failed. This was too overwhelming. It was too dark, and it smelled all wrong, and his shoulders and head and now his hip *hurt*, and even after all this he still didn't know what they *wanted*.

Despite himself, Graham could sense that there were additional tunnels branching from their spiraling route, but he couldn't make out much more than gloomy shadows. With his vision less than useful, though, he could hear more. The shuffle of his boots, and his guards' lighter,

padding steps, and someone crying, not too far away. He hesitated—it sounded distressingly familiar—but his captors shoved him deeper into the caves.

Eventually, they ran out of corridor and halted. Most of the guard scurried away, leaving him with a small contingent of goblins. Still too many to attempt escape, especially with those spears tilted just enough to slash him if he dared try. He could hear something growling behind one of the barred doors along the hall, and behind him something was breathing raggedly, like it was sick, maybe dying. He stared into nothing, nausea and frustration hot in the pit of his empty stomach.

Was anyone looking for him yet? Did they realize anything was wrong? Or did they think he was just walking the forests? In the rain? What moron went wandering off in the rain? *Oh, right, me.* What about Olfie? Had he heard Graham scream, or had the rain muffled it?

Rhythmic thumping echoed down the ramp. Like footfalls, but much, much heavier, resounding along the halls. Something big. He itched to have his archery kit, clenching and unclenching his fists like he was holding a bow and not empty air. No one around him seemed to be reacting, though. He could do nothing but wait with growing dread.

In the end, it turned out to be just another goblin in some sort of ridiculous self-propelled cart. Graham blinked. The goblin clutched a book close to its chest. Perhaps it was some sort of scribe? Did goblins have a written language? Shouldn't Graham know about this already via some dusty *Peoples of Daventry* manual or something?

The newcomer turned pages delicately, ignoring the captive, until it settled on a page with an illustrated king. Graham could just see the little painted crown, and he felt his own crown's weight more than ever. The goblin glanced up at Graham for the first time, for a mere scrutinizing instant, and then with a sharp nod it slammed the book shut and wheeled around and left.

And that was it. Not a single word had been exchanged, no explanations given, no questions asked, no decisions spoken, or orders made, or anything at all. He gaped after it, baffled.

So he was already off balance when his guards seized him and yanked—he collapsed in a scrambled heap, too startled to protest. And then they lifted him upside down, gripping his legs, standing on each other to get enough height that his face didn't hit the floor, and they shook him wildly until he thought his legs might snap off. A literal shakedown. He desperately clutched the crown on his head, refusing to let it fall and dent, but he couldn't do anything about his pockets. He wasn't carrying much today: a couple of old coins with King Edward's face printed on them, scraps of paper with scribbled notes from an earlier addenda study session, pocket fluff, and his feathered cap. It all knocked loose into a little pile beneath him.

Once the hat fell, they dropped him, along with all their apparent interest in him, to pounce on the hat. Like kids fascinated by a new toy. They passed it around, cramming it on top of their masks, and imitating Graham's long limbed, swinging gait.

Frustration finally overcame fear. He'd been given *nothing*, no explanations or instructions, and now they were fighting over his hat with his mother's feather in it, and he was tired and



sore and *done*. “That’s it!” he snapped. “Who’s in charge here?” He cleared his throat, trying to sound intimidating: “I demand to speak to your king!” They had a king. He knew they did. Surely, king to king, they could work out *something*.

They glanced at each other, glanced at Graham, then jumped him. Again. He went down easily under their weight, flailing. They caught his arms and legs and pulled and twisted and got him on his back, their rock-hard hands gripping too tight. He fought and kicked and achieved nothing. They swung him back and forth through the air, laughing like they were still playing a game, and with one coordinated motion, they flung him through the nearest dark opening in the rock wall. He hit something solid at the same time a door slammed behind him and a lock snapped home.

There wasn’t a trace of light here—they may as well have thrown a blanket over his head. He lay on the ground, staring into the darkness and growing increasingly suspicious that it was staring back, when he realized water was soaking into the back of his clothes. Yelping, he scrambled up, feet swishing in half an inch of water. Clean? Dirty? *Cold*. He wrapped his arms around his chest, hugging tight, as though that could make it better. It didn’t help.

“Hello?” he called. He hated how thin his voice sounded, how weak he must seem to whatever was in here. He stepped forward and immediately barked his shin on whatever he’d hit when he’d first been chucked in here.

A squeak came from the dark.

“What was that?” Images of rats wouldn’t get out his head. Big, fanged, plague-riddled, wild, angry things. He bit back a shivery squeak of his own and nervously hummed a few fragmented notes of some half-forgotten song instead, desperate to fill the sucking emptiness of the room.

Something began to glow, the faintest touch of blue. It seemed to like the broken melody, whatever it was. He stepped forward gingerly, lost in the fractured chorus, and jarred his side against a protruding pipe. His song cut short. *That’s gonna bruise*. The blue glow dimmed, but it didn’t go out. Cautiously, hands outstretched, he fumbled toward it, the sole pinprick of light in this place.

Some sort of lizard?

It jumped down, skittered between his feet, hurried to the far wall. Maybe the room wasn’t that big after all. Feeling a little more courageous, he tripped his way over, this time remembering the pipe (he banged his elbow against a different pipe). Again, it squeaked and bolted, tail cutting a wave through the puddles of water. But as it climbed the far wall, he thought he saw—

His breath caught in his throat, and he staggered back, iron pipes ringing against him, trembling hands clapped over his mouth, but he couldn’t silence the whimpers through his chattering teeth.

*Dragon.*

It was so close. It was right there. He had no defense. No place to hide. No way to outwit something so close. Couldn't even see where it had gone. It could be sneaking up on him now and he couldn't see it in the dark, its teeth glistening with saliva, fire curdling in its belly—fire hot enough to melt armor, to kill a friend, to kill him, *right there*.

Finally, some miserable, silent eternity later, he forced himself to think, *It can't be real. It's not*. "I'm fine," he told himself sternly. At least, he wished he sounded stern. His voice cracked. "I'm *fine*."

After another minute or two, he had to give himself a royal command to walk. Even then, all he could do was crab sideways along the wall, feeling desperately for some break in the stone, some way to slide out of this pitch-black hell and the bleak memories it contained. His foot bounced against something glassy. Grateful for the distraction, he managed to scoop it up. Some jar with a lid, maybe? Steeling his spine, he felt around inside, but it was free of all peeled grape eyeballs and noodle intestines. He found nothing but air. Empty.

*Okay. Let's make a lantern.*

Graham had a vague sense of the room layout now, and he slipped up behind that glowing thing, humming those few silly bars of song under his breath. It didn't move, and he slammed the jar over it triumphantly. "Ha! Got ya!" He held it close to his face and stared at it. It stared back, flicking its tail in irritation. Well, only one name could be given to a glowing newt. "I shall call you Newton," he pronounced, beaming, enormously pleased with this one tiny success after what was surely one of the top three worst days of his life.

It opened its mouth and screamed. He nearly dropped the jar.

Light burst around him, dozens of glowing salamanders answering Newton. Truly, it was only a halfhearted sparkle, not much better than a moonlit night, but after the complete darkness it made all the difference. He sagged, both relieved to find the room dragon free and upset to discover that it was a proper cell with barred door, four very solid walls, and no way out. Twisting pipes snaked in and out of the stone, ending in some sort of drain that was far too small to do anything escape-y with—it was struggling just to drain the water dripping down the rocks. Water pooled around his ankles and marked every step with a splash. The salamanders had kicked up some fungus and it was glowing, little motes of colored light drifting in the air.

He gently put Newton's jar on the large stone block in the middle of the room (*a table, complete with molding tablecloth, charming*) before turning to glare at the door. It was quiet out there, and he had no idea how much time had passed while he'd been paralyzed by the thought of dragons, but surely the goblins hadn't *all* left. They'd leave at least a guard, right?

He pounded against the splintery wood. "Hey! You can't do this to me!" Pause, then, "Okay, fair enough, you *did*." He gripped the bars and craned his neck, trying to see around the corner. "Are you listening?" He shook the door, kicked it, and waited. No response. The hall was deserted. "I demand someone get over here!"

His stomach grumbled. He pressed a hand to his belly, frowning. "Problem with dinner; care to reorder?" he muttered. "Great." He'd barely picked at his lunch, either; butterflies in his

stomach had overwhelmed him, and he'd ducked out to read more of that official paperwork he was expected to know. Regret panged almost as sharply as his hunger.

"You can't treat me like this! I am the King of Daventry, and I demand to have respect! And—and also, I demand someone be here to listen. Is *anyone* out there? Hello?" Graham pushed on the door, staring out and hoping for something to look back (as long as it was helpful and holding a key and wasn't full of fangs and drool). "Anyone? Goblins? Please?"

Something growled from down the hall, low and throaty and promising all sorts of pain if he didn't shut up. He let his hand fall against his side, lamely. "Okay. Okay, that's fine. I'm fine. I'm...ohhkay."

He sank against the stone table, staring at the bolts and bars in front of him. They meant to keep him. He didn't know for how long, or for what, or anything at all. Whoever that creature in the chair had been had given him such a strange, appraising look, comparing him with a child's picture book of all things. Against the little illustrated king with its little painted crown. His own crown pressed against his forehead, and he eased it off with both hands, staring at the jewels. At his reflection. He told himself it was just the distortion of the gems that made him look so drawn out and frazzled. A proper king would be keeping his composure in a situation like this. *Definitely*.

*It's a puzzle, Graham. Find a way out.*

If it could just be that easy.

## Chapter End Notes

This should be the only time it's this close to being a one-to-one game/fic expansion sequence...canon compliant tag doing its good work.

## To Seek

“Your Majesty, we’re sorry about earlier,” Royal Guard Number Three called through the door. The others stood clustered behind her, looking apprehensive.

(“He’s going to throw something at us.”)

(“He isn’t.”)

(“You didn’t see the look on his face. He absolutely will.”)

“We brought hot chocolate,” she persisted, knocking again. “After walking in the rain, we thought you might need to warm up.” Still no response. “King Graham, are you in there?” She shifted the tray from one hand to both hands and bumped the door open with her hip. Everyone huddled around her, peeking through the gap.

“He’s not there,” No4 sighed, relieved.

No3 pushed the door open all the way. The throne room was littered with socks and acorns, as they’d left it. “But it’s getting dark.” She thought about the monsoon gray sky and amended, “Late. Shouldn’t he be back by now?”

“Maybe he’s staying in town. He used to do that a lot.”

“Yes, but that was before we crowned him.” No2 hesitated. “Is that allowed now?”

“It’s not like he’s a *proper* king, is it? I expect he can do whatever he likes.” No1 made some dismissive hand flapping gesture. “I suppose we should get this cleaned up or something. Hardly looks civilized. Doesn’t keep a very neat throne room, does he.”

“Does that mean we can drink the hot cocoa?” No2 asked hopefully.

No3 tapped her finger against the tray, not sure at all if she should—or even could—make a suggestion. She was the newest rank and file, just hired by the king. But he’d given her a job when she’d desperately wanted it, and...well, she felt *wrong* about all this. Like an unpleasant itch beneath her armor. Graham had looked so miserable when he’d left (fair enough—she’d heard the shouting even from the entrance hall), and he hadn’t come back hours later, and....

“What if I go to town and make sure?” she offered.

“Sure about what?” No1 said distractedly. He picked up one of the abandoned socks, but he didn’t seem to know what to do with it once he had it, and he let it drop again.

“That he’s safe?”

“Safe? We’re in *Daventry*. It’s no Serenia or Llewddor. We haven’t had anything worse than a wedzel around for years.”

*And that dragon that killed that knight*, she thought, a touch rebelliously. *And leprechauns and goblins and giants and...oh, never mind.* “Still, sir, I think a spot of rust on the helmet will do me good. Get some practice marching in.”

“Ah, go on then. We’ll keep some cocoa warm for you.” He took the tray from her and wandered back toward the kitchens, trying to bat No2 away with his elbow without spilling anything. “Later, *later*. Let’s reheat it and get the rest of the lads in, make it fair.”

She looked at the empty room, remembered how distressed Graham had seemed when he pushed off into the rain alone, and she spun on her heel. She’d go to town. He’d mentioned Wente earlier; may as well start there.

No3 meandered along the road, that eternal Daventry monsoon rain drumming on her umbrella. She practiced what she might say to him, what would convince him to come back, to not give up on them, on her and her beginning career. If she could get Wente or Amaya or Muriel (not Chester) on her side, surely combined they could whip up an argument as solid as Wente’s brownie frosting.

But when she got to the town, and when she found half a broken flute, and empty houses, and a ton of churned mud, and shards of glass and splintered wood, and broken pies and cracked alchemical vials, and a *complete lack of any king or villagers whatsoever*, she flung the umbrella into the shattered bakery, sprinted back to the castle, and managed to completely ruin hot cocoa night in three words: “King Graham’s *gone!*”

---

Someone tapped on his hand, gently. “No, go ‘way,” he mumbled. “Ten more minutes.” The tapping persisted. He withdrew his hand and pulled it close under the blankets. “Five minutes,” he said, keeping his eyes firmly shut, though to his disappointment he could feel himself waking up. Something licked his nose, and he sat bolt upright. “*Triumph?*”

The glowing salamander on his pillow flicked its tail. Graham gaped at it for a split second before the pain hit in a horrible wave and he huddled forward, clutching the back of his head. The blanket (no, his own cloak) bunched around his waist. His probing fingers found the aching lump on the back of his head from where he’d hit it on the cobblestones yesterday. *Yesterday?*

Oh. Right.

He was sure he’d dreamed it. Prayed he’d dreamed it. But in the cold light of salamander glow it was undeniable. No point in pinching himself to make sure—everything already hurt.

Graham shifted, leaning against the stone wall behind him. It felt like he’d rolled down the side of a mountain (ha, again). His leg was uncomfortably stiff. Cautiously, he rolled back the fabric and found a horrible bruise on his hip, mottled purple and black and ugly in the gloomy light. The slightest pressure made him hiss. Sore, finger shaped bruises also marked the back of his legs and calves and even his arms from where they—the goblins, right—had gripped and pulled and thrown him into this cell. *Stars.*

Gingerly, he eased himself off the mattress, putting weight on his good leg before equalizing himself. His stiff leg shuddered, and he staggered forward, catching himself on the stone block that suited for a table. Newton chirped at him, and Graham breathed deep before pushing himself upright. Every bone seemed to creak and groan and pop as he did.

For the next undeterminable amount of time, he limped in agonized circles around the room, half hunched over for most of it, stretching out aching muscles and trying to focus, to think. His steps sloshed—much of the water from the night (or whenever—how much time had passed, anyway?) had drained away, but the lower stones puddled. He guessed it was rainwater collecting in the caves. As long as it was raining on the surface, his little prison would be damp.

The worst part about this, he decided (other than the sharp bite in his hip every few steps), was the not knowing. Not knowing why they'd taken him, and not knowing what they wanted to do with him. The goblins' faces (masks?) revealed nothing. He couldn't ask without an interpreter—not that there was anyone around to ask, anyway.

It wasn't like the kingdom had enemies, at least none that he could definitively name. Or, to be fairer, there were some, but he wasn't *certain* who, or if there even was a who, to blame, and guesses were just guesses. But it felt so...drastic. Unnecessary.

Sure, he'd only just been crowned and perhaps someone was upset about not being chosen (fair enough; who crowns a royal knight with no proper training or, truly, all that much warning), but so what? He upheld an open court. They could have walked in and laid out their frustration, maybe even made a claim to the crown. Stars, after that debacle in the castle earlier, he might have simply *given* them the throne had they asked politely enough.

It could be a ransom demand, he supposed, but the kingdom was dealing with rotten budget problems brought on by Edward's illnesses and badly implemented addendums in his final months, and neither Graham nor any of the guards had sorted out how the unlimited treasure chest worked yet. (If, indeed, it even *was* unlimited. It had the mark of the Merchant of Miracles printed on the bottom, so, not much hope there.) If someone planned on getting a ransom for him, they were going to be sorely disappointed.

Hopefully *send-him-home* disappointed, not *cut-his-throat* disappointed.

*Oh, shining stars.* He ran his hands through his tangled hair.

To avoid losing Graham to the knife, the royal guards would have to strike up deals with the neighboring kingdoms. They'd have to relinquish the lavender fields to the highest bidder. Trade their goats and livestock. Open the King's Forests for hunting. Daventry would be ruined economically and politically, just to scrape together a pitiful ransom for their stupid king.

It might just be best to forget the ransom, crown someone new (a King's Tournament instead of a Knight's Tournament? A tournament of speed could be the first to sign a ream of addendums) and forget Graham had ever existed. They hadn't even had more than two sessions for the new royal portrait to be added to the Hall of Faces. It would be easy enough to hide him, a pathetic little footnote in the history books.

Which would make for a happy, thriving Daventry, but a not so happy pack of goblins, and, consequently, a less than thriving Graham.

He pressed his face against the barred window. No one was around. He looked down, trying to see what sort of lock held the door—a very large padlock, by the look of it. He wriggled a hand through the bars and twisted his arm until he had it in his grasp. Sturdy. Heavy. He tried to angle it to see the lock itself, but he couldn't quite manage from here.

With a flash of delighted inspiration, he unpinned his brooch from his cowl. He flipped it over and studied it, but he felt his burst of excitement drain away again. The metal pin was far too small for the weighty lock. He'd just break the brooch off, and then the goblins would have to break down the door to let him out or just not bother to open it again.

He wandered toward the cracked mirror, to reaffix the pin straight against his chest, and stared at himself. With the dark rings under his eyes, he looked like he'd been punched in the face. Twice.

"Ahh." Graham sank onto the mattress, the only properly dry thing in the whole cell, and wrapped his cloak tight. An opportunity would come, surely. He just had to be ready for it. Whenever it came. Whatever it looked like. He curled on his side, favoring his bruised hip, and tried to think of sunshine.

---

Graham fell into a sort of routine as time crept past on soft salamander feet. He couldn't know how much time was passing, and he was reluctant to make a guess at it for fear of making the situation feel all the more helpless. Hopeless.

He took to reciting what addenda he could remember—he thought he might be mixing up some of the numbers (was it Addendum 78934 that was about pasta in royal guard diets, or 86752, or maybe he'd forgotten a decimal point), but he *knew* he had the content right. He'd been memorizing facts and sheets for weeks. It helped keep him grounded after he'd counted all Newton's spots and every facet of every rock dozens of times over.

Every now and again, when his nauseous hunger felt overwhelming, he stumbled toward the pipes and gathered up a small amount of porridge. Stringy to the eyes, slimy to the touch, and rubbery to the teeth, he bit back on his gag reflex and swallowed handfuls of it as quick as he could with his eyes screwed shut. It didn't seem to have much of a smell to it, but that was most likely because he'd gotten used to the wet-dog reek of his damp, lizard-infested cell.

But one day (the third day, had he been able to accurately number the hours—a proper fairy tale amount of time, which might have given him a hint as to who had done this), the horrible porridge stopped coming. Nothing oozed out of the pipes at all. Graham almost laughed. No more porridge! *Ha! No more...oh, hang on. No more porridge means no more food means...* his stomach snarled. Or was it the goblins outside his door snarling at each other?

Then, because the goblins didn't want to do their own chores, he was freed. Or, at least, he wasn't locked in his cell constantly. Every evening they unlocked the door and let him out to do their literal dirty work. This first night, they thrust an oily rag in his face and ordered him to clear spiderwebs. Well, fine. Chores would break up the monotony of his own thoughts,

and anyway, it was a great excuse to explore every corner of this prison without getting tackled.

But his cleaning came to a screeching halt when he discovered, to his utter horror, that he wasn't alone. All his friends were trapped in the shadows and the slime, too. Wente and his new wife, Bramble. Amaya. The Hobblepots. The Merchant. Even, bafflingly, Mr. Fancycakes. They were starving, bedraggled, as pathetic as he was. Worse than he was. And they were depending on him for survival.

He straightened his crown.

*It's a puzzle, Graham. Find a way out.*



## To Find

It started with a dry cough early in the morning. Hardly more than a tickle. Graham sipped water from the rose fountains and cleared his throat, but it wouldn't stop. It wouldn't normally raise much thought, but he was sneaking around in places he wasn't supposed to be sneaking. He held his cloak against his mouth to try and stifle the sounds while he was deep in the back tunnels, not sure who might be listening. Annoying, but manageable.

He scrambled through pipeworks and scraped through narrow gaps, hunting for anything that could help them escape. And he found bolt cutters. Half sunken in moldering porridge oozing from a broken pipe, but...*bolt cutters*. It was almost too perfect. He paused before fishing them out. This didn't feel like a trap. It felt like a trap that had already been sprung.

He was being paranoid. He was being silly. But, as Graham looked at the broken pipe, at the bolt cutters, at the chair someone short had clearly stood on to reach the pipe's suspension chains, something prickled the hair on the back of his neck.

Someone had intentionally stopped the food. To starve him and his friends. Kill him. That someone hadn't expected the goblins to get bored and let Graham out, or else they would have taken this tool, this key to freedom, with them. They were careless in their certainty of victory.

And, with a sick twist in his empty stomach, Graham's suspicions became just a little clearer.

Distracted, he didn't notice his cough becoming more frequent as he stumbled back into familiar prison paths with the bolt cutters hidden in the folds of his cloak. Didn't notice the cough starting to sound wet as he freed Bramble and Wente. Didn't notice the ache cutting into his throat as he and Bramble stumbled out into the city to find help, alarm bells chasing them down the tunnels.

But now he sank against the wall of some goblin house in some hidden side street, trying to breathe as another coughing attack consumed him. It could no longer be ignored. Something was wrong with him, and it was getting worse.

Bramble glanced at him. "Majesty, that *really* doesn't sound good. We should stop and rest."

"No, no," he said, waving a hand, staring fixedly at the uneven stones beneath his boots rather than at her, sure she would see guilt on his face if he looked up, his fear that they were going to be caught because his coughing was too loud, unstoppable. "It's nothing. I'm fine." His voice was tight against yet another outbreak. "It'll clear. We'll get hot tea. Once we're home."

"Some soup wouldn't go amiss right now either." Bramble pressed a hand to her belly.

He nodded blearily. His knees sort of gave out a little bit, and then a little bit more, and then a little bit more again. He sank down the wall slowly, cloak bunching around his ears, until he was almost sitting on the ground.

Bramble leaned against the wall above him and said cheerfully, “That’s it, that’s what we needed. You breathe easy for a minute, Majesty.”

“N-no, wait, I said we didn’t need to stop.” He started to struggle up.

She pressed on his shoulder. “I think the rest of you ignored that. May as well listen to the majority.” She frowned into the darkness. “The majority of *me* wants Wenté, but I know he’s helping the others as best he can, the dear.”

“Bramble, I—”

“No, you stay put,” she said, pushing down harder. “I might be your subject, speaking technically, but I’m still older than you, and a Mother-To-Be, and that has to count for something. I can at least make orders when I can see matters of health and heart, and both are telling us to pause. We won’t be long.” She sighed and closed her eyes, smile a touch strained when she thought he couldn’t see.

Graham wrapped his arms around his knees and listened to the city. To the low murmurs and clatters of stone against stone. The clank of metal. The steady, faraway wash of the underground river splashing against the weird little underground dock where the mattress raft had been tethered. How many days ago had that been? No way to be sure, not yet.

Little glowing dust motes danced between the buildings. A kaleidoscope of colored fungi illuminated street corners and windows. He searched the skyline (caveline?), hunting for a glimpse of that tall structure he’d seen from the prison tower. Their destination.

They had to get to the goblin castle. They had to see the goblin king. That was the only way they could get all the villagers out safely, could make it back to the surface without pursuit or loss. He had to convince the king to free them, but how? Going in swords blazing wouldn’t be the right move, even if he had a sword or the strength to swing it. It would have to be words.

Yeah, right. Like that could ever work.

This wasn’t the first time they’d ducked into some forgotten side alley. They often hid behind buildings and stairs and in shallow dark spaces while they waited out goblins. The little stone-shielded citizens of this place tended to amble carelessly, meandering along the roads in packs. Some of them wore ragged fairy tale costumes. Tattered wolf ear headbands, or scraps of elaborate princess dresses, with battered wooden weapons more suited for make believe than actual combat strapped to their sides. But then again, the real, sharp spears were just as abundant.

Bramble had saved them half a dozen times by now. She somehow sensed goblins half a street over, well before Graham ever noticed. When he asked how she heard them from so far away, she told him that the sounds of their masks scratching against their armor sounded almost like that singing crackle bread gets when it starts to cool down after the oven. “It’s easy to hear since it’s one of my favorite sounds,” she had said. “Or it *was* a favorite sound. Now I rather like hearing Wenté singing when he’s mixing something good.” She smiled shyly, ears going pink beneath her cap.

Now, Graham looked up at her. “Bramble?”

“If you’re about to tell me you’re sorry you dragged me here instead of Amaya *again*, I’m going to be very cross.”

“No, I, uh. Wanted to thank you. For being here. I couldn’t have gotten this far without you.”

“Don’t make me blush again, either.” She grinned, and he could see the determination in her shoulders, in her eyes. She wasn’t in great shape after the imprisonment, but she was still carrying herself in an undeniably Bramble sort of way. A mother (To-Be) scorned and ready to take someone to task with stern words and an open heart. Even after all this, she still didn’t seem to bear hatred in her, though it would have been well within her rights.

Maybe that’s what these story-loving goblins needed? Maybe some compassionate, determined angle with the goblin king was the best route to freedom. Maybe words *could* win. He would have laughed at the ideas starting to build up in his head, but it bubbled into another cough instead.

He swallowed again, cursing that cough and praying that his gradually creeping dizziness was just the result of stress.

---

As it happened, it worked. He never would have believed it, and yet, it worked.

Words won the day. Compassionate words, hidden in the phrasing of a story. A story that Graham found he knew how to tell very well—a story about himself, and his fears and uncertainties, and the friends he made, and the support he needed. The goblin king bowed to him and his story, ever so slightly, and that—somehow, in this dark place ruled by fantasies—was enough.

---

The adrenaline of facing the goblin king sparked through Graham’s spine and made him stand straight again, but once the king had agreed to let all of the Daventry citizens go, Graham felt all the excitement ebbing out of him to be replaced with a strange ache that he was sure hadn’t been there before. From his shoulders to his back to his legs, he felt dizzy and distant.

To be fair, by his count he’d been shaken down for contraband at least six times by now. The ache in his legs wasn’t exactly surprising, considering the goblins’ method of shakedown was to literally turn him upside down while gripping his legs, and, well, shake.

“What should we do?” everyone asked. Graham answered as best he could, but his mouth was running on its own, with very little input from him. His hands trembled; he grabbed the hem of his cloak so no one would notice. Just another side effect of stress. Nothing to be concerned about.

He stood listening to them all argue about routes and directions and glare at their reticent goblin guides, and all the while he thought, “Huh. My *hair* hurts. That’s new.”

Finally, impatiently, the Merchant stepped forward. He was easily in the best shape of them all, and overjoyed to have a freed caravan and two unicorns back (The Other One had been captured, too, though no one had shown much interest in the poor thing and had let it wander uselessly). He barked commands and directed their steps and threw his generous gut around. Graham was more than content to let him at it, following at a lagging pace until they broke out of the tighter tunnels and were able to climb aboard the rattling wagon. They crammed into narrow spaces between empty boxes and expired and crumbling miraculous ingredients. Exhausted but too nervy to doze in case their guides turned back into jailers, the group anxiously watched rocks roll past for an eternity until they broke into the overcast, rainy, late afternoon of Daventry. The first breath of fresh, free air came with a gentle sigh of relief.

---

The shout came from across the river, and the merchant slowed the cart ever so slightly from its careening gallop to listen. The cry was thus: “Ho there! Good wandering merchant!”

*“What did you just call me?”*

Whoever it was across the river hesitated for a long moment. “Good...merchant?”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s better.” The merchant leaned back and punched Graham in the shoulder. “‘*Ho there*’—*ha*, what kinda medieval establishment you runnin’ here?”

Graham had his hands pressed over his mouth, but not from coughing this time. After a second he breathlessly managed to mumble, “Did you *have* to take that turn like that?” His adventurer’s cap, found in the tunnels near the goblin castle, had slipped down over one eye, and he looked positively green.

“Oh, *so* sorry. I’d think that pregnant lady’d be the one with morning sickness, not a strappin’ young lad like yourself, but hey, whatever. Also, what do you expect when I’ve got a soggy lump of bread for a wheel and one sick goa—uh, unicorn—and no thanks to you. It ain’t no flyin’ carpet ride: you gotta anticipate a bounce or two.” He turned back to face the river, and shouted, “Whaddya want?”

“Have you seen our king anywhere? Or...er...anyone, I guess?”

Graham shuddered, swallowed, and drew a deep breath to answer the guard, but the merchant had a thoughtful look on his face. Before Graham could speak, the merchant leaned back and whispered, “Hey, your magistrate. Scaly lumps of eel guts fried in peanut oil and pickle juice.” Graham blinked, then clapped his hands back over his mouth, making horrible strangled noises. “Hey! You over there!” the merchant shouted, while Graham retched. “There’s a finder’s fee for getting your king and his merry band of villagers back to you, right?”

“A what now? Er. I mean. We don’t really have...yes, yes of course! Did you have an amount in mind? Do you accept frogs as payment? Maybe installments over the course of...er...several years?”

“Oh, shining stars,” Graham groaned through his fingers and pulled himself to his feet.

“We’re all here! Here!” His voice cracked and couldn’t carry far. He waved, but he lost his

balance and fell back among the boxes.

“King Graham? Is that you?” the guard craned his neck. “Gods, is it really you? Where have you *been*? We wrote your mother. Have you seen the others? We’ve been so *worried*. Poor Olfie’s been wandering for *days* looking! Even Acorn offered to go out. Why aren’t you saying anything? Are you okay? I hope I’m not overwhelming you again. I’m sorry. I am, aren’t I? Maybe we should write an addendum about this or something. I’m glad you’re back. That *was* you, wasn’t it? I’m pretty sure it was you. Hard to see in this rain. The water gets in the helmet dreadfully.”

The merchant sighed and glanced at Graham. “Well. I’m still gonna ask if I can get a small finder’s fee. Think of all the merch that went to waste. All the missed business opportunities! I deserve a little recompense, eh?” He paused. Graham frowned, clearly about to argue, and the merchant added cheerfully, “Leftover shrimp twice baked in orange yogurt sauce drizzled with chocolate.”

## To Break

For the first time in his career, Royal Guard Number Two found himself surrounded by people who wanted to be near him *because* of his smell, not in spite of it. His ears burned with pleasure as he beamed in the privacy of his helmet. No fuss about syrup today!

To be fair, the other guards grouped close around him since the reek of syrup was better than (and somehow more overpowering than) the reek of a week and a half of imprisonment in a goblin dungeon. Graham even smelled faintly and inexplicably of chunderblossom, just to top off all the rest of it. Still. No2 took his victories where he could find them: he just might not mention His Majesty's Smell when he wrote all this down in his daily diary.

No3 took a deep breath of syrupy air and pushed off from the group. "Please, Your Highness, we're warming a bath upstairs. Won't you follow us?"

Graham looked bewildered, and he kept rubbing his eyes with the palms of his filthy hands. "No, I can't. I've got to make sure everyone is okay."

"Sire, we've been over this. Everyone's been seen to. As they were last time you checked. I promise, they're all safe, in the guest rooms, with baths and dinner prepared. No need to check on them *again*." She turned away as discreetly as possible (not that Graham was in much state to notice) for another deep breath of fresh syrup.

"You're sure?" His eyes were bloodshot—from rubbing, from exhaustion. He looked near collapsing. "I should ch-check..." His voice, scratchy and sick sounding, was losing volume fast and they had to lean in to hear. Not ideal.

"Sire, you've already looked in on everyone. Twice." No3's voice was getting desperate and strained. "Come upstairs with us. The fire's set, and the bath should be ready. Please."

"But, B-Bramble's pregnant." A tremble started in his shoulders, and he hugged his arms close to stop it.

"We *know*. You've said." There was a pause, then, "Sire," she added.

"Did I check on everyone? Did they all eat? There's enough. Right? D-did I give out everything?"

"Sire, please, if you don't go upstairs now, I'm going to carry you, and that's something we'll both regret."

He blinked, rubbed his eyes again, then finally started moving. Some ingrained habit made him walk like a royal knight on parade, a swinging stroll that hid his wavering balance—unless you knew him well enough to notice his tells. The guards followed a little distance behind, clustered around No2. They *did* know Graham well enough by now, and more than one wondered if they would have to catch the king if he fell—and if you could scrub that

Smell out of leather. Crimson Colada was such an expensive fabric that it would be a shame to have to throw away the uniform if you couldn't get that funk out of it.

Several guards had hauled the copper tub up to the royal rooms shortly after the captive party's arrival. It was extra work, but after some hasty deliberation, No1 had decided it would be better for Graham to be in the comfort of his own bedroom until he'd recovered. Any other option didn't seem appropriate for a king. Graham himself hadn't been part of that conversation, too busy trying to stop the Hobblepots from demolishing the kitchen in one go. The tub was now filled with steamy, sudsy water, with fresh water heating over nearly every fireplace available in the castle, just in case.

They ushered Graham in, herding him toward the bath without touching him. No3 broke off at this point, claiming she was going to order tea for Graham, but probably running to one of the nearby balconies to purge her lungs. After a moment, the guards generally and silently agreed on who would be most helpful here. They shoved No2 toward Graham to help him peel off his cloak and boots. Then, apparently in the name of privacy, they too fled for the nearest window.

"No, I can take care of it," Graham insisted when No2 reached out to help. "I'm fine. Really."

"Are you sure?" No2 watched Graham sway. Somehow, in the firelight, he looked worse. The shadows moved across his face in a sunken sort of way, and whatever well of strength he'd been drawing from in the hall seemed to be evaporating quickly.

Graham crumpled into the rocking chair so hard that the wood creaked in protest. They froze, expecting it to break. Nothing happened. They exhaled together in relief, but Graham's sigh carried him further: he looked like he was deflating into sleep. He choked back a cough, which seemed to rouse him, and he reached for his boot laces. "I'm f-fine. Just...give me a minute."

No2 turned away, clicking his heels on the wood floor, and stared fixedly at the closed door. Why had they picked *him* for this? It wasn't as though he could smell his own syrup smell, being mostly used to it. Which meant the other Smell was properly overpowering.

After a very long series of busy minutes, in which the king made all kinds of exhausted noises, there was a gentle series of splashes as Graham eased himself into the water. Another wet sound as he fumbled for soap. And one more thump as he accidentally dropped the soap over the edge.

A silent eternity passed before No2 cautiously said, "Do you need help now, Sire?" He couldn't hear anything but the crackle of the fire. He wheeled around. "Um. Your Majesty? Graham? Are you okay?" Graham's head was slumped on his chest. "Graham!" He gingerly touched Graham's shoulder.

The king snored loudly. With no responsibilities or goals to keep him pushing forward, it seemed he'd just surrendered to the soft bubbles and the warmth and the safety. At a rather inopportune time.

“Oh. Um. I suppose you’re okay, then.” There was a long, long pause, and then a very reluctant sigh as No2 peeled off his gauntlets and dropped them on the floor, reaching for the soap and the scrubbing brush.

---

Royal Guards Numbers 1, 2, and 4 scrubbed and rinsed and toweled him off, changing the water three times. The first, because the water turned a horrible sludgy brown within a few minutes and they felt like washing dirt with dirt was kind of pointless. The second, to scrub at the caked-on muck that had been beneath the topsoil layer. The third, a shallow bath (because they were getting impatient), to sluice off any remaining slime. It took a long time to replace the musty, sour smell of damp caves with the lavender-scented soap, but they kept at it, trying to keep His Majesty’s face above water while washing it at the same time. After the third rinse, one gently supported his head while another fluffed his hair with a towel, damp curls springing up in every direction.

When they had started, they’d debated quietly for a moment if they should try to wake him: washing deadweight was difficult, and embarrassing, and not at all how anyone wanted to spend an evening. But his eyes had looked so haunted and horrible when he’d been awake that they didn’t have the heart to rouse him. And they could hardly put him to bed in this disgusting state. So, gently, they lathered and rinsed in silence, and he stubbornly slept through it all.

He did twitch under their hands if they accidentally pulled or scraped, especially when they were cleaning the shallow cuts that littered his hands (from tripping in the dark and catching himself, they guessed) or the bizarre rainbow of variously aged bruises on his lower legs (no guesses whatsoever). He mumbled half-words and fragments, but never anything sensible, and if he ever did fully wake, even for brief instances, they didn’t notice.

They fished him out of the tub and wrapped him up tight in a fresh towel while they paused for a well-needed break. They must have gone through reams of towels of every size, which were now discarded in sappy piles around the room, loosely organized from most horrible to less horrible. Most of them smelled like wet Triumph. This last towel was truly the last; between Graham and everyone else, the soap and towel supply had been demolished. The laundresses were going to murder someone.

They looked at Graham, who was slumped carelessly at the foot of the bed, a few errant curls still dripping water, and they looked at his usual nightshirt and trousers, folded neatly on the bedside table.

“No. I’m done. I’m not forcing His Highness into pants. What are you gonna do, hold them open and drop him in? There’s a limit to both his dignity and mine, and I hit mine *at least* an hour ago.”

“He can’t just wear a towel to bed.”

“I hear Whisper does all the time.”

“Yes, but you should know: no one cares.”



“There’s a long nightshirt in here somewhere,” No1 mused. “King Edward’s. Remember? He used to moon around the balconies in it at night, like something out of a play.”

“Yes, but he was very sick then. It was just after the queen...”

“Oh, that’s *right*. I’d forgotten all about it.”

“Graham’s not been king very long. Barely had time to put his own dent in the mattress. I bet that nightshirt’s still here somewhere.”

“It’ll be huge on him.”

“It’ll stay on better than a towel. Go on, go look in those chests over there.”

The nightshirt was dutifully found and dragged over his head—and, as predicted, it rather enveloped him. But it was simple, and it was perfect for their patience levels. All three guards were sweaty, hands pruned with water, and achy with the stress of the evening, but they picked up their king once more (“Last time tonight, Sire, promise!”) to put him to bed properly. All three looked at him, and then at each other with nervous smiles of relief.

If he was a little banged and bruised and scuffed up, well, that was fine: he was back safely in their protection, and the physical marks would heal. If his skin was a little hotter than expected, well, that was fine too: it was probably just the warm water and the air by the fireplace. And if he was starting to look a little more gaunt as they gently wrapped him in his sheets in his bed, it wasn’t anything to worry about: it was just a trick of the fire and candlelight.

After all, he was back and safe. Everything would be fine. What more could possibly happen?

Though, when he woke half the castle so early in the morning that it was still night, screaming in pain and terror, they knew that things weren’t quite so fine.

## To Mend

The goblin ropes were hard, scratchy, and tight. He clutched at the arms of his throne, twisting, but he couldn't free himself, no matter how much he struggled and pulled and fought. He was alone in the throne room, bound to his own seat of office, ropes biting into his wrists and arms and shoulders, and he yelled for someone, anyone, to come, *please*.

The far door creaked open agonizingly slowly, and though the ropes kept him at attention already, he stiffened. His fingers curled into fists and he swallowed, trying to slow his panicked breathing, to stop the little thrills of fright shivering across his skin.

Wente edged into the throne room, bowing and scraping and anxiously tying and untying the knot holding his apron in place.

Graham sighed, relieved, and sagged against his restraints. "Wente! Stars, Wente! I am so—" But he hesitated, a twist in his gut warning him that something was wrong.

"Your Royal Highness, most noble sir, I, I don't mean to intrude, but, ah, it's...oh dear." Wente kept ducking and bowing, not daring to look at Graham for more than a fraction of a second at a time. *Why?* "Please, Sire, I'm sorry, but I can't. The shop. I can't. Taxes. Er. I'm sorry, Your Majesty, I know it's for the kingdom. But I can't. Sorry, I know I shouldn't even be here. Um."

"Wente?" Graham tried to lean forward, but the ropes had no slack at all. "What?"

"I can't. I don't. That is. Maybe an extension. I know you've given me so many, but maybe just one more. I can make it work with one more. Definitely."

"Wente, *please!*"

"Bramble's pregnant, you see. So, it's. Not. Not her fault. The guards said it was for her safety. Until the taxes were paid. Not that I, uh, think it's a lie. I would never doubt. But she can't be locked up, sir. Not because of me, and the money. I promise, you'll get every coin. I just can't...now." He edged closer a fraction of an inch, head low.

"Wente, *release me this instant!*"

That finally broke through the nervous chatter, but it didn't help. Wente flinched back and collapsed onto the carpet in a low bow, nose pressed against the floor, and said nothing more, and didn't move again.

Graham stared, dread settling over him like a suffocating blanket. "Wente? Can you hear me?"

No response. Wente shivered in terror. If Graham held his breath, he could just hear the baker muttering, "Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry," endlessly.

And then, slowly at first but suddenly an inferno, he melted into ash and smoke, like he'd been struck down with dragon fire, and there was nothing left, nothing at all—one moment Wente was there, and the next he was gone, forever.

Graham shrieked, rocking back against the throne, but the ropes wouldn't let him move, wouldn't let him look away, wouldn't, wouldn't—

But almost immediately he froze, scream bitten off, as Amaya stumbled forward, her hair half burned away. She yelled that the dragon was at the gate, that he needed to hurry up and do something about it, but not send her back, no, gods please don't send her back, she would do anything, anything he wanted, just please, she'd just escaped, *don't send her back*.

"I would never—"

The Hobblepots clamored for attention, wailing that there was nothing they could do, that the fields were burned up and that they had nothing to give, and then they were gone too, and the royal guards scattered, and the whole room was going up in smoke and flame, embers flying off the curtains in blazing orange and yellow, and Graham struggled against the throne but no one could hear him.

"No, wait—"

Bramble cowered in chains, and the Merchant huddled in a corner clutching his unicorns close, and the light was fading from Triumph's eyes, and Daventry's citizens were clawing at the smoldering carpets, asking him to let them live, and Graham pleaded with them, and apologized again and again and again for not helping them, not doing what they wanted him to do, but no one heard him, and he couldn't free himself, and the throne room continued to fill with smoke and ash, and he heard the dragon roar.

"Please, I don't know what to do!"

His voice echoed in the sudden perfect silence. The room was empty except for gathering smoke curling around the pillars.

He could feel a presence next to him, and he twisted but he still couldn't see, and out of the stillness he heard Manny's low chuckle and a whisper, "Ahh. You're not doing a very good job, are you?"

Manny slipped from behind the throne and stood before him, taller than expected, taller than he should have been, armor streaked with dragon ash. He stepped closer, studied Graham, and then punched, his gauntleted hand driving deep into Graham's stomach and forcing all his air out in a wheezing gasp. He jabbed him again in the chest, high and hard, and Graham coughed and spluttered. Again and again, harder and higher, whispering, "All hail the king" with each blow.

The last jab blazed through his throat, ice cold and burning hot at the same time, harder than even an armored hand should have managed, and Graham couldn't breathe at all, and he looked down, and found a purple-shafted arrow sticking through him, pinning him to his throne, and he looked up, frantic, as the ash and shadows pressed around him, vision blurring

with tears of pain and terror, and he couldn't make out the details on the shape in the door, not really, but he knew who stood there. Knew the slope of disappointment in those familiar broad shoulders. Knew the disappointment dripping off the arrow, like blood. Like death.

He *screamed*.

---

He screamed, and screamed, and screamed, and the nightmare shattered like glass. He found himself lying tangled in sweat-soaked sheets, staring up at the royal bed's canopy. His throat burned, and his chest ached, and he tried to free a hand to rub where the arrow had hit (*no, there was no arrow, it was a dream, stop, breathe, please, breathe*), but his arms were twisted and pinned to his sides. He'd tossed and turned so much that the sheets had bound him up, and he was too weak to fight them back.

The door slammed open, bouncing against the bookcase behind it, and one of the guards skidded in, boots sliding along the wooden floor. "Your Majesty! What's wrong? Are you okay?" No3 stared at him for a second, then whirled back to the door and shouted, "*Distress!* Someone get in here! *Distresssss!*"

More aches and pains started announcing their presence, like they'd been anxiously waiting for him to wake up to be acknowledged. He tried to sit up. Couldn't. His lank, sweaty hair was in his eyes, and he tried to toss his head and achieved absolutely nothing but a sharp stab of agony in his neck for his trouble. There was no hiding this, no pretending everything was fine. Not now.

"Help," he whispered, ragged. His voice sounded wrong, deep with fatigue and pain. "Please."

No3 was talking to someone he couldn't see. "Are the Hobblepots awake?"

"It's four in the morning," No1 said doubtfully.

"Check the kitchen first," No3 said. "Be willing to bet anything. Get them in here, quick!" A brief pause, the sound of clattering footfalls fading down the hallway, and then she said to Graham, overly loud in her fright, "Your Majesty, we're getting help now. Don't worry. It'll be okay."

Graham tried to acknowledge her with something dignified, but it came out like a choked sob.

"What can I do?" She hovered nervously at his side. He shifted his shoulders deeper into the pillow, squirming and trying to free an arm. "Here, let me." She gently started unwrapping the tangled sheets.

He sighed and instantly regretted it; his throat *burned*, like he'd eaten firepeppers raw by the handful.

"Is everything okay in here?" Larry asked from the door.

Kyle peeked over his shoulder. “Thought we heard a distress call. Graham? Er. Your Highness, I mean. Highness Graham? You...you look *awful*.” He rushed in and tripped over the bed pedestal, overbalanced, and bounced on the mattress.

No3 glanced up. “If you’re going to be in here, you’re going to help!”

“What can we do?” Kyle asked. “He looks near *death*.”

No3 had managed to pull Graham into a sitting position to untangle the sheets tied around his chest, but at that remark, everyone froze, even Kyle, and No3’s nerveless hands let go of Graham, and without her support he collapsed helplessly back into the pillows with a squeak of surprise.

“No no no no *no*, sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean for that to sound like it did, I’m sorry,” Kyle wailed, clapping a hand over his mouth so that everything he said sounded muffled.

Larry desperately tried to fix things, touching Kyle’s shoulder and saying, “Of course you didn’t,” in an uneasy falsetto. He kept babbling, “But, I mean, it’s all okay. If we needed someone to rule temporarily, Whisper could d—”

Every head snapped in Larry’s direction. Larry paused, realized what his mouth had gone off saying, and backpedaled with a lame, “—efinitely not do it. Definitely not.”

“I’m *fine*. I’m not going anywhere,” Graham managed, propping himself up on one elbow. For a moment, anyway, before his elbow wobbled and gave out, dropping him into the pillows. He tried to speak again but was interrupted by his own terrible, damp coughing. He scrabbled at his aching throat, wheezing.

“Yeah, for now,” Kyle mumbled distantly, and then, eyes wide, pressed both hands over his mouth again.

No3 bristled and flung a pillow at Kyle. “If you’re going to act like this, you’re going to leave. Both of you.”

“Sorry, I don’t know what’s come over me, I’m so sorry Graham, I don’t mean it to sound like that, you know I don’t, I’m sorry—but,” and this was a hastily muttered aside to No3, “I mean, *look* at him!”

“I *am*. That’s why I sent for the ‘pots!”

“Oh. Um. Do you...think they’ll actually be helpful?”

Graham’s throat moved from firepepper-burn to swallowed-several-cups-of-broken-glass, and he could feel a headache kicking up on top of everything else.

Nos 1 and 2 were next in, saying that they’d found the Hobblepots and that the alchemists were on the way and what could they, the royal guards, do to help in the meantime? Tea? Coffee? Pancakes? Fluffed pillows? A teddy bear? A large and well-meant hug? They crowded around the bed, and all went rather quiet when they saw their pale king awash in sweat, laboriously drawing breath and clawing at his own neck. No one seemed quite sure

what to say or do, and everyone stood around helplessly, eyeing each other with increasing apprehension while Graham shivered in fever-soaked blankets.

Muriel came bustling in, fire and fury, Chester a few paces behind. She seemed to be in the middle of a long, angry rant to the air: “—and you didn’t say *anything*? Do you have any idea what could have happened? That noble attitude you’ve got is going to get you killed!” She quieted when she saw the little crowd at the bedside, but only for a second. “Everyone back up, let the poor thing have a moment to himself.” She started pushing people aside with more strength than a little old lady starved in a cell for a week and a half ought to have. “King boy, tell me. How are you feeling?”

“Not fine.” His voice cracked around the words as he fought back another cough.

“Little wonders. What’s wrong, specifically?”

“Everything.”

She clicked her tongue and put her hand against his forehead. Frowning, she caught the skin under his eye with her thumb, pulled, looked at his pupils, and said sharply, “Open your mouth and say ‘aaaaaah.’”

“Gaaahhrgh.” He winced and clapped a hand to his throat.

“Mm-hmm. And deep breath, deep as you can,” she said, pressing her hand to his chest.

He tried, but it felt shallow. She didn’t look pleased. “Again.” After the second, equally pathetic try, she went for his wrist and felt for a pulse. “Chesterrrr,” she trilled.

“Hang on. You wouldn’t *believe* the books in here! This one shows how to catch a dragon toad without getting burned! I’ve never been able to do that!”

“Chester Hobblepot, are you *reading*? Get over here now!”

“Yes, dear.” He shuffled forward, stuffing the book into some unknown pocket deep within his robes with a perfectly innocent smile.

“Double check my work,” she said, inspecting Graham’s fingers for swelling.

Chester started to reach out to rest on Graham’s forehead but pulled back sharply. “You could fry my breakfast egg on your face, my lad!” he said cheerfully. “Might we get you to hold a teapot for a moment to boil it? I’d love some chamomile. You might, too.”

Graham groaned and stared pleadingly at the canopy above him for some divine intervention.

“All right, all right, just a joke,” Chester said, doing much the same motions that Muriel had a moment earlier, though with more poking and prodding around Graham’s ears and nose.

“Interesting,” he said to his wife under his breath. “Could get ugly.”

“*Could* get ugly?” Kyle said, leaning over Graham’s prone body. “You mean this isn’t ugly?” His hands pressed into the bruises on Graham’s legs. Even through the blankets, the sharp

pain made Graham yelp. Kyle shrank back, apologizing frantically (though without understanding why this time).

“You haven’t seen anything in my sick room if you think this is as bad as it can get,” Muriel said, darkly. She eyed the spot where Kyle had pressed against Graham with suspicion. “When did this start?”

Graham swallowed. “Yesterday...? Before helping Bramble. Didn’t hurt. Just a little dizzy.”

“Well. You’re lucky, at least.”

“Lucky...?”

“Imagine if you were still locked away when this fever kicked up properly.”

He blinked, horrified realization clicking into place.

“Those stressful conditions. You said your cell was constantly wet, yes? It’s a miracle it didn’t start earlier. Now.” She looked at him, shaking her head. “We need to move you, for just a minute. We can’t leave you in these damp sheets. You all should have gotten fresh linens out already,” she added, glaring at the guards. “Haven’t you *ever* tended someone before?”

Graham tried to get his elbows underneath him so he could sit up, but his body had dealt with more than enough in the last week and refused to listen to him. Every sprain, scrape, and bruise clamored for attention.

Impatient, No1 scooped him up with ease, and Graham dangled in his arms like a melodramatic painting subject. The guard’s armor was cool against his skin, and Graham leaned his feverish cheek against the man’s breastplate with a sigh of relief.

Around him, though, the room took on a decidedly tense atmosphere. Guards 1, 2, and 4 had seen and gently washed the scrapes and cuts from the tips of his curls to the bottom of his toes and were unaffected, but 3, Kyle, Larry, and the Hobblepots were staring, openmouthed. Graham cracked open an eye and blearily considered what had them rattled.

His bare legs hung over the guard’s arm; he realized that his men had, rather than dressing him in his usual nightshirt and trousers, gone for just a long nightshirt. Which...okay, fair enough. He wouldn’t want to force an unconscious deadweight into anything more than that either. This shirt just reached his knees. Wouldn’t have normally raised any sort of comment but for the fact that his shins were covered with finger shaped bruises. Like he’d been gripped tightly by dozens of rock hard hands. Flipped upside down. Shaken. Nearly every night. For a week and a half. He deemed them less unpleasant than they’d been earlier—many were fading off into a rainbow of green and yellow instead of that awful purplish-black color. But the flickering firelight did sort of emphasize them a bit more than expected.

Muriel clicked her tongue angrily and pressed her own finger along some of the fresher marks. Graham sucked in a startled breath and she drew back. “Add some salve to the list,” she said to Chester. “We can get these healing faster, if we pull out a touch of that green ice

scale.” She turned and clapped her hands. “Come on, it’s not that interesting. Get those sheets replaced, *now*.”

---

Graham sat on the edge of the freshly sheeted mattress, slumped against one of the royal guards sitting beside him for support, while No2 gently wrapped his legs in bandages to keep the green-tinted salve in place rather than staining the bedclothes. The icy medicine numbed the aches in his legs the moment it was applied, and he felt like he was floating away from his own bare toes.

No2 laughed quietly to himself as he knelt there. “Do you remember addendum 867530? Daily foot rub?”

Graham hesitated—it felt like months ago—then grinned. “Light touch, wasn’t it?”

In the corner of the room, Chester and Muriel were debating, checking vials, crushing leaves, mixing up gloppy looking ingredients. After a while, Muriel turned to No3 and said, “I need a cup of strong chamomile tea for His Majesty.”

Chester nodded sagely, muttering, “Told you all so.”

She glanced at him and added, with a trace of a smile, “And also a cup of hot chocolate for Chester.” Chester licked his lips and reached into his pocket. “*Just* hot chocolate,” Muriel snapped. “Not including whatever he’s about to hand you.” Chester withdrew his empty hand.

The guards folded Graham under fresh bedclothes, being careful not to jostle bruises and scrapes as they did so. Once the tea arrived, Muriel took Graham’s mug and turned her back to the room for a bit with it. Meanwhile, Chester accepted his hot chocolate with magnanimous grace and clambered up on the bed to drink it, bumping Kyle out of his way.

The chamomile didn’t look all that different once it was passed to Graham. Whatever Muriel had done to it hadn’t changed the look of it, though it did taste ever so slightly stronger of lavender than he would have liked. Too floral. He drained it, and the heat soothed his throat.

“And that will help you sleep,” she said, mostly to herself, as she took the mug back.

It took a beat before he realized what that meant. Panic swept in, sharp and hot. “No, wait!” He grabbed her hand, clutched it tight, knocked the mug away; it shattered on the floor, pieces rocking back and forth. “You can’t! No, please don’t let me sleep again. I don’t want to sleep. I can’t! You have to stop it!”

“Graham!” Startled, she looked to the others. No one else seemed capable of doing anything, afraid of speaking against a monarch no matter how sick he was. It just wasn’t something a royal guard did. The tips of her fingers were turning dark beneath his wretched grip. “You must sleep. It’s the best way for your body to heal.”

“But if I sleep...if I sleep...what if he comes back?”



“He?”

“I dreamed...” Graham forced the words past cracked lips, “I dreamed about Achaka.” The room seemed to grow perfectly still. “Please, I *can*’t. Don’t let me sleep. I can’t face him again.”

Muriel’s face softened, and she sat on the edge of the bed. “Did you? What happened?”

“He was so disappointed in me. I let him down. I failed. I couldn’t protect...I couldn’t protect anyone, and he, he shot, he shot....” His voice broke off.

“You didn’t let him down. You couldn’t ever let him down.”

“Because he’s dead, and *I* got him killed. It’s all my fault. It’s always been my fault.”

“No! Never think that. You have done more in these last days than anyone could imagine. He would be proud of you. He would never want to hurt you because of what you did to help us survive, Graham. He would be *proud*.”

A wave of dizziness washed over him in spite of his frustrations and fear, and Graham collapsed back into the pillows. The world was splitting apart into filmy, iridescent soap bubbles. They popped gently one by one, and the room dimmed with each lost bubble. He sank deeper, fingers slackening, but she caught up his hand in hers.

“Never, ever think that you let him down,” she said gently, rubbing the back of his hand. “No one could act with more bravery and compassion and wisdom in those caves. No one but you.”

Everything was going blurry, his friends fading off into ridiculous colors and shapes and disappearing, but he forced himself to focus on her, to bring her back into real shapes and real colors. He had to be sure. The Hobblepots were very old and very judgmental people, he remembered. They would tell the truth. “Muriel,” he whispered, desperate, slurred, sleepy. “Did I do all right?”

“King Edward could not have done better, Your Majesty. You protected Daventry magnificently. Now, you have to rest. We still need you, but right now, you’ve done enough. Sleep.”

And he did, slipping down beneath sheets and stars, and the nightmares held their peace.

---

She sank into the rocking chair. The last few weeks had taken their toll on her, and now that Graham was unconscious again, the flurry of activity over, she looked just as sunken and nearly as sick as he did. Chester was snoring already, snuggled against one of the pillows. Kyle and Larry were whispering if they should wake him or carry him to his own bed.

Muriel listened to the whistle in her monarch’s throat as he breathed. “I’d bet he’s contagious,” she said, as casual as an afterthought. As one, every single guard took three steps back from the bed. “We’ll need more of the frostleaf, sooner rather than later. Just under

his tongue. It'll melt. It'll help with the wheezing." She stretched. "Lots of it. Bramble'll want some, too." She rubbed her own throat. "And me, if I'm to be tending him."

"Muriel, we can take care of him from here," No1 said, gently.

"No, I don't think you should. You mean well, but unless you get another healer in, I'm the best way to beat that fever before he goes delirious. Just bring in the rest of that list from the shop; I expect we'll need it all soon. *Delicately*, now. Don't go bruising leaves before it's time to bruise 'em."

She eased herself to her feet, wobbled, and No1 took her arm to steady her. She smiled at him, but the smile disappeared again as she thought. "Someone's got to stay and keep watch. If he starts to wake, you get me. He should be out for a few hours, but he's a *fighty* little thing. Gonna be a pest, especially if he decides he can use them kingly orders to make you all let him out of this room before I say so. Which you won't do. Matter of fact, you'll not even let him get out of that *bed* before I personally and explicitly say it's okay. No matter what he threatens, you're going to keep him put because I can make threats too, *and mine have more interesting consequences*." She eyed each guard in turn. "Think *frogs* and *Chester*," she growled.

In unison, every guard agreed, stiff with terror.

"Fine," she said, mostly to herself. "We're all fine." And the kingdom would be...well, more than fine, truly, with this man wearing the crown and leading them forward. They would be wonderful.

# To Heal, and To End

## Chapter Notes

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

Amaya flung open the door. “I didn’t know you were *that* sick! Why am I always the last person to know anything?” She stomped into the room and stopped. Graham was curled around his pillow, snoring softly and drooling slightly. He didn’t stir.

No1 was sitting in the rocking chair near the fire, helmet off, reading some report or other. He glanced up. “Good afternoon, Miss Blackstone. Can I help you?”

She gestured helplessly at the bed. “Well, I was...um. I guess yelling at a king isn’t a good idea anyway.”

“Generally, no, but it’s been an interesting week. I don’t think he’d mind, especially since he’s too drugged to hear you.” He glanced at the hourglass on the side table. “The dose should be wearing off soon. I’ve got to get some soup in him. If you stay, he should be awake presently.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Truth told, it’s not the most thrilling guard shift. He’s been asleep for *hours*. I’d be glad for some distraction from my distraction.” He flapped the paper he held. “Tourism report from Royal Guard Number Two. The man doesn’t know how to spell at *all*.” He paused, and added, “If you do stay and proceed with your original plan, perhaps keep your yelling brief? Nerves bit on edge all around, I think.”

Thunder growled beyond the castle walls as yet another storm billowed up over the mountains. They could barely hear it through the heavy stone, over the crackle of the fire. Graham mumbled something incomprehensible in his sleep and snuggled deeper in the blankets.

“I think that means he’s starting to rouse,” No1 said and went back to his paperwork. “Don’t shake him awake—he tends to flail if you do that, and he’s surprisingly good at landing blind punches.” Only then did Amaya notice the pale scrape on the guard’s cheekbone.

“While we’re waiting, what’s in that tourism report?”

“Well, you know the Fantastical Floating Island? Submersive Sunken Island, now? He’s got this idea...”

All told, it was another ten or so minutes before Graham opened his eyes, still fuzzed over with whatever drug Muriel had fed him. He struggled to sit up, but within a minute he was folding over with a ragged cough and a groan. No1 started to put down his report and come over to help, but with a meaningful glance at Amaya, leaned back again, flicking pages of the report without reading a word.

Amaya sat on the edge of the bed and reached for the mug of water someone had left on the bedside table. It looked like water, anyway. Not one of the wildly colorful concoctions the Hobblepots had whipped together. She passed it to Graham, who drained the mug in one go.

Only once it was empty did he look up and realize who was sitting there. He blinked, groggy and confused. “Amaya? What are you doing here? Is everything okay?”

“I should be asking you.”

“Yeah, but, consider this: I asked first.” He grinned.

Amaya looked over the pile of bottles and crucibles and herbs and tissues and bandages and things crowding the side table. “I didn’t know you were so sick. You just sounded stuffy, before.”

“I didn’t know I was so sick, either. Kinda snuck up on me.” He cleared his throat and winced.

She frowned at him, and she seemed to be debating with herself about something. There was a terrifically long pause, but Graham was too drowsy to think of anything worth saying. It was something of a relief when she finally muttered, “Hey. Do you remember what you told me down there? Try killing them with kindness?”

“Yeah. That was—oh!” He froze, startled, as she grabbed him in a fierce, although stiff and rather awkward, hug. He didn’t know what to do with his hands, and it took a few seconds before he tentatively returned the embrace. When she kept holding it, he sagged gratefully into her arms.

“Thank you,” she whispered into his hair, eyes screwed up tight like that would distance what she was doing from herself. “I don’t think we would have made it without you.”

“It’s what a king is supposed to do, isn’t it?” he said. And then, after another hesitant pause, he mumbled, “Muriel thinks I’m probably contagious.”

“Ugh! Graham!” Amaya shoved him back into the pillows. Despite already wearing gloves, she scrubbed her hands on her skirt. “That’s the only physical sign of affection I’m authorized to give out for the year.”

“I understand. It’s a blanket ban,” he said, nodding seriously. “I won’t hug-gle with you over it.”

“I’m going to wait for Ken to turn his back,” Amaya said, “and then I’m going to thump you with this pillow.”

“Go ahead,” No1 called, not looking up from his report.

“What! No, come on. You’re supposed to be on my side! I pay you to be on my side!”

“Thump him hard, Amaya.”

“I bed Roberta would defend my honor.”

“Not this time she wouldn’t!” No3 trilled from the hall.

---

After a day or so, Muriel altered the doses so that he wasn’t always unconscious, although he still wasn’t allowed to go anywhere. Graham tried reading to pass the time, but the small print tended to bring back his headache. Mostly he watched the flickering fireplace shadows move against the walls.

Once (more than once) he was adamant that the stone walls of the royal bedroom had been swapped for the stone walls of his goblin cell. He yelped for someone, anyone, to come, to *help*, and he clung to the guard that appeared first until the feverish delirium faded. With the Hobblepots and their tinctures close to hand, these distressing spells never lasted long, but they upset everyone.

Someone had the bright idea to let Triumph sit in the room with him to keep him grounded, and then the royal guards could breathe a little easier. Graham never figured out how they coaxed the gerbil up the steps—he tried it once or twice later, but Triumph never dared it again. Still, it worked this time. Triumph wandered around the royal bedroom, claws clicking on the wood. No1 looked at the gerbil with mild annoyance and said he was going to make another pot of honey tea to try and relax the king’s awful sounding wheeze. The moment Graham was alone, he leaned as far out of the bed as he could, clicking his tongue and snapping his fingers until Triumph nosed his huge face into Graham’s hand.

It wasn’t comfortable to lean out of bed for more than a minute or two, but he wanted Triumph close. So, he snapped his fingers over the mattress a few times, whispering random encouragements until Triumph, head cocked with considerably deep gerbil thought, backed up a pace or two and made a flying leap onto the mattress. The impact shot Graham up a few inches before he slammed back into the pillows.

Triumph padded over to Graham, chirped, and licked the king’s face. Then he paced in a tight circle, twining the blanket around his paws like spaghetti to make a lumpy sort of nest, before curling into a ball, chin on Graham’s stomach. His ears drooped low in contented sleep. Graham stroked Triumph’s cold nose. The fireplace crackled merrily, and the thunder purred, and the rain poured, and for the first time in a while he felt truly content and warm and *safe*.

The last thing Graham heard before sleep overtook him too was No1 huffing in irritation, teacup and pot on his tray rattling as he slammed it harder than necessary on the bedside table, muttering, “We’ll never get that fur out of those blankets. Whose idea was this. Gods. I warned them he’d do something like this. No one ever listens around here.”

But all told, he wasn’t to be kept in bed much longer. Muriel relented fairly soon after that and said he was as good as her enforced bedrest was going to make him. The royal guards weren’t allowed to barricade the door against him, so long as he promised not to wear himself out, and to wrap himself in a blanket, and to ask for help if he felt faint, of course.

He felt a touch suffocated, not faint, but he expected this was the way a kidnapped king was supposed to be treated upon rescue—coddled and treated like a doll.

He went for the courtyard. Someone set a chair beneath the overhang and stocked it with blankets and tea and reports that he almost certainly wouldn't bother to read until next week. He snuggled deep into the cushions. The sharp tang of the brisk air made him feel even better, almost bright enough to go for a jog around the trail, but for the fact that his royal guards would probably tackle him and insist he wasn't ready yet. Maybe tomorrow.

From behind, someone coughed—the sort of “I'm here, please notice me, but only if you want to” cough, not the sick sort—and Graham almost leapt out of his hair before realizing it was the Feys.

Wente was staggering beneath the weight of a perfectly ridiculous four tier cake, and Bramble was wavering at his side, ready to throw her hands out to help catch it should it slide. It was drowning in frosting flowers, and the words *Thank You* were so tightly embellished with so many little curls and flourishes Graham could scarcely read them.

“Wente?”

“Your Majesty, I'm so sorry I couldn't visit earlier. Muriel said I wasn't allowed, else I might sicken Bramble, and we couldn't have that, could we, sweetums, honey bun, favored pie—” At this point he broke off and started whispering sugary sweet sentiments in her ear before realizing Graham was starting to laugh. “Sorry, sir.”

“No, you're absolutely right,” Graham said, and then paused. “Uh, I don't *think* I'm contagious anymore...?” He held the question tremulously, a little afraid of himself. A little afraid his friends' smiles might melt away and—

“We cleared it with Muriel,” Bramble said, firm. “We wanted to make you something small to say thank you, but, ah,” she eyed the towering icing sugar construction with barely veiled alarm, “it got slightly out of control.”

“No point in baking small,” Wente said, a touch offended. “I don't believe in those bitty samples. How do you know you'll like something if you don't get to try it from every angle?”

“True enough, dumpling.” Bramble bumped him lightly on the arm. *Very* lightly, so the cake didn't topple over.

Wente and Bramble had planned on leaving cake and king alone, but Graham insisted that they share—*four tiers*, for stars' sake. Plates and forks were found, and once the royal guards realized what the Feys were offering, they couldn't be kept out of the courtyard with a stick. Somehow Chester got wind of it because it was free food and Chester had a nose for that sort of thing, and Muriel came with him like she always did. Amaya was dragged into it quickly after that: a royal guard had requested she double check the strength of the side doors' security, just in case, and it was easy enough to pull her away from her work once cake was offered. Four tiers broke up in short order, with everyone nursing their slice and yammering away about this, that, and nothing at all, while the thunder rolled around the mountains and the rain danced in the leaves.

The tense atmosphere that had seemed to settle into the bones of the castle over the previous weeks (truly, months, ever since the hasty coronation) finally started to break apart. Everyone

was safe, everyone was happy, and everyone was getting hyped up on *tremendous* amounts of sugar. Someone even dragged out a lute, which No2 was valiantly attempting to play. (Attempting being the word.)

“Matt, please. It’s key of C. Not undersea. Give it here.” No1 snatched the lute away and launched into a petulant sort of song before he warmed to it and settled into a decent rendition of Greensleeves.

Graham ended up with an enormous frosting rose on his plate, which he nibbled at in between conversations. He wandered away for a minute to watch the rain—it was gradually starting to break up, and he had the feeling monsoon season was reaching its end.

He still thought King Edward would have handled the whole goblin situation differently. He didn’t know how, but it wouldn’t have gone quite like it had. A proper king, Graham was reasonably sure, wouldn’t have gotten so frazzled and scared, and he’d certainly been frazzled and scared. But, after all, he hadn’t been born to kingship. He’d been given it. It had taken hard work and hope, and he had been *entrusted* with the crown. He was a different sort of leader. Different, but maybe an okay one after all.

Because, in the end, they had survived.

He watched the impromptu party for a minute, licking frosting from his fingers. So he wasn’t King Edward. Fine. He was going to have to be King Graham, as big and good as he could be. That, he thought, he could maybe do.

From out of the little crush of party folk, Bramble came and found him and took him by the hand to lead him back into the conversations—Whisper and Acorn had showed up too, and they were looking for him. He put down his empty plate and rejoined his citizens and his friends, ready to face whatever came next.

Preferably *without* any more mass kidnappings.

## Chapter End Notes

GoddessofTechnology wrote a lovely missing scene fill for Graham's semi-delirious nightmare state, which may be seen [\[here\]](#). It's delightfully soft and comforting.

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