



Stalked by the Giant: An M/M Fairytale Romance (Once Upon A Time)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Jackson's world is on the brink of collapse. In a desperate attempt to save his livelihood, he stumbles upon a mysterious opportunity: seeds that promise to grant his every need. With nothing to lose, he accepts the offer and climbs the massive stalk that promises freedom of ruin at its peak. Facing his curiosity head-on, Jackson discovers a gargantuan land teeming with unimaginable wonders. A land that holds the promise of saving his farm and restoring his prosperity. Little does he know, this enchanted realm is also home to Barrett, an alluring man with a hidden past and access to powerful magic.

Barrett wants a way to return home. A way he gladly takes in the handsome farmer who came from below. Drawn together by fate, Jackson and Barrett form an unlikely alliance, that doesn't shatter when they find themselves victim to the same giant king that stole Barrett years ago. Together, they think they can flee and save both their worlds – one in the sky, one down below.

The pair faces a stark choice: remain in a land that clings to ashes or embrace the unknown and redefine their destinies. Together, they must confront their deepest fears, overcome impossible odds, and rewrite the fate of two realms while ignoring the passion building between them every step of the way.

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ONE

Jackson swore as a lick of pain streaked through him, his back bent, as he planted the last of the season's seeds in the parched ground, hoping that this year would be different. The Walker family farm had been in his bloodline for generations, and he couldn't bear to be the one to let it go under.

The land, his land, was a tapestry of tilled earth and it whispered stories of generations that toiled upon it. His calloused hands and strained muscles, were testaments to his devotion, and harked back to his ancestors.

The farm was not just a livelihood.

It was his legacy.

Last season's plight, however, was etched deeply into the furrows and ridges of the land. Winter had been a harsh mistress blanketing the soil with a heavy, suffocating snow that refused to melt until well into what should've been spring. The delayed thaw had given way to a spring that was mercilessly dry, the rainfall merely a miser's drop.

The crops had suffered—corn stalks stunted, wheat thin and spindly. They rustled with a dry, crackling laugh in the wind, mocking Jackson's perseverance. His bank account ached like the drought-ridden earth, the financial strain almost too palpable.

This season, as winter approached, Jackson was in no better of a place.

Yet, standing there, silhouetted against the twilight sky, Jackson's eyes held a fire that not even the most barren winter could smother. Resolve tightened his jaw. His farm was not going to fall—his heritage would not be reduced to dust and empty stalks.

Wiping sweat from his brow, he squinted up at the ominous clouds churning in the sky above. The weatherman hadn't predicted a storm, but the unpredictability of the weather these days made it hard to trust forecasts.

With a sigh, he straightened his aching spine and trudged back to the red barn.

As he passed the tumbledown barn, Jackson's thoughts drifted back to his late grandfather, who'd always said, "Jackson, this farm was ours for the taking. It will never steer you wrong so long as you do right by it."

Jackson chuckled bitterly. "Yeah, right, Gramps. All I'm getting from this land is a headache."

The screen door of his farmhouse creaked and clapped shut, a defiant drum in the quiet evening. "Jackson! Supper's ready!" Aunt Marie's voice was as warm and comforting as the quilt she'd hand-sewn him when he was a boy.

Only then did he realize he left a field unchecked. "In a minute, Aunt Marie!" he called back, a gentle twang in his voice, one honed by the land he stood upon. "Just gotta check on the north field real quick!"

Turning back on his foot, Jackson moved to check the field he'd missed during his mumbling complaints. His boots sucked at the mud as he moved to the closest field — a sign that perhaps the desperate prayers for rain had been heard—as he trudged towards the last stretch of green land that clung to life. He knew some of the brightness would have drained from his blue eyes had anyone been watching him.

"Dammit," he murmured, kneading his forehead with gritty fingers.

The north field was no better than the rest. He knelt, cradling a wilted soybean plant in his hand that no longer stood on its own out of the ground. The leaves were a sickly yellow, its edges brown and curled like old paper.

Plucking one as if it could be fine inside the withered wrapper, Jackson peeled it open and popped the miserably small bean into his mouth.

The bean was tasteless. There was no juice, no life, in it.

The pre-grown beans he cheated with and planted last week stood out like sore thumbs - they were already shriveled, their vines turning brown and brittle. He pulled one out of the ground, inspecting its wrinkled form.

"This isn't right," he muttered, feeling the texture with his rough hands.

Moving down to the next crop marking, Jackson knelt down to check on the corn that typically grew strong here.

The vibrant green stalks were long gone, replaced by brittle brown ones that crunched under his touch. They'd not sprouted in fall, and with winter coming, he wasn't looking at a random late harvest. Not from this corn. The roots seemed to cling on to life, but even they couldn't withstand the harsh weather any longer.

It wasn't just his bank account that was withering away.

It was hope, too.

His family's legacy was slipping through his fingers like sand in an hourglass, each grain representing another desperate attempt to keep his head above water financially.

Failure didn't scare him - he had endured plenty of those in his thirty-one years of life - but this time, it felt different.

This time, it threatened their entire way of life.

"There's gotta be something else," he whispered, almost in prayer, to the soil that seemed to cry out for salvation just as he did.

Taking a deep breath, Jackson rose, brushing the wet dirt from his knees. Hannah, his loyal Border Collie, sidled up beside him, nuzzling his hand with a whimper. It was as if even the dog sensed the gravity of their situation.

Jackson managed a smile for his four-legged companion as if it would make a difference, and scratched her behind her ears. Her quiet pants were comforting and grounding. "We'll figure this out, girl."

Somehow.

He had tried everything he could think of to save his crops.

Newly dug irrigation ditches.

Fancy fertilizer.

Even fancier feed, even though crops didn't actually need it.

But nothing seemed to help. The once lush fields now resembled a wasteland; cracked earth and dry stalks swaying in the wind like ghosts of the bounty they once were.

He stood up with the weight of the world on his shoulders as he trudged towards the

next marker, the last in the north field.

The potato crop wasn't faring any better. Twisted vines snaked through the dirt with barely any spuds left to harvest. He kicked a rock on his way, wishing he could release some of the frustration that threatened to boil over. He tried not to dwell on how empty their pantry would be after this season ended or how much debt they'd accumulated trying to stay afloat during these recent hard winters and dry springs, but it was hard when there were failing crops as far as the eye could see.

Ambling back towards the farmhouse, the colors of sunset seemed to paint a new promise on the canvas of the sky. Jackson's heart clung to one thing, his determination not to let those who came before him down. He would find a solution. He would save his farm.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the red flag up on the tiny mailbox at the end of the walk to the main house. The mailman had come and gone within just the last hour, which meant Dan snuck bad news into the mailbox because he was a chatterbox.

It opened and spilled out more mail than he ever wanted to deal with. Reaching in, he grabbed the stack, his eyes going to the piece of mail on top.

He recognized the crisp embossed text on the envelope: it was a bill from the bank. A heavy feeling settled in his stomach as he pulled out the envelope, his hands shaking as he opened it up. It took only a glance to know that this was not good news; there were numbers here, many of them, and none of them were kind. His farm was sinking deeper into debt with each passing day, and it seemed like there was no end in sight. But he wouldn't give up. He couldn't give up.

Now his slow amble was more a pathetic trudge back to the house with the weight of the world on his shoulders once again, he couldn't help but taste the bitterness of

failure in his mouth. Everything around him seemed to mirror that bitter taste - the parched earth beneath his boots, the dying crops that wilted under his gaze, even the cool breeze that blew against his sweaty skin had an edge to it now. The sun was setting, casting long shadows across the fields, painting them with hues of red and orange and purple that served as a stark contrast to Jackson's mood.

The door opened without a creak. Nothing was dying inside just because the farm failed to thrive. Without looking outside, one could almost believe the Walker Farm held strong in the harsh, fucked up climate humans seemed to create with their pollution.

"You can't keep stayin' out there," his aunt tsked, her blue eyes soft with concern.

"What good am I doing in here?"

She scoffed and set her hands on her hips. "The same good you're doing out there."

There was no fighting with his aunt, not because she was right but because, like any good Midwesterner, she could argue until she was blue in the face while knowing she was wrong.

"Yes, Ma'am."

She smiled, obviously happy with her victory. "Come on then, it's time for supper. Tomorrow is a new day and those clouds look right as rain. Besides, maybe then you can look at taking care of yourself and not just this land."

Jackson dropped down in the wooden chairs that had been the kitchen table in this house since before he was born.

"Do you miss them?" The question came out of the blue as he thought about taking

care of himself.

His aunt nodded, knowing he referred to her husband and his parents. All three had been killed over a decade ago in the fire that scorched the land and started the beginning of his problems.

Problems that left him with no time to do fill the halls of this house with life.

The quiet didn't bother him, he enjoyed it after the beating sun all day, but he knew his aunt wanted these halls filled with family.

And while Jackson couldn't give her a family without some help, he'd always imagined adopting a kid or two with his husband and living on the land just as his family had always done.

Something that will never happen if you don't fix the fucking land.

Supper was a quiet affair. Marie's home-cooked meals were usually a time for laughter and recounting the day's labor, but tonight, forks scraped against plates, and glances were traded over the dwindling steam of mashed potatoes and roast chicken. The tension could be cut with a knife, but no one dared address it.

Jackson's gaze lifted to the photo on the wall. His parents, forever smiling, forever youthful, seemed to watch over them. They would thankfully never know the danger their legacy was in. It fueled his resolve to keep the farm that had been his family's pride for centuries.

Marie's voice broke through his thoughts. "You thought any more about the Miller's offer for the back forty acres?"

Jackson shook his head, chasing a pea with his fork. "No, I can't do it. That's the

heart of the farm, Marie.”

”But the money, Jack?—”

He looked up, a small, wry smile on his face. ”We”ll find another way. I didn”t haul hay before I could walk just to sell off the best of what we got.”

Marie reached over, placing her hand on his. ”I know you”ll figure it out. You always do.”

The night crept fully in as dinner ended. Jackson offering to clean up as Marie retreated to her knitting. Alone in the kitchen, he watched the steam rise from the sink, ghost-like in appearance, and allowed himself a moment to close his eyes, to find that quiet center of grit within him.

Outside, the crickets began their nightly serenade, the stars blinked into existence, and somewhere in the distance, a coyote cried—a wild, lonely sound that resonated with the ache he felt. The serenity of nature stood in stark contrast to the storm within.

But tomorrow was a new day. And Jackson would rise with the sun, just as he always did. Resilient. Unyielding. Because it wasn”t just a farm he was fighting for—it was a legacy.

And legacies don”t die easy.

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TWO

Agroan echoed through the cavernous chamber as Barrett sloshed the sudsy water, scrubbing the stained floors of his stepfather's hall. Each sweep of the brush over helplessly dirty stone was punctuated by the sighing of the wind, as if even the air shared in his weariness.

Barrett stood alone in the great hall of the giant's castle - though it more often felt like a damn villain's lair. His chest heaved as he tried to force himself to work through the dense humidity that sat on his chest like a boulder.

He could practically taste the fear and despair that permeated every corner of this dark domain. It coated his tongue like bitterness at the back of his throat. Even the smallest movements felt laborious under the watchful gaze of grotesque tapestries depicting giants' triumphs and humans' plights. It didn't matter that they sat as high in the sky as his own true kingdom, the giant's domain was cloaked with death and darkness.

This was his punishment for not accepting the marriage proposal his captor shoved at him. He would never marry a woman – giant or otherwise, but especially not a giant. It didn't matter that his magic allowed him to grow items at will.

With trembling fingers, Barrett lifted a brush to continue his chores, determined not to give the man who stole him another reason to torment him further.

Dust motes danced in shafts of sunlight filtering through grimy windows and cast eerie shadows across the marble floor—a stark contrast to the warmth and light he

remembered from his childhood home. Unbidden memories flashed before his eyes.

Sumptuous feasts.

Royal pageantry.

Laughter echoing through the halls.

It pained him to think about what could have been if not for the fateful night when his kingdom was invaded by giants. Giants who, for some reason, did nothing more than destroy some land and steal him away to this godforsaken palace.

When he closed his eyes, the memories always came to haunt him. Of giants stomping across the land, shaking it with more force than should have been possible. The burnt umber of fire would fill his nose in the dream, and then nothingness swallowed him whole because he'd not been awake by the time the giants stole him.

Every day he woke up with the same vision in his mind only to be disappointed— his old bedchamber in his father's castle, the scent of lavender and roses from his mother's rose garden seeping through the silk sheets. Now all he had was straw and stone, and the rancid breath of his stepfather lingering in the air.

The routine was wearing thin. Like a piece of rough fabric rubbing against raw skin, the day to day as a servant prince of a land he didn't belong in hurt. He longed for something more—something wild and untamed that would set him free from this dreary life.

A memory tugged at him—a memory of home—and he couldn't help but wonder what lay beyond those clouds hovering just beyond his grasp. Couldn't help but think just how far his home would be if he started to run. But even as he dreamt, he knew he couldn't ignore reality for long. The giant who called himself his father was

watching him like a hawk, always ready to pounce on any signs of rebellion or resistance.

The giant never gave a reason for what he did. He treated Barrett like a possession, a gift he received not stole.

Setting the mop back in the bucket, Barrett held it tight as he bent to grab the metal handle.

"Next room," he grumbled.

The rhythm of Barrett's footsteps echoed through the dank and dreary cell he called home, his heart heavy with frustration for yet another day spent trapped.

One darkened corner of his mind whispered that there must be more to life than this, that dreams and ambition could still flourish if he could only get home.

His bare feet sank into the cold stone floor, each step marking off another lap in his agitated pacing. The torches flickered like living things, casting shadows that danced and writhed around him, while the walls seemed to close in tighter with every turn.

Escaping this suffocating existence was all Barrett could think about—returning to his kingdom, reunited with his true family, who waited on the other side of the clouds.

Amidst the quiet murmur of his steps, Barrett's gaze drifted upwards to where the beams of sunlight peeked through a high barred window, casting diamond dust across the floor.

The stench of damp earth mixed with cooking food off in the kitchens filled his nostrils, as it always did at this time of day. He stopped mid-step, hand trembling

slightly as he held onto the magical ring hidden beneath his threadbare tunic.

Its warmth seeped into his skin, reminding him there were powers yet undiscovered in this world beneath the clouds. He took a deep breath, tasting on the back of his tongue memories of sunlit meadows and fresh mountain air.

His eyes sparkled at thoughts of what could be back home. Of the castles towering over verdant hills, and sky-whales soaring above. Of bards weaving stories about heroes who rose above their circumstances, and most importantly. . .freedom.

”Barrett!”

The giant’s voice thundered through the stone halls, causing the very foundations of the castle to shake with each syllable. The shout echoed off the walls and shook dust off the centuries old cobwebs dangling in the air in the corners.

Barrett swallowed hard, his heart racing as he turned to face his tormentor. A mountain of a man towered over him, leering with knuckles white as he gripped a rusty lock poker menacingly. He didn’t wear his battle armor, but it did little to hide the imposing beast he was.

”Hurry up with that mopping. It’s not going to finish itself!” The giant appeared on the final word, his imposing form never failing to make Barrett take a step back.

The giant was a monolithic figure, towering over Barrett even in his adulthood. His massive hands were as big as ax-heads and they flexed and unflexed as if readying for a grip on prey. The stale beer poured out as the creature breathed, leftovers from the giant’s revelry last night.

Sunlight streamed in from high barred windows, casting the beast’s shadow across the cold stone floor like a dark stain.

He wore armor made from bones and leather and adorned swords and shields - trophies from his past conquests swords. Even the gnarled horn from some unknown creature hung ominously from his belt. Once thought to be elegantly crafted, now it was marred by dirt and age.

The giant stepped closer to Barrett, lifting an eyebrow expectantly as he scrutinized every movement.

"Come now, boy," the giant growled slowly as Barrett steeled himself for another day of servitude under this brute's watchful eye. "We both know you shouldn't keep your stepfather waiting."

Barrett clutched his heart at the word "stepfather", feeling bile rise in his throat every time it passed those giant lips. This man had claimed him as family since he was taken so long ago; it was an insult to anyone who knew better. With calculated steps, he moved towards the bucket of water sitting near a puddle on the ground - their only source for cleaning supplies down here below ground. He could hear chatter above, giants going about their day terrorizing another land.

Stifling a moan, he only dared to let out a hushed breath of frustration. "Yes, Father. Almost finished," he replied with deference that tasted like ash on his tongue. When he didn't call the giant that, the man often flew into a fit of rage.

"This isn't at the pace I expect from you," the giant grumbled, his voice a deep tremor. "You've been slacking, Boy. Don't think I don't notice. Be grateful I took you in after your mother's passing."

The mention of his mother tightened Barrett's grip on the brush, his knuckles tinged white. His mother didn't pass. The giant killed her during the attack. "I am grateful, Father," he lied, every syllable dripping with a resignation that had become second nature.

The giant's footsteps, as loud as thunder, heralded his departure, leaving Barrett to his task and his thoughts. The emptiness of the great hall echoed with the distant peals of laughter from the giant's minions, the raucous amusement making Barrett's heart ache for freedom.

Alone again, Barrett allowed himself a slither of hope, a dangerous whisper within him stirring. "One day," he breathed to the walls, who knew his pain far too well, "someone will come for me, someone who sees me as more than just a mere servant or a forgotten prince. Don't let your mind wander to foolish fantasies," he chided himself, the rhythmic splash of water an unkind reminder of his reality.

A cool draft swept through the chamber, and Barrett shivered, the chill reaching into his very soul. Clutching the aquamarine ring on his right hand—a gift from his late mother—he whispered a plea into the darkness. "Help me find a way out."

Just as the final sentence fell from his lips, the ground shook with a quake that was not of this realm. Barrett paused, his heart thudding in his chest. Was this a sign, a response to his prayer?

Then, as quickly as it came, the moment passed, leaving Barrett with nothing but the silent stone and his ever-present longing for a life beyond the clouds.

He resumed scrubbing, a chorus of sobs hidden in the swish of the brush, and the rhythmic beat of his trapped heart.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

"There must be more than this," Barrett muttered to himself. "There has to be. . ."

"Talking to yourself again, Boy?" The mocking tone was sharp against Barrett's ears as he turned to see the giant's sneer.

"It's nothing, Father," Barrett quickly replied, ducking his head and hiding the flicker of rebellion in his eyes. The word was like acid on his tongue but he long ago learned the giant would torment him if he didn't add it.

"You need to stay focused on your duties." The giant's voice bellowed across the chamber, a warning wrapped in a scowl. "Dreaming will get you nowhere."

With a guttural hum, Barrett acknowledged his stepfather's words and watched as the giant retreated once more, each step a cacophony of creaks and groans from the ancient floorboards.

"I will find my way," Barrett mouthed silently, his hands persisting in their endless task. But within him, a flame flickered—a defiant hope that refused to be snuffed out by the suffocating clutches of his stepfather's kingdom.

As the day waned and shadows stretched across the hall with grasping fingers, Barrett clenched the ring once more. The soft glow cast by the setting sun kissed the stone, bathing Barrett in a light that spoke of promises yet to be fulfilled.

In the privacy of the fading light, Barrett allowed himself the smallest of laughter, a sound that should have been joyous but was instead weighted with sorrow.

The sound was a quiet thing, barely disturbing the silence, but it was a declaration of sorts. A vow that, though he was bound by fate and blood, Barrett would not be held captive forever.

And so, with night descending like a curtain on another day's toils, Barrett dreamed yet again of salvation. Of a hero from afar who would climb to the clouds and release him from this gilded cage.

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THREE

Jackson's worn out boots clicked against the cobblestone of the market square as he navigated his way through the bustling crowd of one of the Midwest's many farmer's markets. Each step was heavy, the weight of his burden apparent with every movement as he looked to do the unthinkable - sell a farm pet in hopes the buyer treated it well.

Every step could have brought him one step closer to relief. Instead, only dread filled his heart as he stared off at the market's already bustling commerce center.

The sweet scent of freshly baked pastries wafted through the air, mingling with the earthy smell of livestock and the salty tang of something he didn't want to identify in the distance. A few more steps, and he would be in the thick of it with no turning back.

A cacophony of voices filled Jackson's ears, a mix of vendors calling out their wares and people haggling over prices. The gentle jingling of coins exchanged hands, mingled with the rustling of fabric and paper as people browsed through stalls laden with colorful fruits and vegetables, freshly baked breads and pastries, handcrafted trinkets, and livestock on display.

The smell of different spices assaulted his nose at every turn—garlic from the produce stand down the lane, fish from the nearby dock where boats unloaded their catches for sale. Despite the chaos around him, there was an underlying rhythm to it all—a beat that pulsed in time with the town's heartbeat.

The sun peeked from behind dark storm clouds, casting long shadows as if daring them to play hide and seek with its warmth. Winter was still holding on, keeping each day as cold as the last. He'd already felt a few snowflakes kiss his cheeks earlier in the week and knew winter would not soon relinquish her icy grip.

Every year, it seemed like another struggle for survival—for both him and his crops. But this year would be different, he thought, stuffing down any fears or doubts about their future.

He spotted a woman with dark brown hair and clothes more mud-covered than not, haggling with a fruit vendor over what looked to be a very mealy apple. He couldn't blame her for wanting to take the price down.

The market was a hive of activity the further into it he went, with people haggling over produce, animals lowing and mooing, children laughing, and vendors calling out their wares.

With his weathered boots digging into the ground, Jackson led his plump pig, Mavis, along the path that wound towards the stalls.

The animal huffed apprehensively, sensing a change coming.

"Easy, girl," Jackson coaxed. "It's for the best."

He pushed through the crowd toward an old farmer he recognized from one of his regular visits to this market. The man had seemed trustworthy enough before when they'd talked about mutual interests in crops and farming techniques. It stood to reason he'd take Mavis and just let her be used for breeding and not meat.

As Jackson approached him now, he saw that familiar face light up in recognition before turning serious once he realized what Jackson sought—a deal for more than just

conversation this time around.

The farmer held a middle-aged woman's hand, who appeared afraid of the bustling market. She clung onto her husband's arm as if afraid to let go during all the noise and commotion around them. Her eyes darted between her spouse and Jackson, wondering what business could bring these two men together on such a busy day at the market.

Jackson tethered Mavis to a post outside a stall and approached a neighboring farmer. "Tom, how goes it?" he greeted.

"Better than you, I would imagine. Can't imagine why you haven't converted that old land of yours to meat livestock—or at least, dairy."

"That is a bit of why I'm here." He cast a glance back at the hefty pink sow he'd known since she was born.

A pang in his chest nearly stopped him, but Mavis was the best shot they had at getting some funds for the week.

"I'd like to sell you Mavis - providing you don't use her as anything other than a breeding sow."

Tom scratched at his graying beard, his eyes moving from Jackson to where Mavis was tied up outside the stall.

"Can't do it, son. While I know you wouldn't do me wrong, it's hard to swallow buying something from a failing farm."

His heart sank. "Yeah, that's what I expect to hear a lot of, worry that the crops feeding my livestock are tainted."

"I'm really sorry, Jackson. There's lots of newcomers here today. They won't have my worries."

Nodding, Jackson walked away without another word. His farm was spoiled goods even when he was trying to sell something other than crops.

"Looks like you are stuck with dried and dying grass a little longer." He pat Mavis on the head as he untied her. "I was trying to help us both out."

Mavis gave a little snort, as if letting him know she wasn't angry with him.

A murmuring from the stall over drew Jackson's attention. Five men stood damn near huddled inside the stall's entrance, blocking Jackson's view from whatever the product was.

"Magical beans, huh?" one of the men snorted, disbelief etched into his weathered face. "What do they grow—gold nuggets?"

A thin, wiry man at the stall, with a cloak that seemed too grand for the dusty marketplace, grinned. "Not gold, good sir. They grow opportunities, marvels beyond your wildest dreams."

The group erupted into chuckles with damn near all of them shaking their head.

"Keep your laughter!" The man spoke again. "Haven't you ever heard the story about the farmer who grew a beanstalk that led to a world where all their troubles were solved?"

Everyone erupted into louder laughter; some doubled over with amusement.

"No way! Who would fall for such nonsense?" Barked Tony Dee.

Jackson couldn't help but overhear, his ears perking up at the mention of a beanstalk.

"Well, I know a fool who did," the man added with a wink towards Jackson when their eyes met.

The crowd erupted again into laughter, but Jackson couldn't help but smile at their camaraderie. This was something he hadn't experienced much lately. People were too worried about their own struggles to take time out for others. It wasn't money, but it did pay him in another way.

"So, there was this old farmer who found this magical bean plant that grew overnight and promised riches beyond belief," continued the seller before pausing dramatically, "But you'll have to buy these magic beans if you want to find out for yourself."

Jackson edged nearer, the words tantalizing him despite his doubts.

"Excuse me," he called out to the cloaked man, who turned to him with an eyebrow raised. "These magical beans, what do they actually do?"

The cloaked man's eyes sparkled with hidden knowledge—or was it mischief? "Ah, another skeptic? These are not your ordinary beans, farmer. Plant them, and your needs shall be met. Your sorrows are forgotten. But I must warn you, the realm they take you to is as perilous as it is prosperous."

The murmurs from the crowd softened to whispers. The laughter had died down now, as if the seriousness of the tone reached them through their amusement.

Jackson's heart raced as he listened intently to the old man's words. He could almost taste the hope on his tongue, a sweet and bitter flavor that filled his senses like honey.

He was used to taking risks, after all. It was part of being a farmer in this harsh

land—but this felt different somehow. This felt like destiny pushing him forward.

He took a deep breath, feeling the chill in the air fill his lungs before escaping in a soft sigh. The scent of freshly baked bread from the bakery across the street mingled with the earthy smell of damp soil from his farm. It was an intoxicating mix that reminded him of home.

Home...

He shook his head to clear his thoughts and turned back to the cloaked man.

"And what's the price for risking these so-called perils?" Jackson asked, torn between his disbelief and the weight of his current plight.

"For you, a price of one honest smile and a promise," the cloaked man proposed with a theatrical flair, holding out a singular, tiny bean between his thumb and forefinger. "Promise to pursue what you find with heart and valor, and I will give you three."

Jackson's eyes narrowed, but the promise of respite for his farm lured him in. With a conflicted grin that bordered on a grimace, Jackson reached out and took the seeds. "Alright, I'll bite. . . or plant, as it were."

The man's lips curled into a satisfied smile. "An excellent choice. Remember, plant it under the crescent moon and prepare for a journey that will change your course forever."

"Jackson," Tom called out with a wary look. "You don't believe in that hogwash, do ya?"

The small leather satchel was cool and heavy in his hand as if they held more weight than just their monetary value.

"After sunset, dig a hole deep enough for a seedling, drop one in, cover it up with dirt, and water it with your tears," the enigmatic man replied cryptically before disappearing into the crowd, leaving Jackson standing there alone with his heart racing and head spinning.

FOUR

The day waned and faded into evening's gentle embrace before Jackson made it back to Walker Farm. The waxing silver moon seemed to call him, like a celestial smile in the sky, promising the insanity of these beans would work.

Under the cloak of night, he sought out a small patch of soil, a glimmer of hope in the darkness. Even in the dull light of the moon, he could tell that it was not as dry as all the others, and it was quite a bit closer to the house.

"For better or worse, Mavis," he murmured to himself as he gently pressed the seed into the earth with careful fingers. He smoothed the dirt over the top and looked back at Mavis, who still was inside the car, her head out the open window, showing off what appeared to be a smile on her snout.

The pig, his only companion at the moment, let out a gentle snort, almost as if she understood the weight of his words.

Jackson's heart hammered with uncertainty, and yet, the deed was done. He wasn't certain what it meant to water it with his tears, but storms were often perceived to be the god's crying, and a storm was absolutely coming.

As if summoned by the silly deed, lightning cracked across the sky like the whip of a celestial being, followed by thunder that boomed like the world's outcry. As the heavens opened, pouring rain upon the land, Jackson rushed to the car, threw the door open, and lifted Mavis.

Tonight, she was going to sleep inside.

With the next crack of thunder, Jackson knew getting to the barn safely was going to be too much of a risk.

The door flew open with ease and his aunt stared at him and Mavis, a crooked smirk on her lips.

"I made certain the animals were all away when the clouds came rolling in. Couldn't get the damn barn door locked, though." She glanced at Mavis then. "So, you didn't sell her, and she's sleepin' in here, then?"

Jackson chuckled as he set Mavis down. "Something like that."

He could have told her about the seeds, but she would merely think he'd lost his damn mind.

But it didn't cost a cent.

Which is a sure sign it won't work.

Jackson scratched just above his ear and sighed. "There's something I tried. I'll tell you more about it if it works."

"Nothing ominous there," Marie clucked and wagged a finger at Mavis. "Don't you eat the stuffing out of my couch, you hear?"

Mavis, for her part, gave a small grunt.

"I'm going to bed, you'd best do the same soon. There could be animals to find in the morning when the storm passes."

He gave a nod and watched as his aunt meandered up the stairs across the way. It was an odd roommate, but she belonged on the land and couldn't live in the house on the opposite side alone. It was too big for her.

Sighing, Jackson walked to the fridge and tugged it open. Grabbing a beer, Jackson dropped into his usual chair and watched as the storm came pummeling down.

The rain poured down steadily, drowning out the world with a soothing sound as if to wash away all the woes and troubles Jackson had been facing.

Trees swayed violently, trying desperately not to be uprooted, while others snapped under pressure from forces beyond their control. It was both beautiful and terrifying all at once. An untamed force beyond his comprehension, but also something that held promise of change if harnessed correctly.

A small fire crackled in the hearth, casting flickering shadows on the walls, making him somehow seem less alone. As the flames danced and the rain poured down, a strange sensation overcame him. As if time had slowed or maybe stopped and then sped up rapidly. The only movement seemed to be the rain and wind howling through the farm outside.

Lightning arced across the sky once more, illuminating the room in stark contrasts of light and dark, revealing dust particles dancing in the air like tiny fairies at play. He felt drawn to look out of the window but resisted as best he could until he found himself standing behind a thin curtain, observing nature's fury firsthand.

This rain could've saved me the embarrassment of those damn seeds.

Thunder rumbled as if to answer, so loud the ground shook path as rain pelted against rooftops, turning them into drum kits played by some heavenly band.

The storm grew stronger and all Jackson could think about was the tiny seed - one of three - likely washed away.

"Nothing like watching a pot boil. And why do I even think it'll grow overnight?" Sighing, he rose, beer unopened, and went to bed.

Jackson awoke abruptly, gasping for air, heart pounding in his chest like a jackhammer on caffeine. Images he couldn't quite see hung at the vestiges of his mind as sleep faded.

It took him a moment to remember where he was and why he felt like this. Rain hammered the roof above him, echoing in the small bedroom of his farmhouse.

Throwing off the covers, Jackson moved to the window, curious what damage the storm may have done.

The rain had soaked the ground, leaving behind only muddy footprints from his earlier inspection. He squinted against the downpour, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

The bean!

Wiping sleep from his eyes, he stumbled to get dressed but was awake before he made it down the stairs to put on some boots and a coat before heading outside into the chaos that used to be a serene farm.

The wind tugged at him like an unyielding force determined to push him back inside, but Jackson walked against it anyway, toward the spot where the seeds were planted.

The ground squelched underfoot as he rushed toward the closest patch of tilled earth.

His eyes darted frantically, looking for any sign of movement or change that disrupted the seed.

Puddles filled every corner of his yard, making muddy prints where he stepped. There was so much mud, including a muddy circle right where he had planted one of those strange seeds.

"Of course, the one thing I tried that was crazy ended exactly as it should." Snarling, Jackson slammed the toe of his boot into the earth where the seed had likely washed away from.

As his boot sunk into the soft ground, a rumble under his feet made him spring back.

The earth trembled violently as the stalk shot upwards, sending ripples through the land that knocked over fences and barrels, cracking open the hardened soil like an eggshell beneath a sledgehammer.

Trees at the perimeter of the drive up the house that stood at least twelve feet tall were now dwarfed by the gargantuan stalk.

A cloud of mud spat into the air, blocking Jackson's view of the insanity that continued around him for just a moment.

The sky above darkened as if night had fallen prematurely, casting ominous shadows over everything as the dust cloud started to settle.

Jackson stood there, mouth agape at what he was witnessing—a beanstalk reaching upwards towards the clouds. It seemed to defy all logic and reason, stretching high above him like a spindly finger pointing towards heaven itself. The vines writhed and twisted around each other as they grew, forming an intricate network of tendrils that snaked their way through every obstacle in their path. The sound of cracking wood

filled the air as the stalk shattered fence posts and bulldozed its way across the farmyard.

It didn't take long before it pierced through the clouds overhead, disappearing into the ethereal realm above them. A soft glow emanated from within the stalk, illuminating everything in an eerie blue light that danced across Jackson's face.

"Woah," Jackson managed, his voice a whisper lost amidst the groan of the widening stalk as it climbed into the abyss above.

The trembling ceased, and the world lay still around the gigantic plant, save for the soft hum of bugs that always came post-storm serenading the sun.

The rain had stopped.

He couldn't help but feel drawn to the plant, as if some primal part of him knew what lay at its summit. His heart raced with anticipation at what he might find. Was there really a world beyond these clouds? Was there an answer to his family's struggles hidden among those rolling mists?

Reaching out, Jackson's hand brushed against the rough, vine-covered surface. With an exhale that was part moan, part sigh, Jackson grasped the stalk and, driven by a mix of desperation and thrill, began to climb.

Up and up Jackson went, the beanstalk spiraling toward the heavens. Each step was a challenge, but Jackson's years of farm work made him nimble and strong. The vines were slick with the rain it burst up through, but he held on tight—his grip as sure as his resolve to find a better life for himself and his family. The air grew colder, crisp and fresh in his lungs. He could feel the staircase-like trunk twisting beneath his feet as he ascended higher and higher.

The rustling and creaking of the vine under Jackson's boots as he climbed up the beanstalk were almost soothing to his aching muscles.

He kept going, higher and higher, driven by a curiosity that grew stronger with each step. The cold air nipped at his skin, making him shiver as he ascended. The journey felt like an eternity, but he didn't care. He had to know what waited for him at the top.

Without warning, his fingers slipped against the slick bark as sweat dripped into his eyes - stinging like rainwater meeting with freshly cut grass beneath a harsh sun. Despite the discomfort, he kept climbing.

Finally, after what felt like hours, Jackson reached the summit. With one last push, he pulled himself onto the cloud-like platform that served as the top of the beanstalk. Its softness cushioned his fall as he landed on all fours, gasping for breath from the exertion and excitement.

Before him stretched a world unlike anything he could have ever imagined - a floating sky island bathed in an otherworldly glow cast by thousands upon thousands of gleaming lights that seemed to float in mid-air.

A sky full of floating islands enveloped in soft, shimmering clouds that stretched out as far as the eye could see. The vibrant colors assaulted his vision like a rainbow-hued painting come alive. Pinks, purples, blues and yellows swirling around him in intricate patterns. He stood atop the world on a cloud, dumbfounded at the beauty before him.

Slowly, Jackson took it all in. A towering castle perched on fluffy clouds. A castle made of crystal that shimmered like diamonds in the sunlight that appeared to be resting on the clouds themselves.

Spinning in awe, Jackson nearly shrieked when his eyes landed on what must have been a small garden. Though small was relative because this garden could have only been grown to please a giant.

Gigantic fruits and vegetables hung heavy on their vines, dwarfing the ones he could ever grow in his humble plot of land. The air was filled with the faint scent of freshly cut grass and rich earth despite appearing to be on the clouds themselves. Jackson stepped closer, his boots sinking into the soft moss beneath his feet as he approached the edge of the platform. A carrot as big as a tree trunk poked out from between two leafy plants, its greenness sharp against the pale sky.

He reached out to touch it, feeling its rough texture beneath his fingers before yanking it out of the soil and testing its weight with a grunt. It was as if someone had shrunk him down to make this world seem bigger. Every item in this obviously magical garden was massive!

His heart raced with anticipation mixed with fear as he explored further, expecting something to come charging at him at any moment.

But no such creature or person came. So, he picked more.

Tomatoes as big as beach balls, cucumbers longer than he was tall, and potatoes large enough to feed every animal on his farm for a week.

With each plucked item, Jackson's excitement grew. Maybe this could save them after all? Maybe there was hope for his family's farm after all?

A loud crunch echoed through the garden as Jackson bit into a sweet red apple that tasted sweeter than anything from any market stall. Juice ran unchecked down his chin, and he smiled wide at his discovery.

These fruits and vegetables will fetch quite a penny down there.

As the sun began its descent, the sky transformed into a breathtaking canvas of deepening colors - vibrant blues melting into rich violets. The fading light cast a golden glow on his carefully arranged collection, each item positioned with precise attention to detail. He watched as shadows stretched across the landscape, signaling the arrival of dusk and the end of another day.

"I can't even take all of this, what the hell was I doing all day?" Jackson looked around at the harvest. "Tomorrow then. I'll return tonight and set boxes out along the stalk. I'll start climbing before the sun is out. I can shove these miraculous items down and we'll never be hungry again.

The descent was a welcomed change from the arduous ascent, with gravity now aiding his journey instead of hindering it. His feet easily found footing on the gradual slope as they made their way down.

The air felt lighter and fresher, and the weight of his burdens seemed to lessen with each step. He moved with a newfound ease, grateful for the assistance of gravity on their journey until he was once again at the bottom.

Jackson's boots met the soil with a muted thud, and he leaned against the beanstalk's girth, envisioning the bustling market, the jesting men, and the man who gifted him the seed.

"It wasn't a lie. A giant stalk grew, and what's up there ... it will change everything."

Barks filled the air as a trio of the farm's dogs rushed to him, tails wagging and tongues flopping out of their mouths. Paws slammed against him, nearly knocking him backward into the stalk.

”Now, now. We’ll play later. For now I need to work and rest.”

The day’s adventure felt like a dream, yet the musky scent of damp earth and the familiarity of his farm reminded him it was all too real. The moon hung low in the sky, casting an eerie glow over the landscape - fields once barren now covered in a soft layer of mist that clung to his skin. Taking a deep breath, Jackson let the air fill his lungs, and glanced up at the beanstalk towering above him. It swayed gently against its connection to the clouds before disappearing into the darkening expanse above.

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FIVE

The giant's castle was filled with noise - the clattering of dishes, the murmur of voices, the thundering footsteps of giants going about their day. But high up in the tower, Barrett remained undisturbed.

He leaned on the railing on a balcony of the royal palace, watching the world below with hawk-like eyes. The cool breeze ruffled his dark hair as he stared at the giant intrusion into the cloud. His entire thoughts were focused on what had appeared over night, even though no one else seemed to take note.

A colossal beanstalk had emerged seemingly out of nowhere, its robust stem twisting and coiling its way upwards. The top stopped just a foot above the clouds, and it certainly had no business being here. The twisted vine was a darker green than any shade he'd seen before, and Barrett couldn't ignore the nagging curiosity about how it came to be.

How the giants hadn't seen it yet was beyond Barrett, but he'd watched all morning as two guards checked it out and then left, seemingly unconcerned with the giant plant invading their space.

And yet, they somehow rule most of this land.

Mesmerized, Barrett narrowed his eyes, squinting to see the source of the damn plant. Did it start below the clouds? Or did someone plant something directly into the plush ground of this kingdom? And in both circumstances, why?

To his shock, he spotted a tiny human figure, no larger than an ant to him at this distance, popping up from the clouds.

”Well, that answers where it came from. Definitely below.”

Barrett could go to the human, send him away from the realm. Or, he could watch the human and try to understand how he came to be here and why.

Or you can watch and see if there’s a way for you to leave the way he came.

Barrett continued to stare, watching as the human continued the climb to fully arrive above the cloud layer. His boots must have on the jagged bark, leaving small divots behind him. His strong arms pushed against the vine, pulling himself higher with each determined step. Sweat glistened on his forehead in the light of the sun despite the cool air around them. Barrett could almost taste the tang of exertion in the wind.

Watching the man was mesmerizing. Barrett found himself holding his own breath, afraid that if he made any noise, this moment would end.

Each handhold and foothold looked more precarious than the last. Each step seemed to defy gravity itself. And yet, the human just kept climbing.

Barrett’s gaze lingered on the beanstalk, entranced by the human climbing it. He wondered what thoughts filled the human’s head. If he was scared or brave, excited or merely adventurous. A gust of wind blew through his hair and caused him to close his eyes briefly before steeling himself against the chill.

Even from a short distance, Barrett could hear the audible ragged inhale the man took, thanks to a giant’s hearing. The man’s muscles rippled under his tattered shirt as he pulled himself upwards, revealing a body honed to perfection. A strap of leather wrapped around his waist, holding what must be tools or weapons, but Barrett wasn’t

able to tell.

It wasn't just his rugged features or strong physique, although those were certainly captivating.

It was something more.

There was an air of determination wrapped around the man that Barrett couldn't help but find fascinating. He seemed so strong, yet his stature as a human made him vulnerable by default.

The sun danced across his broad back as he hauled himself higher and higher until he jumped down and began to move directly toward the castle.

Barrett's heartbeat quickened as he watched from the tower.

Either this man was blind or incredibly stupid.

Every instinct in him screamed that this was a fool's errand, but something about the human made it impossible for him to look away.

Sweat trickled down the stranger's forehead and soaked through his shirt, leaving behind salty trails that caught the light of the setting sun. It made Barrett's mouth water to think of what the man must spend his days doing to hone his body in such a way. This man's body was cut with hard work and hands that knew how to hold on.

It had been years since he'd been with anyone and his sex drive wasn't letting up now. For over a decade, he'd serviced himself rather than dare let a giant touch him. And now it seemed to culminate in him peeping after a male he'd never met simply because he had strong arms and a sweaty sheen.

As Barrett stared toward the human man, he realized what he'd missed. Like a jolt, Barrett understood why he watched the male.

"If he came up, then there's a way down. A way away from the giant. And if he grew that plant, there's a way to grow it again closer to his old home." Barrett had never thought to try to grow anything to climb down before, but it was clear this man had something to do with the giant beanstalk.

With a furrowed brow and gritted teeth, Barrett clenched his fists and summoned all of his energy. The familiar tingling sensation prickled across his skin as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, channeling his magic with precision. Slowly, his body began to shrink, muscles contracting and bones shifting as he returned to his human size. The air around him seemed to ripple and distort as the transformation took place, until finally, he stood once again in his human form. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple, evidence of the immense effort it took to control such powerful magic.

The searing pain throbbed his bruised and battered body with every step, but he gritted his teeth and pressed on. His movements were slow and careful, like a tiny mouse scurrying through a maze of dark castle corridors. He stayed close to the walls, blending into the shadows and avoiding any watchful eyes that may be lurking. The musty smell of age and neglect filled his nostrils, a sharp contrast to the crisp air outside. The dimly lit torches cast flickering shadows on the stone walls, making it seem as though they were moving.

Barrett dodged a foot and said a silent prayer that a giant happened to be going out the same instant he needed to - except that meant the giant could bump into the human before Garrett fled.

He squeaked past the door and away from the enormous foot, skidding around the corner and pressing his back against the side of the castle. It had been some time since he'd been so small, and his heart raced with exertion.

Sure, he could have tried to leave as a giant and turn human once outside, but odds of his escape would have been slim.

"Except you don't know if the human left or where he is."

He scanned the area for any sign of the human, but all he could see were towering walls and looming giants. It seemed like an impossible task to find one person in such a vast and intimidating place.

"So, you go to where you think you saw him." The walk toward the garden could take over an hour in this current size, but he wasn't going to waste magic shifting back and forth.

His mother's magic was the only thing that kept him content when he was trapped. He was the stronger creature - he'd just never been trained to use it properly.

"Step one. Get to the human. Step two. Convince the human to take me down."

At the idea of the human going down a sinful image flickered through his mind of the muscular male on his knees before Barrett, lips opened wide.

"Step three. Get laid before returning home. It'll make me a much better prince."

Nodding as if to convince himself, Barrett pushed off the stone wall and started off toward the garden, knowing that he could only be gone so long before someone found him missing.

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SIX

"I wonder which I'll remember as harder," Jackson huffed as he yanked at a carrot until it launched him backward. "Scaling that damn stalk or pulling out the harvest."

Huffing, he wiped the back of his arm over his brow, trying to stop the drips of sweat from stinging his eyes.

Of course, he could slice into the fruits and vegetables - only take portions of them - but if he could throw it down in one piece, he could make a fortune. Not that he really believed anything would stay whole after falling from this height.

"Brilliant idea. Steal the giant food and pray I can chuck it past the clouds to the ground. Clouds I don't understand how I'm standing on, never mind how I expect to throw food through them. Cause it's not like I'm walking these back to the hole like I thought."

Standing, he ignored the throbbing starting in his left butt cheek and went back to the carrot.

"I can help you with that."

Jackson's eyes darted upright, shocked as hell that a human must live here.

A very handsome human.

Jackson let his gaze trail over the man who'd seemingly materialized out of thin air.

The stranger was unlike anyone Jackson ever laid eyes on. The newcomer was tall and lean, with an otherworldly grace in his movements as he stepped forward with his arm extended. The strong, angular jawline and high cheekbones of this man's face were framed by a cascade of raven-black hair falling just below his shoulders. His eyes, however, were what held Jackson captive—a breathtaking shade of amethyst that glittered like the stars on a clear night sky.

Jackson's heart rate quickened, a mixture of awe and desire coursing through his veins as he struggled to process the surreal encounter.

The man's beautiful features were marred only by a frown, which deepened as he accused Jackson of stealing food that rightfully belonged to his people.

His clothes, while adorned with intricate embroidery, looked out of place compared to Jackson's rural jeans and ratty white tee.

"Whoa, whoa, hold on there!" Jackson blurted out, raising his hands defensively. "I'm not stealing anything! I found this feast just lying around, and I figured it would go to waste if I didn't take it." His words tumbled out in a rush, fueled by a mix of guilt and indignation.

A flicker of something crossed the stranger's eyes. Sorrow, maybe, or could it be sympathy? Before Jackson could decipher the emotion, it vanished as quickly as it had appeared, replaced by a steely determination.

Jackson wasn't a fighter, but he was no push over, either, and this man, while attractive, was not a fighter either.

"It's of no difference to me. What I'm curious about is how you came to be here."

Jackson ignored the carrot, his focus on trying not to stare at the man. "So, beanstalks

growing from down below up here aren't a common occurrence?"

"I can safely say I've never seen one before, but it bears the same magic of this realm. That cannot be doubted."

"This realm," Jackson leaned against a giant cucumber stalk. "I know I'm awake, but I'm not sure how I'm awake. I took a crazy shot in the dark, and the next thing I know, I'm compelled to climb up a fucking beanstalk."

"Welcome," the man said, a note of amusement in his voice, "to the realm of the Giants. My home. Well, the home I've been stolen away to."

Jackson gaped at the breathtaking sight before him, unable to find words to do it justice. "It's beautiful," he breathed at last.

"It is," the man agreed, a hint of longing in his voice. "But it is also a dangerous place for one such as you ..."

"Jackson."

"Forgive me," the man said, offering a sheepish smile. "My name is Barrett. Prince Barrett Blackwood."

"Jackson Walker," Jackson responded, trying to ignore the word prince that he for sure heard a moment ago.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Jackson," Barrett replied with a bow. "What exactly are you doing here?"

Jackson's hand scrubbed over the back of his neck as his skin grew hot with embarrassment. The most handsome man he'd ever seen was a fucking prince, and he

was about to admit he was here to steal.

"I've seen your realm through breaks in the clouds. It's interesting—so different from cloud break to cloud break. One moment, I'm staring down onto a farm, but if I travel about thirty minutes, I see tall buildings like the castle but far more rectangular and narrow."

Jackson chuckled at that. "That's America for you. I was here because my farms in trouble. I need seeds - or food - I can sell. When I saw your garden ..." He let his voice trail off, hoping Barrett didn't make him discuss his theft out loud.

"I know I must seem strange to you—a man among giants." His voice grew heavy, a mournful moan lacing his words. "But my heritage gifts me magic that the others don't possess. Magic that could aid in growing your farm. I'm not a giant, but I can grow to their size."

"How do I know I can trust you? A handsome face isn't enough to earn trust."

A flush crept up Barrett's cheeks, and Jackson couldn't stop his smirk.

"Because I need something from you as well. It would not be blind trust, but a trade."

Jackson wasn't about to point out that he had absolutely nothing to trade this man. Still, he'd hear Barrett out and determine if there was a way to take what he needed without screwing him over too badly because the guy seemed like a nice one.

"I can enchant the crops, yield a bountiful harvest... But," Barrett's voice hitched with a haunting desperation, "I need your help first."

"We established that. Pretty sure whatever you're going to ask is not as bad as learning I was trying to steal food to feed myself."

"I need you to come with me to my stepfather. Offer him your world in exchange for me leaving with you for a short time. He'll never see the realm below, but it will allow me time to escape and pay you back with my magic."

Jackson's brow furrowed. The sound of his heartbeat pounded in his own ears. Could he believe this tale? Could he trust this man?

Can you afford not to if he'll make your crops grow?

"So, what you're really asking for is ..."

"Freedom."

"Freedom," Jackson echoed, the word heavy on his tongue. It was something he fought for every day back home. The parallel in their struggles wove a thread of empathy within him.

Barrett's gaze seemed to search Jackson's face. "Yes, freedom," he confirmed, his voice alight with the fervor of a man who'd spent too long in shackles.

"You have every right to doubt me," Barrett replied. "But like your farm, I'm teetering on the edge of ruin. We can either save each other or let each other fall. And I'm not fond of falling."

Jackson considered the offer. The silence between them swelled until it was filled by a distant laughter — probably giants from afar.

Shivers ran down Jackson's spine.

Fucking giants are as well as that damn plant and all this food.

"I'll help you," Jackson decided, the words sounding foreign yet determined to his ears.

Barrett's face broke into a relieved smile, reaching out a hand to shake Jackson's. "You won't regret this. I'll make sure of it."

Their hands met in a firm grip, and the laughter stopped as if driven off by the silent pact made amongst the clouds.

"Worst case scenario, we find ourselves in a tight spot, I'll get us out." Barrett's smile was filled with caution.

"How are you so sure?" Jackson couldn't help but question.

"Because," Barrett's voice held a secret spark, "My magic's stronger than he knows. I've been preparing for this for a long time. Come on then."

Silence fell again, and Jackson couldn't help but wonder if he wasn't being a sucker for a pair of blue eyes and enough food to save his farm.

"We'll be off to my home before the next day?"

Barrett only nodded, his gaze focused on the castle.

Their footsteps matched in rhythm as the castle grew closer. The towering structure loomed overhead, casting a shadow that could engulf entire fields back on Earth.

A guard's massive form towered over Jackson and Barrett, his armor gleaming in the sunlight. His size was truly monstrous, his broad shoulders nearly as wide as the castle walls. His face was rugged and weathered, with a stern expression that seemed to strike fear into any who dared look at him. His voice was deep and booming,

echoing through the air like thunder.

”Who dares approach the castle of the King of Giants?”

Jackson’s stomach twisted into knots. The man was a living embodiment of a nightmare nightmares.

Sweat beaded on Jackson’s brow, and his heart hammered in his chest, drowning out all other sounds but the thunderous footsteps of the guard. He swallowed hard, trying to push past his fear as Barrett introduced himself and explained their purpose. The giant scrutinized them both with an icy glare before speaking in a voice that rumbled like a distant storm.

”Who dares approach?”

Barrett stepped forward, shielding Jackson in a manner Jackson couldn’t help but find heroic. ”I dare.”

The guard’s eyes flickered to Jackson, a mixture of amusement and scorn on his gargantuan face. With a grunt that rolled like distant thunder, he motioned them forward inside the gate with iron balls as tall as a three-story building.

Jackson’s stomach churned with anxiety, but he allowed Barrett to guide him forward. Each step was one closer to an uncertain fate, yet the farmer from Earth moved with a courage he hadn’t known he possessed. For his farm, for this prince, for a chance at averting total ruin—Jackson would stride into the heart of danger. For what were giants to a man whose spirit refused to be crushed?

The grand doors opened with a sound that mimicked the creaking branches of ancient trees. The hall within was vast, the air humming with the murmured conversations of its inhabitants. As they made their way towards the throne, Jackson could sense eyes

on him, the whispers growing louder.

As they were continued inside, everything felt larger than life— even the air itself seemed to weigh down on Jackson's lungs. The castle itself was a marvel of archaic architecture and magical energy that hummed beneath its opalescent surface. Vines crawled up walls and wrapped around pillars, adding an ethereal beauty to the otherwise imposing structure.

Every movement was amplified by the acoustics. Every step echoed through vast halls that seemed to stretch on forever. The scent of ozone mixed with celestial flowers hung in the air, a combination of both wondrous and eerie.

They ascended winding staircases made from living wood to reach what could only be described as a throne room - high above Earth itself.

Jackson's heart leaped into his throat as his gaze traveled up the gleaming golden throne that would be the envy of every dragon in every story he'd ever read.

There, upon his throne, sat the giant king — a behemoth of a being whose very presence seemed to make the air around him tremble with authority.

The giant king towered over them, a mountain of muscle and bone, his form adorned in regal armor that seemed to dwarf even his vast frame. He leaned back on a throne made from what appeared to be petrified gold, his piercing black gaze fixing on Jackson.

His armor shimmered in the ethereal light cast by countless floating crystals embedded within the ceiling, reflecting off the intricate patterns engraved into its surface. His breaths came out as deep, rumbling growls that seemed to shake the very foundation of the castle.

As they made their way closer to the throne, Jackson couldn't help but feel as if he were nothing more than an ant beneath their gaze. The giant guards stopped at regular intervals, allowing them time to catch their breath before continuing onward. It was clear that even moving about this place took immense effort for someone of Jackson's stature. But despite everything, he refused to break stride or show any sign of weakness. He knew that this was his only chance at saving his farm—at giving him and his aunt hope for a better future.

"Father," Barrett called out, his voice not betraying a single note of fear. "I have brought a human who seeks your audience."

Father? Jackson made a mental note to figure out what the fuck was going on later.

The giant leaned forward, his interest piqued. "Indeed. . . and what does this human offer?"

Jackson took a deep breath, his moment had arrived. His heart jackhammered in his chest with enough force to break free, but he forced his voice into a calm and even tone.

"I came from the ... from below the clouds. I am the ruler of my own kingdom - the Walker Farm. I am lonely without someone to rule by my side."

He continued to speak, spewing utter nonsense that he couldn't remember or even hear because the terror running through him seemed to block sound from his ears.

"I offer you the chance to harvest from my world—a place of untapped resources for someone of your might. Countless opportunities. In exchange, I seek your heir's help in saving my farm."

"And what do you say of this, my son? What bargain have you struck with this little

man?"

Barrett walked with an air of calculated confidence that belied his apparent submission. his eyes never left the king's face. It was clear that despite living under the giant's rule, there were secrets about this man.

Secrets you don't need to uncover.

A sinister grin contorted the king's face, revealing a row of gnarled and rotting teeth that glistened in the dim light. The stench emanating from his mouth was putrid, causing Jackson's stomach to churn and nearly forcing him to regurgitate his last meal. He could almost taste the foul odor in the back of his throat, like a mix of decaying flesh and spoiled food. The sight and smell of the king were enough to make any brave man quiver in fear.

"Take the human to the dungeon. My son, as well. Collar him so he cannot change his size."

For all of Jackson's strength and fortitude, he found his feet rooted to the ground as a giant hand rushed toward him, slamming him into the stone floor.

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SEVEN

Barrett's breathing was slow and steady, a stark contrast to the cacophony of the dungeon's usual moans and clanking chains. He sat, back pressed against the cold stone wall, his eyes fixated on the heavy iron door that had slammed shut behind them not an hour ago.

Had there been bars along the door, not just the walls, he could have shrunk himself and scurried out, growing taller and then unlocking the doors. But the giant's dungeon did not afford such a chance.

Mud and dirt coated the floor, making it hard to navigate without slipping. The sound of giant footsteps echoed from above as if they were deafening thunderclaps.

The only light came from torches that flickered in the walls, casting sinister shadows on the stone floor and walls. It was as though they were trapped in a world of black and orange, like molten lava reflecting off the rough surface they now sat against.

Beside him, Jackson's agitation was palpable.

He paced. Three steps forward and three steps back. The echo of his boots against the stone only added to the monotony. Fortunately for Barrett, the constant pacing only served to show off the muscular forms beneath Jackson's clothing and for that, Barrett was not so sorry for.

His mind raced as he watched Jackson pace, unable to shake off the feeling of failure. He should have seen this coming. He had lived his whole life surrounded by

treachery, after all. As he looked up, he could see the dim light seeping through a small window high above, casting eerie shadows on the walls around them.

"I should've known," Barrett muttered. "I should've foreseen the giant's trickery."

He ran a hand through his hair in frustration, wishing he could pull out some magic to help them escape this predicament.

"Don't beat yourself up, Barrett," Jackson said, the weight in his own voice carrying the heavy blend of sympathy and frustration. "We both walked in there with eyes wide open. We knew the risk." He dropped onto the ground. "I'm the idiot who rambled. Though I would love to know this father business."

A dry chuckle, more of a scoff, escaped Barrett's lips. "Yes, but I assured you I could handle him. It seems I'm not as cunning as I once thought." He smiled at Jackson. "Besides, if I was into the whole hero thing I would've thought your speech was kind of adorable."

"Wonderful. Adorable. Just what I wanted to go for."

"As for the father part, he is no blood of mine. I believe he stole me for the magic I possess, believing me to somehow be part of his world

One thing was certain - they needed a plan, and they needed it fast.

Barrett's mind churned as he considered all the ways they might escape this cell. His fingers traced patterns in the air, mimicking spells he wished he could cast.

As the wind howled outside, a sudden gust shook the tower and knocked Barrett off balance. He stumbled into Jackson, who caught him with strong arms before he could fall.

For a moment, they stood there, their bodies pressed together as Barrett tried to regain their footing. The heat radiating from Jackson's skin sent shivers down Barrett's spine.

But there was no time for such distractions. Not until the human took him away from these damn clouds.

"We need to get out of here," Barrett said, breaking the silence between them.

"Agreed," Jackson replied, releasing his grip on Barrett and taking a step back. "But how?"

Barrett's mind raced as he looked around the small cell once again. There had to be a way out that they were missing. His eyes fell on the torches hanging on the walls, and an idea sparked in his mind as he confirmed a shining blue orb in the corner of the cell.

Footsteps whispered across the ground somewhere near them—but too far out of the light of the torches for Barrett to see who was near them.

"You sound like the man the giant likes to call his son." A female's voice called from the west side of the cell.

Barrett swallowed, knowing that anyone who knew him could hurt him to hurt the giant - but it would never work.

"And if I am?"

A falcon's screech came from the darkness, preceding any introduction, and a slight figure stepped forward to the bars. Just enough in the light, Barrett noticed her gaze was sharp as the stare of the bird on her shoulder.

"They call me Lark," she offered with a cautious nod, her voice melodic yet holding an undercurrent of steely resilience. "The falcon is Mardoc".

Another movement in the near shadow, and a man—larger in frame than Jackson but not a gaint—stepped forward.

"Name's Thorne. And before you ask, I'm not from here. I'm nothing more than a blacksmith stolen to make some damn crown and tossed it in here when the job was down." His eyes held a mixture of strength and resignation.

Barrett knew exactly who Thorne was. He'd never met the smith, but the crown was the one the giant tried to force Barrett to accept. When he didn't, the beast threatened to kill the blacksmith for failing.

I've never been so glad not to wear the damn crown than right now.

"Well met, Thorne, Lark," Barrett said, inclining his head before returning a probing look. "Are you certain that crown was all?"

Thorne grunted, picking at his blacksmith apron with a smirk. "Not only that. Also for crafting a blade meant for the Giant, they said. Though we all know it's because of that failed crown."

"And you?" Jackson spoke to Lark as he stepped up to the bars, his hands gripping around them the same way he'd held onto the beanstalk earlier in the day - for dear life.

Her lips curved into a small, wistful smile. "Flying too close to the sun—or rather, exploring too near the stronghold. They don't take kindly to those with the means to deliver messages beyond their reach."

The falcon ruffled its feathers in agreement, a soft fwip-fwip sound filling the air.

"And why are you here?" Lark questioned, walking closer to the bars until the falcon's wings flapped.

"I thought my father would trade my time here for a chance to go to the Realm Below. Something we would have never allowed to actually happen." Barrett added quickly when their faces twisted with shock.

"The Realm Below?" Lark and Thorne spoke together.

"Umm, Earth?" Jackson added.

"So you're not from here?"

Jackson's bellow of a laugh shocked Barrett.

"No. I came up here to selfishly steal food to feed my farm animals and my aunt. This one caught me and somehow roped me into this plan to free him." Jackson looked at him. "Though he never discussed what I would free him from."

"This is not my home. My home is to the far west. A kingdom filled with those who look like Lark and Thorne—and you. My father and mother infuriated the giant king. He came for the land. Instead, he killed her and took me. I've only come to assume it was to remove power because my people will never allow any without the blood of my family to rule."

A pained look etched across Jackson's face. "I don't know how we will get you back home, but I'm sure you don't just intend to go below the clouds. I lost my parents in an accident, and if one of yours is alive, I'll get you back to him."

Barrett nodded, his thoughts a tangled web that he was sure could be seen clearly on his face. He gazed at Jackson, wondering if the man possessed some kind of mind-reading ability or if he was simply perceptive enough to see through Barrett's facade.

Their stories traded, the four prisoners fell into a contemplative silence, each trapped in their private carousel of thoughts until Barrett's voice cut through the gloom.

"We need to get out. We have things to do, lives to live. . ." He cast an apologetic glance at Jackson, a silent echo of their erstwhile plan.

Lark tilted her head, eyes narrowing. "Escape, you say? I've seen the inside of every giant's construction here. What you need is a layout, a map—I can provide that."

"Not to rain on anyone's parade, but if the pair of you could get out, why the fuck haven't you?" Jackson still clutched the cell bars, but his eyes burned with fire when he looked at Barrett.

"Because they'd have to come down here. Our food is dropped from above, but with the stolen prince here, it begs the question of why they'd bring the food."

Barrett could have told her the giant only wanted him as an heir because it left his kingdom without one. Or so he'd come to believe.

"An heir," he whispered, a smirk coming onto his lips as the obviousness struck him.

"We'll say you're a prince from the Realm Below, journeyed here to find a husband."

"And why didn't I say it before?" Jackson released the bars and walked to stand in front of Barrett.

"Because you weren't afforded the time to."

Jackson nodded thoughtfully as if he agreed with the rationale.

A chuckle half caught in Jackson's throat sounded more filled with grim acceptance than mirth.

"What's gotten into me? Me, spinning a tale to a giant king. Yet, the absurdity of it, the sheer audacity of it, I'll do it."

Barrett tried to ignore the swell of warmth covering him at the promise of being Jackson's husband. What is the matter with you? He didn't offer that.

"If my father will not send food directly, I can grow myself to his size. It would be dangerous as hell for you three, but we can prepare accordingly, and it will get his attention."

The hawk screeched again, though Barrett had a feeling it wasn't in agreement.

"Have you two always been in the same cell?" Jackson spoke again.

"Always. Rumor has it they don't have too many for humans. So, if the cells fill up, they kill people to make space because the other cells have large gaps in the bars." Throne looked down.

"And they just did that, didn't they?" Jackson asked as the same thought had formed in Barrett's mind.

"Aye," the blacksmith turned. "We cannot talk much. It will draw them down in a way we do not wish."

As they arrived, the duo vanished back out of the flickering torch light and out of sight.

The sky turned from sunset orange to deep purple, casting an eerie glow on the castle walls. The cool evening breeze swept through the courtyard, rustling the leaves in the trees surrounding them. As they stood there in silence, Barrett couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like to be back on Earth under the stars. He closed his eyes and imagined the scent of the air without the constant smell of rain, or walking through the lush green forests of his homeland.

"It'll be alright," Jackson whispered.

Barrett opened his eyes and turned to face him, surprised by the show of support from this man who barely knew him. As their gazes met, something shifted between them, an unspoken understanding that they were more than two men stuck in a dungeon. It was as if two puzzle pieces were slowly snapping into place, revealing a beautiful picture only they could see.

"You're going save my farm, and I'm going to get you out of this place." Jackson took Barrett's hand in his without warning.

Barrett's heart raced as Jackson's warm hand enveloped his own. It was a simple gesture, but it sent a surge of emotions through him that he couldn't fully comprehend. He had only just met Jackson, yet the man had already become a source of comfort and strength in this unfamiliar world.

"Jackson..." Barrett's voice trailed off as he searched for words to express his gratitude.

"Let's just survive to do all the saving."

Barrett nodded. Survival was a fantastic first step.

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EIGHT

The damp, grim walls of the dungeon echoed with the sound of distant drips of water from the musky ceiling. Days had passed with no sign of the giant king or one of his men. Jackson couldn't help but wonder if Lark and Thorne hadn't overestimated the importance of the famed stepson.

Jackson's gaze turned to Barrett, taking in every feature. Despite time in the dark, his skin seemed to glow with a slight otherworldly tinge - what Jackson now knew was his magic glow.

Barrett's dark hair fell softly over those intense blue eyes that seemed to hold stories untold, and Jackson couldn't help but wonder what kind of life he led up above before ending up here.

He watched as Barrett shifted slightly, throwing an arm over his head to move away a lock of hair from his face. Jackson's breath hitched as he imagined what it would feel like to run those fingers through those strands himself. Maybe even trace them down the strong jawline or along those defined shoulders.

It seemed that while the last three days passed with little excitement, Jackson couldn't take his eyes off Barrett. When Barrett would glance his way, Jackson felt a jolt of electricity coursing through him. His heart beat faster, and his cheeks flushed—two things that never happened to him around anyone.

The dim light of the dungeon didn't diminish the otherworldly beauty that was Barrett, if anything, it made it more pronounced. His dark hair shifted slightly when

he moved, emphasizing the lean muscles of his chest and shoulders.

There was no denying the pull he felt towards this mysterious man from another world. It might turn out to be nothing more than a lustful desire from a man on the brink of the end, but Jackson wasn't so certain it wasn't going to become more.

It was surprising how much this near stranger affected him. He looked away, focusing on their meager dinner. Another night of stale bread and water from a small stream that ran through the dungeon.

Yet his mind kept drifting back to the way Barrett's eyes lit up when he spoke about his home in the clouds.

"How 'bout another tale, Jackson?" Thorne's deep, gravelly voice filled the cell, breaking the silence that often fell between them. His large hands were clasped together, resting on one bent knee, eyes expectant.

Jackson gave an amused snort, happy to think about anything other than the growing attraction for a prince from another world. "I think I've gone through my whole life's worth here, Thorne. I've not got much left that won't bore you to tears. Unless you think hearing about the time a goat ate my auntie's bloomers could help the boredom."

Lark let out a hearty chuckle, her lean figure leaning against the cell bars. "Now that's a story I wouldn't mind hearing."

Barrett cast a knowing smile Jackson's way, his piercing eyes seemed to shimmer in the dim light

"What about the story of a desperate farmer who saved the lot? That's one I'm sure none of us would tire of hearing."

A warmth spread through Jackson at the words—partly from the shared laughter, partly from Barrett’s soft gaze that lingered a touch too long. Jackson couldn’t help but wonder at his own feelings, which seemed to bud like springtime flowers even in the winter of their captivity.

“Well,” Jackson started, shuffling on the stone floor, “I think we’ve told that one enough considering nothing has changed.”

“Speaking” of stories,” Thorne cut in, “How ’bout you, Barrett? Not often we get a real prince in shackles alongside us.” Thorne’s eyes were bright with curiosity.

Barrett’s expression faltered, a shadow dancing over his face, but he quickly masked it with his usual witty charm. “Ah, thrones and crowns aren’t what they’re cracked up to be, my burly blacksmith friend. Besides, I’ve grown quite fond of these shackles. They’re rather becoming, don’t you think?”

The groups laughter rang hollow in the stone chamber. It was a reprieve, but it couldn’t cloak the weight of their captivity, leaving Jackson with yet another thing he enjoyed from Barrett.

The man had clearly lived a hard life, and unlike Jackson, he didn’t allow it to weigh him down. Barrett had all the reasons in the world to mope or curse, and he took none of them.

As the laughter died down, Barrett spoke again. “I know we all overestimated how much my captor values me, but I fear I’m not strong enough to use my magic to break out a distraction any longer.” His head fell back against the wall. “Not in the way we wanted.”

Barrett moved closer to Jackson, lowering his voice so only the farmer could hear.

"Jackson," he hummed softly, "I may have a plan. But it will require your cooperation."

Jackson tilted his head. "I'm listening, though I thought I already gave my word I'd help before you got me thrown in here."

Barrett scanned their surroundings before he continued in a hushed tone, "My stepfather is hardly intelligent. Some might even consider him one step above a fool. However, he's also predictable in his desires. I know how his twisted mind works. If we spin the right story, we can still get out and come back for Thorne and Lark." Barrett's gaze glanced upwards, where the magical orbs serving as cameras eavesdropped.

Jackson followed his gaze and nodded. While he didn't like the idea of leaving the other two, he knew they'd find a way to get them out.

"And what do you propose we do? A jail fight that leads to an untimely injury?"

Barrett's face was mere inches from Jackson's now. "We can trick him into thinking that you've fallen in love with me. That you're going to offer him the realm below in exchange for my hand."

A surge of adrenaline rushed through Jackson's veins, setting his pulse racing with anticipation at the mere thought of pretending to love Barrett. His heart pounded in his chest, matching the excitement and nerves coursing through his body. The possibility of playing this role sent a thrill through him, making his breath quicken and his hands tremble with exhilaration. Every fiber of his being was on edge, ready for the challenge ahead. He could not think of anything more fitting with the way he's been watching Barrett.

But you're not going to let him know that because this isn't an attraction thing. This

is an escape.

Jackson swallowed, finding his voice. "And you think that'll work? That he'll let us go "because of a love story?"

"Precisely. He's invested in the rule of royalty. In heirs." Barrett's eyes were shimmering with mischief now.

"But, Barrett. . ." Jackson said hesitantly, his voice a mere breath, "You are aware we could never give him one?"

Barrett's expression softened, a vulnerability peering out from behind his confident facade. "Of course I am, but he is not." Barrett leaned just a hair's breadth closer. "Let's give those cameras a show to call every damn giant down here."

Their gazes locked, a charged silence hanging between them. In a heartbeat, Barrett closed the distance, capturing Jackson's lips in a tender, yet passionate kiss.

The world narrowed to their shared breath and the heat between them.

Jackson's mind was little more than a chaotic mix of emotions as Barrett's lips claimed his, sending sparks of electricity through his body. He couldn't believe they were actually doing this, but he was not going to waste this opportunity.

Barrett's hand cupped Jackson's face and pulled him deeper into the kiss, their tongues tangling in a dance that left Jackson dizzy. He had never been kissed like this before, with such intensity and desperation. It was as if they were both trying to convey something through the touch of their lips, something that words could never express.

But as quickly as it began, Barrett pulled away, leaving Jackson breathless and

wanting more. They stared at each other for a moment, their chests heaving in unison.

"Was that convincing enough for the spying giants?" Jackson managed to say through ragged breaths.

A mischievous glint appeared in Barrett's eyes. "I think we can do better."

Before Jackson could process what was happening, Barrett pressed their lips together once again. This time, there was no hesitation or doubt in their actions. His hands roamed freely over each Jackson's body, pulling him so damn close Jackson couldn't stop the moan as they came together.

Barrett's lips were intoxicating, sending waves of pleasure throughout Jackson's body. His hands roamed over Jackson's chest and down his sides, pulling him closer with each touch. They moved in perfect sync as if they had been practicing this dance for years.

Jackson gave in to the moment, no longer caring if this was real or just an act. He let his hands tangle in Barrett's hair.

"You are quite convincing," Barrett breathed against Jackson's lips. "But we're not done yet. I want them to see that we can't keep our hands off each other."

Barrett's voice was low and seductive, sending shivers down Jackson's spine. He was not usually the one to be seduced, and the change in role was more than his lust could ignore.

Before he could respond, Barrett claimed his lips once again. This time, there was no holding back—their kisses were hungry and desperate, their bodies pressed tightly together. Jackson's head spun desire as they continued to explore each other's mouths.

Barrett's hands trailed down to the hem of Jackson's shirt, tugging at it impatiently. Without hesitation, Jackson lifted his arms and allowed Barrett to pull it off. The cool air hit his skin but was quickly forgotten as Barrett's lips trailed down his neck.

Their movements became more urgent and uninhibited as they explored every inch of each other's bodies. It was like they were both starving for each other and couldn't get enough.

"Enough!"

The boom of a voice shook the dungeons, separating Barrett and Jackson with a tumble. Their chests heaving up and down with desire. For a moment, they just stared at each other, hearts racing. His skin was flush and warm. Not even the chill of the dungeon could take that from him.

Barrett stood up, brushing off his breeches, still looking back at Jackson with a mix of desire and determination in his eyes. "I assure you, it's as interesting as it looked," he quipped.

Jackson gulped audibly, his heart pounding in his ears as he struggled to catch his breath and regain some semblance of normalcy. The taste of Barrett's lips lingered on his tongue like honey wine—sweet and intoxicating. He couldn't help but glance between Barrett and the giant, trying to hide the need coursing through him.

It was strange how desire overruled the fear Jackson knew he should tremble with at the sight of the giant - fury etched in his overwhelmingly large features.

"And what have I seen?" The voice didn't bellow this time, but it was as loud as it had been days before.

"The start of your next power move," Barrett spoke so smoothly Jackson couldn't

help but wonder if the kiss had been only an act for the prince.

"And that means what?" The king snarled.

"Jackson is in charge of large sums of land in the realm below the clouds. And he's decided that our forced proximity has opened him up to all sorts of ideas." Barrett glanced back at Jackson, a moment of pleading in his eyes. "That we would wed."

"I see," the giant crouched then, an eye as big as Jackson's head suddenly less than an inch away.

It took everything in him not to scream or jump away.

This close up, every pore on his skin was like a city block; every crevice and wrinkle could house entire villages. The muscles in his arm rippled as the giant flexed them casually, causing small tremors in the ground they stood on.

"And what does this have to do with me?" The giant's breath was foul, like dirty gym socks laid in vomit for a few days.

Now you talk to help.

"Through our marriage, you would have a claim to parts of both realms. Your power and riches would double, and I will show you how I came to be here so you might use it for your own means." His heart now slammed in his chest from fear, not desire, and Jackson much preferred the former.

"But you must allow us to gain access to things from his realm that would make your claim to the land official." Barrett stepped up and took Jackson's hand.

"He may leave on his own."

"Not possible," Jackson squeaked. "Umm, the certificate we need, it requires the legal signature of both parties."

The giant pulled away then, letting loose a gust of wind. "I see. Let me think till morning."

As the giant left the chamber, the floor trembled under his footsteps.

Seconds passed in silence before Jackson's heart slowly began to calm. His eyes found Barrett's, and he was shocked to see Barrett's gaze alive with joy.

"It's going to work!"

"Yeah, and what about us?" Thorne called through the bars.

"We're going to break free and get me home. My kingdom will come back. I swear it."

As the realization sunk in, Jackson's stomach twisted and turned, a nauseating reminder that they would have to leave Thorne and Lark behind. The thought weighed heavily on his mind, tainting the excitement and anticipation of their upcoming journey. He couldn't imagine venturing into the unknown without his two closest friends by his side. A sense of melancholy settled over him like a dark cloud, dimming the once-bright horizon ahead. Yet, he knew this was a necessary sacrifice for their mission. With a heavy heart, he grudgingly accepted their fate and prepared for what lay ahead.

"We trust you," Lark spoke, the falcon crying his agreement.

"Aye. Just don't forget." Thorne added.

And that, for now, had to be enough for Jackson to keep going.

NINE

As the first light of dawn crept over the horizon, casting a pale, diffused glow upon the sky-island, Barrett was restless and, therefore, likely unable to do what was needed to trick his father.

His thoughts had been filled with replays of the passionate kisses he and Jackson shared. He couldn't help but replay those moments in his head, the way the farmer's lips had felt against his own, the surprised yet welcoming response, and the intense desire that had flared between them. There was nothing he wanted more than to see where things would go if they kissed without pretense.

Rolling onto his side, Barrett stared up at the rocky ceiling above him, his mind swirling with the implications of what that single act might mean. A part of him longed for something more—for a connection beyond the fleeting alliances he'd known in this realm—but another part of him warned him to tread carefully. Falling for a man from the realm below, especially one whose world was on the brink of a magical catastrophe, was a recipe for heartache.

As the sky continued to lighten through the small dungeon window, signaling the arrival of dawn, Barrett reluctantly pushed aside his thoughts and sat up.

Gently, he shook Jackson's shoulder, knowing that they needed to get an early start if they were to have any hope of finding the enchanted beans and making their escape.

Jackson blinked awake, a smile pressing over his lips when he must have woken fully.

"We should get ready," Barrett said, his voice hinting at formality. We have to convince my father."

"Son!" The giant's grating voice came just seconds later, shaking the ground as it always did when the cruel man wished to make a point.

Six more ground-shaking steps and the man who'd haunted Barrett was in the dungeon. His armor gleamed with what was no doubt slime or sweat. The creature never bothered with hygiene.

The stench of sweat and dirt filled his nostrils as the monstrous figure loomed over them, its armor glistening under the dim light.

"Well, farm boy. Son," the king boomed, a cruel smirk twisting his lips. "It would appear the time has come for me to conquer another land. It has been quite some decades and I am grateful for the opportunity."

Barrett's heart slammed so hard in his chest that he worried the little magic he had might create some bizarre reaction.

The giant's amusement grated on Barrett's last nerve as he watched the sun rise over the horizon. Its fiery hues painted the sky in shades of red, orange, and gold, casting long, elongated shadows over the kingdom. The small window high up in the dungeon wall offered a glimmer of hope, but it wasn't enough to dispel the gloom and despair that lingered in the air.

"You'll permit this?" Barrett asked, actively working to keep the skepticism from his voice.

"This human promises me another world to conquer. One I have not figured out how to get to because I am no fool. I will not plummet to my death for a chance at power."

Could've fooled me.

"I will allow you both to leave under the condition that you explain how you got up before you leave."

Barrett looked to Jackson, and they exchanged a silent look, their hands brushing fleetingly as they clasped them into fists. They were in this together, no matter what happened next.

"I have no problem showing you," Jackson's voice had a deeper timbre than usual leading Barrett to believe he was trying to hide his fear of the giant.

"Then, our deal is sealed. You and my son will descend to the world below the clouds. You will obtain this ... paperwork you spoke of within the next day. If you do not return, I will use your entrance to my kingdom as a way to send my entire army to yours."

To his credit, Jackson merely nodded beside him, not betraying the fear that coursed through him at such a threat.

Which is why we're going to destroy that stalk. Even if it means I never return home if Jackson doesn't have more beans.

The king's response was nothing more than a laugh. A laugh that echoed around the dungeon, and Barrett couldn't help but flinch at its deep, resonant tone.

"Wait!" Jackson's voice cut through the laughter, and all eyes, including Barrett's, turned to his.

"You think you can offer me something?" The king's voice deepened.

Barrett's heart began to rush. Whatever Jackson was about to do had not been part of their plan. His hands began to sweat, and worry over what the human might try began to eat away at the confidence he had felt only seconds before.

"The journey down - it will be far more dangerous for just the two of us. Our weight will not balance well and we could fall. With two other bodies, our descent will be safer."

Lark and Thorne.

"I will lend you a giant. He will see to your safety."

"No!" Jackson's shriek sent Barrett's heart racing more. "No," he said again, calmer this time. "Without this binding agreement, the humans below will attack with vicious force. Force with weapons designed to take down animals nearly as large as a giant. Two prisoners will be fine. One's who live don't matter as there's a chance they won't return."

"There are only two other humans." The king snarled as he spoke loudly enough to shake the chains in the cell. "Fine, they may go, and if they die, they die."

With a swipe of his massive hand, the king unlocked their shackles, metal clinking against the stone floor. The cell doors both opened next, and Barrett stepped out first, tugging Jackson behind him."

"You are both freed for now. Should you live, do not think of escaping."

Thorne and Lark stepped out next, with the falcon flying to Lark's shoulder a moment later.

"Move." A guard commanded.

As they made their way out of the dark cell, their footsteps echoed against the stone walls like thunderclaps announcing their arrival. The giant king towered above them both, his laugh booming like the rumble of distant thunder as he surveyed his kingdom from on high.

He schooled his features into a mask of indifference, refusing to show any weakness before this beast who ruled with an iron fist.

Neither Barrett nor Jackson dared to speak for fear of alerting the giant to their plans, but their eyes spoke volumes. Jackson would glance at Barrett, who would give him a small, reassuring smile before turning his attention back to their captor.

Inside the throne room, banners swayed from the early morning breeze coming through the windows without glass. Intricate tapestries depicting battles won and lands conquered hung from every wall.

"Come then, show me how you arrived."

The king continued forward, his steps making it hard for Barrett to keep up. However, he noticed beside him that Jackson's steps did not seem to slide to the side.

"You walk well despite his footsteps."

Jackson gave him a small smirk. "I've stood my ground against a herd of running cows - it's fairly similar."

Barrett smiled back, wondering how such a strange man came to be so captivating.

He could not help but wonder if there might not be more between Jackson and himself as they walked side by side through the cloud-kissed skies.

He admired how Jackson navigated everything effortlessly without breaking stride or missing a beat. Even in the face of danger, Jackson held his ground. He didn't always seem as enchanting as the moment in the garden, but if he was worried about his hardships, he didn't dwell on them outwardly.

Barrett's heart raced as they stepped out of the throne room, following the giant king. He could not see Lark and Thorne, but he knew they were close by from the small screeches her hawk kept letting out as they walked.

The stalk stood tall and proud, its green stem reaching towards the sun. It remained untouched, unscathed by the passing of days. Each leaf and petal gleamed in the sunlight as if freshly polished. Despite the winds and storms that had come and gone, it stood resolute and strong, a symbol of resilience and endurance. As if frozen in time, it remained unchanged, a testament to the beauty and power of nature's cycles.

Giants truly are idiots.

They made their way through winding pathways until they came to a clearing where a giant vine sprouted from the towering beanstalk, its thick trunk anchoring itself deep into the clouds. Barrett watched, mesmerized, as a pod at the top bloomed open and closed shut like a mouth, revealing that it was indeed a living creature. It seemed to sense them below, because it began to descend slowly. Its leaves rustled gently in the wind, almost like whispering secrets as it crept closer.

Barrett inhaled deeply, smelling scents of lavender and honey mixed with ozone and something else - magic. A sweet symphony of distant melodies carried on the wind too, each one more enchanting than the last. The beanstalk swayed gently back and forth as if dancing with excitement for its new arrivals.

Jackson dropped Barrett's hand and turned to face the king.

"This. This stalk is how I came here."

"You are no human," the giant sneered.

"No, these were gifted to me. I grew these with beans from another farmer. But this is how I came here and how we will leave and return."

Barrett's chest constricted at the false promise.

"Do not try to jump. Even a creature your size would fracture every bone or die trying. It took me over five hours to climb up - we need more time or this will not work."

The giant was quiet. His eyes narrowed into tiny slits and he lowered his face until it was level with Jackson. Still, the farmer didn't flinch.

The giant's breath was putrid and foul, like a mixture of decaying flesh and spoiled food. The air around them grew thick with the stench, intensifying as the giant spoke.

"How long?"

"Four days."

The giant scoffed. "Not a moment longer or we will risk your so-called weapons."

The giant rose back, the wind from the motion nearly pulling Barrett forward.

"You are as useful as I knew you would be the day I stole you." That giant whispered with a sickening grin. "Now climb."

Jackson took Barrett's hand again, squeezing tightly this time. This time he knew he

heard Lark and Thorne's footsteps as they walked through the clouds until all four stood at the rim of the cloud where the beanstalk broke through.

"We need to jump," Jackson said with a hint of dismay before dropping Barrett's hand and leaping at the vine.

Without pausing, Barrett threw himself toward the vine, slamming into it and begging his hands to wrap around a notch in the thick vine. Gripping onto the rough bark, Barrett held tight and watched as Jackson began to climb down.

He looked down, watching as Jackson's muscular form seemed to move with a practiced ease until he disappeared below the clouds. Barrett couldn't see Lark or Thorne as they were on the other side, but he knew he needed to climb down to keep the balance.

Or at least you have to make it seem like you believe Jackson's lie.

The muscles in his arms burned as he pulled himself hand-over-hand down the vine, the rough bark biting into his palms. The thick stalk somehow swayed under his grip, the leaves rustling like a living thing trying to avoid his grasp.

The air was crisp, cold, and filled with the scent of celestial flowers that emanated from the fantastical world above. He hadn't smelled them before, but somehow the honey-sweet scent tickled his nose as if trying to take residence.

With each handhold and foothold, he could feel the beanstalk tremble beneath him—alive with magic. He swallowed hard against the acidic taste of fear in his mouth and pushed downward, foot by foot. The clouds parted to reveal an endless expanse of sky gradually turning purple beneath him—a stark contrast to the bright light of early morning surrounding him a moment ago.

Barrett's heart pounded in his ears as he dangled over this new world - a world filled with impossible possibilities but also unknown dangers lurking in every shadow.

The wind whipped against him as they made their way down, threatening to pull Barrett away from his hold on the vine at every turn. His knuckles went white from gripping so tightly, but he refused to let go. He could feel Jackson's solid presence just below him, urging him on with gentle words and reassuring touches whenever they reached sturdy ground again. Lark and Thorne followed close behind, their grunts echoing through their newfound bond created by a shared experience neither would forget anytime soon.

Mardoc's call was the only warning before it dove past Barrett, seemingly delighting in the ability to stretch its wings once again.

They were all moving together now, and trust was imperative if they were going to survive this journey home together.

Pressure began to build between his shoulder blades as they descended faster than he would have liked. Sweat trickled down his spine despite the cold air nipping at his cheeks and nose. One misstep here would mean certain death below.

The wind howled around them, whipping against their bodies as they made their way down, threatening to pull them away with every gust. It was all Barrett could do to keep his footing on the vine as he climbed down toward Jackson.

Barrett steeled his mind off, focused only on the sensation of the knobby stalk beneath his foot when it searched for a foothold to lower him down.

Finally reaching solid ground after what felt like an eternity, Barrett let out a shaky breath and looked around in wonder at their new environment. Everything was the same size as him - so similar to the memories he had of home. All that was left to do

was touch the ground.

Barrett gasped for air once he touched earth once more, feeling its familiar roughness beneath him after days trapped amongst these towering impossibilities all around him.

With the climb done, every muscle in his body ached in a way he hadn't thought possible. He could collapse in a heap where the stench reminded him of the giants, but they had to work.

Quickly," Barrett urged, his voice hoarse from fear and exertion. "We need to cut this down. There's no way he'll notice, and they can't just descend without it."

Jackson nodded grimly, his muscles already tense with anticipation. With one last glance at the treacherous stalk, he raced away toward a small shack just as Thorne and Lark touched the ground.

"Thank you," Thorne brushed leaves from his shoulders.

"I'd love to take credit, but that was all Jackson. And we're not free yet."

Jackson rushed toward them, the distance closing with every second and Barrett couldn't stop the fear crawling over his skin.

"You're certain he won't notice?" Jackson asked, passing him an ax and Thorne what looked like a scythe.

"He might, but I'm more concerned he could decide to venture down if we leave it."

"Lark, keep your eyes to the top of the stalk. Let's make certain nothing comes down when they notice it shaking from our efforts." Jackson locked eyes with Barrett.

"This could take hours with our muscles the way they are from the climb."

"Then we'd better get started."

With combined efforts, the beanstalk gave a final groan as if the very sky was moaning its demise before crashing down, its fall like the bellow of a beast in its death throes.

Finally, it hit the ground with a resounding boom, sending up a cloud of dust and debris. The earth beneath them trembled, the reverberation singing a song of triumph and freedom.

They exchanged glances, and then erupted into relieved, triumphant laughter. It echoed around them, the sweetest melody they had ever heard.

Barrett wrapped Jackson in an embrace, relief flooding through him as did the stirring of something more. "We did it," he murmured, voice thick with emotion.

"Yes, we did," Jackson replied, his arms tightening around Barrett. Together, they stood, victorious and breathless, the weight of the giant's tyranny lifting like fog at the rise of the sun.

"I hate to ask, but do you have any more to get us home?" Lark chirped from somewhere out of sight.

"I do. But not tonight. Tonight, we need to rest in real beds, eat real food, and let our muscles heal." Jackson offered Barrett a hand. "Come with me?"

Barrett smiled, glee still coursing through him. "I think I'd follow you anywhere."

TEN

As the rosy fingers of dawn stretched across the sky, Jackson awoke with a start, the remnants of his vivid dream still clinging to him like dew on a spider's web. Barrett's lips on his, his body touching the prince's. The dream had spiraled out of control and now Jackson wanted nothing more than to close his eyes and return to those dreams.

He pushed the memories aside, knowing he had work to do. The farm wouldn't tend to itself, and Jackson knew that Barrett didn't want to stay.

A quick summary to his aunt had her storming off to report abduction to the police and then the evening had turned ... normal.

Barrett was able to give Jackson a rough idea of where his kingdom was, and Jackson knew that he could take the prince, Thorne and Lark home.

Even if he didn't want Barrett to go.

Their act was over.

The fastest fake fiancé in the history of the scheme. Now, Barrett had to make good on his end of the deal before Jackson would take him home.

Jackson rose from his bed and dressed in his well-worn overalls and boots, the fabric worn soft against his skin. They'd have a lot of fields to tend to today, and having had to let go of the hands, Jackson would have to return to harvest the crops quickly.

Moving through the hall, he stopped before Barrett's room and knocked as quietly as he could. Within seconds, the door swung inward, revealing Barrett awake and dressed in Jackson's clothing.

The sight of Barrett in the faded green flannel and slightly baggy jeans sent Jackson's mind spinning down an entirely incorrect path.

I could get used to seeing him here. Jackson sighed. But he doesn't want to stay and I can't keep him from a family he hasn't seen in over a decade.

"Morning, sleepyhead," he greeted Barrett with a wink. I hope you're okay with being up early."

"Good morning, Jackson," Barrett responded, a slight blush tinting his chiseled cheeks. "I think I owe you at least an early morning after all you've done." He glanced down the hall. "If we're being honest, I couldn't sleep."

Jackson considered telling Barrett he was there if the prince wanted to talk, but he held back. They weren't dating. They had used each other to do what they needed most.

"Alright, we've got work to do," he said, grabbing his worn-out Stetson off the couch behind Barrett. "Ready to make my dead lands grow?"

Barrett smiled, his eyes glinting with mischief. "It'd be my pleasure, Jackson," he said, following Jackson down the stairs.

"You're certain your magic will work? Even on dead land?"

Barrett's chuckle was more sensual than he likely knew. "My magic needed a real meal and rest. You supplied both. Growing is what I do." His hand set gently down

on Jackson's shoulder. "I promise."

"We'll have to dig around the shit dirt first, get it out of the way and hopefully what you grow doesn't die without proper soil."

Jackson moved as he always did for morning chores - though the animals would have to wait a little longer. Barrett followed beside him at an easy pace. So at ease here and yet still not belonging.

Jackson handed Barrett a shovel off the railing and pointed at the farthest plot. "We'll start farthest out. Give us something to be thankful for as we get closer back to the house."

"Aye, aye." Barrett gave a mock salute and a small wink. "But I won't need this." He set the shovel back down. "Come along then, let me show you magic."

As they reached the first plot of land, Jackson watched in awe as Barrett took the shovel and knelt beside it. He lowered his head, eyes closing, and began to whisper under his breath. The dirt around him seemed to tremble just slightly before the soil rose from the ground, sifting through his fingers like sand. As he dug deeper, it seemed that he was communicating with something beneath their feet. Barrett's face softened, becoming almost peaceful and serene.

Suddenly, giant sprouts popped out of the rich black dirt between his fingers. Each one was perfectly formed and glowing slightly. Barrett grinned at Jackson, "These will do nicely. Carrots, yes?"

"My gosh," Jackson moved forward and set his hands in the dense green top that had appeared by actual magic. His fingers twisted before he pulled, tugging with all his strength as a carrot as long as his forearm sprang from the ground. "This is amazing."

”Told you so. I”m good at making things grow.”

Jackson”s mouth went dry as the simple comment became sensual for some reason.

”Umm yes. Come on, there are more fields to tend to and then we have to get you home.”

Jackson moved, damn near running toward the wheat field, knowing that if Barrett could make even have the field grow, his livelihood would be saved.

As before, Barrett caught up to Jackson and leaned down nearer the dry and empty soil with dead seeds laying inside.

Barrett”s magic started taking effect damn near instantly they grew quickly and steadily until they were towering green stalks reaching towards the sky with broad leaves rustling in a non-existent breeze. They towered higher than any crop Jackson had ever seen before; he could barely reach their lowest branches without standing on tiptoe.

The miraculous transformation didn”t stop there. Jackson and Barrett spent hours moving from field to field, and even stopping in areas that held no seeds at all.

Each plant began producing fruits and vegetables at an unnatural speed and size. Before Jackson knew it, his farm was unrecognizable from the barren wasteland he”d left a few weeks ago to try to save.

There were tomatoes bigger than watermelons. Cucumbers as long as baseball bats, and corn that seemed to stretch nearly to the clouds which would certainly draw attention. All of which looked ripe for harvesting.

They worked side by side until every inch of land was filled with these magical crops

swaying gently in the nonexistent wind currents high up in the sky island realm.

Jackson sighed in relief and wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand. He couldn't believe it. The farm was going to be saved, all thanks to Barrett's magic and that magical beanstalk that had sprouted from the ground. The sky was painted with hues of orange and pink as the sun began its descent, casting a warm glow over the flora and fauna surrounding them.

"You did it," Jackson's voice cracked as he looked at what was now a viable farm once more. "Can you do this with everything? Make it as big as you want?"

"I did," Barrett breathed, looking around with awe in his gaze as well. "Not everything. Things from my realm will grow larger than yours."

They stood there for a moment longer, basking in their shared victory. Suddenly, Jackson didn't care if they'd only been playing roles, he needed to find out for himself.

Jackson couldn't resist any longer and lunged forward, closing the distance between them with a swift movement. He pressed his lips against Barrett's, devouring him hungrily as he let out an audible moan. The desire that had been building inside him since their first encounter was finally being released, mixing pleasure with relief in a delicious rush.

Barrett's arms wrapped around Jackson's waist, pulling him closer as he let out an audible moan. The sound only fueled Jackson's desire as he deepened the kiss, exploring every inch of Barrett's mouth with his tongue.

All thoughts of their fake relationship vanished from Jackson's mind as he let himself get lost in the moment. The desire that had been building inside him since their first encounter was finally being released, mixing pleasure with relief in a delicious rush.

They broke apart for air, both panting heavily as their foreheads rested against each other. Jackson couldn't believe what had just happened. He had never felt such intense chemistry with anyone before.

Barrett brushed his fingers along Jackson's cheekbone, sending shivers down his spine. "I've wanted to do that since I first saw you," he admitted breathlessly. "For real and not just to distract the giant."

"Me too," Jackson confessed, unable to keep the smile off his face.

They stayed there for a few more moments, lost in each other's gazes until the sun began to dip below the horizon and reality came crashing back in.

"We should probably head back," Barrett said reluctantly, breaking the silence between them.

"Yeah," Jackson agreed with a sigh. As much as he wanted to stay there with Barrett forever, they both knew it wasn't possible.

They made their way back to the farmhouse hand in hand, not bothering to hide their affection anymore. After everything that had happened that day, they both knew they couldn't go back to pretending nothing had changed between them.

"Go wake Lark and Thorne. I'll tend to the animals, and then we can get on the road. Her falcon won't like it, but as long as he stays calm, we'll be fine. It'll be a long drive, but I can grow another beanstalk close enough to your kingdom."

I think.

The wind howled as they drove down the winding road, the old truck swaying and creaking as it navigated the twists and turns. The farm had disappeared behind them

hours ago, replaced by a blur of trees and buildings flashing past like memories.

The engine rumbled beneath them as Jackson drove through small towns and wide-open spaces dotted with farmland.

They were moving faster than Jackson had ever gone before, and his heart pounded with excitement mixed with nervous anticipation.

He was going to a hotel to illegally plant a giant beanstalk seed, pray that water from a can worked, and then say goodbye to the most interesting person he'd ever met.

Nothing to it, Jackson thought bitterly.

As they traveled closer to the motel in Colorado, Jackson couldn't help but wonder about what lay ahead - not just the portal to another realm but also the adventures and risks that came with it. His hands tightened on the worn leather of his steering wheel as they passed under an oak tree so large it blocked out the sun for an entire stretch of highway.

The clouds loomed larger now, calling to him like a siren song. He glanced over at Barrett, who leaned against his seat with a small smile on his lips. He seemed so at ease in the truck despite never having been in one before.

In the backseat, Lark sat with her forehead resting against the cool glass window, lost in thought. Her trusty friend still sat perched on her shoulder, feathers fluffed in a comfortable sleep.

Even Thorne was at ease, having fallen asleep at least two hours ago.

Everyone in the truck was at peace - except Jackson.

Jackson's body was a damn live wire. It was electrified tension waiting to burst after his kiss with Barrett hours earlier.

As dusk settled over the area, Jackson pulled the truck into a small mountainside motel. It looked like something that had seen many days.

The red roof had tons missing shingles, and the white paint on the building peeled back in too many places, revealing prior layers of paint.

"We're here." He stuck his hand into his pocket and pulled out the seed bag. "We need to plant this. But, Barrett?"

"Hmm?"

"Any shot your magic is too depleted to have this bean grow without waiting overnight?"

If Barrett thought the request had anything to do with spending more time together, he didn't let on.

"Honestly? Not a chance. This will have to be all-natural."

Jackson nodded but bit his tongue before saying something stupid.

"Why don't you let us plant those?" Lark queried as she opened her door.

"Yeah, you two have been at it since dawn. Go get some sleep." Thorne added when he jumped out of the truck. "Just pass that seed here."

For a split second, Jackson worried the duo might steal the seeds, but they'd been through too much in just a few weeks to not trust each other.

Reluctantly, he handed over the brown suede patch, slammed his truck door shut, and headed toward the front door.

ELEVEN

"I'll be right back," Jackson fought against the urge to squeeze Barrett's hand or something equally foolish and jogged off toward the hotel's entrance.

A small older woman glanced up as he tugged the door open. Her smile reached her dark brown eyes. "Welcome to the Inn on the Mountain! How can I help you? A handsome young man like yourself must be here to do some climbing."

Jackson bit back a cackle. If she only knew.

"Good day, Ma'am," he said, grinning warmly. "I was wondering if you could help me out. I'm in need of four rooms for the night. I swear I'm not alone." Jackson gestured toward the red truck out front.

The innkeeper tsked and looked between Jackson and her computer. "I'm sorry, son," she replied softly, "but we only have two vacant rooms left tonight. We're booked solid due to the festival happening in town."

Barrett chuckled as he came up behind Jackson and rested his hand on Jackson's shoulder in comfort. "It's alright, Jackson. We've shared quarters before. It won't be the end of the world."

Barrett's low, soothing voice seemed to ease some of Jackson's concerns. Though the idea of sharing a bed anywhere near him seemed much harder now than it would have been last week.

"We'll take those two then, please." Jackson handed over his credit card, praying he didn't wince because there was hardly a balance available on it.

"That'll be two hundred and twenty-nine." She took his card and swiped it, passing it and two room keys to him a moment later. "You'll have one room on the second floor, room two ten. The other is just down this hallway, room one-oh-three."

"Thank you, Ma'am." Jackson took the three cards and tried to ignore the way sleep and worry collided in his stomach. "I'm beat. Let's go get Lark and Thorne and turn in for the night."

Barrett merely nodded, and plucked a key from Jackson's hands and strolled out the door, forcing Jackson to ignore his worries and jog after him.

Thorne, his muscled frame hunched over as if trying to seem smaller, approached alongside Lark. She adjusted her falcon's hood, her sharp eyes darting warily about the bustling town square. They exchanged weary greetings, the events of their harrowing journey still fresh in their minds. A glance up showed Mardoc gracefully circling the skies.

"We've planted the enchanted beanstalk," Thorne rumbled, his gravelly voice a comforting presence in the sea of unfamiliar faces. "It should be grown to the sky by morning, but I doubt all these people will just not see it."

"Good." Barrett replied, relief etching fine lines around his piercing eyes. "We'll be long gone by the time it's an issue with an early wake up." He handed Thorne a card key. "The innkeeper was able to find us two rooms. We'll have to make do. How do I know which is which?"

Jackson chuckled. "This one," he waved the one between his fingers, "is the second-floor room. Lark, you're in two-ten. We'll meet outside no later than three a.m."

Lark quirked an eyebrow, her gaze lingering momentarily on the pair before her. "I suppose we've faced worse." She said, her voice tinged with dry humor. "Besides, it's not like we haven't seen it all before."

"Aye," Thorne grunted, "We've been through the crucible and back, lass. A little forced proximity won't kill us." His words were gruff, but his eyes softened as he clapped Jackson's shoulder in a fatherly manner.

With no luggage, they must have looked a strange sight, but they split into groups, with Jackson and Barrett walking back toward the hotel entrance, and Lark and Thorne toward the outside staircase.

Once inside the cramped room, the tension between Jackson and Barrett was palpable. Jackson glanced at the queen-sized bed in the center of the room. It was large enough, but even in the prison cell, they'd had two small cots.

"Well, I s'pose we should get some rest," Jackson said, his voice gruff with emotion he couldn't afford to let loose. "It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

"Yes, tomorrow," Barrett agreed.

Jackson walked over to the window, parting the curtains slightly to look out onto the bustling city in the distance. The lights sparkled like diamonds in the night sky, contrasting sharply with the velvety blackness of the clouds that stretched upward into infinity. He took a deep breath of the crisp, cool air, feeling a familiar pull towards this place that wasn't entirely welcome.

The room was cozy enough, with a warm fire crackling in the hearth and soft carpets underfoot. But there was an unspoken tension lurking between them that seemed to fill every corner.

Jackson pulled off his boots and socks, rubbing at his aching feet as he contemplated what tomorrow might bring. His shirt was next, tossing to the floor where he'd retrieve it in the morning.

The sound of distant laughter and music drifted up from below, carrying on the gentle breeze that swept through the open window. It was an odd mix of sounds—part human delight and part giant revelry—like an ethereal symphony playing just beyond their reach. He glanced over at Barrett, noticing how his eyes seemed to glow in the dim light from the fireplace. There was something otherworldly about him, something that set Jackson's heart racing and mind reeling all at once.

As if sensing his gaze, Barrett turned, and their eyes locked.

"Uh, since this is the last time we're going to really talk, I wanted to thank you again." Jackson knew the words sounded hollow, but the idea of discussing the attraction between them by way of a goodbye seemed stupid.

"It's I who owe you more than what I did. Your farm could still struggle in the years to come, but I will be free."

Jackson nodded, his jaw clenching tight. He'd already thought of that. "It's been an ... adventure."

"An adventure," Barrett agreed.

Timidly, as if afraid to spook one another, they drew closer. Jackson's calloused hand reached out, fingers trembling as they brushed against Barrett's cheek. The prince closed his eyes, leaning into the touch, savoring the roughened texture of Jackson's skin against his own.

"Jackson," he breathed, and in that single utterance, there was a world of longing and

regret.

"Barrett," Jackson whispered back, his voice raw with emotion.

And then their lips were crashing together, the pent-up desire and passion between them igniting like a wildfire. The kiss was all-consuming, their lips bruising, hungry as if they could devour each other whole. Jackson's tongue darted out, tasting the honeyed sweetness of Barrett's mouth, and a moan escaped the prince's lips, spurring him on. Barrett's hands roamed over Jackson's firm chest and down to his waist, pulling him closer still.

Jackson tumbled Barrett against the bed, pressing his growing erection against Barrett's stomach, giving the prince a chance to back out now that he knew what Jackson wanted. In answer, Barrett ground up against Jackson, throwing him into a spiral.

Jackson's hands roamed over Barrett's body, exploring the contours of his hips, memorizing every curve and dip. The bedding, once pristine and untouched, soon became a tangled mess, the sheets a testament to their desperate passion.

Lava-hot desire coursed through every fiber of Jackson's being as he tasted Barrett's tongue, his mind filling with visions of them entwined in sweet ecstasy. His grip on Barrett tightened as if anchoring himself to this man who'd become an essential part of his life these past few days - whether he wanted it or not. A deep groan escaped from deep within him, vibrating against Barrett's lips. The sound echoed throughout the room like a primal call mixed with longing and need.

His hands found the waistband of Barrett's borrowed jeans, and his fingers made quick work of the zipper, tugging the jeans down a moment later before breaking free of the kiss to free Barrett's erection from the boxers.

Jackson gazed at the beautiful sight in his hands. Barrett's shaft was long and thick, with a bead of arousal already gleaming on the tip.

Barrett's breathing was shallow and rapid as Jackson made certain to lock eyes with the prince, waiting for any sign of rejection as he flicked his tongue over the head of Barrett's cock.

He leaned forward, slowly taking the tip into his mouth, savoring the salty taste and the feel of it sliding down his throat. He bobbed his head up and down, sucking gently as he closed his eyes in bliss.

Barrett's hips jerked involuntarily, his fingers digging into Jackson's shoulders as the man panted and urged Jackson to continue.

Jackson sucked harder, groaning around Barrett's cock as he felt it pulse between his lips. He knew this was wrong - he should be focusing on getting them back home to Earth but couldn't shake off this overwhelming desire for more.

His mouth worked in a rhythm that seemed to hypnotize them both as he bobbed up and down on Barrett's erection, taking more of it into his mouth each time until he could take no more and had to pull back for air. Barrett's moans grew louder as he looked down at him with hooded eyes full of lust and need, his chest rising and falling rapidly with every breath.

Suddenly, Jackson stood again, grasping Barrett's hips tightly as he stared at him with an intensity that sent shivers down Barrett's spine. With a newfound boldness, he wrapped one hand around the base of Barrett's cock while using his other to stroke himself through his underwear. Their eyes locked onto each other during this erotic dance of seduction that left neither man able to look away or control their need for satisfaction.

The mattress creaked under their movements as Jackson took Barrett deeper into his mouth, swallowing around him effortlessly while massaging the base of Barrett's cock with soft kisses along its length.

Needy hands twisted in Jackson's hair as Barrett's hips bucked wildly before a strangled cry passed from his lips.

Barrett's release flooded into Jackson's mouth unexpectedly, its sweetness overwhelming him briefly before he swallowed it greedily like nectar and he swallowed while looking up at Barrett who watched him intently from hooded eyes filled with lust and something else - something tender that made Jackson feel exposed yet safe all at once.

A groan escaped him as he worked to remove his underwear. His hand went to Barrett's cock, swirling around the beads of release that were still there to collect on his finger.

It was Barrett who moved first, turning and pressing his knees into the mattress. Jackson nearly came undone at the sight of such a well-muscled man laid out before him.

"Fuck," Jackson breathed out, his hand finding its way to Barrett's ass cheeks as he pushed them apart.

He dabbed the thumb covered in Barrett's release against the entrance before slowly pushing it inside, feeling the tight ring of muscle grip around it with delightful tension.

Barrett moaned, arching into Jackson's touch as he spread his legs further apart on the mattress.

"Do it. . . please." His voice was rough now, void of anything but need as he pushed back onto Jackson's thumb, taking it in deeper.

Jackson moved his thumb in and out slowly, reveling in the sounds of pleasure escaping Barrett. He was doing this. He made this royal man scream and buck with desire and he would be the one to find release inside of Barrett.

As another bead of pre-cum welled up on Jackson's cock, he slid down lower once more preparing himself to fuck until neither of them could stand up. Sliding his thumb free, Jackson shifted his hips to set his cock against Barrett. A roll of his hips pressed the head of his shaft against Barrett's opening.

Without hesitation, Jackson pushed forward, slowly entering Barrett with a low growl. The feeling of being inside this man was indescribable.

Slowly but surely, Jackson began to move, setting a steady pace that had them both gasping and moaning with each thrust. Their eyes never left each other as their bodies moved together in perfect harmony.

He let his hands roam over Barrett's back, marveling at the tightness of his body. Every thrust of his hips took him closer to the release he craved.

Reaching his hand under Barrett, he stroked against the slowly softening erection until it came to life under his hand. When Barrett's hand wrapped over Jackson's, everything vanished into a frenzy of thrusts and desires.

In the flickering light, their bodies moved together in rhythmic harmony, the headboard thudding against the wall in time with their frantic coupling. Jackson's hands splayed across Barrett's back, fingers digging into the lean muscles as he drove his hips forward with a primal urgency. The prince arched his hips, meeting each thrust with a wanton eagerness that sent shivers down Jackson's spine.

Pleasure pulsed through Jackson's body as he moved in and out of Barrett, his senses consumed by the feel of their sweaty bodies sliding against each other, the sound of skin slapping together.

He could feel himself getting closer to his release with every thrust, but he wanted to prolong it as long as possible. He wanted to make this moment last forever - this moment where it was just him and Barrett, connected in a way that went beyond physical pleasure.

With one final thrust, Jackson felt himself come undone. His whole body convulsed as he released inside of Barrett with a guttural moan. The feeling was overwhelming - like nothing he had ever experienced before.

As their breathing slowed and their heartbeats returned to something resembling normalcy, Jackson pulled away, his chest heaving. "I'm sorry," he panted, self-loathing, clouding his emerald eyes. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have—"

Barrett silenced him with a finger to his lips. "No apologies," he said, his voice husky with emotion. "You are my knight in shining armor, Jackson. My thief of hearts. And I don't want you to ever apologize for stealing my heart."

At that moment, as they lay entwined in each other's arms, their worries and responsibilities cast aside, Jackson knew tomorrow was going to be the worst day of his fucking life.

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TWELVE

Jackson stood tall in the chill of the dark and early morning. Colorado was colder than he'd ever imagined, but they couldn't wait any longer.

Just as it had the last time, the beanstalk had grown in just a few minutes he would imagine - but they did need sleep so they hadn't checked it until now.

"If you're ever in need of anything, you'll find a way to find me and I'll gladly help." Thorne clapped Jackson on the back and gave him a solemn smile.

"I should've commissioned some horseshoes while I had the chance."

Thorne laughed and moved to the stalk, ready to be the first person to climb should there be any issues.

"You did right by us, and there's nothing I could ever say or do to repay you." Lark lifted her arm up and Mardoc landed peacefully on the brown glove. "May we meet again."

"Climb safe."

Lark stepped off to the side so that Barrett could take the second position, protected by both, though he didn't need it.

Jackson looked at Barrett, and all he could see were images from hours before. All he could do was twist his lips into a sad grimace.

"You'll forever be with me." Barrett spoke softly.

"The ground and sky are meant to be separate." Jackson crossed his arms over his chest. "It was a wonderful adventure."

"Goodbye," Barrett paused for a moment and then turned away, walking to grab the stalk and leave forever.

Jackson let his eyes fix on the trio's retreating forms until they vanished into the distance. The adrenaline that had fueled his escape from the giant's clutches finally began to ebb, replaced by a weariness that settled in his bones. The harrowing events of the past few weeks—the miraculous beanstalk, the perilous journey through the castle, the intimate night spent with Barrett—all caught up with him at once.

With shaking hands, Jackson retrieved his ax from where it leaned against the stalk and turned sideways next to the miraculous beanstalk that had brought him to this point. Each swing of the ax reverberated through his aching muscles, but he persisted anyway. He knew the risks of leaving behind such a fantastical, otherworldly reminder of his brush with the giants and the Cloud Realm.

As the sun climbed higher in the sky, the beanstalk began to shrivel and vanish with each strike of Jackson's ax, as if it were merely a figment of his overactive imagination. With a final stroke and a prayer that they'd gotten off, Jackson swung. The beanstalk completely vanished, leaving behind nothing but a patch of trampled field and the faintest of glowing embers.

Alone with his thoughts, Jackson couldn't shake the bond he'd forged with Barrett.

He wondered if he'd ever see him again, if their paths would ever cross in the vast expanse of the realms.

Standing just a moment longer, Jackson sighed and closed his eyes, forcing back any further emotions. He trudged toward his battered truck, his heart heavy with the knowledge that his once-ordinary life would never be the same again. The impossible had revealed itself to him, and he could no longer unsee the wonders—and the dangers—that lurked just beyond the clouds.

”All that”s left to do is drive home and sell those crops.” Though he spoke out loud, Jackson knew there wasn”t anyone to answer him.

With each passing day, Jackson felt the call of the Cloud Realm growing louder within him. The mundane routine of his life on the farm seemed dull and lifeless compared to the vibrant, enchanted world he”d glimpsed.

It didn”t matter that his farm had blossomed, and his aunt had finally accepted everything he”d said once she saw the crops. It should have felt amazing. It should have been everything he”d dreamed of.

Only now, the piercing gaze of a pair of cerulean eyes haunted his sleep, beckoning him into a realm of untold possibilities. As he drifted off, their electric hue gave way to new dreams that were both exhilarating and terrifying. How could something as simple as a pair of eyes hold such power over his mind? He felt himself drawn towards them, like a moth to a flame, unable to resist their enchanting pull. And in the darkness of his slumber, those blue orbs continued to haunt him, an alluring mystery that he couldn”t quite unravel.

One night, unable to stand it any longer, he took the final magical bean and tucked it into his pocket, determined to find a way back to Barrett and the life they might have together. He wasn”t certain how they”d move between realms so neither had to give up anything, but that wasn”t something he would worry about for now.

Jackson knew that this decision would change everything—and yet, he found himself

unable to care. With a note to his aunt that he would return at some point, he packed a small bag, said goodbye to the animals who he would miss, and walked to the beat up truck.

As he made the long journey back to the Colorado mountains and the motel that had started it all, his heart pounded with equal parts anticipation and fear. There was always the chance Barrett could have easily moved on once back in his kingdom.

There was the fact that Barrett was a prince and while Jackson owned land, it wasn't the same thing. Princesses often found themselves beneath their station in history, but princes never did.

As if sensing his approach, the motel seemed to awaken around him, its walls practically humming with energy. He killed the engine and grabbed the spade and the tiny leather pouch. Jackson's boots echoed as he moved in the darkness toward the same spot that held the stalk weeks prior.

The memories of his time together with Barrett flooded his senses, and for a brief moment, he thought he could even catch a whiff of Barrett's unique scent on the breeze.

Despite his mounting trepidation, Jackson dug into the frozen soil as best as he could with the small garden spade. Blowing on his hands to try to warm them, he reached inside the tiny sack, utterly unable to feel anything. It took tries before his numb hands found the seed.

Dropping the bean in the hole, Jackson shoved the frozen dirt back on top and allowed himself to do the one thing he hadn't done in the weeks since Barrett left.

He cried, wetting the soil and following the actual instructions given to him that day in the farmer's market.

Closing his eyes, Jackson took a deep breath and braced himself for whatever was to come.

The ground shook as the stalk grew, sending tremors through the earth. His eyes flew open with excitement and he watched as the stalk began to grow.

The giant vine snaked its way up towards the clouds, piercing through the night sky like a beacon of hope for all those below. It twisted and turned, its leaves rustling in the chilly wind as if alive with magic. A frosty mist began to rise. As he watched in awe, tiny sparks of light flickered at its base - stars dancing amidst the foggy darkness.

Jackson swallowed hard, wiping away tears from his cheeks before starting his climb. As if sensing his approach, the beanstalk twitched slightly, its leaves rustling like an old tapestry ruffled by a gentle breeze. Its towering trunk swayed slowly from side to side as if dancing gracefully with an unseen partner beneath its massive frame. Despite himself, Jackson couldn't help but marvel at its sheer size.

"Time to climb again."

Pulling himself up with gritted teeth and calloused hands, each footstep creaking on the sturdy vine felt surreal against this unnatural backdrop. The cool air nipped at his skin, carrying an icy bite that forced him to clench his jaw against the cold. His breath streamed out in white puffs as he ascended higher into the heavens. Yet amidst this bitter atmosphere above Earth, there was something else - something subtle yet captivating. An ethereal scent of celestial flowers that reminded him of Barrett's presence amidst these familiar heights.

Despite pulling himself up over knotted branches and thick leaves for the third time, his muscles protested as much as they had the first.

Jackson's boots slipped against the crisp snow as he continued climbing up the beanstalk, feeling its frozen surface bite into his hands with each grip. He wasn't certain how it froze in an instant, but it had.

Jackson's heart raced in his chest as he ascended the seemingly endless stalk. The world below him became a speck, then smaller and smaller until it was just a memory.

The bitter wind whipped around him, carrying with it the scent of snow and sky, while soft flakes swirled around his face like a gentle caress

Clouds stretched out before him like a vast white sea, their swirling patterns almost hypnotic in their beauty. As he climbed higher, more details emerged. The snowfall turned into a frosty mist, and he found himself surrounded by an otherworldly serenity. The wind whistled past his ears, carrying with it a melody that seemed to come from distant lands and distant times. It was as if the very air had taken on a life of its own, singing an ancient song in praise of this monstrous plant creature that now served as their gatekeeper between worlds.

Jackson could only hope if people saw it, they ignored the urge to climb it or cut it down.

The sky was painted in shades of blue and purple, the sun setting in the background casting an ethereal glow on everything it touched. He could taste freedom in the icy air. It stung his tongue yet filled him with a sense of power he had never known before. He glanced down at his farm below, now just a speck in the distance amidst rolling hills and valleys painted white by winter's icy touch. His farmhouse was but a dot amidst a world so small yet so precious to him. This adventure felt bigger than anything he could have imagined—like stepping into destiny itself.

Every step upward felt like an achievement, and with each one, he couldn't help but

think of Barrett—their connection growing stronger with each passing moment.

Up here, far from the ground and its harsh realities, there was an otherworldly peace that resonated within him. As he neared the top of the beanstalk, he could feel its power humming beneath his fingers; an almost palpable energy coursed through the vine and into his body. He paused for breath, leaning against its trunk as the wind rippled through his hair. Above him lay a kingdom of giants—a world of adventure and danger that beckoned him onward. His pulse quickened at the thought of what might await him in this magical place.

He tasted metal on his tongue from exhaustion, but adrenaline propelled him forward to reach for that kingdom that loomed so close yet so far away. His toes ached within his boots from gripping onto the vine so tightly with every step; however, he couldn't bring himself to let go of this lifeline just yet. The world below him blurred into nothingness as snowflakes fell faster now, kissing Jackson's skin like tender kisses from another realm—cool and delicate against him.

With a last burst of determination, Jackson hauled himself over the lip of the cloud canopy.

The world around him changed entirely. In place of green fields and towering trees were rolling hills covered in ruins, blackened stumps poking through charred earth like rotten teeth. The sky was filled with streaks of thick orange light from a setting sun that bled across the clouds like blood on snow, casting an eerie glow over the scarred land. The ground rumbled beneath him as giants paced through their territory, their hulking forms stirring up great clouds of gray smoke from trampled buildings and shattered stone. It was not the grand kingdom he had expected, but a world ravaged by war. Bodies were scattered everywhere, twisted metal, and broken dreams. The air smelled of ash and copper from spilled blood while magic danced around him in flickers of lightning, casting shadows that made even the most mundane objects seem sinister.

Slowly sitting up, Jackson scanned his new surroundings with wide eyes; torn between amazement and terror at this strange new reality. His heart thundered in his chest as if it wanted to burst free as he took stock of his situation—no longer just an adventurer seeking fortune but a human among giants who must forge alliances or perish. A whisper of wind brushed past his cheek like a lover's touch before vanishing into the abyss between two crumbling towers where once there had been beauty.

The skyline was dominated by gaping wounds that looked like they had been made by some terrible weapon. Towering pillars of ice jutted out from the ground like frozen fingers reaching for the heavens themselves. Piles upon piles of rubble dotted what used to be towns and cities; only here and there did he catch glimpses of hope - small groups huddled together for warmth under makeshift shelters or running towards wherever safety might lie. It was clear this place had been through hell and back already, but it didn't seem ready to let go anytime soon.

Clutching onto this vine like a lifeline, Jackson swung down towards one such cluster of survivors - a group huddled around a small fire, trying to stay warm amidst the chill seeping into their bones. They looked up at him warily but welcomed him with open arms when they saw his battered form. He let out a shaky breath once he felt safe enough before asking what had happened here.

"Giants," one woman said softly as she handed him hot stew, "but they've mostly left us alone now." Her eyes glinted with pain and fear as she gestured towards an endless expanse beneath them where giants still fought among themselves for territory or spoils from their conquests below.

He couldn't see how humans fit into their twisted games yet but knew he must try if he wanted answers about what lay ahead.

"The prince," he asked around a mouthful of stew that held no flavor but offered

warmth. "Was he here?"

"At one point, yes," a man around his age responded. But now? We have no way of knowing."

"Then I'll find him," he set the bowl of warm stew down on the rock and moved out, determined to find the man who he came for.

Jackson looked around and saw that the sky was still filled with the sounds of chaos as if a storm had just passed or was about to strike. The clouds moved and whipped around him, occasionally blotting out the sunlight before revealing it again. He bent down and picked up a stick, using it to help him navigate through the shimmering landscape of the clouds.

He paused when he heard a soft song coming from somewhere above - birds flying towards him, perhaps? No - it was Lark dropping out of a burning tree.

"I can't find Barrett," he replied grimly, scanning the area with fresh determination, "Have you seen him?"

She shook her head slowly. "No, but I haven't searched far." With that, they set off once more, following any sign they could find—footprints or broken plants leading them deeper into this strange new world filled with wonder and peril.

Eventually, they were deep inside the destroyed town. Broken homes scattered around them like discarded toys while grotesque creatures lurked in shadows or flew overhead on majestic beasts that could only exist here within these clouds.

Jackson stumbled upon something shining among the rubble, a dagger half-buried in stone. Its hilt embedded deeply within cracks in a boulder nearby. Just inches away lay an injured form clad all in black leather armor with eyes as blue as the sky.

"Barrett!"

Gasping deeply for breath as if waking from slumber, his eyes locked onto Jackson's face immediately.

Jackson scrambled to get to the man he'd searched for, desperate to know if he was bordering on life or death.

THIRTEEN

"The giants," Barrett swallowed, his eyes going out of focus as the familiar terror wrapped around him. "When you and I did not return, he came. He came with half his damn army—which is far more than my father's army could defeat. Thorne, he went for help."

Barrett winced as pain screamed from the wound in his side. He didn't dare move his hand. There was no telling how quickly blood would seep out if he removed the cloth covering the injury.

"When did this start?" Terror lined Jackson's words.

Barrett closed his eyes, unable to keep them open against the pain if he also needed to speak.

"About a week ago. My father's army—my army—was able to hold them back at first. It wasn't until a few days ago that they came back. I had to help. My father tried to go, but this was my fault. I wouldn't let him fight against these giants again.

Jackson's hand covered Barrett's hand that covered the wound. "You said Thorne left. How long ago?"

"I don't know," the words were strained as a wave of pain washed over Barrett. "Long enough ago that he should be back soon. The giants stopped attacking hours ago. They had no idea I was out here for them to take." He paused and took a deep breath. "The castle is warded against those without the blood of a citizen. It will be

warded against you, too.”

”I don’t give a fuck right now. I’ll wait outside if I have to, but I need you to keep talking. Don’t stop.”

The worry seeping through the words should have made Barrett nervous, but he couldn’t seem to find the energy to worry. Only to be happy that Jackson had somehow returned.

”They started uprooting the trees and swinging them at the castle. Towns and villages were crushed under massive feet - the smaller ones along the way to the kingdom.” Barrett said, his voice cracking with emotion. ”The suffering. . . it was unbearable.”

”We’ll figure it out. We caused this. We’ll stop this. I don’t have a single idea how, but I can’t think around this fucking fear clenching around my heart.”

”Fear?”

Jackson gave a barked laugh. ”In case you didn’t notice, there’s a giant hole in your right side—large enough to have been a broadsword stuck through you.”

”He spared no one,” Barrett added, a hint of disbelief still lingering in his voice. ”Neither royal nor commoner, old or young, all were considered expendable in his relentless pursuit of. . . of me.”

He should have seen this rage coming. He had merely hoped the giant would have assumed he lived in the Realm Below. But not knowing why the creature stole him in the first place made his response unpredictable.

And you should have predicted it.

”Can I ask you for something?” Another wave of lightening-hot pain overtook him.

”Anything except to take over the fight if you die right now.”

Laughter drew immense pain through Barrett, but still, he felt his lips tug up into a smile.

”Kiss me. I need to know you’re really here and not a figment.”

Thunder rumbled as Barrett turned slightly towards Jackson, his heart hammering in his chest, and suddenly all else faded away. The cold sting of the wind that caressed his wounded side was forgotten as he felt warm fingers brush against his cheek. He closed his eyes, savoring the intimate touch, their bond growing stronger with each beat of their hearts.

Their lips met in a heated kiss that sent shivers down his spine. It wasn’t just passion. It was relief and gratitude mixed into one. The bite of hunger somewhat subsided by the taste of earthy determination lacing Jackson’s lips.

Barrett deepened the kiss, somehow pulling Jackson closer, wanting to feel more than just the warmth of his body against his own. His hands traveled up to grip the back of Jackson’s neck possessively, kneading the tension from his shoulders as they sank deeper into each other’s embrace.

As they drew apart, both men panted heavily as if they had run a race together instead of just sharing air mere inches apart. He gazed deeply into each Jackson’s eyes—seeing reflected not just desire, but also unwavering commitment to protecting his home from this new threat.

”I am here,” Jackson murmured hoarsely after several long moments had passed.
”And you’re not going anywhere without me.”

His strong arms wrapped around Barrett's waist gently but firmly, shielding him from any possible harm or adversary that might approach them on this perilous cloud-top perch while helping him stand upright once more despite the swaying movements caused by fierce gusts of wind that raged round them both.

The sky above was an endless canvas painted with hues of violet and indigo, dotted with stars that twinkled like diamonds in an ethereal canvas above them - a sight unlike anything seen on Earth below, where dusky skies usually cloaked the land after sunset.

The scent of lavender mixed with dust and ash filled the air as lightning danced across their skin.

"You know," whispered Barrett between heavy breaths as he leaned into Jackson once more feeling safer than ever before in spite of everything., "I always thought this world was some kind of fairy tale when I would get glimpses of yours below. . . now look it."

"Yeah," he agreed softly, "But we aren't supposed to die. We're supposed to fight off the bad guy."

"Jackson!" Thorne's voice broke through the moment.

Barrett let his eyes close as he leaned on Jackson's chest. He wouldn't be able to go inside the castle, not without someone to remove the magical boundary.

"Barrett!" Jackson bolted, gently knocking him away. "Sorry. But I have an idea. Can you become big? Will the injury stay small or change sizes with you?"

Barrett smiled, always impressed by how Jackson seemed to look at things. "If I had the energy and power I could try it. I've never tried before. I imagine the wound

would grow with me.” He gave Jackson a lopsided smile. ”I’ll have to get a paper cut later and try it.”

”Later,” Jackson agreed. ”Thorne, thank god!”

Barrett’s mind wandered as the pain slowly grabbed hold more. Jackson and Thorne discussed something to do with lifting him. Another voice - a male - also spoke, but he clearly wasn’t a healer.

”Don’t let him fall,” Jackson’s voice was stern.

”Jackson, how did you get up here?”

”You’re asking me that right now?”

”Yes, because I have an idea, but it does require a beanstalk.”

”Then it’s a good thing I used one to get up here—the whole no magic thing myself.”

Barrett smiled. ”Good. Good. We’re going to need it.”

”Okay, your Majesty, stay as still as you can,” Thorne’s voice was in his ear. ”We’re going to lift you onto this stretcher now and get you back inside to a healer before another attack.”

”Thorne, when we get inside, send a wizard to shield the beanstalk from view. We need to make certain the humans below don’t climb up it’s length or chop it down.”

Barrett winced as Thorne and Jackson carefully lifted him onto the stretcher, his injured leg and side making it difficult to move without pain. Closing his eyes, Barrett focused on controlling his breathing, trying to push through the agony that

shot through his body with every movement.

Once he was settled on the stretcher, the two men began their descent back towards the castle. A third set of footsteps finally drew his gaze around Jackson.

"Lark, you're here, too?"

She nodded, and a cry from above could only be her falcon.

"That's good."

Barrett tried to focus on not wincing every time Jackson or Thorne tripped. The sky changed colors as the castle loomed overhead.

"Jackson, I promise we'll come get you."

"I don't care. You go and get healed. I'll be safe outside."

"You can't know that." Barrett countered.

"No, but you're going to believe it so that a healer can help you. I'll be waiting."

There was a change as Jackson shifted the stretcher to someone else.

"Lark, stay with him."

"Of course."

He let his eyes close, knowing that if he watched himself be carried away from Jackson after seeing him again, he might try something stupid like jumping off the stretcher.

When Barrett finally came to, he was met with a blur of faces hovering over him. He groaned as he tried to sit up, but strong hands gently pushed him back down onto the bed.

"Easy there," a familiar voice said. It was Thorne. "You took quite a hit out there."

Barrett looked around and saw that he was in one of the castle's infirmaries. The room was bright and clean, with rows of beds lining its walls. He noticed other injured soldiers scattered throughout the room, some groaning in pain while others slept soundly.

"How long have I been out?" Barrett asked hoarsely.

"Not long," Thorne replied, pouring a glass of water for him. "Just a few hours. You're fully healed"

Barrett sat up slowly and sipped at the water gratefully. It soothed his parched throat and washed away the taste of blood that lingered in his mouth.

"Good, then we need to get my father and go to where Jackson and Lark are." he took another sip.

"I have a plan."

FOURTEEN

As thumping footsteps came from within, Jackson leaped up, moving to look within the entryway. When Barrett's eyes met his, and Barrett smiled, a surge of relief washed over Jackson.

"He's okay." He breathed out in a rush. His feet moved before he could stop himself in a rush to get to Barrett.

Jackson slammed into the invisible barrier that kept him out because he was not a citizen of this realm. The thump vibrated through his nose and up through his skull. The pain wasn't bad, but a flush of embarrassment rose to his cheeks.

"Maybe wait for him to get to you," Lark chuckled, walking past Jackson and the barrier to embrace Barrett.

He had feared the worst, but the magic of this realm saved Barrett from an injury that would have destroyed him down below.

"Jackson," Barrett's voice rang out, echoing off the large hallway just behind the barrier.

And then he was there, his arms wrapping around Jackson until he'd pulled him close against him. Jackson's arms gripped Barrett, tugging the prince so close it might have smothered him.

"I thought you were going to die."

"I noticed," Barrett's lips found his with a quick kiss. "But that's not going to happen."

"Barrett, who is this man that cannot enter?" A voice that sounded like Barrett, if Barrett were a slight bit gruffer asked from out of me.

Jackson's heart leaped when he beheld the imposing figure before him. The king was tall, towering over them all, his broad chest clad in heavy plate armor made of some strange metal alloy that shimmered in a way that seemed almost alive. Calloused hands flexed on the pommel of a broadsword.

But it was more than his height.

Barrett was a carbon copy of the man who was truly his father. Jackson's mind was still reeling from the shock of seeing Barrett, and now he could not look away from the king.

The same high cheekbones, sharp jawline, and piercing eyes were all too apparent in King James. Even his stance seemed familiar somehow - a mix between regal indifference and relaxed watchfulness.

As if sensing his gaze upon him, King James turned his head slowly to glare down at Jackson from behind glacier-like cold blue eyes.

"Who are you?" The king asked again, his voice steely.

"This is the man who made it possible for me to be here again." Barrett slipped his hand into Jackson's and squeezed. "This is the man who saved me, not once, not even twice, but three times."

Even though it made no sense, Jackson had hoped Barrett would say this is the man

he loved—but they were nowhere near that level. Maybe they never would be.

King James's face remained impassive as he towered above Jackson and the other survivors. The armor he wore, while heavy, made no sound as he walked. It was as if it were part of him, moving in unison with his every step until he stood outside the castle, mere inches from Barrett and Jackson.

"You are the one who climbed the skyward stalk." It wasn't a question.

Jackson nodded, uncertain where this would lead.

"Tell me your name."

"My name is Jackson Walker." A tremble crept into Jackson's voice as he replied, suddenly aware that he was once again around royalty.

As King James took another deep breath, you could almost hear the air swirl around him. It seemed tangible enough to grasp between your fingertips. It carried an indescribable scent—one that reminded Jackson of celestial flowers growing high above on clouds and cobweb-like vines twisting through ancient oak trees below.

Magic lingered everywhere here. It crackled in the air like electricity about to strike or whispered between lovers in secret corners of hidden gardens below Earth's realm. This was a place where anything seemed possible - if only one dared to reach for it.

The corners of King James's mouth twitched slightly as if considering something internal before shifting into a smile. It was like watching the sun peek out from behind a cloud after days of rain.

"Thank you," King James finally said in an almost whispered tone that seemed out of place coming from such a powerful man.

Reaching out with one massive hand adorned by intricate runic tattoos on its back—a mark of his royal lineage—he placed it on top of Barrett’s head affectionately as if blessing him before turning towards Jackson once more with open arms stretched wide open towards him invitingly like an offering of trust eagerly awaiting acceptance. An invitation few others could ever hope for let alone receive from such a king Jackson knew.

”You are truly brave,” King James continued, studying Jackson’s face intently with those sharp eyes that held centuries of wisdom within them. ”Not many would have dared what you did to reach our kingdom.” His voice rumbled like thunder across the clouds above them. They were standing on one such sky-island now—bigger than any castle or village below could ever hope to be - where magical creatures roamed freely and mythical tales came true.

Jackson found himself speechless at first. This was so unlike anything he’d ever known or imagined possible. But then courage found its way back into his words as he cleared his throat and responded carefully.

”Your Majesty, I have had time to think while Barrett healed. I know how we can save everyone without any more loss.”

”I told you I had a plan,” Barrett whispered into his ear.

Jackson took his attention from the king and looked at Barrett.

”Which is how I came up with mine. I don’t know yours, but I worried it would involve you sacrificing yourself to save others.”

A flush crept up Barrett’s cheeks. ”I see you know me well.”

Jackson only nodded before turning back to King James. ”My plan will ensure Barrett

stays as safe as possible. That your entire kingdom does.”

”Continue,” King James urged.

Jackson took a deep breath, trying to remember every detail of his journey from the moment he’d discovered the magical beans until now. ”Your Majesty, about how I came here myself. I traded some of our family’s last food for these ”magic beans”, thinking they were a scam, but desperate to save my land. Well, when night fell, and darkness shrouded the skies, a storm knocked on our farmhouse door like never before. In the morning there was nothing. Furious, I took it out on the land, and the beanstalk grew.”

Jackson paused to see if the king doubted anything, but his gaze remained calm.

”This beanstalk shot up higher than any tree or tower could ever reach—right into these clouds! I climbed up and found salvation in the large food in the giant’s garden. I also found your son.”

”I’m not following the importance.” Now, the king’s eyes narrowed.

”When we tricked the giant, we went down the beanstalk, and we cut it down. We trapped the giant up here. We can do the same thing with your kingdom because I had to use the final bean to grow the stalk to come just now. We get your people down the beanstalk and cut it down.”

Dead silence met him, so Jackson continued.

”It may take some time to find homes and jobs for everyone, but my property can host many. There can be a new life for you all.”

”You speak of salvation and new beginnings, human,” King James rumbled, his voice

deep and resonant like thunder in the distance. "But what you fail to understand is that my people are not animals to be caged and moved about like pawns on a chessboard."

Lark stepped forward, clutching her bow tightly. "But sire - we've seen it!"

"I do not understand how you fit into this, but I urge you to remember you are not part of my council." He paused and closed his eyes for a moment as if trying to calm himself. We are a proud kingdom, one that has stood tall for centuries against the harshness of this world. And now you come before me with some magical vegetable that promises an escape? No, I refuse to abandon all we have built simply because of a few. . . giants."

Jackson understood where the king's thoughts came from, but if he would listen, Jackson could save them all.

"I have seen too much bloodshed already—my son's abduction being just one example," King James continued amidst the commotion behind him. "But we cannot allow these monsters to dictate our future! We will march against them with all our might! With all our magic!"

Jackson winced with fear the king might strike him down.

"Your proposal is denied," he finally said coldly before dismissing them from his presence entirely by raising a hand high into view. "And what of this bond between you and my son?" His voice was like thunder rolling across a battlefield; it seemed to command respect and fear all at once. "Are you prepared for the consequences?"

Jackson swallowed hard. He knew what that meant. He couldn't let Barrett return to him unless he was willing to accept this newfound relationship. It wasn't love, not yet, but there was definitely something more than friendship between them now. And

yet. . .

"I am willing to accept whatever comes with it," Jackson said with determination etched on his face. He'd not told Barrett how much he meant to him, but if he had to declare it to the king first, he would.

"Very well. Then a mage will allow your blood to pass through this barrier. Wait here. You will come in and we will continue to plan my plan. My plan is to save my son and my people without running."

Jackson held back a sigh. If he could spend time here, he could perhaps change the king's mind.

"It would be my honor," he bowed, playing the part he needed to play.

Days passed slowly for Jackson, yet they were filled with non-stop activity. The kingdom continued to buzz with preparations for the threatened attack, but now, with the added task of finding more magic to help them shrink the giants down to their size to fight as fairly as they could.

Jackson's time with Barrett was the main reason he stayed. The days and hours spent doing everything and nothing with the prince seemed to quiet all the storms raging inside Jackson.

He was falling in love with Barrett and was pretty certain Barrett was falling in love with him, too.

"Jackson?" Barrett poked him in the arm. "Are you there?"

He sighed. "I can't focus on anything. Every time your father starts talking of the attack, all I can think of is how lost you'll be if he fails."

"My father has never truly won against the giants. But with me here, he's so determined -"

A slam drew both their gazes toward the entrance of the throne room where a man Jackson had not met stood. His face was etched with weariness and grief and bore a gash along the chin. Blood stained his armor, and it looked like a portion of his left pauldron was missing.

"Neil!" Barrett was up, rushing to the man's side.

"We tried to stop them from getting closer to the castle. We succeeded, but -" Neil hung his head for a moment before lifting it. "I need to speak to your father."

"What is the commotion?" King James entered and Jackson saw the man immediately cross to whoever this Neil was.

"My liege," Neil began solemnly, removing his helmet with a sigh of relief since protocol wasn't necessary anymore, "We failed." The helmet clanked to the floor as if he lost all strength to hold it. "Our numbers were too few," Neil continued, "and our resources are depleted." He took a deep breath before continuing. "We encountered impossible odds. . . there were too many of them."

"How many did we lose?" King James' voice echoed with madness.

"We must leave," Neil said bluntly. "Find safety elsewhere before more attacks come."

A long silence fell over them all. It hung like a leaden weight on the windswept clouds above them all.

King James finally spoke. "Very well," he said at last, turning away from Neil

towards Jackson himself now. "We'll follow this man." King James looked directly at him.

The room spun as Jackson realized that he was going to be in charge of saving an entire kingdom of people.

You've saved your farm, you can save them. With Barrett's help.

"Here's what we're going to do," Jackson tried to breathe calmly. He had a kingdom to help save.

FIFTEEN

Rushing around the grand chamber, Barrett tried to focus on the task at hand and not everything else. Because that's all your brain wants to think about.

More specifically, it wanted to focus on what would happen between him and Jackson when they were back in his world. Up here, their nights had been spent entangled together, but their days were usually spent apart. There was no way to know what would happen when Barrett was perpetually around. He had nothing to offer beyond being a prince, and that wouldn't have anything importance in the Realm Below.

Barrett's cheeks burned as he remembered Jackson screaming his name while his cock was between Barrett's lips, but this was absolutely not the time for that. Unfortunately, he'd been thinking about it before Neil burst in only an hour ago.

They needed to capitalize on the chaos and make their escape before the giant and his men discovered their plan.

With everyone already inside the castle to protect from the giant's attack, rounding them up had taken only an hour. Getting everyone out before the giants arrived could be an entirely different story if people didn't start taking this as seriously as it was.

The scent of magic filled the air, mixed with the earthy smell of giant footprints crushing grass and dirt underfoot. He tasted something bitter on his tongue - fear? Regret? Both? His mind raced as he thought about the home he'd only recently gotten back, and would now leave behind. But, he couldn't let himself dwell on it now.

They had to focus on survival first.

"Hurry!" Barrett rushed the terrified servants, his voice strong and commanding as he tried to mask his own apprehension. "We don't have much time!"

Together with the servants, they gathered crucial supplies and weapons, stuffing them into satchels and packs. They couldn't afford to be caught off-guard if they were to stand a chance against the enraged giant and his minions. The weapons may not buy much safety, but anything was better than nothing as far as Barrett was concerned.

"Guards!" Barrett's father's voice boomed through the grand hall. "The time has come to seek a new life in the Realm Below. While it pains me to leave this realm - and our history - your safety is my top priority. My guards will lead groups of ten. You will go straight to the beanstalk. You will begin to climb down. You will never look back. Speed is key, but you must be as safe as you can be. Once we are on the ground, all those not in my army will move as far from the site as they can. We will cut the beanstalk as quickly as possible, and if we are lucky, the giant will fall to his death and his people will not be stupid enough to plummet to their death."

Barrett didn't know his father well after so many years apart, but he hated the pain he heard in the man's words. Leaving was killing him, but he still did what was best for the people who trusted him. Looking to the guards, he wondered what they thought of these plans.

The guards, fear etched into their faces, scrambled to obey their king's orders. They knew well the consequences of failing and it showed.

One day, this will all be behind us.

Without warning, the ground shook, knocking Barrett into a woman behind him. His blood froze. Only one thing shook the ground like that.

A giant's step.

Barrett rushed to the nearest window, his heart threatening to jump out of his throat as his eyes confirmed what his head already knew.

The towering king strode with purpose towards the castle, his heavy footsteps echoing through the air. The walls of the fortress rose high, a symbol of safety and protection for those inside. Their hearts raced as they watched the immense figure approach, their fear palpable in the stillness of the moment. And yet, there was also a sense of awe at the power and strength that radiated from the giant's imposing presence.

Barrett's heart dropped as he watched the giant king approach. It was terrifying to see the massive creature up close, his footsteps shaking the ground with each step.

A fist as large as a tree swung, but failed to damage the castle. The enchanted shield sparkled and hummed angrily as a foot tried to kick through it. His fury couldn't break the magical barrier. Not easily at least.

His gargantuan frame towered over the castle, making it so Barrett could not even see the giant's face—but he knew it was the king. He'd spent over a decade with his captor and there was no doubt who was here now.

He could feel the king's anger like a palpable wave crashing toward them and turned to the small group gathered around him.

"Jackson!" Barrett cried out, spinning to try to find the man he would not leave behind.

His heart raced with fear and guilt as his eyes frantically searched the castle halls. There was no room to move through a crowd, but he needed to know Jackson was

safe and ready to leave. The giant's fury at Jackson would likely be the deepest of all.

Barrett cursed under his breath. They had been so close to escaping, so close to finally being free from the tyrant's grasp. And now they were trapped again.

The ground shook once more when the giant king let out a deafening roar, sending tremors throughout the castle. Suddenly, a loud explosion filled the air and dust filled their vision.

When it cleared, Barrett saw that a part of the castle wall had crumbled, revealing a hidden passage behind it. It must have been created by some previous occupants as an escape route in case of emergencies.

"You have something of mine!" The giant howled, the castle shaking with the sheer volume coming from the furious giant. "A human tried to steal him as I stole him from you. But he is mine, and that human will lay dead in my grasp!"

The roar echoed through the castle halls, vibrating the very bones of those who heard it. Barrett's heart began to race as he turned back to see what had caused it.

"We must move quickly," his father called out firmly. "The faster we get to the beanstalk, the better our chances."

Barrett nodded at one guard, who immediately began organizing a group for the journey down. There was no time for hesitation or second-guessing. They all knew that their lives depended on this escape.

But not everyone moved quickly enough. Many were too scared. Some were frozen in fear, unable to move. Barrett could see the panic in their eyes and knew they needed a leader.

They didn't have much time before the giant king could get through their defenses again.

As they rushed through the narrow passageway, Barrett's mind raced with thoughts of what could be waiting for them at the other end. But he pushed those fears aside and focused on getting his people to safety.

A hand wrapped around his upper arm and Barrett's heart stilled as he turned in hopes to see Jackson caught up to him.

It was Thorne, though his friend didn't wear the usual bright expression. His eyes were dark, stormy almost, and his lips were set in a straight line.

The castle shook again as the giant rampaged outside, determined to find a way in.

"Something is wrong, but we do not have the time to discuss this. Come with me, lead them out, and talk as we go."

"Understood."

Barrett moved again, hurrying down another corridor toward their escape route - a hidden passageway barely large enough for them all. Barrett could almost taste the fear in the air itself - bitterness and desperation mingling together into something potent and overwhelming.

Each step was accompanied by a low rumble that resonated through his bones. The tunnel led to god-only-knew-where and Barrett was beginning to worry this was not an escape route.

As Barrett ran, he could hear the pounding of his heartbeat echoing in his ears. His lungs burned with each breath, but he pressed on, driven by a mix of terror and

determination.

The passageway twisted and turned, diving deeper into the mountain's belly as if trying to hide from prying eyes above. But Barrett knew better. The clouds housed an entire realm of monsters and magic beyond mortal understanding. He wondered how many more secrets lay hidden beneath its surface. How many more dangers waited for those who dared to delve beneath? Yet they had no choice but to trust in their plan or face certain doom at the mercy of the giant's wrath.

"You know it can't end like this," Thorne grunted between ragged breaths, his words barely audible over the din outside. "I came to say goodbye and wish you luck. My battle is with the giant. And I am determined to make certain he pays for my time within his walls."

Barrett stopped running and was almost run over before people stopped.

He could only stare at the blacksmith—his mouth refused to move, but his arms didn't. Barrett wrapped Thorne in an embrace, understanding that even if he survived, he would never see his friend again because there would be no way for him to get down.

A crack reverberated through the walls as a chunk of masonry dislodged from above, sending dust cascading down upon them like snowflakes in an avalanche form.

Barrett pulled away, fearing the barricade would fall soon.

Jackson's voice rang out over the chaos. "Keep moving! We're almost there!"

Barrett's heart soared at the sound of Jackson's voice, and it did more than that. It fell in love.

And when this is all over, you're going to tell him.

He had to keep running. To keep moving to get them all to the beanstalk and to safety. They all couldn't outrun the giant, but he understood that Thorne was about to give them a chance.

At last, the cool air hit Barrett's skin when they emerged into one final chamber carved into living rock long ago by some forgotten hand-wielding unknown tools. Only then did Barrett slow enough to see what lay ahead. A ladder leading up into the sky that would take them to their next run to the beanstalk.

His body shook and his lungs burned as Barrett forced himself to climb the ladder just behind the first guard. It was his duty to ensure it was safe, even if every fiber in him needed to pause.

Keep going. You've heard Jackson, get to safety and get to him then.

He glanced back at Jackson, who had picked up speed now that they were close enough to see their goal. His rough features were etched with determination and something else Barrett couldn't quite place. . .was it relief?

Whatever it was, it made something inside him soften as he turned back towards Thorne who nodded grimly in response to Jackson's words before hurrying towards the castle and the giant.

"Come on, come on," he spoke in a hushed whisper, trying to keep his footing as the giant's attacks on the castle and barrier shook the ground. He urged people forward, praying the giant was so engrossed in his rage he didn't notice.

The beanstalk was a beacon in the bleak landscape of the destroyed kingdom. Barrett could see it, though it appeared to be so far in the distance he couldn't help but fear

they would not make it before the giant figured it out.

He ran for what felt like hours, watching as guards, servants, and others passed him until they finally reached the impressive magic beanstalk.

"Barrett!" Jackson's voice somehow called out above the fray as he pushed through the group.

Jackson was there in a flash. Barrett was breathless and covered in soot when Jackson's hands came to rest on his face. His lips took Barrett's in a kiss that sent a wave of pleasure all the way through him.

He blinked in surprise, his body still humming with adrenaline as he stared into the other man's blue eyes.

"Jackson," he murmured, heart racing as he realized how close they were.

"We made it," Jackson breathed, a smile breaking through his dirt-streaked face. "Now climb. I'm going to be behind you."

Barrett took one last deep breath before launching himself onto the beanstalk itself. A sharp intake of breath pulled from his lips as his muscles adjusted to the unexpected shift in weight distribution. The bark was rough underneath his hands as he began climbing swiftly down and away from everything he knew toward something even greater waiting just beyond reach.

Jackson and his father would continue the evacuation from their points and when this was all over, Barrett was going to tell the man he loved that he loved him.

Up above, the giant continued to pound on the enchanted barrier, sending shockwaves of destructive energy through the beanstalk and likely the castle. He roared with rage

and frustration, but it didn't sound as if he'd noticed the escape.

A fog began to swirl around them, hiding them from view but also adding a mystical element to their escape.

Barrett glanced over his shoulder one last time at his home, and then he moved as swiftly as he could lower, climbing down and down, knowing that freedom was coming.

He couldn't tell how long he climbed, but at a certain point, snow began to fall, freezing his fingers and making everything a far deadlier descent.

His father was below him somewhere, and Jackson above. All he had to do was keep climbing a little while longer.

A powerful jolt reverberated through the beanstalk, causing it to sway and creak violently. Vibrant streaks of orange and billowing clouds of black filled the sky, creating a stunning display of color and movement. The ground rumbled as the beanstalk continued to shudder, threatening to uproot itself and send them tumbling down.

An explosion.

"Jackson, are you okay?" Barrett looked over, only to find that Jackson was not behind or beside him.

SIXTEEN

Jackson's heart pounded like a drummer's hands against a drum as he reached Thorne's side. The smith had shared a desperate plan, and now it was up to them to distract the giant. He knew he was no match for the behemoth, but he couldn't stand by and watch Barrett get hurt again. And if they didn't take the giant down before the others got to safety, that's exactly what would happen.

He'll wait for me.

It was a foolish thought, but one Jackson couldn't shake. Barrett wouldn't let them take down the beanstalk unless Jackson was down. Which is why Thorne and I have to end this up here.

The choice might destroy him, but Jackson would choose to protect Barrett again and again. He'd assumed for some time, but it wasn't until they kissed in front of the beanstalk that he was certain.

Jackson loved Barrett.

And that meant doing anything and everything to save him.

Again.

"Hey, ugly!" Jackson bellowed, his voice barely loud enough to be heard by the giant even with him shouting. Jackson moved, dashing forward even further, nodding at Thorne as he rushed between the giant's feet. "You think you're so tough, picking on

a little guy like him? Well, I've got something for ya!"

The giant turned, its soulless eyes narrowing at Jackson. It laughed, a booming sound that shook the very foundations of the cloud floor.

"You think you can challenge me, puny insect? You thought you could trick me, and now you stay for me to squash you?" The giant's mouth twisted into a horrific grin showing off gnarled and twisted yellow teeth.

"I may be small, but I've got more guts than you'll ever know!" Jackson shot back, backing away, trying to lure the giant away from the castle. He wasn't certain if the magic barrier would stop Thorne's explosives from working, but he didn't want to take that chance. "Why don't you leave the real men alone and pick on someone your own size!"

Thorne was hidden somewhere inside the castle, readying the explosives he'd chosen to attach to his body. As soon as Jackson had heard the insane plane, he'd had to stay behind. He wouldn't let the smith die alone. Not when he did so to save them all. Unfortunately, if he didn't get to the castle to breathe, the giant was going to squash him.

Moving toward the castle, Jackson rushed inside. He needed to keep the giant's focus on the castle for as long as possible. As soon as the enemy king saw the beanstalk, the others were gone.

And if Jackson and Thorne failed, then the others needed more time to get off the stalk and cut the damn thing down.

"Come on then!" Jackson hollered as he rushed inside the main hall, tumbling as the giant struck the magical barricade.

He quickly climbed to his feet and stumbled back, avoiding another strike from the giant's massive hand.

Thorne's muffled voice called out for him from somewhere in the castle. Jackson knew he wouldn't be able to hold off this giant for much longer. He needed to find a way to take it down or at least distract it long enough for Thorne to set off the explosives.

Thinking quickly, Jackson reached for a nearby sword that had been left behind by one of Barrett's knights. It was heavier than what he was used to, but he knew how to use it well enough from playing around as a kid.

With a battle cry, Jackson charged toward the giant and slashed at its knee with all his might. To his surprise, he managed to make a deep cut in its skin.

"I'm ready!" Thorne cried from somewhere within the castle.

"Not yet!" Jackson screamed, trying to be louder than the giant's incomprehensible roars. "They haven't had enough time."

"Then it's time to play tag. Do they have that where you're from?" Thorne appeared beside him, the burly man offering a sad smile.

Jackson had no idea how much time the others needed. Up took forever, but down seemed much faster. The first out had to have at least a thirty-minute start. They needed to keep this beast busy for at least an hour.

That way, if they failed, maybe the stalk would be cut down.

Or maybe we'll just limit how many others die in the crossfire.

"The hell we do," Jackson clasped Thorne's hand. "It's time to play with a giant."

The giant reeled back, his gaze turning from confusion to rage as it saw the blood dripping from the gash on his leg. It roared again, casting about for the tiny intruder that had wounded it. Its boots thundered across the cobblestone streets as it stomped towards Jackson and Thorne.

The thick dust cloud began to form behind them, obscuring their vision but not the giant's predatory determination. Each step shook the buildings as if they were made of paper dollhouses.

"Come on!" Thorne shouted over the noise. "We need to move!"

Smoke swirled around them like ghosts as they ran past abandoned houses and crumbled walls until they reached a small clearing where a hole had been blown into the hillside. They hesitated only briefly before leaping inside; darkness swallowed them whole.

The entrance closed behind them with an ominous sigh, muffling some of the sounds outside but not their pursuer's heavy footfalls or furious bellows which rattled boulders above their heads. They raced through tunnels cut by magic into solid rock until they reached a hidden chamber filled with torches providing just enough light to see by—barely. Panting heavily from exertion and fear, Jackson turned to check on Thorne's progress when something warm splashed against his neck, it was blood from above where pieces of debris had rained down from their escape route.

Gritting his teeth against panic, he ignored it and continued onward until they reached a second chamber containing rows upon rows of candles lit by an eerie blue glow emanating from crystals embedded in walls beneath glowing runes etched deep within black marble slabs. Here, they found another exit leading deeper into the earth's crust beneath an overturned cart near a well-hidden passageway outlined in

soft white sunlight.

"I don't know how much longer I can do this?" Thorne gasped. "I can take him down, but you need to let me do it. I need your permission we both fucking know you would have married the prince and ruled over me one day."

Jackson didn't have time to process anything. He nodded, trying to see past the tears blurring his vision. "You're a godsend."

"No, I'm a man with nothing left to lose." Thorne pushed away and started back outside. "Get to the beanstalk. Go."

As Thorne disappeared back outside, Jackson was left alone in the candle-lit chamber with a sense of dread creeping over him. He knew what Thorne was planning and if he sat around to cry now, he would waste Thorne's heroism.

With a determination fueled by fear and love, Jackson followed Thorne out of the underground tunnels and back onto the streets. The giant was still hot on their heels, now closer than ever.

He ran toward the beanstalk, forcing himself to keep his gaze forward because if he turned to watch Thorne, he would never let the man go through with it.

The beanstalk somehow grew closer despite the way his lungs and muscles burned. He could not imagine how he was going to climb down, but he had no choice.

The ground shook, and he launched, slamming into the ground so hard his chin felt as if it split and the world spun around him.

He was too close to give up, but the ringing in his ears made it impossible to stand.

The giant turned around slowly, its massive form casting a shadow over Jackson even from where it stood. It snarled and reached for him, its fingers stretching like trees towards him as if it were playing a game of tag. But Jackson knew better. This wasn't just some game—it was a fight for survival.

The giant took the bait and lumbered after Jackson, its massive strides shaking the ground and making it harder for Jackson to move. Glancing over his shoulder, Jackson made sure the giant followed him.

"I'm sorry, Barrett," he whispered, a tear escaping his eye. "I did my best."

Jackson gritted his teeth, preparing for impact. He'd buy them the time they needed, even if it cost him his life. He raised his fists, and as the giant towered above him, he muttered, "This is for my farm, and for him."

The giant's massive fist swung down, aiming to obliterate Jackson.

It never saw Thorne emerge from behind and follow it, the target.

The world seemed to slow down for Jackson, the air thick with anticipation. Time itself held its breath as the Thorne rushed to grab the giant's fucking foot.

Acting on instinct, Jackson dove toward the beanstalk, hoping it would catch his fall.

He closed his eyes and braced for impact, tears threatening to escape, but he gritted his teeth together, holding them back. The wind rushed past him as he leaped towards the beanstalk, feeling it shiver beneath his feet as if alive. His hands splayed out wide, grasping at it with every ounce of strength left in him. He cried out as it bent beneath him but held fast. He felt himself rising upwards at blinding speeds that made his stomach twist.

Only, the giant jumped on as well—which meant Thorne and the explosive would have to be on it, too.

It was too late, the explosion came, shattering through the beanstalk and deafening Jackson.

The beanstalk shuddered and groaned, the explosion rocking the very foundations of the earth the stalk grew from. The giants' castle, the source of so much destruction and heartache, crumbled into a million glowing embers, which drifted gently down, like the first snowfall of a new beginning.

The sky above filled with dust and debris, casting a haze over everything below. The air was crisp yet cold, and it tickled at their skin as they ascended higher and higher away from the dying earth below.

His eyes watered as the cool cloud air rushed past him, mixing with the salty tears streaming down his sweaty cheeks. His heart pounded in his chest like a drum, echoing in his ears alongside the roar of the wind that threatened to deafen him. He gritted his teeth against the force of gravity pulling him downwards and hoped against hope that Barrett had managed to make it to safety. . . but then, there was no more time to think.

The giant's massive hand wrapped around Jackson's waist and lifted him off the ground, its fingers digging into his skin like bark-covered roots.

The wind howled past them both as they fell, faster than any bird could fly or any man could run, towards the unforgiving earth below. No! This couldn't be how it ended. Not now, not when he had finally found someone who understood him and made him feel alive again.

He had to live for Barrett.

Despite the excruciating pain coursing through every muscle and bone in his body, Jackson summoned all his strength to twist out of the giant's grasp before it was too late. He tumbled through the air like a feather caught in a tornado, spinning and spiraling downwards until he lost track of which way was up or down.

Jackson's heart pounded in his chest, and his lungs screamed for air. His eyes widened as he really knew exactly which way was down.

He felt like he was falling forever, but then something grabbed onto his foot and his arm, anchoring him down just enough to prevent any further descent into oblivion.

The ground rushed toward him slower and the sound of wings filled his ears. Birds.

Lark.

And then everything went white.

SEVENTEEN

With a deep breath, Barrett launched himself off the beanstalk, tucking his knees to his chest as he descended into the unknown abyss below. The wind rushed past him, whipping his hair in all directions. He could see the ground approaching rapidly, and he braced himself for impact.

But instead of crashing into the rocky terrain below, Barrett landed in something soft and white. It was cold and numbing, but it had also braced his fall. He had seen this substance before, in the mountains the day they went to the motel, but he had never asked about it. Now, it seemed to have saved his life.

"Barrett!" Neil's familiar voice called before the guard was by his side. "We must get you away from the beanstalk."

"Jackson," Barrett moved to rush back to the stalk, but Neil caught him.

"He will be down when he is down. We must get everyone away from the base except the guards in charge of cutting it down. You must get back, we don't know what shook it.

Barrett knew better than to fight the man who'd trained him in the combat he did know. Instead, he rushed off towards the motel, shocked that no one had come out yet.

Only the loud groan of the beanstalk paused his race and drew his attention back.

Barrett's heart hammered in his chest as he watched the beanstalk shudder and groan, its heavy trunk flexing like a muscle under the strain of the towering weight above.

With a final deafening crack, the beanstalk gave way under the giant's might, splitting into two pieces that plummeted towards either side of their ascent point. The ground beneath Barrett's feet shook violently, throwing him off balance as he stumbled backward. He winced at the impact of the coldness against his face, feeling a few weak strands of hair whip across his cheeks.

Screams echoed as those still on the stalk were thrown into the snow. Barrett went to rush forward, but his eyes landed on something just below the cloud line, rapidly racing toward the snow.

The giant and Jackson.

They were a tangle of limbs and nothing more that Barrett could make out.

"Save him!" He commanded the guards who looked up and quickly backed away, clearly not wishing to be under the giant when it landed on the ground.

Barrett watched in horror as Jackson fell free-falling towards him, arms pinwheeling wildly before landing hard on the ground below. He screamed out in reflex, forgetting himself.

But he couldn't get to Jackson, not with the beast of the giant rushing faster at the ground.

"Move!" he screamed, trying to alert those who'd fallen to get up before the giant killed them.

He balled his hands into fists, anticipating the inevitable fallout from the towering

mass above. The snow below him started to shift and dance as if instinctively reacting to the impending disaster.

Time seemed to slow down as Barrett watched the giant plummeting towards him, arms flailing wildly before crashing hard into the ground with a thud that rippled through Barrett's entire body.

The earth beneath him shook violently as the snow and ice cracked and shattered under the weight of the fall.

His head cracked into the ground with zero time to realize he'd fallen, and the world tipped and spun as he looked at the giant's unblinking eyes.

Blood rushed back into Barrett's head slowly after hitting it against solid ground; disorientated yet determined not to let this opportunity slip away so easily, he pulled himself upright.

A cry escaped from Barrett's throat before he could stop himself, but it was already too late. instinct took over.

As he regained his footing, he turned his gaze towards the sky again just in time to see Jackson tumble headfirst towards him like a rag doll falling from grace. His heart leapt into his throat at the sight of pure terror on Jackson's face contorted in fear.

He could imagine how it felt— that free falling sensation was one he knew all too well.

Neil shouted something that Barrett couldn't make out, his focus solely on the giant who was now lying motionless in a heap.

Barrett couldn't seem to tear his gaze away until he heard Jackson scream his name.

Instantly, he found himself watching Jackson again. Staring at the man he'd only just realized loved about to splatter into the earth that had been so cruel to him already.

But fate, it seemed, had other plans. Just as Jackson was about to collide with the unforgiving earth, a miracle unfolded before their very eyes. A trio of falcons, massive wings outstretched, soared out of the sky, their talons outstretched. They swooped in, catching Jackson in their powerful grip, and carrying him away from certain doom.

"Lark," Barrett whispered, turning to find the woman behind him but not entirely out of the way. "You're amazing."

"I know, but they can't hold him forever."

With a nod, Barrett was off, ignoring the unstable dizziness still threatening to take him down.

Barrett frantically signaled for help while yelling orders at those around him, urging them to get everyone clear before another piece of debris fell or another giant made its appearance. As they scattered away from the wreckage, Jackson tried desperately to push himself up onto shaky legs but slipped back down onto all fours once more.

Bloodied but unbowed, Jackson managed to push himself onto all fours and crawled over to Barrett who had watched every move with bated breath. He pulled him into an embrace so tight it almost hurt. Barrett let out a small whimper at this small act of affection that meant so much more than words ever could have conveyed at that moment .

He could hear screams and cries of panic all around him as people rushed to help those who had fallen off the beanstalk. Barrett's heart raced as he ran his hands all over Jackson's body, searching, gently turning him over to check for any injuries.

"Jackson, can you hear me?" Barrett called out anxiously, shaking Jackson's shoulders lightly.

Jackson groaned, his eyes fluttering open slowly before focusing on Barrett's face. "What. . .what happened?" He mumbled in confusion.

"The giant fell," Barrett replied grimly, helping Jackson sit up. "You took quite a tumble with him, damn it. And for some reason, the lodging doesn't seem to notice the ruckus."

"Thanks to you, I had enough pay to rent the damn thing out and give the staff time off for my very special party. There's no one else here."

Barrett brushed a lock of hair from Jackson's forehead gently, his touch shaking slightly with nerves. He'd never experienced anything so powerful - or so magical.

The twists and turns of fate were suddenly clear. He was meant to return home. To save these people from the destruction the giant's could bring. Only, that wasn't all.

Barrett could only think about the love he felt for this man in his arms. His heart raced uncontrollably as he leaned down to meet Jackson's lips softly at first, and was met with a sweet warmth that sent a tingle through him from head to toe.

Jackson responded eagerly, returning the kiss with tenderness and an intensity that left Barrett breathless. Their tongues tangled together like two vines entwined within the rich soil. Their bodies pressed against each other like trees in a storm-battered forest seeking refuge in that kiss.

A kiss that filled that damning ache that started the moment he didn't see Jackson above or beside him on that stupid stalk.

"I love you," Barrett whispered between kisses, each word catching in his throat as if it were the most significant thing he'd ever said.

And it was - because it was true and raw and real all at once. He'd not understood these feelings for too long. They could no longer be suppressed under the weight of propriety or duty or worry about what others might think or say.

At that moment, there was only Jackson's face before him and the taste of his lips on his own tongue. Nothing else mattered anymore. This was real. This intense passion between them that burned brighter than any flame ignited by mythical beans could ever hope to achieve.

Jackson pulled back slightly to look into Barrett's eyes, surprise etched across his features but quickly replaced by understanding dawning on his face as he smiled softly before replying just as convincingly. "I love you, too."

Those three little words were enough to unravel both men emotionally, each one holding onto each other tighter still amidst all these newfound emotions surging through them both like electricity caught in lightning.

"Jackson," he whispered reverently, watching as his eyes fluttered open slowly. "We need to get you to safety," he said firmly, helping him up onto his feet despite the younger man's protests. "Can you walk?"

Jackson groaned and winced but nodded slowly.

The cool night air bit at Barrett's exposed skin, making him shiver as they made their way through the winding pathway up to the motel. Jackson was going to have a lot of explaining to do, but not tonight. Tonight, he would sleep with Barrett holding him.

"Barrett!" King James' voice cut through his determination to get Jackson inside.

Barrett had forgotten those who would one day be his people. He'd let them all down to focus on Jackson.

And Barrett didn't care.

King James's eyes were a mix of fear and confusion as he approached the two men, his armor clinking with each step he took.

"We need to ensure there are no more magic beans," he said firmly, his deep voice echoing in the expanse of mountains. "I know you mentioned we could stay here for a day or so, but we mustn't rest. We must make certain no one else can ever go up there."

"We need to rest. Jackson damn near fell to his death."

"Tomorrow then. As soon as possible."

"And the giant's body?" Jackson asked.

"My men will do what is needed. My sorcerers could never kill because their magic cannot harm, but they can shrink him, so he is nothing more than a poor soul who fell in these mountains."

Barrett felt Jackson's head nod.

"Tomorrow then. My head is ringing and I think I'm going to pass out now that all my adrenaline is gone."

"Go," Barrett's father smiled. "You've done more than any could have ever expected."

”We”ll make certain we”re safe down here. Consider it my first job as a ruling prince.”

His father chuckled but didn”t say anything in response.

EIGHTEEN

Jackson nudged Barrett not surprised to see he'd fallen asleep during the near eight-hour drive. Though he enjoyed the serenity Barrett seemed to experience during sleep, two pairs of eyes were better than one if they were going to find the strange man.

If he even comes anymore.

"Hey there, we're here."

Barrett made a sound similar to a growl but opened his eyes. Within seconds he went ramrod straight.

"My goodness. The cars are everywhere. There's ... thousands of people!"

Chuckling, Jackson undid his seatbelt. "As we've discussed, cars are normal, and there are probably not that many people."

"There's more than survived in my kingdom."

A solemnity settled over them as Jackson got out of the car and shut the door.

Barrett followed suit, and when Jackson offered Barrett his hand, the prince took it with a smile.

"Remind me what this man looks like," Barrett said, though it was obvious he was

distracted.

"Tall and thin. Wire-rimmed glasses and a black cloak. An oddly luxurious black coat."

"Okay then." Barrett nodded. "Where do we start?"

The farmer's market was alive with activity, the bustle of people and animals creating a symphony of sounds. Aromas filled the air—fresh produce and baked goods, spices and exotic herbs. Music drifted through the crowds, carried by gentle breezes that rustled colorful stalls and flags. Jackson led the way, navigating the sea of bodies with ease while Barrett followed close behind him.

The day was cold, but not unbearable as the snow seemed to have only fallen yesterday leading to a sunny winter day today. A slight chilly breeze carried the scent of sweet meats grilling nearby. Vibrant colors painted every inch of the market as vendors called out their wares to passersby.

But despite the crowd, there was no sign of the man they searched. Jackson scanned every face they passed, his eyes searching for anyone out of place or anyone who seemed to be hiding amongst the crowd. He caught snippets of conversations - a mother bargaining over prices with a farmer, a group of children begging for sweets from an old woman - but nothing that matched their description.

Barrett's hand tightened on Jackson's arm as they wove through the throngs. He stood out amongst the crowd, even in the borrowed clothes. Barrett was too tall and handsome to blend in seamlessly. Yet his presence only added to the spectacle around them. They drew envious glances from some and curious ones from others, but no one seemed to recognize them as anything more than two men out for an adventure.

As they walked deeper into the market, Jackson couldn't shake off a feeling of dread

settling in his gut. Had they missed him? Had he already sold his wares elsewhere or simply given up on coming here? He tried to reason with himself; this had only been their second trip after all, surely they wouldn't give up so quickly? But as they continued their search without any luck, doubt began to creep in once more.

After a tiring day of fruitless searching at the market, Jackson knew it wasn't going to happen. Not today at least.

"Should we go back to the farm? You see how the shops are packing up? If this man was here, he'd be leaving, too."

Barrett only nodded and moved in silence beside Jackson.

Jackson was the first to break the silence, his mind swirling with the events of the past few days. "I can't help but wonder if we're chasing ghosts, Barrett. What if this man with the beans only had those three and will never return?"

Barrett stopped in his tracks, turning to look at Jackson with a reassuring smile. "Jackson, we've seen things we never thought possible. Magical beans that grow into sky-reaching vines, a world above the clouds teeming with magic and giants. I refuse to believe that the man we seek won't show up at some point."

Jackson sighed, unable to shake the creeping sense of hopelessness.

Barrett nodded in understanding, his grip tightening around Jackson's hand. "I know how important it is - how important you think it is to make my father happy. And we will find a way to do it. Together."

His confident words were like a balm to Jackson's weary heart.

"I think I've figured out where everyone can go." Jackson set his hand over Barrett's

before they stopped at his truck.

"Really? Why are you only just now saying something?" Barrett's eyes sparkled as if Jackson had just promised him the world.

"Well, I wasn't certain, and it does require some magical help."

"I feel like I need to hear this in the car."

Jackson couldn't help the smirk that slipped over his lips. He let Barrett's hand go and climbed in, waiting until Barrett shut his door.

"I want to keep renting out the motel. There's over a hundred rooms."

"And that needs magic?"

Jackson nodded. "Well, I can't afford to keep doing it on my own. But if you can make some things grow ... like more than my crops, I can keep paying for it."

"Jackson Walker, are you trying to be a cheat?"

He shrugged and pulled out of the spot. "What I'm trying to do is save an entire kingdom that I basically put in danger."

"Well, what you put it like that, I suppose I have no choice."

Weeks passed, the early spring turned into spring, and the summer months melted into fall.

Jackson and Barrett continued to visit the farmer's market, and many others in the area. All in hopes of catching a glimpse of the man who changed Jackson's world.

Every single visit left them without any idea if there were more beans left in their realm. And every failed attempt meant they were a step away from finally calming down.

With Barrett's help the motel housed many from his realm, but others had found jobs in Jackson's realm.

Which is how King James came to tag along on this one last chance at finding the bean. After this, the king agreed to assume they would be safe from any others growing the stalks because the man had been nowhere to find.

Morning had already come and gone with the three men searching every cart and indulging in more coffee and pastries that were necessary.

As Jackson strolled through the bustling farmer's market, his boots thudding against the dirt-packed earth, he scanned the stalls with a practiced gaze. Barrett walked beside him, equally determined but also enjoying the vibrant atmosphere around them.

King James followed behind them, his towering figure casting an imposing shadow as he surveyed the scene with keen interest.

They circled around another group of vendors selling freshly picked fruits when suddenly something caught Jackson's eye: an old man sitting atop a small cart piled high with colorful fabrics and trinkets from afar-off lands. A glint of recognition flashed across his face as he spotted what looked like one remaining magical bean nestled amidst the fabrics. "Excuse me!" he called out over the crowd noise, making his way towards the man amidst some confused glances from passersby. "Have you seen this man before?" he asked while holding up an image on his phone - it was a sketch of their mysterious bean seller from previous encounters.

The old man squinted at it for a moment before shaking his head no but gesturing towards another stall further down where there were more people gathered around than usual. Without wasting any more time, Jackson rushed ahead while Barrett quickly trailed behind him followed by King James who looked grim yet determined to get what he wanted.

Only as they were preparing to leave empty-handed again did Jackson hear the whisper of a crazy bean guy.

"Where?" he nearly grabbed the woman by the shoulder but restrained himself.

"Over that way," she answered with a smile and a hand signal to the left of where she stood. "He's been there only a few minutes but most people don't have time for nonsense."

His eyes widened as he pushed through the throng of people toward the man.

"Excuse me," he gasped out between breaths, "are you. . .the man from before?" Jackson couldn't risk his eyes deceiving him. Not now.

A smile spread over the man's lips before nodding at King James as the man approached. "I see you planted my beans."

"I knew it!" Jackson hollered, drawing more than a few glances his way.

"We need more beans," Jackson blurted out, his voice shaking slightly with excitement.

The seller chuckled and shook his head, reaching into a small pouch at his side. He pulled out a single bean. "This is all I have left. Though I am not looking to sell the final one."

King James stepped forward then, his towering presence and regal bearing making even the bustling market go silent for a moment. He narrowed his eyes at the seller and cleared his throat, commanding attention. "We require your service," he boomed loudly enough for all to hear. "We require the magic of that bean."

The seller bowed to the king. "Your Majesty. I had no idea you were here. You do not recognize me, but we knew each other, decades ago."

"Explain." The king growled.

"Let's get away from prying ears." The man jumped down, his cloak billowing behind him for a moment.

Jackson followed behind, keeping an eye on the man as if he would dart away at any moment. Instead, he merely walked toward the outer stalls and faced away from those in them.

"I am from the Realm Above. I fell - and only my magic saved me. Once here, I had only the enchanted beans from one of your son's playtimes to get home."

Jackson's jaw dropped, but the explanation made sense. Barrett made things grow.

"Only, I didn't want to leave. I found myself rather in love with this world."

"Valemont?" James stepped forward.

"Yes."

"My god, we had no idea what became of you."

The man gave an exaggerated bow. "I fell below."

"You must come back with us. We are all here now, I suppose in thanks to you." Barrett jumped in.

Jackson's head still spun too much to follow all that was going on.

"I want that bean destroyed. There can be no accidents for people journeying above."

"Have you ever thought that it may be safe again in the clouds?" Valemont's lips quirked into a very strange grin. "Think about it, With this bean, we could potentially rebuild our home in the clouds. We could start anew. Has it not been months since you left?"

Jackson didn't want to put them back in danger. Not after Thorne sacrificed himself so they could all escape.

King James and Barrett exchanged looks before turning back to Valemont. Jackson could see the excitement bubbling within them.

"Is it possible?" King James asked, his voice laced with hope.

"The giants I remember are not the smartest. If you have been gone for months, they have moved on."

"Your Majesty, I will check." Jackson spoke only to ensure that they did not just assume it was safe.

Too much could go wrong if they all climbed back up. Jackson wasn't taking any risks.

NINETEEN

The bean, now damp with Jackson's tears, sank into the earth as he gently covered it with soil. Lark's reassuring words about her falcons patrolling the sky above did little to ease the worry in his chest. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing away the visions of the cloud-tossed world he had left behind.

Barrett's hand on his shoulder was a comforting anchor, grounding him in this moment, in this realm. Jackson turned and pulled the prince into a searing kiss. The passion between them flared, a brief respite from the looming threat of their separate worlds. The kiss lingered, heavy with the knowledge that it may be their last.

"And now?" King James asked with a hint of impatience in his tone.

"Now we wait."

"Or I help," Barrett stepped forward and set his hands on the ground.

As with everything Barrett manipulated, a familiar tendril broke through the earth. The ground tossed them all back a second later as another tendril broke from the soil and began to stretch to the sky.

The beanstalk seemed to unfurl before him, its thick stem providing a natural ladder into the unknown. The vine stretched skyward, its trunk thickening before his very eyes, twisting and turning as if alive. The scent of earth and magic mixed together.

With every step he took closer to the base of the stalk, he felt himself being pulled

toward it—not just because of desperation but also curiosity and wonder he’d experienced every other time. It was as if the Realm Above called to him somehow.

In the distance, the clouds parted, as the stalk split them in the center. When no giants poked their heads down, Jackson breathed a sigh of relief.

As the beanstalk reached its zenith, Jackson hesitated. This time, he was not some naïve farmhand chasing dreams of riches and adventure. This time, he had something to lose, and the thought of leaving Barrett behind weighed heavy on his heart.

He reached out and ran his roughened fingertips along the rippling green skin, feeling the pulse beneath it. It hummed under his touch, almost as if in agreement with his decision. Looking up into the clouds that loomed overhead - no, not clouds anymore but a whole new world—he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Jackson,” Barrett’s voice drew Jackson’s gaze back to him. “You get back down here. I don’t care what you find up there. You get back down here to me. I’m not leaving this spot.”

His smile came of its own accord. The climb up would take hours, but he knew Barrett would wait.

“I love you, too.”

His heart pounded in his chest as he began to climb, placing one calloused hand over another on the smooth surface of the beanstalk. The air grew crisper with every rung he ascended he could hear the distant melody of creatures he couldn’t begin to imagine living their lives among such regality. His muscles ached from the unfamiliar exertion, but he pressed on, regardless. This was too important to fail now.

Jackson’s muscles, though stiff with disuse, remembered the rhythm of the ascent,

and soon he found himself at the impossible heights he'd once explored. His heart pounded in his chest, but not from exertion alone.

The beanstalk swayed gently, its trunk thick enough for him to wrap his arms around comfortably. Vines snaked up beside them, tendrils lashing against each other in a slow dance. Jackson could almost hear their whispered conversations as they swayed back and forth. The scent of flowers filled his nostrils now—exotic blooms unlike any on Earth—mixing with the crisp air filling his lungs with every step upwards.

An invisible hand seemed to press against his back, propelling him forward. His heart in his throat, Jackson Walker, Jack of the Beanstalk, stepped into the unknown, and the clouds swallowed him whole.

Breaking through the clouds, Jackson knew he was almost there. Almost about to learn what became of the abandoned kingdom.

The once-bustling kingdom lay in ruin, just as they'd left it, but there was something. . . off. The absence of any signs of life was more unnerving than the destruction itself. This place should have been bustling with activity, the very air alive with the buzz of daily life.

Jackson's steps echoed on the cobblestones as he ventured further into the deserted kingdom, his senses on high alert. He couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched, but by whom or what, he couldn't say.

As he neared the center, he spotted the familiar silhouette of the castle looming ominously against the sky. Heart pounding in his chest, Jackson crept closer, his every sense on edge.

If the magical barrier was still up, he couldn't see it now as he couldn't see it before. The castle still stood, and that gave him hope.

The palace doors stood ajar, swinging ominously in the breeze. Jackson hesitated, his courage faltering. He swallowed down the lump of fear that had formed in his throat and took a deep breath.

"I've come this far," he murmured to himself, squaring his shoulders. "Might as well see this through to the end."

Inside, the palace was just as deserted as the rest of the kingdom. Dust motes danced in the shafts of light that streamed through the stained-glass windows, casting eerie patterns on the dark stone walls.

He crept up the grand staircase, his boots silent on the thick carpets. The usually bustling corridors were now silent as the grave, save for the occasional creak of an ancient floorboard or the distant echo of his own breathing.

He reached the topmost tower, his steps quickening with a sense of urgency he couldn't name. The door to the giant's chambers was ajar, and he cautiously peered inside.

The room was as he'd left it—the four-poster bed unmade, the feather-stuffed comforter in disarray, as if the occupant had simply vanished into thin air.

Relieved, Jackson slumped onto the edge of the bed, running a hand through his hair. "No one's been here?" he asked the empty room. "It really is just safe?"

Only the echo of his words filled the room, bouncing off the towering walls and tall tapestries that adorned them

No one came to Jackson. He waited hours, watching through the windows, listening for any sound. The wind blew outside, sending chills down his spine as it howled through the abandoned kingdom.

A sense of loneliness coiled in his gut, but he would not leave without waiting to make sure no one came to the kingdom before he reported it as safe. He took slow deliberate steps back down the stairs and out of the castle, his heart already knowing there was nothing coming.

“And will you come back up here with him? Will you leave behind the farm that means everything to you? Or will you ask Barrett to leave the father he’d only just found. Jackson’s farm was too far from the motel to make regular visits, and they couldn’t just come and go through the giant’s kingdom.

The thoughts plagued him as they were all he had for the company.

Only when fatigue began to overtake him did Jackson decide it was time to return to Barrett. The motel’s bed called to him nearly as much as the man he loved.

The sky was safe again.

TWENTY

Barrett kept his gaze high above the earth on the massive beanstalk. He'd stared at it for so long Barrett worried he would someone get stolen inside the giant vines of the plant.

Vines that twisted and coiled around themselves in a seemingly impossible feat of growth. At the base of this colossal shaft, Barrett waited, a flash of anticipation in his eyes as he scanned the heights.

His jaw remained set in a determined grin, and his posture radiated an air of regal confidence. Though he wore simple human attire, Barrett's true nature as a Prince couldn't truly be concealed.

"My nephew has not returned?" Jackson's Aunt stepped up beside Barrett. She'd insisted on coming when she learned what her nephew would do ... again.

"Not yet, but it's only been three hours since I watched him disappear into the clouds themselves."

"You're going to fall down from fatigue if you don't come inside soon."

Barrett heard the woman but refused to take his gaze from the stalk.

"He'd better be up there," Barrett muttered under his breath, his voice a low growl that carried a hint of both impatience and concern. "I can't believe I let him do this."

He paced back and forth, his keen senses attuned to any sign of movement or distress. Barrett could sense Jackson's footsteps above him but tried not to think about what danger lurked up there or how fragile their connection truly was.

As if sensing Barrett's nervous energy, a cool breeze swept through the clearing, carrying with it a sweet scent of celestial flowers that grew only in this realm above.

Sleep threatened to close his eyes, but Barrett ignored it, knowing that Jackson had been awake just as long. They would rest together when he returned.

Eventually, the distinct sound of rustling leaves and shifting branches filled the air. Barrett turned, his eyes narrowing in concentration as he tried to visualize Jackson's location on the beanstalk. The vine shook and swayed, its leaves glistening in the pale light.

Then, finally, there he was.

A muscular figure appeared just beneath the clouds on the spiraling stalk, descending slowly but surely. The young farmer's hands gripped tightly onto roots and vines as he climbed down towards them, his feet finding solid ground with each step.

"Jackson!" Barrett gasped, stumbling over his feet as he rushed to move closer. "Father, Jackson is back. We will have our answer."

However, Barrett did not care about what the Realm Above held. He only cared that Jackson returned and appeared to be in as perfect of a condition as when he left.

Time passed so slowly that Barrett wondered if he hadn't angered a time wizard somewhere. But finally, after another hour, Jackson jumped the final three or four feet off the stalk.

Barrett rushed forward, wrapping an arm around Jackson's shoulders and pulling him

close in a tight embrace. Relief coursed through him like electricity as he felt his friend's heart pounding against his chest. They held each other for several moments before parting slightly to share a warm smile—a bond forged by their shared experiences that transcended worlds or class differences.

"You're okay," he whispered, pressing his lips to Jackson's as his hands tangled in the man's hair.

"I am."

He knew his father stepped up behind when the king gently cleared his throat, causing Barrett to release Jackson and they both took a step back.

"Tell us what you saw." The king demanded, something akin to wonder glistening in his eyes.

"The land is as we left it—a desolate and destroyed landscape. But it is untouched and there was no sign of any—be them or size or giant."

Barrett's sigh of relief was a surprise to him. He'd come to enjoy the Realm Below and hadn't realized what going home would mean.

Leaving Jackson.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to hold on to this moment as long as possible before their return journey began.

A moment they only had because Jackson climbed up a beanstalk almost a year ago.

"Jackson here risked everything to save our realm. He even faced the giant itself."

Barrett knew Jackson didn't need a title for Barrett to marry him, but it was the least

they could do. And no one has proposed anything. You're getting ahead of yourself.

"I believe it is only fair that Jackson be recognized for his bravery as well. He shouldn't return to his home unrewarded or without honor." Barrett fixed his gaze on Jackson's face, seeing the stubborn set of his jaw and knew this wasn't just about returning home but something deeper - a desire for recognition from those who mattered most to him.

Thankfully, his father did not hesitate to agree.

"For your courage and valor, Jackson Walker," the king began, "Your deeds will be remembered for generations to come. You have proven yourself a worthy ally to our kingdom. Therefore," he said, extending a gilded arm, "I bestow upon you the title of Sir Jackson Walker, Defender of the Realm."

"And your approval to wed," Barrett spoke, turning to Jackson when he realized what he'd done. "If he'll have me, that is."

"Oh, he'll have you." Jackson's hand snaked around Barrett's waist and pulled him close.

"I believe we've passed the need for that," his father said with a grin.

"You must be tired," Barrett ran a hand down Jackson's cheek. "You need to go in and rest."

"Yes, rest," Marie chided. "I have replaced you on the farm, there will be no objections. Next time they leave, you go with them—but I want the wedding down here!"

Laughing, Jackson offered Barrett his hand. "I'm not certain what my life would be without my farm, its all I've ever known."

Barrett spoke before he even realized it. “Then we will stay down here. The stalk can remain cloaked at this motel and we can come and go as needed when time allows.”

“You’ve only just found your father.”

Barrett looked to the king, knowing it was bittersweet. “But I’ve found you first.”

“Are you certain?” Jackson looked into his eyes.

“I’m certain.”

Jackson took his hand and they walked quickly toward the motel lobby they knew far too well. They moved in silence, going back to the same room they’d shared the night they made love.

”Jackson. . .” he started to say, but Jackson cut him off with a kiss.

Their lips met tentatively at first, but soon the passion between them ignited, their bodies pressing together as if they had been made to fit this way. All the tension, all the fear and yearning, poured into that single, life-affirming moment.

When they finally broke apart, panting and flushed, they smiled at each other, their eyes reflecting the budding love that had blossomed between them.

”We should probably get back to the farm tomorrow. I’ve got things I have to do if I’m going to leave forever,” Jackson said reluctantly, his heart still pounding in his chest.

”Yeah,” Barrett agreed, brushing a stray hair from Jackson’s face. His hair had grown long enough to cover his eyes in the past months, but Barrett only seemed to notice now how much more he was than the farmer who went seeking help. ”But tonight. . . we have this.”

Barrett pulled him closer, his hands moving over Jackson's strong body with a possessive grace. He tugged at Jackson's shirt until it pulled over his head, revealing Jackson's naked, muscular form. Barrett let his hands trace over the delicate scars covering hard muscles on Jackson's chest.

Muscles that had been tested over time, honed to perfect through hard work and suffering.

Barrett's hands reached for the button on Jackson's jeans, undoing them slowly and pulling them down slower still.

A small gasp escaped from his lips as Barrett ran his cool fingers up Jackson's inner thigh, tracing the contours of his legs before meeting the dampened fabric covering his cock. With gentle but determined motions, Barrett lowered Jackson's boxers and grasped his hardening member, giving it all the loving strokes he'd been thinking of doing since Jackson climbed away.

Jackson's cock twitched slightly, leaning into Jackson's touch. "I think he likes me."

"I am damn certain he does," Jackson spoke through gritted teeth.

"Fuck!" Jackson cried out, unable to contain himself any longer. He gripped onto Barrett's hair tightly yet tenderly.

The taste of pre-cum filled Barrett's mouth, and he hummed appreciatively around the man's erection.

As if in sync, they moved together - Barrett bobbing his head faster while jacking off Jackson's cock in time with each lick and suckle while Jackson ground against him hungrily, seeking release from their mounting passion. Their gasps and moans filled the room like music composed only for each other, creating an intimate melody that echoed off concrete walls.

"Not like this," Jackson growled, his hands tugging Barrett off his thick cock as his hands went to Barrett's sweatpants, tugging them and his boxers off at once. "I think he likes me, too."

Barrett groaned as Jackson took his dick in his grasp and pumped up his length until Barrett couldn't see straight.

"Now, we continue." Jackson gave Barrett a playful push until he sprawled out on the bed.

The bed creaked under their heavy bodies as Jackson climbed on top of him, bracing himself above with one hand while using the other to guide his rock-hard cock towards Barrett's inviting entrance.

A moment passed where neither moved as they waited for permission. Barrett nodded his consent. With slow yet steady strokes, Jackson began penetrating him, inch by agonizing inch until he bottomed out inside with a final thrust that sent shockwaves rippling through Barrett's body. His eyes rolled back in pleasure as he felt himself stretched by Jackson's imposing girth.

Jackson began to slowly withdraw and then plunge back in again at a leisurely pace. Jackson grasped Barrett's cock firmly in his hand, sliding it up and down its length at the same tempo as his hips thrust in and out of Barrett.

The walls seemed to disappear amidst their blissful sighs and gasps of pleasure while nature-inspired magic coursed through every inch of their entwined flesh.

They moved together like dancers in tune, each thrust sending shivers of ecstasy through their intertwined beings. Hot skin slapping against hot skin was likely heard by those around but neither man stopped.

The bed squeaked under their weight as sweat began to form on their torsos from the

intense session ahead. Barrett's hands fisted in the sheets as he moved, trying to encourage Jackson to speed up.

As climax neared, an electric current passed between them - sparking arousal from every nerve ending - leaving tiny trails of fire wherever it touched.

Jackson's thrusts became more urgent, driven by an overwhelming need to claim and be claimed. Barrett cried out in pleasure as he felt his release approaching, his body trembling with anticipation.

"Come for me," Jackson growled, his voice thick with desire.

Barrett let go, his body convulsing with intense pleasure as he released himself onto Jackson's hand and their chests. The sight of Barrett's orgasm sent Jackson over the edge as well, spurring him on until they were both spent and satisfied.

They lay intertwined for a few moments more, their breathing slowly returning to normal as they basked in the afterglow of their lovemaking.

"Well, we did it," Jackson said, rolling himself off Barrett and onto the bed before tugging him close.

"We did." Barrett leaned into Jackson's embrace, casting him a sideways glance. "But who's to say our story ends here?"

Jackson's eyes twinkled with mischief. "I don't know. Why don't we find out?"

"I think I'll like this one last climb up most of all."