

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

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# *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants*

*By candygramme*

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*Pairing: Jared/Jensen*

*Rating: R*

*Word count: 24k*

*Summary: Based on the movie "Ladyhawke" although with many changes to protect the innocent. Two lovers have been cursed never to meet again as themselves. By day one of them becomes a hawk, and by night the other turns into a wolf. How will they ever win through and find each other again?*

*Only one man can help, and, sadly, he is about to be executed...*



*Many, many years ago, in the fabled country of Texas, the city of San Antonio was ruled by the church, and the church itself was represented by the local bishop, who was extremely tough on the local populace, taxing them hugely and enjoying an extremely lavish lifestyle himself. His power was so complete that none dared criticize him for fear that they would find themselves in the dungeons beneath the citadel, never again to see the light of day. The dungeons themselves were famed throughout the land of Texas, for never had a man - or woman - consigned to the depths there ever escaped.*

*As our story begins, we must take a peek inside those very dungeons...*



Dmitri Krushnik, more popularly known as Misha the Angel, was going to die. He'd been in some scary predicaments in his time, but never one to equal this. He could see no way out this time, and was beginning to conclude - somewhat reluctantly - that he was doomed.

The jail cell into which he'd been thrown was rat infested, of course, and dank and dark - in short a most unpleasant place in which to spend the last few hours of one's life. He'd banged on the door and yelled insults at the guards, informing them that their guest accommodation sucked, until one of them had opened the grille in the door and told him snidely that he shouldn't worry. He wouldn't be there for long, because he was going to be hanged at two that afternoon. That put a completely different complexion on things, and he'd begun feeling his way around the cell, rooting through the moldy straw to see if there might be some means of exit for a cunning fellow such as himself.

Alas, the floor proved to be completely without any means of escape. After casting about fruitlessly to find any kind of trap door or grating under the moldy straw, he turned his attention to the walls, tapping and scrabbling to see if there were any loose stones, any hidden passages. In fact, he'd be happy to find any way at all of escaping his upcoming appointment with the hangman's noose.

The wall facing the door was wet. Water oozed and dripped from the mortar between the rough chunks of masonry, and that gave Dmitri the bare bones of an idea.

Taking a deep breath, he addressed his God, as was his usual practice. "Okay. Lord, I'm not sure what sort of test You're trying to put me through here, but, I must say, I think it's very extreme. You know, if You were to help me get out of this prison, I'd totally reform; I promise that I'd become an angel in truth. Give me a chance, and then just wait and see. I'd make You proud..."

At that very moment, he found a soft spot in the mortar and began to dig, scratching at it furiously. It had been made countless years ago, using lime mortar rather than cement, and it was as soft as putty. As he scratched and clawed at it, it began to crumble, and soon he had enough of it scrabbled away that he could remove the huge limestone block it had surrounded. "Come on, Misha, my boy," he muttered. "The Lord helps those who help themselves, and if ever you've helped yourself in your life, now's the time to do it!"

One block became two, and then three, and finally, just as he heard the rattle of the key in the lock of the cell door, he shoved desperately at the ones below and tumbled through the hole he had made, falling into a dark void to land with a splash in the sewer that ran alongside the dungeons in which he'd been imprisoned. Temporarily submerged, he found himself fighting hard for his life. He'd never been much of a swimmer, but, thinking it was never too late to learn a new skill, he flailed in an attempt to get to the surface, struggling to escape, to live.

*Lord, I am, of course, grateful for Your intervention, although I deplore the means of it. If I didn't have the faith in You that I do, I would believe myself to be the butt of some cosmic joke perpetrated by the very Deity I worship. Of course, I am glad to afford You a little amusement, and I think You deserve a small amount of humor after You have spent so long caring for us poor humans, but might I request one thing further? I would very much like to get out of this disgusting swamp, and I would be eternally grateful for Your assistance in this matter,* he thought.

Rising at last to the surface of the dirty, foul smelling water, he gasped air with great relief. Then he began to look for a way out, striking out in a kind of wincing dog-paddle as he attempted to reach somewhere a little dryer and hopefully much less fragrant than his present location.

He never knew just how long he was down there in the dark, filthy water, but he knew that it was hours at least. The sewer seemed to go on forever. He spied a grille in the roof at one point, and clambered painstakingly up a long, slimy, stone-lined shaft to peer through it, thinking that he would use it to escape the confines of his smelly hiding place. Sadly, it turned out to be an outlet to the cathedral entrance chamber, and way too close his would-be killers for comfort. In fact, he could see the gibbet that stood in the cathedral square, where some unlucky wretch was currently dancing his final jig to the cheers of the crowd. He was looking for a handhold so that he could make his exit, when a burly man-at-arms stepped on his fingers, causing him to lose his tenuous hold on the metal of the grille and plummet back into the sewer's depths.

"Okay, Lord, I get it. No shortcuts. I can do that." He was doing his best not to ingest any of the sewer water, but the conversation he was having with his Maker wasn't really helping. He began to look around him and realized with a sinking feeling that he'd reached a dead end.

For a moment he thought that he would have to wait until after dark so that he could try the grille above once again, but then, after treading water for a few minutes he noticed that there was daylight shining up through the murky water, and decided that he would investigate, since he had nothing but time. It seemed a little ironic that he was desperately thirsty in the world of water that he currently inhabited, but there was no way he was going to drink any of the filth in which he was swimming, thank you very much. Still, he made up his mind in short order that he would dive down and investigate the cause of that tantalizing daylight, because one thing was certain, he didn't want to stay here for one moment longer than he had to.

Filling his lungs with air, he offered brief thanks up to his Lord that he had grown accustomed to the stench and could no longer smell it half as badly. He took his courage in both hands and dove for the light. Another grille stood between him and the outside world, and he rattled it fiercely, kept rattling it until he thought that his lungs might burst. He was about to give up the battle and swim for the surface again when the rusty metal gave way at last, and Misha found himself catapulted through the gap, still clutching the grille, to land with a splash in the river that ran around the outside of San Antonio's walls.

"On the good side, Lord, the river water will wash away some of the muck I undoubtedly gathered while in the sewer, but on the bad side, I'm soaked through, and it's not exactly warm." He smiled to himself as he struggled out of the water and tried to wring out his sodden clothing. Sighing histrionically, he cast his eyes heavenward, uttering a brief prayer of thanks for his deliverance.

Skirting the city walls, he found a footpath that led into a stand of trees and began to run, anxious to get out of sight as soon as he possibly could. This was old ground for the man who called himself 'The Angel'. He'd spent many an hour practicing the art of self preservation, and he was now not only as fleet of foot as could possibly be desired, his stamina was also incredible as befitted a man who had spent a quarter of his life running away from pursuit. As he covered the ground, he was, unbeknown to him, being observed by a hawk that was riding the air currents, high in the clear, cloudless sky.

He'd run for miles, and San Antonio was no longer in sight when he came at last to a village that was sizeable enough to sport a tavern, a small church and a scattering of crofters'

cottages. There seemed to be nobody about, and he concluded that there was no better time than the present to find himself some less unpleasant clothing. Addressing his Maker once more, he hoped that his intended plan of action wouldn't interfere with his announced intention of becoming an angel in truth.

"I'm sorry, Lord, but You will have to pardon me if I resort to my old habits at least temporarily, because I see no alternative but to resort to thievery, since I have no money, and I know that You really don't want me to die of the cold. I promise I will become that angel for You very soon."

At two in the afternoon most of the inhabitants were out working in their fields, attempting to eke out enough from them to pay the Bishop's tithes and support their own families. It was the work of but a few moments to steal some of the laundry that was hanging out on a line, blowing in the fresh breeze. He swiftly abandoned his still wet, filthy clothes in exchange for warm, dry ones. Pausing to make a foray into one of the larger cottages to find himself a serviceable pair of boots that would fit, he pulled them on and then began looking around a little more. There were two rooms, but since one of them seemed to serve as a byre for a placidly ruminating cow, he turned his attention to the other and began to search for anything else he might discover that he could use. Sure enough, once he'd pulled up the straw mattress that lay in the corner of the room, he smirked as he revealed a purse full of coin.

"Lord, You are bountiful today. Thank You for taking care of me so perfectly. I'll make my confession in a short while, but first I really need food and a little wine. Wine is something that I know You can get behind since you had your Son create it for a group of total strangers." He made for the exit, snagging a cloak from behind the door as an afterthought as he left the cottage and made himself scarce.

He didn't see the figure dressed in black who was partially obscured by a stand of trees. The stranger was sitting on a massive black horse, a hawk on his arm, watching him as he made his escape.

Another, larger village loomed a little later, and he stopped his steady jog in favor of walking the last few hundred yards to the first, ramshackle tavern he could spy. There were a handful of what looked to be travelers, wrapped in cloaks and drinking from their pewter mugs.

Striding up to the tavern owner, he called for wine and then looked around himself. There was only a small group of others taking refreshment, and he decided that he should make a good impression and maybe celebrate his narrow escape from death without it costing all his newfound wealth. "So if any man among you will drink with me, state your poison and tell the world that I, Misha the Angel, am a mere human no more. The good Lord aided my escape from the dungeons of San Antonio, and so I have become an angel of the Lord."

"Oh?" One traveler, hooded and cloaked, turned to study him. "And who says that you're an angel now? You look very much like a man to me."

"I may seem like a man to you, but I assure you that only a higher power could have brought about an escape such as the one I just made. I'll wager that no other who has been inside the dungeons of San Antonio would be standing here now. " Misha nodded his thanks to the landlord as he received the mug full of steaming, mulled wine and took a sip. It was good, heady stuff. He started to take a deeper draft, but ended up choking and spraying it across the room as the man who had addressed him rose to his feet and threw off his cloak to reveal the uniform of the Guard of the Bishop of San Antonio.

"Then, in that case, it seems a shame that your liberty should be so short lived, but I regret to tell you it's come to an end." As the soldier drew his sword, Misha acted swiftly. Hurling the tin mug full of hot, spiced wine at the guard's eyes, he dropped to the floor and darted under a table and through the space beneath it to work his way out of the garden of the tavern.

Other soldiers cast off their cloaks too and started in pursuit. Misha, having reached their horses, was attempting without any noticeable success, to persuade one of them to let him ride it. With a frustrated curse, he gave up and, lacking a weapon with which to fight, began clambering over the many obstacles in his way as he worked his way towards safety.

It could not last long. Misha was nimble, but he was outnumbered, and after a while the guards had captured him. Two of them were holding his arms, while the sergeant in charge of the squad, face red and blistered from the wine, pulled back his arm, preparing to run him through with his broadsword. Thinking fast, Misha was about to tell his aggressor that the Bishop was looking forward to seeing him dangle on the end of a rope, but already the sword was beginning to come down to cleave his head from his body, when the guard gave a



sudden cough and slumped forward. Blood blossomed at the corner of his mouth, caused by the arrow that had pierced him through and through.

Misha didn't wait to find out what had happened. Taking advantage of the way that the stunned guards had frozen in shock, he shook himself free from their grip and took off like a rocket, running as fast as he could along the road out of the settlement. Intent on making his escape, he didn't see the tall figure in black from earlier stroll down to where the soldiers stood, aghast, looking down at their fallen sergeant.

"Let the thief go!" commanded the man in black in a soft, implacable voice. As he spoke, the hawk that had been sitting on his forearm took to the air and winged away in the direction that Misha had taken.

"Padalecki!" A blond soldier who had just emerged from the tavern privy, and who was making as if to chase after Misha turned to the newcomer, his jaw lax with shock. "What are you doing here? You were exiled."

"Yeah. How about that, Carlson?" There was a grim smile on Padalecki's face as he surveyed the speaker. "Who'd have thought that I'd defy my exile and return to San Antonio? The nerve of me!"

"The Bishop will hunt you down like the cur you undoubtedly are." Steve's blue eyes snapped with obvious dislike. "You just murdered an officer of the guard. That makes you a felon and an outlaw."

"And an outlaw too? That's interesting, because I had thought I was already an outlaw. It just goes to show, doesn't it?" Padalecki took a moment to chuckle, then suddenly became sober once more. "Be that as it may, Carlson," The knight gestured with the crossbow he was still holding, cocked, and ready to fire. "I can't help but think that you're at somewhat of a disadvantage right now, because I'll spit you like a hog for roasting if you make any sudden movements."

"You might be in charge right now," growled Carlson, having considered the situation. "But my hour will come, I assure you."

Padalecki gave a shout of laughter at the angry words and inclined his head, dimples appearing to bracket his mouth as he turned away. "I'll look forward to that, make no mistake." He inclined his head to the assembled company and turned to mount his black horse, riding swiftly away in the direction that Misha had taken, and leaving the company of soldiers behind. The man named Carlson watched him go, then uttered a curse and ran for his own horse, turning it towards the city and taking off at a gallop as the rest milled around, uncertain of how to proceed.

In the distance, the man named Padalecki, galloping at breakneck speed, sent a shrill whistle heavenward, and a moment later his hawk swooped down to fly alongside of him.

Misha had navigated the small wood to which he'd run, and, although he was still running, he'd slowed his progress to a steady jog which he knew he could sustain for a long time. He was congratulating himself on his miraculous escape when he heard the drumming of the horse's hooves behind him.

"Oh, come on!" he growled, accelerating as he lengthened his stride again. "Lord, I promise You whatever You want, if You help me find a way of..." his words were cut off with a grunt as he was seized from behind and hauled up onto the big, black warhorse that Padalecki was riding. "Never mind, Lord. I'll think of something myself. You're definitely not being very helpful this afternoon."

"What are you babbling about?" Padalecki settled Misha in front of him on the horse and slowed his headlong gallop to a gentle trot. "Do you always talk to yourself? That's going to prove really annoying in no time flat."

"Have you never heard of prayer, sir knight? Surely you must occasionally... er... give thanks to your Maker for releasing you from peril?" Misha's expression was pious, and the knight gave a sudden cynical laugh.

"I see. Well, as to that, I've given up praying lately. There seems to be little point in addressing a Deity who not only doesn't listen, but who delights in denying one's heart's desire." He held up his arm as he spoke, and, as if some message had passed between them, the hawk that had been shadowing them dropped down to take its position on his arm. "But nevertheless, I feel blessed to have found you. I will be even more blessed when you help me to achieve my dearest ambition."

"And what might that be?" Misha was almost sure that asking for that information was a dreadful mistake, but his mouth had betrayed him, and the words slipped out anyway.

"My friend...?" Padalecki leant forward. "What do I call you, friend?"

"I'm nobody important, really, and certainly not worthy of being a friend to a noble knight such as you." Misha was sure that this putative friendship was a bad idea - a very bad idea indeed. "Nevertheless, you can call me Misha." He peered up at the man behind him. "And what should I call you? It seems a little churlish to me that you should know my name, but I remain in ignorance of yours."

"You certainly have bravado," said the knight, smirking. "My name is Jared Padalecki, and I was once the captain of the Bishop's guard."

"What happened?" Misha frowned. There was more and more reason for him to make himself scarce. This man was apparently as much on the run as he was, although he was able to make much better time on his horse. "And are we escaping, because we could very likely go a lot faster than this if that's the case."

"We had a disagreement over a pair of beautiful green eyes," said Jared. "And we're not precisely escaping, because you are going to help me actually get back into the city of San Antonio, where I will be able to achieve my dearest wish."

"You intend to seek out this lady with the green eyes?" Despite the sudden need to scream, writhe out of Jared's grip and run like the wind for the rest of his life if need be to escape this madman, Misha was still inquisitive. "A laudable ambition no doubt, but I fear that I will be unable to assist you with finding your lady, for the simple reason that I will be going in the

opposite direction."

"Not precisely." Jared's grin was shark-like. "The man I fell in love with has disappeared, and I intend to kill the man responsible. The one they call the Shepherd of San Antonio."

Misha jumped, horrified at what he was hearing. Of all the lunatic schemes he'd heard in his life, this had to be the worst. "You intend to kill the Bishop?" His voice was almost a shriek when at last he forced it out. "Oh, no, nononono! Absolutely no!"

"Your objection has been noted. However, be that as it may," said Jared, "The Bishop will die, and you're the one who's going to help me get close enough to make it happen. God has told me so."

"With all due respect, sir," said Misha, smirking. "I talk to God all the time, and He's never mentioned you."

As he was talking, they'd entered a wood, and now Jared steered his horse towards a hut that stood in a clearing just off the pathway. The sun was beginning to set, and it would be dark in a half hour or so. Leaping down from his horse, Jared set his hawk to perch on the pommel of his saddle and strode over to throw the ramshackle door wide. "At least we have shelter for the night. I advise you to enter the hut and remain there for the night. I know for a fact that there are wild animals in these woods, and I don't want you to become some fierce creature's dinner."

*Yeah, sure,* thought Misha. *As soon as you're asleep, I'm out of here.* Aloud, he said, "You wouldn't hate it half as much as I would," and was rewarded by a chuckle from the tall, saturnine knight who had taken him hostage.

Returning for the hawk, Jared brought it indoors, setting it on a rafter to roost and then went to unsaddle his warhorse, leaving Misha to make himself as comfortable as he could under the circumstances.

Misha sat down in one corner of the hut, thinking to feign drowsiness until after Jared had fallen asleep. Outside, he could hear the whiffle and stamp of Jared's horse as it settled to feed

on the bran that the knight had given him. The last rays of the dying day slanted low through the gaps in the wooden door, illuminating the specks of dust that had been kicked up by their to-ing and fro-ing, and as Misha watched, content to bathe in the last of the light, there was a rustle, and the hawk glided past him and out of the doorway.

Shrugging his shoulders, Misha watched it go, wondering idly what a hawk would do in the darkness, once night had fallen. Jared came in at that moment, leading his horse to tether it at one of the posts that held up the roof and then disappeared behind the partition into the small back room. "Sleep now," he said as he dragged the door shut behind him. "And if you wake me up, trust me, you'll regret it for the rest of your very short life."

"Got it," nodded Misha, turning to look at the barricaded doorway. "No waking the ravening beast. Check!"

There was no further sound from the knight, and a few moments later the sun had gone, and the darkness had descended, black and sudden.

Rising to his feet, Misha stole cautiously towards the door, pausing at every step to listen for any signs that Jared might still be awake and monitoring his movements. Hearing nothing, he finally took his courage in both hands and carefully widened the gap so that he could slip out of the door.

Silently making his way across the clearing towards the trail, he felt almost light-headed with relief. He'd escaped from the threat of a forced return to San Antonio, and he would be long gone before the morning dawned. He was about to mutter a short prayer of thanksgiving, when he heard a wolf howl somewhere close by.

"Oh, shit!" All of a sudden, he didn't feel so brave any more. "That's a wolf! Is it a wolf? I heard a wolf for sure." He was torn, standing indecisively as he tried to decide whether to run for freedom or back to the hut, when all of a sudden a figure loomed out of the darkness. "Jesus, Mary and fucking Joseph! Jared, is that you?" He flinched, took a step backwards and tripped over a root behind his feet to sprawl gracelessly on the bare dirt of the clearing. He sat looking rueful as he rubbed at his ankle, which stung from the contact with the obstacle, and looked up at the newcomer, just as the sudden light of the moon struck the man's face,

revealing a man of quite incredible beauty. The man was tall, although he wasn't quite as tall as Sir Jared. His eyes glittered in the moonlight, shining from the shadows, and Misha could see the thick fringe of the lashes that surrounded them. There was a straight nose, high cheekbones, a determined chin, and thick, sensuous lips that formed a perfect, plush cupid's bow. All Misha could think of to say for a moment was, "Wow!"

"And good evening to you, too," murmured the man, his voice soft and deep. "It would be kind of nice to get inside out of the weather, because I'm pretty sure it's going to be down near zero a little later. Look at the ring around the moon."

Misha tore his eyes away from the newcomer for a brief moment to cast his eyes towards the moon. He had to agree, the haze of frost crystals around the cold white of the waxing moon stood out in mute testament to the truth of the other man's words. Swiftly, he nodded. "You may share my humble abode if you wish," he murmured. Just then, the wolf howled again, much closer this time, and Misha turned to dash back into the ramshackle hut, pausing at the doorway to turn and look back at the other man. "Come on. You'd better hurry, or the wolf..." another howl, and a rustling in the bushes close by made him jump. "The wolf!" he said again, his voice hitting a higher register than usual as he stepped backwards into the comparative safety of the little refuge.

"You go on," murmured the man with the beautiful eyes. "I'll be in, in just a second. I have something to do first."

Misha didn't argue. He swallowed thickly and then retreated into the safety of the shack, closing the door behind him. He leaned against it, sagging in relief. "Oh, God," he whispered. "What a waste; he'll be killed. The wolf will get him, and it would be such a shame if a base beast such as a wolf should consume that beautiful man."

He headed for the far corner of the room and settled himself down to sleep, wrapped in his stolen cloak, with his stolen knapsack under his head to serve as a pillow. He was drowsing, almost sleeping, when the door was pushed open, and the handsome man entered, treading softly. Closing the door behind him, he murmured a soft, "Goodnight," to which Misha mumbled something that might have been a response, and then silence fell.



The sun was well over the horizon, shedding watery daylight through the cracks and holes in the wooden walls when Misha awoke. His attractive visitor was nowhere to be seen, and the hawk was shifting restlessly overhead, perched on one of the timbers in the roof. Sadly, he concluded that his erstwhile companion had gone on his way, and shrugged philosophically as he rose to his feet, stretching to iron out the kinks in his spine and moaning as his joints popped pleurably.

The hawk was still apparently roosting, feathers fluffed out as it slumbered on the rafter overhead, and Misha looked up at it, mouth quirking in a smile. "Oh, bird, if only I could be like you; I'd be in the air and out of here in no time flat, heading for France, or Spain, or pretty well anywhere that wasn't here. Actually, thinking about it, I've always wanted to visit China."

The door behind him creaked open as he finished speaking, and Jared stepped through, buckling on his armor. "Don't even think it, little thief," he murmured, with a grin. "I'd hate to see you throw away your future that way."

"What do you mean?" asked Misha, backing away so he could look up at Jared without craning his neck too badly. The words were barely out of his mouth, before he realized that he really shouldn't have asked. He certainly didn't want to hear the answer. He needn't have worried. Jared had bent to buckle on his greaves, but turned his head to flash his dimples at Misha as he considered the question.

"Why, Misha, I do believe you already know the answer to that," smirked Jared, reaching out to take hold of his long sword and fondling its hilt in a suggestive manner before sliding it into the scabbard he carried, strapped to his back. Misha nodded his fervent agreement, watching as the knight held out his arm to the hawk, which cocked its head to one side, considering, and then suddenly decided to flutter down and take its place there.

"You don't really have to elucidate, for sure," agreed Misha, "But tell me, why are you so committed to seeing me dangle from the end of a rope?"

"Misha, Misha, Misha, I believe I am hurt! You don't believe me equal to the task of protecting you? Alas, you've cut me to the heart." Jared clasped his hand over the aforementioned heart and assumed a tragic expression.

"Uh... No, no, of course not. I mean, I wouldn't..." As Jared started to grin, Misha realized that he was being played and closed his mouth with a snap. "I don't understand why you wish to end your life so dramatically. For sure, the Bishop is a vile, evil man, but he is very powerful, and I know that he has a huge number of retainers, all of whom stand between him and you. You may be powerful, but I doubt that even you could vanquish an army such as that which Bishop Mark has at his command."

The expression on Jared's face darkened, and he walked over to his horse to start saddling him, and then stepped out of the hut, leading it with him. The hawk twittered once and then took to the air, winging its way aloft, until all that could be seen was a faint speck in the bright blue of the sky. The two men stood and watched it rise against the bright blue of the fair morning. "The one I love knows why I hate him so much." Jared's voice had turned cold, and he stared upwards as if he wished he could fly away with his hawk.

"Well, of course, that explains everything." Misha couldn't help rolling his eyes. "And who is this one that you love? Why do you have such a grudge against the Bishop about her?"

Rounding on Misha, Jared stalked forwards, jaw set and anger flashing in his eyes. "You ask too many questions, little man. You know what curiosity did to the cat, don't you?"

"All right, all right. I can take a hint." Misha fell silent again. After a while the two of them mounted on Jared's horse, and they set off on the trek back to San Antonio.

The day dragged on, and the sun disappeared behind an ominous blanket of heavy black clouds. They had reached a small wood, and the two of them dismounted to lead the horse past the thickets of brambles that lined the path to nag and scratch the unwary traveler. The



hawk had returned to Jared's arm once again, and as a storm began to threaten, Jared looked around himself at the darkening sky and headed for a patch of ground that was sheltered, at least for the most part, from the incipient rainstorm. "We should rest here. There seems little point in going on when it's almost certain to pour with rain at any moment."

Indeed, even as Jared spoke, lightning lit his face, illuminating the sharp planes of cheek and chin in momentary high relief. Moments later, the dull roll of the thunder followed, and the heavens opened. Misha had been leading the stallion, and he quickly tethered it to an alder sapling and dropped to sit, leaning his back against the horse's sturdy leg. Jared nodded in approval, lounging against the bole of a tree to one side and stretching his long limbs out with a grunt of relief. Closing his eyes, he seemed to all intents and purposes to have fallen asleep.

"I had a visitor during the night," murmured Misha, idly, more to break the silence than because he had anything he really wanted to say.

"You did?" Jared immediately returned to full consciousness. He pushed his hood back from his forehead and sat forward a little, eyebrow raised, listening.

"I did." Misha smiled a little. "Pity you missed him, dude. He was a man - or he may have been some kind of wood spirit, because I've never in my life seen one so stunningly handsome. He was almost too beautiful to be human, and he spent the night there in the hut with me before continuing on his journey."

"Oh, really?" Jared seemed to share a private joke with his hawk. "A stunningly beautiful man, was it? Tell me, what did this stunningly beautiful man look like? I'm told that the wood elves are small in stature and girlish of form. If he was of that nature, then he might well have been a wood elf or something like that, there to trick you the way I understand that the little folk are inclined to do."

"No. Listen. This man was tall - not as tall as you, perhaps, but much taller than me. He had the most amazing eyes, and a mouth as soft and tender as a maiden's, but for all that, he was a man, and not a young boy. He was definitely not one of the little folk." Misha gave a sigh. "I like the ladies as well as any other, but this particular man would make me seriously consider

changing my orientation. In some ways I am still wondering if I was dreaming, because, as I said, by the time I awoke this morning he was gone."

"Well then," said Jared, exchanging yet another long look with his hawk. "In that case, I hope to make his acquaintance in my dreams too. I am in need of diversion." He paused for a moment, his face turning wistful. "Jensen, my heart's desire, has the most beautiful eyes you ever saw. They're as green as emeralds, and fringed with the longest, thickest lashes that any girl would covet." He gave Misha a wink as he sat gaping and then yawned, pulling his hood back down to cover his face, his confession apparently over. "Sleep now, while you can. We've a long journey ahead tomorrow." The bird on his arm twittered briefly, and then they were both still.

Misha said nothing in answer, merely closing his eyes and doing his best to seem as if he were sleeping. Jared appeared to have dropped off too, and it wasn't long before Misha stirred, climbing cautiously to his feet and beginning to tiptoe away. He had gone only a few paces when a hand like the clap of doom descended on his shoulder, causing Misha to jump a foot into the air.

"Going somewhere?" asked Jared in sweet inquiry. "I don't think that's possible, because it would be rude to leave without saying goodbye to your host, now, wouldn't it? So I'm sure that you didn't intend to just run away so churlishly."

"Oh, fuck!" The hopeless expression on Misha's face remained as Jared led him over to a handy tree stump and bound him to it hand and foot.

"There," he murmured as he strode back to where his horse rested behind Misha, and apparently settled back down to sleep. "See you in the morning. Sleep well."



Steve Carlson had ridden hard, and as the storm began, he was within sight of the city of San

Antonio. He pelted through the city gates and past the guards on duty, calling out that he had urgent news for his lordship the Bishop, and that he should not be held up or there would be dire penalties. His urgency was apparent, and it was only a few moments later that he was being admitted into the presence of Bishop Mark, known throughout the diocese as the Shepherd of San Antonio. The Bishop didn't immediately acknowledge the travel-stained Carlson, who had rushed in to see him without even taking the time to wash his hands and face after his long journey. When Bishop Mark finally did turn away from the scantily clad dancing girl who had been occupying his attention to give Steve his consideration, his voice was cold as he surveyed his messenger. "Thank you, Candi, that will be all," he said to the dancer as she gathered up the clothing she had shed and prepared to leave her impromptu stage, carrying all before her. He tucked a dollar into her g-string and waved her away, turning to fix Steve with his gimlet eyes. "Do you have Krushnik?" He asked, fumbling for a perfumed kerchief and holding it up to his nose with a flourish.

"I confess, my lord, that I have yet to apprehend the little bastard," replied Steve, hanging his head.

"In that case," murmured the Bishop, his brows pulling together in a scowl that would send most men screaming for safety, "I am at a loss as to why you've decided to importune me with your presence, especially in such a disgusting condition. I can smell you from here, you know. You reek of horse and sweat. I am not at all impressed."

"Sire, I've ridden day and night to reach you." Carlson had visibly quailed, but he stuck to his guns. "I thought that you needed to know that Sir Jared has returned to the diocese."

The Bishop startled at that, and, for a moment, he seemed a little disconcerted. He appeared to pause for a moment, evidently pondering this information, and then he waved a hand, dismissing his retinue and the dancing wench he had been so admiring. "Walk with me," he said, gently, gesturing to Steve to accompany him through the cloisters and away from his servants' prying ears.

Carlson knew better than to let a sigh of relief - or indeed any other such indication of his emotional state - betray his feelings to the Bishop. Nodding, he stepped up to allow Bishop Mark to take his arm and guide him away from the followers who had so recently been

entertaining him.

"So he's back, is he?" said Mark. "I wonder how he dares to show his face anywhere within a hundred miles of here."

"Yeah," nodded Carlson in fervent agreement. "And not only is he back, but he's apparently taken up with that nasty little pickpocket, Krushnik. They were reportedly traveling together when last heard from."

"Interesting," mused the Bishop. "And was there by any chance a bird nearby? It would be a fine, large hawk of some kind. Did you see such a bird?" The Bishop released Steve's arm and turned to face him, intense eyes boring into Steve's until the soldier almost imagined that the prelate could see his very thoughts. He swallowed, hoping that didn't mean that his last, ignominious encounter with both the men under discussion had become visible to his reverence, or his remaining existence might be coming to an end very soon.

"Odd that you should mention that, my lord." Carlson frowned, his mind straying willfully back to his last encounter with the man who had once been his superior officer. "There was indeed a hawk with him. Padalecki had it on his arm."

"Oh, excellent." The Shepherd smiled. "I was hoping you would confirm that for me. Well, here's what we need to do. Firstly, I want you to summon Kane, the wolf catcher, and have him here as swiftly as is possible. Secondly, I want you to make sure that whatever might befall the other two, the bird remains unharmed. Do you understand? If that bird loses even a single feather from its head, your head will fall with it."

"It shall be done, my lord Bishop." Carlson bowed and bent to kiss the Bishop's ring, feeling that he had got off very lightly if that was all he would need to do.

"You must understand, Carlson. Last night, God spoke to me in a dream." The Bishop's eyes glowed with the light of a true fanatic. "He told me that the devil walked amongst us, and that his name was Sir Jared Padalecki. Now I want you to go and personally make sure that the devil no longer has the power to harm either our Holy Mother Church or its representatives."

As Carlson backed away to return to his duties, the Bishop was already calling for his attendants to find Kane for him, having forgotten his commands to Carlson already in his excitement at tracking down his prey.



There were noises in the dark. Bound hand and foot to the tree the way he was, Misha couldn't turn to check what was going on behind him. He could hear crashing in the shrubbery that surrounded him, and when the man from the previous night appeared at his shoulder, he jumped as high as his bonds would let him and let out a faint and very girlish squeal. The man gave a rich chuckle and laid one hand on Misha's shoulder. Leaning forward to press his lips to Misha's ear, he whispered, "Boo!"

"You fucking jerk!" The words were out of Misha's mouth before he could stop them. "I think you just knocked ten years off my life expectancy."

The newcomer gave a loud, hearty laugh. "It has been said before," he nodded, surveying Misha's current position with a smirk. "Are you enjoying yourself there? It seems a strange way to spend the night, but if you're happy with it, then far be it from me to interrupt your continued enjoyment."

"Actually," murmured Misha, gazing up at the man with what he hoped were his most guileless blue eyes. "I was hoping you could cut me loose. I'm really scared about what will happen when they come back."

"They? Who are they?" The inquiry was polite, but the voice had an amused tone to it.

"They are the Bishop's men," announced Misha, thinking on his feet. "They tied me up and left me here at the mercy of any wild animal that might happen to fancy a tasty meal."

"Oh?" the man raised an eyebrow. "Interesting. Why didn't they just kill you?"

Good question, thought Misha. Why didn't they just kill me? Help me out, Lord, please. "Ummm... The captain said that it was more than his life was worth to let anyone harm me, because the Bishop wants to end my life himself. Apparently I have become something of a thorn in his holy side. That infernal bastard left me here, bound and helpless as I am and went away to get another horse on which to convey me back to San Antonio for that purpose."

"I see." The other man was still grinning, but he did bend and begin to cut him free of the ropes that were holding him fast. "There," said his savior once the ropes had fallen to the ground. "That should give you the opportunity to get a good head start if you go now." He was still smirking as he jerked his head towards the pathway. "I should run if I were you."

Rising to his feet to massage the circulation back into limbs that had long since become numb, Misha nodded his thanks. He certainly intended to run far and fast. "Well, okay," he mumbled. "I'll be off now, and thank you for your assistance."

As he began to stumble away through the moonlit woods, he heard the soft laughter that was following him, and smiled to himself. He might have appeared a figure of fun, but at least he was free of Sir Jared's bonds, and hopefully would never have to set foot in San Antonio again.



Daylight found him still running. He wasn't sure how far he'd come, but he knew it to be a fair distance. He was nothing if not fit, and very used to running, of course. He was jogging along at a steady pace that ate up the miles when he heard the sound of hooves behind him. "Oh, God, no!" he panted, picking up his pace as he headed for a little, wooded thicket that surrounded the pathway a hundred feet or so ahead.

He was almost there when the horse and rider swooped by him, and Jared gathered him up

in his arms as he passed. Cursing, Misha felt for all the world like some demented rag doll. He struggled, but it was in vain, and he was about to bite Jared's hand when there was a clattering, and the Bishop's men, with Carlson in the vanguard, rose out of their places of concealment to surround them.

"We seem to have somewhat of a dilemma, my lord," he said, and Jared growled, then set him down and drew his sword.

"You're surrounded. Might just as well give it up right now." Carlson's sneering voice reached them, and Misha watched apprehensively as he beckoned his troops forward. "I've been looking forward to this day, Padalecki."

"As have I," gritted Jared, whirling his sword above his head and striking out at one of Carlson's men who had proven a little rash and come too close to save himself. Carlson was about to take aim with his own sword when, from nowhere, the hawk swooped down to claw at the guard's hair and eyes, before soaring skyward again.

"Ah, got you," cried another soldier, who had taken aim with his crossbow and let fly. The hawk, wing transfixed by the bolt, let out a scream and plummeted to earth to lie still, seeming like a shabby bundle of feathers rather than the vibrant creature it had been just moments before.

Sir Jared looked on in horror as his bird was hit, and then he seemed to go berserk, sword whirling as first one soldier and then another fell before the ferocity of it. Carlson had looked on with horror, recalling the Bishop's words about the creature his man had just shot. As Jared busied himself with the execution of the other guards, Carlson swiftly leapt onto his horse and took off as if the devil himself were after him.

Misha had lost no time in running to where the hawk lay, transfixed by the arrow, and now he bent to gather it into his arms. Jared, paying no attention to the slaughtered bodies, stood his broadsword up in the dirt and went to see. "It still lives," said Misha, cradling the creature tenderly as it lay quietly within his embrace. "What do we do?"

Biting his lip, Jared studied them both. "Can I trust you?" he mused. "I hope I can." He

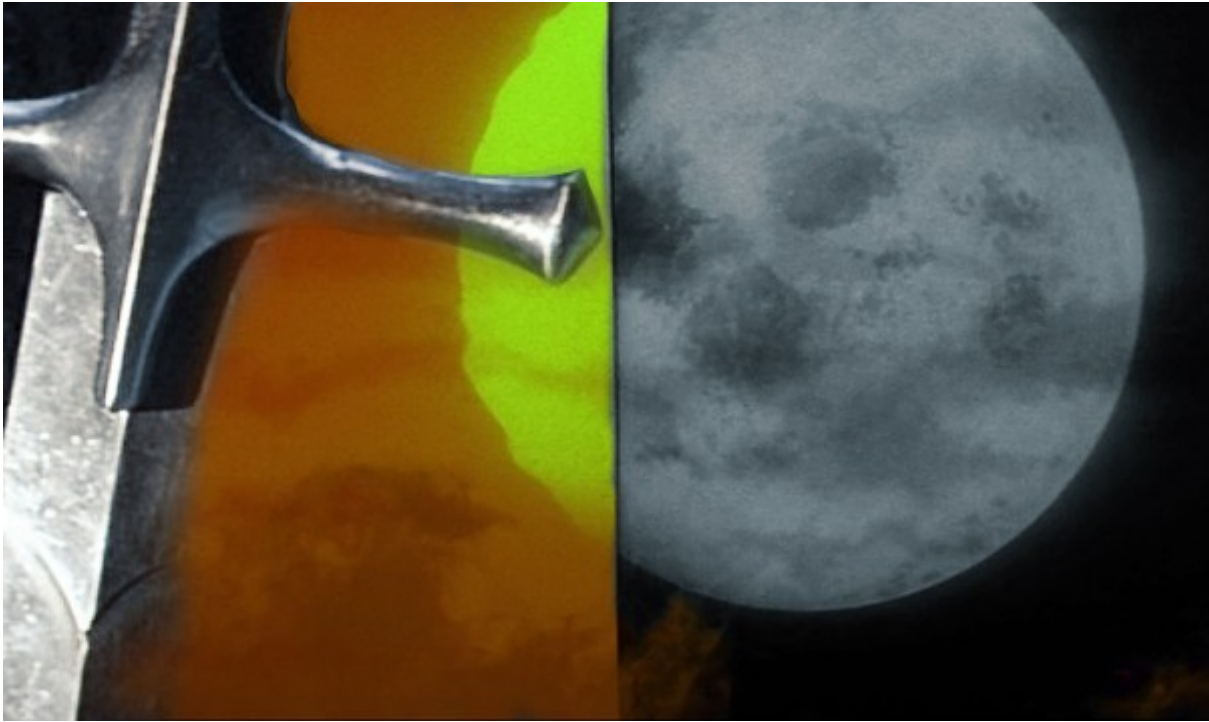
stepped forward and bent pleading eyes on the young thief. "I need you to do something for me," he said, voice cracking with grief. "Take him and go that way." As he spoke, he was leading Jared to the side of the wood to indicate a faint pathway across the meadow. "Go swiftly and don't waste any time. There's a ruined keep around a mile or so along the path, and there is someone there who will help. She owes this to him, and she must help him or she knows that she'll die on my sword."

"Ruined keep, right," nodded Misha. "Okay, you got it." Turning in the direction Jared had indicated, he took off like the winged Mercury, feet fairly flying over the ground as he ran to save the life of the hawk that had defended him, and which was so evidently dear to its owner.

As Jared sat astride his horse and watched them go, his heart was in his eyes. Murmuring a soft prayer to whatever Deity might be watching, he waited until Misha was out of sight before spurring his horse to a trot and making his way in pursuit of Carlson.







## CHAPTER TWO

True to Jared's description, the ruined keep was only a short distance from the place where the disastrous skirmish had taken place. Misha approached it, still carefully cradling the wounded bird in his arms, and began to look for a way in. The main door was sturdy and bolted, and he looked for some means of attracting attention from whomever it was that lurked within, but he could see nothing that might help him. Finally, he gave a shrug. "It seems that if I am to save you, my fine, feathered friend, I must take matters into my own hands." The bird uttered a feeble cry as Misha added, "Don't panic. If this doesn't work, all I will need to do is simply set fire to the door."

Setting his fragile burden down on one of the large rocks that edged the path and taking a

deep breath, Misha took a run up at the door and kicked at it hard, producing a hollow, booming sound that could possibly have woken the local peasantry for miles around. It produced almost instant results when a pretty but somewhat irritable face appeared over the battlements, and the vision called down to him, "Couldn't you just have rung the bell like everyone else?"

Looking around himself, Misha shrugged. "There's no bell," he said, huffing irritably. He was about to continue, to show this woman his reason for being there, but she pre-empted him.

"What do you want, anyway?" she demanded.

"I have an injured bird here. I was told to bring it to you."

"Well, all right. We'll dine sumptuously tonight then," she announced.

"No, No! Good God, woman, have you no sense?" Misha was horrified. "Sir Jared would gut me with his enormous sword, and you straight after that. He's expecting you to heal it. It's his hawk."

"Did you say Sir Jared?" The woman didn't wait for an answer. She withdrew smartly from her perch and disappeared, only to unbolt the door and reappear a moment later in the doorway. "Stupid kids!" she growled, looking in vain for the missing bell. "They're constantly stealing things. I hung my habit out to dry in the back yard the other day, and when I went to look, it was gone."

Avoiding any snarky comments about dirty habits, Misha followed her inside and watched as she re-engaged the numerous bolts and locks that secured the heavy iron door. The bird gave a little cry again, and the woman peered at it. "My God," she said, voice hushed. "Bring him through. I fear that it might already be too late. Best pray to God that it isn't."

Taking the bird from Misha, she made swiftly for another room, and as Misha tried to follow, she slammed the door closed in his face, narrowly missing his nose. Tapping somewhat diffidently on the now firmly locked door, he waited for a response, and when none came, he called out to her. "Uh... Sister, may I come in?"

"No. Go away. I must be alone for this," was the response. "Go play with something in the main hall. Do some embroidery or something. There's plenty of darning in the basket beside the fire."



Moodily, Misha mooched off in search of the main hall. One thing he was certain of, was that there would be no darning in his future. Did this woman mistake him for a maid? He was a man, and men did not do such things, ever - although come to think of it there had been that time he'd broken into the Dean of Morgan's palace under the guise of a servant maid, and found himself polishing the very candlesticks he wished to make off with. He bent his mind to his current problems, chafing that there was nothing he could do to help. He hoped beyond hope that Jared's hawk would be okay. "Listen, Lord, I've neglected You shamefully this past day or so, but You must understand that I've been very busy with all the challenges You've thrown at me. I suppose that if I aspire to become one of Your angels I must first face challenges such as these, so I know You'll forgive me, because You know that I carry you in my heart at all times, even if I appear to be really, really busy. I'm merely asking for one teeny little favor, and it's one that shouldn't be too hard for You, Lord. Please, I beg of You, don't make me return to San Antonio. I really think that would be over and above expectations." He paused. "Oh, and I'd be very grateful also if You could make sure that the bird lives, for if it dies I very much fear that any return to San Antonio will be moot, because Sir Jared will see the color of my blood upon the ground when he spits me on that gigantic sword of his. I know this with great certainty."

There was no answer of course, but he didn't expect one. He uttered a heavy sigh and threw himself down in front of the fire, where he basked in the heat for a few minutes, before dropping off to sleep, thoroughly warm for the first time since he'd been taken by the Bishop's men and imprisoned in San Antonio's fortress.

It was much later in the day when he was finally awakened somewhat rudely by the woman who lived there stirring him with her foot. Startling into wakefulness and poised to take immediate evasive action, he stared around himself wildly before finally relaxing as he recognized his surroundings.

"Wait! What...?" He clasped a hand to his chest and scurried back out of reach of her feet. "The bird?" he asked. "Does it still live? Think carefully how you answer, because your response might well mean life or death for me."

"Of course it lives," murmured the woman, still standing over him, menacingly. "Did you doubt my skill as a healer?"

"Uh... no. Definitely not. I would never... I mean, good; I'm glad that you saved it. Sir Jared will be so pleased."

She gave him a somewhat sour smile. "Perhaps," she said. "He has no reason to love me, but perhaps his heart will soften towards me for saving the most precious thing in his life."

She beckoned him to go with her and led him back beyond a tapestry that hung from the wall, into a large kitchen. There was a huge fireplace with a range attached lining one wall where several kettles were bubbling on the hotplate. A cauldron hung suspended above the glowing fire, and from it there came the most delightfully fragrant scent of stew, underlaid with the smell of freshly baked bread. Indicating that he should take a seat on one of the benches that lined the table in the center of the room, she turned to pull open the door of the oven, revealing the source of the wonderful smell.

She had baked several small loaves of bread, and pulling them out of the oven to inspect, she nodded, and proceeded to tear the tops off two of them. Scooping out the soft inner part of each, she dumped the contents onto a pair of wooden platters and set them aside, turning to fill each of the now hollow loaves with some of the deliciously scented stew. "I fear that it's not hawk this time, but only one of the deer that decided to dine on the vegetables I planted in my garden. It seemed to be poetic justice that since I fed him he should feed me."

Grinning widely, Misha nodded his agreement. "The king won't miss one little animal," he

said. "And I promise that if I ever meet him, I won't say a word." He murmured his thanks as she passed him the filled loaf and one of the platters with the bread on it, and reached for the spoon she was offering, digging in with no further ceremony. He fell upon the food, suddenly realizing just how very hungry he was, since he had barely eaten anything for days now. The food was delicious, and it wasn't very long before he was able to slow down and savor the part that remained.

The woman had risen to her feet after taking a few mouthfuls of her own stew, and now she brought a large stoneware jar back to the table along with two cups. Pouring some of the contents into each cup, she passed one to Misha and took the other herself, draining it swiftly, only to refill it before resuming her meal.

When Misha picked up his own cup and sipped, he found that the liquor it held was a potent spirit that tasted of plums. Nodding his approval, he finished the stew in his trencher and began to devour the now gravy soaked bread. His hostess drained her cup once again and reached to pour herself more.

"Sister... you did say that you were a nun, did you not?" Misha frowned. "How do you wish for me to address you? I am Misha, known as "The Angel" to those who fear me."

"Why would they fear you?" she asked him, one eyebrow delicately arched in disbelief. "To tell you the truth, you are the least angelic specimen of humanity I've ever laid my eyes on."

"They fear me because I..." he caught a look at her face, and his words tumbled to a halt. "Well, they would fear me if I didn't remain under the radar, anyway." He flashed her his most winning smile and took her hand, bending to kiss it in a courtly manner. "And how may I address you, my lady?" he asked.

"I was a nun, but alas no longer, for reasons that are far too lengthy to explain." She gave him the first genuine smile he had seen from her. "You may call me Danneel. I am Sister no more, and now even my habit is gone, and I must needs wear homespun clothing."

Misha didn't know what to do with that information, so he merely looked sympathetic, waited for her to elaborate, and when she didn't, he frowned. "I always thought that once you

became a Bride of Christ, you were a nun for life. I don't understand."

The bitter laugh she gave cut through him like a knife. "It's all because of that creature in there - the bird you brought to me." Again she stopped speaking, and Misha nodded as if he understood, which was not at all the case. She raised her eyebrows at him and then appeared to reach some kind of decision. Gesturing to him to hurry and finish with his meal, she began to clear away the debris from her own meal.

"Come. I'll show you something," she said, rising to her feet and standing over him as he crammed the rest of his gravy soaked trencher into his mouth. Rising hastily to follow her, he rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth, rearranging the smears of gravy that had trickled down his chin.

"What is it?" he asked as he fell into step beside her. They went up the stairs towards the small room from which she had earlier barred him.

"You'll see," she murmured, a slight smirk on her face as she stepped back to usher him inside. The bird lay still on a straw pallet that was partially covered in a coarse, woolen blanket. At first Misha thought that it was dead, but then he saw that it was still breathing, sudden, rapid breaths as it lay quiescent, feathers barely stirring. Danneel walked over to the window. "Look there. It's almost sunset. I love the night, don't you?"

It was true enough. From the window, Misha could see the sun hanging low on the horizon, already partly eclipsed by the edge of the world. As he watched, it sank a little lower, painting the sky in flaming pinks and oranges as it was doused for the day. The bird peeped softly behind him, and Danneel turned to pet its head. "Soon, little one, soon," she murmured. "He needs to know. It's the best thing I can do for you."



Misha watched the sun setting. The wounded bird gave one more peep, and as the sky faded from pink to lilac, and into the purple of dusk, he heard another sound, more of a gasp. It caused Misha to turn abruptly, afraid that the creature might have died in spite of Danneel's care. For a moment, he didn't believe his eyes, and he rubbed at them as if to clear them.

Danneel seemed to have left the room, and on the bed where the bird had been lay a man, and not just any man. This was the man that Misha had seen twice before, and whom he had described so eloquently to Jared. He gasped in disbelief as he rounded the edge of the pallet on which the man was lying. "It's you," he murmured. "I don't understand. How did you...? What just happened here?"

The man on the bed appeared flushed and feverish, eyes glittering with the pain of his injury. He coughed a couple of times, face twisted up in pain as he convulsed in his fit of coughing. He smiled a wry smile at Misha's confusion and indicated his shoulder, which was bandaged neatly in fine linen. "It's very simple, dude. It's magic." He seemed to want to say more, but it was evident that he was close to passing out, and Misha bit his lip, trying to decide what to do.

"I'll go and find Danneel," he said, finally. "She'll know what to do, because I'm completely out of my depth right now. You try and rest; I'll be back shortly."

The man nodded his head and then gave a soft sigh as his eyes closed. Another moment, and he was sleeping - or unconscious - Misha had no idea which.

He left the room and went in search of his hostess. She hadn't gone very far, and he found her sitting halfway down the stairs, awaiting his arrival. He left no time in demanding answers from her.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, voice tight with rage.

"And of course you would've believed me, wouldn't you?" she growled. "It's such a likely scenario. It happens every day, to be sure."

Mouth open, about to say more, Misha paused. She had a point, that was certain. Slowly

letting his mouth fall shut, he nodded, and when he spoke again his tone was far more gentle. "What happened? Were you there? Did you see?"

"In a manner of speaking." She was blushing, her pretty face unaccountably stained with a crimson that rose from neck to forehead. "I was one of the archivists in the Bishop's retinue. I know that it's unusual for a woman to have such a position, but my skills are superior, and I was in charge of illuminating the manuscripts that the Bishop required." She looked a little forlorn as she recalled her past, and Misha saw that she had brought her cup of liquor with her. "Jensen was... still is, I suppose, a noble of San Antonio, the second son of Sir Alan of Ackles. You've seen him. You know how... how very beautiful he is. Everyone fell in love with him. You only had to see him to want him. I could see, as could anyone who looked, that Sir Jared had fallen quite heavily too - he was the commander of the Bishop's guard at that time." She drew a breath. "Unfortunately, we weren't the only ones; the Bishop wanted him too."

"The Bishop Mark? The Shepherd of the people? But he's a man of God." Misha sounded confused.

"Yeah, that's the Bishop I'm talking about." She rose to head down the stairs and back to the kitchen where they'd eaten their meal. He followed in her wake, itching to know more, and wondering just what he could do to drag the rest of the story from her. "He's not what he appears, you know. All that piety he exhibits publicly hides an evil so remorseless that it's almost beyond belief." She shuddered, her arms rising to fold about herself as if a chill had touched her. There was a long pause as she sat, wide eyed, apparently staring into the past.

Misha waited, mentally cursing women and their over-dramatic sensibilities. It was fully dark now, and only the fire illuminated her face, casting strange shadows that painted her in scarlet and black. Still silent, she rose to light a taper from the fire and use it to trim the lamp that was sitting in the center of the table. She reached for another stoneware jar, which sat on the sill of the window, pouring a portion of the contents into each of their cups and passing his back to him. The scent of apples reached him this time, and he bowed his thanks as he accepted it and sipped.

"He was my Confessor, of course," she said at last. "It was through me that he learned of Sir Jared's desire... and of mine, too, because, of course, I had fallen in love with him as well. It



was early in the day, and we had just celebrated Vigils. I had come, as usual, to be confessed and shriven, and I told him... everything, curse my wagging tongue! He laughed. I can still hear him laughing." Drinking from her own cup, she set it down on the table and began to walk back and forth as if the story she told was causing her much pain. "Then, he told me to take a seat in the corner of the room, and he sent for Jensen." Her pacing stopped for a moment, and she turned to face him. Misha could see the tears in her eyes. "Jensen attended him almost immediately, fresh from his bed, good Christian that he is, and when he came in, the Bishop made advances to him that appeared to horrify him."

"Advances? The Bishop?" Misha was equally shocked, and she nodded.

"His proposition was most graphic, I assure you. He told Jensen he wanted him in his bed, and what he would do to him there. Jensen seemed a little stunned at first, but then he let the Bishop know in the most definite of terms that he was not interested. He told the Bishop that he would never accept such a fate, and threatened to announce his shame to the world. Then, as Jensen turned to leave, calling for the guards, Mark bade him halt, and he cursed him."

"I don't understand. How could that happen?"

"Neither do I, but it seems that the Shepherd has dark forces at his command. He told Jensen that from that day on, as the sun rose, he would change and be unable to speak. He said that henceforth Jensen would be an outcast, and that nobody would know his fate. Just at that moment, the first rays of the rising sun struck, and I saw it happen. Jensen transformed into what you have seen. I think that the Bishop had intended to cage him, but fortunately there was a window open in the solar, and he fluttered out and away before the Bishop could capture him."

At some point, Danneel had drained her cup again, and she rose again to pour more for them. Misha's head was buzzing with questions, but as he sipped his drink she gave him no chance to ask them.

"At that moment, Sir Jared burst in, looking around him, wanting to know where Jensen was. The Shepherd told him to go back to his post, and Sir Jared refused. Laughing, Bishop Mark remarked that he was too late to help Jensen, and that the two of them would never be able to

meet as men again. Then he cursed Sir Jared too. He told the captain that during the hours of darkness he would roam the forests on his belly, and then he exiled him." Her face was expressionless as she drained her cup of liquor. "Then he exiled me, excommunicated me from Holy Mother Church, and here I am. Until now I've been powerless - unable to set things right again. The Shepherd had told Sir Jared it was I that gave away his passion for Jensen, and until now Sir Jared has refused point blank to give me any opportunity to explain, or to find any way of setting things right again."

At that moment, the mournful howl of a wolf came to their ears, and Misha jumped. "Now I understand," he said. He set his cup down on the table and rose to his feet. "Thank you for your confidences," he said with a bow. "I must go see how Jensen does. He needs to be supported." Nodding, Danneel smiled her assent.

"I think I will sleep now. I am glad you will be there for him. It will be easier for him with someone to encourage him through his recovery."

Bidding her a good night, Misha made his way back up the stairs to the little room where Jensen lay, and as he went, he murmured a soft prayer to his God that the young man might come safely through this terrible time.



Back in the little chamber, Jensen had opened his eyes once more, and was looking a little better, less feverish. He gave Misha a half smile as he entered the room and stirred restlessly. "Don't...!" Misha rushed to his side. "Don't move. You might start bleeding again."

"You travel with him, don't you?" said Jensen. "Why? What's your name?"

"I'm just Misha, sometimes known as 'The Angel'," Misha replied. "And, yes, I travel with him, basically because he won't let me go. He thinks I can help him kill Bishop Mark. I'm here

with you now, because he demanded that I bring you here to be saved. He... he loves you so much more than his own life."

"Well, thanks for that." Jensen's sarcasm was evident in the curled lip and the roll of his eyes. "Not that it will ever do us much good in our state." He closed his eyes again, and seemed to fall back to sleep. Misha watched him for a while and finally settled down in the straw beside him. The strange revelations stood no chance of keeping him awake now that he was warm and fed. The liquor inside him had made his head swim a little, and he marveled that Danneel had been able to drink as much as she had without any apparent ill effects, but ascribed that to her holiness. Very soon, he too slept.

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In the Bishop's palace, the Shepherd of San Antonio was growing increasingly frustrated. Kane, the wolf catcher, had finally come in answer to his summons, and had been brought before him by his captain, Carlson, who stood by, anxiously awaiting his further orders.

"I don't get it," growled Kane. "You want me to get out there and find you a specific wolf? Out of all the wolves in the forest? Just how do you expect me to find one goddamn wolf? How'm I gonna know that it's the right one? Answer me that!"

Carlson closed his eyes, expecting the Bishop to blast Kane where he stood. He'd seen this kind of thing before. The Bishop would make some outrageous, impossible demand, and then, when it could not possibly be met, he would lash out, and inevitably the unfortunate culprit would suffer a dreadful fate. This time, however, he was surprised.

"I realize that it's a difficult task I have set you," said Bishop Mark, voice silky. "But it's one that's most important to me, and, I assure you, I will reward you well."

Kane remained impassive, arms folded and posture defiant. "Still don't make it possible," he said. "How'm I gonna know it? You still haven't told me."

"The one you're looking for will be with a man who only travels at night, once the sun is gone. That man is named Jensen, and he's going to be easy to identify, because of his extreme

beauty. Find Jensen, and you'll find the wolf, because the wolf is in luuuuurve! He loves this Jensen to distraction." Mark flicked his fingers at Kane in a clear gesture of dismissal. "Now go. Carlson here will show you a miniature I had painted of Jensen to aid you in your search for the wolf I want. Bring me the skin of this wolf that travels with him, and your pay will be such as you never imagined." Extending his hand to the wolf catcher, the Shepherd waited for him to kiss his ring and then he turned to leave.

Once he'd gone, Kane turned to Carlson. "What's going on, Steve?"

"Dunno," murmured the Captain. "He's been like a bear with a sore head ever since Padalecki returned and started roaming around the countryside. Anyway, this Jensen is Sir Alan Ackles' younger son, and you must've seen him around. He was pretty hard to miss. I'd heard that he'd gone to Rome to be ordained, but it sounds as if that's just a rumor. Dunno what he's doing with a wolf, though."

"Well, I've seen the Ackles kid, so I've got something to go on at least." Nodding, Kane began to gather his equipment together. "Let's go get us a wolf skin. Who knows? We might actually get paid enough to open that tavern and retire from all this dangerous soldierin' an' shit."

Grinning at each other, the two friends began to make their preparations to head out.

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At the keep, Dawn was coming. Misha had slept only fitfully, and was now back in the kitchen with his hostess, helping her prepare for the day. Jensen was still sleeping, and seemed to have improved still more from earlier in the night. The self-styled angel had just drained a beaker of mulled wine and was working his way through another hunk of bread, slathered with honey, when sounds from outside caught his attention.

"Riders are approaching; I can hear them," he called out to Danneel, who was busily sweeping the floor. Setting down her broom, she beckoned him to follow and hurried up to the ramparts, leaning over to peer through the half-light of the false dawn. A posse of soldiers was just approaching the keep.

"Go help Jensen," she told him curtly as she leaned over to call down to the soldiers. "What do you want?"

"Open up, in the name of the Shepherd of San Antonio." The leader of the troop gestured importantly, and Danneel sneered at him.

"You're not the Bishop. I've seen the Bishop, and he looks nothing like you," she called, madly waving Misha away. "Go, you fool!" she hissed. "Don't let them find him here."

Misha didn't wait any longer. He ran down the stairs to where Jensen still lay sleeping and shook his uninjured shoulder. "C'mon, Jensen. You have to wake up and come with me."

Below, he could hear the deep, solid boom, boom, boom of the door as the soldiers began to break it down, and the curses that erupted after Danneel dropped a loose rock onto one of them, fairly flattening him. Then they were inside, and, after the sounds of a brief struggle, they could be heard ransacking the rooms below as Danneel hurled most un-nun-like obscenities at them.

"Come on. This way," murmured Misha again, and Jensen stumbled to his feet to follow as Misha led him up the stairs and through the trap door onto the very roof of the tower.

"It's me they're looking for." Jensen was peering over the edge, searching for some hiding place out of sight.

"Don't flatter yourself, man," was Misha's terse reply. One of the soldiers decided at that point to try and push open the trap on which they were standing, and Misha jumped up and down on it, stunning the man and knocking him back down the stairs. There was a moment's pause, and then again someone tried to push open the door, although he failed. Misha could hear him shout as he called for reinforcements. As Misha watched from where he stood ready to repel all who attempted to come through, Jensen climbed up onto the battlements and stood, watching the horizon intently.

"I'll be okay. Save yourself," he called out, and launched himself off his perch and into thin air, just as the onslaught started beneath Misha's feet once more. Horrified, Misha ran to the edge

of the tower to watch him fall, and then, as the first sunbeam broke the horizon, saw him change, fluttering his wings and calling out a piercing farewell as he flew up into the newly blue sky to greet the for once helpful sun.

Scrambling forward, Misha swiftly climbed over the battlements to sit astride a particularly malevolent looking gargoyle in the hopes that his pursuers would think there was another way down and fail to find him. It was not to be. A mail clad figure appeared in the space between the crenellations, and a rough voice yelled, "You there, where's the other one? The man that was with you?"

"Oh, him? He didn't stay," smirked Misha. "Actually, he was sorry to have missed you, but I'm afraid he had to fly."

The soldier was in the act of drawing his long sword, when there was a whirring, and an arrow transfixing him. Watching, horribly fascinated, Misha saw the soldier drop his sword and topple over, to plummet to the rocky ground below the keep. "There, you see, Lord? I just demonstrated that it always pays to tell the truth." He could see Sir Jared standing on an outcrop some distance away in the act of reloading his crossbow, and he waved cheerily to him. As he watched, the hawk flew down, circled and settled on Jared's forearm to permit him to lightly stroke the feathers around his head and neck. Raising his hand again, Misha waved to them both and then set about getting back up onto the turret.

As he scrambled back down to where the door had been flattened, he could see that there were a couple of other soldiers lying dead. Danneel had emerged from the keep, and was tucking a wicked looking knife away into her bodice as she walked towards where Jared was sitting astride his big black horse.

"Thank you, sir knight," she called.

"And thank you for saving this," responded Jared, gesturing to where Jensen sat perched on his arm. "You know what he means to me."

"I've prayed for the opportunity to redress the wrong I did you," said Danneel. "And I believe I've found a way."

"Woman, you've brought too much harm to me and mine already. You won't blame me if I don't trust you any further than I could throw you." Jared's jaw was set in a determined manner, and he shook his head as if denying her the chance to set things right.

"I don't expect you to," she said. "But trust me just enough to listen to me now." Watching his face, she seemed to swallow. "You are heading for San Antonio anyway, or so Misha says. In three days time, the Bishop will be holding the service to commemorate the Ascension of our Lord. He will be in the Cathedral with all of the city present, and at that time there is to be a day without a night, and a night without a day. God himself disclosed it to me in a dream last night. All you will need to do is confront the Bishop in your true forms, as men, and the curse will be broken. You will be free."

Both Jensen and Jared had stirred at the mention of being human together, and Jared's brow drew tight, his mouth grim. "Get back to your housewifery and your tears, woman. You've caused enough heartbreak already."

"But I swear to you..." Danneel wrung her hands. "Let me go with you. You will need me; you'll see."

"God hasn't forgiven you; he's just made you mad, and we haven't forgiven you either." Jared turned his horse to ride away, and as the horse picked its way over the stony ground, Misha broke from his place of concealment and ran after him, leaving Danneel standing there, still unsure what to do.

"Sir Jared, wait." Misha finally drew level with the others. Pausing, Jared looked down at him, his free hand idly caressing the hawk's neck. "How is the bird? Is he well?"

"He's fine," murmured Jared, a rare smile crossing his usually severe face. "We are both in your debt."

"I did nothing," said Misha. "It was Danneel who mended him." He gave Jared an answering smile. "And now, I suppose, you are heading for San Antonio?"

"We are indeed," confirmed Jared. "What of it? You're free to go."

"Well..." Misha cleared his throat. "Oddly, I find that I am traveling that way myself, so I believe I will keep you and Jensenhawk company along the way."

The name Jensenhawk made Jared chuckle, and, after a moment of thought, he inclined his head. "If you're going to accompany Jensenhawk and I, then you'd better go and get your things together immediately. We have a long way to travel," he said.



The evening was drawing in as the travelers made their way through the edges of the forest. The clouds had been threatening for some time, and Jared, who had been walking beside the horse, while Misha took his turn riding, paused to listen as the ominous roll of thunder sounded. "It's almost sundown," he said, holding out the arm on which Jensen was sitting. "Take Jensenhawk and find shelter."

"How can you tell that the night draws near?" Misha allowed Jensen to trade perches from Jared to himself and nodded his acceptance of the task.

"When you've feared the night for as long as I have," Jared replied. "You can feel it pressing on you, ready to devour you. Take care of him." He nodded towards the hawk, who was standing quietly, head cocked to one side as he waited.

Nodding, Misha rode forward, leaving Jared alone to face the change that would come with the setting of the sun.

Misha soon found a village, and secured lodging for them in a barn beside the tavern. Leading Sir Jared's horse into a stall in the corner, he tethered it beside one of the cows. He



made sure that there was both food and water for it, and then turned to the hawk, which sat watching him from a low beam. "I wonder just how much you understand when you're in your bird form," mused Misha, reaching to caress the feathers on its breast. He shook his head, smirking. "Guess I can ask you in a few minutes, can't I?"

He frowned as the thunder rolled and rumbled, very close by now from the sound of it, and then the rain began to fall, a great curtain of it, washing away the remaining daylight and eclipsing the last of the afternoon. The downpour was steady, hissing onto the tin roof of the barn and bouncing off the packed earth of the barnyard. From the tavern across the way, there came the sound of music, a pair of guitars playing counterpoint, and two voices raised together in praise of whisky. The chorus was infectious, and he found himself singing along with the refrain. "Slide over and kiss me; I've got more than whisky in mind."

Laughing softly, Misha turned back to find Jensen, standing behind him, smirking at him. "Your voice has a fine range," said Jensen. "About 30 miles in still air, I reckon."

"Very funny," growled Misha. "I'll have you know, I've been charged with your protection. From now on, your safety is my greatest concern, and Jared told me to tell you that you should take my word for his."

"Oh, really?" Jensen's grin was wide, and there was an unsettling gleam in his eyes that said he would take Misha's words with a pinch of salt. "And, pray, what are your instructions, oh, noble protector?"

"Now you're making fun of me. Is that any way to treat someone who is committed to protecting your welfare?" There was a definite pout on Misha's face, and Jensen instantly became serious.

"I'm sorry. You know that I'm grateful for what you've done for me and for Jared too. I think our lot would've been much harder without you."

"Well, I'm thinking that we should go over to the tavern across the yard," said Misha, loftily ignoring Jensen's words. "There appears to be a gig of some kind happening, and also we could definitely partake of a little liquid refreshment, wouldn't you say?"

"Now that's an order I could really get behind," smirked Jensen. Together they prepared themselves to run across the yard through the downpour and were just about to burst out into it when Christian Kane, wolf catcher extraordinary, appeared in the doorway. Jensen took one look at the wolf skin Kane was wearing around his shoulders and gasped. "Oh, my God, no!"

"It's okay, Jensen," murmured Misha, patting the other man's shoulder, and surprising a laugh out of Christian.

"Jensen, is it?" he said, snickering. Offering no further explanation, he stalked over to one of the stalls and led out the horse that was apparently his, mounting and riding out as Misha made a show of threatening him with Jared's enormous sword. He was just turning back to tell Jensen that they could now go over to the tavern, when the thunder of hooves sounded, and Jensen burst past him, mounted on the back of Jared's black stallion.

Misha called out a protest, made as if to follow, but it was too late. Jensen and horse both disappeared, swallowed by the forest and the foul weather. "Oh, Lord, help me," he called. "Jared will kill me dead, and if I'm really lucky, he'll leave me dead. If not, he'll have the Bishop raise me from the dead so he can do it all over again." Sighing heavily, he grabbed Jared's sword once more and hefted it, gasping at the weight of it, before charging off after Jensen into the cold and wet.

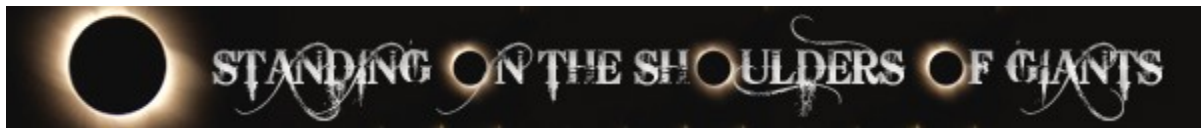
It didn't take long for him to catch up with his quarry. He was scared and shaking as he stumbled through the trees, and when he came upon Jared's horse, placidly standing in the shelter of a particularly low hanging tree he felt a little surge of panic thrill through his stomach, because Jensen was still nowhere to be seen. Pausing to test the air, he patted the horse's flank and then crept forward, arriving just in time to see Kane crouching over one of his traps, and behind him, Jensen, stealthy as any night creature, creeping towards him. There was a growl from the undergrowth to one side, and they all turned to see the wolf. He'd appeared from the shadowy scrub where he'd been lurking, and now he snarled at Kane.

Everything happened in a blur of movement. As Misha watched, the wolf stalked forward, stiff legged and growling, and Kane made as if to stand and face it. Unfortunately for Kane,

just at that moment, Jensen dove forward to tackle him, taking him off his feet and into the very wolf trap he'd just set. As it snapped closed around Kane's neck, the horrible gurgling sound he made told its own tale. Turning to the wolf, Jensen dropped to his knees and opened his arms, welcoming the ferocious creature into them and hugged it close, burying his face in the animal's ruff despite the lashing rain that was still pounding down.

Turning, Misha made as if to leave. The sword was heavy, and he very much doubted his ability to use it effectively anyway. Just as he was stepping away, Jensen called out to him. "Thanks, dude. You didn't have to come defend me, really. Shows that you're a brave little man, I guess."

"Oh, whatever," he growled as he made his way slowly back to the barn, lugging the damned sword.



The morning dawned bright and chill, the rain long since past. Misha awoke to the smell of fish grilling on a skewer over the fire. Jared smiled at Misha as he rose to stretch some of the kinks from his joints and indicated the fire he'd made. He looked around himself and found that not only was he nowhere near the barn in which he'd fallen asleep, but he was out in the open, and somehow he'd been conveyed there on a litter of some kind that was still harnessed to the horse. He concluded that Jensen must have fashioned it in his urgent desire to move closer to their goal.

"Good morning," called Jared. "I've caught you some breakfast."

"Good morning to you, too," replied Misha, courteously. "That was a terrible night," he added.

"Why, what happened?" A cloud passed over Jared's features.

"Well, we were heading into the tavern, and..."

"You were what?" thundered Jared. "You took Jensen into a tavern?"

"See, that's what I was trying to tell you. We were going to go to the tavern, but we never made it, because the wolf catcher..." As Misha was about to say more, the hawk flew down, bypassing Jared's outstretched arm to settle on Misha. He looked at the bird, somewhat horrified. "What... what are you doing, bird? You need to go to Sir Jared." He waved his arm, attempting to dislodge his unwelcome visitor, but Jensen stubbornly remained in position, his talons boring holes in the skin of his forearm as it clung to him. "You need to go to the one you love."

He could see that Jared was jealous. "Just what exactly did you get up to, last night?" The question was not unexpected, and Misha was trying to think of an answer that might defuse the situation, when all of a sudden, an approaching cart saved him from having to make any response.

The newcomer was Danneel, who alighted from her rickety cart and strode up to them. "Jared, if you're going to San Antonio, you have only two nights before the curse can be broken. I don't care what you think; you need me to go with you. I can help; I want to help."

"We'll be in San Antonio tomorrow, Danneel. I don't need you, and neither does Jensen." He held his arm out to Misha, and he gratefully transferred Jensen to him, relieved to see the bird finally go where he was wanted.

"What harm could there be in waiting a few hours to see if she's right?" Misha asked. "If it means you can break the curse at last, wouldn't that be worth striving for?"

"Look! We don't need you. We'll survive without your help. We've always managed until now. Stay here with the woman and forget about Jensen." Jared mounted his horse, his face a mask of furious disdain.

"You need me." Misha tried once more. "How will you get inside the cathedral without me?"

"Oh, I'll get in. Don't you worry." There was scorn now in Jared's voice. "I'm not completely without my own resources." So saying, he turned his horse and cantered away, leaving Misha and Danneel to watch, impotently. Finally, not really knowing what else to do, the two of them mounted Danneel's cart and began to follow, only pausing for Misha to grab the fish which had been roasting over the flames. "Waste not, want not," he murmured as he took a bite.





It was almost midnight when they finally heard the mournful sound of the wolf, and then found Jensen at last. He seemed pleased to see them, sitting up to call out, "Hi, guys."

"Oh, thank goodness, Jensen!" Misha headed to where Jensen lay stretched out and wrapped in Jared's cloak. "I think this is the last night we're going to be able to spend together, so I'm really glad we found you."

"What do you mean? The last night?" Jensen rose to his feet to come over to him.

"It's just that there's a way to break your curse that Danneel has found, and I want to make sure that everything goes according to plan." Misha was desperate to get Jensen on their side, and it took him a few minutes to explain Danneel's plan. "You have to confront him together, and it can't be today. It must be tomorrow, and it must be in the cathedral, at the appointed time when there will be a day without a night, and a night without a day. You do see that, don't you?"

"I do hear you, although none of it's actually making any sense right now," nodded Jensen. "But if Jared is determined to do things his way, what do you suggest? It's not like I can talk him round, once he's himself again."

"I have an idea," said Danneel, who had hung back, not wanting to draw too much of Jensen's attention to her. As he turned to look at her, she blushed a deep red, but continued to talk. "First we dig ourselves a hole deep enough to contain him in his wolf form."

The digging commenced as Jensen, still hampered by his wounded shoulder, stood guard, watching for the wolf to put in an appearance. Misha and Danneel began digging, and there was much cursing as the two of them tried, and failed, to co-operate. It was eventually deep enough that Danneel called to Jensen that they were about to cover it over and set the trap, and Jensen nodded.

"Good thing, too, because I see him. He's coming over." Sure enough, when Misha clambered out of the hole, he could see the wolf standing on a nearby outcrop of stone, gazing down at them. Waving to him, Jensen made encouraging sounds. The wolf's ears perked forward, and he rose to his feet, beginning to make his way down the rise and over towards where Jensen stood.

"He's coming across the ice," observed Danneel, who had struggled for a while, but finally managed to climb out of the hole they had dug, and the trio stood and watched him approach across the frozen river.

He was in the middle of the ice when, suddenly, the unthinkable happened. Jared was a large wolf, and probably weighed a hundred and eighty pounds or more. He must have stepped on a thin patch in the ice, because all of a sudden, there was an ominous cracking sound, and a

hole opened beneath him, dropping him into the freezing cold water. Jensen took off with a yell, but slowed as he found that the ice wouldn't take his weight. Misha, smaller and lighter, crawled out onto the frozen river with Jared's sword. Armed with it, he began to inch his way to the wolf. As he reached the edge of the rotten part, he drove the sword into it and lashed a rope around it, then crawled on, sliding along on his belly.

The wolf was struggling, doing its best to drown itself in its battle to clamber out of the water. Misha made a valiant attempt to get the cord around under the animal's shoulders, so that Jensen could haul him out, but it was a lengthy struggle, and Misha himself ended up in the water, along with a hundred and eighty pounds of enraged, terrified wolf, fighting for both their lives. Between the three of them, they finally managed to get Jared out, soaked, bedraggled and exhausted. Jensen hauled him back to wrap him in blankets, leaving Misha to struggle out on his own. When he finally succeeded in getting himself out of the water, he lay on the ice, blue and shaking with the cold, and wished he was dead.

It was Danneel who encouraged him, torn and bloody as he was from the wolf's scratching claws, to crawl back off the ice. It was Danneel who wrapped him in blankets, and who took him to lay him down in the warm bed of the cart. It was Danneel who dug the sword out of the ice and hid it in the cart under the baskets of provisions she had brought. Jensen had laid Jared's inert body in the hole they had prepared in order to trap him, and curled up with him to share his body heat with the badly shocked animal.

It was just before the dawn when Misha woke and rose to go answer the call of nature. He returned just as the sky was lightening, and gazed down at where the two lovers lay, condemned to be always together, but eternally apart. He could see Jensen's eyes fixed on the sleeping wolf, and the pain he saw in them made his heart skip a little in sympathy for their plight.

As the first fingers of light broke from behind the nearby mountain, he could see Jensen's fine hand curl and uncurl in the fur of his beloved wolf, and he bit his lip as he watched for the sun's rays to strike.

Jensen stirred, a single tear falling from his eye to roll down his cheek and be lost in the blankets, and he gave a soft cry as the change began. Jared was slowly assuming human form,



and just for one moment their fingers almost touched. One moment only, and then the cry of the hawk, anguished and lonely, rent the air as he fluttered away, leaving Jared to pound on the frozen earth and scream his frustration to the skies.

They broke their fast on food that Danneel had brought with her - hard bread, dried meat and honey, and Misha tried not to watch as Jared paced back and forth, back and forth, his anger and impatience visible in every line of his long, strong body. They were cleaning away the evidence of their meal when Jared suddenly stalked over to where Misha was sitting.

"Where's my sword?" he asked.

"It's gone," Misha replied. "It fell through the ice last night. It's probably at the bottom of the river."

"You lost my sword?" The fury Jared was displaying made Misha step back a little. "How can I kill the Bishop without my sword, you careless, encroaching little bastard?"

Misha felt any patience he might have been feeling for Jared and his plight snap as he recalled what he'd gone through the previous night. "You can always get another, because why would you ever listen to the voice of reason anyway?"

"What do you mean?" Jared loomed over him, eyes snapping with fury.

"I mean you say you love Jensen, but I don't think you love him anywhere like as much as you love yourself." Misha retorted. "All three of us, Jensen included, want you to try things our way, but no! You have to plough on, because you always know best. You're so pig-headed, I'm amazed that Jensen gives you the time of day..."

He would have added more, but Jared took him by the shoulders and threw him down onto the ground with such force that it ripped the shirt he was wearing. The shirt had seen better days, and the fabric was worn thin, and it split at the neckline to reveal a chest that was covered in claw marks. Misha, already stiff and bruised, lay on the ground, trying to decide whether or not his back was broken, but Jared, who had stepped forward, evidently intent on delivering a kick or two to him, froze, his eyes fixed on the deep, angry scratches.

"What are those?" he asked, indicating Misha's chest with a frown.

Misha didn't respond, too busy trying to force the breath back into his battered body, and it was left to Danneel to say, angrily, "They're the wounds he received last night, when he was hurt helping your stupid ass out of the river. He almost died saving your life, you ingrate."

Her words seemed to hit Jared like a physical blow. He froze for a moment, and a look of anguish passed over his face for a second. Nobody said anything further for several minutes, and then Jared abruptly held out his hand to help Misha up. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "I didn't know. I don't remember."

Misha struggled to his feet, pulling himself up and standing still to gaze at the knight. He slowly smiled, and Jared smiled back, pulling him into a hug. "I'm sorry," he said again.

"Think nothing of it," murmured Misha. "It's all part of the service you receive, when you find yourself with a guardian angel."

Jared laughed at that, and slapped him on the shoulder, making him wince, but as the two of them got ready to begin their journey once more, it seemed that the knight had relaxed, and determined to do what Misha had been advising.

"Stick with me, little angel," he said. "If it's a skill you need, I'll show you how to trap a wolf."



They journeyed more slowly, and it was after sundown that evening when they reached the gates of San Antonio. Misha and Danneel were riding the cart, while Jensen walked alongside, and Jared, wolf once more, was imprisoned in the back of the cart in a hastily constructed cage. The fortified city was brightly lit, and, although the hour was late, there

were people bustling about, still busily going about their chores. One of the guards stepped up to the cart to survey it.

Danneel had traded her homespun bodice and skirt for the livery of a Bride of Christ once more. Although Misha was unsure where she had found it, she was now wearing the wimple and black robes of a nun, with a silver crucifix about her neck and a rosary at her belt. The guard gave her a brief obeisance and then rose to greet her.

"Good evening, little Sister, what brings you to San Antonio this fine evening?" He leered at Danneel, and she reared back haughtily, her eyes flashing disdain. Misha stepped in smoothly.

"The reverend lady has taken a vow of silence," he confided. "But we are here with a fine gift from our parish to my lord the Bishop of San Antonio."

The soldier drew back the blanket that was covering the cage, revealing Jared, huge and grey, slavering as he growled through the bars at him. He stepped back in a hurry as Jared drooled and bit at his confines, and then drew his sword and gestured with it, blustering, "Excellent. I've never killed a wolf before."

"How strange! That's what my lord Bishop said," murmured Misha, beaming. "Go right ahead. We'll explain it to him when we bring him the pelt."

"I understand that the Bishop is a most forgiving man," chimed in Jensen, as Jared chewed at the bars of his cage. "I'm sure he won't mind."

The guard turned pale, backing off abruptly and sheathing the sword without further ado. "Don't let me detain you, holy Sister. Please pass on and get that... that thing to its destination. I don't care for the look in its eyes; I suspect that it's rabid."

"No sir." Jensen shook his head, dislodging some of the straw that was visible there and grinned vacantly. "That's definitely not a rabbit. That's a wolf. Even I can see that. Your average rabbit has a fluffy tail and long ears, and..."

"Get this idiot out of here!" The soldier gave Jensen a shove that set the wolf to snarling all over again, and the little troupe of conspirators made their escape, breathing collective sighs of relief.

"Thank you, Lord," murmured Misha, piously raising his eyes to the heavens. "It's quite obvious that You perceived from the start that a skilled liar would be not only useful but indeed necessary to further Your ends. I realize that you never waste anything, and now I must view my skills at fabrication as God given."



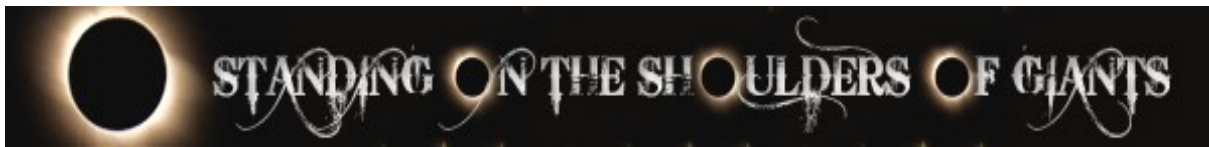
### *Jared*

The morning dawned at last, and Danneel was quite insistent that if Jared could only have patience, the curse would most definitely be broken later that day. The sky, unlike the previous day, was leaden, curdled with great clots of cloud that hung low and oppressive over the cathedral as if passing judgment. Jared had, for the first time ever, placed a leather hood over Jensen's head, and the bird sat on his wrist uttering plaintive little cries as if objecting to the unaccustomed barrier to flight.

Jared shushed him gently, gentling his feathers and telling him how much he loved him. Misha had been sitting in the cart, having what appeared to be quite a vociferous argument with the Creator, but at last he appeared to come to some conclusion and rose to his feet, stripping off his clothing down to his shirt and breeches and shaking his head sorrowfully. Danneel stood close to Jared, still silent, frowning at everyone and everything as if she disapproved completely of the entire world.

The bell began to toll, announcing the summons to the service, and from the sounds beyond the walls of the cathedral chase, they could hear the sounds of the monks' voices, raised in a chant as they progressed with the Bishop from his palace to the service. Danneel looked up at

the sky and muttered, "It won't be long now. Wait just a little bit longer."



*Misha*

Misha jumped down from the cart and made his way over to join the other three, where they stood in silence, watching the clouds. "Well, I have been given my marching orders," he announced. "Give me twenty minutes and then come to the cathedral."

Turning, he headed out to the place where he'd emerged from the sewers when he'd made his daring escape just a few short days earlier. He shuddered, then braced himself and plunged back into the murky water.

Diving down to look for the broken grating through which he had crawled before, he began to retrace his path back into the bowels of the city. There was a long drawn out moment when he didn't believe he would ever be able to find the surface again, and then, at last, he burst from the depths, puffing and gasping in the sheer relief of being able to fill his lungs with oxygen once more. "Please, Lord, I know You delight in trying my skills and my courage, but I have to ask You to stop requiring such extreme tasks of me. I've already done this whole thing once, You know, and while it would be nice to think that You were entertained by my daring, I suggest You dream up something new, with less of a bad smell next time."

The short swim to the shaft that he had climbed once before was accomplished in only a few minutes. Then he began the arduous task of pulling himself from the water and climbing the slimy, slippery stones to where the grated vent was set.

It seemed an impossibly long way to the top. As he ascended, the chanting of the monks grew louder and louder until he could see them passing overhead and into the nave of the

cathedral. He'd carried with him a knife with which to loosen the grating and enable his escape into the church itself, and now he wedged himself in against two protruding rocks and began to pick at the setting, digging out the mortar around the grate in order to loosen it some more. Sir Jeffrey, the Dean of the Cathedral, accompanied by some of the monks, passed overhead at that instant, and some movement of his must have drawn the Dean's attention, because he made an exclamation about seeing rats and began to poke the haft of the standard he carried down through the holes of the grid, narrowly missing poking Misha's eye out with his first pass and threatening to send him plummeting back down into the water below. He froze, not daring to breathe, and only relaxed when the Dean finally ceased his efforts to exterminate him and moved on into the body of the cathedral.

Shortly after that, Misha was out of the hole, had replaced the grating, and found himself a chorister's surplice to put over his wet clothes. Lurking behind one of the enormous pillars that separated the atrium from the nave, he settled down to wait until such time as the nave had filled with enough people to allow him to mingle.



### *Danneel*

Jared was pacing again. Finally he appeared to make a decision and carried Jensen over to where Danneel was standing watching and held out his arm to transfer the hawk to her. Bending to nuzzle Jensen's feathers briefly, he fixed Danneel with a glare. "At the end of the service there will be the tolling bell, and that will tell you that I failed." He reached down to extract a long, needle sharp stiletto from his boot. "If you hear that, I beg you, kill him."

He pressed the hilt of the knife into her hand, and when she tried not to take it, he seized her wrist and held it steady. "Please, Sister, if you ever loved him, don't leave him to live out his days without hope, without happiness, living in this half existence."

"How could I do that?" Tears stood out on Danneel's cheeks. "He never asked for this. It would be murder of God's precious creation. All you need to do is confront the Shepherd together as men. I can't kill him."

"You must," said Jared simply. "Because if I fail, it will be because I am dead, and once I am dead there will be no hope for him. Hawks and wolves both mate for life, you know."

He didn't give her any chance to respond further, simply wheeling around and mounting the great black stallion that had carried him into battle, and which would carry him into one more fight, this time for everything he'd ever wanted.

She stood, tears wetting her face, watching as he drew a borrowed sword and spurred his mount to a canter as he made for the cathedral. There were guards outside it, in the square, a dozen of them, all mounted, and Steve Carlson was at their head. He looked on, warily, as Jared approached, his face set in a stony expression of disapproval.

"Men of the guard. I was your captain, and through God's grace I hope to be your captain once again in a very short while." He surveyed Steve with a faint smile as he bristled.

"Captain Padalecki," he said. "I have my orders." Drawing his own sword, Steve pushed his horse forward to engage Jared, while the body of the troops scattered to avoid the ferocious onslaught.

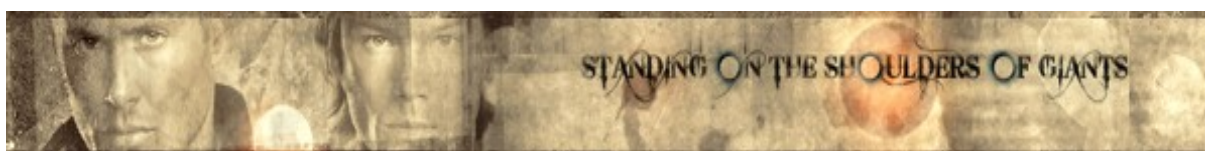
Trading blows that struck sparks from the steel, Steve and Jared battled to and fro across the courtyard. It couldn't go on; for a moment, Jared stunned Steve and broke away to enter the cathedral. Still mounted on his charger, he trotted easily up the central aisle to pause and survey his quarry, the Shepherd of San Antonio, Bishop Mark. Mark seemed transfixed, unmoving as the knight sat his horse and stared at him through the bars on his steel helmet. Finally, he spoke with a smirk.

"You know, this is the kind of desperate swashbuckle I've been desperately trying to avoid."

Jared seethed. He was about to put an end to the Bishop, was already in motion, when Steve bellowed his name from the back of the nave. With a roar of, "Padalecki!" Steve spurred his

horse to a full gallop and came at Jared, hell for leather.

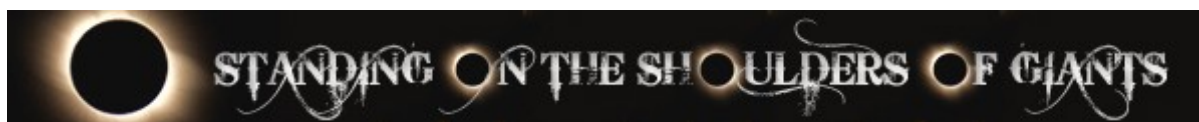
Wheeling around, Jared met the charge, and their first clash caused the spectators to back away, trying to find safety from swords and flying hooves. Again and again they rode at each other, and Misha, who had remained concealed behind his pillar, turned and ran from the church to return to the cart where he had concealed Jared's own sword. Breathing a sigh of relief, he sent a brief thank you to his Lord, extracted it from its wrapping and took off back to the cathedral at a run.



### *Misha*

Back in the nave, Jared had succeeded in unseating Steve from his mount, and the two of them were now battling on foot while the Bishop watched warily. High above them, the sky produced an ominous rumble, and looking up momentarily Jared could see through the great window set into the roof of the nave that something dark was slowly beginning to move across the face of the sun. His face cleared. "Day without a night," he whispered to himself.

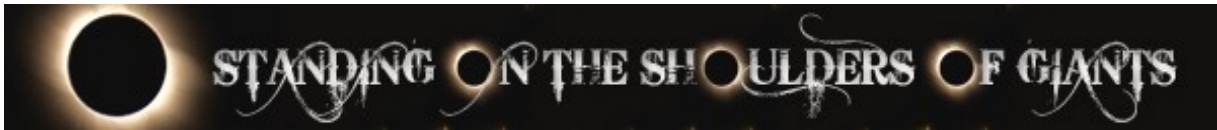
Steve left him no time to ruminate further. He ran at Jared, hoping to take him by surprise, and almost succeeded as Jared went flying, losing his grip on the borrowed sword and falling to strike his head against one of the stone pillars that supported the roof. Looking up, he spotted a guardsman who was about to loose an arrow at him, and sent a knife winging through the air to knock him from his perch. As the guard screamed and fell, he caught hold of the bell-rope, and the bell began to toll, ringing out its steady, solemn note across the city. Jared froze. "My God, Danneel, no!"





*Danneel*

Out in the courtyard, Danneel was staring at Jensen, who sat placidly on her arm. She was anguished, tormented by indecision. The bell signifying the end of the service had rung, meaning that Jared was dead; should she do as he had requested and kill the one creature she had ever loved?



*Misha*

Back inside the nave, Jared was separated from his stolen sword, and Steve was advancing towards him, his own weapon in hand. As Misha looked on, Steve raised his sword to deliver the coup de grace, and brought it down with a mighty swipe just as Jared rolled in towards him to take him off his feet, and Misha, heart in his mouth, sent the sword he'd brought back skittering towards Jared across the flagstones.

Stretching to reach for it, Jared gripped the hilt and swung, and Steve, who had been leaping towards Jared to finish him, found himself impaled on it. He sank down wordlessly as the light faded from the pale blue of his eyes.

Rising to his feet, Jared loosed his helmet and shook his hair out, determined that the Bishop would see his face when he killed him. Stalking towards Mark again, he came to a stop in front of him just as Mark raised a finger to wag at him. "You didn't think this through, did you, sunshine? Kill me, and the curse will never be broken."

"You're too late, Shepherd. Jensen is dead, damn you to Hell!"

"Woah." Mark applauded slowly and sarcastically. "I bet it felt good to get that off your chest."

We should make this a thing."

"You're a dead man, Bishop," hissed Jared, raising his sword again.

"Jared?"

The cry came from behind him, and Jared was afraid for a moment to turn around, firmly believing that his imagination was playing him false. Turning at last, and expecting to see nothing but the air, he beheld Jensen, straight and tall and human, standing in the center of the nave as, high above him, the sun vanished, completely eclipsed by the round, dark disk of the predatory moon.

Jared gave an inarticulate cry and turned again, gripping Mark by the wrist and forcing him to the ground where he groveled, miter askew. "Look at him," he growled. "Look!"

Mark obeyed him, apparently dazed by the events that were unfolding. "Look at me!" Obediently the Shepherd raised his eyes to the man who he now knew was about to kill him.

Jared paused a moment and then said, low and deadly, so softly that he was barely heard, "Now look at us!" Mark was still staring at him, and it seemed from his face that his death could be read in Jared's eyes. Jared frowned. The man would do as he bid, and then he would die. "Look at us!" he roared.

Danneel had followed Jensen into the cathedral, and taken a place at Misha's side. As the Bishop surveyed the two lovers, she breathed out a sob and turned to whisper, "It's over," to him. Misha waited. The sun stayed dark, and he wasn't sure what was supposed to happen, but nothing seemed to have changed. The sun continued to hide its face as Jensen slowly approached the altar to where the Bishop was standing. There was no sudden, angelic choir singing hallelujahs, no ripple of unearthly light sparking out from where Jensen and Jared were, and the earth didn't move.

"Are you sure?" he murmured to Danneel. "How can you tell?"

"I'm absolutely certain," she responded. "God told me."

"He did?" Misha frowned, making a mental note to have a stern discussion with his redeemer once all of this was over - always supposing he was still in one piece, of course! "He didn't say a word about it to me."

There had been a general hubbub as Jensen had appeared, and some of the congregation who had gone to hide behind the pillars to avoid stray horses and battling knights were creeping back out to see what was happening. The result of that was that the hardier souls, who had toughed it out, or who had been unable to get out of the way due to the crowds, were fighting to stay in the front of the crowd so they could see. Clergy and choristers alike jostled for position. Jensen slowly advanced, his boot heels clicking on the uneven stone of the slate flags that covered the floor, his face set with a terrible purpose. His eyes never left the Shepherd's face as he approached the dais on which Mark was standing, and still Mark did not move, apparently frozen, almost hypnotized by the way those eyes compelled him.

Time seemed frozen too. Jared seemed content to watch, wary as Jensen passed, his sword ready in his hand as he watched for any sign of threat towards the man he adored. The place had fallen almost completely silent as the young aristocrat stepped up before the altar, and there was a gasp as he extended his hand to the Bishop. He had something held in it, clutching it so hard that his knuckles were white, and he stood before the Bishop, unmoving, his hand extended, waiting.

Ages passed, and slowly the very edge of the sun flared from around the dark disc that had swallowed it. The Bishop stirred, still transfixed by the intensity in Jensen's eyes. It seemed almost as if he was fighting the need to take what it was that Jensen was offering him, but slowly, reluctantly, his hand rose to accept it, and his palm opened beneath that of his object of desire. Jensen didn't speak, he barely moved, and Mark's eyes remained fixed on him as the other man's extended hand slowly opened to drop its contents.

Mark shuddered as the scraps of leather fell from Jensen's fingers to his own, and the hood and jesses that were the badges of his servitude were finally passed back to his tormentor. Jensen remained in place for a few moments more, and there was no change in his facial expression. At long last, he dusted his two hands together as if wiping them free of the curse that had rendered him unable to be with the man he loved for the past three years.

Turning on his heel, he stepped down from the dais to retrace his footsteps, his green eyes flashing with triumph.

Mark finally managed to tear his eyes from the scraps of leather in his hand and watched him go. He hissed in fury as he threw the worn leather to the ground, and groped beneath his surplice for a moment, only to withdraw a wicked looking, needle-pointed dagger, with which he lunged at Jensen's back.

Jared had been watching the Bishop, watched him like the hawk Jensen had been, and he'd been prepared for such an action from Mark from the moment that Jensen had come within arm's reach of him. Now he was ready. There was no time for him to run to Jensen's rescue, but he would save his lover anyway. Drawing his arm back, he aimed his sword and flung it hard. The jeweled hilt flickered and flashed as it flew through the air, and its path was straight and true. It struck Mark below the breastbone and pierced him through and through, fixing him to the high altar behind him.

There was blood seeping onto the snowy white of his ceremonial robes, and Mark, Shepherd of the people, Bishop of San Antonio, turned his head to glare at Guard Captain, Sir Jared Padalecki. His face contorted with malice, and it was plain that he intended to curse the man who had robbed him of his chance to kill Jensen. He opened his mouth, but he couldn't speak. Thick, red blood bubbled out between his lips, and he coughed once, a dreadful, hacking sound that broke the silence that had shrouded the cathedral's interior. A look of extreme surprise rippled over his face, and then he died.

Jared stepped forward to retrieve his sword, tugging it loose from the Bishop to wipe it on the dead man's costly vestments, and then he turned away, re-sheathing it in one smooth movement. Jensen stood behind him, watching him with a slight smirk on his sensual lips. "I guess you could say that this was... ummm... hawkward," he murmured. "God, I've waited a really long time to say that!"

Whatever Jared had expected to hear as Jensen's first words to him as a human being, it wasn't that. He stared aghast at the man he loved and reached back for his sword, laying his hand on the hilt with a groan. "I love you, dude, but I'm going to have to kill you if you come

out with anything else like that."

"Better get used to it, man," said Jensen. Snickering, Jensen stepped forward, reached his hands up to cup Jared's face and pulled him down to press soft lips against his mouth. For a moment Jared froze, and then as if a switch had been turned his arms slid around Jensen, and he pulled him close as he returned the kiss with interest.

Misha and Danneel looked on, eyes full of pride at the part they had played in reuniting the two lovers. Misha flung his arms around Danneel and kissed her cheek before turning back to watch as Jared picked Jensen up off the ground and swung him around in joy. There was a collective gasp from the audience within the cathedral, but the two men continued to embrace, locked tight in each others' arms as they began at last to explore each other as humans.

When at last they broke their kiss, it was evident that they could not keep their hands off each other. Hand in hand, their shoulders were pressed tight against each other as they turned without words to walk toward the door and then out into the courtyard. Misha and Danneel followed, close on their heels as they left the church and emerged into the courtyard. High above, the sun was almost out from behind the marauding moon, and it looked as if the weather had settled and the rest of the day would be hot. Jared's horse was there before him, placidly awaiting his owner. It nickered softly and trotted across the cobbles to nuzzle into his neck, and Jared laughed as he patted the creature's neck. "You shall have an apple later, if I have to hunt across the country to find it for you."

Leading the horse, and with Jared holding his hand tightly, the two of them left the square and headed for Jensen's father's house. Misha and Danneel watched them go, and Misha's eyes misted over. Finally, he gave a heartfelt sigh and turned to Danneel. "Are you going to take the veil once more, now that the Bishop has come by his just desserts?"

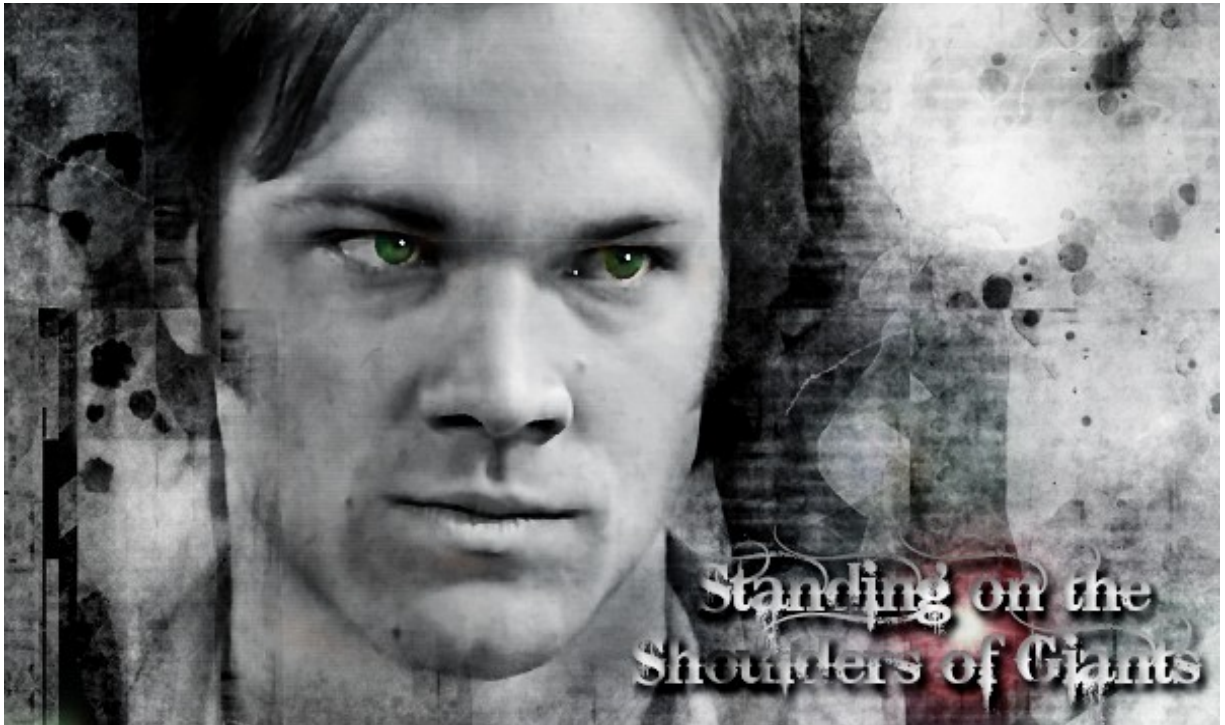
She gave him a sideways glance that indicated that she understood him altogether too well. "And why would you care, Sir Angel?" she asked, a dimple peeking out in her cheek.

"I just thought that you might care for someone to come back with you and maybe help you get your door back up and working again before the local kids break in and steal everything

you own." Leaning in to whisper in her ear, he murmured, "There are thieves everywhere, you know, who would rob a devout nun given even half a chance. One cannot be too careful."

Her smile broadened. "Why, what a generous soul you are, Misha." She nodded as they made their way back down to where her donkey and cart were waiting. "I think I'd be glad of the assistance. I'm not sure that the life of a nun is what I was cut out for."

And together they mounted the cart to return home to the keep.





## EPILOGUE

A few days later, Misha found himself repairing the door to the keep, and, for once, was content to do actual work.

Danneel had shed some of her prickly nature, and as he'd offered his help she'd relaxed, allowing him access to that part of her which her guilt had caused her to bury under the haze of alcohol and anger. He was beginning to feel as if he had found his place at last, and was almost prepared to give up thievery and embrace the quiet, comfortable lifestyle that she seemed to be offering him.

There had been no looting of the keep while they'd been away. The locals had, in fact, taken pains to keep their children from running wild over the place while Danneel was absent, and the only damage they could find other than to the doors was where one of the patches of garden she'd planted had been completely denuded of vegetables by a wandering deer. The

deer had been delicious, and Misha wasn't complaining at the lack of lettuce.

The day was drawing to a close, and there was the promise of spring in the pleasant evening sunshine. Misha had laid aside his cloak and was standing in tunic and breeches, surveying his handiwork as he prepared to put away his tools and retreat inside his newly secure door, when the sound of horses' hooves on the hard packed dirt alerted him to approaching company.

Danni was up in her still room, preparing ointment for one of the villagers, so Misha turned to address the newcomer, wondering who might be coming their way, since most people didn't know that the keep existed.

Along the path he saw a familiar sight. There was a big, black horse, and astride him was a tall, stern-faced rider, and alongside him on a spirited white stallion was another, who was smiling at them as if every moment brought some blessing.

"Misha!" The deep voice was joyful. "How's it going? We came to help put the tower to rights, but you seem to have the job well in hand."

"Yeah," agreed Misha, suddenly feeling proud, and just a little bit surprised at how good the achievement felt. "Took me a bit of effort, but it's finally back the way it was. Gonna start repairing the bridge tomorrow, and maybe get going on some furniture. Danni does okay, but she doesn't exactly live in luxury, and she's pretty much busy all day now helping heal the locals of their illnesses."

Jared had dismounted while Misha was telling them about his plans, and gone to stand at Jensen's knee. "Well, we came to see the two of you and tell you all about what happened after you left to come back here. Is Danneel around?"

"Excuse my manners. Come on in, the two of you. Bring the horses; they can go out back by the shed. It's nice and sheltered there, and there's plenty of hay." Turning to lead them through his newly repaired doors, Misha closed them with great satisfaction and guided them around the tower to the area that would best suit the two horses. "Danni's somewhere in her pantry, doing things to a healing ointment, but I know she'll be pleased to see you. You'll stay



the night with us, of course? We have venison on the menu."

"Works for me." Jared's normally stern expression had morphed into a wide, beaming smile.

"Of course it does," snickered Jensen, shaking his head and winking at Misha. "When did you ever turn down an opportunity to eat?"

"First rule of battle, Jen. Eat when you can, because you never know when you'll get another chance." Jared had moved close to Jensen, and now slid his arm around his shoulders.

"Oh, yes, of course," mocked Jensen, snuggling closer to Jared's side. "Because we're fighting a terrible battle ight now. I forgot."

"Not the point," muttered Jared, rolling his eyes. "It's a way of life. An attitude. Gotta stay on the ball, dude."

Bickering playfully, the two allowed themselves to be led up the stairs to the kitchen. Danneel had heard them approach, and now emerged from the depths of her still-room. She was not looking her best. The concoction she was making had needed boiling, the fat rendering to form the base, and she was red faced and sweaty, her hair hanging around her face in snakes. She stiffened when she saw who the visitors were, but Misha, who had noticed her confusion, swiftly hurried over to her and slipped an arm around her waist.

"Here she is - the prettiest apothecary you could ever hope to find." He quailed a little at the blistering look she shot him, but continued to hold her beside him, knowing that she could use the support now she was face to face with Jensen.

"Danni!" Jared's face lit up, and he came towards her, hands outstretched to take hers. "You and Misha had already left by the time I got around to thinking I ought to say thank you." He bent to kiss her on her cheek, and Misha was pleased to note that the defensive look had faded a little from her pretty face.

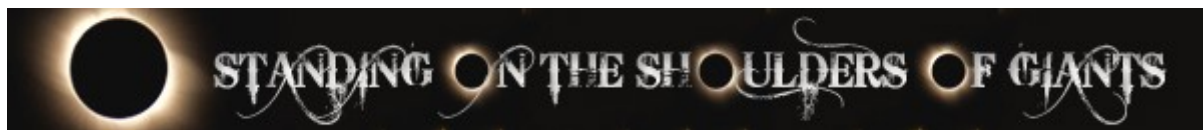
It was only when Jensen followed Jared to plant a kiss on the other cheek that she began to smile, relaxing visibly as though she had somehow shed a vast weight from her shoulders.

Misha nodded his approval and winked at Jensen, then pursed his own lips to make kissy sounds at the two visitors. "Hey, come on, guys. Why should she have all the fun?" he whined.

"Sorry, man. No can do." Jensen was snickering. "Jared here gets frightfully jealous when he thinks someone's making a move on me. You wouldn't like how he gets."

"I suspect I know all too well how he gets," muttered Misha, and Danneel, who had peeled herself out of Misha's grip, smacked him on the back of the head with the ladle she'd been holding, much to Jared's amusement.

"I see that you've finally learned who your master is, my young thief," he said, winking at Danneel. "It was about time."



Dinner was hearty, the roast meat and greens served up in trenchers made from warm, crusty loaves. Danneel poured mead for the four of them to wash it down, and they talked until the oil lamp began to gutter. Finally, Jensen rose to his feet. "Please excuse me, but I am really tired, and if I don't go to bed right now I will likely fall asleep where I'm sitting."

Getting up, Danneel took a taper and lit a tallow candle for him, taking one for herself as she beckoned the two to follow her. The little room she led them to was almost unchanged from Jensen's earlier visit. The hay had been refreshed, and there were furs to cover them, but otherwise it was the same. He turned to thank Danneel, and she nodded, smiled and bade them good night before turning to descend to her own room.

"Shhh..." Misha had followed behind her, and caught her arm to steady her when she

jumped.

“What are you doing?” she hissed, going to move past him on the narrow stairway.

“Don’t you have the slightest curiosity about... about what they do?” Misha’s voice was quiet enough to pass as a whisper, but the grin on his face expressed his thoughts admirably.

Danneel jumped, her eyes wide in the flickering candle light, and a frown creased her forehead. For a moment she seemed not to comprehend, but then she shot him an old fashioned look and took his hand, leading him down a narrow and dusty corridor into another room beside the one where Jared and Jensen were. It was lined on one side with shelves that were filled with bottles and jars. Below them was a wooden bench upon which stood a pestle and mortar, and a small scale with weights. An oil stove stood to one side, and there were bunches of herbs hanging from the timbers of the ceiling. “This is where I make my potions, but when I have a sick patient, and I need to keep an eye on them without being distracting, I can do so. She uncovered a mirror, and turned it so that it was angled upwards and stood looking down into it intently as she tilted it until she was satisfied.

Misha gasped. Depicted in the highly polished metal he could see the room next door, and the two inhabitants, who were currently locked in each others’ arms, kissing passionately. They had shed their coats, and both stood in shirt and breeches. Misha swallowed as he saw Jared’s hand slide down Jensen’s back to spread over his buttock, pulling him tightly in so their bodies were pressed together.

“That’s amazing,” murmured Misha. “You’re full of surprises, aren’t you.”

“You don’t even know,” replied Danneel, a small smirk on her face. “Not that I ever used it to spy on lovers before. I think you’re a truly evil influence on me.”

“It’s a good job you’re no longer a nun.” Misha was unrepentant. “You’d probably exorcise me, and that would hurt, I’m sure.”

A glance into the mirror revealed that Jensen was struggling to get Jared’s shirt off. He was having trouble, and his hands were fisted in the voluminous fabric as he tugged it loose from

the waistband of Jared's pants.

Jared was laughing, apparently, and Misha saw Jensen bend forward and sink his strong, white teeth into Jared's shoulder, swiftly putting a stop to any mirth on his lover's part.

Jared's face grew predatory at that, and it was obvious that he was taking Jensen to task, although there was no sound to be heard. It was Jensen's turn to laugh now, and he did, although not for long. Jared pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it to one side and then, as they watched, he gathered Jensen up in his arms, despite Jensen's size and dropped them both down onto the straw pallet where they would sleep.

Things moved swiftly after that. Clothing was flung haphazardly away as the two men writhed together, mouths seeking each other and hands fumbling for purchase as they struggled to climb inside each other. Jensen slid down into the straw, mouthing down Jared's body. The look of utter adoration on Jared's face was plainly visible as Jensen nuzzled into his groin, and it seemed as though he gasped, throwing his head back and arching his neck. It wasn't possible to see Jensen's face from the angle where the mirror was placed, but it was evident what he was

doing from the way his head rose and fell, and the manner in which Jared had clutched Jensen's hair, knuckles white as he twisted his fingers in Jensen's hair.

Stealing a sly, sideways look at Danneel, Misha noticed that her breathing had speeded up, and her breast was heaving. He flushed. More and more he was thinking that this was where he belonged. He ventured an arm around her waist as they continued to watch, breathing a small inner sigh of relief when she merely leaned into him.

Jensen had pulled Jared's knees up and apart, and was pulling back, watching his lover's face. They made a gorgeous picture; the candle bathed the two of them in the warmth of its amber glow, while the moonlight streamed through the window to gild their extremities in silver. As they made love, the two of them seemed like statues come to life. Passion showed in every look between them, every touch. As Jensen wrapped Jared's legs around himself and lowered himself to cover him, Danneel took an unsteady breath.

They were kissing again, the movement of their bodies sinuous and easy, and Misha thought he'd never seen anything quite so arousing before. He was about to slide his arms around Danneel when she suddenly jabbed him in the ribs with a sharp elbow, and he gasped, turning to look at her with his most plaintive expression.

"We should go," she murmured. "This isn't something we ought to be watching."

"They are beautiful though," he whispered, nodding his agreement as he turned to pick up his candle and follow her out.



o which she'd added cream.

"You're always so well prepared," he said to her, moving to take the tray from her and convey it to the table. "Have you ever considered... a... er... I mean, do you want to..."

His voice trailed away, and she smirked at him, the expression he was beginning to accept as her usual face where he was concerned. "Spit it out, little thief," she said, husky voice amused.

"I mean, you and I... we get on so well together," he mumbled, flushing as he looked for somewhere to hide.

"Do you think so?" Her face assumed an expression of polite interest, and he crumbled.

"I thought..."

"Silly man. It's so easy to embarrass you," she said. "Now what were you trying to ask me?"

"Would you consider me? I mean, as..."

"As a lapdog?" Her brow arched.

"I think he's trying in his unique and feeble way to propose to you, you wretched woman." Jensen stalked in from the yard, rubbing his arms in an attempt to warm himself. "Put him out of his misery, why don't you?"

"You think I should?" She was still smiling, and there seemed no trace left of longing as she looked at Jensen.

"I do," he said, smiling.

Jared, who had come up behind him to slip his arms around Jensen and nuzzle into his neck asked, "What are you agreeing to?"

"He was just asking me to marry Misha, I think," said Danneel, laughing. "And Misha is so dumb it hasn't occurred to him that he's not getting out of here alive, I was only waiting for him to notice."

"So just tell him and let's eat." Jared shrugged.

"Well, that was romantic." Misha shook his head, passing him one of the bowls of porridge and the jug of cream.

"What's the problem?" asked Jared. "She said yes, didn't she? Kinda?"

"I guess," Misha said, somewhat dubiously. "So does that mean we need to go into San Antonio to find someone to marry us?"

"Well," grinned Jensen. "I ought to warn you that we need a new Bishop. Jared broke the last one."

"So I hear." Danneel nodded, flashing a smile at him before moving around the table to take a

seat beside Misha.

“Black magic is never a good thing for a clergyman to mess with.”

““It was painful for a while, but I have no regrets.” Jared had finished his cereal and was reaching for the meat.

“Do you?” He turned to Jensen, eyebrows arched in inquiry.

“Me? Not any more.” Jensen shook his head. “But like I said way back, while it was happening, the whole thing was for the birds.”

*And so we leave our little bunch of heroes to enjoy peace at last. It is interesting to note that the new bishop, who was appointed soon after the events of our story, was one Joshua Ackles, and he ruled wisely and justly.*



~The End~