

Day fifty-six. He still hadn't checked his social media. Occasionally there were notifications on the phone from potential clients, but they went ignored. Most of the phone calls went ignored as well.

The only ones that didn't were from Ludus and Ducky, who called him at least once a week. Ducky called twice. Any moment now, Worm Money would have to drag himself out of bed and answer the phone.

Thankfully, he no longer had to put on a chipper voice to be heard. He didn't have to pretend that he was terrified of the monster coming for him. The best he could muster was a voice at all. Monotonous, disinterested. Quivering.

The phone rang and when Worm Money had finally pulled himself to his feet, he was just about to look at the caller ID before the ringing stopped. He hated to sigh in relief. He hated it even more that he hoped it wouldn't immediately ring again. That's how he knew it was Ducky.

There was only a few seconds of silence before his room was alive with the sound of ringing again. He brushed his hair out of his face - colorful locs - and picked up the phone. The hesitance in his voice was palpable and he almost didn't speak.

"Worm Money!"

She was sounding her typical self, though the air of concern in her second, subtler, voice was obvious and it made Worm Money balk. He very nearly hung up on her in the throes of the darkness, but his heart was beating too fast.

"Did you shower today?" Ducky asked.

Worm Money looked down at his legs. They were thick, striped and yellow with white inner thighs. All pristine. Well as pristine as he could make it.

"Yesterday," he grumbled.

"That should be good enough," Ducky replied. "I'm taking you out."

"I don't really want to go out, Ducky."

"It's been a while and some fresh air will do you good. I'm not taking no for an answer."

Worm Money sighed.

"And I am already outside your house so you better come downstairs."

He heard his door open. Worm Money hung up the phone as Ducky honked for him. She had used a key this time out of respect, but Worm Money wasn't thrilled. In fact, he sank back into bed and covered himself with his blankets for only a moment before they were ripped off.

"Up and at 'em, Worm Money!" Ducky puffed her chest out, her colorful feathers flaring out around her and betraying her annoyance. "We're going to Polnareff's. You'll like it, I promise."

Worm Money allowed Ducky to pull him to his feet. He was dressed down, nothing but a loose shirt on, but when he wasn't fully human, he could get away with the minimal effort. Ducky rummaged through his closet, peeling out a nice enough smelling hoodie and tossing it at him.

He put it on without much fuss, as he could not compare to Ducky's overwhelming personality when his was so closed off from the outside. Despite seeing her annoyance, he appreciated that she was trying to lift him out of the fog of his own design. The words escaped him.

"I promised Ludus that I would drag you out," Ducky said as she threw an arm over his shoulder. "And I will never break a promise."

The walk to Polnareff's was a long one. Ducky struggled to fill the silence that Worm Money provided. He couldn't help it, and it broke his heart to see her try and fail to break the fog. He wanted her to be successful, but when words came to him, he could only think them before they were lost.

It was like he wasn't in control of his own body. Like it was moving only because it was being forced to. The sheer radiance of Ducky's overwhelming presence was supporting him. He wanted to tell her that he appreciated her efforts, even though he could see that she had no idea what she was doing.

That she was assuming the worst of him. Of them. She was only hanging on by a thread. He wanted to tell her how much he loved her. That's what this was.

His sister. Trying her damndest to support him.

He wondered vaguely if she had gone to Idris for advice. He wondered if Idris even knew of what had happened at The Prance Center. Everyone must have been talking about it. Surely she'd heard.

"So they have this coffee that they say comes from Off Skire," Ducky said. "And it's supposed to give you a real pep in your step. Not like in the stopping your whole deal way. But in a wake you up kind of way. And some of my human friends say it's delicious. That's the real reason we're going there. Also it's new, and Jo's been looking for a new breakfast spot.

"It's more like an everything spot, but they have eggs and coffee and that's a good enough reason to go."

Worm Money's cluster eyes followed Ducky's, which were located on her knees and thighs. The weaves of the magical sight made up for the otherwise visual darkness, and he could see her pupils locked onto his. They almost immediately looked away.

She was mad.

He spent the rest of the walk looking in every other direction in a vain attempt to avoid what he knew was inevitable. She was going to try to force it out of him. The fear. She was going to try to force him to tell her what happened and the very thought of that made him seize up. What would he even say?

He focused on the brownstones around him. The look of a centuries old neighborhood standing proudly amongst the overgrown trees and bushes. Flowerboxes in every window, cracks in the sidewalk in serious need of filling, people of all shape and size sitting on the stoops.

Were they watching him? He didn't see anyone out of the ordinary. Some of the neighbors were familiar, though if they made any effort to wave to him, he was oblivious and did not return any of the gestures. This might have been the first time any of them had seen him in weeks.

Though, glumly, Worm Money recanted how none of them seemed to even try to check in on him. No inquiries into his health. Nothing more than maybe a passing wave from them.

"We're here," Ducky said. At some point she had stopped trying to fill the air, and it made Worm Money shrivel up. She hated him, he could tell.

They were quickly seated, and it was a large booth to account for the both of them. Ducky, who never took an alternate form, was quite large, and needed the extra leg room. Worm Money slid into the other booth seat and folded his hands on the smooth table.

The place was modern feeling. A real diner type of vibe, with checkered floors, red seating, and curtains in the windows. It was cozy, and clearly meant to be a focus of community gathering. There were people seated at the chromium bar on circle stools who were all engrossed in plates of food and casual conversation.

Despite the sinking feeling of doom in Worm Money's stomach, he did like how lively it was. A server came to them and slipped them a couple menus. Ducky took them without hesitation and ordered two coffees.

"I have to be honest," Ducky said, pushing a menu into Worm Money's hands. She physically put his hands over the menu, but he could tell she wasn't actually going to make him eat. "I didn't think this would work."

"Huh?"

Ducky motioned to all of him. "I thought taking you out would be a bad idea. That it would make you worse, but you're practically beaming."

Was he? Worm Money didn't feel like he was beaming. He was still under the oppressive weight of the fog. Perhaps, she was just imagining things. Maybe she was just lying to him.

"It might not seem like it to you. But you are different. A little bit. And a little improvement goes a long way."

"You're not mad?" His voice sounded so hoarse and pathetic.

Ducky's feathers flared out again. She was mad. "Well I learned that my feelings are my problem. And you need to go at your own pace. I have a lot of feelings about a lot of things, but that's not really on you."

"And Ludus said he'd tell on me if I tried to make you do anything you really didn't want to."

That made sense.

"So now what?" Worm Money asked.

"You order food if you want it."

"Okay."

When the coffees arrived, Ducky was quick to slurp hers down. Worm Money sniffed his cup curiously, but didn't immediately partake. However, the aroma seemed to flip a switch and he was suddenly ravenously hungry. Willing to eat whatever his eyes landed on first.

A burger and fries. And an omelet with just about every topping imaginable. When the server came to take their order, Ducky allowed Worm Money to point at the menu. Still unwilling to divulge whatever was on his mind. Ducky ordered a similarly large meal, her justification being recovery from tough training.

The silence between them suddenly felt amicable, Worm Money noticed. He didn't bother to point it out. Ducky did make comments about the diner and some of the other patrons, but it didn't carry the same air of disappointment as it had before. Perhaps Worm Money had been imagining it. Maybe he was imagining it now.

It was nice. A mild reprieve from the fog if only for a few moments. Maybe he would remember this later, when he could see and think clearly.

When the food came it looked delicious, and clearly portions meant for smaller creatures. Ducky seemed disappointed by this more than anything, but she didn't seem to want to complain.

The burger was delectable, and Worm Money found himself chewing quickly, and swallowing large chunks of his food through small huffs. Ducky did not comment, though she took great care not to scarf her meal down as well despite her hunger. Worm Money was ferocious, and it was a striking contrast when he looked mostly human. Humans did not eat like this unless they were starving.

“You gonna drink your coffee?”

The only question asked through the whole meal. Worm Money shook his head and dug into his omelet as well as Ducky drained his cup. He was glad that she liked it, but his attention was on the food so keenly that he didn’t actually care that much about how it might have tasted. He would come around on his own sometime.

Which surprised him to think about.

When he finished his meal, he leaned back, hands sticky and face smeared with sauce. Ducky pushed a pile of napkins at him and he took the time to clean himself up as much as possible. He was a bit timid when he gave Ducky a thumbs up.

“Glad you liked it,” she replied. “You got to walk back?”

Worm Money nodded and Ducky was quick to pay and escort him out. Worm. Oney, oddly, felt lighter than he did before. The sun was a bit brighter and the colors of the trees were more vibrant. He felt a profound sense of belonging and he was content to bask in it for as long as his brain would let him.

Ducky smiled, though kept her comments to herself. The walk back felt shorter somehow and she was sad to let him go.

“So I’m totally gonna bother you again in a few days. Mainly to make sure you’re alright, but also to drag you out if I need to.”

“Okay.”

“And Worm Money?”

“Yes?”

Ducky hugged him. “You know I love you right?”

“Yeah,” Worm Money replied, returning the hug. “I know.”