

BEGINNING

Trill wasn't the most observant person in the group, so they thought it was kind of odd that they were the only one who seemed to notice when Nero disappeared off into the woods as they were making camp for the evening. The elf's back disappeared behind a tree, the sound of his footsteps getting lost in the sound of the rest of camp setting up; nobody else was watching him leave. Trill almost commented on it, but... maybe Nero wanted privacy? Maybe he'd be back soon?

After maybe five minutes, the curiosity was a never-ending itch in the back of Trill's mind. Clearly he wasn't going to the bathroom, or, or anything, right? And if he really wanted privacy then there were better places than the woods in the south. There were definitely dinosaurs around here. And Trill was almost friends with Nero these days. And even if they weren't entirely friends, they didn't want him to get eaten by a dinosaur, they hadn't wanted that even when Nero was sending demons to eat them. So, the point was, they should go see what Nero was up to in the woods. Right? Right.

They made a vague excuse that got them a couple weird looks ("I have to go check on something!", they probably should have said nothing at all but too late now), but the benefit of carrying around a bit of archangel in them was that most people trusted they could take care of themselves. A few feet into the woods, they stopped, listening and looking around, debating how wise it was to call out to Nero.

It wasn't necessary; they heard unsteady breathing a few yards further out in the trees. Which, that seemed odd on its own. If Nero'd gotten hurt he definitely would have come back, so was he exercising? Was he....?

They found themselves creeping forward without really meaning to. If they were right about what Nero was doing they *should* definitely just leave him to it. It wasn't like they could really blame him, they'd been on the road for weeks and they were all well-off enough to stay in their own inn rooms in civilization, but they hadn't seen an inn in weeks and were pretty much living in each other's pockets all the time to avoid getting eaten by wildlife. It wasn't smart but if they could hear Nero from here, he definitely was close enough to be heard if he screamed about a dinosaur, so they should just - stop walking now. Or now. They definitely didn't need to see him, and they definitely weren't desperately curious about why now or who he was thinking about or if he looked just as angry and anxious as he always did or if he finally managed to relax just a little bit, and....

Nero's breathing hitched, and released on what sounded like a sob, and Trill got their first glance of him. He was leaning on a tree, facing away from camp, and Trill had to blink while their thoughts restructured, because that was a crying sound, that was definitely not a happy sound, and was he crying while he was -?

But, no. One of Nero's hands was pressed to his mouth, as though desperately trying to hold sounds in, and the other was pressed to his eyes. His knees were tucked up against himself, almost fetal, and he was continuing to make little sounds that were... definitely not happy.

"Are you crying?" Trill said, and immediately wanted to hit themselves.

Nero startled so badly that he banged his head on the tree behind him, and then he was grabbing at that while his other hand fumbled for a bag of spell components that wasn't there and his face was still wrecked, red and blotchy and streaked with tears and snot as he whisper-shrieked, "Trill!"

"I'm sorry!" Trill said. "That was a stupid question, I, of course you are, and I mean, look I was just worried about you, and -"

"Go away!" Nero snapped, still in a whisper that sounded like it wanted to be a yell. "Can't you leave me alone for a few minutes, I just wanted to-"

"Feel sorry for yourself in peace?" Trill quipped, and then "I'm sorry! I'm sorry, that was mean, please don't be mad," as Nero's expression flickered through something that was murderous and then closer to stricken.

All at once, the fight went out of Nero. He fell back against the tree, his hands coming up again to wipe away at his face. His knees drew up again and he mumbled something into them.

"What?" Trill asked, taking a step forward.

"I said I'm not going to hurt you!" Nero snapped, still mostly making eye contact with his knees. "Don't worry, I can't summon demons down to rip you apart anymore, so just - leave me alone, ok?"

Trill stared at him. There was something weird about this conversation. "I know you're not going to summon demons anymore," Trill said slowly.

"Right, because I can't, and actually I can't do anything like that so you don't have to be afraid of me turning into a demon again, so you can just leave me alone, all right?" Nero's voice was so fast and low that Trill had to lean forward to hear him, and even when they could he still wasn't really making sense.

"I wasn't worried because I'm afraid you're going to go all - spooky and smokey again, Nero," Trill said, still slow, maybe a little patronizing because this seemed very obvious to them. "I was worried because you're my companion, and my friend, and you're crying alone in the woods at night."

“Why?” Nero’s whisper was more pained breath than voice.

“Um, I was kind of hoping you would tell me?” Hopeful that they wouldn’t have to run again anytime soon, Trill lowered themselves to the ground so that they were eye level with Nero, not that Nero was making eye contact.

“What? No, I - why do you care? How are we friends?”

“Are we... not friends?” Trill said. They seemed like friends. They’d been traveling together for weeks, they worked decently well together now that they weren’t violent rivals, Trill’d even gotten Nero to laugh earlier that day. It hadn’t sounded anything like the mocking, cruel laughs that he had always made at Trill’s expense, either. It was almost a giggle. Trill had nearly fallen over.

“I - are we - I killed you!” Nero finally looked up from his knees so he could glare at Trill. “How are you fine with this? How can you stand to look at me? I tore apart a city I wanted to see you dead so badly, how are you just *fine* with this?”

Trill gaped for a second. “I’m, I mean, I wasn’t fine with it, that stuff was pretty shitty? But it wasn’t you, not really.”

“It was, though,” Nero said, and his voice broke in the middle again. “It was me. I remember what that felt like. I remember how, how badly I wanted what you had, and how badly I wanted to destroy it. How I tried to destroy it. Trill I *killed* you.”

“But like you said,” Trill replied. “You wouldn’t do that anymore.”

“I said I can’t do that anymore,” Nero corrected.

Trill shrugged it off. “Sure, but you wouldn’t, either.”

For a second Nero just breathed, and Trill watched him breathe and was a little uncomfortable but really this wasn’t so bad. They’d always kind of wanted to talk Nero down, and now they could, and it wasn’t anything more awkward than telling Nero that they were friends which really Nero should have noticed weeks ago.

“I don’t understand,” Nero said finally. “I’ve never - I’m not a good person, Trill. That’s why the demon thing happened in the first place. I was cruel and angry and selfish and I couldn’t handle it.” His voice was shaking so hard at the end that it had nearly dissolved back into tears.

“Nadine couldn’t either, and she’s pretty good,” Trill pointed out. “I mean, we met the guys who make that decision, and no offense to them,” Trill touched their charm, “but it seemed like they didn’t really know what they were doing? Like, the whole thing is - it was pretty messed up,

Nero, I'll tell you about it sometime. But just cause it messed you up doesn't mean we'll never be friends now."

There was another silence, and then a horribly shaky breath, and Trill didn't get all the way asking "Wait are you -" before Nero snapped "Don't - shut up, Trill!"

Trill gave a startled little laugh at that. "Sorry, it's fine," Trill said. "It's um -" they bit their lip, unsure if they should share this but there weren't many people who'd dealt with this and Nikolay probably wouldn't mind and definitely wouldn't know. "I, Nadine cried a lot, the first few days after we, y'know, stabbed the pool magic out of her." They shifted a little closer to Nero. "I heard her talking about how it's, I mean, one time someone thanked her for cooking breakfast and she just lost it and it was really awkward? She said a lot of stuff was too much, especially nice stuff."

They shifted again, so that they were shoulder-to-shoulder with Nero. Not touching, they were pretty sure they'd get hit for touching, but there. "Yes," Nero said finally, softly. "She was right. Sometimes it's too much. Especially the... the nice stuff."

Trill almost asked if this was too much - Nero's shoulders were still shaking - except they didn't want to assume this was nice, especially right after Nero had been yelling at them. Maybe, maybe them being here made it less nice than being alone, and so it was actually helping, kind of? "Should I be more mean to you?" Trill asked.

A second of shocked silence later, Nero broke into that same giggling laugh he'd given earlier that day. It made Trill's stomach jump with surprise. "No," he said, sounding slightly hysterical. "I - no, Trill, I don't want you to be mean to me."

"Well I don't know, if nice stuff is too much then, then I'm not sure what else to do?"

"Whatever you want!" Nero exclaimed. He finally turned to look at Trill, and his eyes widened as they flicked down to register how close they were. "I'm not going to get it anyways, I have never understood you and now I have a heart and I understand you even less, so just, do whatever you want."

Trill frowned at that. It sounded like an insult but it didn't sound like it was meant as one, and they weren't sure what to make of that. "I just - don't want you crying alone in the woods?"

"Shut up," Nero said, but they didn't sound quite so murderous or miserable anymore, so maybe it was kind of a win. And then he leaned against Trill's shoulder, just a little, just for a second, so yeah it was definitely a win.

They lapsed into a silence that lasted about as long as Trill's patience could stand, and as soon as they were sure they were going to say something and ruin it, a growl came from the woods that sent them both jumping up and scrambling to the campfire.

But things were different, the next morning. Not in a loud way. But Trill smiled at Nero when they said good morning, and Nero almost smiled as he said good morning back.