

*i walk with others in me yearning to get out
claw at my skin and gnash their teeth and shout
one of them wants only to be someone you'd admire
one would as soon just throw you on the fire*

Concerted effort was required to corner Worth. He woke up the earliest of the tidesages, and would often be out the door before others sat down for breakfast. Though he was often visible around Kraken's Refuge, doing chores or chatting with the council, he was seldom not busy and went to bed silently each night.

Finally, though, Morgan managed to catch the younger sage before he could slip out the inn's door. A cane snagged the back of his robes and pinned it to the floorboards.

"Worth." Worth flinched at the sharp tone, hooded head turning guiltily toward the gnome behind him. "We need to talk. My room, now."

How could he say no? "Aye, Sister," he agreed weakly. Only once they released the fabric did he turn to follow them back between tables and chairs. Marley gave them a wave that went unanswered, and Morgan simply nodded to a sleepy Xue pouring strawberry syrup on her pancakes. Fay, hunched over a cup of coffee dark as night, did not move except for her eyes tracking them to the back.

The room they entered was on the ground floor, simple and clean. A window was cracked to bring in a fresh breeze and the sound of the sea. A spare pandaren-sized sage robe was thrown across Xue's bedside table, while the one next to Morgan's bed held the books they'd smuggled in with the supplies. As Worth went over to check their titles, the gnome locked the door behind them.

"You brought *Knight of the Deepest Forest*? I thought you already read this." He wiggled the book at Morgan with a raised brow.

"I don't read new books when I'm on vacation. That takes away the point of the whole visit," Morgan replied with a roll of their eyes. "So I choose comfort books."

Despite his nerves, he managed a smile. "All of your books are comfort books."

"I need a lot of damn comfort." Morgan moved over to their bed and sat down with a sigh, resting the cane on the coverlet. "Besides, I have plenty of other books. They're just not fiction, so you don't borrow them unless I tell you to."

This was striking closer to home. Dark eyes met brown, and Worth looked away first. As if by silent agreement, they both reached up and lowered their hoods. In the privacy of the room, Morgan's hair was still damp in its pinned buns and their gaze continued to follow him. It

lingered on the streaks of greyed hair that curled at his temples and contrasted against the black waves.

Worth moved around Xue's bed to the other side and put distance between them. "This is about the last visit we had in Drustvar, isn't it?" He couldn't even look at the other person in the room, staring at the cheerful blue and white quilt before him.

"Of course it is. You sailed off that day and we haven't had a moment alone to talk ever since. Unless you'd rather have the others looking on?" This came out sharper than intended, and Morgan stilled their tongue. Best not to start out on the offensive.

Worth frowned toward the floor. "No! I mean, they don't need to be a part of this. I can speak for myself." He smoothed down his robe front then added, "...If you're waiting for an apology, I don't have one, though. I meant what I said."

Despite their intention to discuss this in a civilized manner, Morgan found themselves frowning as well. "You learned that from Taggin, didn't you?"

"She's taught me some things! Like trying to stick up for myself." Worth certainly sounded a bit defensive, but he straightened up. "You never taught me that part - if someone tried to hurt me you just scorched the earth with them."

That stung a little. "What was I supposed to do? I was trying to protect you!"

"You could have taught me to protect myself!" The words were just a bit too loud, and Morgan glanced over to the door, but Worth continued. "I had to learn that by watching her, and I guess it finally started to stick."

Imagining Fay being a better teacher really rankled in a way that Morgan couldn't describe, in a burn of bitterness or something close to jealousy. "How could she even teach you that better than I could?"

With a snort, Worth finally sat down on Xue's bed. The mattress sagged a little with his weight. "You didn't really want me to grow a spine. Not really." He stared at his hands, realizing what he'd said, then winced. "Sorry. Rather, you wanted to shelter me instead of making me have to defend myself. You preferred that I did everything you said without complaint or backtalk, because you like to be in control."

"I'm not trying to *control* you!" Morgan's spine was forced into rigidity by the immediate fury this provoked, and an unbidden squeak briefly entered that sentence. "You were rejected by the Shrine and emotionally neglected by that mother of yours, and I wanted to give a way out!" Automatically they stood, reaching for their cane to tap their way toward the taller sage.

At that, Worth knew he'd gone too far. He stood up as well, hands raised defensively. "Sister, please! I j-just - I mean, you did! You gave me so much opportunity. And I'm eternally grateful." He backed up from the advancing Morgan, who halted as soon as he took the first step.

Seeing Worth this... afraid of them... discomfited Morgan. They immediately turned away in disgust at themselves. "I'm not a good teacher at life, Worth. The only thing I know how to teach is academic shit, not philosophy or whatever. How can I hope to help others like that when I don't even know the answers myself?"

The gnome could hear his sigh as they headed back to the bed. The walk was slow and unsteady, limbs moving only somewhat according to their wishes. "I knew I couldn't be a good moral example for you. But I did try to make sure that you were cared for and had the opportunities you never got before."

As they lay down on the covers and stared at the whitewash on the ceiling, they could hear Worth sit down as well. He made a pensive noise into the quiet between them. "You did great for what it's worth, Sister."

"You always deserved better than what you got, Worth." At his wordless protest they interrupted, "No arguing on that. Sure, life dealt your mother a bad hand, but she also took that out on you and never let you be your own person. I couldn't be the parent you deserved...but for a while, I was the one you needed."

When Morgan looked over, Worth was watching them back. There was a familiar vulnerability in his eyes, one that never failed to bring out unpleasant feelings of protectiveness in them.

It prompted them to speak again, unbidden. To let out words that weighed on their chest and made the space between them grow further apart. "That's why I yelled at you about your hair. About spending your life force on her. It felt like you were throwing away your safety without thinking about the consequences. How am I supposed to keep you safe if you're getting yourself into danger like this?"

When he smiled, it made the worry lines of his face lift and soften. He adjusted his scrolled mantle carefully. "With all due respect, I'm not trying to get into danger. But you and Fay taught me to care for those close to me, and I'll always make sure we survive this together. I can't promise I won't do it again if it's ever necessary. But I'll be careful. And I won't let you down."

"Of course you won't. You've always been a self-made man, Worth." Finally Morgan sat up and added, "I'm sorry I tried to take the choice of your actions out of your hands. It was born out of -" they gritted their teeth, "- concern for your wellbeing, but that doesn't mean I was right."

"Thank you," he muttered into the air. Unsurprisingly, he sounded a little wobbly. "I know you hate being wrong, Morgan. But I appreciate it. A lot." Turning, he peered out to the open window and the churn of the ocean.

Don't get used to it, Morgan wanted to reply, but they stopped their tongue from sharpening itself on his feelings. "I didn't have to go through an awful childhood just to take it out on you," they said eventually. "I don't have to express how much I care by hurting you when I can exercise kindness instead."

When Worth rose, he crossed between the beds to kneel at Morgan's side. His hug was careful, waiting to be rebuffed, and when it wasn't it firmed. They rested their head on his shoulder and shut their eyes as the sound of crashing waves curled within the room.

They parted, and Morgan let whatever feelings had washed over them recede back into the corners of their mind. If they could just get through this with everyone alive, then it would be worth all of the emotional turmoil.

"You might not be my teacher any more, but you're not getting out of being someone I respect," Worth joked meekly as he stepped back and pulled his hood back over his head. "You're still - you're still close to me. Right?"

"Of course I am." Morgan instantly scowled at the open-ended question. "I'm not letting Taggin replace me in everything. At least not with that atrocious habit of kleptomania that she's starting to instill in you."

When he laughed, they reached for a pillow. "I'm going! I'm going! Don't throw that at me." Worth ducked toward the door and unlocked it with a click, yanking it open...