

You knew that Monty had a troubled history, because everybody knew Monty had a troubled history: it was Base Camp's worst-kept secret, and you were about the only person who kept it at all, mostly by yelling at people to keep their big traps shut. Particularly Eloise, who had known Monty for years longer and seemed to think that made her an expert. Eloise always thought she was an expert, and never thought anybody else was, which was why you didn't like her much. Eloise didn't know Monty at all.

You did. He was your best friend, and you weren't ashamed of crowing that all over the place. And it wasn't like you had no standards, or nothing to compare to: most of your friends in your life were men (Bran was practically a man), and none of them compared to Monty in competence, in seriousness, in sheer affability, or in, this was crucial, not wanting to fuck you. Because most of the previous ones did want to fuck you, and either you agreed, and weren't "friends" pretty quick, or you disagreed, and that made it tense. For them, maybe, not you, but it was the same thing. Monty, your friend, your partner-in-crime, wanted to fuck his wife— not you, his wife— had made that clear from the start, and never wavered, and you had Ell, anyways. Now you re-have him. But in the middle, there, when you were available, Monty didn't do shit but give you a pat and tell you to take time off if you needed.

So what you're saying is, whatever his big secret crime, it wasn't womanizing. Hell, you're half-convinced he's never had a woman besides his wife— but that couldn't be right. He's good-looking, and it wasn't the arm putting them off, because you were there when he had two. Whatever. Too crass to ask. Monty was the kind of guy who made you feel crass to ask things, not that he shamed you, just that he was so aggressively decent it sucked you right in, made you decent, too. Made everybody decent. Camp was all of six or seven people before he came, and it'd be six or seven people after, when the stragglers drifted off or killed themselves infighting. He was the absolute center of things, knew everything, solved all problems, was nigh-infinitely patient and kind, no matter how fucking stupid the conflict, no matter the dickheads involved, was too kind, which was where you came in. You told people to shut the fuck up and listen to him. But that was your only job, really: he solved everything else.

And if he had moods sometimes, if he had nightmares— not big screaming terrors like yours, but sweaty mumbling dreams he'd never wake up rested from— if you caught him sleepwalking, if you caught him dead awake in the middle of the fucking Fen in the middle of the fucking night, with a big fuckass trident, trying to stalk something-or-other— if he came back with carcasses sometimes, or skins, and rings around his eyes— if, on one or two occasions, under extreme fucking duress, in private, with you, he would crack open, and not be patient or kind at all, really? If all of that were the case, what the fuck did it matter? You were a good judge of character. You'd clocked just fine that Monty was in fact trying hard, very hard, every day, to be what he was. That maybe it didn't come entirely natural. Eloise, the sainted expert, seemed to think this was a big goddamn deal. Eloise could put a sock in it. Thank god Monty was trying! Imagine the dope he'd be if he wasn't! And imagine the hypocrite you'd be if you bitched— not like you don't know a

thing or two about putting something on. If Monty wanted to dedicate his life to being the biggest gooshiest good guy possible, who were you to care? When you dedicated half your life to the opposite?

Which is all to say: you had decided long ago that you didn't care what Monty did. If someone tried to tell you, you didn't care. If his dumbass not-friend wanted to wink-wink nudge-nudge all day and night, that was her business and Monty's. Not yours. You didn't ask, and you shut up people who did ask (because Monty had moods more often when they asked), and you were prepared for that to go on forever.

You were not prepared for him to sit you down, one sunny day, looking like his dog just died, to inform you, gravely, that there was something you deserved to know. And if it affected how you felt about him, or about his ability to lead, etcetera, he would accept your judgment without complaint. And so on. There was a lot of preamble.

And you were thinking, during that preamble: did he fuck kids? Was that the troubled history? Because you were wracking your brain trying to think what'd deserve this— what **you** would judge him for, which wasn't much. He knew the kind of clients you had. But if Monty fucked kids, serially... you mean... it'd explain why he wasn't interested in you? How old **was** his wife? You never met her. And he did have a demeanor that would work with kids. You always thought that. But if he did fuck a kid, or two kids, years and years ago, and didn't do it since (no shit), and more importantly, felt so much crushing remorse that he spent the whole rest of his life making up for it? Knowing he could never fix what he did to those poor kids' heads, but trying his goddamn hardest to fix everything else? Would you still—?

Anyways, Monty didn't fuck any kids. Or adults. Or if he did, he didn't consider it worthy of mention. Instead, he went through the stuff you'd heard already (and didn't give a shit about). The rumors confirmed: he participated in a perfectly legal sport, killed some people who signed waivers, and didn't feel too bad about it at the time, which, why would he? Why should anybody? It sounds like he was damn good at what he did, and you congratulated him, and said you felt pretty lucky to pal around with such a certified badass.

He didn't like that very much— you saw his eyes— but couldn't say so. Instead, he tried to press on, saying wanly that he was glad you felt that way, Mads, but that you'd heard maybe a third of it. You started wondering about kids again, in the silence that followed, where the poor guy ginned up the nerve to out with it. Like he thought you'd knock his lights out or claw his face off for whatever-the-fuck-it-was, like he thought you were some stick-up-the-ass Court type, not his extremely good friend of four years running, who had been booted into the ocean, in case he forgot, for being a bad bad terrible person. And the longer the silence went on, the more you were offended, but you kept it to yourself. No point in jumping the gun.

And at last Monty clenched all his fingers and spilled it, and it was the goofiest fucking thing you'd ever heard. Nothing to do with kids, of course, just him stumbling through the plot of some dog-eared yellow pulp novel, all centuries-old conspiracies and induction rituals and evil magic masks and lots and lots of murder, and you would genuinely think he was taking the piss, except he never took the piss. He was a serious guy, and, from the way he screwed his face up, this was a serious topic. Also, he had a little bit of evidence. His scary-perfect teeth— which you'd noticed before, but your previous working theory was that the Troubled History was a drug thing, and his old teeth rotted, and he got them knocked out and replaced. Like Earl, but permanent. Anyhow, not a drug thing, just magic. Magic teeth. (He really hated you using the word "magic," but did not provide alternatives.) Also, his fucked-up new arm: also magic. Mask-related.

This was a lot to take in, but a snake had come out of your leg a month ago, so you got over it quick. Mainly you were astonished that this kind of thing happened on a Pillar— from your rudimentary knowledge (what little you'd retained from Ell's digressions), everything was all regular up there. Apparently not. Not like it affected you. You mainly felt bad for Monty, the poor beleaguered bastard, forced to deal with dumbass pulp-novel masks and schemes and ghosts, when all he wanted to do was run around and do some perfectly legal stabbing. Shit, you'd be mad as hell, if it were you. And no wonder he hadn't attempted to tell anybody, even you: what a slog to explain! So much to get through, and anybody who didn't trust him to the hilt would call him a lunatic.

So you reached over and wrapped his hand in your hands and said Holy fuck, Monty, I'm sorry about all that. That's crazy. What a pain in the ass.

This was clearly not the response he was anticipating, and he tried pulling his hand away before you clutched on and he thought better of it. He said that he didn't think you understood— that you— that he wasn't fishing for sympathy. Please don't feel any need for sympathy. That he had a role in enormous, terrible things, Mads, that hurt thousands and thousands of people—

(Meaning that he was strong-armed into evil ghost schemes? you interrupted. Against his will? By evil mask ghosts? Did he blame *Charlotte* for what her evil ghost-dad-snake had her doing? Because that's basically the same fucking thing?)

Charlotte... he said, and closed his eyes, and did not address the topic of Charlotte further. Even though you thought the comparison was a good one. Instead, he said: Mads, he had no moral objection. At the time. He didn't care how many people suffered from the consequences of his actions: his motivation for hating it was purely selfish. There was nothing to be proud of, and everything to loathe.

He left it unspoken, but at last the whole picture clicked in: your sympathy wasn't just unexpected, but unwanted. He damn sure wasn't fishing for it. What Monty, all balled up, was

waiting for— from his best damn friend in the whole wide world— was validation. He wanted to be loathed, because he'd settled on loathing as the response. Meaning: he wanted to be mommied. He wanted you to pat his pathetic ass and call him a bad naughty boy and send him to his fucking room for transgressions nearly a decade old, which mostly weren't his fault, which he hated at the time, then hated for better reasons later, while spending the intervening near-decade devoting 110% of his energy to being as nice a fucking guy as physically possible. Come the fuck on!

The bitchy side of you (not insubstantial) wanted to scorn him for this, not for the sad imaginary crimes, but for his goddamn myopia. It wasn't like him, and it was embarrassing for him. Deeply embarrassing. How stuck in his own fucking head was he? How thick were his blinders? Did you know him better than vice-versa? You were offended before, and were offended worse now. You were hurt he'd think you'd hurt him.

And usually you'd lash out, when hurt, but you were aware of the irony and took a deep breath and expelled the irritation through your nostrils. And you thought about the fact that he could've spilled this to anyone. He could've gone up to Eloise. *Eloise* would've sent him to his fucking room. But he went to you, because he— he trusted you. He knew you'd give him the straight dope, no matter what.

So you would give him the straight dope. "Uh-huh," you said, to the 'loathing' thing. Then: "Damn. It sounds like you were a dickhead."

Monty shut his eyes. "Yes. You... would not have liked me."

"I wouldn't have liked you? Eight years ago? Fuck, I would've been... 22." Not one of your best years. "Do you know who I was at 22, Gewecke?"

He must've sensed the punchline, because he didn't respond.

"Wow! Guess what! I was a dickhead too. We would've gotten on like a house on fire, asshole. Are you trying to tell me that all *this*..." You gestured up and down him. "...is guilt about... being a *bit of a dickhead* in your fucking 20s?"

"Not a 'bit of.' And not— Mads, I killed—"

"Legally."

"I was responsible for—"

"Ghosts were responsible for. Did you ever fucking kill anybody outside of work? Random civilians? For shits and giggles?"

Monty's throat bobbed. "No, but—"

"Did you shove people in the way of moving carts? Did you sneak up behind women in dark alleys and rip their skirts off and fuck them? Did you fuck kids? Dogs? Did you go around pinching people's shit and selling it for drug money? Did you steal cats and drop them off the side of the Pillar? Did you light houses on fire?"

"These aren't—"

"Yes or no, asshole!"

"...No." Monty looked away. "I was too busy for any of that. Frankly."

"Not looking for reasons. Just looking for any actual justification for *loathing*. I don't loathe you. Who fucking loathes you? Look at me; do I loathe myself? No! And I was worse than just a dickhead, Monty, I was a goddamn rancid cunt. I stole from my own goddamn family. I beat people up. I gave them scars from here to here. I was drowned for good goddamn reason, and nobody came to watch, because—" You wipe your mouth. "—that's what I deserved! Do I wish I never did that shit? Sure, maybe. But it was years ago, and I can't change it, and I don't do it anymore. And I won't do it anymore. And that's that. Now, I'm not saying you should... it's not like you need to embrace being a fucking dick. It's fine to be a cool, nice guy. But this whole... bottling-up horseshit... you fucking strangled Charlotte. Doesn't matter if she deserved it. It's not working."

"Yes. I know. I— I am—" He inhaled. "Charlotte encouraged this, actually."

Of course she did. "Well, sometimes she has a good idea. Do you feel better yet?"

"I'm not certain."

"You will." What a stupid thing to be lugging around, all by yourself. What a stupid, stupid man. "Maybe it just needs to sink in. What if we got a drink?"

This elicited a pained half-smile. "I don't really—"

"Because you drank too much up there? Probably not, if you were so busy. Just guessing. Is it because you don't deserve to relax?"

"I fear if I—"

"Huh?" He shut his mouth. Did he not mean to let that slip? "Sorry? If you have a drink, you fear... you'll get eaten by the fucking drink monster? What? Or, no. If you had a couple drinks, you might start strangling people?" You scoffed. "I'll believe it when I see it. Actually, I do want to see it. We should go see it."

"I'm not putting you in danger," he said quietly.

"In danger! *Ha!* That settles it. We're **getting** drinks. We're getting a lot of drinks. I'll make you a fucking bet, if you want. If you get piss-drunk and your strangling fingers get itchy, I'll owe you whatever, but I just don't see— I just don't. No way. No damn way."

And that did settle it...

>[TO BE CONTINUED...?]