Emily: Mister Burin Always Knows Just the Right Thing to Say

I couldn't stand being there anymore. I couldn't stand to look at Dad or Miss Lyriana. How could she be siding with *him*?! I was pretty sure now that she didn't even like him, but it was now somehow Momma's fault that he'd given up and shot himself, because she hadn't been there for him? She'd been DEAD! BECAUSE of him!!! None of it made any sense and it made me feel like I was suffocating. The whispers in my head were turning into screams again, so I ran. I bumped into Mister Burin as I went, managed out, "Sorry," and then gave up on running and just teleported. I barely had to think about it. Compared to summoning Mama or my Pokémon, where I had to actively concentrate to bring them to form, teleporting was almost as easy as blinking. When I opened my eyes again, I was somewhere deeper in the hut, in some kind of thick forest. The trees were tall and dark and their thorny branches nearly blocked off the fake sky above. Everything was bathed in shadows, including me.

But I wasn't the only "me" in these woods.

They crept out of the shadows the same way they sometimes crawled out from under my bed or out of the closet in my room I had back at the hut. They never talked when there were other people in the room. That's why I spent so much time playing games or watching TV with Uncle Coffin. He didn't really need to eat or sleep or go to the bathroom, so he was always awake and watching over me. The only problem was when I had to go to the bathroom. During these times, I had no choice but to ask Nebula to come with me. It was kind of awkward peeing while holding a magic kitty, but I just couldn't stand being alone.

But I was alone now. No Uncle Coffin. No Nebula. Just me.

Me and at least a dozen other Emilys.

"Good job," one of them-the one with half her body eaten away by the hottest acid in the abyss-said sarcastically. "You ran away in a circle, back into Hell."

"No!" I screamed at her, covering my eyes to keep from looking at her. "You're a stupid liar! M-Miss Lyriana promised I-I wasn't in Hell anymore!"

"And who is she to us?" another me asked miserably. I couldn't stop myself from looking through my fingers. This Emily's face was intact, but she was missing her arms and legs. They'd been pulled off by the pretty, goofy ponies. She sat against a nearby tree, blood flowing from her stumps. A red pool had already started to form beneath her and was spreading outward, towards me. "You said it yourself. We're just a girl she's known for a few weeks. Unlike you, Miss Lyriana's a real hero. She's got better things to worry about, more important people to save, than you, crybaby."

"Stop it!" I cried. I covered my ears but I couldn't block their voices-my voice-from crawling in and out of my brain like ants.

"Come on," said an Emily directly behind me. "Daddy had the right idea the first time. You have a gun too. And thanks to him, we know how to use it." I was suddenly very aware of the gun holstered at my hip. I'd completely forgotten about it. I'd been so distracted trying to level up my magic and my creatures that I'd never bothered using it except for target practice. "It really is as easy as opening our mouth and counting down from three…"

I collapsed to my knees. I could feel them around me. And even though I squeezed my eyes shut, I could still see them now. It was like having dozens of twisted mirrors nailed to the insides of my eyelids. All me, but all different. And just the tip of the iceberg. Nocticula had been creative. When I had first been alive, there'd been a soft but sturdy wall between my

conscious mind and all of my memories of Hell. But that evil bird lady had shattered the wall when she'd "killed" me during our fight with Typhon Lee. Little by little, lifetimes of torture had started creeping in…

"…Two," they said together and I felt my hand sliding downward, taking ahold of the gun.

"…No, please!" I begged. "I…I don't want to go back!"

"You can't go back, honey," said a voice that sounded painfully like Momma's, "because you never left-"

"Little girl?"

Like a bomb of light, the goofy voice pushed the ghosts away and made them disappear. Tears still streamed down my cheeks as I opened my eyes. Mister Burin was there, kneeling in front of me, looking very worried. He was holding onto my wrist, though he was careful not to hurt me. I saw that I had the gun up by my neck and had begun to angle it towards my mouth. I quickly dropped it and after a moment he let go of my wrist.

"You're not okay," he said, his voice gentle. "But it's okay. You don't have to pretend. Sometimes crying's just what you gotta do."

My body shuddered and I collapsed against his chest. And I cried. I don't remember for how long, but I knew it'd never be enough. I was a girl made up of ghosts now. And they were all furious that I'd been the one to finally get saved. The one who got to live and be a princess and a wizard. Because of that they'd never stop. And no matter what anybody else did, nobody-not Momma, Dad, Miss Lyriana, or Mister Burin-could save me from myself…But…

"But I have things that they don't," I said in a shaky breath.

Up to that point Mister Burin hadn't said anything. He'd just held me and stroked my hair back. Now he asked, "Er, and what's that?"

"I have magic. And angles. And Better Zeus and Squidward." I pushed myself off of him so that I could see his face. "I'm broken, but I can hurt them back with my pieces."

"Who's 'them'?" Mister Burin asked, frowning.

"The other mes."

Mister Burin's frown deepened. "Um. Okay."

My body was still trembling and my head still ached, but when I rested my head against Mister Burin's chest again, it wasn't so bad. I listened to his steady heartbeat. He hugged me and I hugged him back and everything started to feel kind of real again. Mostly because I doubted that Nocticula could make up the silly awesomeness that is Mister Burin the Dwarf Wizard. "Mister Burin," I said, "I love you. Please be a part of my life forever."

"I…You're going to be alright, little…Everything is going to work itself out, Emily," he said. "I've made certain of it."

"Okay." I let go of him and wiped at my face. I looked around at the forest and that reminded me of the reason why I'd run in here in the first place. "Mister Burin, do you think Dad's a bad person?"

"Yes," he answered without hesitation.

"I knew it," I sighed. But I already had more than enough proof. More than I ever wanted. I could recall every kill or cruel act Dad had committed while he'd been in my body. I couldn't hear his thoughts while he was doing them, but I was actually glad for that. I don't think I really wanted to know what goes through somebody's head when they shoot a guy's penis off,

set it on fire, and then used said flaming penis to threaten its original owner. Or when shooting a talking tree first and offering it cake second. Seriously, Dad. What the fuck?

But Mister Burin wasn't done. "But I think it's because he had an unusually bad life. Pain changes you both for the better and the worse. He probably hurts people so that they won't get a chance to hurt him first. And he's not really sure how to turn that off." The dwarf gained a thoughtful expression and said, "Take being the Burin for example. I had sigils to contain the demon carved into my body when I was a baby. I don't remember it now, so I'm okay. But if did, if I grew up with the knowledge of all that pain, I probably wouldn't be as agreeable a dwarf as I am now."

"But you've been through more bad stuff since then," I pointed out. "And you're not mean."

"Because I actively try to make people comfortable," he replied. "I see strangers as friends or allies you haven't made yet. Terry…Maybe guilty until proven innocent is the best way to describe your father's view of the world."

"But he's so mean to you!" I pressed.

"And?"

I blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

"Sometimes words are just words. And you can always take them back." He placed a hand on my shoulder. "Or replace them with actions."

"Wow," I said. "Dad's totally wrong. You're most definitely not a brain-dead idiot, Mister Burin!"

"I'm also not afraid of goats," he laughed. He stood up and helped me to my feet. I reached down, grabbed the gun off the ground, and holstered it. "Are you ready to rejoin the group?"`

I looked at him and then glanced over my shoulder. They were there, in the shadows, waiting for the next time I was alone. But they'd have to wait a while longer. "Yes, sir," I said. "We've got a job to do." A hooked my arm through his and together we teleported out of those woods, leaving the shadows and my nightmares behind.

At least for a little while.