

Faceless Guide, commonly referred to as Faceless by the very few people who had managed to find them, spent most of their days languishing in their self-inflicted misery. Not many pupils had the gumption to do what was necessary to find him, and as the initial explosion of activity (most of which he had rejected outright) faded away, he waited, paranoid, for the next pointless endeavor to cross his path.

He felt as though he could see it coming from miles away, and Howwer had not been any help. Each request to warn of nasty students went ignored. Faceless often assumed that they were just caught up in their own convoluted machinations, but the simple fact was that Howwer did not want to enable Faceless's spiraling depressions, and Faceless just couldn't take a hint.

So, imagine his surprise when a little Nautipod appeared outside of the temporary office that Faceless was squirreled away in.

Ruby was his name, and he was small. Slender and lithe, and bursting with the kind of energy that only a specific type of person would find endearing. Someone who could wrangle with the snippy comments and quick wit.

Faceless took one look at him and could tell that this Nautipod had come a long way, peering through the door without Ruby's knowledge. The swishing tentacle tail that was almost as long as Ruby was tall, was striped at the end in a few rings of color, and he clutched a broom that had near microscopic etching in the wood. An enchantment that was fading. Fast.

Ruby took their sweet time knocking on the office door. The office itself was in a far removed town, beyond where any sensible person would travel just for a chance at a lesson, and Ruby had heard it all along the way.

Faceless was a monster. A coward. Codependant on anyone with enough wisdom to potentially ease him of his mental burdens. Worthy of slaughter. The biggest patsy to the gods that will ever exist. Crooks hated him, CCCats revered him. And the humans that would have had opinions that mattered had died so long ago that their names were overwhelmingly reserved for places that only Howwer would be able to see.

Ruby balanced on their delicate paws, leaning on their broom, which could carry their weight and not much more. Maybe a second Nautipod if they were both clinging in pod form.

"Hello?" Ruby called, knocking on the door again. It rattled in the frame despite Ruby not applying that much force. "Faceless, I know you're in there! Let me in!"

More knocking. Faceless laid across the long couch that they had moved into the corner of the office. With a lazy rotation of their crowns, the door opened and Ruby entered with a quickness, clearly afraid that the door would be slammed shut. Must have heard a rumor somewhere...

"If you are here to try and succeed where I have failed, then you can depart and never return," Faceless said, voice hollow through the cloud of space that counted for a

head. It morphed as if to mimic flying comets and new constellations formed anew with each passing second. He couldn't help but think that they were star maps of far off places, kept in place by the gravity of the floating crowns around it.

Ruby could see the pink meat of the stump left over, and only after pondering, he noticed that the mouth was a vertical slit down the neck. It articulated perfectly, but the voice was soft, and was being amplified by the cloud of defected magic.

"I'm not here for any of that," Ruby shot back, looking around at the barren office. "I want to be able to fly."

That was only partially the truth. Yes, they wanted to be able to fly by manipulating the broom, but what was more important was the ability to teleport out of dangerous situations. Something that would have been helpful more than once already.

He just knew better than to tell the whole truth, for Faceless was finicky and would not train pupils if he thought they were up to no good.

Faceless dragged himself off the couch, and in a single fluid motion, appeared before Ruby with a critical eye that orbited the stump in line with the circular crowns. It, too, took on the appearance of a celestial body. Round and blue, ringed by magic and bleeding stars.

They studied Ruby for what felt like a century. Ruby could sense that Faceless's shifting was them sliding through portals too thin to recognize. Wherever they had gone was unknown, but Ruby waited patiently enough and resisted the urge to complain about it.

Faceless was wasting his time because they did not actually want to do what was required of the title.

They held out a marble. It was no larger than a quail egg and had a transparent shell that surrounded a dense copse of trees with brambly crowns and thick blue trunks. It appeared to be twilight within the marble, and Ruby could sense that time was passing within it.

It felt perverse to stare for too long.

Faceless placed it in Ruby's hand, and Ruby pinched it between his fingers experimentally. If he had to do something with it, Faceless didn't make it obvious what it was, and since their crowns did not have spokes that could twitch, Ruby could not tell if they were communicating within the greater hivemind. He guessed that they were.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

Faceless turned away, the swish of their cloudy galaxy tail leaving Ruby momentarily stunned in silence. "Make it float."

"I don't know how to do that." More wasting time. His handle on his attitude was slipping. "That's why I'm here, stupid."

"It is pointless to try to teach a moron who does not have the aptitude," Faceless replied. "If you cannot make it float on your own then you are not worth the air it takes to speak to you. I fear I have already wasted so much of my time."

Ruby had a very violent thought flash behind their eyes, but settled for sinking to the floor, legs crossed, marble in hand. The floor was dusty and looked like the stain had worn away centuries ago. There were books on shelves opposite of Faceless's couch, but Faceless had disappeared into a portal without a word.

Ruby placed the marble an arm's length away and stared so hard at it, he thought his eyes might fall out of his head. It didn't move. Not even a little. It sat there, a stubborn nail in a stubborn floorboard.

He thought about how he was supposed to make it float without touching it. Or, rather, he assumed he was not allowed to touch it in any way, shape, or form. And when the marble still did nothing after hours of trying, Ruby decided that he would go find Faceless again and shove that marble where it would never see the light of day again.

That jerk had ditched him. The nerve!

Ruby put the marble under his helm and forced it up through a tiny opening into the part of his shell that resembled a bent witch's hat. He'd have to keep it there until he could find the time to try to make it float. It did not feel good to do this, the contents of the marble weighing on his mind.

And with that, Ruby exited the office.