

It was finally over. Well, according to Parti and Idris, these feelings could be a lifelong battle, but it was over for now. The fog had finally lifted, leaving Worm Money's bright exterior shinier than it had ever been before.

To Worm Money, it felt more like a switch. One day, he was shaking with fear, trembling with the sense of impending doom that never seemed to be coming, and then it just all turned off.

The very first thing that seemed to happen with this revelation was that he assumed that he had been faking it for attention. This came with a wave of guilt and shame that disrupted his early morning routine. He stared at himself in the mirror, shifting into and out of his human form until he settled on his usual. Human.

It wasn't that he didn't like his Crook self. No, he maintained at least half of it at all times, but he found this balance to be the most optimal for work. He had no idea how he was going to jump back into where he left off considering it had been at least four or five months since he had last taken a job on.

That cookout didn't count. Not to him. He had done that for his family, and it had worked out for them. They had acquired the funding, and that gave Worm Money a strange sense of pride. The wormlingkin that crossed that threshold going forward would have even more resources now.

This was a good thing. He told himself this so that the odd feeling in his stomach would go away.

Perhaps he would bring that up to Parti. See, he had been diligent in seeing Parti on a recurring basis. It was difficult to get one on one time with her, as she had a lot of Crooks to tend to in addition to her own personal responsibilities. Worm Money made the most of the time he did have.

It was surprising to him how good at her job she was. He was so used to CCCats being difficult to approach. They didn't have the ability to telepathically communicate with Crooks, and they didn't have cluster eyes to watch for expression changes. Worm Money thought this would have made them hard to relate to, but Parti seemed to be able to bridge that gap without much issue.

Perhaps, he thought, she just made it look easy because she was so experienced.

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"I've been feeling weird lately."

He was once again sitting in Parti's office. He had had to wait for quite a bit, but he sat with his hands folded in his lap, yellow striped legs crossed. He kept feeling the compulsion to pick at the knuckle spurs on his feet, a laser focus that was not missed by the other in the room.

"You seem tense as well," Parti offered.

The session room was quite large to accommodate the various sizes of Crooks that needed one on one sessions. It was cutely decorated, with beautiful and calming paintings of nature, abstract shapes in pleasing arrangements, and what appeared to be solid canvases to the visible light eye, but radiated peacefully to the magical vision eye. Pieces that Parti was more than willing to talk about if ever asked.

She was rarely asked though.

There were also large plush couches and chairs. They had coverings on them so they could be changed at will. It was most commonly blue. The very same tranquil color as the surface of Meteor Lake, and it was a bit frayed from age, and from being picked at by the anxious Crooks that sat in the very same place Worm Money did.

With him assuming a relatively normal human size, and Parti not being very large herself, sometimes the room felt too open. Didn't help the nerves as much.

"What's been happening lately?" Parti prompted.

"Well, nothing really." Worm Money forced out those words. They were true to him, and that was frustrating. "Just, I've been feeling normal. Or the closest to normal I have felt in a while. And I don't really understand why that bothers me."

Parti wrote quietly, her glassy yellow eye focused on Worm Money. She had no intention of interrupting his train of thought, which put Worm Money at ease. He hadn't realized it, but he was often interrupted when with his friends and family. Not in a rude way, he supposed. Just in a normal way.

"I suppose I just feel a lot of conflicted feelings. Especially after the cookout? It went really well, and I heard you guys got the funding - congratulations by the way - and when I heard the news, I was happy! For a little bit. And then I was...well, not so happy.

"I suppose you could say that I was jealous. And then when I realized that I was jealous, I felt guilty. Shameful. I shouldn't be jealous of these guys. Or of any of the wormlingkin who will benefit from the funding. But I can't help it. I want it to stop, actually. I want to just be happy for New Paths."

"You can experience both of these emotions at once," Parti said after swallowing her eye. "It is very common to feel like this when you can see the changes happen in real time."

"But why? Idris deserves to not struggle as much as she did with us. She deserves to have a better house to raise them in. One that has all the fancy new things that make learning fun and simple.

"And I would never take that from her. I just wish I had that too, you know? Fancy wallpapers and chairs that didn't wobble, and electricity that worked properly all the time. Cookouts and parties."

Parti kept writing. Worm Money could barely hear it as he talked, but he almost wished she would just tell him what to do. Tell him to stop being so immature. Or something! Anything!

"Do you regret staying at New Paths?"

Worm Money flinched. "No, of course not! I loved it here. I still do love it here, but I can't stay."

"Why do you suppose that is?"

"I don't know. Maybe because I already learned everything that she had planned for us? It doesn't feel right to live here, you know? I made my own life and it was a successful one for a while. Not so much now. I'm afraid of something happening again."

He was picking at his knuckle spurs. It hurt when he pulled the skin too hard, but he wasn't breaking it, and it took his mind off the stress of the Prance Center. He thought he had gotten over that, but now his heart was beating so hard, he could hear it in his ears. His mouth felt dry, he had the intense need to run, but his body was rigid.

Parti cleared her throat. "You've mentioned that before. 'Something happening'. Do you feel like you are ready to talk about it? It seems to me to be the root of your anxiety. Or one of them at least."

Worm Money blinked. Had she read his mind? He thought CCCats couldn't do that.

"No. I don't want anyone else to get hurt because of me. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if anyone at New Paths was hurt."

Parri left it at that and Worm Money was thankful for it for the time being. Maybe one day, when he was sure that the danger was over, He'd tell someone about it. But he meant it. He would not be able to live with himself if anyone at New Paths came across that monster.

He refused to let that happen.

"I will respect that decision. Do remember that you will always have a private ear here. For whenever you are ready. I think in the meantime, we should try to practice some breathing exercises. We are coming up on time today."

Worm Money nodded. He had been neglecting his practice, and it looked like Parti could tell. He would listen more intently.

As he practiced with her, Worm Money did feel better. Something about the way he had to hold his breath seemed to let the tension go when he exhaled. Not all of it, as Parti had reiterated to him, but enough of it to take the anxiety down a couple notches.

The paintings on the wall were much more vibrant and relaxing. He kept a few of his cluster eyes open as he breathed and could see the pulsing of the magic in one of the paintings bleed down the wall. It had a wavy look to it. Like water flowing down the wall for a short spell before receding back into the canvas. Just like a real ocean.

When their exercise was complete, Parti stood up, prompting him to do so as well. When standing, Parti was only a little shorter than him, but the size and density of her cloudlike fur made her so wide wider than him. Her eye was still swallowed, and she gently guided him to the door.

He didn't want to leave so soon. Parti's voice was so warm and comforting, that it felt as though he were being released into a cold and hostile world. In a way, he was. He just hadn't drummed up the courage to detail it yet. If anyone was going to receive that, it was going to be Parti.

"When will I be able to see you again?" Worm Money asked.

"You'll have to speak to Cardamon when she is in again. She will be in tomorrow, but you can always leave a message and she will get back to you."

Worm Money nodded and left. He had the rest of the day open to him and no real plans. He was always tired after a session, and wasn't keen on seeking out one of his siblings just yet.

So he went for a walk.

This seemed to do exactly what he needed, which was keep his mind in a state of ease. The sun was warm, the shade was cool. When he kept to himself and just observed, he could better see a tiny glimpse into other people's lives. How some were having great days, others not so much. It was complicated.

Before he forgot, he called Cardamon's phone. As expected, there was no answer and Cardamon's excited voice came through the line like a piercing arrow into the skull. She instructed the caller to leave a message and there would be a response within 48 hours.

"I'd like to make an appointment with Parti. It's Worm Money." He thought about adding something else, but he decided against it. It wasn't urgent. Nothing ever was for him.

When he hung up, there was a ping on his phone. A message from Instagram. Worm Money, curious, opened it. Maybe it was about a potential job. Or maybe it was nonsense. A bot. A troll.

It was a message from a CCCat looking for an event planner. An inquiry that seemed legitimate enough. Worm Money responded in kind. He would meet with them and they could hash out details at a later time. That seemed agreeable enough. In fact, they seemed surprised that Worm Money even answered at all.

He didn't get that same level of excitement as he used to. Before, he had felt a surge of activity in his brain. Guesses as to what the theme would be, opportunities to use a new caterer he had sampled, maybe a new idea for lights. It was still there, just suppressed.

Muted, he would later decide.

He made his way home. The walk was enough to keep his mind clear and the breathing exercises from earlier had kept him from circling the drain, but now he was hungry.

He figured now would be the best time to order out and settle in for a movie or two. Maybe he would invite a few of his siblings over. That would be nice.