

Come As You Are

Pomni's entire body shivered and trembled as she processed that day's adventure. Caine had tasked them with capturing the firewolves causing trouble in a rural community he made up. Much to Pomni's chagrin, firewolves were ferocious beasts which, from a distance, looked like burning wolves and, from up close, like bear-sized monstrosities with manes of fire, big sharp claws, and even bigger, sharper teeth. They had been a nuisance to farmers, or so Caine claimed, preying on their livestock and burning their crops simply by passing through the fields.

Jax ever so helpfully had put forward the proposition to solve the firewolf problem by using someone as bait. Even more to Pomni's chagrin, his way of putting forward a proposition consisted of shoving her into a basket and pulling up said basket to hang from a tree branch for the firewolves to find and leap and snarl at. In effect, that had led to Pomni staring down fiery, hungry eyes, teeth, and throats howling and growling at her for the better part of the day.

Back in the Circus, it took Pomni several hours to calm down from being twitchy to merely trembly, even though she'd been holding Ragatha's hand for reassurance. Though her gaze remained somewhere far, far away in the distance.

Ragatha thought it a good idea to look after her for a bit. She spoke to her in a soft, calm voice and gave her enough time and space to do things at her own pace. Eventually, she managed to motivate Pomni to go to her room and get some rest. Gently guiding her by her hand and chatting away with idle ramblings to keep her mind off the firewolves, she slowly got her there.

The red and blue walls of Pomni's room were not what Ragatha had hoped to find. They seemed too exciting and agitating for the current situation, as if their bright colours exerted pressure on the room itself, leaving the inhabitants with expect-

tations to be bright and joyous too; Unwaveringly so, at all times. The painfully colorful furniture and toys strewn throughout the floor and on the desk and under the bed joined in on the walls' bullying their occupants into cheerfulness. The room itself resisted gloom in an oddly oppressive manner. Ragatha wondered whether it may have been better to take Pomni someplace else, but on the other hand, a safe, familiar place may have been the safer bet after all.

"There we are," Ragatha said overly cheerfully. "Isn't this better already?"

Pomni didn't look better at all. She just stood there absentmindedly, holding her own elbows, a hunched ball of misery in a double-pointed hat.

"Ragatha?" Pomni peeped shyly.

"Hmm?"

"Do you think this is hell?"

"Hmm?"

"Are we in hell? Or purgatory? Or something like that?"

"No," Ragatha shook her head, "I don't think so."

"Those things did look an awful lot like hellhounds."

"But they weren't actual hellhounds. Just something Caine made up."

"Are we being punished for something? It feels like we're being punished for something."

"I don't think that is the case. Although I can see why you would say that. You did *not* have a great time so far."

"Does anybody? Have a great time? Is anybody enjoying this?" Pomni looked at her with big, drowsy eyes.

"I don't know for sure. Sometimes, it's not too bad. But I don't think anybody genuinely thinks of the Circus as punishment."

“But it’s all just so... horrible,” Pomni shuddered.

“I know it can feel like that sometimes. But you just had really bad luck with the adventures so far, I promise. It’s okay. It will pass. You’ll feel a lot better soon.”

“But it won’t pass, will it?” Pomni twitched. “It *won’t* pass. There is no exit. There is no end. Each day Caine can come up with some new horrible, horrible thing that looks cute and benign at first and then shatters me or one of us. We’re completely at his mercy and there is no way out.” She clasped her face in terror.

“Well... Yes. But Caine isn’t bad or evil. He means well, you know that. He just gets it a bit wrong sometimes. Okay, really *really* wrong sometimes. But you know he means well, don’t you?”

“I’m not sure I do. Sometimes, that’s hard to believe,” Pomni drooped her shoulders.

“I know. But it’s important to remember that he’s not out to get you. Especially when he gets one of his more... creative ideas.”

Pomni slouched down further.

“And in any case,” Ragatha placed her hand on Pomni’s shoulder, “you’ve got us. We’re all in the same boat. That makes us comrades, at the very least. But I like to think of us as a rag-tag group of friends.”

The little jester appeared to shrink even further as she held herself for comfort, her gaze disappearing into the far distance again.

“How about you get some sleep?” Ragatha suggested. “I’m sure you’ll feel better once you’ve gotten some sleep.”

Pomni stared distraughtly at her bed.

“Come on,” Ragatha said, pulling away the covers, “I’ll tuck you in.”

Pomni reluctantly dragged herself onto the mattress.

“There you go,” Ragatha gently pulled the covers up to her chin. “Doesn’t that feel better?”

Pomni nodded weakly, staring at the ceiling.

“Great! And I’m sure you’ll feel much better tomorrow. Good night, Pomni.”

Pomni’s hands shot up and grabbed Ragatha’s arm.

“Can... Can you... Can you stay a bit longer?”

Ragatha looked down at her concernedly.

“Please?” Pomni whimpered. “I... I don’t want to be alone right now.”

“Sure,” Ragatha gave her a soothing smile and took a seat on the bedframe. “I’ve got nowhere to be.”

As Pomni silently kept staring at the ceiling, Ragatha began humming a tune and let her gaze wander through the room. The longer she looked, the more toys she discovered. Dice, those blocks with letters on them she didn’t know the proper name of, monopoly money, checkers, a rocking horse, toy cars, the list went on and on as if more of them gradually kept appearing over time.

“There’s so many toys in here,” she said. “Do you have a favourite?”

“Not really,” Pomni mumbled. “I haven’t played with any of them.”

“You never played dice or checkers?”

“I mean these ones. I haven’t played with them since I arrived here.”

“Ah. Right. Do you... want to?”

“Maybe later.”

“Of course.”

Ragatha hummed her tune again, thinking of ways to lift the little jester’s spirits. In a room full of toys, none of them were of any use if Pomni was not interested in a game. A room full of entertainments with an occupant not in need of entertainment, but solace. It was almost a bit cruel. But the bottom line was that nothing digital was of help. Then maybe an old-fashioned idea might be, Ragatha figured.

“How about,” she tried, “we make a sleepover out of it? I haven’t had a sleepover in ages. Since I was a kid, I think. We can, I don’t know... Tell stories and jokes and chat deep into the night? Talk about boys, maybe? Or horses? Do you like horses? It’ll take your mind off things, I bet. How about that, would you like that?”

Pomni managed a faint smile and nodded.

“Great! Then scoot over,” Ragatha said and slid under the covers next to her, hitting her feet on the lower bedframe. “Wow, your bed is short,” she noticed and tucked her knees in so she could fit comfortably. “My feet barely fit in.”

“Sorry.”

“Oh no, sweetie, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Sorry,” Pomni sunk deeper into the mattress.

Ragatha turned on her side towards Pomni, propping her head up on her fist.

“You don’t need to apologize for anything, sweetie.”

“Sorry,” Pomni repeated, her features distorting into a pained grimace as she caught herself apologizing again. “And thank you for staying,” she added hastily, pulling the covers up to where her nose would’ve been if she had one. “I really didn’t want to be alone right now.”

“It’s no trouble.”

Ragatha gave Pomni’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. The little jester twitched and looked at it. Then she turned towards Ragatha, enveloping her hand with both of hers before the latter could pull away and curled into a ball.

“Is this okay?” Pomni whimpered.

“Sure, sweetie.”

Pomni visibly relaxed with a deep exhale. “You’re being very kind to me,” she murmured.

“Well, of course.”

“Thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Ragatha?”

“Hm?”

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to sleep anytime soon.”

“That’s okay. We can just chat. Or stare at the ceiling together.”

Pomni looked at the hand in hers and with much concern between her brows.

“Ragatha?”

“Hmmm?”

“Are you nice to me because there’s something wrong with me?”

“No, why would you say that?”

“I don’t know, you all seem okay with all of this madness. None of you freaked out about being chased by firewolves. I’m the only one freaking out constantly.”

“No, honey, no. There’s nothing wrong or weird about that. We’ve just had a bit more time to adjust, that’s all. Everyone had a hard time when they first arrived.”

“They did?”

“Yeah, they did,” Ragatha nodded. “When Jax first arrived, he was freaking out and raging. If you think he’s destructive now, you should’ve seen him back then. Nothing and no one was safe. He wouldn’t even go on adventures, he’d just run around and scream at things and people and thrash and break everything he got his hands on. It was constant mayhem with him, let me tell you. All he did was break and destroy and then break stuff some more. It went on for about a week until he realized how futile it all was. Caine could always fix everything with a single snap of his fingers, provided he remembered he could do that. Then Jax locked himself in his room and thrashed that too. He wouldn’t come out of it for days. And when he finally did, he’s calmed down a bit, thank goodness. At least he

had stopped spending all his time on indiscriminate destruction. He stayed quite hostile and standoffish for a while, though. Even now he's still a jerk a lot of the time. But it was a lot worse when he first arrived.

"And Gangle, the poor thing, was frightened out of her mind. She also thought this was some sort of punishment at first. She's shy and timid at the best of times, and she needed a lot of encouragement and reassurance when she arrived. She was frightened and scared of everything and everyone and saw doom around every corner. I kept telling her that everything was fine and everything would be alright and that she didn't need to be scared of any of us. She wouldn't even join us for games or food or to hang out, you know. Always made some flimsy excuse and went off to hide somewhere by herself. The poor thing. But eventually, she adjusted too and came out of her shell, even if only a little."

"What about you?" Pomni looked at her with big eyes.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. Did you do okay?"

"I was a little like you too, I guess. Everything freaked me out, especially that there was no exit. And everything was different and unfamiliar and I didn't know anybody. I'd act tough, you know, like I had it all together and everything was alright and like I wasn't scared out of my wit for the first few days. Luckily, that worked out well for me. Kinda. But on the inside, I was very afraid and worried. Every time I got a chance, I'd sneak off to my room to be alone and away from it all. But there is no away from it all here, as you know. So I tried to sleep a lot. Which meant staring at the ceiling a lot. I thought that maybe if I went to sleep, then maybe I could wake up back in my previous life, out of here. But obviously, that didn't happen. I still like sleeping, though, even if I don't really need it. It relaxes me. That's why I think it'd be good for you too," she gave her a kind smile.

"Does it really help?" Pomni tightened her grip on Ragatha's hand. "It feels like waking up in a nightmare over and over again. Every time I wake up and look at these rubbery cartoon hands, it's like I'm thrown off a cliff all over again and need to catch myself before I hit the ground."

"It takes some getting used to," Ragatha admitted. "But it does help eventually. Having somewhat of a routine helps to deal with all the craziness. I promise."

"How long," Pomni whispered solemnly, "until it gets better?"

"Hard to say," Ragatha pondered. "A few more days, maybe? A week or so?"

"That quick?"

"Maybe. Maybe a bit more, maybe a bit less. But people adjust quicker than you might think. Even if it seems hard and impossible right now. It'll be okay."

"Thank you, Ragatha." Pomni squeezed her hand again. "Thanks for looking out for me. For all of us, I guess. It feels a bit like you're the one who's trying to make sure we're all getting along and are together."

"Well, I try."

Ragatha took a moment to ponder a thought. Pomni had relaxed a little, but she still looked worried and downtrodden. She didn't want to upset her more, but perhaps sharing was the right thing to do in this instance, even if it wasn't an entirely pleasant thing to share.

"Pomni, can I tell you a secret?" she muttered somberly.

Pomni nodded, making big eyes.

"The truth is, I don't do so well on my own. I like company. I *need* company, to be honest. I think I may have had a big family back in the real world. I think I miss them. And I think that's why I'm trying so hard to get along well with everyone and to look after everyone. Sure, it's the nice thing to do, too, but I also want a community. A close community. And to be part of it. Everyone else here doesn't seem to mind being together, but they also don't seem very keen on it either. It's like they can take it or leave it. At least they don't seem keen enough to push for it or put in more effort than necessary to get by. So I figure that if I want community, I need to make it happen myself. But some days are hard," she swallowed. "Especially in the beginning, when I was still the new one here. Some of those days were really hard. Kaufmo was alright. He was pretty straightforward. Kinger is... Kinger."

Gangle and Zooble have their hands and minds full with their own stuff going on. I can't blame them, and I don't, but it doesn't do much in terms of maintaining a close community. Although Zooble tries sometimes when she feels like it. I love it when she does that. It really feels good. And Jax is... a handful. So the first few weeks here have been... a bit rough for me."

"You were lonely?" Pomni probed carefully.

"Yes. Not all the time... but yes. It caught up with me once I settled in properly and the novelty of it all wore off, I guess."

"Do you... Do you still feel like that?" Pomni didn't let her out of her sight.

Ragatha's head snapped back. She blinked several times at Pomni. "Sometimes," she finally sighed. "After a bad day, maybe. Like when everyone is fighting and there's nothing I can do about it. Then we have these dinners where nobody talks to each other. They just stare at their plates until Jax does something rude and obnoxious again and the next fight breaks out."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Everyone has bad days. That's just life. Even digital life. Bad days come and pass. Nothing to worry about."

Ragatha swallowed. "But truth be told, I'm a bit worried about you. That's what I wanted to tell you. Remember when I told you I used to go to sleep hoping I'd wake up back in the real world? Back when I was still hoping there was an exit or a magical escape from this place? That... wasn't exactly all there was to it. Sometimes, well, mostly on the really *really* bad days and once I understood, really *really understood* there was no exit, well, maybe then, sometimes, I had been going to sleep hoping I wouldn't wake up at all, you know."

Pomni's eyes darted left and right as she was trying to make sense of what she had just heard. Her irises shrunk into tiny trembling dots, firmly fixed on Ragatha's, once it had sunk in.

"And... I don't, I don't want you to go through that too," Ragatha stammered on,

gripping Pomni's hand tightly. "It's a very unpleasant thing to go through. I didn't mean to scare you or upset you. I was thinking that maybe I could help it. I can let you know about it. It may happen, and if it does, we can do something about it to make you feel... not that way. So if you ever start feeling like that, please come talk to me, okay? Then we can figure something out together. But please promise you'll come talk to me, okay? Promise?" Her hands were clasping Pomni's.

"I promise," Pomni nodded firmly.

"Good," Ragatha squeezed her hand affirmingly. "I'll hold you to it."

Pomni squeezed her hand back. "You really are kind."

"I try," Ragatha smiled softly.

Pomni fell into deep thought, stroking her thumb over Ragatha's hand. Ragatha wondered whether she had said too much. Pomni had enough to deal with, she didn't want to worry her further, and she may just have done that. But she had genuinely thought sharing this darker unpleasantness with her could help. If not today, then maybe someday in the future. That had to be a good thing, right? That had to be the right thing to do, right?

"Ragatha?" Pomni eventually looked up at her with big determined eyes. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," Ragatha said, unsure what awaited her.

"How lonely are you, really?"

Ragatha stammered a series of hasty and frantic "um"s and "ah"s, but no words formed on her tongue, no useable white lie or distraction entered her mind. She gave up with a deep breath, her lips spreading into a grim smile.

"Very," her voice cracked.

Pomni hesitantly reached for her, her fingertips carefully brushing along her cheek as they made their way towards her nape and Pomni held her cheek in her palm. Ragatha leaned into the exploring caress, embracing the sensation on her textile

skin, and held onto the hand on her cheek as if it were a distant memory that could vanish any second without a word of warning.

"I remember feeling lonely a lot too," Pomni admitted. "Before I arrived here."

"I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that."

"Well, neither do you."

Ragatha whimpered.

"Next time you're feeling lonely, just come over and let me know, okay? We can look out for each other. We can do another sleepover or something, okay?"

Ragatha slung her arm around Pomni and pulled her into herself, burying her face deep into the jester's hat.

"Okay," she sobbed. But moments later, she snapped away from Pomni.

"Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry," the flood of words rushed out of her like an avalanche.

"I don't know what I was thinking, just grabbing you like that. I'm so sorry!"

"It's okay, I didn't mind. I *don't* mind." Pomni's hand exploringly snaked around Ragatha's waist with a hesitant touch. "Is that... okay?"

"Yes, very," Ragatha nodded and shimmied into Pomni again, holding her firmly.

"We can look out for each other."

"Yes, we'll look out for each other," Pomni exhaled as she nuzzled into her neck.