

Comfortably Numb

As Zooble knocked on Ragatha's door, not having noticed that its bolt hadn't been fully shut, it slowly opened inward as she called out, "Ragatha?"

Their hand shot out to grab the door handle before it swung out of reach, reluctant to enter Ragatha's room uninvited. Darkness and a stifled snuffle greeted them from the inside of the room.

"Are you in there?" they tried again.

"Yes," a weak voice from the deep corner replied.

"Great," Zooble continued tiredly. "Do you have more Stupid Sauce lying around? I ran out," they waved the empty bottle in their other hand.

"Maybe," the weak voice said.

Zooble waited for a few long and awkward moments of silence before they asked, "Could you... check?"

"It should be in the drawer over there," Ragatha sighed.

"If you're pointing at something, I can't see #@!% without any lights on," said Zooble.

"The big drawer on your right-hand side."

"Can I turn the lights on?"

"Don't," Ragatha said hastily, and then added more calmly, "please don't."

"Alright," said Zooble and stepped into the room. "I'll just fetch the Stupid Sauce and then I'll be out of your space again, okay?"

“Okay,” said Ragatha and sniffled.

Zooble chose to gracefully ignore the sounds of emotional distress and rummaged through the drawer, whatever little light entering the room through the open door proving itself to be somewhat of an aid after all, until their hand gripped the squeazy plastic of the condiment bottle they were looking for. “Got it,” they said and made for the exit. “I’ll see you later then,” they added as they closed the door.

“Bye,” Ragatha said weakly, her voice cutting off as the door bolted.

A few steps down the hallway, Zooble halted, looked at the Stupid Sauce in their hand, sighed, and turned around to knock on Ragatha’s door again.

“It’s me again,” they said. “Can I come in?”

A soft “Okay” came from the other side of the door. Zooble stepped back inside Ragatha’s room and closed the door behind them, shutting out the only source of light with it. “Ragatha?” they asked gently, “Are you okay?”

Ragatha sniffled again, but said nothing.

“You’re sitting alone in a completely dark room, and you sound like you’ve been crying,” continued Zooble after a while. “You don’t seem like you’re doing too good.”

Their only answer was silence.

“Do you want to talk to someone? Should I get Pomni or something?”

“No!” Ragatha blurted out swiftly. “Don’t.”

“Oh-kay,” Zooble said slowly in a low voice with a tiny uplift stemming from a thin layer of curiosity and confusion. “Are the two of you on bad terms now?”

“No, nothing like that,” said Ragatha. Zooble could hear her red woollen locks swoosh through the air as she shook her head. “At least, I don’t think so.”

“Something else bugging you?”

“Why do you care all of a sudden?” grumbled Ragatha.

“Look, I was just trying to be nice. If you want me gone, all you need to do is say so. There’s no need to come at me like that.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Ragatha muttered hastily. “I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just... I thought you hated me, and now you’re in my room, being all concerned and whatnot.”

“Girl, what? I don’t hate you. What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know, it feels like you’re avoiding me and like you hate being in the same room as me and hate talking to me.”

“Well, yeah, obviously.”

Zooble could feel Ragatha staring daggers at them through the darkness of the room.

“But that’s not because I *hate* you. It’s because I hate it *here*. And most of the time, I just wanna be left the &%!# alone. But being left alone is apparently an unattainable luxury around here. Which makes me hate it here even more. That doesn’t mean I hate you. Or that I enjoy seeing you being miserable like this.”

It wasn’t a lie: As their eyes grew progressively more accustomed to the darkness, Zooble became increasingly capable of making out shapes in the room. Ragatha’s shape was that of a curled-up rag doll sitting on the floor, hugging her knees tightly in the far corner of the room and hiding her face behind her elbows.

Ragatha sniffled.

“Besides, what do the two of us even have to talk about? You don’t really know me, and I don’t really know you, and idle chitchat is exhausting me, so I’m doing my best to avoid it. Still doesn’t mean I hate you. Even if you can be pushy sometimes.”

“I know,” said Ragatha. “I’m sorry. I’m just... I don’t know what else to do. Do you hate it that much?”

Zooble slowly moved deeper into the room and took a seat on the edge of Ragatha’s bed, facing the curled-up doll. “Look,” they said, “I try to assume that you’re coming

from a good place. But a lot of times, I can't stand it. Partially because I'm me, and I'm not in the mood for any of it. But partially, it's because you can come across as... kinda fake. As in, I can't tell if you're being genuine or if you're after something else. Like you're trying to fulfil some weird social obligation nobody cares about, or like you're trying to insert yourself into my life for some reason, or get some information out of me for some reason."

"I'm sorry," whimpered Ragatha. "I'm doing my best, I promise. That's just me trying to be nice. And friendly. And I'm not trying to be fake or impose on y'all or get information out or anything. All I'm trying to do is connect with you. I promise. And be friends. I just don't know how else to do it. I don't. It's like everybody else got handed a manual on how to make friends at some point, and I didn't get mine, and now I'm stuck trying to figure it out on my own, getting nowhere and messing up all the time, and nobody tells me what I'm doing wrong or what I should be doing to do it right. I keep trying and trying to connect to people any way I can think of, and all I do is push everyone away and end up crying in my room by myself."

"Can't you just, y'know, be yourself?"

"But this is me! This is myself. I don't know how to be someone or something else! I would if I could, if I knew how! But I don't!"

Zooble sighed. "That's... That's a fair point."

"Me being me and me trying my best messes things up with everyone. Always. I messed it up with you, I messed it up with Gangle, I messed it up big time with Jax, and now I also messed it up with Pomni today. I keep failing and I just... I don't know what to do," Ragatha whimpered tearfully. "I don't know where I'm going wrong. I don't know what's wrong with me and I... I can't figure it out."

"Is that what you've been upset about?"

"Mhm," Ragatha snivelled.

"Why do you say you messed up with Pomni? I thought the two of you made up after that award show or whatever ended."

“Kinda,” said Ragatha. “But I shouldn’t have messed up in the first place. If I wasn’t this... incompetent, there wouldn’t be anything to make up about. At least things seemed fine after the award show. Maybe I got lucky this time, and I didn’t cause any permanent damage. We had a nice chat and cleared things up. And we’re both worried about Jax. He seems... unwell. But he’s not letting anyone get close to him, and he doesn’t talk to anyone, not really, and now he’s getting worse, maybe?”

“So? Let him.”

“What?”

“You do realise you’re not responsible for him, right?”

“I do, sort of. But I can’t help it. I’m still worried.”

“By the looks of it, you’re worried sick.”

“Maybe.” Zooble sensed Ragatha shrink into herself from across the room. “But even if I tried, all I would do is mess things up even more.”

“You *do* realise you’re not responsible for him, right?”

“Kinda.”

“And yet you’re still blaming yourself for ‘failing’, as you put it?”

“I guess.”

“Sounds a lot like you *don’t* realise you’re not responsible for him after all.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Look, Raggie, I feel you, but you can only lead a horse to water. You cannot make it drink. If Jax doesn’t want to let anyone in, there’s pretty much nothing you can do about that. If he doesn’t want to get helped, there’s pretty much nothing you can do about it. If he wants to continue being a %#&!^ #/@+! to everyone, there’s pretty much nothing you can do about it.”

“I know. But he’s clearly unwell. What if he keeps getting worse? What if he abstracts? What if he *abstracts*, Zooble? I just... I can’t just sit back and watch it

happen and do nothing. I just... can't. I don't have it in me. But at the same time, I don't know what to do."

"Pushing him ain't gonna help, I can tell you that much for free."

"I know. I just... Don't know what to do."

"I don't think there's anything you *can* do, Ragatha."

The doll dropped her forehead onto her knees.

"There's just... nothing to be done," Zooble continued with a gentle voice. "You're damned if you do something, damned if you don't. You'll just have to sit this one out with the rest of us."

"Is there really nothing we can do?"

"I can't think of anything," sighed Zooble. "I'd love for things to be different, too. But... it is what it is, I guess."

"That sucks," whispered Ragatha.

"Yup. It sucks *big time*."

"I hate it."

"Me too, girl, me too."

Ragatha straightened up and let her head rest against the wall on her back. "So, now what?" she asked with an exasperated voice.

"Nothing," said Zooble, equally exhausted. "Nothing. The same thing over and over again. Waiting for time to pass. Call it what you will, but the essence remains the same. Godot is sure to come tomorrow."

"Godot?"

"Never mind," said Zooble. "Just a book I read a long time ago."

They sat in motionless silence until the weight of the Stupid Sauce in their hand reminded Zooble of the original purpose of their visit.

"We still have this," they said and lifted their hand with the bottle.

"The Stupid Sauce?"

"Yeah."

"I'm not sure that's a great idea."

"Probably. But it's not like there's much else to do around here. I was planning on getting &\$*&#! tonight anyway. You... Wanna get Stupid together?"

"I dunno," mumbled Ragatha.

"Fair enough. I don't wanna push you into it."

"Does it help?" Ragatha asked meekly.

Zooble shrugged. "It helps pass the time. And it keeps your thoughts from spinning in circles for a while, while time passes. You've done it before, you know what it's like. At least for me, it makes me feel comfortably numb for a while. And to me, that's at least something."

"Hm."

Zooble looked at her. "Does that mean you're considering it?"

"Maybe," Ragatha said weakly.

"Well, if you change your mind, come find me in my room, okay?"

"Could we... could we do it here?"

"Sure, why not. Scoot over," said Zooble and joined Ragatha on the floor in the corner of her room.

Once she was leaning against the wall next to Ragatha, Zooble eyed the bottle of Stupid Sauce in their hand. "Funny", they said. "Here we are, one who wants nothing more than to connect with people, and the other who wants nothing more than to be left alone and get out of this place, and all we can do about it is Stupid Sauce."

"Yeah." Ragatha exhaled tiredly. "Funny."

“Wanna go first?” Zooble asked, handing her the bottle.

Ragatha took the bottle and looked at it. “Is this it?” she said. “Is this what eternity in here is going to be like? Nothing ever changes, the same thing over and over again, until we abstract? Squirting Stupid Sauce in our faces to pass the time?”

“I don’t know,” said Zooble. “Maybe. Maybe not. Who’s to say.”

“And me being unable to make friends, alone and lonely, until I abstract? Is that going to be who I am, too?”

“Don’t say that,” said Zooble. “Just, maybe, take it easy for a bit? Relationships are tricky business. I’m sure if you just give it some time and don’t try to force it, things’ll change for you. It won’t work if it’s one-sided. If you’re the only one trying to make a friendship happen, it’s bound to leave you with something different from what you’re looking for.”

“Heh,” Ragatha smirked. “Kinger said something similar.”

“He did?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, there you go.”

“There I go,” sighed Ragatha. “Still in the same place I’ve been, still in the dark corner of my room, still clueless and without any answers. But there I go, waiting for something to somehow change tomorrow.” She looked back at the condiment bottle in her hands. “Until then, we’ve got the Stupid Sauce, right?”

“I guess so.”

Ragatha took off the lid. “There I go,” she said and squirted the pink liquid into her eye, the thoughtlessness embracing her mercifully quickly. Moments later, Zooble followed her into the realms of sweet delirium, both shrouded in the gentle veil of forgetful, warm, and comfortably numb darkness of Ragatha’s unlit room.