

CLOD

MAKES A FRIEND

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Age 9

“Is his name really Clod?” Learned Yugen asked, speaking each word slowly as though the conversation was already a waste of his time. He finished with a distraught sigh, as haughty as his tone.

Clod cursed under his breath—another thing he would get in trouble for, if they could hear him from the other room. Not that it really mattered. His punishment was already going to be severe; how could a little cursing make it worse? It was just so frustrating. Why would his teacher ask that? Was Yugen trying to make this last longer just to torture him? It grated that his teacher would choose to start his visit by picking on Clod’s name. His own name was no better. What was a Yugen, anyway? It sounded like the name of a bad noodle. Even worse, the man insisted that everyone pronounce his title “learn-ed,” even though it was spelled “learned.” As if the extra syllable made him that much more important.

Despite everything Clod had learned in his short nine years, nobody would explain why Yugen’s title required the separate ‘-ed.’ The second time Clod had asked, he’d received a sharp rap on the knuckles by Learn-ed Yugen’s “teaching wand.” The wand had never actually produced any magic he was aware of, other than entrancing the wary eyes of students cautious of its smacking. Clod hated that wand almost as much as he hated his stodgy teacher. He could only imagine that the evil wand was dancing before his mother’s eyes right now while Yugen explained the “situation.”

Maybe she would break it. His mum had a temper, and Clod listened closely, longing with every fiber of his body to hear the snap of that wand. He kneaded a small mass of clay as he let the scenario play out in his mind. Yugen would gasp, completely speechless as he gawked at

the destruction of his favorite disciplining weapon. The pompous man would stomp around in a fit then Clod would rush into the room and hug his mum before they shoed Learn-ed Noodle away. That would certainly make everything better.

“He’s named after his father,” she said, with absolutely no apology in her voice. It wasn’t quite the delicious snap he’d hoped for, but he was grateful for her defiance.

“Eidy, his father’s name was Claude, with a *u* and an *e*. Not an *o*,” Learned Yugen corrected, education dripping from his tongue. “So, I’m to assume you can’t read or write. This, at least, explains the boy’s ignorance.”

“What difference does it make?” his mum asked.

“Your illiteracy has cost your son his dignity. Now and forever, he will be known as Clod,” Learned Yugen said. “Which is nothing more than a clump of dirt.”

Her slight intake of breath was enough for Clod to smash the clay pile with his large fist. It seeped into the pores of the wooden board it sat on. The kids at school had teased him about his name for years, calling him mudboy or dirt-eater. Until now, he’d kept the misspelling from his mother, because she would be hurt too. All she did was work and take care of him. The last thing he wanted was to make her feel bad. Clod thought that punching Learned Yugen in the mouth might make him feel better. He was almost as big as his thin, gaunt teacher, and it wouldn’t take much to hurt him. Not to mention, he deserved it. The man was a bully, just like the kids at school, but his mum said no fighting. Even when someone deserved it.

“I am beginning to understand your son’s disinterest in the importance of our institution,” Yugen went on. “Despite my efforts, he is almost failing in every course.”

His grades? Clod’s heart raced. Yugen wasn’t here to talk about the accident? He had mentioned the accident at school to his mum, hadn’t he? It didn’t matter; Clod had definitely

forgotten to mention his grades. Sort of forgotten. It wasn't that he didn't try to do well; he just didn't get it. Learned Yugen spoke down to him, and he couldn't ask his mum for help. She couldn't read, and she worked so hard at the mill that he just didn't want to bother her with it.

“So, he's passing?” she asked.

Clod immediately wanted to hug her. His mum may be upset with him later, but she was standing up for him now. The vilest teacher ever didn't stand a chance!

“He is,” Yugen said. “Barely.”

“I live on barely,” she said snappily.

“I've noticed,” he scoffed.

“It doesn't matter as long as he passes, right?” she said, ignoring the man's slight. “He could still be...chosen?”

“Is the boy here now?” Yugen asked.

“He's resting in the other room. I believe he's sleeping,” she said softly. “He was very upset when he came home.”

“There's another room? I thought that was a closet,” the hateful man muttered, his whiny voice crawling under the door like a freshly hatched nest of spiders. “It is unlikely that Clod could be placed into a school of magic. Amongst his age group, I have already identified those with great talent in Neuromancy, Theriomancy, Chaomancy, Theomancy...” Learned Yugen wasted a lot of air listing a boring variety of ‘-mancys’ other students could perform.

Clod lay on his side, squeezing the pile of clay that was far more important than anything his teacher had ever said. Despite her long hours at the mill, his mother always managed to bring him an apron-full of clay every few weeks. She would deliver it with an apology about not giving him better toys. But, he really didn't care. Clod loved the clay; it could become anything.

He'd made castles they could live in, tiny armies that would protect them, and monsters that could easily be squished. Clay wasn't just a toy; it was all of the toys!

"...and unfortunately, Clod shows less sign of having magic than he does intelligence," Yugen said, interrupting him from clay daydreams. "I doubt you remember from your own school days, but everyone on Yulth can do some sort of magic. The type of magic is typically passed down from the parents. What is your talent?"

"I have none," she muttered.

Clod had never thought of that before, but his mum had never done anything magical, other than make him feel better after a bad day. That certainly had to be a type of "mancy". It should be called "Mum-mancy". She had to be the best mumancer who'd ever existed.

"Pfft," Yugen said. "Everyone has a magical talent. Apparently, you are lacking the same confidence and conviction as your son. Any gift you had is probably so far buried by now that *I* can't even sense it."

"You can't sense any magic in Clod?" she asked, sounding worried.

"None, which is my concern," Yugen said. "I know what each of my students can do the minute they enter my classroom. My efforts are mostly spent teaching those with great potential how to become strong in their magic. I prepare them for a higher education in one of the great cities where they will learn mastery over their power. I also watch for those who are in danger of being tainted by the dark."

"What?" she snapped.

"It's probably nothing to be concerned about. Your son can't even cast the most remedial spells. Usually the weak ones are most tempted by the darkness because it can give them some of that power they lack, but like a disease it will twist a mind to evil." Yugen sighed. "I'm not too

concerned. So far, he has done nothing more than live up to his name.”

“Oh,” his mum said, a hint of defeat in her tone.

“It’s not just that,” Yugen said, now sounding elated. “He has no friends. The other children are frightened of him. Not only because he is so large, but because he is ugly. They look on him like he’s a monster.”

“He...he doesn’t have a single friend?” she asked.

“No,” Learned Yugen said with the empathy of a coroner.

There was despair in her shaky voice, and it was crushing. Clod tried masking a sob by sniffing deeply. The sound of his mum’s shame burned into his chest as he clawed at clay bits now smashed into the wooden board. He’d tried so hard to make friends, to play their games, to be nice. It just never went right. Still, more than anything, he wanted a friend. Grasping the mass of clay, he squeezed with all his strength. The clay was firm enough to resist his anger. He opened the palm of his hand and stared at the gray bit of earth.

“Is this why you’re here?” his mum asked, the sadness in her voice turned sour. “To insult our house? To insult my son? It sounds like you’ve already decided he isn’t fit for placement in any school of magic. Why should he even bother with your dumb school?”

“I’m here because of what happened on the schoolyard,” Yugen explained. “But I think it’s just as important you understand what I do. I ed-u-cate. I teach those little vessels of power how to use their gifts wisely, and steer them away from the taint of darkness. Despite my low expectations, your son still could have some small morsel of potential. Something even I don’t recognize. It’s my job to find that gift and cultivate it. There are not many Learn-ed because it is so rare to recognize and hold an understanding for all forms of magical divination. It is my job to teach those who will become heroes and leaders, weed out the dangerous, and find chores for the

few who are less fortunate.”

“Less fortunate?” she asked.

“Those, like yourself, and probably Clod, who lack the conviction to meet their potential,” he said with mock regret. “People who will help with the menial tasks of mill work or digging ditches.”

There was a long pause, and Clod could practically sense her glaring at Yugen through the closed door.

“Is that all?” she asked coldly.

“That is not all,” Learned Yugen continued. “Your oaf of a son is also a menace. Today, he broke young Ried’s arm.”

“Clod mentioned something about an accident,” his mum said. “That someone tripped him, and he fell on Ried.”

“And we’re all grateful that Ried wasn’t crushed,” he said. “That boy is a fount of potential. It would have been a great loss.”

“My son didn’t mention the broken arm. I’m sorry Ried was hurt,” she said. “Boys and girls get hurt playing. That’s what healers are for. Is Ried in trouble for teasing my son?”

“I don’t punish strength,” Yugen said sharply.

“Well, you certainly don’t inspire confidence,” his mum said, her voice louder with every word. “Didn’t you just tell me that’s what Clod needs?”

The argument that commenced became less important than the clay. Clod smiled as that familiar earthy smell, like a spring rain on dry dirt, filled the room. He worked the mass until it was warm, almost unnaturally so. Something felt different this time—different from all the other times. Normally, he would mold the clay into soldiers, and daydream them to chase Yugen away.

This time, the clay seemed to want a shape of its own. Despite his clay-smashing-tantrum, there was still enough to form a pillar. That was when he started to sculpt.

When his thick fingers became too tacky, Clod poked and carved the figure with small sticks he'd fashioned into tools. He frowned in concentration, sweat dripping from his nose at the effort. Frustration became tactile and poured into the tiny figure as his creation evolved into something more. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done, and the most rewarding.

The front door banged hard enough to shake the small cottage. His mum roared in anger, her shoes clacking loudly on the wooden floor as she stormed around. She muttered curses he'd never heard before, and slammed a pot on the stove. Her sobbing made him wince, and he knew he should go apologize, but he wasn't done.

"Dinner," she called after a long while.

He barely heard her, so close to being finished that nothing else mattered. An odd sense of giddiness overwhelmed him, like he was finally doing something right. Like he was discovering something new. His heart fluttered with a hint of confidence that he barely recognized.

The bedroom door opened with a wrenching sound as old wood complained loudly, scraping across the floor with every jolt of his mother's shoulder. He didn't look up when she came in, but felt her eyes watching him work the clay.

"Do you want to tell me more about what happened?" she asked gently.

Her pity struck him. Clod wanted to cry alone more than he wanted to talk about it. After a long wait, he realized she wasn't going away. She sat on the nearby bed, her thin arms crossed but her face and eyes patient. His mum's dark red hair curled about her shoulders. She was thin from too much work and not enough food, but showed no age in her porcelain features. Despite

her petite frame, she was strong enough to hold up the world, and far smarter than Learn-ed Yugen gave her credit for. She also had a temper that Clod would have to face if he didn't explain.

"I didn't mean to break his arm," he said through a scratchy throat. "We were playing tag. I think someone tripped me."

"Oh," she said, more concerned than angry. "He's much smaller than you..."

"Everyone is," he said, unable to hold back a tear. It dripped from his chin and landed in the clay. "That's why they make fun of me. They say mean things about my size, and my name, and my face. They tease me all the time for having no magic. Now they'll hate me even more."

"We've talked about being careful playing with the other children," she said gently. "It's hard, but you have to ignore them."

"I just wanted some friends, but they call me names, and push me, and trip me," he said through labored breaths. "It really was an accident, Mum."

"I know, baby," she said.

He crawled around his small creation and fell against his mother's legs. She patted his wiry, brown hair as he wept, letting him mumble on about mean kids and wanting a friend of his own. She rocked as best she could until his cries became the occasional catch, finally wiping away his tears with a kerchief before dabbing her own eyes.

"Show me what you're making today," she said, her voice more cheerful. "Is it a dragon, or an army?"

"No, I made a friend," Clod said with a sniff. He turned the board around so his mum could have a better view.

"Oooh," she said, leaning in to look closer. "This is wonderful. You've never made

anything so detailed.”

The clay figure was shaped, more or less, like a young girl. It stood no taller than his hand, with dark holes for eyes, and a mouth that looked like a shadowy cave. The figure had roughly hewn hair that fell below her shoulders, a round nose, and a dress that draped over her knees.

“What’s her name?” she asked.

“My name is Ada,” the clay girl squeaked in a tiny voice. Her dark eyes blinked as if she were waking abruptly, and she smiled at Clod.

“Oh my,” his mum said with a start, placing a hand on her chest.

It felt right, and Clod beamed at his mum.

She looked from him to the clay figure nervously. “Ada is a very pretty name,” his mother said. “Where did you come from?”

Ada raised an arm and aimed it at Clod, her hand so roughly carved she was unable to point. He nodded proudly, slightly out of breath. He’d rarely seen his mum surprised, or even nervous, but her eyes were wide and her hand shook. Despite his elation, he began to worry that he’d done something wrong.

“I see,” she said. “And why are you here?”

“To be Clod’s friend,” Ada said.

And, for some reason, this made his mother’s shoulders lower. Her breath caught, but she gathered her composure quickly.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here,” she said to Ada. “Clod needs a good friend.”

“I’ll be his best friend,” she said sincerely.

“How did I do this, Mum?” Clod asked, staring at Ada in wonder as she spun about.

“Yugen said I have no magic.”

“Yugen doesn’t know everything. But this needs to be our secret,” his mother said in her almost-angry voice. “Please, Clod. You can’t tell anyone.”

“I promise, Mum,” Clod said, not completely understanding.

“I’m going away already,” Ada said weakly, covering her face with a tiny arm. “But I don’t want to go. I need to play with Clod. This isn’t enough time.”

Ada struggled to say something, but her body became still.

“Ada?” Clod asked.

She didn’t move, and he gently rested a finger on her. His heart pounded, and he wanted to cry again. His only friend was already gone. Clod looked at his mother, but she merely shook her head. He wanted to bring her back, but didn’t know how. He pulled back his hand, and Ada collapsed into a heap of soft, gray ash.