

## Anything To Hear You (Say It One More Time)

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## Anything To Hear You (Say It One More Time)

by [mgrnn](#)

### Summary

Bdubs scoffed. “Etho, why in the world have you called me out of the blue just to ask about how my day went?”

There was a pause. Etho dropped his head to the ground again, too tired to hold it up anymore. He shifted his left arm so the communicator lay close to his head, allowing him to speak quieter. He didn’t feel like he had the strength to keep speaking so loudly.

His eyes were heavy, and all he wanted was to fall asleep right now, listening to Bdubs' voice until he couldn’t hear anything at all.

“Etho?”

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Prompt: Character A is about to die, and rather than try to get help, he calls Character B to talk to him one last time before he goes.

Except Bdubs won't let Etho die.

## Notes

Song Recommendations:

- Saturn (Sleeping at Last)
- This Night Is For You And Me (Danny Norbury)

This fic is set in Season 8, and perma-death is A Thing(tm). Etho also sometimes calls Bdubs 'Bubs', it's not a typo.

Edit: this isn't meant to be a ship fic, but can be interpreted that way if you'd like :) Enjoy

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# Chapter 1

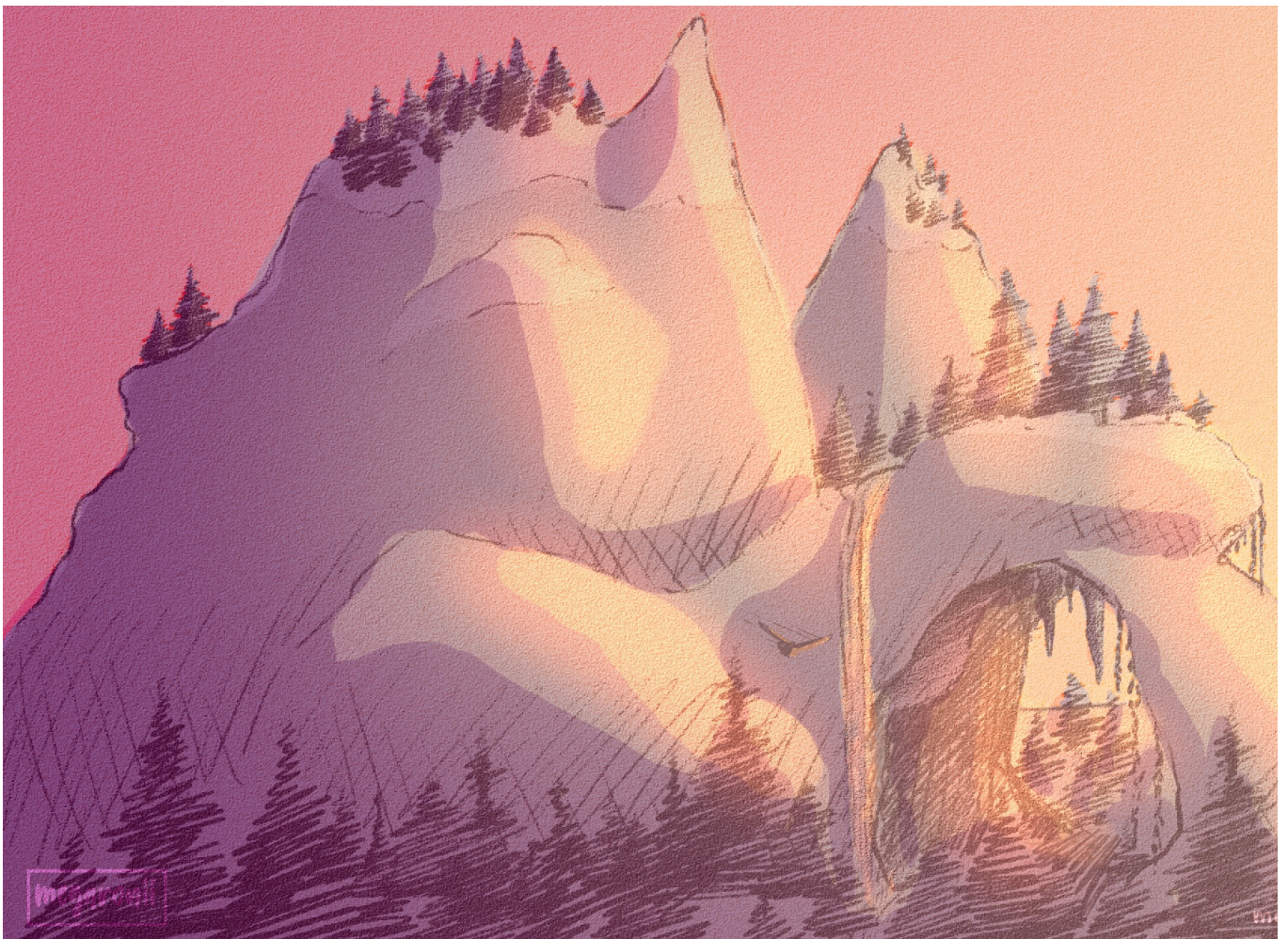
Wind whipped past Etho's face and combed through his hair as he soared through the sky. The ground rushed by far beneath him, and he watched as all kinds of structures and landmarks disappeared into the distance behind him.

The sun was close to setting, and Etho was determined to make it home before it got dark enough for mobs to spawn. He hadn't slept well in many nights, and if he was still flying by the time the sun set, there would be far too many phantoms for him to risk continuing. Etho didn't want to camp underground for *another* sleepless night.

Etho checked the communicator strapped to his left forearm as he flew. The light-up display showed him his armor and elytra durability, as well as his supply count in his inventory. His elytra was starting to run low, but he was sure he would make it home, so he swiped to the next page, unphased by the warning bubble that appeared underneath the elytra durability.

A few messages from the other hermits sat unread in his inbox, and while he didn't open them to take a look right now, he made a mental note to check them later that night, once he arrived home. He quickly skimmed through the hermit group chat to check for any important updates before turning off the screen and returning his attention to the landscape before him.

He was beginning to approach an enormous mountain, in which lay the mouth to a tremendous cave that carved straight through the base. Etho decided on a whim to angle himself down and swoop through the cave to take a look at the interior and admire the structure without losing much speed.



As he soared through the tremendous cavern, he admired the stalactites that hung from the roof, some more than five times his size. Moss and glowing lichen crawled along the walls of the cave, and vines covered in bunches of glowing berries were draped from the roof in a beautiful array of natural lights. Nestled in the rock were numerous clusters of ores, glimmering in the light of the sunset that poured in through the other opening of the cave, bathing the stalagmite-coated floor in hues of red and orange.

Etho huffed in awe as he took in the sight. It was beautiful and lively, and he raised his communicator to mark down the coordinates to come back and explore at a later date.

Before he could do so, however, he heard a hiss from above him, and his heart skipped a beat when he looked up and his gaze was met by dozens of pairs of bright green eyes.

As his eyes swept around the cave and caught sight of numerous nests built from vines, moss and carcasses of dead creatures, Etho began to realize what he had stumbled upon. This was a colony of phantoms, and he had just entered their home uninvited.

Etho angled himself slightly downwards, gaining speed and momentum, but a couple phantoms had already left their nests to chase him down. As he exited the other end of the cave, he expected them to leave him be, but one of the phantoms had followed him into the sunlight and he heard it screech as the sunlight began to burn the thin membrane of its wings. Etho knew that he didn't have the skill to shoot it with a bow mid-air, so he just continued soaring through the sky and hoped it would die from the exposure to the sunlight before it could reach him.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the case, and he soon heard a snarl from above him and began to roll to his left to dodge the incoming phantom. He wasn't quick enough, and he could feel a pull on the straps of his elytra as the burning talons of the phantom latched onto his artificial wings. He snapped his head to the side to look at the phantom out of the corner of his eye, and lifted his leg to kick at its chest. His boot made contact with exposed ribs, and he heard a crack beneath his foot as a rib snapped under the impact. The creature screeched, but its grip tightened around his elytra, and Etho heard the weak gear snap and tear in its grasp.

Etho could feel them both lose momentum, due to both the elytra being damaged and the phantom's wings burning up in the sunlight. They began tumbling down to the earth together, and Etho had no clue how long he had before they would crash into the ground. All he knew was that he didn't have long.

The phantom opened its jaw, and Etho's eyes widened as he saw rows and rows of sharp teeth rushing to meet his skin. He kicked out again, this time with both feet, and the beast screeched as his boots collided with its chin, causing it to bite into its own tongue. With a twist of his body, the phantom lost its grip on his elytra and they swapped positions. Now on top, Etho was finally able to catch a glimpse of how close the ground was as he wrestled with the monster.

His heart nearly stopped when he realized there wasn't any time to think. The ground was rushing up fast to meet them.

The only thing he had time to do was to bend his legs and kick off of the beast, hoping to lose some momentum before they both crashed into the pine trees below less than a second later.

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Etho's head was pounding.

He opened his eyes when he heard rustling leaves nearby. Dark clouds had rolled in, carrying with

them a strong wind that had started blowing through the branches of the trees, and the sky was noticeably darker than he last remembered it being. Etho could tell that a storm was starting to roll in, and the sun was going to set soon as well.

He needed to get up.

When he made an attempt to sit up, a burst of pain shot through his right thigh, spiking through the entire limb. The pain was strong enough that Etho's stomach twisted, and he did his best to suppress the sudden urge to vomit. With a groan, he dropped his head back to the ground with a soft thud and stared up at the clouds, waiting to catch his breath.

When his breathing was steady once more, he tilted his head to get a look around. At the angle he was at, it was hard to make sense of the world, but he could see his belongings scattered all around the surrounding area. Food, rockets, tools and the like were strewn across the ground around him, and not five feet from him was the body of the phantom he had been fighting when they had hit the ground.

And it was still breathing.

Etho's breath hitched as he saw its back shallowly rise and fall, and when he looked to see if its eyes were open, he found bright green eyes staring back at him. Etho froze.

The phantom began to shift its body, and Etho hurriedly scanned for anything in arm's reach. On the other side of his body, opposite the phantom, his fingers met his bow, and with his other hand, he reached for the quiver that usually hangs on his hip.

The quiver was empty, and Etho realized that it didn't matter anyway, because the bowstring on his weapon had snapped in the fall.

The beast shuffled up and lunged at him, and he screamed when the jostling from the creature unleashed a wave of unbearable pain in his leg.

He reached his hands up to catch on the phantom's throat as it dove for his neck, and he thrust its body away and reached again for the damaged bow. He grabbed the snapped bowstring with both hands and twisted his wrists, gripping the string so that the ends were wound once around his palms, and held on tight to the string. When the beast dove for him again, Etho crossed his arms in front of his chest, letting the phantom's neck catch on the cord.

And then he un-crossed his arms, wrapping the string around its neck, and pulled tight.

The beast screeched and wrestled in his grip, but its legs must have been broken, because when it tried to scratch him, its movements were too weak to do any damage to Etho. The webbing in its wings had burned in the sun and melted away, leaving useless limbs that didn't have the reach needed to defend itself. He tugged harder on the string, cutting off the blood flow through the arteries in its neck, and after what felt like an eternity of struggling, the phantom dropped limp in Etho's grip. He continued to hold the string tight for even longer for good measure, and it was only when his arms started to tremble and his knuckles were white from the strength it took to grip the string that he finally let go with one hand, letting the dead phantom topple to the ground beside him.

Etho panted as he dropped the bow to the ground, but the air he was getting wasn't *enough*. He slipped a finger under the top of his mask and pulled, ripping the fabric away from his face so he could take deep, gasping breaths. He tossed the mask away and lifted his head up again, screaming as the movement unleashed another torrent of pain in his leg. Etho managed to get his arms

underneath him, and leaned back, propping himself up on his elbows. The ground was soft, and when the searing pain finally passed and Etho managed to crack his eyes open, he saw that the earth was coated in moss and pine needles, giving him a soft cushion to rest his elbows on. It was a little itchy against his skin, but that was the least of his concerns right now.

Because the sight he saw before him made him want to hurl, and he felt like he was dreaming as he stared down at his leg.

*This can't be real.*

The fabric of his pant legs was torn to shreds, presumably by the branches that he had tumbled through on his way to the ground during his battle with the phantom. Through those tears in the fabric, Etho could see his own flesh, mangled and maimed, with blood seeping out of the dozens of small gashes that were scattered along his legs. The angle of his legs wasn't right, and Etho knew full well that they were broken.

And the worst of it all was the sight of a sharp, thick, dead branch, which had landed on his right leg and impaled his thigh. The weight of the wood was crushing him, and Etho was sure that he wouldn't be able to lift it from the angle he was stuck at.

But, against his better judgement, Etho acted on impulse.

Etho took a deep breath in through his nose, grit his teeth, and gingerly reached his hand down. He wrapped his fingers around the thickest part of the branch and flexed them once, twice, three times in anticipation. And finally, he pulled.

That was a mistake.

Pain immediately erupted in his thigh, and Etho let out a scream so loud it made his throat burn. He let go of the wood, leaving it lodged in his leg. It had barely even moved.

The pain was unlike anything he had ever experienced before. His vision darkened around the edges, threatening to take him unconscious yet again. He dug his hands into the ground, grasping at the dirt and sobbing until, after what felt like *hours* but was really nothing more than a mere two minutes, the pain finally weakened into something that became somewhat bearable.

Etho scanned the items strewn across the ground around him. He needed to stop the bleeding as soon as possible, and examined the area in search of bandages, potions, or anything of the sort. His eyes landed on a broken potion bottle, the contents of which had long since escaped into the dirt by now. Etho huffed.

Something glimmered in the corner of his eye, and he turned his head to look. His netherite axe lay in the grass by his tattered bag, just less than ten feet away. His grip on the mossy ground loosened, and he looked down at the heavy branch lodged in his leg.

Then he looked back at the axe.

Not far from the axe lay his pop-up Enderchest, and Etho knew he would have regeneration potions in there. He always had a couple extra potions in his Enderchest. So if he could manage to make it to his axe, he had a shot at making it home alive.

So Etho braced himself, and counted down from three...

Two...

One.

...

He couldn't move.

It wasn't that he was paralyzed. He was too *terrified* to move an inch, even if the reward may be salvation. His heart caught in his throat and the mere *thought* of moving and setting off the pain nearly sent him into a panic.

More tears welled up in his eyes and dripped down his cheeks. Etho clenched his jaw and looked away from the axe, and his head felt heavy, so he let his back drop down to the mossy ground underneath him. He laid his head back and stared up at the sky as the wind began to pick up.

It wouldn't be long until the rain came in, and shortly after, the sun would set as well. Etho's heart ached, knowing that there was no way he'd be able to defend himself once the mobs started coming out.

He had barely survived a single phantom.

He let his tears stream down the sides of his face, dragging across his temples and getting lost in his white hair. Etho raised an arm up to wipe away some tears with the back of his hand, and was startled by a shard of glass falling out of the screen of his communicator, landing on his cheek.

The device beeped at him, indicating that it was beginning to overheat. The impact must have damaged more than just the screen. He tapped the screen with his other hand once.

It didn't register the touch.

Etho tapped again. Still no response.

When he tapped a third time, he poked it hard, and the screen finally changed. The right side of the screen, the only side that worked at all, flashed in all sorts of different colors, and Etho could barely make out a few of the buttons. He tapped on where he knew his contacts list was, and when he realized it was impossible to see whose name he was tapping on in his contacts list, he picked a random one and hit the call button.

Seconds seemed to drag on into minutes as he waited for the other person to pick up. One of the speakers in his communicator crackled as the call buzzed, and the other speaker was broken altogether. Etho hoped with all his heart that the microphone was working.

He heard a click and gasped.

“Hello, this is Grian! Sorry-”

“Grian!” Etho yelled. His heart was racing. “Grian, listen-”

“-I’m not available at the moment.”

Etho’s heart nearly stopped.

“If you’re hearing this message, I’m either busy building or sleeping! Please leave a message at the beep, and I’ll get back as soon as I can. Thank you!”

*Beep.*

Etho jabbed his finger against the screen and scrolled, then hit another call button.

The buzzer rang six times, and yet again he was met with a pre-recorded voice, this time of Impulse, followed by a beep. He must be building, too.

His left forearm was getting warm, and the device beeped at him again.

Etho groaned and hung up. His head was full of cotton and he could barely keep his train of thought.

*Call people. Tell them where I am.*

*They need to know where I am.*

*Call-*

*Tell them-*

*Where...*

Etho paused, his finger hovering over another call button. Instead of calling another hermit, he pressed the back button to go to the home screen.

Coordinates were always displayed on the left side of the screen.

The left side of his screen was shattered and black. Even if Etho managed to get someone to answer his calls, he had no way to tell them where he was.

Etho’s hand began to tremble.

He navigated back to his contacts list and jabbed another call button. His chin was trembling and he was trying his best to stay level-headed.

The speakers crackled as the line buzzed, and after what seemed like hours, there was another click, and *another pre-recorded voice.*

He didn’t stay long enough to recognize whose voice it was. Etho simply exited and poked another name.

This one rang three times before Etho impatiently hung up and tried another contact. The light from the screen was blurring behind his tears.



“Please,” Etho pleaded. “Please, someone *answer*.”

He tapped the call button, and it rang once.

Twice.

Etho was about to poke the screen again when he heard a click.

“Etho!”

The voice caught him off guard, and when he recognized who it was, he blinked. “Bdubs?”

“The one and only,” he heard Bdubs boast. The speakers crackled so much that it was difficult to tell apart the words. Etho had to listen closely to understand what he said. “What can I do for you on this fine evening?”

Etho huffed. “Well that’s a little odd, I’d expect you to be getting in bed already.”

“The sun’s still up, Etho!” Bdubs’ voice shouted incredulously. “I know that I go to sleep a bit early compared to everyone else, but never *this* early!”

And despite the tears streaming down the sides of his face, Etho laughed. And he heard Bdubs laugh, too.

And it felt so good to laugh again, in spite of everything he was going through right now.

Maybe it would be easier to stay like this.

Maybe he didn’t want to upset his friend.

“Well, the sun is gonna set soon, ya know,” Etho retorted. “You should start getting into your jammies.”

“HEY!” The exclamation clipped over the damaged speakers, and Etho smiled. “You SHUT YOUR MOUTH, Etho!”

Maybe he just wanted to feel comforted right now.

“Alright, alright, fine.” Etho coughed, and bit his lip to hold back a cry of pain when the cough jostled his leg. He raised his head to look down, and could see blood soaking his pant leg. Etho grimaced.

“Do you need something or not? If you called just to berate me over my sleep schedule, I’ll hang up right now!”

Etho’s communicator beeped again, and with the screen so broken, Etho wasn’t able to see how much time he had left.

*Better make that time count*, Etho thought.

He smiled.

“How was your day, Bubs?”

“Huh?”

“Tell me about your day,” Etho said, and he could nearly *hear* the confusion woven into the silence that followed.

“Well...” Bdubs scoffed. “Etho, why in the world have you called me out of the blue just to ask about how my *day* went?”

Etho huffed and rolled his eyes. “You ask that like I don’t do this that often. I call you often just to ask how your day was.”

There was a pause. Etho dropped his head to the ground again, too tired to hold it up anymore. He shifted his left arm so the communicator lay close to his head, allowing him to speak quieter. He didn’t feel like he had the strength to keep speaking so loudly.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right.” He heard Bdubs laugh. The audio cut out part way through, but Etho had heard his laughter so many times before. The speakers giving out didn’t matter.

“Well, my day was pretty great, actually,” Bdubs started, and he began to describe a prank that he, Keralis and Tango have been planning out against the members of the Boatem village. Etho turned his head and stared at the flashing screen in peaceful silence, tears silently dragging down his face.

The flashing light was starting to give him a headache.

Or maybe that was the blood loss.

He reached over with his right hand and turned off the display. The call continued, but the screen was dark, and hopefully that would help with the headache and prolong what was left of the device’s short lifespan.

“-and today I woke up with a big ol’ gift box sitting outside near the docks, so I guess that means we won!” Bdubs guffawed. “Imagine that! Tango is brilliant, isn’t he?! Winning a prank war against those rascals is nearly impossible!”

“That sounds incredible, Bubs.” Etho chuckled. His eyes were heavy, and all he wanted was to fall asleep right now, listening to Bdubs ramble on and on about his day until he couldn’t hear anything at all.

He heard a snicker on the other end. “It was, it really was.”

Silence followed.

When the speakers remained quiet, Etho’s eyes snapped open and he raised his head. When did he close them in the first place? How long were they even closed?

“Bdubs?” His voice carried an edge of panic.

“I’m here, Etho,” he heard, and Etho could feel the tension in his shoulders relax. “Were you dozing off? Geez, man, sounds like I’m not the one here who needs an early bedtime.”

“Oh, wh’ever,” Etho huffed. “I’ll go to sleep in a bit. I jus’ wanna talk to ya more.” His speech was starting to slur a little, and he couldn’t find it in himself to care.

“Oh, Etho,” Bdubs sighed. Etho chuckled, and his head was spinning, so he lowered it to the ground again, finding comfort in the soft moss pressed against his cheek.

Despite the light up display of his communicator being turned off, Etho could still feel the heat

against his forearm steadily rising. The warmth was comforting as well, but he knew that it was just an indication of what little time he had left.

Etho's head was full of cotton, and it took him a moment to think of something else to talk about. "Wh'bout your shops?" Etho asked. "Those goin' well for ya?"

He just wanted Bdubs to keep talking.

Etho just wanted to listen to his voice.

"Oh, yeah, they're going alright. I just built a new one today, actually," and Etho let out a breath of air he didn't know he had been holding once Bdubs started rambling again.

His adrenaline had finally started wearing off, and the pain was starting to set in. It was excruciating; the dull aching in his thigh had blossomed into a searing pain that shot straight through his entire leg, and up into his torso. Both of his legs and his arms were starting to feel like they were on *fire*, the scratches and scrapes littered all over his skin making themselves known now that the adrenaline rush was fading away.

His head was spinning, and the sunset was blinding, and the rain was beginning to come down, so he clamped his eyes shut and focused on Bdubs' voice.

"...and I had to spend half the day restocking. *So much restocking*, Etho!"

Etho didn't reply, and there was a moment of silence.

"Etho?"

He groaned. "M'yeah, Bubs?"

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"M'yeah, bud, jus' tired, y'know?"

Another pause. Etho's eyes were still squeezed shut, and his sense of direction was lost. It felt like he was spinning, like he was still, like he was stranded in a frozen wasteland and like he was tucked into bed, with a warm hand pressed against his cheek. He imagined that hand to be Iskall's, trying to wake him up, and distantly, he wondered if he was just dreaming.

Maybe he'd wake up to sunlight pouring in through the window, and he could call Bdubs to tell him about what a weird, horrible nightmare this had been.

"Where are you right now?"

The voice snapped him out of his daydreams. His eyes opened to rain beginning to pour down around him, and his stomach twisted yet again, threatening him to spill whatever contents may still be within.

It took all of Etho's focus to keep himself from throwing up. He groaned and clamped his eyes shut again, trying his best to ignore the burning pain of rain seeping into his wounds.

"Etho?"

His heart was pounding.

"Etho, give me your coordinates. I'm getting my tools."

“Don’t.”

Bdubs tried to argue, but Etho interrupted him.

“Please, jus’ talk t’me. ‘M sorry, I- I jus’ wanna hear your voice. ‘M so tired, that’s all I want, promise.”

There was no reply.

“Bubs?”

He slowly reached over, his eyes opening slightly to watch as he poked at the screen. It didn’t react.

He poked it harder. When the screen continued to remain dark, he jammed his finger on the screen. Raindrops had collected on the surface of the shattered screen, and his finger slipped, causing it to slide over to the left side and slice his finger open on a shard of the glass. Etho winced as the glass pricked his skin and drew blood from his fingertip.

His communicator had overheated and shut down.

Etho dropped his hand to the grass, letting the blood pooling on the surface of the skin seep into the moss beneath his hand. His eyelids drifted shut again, and he began to sob. If he could breathe anything more than short, shallow breaths, he would scream his frustrations out.

Rather than scream, Etho continued to quietly sob.

Looked like he was dying alone after all.

## Chapter 2

Bdubs was sprawled in bed, communicator resting on the blanket beside him, when he began to notice something different about Etho. Maybe it was the slur in his speech, or the wobble in his voice, but Bdubs could tell that something was off, even through the distortion of the audio. Of course the distortion confused him at first, but Bdubs assumed that that was a result of the storm rolling through the area at the moment. It wasn't until he started hearing rain on Etho's end, a little too loud for him to be inside and safe, that Bdubs started getting suspicious.

“Etho?”

The audio that replied was crackly, broken up by the sound of rain. Bdubs' brow furrowed, and to make it even worse, his anxiety spiked when he heard what sounded like a pained groan. “M'yeah, Bubs?”

Bdubs sat up in his bed, eyes trained on his rack of tools across the room. He stared at his axe, and the reflection on the diamond blade stared right back at him. “Are you sure you're alright?” he asked.

“M'yeah- jus'-”

The audio was getting worse. Bdubs immediately stood up, grabbing the bright green sweater off of the headboard of his bed.

“Where are you right now?”

There was a pause, and as Bdubs began putting on his elytra, he glanced back at his communicator, laying on the bed.

Seconds felt like minutes, felt like hours, and Etho still wasn't answering. Bdubs clenched his jaw, and clipped the straps, then tightened them with one swift tug on the cords.

“Etho?”

His heart was pounding.

“Etho, give me your coordinates,” he demanded, and grabbed his sword. “I'm getting my tools-”

Etho finally replied. One short, simple *don't*.

“Etho, I don't care what you say!” Bdubs strapped the weapon to his hip and walked over to his bed. “I need your coordinates, I have to make sure you're okay. I'm not arguing with you over this, send them to me right now.”

There was no answer. Bdubs let out a frustrated grunt.

“Etho, come on. Spit it out, where are you?”

When he still didn't receive an answer, Bdubs frowned and picked up the device laying on his bed. The call had ended, and his blood ran cold almost immediately.

Bdubs poked at the screen and tried to call Etho back.

The wind outside was howling, and Bdubs' heart was pounding in his ears.

The call didn't get a chance to ring. Instead, it went straight to Etho's voicemail.

Bdubs hung up and called again in disbelief. Sure enough, the man is met with the same outcome as before, and he tosses the device on the bed and runs both of his palms up his face, over his eyes, and into his hair.

He grips his hair and pulls at it, spinning around on his heel to begin pacing around his room.

Etho wouldn't just turn off his communicator like that. He was a bit cold, but he would never purposefully do something like this to a friend, knowing it would scare them.

And Etho knew how much of a nervous wreck Bdubs was.

Bdubs took a deep breath in through his nose, and considered that maybe, just maybe, Etho was alright. Maybe this was all a misunderstanding, he could go to bed without an issue, and they'd bicker when he got back tomorrow then laugh it all off in a week.

But then, as he exhaled through his mouth, his heart ached. He knew that no matter what he did, he wouldn't be able to sleep if he knew that there was a possibility that Etho was in trouble and needed his help. He needed to go find him, and if Etho ended up getting upset with him, then so be it.

All that mattered to Bdubs was that he was okay.

So he dropped his hands to his sides and walked back to his bed, picking up the device and poking at the screen. He scrolled through his contacts list until he found a familiar name, and hit the call button.

It buzzed once before Bdubs heard someone answer.

"Hallo?" Bdubs sighed in relief.

"Hello, Iskall! Do you think you could do me a favor?" he asked, and sat down on his bed. He leaned forward, propping himself up with his elbow against his thigh, and his leg bounced with anticipation.

"Of course, what do you need?"

"Are you home? I need to know if Etho is there."

"Yeah, I'm here, but I'm pretty sure Etho is still out."

"Can you look around the house for me and double check, just to be sure?"

"Yeah, of course," Iskall replied, and Bdubs knew what was coming next. "Is there a reason for all of this?"

"I'll explain later. I need you to be quick, and call me back immediately if you find him, or if you can't, okay?"

"Yeah, sure, talk to you then," Iskall replies, and Bdubs quickly hangs up. He hung his head low and combed his fingers through his hair yet again, sighing.

And then he scrolled through his contacts list again, all the way to the bottom, and tapped on the name third from the bottom of his screen.

Luckily, Xisuma was quick to answer.

“Xisuma, I need your help,” Bdubs said. He heard wind howl as it whipped past his window again, and his leg bounced more.

He would probably have to fly in that wind soon, and Bdubs was not looking forward to that ride.

“What can I do for you?” Xisuma asked, and Bdubs huffed.

“You’re the server admin, so you have access to other people’s coordinates, right?” he asked, and he heard Xisuma hum.

“I do,” he warily answered. “What’s all this about?”

“I need you to check Etho’s coordinates.” When Xisuma didn’t reply right away, Bdubs winced. “I know, it’s a weird request, just... Please?”

“Bdubs, what’s the reason for this?”

Bdubs sighed. “I think Etho’s in trouble. He called me and we talked for a bit, but I didn’t realize something was wrong ‘til last minute.” His voice was trembling, and he removed his chin from his hand, running his palm up to his face and covering his eyes in shame. “I asked him where he was, but he hung up before I could get his coordinates. Please, help me out here.”

“On it,” came the reply, and Bdubs waited as Xisuma tapped away on his screen. His leg was still bouncing, and he couldn’t contain the anxiety, so he stood up and continued to pace around his room while he waited on an update.

Every moment they wasted trying to figure stuff out was another moment Etho might be out there, lost or in danger.

And the moon, three times its normal size, was already beginning to peek over the horizon.

“There’s nothing coming back when I ping his device,” Xisuma answered, and Bdubs’ heart sank.

“You mean you can’t get them at all?” Bdubs froze in place. “Xisuma-”

“Wait, Bdubs, don’t panic on me.” He heard Xisuma groan. “I can look up his last known coordinates, but that’ll take some digging in the server logs. Shouldn’t take long. I’ll go as fast as I can.”

“Please, *please* be quick,” Bdubs pleaded, and his communicator beeped. He looked at the screen and saw an incoming call from Iskall. “As soon as you get that info, come to my house. Let me know when you’re on your way, message me.”

He heard some shuffling on the other end of the call. “Got it. Should be done in a few minutes, I’ll start heading out right now.”

“Perfect. Fly safe,” Bdubs said, glancing up at the windows. Leaves blew by the glass pane. “Iskall will probably be showing up around the same time. I’ll see you then.”

He hung up and answered Iskall’s call, setting the communicator down on his bedside table. Bdubs then proceeded to push up the left sleeve of his sweater and wrapped the straps around his arm.

“Talk to me Iskall, did you manage to find him?”

“No, he’s nowhere here, and Grian just called me asking about him, too.” Iskall sounded stressed.

“Bdubs, what is going on?”

“Something’s wrong with him, can you come over? Xisuma and I are gonna go out looking for him.” Bdubs bent down and bit the end of the strap, tugging it tight and fumbling with the buckle to secure the device to his forearm. He then did the same with the next strap as Iskall replied.

“Xisuma’s helping, too? Oh geez, sure, I’m on my way.” Iskall cleared their throat. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Good, fly fast, come in as soon as you get here. We’re going to leave to look for him as a group so we don’t get lost.”

“Okay.”

Bdubs hung up just in time to get a notification from Xisuma. The message was a set of coordinates, the location of which was somewhat far from where any of the hermits lived.

Bdubs sighed.

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“Etho should be nearby,” Xisuma said. “He’s gotta be somewhere in this forest, so let’s just land here and search for him.”

“Alright,” Bdubs said, and he angled down to dive. His feet hit the ground and he skidded to a stop in the mud. Iskall landed beside him, and Xisuma was the last to arrive, landing a few meters ahead of Bdubs.

“Does anyone have a lantern?” Xisuma asked. “The rain is too heavy for a torch right now. The storm should pass soon.”

Bdubs glanced through his inventory, but Iskall was quicker, and pulled out a lantern, handing it to Xisuma. “I only have one,” Iskall told him. “I have some shroomlights to light up the area when we find him if need be, but they won’t work very well for searching for him. The light is pretty dim.”

“Damn.”

The three hermits snuck through the forest. The moon slowly rose above them, illuminating the forest in a dim glow.

Iskall heard a groan from nearby, and he stopped, reaching a hand out to grab Xisuma’s sleeve. “Put the lantern out,” Iskall whispered, but Xisuma shook his head.

“It’s still too early in the night for mobs,” Xisuma told him. “We should still have some time.”

“Then that couldn’t have been a zombie,” Bdubs mumbled, and he hurried ahead toward where the noise had come from. Iskall and Xisuma picked up their pace, matching Bdubs’ as he jogged through the trees.

“It sounded close by,” Xisuma said, and Iskall stopped to look around. “He can’t be far.”

Bdubs scanned the area, and his eyes landed on a netherite axe, glimmering in the moonlight.

“Guys, come look,” he said, and beckoned the other two hermits over. He approached the weapon, and began to notice other items scattered around it. Things like broken potion bottles, food, and an



Enderchest lay nearby.

And then, out of the corner of his eye, Bdubs spotted a body. Its lower half was covered in a thin blanket, and Bdubs' eyes landed on a white tuft of hair poking out of the tall grass, coated in bits of moss and mud, and completely drenched by the rain.

“Etho?!”

He was answered by another groan.

Bdubs burst out from the trees and made a beeline for the body on the ground. As he approached, he skidded to a stop—nearly slipping in a puddle of mud in doing so—and kneeled down on Etho's left side. Xisuma was quick to follow, kneeling down on his opposite side. Iskall, rather than sit down with the two of them, unsheathed their sword and took to being the lookout for the group, eyes scanning the treeline for any sign of undead creatures or hostile monsters trying to sneak up on them. While they patrolled the area, they pulled out and placed down spare shroomlights from their inventory as makeshift lighting, but the dim light emanating from the blocks wouldn't be enough to ward off any monsters.

Bdubs, without thinking twice, reached down for Etho's shoulders and squeezed them. “Etho, what were you thinking?!” he exclaimed, jostling his shoulders. “How could-”

He was cut off by Etho's pained screams, and Xisuma reached over and swatted his hands off of Etho. Bdubs froze, hands suspended midair, and stopped breathing as he watched Etho sob in pain. Xisuma took no time to start examining him for injuries, and he gingerly lifted the blanket that was draped haphazardly across Etho's leg.

“Oh, Etho,” Xisuma murmured as he stared down at Etho's legs. Bdubs looked as well, and his stomach lurched.

His right knee was twisted at an awful angle, the skin surrounding the joint swollen and heavily discolored. Blood streamed from cuts and scrapes that were scattered along his legs, smearing across his skin and dripping onto the grass below him. A large tree branch had impaled his thigh, stabbing deep into the flesh, and to top it all off, dozens of splinters of wood were embedded in the skin around the wound. Bdubs resisted the urge to gag at the gruesome sight.

“Oh my goodness, how could this happen,” Bdubs could distantly hear Xisuma mutter. Bdubs was doing his best to avoid throwing up at the sight, and turned his gaze away, holding a hand up to his face to cover his nose and mouth. “Iskall, I need that Enderchest over here!”

“On it!” Iskall called out, and walked over to the Enderchest Etho must have dropped when he fell. They grabbed one side of it and dragged it over to Xisuma, sucking in a breath when they caught sight of their roommate's injuries. They reached over and gave Bdubs' hair a quick pat before turning and continuing to patrol the clearing.

Xisuma threw the lid of the chest back and began digging through for supplies. He pulled out everything he might need—potions, stitches, bandages, disinfectant—and handed a health potion to Bdubs, instructing him to make Etho drink it while he inspected his wounds.

Bdubs took the potion in one hand, and with his other, he gripped Etho's hand.

His eyes welled up with tears when he heard Etho speak, and he turned to look at him.

“M's'rry, Bubs,” he murmured, feebly squeezing his hand. Bdubs' chest tightened when he heard how weak Etho's voice was. “I jus... I couldn...”

The slurred words didn't register in Bdubs' mind. The only thing he was paying attention to was Etho's face, blurred through his tears.

His mask was gone. Etho never let anyone see his face.

This was the first time Bdubs had ever seen it, and it was because he had nearly died.

He had almost died, and Bdubs could have helped, but he had been too stupid to notice that something was wrong.

A sob escaped him, and he doubled over, dropping his forehead against Etho's chest.

Etho squeezed his hand again, and Bdubs let out another sob.

A moment passed, and Bdubs felt Xisuma's fingers come into contact with the hand holding the potion bottle. Bdubs' grasp tightened as he sat back up, and he let go of Etho's hand to wipe away some of his tears. "No, I-" He gulped. "I can do it, X, I promise."

At Xisuma's nod, Bdubs gripped the cork in the neck of the bottle and pulled. The bottle, covered in droplets of rain water, nearly slipped in his grip, but the cork came out with a *pop* after a second. He dropped the cork, lowering his right hand to gingerly reach underneath Etho's neck and tilt his head up. "Etho," he murmured, and Etho grunted. "You need to drink this, okay? It'll help you feel better." Met with another grunt, Bdubs brought the bottle to his lips and tipped it just slightly, letting the glowing liquid pour into his mouth slowly enough for him to gulp it down.

Once the potion bottle was empty, Etho groaned. Xisuma took the empty bottle from Bdubs' hand, leaving him to grasp Etho's hand once again. "We're going to get you out of here, Etho. You're gonna be okay. I promise." Whether he was saying it more for himself or for Etho, Bdubs couldn't tell.

Then Etho smiled.

It was dark, but the dim light provided by the abnormally large moon, as well as the shroomlights scattered around the clearing, lit up his face just enough for Bdubs to make out a flash of white teeth, and he felt Etho's head shift as he chuckled.

It felt wrong to see him smile, but it was so, so much better than seeing him dead.

"Yeah, Bubs," Etho croaked out. "Y'will, I know."

And then Etho *screamed*. Bdubs' jumped when his hand was crushed in his vice-like grip, and he looked up to see Xisuma kneeling over Etho's injury, his knee pinning Etho's leg in place while he carefully lifted the branch up and out of his leg.

Bdubs clamped his eyes shut and flinched, turning away from the sight. He gripped the back of Etho's neck. "You're gonna be okay, you're gonna be okay," he repeated in a panic, reassuring himself as much as Etho.

"Blazes, Etho, this is terrible," Xisuma told him as he set the bloody branch down next to him. "You're lucky the branch didn't hit any of your arteries." Bdubs heard a *pop* as Xisuma opened a new potion and slowly poured it into the wound, covering it with a hand to prevent any rain from landing in his wound and mixing with the potion.

The potion began to do its work, lighting up the skin surrounding the injury in a faint pink glow as it slowly healed shut from the inside out. Bdubs watched as Etho squirmed and grimaced, groaning

as his skin stitched itself back together. His leg jerked against Xisuma's knee, and the sudden movement unleashed another blood-curdling scream, making Xisuma flinch and remove the pressure against Etho's leg. Bdubs could feel tears stream down his cheeks, mixing with the raindrops on his skin.

"Please," Bdubs pleaded. He looked up at Xisuma, and his voice cracked. "Please, X, don't let him die."

"Bdubs," Xisuma said, and he reached over to grip the sleeve of Bdubs' sweater. "I swear to the Void and back that I will do everything in my power to keep him alive. You have my word."

Bdubs choked out another sob as soon as Xisuma's grip on his sleeve was released. He looked down at Etho to find his face contorted in pain, eyes squeezed shut and jaw clenched. Bdubs flexed the fingers holding the back of Etho's neck, and leaned down again, resting his forehead against Etho's shoulder.

Etho squeezed his hand again, and Bdubs' chest tightened. Through the sound of the rain falling around them, Bdubs could make out the clinking of more potion bottles and wrappers tearing open as Xisuma worked on Etho's leg.

When Bdubs raised his head again, he saw Xisuma opening a new bottle and putting it to Etho's lips. "This is a turtle master potion," he told Etho. "Your knee is dislocated, so this should help alleviate the pain while I immobilise and relocate it."

"If it helps with the pain, why couldn't you give him one earlier?" Bdubs asked, brows furrowed and voice tinged with anger. Xisuma tipped the bottle up slightly, letting Etho drink it.

"Because if he got that before he drank the health potion, it would have sapped all of his energy," Xisuma explained in a dead-pan voice. He pulled away the empty bottle and dropped it on the ground next to him. "The effects of this one don't last long, either, and I only had one, so I needed to save it for this. I know what I'm doing, Bdubs, I promise."

Bdubs nodded silently, looking down at the ground. He squeezed Etho's hand, and Etho lightly squeezed back. Distantly, Bdubs noticed that the rain was beginning to finally let up.

"BDUBS! DUCK!" he heard Iskall shout from his right.

Bdubs, in a panic, dropped his head just in time to hear an arrow whizz by, and his heart leapt when he heard a zombie snarl to his left, an arrow embedding itself into its skin. Bdubs dropped Etho's head to the ground, careful to avoid jostling him around much, then stood and unsheathed his sword.

"Blazes, looks like it's late enough for mobs to come out," Xisuma said as he reached into the Enderchest for more supplies. Bdubs slashed at the zombie, quickly killing it. "Phantoms won't be too far behind. What do we do?"

Bdubs looked over at the corpse of the phantom beside Etho, and he shuddered.

There was no way the three of them could carry Etho and get back home without getting attacked, and the entire trip home would be a horrible, excruciating experience for Etho anyway.

Etho was in no condition to walk, let alone fly. That didn't matter anyway, judging by the mangled remains of the elytra that lay nearby, straps torn and one whole wing completely missing from the device.

Bdubs heard a hiss behind him, and spun on his heel, slashing his sword out at the spider that was crawling toward him. He stabbed it through the body, then lifted a foot to kick it off of the blade and knock the corpse away, closer to the treeline.

He heard Iskall slash at a zombie. “He has an Enderporter at our home that can be triggered,” they said. “He almost always has a pearl in it, there’s a chance he put one in before he left for his trip. But it’ll hurt him to get teleported back.”

“I can’t give him any more potions,” Xisuma said. “It’ll wear him out too much. If I give him any more, we risk him dying. Is there any other way to get him back?”

Iskall’s sword came down on the zombie, decapitating the monster. “I think it’s our only hope, X.”

Bdubs looked back at them. “Who’s flying back, then?”

The other two stared back.

“I need to stay to heal Etho as much as I can beforehand,” Xisuma said, looking over at Iskall.

Iskall spun around and slashed at another zombie, killing it in one attack. “More mobs will be showing up soon,” Iskall said, “and I don’t doubt phantoms are gonna appear and start swooping down to attack Etho. We all need to stay here. Call someone and get them to trigger it, Bdubs.”

“On it,” Bdubs answered, and he sheathed his sword and scrolled through the contacts on his communicator.

Tango should be up right now. He often stayed up late working on new redstone projects, and surely he would answer Bdubs’ call.

Bdubs tapped on his name and hit the call button.

It buzzed once. Twice. Thrice. Bdubs’ body was buzzing with anticipation. He could hear Iskall panting for breath, and Xisuma mumbling to Etho to soothe his sobs while he worked.

Bdubs heard a click.

“What’s up, Tango Tek here-”

“Tango! Quick, I-”

“If you’re hearing this, I’m probably in bed or working on redstone, and am unavailable.”

Bdubs jabbed at his screen and looked over his shoulder. “Tango didn’t answer!”

“Call somebody else, then!” Iskall shouted, kicking a skeleton and raising their shield to block the arrow it shot at them.

Bdubs scrolled through his contacts list. They were running out of time fast, and Bdubs needed someone who was quick, and guaranteed to still be awake. He recalled Iskall telling him that Grian had called, asking about Etho. Grian had wings and was an excellent flier. Surely he could get to Etho’s base quickly.

He scrolled up and hit the call button, and surprisingly enough, it only took one ring before Grian picked up.

“Grian!” Bdubs shouted. “Grian, I need you to do something, quick.”

“Is this about Etho?” Grian asked, and Bdubs could make out the panicked tone in his voice. “Is he okay? He called me earlier but I couldn’t answer, and then Iskall wouldn’t tell me what was going on, and-”

“Yes, no time to explain!” Bdubs exclaimed, interrupting him. “I need you to fly to Etho’s base as fast as you can and trigger his Enderporter to teleport him back home.”

“Okay, okay, I’m grabbing some stuff, I’ll be on my way soon,” Grian said. Bdubs’ heart rate sped up when he heard Etho cry out in pain behind him. He spun around to look for the cause, and realized that Xisuma must have relocated Etho’s knee. He winced at Etho’s sobs and looked away. “Bdubs?! Was that-”

“Quickly. Please, you need to go NOW,” Bdubs told him. “He’s going to be injured when you teleport him home, we need you to make sure he’s alright until we arrive. We should only be a few minutes behind him, okay?”

“A-alright, I’m heading out now! Do I need to let you know before I teleport him?”

“No,” Bdubs told him. “Just do it the second you get there. He needs to be out of here as soon as possible.”

“Okay, I’ll be there in a few minutes. See you soon.”

Bdubs hung up, and immediately whipped his sword out, plunging it into the chest of a nearby creeper that he had noticed sneaking up. It hissed once, but died before it managed to explode. “Grian’s on his way over! It should only take a few minutes for him to get there, we just need to hold down the fort until then.”

“Did you tell him about Etho?” Xisuma asked, and Bdubs looked over at both of them. Xisuma was holding Etho’s head in his hands. He had made quick work of stitching Etho back together—figuratively *and* literally, as can be seen by the various gashes in his legs that were now held shut with stitches—and Bdubs grimaced at the amount of pain Etho was visibly suffering through. His thigh was now covered in bandages, and his ankle must have been broken, because it, too, was wrapped up. Soft padding was folded around the joint and tied in place to minimize movement.

“I told him he’d be injured, but I didn’t waste time giving him specifics. He’ll know what to do once Etho’s there,” Bdubs said. He scanned the treeline for more monsters.

And then they heard hissing from above. All three hermits looked up to find phantoms screeching, circling far above them.

“Xisuma!”

“Got it,” Xisuma said, and he gently lowered Etho’s head before standing up, pulling out his sword. The weapon glimmered in the moonlight, a magical sheen sweeping down the wide, black blade. *It must be enchanted*, Bdubs thought.

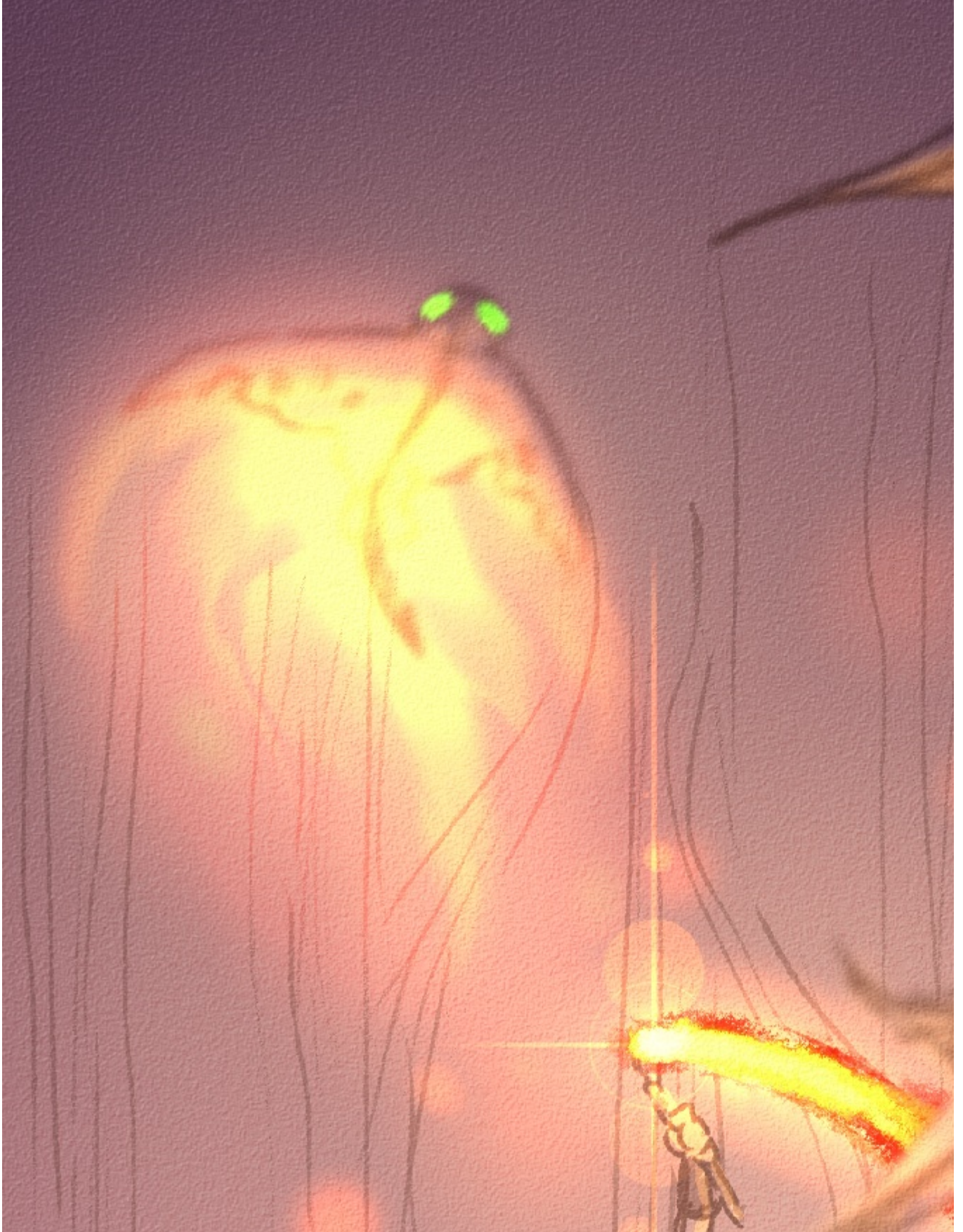
A phantom swooped down, and Xisuma stepped over Etho to protect him. When the phantom dove into his reach, Xisuma curved to his right, gripping the hilt of his sword with both fists, and swung overhead. The blade arced over him, and Bdubs heard a sickening crunch as it came into contact with the beast.

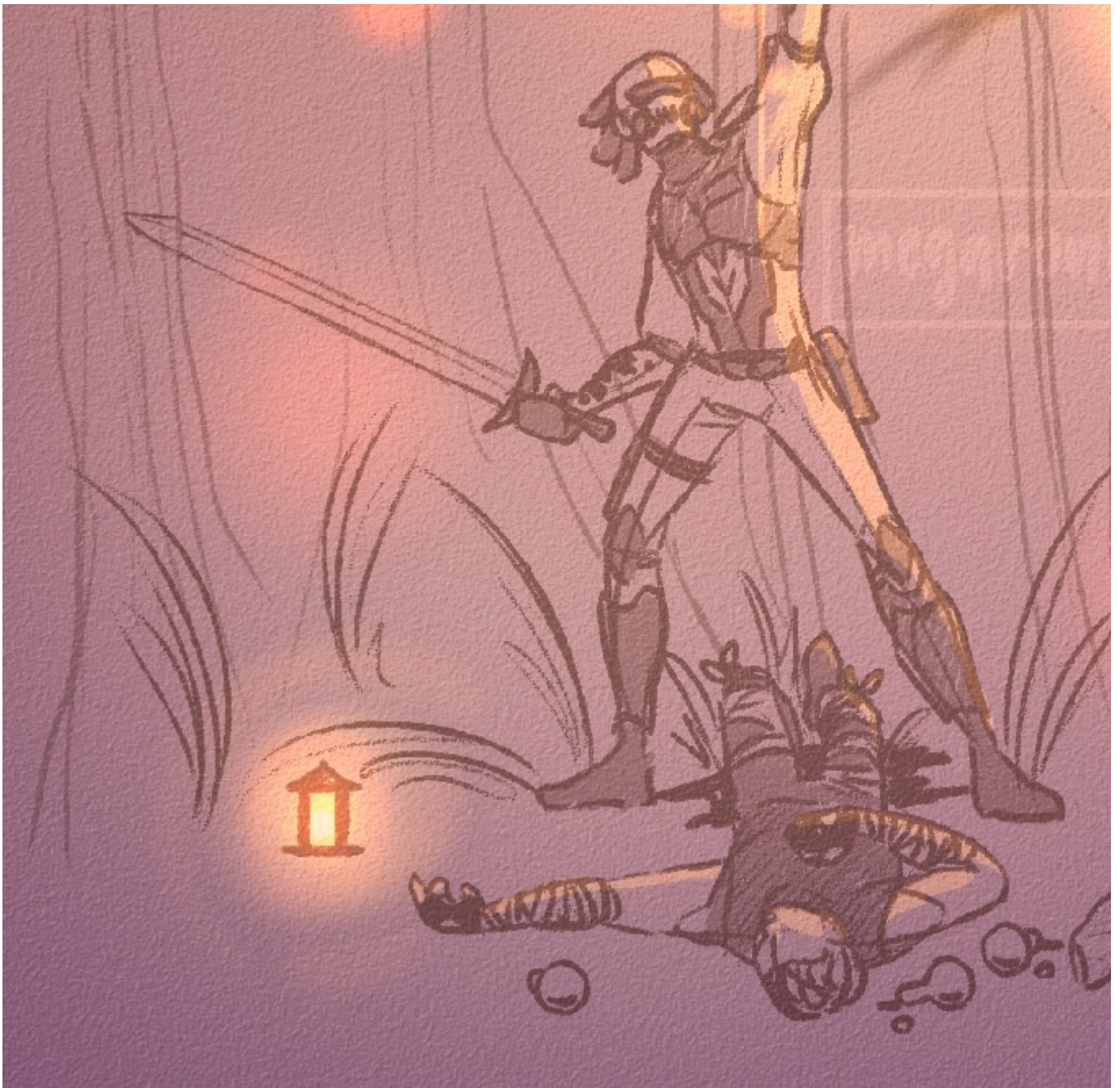
The phantom screeched as its skin erupted into flames, and it took off toward the sky again. The rest of the phantoms shied away from the flaming beast, scared by the light, and Bdubs watched as they dispersed, losing coordination for a moment. He looked down again at Xisuma to see him

huffing for breath, staring at the group of phantoms circling up above.

“I can deal with the phantoms,” Xisuma said as he pulled out a torch and lit it. Another phantom swooped down, but as soon as the torch was lit, it screeched from the light and flew back up into the sky. “I’ll keep them away from Etho, but you guys need to watch the skies for yourselves and fight off the other mobs.”

“On it!” Iskall shouted, and Bdubs nodded, turning to scan behind him for more monsters.





Seconds turned to minutes as they fought off the mobs, and while it wasn't hard to fight them off, it was getting tiring. Bdubs' shoulders were beginning to ache between every slash and dive, and Iskall's movements were becoming sluggish as well. The only one who hadn't been affected by the fighting quite yet was Xisuma, who stood his ground over Etho and kept slashing and stabbing at phantoms as they dove in for attacks. He held his sword in one hand and the torch in the other, using the flame from the torch to ward off phantoms that snuck up on him and got too close for comfort.

Bdubs pulled his sword out from yet another creeper and panted for breath. He spun around when he heard the sound of an arrow being nocked, and he raised his shield to protect himself.

His eyes widened when he realized it wasn't him the skeleton was aiming at.

The weapon was aimed at Etho.

Time slowed to a stop as he watched the skeleton pull the bowstring back, and he kicked off the ground, making a beeline for the monster. Once he was no more than a few feet away, he lunged for the skeleton. But he was too late.

The arrow flew into the air milliseconds before Bdubs' body collided with the mob, and the momentum of his tackle drove his sword straight through the vertebra of the skeleton, sending the skull tumbling. The skeleton crumbled by the time they both hit the ground.

Bdubs spun around fast. "ETHO!" he screamed, expecting to see his friend writhing in pain.

But Etho wasn't there. Where his body had previously been laying, only a single arrow remained.

"He's gone!" Xisuma shouted. "Grian must have teleported him. Come on, let's get out of here!"

Bdubs sheathed his sword and Iskall ducked down, spreading their elytra wings. The three of them all took off as fast as they could, and Xisuma waved his torch at the remaining phantoms to ward them away one final time as they began their trip home.



## Chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Grian had made sure that when he left his house this time, he had his communicator. The guilt from having missed Etho's call, as well as Iskall refusing to tell him what was going on—and surely, whatever was going on must have been *bad* if they, Bdubs and Xisuma were *all*involved—was doing quite a number on the man. His legs were restless, he couldn't sleep, and he needed to find something to keep his hands busy, at least until Grian knew that Etho was alright.

Surely he would be, right?

Grian didn't want to dwell on that thought. He didn't want to think at all, actually.

So, despite his hatred for sorting storage systems, Grian had decided to go to Midnight Alley and tidy up his storage storefront a little, stacking barrels against the far wall and digging through them one by one for various items to start filling up the chests that lined the wall opposite him. He had been carrying a barrel, full to the brim with what looked like junk, when he had gotten the call.

His communicator started buzzing, and Grian hefted the barrel he was carrying over his right shoulder with a huff, lifting his left arm to poke at the screen with his nose. “Bdubs?”

“Grian!” The audio from Grian's communicator speakers peaked, and Grian flinched at the sharp noise. The barrel on his shoulder teetered back, and he took a step back to balance it again. “Grian, I need you to do something, quick!”

“Is this about Etho,” Grian asked, heart racing. “Is he okay? He called me earlier, but I didn't answer. Iskall-”

“No time to explain,” Bdubs interrupted, cutting off Grian's anxious rambling. “I need you to fly to Etho's base as fast as you can and trigger his Enderporter to teleport him back home.”

“O-okay, I'm grabbing some stuff, I'll be on my way soon-” Grian carried the barrel to the corner, adding it to the ever-growing pile of barrels stacked haphazardly against the wall. He reached over to grab his axe from against the wall, but his hand froze.

Through the speakers, Grian heard an agonized scream, and the noise chilled him to the bone.

“Bdubs?! Was that E-”

“Quickly, please, you need to go NOW!”

Those words finally got him to move, and Grian lurched forward, wrapping his fingers around the handle of his axe. He strapped it to his belt and looked around.

Surely there was something else he should bring with, something that could help once he was with Etho.

But, judging by what he had heard over the call, there was no time for waiting around.

“Alright, heading out now,” Grian told him, making a dash for the front door. “Do I need to let you know before I teleport him?”

“No,” Bdubs told him. “Just do it the second you get there. He needs to be out of here as soon as possible.”

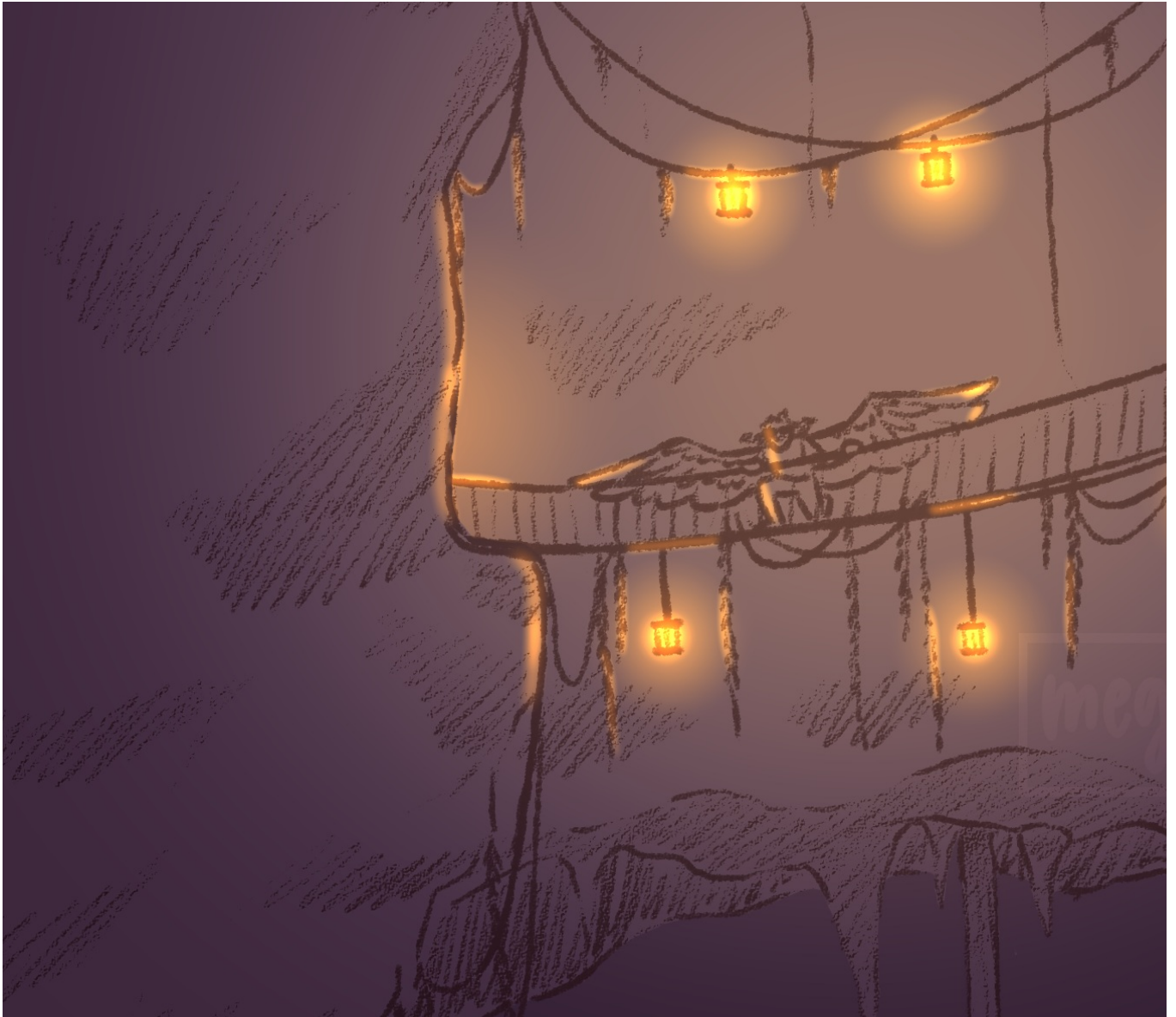
Grian shoulder-checked the door, letting it swing open wildly, and spread his wings. He let the door swing shut behind him.

“Okay, I’ll be there in a few minutes. See you soon.”

The man took to the sky the second Bdubs had hung up.

—

Grian dove out of the sky, kicking his legs out underneath him and landing on the bridge that stretched along the cliffside. His landing put him in a kneeling position, and he didn’t move as the bridge swayed back and forth, gripping the ropes and waiting for the bridge to still once more.



Once the swinging came to a stop, Grian climbed to his feet and sighed, removing the flight goggles from over his eyes and raising them to rest over his hair.

“Probably this way,” Grian muttered, making his way to one end of the bridge. His wings remained outstretched out of instinct, providing him with more control over his balance as he crossed the bridge, and folded as soon as his feet hit solid ground. “Where would it be?”

He found stairs that cut through stone, leading down to an open room with a balcony on one side overlooking the cliffside, and multiple hallways branching off in each direction. Near the staircase was a Netherportal, whirring and whispering to the empty room.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he could hear the distant sound of bubbling water to his left. He spun on his heel and ran past the Netherportal, into a hallway branching off from the main room, and skidded to a stop.

Two columns of water were built into channels carved into the stone wall before him. The water stopped just before floor level with soul sand at the base of either tunnel keeping them both bubbling and rolling. One of them contained a single Enderpearl, bobbing up and down on the surface of the water, and when Grian read the signs above each column, he was relieved to find that Etho's was the one housing a pearl.

Without any hesitation, Grian reached forward and pressed the wooden button beside the sign.

Immediately, he heard the sound of a piston firing, shifting the wall behind the pearl (which Grian finally discovered was actually made of grey wool rather than stone) out and back in with one quick movement. The wool knocked the Enderpearl out of the water without breaking the fragile pearl, and it fell to the ground before Grian, shattering. Shards of the pearl flew everywhere across the floor before disintegrating into nothing but air.

Then his friend materialized before him on the ground, shouting in pain with his back pressed flat against the wooden floor, and the sight of Etho made Grian sick to his stomach.

The first thing Grian noticed was the blood smeared across Etho's face. His first assumption was that the blood was Etho's, but when he kneeled down and tilted Etho's head to the side to get a better look at the wound the blood must have been coming from, he was surprised to see that there was no wound.

So the blood wasn't his, Grian realized, and then he decided that the implications of that were much worse.

Grian leaned forward and hooked one arm around Etho's shoulders, then one under his legs, and hefted him up into the air. The movement jostled Etho's legs enough to pull a sharp cry from the taller man, and Grian winced. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Grian repeated over and over as he carried his friend into the main room, and looked around.

Across the room stood a doorway, the door left partially ajar, to what Grian thought looked like a bedroom, so he walked over and stretched out a wing to the side, pushing the door open. Before him was a shared bedroom with two beds, a couple chairs, and some chests and barrels lining the walls, accompanied by various other trinkets scattered across desks and tables. He could tell which bed was Iskall's by the tools and spare parts for their prosthetic eye scattered across the bedside table, and which bed was Etho's by the headband draped over the lamp on his own table. Grian entered the room and carefully lowered Etho down onto his bed before pulling up one of the chairs to sit in, grimacing at the sheer amount of blood, dirt and slivers smeared and scattered across his skin.

Was he already this badly beat up when Grian had missed his call?

Would Grian have been able to prevent all of this, had he been able to answer?

Grian's heart sank at the thought.

Most of his major injuries seemed to be taken care of already, so Grian was unsure of what to do. He sat there, head hung in shame as he waited for the others to arrive, feeling guilty and completely *useless*- when Etho's leg suddenly twitched, followed by a horrible, pained groan. Grian snapped to attention, and saw that the splinters embedded in his thighs were digging deeper into his skin with every movement.

The feet of his chair creaked against the floor as he pushed it back to stand and look frantically around the room for something to remove the splinters with. His eyes landed on the assortment of tools covering Iskall's bedside table, so he walked over and scanned the table for something useful.

He reached down and plucked up a pair of tweezers, holding them up to inspect them. Surely, for something as simple as splinters, any old pair would do, so he gently wiped them off on his shirt and returned to Etho's side to sit down and begin plucking splinters out of his thigh.

Some were easy to pluck out, while others were painful enough for Etho to jerk his leg away. Grian focused on the ones closest to the surface of his skin, too afraid of hurting Etho more to risk trying to pull out the ones rooted deeper in his flesh. With every grunt of pain that Etho let out, Grian's eyes welled with tears a little more, and he let another apology slip past his lips.

Eventually the tears got to be too much, and he could no longer tell splinters apart from skin.

Grian dropped the tweezers to the bed and put his face in his hands. "Etho, I'm so *sorry*," he sobbed. "I didn't mean for this to happen, I'm so sorry you're hurt so bad, and really I shouldn't be crying over this-" Grian wiped a tear from his cheek as they began to spill over. "But I've just been so worried and- and nobody was telling me what was going on-"

Grian felt a hand on his shoulder, and stopped rambling long enough for Etho to speak.

"S'okay, G," Etho mumbled. His eyes were cracked open just barely enough for Grian to tell. "Y're doin' great, s'okay."

Grian's chin began to tremble. "I'm sorry for not answering," Grian told him, reaching up to grab Etho's hand from his shoulder and hold it. "I was away from home and had left my communicator there, I swear if I knew I would have never ignored your call-"

"Not y'r fault," Etho drawled, and his eyes drifted closed again when his jaw clenched in pain. His back arched, and that must have made his pain even worse, because Etho *sobbed*.

Grian couldn't stand to watch Etho writhe in pain. Nearby he spotted an Enderchest, pressed against the far wall near the door, and his chair scraped against the floor as he got up and walked over. Throwing the lid of the chest back, Grian rifled through the contents in search of something specific.

He pulled out a shulker box and set it down on the ground, then kneeled beside it. Twisting the lid, Grian lifted it up to reveal a warm glow from within, and set the lid aside to search through the contents. Strength, Fire Resistance, and Invisibility were a few of the many potions he had stored within the shulker box, but there was one in particular that Grian was looking for. Bottled clinked as he shuffled them around, searching for the right color.

*Ah, there it is.*

Grian reached in and wrapped his fingers around the neck of a bottle containing a glowing violet-grey liquid, and lifted it up to eye level, turning it around to look at the label.

*Turtrlue Mamster.*

Normally the silly names Scar left on all of Grian's potions would make him chuckle, but this time, he found no humor in the words scrawled across the label.

Grian closed the shulker and approached Etho's bed once more.

He looked weak, his breathing was slow and shallow, but surely one potion to help with his pain wouldn't hurt, right?

Right?

Grian stood by the head of the bed and pulled the cork out of the bottle, then put a trembling hand under Etho's head, tilting it up so he could drink. "Hey, Etho, I've got a potion for you to drink. It'll make everything hurt a little less for a bit, okay?" he asked in a broken, trembling voice.

Etho, without opening his eyes, parted his lips, and Grian put the opening of the bottle to his mouth.

"GRIAN, NO!"

A sudden, heavy weight barreled into Grian's side, and the potion bottle was ripped out of his grip. Grian reached for it, but it was thrown to the ground and shattered into hundreds of pieces. The magical liquid seeped into the floorboards.

"Are you *trying* to kill Etho?!" he heard Bdubs screech, and Grian froze.

"W-what?"

Bdubs shoved Grian back, away from the bed, and put a hand on Etho's cheek. He bent over his body to get a closer look at his lips, and let out a breath of relief when he found that none of the glowing liquid could be found on his skin.

Bdubs then whirled around, pointing an accusatory finger at Grian and jabbing him in the chest, sending him a step back and away from the bed.

Grian's arms were suspended in the air. He'd never seen Bdubs so *angry*. "You're FUCKING lucky that Etho didn't drink any of that potion, or you would have *killed* him, Grian!" Bdubs shouted.

Grian's hands were trembling, and his voice was wavering. "I-I didn't know! I'm sorry!"

"Just like how you didn't know Etho was in trouble, *huh?*!"

And, oh, that line hit like an arrow to his chest. Grian's arms wrapped around himself defensively, followed by his wings. His shoulders tensed.

"I-I'm SORRY!" he shouted, and when he took another step back, he bumped into somebody and jumped away, startled. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean for this to happen, I promise!"

"Grian, come here," Xisuma said from behind him, and when he turned, he found Xisuma's hands reaching for him. Grian's wings folded around himself tighter, flinching away from the admin's touch, and soon everything became a blur.

"This is my fault, I didn't mean it, I'm so *sorry*-"

"Look what you've done now, Bdubs-"

“He almost **KILLED** him, Iskall-”

“Calm down, everybody, ple-”

“No, *you* calm down!”

“We need to be rational here-”

“Oh, **YOU’RE** one to talk about *rational*-”

“Everyone **shut** the **FUCK UP!**”

The room fell silent at Xisuma’s outburst.

Grian was curled into a ball on the floor, pressed up against the wall with his hands covering his ears.

When did that happen?

Grian could feel his chest burning, the sides of his head hurt, and distantly he realized that his fingers were gripping his hair, harshly tugging at the strands and making his scalp sore.

He felt like he was gonna vomit.

He felt like he was falling, tumbling out of the sky towards the ground.

He felt like there were walls around him, closing in, getting closer and closer and *closer* and there wasn’t any room to *breathe* and everything around him was getting darker and darker and **DARKER** and grian *beganchokingonhisownbreath-*

“Grian?”

Grian couldn’t see. His wings were wrapped around him like a cocoon, shielding him from the rest of the hermits, but between the feathers, Grian could see a sliver of Xisuma’s boots in front of him.

“Grian, let me in, it’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Grian’s wings separated, just a crack, and he watched as Xisuma removed his helmet and set it on the ground beside him. Xisuma then raised a hand up, hovering right in front of a wing.

“Can I touch you?”

Grian nodded once. His entire body was trembling.

Xisuma slowly moved Grian’s wing aside, opening up Grian’s cocoon and crawling in. He slowly wrapped his arms around Grian’s shoulders and squeezed lightly.

The pressure on his chest felt so good, so warm. Grian was finally able to unwind and let out his tears, and he clung to the front of Xisuma’s shirt and silently cried, too shocked to make a noise. He could hear Xisuma’s calm, collected voice speaking to the other hermits, but the words melted together, and he couldn’t decipher what they meant.

All he knew was Xisuma was warm and safe, and he pressed against Xisuma’s body and clung to him like his life depended on it, waiting for the gaping hole in his chest to stitch itself back together.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Xisuma whispered, rubbing a hand up and down Grian’s back. “You didn’t know, this isn’t your fault. It was an accident.”

And that was what finally broke down his walls. Grian let out a sob and buried his face into Xisuma’s shoulder, curling deeper into his embrace.

—

Wood scraped against wood as Iskall dragged more chairs over to Etho’s bed. On the bedside table sat a thermos full of steaming hot water, and a mug of warm tea.

Grian’s hands were trembling too much for him to hold a mug. He couldn’t trust himself not to break it.

Bdubs was to his left, sweeping up the remains of the potion bottle he had shattered upon his arrival, and Grian’s wide eyes were trained on the shards of glass as they dragged across the floor.

His eyelids were so heavy, and sleep was calling his name, but he didn’t want to fall asleep just yet.

Footsteps could be heard from the main room, getting louder by the second, and Grian turned to look over his shoulder and found Xisuma entering the room, carrying in his arms blankets of various colors and textures. The first person he stopped at was Grian, and he let Grian have first choice between the blankets.

Grian’s heart was set on a sky blue blanket near the bottom of the stack. It looked fuzzy and thick, but he was sure somebody else would want that one more, plus he didn’t want to make Xisuma wait while he dug it out, so he settled for the one at the top of the stack instead.

Xisuma stopped him before he grabbed the blanket by setting the pile down out of his reach, at the foot of the bed Etho was laying in. He dug the fuzzy blue blanket out of the pile and unfolded it, then caringly draped it around Grian’s shoulders, making sure that the fabric lay comfortably against the feathers of his wings.

Grian wordlessly gripped the edges of the blanket and burrowed his nose into the fabric, curling in on himself just a tad. His heart ached, but in a good way this time.

Xisuma was too sweet for him.

And maybe that’s why he was the server admin, because he was so caring, and knew exactly what to say or do to help people relax.

Grian appreciated it.

Xisuma turned away from him, walking over to Iskall and offering them a blanket, which Iskall declined. While Xisuma’s back was turned, Grian took notice of his change of clothes; rather than the pink, axolotl-themed bodysuit he usually wore, Xisuma was now sporting a pair of sweatpants and a plain white t-shirt, and Grian saw the edges of blood-soaked bandages peeking out from the neckline of the shirt, on the back of his neck. The bandages looked freshly applied.

From the moment the rest of the crew had arrived until now, Grian’s memory was a blur, everything melting into one big puddle of yelling and sobbing and emotions that his brain had decided were too much to handle. As a result, he hadn’t realized Xisuma was injured until now, long after they had gotten back.

His mouth felt like it was glued shut, and his throat felt like it hadn’t been used in years. He

couldn't find it in himself to thank Xisuma, but X turned around and found him staring, and smiled, and Grian knew that he understood how thankful he was.

Iskall reached forward, and Grian watched as they took Etho's hand in their own while Etho slept. Their thumb soothingly brushed over the back of Etho's hand.

Grian couldn't bring himself to look at Etho.

Nobody had spoken since Xisuma's outburst earlier. Nobody but Xisuma himself. The silence wasn't awkward, but it wasn't calm, either; the air carried a feeling of uneasiness yet understanding. There was no need to talk quite yet, so everybody in the room kept quiet.

The silence dragged on even longer, long after Xisuma took his seat beside Grian, until Bdubs was finally the first to break it.

"Grian?"

Grian flinched and stared down at the fuzzy blanket in his grasp.

"I'm sorry."

He didn't move. Bdubs sighed.

"I shouldn't have gone off on you like that. You were only doing what you thought was right to do for Etho, and... and it was wrong of me to assume you would know what to do with so little information on the situation." The broom stopped brushing against the floor. "I'm sorry for treating you like that. You-" Bdubs cleared his throat. "I don't expect you to forgive me."

Grian didn't reply, and Bdubs didn't expect him to. He continued to sweep the floor to keep his hands busy.

Iskall was the next to speak. "I should have told you what was going on when you called me," they said, "but I didn't. I apologize as well, for that."

Grian met Iskall's gaze and saw the sincerity in their eyes. He pursed his lips and pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders.

He still couldn't speak, even if he wanted to.

He turned his head to watch as Xisuma lifted up a small toolbox and set it down on the mattress before him. The tweezers Grian had used earlier, along with the loose splinters left strewn across the bed, must have been taken care of during Grian's breakdown, because they were nowhere to be found, and Xisuma pulled out a new set of tweezers. He then got to work meticulously pulling out splinter after splinter, even some of those which Grian didn't dare try to remove earlier.

Grian leaned over against Xisuma, soaking up his warmth, and the admin hummed as he continued to work on Etho's leg, unwinding some bandages as he worked.

Grian didn't watch Xisuma work.

Bdubs finally set the broom down, leaning it against the wall, and walked around the bed to sit beside Iskall. He rested his hand on Etho's forearm, and Grian finally mustered the courage to look at Etho, if only for a second to confirm that he was still breathing.

He found that Etho's chest continued to slowly rise and fall, and the tension in Grian's shoulders



and wings relaxed at the sight.

“He’s gonna be alright, Grian,” Xisuma murmured. Grian looked up at him.

His helmet was on once more, and Grian heard a small, mechanical whirring coming from the helmet when Xisuma pressed a finger to where the corner of his jaw would be. Xisuma must have had some kind of magnification feature in the visor, using it to pick out splinters easier.

The whirring paused, and Xisuma turned his head to look at Grian. Grian could see his own reflection in the blue visor. “You did well. Thank you for helping us.”

Grian bit his lip and nudged his head against Xisuma’s shoulder. Even if he could muster up the energy to speak right now, he didn’t know what he would say.

Xisuma reached over and patted Grian’s knee, then returned his attention to the work in front of him. Grian looked down at the floorboards once again.

And eventually, leaned against Xisuma’s shoulder as he worked, Grian’s heavy eyelids finally drifted shut, and he fell asleep.

## Chapter End Notes

I just completely made up bullshit about Etho’s and Iskall’s base because I couldn’t track the layout of the base very well by watching Etho’s videos. It’s fiiiine, dw about it.

As for Turtrlue Mamster, it was a horrible typo I made while writing the outline and Worm told me to keep it lmfao galaxy brain moment

I drew some art of Grian looking at the potion but didn’t like it enough to add it to the fic, but you can find it over on Tumblr! Also, the chapter count MIGHT change to 5, I’m not sure if I’m going to be adding an epilogue or not. Hope you enjoyed this chapter!

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Etho was aware that he was laying in a bed, but at the same time, he felt like he was floating. His body felt alien; he couldn't move, couldn't speak, and the darkness around him translated into what he thought was the Void.

Had he fallen into the Void somehow?

No, that couldn't be right. He could hear screaming, and the Void didn't scream.

...

Or did it?

There was screaming, there was sobbing, Etho even thought he heard the sound of glass breaking at some point.

And then there was silence.

---

When Etho came to again, it was for a brief moment, just long enough to feel a hand slide over his own, and another rest on his forearm. He wanted so desperately to open his eyes, but they were too heavy.

He didn't last long this time, and fell back under again.

---

When he woke up again, his legs were on *fire*. He couldn't look, but he was sure if he were able to,

he would find flames dancing their way across his skin. Fingers gently combed through his hair, warm to the touch.

He could distantly make out the sound of somebody sobbing, and a moment later, Etho realized the sobs sounded eerily like his own.

The cold mouth of a glass bottle was pressed to his lips, and Etho felt a numbing liquid pour into his mouth. Etho drank, and the burning pain faded long enough for him to fall under yet again.

---

Etho's eyes opened.

Sunlight poured into the room through the windows, lighting his surroundings in hues of scarlet and gold. Mind full of fog, Etho mentally stumbled his way through his thoughts as he tried to make sense of the things around him.

He was tucked into his own bed, surrounded by a familiar room that unwound the tension in his shoulders. The smell of freshly baked bread and newly sawed wood wafted in through the doorway, filling Etho's mind.

It smelled like home.

To his left lay Bdubs, sitting in a chair pulled close to the bedside. The top half of his body lay draped over the blanket that covered Etho, cheek resting on the edge of Etho's hip. He found Bdubs' right hand covering Etho's left, their fingers interlocked.

Etho smiled and tightened his weak grip around Bdubs' hand, and the shorter man stirred lightly in his sleep, mumbling something just too quiet for Etho to make out. His fuzzy green hoodie obscured his torso, with the hood pulled over his head and hiding most of his face. It made him look almost identical to a snoring pile of moss, and Etho snorted at the sight.

Something rustled across the room, and Etho peeled his eyes away from Bdubs to look at the source of the noise. Across the room was Iskall's bed, and Grian lay curled up on top of the comforters, red and blue parrot-like wings draped over himself like a blanket. His face, half obscured by his dusty blond hair, was half-buried in the fuzzy blue blanket in his grasp, and the lower end of the blanket was draped over his hips and tangled around his legs. A pair of flight goggles rested on the table beside Iskall's bed, presumably Grian's.

"You're finally awake," Etho heard, and he looked to the doorway to find Iskall entering the room. They carried two potion bottles in one hand and a tray of food in the other as they approached. "How's it feel to be back in the land of the living?"

Etho tried to speak, but nothing came out. He blinked and tried again.

"Hurts," Etho croaked out, and Iskall threw their head back with a laugh.

"Yeah," they replied, nodding their head. "Yeah, I thought you'd say that. Brought some stuff that might help with that."

He set the tray down on the bedside table. Etho heard a clink when one of the bowls knocked against one of the multiple empty potion bottles stood on the table.

Etho's brow furrowed.

“How long..?”

“Few days,” Iskall answered, setting down a potion. They twirled the other bottle around in their hand, the red glowing liquid sloshing around within, and then pulled the cork out with a *pop* .

“How are you feeling? Think you can drink it yourself?”

Etho tried to lift his right arm and winced at the pain. His arm was abnormally heavy; it felt like a block of iron had been tied to his wrist, holding his arm down to the bed. When he tried again, his arm trembled as it rose up, and he stretched it out in front of him and spread his fingers wide, sucking in a breath at the pain that shot down his arm as he rolled his wrist.

That’s when Etho noticed the injuries. He turned his arm to take a look at the amount of scratches and gashes that were scattered all over his forearm, some stitched up and others coated in bandages that pulled against his skin as he twisted his arm to examine them.

He looked at the other, and was met with the same sight. For this amount of bandages, there was a surprising lack of blood.

“What-”

“Drink, and I’ll explain,” Iskall replied, gently placing the potion in Etho’s raised hand. Etho’s fingers closed around the neck of the bottle, and he brought it to his lips. “You did quite a number on yourself, Etho. Xisuma spent the past two nights visiting to help dress wounds and clean you up, and that’s not even counting all the work he did the night we got you home. You’re lucky you’re alive.” Etho finished gulping the potion down, and offered the empty bottle back to Iskall. “There you go,” Iskall murmured, “good job.”

Etho rolled his eyes as Iskall took the bottle. “I’m not a baby, Iskall.”

“Never said you were,” they replied as they swapped the empty bottle with the other potion. This one emanated a vibrant magenta glow. “Strength potion next. Xisuma says you should be able to drink one of these by now, it should help with the pain and lasts a lot longer than the turtle potions we’ve been using up until now.” Iskall handed it to Etho. “A lot easier to make, too.”

“Good,” Etho muttered, and he drank that one, too, sighing in relief as the pain and heaviness in his limbs faded away almost instantly. He painstakingly rose to a sitting position, and shuffled back so his shoulders rested against the headboard of his bed.

“Bet you’re hungry.”

Etho nodded.

“I brought you some soup,” Iskall said, and removed a bowl from the tray. “Also brought bread.” They then jerked their head forward, gesturing to Bdubs, and waved a hand in Grian’s direction. “There’s more in the kitchen for these guys if they want some when they wake up. Shouldn’t be long, they tend to wake up not long after the sun comes up, I’ve noticed. Speaking of which, these two nearly refused to leave your side until you woke up.” Etho snorted, and Iskall huffed. “Not funny. Had to just about fight off half of the server from barging into here while you were recovering as well. You had us all concerned, bud.” Iskall rolled their eyes. “Anyway... I let the soup cool a little before I brought it in, so it’s not too hot to hold. I’m sure you’re starving.”

“You gonna try to feed that to me, too?” Etho asked, and Iskall snorted.

“Happy to know you’re feeling good enough to be a sarcastic little-”

“Etho?”

Both Iskall and Etho turned to look at the source of the voice. Grian was raised up on one elbow, looking at Etho in disbelief. “Well, look who’s finally up,” Iskall muttered. “Hey, G.”

“You’re awake,” Grian murmured, staring at Etho. His voice cracked on *awake*, and Etho could see the puffiness in his eyes. He must have spent a lot of time crying over the past few days.

“Yeah,” Etho said, taking the soup from Iskall with his right hand, and Grian’s eyes welled up with tears. “Grian? Are you-”

Grian shot up off the bed and crashed into Etho, narrowly avoiding spilling the bowl of soup when he wrapped his arms around Etho’s waist. Iskall took the bowl back so Etho could reciprocate the hug, patting one hand against Grian’s back. His other hand remained in Bdubs’ grasp as he slept.

“Hey, it’s alright,” Etho murmured, rubbing his hand up and down Grian’s back. “Come on, G, you knew I was gonna-”

“I didn’t-” Grian interrupted, voice cracking again. Etho fell silent as Grian spoke. “I almost let you *die*, Etho, I’m so sorry-”

“Shhhh,” Etho said, gently removing his other hand from Bdubs’ grip so he could wrap it around Grian. He held him close. “It’s okay, Grian, it’s okay...”

Iskall laid a hand on Grian’s shoulder, and Grian sniffled. Etho’s left hand tangled in Grian’s hair and pulled his head against his shoulder, letting Grian bury his face into the crook of Etho’s neck as he began sobbing.

“I’m gonna...” Iskall jerked their head toward the door, and Etho nodded. “Let you guys talk a bit. Xisuma’s gonna show up later today to take a look at you. Don’t do anything stupid, and stay in bed, for Void’s sake.”

“Thanks, Iskall,” Etho replied, and when Iskall left the room, he turned his attention to Grian.

Today was going to be a long day.

---

Etho patiently listened as Grian dried his tears and explained the last few days to him. An hour or so passed as they spoke, and somewhere in that time, Etho’s hand returned to Bdubs’ sleepy grasp.

Grian then left the room to get some food from the kitchen, and when he returned, he was carrying a steaming bowl of soup in his hands. He sat in a chair beside the bed, and the two men ate in comfortable silence, the quiet broken up every now and then by the clinking of silverware against dishes.

Once they had finished their meals, and the sun was well over the horizon, Grian stood from the chair he had been sitting in and stretched his wings, telling Etho he needed to fly back to Boatem for a meeting with his neighbors. Etho nodded his head and offered him a wave as he left the room, taking both of their empty dishes with him as he went.

Bdubs stirred beside him, having just woken up, and squeezed Etho’s hand. Etho, with a small grin, squeezed back, and watched as Bdubs scrunched his nose and mumbled something too quiet for Etho to hear. Bdubs then began to lift himself from the bed, letting go of Etho’s hand to raise both arms up over his head and stretch, and Etho winced as he heard his back crack and pop.

Bdubs' jaw opened wide with a loud and overly-dramatic yawn.

"Well, good morning, my fragile flower," Etho said as Bdubs cracked his eyes open. Bdubs grunted in reply, and Etho waited for the realization to hit him.

And when it did, Bdubs' eyes snapped open wide, and his head jerked to the side to look at Etho in shock.

"You're awake!" Bdubs exclaimed, and then he lunged forward, arms wrapping around Etho's neck and face pressed against the side of Etho's head. Etho laughed and raised an arm to wrap around Bdubs' waist.

"You're awake, oh my goodness, thank the Void, you're awake-" Bdubs' voice was a broken record, repeating the same lines over and over again, voice tinged with what sounded like disbelief.

Etho pulled Bdubs back with a hand on his shoulder. "Yeah, I'm awake," Etho told him. "I'm awake."

"I was so *worried*," Bdubs said, hands gripping Etho's shoulders. "Xisuma had to do so much just to keep you *alive*, and we weren't sure you were going to make it-" He trailed off, staring at Etho, and Etho stared right back, unsure of what to say.

"You're lucky to be alive, Etho."

His voice was quiet as he said it, barely above a whisper.

Etho's voice was soft, too. "I know."

And then Bdubs' body crashed into his again, and this time, both of Etho's arms wrapped around him. His fingers combed through the hair on the back of his head, he buried his chin into the crook of his neck, and Etho *knew* how lucky he was to be alive right now. He knew how lucky he was to be held with joy instead of mourning, and at long last, he felt the tension that he had been holding in his chest all morning let go.

He was finally home.

---

The next few days were a blur to Etho, and he remembered them in bits and pieces.

He remembered Doc coming in to visit him, supplying him with a brand new communicator that he built himself. As Etho strapped it to his forearm to ensure it fit correctly, Doc continued on, explaining a new safety feature he was working on with Xisuma to prevent anything like Etho's accident from happening again, and he stayed in the room to discuss the incident in detail to help Doc think up ideas for the new safety feature.

Eventually, they agreed on a basic idea for the system, which would be triggered by a voice command. Doc explained that it would automatically send out a warning and set of coordinates, along with a ten second audio clip, to the hermit group chat, and he said he'd talk to Xisuma about it as soon as possible and make sure the update was sent out to all of the hermits' devices, including Etho's new one, by the end of the month. Etho felt incredibly thankful for the effort Doc was going to to ensure this couldn't happen again, and made sure to express that thankfulness before Doc left later that afternoon.

Mumbo was the next person to visit, accompanied by Xisuma, and the raven-haired man showed

up with his arms full of various trinkets and papers. When Mumbo dumped them on a nearby desk and started laying out papers and measuring tapes, Etho asked what all of the supplies were for, and Mumbo told him he was designing a pair of leg braces to help Etho walk easier.

It was then, when Etho's eyes opened wide in confusion and concern, that Xisuma explained to him just how badly his legs had been injured. While he should be able to walk again soon, his legs hadn't recovered quite right due to the speed at which they were forced to heal, caused by the potions Xisuma had used on him. Walking would be painful, and for how long, nobody could be certain, but the custom braces that Mumbo was designing would help him walk with less strain on his joints.

Etho nodded, and Mumbo got to work with taking measurements and brainstorming ideas for the braces. He stayed throughout the rest of the afternoon, interviewing Etho and jotting down notes on the little notepad he brought with him while Xisuma inspected his wounds. Etho was astounded by Mumbo's eagerness.

The next day, Etho had two more visitors. Grian and Impulse arrived together, Grian's hands clutching the edge of his sweater and Impulse's eyes filled with nothing but concern for Etho. Etho could tell that Grian was a mess—it was obvious from the day he woke up and found Grian in Iskall's bed—and Impulse looked alright at first glance, but his messy hair, the bags under his eyes, and his hastily put together bowtie told Etho all that he needed to know.

The moment the two men opened their mouths to speak, Etho hushed them and beckoned them over, and he wrapped his arms around the both of them. Grian cried a bit, and Impulse hugged him back.

They spent the rest of the day together in the room, Impulse and Grian telling him about the prank war he missed while he was away and the strange anomalies that had begun to happen around the island while he was unconscious. They left at sunset, with the promise to come back soon.

His next visitor, early the next morning, was Scar.

Scar excitedly strode into the bedroom, carrying a bundle of leather and copper in his arms, and the moment he set it down on the desk Mumbo had been working at days prior, Etho's eyes lit up.

“Are those..?”

“Yep!” Scar replied, grinning from ear to ear as he removed his tailcoat and draped it across the back of a chair. He removed his top hat and set it on the desk, revealing his soft grey cat ears. “Mumbo finished your leg braces, and as the local expert on this kind of thing-” Scar pointed both hands at him, finger-guns style, and winked- “I've been appointed to teach you how to walk in them. Come on, let's try it out!”

Etho sat up in his bed, legs hanging off the side of the mattress, and Scar guided him through the process of putting on and removing the braces, how to tighten and loosen the straps, as well as the other custom features Mumbo incorporated into the devices. Etho was awestruck by the effort Mumbo must have gone through to build the braces for him.

Once the braces were set and secure, Scar offered both of his hands. Etho, smiling, reached forward and wrapped his hands around Scar's wrists. Scar's hands closed around Etho's wrists so he could hoist him up onto his feet, holding his arms to keep him steady.

Etho took a tentative step forward, and then another, and marvelled at the way the braces negated so much of his weight. It felt like he had chugged a potion of leaping, the way his body felt so

deceivingly light, and he wasn't used to the change. It didn't take long for him to inevitably trip, and his body crashed into Scar's, sending them both tumbling to the floor with a loud thud. The bedroom door flew wide open a moment later to reveal a panicked Iskall, but they let out a sigh in relief when they found the two men laughing together on the floor, and Iskall approached to help pull both men back up to their feet.

And every single day, throughout his entire recovery process, Bdubs would come to visit him. Every day, Bdubs brought something for Etho—a slice of a cake he and the rest of the Big Eye Crew baked together, a bouquet of flowers picked straight from his garden, a book to read together during the lonely hours when Iskall was out of the house—and every day, Etho would look forward to seeing him.

What he didn't look forward to, however, was the question he knew was on the tip of his tongue, the question he knew Bdubs was longing to ask him.

The question for which he wasn't sure there was an answer.

Etho dreaded it. He had asked himself that very same question multiple times over the past few days, when he'd had far too much time trapped in his room without much to do but think. He still hadn't come up with a good answer.

He did come up with an answer, eventually, but he knew it wasn't a *good* one. Etho didn't like it, and he knew Bdubs wouldn't, either.

But one night, Bdubs finally asked, and Etho had to answer.

They were sitting on the balcony outside the main room, stargazing with their legs dangling over the cliffside. Etho was fiddling with the leather straps on his right leg brace, flipping it one direction over and over in his hands, and Bdubs was tying knots into the strings on his green, moss-like hoodie, his feet kicking back and forth over the edge as they surveyed the stars together in silence.

And then that silence was broken.

“Etho?”

“Mm?”

There was a pause. Bdubs' voice carried an edge of uncertainty, and that alone sent Etho's stomach twisting into knots.

He knew what was coming.

“Why didn't you tell me?”

Silence followed. Etho didn't look over, but he could feel the shorter man's eyes boring into the side of his head.

It took a minute for Etho to answer; not because he didn't know what to say, but because he needed the courage to let those words come out.

“I thought...” Etho cleared his throat. “I thought I was too far gone.”

His voice was barely more than a whisper, and if it weren't for Bdubs remaining silent, patiently waiting, Etho wouldn't have been sure if Bdubs had heard him in the first place. “I didn't think at



the time that it was worth going through all the trouble to come save me,” he continued, and despite how hard he tried to hide it, his voice began to waver the slightest bit. He felt like he was coming apart at the seams, and Bdubs’ lack of reply only compelled him to continue. “I thought I was going to die, and there was no way I’d survive, so when I heard your voice, and was reminded of how cheerful you always are, I decided- I wanted that to be the last thing... I’d...”

He couldn’t turn to look at him, but he felt fingers interlock with his own.

“So...” Bdubs finally said. “You just gave up.” It wasn’t a question.

Etho lowered his gaze, staring down at the strap in his fingers. He found himself picking at the leather with his nails, tearing little bits of the material away from the strap, and set it down so he wouldn’t destroy it. When he blinked, he felt tears drop from his eyes and soak into the mask stretched across the bottom half of his face. “Yeah.”

Before he could do anything else, there were fuzzy arms around him, and a hand guiding his head down to rest against Bdubs’ warm chest.

“Etho, you’re an idiot, you know that?”

Etho’s eyes squeezed shut.

“You’re worth the effort. You always have been, and you always will be.” Bdubs held him tight. “I don’t care what you believe. If I have to tell you every single day how worth the trouble you are, then I *will*.”

Etho took a deep breath in through his nose, then reached his hand up to his face, hooking his index finger under the fabric covering his nose and mouth. He tugged it down, tucking it under his chin, and then let out a shaky sigh.

“Bdubs, you don’t- you don’t have to-”

“No, but I *want* to.” Bdubs rested his chin in Etho’s white hair. “I *want* to be here for you.” Etho’s shoulders relaxed, and he wrapped his arms around Bdubs’ waist and readjusted so he was closer to him.

“Can you promise me something?” Bdubs asked. When Etho hummed in response, Bdubs continued. “Promise me this will never happen again. If you need help, you’d better *tell* me. Okay?”

Etho sighed again, and nestled his head against Bdubs’ soft sweater.

“Okay.”



## Chapter End Notes

and then they got married and lived happily ever after /j  
Funny moments while writing the fic: [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#) [\[3\]](#)

## End Notes

Fic was beta-read by [tinithebini](#) AND [curseworm](#). Huge thank you to the both of you! Go give them some love <3  
Art is my own

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