

## Body Art

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## Body Art

by [dontrollthedice](#)

### Summary

Beef is content with his life as a tattoo artist. He makes enough of a living to survive on, finds camaraderie in his coworkers, and gets to do what he loves for a living. He's alive; that's enough for him.

Then Etho steps into his life, and for once, Beef finds himself wanting more.

### Notes

woooo 100th beetho work! congrats guys :D

also the inspiration work was about etho having a tongue piercing and i just... etho tongue piercing brainrot guys. its real. also more beef & cleo friendship. thats my agenda today

- Inspired by [The Case of The Mystery Piercing](#) by [Gatorade\\_blade](#)

# Chapter 1

There was something to be said about drunk people not understanding basic directions, but Beef didn't feel the need to verbalise it when Cleo was already halfway through getting the guy out the door.

"Sir, discussing a change to your body while you have alcohol in your system is not ideal," Cleo said as she gently nudged a drunkard out the door. "Please come back when you're sober."

"I am," the drunkard whined.

She braced the door open with her foot, then pushed the drunkard out. "My apologies, sir. We'll be happy to discuss this at a later time."

Eventually, the drunkard stumbled off with a pack of friends, and Cleo walked back into the tattoo studio, brushing her hands off with a huff. It was clear they'd have a lot to discuss that night after hours.

"My goodness me," somebody muttered beside him.

Oh. That was a good time to get back to his current client.

"Sorry about that, Xisuma," Beef said, shaking his head and picking up the needle. "I'll take that distraction off the timer."

Xisuma offered him a smile. "No need for taking time off for a show. It was quite entertaining. I assume a little shake-up of routine once in a while is entertaining for you two as well."

Beef chuckled at that. "You can say that again. Lift your arm for me, will you?"

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Beef was an artist first and foremost.

From the time he was a kid eating dirt on the playground, he had always been scribbling on some sort of canvas around him. He defined his schooling years as stages of his art: being yelled at by his mother for taking a crayon to the wall, sketching flowers in the back pages of class notebooks, spending every lunch period in high school on painting on a canvas. He knew for a fact his coworkers had that same fervent love for art; the only person with him during those lonely lunch periods was Cleo, and he had gotten to know his other friends' art before getting to know them as people.

So the transition from art on paper to art on people wasn't an illogical one. He hadn't ever once imagined he'd open a tattoo shop with a team of his friends, but he never resented where life took him. Tattooing was the best part of his life.

Still, he had to admit watching Cleo blow a fuse over dinner was pretty fun.

"Why'd we decide to open this place next to a bar?" Cleo grumbled as she poked at a bowl of noodles. "I swear, I'm this close to installing a sign that says 'No drunks.'"

“We’d lose, like, twenty percent of our business,” Cub mused.

“Don’t even joke about that.”

Jevin snickered.

“Don’t try it, blue-face.”

“Oh, come on, man! Don’t diss my face tats.”

Beef exchanged a glance with False, who only shrugged before picking up a string of noodles with her chopsticks.

While all five of the friends were technically on equal grounds, Beef still felt he had the responsibility of taking care of them, as the person who took care of the business side of the shop. Monthly dinners at his apartment on the weekend were nothing new either; this had been a tradition since he and Cleo’s time in high school, and they had only continued picking up people as they progressed through the years.

“Pipe down, you lot,” Beef said.

Jevin rolled his eyes. “You sound like an old man.”

“That’s the meanest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Really? I feel like I’ve said worse.”

“Anyway,” False said in a tone that didn’t leave any room for argument, “who’s opening on Monday? All of my clients are booked after noon.”

Cub, as the resident bookkeeper, spoke up. “I believe that’s Beef. You said you booked an appointment with a first-timer at nine in the morning, right?”

Oh, the guy with the lightning bolt design for his forearm. Beef nodded. “Yeah, I’ve got the keys. Don’t worry about that.”

“Don’t go losing your memory now,” Cleo snickered.

“We are the same—Fuck you guys. I’m going home.”

The other four laughed as Beef stood up, then resumed discussion when he sat back down.

It was odd having a group of friends as co-workers, but they made it work.

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True to Cub’s records, Beef was, in fact, the opening tattooist. And true to his own records, his client walked in right on time with a taller man following behind him, both of whom were decked out with piercings. Not that Beef had any room to judge, of course. Almost every inch of his own skin was covered in tattoos.

“So, Tango, I hear this is your first tattoo?” Beef asked as he assembled the tattoo machine. He looked jumpy. Conversation was always important with the jumpy clients.

Tango laughed, then shifted in his seat. So he was a nervous laugher. Beef could work with that. “Yup! Never even got one of those temporary ones as a kid.”

“Cool, cool. How about you, Mister Tango’s Friend?”

The man blinked from his spot on the opposite side of Tango, and Tango laughed once more.

“Oh, that’s Etho,” Tango said. “We work at the piercing store down the street together.”

Beef blinked at that. He remembered hearing a couple clients mention it here and there, but the information hadn’t truly set in until now. But he did remember visiting the flower shop across from it every few months for more flowers to stock his shop’s front desk with. “Oh, then you must know the flower shop across from there.”

“I think your cousin works there, right, Etho?”

Etho glanced at Tango in a way that made Beef think he hadn’t wanted that information to be spilled so easily to a stranger. “Yeah, Stress still works there. I’m pretty sure Xisuma does, too.”

Two familiar names! And machine assembled! Beef set the machine down and began smearing an ointment over the design. “So you two know X, too?”

“Yeah, he’s our friend. He kinda, um... recommended the place to us, actually,” Tango said.

Huh. A recommendation was always nice to hear in this line of work. But now that the ointment was down, it was time to start the lineart.

Beef disposed of his gloves and snapped on a new pair before picking up the tattoo machine. He offered Tango a smile. “We’re gonna be starting the lineart now, okay? Think of it as me just drawing on your arm. Relax.”

Tango gave him a shaky smile before holding his other hand out to Etho, who took it. “You got it, boss.”

Beef zoned in on the design and began making his first line. “Brace yourself! Weeeee!”

Tango laughed again, genuinely this time.

The lineart phase went by quickly, Beef pressing for more conversation while Tango responded in equal amounts and Etho occasionally added his own quips. Somewhere in the middle, Cub and Cleo had walked in and started their own work.

“Busy place,” Tango said, looking at Cub and Cleo preparing for their own work.

“Yeah, they work hard,” Beef said. He swirled the needle in a cup of hot, soapy water and dried it off before dipping into the yellow. “You’re doing really good, though! That’s the difficult part over with. Now, all we have to do is the colouring. Do you wanna take a break beforehand?”

Tango let out a sigh of relief and dropped Etho’s hand.

“Your hand was so sweaty,” Etho snickered.

Tango whipped around towards him. “Well, *I’m* sorry I’m literally getting stabbificated a billion times by a needle right now! If I’d known you were gonna complain, I would’ve brought Zed along with me.”

“Why *didn't* you bring Zed with you?”

“Uh... I asked, but then he told me to bring someone more competent along.”

“And you chose me?”

Beef hummed, smiling at the banter as he stretched his hand.

He had already done his job. This time, Tango and Etho were too busy talking to each other for them to notice Beef's lack of conversation during the colouring. Except at the very end, of course.

“Aaand, there you go!” Beef wiped the smeared ink off Tango's forearm one last time before tossing the towel into the bin next to him. “One lightning bolt tattoo for one Tango!”

Tango moved his forearm towards him for a clearer view and—he grinned! That reaction was what Beef lived for. He laughed and set his arm back down. “Oh, man, that actually turned out really well. Can I take a picture for bragging rights?”

Beef gestured for him to go ahead as he prepared the dressing and bandage.

After bandaging the tattoo, they found themselves at the counter again, Beef processing payment on the computer as he recited his speech about taking care of the tattoo.

“Don't forget that,” Beef said. He slipped a sheet of paper with aftercare instructions to Tango. “It's on here, too, in case you do. But don't forget! Don't let him forget, Etho! You're part of the team now, too.”

“Alright, alright, I got it,” Tango laughed. “I'll let you get on with your day now. Thanks for the tattoo, dude.”

With that, Tango pushed the door open and walked out, leaving Etho behind in the store.

It took Beef a second to notice, but when he did, he directed his full attention towards Etho. “Oh, sorry! Can I help you with something?”

“I, um...” He pulled his mask up even further up his face and stared down at the floor. It was a complete change from his relaxed demeanor from the rest of the day. “Just wanted to thank you for being nice to my friend. He was psyching himself a lot over it, and I think you really helped his nerves. I was impressed by how nice you were to him, to be honest.”

Oh. Oh! That was nice! Beef couldn't help but smile at that.

“Oh, no, it's just part of the job,” Beef said. “Thank *you* for being there for your friend. I'm sure he really appreciated that.”

The image of a tall man fully kitted out in piercings pulling his mask up even further and squirming at the compliment was a fun one. “Yeah, thanks. Um... bye.”

With that, Etho rushed out of the shop, the door swinging behind him.

Huh. Those were a fun set of clients.

Beef tuned back into reality when he heard Cleo snickering next to him.

He whipped around with furrowed eyebrows. “Aren't you supposed to be cleaning your area?”

“Well, I was,” Cleo said, leaning against the counter. “Then I heard something *very* curious. If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve thought he was two seconds away from asking you out.”

Etho? Asking *him* out? Beef had a healthy sense of imagination, but Etho seemed more nervous to deliver a compliment than flustered by him.

“You’re seeing things again,” Beef said. “I’m gonna clean my area now. You know, like *you* should’ve been doing.”

Cleo stuck her tongue out at him but returned to her area.

Beef rolled his eyes and picked up a new sharps container before heading back to his area.

It wasn’t that being asked out by Etho was a horrible thought. Beef had found himself smiling at some of his jokes throughout the session, and he was easy on the eyes. But they had only spent about an hour together. Wouldn’t it be weird to—Why was he thinking about this? He had a job to do.

So Beef emptied the needle into the sharps container and began cleaning the rest of his area, dumping his thoughts elsewhere. He had another client coming, and he needed to be prepared.

Cleo’s smug glances at him be damned.

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Damn it. It was Beef’s turn to be errand boy this week.

Beef sighed as he left his shop.

Let’s see, he had to order razors and sharps containers, which he did in between clients at the tattoo shop. Cub told him he would renew their deal with the sanitarian who came in on a regular basis. False said she already checked the expiration dates on their paints. Jevin had warned him about their bleach supply running low, but that was nothing a quick rummage online couldn’t fix. And Cleo—

Oh, right, Cleo always wanted fresh flowers in the shop for some god forsaken reason, and their current vase had started wilting long ago.

Granted, there was a business aspect to it. Flowers were always a nice touch to every business, not to mention a good part of their clients asked for floral designs. Cleo being able to take home the dead flowers and repurpose them for whatever was just a bonus. Either way, the flowers didn’t cost more than they brought in, so Beef was happy to comply.

“‘Ello, Beef!” was the first thing he heard as soon as he walked in. Stress stood at the counter with her usual cheer and smile. “Need another bouquet?”

“Yup,” Beef said. “Just the same as last time will be fine. I think that was... the white daisy arrangement? I have a picture if you need one.”

“Oh, no need for that, love. Just give me a minute to get me wrapping papers.”

With that, Stress ducked underneath the counter, and Beef waited. A moment passed before a man emerged holding a wad of wrapping papers.

“Hold this for me,” the man said, and—

Wait.

Beef paused. “Where did Stress—”

Then Stress popped out from underneath the counter, and the two started laughing.

“Yes! It actually worked!” Stress cried, fanning her face. She grinned. “We’ve been planning that since yesterday.”

Beef couldn’t help but chuckle at himself, too. “I *knew* there was something going on! You never stand by the counter.”

“All’s fair in love and war. I’m gonna get the flowers from storage now. Etho, be a dear and keep holding onto that for me.”

Etho rolled his eyes but continued holding onto the papers as Stress disappeared into the back. “Look at her making me do free labour. I come in to hang out with my cousin, and she makes me do work.”

Oh, right. Cousins. That explained it.

“I heard that!” came Stress’s voice, to which Etho only snickered.

There was silence now. Small talk was okay, right? Small talk was one of Beef’s strengths.

“So, do you just hang out here after your shifts?” Beef asked.

Etho shrugged. “It depends on who’s working here and when my shifts end.”

“Yeah, he just barges in whenever he pleases and loiters like a hooligan,” Stress snorted as she walked back to the counter, holding a bouquet of white daisies. She took the paper from Etho’s hands and began wrapping them proper.

“Okay, I’m guessing this is the same price as last time?” Beef asked, taking the shop’s credit card out of his wallet.

“Same as last time,” Stress said. She took his credit card and returned it when the transaction was complete. “But say, I wasn’t aware you two knew each other.”

“What, me and Etho? We’ve met.”

Etho nodded to that. There was nothing in that statement to refute.

“Oh, then why don’t you go along with Beef and make sure the flowers stay gorgeous on display?” Stress said, a tight grin on her face.

Etho blinked. “What?”

“These flowers are particularly fragile, you know. I don’t want Beef dropping them or anything that could ruin the flowers before they’ve had a chance to shine.”

“Hey!” Beef said.

Etho furrowed his eyebrows, but before he knew it, they stood outside the doors of Stress’s flower

shop.

“Daisies aren’t fragile at all,” Etho murmured. “I think this is just her revenge. Sorry you had to get caught up in all this.”

Well, it wasn’t like this was the most horrible of circumstances to be caught up in. Beef had gone through worse. Small talk with an acquaintance was far from the most uncomfortable experience in his life.

“No, I could use the company anyway,” Beef said. He adjusted the flowers in his hands and hoped he was making the right decision. “So, you don’t strike me as a local. Where’re you from?”

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That was the best decision he could’ve made.

As it turned out, Etho was a fellow Canadian who had moved down to the States after finishing his degree in engineering. After a brief stint in the industry, he quickly discovered the corporate world wasn’t for him and floated around in the job world. It was only after he got his first piercing at a place Stress recommended that he entered the piercing world, obtained his license, and began his current line of work. Despite the amount of stress Beef felt just listening to that story, the way Etho spoke about it was easy-going yet reminiscent, as if he were recounting a dream. It was an interesting way of speaking fit for an interesting person.

(That and he knew more Seinfeld references than Beef, which was honestly unfair.)

That wasn’t to say Beef didn’t share his own stories. But given how dull his own foray into tattooing was, he settled on... *stretching the truth* of some childhood stories.

“You’re lying,” Etho laughed as they walked into the tattoo shop together. “You’d never be able to tattoo again if you met a moose as a kid.”

“Like I said, you choose whether to believe me or not. I’m just telling a story.”

“A story that’s obviously not true. Moose don’t live in Quebec.”

Beef blinked, unsure of if he was being messed with or not. “Uh...”

Thankfully, a quickly approaching Cleo absolved him of needing to make that decision. She took the flowers out of his hands with a huff.

“Beef, are you bullshitting people again?” Cleo said as she set the flowers into their new vase. “Sir, I’m so sorry you just spent the entire walk here being lied to. He does this a lot.”

Beef balked while Etho chuckled quietly beside him. “What? C’mon, you’re ruining the magic! Did your parents never give you storytime?”

Cleo only smirked at him. Jerk.

“Um, I’ll let you get back to your work here,” Etho said. He took a step back and slipped his hands into his pockets. “It was nice talking to you, though.”

“Thanks for walking with me in the first place,” Beef said, smiling. “It’s not often I meet someone



who knows their Seinfeld more than me.”

Etho chuckled at that. Beef shouldn't have felt so proud making him laugh.

But before Etho could walk out of the store, Cleo said, “Why don't you two exchange contacts? You know, for future delivery purposes.”

... This was a one-time thing, and it wasn't even for delivery purposes; Stress had just decided that was the best way to get revenge on her cousin. But Beef wouldn't complain. Etho was an intriguing person, after all. He hoped Etho found him just as interesting.

Etho blinked but nodded. “Oh, sure. Here, give me your phone.”

Beef opened the contacts page on his phone and handed it over to Etho.

Cleo's watchful gaze told him he wouldn't be hearing the end of this.

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“And he was really about to say bye without exchanging numbers! The whole thing just made me wonder how the hell Beef has friends.”

“Thanks, Cleo,” Beef grumbled as he spooned rice into a bowl.

“You forget his only friends are us.”

“Thank you, too, Jevin.”

“Well, it's true.”

“More thanks to you, False—What's with you guys? Why're you all making fun of me?”

Four shrugs. Looked like that was just on the agenda for tonight's monthly meeting.

Beef sighed and set the bowl in front of Cub, who nodded in thanks.

This time, the group had thankfully decided on something simpler for dinner: fried rice. His kitchen wasn't in too much of a mess like it usually was after cooking. Instead, one wok sat on the stove, and a cutting board and knife rested on the counter. He'd clean the food scraps later with his friends. He had a table to finish setting and more roasting to endure.

But while there was nothing his friends loved more than poking fun at him, their teases always had elements of truth.

“I know we love giving you shit,” Cleo said, her voice calmer, “but it has been a real concern of mine since we moved here.”

Beef rolled his eyes at that and rummaged through the silverware drawer. “What are you, my mom?”

“No, but I am your friend. And I know you haven't made a single friend outside of work. Jevin may have been adopted into the group a bit late, but he doesn't count.”

Jevin opened his mouth to disagree, then nodded. “Yeah, that’s fair.”

They were right. They were right, and Beef hated it. To be fair, though, he had never felt the urge to make friendships with anyone outside their group. They were his family, friends, and co-workers all in one. Why would he need anyone else’s company?

But maybe that was the problem. He remembered his parents had told him not to put all his eggs in one basket when he had told them he was opening a tattoo store with his friends. While things had worked out for him on that front, there was always the chance somebody would take the opportunity to go elsewhere, explore their other options. And there was always the chance everyone would take that chance.

The thought made Beef sick to his stomach.

“I’m just saying,” Cleo said, “maybe making more friends would be good for you. You know, outside the tattoo shop. Too much business and personal stuff in one place doesn’t make anything good, darling.”

That was obvious. What wasn’t so readily obvious was how to make those friends in the first place.

Beef swallowed and focused on handing everyone their silverware. That was too embarrassing to admit.

Of course, Cub seemed to read his mind. “Just invite him to our thing at Targét this weekend,” he said. “Tell him to bring a friend, too, if you’re really that nervous about it.”

“I still need to give Targét a try. You guys keep talking about it, but I haven’t gone yet,” Jevin said.

And with that, the conversation switched from Beef’s lack of friends to Cub describing all the games at Targét.

But even as the conversation trucked onwards, Beef’s thoughts returned to Etho.

Etho was interesting. He was fun to be around. He was intriguing. Maybe that was a good first step into friendship.

Beef sat down and stuffed a spoonful of rice into his mouth.

He had the feeling he was making this out to be harder than it needed to be.

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Beef probably should’ve expected for Etho to agree to this hangout, but he hadn’t.

“I don’t get why you’re so nervous about it,” Cub said as he entered the doors of Targét. “We’re all just playing a bunch of games together.”

“I’m not nervous,” Beef huffed.

Cub scoffed at that. He didn’t need words to tell Beef he wasn’t believing his bullshit.

Targét was a strange place. From the outside, it was an oversized pyramid-like structure that

looked like it violated every zoning law in the city there was to violate. But the inside was a grand, royal palace of an arcade. Every detail of the interior was kitted out in decorations that were probably more expensive than Beef's entire annual rent.

(How an arcade made this much money, Beef didn't know and highly suspected money laundering shenanigans. But if the games functioned well, he supposed he'd keep quiet about it.)

Despite the decor, only a few people seemed to occupy Target at a time: staff and a couple scattered groups of people. That made Etho and his friend easier to spot against the background.

He had to prove Cub wrong. He wasn't nervous!

"Hey, guys!" Beef called, raising his hand. "Sorry for the wait."

Etho lifted himself from the wall he was leaning on. "Oh, no, it's nothing. We just got here, like, a minute ago. This is Doc, by the way. Doc, this is the guy I was telling you about."

The man next to him was taller than anyone in the group, outfitted in a white lab coat. Still, his outfit choices didn't hide the stretches of green, scaly tattoos over his neck and hands. A tattoo style that seemed quite familiar...

"Oh, did Jevin do your tattoos? The guy with the blue face?" slipped from Beef's mouth before he could think about it.

Doc blinked but nodded. "Yeah, how'd you know?"

Beef had to smile at that. He'd recognize that style anywhere. "We're coworkers. He's the best at doing that kind of skin texture style."

Cub hummed in agreement, and introductions started from there.

Beef felt his nerves slip away with each step they took towards the games.

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"I can't believe we almost got wiped out," Beef groaned, feeding the tickets he had into the ticket reader.

Doc and Etho only snickered from their ticket readers. Cub gave him a sympathy pat on the shoulder.

They had decided early on in the hangout to split into teams of two; that made some of the games simpler to play. The day had started off in their favor with Cub's knowledge of the games and the communication he shared with Cub. At least, their system had worked until Etho had enough time to study the games and figure out what could be exploited. Cub had been familiar enough with the games for them to keep their lead, but that didn't mean it wasn't a struggle.

Beef would've called it a bad day, but laughing and messing around with Cub was fun. They hadn't had the chance to relax like that in a while, and the addition of a couple new friends made the hangout that much more exciting. It was a nice breather from the everyday monotony of life as a working adult.

"Well, GG," Cub said, smiling as he retracted his game card from the ticket reader. Right before

he retracted it, Beef spotted an absurdly large number of tickets on the screen. He knew Cub had been one of the earliest customers of Targét, but jeez. “It was fun.”

Etho shared a glance with Doc before answering, “Yeah, it was. Thanks for inviting us.”

“Well, thanks for playing. Have a safe trip home, okay?”

The two waved their goodbyes before leaving. Only Beef, Cub, and the good feelings from the hangout remained.

“They’re smart,” Cub noted, to which Beef nodded.

They were. It took a certain level of genius to figure out game mechanics that quickly, and while Beef already had the feeling Etho was a smart person, he hadn’t expected *that*. Cub clearly hadn’t expected it either, judging by how casually he treated the first few games.

It was admirable. Beef found himself smiling just thinking about it.

“We know Etho’s a smart guy,” Cub said. Then he chuckled. “So, why’s he dumb enough to try being your friend?”

Beef rolled his eyes and elbowed Cub’s side. As if that would stop Cub from laughing at him.

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Beef’s hangouts with Etho followed that same pattern for a while: they’d invite each other to events with friends, learn something new about each other, and go home after saying polite goodbyes.

In that time, he thought he had gotten to know Etho pretty well. He completed his apprenticeship under Doc (who was apparently a fellow piercer), he kept an illegal hamster in his apartment named Chester, and he kept a concerning amount of fireworks stored in his closet (and looking at it now, the amount of casual crimes he committed were more concerning). He wasn’t able to pick a favorite flower upon being asked. He happily snacked on plain bread but turned his nose up at shrimp.

“They’re basically sea cockroaches,” he had told him once. “Why would I wanna eat that?” Beef conceded he had a good point, and their conversation about shrimp had ended there. But for as much as they spent talking, they had never had a one-on-one hangout with each other before.

That changed today.

While Beef didn’t have the luxury of stopping by cafes as much as he would’ve liked to, the busy atmosphere made for a perfect place to sketch out designs and try ideas. It was easy to get lost in the music and chatter, even during times like this when the cafe wasn’t as busy.

Today’s assignment was a design for an ankle tattoo. Cleo, apparently sick of looking down and seeing blank spaces on her foot, had asked him to surprise her with a design that suited the rest of her leg’s starchy, gorey aesthetic. Beef was happy to do that; after all, several of his own tattoos were designed by his other friends.

He hadn’t quite accounted for a tap on his shoulder.

Beef took his earbuds out, then blinked upon seeing Etho in front of him. A surprise, but not an unwelcome one. If he wanted privacy, he would've sketched in his apartment. "Oh, hi, Etho."

"Hey," Etho said. He gestured towards the table with the hand holding a cup of coffee. "Mind if I join you for a sec?"

"Oh, no, I don't mind. Pull up a chair."

Etho took the chair across from Beef's table and pulled it to the side before taking a seat. His gaze immediately fell on the sketchbook on the table. "Oh, sorry, are you working?"

Beef shrugged. "Technically. This is just a gift for one of my coworkers, though. She wanted a tattoo on her ankle and told me to surprise her, so this is what I'm drawing."

"An arrow through a skull?"

"I mean, her nickname in the tattoo world is Zombie. It suits the whole aesthetic she has going on."

And he truly did believe that. On the white sheet of paper in front of him, he already had the skull sketched and shaded. The arrow, so far, was a stick through the middle. He would've been embarrassed to show it under normal circumstances, but this was Etho. He had already seen Beef's finer works, and that was enough for him.

Etho hummed, his gaze settling on Beef's arm. "Is it supposed to match that butcher knife you have there?"

Beef glanced back towards his arm and laughed. He had nearly forgotten he had that tattoo in the first place. It practically disappeared under the crowd of tattoos he had on his arms. "No, no, that's a whole other thing. That was one of my first tattoos. I put it there as a joke—"

"You got a tattoo as a joke? You're full of surprises, Beef."

"Yeah? I mean, it's not a bad tattoo. It just doesn't match all the animal sleeves I got."

Looking at it now, his entire right sleeve was covered shoulder to hand with llamas, and his left sleeve housed all sorts of animals. It wasn't balanced in the slightest, but Beef could never bring himself to care. He had loved every animal on his skin, and love was the only thing that mattered to him.

"What're they all about anyway?" Etho said, looking him up and down. "I've always wanted to ask, but it always felt... rude, I guess."

Beef smiled. "And what stops it from being rude now?"

Etho didn't emote much, but the half-second of sheer panic on his face was a glorious one.

"No, I'm kidding," Beef laughed. He set his pencil on the table and held his arm out. He'd start with the llamas first; his family farm seemed to be the easiest to explain. "Here, I'll tell you about them. Stop me if it gets boring."

"It's not gonna get boring," Etho said.

"Is that a challenge?"

"Maybe."

With that, Beef explained the significance of every tattoo on his arms, starting from his first pet llama to the pet fish he and Cleo had broken university rules to take care of. And to his credit, Etho nodded along to it all. There was a fifty-fifty chance he was genuinely interested or he just happened to be the greatest actor Beef had ever seen. But even if the latter was true, he appreciated the effort.

Huh. Etho must've cared a whole lot about him to sit through all that.

They were real friends now. When had that happened?

"I'm amazed you sat through all that," Beef chuckled, picking the pencil back up.

Etho shrugged as if that was a normal occurrence in his life. "I don't mind. Tattoos are really important to you, so..."

Fuck. That was sweet. The sentiment made him smile.

"It's okay if it's boring," Beef said. He focused his gaze on the piercings on Etho's ears. If Etho got to ask a question, he supposed he could ask a question that had been burning in his head for the longest time. "Does this mean I can ask you how many piercings you have?"

But Etho's eyes crinkled into one of his smug smiles, one Beef had grown to recognize even with that mask on his face. "Nope. I only tell that to people who know *where* all my piercings are."

Beef looked him up and down.

Snowflake earrings hung from his earlobes, but those were far from the only piercings he had. His ears were dotted in different shades of silver piercings. Small rings trailed the outer edges of his ears. On his right ear, a bar extended from the outer edge to the inner edge. There was no hint of piercings anywhere else, and Beef didn't think they were quite close enough friends for him to guess *other* areas.

"I don't know, your ears?" Beef tried.

"Well, that's obvious."

"Nose?"

"Ears and nose aren't it. You'll have to guess the perfect combination if you wanna know." Etho laughed at the annoyed glance Beef sent him. "C'mon, Beefers, you can do it."

"Why can't you just tell me?"

"Where's the fun in that?"

Beef huffed as Etho laughed again. "Fine, be like that."

They settled into silence after that, Beef drawing the rest of the arrow while Etho sipped at his drink.

This was nice. Having Etho as a friend was nice.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

(walks in late with starbucks)

i wanted this to be the final chapter but the whole thing just kinda got away from me. anyway have 5k of beef being a dumbass

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

There was something to be said about manners in this establishment, and Beef seemed to be the only person willing to say anything about it.

“Oh, come on!” Beef cried, throwing his hands up at the foot Cleo had lifted onto the counter. “I *just* sanitised that.”

Cleo, being the rat bastard she was, grinned as she rolled her pants up. There was no way she wasn't doing this on purpose. “Guys, look! My ankle tattoo finally healed!”

And the other three enablers stopped what they were doing to crowd around her, ooh-ing and ah-ing at the new tattoo. Under other circumstances, Beef would've felt proud. He had created it, after all, and False had been there to act as Cleo's stress ball during the actual tattooing process. The whole ordeal had been worth it. The arrow through the skull had ended up being just the right design to tie her whole leg together.

But damn it, he had a job to do, and he would've pushed Cleo's leg off the counter had he not known it would still hurt with the recent tattoo.

“Get your foot off,” Beef huffed. He spritzed the surface with more bleach when Cleo reluctantly returned her foot to the floor, then wiped the counter dry. He shook his head. “You people, I swear.”

The other four only laughed before returning to their own sanitation duties.

Bastards. Bastards, all of them.

---

“So, they just laughed at you?”

“They just laughed at—Hey, don't you start laughing, too!”

Beef's warnings came too late. Etho was already chuckling at him in that Etho way he did, low and soft.

One-on-one hangouts with Etho were familiar now. While life and other priorities had the habit of taking their attention away, they always found their way back to either grabbing coffee together or walking each other back home after work. Opportunities for longer hangouts were rare, but they

made it work.

Speaking of which, the walk from Stress's flower shop to Beef's tattoo shop was a short one, but Beef appreciated the company anyway. It was a breather from the glaring lights in the tattoo shop and a good opportunity to stretch his legs. He didn't know what Etho got out of it, considering he went voluntarily with him most times.

"Oh, love, he *adores* you," Stress had told him one day when Etho had dipped into the storage room for the flower order. "You're better company than you think of yourself as."

Beef had lots of questions after that, but Etho had come rushing out of the storage room with a new fervor in his stride and cut the conversation to an end.

"What do you people get out of laughing at me?" Beef groaned.

"Not really anything. You're just an easy target."

"Easy target—you take that back!"

Etho only snickered that quiet, endearing laugh of his that would disappear under the sounds of the street if Beef weren't paying attention. It was a laugh that made Beef smile despite him being the one under fire now, just like the laughs of all his other friends. Joy was contagious, after all.

But before Beef could say more, they approached the front door to the tattoo shop. There was no delaying their goodbyes anymore.

"Well, thanks for walking me," Beef said, clutching the flowers closer to him. He offered Etho a smile he hoped came across as grateful. "You didn't have to."

Etho shrugged. "It was the least I could do. Have fun at work."

Beef thought towards the particularly difficult customers in store for him that day and snorted. "Yeah, I sure will."

The glass door slid open, revealing a familiar head of blonde hair.

"Oh, hey, False," Beef said. "Sorry for taking a while."

But False's attention wasn't on him. Her gaze was locked solely on Etho as she raised an eyebrow at him.

"Are you the piercing guy?" False asked.

Etho raised an eyebrow right back. "Yeah, I think so."

"Huh. Okay. Bye."

"Yup, bye."

God, they were both so painfully awkward around strangers. Just being around them made Beef want to die of secondhand embarrassment.

Beef said another farewell before taking False's hand in his and dragging her into the store with him. He set the new bouquet into its proper vase, eager to forget but—

"He has so many piercings," False muttered.



Well, she certainly hadn't said that in a judgemental tone; Beef had been on the receiving end of that too many times to not recognize it at an instant. She stared off into the distance, lost in thought. Except in the distance was Cub, who exchanged a confused glance with Beef before focusing back on cleaning his station. She was completely and utterly dazed.

By Etho, though? Beef would agree he was absolutely daze-worthy, but something about that didn't sit right with him.

Beef's gut twisted. He couldn't quite pin why.

"You got the flowers!" came Cleo's voice. When he turned, she was running her hands along the stems with a grin on her face. "Thanks, darling."

Beef snorted, but a customer walked in before he could retort.

Even as he discussed designs with the customer, something nagged at his mind.

---

Etho waiting for Beef to finish cleaning his station was nothing new, but him so obviously keeping an eye on his coworkers was.

"You okay?" Beef asked.

Etho tore his stare away from where Cub tattooed an ornate design on False's upper arm. "Yeah, I'm fine."

That wasn't true.

---

And even at their monthly team dinner, Beef couldn't help but feel something was off balance.

It was pizza this time, Jevin recently having bought a pizza stone despite his oven not reaching high enough temperatures to bake a pizza and Cleo having bought more tomato sauce than she knew what to do with. Combined with Beef's overly ambitious spice rack and the absurd amount of shredded cheese he always kept in his fridge, it was the perfect storm of conditions for the worst pizza ever made.

"Cub," Jevin called, "I love you so much, but if you add olives to that pizza, I have no choice but to throw you in the oven with it."

Cub responded by looking him in the eyes and popping an olive in his mouth.

"I—Beef, why the hell do you even have sliced olives? Who pre-slices their olives? Is this collusion?"

Beef was saved from addressing that question when Cleo plonked down at least a pound of pepperoni on one pizza, starting another argument. But he wasn't part of the chaos this time. Instead, it felt as if he was in his own bubble, universes away from his most loved ones celebrating

their friendship.

Ever since that one day he had felt strange, his and False's conversations had fallen short. They would greet each other when the other came into work, talk through payment, discuss designs, but the banter and casual energy that made their relationship so easy was gone. Where had it gone? Had he done something wrong? Or was False slipping away from him, just as he feared would happen one day?

Etho had stopped dropping by as often, too. He stopped hanging by Stress's shop as much, and their almost daily walks had been cut short. Etho had chalked it up to extra business when Beef had asked about it, but it still didn't seem quite right. He hadn't noticed an influx of people on their street of the city, after all.

Then Beef thought back to that awful, almost sick feeling in his gut those few weeks back. And it was compounded by another awful thought.

False had seemed so amazed during their first meeting then. Were they interested in each other?

Not that Beef had any problem with that. It was their business as full grown adults. His opinion shouldn't factor into who False or Etho were allowed to talk to.

So why did the thought make him feel so ill?

"Beef?"

Beef anchored himself back to reality. He could hear the screaming and cackling now, Jevin flopped on the floor over his ruined pizza and Cub and Cleo ganging up on him. Distantly, the oven hummed.

And False was in front of him, waving her hand.

Beef blinked. "Oh, hi."

"You back?" False mused.

"By unpopular demand! What's up?"

False gestured towards the scene in front of them. Beef understood immediately.

"Jevin, get off my floor," Beef sighed. "I just swept yesterday."

Jevin groaned but stood up. Cub and Cleo were too busy slap-fighting with oven mitts to notice. False laughed, picked up an oven mitt of her own, and joined in.

Beef patted Jevin on the shoulder as he whined about... olive juices or whatever. He wasn't certain anymore.

But this was his family. No matter what happened, he still loved them with all his heart.

---

The assertion came way after closing time, when Beef had no form of escape.

"Something's bothering you," Cleo said.

She had a tattoo machine in her hand. The fish tattoo on his left arm was at her mercy. This was not an optimal position to be in for this conversation.

"Really?" Beef said. He paused to move his arm into a better position for the touch-up. "I think that's just you."

That jab was rewarded with a smack to his head. Beef had no regrets.

"No, not me, you idiot," Cleo huffed. "You're, like... spacing out a lot more now. You're not paying attention like you used to. It's like you're off in another world most of the time. And, um..."

She fell silent. The heaviness of the night settled around them.

So he had. His behavior didn't interfere with his job; his coworkers would've nipped it in the bud long before it could, in that case. But that was his mistake: assuming they wouldn't notice if it didn't affect his performance. He was such an idiot. Of course they cared. Of course they would look after him, just like he had for them so many times.

It was time to come clean.

"Well, like," Beef stuttered out, "it's not easy, you know? I love all my friends—and I know I have no right to be like this—but it kinda hurts when two of my best friends start distancing themselves from me with no explanation. Like, I'd get it if they were busy, but..."

And there it was. The source of all his frustration for the past month. He thought it would've released some of the pressure on him, but it just seemed more pathetic to say it out loud. The way Cleo's expression softened didn't help. He just wanted to crawl under the chair and hide from the world.

"I'm sure it's not like that, darling," Cleo said. Her voice had always been disarming, comforting, and no matter how pathetic Beef felt, his feelings didn't change that. "Why do you feel like that?"

Beef took a deep breath and explained everything.

There was the release he had been looking for all this time. The longer he talked with the tattoo machine buzzing, the more reminiscent the scene seemed of their sleepovers back during their school days: nights spent drawing on each others' limbs with pen, their laughter and discussion hushed as to not wake up anyone else in the house. That was a fruitless effort more than anything. Beef could recall Cleo's mother yelling from the next room over to quiet down and his own parents banishing them to the farthest room in the house when they couldn't keep quiet. They were in their own universe again, a space Beef wasn't the tattoo shop's businessman, his coworkers' paternal figure, *himself*. He was just a living person, and he hadn't known he had missed that until he had it again.

The tattoo machine stopped when Beef trailed off into nothing. When Beef glanced over, he saw Cleo's brow furrowed into a frown.

"Well, that's certainly odd," she said. "I've noticed False being a bit aloof these days, but I don't think it's anything you're implying."

Implying? He was implying something?

"What am I implying?" Beef asked.

Cleo raised an eyebrow. "Um, that False and Etho are into each other? Isn't that what you're so bothered over?"

He hadn't meant to imply that, but that made too much sense. That was one of his first suspicions, after all. They had started becoming distant at the same time as each other, looked strangely at each other, hell, they even just looked like a good couple. Beef should've been happy for them. Why did his stomach turn at the thought of that?

He knew why. There was only one plausible reason.

"Oh my god," Beef said, "I'm a shitty person."

"What? Of course you're not a shitty person. You can't help how you feel."

"I'm being overprotective of False for no reason!"

"... What?"

It all made sense now. Beef's coworkers were the only thing he had that resembled family, and he knew they felt the same way, too. It wasn't completely unreasonable for him to fear one of his coworkers being hurt by something out of his control. But Etho was a good guy! He would never hurt anyone, and False could throw him across the Atlantic Ocean if he tried. There was nothing to be protective of, so why was he feeling this?

Cleo still looked confused. He should probably explain.

"Well, False is like our little sister, right? It makes sense that I wouldn't want anyone to hurt her, even unintentionally. And I know Etho would never hurt her, but—"

"Okay, slow down there," Cleo said. She was rubbing her head now, tattoo machine safely set down on her station. "So, you think this is all because you're afraid of False getting hurt?"

"... Yes?"

"That may be true to some degree, but I don't think that's the entire story."

She was trying to imply something. Beef didn't get it. He blinked to convey so.

Cleo sighed like a disappointed parent would. "God, you're the stupidest... Listen, just talk to them, okay? If I know you as well as I think I do, you've probably just been stewing on this without talking to anyone about it."

Beef wanted to object, but that was true.

"I knew it." Cleo picked up the tattoo machine. "You're not a bad person, though. We... We love you a lot, Beef. More than you could ever know. I promise you it'll turn out better than you think."

Beef had to smile. She said that so genuinely he couldn't help but believe it.

Then she whined at him to move his arm, and Beef understood exactly how their friendship worked.

---

Etho had left him on read when Beef suggested having a talk, but False responded right away to an invitation to brunch at his apartment before their shift. And Beef was...

Beef was nervous. Hell, he had woken up early and stress-cleaned the entire apartment. But when False stepped in and opened his fridge with a yawn with all the familiarity of someone who lived there, Beef felt all his worries melting away.

"False, I made breakfast burritos," Beef said, gesturing towards the plate on the dining table. "Why're you raiding my fridge like a gremlin?"

False pulled out the gallon of lemonade Beef didn't even know he had and began pouring them into two glasses. "I'm getting lemonade. Do you want any?"

"No."

"... Oh. Well, I'm pouring you some anyway."

They settled into casual conversation quickly after that, both taking a seat at the table while Beef grumbled about someone sneaking lemonade into his house. And it was like nothing had happened at all: their conversation was light, quick, everything it had been before. If Beef hadn't spent so long agonizing over the whole situation, he would've assumed everything was back to normal.

But there was no avoiding the conversation, and there was no avoiding Cleo's evil eye if he didn't talk about it.

"So, I wanted to talk about something today," Beef started.

False sighed. Beef regretted this decision immediately, but before he could take it back, she said, "Yeah, I figured. I've been acting shifty lately, haven't I?"

"Well, I think all of us acted that way at one time or another."

The best part of that was it wasn't a lie. Beef remembered Jevin dropping off the face of Earth when Beef and Cleo had invited him to join the shop as a tattoo artist. Turned out he had faltered at the last moment and spent the next three weeks doubting himself as an artist before deciding to take the risk. Cub had avoided Beef and Cleo around their university's campus after they had asked him to lunch. Turned out he had panicked at the thought of making genuine human connections after spending most of his life relying on himself. Cleo had her own shifty moment in high school when she refused to talk to Beef after Beef had complimented one of her sculptures in the art room. Turned out she thought he had been making fun of her like so many others had at the time. Hell, Beef had his own shifty moments all the time, so many he couldn't even begin to count them all.

False must've remembered them, too, because she smiled at that. "Yeah, I guess. But I owe all of you an explanation, don't I?"

"On your own terms."

"Okay, well..." False shifted, her gaze dropping to a bleach stain on the table. Her smile dropped in favor of something more nervous than Beef had ever seen from her before. False was composed, cool, collected; seeing her like this felt strange. "Promise not to tell anyone?"

Beef had to chuckle at that. It felt as if False were a child about to tell him her favourite colour. "I promise."

"I'm serious. You can't even tell Cleo, okay? I know where you live."

That was true. He nodded and tried fixing a serious look on his face.

False gulped. She gingerly lifted a finger to her ear and tapped at her earlobe. “I, um... I wanna get a piercing.”

A piercing.

She had been distancing herself over wanting a piercing.

The disbelief must’ve shown on his face, because False scrambled to elaborate.

“I mean, I know I could’ve just gotten it and nobody would’ve cared, but it feels weird trying another form of body art, you know? I have—” She shrugged her jacket off and tugged her gloves off, revealing a series of interconnected tattoos she had completed over the years. Her specialty had always been connected tattoos that told a story, after all. “I have all these tattoos. You know I have more.”

Beef nodded. False was the only one between the five of their group to have the pain tolerance for a ribcage tattoo. If anything, she was the most tattooed out of all of them.

“It feels like I’ve trapped myself into one artform. Like, tattoos are nothing, but a piercing feels like too much. I don’t really know why...”

She fell silent at that. Beef supposed this was where he began to talk.

“What kind of piercing do you want?” Beef asked.

False’s face brightened at that. “Oh, I just wanted some on my ears for now to start off easy. You know, like the ones Etho has.”

More things started clicking into place at that.

“Etho?” Beef said.

“Yeah. I want the bar one he has, but I think I’ll start with just the lobes for now.”

“What’s stopping you?”

False didn’t answer.

“False.”

She stayed silent.

“You’re not afraid of new experiences, are you?”

More silence.

Beef burst out laughing.

False huffed and kicked him underneath the table, her face reddening. “It’s a new experience, okay? There’s a lot of things that could go wrong with it. You know I had my own scare with some tattoo stuff early on.”

That was true. It took a scare with the sanitation side of tattooing for False to never forget her lessons ever again. Beef shouldn’t have found this as amusing as he did.

He calmed his laughter down to a grin. “Yeah, yeah, I know. Would it help if someone went with you? You should ask Cleo to pick out some earrings with you.”

“I thought about it, but the only time I’m free is Saturday, and she always has her movie nights with Joe then.”

Right. Cleo had already canceled on him twice. She would sooner never pick up a tattoo gun again than ditch her roommate like that again.

“Okay, what about Cub?” Beef said.

“He’s booked all night.”

Oh, shoot, he always was. Cub was the definition of a workaholic. Beef needed to have another talk with him, but if he had already booked clients, there wasn’t much he could do.

Beef frowned. “Jevin?”

“He said one client’s job is going to take, like, five hours with the kind of tattooing he does.”

That was true. Jevin’s specialty lied in skin details, transforming human skin to something entirely different. That required more time and focus than Beef could imagine.

“So, who’s left?” Beef asked.

False’s face blanked. “Are you kidding?”

“No?” He thought, thought, thought again, then he realized. “Oh! *I’m* left—”

“You sure are,” False said dryly, “though given your fashion sense, I’m not entirely sure about this.”

Beef gasped. “How dare you? I’ll have you know that my nickname in college was Beef Dressing just ‘cause of how well-dressed I was!”

“Ew.”

“Yeah, beef dressing sounds kind of gross. But I’ve got fashion sense!”

“You’re wearing boxers and a button-up floral shirt.”

“Fashion, False. Fashion.”

False shook her head, but she was smiling and that was all that mattered. “You’re so ridiculous. Are you coming with me or not?”

*Can you come support me?* That was the translation.

How could Beef say no to that?

---

The walk down the street to the piercing shop wasn’t as far as Beef had expected. Then again, Beef clearly didn’t know what he was expecting given how surprised he was at the interior of the

piercing shop.

The walls were lined with cabinets full of piercings, from small beady piercings to show-off opulent beauties. While all colours were available, he could tell at a glance that most of the piercings in this store were white, gold, and silver. Somehow, it felt simultaneously homey and elegant. That was probably a good vibe to have as a piercing shop.

Beef tapped False on the shoulder and waited for her to turn to him before giving her a thumbs up. *You good?*

False smiled and followed that motion. *I'm good.*

Then they heard footsteps, and somebody emerged from the door beside the register.

Etho.

“Sorry about that,” Etho said. “I thought Grian was supposed to be managing the register today but—Oh, hello, neighbors.”

It seemed he recognized them, too.

“Hi, can I get a piercing?” False said, direct as always.

And here, Etho switched from the dork Beef knew and loved into his professional self, his back straightening and expression holding more focus. The transformation between friend to professional was always a startling one, even as Etho maintained his casual air.

"You have something in mind already?" Etho asked, walking over to the display case.

False nodded. "Lobe stud piercing. Just one. I have no metal allergies, if that's something to be concerned with."

"Great, that makes things easier. Our stud earrings are on the middle shelf, if you wanna direct your eyes there."

True to his word, there was an array of stud earrings at around Beef's waist level in the display cases, from jewels so small they were barely visible to earrings that didn't look like they would fit on an ear. There were too many choices to pick from. Judging by the split second of panic on False's face, she felt the same way.

"Yeah, we've got a lot of choices here," Etho chuckled. "Any material or colour you were thinking of?"

False hummed, her gaze darting from piercing to piercing. Knowing her, she didn't just want a pretty rock like Beef would; she wanted something to integrate within her life. And although Cleo and Cub were closer to her than Beef was, he still liked to think he knew her well enough.

"Well, it needs to be pretty resistant because of all your martial arts stuff, right?" Beef said.

False blinked, then nodded.

"Then you'll want to look at some of our stainless steel or platinum stuff," Etho said, gesturing to a row on the display case. "The platinum stuff is pretty expensive, though, so I think for your lifestyle, stainless steel could be a good fit."

That narrowed down their options quite considerably. Now came the hardest part.



At least, that was what Beef thought before False's face brightened and she pointed at a deep blue set of studs.

"This one!" False cheered.

Beef took a closer look. Huh. Same shade as both his and False's eyes. "Oh, because of your eyes?"

"No, because it's the same colour as Jevin's face. It'll remind him to actually touch his tattoos up once in a while."

Beef coughed out a laugh at the same time Etho just barely suppressed one. Clearly, neither had expected that answer.

"Okay, are we going with that one then?" Etho asked. "You'll need to keep this on for six to eight weeks, so pick one you really like."

False hummed and pointed at the earring again. "Yes, I'm sure."

"Alright. Stand back, please."

Beef stepped back with False, and Etho unlocked the display case to take the earring out.

Afterwards, Etho led the two through the door he had come out of, then into a smaller room that was more reminiscent of a clinic room than a piercing shop. At the center of the room was a cushy black chair, as well as a smaller office chair beside it. Cabinets and counters lined the walls, and a sink was stationed at the very corner of the room. On top of one counter, an autoclave rested.

"You two can take a seat. I don't think you need me to explain what I'm doing to you, but I'll do it anyway," Etho said, snapping his gloves off and washing his hands in the sink. He snapped another pair of gloves on, then began rattling off the sanitization process.

False took the opportunity to take a seat on the black chair. Beef took the seat next to her.

Soon, everything had been properly sanitized. Etho changed gloves and washed his hands one more time before holding up a cotton swab.

"Next step is sanitizing your ear. It's gonna tickle a bit," Etho said.

Given False's high pain tolerance combined with how ticklish Beef knew she was, this might've been the worst part of this appointment. Still, after a grimace and an involuntary chuckle, that part was over.

Now came the needle.

"Ready? Deep breaths," Etho murmured. "In, out."

False held her hand out.

Beef latched their hands together and squeezed.

Then it was over.

"And it's done," Etho said. "You're doing good. Just keep breathing. The jewelry's going in now."

"It feels warm," False chuckled.

“It feels like that sometimes. After I sanitize your ear, we’re done.”

True to his word, they were out into the lobby within a minute. After payment was processed, Etho explained aftercare procedures.

"Don't forget any of that, and especially don't touch your piercing." Etho handed False a slip of paper from a stack. "Here's everything I told you again in case you forget. Beef, make sure she doesn't forget."

Somehow, those words felt familiar.

Beef laughed and took another slip Etho handed him. “She’s got it, but I’ll keep an eye out.”

False rolled her eyes, but her smile betrayed her. “Hurry up, I told Cub we’d be back by eight.”

Beef waved her off as she walked out of the store with a new bounce in her step. When she reached sunlight, her piercing shined brilliantly. It fit right in, as if it had always been there.

A cough brought him back to reality.

Right. He was here, standing in front of Etho from across a desk, who was staring at him strangely. Etho wasn’t the professional piercer now—he was Beef’s friend. A friend who had been acting unlike himself lately.

“You guys are all really close, aren’t you?” Etho asked.

Beef thought that would’ve been obvious from the start, but he nodded anyway. “Yeah. You know, like family.”

“Family?”

“Family.”

Etho fell silent at that, staring at him with that same strange look. Just before Beef could excuse himself, he said, “I’ll text you, okay? Thanks for dropping by.”

It was strange. But it wasn’t bad.

Beef stumbled through his own goodbyes before jogging to catch up with False, who was already close to approaching their tattoo shop.

“You couldn’t wait for me?” Beef huffed.

“Sorry, I don’t like watching PDA,” was False’s confusing response before she pulled open the door.

Beef didn’t have time to think about that. He was already walking in through the door with False.

In a rare moment between customers, all heads turned towards them. And of course, the exact type of chaos Beef expected unfolded.

“False!” Jevin called. “You got a piercing!”

“Yeah, it’s the same colour your face is supposed to be,” False sneered. “Get a touch-up, Jev.”

“Wow! I hate you!”

“Guys, please,” Beef said, right as both of them ignored him and proceeded to squabble.

Cub shuffled to take his phone out. “Hold on, let me FaceTime Cleo. She would wanna see this.”

Beef stood in the midst of chaos, Cub providing no help. As always.

A delighted screech from Cub’s phone told him the call went through.

“False! My darling!” came Cleo’s voice. “You look so beautiful! Joe, look, my little sister got a piercing!”

False whipped around from her squabble with Jevin to properly greet Cleo and Joe, whose only presence on Cub’s screen was a shoulder.

Then the door swung open, and it was as if a switch had flipped.

“Hi, welcome!” Beef called. “You here for an appointment or a walk-in?”

## Chapter End Notes

i dont actually like this one. the plot took a bit to figure out 😞 ngl i got carried away with the friend group dynamic and now i am Obsessed. didnt mean to make it drag out for so long D: next chapter is more beetho focus

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

thank u to tika for giving me the idea for the aesthetics description, you rock you artist  
you

cw: discussion of past animal death, mention of past binge drinking

There was something to be said about texts involuntarily making him grin, but Beef didn't want to hear his coworkers giving him shit.

**Etho [02:11]** Hey I'm taking you to dinner later tonight, my treat

**Etho [02:11]** I don't care if you have plans

**Etho [02:14]** Ok maybe I care a little bit

For once, it didn't matter that Etho had apparently texted him at two in the morning. That was a scolding for another time. For now, Beef was content chuckling to himself and typing back that he was, indeed, free for dinner tonight.

"You look like an idiot."

Beef jumped and whirled around to meet Jevin, who had somehow snuck into the tattoo shop and now stood behind the register, unlocking the drawer to take his notebook out.

"Holy hell, you scared me," Beef sighed. "Also, you still haven't gotten your face touched up, so who's the idiot now?"

"Still you."

Well, Beef had no argument there. Instead, he slid his phone into his pocket and focused himself on his goals for the day. He had two clients already lined up that day in a couple hours, he still needed to design another client's flower tattoo, he still had his own—

Oh, right.

"Hey, Jev," Beef called. "You mind putting my dragon design on me? You know, the chest one I've been drawing?"

Jevin, who was already at work sketching in his notebook, snorted. "You're better at animal designs than me. Why don't you do it on yourself?"

"Um, it's kinda hard to see while you're tattooing your chest. And don't sell yourself short, Jevin. Your specialty may be skin textures, but you're still very talented in everything and an amazing friend and person—"

"Okay, okay, stop, jeez," Jevin groaned. "Stop talking, and I'll do it for you. It's gonna have to wait a while, though. I'm kinda busy."

Oh, Jevin. He hadn't changed a bit.

Beef opened his mouth to say as such, but Jevin spoke first.

"That Etho?" Jevin asked, tilting his head to point to Beef's phone. When Beef nodded, he continued, his hand moving carefully across the page. "Good. Glad you guys made up. Looking at you during the whole thing was miserable."

Made up? That would require them to be fighting in the first place.

Jevin snorted at what Beef was certain was confusion on his face. "Just give me the design, and we'll work something out later."

That sounded reasonable. Beef moved to pocket his phone—

"Oh, and Beef?"

Beef's gaze fell on him. Jevin's hadn't moved from the page.

"I meant what I said. If it happens again, I'll kick his knees in."

---

Given that terrifying statement from Jevin, Beef was glad he was the only one left to lock up that night.

"Wow, that's dark. Where's everyone else?" Etho asked, whistling upon seeing the void behind Beef.

Beef rolled his eyes as he locked the tattoo shop doors behind him. "Cub suckered False and Jevin into playing at Targét with him. Cleo always spends Saturday nights with Joe. What, do you guys close with everyone?"

"Yeah, but that's because we close at a reasonable time."

He had him with that one. For as early as their tattoo shop opened, midnight probably wasn't a reasonable time for a tattoo shop to close. But to be fair, most of the last few hours were spent cleaning rather than tattooing. It all evened out in the end.

"Fine, you win that one. Anyway," Beef said, eager to move past the grin that was definitely present under Etho's mask. "Where're you taking me?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

Beef rolled his eyes and followed Etho as he began walking.

He missed this. He missed this more than he would ever let on.

And that was how they ended up at the ramen bar Etho had told him about a while back. They swapped stories about various projects they'd completed over the past month, about their coworkers' shenanigans, about everything they had missed. It was bizarre: they had only stopped talking for a month, yet Beef found himself sticking as close to Etho as he could, as if he would leave again.

There was no logic to it. There was no logic to anything when it came to Etho. And when it came

to Etho, there were always surprises.

"Liquid Courage, please," Etho said to the bartender. "Make that two. Unless you want some."

Liquid Courage? Beef distantly remembered spotting it on the alcohol side of the menu, some kind of specialty cocktail. He supposed he shouldn't have been so surprised at Etho ordering alcohol at a bar, but...

"No, I'm good. I didn't know you drank," Beef said. "Not that there's anything wrong with it, I just didn't know."

Etho shrugged as the bartender poured him a glass. "I don't."

Huh. Beef didn't know what to make of that.

"You mind walking me home tonight?" Etho asked. "It's dark, and I'm scared. You never know what's out there to getcha."

Beef rolled his eyes. If anything, Etho was the most risk-blind person he had ever met, from the time he had walked straight into a pole to the time he had walked all the way across town in the dark and had the audacity to wonder why Beef was so worried. "No, you're not."

"Yeah, I'm not. You mind walking me back anyway?"

Well, Beef wasn't so keen on Etho walking back home alone, especially with a couple drinks in his system. What kind of friend would he be if he didn't make sure Etho returned home safely? This had nothing to do with Beef's own selfish need to stay as close to Etho as possible.

Beef gulped down the rest of his water and laughed. "Not like I have anything else going on."

---

Somehow, the night fell darker throughout their walk to Etho's apartment. The stars were hidden away tonight, and the streetlamps and occasional convenience store alone were left to illuminate the streets.

That, and of course, Etho.

"Thanks for walking me all the way here," Etho said once they made it up to the door of his apartment.

Beef shrugged in response. It had been a five minute walk at worst—he understood why Etho was so fond of the place if it was so close to where he lived. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary given their frequent walks together.

Then Etho took a deep breath, muttered some colourful words underneath his breath, and said, "Do you wanna come in?"

Beef paused at that.

There was a new heaviness to his words, something serious from someone who prided himself on escaping the pressures of industry and thriving in the happiness that came with absolute freedom. Despite how much he had told Beef already, Etho was a private person. Every fact he shared was a

tad removed from him, not too personal, not exposing of any weaknesses. So an invitation to see his apartment, the side of him he only showed to people he absolutely trusted? It was a heavy ask.

So no, contrary to popular opinion, Beef wasn't stupid enough to reject that trust.

"Sure," Beef said. It felt too nonchalant for what was actually being asked.

Etho opened the door to his apartment, and Beef...

Okay.

The first thing that caught Beef's eyes were the colourful sticky notes slapped onto the walls almost at random, as if Etho just wrote one down when he needed to remember something. LED lights were strung up wherever there was a place for Etho to hang one. Potted plants of all sizes were placed almost haphazardly (Beef had the feeling he would trip on one tonight. Life just seemed to work out that way sometimes). It was as if a whole laundry list of aesthetics had mashed into one. And the most intriguing of all: an ordinary couch smack in the middle of all the chaos.

"Wow," Beef said, blinking. "Your place has so much... personality."

Etho's eyes crinkled as he chuckled. Another Etho-ism he had missed dearly. "I call it the Monstrosity."

"How does your landlord let you do this? Aren't a lot of these fire hazards?"

"Everything's allowed if your landlord doesn't catch you."

Beef stared. Why was he not surprised?

"Anyway," Etho said, "can I get you anything to drink? Anything to eat? It was a long journey here, you know."

"It was a five-minute walk."

"You're getting old, Beefers. Can't let you get malnourished on me now."

While Beef didn't doubt that came from at least some part of Etho's heart that cared about his well-being, he had spent enough time befriending emotionally-stunted people to spot this popular trick. And after trial and error, he had discovered only one way of bypassing it.

"You're delaying what you really wanna say," Beef said. "You didn't just ask me here for no reason, and I know you didn't drink enough to forget. So what is it?"

Etho's face blanked, but not to any extent Beef had seen before. It was cold, almost robotic, devoid of anything that made him *him*.

It was uncomfortable. Beef's skin prickled.

"Getting right to the point, huh? I guess we should, yeah," Etho said. He took a seat on the couch and gestured for Beef to sit next to him. After Beef settled into his seat, he resumed speaking.

"First of all, I should probably apologise for avoiding you for the past... I don't know, too long. So, sorry for that. It wasn't you, it was me dealing with something."

This sounded an awful lot like a shitty teenage breakup speech, but Beef pushed that to the back of his mind. Something enough to shake Etho this much couldn't be insignificant.

“Well, what was it?” Beef asked.

Etho hesitated, the very tips of his cheeks raising just a tad. He must’ve been pursing his lips. “It’s kind of stupid.”

This situation felt familiar. Beef knew exactly how.

Beef would say he hated to expose False like this, but that would be a lie. What kind of friend would he be if he didn’t?

“I mean,” Beef started, “False was acting the same way to me, and it turned out she just wanted a piercing. Whatever you’re about to tell me, it can’t be stupider than that.”

Etho burst out laughing, resembling a hyena more than a human.

Whether that was a good thing or bad thing, Beef couldn’t tell with that kind of laugh. He smiled in an effort to obscure his ever-increasing nervousness.

Etho’s eyes crinkled when he calmed enough to stop laughing. “Oh, you’re definitely not gonna like this answer then.”

“Try me,” Beef said, and he braced himself to hear the worst.

“I wanted to get a tattoo.”

Oh.

Part of him sighed in relief. The problem could’ve been anything from money issues to being told he was going to die in two days. Troubles over tattoo decisions were possibly one of the least dangerous parts of adult life.

The other part of him wanted to slap Etho for being so damn dramatic about it.

Etho laughed again, presumably at the expression that must’ve been on Beef’s face. “Yeah, I told you it was stupid.”

“What is it with you people and being unconfident in your decisions?” Beef scoffed.

But that was besides the point. No matter how stupid it was, no matter how much it made Beef want to stand out in the cold for hours on end, he had a friend who needed reassurance.

That and he had more questions.

“I don’t see why you avoided me,” Beef said. “I could’ve pointed you in the right direction. I know some reputable shops on the other side of town.”

The humour disappeared from Etho’s face, and he flicked his gaze to the side.

That was, yet again, another expression Beef didn’t want to see on Etho’s face. He fixed what he hoped was a comforting smile on his face and placed a hand over Etho’s. “Hey, it’s still not too late. I know asking people about it can be really rough—”

“It had to be you.”

Beef stilled. “What?”



Etho hesitated before speaking again, his gaze still pointed as far away from Beef as possible. “It would’ve been easy to ask you for other shop recommendations or to just walk in and make an appointment with one of your friends. But the only person who can put this tattoo on me is you.”

Beef paused, his mind running at light speed to piece together all the information he had into a logical conclusion. His heart pounded, and suddenly their touching hands felt warmer, firmer, as if there was importance to it.

“Why me?” was the only string of words Beef could pull together.

“... Do you remember when we first met?” Etho said. “When you were putting that tattoo on Tango?”

If Beef dug back far enough in his memory, he remembered Etho accompanying a friendly, nervous laughter of a man, whose physical details eluded him at the moment. There was a lightning bolt tattoo involved, but it had been so long ago that Beef couldn’t recall much more. Nevertheless, he nodded.

“You were just...” Etho turned to meet Beef’s eyes, and he gazed so adoringly at Beef that he felt he couldn’t breathe. “You were so *kind*. I know you told me back then that you were just doing your job, but I don’t agree with that. All of the things you do to make everyone feel more comfortable—that says more about you than it does your job. But you’re more than that. You’re patient, you’re gentle, you’re creative, you’re so unapologetic about who you are, you’re so—”

Etho fell silent. He turned his hand to lace their fingers together.

For a reason Beef couldn’t pinpoint, his throat went dry.

“You’re you,” Etho said quietly, tenderly, as if he were speaking to just himself.

There was no way he meant everything he had just said. He was drunk. He was tired. He was anything but sane enough to say this to Beef of all people.

“I mean,” Beef stuttered out when the silence grew too thick, “that’s a lot of people, you know? You’ve gotten to know my friends pretty well at this point.”

Silence.

Etho laughed. “Oh my god, Beefers. How did I know you were gonna say that?”

“Well, you’ve gotten to know me pretty well at this point, too.”

And that was true. Etho knew him so well it was unfair.

“Anyway,” Etho said pointedly, “the kind of tattoo I wanted is really special, and it’d take a special kind of person to get it exactly how I want it to be. I knew you’d probably agree to take me on as a client, but...”

“But what?”

And instead of answering, Etho pulled out his phone and pulled Beef closer with their interlocked hands. “Here, I wanna show you something.”

Okay. Beef couldn’t predict where this night went anymore. He might as well accept that.

Etho turned the screen to face Beef, then Beef understood.

It was a drawing of a white cat on white copy paper. The cat lied on the ground with its feet tucked underneath its body, not unlike a loaf. Its eyes were shut and face content. Flowers of all colors and sizes surrounded the cat, as if it were laying in a blanket of flowers.

“Stress drew this a long time ago,” Etho said. “Her name was Sidekit. I found her on the street during my second year in uni, and I was enough of a sucker to take her in immediately. It felt like she was my parent sometimes, with all the yelling at me when I binge-drunk and yelling at me to get up in the morning to feed her and... all the yelling at me in general, really. She was always the one looking after me, not the other way around like it should’ve been. So...”

Oh. Suddenly everything made much more sense.

Because this was the most vulnerable Etho had been with him throughout their entire friendship. That kind of vulnerability—laying his past out, revealing just how shattered life without his companion had left him for a while—required so much strength it was almost exhausting. Beef should know; his body was marked with evidence of all the animals who left him a better person than before.

It had taken thought, but this was his decision. Etho had decided he trusted Beef enough.

Before Beef could string together a coherent response, Etho pointed at his upper arm.

“I want it here,” Etho said. “I did some research, and it shouldn’t be too unbearable. I saw False getting a tattoo there, and she wasn’t dying. I think.”

Beef smiled. Emotions were hard, but tattoos—that was something he knew intimately. “I don’t think you should be comparing your pain tolerance to False’s. But this tells me you’re nervous about getting it.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say *nervous*,” Etho said. Then he paused. “Maybe a little bit. It’s just because it’s a new thing. I’ve only ever had piercings before, so I don’t really know what it would be like.”

Huh. There was an easy solution to that. Beef just wasn’t sure Jevin wouldn’t hate him after this, seeing as how insecure he was about being watched during the tattoo process.

That was a risk worth taking.

“I’m getting a tattoo put on me sometime soon,” Beef said. “If you want, you can come in and watch the whole process. Then if you still want the tattoo, we can arrange that.”

Etho’s face brightened. “Are you sure? I don’t want to intrude on anything.”

“What would you be intruding on?”

“... I don’t know,” Etho said. He turned to meet Beef’s eyes again. “But Beef, I never want to do that again.”

The eye contact was too jarring for something that should’ve been normal for them by now. Nevertheless, Beef maintained it. “Do what?”

“Avoid you. Stop talking to you. That was...” Etho shook his head. “I’m really sorry for that. I’m gonna try being more honest with you from now on. But if I make you uncomfortable, you need to tell me to stop.”

But before Beef could latch onto that line of questioning, he released their hands and stood up.

“Wanna meet Chester?”

Okay. This was what was happening now.

His hand felt cold, but Beef stood up with him nonetheless.

---

Beef was halfway to walking towards his apartment when everything clicked into place: why he had been so devastated at the thought of his friends getting together, why seeing Etho sad made him so sad, why Etho’s presence felt like home, why their hands fit just right together, why he had been feeling everything he felt for the past months.

Beef stopped, laughed, and dialed a number on his phone.

“... Hello? You’re lucky movie night just ended.”

“Cleo, buddy, you’re not gonna fucking believe this.”

---

“I knew it, you know.”

“I know, you don’t have to rub it in.”

“I knew the whole time. I was joking about him wanting your number when you two first met. I was just trying to piss you off, but—okay, okay, I’ll stop.”

Beef rolled his eyes when Cleo set two glasses on the kitchen counter and began pouring lemonade into them. “What’s with you people and raiding my fridge for lemonade? I don’t even want it.”

“Well, I’m pouring you some anyway,” Cleo snickered.

“You know that’s what False said?”

“She has good taste. Unlike *you*.”

Beef sighed and took the glass.

Late-night hangouts hadn’t been uncommon when they were in school: sleepovers with very little actual sleeping, cramming for finals, parties in the dorm with just them and maybe Cub and False when they had the time. But now that they were adults with actual responsibilities, sleep deprivation was a dangerous game to play. They hadn’t had one of these in a long time.

So the scene of one light illuminating the kitchen while the rest of the world slept around them was nothing unfamiliar. In fact, the memories it brought back were comforting, nostalgic. And it certainly helped that the person with him now was the same person who had had his back for all those years and counting.

That being said, he still wanted to chuck himself out the window.

“Okay, come on. This can’t be the worst person you’ve seen me get a crush on,” Beef said. It was the only way he could think of defending himself.

“Don’t kid yourself, darling,” Cleo said nonchalantly, as if she were commenting on the weather rather than her best friend’s love life. “You’re in love with that man.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Cleo scoffed and set her lemonade down. “Okay, I know I just sounded incredibly condescending, but it’s true. You’ve had some horrendous crushes before, made terrible decisions before, but you always got over them in, like, two days with enough ice cream. Heartless bastard.”

“Well, as we established, they were pretty horrendous.”

“Cheers to that one. But really, I mean it. You were more devastated when Etho stopped talking to you than you were when Cub dropped off the face of the planet for a week.”

“Okay, Cub was a physics major, that’s normal for them.”

Cleo paused. “I’ll give you that one. But seriously, listen.”

And true to her words, all traces of the playfulness she kept so carefully in her tone vanished. There was still a smile on her face, yes, but it was a wistful smile, the sort that was shot at a kid asking questions they shouldn’t be, not a best friend. This wasn’t something to make fun of Beef for anymore; this was a serious matter.

“I’ve never seen you like someone so much,” Cleo said, “and I’ve never seen you so happy with just one person. I know there’s me and the rest of our little shop, but... you’re happy. The butterflies, the ‘Is he gonna text me back?’, the flutters—that’s a crush. You’ve gone beyond that now. You’re in love, and it’s honestly been beautiful to watch. The only question is if you can accept that or not.”

Beef lowered his gaze to the lemonade in his glass, watching light flicker through the liquid.

It was all true. Etho had been someone different from the moment he had stepped into Beef’s life, and he had become so intertwined in it that it became upsetting to have him distance himself from that. To some degree, Beef knew it was true for Etho, too. They walked each other home, waited for each others’ closing times, no longer kept track of who owed who dinner. Even Etho nudging his shoulder made him feel grounded, anchored. He felt safe. It had taken years for Beef’s other friends to gain that same privilege.

So, again and again, Cleo was right. He was in love now, and not even their time apart could divorce him from that fondness.

“I hate it when you’re right,” Beef chuckled weakly.

“Then try not being wrong for a change,” Cleo said.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m just...” Beef rubbed his eyes and for a moment, relished in the coolness of his fingers against his eyelids. “I can accept that.”

Cleo offered him one of her rare warm smiles. “For what it’s worth, I think you make him as happy as he makes you.”

“That’s stupid.”

“Well, okay, genius, I was trying to be reassuring and all, but you can ignore my brilliant observations like a blithering fool.”

“That’s Joe language. Stop that.”

Cleo laughed and shot him a bright grin. “Yeah, yeah, you can’t not pick up on some words when you live with Joe.”

Beef leaned back in his seat, finally feeling his nerves die down. He would be okay. He was in love and it was the scariest thing he’s ever gone through, but he would be okay.

“Anyway, how’d that movie night go?” Beef asked.

“Oh, awful,” Cleo said, and she rattled on about whatever shitty Halloween movie she had roped Joe into watching and mocking with her.

Beef nodded along, taking a sip from his glass of lemonade and wincing at the tartness of it.

No matter what, he’d be okay.

---

“So,” Beef said on their next walk together, “you do remember what you said last night, right?”

Etho scoffed. “Yeah, I wasn’t drunk enough to forget. Just drunk enough to let some of the filters loose.”

“So you still wanna see the tattoo process?”

“I meant every word I said.”

“Then okay. I’m getting it done this Tuesday after my shift, if you can make it.”

“I can,” Etho said. Then he stopped walking.

Beef carried on for a few more steps before realising Etho wasn’t walking with him. He turned around, mouth opened to ready a question but—

Etho’s stare on him was intense, meaningful, brimming with something Beef couldn’t quite put his finger on. He stood straight up to his full height, as though he’s determined to say whatever comes next and is prepared to put his entire heart into it.

“Beef, I meant everything I said last night,” Etho said firmly. “All of it.”

Huh. Well, they had already established that.

Beef offered him a confused smile. “Yeah? I know.”

“No, like. All of it. I meant everything I said.”

“Yeah, so... you’re watching me get a tattoo on Tuesday.”

“You’re not understanding.”

“Well, you’re not doing a great job of being understandable.”

Etho stared for a moment longer before sighing and dropping his gaze. When it returned to Beef, it was back to normal. He stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets and started walking again.

Somehow, Beef couldn’t help but feel like he said something wrong.

“You okay?” Beef asked, picking up his pace to match Etho’s.

“Yeah,” Etho said, his voice dry. “Don’t worry about it.”

---

“I can’t *believe* you.”

“Surely, I’ve done worse.”

“You have, but that’s not the point.”

Beef bit back a laugh as Jevin paced around his station, arranging his tools every so often.

It was barely past ten o’clock when everyone had finished with their clients for the day. False and Cleo had been the first to leave, having cited whatever film they had agreed to watch together as the reason they were leaving the others to clean for the night. Cub had stayed behind to finish mocking up a draft design for a client before bidding Beef and Jevin farewell. And now they were stuck here together, Beef only barely keeping himself in check while Jevin fumed.

He had to do this more often. Pissing off his friends was fun.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” Beef said, “but I told you ahead of time that Etho would be coming to be the stress ball this time. What more could you want from me?”

“You know I hate it when you guys do that!” Jevin huffed.

“Do what, invite people over to see when you tattoo us?”

“It makes me feel like I look stupid.”

“Jev, you are the last thing people are looking at when their friend is getting tattooed.”

“I know, but...” Jevin huffed again and finally stood still next to his station. “Actually, nevermind. I know he won’t be looking at me if you’re getting a chest tattoo.”

“Jevin?”

“Yes?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Whatever you want it to mean!” Jevin chirped all too cheerfully.

But even with Jevin being their newest friend, his tells were obvious. He was jittery, clenching and unclenching his hands. His shoulders were tense and eyes looking anywhere but Beef. He was a worrier. That was part of what made him so valuable to the team; his ability to reflect and anticipate the most out-of-the-box scenarios had saved them multiple times.

This was ridiculous, though. Jevin had doubted himself as an artist for far longer than he deserved.

“If you’re nervous about us seeing your technique, don’t worry,” Beef said. He grinned, wrapped his arms around Jevin’s middle, and picked him up from the floor, ignoring Jevin’s subsequent yelp. “You’re such a great artist, one of the best tattoo artists in the country, *the* best face tattoo artist in the world with such a great way of using colours—”

Jevin kicked and squirmed half-heartedly against him. “Ew. I hate you. I hate you so much. Put me down.”

“Only if you admit you’re a great artist.”

“No.”

“Fine. Only if you admit you’re a good artist.”

“You’re so annoying.”

“Say it!”

“Fine! I’m a good artist!” Jevin said. When Beef set him back on the floor, he brushed off his clothes dramatically. “You know, I finally get what False was saying about you being like an older brother. A really annoying older brother.”

Beef snorted. “Self-doubt isn’t a good look on you, Jev.”

Jevin rolled his eyes, but there was an easy-going smile on his face now. Mission accomplished, as far as Beef was concerned. “Oh, shut up. Take your shirt off and sit down. I have to change my gloves now.”

“So you want me to strip for you?”

“Oh, yeah, baby,” Jevin said in the most deadpan voice possible. If Cub was in the room, he might have added a sarcastic wolf whistle. If Cleo was in the room, she *definitely* would’ve added a sarcastic wolf whistle.

Beef shrugged and began pulling his shirt off him, only to hear the doorbell ring.

Of course.

“Uh, am I interrupting something?” came a familiar voice.

Beef finished pulling his shirt off, only to see Etho pointedly keeping his eyes on Jevin.

“Nah, you’re right on time,” Jevin said.

There was a mischievous glint in his eyes now. Beef wasn’t so sure he liked that.

Jevin whistled and smacked his hand across Beef’s chest. That was a normal interaction between them, but the way the tips of Etho’s ears deepened into a pink was not. “We’re gonna be tattooing this bad boy today. Take a seat over there.”

Beef sat down in the work chair while Etho took a seat next to him, turned away. Jevin lifted his gaze away to snap on a new pair of gloves.

“You didn’t tell me you’d be taking your shirt off,” Etho murmured, and if Beef looked carefully,

there was a tint of pink showing just above his mask.

“How else would I get my chest tattooed?” Beef laughed.

“You didn’t tell me it was a chest tattoo either.”

“I didn’t think you needed to know. The process is the same for every area of the body.”

“Right.” Etho coughed, and now the pink was clearer. “The process.”

Jevin picked up a bottle of rubbing alcohol, and the process started.

The explanations of the process came easy; Beef tried his best to incorporate those into his daily conversations as a tattoo artist, after all. But it was more fascinating seeing Etho respond to him, commenting on what he had already seen from spectating Tango’s tattoo and asking questions about what was new.

“Isn’t that painful?” Etho asked during a break. “I mean, getting a tattoo on your chest.”

“Yeah, usually,” Jevin said, “but I have face tattoos, False has rib tattoos, Cleo just got one done on her ankle, and we all have some on our wrist. We’re used to it.” He paused. “Also, believe it or not, Beef is in a load of pain.”

“It hurts! A lot!” Beef chirped. Because it did, in fact, hurt a lot. His skin still felt like it was buzzing, and they were only putting on the lineart for this session.

(Maybe he was a bad person for this, but Etho’s concerned expression soothed it just a bit. Just a tad.)

“Besides,” Jevin snickered. Never a good sign. “It would hurt way more if he didn’t have all this muscle on him. There’s a reason we all call him Beef. Right, Etho?”

Beef rolled his eyes. It always got flirty between him, Jevin, and Cub, but there was no need to involve Etho. “Yeah, because that’s my name.”

But instead of laughing along like Etho usually did, Etho only buried his hands into his lap and kept his stare dead on the floor.

“I’ll just finish the tattoo now,” Jevin said before picking up the tattoo machine again. “You good, Beef?”

Well, he *did* say Etho would be the stress ball for this session...

Beef held his hand out and looked at Etho expectantly. When Etho gave him his hand, he squeezed tight and turned towards Jevin. “I’m good.”

The tattoo machine whirred again.

As painful as chest tattoos were, they weren’t painful enough to distract him from the way Etho’s hand squeezed back.

---



“Jevin did a nice job on this one, didn’t he?” Beef said, admiring the finished tattoo in the mirror while Jevin stretched his hands.

“Yup,” Etho said weakly. “Looks nice.”

---

“Hey, Beef?” Jevin had called while they cleaned his station together.

“Yeah?”

“Dude, you’re a fucking idiot.”

---

With his fears out of the way, Etho had been quick to arrange an appointment time (during actual business hours with no discount, he had insisted despite Beef and Cleo and everyone else in the shop saying otherwise). But as ready as Etho was for his tattoo, Beef was decidedly a wreck.

“Oh my god, Cleo,” Beef muttered, scrubbing a little too hard to clean his counter. “What if I mess up?”

Cleo was turned away from him, colouring in a tattoo for a regular. “I’m literally the only one tattooing somebody. Why don’t you go bug someone else for a change? I don’t need Xisuma losing brain cells from your drivel.”

“No, no, I’m content to listen,” Xisuma said. He raised the arm with the sheet music Beef had tattooed onto him so long ago, careful not to move the leg Cleo was working on. “What’s ailing you, Beef?”

“At least *somebody* here likes me,” Beef scoffed.

“Only for the discounts,” Cleo said.

Xisuma shrugged. He was a nice man, too nice to lie.

But there were more urgent matters at hand.

“He’s gonna come in, like, five minutes,” Beef said. “He’s gonna see my tattoo work and regret ever meeting me.”

The buzz of the tattoo machine stopped, and Cleo stood up, setting it down on her counter. Must be the mandatory break. “Beef, the only tattoo you’ve ever really messed up on was on yourself, and that was your first one. Why’re you going full Jevin on me?”

“Hey!” Jevin shouted from the next room over.

“So you *were* listening! Get out here and help me!”

Jevin did not get out there and help her. Cleo cracked her knuckles and picked up the tattoo

machine again. “You ready, Xisuma?”

Xisuma nodded, wincing when the needle made contact with his skin. “Like Cleo said, you’ve only ever done a wonderful job, Beef. Why is this tattoo so different to you?”

“Because he’s in love with the guy he’s putting it on,” False piped up from behind the counter.

Silence. The tattoo machine buzzed.

“False!” Beef shouted, his attention finally pulled away from his counter and towards his smiling friend at the counter. “Why?”

“It’s true!”

“Well, I can see how that complicates matters,” Xisuma mused.

“Did you tell everyone, Cleo?” Beef said. “Because if you told everyone—”

“Doesn’t take a detective to figure out where your affections are, *VB*,” Cleo snorted.

“Don’t Joe me!”

“The only Joe part of that was the nickname, you knob!”

The bell above the door rang. When Beef turned, there were two all too familiar people.

“Oh, there it is,” Cub said, clicking his tongue. “The high school sweethearts, bickering on the main floor again. Sometimes I wonder how they made it this far without killing each other.”

Etho paused, suddenly rigid. “... The high school sweethearts?”

The pause after that was quick enough to not seem like much of a pause at all, but that was enough time for everyone to make eye contact.

“That’s just what we call them,” False said too quickly.

“Yeah,” Cub said. “Not like actual high school sweethearts.”

“Had it not been for the laws of this land and Xisuma’s leg, I would’ve broken your kneecaps on the spot,” Cleo called from her station. To whom that was addressed to, Beef wasn’t sure, but Cub acknowledged it with a nod.

Oh, god. Showtime. He was a professional, damn it! He could do this!

“Hey, Etho!” Beef called, swallowing his feelings and ignoring everyone else’s pointed stares. He forced a casual grin on his face. “You ready for your first tattoo?”

But Etho’s attention wasn’t on him.

“Oh, hi, X,” Etho said, blinking. “I didn’t expect you to be here.”

“I’m the one who recommended this place to you and Tango,” Xisuma said.

Oh. Xisuma had been there for that whole discussion, and apparently he knew Etho.

Suddenly, Beef hated life.

“Semantics, semantics.” Etho’s gaze darted between Beef and False. “Um... sorry, I don’t know where to—”

“To the counter first,” Cub said. He offered him one last awkward pat on the shoulder before scurrying to the back with his laptop in hand.

Realistically, only a couple minutes had passed between Etho’s arrival and False directing him towards Beef’s station. They had already discussed payment and all the concerns beforehand, after all. But those few minutes were enough for the insecurity to pop up again, for the jitters to return to him, for him to start trying to remember all those tattoo lawsuits he had read about during his first year as an artist.

Then Etho took a seat on the tattoo chair, and all of it washed away.

Beef was an artist, a professional one at that. Etho had chosen him as the best person for the job, and he would sooner never draw again than disappoint him.

“You ready?” Beef asked.

Etho settled back into the chair and shot Beef a smile. “Yeah.”

“... You wanna pull your sleeve up or—”

Etho pulled his sleeve up at record speed, pointedly ignoring the amused chuckles from Xisuma.

Beef picked up the bottle of rubbing alcohol and got to work.

---

Line, colour, shade. They were halfway through the lining, and Etho still hadn’t spoken a word and his eyes were closed.

Beef kept silent in kind. This was Etho’s tattoo experience, not his. But this was still a business transaction, and he needed to be assuring.

“You wanna take a break, or are you good?” Beef asked quietly.

“I’m good.”

Beef continued the lining without any further questions.

---

It was only during the colouring that Etho opened his eyes and began speaking.

“You know,” Etho began, “during my senior year of undergrad, I started taking Sidekit out on walks.”

Beef paused to let that process. “You took your cat out for a walk?”

“Yeah. Bought a leash and everything. Then she picked up a dead squirrel from the road and wouldn’t let it go, so that was the end of walks for Sidekit.”

Cleo snorted out a laugh from the counter. Etho shot her a smile.

“You say that so casually,” Beef said, and Etho only laughed.

---

Art was always an endeavour from the heart.

That didn’t mean it was always Beef’s heart. He had learned that long ago when he struggled to pick up his pen for commissions in uni or when he had a clear image in his head but couldn’t quite figure out how to start it all.

Sometimes, other people trusted him to try manifesting their soulful creations to life, like the tattoo he had drawn for Cleo or when his friends gave him a design and asked him to tattoo it onto their bodies. The commonality between it all was there was a heart, a soul; every piece of art was brought to existence out of somebody’s wish for it to exist, to pay tribute to something, especially in body art.

Maybe that was why this tattoo in particular felt almost religious, spiritual. Sidekit was long gone as far as Beef knew, but her memory would live on through the people whose lives she had touched. Her soul was forever bound in the tattoo that now lived on Etho’s shoulder.

It was too self-important to attribute that to his abilities. Etho had given him the heart; Beef was only the vessel.

But looking at Etho stare in awe at the mirror, moving his shoulder to watch the colours shimmer under the lights—that was something special. It was always something special.

“You like it?” Beef asked, half-jokingly.

Etho looked down at the returned companion on his shoulder, then looked back up at Beef with glimmering eyes that spoke a million words in a language Beef couldn’t understand.

“Yeah,” Etho said. He looked back down at his tattoo. “Thank you.”

“Do you want a moment before we put on all the dressing and bandaging?”

“If I can.”

Beef turned his back towards Etho. It felt like a moment too raw to intrude on, and Beef had done enough intruding over the past week.

After glancing over the entire studio enough to commit a good part to memory, Etho spoke again.

“I think I’m ready to let it heal now,” Etho said. He relaxed back into the tattoo chair and held his arm out.

Beef began applying the protective ointment, and that was when somebody chose to break the magic.

“So,” Cleo said, in the midst of cleaning her station. “Is now a good time to mention the flowers at the counter are wilting or...”

If Beef were in their high school art classroom again, he would’ve thrown a pencil at her. But he was in a professional studio and all these supplies cost money, so Beef settled for sticking his tongue out at her as Etho laughed.

Now that the danger of fucking up the tattoo was gone, Beef smiled at the laughter, his heart light and happy.

---

“You’re gonna want to leave that bandage alone for a while, minimum two hours. After you take off the bandage, you don’t wanna leave it in water or under the sun for a long time. Try not to exercise, because the sweat can mess with the healing and that’ll mean you have a bad time. Don’t \_\_\_”

“Beef, I know how infections work,” Etho said.

“I know you know. I have to say it anyway. Don’t shave it, don’t pick at it, don’t scratch at it—”

“Ugh, you sound like a teacher.”

“I was a teacher at one point,” Cleo said, all too proud to be entering the conversation at the wrong time.

And Etho, apparently sick of all the sanitation talk, embraced the turn in conversation. “Oh, you were?”

“Yeah. Tutored some kids for a while in university. Really liked it, actually, but the pay was less than stellar.”

“I hate all of you,” Beef huffed. “Let me finish. You should wash your tattoo after you take off the bandage, but not too roughly. Use lukewarm water and mild soap. Don’t use anything like a towel—your hand is good enough. Pat it dry, then apply an antibacterial ointment. You should be doing that several times a day for the first week—”

“Ah, that makes sense,” Etho said. “You did always strike me as someone who could be a teacher.”

Cleo gasped and held a hand to her heart, the dramatic bastard. “Aw, really? What makes you say that?”

“You have Beef as a best friend. Your patience must be out of this world.”

“And for the love of god, let the tattoo breathe. You should be wearing loose clothing for about the first week,” Beef said. “There! I’m done! God, you guys only exist to spite me.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Cleo mused.

Beef could bicker with Cleo another time. For now, he redirected his ire towards Etho, who he was almost a hundred percent certain was smirking at him. “Etho, you know how important sanitation is for healing. You should’ve been listening.”

Etho shrugged. "Yeah, I know, but... it's a team thing, right? And I have you, don't I?"

Fuck. Damn it.

Cleo cackled right beside him and moved to stand behind the register. He supposed as unhelpful as she was sometimes, she pulled her weight around here after all.

"I guess... I guess you do," Beef said, his voice weaker than he would've liked to admit. He cleared his throat and tried not to think about the way Etho was looking at him. "Anyway, you know the price. If you need any aftercare supplies, just shoot me a text."

Jevin snickered from his station. Asshole.

"Got it," Etho said. He dug into his pocket, pulled out two hundred dollar bills, and held them out to Beef.

Beef glanced at the bills. "That's not the right price. I said a hundred, remember?"

"It's tip."

"No."

"Why not?"

"That's too much. I know you don't make too terribly much as an artist either."

Etho chuckled. "Oh, come on! You don't know how much I make."

"A hundred percent tip is not appropriate no matter what discipline you're in."

"It is now. Let me give you money."

"No."

"What if it's for your friends?"

Cleo rolled her eyes and plucked the bills from Etho's hands. "Thank you for your patronage. I was thinking of getting my eyebrow pierced, and a little birdie told me you guys have a tip jar."

Etho matched Cleo's teasing grin with his own. "Don't even think about it."

The way Cleo burst into whistle and slowly slunk away from the register told Beef she was, in fact, thinking about it. And for once, he had no objections.

Etho sighed, but the glimmer in his eyes lightened any serious impact it would've had. "Are we done here? I have the day off, but I wanna pay a visit to my coworkers."

"If you understand how to take care of your tattoo, then yeah," Beef said.

"Great. See you later then?"

"See ya!"

Etho walked towards the door but stopped as soon as he raised his hand. Instead, he turned back, his usual confidence seemingly seeped out of him. "Oh, and Beef?"

Beef offered him a confused smile. "Yeah?"

“You know how I said only people who guessed where all my piercings are can see them?”

“Yeah.”

“And you know how you guessed my ears?”

“... Yeah?”

Etho paused. Then he reached up, pulled his mask down, and stuck his tongue out—

His tongue. He had a *tongue piercing*.

Then as quickly as it came, Etho flashed him a smirk before pulling his mask up and walking out the door for good. He left a bell chiming in his wake.

Beef stared unabashedly.

Holy shit.

Tongue piercing...?

“Close your mouth, darling, you’ll attract flies,” Cleo snorted from beside him. But that didn’t matter because, holy shit, Etho had a *tongue piercing* and Beef already knew that was going to haunt him for the rest of his life.

“Cleo,” Beef called.

“Yes?”

“Etho has a tongue piercing.”

“Yes, he does,” Cleo said in an all too condescending voice she usually reserved for children.

Beef sighed and buried his reddening face into his hands, his shame only deepening upon hearing his friends laugh.

He was fucked. He was so fucked.

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Notes

soooo this was supposed to go out yesterday but my internet died. and is still kinda dead. hope you enjoy anyway :)

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

“Sooo, what do you think of my piercing?”

Beef raised an eyebrow at Etho’s eager face, hoping that would be enough to keep his own from reddening again. He had already gotten so much shit from his friends; he didn’t need more from Etho.

After enough badgering from Cleo, he had returned to Stress’s flower shop to pick up their regular batch of flowers. And of course, luck would have it that Etho just so happened to be visiting at that moment and was feeling particularly mischievous if that glimmer in his eyes was anything to go by.

So Beef set his elbows on the table and turned to the only person in the room who could offer any help. “Stress, are you really gonna let your cousin get away with badgering your best customer?”

“It’s a feature, not a bug,” Stress called, her back turned to them as she cut off a long string of twine. “That’s what Etho always said during his industry days anyway.”

“Why do you people always abandon me when I need you most?”

“It’s all out of love.”

“Stress, it’s *my* question,” Etho sniffed. “Tell me what you think of my piercing, Beefers.”

This was a trick question. It had to be.

Beef regarded him the same way one would regard a passing acquaintance, as if he didn’t think Etho was beautiful. “Your snowflake piercing is pretty nice.”

Stress burst out cackling. Etho deflated. Beef wondered if he had answered that correctly or not.

“Thanks,” Etho said, now pouting. “I’m... gonna go rearrange some flowers. Be right back.”

With that, Etho disappeared from the counter right as Stress finished wrapping the bouquet. There was a cheeky grin on Stress’s face, much too innocent for Beef to believe she had no idea what was up with that. But alas, family relationships were complicated, and the last thing Beef wanted was to get caught up in whatever shenanigans they had going on. He had his own family back at the tattoo shop to deal with, after all.

“One lovely bouquet for a lovely customer!” Stress cheered as she handed Beef the bouquet. “I’d tell you to keep this one alive for more than a month, but Etho probably doesn’t want me to say that. Have a lovely day.”



Beef only barely got out his usual “you, too!” before distantly catching Etho storming out the storage fridge and calling for Stress in a strangled voice.

Beef paused after letting the door shut behind him.

Huh. That was weird.

The day only got weirder after Beef relayed the story to Cleo, who only sighed and plunked the flowers into their usual vase at the register. No teasing, no banter, nothing.

Something was going on. Why did it always seem like Beef was out of the loop?

---

“So, what’s with everyone in the tattoo shop?” wasn’t a question Beef expected to be ambushed with at any given moment, but he supposed he could roll with the punches.

Still, he stopped, blinked, and set his gaze on Etho, whose gaze didn’t falter.

The two were out on lunch break together, in no real rush now that the usual slow period of business around this time had settled in. That had lent them enough time to grab takeout, find a bench, and sit down to eat together. By now, their food was long gone, and they had settled into a relaxed conversation. Until Etho threw that curveball at him, at least.

"What about them?" Beef said.

"Well, like..." Etho looked down and kicked at a pebble on the sidewalk. "They're all really important to you, right? Like *really* important, you know?"

“No, I don’t know.”

Etho huffed. If Beef squinted, he could see the tips of Etho’s ears grow the slightest bit pink. Or maybe that was from all the piercings he had stuffed in it. Beef didn’t know how piercings worked. “I meant, like... you’re all pretty close and about the same age. I was just wondering what kind of family you meant when you said you thought of them as—Why’re you laughing?”

It had taken a moment for Beef to process he was, in fact, laughing. It didn’t take as long for him to understand why.

"Etho, these are the nerdiest people on the planet," Beef said. "What do you think I meant?"

Etho huffed and rolled his eyes. “Well, it’s kind of ambiguous with the way you guys act sometimes.”

“What, you don’t smack your coworkers’ chests and wolf-whistle at them?”

“I mean, *I* don’t.” Then Etho paused, and he looked up to meet Beef’s eyes. “Actually, you wanna meet my coworkers? They’re... kind of like family to me, too.”

That may have been a completely innocent question, something solely borne of a “I’ve met yours, you should meet mine” sentiment. Still, Beef couldn’t help but feel there was another unsaid question lingering just beneath.

That and Beef wouldn't pass up the chance to meet more people. He still remembered everyone's worried gazes all those months ago as they chastised him for putting all his emotional stock into the shop. He may have met Etho, but there were more people than just his family and crush.

Crush. What an ugly, childish word.

Etho must've taken Beef's silence as hesitation, because he added, "You already know some of them, like Doc and Tango. You'll catch up with the other guys real quick. Grian's been trying to get his sister over, too, so maybe you'll be introduced with someone else. I promise they're nice people."

"Well, I already knew that," Beef said with a laugh. "Sure, I'll meet them.

"Oh, snappers! This'll be fun then. You think you can come over after we close? Any weekday works."

"Um..." Beef tapped his phone awake and scrolled through his calendar. "I finish early next Tuesday. How's that?"

"Perfect," Etho said. His eyes crinkled into a sunny smile. "You're gonna love 'em, trust me."

That, Beef had no doubts about.

---

"I can't believe you're getting introduced to the family," Cleo said, sniffing. "You're basically headed towards marriage."

Beef rolled his eyes on his way to the door. Sarcasm was the last thing he needed after a grueling deep-cleaning session. "Oh, shut up. Just make sure the place doesn't burn down while I'm gone."

"Right. Because I'm clearly the one to trust with that."

"Actually, you're right." Beef turned his head. "Cub, make sure the place doesn't burn down when I'm gone."

"No promises," Cub called back.

"... False, make sure the place doesn't burn down while I'm gone."

And finally, from her spot wiping down the register, False offered him a thumbs up.

"Have fun on your *date*," Jevin cooed from beside False. He set his elbows on the counter, earning a glare and a light smack on the arms.

"Meeting the family," Cleo snickered.

Beef sighed and left the shop, Jevin and Cleo's laughter trailing him outside. Sometimes, he wondered why these were the people he had chosen as his life companions.

But that didn't matter here. He had another group of people to meet, one that Beef got the impression were just as important to Etho as Beef's friends were to him.

Beef took a deep breath, shook off his nerves, and walked down to the piercing parlor.

When he walked in, the piercing parlor looked just like how it had back when he had accompanied False here. The jewelry inside the displays had been switched around and a new chair had been added to the lobby. The dimmed lights added a softer atmosphere, a quieter atmosphere. It was comforting.

A shorter man with piercings dotted all over his eyebrows and feathered piercings hanging from his ears stood behind the counter with a cloth in his hands. He looked up at Beef with a sharp grin that promised mischief. "So, you're Beef, huh?"

Beef paused. He had made his appearance at the piercing parlor before, but he could only remember running into Etho. Maybe Etho told his coworkers about his arrival beforehand?

"That's me!" Beef said. He opened his mouth to make small talk as he always did, but the man shushed him before any noise could escape.

"I'm Grian. Etho doesn't know you're here yet," Grian said, his voice hushed. "Let's keep it that way. Stay here, will you?"

Was this mischief? Beef supposed this was mischief. He stayed still as Grian disappeared from view.

Moments passed before Grian reappeared in the lobby with another man trailing behind him.

While not having as many colourful piercings as Grian, the man's ears were studded and he wore sunglasses on the top of his head. Those two details easily made up for his lack of visible body art in cool points. Or maybe Beef was just easily impressed. Or desperately wanted to get along with Etho's coworkers. The line was a tad blurred at this point.

"Oh my goodness gracious, G," the man said, breathless. "Do my eyes deceive me? Is this the mysterious man? Mister Steal Etho's Heart himself? The angel with the tattoos—"

"So, this is Ren," Grian said. "We were gonna get Zed with us, but he left early like a *traitor*."

"Ah, yeah. Hey, I'm sure Doc and Tango can keep Etho distracted by themselves. They're probably playing Yu-Gi-Oh in the autoclave room."

"... You mean Uno?"

"Wait for it."

A few seconds passed before three men yelled in the distance, the shouts concluding with the sound of Etho whimpering his trademark, "No-ho-ho!"

Beef couldn't help but smile at that and wonder when exactly he had learned to recognize him by that.

"Okay, nevermind, they're playing poker and Etho just lost twenty bucks," Ren said. Then he focused his gaze back onto Beef. "While they're doing that, we have some questions for you."

Beef laughed nervously.

---

As it turned out, it had been a pleasant discussion between the three of them. Apparently the intended purpose of it all was to parse out the truths and lies Etho had told them about him, but it quickly evolved into an actual conversation.

Grian was one of the newer members of the piercing parlor, having moved into the area just a year ago (same as Jevin, Beef noted). He had worked under Doc as a lab tech at some point and stayed long enough for the facility to run him to the bone. After burning out of the biology field, Doc had extended an invitation for him to learn the art of piercing, and Grian took the opportunity and ran with it.

Ren was a different story. He was one of the founding members and had been piercing his ears for years before he attempted an apprenticeship. His portfolio, something he shared proudly but the details of which he kept private, was piercing several famous rock stars in areas Beef winced at.

“Holy cow, really? How?” Beef had said, to which Ren laughed.

“Surgical precision, baby! Kind of. Dropping out of med school does that to ya.” And before Beef could ask him to elaborate on that point, Ren moved onto pulling his shirt up to show off his belly button piercing.

For all intents and purposes, they were interesting people with backstories as interesting as their personalities. Beef could certainly guess they were the chaos makers of the shop, but they were good people to keep around. Coworkers like these were rare.

And of course, their conversation ended with a bit of that mischief.

“So,” Grian said, “me and Doc have a bet going on that you and Etho will get together within the next two months. You mind doing me a favour and telling him in that timeframe?”

Beef laughed nervously. There was no way they had guessed his feelings within just a few moments of meeting him. “What?”

“I mean, Etho talks about you constantly. We just kinda want the best for him, and well... you *are* the best for him, if he’s telling the truth about everything.”

Ren snickered. “Yeah, like how he thinks you’re—”

“Ren? Grian? Did you guys clean up already?” came another voice.

Ren and Grian shot up at that, but it was too late for them. Etho had already stepped into the lobby dressed in his full winter coat and spotted them.

There was a brief flash of panic on Etho’s face before he soothed it back. “Oh, you were bothering Beef. Come on, we talked about this.”

“And we made no promises,” Grian laughed. He turned to shoot Beef one last smile. “Well, I suppose Etho wants you to walk him home. Nice meeting you, Beef. I get the feeling we’ll see you around quite often.”

Etho’s stare on him sharpened. Grian grinned back.

Ren clapped him on the shoulder and wrapped him in a sideways hug. “Same here, my dude! You’re welcome here any time. I’m sure Etho would be happy to invite you to some of our get-

together.”

Etho’s glare moved onto Ren. If Ren noticed, he gave no indication of it.

“Beef, walk me home,” Etho said, taking his usual spot next to Beef’s side. “I’ll see the rest of you in hell.”

“Right,” Beef said. He turned towards Ren and Grian and offered them one last smile and wave. “Thanks for having me here, guys! See you all later.”

They shouted their own last goodbyes before Etho took Beef’s hand and led him out of the piercing parlor.

It was cold outside, but the warmth of spring was just settling in. The flowers outside Stress’s flower shop right in front of the piercing parlor were starting to bud, and the few plots of grass outside looked more alive. Even the air seemed warmer under the dimmed streetlamps.

And of course, Etho was beside him.

“Nice people,” Beef said.

“They didn’t say anything weird, did they?” Etho asked, staring straight down at the sidewalk. Either the tips of his ears were red or the streetlamps were playing a trick on his eyes. “They say some weird things sometimes.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. They were nice!”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Good people.”

Etho said nothing at that, instead answering with a hum and tightening his grip on Beef’s hand as they walked along the sidewalk.

Now that they were outside away from all the chaos, the events of the past ten minutes processed. Had Etho really said all that about Beef? Mentioned him so offhandedly to his friends that they recognised him right away?

That was special. Even if Etho denied it, he couldn’t take back what his friends said.

“They seem like they care about you a lot,” Beef said. “You have some pretty great friends.”

Etho looked up at that, chuckled, then looked back down. “I really do, don’t I?”

It was only when Beef was walking home alone he realized Etho had held onto his hand all the way.

---

“Wow, you are pathetic.”

“Shut up, I know.”

Cleo rolled her eyes and pulled off another string off the string cheese bar in her hands. She plopped it in her mouth and said, “I literally have this design to do, and you’re over here freaking out about how good of an impression you made on his little piercing parlor family. Priorities, darling.”

“You are eating string cheese at midnight,” Beef said.

“I don’t need your judgement!”

“Can you both quiet down?” Joe called from the other room. “I’ve got a class of thirty to teach tomorrow first thing in the morning.”

“You’re a dog trainer, idiot!” Cleo yelled back. Nevertheless, she lowered her voice. “Show me what you texted him.”

Beef hesitated.

“We’re in my kitchen. There are knives. Give me your phone.”

Beef rolled his eyes and passed his phone to Cleo, who grabbed it and squinted at the screen.

“Ugh, you keep your screen so bright,” Cleo mumbled, her thumbs clumsily moving along the keyboard.

But before Beef could retort with her keeping her phone screen too dark, his phone buzzed.

They stilled.

Cleo turned his phone screen back towards him.

**Etho my love [00:12]** Don’t worry, they like you

**Etho my love [00:12]** Why do you ask?

But that subject wasn't what Beef's focus was on.

"Did you change Etho's name in my phone? Cleo!" Beef laughed, and Cleo cackled.

Their laughter only grew when Joe yelled again.

---

“Hey, Romeo!” Jevin called when he passed Beef at the counter. “Stop texting your boyfriend and get on those designs, will you?”

Beef shot him a glare but set his phone down. “You don’t know I was texting Etho.”

“Did I mention him?”

If there weren’t sharp objects all around the room and clients that would’ve easily been spooked, Jevin would have a billion pen caps thrown at him.

---

“Why don’t you just ask him to dinner?” False said.

Beef looked up from his paper.

It was after business hours, and the two were side-by-side at the counter, Beef’s jazz playlist playing in the background as they sketched out designs. That meant it was far too late for them to be having this conversation.

“We’ve had dinner together a couple times,” Beef said.

False scrunched her nose at that instead of politely dropping the conversation. “And you two still aren’t together?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Yeah, that’s obvious.”

The two fell silent, and not a word was exchanged between the two later that night.

---

“You know in secondary, I sang a lot?” Etho said one night as they walked home together.

Beef quirked an eyebrow. “I did not.”

“Yeah, I was in the men’s choir with my best friend. Was never really any good at it, I mostly just poked him in the stomach while he sang his solos.”

A laugh escaped Beef before he knew what he was doing. It was so ridiculously Etho he couldn’t help but laugh.

Etho laughed along. “It was really funny at the time, okay? And still is now, to be honest. When I run into him at town hall, I sing his stupid little solos to him just to piss him off. It’s like a bird’s greeting song at this point.”

“I mean, let’s hear it,” Beef said. “I know he’s not here now, but...”

“Are you sure? I just told you I wasn’t any good at it.”

“Well, it’s you. I’m sure I’ll like anything from you.”

Etho paused just long enough for Beef’s brain to catch up with his mouth, but not long enough for him to rephrase his words in a way that didn’t sound so intense. His head was tilted too far downwards for Beef to read any sort of expression on him.

Then Etho chuckled and linked their arms together, gazing up at him with a smile that caught Beef’s breath. “Okay, but don’t judge me if it’s bad. I never said I was any good,” he said. He faced forward and took a breath, his back straightening. Then he sang.

And both of them were right. Etho’s singing was clumsy, not in tune to any known key signatures. He fumbled over the pronunciation and rhythms harder than a man falling down a mountain. It

made sense; he had been out of practice for over a decade.

Yet Beef loved it anyway. Out of everyone in the world, he dared call Etho his favourite singer.

And when Etho closed his solo softly, Beef clapped with all the genuity in the world.

---

When Beef walked into his apartment to find four other people ransacking his fridge for unknown purposes, he knew he wasn't in for a good time.

"Hi, people who aren't supposed to be here," Beef said, hanging his scarf on the coat rack beside the door.

Cub, who was the only person not preoccupied with food, greeted him with a nonchalant wave.

"What're you guys doing here?"

"Our monthly thing."

"... That's tomorrow."

Cub froze, looked down at his phone screen, and tapped through a calendar. A couple seconds passed before he powered his phone off and shrugged. "Well, guess it's today now. You can't really reason with them when they're already this far into it, you know?"

"No, I don't know."

"Oh, Beef's here," Jevin said, to which Cleo and False turned to greet him half-heartedly.

Jevin was holding a carton of lemonade. Cleo was holding a baking sheet. False had the whole carton of eggs in her hands. Beef didn't trust this situation in the slightest.

"What're you guys doing?" Beef said.

When nobody had an answer right away, Beef realized nobody knew. That seemed par for the course these days. In fact, that seemed par for the course most days.

"Omelets?" False said weakly.

Jevin slowly set the lemonade down on the countertop as if Beef couldn't see him if he moved slowly enough, as did Cleo.

God. This was his family, for better or for worse.

"Anyway," Beef sighed, "you guys are usually good about remembering when our monthly things are. What happened?"

"Well, when you listen to Jevin at any given moment," False said, to which Jevin elbowed her.

"We were hoping to ambush you, to be honest," Cleo said. "Looks like we did, so we can get the ball rolling now. Cub, if you'd please?"

This was an intervention. Why were they holding an intervention?



“Oh, what the heck, *I’m* doing it?” Cub said from his spot at the kitchen table.

Cleo gave him a blank stare. “We talked about this.”

“And you expected me to listen?”

“Yes?”

Nevermind. This would’ve been an intervention if his friends were as competent in organizing these things as they were at their jobs, but Beef saw that wasn’t happening anytime soon.

“... Oh. Well, guess I’ll get to it then.” Cub cleared his throat and turned towards Beef with a look that was all too reminiscent of his university straight-edge physics major days. “As you can see, I’ve been assigned as the group’s, uh... talker, of sorts. Which I maintain was a bad idea, by the way, all of you listening at home.”

The three making a fool of themselves in the kitchen snickered.

“I’m guessing you know what this intervention is about,” Cub said, “and we all love you too much to let it go. So I’ll say it anyway. Beef, holy hell, man. You need to get over yourself and ask out Etho.”

... Right, Beef should’ve guessed that was why they broke into his apartment. He opened his mouth to speak, but Cub continued.

“We get that you guys are really good friends and a lot would be at stake if he rejected you. But if you asked him out right now and you knew he’d say yes, would you do it?”

Oh, without a shadow of a doubt. Beef nodded.

“Okay, what if I told you that he *will* say yes? That his coworkers probably tease him like we do to you? That he’s just as afraid as you of ruining it all? Somebody needs to break the stalemate here, Beef. I know you don’t want it to be you, but he strikes me as way more stubborn than you are.”

Silence.

“Holy shit, Cub,” Jevin breathed. “Not like *that*.”

“Told you me speaking was a bad idea.”

Those were a wonderful set of what-ifs Cub had laid out for him, but that was far from concrete evidence. Etho was too important to risk without absolute certainty.

“W-Well, there’s no way of really knowing,” Beef said.

It took one second of silence for him to realize that was a mistake.

Cub cleared his throat and pulled his phone up towards his face. “Okay, let’s see here. Constantly holds your hand when you walk together, makes time for you at least once a week despite how busy he is, trusted only you with that really important tattoo he got—”

“You guys made a *list*?”

“—Got really flustered when you had your shirt off, seemed really smug when he showed you that tongue piercing, literally flirts with you at any given opportunity, need I go on?”

"Yeah, we literally had a whole meeting over it," False said. "It's just you weren't there because you were walking Etho home like a gentleman."

"He walks me back around half the time," Beef said weakly.

The four stared. Beef's skin crawled from the concern and judgement.

"I'm just saying, it seems like pretty good odds that he likes you back," Cub said. "But even if he didn't, isn't that risk worth it? Isn't *he* worth it? If he's so precious to you that you can't bring yourself to do anything that might jeopardize your relationship, then shouldn't he be precious enough to be worth that?"

More silence followed his words, and Cub snorted and leaned back in his seat. "Again, told you so."

But for all intents and purposes, Cub was right. Beef's feelings were hypocritical, screaming to hold onto safety. His entire career had been a risky leap, and there was no place he would rather be now. Who said relationships were any different? Beef's history of "pspspspsp"-ing at people until they became his friend certainly spoke volumes.

He had made this leap many times before. What was it about Etho that made him stop in his tracks? Why had it taken his closest friends to make him realize that?

"Yeah, no, you're right," Beef sighed. He took a seat across from Cub, holding his head in his hand. "I have to stop being a coward. That's what I've been this whole time."

Even without looking up, Beef could feel four gazes burning into him.

Then when he finally hazarded a glance up, Jevin pulled a glass from a cabinet and poured lemonade into it. "I'm getting myself some lemonade. You want some, Beef?"

"No."

"... Well, I'm pouring you some anyway." Right after that, he set a glass right in front of Beef.

"Hey, give us some, too," False sniffed.

Cub laughed. "Could make it a real party here if we wanted."

"Yeah, the 'Beef Stopped Being An Idiot' party," Cleo said. "Congratulations, by the way."

Beef huffed and downed the glass of lemonade.

Sweet and sour. Just the way he hated it.

---

Even with his final decision sorted out, talking to Etho wasn't any easier. The last time Beef had asked someone out was in high school, and he cared about those people considerably less than he cared about Etho. None of his friends had much experience in that department either. And Beef would rather throw himself into traffic than look up how to ask someone out like some kind of twelve-year-old. That would be too much for his pride to take.

When the bell above the flower shop door rang, Beef stopped in his tracks.

“Oh, hi, X,” Beef said.

Xisuma, who stood at the counter wrangling a bouquet, looked up and smiled. “Hey, Beef! You here for your regular order?”

“Um, no, something else.” Still, Beef walked closer to the counter and pointed at the bouquet. “You need help with that?”

“Ah, no, I’ve got it. Thank you for offering, though.” True to his words, Xisuma placed the bouquet in its proper vase once he deemed the arrangement stable enough to stand on its own. He sighed and dusted his hands off. “Whew! Weddings, am I right?”

*That* was certainly something Beef had no experience in, but he found himself nodding anyway. “Didn’t know you worked here.”

“Hm? Oh, right. I’m usually the flower delivery personnel for large events, but we got a request from one of Stress’s friends and she insisted on being there herself.”

Huh. That made sense.

“Anyway,” Xisuma said, “what brings you here, if not your usual?”

Beef stopped.

He knew exactly what brought him there, but how was he supposed to admit it without sounding like an idiot? That his only basis for asking someone out was cheesy romance movies?

Well, he supposed he looked like an idiot anyway, and Xisuma already knew that. He had nothing to lose, except maybe some sanity when Xisuma came in to touch up his tattoos.

“So,” Beef said, “hypothetically, if I wanted to confess to someone but didn’t wanna be overbearing about it, what flower would be best for that?”

Xisuma stared blankly at him. “Beef, if you want to ask out Etho, you don’t need flowers to do so.”

Beef faltered at that, then remembered he had been there when False said *that*. Damn his friends.

“Just be upfront and clear about your intentions, and I’m sure it’ll go well for you. Etho’s not the flashy type when it comes to romance. He’s also...” Xisuma paused, then shrugged. “Well, I’m not beholden to Etho’s secrets like Stress is, so I’ll go ahead and say it. That man is in love with you.”

Beef’s breath caught in his throat.

Logically, he figured his friends were correct in their judgement. But to hear it laid out like that? By somebody who had no obligations to either him or Etho? It was...

God, at this rate, he’d suffer a heart attack right on his floor.

“You could go on and on about the intricacies of economy in ancient Mesopotamia, and he’d look at you like nothing else mattered. But I think he’s been hassled enough by all his friends that he’s hesitant to make a first move, because he’s just that kind of person. Please do us all a favour and ask him out.”

What a polite request. How could Beef say no to that? His head was still spinning, but he had a

good grip on his life, right?

No. But if Xisuma had been kind enough to share that with him, he should be kind enough to do something with it.

“Well, thanks, Xisuma,” Beef croaked. “I’ll... I’ll let you know how it goes.”

Xisuma regarded that with a nod. “Do you need anything else? And are you all right?”

“... Guess since I’m here, I’ll get a flower crown for Cleo.”

“So you’re not all right. Okay.”

“The closer they are to dying, the better.”

“Truer words have never been spoken, my friend.”

---

“And then he said, ‘Truer words have never been spoken, my friend,’ and wouldn’t elaborate when I asked him to.”

Cleo hummed as she fiddled with the flower crown in her hands. “I mean, he’s right.”

Beef huffed. “What’s with you people and death?”

“What are you two fucking talking about?” Jevin said, walking into the lobby from his station.

“Throwing you out if you don’t order more sharps containers,” Cleo snorted.

“Hey, it’s Cub’s turn this week. I did what I had to do during my week.”

Beef scoffed, and the two bickered amongst themselves.

For once, everyone had finished their work with their clients early in the night. Cub and False had cleaned their stations and left to play at the new archery range a bit far off from town. Beef had stayed back to sanitize the rest of the area, and Jevin was the assigned closer for tonight. Cleo was here solely for the entertainment value.

“Well, I’m going home,” Beef said, already headed for the door. “See you guys when you’re done fighting.”

Cleo and Jevin immediately turned to jeer at him, and Beef laughed. He would’ve stayed longer, but there was somebody else he needed to be with tonight.

Spring was in full-swing now, but the remnants of winter hung on in the biting wind. It was cold enough for Beef to regret not bringing a coat with him but not so cold he felt the need to huddle back indoors for safety. When he looked across at Stress’s flower shop, the flowers outside were starting to bloom.

“Hey.”

Beef jumped and turned, only to find Etho laughing at him. Despite the huff that escaped him, he

couldn't help but smile.

"I can't believe that got you," Etho said, his laughter settling down into a grin on his face.

Beef gestured towards the locked doors of the piercing parlor. "I can't believe we actually closed on time with each other for once."

"Slow day?"

"Slow day. We're getting ready for a bunch of floral design requests to come in, though."

Etho hummed, then they began walking... towards Beef's apartment. Beef supposed this was the route they were following today.

Their conversation was small, comfortable. They discussed what the upcoming season might mean for the town, what shenanigans their coworkers had pulled today, what their latest projects were. In a storm of chaos, Etho was familiar, someone who settled him back to reality when reality seemed too ridiculous to believe.

That was not a good thing to think about while Etho was walking him home. Beef shook off his thoughts and kept walking.

Then Etho intertwined their hands, and all systems shut down.

"We missed a turn, we should go back this way," Etho said. When he realized Beef wasn't moving with him, he turned, looking up at him in concern. "Beef? You okay?"

Beef stared holes into the ground, too aware of his face slowly reddening.

They had gone through these motions before. They held hands so often it was almost expected at this point. They had the routes to each others' apartments memorized. But this time, it was too much. If Beef didn't get everything out now, then...

"I just, um..."

Right. If Beef could stop fumbling over his words, maybe this whole process would go a lot better.

Etho turned his body to face him. Under different circumstances, Beef would've poked fun at the sheer amount of concern on his face. "Are you okay? Did something happen today?"

"No, it's just..."

There was no coming back from this one. He had to risk it now.

"I..." Beef paused, then redirected his gaze towards Etho. "Everyone's been telling me to get this off my chest for months, and it's been driving me crazy. And I'm sorry if this is bad news to you, but I like you. A lot. Like, more than I've ever liked someone before."

God, he sounded like an idiot.

Beef's gaze flickered to the road, and he briefly considered lying down on it. "I'm really bad at this. Sorry."

Etho blinked. The concern on his face melted away, leaving room for a smile brighter than Beef had ever seen before.

“You like me?” Etho breathed. And when he looked at Beef, his eyes shimmered so hopefully, beautifully that he forgot how to breathe for a moment.

“Er, yeah. Again, sorry about that—”

“Wow, that was the lamest confession I’ve ever heard.”

Beef coughed out a laugh, his mistakes forgotten for a moment. “Hey! That was hard!”

Etho laughed with him, then locked his other hand with Beef’s. And the way he looked at him—

Oh. His friends had been right all along.

“I like you, too, Beef,” Etho said. He locked eyes with Beef for a split second before he ducked his head and placed his forehead on Beef’s shoulder. “More than you know.”

And with that, all the pressure on his heart lifted off into the air, and he felt weightless.

“Are you doing that just to hide your face?” Beef said, laughing when Etho whined in response.

Etho lifted his head up to glare, but the effect was marred by the sheer amount of red on his face and the fighting smile underneath his mask. Then his gaze softened. “No, you’re just too pretty. I can finally say that now.”

This was too much. This was all too much, but for once, Beef didn’t mind.

“I’d say you’re the pretty one, but your ego’s already big enough as it is,” Beef said, laughing when Etho pouted at him. “Walk me home now, will you?”

Etho released one of his hands and shuffled back to Beef’s side. “Okay, but I’m gonna hold the fuck out of your hand.”

“You say that like you haven’t done that before.”

“Well, I’m gonna hold it even more now. You got a problem with that?”

Beef laughed and squeezed Etho’s hand. “No. No, I don’t.”

---

When Beef walked into his apartment with the ghost of a metal piercing on his tongue and a promise for a proper date soon, everything he had felt in the past hour finally caught up with him and smacked him like a truck.

He was dating Etho now. Despite it all, he had a boyfriend who actually liked him back as much as he liked him.

Oh, goodness. Was any one man allowed to feel this happy?

There were too many feelings. If he didn’t ground himself soon, he’d fly off into the sky, never to be seen again. But at this point in his life, he knew what to do with it all.

Beef walked into his bedroom, took out a pencil and sheet of paper, and poured everything he had

into his art.

---

It wasn't until his friends were staring wide-eyed and jaw-dropped at him that Beef realized something was off.

Beef let the glass door of their shop shut behind him, and he chuckled nervously, eyes darting from person to person. "Um, hi, guys! Good morning?"

"Did Etho just kiss you?" Cleo asked.

Well, Beef had walked to the tattoo shop with Etho after a quick breakfast together, hand-in-hand. Then when they arrived, Etho had bid him goodbye and given him a quick kiss on the cheek—

Oh. He had.

*Oh, he forgot to tell—*

"Yeah, I guess he did," Beef laughed. "We just got together a couple days ago."

"A couple *days*?" Cleo screeched. She abandoned the paints in her hands and went rocketing out the door, shouting, "Etho! Etho Slab! Get back over here right now and *explain!*" Distantly, Etho laughed, and their footsteps disappeared into the noise of the city.

Jevin sighed and reached into his pocket to take out his wallet. "Shit, guess Cleo and I gotta pay up then."

Cub held his hand out with a new excitement in his eyes.

Beef squinted. "Wait, you guys were betting on us?"

"Of course, man," Cub said. He grinned when Jevin dropped a note into his hand. "And thank you very much. Pleasure doing business."

This was both the most surprising thing Beef had ever seen from them and something entirely unsurprising. The more Beef thought about it, the more that verged on completely unsurprising. He had chosen a good pick of friends, all right.

False poked him in the side. Right when Beef thought she was about to say something sane, she smiled and said, "Don't go getting his name tattooed on you."

"Wh—False, I don't even have words on me. Why would I get someone's name?"

"Well, don't let his name be the first one!"

The bell above the door jingled again, and Cleo stumbled in, panting.

"Slippery bastard, that one," Cleo huffed. "Anyway, I've got wine. We're crashing at your place and having a proper party."

Cub raised an eyebrow.

“... And Cub, I’ll buy you dinner.”

Cub lowered his eyebrow.

Despite having just been volun-told to host a party, Beef laughed.

They were happy for him, and they all showed it in varyingly strange ways. Wasn’t that the best family he could ask for?

“Yeah, fine, it’s not like I could stop you guys anyway,” Beef said, and judging by how they all smiled at him, they knew just how much he adored them. “Get to work, you losers. It’s our first busy day in a while.”

With that, the four scrambled off to prepare their stations for the day. Beef supposed he should follow.

He hummed to himself as he walked to prepare his own station, somebody’s cutest ugliest laugh playing in his head. In that moment, his hands itched to draw again, and the day felt like his to conquer.

There was something to be said about the joy blooming in his heart, but Beef felt that spoke for itself.

## Chapter End Notes

pour one out for Gatorade\_blade, the og behind the etho tongue piercing brainrot. i miss you, fellow beetho enjoyer you  
this took way longer than i thought itd be to write. thanks to everyone for sticking out the journey with me.  
and yes i am obsessed with this friend group. still obsessed 🥰 i wanna write a backstory fic for them but. we'll see how 2022 goes :')

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!