

Do it Again

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Do it Again

by [bellshazes \(elodiej\)](#)

Summary

It was, even for him, a pretty stupid thing to do: falling off a ladder and hitting a tree branch on the way down. (Or: Bdubs buys a crystal, gets a concussion, and starts to remember his last life - in that order, more or less.)

Notes

Written in the spirit of [Opera25's My Last Life AU](#), in which Etho & Bdubs are roommates and begin regaining memories of Last Life amidst many shenanigans. I'm just playing in it!

Chapter 1

“Hello and welcome, friend, to Magical Mountain, Incorporated – wait, what happened to your *face*?”

“Healing is a process!” Bdubs grimaces and sticks his tongue out at Scar. “You should see the other guy.”

“Did you – dude, your *teeth*! I heard you fell but, wow. You’re really, uh, I mean, that might be more than even a deluxe crystal can fix.” The little desk Scar has set up right across from the front door of his studio apartment is covered in them, some of them larger and loose, the smaller ones in what clearly used to be ice cube trays.

Bdubs shoves his hands in his pockets and shrugs. The movement makes his ribs ache, from his spine to his sides where he’d landed on his back. “Actually, I was hoping you had a deal for me on one of those things. Figure it can’t make this any worse, right?”

Scar eyes him surreptitiously but then brightens as Bdubs starts examining his wares. “Anything for a friend, of course. Now, normally, I’d charge premium for a case like yours. Something to help with the bruising *and* a little bit of protection, plus whatever psychological damage that you’ve added on with the concussion. That’s a lot for one crystal!”

“Scar,” says Bdubs. There’s an orange one with smooth, straight-cut sides that fits perfectly in his palm. When he closes his fingers around it, it’s already a little warm. “I think just this one would be fine.”

Scar holds out his hand and Bdubs dutifully drops the crystal into it so Scar can make a show of inspecting it, holding it up to the light and then to his eye, then pulling out what appears to be a little toy telescope and pointing it at the rock as if it were a magnifying glass. “Oh, a crystal of courage. Excellent instincts as always, I must say. Not what I was expecting, but if it sings to you, who am I to stand between you and your destiny?”

“Sure,” he says, a little uneasy. “Listen, how much is this courage crystal thing gonna set me back?”

“For you, Bdubs,” says Scar, leaning over the desk and pinching the crystal between his fingers. “I’m sure we could work out a little something, a mutually beneficial deal.”

“Medical bills aren’t cheap you know! I don’t got much at the moment. What do you want, the shirt off my back?”

“No, no, of course not, silly. If we’re talking clothes, I could really use a new pair of pants, but you’re so short – anyway. No,” Scar says. “Just your soul.”

When Bdubs takes an incredulous step back at that, Scar laughs.

“Just kidding! Boy, you really do need a courage crystal, getting all scared like that. You can have it for nothing but the promise of a favor down the line.”

“Don’t you think I would know better by now than to say yes to an IOU like that? A *small* favor. Nothing illegal, nothing *ambiguously* legal, I’m talking help you move or buy you dinner level stuff.” Bdubs considers it for a moment. “And I’ll try and get Etho to buy something as well.”

“Did you hear that, Jellie? Here I am, trying to help out my poor, scary friend and he insults my honor. With friends like these!” Jellie, who had been sleeping peacefully in Scar’s lap during the exchange, only purrs a little louder as Scar pets her. “I like your terms, though. Are you sure you don’t want to take something back for him as well, then? This green one –“

“No, thank you,” Bdubs says to cut him off. “Etho hates all this gobbledygook stuff – no offense, of course, but you know how he is. About science. It’ll take time for him to come around, but I can try and warm him up to you. Maybe if you had some kind of scientific crystal the next time you see us...”

“I see, I see,” says Scar, a scheming twinkle in his eye. “I’ll hold you to it, Bdubs, and we’ll put a small, totally legal favor in my ledger and call it a deal. You want a bag for that? I have hand-crafted pouches! Every stitch is infused with –“

“Just gonna put it in my pocket, thank you so much.” And Bdubs does, taking it from Scar’s hand and shoving it in his hoodie before more negotiations can happen. “Gotta keep it close so it can work faster or better. Or whatever. Anyway, wonderful chatting about magic and stuff but I gotta get home and feed Pineapple Pizza or she’ll start tearing up the couch. I’ll see you around.”

“Any time, any time,” says Scar as he watches Bdubs lock the door, try to open it, realize he locked it instead of unlocking, and then throw a look made even more sheepish than usual by the big purple ring around his eye over his shoulder as he gets it open. “You’re always welcome at Magical Mountain, Inc.! Except maybe don’t come back until the magic fixes your face and you’re not so scary anymore!”

Bdubs laughs as the shutting of the door cuts Scar off, stage-shouts a “My face is perfect!” back for good measure, and when he puts his hands back in his pockets and prepares to walk home, he closes his hand around the crystal and feels a little braver.

It was, even for him, a pretty stupid thing to do: falling off a ladder and hitting a tree branch on the way down. “We’ll just go up there and put a little tarp over it,” he’d told Etho when their kitchen ceiling had started to drip. “I’m a professional, it’ll be easy, and we won’t get rained on inside while the landlord takes two weeks to get someone out here. Hell, he’ll be grateful to us for preventing the damage from getting worse! Everybody’s a winner.”

Etho had peered down at him in the silent tone he used when he knew it wasn’t worth arguing about and sighed in acquiescence. He’d even gone up first, refusing to let Bdubs set up the ladder or touch it until he’d verified it was safe and sturdy. The wind picked up as darker clouds rolled in and made a mess of his hair. “All clear,” he called down.

“Sure thing, Ladders,” said Bdubs, shaking his head as he clambered onto the roof, tarp in one arm. “You’re unbelievable.”

“I go up and I go down,” Etho replied with fake solemnity. “Let’s get this over with.”

It wasn’t difficult between the two of them to pin down the tarp over the hole in the roofing, hopefully enough cover to not have to worry about rainwater shorting out the microwave while making dinner. “It’s looking good, but I think we need a couple more nails. I’m gonna go grab them real quick before the rain comes in.”

“Mhm,” said Etho, hammer in hand and the last of the nails he’d brought up in his mouth as he smoothed out the third side. “Careful,” he tried to say, but Bdubs was already at the roof’s edge.

The wind picked up even more, and as he started to get on the ladder, a big burst of wind knocked him off balance and he was falling. His arms windmilled, looking for anything to grab – there was a tree at the edge of the roofline, whose branches had probably led to the stupid damage in the first place, and he managed to catch one of them not with his arms but with his face on the way down.

He doesn’t remember hitting the ground. That’s probably because of the concussion, but it’s strange that he remembers being unconscious so clearly. In that world, it’s him looking down from a rooftop at Etho, who’s scrambling up white walls with a look so devilish in his eyes – eye? One of them glints red; Bdubs’ heart rate spikes.

“So I still haven’t *got* anybody,” Etho is saying. He doesn’t fill in the rest, because they’ve been playing this game all day.

“Yeah! Yeah, yeah, I noticed, so stay down,” says the person Bdubs is inhabiting, in his own voice. It’s the first time he’s seen Etho in a while, since the last time he dropped by to remind Bdubs of his very vulnerable and limited mortality.

“Oh, you shouldn’t be up there! It’s dangerous up there, Bdubs, what if you fell?” When this Etho says it, it sounds more like a suggestion than a warning. This Etho has a shield hanging off his back and a bright, shiny axe at his side where his right hand is hovering – not touching, but it’s all Bdubs can pay attention to. A shove would do him in. There’s a quiver of arrows somewhere on him too, and Etho’s always been good with a bow –

“I’m *fine*, thank you,” he says, slinking along the walls of the parapet to try and maintain eye contact with Etho, who finally stops moving and gives him an exaggerated wink.

“Alright, alright. I’ve been goofing off – how can I help? I’ll start putting in the stairs up to the wall, how about that.” And Etho deliberately turns his back on the wall Bdubs is still perched on, heading toward their little storage space. Only one person in the snow fort is scared, which rankles given which one of them actually has blood on their hands.

With a great sense of vertigo, a memory-of-a-memory bubbles up: *If you started a fight with Etho, you know you’d die*, says a voice that sounds suspiciously and improbably like one of the baristas down the street.

“Oh, trying to put me at ease, get his guard down,” he says, taking the opportunity to climb down to the flat top of the wall and trail after Etho, who just laughs and opens the front door. “You know what, give me the boots back.”

Etho freezes and turns back, but there’s a calculating tilt to his head when he says, “No, Bdubs! We’re buddies!”

And then there is an echo – but louder, this time, Etho’s voice much closer, saying his name and it’s not the weight of a full set of armor but –

“No, Bdubs,” says Etho from above him, and Bdubs blinks his eyes open and finds himself on wet ground with aching ribs and an ominous numbness in his face. Etho’s glasses have fallen almost off his nose; he whistles low and touches the right side of Bubs’ face with shaky gentleness. “You fool.”

“Gimme back the boots,” says Bdubs, feeling heavier than he ever has in his life. His mouth feels

like it's stuffed full of crackers; he can't quite get both sides of his mouth to move at the same time. "Don't..."

"You *definitely* have a concussion, buddy, so maybe hold onto that thought while we get you inside before the rain comes, yeah?" Etho slowly lifts his upper body up to a sitting position for a moment, and then hauls him up to stand so that Bdubs' arm is already draped over Etho's stooped shoulders by the time the pain registers. Bdubs breathes through it and watches their feet as they shuffle lopsided back into the apartment. Etho is wearing his ancient, scuffed-up blue sneakers, and only then because it would have been about sixteen different ladder safety violations to wear the socks and opened toed slippers he constantly wears in the house. No boots, no armor. No shield, no axe. And no curses.

When he has been safely deposited on the couch so Etho can fetch him something cold from the freezer, Bdubs flexes the muscles in his jaw and groans with the knowledge it's going to be a nasty one. "No hospitals," he says as firmly as he can when he accepts an unopened bag of pizza rolls and presses them to his eye.

"No sleeping," counters Etho, who has crouched down and sat back on his heels to peer at Bdubs' face. "And Tango's coming over with a first aid kit and a second opinion before we rule out the ER. How are your ribs? You just disappeared, and when I got down you were flat on your back."

"Perfect as always," he says automatically. "As long as I'm not moving, or breathing, or thinking about it – no, don't make that face, only one eye is covered up by frozen food, I see that. I can breathe deep but it aches in my muscles, not my ribs or anything scary. Going to need some painkillers soon." There is a faint nausea rising in his stomach, but it had already been there in the other world. The dream.

"Mhm," Etho hums. There's a knock at the door, and Tango's already inside when Etho stands up; he must not have locked it after carting Bdubs inside. "I can't believe he did that."

Tango gives them both an appraising once-over and raises his eyebrows. "I can."

"I'm right here," Bdubs says, removing the pizza rolls from his eye to glower at them more effectively.

"Oh, yikes," says Tango, wide-eyed, confirming the bruising is already underway. "What happened?"

"Big gust of wind, tried to grab the tree and break my fall. You can see how that went." He looks back down at the bag in his hands and flips it over to the other colder side. They're pepperoni-flavored.

"I heard a shout and when I got to the ground, he was totally out of it – saying something about boots?" Etho's turned fully to face Tango now, arms crossed over his chest.

"Must've thought you'd come to loot his corpse or something." Tango sets down the first aid kit on the couch. "You're gonna need that, I'm guessing."

"You're one to talk about looting," says Bdubs as he starts searching for the Neosporin, and then stops and blinks in consternation at himself. When he looks up, Tango and Etho are staring in mild surprise. "Sorry, what? Forget it, I had a weird dream. Go back to ignoring me."

But it's a dream he hadn't had yet – and now, like a double-exposed photograph, there is Tango nervously setting a sword on the ground as Etho, slightly further away and watching with hawklike

mismatched eyes, says *No, don't give him a sword!* But he'd favored the axe then, to Etho's initial chagrin, and it was only after he wasn't red again that Tango gave that back.

Red *what?*

He snaps back to just one reality and finds the sudden, chilling absence of any nausea and the fact that he hasn't retained anything they've said in the last thirty seconds incredibly disorienting. Clutching the first-aid kit, he stands, reasonably steady given the current circumstances. "I'm – bathroom, right now, with this. Fix myself up. Be right back, promise."

Etho reaches out to him, as if he's seriously going to escort Bdubs the whole four feet to the hall bath. Bdubs swats at him, a little panicked. "No, right back. Hang on."

"Don't expect me to hold back your hair!" Tango calls, aiming for and just missing a punchline.

He tunes out whatever semi-hushed discussion is going on in the living room in favor of examining his reflection. There are the beginnings of a nasty black eye, but once he very carefully washes his face and swabs it down with some alcohol wipes, there aren't too many scratches and none of them seem particularly major. He pokes at his ribs trying to confirm nothing's broken or out of place, and then resigns himself to slowly wrestling out of his hoodie, a claustrophobic and torturously slow process that leaves him feeling drained, even if he knows a little gentle stretching will do wonders for tomorrow's pains.

He's breathing a sigh of relief that even without layers in the way everything checks out when the door clicks open. He almost jumps and swivels his head to find Etho standing in the doorway, looking a little too intentionally calm.

"Goodness gracious, can't a guy get five minutes of privacy after a near-death experience?" he says.

"I promised Tango when he left ten minutes ago that I'd make sure you didn't pass out in here or anything. You do kind of look like you got shot, though. Pew, pew," Etho says, making half-hearted finger guns at Bdubs' back.

When he contorts to try and catch a glimpse of his own back in the mirror, he can just barely catch an angry red dot with lines branching out; he must have landed on a rock or something. In the awful bathroom lighting and bad reflected angle, it could be a shot from a crossbow, or –

"Very funny. I'm all cleaned up and good to go, actually, and I'm guessing this means I am not being escorted to the hospital against my will?"

Etho tugs down his mask to emphasize he's serious, but there's the ghost of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. This way, he doesn't look like the person who thought hunting Bdubs for sport like a cat playing with a mouse at all. "If you promise to stay up overnight and consider going to immediate care in the morning, sure."

"Yessir, one un-slumber party coming right up. You better make me popcorn."

But Etho doesn't respond or move at all, leaned up against the doorframe, just looking at him. There's mud on his knees and splotches of it all over his jacket, which he evidently has not bothered to take off since everything happened. "I leave you alone for one second," he says, and then stops.

"You did not even, I was right there with you. Well, until I fell, of course."

“Oh, that’s way better.” Etho pauses. “I’m sorry I didn’t save you in time, then.”

“Are you nuts!” says Bdubs. “What were you going to do, fight the wind? Control the Matrix and stop time? Fall with me and use me to break your fall? I swear, people just don’t get that you are the crazy one here. Stupid. I’m alive, aren’t I? What do you got to be sorry about?”

“Alright, alright. Forget I said anything. Just promise me you won’t do anything stupid like that again?”

“I never have before, and I never will again – and if you bring up that one time five years ago, I cannot be held responsible for my actions, Etho, do you hear me?”

That finally gets a laugh out of him, the tension draining from his shoulders as he straightens back up. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. No screen time for the concussed, but we can bring all the blankets into the living room and camp out.”

“If this is a convoluted ploy to get me to try one of those new super complicated board games Tango gave you, you’re doing a bad job. I bet you’re probably not even gonna let me have my phone to check whether you’re lying to me,” Bdubs accuses as he follows Etho back into the living room which is all dark now that the storm has robbed them of any remaining daylight.

“Already hid it while you were in the bathroom,” says Etho, extra chipper. “And now that you mention it, a two-person Twilight Imperium game is tempting – “

“I know just enough about that to know you’re just being mean.” Bdubs collapses onto the couch and scowls while Etho rummages in their kitchen. He stretches out his legs just to be spiteful; Etho can either take the floor or figure something else out. “That better be popcorn noises I’m hearing! Aren’t you so glad we got that patch up there before the storm hit so we don’t have to worry about getting electrocuted from the rain indoors?”

“Uh-huh,” says Etho, with a remarkably passable level of sincerity.

Bdubs snorts and throws one elbow over his face as Pineapple Pizza curls up next to him. No sleep, because he promised, and because despite not really processing any of this, he’s not keen on inviting more bizarre dreams. Maybe that’s why they advise against sleeping after head injuries, the risk of weird visions and all. Scar would know; he’ll steal his phone back when Etho hits his caffeine crash at dawn and give Scar a call. In the meantime, there will be snacks (or else) and probably one nightmarish game of Catan, and a rotation of all the vaguely ice pack shaped foods in the freezer.

I’m sorry I didn’t save you in time. Goodness’ sakes. Just thinking about it and the awkward, stilted way Etho had said it makes his back ache, but they’re both alive. The weird dreams will fade in time with the scrapes and bruises, he’s sure of it. What do either of them have to be sorry about?

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Bdubs and Etho independently and accidentally terrify their friendly neighborhood baristas and call up some friends.

Neither the weird dreams nor the bruises seem to fade fast enough. His face heals first, thankfully, but the dream he had the first sleep after falling off the roof repeats.

It's not quite the same every time – he relives the argument about the boots and the stand-off with Tango in some hellish, murky place often. There are what seem to be fifty different occasions where Etho is menacing him, sneaking up behind him while he's building walls to let Bdubs know how disappointed he is, how easily he could be killed with his guard down like that, or chasing each other along their castle walls. In one of the scenes, Etho is attacking him with an axe as he tries to escape up a long, dark stairway, shouting, *I have to do this!* The scene shifts; he doesn't remember what happens when he gets to the top.

After the first week, they always end the same. He's walking with a group of people and he's stressed, he's *itching* in a way he hasn't since the very first day. It's not a curse, only a promise, because he's got nothing left to lose that a curse could take from him. He's thinking about that promise, and he's thinking about *If he loved you, why didn't he give you a life?*

Etho loves him, he's pretty sure. And if they pull this off, everyone else will know he was right.

He steels his nerves and finds himself already springing into action. Plant the rose, take the shot. He remembers he's not alone when the first retaliatory shot connects, someone dies, he's shouting, "I had to do that, I had to! Okay. Alright. Etho –"

One last crossbow bolt.

And then nothing.

He knows he died saying Etho's name, but unlike a normal dream, his death doesn't wake him up. He has a faint awareness that whatever his death set in motion is still happening out there, somewhere, but he can't access it anymore, wherever or whenever he is now, in a darkness waiting for the credits to roll. Nothing comes.

The first time a dream ends that way, it's only Etho shaking his shoulder to wake him up that breaks it. Bdubs sits bolt upright in surprise and nearly punches Etho. "You have *got* to stop scaring me like that!" he says, clutching his chest and trying to regulate his breathing.

"You hit me!" Etho says, rubbing at the arm Bdubs smacked. "It's past noon, I thought you'd want to get woken up."

"Sorry, sorry. I just had a weird, uh..." *Dream*, he's about to say, but when he looks up at Etho, he sees the mismatched red-and-grey eyes of the person who attacked him on the stairs and taunted him in the castle. He blinks; his vision blurs and tilts, but it persists. "Are you – is your eye okay?"

Etho gives him a wary look. "I'm fine." Are you fine, says a long pause.

Bdubs rubs his eyes once, twice, and stares back. It's still there, the – optical illusion, probably, some weird trick of light on Etho's glasses. "You know what, I need a drink. Coffee. How about I get us both something from the Southlands? Or are you gonna keep standing there and not let me out of bed?"

For a moment Etho looks like he's seriously considering strong-arming Bdubs into bed rest, nose visibly scrunched up even under the mask, but it passes. "Sure, that sounds good. I'll have the usual," he says, heading out of the room.

"Say 'thank you, Bdubs, for graciously offering to buy me coffee,'" hollers Bdubs as he scrambles out of bed. He doesn't leave any space for Etho to reply. "It's like I'm not allowed to get a little extra beauty rest now and then, not that I need it of course. If I were any less perfect than I am I'd make them put all that extra crap you hate in there as punishment for your ungraciousness, one of those – what did you call them, Etho, one of those *frappucini* things –"

Etho's probably rolling his eyes while he talks, but Bdubs keeps going as he puts on pants, pulls on his green windbreaker, the warmest thing he has. It wasn't warm in that void, at the end. The memories are fragmented, mixed up, but he remembers what he saw just as clearly now as he did when he was asleep. His back is aching again, a sharp throbbing where he'd fallen on that rock. Where he'd been shot in the other world.

Definitely time for a drink.

The Southlands Café is only a block and a half from their place, a dangerously convenient distance when he and Etho both mostly work from home. The building has changed hands several times since Bdubs moved in, but the new café owners have tried their best to make it welcoming, despite the dark brick interior and automatic door that constantly jams, either trapping customers inside or locking potential ones out. On workday visits, he brings his laptop along so that if he does get stuck for an extra half-hour he's not losing time. Etho's luck is usually worse, waiting outside in the rain or cold as the baristas apologetically mime at him through the glass when he goes as soon as they're set to open so he can get one quality dose of caffeine and a snack before calling it a day, because he has the worst sleep hygiene of anyone Bdubs has ever met.

He gets Etho's coffee, and a hot chocolate for himself, because his heart rate has only sped up since arriving at the café and caffeine doesn't seem wise. He needs to warm up, not give himself heart palpitations.

"Bdubs," calls the barista, and when Bdubs looks up from his phone he hears the same voice – the same one he had remembered in the other world – say *If he loved you, why didn't he give you a life?*

"Are you... alright?" says the barista, speaking in the tone of someone who does not get paid enough to deal with crisis situations and maintaining eye contact while Bdubs stands frozen like a deer in headlights.

"Sorry, I'm losing my mind," says Bdubs. He takes both drinks and turns tail to escape back into the street. He considers taking the long way home, circle around the back of the block, but he doesn't want to deal with Etho giving him a hard time about cold coffee and having to explain himself.

When he gets back, Etho's working at his desk in their shared office. The lights are off, because Etho never bothers to turn them on, not even at night when the room's only window has no light left to give. Bdubs had demanded his desk go under it when they moved in and were arguing where to put all their things; Etho hadn't fought back much, and seemed to enjoy the endless

opportunities to accuse Bdubs of photosynthesizing or pretending to mistake him for a large houseplant if he happened to be wearing green, which was often.

“Boo,” he says flatly, setting the cardboard cup gently on the top of Etho’s head, not letting go until Etho’s arm snakes up to retrieve it. Etho doesn’t even stop tapping keys with the other hand, which is definitely just showing off.

“That’s you,” Etho says, taking a sip. “Thank you, Bdubs, for getting me coffee.”

“I accept your very sincere gratitude, and you’re freaking welcome.” He doesn’t move. He’s never had a reason to consider that it would be very easy to sneak up behind someone who trusted you in order to kill them, not until Etho taught him that. The idea makes him itch. Etho’s two completely normal eyes are faintly reflected in the white glow of the monitor. “You know, it’s pretty nice out, so I’m thinking I’ll take a long walk. Probably be a couple hours or so.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You might need to feed Pineapple Pizza for me. And make sure and eat something, will you? *Actual* food.”

“Yup, yup.”

“Hey, listen to me!” He flicks Etho in the back of the head, which finally gets him to turn around with a wounded look. “And turn on the lights when it gets dark, you’ll ruin your eyesight. Seriously.”

Etho clutches the back of his head and makes puppy-dog eyes at him. “Cat, real food, lights, I got it. No need to nag.”

“Oh, come on now, like you’re not always reminding me what to do. I know how you are when you’re working like this.” Bdubs rubs at his face. “I worry, that’s all. I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Be safe, make good choices,” Etho says, sing-song and overly sincere.

He can tell from Etho’s expression that he’s acting hypocritical, but it doesn’t matter. He resists the impulse to put his hand on Etho’s head and ruffle his hair, to try and communicate that he cares despite the visions he’s unwilling to explain, that he can’t reconcile an Etho who is constantly implying he’ll kill his partner with the familiar gentle person in front of him. He doesn’t, huffing out *whatever you say* on his way out.

Out in the street, he feels less trapped but not more safe; in the apartment, he’s constantly aware of how limited the entrances and exits are, but in the open, every nook and cranny seems like a potential threat. That’s how it had been, in the world he dreams of every night. He remembers now what it was like to be cursed and have to kill to survive, and the lonely desperation of being red and cut off from everyone he cared about. Maybe it’s not fair to resent Etho’s terrorizing when he can look down at his own hands and see someone else’s blood there, dripping from his own sword – but he has never dreamed of hurting Etho. He remembers conspiring with Cleo – Cleo, angry and red and out for revenge – and complaining that Etho was kicking him out for the crime of having died, the fort they built entirely by themselves split down the middle. He remembers Etho throwing the potion that poisoned him right before he died the second time, and having no choice but to team up with the person who had finished him off. He remembers his last life, shouting Etho’s name with his last breath -

When he shakes himself away from dangerous thoughts, he finds that his feet have carried him past

the Southlands Café again. He sees Grian through the big glass windows and winces. He is almost certainly losing his mind, but it's gotten worse, not better, since the damage from his fall has slowly healed. He can't begin to imagine how he's supposed to explain all this to Etho, who is rational to a fault and prone to being overly concerned and who has a talent for saying things right out of his dreams and prompting fits of vertigo. If he's right about their hostile past, it's a bad idea to open up to Etho, and if there's a chance he's wrong he can't bear the thought of Etho finding out what horrible things he's been suspecting for weeks.

He has to tell *someone*, either to confirm that his friends' appearances in the other world mean they were really there too, or to finally admit he needs serious help. If Etho is out, there's Scar, who would have a lot to say about dream interpretations while swindling him out of a good chunk of cash and into more mystical cures he isn't even sure Scar truly believes in, or worse, counselling services. Tango clearly isn't handling the jokes at his other self's expense well, even if he doesn't know why, and that basically means Skizz is right out since his boundless compassion would almost certainly prevent him from keeping things secret. Of his friends who can be depended on for a healthy dose of reality, Cleo will probably hear him out. And she had been kind to him when they had both found themselves friendless and alone, last time.

He calls her immediately, his pace picking up as a spring enters his step waiting for her to answer. "Hey, how you doing?"

"What do you want," says Cleo, but it's only her usual level of grumpiness.

"Can't I call you for no real reason?" Bdubs says, extra-sweet. "Well, one reason, but the reason is I just wanted to talk. I've missed you so much!"

"It is one o'clock on a weekday, Bdubs. Not all of us can set our own schedules."

"I know, sorry, I'll let you get back to work in a second, but could I come over later this week? Just let me know what day works for you, I've been going a little stir-crazy since the concussion." He doesn't mean to use it as an excuse to get his way, exactly, but he's also not above it.

Cleo sighs heavily, but there's a fond undercurrent of laughter underneath that makes Bdubs feel right at home for the first time in a while. "Let me figure out when I'm free and I'll text you later."

"You're the best," says Bdubs, grinning.

"That's right. Got to go now, but we'll talk soon, then." Cleo pauses. "I've missed you too."

"I'm writing that down!" he says as Cleo hangs up on him. It doesn't bother him a bit. Finally, things are starting to feel a little less bleak.

Things haven't been quite right since Bdubs fell. It's not just Bdubs' odd behavior, either – sleeping at strange hours, spending unusually long times walking around their neighborhood, the new habit of constantly looking over his shoulder when their working hours do overlap, throwing what he probably thinks are sneaky glances at Etho every ten minutes, sometimes. That's all weird, but Bdubs is a generally weird person, so Etho keeps a mental list and tries to let it go in the absence of any identifiable reasons.

Some of that bleeds into their interactions with other friends, even when there's nothing Etho can put a finger on that's Bdubs' fault. They'd gone to Tango and Skizz's for game night, and

everything was fine until Tango made a mistake that put Bdubs ahead.

“Oh, you’re too kind,” Bdubs had laughed as he built a statue and moved his victory point marker around the next corner. “You’d give up *anything* for a loyal friend like me, right?”

Tango had whipped his head around so fast and glared at Bdubs with such intensity it made Etho shift uncomfortably in his seat. Tango hadn’t said anything directly back, although he *had* made a noise like an angry wet feral cat that set Skizz off laughing uncontrollably, almost recovering the mood. But not quite, not even after Tango pulled off a second-place finish, trailing Etho.

On the short walk back to their own apartment, Etho bumped Bdubs’ shoulder with his own. “Were you trying to make Tango mad? I’ve never heard him make that noise before.”

“I think he’s mad about the last time,” Bdubs had said, shoving his hands deeper into his pockets. His shoulders were hunched around his ears, like he was expecting a fight.

“What, last game night? I don’t remember anything happening. It’s all fun and games.”

“Until somebody gets hurt,” finished Bdubs. “You don’t remember, Etho?”

He had watched Bdubs fight with the lock – all their friends joked they might as well make their own entrances instead since it’d be easier than trying to figure out the front door – and wracked his brain trying to think of anything significant. It didn’t make any sense, in the moment or reflecting on it after.

When the door had opened and they’d stepped inside, Bdubs turned around to face him. “Etho. You really don’t remember.” It hadn’t come out quite like a question.

Etho had shrugged and turned his palms upward in a half-hearted gesture of apology. He couldn’t understand why that made Bdubs look at him like he’d just kicked Pineapple Pizza, or said he wanted to move out.

But then Bdubs had taken a deep breath and smiled face-splittingly wide. “Nah, I’m kiddin’ you. I got nothing. I was hoping you’d come up with something, because it was pretty scary. I didn’t think human beings could make those sounds!”

So there were moments like that, but Tango seemed a little sheepish the next time they saw each other anyway, like he couldn’t justify his reaction either.

The dreams, though.

He’s not, as a rule, a superstitious person. It’s probably why he’s more suspicious of Scar’s crystal “business” than anyone they know, although he politely refrains from pointing out it’s a total scam even when Bdubs cajoles him into purchasing one as part of some haggled discount he insists was necessary. When the dreams start, he doesn’t pay them any mind, but after a week of sleep spent patrolling the snow castle he and dream-Bdubs built together, arguing over stairs or aesthetic versus defensive choices or keeping their tools in good shape, it feels like *something*.

There’s a dream where he and Bdubs are in their fort at the dawn of a new day, and as Bdubs hands him a gift so he can arm himself, something sentimental in him makes him pause. “Can we just have a moment, right now? Can I just say how glad I am that you were my partner.” Bdubs makes a motion like *Oh, stop it, you*. “You always had my back. When it came time to kill someone, you never killed me –“

“I would *never* kill you!”

“- you went for Tango instead.”

“Yeah, Tango’s easy. No question there.”

Etho laughs and slings one arm around Bdubs’ neck, pulling him close enough that their armor clanks together. He knows Bdubs wouldn’t kill him, the same way he knows he’d do almost anything to keep Bdubs from losing a life as well.

He wakes up wanting to tell his Bdubs that he’s glad they’re partners, too, that he’s suddenly immensely grateful for all the years they’ve spent together so far and all the years ahead of them to spend as well. Intellectually, he knows the dream is pulling from what’s on his waking mind, like Tango’s weird aggression and being a little lonelier now that his and Bdubs’ schedules don’t often line up.

Even so, he’s halfway into his first cup of coffee trying to figure out a way to phrase it that doesn’t make him sound absolutely insane or imply a sudden change of heart around dreams and magic that would make more crystals acceptable birthday presents before he realizes it’s after six and Bdubs isn’t home, and hasn’t been home in a while. There are untouched leftovers in the fridge, and no dishes in the sink besides four of Etho’s own coffee mugs. Pineapple Pizza got fed while he was dreaming, but otherwise, there’s no sign that anyone else has been around recently.

Even when he picks up PP to carry her around the apartment as he looks for some sign he doesn’t live alone, her gentle purring and warmth against his chest can’t quite soothe the disproportionate sense of grief that descends on him. Despite an unshakeable blustery confidence and constant needling of all his friends, Bdubs has always been patient with Etho, even when they first met and Etho’s words tended to get away from him, tripping over his own thoughts. He had a tendency to come off as standoffish and intimidating, but Bdubs had seen right through him and immediately started calling him a nerd and a softie and stuck to his side.

They haven’t argued recently, not even their usual joking banter, really, so he can’t think of any reason for Bdubs to be mad enough to freeze him out. The passive-aggressive notes stuck to their fridge are evidence that Bdubs has never been afraid to let him know when Etho is doing something to get on his nerves. If it’s not something he did, Bdubs must have something else going on he doesn’t feel comfortable talking about. That idea worries him – it’s not like they’re prone to gushing heart-to-heart chats, but he can’t remember any other times they’ve hidden serious problems from each other.

Since there’s daylight left to burn, he decides to visit Scar to fulfill his end of Bdubs’ deal, on the off chance that either Bdubs is mad about not finishing the deal he made or that he’ll find Bdubs there. It’s a short enough bike ride to Scar’s building, although the weirdly steep stairs leave him more breathless than the trip over does. When he knocks on the door, breathing heavily, he considers that it might have been more polite to send a text first, but the door swings open before he can correct his mistake.

“Well, hello there, Etho,” says Scar. “I was expecting you!”

“Were you really?” Etho asks as he shuffles into Scar’s apartment.

Scar laughs. “I’m always expecting people to flock to Magical Mountain, Incorporated, but I have to say I’m often disappointed. I had no idea you were coming, but I’ve also got some new products that may be of particular interest to someone such as yourself... unless this is a purely social call?”

“A little of both,” Etho confesses. He always feels a little on edge around Scar, who is prone to completely unpredictable fits of fancy that he has trouble anticipating. “Bdubs told me I should

check out some new science thing you'd gotten, and we haven't talked in a while. Gotta check up on my friends."

"We are friends, aren't we? And friends look out for one another. For instance, when I got this, I knew it was meant for you." Scar extracts a small green gem from the ice cube tray on the desk. "Now, it may look like a perfectly ordinary glass bead, but I assure you, this is pure science. Guaranteed to improve your life."

"Uh-huh," says Etho. "And what does it do?"

"This is a one-of-a-kind danger detection crystal. Now, you may have everyone thinking you lead a normal, boring life, but I know better. I have a sense for this kind of thing – maybe you're dodging, you're weaving, fighting crime by night which is why you've tricked everyone into thinking you're nocturnal. Or maybe," Scar says, holding the glass in front of his eye, "you live with a very clumsy person you can't stop worrying about."

"Definitely that first thing." Etho opens his palm and Scar drops the glass into it; it is a completely ordinary, cheap bead. "Bdubs can take care of himself, you know."

"Can he? I say that with love, of course," Scar says hastily at the incredulous raise of Etho's eyebrow. "Bdubs and I, we go way back – not as far back as you two, but still. What a guy. He's had a hard time of it lately, though, hasn't he?"

"Concussions tend to be pretty rough," says Etho, now holding the glass in front of his own eye, peering at Scar through a vague green tint. "Unless you're referring to something else?"

"The G-man was telling me about this customer he had the other day, came into the Southlands and got coffee with whipped cream and a hot chocolate extra marshmallows, but when he called the guy's name the guy just stared at him with the scariest, widest eyes he'd ever seen. Said something about losing his mind before scampering out of there." Scar picks up Jellie from the chair behind his desk before settling into it and repositioning her on his lap. "I don't want to assume since Grian said he didn't remember the name but the guy was wearing a bright green windbreaker. Terribly inconvenient for a business like mine."

Etho thinks for a moment. That was probably the last day he had a real conversation with Bdubs, nagging at him to take care of himself. "Sounds like Bdubs, alright. He has been a little weird lately."

"Trouble in paradise?" Scar seems a little too gleeful at the prospect. "You know, I'm a licensed relationship counselor. Oh, it just makes me so happy to help repair relationships."

"I don't think that will be necessary, thanks. You haven't seen him recently, have you?"

"No, not since he showed up with his very scary face and got a courage crystal. Courage of the lion, you see, very unexpected. I think he's got a natural affinity for magic – I mean, science crystals. Ninety-nine percent science."

"One percent flawed. I can work with that," Etho says, and laughs at Scar's dramatic hurt look. "I am interested in this... danger thing. What's the going rate for ninety-nine percent science these days?"

"You know, normally that'd be a hard question, but you're a friend of mine and a good friend to Bdubs, too. I know you've been skeptical of my wares in the past, and I can sense a great kindness in you, coming here and opening up like this. So take that as a token of our continuing friendship,

free of charge. It'll be like I'm helping watch over you! And if I happen to be in a pinch myself someday, maybe you'll be reminded and feel inclined to pay me back with a small favor..."

"Okay, okay, I see what you're saying here. You can't put a price on friendship, but you *can* measure it with a list of totally not mandatory favors." Etho pockets the little bead. "I'm not signing anything, but if you see Bdubs, will you let him know I held up my end of the bargain?"

"Sure, of course. You know, it really has been wonderful chatting with you, Etho. Really. I hate to cut this short, but I actually have another client to prepare for so we'll have to check in again soon. I want to hear about all the changes from the crystal, and I might even have more science-y science stuff to show you by then."

Etho allows himself to be herded out the door, getting a goodbye in before Scar can get the wrong idea about his eagerness to hear any more sales pitches in the near future. He rides to the Southlands on his way home to snag a coffee just before they close. Instead of his usual, he asks for the most caffeinated thing they have. The barista studies him for a moment before asking, "Are you sure about that?"

Etho shrugs. "Yep, it's gonna be a late night. I'm not worried about it."

Apparently that's a good enough reason, because the barista rings him up and shouts, "Mumbo!" before beginning to confer with the other person behind the bar. When he sees them scribbling on the back of a receipt, arguing about proportions, he takes a seat near the window and pulls out his phone and the bead. He takes a photo of it on the table and debates whether he should text it to Bdubs. He writes and deletes three different captions before settling on just """"*science*"""" *acquired* and sending it on the off-chance it really is a delayed favor that's the issue.

It takes a full five minutes even though there's no one else in the café before his order is ready. He throws some extra change in the tip jar with a nod; he's not sure what's in it, but the cup is larger than he thought they even carried and full to the brim, with a very strong smell. The name tag of the barista who rung him up catches his eye. "This may be odd, but do you know Scar?"

Grian quirks one eyebrow at him. "I'm a little afraid to answer, but yes. If you know him too I hope you're aware you can't trust any stories he's told you about me."

"Nothing bad," Etho reassures him. "Me and him were talking about the café earlier and he happened to mention you. It's a small world."

Before he can respond, Etho's phone goes off and Grian visibly startles, hopping back a little bit. Which seems like an overreaction, but Etho does forget how creepy his alarm tone of ominously ringing bells is if you're not expecting it. "Whoops, that's my cue. Thanks for the coffee."

He thinks he hears the other barista – Mumbo? – saying something like *that guy* and *creepy* on his way out, but he ignores it. He'll worry about his reputation later, after Bdubs comes home and they can finally talk about whatever's going on. Bdubs, presumably, will have to come home to sleep at some point and the coffee will ensure Etho is awake to see him. One way or another, they're going to make this work.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Etho experiences consequences for his actions, and Cleo is a good friend. (It's [death coffee saga](#) time.)

Bdubs comes over on Friday evening. Cleo orders pizza in advance and it arrives minutes after he shows up at her front door, cementing the cozy, homey feeling Bdubs always carries with him. When they first met it had almost bowled her over, how familiar and easy it was to start egging him on whenever he got worked up. He and Etho had shown up at her favorite diner for takeout midnight breakfast while she had been hanging out at the bar, chatting with Scott, and without even thinking about it she'd joined their argument, switching sides periodically to keep it going. Years enough have passed that she can't remember now what it had even been about, but she remembers Bdubs' instant adoption of her as an ally and the wounded look he gave her when she conceded Etho had some good points, too. Etho had smiled brightly with his eyes and given her the faintest nod of approval, opening up the takeout boxes and settling down on the seat next to her.

She hasn't seen Bdubs for a few weeks, although he'd sent pictures of his wicked black eye when he'd fallen. It's mostly faded now, the last of the bruising fading smoothly into the heavy bags around his eyes.

They spend a good while catching up, with Cleo explaining the more unusual taxidermy jobs she's taken on recently and Bdubs dramatically explaining – nearly to the point of re-enactment – his recent injury, and subsequent wanderings.

“So imagine there's this game,” Bdubs is saying after they've finished catching each other up. Cleo watches him, chin in her hand. “Last one standing wins. But it's a little, you don't have just one shot, it's random for each person how many chances they get. Once you're on your last one, though, the game changes and you gotta try and take down all the people who aren't on their last.”

“Oh, I like that.”

“Yeah, and so – until then, you can make friends, it's all peaceful, you can't attack anyone else. But it never lasts. There's this curse, and every week at least one person gets it, and if they don't kill one of the peaceful people they lose all their chances.”

“When you say chances, do you mean – you're talking about lives, right? This is a murder game. Which, for the record, I am on board with.”

Bdubs smiles knowingly at her. He heard all the goings-on of her tabletop campaigns and knows exactly what happened to her old D&D group. He'd been an exceptionally good sport about it, showing up for many late-night dinners to let her vent, as if it were a recap of his favorite TV show. “Of course. Lots of drama if you get cursed, trying to decide whether you should betray your ally or confess you've been cursed and possibly ruin your chance to surprise anyone... Does it ring a bell?”

Cleo thinks about it. “Battle royale games are popular, but no, it doesn't.”

“I played it a long time ago, I think, and now I’m desperate to find someone else who remembers it. Frankly, it’s driving me crazy.” He looks it: his eyes are a little too bright, too wide, even accounting for the faded shadow of his nearly healed black eye. “I mean, I’ve been dreaming about it. There must be somebody else who remembers this thing, and if I find them, maybe I can get it out of my head.”

“I don’t know of any games with a boogeyman, sorry.”

“A *what*.” The way Bdubs says it is more like a threat than a question, but he clears his throat and goes on, suddenly smiling. “You do know it! That’s what the curse was, the boogeyman curse. You already knew. I had a feeling you played too. Oh, Cleo, you have no idea what a relief that is.”

“Hang on, hang on, that doesn’t mean I have any clue what this thing is. What else would you call someone cursed to secretly murder their friends? That’s a boogeyman if I ever heard of one.”

“Naw,” says Bdubs, waving a hand dismissively in her direction. “C’mon, humor me –“

“Have I not been this entire time?”

“*Cleo*. Okay, alright, what about this. What colors were you thinking of?”

She pauses, wary. “What do you mean, what colors?”

Bdubs doesn’t say a word, just staring with bright shiny eyes at her and tapping two fingers on his leg. *Bum pa-dum, bum padum*, a steady heartbeat.

“You’re really making me do this.” Cleo sighs. “Green, yellow, red – for the lives you had. It’s like calling it the boogeyman, it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“I didn’t say anything about the colors having to be for the life system, that’s on you! But yes, the boogey gets knocked down to red if they can’t kill a green or yellow in time.”

“I’m starting to feel like you’re the boogeyman in this conversation, actually.”

That gets a laugh, strained though it is. “I’m such a perfect boogeyman no one ever saw it coming. And I had it twice.”

“I can’t see how when you have such an... intimidating reputation.”

Bdubs snorts. He hasn’t stopped drumming on his leg. “Very funny, coming from you. Your reputation always preceded you.”

“I’m deliberately choosing to take that as a compliment, for the record. But you’re taking all of this very seriously. Are you sure you’re alright? It’s just some game, you said.” She watches him squirm and leans forward in her seat.

“It’s not just,” he starts, and then stops. Bdubs looks down at his hands. “I have this dream, sometimes. We’re both red and you help me set up a trap, and then you offer to go talk to Etho, because he’s kicked me out. We’d built this whole fort together, you know, and he hated the way I did the stairs, but he let me mess up his walls because he could tell I thought his idea was ugly... but the rules are the rules. And I remember you doing that for me, probably because you thought it’d be fun to threaten him, but I’m sitting here now, and I can *see you*.” He looks up and directly at her with big sad eyes. “You have to die a couple times to get to red. It wears on you – you’d gone grey and drained, and I swear to you I can see you like it was last time. Right now, just like what I remember. You somehow knew about the boogeyman and red lives before I even worked up the

courage to tell you. I can't be crazy. Right?"

Cleo pauses and holds eye contact. For half a second she imagines a red bandana around Bdubs' head, but it's only the force of Bdubs' belief that snares her. "First of all," she says slowly, "there are worse things to be than crazy, which I have told you you are many, many times. But you're still *you*, and I'm glad you told me. Have you talked to anyone else?"

He lets out an ugly laugh, but he relaxes a fraction. "No. Tango acts like he knows, but I don't know if he knows he knows. If you know what I mean." At Cleo's raised eyebrows, he continues. "I may have not been very nice to him last time, but any time I accidentally make a joke about it he starts frothing at the mouth all confused-like and then sends these weird apology texts after. Even Etho noticed, but when I said it might be because of last time he thought I meant last time we played games. I played it off like a joke, but he's got no clue."

"It's one thing if you're dreaming of a game that feels like it was real but if other people are reacting like they know your dreams," says Cleo, and then can't figure out how the sentence should end. What if other people are dreaming your dreams? That is not a part of any plan. "I don't know what to make of that. What exactly did you say to him?"

"Oh, you know," Bdubs says, looking away. "Just saying he'd gladly sacrifice himself for a loyal friend like me." He pauses. "I may... he might have been the victim of a boogeyman. Who was me."

"Bdubs," chides Cleo.

"And he *might* have given me a life to come back from red that same day. In my defense he was only green and got all his stuff back, which I think was very polite of me. Not that Tango appreciated all my effort."

"Bdubs! You know how I feel about traitors," she says, and Bdubs nods fervently, a little sheepish. "But that is in fact pretty funny. It's hard to know where Tango stands, sometimes." She's not sure how she knows this, other than mostly vague impressions of him when she's visited Bdubs and Etho's place and he happened to be there. But it feels right when she says it. "How long have you been putting up with all this?"

"Couple of weeks now, since I fell." Bdubs laughs again, rubs at his bruised eye. "That's how I died the first time, it turns out. Just plummeted from too high up, nobody's fault but mine. Most of the dreams are about dying, actually. Or Etho trying to kill me. So that's – I couldn't talk to anyone. I didn't know who I could talk to without them freaking out."

"Hold on, are you avoiding Etho?" Cleo takes a moment to pinch the bridge of her nose. "Bdubs, if you are here in my apartment because you are using me to hide from him I am going to be *very* cross with you, and then Etho will be very cross with *me* for throttling you to death and I'll have even more trouble than you're worth to deal with."

"I'm not avoiding him!" says Bdubs defensively. "Not on purpose, anyway. He sleeps most of the day, and since I couldn't do much work because of the concussion I was out walking or whatever in the evenings until I had to go to sleep, and we just kind of..." He puts the index fingers of both hands together and then moves them apart with a short whistle. "Drifted."

"I believe you that all of this dream stuff seems creepily real, but you have to know you can't hold Etho accountable for this stuff, right?" She tries to say it gently, but she's not sure if it lands that way.

“I know, I know.” Bdubs has the decency to look guilty about it. “I just don’t think he’d take something like this seriously. I mean, if you hadn’t just told me stuff you shouldn’t have known about it before I even told you I might have found somewhere to check myself in. And if I can’t tell him about it, I can’t exactly explain why I almost screamed when he walked into the kitchen behind me last week and I almost couldn’t stop freaking out when I could see the one weird red eye he has in my dreams instead of his regular face.”

“Okay, I do see your point there. Screaming at your roommate is not generally conducive to working things out,” she says, ignoring Bdubs’ protest. It’s easier to rile him up than tether him, but he looks more himself when he’s indignant and sputtering than that far-away look he has whenever he mentions his dreams. “Look, it’s getting late, and I hate to kick you out, but I really think you should go home and at least *consider* telling Etho something. At least let him know you’re dealing with some stuff, if you won’t explain yourself to him. And if you do that – *if* you do that, we can talk about this more tomorrow when I am less tired and more capable of giving good advice.”

“That is a lot to ask of a guy, Cleo,” he says, but he stands up when she does. “If I for some reason am prevented from talking to Etho by such things as him being asleep all day, or un-overcomeable anxiety -”

“You’re still welcome to talk,” she says, pulling him into a hug. He laughs into her shoulder, and they stay like that for a long moment. “You have to know that by now. But I have faith in you. Of all people you should know better than to be scared of Etho.”

“Ha,” says Bdubs, but he gives her one genuine, wide smile before moving to the door. “I’ll text you tomorrow how it went. And I really appreciate you taking me seriously. You have no idea how much worse it was, not telling anybody. At least you know, even if I am crazy.”

“Crazy or not, you’re always welcome here.” She holds the door open and Bdubs steps out into the hallway. “Now, be brave, and bring me back good news.”

“You got it boss,” he says, and waves before disappearing around the corner.

After she’s locked the door and surveyed the empty pizza box on the coffee table, she decides to message Joe before going to bed, because while his advice may not always be actionable there is no better person she knows to present a totally hypothetical dream-sharing, possible fake-memory scenario to. In its own way, it is a weird kind of badge of honor that Bdubs came to her first – even before Etho, which is a disconcerting counterbalance.

By the time she’s settling in, she gets a text from Bdubs: *just parked, home safe! sweet dreams*. It’s unnecessarily ominous, but probably well-meant; she doesn’t bother responding before turning out the lights, and hopes the well-wishing works.

When Bdubs gets back to his apartment, trying to slink quietly to his bedroom to sleep until he can hold Cleo to her promise to talk more about the game when he wakes up, he’s stopped in his tracks by the sight of Etho on the couch, one hand pressed over his eyes and the other dangling off the couch, glasses clutched in a loose fist. At first he’s terrified Etho has been waiting for him, to confront him about being avoidant, but Etho barely reacts to the sound of the door thudding shut.

“Etho?”

He only gets a pathetic, garbled moan in response.

“Hey, Etho, are you – are you okay? Look at me,” he says as the rising tide of anxiety swells up. “It’s Bdubs, I’m home, what’s going on?”

Etho turns his head and parts his fingers the tiniest bit to see Bdubs crouched next to him. “Not great,” he says, and then closes his fingers again to seal his hand over his eyes. “I can feel my heart beating.”

Bdubs gently pries Etho’s glasses from his dangling hand to set them on the coffee table. When he loops his own hand around Etho’s wrist, his pulse is far too rapid. “You’re not kidding. Can you sit up for me?”

“No,” says Etho, who begins to lever himself upright anyway.

“Well, you’re feeling good enough to argue, so that’s either a good sign or a sign being mean to me is one of your essential functions. Don’t even think about weighing in on that.” He hasn’t seen Etho like this since – college, at least, and even then it was different, going days without sleep to finish projects or pulling pranks. “How long has this been going on? And what in the world happened?”

When Etho brings up his other hand to press against his chest, his whole arm trembles. “A few hours, and I don’t... know...” he says, trailing off with closed eyes, breathing deeply.

“Alright, okay. Great.” He’s still holding onto Etho’s wrist. “We’re gonna try and stand up, and if that goes south we are going to the emergency room. So give it your best shot here.”

He tries to haul Etho to his feet, and to Etho’s credit he does groan like he’s trying but contributes essentially nothing to holding himself upright. Bdubs maneuvers himself to support Etho, arm around his waist and Etho’s arm slung over his shoulder. He grips Etho’s hand that’s dangling over his shoulder, squeezing it. Etho squeezes weakly back.

“Emergency room it is.” Etho groans again in protest, but Bdubs is already shuffling them out the front door. “Not calling an ambulance and getting you in the car *is* the compromise, buddy, so you’re gonna have to hang in here with me.”

It’s a challenge to wobble Etho out to his car, fighting to get the passenger door open and then trying with great difficulty to get Etho inside. Mercifully, Etho manages to buckle his own seatbelt by the time Bdubs gets in the driver’s seat and starts the car. He keeps one hand on the wheel but takes Etho’s left hand in his right, afraid that Etho’s pulse will skyrocket further or he’ll somehow disappear or go where Bdubs can’t help him anymore.

This time, it’s Etho who squeezes his hand as he mutters mostly to himself about people cutting him off and getting stuck at red lights when the situation is so urgent.

“Bdubs,” he says. “Hey, Bdubs.” He squeezes his hand again. “I wanted you to know. I’m so glad you were my partner.”

“Hey, what’s with the past tense there?” Bdubs says, glancing quickly over and then back at the road. He speeds up a little more.

“Last time, I know what you mean now. I’m sorry I couldn’t save you in time.” Etho’s grip tightens and stays that way as he talks. “I wasn’t there, and I didn’t keep our promise. I thought we

could be together again, and everything would be peachy, but..." He trails off into a sigh and more unintelligible noises.

"When you're okay, we are gonna have a conversation about this," Bdubs says, own heart pounding, trying to focus on getting to their destination as quickly as possible. Etho makes occasional comments on the rest of the slightly illegally quick drive to the hospital but it's hard to make them out amongst the general sounds of misery.

The process of checking into the ER is as onerous as he expected – trying to fill out the paperwork for Etho, who is still more out of it than Bdubs was when he had a head injury, having to put his foot down that he'd like to stay with his partner as much as possible and yes he had the paperwork to back him up, because Etho had made him keep a copy of important things in his wallet after he fell of the roof in case of something like this. He texts Cleo to let her know he won't be able to make it tomorrow after all, and texts Skizz as well after weighing the pros and cons of freaking him out unnecessarily versus looping their friends in.

Eventually, far longer than he thinks it should have taken, Bdubs is allowed into Etho's room, where he's hooked up to an IV to fix the dehydration. The passing of hours and drip have done him good already, although he looks like he hasn't slept in days.

"Hey," says Bdubs, pulling a chair closer to Etho's bedside.

Etho opens one eye and turns his head slightly to smile at Bdubs. "Oops," he says.

"Yes, *oops*. You're severely dehydrated and no one has told me what else. What did you do to yourself?"

"Um," Etho says. The corner of his mouth twitches. "I may have ordered the most caffeinated thing they could make from the Southlands. I guess they didn't expect me to drink it all at once."

Bdubs stares at him, not sure if he wants to laugh hysterically with relief or strangle Etho right there. "You – you are something else, you know that? If you didn't look so pathetic right now I'd throttle you. *Caffeine*? You did this to yourself with *coffee*? I thought – I thought you were *dying*, Etho, you were talking crazy and shaking and, I don't know what even. I thought I was gonna lose you, idiot."

"Now you know how I felt when you fell," Etho says, but there's no bite to it. He weakly reaches out a hand toward Bdubs, who takes it in both of his, derailing Bdubs' indignant counter-argument. "Doctor says I'll be fine once I get some fluids in me. It's not like last time."

"Do you even know what you're saying?" Bdubs' heart is in his throat; Etho's hand is cold between his fingers.

Etho sighs and closes his eyes again. "I've been having the weirdest dreams. You and me building a castle made out of snow. Chasing each other around. Skizz and Tango sometimes are there too. That's what you meant when you said he was mad about last time, right? I remember them like it was real."

"It would be pretty crazy if you were dreaming the same dreams as me," Bdubs says slowly, watching Etho's face. "They're not very good ones."

"Mine are a lot of fun, actually. Except..." Etho trails off and doesn't continue, even when Bdubs waits for more.

"Except?"

“I already told you I was sorry.”

“Hey, hey, don’t be. Etho, look at me.” He waits until Etho turns his head slowly toward him to make sure Etho understands how serious he is. He hopes his face looks something remotely resembling a grounded, sane person. “We’ll talk about this when you’re better, how about that? Sleep this off and get better and then we can argue like normal over who should be sorry about what.”

“I’d like that. Missed telling you you’re wrong,” he says, sounding tired beyond belief. “Crash is getting to me.”

“I bet it is. Don’t keep yourself awake on account of me. I’ll still be here when you wake up.”

Etho doesn’t respond after that, and after a few minutes his breathing evens out and his hand relaxes.

Bdubs doesn’t bother trying to sleep. If he and Etho are sharing dreams – a new and possibly even crazier explanation than secret past-life memories – he doesn’t want to intrude now. He stays awake thinking about *last time*, and how stupid Etho is to have given himself caffeine poisoning over nothing. How stupid it was of him to not notice enough to intervene, to not have been *around* to talk some sense into him, and how strange it is that Etho thinks he should be sorry for Bdubs’ death.

He remembers fragments from his last death: that he had made some promise that didn’t save him, that cost him his last life. That he died calling Etho’s name, calling out to an Etho who took great joy in menacing him and making him paranoid, who had attacked him in that long dark stairway. It does not comfort him to know Etho thinks he’s responsible for whatever happened.

Of all the things, it’s Etho’s quiet almost-snoring that almost makes him break down, a familiar noise among all the sterile hostility of an unexpected hospital stay. He can’t tell whether he’s laughing or crying, covering his own mouth to try and avoid disturbing the other occupant of the room who has – presumably and hopefully – been asleep the whole time. It’s *Etho*, after all. Etho, his partner and his best friend and someone he has always felt like he’s known his whole life, from the moment they met. And maybe even longer, it turns out.

He tries to hold onto that, the rock-solid foundation of his current life, and lets what remains of his certainty and Cleo’s confidence carry him into his own slumber.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Pineapple Pizza gets a new toy, Bdubs becomes a ghost, and Etho tries his hand at art criticism.

It doesn't start with a fishing rod showing up in their living room, but its appearance does mark the moment Etho's current state of affairs becomes undeniable.

"What's this for?" he calls to Bdubs, who is puttering around their kitchen, opening cabinets and shutting them again and generally refusing to make up his mind about what to have for lunch.

"What's *what* for?" Bdubs calls back, head popping up from behind the kitchen island. A cabinet door swings shut a little too loudly.

Etho lifts the fishing rod and waves it up and down. Pineapple Pizza circles his legs, having decided it must be a new toy.

"Oh, that," scoffs Bdubs, who turns to open the fridge. "Got it secondhand. Seemed like it might be nice to go out to a lake or something, sometime. You're good with one, aren't you?"

The phrasing of the question and the way Bdubs squares up to the fridge without looking back makes Etho uneasy, although it's difficult to imagine why. "Oh for sure, you know me. I got all kinds of tricks up my sleeve."

Bdubs harrumphs at that, shuts the fridge again. "Yeah, I believe that. Probably used to go around trying to hook people while their backs were turned like some kind of, of – some kind of pond cowboy, or something."

"You have a very active imagination," Etho starts to say, ready to give Bdubs a hard time over *pond cowboys*, but then vertigo overwhelms him. When he looks down at his feet to steady himself, it's like he's looking past the hardwood he knows is under him and instead sees a green landscape from the top of some pillar, a fishing rod in his hand, the line connected to someone down below.

He can feel his heart beating in his chest, and he has a sense-memory of falling down with all the vivid, terrifying sensation of jumping from the height of a swing in the park as a child, down to the faint awareness that the intervening years meant it was no longer quite the same body, that something had been knocked out of alignment by time. Bdubs' voice shouting his name is ringing in his ears as he chases down his target.

When he looks up, Bdubs is staring at him, knife in one hand and a half-peeled apple in the other. The sheen of the metal flashes an odd blue color with a slight movement. "Hello? Anybody home?"

"Uh," says Etho. Pineapple Pizza has pounced on the end of the fishing rod which has fallen to the floor; he jerks it upright and she jumps after it. "I'm definitely paying attention."

"Sure you are," Bdubs says, but there's no laughter in it; his face is unusually stony. He abruptly

leans over the counter and points the knife in Etho's direction. "You been drinking coffee again?"

"No! I've been following doctor's orders. Must be why I'm so tired."

"Hm. You better not even try – even if you tried to order some down the street I think they're probably all too terrified of you to risk it."

"Terrified of *you*," says Etho. The day after he got out of the hospital he mostly spent sleeping, but he'd followed Bdubs down to the Southlands right at closing time. There was no use trying to stop him, and it had been pretty priceless to watch him lecture Grian and the other barista for a full uninterrupted five minutes about the dangers of caffeine overdoses and interrogating them with gusto about what exactly they had mixed in that drink. While Bdubs was working up to explaining exactly how generous he was being in not pursuing any legal action given the cost of ER trips these days, Etho snagged a nametag off the apron that had been draped over the drinks counter, presumably in a now-ruined hope of ending the shift quickly, and slipped it into his pocket before turning back to smile placidly over Bdubs' shoulder.

It had been funny, even, when Bdubs turned to jab him in the shoulder to emphasize that they were not under any circumstances including but not limited threats, bribes, extortions, blackmail, gifts, incentives, deals, bargains, or manipulations allowed to serve Etho coffee for at *least* a full week and probably not for, like, a month after. Possibly never again, given their irresponsible business practices.

At that point, Bdubs had finally let off enough steam to pause long enough for the guy in the back, who had been shuffling anxiously back and forth in and out of sight behind the espresso machine to say, "Is this guy... are you...?" He couldn't seem to get the question out.

"Yup, yup," said Etho. "It's no fun being stuck in the hospital overnight. I basically don't remember the last twenty four hours at all, but I hear it got pretty bad." He shrugged and stuck his hands in his pockets, pleasant as could be.

Bdubs had swiveled to study him for a moment before turning back. "*He's* the scary one, bud. You only got half the talking to you deserve, so you better remember twice as much, got it?"

There was panicked nodding, and then Bdubs, apparently satisfied he'd made his point, had grabbed his elbow and dragged him back out into the street.

"You sure know how to make a point," Etho said, finally letting himself laugh.

"Yeah, well. Wait until you hear the lecture I've got saved up for you, mister I almost died from coffee because I don't even know what." Bdubs kicked at a pebble on the sidewalk. "I'm going to get you a water bottle with a D-ring and weld it shut so it's permanently attached to you. Dehydration! If you'd bother to listen to me when I tell you to take care of yourself we wouldn't have had to go through all this."

"I'd never lose my keys again," Etho said thoughtfully. "I guess you did sleep on hospital furniture, which is pretty much worse than being hospitalized. I got a bed and pillows and everything."

Instead of the laughter Etho expected, Bdubs had made a noise not unlike a repressed scream. "I really do not want to do this out here," he said, gesturing to the street around them, "but you are making this very hard. You know what you told me, right before you passed out last night? *Now you know how I felt when you fell*. So don't go acting like you were smarter when you were all messed up."

Etho punched the crosswalk button and tried to remember that conversation but couldn't. He remembered getting coffee, and that he'd almost finished it off by the time he'd gotten home. After that, things got blurrier and blurrier beyond the overwhelming awareness of his own heartbeat, and waking up the next morning under the too-bright fluorescent hospital lights, Bdubs curled awkwardly into the ugly, pleather-cushioned chair at his bedside. "I'm wiser than even I know. But no," he said when Bdubs moved like he might actually hit him for not being serious enough, "I know. I screwed up, but I was just trying to make sure I'd be awake when you got home. I wouldn't have done it if I'd realized how bad it'd be. I probably already told you that, though."

The walk sign came on; he started walking again, and looked over his shoulder to quirk an eyebrow at Bdubs, who had been looking a little shell-shocked.

"No," he said, sounding strangled. "That hadn't come up, actually."

Etho shrugged, and they had walked in silence the rest of the way home. When they were back inside, Etho scooped up Pineapple Pizza and settled on the couch with her in his lap.

Bdubs had heaved a sigh and then laughed softly and joylessly. "You scare the ever-loving crap out of me, you know that, right?"

He turned his head so that Pineapple Pizza would stop rubbing her face on his for a moment. "Who, me? We've known each other for how many years, and in that time who's gotten into more bad scrapes between the two of us?"

"That's a good question, but not the point I was making," said Bdubs. "Look, you – I'm sorry. It had already been a long day before all the hospital stuff, and then I thought you were dying, and then you were in the hospital telling me crazy stuff about your dreams and I slept awful in that stupid freaking chair, and now – anyway." He'd taken a deep breath.

"You can't take dreams too seriously," Etho said, cat purring loudly under his hands, a soothing anchor. "It's just your brain picking up on whatever's going in your life and making up stories about it. No good worrying too much about them."

Bdubs had stared with that funny closed-off expression before announcing it was time to worry about the important things, like what takeout they were ordering for dinner. Etho hadn't recognized it at the time, but it's the same expression Bdubs has now, knife in hand and looking very much like he has thoughts on who's the more terrifying one between them. Like Etho might actually be scary, not just scaring him with the years-long litany of unnecessary risks that turned out alright in the end, more or less.

"This is great, yeah. We'll waste all our time arguing about who's scarier and freak out all the neighborhood businesses trying to trip each other up. It'll be great for our productivity *and* our reputations."

Etho watches Bdubs go back to peeling the apple with the paring knife. "I think we've had this argument before. Or something close."

"Surely we have before, and surely enough we will have it again!" says Bdubs, now chopping the apple into slices. The slide of the knife into the flesh and sharp thunk of it colliding with the cutting board is oddly soothing despite the excessive force. "You gonna stand there with that fishing rod all afternoon or are you gonna make yourself something to eat so you don't go and land yourself in the hospital again?"

He almost makes a joke about Bdubs being the one to talk, but it would only upset him. Etho tries

to pin down the memory as he makes a sandwich while Bdubs moves onto complaining about his newest client but finds only vague impressions that won't quite align: sprinting away from Bdubs, both of them laughing, the vast dark sky mottled with stars above them, the cool breeze that whistled between the walls they'd built on top of the hill, the one he keeps dreaming about.

He can't keep down the dreams after the fishing rod incident, no matter how much he tries. He's learned not to use stimulants to keep him awake, but that doesn't mean he can't use other methods to keep himself sane, even if it puts him squarely where other people might start worrying about long-term effects of sleep deprivation. He spends a few nights on the couch, methodically trying to rule the variables out: the quality of moonlight through his bedroom window, some oppressive sense of confinement, embracing the possibility his roommate is testing him and trying to prove to his subconscious that fishing rods are nothing to be worried about. But on the second night, when he's just on the verge of finally drifting off, Bdubs shows up in their living room at midnight looking like a ghost.

"Don't even start with me," says Bdubs, unnaturally pale and splotchy. His face is white, and his clothes are covered in what looks like a fine layer of white dust. He points one shaky, luminous finger in Etho's direction and ghostly particles float to the floor. "This is your fault."

"My fault?" Etho says, throat scratchy. Pineapple Pizza jumps from under the crook of his arm to circle Bdubs' feet surreptitiously while Bdubs scowls down at her and him alternately.

"Don't," says Bdubs, rubbing at his face. "Don't ask, don't *even*. You should be in bed! Even you need sleep!"

Etho bites back a comment about Bdubs' dedication to sleep schedules and waves the criticism off instead. "I'm trying to sleep right now," he lies. "Not my problem if you want to haunt me."

"Like you'd care," Bdubs says, with enough vitriol it's almost enough to make Etho sit up. Before he can engage, Bdubs slinks down the hallway, fading into darkness as whatever had caused his ghostly glow only affected the front of him.

In the morning, after several sleepless hours, he finds faint ghostly footprints trailing down the hallway. The next day, Bdubs is conspicuously absent again, but when Etho enters their office there's a drawing still up on Bdubs' tablet. It's clearly unfinished, but he can see what Bdubs was going for and scribbles a suggestion on a stray post-it note laying on Bdubs' desk.

When he sits down to start his own work for the day, he thinks about the drawing and decides then and there what his plan is to fix all this.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Bdubs dreams of ghosts, tries to get a refund, and decides to give someone a present.

The first few days after Etho's death coffee incident are almost easy, with mornings spent doing on-site visits and afternoons that alternate between work and sketching out the fort from his dreams – first the main little tower, then the walls, the hazardous tree. Something keeps sticking, never living up to what he remembers or a more distant, painful echo he can't quite place. When he gets frustrated he spends his breaks shoving water bottles at Etho, unable to have a civil conversation but waiting at his shoulder to make sure he actually drinks it before heading out for a walk around the block.

The walking doesn't fully keep the itch from rising over the following week into a tension across his back that keeps him glancing over his shoulder at all hours of the day, but one evening as the golden hour light begins to creep across his desk it catches the courage crystal sitting there and refracts shattered patterns that waver back and forth along the walls. When Etho stumbles in, gripping a coffee mug with both hands and squinting at the last dregs of daylight, it catches him too and he's lit up in flames. Bdubs' heart siezes up as Etho tilts his head down to try and keep the light from his eyes, the deepened burning shadow transforming his face into something menacing and sharp.

"That better not be coffee in your hands," Bdubs says after a beat too long as Etho stalls in the doorway, groaning at the bright light.

"Decaf," Etho says hoarsely, lifting the mug slightly as he moves to his desk. "Have a little faith in me."

"I'll believe it when I see it. You can't possibly blame me for wanting to see you follow through on promises after what you've put me through."

Etho tilts his head consideringly and Bdubs' heartbeat quickens, but Etho turns to move PP out of his chair with one hand before settling down without saying anything further.

It's bad enough that he has to put up with the dreams and a partner who clearly has no concern for his own well-being, but the first time Bdubs wakes up from the dream where someone shoots him in the back and that blank void swallows him up to Etho looming over his bedside, he shrieks and falls out of bed, right onto Etho's feet, which causes *him* to fall over.

"What in the world," says Etho, flat on his back and slightly out of breath.

Bdubs presses a hand to his chest and tries not to hyperventilate. "What in – you explain yourself!" he shouts.

Etho sits up gingerly and tries to wiggle his feet out from underneath Bdubs. "Oh boy, you're loud. What time is it?" He blearily squints at the clock on Bdubs' nightstand; he's not wearing his glasses, or they fell off in the falling over. "What are you doing in my room?"

“This is *my room* , you freaking menace! Get the hell out of here!”

To his credit, Etho does help hoist Bdubs to his feet, but when they're both upright he claps one hand on Bdubs' shoulder and mumbles something unintelligible. Bdubs searches his face in the dim light but Etho's looking through him, fixed on some far-away place Bdubs can't follow.

When he finally settles back down into bed that night he doesn't dream of dying, for once. Instead, the darkness of unconsciousness receding into a cold distance as the world he died in wavers into shape.

He'd stayed too long there, lingering and alone - he knows that now, a grim resignation at odds with the lightness in his chest and the wonder that the world had continued to spin on without him. He takes in the ruins of their fort and laughs into dead air - the broken walls, the crater, planks dangling precariously in the gentle wind. He laughs for a long time, with no need for air or muscles to ache to keep the hysteria from rolling, thinking of how neither of them would have the last word on the stairs anymore.

In another world they would never have needed them, where the nether was kinder and he hadn't needed to be brave and died for it. He never did bring himself to explain what he had hoped their home could look like, full of color and safer and sturdier than the cold, lifeless snow they settled for and in. That dream had died too quick to share his grief when they were still both been green and naive. There were no stairs in the home he'd hoped to build, but Bdubs couldn't construct it fast enough with only snow and the constant fear of being killed by his partner or any of their enemies. And so Etho insisted on the stairs, and ruining the concession Bdubs had made was the first thing he did when he was finally rid of Bdubs for the first time.

Etho had never had faith they would finish it, or even much cared about building a home together. Still, it stings a little where his heart used to be to see Pearl and Scar come to scavenge the wreckage. Stranger still to float nearer and find Etho himself skulking about the outskirts, watching him connive his way to the last remaining chest of resources, just barely untouched by the carnage.

“This would be a lot easier if they weren't here. Just saying,” Etho says under his breath as he tucks his spoils away. Bdubs laughs again and without thinking about it tails him away from the ruins of their lives together.

When Etho loses a life - his first one, Bdubs thinks, his present self a little sick to have seen it - an echo of *excitement* overtakes his dream self. It's not quite vengeance, but the afterlife is lonely, and he's already stayed too long. It'd be nice to have some company again, even if it's him.

Etho's a survivor, man, that's what he does , Tango had told him. He remembers that clearly now, and watching the carnage unfold right next to where he'd made his own first kill, there's also joy in watching him still survive, even after everything, flanking Cleo as she gets her own revenge on Big B. So it goes, but it's good to see her laughing and outliving him, this time. That thought has weight but he lets it sink deep below as he realizes Big B's ghost is already gone, and Scar's too.

That acute awareness of absence carries him to a red seance, and when he hears Joel and Grian calling his name he doesn't even mind the racket they're causing and scribbles clues into the redstone dust they've scattered on the ground. Betrayal doesn't come to mind at all as he tells them where the others had gone to hide. He's never been good when left alone, with no one to orbit around and make sense of his place in the world. That's the problem with putting your heart into one person's hands: when they're gone, you're left heartless. A clock, a life, a question - whatever the promise, he'll always take it if it means an end to loneliness.

He wakes up and thinks for a blissful moment that it had all been a dream, but most of the contents

of his nightstand are on the floor and he feels cold, cold, cold and doesn't warm up until well into the evening.

Etho doesn't bring up his creepy visit, not even after Bdubs resorts to trying out strategies he found online to prove your roommate is snooping threateningly at you and ends up accidentally covering himself in flour by dropping the bag as he tries to lightly coat the floor with it so that if Etho pulls the whole creepy night watching thing again on a night where Bdubs doesn't wake up screaming in a cold sweat he can check for footprints.

He doesn't make a second attempt because he's afraid he's given himself away and because he can't bring himself to buy another bag of flour solely for counter-espionage purposes. He settles for dragging furniture around in his bedroom and the living room in the hopes that if Etho is really not aware of what he's doing, it'll be enough to stop his sleepwalking.

When he finds a sticky note stuck to his tablet screen that reads *the stairs are wrong* in Etho's chicken-scratch handwriting, something in Bdubs snaps and for the first time in weeks he has perfect clarity: Etho remembers everything like he did in the hospital, but is pretending not to because he's still affected by that terrifying bloodlust and is either still trying to kill Bdubs to reenact his last death, or at the very least force him to move out since Etho is conniving but also prone to underhanded schemes of least resistance, and competently executed murder does seem like a lot of work. It's the only thing that makes sense; in the dreams that increasingly invade his waking hours as distant overlays, a disorienting kind of *deja vu*, Etho is overjoyed to torment him with the possibility of his imminent demise at Etho's hands and sends him on a suicide mission that ends with Bdubs shouting Etho's name as he dies.

"Your crystals don't work and I want a refund," Bdubs announces as he swings open the door to Scar's apartment, orange courage crystal in one hand and a bag full of takeout in the other. "Also, dinner's here. Hi."

"You sure know how to open negotiations," Scar says admiringly as he snaps the little wooden box he'd been peering into when Bdubs burst into his apartment without warning. He clears off the coffeetable in front of him with impressively efficient speed, motioning Bdubs to set the food down. "You know I run my business on very firm anti-refund policies, but I *also* have an even firmer business policy of listening to people who bring me food. Especially when it's one of my favorite people doing the delivery."

"Oh, stop it," Bdubs says, taking containers out of the bag. A lot of people don't take Scar seriously, but for Bdubs it's easier to treat his grandstanding like white noise, soothing and meaningless. Having two halves of two different conversations in tandem with each other feels as much like home as stumbling on Cleo in a diner for the first time, although when he tries to trace the shape that the feeling echoes it conjures visions of children playing pretend, of self-important schoolyard games. The thought makes him grin, toothy and wide, and his muscles twist halfway to an involuntary sneer. "I'm serious about filing a complaint. I've had the worst dreams since you gave it to me and I certainly haven't felt any braver. If anything I'm more scared than ever!"

"What did a harmless little guy like you ever have to be afraid of in the first place, anyway?" Scar isn't looking at him, wonderously setting each utensil and napkin to the side of his takeout containers.

"Little guy!" Bdubs shouts, and then scowls when Jellie disdainfully hops away from them. "Don't think I don't know what you're trying to do, get me distracted so I don't get my refund. You can't

fool old Bdubs that easy, I tell you what. No - seriously, I mean it. Scar, look at me.”

“Is it really healed by now,” Scar starts, ready to launch into his well-trod tirade against blackened eyes and beat-up faces before he’s even looked up, but when he makes eye contact he tilts his head consideringly. “You *do* mean business, don’t you? My kind of business. I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Come on now, I’m no Etho,” says Bdubs, and has to keep the momentum going before he can think about Etho too long. “This is something else. You ever had complaints about dreams before? Bad ones.”

It’s the way Scar’s smirk doesn’t change that almost makes Bdubs hate him, but he can’t quite muster the feeling - he never could, not even when he’s tried. “Please, go on.”

“When I fell,” Bdubs says, and then stops. A new memory overlaying the present moment again, that sense of vertigo like falling, falling always, the absurd substitution for a sword where he knows Scar is only holding a drink, the same wheedling tone and incongruously, ironically, Etho at his shoulder counseling him not to trust whatever’s being said because their lives are in danger - in the same hellish landscape where he had the first memory of dying. He blinks twice, a third time; the vision dissipates. “After I fell and came to get this - this crystal, from you, my bad dreams just got worse. I keep dreaming of dying and being a ghost and seeing...” The sentence won’t finish itself. He shudders. “I’m just asking what you know about bad dreams.”

“Oh, Bdubs,” Scar says, an ominous rising and falling tone. But he puts down his food to regard Bdubs with kinder eyes than he deserves. “You have to believe in the crystals, and I am not legally, financially, spiritually, or ethically responsible for any side effects you may encounter as a result of mis-matched beliefs. If you remember, I didn’t tell you which one to get! But I am intrigued by your question. You may have uncovered a secret power through your connection with the courage crystal, which, remind me to show you some other - no, don’t make that face at me, I can’t look at you when you do that. All I see is scary pirates. I’ve never had complaints about dreams before.”

“Oh, Scar,” says Bdubs, and he means it mockingly but it comes out like another echo of something he can’t quite place. Not fond, not cruel, but filtered through a lump in his throat that he can’t reason away. *Sweet Scar*, a tangible memory supplies, when not six months ago Etho had laughed in his face as he tried to defend a desire to see at least one of Scar’s business endeavors be successful. “When Etho got messed up on caffeine and had to go to the hospital he told me he was sorry for *last time*, and that he was glad he’d *been* my partner. He told me things I’d dreamed about and never said and I had your crystal in my coat pocket the whole time. Nothing about that was courageous. Are you telling me you really can’t help? You got all these crystals all over the place and you aren’t dreaming weird dreams?”

“Well,” says Scar, gleeful in a way he instantly pretends to regret, clapping one hand over his heart. “If you can tell me about your dreams I’ll tell you about mine. Grian always gives me *such* a hard time for caring about dreaming that I used to be a wizard who made the world better with my magic because he doesn’t believe in it in the real world, but you and I know better. “

“Aha, that barista who ruined my life.”

“Exactly! Clearly I’m a more powerful wizard than I thought if things are this serious. I didn’t even give Etho a crystal until, what was it, was it that same day? Maybe our dreams are connected somehow! Am I a wizard in your dreams?”

A hammering in his skull, not new but more intense. “I don’t dream about you at all,” Bdubs lies, and tries not to think about Scar getting shot in that final battle in case his thoughts are as

contagious as his dreams. He leans forward. “I know *you* didn’t kill me, but I think Etho did. In my dreams. That’s got to be why things have been so freaking weird since the coffee incident, because he remembers it too. He saw you the day he he got all messed up?”

“Perhaps,” says Scar. “Yes, it must have been the same day. He picked a danger detection crystal just like you did, without any suggestion from me. Beyond the normal speeches, you know, I’m a professional so there’s a little bit of wizard preliminaries to get through. When I tried to tell him you might need extra help staying out of trouble he shot me down! And now here you are talking about being murdered by your partner, when Etho thought you didn’t need my totally legitimately certified relationship counseling services and protection magic. I still get the feeling he never liked me that much.”

“At this point I think Etho’s problem with you is more about not being able to one-up you when you’re going on about whatever thing he’s logically opposed to, way more than whatever it was you did to piss him off way back when.”

“I’ve always respected Etho’s crafty nature and ominous aura. He’s like - a harmless sort of dangerous, like one of those snakes that looks like the super poisonous ones, but they’ll just regular bite you if you make it mad so you’re just grateful you only have to deal with all the blood instead of the blood *and* finding a super rare antidote before the venom goes to your heart.”

“Yeah, and you’re a dangerous sort of harmless. Like a toddler in a kitchen.” Bdubs snorts. “I’ll be the judge of what’s harmless here. Maybe your stupid crystals do work if he’s got one that detects danger because none of my perfect traps have worked out for me.”

“You’re setting *traps* ?”

It might just be the food, but the way Scar is practically drooling at the idea of traps makes Bdubs a little ashamed. If Scar’s so excited about it, maybe that’s a sign traps aren’t a good idea. “Well, just a couple things here and there to try and trick him into saying something that shows he knows about the dreams. Some self-defense type stuff that didn’t work out, it’s not important! What’s important is my crystal is the *worst* and I want a refund.”

“Bdubs, Bdubs,” Scar chides, setting down his food entirely. His expression stays smug and self-assured, but something in his eyes sharpens in a way that gives Bdubs vertigo. “Like I said, we don’t do refunds here at Magical Mountain Incorporated. I feel like you owe *me* , still.”

“What in the world do I owe you for? I got Etho to get a crystal from you and unless you’re calling in that favor right now, as far as I can see we’re square.” He holds eye contact even as his vision blurs and Scar’s face becomes hooded and shadowed with desperation.

They had escaped the grip of Scar’s contract through Scar’s own bad luck rather than their own actions. He remembers the breathless adrenaline and the shaking of his hands as he’d signed the contract, feeling too free and trapped to read the fine print. He had less of a choice than he realized in that moment, but he knows he would have signed anyway, not yet understanding what else Etho would ask him to give up for Etho’s own self-preservation.

“Are you sure, Bdubs? I could have sworn -”

“You always swear somebody owes you. If you’re remembering something, you’re remembering it wrong.”

Scar’s lopsided grin grows. “Maybe, maybe so. Perhaps it wouldn’t be fair to hold you to promises you made in another life.”

Bdubs freezes with his fork halfway to his mouth. “Another *life* ?”

“Past lives, other worlds, whatever you want to call your dream memories. That’s what you mean about all this dying business, right? I always remember the wizard dreams when I wake up, just like I remember what I did yesterday. Haven’t you always felt like we went way back?”

“We actually do go way back.” Bdubs thinks about how close he’d come to working for Scar, before he had built up his client list and had regular business after college. How appalled Etho had been, enough to point out that even on their meager incomes they could easily afford a two bedroom apartment on the same block as Skizz and Tango if they moved in together. So he’d taken graveyard shifts where he could find them and told Scar no instead, which was harder than he expected, even before Scar started wheedling. It had felt strangely like giving up something familiar, even though he’d known Etho for longer.

“You’ve been in my dreams before, so of course you’d dream about Etho, too,” Scar says, talking past Bdubs. He claps his hands together. “I bet we’re all connected now because we were connected in our past lives. It’s all fate!”

“I hate that,” Bdubs says. “I can accept these are memories are of something real especially when Tango gets all mad like he knows about them too and then gets madder that he can’t figure out what’s bothering him, but the universe or whatever isn’t the boss of me. I make my own choices, and I choose my friends all on my own. If fate tried to make me do something I’d just try and find a way around it right back.”

“You always loved a loophole,” says Scar, suddenly fond: soft smile, sharp eyes. He props his chin on his knuckles. “You know, we really could have had a lot of fun together. Me, wheeling and dealing - you, keeping me on track. Possibly undermining me at every turn. We’d keep each other on our toes.”

“You’re keeping me on my toes right now,” Bdubs says and smacks his hand on the coffee table just hard enough to emphasize his point. “You give me enough trouble without being my boss on top of everything too, no thank you. Like this freaking crystal that you keep trying to get out of refunding me for!”

Scar pouts. “Who in their right mind wouldn’t want to learn about all the cool stuff they did in a past life? That’s more value than you bargained for. I should have charged a higher price.”

“I *die* in those dreams,” says Bdubs. “And I think my roommate killed me! Is trying to kill me *again* because he remembers now too, possibly thanks to you as well seeing as how he didn’t respond to anything I mentioned from my dreams until he got himself stuck in the hospital for a night!”

“Oh, right, the Etho thing. That’s a bummer.” While Bdubs sputters indignantly, Scar continues talking unphased. “Seeing how you’ve done me one favor today bringing me food and new arguments for my wizard skills being totally legit from a past life, I think I can do you one in return. Why don’t you pick out a new crystal and you can do whatever you want with it. Maybe even give it away - maybe both of them, if you’re so convinced it’s the crystal’s fault. It’s like Cinderella, we just gotta keep trying on shoes until we find the one that fits.”

“I don’t think that’s what Cinderella was about,” Bdubs says. There are a handful of crystals pushed to the edge of the coffee table they’re seated at and he picks up a smooth red-tinted one that fits solidly in his closed fist. It’s warm, and only grows warmer as he grips it tightly. It’s the same shade of red as the dust he’d scrawled his ghostly message in, and he decides he’s had enough of loneliness for several lifetimes. “Are you sure you don’t want this one back? What if it’s causing

my dreams and it'll make yours stronger or something since you seem to enjoy your past life whatever so much, you weirdo?"

Scar gesticulates wildly toward the room full of knickknacks and errata around him and nearly knocks over a small bird statue next to the couch. "Look at all this, all the magic I'm experiencing every day. We need a controlled experiment so we can tell what your crystal's real powers are. If you give the courage crystal to somebody else, you can prove whether it's causing your dreams or not. Etho would totally approve of that!"

"Not science crystals, but crystal science. Sure." Another echo of voices in the tower behind him, a deal going south. He focuses instead on the crystal in his hand - it feels warm, and he stows it in his pocket after a considering moment. "I have an idea of who might, uh, benefit from one of these. A couple people, actually. I should probably give them a call and let them know I want to drop off some prezis soon."

"See, isn't this so much better than a regular refund. It's not like you paid in money anyway, so getting crystal science back when you'd promised to help me sell a science crystal sounds like a great deal to me. What about you joining Magical Mountain just as a side gig?"

"Scar," Bdubs says, and switches the conversation from crystals to Scar's weird wizard dreams, which could plausibly live in a world like the one he dreams of but are so tonally different it's mesmerizing to hear, although it's impossible to tell whether that's because it's not a shared past life or because of Scar's usual egomaniacal spin. Scar talks about dying like it has no weight, like it's a momentary inconvenience he's grown accustomed to.

But still, he feels not better but a little more secure and a little less alone when he leaves, dialing up Cleo's number even though he knows she won't answer at this time of day unless he rings twice. He leaves her a voicemail and calls Skizz instead, who picks up right away.

"Is that my long lost buddy B-double-down on the line? It's been for freaking ever man, what are you up to?"

"Hey Skizz," says Bdubs, laughing. It has been too long since he's heard Skizz's voice. "I know, I know - you can give me a hard time about it later. Listen, is Tango home? Are you?"

"Tango's out, I'm in. Why?"

"I actually have something for him." Bdubs turns the new crystal over in his pocket. "I think I've been getting on his nerves lately and I just wanted to show him there's no hard feelings from me. Picked it out special and everything. Can I swing by and drop it off to you? I'm leaving Scar's place now."

"Well, now you're gonna have to swing by to catch me up on why you're hanging out with that guy of all people, and also explain what in the world you've been up to these days." Skizz pauses. "I don't know what's up with you and Tango, but I'm glad you're doing something about it. I miss hanging out with my buddies, we've gotta get the band back together. Etho's been harder to get a hold of too lately and everything is just all weird. I don't like it."

"I'll catch you up on everything." *Except the dreams*, he thinks. It's not surprising that Skizz has noticed, but it unsettles him that he's noticed something off about Etho too, the dissonance between joy at it not all being just in his head and the despair of it being more real tilting him off-balance. "And don't worry about the Scar stuff. You'll see when I show you what I got - I can be over in ten, tops?"

“You know the way in, don’t need my permission to drop by. Seriously, you have a key for a reason. Should I order pizza or something? Tango should be home by the time it’d get here.”

“No, I won’t stay long, I have to go feed the cat, you know how she gets. Don’t wanna make Etho mad. I just wanted to say hi and drop off Tango’s present real soon. I’ll be there in ten,” he says, and hangs up shortly after Skizz agrees.

An experiment, Scar had suggested. The crystals hadn’t ever harmed him directly, to be fair, and if Tango has bad dreams - well. It can’t make his grudge much worse than it is now, and it’s certainly kinder than he’d done in his dreams. “He’ll forgive me, I’m sure of it,” he says to the empty sidewalk as he starts trudging toward Skizz, trying to believe it.

Chapter 6

On Saturday morning, Cleo wakes up and deliberates for only a few minutes before sending Bdubs a text that reads *I remember*. A call comes in almost instantly, and when she answers she doesn't let him get a word in edgewise. "Yes, I'm serious. You can come over, I'm not doing anything this morning. I'll see you when you get here."

She hangs up before the flurry of consternated noises can coalesce into actual words and feels warm and smug knowing that he's probably already hopping in his junky little car and speeding over. She's always known that Bdubs will come if she calls for him, since the moment they met in this world and the moment they met in the last. The certainty that he will keeps her from calling often, but it's always been the right call to make when she does.

He shows up not twenty minutes later, looking too out of breath for the half-flight of stairs it takes to get to her door. "You better sit down before you fall asleep on your feet. You look terrible, you know."

"People keep saying that and I keep not believing them! I look fine. I'm fine," Bdubs insists despite the way he drops into an armchair with dramatic flair, shoulders hunched up around his ears. "When you consider what I'm putting up with I'm doing great."

She takes a moment just to watch him clawing at the arms of the chair restlessly, creased at the waist like a spring coiling itself tight, gravity dragging on him like a star that's readying to go out with a bang. She had really loved him for that, once. "Sure," she says, and his suspicious glare only makes her smile widen. "I dreamt of meeting you again."

Bdubs stiffens, muscles locking, but he doesn't say anything yet.

"The first time I came to see your fort there wasn't even any snow." When she smiles now, it's with mean purpose as she snags each of his hands and tugs him upright, forcing his spine to unbend and though the tension doesn't leave him, he follows her up. "I walked in the door and you ran down those half-done stairs shouting -"

"*Now* it feels like home," he says, finally smiling back, even as she wraps her arms around his waist to lift him up just enough that his toes scrape the carpet as she whirls them both around, his hands coming up around her shoulders first in surprise and then half-hearted smacks on her back that end in him clutching her back just as tight. That dizzies her more than the spinning, the double-layered sensation of their armor clanking together in the last world at odds with the huffing of his breath on her shoulder, his knees bumping her thighs as he bends them and gives into being swung, the warm aliveness of the here and now. When she sets him down, they're both still giggling and he doesn't even bat her hand away when she moves to muss up his hair even more.

"Just like that. We made quite the racket." Cleo looks over his shoulder and the echo comes: *Is that Cleo I hear?*

"Acting like he couldn't trust me already!" Bdubs turns toward her door like he's expecting Etho to burst in and struggles to get his face under control, elation crackling under the scowl. *I leave you alone for two seconds and you're already teaming up with her?*

She'd understood then, watching him lurch away from her not out of shame but falling into someone else's orbit; not every home had to be for always. Even now the confirmation of it all sends diffuse warmth radiating out from her chest, that by chance and by choice they've ended up

together again and again, despite it all.

“You sent me to keep him in line. You did say you remembered me being red. I don’t know why you’re so worried about Etho when he was such a pushover.”

“Pushover!” Bdubs huffs, crossing his arms over his chest. “He was a menace, I’m telling you. Always sneaking around and scaring me when my back was turned, pretending to be the boogeyman, *poisoning me* right before I got killed by the actual boogeyman.”

“He was there for me the first time I died,” she says. “Well, to loot my corpse, I suppose, but there were no hard feelings. Not enough to stop me from burning his dogs on your behalf, but still. Even then he said you were wrong about him wanting to kick you out.”

“He lied all the time for fun, so I don’t see how lying to you as self-defense matters at all. What kinda partner is that?”

Cleo moves to sit in the chair she’d dragged him out of, watches him follow her movements even as he stands rigid. “My partner betrayed me after telling me he never would. So I killed him.” When she smiles now, it’s toothy and sharp. “Etho even helped. I think I win the bad partner contest, yeah?”

“Telling me about how my roommate was more murderous than I thought is not helping, Cleo,” Bdubs starts, but before he can continue the thought his eyes go wide and he stiffens like a bolt. “Wait, by the river? That’s what that was? I remember that.”

“You weren’t there in my dream,” she says.

“No, I wasn’t,” he says, sighing and letting his arms drop. He comes to sit on the arm of the chair, close but not touching, looking off to the side. “I was already dead. *Dead* dead, a ghost. I got stuck.” He picks at a stray thread on the hem of his jeans. “Floated around for a while. Got summoned by the reds. I saw Big B and Scar go - they didn’t get stuck. Every night, I dream of...”

When he doesn’t continue, she leans her head against his side and watches his thread-picking become more and more vicious until she can’t take it anymore and rests one hand on top of his. He stills and a beat later turns his hand over so he can grip hers back tightly.

“I know it’s stupid. I know it was always a death game from the very beginning. It just... matters. To me. What we did, to each other. It has to.” He lets himself lean a little back into her.

“Of course it matters,” Cleo says. “Bdubs, I know that better than anybody. The first time I went red the only thing that mattered was revenge, and I got it. I only trusted Etho after you died because you’d trusted him. And I trusted you because of the time before.”

“The time *before*?” He turns and Cleo has to move away to look up into his intense expression. “You don’t mean - well, I know what I heard you say but you’re not saying - *Cleo*.”

“I can see your gears turning,” she says, stifling a laugh. She tangles their fingers together. “I don’t remember, but I remember remembering. Meeting you felt like home again.”

“Again,” he repeats, scrubbing at his eyes with the palm of his free hand. “Yeah, yeah. Goodness sakes. Of course there wouldn’t be just one past life. Why would there be only one? Going back and forth, forever. If I have a new kind of nightmare tonight it’s all your fault and you’re gonna hear all about it.”

“You’ve given me three so far, so I think you’ve still got a debt to pay.”

"I should be sorry about that," he says, as unapologetic as ever. "Actually, you seem pretty freaking calm about all of this."

"This is day three Cleo, post-hysterical phone call to a long distance friend Cleo, Cleo who spent a whole evening at the diner trying not to freak out in public while interrogating people for more information. You get wild Cleo after I have made sure you're alright."

"Who in the world were you interrogating? I never asked you to protect me."

"No, you never do. You're very loud about that. That's why when we want to keep you safe sometimes we keep it secret until it's done."

"She's dodging the question!" Bdubs announces to the ceiling. "You'd have to be pretty sure the other person would know what you were talking about, and the only person you know about who knows is - no! Nuh uh, no way, Cleo, tell me you didn't -"

"I'd heard he was messing with my buddy," she says, squeezing his hand again. "I couldn't let that slide. And there were things I wanted to know that you couldn't tell me."

"Like what? You can't trust a word he says, and he never admits to any of it now anyway."

"I really don't think Etho is trying to kill you in this life," Cleo says. "I'm not certain he tried in the last one. Or ever. "

"He didn't just try, he succeeded! Hung me out to dry and let me die for him, just about the biggest fool in the universe. *If he loves you, why didn't he give you a life?* I'll tell you why, because he didn't care about me at all! And now that he's got these weird dream things too, it's turned him all weird and vicious again."

"I just told you about killing Big B, and you told me about killing Tango as a boogeyman the first time we talked about this."

"Big B betrayed you then and it didn't seem to go great for you two this time either. But Etho was supposed to be my partner until the very end." He flexes his hand into a fist but doesn't move away, only shifting his other leg, toes just scraping against the carpet restlessly. "If I was wrong about that last time, then there's a chance it's just things bleeding through making him weird now. If I was right that he loved me, then he still got me killed anyway and he's choosing to lie to me about remembering for no good reason because he's capable of caring and also doing awful things to me. I don't know all about *that* Etho, but I know this Etho. I do," he says, nodding to himself with a suddenly distant look in his eyes.

"Etho makes his own choices, just like we do. I'm not Scar, I'm not trying to fix whatever you've got going on. I trusted Etho because you trusted him, but we're friends now because of before and because of right now. You haven't chosen to betray me and you're under any murder curses now. Even if things played out the same with Big B and me, we didn't *kill* each other in this life."

"Thank goodness you're not Scar," Bdubs snorts. "One of him is more than enough meddling already. Choices are what I'm worried about. I don't know if he made the choices I thought he did last time, and I don't know what he's doing now."

"You could talk to him. You know, with your words."

Bdubs shoots her a wounded glare. "You talked to him, and you haven't even told me what about."

"Nothing you couldn't learn on your own," she says. "I know better than to play middleman, but

Bdubs, I've never lied to you. I wouldn't keep anything from you or tell you to do something if I thought it would put you in danger."

"You could be lying to me now," Bdubs says, but it's half-hearted. Cleo waits. "It could be - the boogeyman curse."

She lets go of his hand so she can flip it over, palm face up on his knee, tracing his lifeline with one fingernail. "Do you really think I'm out for your blood, too?" she asks as her index finger comes to rest at the base of his wrist, feeling his pulse. "Are you waiting for an opening to attack me? Because I promise you won't find one. We keep making the choice to care about each other, and unless you stop choosing that, this won't change. That's what makes it familiar."

"No," he says automatically. The tendons in his arm jump under her fingers as he tenses and relaxes. "No. I would never. I couldn't."

"There you go," she says, and entwines her fingers with his again. "I've said what I wanted to. You're not alone, this is a *good* day. You don't have to stay, but I'm going to make lunch and then work on my journal and possibly play a game, if I have someone to play it with. To celebrate friends and being alive."

"Okay. Just..." Bdubs hums thoughtfully and hesitates before asking, "Was it like this? With Etho."

"What, are you asking if I held Etho's hand last night?" He pinches her but she doesn't let him protest, keeping right on talking. "I know what you meant. This is new," she says, shrugging. "But it's the same. We're still the same people."

Things keep changing, but the changes don't stop her from knowing Bdubs. Here in this life, this one singular life, there is no threat of dying or betrayal and the choices they both make are different. But when she dreamt him in that open field, conspiring badly to trap the enchanter and asking her help to lure others in, it had been the comforting sameness of him that had made her agree to a plan she knew was doomed. They had not been allies, quite, but they had been before and the friendship, though changed, remained. Even forgotten history is only built on, not erased.

He stands up and tugs her after him without saying anything to that, but when he draws her in for one more quick hug he's smiling.

Hours later, on his way out, Bdubs says, "Love you," as if they've always said it in parting.

"I know," Cleo says, overtaken by a sudden sense of vague vertigo, not just the visions that she's had for days but the feeling of being on a precipice. "Take care of yourself, Bdubs."

He must know what she means, because he stretches up on his toes to kiss her on her cheek with a soft smile before waving and shutting the door behind him.

"I heard you've been picking on my buddy," Cleo says as Etho takes a seat in the booth across from her. The diner is empty for a Friday night, but it's late enough that the few other patrons are regulars on their way to graveyard shifts, or quiet travelers sipping cups of coffee with tired eyes.

Etho tilts his head and tries to communicate a smile; even to him it falls flat. "He's not exactly been making life easy on me, you know."

“You’re the one trying to intimidate him into moving out, though, yeah?”

“What - no! You’ve got it all wrong, Cleo, Bdubs has been avoiding *me* .” He rubs at his eyes with the palms of both hands. “He keeps rearranging furniture while I’m asleep so that I end up tripping all the time in the dark and he won’t even acknowledge any of the notes I’ve left him since I never *see* him these days. My shins are completely bruised.”

“Threatening notes?” Cleo’s voice sounds too hopeful for someone who appears to be trying to scold.

“Helpful notes! It’s so bad I started seriously considering talking to Scar about it and you know how I feel about his unscientific business practices.”

“You poor thing. I heard you’d threatened him over some drawing, and he seemed quite terrified about it, although he wasn’t very specific. Bdubs can get a little dramatic when he’s panicking.”

“Is this about the stairs again?” Etho heaves a sigh. “Well - not again, I guess, but the only thing I can think of is I told him the stairs in this drawing he’d been working on all week weren’t right. They just didn’t look practical. I wanted him to know I still cared about his stuff.”

“By telling him he did it all wrong?”

“He’s never taken a suggestion like that this badly before. Bdubs has to know by now I respect - his art. He knows I care,” he insists as one of Cleo’s eyebrows goes up. “He does.”

“Hmm,” is all Cleo says, one of those long drawn out hums that contributes to her intimidating reputation. Etho squirms in his seat and gets the distinct, uncomfortable feeling he’s being sized up and found wanting. “Maybe you should talk to Scar after all. Maybe one of those crystals would do you some good.”

“I already got one last week - as a favor to Bdubs, in fact.” He pulls the crystal out of his pocket again and holds it in front of one eye. “I’m already in debt to the guy for it too.”

“Well, that explains the sleepwalking,” Cleo says with the confidence of someone who believes they’re making perfect sense. Before Etho can object, she cuts him off with the wave of one hand. “Bdubs also mentioned waking up in the middle of the night to you standing creepily in his room like you were watching him. Been having weird dreams lately?”

“I think I’d know if I was sleepwalking,” Etho says, but he’s thinking of Bdubs’ ghastly pale face angrily moving through the darkness. He’d dreamt Bdubs in the corner of his eye every dream that night: his own flickering torchlight casting familiar silhouettes onto rough-hewn stone walls as he trudged through a long, long cavern; a flash of shimmering green at his shoulder translucent like sunbeams through old, arched canopies as he stood tense on the top of a different fortified tower. With all the confidence of dream logic he knew that ghosts were real there and had been real before, although what that meant precisely he didn’t know either awake or asleep - only that whatever he was working toward, he had better hurry there. Someone was waiting for him on the other side of a dream. He had woken up laughing, feeling foolish and fond and not even minding the way Bdubs was glaring daggers at him as he started interrogating Etho on what, exactly, he found so funny. “Have *you* been having weird dreams lately?”

“Maybe,” she says, and smiles somewhere past Etho’s shoulder, toward the diner’s open kitchen where Scott and Pearl are having their own conversation. “Something seems to be going around.”

“Well, I used to dream all the time about getting beaten to death by my own clones but you never

heard me make everybody else all weird about it, huh?"

"That is - very not normal, I hope you understand that. Absolutely, just so far beyond normal, for the record. But I have people I can talk to about my dreams, normal or not, and I'm really only talking to you about this now because Bdubs trusted you - you may not believe me, but I know what it's like. I figure you'll find some way to get him back with or without my meddling, but you know how I feel about a little rudeness."

"I thought you liked that kind of thing." The words come automatically, in a different tone than he means it to, the same rehearsed muscle memory that makes him trip over moved furniture in the dark. "Did I already say that? I've been getting the worst *deja vu* lately."

"Oh?" she says in a tone that begs an answer.

"You're making me nervous, Cleo," he says, and he's not even exaggerating. Being constantly off-kilter these last few weeks hasn't made him any more comfortable with feeling like he doesn't have enough information to know what's going on or how to respond.

"I've been nice to you in your dreams, haven't I?" Cleo is watching him like a hawk.

"Um," he says. "I don't know what..."

"Because you've been pretty friendly to me in mine. Last night I had a dream I died, and you were *there* for me. You might have looted my corpse, but we worked it out in the end. It was all a big game, of course."

"That's flattering, I think," Etho says, watching as Cleo drums her fingernails against the table top. The powerful disorientation crawls back, his vision wavering. "What - what kind of game?"

"Murder," she says flatly.

"I see." He doesn't. Etho closes his eyes and finds himself back in that snow fort he and Bdubs spent so much time laughing and playing around in, trying to keep each other safe. When he opens them again, he can hear Cleo's voice echoing *You also did, you know, you looted my corpse* even though she's sitting silent across from him. "It would be crazy if I was having weird dreams about death games. Except Bdubs is acting really weird and suspicious so it's not crazy to have stress dreams about it."

"I don't think any of us are crazy. Not because of dreams, anyway," Cleo says, but before he can figure out what he's supposed to say to that, Pearl comes over to take their orders. He stares down at the familiar laminated menu like it's going to help and finally settles on just decaf for lack of any better options.

When Cleo raises an eyebrow at him again, he says, "Bdubs would kill me if I had regular after the last time."

That makes her laugh for some reason as she tells Pearl she'll explain the joke later. Whatever that means. When Pearl goes back behind the counter, she says, "Poor, poor you. No caffeine and dreams that just get worse."

"Have you been snooping in my diary?"

"Yes, I've been snooping in your apartment to read your diary just to concoct this elaborate plan to recite your own dreams back to you. Bdubs was my inside guy." Whatever she sees in his expression makes her cackle into her hand. "Come on now. You keep a diary?"

Etho laughs too, a little shakey. “No-oooo, definitely not. But how do you know so much about my dreams? I don’t think Bdubs has even been around for me to mention any of it.”

“No, he hasn’t,” Cleo says. “You told him the stairs were wrong because it didn’t look like you’d dreamt it. That happened after you got a crystal from Scar and started sleepwalking. I was gifted a crystal from Scar and started having dreams about dying and boogymen and murder games. Which is not good for getting enough rest, if you didn’t know. Unlike you though, I’ve had people to talk to about it.”

“Low blow, Cleo,” Etho says. “I’m not that much of a hermit.”

“You just told me you’ve not talked to Bdubs about it. It’s pretty obvious you’d rather not think that much about this at all. Would I really drag you all the way here just to play an elaborate prank about dreams? I like rudeness, you’re right, but you have to know *me* enough to know if I wanted to mess with you, I’d come up with something better than this. If you don’t believe me, I bet you can play the same trick on Tango since he’s got a crystal now too.”

“I don’t know,” he says, thanking Pearl when she brings a mug over for each of them. He takes a sip and finds it good but deeply unsatisfying. “So you guessed what I’ve been dreaming lately. Even if we’re dreaming the same stuff, what does it matter?”

“It matters to Bdubs. I bet it’ll matter to Tango, and anybody else who’s having them. What you do about it is your choice, but I thought you’d like to know you weren’t alone. They feel pretty real to me. And we’d been a little less alone together in the end, in them.”

“Bdubs,” he says. Bdubs who thinks he’s being forced out of their home; Bdubs, who avoids him except to nag about hydration. Angry and absent and somehow still casting shadows all over his life. In all the places in his dreams that Bdubs’ presence is a constant, Etho feels his absence in the waking world more keenly. Beyond the bruises developing across his shins as he navigates from memory through their darkened empty living room to find the coffee table half a foot from where it has always been, a different but no less painful awareness of weight along his ribcage threatens to drop to his stomach if he holds it in mind too long. It chafes, its presence aches - although he is often alone, he has no tolerance for loneliness, having gone without any sense of it for so long.

“I feel like you’re not telling me everything. Why’d Bdubs get weird about some good dreams? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Good dreams, huh.” Cleo takes a long sip of her drink. “It’s no fun if I put all the cards on the table. But I’m not hiding anything you can’t figure out on your own. Bdubs doesn’t even know for sure about my dreams yet - I wanted to confirm with you first before I encouraged him. His haven’t been very nice.”

Etho looks down at the mug between his hands. His dreams echo with what he’s missing, the back and forth of faith in the face of uncertainty, the joy of doing something stupid to bother Bdubs, to aggravate him, to save him. Death doesn’t mean much in them, the calculations of lining up a shot with a fishing rod of all things before hefting his axe a shadow of a feeling next to hefting Bdubs off his feet as he protested weakly, both of them in hysterics because they were together, together again, for however long the world would allow it.

The feeling is hard to shake and rubs him raw trying, the contrast between the unshakeable awareness of Bdubs at all times during the dream and his absence in the real world. Together, when he scanned a room it was easy to keep him in the peripheral, anticipating unsubtle empty threats or the trouble that would always come to find him; apart, he charted the world against

Bdubs' vector, always swinging the line of his leaving like the hand on a compass searching for north, an axis he could measure himself against to find where he stood. Apart, he feels adrift, like he doesn't know where to turn.

What he says is, "I remember it being good. I mean, my dreams are. I don't know what else to tell you."

"You don't have to tell me anything. Not now, anyway, since I do have to go. It's getting late, and I think I'm going to need the rest for tomorrow. Just talk to Tango if you won't talk to Bdubs. Get a little mean, if you like. It would be fun for you." Cleo stands, finishing off her drink. She gives one toothy smile and says, "You really aren't anything to be scared of. We'll all be fine."

"Just peachy," Etho says morosely.

"Now you've got it," she says, apparently satisfied beyond reason with that answer. "Thanks for coming, Etho. Take care in the meantime."

"Sweet dreams," he tells her. "I'll think about it all."

And he does, for an hour or so after she leaves, trying not to mind Pearl's increasing inquisitiveness as she brings him a second and a third refill. He's tired, and it is late, and as he scrolls through his texts he confronts the fact that he hasn't received any from Bdubs in weeks.

Eventually, he steels himself and texts Tango: *board game shopping tomorrow?*

The response comes shortly after, affirmative, asking what he's looking for. He doesn't know, but it's a good enough excuse. Despite his better judgement, he trusts Cleo. She wouldn't set him up for no reason, not for any real stakes. And if she's wrong about Tango, then it'll be one less thing to worry about as he figures out how to make things right. After his fourth cup, he finally leaves for home and whatever dreams await him.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

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

“Ren, we’re buddies, right?”

The following pause is not exactly reassuring. Ren had been intensely focused on painting his miniatures in his usual corner of the game shop when Etho arrived, presumably preparing for his next tabletop session, but his hands go still when Etho asks his question. “Sure, man – it’s just, kind of a weird question to ask all of a sudden after showing up out of nowhere.”

“You know me, I’m always snooping around, biking all over the place - saw you were here and thought I’d come check up on my friend.” Etho takes a seat in a nearby folding chair and picks up one of the unpainted minis, an oddly menacing fairy. “Also, Tango’s supposed to meet me here and he’s late. Working on the campaign?”

“Yeah, I kind of sold my soul to the shadow queen and it’s good for the group but now I need to fix some stuff up, you know, repurpose some of these old things for the new arc.” Ren tilts his nose down to give Etho a long sideways look over the top of his glasses. “You finally wanting to join us?”

Etho laughs. “I’ve got my hands full already. I’ve heard some things through the grapevine – it’s you and Lizzie and... Big B, right?”

“The Forest Fairy Castle Alliance,” Ren says, and then clears his throat. He tries to keep his GM voice to tabletop nights, but it’s hard to switch off when he’s talking about his campaigns. He laughs, holds the half-painted mini in his hands up to his face to check some imperceptible detail. “I believe that’s the name we’re going with, yes indeed. Friday nights here at the shop.”

“That’s kind of what I wanted to ask you about, actually,” Etho says, setting the fairy down. “There’s this hypothetical scenario I was thinking about.”

“Okay, shoot, I guess.”

“So, *hypothetically*, if you were in a session where your character was, say, a secret assassin... and you had to kill someone else before the end, otherwise you’d die instead. What would you do?”

Ren tilts his head. “That’s an interesting set up, I suppose... a character with a secret curse to kill – I’m guessing you mean one of the other PCs? You’d need a table with a lot of trust to set that up, but for a one shot maybe the stakes would be just right. Everyone would have to know someone could be a killer, which come to think of it would make for some wicked tension.”

“Yup, yup. If you were playing and got the curse with your current group, what would you do?”

“Well, I suppose I’d be grateful I wouldn’t have to worry about being the one to get killed. I’m not really a fan of big drawn out battles, not my fave, so I’d just go for the weakest person. Surprise them and try and chop their head off, be done with it.” Ren pauses for a moment and grimaces. “Of course, even in-game betrayals are a risky business, as I’m sure you know.”

“Oh, right.” Etho had happened to be the first person Cleo ran into after her last session with Big B after all; he’d heard all about that. “A quick kill is smart, I respect it. This kind of game would work better in a big group. Then you wouldn’t have to kill your allies, unless you chose to. Would

you like to know what I'd do?"

Ren nods, a little wary.

"I was thinking, if I had the curse, I'd be very up front with people about it. I wouldn't try and hide it. Instead I'd go right up to them and pretend to interview them. Get them scared, get them terrified – but then I'd give them some power in the situation! I would be like, Ren." Etho leans forward, puts his hands face-up on the table. "Ren. Do you have any gifts for me?" He pauses, leans slightly more forward and holds eye contact. "Just like that. I'd go around and ask a bunch of people, and whoever gave me the worst gift is who I'd kill, since obviously they didn't value their life."

There is a long, tense moment of silence, until Etho leans back and laughs loudly. "That's the idea, anyway. I'd I don't know if I'm intimidating enough to pull it off in a real game."

"You're intimidating me *now*, man. I mean, you have my heart racing." Ren lifts his hands up slightly, and they are shaking the tiniest bit, which feels like an overreaction. "Are you sure you're not looking to finally start playing tabletop? Or are you propositioning a big LARP event right off the bat?"

"Come on, Ren, this is all hypothetical!" Etho tries to smile with his eyes, although possibly that's the wrong move since it's the kind of thing that will usually cause Bdubs to smack him in the arm for being too creepy in public if he does it to strangers when he's stressed. "I had a really vivid dream last night and I just thought my buddy might appreciate a good idea for a game, is all."

The bell above the shop door rings – Ren, not reassured, swings around and waves to the newcomer. It should be more surprising to see the beleaguered Southlands barista waving back, but at this point Etho is finding it hard to be bothered by odd coincidences. When he shoves his hands in his pockets, he finds the little glass bead Scar gave him there.

"Oh, it's *you*," says Grian. "Hey, Ren."

Ren looks between them both. "I didn't realize you two knew each other."

"He almost killed me the other day." Etho shrugs. "Sorry about all that with Bdubs, by the way."

"*Exsqueeze me?*"

"If someone comes in and orders the most caffeinated thing we can make, I don't think you can blame the baristas if that person is stupid enough to drink it all at once," Grian says, and then seems to think better of it. "That said, I *am* sorry you landed yourself in the hospital. I didn't really get a chance to say so when – Bdubs, was it? – came by. I had no idea either of you would be here, I'm just running an errand for Scar."

Etho gestures a vague *I'll explain later* wave at Ren, who is going to give himself whiplash from jerking his head back and forth trying to follow the conversation otherwise. "Crystal business?"

"No, I've managed to avoid that so far. I'll never understand how he gets anybody to fall for his obvious scams but I've learned to stop trying to interfere. Don't tell me you fell for it?"

Ren laughs. "No, of course not. Haven't seen him in a little while. And there's no way Etho ever would."

"Well," says Etho, drawing the word out. "It wasn't exactly my choice. I did it for Bdubs." A tap at his shoulder startles him, and when he turns around, Tango is standing there with a crystal of his

own in hand.

“He got you, too?” Tango says, rolling the smooth-sided red rock in his palm. “I’m starting to think you need to stage some kind of intervention. He swung by the other night and left this for me as some kind of... apology gift. I think.”

“Not a very good apology gift if you don’t know what it’s for, is it?” says Grian. “Anyway, lovely running into you all, but Scar will be insufferable if I get distracted. I’ll see you around.”

“Does everybody know everybody around here?” Tango asks as Grian wanders away, mostly rhetorical. “Hey, Ren.”

“Great to see you Tango - you interested in joining *the campaign*?” Ren says, his voice dipping low and a little too booming for indoors on the last two words. “Etho was just giving some suggestions for a backstabbing mechanic.”

“What, like some kind of boogeyman?”

Etho looks up sharply, and Tango raises both eyebrows back at him. “Just like some kind of boogeyman. You been peeking at my dreams, Tango?”

“My dreams,” Tango says.

“Ha ha,” Etho fake laughs, already standing up to start dragging Tango away. “Thanks for the chat, Ren, but I gotta go. I’ll see you around.”

“Give my regards to Skizz for me, won’t you?” There’s something sharp lurking behind Ren’s glasses that belies the lighthearted tone and remarkably appropriate volume he delivers it in. Last night, Etho had dreamt of laughing with Cleo, following Ren’s ridiculous plan and killing two reds in spite of it all. Even that had felt like an echo of something else the same way his waking *deja vu* echoes his dreams. He’s always been content to follow Ren around when nothing better was going on, an occasional one-shot with Skizz and Martyn no one minded he couldn’t take seriously, but the bombastic tone of Ren the DM isn’t this quiet, this self-assured.

He pushes the welling sentiment right back down where it came from with a nod and a hand on Tango’s shoulder, steering them to the opposite corner of the room.

“Was that weird to you?” Tango hisses under his breath as they head toward the shelves full of board game boxes. “Because that was *really weird* to me and I did not like it.”

“Uh,” says Etho, scrambling for an explanation he doesn’t have. “It was a little weird?”

“Like you’re not half the problem, buying crystals and talking about dreams. Since when were you into all that - spooky mystical wack job nonsense?” he says, punctuated by characteristically cryptic noises.

“I’m not! It’s just - complicated.” Etho grabs a box off the shelf and turns it over, just to have something to pretend to read. “You can’t take dreams too seriously.”

“I hope not, because if getting murdered by Bdubs in my dreams every night since he gave me that apology gift thing is for real we are going to start having some problems. Some more problems,” he amends.

Etho hesitates, stuck reading the same line over again. *In a time of suspicion and desperate need, the line between right and wrong grows less and less distinct.* On second thought, the base game’s

fine; no need for this expansion. “It would be pretty crazy if you were dreaming of getting stabbed in the back by my roommate while we were all hanging out.”

Tango narrows his eyes. “It would be crazy. Did he put you up to this?”

“Did who put me up to what?”

“You know who! Mister Traitor McDream Traitorface himself!”

“You’ve talked to Bdubs recently?” Etho says, and he knows he’s given too much away when Tango’s face goes through a rapid series of strange contortions around the mouth and eyes, moving through suspicion and anger and landing concerningly close to pity before closing off again. “He’s been - working a lot.”

It’s not the longest he’s gone without seeing Bdubs before, although the weight in his chest grows heavier by degrees as his mental tally of the intervening days ticked up. That morning he had woken himself up laughing from breathless wild dreams and the manic energy fades into irritation. Insult to injury, though he doesn’t see it happen, the recycling goes out and the cat gets fed and when he rattled the doorknob to Bdubs’ room to see if he’s home it won’t turn. PP wove between his legs, meowing for attention, but when he tried a second time it doesn’t budge, clearly locked.

He didn’t even know their doors could be locked from the inside like that. He had cleared his throat. “Bdubs, are you in there?”

Only PP responded, insistent.

“If you’re in there I know there’s no way you’re asleep.” He waited. “If you’re fine, don’t say anything.”

Silence was his only answer, so he let go of the door before he could embarrass himself by putting his ear to it. They’ve never bothered to do more than leave each other fridge notes when they’ll be out for a while before so there’s no line crossed or complaint to make. It’s not fair to be frustrated with Bdubs just because for the first time in memory Etho has predicted him wrong, expecting smothering concern he’d ward off with pointed jokes and shared history and found only absence.

“He’s not doing a very good job of haunting me after all,” he told PP as he moved to the kitchen to begin making a cup of (decaffeinated) coffee. “Has he been neglecting you, too?”

She meowed and put her paws up on his legs, so he scooped her up in his arms while the coffee brewed.

“Poor thing. How are you supposed to keep your routine when he’s not even around to bother and argue with you when you sit down in front of him while he’s working or beg for snacks? It’s his fault I’m not awake in the middle of the night to give you treats lately.”

It’s deliberate provocation in case Bdubs was listening and would be compelled to protest; he hadn’t wanted a cat at first. He’d protested at length, in fact, unhappy to have met the new addition to their household after she’d moved in. “You’ve never had a pet. You never seem to feel one way or another about other people’s when you’re visiting somebody, I just don’t get it. I don’t want to be responsible for a *cat* if you end up getting bored about it.”

“Look at her,” Etho had said, holding the kitten up to his cheek. She nearly fit in the palm of his hand, the other hand braced around her chest to keep her in place mostly pointless as she rubbed her face on his. “Doesn’t she just seem like somebody you could talk to? Pour your heart out?”

“She’s - cute, I guess,” Bdubs conceded, arms folded over his chest, still scowling.

Etho had closed his eyes and smiled as she purred into his ear. “If I’m going to get better at talking, I gotta practice, right? And you’re not always gonna be around. It’ll be good for me.”

Bdubs’ lips had gone thin and his arms stayed crossed, but when Etho opened his eyes the tension in his face had softened, and Etho knew he’d won another argument.

It had stung in the morning when PP leapt out of his arms to go sit in the sunbeam on Bdubs’ empty office desk instead, just like trying to thread all the needles of ulterior motives and asymmetric knowledge and suspicion and, absurdly, cheap glassy rocks would have been harder all that time ago - before the cat and before meeting Bdubs and becoming more confident in expressing himself.

“Right,” Tango drawls after concluding his study of Etho’s sad-sack expression. “Skizz, then? That’s who he actually called when he dropped off this stupid rock. You all got me good with this spooky crystal business, you can drop the act. You’re not a good liar.”

“It’s like you don’t even know me,” he says, deciding to go for puppy-dog eyes, shoulders slumping. It doesn’t work. “Or Skizz.” And that doesn’t either, judging by Tango’s steely resolve and the way he plucks the box out of Etho’s wavering hand to put it firmly back on the shelf. “I should be accusing you of being in cahoots with Cleo, ganging up on me! She told me stuff she shouldn’t have been able to know about my dreams and told me to talk to you. Sort of.”

“So you’re admitting you know exactly what my dreams are about!”

“My dreams,” Etho repeats in a whisper-shout, trying to bring down the volume again. When he straightens up and peers over the shelving, he can see the back of Ren’s head, titled at an angle that reminds him of Pineapple Pizza when her ears swivel back as she pretends not to be paying attention. “It’s complicated, I promise. You trust me, right?”

Tango takes a long hard look at him. “I’ve played how much Friday Werewolves with you?”

“Well, that’s -”

“And the Resistance. And Citadels.”

“You don’t have to -”

“And Battlestar!” Tango punctuates the litany with a tap on the box he’d just put back moments ago. “You are a *menace* .”

“Those are games, Tango, not for real. Look into my eyes. Would I lie to you about something like this?”

It’s hard to maintain eye contact between Tango’s intense seriousness and the nauseating feeling of retreading old ground to find a missing stair you didn’t know was there, toppling you, but Etho waits.

“You would,” Tango says after a long moment, but before Etho can object he carries on. “Somehow I trust you anyway. I should know better.”

Etho brightens. “You should, but you won’t regret it. You started having those dreams the same night you got that crystal, right?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Wait, are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“I was just asking a question. I can’t get into all this here, but Cleo might be right about a bunch of things and I’m going to have to track Bdubs down.” He pauses. “Also, I want your crystal.”

“You people are so greedy,” Tango says, but he’s digging it out of his pocket already. “You can give it back to Bdubs for all I care. The last thing I want to do when I’m having boogeyman nightmares every time I close my eyes is get in the middle of your little cat and mouse routine or whatever. But you can tell him apology... accepted, I guess, unless he’s actually conspiring against me, in which case, apology un-accepted.” He sighs as he drops the warm crystal into Etho’s palm.

"You won't regret it," Etho repeats. "I mean it. I bet you'll have better dreams tonight already."

Tango shakes his head. "Sure, buddy. Clearly you've got somewhere you need to go now. Even though you're not buying anything after all."

Etho laughs "Turns out I'm not in the mood for the games I thought I was. Maybe when this is all sorted out we can get together again and start playing regularly. Not Werewolf, though."

"Or any of the others, I get it. No secret enemy stuff. If it's all Bdubs' fault I reserve the right to bully him into playing TI without anyone stopping me."

"It's a deal," he says, and pats Tango awkwardly on one shoulder before heading toward the door.

On his way out, Ren turns around and flags him down. "Hey man, I was thinking about that idea of yours and I wanted to hear more about your dream - and what was up with that whole attempted murder thing? We have got to catch up, dude."

"Oh, that," Etho says, and before he can come up with some excuse to not have the same conversation for a full third time in a row, the slow, dissonant bells of his phone alarm go off.

"Oops, gotta go - soon!" he says over one shoulder, still walking. He's already planning his to do list for when he gets home: furniture arrangements, strategic napping, and a little advanced tactics. He doesn't even hear Ren's loud plea to change his ringtone as he makes a beeline for home.

Chapter End Notes

The board game box Etho reads is the Battlestar Galactica Pegasus expansion; the ones Tango mentions are social deduction (or adjacent) games.

Also, this fic is one year old! Thanks to everyone who's been so patient - one more chapter to go.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

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

Etho doesn't even give him a chance to shut the door of his car before things go off the rails.

He's sitting on the quarter-flight set of stairs that runs the length of their tiny back porch. Beside him is a strange, meager pile of objects fashioned in a straight line down the middle of the stairs, as if to suggest -

"Step into the office, Bdubs," Etho calls.

Bdubs' heart thuds in his throat, but something in him steadies. "What in hell's blazes is this!" he says, starting off nearly at a shout and struggling to bring his volume down mid-sentence to not alarm the neighbors as he slams the car door shut.

"I needed to speak with you about something," Etho says, a terrible and manic glint in his eye straight out of Bdubs' nightmares, even though everything's suddenly backward.

"And I bet you're gonna try and tell me this set-up of yours is for my comfort and safety," Bdubs retorts, stopping a few feet away from the bottom stair. His heart is still lodged in his throat, but for once the overwhelming sense of *deja vu* makes him more grounded in the moment. In the late-night darkness under a splattering of stars in the cool air there is Etho on the stairs and Bdubs with his feet planted firmly on the ground. His heart is beating in his chest. Everything but them is quiet.

Etho doesn't get up, but he tilts his head and laughs. Stillness has never, ever been a good sign where Etho is concerned. "Now you're stealing my lines, Bdubs. It's like you already know what I'm about to say."

"You're stealing *mine*," he says, crossing his arms and imagining the strength of his glare vaporizing Etho where he sits. "I'm not - this is not, I have to say, not making me feel any better. You stay put right there, right where you are, buddy boy. No sudden movements, I know your tricks."

"Bdubs, I'm hurt you don't trust me. We're buddies! What could possibly give you the idea that I'm up to anything?"

"Don't play stupid with me. How long have I known you, now, for you to ask me that."

"Oh, I don't know," Etho says, almost certainly smirking under his mask. "Basically forever. Feels like a dream."

Against his better judgement, without thinking about it, Bdubs steps up onto the bottom step so he can glare down menacingly from a more dramatic, intimidating angle. It clearly doesn't work, but that's never stopped him from barrelling down doomed plans before. "More like you've been peeking into my nightmares and leaving reminders just to mess with me. Going into my room in the middle of the night! Leaving threatening notes on my desk!"

"Helpful suggestions," corrects Etho, ever the pedant, even when he's objectively wrong. "Also, it was just one note, for the record -"

“*Threatening* notes critiquing my dreams you got no business knowing anything about!

“Well, your dreams must be different than mine after all because mine are *good* ones. You and me teaming up, starting rumors, getting into trouble. What do you dream about?”

“Dying,” says Bdubs, flat, still staring straight down. “You threatening to kill me.”

Etho smiles up at him. “Tango’s been dreaming you killed him. I remember dreaming it was pretty funny.”

“Oh, so now you remember. And now you’re playing your hand because you’re finally gonna *get me!*” Bdubs says. He’s almost resigned to it, all the tension in his body in the anticipation of Etho’s next move, the familiar inevitable push toward an unsatisfying ending.

“I remember it was great when you almost killed me with the enchanter. That was pretty good,” Etho offers.

He doesn’t say that the sound of Etho’s laughter and the smell of singed fabric filling the shoddy little office he’d made to convince Etho to join him is his favorite memory of that life, that he knows that one will stick with him in the next world and all the worlds after if he can help it. The scent had lingered for a few hours after, ash and soot streaks left just below the bars Etho had held to prop himself up through his hysterics. Every time he passed it, he’d been flush with pride to know Etho’d come back just to tell him, just to finish the joke.

Bdubs has a private, brief moment of hating him furiously, actual rage beyond irritation that he’s going to have to explain himself and Etho will just make him without doing anything at all, but it fades to a familiar fondness-tinged resignation almost as quickly as it came.

“Attempts on your life aren’t compliments!”

“Aren’t they?” Etho asks, slowly standing. “We are gonna make this work. One way or the other,” Etho says, and reaching out one arm as if to grab him.

Instinctively Bdubs starts to backpedal, forgetting there’s still a step between him and flat ground and he goes tumbling backward - and suddenly it’s dark and hot and claustrophobic, then a bright blue sky with faint breeze and flashes of stone, then a cold night hurtling toward jagged craters, and finally a rainy day on the same roof he’s standing under and before he can brace himself for impact -

“Got you this time.” Etho has a hold on his forearm with both of his hands, one wrapped behind Bdubs’ elbow and the other grasping his hand, and is staring incredulously, barely keeping him upright as his heels bob dangerously against the side of the stair. “You should really watch your back.”

Suddenly, the panic returns, and Bdubs swings his free hand around in an attempt to get out of Etho’s grasp. His knuckles connect somewhere around Etho’s jaw; they hurt, but not nearly as bad as hitting the ground hard enough the watch on his wrist makes a loud, resounding crack when he slams into the gravel, or the subsequent impact of Etho being dragged down with him.

Etho’s unintentional piledrive hits right at his shoulder, and he groans as Etho uses the momentum to roll a once, twice, a third time, just out of arm’s reach. It’s hard to tell for whose safety.

"You hit me!" Etho says when he’s flat on his back, taking off his mask to press the heel of one hand against his mouth for a moment. “You jerk, I didn’t know you had it in you!”

Bdubs scrambles to his knees and looks at Etho looking at his palm, turning his wrist back and forth so that the little bit of blood pressed there just barely glints with the light from a far-off lamppost. He should probably apologize for that, but something in Etho's tone is sparking different memories, the rush of adrenaline the same but something else running in the undercurrent.

As Etho rolls over he holds the bloodied hand out to wave it in Bdubs' direction like a demanding child, petulant and angling for attention despite the sharpness of his smile. "Look at this, you got me!"

"You better watch out," Bdubs says, too late. "I did get you, and I'll do it again." It comes out wrong, his mouth twisting itself into a grin - some cruel echo of before, of the curse, surely, same as the growing sense of pride he'd felt when Etho admitted he had no idea Bdubs had been the first boogeyman. But the curse had lifted by then - and, strange, to have forgotten that until now, how *proud* he'd been at Etho's stunned admiration, proving that no matter how much better Etho knew him than anybody else, he could still surprise him. It's the same tone Etho's using now.

I had no idea, his voice echoes. Bdubs had, under pressure, admitted to sparing Etho out of fear he'd lose; and it would have been stupid, with everything he knew about Etho and right at the start. But among the echoes still reverberating he doesn't find fear of dying.

"Nope," says Etho, still too cheerful. "You're not scared of me anymore."

"I just *decked* you," Bdubs says. "You're terrifying. You are the - you're the craziest person I've ever met in my freaking life."

Etho flashes him a toothy, slightly reddened grin and runs his tongue over the split in his lip. "Just this one?"

"I really will hit you again," he says instead of an answer. He had been nervous and hesitant but he'd considered it and undermined his own chances over and over, because he wouldn't have. Keeping the faith had paid off not in keeping lives while there were still enough to go around, or preserving the peace with his partner, but for the opportunity to say *Are you sure you know me?* After all that time, all those lifetimes -

Etho's grin just gets wider. "No, you won't," he says immediately, with perfect confidence.

"I will -"

"You won't," Etho says, cutting him off. "You could, but you won't."

Bdubs stares hard for a moment that stretches on and on, eyes locked, faint noises of the rest of this world unable to interrupt.

He could. He'd proven it before and surely he would again, in some other life, if given the chance, if it meant surprising Etho, getting a rare upper hand, proving that the game hadn't gone stale yet. The look in Etho's eye after that first kill said *so this will be fun*, and Bdubs had whooped with joy and triumph.

It's enough that Etho knows he could. Not a threat or a promise but a possibility, one possible iteration of infinitely, endlessly many, all of them unique and more fun than the last. After all, Etho has always enjoyed taking risks, and Bdubs liked himself just fine but even better was the person he became when he was a risk worth taking. It wasn't faith they'd succeed, but it was something to sink their teeth into all the same. Who cared how it ended, as long as the getting there was interesting?

Finally, something cracks and he lets himself laugh, and the overwhelming weight of so many lifetimes' joy and discovery wracks him so hard it rattles his sore ribs and almost chokes him.

When Etho moves just close enough to thump him hard on the back a few times, Bdubs does throw a hand out to stop him, but it's an intentional open palm shoved in the general direction of Etho's eyes and forehead, not even applying force so much as trying to mess up his hair or squash his face. He knows he's hit his target when the thumping stops and Etho's squawking indignation and bark of laughter as he struggles to get away echoes in the absence of Bdubs' labored breathing.

"I won't," he says at long last, and puts just enough force into a shove that Etho chooses to dramatically fall backwards, slain. After a moment, he follows suit and lowers himself flat to the ground as well. "I get it, I get it, I give in. I graciously spare your life over and over, and in return I get led to my doom and constantly threatened, that's how it always has been."

"Isn't it great?" Etho says, chasing away the last of his own case of contagious laughter. "You know, we've killed each other a lot. I've probably killed you more than you've killed me. Is that a problem?"

"Prove it," Bdubs retorts. "Also, *now* you're asking? What do you think, Etho."

"I don't know. Is that why you were so scared of me before tonight?"

Bdubs studies the stars. "No. Yes - well, no. I knew I killed people too back then. It wasn't about the killing, exactly..."

Etho lets the silence stretch on.

"When you went to the hospital," he says, and stops. "I'm sorry I didn't save you in time, you said. You meant that? You mean it, now?"

Etho laughs. "Now that I know what I meant by it, yeah, I guess," he says. "Mostly. You died so fast, and I hesitated. I wished it was different." A pause. "Is that a problem?"

"Everything is a problem with you," Bdubs says, but it comes out so sweet and quiet he has to cough. "Crazy and stupid, that's what you are. If you did you would've wasted a life. That's why you never gave me any of your own. I know that - I knew that."

"Don't worry, I wouldn't have held it against you."

"No need to apolog- wait, me? I should be telling you I wouldn't hold it against *you!*" Bdubs sputters. He doesn't look over. If he looks over, he'll have to see Etho's expression and he might actually be tempted to hit Etho in his stupid smug mouth again.

"Then what are you still mad about?"

"I'm not mad!" he says, sharp and automatic even though he huffs out a laugh right after. "I know what you're doing here, I know your tricks. You pretended to want to kill me, I pretended to want to kill you, we both pretended we've never wanted to kill each other before, it was a regular old riot. You killed somebody else for me instead." He stops. "You killed somebody for me," he repeats, a warmth diffusing through his chest and all the way down to his fingertips, just shy of an itch. "You killed *Scar* for me."

"So smug for someone who stood back and watched."

"I was a little preoccupied with running for my life and then getting one back! You don't know

what that's like, you never -"

He doesn't have the words for the way life had come back to him. They had already known what it was like to go red, and learned to live with the bloodlust of the boogeyman that sliced into the fullness of green life, but Etho'd never been bowled over by the force of life suddenly blooming in his chest, knocking the wind out of him like he'd been drowning and had finally come up for air he'd forgotten he needed.

"Got more alive," he finishes eventually, the echo of that feeling sending a full-body shiver down his spine. Something else is dawning as it fades. "That wasn't the first time you killed for me, either. Not that world, a long time before that."

Etho looks at him, and looks at him, and then his eyebrows twitch down and up again in a sudden flash. "No idea what you're talking about," he lies.

"You can't fool me," Bdubs crows, and he knows he looks the fool but doesn't care. "You *remember* now. I caught you. It was a team-up, right? We lost then too, but that's details. Man, we haven't changed at all."

"I always knew you were crazy," Etho says, but he wraps one hand around his other wrist as he looks through Bdubs. "I can't believe you got me to trust you."

"Don't you try and sweet talk me, I know you were just scared of me." It had been dark and starry then too, the thrill of catching Etho off-guard the same. It *had* been a team-up, and it hardly mattered that Etho'd gone along mostly because he couldn't defend himself while handcuffed and it was better than dying then and there, not when he died walking into his own trap in a fight when it came down to the final four. They had only had the one life each then and spent them even more recklessly.

"Uh *huh*." The eye rolling is practically audible. "You're right, we haven't changed. We just take turns."

Bdubs ignores him. "You were a menace last time, you know that, right? Making me do all the work and pretending you were gonna murder me for the hell of it." He can hear Etho's muffled snort of laughter, and blindly smacks Etho's arm with his hand. He doesn't move away, after, his hand curled around Etho's forearm, the warmth and just barely felt pulse there reassuring him that they are both alive and together. He squeezes once. "I thought you remembered everything and were hiding it because you were still the boogeyman or something. It's different when it's permanent."

"You know me, Bdubs," says Etho, but this time it's honest and it's an admonition. The tendons in his arm flex, as if they were making a fist. "I didn't win it for you." Bdubs waits. Overhead, thin clouds are crawling by; there is faint moonshine beginning to climb its way above the trees. The grass beneath them is cool and beginning to grow damp with dew, but Etho's a warm presence against his shoulder. "Of course, you didn't win it for me either."

"No, I sure didn't." Bdubs turns his head toward the sky again, reaching his free hand above him. His fingers move through the motions of rummaging through tattered pockets for a weapon, a flower. "I was so reckless, but for all your complaining you never complained about that. It never did feel all the way real, even before, I guess."

"You weren't there, when I died," Etho says. Bdubs keeps his gaze fixed on the stars as the silence stretches on. "I went laughing, after it all was over, even though you weren't there. One last joke for you, in case you were still listening."

“Yeah?”

“Uh huh. You really don’t remember that? You weren’t there?”

Bdubs thinks about rolling over on his side to look at Etho directly but settles for squeezing the hand that’s still curled around Etho’s arm instead. “I stayed longer than anybody should, you know. I dream about it all the time, stuck in a cold dark place and watching as a ghost. You never said anything about me or to me while I was there. If you weren’t gonna win it for me you could’ve had the decency to die a little quicker and not make me wait.”

“I thought it didn’t matter,” says Etho. “I knew we’d get another chance. You’re always there, so if I won it was our victory and if I didn’t, you’d turn up again. Like a bad penny.” He paused consideringly. “Or maybe like a cockroach, always crawling back.”

“Speak for yourself!” Warmer, more distant memories float by: a castle, a rail line, a firing squad. He winces. “I remembered. I don’t think we were supposed to. Cleo did, a little. But you and me...”

“What’s one more little murder? After you died, she trusted me because you’d trusted me, because of the time before when it was the two of you instead. I can’t get people to give me things to save their own lives and you just trick people into trusting you across lifetimes, that’s not fair. You don’t even use it to your advantage.”

“I can’t help that I’m such a likeable, honorable, trustworthy guy, unlike you. Maybe next time I’ll just have to start spreading rumors to prove I can do that better than you, too.”

“The time she was talking about was in a world where you killed me! On purpose!”

“This again,” groans Bdubs, as Etho says “I’d never kill you,” over him in a terrible mocking imitation of Bdubs’ voice. “I get it, I get it, the boogeyman stuff was funny because we both know that never was *maybe* a strong word. But I meant it. I never even thought about killing you. We almost never get lucky enough to be on the same side, so it was important. I knew you knew that too, even if none of those reds believed me when I tried to tell them you cared. Man, was that a bad dream. Thought I made a fool of myself up there in that stupid fort we never finished, the place all blown to hell and me almost blowing my cover by telling them you loved me even if I was still red. He cares, he does! *If he loved you, why didn’t he give you a life*, they said. And then to go off and die shouting your name? Oh brother, what a bad joke.”

Etho sits up and scrubs at his face, hunched over his knees. “That’s the wrong punchline,” he says, shoulders shaking. His voice wavers and Bdubs sits up in a hurry, but Etho keeps talking. “I didn’t know about that until just now, and you didn’t stick around long enough to hear the rest of the joke.”

“This better not be another set up about your stupid comedy class,” Bdubs says, wary.

“It’s not,” Etho says, and then it becomes clear that he’s laughing, and every time he starts to collect himself he doubles back over and hangs his head between his knees again. “When I said - I was telling you, I didn’t win it for you, but you didn’t win it for me either.”

“We’ve been over this, yeah! What’s so freaking funny, you? We were - we were having a moment! Now who’s losing his mind?”

“No, no,” Etho says as he looks up at Bdubs, trying to get himself under control. Bdubs glares, which just makes Etho giggle and turn his head away, clearing his throat to try and ward off whatever hysteria is possessing him. “You did know the whole time. I said, but he didn’t win it for

me either. Just kidding, Bdubs, you know I -”

“I know *what*,” Bdubs says, patience running out when Etho trails off again. “I’m starting to think maybe I was wrong about being wrong about you in this life, the way you’re treating my extremely fragile revelation about my last words.”

“I’m trying to tell you mine.” When Etho looks up at him this time, he’s smiling, plain and honest as Bdubs has ever seen him, the same face he’s worn every time he beats Bdubs in a board game or they pull a prank on Tango together, or the day they brought Pineapple Pizza home for the first time - the same face he saw last time light up at *this brings back memories*. “You already said it. You knew, even though you weren’t there to hear it.”

Bdubs folds his arms over his chest, the urge to smack Etho again fading but still present. “I’m too tired for riddles, Etho.”

Etho just keeps smiling at him, elbow on one knee and head leaned against his knuckles, waiting.

“Etho,” he pleads, knowing it’s futile. “Just kidding, I know you - what? What could be so funny?” Etho has always been willing to play the long game; they’ll sit out here all night if he can’t figure it out, or the moment will pass, and he can’t bear it. He’s waited two lifetimes to hear the end of this sentence.

A man dies and wakes up in a murderer’s club. His partner makes him a secret deal, and he tells the murderers that his partner loves him, and is believed by no one. He dies, and they all laugh because he was wrong. Even knowing what he does now, alive and with Etho at his side, it’s a bad joke if it ends there. The partner dies too, so it doesn’t matter, and when he goes no one’s around to hear it, but the funny thing is, he says, *just kidding* -

I love you. He cares, he does.

“I was right,” he says, the joke finishing itself at last. “I say it in front of everybody and you just say it when I’m not even around to hear, but I was right.” He uncrosses his arms and slaps his hands down on his crossed legs. “I knew it the whole time! You didn’t have to get all hysterical about it.”

“It’s just funny,” Etho says, still looking at him. Finally, Bdubs breaks down and smiles back. “You forgot, but I won’t hold it against you. I knew you wouldn’t make me say it again.”

“As far as I’m concerned you never did, you weirdo! If a tree falls in the forest and no one’s around to hear it, it doesn’t make a sound.”

“I don’t think that’s the point of that saying,” says Etho, bumping his shoulder against Bdubs’. “I say it all the time. As long as I have a choice, I end up choosing you, don’t I? One way or another.”

“Actions aren’t words, Etho. Trying to blow up my perfect crastle multiple times is not the same thing as saying it out loud.”

“They speak louder! You got the message.”

“Stop it with the sayings, I swear, I’m not arguing about this with *you* of all people.” But he’s laughing now too, bumping Etho’s shoulder back. “You can act like you’re obsessed with me all you want, but it’d be nice to hear you say it, just once.”

“You’re one to talk about being obsessed,” Etho says, but instead of retaliating he just leans his weight into Bdubs’ shoulder and looks up.

“Etho,” says Bdubs, refusing to take the bait. “Do it again, and I’ll never ask. Not in this life.”

And finally, on a different cool night under a different sky, together by choice for as long as this world will allow it, he does.

Chapter End Notes

If you want more, go read [Wind Back the Clock](#) and tell me if you caught the references - to me, in my heart, Do it Again and it are canon to each other. There'll be at least a few one shot/drabbles soon, exploring other in-between worlds like this one, and I've started a [directors commentary](#) over on tumblr too, if you want that sort of thing.

Thanks for sticking through this beast of a thing, my first ever completed multi-chapter piece. Here's to the next world, and all the worlds after.

Works inspired by this ~~one~~ [crossbow bolt in the back](#) by [rabbit_with_a_sword](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!