

You Could've Applied Online

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/47834815) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/47834815>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	Multi
Fandoms:	Hermitcraft SMP , 3rd Life Last Life SMP Series
Relationships:	John Booko BdoubleO100 & EthosLab , John Booko BdoubleO100 & Ryan GoodTimesWithScar , BdoubleO100/EthosLab , EthosLab & Joel SmallishBeans , Charles Grian & EthosLab , John Booko BdoubleO100 & ZombieCleo , Jimmy Solidarity/TangoTek , Joel SmallishBeans/Lizzie LDShadowLady (Video Blogging RPF) , Charles Grian & Ryan GoodTimesWithScar
Characters:	John Booko BdoubleO100 , EthosLab (Video Blogging RPF) , Ryan GoodTimesWithScar , Martyn Littlewood InTheLittleWood , Charles Grian , Rendog (Video Blogging RPF) , impulseSV (Video Blogging RPF) , TangoTek (Video Blogging RPF) , Scott Major Smajor1995 , ZombieCleo (Video Blogging RPF) , Joel SmallishBeans , Jimmy Solidarity , Lizzie LDShadowLady (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe , they're in the real world...kind of? , your guess is as good as mine what season this is based off of , season 7 mostly , with a little third life mixed in , hitman - Freeform , Spies & Secret Agents , Fake/Pretend Relationship , strangers to whatever you would call their friendship , lying for the kicks and giggles , a little ooc idk what im doing , EthosLab-centric (Video Blogging RPF) , BdoubleO100-centric , i cant believe the thing getting me out of my writing slump is block men , obligatory this is the characters not the people , the government name threw me off ngl , they can swear a little , Mycelium Resistance (Hermitcraft) , Hermitcraft Season 7 , POV Alternating , Minor Character Death , Alternate Universe - Modern with Magic , The Void (Minecraft)
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Should've, Could've, Would've , Part 1 of im trying to make it easier to find my fics
Collections:	Anonymous
Stats:	Published: 2023-06-12 Completed: 2023-09-26 Words: 99,352 Chapters: 13/13

You Could've Applied Online

by Anonymous

Summary

“Twelve hours? Where do you work that makes you work twelve hours straight?” Bdubs asked incredulously. “Wait no. No we can’t pick this up! We’re talking about murder here!”

“Yeah, and now I'm gonna have to find a new roommate because of this. You owe me. Maybe tomorrow won't work. Let's schedule it out for...next week?”

Bdubs stuttered over his words, hand holding the knife tensing around the handle as he looked around the room. Was he being pranked? Did Scar do this? He couldn't think of another conversation that had confused him more than this. Etho's eyes crinkled around the edges, mouth subtly changing into what Bdubs imagined was a smile as he felt irritation creep into his mind. “You're joking right now.”

Another shift under the mask. He was definitely smiling now. “How'd you guess?”

Or: Bdubs kills someone (on purpose), makes people angry (NOT on purpose), and somehow gets a boyfriend in the process. Or was he a bodyguard? Bdubs doesn't really know himself.

Oh, and Etho just wants to pay his rent on time. Preferably without another dead roommate.

Notes

I have been stuck in with writers block for so long, it isn't funny. Started reverting back to YouTube and Minecraft and stumbled into the life SMPs and eventually HermitCraft and here we are! Because of who I am as a person, I watch things out of order and randomly, so if the ideas and seasons seem out of order or not in the right season tagged- they're not. I know my own faults and now the vast internet knows them too. Enjoy, hopefully

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

Chapter 1

This wasn't how Bdubs planned this night to go.

It wasn't his fault, he swore! The guy had insisted they go back to his apartment instead of Bdubs own, making killing him that much harder. He didn't know the layout of the place like he did his own house, making the chase scene longer and way more messy now that it was over. Blood sprayed on the walls, sweat and fingerprints probably everywhere, Bdubs could safely say this was one of his lower moments in the crime business.

“Aww man...” He faded out as he looked around the front room. The guy was fast, Bdubs would give him that. Almost made it to the front door before he had caught up to him. It looked like a disaster zone now that everything was done. Really, this is why his targets should come back to his own home instead of forcing Bdubs to go somewhere out of his element. It was this guys fault that his house was all messed up and that his roommate would find it in the morning like this-

His roommate.

Bdubs eyes widened as he dropped his knife, immediately crouching to pick it up again as a new wave of panic washed over him. Crap, the stupid target had a stupid roommate that, if Bdubs remembered right, worked night shifts. Meaning... Bdubs checked the clock before cringing. Meaning he had a little under two hours to make it look like an accident.

Sighing, Bdubs quickly sent a text to his employer saying the target had been neutralized (Scar was always a bit dramatic, but Bdubs didn't mind) before cracking his neck. Cleaning this up would be a pain in the ass, but nothing that he couldn't handle. The hit man/spy/paid assassin business wasn't all just fun and games after all, you had to be willing to get a little dirty. Well, even more dirty then killing someone you knew little to nothing about.

Blood was cleaned off the walls, fingerprints wiped off the doorknobs and fridge looked through for a small snack break. “You've got to be kidding me.” Bdubs mumbled under his breath. Vegans? Again? Honestly this was the third hit this month where the person he killed had been a vegan. What was with this resistance and their weird plant food diet they had going on? Or maybe it was the other roommate, he was Canadian if Bdubs remembered right.

Maybe they ate only vegetables or something like that. Closing the fridge door, a little harder than how he would at his own home, Bdubs couldn't help but let out a short scream as a gloved hand covered his mouth. "Oh shi--"

"I'm guessing you're the reason my rent has now doubled?"

Bdubs barely heard the question before he jerked his head, mouth successfully getting a hand stuck in between his teeth and biting down hard. The other man hissed, ripping his hand out of the other mouth as Bdubs scrambled for his waistband. He knew he had some extra knives in there, something that could help him-

The sound of a crossbow getting loaded had him freezing In his tracks.

"Why don't we both calm down a bit, huh?" Bdubs slowly put his hands above his head, still not facing who he assumed was the roommate. If he got out of this alive, Bdubs would have to have a serious talk with Scar about information packets because why wasn't he informed the roommate was apparently very willing to shoot another person with what sounded like a firework? "What's your opinion on deli sandwiches?"

What?

"Depends on what kind of vegetables you put on them." Bdubs slowly responded after another few moments of silence once it became clear that the other wasn't going to speak. "Not a fan of spinach on sandwiches."

There was a shuffle behind him, Bdubs taking a deep breath as he resisted the urge to turn around. He was stuck between wanting to see the guy who was simultaneously threatening him and asking him about food preferences or leaving it up to his imagination. He guesses the weird vegan food wasn't for this guy. That was a plus, right? "I guess you can pick it off then."

"Huh?" Life be damned, this was getting too weird, even for him. Turning around, Bdubs shook his head as the roommate seemed to be unwrapping a half of a sandwich, another half sitting across the table where he was now sitting. How did he move so quietly that Bdubs

couldn't hear him? The crossbow was nowhere in sight, just a masked man with a light scar over his eye, clearly showing his amusement with this whole situation as Bdubs shook his head again. "What's going on?"

The roommate's eyes darted to where the guy Bdubs just killed was *still* laying, before nodding his head towards the other half of the sandwich. Coders, why didn't Bdubs remember his name? He really should read the files more seriously. Maybe it was a mix of his and Scars fault, now that he thought about it. The man pulled down the mask to take a bite before responding "Are we pretending you didn't kill my roommate? I didn't get the script."

"Everyone's a comedian." Bdubs managed to get out, walking towards the table even though the rational thing would be to leave, or even better, kill the other guy. Instead, he picked up the half of the sandwich, eyed it suspiciously before slowly unwrapping it. "So is this like a grace period before we fight to the death or?"

The other man chuckled, something quick but low that felt more dangerous than Bdubs was ready for. Bdubs took a bite as he waited for the other man to actually respond, going through all the possible names he might have knocking around in his brain. Comm going off, Bdubs quickly checked it as the other man seemed to get lost in thought.

[scar]

Just a reminder that Etho will be home soon if you haven't left yet

Etho! That was this guy's name. Good to know. Bdubs took another bite, typing with one hand as Etho finished off his sandwich.

[Bdubs]

Yah, he's here rn

Read 1:32am

Great. As much as Bdubs wanted to be upset, it wasn't like he wouldn't do the same thing if he was in Scars position. Looking up, Bdubs jerked back as Etho stared at him, amusement still shining through with something else mixed in. The mask was back up. "I thought you didn't like spinach."

Looking down, Bdubs cringed as he realized his mistake. More than half the sandwich was gone, spinach too as he looked back up. "Whatever. We're killing each other now." Bdubs announced, standing up and reaching for his knives.

Etho, however, just quietly groaned while stretching out on the chair. "Man, I just got off a twelve hour shift. Can we pick this up tomorrow?"

"Twelve hours? Where do you work that makes you work twelve hours straight?" Bdubs asked incredulously. "Wait no. No we can't pick this up! We're talking about murder here!"

"Yeah, and now I'm gonna have to find a new roommate because of this. You owe me. Maybe tomorrow won't work. Let's schedule it out for...next week?"

Bdubs stuttered over his words, hand holding the knife tensing around the handle as he looked around the room. Was he being pranked? Did Scar do this? He couldn't think of another conversation that had confused him more than this. Etho's eyes crinkled around the edges, mouth subtly changing into what Bdubs imagined was a smile as he felt irritation creep into his mind. "You're joking right now."

Another shift under the mask. He was definitely smiling now. "How'd you guess?"

"You're Canadian, you're supposed to be nice!" Bdubs pointed his knife in Etho's direction accusingly. Etho's smile fell slightly from under his mask, head tilting to the left as he stood up.

“How’d you know that?”

Oops. The air was much more tense now. Bdubs gulped, taking a step back and directly running to the counter edge with a hiss. “What else do you know?” With Etho now standing, Bdubs could clearly see who had the height advantage here. Etho’s voice hadn’t changed from the casual vibes from before, but that didn’t stop the shiver going down his spine now that his attention was fully on him.

“Nothing much!” Bdubs quickly said. “I knew more about your roommate. I know barely anything about you!”

Etho raised an eyebrow. “And the fact I’m Canadian was important enough to know?”

“...Yes.” Bdubs double downed, rolling his shoulders back as Etho nodded a few times like he was trying to process what was happening. “Always wanted to meet a Canadian.”

Always wanted to meet a Canadian? What was that? Why was he feeling all scared about this in the first place? He was the one who killed the body now rotting on the floor boards, he was the one who regularly did this on a weekly if not daily basis. What was he so scared of? Standing up straight, Bdubs watched as Etho finally rolled his shoulders back, still looking irritatingly calm for what was going on. “Sorry I didn’t offer you any maple syrup then.” Etho finally said, cracking each of his fingers against the table top.

“Is everything a joke to you?”

“You’ve gotta admit, this is kind of a funny moment.”

“What, you walking in on your roommate dead?” Bdubs questioned, the night and everything leading up to it starting to get to him. He was tired, he was feeling the exhaustion and inherent dirtiness that came with murdering someone, he was done listening to this...this asshole joke about something that shouldn’t be joked about. “I should've killed you, payment be damned.”

Etho's eyes widened, hands tensing on the table. "You're getting paid to kill?"

Snorting, Bdubs relaxed his hand on his knife, cracking his neck with his other before taking a step towards Etho. Etho took a step back. "Not you. Just for your roommate. Why? You think I just waltzed in here and decided to knife the guy in the back?"

"Kind of." Etho said immediately, gesturing around the room. "It looks like an amateur did this."

"Yeah freakin right!" Bdubs took another step forward, Etho one back. "This is a professional murder, I'll have you know! Fingerprints wiped, Blood barely there anymore, you should be honored to have witnessed how a professional does things!"

Etho looked surprised by his outburst, eyes darting around the room again for a moment. What was he thinking? Was he more stressed now, or maybe just so tired he couldn't feel anything but apathy? His appearance was still relaxed, though his shoulders did seem just a tad bit tighter than earlier. The mask made it harder to read his body language, Bdubs would admit, so he would take all of this with a grain of salt. Etho let out a short huff, and then another.

And another.

He was...laughing?

Etho was laughing.

And for some reason, the urge to laugh started to bubble out of Bdubs too.

"You think this is a joke?" Bdubs managed to get out around his laughter, Etho now slightly leaning over the table like he couldn't stand up straight. "I'm not freaking kidding!"

“I know! I know you’re not!” Etho huffed, taking a few deep breaths like he was struggling to breathe. “So this is how a professional killer does things, good to know.” Etho’s eyes were...pretty neat, now that Bdubs was looking through a rose colored tint. A little startling, with the two tones now staring back at him, crinkled in a smile like this was two friends sharing an inside joke. “Good to know.” Etho repeated, standing back straight.

Maybe they could’ve been friends.

It was quiet for a moment, Bdubs flipping the knife in between his fingers before he let out an exaggerated sigh. Scar was not going to be happy about this, but what he didn’t know wouldn’t kill him. “Twelve hours huh?” Bdubs found himself saying. Etho raised an eyebrow at the change of subject, but nodded. “I bet you’re real tired after that.”

Another pause, Etho blinking twice before the crinkles around his eyes came back. “Dead tired.”

“Wouldn’t really be fair if I killed ya now.”

“Be like taking candy from a baby.” Neither of them mentioned the elephant in the room, the one where contract killers didn’t seem to care about a fair fight. Etho raised an eyebrow again, eyes darting towards the body again. “Pick this back up in a week?”

Bdubs grinned, nodding a few times before pocketing his knife. “As long as you’re not planning on ratting me out.” Etho just shrugged, a whole body movement it seemed as he stuffed his hands in his front pockets. “I don’t think you’re planning on it, since you didn’t seem to have much of an attachment to your roommate.”

“As a good citizen it is my responsibility to report crime.” Etho responded, slumping back in his kitchen chair before offering a head tilt. “It’s a good thing I’m not that good of a citizen. Get the body out of the apartment and we’ll call it square.”

Now that he was listening for it, Bdubs could hear the exhaustion in the other man’s voice. Twelve hours will do it to anyone, he supposes. Nodding even though Etho’s head was now resting on the table, Bdubs quickly sent a message to Scar’s clean up crew before pocketing

his comm. “You might want to get out of here for a few days anyways. Police are gonna swarm the place soon enough.” Etho just waved a tired hand, clearly over all of it as Bdubs hesitated. “And my guys are coming to...you know, clean up the area. And they might not be as forgiving as me...” Bdubs faded out, looking at the slowly moving shoulders of the other man. Did he really just fall asleep?

Letting out a huff of air, Bdubs quickly wiped over the spots he touched one more time before leaving. It wasn't his fault if Etho got killed after he tried to help. He didn't even know why he was helping anyway. Clearly the man had some survival skills to have seen this and not freak out, or he was just so deep in apathy that he didn't care. Either way, he wasn't Bdubs responsibility. Leaving the apartment, Bdubs passed the three person clean up crew with a single nod and a passing thought to the soon to be deceased.

His work was done.

.....

“What do you know about Etho Slab?”

It was a few weeks later, Scar and him talking in his mayor office.

Dirty politicians, you know?

“Who?” Bdubs asked, mouth full and feet up on the desk as Scar gave him a glare.

Pushing his feet off, Scar wiped the surface with the back of his hand before speaking again. “Etho Slab. Etho. Whatever you would call him. You...ran into him around three weeks ago.”

The memories came back, Bdubs eyes widened slightly as he sat up straight. “What about him? The police lookin' for his body or something?”

“More like the police are looking into the four bodies left in his apartment.”

The what?

Scar watched his expressions, finally letting out a sigh as he realized this was news to his assistant. “The target and all three clean up crew were found dead. Etho however, was nowhere to be found. Thoughts?” Scar took the drink now frozen in Bdubs hand out of it, placing it on the desk where there wasn’t a threat of it spilling on the newly installed carpet. “I know you didn’t kill them.” Bdubs shoulder relaxed a bit. “What I’m wondering is why you didn’t kill Etho when you first met him.”

His shoulder tensed again.

“I- I don’t know?” It came out more like a question, Bdubs cringing at himself as Scar raised an eyebrow. He knew, he knew that out of all his ‘friends’ and workers he trusted Bdubs the most. It was something he wore with pride most days, but right now it made it hard to lie to him. “He gave me half a sandwich. He didn’t look threatened in the slightest, and after the first moment with a crossbow, all he did was joke around and fall asleep before I left. I didn’t think he was a threat and...I thought at least one of the clean up crew guys could handle him if they had too.”

It was too quiet in the office, Bdubs decided. If Scar didn’t kill him for this, he would probably build some aquariums here. Jellie would probably like that. Scar was now tapping his fingers against the desk, seemingly thinking deeply about what Bdubs said as he shifted in his seat. “He said he wouldn’t call the cops. Or rat me out.” He tacked on.

That got a snort out of his boss, though it was one of disbelief and aggression. Bdub sank lower in his seat. “I’m sure he did.” Letting out a long suffering sigh, Scar finally relaxed, taking Bdubs drink and popping off the lid to pour it into his own cup. “You’re lucky he didn’t kill you, huh?”

“I could’ve taken him.” Bdubs immediately responded. “You’re clean up crew are mediocre at best, but I’m the real deal.”

Scar snorted again, offering the basically empty drink cup back to Bdubs. "I'll pass the word to Tango that he doesn't train them enough." Bdubs rolled his eyes, but mentally made a note to prepare himself for Tango's rage. "What is actually lucky is-

There was a knock on the door, a moment of irritation passing through his face before his public persona took over. "Come in!"

"I didn't mean to interrupt, I would've waited till you were done." Scar waved the newcomer off but Bdubs found himself frozen once again in his seat. There was no way Scar thought this was a good idea. If Bdubs didn't think it was a good idea, it was a really bad idea.

"It's no problem, why don't you sit down?"

"I prefer standing."

"Not when I met you." Bdubs shout out, eyes immediately widening at the twin stares he could feel and see. "I mean...you barely stood the entire time I was there."

There was a low chuckle, something like that night as Bdubs felt a body sit right next to him. Still he couldn't turn his head to look. If he didn't look, then it wasn't real. "You're right. It was a long shift."

It was quiet, Scar now getting a very obvious look on his face that only meant trouble for Bdubs. "Scar, whatever you're thinking, it's a bad idea."

Pursing his lips, Scar let the silence grow after Bdubs comment for a little longer before speaking. "I think differently. Etho!" Etho barely tensed, but it was still there. "Building without a road permit. Sneaking stores in the air to avoid taxes. Not to mention what exactly your stores are selling-"

“Is this just a meeting about how much I owe the government?” Etho interrupted, going unheard as Scar barreled on.

“Three weeks ago you murdered four people in your apartment after luring them there.”

This time, not even Etho could hide the way his body froze.

“You know that's not true.”

Breaking his own rule, Bdubs head ripped towards Etho, jaw clearly tense even with the mask, hands curled into fists in his lap as Scar just grinned at him. “Is it not? It was in your apartment. There was no evidence of a break in, nothing to signify that much of a struggle. Only from your poor roommate, whose blood was left on some scratch marks he left on the floorboards.” Scar’s eyes darted to Bdubs, accusation clear on his face as Etho forced his body to relax. “But, even with all these offenses to the government, I was willing to let you slide under the radar. Wanna guess why you’re here, Etho?”

Etho rolled his shoulders back, Bdubs holding his breath for some reason due to the tension in the room. “He’s sure one for theatrics, huh?” It took Bdubs a beat too long to realize Etho was talking to him. “I can’t say I know why I’m here, mayor.” Etho finally said once he figured Bdubs was still in shock with everything happening around him. The last word was basically purred out, a chill running down Bdubs spine that he didn’t want to think about.

Scars eyes darkened. “Framing your roommate for resistance work isn’t the kindest thing you could’ve done, nor is it the smartest.” Etho’s nose twitched as Bdubs finally figured out what was going on.

“Etho framed the other guy?” Bdubs exclaimed, jerking the other two out of their staring match to look at him again. “Etho, you're a resistance member?”

The man in question just scoffed, something almost unnatural in the noise like the man wasn’t used to making the noise. “I work for whoever pays me. If the resistance paid me money, and I'm not saying they did,” Etho pointed the comment towards Scar, who simply nodded along. “Then I would accept it.”

“What if someone offered you more money?”

The pause was longer than the rest, Etho’s jaw tightening and relaxing before he finally relaxed fully in his seat. “What if you did?” Etho finally parroted back. Bdubs didn’t miss the way Scar’s own body language seemed a bit on edge, like he didn’t really trust the man sitting across from him but due to the circumstances, he had to.

“You would hypothetically do what they wanted, yes?” Scar leaned forward, giving a slight head tilt towards where the front of the build was. Where the diamond throne was sitting. It was tense, it was so tense but at the same time Bdubs knew Scar had convinced Etho.

Etho offered what Bdubs would guess was some form of an agreement in business men body language. “Hypothetically.”

Clapping his hands together, Scar offered what Bdubs called his “Slimy smile” with ease. “Perfect. I’ll double it.”

“You don’t even know what I’m being paid.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Scar reached a hand out, offering it for a handshake as Etho looked at it with distrust. “Double whatever the resistance is paying you. Even better, I can guarantee you won’t have to do as much work with me as you do with him.”

“Anyone tell you that you sound like a used car salesman?” Etho complained, but took Scar’s hand in his own. Bdubs bit down the concerned warning trying to bubble out of him as Scar’s face turned more dangerous. He knew that look, and it usually didn’t have a good ending for the person on the receiving end. “What do you need me to do?” Etho asked as he let go, readjusting his mask for a moment before stuffing his hand back into his pocket.

Scar’s grin grew to an unnatural length. “I need you to pay your building fees.”

Etho was scowling, Bdubs could tell. “ *Fine* . If thats it-”

“There's a very important gala in two weeks as well. I'm sure whoever is running the resistance has already made note of it and is planning something to ruin it.” Scar paused, looking at Etho like he was waiting for any information. Etho just stared back.

Bdubs was starting to think he wasn't supposed to be here for this meeting, since neither of them had really addressed him. Maybe he should excuse himself, now that he was thinking about it. The gala was coming up fast, and there were some really important people coming. He still needed to talk to Stress about flower arrangements, maybe that could be his escape route to leave this boring business meeting. Sure, Etho being here- being *alive*- was a surprise, but other than that it was pretty dull. Opening his mouth, Bdubs went to excuse himself but Etho cut him off.

“I thought you said this would be easier than what the resistance had me doing?”

Wait, what was Scar asking Etho to do?

“It will be!” Scar exclaimed, glancing at his watch like he was running late for something else. “Bdubs here knows how to take care of himself, you're just going...in case he doesn't.”

Huh?

Etho rolled his eyes again, pulling his hands out of his pocket to throw some money on the desk before standing up. “There, for the buildings and other stuff. I'm not babysitting a grown man just because he doesn't know how to clean up his own messes.”

“What?” Bdubs finally got out, confusion clear as day as Etho raised an eyebrow. “What's going on?”

“He's not even paying attention right now!” Bdubs might not know what was going on anymore, but he was pretty sure he was the target of all the aggression.

Scar offered the two of them a disarming smile, gesturing to the seat Etho had just left with a flourish. “Now, it really isn’t worth getting all worked up. And this will hardly cover one road pass. It’s only for two weeks, maybe three if they stay in town longer. You’re free after that. No need to pay for the buildings, no memory of resistance work. *And* you can keep what you just threw on the table so rudely.” Bdubs didn’t miss the way Scar threw a few more diamonds on the stack.

It was tense, Etho looking at the money on the table like it was the last of its kind before glancing back at Scar. After offering him a minuscule nod, the masked man turned towards Bdubs. “Will someone tell me what's going on?” He complained as Scar offered him a genuinely sorry look.

“Well BdoubleO,” Etho strung out his name, like he was savoring it on his tongue as Bdubs took a step back. “Thanks to your lovely mayor and apparent best friend Scar here,” Another pause, this time feeling like it was Etho trying to get his thoughts together. Then, a slight shift in his eyes that had Bdubs taking another step back. “You got yourself a boyfriend for three weeks.”

.

..

...

“WHAT?!”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

UPDATED TAGS, PLEASE CHECK THEM OUT

this is where the seasons get muddled, bc i'm very aware that the house i'm talking about here is Bdubs season nine base. However, the basement and that whole ordeal was something i wanted to write about, so here it stays lol- and that third life tag comes into play as well

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

Etho thought he was a pretty normal guy.

Sure, he had gotten mixed up with some shady stuff in the past, but hasn't everyone? And fine, maybe he was a little over his head with some things, mainly money and a place to live, but it wasn't like he was dying or anything.

He made sure he wasn't dying. Even at the cost of other people's lives.

Which is exactly why he had taken the deal.

It was something in the mayor's eyes, something that was screaming that if he didn't take this deal it was only going to get worse. And Etho really couldn't handle his life getting worse.

Being an overpaid babysitter for a whole grown man really couldn't be that bad, right? And it was only three weeks, Grian would understand.

What Etho didn't understand is how he flew under HEP's radar for so long. Even now, they seemed to think he was some lower level grunt worker. That was fine, meant he was safe from anything they might be planning for the higher ups.

[etho]

Won't make it to the meetings for a while, try not to press the emergency button till after the gala

[grian]

Yeahhhh...impulse saw you going into town hall. You good or need help?

Etho scoffed under his breath, glancing to where Bdubs and Scar seemed to be arguing about the arrangement still. Void, it had been three hours. The two of them seemed to have unlimited energy, something Etho could safely say he did not.

[etho]

Nothing i can't handle. Seriously, three weeks and i'll have so much information you'll have to make me the boss.

Sometimes Etho swore he could hear Grian's laugh even when he was nowhere close. Pocketing his phone, Etho watched Scar gesture wildly at him, Bdubs offering him a glare that was more funny than scary to Etho. He had been dead tired the day he met Bdubs, yet there was nothing threatening about the other man even though he totally killed his roommate. Speaking of that, Etho should probably go offer some apologies to his grave, since apparently HEP thought he was part of the resistance, not Etho.

“Babe, if you're done with this street performance, can we go home?” Etho interrupted whatever Bdubs was yelling about now, walking up to the two of them and slinging an arm around the shorter male. It was like Bdubs brain stalled, the man making several noises that didn't actually make sense as Etho tucked him into his side. “You're waking up everyone within a twelve mile radius.”

If his face could go any more red, Etho would be concerned. It was like the guy had never been hit on before, which would be...surprising. Not that Etho was really hitting on him or anything, it was just for the job. Since he had to stay close to Bdubs for three weeks, he figured he would have fun with it. Fake dating? Why the hell not?

"I'm not doing this!" Bdubs fumed at Scar, who was unsuccessfully trying to hide his own laugh as Etho turned them around. "I'm serious! I'm not doing this!" Bdubs yelled again.

Etho just continued to walk, amusement probably showing on his face since Bdubs continued to walk with him even though he was denying that anything was happening. "Stupid Scar." He mumbled under his breath as he wrestled his way out of Etho's arm. Etho let him go easily, watching as he kicked at the ground. "I don't need a- and you!" Tilting his head at the pointed finger, Etho just waited for Bdubs to continue the rant he was clearly gearing up for. "You! Why would you even agree to this? Boyfriend? Scar just said you needed to protect me, not, not-" Another moment of incomprehensible sounds.

"I know he didn't." Etho finally decided to put the man out of his misery. "But what better way to watch over you then by your side?"

"I don't need you to watch over me though, I'm perfectly fine on my own."

Etho didn't need the reminder. Bdubs was clearly...well, he might be older than Etho. He was built, probably could bench press Etho if he really wanted too. That and he could kill someone, like Etho's roommate, without issue. Made him wonder what actually happened that night, for his roommate to invite Bdubs back to their apartment in the first place. He usually hung out at nightclubs, which meant that Bdubs was also at said nightclub. Probably in the proper attire, maybe sweaty from the amount of people there, all dancing and flirting and biceps out and-

Woah.

Etho blinked a few times to clear his head. That was *not* where he was going with that thought. Glancing to his right, it was clear the other man didn't realize he had stopped listening, which was good since he had no idea what his face was doing during that. Part of the reason he didn't take off the mask was because he had a hard time controlling his face. Being good at lying didn't help anyone if your face told everything.

“It sounds like these guys want you dead though.” Etho interrupted his rant, letting the other man take the lead in wherever they were walking to. He hoped it was Bdubs house, because it was way too late to be wandering the streets like they were doing. His apartment was off limits for obvious reasons, Etho camping out in the resistances base for the time being. “Like, willing to send people in and kill you at a public event.”

“Jimmy wouldn’t kill me at the gala.” Bdubs scoffed before popping his bottom lip out. “Scott might. Joel would. Joel totally would.” Etho nodded, even though only one of those names stuck out to him. And hopefully, fingers crossed, it wasn’t the same person Etho knew. This whole situation would get even more messy if Joel was the Joel *he* knew. “But it’s not like we even know if they’re coming. Scar didn’t get confirmation from any of those guys. Well, we got one from Martyn but...”

Bdubs faded out, giving Etho a side eye as he stuffed his hands in his pockets. How far away was this guy's house anyways? What was he even expecting Etho to say? Martyn was a good roommate, if a bit annoying. Martyn found him through an internet ad, and had moved from a different town. Etho really didn’t care to know more than that. He paid rent, and that's all that mattered. Sure, it was pretty clear that the guy was trying to escape his past, or he was still running from it, but that wasn’t Etho’s business. Both of them were wrapped up with their own stuff, and that was that.

Etho guessed he should feel bad that the guy died for *Etho’s* problems, and not his own.

“Yeah. we didn’t really talk.” Etho broke the silence with that, making the mental note again to go visit his grave. “Shame you knifed him in the back, huh?”

“Oh shut up!” Came the predictable response. Etho couldn’t hold back the snort, earning another string of much too loud shouting as Bdubs wrestled his keys out of a clearly stuffed full bag.

Looking up, Etho was surprised at the house. “This is big.”

“And?”

“And nothing, just-” Etho clamped his mouth shut at the glare the shorter man sent his way. If he was going to make this plan work, he was going to have to make it seem like it was Bdubs idea. “Must get lonely.”

There was a pause, keys still in the lock as the man slowly turned around. “What do you mean by that?”

Huh.

Etho tilted his head. That wasn't the response he was ready for. “It's just a little big for one person.” He explained, raising an eyebrow at the way Bdubs looked at the building.

“Well, the rooms aren't completely...done.”

“What?” What could that even mean?

Bdubs groaned, running his hand through his hair before flipping towards Etho. “It means I've been a bit busy and haven't gotten around to finishing the house!”

Hold on a moment.

“You built this?” Etho looked up at the building again. That was...Impressive, to say the least. It was a really beautiful house. Bdubs puffed up with pride, nodding like a bobblehead almost as Etho absorbed the information. “That's really cool.”

Once again, Etho was confused with the way Bdubs seemed to get more embarrassed after that comment. He had to be used to flirtations and compliments in this line of work. People were fake like that, and even though Etho's comment was genuine, it never hurt to be cautious. “Had to be put on the back burner for a while since...politics and all that.” Once again, Etho nodded like he knew anything about that as Bdubs continued. “But someday. Hopefully.”

Etho watched as Bdubs ran his fingers across the stone, like he was remembering simpler days. Maybe he was. Maybe he could afford too.

Must be nice.

“So what I’m hearing is that you have plenty of space for one more?” Screw having Bdubs think it was his idea, the street lamps wouldn’t be on for much longer and Etho wasn’t awake enough to fight mobs right now. Bdubs face changed from nostalgic to annoyed, rolling his eyes as he pushed open his door. Guess he’d have to lay it on thick. “Come on babe, don’t make me-”

Etho was suddenly tugged down but the front of his shirt, the point of a knife now barely sticking into his neck as he looked directly at Bdubs. He was grinning, but it wasn’t like Etho had grown used too. Unhinged would be a good word, something slightly too wide and too happy to have a knife moments away from killing someone. “Don’t babe me when you don’t have to. Got it?” Bdubs hissed out through his teeth, grin never leaving as Etho swallowed.

“Got it buddy.”

A flash of aggression crossed Bdubs eyes, the knife poking in more, a stinging feeling now registering. Etho should really remember when to open his mouth. Just because Bdubs was friendly with him, more than Etho deserved anyways, didn’t mean that they were friends. It was tense, the disgusting feeling of blood trickling down the column of his neck sending a shiver up his spine. “I got a basement.” Bdubs finally said after a few more seconds of silence. “It’s cold and damp, lit up just enough in *most* places for no monsters and has a lock on the door from the outside for my own safety.”

“Safety for what?” Etho managed to croak out, adrenaline pumping almost as hard as when he had to defend himself from three random people bursting into his apartment after Bdubs had left. Bdubs pulled away, knife pocketed as he walked into the house. “Safety for what?” He repeated, following him through the door and closing it behind him.

There was a series of clicks, a bunch of redstone moving as he watched a door open. Bdubs jerked his head towards the now revealed staircase. Great, this was just...not the worst

situation he could be in, actually. It was a place to sleep at least, even just for the night. After this, maybe he could bum with Impulse or Grian for a while. Stepping inside the stairwell, Etho didn't miss the way Bdubs grin grew sharper as he held up the flint and steel in his hand. "Safety for what, Bdubs?" Etho asked a third time, following where he was looking at some candles placed on a side table.

"Guess you'll find out." Bdubs cheerfully replied, blowing out the candles with a wave. Etho's eyes widened as the redstone started up again, door slamming in his face, leaving him in almost complete darkness.

Great.

.....

"You have to believe me, a warden wasn't down there last I checked."

Etho didn't say anything, choosing to read over the private line of messages he missed last night due to...well, a warden being down in the basement. Bdubs was right, most of the mobs had been stuck down on the sides of his creepy ass basement, unable to get him. The ones that weren't were easily killed. But a warden?

"Come on dude, I even let you out early because of it."

Again, Etho ignored him, barely giving him a glance as Bdubs huffed around the kitchen. He was cooking, hopefully for two, while also trying to turn the story back on Etho. Which was completely not the case. Etho was locked in the basement, Bdubs did not save him. No matter what the other man said. The private line wasn't anything he didn't know, just plans for the gala and other small missions that didn't really involve him anyways. He sent a quick message out for someone to hopefully cover for him today, since he wouldn't be able to 'spread the spores' anytime soon.

"I'll leave the basement door open now. Won't even take the key with me."

Etho looked up, watching as Bdubs eyes filled with something close to excitement before looking back down. He could basically feel the way Bdubs deflated. Good, it's what he got for locking someone in a basement with a monster like a warden. Even if it made Etho feel a little bad, Bdubs deserved this. Even if it was kind of funny. Even if it all turned out okay in the end, since Etho somehow killed it without dying.

Void, this was stupid.

Etho looked up right as Bdubs placed a plate in front of him, both of their eyes widening as Etho looked down. Pancakes, whipped cream piled on top of them with pecans placed very purposely on top.

Please don't be mad at me

The pecans spelled out the words easily, though Etho realized that Bdubs must have known he didn't have any nut allergies to pull a move like that. Made him wonder what all Bdubs knew about him. Etho glanced back up, Bdubs already back at the stove where he was busying himself with making his own plate. Mouth dry, Etho looked back at the plate before letting out a loud sigh.

“It was pretty weak anyway.”

It wasn't, but he wasn't dead. “Yeah?” Bdubs slowly questioned, sitting down with his own plate. “I barely heard you fighting it. Either way, you must be a good fighter to kill it. Didn't even register that it could be anything other than, like, a zombie or something.” Etho didn't point out that the best way to fight a warden was to stay quiet, instead taking his comm out to take a photo of his pancakes. “What are you doing?” Bdubs asked with his mouth full, the words coming out muddled.

“It's kind of funny that this is what made me talk.”

It was quiet, the only sound being Bdubs swallowing before taking a drink of milk in front of him. “Well, are you gonna eat or just take photos of it like a teenage girl?”

Etho snorted, but hesitated for a moment before taking off his mask. Bdubs didn't react when he took it off last time. It would be fine, right? When he offered the sandwich, it was so dark he could barely see Bdubs. Now...

The pancakes were good.

The rest of the morning was pretty quiet, Bdubs left as soon as he was done, leaving the dish in the sink still dripping with syrup while claiming he was going to get ready for the day. Etho just nodded, eyes trained on the dish as he listened to the man start the climb up to wherever his bedroom was.

Bdubs was weird, Etho decided. He clearly didn't like Etho, or at least was slightly put out with the idea of him hanging around for three weeks, but didn't do anything about him in his personal space but complained a little and then made him pancakes. He actually seemed upset that he had put Etho in such a dangerous position last night, even though he was probably aiming to kill him.

He just...didn't make sense.

That and he left his comm in plain sight, just past the dish still sitting there. Didn't Bdubs know it was easier to wash if he did it quickly? Clean up your messes, the quicker the better. It was something drilled into Etho from a young age, and he applied it to every aspect in his life. Cleaning dishes, covering his tracks, killing and getting rid of loose ends, it was all the same principle.

And of course, it was about the principle, right?

Snorting at his joke, Etho slid his mask back on before taking his plate to the sink and quickly rinsing it off. He paused, looking at Bdubs dish before washing it off too.

“What are you doing?”

The dish clattered back into the sink, Etho feeling like he was getting caught red-handed for something so simple like doing dishes. “Uhh... washing the dishes?” Etho cringed at himself, at the way he ended the words like a question. Turning around, Etho braced himself against the edge of the counter, raising an eyebrow at Bdubs questioning tone, deciding split second to turn it back on him. “What? The syrup was going to stick and be a pain. Not to mention you cooked breakfast so it was the least I could do.”

The last sentence seemed to be the winner, Bdubs visibly softening. Etho blinked twice as Bdubs got closer, the man seemingly trying to ready himself for something as Etho suddenly found himself boxed against the counter. It was kind of funny, since Bdubs was so much shorter than him, but at the moment all Etho could focus on was making sure he was still breathing. People don't get close to him, that was just a fact. He was scary looking, he was intimidating. If someone was this close to him, it usually meant that he was about to get attacked. But all Bdubs did was look up at him for a moment, eyes flicking down to where his adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed before reaching behind him and grabbing his comm.

It wasn't till Bdubs pulled back that Etho felt air come back into his lungs. Bdubs could easily walk around him and grab it but instead-

“Bathrooms open. I need to go by our flower lady to finalize our order for the gala today. I don't know if you have any plans but...” Bdubs faded out, looking up from his comm to give him a look. “You can do that while I'm out.”

Okay, Etho could salvage this. He was just thrown off by the physical aspect that Bdubs seemed suddenly okay with. This was still on his side of the court. Pushing off the counter, Etho tried to calm his own nerves as he walked past Bdubs in the direction he came from. “If you wait for like ten minutes I'll come with you.”

“I don't need you to come-”

Etho spun on his heels, letting out the breath he was holding to reach out and grip onto Bdubs face. “Give me ten minutes, and we can go.” He rephrased his comment from early, watching heated anger pass through Bdubs face before he ripped out of Etho's hold. “Don't make my job harder for the both of us. I can be your friend, or I can be someone following you for three weeks at an awkward distance. Either way, I'm not one to ditch a job.”

Scoffing, Bdubs looked down at the ground. “Unless someone paid you more.”

True.

“Too bad for you, no one’s paid more than your well meaning friend.”

Bdubs was still glaring at his flooring, eyes trained on a spot in his tile that was scuffed. “If you’re not ready in ten minutes, I’m leaving.”

Etho knew reluctant acceptance when he heard one. Chuckling, Etho nodded even though he wouldn’t see before climbing up the stairs. It was no wonder the other man was so fit, climbing these was a workout in itself. Finding the bathroom was easy, along with the other man’s toothpaste. Using his finger wasn’t ideal, but it was better than nothing. He would have to drop by his apartment anyways for a change of clothes, so maybe he could grab his tooth brush then, He quickly threw his hair into a bun, cursing himself under his breath for not finding a hairdresser since his last one moved cities. He instead just kind of let it grow out, which was fine other than when his fingers wouldn’t work with him and instead made the worst bun he had seen. After spending another five minutes making it look nice (or at least, presentable) Etho made his way back down the stairs to where Bdubs was now waiting by the door.

The man looked disappointed that Etho made it in time, turning off a timer he had apparently started with a sigh. “Eight minutes is impressive.”

Etho grinned, pushing open the door before holding it open. “I could go faster.”

“Not sure that’s something to be bragging about.”

Etho would give that one to him.

.....

He should've known it was Stress.

She was fantastic at flowers and flower arrangements. She was *also* an unknown resistance member with a nose for sniffing out if something was wrong.

So basically, Etho wanted nothing to do with her at the moment.

As soon as Bdubs stopped in front of her store, Etho knew he had made a mistake. Stress and him weren't on bad terms or anything, but the fact was that Stress herself wasn't really a fan of the organization she found herself in. She had basically found the HQ by accident, and when cornered by Grian was forced to join. She was a great asset, but Etho could tell her heart wasn't in it.

The door chimed in a pleasant tune as Bdubs held the door for him, Etho looking around the store desperately in hopes that she had some random employee working. No dice, since he could hear Stress yelling about something in the back. "Dude, you look like you've seen a ghost. Stress is not that scary." Bdubs whispered, giving him a weird stare that had Etho wanting to crawl out of his skin. Actually this whole moment was making him want to turn and ditch town. He should've texted the whole resistance, not just Grian. Impulse probably knew, but there was no way Stress did. She would see right through him and Etho didn't know if she was still bitter enough from being forced to help them to rat him out immediately. Maybe he had time to-

"Bdubs! I'm so glad you're here, love!"

He had just enough time to intertwine his hand with Bdubs and offer some squinty eyes as Stress came around the corner. Bdubs looked at him with surprise.

To her credit, Stress only looked mildly shocked before schooling her face back to normal, offering the couple a head tilt and a more than questioning smile. "And you are?"

Thank the Coders.

“Etho.” He said warmly, offering his free hand which she took, eyes screaming that he would have to explain sooner than later as he nodded once.

“My boyfriend.” Bdubs said casually as Etho felt his own shoulders tighten. He really was going with that for everyone they met? Etho had said that more as a joke, a tease, but clearly *someone* didn’t take it that way. They were really doing this, that's fine. Totally fine. Stress raised her eyebrow, amusement starting to shine through as Etho closed his eyes.

Yep this really was his life, wasn't it?

“Oh really!” Stress clapped her hands together, enjoying the predicament Etho had found himself in. “How did you meet?”

Oh shit. Etho glanced out of the corner of his eye, only to meet Bdubs own stare. So neither of them had thought about this, great.

“It's a funny story actually.” Bdubs finally said, hand squeezing in Etho’s own, like he was trying to signal him to say anything. “He gave me half his sandwich.”

Okay, not bad. Stress just nodded, sitting down on the counter and resting her head against her hand. “He said he didn’t like spinach, but ate almost all of it without taking it off.” Etho awkwardly added, jumping back as Bdubs took their interlocked hands to hit him on the chest.

“Hey! Just because I was distracted!”

Etho felt a smile crawl on his face at the loud response. “And what were you so distracted about?” Etho let himself purr out, watching with fascination as Bdubs face grew an interesting shade of pink. “See something you like?”

Bdubs immediately tried to wrestle his hand out of Etho's grip, mumbling something incomprehensible under his breath as Etho chuckled. It was too easy sometimes. Not letting go of his hand, the two of them twisted around as Bdubs unsuccessfully tried to free his hand. "...You and your stupid pretentious mask and gloves and-"

"You think my mask is *pretentious*?" Etho managed to get out as Bdubs elbowed him in the side, a resulting 'HA' coming out of the other man until Etho forced the other man into a headlock. "What's pretentious the the literal *cloak* you run around in-"

There was a fit of giggles coming from the counter, both Bdubs and Etho looking up from the weird headlock situation they were in to see Stress trying to hide her laugh behind her hand. Suddenly remembering they were in a public place, a public place with a high profile politician, Etho let his arm drop off the other man quickly. "You guys are cute, don't worry about it." Stress laughed again, waving her hand around in the air as Bdubs brushed himself off. He sent a glare towards Etho, one that didn't have any heat in his eyes before nodding at something Stress.

Etho wouldn't lie, he was lost after that. He tried to pay attention to whatever the two of them were saying, but again, he wasn't very knowledgeable about all this. Stress seemed to have everything under control, so it was probably more of a check up than anything important. She did keep sending him looks over the papers that Bdubs had shown up with, but Etho was really good at ignoring looks.

What he wasn't good at, was ignoring random shadows that kept passing by the windows of the store. Bdubs and Stress were clearly engrossed in whatever they were talking about, leaving Etho to his own devices. He was already poking around the store, surely they wouldn't mind...

Grinning, Etho wrapped his arm around Bdubs shoulders, tugging him close and interrupting the conversation. "I'm gonna go get some fresh air. Are you gonna be okay in here?"

You don't sense that something is weird?

Rolling his eyes, Bdubs flashed Stress a smile before forcibly removing Etho's arm. "I handled myself for years without you Etho, I'll be fine."

I'll take that as a no.

Etho left the store, walking around back before making his way up to the roof. It was a pretty rickety staircase leading up, but Etho was light enough on his feet that it barely moved. Just like he thought, two figures stood on top of the building, far enough away from the stairwell that Etho couldn't make out what they were saying. Ducking behind an AC vent, Etho finally was able to get a good look at the two of them.

Blue hair, a little shorter than Etho originally thought when he first got a glance at him. His head was surrounded by floating stones, each glowing a pale green. Clearly, some type of magic user then. The other man-

Was Ren?

Etho's eyes widened. Was this just some resistance recruitment that he wasn't aware of? Ren was usually down in his lab, not out in the open like this. Etho knew for a fact that the HEP organization knew Ren was part of the resistance, meaning there was a major target on his back when he went out of the base.

"What if Grian finds out?"

That was Ren for sure. Etho scooted closer to the box, straining to hear more. The other man laughed, something calm and unnerving at the same time. "Then he finds out. It really comes down to if you're more scared of Grian," There was a pause, Ren's breath hitching. "Or me."

Ren was in a tough spot then. The dog-hybrid in question let out a tense laugh of his own. "It's more about avenging Martyn, if I'm being honest dude."

There were more words exchanged, but all Etho could focus on was the fact that somehow, *somehow*, this all rounded back to his dead roommate again. Apparently Etho and Martyn did

run in the same circle, or at least an overlapping one. This was all too much information for just him, he could use some back up. Worrying his bottom lip between his teeth, Etho quickly pulled out his comm to message Grian when a shadow fell over him.

“And who might this be?”

Just his luck.

Chapter End Notes

don't expect the next chapter as quick- i've been on a writing frenzy since getting this idea but idk how long it will last or exactly where the story is going. writing Etho was much more serious(?) then writing bdubs and i'm not entirely happy with it but that's not the point with this fic since it's. just. stress. relief. (Thats a reminder for me lmao) I usually have a beta for my other fandom so its kind of weird to get done writing a chapter and just being like "whelp, lets send it to the wolves" but its kind of fun too!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

nothing really new in the tags, just an update about characters and the magic realism tag I forgot in the beginning haha

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

Something was happening on the roof of the flower shop.

Bdubs knew, because he had fantastic deduction and reasoning skills.

That, and there was a really loud thud.

“Woah, what was that?” Stress asked, looking up from her bouquet with a small frown. Her and Bdubs were miles away from the original reason he had come here, the two of them just chatting by now after Etho left for some fresh air. Bdubs knew it wasn’t just for air, but whatever his fake pretend boyfriend did wasn’t his issue.

But it did sound like fighting. Which...was kind of his issue.

Because if it was Etho fighting off people trying to kill *him*, then it was a problem. It meant that Scar was right, that Martyn was actually a pretty important person they killed and that Bdubs was now a target. But that didn’t make sense. Martyn lived with Etho for months here, there was just no way he was important to the gangs out south of their town.

He hoped, at least.

Either way, Etho wasn’t back and there was another loud thud, followed by a curse loud enough that Bdubs could hear it. Stress looked at him with wide eyes, arms now crossed as she bit her bottom lip. “It sounds like fighting.”

Nodding, Bdubs reached for his comm. “Yeah, I’ll call the police and-”

“No!” Bdubs jerked back as Stress froze, her smile plastered on her face as he tilted his head. “I mean, we don’t need to do that.” Her fingers twitched back towards the bouquet as Bdubs slowly started to put his comm back into his pocket. “It’s a rough part of town. Besides, what if your boyfriend is fighting? I don’t know Etho at all, but I’m sure you wouldn’t want him to get arrested, right?”

Bdubs really couldn’t think of a better way to end his day than getting Etho arrested, but contrary to popular belief, he knew how to follow orders. And Scar was very adamant about keeping Etho around. Nodding once, Bdubs quickly collected his papers from the counter and stuffed them into his bag. “You’re right, he’s got a sharp tongue. He probably just mouthed off to the wrong people.”

Stress snorted, like she knew what he was talking about before offering a shrug. “I bet. Tell Scar I’ll have the flowers all ready for the gala.” The two of them said a few more niceties before Bdubs left the store, looking around the entrance before letting out a sigh of his own.

No Etho in sight.

That meant he was on the roof. Really, Bdubs should use this time to ditch the guy, since he seemed so confident that he could protect both him and Bdubs. To be fair, the guy said the warden was ‘pretty weak’ this morning at breakfast, so maybe he could.

Walking around back, Bdubs quickly jumped behind the dumpster as the sound of a magic user zipped through the air. Bdubs only recognized the sound since Scar sometimes let his Vex side out when they were alone, but to hear the sound out in the open was surprising. Magic wasn’t illegal, but some people still had reservations about magic users in general. It was why Scar kept his glamor up, why Bdubs just had a ‘really good’ green thumb.

Looking up, Bdubs eyes widened as a portal was flung open, a man with a red floating rock crown and a bloody smile pulling at the edges to make it wider. What kind of magic was that? The other side of the portal wasn’t somewhere he recognized, the world on the other side much more colorful and almost iridescent in the way the air looked around it.

Bdubs stepped out from the dumpster, trying to get a better look at whatever was going on before stepping right on a plastic bag. Eyes met eyes, the man freezing for a moment before recognition flooded them. It took Bdubs a minute more, but as soon as he realized who it was, his blood ran cold.

Scott.

It was like his feet were moving on its own, Bdubs tucking and rolling as Scott reached out a hand, a ray of light like a laser shooting past and cracking the wall behind him as Scott retreated into the portal he opened. There was another sound of magic, the portal no doubt closing up as Bdubs groaned. Scar was not going to be happy that Scott made an appearance before the gala. The gala was supposed to be a peace meeting, so this interaction was definitely not the best start. There was a louder groan from the rooftop as Bdubs brushed himself off.

Etho fighting against Scott was not going to be pretty.

It wasn't like he was worried about the other man, but fighting Scott was never easy. Climbing up the stairs, Bdubs froze at the top of them as he took in the scene.

The rooftop used to be much more organized, if Bdubs memory was correct. Now, the little chairs and tables were trashed, an entire electrical box now ripped out of its spot and sparking ever so often. At the very edge of the building were two men, one clearly pinning the other to the floor as Bdubs let out a sigh of relief.

Etho was alive.

He was alive, and pinning someone to the ground with an impressive amount of strength.

Wolf hybrids were very strong, something that scared a lot of people. But Etho clearly didn't mind, calmly muttering something under his breath to the other man who was slowing his struggling to a stop. Wait a minute...was that-

“Ren?” Bdubs heard his voice call out. Both Ren and Etho startled, the hybrid immediately starting to struggle again as Etho refocused to keep him down. Stepping closer, Bdubs took in the damage.

Etho clearly got the brute force of Scott attacking, skin burned from the light and eyes zapped of energy. There were clear bite marks on his shoulder where his jacket had been ripped open, a few claw marks fresh and bleeding on his arms from when he was struggling to get Ren under him.

All expected, after a fight.

What was more weird to Bdubs was the fact that Etho didn't seem winded at all, his breathing completely normal. It was like the other man didn't realize he was bleeding, that his energy had been purposely zapped. He just kept his grip on Ren, words Bdubs wasn't listening to still coming quietly out of his mouth as the hybrid calmed down once again. “Nice of you to show up.”

This asshole.

“It sounded like you had it covered.” Bdubs bit back, stepping up to the two of them as Ren struggled for a moment more before slumping into the concrete. Clearly the other man was much more affected by the energy draining than Etho, his ears folding down on his head like he was finally giving up. “I'll call a clean up crew and the cops pick him up.”

“What?” Etho ripped his head up from where he was looking at Ren to give Bdubs an incredulous look.

Bdubs matched his disbelieving look. “I said I'm going to call the cops. To arrest a wanted criminal of a government resistance.” Etho's eyes darted from him to the man underneath him, like he was still confused about what was happening. Sighing, Bdubs patted his shoulder. “Ren is a wanted criminal, remember? And you caught him?”

“No, I didn’t *catch* him, I was just-” Etho stopped talking, jaw tensing under his mask as Bdubs waited. “Whoever was shooting rays of sun and magic is the guy we should be going after. Not Ren. he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“And you know Ren personally?” Bdubs questioned, leaving his hand on his shoulder as Etho glared up at him. Scar was pretty sure Etho was some grunt worker that didn’t know much of the higher ups in the resistance, but Bdubs wasn’t so sure. The way he was acting around Ren told him differently. “He’s resistance. You seem to know him.”

“Only his name.” Bdubs tightened his hold on Etho’s shoulder, only to release it once the other man let out a hiss. They really should get some regen on him sooner than later. Ren groaned again, clearly still out of it as he jerked once before settling back down. “It’s not a fair fight if you take him in now.”

Something was up. Etho didn’t seem to have any regrets with leaving the resistance for more money, but now that they were faced with an actual criminal, it was a different tone. Staring at him, Bdubs felt his resolve start to crack as Etho grinned at him through his mask, eyes crinkling just slightly like he knew Bdubs was going to break.

Maybe he did.

“Besides, me being the one that caught a resistance leader doesn’t look so good on the government’s part, does it?”

“I mean, we’re all about fair fights.”

It was like those were the magic words. Etho relaxed, Bdubs kicked his leg lightly before turning around. “I’m leaving. I got paperwork back at the office that I gotta do before a committee meeting. Ten minutes.”

He could picture Etho nodding behind him, though he didn’t check before he made his way down the stairs. Void, what was happening to him? He was a headstrong guy, usually. It was... weird that he wasn’t with Etho. It was like something wiggled into his brain after that first night and now...

He couldn't keep doing this.

Pulling out his phone, Bdubs sent a silent apology to Etho before opening his messages.

[tango]

Got someone on the roof of the flower shop that you'd like to find. Give the guys ten minutes, hes not going anywhere soon. Here's the pin

“How's that for quick?”

Bdubs jolted back as Etho jumped over the last portion of stairs, clearly not caring for his ankles as Bdubs cringed at the popping sound they made. “I don't know, I didn't time it.”

Letting out a short gasp, Etho was quick to intertwine their fingers before they stepped out into the main street. “I can't believe you didn't keep up with the bit. Always keep up the bit, Bdubs.”

“Is that the strat?” Bdubs asked, giving Etho a once over as the man nodded seriously.

“That's the strat.”

Bdubs couldn't help the laugh that came out, or the way he let Etho lean more on him since it was like he could feel how tired the other man was. In the back of his mind, he knew that Etho had only gone up on the roof because he sensed something was wrong, effectively doing his job in keeping Bdubs safe. “We need to get you some more clothes.”

Etho looked down at himself before shrugging. “I don't look too bad.”

Raising an eyebrow, Bdubs tugged him closer. Just to keep him balanced. “You look like you’ve been mauled by a bear.”

“Yeah, but I’ve been told I look good in blood so...”

“Whoever told you that is a liar.”

Etho chuckled, taking the offered extra support without complaint as they made their way to the town hall. It would have been almost nice, if Bdubs didn’t stop to think about why Etho was hurt, or why they even knew each other in the first place. “Thanks for that, by the way.”

Bdubs narrowed his eyes. “You’re the one who fought those guys. I should be saying thank you.” Not that he was going to.

“Thanks for not ratting Ren out. Wrong place, wrong time you know?”

Oh.

“Don’t get sappy on me now. Who knows if someone else will find him.” Bdubs tried to say casually, hoping the tone of voice he used would hide the immediate guilt that had flooded his chest as soon as Etho said thank you. “You really look like shit, by the way.”

Again, it was just another low chuckle as they reached the front of the town hall. “Yeah, yeah. I get the hint. I’ll go patch up. See you around.”

Etho let go of his hand, Bdubs forcing himself to not complain about the immediate heat loss he was now suffering from as the taller man tucked his hands into his pockets. “Where?” Bdubs found himself asking when he realized Etho was being serious about leaving.

“What do you mean ‘where’? My apartment probably still has some stuff in it, unless your dirty police force cleaned it out.” Bdubs didn’t warrant that quip with a response, hands already reaching into his bag to pull out his keys.

He was really stupid, wasn’t he?

“Don’t bother. I got stuff at my place.” Holding out the keys, Bdubs watched with mild amusement as Etho looked at the keys confused. “What, you’ve never seen house keys before? Or just never locked a door?” After all, it was easy to get into his apartment the first time, Martyn not ever pulling out keys before they walked in. Bdubs rattled the keys again. “Come on, my house is closer anyways. You can come back faster this way.”

Rolling his eyes, Etho took the keys from his hand before turning around. “Don’t take anything!” Bdubs called out as Etho started to walk away. “I know where you live!”

There was a loud snort, Etho raising a hand with the keys wrapped around his middle finger. “You know me, ten minutes or less. Don’t miss me too much.” Bdubs scowled as the man mumbled something under his breath, too far away for Bdubs to hear as he watched him disappear out of his line of sight. It was quiet, well, as quiet as a city street *could* be as he stood there looking at the spot Etho just was.

“Now *this* is a fascinating turn of events. And in one night? You really do work miracles BdoubleO.”

Flipping around, Bdubs ignored the fear curling in his gut as he glared at Scar. He wasn’t afraid of Scar. Scar really was one of his closest friends. They were in this together, business and political partners till they got voted out or until their crime caught up with them. But that was the problem.

Scar was always thinking one step ahead.

Which was fine, until he forgot you on that step.

Bdubs had seen it before. Their group used to be bigger, used to be stronger. But every so often, Scar got a crazy idea that would take a miracle to work. People would leave, or they wouldn't, and someone always had to take the fall if the plan didn't work. So far, only him and Tango have been able to keep up with him.

Tango was a genius. It pained Bdubs to admit, but it was true. He was loud, abrasive, full of opinions that sometimes made sense and sometimes didn't, but he could get away with it because of what he could do. His building was impressive, his red stone even more so, and his willingness to get his hands dirty were all winning qualities. He was just as crazy as Scar and Bdubs. It was an easy choice to make him police chief after Scar became mayor.

Bdubs was what Scar called a 'miracle maker.'

He didn't know how much he agreed with that.

It wasn't like he was trying to make miracles happen, but he could see Scar's reasoning. Anytime he was around, Scar's plans seemed to work that much more. Just a little better than it could've if he wasn't around. Sure, Bdubs would accept all the compliments to his building skills and leadership, but he knew the truth. He was Scar's good luck charm, something linking them through magic, and there was no way Scar was going to leave him behind now that they both knew the truth.

And that...that was scary.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Bdubs shook his head clear, earning a loud laugh from the mayor as the two of them headed into the hall. The diamond throne sat proudly in the foyer, people coming and going as Bdubs felt his shoulder relax. He knew his way around the environment much more than one on one. Especially one on one with someone who seemed to be collecting more and more secrets every second.

How did Etho withstand that many injuries without fainting? How did he seem to know what was going on around them before Bdubs did? Why was he so calm and cool and annoyingly annoying but also convincing enough to make Bdubs give him his house keys and-

“You got a very love-sick look on your face.” Bdubs shook his head again as Scar turned in circles in his desk chair. They had somehow made their way into Scar's office during his zone-out, Scar now spinning even faster before catching himself on the desk edge to offer a shit eating grin. “Or maybe it's just constipation.”

He really didn't want to do this right now. “Once again, have no idea what you're talking about-”

“You're crazy dude!” Tango busted in then, his smile wide and almost unhinged as he launched himself at Bdubs. He didn't have time to react, Tango landing right on him and bringing the both of them to the ground of the office. “Ren? You send me a casual text about someone on the roof of a flower shop and its *Ren*? My guys have been trying to get him for *months* !”

“Get off me, you're heavy as-”

“You caught Ren?”

The two of them looked up from the floor where Scar was looking at the two of them with an amused expression. As if he just realized Scar was there, Tango launched himself off of Bdubs body, taking over the seat he was just in as Bdubs scowled at him from the ground. “Yep! Got him booked and in a cell as we speak!”

Scar looked impressed, which wouldn't do since Tango didn't do anything. “You only got him because I told you where he was- DID YOU JUST STEP ON MY HAND YOU-”

“So this is what government officials do on taxpayers dollars. Good to know.”

The room seemed to freeze as Bdubs turned towards the door frame, an amused Etho leaning against it. How much did he hear? Scrambling up to his feet, Bdubs ignored the snicker that came from Scar and the confused noises coming from Tango as he pulled Etho back through the door and closed it. “How'd you get up here?”

“Used a window. By the way, your security is really bad.”

“I- the security isn't- give me my keys.” Bdubs fumbled over his words, finally just reaching out for the key ring still hanging around Etho’s middle finger. The man was the most childish-

“I hope you don't mind, I made a copy of them down at the Barge before I came back.”

Bdubs was going to kill this man.

Bdubs knew he was giving him a shit eating grin under his mask. He knew it. He was almost tempted to pull it down, just to be sure, but the sound of Tango getting closer to the door to spy on them made him stop. “Since I’ll be staying for a while.” Etho added on, since Bdubs still hadn’t said anything.

“That’s fine.” Bdubs said through clenched teeth. Etho’s shoulders moved like he was laughing, even though there was no sound coming from the other man.”Did you hear anything?”

“Not really, just a bunch of screeching and you losing a fight. Very disappointing. Thought you were better than this.”

Thank the Coders. Bdubs felt his shoulders relax as he put on an aggressive mask. “I was letting him win, I totally can beat him one on one.”

“Sureeee.”

Bdubs grinned before turning away. “Believe what you want, I know I could. I actually have stuff to do so-”

“Can’t a boyfriend visit every once in a while?”

There was a pause as Etho raised an eyebrow, eyes barely flicking to the door where it was clear that Tango was listening in. This day really couldn't get worse. "You don't need to visit me at work when we live together."

There was a tiny gasp from the other side of the door.

Okay, this *was* kind of fun. Bdubs struggled to keep his smile contained as Etho let out another one of his silent laughs. The door clicked open, like Tango wanted to get a better look at Bdubs new boyfriend.

Etho was quick, grabbing his wrist and pulling him closer, making Bdubs lose his footing and having to balance himself on Etho's chest. He felt his eyes go wide as Etho leaned down, close to his ear. "Pretend I'm saying something either really romantic or sleazy, your choice. Really, this is me telling you that I'm going to work, so you're on your own for a few hours. And that I took the last of the milk you had in the fridge."

Bdubs could barely focus on the words, Ethos breath hitting his ear and eyes baring into him as he pulled away just slightly. It would be so easy to pull that damn mask down and-

"You're awful." Bdubs managed to croak out instead of acting impulsively. Etho's eyes crinkled, leaning even closer.

"And you're flustered."

Oh Coders, Bdubs was going to explode. Pushing the other man away, he earned an actual laugh from the other man before he caught his wrist again. "Etho, I swear to the void if you don't go to work-"

"What, no goodbye kiss?"

This man was *asking* for a slow death.

Bdubs rolled his eyes, trying to act unaffected, even though he was sure that Etho could feel the way his heart was beating out of his chest. If Etho wanted to be a pill, Bdubs could play hard ball. “What, no goodbye kiss?” He mocked, wrapping his arms around Etho’s neck and watching the man's mismatched eyes widen. Shaky hands rested lightly on his waist. “You gonna let me take off your mask to kiss you?”

The hands tightened.

The mask hid most of his reactions. But there was still a bit of blush peaking over the top of it, the tips of his ears flushed. Bdubs had...successfully made Etho flustered.

Maybe he was winning.

“I really need to get to work.” Came the cracked reply, like Etho hadn’t drank anything for a while and was now having a hard time talking. Bdubs just smiled, something definitely smug mixed in as Etho looked at his right ear, not him. “I’ll see you after?”

“Yep.”

Neither of them moved.

Then, Etho leaned down, tilting Bdubs face up slightly with one hand before kissing just the corner of his mouth through his mask. It was quick, nothing special, more of the fabric brushing his face than the outline of the other man's lips- but it was there. He could still feel the outline, the way it was definitely a choice, not an accident.

Etho pulled away, humor dancing in his eyes along with something else. It was tense, like Etho was waiting for his next move while Bdubs was waiting for his brain to come back online.

Fine, Bdubs would say this one ended in a tie.

Offering a reassuring grin, Bdubs knocked his head into Etho's chest before taking a step back. "You're gonna be late."

"Eh, I'm my own boss." Bdubs raised an eyebrow as Etho shoved his hands in his pockets, looking oddly satisfied for something that definitely ended in a tie.

"Really?"

"Really." Etho started to walk towards an open window, Bdubs realizing that he *wasn't* kidding about how he got into the building before turning back towards him. "I'll bring you some time. It will be like "bring your boyfriend to work day." You'd be great at pest relocation."

"I'd be the best at any lame job you gave me."

Etho laughed again, sitting on the window sill before offering a sarcastic salute. "See you tonight." Bdubs didn't blink as he watched the man lean back, basically rolling out of the building. Quickly walking over to the window, because he totally didn't run, Bdubs rolled his eyes as Etho looked up at the window, totally fine after a fall of three stories.

Add that to the weird things about Etho.

Bdubs turned around from the window, closing and locking it before walking back to Scars office. The door was closed again, a half-hearted attempt to make it seem like Tango wasn't listening as Bdubs took a deep breath in. The door barely clicked open before Tango started.

"I thought we were *best friends* -"

“I never said that-”

“And best friends are supposed to tell other best friend when they’re dating someone as famous as Etho-fucking-Slab!”

What?

Tango actually looked upset, but not for the reason Bdubs thought he would be. Famous? Etho wasn’t famous. If he was, Bdubs would’ve known before killing his roommate. “Etho isn’t famous Tango.” That was Scar, who looked just as confused as Bdubs felt. What was Tango going on about?

“Maybe not to you guys,” Tango said, waving his hand around like they were the stupid ones in the room. “But in the red-stone community, he’s a legend.”

Blinking back in surprise, Scar pulled out his computer, no doubt to research the guy more thoroughly. “I’m surprised you don’t know this Bdubs, since you seem...close.” Tango faded out awkwardly as a flush came back on Bdubs cheeks. He already forgot about that whole ordeal outside.

“He doesn’t really talk about his past that much.” Bdubs mumbled.

Tango nodded, clearly a little star-struck as Bdubs pulled up a second chair. “That seems on brand from what I know about the guy. Never taking credit, real humble.” The room lapsed into silence for a moment before Tango let out a small gasp. “You should bring him to open mic night on Thursday!”

Oh hell no.

“I literally can’t think of a worst thing to bring him to the open mic night.” Bdubs said deadpan as Scar snorted.

“I think it's a good idea. Besides, you know Cleo will be pissed if you don't introduce him to her soon.”

Ooo, Cleo. Bdubs hadn't even thought about how Cleo was going to react to all of this. Tango offered a grin towards Scar before it turned more smug in Bdubs direction. “I won't even question you on how you met and how long this has been going on behind my back if you come.”

“We both know you're only saying that because Cleo will do it for you.”

“Exactly!” Tango said happily as Scar shut his laptop. “Thursday, seven. You know where.”

Of course he knew where Bdubs had built the damn shop/bar in the first place. Scar sat up, the decision clearly made up for all three of them as Bdubs sighed. Getting Etho there was going to be a pain in his ass. “So, tell me about Ren.”

Scar had focused back on the serious side of things, Humor draining out of Tango's eyes before he sat up straight. Bdubs shook his head as Tango began to talk, saying that Ren was pretty beat up on the roof of the flower shop, sun beam burns now being healed up as he was taken to a cell. Bdubs knew his meeting with Scar would be at a different time to get the full story. For now, the two of them listened to Tango's story before he left to fill out some paperwork. Then-

“You work fast.”

“I'm not doing anything wrong.”

Scar smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. “I know Bdubs. Just...be careful. There's a lot more to Etho than we originally thought.”

Bdubs nodded absentmindedly, hands clenched in his lap at the hypocrisy of it all. Scar was the one who made him partners with Etho in the first place, and now he wanted him to be careful? There was one thing the two of them agreed on though.

Who exactly was Etho Slab?

Chapter End Notes

Is this less of a cliffhangers??? I totally didn't realize I was doing this till you guys pointed it out- also I've never been good at writing fight scenes, and I realized that this fic is going to have those in them so I guess we will see what happens with that lol

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Etho's a normal guy- just...don't ask about his past. or pasts. Whatever.

Chapter Notes

heyo! this one took longer and kind of ends abruptly but I needed to end bc of pov switch lol- also tag changes are adding cleo and joel, and sadly taking out stress bc i felt bad tagging her for her not to be in it that much

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

Etho thought he was a pretty normal guy.

[grian]

Ren is missing.

He was *just* a normal guy mixed up with a lot more problems than he originally thought he had.

Etho read the three words over and over again as Bdubs fiddled around in the kitchen. It had been three days since the fight on the roof happened, and no more answers had come to light. And believe him, he had tried. He went around the resistant base, walked around the locked MooPop factory. Checked Ren's house and the nightclub he was a bartender for. He even went back to the flower shop to see if Ren was still there. Nothing.

Bdubs was acting weird too. Not that his fake boyfriend wasn't already weird, but even more weird than usual. Talking fast one minute, going quiet the next, something was clearly wrong. Was the not-really-a-kiss too much? Maybe he should dial it down for a while. Etho sighed,

looking down at the message another time before shutting off his comm. He would continue the search for Ren soon.

He had other things eating at him now.

“You weren’t being serious about me going to the…” Etho waved a hand around as Bdubs turned to look at him, eggs now cooking faster than Etho thought Bdubs realized. They were totally going to burn, and Etho would laugh while Bdubs complained about how he distracted him and the two of them would eat them anyway.

It should be scary to know someone this well after only living with them for a few days.

Speaking of that, Bdubs did hold true to the fact he would leave the key to the basement to Etho. He was clearly upset about him making an actual house key, but didn’t seem too keen on making him give it up. He even let Etho make some minor changes to the downstairs to make it more homie.

It was…nice.

This was nice.

It couldn’t have come at a worse time though, this whole friendship/domestic act they had going on. Etho had a missing member of the resistance to find, he had governments to lie too and people to scam. He really didn’t have time for whatever this was.

“Am I serious about what?” Bdubs asked, finally noticing the burning egg smell and quickly shutting the burner off. “I’m always serious!”

Snorting, Etho stretched his legs out under the table, silently cursing at the way Bdubs clearly built it at a height for him, not for tall people. Bdubs placed a plate in front of him. “Don’t you dare complain about it being burnt, it’s your fault anyway for distracting me with your stupid open ended statement questions you never finish!”

Predictable.

Still, Etho couldn't help the small laugh, the way he took off his mask slowly and ignored the wandering eyes of the other man. He knew it was a matter of time before Bdubs asked about the scarring around his mouth. He just hoped he could think of a logical lie before then.

"I know you don't want to go."

Etho looked up in surprise as Bdubs moved the eggs around the plate sadly. "It's not that I don't want to hang out with you or anything like that." Etho offered, even though he didn't really know why.

No, he didn't want to go to whatever open-mic-night was. He wasn't good with crowds in general, that was the whole reason he sneaked around in the first place. Besides, Etho knew that if he went he would be meeting most if not all of Bdubs friends, which also happened to be major government officials and other probably law abiding citizens. Not really the right vibes for Etho.

But Bdubs was giving him such a sad look, barely touching his very burnt eggs while letting out quiet little sighs like he couldn't keep them in. Was this what it was like to have a puppy? Something you couldn't ignore because of how cute and/or pitiful it looked? "I mean..." Etho rubbed the back of his neck as Bdubs head shot up, eyes big and glossy.

This wasn't fair.

"I could...come for a moment." Etho finished with a sigh. Anything to get that awful face off of his...whatever he was. "It doesn't sound like the worst thing I could be doing tonight." On his only day off he gave himself. The day he was going to look for Ren and meet up with Grian and-

"Perfect! We meet there at seven but we can just go together since I'm introducing you as my boyfriend." Etho shook his head as he looked at Bdubs again.

Did he just get tricked?

Bdubs eyes were completely dry, grin wide as he shoveled the eggs into his mouth at an almost alarming speed. There was no sign of sadness anywhere on Bdubs, the man even having the audacity to reach for Etho's plate with the intent to steal his eggs. "Are you serious?" Etho asked with a laugh, pulling the plate back from Bdubs wandering fork.

"Is that the only question you can ask?" Bdubs questioned back, letting out a happy noise as Etho pushed the plate back towards him. This man was going to be the death of him. "Once again, I'm always serious."

Maybe in a different universe, Etho would even let him kill him.

"Of course, I just forgot."

"Bet you're getting dementia, old man." Bdubs said wisely, like he knew Etho's age or literally anything worthwhile about him. Which gave Etho a horrible idea.

"You seem to know a lot about me, but I don't know anything about you."

Bdubs looked up from Etho's plate, cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk. He swallowed as Etho felt his comm buzz with a message. "I don't see why, I'm an open book."

Etho raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Really. Ask away, I'll answer dead honestly."

Bdubs seemed confident. Maybe a little too confident, but it was an invitation. "Favorite color?" Etho finally asked, startling a laugh out of his counterpart.

“You’re so weird dude.” Bdubs commented, leaning back in his chair. “I give you free range to ask me any question and you ask that?”

“Hey, you can know a lot about a person from what their favorite color is.”

Etho put his mask back on, adjusting it as Bdubs just laughed again. He had a nice laugh, if not a little loud. “Sure, I’ll bite. Green.”

“Oof. Green’s not a very creative color.” Etho grinned at the face Bdubs made after that comment, standing up and taking both plates to the sink to wash them.

Again, predictable.

“Okay hotshot, what’s your favorite color then?”

Turning on the water, Etho focused on the plates instead of the other man. “Hey now, I didn’t say *I* was going to be an open book.”

“Wa- That’s not fair!” Bdubs immediately shouted back. “I’m over here, pouring my heart and soul out to you and you just get to sit back and not talk?”

“Oh, I’m sure telling me your favorite color was super distressing for you.”

“It was, thank you very much!” Etho rolled his eyes, hiding his smile as well as he could as he placed one dish on the drying rack. It was a nice start to his mornings, he had to admit. Simply, much better than an alarm clock.

“Sorry for causing you psychological problems then.”

“You should be.” Etho didn’t look at him, but he could hear the smile in Bdubs voice. “We should go to that burger place for lunch today, I have this coupon book that's going to expire.”

Etho placed the other plate on the rack, turning off the water and wiping his hands before turning back towards the other man. “I actually have stuff I’m doing today, so you’re on your own.” The disappointment was clear on the other man's face as Etho cringed. He was never very good at letting people down, usually choosing to just reluctantly accept whatever the person wanted or somehow convince the other person to go with him instead. Sadly, his plans for today weren’t the most government official friendly. “But I’ll be back before six. So we can still go together.”

Bdubs had the puppy dog eyes back, but this time they didn’t feel as forced. Void, this was so stupid. Grian would probably laugh at him for feeling bad about this. “Bdubs-”

“Its fine, it’s not like I enjoy hanging out with you anyways.”

Oh? He was going to be all defensive about it?

He was crossing his arms, shoulder tight but relaxed as he looked at Etho with forced indifference. Maybe if the guy was a better actor Etho would’ve believed him. “You gonna stay safe?” Etho asked, earning a scoff that was more believable than he was ready for. Maybe Bdubs was getting better at this whole lying thing.

“I’m always safe, you’re the one that comes home with all the little scraps and bruises and busted elbows.”

Raising an eyebrow, Etho crossed the kitchen to where Bdubs was now standing up. It was funny that he would point that out, since Etho was only getting into fights because of him. Protecting the man was a full time job. Whoever was after him was pretty persistent. The amount of time he spent reporting crimes and running away could've been spent running his own business, but some sacrifices had to be made. Like, spending unreasonable time at his store during the middle of the night when Bdubs was sleeping. Etho knew Scar had police watching his house during the night, something the two of them had talked about to give him

a bit of time to recuperate but the police could only do so much. And as much as Scar had faith in his business partner, he couldn't argue the fact that Etho had been much more successful in keeping him alive than his force.

“Careful, I almost thought you cared about me for a second.”

Etho waited for the quip back, something denying the truth like usual as Bdubs reached for his hands. Etho offered them willingly, confused where this whole interaction was going. “Who wouldn't be? Your hands look like shit.”

Oh.

Looking down, Etho forced the feeling of...something back down his throat as Bdubs turned his hands palm up. Paper thin cuts covered the majority of his skin, front and back. But that wasn't due to the job Scar had him doing. That was just...

“You don't have to worry about that Bdubs!” Etho tried to say, putting a little bit more pep in his voice to hopefully hide the fact it was wobbling. “That's just from work.”

The grip on his hands grew tighter. “This is from your job?” Bdubs looked up with him, clear disappointment on his face as Etho tugged a bit. No luck, Bdubs just continued to hold on. “What are you doing that makes your hands like this?”

Like Etho said before, it was nice that they had formed a weird sense of domesticity when they were alone. That being said-

It was terrifying.

Etho was scared shitless every time Bdubs got this certain look on his face, like he could see through every wall and act Etho had put up. Like he knew his past, like he wanted to be part of his future, no matter how bleak it was turning out to be. “Glass.” Etho answered honestly, flinching at the way his knuckles popped at how tightly Bdubs had gripped onto his hands.

“Sorry.” Bdubs mumbled, relaxing his grip. Etho couldn’t breath, the feeling of tenderness was too much for him. “You wear those pretentious gloves for a reason then?”

“I don’t wear them when working, they get in the way.” Etho mumbled, taking his hands from Bdubs and stuffing them in his pockets, just in case the other man tried to reach for them again. Just in case he tried and Etho decided to give them over again. He felt the fabric of the gloves in between his fingers.

Bdubs was clearly not impressed, jaw tight like he was trying not to yell as Etho turned towards the door. “Wear them today?” Bdubs offered once Etho had reached the front door. The two words “for me’ were left unsaid, but it was heard.

Holding up his hands, which were now covered by the half gloves, Etho nodded. “Got 'em covered.” He reached for the doorknob before pausing. “Green is my favorite color too, by the way.”

He could hear the annoyed laughter for what felt like a mile after.

.....

You know, for an organization that was so keen on killing Bdubs for killing one of their members, they sure could’ve spent more money on that member's headstone.

Not to say it was bad or anything, and a grave that can identify you was good enough in Etho’s book, but it was kind of...plain? Something that Etho wouldn’t expect the other man to want from the limited interactions he had had with him.

Etho sat cross-legged on the newly planted grass, a light breeze blowing and running through his hair. It was quiet, as a graveyard should be, but the air seemed to whisper just enough to unsettle him. “This is so lame.” Etho whispered, tucking his hair behind his ear.

Obviously, the stone didn't answer.

“Did you know what would happen when you died?” Etho asked anyway, staring at the stone. Whatever font they used was pretty, Martyn would probably like that at least. “You seem smarter than that. You seemed...sorry you died for me, I guess.”

Etho continued to stare, marking the imperfect edges of the stone and ways it seemed to dent in and out. For the amount of wind whispering was going on, it sure didn't say much. Closing his eyes, Etho tried to listen harder.

“Do you think the wind speaks to you?”

Etho looked over his map, giving a curious look to the only other person that seemed to want to talk. The green stripe in his hair always distracted him, not that he was very good at eye-contact anyways, but it still felt kind of weird.

“Sorry?”

The man snorted, walking across the floor to look at the map. “How Canadian of you.”

Etho shrugged, but offered the other man a tense smile. “Runs deep.” He handed the map over to him, clearly not using it himself as he thought about the question. “If the wind is talking to me, then I don't know what it's saying.”

His friend, if you would call him that, tilted his head before letting out an uneven laugh. It was grating on the ears, something too loud but too soft before he hit him on the back too hard. “You're a weird guy Etho. Real weird.”

It wasn't a compliment. It might have even been an insult. But there was a smile on his coworkers face, and honestly? That was something sparse around them. “Says the guy who thinks the wind is talking to him. I would say you're the weird one Joel.”

Etho grinned, knowing his mouth was now stretched a bit thin from the way Joel's eyes suddenly trained on it. "You ever thought about a mask?" Joel suggested. Again, rude, but at the same time it was a suggestion Etho hadn't thought about.

"Shouldn't people know what they're getting into from the beginning?" Etho asked as he leaned over his shoulder.

Joel offered a lopsided grin, nudging his shoulder before pointing at a random island. "Shouldn't you hide it to surprise anyone attacking?"

*Etho blinked a few times, Joel basically staring into his soul before another smile started to spread. It felt unnatural on his face, something a little too unhinged, something almost skin breaking as Joel's eyes darkened. "I think that is a **very** good idea."*

"You often fall asleep in graveyards or is this a one-time Etho thing?"

Etho opened his eyes, back now against the grass as a face leaned over him. The shadow was bigger than the actual person standing over him, his wing span covering most of the area around him as he offered a knowing grin.

"Grian."

"Etho." The avian pulled back, letting Etho sit up as he moved to lean against the gravestone. "How've you been?"

"Don't tell me this is a house call." Etho jokes, watching as Grian read the gravestone.

His face twisted, something complicated in his look that he gave back to Etho. "Don't have a house for me to visit." The man's feathers ruffled in the breeze, head tilting before he clicked his tongue. "Find anything worthwhile while listening?"

If there was anyone Etho would say understood him, it would be Grian. Not really that he understood him even, but...something like that. Neither of them talked about their past, neither of them asked. Any weird quirks like Etho's wind listening and Grian's monthly disappearances where he came back with more purple feathers were quickly discarded as such. Nothing too weird for the other, past and present stayed hidden unless it was something they needed to talk about.

There were a few differences, Etho knew. Grian knew too much at all times, always seemed to know where he was and what he was doing. Whatever Grian was or what he did definitely had more magical powers at play than Etho scamming people out of money.

Yet Grian never scared him. If anything, it was almost refreshing to have someone constantly over his shoulder, always watching over him. He was never alone, no matter if he wanted to be. The downside to having Grian as a close friend was-

“So, have you kissed that government employee yet or did you chicken out?”

That.

“I feel like you're forgetting this is all a cover.”

“I feel like *you're* forgetting this is a cover.” It wasn't even said accusingly, just like a fact almost as the avian sat down and leaned against the headstone. Etho looked down at his hands, fiddling with the string of his gloves as Grian sighed. “The opportunity you have is-”

Etho looked up, effectively making Grian stop talking with a glare as the breeze seemed to speed up. *I'm not going to be able to listen if you speak fast.* Etho thought at the wind bitterly. The wind just kept blowing. “I'm working on it.” Reaching into his pocket, Etho pushed down the guilt he felt as he tossed a third key ring over to the other man. Grian caught it with ease, raising an impressed eyebrow at the amount of keys. “All access to the town hall. Front hall, Scar's office, you name it.”

Etho could admit to himself there were a few keys missing. There was no reason Grian needed the house key, right?

“I knew I could count on you.” Grian chirped, eyes filling with mischief as he looked at the ring before making it disappear in the palm of his hand.

Etho didn't ask.

“How'd you get them, if you don't mind me asking?” Grian spread out his wings, the wind seemingly bending to his will as it slowed down. Once again, Etho pushed away the guilt as he laid back down on the grass. Martyn was probably rolling in his grave, the person who he got killed for literally doing business over his decaying body, but Etho just added it to the reasons he was going straight into the void after he died. “Your little boyfriend give them to you?”

“Hey now.” Etho found himself saying, Grian holding out his hands in mock defense as Etho sighed. “You could say that.”

The breeze was unnaturally warm, Etho thought as he closed his eyes again. The comment was something Joel would've made fun of him for saying. All wind and air felt the same, he claimed. Etho thought it was just him trying to be contrary. It wasn't close enough to summer for it to be this warm on his face, just slightly uncomfortable in the way it hit his cheeks. “You find anything on Ren?” Etho asked after he realized that was all he was going to get out of focusing on the air.

Grian didn't say anything for a moment before letting out a long breath. “Nothing you'll want to hear.” Sitting up, Etho swallowed the panic settling in his gut as Grian offered a smile. His smiles never seemed to meet his eyes. “Heard you got a hot date tonight though, so I won't bother you with the story. Now that I have these,” Grian jiggled the keys that were suddenly in his hand. “We'll have Ren back before you can get your first kiss, lover boy.”

Etho didn't like the reasoning behind that. He also didn't say anything. If he was picking up what Grian was implying, then it meant the cops got to Ren anyways, even though Bdubs told him he wouldn't rat him out. And Etho really wanted to believe Bdubs.

“I’m going to ask you to never refer to me as that again.”

“I’m going to decline that request, the face you made was funny.”

Etho scowled, but he knew there was no heat behind his eyes as Grian stood up and offered a hand. “I don’t need to kiss him, I just got to make sure he stays alive for these three weeks.”

He took Grian’s hand, even though he did most of the work of standing up. “Well, would it kill you to be a little less good at your job?” Grian asked, Etho letting out a chuckle at the response. “What? The pity project you picked up as been a pain in my-”

“Hey now, Bdubs hasn’t done anything to you, Grian, and you know it.” Etho cut him off good naturedly. Grian *pouted*, but didn’t say anything as the two of them started making their way to the exit of the graveyard. “Besides, he’s not as bad as I thought he was going to be. I mean, he’s reckless for sure, but not as much as Scar made him seem. I think the mayor was just worried I wouldn’t take the job.”

Grian’s face had fallen after Etho had mentioned Scar, which was as predictable as it was funny. Whatever happened between them definitely went farther back than Etho was willing to listen to, and it ran deep. Impulse had once said they acted like exes, which...Etho could see. Really messed up exes. Speaking of Impulse...

“What’s he up to recently?” Etho didn’t feel the need to elaborate who he was talking about.

Grian just shrugged. “Collecting mycelium if I had to guess. I don’t really keep tabs on him as much as I do the others.” The words not said were clear though, in the way Grian’s wings twitched and fingers twisted in the fabric of his sweater.

Impulse didn’t get watched as much because Grian trusted him more.

“Hey,” Grian pulled Etho out of his head with a hand on his shoulder, mouth in a tight line as they reached the exit. “It’s only three weeks. Less now, since you’ve already been doing this

for a few days. Impulse and I trust you, even if you're doing the whole..." Grian waved a hand around like it explained whatever was going on with him and Bdubs. "I think it's good for you. Maybe you'll finally relax."

Etho scoffed, bumping his shoulder into Grian. "I don't think you can preach anything about relaxing."

The two stood silent for a moment more, just then and the breeze before Grian grinned. "Wanna do something illegal later?"

Etho glanced at him, but the avian wasn't looking at him but past where he knew the MooPop factory was standing. Shaking his head, Etho knew Grian could see the smile even behind the mask.

"Give me a time and date."

.....

Etho knew that Bdubs thought he was being weird. It made two of them, since Etho thought Bdubs was being weird as well. He was hovering almost but not quite, like the man didn't want to be but couldn't help himself from doing it. If Etho was in the kitchen, Bdubs was in the dining room. If he was in the living room, he was just around the corner. Going to take a shower took Etho physically telling him where he was going before Bdubs backed off.

Etho also knew he *was* being weird. He got back around five, took a very quick shower, avoided eye contact as Bdubs tried to be inconspicuous about his hovering. It wasn't Etho's fault. He didn't know if Bdubs called the cops anyway after telling him he didn't or if it was a coincidence. Either way it left a weird feeling in his gut whenever he looked at the other man, so he just...didn't. Which then made Bdubs follow him more. *They* were now in the basement, since apparently Bdubs decided that it was fine if he came into Etho's personal space he had carved out for himself as Etho looked over the clothes he brought from his apartment.

Sadly, he really didn't know what the 'open-mic-night' dress code was. Bdubs hadn't changed that much, maybe combed his hair more, but Etho also wasn't looking at him due to the previous points made. Mind made up, Etho just grabbed a black cut out shirt before finally facing Bdubs. "Turn around if you're gonna follow me around. I gotta change."

The tone of voice was strained. Great.

Bdubs didn't comment on it, just looked down at the ground as Etho pulled off the tee-shirt he had thrown on when he heard Bdubs thundering down the stairs earlier. God, this shouldn't be so awkward. It wouldn't be, if Etho felt more balanced. This whole day just felt flat, from visiting Martyn to talking with Grian and-

"Ren is in holding right now." Etho's jaw tightened as Bdubs played with the edges of his sleeves. "But I figured you found out about it since you're being such a-" Etho raised an eyebrow at the stop, Bdubs eyes flicking back up before darting back to the ground. "Put on a shirt dude! I'm trying to talk here!"

"You're the one trying to have a conversation while I'm half naked." Etho immediately responded, watching the embarrassed flush grow up to Bdubs ears. "Did you tell the cops?"

"No!" Bdubs ripped his head up, eyes wide before they immediately shut. Coders, Etho couldn't believe this was the guy that somehow got Martyn to take him home. "You got to believe me, I didn't message or tell anyone. Wrong place, wrong time, like you said!"

Etho felt his angry lift, just a little. Bdubs seemed genuine. And really, he was right. Ren wasn't that lucky of a guy. It really could've just not been his day. Still, Bdubs could use some light teasing. "Hmm, why don't you look me in the eyes and tell me that again?" Etho stepped closer, his grin spreading on his face as Bdubs shook his head. "Why not?"

He had to admit, it was probably more mean than it needed to be. Bdubs was clearly flustered by him, but it was just fun. "I'm not having this conversation till you have an appropriate amount of clothing on."

"What qualifies an appropriate amount of clothing?"

“Oh you-” Bdubs ripped open his eyes, pupils dilating almost immediately as he realized that Etho was standing right in front of him. It was easy, Etho absentmindedly thought as he nudged Bdubs chin up to meet his stare. It was easy to find the right rhythm with Bdubs, no matter what emotion they were acting on. “You’re a menace.” He croaked out.

Etho shrugged. “You call the cops on Ren or not?” he pitched his voice lower than normal, watching for the shiver to run down the others spine like he had seen on so many other people.

It did, but instead of pulling away in fear or apprehension, Bdubs eyes just darkened.

That was new.

“I didn’t call the cops on Ren.” Bdubs stared directly at him, jaw set with determination. Etho could feel the others hand wrapped around his wrist, pushing his hand holding the shirt into his chest. “We’re going to be late.”

Neither of them said much of anything else.

They were halfway to the coffee shop before Bdubs grabbed his hand, hesitantly intertwining their fingers. Etho could feel the rest of his anger melt away. Bdubs probably felt back that Ren got caught after they left. Well, probably not, but Etho could pretend. He continued to look forward, but offered a single squeeze. Bdubs responded with two.

They were good then.

The coffee shop wasn’t packed, but it sure wasn’t the pleasantly empty store Etho was secretly hoping it would be. “How many of your friends are we meeting again?” Etho cringed at the hesitation clearly leaking into his voice.

Bdubs laughed, shoulders relaxing as he tugged him along. “Only like, three or four.” Etho nodded slowly. “I already told them you were coming though, so who knows if more will show up just to meet you.”

“Goody.” Etho deadpanned. “I should have you meet my friends.”

“If I met your friends, I’m pretty sure none of them would be a fan of me.”

Etho thought about Grian. “You would be correct.”

Bdubs let out a scoff, shaking his head while mumbling something about how everyone liked him before rolling back his shoulders. “Whatever, we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. You remember our story, right?” Etho nodded, checking the area before Bdubs jerked an elbow into him.

“Ouch! Why’d you do that?”

“Because you’re not here as my bodyguard, you’re here as my boyfriend.” Etho rubbed his side while letting out a sigh. “Cleo is going to see right through you if you act like that!”

Etho felt the air get punched out of him.

Slowing to a stop, Etho vaguely registered that the two of them were standing outside of the coffee shop now, soft music flowing through the closed doors as he struggled to breath. Was he cursed? Did Martyn do something to him before he died to make it so every single thing that could go wrong with the mission would? Bdubs was saying something, but it was like Etho couldn’t hear him through all of his brain fog.

He looked up, (but when did he look down?) eyes drawn inside the store due to the glass door. There was someone playing a guitar on the stage he could barely see, people talking and listening around him. There was a line for coffee (At this late at night?) but the barista

didn't seem stressed at all. She looked like she was joking around, a small smile on her face as she glanced up.

The cup promptly slipped out of her hand as the two of them made eye contact.

The shatter was loud enough the two of them could hear it outside, Bdubs going to see what the noise was before Etho grabbed his face in both his hands to keep him looking at him. Cleo was walking around the counter faster than Etho could keep up with, Bdubs was giving him attitude, and the only thing that could make this moment worse was if Joel was behind him with a knife.

"I'll give you three 100% honest answers to any question, *I promise*, if you don't kill me after I do this."

Etho knew his words came out fast, but he really didn't have time for Bdubs to decipher them as Cleo reached the front of the building. He refocused on his partner, whose lips were parted slightly as he stared up at him. "Please." Etho asked again, watching simultaneously as Cleo pushed open the door and Bdubs eyes darted to his mask.

"Well, you gonna kiss me or not?"

"Etho-"

He leaned in, barely realizing Bdubs hands coming up and pulling down his mask as he watched Cleo's eyes widen with hostile realization.

It was quick, not the first kiss Etho would've liked with the other man if he really thought about it, but it was enough to calm the rising vomit that was threatening to come out as soon as he realized who Cleo was. Bdub's pulled back first, a sheepish grin on his face as he pulled the mask back up. "Deal." Bdubs whispered under his breath.

There was a loud noise, Cleo clearing their throat before Bdub's even realized there was someone else outside with them. He flipped around, tugging on Etho's arm to get him to

stand next to the shorter man as Cleo raised an eyebrow. Etho couldn't even offer anything back. "Cleo! This is Etho, my boyfriend!"

The laugh Cleo let out was hollow, something Etho was well acquainted with as Etho closed his eyes. "Etho, this is Cleo. It's a little weird, but Cleo and I used to date before we decided to just be friends."

Etho tilted his head. How *nice* of her to become friends with someone after they dated. It was like Cleo could read his thoughts, since her scowl grew. "Etho." They said shortly.

"Cleo." Yep. It was tense. Even Bdubs could feel it, the man rubbing the back of his neck before Etho offered his hand. "It's been a while."

Cleo took it, grip too tight to be friendly as she gave a half smile. "You could say that."

"Oh, you two know each other?" Bdubs piped up, eyes flooding with concern as Etho let his hand drop.

"Yep."

"Far too well."

Neither of them expanded on the thought, clearly content in keeping under obvious wraps as Bdubs switched his look between the two of them. "We're just gonna...Do this, all night?"

Cleo let out a sigh, shoulder forced to relax as Etho tried to do the same. "Etho and I...used to date too."

"Obviously it didn't end as nicely as you two if you're still friends."

"Well, Bdubs didn't try to kill me, so there's that."

“I mean, is it an attempt if it was to stop *you* from killing *me* ?”

“Only the last time! I know you were trying to kill me ages before then.”

“Yeah right! Like how I knew you were trying to poison me with rat poison in my drinks for months!”

Bdubs head looked like he was watching a ping pong match. Cleo’s jaw tensed, Etho’s hands curled into fists before a gust of wind blew through the air.

“What does it say tonight?”

Etho could barely focus on her words, just the way her hair seemed to be a halo on the ground surrounding her head. The stars were so bright over their heads, the universe was endless, and the world was theirs, if they wanted it.

“It says...” Etho pause for dramatic effect, earning a deserved eye roll. “You should forgive me for over spending the budget this month.”

“ETHO!”

...

Forgive.

“It was paranoia.” Etho finally supplied, to the surprise of both Cleo and Bdubs. “It was a lot of things adding up, but mostly paranoia and the lack of communication.”

The air always felt too still after it spoke. Cleo seemed to realize what happened, mouth opening to fight with him again before it shut. “We...both had problems. We’re both better off now anyways.” She settled on as Bdubs shoulders relaxed.

Etho hadn’t realized how tense he was. It was almost like he actually wanted his friends to like Etho. He pulled the smaller man into his side, wrapping an arm around his shoulder before shooting a grin he knew Cleo could understand even without seeing it. “Now, you don’t know that. Unless you’re keeping tabs on little ol’ me?”

“Just as annoying as before.” Cleo rolled her eyes, but started leading them into the shop. “I think everyone’s heard about hotshot redstoner Ethoslab by now. Though, I do hope we can fight one of these days. For old time sake.”

Etho felt his face grow tense. How many people knew the different versions of himself? Why were all of them showing up now?

Bdubs made a curious noise as Etho cringed. “Why would you want to fight Etho? Other than...apparently trying to kill you?”

Cleo just smiled, holding open a door. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell him.” Etho shook his head as Cleo’s grin grew more sinister. “Etho here used to be a PVP champion.”

Bdubs head whipped around to stare at him, mouth dropped open as Etho closed his eyes. There was a shout from inside, definitely sounding like the police chief if Etho was hearing right as he gave a tiny jazz hand. “Surprise?” He offered weakly.

“First red stone, now PVP?” Etho cringed as Bdubs raised an eyebrow. “Well, I know where two of my questions are going.”

Etho decided Joel being behind him wouldn’t have been that bad

Because this night was already shaping up to be even worse.

Chapter End Notes

That felt like a monster to write lmao! I know this chapter creates more questions than answers, but everything will be reveal sooner or later! some feed back for flashbacks would be nice. was the italics okay? Did it make sense that it was something from the past? the reception for the last chapter was so kind btw, thank you! hopefully I'll have the next one out soon!

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Using his magic really wasn't Bdubs forte.

The guy attacking him didn't seem to care though.

Chapter Notes

Hello! tag changes today include adding Jimmy and adding the void.

Fun!

Also, just as a reminder, this fic is rated T, BUT has the fun little "graphic depictions of violence" warning on here.

So, you know.

There is violence.

Anyways! Enjoy the fic!

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

This night was going just as good and as bad as Bdubs thought it would.

Bad because he predicted Cleo wouldn't like Etho. He didn't know she and him had dated, not that that helped his case, but more because he didn't think their personalities would mesh well. But who knew, since they dated, so maybe opposites attract?

It was going well with Tango though, just like Bdubs thought it would. Etho was clearly still on edge since he was talking to the literal police captain, but throughout the night he seemed to relax a bit. Scar hadn't shown up yet, but Bdubs wasn't really expecting him to. The only people missing from their little group were Cub and False but they also mentioned they were working on something till late.

“So, what’s really going on here Dubs?”

Bdubs looked back across the counter to where Cleo was wiping her hands off on a towel before she leaned against the counter. “What do you mean?”

“What’s going on with you and Etho? Don’t try to act stupid now, we both know the guy has had a rough time.”

Bdubs almost opened his mouth to say no, he didn’t know because he knew the bare minimum about his boyfriend, but stopped himself in time. “So he has a few rough edges, so what?”

Cleo just shrugged, pushing over a cup of tea instead of coffee. “Nothing. It’s just a weird time to get a boyfriend.” There was almost a knowing look in her eyes, something dangerous lurking underneath as Bdubs took the cup. “As long as the two of you are happy.” It was almost raised as a question, Cleo obviously trying to get him to tell them the real story and offering a way out.

“I think we can be.” Bdubs answered instead, turning his head to where Etho was sitting. Tango was gesturing wildly, voice a bit too loud for the shop as Etho nodded along. Apparently, Tango had even brought some blueprints for some building that they were looking over, Etho pointing at it before mumbling something under his breath. He looked relaxed for once, eyes crinkling as Tango once again went off on a tangent. The lighting in the shop made his hair look softer than it probably was, eyelashes longer. It was like he was frozen in the moment, eyes flicking back down to the paper as Tango started writing on it.

It was nice.

He looked really nice.

“Oh Dubs...” Cleo followed his line of sight, a type of smile on their face that was kind but almost cruel in the way it twisted. Bitter? Cautionary? “He’s got you good, huh?”

“Huh?” Bdubs reply absentmindedly. Etho looked up at that moment, eyes meeting him before they crinkled even more. Void, direct eye contact was intense. Etho jerked his head, a tiny action enough to release a whole batch of bees in Bdubs gut.

Cleo sighed, tapping his hand to get his attention. “Be careful, is what I’m saying, Bdubs.” Bdubs blinked, turning his attention back to her as he drank the rest of the tea. It was kind of cold, which was embarrassing since that meant he was staring for longer than he thought. “Etho...tries. It’s not his fault that the past follows him. But that doesn’t have to be your future.”

Placing his empty cup down, Bdubs tried to make sense of what Cleo was talking about. “I don’t understand-”

“Bdubs, are you going to spend time with your boyfriend or can I kidnap him for a moment?” Both of them looked up as Tango and Etho made their way to the counter, Tango basically dragging Etho along as the other tried to clean up the table they were vacating.

“What do you mean kidnap? He’s here with me!” Bdubs asked, looking at Etho who just offered a shrug in turn. He ignored the snort from behind the counter. “This is like, the only day he’s off!”

Tango legitimately pouted, rolling up his blueprints as Etho wrapped an arm around Bdubs shoulders. “He just wanted to show me the place he’s putting up the new building. Sounds pretty cool man, your redstone is practically perfect. It looks like you just need to stop doubting yourself and go for it.”

Tango immediately started to deny the praise, only stopping once Etho raised an eyebrow. It was clear to Bdubs that Etho was just messing around, but maybe not to others? Bdubs tried to stay calm as Etho’s arm slid down to his waist. “You got one scary boyfriend, Bdubs.”

“Like some kind of attack dog.” Cleo added on, grinned at whatever face Etho made back at her that only the two of them could decipher. Bdubs ignored the twist in his gut.

“Nah, he’s more like a rabbit than anything else.” Bdubs found himself saying, ignoring the way Etho lightly cuffed him on the back of the head. “Gotta move slowly or he gets startled and runs off.”

The group laughed as Etho rolled his eyes, but didn’t deny the accusations. “Calling all units to 34th street-” Tango fumbled with his radio as Etho’s arm tensed. “-Winged man, explosives on the edge of the jail-” Tango responded, giving a guilty smile as he stood up to leave. Etho’s arm didn’t relax.

“That’s my que to leave.” Cleo quickly made him a cup-to-go as Tango threw his blueprints into his bag. “It was great meeting you man.”

Etho looked at the hand Tango offered, eye glinting an almost...red tint before it returned to normal. “Yeah, for sure.” Etho shook his hand, reaching for his pocket before pulling out his comm. “I’ll come see the building if you want to give me your info.”

Bdubs didn’t have a good feeling about this. Tango however, looked ecstatic, giving over his communication information before sending a message for Etho to have his. Cleo raised an eyebrow at his reaction, but Bdubs really didn’t have an answer. He wasn’t jealous that Tango got Etho’s number before him. That would be stupid, and Bdubs wasn’t stupid!

He would just bother him for it afterwards.

Etho watched Tango leave the building, fingers digging into Bdubs side until he was out of sight entirely. Then, like the man realized what he was doing, relaxed his grip. His thumb absentmindedly rubbed circles where he had just barely dug in like an apology as Bdubs struggled not to melt into his grip. Cleo was clearly still keeping an eye on them for the rest of the night, even after they claimed a booth for just the two of them to listen to the bad jokes and mediocre music. Cub and False did come later, Etho introducing himself just as charming as Bdubs was hoping he would.

Something was wrong.

One, because Etho wasn't making fun of him. Which, he knows, is a weird thing to think, but it was true. Usually when Bdubs messed up talking, Etho had a quip back, or even just a subtle jab that was more funny than mean. This Etho was quietly polite, which was fine when Cub and False were visiting, but it felt stagnant when it was just the two of them.

Two, Etho's eye. Bdubs swore he wasn't waxing poetic, something was different about his eyes. More specifically, the one with the scar over it. Sure, Bdubs always thought it was slightly discolored, but it was more than that. The red? Probably a coincidence, something with the lighting.

The purple?

That was weird. That wasn't something that could naturally occur.

At least, with Bdubs knowledge. It once again routed back to what little he knew about Etho. Void, he didn't even know if he was a hybrid. Maybe barely glowing purple eyes was just in his DNA. Maybe he could ask about it.

Bdubs was so lost in thought he barely noticed when Etho leaned closer, fingers that were playing with his own sliding up his arm and wrapping around his chin to force him to pay attention.

Oh.

He never noticed how much bigger Etho's hands were till there was one calmly sliding up his thigh. Etho grinned, eyes darker than normal (and more purple) as he leaned closer. "Is it okay if I go back to your bodyguard for a moment?" Etho whispered into the limited space between them. "Because portal guy and some other dude just walked in."

Bdubs shoulders tensed, and he didn't know if it was because of the fact Scott was here or because Etho was now gripping onto his thigh a little tighter than he was ready for. "Should we leave?" Bdubs managed to croak out as Etho relaxed his grip.

“That would draw attention to us more than just chilling here.” Void, he was right. Bdubs swore he could feel eyes on him anyways, probably more due to the fact Etho looked like he was five ticks from making out with him or killing him then anything else, but the eyes were still there. “Here’s what we’re gonna do.” Etho said after a few more moments, eyes tracking what Bdubs supposed was Scott before he looked back at him. “After I let go, I’m gonna need you to go order an apple cider tea. Cleo will know what to do with that. Just follow their lead.”

Bdubs wasn’t going to question it. Whatever past Cleo and Etho had that required them to have fancy code words wasn’t as important as leaving in one piece. He nodded, worrying his bottom lip with his teeth before releasing it. “What about you?”

The hand tightened. Bdubs most definitely didn’t let out a noise, because that would be lame. “Not your problem.” Etho finally answered, hand on the jaw moving to cup his cheek instead.

"What if I make it my problem?"

Etho didn’t even look surprised. “You won’t, because this is my job. Go talk to Cleo, I’ll be home either tonight, or tomorrow.”

“Why so long?”

“Why so needy?”

Anger filled Bdubs' gut as he covered Etho’s hand with his own, letting his fingernails bite into the other's skin. “Just make sure you get out safely.”

Etho barely flinched at the way Bdubs dug his fingers into his hand. “You’re laying it on a little thick there, babe.”

“Just worried about you, sweetheart.” Etho’s hand on his face jerked like he was burned, eyes widening for a split second before returning to normal. Bdubs watched his eyes flick back to where he guessed Scott was, his hand started to relax like he was going to pull away. Now or never, Bdubs guessed.

It was fast, Etho pulling away casually, pulling out his comm like he had gotten a message as Bdubs stood up on shaky legs. Luckily, Cleo was free, just whipping the counter off and doing precise things as Bdubs approached her. He could feel the eyes on him, he could feel the magic radiating from the corner of the room he was sure Scott was in. “I was a few seconds away from yelling at the two of you to get a room, you know.” Cleo said casually as Bdubs approached. “You looked about five seconds from-” Cleo cut herself off at whatever face he was making.

“I know you’re closing, but could I get an apple cider tea?”

His voice didn’t shake, point for him.

Bdubs would like to take the time to say he wasn’t usually this scared of a fight. When he had the information, he was unbeatable. But this was different. This was people actively wanting his head, this was powerful magic users sending hitman and eventually, themselves, to get rid of him.

Cleo’s eyes darkened, flicking to where Etho was sitting before looking back at Bdubs. “You owe me an explanation.” She whispered before clearing her throat. “We can see what we have in the back. I know someone returned a wallet earlier, walk with me.”

Cleo opened the latch as they gestured for Bdubs to go back into the employees only area. “Why would I order something when you’re gonna pretend like I lost something?” Bdubs asked as soon as they were out of ear shot.

She snorted, leading them past a set of doors and towards the back exit. “Because Etho came up with it.” Like that explained anything. Maybe it did, Bdubs didn’t know. She pulled out a set of keys, unlocking the backdoor from the inside. “I’m serious about you telling me the truth. Not tonight, but sometime soon.”

“What if I say that it was a government secret?”

“I would call bullshit.” Cleo cupped his cheek, offering a small smile. “I’m just worried about you Dubs.”

The warmth that spread in his stomach was quickly extinguished as there was a loud yell from the store. “Message me when you get home, okay?”

“Got it.” Bdubs quickly pressed a kiss to the palm of her hand before they pulled away. “Be safe.”

“That’s my line.” Still, Cleo grinned at him, something sharp in the smile before she pushed open the door. “Now get out of my store.”

Bdubs closed the door as soft as he could behind himself, the automatic lock filling him with a sense of dread as he took in the cool air. He should hurry to the town hall, or maybe his house. Somewhere Etho can find him. However, those spots might also be main targets for him. Luckily, some police were stationed outside of each location-

Except they weren’t because of the radio call Tango go earlier.

Shit.

Bdubs eyes stung with how long he went without blinking. Shit, okay. So no police cover. The wind seemed to ring in his ears, shadows suddenly larger than normal. The sound of a wing flap, someone’s steps. He really needed to move. Quickly patting himself, Bdubs let out a noise of frustration. He left his keys on the stupid booth table and now he was locked out unless he went around front and-

“And who do we have here?”

Great.

Looking up, there was a shadow looming over him, wings stretched wide, barely illuminated by the single street lamp behind him. The one above Bdubs seemed to be out. "Come out into the light!" Bdubs called, hoping his eyes would adjust to the darkness sooner than later.

There was a light laugh, something almost familiar in tone as Bdubs tried to remember anyone he knew with wings. "Come on BdoubleO, no hello? You were just going to leave without saying hi?" The person swooped down as Bdubs quickly scanned the ground. A few weeds, four individual plants, not much to work with.

It was even harder to see whoever it was now that he was moving, the dark disguising him well as Bdubs moved away from the door. "Don't usually say hi to people I don't know. Stranger danger and all that."

"You willingly kill strangers though."

Scoffing, Bdubs slowly bent down to pick up a piece of wood from a broken box as the man stepped closer. "So you're one of Scott's lackeys." Bdubs spit out, trying to sound as threatening as possible as the footsteps stopped.

"You..." The shadow's head tilted. "You really don't know who I am?"

"Uhh, No?" Bdubs rubbed his forehead. "I wouldn't be asking who you were if I did."

The shadow made several noises, chirps and whatnot like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. Bdubs' hands tensed on the board as the guy came into the light, hands positioned like Bdubs was being stupid as he felt his shoulders relax. "Oh. Hi Jimmy."

"Oh, hi Jimmy???" Bdubs struggled to keep a straight face at his reaction. "That's all you have to say?"

Bdubs let the wooden board fall to the ground with a shrug. “I mean, i was ready for a fight with one of Scotts guys, not his-”

“I’m his second in command!”

“Not his lapdog. Or...lap-bird.” Bdubs finished, watching as Jimmy’s mouth fell open like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. It was mean, sure, but something at Bdubs considered the truth. Jimmy didn’t really specialize in anything, he was just kind of there in the record system. The hybrid seemed to have a tough upbringing, petty crimes that the police didn’t bother trying to get him on. He wasn’t magic, as far as Bdubs knew, just had some pretty bright yellow wings.

Bdubs couldn’t figure out what someone like Scott saw in him.

In any case, his file had made it back to the front of the line over the past years, him frequently being at places where major crimes were committed, though the police could never catch him on anything. Tango was really the one suffering, since the chief couldn’t get a solid hit on him. It was like some version of cat and mouse, or in this case, bird and blaze.

Bdubs was jerked out of his thoughts with a gust of wind, Jimmy’s wings flicking back and forth just enough to cause a stirring in the air. Agitated, was the word Bdubs would pin on him, feathers ruffled. “...And I’m tired of people not seeing me for what I am!”

“I’m sorry, what?” Bdubs actually did feel guilty about zoning out during Jimmy’s rant. Clearly, his comment wasn’t as well received. Jimmy once again fell quiet, this time mouth clenched tight as the wind picked up again. “I didn’t mean to-”

“Shut up.”

What? Jimmy had never...he was never aggressive. Tango once said he was someone you couldn’t help but like, because of how pitiful he could be. Bdubs was inclined to agree. Shut up? Scott must have done something. Bdubs walked even closer, eyes drifting to where the

hybrid's hands seemed to be shaking. "Jimmy, let's talk." Bdubs put his hands up complacently, like he was trying to calm a small child as Jimmy's jaw tightened. "I can call Tango over and we'll get you out of this. Whatever Scott's got you on, we can get you out."

The resulting laugh wasn't what he was expecting. It was high pitched, grating to his ears as the streetlamp above them suddenly lit up like someone took a torch to it.

Oh.

This wasn't his Jimmy.

Purple ooze seemed to leak out from the bottom layer of his wings, dripping to the ground with a sizzle as it *burned* through the cement below. His jaw seemed to relax as Bdubs eyes widened, splitting into a grin that had Bdubs freezing in his place. His eyes burned black, like they were endless and unforgiving as he stepped closer still. Bdubs lowered his hands.

Weeds were better than nothing.

"You can call your little police chief over here if you want." Jimmy's grin grew somehow, teeth almost glowing in the light. "I doubt either of you could take me."

"What did Scott do to you?" Bdubs stepped back, his back hitting the cafe door as Jimmy's eyes swirled with purple.

"Who said it was Scott?" Jimmy raised one hand, the ooze dripping off his wings suddenly flowing upward, coating the entirety of them before covering his arm. "Enjoy the void."

Bdubs was moving before Jimmy finished the sentence, diving onto the ground and ripping one of the weeds out of it. Pain shot up his arm as he landed, barely sparing a look at where Jimmy was shooting the liquid out of his hand and into the door where he was just standing.

The void.

The door melted away, but instead of burning a hole into it like Bdubs had expected, it left a hole of...nothing in its place. A pitched black dripping circle of nothing, something that if someone fell into would be end game. Jimmy let out another laugh, this time sounding like it echoed through the alley as Bdubs scrambled to stand up.

“What, afraid of falling?” Jimmy called out, raising his hand again as Bdubs crushed the weed in his hand, whatever life force that was stuck in the plant now flowing through him. The avian shot again, Bdubs quickly shaking out his hands before letting out a deep breath.

He was a little out of practice.

Gritting his teeth, Bdubs focused his energy on one of the weeds still rooted in the ground, and forced it upwards. The dandelion shot up, roots growing 100x its normal size as it cracked the cement below the two of them. Stumbling, Jimmy shot aimlessly. The ooze hit to the right of him against the back wall, the splatter going across the giant stem of the and making it wilt. Pain blossomed against Bdubs shoulder.

He didn't have time for talking, as much as Bdubs wanted to make a smart ass remark like the others had. Now that his feelings were linked with the plants, it was only a matter of time before Jimmy realized and used that to his advantage. Climbing over one of the massive roots, Bdubs quickly, grabbing ahold of the crabgrass growing in the crack of the building before another deep breath. He was going to have to call out of work, that's for sure.

The grass grew taller, roots once again disrupting the ground as Jimmy found his footing. “You sneaky little-” Bdubs didn't hear the rest of the insult, sending the grass towards the bird like whips, hooking one of the blades around the avian's ankle and hoisting him into the air.

Quicker, he had to be quicker. Sending four more blades, Bdubs forced Jimmy's hands behind his back before wrapping his palms as tightly as he could with the plant. The other two grass blades weaved against his wings, keeping them against his back as Jimmy struggled.

Honestly, Bdubs didn't think it would work. If the void ooze could go through doors and walls, there was no way it wouldn't be able to melt plant life, even if it was giant size. But the more Jimmy struggled, the more Bdubs realized it was over.

It still hurt like a bitch though. Every attempt to get out was a strain on Bdubs muscles, a cut against his skin. He barely could make it to the wall to steady himself as Jimmy continued to struggle. "SCOTT! SCOTT!" Jimmy started to yell, adding a headache to the list of ailments Bdubs was currently growing. "SCOT-"

"He's not coming. Went through a portal about ten minutes ago."

Bdubs opened his eyes at the familiar voice coming towards them. When did he get on the ground? When did he close his eyes? Bdubs blinked a few times as Etho came into view, the man crouching down over him and moving his face from side to side like he was checking out the damage. Jimmy had grown quiet as Etho nodded once. "Nice fight."

"Told you I could handle myself." Bdubs managed to croak out, the dandelion shaking from the effort it took. Etho glanced in between them before letting out a deep breath.

"You're a piece of work, you know that right?"

"What do you mean he went through a portal?"

Etho turned his head towards where Jimmy was stuck, standing back up straight and placing his hands in his pockets. "I mean he went through a portal ten minutes ago. Without you."

It was silent, save Jimmy's rough breathing and Bdubs quiet sounds of pain. "I don't believe you." Jimmy finally said, determination in his eyes as Bdubs felt his own heart hurt for him.

"You don't have to believe me." Etho said with a shrug, stepping closer to the man. There was a warning on the tip of his tongue about the void ooze, but he couldn't find the strength to talk. It didn't seem to matter, since Etho just glanced at the void in the door before looking

back at Jimmy. “Rough landing? Or just a long fall?” It was asked almost like a joke, something only Etho would laugh at as Jimmy’s eyes suddenly cleared up.

Hearing Jimmy’s normal laugh was as relieving as it was weird. Etho took a step back as Jimmy’s laugh made the plants move, causing Bdubs to slump further into the wall. Seriously, his abilities were the *worst*. “*You’re* Etho!” Etho’s face dropped as Jimmy laughed again. “You? What are you doing working- working for-” Jimmy laughed again, the darkness in his eyes fading and leaving him looking normal again. “Oh Void! Joel’s gonna lose his mind!”

“You’re not gonna be able to tell him, because Tango is on his way now.” Etho basically growled out, nothing like Bdubs was used to. Jimmy just continued to laugh, weeds relaxing around him as Bdubs felt his connection to them fade. It wasn’t long until the avian tumbled out of the plants, Etho catching him easily and quickly shoving him against the wall, far too close to the void hole Jimmy had made earlier.

Jimmy stopped laughing.

“Not so funny anymore, huh?” Bdubs could barely hear Etho now, wishing and hoping he could get enough energy to move closer. “You’re not going to tell Joel *anything*, because if you do, I will personally make it so you will fall through the void till your literal skin is ripped from your already rotting bones. Got it?” Jimmy didn’t say anything as Bdubs watched Etho push his face harder into the wall, reaching down to grip onto the other man's wrist and move it closer to the void. “Do you understand?”

Bdubs eyes widened as Jimmy still didn’t respond other than a small whimper. Etho shrugged, pushing his arm into the void and making the man scream. “If you’re screaming now, wait till I push you in completely-”

“No!”

Etho jerked his head up as Bdubs struggled to his feet, freezing as the two of them made eye contact.

Purple.

His eye was definitely purple right now.

It was silent as Etho stared at him for what felt like forever before pulling Jimmy's arm back out. The man collapsed in on himself, Etho watching almost too casually before he let go of his arm completely. "Got it?" He asked again, watching the resulting nod with some kind of sick satisfaction as Bdubs took a step back.

Etho's eyes snapped up to him, freezing him again. It was like he didn't recognize Bdubs, the face of absolute neutrality as the sounds of sirens started to grow closer. "We need to go Etho." Bdubs struggled to get out.

He didn't respond. He didn't even blink.

"Etho, we need to get out of here." The sirens were getting louder, and even though he knew both him and Etho would be safe from jail, Scar would question Etho's current behavior and Bdubs didn't have an answer for him. *He's like a rabbit.* Bdubs reached for him, holding out his hand for the other to take as the first sign of flashing light started hitting against the walls. "Etho, we need to go *home*."

Etho looked down at the hand, almost like he was confused before the purple faded. "Bdubs?" Etho asked, voice cracking as he looked around the alley. "Bdubs what?"

"We had a really eventful first date sweetheart." Bdubs grabbed Etho's hand, pulling him towards him before starting to lead him toward the main street. "One I would love to tell you about once we are out of the way of the police."

He nodded slowly, mind seemingly still far away as Bdubs led them away from the alley. Tango was one of many there, but quickly diverted attention away from the two of them as Bdubs nodded at him. Thank the Coders for friends in high places.

Bdubs called out of work.

Clearly, the news covered the fight, with giant flowers ruining infrastructure and void holes showing up, but Bdubs left Scar to deal with the fallout of that. He barely woke up for that whole day (it was a miracle that he even got the two of them home in the first place) but he did remember some parts of it.

Etho was there, he knew that. It was like they reversed roles, Etho hovering or just simply staying in the room while he slept. He remembered the guy offering some kind of soup that smelt much better than it tasted, which really enforced the idea that Bdubs would be cooking for the foreseeable future when he stopped being so tired. Apparently, using your abilities that much after not using them for years has consequences.

There was something else he remembers. Etho basically scolded him while he was sleeping, Bdubs only hearing bits and pieces when he was awake. How he should've run like Etho told him too, that he really should listen to Etho more, or even just his body when it's telling him to rest. Bdubs thought it was a bit hypocritical, but didn't say anything since he was never awake long enough to speak his thoughts out loud.

Eventually, Bdubs finally cracked open his eyes, feeling energized enough to rub the sleep from them. Etho was sleeping in the chair next to his bed, once again looking more calm than Bdubs was used to. Bdubs watched the way his chest rose and fell, eyelashes spread across his cheeks like a fan, mask-

Mask in his right hand.

Bdubs was taught not to stare. It was rude, and Bdubs didn't really consider himself a rude guy.

He was staring.

He didn't know how he would ask, even if he wanted to. The scarring around his mouth was so...much more different than he could picture. It was like his mind couldn't figure out what

would cause that much, why it almost spread to his ears. Why some of the scars would stop and start, how one side just had one long one across his entire cheek.

If his most important question was ‘who was Etho?’ then his second question was ‘what was Etho?’

And why wasn’t Bdubs scared of him?

Etho had almost pushed someone into the void without remorse. He would’ve, if Bdubs hadn’t said something. Was that how he was with the three clean up guys? Was he worse? The Etho Bdubs had seen in the alleyway wasn’t the Etho he was getting to know.

“Your mother ever teach you it’s rude to stare?”

Bdubs shook his head, Etho stretching and groaning from his chair before sliding the mask back into place. “Your mother ever teach you that pushing people into the void is rude?”

Etho snorted, eyes flashing with something Bdubs couldn’t catch before he started to play with the edges of his sleeves. “Scar messaged me. I wasn’t aware he had my contact.” Etho didn’t sound angry, just tired as he let go of his sleeves. Did everyone have Etho’s contact except him? “Said you can’t come back till Tuesday.”

“Tuesday!?” Bdubs tried to sit up before the coughing started, an unfortunate side effect of using his powers so suddenly. “The gala is that Saturday! What does he mean Tuesday?”

Etho shrugged, slowly getting out of his seat and walking over to his bed. “I’m guessing it means that he’ll take care of it till you’re fully rested on Tuesday. Resting typically means low level activity. He said he’d bump it down to Monday if you stay in bed for the weekend.”

“I know what resting means you asshole.” Bdubs muttered. Etho was hovering again, like he didn’t know what to do with himself as Bdubs let out a long sigh. “What do you remember?”

He asked, pretending not to notice the way Etho's flinched at the question.

"I remember all of it now. Jimmy helped fill in the blanks when I went down to the station for a bit." Okay...Etho didn't add anything more than that, which was as frustrating as it was predictable. "Sorry. I'll let you sleep."

Bdubs didn't think before his hands shot out to wrap around the other's wrist, simply acting on impulse to stop the other man from leaving. Etho turned back to look at him, jaw tight under his mask as Bdubs struggled to form a single word.

Here's what Bdubs knew, for certain, about EthoSlab.

He was Canadian. He liked spinach on his sandwiches. His favorite color was green and seemed to own a lot of black shirts of various sleeve lengths.

He wasn't human. He seemed to know much more about magic and void than previously thought. He was in deep shit with almost everyone he was associated with and Bdubs was starting to think Etho didn't have any friends he could actually trust.

And for some reason, Bdubs trusted him.

He wanted Etho to trust him back.

Maybe it was self-preservation. He saw just how willing Etho was to kill someone just for threatening to spill an apparent secret. It would be better to be his friend than his enemy.

Maybe it was guilt. He had lied about Ren. Not that that was a big deal, but maybe it was still eating at him enough to want to gain the trust back, if it was lost in the first place.

But really, Bdubs knew what it was.

Because as soon as Etho made eye contact, as soon as he saw whatever face Bdubs was making, Etho softened.

And Bdubs didn't want anyone else to get that look directed at them.

“What can I do for ya B?”

Bdubs opened his mouth, then closed it before opening it again. “I'm cold.”

Blinking twice, Etho tilted his head with a tiny smile. “Okay...want me to bring you some more blankets?”

Bdubs just shook his head, willing his body or mind to work for at least half a second. Etho continued to stare, confusion falling over him for a moment till Bdubs finally managed to lift the blanket up.

It was interesting, watching the emotions in Etho's eyes.

Confusion. Clarity. Realization. Embarrassment.

“You sure, Bdubs?” Etho's voice sounded dry. Bdubs just tugged on his wrist, face feeling flushed. “I could really use some verbal communication here.”

Biting his lip, Bdubs swallowed once, then twice before finding the words. “Just get in here before I change my mind.”

It was weird, sharing a bed with someone you've only known for about a week or so. It was weird to feel the bed sink lower as they climbed in, weird as the two of you adjust so that you can fit properly.

It was nice too. It was nice to feel someone else's heat, their hand around your waist as they pull you into their chest. It was nice to close your eyes and just listen to the way they breath against your neck, lips close enough to kiss your skin if you just moved back a *tiny* bit more.

It almost made you forget about how awful your life was going at the moment.

Almost.

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry about Jimmy too much guys, he'll bounce back in no time/threat/hj

But actually, our boys are 'officially' halfway through Etho's contract with Scar! Exciting or heart breaking, only time will tell~

I'm starting to play around with the idea of bumping the rating up to M??? What do we think about that? I don't know if my writing is really M worthy, but I'm worried that I'm toeing the line a bit. Also, apologies about the fight scene, its not the worst thing I've ever written, but its sure not the best lmao.

I also made a tumblr but we're gonna have to give me time to figure out how to use it before I post it here bc I'm slow at tech. ANYWAYS, long note- again, apologies- but I'll see you in the next chapter!

(Thank you so much for your nice comments, they're a real motivator for sure!)

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Etho can't seem to run far enough.

Chapter Notes

TAG AND RATING CHANGES!!!

I bit the bullet and upped the rating to M. I still don't know if the fic really qualifies for the rating, but due to the direction it seems to be heading, it felt better to be safe then sorry.

We have the first POV switch that isn't in Bdubs or Etho's POV. It's also the first chapter that has split perspectives, starting with Tango and moving to Etho. I promise those will be limited, but it was needed.

also, added in the ranchers bc I physically can't escape the brain rot I have with them.

THIS CHAPTER IS MUCH MORE INTENSE THEN THE OTHERS. MAJOR PLOT LINES COME INTO PLAY, SECRETS ARE REVEALED, AND MINOR BODY HORROR HAPPENS- if you don't want to read that, I get it. I will have a very brief summary in the end note, though I can't promise I'll remember everything bc of the length of this chapter lmao, I really do recommend reading the chapter.

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

The thing with being a dirty cop isn't that you feel bad about being a dirty cop, you feel bad because you're *still* a cop, meaning you still have paperwork to do.

“Is he coming?”

Another thing with being a dirty cop, is that sometimes, the criminals that you arrest aren't really...criminals. Tango was on watch duty, which he would deny he willingly volunteered for if anyone asked, pretending to do paperwork on a clipboard as Jimmy looked at him impatiently. The two of them sat in an interrogation room turned magic user holding unit. The mirrored glass sat behind Tango, which meant that Jimmy could see what he was working on,

but it didn't really matter when it was Jimmy's paperwork in the first place. Jimmy Solidarity is someone Tango would classify as a not-criminal criminal. A rough circumstance will cause anyone to crack, Tango would know.

After all, most of his guys were in the same boat.

Probably not as intense as Jimmy and Scott though. Scott seemed to run his little gang of magic users with a tight thumb, while Tango was more of a 'I don't see it, it didn't happen' kind of guy. Jimmy just fell into the wrong crowd, got scooped up by Scott, and was stuck. At least, that's what Tango wanted to believe, and he was always a big fan of delusion.

"It's two am Jimmy, he's not gonna respond for a while." Tango looked up from the paperwork to give the avian a half hearted sneer, the man already glaring at him, before he looked back down. "Better get comfortable, birdy."

The resulting squawk was enough to get a laugh out of Tango, Jimmy struggling in his chair before he huffed. Tango wasn't too worried about him getting out. With the ability neutralizer-facator (name pending) around his ankle and wrist, and another two clamped to the back of his wings, there was really no way the guy could get out of the chains keeping him in his chair. It was still fun to watch him struggle. Cute, even.

Tango ignored that thought.

"Scott will be back for me." Jimmy said after a little bit, like he couldn't keep his mouth shut for longer than five minutes at a time.

"I don't doubt that."

"Really, he's coming for me! I know you don't-" Tango looked back up as Jimmy cut himself off. He looked surprised. "You don't?"

Well, this conversation was better than doing paperwork, that's for sure. Tango put the clipboard down on the ground, stretching out on the chair and ignoring the way Jimmy's eyes moved to look at the sliver of skin that showed on his stomach as he raised his arms above his head. "You seem really important to Scott. So yeah, I think he'll be back for you. I don't know when," Tango added as he relaxed, quick to extinguish any hope that could be building. "Since this room is magic proof. No portals, no void holes are getting through these walls."

Jimmy slouched in this chair. It was almost sad watching him, how much he had faith in someone that was clearly using him. "Wanna tell me how you got all void-magic-y on me since last time we talked?" Tango was the one to fill in the silence after a little bit. Jimmy didn't say anything. This was gonna be a long night if things went this way the whole time.

But what was Tango even hoping for anyways? Jimmy wasn't- neither of them were obligated to tell each other anything. Just because they had whatever they had didn't mean anything when they were like this. A cop and a criminal. One actively broke the law, one chased them for it. One had put the chains on the other and that spoke more words than anything else Tango could do. He could feel Jimmy's stare on him as he picked the clipboard back up, the angry gaze doing nothing but fueling the fire already burning in him.

Why didn't Jimmy just leave? What did Scott have that Tango couldn't give him? What did Scott offer that Tango wouldn't offer ten times over? Tango didn't even know if Jimmy and Scott were dating, or if they were just partners, but either way it would never sit right with him.

Tango didn't mean for this to happen either. It wasn't like he woke up one day and thought to himself, "I think I'm going to fall for this stupid man that I'm trying to catch". It happened over time. Anytime the two of them saw each other, it was borderline jokes, almost flirting, Jimmy slipping through his fingers right when Tango thought he had him.

And then Jimmy had kissed him.

It wasn't fair. Tango glanced up, fingers clamped tightly around the pen as Jimmy avoided eye contact like the other knew what he was thinking about. It wasn't fair that Jimmy got to be the one to kiss him against the wall, fingers fidgety and nervous, like it was his first time. It wasn't fair that Tango was thrilled by it, that he only got a few minutes to grab the *stupid* jacket he was always wearing and pull him closer. That he only managed to get him for moments before the sound of Scott's portals had filled the air, till Jimmy gasped like he

forgot who he was for a moment, till he had chosen his side as he decked Tango across the face before disappearing for six months.

And now he can make void holes.

Tango guesses that's what Scott can offer Jimmy that he can't. Power.

“Fell.” Tango jumped back as Jimmy’s voice filled the air again, causing him to throw the pen across the room. It rolled on the floor, slowing to the stop right by Jimmy’s left foot as Tango scowled at him. “I fell into the void, but instead of dying I...” Jimmy faded out, eyes slowly meeting Tango’s own like he was asking for permission to continue. “I really didn’t want to die.” He finished lamely.

Surviving the void, huh? Not really a *likely* story, but there had been cases of people doing it. Mostly people with wings, which Jimmy has, but most of the people also had a strong will to live. Tango didn’t know how strong, but due to the gravitational pull, he guessed it had to be a lot. Jimmy...well, Jimmy probably had that amount of will to live, if Tango was being honest. “So you flew out of it?” Tango asked, raising an eyebrow as Jimmy perked up like he wasn’t expecting him to believe his story.

“Yep! Took a whole lot out of me, ripped my right wing a bit, but I did it!” Jimmy said proudly, shifting the best he could in the chair as Tango fought off the urge to look at his wings closer. “Fell for a long time though, which is where the void powers come in. Spending too much time in the void will do that to a person, I guess. At least that's what Scott said when I got back.”

Of course Scott would say that. Tango gave into the temptation, standing up and walking behind Jimmy to get a good look at his wings. “How’d you fall in?” Tango watched his shoulders tense up. “Scott push you?”

“Neither of them meant too.”

“I’m sure they apologized when you came back.” Jimmy let out something close to a growl as Tango looked at the wings. Story held up, there was a tear, clumsily sewn up on his right

wing. Leaning closer, Tango couldn't help the tiny, cruel smile that grew on his face as he hovered his hands over the feathers. "May I?" He asked, looking up to meet Jimmy's dilated eyes through the mirrored glass.

"I don't care." Jimmy croaked up, clearly caring as Tango's smile grew. He kept his touch light, running his fingertips across the poor patch up job and watching the resulting shiver run through the other man. He was lucky he was the only one at the station right now, since Tango was sure this was going against some kind of protocol. "I know it's messy. I was alone for a while after I got out and-"

"It's good, for you doing it yourself." Tango cut him off, running his hand over it again, this time actually putting pressure. Jimmy gasped, face immediately going red as Tango's eyes darted back to the mirrored window. "Why didn't you call me?" He took his hand away, watching Jimmy bite his bottom lip from letting any other noise out. "You know I would've come to get you."

"Scott wouldn't have been happy."

It always rounded back to Scott, didn't it? Tango nodded, stepping back at ignoring the disappointed look the other man failed to hide. "I'm sure he was happy you came crawling back to him."

"That's not fair."

"Never claimed to be."

Jimmy's jaw tightened as Tango walked back around him, bending down and picking up the pen before standing back up. It wasn't fair, for either of them. Tango would never understand whatever possessed Jimmy to keep going back to a guy that didn't seem to even like him, Jimmy would never understand the need Tango had to make sure he was okay.

"If Scar pushed you into a void-"

“I would die. I don’t have wings like you.” Tango interrupted, walking back to his chair as Jimmy glared at him. “But he wouldn’t. Because unlike you, Scar actually appreciates me.” It was a low blow, something Tango wouldn’t usually resort to, but he was close to his own cracking point. “Scar, Bdubs and I work together as a *team*. A team that has space on it if you would just-” Tango let out a deep breath, stopping himself from revealing his whole deck as Jimmy stared at him wide-eyed. “Forget it.”

“If I would what?” Jimmy asked as Tango picked the clipboard back up. He was done with the majority of the paperwork, but it wasn’t like Jimmy was going to know. He flipped it to a different page and started to read through it. “If I would, what, Tango?”

This was so stupid of him. He should’ve had someone else watch Jimmy. Scar would’ve done it, though with Bdubs out of commission he was busier than ever getting ready for the stupid gala. Peace treaty? Yeah right. It was a major security risk, that’s what Tango thought. If he wasn’t in this stupid magic free box he knew his hair would be in flames, hands burning this stupid clipboard and paperwork and-

“ *Tango please.* ”

It wasn’t fair.

“You can’t possibly be this dumb, right?!” Tango could hear his voice, hear himself yelling, but it sounded far away like he wasn’t the one speaking. “You have to know! You have to know how I feel about you, and what I’m willing to do for you if you would just *let me help!*” He was shaking, he could feel his bones vibrate. Jimmy was just- just staring at him, just looking at him with his big, endless eyes like everything Tango had told him the answers of the universe. “I’m not really a subtle guy, Jimmy. You have to know.”

There, everything was out in the open. Tango felt like a bottle of coke that had exploded, pieces of himself everywhere, his guts and feeling on the floor for Jimmy to stomp on. For Jimmy to laugh at, for him to call for Scott and land the final blow.

Jimmy didn’t say anything.

It was quiet, too quiet now that neither of them were talking. Tango even wished for a clock, just so there would at least be the ticking sound.

Then, a buzz.

Tango looked at his comm sitting on the ground. A message.

[etho]

Tell him I'll come by. Probably later in the day. Sorry its so late

“You’re lucky. Etho says he’ll drop by.” Tango finally got out, words feeling thick in his throat.

Jimmy’s eyes seemed to see through him as he nodded once. “Is... is Etho doing what you're offering me?” Jimmy hesitantly asked, mouth clenching shut once he got the question out.

“What do you mean by that?” Tango didn’t want to have this conversation. Tango wanted to go home to nurse his broken heart back to health.

Jimmy bit his lip. “You know. What you’re offering me. To get out.” Tango wouldn’t get his hopes up. He wouldn’t.

“What would Etho need to get out of?”

“Nothing.” Jimmy suddenly said, shaking his head as Tango slowly looked at his comm. “If you don’t know- I mean, Etho just...Nothing. I’m spouting nonsense.”

“Yeah,” Tango laughed humorlessly. “I guess we both are.”

The flitch Jimmy offered didn't feel as good as Tango hoped it would.

Then again, he wasn't expecting it to.

.....

"So what now?"

Etho looked up, tired from the falling and void magic and everything else. He was really hoping that Joel didn't actually want him to respond because there was no way his mouth was going to move the way he wanted to right now. Instead, he shrugged, grimacing at the feeling of blood running down his neck. They clearly weren't in the same world, but they weren't in the world they were gunning for.

"You need to cover your face up." Joel said next, placing his bag on the ground and unzipping it. Etho did the same, fingers fumbling around till he found the basically empty healing potion. After offering it to Joel for his wounds, Etho took a deep breath before pouring the potion over his mouth.

Screaming wasn't something he did often. The feeling of his skin knitting back together, the way his flesh started to seal up, far too quickly, far too intense. It wasn't even as painful as it was just overwhelming, but it was enough to force a noise out of him. And between whimper or a scream, Etho knew which one he would rather let out.

Joel was used to it. He expertly ignored the gurgling noises and yelling coming from the other man, pulling out two water bottles for after Etho had calmed down. "Yeah, felt."

It wasn't funny. Etho gave a shaky grin anyway, the newly formed skin now stretching awkwardly on his face. Joel didn't blink at it, just held out the water bottle. "Thanks." Etho croaked out, voice feeling as raw as the new scars on his body. Right after, Joel thrust a new mask at him.

“Cover up, we don’t know who’s out here and how they’ll respond.” Etho took the mask out of his hand, rolling his eyes as Joel offered a grin. “That, and you look like shit and I don’t want to see your face.”

“Gee, thanks.” Etho did what he told though, covering the scars and ignoring the itchiness that came with the fabric of his scarring. “We’re clearly not home, but it’s gonna take a while before we jump again.”

Joel hummed under his breath, zipping closed his pack before hoisting the bag over his shoulders. “If your face didn’t get ripped in half every time we jumped we could.”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s all my fault.” Etho threw him a packaged cookie in his direction before zipping up his own bag. “Why don’t you try falling without me?” Joel scowled, ripping open the package with his teeth and not answering the obvious question.

“I swear to the Watchers below, as soon as we’re back in our world I’m killing you myself.” At least, Etho thought that’s what he said with his mouth full.

“I’ll hold you to it.”

The two of them grew quiet, Joel looking around in the area with a sigh before pulling up his personal inventory. Etho let his eyes close for a moment. They landed in some type of field, the sun barely rising over a hill in the distance. Etho opened his eyes, looking further into the distance. There might be a town out there, the two of them could probably make it by sundown if they started walking now.

It seemed Joel seemed to have the same idea, dusting off his hands on his pants before looking at Etho. “Welp. Ready?”

Neither of them were sentimental, Etho knows that. He didn’t think either of them would’ve lasted this long if they were. But drifting through a void will make people show their true colors, will make them open up either physically or emotionally. Etho patted him on the back,

pulling his bag onto his shoulders before taking the first step forward. "We're getting closer." Etho mumbled as Joel stumbled forward.

"You don't know that."

"I can feel it." Etho immediately countered. "Lizzie is close. Our world is close."

Joel snorted, but Etho knew he appreciated the gesture. Etho wasn't a liar. They were getting close, only a few more void jumps and they would be back in the world they had started in. Joel would be back with Lizzie and Etho could finally rest.

He just had to heal first.

.....

Etho thought he was a pretty normal guy.

Sure, he had maybe gotten a little intense at the coffee shop. Threatened Jimmy (as he found out was his name from a sleepy Bdubs) a little bit roughly. It wasn't like the guy didn't deserve it. He was the one who threw Void first, Etho was just using it to his advantage. But now the guy was asking if he could talk to Etho, and for some reason, Etho said yes.

Well, more like Bdubs had looked over his shoulder last night, and told him to say yes.

Etho didn't know why he kept listening to the guy.

He didn't kill Jimmy because Bdubs didn't want him to. He went to the coffee shop, sat through a very *very* awkward encounter with someone he never thought he would see again just because Bdubs said he wanted him to meet his friends. Void, he even gave his number to the literal police captain, one who had been riding his ass for illegal resistance work for

months, because he thought it would make Bdubs happy to see him getting along with at least one of his friends.

It was now late in the morning, Etho having been up for a while and totally not staring at the guy he was just thinking about as they laid in the same bed. Sue him, it had been a stressful week leading up to this. He could have these few days Scar had given them to decompress.

He didn't think Scar meant decompress in the way they were doing it. Sleeping in the same bed, waking up late together, making meals and just enjoying each other's company probably wasn't what Scar meant. But what he didn't know wouldn't kill him.

They should talk about it.

Etho didn't think they were going to talk about it.

"...Etho...?" Bdubs mumbled, eyes slowly opening as Etho forced himself to relax. He hummed, giving into the urge to push some of the blanket back so he could see his face better. "Why are you up?"

"It's Monday babe, remember?" Etho tried to make it sound teasing, but it came out much more genuine than he wanted. Bdub just groaned, tucking himself into Etho's chest. "You can call out if you want, Scar gave you till Tuesday."

Etho let him latch on him, arms wrapping around his waist like Etho was the one that needed to get up and pull him even closer. "Do you think he'll believe me if I say I'm still sick?" Bubs asked, looking up at him, mouth morphing into a sleepy smile as he reached up to cup Etho's face. It felt weird to feel the actual skin of his hand against his cheek. "You're very pretty Etho." Bdubs mumbled after, the compliment almost immediately covered by a yawn.

"And you're clearly still waking up." Etho responded, trying and failing to ignore the warm bubbling feeling in his chest.

Pretty.

What a word to describe him.

“Nah man,” Bdubs thumb slowly brushed across his cheek, against his scars like he was something precious, something breakable. “Your eyelashes are so long. And you have the pretty boy vibe. Like, lean and shit.”

Etho shook his head, amused. “Lean?”

“Shut up, I’m trying to compliment you.” Bdubs growled, Etho fighting the urge to laugh and instead of leaning more into his hand. It felt safe, Bdubs felt safe.

That wasn’t good.

“Am I supposed to compliment you back?” Etho gave into the urge to turn his head slightly, pressing his lips into the palm of his hand while keeping eye-contact. It was always interesting to see how people responded to eye-contact. Joel would keep it an uncomfortable amount of time, never backing down till you did. Cleo was almost the same, though they seemed to understand social cues more than Joel did. Bdubs-

Well, Etho had already waxed poetic about him before.

He was the perfect example of someone who could blend anywhere. Someone who one minute was glaring holes into someone, and the next minute unable to look them in the eye. With Etho, it was almost like he was forcing himself to look, like Bdubs wanted to look away but wouldn’t, for one reason or another.

Etho didn’t know what to do with information.

“Most people would compliment someone back, yes.” Bdubs responded, looking far too amused at Etho’s question. “And I know I have so many amazing qualities it must be hard to choose from but-”

“Eh, you’re alright.” Etho cut him off with a smile and a shrug, watching for the predictable outrage that would come. As soon as Bdubs tried to pull away, Etho wrapped his legs around his waist, flipping him onto his back and effectively straddling him on the bed. Bdubs blinked up at him, the grin Etho was wearing probably coming off far too satisfied for simply pinning someone underneath him. But it was Bdubs, and he was *speechless* under him, wide-eyed and unassuming as he waited so patiently for Etho’s next move. Bdubs hands moved to grip onto his forearms, like it was the only thing anchoring him to the bed. “You look really nice underneath me.” Etho pitched his voice lower, waiting for the shiver and dark eyes that Bdubs often got after that voice.

The tiny whine was new.

It was clearly new to both of them, since Bdubs face turned bright red. It was hard not to laugh at his reaction, the way one of his hands gripped tighter on his arm as the other flew up to grip the back of his neck. “Etho...” Bdubs wiggled, Etho immediately tightening his thighs to stop him as another whine left the man's mouth. “You’re being mean.”

“I’m not doing anything.” Etho leaned closer, the feeling of fingers slowly sliding into his hair sending a shiver down his spine. “I’m just complimenting you, like you were asking for.”

It was instantaneous, almost scary how well they worked together. How they were so different but how their brains seemed to link up. Etho leaning the rest of the way down, Bdubs pushing himself up on his elbows to meet him halfway.

Etho was pretty sure Bdubs meant to complain about how that wasn’t what he meant when he said that Etho should compliment him, but as long as his lips were occupied he couldn’t. And if it was because he was occupied with another pair of lips...

Well, it worked just as well as anything else.

Bdubs was vocal, no matter what activity they were doing, Etho found. Whether he was yelling at Etho because he forgot to set a timer for the pizza bites, or letting out tiny gasping sounds as Etho licked into his mouth, there was always some kind of noise to make. It was already bad enough that they had fallen into this pattern of acting like this when there was no one else around, but all the noises made Etho want to see what other noises he could pull out of the other man.

But of course, because Etho couldn't have anything good in his life, Bdubs comm went off.

The groan Bdubs let out was at least a little consolation prize, since it meant he wasn't alone in his annoyance. Etho rolled off of him, actually getting up and grabbing his own comm off the ground where he had left it the last night as Bdubs looked at his own. There was another groan, then the sound of Bdubs typing fast as Etho turned his on.

[grian]

Tonight. 2am?

Right. The resistance. The thing Scar was paying him to leave, the thing that took him in when he fell into this world. Even more, it was Grian who was asking him to come with him, meaning it was probably more high profile than he thought. Breaking into the MooPop factory was probably more of a cover than what they were actually doing. Biting his lip, Etho looked up to watch as Bdubs glared at his own comm. *I know the feeling.*

[etho]

Yep yep. Meet you there.

Etho didn't think he was lying to Scar when he told him he would do anything for more money. But the thing was, Grian really wasn't paying him. Security and a home to go to isn't something Etho took for granted. And when Scar offered him more money to ditch the resistance, he didn't think Scar knew he was as high as he was.

So he took the deal, knowing that after three weeks he would be back at the resistance base with more money *and* information on the HEP agency.

It feels more complicated now.

“Scar is calling for a mandatory elite meeting.” Bdubs scoffed, cracking his neck before offering a sheepish smile. “Which is fancy talk saying he wants to have a sleepover tonight at my house. He says, and I quote, “no sneaky boyfriends allowed.” That...actually worked nicely with what Grian had planned for tonight. Etho raised an eyebrow, reaching for his mask before Bdubs launched himself across the bed to catch his wrist. “But that’s not till later!”

“It’s not like I don’t have stuff to do today.” Bdubs pouted, throwing up a middle finger after Etho chuckled and put on his mask. “I guess I’ll stay at one of my friends' houses.”

“Etho, I know you’re lying about having real life friends.”

Shaking his head, Etho quickly pulled off his sleeping shirt, throwing it on the bed before pressing a hand to his chest. “You caught me. I was totally alone in this world before you broke into my house and killed my roommate.”

“Weird way to say thank you, but I’ll take it since you seem socially inept.”

“Why you-” Bdubs just grinned, throwing his own shirt at him, Etho snatching it out of the air as Bdubs pulled on his work shirt. “I’m not thanking you for killing Martyn.”

Bdubs just waved him off, quickly getting changed. As much as Bdubs seemed to enjoy staying in with him, Etho knew he was a busybody at heart. He had to be excited to get back to work, made very clear as he made the two of them get breakfast bars and eat them on the way there instead of sitting down.

The town hall was just as busy as always, maybe more with the Gala only six days away. People stopped to talk to Bdubs, check up on him, all that nice stuff people did when they seemed to genuinely like a person. However, Etho didn't let go of his hand till they reached the employees only elevator. "You're going to visit Tango after this, right?"

Etho stuffed his hand into his pockets, scrunching up his nose. Bdubs laughed, reaching up to fix his mask before scanning his card against the keypad. "Yeah. I'll probably go to work after and then crash at my imaginary friend's house, so make sure Scar is with you at all times."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll look both ways crossing the street, make sure I brush my teeth before you get home." Bdubs grinned, elevator dinging behind him. "See you tomorrow?"

Nodding, Etho waited till he saw Bdubs elevator reach his floors before he left the building, trusting Scar and his security to keep him safe before making his way to the jail. It was nerve racking, walking in and literally asking for the police captain.

Tango really was someone he would've liked to be friends with. Bdubs had bragged about how he knew they were going to get along, and to be honest, he was right. Sure, Tango seemed really hyperactive, but that wasn't a bad thing. If Etho was a better person, or at least a person on their side of the cell, he thinks they could've been actual friends.

However, that wasn't a reality, no matter how much it seemed like it was within his grasp recently. He was getting too comfortable with these people, and this was the perfect reminder that he wasn't the same.

"Hey, thanks for coming!" Etho looked up as Tango scanned the key card to get out to the front, holding the door open for him to walk past.

"It's no problem, though I'm surprised he asked for me. I barely talked to him."

Tango shrugged. Looking closer, Etho could see the deep circles under his eyes, something heavy in the way he walked. "People have weird requests sometimes."

“And sometimes you grant them even though the law says otherwise? I know I’m not supposed to be back here Tango, I’m no lawyer.” Tango fumbled his keys, barely grabbing them before they hit the ground as Etho snorted. “I’m not saying anything. I thought there was a tnt threat here though? Nothing serious?”

The police chief offered a sheepish grin, the smile not quite reaching his eyes as they reached Jimmy’s holding room. Blinking, Etho could see the magic wards, the seal around the door glowing just enough to put him on edge. Magic resist, maybe even nullifying. Looking through the glass, Etho wasn’t surprised to see the guy chained to the chair, wrist and wings secured. “...nothing there. A false call. But...” Etho looked back at Tango, who was now leaning close to him like he was about to tell a secret. “We did lose someone that night. I don’t know how, since there was no one on camera.”

Not for the first time, Etho was glad he wore a mask. “No, really?”

Tango nodded rapidly, looking almost like a bobblehead. “Yeah. And listen, this isn’t something I should tell civilians, but your Bdubs boyfriend so it’s not like you’ve haven’t heard about it *anyways*,” Etho made the zipping motion across his lips, Tango’s grin growing just a bit more as Etho ignored the guilt starting to bubble up in his gut. “But it was definitely the resistance. I mean, it was *Ren*. I don’t know if you’ve heard of the guy, but we had to put a muzzle on him when we got him here because of how vicious he was.”

Oh, Ren was going to be complaining about that for *months*.

“Real bitey?” Etho asked anyway, nose twitching as Tango nodded again.

“Really *really* bitey.” Searching through his keys, Tango glanced at him through the corner of his eye. “Crazy we didn’t get anyone on tape though. You look at the cameras and there’s nothing. One second he’s there, the next he isn’t.”

“I can take a look at it, see if I see anything.” Etho offered absentmindedly as Tango found the right key.

“Yeah, that would actually be a big help.” Etho raised an eyebrow as Tango unlocked the door. “What? You seem to have an eye for the little things, maybe you can see something we missed.”

“Is that allowed?” Tango knocked against the door, Etho watching as Jimmy instantly perked up.

“I’m the police chief, of course it is.” Etho scoffed as Tango pushed open the door. “Rise and shine birdy, you got a visitor.” Etho nodded once as he followed it, watching as Tango pulled up a chair and sat backwards on it, leaning on the back as Jimmy glared at him. “You didn’t think I was going to leave for this little chat, right?”

Etho grabbed another chair as Jimmy’s wings tried to flap with annoyance. The way they had the binding on him would definitely be cutting into his skin sooner than later. Sitting down, Etho vaguely questioned if the force usually had hybrids in here or if they were just guessing on how to handle them. Muzzles, now too tight binding? If Etho was correct, Tango was a blaze hybrid, which made the whole thing even worse. Maybe he wasn’t the one to do it? “I was hoping.” Jimmy finally responded.

“Wouldn’t really matter, he would just listen through the one-way glass.” Etho chimed in before Tango could open his mouth. Jimmy looked even more annoyed by that, Tango tilting his head before standing up. “Though, I’ll be okay if you want to wait outside. Me and Jimmy go *way* back.”

Snorting, Tango stood up, stretching a little before offering a crooked smile. “Fine, I’ll just wait outside, give you the feeling of privacy.” Etho waved him off, Jimmy a middle finger before the door closed again.

Here is what was interesting to Etho about Jimmy. He clearly knew Joel. Joel clearly talked about his past for Jimmy to know about Etho. Maybe that was also a reason he came, to see what exactly Joel had said about him. He just didn’t want it happening while Tango was listening.

However, Jimmy didn’t talk about Joel. Jimmy told him how he got his powers. Etho couldn’t say he was expecting that, but he listened anyway. It was interesting hearing other peoples experiences with the void and how they were different then his own. It almost felt

like a confessional, Jimmy telling him how it felt like he was freezing and burning at the same time, how he must have fallen for 20 minutes before he remembered how to use his wings. How he barely made it out, hurting himself in the process but getting the void making ability. How Joel had accidentally opened a hole in the void, and how Scott had accidentally pushed him in.

Etho wasn't buying that part of the story.

The fact was, opening a hole in a void was tiring. It was something he and Joel had to prepare for months in advance. Besides that, it didn't make sense for him to open a hole in the void if a void walker wasn't with him to help him pass through. And Etho could confirm, he hadn't been there to help him through.

Etho wouldn't be walking through any more void if he could help it.

"Do you really think Scott pushed you by accident?" Etho asked as Jimmy finished his story. "Seems unlikely, coming from an unbiased opinion."

Something flashed in Jimmy's eyes, memories Etho wasn't privy too before they cleared. "I have to think so, because there's nowhere else to go if he meant to push me." Jimmy wasn't looking at him, he was looking at the mirrored glass. Etho could understand the sentiment well. "But that's not why I asked to see you."

Etho shifted in his seat. "You didn't call me here to tell me your life story as we get watched by one to three cops?"

Sadly, Jimmy didn't take the bait, just leaned closer the best he could before lowering his voice. "Don't you understand?" Etho glanced at the mirrored glass before leaning closer himself. "All three of us, together?"

Oh.

Oh shit.

Etho felt his blood run cold at the look Jimmy was giving him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Etho managed to get out, listening to the doorknob rattle like someone couldn’t get it open. “Whatever Joel told you about me, he’s exaggerating.”

The laugh Jimmy let out wasn’t quite right. More echo-y, the sound of a voice screaming in the empty void more than someone enjoying themselves. “He said you two aren’t from this world. Said you got distracted with a person in one world, so much that you dragged her through a void just to leave them. Said you promised him you would get him back to his world and you didn’t.”

The door was rattling now, like it was jammed as Etho felt his jaw starting to open on its own the longer Jimmy looked him in the eyes. “What do you want from me?” The edges of his lips started to split open, the curious look in Jimmy’s eyes growing as the first trail of blood snuck out and past his mask. “If you want me to be able to talk, you’re gonna have to stop looking at me in my eyes.”

“Is it true that your jaw will completely unhinge if someone stares at you long enough?” Despite Jimmy’s question, he looked away, the skin that was starting to pull tight around his mouth relaxing. Etho took deep breaths in as the door stopped rattling.

Yet no one came in.

“I think I asked you some questions first.” Etho finally bit out, using the back of his hand to wipe under his chin before the blood dried. “What do you want with me?”

Jimmy’s eyes just shined back at him, wide and nothing like they were when he walked into the room. “Isn’t it obvious? I can make a void hole without the need to find one, Joel can rip the bottom out of the void to lead us to new worlds. And you-”

“No.” Etho interrupted, desperately looked at the door. Realistically, he could go, he could leave and there was nothing Jimmy could do to stop him. Whatever magic that had somehow slipped into the room was clearly gone now. Other than the slightly vacant look in his eyes,

Jimmy wasn't any different than before. That and the personality switch, but that was a whole other can of worms. "I'm not leading anyone through the void. Not again."

Jimmy leaned back in his seat, the chains around his wings digging in even more as Etho cringed for him. How was he not freaking out about that? Those were some of the most important parts of a bird hybrid, Etho would know. Grian was almost too protective of his own, preening regularly and making sure they were in tip-top shape. "Why? It would be so *easy*. I open a void hole. Joel makes it so we can fall through completely. You make it so we don't die."

"You're not listening to me." Etho stood up, proud of himself that he didn't shake as much as he thought he would as Jimmy glared up at him. "I will not be going through the void again. I don't care if I have the ability too, I don't *want* to. I've built a life here, and- and I'm happy." Turning around, Etho could hear the frustrated curse from the other one as he reached for the knob. "Why exactly are you trying to leave, anyways? What is so bad about this world that you think leaving it would solve your problems?"

It was quiet as Etho put his hand on the knob, waiting for a response he didn't even know was coming. "I'm just listening." It was the quietest thing Jimmy had said yet, almost sad, like he was coming to the realization himself.

Bdubs was an awful influence, Etho decided as he flipped back around to look at the other man. "You know Scott pushed you." Not a question, but a statement.

Jimmy nodded once. "Yeah. I know Scott pushed me."

"And now that you have this, this *power* you didn't even want to have, what does he want you to do with it?" Jimmy clamped his mouth shut as Etho slowly approached. The empty look was gone, which was good, but in place was a look so scared it hurt to see. "Whatever he wants you to do with it, that's the reason you want to leave this world, yes?"

There was a whimper, wings suddenly trying and failing to get out of their binding as Jimmy's eyes widened to a concerning degree. "Jimmy! You got to stop moving them or-" Etho panicked as Jimmy cried out, like his body had just realized he was trapped, that he was trapped *painfully*. "TANGO!" Etho turned towards the door, gripping the handle and ripping it open. "TANGO WE NEED TO GET HIM OUT-"

The world seemed to be frozen outside.

“What-” Etho shook his head. Tango was simply staring at the window, body moving so slow it was like he wasn’t moving at all. In fact, everything seemed to be going in slow motion as Etho looked out of the holding room. People walking at a snail’s pace, the mugshot camera’s flash so slow you could see how each air particle lit up.

“We’re lucky we’re stuck in the no magic box, huh?” Etho whipped around at the sound of Jimmy’s voice, but once again it was echoing. “Scott is getting *real* powerful.” Etho closed the door almost as slowly as the people were moving outside as Jimmy grinned at him, all teeth. “Both of us were getting powerful, but then you’re stupid son of a bitch boyfriend had to kill me.”

Martyn?

Etho couldn’t seem to get a full breath in. Jimmy’s smile seemed to widen, though Etho didn’t know if that was possible with how large it was already. “Can’t say he did a good job, if you’re still talking to me.” Etho wheezed out, watching in horror as the light in Jimmy’s eye faded.

An empty laugh. “I suppose not. We’re coming for him. But you know that already, don’t you, Etho?” Jimmy- or Martyn, talking through Jimmy’s body- was shifting around in the chair like he was trying to break free. “We’re coming for everyone whoever wronged us. Bdubs is at the top of that list. Be ready, I do enjoy a good fight.”

There was another laugh, this one much more lighthearted as the sounds of the outside world picked up, like everything was unfreezing. “That’s my cue to leave.” Jimmy/Martyn said, blood starting to bubble up from the chains on Jimmy’s wings. Jimmy tilted his head too far to the right. “You were a good roommate Etho, don’t get caught up in this. My advice, go back to your silly little resistance and enjoy it. Don’t trust a liar like Bdubs. Oh, but do give your boyfriend a kiss from me.”

It wasn’t dramatic, the way Martyn seemed to disappear from Jimmy’s body. The man slumped forward as Etho stared at nothing, stuck in place. There were people yelling, the

door slamming open as Tango rushed in to help the avian out. There was a shock blanket, there were questions Etho couldn't answer and one he pretended to not know. It didn't happen often, something throwing him off, but this felt reasonable.

Martyn was dead. Etho had seen his body, had seen it bleed dry on the floor. But that wasn't Jimmy talking to him then. Maybe falling in the void had even more consequences than they thought?

Etho didn't know how long he had been sitting in Tango's office. He didn't even know why he was still waiting around. He had been given the clear to leave after he gave his statement on what happened, yet here he was just...waiting. His eyes were trained on the cameras, watching Tango yell at some officers, hair on fire. Jimmy was standing behind him, wings wrapped around him like a blanket as Etho realized what the avian really wanted from him.

Him making void wasn't in Scott's plan, that was a side effect he wasn't expecting. What Scott was expecting was Martyn. Somehow, Martyn had semi-possessed Jimmy. Jimmy, clearly not liking that, came to Etho with the hopes that he would walk him through the void and get him far away from what was going on.

Etho didn't know if that would get Martyn out of his head though.

Etho's eyes darted to the other cameras, eventually giving in to the temptation to watch the night Ren had escaped. Something to get his mind off of all of this. Just as he thought, the only way you could see Grian grabbing him was the blink of lights, and in the bottom right corner there was a flash of purple. Nothing incriminating.

"You find anything?"

He jumped, Tango immediately holding his hands up and slowly entering the room. "My bad! Should've been louder!" Etho chuckled awkwardly, teeth licking over his bottom lip, the now familiar taste of copper melting on his tongue. He needed to clean up before Tango realized he was bleeding too. Etho had figured out pretty quickly that nobody had heard their conversation, because as soon as Scott had slowed down time, he had apparently made it so no one could understand them too. What Etho didn't understand was why.

Why would he do that? When the time slowed down, when people weren't listening anymore, that was when it was Jimmy desperately asking for help. It wasn't when Martyn was possessing him, it was when Jimmy was begging him to get him out of this world. Why would Scott help him like that?

Secrets were building up, and it was leaving Etho more than frustrated. Which led to the other moment of magic, his own. He was the one to lose control of himself, to make the door rattle, to almost snap and-

He didn't though. And that's what was important.

"Nope. Nothing, sorry." Tango just smiled sympathetically at him, patting him on the shoulder and leaning over him to switch the screens back to Jimmy. He was now much more comfortable, wings still being cared for as Tango's jaw tightened. "It's not your fault he moved so much."

"I should've noticed it was too tight."

What was Etho supposed to say to that? He had his own issues to deal with, more adding every day, he didn't have time for Tango's guilt on top of it. "It was a long shot anyways." Tango let out a sigh as he stood back up straight. "I can't believe I let him get away after all of that. Bdubs is going to kill me."

Don't trust a liar like Bdubs.

Etho could feel something in him snap.

"Why would Bdubs be angry?" Etho managed to get out, avoiding eye-contact as he stood up from the chair, ditching the blanket.

Tango tilted his head, mouth tucked into a confused, tired smile. "Because he told me where to find Ren. He technically got that arrest, even though he's not a cop."

Etho needed to get out of here. “Yeah, that sounds about right.” Etho tried to push past Tango, looking at the ground instead of him before Tango grabbed his wrist.

“Hey, you doing okay? I can call a cab to take you to Bdubs house, I know you’ve had a rough day-”

“No, I’m fine!” Etho yanked himself out of Tango’s grip, rushing out of the station, the noise of the police chief yelling fading out behind him as the door slammed shut.

He needed to get to Grian. Grian would be able to help. Etho’s hands were too shaky, the inability to get his comm out of his pocket sending him spiraling more as people started to run into him. He wasn’t watching where he was going, but he couldn’t! People didn’t understand but if he looked up now, if he looked at someone in the eyes he would-

Etho stumbled into a secluded alleyway, breathing heavy as he ripped off his mask. Why couldn’t he get enough air? What was with today going from one of the best mornings ever to the worst day of his life so quickly? Purple haze was quickly covering his mind, fingers desperately trying and failing to grasp his comm as someone cleared their throat behind him.

Oh *no*.

“Sorry buddy, this is my alleyway.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll be out of your hair in a second-”

“Yeah right, look at me.”

Etho flipped around in the direction of the voice, holding up his hands while still looking at the ground. He wasn’t going to do it, he couldn’t be responsible for another death because of-

A hand gripped his jaw, ripping his face upwards and locking eyes with him.

The sucker didn't stand a chance.

.....

“Does it bug you?”

Cleo raised an eyebrow, mouth twisting as she looked at him through the mirror. The scissor in her hand slowed down, but never quite stopped as they continued to cut his hair. “What? That you have some scars? Would be pretty hypocritical of me.”

“How I get them Cleo, not that I have them.”

That got her to stop cutting. Cleo put the scissors on the counter, looking at him dead in the eyes before turning his head to face her directly and squishing his cheeks together. “Etho, do you get bugged that I have to sometimes take a few bites out of people?” She didn't give him time to answer, just shook his head back and forth. Etho rolled his eyes, but he could feel the relieved smile start to try and spread on his face. “No? Then I don't care that sometimes you have to...do whatever you do that makes your jaw rip off of your face.” They released his cheeks, rubbing at the scar so tenderly it made him feel light headed. “Just don't do it to me, and we'll be okay.”

.....

“...reports of an enderman attack, the first one in ten years, now right outside of the police station where not even three full days ago there was an-”

Grian turned off the radio as Impulse shoved another healing potion at him, none of them talking as Etho slowly drank it. He had already placed most of it over his skin, so this one

was hopefully for the inside of his mouth. You think after so many times doing this he would be used to it, but he guessed feeling your skin stretch till it snapped wasn't really a feeling you would get used to.

"You should've called one of us." It was Impulse, the man frowning down at his comm before showing the screen. "The last time we messaged was three weeks ago dude."

"Tried, fingers wouldn't work." Etho managed to croak out, grimacing as the skin pulled tight.

Impulse sighed as Grian nodded, eyes trained on Etho like he was reading his thoughts. Maybe he was, Etho didn't really look into what Grian could really do. Ren quietly slipped in as Grain hopped down from the window seal he was sitting on. "Well, you should check your comm now, since it's been going off nonstop for the past thirty minutes. Etho groaned, but it came out pained then annoyed as Impulse handed him the device. He was really lucky that the two of them had been walking by and got him to the base quick enough, Etho didn't think he could explain the situation to Tango and live to tell the tale.

[scar]

Hey this is bdubs from scars comm bc i dont have your number are you okay?

Etho?

Etho there was a enderman attack near the police station are you at work?

Call me when you get a chance

Etho this isnt funny

Etho i swear to the watchers i will go down to the station right now

Etho im worried about you.

There was more, but with a tired sigh Etho turned off the comm without responding to any of them. What was he supposed to say? *Hey, I'm fine, I was actually the enderman that attacked because sometimes when I feel too much emotion I just kill people if they look me in the eyes, also I know you ratted Ren out so I don't trust you anymore? Nevermind that it's hypocritical due to how much I've lied to you, but this isn't about me .*

Yeah, that would go over well.

He was tired. Understatement of the year, but true. Ren looked at him with understanding, full moons and all, patting the spot next to him on the couch. What was Etho supposed to do now?

He just wanted to go back to when Martyn was still alive, when he was working on shade-e-e without a care in the world. He didn't want to worry about random bird people asking him to lead him through the void, he didn't want to worry about political figures getting murdered. Where his roommate wasn't possessing people and Etho hadn't fallen for someone who was lying to him. Etho plopped down on the couch, immediately laying his head on Ren's lap as Impulse quietly came and sat on the ground in between Ren's legs. Claws gently ran through his hair, the overwhelming need to cry hitting him full force as Grian watched the three of them.

“Get some sleep, Etho.” Grian finally said, his own worry leaking into his voice as he turned away from the group. “All of you should. If you feel well enough by tonight, we can still go break into some buildings.”

Impulse nodded, leaning his head against Ren's knee as Etho readjusted himself more comfortably on the couch. “You gonna join the pile dude?” It was asked as a joke, but Etho knew Ren was being genuine. He also knew Grian wasn't going to join. He had the look in his eye, the one where you knew he had an idea and he wasn't going to stop till he did it.”

Impulse must have had the same realization as Etho, since he sighed loudly. “What are you going to do now, Grian?”

Their leader simply shrugged, eyes flashing purple for a moment before he walked over to the window. “Grian? What are you planning?” Etho asked, voice cracking under the stress. The scream enderman let out was rough on the vocal cords, okay?

Their leader turned away from the window, flashing them a small smile that was nothing but teeth. “Nothing! I just think...” he faded off before finding his resolve. “I think it's time I had a chat with an old friend.”

Chapter End Notes

Tango talks with Jimmy, fights about their not-really a relationship, but still asked Etho to come talk to Jimmy at his request. Etho has a memory about him and Joel right after the two of them fell through the void into a new world, clearly not their first time. Bdubs and Etho have a cute morning before Etho goes to talk to Jimmy. They go back and forth before Jimmy asks Etho to help Joel and him get to a new world, reveals that Scott had slowed down time outside of the room, and that Martyn's spirit had somehow semi-possessed Jimmy. Etho finds out Bdubs lied about tell Tango about Ren, and losses control of himself, revealing himself as a enderman hybrid. Ends with him in the resistance base and Grian saying he was going to visit a old friend.

PHEW. and we thought this was going to be a silly little romance. Honestly, I went into a coma and popped back out with this, writing the recap was a mess and a half and I'm sure I missed something. I'm worried there was so much info dumping that it was boring. Anyways, the boys are fightinggggg lmao

I never know how to end these notes, so I guess I'll just tell a fun little fact about myself bc I'm actually a chronic oversharer. In the fandom I publicly write for, I actually am most well known for writing rated E fanfiction haha, I think you can see it in the bedroom scene the most.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

otherwise known as the backstory chapter

Chapter Notes

Hello! tag changes are adding lizzie and lizzie/joel relationship tag, and i changed the relationship thingy to multi which is what it should've been in the first place lol

I'm going to be so honest with ya'll, this is probably my least favorite chapter. I wanted to throw my computer out a window, i'm not a fan of the ending, made me want to delete the fic completely.

And then I started shark week today, so it could be a mixture of that.

anyways, tmi out of the way I hope you enjoy the chapter, even though I kind of cheated in this bc we once again have different POVs. (sorry bdubs, you have to share screen time with Scar and Etho's tragic backstory)

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

Sometimes, after Etho had...relapsed, Etho would dream.

“Are you alone?”

Etho never enjoyed being alone.

“Are you alone?”

Etho was used to being alone.

He had been walking forever. It was dark, it was cold and hot, it was quiet, and he was alone.

Until he wasn't. And suddenly it was too bright, it was too loud and too much all at once. He could see the sun again, he could feel the grass under his skin. It was overwhelming, and the first noise he could recognize was that question.

“Are you alone?”

Etho opened his mouth, but no noise came out. He didn't need to talk in the void, there was no one to talk to. The girl's mouth tightened, but her eyes filled with concern. “Let's get you inside.”

Etho would've cried, if he could remember how.

Overtime, his voice came back to him. The girl's name was Lizzie, she was waiting for her husband to come back from his job at sea, and won't you chill out, I know you don't have anywhere else to run off too anyways. So Etho tried to relax.

It was easier than he thought it was going to be, when he finally found his words again. He had been living with Lizzie for about a month, doing housework and other chores so he wouldn't feel useless. Lizzie had been sitting at her table as Etho struggled to cut up carrots in a uniform way when the words slipped out. “Do you miss him?” It came out cracked, dry, nothing how he thought his voice would sound after all that time, but it was real words.

The sound of Lizzie dropping her scissors on the table filled the air as Etho's cringed. How rude of him to ask that, even worse that he used his first words on that. There was a quiet sniff behind him, Etho's eyes widening as he flipped around. “Lizzie I'm sorry, I didn't mean-”

“I do, I miss him a lot.” Lizzie's eyes shined with the tears, a warm smile on her face as she stood up. “But you've helped by being here.” Etho felt himself start to shake as Lizzie wrapped her arms around him. “My guardian angel.”

How wild, to be considered something so kind when he crawled his way up from the dirt. He slowly wrapped his arms around her, hanging much more loosely than the way Lizzie seemed to by squeezing the void out of him. Still, Etho let her hold him just a bit longer.

Etho didn't like being alone.

When Joel came home, he was rightfully suspicious of Etho. Etho wouldn't blame him, an enderman hybrid had to be a startling sight to come home too. But Lizzie was Lizzie, and it seemed like Joel wasn't immune to whatever magic she had to convince him Etho wasn't a threat. Maybe it wasn't magic, maybe Joel just really really loved her.

Either way, the three of them somehow made it work. Etho started talking more, though never enough if you asked Lizzie, and got a job at the same ship harbor Joel worked at. The two of them went to work, Joel would joke and gripe about Etho still being there but confront anyone who questioned Etho personally. "Why do you do that?" Etho remembers asking one day, when the two of them were walking home.

"Do what?" Joel had asked back, sniffing the air before scrunching up his nose. "Man mate, you stink. You're definitely washing off before you step into the house."

"Pretty sure that's you Joel."

"Pretty sure you weren't this rude when Lizzie took you in like a lost puppy."

Etho promptly forgot about the question at that.

Etho almost forgot about being lonely, after a while. He branched out a bit more, made some friends outside of the couple. Lizzie was his biggest supporter, behind Joel, though his friend wouldn't admit to liking him.

And then he got promoted.

Lizzie didn't look happy when he told them over dinner. Joel assured her that it was fine, that they would both take care of each other out at sea and they would be back in six months time.

They barely made it a month before their ship sailed right into a void hole.

Etho had tried to warn them. Had tried to tell them to turn around, to stall for a day, to do anything. He could sense the magic coming from it, but nobody listened. Why would they? He was just the new hire, someone that barely talked and if he did, always had someone yelling behind him.

Joel believed him. Maybe that's why Etho grabbed his hand when the boat started to fall in, why he gripped onto his face and demanded that whatever happened, Joel wouldn't let go.

Falling into the void was just as terrifying as the first time, even though he knew he wouldn't die. Maybe it was even worse, because he knew he would be walking around for who knows how long before he found his way out again.

But this time, he wasn't alone.

Joel hadn't let go of his hand.

Etho could hear the screams of their crewmates around them, their flesh melting from their bones and hearts slowing to an abrupt stop. But Joel continued to hold on. Continued to breathe.

Etho couldn't remember how they figured out Joel could make a hole in the void. It was interesting to test later, when it wasn't so life or death. It was interesting to see if he could do it in the real world (he couldn't) if he could choose what world to go to when they were in the void (once again, no) if it was just a lucky moment. (if it was, the two of them have had a lot of lucky moments)

Instead of just him landing in a field somewhere, it was him and Joel. The two of them had somehow lived through the void- himself twice, he might add- and were now in a totally different world.

Etho's mouth felt weird.

The moments after that were blurry, years went by where the two of them grew closer and yet farther apart as they decided to go back home to where Lizzie was. It was a lot of void falling, a lot of adventuring and finding void holes and being willing to jump in them. It was a lot of friendships made and friendships lost as the two of them continued to jump from world to world.

And then they fell into Cleo's world.

Etho was pretty sure he was tearing himself apart by that point, the constant void jumping literally ripping apart his jaw. It was only a matter of time before his enderman instincts took over completely. But he had promised Joel that the two of them would get back, and he had told him they were close. There was no way he was backing down now.

But Cleo...Etho wondered if how he felt with Cleo was how Joel felt with Lizzie.

She kicked ass. The two of them had fallen into some kind of survival world, one with a major zombie infestation. When they met, Cleo had taken one look at him before asking him to spare, only to beat the shit out of him and then promptly ask him to dinner.

Etho was pretty sure this is what Lizzie and Joel felt like.

She was kind, but not a pushover. She was understanding of his hybrid self, because well, it wasn't like she was very normal either. Etho would sneak them people he accidentally killed to eat, Cleo would cut his hair and tell him he wasn't alone anymore.

But Joel was.

Joel waited much longer than Etho thought he would before he started hinting that the two of them should leave. He let Etho fall in love, before quietly reminding him that they weren't home yet. That they were missing someone from their little trio. That Lizzie was still waiting for the ship to come back.

They argued a lot.

All three of them did. Cleo joined them on their journey to find an open void hole, much to Joel's annoyance, and every night seemed to be a new fight. It was tiring, hearing his best friend and partner argue about every little thing. How Cleo thought Joel was taking advantage of Etho and how Joel thought Cleo was using him for a food source.

Etho didn't know if it was just how she was raised, in the end, the paranoia got to all of them. After all, it was a world full of dangers and monsters galore, there was no way of telling if the monsters they were fighting were one of them. All Etho knows was that one night he woke up with Cleo on top of him, knife to his throat and a bloody smile on her face.

And then the three fell into a hole.

It wasn't as comfortable as the times with Joel had been, desperately keeping his grip on Cleo as they tried to get away from him, shouting and sighing with relief as Joel's hand gripped onto his shoulder. Cleo kept shouting that they were trying to kill her, Joel was screaming that he didn't have a good enough grip, and Etho-

Etho felt his jaw rip in two.

Waking up in a field felt very redundant, by this point. Etho really didn't care about that.

He couldn't feel his face.

He knew he had to be dying. There was no way that he wasn't, not with the way his eyesight was blurry, the way he could see the lower half of his face laying a few feet away from him. But despite all that, he didn't feel scared.

It was kind of nice, actually, that even if the void couldn't kill him, his own body would find a way.

He woke up somewhere dark. Etho remembers three or four people talking, but none of them sounded familiar to him. Vaguely, he thought about Cleo and Joel, and wondered if they made it through, but quickly put those thoughts to the side. No use wondering if he woke up alone. If they were alive it meant that they left him for dead, and that was as good of a goodbye as he was going to get.

"Grian! He's awake!" The voice was much louder than he was expecting, a headache blooming in the front of his brain as the man gave him a shaky smile. "Hey dude, sorry to startle you like that."

Etho blinked twice, taking in the dog ears and relaxed pose as two other men walked in. It was weird, seeing hybrids look so relaxed. Etho had been in many worlds, but just by these few seconds he could tell something was different about this one. The demon hybrid offered a kind smile, something hidden in his eyes as he quickly reached into a chest on the ground. "We got more healing potions for you bud, don't you worry!"

Other than Lizzie, this might have been the kindest welcome to a world he had received. The last guy, some Avian, leaned against the door frame as he watched the three of them interact. Or, the two of them as Etho stared confused. Finally, the guy pushed off the door frame and made his way to the couch he was laying on as the demon offered him a potion bottle. "Rough landing, or just a long fall?" It was said with understanding, not sympathy as Etho took the bottle.

The three waited as Etho slowly drank the potion, trying and failing not to make a face at the uncomfortable regeneration. Then-

"You would not believe the fall or landings I've had."

He really didn't know why he said it. Maybe he was trying to make friends, maybe he was tired of running. Maybe it was because without Joel or Cleo, he really didn't have a reason to move anyways. The three of them looked at each other, then back at him as the bird guy's smile grew. "Try me."

Grian, Ren and Impulse.

Etho would probably give up his life for them.

Impulse got him a job at the factory he worked at, something with red stone that Etho picked up far too quickly, much to the demon's annoyance. Once Etho got too popular for it, Impulse was the one to help him build his own store. He was someone Etho didn't have to search for words with, they came naturally.

Rendog- no really dude, that's my name!- got him his apartment. Sure, it was at a scarier part of town, but as Ren said himself, Etho was pretty scary anyways. He was someone that was always over, no matter what new roommate Etho had, because he got along with everyone. He always seemed fond of Martyn though, so Etho got closer to him when the other man moved in.

And Grian.

Etho didn't really know where to start with Grian.

He didn't offer sympathy, he offered understanding. Etho didn't think Grian had fallen through the void before, but it sure felt like he understood. Neither of them talked about their past, to the point it confused the other two, but it didn't matter to Etho. Grian was someone who had Etho's back, no matter where he was or what he did.

And all it cost was him resisting a government he didn't care about anyways.

It was an easy decision. Etho did a lot to fight the government. He was a perfect member to Grian, because he didn't exist. He wasn't in the system, he was free to do what he wanted. And together, Etho almost forgot he was left to die in the field when Grian had found him.

He could almost forget the promise he made to Joel.

He could almost forget that Cleo knew he was alive, yet continued to live as though he died.

He could almost forget that Lizzie was still waiting for her husband to come home, that she had placed her faith in a faulty guardian angel.

And when he was dreaming, it almost felt real.

Almost.

And then he would wake up.

And Etho would still be on the couch at the resistance headquarters, the pipe still dripping in the corner and the air stale that he was used to.

And he would be alone.

[scar]

Etho, we need to go over your contract. Don't make this harder than it has to be.

.....

Scar GoodTimes considered himself a good person. He was kind to animals and people alike, was very conscious of his footprint made on the planet, and was all in all a good mayor.

He made sure he was *always* perceived as a good mayor.

After all, to continue to be in a position of power, a position where he can *continue* to be a good person, sometimes required him to do not-so-savory things. It was all about balancing the scales, something Scar was pretty good at doing. Until recently, it seemed.

Etho Slab.

Etho Slab was the one person who was making him tip the scales. And honestly, it was all his fault.

He should've known Bdubs would fall for the guy. Bdubs had such a...loyal heart, one that once it got attached to someone, would go to the ends of the earth for them. It was fine, totally wonderful for him to have that.

When it wasn't towards Etho- *fucking* -Slab.

Etho Slab, the man who seemed so...normal, when Scar had first met him. Someone who seemed like they were in a tough spot, someone who joined a government resistance because he was out of options. So Scar, curse his own bleeding heart, gave him more options. Be a bodyguard for his assistant, get out of jail free card after. Scar probably would've even offered him a job after the three weeks were done since Etho had done such a good job.

But Etho, Etho was a liar.

Etho Slab isn't who he appeared to be. Tango knew him as a red stone genius. Cleo, after a little bit of bribery to fix the outside of her shop after the big plant fiasco said that they knew him as an excellent fighter. And government records?

Said he didn't exist in this world.

No birth certificate. No drivers license. No form of government ID, anywhere.

Etho wasn't supposed to be here.

The man was sitting silently across from him, the dead of the night making his office seem much more ominous than Scar really intended it to. There was a video playing on his comm, Etho's hands curled into fists as he watched. It didn't feel good to be doing this, Scar wanted to say on record. It didn't feel good to put someone in a tough position just because he was a little bit different from other people. Scar knew first hand how frustrating it could be to be judged because of his appearance. But this wasn't about Etho's heritage, this was about his abilities that came with it. It was about him being in a world that he wasn't supposed to be in, it was about him inserting himself into this world's politics when he had no reason to be.

Tango agreed. Hesitantly, but he agreed. His police chief was in the room as well, looking queasy as Etho watched the video loop again. It had only been a day since the accident, too fresh for the video to be playing over and over, but Etho watched it anyway. The room was tense, overwhelmingly so, Tango's hand close to his gun and shaking. Scar didn't think it would lead to that. Etho may have killed someone in an enderman craze, but he didn't think it happened regularly. In fact, for however long Etho had been in this world, it had only happened once. It was an impressive amount of restraint. It also wasn't enough.

"So what?" Etho looked up from the comm as the video replayed again, the sound of screaming and bones snapping playing in the background as Scar reached for the device. "You caught me. I killed the guy. You gonna take me to jail? Wrap me all tight like you guys did to Jimmy?" Tango flinched at that, scowl growing as Etho forced himself to relax. "Or are you just gonna shoot me now? Shame I never got to see that building, Tango." Another jerk back.

Tango was conflicted about Scar's choice, he knew that. Scar also knew Tango wouldn't ever go against his final decision unless he was sure it was a bad choice. Whatever friendship the two of them could've had wasn't something Scar was worried about.

There was a reason Bdubs wasn't in the room.

There was a reason Bdubs didn't know about this meeting in the first place.

"We're not going to kill you Etho." Scar calmly said, turning off the comm mid snap and leaving the office completely silent. "I'm thinking more in the zone of...relocation."

Etho's glare grew, the void energy around him growing just a tad bit more before Scar watched him reign it in. It really was impressive, how much control he had on his emotions and magic. "I'm not leaving."

Tango cleared his throat, shoulders tense. "Don't you miss your home world? You've been living here for so long, don't you have people back home missing you?"

Scar raised an eyebrow as Etho's jaw tightened under his mask. "Kill one person and suddenly you want me gone."

"It's not sudden though, is it Etho?" Scar grinned, knowing it was more aggressive than friendly as Tango's hand gravitated back to his gun. "You've been hiding in this world for years. Enough that you have multiple reputations from multiple sources." Etho's eyes widened slightly before going back to normal. "Good at fighting, good at redstone, good at walking through the void without dying." Scar maintained eye-contact as Etho shifted in his seat. Good, he was wearing down. "Jack of all trades, hmm Etho?"

"Hardly qualifies for world relocation, in my opinion."

So unserious, to the bitter end. Scar let the nice guy act drop, Tango letting out a sigh before reaching into his pocket. He knew he was tipping the scales. "We're willing to let you stay Etho, but there are going to be changes to the contract we have." Etho's eye twitched, head ripping toward Tango where he grabbed his wrist. "One, we're going to put a magic nullifier on you." Tango didn't wait, snapping the metal around his wrist as Etho glared at the two of them. "Two, you will be working under Tango for the foreseeable future. Despite you actively lying to all of us, Tango seems to be under the impression you would be good at interrogation at the station. I'm willing to see if he's right."

Scar watched as Etho's glare went solely on Tango, his police chief biting his bottom lip before stepping back. "It would be the best outcome for everyone, Etho." Tango said softly, avoiding eye-contact. Etho's adam's apple bobbed. "I mean, you get to stay in this world, we keep an eye on you, you get to live freely."

It was interesting to watch, if not heart breaking, the way Scar could see him losing the fight. Whatever world he left Etho clearly didn't want to go back to, since the guy was actually considering changing his contract to what they were proposing. "And I mean, I know things are different now, but eventually we could be friends again, you know? This is all just precautionary measures, so stuff doesn't spiral out of control again!" Etho's eyes had dimmed from the fight leaving him, almost looking dead as he tilted his head at what Tango was saying. "I really did enjoy working with you Etho, it's just--"

"I don't recall us ever being friends, Tango." The fire on Tango's hair faded quickly, a stiff nod from him before Etho looked back at Scar. "I'm guessing there's more."

Scar really was a good person. Everything he did was for other people. It was to look after other people. Him repeating it didn't help the churning in his gut. "Starting today, you will no longer be BdoubleO's boyfriend." Etho closed his eyes as Scar felt the literal pain going through the other man's body. "You can continue your post of his bodyguard until the end of the gala, and then you will cut any and all unnecessary contact with him."

Sometimes, when it was quiet, Scar could remember very distant memories from the past. He didn't know if it was vex magic, or just him being silly, but he swore it was true. He didn't even know if they were his own memories by this point. The feeling of powdered snow, a laugh and a scream that never made it out of his throat. "This is for Bdubs protection, but I think you know that." Swallowing his own lump in his throat, Scar decided it was best to dig his claws in deep. "You already know how much trouble you bring."

Etho... The cuff on his arm lit up, a signal that the person wearing it was admitting more magical energy than normal before it went back to regular "I still get to watch over him?" Etho finally asked, voice cracking. Tango looked away.

"Till the gala, he is still in your care."

It was quiet, so quiet as Scar pushed the new contract towards him, ignoring the shaking fingers that grabbed it. It was hard, being a good person.

It was almost harder watching Etho sign the contract.

The man stood up as soon as he did, whole body tight like a wire as Scar took the paper with a sad smile. “Welcome to the crew, Etho.”

“Take your crew and shove it up your ass.” Tango reached for the door handle but Etho beat him to it, slapping his hand away before turning back to face them. “Anything else, *mayor* , or may I be excused?”

Scar waved his hand around. “Tango, please follow our guest out. You can go home after.” Tango nodded, jaw just as tight as the two of them left the building. He slumped in his seat as soon as he heard the elevator close. It was hard being a good leader. It was harder when you were faced with a decision that people would argue with, no matter what choice you ended up going for.

It was hardest when you were being watched making those decisions.

“Come on out Grian,” Scar called out tiredly, looking around his empty office. “Can we skip the hide and seek for one night? I’ve had a hard day.”

No reply.

“Grian?” Scar slowly rose from his desk as the doorknob shook. Did Tango lock it? “If you’re here to yell at me for blackmailing one of your own guys, you should really do it in person.” Scar made his way to the door. “Truely, so rude to make me talk to thin air like this-”

“But isn’t it a little funny?”

Scowling, Scar flipped around as Grain placed his feet on the desk, now sitting in the chair Scar was just in. Grian gave a little wave and grin before picking up Etho's contract, pretending to read it before promptly ripping it in two. "Scar, pal!" Grian pointed to the empty seat Etho was in. Scar slowly sat down, hands placed where Grian could see them as the Watchers' smile fell. "Let's have a chat."

Scar GoodTimes was a good person, but even he could tip the scales too far.

.....

"Are you serious? It's like you've never cooked a pizza roll before!"

Etho just shrugged, looking up from his comm with a lopsided smile that totally didn't make Bdubs want to giggle like some lovesick school girl before glancing back down. "It's not my fault I forgot to set the timer."

"It literally is." Bdubs huffed, looking at the pan with disdain where almost all of the pizza rolls were popped. "I said 'hey, Etho, set a timer for me?' and you said 'sure babe, i know you're working so hard even though you can't go to work right now, the least i could do is set a timer for you' and I said-

An arm wrapped around his waist, quickly turning him and pressing him up against the stove. "Pretty sure I didn't say all that." Etho grinned down at him, head tilting as Bdubs gave a deadpan look back. "I can't tell if you're actually mad at me or not."

"It's pizza rolls Etho!" Bdubs hit against his chest at the laugh Etho let out, glaring up at him. "I'm furious, they're all ruined."

Etho rolled his eyes, reaching around and picking up one of the half full pizza rolls before popping it in his mouth. It was hard to continue to glare as Etho chewed, pretending to consider something before swallowing. "Taste the same to me."

“Yeah, other than that they're messier now.” Etho rolled his eyes again, grabbing another one off the tray as Bdubs continued. “And the filling is all over the pan, which sucks to clean. You probably would’ve let them burn if I wasn’t here to uummM-”

Etho shoved the pizza roll in his mouth, ripping his fingers out of the way as Bdubs tried to bite down on them. Etho snickered at whatever face he was making as he reached around for another one. “Don’t even think about-” Another one popped into his mouth.

It went like that for a moment, every time Bdubs finished swallowing one, Etho was ready with the next. It was all just so unserious, Bdubs couldn’t help but laugh. “Etho, Etho you got to stop!” He managed to get out, turning his head as far as he could to avoid yet another pizza roll. Etho was chuckling quietly, popping the one he had in his hand in his own mouth, chewing and swallowing before offering him a grin. “You’re a menace to society.”

Still, the fact didn’t stop Bdubs from wrapping his arms around Etho’s neck, didn’t stop him from looking at his unmasked face with nothing but adoration. It was a slippery slope, falling for someone, and Bdubs could safely say he was falling at light speeds. It wasn’t as scary of a thought as he would assume, but it could be because of how obvious it was for both of them. Bdubs might wear his heart on his sleeve, but if you knew where to look, Etho did too. Not wearing his mask when it was just the two of them, actively cheering him up when he was upset, it was the little things.

“You still mad?” Etho asked quietly, the hand on his waist slipping a little lower onto his hip.

Bdubs tilted his head like he was considering it, popping his bottom lip out and enjoying the way Etho’s eyes immediately darted to them. “What if I am?” Bdubs asked, fingers tangling in the hair at the base of his neck.

“Guess I’ll have to find a way to make it up to you.” Etho raised an eyebrow as Bdubs laughed again, moving his hands to Etho’s jacket collar, pulling him down and promptly forgetting the argument with one kiss.

Etho wouldn’t talk to him.

It hurt, sure, but even more Bdubs was just confused.

When he came back home Wednesday morning, Bdubs had a whole list of things to yell at him about. Why didn't he call? Where was he? Can he please give him his number so Bdubs could finally text him and send him funny memes he saw? But as soon as the man walked in, all Bdubs wanted to do was cry with relief.

But Etho still had his mask on.

And Etho wouldn't look at him, at all.

And stupid fucking Etho told him that it wasn't going to work out, that they were destined to fail, and that they should give up before it even started.

So Bdubs yelled anyway. He yelled about everything, about nothing. About how Etho had led him on and how he wanted a new bodyguard and all that immature bullshit that came with a breakup that wasn't one, because they were never in a relationship to begin with.

And then they went to work.

Bdubs knew Scar could see that something was wrong. It was clearly written on his face, people dodging him left and right to avoid getting in his way. Etho was always an appropriate five feet away from him, watching the area but never talking if he could help it. It was frustrating, it was annoying and cruel and-

And Bdubs deserved the truth.

Because there was no way that Etho was pretending to like him. No way in hell! Bdubs was amazing, and he could tell for sure when someone was crushing on him. Etho checked all the boxes! Maybe that's why Bdubs didn't feel heartbroken, because there was no way that Etho was not in love with him. So why was he trying to distance himself?

It hit around one pm when Bdubs decided to do something about it.

The venue for the Gala was huge, so Bdubs took it upon himself to make sure they started decorating early. He dragged Etho along, since he had to follow him anyways, checking up on Cub and False's work before forcing them out to lunch. "I have a burger coupon that's about to expire." Etho didn't say anything.

The burger place was nice, it wasn't crowded, and best of all, Etho had to take off his mask to eat. Bdubs made sure to pick a secluded corner, taking the side facing all the people as Etho glared down at the meal. "I didn't order anything."

Oh, it was nice to hear him complain. Bdubs grinned, something smug slipping into the smile as Etho's eyes narrowed. "The coupon was a buy two for one. The correct response would be 'thank you so much Bdubs, you're the best not boyfriend ever since I'm having a weird emo moment right now.' and then i'll say-"

"Thank you."

Bdubs stopped talking, Etho staring at him with such sad eyes it made him want to cry too. What had happened since Monday afternoon? Why wouldn't Etho tell him anything? "No problem. Anything for you Etho."

Etho's hand tensed around the cup. "BdoubleO, I know-" Etho's voice crack along with Bdubs heart, the sound of his full name never hurting more than that. "I know you think that this is a good idea but-"

"But I have three 100% honest answers from you." Etho froze, hands crushing the side of the cup as Bdubs stared him down. It was a cheap trick, but it really felt like all he had left. "*Honest answers.*"

Etho looked down at his plate, eyes tracing over the burger and fries before looking back at him. Bdubs really hated doing this. He just looked so tired, and there was nothing Bdubs

could do without knowing what was going on. “You’re right. You have three questions.” Shaky hands came up to his mask, Etho taking a deep breath before pulling it down.

Bdubs couldn’t help the gasp he let out.

Etho’s face... What happened? Old scars split open, New ones ran along his cheeks as Etho took a shaky breath in, gauging his reaction before popping a fry in his mouth. “I have some questions too.” Etho finally stated, swallowing and grimacing like the action hurt. “Did you rat out Ren?”

This again. Bdubs rolled his eyes before looking back at Etho. Who was... He knew. Bdubs could tell he knew. The guilt came flooding back as Etho tilted his head. “Yeah. I told Tango where he’d be.”

Nodding, Etho took a bite of his burger, sleeve of his jacket sliding down a bit and flashing Bdubs a moment of metal. Eyes darting back to Etho’s face, Bdubs barely thought before pulling his sleeve down further. A magic nullifier. Etho barely reacted, continuing to eat as Bdubs sat back in shock. “What *are* you?” It came out much more accusatory than Bdubs meant it, a flash of hurt in Etho’s eyes before he swallowed.

“Is that one of the three questions?” Etho asked, raising an eyebrow as Bdubs gripped onto the table.

This was all such bullshit. He was just trying to help Etho, why was he making it so much harder? “If you’re not willing to answer that honestly, then I don’t think you’ll answer anything honestly!”

The nullifier flashed with a spike of power, Etho putting down the half eaten burger before directing his attention solely on Bdubs. “Something dangerous.” Etho said, raising an eyebrow like he was challenging Bdubs into asking more questions.

“Right. Everything can be dangerous, if you put it in the right circumstance.” Bdubs scoffed, also directing his attention. “What are you Etho? You can’t be that dangerous. We’ve been

living together for Void sake, I think I would notice if you were life threatening. It's not like you murder people randomly or caused the damn enderman attack--"

Etho's eyes flashed purple, which shouldn't happen with the bracelet he was still wearing, mouth twisting into a bitter smile that didn't fit his face at all. Bdubs felt himself sink more into the booth. "And if I did? What if I did cause the enderman attack?" Etho leaned closer, eyes dark and almost hungry as he looked Bdubs up and down. "What if," his face broke into a larger smile, one that seemed to stretch along his mouth too far, the side of his lips cracking under the pressure. "I was the enderman?"

That...made a lot more sense for what Bdubs was seeing.

The two stared at each other, Etho's smile dropping as Bdubs struggled to breath. Etho wouldn't kill him. Etho...Etho liked him enough to not kill him. They had slept in the same bed, they had kissed and done other couple stuff that made it rude to kill someone. Right? That's how it worked, right? If anything, Etho acting like this was a defense mechanism, something to protect himself from something else. Bdubs just didn't know what.

Taking a shaky breath, Bdubs sat up straight, reaching slowly to where Etho's hands were clenched around the table and placing his own on top of him. "I would say you had an unfair advantage in killing that warden." Etho froze, mouth still slightly open as Bdubs tried to breath right. "I would say that you had an unfair advantage in killing those guys from the clean up crew. I would say you're stupid if you think that's going to make me not like...not enjoy your company."

Bdubs could see Etho thinking. It was almost like he could see the little cogs in his head turning, trying to figure out what to say next as Bdubs started to force his hand to relax on the table. "There's one, then."

He was going to scream in this stupid burger place, why was Etho being so difficult? Looking down at his place, Bdubs tapped the back of Etho's hand twice before pulling back. "I feel like this is unfair, Etho." Bdubs finally said, shaking his head as Etho opened his mouth to interrupt. "I just want to be with you, you know?" A pained look shot across Etho's face before he looked down to avoid eye-contact. "In whatever form you wanted. And I would stop pressing if I thought that you didn't want to be with me, but I don't. I don't think you're that good of an actor, Etho."

“I can’t.” Came the predictable reply, Etho pushing the plate away from him. “I *can’t*.” He repeated once Bdubs didn’t say anything else. “You don’t understand, and I don’t think you’re going to anytime soon.” The smile Etho offered was heart shattering as he stood up, tugging his mask up before starting to leave.

“Then explain it to me!” Bdubs scrambled after him, leaving some money on the table of a tip as Etho pushed open the door. “We can make this work! I know you’re thinking we can’t, but I promise we can! Whatever your biology you have isn’t going to make me like you less or-”

Etho gripped his forearm far too tightly as he pulled them behind a building. Bdubs breath was forced out of him as Etho slammed him into the wall, pinning his arms above his head and leaving him speechless as Etho ripped his mask down. “This is for your own good Bdubs. This isn’t some ‘I’m too dangerous’ Twilight bullshit. Sure, I’m the enderman that attacked, but you would have to be stupid to think that would keep me away from you.”

Bdubs eyes darted towards the bracelet before looking back at Etho, who leaned in closer, free hand pinning his hips against the wall when he tried to move. He was completely stuck. “Okay, what is this about then?” Bdubs asked breathlessly.

“Contracts.” Etho mumbled against their almost touching lips, ignoring the way Bdubs tried to lean forward to connect them. “Contract changes, more importantly.”

This was all so confusing, but Bdubs really couldn’t care when Etho was so close to kissing him. It was more important to get his not-boyfriend’s lips on him, even if there were more important things to talk about. “Hmmm...” Bdubs leaned closer, only to pout when Etho pulled back. “Etho, I’m getting mixed messages here.”

“Scar changed the contract.” Bdubs felt his eyes widen as Etho took a step back. “I have till the Gala and then I’m supposed to cut ties with you. The fake... dating, or whatever we’re doing has to stop, because if it doesn’t I’m-” Etho clamped his mouth shut, taking another step back as Bdubs reached for him. “I’m sorry, Bdubs.”

Etho never seriously apologized. It was something Bdubs had learned quickly after meeting the other man. He said sorry often, but if he was actually sorry he was more of a man of action than someone with words. The mask came back up, along with the metaphorical walls as Bdubs watched Etho take another step back. "I don't get it. What could Scar threaten you with that would be more important than?"

"I'll get my stuff from your house later tonight, Scar will message you with the new bodyguard rotation list later today." it was like Etho wasn't listening to him anymore, all closed off as Bdubs struggled not to cry. "I'll be with you from ten am to ten pm, after that a group of cops will rotate the hours I'm not there."

Bdubs reached for his wrist to turn him around. "Etho, wait-"

"I really am sorry this happened, Bdubs." Etho said softly, so much unlike himself it made Bdubs want to vomit. His hand gently took Bdubs hand off of his wrist, letting it drop to the side with a quiet thump. "I can't let something happen to you too. Give me a second to clear the area and we should be good to go."

And then Etho left him.

It wasn't good enough, Bdubs thought as he watched Etho leave the area. It wasn't a good enough explanation. Bdubs was pissed, he knew that for sure. Pissed at Scar for pulling whatever he thought he was pulling with the contracts, pissed at Etho for going along with it. Void, he was even angry at himself for not understanding the clues that were right in front of him, for not noticing Etho's genetic makeup sooner.

"That," Bdubs shoulder shot up as a new voice came from behind him, a slow clapping filling the air. "Was honestly better than what major TV stations are coming up with nowadays. You two should be proud."

It was like he was frozen in place, the voice clearly full of disdain and anger. "Joel." Bdubs managed to get out, eyes trained on the spot where Etho had left. Whatever he was doing, Bdubs could really use some help right now. The cold feeling of a gun against the back of his head had him jerking forward, the sound of the safety clicking off having him freezing again. "Can't say I'm that happy to hear your voice."

“BdoubleO.” The man sounded so cheeky, a clear smile on his face as he grinded the gun harder into his head. “It’s funny that you would say that, since I’m sure your ex-boyfriend would say the same thing.” Bdubs went to flip around, but Joel quickly kicked the back of his knees out, making the man land on the cement.

“Joel, don’t hurt him too much.”

Oh shit.

Light green converse came into his vision as Joel gripped onto his hair, tearing his head back to look at his attackers head on. Scott just smiled at him, crouching down to his level. “How are you doing today, Bdubs? He asked, like there wasn’t a gun pressed to his head, like Scott himself wasn’t capable of killing him with a whisper.

“Just peachy, now that you two are here.” If Bdubs was going down, he wasn’t going down without a fight. Wiggling his fingers, Bdubs felt a single weed wedged in between a crack in the cement before connecting himself to it. It wasn’t good odds, but maybe it would buy him time till-

Scott tilted his head, like he was reading his mind before letting out a sigh. “I’m glad my presence is so well received.” He stood up, letting out an exaggerated groan before flashing another smile. “You know Bdubs, humans are so...easy.” Bdubs cringed as Joel yanked his hair harder. “Easy in every way! To seduce, to figure out what they want,” His eyes flashed red, walking over to the weed and pausing. “To figure out how to crush the one hope they had left.” Scott stepped down on it, grinding the soul of his shoe into the stem and killing the flower.

Bdubs barely recognized the scream that he let out, the pain shooting up his spine and making him collapse onto the ground. Joel let him go, feet barely in view as his vision swam. “Did that hurt Bdubs?” Joel ripped him off the ground, Scott giving him an easy smile that didn’t match the way his hand gripped onto his cheeks. “Good.” The man patted Bdubs cheek twice, the condescending action making him want to fight more even though he knew it would only make the situation worse. “Joel, get him tied up and into the portal before your little friend comes back.”

“Too late.” Bdubs looked up willingly this time, Etho stepping up the the three of them, hands tucked into his pockets and relaxed like he was having a casual conversation. Joel's hand tensed in his hair again, but it didn't feel the same as before. “Joel, nice to see you're still alive.” Despite the way Etho was talking, Bdubs could feel how nervous he was. His eyes darted towards Bdubs, offering a nod that he was supposed to feel reassuring.

“Can't say the same.”

Scott huffed, looking irritated as Etho cracked his neck. “Joel, we don't have time for this.”

“Why take him?” Etho asked as soon as Scott closed his mouth. Etho raised an eyebrow at the confused look Scott offered him back. “You want to kill him, don't you? To avenge Martyn, right? So kill him here.”

Bdubs had a few complaints about that, actually. “Bdubs would like to argue against that-”

“I'm not trying to *kill* him to avenge Martyn. I need a vessel for Martyn.” Bdubs really didn't like that sound of that.

Etho strangely didn't look too confused by that statement, head tilting as the portal started to wobble. “What's wrong with Jimmy?” Scott's body froze, eyes flashing red as Joel took a step back. “Not the vessel you wanted?”

“Jimmy was never a permanent vessel. He knows that.”

Etho's eyes lit up, something almost dark swirling in them as Joel took another step back. “Does he?”

Bdubs slowly got on his feet, Joel taking another step towards the portal as Scott flashed red again. “Jimmy understands his role in all of this.” Bdubs was sure that Etho was grinning behind his mask as Scott stepped towards him. “You should learn your own role, Etho.”

“Scott, we need to get out of here.” Joel’s voice cut through, the portal wobbling more the farther Scott got from it. “Etho’s just antagonizing you.”

“Get Bdubs through the portal then, Joel.” Scott bit out, harsh and nothing like any of them were used to. Scott continued to stare at Etho, who maintained the glare, stepping even closer. “Joel! Get him through the portal, now!”

Joel’s eyes darted towards the portal, now flashing in and out of existence before looking at Etho. “Joel, we can still work something out.” Etho’s voice came out as a warning more than a compromise, Joel flinching at his voice. “Bdubs, step towards me-”

The gun was back, now pointed at Etho as the whole group froze. “You know what, *Etho?*” Joel hissed out, eyes darting towards Scott, then Bdubs, then Etho who slowly put his hands above his head. “We should work something out. Get in the portal.”

“What?” Bdubs tried to move towards Etho, but found he was stuck in place. Scott gave him a wink. Bdubs flipped him off. “You can’t reverse kidnap him!”

“Come with me or I kill Bdubs right here.”

Etho finally looked at Joel, jaw tight like he wanted to say something but wouldn’t let him out. The two of them stared at each other, a mix of emotions swirling in their eyes that Bdubs couldn’t figure out. Did they know each other before this? “Fine. As long as the two of you leave Bdubs alone.” It was quiet, Bdubs opening his mouth to protest only to find Scott had taken his speech away too.

No, no no no-

Scott scoffed, turning back towards the portal with a wave. “As long as Martyn has a vessel. Get *Etho* in the portal then.” Scott looked back at Bdubs with a condescending smile. “Sorry about the confusion BdoubleO. Do tell Scar we will be in attendance.” As soon as the magic

user was through the portal he could feel his knees give out, his body overwhelmed with everything going on as Etho caught him.

Joel looked shocked by his outburst, probably because it worked in the first place, flicking the safety back on as Bdubs sank to the ground. "Etho-"

"I'm coming." Even with the upperhand, Joel took a step back. "Bdubs, look at me." Whatever magic Scott had used on him was making his brain foggy, eyesight blurry as Etho took his face in both of his hands. "When Grian asks, tell him I went AWOL, okay?"

Grian? Why the fuck was Grian? Why was Etho going so easily with the enemy? What was going on? Bdubs tried to say something, *anything*, but it was like he forgot how to speak. Joel's face didn't show how he was feeling, Etho kissing his forehead softly through his mask before leaning closer. "I'm sorry I've been an ass today." Etho whispered into his ear as Bdubs tried to grab onto his sleeves. "I'm gonna fix this, I promise."

Etho pulled out his grasp, straightening his jacket out before willingly walking over to the portal. Joel looked surprised, but quickly scowled at him, hitting him on the back too hard before mumbling something under his breath about Etho always being a over confident fucker before he stepped into the portal. Bdubs eyes widened. This was perfect! Joel and Scott had both entered the portal before Etho, now they just had to figure out how to close it and-

Etho shook his head like he knew what Bdubs was thinking, putting one leg in the portal before looking him dead on. "I promise Bdubs. I'm going to fix this."

And then Etho was gone.

And Bdubs-

Well, Bdubs didn't like being alone.

Chapter End Notes

oh, the boys are in for it now!

Would people mind if I switch POVs more often? Maybe more changes in one chapter? Etho and Joels relationship is one I've had such a hard time writing but I've enjoyed immensely at the same time. I'm excited that we finally got Etho's whole story, even though now Bdubs is really sad and could use a hug (or a good free punch scar in the face for metaling)

I feel like its a good time to say that I've never written a completely good character, they always have to be a little morally grey. But I also feel like every single character also feels like they are justified in doing what they're doing, if that makes sense.

also, shout out to this discord I'm in, it was really cool to see ya'll recommending my fic. Felt very nice to see you guys liking it haha, even though I'm too awkward to say anything. You guys are the best. Anyways, hopefully the next chapter will be more fun and of course, thanks for reading!

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Pov: the jail cell team

Chapter Notes

heyo! no tag changes, but just a reminder that this fic does have some body-snatching events in it and the fun graphic depictions of violence warning.

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

Etho considered himself a normal person.

Normal people sometimes get kidnapped, right? Sure, they probably didn't willingly go through a portal after his kidnappers did, but he was sure he wasn't the first person to do so. There was something almost comforting about it. It was familiar the dripping of a pipe, the inherent cold came with being underground. Being chained to one of the bed posts in his cell was new, but at the same time not. Etho was sure that he had been in this situation before, if he looked through all the worlds he had been in.

What did feel new, was the way Joel watched him from the other side of the cell. Etho hadn't been able to get a good look at him, but he knew something was different.

Etho didn't think his face had looked like that before.

There was a joke there, on the tip of his tongue, but it didn't feel like the right time. Besides, Joel was much better at dishing out then taking. The man sat outside of his cell, mouth tucked into a tight line as he watched Etho. It was almost amusing, since the two of them knew there was no way Etho was going anywhere like this.

Well, there was one way, but it all depended on if Bdubs talked to Grian or not.

“You get demoted to guard duty?” Etho asked, eyes trained on the ceiling, wishing he had a ball or something to play with. Maybe Joel would sneak him a pen so he could draw on the walls, he was pretty sure he was good at art in one of the worlds.

If he was honest with himself, Etho was scared shitless.

He could act tough, he could make smart ass comments and try his best to fight back, but in the end he was a sitting duck. Either Grian and Bdubs got him out of this mess, or Etho’s head became the house of two voices. Maybe they would just kill him and somehow stuff Martyn in his body? Etho wasn’t sure on the technicality of body snatching. It would almost be poetic, Martyn dying because they thought he was a resistance member, Martyn taking over his body in retaliation almost.

Etho really wasn’t that big of a fan of poetry anyways.

“You seem to have everyone convinced you’re some genius. Everyone else is scared of you.” Joel said casually, looking up from the switchblade he was playing with to sneer at him. “But you’re still the lost puppy Lizzie took in, aren’t you Etho?”

It was as painful of an insult for Joel as it was for Etho. Joel was never one to stop when he was ahead, always had to be miles in front of the other player, no matter what cost. Etho was starting to think the cost was his mind. “You know how she used to respond after you called me that, Joel.” Etho said anyway, because it was familiar and because he was just like Joel. He could also say that he was losing his mind too.

“Can’t say I do, it’s been a few years.”

Now that just wasn’t fair.

“I wasn’t the one who left.”

There was no reply, just the sound of Joel setting the knife down. It was such a weird energy, Etho thought, finally sitting up on his bed to look at the man completely. It was weird in that it was almost casual, like no time had passed and the two of them were just having a normal conversation. Etho wasn't afraid of Joel. It was a stupid thing to think, since Joel clearly had a death sentence waiting for him, but all Etho could feel towards him apathy and a sense of responsibility.

Scott still scared him though.

People were scared of things they didn't understand, Etho was a first hand example of that. Being an enderman hybrid meant he was dangerous, it meant that he was a cold-blooded killer to other people. People would think because he had dealt with that his whole life he would be more relaxed, but if anything, it made him more cautious about people like him.

People that other people didn't understand.

Because there was a *reason* people didn't understand.

People didn't understand Etho because he physically couldn't stop himself from killing people sometimes. People didn't understand Cleo because she continued to live even when she never took a breath. People didn't understand Scott because-

Well, Etho was still trying to figure that out.

Because he was powerful, he was extremely powerful. Etho had never sensed so much magic in one person since he first met Grian, and even then it seemed excessive. It was like the world itself bent to the will of Scott, it was almost like he was a god. Like he could control the breeze, the literal thing Etho listened to the most.

A breeze.

“You think you’re smart.”

It wasn't said antagonistic at all, a simple comment as Etho watched Cleo and Bdubs leave the front of the coffee shop. To his credit, Etho didn't flinch as the portal guy slid into the booth, the other man slipping away before Etho could catch where he went. Etho pushed down his panic, tilting his head at the comment. “I suppose.”

The guy in front of him...seemed to glow. It wasn't like it was noticeable unless you were looking for it, but the air around him seemed to light up. “Scott Smajor. You are?” The man held out his hand, Etho taking it after a moment before quickly letting go.

“Etho. I'm pretty sure you were throwing...light at me last time we saw each other.” Scott lowered his hand, tilting his head like he was trying to remember, like trying to kill someone was a casual activity he did. “With Ren?” Etho added, watching as Scott's eyes cleared up.

“Ah yes!” Scott smiled, something warm and bone chilling as he tapped four times on the table. “I thought I recognized you.” Etho nodded once eyes drifting to where his Scott's finger scratched against the wood. One, two, three. It felt intentional, but Scott didn't seem to be thinking about his actions. Etho tried to refocus. “You know Etho, I was really impressed by your abilities on the roof.” Two more scratches.

Etho leaned back, tearing his eyes away from Scott's hand to look at him directly. The tapping had to be on purpose, but just in case... “My ‘abilities?’ Like what? Being able to withstand blows?” A single tap against the surface.

Tilting his head, Scott's smile just seemed to get more relaxed. “Exactly! It's impressive for any mortal to withstand that many blows. I wasn't pulling any punches.” Etho's eyes darted to where Scott's hand paused. Then, two scratches, one tap.

Morse code.

Etho silently thanked the version of Joel he still liked for making him learn it one time when they were wandering in the void. It was a lot of hand tapping back then, but Etho had used it more times than he thought he would, which was a fat zero. Scott was waiting for his

response, Etho was waiting for the next letter. In the back of his mind, Etho wondered if Joel was the one to teach Scott Morse code when they banded together.

Three scratches.

Go .

“I don’t know if that’s a compliment or not.” Etho finally said, his tiny smile hopefully hidden behind his mask as Scott’s seemed to waver. “Thank you, I guess, coming from a mortal.”

Four taps.

H

“You phrased that weird, I have to say.” Etho continued, not minding the way Scott’s eyes seemed to darken, the way the man’s shoulders seemed to tense as he looked down at his own hand. Three scratches. “For a mortal, I mean.”

O

“I’m not wrong.” Scott’s smile had faded, looking up from his hand to Etho. “Though, things aren’t always what they seem, are they Etho?” Two scratches.

M

Etho reached over, putting his hand over Scott’s and forcing his smile down. “No, I guess not.” Etho tapped once against the back of Scott’s hand, watching as his eyes widened slightly.

E

“I do consider myself pretty smart. And I’m not going home anytime soon Scott.”

“I should’ve known.” Scott ripped his hand out from under him, looking almost unsettled as he glared at Etho. “Some kind of end-child then?”

Etho raised an eyebrow as Scott rubbed the back of his hand like Etho had burned him. “Enderman hybrid.”

“Annoying, end-children are so...annoying.” What was this guy going on about? Scott looked outside the window before he abruptly stood up. “They never listen to physical commands, always have to say it.” it was like he wasn’t talking to Etho anymore, looking down at him like he was some bug that needed to be squished. “I had fun distracting you Etho, hope you reach your boyfriend in time.”

Fuck.

Etho tried to stand up as Scott grinned at him. “Stay.”

It was like his body froze, eyes wide and gut dropping as Scott let out a low whistle. “At least end-children are good at following verbal orders, huh?” Tapping the back of Etho’s hand twice, Scott left the booth with a wave. “See you around Etho, don’t get into too much trouble without me, k? I love seeing the beat up look on you.”

“Scott, wait-”

Scott left the store, opening a portal right outside of the door. With a wink and a wave, Etho watched desperately as it closed behind him.

Shit.

Etho was so stupid! It was like he was superglued to the booth, hand frozen where he had reached for Scott's hand in the first place, his fingertips barely twitching. Who knew how long it would be before Etho would be able to move again?

Glancing down, Etho's gut sank further as he noticed Bdubs keys and wallet sitting on the seat next to him. Bdubs probably didn't make it that far then, meaning if he could figure out how to move he could reach him. His fingers moved again, just a bit more than before. Void, this would take all night to be able to move again.

Behind him, Etho could feel her creeping up before she said anything. "What did you rope him into?" Cleo asked casually. That was good, it meant that there weren't too many people left in the store if she felt like it was safe enough to talk about stuff out loud.

However, Etho didn't have time for this. He didn't have time for someone who left him to die, for someone who promised they would be there for him-

There wasn't time.

"He killed my roommate, he isn't completely innocent either, Cleo." Etho managed to get out through gritted teeth. "It doesn't matter anyways. That magic user froze me and I can't seem to move. Got any ideas for that?"

"Why would I share ideas with you?"

"Because you care about Bdubs." Etho responded on a whim. He didn't know, but it was a pretty educated guess. He didn't think anyone who knew Bdubs at least a little bit wouldn't like him. "You care about him and he's in trouble."

"I don't-" He could hear Cleo sigh behind him. "You're not gonna like it."

“I already don’t like talking to you Cleo, just do it.”

There was a sharp intake from behind him, Etho closing his eyes at the pained reaction. He wasn’t the one to leave, he was left. He was the victim, he was the victim, he was the-

“Open your eyes.”

Etho opened them, Cleo now on the other side of the booth where Scott had been, knife in hand as Etho raised an eyebrow at her. “To finish a spell, a starchild will have to seal it with a motion. If you ‘break’ the motion, the spell will be off.”

Great, a starchild. Whatever that meant. “My hand. Two taps.” Etho managed to move his fingers just a bit more as Cleo nodded.

It was a shame they didn’t work out, Etho thought as Cleo opened the knife up. They used to work so well together in stressful situations. “Do you-” Cleo gulped.

“Hey, you wanted to stab me before all of this anyways.”

Cleo’s jaw tightened, along with their grip on the knife. “For what it’s worth, I do feel bad about leaving you there.”

Etho didn’t tell her it meant jack-shit, since the knife went through his hand right after.

“For what it’s worth, Etho, I do feel bad about leaving you there.”

Predictable.

The scar that ran threw his palm almost tingled. Etho was lucky to have faster regeneration then normal humans, he supposed. “That’s funny, Cleo said the same thing before they stabbed through my hand so I could save Bdubs from your crazy boss.”

“Scott isn’t my boss.” Joel immediately argued, like that was the point Etho wanted him to focus on. The void burn on his face shouldn’t make Etho feel good, but how he felt wasn’t something he was willing to change. It took up almost half of Joel’s face, dark and scorched like how the ground of the void was. Etho guessed he really didn’t have a good enough grip during that last fall. “Cleo was so sure you were dead, or as good as, and we had just woken up and my face was bleeding-”

“Yeah, I’m sure your face was bleeding real bad.” Joel’s jaw clamped shut as a surge of energy flowed through Etho, his stupid wristband lighting up. This was all so stupid, hadn’t he gone through enough? Hadn’t he given enough for other people that he could rest? “I’m sure *your* face hurt back then. It’s too bad that they don’t make a mask to hide that much scarring, huh?” Joel looked taken back, like he wasn’t expecting this reaction as Etho felt an unhinged laugh start to build up. “And I’m sure Cleo and you checked my *still breathing body* before you decided to leave me. I’m so glad you guys decided to agree on one *fucking* thing, and it was leaving me to rot!”

Etho took a shaky breath in, watching the guilt and aggression pass through Joel’s face. There wasn’t anything any of them could do. Cleo had made a new life, Joel had found a new team and Etho-

And Etho was still forced to be the sacrificial lamb.

Joel’s jaw was tight as he stood up, eyes looking towards the only exit as he grabbed on to the bars of his cell. “I’m not going to apologize.”

Again, predictable.

“I’m not expecting you too.”

The funny thing about life is that no matter what happens to you, it continues. The pipe continued to drip at the annoying rate. The people outside of his cell continued to talk in low voices, like Etho would be curious enough to listen. Joel would continue to dig his fingers into every nook and cranny of Etho's life no matter how many times Etho tried to leave him behind and Etho would continue to haunt Joel as a cruel reminder that everything he wanted was just out of reach.

"Predictable." Joel actually said out loud, a honestly awful grin spreading on his face like they were both in on an inside joke.

"You? Always." Etho felt his own smile spread, because in all honesty, both of them were.

The thing with a broken friendship that ran as deep as theirs was that there wasn't anywhere to run. Etho would never not know what Joel looked like when he sobbed about missing Lizzie, Joel would never forget how it felt to almost die next to Etho. No matter how hard Etho tried, Etho couldn't forget Joel. It was like a string was tied around their throats, choking them with memories and promises not yet completed.

Maybe that's why Etho wasn't afraid of Joel. Joel wasn't going to kill him, because it would be like killing himself.

It wasn't ever going to be forgiveness, simply acceptance and aggressive actions of moving forward together till one of them died. Etho would never forgive Joel for what he's done, because Joel would never forgive Etho.

A match made in hell.

"Do you regret leaving me?"

Joel tilted his head, fingers drumming against the bars of the cell before shrugging.
"Sometimes." Etho nodded, looking down at his sleeves instead of maintaining eye contact.
"Do you regret dating Cleo?"

“Sometimes.”

There was a pause, which never meant anything good when I came to Joel as the voice outside of the room grew louder. It was most likely an argument, now that Etho could hear it better, but he wasn't interested in the conversation much anyways. “So what do we do now Etho?” Joel asked, leaning closer to the bars, like he was trying to get closer, like Etho was ready to let him back into his life just like that.

“I guess it depends if you're gonna get me out of this or not.”

“You know that won't be easy.” Joel's mouth twisted, eyes darting towards the door. “I'm a little deep mate, besides the fact I don't believe that you're willing to leave this world anytime soon.”

Etho pulled his mask down, showing him the tiny grin he had that meant nothing good. “You're probably right in that assumption.” Joel rolled his eyes, but Etho could see the way he slumped. If Etho stopped to really think about it, all Joel wanted was to go home, back to the world that had someone who loved him for all his flaws.

Not Etho's problem that Joel was hard to love in any other world.

Unnecessary cruelty ran in some people's veins. Unnecessarily cruel, something Cleo would say about him back in her world. It was always said with a warm smile, a kind glint in her eyes when Etho would feel bad about killing someone. He felt a lot more back then, much more inclined to murder. This world had really mellowed him out, now that he was thinking about it. But the instinct was still there, the way it would be easy to tell Joel he was never going to go home, to voice his opinions about the other man where it would quite possibly break him beyond repair.

Instead, Etho laid back down on the bed.

As stupid as Joel pretended to be, he was able to read social cues just fine. It was always a toss up if he would act on the said social cues, but the point still stood. There was the sound

of Joel moving back to his chair, conversation clearly over as Etho took a deep breath in. “Do you regret letting me stay with you and Lizzie?”

It was a disconnect, his voice from his body. He didn’t even know why he asked. Joel let out a deep breath of his own, something pained and tired and overwhelmingly fond. “I wouldn’t be alive if I kicked you out. But sometimes.”

Predictable.

.....

Let it be known that Jimmy Solidarity was *not* dead weight. Jimmy could do a lot of cool stuff! He was a pretty good flier, had really good aim and recently could hear dead people talking to him in his head.

That last one wasn’t really a plus.

It wasn’t what Jimmy had thought would happen when he fell. Scott had been kind of vague about the whole thing and by the time the three of them got to where a void hole had opened up Jimmy had a feeling neither of them were telling him everything.

And yet he still let himself get pushed in.

It wasn’t like he was expecting it, so to speak, but it wasn’t as much of a surprise as Tango seemed to think it was. He means, it *was* Scott and Joel. The two of them were always up to something, and if they weren’t telling Jimmy everything, it meant it probably involved him somehow.

Involving a dead guy wasn’t really what Jimmy thought was going to happen. That part was a surprise.

His void opening powers was something Scott wasn't expecting, which was crazy because Scott seemed to know and expect everything. When the two of them came back to the hill they had pushed him off of a few days later, Joel seemed almost...scared of him. Which was a weird experience since the guy didn't seem scared of anything.

One bar trip later, Jimmy understood why.

He wasn't really expecting to meet Etho in the alleyway, because he wasn't expecting Bdubs to have weird plant powers that made him harder to fight. And he *really* wasn't expecting Etho and Bdubs working together, or that Etho would have some connections to the police. Scott must have been so disappointed.

Scott left him to get caught by the cops.

Then the cops messed up his wings.

Jimmy was still salty about that.

Not at Tango though, it wasn't Tango's fault he couldn't see everything that happened in his precinct. If anything, Jimmy had a newfound respect for the guy because he always seemed to be running around like a chicken with its head cut off. Of course, it was probably easier to forgive him since it was *Tango*, but as long as Jimmy didn't think about that fact for too long he was fine.

Tango was now sitting across from him, back in the magic containment unit, but unlike the first time Jimmy's wings were able to move. The police captain had basically woken him up from his midday snooze (sue him, there wasn't much to do in a cell) with takeout.

"What's this?" Tango didn't say anything, just placed the container in front of him before handing him some chopsticks.

"If you attempt to stab me with these, I *will* reattach the nullifiers to your wings."

Jimmy raised an eyebrow, but took the chopsticks. Tango seemed a bit more settled after that, opening his container. It wasn't like this was necessarily weird, but it was out of the blue. Usually Tango would pop in right before he left for the night, say something that made Jimmy either glare or blush before leaving. What happened the first night watch definitely put a damper on whatever was going on with them though, Jimmy could feel it in the stunted conversations they would have.

Jimmy didn't consider himself a greedy person. Not like Scott was, or Joel, in some aspects. He really didn't need that much to survive. Scott always made sure he had enough...mostly.

Tango...wasn't something Jimmy needed. Scott made sure to remind him that regularly.

Slowly opening his own container, Jimmy watched Tango relax even more as the smell hit his nose. Void, it had been so long that Jimmy had actual good food. The tiny chirp Jimmy let out was embarrassing, but not enough to distract himself from the deliciousness in front of him.

The small chuckle Tango let out at the noise might have been.

It wasn't his fault! Anyone within a close radius would know that Tango had a pull to him. People liked Tango, he was a likable guy. And sure, maybe Jimmy liked him a bit more than other people do, but that's just admiration. Tango was good at his job, was smart and funny and sometimes when he laughed he would give Jimmy a look that made his wings want to puff up with excitement because there was no way Tango gave that look to anyone else.

A small crush was fine, Jimmy reasoned. Nothing more, nothing less. It was just fun to tease him, Jimmy had tried to reason with Scott after the first couple of times the two had talked. It wasn't anything serious, he had denied after Joel caught him on a coffee outing with the other man. He didn't mean anything to him, Jimmy had screamed as Scott offered him a way out.

Jimmy still didn't understand why he didn't take the way out.

It was right there, Scott had literally presented it to him with no strings attached. But Joel was there, and so was Martyn and his *stupid* boyfriend. It felt like they were all waiting for him to take the easy way out. That Scott was wanting him to leave, after Jimmy had placed so much of his life and soul into their group.

And yet Tango offered him the same thing.

And Scott had not come back for him.

Martyn was getting annoyed, Jimmy could tell. It took a lot of energy out of the ghost to talk apparently, so Martyn usually saved it till he could talk with Jimmy during the night or when he thought it would be funny to mess up Jimmy's life more than it already was. Mouthing off to cops, keeping him awake into the late late hours of the night, it was getting tiring. Jimmy hoped Scott had a plan since he really didn't want to keep Martyn in his head forever.

If he didn't, at least Joel said he had one.

World jumping. And all they needed was the one guy Jimmy had accidentally pissed off in the alleyway.

"You look tired." Jimmy looked up from his almost empty takeout box with a frown, realizing that since he zoned out he had pretty much finished the food he was trying to savor. Tango tilted his head like he was looking at his face from a different angle. "Is there anything I can do to make it more...sleepy, in here?"

Jimmy couldn't help the small bubble of laughter as he shook his head. "This is a prison Tango. I'm not meant to be comfortable." Tango frowned, but after a minute started to place his food into Jimmy's takeout container. Jimmy could almost cry. "Besides, Scott should be coming for me at this point now."

Tango paused.

It was always like this, when Jimmy brought up Scott. He knew it was a bad habit, almost as bad as falling for Tango in the first place but he couldn't help it. Scott was just such a fundamental part of his life. He couldn't not talk about him. "What if he doesn't come?" Tango finally asked, voice just a little lower than normal as he continued to shovel his food onto Jimmy's side.

"He will."

"But what if he doesn't?"

Jimmy looked down at the container, now almost as full as it was at the start before looking back up at Tango. "Then you're stuck with me, I guess."

The small smile on Tango's face was enough to get over the embarrassment.

It wasn't meant to sound like that, Jimmy promises. It wasn't meant to give either of them hope, because Jimmy or Tango couldn't afford hope. But Tango had offered him an out...and he looked really good with hope in his eyes, like Jimmy had offered him something amazing when all he did was offer more time with him, something people didn't really appreciate.

I swear to the Watchers, if you take him up on that offer, I will personally kill us myself next time I'm in control of the body.

Fucking Martyn.

Tango was saying something, but Jimmy couldn't seem to focus as Martyn's thoughts seemed to be louder than anything spoken out loud. Jimmy smiled something tense as Tango tilted his head. "You good buddy?"

Void, wasn't that a loaded question.

“Yeah, yeah!” Tango didn’t look convinced as he raised an eyebrow. “I’m distracted, thoughts are a little loud or whatever.”

Jimmy didn’t know why he was lying, maybe it was a habit by this point. Tango just shook his head, closing up his empty box before nodding towards Jimmy. “Finish that. I have to take everything out of this room afterwards and the food isn’t that good cold anyways.”

“Ah man, does that mean I can’t keep the chopsticks?”

Ah shoot. Jimmy felt his body surge, an overwhelming sense of nausea flooding over him as his own soul was pushed to the back of his mind. It was sickening, to be forced into the back of his own body as soon as Martyn got enough strength built up to do so. Jimmy wishes he paid more attention to his rambling when he was alive so maybe he would understand what was going on now. Tango looked mildly amused, which was rude because that wasn’t Jimmy saying that at all, looking around the room before shaking his head. “There is no way in hell you get to keep the chopsticks.”

It was almost a disconnect, Jimmy’s mind from his body as Martyn made his face frown. He knew for a fact that Martyn couldn’t feel the pain or really any sensation that came from him, as evident in his wings getting messed up without Martyn’s knowledge, but he seemed to be learning how to control the body better everyday. Which was concerning, if Jimmy was being honest.

“It’s not like I can do anything with the chopsticks anyway.” Where was Martyn even going with this anyway? There really wasn’t anything Jimmy could think of to use the chopsticks for while he was locked up. Martyn asking for them didn’t make sense. Tango didn’t look convinced, reaching over to take the container. “It would give me something to do with my hands, it gets boring in here.”

Looking through your eyes when there’s another soul in the way was really weird. It was almost clear, but there was also clearly something in front of him. Tango looked a bit distorted, his face shifting from amused to something distrustful as Martyn made Jimmy’s body shuffle in his seat. “I’m not talking to Jimmy right now, am I?”

The fear of getting caught in a lie but not being able to do anything about it was something Jimmy wouldn't recommend to anyone. Martyn froze slightly, his thoughts screaming and cursing Etho out for telling Tango before forcing Jimmy back in front. "Who else would you be talking to?" Jimmy heard himself, his *actual* self, wheeze out. It almost felt like Martyn was the one forcing him to say it, but that didn't make sense. "I mean-

"Etho mentioned something about body snatching or something like that." Tango leaned closer, looking at his face like he was trying to find any changes. "Said something about how when you...fell, you might have picked up a dead guy or two."

Scott's not going to be happy if you tell him about me. He already has someone waiting for the body swap Jimmy, just wait it out and I'll be out of your head for good. Scott will be so proud of you for not messing this up.

Jimmy bit his lip, breaking eye contact as Tango sighed. "Etho doesn't know what he's talking about." It was like he could see Martyn's vicious grin in the back of his mind, something sickening mixed in as Jimmy tapped against the table. "Thank you, for the food."

Tango let out another sigh, this time something fond and warm and almost heart-shatteringly mean as he looked at Jimmy. "It isn't anything special."

But it was, and Jimmy knew it was. He wasn't dumb, he wasn't stupid just like Tango had called him out on that one night when he let all his emotions loose. Even now, Jimmy knew Tango was holding stuff back, affection and love and heartache that Jimmy would be willing to bear and love to feel if it wasn't for-

You don't want to live up to the useless allegations, do you Tim?

"Thank you anyway." Jimmy forced Martyn back, ignoring the head-splitting feeling of someone clawing at the inside of his brain. Tango nodded, picking up the trash and placing it back in the plastic bag it came in. "Really Tango, I appreciate-

"You must really want these chopsticks, you're laying it on a little thick."

Tango sounded like he was joking, but the way he avoided eye-contact made Jimmy think it wasn't really a joke. "No, Tango-" Talking was hard. What they wanted was hard. Jimmy was making it hard, and he knew that but... "You have to know." Tango's shoulders tensed, hand hovering over the rest of the garbage as Jimmy's wings folded back. "You have to understand what... *this* means to me."

This wasn't about the damn chopsticks, Tango had to understand that. Jimmy couldn't give a damn about whatever Martyn wanted with the chopsticks. "This?" Tango sounded tired. Was Tango tired of him, or was it just life stacking up against him? "I get it, you're thankful for the food, jail food isn't the best, even when you're waiting for your... friend to come save you."

The pause between the words had Jimmy's bracelet flashing, the new powers coming to light as Tango's eyes widened slightly. It was gut-wrenching, seeing someone Jimmy just wanted to hold close, scared of him. "Martyn is in my head." Jimmy shot out, if only to get Tango to look at him instead of the wristband holding him back from accidentally opening a void. Martyn was screaming at him, the words bouncing around his head like a pin ball as he struggled to keep his own soul in charge of his body. "Martyn's soul is stuck inside of me, and I'm...I'm really fucking scared, if I'm being honest."

It was almost relieving, to get it off his chest. Even with Tango's shocked and then appalled face, all Jimmy really felt was relief. Maybe letting Tango help him wouldn't be so hard. Maybe Jimmy would be able to get away from all the awful things he had to do, all the magic and death that had happened because he was there. Maybe him and Tango could even-

Scott's going to be so upset with you. Couldn't even do one. Single. Thing. Right.

Tango was talking to him, asking something or even just trying to get his attention but Martyn continued to get louder and louder. Tango's panic showed on his face, but it was wobbly, Martyn being an ass and forcing him out of the driver's seat again, this time almost forcefully. Which wasn't good, since Martyn wasn't able to do that at the beginning.

Which meant Martyn was getting stronger.

If Jimmy could, his heart rate would've sped up, his eyes would've widened in panic as he came to the realization. Jimmy was actually getting forced to the back of his mind, and if Scott didn't come quick, Martyn would completely take over his body. Sure, Jimmy could fight back, but he wasn't stupid enough to think he would be able to take Martyn in some mental battle in his body.

Martyn said something, something Jimmy couldn't catch yet still made Tango blush.

Jimmy was going to be sick.

"I'm going to call Scar." Jimmy could hear Tango say in the distance, Martyn making Jimmy's body nod as Tango stood up. "He's been in a meeting all day but hopefully..." Tango faded out, offering a sweet smile that was meant for Jimmy, not Martyn. "Thank you for telling me Jimmy, I'm proud of you. Etho had said something was wrong, but he wasn't sure of the person. We're gonna... We'll figure this out."

Jimmy tried to push Martyn out of the way, to be the person in charge, to let Tango know it wasn't him flirting or saying whatever Martyn was saying but he was just so tired. Maybe he would be able to do it after a nap, or whatever Martyn did when Jimmy was in control of the body. A scary thought, but one that barely crossed his mind before he felt his soul start to slip away to somewhere he hadn't been before. Somewhere dark, somewhere where he could finally get a good night's sleep for once.

He could hear Tango's laugh again, something bright and warm as another pang of heartache shot through Jimmy. At least Tango was proud of him, which was more than he could say about Scott when he found out what Jimmy had done.

But maybe he didn't have to worry about that right now. The darkness was welcoming, almost like the void but instead of burning him it was like a warm blanket of nothing. Maybe...just for a moment...

When he woke up, it was startling to feel himself back in his body, hands clenched around a single chopstick. Both ends were sharpened now, which was definitely a change from the beginning. What did Martyn do when he was in control, and why did he have a bad feeling about it? Jimmy didn't have a lot of time to worry about it as the sound of the door opened.

“Jimmy! What’s going on baby?”

Of course they would send *him* to get Jimmy out of here. Standing up, Jimmy ignored the way his wings felt heavy as he stuffed the chopstick into his pocket. “Other than being possessed by your boyfriend, I’m just peachy. Scott too busy to portal us out?”

His escort's eyes darkened. “The magic nullifiers were too much, even for him. You understand, right?” Jimmy didn’t, but agreed anyway as his knight in shiny armor held open the door. “Figured brute force was the way to go. Since Joel is watching the body we got for Martyn, I was the backup. Just...don’t look at all the bodies on the ground.”

Jimmy figured his eyes widened as he looked out the door. Fuck, if it was all the police officers down... “You didn’t-”

“Tango isn’t here.”

Jimmy knew his breath of relief wasn’t subtle, but if he could be honest with anyone, it would be the guy in front of him. “I bet Martyn’s been a real pain in your ass.” Jimmy just nodded, clearly not interested in conversation as the two of them calmly walked out of the station. It didn’t matter, Martyn’s boyfriend was really good at filling the space with noise anyway. The bodies on the floor didn’t move, some of them barely breathed as Jimmy tried and failed not to look at them. Sue him, he really wasn’t cut out for this line of work anyways.

Scott seemed nice enough to open a portal outside of the station, Jimmy being pushed through before it shut rather abruptly. “Sorry dude, Scott gave a time limit. Didn’t realize it was so close.” Jimmy let out a huff of air as the door to the cells swung open.

Joel looked crazed as he grabbed onto Jimmy, the hug shockingly warm and nothing that Jimmy expected as he stood there shocked. “Woah! It’s good to see you too! I wasn’t locked away for-”

“They got Etho.” Jimmy’s eyes shot open as Joel hissed into his neck, not letting go as another door started to open. “If they force Martyn into Etho, there’s no way I can get home. Don’t ask how I know, I can just feel it.”

Not really the news Jimmy wanted to hear as Joel let go, the smile he had crazed and nothing like Jimmy was used to seeing. Him and Joel weren’t really friends, but they had... Well, they understood each other, Jimmy guesses. He understood why Joel didn’t help him when Scott had pushed him into the void. Joel understood why Jimmy didn’t help when Scott almost killed Joel during multiple sparring sessions. He didn’t understand why Joel was tell him, since he was the one that had Martyn in him, even if he was sleeping. He didn’t-

“Jimmy!” Jimmy was shook out of his thoughts as Scott walked up to the group, a calm smile on his face as he glanced at the third person. “Glad you got him out safe, I was worried about your loyalty to the group.”

“It’s not loyalty to the group Scott, it’s loyalty to Martyn.”

Scott patted Jimmy on the back, a shiver running down his spine as he walked past him. “Same thing, Ren, after this.”

Ren, Martyn’s boyfriend and what Jimmy supposed was a resistance member, frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

Chuckling, Scott just opened the door to the cell with a grin. “There was a change of plans. You really didn’t care about the vessel we put Martyn in, right?”

Ren didn’t say anything as he walked into the room, mouth falling open as he and Etho made eye contact. Jimmy had only really seen Etho once, but watching the pain flash across his face was still gut-wrenching. “Ren?” Etho croaked out, eyes darting around the group like he was confused as Ren whirled around to look at Scott.

“What is- This isn’t who we agreed on!”

“So what?” Scott shrugged, walking into the room further as Ren snarled at him. “Etho *volunteered* to be here, isn’t that right?”

Etho’s jaw was tight as he glared at Ren, Jimmy starting to inch his way closer to Joel before freezing in his step at Scott’s stare. “Come here.” Scott snapped, Jimmy’s body lurching forward due to the magic before he walked willingly towards him.

“I said Bdubs, not Etho. Etho is a friend, you can’t-”

“You were going to kill my boyfriend so you could get-” Etho cut himself off, clearly still in shock as Ren looked down at the ground. “This is *fucked* Ren. Does Grian know what you’re doing?”

“It’s none of Grian’s business what I’m doing!” Ren snapped back as Scott let out a giggle. Jimmy glanced at him, at the way he seemed to glow brighter the more the two of them fought. Out of the corner of his eye, Jimmy watched Joel slip out of the room. “Grian is always watching anyway, there’s now way he didn’t know-”

“ *Grian* wouldn’t let you shove a dead guy into someone else!”

“He wouldn’t be dead if your boyfriend didn’t kill him!”

Etho banged his hand against the bar, his bracelet lighting up a bright purple as Scott’s eyes glowed green. “This has been so informational!” Scott said gleefully, looking over at Jimmy with a wide smile. “Humans are so interesting!”

Right.

Etho’s grip on the bar was tight, the other hand wrapped around his wrist band like he was trying to snap it off as Jimmy looked down at his own bracelet. It was glowing constantly, since he didn’t know how to turn off his powers very well, but it was nothing in comparison to what Etho was doing. He was feeling everything right now, and the power had to be

building up. Ren and Etho were still arguing, Scott finally finished doing whatever he did with negative emotions as his green eyes faded back to normal. “If we’re done being emotional, I think Jimmy would like his head free of a voice.”

Jimmy was pushed forward, stumbling a bit as Ren grabbed his arm. “This isn’t what I agreed to Scott.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Scott’s eyes flashed yellow, a warning, as Ren backed up. “I got you a body, asking for more would be greedy. And we’re not greedy people, are we Jimmy?”

Etho’s eyes shot to where Jimmy was, staring him down as he gulped. “We don’t get what we want, we get what we need. Joel doesn’t need to jump worlds, he needs food to survive.” Etho’s jaw dropped slightly as he took in what Scott was saying. “Jimmy doesn’t need Tango to be happy, he has a family already. Marytn doesn’t need Bdubs body, he just needs a body. Do you understand?”

Ren was staring at Etho, but it was almost like he was looking through him. Martyn was starting to make noise again, the pulsing headache coming back as Ren nodded once. Etho’s eyes darkened as Scott grinned wide. “Good.” Another push, Etho looking over wide eyed as Jimmy fell against the bars. “Just a little closer Jimmy, and we can get started. Joel, would you open the bars a bit?”

No answer.

Scott looked confused, turning to see the open door, the way Joel clearly wasn’t in the room as he frowned. “Interesting. Humans are so...” Scott waved a hand around, looking at Ren and Jimmy for a second before sighing. “Ren, will you open up the bars a bit?”

Ren continued to stare at Etho, who was actually looking a bit panicked before he nodded again. “Sorry Etho.”

The funny thing about fighting is that when you’re in a fight, you can’t see everything happening around you. Jimmy watched as Ren raised the bars a bit, biting back tears Jimmy didn’t understand as Etho glared daggers at him. Scott started to transfer Martyn’s soul, a

weight literally lifted from Jimmy's mind, the room glowing with a bright light. Then, a snapping sound, and a blast of purple.

Jimmy's body was thrown against the wall, the feeling of half a soul still stuck in him as Ren let out a howl. The heat against his skin was close to what he felt in the void, the mist parting with a red beam of light as Scott suddenly reappeared. "Fucking *end-children*." Scott hissed, looking around as the void vapor faded into the air. Etho leaned against the now broken cell, clearly overwhelmed with the amount of power he just let out as he dropped the broken cuff onto the ground. "I should've killed you in that damn cafe."

Etho just grinned, the side of his mouth splitting open with a bloody smile. "No use looking back on the past, Scott." Etho rolled his head against the wall to look at Ren. "The dead should stay dead."

Ren clearly wasn't there anymore, snarling as his jaw snapped at Etho. Was his teeth longer? Jimmy was starting to think Joel had the right idea to leave when he did. Martyn was silent in his head, half of his soul somewhere in the room as Scott snapped his fingers twice. "Ren, sit."

Jimmy hated when Scott got a rush of power. Ren's body was forced to the ground, eyes wide and wild as Etho stepped backwards towards the door.

"You know you have a choice, right?"

Jimmy looked up, Martyn's voice coming through him so quietly he barely heard it. Scott had somehow gathered the rest of Martyn's soul into the palm of his hand, the magic swirling around like a small ball.

"Aren't you tired of pretending you're okay?"

With another two snaps, the bars of the cell started to mold back together. Another two, the door slammed shut. Etho spun around on his heels to look at the two of them.

“Aren't you tired of only getting what you need?”

Scott tilted his head, a wild smile on his face as Etho reached behind himself to try the door. Locked. “It was fun, Etho.”

Thinking wasn't Jimmy's strong suit, but he did consider himself strong. Ripping the chopstick out of his pocket, Jimmy gripped onto Scott's free hand before plunging the end into it.

Magic rippled throughout the room, the bars falling to the ground, the door swinging open and Martyn's soul ripping back into Jimmy's body. There was a loud laugh, thoroughly unhinged as Jimmy looked down at Scott's hand where the chopstick had gone through it completely, Scott laughing and laughing as Jimmy turned towards where hopefully Etho had run.

He hadn't.

Etho stared at him, grip loose on the handle as Ren started to stand up. “Run!” Jimmy yelled at him, Etho shaking his head before looking down at Ren. “Etho you got to go-”

“I'll be back.” Etho stared at him, nothing but a promise in his tone before he glanced at Scott. “I'll be back for both of you.”

There was the sound of an enderman teleporting, purple sparkles, and Etho was gone.

Scott had not stopped laughing, even as Jimmy let go of his hand, sinking to the ground as the nausea came back full force. Ren ran out of the room after him, but there was no way any of them were going to find Etho right now.

There was the squelching sound from the right of him, Scott's laughter fading to small giggles as the sound of the chopstick hitting the ground filled the now quiet room. “Humans,”

Jimmy's head got ripped upwards, eyes forced to look at the red glow of Scott's eyes as he showed off his hand. "Are so *very* interesting. It's good to have you back, Jimmy."

And Jimmy's world went black.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry its a little short this time! I've had friends come visit, which was always nice, but it did mean I haven't had much time recently. It also almost feels like a boring chapter, but I really felt like Joel and Etho needed this moment, and for everyone to get an insight in Jimmy's brain. Or is it Jimmy and Martyns brain now? Besides, maybe boring is good since, you know, they're both trapped.

I was fighting my inner demons with this chapter tbh. I went back and read through the whole fic and suddenly hated everything about it lol. The beginning chapters were so clearly set up for a rom-com kind of thing, and then an escaped plot bunny happened and suddenly we're looking at a really long and happy-ish ending for the fic. Hopefully its still interesting for everyone either way. I'm actually really excited for the new chapter with Bdubs and company, I'm already half done with it because of the hype lol

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

In which Bdubs is confused, angry, bitter, falling in love, and relieved.

Not all necessarily in that order.

Chapter Notes

AND WE'RE BACK!

sorry its been a minute, I really only have my poor planning skills to blame. I had a lot of job stuff I had to do, went to a concert, wrote a lot on another fic not posted, had a fun moment of existential dread that lasted longer then I want to admit, the regular.

Tag changes include to all fun and shiny Grian & Scar tag, and a reminder about the rating, just in case.

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

Bdubs was not happy.

Him, Tango, and Scar were sitting on one side of a long table, Bdubs avoiding eye contact from either of them because of the anger he was desperately holding on to. It was between being angry or feeling like he was going to cry, and there was no way he was going to cry with the company he was in.

Scar didn't seem too keen on explaining himself, and even if Bdubs was angry, he wasn't going to push Tango any further. The police chief was on edge already with the disappearance of Jimmy and the way most of his officers were now out of commission, Bdubs didn't need to add more guilt on top of that. At least, not at the moment.

On the other side of the table sat two people, who by the standards of hybrids, blended into the crowd nicely. *Too nicely*, since these were two people the government had been hunting for who knows how long. Some nether-born and an avian sat across from them, one looking

very tired as the other looking almost amused that this meeting was even happening. “I don’t think Ren is coming.” The avian spoke quietly, only caught by Bdubs because he was avoiding listening to Scar in any form.

“I wouldn’t if I was Ren. They’re a little muzzle-trigger-happy in my opinion.” Tango stiffened up next to him, but Bdubs continued to stare at the empty two chairs on the other side.

Scar cleared his throat, setting what Bdubs would guess was his folder he kept with him everywhere down on the table before speaking. “I guess we can start then?” That was weird, Scar never seemed nervous.

“Sure, we wouldn’t want to take *too* much time from the incredibly busy mayor after all.” The avian grinned, lopsided and disrespectful as he put his feet up on the table. Bdubs felt a pulse of irritation run through him even though he was trying to stay mad at Scar. “It isn’t anything important like the balance of our world or anything like that. The little party you have planned is much more important-”

“You just said Ren wasn’t coming.” Scar interrupted. “And due to other events I’m sure you’re going to talk about, Etho isn’t-”

The nether-born’s raised an eyebrow, leaning on the table with an unimpressed look. “Why don’t you talk about it then, since you seem to know all about it yourself?”

“Who are you guys?” Bdubs interrupted the conversation, tired and frustrated about the whole thing. Resistance members, resistance *leaders*, if what he remembered from Scar’s quick debriefing was correct. Still, the audacity to talk to someone like that, someone with the position and influence to wreck your life was stupid at best. Whoever this guy was, he was ballsy and stupid at the same time. And that was Bdubs saying that, for the record.

“Impulse.” The nether-born barely glanced at him, continuing to glare daggers at Scar. Another wave of irritation washed over Bdubs as he cleared his throat. What kind of rude, awful person would-

Impulse finally looked at him, an electric feeling coursing through Bdubs whole body as he watched the other's eyes widened. It was intense, not necessarily bad, but something that shouldn't have happened when making eye-contact with a total stranger. There was a small snort from the avian as the two of them stared at each other. Bdubs watched Impulse gulp, the similar urge crawling in his own gut as one thought passed through his head.

This guy is going to ruin me.

Bdubs shook his head, clearing the thought away as the other man did the same. Scar was talking again, but Bdubs couldn't focus as he stared down at the table. What was that about? The feeling was still crawling up his spine slowly, like a spider trying to decide where to dig down under and lay its eggs, like whatever was in the air was slowly clouding his mind and making him lose focus. Maybe it was the lack of sleep, maybe it was the way he didn't sleep well now that Etho was missing. Was Etho even alive anymore, or did Scott kill him? Maybe Martyn already possessed his body, since he was talking about Bdubs being a vessel of something. He really should tell Scar all of this, but it was overwhelming to even think about, he didn't know if he could speak it outloud.

"...so Grian was just *so kind* to offer-"

"*You're* Grian?" Bdubs interrupted Scar, looking wide-eyed at the avian who shrugged.
"Etho mentioned you!"

That got his attention. Grian sat up, taking his feet off the table as his eyes darkened.
"Really? What did he say?" his wings had opened more, the dark purple a striking contrast to the red on top hiding them. "Anything worth mentioning?"

"Uhh..." Bdubs faded out, glancing at Scar and Tango, who just shrugged. Clearly, the two of them were the most clueless about the situation. "He said to tell you that he went AWOL. Whatever that means."

Grian's eyes widened just a tad as Impulse started to stand up. There was a loud gasp from Tango, Bdubs turning to look at his friend who stared at him shocked. "You knew Etho was a resistance member?" Scar let out a tiny snicker as Tango whirled around to look at him.
"Wait, wait, wait. Both of you knew before you hired him to watch over Bdubs? Is that why you didn't ask for a background check? Did you know he was with the resistance when you

started dating or was that like a weird conversation the two of you had to have later over meatloaf?”

Scar couldn't seem to keep his laughter contained, letting out a small laugh at Tango's dismay as Bdubs swallowed back giggle rising in his throat. The plan had grown so convoluted from the beginning, he had basically forgotten all of that. “We're not dating Tango. That was also a cover.”

“WHAT?”

Bdubs couldn't help it either, a tiny laugh coming out of him as well despite the situation. Impulse was whispering something to Grian, who nodded, but also looked amused at the conversation. “Come off of it BdoubleO,” Grian said, putting his feet back on the table and also suddenly having a drink in hand. Did he have that earlier and Bdubs just missed it? “I know the two of you were making out anytime you could during that break Scar gave you to recover.”

Who was this guy? Scar started laughing harder, smile actually genuine as he flashed it at Grian. Grian's grin grew softer, for a second, before something tense leaked into it. Tango still looked thoroughly confused, Impulse impatient as Bdubs cleared his throat. “Sorry Tango, I kind of thought Scar told you what was going on.”

“And I thought Bdubs told you.” Scar added on, taking a deep breath in to control his breathing.

“You're both not forgiven.” Tango said, waving his hand in the direction of the two outliers. “And what about them? Did both of you know these guys were and were just sending me on a wild goose chase all these years to find them?” Bdubs went to deny when Impulse piped in.

“I would love to keep listening to your mental spiral, but we have more important things to do.” Impulse said, nudging Grian on the shoulder. Grian sighed, but also stood up as Scar quickly mimicked them.

“Woah, woah! Where are you two going?” Bdubs scrambled to his feet as the two of them started to make their way to a large window in the back of the room. “Seriously? You’re gonna ask me for a meeting, ask me to tell my police captain to *not* make any moves to arrest you and your-” Scar waved a hand in Impulse’s direction as Grian turned back to look at him, something unreadable on his face. “Your friend, and now you’re just ditching? I swear to the Watchers-”

Grian’s breath hitched as he stepped towards Scar, hands balled into fists before Impulse caught his shoulder. “You listened, didn’t you? I asked, you listened. You didn’t have to.” Scar glared as Bdubs tried to catch Tango’s eye in hopes he would know what was going on, Tango however, was pointedly not looking at him. Grian turned back around, shoulders tense and jaw tight as he opened the window. “Besides, I didn’t say you guys couldn’t follow.”

Huh.

Scar’s eyes widened slightly, adam’s apple bobbing as Impulse shrugged on an electra, tossing one back in Bdubs direction. He barely caught it, fumbling the catch as Impulse snorted. Void, this man was the-

“You don’t have wings either, do you Tango?” Impulse asked, something almost kind in his voice that was lacking when talking to Bdubs. Tango’s body language screamed that he wanted to be anywhere but here, but he nodded slowly. “Grian?” Grian barely looked back, hands suddenly having another Electra.

Grabbing it slowly, Tango still looked conflicted but started to put it on. “What about Scar?” Bdubs finally asked, clipping the straps to the front of him as Grian snorted.

“Last I checked, Scar has his own set of wings.” Bdubs eyes widened as Scar rolled his eyes. Scar had been very secretive about his hybrid side, most of his magic used to glamor himself into a normal looking human. The fact that Grian knew that he was part vex was as strange as it was concerning. That meant the resistance knew much more about them than they originally thought. Or, and this was a worse option, Scar was hiding knowledge from the two of them. Either way, not good.

Scar took a deep breath, glamor starting to fade as Grian’s smile grew more genuine. They definitely knew each other then, looking at the social cues. Did that mean that Scar knew him

as a resistance leader or was he just a friend of the past? Bdubs had never felt more in the dark till this moment. Wings materializing, Bdubs took a step to the side to let Scar have more room to stretch them. “Are we leaving?” Grian actually looked human as his eyes wandered over Scar’s wing, biting his bottom lip before seemingly remembering what was going on.

“See if you can keep up.”

With that, both Impulse and Grian leaped out of the window, Impulse’s electra not even completely on as he let out a woop. Tango quickly followed, pulling his goggles on and shouting something in their direction that Bdubs missed as he stared at Scar. Scar, in his whole vex glory, sharp teeth and slightly gray skin, wings twitching like they were screaming at Scar to let them breathe. Scar looked back at him, hands slowly untensing from the fists they were in as he let out a long breath, suddenly looking far more tired than Bdubs was used to seeing. “I think I owe you an explanation.”

An olive branch.

“I think you own more than that.”

One Bdubs would take, because where else could he turn?

Scar’s laugh was bitter, something terrifyingly sad mixed in that had Bdubs wanting to hug his best friend before strangling him for not taking care of himself. “Yeah. I think I owe a lot of people a lot more than that.” Clearing his throat, Scar turned back towards the window before flashing him a grin that showed off just how sharp his teeth really were. “But first, let’s get your boyfriend back.”

.....

Landing an electra was always the hardest part, in Bdubs humble opinion. Stumbling as he landed, Bdubs looked up at the building the rest of them had gathered around as Impulse dug around in the bushes for something. Tango was looking at the door, clearly infatuated with the redstone component as he felt Scar land next to him. There was the heat of Scar pulling

his glamor back on, wings shifting into glitter before going completely invisible. “Shade-e-e?” Bdubs read the sign aloud looked around at the rest of the group as Impulse made a frustrated noise. “Why are we here?”

“Because, my dear government employee who somehow caught the attention of one of my greatest members of the resistance,” Grian basically sing-songed, appearing behind him and pushing him slightly towards the doors before walking around. “This is *your* boyfriend’s store.”

Bdubs raised an eyebrow as Impulse came back, key in hand before he threw it to Grian. “I don’t know if you can call it a store,” Tango added, looking back at him for a moment before he continued to study the door. “Since I got a lot of scam reports because of this place.”

“Hey, he did exactly what he said he would, give free glass.” Grian shrugged, unlocking the door. It was like the store shot to life, doors suddenly sliding open and lights coming on as he stepped aside. “He went on some energy saving kick recently, making all the red stone shut off if no one has been by in a few days. Sadly, he was still working out some kinks when other things got in the way, hence why the door locked completely.”

Bdubs had a feeling he was the ‘other things’ that got in the way as the group of five walked into the building. Now that he was inside, Bdubs could remember what the store really was, since he was one of the unfortunate people who fell for it. He definitely wouldn’t be telling anyone in this room that though. “So why are we here then?” Scar asked as Grian unlocked the employee’s only entrance. “If Etho went AWOL, why would we be looking for him anyway?”

“Secret code.” Bdubs answered absentmindedly, thinking back at the way Cleo knew what he was talking back at the café. Grian raised an eyebrow, but nodded as he pushed open the door. Behind it was massive, machines loud and powerful as they kicked on automatically now that there was someone in the room.

“So cool.” Tango muttered under his breath as he walked past him into the room. At least he was having a good time looking at all the red stone. Maybe it would take his mind off of-

“So Scott and Jimmy have Etho.”

That.

Bdubs cringed at the way Impulse looked at Tango for a reply. “I would guess so. Jimmy was gone when I got to the station, most of my men were in critical condition.” Tango finally answered the question, looking around for a moment before letting out a deep breath. “What was weird was the way he got out. No traces of magic inside the building. A lot of teeth marks and physical force.”

There was a clear accusation in the air as Impulse scowled at him, taking a step forward before Bdubs wedged himself in between them. It was tense as they stared at each other before Tango decided to walk away. Clearly, both of them were on edge, but all of them were. All of them needed to cool off, and that was coming from him. “Scar? Come help me for a second.” Bdubs looked at Grian, who was already halfway across the room, looking at some device that Bdubs wouldn’t have a clue where to start with.

“He’ll be fine.” Impulse followed his line of sight, watching as Scar made his way over to where Grian was waiting. Bdubs turned to look at him, mouth twisting into what he would assume was an unconvinced look as Impulse stared back. “If there is one thing I know about Grian, it’s that he wouldn’t purposely hurt Scar.”

Like that made a load of sense. Scar and Grian were literally fighting with each other everyday, and due to the fact that Grian was the one leading the two of them and that Etho had mentioned him, it was pretty obvious who was the boss. The claim didn’t make sense, it didn’t line up. “I don’t think either of us know enough to make that claim.” Is what Bdubs settled out, Impulse giving him a shrug as Scar flipped down a part of the machine.

It was almost instantaneous, the purple that flooded across the floor as soon as the trap door closed. Scar and Grian both let out a screech, Tango a small laugh as a very bloody Etho suddenly appeared from the machine and collapsed onto the ground. “Etho!”

Bdubs was quick to push everyone else out of the way, kneeling down to place his head on his lap. Etho...had seen better days, that's for sure. His hair was knotted, half of his face was very shittily sewn back together, dried blood flaking off as he let out a quiet noise of distress. “Impulse, you got any healing potions?” Grian asked, giving the two of the space as soon as Bdubs got him steady.

There was shuffling, then a curse as Buds pushed some of the hair out of Etho's face. "Back at the base."

"Take Tango, and get back here as fast as you can." Bdubs ripped his head up, barely catching the looks Impulse and Grian gave each other before Impulse nodded once. "You're gonna need more than one pair of hands, and you know it."

"I know, I know." Impulse looked down at Etho, a series of emotions flying across his face before he looked back at Bdubs. "You're gonna want to get those stitches out as soon as you can. Now that he's back to a normal balance of magic inside of him, they're gonna do more harm than good."

Bdubs took the olive branch for what it was, a concern for someone they both cared about as Tango strapped on his electra. "We'll be back soon, I would think." Tango added, offering Bdubs a shaky smile that didn't reach his eyes before looking back at Etho. No matter what anyone said, Tango would think that this was his fault somehow, in whatever convoluted way he could twist it. Impulse nodded at the group, knocking Tango on the shoulder before the two of them flew out of the building.

"I'm going to his office, maybe he'll have something there." Scar suddenly said, eyes never leaving Etho's body. He was breathing steadily, which was a good sign, but the white substance oozing from his wounds definitely wasn't. They were clearly infected, Impulse was right. They really should get them out and wash the wound before the two of them come back with the healing potion.

"I'll show you the way." Scar frowned, but said nothing as Grian quickly offered Bdubs some tiny scissors like he knew what he was thinking about before walking towards Scar. Bdubs watched the two of them leave, Scar's shoulders showing how tense he was about this situation as the door swung shut.

Then it was just him.

Bdubs didn't know what to do. So much had changed within this week and a half, so much was coming that he didn't understand. He felt trapped, like he wasn't supposed to be involved

in this story but was now ruining the entire book because of his presence. “You know,” Bdubs whispered, fingers trailing over the side of Etho’s face that hadn’t ripped open “you told me once that you look good in blood, but I have yet to see it.”

“I should’ve put the disclaimer that I only look good if it’s someone else’s blood, huh?” Bdubs jerked back as Etho’s eyes fluttered open, offering a tiny smile that pulled at his stitches. “Good job B, knew I could count on you.”

Love was interesting. Where else would you find the urge to kiss, slap, hug, and punch someone at the same time other than if you were in love with them? Where else would someone feel so crazy for another person that they met two months prior that they would throw out their core values if not for love?

Bdubs just stared at him, mouth slightly open as Etho stared back up, eyes never wavering, never scared or fidgety, simple adoration in them as he reached up to cup Bdubs face. “I hate you.” Bdubs wheezed out, tears stinging his eyes as Etho grinned wider, some of the stitches snapping on their own due to the force. Etho didn’t seem to notice, thumb coming up and pressing at Bdubs bottom lip so tenderly like he was testing if Bdubs was actually there or not. “I don’t think I’ve hated a person more than you.”

Even as he said that, he couldn’t resist the feather-light kiss he pressed against the pad of Etho’s thumb, watching with rapt attention at the way his eyes fluttered at the pressure. “I’m really getting the ‘i hate you’ vibes right now.” Etho moved his hand, an exhausted breath leaving him as he let his arm drop. “I figure you gotta cut the string out of me?”

Right, that. Bdubs must have made a face at that, since Etho let out a tiny snort followed by a gasp of pain. “Right, not doing that again.” Etho sat up more, grimacing at the movement as Bdubs tried to help. “Just go quick. Impulse always goes too slow and Ren has a-” Etho stopped himself, gulping loud enough that Bdubs could hear it as a pained look crossed his face. “Just go quick.”

Bdubs tried, going as quick as he could while Etho gripped onto his other hand tight enough he thought he was going to crush his bones. Luckily, Etho just cut off circulation as Bdubs worked, ignoring the white infection and fresh blood coming out of the wound, trying to focus on the fact that Etho was back with him. It had only been about a day and a half, but it was still too long since he didn’t know where Scott had even taken him.

As soon as the stitches were out however, Bdubs realized he needed some supplies to clean the wound completely. “Hey,” Bdubs started softly, watching as Etho opened his eyes slightly, pain glazing over his eyes as he nodded once to signal he was listening. “Where do you keep-”

“Office. Upstairs and to the left closet.” Bdubs nodded, leaning down to press a kiss to his forehead before helping him to an upright position.

“I’ll be quick.”

Etho mumbled something back that Bdubs didn’t catch, already rushing up to the stairs. In the back of his mind, he remembered that Scar and Grian had already said they were heading up there, but only remembered completely at the sound of their voices coming from the closed room.

“If you stopped being so stubborn, there could be more.” That was Scar talking, but what was he talking about? Bdubs crept up to the door.

“This is it. You know that, we both know that.” Bdubs pushed his ear closer to the door, listening to Grian’s pained voice as Scar cleared his throat.

“It doesn’t have to be. Let us help, we can use the gala for cover and-”

“The gala that you were originally using to draft a peace treaty with the group we’re having trouble with?” Scar paused at that, frustration clearly leaking into Grian’s voice as he continued. “You made it clear where you’re standing in all of this. Just because one of your own is suddenly involved doesn’t mean that we want to work with you.”

“You came to me Grian, if you want to remember that any time soon.” Scar snapped back. Bdubs had never heard him act like this before, or at least this emotional during what seemed to be an important meeting. “If you wanted to stop pretending we don’t have any past together, that would be great.”

Grian snorted, something mean and aggressive as there was the sound of a drawer pulling open. “Right, because *I’m* the one who went and left. I’m the one who became the fancy new mayor with fancy new friends and lovers and-”

There was a thud, like a body hitting a wall as Bdubs resisted the urge to gasp. Did Scar just push Grian? “I’m not like *you*, Grian. It’s always been you, and I know you know that, because a Watcher’s eye never closes.” It was said low, so low that Bdubs could barely hear it. “I can still feel you watching me, so don’t even pretend to act like you’re not. If you’re not going to let me help you, stay out of me and my group's way.” There was a shuffle, Bdubs picturing Scar letting Grian go as a silence carried throughout the room.

“...for Etho.” It was so quiet Bdubs almost missed it. “I’m doing this for Etho and the rest of my guys.”

“I figured.”

Bdubs didn’t know what was going on, but suddenly he got what Impulse was talking about earlier. Grian might not hurt Scar on purpose, but he sure knew how to throw daggers on accident. It was in Scar’s voice, something so devastating in those two words it made Bdubs want to cry. Instead, he listened for a bit longer.

“Are you not teaming up with us for Bdubs? Or is it something deeper than that?” Oh, that was just cruel. There was a taunt mixed into Grian’s voice as another drawer pulled open. Scar was silent. “You’re right Scar, I’m still watching you. I like to see you struggle without me, I like to see everything you worked so hard for crumble so quickly in the face of magic you’ve been trying so desperately to hide.” Why wasn’t Scar fighting back? Why was he letting Grian say all of this horrible stuff? “Maybe if you stopped hiding who you really are people and hybrids would-”

“You’re right.”

Grian paused, the stillness in the air coming back even quicker as Bdubs eyes widened. “You’re right, that’s what you want me to say, right?” There was anger, clearly, but there was something else mixed into Scar’s voice that had Bdubs wanting to back away from the door.

“You want me to regret making a better life for myself, and for my friends. You want me to *miss you* . Because you miss me-”

“That’s not true-”

“You miss me so much that you’ve grown bitter and angry.” Scar ignored his interruption, more drawers opening and closing faster now. “And even worse, you’re angry that I’ve moved on. You’re upset that I’m doing *just fine* without you, and without *us* and-”

There was another cut off, sudden and aggressive as Bdubs pulled back from the door with confusion. What was that? There was no one talking anymore, barely any noise now as Bdubs pressed his ear to the door again. Neither of them were talking anymore, which probably meant that it was okay to go in and get the stuff for Etho now, right?

Clearing his throat, Bdubs pushed open the door to the sound of scrambling and things getting knocked off the desk. “I need...” Fading out, Bdubs raised an eyebrow. Grian and Scar were at opposite edges of the office, stuff clearly meant to be on the desk scattered on the ground as the two of them avoided eye contact. “Stuff, for Etho.” Bdubs finished lamely, looking around the room as Scar quickly started looking through a closet.

It was tense, awkward, for reasons Bdubs didn’t really want to think about. If his assumptions were correct, it was going to take a lot of alcohol to listen to Scar’s backstory with this guy. Grian didn’t look embarrassed, in fact he looked slightly proud with his wings puffed out like that, but he did still have a slight flush to his face. “So-”

“I’ll pay you double if you don’t tell Tango.” Scar quickly said, pulling down a box labeled ‘accident? Again?’ before offering to Bdubs.

“All the money in the world couldn’t convince me to not tell Tango.” Grian snorted, but quickly straightened up as Bdubs glanced at him. “Besides, I think the truth is needed if we’re going to be teaming up for a moment.”

The two of them looked at each other, clearly sharing a look that Bdubs wouldn’t understand as he took the box from Scar’s hand. “Soon?” Scar finally offered weakly, stuffing his hands

in his pockets as Grian's stare softened. He nodded, making Scar relax a bit as Bdubs shook his head. There was way too much to pick through with the two of them. "Soon."

"Soon." Bdubs agreed, turning away from the two of them with the box. "You should fix your collar Scar, I doubt Tango and Impulse are as willing to ignore the hickeys you suddenly have like I am."

There was the sound of stuttering behind him as Bdubs made his way back down the stairs, fingers gripping onto the box tighter as he realized Tango and Impulse were back. Etho was saying something quietly to Impulse, who had crouched over him as Tango leaned against the entrance of the room. He looked up however, offering a bloody smile in Bdubs direction as soon as he heard his footsteps, which really shouldn't have made his gut flutter like it did, but he chalked it up to the awful day he had. "Took you long enough." Impulse said as he sat the box down by the two of them, but it didn't seem to have much aggression behind it. Whatever Tango and him had talked about during their time away from the store was apparently enough to make Impulse mellow out.

"I've seen and heard things I never want to see or hear again." Impulse snorted, nodding a bit like he understood before turning back towards Etho. They were clearly in the middle of a conversation that didn't seem to involve Bdubs, but it was between listening in or talking to Tango, and Bdubs didn't know which one was better right now.

Luckily, Scar and Grian started down the stairs then, Scar looking thoroughly confused while Grian looked slightly angry but mostly resigned. Impulse had taken over the wound cleaning, the quiet hissing coming from Etho doing nothing to calm the storm in Bdubs gut as he reached out to grip at Bdubs hand again.

It was interesting, in some awful way, how calm everyone seemed. The only one on edge seemed to be Tango, and even he was on a decline of what was probably adrenaline. "Etho, how are you feeling?" Grian asked as he approached the group, Scar making his way over to where Tango was now looking at his comm. Bdubs would hate to be either of them right now, if he was being honest. There was no way the mayor and police chief were not under fire for the recent events.

"Like the day you found me Grian." Etho managed to get out through clenched teeth, amusement in his eyes that matched the look in Grian's own. It wasn't funny, Bubs thought, but all three of the men seemed to enjoy the comment. "Ren-"

“Ren hasn’t responded to any messages we’ve sent.” Impulse interrupted, frowning as Etho took the rest of the healing potion out of his hand and shot it back.

“Ren won’t respond.” Etho wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, Bdubs watched as his skin pulled tight against his jaw far too quickly to heal, splitting itself again with the force as Etho just reached for another potion. Bdubs went to argue, but with a single hand squeeze, he closed his mouth. “He was there.”

“He was there?” it was Tango who asked the question, raising an eyebrow as his eyes darted towards Impulse. “Where is ‘there’, exactly? And how did you get here afterwards?”

Etho put down the bottle, cracking his neck while holding up a hand. “Void, does anyone have another one-” Tango reached into his pocket, pulling out another potion and throwing it in his direction. “Thanks.” Etho caught it, letting go of Bdubs hand to do so before promptly reaching for him again. It would’ve been sweet, if it was under different circumstances. “I went through a portal after Scott and Joel caught Bdubs. Told him to tell Grian the code-word. I was placed in a cell for a few hours till Jimmy and Ren showed up. Apparently, Marytn was Ren’s boyfriend, and he’s now cool with stuffing his soul into other people's bodies.”

That was...fucked. Bdubs was sure his eyes matched everyone else’s in the room with how wide they were, though his didn’t match the other mixed emotions coming from the three other men that knew Ren personally. “And to answer your other question, it was an ender portal.”

Tango’s eyes brightened, clearly wanting to ask more questions but trying to refrain himself due to the circumstances. Etho stood up, a little wobbly before Bdubs reached out to steady him. It was good to see him not looking depressed, I’ve if it was just for a moment. Grian and Impulse seemed to be slowly processing the information, grief written on both of their faces. It would be hard to have someone you considered a friend suddenly turn their back on you. Still, even if Etho was sad about Ren, all Bdubs could really feel was anger that the guy tried to stuff Martyn into either of them. He had killed the guy fair and square, why wouldn’t he stay dead?

“If it wasn’t obvious, Scar and I have decided to...put aside our differences for the moment so we can get rid of a high threat.”

“You don’t consider yourself a higher threat to the government than some group from the south?” Tango asked, walking closer to the group while pocketing his comm. Scar followed, the six of them forming some kind of circle in the middle of all the machines. In the back of his mind, Bdubs thought about how this place might not be the best for someone who clearly just wanted to lay down, but didn’t want to point it out if Etho wasn’t going to.

Grian glanced at Scar before letting out his own sigh. “Scott...isn’t from this world.”

Etho stiffened.

“Okay?” Impulse asked slowly, eyes darting around the circle. “Bad then?”

Etho didn’t relax.

All three of them seemed slightly on edge as Scar cleared his throat. “It could potentially throw off the balance of our universe if we have too many extra visitors in our world. Things that should’ve happened won’t happen because of the extra people. The butterfly effect, kind of.” Did Scar’s eyes linger on Etho longer than the rest of them, or was that just in Bdubs head? “We have reports that there are at least three people in this world, in the town, that didn’t originate from this world.”

Impulse stared at Etho, who was pointedly looking only at the ground or at Bdubs. “The problem, at least for my guys and I,” Grian interjected. “is that Scott is not trying to do good in this world. In fact, from everything that he’s been doing, there isn’t a doubt in my mind that him staying in this world is a good idea.”

“A starchild, right?” Etho finally spoke, eyes tired and almost dull as Impulse reached out. Etho just leaned closer to Bdubs, ignoring the other man.

Bdubs ignored the flitch in both of their body language.

“Right.” Grian looked tired too, like all the adrenaline had finally calmed down, and they were left with just the base emotions and the reality of the situation. “Starchildren...don’t understand humans. In fact, I’m willing to bet that Scott is here on his mission to become a full star.”

Tango let out a groan, hands running through the flames in his hair before he took a deep breath. “I hate to be the one who’s like ‘explain it in terms I would understand’ but I’m lost.”

That earned a few chuckles, tired and half assed as Grian offered a half-smile. “Sometimes me and Scott are closer than I like to think.” It was muttered under his breath before he cleared his throat. “Starchildren are sent to a planet with humans once they reach a certain age so they can learn how mortals work. Mostly, their emotions, since Starchildren don’t seem to feel emotions the same way we do. So this is the way their elders figured would be the best to teach the newer children. Since all of them grow up with the powers to create worlds, it was the best way to make sure they would understand the people they would be gods to.”

“But it didn’t turn out that way, I’m assuming?” Impulse asked, cracking his knuckles against his thigh like a nervous habit.

“Right.” Grian’s eyes flashed purple, a breeze drifting through the air before purple particles drifted into the middle of the circle they were standing in. A small Scott formed out of the particles, the rest of them forming the room around him. “When I first met Scott, he was fresh. He didn’t really understand human emotions at all, why people did what they did or why they hurt people. I thought- I thought he was one of the good ones, a good God, or at least had the makings of one.” Bdubs eyes drifted up to Grian’s, who’s were now trained on the magic in the middle of them, dark and almost like pits. What exactly was Grian anyways? The little Scott started growing up, his naive appearance slowly changing to confident, Scott looking like himself as the magic version of him leaned over another person, a girl, knife in hand. “I should’ve known. There’s no such thing as a good God.”

Bdubs watched in horror as Scott plunged the knife into the girl, her mouth opening in a wide, silent scream before the particles mixed up. “Pearl and Scott...Fate is funny, isn’t it?” It wasn’t Grian asking that, Bdubs realized, as he looked back up at the resistance leader. His red on his feathers almost looked like blood now, oozing over the purple galaxy as Etho

gripped onto his hand harder, like he was worried Bdubs was going to run. He might have, honestly speaking, but he didn't think he would get far even if he did. "Fate is funny in the way it's cruel, everytime."

Scar looked away from the whole group, mouth tight and hands clenched as the magic formed a new scene. There was a gasp to the left of him as the particles formed Jimmy, body bloody and bruised as Scott looked at him through bars. There was Ren in the background, eyes covered by sunglasses but teeth bared like he was waiting for a call to attack. "Yet, some people are selfless enough to know their fate, and still continue with it when there is an easier option." Bdubs didn't think this was about them anymore, since Scar was now staring at whatever form of Grian was standing with them with new found determination. Impulse was also starring, Bdubs realized a beat later, mouth tucked into a tight line. Before Bdubs could meet his gaze, Impulse was already looking back at the magic. "Scott was not. Scott killed Pearl, someone that had taught him what happiness was, what friendship was, just so he could understand grief. After all," Grian's body offered a smile, something bone chilling and dark as the magic faded away. "A good God would understand *every* emotion a mortal can feel."

The room fell quiet as the magic cleared, the only noises being the machinery around them and the way Bdubs could hear his heart beating out of his chest. This was so much bigger than him killing the wrong guy. This was so much bigger than whatever they originally thought was going on. Scar, Tango and him all looked at each other with varying degrees of concern and worry. "So what's the end goal then? I mean, it's horrible and all of that, but what is it about Scott that means we have to get rid of him?"

Grian tilted his head around like he was considering Tango's question before sighing. "After a Starchild decides they have learned everything they need to know about mortals...they usually get rid of the world they were inhabiting to make space in the universe for their own world."

Oh.

"And you're worried this is it for Scott? This is the last thing that he's going to do before he destroys the world?" That was Impulse, fists tight as Etho started to nod off. Was it rude to elbow someone so close to death?

Bdubs did it anyway.

“It feels like that, to be honest.” Impulse nodded slowly at Grian’s words, like he was taking it in as Grian continued. “I mean, even if starchildren don’t originate with emotions, they can still develop them. I’m thinking that maybe what he’s trying to do with Martyn is like...his form of being a good friend? Almost?”

Trying to act like he was more awake, Etho nodded slightly while forcing himself to stand up more straight. “I would agree. It seems like he’s trying to do what he thinks is a nice thing for all of his...friends, before he ends the world. Joel was-” Etho cut himself off as Grian’s eyes flew open, wings puffing up like the name drop was something important as Etho’s hand gripped tighter on to Bdubs. “Joel, *who was my prison guard*, mentioned something about how Scott seemed to be wrapping up things on his end. Asking Martyn to look over more of the operations, asking Joel to take over recruitment as he worked on a side project. Stuff like that.”

“Isn’t it nice that you have such a good relationship with your...prison guard.” Scar’s eyes were narrowed, mouth twisted like he was questioning the truth of the statement as Etho just shrugged.

“What can I say, I’m great at making friends.” Scar glared at Etho, who just offered a shaky but condescending smile. There was a moment, but soon enough, Scar rolled his eyes before looking down. Grian continued to give him a side eye, but didn’t say anything. “Joel also left as soon as Jimmy and Ren got there, so I have no idea where he went after that fight.”

It was quiet again as they all seemed to think through the information. Then-

“I need a nap.”

Bdubs eyes widened. His mouth really seemed to be working on its own today, didn’t it? Etho snorted, leaning more on his shoulder as his body shook like he was silently chuckling. “I mean-”

“I think all of us could benefit from some...nap time.” Grian said slowly, a small smile sliding onto his face as he looked at Bdubs and Etho. It was almost melancholy, but Bdubs didn’t really have time to think about that when the rest of the group was agreeing with his

sleep deprived idea. Grian and Scar said something about picking the meeting up tomorrow, which led to some arguing from Tango and Impulse but Bdubs wasn't listening. It sounded like the other two wanted to work something out now, but it seemed like it was a losing battle for the two of them.

Etho had seemed to grow restless on the trip home, messaging Tango about the enderporter and how it worked as Bdubs fought off the urge to yawn. It was stupid, since Etho was the one who got kidnapped but Bdubs chalked it up to enderman abilities or something like that. For someone who was almost dead, Etho seemed...okay? Relatively speaking, he guesses. He still looked like shit, but he also had the look in his eyes that screamed his mind was going a hundred miles an hour.

“Penny for your thoughts?” It was late when they got home, Bdubs staring in the direction of the bathroom where Etho had just cracked the door as he got ready from bed. He had showered first, barely resisting the urge to invite Etho to join him just so they could stay close to each other. Besides, as excited as Bdubs was that Etho even came home with him in the first place, he didn't know where they really stood. Etho had...broken up with him? Bdubs guessed, last time they actually talked. But he seemed to attach himself onto Bdubs as soon as he could.

Etho peeked around the door, holding up a finger with a toothbrush in between his lips. Briefly, Bdubs wondered if Etho's teeth were as sharp in human form as he was when he was leaning more into his hybrid self. The thought was promptly tossed out as he felt himself start to grow warm with the idea. “My thoughts are worth at least a dollar.” Etho said after spitting, grinning wide and very uneven with how his mouth was healing. It shouldn't be as charming as it was, Bdubs throat suddenly very dry as his eyes traced his teeth. It was like Etho knew what he was thinking about, Bdubs watching him blink twice before his eyes darkened. “Maybe two dollars. After all, I've been called a genius before.”

Bdubs snorted at that, fiddling with the edge of his sleep shirt. “Highest I'll go is one fifty. I know there's mostly empty space up there.” That got a chuckle out of Etho, the man turning off the backroom light and walking past Bdubs to where his bedroom was.

Okay, cool.

That was fine. Right?

He followed, which was weird since it was *his* room in the first place. It wasn't awkward, but it should be awkward, and that was making Bdubs act awkward. Understand? He sure didn't, but he did understand that he was getting more and more flustered as Etho flopped onto the bed, letting out a groan that was totally normal and not at all pitched like how Bdubs was hearing it to be. Etho cracked his fingers against his palm as Bdubs stalled at the door, watching him. It was nice to see him look relaxed for once.

Etho steadied himself on his elbow, raising an eyebrow at him. "See something you like?" Yeah, Bdubs did. But instead of being smooth like he wanted to be, Bdubs felt himself start to tense up. Etho leaned up further, eyes losing the teasing edge from before and instead starting to look concerned. "B?"

"We broke up."

Bdubs hands flew up to cover his mouth as Etho blinked twice, grin fading and shoulders tensing up like he forgot that small very important fact. He sat up completely, mouth now in a tight smile as he offered a shrug. "I mean... We weren't ever *really* dating in the first place, right?"

Right. Bdubs bit at his bottom lip, peeling the dead skin away and ignoring the way Etho's eyes followed the motion. He felt raw, tired, worked to the core and yet-

"No, we were never dating."

He still would go with whatever stupid little bit Etho was going to do.

Etho's eyes sparkled as he stood up, quickly crossing the room to where Bdubs was standing. Bdubs resisted the urge to back up, even though there wasn't that much space to back up anyways as Etho rested his hands on Bdubs hips. "So I couldn't technically break up with you in the first place, right?"

“You and your technicalities.” Bdubs whispered, though he really didn’t know why he was talking so quiet as Etho pulled his hips closer, making him stumble and catch himself against the other’s chest. The half smile was back, the heat in his gut almost bubbling as he slowly dragged his hand up and around Etho’s neck before playing with the hair at the base of it. “It *would* be pretty weird if you broke up with someone you were never dating. Physically impossible actually.”

Bdubs felt his eyes widen as Etho pulled him even closer, one hand sliding behind him to his lower back as the other came up to gently tip his head up to make him look directly at the other.

Oh.

He wasn’t smiling like Bdubs was expecting. He was used to the teasing grin, the masked affection. He wasn’t used to the tiny smile, the way his mismatched eyes seemed glimmer with adoration and-

“I think you’re my guardian angel, you know?” The air seemed to force its way out of Bdubs chest as Etho traced his jaw with featherlight touches, seemingly trying to map out every invisible scar and divet in his skin as Bdubs continued to stare up at him. “I had someone who called me that once, but you-” Etho gulped, hand sliding down to the base of Bdubs throat, a shiver going down his spine with it. The hand rested there, not heavy, but full of promise as Bdubs leaned into it.

I trust you.

Etho’s eyes darkened.

The hand slid up, just enough to feel like a threat but not tight enough to be one as Bdubs took a shallow breath in. “I feel like I should be saying that, since you’ve kept me alive this whole time. It’s an impressive feat, even if you’re a proclaimed PVP master.”

His hand tightened, for a moment, before relaxing again. Just enough to have Bdubs letting out a tiny gasp, enough for his grip in Etho’s hair to grow a bit more tight.

Do you trust yourself?

“I don’t know how I feel about all of that stuff, if I’m being honest.” Etho admitted. “People keep putting me up on a pedestal when-”

“When you’re really a major loser?” Bdubs offered, raising an eyebrow.

Chuckling, Etho let go of Bdubs throat, head falling on his shoulder as he pulled his body completely flush with him. Going willingly, Bdubs wrapped his arms around him, ignoring the way his heart was beating out of his chest at the way Etho buried his face into the crook of his neck. “Yeah. When I’m a major loser.”

“Good thing you’ve got me to remind you of that.”

“Can I get your word on that?”

It was muffled, words dusting across his skin and making Bdubs eyes flutter. It was almost more vulnerable than anything else he had said, the words echoing in his head for a moment before fading away. “Of course.” Bdubs croaked out, breath catching in his throat as Etho pressed a light kiss on his shoulder. “I think if it comes down to it, it will be me and you to the end.”

Etho grinned, the feeling on his skin sending another shiver down Bdubs spine as he pushed a tiny whine back down. It was pathetic how needy he felt when they were having such a normal or even soft conversation. Etho kissed his shoulder again, then the crook of his neck, then up the column of his throat as Bdubs pulled at him. It wasn’t like they could get closer, Bdubs was as close as he could get but it didn’t stop him from trying. One hand came to cup his cheek, forcing him to pay attention as Etho pulled away for a moment. “The end is a scary place, Bdubs. I don’t know if you’d want to come with me.”

It was a joke, clearly, but Bdubs still tilted his head to kiss the middle of his palm. “The end, the void, Canada,” Etho snorted, shaking his head as Bdubs offered a grin. “I’ll follow.”

It was funny to think about two-ish months ago. Where Bdubs was fully committed to his job, to Scar and to his city. He killed without thought, he passed laws that he hoped would benefit everyone but took money under the table anyways. He wasn't as good of a person as people seemed to think, which is why he was so successful. But now-

“Be my boyfriend?” Etho leaned closer, knocking his forehead against Bdubs while offering a crooked smile. “I happen to have an extra ticket to some Gala and I need a date.”

Bdubs closed the gap instead of saying anything, but he figured that he got the point across anyways.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I took the worst chapter to have a minor gap in posting since this one feels boring, but yall all said you like Lore so here we go- also I want to say I read all of your comments on the last chapter, they were all very kind and nice and I really appreciate them. I also feel like so much time has past that it would be weird if I commented on them now if that makes sense? But I do appreciate the feedback and kind words always.

Also! Look! An end goal! Four more chapters! Unless I can't count and it's more then I thought!

...Thats a lot of explanation points.

See you in the next chapter!

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

"So you really think we're doomed?"

"I think saving the world would take a miracle."

Chapter Notes

no tag changes!

I've been fighting literal demons to get this chapter out (my bedtime got screwed up so I kept falling asleep while trying to write this lmao)

I once again fell behind in replying to comments, but I do want people to know I read each and everyone of them! they really make my day! Hope you guys enjoy this next chapter!

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

You know, for the amount of time that had passed and places he had been, he never really understood coffee.

Sure, he got the principle of it. Bean juice makes people go fast. Big whoop. Cleo was always a huge fan of it, so he guessed it made sense that they made a shop once they all separated.

He didn't like to think of himself as a spiteful person, even though in the back of his mind, he knew he was. Therefore, he changed the thought to "he didn't like thinking he was *always* a spiteful person", which settled in his gut and made living his life he was forced to live that much easier.

Cleo was always a sore subject for them, he remembers. She was head-strong, she always knew what she wanted it seemed and wasn't afraid to go for it. When they first fell into that world, that meant that she wanted Etho. And Etho walked right into their trap willingly.

Wasn't his company enough? Sure, it wasn't romantic or even friendly at times but that was just them. That was how they worked. They held each other an arms length apart till something happened to make them bend. But with Cleo it was like Etho suddenly forgot he had elbows to bend, that he had a choice he could make. And then Cleo decided to follow them once he had finally convinced Etho to get moving along even though their relationship was on the rocks anyways and now-

“Are you coming in, or are you going to stare at the front doors all day?”

He blinked, eyes refocusing on where Cleo was now standing in the doorframe, door held open with one hand as the other lay lazily to their side. She was clearly still on edge, shoulder tense just how they normally were whenever they used to talk in the past. “Hello Cleo.” He finally said after a few tense beats.

There were a few more seconds, Cleo seemingly studying him before they sighed. His hands tightened on the duffle bag he had thrown together at light speed. “I keep hot chocolate packets in the back for weirdo's like you. I'll get the water started.”

Joel grinned.

.....

Etho liked to think he was a normal person.

Etho was starting to think he was also good at remaining delusional.

He knew, he knew that Scar and Grian were planning something. It was obvious from their conversation that Grian wasn't showing all his cards. Clearly, since the 'reports of three extra people in the universe' was utter bullshit. That would only cover him, Joel and Cleo if that were true. Then there was Scott, and don't even get Etho started on Grian himself who definitely wasn't from this world either. Etho might not know much about Grian, but he could confirm that at least.

Bdubs tucked himself into Etho's chest more, the morning light streaming through the window just enough to have woken Etho up in the first place. He didn't mind, since all his dreams were him falling down an endless void, never hitting the bottom, never aging. A nightmare, some might say, but Etho didn't think that was as bad as some of the things he had seen while being awake.

What was Grian planning? Surely the guy already had a plan, even if he was acting like he didn't. Grian wasn't the kind of person to wing something, especially something big like this. So if he wasn't telling Etho and Impulse what was going on, it meant it wasn't something the two of them would like. Etho had a feeling it was something to do with the fact Scar seemed very determined to get rid of extra people inhabiting his city, which meant bad news for him. Even worse, and Etho really didn't want to think this, Grian didn't seem to be fighting him on that.

"You're thinking too loud." Bdubs mumbled, voice shaking Etho out of his thoughts. He had somehow wedged himself closer to Etho, which was impressive since there really wasn't that much space between them in the first place. He was like a leach, legs tangled up in each other as he smiled sleepily at him. "Gonna get wrinkles."

"I'm not too worried about wrinkles." Etho managed to say, Bdubs hand tracing his jaw before pressing a thumb in between his eyebrows.

"I am. I can't be seen with someone *that* much less attractive than me-"

Etho laughed, easily flipping the two of them around, reminiscent of the day before everything really started falling apart. This time however, there was more than just minor infatuation. There was a feeling growing roots in his chest, almost strangling his heart whenever Bdubs looked at him. It often confused Etho that people thought love was something soft when it always felt like he was willingly putting himself in the line of fire. It felt like a death sentence, something so final as Bdubs pressed a soft kiss against his lips.

"I guess I'm lucky you'll still like me even if I'm ugly." Etho offered a half smile, eyes wandering to the marks left the night before that dotted Bdubs neck and shoulder, trailing a hand down his chest as Bdubs breath picked up. Placing a knee in between his legs, Etho

slowly dragged it forward and listened for the predictable half-moan Bdubs would make. Etho leaned closer into his space. “Right babe?”

Bdubs leaned even closer, glaring without heat as Etho chuckled low. “You’re an awful person, you know that right?” He said that, but closed the gap immediately after, willingly opening his mouth to let Etho explore further once he ran his tongue against his lips. The little noises Bdubs let out were always a great motivator to continue doing what he was doing, digging his fingers into the small of his back to get another groan out of him.

It was almost like playing an instrument, Etho thought later, brushing his teeth next to Bdubs. It was late morning by this point, both of them feeling sore in the best way, a pep in Etho’s step that Bdubs didn’t hesitate to make fun of as they two of them ate a quick breakfast. Bdubs had a whole list of things he had to do before the gala, which was apparently also going to be used as a cover for the whole ‘catch Scott’ thing everyone was doing.

Etho still needed to clarify that.

In any case, it was as good of a time as any to visit Grian and get that clarification he needed. Bdubs would be occupied till late tonight, Scar too- which got him off of Etho’s back- and Etho would be able to maybe rest for five seconds.

“Why are you so worried about getting rid of Scott?”

Etho froze, lips wrapped around his spoon as Bdubs watched him carefully. He should’ve known the question was coming. It wasn’t like he was hiding his conflicting feelings very well in the first place. It was only a matter of time before Bdubs realized him being an enderman hybrid wasn’t the only thing Etho was hiding. Still, he was hoping he would’ve had a few more days, maybe even after the gala to collect his thoughts. “I don’t know, it feels rude.” Etho finally said after a few seconds, look down at his bowl. He wasn’t very hungry anymore.

“What’s rude is trying to destroy the world he learned everything in.”

“I guess.” Bdubs was still staring at him, not saying anything but clearly waiting for more. “Just...he built a life here. It feels rude to rip him from it if he really isn’t planning something.” Bdubs seemed to grow more confused as panic started to build up in Etho’s chest. Did Bdubs disagree? He knew that Scar and Tango both had mixed emotions about Etho staying in their world, but would Bdubs if he knew? “I’m just spouting nonsense-”

“How’d you know Joel?”

Pausing, Etho finally looked up at his partner, who leaned forward.”And don’t tell me you don’t. We’re past the whole lying thing.”

“I guess you do have two more 100% honest answers from me.” A flash of hurt crossed Bdubs face as soon as Etho said that, mouth twitching downwards. It shouldn’t be scary to talk about his history, but there were so many more questions Etho wanted answered before he answered Bdubs himself. Fair? Not really, but Etho never really thought he was fair anyways.

“If that's what it takes for you to be honest with me, then yeah.”

Etho pushed his bowl away from him, watching as Bdubs seemed to square up for a fight. How dysfunctional were they if Etho couldn’t even tell the person he likes the most the truth? How broken was he? “We came here at the same time. Travel buddies.”

There was a silence after the half-truth, guilt eating away at Etho’s stomach lining before Bdubs comm went off. It was still tense as Bdubs let it ring for a moment, before breaking eye contact to pull it out of his pocket. “Hello?” Etho continued to stare as Bdubs stood up, cradling the comm between his ear while he dropped his bowl off in the sink. “No, it's not a problem Stress, I’ll come down now. Really, I’m sure the red will look just fine.” Bdubs hand wrapped around Etho’s chin, tilting his face upwards so he could kiss his cheek. The embarrassing warmth Etho wasn’t used to filled his gut as Bdubs offered a half smile, something reassuring in it as he rubbed a careful circle on his scars before pulling back. “Yep, even with the orange they will look fine. I promise. See you in five...ten minutes.”

Bdubs made his way over to the door, grabbing his jacket off of the hooks before turning around. “See you soon.” Etho stood up as Bdubs hung up the call, taking his half-empty bowl to the sink. “You going to be home later?”

Home. Because Bdubs considered this place both of their homes.

Etho could admit that he wasn't thinking the night before. He was exhausted, the ender-portal taking a lot out of him. Then everyone seemed to want to plan stuff right then, when he was barely standing on his two feet. The enderman regen did help as him and Bdubs walked home, but he would say he was still slightly out of it till this morning. He was glad Bdubs still said yes to him asking if he would be his boyfriend, but that really wasn't in his original plan. He didn't regret it, but it was still scary to think about.

"I'll probably be home earlier than you. I don't know what Tango wants to do today."

"You're hanging out with Tango?" Bdubs hovered by the door, a confused look on his face as Etho rubbed at the wrist the arm band used to be. The question itself was something Etho didn't think about. He had contracts he signed, but he also clearly wasn't following it. Vex magic was confusing and he didn't know if Scar had used any on the contract in the first place. He didn't want to risk it...unless it was about Bdubs.

Etho walked up to him, letting Bdubs wrap his arms around his shoulders as he felt the tension slip away. "He mentioned something about police reports. Nothing exciting." Bdubs just raised his eyebrow. "He's trying to trick me into the police force. Little does he know I'm being paid so much more by Grian." Bdubs laughed, running his fingers up and through the underside of his hair. Grinning, Etho leaned down to softly kiss him.

It was mind blowing, how gently Bdubs moved when kissing him. How he almost felt like he was breakable as Bdubs moved his hands to cup his face and angle him a way he could deepen the kiss. It was almost like Bdubs thought he was fragile which was clearly not the case. It was sweet though, the feeling of being someone so cared for. "You know, you could finally join the dark side." Bdubs whispered as he pulled back, thumbs moving across his scars and sending tingles down his spine.

"Ah yes, politics. The darkest of sides."

Bdubs laughed again, resting his head against Etho's chest as Etho pulled him closer. "Go take care of the flower emergency, I'll be waiting here when you get home." Bdubs mumbled

something into his chest before pulling away with a soft grin.

“Make me food since you’ll be home?”

Chuckling, Etho rolled his eyes before pushing him away, the affronted gasp doing nothing but making his heart hurt in a way he wasn't used to. “Maybe. Though I don’t know why you’d think I was any good at cooking.”

Bdubs shrugged, finally pulling open the door before offering a grin over his shoulder. “I don’t. I think it would be funny to see what you try and make.” It was Etho’s turn to snort, pushing him out of the door completely before being pulled for another kiss. “Bye.” Bdubs whispered. Patting his chest twice before actually leaving.

Etho couldn’t lie, it was weird. Not the domesticity of it all, even though that itself was strange to him since his only other partner he had was during an active apocalypse, but the fact that it felt so normal. Like this was something he could actually continue to have if he wanted. That even if he messed up a little bit, Bdubs and him could work it out. That he could be happy, finally.

Maybe he would let himself be happy, after the Gala.

Maybe.

[Grian]

We need to talk about the plan for tomorrow

.....

The smell of stale blood was never a good scent, but it was one Etho was unfortunately familiar with.

His apartment was relatively untouched since the police had come, the bodies taken away and blood now dried on the walls. Etho had tried to feel bad about killing the three officers, but at that point in time, he wasn't.

It was crazy to think how much he had changed since then.

Martyn's stuff had also not been touched, which was interesting to see since Ren had a key to their apartment. Etho was sure he would've come over to collect his things at least, even if he thought that this whole body snatching thing was going to work. Walking into Martyn's room however, there was nothing that seemed out of place. Granted, the two of them didn't talk that often, but still. His bed was messily made, clothing hung up and his computer still plugged in. The desk was cluttered, but in an organized way that would probably make sense to Martyn. A lot of paperwork Etho wasn't willing to look through, a lot of sticky-notes and other stationary items that seemed useless but looked nice.

[grian]

etho i know you read my message

Etho had only come back to get more of his clothes. He wasn't paying for the apartment anymore, at least if the landlord couldn't find him, so he wanted to get anything he might need before they cleaned it out for good. He eyed the computer as he ignored the vibration of his comm, stepping further into the room to open it up.

What was crazy to think about, or maybe not if people really knew how Etho worked, was how oblivious he was to what Martyn was doing while he was alive. He knew him as a freelancer, someone who was definitely running from his past, and was pretty good at doing his dishes without Etho forcing him. A good roommate, nothing more, nothing less.

The screen lit up, a photo of a generic sunset showing with the password box popping up moments later. He should've known he wouldn't have made it easy. Etho was half tempted to give up then. He really didn't know why he was even snooping, especially when the plan was to get rid of Scott, not Martyn's ghost. Hopefully it would be a two for one deal, if Etho was being honest. Etho quickly went through the obvious ones, six numbers in a row, Ren and his

names, his birthday Etho only remembered since it was the day Martyn had moved in. Nothing worked.

Huffing, Etho stood back up straight, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth for a moment before looking around the room again. He might have some clues around the room itself. Clean, nothing out of the ordinary just like he originally thought. The windows were open, the curtains rippling slightly at the breeze coming in. His comm buzzed. Etho ignored it, he knew who it was.

Etho had always respected Grian. He never seemed to bring other people down with his own personal problems, always did what he thought was best. His and Grian's morals matched up pretty well, and when they didn't Grian was willing to talk out the best course of action for the group of them. It was simple, it was an easy friendship.

Etho was starting to think maybe he should've asked more questions.

Memories of Grian avoiding questions, avoiding topics in general flashed in his head as Etho walked back towards the computer. What was Grian, exactly? He knew he wasn't from this world, it was obvious. But the fact he knew so much about Scott left a sour taste in Etho's mouth. After all, if he knew Scott, then he probably knew Martyn too. It did explain why Grian looked conflicted when they were at the cemetery though.

Whatever Grian was, he wasn't someone that should be ignored. Etho's comm vibrated again as he quickly unplugged Martyn's laptop, stuffing it into his bag before looking around the room for a final time. Maybe Tango could unlock it if he took it to him.

A breeze.

"Hey Martyn." Etho said out loud, hands tightening on the strap of his bag as he talked to an empty room. There was no reply, but Etho wasn't expecting it. He was used to talking to nothing anyways. "I would promise to return this, but I have a feeling you won't be using it anytime soon."

Another breeze, this time almost harsh as Etho raised an eyebrow. Last he knew, Martyn was stuck in Jimmy-

Or maybe not.

After all, Scott was actively pulling Martyn out of Jimmy when Etho had broken the wrist cuff. Who knew if Martyn was still in Jimmy or if he was out in the world. He could be here right now...

“Wanna give me the password to your computer?” Etho tried, putting the bag back on the bed and unzipping it. Etho didn’t get very far as a gust of air flew through the window, the organized desk and paper stacks flying around as Etho dropped the laptop on the bed before ducking slightly. “It was just a question!” Etho called out, bracing himself for another wind attack.

Nothing.

Okay...Etho looked around the room, at the papers and knick knacks on the ground before sighing. “I know you’re angry about dying. I would be too. But... don’t think that you want the world to end.”

Nothing again. Typical.

Etho walked back towards the desk, pushing some papers out of the middle before talking again. “Maybe you do. I guess I didn’t know you well. I always just...Thought you were similar to me.” The air almost felt stale without the breeze, the smell of the blood filling his nose now that there wasn’t anything to distract him. “The second option, the scary one, the person that people fell back on if the first plan didn’t work. Morally gray, all the works. That’s probably why I never asked what was up with you, I thought we were the same. People wrapped up in something bigger than they thought, too deep to get out.” Shifting the papers around even more, Etho closed his eyes to hopefully listen. Listen to what exactly, he wasn’t sure. Maybe he wouldn’t hear anything.

Instead of hearing anything, Etho's fingers brushed across the edge of a paper. "Shit!" Etho's eyes ripped open, fingertip bleeding onto a bill of some sort as Etho glared down at it. Of course he would get a stupid papercut when trying to communicate with the dead. Etho just watched the blood saturate the paper instead of doing anything about it, watching it bead on the surface before slowly sinking into the white.

A breeze.

Etho looked closer, watching as the splotches seemed to shift subtly across the sheet.

W

Eyes widening, Etho watched as the blood started spreading. Of course it would be something macabre, Martyn would go for the theatrics after all. His finger had already sealed itself up by this point, the fast healing of his endermen side acting as a hindrance for once. The W was lopsided, but after glancing at some of the other documents he was sure that it was Martyn talking to him.

"You're an asshole, you know that right?" Etho was sure if the wind could snicker it would, Etho glaring at nothing before slumping. "I bet you could just write it with a pen." He muttered. Closing his eyes, Etho opened his mouth just enough to get his palm under one of his canines before slicing it open.

Endermen blood was horrible to taste, Etho had to admit. He quickening shut his mouth, holding his hand over the paper as blood dripped down his palm and fingertips to the surface below. He didn't look, choosing to look up at the ceiling as his hand started to stitch itself back together. Finally, after his palm felt tight across the center where the cut had been he looked back down.

Watcher

Etho stared at the paper, the blood already starting to brown as he blinked at the word. Watcher? Like the deities? Was that the password to the computer? The breeze was back to normal, which meant that Martyn was gone, or that he was done with answering Etho's

questions. Either way, Etho was quick to fold the paper, tucking it into his pocket before putting the computer back into his bag. He should've messaged Grian back much earlier and he still needed to go talk with Tango-

“Thanks.” Etho found himself saying even though he was sure Martyn was long gone. The room was quiet, just like he thought it would be, but Etho still lingered. “I don't get you, or what side you're on, but thanks for the help. Ren misses you a lot, enough to-” The lump in his throat grew fast, hands tightening on his bag before turned away from the room. “I hope we all get what we deserve, in the end. I'm sure you feel the same.”

The breeze remained the same, but this time Etho couldn't help but feel relieved.

.....

Something was wrong with Grian.

They were sitting in the base alone, Impulse apparently out with Tango in a surprising turn of events to talk over their part in this whole plan Grian was supposed to be talking to him about. Etho supposed the two of them were not hanging out then. Instead, Grian was fiddling with his lukewarm cup of tea he hadn't drunk out of, Etho sitting across from him with an empty coffee cup. “Why am I actually here, Grian?” Etho finally said.

“That's a good question.” Grian's shoulders were far too tense for how casual his voice was. “Why are either of us here, really?”

Raising an eyebrow, Etho sat further back in his seat as Grian looked down at his cup. “Didn't know talking to an ex-boyfriend would cause you to have an existential crisis.”

Grian's wings puffed up, looking from his tea to send a glare in Etho's direction. “Scar and I have never dated.”

“Ah, fuck-buddies. Even worse.”

“You’re throwing rocks at glass houses Etho.”

Shrugging, Etho placed his empty cup on the table between them. “Actually, Bdubs and I talked last night.”

“Really?” It was strained. Which...wasn’t exactly what Etho was wanting to hear in his friend's voice.

“Really.” Etho confirmed anyways, watching as Grian avoided eye-contact. “We’re dating now...or something like that. But yeah, we talked.”

“I didn’t realize you were that serious.”

That was a lie. Etho slowly sat up, a chill crawling up his spine as Grian continued to look at his cup. Grian wasn’t a liar, at least to him. It was one of the fundamental principles of their friendship.

Ask me no questions, I’ll tell you no lies .

Etho felt a cold hand wrap around his heart, freezing over his veins.

“What do you mean by that?” It came out lower than Etho meant it too, the voice much more serious than he thought either of them were ready for.

For his credit, once Grian looked at him he didn’t falter. “Scar wants you gone.” That wasn’t an answer to his question, but it did open the conversation for more. “He’s set on it, in all actuality.”

Etho couldn’t seem to get warm, goosebumps forming on his arms as he crossed them. “So?” Grian continued to stare, eyes darker than normal. Etho had to admit, he wasn’t used to that

look being directed at him. That look was usually for people he was fighting with, people he had resentment towards. Etho had done nothing to deserve the look. “Nothing, I guess. I can’t make you leave.”

“But you want me to?” Etho asked it as a question, but the sinking feeling in his gut was enough to make it sound like a statement.

“No!” Grian looked surprised that Etho even suggested that, like he wasn’t acting weird in the first place. He reached across the table, gripping onto his hand like he was afraid Etho was going to leave. Which he might have, since the purple film started to build over Grian’s eyes. “No, never. I’m just saying that Scar seems very determined...”

“I’m not too worried about Scar, no offense.” Etho laughed a bit, pulling his hand from Grian’s grip and placing it in his lap. “I mean, he hired me to protect his employee because he couldn’t. There’s not much he could do to me.”

“You don’t know that.”

That was enough. Grian was being really weird and Etho didn’t have time for it. The gala was *tomorrow*, they couldn’t be doing this back and forth about someone they had to trust for whatever plan they had. “And what do you know about Scar? You two are close, yes?”

Grian’s wings puffed, the purple seemingly shining in the low lighting around them as he glared. “I’m just *saying* he’s persuasive. I’m just warning you to be careful.”

“I think you should take your own advice.”

Grian’s hands were tense around his cup, mouth tucked in a tight line before he let out a long breath. “Scott is going to try and destroy this world tomorrow.” It was a change of subject, a clear movement in a different direction meaning that neither of them were going to win the argument. Etho’s hand twitched towards the paper in his back pocket. The air conditioner turned on. “Tango and Impulse haven’t slept at all, trying to figure out how he’s going to do it. Research about Star children has been limited though, and without Jimmy in our

possession we don't have much to go on." Etho nodded, rolling his shoulders back as Grian looked at him head on. "What are you going to do if it's a void hole?"

Etho hadn't thought about that.

Etho hadn't thought about a world collapsing into a void hole in a *long* time.

"Etho!"

He looked around, eyes wide and overwhelmed as the buildings in the distance started to fall through the ground, a blackness- no, an absence of anything swallowing them whole as Beef tugged at his arm. "Etho we have to go!"

The street was cracking, people screaming and disappearing right in front of him. This wasn't how it was supposed to go, this wasn't how worlds disappeared, right? There was no way a world could just be-

"ETHO!"

He was falling.

And falling.

And falling.

For a void walker, Etho had never tried to find his original world. There was nothing left anyways, not if what he remembered was true. If he had to talk about it, he would say Lizzie and Joel's world was his home before he came here.

“I made a promise.” Etho finally said, looking down at the table as Grian nodded slowly like he understood. “If the world was falling into the void...”

“What about the other one?”

Etho didn't want to think about Cleo. Etho didn't want to think about how Grian knew so much about him when he didn't know shit about someone he called his closest friend. The paper in his pocket seemed to be burning a hole into it. “What about her?” Etho choked out.

“Would you take her with you? Or would you let her die in trade for Bdubs? Or would you take Impulse, or me? What about Ren? Why would you turn to Joel when-”

“*How* do you know this?!” Etho ripped his head up to look at Grian, watching as the other flinched back as the purple faded from his eyes. “How do you know so much about me when I don't know anything about you? How do you know? It's like you're constantly there, always watching over my-”

The air conditioner stopped.

In fact, it was almost like the whole world stopped as Etho cut himself off. Grian was still looking at him, but there was clear guilt in his eyes as Etho slowly reached for his pocket. Grian watched as he pulled out the bill and unfolded it before he threw it on the table.

There's no such thing as a good God.

Grian's words echoed in his head as he watched the man look at the paper, mouth tucked into a light line before he looked back up. “Martyn?” Etho barely nodded as Grian let out a strained laugh, like it had been caught in his throat for too long and had to come out or it was going to choke him to death. Could Grian even die, now that Etho knows what he is? “His handwriting always sucked. Martyn's had it out for me for years, it's not even surprising he would still be at it after he was dead.”

Etho didn't say anything as Grian finally took a drink of his tea, clearly not minding the bitter taste before he sat it back down. Etho had never felt awkward around Grian, but now it was almost unbearable. His blood on the paper was discolored, the ugly brown staining it forever as Grian slowly reached for it. "How much have you been hiding from me?" It was choked, fingers digging into his jacket fabric while Grian's eyes flooded with purple.

"Nothing that mattered."

"Bullshit." Etho immediately countered. "You just happened to know Martyn even though he moved from out of town? You seem to know Scar *very* intimately. And Starchildren? You're sending Tango and Impulse on a wild goose chase for more information when it seems like you know so much about them yourself."

"Do you believe in soulmates, Etho?"

Etho blinked, mouth still open from the interruption as Grian looked calmly at him. His eyes were closed, fingers tapping on the glass of the cup as Etho thought about the question. "I can't say I do." Etho gritted out.

"You should ask Impulse about them sometime." Grian waved his free hand around. "I do believe in them, in some sense. Fate is something I put more confidence behind. I think it was fate that you fell into this world at this time. I think you met Bdubs by fate, and that you and Joel are bound by fate. Just like me and Scar. There's always going to be a pull towards each other."

God's could go crazy right? Etho leaned back in his chair, watching as Grian's eyes seemed to wave with different colors of purple. Crazy with power, Etho supposed, but Grian wasn't like that. Etho refused to think Grian was like that. "Answer my questions."

"Can you say please?" Etho didn't say anything to the quip, just stared. He didn't know if any of his magic was forming, but if it was, the situation could get bad fast. Grian's grin faded, eyes darkening as he finally sat his cup down. "As Martyn wrote, I was a watcher." Etho closed his eyes as Grian took a shaky breath in. "It's a long story, one that doesn't need to be told right now since we're kind of in a time crunch. I..." Etho opened his eyes to see Grian taking in another deep breath, like he was struggling to remember to breathe on his own. "Me and Scott are pretty similar. Human emotions come slowly or not at all. I think I related to

him much more when we both got here then now though. I like to think I've at least started to understand emotions better." Grian looked at him like he was expecting a response. Etho didn't offer one.

It was weird seeing Grian look so unsure about himself, about the conversation he was directing. He sank lower into his seat, another wave of purple flooding his eyes as he tried to steady his breathing. "I understand emotion now, I really do. I get all the good things like being happy and in love and simply content with things in my life. I get the bad stuff too." Etho flinched back as Grian looked up at him, eyes pitch black with only purple specks in them. " *Void* , I understand the bad human emotions just fine. I'm as human as they come in that regard."

"Why do you know so much about me?" Etho could barely look at him without feeling uncomfortable. It was like Grian didn't have eyes anymore, just blank spots where they should've been.

"Is it so bad to want to understand your friend?"

Yes! Etho wanted to scream. Yes it was bad when you didn't share the details yourself, when you looked inside his brain to memories he should only know. But Grian still looked almost confused at his anger, at his frustration of it all. If what he was saying was true, and Etho really couldn't think of a reason why it wouldn't be by this point, then Grian might honestly not understand. And that-

Etho didn't know how to feel about that.

"So I know what you are now." Etho finally said, tapping his fingers against the table as he leaned forward. He would let go of that argument for another time. "What about my other questions?"

Grian blinked, eyes starting to fade back to the normal color as Etho refrained from letting out a sigh of relief. "I really don't know much about Starchildren. A different kind of Deity entirely, if I'm being honest. When I was a Watcher they used to tell me that they were self-righteous since they came from the sky and walked among humans for a time period, but that's about my extent. I know Scott, not Starchildren."

It was quiet after that, Grian fading back into his normal self as Etho thought about his words. They were fighting against a literal God, with another God on their side, and yet that God seemed apprehensive at best. It was the questions before that had Etho on edge more than anything, the fact the Grian seemed to be planning on the destruction of the world more than saving it. "You don't think we can stop him." Etho asked, more as a statement than a question.

"...No."

Etho stomach dropped.

"I will admit I sent Tango and Impulse on a wild goose chase for more information." Grian said next after it became apparent Etho wasn't going to say much else. "They could use the distraction from what's coming tomorrow."

And maybe that's why Etho couldn't hate Grian completely. Because even though he looked inside his head, looked and watched his memories and daily occurrences, he was still trying his best. He was trying to make the best choices for everyone, ones that would lead to the least amount of heartache. "Is that why you asked about a void hole?"

Grimacing, Grian nodded again. "It's the most common way a world can be destroyed. And hopefully, at least for us, it's the way we can take people we love to a new world."

Wait a minute.

"You can walk in the void?"

Grian cracked a tiny smile, sharp teeth poking out for a second before disappearing. "You're not the only one who can survive a fall."

Rough landing, or just a long fall?

Falling from the grace of other Gods had to be a long trip.

“Who would you take, if the world was falling from beneath you?”

Grian eyes didn't leave his own, mouth twisting down into a bitter frown that had Etho's heart hurting for the other man. “I don't know if it's a question of who, it's more of a question of if he would come with me.”

“You really think he would choose to die rather than to live with you?”

There was a pause, something almost longing in the air as Grian finally broke eye contact. “I don't know if I could ask him to live for me.” Then a hollow laugh, followed by a choking noise that had Etho's eyes widening with alarm. “I don't know why I'm lying. I would take Scar. I would make him come with me. I would rather him alive and hating me than dead from a stupid hole.”

And that was that.

Grian straightened back up, rolling his shoulders back with a grim look on his face as Etho took a shaky breath in. So this was it? Grian really didn't think that they could win tomorrow. Etho's lip felt raw from the amount of time he spent biting it today. “So you really think we're doomed?”

“I think saving the world would take a miracle.”

.....

“You know what? This is better than I thought it was going to be.”

Etho couldn't help but smile at the absolute bewilderment in Bdubs voice as he looked down at the pasta, fork already spinning more noodles onto it. "This is the only thing I can make. That and instant ramen."

The rest of the meeting with Grian went exactly how Etho thought it would. He argued with him for a while, the two of them brainstormed any and all ideas of how to combat Scott and came up blank 99% of the time. Grian was right, it would take a miracle for them to stop what seemed to be a basically fully formed God.

It didn't mean they weren't going to try though. Grian promised to text Etho with any ideas Tango and Impulse came up with, and Etho promised to do the same with Bdubs. It was rough, especially since they didn't have contact with Jimmy to really plan for *anything* that Scott was planning. Grian seemed taken back that Etho was adamant that Jimmy was part of their team, but Grian also hadn't seen the way he stabbed through Scott's hand like Etho did. Someone who was following a God religiously wouldn't do that.

Etho's mind wouldn't stop wandering back to Joel.

Joel had to know Scott's plan too. After all, he had been part of that team for who knows how long. Probably since the three of them landed here, if Etho was to guess. In any case, Etho didn't know where Joel was or if he'd even help him by this point.

"I honestly thought you were going to order in, so this is already a step up. It's good." Bdubs grinned before taking the bite, Etho's chest constricting as his face began to warm. Simple compliments shouldn't influence him so much, but it was so new to him.

If you don't want him to hate you, you have to tell the truth. Take it from me.

Etho's smile faded as he looked down at the pasta, Grian's parting words echoing in his head like a mantra. It was a passing remark, something deep rooted from what had to be past experience as Etho nodded.

The fact of the matter was, Etho was still living a lie. Bdubs knew he was an enderman hybrid, but what else? What else had Etho lied or didn't talk about just because he didn't feel comfortable sharing? How could he expect Bdubs to want to go to another world with him if he didn't know who he was?

He just didn't know how to start the conversation.

"...Etho? Sweetheart?" Etho shook his head again, mouth now tucked in a tight line as Bdubs looked at him concerned. "Are you okay-"

"The day that you gave me your keys I copied them." He guessed that was one way to start a conversation. Etho's eyes widened as Bdubs stopped mid-sentence, head tilting slightly at the interruption. "I told you I copied them just for me but I copied a third pair for Grian. It's how Ren escaped from jail that one night."

Etho watched as Bdubs seemed to process the information, slowly setting down his fork and picking up his napkin. "Okay... What's going on?"

What?

"I-" Etho was struggling to think. "I'm trying to, I don't know- honest. You want honesty. I'm being honest." Bdubs eyes widened but he nodded quickly. That was good, that meant that he wasn't mad about the key thing. Or he was, but was willing to let Etho talk. It was a start at least.

"I didn't think this was going to turn out to be anything when I stole the extra set of keys. I felt guilty about it even then but by that point I had done so much other stuff to other people it didn't really influence me that much." Bdubs snorted. The noise itself was a relief.

Picking back up his fork, Bdubs offered a lopsided smile. "Okay. You let someone have city hall keys. Glad you got that off your chest-"

“I’m not from this world.”

A pause. Bdubs put the fork down again.

“That...” Bdubs blinked as he collected his thoughts. Etho tried not to vomit. “That one was more surprising, I have to admit. So when you said you and Joel were ‘travel buddies,’ you meant...” Bdubs faded out as Etho nodded.

Bdubs didn’t seem mad, which was good. Maybe it was because of the amount of shock Etho was putting him through over a slightly under-cooked alfredo dinner, but Etho would take the wins while he could. “Yep. When Scar was talking about the ‘three people’ not from this world, it was me and Joel. Cleo is also not from here, so we technically didn’t date in this world.”

That got a laugh out of him. Bdubs stared at him with disbelief, mouth slightly open as Etho fidgeted with the edge of his sleeve. “So you’re telling me that *my* boyfriend, mr. PvP/redstone legend himself, is also a casual world hopper?”

Not the reaction Etho was prepared for.

“I wouldn’t say casual- OH-” Etho was not prepared for a lap full of Bdubs, the other man basically jumping across the table and landing in his lap to grab onto his face. In the back of his mind Etho made a mental note to compliment Bdubs building skills, because this table was sturdy. “Hello-”

“Dude.” Bdubs interrupted him, squishing his cheeks together while also apparently getting comfortable on his lap if the adjustment of his hips were any indicator. “How are you so cool but *so* lame?” Etho opened his mouth to respond, but Bdubs was quicker. “I forgive you about the keys, and for not telling me your totally cool but probably traumatic past.”

Just like that?

Just like that?

Bdubs was grinning down at him, hands now ruffling his hair softly as he said something about Etho needing to get a haircut soon. Just like that, he was going to forgive him? He had- he didn't understand-

"Bdubs." Etho took Bdubs wrist, pulling them away from himself and placed them on his own lap. Bdubs frowned, but kept them there as Etho took a deep breath. "I lied to you." He had to understand what Etho was trying to say, right?

"Okayyy..." Bdubs shrugged. "I lied about telling Tango about Ren. Did you not forgive me for that?"

It wasn't the same. "You know I did." Probably before Bdubs even told him officially. Etho didn't even know if he actually held a grudge in the first place.

"So we're even."

Etho wanted to tear out his hair. Why didn't Bdubs understand? It wasn't just about the keys. It was the principle of the whole thing, it was the idea that Etho lied about so much indirectly. It wasn't- it *shouldn't* be that easy to forgive him. Bdubs slowly, almost like he didn't want to startle him, reached back down to cup his face. "*Etho*. You're thinking too hard."

"You don't *get* what I'm trying to say-"

"You don't think you deserve forgiveness." Etho stopped talking as Bdubs smiled sadly at him. "Whatever guilt you're carrying isn't just because you lied about keys Etho, I get it. But I'm letting you know, whatever you've done to me, *I* forgive you. You have to learn to forgive yourself."

Etho didn't think it was possible to shatter without actually breaking.

Let it be known that Etho wasn't a crier. Etho couldn't remember the last time he cried out of emotions, not just physical pain. Bdubs was still cupping his face, so softly, so stupidly tender as Etho felt the first of his tears spill over. "Oh *sweetheart*-"

Etho choked on a sob, Bdubs pulling his face towards him as Etho clutched onto the back of his shirt. He didn't deserve it, the forgiveness, the total trust Bdubs seemed to have in him. It was quiet for a while, the only sounds being Etho's crying and the leaking faucet. "I'm getting you soggy." Etho sniffed, feeling especially pathetic as Bdubs pushed some of his hair out of his face.

"Ehh." Bdubs shrugged again, wiping under his eyes before pulling his forehead in for a kiss. "I guess I can suffer. Just this once." The laugh was ugly, clawing its way out of Etho's throat as Bdubs continued. "What's going on Etho? What's *actually* going on?"

"Grian doesn't think we're going to win tomorrow." Etho took a deep breath, pulling back and wiping the rest of the tears away. Bdubs nodded, frown deepening before Etho continued. "And honestly...I think he's right. I think we should cut our losses."

That had more of a reaction, Bdubs pulled away slightly before he climbed off his lap. "What do you mean by that?" He asked slowly.

"I mean that I sat with him for hours today and tried to figure out how to stop Scott, and we both came up with nothing."

Bdubs started pacing across the room, Etho watching as his gut twisted. "Okay...so we ask other people for their ideas."

Running his fingers through his hair, Etho tried to refocus his energy on something not as draining as emotions. Etho tried to think rationally. "Bdubs, Tango and Impulse have been troubleshooting all day and they're probably the smartest people I know. If they can't figure it out-"

“So you’re giving up?” It was almost accusatory, it was whiplash from the moment before. Etho stood up to match his level. Bdubs was just stressed about his world ending, he didn’t mean to lash out.

“No, I’m just saying-”

“This is our world Etho, we can’t let Scott destroy it.”

He didn’t mean to lash out.

“I *know*, I’m just saying we should be prepared if it goes south.” Why couldn’t he explain anything right? This whole night was going wrong, from crying to fighting. He was feeling too much.

“If it goes south, we’ll be *dead*.”

He didn’t *mean* to lash out.

Etho stepped closer. “Not if you come with me! If there’s a big enough void hole we can go through together.”

Scoffing, Bdubs stepped closer too. “So you want me to leave my world that I could’ve saved?”

“You’re not listening to me.” Etho felt his own irritation building up. Bdubs wasn’t trying to understand what he was saying. “If the world is already going to be destroyed, then I want to make sure you’re not! It’s a preemptive measure.”

“*You’re* not listening to me either!” Another spike of irritation. “I’m saying we don’t need a preemptive measure, we *need* a plan for tomorrow. If we have a plan to stop him, then we won’t need a plan to escape him.”

“I’m telling you, I’ve been trying to think of a plan-”

“Then try harder!”

“I’m *trying* to save you!”

Bdubs flinched back as purple rushed out of Etho, mouth snapping shut as soon as he realized what was happening.

He was *feeling* too much.

The stupid, *stupid* leaking faucet dripped as the two of them stared at each other, purple particles floating around the kitchen as Etho’s eyes darted towards the door. He needed to get out, he needed to cool off. His skin wouldn’t recover if he snapped it so soon after what happened at Scott’s. He had *scared* Bdubs, who was now staring wide-eyed at him as Etho took a step back.

And then another.

And another.

“Etho.”

Etho looked up. How was he by the door already? Bdubs still stood in the kitchen, mouth in a tight line, eyes as watery as Etho’s felt. “*Please don’t leave me again.*”

Slowly taking his hand off of the doorknob, Etho’s gut dropped like a stone as Bdubs offered a shaky smile. “If I die tomorrow, I don’t want it to be with us fighting the night before. *Please don’t leave.*”

Etho heard what wasn't said.

Bdubs wasn't going to go with him if the world got destroyed.

Because Bdubs was a fighter, and Etho was a survivor, and that's the difference between them. Bdubs would go down with a ship while Etho would abandon it. It hurt, because in that moment Etho realized he would never be as inherently good as his boyfriend he left standing in the kitchen where he had just comforted him for the past 20 minutes. Where he had yelled at him for wanting to give up. Where he continued to stand, waiting for Etho to walk out of his life again because that was what he was used to.

Etho was quick to cross the room, quick to pull him close and tuck him into his chest. There was a quiet sigh of relief and another bullet in Etho's chest as he looked up at the ceiling. Bdubs had worked hard to create this world they were living in now. He had built buildings, he had worked for the people doing what he thought was the best for them. He was right, this was Bdubs world and Etho wasn't going to take him away from it if he didn't want to leave.

He had already done that to someone anyways.

Etho felt overwhelmingly guilty as he stood in front of Cleo's coffee shop, the lights shut off and the duffle bag held tightly against his body. Bdubs had apologized for getting angry, Etho had apologized for scaring him which he promptly denied happened. They went to bed together after Bdubs made him promise he would still be there in the morning.

He would, but he was pretty sure that meant that he was supposed to be in bed the whole night.

Instead, Etho wandered the city streets until he ended up where he now stood. The breeze wasn't talking to him tonight, so he simply followed wherever his heart told him to go. Cleo's shop wasn't open this late at night, but he didn't think that was the point.

“Come to finish me off?”

Etho wasn't even surprised by this point. Maybe Grian had a point about the whole fate thing. "Just the person I wanted to see."

Joel didn't look amused as he peaked out of the door of Cleo's shop. "How'd you know I was here?"

"Didn't."

"Bullshit."

Etho couldn't help but grin as he unzipped the duffle, pulling out Martyn's laptop. Joel raised an eyebrow, clearly recognizing it before he schooled his face back into something more neutral. "I want you to tell me Scott's plan."

Joel's eyes were trained on the laptop, mouth twisting into something complicated before he looked back up at Etho. "What's in it for me?"

It was a hail mary, it was Etho's own miracle he could force. It was his last shot to make sure Bdubs would be safe. If Bdubs wasn't going to go with him if the world got destroyed, then he would make sure it wouldn't get destroyed in the first place. He would protect him, even if it meant that they wouldn't be together.

"We go home."

Chapter End Notes

...tada?

We have the gala in the next chapter I'm literally vibrating to start writing it, it's a doozy! I do want people's opinions about it though. It's going to be a long chapter, but I could make it just one chapter if people prefer it that way. I originally had it spilt into two but

I'm down to just crush them together if that's what the majority of people want. I know ya'll like cliffhangers though ;)

ALSO! I saw the most amazing art for this fic on Tumblr the other day and promptly lost my shit. aliensstuff (God i hope I typed that right) drew a scene from chapter six and character outfits and RAAAA- i just loved both of them so much. Especially your Joel, I literally woke my roommate up to show him the little guy because I was going batshit for the way you did his void burn. If there is more fan art out there please let me know, I would love to awkwardly reblog it without any tags because I'm still struggling to figure out how the cursed app works.

That was a lot of words, I'm sorry! The end is nigh and all that, thank you for the support on this silly fic, every comment and Kudo's means so much to me. Have a good rest of your time zone, and I'll see you in the next chapter!

(Also, if anyone wants to talk me out of killing a certain character, now would be the time/hj)

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

It's the end game, and all Bdubs really wants to do is get a dance with Etho.

Too bad there was this whole 'world is ending' thing going on.

No tag changes! I hope you all enjoy!

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

His head hadn't felt this clear in a *long* time.

He didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

“There we go.” The hand was gentle, the fingers patting the makeup down under his eyes as softly as Jimmy thought he could. “How does that look?”

He held up a mirror, steady hands nothing like the way Jimmy felt like he was shaking out of his skin. He barely looked at the bruises now covered up pretty well with the concealer, choosing to look at the way his eyes seemed to be sunken in. He was tired. He couldn't remember why he was tired. “Looks good.” Jimmy said anyway. “You covered them well, Scott.”

Neither of them mentioned that the bruises were Scott's fault. Joel hadn't come back, leading Scott to need a different outlet to let energy out. Ren wasn't willing, so Jimmy had stepped up. Scott was smiling at him, putting the mirror back on the counter before cupping his cheeks. “I'll be able to make them go away after tonight, just like that.” Scott snapped, the feeling on Jimmy's cheek making him flinch as Scott let out a soft laugh. “We just need to make sure tonight goes exactly to plan.”

Jimmy's gut sank. “Yeah.”

“ *Exactly* to plan. Right, Jimmy?”

Scott was being mean again. Jimmy was starting to feel numb to him though. Maybe it was a side-effect to whatever he did to him when he was blacked out. Maybe it was just who he was now. He knew he was missing something, some emotion or feeling or-

“You don’t need to remind me, Scott. I got this.”

Scott's smile was never genuine, but it was close right now. “I know you do. My favorite person, my canary.” Scott’s hands were back on his face, Jimmy giving in to the urge to lean into the physical affection as his eyes fluttered closed. “This world is a cruel place, but you can fix it.”

It was on him. The plan had to go well, it was on him. Scott was trusting him, even after he had stabbed him through the hand. Scott had forgiven him, he had cleared his mind of any distractions and extra voices. He had gotten rid of emotions he didn’t need, he even offered to get rid of other emotions if Jimmy wanted. He was just being a considerate God.

God?

Jimmy’s eyes shot open, the hands on his face suddenly too close to his neck. Scott was still looking at him for a reply, eyes darker than Jimmy ever remembered them being. “You’ll take me with you, won’t you?” He whispered, staring into the black abyss that were Scott’s pupils. One of the hands slipped down, now actually on his neck, giving it a little squeeze before relaxing.

“As long as you behave.”

The threat was there, it always was. There was a time that Scott didn’t tell him the plans, but whatever he did to him apparently meant that Jimmy was now allowed to know *everything*. In the back of his mind, Jimmy wondered what Martyn would say if it was still stuck in his head about all the choices he had made in these past few days. He could feel the light scarring of the hole he pierced into Scott’s hand as he put more pressure on his throat and made

Jimmy's eyes close again. It was bad, he knew it was bad, to put one life over millions of other peoples.

Tango always said Jimmy had a unreasonably strong will to live.

"I'll do anything." The hand relaxed again, fingers gently trailing up the column of his neck before pulling away completely. Scott was quiet, save the drawer opening to put the mirror back in its original place. Jimmy opened his eyes to Scott lost in thought, which was never a good sign. Jimmy tried to gulp, but his throat was still dry. "I'll do anything Scott." He repeated as Scott's eyes focused on him.

"I know Jimmy." Jimmy felt his shoulders relax. So it wasn't something that involved his destruction in anyways. At least, in the way Jimmy was worried about. He didn't survive the void just to die from a God who wanted to restart the world they were living on.

Jimmy couldn't seem to remember ever regarding Scott as a God before.

Scott cracked his knuckles against the counter. "What do you think about Joel?"

Oh.

"What about him?" Jimmy's voice cracked, standing up after Scott gestures for him to do so.

He didn't say anything else for a moment, hands coming up to straighten out Jimmy's collar before patting his chest. "Do you think we should take him to the new world Jimmy? I haven't seen him in a while, he dipped after Etho and we both know about their past," Scott reached up, tightening Jimmy's tie just enough to be uncomfortable. Jimmy let him. "And now I have no idea where he is. Where either of them are." Scott stuck out his bottom lip in an action of a pout, though Jimmy knew better.

Joel wasn't getting out of this alive.

“If he wanted to join us, he wouldn’t have left.”

Laughing, Scott pulled away, straightening out his own tie before offering a dazzling grin. The room seemed to glow, Scott’s eyes endless and full of stars, enough that it made Jimmy feel like falling. He was dizzy, he was missing something, he was content and upset and confused and-

“You’re right.” Jimmy blinked, all the feeling disappearing as soon as Scott spoke again. Scott’s grin faded slightly, like he was considering something he hadn’t before he shrugged. “So, it will just be you and Ren and me. I do have room for one more if we’re not taking Joel to the new world. Any suggestions?”

It was a trap. Jimmy knew it was a trap. There was a condescending look in his eye, there was the cruel twist in Scott’s smile. It was a test. It was mean. Scott was being mean again. Scott knew what he asked him to do at this Gala, and he knew how much living meant to Jimmy.

“You’ve always given me what I need.”

Scott’s smile grew.

“Good answer.” Jimmy was proud that his knees didn’t give out, that he didn’t burst into tears. It was like there was a mental block, either placed by Scott or himself that stopped him from feeling *anything*. It was scary. It was relieving, that he wouldn’t have to do this with a guilty conscience. Scott tilted his head for a moment before standing up straight. “Shall we?” Scott offered his hand like the perfect gentleman he was trained to be- the perfect gentleman he *learned* to be- by learning emotions and forcing himself to be the best person he thought he could be.

And maybe that’s why Jimmy could never hate Scott, not completely. Because Jimmy remembered when Scott and him met, when he and Martyn and Pearl and Grian were friends, they were just people trying to get by. Scott wasn’t evil, not completely. He was loyal to the people that were loyal to him. Scott was brave, he was powerful and impressive and did everything he thought was right.

Jimmy just wished he was brave to tell Scott when he was wrong.

Instead, Jimmy took his hand, offering him a shaky smile as he felt Scott's perfectly shaped nails dig slightly into the center of his palm. Scott let go first, but had an unfamiliar look in his eyes, at least when he was looking at Jimmy.

Proud.

Scott was proud of *him* .

Jimmy let go of his hand, rolling his shoulders back and pretending to be okay with the heavy weight of the gun strapped to his belt. "We should get going." Jimmy opened the door, taking a deep breath as Ren looked up from the couch he was sitting at. Scott opened a portal, a well decorated hallway appearing on the other side. "I do have a police captain to kill."

.....

He didn't understand,

He wasn't going to ask. Well, he might, but it was only if I really started to weigh on him. Bdubs knew Etho wasn't in bed last night, at least for a few hours. Which...

He just didn't *understand* .

Etho was trying to help him, Bdubs understood that. Etho had been apparently running from world to world for years, it made sense that Etho didn't care so much about this one. But this was Bdubs *home*, it was the place he had always been. He couldn't just leave. And then Etho told him he wouldn't leave, and then he *did*, but he came back and was so much more relaxed then before and Bdubs-

Bdubs was grateful for that. So he wasn't going to ask.

Bdubs took a deep breath, eyes closing again as he let Etho pull him closer. It was late at night, or he guessed early in the morning, Etho pushing his shirt slightly up to spread his hand across his stomach where he was soft. "What time is it?" Bdubs mumbled, feeling Etho's breath on his neck as Etho leaned closer towards his throat. His eyes shot open as Etho grazed his teeth against his skin. "*Etho!*"

"Mmm... We have time." Etho pulled his hips closer. The flush was something Bdubs was getting used to ever since he met Etho, but it was still embarrassing in the way his cheeks warmed.

"What? We have more time to sleep?" Bdubs asked anyway, grinning softly as Etho huffed into his hair. "You're insatiable."

Flipping around, Etho grunted as Bdubs pushed some of his hair out of his face. "I can't help it." Oh, it was almost pitiful as Etho curled closer to him. He was like a large cat, hair getting in the way of everything. "I see you drooling in your sleep and your crusty eyes and immediately want to get into your pants."

"Have I mentioned that you're the meanest person I've ever had the displeasure of meeting?"

"That's why you let me push you into the matt-"

Bdubs shrieked, the noise easily covering Etho's quiet laughs as Bdubs swung his pillow at him. A truly, *truly* awful man. "I'm kicking you out of my house, I'm revoking your keys, I'm calling my ex-"

Etho gripped onto the pillow after Bdubs swung at him a few more times, smiling wide and laughing as Bdubs felt his chest restrict. He was just so *pretty* when he wasn't weighed down by the world, when he was laughing and enjoying just being in the moment. It made Bdubs want to make sure there was always going to be a space for Etho to just be happy, to be himself without worrying about if someone was going to kill him. To just exist, and be okay with existing.

“I think you’re right, I need a haircut really bad.”

Blinking, Bdubs didn’t notice how his hands had gravitated back to push his hair again. “I could cut it for you, if you want. I think I have scissors somewhere…” Etho just blinked at him, mouth slightly open as Bdubs knocked their foreheads together. “If you want, of course.”

To be honest, Etho’s hair didn’t look bad. Bdubs had never seen it other than the length it was, but it did have a habit of getting in his face and knotted more than Etho seemed to like putting up with. “That would be nice.” Etho finally managed to whisper.

The idea suddenly felt much more personal as Etho sat in front of the mirror in the bathroom, Bdubs standing behind him with his hands on his shoulders. “Just a little off the ends probably. I don’t mind if it can still go in a bun or not.” Bdubs swallowed, the lump in his throat growing as Etho closed his eyes.

He trusted him, Etho trusted him just like Bdubs wanted at the beginning of all of this. Bdubs willed his hands not to shake as started to snip at the dead ends. It wasn’t a lot, Bdubs had to admit. Etho was simply letting him take care of him early in the morning, but it was still Etho letting him do it. And that was…

Bdubs didn’t think he could love someone more.

It did look better, which caused a breath of relief from Bdubs once Etho blew it out with a hair dryer. Long enough to get his hair in a nice shaped bun, not enough that it's overwhelming, Etho looked nice.

He looked *really* nice.

“You look good.” Bdubs croaked out as Etho looked up from where he was hanging up his towel. His Hair was fluffier now that he actually took care of it for once, but Bdubs found his hands drifting upwards to ruffle it up anyways. “I think it suits you?”

“That sounded like a question.” Etho still leaned down, letting Bdubs dig his fingers through his hair. “I like it though, thank you.” Bdubs choked on his tongue as Etho cupped his face, pulling him up to kiss him softly. “Look handsome enough to be your date?”

Bdubs blinked up at him, leaning closer to kiss him again as Etho smiled against his lips. “I guess, as long as those wrinkles don’t come back to haunt you.”

Etho laughed, knocking his head onto Bdubs shoulder as he wrapped his arms around him. It was quiet, the sunlight leaking through the blinds finally enough light that made it hard to sleep if the two of them were to try too. Besides, Bdubs was pretty sure there was a reason neither of them complained about being up early.

Etho didn’t think they could save the world, and Bdubs wasn’t willing to ditch his world he worked so hard to create.

“I know you left last night.” Bdubs felt Etho stiffen in his arm, the guilt flooding his eyes as Bdubs let out a tired sigh. It was *so* tiring. “I’m not mad, I’m just-”

“I think I figured out how... Well, a better way to figure out what Scott is going to do.”

Bdubs pulled away slightly, Etho’s arm flexing slightly just to make sure he wasn’t going far. Bdubs ignored the pull in his gut to cup his cheeks. “That’s great sweetheart!”

“You’re not gonna like it though.”

Bdubs shook his head slightly as he let out a little laugh. “I don’t know about that.”

Etho nodded slowly, tightening his hold on Bdubs waist. “No, seriously. You’re going to hate this.”

Grinning, Bdubs leaned up to catch his lips again. “Try me.”

~~~~

“*Oh* you’re right, I *hate* this.”

Etho snorted as he held open the door to Cleo’s coffee shop, Bdubs simply standing firm and staring at the only other occupant in the building. Bdubs absentmindedly wondered where Cleo was. “Bdubs,” Etho leaned closer to whisper into his ear. “He would know the most about what Scott’s plan is. Play nice.”

Joel just grinned and offered a sarcastic wave as Bdubs glared, but moved into the building.

This was going to be a long day.

.....

Scar GoodTimes considered himself a good person. He tried, *hard*, to do what's right. He was kind to animals and people alike, he was very conscious of his footprint made on the planet, and was all in all a good mayor.

Scar was tired of being a good mayor. He was *tired* of doing things for other people, tired of being the nice guy all the time, tired of sacrificing his own mental wellbeing for the sake of others.

One more night.

One more night, and he could be done. Either they saved the world from whatever plan Scott was planning on doing, or they died trying.

“You’re thinking too loud.”

Scar slowly opened his eyes, taking in his reflection in the bathroom mirror before focusing on the person talking behind him. “Stop watching me and it won’t be so loud.” Scar finally replied after another moment of staring.

Grian pushed off the wall, walking deeper into the restroom as Scar adjusted his tie in the mirror. “You know what’s coming tonight, right?” Grian asked, ignoring his obvious attempt at a jab, voice low but vicious and enough to send a shiver up Scar’s spine.

“I’m not an idiot.” Scar said anyway, running his hands over his suit jacket before turning back around to actually face him. “I was friends with Scott as well, at least for a moment. I’m not unaware of what’s going to happen tonight.”

Grian stepped up to him, slowly reaching up to fix Scar’s tie even though he had just adjusted it himself. He stood stiff as he let him do it, Grian’s face showing nothing on how he was feeling as his fingers brushed against his neck. “Would you-” Grian’s voice sounded choked, just like how Scar felt. “If we...fail tonight...” Grian faded out as he finally made eye-contact.

Void, Scar could fall through his eyes for centuries without getting tired of looking. Speckles of purple dotted in the brown, big and almost unassuming as the day Grian introduced himself to him. Grian’s hands hovered above his collar, fingers twitching to fix the nonexistent problem. Scar knew that he looked put together, he had been keeping himself together ever since the day Grian left in the first place. “If we fail tonight?” Scar repeated into the limited space, slowly reaching up to stop Grian’s fidgeting. Grian let out a breath of air as Scar kept his hands on his shoulders, holding them under his own.

“If we fail tonight, and the world is-” Grian froze, eyes glazing over with a sheen of purple before he blinked it away. Scar had already released his hands. He knew what would happen after that. He knew Grian would leave, or make a new excuse for what he was originally going to say. He knew *Grian*.

“I have a Gala to start.” Grian’s fingers dug into his suit coat as Scar tried to pull away. Scar pretended like it didn’t make him want to wrap in his arms and help him in any way he could. “I have a Gala to start, and you have a God to catch.” Scar reminded him, taking a deep

breath before pulling completely away. “For Bdubs.” He couldn’t help but add as he watched the hurt cross Grian’s face.

“For Etho.” Grian finally said, shoulders tight as he pulled away. Hundreds of unsaid words passed through the look the two of them offered each other before Grian finally sighed. “I have to say, your wings would look wonderful with his outfit.”

That got a snort out of him, Scar cracking his neck as he shook his head. “Ah, yes. Revealing myself as a hybrid after all this time of a public figure sounds like a splendid idea.”

“Hey, I didn’t say it was a good idea, I said you would look nice.” Grian threw a cheeky grin that Scar totally didn’t blush at. Because Grian didn’t deserve that reaction. Because Scar wouldn’t have that reaction if he was over whatever him and Grian were in the past. Grian bowed, offered a sarcastic grin that only made Scar want to double down on whatever they were doing. “Good luck, Mr.Mayor.”

“And to you, Xelqua.”

Scar didn’t wait for a response, plastering on his best smile before pushing open the bathroom door. It was like the already busy party split in half for him, Scar easily making his way to the stage and taking the microphone. “Hello everybody!” Scar grinned, eyes darting to where Bdubs and Etho just walked into the venue. He knew Impulse was sneaking around here somewhere, Tango hopefully with him as he cleared his throat. “And welcome to our first, of hopefully *many*, Mayor Scar approved Gala!”

There was a loud cheer as Grian slipped out of the bathroom, a tiny buzz suddenly coming through his ear as he felt his grin slip into something familiar. Something a little more real.

*It’s showtime.*

.....

He was being stupid.

Tango knew he was being stupid.

He was sitting at the station, watching the police cameras on the day that Jimmy disappeared. He was watching Ren take down the majority of his men, breaking down the door and letting Jimmy out of the room. He was watching and rewatching over and over again as he sat in his suit and tie, phone going off that was probably Impulse asking where he was, and ignoring the pressure in the front of his head. Migraine, probably going to get worse. He should probably stop looking at the screens, and find some ibuprofen, but he also was supposed to be at a gala where an apparent god was supposed to attack, so it wasn't like he was doing what was told.

It's just that Jimmy didn't look conflicted at all when he left. He didn't look like he was thinking about Tango or about the other lives that were now hanging on by a thread just outside of the room. And maybe it was unfair for Tango to think that, but wasn't it unfair of Jimmy to be stringing him along like this?

He really should get going. The gala had already started, and Scar and Bdubs were probably freaking out that he wasn't there. Tango shut down the computer, letting out a deep breath as he leaned back into his chair. One more moment, and he would get up.

But he didn't have a moment.

Standing up, Tango quickly grabbed his keys off the desk before leaving his office. It was eerily quiet, since he was the only one in the building, and it grated on his nerves more than he really thought was necessary. There was a quiet shift out of the corner of his eye as Tango slowed down.

He *should* be the only one in the building.

Flipping back around, Tango's eyes widened as the lights he had just manually shut off started flicking back on one by one due to the motion sensors. His hand slowly reached to his



side as the lights continued to turn on, ending back at his office where a figure stood at the end.

“ *Jimmy?* ”

Jimmy...didn't look quite right, if Tango was being honest. His wings were dripping void, something like how he had found him in the alleyway as he took a hesitant step forward. “Jimmy? Why are you here?” Jimmy just smiled something soft, eyes a mixture of pain and almost excitement as Tango stepped closer.

“Oh, you know...” Jimmy faded out, eyes finally finding Tango's and making him stop in his tracks. The void hissed as it hit the ground, tiny little holes of nothing spreading across the floor as Tango stepped back. Jimmy's eyes were pitch black, his grin unnaturally large as he slowly raised his hand, “I'm here to kill you.”

“Wha-”

Tango's eyes widened as Jimmy's fingers seemed to reach *into* his wings and pulled out a glob of void, the liquid of nothing seemingly squishing between his fingers before he looked back up. “ *Run.* ”

He didn't have to tell him twice.

Tango turned around, the ball of void flying past his shoulder and landing on the floor in front of him. The floor melted, the world curling away from itself as Tango caught himself on the wall. Shit, Shit-

“Jimmy what are you-”

Jimmy didn't hesitate, forming another ball and chucking it directly at him. Tango barely had time to duck, flames igniting from his hair and hands as he heard the void splat against the

wall. Blaze rods started to form around his head as his breath started to speed up. “I didn’t know you were deaf Tango, I’m here to kill you.”

Jumping over the hole, Tango’s foot caught on the edge of the flooring, sending him tumbling to his ass as Jimmy continued to walk closer. His brain couldn’t seem to catch up on what was actually happening, the lack of answers only making it worse. “Okay, *yeah* -” Another splash, right over his shoulder. “Yeahyeahyeah, I get that.” Tango wasn’t even paying attention to what was coming out of his mouth, scrambling backwards as Jimmy’s smile seemed to glow in the low lighting of the station. His hands had started to stick to the vinyl flooring, the material warping around his fingers as his eyes widened. “I’m just wondering *why*-” Jimmy made a low noise from his throat as Tango continued to tug at his hands. Shit, he was really stuck now. Jimmy was getting closer, Tango couldn’t seem to move and this wasn’t feeling like all the times before when they were “trying to kill each other”. “*Why are you*-”

Jimmy casually jumped over the hole, Tango desperately trying to get his hands off the damn flooring as a taloned hand wrapped around his jaw. The leftover residue of the void *burned*, hotter than anything Tango could create. Or maybe it was just so cold it burned? Either way Tango hissed as his face was ripped upward, eyes meeting Jimmy’s lifeless ones. “*Shit, Jimmy*-”

“Burns, doesn’t it? Imagine this, but your whole body as you fall to your death.” Jimmy’s talons dug into his cheeks, pinpricks of pain almost welcomed as a distraction from the literal face melt feeling along his jaw. Tiny rivers of blood flowed down his hand as Tango continued to struggle. Jimmy’s eyes seemed to clear for a moment as the feeling of the liquid hit his wrist. “Scott told me too.”

Of course.

Tango’s hands were almost at the heat that would simply melt the flooring instead of warping it, he just had to stall for a little longer and he’d be free. He could get out of this mess, figure out what was wrong with Jimmy and the two of them-

“*FUCK*-”

Jimmy actually jumped back a bit at his yell, hand that had come to rest on the side of his neck pulled off as Tango felt his skin immediately start to bubble up. Being a blaze hybrid, Tango wasn't used to any kind of burning. It was going to leave a nasty void scar, that's for sure. "You don't have to do what Scott asks you to, you know that!" Tango couldn't help but sound aggressive as he ripped his face out of Jimmy's hold, but he couldn't help it. They had had this conversation so many times, and now it was hurting him and the rest of literal humanity. "What did he do to you this time? I can help, let me help-" Tango's plea got cut off as Jimmy dug his nails deeper into his cheeks, fresh blood flowing as his talon's slid deeper into his flesh.

"Scott *fixed* me." Jimmy hissed, Tango fighting a wave of nausea as the metallic smell of his own blood finally hit his nose. Just a little bit longer, he could make it a little longer. "Scott got rid of all those annoying emotions and things that were getting in the way. He *fixed* me, he made me better!" Tango felt his gut drop as he stared up at his...

His nothing, if he was honest.

What was Jimmy to Tango, if not a constant thorn in his side? If not someone who continued to use him and his emotions to get what he wanted? What was Tango to Jimmy? What was their thinly-veiled relationship if not doomed from the start? Tango's lips parted, emotions going haywire as Jimmy continued to look on passively. He was telling the truth. Whatever Scott did to him had him acting like an empty shell of a human. And yet...

Tango felt the vinyl slide off his palm, hands finally hot enough that the material melted instead of just stuck.

There it is. He could leave, he could throw a fireball and dip. He could burn this whole building down with Jimmy in it. And yet...

Tango continued to sit there.

And yet, there was always a pull. Tango didn't mind covering and covering for Jimmy, just like how Jimmy constantly used to lie about him escaping when things were more simple. Jimmy couldn't just *get rid of him*, Tango didn't think he had it in him. Tango didn't have it in himself, if he's being honest.

“And all he asked, all I need to do for him to forgive me, is kill *you*. ” There was a quick flash of some kind of emotion, a quick flash of hope in Tango’s chest before it was gone. Whatever magic Scott had used on Jimmy hadn’t completely settled in yet, for whatever reason. Jimmy could be restored to normal, at least if Tango could figure out how.

People didn’t call him a genius for nothing.

“So why haven’t you?” Tango asked, glancing around the hallway for a moment as the gears in his head started to turn. He was in the right corridor, meaning they were closer to the front doors than not.

Jimmy’s face had twisted into some complicated knot, eyes flashing again with feelings he was clearly battling with. His face almost felt numb by this point as Jimmy finally let go. He didn’t step back though, jaw tight and hands curling into fists as Tango let a slow breath out.

He was never good at fighting. It was funny that he was a police captain, someone legally able to carry a gun and tackle criminals in public if the situation called for it when he was much more capable of building a high-tech cell. He had learned, they all had, to fill the positions they were given. So sure, he wasn’t good at fighting.

He *was* good at thinking faster than his opponents.

Clearly lost in thought, Jimmy wasn’t expecting the way Tango wrapped his left foot around his ankle, one hand coming up to where his crown of blaze rods now sat and yanking one out of formation. He quickly melted the tip into something sharp before clearing his throat. “Sorry birdy, but I have a gala I was supposed to be at ten minutes ago.”

Jimmy shook his head to clear away the thoughts just as Tango threw the rod, closing his eyes as the sickening squelch of Jimmy’s shoulder being impaled rang throughout the air. “SHI-” Pulling his foot against his ankle as hard as he could, Tango scrambled to his feet as Jimmy tumbled backwards. There was a squawk as Tango quickly turned around, fully ready to book it out of there, away from crazy lovers and void holes and-

The void hole.

Tango was never good at fighting for himself.

He was good at fighting for others.

His hand reached out before he realized he had turned back around, wrapping around Jimmy's wrist as the avian desperately gripped back on. Jimmy stared wide-eyed as Tango pulled. It was like his brain came back on line, wings finally flapping and helping the two of them get back on the other side of the void hole, closer to the exit.

As soon as Jimmy wasn't at a risk of falling to his doom again, Tango let go. They were both breathing heavily, not saying anything as Tango looked back at the hole of nothing Jimmy almost fell in. The hole Tango had almost sent him tumbling into.

Just like Scott.

Something in his chest tugged, eyes suddenly burning for a split second before returning to normal. Jimmy was staring at him, mouth open slightly like he couldn't believe what was happening. The blaze rod was still in his shoulder, black...something oozing from the wound as Tango finally made eye contact. His eyes were still as black as the void dripping from his wings, but there was something confused mixed into them now. "Why did you-"

"I'm only going to ask this one more time." Tango's voice shook as he continued to look into the abyss that was the person he loved most. "*Let me help you.*" Jimmy's wings shuttered as Tango felt a tear slip out, only to sizzle and evaporate as soon as it hit his skin. "*Please let me help you Jimmy.*"

Tango didn't know what he would do if Jimmy denied him again. Void, he didn't know what he would do if Jimmy said yes. The world was literally ending tonight, what could Tango do to help someone who was trying to kill him? Jimmy's eyes cleared for a moment, something almost relieved in them as he gulped. The world seemed to stand still as Tango waited, time waiting for two people at a crossroads to finally make a choice.

“I can’t feel anything right now.” It was said almost like Jimmy was trying to steer him away.

“I know.” It was quiet again as Tango let out another breath. “But you used too. I can work with that.”

Jimmy’s jaw tightened again, eyes fluttering slightly as Tango watched the blaze rod change from red to a lighter tone. They really needed to get that checked out sooner than later. Tango also needed to chill out, no pun intended. “I’m more trouble than I’m worth.” Jimmy said next.

“Well,” Tango ignored the urge to demand who made Jimmy feel that way. Both of them knew the answer anyway. “If we fail, I’ll only have to deal with that trouble for one more night.” He didn’t know if that was the right thing to say, to remind the both of them of how little time they really had. “It would be my pleasure to die with you tonight. Fighting on the same side could be fun, don’t you think?” Jimmy’s eyes flashed with something like earlier, something like excitement as Tango offered his hand, shaking out the active flame.

Jimmy took it.

.....

“It’s a little weird that he hasn’t shown up yet, right?”

Impulse, or at least that’s what Joel thought was his name, whispered into his ear piece as Joel tapped against the table. They were in some kind of library, Martyn’s computer open and taunting them with the password asking screen. Joel had tried everything that he could think Martyn would’ve placed as a password, but came up blank every time. Which was frustrating, because as soon as he got this computer unlocked, the quicker they could kill Scott and get off this stupid world.

“Who, Scott?” Joel asked after a much too long beat after Impulse looked thoroughly on edge because of his silence. To be fair, Etho had only told him to play nice with Bdubs, no one else, and Joel had played *very* nice with Etho’s not-really-a-boyfriend-boyfriend. After all, how much of a boyfriend could you be if you were leaving on purpose? Joel could hear the party going on outside of the locked room. “Scott won't come now, he’s gonna wait till more people show up. He’s going to want a crowd.” There was more silence as Joel tapped his fingers against the keys, not quite putting enough pressure on them to actually type.

“No, Tango. It’s weird that he hasn’t called or anything.” Joel just grunted as Impulse stood up. He really didn’t care where the police captain was, or why someone in the resistance would care about him. Joel reached up, turning off the ear piece as soon as another voice filtered through. He didn’t need to hear more people, he needed to focus. What would Martyn put as a password?

To be honest, Joel didn’t really understand why he was doing this. He should just pass through the password, break into the computer, but there was something stopping him.

*“You’re not from here, right?”*

*It was probably a month into this new world they had fallen into, a month without Etho and two weeks without Cleo. The two of them split as soon as they realized someone had gotten Etho’s body from the field. They never got along before, there was no reason to stay together now that Etho was dead or worse, thought that they ditched him.*

*They kind of ditched him.*

*Joel blamed Cleo.*

*The blonde in front of him hadn’t stopped looking at him, which was fair but rude, which Joel actually appreciated. Some guy named Scott had found him at a corner stop and took him in, which he apparently did with a lot of people, probably the same with the guy in front of him. Joel accepted the job, choosing to lay low in whatever company he was now in for the time being till he could figure out what he was actually going to do. “What’s it to you?” Joel finally responded, clicking his tongue in annoyance as he realized that his cup was empty.*

*“Nothing really. Just trying to make conversation with the new recruit.” Joel snorted as the guy offered him another cup. Joel didn’t even check to see what was in it, that used to be Etho’s job, choosing to down it in one gulp as the man’s eyebrow raised. “Rough day?”*

*“Rough life.”*

*The guy's eyes seemed to sparkle as he leaned closer. “Rough life, or rough lives?”*

*Joel suddenly wished he checked what was in that cup. “I don’t know-”*

*“Cut the crap.” The guy cracked his neck as Joel’s eyes quickly checked the room for exit points. “Scott isn’t from here either. I’m sure he figured you out in five seconds flat.” That... wasn’t the worst thing. If Scott wasn’t from this world, it meant that he would be more understanding of Joel’s situation. The man sat up straight offering a casual hand that Joel eyed. “Martyn Littlewood. Scott unofficial right hand man.”*

*Taking it, Joel made sure his grip was strong before letting go. “Joel. I thought that Jimmy was the right hand.”*

*“Jimmy...” Martyn’s face twisted into what Joel would call a cruel smile for a second before returning neutral. “He tries. Not much an avian without powers can do for someone like Scott in my opinion. I’m sure he pulls his weight in other ways though.”*

*Joel didn’t want to know anything about that. Besides, Jimmy seemed...nice, when Joel met him. Far too nice to be wrapped up in whatever Scott was doing. Joel was still a grunt level worker anyways, he didn’t need to know any of this. “Right.” Joel said anyway, because he wasn’t an idiot who went against someone higher than him. “So what’s your deal then? Make the newbies stress over a cup of mysterious alcohol?”*

*Martyn snorted at that, hitting Joel on the back a tad too hard as Joel caught himself on the counter. “It’s not my fault if newbies feel nervous when I’m asking them questions.” Martyn’s grin grew. “Do I make you nervous, Joel?”*



*Putting his cup down, Joel pushed down the- nothing, because he wasn't nervous, at all- before turning to face him directly. "Do I make **you** nervous, Martyn? We're supposed to be on the same team, right?" Joel was proud that his voice didn't shake. Etho would've been proud of him.*

*Joel ignored that thought.*

*Martyn's grin faltered for a second before returning, something new mixed in as he reached for Joel's cup. "We are." He agreed, eyes almost shining like he could see some potential in Joel that had his gut turning. "I think," Martyn filled his cup again, offering to him before picking up his own. "I think we're going to be a good team."*

*So much for laying low.*

*Martyn boosted him over-night. Scott let him, seemingly amused as Joel was trusted into the world of crime and magic like he had never seen before. It was overwhelming, but distracting, something that Joel desperately craved. So he followed. He got more cruel, more bloodthirsty to Scott's and Martyn's pleasure. It wasn't overnight, but it felt like it.*

*Would Lizzie even recognize him now?*

*Joel picked up more to distract himself from that thought.*

*And soon enough, he was invited to meetings he didn't want to be in. He was standing next to Martyn, he was standing next to Scott. He was killing people left and right, he was doing everything he could to distract himself from the news articles saying something about a new red stone genius now appearing on the scene.*

*Joel could only run so far.*

*Martyn was the one to notice.*

*“You have someone waiting for you, don’t you?”*

*Joel barely caught himself from doing a spit take as Martyn simply tapped against the counter of the bar. Joel was starting to wonder if he had a problem. “I don’t know.” He finally said, looking down at his cup. “I hope so.”*

*There was silence for a few minutes as Martyn seemed to absorb the comment. Then-*

*“You know Scott can open portals, right? I don’t know if they can go to different worlds, but its worth a shot.”*

*Joel didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.*

*Scott was quick to tell them his portals could only open in this world. Martyn was quick to ask if there was a way to enhance that power. Joel was quick to jump onto the possibility that Scott responded with.*

*A magic enhancer.*

*Joel and Martyn worked tirelessly on it. A ranged area where all magic and abilities would be enhanced. Of course, they would have Jimmy come help since neither of them had any abilities, (or in Joel’s case, abilities that they could test) and soon-*

*Well, it worked. Only for a moment, but Jimmy swore he could feel the strength in his wings suddenly grow when the device was plugged into a generator. Joel did cry, late that night when he was alone.*

*He was so close.*

*And then the program didn't work. It didn't work at all. In fact-*

*Well, the police used his design for a power nullifier regularly.*

*Joel didn't understand. He didn't do anything to the codes, he didn't do anything to the design or-*

*Martyn.*

*Martyn messed with his code.*

*Martyn, someone at that point Joel considered his best friend, ruined all of his work. He admitted to it even, saying that making Scott that powerful would only destroy the world. Telling Joel that he was better to say that they failed, that this was for the greater good. He even locked up the codes and everything Joel had worked so fucking hard for on his stupid laptop, so he couldn't even reach the designs for the magic nullifiers.*

*Joel didn't understand why he didn't leave then.*

*Well, he did, but he didn't. Martyn had used him, had sold his work to the government for what felt like nothing. But Scott was still willing to help him- or so he said- and Jimmy and him were kind of friends, and Etho was still out there somewhere and-*

Joel hadn't cried when Martyn died.

But now, sitting in a stupid library, Etho a room away as a different resistance member looked over what he was doing, Joel couldn't seem to do something he'd wanted to for years. "You got this?" Impulse asked, leaning over his shoulder to look at the screen himself as Joel batted him away.

“Obviously.” Impulse backed up, hand up in a mock defensive position as Joel huffed. Martyn was mocking him, wasn’t he? He was probably floating around here right now, making fun of his attempts to get into a stupid macbook pro.

In the back of his head, Joel knew Martyn was right that night. Scott was clearly going crazy with power right now, what would he have done a few years prior? It was terrifying to see him like that, like how he was acting when Etho was locked in a cell. Joel would like to say that was the reason he had dipped, but he knew that wasn’t true.

Seeing Etho alive, realizing he was willing to talk with him, still had Joel willing to ditch the life he had made just like that.

Which was...annoying, to say the least. That Etho still had such a grip on his mind. But Etho was a tried and true method of getting home, and that's all Joel needed. Sure, he still needed to convince Etho to leave this world, but that was easy compared to all he had been through.

Of course the guy fell in love again.

Predictable, by this point.

The point was, he was leaving this world tonight either way. Either he and Etho saved it, or it got destroyed and the two of them fell into another void hole unwillingly. So why was Joel even trying to unlock the computer?

“I’m going to try and call Tango.”

Joel just nodded as Impulse left to a quiet corner. Joel didn’t consider himself sentimental, not by a long shot, but if he was going to answer his previous question it would be that. That the people in this world seemed to care an unreasonable amount about others. Impulse and Tango had been fighting with each other for years, yet the guy was still worried about him. It didn’t make sense.

Joel might be cynical though, who knew anymore.

In any case, he was going to try. Etho asked him too, and it was the least he could do since he was going to rip him away from someone he loved after the fact. Joel had asked him why they didn't take Bdubs with them, but Etho just mumbled something about surviving and fighting and Joel really didn't care to figure all of that out at the moment. Besides, soon they would be back home with Lizzie and it would all be okay.

Right?

He didn't have time for guilt. Etho made the deal, not him. Refocusing on the computer, Joel pushed aside any bad feelings that would distract him. Things about Martyn...

He was human. Annoyingly so. He didn't let that stop him though, he invented so much stuff to help and was overwhelmingly good at getting information. It was scary almost, how he would leave and come back with mountains of information. Joel asked about it once, but all Martyn said was that he was good at-

Listening.

Joel almost wanted to laugh. He wanted to throw the computer out the window. Martyn was just so damn good at listening, that most of the guys called him the listener. He wouldn't.

He totally would.

Typing it in, Joel actually did let out an unhinged laugh as the screen lit up, Impulse offering a concerned look as he wedged the comm in between his shoulder and ear.

Access granted.

.....

Bdubs didn't mean to get distracted.

After all, they were there because the literal world was ending, not because Bdubs worked really hard on this damn Gala and wanted to have a single night where he and Etho could just enjoy themselves.

The flowers looked nice.

Etho looked really nice.

Etho was watching him from across the room, taking his job half-way serious in that they were supposed to be spread out and surveying the room but also continued to send him looks that made Bdubs want to pull him into the bathroom for five minutes just to let him know what *he* thought about all the directed looks.

“If you continue to have eye-sex, I’m going to make Etho go into the kitchen and stay there for the whole night.” Bdubs struggled to keep his face straight as Scar hissed into the ear pieces, Etho’s eyes crinkling from across the room where he shrugged his shoulders.

“I doubt you could make Etho do anything.” Bdubs mumbled back, watching out of the corner of his eye as Etho’s shoulders shook slightly.

“*I’ll* tell Etho to go into the kitchen then.” Bdubs snorted, quickly apologizing to the lady next to him who shot him a weird look as Grian’s voice filtered through. “You guys are seriously the worst.”

“There will be no reason to send me to the kitchen if you’d let me hang out with-”

“*One dance.*” Scar sounded exasperated. Bdubs could picture him rubbing his temples, the stressed lines that appear in the middle of his forehead every time Bdubs pushed his buttons a

little *too* far.

“One dance.” Etho confirmed as Bdubs quickly found a waiter to give his glass to. Etho was already crossing the floor, eyes trained on Bdubs as the sudden need to break eye contact filled him. It was almost embarrassing, which was clearly out of Bdubs wheelhouse since he never used to get embarrassed, but seeing Etho so outwardly eager to be next to him had his cheeks flushing.

Etho reached him, eyes crinkling into a smile as he stuffed his hands into his suit coat pocket. He went without a tie, something him and Etho argued about before Etho thoroughly distracted him with...

Well, he distracted him.

“You heard the boss,” Etho whispered, leaning slightly down in his personal space. “One dance.”

Etho offered his hand as Bdubs shook his head, reaching up to switch off his ear piece before taking it. “Better make it a long one.”

Leading them out into the crowd, Etho offered a cheeky grin over Bdubs shoulder before it softened. “I’m going to be honest, I have no idea how to dance.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Hey now.” Bdubs giggled as he took Etho’s hands in his, placing them where they’re supposed to be before starting to lead. What Etho didn’t know about female/male parts wouldn’t kill him. “You look really nice by the way.” Etho said casually, stepping back carefully after Bdubs moved.

He shouldn’t feel flustered. “You too.” Bdubs managed to croak out, throat feeling dry. “I mean, you always look nice but-” Bdubs stopped as Etho chuckled, pulling him closer and

stepping more confidently.

“You know,” Etho whispered, suddenly leading as Bdubs struggled to catch his breath. This little liar- “I’m trying to be nice. I’m not fishing for compliments like you do.”

“I do not.” Bdubs was quick to follow his lead. “So you do know how to dance.” Etho just grinned as Bdubs rested his head on his shoulder.

“Nah, I just had a good teacher.”

“Such a flatterer.”

“ *Compliments* Bdubs, I’m offering compliments.”

“Well, you need to work on genuinity then, because I don’t believe you.” Bdubs said that, but smiled into Etho’s neck as he led them easily. Either Etho lied about dancing or he really was just that fast at learning things, but Bdubs didn’t mind. Etho just hummed, letting a pleasant silence fall in between them as soft music played in the background.

It was nice. It was exactly how Bdubs had pictured it, minus the hot guy he got to call his boyfriend. The venue, the food and drink, the flowers, everything. Bdubs had worked so hard on this, even if it didn’t show for the past two weeks, and it had paid off.

Of course, there was always the looming fear of death hanging over his head now that kind of detracted from the situation. Etho had tensed slightly in his arms after a few more moments, hand coming up to push some of Bdubs hair back and simultaneously turning his ear piece back on.

“Ren just snuck into the kitchen.”



Etho turned them slightly as Bdubs let out a sigh. He never got to have nice things. Grian said something in reply to Etho's statement that Bdubs ignored since Etho's hand had crept slightly lower on his back. "Yep yep." Etho muttered into Bdubs ear, confirming whatever Grian had said before pulling slightly back. "As soon as this song is over."

"Insufferable, the both of you."

Etho did laugh at that, Bdubs hearing that complaint from Grian before Etho span him around. It was easy to forget how much danger they were in when Etho was in front of him. Maybe it wasn't, maybe it was just because Bdubs *wanted* to forget for a moment. "Etho." Bdubs ignored the warning tone in Grian's voice as Etho let out a soft sigh. "The sooner you take care of this, the faster you'll come back."

"He's your employee."

"He's your friend."

Bdubs looked up just in time to see Etho's jaw tighten at Grian's remark. The song faded out, transitioning to something a bit faster as Etho stepped away. It was hard not to pull him back closer, a clear look of anger and something else in Etho's eyes as he offered a tight smile. "I'm on it."

Short, to the point. Etho quickly turned off his own ear piece as soon as he confirmed, leaving Bdubs to hear the resulting apology offered alone.

Bdubs didn't respond.

Instead, Bdubs found himself trailing after Etho for a moment before his boyfriend turned around. "Hey, I'm behind you all the way! Two against one won't be--"

"B," Etho cupped his face, stopping them a few feet away from the kitchen door. It was quiet as Etho seemed to struggle to figure out what to say. It was hard to read him, Bdubs had to

admit. It was hard sometimes, to be patient while he waited for him to collect his thoughts. Still, Bdubs waited as Etho stared down at him, eyes already morphing into something darker. "I don't want you to see me like this." Etho leaned down to press a soft kiss on his forehead, the fabric of the mask getting in the way Bdubs eyes fluttered closed. "I'll...I won't be too long, okay? Go back to the party."

Etho didn't wait for his response, straightening out and rolling back his shoulders before offering what Bdubs took to be a cocky smile. "Besides, I've beaten Ren a few times, I'm not too worried about overpowering a large dog."

Okay, that was-

That was kind of hot.

Not that Bdubs would tell him that.

Bdubs grinned, something almost unhinged at Etho's confidence as he watched his eyes swirled deeper into purple. "Be safe. Cutting those stitches out of you was disgusting." He settled on, trailing his fingers over his forearms before stepping completely back. "Fast. In and out. Cuff him, get him immobilized."

"You know me Bdubs, ten minutes or less."

Bdubs raised an eyebrow at the comment, a laugh bubbling out of his chest as Etho winked at him. "I'll set a timer." Etho nodded, clearly amused as he turned around. "Since that's the strat."

"See you in ten."

Bdubs watched him follow one of the servers into the kitchen, body retreating and disappearing into the room before the door swung shut. Ten minutes. Bdubs could wait ten minutes. He would be fine for ten minutes-

“Bdubs, we have a problem outside.”

.....

Etho considered himself a normal person.

Etho was currently standing in the kitchen, watching one of his best friends rip someone's throat out so fast that they didn't have time to scream.

The waiter that had walked in in front of him fell limp on the ground as Etho closed the door as quietly as he could, eyes wide and heart in his throat as Ren wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Ren?” Etho finally asked slowly, holding his hands in front of himself and stepping closer. Whenever Ren got in these kinds of moods Etho was always the one to calm him down, but something in his gut told him this wasn't going to be as easy as the other times.

Ren's head snapped up, eyes bloodshot and wide as Etho watched someone's blood trail down his neck. “Hello, Etho.”

*Oh hell no.*

“Martyn. Get the hell out of-”

“I don't think you get to call the shots here.” Ren- or Martyn? In Ren's body- grinned, teeth sharp and claws out as he stepped over the person's body. Glancing around, Etho's stomach dropped at the amount of people on the ground. Martyn followed his eyes, his smile only growing at whatever face Etho was offering back. “It's *so* much easier to kill someone with abilities like these, don't you think?”

He was crazy, psychotic. “Ren wouldn’t want you to do this with his body and you know that.” Etho hissed out even though Martyn was really freaking him out. Martyn simply shrugged, the action looking almost choppy in Ren’s body as he continued to creep forward.

“You’re wrong about that too Etho. Ren wouldn’t let me possess his body if he didn’t know what I wanted. Ren and me?” Two clawed fingers crossed, a grim smile on his face as he continued to stare directly at him. “We *get* each other. We understand what we- what *I* have to do to save the world.”

What? Etho blinked, hand coming up to hold his jaw closed as he glared at his friend. “What do you mean by that?” Etho managed to get out. Etho couldn’t break eye-contact now, it was all up to Ren if he went off the handle or not.

“Save the world.” Ren’s voice even sounded distorted, a mix of him and Martyn as Etho took a step back. That didn’t happen with Jimmy. “You know, the thing you and your ragtag team of misfits are trying to do? *I know* how to beat him.”

“That’s great, just-”

“I need a body to do so though.”

Etho paused, glancing at the multiple dead bodies around them. Martyn laughed, but it didn’t sound amused. “A magical body. Someone with...end abilities, if possible.”

Etho’s gut dropped.

“Sorry Etho.”

It was like he was flashed back to the cell, the same words uttered out of his friend's mouth. This time though, it was almost bloodthirsty as the voice took on more of Ren. “But it's for the greater good. You understand, right?”

“Like hell I understand!” Etho backed up more, the side of his mouth ripping as Martyn’s grin turned even more sinister. “Just tell me what I need to do, I can do it we don’t need to-”

“You have to get him in a void hole to kill him Etho, don’t you understand?” Etho stopped, mouth falling open faster than he could stop it. “You have to go back into the void. And sure, I could take your word for it, but it would just be easier to *make* you do it.”

Ren’s body lurched forward as Etho ran into a counter, knocking a tray of desserts onto the ground with a clatter before he turned back to look at his friend. “Void *kills* him?” Etho asked, disbelief leaking into his voice as Ren continued to get closer. “If void kills him how is he going to destroy the world?”

Ren stepped up to him, hooking a finger under his mask and pulling it down. Etho gulped.

“Well, they don’t call them star children for nothing, do they?”

.....

“A problem?” Bdubs was already walking to the front of the main room, echoing Scar’s words back to him and being met with silence. Typical. Scar and Grian were probably making out somewhere if Bdubs were to guess. He should’ve just stayed and waited for Etho to come back. Now he was far away and waiting for nothing-

Bdubs stopped dead in his tracks as soon as he stepped outside.

Were the stars...larger? Than before?

Bdubs was almost transfixed on the biggest one, the seemingly ball of gas growing bigger and bigger-

“MOVE!”

He barely heard the word before his body was tackled to the ground, the sound of something crashing into the earth filling the air as he quickly tucked himself into a ball. Smoke and dust flew up, covering the entire front lawn as the sound slowly faded out. Was he dead? Who tackled him? What was-

“Tango?” Bdubs didn’t mean to sound surprised, but he hadn’t seen the officer all day and honestly? He didn’t know if he was coming. He didn’t look so good, clearly had been in a fight before this. Tango grinned, lopsided and almost giddy as Bdubs looked past him. “*Cleo?* What are you doing here?”

Cleo just offers their hand, hoisting him up before offering a tense smile. “Getting the explanation I was promised.” Bdubs laughed, brushing his coat off as they pocketed their keys. “That, and these two clowns needed a ride.” Leave it to Tango to call Cleo for a favor like this.

Wait a minute.

Two?

Bdubs watched the dust clear out more, a winged figure standing slightly farther away from them. Jimmy looked worse for wear, a large bandage wrapped around his shoulder and a bruise poking out of what looked to be old makeup. Bdubs straightened back out as Jimmy took a single step forward.

“Rough landing, or just a long fall?” Bdubs managed to ask, jaw just as tight as Tango’s shoulders as he watched the two of them. Etho was so sure Jimmy was on their side, but looking at Tango’s face, Bdubs wasn’t so sure. In fact, he could still be playing them all.

Jimmy’s Adam apple bobbed, eyes darting to where the dust was still swirling in the air before looking back at the group of them. “Whatever choice lets me fight with you guys.”

Bdubs opened his mouth to respond, but a new voice beat him to it. “You’re a little late to the party, Tim.” Jimmy’s shoulder tensed as Scar and Grian came out of the building, Scar already halfway shifted into his vex form as Grian grinned at the other avian. “It’s a good thing Bdubs here is really forgiving.” Jimmy’s laugh was somewhat tense as Grian wrapped an arm around his shoulders, leading him closer to the other group as Scar watched with something soft in his eyes. Bdubs didn’t think he would ever understand their backstory, even if Scar actually sat him down and explained it.

Besides, Bdubs didn’t have time to wonder about people's pasts as a slow clapping seemed to surround them on all sides, almost like thunder as all the dust suddenly settled.

A star, a literal star was now embedded into the ground right outside of the gala. It was like realization hit all of them at once.

Scott wasn’t going to swallow the world into the void, he was going to bring the sky down to crush it.

Speaking of Scott, the man stood in front of the glowing ball, shoulder relaxed as he pocketed his hands into his jacket. “Real *found family* of you Jimmy.”

Tango quickly pushed Jimmy behind him, hand grabbing his gun out and pointing it at the lone man standing in front of them. “Don’t talk to him, Scott. I don’t know what you did to him but I swear when-”

“Drop the gun.” Tango’s fingers jolted open, gun falling to the ground with a clatter as Scott offered a tiny smile. Shit, Scott could- “Jimmy. Get over here.”

Bdubs watched as Jimmy’s feet pulled forward on their own, only catching himself as Grian reached out. “Jimmy, you don’t have to do that.” Grian hissed out, eyes flashing purple as Cleo looked at the group confused and thoroughly stressed out. Jimmy stopped as Scott rolled his eyes.

“Always so noble, to the bitter *bitter* end, aren’t you Xelqua?”

“Better to be noble, then a crazy psychopath trying to kill everyone on the planet!” Scar called out from the back of the group.

“Not everyone.” Scott’s eyes flashed red. “I’m saving my friends. Even the confused ones.” Scott lifted his hand, the energy from the star swirling into the center of his palm as Bdubs took a step back. “In fact,” Grian pulled Jimmy back further as Bdubs eyes widened. “Let's make him a little *less* confused.”

A ray of light shot from Scott’s hand, brighter than Bdubs had ever seen before as he quickly ducked. He didn’t need to though, since as Bdubs looked back up he realized he wasn’t the target.

Tango, now standing shell shocked with a hole through the center of his chest, was.

## Chapter End Notes

All I could think about while writing the last section was 'MOON BIG'

in all seriousness though, we're in the end game now- two more chapters and Etho and Bdubs storyline is done! I'm considering a prequel with Grian and Scar and all of those guys, but nothing is set in stone.

I haven't written action scenes in so long, I hope they came out okay! I know not many action scenes happened yet but soon...very soon...like the next chapter because the last one is an epilogue soon...

anyways, no confirmed deaths yet, though my roommate is pushing so hard in letting them all live...somehow. I guess we will see lmao- thank you for all you support, it means the world! see you in the next chapter!



# Chapter 12

## Chapter Summary

End game.

## Chapter Notes

Heyoo! I don't have an excuse for why this took so long other than Decker out two opened and Bdubs limited life Pov wrecked my psyche for a moment lmao

Tag changes include the removal of the "kind of" tag that implied that there was no real minor character death.

hope you all enjoy!

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

Impulse was used to the extra things that floated just outside his vision.

After all, being a nether-born, being a nether-born now living on the surface came with some...unique abilities.

Eyeing the frayed string wrapped around Joel's pinky, Impulse looked back at his comm as soon as Joel glanced back at him. It was only a matter of time, in Impulse's opinion. The second string Joel had was almost brutally placed where Impulse would guess his heart was, shooting from his chest and fading out into nothing.

Another soulmate, worlds away.

Impulse felt for him, he really did. Having two soulmates would be difficult, especially when you were torn away from one by the other by accident. The one in Joel's chest was strong though, unlike the one shared with Etho, apparently strong enough to last through multiple world changes. It was impressive.

It would drive Impulse mad.

Not to say he was against soulmates, not at all. It was sweet, the concept of it all. Tango and Jimmy for example. They tried so hard, and after a single talk with Tango, Impulse was rooting for them. But that wasn't what soulmates were really about.

Soulmates, at least from what Impulse had gathered from his time above the surface, were tied together no matter what. It didn't matter if you loved or hated them, that wasn't the point. They were someone that would be an important part of your story whether you liked it or not. Scar and Grian, Etho and Joel, Him and-

Well, Impulse never considered the fact he would also have a soulmate, not until a few days ago.

Being tied to someone suddenly was...confusing, to say the least. He was perfectly fine on his own, he didn't need Bdubs in any sense of the word. The string now moved in his peripheral vision every time he moved his hand which was something he needed to get used to, but he wasn't going to let that get to him. He wasn't going to think about any possibilities or ideas that could form because of the string.

Whatever fate wanted with him and Bdubs, he would rather die than find out.

Besides, watching people defy fate was something Impulse always enjoyed. Not in a sadistic way, but there was a certain element of satisfaction when it worked. It didn't always work, thinking about a certain avian and vex that couldn't seem to stay away from each other, but the idea was there. Impulse was not going to get wrapped up in whatever this string meant, no matter how curious he was.

"It's bloody bright outside, will you close the blinds more?"

Impulse looked up from where he was apparently staring holes into the table, Joel squinting at the recently unlocked computer as light shined through the windows. He was right, it was

really bright out there, which was weird since it was night time...

Bringing his hand slowly to his ear, Impulse turned his own ear piece back on, waiting for a moment just in case people were talking before letting out a huff of air. What was the point of having a communication device if no one was going to use it? Standing up, Impulse crossed the room to shut the blinds completely before the locked door rattled.

Both of them froze.

Impulse watched Joel slowly stand up, mouth tightening into a tight line as his hand quickly switched the safety off the gun resting on his thigh. "I can take care of them Joel, just get whatever you need done on that code." Impulse found himself saying, watching as Joel's hand jerked, like he had forgotten he was even in the room.

"No offense mate, but I don't believe you've been fighting starlight children as a training warm up."

"Starlight children?" Impulse could barely hear himself over the sudden thud against the door, the wood splintering before catching fire. "Starlight-"

"Starlight children." Joel rubbed his temples, eyes tired and almost frustrated as he glared at the door in annoyance. It was almost funny, like Joel didn't seem to realize this was a life-or-death situation, more just upset that he couldn't work on his code in peace and quiet. "Not a Starchild. It's like their little monster creations. Scott used to make them for us to practice killing. They're pretty... They're a lot."

Okay, that was a lot of unresolved trauma Impulse didn't have time for. Offering a tilted grin Impulse didn't really feel, Joel raised an eyebrow. "Well, no better time than the present right?"

The door had basically burned away, the sounds of peoples screams now coming through the empty space as Impulse stared at the glowing eyes peering into the room. Then,

“Well, it’s not like you have a choice now.”

Joel’s words seemed to spur the monster into action, a high-pitched screech filling the air as Impulse quickly let go of his own glamor.

Now, Grian had commented on his choice of glamor before. After all, if he was going to disguise himself as anything, he might as well just be completely human, right? But Impulse was always fond of demons, and since he was already on a government watch list, he might as well look cool for mugshots. Joel’s eyes widened as Impulse’s skin melted off half his face, the charred skull now peaking out as he felt his smile turn genuine. The feeling of his gums exposed was something a little chilling, but nothing he couldn’t handle as Joel put his hands up. “Okay, what the fu-”

The starlight child lunged for him, Impulse reaching out with one skeleton hand gripping into the center. The actual being wasn’t really...a being, more like a constantly moving thing of light, but in the center of it there seemed to be a core of some kind. Focusing his magic (Impulse was a little rusty, after all) he watched as the dark magic flowed into the core before locking on. The starlight child immediately screamed again, the energy shrinking and withering away until all that was left was a single rose on the ground.

“I- you, you’re a-” Joel stared wide-eyed as Impulse felt the energy flow back into him, bending over to pick up the black rose on the ground and pocketing it.

“A nether-born. Not my fault people didn’t ask what kind.” Impulse shrugged as Joel continued to stare. “I can handle this, finish the code.” Joel opened and closed his mouth a few times as there were more shrieks getting louder. “You don’t have to fight every battle alone, Joel. We’re in this together.”

Joel’s mouth tightened as Impulse watched both strings light up, his and Etho’s almost getting stronger as the windows surrounding them shattered. “Don’t get me killed.” Joel finally said, bending down towards the laptop just in time for a blast of light to shoot over his head. Impulse smiled as a group of starlight children started running at him.

It had been a while since he got to play after all.

.....

You know, when Tango was made to be the police captain, a lot of humans were...not pleased, to say the least.

It was something all three of them were used too, Bdubs, Tango and Scar. They knew it was going to be an uphill battle for him, especially since he couldn't hide his hybrid self like Scar could. Still, Tango took the unfair criticism and hypocrisy in stride and eventually won over the majority of the public. He was just a likable guy, he was good at his job, and he was what every good police officer should be.

He was good at protecting other people.

Scar watched as one of his best friends crumbled onto the floor, the hole through him seemingly sealed up due to the heat. There was a scream, something so distant in his ears before he realized that it was *him* making that noise. More stars were falling around them, more people running and dying and all Scar could think of was how he let someone who cared about him die *again* and that he couldn't reach him fast enough and-

Jimmy was standing in front of his view, body leaned over Tango's for a moment before he stood straight.

And suddenly, it was quiet.

Scott seemed to be waiting for a reaction. All of them did, if Scar was being honest. Grian was the one holding him back, Scar realized, Bdubs and Cleo already crouched next to the body as Jimmy stared. His mouth was slightly open, eyes almost glazed over as Scott tilted his head. "Jimmy-"

"I can't feel anything."

It was monotone, almost uninterested as Scar's gut dropped. "I can't feel *anything*." Jimmy gulped, eyes flashing purple before returning back to normal, hands shaking at his sides. It was heartbreaking, it was brutal. "Why can't I feel anything?"

"It's for the best, Jimmy."

*Oh, this fucking-*

Grian tugged him back, his own eyes flashing dark as Jimmy looked up from Tango's body. "For the *best*?" It was haunting, the unamused laugh Jimmy let out as he calmly stepped over his lover's body. "You taking away my ability to feel bad about- about-" Scar's eyes widened as more of Jimmy continued to be overtaken with void, the liquid climbing up the rest of his wings and up his arms. There was the distinct smell of flesh burning in the air, but Jimmy didn't flinch as Scott himself took a step back. "I *want* to feel bad about you killing Tango."

Scott offered a shaky smile. "Jimmy, we don't always get what we want-"

"Why not?" Scott's mouth hung open as the void crawled up his neck. "Why *can't* I get what I want? I wanted to go with you to the new world, weren't you able to provide me with that?"

"Well, yes." Scott almost looked exasperated, like he was dealing with a small child rather than a literal person turning into a moving abyss of nothing. One of their *friends* turned into a living void, if Scar was being honest about their relationships with each other. Scar glanced at Grian, watching as his wings slowly blinked back at him. Oh, it was almost time. "Because I want what's best for you Jimmy. Staying in a dying world isn't-"

There was a blast of something dark, Scott barely ducking in time for the void to splat against the star behind him and melt the energy into nothing.

It was quiet again as Scott slowly stood up.

Then-

“Give them back.”

It was low, it was *threatening*. Scar felt his own shiver run down his back as Scott looked at him with an emotion Scar hadn't seen on the God's face for a while. “Give them back!”

Scott was scared.

Jimmy wasn't Jimmy anymore, more of a form than anything else. Void dripped off his figure as he grabbed more. “Give what back, Jimmy?” it was no longer condescending like Scott was prone to use when talking to Jimmy, it was more matter-of-fact. “Tango? Tango's gone.” Jimmy flinched as Scott's grin grew to an unreasonable size, far too many teeth showing before it flashed back into something natural. Everyone's glamor were failing now that they were focusing on actually using their magic. “You can't save him anymore. You can't save *anyone* Jimmy. You are *nothing* without me.” Scott hissed out the last part, eyes crazy and more power flowing into him from every direction as he collected them from the falling stars.

“Give me my emotions back.”

Grian released the grip he had on Scar as Jimmy continued to walk closer to Scott. Scar turned to him, jaw tight as he realized what he was about to do. “Don't die on me.” Scar whispered low, staring at the purple eyes where he was hoping Grian could see him.

Twenty pairs of eyes blinked back at him.

“Don't let Jimmy die either.”

Grian reached for his pinky, hooking it with his own before offering a tiny smile.

“Go.”

Grian took off, wings spreading out wide and huge as Scar turned back toward where Scott was still laughing at Jimmy’s demand. “Fall into one void hole and you’re suddenly so brave!” There was another beam of light, Jimmy holding up his hand and basically absorbing the energy shot at him. “You sound like a child throwing a tantrum, Jimmy. Think reasonable for once-”

Jimmy cut Scott off with another blast of void, the God’s face morphing from annoyed to actually angry as his shoulder got caught. The wound bubbled, light streaming from the cut before sealing over itself. “*Okay Jimmy.*” Scar felt his eyes widened as Scott’s voice suddenly dropped any emotion. It was chillingly familiar, something Scar himself had only heard once. Scott offered a tiny bow, Jimmy taking a step back as the memory of that night seemed to come back to everyone who was there.

*Thank you for teaching me, Pearl.*

Scott laughed, thoroughly unhinged as Grian landed next to Jimmy with a grim look on his face.

*But you’ve outlived your purpose.*

Grian’s wings caught most of the blast Scott let out, the rejected God taking the blunt force of the damage as Scar tumbled to his feet. Jimmy, on the other hand, stood firm as the rest of the light hit him again, the void absorbing it with an awful sounding garble. “Thank you for teaching me Jimmy.” Scott’s glamor slipped again, too many teeth. “But you’ve outlived your purpose *far too many times.*”

The light was bright again, far too bright for Scar to see clearly as more stars hit the ground. The energy from them quickly flowed towards Scott. If they couldn’t figure out a way to stop him from getting more powerful, it was all over.

Jimmy seemed to come to the same realization, glancing at Grian for a moment before the two of them nodded. It wasn’t the time, but it still brought a tiny smile on Scar’s face that



they were working together again. Another star was racing towards the group, Jimmy flying up and throwing the void into the air. Grian's eyes sparkled, a shot of adrenaline crossing through Scar's body as his wings twitched in protest of being held in. Grian held up his hand, dark magic shooting from his palm and suspending the void hole in the sky. The star fell through, disappearing into nothing as Scar felt his wing fly out.

*This* was what Scar was missing as mayor. The ingenuity, the risk involved with just being next to Grian. The Watcher turned to look at him, eyes glazed over but seeing everything, a lopsided grin that had Scar stretching out his wings further. Why did he move on in the first place? When Grian clearly still liked him, where he was still welcomed even after all this time? When Scar could still fly and be himself and-

“Oh my god, he's breathing!”

Bdubs exclamation shook Scar out of his thoughts, his eyes darting to where Bdubs and Cleo were still leaning over Tango's body.

Tango's... alive, body?

Rushing over, Bdubs offered a shaky smile, tear tracks down his face as a shot of guilt ran through Scar's veins. It was a good reminder at least, why he left that life. Why he tried to be a better person. Cleo seemed to have some kind of light blue string in between her teeth, a needle in her right hand as Bdubs held on tightly to Tango's hand. “Good job Cleo, you're amazing, you're so smart and talented and-”

“Laying it on a little thick Dubs.” Cleo said, the words muffled around the glowing thread. What were the two of them doing? “Back up, this one's going into the heart and I don't want your hand in the way.”

“You're putting *that* into his heart?” The two of them jumped back, like they were lost in their own little world as Tango's chest lightly rose before dropping. “What are you doing to him?” He didn't mean for it to be accusing, but panic quickly rose in his chest as Cleo pulled the thread through the needle.

Oddly enough, Cleo didn't look surprised at the outburst. They looked up, mouth set in a steady line as they stared at him. "I'm saving his life. Or I guess, what's left of it."

Scar reached out, stopping her hand from moving closer as Bdubs looked confused. "Don't-*don't* stab him more." His hand was shaking on their arm, a full transformation suddenly clear as he saw the gray coloring on his skin. Shit, he was fully vex now, right in the open where everyone could see and Cleo was stabbing someone he couldn't save and Bdubs was letting them and-

A generic ringtone was what brought him out of his thoughts this time, everyone looking startled as more stars and more void holes fell and opened around them. "It's been ten minutes." Bdubs explained, eyes suddenly much more focused on the building behind them. Cleo glanced at where he was looking before letting out a sigh.

"Good luck." It sounded resigned, tired but bittersweet, something with a longing for an easier time and a wish for something similar for the two of them. It was honest, brutally so.

There was a pause between them as Scar watched, something like they were talking without words. Finally, Bdubs stood up, brushing off his pants before offering a shaky smile. "I'm a miracle maker baby, I don't need luck." Bdubs brushed past Scar, catching his shoulder before lowering his voice. "*Please trust them. For Tango.*"

Cleo wasn't looking at the two of them, but it was clear they heard if you looked at the tightness in their jaw. Bdubs let go, running quickly into the building as Scar stared at the string. "You know what you're doing?" Scar finally asked, the sound of screeching filling the air as the stars started morphing into something Scar had only seen a few times before.

Starlight children. Great.

His wings twitched, magic gathering around him unwillingly as Cleo glanced up at him, fingers tense around the needle. "Well, I wasn't born half-dead, so I figured I had some experience reanimating someone." She finally made eye contact, something heated in her eyes before her fingers relaxed. "I guess it depends if you can trust someone that isn't from this world, and if you're willing to keep me safe while I work."

The starlight children grew louder, forms starting to take shape into larger beings then Scar was used too. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Scar knew Cleo wasn't from here. How they knew that Scar had a problem with that, he didn't know, but the look in her eyes told him if he wasn't willing to help she would leave. The thread glowed brighter as Scar let his shoulders drop, stretching his fingers out as the feeling of his claws breaking through his skin made him grit his teeth. Tango's chest moved upward again. "Deal."

Scar Goodtimes was a good person, and hopefully this time, he would be able to prove it.

.....

Etho liked to think he was a normal person.

He liked to think that, because even if everyone else in his life seemed to hold him in high regard, he was able to reign in any ego or idea that he was more than what he was.

Sure, Tango knew him as someone who was a redstone genius. Cleo knew him as a pretty reasonable fighter. Scar knew him as a liar and a con-artist, Grian as an unknown creature able to help him progress in whatever plan he contrived next.

Etho knew he was a normal person.

He was a normal person stuck in an awful situation, one that had lasted far too long in his valid opinion. It had lasted far too long, with so much heartache that Etho didn't know what he would do if his life finally evened out.

So, in that regard, Etho would have to agree.

He was not a normal person.

Ren was on top of him, fangs close to his neck and claws digging deep into the flesh of his shoulders. One part roommate, one part best friend, both apparently okay with killing him for what they considered the greater good. And maybe-

Maybe they were right.

He had been living on borrowed time since the first fall after all. He didn't think he was supposed to survive his world collapsing in on itself, nobody was. This could be the reason why fate dragged him through different worlds in the first place. Etho didn't tend to fuck with fate very well.

Still, he was exhausted. The kitchen was a disaster, plates and bodies everywhere, werewolf and enderman blood covering the walls. It didn't help that both of them were good at taking hits and it didn't help that Etho couldn't seem to feel half his face. There were purple particles all around the room still due to his constant teleporting in avoidance of actually ripping apart his friend, though it was spotty at times. Etho could taste a different kind of blood on his lips, and with the giant gash oozing blood on Ren's side, Etho could tell he wasn't super successful.

“ *Why,* ” Etho hissed as Ren's claws dug deeper, Martyn's distorted voice echoing across the kitchen. “ *Are you making this so **difficult?** ”*

Etho grinned even though it made his jaw split further. “Well, you know, letting my crazy roommate possess me isn't something I had marked down on my bucket list.” Etho tried to sound confident, but he knew it was a fruitless effort. Martyn/Ren didn't seem like it was convincing since he *swore* Ren was trying to take a chunk of flesh out of him. “ *Motherfucker-* ”

“You don't get it!” Etho blindly jerked his legs up, ignoring the sickening squelch of his own shoulder being ripped apart as he threw Ren's body off of him, the pain blinding him for a moment as a screech filled the air. His jaw spilt more, blood immediately pouring in and out of his mouth as his eyesight cleared. More purple particles surrounded them, Ren now pinned against the wall as Etho struggled to breath around the metallic smell. Still, Martyn's voice only sounded angry as he struggled out of his hold. “You walk around life solving your problems with your stupid little *abilities*, you get to kill and blame instincts. But suddenly, when we need your powers for something good, you won't help?” Ren's head jerked towards him, teeth bared and aiming right for his jugular.

Forced to pull back, Etho put the full distance of the kitchen between them with a blink of his eye as Martyn let out an unhinged laugh. Ren's body had seen better days as it lurched forward, eyes wide and wild and clearly not all there. "See?" Ren moved closer. "See?" Blood poured from the gash on Ren's side as Etho struggled to breath right. Shit, he wasn't used to being so...coherent at this stage. Maybe it was the adrenaline, but he could see and hear everything perfectly. Which sucked, since he felt like he was drowning in his own blood. "Only using your abilities when it suits you best, only helping yourself. People would kill to have what you have!" Another laugh, distorted and bone-chilling as Etho's need to sit down suddenly increased by ten. "People *have* killed to get what you have."

The room was spinning as Martyn and Ren continued to get closer, Etho's eyelids feeling heavy as he struggled to keep them open. Ten minutes had definitely passed now, but Bdubs hadn't come to check up on him. He was probably busy, or Scott had come or-

The punch was unnecessary, in Etho's opinion. He could hear the cough more than he could feel it, the pain more in his knees as he fell onto the ground. He barely had time to process that Martyn had hit him before Ren's full voice came filtering through. "Dude, you didn't have to do that!"

It wasn't as distorted as it had been before, Ren clearly distressed as Martyn's voice took a softer edge. "You know I can't get into a mind that's unwilling unless I'm forced there by a magic user. Scott's not gonna help us anymore. Weakening him will make him more susceptible." It was muttered, clearly not for Etho's ears, but it was enough information. Blindly reaching out, Etho gripped onto Ren's calf, digging his fingers in as deep as they could go as another enderman shriek left him.

He was blind again, body moving to protect him and *only* him as Ren's agonized scream echoed around the room. Blinking rapidly, Etho found Ren on the ground again, more blood from the gash on his side as Etho stared down at him. His chest was still moving, which was good, but all it did for Etho's instincts was making it harder to not go in for another hit. It would be so easy to rip him apart, to open his jaw and swallow him whole. It would be so *easy* to kill him and-

*"Does it bother you?"*

*Joel looked at him, eyes clearly tired even with the flickering light of the fire in between them. Etho's jaw was still fresh, new skin stretched thin as Joel tilted his head. "Can't say I know what you're talking about mate."*

*Wrinkling his nose, Etho's eyes glanced in the direction of the pile of bodies he left a few miles back. It wasn't his fault, they had tried to rob the two of them and when they didn't have money, one pulled a knife. It was enough for Etho's instincts to go wild. "Forget it."*

*Sadly, it seemed like Joel was in a more talkative mood since he stretched his arms above his head before offering what Etho was starting to guess was his supportive smile. It still looked condescending to him, but he was also horrible at reading people so maybe he was wrong. "Nah, what bothers me? Your breath? Everyday. Your weird need to wear fingerless gloves for no reason? I got over that a while ago. Your-"*

*"The way I go off without warning."*

*Joel's grin fell slightly, relaxed posture tightening as he sat up. "You don't kill friends." Etho just blinked at him as Joel sighed before pushing his fingers into his thigh like he was trying to crack them. "You've attacked a lot of people in my time. But I'm still alive. Even if you don't consider me a friend- which, by the way, we're not- you still haven't attacked me in a life threatening way. I don't think you're capable of that."*

*Joel left it like that, not saying anything else as Etho continued to think about it all night. Even without his mind completely there, Etho had never tried to kill Joel. He vowed that night to never kill one of his friends if he could help it, not like that.*

It would be so *easy* to kill Ren.

Instead, Etho gritted his teeth. "You're fucking crazy Martyn."

There was a weak laugh as Etho forced himself to take a step back. "You're just realizing that?" It was followed by a string of coughs, more blood as Etho's eyesight blurred. "Come on Etho. Gonna finish us off? Use your big strong special abilities on-"

More particles, Etho now over Ren's body, using his full weight to pin the wolf hybrid on the ground. It was disgusting, his own blood dripping from his mouth onto the unhinged grin of his possessed friend. "I am *normal*." His voice didn't even sound like himself, deeper and almost animalistic. Martyn just laughed again, the smile turning into something almost cruel as Etho forced his eyes to focus. He wouldn't kill Ren, he didn't *want* to kill Ren. But if he didn't kill Ren then Martyn would continue to try and possess him or worse, kill him. There wasn't a good ending to this story, no matter what angle he tried looking at it. "I'm normal." Etho tried again, Martyn's smile fading.

"What is that, a mantra? Something you say in hopes it will come true?" Etho's grip on his wrists grew tighter at the harsh truth. "You, Etho Slab, are the furthest *thing* from normal. You're a freak, an anomaly, something that should've died years ago. You keep running and running and *surviving*, but from what I've seen, you've never lived a day of your life." Etho couldn't breathe as a weird sensation started in the back of his mind. Like a tickle, like something that wasn't supposed to be there. Martyn was right, it was a mantra. It was something Etho desperately wished were true. "What are you running from by this point? Every world you've been in is left void, isn't important to you right? You could just leave and eventually you'd be okay again, like you did with Cleo, like you did with Lizzie." Martyn's voice almost sounded louder, the sensation in his mind growing. How did he know about Lizzie? "You'll get over Bdubs. You're not made for being *normal* Etho. You were made to kill, to survive." Etho blinked again. Ren's lips weren't moving anymore.

Ren's lips weren't moving anymore.

Fuck.

Etho barely had any time to think before his hands wrapped around Ren's throat, the mind numbing feeling suddenly stopping. "I'll kill him."

There was a pause.

"No you won't." Ren's mouth still wasn't moving, but Martyn's voice sounded unsure from wherever he was. "He's your friend."

Ren's eyes looked clear as he looked up at him, mouth trying to say something but all that came out was a gargled mess of noises. Etho swallowed. "I'll do it right now. Easily." There was a stone in his gut, rolling around as there was a longer pause. "I will crush his windpipe Martyn. I will kill him if you don't leave."

The tingling sensation was back, but this time Etho just gripped tighter. "Martyn--"

"I'll leave." Etho felt his jaw start to unhinge anyway as Martyn's voice came through louder like he was yelling. "I'm leaving, don't kill him!"

"Don't come back." Etho was basically growling, more blood, more blindness. "If I find out you're possessing anyone else I will come back and finish this job." There was no answer, which was an answer in itself as Etho forced his hands to relax on his throat. There was a commotion outside, but Etho couldn't focus on that. Instead, he listened for anything inside the room.

The air was stagnant.

Taking a breath, and then another, Etho could feel his shoulder wounds start to heal over itself as he looked down at his friend. Ren was still breathing, but that was all Etho could really say was positive. He had seen better days, that's for sure.

Once Etho finally felt stable enough to move, he quickly rummaged through his pockets for the spare healing potion and magic nullifiers Grian had slipped him earlier in the night. Bdubs had said to cuff the guy but Etho was pretty sure Ren would be able to break out of anything they put him in. Still, Etho cuffed the guy before placing the nullifiers on his shoulder blades after slowly moving his body against a workstation. Ren barely put up a fight, more trying to croak something out that Etho wouldn't want to hear. As soon as the nullifiers clamped onto his back Ren let out a quiet hiss before slumping against the counter. Etho could sympathize in that regard. The nullifiers wouldn't do much in the case of the hybrid, but they would weigh him down and get rid of anything Ren could hide. With his teeth Etho ripped the cork out of the bottle, standing back up with chugging half of it before pouring the rest over Ren.

It was weird, looking down at his friend's body. He was going to be fine, Etho knew that. Ren attacked *him*, not the other way around. He should be angry. He should at least be upset. Even



if he was upset with himself that he had hurt Ren this much would've been better than the swirl of emotions he couldn't identify in his gut. "The police will find you eventually." Etho finally croaked out, watching as Ren's claws and teeth retreated into his body. He wished he could tell what emotion Ren was feeling as he blinked up at him, eyes full of anger and overwhelming sadness that Etho had to look away. "Martyn won't be back if he knows what's best for him." Ren jerked a bit at that statement as Etho turned around.

It almost felt like closing a chapter, if he wanted to think poetically about it. It didn't feel good to be leaving Ren in there alone, but it didn't feel good to be teared into physically and mentally like that. None of this situation was fair, which was something Etho was very familiar with.

He had made it to the door before he heard Ren actually make an articulate sound. "You shouldn't have done that."

Etho paused. "You shouldn't have tried to kill me."

"He wasn't, he *wouldn't*..." Etho clenched his eyes closed for a moment before turning back toward one of his closest friends. "Martyn wouldn't have killed you." Ren tried again, voice hoarse from the fight and choking. "I wouldn't have let him-"

"Yes you would." Etho cut him off, anger finally becoming more prominent as he stepped toward him before stopping himself. "You were going to let him possess me and you were going to let him kill me. I'm your *friend!*" He couldn't keep the hurt out of his voice. "I'm your-" Etho cut himself off, clenching his fists before letting out a slow breath. "You would've let him kill me." He finished lamely.

"Would you kill me, if Martyn didn't leave?"

Etho closed his eyes again for a moment, Joel's words echoing in his head before he turned back towards the door. Maybe Joel was wrong. Maybe he was capable of killing friends.

Maybe Ren wasn't a friend after all.

“The police will be here eventually.” Etho finally said, leaning against the door frame. Both of them knew the answer after all. “You know, once we save the world without the need for body swapping.” The door closing felt much more final than he thought it would, like he was leaving a piece of himself behind. His hand reached out, stopping it from closing completely. Ren barely looked like himself, glaring daggers Etho wouldn’t ever understand. “*Sorry, Ren.*”

Etho let the door close.

.....

Bdubs felt like he should feel more guilty about leaving Tango with Scar and Cleo. Cleo seemed to know what they were doing though, and as much as Scar seemed to hate that people were from other worlds, Bdubs had enough faith that he wouldn’t stop her from helping Tango just because of that fact. He was leaving him in very capable hands.

Not to say that Etho wasn’t capable, because Bdubs knew first hand the guy wasn’t someone to mess with. But...

Ten minutes were up. And Etho, no matter how much he lied and stretched the truth, had never lied about that. So something was wrong. Right?

Bdubs rushed into the main room, slowing to a stop as he took in the scene. He had worked tirelessly for months on this event, and no matter the reason, it hurt to see it ruined like this. Tables overturned, decorations ruined, lights sparking with electricity from ripped out light fixtures. Bdubs wandered over to where one of the tables still sat upright, dragging a finger over a delicate petal in one of Stress’s bouquets.

At least the flowers were pretty.

“It hurts, doesn’t it?” Bdubs froze, hand jerking from the flower as the voice continued. “To see all your hard work ruined, just because of someone else’s decisions? Turn around.”

He couldn't stop himself, feet working against him as he turned away to face Scott. He was glowing, light flowing from and into him in streams. It was beautiful, he was something captivating that had Bdubs struggling to take his eyes off of him.

“Weren't you outside-”

“It's *boring* outside Bdubs.” Scott cut him off with a wave of his hand, his jaw suddenly clamping shut as soon as Scott snapped two times. Shit. “Grian and Jimmy catching my stars in void holes, Cleo and Scar trying to revive a cold corpse,” Scott plucked a red rose off the ground, a tiny smile on his face before he looked back at Bdubs. “After all, you get used to betrayal in a thankless job like ours.”

Scott started plucking the petals off the rose one by one as Bdubs desperately glanced at the kitchen door before they were forced back toward Scott. The God snapped once, his jaw relaxing. It took Bdubs a moment to realize that Scott was allowing him to talk. “I don't think we're on the same par, Scott.”

Scott looked at the empty stem before letting it fall to the ground with a toss of his hand. “I will admit that you and I don't seem to have much in common with each other. Your boyfriend however...” Bdubs heard something happening to the left of him, but couldn't turn his head to see. A lock maybe? Something unimportant to Scott as the God finally stood toe to toe with him. “We're pretty close to the same.”

“You and Etho are nothing alike.”

“Really?” Scott offered a smug grin, leaning over Bdubs to pull a flower out of the bouquet he was just looking at. “Maybe you're right. I mean, I had to learn how to feel, where he has to force himself *not* to. You know, so he doesn't kill anyone with those freak of nature end-child abilities of his.”

“I don't see how Etho's behavioral patterns are any of your concern. Especially if you're ending the world tonight. Why don't you just get it over with already?” Bdubs gritted out, hands twitching at his side as Scott's eyes darted at the movement.

“You can move Bdubs, I didn’t tell you to freeze.” Scott said easily, offering the rose with an over-dramatic gesture. “In fact,” Scott continued as Bdubs slowly took the rose carefully into his palm. “This would be much more fun if you fought back.”

The god wrapped his hand around Bdubs, grin slipping into something more serious as he forced Bdubs fingers to crush the flower. The plant's energy flowed into his veins, suddenly connected to every slightly alive flower in the area. Which, because of the decorations, was a lot of them. Energy shot through him, a tiny gasp forced out of his mouth as Scott’s eyes sparkled. “*What-*”

“Like I said before, it’s rather boring outside, don’t you agree?”

...Scott was bored.

Scott was ending the world, watching what Bdubs supposed used to be his closest friends turn against him and try to ruin his plans, and he was *bored*.

Bored enough to give Bdubs a fighting chance, no matter how slim it might be.

Bdubs crushed the flower more, feeling a slight pain at the action before more plant’s connected to him. They were alive, they were part of him. Bdubs felt his own smile grow at the amount around him.

This wasn’t some weeds stuck in a sidewalk crack situation.

“Now that I think of it,” Scott took a step back as Bdubs flicked his wrist, the original rose he was just touching blasting upwards and exploding pollen everywhere in the grandhall. Scott’s grin grew as the particles floated around them. “It *was* getting a little stale outside, wasn’t it?” Scott didn’t say anything, but with the amount of light now streaming into his body, Bdubs knew he had his attention. As long as Scott was entertained, he wouldn’t end the world. Bdubs connected himself to a bundle of baby breath, feeling each individual bud flow across his fingertips as Scott backed up more. Scott snapped twice, music suddenly starting

back up as Bdubs resisted the urge to let out an unhinged laugh. Always the show man, wasn't he? "Wanna dance?" Bdubs asked anyway, sweeping his hand in front of him as he felt the rest of the bouquet behind him start to grow.

Scott blinked twice, eyes flashing red for a moment. "Thought you'd never ask."

.....

"Could you keep it down? The software can hear when things are going wrong outside of itself you know."

That was the first thing Etho heard as he teleported into a random room, followed by a startled shout and what sounded like screaming goats dying. Etho blinked rapidly, trying to clear his vision as the sound of a gun shot rang through the air.

His eyes shot open at that, staring at a completely revealed Impulse and a pissed-off looking Joel holding a very recently fired gun. Etho blinked again, turning his head slightly to where some light monster stood almost completely still, a tiny hole through the center of its core before it crumbled to stardust. Ah, Joel just saved his life. Awesome.

He wasn't going to live that down anytime soon.

"Nice shot."

"Void, you're the *worst* ." Joel bit back, turning his head toward the computer. He could say that, but he just killed something that was about to kill Etho, so it really made the comment null. From what Etho could see, Joel was uploading something onto a drive. It was good that he got into the device at least, even if Etho had no idea what he was doing now.

Impulse on the other hand, looked far more concerned. "You look awful dude." He said, reaching into his own pockets while also thrusting a hand into another light monster and

gripping tightly onto the core. Looking around, that did explain the black roses everywhere. “Here.”

Etho caught the potion, only fumbling a little bit before he popped it open. “So.” Etho started after he guzzled the whole thing. Joel was untouched from what Etho could see, and Impulse didn’t seem too keen on drinking something that would only hurt him in the state he was in anyways. “What are we-”

“Give it like...two minutes.” Joel cocked his gun again, placing it back on the table as soon as it was primed as Impulse took down the last of what Etho assumed was the wave. “We’re getting the nullifier code. If we can find a generator close by... I changed the range to cover at least this area. If Scott’s around, he won’t be able to use his powers once we get this plugged in. Of course,” Joel glanced up at Impulse before looking back at Etho. “None of us will be able to use our abilities either. Hybrids are a gray area, I’ll admit.”

Nodding, Etho pulled up a chair before slumping into it. “Neither of you know if Scott’s around?”

“No one’s using the damn ear pieces they gave us.” Impulse wrinkled his nose as Joel grunted in agreement. Etho cringed, turning his own ear piece back on. Joel rolled his eyes before flicking his own back on.

Predictable.

There was a loud crashing noise from the outside of the room, loud enough to be heard through the thick walls. All three glanced towards the empty door frame, watching as what looked like...roots?

Plant roots.

Etho found himself halfway across the room before a familiar hand wrapped around his arm to pull him back. Flipping around, he wasn’t surprised to see Joel staring at him with his mouth tucked in a tight line. “I’m not-”

*“You promised .”*

Etho felt himself tense up as Joel took his hand off his arm, looking just as angry as Etho found himself feeling. They were one of the same, if Etho really thought about it. Both trapped, both doing everything they could to get a better ending for themselves.

If only their happy ending were the same destination.

There was a mixture of sadness in Joel’s eyes though, clearly conflicted with every action he did. Etho gulped, letting his shoulders relax as Joel’s eyes cleared. “I’m not backing out. I’m just going to see if he’s okay.”

“You’re going to back out if you see him.” There was a chime from the computer, but neither of them acknowledged it. “I know you Etho, you’re gonna see him-”

“You know me from when we first got here, you don’t know me-”

*“ I know you Etho.”* Joel cut him off. Etho gulped again. He knew that. “Don’t make me regret helping you.”

It was a throwaway comment, Etho knew. Because Joel was right, he did know him. Just like he knew Joel, Joel knew him. He knew that Joel was paranoid that Etho was going to back out on him again, because he knew that Joel knew that he wasn’t completely honest that they would be going home after this. He knew that he was putting his faith in a faulty guardian angel again. He was trusting someone who had ditched out on him before, and would probably do it again. Just like Joel had done to him.

Joel turned away, walking back to the laptop as Impulse stared at the two of them. Well, to be more specific, staring at the space between them. Grian’s words about asking Impulse about soulmates echoed in his head, but was quickly pushed out as Joel pulled the flash drive out of the port. “We need to find a generator. Or really, anything that can take this. Preferably somewhere central.” Impulse looked up at the ceiling as he thought, the roots starting to

crawl into the room like it was trying to reach for help. Etho resisted the urge to bolt out again.

“Will a sound system work? There’s one on the stage.” Impulse finally suggested, a faint screeching sound coming from the outside. Impulse cringed, pocketing another wither rose as Joel thought about the question. “The quicker we get away from those light monsters the better. I can keep withering them away, but I’m getting pretty tired since I’m not in the nether.”

Nodding, Joel pocketed the flash drive before closing the laptop. “As long as it has a port, and a signal, we’re good.”

The screaming was growing louder as the three of them looked at the door again, the roots splitting apart and giving them a clear entrance into the main room. Impulse shrugged, walking through easily as Etho took a deep breath. It was good that the plants were responding, that meant Bdubs was still alive, even if he was fighting someone with his abilities. “Etho.”

Etho didn’t turn around until Joel grabbed his wrist, pulling at him and placing the drive in his palm. “I want to go home.” Anger bursted in his gut as Joel pulled away, determination in his eyes before he walked past. “I want you to be happy too, for some stupid reason. So…” Joel paused as he looked down at the roots before glancing back. “Figure something out with that abnormally large brain of yours. You’re acting like a cat left in the rain.”

Joel left the room, stepping over the roots carefully as if they would trip him. In all honesty, they might if they’re connected to Bdubs emotions. He was acting like a cat left in the rain?

Etho felt a snort leave him, face burning as purple particles started to float in his vision.

He *was* acting pretty lame, wasn’t he? And it was such a Joel way to say that. The roots seemed to beckon him further, growing more towards him like they were trying to reach him. The fact that Joel was aware that they had different ideas of happiness, and wanted him to reach his...



He could work with that.

He just had to save his boyfriend first.

.....

It was bad.

Bdubs might be an optimist, but even he knew it was a losing fight. After all, he was one on one with a *god*, a god of light for a matter of fact.

If the room was ruined when he first came in, it was completely destroyed now that they had started fighting. Flowers and flower stems crawled up the walls and around the room, making it hard to navigate.

Well, hard for Scott anyways. For some reason, the plants didn't seem very fond of him.

The flowers seemed to be sucking life force from the ones that were damaged, making the more strong ones stronger by jump starting the growth. Some even regrew their roots, the floor cracking under the pressure. They moved with every thought, every motion Bdubs did. It was *exhilarating*. He hadn't had this much fun with his ability in a *long* time.

Still, he was fighting a god.

A daisy swept underneath him as it grew larger than life, Bdubs quickly using the new height advantage to jump towards a full grown morning glory as a light blast hit the previous flower. Bdubs shoulder jerked, the plant screaming in his head as the pain flooded in. Shit, that was going to leave a mark.

“Running out of plants, flower boy!” Scott's voice taunted, the words echoing around the grand hall. It was like a jungle of flowers and other foliage, light sporadically blasting

through the stems and petals. “Hide and seek is about to get *real* easy Bdubs, better come up with another plan!” Scott giggled, the ceiling above them cracking due to how tall the flowers had grown. This was really bad. He was right, Bdubs was running out of plants to throw at Scott. He could easily wilt them with the light, or just shoot through them like he was doing, and every shot was an indirect hit to Bdubs himself. His whole body was aching with the amount of damage his plants had taken.

Taking a deep breath, Bdubs grew more baby's breath around him to act like a shield as he followed every path he could find of living plants in the area. There were a few more daisies left...plenty of filler items. There was-

Bdubs gasped as his eyes flew open, hands clenching tight as his body tried to connect to more plants that were previously unavailable. What *was* that? Whatever plant that was almost hurt his head when he tried to connect with it. His main rose, the one with roots now growing deep underground and around them shifted with that thought, the feeling of three more living things entering his jungle easily.

Etho was here.

The baby's breath blossomed with more flowers as soon as Bdubs realized. Etho was alive, thank God. Well, not really thank god, because-

There was a heat wave, Bdubs collapsing onto the ground as almost all the plants above and around him wilted. Scott had just made it too hot for them to survive, the flowers around him crumbling to dust as Bdubs struggled to his feet. His body was on fire, despite no physical burns, breath labored and dwindling as he reached for the strange connection again. Any fighting power would be better than none, right?

But Bdubs reached out again, only to flinch back at the intense *heat* the plant was now offering. Was it on fire? What was wrong with it? Bdubs cringed as another blast of light covered the area, the rest of his flowers wilting or burning to a crisp. Opening his eyes, Bdubs quickly scanned the room for Scott as the man smiled at him from the other side. He was bouncing on his toes, sneakers still just as pristine as they were the day he saw him on the flower shop roof.

“All out of tricks BdoubleO?” Scott’s eyes still sparkled, he was still entertained. Good, good. Bdubs eyes darted towards the kitchen door again. How long did it take to restrain a overpowered dog? “And I was having such a fun time.”

“Yeah, I’m sure causing internal burns to my skin was such a fun time for the both of us.” Bdubs could feel his adrenaline starting to wear off, the sting of his skin bubbling under the surface like a bad sunburn now starting to creep around the corners of his mind. He was part (though it was unclear to him as well) plant after all, all this heat couldn’t be good for him.

Scott’s grin just grew, glamor flashing off for a moment to show just how terrifying Scott really was. A proper god, that’s for sure. “Well, I’ve had a wonder-” Scott froze, head tilting and a smile frozen on his face.

“What?” Bdubs finally asked as Scott’s eyes shot towards him. It was like he was stuck in motion, not moving, simply staring for a moment as Bdubs ignored the chill running down his spine. “What’s happening-”

“Freeze.”

Bdubs closed his eyes in preparation for the hit, but it never happened. In fact, Bdubs could still move. Bdubs cracked an eye open as Scott tilted his head further. “Both of you, freeze.” Still, his body didn’t tense, leading Bdubs to look around the room. There was a layer of dust in the room caused by the burnt up flowers, but both Impulse and Joel were suddenly frozen right outside of a doorframe to his right. Joel looked vaguely annoyed that he was frozen, which was kind of badass if Bdubs thought about it, and Impulse-

Well, Impulse looked fucking terrifying.

There was the pull though, just like in the meeting. Black smoke seemed to rise from the man, something that loomed death surrounding him. His fist was wrapped around a flower Bdubs had only heard about, but suddenly his attempts to connect with it made a lot more sense.

He had never tried to connect to a wither rose, but he didn't think it would have the best outcomes.

"Bdubs," Bdubs eyes snapped back to Scott, who was now offering a fake pout as Bdubs felt the other two's eyes on him. *Where* was Etho? "I thought this was a one on one fight. Didn't know you needed to bring friends to help you."

"Those two are not my friends." Bdubs found himself saying, Joel immediately snorting as Impulse struggled to roll his eyes. "Forced by circumstance to tolerate each other."

"Ah." Scott flicked his wrist, a blast of wind flowing through the room as Impulse's body went flying into the far wall. The wall cracked with the force, Bdubs heart suddenly feeling tight as soon as his body hit.

"What the-"

*"Freeze Bdubs."*

Bdubs' knees locked up before he realized he had been running towards where Impulse was now slumped against the wall, chest moving far too slowly up and down. Scott had lost the sparkle in his eyes, smile seeming much more forced as he turned around in a circle. "Alright end-child, let's not play any silly games now."

Purple particles zipped through the air as Bdubs stared at Impulse. He couldn't move to see what was going on, he couldn't move his head from staring at the jackass who was only helping them because he was forced too. But wasn't that the same for him? He sure wouldn't be if Etho and Scar didn't ask him to work with them. "Silly games? Like the one you were playing with Bdubs a few seconds ago?"

Etho.

Scott growled, a blast of heat passing above his head. "*Would you stop moving?*"

There were more particles, something happening to the left of him he couldn't see as Impulse's body seemed to twitch. Twitch? But Scott told him to freeze before he threw him against the wall, meaning he shouldn't be able to move, right? How could-

"I don't think Scott can freeze more than two of us at a time, unless we're grouped up."

Impulse's voice came through the earpiece strained, breathing heavy. Still, Bdubs watched as Impulse let his arm fall down against his side after using it, mind going a mile a minute as to how this could benefit them. There were four of them, surely the three of them had a plan of how to stop Scott by now, right? Bdubs just wished he knew what it was.

There was a loud scratching sound followed by a thud. Bdubs really wished he could see what was happening behind him. Another loud scratch and thud. Impulse's chest rose slower than before.

A pause before another thud and scratch against the floor to the left of him. "*Come out Etho* ." Scott sounded like he was seething.

Impulse was definitely dying silently. Bdubs didn't get it, why didn't he say anything? A long scratch. Why wasn't Impulse asking for help, or even just mentioning he was dying on the floor alone? Scratch, thud. Scratch, Thud.

This was going to hurt.

If Bdubs could he would've gritted his teeth, but instead he forced himself to connect to the wither rose in Impulse's hand. The effect was almost instant, wither flowing in and out of his blood as he tried to move the energy back into Impulse's body.

"Etho, I don't want to have to kill your lover boy just because you won't show your face for more than a second." Scott said this with a smile, sudden heat close to Bdubs body as his world seemed to slow down. He was going to die, wasn't he? Scott was probably behind him, about to shoot him through the chest like Tango and he was going to die. He would probably

die faster than Tango, since he was trying to do some kind of janky blood transfusion with a guy he met a few days ago. Why was he so nice all the time?

Then-

Etho appeared in front of him, jaw ripped almost in pieces, eyes wild and more crazy than Bdubs had ever seen as he looked down at him. He was terrifying, he wasn't himself. He looked blood-crazy and by void did he look good in Ren's blood. Bdubs thought he offered what was a grin, a flashdrive in hand as Etho looked past where Bdubs was standing to someone behind him. There were more particles, more wither entering his blood as he felt his eyes start to shut.

Four thuds.

“FREEZE!”

Bdubs opened his eyes just in time to see Etho's hand release the drive into the air.

.....

***C.A.T.C.H.***

Joel felt his body untense just as Etho finished the letter H, watching as Etho threw the device into the air. That smart little fucking-

Joel caught the drive, adrenaline coursing through him as Scott's eyes widened with realization of what it was. Etho was grinning wildly at him, something familiar in his eyes that Joel hadn't seen in a long time. It was reminiscent of years gone by, of adventures Joel desperately tried to forget but could never let go. Scott's glamor shifted, almost like it was glitching as more and more of his real self tried to break through. “Joel-”

“Scott, nice to see you!” Joel cut him off, watching as Impulse slowly got to his feet. Good, this would only work if they had two people able to move at once. Impulse looked at him, nodding once as Joel turned back towards the guy that had been his... friend? Tormentor? His something ever since he got to this world. “Sorry I had to dip earlier, trying to stuff a dead person in my only way home was a bit of a turn off for me, you understand right?”

Scott snarled at him, raising a hand to blast him. Too bad Joel had years of experience fighting Scott himself. Ducking, Joel started making his way to the stage as there was a loud crack of the wall getting hit with the blast instead. “Stop!”

Joel turned around just in time, chucking the drive as far as he could in the direction of Impulse, watching as Bdubs body untensed. “B, get this to the stage as quick as you can! If we get it in a power source we can stop his powers!” Impulse called out, the drive already back in the air as soon as Impulse had a good grip on it.

Bdubs fumbled with the catch a bit, but started running towards the stage as soon as Impulse instructed him to do so. Etho’s eyes looked so *proud*, so fond, so reminiscent of-

“Stumble!”

Bdubs tripped over nothing as Scott ran after him, light violently shone out of any skin showing, eyes almost painful to look at as the drive flew upwards. There was a zipping sound, almost immediately covered by Joel’s laugh as Etho teleported in front of Scott and snatched it out of the air.

*You don’t have to fight every battle alone, Joel. We’re in this together.*

Impulse’s words echoed in Joel’s head as Etho teleported pretty close to the stage before Scott froze him again, his muscle’s relaxing as the flash drive landed right by impulses feet. Was this what it was like to be on a team? A real team? Not one where everyone was clawing to the top, but one where they were going for the same goal? Scott bolted towards Impulse, who oddly enough didn’t move closer to the stage. It was a scramble for the device, Scott sending out another wave of light that had Bdubs letting out a tiny whimper. Joel wouldn’t have been able to hear it if he wasn’t running past him, but the sound made him turn. Bdubs...didn’t look so good, now that Joel was looking at him. It was almost like he himself

was wilting, chest heaving and finger tinged black almost like how Impulse's skull was. What had-

“Joel!”

Joel looked up to see the flash drive fly through the air, mind one step behind as Scott let out a blood curdling scream. Joel barely caught the device, glancing behind him to where Impulse had a grip on Scott's arm, wither crawling up it at a rapid pace. It was like his brain was froze for a moment, watching and putting together what was going on. The dark hands, the way the wither was on Bdubs *and* Scott, how Impulse was still moving after that impact from earlier.

Bdubs was using the wither roses to keep Impulse alive, at the risk of killing himself. Someone he barely knew, someone that from what Joel could tell, he hated. And for what? Because of a tenuous alliance? Because he was an actual good person? Joel blinked rapidly as Bdubs looked at him, mouthing something that he couldn't catch as Scott let out another blast that had Impulse flying towards the front of the room and out of any throwing range Joel could do.

Shit.

Etho was frozen too, Joel would bet on it. During his zone out, Scott had most likely frozen Etho and Bdubs, leaving Joel the only one who could move. Impulse wouldn't be back up anytime soon, especially if Joel was correct that Bdubs was the one keeping him moving all this time. What was he supposed to do now? Scott looked down at his arm with what looked like mild annoyance, the limb hanging uselessly to his side before he shrugged. His glamor slipped away as Joel's eyes widened. He had seen Scott completely glamorous once or twice, but it was a different ballgame. His mouth dropped open, not unlike how Etho's does when he's really stuck in his hybrid self, but instead of void it was full of sharp teeth. Scott's body contorted, teeth sinking into his flesh and ripping his own arm off to get rid of the wither and stop it from growing.

Joel bolted towards the stage.

It was times like these that he was vastly reminded of his human status. He was constantly surrounded by hybrids and magic users and *gods*, and all he was really able to do was blast



holes in the void, and that was only if he had Etho with him to keep him alive. Joel clambered onto the stage just as Scott appeared in the corner of his vision, blocking the way to the sound system. Scott still hadn't put his glamor back on, his own blood dripping from his mouth as Joel took a step back. This was it, wasn't it? He was face to face with an unhinged God, all his allies and possibly friends and *Etho* unable to get him out of this. He was 100% alone.

You'd think he'd be used to that.

"Joel~" Scott purred out, waving his remaining hand over his shoulder where his arm was missing, cauterizing the wound to make it stop bleeding. "I thought we were *friends* Joel?" Scott stepped forwards, Joel back before he realized he was at the edge of the stage. This was bad, this was really fucking bad.

"We are." Joel said, desperation leaking into his voice and making him cringe. "I mean, we *were*, but you promised that you would help me get home but you never-"

"Is that what this is all about?" There was faux sympathy in voice, the glamor finally returning as Scott held out his hand. "Joel, you're just confused. Of course I'll get you home." There was a movement to his left. Etho? Was Etho not actually frozen? "I just need that little device, and I'll send you home right now."

What?

Scott just smiled something almost warm, waving his hand to open a portal. The figure in his peripheral vision stopped moving. There was a field on the other side, a small cottage barely in view as Joel's heart seemed to stop beating. There was a ball or something stuck in his throat as the image waved, the breeze gently blowing the wheat around as the door to the home opened.

There was a choked noise that forced its way out of his throat as he watched, Lizzie looking just as beautiful and perfect as the day he left on that wretched ship. She was carrying a basket, eyes looking tired but kind as she made her way down the trail. Joel was well versed in that path, having been the one to make it, just to make her trip to the main town that much easier. God, how many years has it been? How had Scott- *when* did Scott-

“Gaining this much power made it possible, Joel.” Joel forced his eyes to look at him, blinking back tears he didn’t remember starting as Etho began to move again. Scott didn’t seem to notice, the warm smile still plastered on his face. “I needed to start the end of this world to be able to get you to yours. This is for *you*, Joel, and all you have to do,” Scott’s eyes darted to the drive before finding Joel’s again. “Is give me that. Then you get to leave.”

Etho finally crept into his view, standing behind Scott with his hand raised, ready to catch the drive if Joel threw it. He was right next to the speaker, he would be faster than Scott, Joel knew that. If he threw the flash drive, Etho would be able to get it plugged in and everyone’s powers would disappear. Etho wouldn’t be able to teleport, Impulse wouldn’t be able to wither things-

Scott wouldn’t be able to keep the portal open.

Etho’s eyes were basically begging him to throw the drive, something so grief-stricken swirling in them as Joel’s eyes kept darting towards the portal. It was right there, his happy end was two feet away and all he had to do was give Scott this piece of metal. All he had to do was let go of the drive, and he would be home. *His* home, not just some world that he tried desperately to make into something it's not. He would be with Lizzie, he would be with the one person who understood him. All he had to do was give Scott the drive.

Joel looked back at Etho, an apology already on his tongue before a gust of air blew around them.

*“I want you to tell me Scott’s plan.”*

*Joel felt his gut curl as Etho looked expectantly at him, like he expected him to give up the information just like that. Like Joel even knew what Scott's plan really was. “What’s in it for me?” Joel stared at the laptop. Of course Etho would find that.*

*“We go home.”*

*It was something that if Joel had heard two months ago, he would've been ecstatic. Etho forgave him **and** wanted to go back to their home?*

*But Joel wasn't stupid. Not anymore.*

*"You're a fucking liar." Joel held open the door anyways, letting Etho into the shop while sending an apology to Cleo in advance. "That world isn't your home anyways." Joel couldn't help adding on, just to twist the knife.*

*Sadly, Etho didn't argue, sliding into a booth as Joel locked the door again. "It's not." Etho finally responded after Joel joined him on the other side.*

*"Lizzie's there." Joel tried, knowing it was a mute point. Etho offered a sad smile as he shook his head. This was so stupid. "My wife is back there Etho, you of all people have to understand-"*

*"I'm not lying to you Joel." Etho placed the laptop on the table, turning it so it would open towards him. "If you help me save this world, I promise I'll get you back there."*

*His throat was dry. Joel looked down at Martyn's laptop, letting out a quiet sigh that he knew Etho would know was acceptance. Etho always seemed to know. "I don't get it. Just take Bdubs with us. Let the world die. Why are you making this harder for yourself?"*

*His partner didn't say anything, hands curling into fists on the table before Etho forced them to relax. "It's not just Bdubs. I can't explain it, but I can't just leave everyone like before. I'm-"*

*"Void, you've grown soft." Joel scoffed, opening the laptop and holding down the power button to turn it on. Etho just shrugged, eyes almost glazed over like he was thinking deep.*

*"People are just...different here, you know?"*

*“I don’t.” Joel looked up to see Etho flitch, like he had forgotten they hadn’t seen each other in years, like they didn’t hate each other with every fiber of their being.*

*Other them...Neither of them did, did they? Etho would’ve killed him in that alleyway if he did, Joel wouldn’t be helping him at all. People were different here, huh? A load of bullshit.*

It was like Joel could hear how heavily Bdubs was breathing behind him, the vision of his hands now crawling with wither because he wanted to keep Impulse moving for as long as he could. Impulse, who kept him alive and took out countless starlight children so Joel could focus on the code. Etho, who was begging him to throw the drive, years and years of adventures and heartache between them showing on his face as Scott held out his hand just a bit farther. “The drive, Joel.”

This was so stupid.

The flash drive was out of his hand before he could even realize he had thrown it, Etho’s eyes widening as he caught it. Scott’s condescending smile dropped, along with any magic he was using to make himself appear human as he lunged at Joel, mouth wide and seemingly ready to consume his whole body as Joel closed his eyes.

Maybe Lizzie would forgive him if there was an afterlife.

Maybe he didn’t deserve forgiveness in the first place.

Maybe-

There was a loud cry as another wave of energy washed over the room and outwards, Joel opening his eyes just in time to see Scott crumble to the floor. Etho had collapsed as well, Impulse was already down and Bdubs-

Joel turned to look at the destroyed room, watching as the wither evaporated from Bdubs arms and only leaving a slight scarring there. Joel stood alone in the room full of magic users and hybrids, breathing like he had just run a marathon. They had done it.

He had done it. Right?

.....

It was oddly quiet now.

The stars had stopped falling.

Etho blinked up from where he had dropped to the floor, feeling oddly fragile and fatigued at everything that had happened. There was a hand offering help. Etho took it.

“ *Why* -”

“Don’t make me regret helping you.” He couldn’t help it, gripping on tighter to pull Joel into his arms. “Oi-”

“Don’t make this weird.” Joel let out a bark of a laugh, hugging him back with just as much force.

“You already made it weird with the hug mate.”

Etho laughed, something bone-deep tired and proud. God, they had done it, hadn't they? Scott couldn't end the world now. He had no powers, he had used every ability and they still won. Bdubs would be safe now, he could easily figure out a way to get Joel home now that he wasn't worried about Scott making the sky fall on them. Etho pulled back, looking slightly behind Joel where Bdubs was standing up shakily, his own proud smile on his face. They had really done it. They were finally safe. They were-

There was another laugh, one bone chilling as the front doors to the room swung open. Scar, Grian and Jimmy came rushing in, all of them looking worse for wear but alive as Scott slowly stood up. Where was Tango? What was-

It was moving too fast. One moment Joel was pulling out of his arms, the next he was on the floor with a knife through his gut.

“*NO!*”

Etho didn't think, *couldn't* think, gripping onto the still laughing Scott's shirt and throwing him off of the stage. Joel didn't scream, he barely made any noise as Etho crouched by him, the sound of the other three running to grab Scott before he could do anything else falling on deaf ears. “Joel- nonono, I-”

“This is *so* stupid.”

Was he crying? Etho didn't want to be crying. There was another person by him trying to get his attention, but Etho just brushed their hand off his shoulder before gripping onto Joel's hand. “Should've gone through the portal, ey?”

It wasn't funny. The stupid accent that Joel couldn't pull off, the way he was attempting to make a joke as Etho looked at the wound. It was oozing blood, why wasn't Joel screaming? He wasn't one to accept things lying down. What was he doing? Etho couldn't think. “You're gonna be okay. We're done, it's done you just need to hold-” Etho's voice broke, hand gripping tighter at Joel's relaxing one. “You're not dying.”

“I'm totally dying right now.”

“Fuck off, no you’re not.” Joel had finally started crying, so at least Etho didn’t feel as bad. “You’re not gonna let a stupid stab wound kill you, that’s dumb.” Joel didn’t say anything. “That’s *stupid* Joel. You didn’t fall through countless void holes just to die from a knife. You can’t die I promised-”

There was a pained laugh coming from below them, Etho looking up to see Grian and Scar holding Scott on the ground. Bdubs was the one behind him, Etho realized, keeping the space. Impulse was leaning against Jimmy, who looked at the scene with what seemed like disinterest. “You think you won?” Scott was screaming, Scar holding his head against the ground. “You can’t keep me here forever! I’ll be back with my powers and there is nothing you can do to stop me!”

The sound of a gun cocking stopped Scott’s rant.

It was Joel who let out a tired laugh as Etho saw who was pointing the gun at Scott’s head. Scar let go, taking a step back as Grian offered an unhinged grin. Jimmy didn’t say anything, just adjusted his hold on the weapon as Scott looked up. “Jimmy, you can’t possibly think that a single bullet will kill me-”

“You’re not a god right now Scott.”

Scott stopped talking again, eyes widening slightly at the realization. Grian stepped back too, letting Scott get up if he wanted too. Joel’s grip weakened even more. “Jimmy, let’s think about this.” Scott finally said, eyes darting around the room like anyone was going to back him up. “You don’t want to kill me. After all we’ve been through? It would break your heart-”

“I don’t have emotions to break anymore.” It was like the room couldn’t move, all waiting for Jimmy’s decision. “You made sure of that.”

Joel’s grip slipped again.

No, no no no-

“I can get them back.” Scott said quickly, backing up until he hit a wall. “You just have to unplug the device and I can get your emotions back.”

Jimmy offered a half smile, nothing reaching his eyes. “Can you bring Tango back?” Etho felt his blood run cold. Was Tango dead? “Will you be able to bring Joel back, if he dies?” There was a pause as Jimmy waited for an answer all of them knew.

He aimed.

“Wait, wait-” Scott sounded panicked, holding his hands up like he could stop a bullet. Jimmy’s eyes darted around, finally landing on Joel before glancing up at Etho. Joel’s hand slipped out of his own. Etho felt something snap.

Jimmy pulled the trigger.

## Chapter End Notes

Wooo! Only one. chapter. left. Aren't cliffhangers so much fun? I actually don't consider this much of a cliffhanger (unless you're waiting to know what happened with Joel and Tango...then it might be a little bit...perhaps...) Its times like these I ask myself if I'm a mean person or not lol. Despite all this, I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter! I'm very rusty at write fight scenes and I feel like the POV changes are a bit choppy at times, but all in all I'm okay with how it turned out.

One chapter left! I'm actually going to be so sad to see this universe go! the prequel is still on the brain though, so we will see if anything comes from that. I also have this new idea brewing involving being trapped in decked out and a superhero AU...idk. I guess expect more fics sometime soon lmao! Thank you all for reading, and I'll see you in the next (and last) chapter!

EDIT: RAAAA i totally forgot to mention this but I am forever grateful and in AWE of the fan art that was posted! alienssstuff did a sheet with Jimmy and Martyn that I adore (you got their dynamic so well, its amazing) and absolutely wonderful pieces done by nezhanetwork with Lizzie, Joel and Etho. If you haven't seen them (Which I'm sure ya'll



have) make sure to check their tumblr! Okay see you in the next chapter for reals this time lmao

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Summary

And the end is the beginning, or something poetic like that.

## Chapter Notes

Tag changes include removing the 'more tags will be added' since you know, its the end.

Hope you all enjoy!

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

Etho couldn't consider himself a normal person anymore.

“Do you regret it?”

Etho was trying to listen to the breeze, something Joel would make fun of him for if he were still around to see it. Sadly, he was also in the company of people who didn't seem to understand his need for quiet, so he was stuck answering questions he didn't want to. “Regret what?” Etho finally asked back, not opening his eyes as his hand ran through the freshly tilled dirt.

“Not letting him go.”

Ouch. Etho took a shaky breath in, finally opening his eyes to find Cleo staring back at him. They looked tired, but stringing someone back to life had to be exhausting. It was hard to not feel bitter about that whole thing, but Etho was trying.

“Do you regret not being there to keep him alive?”

Maybe he wasn't trying as hard as he could be.

The fact of the matter was, Joel was dead, Tango was alive. Etho was a faulty guardian angel and Lizzie would forever be waiting for them to come back home. How good of a person could Etho claim to be if he still let Joel die in the end? Sure, he dragged him through worlds and worlds in an attempt to get them home, but when it really counted he still failed. He still only survived for himself.

Cleo didn't look offended at least. They joined him on the ground, leaning against the otherside of the headstone. "No. Tango is a friend and Joel was..." Cleo faded out. Etho closed his eyes again. That was fair, he knew it was fair. But it hurt.

Etho's very being hurt with every breath he took, like it was something he wasn't supposed to be doing if Joel wasn't breathing either.

"Yeah. Joel was..."

"Your best friend?" Cleo suggested voice lifting in an almost teasing manner that just made Etho hurt more. If he could go back in time to the ship, would he let Joel die in the hole?

There was a breeze, but nothing long enough for Etho to listen in. "Nah, I hated that guy." Cleo snorted as Etho played with the fraying strings on his gloves. "No, seriously. He hated me, I hated him."

"He told me something, the night that he came by the shop." Cleo didn't seem to agree with Etho's assessment of the two of their friendship, but Etho didn't expect them to. "Seemed real frustrated with himself. Tell me Etho," Cleo pushed her hair out of their face, tucking their knees into their chest as Etho glanced over at them. They looked conflicted with what they were trying to say, stitches pulling slightly at the movement. "Would you...I don't know." Cleo let out a sigh, letting the train of thought go. "I don't know Etho."

Etho could sympathize. He didn't know where to go from here. Honestly, Etho didn't expect that he would be breathing right now, sitting on his best friend's grave with his ex-partner as

the two of them tried to figure out what to do next now that they were still alive. “You going back to the coffee shop?” Etho finally asked, leaning his head against Joel’s headstone. He was sure the guy was raging, having his gravesite so close to Martyn’s, but Etho already had to fight to get him a spot anyways.

“I guess.” Etho felt the thump of Cleo’s head hitting the backside of the stone. As Joel would say, this was so stupid. Etho shouldn’t be the one breathing, not when he wasn’t the one that had that much to lose. “You’re thinking something stupid, aren’t you?” Cleo asked next.

“Rude.”

“Honest.”

That got a snort out of him. “Honest.” Etho agreed. Joel would probably hit him if he could see him now, acting like how he was. Through this past week, Etho wondered if Joel was floating around like Martyn was, like Martyn still was doing, but heard nothing. When he mentioned it to Cleo, all the zombie said was they hadn’t seen him around. “He had something to look forward to. I don’t have...” Etho let out a huff. “I have Bdubs. He would kill me if he heard me say that. I have Bdubs.”

“You have Bdubs.” Cleo agreed. Etho could hear a smile in her voice. It was a nice sound. “What are your plans then, Mr. Redstone genius?”

Opening his eyes, Etho looked out into the world as the breeze blew around them. Bdubs house was barely in the distance, Etho’s hand curling around the set of keys Bdubs made sure he had before he left the house this morning. “I...really need to pay my rent.” Cleo hummed, clearly lost but not caring enough to question him further. Etho let the metal dig into his palm, willing the pain to distract him from his thoughts. “I need to pay rent.”

The breeze never seemed to calm down.

.....

“Honesty is something that has always been important to me as your mayor, and will continue to be as long as I’m still in charge of this wonderful city. What happened last Saturday was a tragedy, something no one could predict or prepare for. All my condolences go out to anyone who has lost a loved one, or is suffering from the losses this attack has caused. As for myself, I would like to reach out with an apology for not being completely honest about my hybrid status and a promise to be more open in the future. Me and my team promise to-”

The TV shut off with a click, Scar and all the reporters disappearing as Jimmy set the remote back on the side table. The hospital was quiet, too quiet for what Jimmy wanted. There was the consistent beeping of the heart monitor though, which was something Jimmy never wanted to stop hearing.

Tango was stable. That was a good thing.

Scott was dead. That was...

That was also a good thing. Everyone said it was a good thing. Scar, Etho, Tango. All of them said it was good.

Grian was the only one who didn’t say anything about it.

Jimmy didn’t feel bad. He literally couldn’t. But he felt like he *should* feel bad, you know? Scott was his friend, his whole reason he was still alive, if he was honest. And Jimmy just...

“You’re thinking about him again.”

Jimmy blinked at the scratching voice, Tango clearly still waking up as he blinked like he was trying to get rid of the sleep in his eyes. It wasn’t an accusation, just a comment, but Jimmy still felt what should’ve been guilt wash over him. Instead, it was the feeling of *missing* a feeling, which was something hard to describe. It was like his mind knew what he should be feeling, but it wouldn’t connect. Still, Jimmy offered a nod of acknowledgement, looking back at the black screen of the TV as Tango sat himself up. “Are you feeling-” Tango cringed, stopping himself before trying again. “Did you sleep better last night?”

It was tense. Jimmy knew he should be excited, overwhelmingly ecstatic that Tango was even alive to be talking to him. But was he? Cleo had given some half-hearted answers when he asked them about the logistics of Tango's breathing, and from the stitches Jimmy knew were under his shirt that he wasn't completely alive anymore. He was more like Cleo, half-living, half-dead.

Pieces of work, the two of them.

"Hey." Jimmy looked up to see Tango gesturing him closer, something concerned in his eyes that made Jimmy want to...laugh? It was funny, that Tango was the one basically dead and was still trying to make Jimmy feel better. "Come on." Jimmy sighed, but walked closer as Tango's eyes lit up. He made it to the edge of the bed, Tango wrapping a cold hand around his wrist and pulling at him. "*Come on.*"

"I'm right here, where do you want me to-"

Tango scooted over, offering a pointed look as Jimmy felt his cheeks warm up.

Huh.

That was...

"Right." Jimmy choked out, the warmth on his cheeks almost foreign by now as he slowly sat on the edge of the bed. "I don't know if the nurses will appreciate me doing this."

Tango let out a soft laugh, pulling him further in the bed as the heart monitor sped up slightly. Jimmy flushed further. "Don't look so embarrassed Jimmy."

Embarrassed. That was what he was feeling.

“I’m not!” Jimmy found himself denying the feeling, but it was true. Which was... Tango grinned, the black void burn speckles almost looking like freckles across his skin as he reached up to cup Jimmy face. “I’m not embarrassed.” Jimmy repeated quieter, letting his eyes close as Tango knocked their foreheads together.

“Okay, I believe you.” Tango’s breath was warm on his face. “We’re going to be okay Jimmy.”

How could Tango be the one to say that? Tango, out of all the people at that event, didn’t deserve what he got. In fact, if Jimmy was completely unbiased, he would say that out of that lineup, Tango would be the only one to go to heaven if there was such a place. He was a good guy, he didn’t deserve to be shot through the chest. He didn’t deserve to be wrapped up in all of this in the first place. And he certainly didn’t deserve to be cursed with someone like Jimmy, who seemed to bring nothing but bad luck with him anywhere he goes.

“I don’t-”

“I heard you were pretty badass that night.” Jimmy pulled back slightly, opening his eyes to stare directly at Tango, who offered a boyish grin back. “All voidy on everyone. Looked sick as fuck.” Jimmy wouldn’t say that, since every single one of his friends looked at him with varying degrees of horror. “Protected me.” The heart rate monitor beeped steadily as Tango forced him to continue looking at him. Tango looked so sure of himself, of *Jimmy*. He didn’t get it. “Thank you for fighting with me.”

Jimmy blinked back tears. Nothing was connecting. Feelings, Tango’s forgiveness. Why didn’t Tango understand that he was nothing but trouble? “Tango, you can’t possibly think-”

“Thinking with you in the picture has never been my strong suit, you’re right about that.” Tango kept the grip he had, like he was afraid Jimmy was going to bolt. “If it was, I doubt I would be missing a chunk of myself.”

Right. Jimmy clearly had a reaction to that comment, since he felt his body get tugged back towards Tango. He looked just in time to see the concerned look again, quickly covered by a shaky smile and more gestures for him to get closer. “But it’s fine! I’m fine, I’m alive. You’re fine-”

“Tango, you can’t think that this is a good idea.” Jimmy stood up, only to be caught by his wrist again and forced to turn around. “I’m not good for you Tango, and you know that.” Tango’s jaw clenched closed as Jimmy felt something almost like anger pulse through his veins. “You’re not fine, you’re half-dead. I’m not fine, I can’t feel anything right! We can’t- You’re the smartest person I know Tango. You know this is a bad idea. Us together is just shooting ourselves in the foot.”

It was quiet, the heart monitor continuing. It was a harsh reminder that time was continuing too, that they couldn’t keep doing the weird limbo thing they had been doing for years. “I want to be with you.” Tango finally said, the teasing smile gone and nothing but determination in his eyes. “I didn’t take a shot in the chest from a God and survived just for you to give up in a shitty hospital room.”

Jimmy let out another hollow sounding laugh, though he desperately wished there was something warm bubbling in his gut like it used to. “I can’t feel anything.” Jimmy said anyways, the words echoing in his mind from the night of the gala.

From the look Tango gave him, he was remembering the same thing. “I’m not so sure of that, Mr. Embarrassed.” Jimmy blinked, an actual smile spreading on his face that *almost* had him feeling something good. He hadn’t even thought about that. Jimmy sat back down, Tango sitting up more and pulling his face close.

“I’m more trouble than I’m worth.” Jimmy weakly warned, even though he knew the point would go over Tango’s head. The fact had been going over Tango’s head for years now. Tango was already shaking his head, forcing Jimmy to do it with him. “Seriously-”

“I’m a big fan of trouble then.” Jimmy’s eyes fluttered closed as Tango leaned closer. “And if a hole through the chest doesn’t prove how much you’re worth to me, I don’t know what will.”

Tango looked so honest, so willing to put everything on the line. And really, hadn’t he already? Tango was literally sitting in the hospital, barely alive but still breathing. It was always Tango reaching out, always Tango offering to help Jimmy. Tango was the proactive one in their relationship, not Jimmy. But that wasn’t fair. It never was, but Jimmy was...



Jimmy wasn't going to let someone six feet under decide what he was going to do.

"I want to be with you too." Jimmy forced out, watching as Tango's eyes widened. How long had the other man been waiting for him to admit what they both already knew? "I would really, really like to be with you."

The smile Tango offered was enough to send a tiny zap of excitement down Jimmy's spine. He actually had done it, hadn't he? The heart rate monitor was going fast enough Jimmy was starting to worry the nurses would come in to check up on them, but he couldn't focus on that when Tango pulled him as close as he could without actually having their lips touch. "Can I kiss you?"

A pleasant feeling blossomed in Jimmy's chest.

*"Please."*

.....

This was stupid.

Scar would never voice it outloud, especially with the company he was in, but he wanted the fact to be known that this was a dumb thing for the two of them to be doing.

"They're going to be mad at us, you know that right?" Scar tried anyway, even though he knew Grian wouldn't listen to him.

"They're going to be mad at *me*, not you." Grian corrected almost happily, shovel hitting the box the two of them were digging for. Scar just grimaced, looking down at the head stone before rolling his shoulders back. "The only thing you could get in trouble for is grave robbing."

That didn't make him feel better.

He still helped Grian pull the box out of the ground, grateful that the night provided enough shade that the two of them could get away if they really needed to. Bdubs and Tango would kill him if they found out what he was doing, but with both of them out of commission for a little bit, he could hopefully keep this under wraps.

“You sure you don't want to tell Etho about this?” Scar asked as Grian popped open the lid. It would've been freaky how calm Grian was if Scar couldn't feel how rapid his heart was actually beating. “I'm sure he would be-”

“He was already freaked out about the Watcher thing, how'd you think he would feel about reanimation?”

“I just don't understand why you're doing it in the first place.” Scar looked at the corpse with mild disgust, ignoring the way his vex instincts started waking up. There was a reason why Grian asked him to come after all, but he wasn't above waiting for him to actually ask for his help. “Did you know him?”

Something almost nostalgic seemed to fall over Grian's face, the smile he offered tiny but genuine. “Not in this life.”

Scar wasn't willing to ask anything more.

“He's been dead for at least a week Grian, I don't know if-”

Grian leveled him with a pointed look, Scar closing his mouth and letting his wings roll out. “If you...He just wanted to go home, Scar. He didn't deserve to be here during this anyways.” Scar wanted to say that none of the four of them deserved to be there, since they weren't from this world in the first place, but Scar refrained. Grian looked oddly genuine about the whole ordeal, which was really the main reason Scar hadn't left the graveyard yet.

“So will you help?” Grian finally asked, letting some of his glamor drop as purple swirled around him.

Looking down at the body, Scar ignored the way his mind filled with memories that weren't his. Maybe they were. Maybe there was a world where he, Grian and Joel lived in the same world since the beginning, making houses and going adventuring and trying to survive. But that wasn't Scar's world, so it wasn't important to him. Still, he was trying to be a good person. And a good person would...

Well, this was more for Grian than anything, but Scar would make any excuse he could. Scar stretched his wings out to their full extent, letting the voices of vexes before him fill his mind. Grian's grin grew as Scar's eyes fell on him, the world growing blurry as he searched for the lost soul. He was pretty easy to locate, if Scar was being honest, even if he had only done this once before. The room was all white, Joel sitting in the middle of it, knees tucked into his chest like he had seen Etho sit quite frequently like this past week.

Joel was surprisingly *not* surprised when Scar appeared in front of him. In fact, he looked mildly peeved more than anything, which from what Etho had said about him, made sense. The...human? Glared up at him, clearly not pleased with the turn of events as Scar offered a hand. Scar really couldn't tell what Joel was, now that all the earth was stripped off of him and it was just his soul he was looking at. “Will someone get me home? If I don't get to go home, I'd rather-”

“You don't mean that.” Scar's voice seemed to echo around the white space, Joel's jaw tightening at the comment. “You would rather stay here? If you don't take mine and Grian's offer, I have no idea where you'll go. You might be like Martyn, who's stuck till he settles something from his past. And if it's you not going home...” Scar faded out, reaching his hand out further as Joel let his legs fall out straight. “Selling your soul to a vex who's hopefully going to be worlds away isn't the worst thing you could do.”

Joel's soul seemed to shake at the offer, almost like he was scared of Scar. Which was laughable, since Scar was only able to buy souls due to a certain fallen God watching them currently. Scar could feel him watching now, eyes blinking so fast you would miss it if you weren't aware. “Etho said you were a con-man.”

“Etho would be correct.” Scar offered a half grin as Grian chuckled. Joel's eyes widened as he looked around the empty room. “Your soul, I have my...patron bring you back. Grian can

walk through void, if Etho can't figure out how to get you home, I'm sure we'll be able to." Joel looked conflicted as Scar felt a surge of exhaustion wash over him. Void, he was out of practice with this whole thing. "Joel, don't let your story end as a tragedy. We both know you weren't supposed to be there."

The words were meant to be comforting, but Joel simply let out a hollow laugh. "I wasn't supposed to be alive by that point anyway. Etho and I were both living on borrowed time. His clock just lasted longer than mine, that lucky fucker." Scar didn't want to admit it, but he was right.

Still, he was on a mission.

"Last chance Joel." Scar was too old for this. Joel stood up, brushing off his hands on his pants even though the room they were in was pristine. "Your soul, we get you home." Joel looked down at the hand, something close to determination setting in his jaw as he gripped on. Scar could feel the power flush through him immediately, the almost nauseating feeling of suddenly feeding too fast washing over him as he felt Joel's body let out a rough gasp.

Being in charge of three souls now was going to be a bummer, if Scar was being honest.

Waking up in a graveyard alone wasn't really what Scar expected, but it also wasn't surprising. After all, it was Grian who he went with. The gravesite was already put back together, nothing out of place from the night before as Scar groaned. He wiggled his fingers, then his toes, letting his own soul settle back into its body before checking his others.

Joel was alive again, somewhere...not on the planet. Good for him, however he figured out how to do that. And the other-

BigB was fine. That's all Scar wanted to know.

Grian was far away too, if the lack of pressure from the eyes was any indicator. Maybe Grian just took him as soon as he woke up, and didn't bother with telling Etho. That would make sense from how Grian was talking. If that was the case, that meant that Grian was the one taking him back home, which was...

Fine. Totally fine. If he knew what was best for himself, he would stay far away from this world.

The eyes seemed to roll as Scar made his way out of the graveyard. Of course Grian would still be watching. Scar flipped off the general area, the feeling of the eyes narrowing making him grin. He paused before he got to his car, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth before flipping back around. “You’re coming back, right?” The eyes didn’t say anything but blink back at him. It would be weird if they spoke anyways. Scar let his shoulders relax, though he knew Grian wouldn’t buy it. “If you don’t I swear-”

“Talking to yourself, Scar?”

Scar yelped, flipping around to where... Impulse? Was unlocking his own vehicle, raising an eyebrow at his outburst. Impulse was someone Scar didn’t really know what to do with after all of the chaos had settled. He was a criminal, but there was no denying that he was a fundamental reason the world hadn’t ended. In fact, Tango had nothing but glowing reviews about the guy, and that was before the gala had even started. Speaking of Tango...

“I got some openings at the station. If you’re interested.” Impulse blinked back in surprise, hands tightening around his own keys as Scar unlocked his car. “Tango could use the help. You could use a new job that doesn’t involve me chasing you around in a wild goose chase.”

Impulse looked confused, but interested as Scar popped open his door. “I’ll text Grian, see what’s going on.”

“I wouldn’t bother.” Impulse once again stopped. Scar looked out across the graveyard, making eye-contact with the purple ones that always followed him around. They crinkled in what Scar assumed was a smile. “He’s going to be busy for a while. Should be back within the next few months.”

The eyes seemed content with the choice of words, which was unfortunate since Scar was aiming for annoying but at least Impulse seemed confused. “I’m sorry?”

“Two months at most. Watcher things.” Impulse’s eyes widened more as Scar got in his car, closing his door quickly before Impulse could ask any more questions Scar didn’t have the answers or time for. “Text Tango for more job information!” Scar said loudly, turning on his engine so he couldn’t hear Impulse’s response. He already owned an explanation to Bdubs anyways, there was no way he was telling the story *twice*. It would take at least a day, and that was if Scar could stay on topic.

It wasn’t till he got on the freeway before he spoke again, eyes darting to his back seat where it was empty but wasn’t. “Get back safe.” He let himself whisper, the faint feeling of Grian’s hands against his appearing and disappearing faster than he could grab them. Honestly, predictable by this point in his life. There were more eyes as he refocused on the road.

Yeah, it was a long story.

.....

Joel had made a lot of bad choices in his life. He had a lot of time to think about those choices when he was dead. Was he still dead? Joel really didn’t know. He remembered Etho’s face, crumpled and devastated as he laughed about Jimmy pulling the gun on Scott. After that, not much. Speaking of Scott...

“Jimmy land the hit?”

Talking in the void was different, Joel had to admit. Him and Etho didn’t do it normally when they were traveling. The guy traveling with him wasn’t that much of a conversationalist either, but he talked more than Etho. Grian, or some form of Grian Joel didn’t want to look at too long, simply looked forward into darkness. “Headon. Not even a scream.”

“I taught him how to aim.”

“I doubt that.”

Joel snorted, another wave of exhaustion washing over him. It was like this with Grian. Joel didn't really know what was going on anymore. He was hoping Etho would be able to explain it to him eventually. Grian was his boss after all, Etho would meet up with them soon, right?

“We'll be there soon.”

Already?

Joel tried to ask a question, even turning to face Grian who looked almost conflicted about something, but found himself too tired to talk. “You're good to go to sleep Joel.” Grian finally said a few minutes later. “I'll...wake you up when we get there.”

He was struggling to keep his eyes open, slowing to a stop as he tried to hold on. There was something missing still, something that he needed to ask. Grian held onto his shoulders as Joel blinked up at him and his multiple sets of eyes. “I...I feel like I needed to tell Etho something. Is he around? Is he meeting up with us later?”

There was a flash of pain that crossed Grian's face. “Go to sleep Joel.” Grian repeated, something tense in his jaw as Joel finally felt his eyes close.

.....

*“Are you alone?”*

Joel felt the familiar feeling of soft grass under his hands, the smell of fresh wheat in the air as the memories came flooding back. Years and years of adventures, all ending like this?

*“Are you alone?”*

The voice was wet, clearly overwhelmed as Joel felt a bittersweet smile spread on his face.

“Yeah. I’m alone.”

Then Joel took a deep breath on lungs that shouldn’t work, sent a thank you and fuck you into the void where it wouldn’t be heard anyways, and opened his eyes.

.....

This wasn’t how Bdubs planned this night to go.

It wasn’t his fault, he swore! One moment he was trying and failing to convince Etho that he didn’t need to go back to Sneaky-E-Es for at least another few days, and suddenly he was throwing something called ender pearls on the ground and hurting his back while Etho continued to say that eventually a bug will come out.

“Where do these even come from man?” Bdubs finally asked, exasperated, holding the pearl in his right hand while standing slightly bent over like he had a stomach ache. In reality, Bdubs was *trying* to get Etho to go on an actual date, but the other man still hadn’t picked up his obvious attempts in hinting at the idea.

“A trade enderman secret, they would kill me if I told you.”

“I bet you jizz them out.”

Etho scoffed, amusement shining in his eyes as he threw a pearl at the ground in front of him. Bdubs watched his body lurch forward, eyes widening slightly as a purple bug crawled out of the area too, before burying itself into the ground below them. “What the-”

“And that is pest relocation!” Etho interrupted him, wrapping an arm around Bdubs shoulders and tucking him into his side with a grin on his face. The mask had been abandoned as soon as they got to the shop, sitting limp on the counter next to their chinese takeout that was now going cold.



“*That’s* pest relocation?!” Bdubs looked up, mouth slightly open as Etho let out a laugh. “You said that you thought I would be good at that! What part of me makes you think I would be good at *that* ?”

“The fact that you willingly threw ender pearls for twenty minutes in hopes you would get a single bug.”

“I hate you.” Bdubs immediately said deadpan, trying and failing to pull out of Etho’s hold. Was he that predictable to the other man that Etho could easily get the upper hand on him? That wouldn’t work. Bdubs quickly turned, wrapping his arms around Etho’s neck and stepping closer. Etho’s eyes were wide, like he hadn’t expected the movement as Bdubs smiled at him. “I’m far too pretty to be throwing weird teleportation jizz pearls around.”

“Not jizz pearls.” Etho weakly denied, still looking slightly confused at the turn of events as he rested his hands on Bdubs hips. “Just a trade secret, completely jerk-off free.” Bdubs rolled his eyes, stepping closer and sliding his fingers up into Etho’s bun to loosen it. Etho’s smile grew more genuine. *Finally* , maybe his boyfriend finally caught onto the idea that Bdubs was trying to romance here-

“Wanna move on to gardening?”

“Oh my god.” Bdubs groaned, letting his head hit Etho’s collarbone. Etho was laughing, which just confirmed the idea that he was actually the devil disguised as a very hot man sent from hell to make Bdubs life that much harder. “Have I told you recently that you’re the worst? I feel like I haven’t told you recently enough that you suck and I hate you.”

Etho just hummed, a quiet laugh still hiding in his voice as Bdubs glared up at him. “I’m pretty sure that’s not what you were saying a few hours ago.”

“A few hours ago I was a different man. I’ve seen horrors now.”

“Ah yes, endermite truly is the worst thing we’ve seen.”

“I can tell you’re being sarcastic, but I’m choosing to believe you’re being genuine for my own sanity.”

“Noted.”

Bdubs glare was getting hard to keep up as Etho smiled down at him, the carefree relaxed stance he was holding making Bdubs want to cry. He was relaxed, he was happy, and that's really all Bdubs wanted. So what if Etho was sucky at recognizing social cues? At least they were alone together, which was more than welcomed recently. Scar and Impulse had been constantly down the two of their throats, especially with Tango out of commission for the time being and Grian ‘away on business’. Etho looked slightly irritated when Impulse had told him, but hadn’t brought it up again. Bdubs wasn’t going to push.

Especially not now, as Etho’s bun fell completely out, hair immediately falling in his face and making Bdubs laugh. Etho slumped slightly as Bdubs pushed the hair back, using it as a reason to hold onto his face and place a soft kiss against his lips. Etho was quick to swoop back in, tilting Bdubs head to deepen the kiss.

Void, it was easy to forget everything wrong when it was just the two of them. But if Bdubs was being honest, how much more wrong could it get? He means, they survived the end of the world. Sure, that was also a problem. He could see the guilt on Etho’s face every time he thought Bdubs wasn’t looking. He could tell it was eating him alive that Joel didn’t make it. Hell, it was eating at Bdubs too, and he hated the guy. Cleo hadn’t been much help in that sense, though Bdubs did notice that Etho was going by the cafe more often after the funeral. It was a small thing, only the group of them attending, but two graves were dug and two bodies were buried.

Bdubs wasn’t sure if Etho was trying to hide his tears, but nobody mentioned it.

In fact, the one person he thought would be there wasn’t, but Jimmy also wasn’t someone Bdubs understood. He thought he did, but all this event proved was how much he didn’t know people as much as he thought he did.

In fact, this was still all he knew about Etho Slab:

He was Canadian. (From a different world.)

He likes spinach on his sandwiches. (like a weirdo)

His favorite color was green and he owned a lot of black shirts with varying degrees of sleeve length. (Like, a *lot* of them. Enough that Etho had claimed another closet in the guest bedroom.)

He wasn't human. He knew *so much* about magic and the void that Bdubs couldn't possibly comprehend. He was in less deep shit than before and maybe his friends weren't as bad as Bdubs previously thought.

But, even if Bdubs didn't *know* certain facts about Etho, he chose to believe he knew more about Etho.

Like the fact he had never once stopped washing their dishes after breakfast, no matter how late they were running. How Bdubs knew he was dealing with nightmares, since he woke up one night to Etho fixing a dripping pipe in the kitchen because it reminded him of a cell. How he loved Bdubs just as much as Bdubs loved him, even if neither of them had said it.

Scar had asked about that, actually. Bdubs didn't have an answer then, but wasn't it obvious? In every action, every breath they took? The fact that Etho was still breathing for him? A gasp escaped him as Etho tugged slightly at his hair, bringing him back to the present. "Lost you there for a moment, you good?" Etho asked against his lips, concern leaking into his voice as Bdubs leaned back in. "you okay B?" Etho asked again while pulling away.

"Just thinking about how I'm going to lock you in the basement when we get home for ruining our date." Bdubs lied, because there was no way he was going to admit to all the sappy stuff he was actually thinking about. Etho paused, letting him kiss him for a moment more before pulling completely away.

"I didn't know we were on a date."

“Oh my gods.”

Etho looked startled, glancing around the room as Bdubs laughed. “We’re on a date right now? I made you throw ender pearls at the ground for forty minutes and you thought that was an appropriate date activity?”

“Me?” Bdubs hit against his chest, offering a fake glare as Etho shrugged. “*Me?* I’m the one who suggested getting food and hanging out at home, you’re the one who decided it was “bring your boyfriend to work day!” How was I supposed to say no when you seemed excited to show my your stupid pearls-”

Etho covered his lips with his, a very effective way to shut him up if Bdubs was being honest, the kiss melting into something sweet as soon as Bdubs tried to deepen it. “Thank you. For coming tonight.” Etho whispered after he pulled away, knocking their foreheads together.

“Anything for you.” Bdubs responded immediately, watching Etho’s eyes soften. He still looked almost like he was on edge, which was reasonable, but it was much less than when Etho and him first met. Etho reached into his own pocket, hand wrapping around something as he glanced to the side. “Are you okay sweetheart?” Bdubs asked after a little while longer, enjoying that quiet space between them.

Etho shivered at the nickname, eyes refocusing on him with more intensity than Bdubs was ready for. “I…” Was Etho blushing? Bdubs felt a grin start to grow on his face as Etho looked down. “It’s pretty stupid actually.” Still, Etho pulled slightly away, grabbing Bdubs hand and placing a simple metal key in his palm. “I don’t have an apartment key. So, a key to this dump. If you want.”

A lump formed in his throat as he looked down at the key, then back at Etho’s embarrassed face, the back at the key. “You totally knew this was a date.” Bdubs managed to croak out, finally looking back at Etho who was still looking very embarrassed about the whole thing. Etho cracked a helpless smile though, shrugging and holding out his own key ring.

“I mean, I know I stole your keys, so I figured it was only fair-”

“You’re a sap and a half, you know that right?”

If it was possible, Etho flushed further, an actual frown falling on his face as Bdubs placed the key on his own set. “No one will believe you.”

“They totally will, I’m a very honest guy.” Etho shook his head as Bdubs wrapped his arms around him, burying his head into his chest. “Your stone cold killer attitude will be ruined.”

“Oh no, whatever will I do?”

“Once again, sarcastic, once again ignoring it.”

Etho laughed, resting his head on top of Bdubs.

Life was still hard, Bdubs knew that. Etho was probably going to have a nightmare tonight, something that would wake them up with him screaming about falling and needing to hold on. Scar would still be moody, now dealing with magic users fall out and the fact the world now knew that the two of them were hybrids themselves. Tango was out of commission for a while, Cleo wasn’t answering his phone calls. Impulse was still annoyingly in his circle and none of them knew what to do with Jimmy.

But it was better than before, and Bdubs stood by that. It was a new start, if Bdubs was being honest. Maybe he would take a step back from politics, actually finish his house now that he had free-labor in the form of a boyfriend. Maybe he would take Etho’s suggestion and try out this whole barely legal business thing. Maybe he would take up gardening again.

In any case, Bdubs was happy. He was overwhelmingly happy that he and Etho were now sitting on the ground of a glass factory, eating lukewarm chinese food together as Etho talked about more fun worlds he had fallen into. He was content in the way their story worked out, even though it was never going to be fully over. Bdubs wasn’t stupid enough to think that everything would be fine now that Scott was dead, but it was enough that they were both alive and both still on this planet.

He was content.

Etho was gesturing around with his chopsticks, talking almost shakily like he couldn't contain how crazy this story was as Bdubs sat straight up.

He was almost content.

“Can I have your number?”

Etho paused, chopsticks in the air before letting out a carefree laugh and pulling out his comm.

Yeah, now he was happy.

## Chapter End Notes

uhhh...fun fact about this fic time? The title was going to be something much more dramatic and honestly more fitting for the story but I changed it last second because I thought the fic was going to be 20k max meet-ugly that a total of 100 people would see. I was so wrong.

I'm overwhelmed by the support people have had for this fic and universe, and I just want to say thank you to everyone who's made art or commented or kudos or simply read the fic, because this was way more than I thought would happen when I posted the first chapter. I totally forgot to answer comments on the last chapter so I apologize, but I promise I have read each and everyone and I'm so grateful for each of them.

As for wrap up...future fics? I will still be writing on Anon. I feel the most comfortable here, so for the time being it is where I will stay. That being said the prequel and one shot will be added to a series (Eventually) so you will be able to find it linked through this fic if you want to read more about this universe. The prequel does circle around Scar and Grian, and the one shot is the wrap up for Martyn, Ren and Cleo, so if you were hoping for more central Ethubs...I'm sorry? Future plans outside of this universe include a Decked Out fic since I'm literally obsessed with it at the moment, and I'm

playing with a superhero AU that may or may not become an actual idea instead of just soup in my brain. Hopefully I'll see some of you guys on those fics too! (If you like Ethubs I'm willing to bet I will, I can not escape they are in my walls forcing me to write them into more gay scenarios)

Once again, thank you for the art and the support, I still can't wrap my head around it all. This was such a good intro into the fandom. Not a bad way to start my birthday lmao

## End Notes

I saw the current fake dating tags (23 from when I started this) and thought "yeah I could do another one." Idk if this will stick but I'm enjoying writing it, which is more than I can say for my public profiles and fandoms. If you liked it, please let me know, I thrive off of validation and kudos and comments lol

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