

devil town is colder in the summertime

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devil town is colder in the summertime

by [BananasofThorns](#)

Summary

“Sorry, say that again?” Tango asks, leaning across the table to better scrutinize Bdubs. “Your village is what?”

Bdubs rolls his eyes. “Slowly getting overtaken by a corrupted forest! That’s why I left! If my life force is, like, tied to the village, I didn’t want to also get...possessed, or whatever! I don’t know, I never asked what exactly was wrong with the forest, I just know it’s weird and bad and I promised I’d try to figure out how to solve it!”

Team BEST returns to the village Bdubs grew up in to investigate the forest's corruption. Unfortunately for them, it is far more dangerous than Bdubs remembered.

Notes

[title from Devil Town - Cavetown]

heyyy besties! I have been working on this fic for like a month and it is FINALLY done and I'm so happy with how it turned out. I hope y'all enjoy! please heed the tags, though

also! this is a dnd au. see the series for more info, but here's a quick rundown:

Bdubs: kalashtar, circle of dreams druid w/ chronurgy wizard elements

Etho: drow, gloom stalker ranger

Skizz: half-orc/half-tiefling, psi warrior fighter

Tango: fire genasi, rogue

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

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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

“Sorry, say that again?” Tango asks, leaning across the table to better scrutinize Bdubs. “Your village is what?”

Bdubs rolls his eyes. “Slowly getting overtaken by a corrupted forest! That’s why I left! If my life force is, like, tied to the village, I didn’t want to also get...possessed, or whatever! I don’t know, I never *asked* what exactly was wrong with the forest, I just know it’s weird and bad and I promised I’d try to figure out how to solve it!”

“‘Life force’?” Skizz repeats under his breath. “Dude, what?”

“I’m made from the dreams of everyone in the village, kind of,” Bdubs explains.

Tango pauses. He and Skizz exchange a perplexed look. That explains a few things, he thinks? But also—

“... *what?*”

“That’s why I have to sleep so much, my magic is tied to my dreams. Or, well, their dreams, I guess. I don’t know, but I’m still here, so!” He swallows, smile dimming. “They’re...it’s probably fine! Just fine. But still, I promised I’d try to fix it, so. We have to go back.”

“Shouldn’t you figure out what’s wrong with it first, though?” Tango points out.

“Well...I don’t exactly remember, okay! That’s why I have to go back! I left, uh—” he glances at Etho. “How long ago did we meet?”

Etho shrugs. “I don’t know. A few years? Five years? It’s hard to keep track, you know.”

“I left over five years ago,” Bdubs concludes. “And the corruption has probably...spread, a lot, or changed. I’m not really sure! But I want to go back and see how everything is before we figure out how to try and fix it.”

“...right, okay, I guess that makes sense,” Tango says slowly. “How far away is it? Like, is this a two-day sort of trip, or—?”

“Oh, it’s actually not that far! We should be able to make it there in like a day and a half, I think. It’ll be faster if we get horses, but the forest might be too thick, we’d have to leave them outside.” Bdubs makes a face. “They’d be fine, though. Probably.”

“And your village is *in* the forest?”

“Yeah, a clearing. The place is real dense, it was really easy to get lost if you didn’t know where you were going.”

Tango makes a face. “Well, that seems...inconvenient.”

“Oh, it was!” Bdubs pauses. “...You guys *are* going with me, right?”

Etho blinks. “Yeah, of course.”

Skizz nods. “What he said! Obviously we’re gonna help you, dude, it’s your home!”

Bdubs smiles, silver eyes shining. The pale gold freckles on his face seem to glow brighter.

“Oh, thanks, guys! Seriously, thank you.”

Tango reaches over to gently shake his shoulder. “Yeah, man, of course. We’re a team, it’s what we do.”

“Team BEST!” Skizz grins.

“Exactly. So, we leave tomorrow, then? We get anything we need today - like healing potions, probably, I think we’re still out - do we have money for that? We should, right?”

Etho nods. “Yeah, we do.”

“Okay, great! We spend the rest of the day preparing, and then we leave tomorrow morning? Does that sound good?” Tango turns to Bdubs. “Really, this is up to you. I mean, it’s your mission.”

“No, no, that sounds perfect! We leave tomorrow!”

“Alright! Sounds like a plan, then. Let’s go!”

+++

“Wow, you were not kidding about the corruption, huh?” Tango asks, glancing around the forest.

They’re barely an hour in and already, the trees and forest flora are starting to get...weird. Trunks and stems have started to become bleached, drained of their color until they’re an off-white that reminds Tango of bones, with smudges of bluish-grey in their shadows. Meanwhile, the leaves are bleeding from green to dark teal, speckled with bright cyan and cream. Odd plants that he’s never seen before are starting to pop up between the underbrush; the deeper they get into the forest, the more common they become. Fungi are also far more prevalent than they should be, he thinks, but then again, he doesn’t know much about nature.

The ground alternatively squelches or sounds like they’re walking on something solid and porous, and Tango doesn’t know which is worse.

“Things have gotten...a *lot* worse than the last time I was here,” Bdubs murmurs, picking at a ridge on his rough-hewn quarterstaff. “It used to take *way* longer until you’d reach an area that was this covered. We’ve only been here for, like, forty minutes!”

“You’re sure it’s *safe*?” Skizz asks.

When Tango glances back at him, his hand is resting on the hilt of his sword.

Bdubs scoffs. “No, of course not! That’s why I left, that’s why I need to find a cure! What, you think the forest got corrupted for *fun*?”

“I had a question about that, actually,” Etho interrupts. “This place...kind of reminds me of where I grew up.”

Bdubs spins to stare at him. “You grew up in the forest, too?! Why didn’t you ever say something?!”

“No, no, I didn’t grow up in the forest, I grew up way underground. It’s...kind of weird, to see stuff

like this so far up,” he muses.

“...huh,” Tango says. “But you know what this is, then?”

Etho shrugs. “I mean, kind of? We have mushrooms like this, I think, but a lot bigger. And these things.”

He nudges one of the weird plants with his boot. It shivers and then lets out a high-pitched, breathy shriek. Tango jumps.

“Shit, dude, give us a warning!” Skizz cries.

“Sorry,” Etho chuckles. “Yeah, they’re called shriekers, for, uh, pretty obvious reasons. You had to be really careful around them or they’d warn monsters you were there.”

“That’s how you’re so damn stealthy!” Tango exclaims. “It explains so much!”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

The conversation falls flat. Around them, the forest is eerily quiet; there aren’t even animal sounds, just occasional, distant chittering from the shriekers. Tango isn’t sure he wants to know what’s activating them.

They continue on.

+++

The deeper into the forest they get, the more on-edge Bdubs feels. By now, there should be *some* hints of civilization - paths worn through the underbrush, markers carved in the trees - but there’s just...corruption. It’s spread far more than he expected; only by his instinctual knowledge of the village’s location does he know that they’re going the right way. He can barely see the sky through the thick, dark leaves of the corrupted trees.

Everything looks like home but so, so foreign at the same time. He grips his quarterstaff tighter.

“We should be getting close,” he says. Is it just him, or does the forest feel colder, now? “I recognize this area.”

He doesn’t. Etho glances at him and he pretends to not see the worried crease between his brows. They continue walking in silence.

It’s late afternoon by the time the trees start to thin. Bdubs slumps, leaning a little heavier on his quarterstaff than he usually does; for a moment, he’d been worried that his instincts were wrong, and he’d led them all astray. But he thinks he recognizes this clearing, even if something suddenly, instinctually feels *wrong*.

A frozen feeling of dread suddenly curls around his ribs, suffocating. He shakes his head. There should be...something, he thinks, a familiar buzz in the back of his head that was always there when he was at home. There’s nothing. It’s quiet and empty, except for the feeling of eyes on the back of his neck and the unnatural coldness settling in his chest.

“You alright?” Etho asks softly.

Bdubs waves him off. “Yeah, of course! I—”

He trails off as the large clearing the village had been nestled in comes into full view. For a

moment, he thinks they've ended up at the wrong place after all; he doesn't see any buildings at first, just towering, corrupted trees and crawling plants. Then he notices the crumbling stone foundations and the more open areas where not as many things have grown, and he—

He stumbles, and Etho has to catch him, but he barely notices. It's— there's nothing *there*. There's no chimney smoke, no joyous chatter, no life, there's just...forest, and corruption, and the long-abandoned ruins of his home. He sinks to his knees.

“Oh, Bdubs,” Etho murmurs as Skizz and Tango come up beside them. “Buddy, I'm so sorry.”

“It's all gone,” Bdubs breathes. “How is it all gone?! I was only gone for a few years! I mean, I thought—”

He presses his hand to the ground, searching desperately for the familiar feeling of the forest. *Come on, you jerk, talk to me, he thinks. Tell me how long it's been. Please!*

All that answers him is cold, echoing emptiness. *A long time, he concludes. It's been a long time.*

Abruptly, he stands, jaw set. The others trail after him, confused, as he marches into the ruins, crushing the corrupted plants beneath his boots. Now that he knows what he's looking at, he can see where buildings lined the paths, converging on the hearth at the village's center. It's long gone out, of course, but nothing has grown over the loose ring of stone. He squeezes a fistful of cold ash in his hand and listens to the last remnants of his village; their memories and dreams are nearly faded, now, no more than distant birdsong, but he hears them nonetheless.

Laughter that slowly fades, turning nervous and fearful— the slow disappearance of animals, the rumbling of stomachs— reports of the spreading corruption, with no ideas on how to halt its tracks— heartbeats fading and dying and flickering out— creaking roots and crumbling stone— there is no one left to bury them— the forest is quick to take hold—

He drops the ash with a gasp and stumbles back. Multiple pairs of hands catch him but quickly let go when he's regained his balance.

“Bdubs?!” Skizz cries.

“What the hell was that?” Tango adds. “I've never seen you do anything like that before!”

“They all died,” Bdubs murmurs. “They all— fuck you!” he screams, glaring up at the looming forest. “You stupid— I hope you burn. I hope your ashes don't even leave a stupid *memory*.”

He doesn't know if anything hears him. He finds that he doesn't particularly care and pointedly ignores the disturbed looks Tango and Skizz are giving him. Even Etho looks startled.

Bdubs shakes his head. The sun is setting, and they've been walking all day and—

“We can rest in one of the— the ruins. Maybe,” he suggests, spinning on his heel and marching away, grabbing his fallen quarterstaff as he goes.

The others follow without a word. He brushes the rest of the ash off onto the soft moss of his cloak.

His old house, miraculously, is one of the least overgrown ruins. Half the roof is still intact, though he's not sure how structurally stable it actually is, and while the walls are covered in vines and overgrowth, they look sturdy. The floor is easy enough to clear and he slumps down on the ground where his bed used to be, ignoring how his skin is still crawling from the village's eerie,

overgrown emptiness.

“...are you okay?” Tango asks tentatively, before making a face. “No, sorry, that’s a stupid question.”

Bdubs shrugs. “It’s— you know! Well, you probably don’t, actually.”

He frowns. The silence hangs awkwardly as they all wait for him to continue; none of them know how to handle this, he thinks.

“We gotta figure out...stuff, tomorrow,” he finally says. “Like, if we can figure out where the root of the corruption is, then we can stop it! Easy!”

“...right,” Tango agrees slowly. “Easy, yep.”

Skizz grins. “I mean, it sounds simple when you say it like that!”

Etho chuckles. Bdubs rolls his eyes.

“Hey! I’m doing my best!”

His voice cracks on the last word. Silently, Tango hands him one of their better rations bars. Skizz shuffles over to wrap an arm around his shoulders.

“Aw, it’s okay, buddy. We’ll figure it out, it’s what we do!”

Etho offers him a teasing smile that, somehow, manages to be reassuring. “Yeah, we’re pretty good most of the time.”

“Thanks, guys,” Bdubs mumbles through a mouthful of food. He swallows. “Hey, I can take first watch tonight.”

“Sorry, what? Say that again?”

“Woah, what?”

“Are you serious?”

Bdubs glares. “Yes! I just need to think about things, okay? And I’m not— it feels weird trying to sleep here. I just need to figure some things out, first, alright? I’ll go to sleep when Etho takes over, don’t worry!”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Etho asks lightly, but Bdubs recognizes the undercurrent of worry in his voice. “You need to get your beauty sleep, Bdubs.”

“I will!”

“...well, okay,” Tango concedes, still with a concerned tilt to his lips. “I mean, you know this place the best, so. If you think it’s a good idea, then I trust you.”

Skizz nods. Bdubs smiles at all of them.

“I’ll make good decisions, I promise!”

“We’ll hold you to that,” Skizz jokes.

As the sun sets over the forest, they finish their dinner with more subdued chatter than usual, but it's enough to somewhat take Bdubs's mind off of everything. Eventually, their talk fades. Skizz and Tango move to one side of the room and lay their bedrolls out at the base of one of the more intact walls. Bdubs quietly urges the vines on the stone to grow a little stronger, just in case. He doesn't want to chance the roof falling in on them.

Etho stops beside him on his way to the other side of the open room. "See you soon, Bdubs," he murmurs, quiet enough to not break the still silence that's fallen completely over the area.

Bdubs smiles up at him with as much of his normal enthusiasm as he can muster. "Yep, see you soon!"

Etho scrutinizes him for a second longer before taking his place in the corner. He's still sitting up against the wall, but his eyes drift shut and his breathing slows as he enters his trance.

Soon enough, it's just Bdubs. Just him and the forest and the stars.

+++

It doesn't take long for him to give up on staying in the ruins of his old house; he can keep watch just as well, if not better, if he isn't confined to one spot, he reasons. Quarterstaff in hand, he tiptoes outside, going as far around Etho as he can in hopes that he won't wake up. His ears twitch as Bdubs passes, but other than that, he doesn't stir.

The house hadn't been claustrophobic by any means - nearly the opposite, in fact, with its broken walls and caved-in roof - but once outside, he can suddenly breathe easier.

He takes a deep breath, then frowns. The forest is...silent and still, almost deathly so. There are no distant calls of wildlife. Not even a breeze rustles through the leaves; the only sound is the soft, haunting shrieks and chitters from the plants Etho had pointed out. There is no indication as to what sets them off. Bdubs shivers, drawing his cloak tighter around himself. The forest does not feel like home.

He blinks and finds himself back at the communal hearth. There are mushrooms growing between the cracks in the stone. He doesn't think that they were there before. Frowning, he reaches out and nudges the closest one with the end of his staff.

It shudders, spots lighting up teal. *Double?* voices whisper in the back of his head. He jumps, barely managing to muffle a scream. They sound so achingly familiar. *Double, is that you?*

"What?" he hisses. "Yes, that's me. Who are you?" He pauses, then frowns. "And don't call me that!"

The mushroom's spots light up again, then flicker out. A few feet away, another one lights up, and then another, and then another; Bdubs spins and watches the trail jump its way to one of the buildings lining the village's center. The light climbs up a thick cluster of vines on the crumbling wall. He stares, heart pounding. The vines twitch and slowly pull away from the stone brick, contorting into the shape of a human. It steps forward. He stumbles back, tripping over the rocks at his feet; ash swirls into the air as he slams his quarterstaff down in the cold hearth to catch his balance.

Where are you going? the voices laugh. One of them is louder than the others. It sounds like his brother. *B, it's me!*

Inside the vine creature's mouth, a cluster of round-petalled flowers glows with the voices echoing

in Bdubs's head. They illuminate the creature's face, sculpted out of slowly moving vines and flowers and leaves and fungi. It looks exactly like Bdubs does. It looks exactly like Pungence.

"What in the world," Bdubs murmurs, horrified.

Pungence - it's not him, he reminds himself, Pungence was *human* - steps forward. There's something unearthly about the way the plants move, doing their best approximation of a sentient being even as mushrooms grow through where the eye sockets should be. The creature smiles, and it is warm and familiar, and it should not be.

You came back! Pungence's voice cries, echoed by the indecipherable chorus that had first spoken. *Just like you promised.* The voices turn dark, bitter. The creature's smile drops, flowers wilting in its mouth and between the vines of its chest.

You said you'd be back soon, Double, they hiss. The creature shambles towards him, form unravelling until it dissolves into vines and flowers and rot. Pungence's voice fades into the clamor. *You said you'd find a cure! You were supposed to protect us!*

Bdubs scrambles away from the still-twitching plants, scattering ash from the hearth as he goes. A sudden wind picks it up, swirling the ash away into the dark forest. It tugs at his cloak as it goes, like it's urging him along. Heart pounding, he follows blindly. What else is there to do?

You could help them still, the voices whisper; he frowns.

"They're— you're dead! You're dead and gone. I can't fix that!"

Oh, but you could. If you had more power - more time - you could do anything. We can help you. Just...give.. in, the forest pushes, voices rising. He can barely see where he's going; the only things leading him are the wind at his back, the plants tugging at his clothes, and the fungi and flowers lighting up electric blue in time with his heartbeat.

Finally, he stumbles to his knees, quarterstaff falling to the side as he catches himself. His hands dig into the cold, soft ground and flowered vines immediately begin to weave over his fingers and up his wrists. The voices of the forest echo in his head— *you can still save them, we can help you if you just give in GIVE IN GIVE IN—*

He screams. The sound tears itself free from his ribs, scraping the walls of his throat and bounding over his tongue to escape. His nails sharpen, fingertips blackening. Newly grown fangs poke his lips when he bares his teeth. Darkness, sudden and suffocating, blankets the forest. He tears his hands free, clawing at the plants around him. Their thorns prick his skin.

We can help, the forest murmurs again. He inhales shakily.

Slowly, he stands. As quickly as it had come, the darkness recedes. The claws and fangs disappear; the vines around his wrists regrow their flowers. A breeze twists its way through the trees, ruffling his hair.

When he opens his eyes, they are bright, shining teal. The freckles on his face darken to match, glowing in time with his heartbeat.

+++

Etho wakes from his trance to find Bdubs gone. Frowning, he pushes himself to his feet and stretches. There's no sign of Bdubs inside the small, open room; if he didn't know better, he'd think that Bdubs had never been there at all.

“Bdubs?” he calls softly. “Where’d you go, man?”

He waits. After a minute without a response, he slings his bow and quiver over his shoulder and double-checks that his scabbard is in place. With a glance at Tango and Skizz, he steps out into the night.

There’s no indication of which way Bdubs went but Etho finds himself instinctively drawn north, through the winding village streets. The empty buildings, overrun with plants corrupted by sculk - something Etho didn’t know could even exist on the surface - are unsettling; the forest is near-silent and he finds himself twitching towards every sound, one hand on the pommel of his sword.

He walks past the abandoned hearth and pauses. There are plants strewn across the path that hadn’t been there previously, he thinks. Warily, he goes around them, boots silent as he steps up onto the stones surrounding the hearth. The ash is scattered like someone had run through it. *Aha*, he thinks. The trail is faint and gets harder to see the further from the hearth it goes, but it leads the same way his instincts have been drawing him.

He follows.

Deeper and deeper into the forest, he follows. The path fades, but that tug in his chest, just behind his heart, leads him on. His footsteps are silent; the only sounds in the entire forest are the soft, grating sighs of the sculk plants. On-edge and wary, he walks on.

Eventually, he comes across a small clearing. The plants are thicker here, the sculk brighter and harder to avoid, but Etho’s spent years running around the deep dark. He approaches silently and pauses just before the trees open. On the other side of the clearing, Bdubs is perched on a tree, crouched in the junction between the thick trunk and one of its scraggly, sturdy branches.

His eyes, glowing the same teal as the mushrooms, snap open and find Etho instantly. He grins; something about the way his mouth twists is off, but Etho can’t place his finger on what. He gives up on being stealthy - clearly, Bdubs noticed him, somehow - and steps forward tentatively until he’s at the base of the tree.

“Hey, Bdubs.”

“Etho!”

His voice sounds— wrong. It’s like it’s echoing, but they’re in the middle of a forest. Etho frowns. Now that he’s closer, he can see sculk mushrooms and corrupted flowers poking between Bdubs’s fingers. There are dark, thorny vines wrapped around his wrists and ankles. He doesn’t seem to notice.

“I think something’s wrong,” Etho starts carefully.

“No, no, it’s fine!” Bdubs insists. “You’re here! I knew you’d follow.”

Etho breathes out a sigh of humorless laughter. “Yeah. I, uh, woke up and you were gone, so I went looking for you. Had to make sure you were safe, you know. Fragile flower,” he tries to tease. The words fall flat.

Bdubs hums. “Well, you found me!”

“Yes, I did.”

He glances around. The boughs of the trees surrounding them seem to bend forward, obscuring the

sky so that it and the branches are near-indistinguishable. Everything is lit in a soft, dream-like glow from the sculk. Is it spreading? It looks like it's spreading, but Etho isn't sure.

He jumps when a hand lands on his shoulder. Slowly, he drags his eyes back to Bdubs's face.

“What?”

“Stop thinkin' so hard! I can see you worrying from here, Etho. Look, I told you, I'm fine!”

Bdubs spreads his arms as if to demonstrate. There are more mushrooms and flowers growing in his moss cloak. Those *definitely* weren't there before. Another vine curls around his wrist. Etho frowns.

“...hey, what—”

He trails off. *It's fine*, the forest echoes. Despite himself, he jumps. Bdubs drops his hand back onto his shoulder. His fingers are cold even through Etho's jacket.

It's okay, Etho, the forest's voices continue, a low hum in the back of his mind. *You can join us. Why bother to fight? You don't want to hurt him. You know he wouldn't hurt you. It's okay.*

Etho hesitates. “I mean—”

“Oh, come on, Etho,” Bdubs says softly.

When Etho looks up, he's smiling, quiet and teasing. The corruption glowing in his body subtly pulses in time with the rhythm he's tapping on Etho's shoulder.

It doesn't take more than a heartbeat to give in.

Chapter End Notes

List of spells/abilities used:

- Trance (elf feature)
- [Primal Savagery](#)

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

:D

WARNINGS FOR THIS CHAPTER:

- Lots of body horror. Most of it is mild, but if you want to skip the worst of it, skip from when Bdubs says "Sorry, Etho!" to when it says "For an instant, everything is silent."

- Injury and blood, not too graphic beyond what is in what's mentioned above

enjoy!

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

Skizz wakes up to something cold and sharp pressing against his throat. His eyes snap open. Tango is crouched above him, face stony; his eyes are glowing the same unnatural teal as the corrupted plants in the forest. His knuckles are white around the hilt of his knife. *Oh, shit*, Skizz thinks.

"Tango," he says, quietly but urgently. "Tango, it's me, dude."

Tango's arm twitches; the blade jerks away before immediately returning, this time with a bit more pressure. Skizz stills, barely daring to breathe.

Very slowly and carefully, he reaches out with his mind and wraps his powers around the knife. A thin field of purple-blue shimmers into existence around the blade. Tango's grip tightens, his face contorting into a snarl. Skizz narrows his eyes. The forcefield around the knife sparks before it tears free from Tango's grasp hard enough to embed into the wall across the room. Skizz gasps, dropping his concentration. Before Tango can react, he reaches up and grabs his wrists, then pushes him to the side so he can sit up.

Tango doesn't try to pull away, but his hands begin to heat up and flames start to flicker to life in his hair. Skizz rolls his eyes and doesn't let go.

"Come on, dude, you know you can't burn me."

Tango growls. The light in his eyes flares, flashing gold-red before bleeding back to teal, and he jerks.

"Let me— *go*—" he chokes. "Stop—"

Suddenly, he stills. The veins around his eyes briefly glow electric blue. With supernatural strength, he twists free from Skizz's hold. Another knife appears in his hand with a flick of his wrist; Skizz barely manages to roll out of the way of the strike. He and Tango stand at the same time.

"Tango, snap out of it, dude!" he shouts, an edge of warning to his voice.

Tango ignores him and charges forward. His movements are wild, almost reckless, and it isn't hard

for Skizz to dodge the attack, catch his wrist, and twist the knife away. He pushes Tango against the wall, hard enough to jostle him but not enough to do any real damage, and holds him there.

“Snap. Out. Of. It,” he growls, pressing his forearm to Tango’s throat. “It’s *me*. Come on, man. You gotta wake up.”

“I’m— *get out*,” Tango snarls, with voices that aren’t his own clawing their way out of his throat.

Skizz tenses. Beneath his arm, Tango jerks and then stills, squeezing his eye shut. His jaw twitches. The hand Skizz is holding spasms; with the other, Tango reaches up to hold his temple, digging his fingers into his skull. Skizz waits, barely daring to breathe. *Come on, Tango*, he thinks. *Come on. Fight it.*

Abruptly, Tango slumps, legs giving out. Skizz lowers them both to the ground, heart pounding. Warily, he releases his bruising grip and gently grabs Tango’s shoulders to pull him back. For one terrible, heart-dropping moment, he thinks Tango is unconscious; the only thing that keeps him from panicking completely is the fact that he can see Tango’s chest rising and falling. Then he tips his head back, eyes blinking open slowly, and Skizz lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. Tango’s eyes are their normal red.

“Oh, fuck,” he groans. “What the hell just—”

Skizz crushes him into a hug. He yelps, then returns the gesture almost as tight. After a second, Skizz pulls back and points at him threateningly.

“Never do that again, okay?! I can’t take it, that was terrifying!”

“I don’t even know what happened! I just— I woke up, and there were these voices talking to me - gods, my *head*,” he mutters with a wince. “Jeez. Anyway, I had a really weird dream about the forest and then I woke up and these voices in my brain were talking to me, and then they tried to make me kill you— I don’t know! It was terrible! I hated that!”

“Your eyes were glowing the same color as those plants Etho showed us,” Skizz says. “Do you think—”

He cuts himself off with a frown and looks around. It’s barely sunrise; the cloudy sky is grey with the barest beginnings of sunrise. The house itself is empty and around them, the village and forest are silent. Dread settles in his lungs. *Oh, no.*

“Hey, Tango,” he says slowly, “do you know where Etho and Bdubs went?”

“I— are they not here? They’re not here.” Tango inhales and then exhales very slowly. “...Okay. That’s— okay. Maybe they just went for a walk!” he suggests, though he clearly doesn’t believe it himself.

“A walk? With the sun barely up? After Bdubs took first watch? Yeah, no. Something’s up.”

“It’s this stupid forest,” Tango mutters, looking around. “I don’t know what it is, but it’s like— alive, or something.” Skizz snorts. “Oh, shut up, you know what I mean! I’m willing to bet it’s what was talking to me in my dream, or whatever.”

He jumps to his feet, crossing the room in a few quick strides to grab his knife from the wall. Skizz stands and hands him the other one when he returns. With a nod, he tucks them both into their sheathes.

“We need to find them,” he says, sliding his bracers back on.

Skizz reaches for his own breastplate. “How, dude? They could’ve gone anywhere!”

“I mean—”

There’s a sudden cracking sound and Skizz looks up just in time to see a jagged dagger of ice flying towards them. He flings his hand up and a shimmering purple-blue forcefield flashes into existence. Both it and the dagger shatter upon impact; Skizz winces as shards of ice cut his face and arms where his armor doesn’t cover. Beside him, Tango swears quietly. Steam hisses off of his body where the ice had impacted.

Before either of them can react, two arrows whiz past their heads, narrowly missing them both. With narrowed eyes, Skizz traces back the path of the projectiles. Through the half-crumbled wall, he can see Bdubs and Etho at the edge of the forest. He swallows, reaching back to nudge Tango.

“Well, shit,” Tango says, which sums it up pretty nicely.

Bdubs and Etho’s eyes are both glowing teal, obvious even at a distance. Half of the moss on Bdubs’s cloak has turned dark, speckled with spots that glow like quiet starlight. Vines with electric blue flowers wrap up his arms; more of the buds nestle in his hair almost like a crown. Mushrooms grow from his shoulders and the gnarled wood of his quarterstaff. Beside him, Etho’s already pale skin has taken on a greyish-blue tinge that Skizz hopes is only the dull morning sunlight. Vines and flowers and mushrooms and moss are similarly sprouting from his body, but to a lesser extent; most of the growth is on his shoulders and in his hair.

He notches another arrow and fires. Skizz isn’t fast enough to block it this time and it pierces into a chink his armor; it doesn’t go deep enough to do much damage, but the force of the impact makes him stumble. As soon as the arrow hits, it shatters, sending shrapnel at both him and Tango.

“Would you stop with that?!” Tango cries.

Brushing the splinters off, he slides on his brass knuckles and rushes forward, deftly clambering through the large hole on the cottage’s wall. As he runs, flame starts to curl around his hands. He dodges another two arrows from Etho and then he’s right in front of him, so fast that he doesn’t have time to trade his bow for his sword.

“Hi!” Tango grins, before punching him directly in the face.

Etho staggers back, one of the edges of his mask burnt away. The skin on his cheekbone is burned and blistered. As he reaches for his sword, Skizz shakes himself and heads towards the fight. He doesn’t draw his own weapon.

Bdubs intercepts him, face unsettlingly emotionless. Vines weave between his fingers where he’s holding his quarterstaff; when he swings it towards Skizz, the plants reach out with the attack. Skizz bats them away. He feints a punch at Bdubs’s face and uses the distraction to sweep his legs out from beneath him, hoping that maybe the hits will knock some sense into him.

Instead, he hits the ground hard and then rolls into a crouch, face contorted into a snarl. His free hand digs into the dirt and corrupted plant matter as he slams his quarterstaff into the ground. A sudden tremor rumbles through the earth, strong enough to throw Skizz off his feet, though he rights himself quickly, wincing at the new bruises on his knees and elbows. A few yards away, Etho and Tango are similarly thrown, but neither of them does more than waver in their footing for a moment.

Etho recovers first and darts forward with two strikes; Tango ducks beneath the first one but the second carves a deep line in his arm as he turns away. He grimaces.

Skizz's attention is drawn away again when Bdubs's quarterstaff cracks against his side with a sharp clang. It doesn't do much more than jar him, but the vines on the staff snake beneath Skizz's chestplate, digging thorns into his chest. He tears them out, clenching his jaw against a shout of pain as they leave gashes in his chest and cut into his palms.

Dropping the vines, he rushes forward. Bdubs braces himself. This time, Skizz is ready; he dodges both Bdubs's strikes and the supernaturally alive vines and easily breaks through Bdubs's guard. He pulls the staff away and tosses it off into the forest, far out of reach. Bdubs steps back and Skizz grins.

"Not so tough now, huh?" he taunts.

Bdubs just laughs. The sound is cut off when Skizz elbows him in the face, sending him stumbling back and clutching his jaw. Now that he doesn't have a weapon, it's easy for Skizz to get the upper hand. Bdubs is fast, too quick for Skizz to get a good grip on him, but as long as Skizz keeps him defensive and stops him from casting, he's not a threat.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Tango sweep Etho's legs out from beneath him. Tango pins him before he can get up and pulls the brass knuckles off of one of his fists; *good*, Skizz thinks. They don't want to *kill* their friends, even if Bdubs and Etho don't seem to share that same principle.

"Wake up," Tango breathes, punctuating the statement with a punch to Etho's face. It looks like he's pulling the strikes, at least, and his hand is no longer on fire. Small mercies. "Wake up. Wake up. Wake up."

Etho's hand snaps up and catches his wrist before the last punch can hit. "Dude," he groans. "My head, come on!"

Tango pulls himself free. "Are you back with us?"

"I think so."

"...okay. You better not stab me again," he threatens, standing and holding out a hand to pull Etho to his feet.

Etho laughs. His face is bloodied and bruised in addition to the burns, but his eyes are back to normal.

"Etho!" Bdubs shouts.

YOU PROMISED, the forest roars with him, loud enough to send a spike of pain through Skizz's head. *You said you wouldn't hurt us*, its voices - countless and unrecognizable, clambering over each other into a terrible cacophony - continue.

Etho's face shutters, even more unreadable than usual beneath his burnt mask. "I didn't promise you anything," he shoots back.

The forest and Bdubs respond with a wordless scream. Skizz spins, too slow, too distracted, and only catches a glimpse of Bdubs dragging a clawed hand up through the air before the ground splits with a heavy tremor. It throws Skizz back and he hits the ground hard, rolling until he bumps against the wall of the house they'd slept in. He scrambles to his feet, shaking off the pain from the

earthquake as large, dark vines erupt from the earth. Dirt and rocks rain down around him. The vines blanket the new space between Bdubs and the rest of them, slowly slithering over each other like a massive, writhing net.

Smaller, more tightly woven vines rise to take the place of Bdubs's quarterstaff. He doesn't react when thin tendrils of the plants wrap around his fingers, tying them to the staff. More flowers and mushrooms sprout around his wrist.

Tango, from the far side of the vines, swears. "Are you kidding me?"

He slides his brass knuckles back on.

"It's hurting him," Etho says quietly. "We have to get him out of there."

"How?!"

"...I haven't figured that part out yet. Hey, punching me in the face worked, maybe—"

"How are we going to *get to him*, Etho?" Tango interrupts.

Skizz tunes them out to duck into the house and quickly grab his sword. He doesn't want to use it, but...just in case. It'll be good against the vines, at least.

He steps back outside just in time to see Etho carefully step into the vine-covered terrain.

"Dude!"

Tango startles. "Wh— Etho!"

Etho doesn't seem to have any issues moving through the plants and rocks, even though Skizz counts at least three different times he should fall and doesn't. He makes it halfway to Bdubs before Skizz realizes that he and Tango should maybe back him up.

"C'mon, let's go!" he calls over to Tango, who looks at him like he's crazy before shrugging and stepping in, muttering something that Skizz can't hear. He assumes it's insulting.

Navigating the writhing vines is significantly harder than Etho made it seem. Skizz slowly slashes his way through, doing his best to dodge the plants reaching for him. Tango takes a more direct approach; with a soft roar, a wave of flame unfurls from his outstretched hands. He rushes through the newly open path, but just before he can jump free, a darker, more sharply thorned vine bursts from the earth. It wraps around his legs and drags him down. He muffles a scream behind his teeth.

"Oh, you jerk-face!"

Metal flashes as he reaches for one of his knives; the blade lights aflame but even then, Skizz isn't sure how much it can do against a vine that thick. Slowly, he starts making his way over. As he does, Etho makes his way out of the plant-covered terrain, slashing at the last few that try to curl around his ankles. He hurries towards Bdubs.

"Come on, time to wake up," he says, lighthearted and almost teasing like there aren't unnaturally black and blue plants growing on his and Bdubs's shoulders, like the forest isn't an angry hum at the back of all their heads.

"I'm perfectly fine, Etho, I told you!" Bdubs jumps back when Etho lashes out with his shortsword. "Hey!"

Etho flips the sword so that he's holding it hilt-first. He steps forward until the two of them are almost face to face. Bdubs lets him, head tilted.

"I don't wanna hurt you, Bdubs," Etho says lowly. "I don't want to, but I will, trust me."

Bdubs laughs, harsh. "Yeah, sure, you could *try*."

Etho shrugs. "Okay."

He lunges. Bdubs dodges all his attacks with supernatural speed; after the last strike, a vine snakes out from his staff to catch Etho's wrist. It pulls, sending him stumbling forward.

Bdubs catches him, one hand reaching up to cradle his face in a mockery of gentleness. Etho stiffens.

You are a fool, the forest hisses. *He is ours. He will succumb to us just like all the others. And so will you.*

"Sorry, Etho!" Bdubs says cheerfully. "It's really a shame it had to come to this, but—"

You promised, the forest finishes, so loud that it leaves Skizz's ears ringing.

Etho tries to pull away but Bdubs's grip tightens. The tips of his fingertips slowly bleed black. He digs his nails into Etho's cheek, just above his mask. Slowly, darkness spreads through Etho's veins, spiderwebbing beneath his skin. Bdubs pulls away. As he goes, cuts open up on Etho's face and neck and hands.

Pale blue-grey sprouts begin to poke up from the wounds. Skizz watches, horrified, as dark, teal-speckled mushrooms and flowers grow through his skin, watered by his blood. In the back of his head, the forest hums, pleased. Bdubs watches impassively. The vines from his staff crawl up his arm and over his shoulders, settling loosely around his throat.

Etho stumbles back, desperately trying to pull the plants out, but even more grow in their place.

"Bdubs!" he gasps, more terrified than Skizz has ever heard him. "Bdubs, please—"

Bdubs twitches. "I—"

The vine around his neck tightens, slightly. His face hardens. A handful of small black roses blossom from Etho's face, where Bdubs had held him.

With one final, choked breath, he crumples. A similar rosebud blooms around Bdubs's wrist.

For an instant, everything is silent.

"*Etho!*" Tango screams.

His hands reignite with fire so furiously hot it's almost blue. Skizz shakes himself, hand tightening on the hilt of his sword.

"We gotta get out of here, dude!"

He starts hacking at the vines around him with renewed determination. Tango burns himself free.

Silently, Bdubs retreats, melting back into the surrounding forest. A wall of thorns rises in his wake. Skizz narrows his eyes.

“Oh, of course!” Tango cries.

He lobbs a handful of fire at the wall. It does nothing.

“I can get us both over, but you gotta trust me,” Skizz calls, sheathing his sword.

Tango shakes his head. “Go for it, dude!”

Skizz takes a deep breath. With one last glance at Etho, he focuses his mind. First, he reaches out to Tango; a subtle, shimmering field of purple-blue appears around him and lifts him up off the ground. A beat later, that same energy flickers into existence beneath Skizz’s feet.

“Hang on!” he shouts, then flings them both over the wall.

Bdubs is walking deeper into the forest, trees and plants and quietly chattering mushrooms shifting out of his way as he goes. He spins when the two of them appear; the teal glow in his eyes is so harsh that Skizz briefly loses control over his telekinesis. Tango drops but rolls, shaking out his shoulders as he rises smoothly to his feet. Skizz catches himself just before he hits the ground. This time, he purposefully dissipates the telekinetic field, grimacing at the twinge of pain in his temples. He hasn’t stretched his mind like that in a long time.

It only takes him a few seconds to recover, but in that time, Tango has already rushed Bdubs. With his offhand, he draws one of his knives. Bdubs sweeps his hand through the air to summon a thorned vine that lashes towards him, but it has only barely sliced into his side before he cuts it away. As soon as he reaches Bdubs, he aims a punch right at his face.

The ticking of a clock suddenly fills the air, thudding in Skizz’s head. Tango freezes mid-movement, eyes wide; his entire body shakes with how hard he’s trying to break free from the unseen force holding him in place.

Too late, Bdubs and the forest snarl, viciously triumphant. Bdubs snaps his fingers.

Tango vanishes.

Skizz shouts, fury and terror flooding his veins. Bdubs turns to face him. With a deep breath, he unsheathes his sword. Etho is dying on the other side of the wall. Tango is— gone. It is just Skizz against Bdubs and the sprawling forest; suddenly, he can feel it watching him from every angle, humming softly as it basks in his fear. He does not want to hurt Bdubs, but the creature in front of him is more forest than man, and it does not care.

He bares his teeth and charges. The force of his anger bolsters his telekinesis and he wraps it around the blade of his sword; when he hits Bdubs’s chest, the forcefield around the weapon both blunts its edges and sends Bdubs flying back so fast that even the cursed vines in his veins can’t anchor him. He slams into a tree hard enough that the bark cracks, revealing a deep teal interior pulsing in time with some unheard heartbeat.

Bdubs stumbles to his feet, teeth bared. He steps back into the tree’s shadow and vanishes. Skizz swears, heart hammering; less than a second later, though, Bdubs reappears beside him. The glint in his eyes is wild, pupils slit deep black. Tiny, glowing mushrooms have started to grow in place of his freckles. He slashes a clawed hand across Skizz’s face, drawing four lines of blood through his skin.

Instinctively, Skizz punches him. With a sharp snap, his nose starts gushing blood. He yelps, sounding much more like normal Bdubs, but his face stays twisted in anger. Blood flows over his lips and teeth.

GIVE UP, the forest roars. GIVE IN. YOU ARE JUST ONE MAN. YOU CANNOT STOP US. IT WILL HURT LESS TO STOP FIGHTING.

“Shut up!”

THERE IS NO ONE LEFT FOR YOU TO PROTECT.

A vine curls around Skizz’s leg. He slashes it away, but two take its place; every time he breaks free, more and more rise to bind him. The forest laughs. It’s well into morning now, but the trees seem to close in above him, leaves masking the sky. Bdubs digs a clawed, bloodied hand into the metal of his chestplate and forces him to the ground. His grip tightens on his sword, but vines have wrapped around his arms and bound them to his sides. Fighting is futile, the forest whispers, but he bares his teeth and keeps on trying.

Suddenly, so fast he thinks he’s imagined it, there’s a rushed ticking sound, like a clock going in reverse. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the empty space a few yards away shift. Bdubs spins; Skizz, to the best of his ability, turns as well.

Tango reappears, punch going wide into open air. He pauses, eyes flicking around rapidly as he catalogs everything that has changed. The fire in his hair and hands dims, slightly.

“What the hell?”

“Tango!” Skizz cries, nearly breathless with relief.

“Skizz, what—? Oh, shit.”

Tango just manages to duck beneath the ice dagger Bdubs throws at him, formed from magic and tinged red with the blood he’d wiped from his face. Stepping away from the shattered ice and the ominously writhing vines beneath him, Tango shakes out his hands, reigniting the fire. His knife glints in the dancing golden light when he flips it to face hilt-first.

“Yeah, okay, we’re done here,” he decides.

The forest isn’t fast enough to stop him before he reaches Bdubs. This time, his punch connects, sending Bdubs staggering. Before he can recover, Tango slams the hilt of his knife into his temple.

He crumples. The lights in all the mushrooms and flowers on his body go out. Something in the forest settles, though Skizz can still feel it humming angrily at the back of his head.

Quickly, he pulls himself free from the slackened vines and rushes over. Tango grimaces.

“Hopefully that doesn’t do anything too permanent,” he mutters.

Skizz shakes his head. “We can worry about that later. We need to get out of here, dude.”

He starts to lift Bdubs up but Tango nudges him out of the way, taking Bdubs’s full weight.

“Can you get us back over that?” he asks, nodding to the thorn wall.

It’s crumbling, but not fast enough. Skizz takes a deep breath.

“Yeah. Yeah, hold on.”

A headache is starting to pound insistently behind his eyes but he ignores it, yet again reaching out to wrap himself and Tango - and, this time, Bdubs - in a telekinetic field. Carefully, he lifts them

back over the wall and settles them onto the scattered dirt on the other side. As soon as they hit the ground, he rushes over to Etho.

He's still unconscious, but the plants on his body look like they're starting to wilt away. Skizz starts to brush them off, pausing slightly when he realizes most of them are still grown into his skin.

"Okay, new plan," he mutters, reaching out to grab Etho's shoulders. "It'd be really great if you woke up right now, dude!"

He shakes him aggressively. After a tense, silent moment, Etho gasps awake and sits up so fast Skizz barely manages to avoid being headbutted.

"What..." Etho starts, blinking rapidly. He looks down at himself, eyes going wide. "Oh. That's not good."

Tango laughs, high-pitched and relieved. "Yeah, no kidding. We gotta go!"

"Yeah, give me a second," Etho winces.

He presses a hand to his chest. Soft light glows from beneath his palm; Skizz watches it diffuse into his skin, chasing the lingering blackness from his veins. The plants shrivel and wilt away. Etho's skin seals in their wake, leaving barely-healed lines of red. He stumbles to his feet with Skizz's help, pulling out the rest of the mushrooms and flowers as he goes.

"What happened to Bdubs?" he asks, limping towards Tango. "Is he okay?"

"...yeah, probably," Tango says, mostly convincing. "I whacked him pretty hard, but if we get a healing potion in him, he'll be fine."

"I have one in my bag," Skizz offers. He's already on his way back to the cottage.

"There's one in mine, too, I think," Etho adds.

He kneels next to Bdubs, carefully pulling out plants with hands that glow quietly with the same magic he'd used on himself.

"Grab our stuff," Tango calls at Skizz's back. "We're leaving, this place sucks!"

"I hear ya!"

Quickly, he stuffs their bedrolls back into their packs and gathers their things. He grabs three healing potions from his and Etho's bags and returns to the others; Etho chugs one and takes another to spread on the worst of Bdubs's wounds, where the forest hadn't wanted to let go. Skizz and Tango share the third.

After another moment of healing the worst of Bdubs's wounds, Etho stands so that Tango can pick him back up. Skizz hands Etho the lightest of their packs. The four of them silently and slowly start the long walk out of the forest.

Bdubs starts to wake up as they reach the edge of the village. He lashes out at Tango, who nearly drops him, and only calms slightly when Etho grabs his hands - to reassure him or keep him from casting or both, Skizz isn't sure, but it works either way. There are flecks of unnatural, glowing teal in his eyes still, but he doesn't resist when Tango suggests tying his hands together. With Etho close at his side to keep him from running and to make sure he doesn't trip over himself and pass

out again, they continue to stumble their way out of the forest.

It doesn't try to stop them, even though Skizz can still feel eyes on his back. Every so often, one of them will twitch as something moves too quickly in the underbrush or a corrupted plant - sculk, Etho calls them - chitters in the distance. The further they get from the heart of the forest, the lesser the effects are. By the time they make it out over half the day later, the trees and plants look normal again.

Their horses are where they left them. Skizz is apprehensive about making camp so close to the treeline, but all of them are nearly dead on their feet. Etho, at least, is mostly confident that they're out of any danger.

"Well, probably,," he concludes, eyeing Bdubs, whose hands have been untied now that they're free. "I'm not sure I managed to get all of it out of you - or me, for that matter," he adds with a nervous chuckle. "But we should be good for right now."

"Hey, you know about this stuff," Tango says, leaning towards him over their campfire.

"I used to live near where the sculk originates, yes," Etho agrees. "Or one of the places, anyway."

"Right. So do you happen to know anyone who can help us de-sculkificate, or? Like, the whole reason we came out here was to fix the forest, which clearly went *amazingly*. And I don't know about you guys, but I'm not about to leave a job unfinished, even if we're not getting paid."

"Yeah, you better not!" Bdubs cries. He's been uncharacteristically quiet for most of the day, but the further they've gotten from the village, the more he's returned to himself. "That's my home we're talking about!"

Etho hums. "I might know some people. We'd have to take a trip to the Underdark, though."

"The huh?"

"It's a dimension, kind of," Tango explains. "Or, well, not exactly, but. It's like this huge sprawling place *way* underground, made of caves and tunnels and stuff."

"That's where I grew up," Etho adds. "Like I said, I should know some people who can help. Old friends of mine."

"You had friends?!" Bdubs cries.

Tango's smile turns sharp and teasing. "Before *us*?"

"Shut up," Etho laughs.

"Can we wait? A bit? Before we go on another adventure?" Skizz asks from where he's laying beside Tango, still fighting with the remnants of his headache. "This sucked, dude."

Tango pats his shoulder consolingly. "I'm sure that can be arranged."

"Good."

He tunes back out of the conversation as it moves on. Slowly, he drifts off to the low, murmuring voices of his friends. The sounds of the forest are still too close for comfort, but there are no unnatural stillness or distant, eerie screeches. Tango is a warm presence at his side, and Etho and Bdubs are both safe.

Soon, there will be a new adventure and new dangers. For now, they rest.

Chapter End Notes

List of (most) spells/abilities used:

- Telekinetic Movement (3rd level [Psi Warrior](#) ability)
- [Ice Knife](#)
- Protective Field (3rd level Psi Warrior ability)
- [Hail of Thorns](#)
- [Produce Flame](#) (fire genasi ability)
- [Earth Tremor](#)
- mix of Earth Tremor and [Entangle](#)
- Land's Stride ([ranger](#) ability)
- [Burning Hands](#) (fire genasi ability)
- [Blight](#) (with a lot of creative liberty)
- Psi-Powered Leap (7th level Psi Warrior ability)
- [Temporal Shunt](#)
- Telekinetic Thrust (7th level Psi Warrior ability)
- [Hidden Step](#) (10th level Circle of Dreams ability)
- [Primal Savagery](#)
- a mix of [Lesser Restoration](#) and [Cure Wounds](#)

End Notes

thank you for reading! comments and kudos are greatly appreciated

check out the series for more info about the au! feel free to send me asks on tumblr,
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