

the creature of the lake

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/40495191) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/40495191>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hermitcraft SMP , 3rd Life Last Life SMP Series
Relationship:	EthosLab/Bdouble0100 , Minor or Background Relationship(s) , impulseSV/Kris ZedaphPlays/TangoTek
Character:	John Booko BdoubleO100 , EthosLab (Video Blogging RPF) , TangoTek , Skizzleman
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Modern Setting , Alternative Universe - Mermaid , Pre-Relationship , First Meetings , Summer Vacation , No Beta We Die Like Me This Week Apparently , Crushes , Etho has A Sugar Addiction , Swimming , roasting marshmallows , Open Ending , Fluff and Humor
Language:	English
Collections:	MCYTBLR AU Fest Summer 2022
Stats:	Published: 2022-07-23 Words: 16,643 Chapters: 1/1

the creature of the lake

by [Luckyducks](#)

Summary

The creature's name is Etho and he lives in the lake.

Bdubs has yet to decide if this information is better than there being a ghost or not.

Tango, Bdubs and Skizz have managed to find a deal of a lifetime in a cozy, lakeside cabin vacation. But something lurks beneath the surface, ready to strike... a friendship?

Notes

my very late entry to this event because i kept getting nailed by things and it kept getting longer. i had a lot of fun writing this, though, and found the universe very fun to play in. i hope you enjoy!

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

Bdubs swings his rucksack on, letting it hang from one shoulder as he grabs the cooler bag with both hands. He kicks it up with his knee, grunting and waddling towards the stairs of the cabin.

The location is picturesque. A private lake, hidden away by thick forest. It's already dusk – the drive up with these two numbskulls was far too long – and the building is illuminated by warm lights along the fencing and through the windows. Tango has run up ahead, bright hair muted against the stone and wooden frontage of the building. Bdubs breaths in deeply, taking it one step at a time with his cargo. It's only three steps to get onto the patio, but he feels like he's moved a mountain by the time he's dropping the bag by the door.

"Tango, why's this door not unlocked yet?" Bdubs calls. Tango's head pops around the wall, a pout on his face.

"I can't find where the key should be!" He complains. Bdubs sighs, glancing back at the van. Skizz has walked back into the forest to find that one spot on the drive up where they had network, hoping to let Impulse know they've arrived safely. They're in the middle of nowhere. It's hardly like anyone's going to steal their junk if he takes his eyes off it.

"Right, come on then." His rucksack falls beside the cooler, waving Tango around the building. Fairy lights are weaved around the railings and up the posts of the verandah jutting off the house. "They said that it would be in a birdhouse around..." Bdubs looks up at the post at the back corner of the house. Sure enough, there's a small house tucked towards the top of the post. "Here!"

"Oh," Tango mutters. He reaches into it, squinting as he wiggles his hand around. Bdubs leans on the railing, looking out at the smooth water of the lake.

"Maybe you should get better at looking up," he teases, laughing at Tango's strangled noise.

When he turns back to the water, something glints on the surface. He pushes himself over the wood, trying to get a closer look at the dark silhouette of... a rock? Floating near the surface. It's shrouded in a white that almost blends in with the moonlit water behind him, but there's a gleam of red, something dark-

"Well, it's not my fault I'm tall enough I don't have to!" Bdubs whips around at Tango's voice, finding him waving the key between his fingers. Wait, what were they talking about again?

"Yeah, well- well-" He puffs up his cheeks. "At least I don't bang my head on doorways!"

Tango crosses his arms, "At least I'll be able to reach the top shelves. Should I get you a stepladder for the sink?"

"Hey- You take that back!" Tango is already walking away, and Bdubs stumbles to keep up with him. But he glances back first, hoping to get a glimpse of that rock again. Maybe they could kayak out there one day.

The lake's surface is serene, the crescent moon painting uninterrupted ripples across the water. There's not a rock in sight.

Bdubs tries to pretend the shiver down his spine is just from the cold.

They've already claimed beds and begun unpacking by the time Skizz comes back. Bdubs has bagsied one by a large window, overlooking the lake. There's a plug at the top of the bed, which is everything he needs, really. He throws his favourite soft, fluffy green blanket over it, smiling at the splash of colour. This place is all a little too modern for his tastes. Keralis would love it, though.

"Have you schmucks stolen the good beds?" Skizz's voice carries upstairs.

"Maybe you should've been faster!" Tango yells, in one of the bedrooms down the hall. Bdubs snickers when he hears stomping up the stairs, watching as Skizz's hair appears.

"I'm sorry *one* of us had to let Dipple Dop know we made it safely." Skizz drags his bag up the last few steps, sighing in relief as he reaches the landing. "And he said he's coming next week, by the way!"

"Tell him we'll let him in as long as he brings beer!" Tango's head briefly pops through the doorway, vanishing once his sentence is finished. Bdubs, meanwhile, gets a great view of the life leaving Skizz's eyes.

"I am not walking all the way back out there again! What will you guys take from me next?" Skizz points vaguely in the direction of a window. "I already told him that, anyway."

Bdubs snorts, whilst Tango lets out an enthusiastic, "Whoo!"

"There's still plenty of beds left," Bdubs tells Skizz. He bumps the door open, turning to go back in, "But you're not having my one!"

"I don't want your stupid bed!" Skizz calls, his voice muffling when the door closes. "I'm going to find a better bed!"

"Good luck!"

It still feels a little surreal to actually be here. Bdubs sits on the bed – most of his packing finished – and looks out at the lake. The cabin had seemed too good of a deal to be real. If Bdubs weren't sitting in it right now, he might still think it is. They'd booked it the moment they saw the price with the idea that if everything went wrong, they could just camp out of the van or something. He pulls the blanket around his shoulders, relaxing into the pillows. Tomorrow, they can go out and explore the lake. But the sun has long set, and Bdubs is already up past his bedtime.

"Are you already going to bed?" Skizz appears at the door, giving the bedroom an appreciative look over.

"But of course!" Bdubs sits up straight, gesturing with the blanket still in one hand. "Some of us need our beauty sleep."

"You sure do!" Tango calls from what sounds like the stairs.

"You shut your mouth!" Bdubs shouts back, listening to the loud cackle grow more distant.

"We're going to check out the fire pit," Skizz tells him before his voice takes a far cheekier note. "In case you wake up all scared and need to come find us-."

"Oh, you shut your mouth as well!" Bdubs punctuates it by throwing his pillow at the doorway. Skizz manages to close it in time, laughing loudly.

"Good night, Bdubadubs!"

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbles. He has to get up and get the pillow now, doesn't he? *Ugh*.

Bdubs, naturally, wakes up first. He ambles through his morning routine, only pausing to look out at the lake in its morning splendour.

If he thought the water sparkled last night, it's positively twinkling this morning. The sky is still

alight with pale pink and amber, creating a dazzling reflection of colour. The entire world seems bathed in the gentle glow, and Bdubs stands at the window brushing his teeth.

The others emerge as Bdubs cooks breakfast. Tango walks in a haze to the counter, grumbling as he fails to figure out the coffee machine. Skizz, on the other hand, is dressed, and the one who actually gets the machine to work. Bdubs slides two plates of scrambled egg on toast across the table and sits down with his own.

"I knew there was a reason we brought you on this trip," Tango murmurs, dropping into a chair. The coffee in his mug sloshes dangerously up the edges, but just about avoids spilling onto the hardwood table.

Skizz talks before Bdubs manages to take offence, "Thanks for the breakfast, 'Dubs." He yawns, slumping onto the table more than the perfectly good seat beneath him.

"How late did you two even stay up?" Bdubs asks, finishing the last sips of his coffee.

"Too late." Tango shoves a forkful of egg into his mouth. Skizz snorts, cradling his mug.

"We're on holiday, we're allowed to make some stupid decisions," he reminds them. "And speaking of stupid decisions, I think we left the marshmallows out." Bdubs groans, pushing his chair back. "You don't need to go!"

"I don't trust you two idiots not to fall into the lake right now," Bdubs replies. "Where'd you leave them?"

"Over by the fire pit—" Tango waves his hand meaninglessly in the air by his head, "—I think in a plastic bag?"

"Right." Bdubs heads towards the back door. "If I notice any of my food missing..."

"You know we wouldn't!" Skizz calls.

"That's a lie!" Bdubs lets the door fall shut behind him.

The breeze hits him immediately, the sun rising above the trees and melting away the clouds of the morning. He can hear insects, birdsong, the rustling of leaves – everything he feels like he's been missing in the sprawling metropolis he calls home. A bird flies overhead, forcing Bdubs to raise a hand to block out the sun. The pine trees feel like they're shielding this place from the world. There could be nothing else outside this forest, and Bdubs would be none the wiser. The thought is relieving as it is unnerving.

He finds the plastic bag, just as they said, leaning against the fence beside the water. If Bdubs had small enough hands, he could probably reach through and touch the water down below. He grabs the bag as requested. The two of them can pick up the cans, he wants to finish his breakfast before it's as cold as the lake water.

"Leftover marshmallows for your Highnesses." He drops the bag on the table and retakes his seat, picking up his fork. Tango leans over (and if there was anything on his plate it would've now been on his shirt) to grab it. The plastic rustles before Tango frowns, looking at Bdubs with a squinted scrutiny.

"I know we opened them without you, but that's no reason to hide the rest! I thought you loved us more than that."

Bdubs tilts his head in confusion, "Tango, I have literally no idea what you're talking about right now."

"Look!" Tango holds the bag open, revealing it's... empty?

"You said to grab the plastic bag!" Bdubs protests. "There weren't any other ones I saw! Not my fault you guys can't look after your food right." He huffs, crossing his arms and sinking in his seat.

"Maybe some wildlife got to it?" Skizz suggests. Impulse must be rubbing off on him if he's taking the mediator role.

"But the bag was pretty much still closed! It was leaning against the fence!"

"We didn't even leave it against the fence!" Tango cries. Skizz sighs, taking a long look at his empty coffee mug.

"How about we finish our breakfast, then we go look for them?"

"Why do I have to look for the marshmallows you dummies have lost?"

"*Tango and I* will go and look for them."

They do not find the marshmallows. Skizz and Tango must be out there for an hour whilst Bdubs examines the maps of the area. It's an hour's drive out to the nearest civilisation – which *apparently* one of them will now need to do over a bag of lost marshmallows. There are a few marked walking routes around the lake, though Bdubs won't know what state they're in until he gets there. He thinks it'll be a fun activity to do for the first day, though.

"I don't get it," Tango declares, hitting the door open. He's dressed now, wearing a puffy bodywarmer over a red shirt, though his hair still looks just as much of a mess. "How can they just *disappear*?"

"I don't know, dude," Skizz's reply comes shuffling through the doorway after him. "I thought I'd put them away carefully! It makes no sense." Bdubs props his head up on his hand, examining his two very put-out-looking friends.

"Have we really lost something already?" He questions. "We've only been here a night!" Tango looks at Skizz, who shrugs helplessly.

"Who knows, maybe this joint is haunted and that's why the price was so low." Bdubs snorts at the suggestion. Those two and Impulse have always insisted their college dorm was haunted. They even had a bunch of cheap ghost-detecting stuff, even. He's never let them live that story down. Impulse ended up keeping most of the equipment, he thinks.

"Well, if you two are going to make up imaginary ghosts, then you'll be pleased to know I found a walk around the lake. We can pack some lunch, make a day of it!" He pushes the map across the table, pointing out the route marked in blue. They lean across, giving it their own look over.

"I guess we did come on this holiday to enjoy nature," Tango murmurs, dripping with fake dramatics.

Bdubs rolls his eyes, "Of course we did! Now, what did you two want in your sandwiches?"

Tango digs out their walking shoes (Skizz's brand new shoes, Tango's well-worn boots and Bdubs'

falling apart trainers) whilst Skizz helps Bdubs put together lunch. They've already eaten half of it by the time they're out of the door; Tango's excuse being that they're going shopping soon anyway.

"This still doesn't feel real," Tango says, staring at the canopy of trees. They can still see the lake sparkling to their right, but this dirt path provides much-needed shade. The dried mud crunches and cracks under their feet.

"If it's not haunted then it'll be the best holiday I've ever had," Skizz agrees. Bdubs rolls his eyes, resting his hands on the strap of his bag.

"You two just want something to scare Impulse with," he tells them. Skizz snickers, but Tango responds with an offended huff.

"It's a valid concern! Just because *you* haven't had anything happen to you yet-" Bdubs frowns, tuning Tango out as he stares at the ground. What if that's what he saw, out in the lake last night? The water is perfectly clear now – like nothing was there. No rocks, no plants, just clear water that twinkles in the sunlight. Maybe what Bdubs saw was a mere trick of the light, but he's never been one to distrust his instinct before.

"Maybe we should get Impulse to bring our gear with him!" Skizz says, and Bdubs decides right there that he's not going to mention it to either of them.

"Well, if we find signal somewhere around this lake, you guys can tell him and hear him laugh at you too!" Bdubs calls, striding out ahead of them.

He didn't expect them to actually find a signal.

They're nearly halfway across the lake, so they set up their picnic blanket in a spot overlooking the lake. Skizz fiddles with his phone, looking up directions for the nearest store. Tango, meanwhile, is sprawled out across the blanket and gossiping with Impulse like a teenager with a crush.

Bdubs sighs, shoving his sandwich into his mouth. If he's honest, he doesn't care enough to try contacting anyone. He made sure to tell Keralis he'll be off the grid for a few days, and he and Scar have been a bit shaky since they broke up. He's sure they'll come around to being friends again, but Bdubs thinks some space will do them both good.

Sandwich finished, Bdubs puts the plate aside and reaches for the hair tie around his wrist instead. He gathers up his hair, braiding it back.

"I'm going to take a look by the lake!" He calls, pushing himself onto his feet. Tango waves in acknowledgement, whilst Skizz offers a distracted, "Cool." Bdubs isn't sure either of them even heard what he just said. He heads down the dirt path, past the dented grill that sits overgrown by the remains of what could've been a park bench.

This whole place gives him a bit of the creeps.

Stumbling through the overgrowth, he's able to find the bank of the lake itself. He can just see the grill over his shoulder, shielded from his eyes by large leaves and trees. Tango's voice carries on whispers, only his intonation recognisable. With a bit of effort, he stamps down a spot for him to sit.

The lake stretches out before him. He can see all the way across to the other side – even their cabin in the distance. He slumps forward, resting his chin on his fist. The water is still clear, though he can see what looks like some branches leaning into the water. Maybe that's what he saw, yeah!

He's not going crazy, and he's certainly not seeing ghosts.

His gaze drifts directly onto a pair of dark eyes, watching him beneath the water.

Bdubs screams, trying to step backwards and falling straight into the plants. Stems and dirt dig under his nails as he scrambles to his feet, kicking away from the innocent-looking liquid.

"Bdubs?!" Skizz cries, forcing himself through the leaves. "Bdubs, are you okay?" Bdubs looks back, reaching his hand out. Skizz catches it in his own, dragging Bdubs back into the clearing. The back of Bdubs' palm hits the broken-down grill, falling against Skizz. Bdubs urges his heart to relax, staring at the metres of plant life between him and the waters of the lake.

"I'm-" Bdubs takes a deep breath, leaning his head back against Skizz's shoulder. "You guys need to stop with all that ghost talk, man. You're making me see things." Skizz gasps, spinning Bdubs around to face him.

"You saw a ghost?!"

"I thought I saw a ghost because *you two* keep going on about it!"

Something snaps to their side, Bdubs and Skizz both jumping backwards. Tango stands, foot poised over a broken twig, hands up.

"Tango, Bdubs said he saw a-"

"I did *not!*"

"Oh, is that what all this screaming is about?" Tango asks, folding his arms. "We've progressed to seeing things now?" There's...no way Bdubs can answer that without sounding bad.

He huffs, "Let's just get back to the bags before something else goes missing." He shakes Skizz off him, striding past Tango and towards the picnic blanket still strewn across the dirt.

"I don't know," Skizz calls, jogging to catch up. "Maybe we should make sure we lose it now, that way we only have to do one trip to the shop!"

By the time they arrive back at the cabin, Bdubs has convinced himself what he saw was all an illusion. It has to be, the two of them are just making him nervous. He'll ignore the first thing he saw, before all this conversation of ghosts even started.

"Oi, Tango!" Bdubs grabs the back of his hood, dragging him out of the doorway. "Clean your boots before you go tracking mud in through the house." Tango groans, but stops by the boot scraper that Bdubs has just finished with.

Skizz is already inside, walking shoes tucked inside the door. He's unpacking their containers, throwing anything dirty into the sink. Bdubs wonders if he'll actually finish washing it up or not. He throws his trainers on the shoe rack, wincing at the way the threads stretch and pull. If they don't fall apart by the end of this trip, it'll be a miracle.

They settle on the plush sofas (the hanging chair is tempting but Bdubs needs to reach the coffee table) and set out on formulating a shopping list for tomorrow. This means, of course, a full meal plan; checking how much coffee they have versus how much they'll need; does Skizz really need a new tube of toothpaste and remembering the marshmallows. Bdubs almost wonders if he should put trainers on there, but that would require finding a shoe store too, which is more effort than any

of them really want to put in.

"So, if we head out tomorrow, we could grab lunch somewhere local," Skizz suggests.

"And then barbecue in the evening?" Bdubs adds. They've added several meat items to their list. He's never been good at grilling himself, but he can whip up some mean seasoning when he needs to.

"As long as our ghost doesn't blow the fire out," Skizz whispers, walking his fingers down Bdubs' spine. Bdubs makes several loud noises of complaint, whacking his hands away.

"You and your stinking ghost!"

"Well, if you're *so* reluctant to believe us then I'm sure you won't mind staying at the cabin whilst we go shopping," Tango proposes. "It would be really helpful to know somebody is looking after our things whilst we're gone." His smile mimics a smug-looking cat that just stole its owner's favourite chair. Bdubs has never wanted to fight him more.

"Oh how awful, a day spent lounging around at a beautiful lakeside cabin. However will I cope?" In his opinion, he nailed the dramatic range of his voice right there. "I think the biggest worry is you idiots forgetting something, not some fantastical lake monster."

"So it's a lake monster now?" Tango asks. This time Bdubs does throw a pillow at him. Tango catches it easily, laughing loudly.

"It's okay, Bdubadubs, I'm sure you'll be just fine on your own, with no cellphone service, in the middle of nowhere! Nothing could go wrong!" Skizz pats Bdubs' shoulder, ignoring the ice-cold glare he sends at him.

"You're both as bad as each other," Bdubs decides.

"We weren't the ones screaming at a lake," Tango sings.

"You know what, fine. I'll stay at the cabin tomorrow. At least I'll get some peace and quiet from you schmucks."

Skizz throws his arms around Bdubs, "Aw, you love us really!"

"I would throw you in that lake without hesitation."

Bdubs' dreams that night are filled with swirling waves. He's on a small raft; a boat; a dented old grill. There are dark shapes in the water beneath him. He stays frozen, for fear if he moves even an inch he'll be dragged into the murky depths by unknown limbs – deeper and deeper and deeper until he's just another dark shape beneath the surface.

Suffice to say, he's not in the best of moods upon waking up. Tango drops a plate of pastries that need using up and some sliced fruit at his door and tells him that they're heading out. It's the latest Bdubs has slept in for months. He rolls over and grunts.

He does appreciate it later, shoving a slice of melon in his mouth as he attempts to brush out his hair. He'll shower...at some point. Tango and Skizz have seen him in far worse states. He pokes his head in Tango's room on the way downstairs, wincing at the clothes strewn around. Yeah, he thinks he's fine, actually.

After rinsing his plate – and Tango and Skizz's – he slides them onto the drying rack. The house feels...peaceful without them here. The sun sends beams of light through the house, dots of dust floating like fairies through the air. Outside, birds continue singing their songs and there's not a single car audible. It's not that Bdubs doesn't want Skizz or Tango here, obviously, but he can appreciate the atmosphere in their absence as well.

He ties his bandana as he heads outside. The lake has continued its ever-present calmness, as if the events of yesterday were simply a dream. Unfortunately, his dreams were far worse.

He leans on the fence, keeping his feet away from the edge. A light breeze catches his cheeks, barely enough to create a sound through the leaves. Now he thinks about it, he has no idea what he's actually going to do with the other two gone. They'd done very little planning for this holiday to begin with. A day lounging around like a pampered cat can't hurt, can it? He thinks he has a few books downloaded on his phone, maybe he'll finally get around to reading one of those.

"Hey."

Bdubs screams. Within a second he's leapt backwards, clattering over a chair and landing with his legs in the air.

"Oh come on, I even said hi this time!" Bdubs grunts as he lifts himself up, trying to find the source of the voice. It has a light accent, Bdubs hasn't spoken to enough people around here to know if it's local. There's a pleasant lilt to it; he could happily listen to an audiobook read by a voice like this.

"Where are you?!" Bdubs demands, rocking onto his feet with his fists raised. "I'll get you!"

"In the water, I mean, where else would I be?" Bdubs is being sassed by a complete stranger after falling over a chair. Maybe it's a good thing Tango and Skizz are gone because he'd never live this down.

He looks down and temporarily forgets how to breathe.

Floating at the surface of the water is a pale face, peering up at him with heterochromatic eyes. One is so dark it might as well be black, and the other is a piercing red that reminds Bdubs of a laser. Short, choppy white hair floats on the water like the reflection of the moon.

And yet, despite all of that, what's most distinctive is the dark scales creeping down the creature's neck – a mixture of black and deep, murky greens. Through the clear water of the lake, Bdubs can see the blurry shimmer of a tail lazily swishing through the water.

"What *are* you?" Bdubs blurts, wisely deciding it might be time to close his jaw.

"Wow, is that how you start up a conversation with everyone?" The creature asks, tilting their head. Bdubs can't quite tell, but he thinks they're crossing their arms under the water. "Do you walk up and demand to know what the birds are, too? Wow."

"The birds don't start speaking English at me!"

"They probably could if they lived longer." Bdubs stares at them, unsure how he's even supposed to reply to that. "Anyway, I wanted to ask if you had more of these." They fumble with something around their... waist(?) before triumphantly holding it up in the air. The plastic gleams in the sun.

It's the empty packet of marshmallows.

"You stole them?!"

"They were next to my lake!" The creature argues. Bdubs catches a glimpse of sharp teeth as they smile. "That's as good as mine." Bdubs takes a deep breath, pressing the base of his palm into his forehead. Nope. That's not magically made this situation less weird.

"Right, no. We don't have more because you *ate them all!*"

"Aw." Large, fin-like structures in the place of their ears droop in disappointment. There is not, however, an inkling of guilt on their face. "Will you get more?"

"Will you eat them?"

They tilt their head, thinking before answering, "If I agree not to eat *all* of them will you give me some?"

"That's- that's a threat," Bdubs points out. "That's not a deal." He crosses his arms, tapping his foot. "Besides, what's stopping me from keeping them inside?"

"So you are getting more!" They declare, the fin of their tail flicking out of the water. "I thought so when I saw the car leave."

Bdubs, against his better judgement, sits down at the railing.

"How do you know what cars are."

The creature's name is Etho and he lives in the lake.

Bdubs has yet to decide if this information is better than there being a ghost or not.

"So have you lived in this lake your entire life?" Bdubs asks. They've moved to the pier so there aren't panels of wood in-between them. Bdubs refuses to put his limbs anywhere near the water, sitting cross-legged and tucking tight. Etho floats on his back, tail lazily swishing. He has his arms behind him like a cushion. The scales continue down his chest, which is bare besides a harness of straps that look to be made of dried plant material. There are various hooks of the material, and a larger pouch at Etho's waist.

"I lived other places," Etho replies, with a noncommittal shrug, "but I've been here a long time now. And the lake's nice. Plenty of you humans drop food, there's small fish, plants." Bdubs looks past Etho to the water, trying to imagine spending life in it.

"And are there any more of you?"

"Somewhere." Etho raises his tail, stretching it out. "None in my lake, though."

"Huh." It feels rude to outright ask if he gets lonely, but Bdubs can't help but wonder. Which is a development. He's barely accepted the fact he's talking to a guy with a *tail* and now he's wondering if he gets lonely or not. What a day, and it's not even lunchtime yet.

He shields his forehead as he looks to the sky.

"If I go and make lunch, will you hang around until I come back?" Bdubs asks. They'd dropped the plan for a barbecue to another night, Tango and Skizz realising they'd rather not put the effort in after driving most of the day. So, they'll be having take-out instead. Bdubs just has no idea when, and it's not like he can text them to see when they're coming back. He guesses he can make a snack later if he gets hungry.

Etho swirls around onto his front, poking out of the water, "Will I get some?"

"Sure. I'll make you a plate." He pushes himself up onto his feet, only wobbling slightly. Before he attempts to walk, he does a few stretches, hoping to ease out the stiffness of sitting on a flat, wooden pier.

"Don't take too long!" Etho calls. "There's no knowing if I might just fade away!"

"Oh, go catch a fish or something!" Bdubs rolls his eyes, skipping up the stairs. He takes one step through the backdoor and is hit with a sense of normalcy. The sunlight is filtering softly through the windows, and all of their items are scattered around messily. It's just like a normal, ordinary house.

He turns, looking back towards the pier. Etho is still swimming around, tail sparkling as he dives beneath the wood. Not a figment of his imagination, then. Bdubs sighs, walking through and picking bread out of the bin. He pokes it. Doesn't seem too stale. It's not like Etho gets to be picky.

What do half-fish people even eat? If Bdubs had tuna or salmon he might use some of that, but surprisingly three guys not that into cooking didn't think to pack anything like that. Would those even be in this lake? He should've paid more attention to the local ecosystem. Clearly, Etho enjoys sugar, but what if he's allergic to chocolate like dogs are? Bdubs doesn't want to be responsible for poisoning the dude!

He finally slaps some ham that's slightly hardened around the edges onto the bread with some lettuce. He'd add cheese but he's pretty sure most animals are intolerant to milk. He grabs a bag of their pre-prepared trail mix (that doesn't have chocolate in it) and drops that on the side of the plate. It's not the most appealing looking lunch, but it'll do. If Etho complains then he simply doesn't need to eat it. More lunch for Bdubs!

He carries the plates out with him. The water around the pier is suspiciously empty.

The ceramic clunks as he sets it down, calling a "Etho!"

"Boo." Bdubs spins with a startled squeak, holding his hand over his heart. Etho has pulled himself up on the side of the pier, wet hair sticking to his neck and sharp canines grinning at him.

"You can't just *do* that to people!" Bdubs cries. Etho laughs, using his arms to pull himself up, sitting neatly on the edge of the pier. Half his tail still hangs in the water. Bdubs will just trust that it's safe for him.

"Well, I've decided not to drown you, so I've got to have fun *somehow*." Bdubs huffs, sitting himself down beside him. "And not as many people visit as they used to. It's pretty boring all by myself." Bdubs thinks of the dilapidated picnic spot and the overgrown benches he saw.

"That might be because you're super creepy," Bdubs tells him, honestly. "Most people don't appreciate strange creatures watching them from lakes."

The smile Etho gives him is all teeth, "I do much worse. But you guys seem cool."

Bdubs blinks and decides to silently slide the plate over instead. Etho coos at it, picking it up with webbed fingers.

"This is a sandwich, right?" Etho turns to look at him, tilting the sandwich towards him. Bdubs nods.

"It has ham and lettuce in it. I wasn't sure what you actually eat."

Etho has picked up one half, twisting it around to examine it, "I told you. Mostly fish in the lake. But if somebody leaves some food then that's just free to take, right?" Bdubs isn't going to argue with those teeth.

"Isn't eating fish when you're-" Bdubs waves at Etho's tail. "Isn't that a little weird?"

"I'm pretty sure most of the big fish eat other fish." Etho shrugs. "Though I'm pretty sure I'm fish adjacent, not a fish." He finally takes a bite of the sandwich. Whether it's passed his high expectations, he's decided it isn't poisoned, or he's simply done looking at it, Bdubs has no idea. He takes the prompt to pick up his own.

"Good enough for you?" He asks. Etho's fins wiggle.

"I didn't know these tasted so different fresh!" Etho takes another two bites and *wow* that mouth can be bigger than Bdubs expected. "You have to give me more now."

"That's not how this works!" Bdubs scoffs. "But if you're lucky I'll sneak you some of our dinner."

Etho straightens up, one of his fins twitching. He slipped back into the water at some point in the afternoon, letting out a long sigh as he did. Bdubs has explained his job, he's answered hundreds of Etho's questions about various aspects of human life and they had a long debate about the concept of money. Bdubs finally conceded that Etho doesn't have to understand it, but it won't stop it from existing.

"I think that's your folks coming back," Etho tells him, glancing towards the road. Bdubs checks his watch, finding it's already creeping into the evening.

"Will I see you-" Bdubs looks up, but Etho's already vanished. The only sign he was ever there is a ripple in the water, damp wood and an empty plate of food.

Which, Bdubs should probably wash up. He doesn't need them bullying him over using two plates. He stacks them together and puts the half-eaten trail mix on top. It was pleasant to snack on as they talked, and Etho seemed to like it. Bdubs wonders how many foods he's actually experienced, confined to one lake.

He rinses both plates, sweeping loose lettuce into a small container labelled 'compost.' One of the plates he dries and puts away, the other he puts in the drying rack.

A car door slams, accompanied by a loud call of, "Come help us, Bdubadubs!"

"Coming, coming!"

He passes Tango on the way, hauling a bag full of what looks like soda up the stairs with both hands. Bdubs rolls his eyes, smiling to himself as he approaches the van, hands open. Skizz wastes no time filling them with bag straps.

"On the kitchen counter, please!" Skizz tells him. "Tango is going to unpack the frozen stuff, then we'll do the rest when we're done."

"Got it!"

There is a suspicious number of bags versus what Bdubs remembers being on the shopping list.

Maybe he should've put a bit more thought into letting Skizz and Tango loose in a supermarket by themselves. But, Skizz is carrying in bags of something that smells delicious, so it's all forgiven in Bdubs' opinion.

They slide tins onto shelves, for some reason another box of cereal goes into the cupboard. There are a few crates of beer, which Tango puts in the pantry (what kind of place that cost this little has a pantry? One with a creature living in the lake, apparently.)

"So what have you been up to all day?" Tango asks as he shoves a plate of kebab meat into the microwave. "Lonely without us?"

And then he leaves Bdubs with an awkward decision.

Etho never said he didn't want to be seen, but the fact he scarpered the moment they turned up suggests he doesn't. It feels like a strange thing to lie about, but Bdubs doesn't want to make Etho uncomfortable. If Etho wants to reveal himself, then he can. That's not going to be Bdubs' business.

"I've just been hanging around," Bdubs replies. "Rolling in a puddle of my tears."

"Hah! Knew you wouldn't last without us!" Tango grins at him. Skizz sits at the table, pouring himself a drink. Bdubs sits opposite him, leaning on his fist.

"Yes, yes, very sad," Bdubs waves in Tango's direction.

"Any other ghost sightings whilst we were gone?" Skizz asks, across the table.

"Oh, Impulse was so scared when we said you were at the cabin alone," Tango chimes in. He takes one of the plates out, replacing it with another. "Apparently that's when the ghosts like to strike." Bdubs leans on his arms, rolling his eyes.

"Guess I'm just too scary for any stupid ghosts, then!"

Skizz gasps, "Bdubs! You'll make them angry saying stuff like that."

"They'd have to exist first, which they do not!"

"Oh, so you weren't the one screaming next to the lake?"

"Boys, boys." Tango strides over, sliding two plates in front of them. "Eat your food."

"I'm saving it for lunch!" Is Bdubs' very clever excuse for why he leaves a good third of the food on his plate untouched. He might grab a snack from somewhere, goodness knows those two have bought enough of them. Then it's just a waiting game to find the best time to sneak it out to Etho.

Tango goes to shower, whilst Skizz turns into bed early, which gives Bdubs time to scoop some of the meat onto a plate. He searches through the cupboards, managing to find a new packet of marshmallows tucked behind a pack of biscuits. Predictable. He picks out three and puts them in an empty space on the plate. That should be enough to keep Etho happy. He hopes Tango and Skizz might miss him if Etho decides to eat him.

He listens upstairs for a few seconds, to the rhythmic pattering of the shower. He clutches the plate close as he carefully opens the backdoor, stepping onto the decking. He's practically walking on his toes as he rushes down to the pier. The night air smells of pine and earth; he takes a deep breath.

No sooner has he placed the plate down than a hand shoots out of the water to grab a marshmallow. The rest of Etho's torso appears shortly after, shoving the sweet straight into his mouth.

"You know, normally you eat the savoury stuff before dessert." Bdubs doesn't bother to sit down, wary of Tango noticing he's missing.

"You don't know how desperate I've been for this," Etho tells him, picking up the second just as fast.

"They might last a bit longer if you weren't eating them so fast!"

"They'd last longer if you gave me more. There were way more than this in the packet!"

Bdubs shakes his head, "We want some of them as well, you know! If you're lucky I'll bring you more tomorrow." Etho lights up at that – thankfully not literally, Bdubs doesn't need any more weirdness.

"Will you really?" Etho cradles the third marshmallow in his hands.

"If I'm able to. The others will be around, and they usually stay up later than me." Etho's fins droop, and oh no, why does that look so sad? That shouldn't be allowed. "I'll try my best, okay, stop giving me those sad eyes!"

Etho promptly puts the marshmallow in his mouth instead. Bdubs leans down to spin the plate around to the side with the meat. He doesn't even want to think of how it'll taste after eating marshmallows, but that's Etho's mistake to make.

Then, when Etho finishes chewing, he disregards the fork and simply grabs the plate to tip it into his mouth.

"I should've expected that," Bdubs admits. Etho looks at him over the plate, tilting his head in question. Bdubs waves him off, "Nothing for you to worry about."

"This isn't the normal way humans eat, is it?" Etho asks, and for the first time he sounds... self-conscious, maybe? Bdubs swallows. He better stop making himself so endearing.

"I mean, no, not *exactly*, but I don't think you need to worry about forks and knives when you live in a *lake*."

"I guess not." Etho slides the empty plate across the pier. Bdubs picks it up, trying to ignore the feeling there's something unsaid in Etho's words.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" He asks.

"If you're able to," Etho repeats Bdubs' words back at him, perking up. Bdubs huffs at him, which raises a giggle from the creature.

"I'll try to see you in the morning before they wake up."

Etho groans, "So *I* have to wake up?"

"There might be food in it for you." Bdubs walks away from the pier, waving over his shoulder. "I'll see you then." He hears a splash from behind him, knowing Etho has dived into the depths of the lake again.

He's just put the rinsed plate on the rack when Tango descends the stairs. He's still towelling his

hair and Bdubs will never get used to the sight of it without gel. He's pretty sure if you waved a flame in Tango's direction the whole thing would go up. Unlike right now, when it flops straight into his eyes.

"Surprised you're still up," Tango comments. Bdubs watches as he pulls a bottle of juice from the fridge.

"I had a lie in, you know how it is!" He does find himself yawning at the reminder, though.

"Sure, sleeping beauty," Tango teases. "By the way, Skizz says we should go swimming tomorrow. He took a screenshot of the weather whilst we were out. Think they've got any pool floats hidden around here?"

Interesting.

He wakes up whilst the sky is still a blend of deep blues and vibrant oranges. He takes a few minutes to look at the colours of the sunrise reflected on the lake before moving, grabbing his hairbrush from the dresser. The shaved sides are growing longer, nearly enough for his fingers to catch the base of the gradient. He brushes the main length out, letting it fall to the left whilst he heads to the bathroom.

He can hear Tango snoring down the hall, treading lightly down the stairs. He doesn't want to cook something and risk the smell waking the two, so he'll settle for some cereal. It takes a while to find one he thinks will taste fine dry, pulling out two bowls as he does. He doesn't pour too much – they'll probably expect something cooked when they wake. Enough to keep Etho happy. He considers adding milk to his own bowl, but Etho will probably get curious about it and then how does he explain he's not sure if Etho can have lactose or not? It's not worth it.

He places one of the bowls on the counter as he picks up the backdoor key, unlocking it before grabbing the bowl again. The air is crisp this early, sun only just beginning to break through the coolness of the night. But it's already a comfortable temperature, even in his bedclothes. It's going to be a hot day.

He plonks himself on the pier, looking down into the water. Etho hasn't suddenly appeared yet, and Bdubs isn't sure how to call a creature that lives in a lake. He sighs, falling into the temptation to stick his feet in the water. It's cold, colder than he expects, and he squeaks in surprise.

"Aw, is the human chilly?" At least this time Bdubs doesn't audibly jump. He turns to glare at Etho, who just laughs and sits up on the pier beside him.

"Not all of us are adapted to cold temperatures!" He passes Etho one of the bowls. He regards it curiously, poking at the cereal inside.

"I feel like I've seen stuff similar to this before," he says.

Bdubs shrugs, "You probably have. It's cereal. There's loads of different types, but a lot look like the same kinda thing." He puts two pieces in his mouth, cautiously lowering his feet back into the water. He can feel the ripples from Etho's tail beside him. Etho licks a piece. "Good?" Bdubs asks. Etho puts two pieces in his mouth, the same as Bdubs. He finds himself smiling at the action.

"How do you have so many sugary things?" Etho asks. "It's so unfair. You don't get anything like this in the lake."

"Guess you've got to learn how to grow sugarcane," Bdubs jokes. Etho tilts his head. "Oh, it's

like... a plant or something. And they use it to make sugar?" Bdubs hand instinctively goes for his phone before remembering, oh yeah. No connection. "I don't actually know that much about it."

"So it just grows?" Etho asks.

"I think so."

"Can you get me some?" He looks so hopeful that Bdubs feels a little bad laughing.

"No, I don't think I can. I wouldn't even know where to buy it." Etho's fins once again droop, but they stand up as soon as he's taken another two pieces. Bdubs has progressed to handfuls at this point, too impatient to eat slowly. "We're planning to go swimming today, by the way."

"And what makes you think you can do that?" Etho says, and what Bdubs might've interpreted as a threat before is clearly teasing to him today. He can see the slight crease in the corner of Etho's eyes where he's suppressing a smile.

"The fact there's three of us and only one of you," Bdubs teases right back. Etho pouts at him, filling his mouth with a handful of cereal. "Besides, I'm giving you a warning! You'll know to stay out of our way."

"Or *in* your way."

"If that's your choice then I'm not going to stop you." Bdubs decides with a shrug. He isn't going to argue with the creature with sharp teeth.

He makes pancakes once the sun is fully over the horizon. The first one he leaves out by the pier. Skizz is stumbling down the stairs by pancake three.

"Bdubs, did you know I love you, man?" Bdubs laughs, sliding Skizz the plate with two already prepared with chocolate spread.

"I could hear it more often." He flips another finished pancake onto a plate, deciding to jump straight into the next one instead of garnishing it. Skizz is here now, that can be his responsibility.

Once they've made enough to be an appropriate offering for a slumbering Tango, he makes Skizz take it up for him whilst Bdubs sits at the table to eat his own. He peers up, trying to look through the window of the door. It looks like the pancake he left outside is gone. He hopes Etho enjoyed it.

It takes about fifteen minutes for Tango to even get down the stairs. Bdubs microwaved them at the ten minute mark so they aren't colder than the lake water by the time Tango eats them. He heads upstairs whilst they're sitting around the table, changing into some actual clothes and attempting to dig out his swimming trunks.

He's not sure if Etho will bother them whilst they're swimming. Despite first impressions, he seems almost... like he wants to fit in. Etho hasn't outright said he's lonely, but given the state of disrepair of the surroundings, there obviously aren't many visitors that fit Etho's standards. He wonders if Etho can talk to fish. Maybe he should ask him about that. But wouldn't that be a little awkward if he's eating fish? 'Hey, nice weather we're having. By the way, I'm eating you for lunch.'

That feels like Etho's humour.

"Bdubs!" He straightens at the call, squinting his eyes as he tries to work out where it came from. "Bdubsdubs!" Ah. He walks over, unhooking the window latch and swinging it open. The reflection

of the sun across the lake is close to blinding him, blinking hard as he shields his eyes.

"What do you want, Tango?" He shouts back, looking down at the roofed patio. He thinks that's Tango on the pier. Though, the coloured monstrosity he's holding up makes it hard to tell.

"Skizz was right, they do have floaties out here!" Bdubs smiles, watching Tango wave them around above his head.

"Have fun blowing them up!" Bdubs calls, stepping away from the window to hear Tango's call of despair. He laughs, picking up his bandana and tying it back. He doesn't want his hair in his face whilst he's swimming. He forgoes wearing shorts, just pulling his trunks on instead.

He waves at Skizz – who looks to be finishing the washing up – on his way out of the house. He also grabs sunscreen from the side, because it's pretty much a guarantee that Tango has forgotten it. Impulse has tried his best to introduce it into Tango's life and has failed so far. Bdubs owes it to him, and to his own skin in this sun.

"Right, get in the shade," Bdubs calls, grabbing the end of a float and using that to pull it towards him. Tango obediently walks under the patio, still puffing into what looks like a giant pizza. Bdubs sighs, looking at the pile. "Impulse would probably have a way to do this faster."

"Like a pump?" Tango asks.

"Well, it's too late now!" Bdubs replies, taking a deep breath.

He sits Tango down to slather sunscreen on him before he launches himself straight into the lake without it. Skizz laughs, skin already sporting a white sheen. The sun is high in the sky now, and the heat has risen with it. When a breeze manages to catch the lake surface it's heavenly, but that seems rare at the moment.

"You know Impulse would be mad if you didn't," Bdubs reminds Tango, making sure he gets the cream right to the top of his neck. Tango groans, sitting back up when Bdubs taps him.

"What Impulse doesn't know wouldn't hurt him," he complains.

"It would hurt you when Impulse arrives and your skin is still as red as your trunks!" Skizz calls from where he's pushing the floats out into the lake. The blue has taken on a myriad of different colours, from doughnuts to pizza slices to pineapples. It makes Bdubs feel a bit like a kid again.

Tango huffs but makes no further complaints until Bdubs is finished. At which point Bdubs forces him to at least help with Bdubs' back before he goes bombing into the water.

"Oh, I should go and get the camera!" Skizz announces. "Take lots of photos to show Impy when he gets here."

"And send to Zed!" Tango calls. "Make him jealous that we're out here enjoying the weather whilst he's over in dreary old England."

Bdubs laughs, shaking his head, "Are you two shmucks really going to do all that walking just to show off?"

"What's the point of a holiday if you don't post all the pictures online, Bdubs, come on, dude!" Tango and Bdubs laugh. "I'll be back in a minute. Don't let Tango in the water until I'm ready!"

"Aw, Skizz!"

"I want some cool photos of you jumping in!" Bdubs laughs, standing up as Tango pats his shoulder.

"I'm sure you'll survive another minute."

"Yeah and then I gotta wait for Skizz to mess with all the settings," Tango grumbles, staring at the water with his arms crossed. Bdubs isn't even going to reply to his pouting. He just checks that the cooler bag is untouched where they left it. At least he'll know the culprit if anything goes missing.

"If you don't survive can I have your computer?" Bdubs chances.

"Absolutely not. You've made me put the horrible sticky sauce on."

"It's sunscreen! Not- not chocolate sauce!"

"It might as well be!"

"What are you two arguing about now?" Skizz asks, camera in hand. Tango leaps up, and they both yell at him not to run. He walks, with a glare at them, onto the pier.

"You better get some good pictures of me, Skizz!" Tango yells.

Bdubs sits back, leaning on the fence to watch them both for a while. Skizz trying to snap the most unflattering photos of Tango that he can whilst Tango throws water in his direction. Bdubs' attention is still drawn to the larger expanse of the water, though. He finds himself looking for a patch of white at the surface, or the glint of something shimmering.

He doesn't see anything.

"Bdubs, are you coming in the water or not?!" Tango calls, waving his hands. He's climbed onto the flamingo, floating about like an idiot.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" Bdubs calls back. And then he does the exact thing they warned Tango not to do, and takes a running leap straight into the water.

"We should probably move him." Tango's voice wakes Bdubs up. He yawns, tries to open his eyes, and then immediately winces at the sunlight directly overhead.

"Move me where?" He grumbles, unsure if he's ready to commit to their shenanigans. He didn't think such a minor disruption to his sleeping schedule would cause him to be this tired, but, *apparently*, he decided the bright pink pool lounge was the perfect place to nap.

"Out of the sun! You're just lying in it, and after bothering me so much." Bdubs stretches, tries to sit up, and immediately topples straight into the water.

It's still fresh, the temperature giving him a bit of a shock. He opens his eyes, looking at the sunlight filtering through the surface. The water is clearer than most lakes, he can just about see the bottom where he is now. But everything still blurs into murky darkness in the distance. Except, in the distance, he swears he can see-

A hand catches him beneath his arm, dragging him towards the sun. Bdubs kicks his legs, taking a deep breath as they surface.

"Bdubs! Are you okay, man?" Bdubs kicks, treading water easily.

"I'm fine! I can hold my breath!"

"Well, with your height I'm not sure you have the greatest lung capacity," Tango teases, floating over on the doughnut with gentle paddles.

"Hey!" Bdubs pushes water at Tango the best he can, managing to send a splash over him. Tango laughs, splashing him back.

"At least you're awake now," Skizz says, sighing. "And so are the rest of us." Bdubs laughs, pushing some of his hair out of his face.

"So you'll be okay if I just-" Bdubs takes a deep breath, ducking back underneath the water. He can see Skizz looking down at him, so he swims a bit further out, careful not to get too far from the surface.

He feels something brush his leg, looking down to see Etho peering at him through the darkness. Etho tilts his head, as if in question, and Bdubs tilts his back. Etho makes a series of chittering noises, before finally rolling his eyes and simply holding a hand out. Bdubs glances backwards, to where he can see the bright floats and Skizz's legs.

He reaches out and takes the hand.

Etho dives, pulling Bdubs along with him. Bdubs knew he must be able to move fast, but he didn't know it was fast enough to force Bdubs to close his eyes against the water stream. And to achieve this speed whilst Etho has another person in tow... Bdubs can feel the pressure on his lungs tightening. He gives it another two seconds, unsure what Etho wants from him, before tugging their joined hands upwards. Etho changes course immediately, and seconds later Bdubs is surfacing with a spray of droplets. He looks across, finding Tango and Skizz are still at the floats. Tango spots him first, voices too quiet for Bdubs to make out.

He can't keep himself from laughing, the exhilaration bubbling up from his lungs. Etho hasn't surfaced with him, probably circling down below, but Bdubs wants nothing more than to tell him how incredible that was. How lucky he feels to experience it.

"How are you all the way out there?!" Tango cries. Bdubs can just about see the shocked look on his face.

"How's that for lung capacity!" Bdubs yells back.

"You- How'd you even swim that fast?!"

"Wouldn't you like to know!" Bdubs looks down, trying to catch sight of Etho underneath the water to take him back.

He's completely vanished.

Oh what a-

They've managed to drag all the floats back onto the patio for the night. The fire roars in the middle of them, an amber light against the black sky. Bdubs yawns, sinking down into the seat. Usually, he'd be asleep by now, but somehow he got roped into making s'mores. He could curl up on this chair and go to sleep right this moment if he really wanted to.

"Who's had some of the marshmallows?" Skizz asks, levelling them both with accusing stares. The biscuit and chocolate packets are under his other arm. Bdubs glances at the lake.

"Uh, I did!" He lies. "To snack on."

Tango huffs, "We didn't go out and get more marshmallows just for you to eat them all!"

"I had *three!*"

"Eating us out of house and home, he is." Bdubs rolls his eyes, kicking back in the seat and crossing his arms. Skizz pours the contents of the bags into three separate bowls, one for each of them. Saves them from reaching around a fire because they know their luck well enough.

"It's been nice so far, hasn't it?" Skizz asks, passing Bdubs his bowl. There's already an opened packet of skewers, Etho obviously didn't have those. Bdubs sticks a marshmallow on one, holding it over the flame.

"I think so," Tango replies. "I'm excited to show this place to Impy. He could use a proper break." Skizz nods.

"I mean, it's only slightly haunted." Bdubs notices Skizz looking at him as he says that and groans.

"Don't tell me you actually told him to bring all that junk." The less than muffled laughter is a good enough answer. "You guys!"

"It's important information! We could film *Exploring A Haunted House* vlogs like all those cool kids!" Tango waves his arms.

"We are far past the point of being cool *kids*," Bdubs replies. Tango quickly pulls his burning marshmallow from the flame, blowing it out.

"You could at least let me pretend!" He says, biting off the burnt bits.

"The way you're acting right now is pretty childish," Skizz throws in and immediately grabs Tango's ire.

"What do you mean?!"

"You're literally talking with your mouth full, dude!"

Bdubs reaches for two biscuits, squeezing the marshmallow between them. Then, with a glance at the other two to make sure they're still arguing, he leans down and plants it towards the fence (where he sat on purpose.) And, sure enough, a hand reaches out just as fast and snatches it from the deck, leaving only a splatter of water in return. He waits a few seconds, then grabs another marshmallow, sticking it on the skewer.

He manages to sneak another two to Etho, eating one himself because he *is* the one putting all the work in here. He also eats three squares of chocolate whilst they aren't looking, so everything evens out. Tango and Skizz have both had a can of chilled beer or two, so it doesn't take much for Bdubs to offer to clean up whilst they head inside.

The moon is overhead – what little there is of it. Only a slither of a crescent remains, glowing bright against the stars, and Bdubs wonders what the lake will look like in its absence. The temperature has dropped, wisps of smoke still floating from the fire pit. Bdubs regrets not bringing a jacket out with him.

"Do you have any more?" Etho asks, face poking out of the water. Bdubs looks down at him over the rail, crossing his arms on it.

"You have a lot of nerve asking that after your stunt earlier!" Bdubs tells him, watching the way Etho's hair floats at the surface. "I had to swim all the way back!"

"It was fun though, right?" Etho asks, not a hint of an apology in his voice. Bdubs huffs at him, regretting the fact there's nothing to throw from up here. At least he's got something even better.

"No more marshmallows." Bdubs shakes the packet for emphasis. Etho's fins drop, ever so dramatic.

"Ever?" He asks, actually sounding a little heartbroken.

"Until tomorrow night, you sugar addict."

"Oh thank goodness—" Etho rests his hand over his forehead, "—I don't know what I'd be forced to do otherwise." Bdubs snorts, shaking his head.

"You'd have to grow legs and get a job," Bdubs tells him. "Unless you can find one as a fisher. Maybe a diver."

"You mean *pay* for my own things?" Etho asks, gasping. "Outrageous. That's what you're here for."

"For another week and a half," Bdubs tells him, because he thinks it's important Etho knows. "We're only here on holiday."

"Oh." Etho looks down, expression hidden by the darkness. "Right, of course." Oh no, he looks sad. This is terrible, how does Bdubs undo this?

"I'm sure you'll survive!" He tries. "And maybe we'll come back here at some point!"

"But you'll come to see me in the morning?" Etho asks.

"Yeah," Bdubs agrees. "I'll bring you breakfast, you freeloader."

He brings a different cereal the next day, something cinnamon this time. He doesn't think Etho has tried it before, because his face scrunches up before he shoves more in his mouth. Bdubs smiles, watching him fondly, and proceeds to answer even more of Etho's questions about human life. This time, the focus is more on where Bdubs normally lives, what having a job actually entails, and despite Bdubs' best efforts, money. At least it seems like Etho isn't still upset after last night. He's very upset when Bdubs can't explain the economy to him, though. Bdubs doesn't want to admit he's pretty sure it's mostly made up. That would be like telling Etho he's won.

The three of them still don't have a plan for the day until they're sitting around the table, omelettes on each of their plates (he left a bit out for Etho before the others woke up, as usual. It's amazing how fast routines form.) Skizz is still yawning, Tango is face first in a mug of coffee.

"I think," Bdubs starts, looking at the crowd around the table, "we should have a lazy day today." They went swimming yesterday, Tango and Skizz were out the day before, and they had a walk the day before that. For a holiday, they've had very little time to relax so far. And if Bdubs thinks it'll be the perfect opportunity to hang out with Etho then that's just a bonus!

"Good, because you're going to have to peel me off this table," Tango mutters. He tips the mug into

his mouth, glaring into it as he finds it empty.

"You know, if you went to bed earlier-"

"No. Not an option." Bdubs shakes his head, sipping his own coffee. There isn't much more he can do to help. If Tango wants to be punished for his own decisions then that's up to him.

"I might read something, then," Skizz says, shrugging. "I've brought all these books and haven't opened a single one."

"Imagine deciding to spend your time reading," Tango teases, "when you could be doing something productive like video games instead."

"And how do you plan to do that without getting up from this table?"

"By begging Bdubs really really nicely?" Tango turns to look at him and Bdubs holds his hands up.

"Nope!" He replies. "In fact, I'm going to wash up." He picks up the empty plates before either of them can even argue with him about it. Not that they would, because who really wants to do washing up? Tango groans, slumping onto the wood, only to revive when Bdubs returns with a fresh mug of coffee for him.

He's not sure what the best way to hang out with Etho will be. Does he trust the guy enough to go swimming without telling one of the others? Because the moment he tells them, they'll start reciting pool safety and tell him off for trying to swim on his own. And he wouldn't be alone, but also he would. It's complicated.

He'll just head out and hope for the best. He slides the dishes onto the drying rack, making them officially somebody else's problem. It'll likely still end up being his, but he can say least pretend it isn't for a little while. Then he darts up the stairs, hoping his trunks are dry from yesterday. The sunscreen should still be on the counter, he just needs to grab it on his way out. As much as he likes Etho, he's not risking a sunburn in this heat for him.

(He'll try not to think about how he likes Etho a concerning amount for how long he's actually known him. How the guy could still just be a figment of his imagination made up these last three days. And he'll ignore the way this feels like when he was a kid, meeting somebody at camp and getting butterflies in his stomach, and wanting to be around them, make them proud, get their approval-

Nope! He won't think about any of that.)

Tango predictably curls up on the sofa, and Skizz takes the comfy hanging chair by him, the two occasionally exchanging idle chatter. It's during one of these exchanges that Bdubs takes the chance to sneak past, slipping through the open backdoor and plucking the sunscreen up on his way past. He walks to the end of the pier, sitting down and squeezing a line down his leg. He checked it was environmentally friendly yesterday. If he damaged Etho's home with his carelessness he's not sure he'd forgive himself.

He continues onto his other leg, which is when Etho pokes his head out of the water.

"What are you doing?" Etho asks, resting his arms on the pier. "You guys were doing this yesterday, too, but I couldn't figure it out."

"It's for the sun," Bdubs replies, still rubbing it into his skin. "I don't know how your skin works,

but we get burnt, go all red, our skin gets peely if we're out in it for too long. It's not very fun." Etho tilts his head, resting it on his crossed arms.

"That sounds dumb," he replies. Bdubs snorts.

"A little. Nothing I can do to change it but make sure I'm protected, though." Etho hums, pulling himself onto the pier fully.

"Let me help," he says.

"What?"

"Yesterday, you had help. I want to make sure you're protected." Etho has his hands in his lap, sitting patiently. Bdubs gets the feeling he's not allowed to say no here.

"Alright, alright, but I only need help with my back. It's hard to reach." Etho nods eagerly, holding his hands out ready. So Bdubs squirts some into his open palms, sitting back and letting Etho rub it into his back whilst Bdubs works on the rest.

He tries to ignore the close proximity; the way he can feel the webbing on Etho's fingers against his skin. Each little hum Etho makes, tail flapping absentmindedly. Despite the sharpness of Etho's nails, Bdubs doesn't feel one scratch. It's almost tender, the way Etho works the cream into his skin.

"Are you supposed to go that red?" Etho asks, and Bdubs just about squeaks.

"Yes! That's totally normal, nothing to worry about, you don't even need to think about it." Even though he can't see Etho's face, he can feel the judging eyebrow raise. But Etho clearly doesn't know enough to argue with him, continuing silently.

With both of them, it doesn't take long until Bdubs is done, and Etho even thinks to ask, "So what are you doing out here?" Bdubs turns to look at him. It's amazing how pale Etho's skin is in the sun, more than even Tango's.

"Am I not allowed to hang out with a friend?" Bdubs replies, smiling. Etho's eyes widen. "I thought we could go swimming together, instead of you ditching me halfway across the lake!" It takes a moment for Etho to collect himself, and then he naturally responds with a giggle.

"It was funny though."

"Don't think I won't follow through on my threat of no marshmallows! I'm a very strong-willed man, Etho!" Etho laughs, tail flicking a spray of water up.

"Alright, alright, I won't abandon you this time. I just didn't want to get close enough they could see me, you know?"

"You're already forgiven, you dork." He shimmies forward, slipping into the lake without another word. "Now, are you gonna join me or what?" Etho laughs, pushing himself straight off the pier (oh those arms *are* strong.)

The splash pushes Bdubs back, until Etho's hand catches him, still grinning brilliantly. He looks so natural in the water, still and quiet whilst Bdubs frantically treads to stay above the surface.

"How long can you hold your breath for?" Etho asks, because of course he'd remember humans need to do that. Of course he'd even think to ask Bdubs to make sure! Of course he would!

"About thirty seconds," Bdubs replies, with the best shrug he can give in the water. "I don't go swimming very often, I've not needed to hold my breath for longer." Etho looks up like he's figuring something out in his head.

"I can work with that," he decides.

"If I need to breathe sooner then I'll... hit you or something. I'll figure it out." Etho smiles. He holds out his hand, practically vibrating in excitement.

"Are you ready?" He asks. Bdubs places his hand in Etho's, squeezing it.

"Let's go."

Swimming with Etho can only be described as magical. The water rushes past Bdubs' skin, and he wonders if this is how dolphins feel. Etho moves effortlessly, tail propelling both of them forward like he doesn't even feel Bdubs' weight. How fast can Etho move on his own? It's no wonder that he appears and disappears at will.

It's still hard to keep his eyes open whilst they're moving, but Etho seems to adapt to that. He'll pause in locations, letting Bdubs swim around and watch small fish weaving between the plant life. Or he'll pick up a rock to show him the life that's hidden beneath it. All before pulling Bdubs back to the surface for a breath. They fall into a natural rhythm, exploring the lake with Etho as his tour guide. Occasionally, he finds somewhere at the surface to rest, telling Bdubs about the area from Etho's perspective. A good hunting ground, a place to relax, he stashes food on the rocks up there, a common place for trash.

They stop across the lake, the house standing tall against the forest. The sun shines through the trees, even though they've found a shadier spot. Bdubs sits on the bank, Etho lounging in a shallow spot beside him. He's looking towards the sky, at a flock of birds flying overhead.

"How far away do you live?" Bdubs turns to him at the question.

"It took us nearly a day to get here," he replies. "Of course, that's picking all three of us up as well." Etho still hasn't turned to look at him. "Not the kind of distance we can easily visit." He thinks it's important for Etho to know that this, whatever this *is*, is temporary. "And next week Impulse will be here, and it'll probably be even harder for me to sneak away like this. He's... outdoorsy."

Etho hums, "Is he nice?"

"Impulse? Oh, he's a massive softie. Like a big ol' teddy bear." Bdubs smiles. "If he and Tango hadn't been together forever I would've gone for it. Though I'm pretty sure they have a thing with somebody in another country, too. I have no idea, but I'm not getting in the way of it." He's heard a few conversations about Zedaph that sounded more than friendly, but until they say something Bdubs won't push it. As long as the three of them are happy, that's good enough for him.

"Together?" Etho asks, squinting his eyes. At least he's looking at Bdubs now. "That's like... all those humans that do the face stuff, right? And cuddling." Etho pats his hands together, making Bdubs snort.

"Yes, that's together. It's... usually two people who care deeply for each other and decide to commit to spending their lives together." Bdubs gotta use this to remind himself not to have kids, because this conversation is awkward enough already.

"I had friends like that," Etho says, his voice quiet. "We stuck close to each other. And then I

ended up here, and they went ahead and suddenly the stream wasn't there. I had no way to follow." He sighs, sinking into the water. "I don't know where they are anymore. So, it's just me. And this big lake." Bdubs swallows.

"I'd offer to bring you back with us, but you'd have to live in a swimming pool." He smiles at the silliness of the idea. "Just... drive you back in a bathtub. Perfect." It puts a smile back on Etho's face too, and that's what matters.

"Pretty sure I wouldn't fit in a bathtub that's your size." Etho holds his tail up. "This is a bit longer than those stubby legs of yours."

"Why does everybody call me short?!" Bdubs cries, falling back into the dirt as Etho laughs.

"Well, there's an easy answer to that." Bdubs throws a handful of soil at him, which only makes Etho laugh louder.

"That'll get in my scales!"

"Oh no, your poor scales on your *ever-so-long* tail!"

They continue to laugh, and Bdubs is glad this lake is so abandoned because they can probably be heard across half of it. Etho finally rolls to face Bdubs, the scales on his neck glittering.

"I'd like that," he says. "To go back with you."

"I wish you could."

Etho brings Bdubs back some time after lunch. They've changed position, Bdubs linking his arms around Etho's shoulders and trying to keep his legs out of Etho's way as he soars through the water. Bdubs has a list of things in his head he needs to write down; things to look up when he gets the chance to. The routes of rivers, local lakes, and swimming pools.

"And you'll come to see me tonight?" Etho asks, leaning on the end of the pier. Bdubs smiles at him.

"I'll try to." It's all he can promise. "And I'm very good at doing what I say I will." Etho gives a decisive nod, dropping off the pier and disappearing into the water. Bdubs catches a glimpse of scales before he vanishes completely.

Right. Time to face the music.

He didn't think to bring a towel out with him, instead rubbing his hair off with the shirt he slung to the side. If he's quiet then maybe he can get upstairs and change before they notice.

Skizz, predictably, confronts him at the door.

"Where have you been!" He shoots up from his chair, pointing at Bdubs' chest. "You didn't tell us where you were going, we have no way of contacting you- *have you been swimming?*"

Bdubs raises his hands, "Just in the shallow water by the bank! I didn't go anywhere deep!" He forgot how scary Skizz can be in his parent mode.

"That's still not safe! You should've had one of us out there with you. Or at least told us. What if something happened, Bdubs?!"

"I was fine!"

"You might be but what if you weren't!"

It occurs to Bdubs that he didn't realise how much trust he put in Etho until this moment. He could've drowned Bdubs. He could've attacked him, left him halfway across the lake. But he didn't. And Bdubs never even considered that he would. Going swimming together was *his* idea, even! He- maybe he should've thought this through more.

"I would've figured something out," Bdubs replies, even though he's not sure he would've. "I won't do it again."

"You shouldn't have done it to begin with!"

"Oh, are we yelling at Bdubs?" Tango asks, choosing this moment to walk down the stairs. "I can yell at Bdubs."

"We are not-"

"He went swimming in the lake and didn't think to tell us!" Skizz interrupts before Bdubs can finish his sentence.

"Ouch, I'm sure Impulse will be happy to hear that."

"Tango!" Bdubs cries.

"Nope, I'm with Skizz on this one. You would've yelled at us for doing the same thing." Bdubs finally gives up and just sulks, crossing his arms like a child.

"I won't do it again, alright! I just wanted a dip."

"You've been gone all morning!" Skizz points out, gesturing towards the clock on the wall. Bdubs doesn't point out how it doesn't seem like either of them were worried enough to come looking outside, even though it's *really* tempting.

"I'll make lunch as an apology, how about that?" Bdubs decides. "A nice, Bdubs patented lunch and I won't go in the water on my own anymore."

Skizz gives him a long, judging look, before finally declaring, "Fine." He walks to the living area. "But it better be the best lunch I've ever seen!"

Bdubs can live with that.

He ends up pulling apart half of the kitchen to make fried tacos, not a single cupboard left closed in his hunt for utensils. He's surprised the kitchen is so stocked considering the price of accommodation. He gets it, now, but surely a lake creature scaring off guests would be more reason not to stock this property as well. He wonders if the owner even knows about Etho. Maybe they do. But...Bdubs has his doubts. He could always ask.

Skizz and Tango are both waiting at the table by the time he's finished. Bdubs feels a little guilty that he can't set some outside for Etho. He spoons a few scoops of the meat into a bowl and slides it into the fridge. Hopefully he'll have a chance to take it out for him later.

"Finally!" Tango cries, picking a taco up before Bdubs has even put the plate on the table. "We were about to fade away."

"We'd spend a whole lot less on food if you did," Bdubs says, dropping into his seat and reaching for his own taco. "Anyway, Tango can wash up."

"What? That's not how this works!"

"No, I think that's perfect," Skizz agrees, nodding behind the shell. "Tango does the washing up."

"So Skizz has to do it for dinner then!" Tango argues. Skizz recoils, making Bdubs laugh as he leans back in his seat.

"That's how this works!" Tango reminds him. "If I'm doing lunch then you have to do dinner."

"But I was planning to cook," Skizz pokes Tango's arm. "Which means it would be *your* turn to wash up."

"I guess that means Tango just has to wash up both meals!" Bdubs shrugs, as innocent as he can act. "And tomorrow. Maybe the day after that, too."

"How did this even happen?!" Tango exclaims. He's not managed to eat a bite yet, whilst Bdubs is about halfway through his first one. "I thought we were ragging on Bdubs today!"

"Bdubs has redeemed himself with this lunch."

Bdubs laughs and lets the conversation lull as they eat. He thinks... maybe it's worth talking to them. In ambiguous terms, at least. They're his best friends and he can't throw that away for somebody he's known for less than three days, no matter how cute he might be.

"What would you guys do if you think you're making an impulsive decision?" He asks, because he thinks that's what he's doing here.

"Tell Impulse," Tango replies, without hesitation. At Bdubs' look, he holds his hands up, "What! If it's a really terrible idea he'll tell me. Otherwise, he's a great enabler."

"What kind of impulsive decision could you be making all the way out *here*?" Skizz asks, giving Bdubs a look more scathing than his own. "If you're thinking of buying the house then I'm afraid all three of us are probably too poor for that." Buying the house, that could be a good solution... no, focus on the problem at hand!

"I just- it's hard to explain, okay?" Because they're missing half the facts, and Bdubs doesn't think he can give them. "I really want to help someone, but I'm not sure how to. And all the options I have would be pretty life-altering, and I'm not sure if I'm moving too fast? Or if this person even wants this?"

"Didn't you and Scar break up like... last month?" Skizz asks.

Bdubs sighs, "It's not- it's not a *relationship*. Just friends. At least, I think we're friends?"

"To me, it sounds like you need to communicate before you do anything," Tango says. And oh god, it must be bad if Tango is being the sensible one. "Because if the decision affects both of you then you need to make sure it's what you both want." Bdubs privately wonders how much of this comes from the long-distance relationship he may or may not have.

"That's a good plan," Bdubs agrees. "It just feels like I'm on a time limit, I guess?"

"You'll figure it out," Skizz encourages him. "And if we need to do anything, like go out with you

to get network, then just let us know. We're happy to help."

"I... appreciate that," Bdubs tells them, doing his best to provide a confident smile. "I'll figure things out, don't you worry about it."

They sit and play video games from afternoon until evening. All three of them are curled up together, even when it gets unbearably hot. Bdubs ends up tying his hair back, trying to ignore how the sides feel wet. It's worth it, though, to spend time with them. That's the whole reason they booked this holiday together, after all.

Bdubs hopes he doesn't mess everything up. But at the same time, he wishes Etho was here playing with them. He can see him fitting in with their odd friendship group. And they have time to figure this out. Even if Bdubs is just able to give Etho more information, or maybe take him to another body of water so he can search for his friends. Tango is right, though. It's important that he talks to him and they get on the same page about what Etho wants.

It's... been an awful lot to figure out in only a few days. Bdubs is looking forward to taking it easier.

Skizz, as decided, makes dinner for them. Neither of them bring up what they discussed at lunch, and Bdubs appreciates them for it. He's chosen some good friends. Well, if Tango weren't taking apart every single mechanic of the game they just played and discussing it with them. Bdubs does not need to hear anything else about RNG. This should be Impulse's job, damn computer people.

Bdubs isn't able to see Etho until late that day. The world is painted in a rose light, the sun nearly obscured by the trees. In his hands, he has the bowl of leftover meat and a few marshmallows (in a separate bowl, though he's not sure if Etho would actually care if they weren't.) He's ready to crawl into bed, but he sits himself down on the pier, knowing Skizz and Tango are busy for at least a few minutes.

Etho emerges like clockwork, jumping onto the wood and holding his hands out. Bdubs laughs, giving him a bowl without complaint.

"What's this?" Etho asks, tilting the bowl around in his hands. "Some kind of meat, right?"

Bdubs nods, "I made tacos for lunch, so like... hard wheat shells – that's the stuff bread is made of – and then you put meat in and some salad stuff, sometimes cheese, they're nice. Very customisable."

"So sandwiches, but more limited?" Etho looks at the meat, eyebrows pinched.

"I- maybe you'll be able to try one at some point," Bdubs laughs, rubbing his neck. "I don't think I'm explaining myself very well."

"I appreciate you trying!" Etho grins at him. He looks back down at the bowl. "But, how do I eat it?"

Bdubs has to spend about five minutes showing Etho how to properly hold a fork. Next time, he's just getting a spoon. It's not Etho's fault, the poor guy, because he's obviously seen people use forks before. But the webbing between his fingers is working against him. It's a relief when Bdubs can pass over the marshmallows as a reward for his hard work.

"Yes," Etho hisses, tail wiggling as he greedily takes the bowl. There's not even a pretence of trying to eat like a human, he shoves one straight into his mouth. Bdubs smiles, looking up to see the stars

faintly appearing in the sky. He'd try to find the moon, but all that's there is a dark shadow in the sky. A shame, really, because it glows so prettily out here.

"I feel like we should talk," Bdubs tells him. Etho turns, tilting his head. His eyes have narrowed warily.

"Humans always say that when something's wrong." Bdubs wonders how many times he's heard it in conversations drifting over the lake.

"Nothing's wrong," Bdubs reassures him. "Things are good, in fact. But I want to make sure we're on the same page with things."

"Oh?"

"Like- I want to help you." It's easier just to say it. And seeing Etho's face light up, he thinks it was the right thing to do. "But I also don't want to overstep anything. Etho, are you happy here?"

Etho frowns, "It's secure. It's comfortable. I have enough food and there's plenty of space, no fighting for territory..." The words are hesitant but seem almost rehearsed. Bdubs doesn't let himself assume Etho's been thinking about this too just yet.

"But are you happy here?" He repeats. Etho swallows, the gills on his neck flaring.

"I don't think so." He doesn't look at Bdubs. "I mean, it could be worse, but-"

"It could be better, too, right?" Etho nods. "What do you want to do, then? Do you want to find your friends?"

"I think I just don't want to be alone anymore," Etho sighs. Bdubs hums. He can work with that.

"How about tomorrow," he starts, watching Etho carefully for his reaction, "you can meet my friends." Etho tenses, fingers tightening around the empty bowl. But he haltingly nods.

"I can do that."

"They'll like you," Bdubs tells him. "And they're good at planning things out! We can decide what to do next."

"That makes it sound far more exciting than it is," Etho says, with a nervous sounding laugh.

"It could be exciting!" Bdubs points out. "We just need to figure it all out." Etho nods again, fins flicking.

"Tomorrow morning, then," he says. He looks at the sky, to the shadowed moon. "I'll be here. I'll be ready." Bdubs smiles at him.

"I'll bring you more marshmallows?"

"Perfect."

Bdubs wakes up far earlier than he means to. His stomach feels like it's full of butterflies, pressing his hands into his face. Part of him doesn't want to get up today. For hours last night, he tried to decide what to say to Tango and Skizz. But, every time he looked at them, he found the words dying in his throat. Which leaves today.

Bdubs pushes himself upright, rubbing a hand through his hair. He washes his face, brushes his teeth, and starts to feel a little more human. It does nothing to alleviate the anxiety in his chest. Guess that's just an unfortunate part of being human, huh? By the time he's shuffled into clothes, he's at least shoved down the urge to crawl back into bed and hide.

Tango and Skizz's doors are still closed, so Bdubs treads lightly down the stairs. Some beams of sunlight filter through the room, catching the dust Bdubs kicks up by moving. Despite this, the house remains mostly enveloped in darkness. The full brightness of the sun struggles to breach the trees and the horizon and Bdubs doesn't bother to turn any lights on. He's already grown familiar enough to find the cupboard, pulling the bag of marshmallows down. He places a few into a bowl, pouring cereal around it. Plus a bowl for himself, minus marshmallows. Whilst he's in the kitchen, he puts away the plates left overnight on the drying rack.

He notices Etho's silhouette lying on the pier already, opening the door handle with his elbow. "Good morning!" He calls, carefully closing the door behind him. There's a spike of concern in his chest when Etho doesn't move, though, taking bigger strides down the pier. "Etho?"

Lying prone on the pier, Etho is entirely humanoid in *both* halves.

Bdubs almost drops the bowls, placing them on the pier in a daze as he rushes forward. Etho's eyes are closed, white eyelashes brushing his skin, and he doesn't react when Bdubs drops to his knees beside him. There are still patches of scales on his neck, and Bdubs thinks he might still have thin lines where his gills should be. But where his tail would start are normal human hips, his toes dipping into the water.

"Etho, you gotta wake up for me, man." Etho does not. His chest rises and falls, and Bdubs can feel a heartbeat under his fingers. He's alive, but Bdubs doesn't know why he isn't waking. And he doesn't know if his skin will burn, or why he's got human legs, or what his clothes size is-. He runs his hands through his hair, taking a couple of long, steadying breaths.

First things first, getting Etho inside before the sun gets any higher. Bdubs crouches down, careful with where he positions his hands around slim limbs. Etho packs a good amount of muscle in his skinny physique, though Bdubs knew that already. The bowls are left abandoned as Bdubs hefts Etho into his arms, relieved that he's not a weakling either. He has to use his elbow to bash open the backdoor again, walking Etho to the couch.

He makes sure he's comfortable on there, covering him with a blanket. He'll have to find some clothes for him later – Tango's might fit him – but trying to dress the guy whilst he's unconscious feels all kinds of wrong.

Then, Bdubs slumps in the hanging chair, picks up a video game controller, and settles in to wait.

The monotonous roguelike isn't enough to keep his thoughts from straying and swirling swiftly into anxiety. What if Etho doesn't wake up? It's suddenly become even more important to make sure this introduction goes well. At least they have the spare bed because Zed couldn't make it. Now he's back to the dilemma of what Etho eats. This is a lot, and Bdubs has never been good under pressure!

"Bdubs." Bdubs nearly jumps out of his seat, which would be a bad idea considering his feet don't touch the ground. "Why is there a strange man asleep on the sofa?" Bdubs turns to see Tango standing hesitantly in the staircase, still wearing the joggers he sleeps in.

This is not the way he wanted this conversation to go. But it's okay! He can salvage things.

"It's a long story?" Bdubs offers, instead. Great salvaging right there.

"We haven't even been here for a week!" Tango cries, brushing his hair back. Bdubs finally remembers to pause his game at the sound of damage.

"Look we were- we were *planning* to tell you guys about it today," Bdubs explains, well he's not really explaining anything, but he's *trying* to, "But I didn't expect him to be like this!"

"Naked or-"

"Human!"

Tango blinks at him, then presses his fingers into his eyes.

"You... mean to tell me he wasn't human?"

"Yes?" Bdubs realises how bad that sounds. "Maybe- I think it would be smart to wait for Skizz to explain this." He looks at Etho, still curled up peacefully. "And maybe for Etho to wake up."

"Etho, huh?" Tango looks at him.

"I was thinking he might fit into some of your clothes?"

"Oh my gosh."

Bdubs can hear the exact moment Tango tells Skizz what's going on. He kicks back in the chair absently, letting himself swing. He wishes Etho would just wake up. He had ideas of how all this should work, even if they weren't very solid. He'd make breakfast, and he'd come outside with Tango and Skizz, and they'd all talk and introduce themselves and it would be *fine*. Instead, Tango and Skizz are coming downstairs and Etho is still asleep and Bdubs doesn't even know why!

"I'm making breakfast," Skizz calls. Bdubs is grateful that they're trying to keep some normalcy. Tango just takes Bdubs' abandoned controller and turns the game back on, curling up in his own armchair. Which leaves Bdubs leaning on the side of the chair, simply watching Etho rest.

Things could be better, he's sure. But they could be a lot worse too. Neither of them are yelling, or telling Bdubs to kick Etho out. They've not even jumped into accusations or interrogations yet. Which is good, because Bdubs desperately doesn't want to scare Etho off. He trusts them. He really seems to trust them and Bdubs doesn't want to ruin that.

He's afraid he does the moment Etho starts to stir. Skizz is frying bacon and Etho grumbles something incomprehensible, rolling into the pillows. The sun is shining fully through the window now, morning in full swing regardless of the momentous change. Bdubs leans forward in his seat, cautious of getting too close.

"Etho?" He asks, trying to prod him into gently waking. Etho mumbles something else with a few clicks in it before yawning. Then, much to Bdubs' relief, he's opening his eyes. Still the same heterochromatic colours as before. Still the same sharp teeth, too, which is a bit more worrying.

"Bdubs?" Etho asks, rubbing his eyes. He goes to move and freezes, every muscle in his body tensing. "Oh. I actually did it."

"Did what, Etho?" Bdubs asks. "Because you have a *lot* of explaining to do." Etho scratches at his hair. He tries to push himself up, dragging his legs over as he sits. It's like he doesn't know how to

use them. The blanket is pulled a little tighter around his shoulders.

"First though!" Skizz interrupts, carrying over plates of sandwiches. Bdubs can see bacon sticking out, as well as the white of an egg. "Breakfast. I'm sure you must be starving." Etho eyes Skizz warily, taking the plate when it's offered but holding it close. Bdubs takes his far more gracefully. Tango just picks up the sandwich without the plate, leaving Skizz to put it on the side table for him.

"This is a sandwich," Etho says, looking over at Bdubs. "You couldn't put this in a taco."

Bdubs splutters, "Are you still going on about this?!"

"Hey, I'm just trying to learn!"

"What do you have against tacos?!"

Skizz coughs, his plate in his lap. They both turn to look at him, and Skizz puts on a friendly smile.

"It's a pleasure to meet a friend of Bdubs', my name's Skizz!" Skizz is holding his hand out, much to Etho's confused expression. He doesn't release the grip on his bowl.

"It's, um, nice to meet you," Etho tries. "I'm Etho. I live- lived in the lake."

"Lived *in* the lake?" Tango questions, raising an eyebrow. Skizz clicks his tongue at him, gesturing to Etho. Tango sighs, "I'm Tango. What do you mean by *in* the lake?" Etho looks absolutely terrified, eyes darting between the three of them as he tucks himself into the blanket.

"Etho used to have a tail," Bdubs takes pity on him, "instead of legs. He's been living in the lake after getting separated from his friends. He's also the person that stole our marshmallows."

"I did!" Etho agrees, quick to perk up. "They're very tasty."

"*You stole-*"

"So why doesn't he have a tail now?" Skizz interrupts Tango, holding up a hand. Tango grumbles something, taking a bite from his sandwich.

"I would also like to know this!" Bdubs agrees. "Because I was expecting to meet my fishy friend this morning."

"You still met him!" Etho points out. "Just... a little less fishy."

"Etho," Bdubs says, as serious as he can manage. "Explain." Bdubs can almost see the metaphorical fins pressing back against his head.

"Well, uh. Every new moon I can shift between forms?" Etho says. "I'm not sure why or how, I think our species is connected to the moon? There wasn't anybody to learn from, so we had to figure things out by ourselves. But it's something I can do!"

Bdubs takes a deep breath in, "And you didn't think to mention this?"

"I did *mean* to tell you about it," Etho explains, squeezing his hands around the plate. "But I kept looking at you and I... Kind of got distracted." Thankfully, Etho doesn't see Bdubs' eyebrows shoot up.

Tango is a lot more obvious with his, "*Oh.*"

"I trusted that you wanted to help," Etho continues, thankfully unaware of the other realisation they're having. "So I thought this would help too? I've just not used this form for some time now and I *kinda* forgot how everything works." That would make sense, considering Etho's legs have been completely still the entire time he's been talking.

"Is this what you were talking about last night?" Skizz asks, turning to look at Bdubs.

Bdubs nods, joking, "Guess I wasn't the only one planning to make an impulsive decision."

"They're perfect for each other already," Tango whispers. If he weren't so far away Bdubs would kick him.

"Oh, Impulse!" Skizz sits up, remembering. "We should probably tell him that we don't need the ghost hunting equipment now."

"So we're not going to tell him about the literal new person in our house, we're just going to tell him about the ghost not being real?"

"I thought the second part was implied." Bdubs smiles at the two, turning to Etho.

"Meet your crack team ready to help out," he jokes, listening to them squabble. "Once you finish eating we can get you some clothes?"

"Ew," Etho mutters. Bdubs laughs, shaking his head.

"Am I gonna have to bribe you with marshmallows to make you put clothes on?"

"I'm not used to them, okay!" Etho huffs at him. "Fabric is itchy and scratchy and you promised me marshmallows anyway."

"I did, didn't I?" Bdubs squints, trying to remember. "*Oh yeah they're still outside, hold on!*"

And as he walks back inside, both bowls in hand, he smiles as he sees the three of them sitting together. Etho is smiling, waving his hand at the television screen with big eyes, as Tango holds the controller up for him to see. They're laughing, and they're getting along, and something in Bdubs' chest untwists.

He thinks things are gonna work out.

End Notes

some fun bts notes!

- the friends etho lost are the other members of team canada: beef & pause! they were travelling together but ended up separated when they went ahead and the path they used dried up before etho could follow
- etho does end up living with them and trying to figure out being human. he wears a face mask to hide his very sharp teeth.
- i really like the idea of mer creatures that are connected to the moon somehow, but have much thought into it. i just think they're neat.
- zit are really in the background of all this trying to negotiate a long distance, poly

relationship lmao

- this was planned & started before double life, so a lot of dynamics established in that series don't appear here - sorry!

my tumblr is, as ever, [here!](#)

thank you for reading!

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