

the stories we tell and the truths untold

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by [oh_snapperss](#)

Summary

Truth be told, Etho hasn't ever really gotten the... point of scary stories, really. Sure, he'd been afraid of the occasional mob or fall, but ultimately he knew he was safe. The universe was kind, kinder than most people knew, why should he fear it? For all the campfire stories Etho had heard others swap over drinks and meals, he'd never really understood the appeal of it being scary. To him, it felt like just that—a story. Something never to be feared, just enjoyed.

“C’mon, Etho, don’t you enjoy being scared out of your wits? Just for fun?” Pause grins, and there’s something in it that feels unfamiliar to Etho. Again, another phrase he can’t understand. The other players have always described fear in ways he’s not sure exist.

“I mean, sure? Why not?” He settles, taking his hands off the wood and instead leaning forward to rest his elbows against his legs. The fire crackles as if laughing in the wind, sharing his sentiment that such fear doesn’t exist. Etho snorts softly in agreement. “Tell me a scary story, Pause.”

Notes

hey guys what if team canada told the story of Evo incredibly inaccurately around a

campfire and what if etho feels watched?

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

“Hey, Pause, if you’ll get wood for a fire, I’ll set up the tents?” Beef drops his bag unceremoniously on the forest floor. After a day of gathering supplies, they’re all exhausted in this new world, and with the sun steadily traveling towards the horizon, Pause had suggested they settle for the night, instead of fighting through it. Little supplies and no armor certainly didn’t lend itself to quick traveling, especially with the complete lack of villages so far.

Pause cranes his head up to look up incredulously from where his hands are braced against his knees, breathing heavily. “Beef, we don’t have tents! What do you *mean?*”

“Oh... c’mon man, it’s about the principle. I can go kill a rabbit?” Beef shrugs, then winces. “Man, walking all day... ain’t no joke.”

“The principle?” Etho has to stop where he’s sorting their few supplies just to laugh.

“*Yeah*, Etho, the principle!” Beef starts picking up rocks around the area, placing them in a circle for a campfire.

“Principle of what? Pretending we have tents?” Etho sounds incredulous, holding back a snort. *Only Beef.*

“You know they called me that in–nevermind.” Beef cuts off his own joke as both Etho and Pause break into laughter. “That doesn’t work–but it’s not my fault we don’t have any!”

“Then why would you offer–okay. Principle it is.” Shaking his head, Pause straightens up, pulling the already worn stone axe from his back. “I’ll chop the wood, but only cause I’ve got the only axe right now. You fellas better help out.”

“Yeah, yeah, get chopping, wood boy.” Beef retorts.

Etho just rolls his eyes. He leans back on his knees to sit on his haunches, resting his hands on his legs for a moment. They’re dirty, covered in mud, soil, and scratches from the day so far. Later,

he'll clean them off in the river he can hear nearby, maybe even wrap them to protect the scratches, but for now he wipes his forehead off with his sleeve, glancing up through the trees. Sunlight filters through them, although shadows around their clearing are quickly growing as the night approaches. There's a tiny breeze filtering through the woods, sending the branches into a gentle dance that Etho has always enjoyed seeing. The rustles in the foliage beyond seems to promise food and life, although he can't see any cows or sheep yet, which is unfortunate. They'll have to make do with the thin sleeping pallets for the night. Inhaling deeply, Etho can't help but love how clean and *new* the air itself feels—it's the fresh air of a world just freshly created by the universe, and Etho always feels slightly awed every time.

After all, the universe loves him. His lips curl into a smile under his mask for a moment, and then he's brought back to reality, where Beef seems to have stubbed his toe on one of the rocks he'd just placed.

“Crap!”

“You good?” Etho asks, trying to sort through his belongings again. Had he always had two wooden pickaxes? *Why did he have two wooden pickaxes?*

“Yeah, I'm fine,” Beef grumbles somewhere behind him.

A few beats of silence, then—“Sun's already setting... I can't believe this.” A dull thunk of the axe hitting wood sounds, then another, and another as Pause sinks his axe into one of the smaller trees, until it finally crashes to the ground, crushing a couple bushes below. “Got us some wood!”

Etho glances up from counting how much wheat he has. “Pause... that's how day works. Sun rises, sun goes down...moon comes up... moon goes down...”

“I know! But it just seems fast!” Pause says, quick to rise to Etho's banter. He grunts as he heaves the axe down on the fallen tree, before dragging them over to the circle of stones.

“...okay. How's the campfire going?” Beef asks, cutting both of them off. Etho twists to look at him—he's sitting on the forest floor, glaring down at his foot as if he'd done more to it than simply whacking it on a rock.

“I've got some wood. I'll get it started,” Pause stops for a moment, glancing down to Beef with exasperation and amusement. “You good?”

“Yeah, I’m *fine*,” Beef says with a tone that says the exact opposite, before whipping his head to look at Etho. “Etho, what are you doing? We’re working hard, you’re just–sitting there!”

“I’m *supervising*,” Etho corrects. “and you’re *just sitting* too!”

“...wh–no, go help start the fire!” Beef waves Etho towards Pause, and Etho rolls his eyes before scooching over to help pile sticks on. There’s dirt caked into his pants, and twigs digging into his knees, but it was easier than standing fully to take the few full steps over. With the sticks and logs in the pit, he leans back, letting Pause do the actual lighting since he has the only flint between the three of them.

For a moment, there’s silence, until the cracking of fire fills the air, and Etho sneezes at the smoke immediately blowing to his face. Beef clammers back to his feet with the air of a mortally wounded soldier, grumbling under his breath about smoke in his eyes.

“Beefers, can you bring over the pork?” Pause asks.

“Yeah, I got it,” Beef replies. Etho ducks instinctually, and sure enough, meat soars through the air a second later towards Pause, who catches it without missing a beat.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah, no problem!”

And so their dinner is cooked quickly, while Etho and Beef set up torches around their area in the hopes mobs won’t dare to come near in the night. It’s an easy routine for them–Pause always cooks, Etho sets traps for more food, and Beef sets up tents... except they don’t have tents this time. Or traps, for that matter. Not yet.

For now, pallets are laid out, and while Pause is turning the meat over, Beef rolls three logs into a triangle around the fire for them to sit on. All three of them eat unceremoniously and quickly–they haven’t had a good meal since arriving, after all. As the sun turns to brilliant pinks and oranges, Etho wipes his fingers on his pants and glances over at his bag. His fiddle is wrapped in there, and he’d love to play it, but something holds him back, this time. Beef raises his eyebrows at him, a silent request, but Etho shakes his head.

“I shouldn’t... don’t wanna make the cuts worse on my hands.”

Beef nods in understanding. “I have an idea for what we could do instead..”

By now, the sun has set fully, but the world hasn’t completely darkened. Etho can just make out the leaves of the bushes drenched in deepening shadows, and the fireflies have just started to flicker into existence. Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howls. Glancing up at the sky, Etho watches the final streaks of pink fade, replaced by the first of thousands of stars. As always, he smiles up at it—he knows what that star is. *Home*. The stars smile back as they twinkle into existence, as if greeting a friend. After a moment he tears his eyes away from the galaxy above, brought back by Beef’s statement. Both Pause and Beef are staring at him, and he realizes he must have ignored them by accident—a rarity. Usually he ignores them on purpose, just to be funny.

“Hmm?” Etho glances between them. “Wasn’t listening, sorry.”

“Yeah, we figured. You always do that—looking at the sky and forgetting the earth when the stars come out,” Beef says, as if it’s the most normal statement in the world.

“...do I?”

“*Yes,*” Both Pause and Beef say in unison.

“Oh,” Etho says, and while they look back at him, as always, he offers no explanation. He clears his throat, trying to move on. “What were you saying?”

“I was suggesting something...” Beef trails off, looking to Etho as if that would make him magically know what he said.

Etho raises his eyebrows. “Is it... sleeping?”

“Nope!”

“I like your thinking already,” he laughs, scooting on his log just barely toward the fire. The gentle wind on his back has turned unkind in the night, serving to bite with a chill.

“Thank you! Now hear me out, gentlemen....” Beef stops, glancing around the woods as if to make sure nothing else is listening. “*Scary stories* .”

Pause nods emphatically from his own log, looking rather enamored with the idea. Rolling his eyes, Etho sets aside all hope of a full night's sleep—not that he's ever had that with them. *Not that he cares.*

Another beat of silence passes, where Etho forgets to reply, and then Beef speaks again. “C'mon guys, it'll be fun!”

Etho settles his hands back into the rough bark, bracing himself against them. “I'm not saying otherwise...”

Truth be told, Etho hasn't ever really gotten the... point of scary stories, really. Sure, he'd been afraid of the occasional mob or fall, but ultimately he knew he was safe. The universe was kind, kinder than most people knew, why should he fear it? For all the campfire stories Etho had heard others swap over drinks and meals, he'd never really understood the appeal of it being *scary*. To him, it felt like just that—a story. Something never to be feared, just enjoyed.

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For a moment there's silence, broken only by the sounds of mobs out in the distance, the fire laughing, and crickets whispering, and Beef settles too, sitting on the ground in front of his log, far too close to the fire for what Etho would deem comfortable. Pause closes his eyes, and the shadows on his face, for a moment, seem to cast a warning over it. Etho's brows furrow—he's not sure the shadows have ever done that before. Nonetheless, the moment passes, the shadows become as friendly as the rest of the universe again, and Pause opens his eyes, glancing between Etho and Beef with a glint.

“Alright, gentlemen... gather close... gather near... and let me tell you the legend... the tragedy... of *Evolution*.” Pause waves one of his arms at the sky, and Etho follows his gesture, looking to the sky. Again, he smiles. Then Beef interrupts, and Etho drags his gaze away again.

“Oh come on, Pause, we’ve all heard that one!”

“Have we?” Etho frowns... *Evolution*... the word is familiar, but not with the weight placed behind it.

“Come on, Etho, everyone knows about Evo . Oldest legend in the books... ‘cept for a couple stories, I guess.”

Etho can’t reply to that. He knows which legend is older, and he won’t confirm it. *Not yet*. He speaks after a moment, choosing his words carefully. “I’ve not heard it... I don’t think.”

“What, really?” Pause tilts his head at Etho. “Out of everyone... I guess I figured you’d know all these legends by now.”

“Nah, you know me!” Etho cracks a grin. “I’m a redstone guy! I’m no storyteller.” (*That’s a lie, and they all know it.*) “Tell me about it?”

The other two trade glances, then Beef shrugs and leans back against his log again. Pause nods, takes a deep breath, and begins.

“Once upon a time... there were beings. Powerful, godly beings... ones who called themselves...” he trails off, glancing around again, even to the open sky, before reaching for a stick on the ground. “I’ll write it... just in case.”

“In case of what?” Etho scoffs, confused.

“*In case they watch!*” Pause hisses back, and for a moment Etho is taken aback at how *serious* he sounds. Then he’s shaking it off, craning his head around the fire to see what Pause writes in the soil. For a moment he struggles to read it—it’s upside down for him and scrawled without care to keep it neat looking. Then he reads it out loud, just to be sure he’s read it right.

Watcher

“ Watchers ?”

“Shh! You can't invoke Their name!” Beef sounds appalled, swatting at Etho's leg. “You don't want *Them* near!”

For a moment Etho stares at him, brows furrowed, then he turns his head to see Pause looking at him with the same deadly serious expression. *They can't be serious, can they?* He decides to test their theory, and dispel whatever the odd feeling in his chest is by mocking it.

“Watcher watcher watcher watcher—”

“Etho, *no!*” Pause shoots to his feet, eyes wide with... fear? Etho wonders if that's what his eyes look like, when facing the dangers the universe won't ever truly hurt him with. Beef doesn't move, but he trades looks with both of them before settling.

“Etho, just hear the story!” Pause scolds, sinking back down to sit. Despite feeling rather inclined to burst into giggles, Etho obliges, crossing his legs and staying quiet. He's intrigued, to say the least.

“Alright, so these *beings*... the ones who ~~watch~~^{watch} they're not players, right?” Beef prompts Pause, giving him a nod.

“Right. Nobody seems to know *exactly* what they look like... mostly because anyone who could tell us either won't or is dead.” Pause sighs, rolling the stick between his hands. “I think the general agreement is whatever they are, they aren't *human*, or *mobs*, but... something different. It's like they're admins on steroids—they just *have* that kind of power, and more. And the thing is, they don't use it how admins do.”

“What’d you mean?” Etho asks. There’s a stray coal burning orange by his shoe. He crushes it under his heel, and it crumbles into ash.

“They use it... well, they use it like a toy. As far as anyone knows, they pick servers, pick players, use them as their playthings. Like *entertainment*.”

“Seems a little ridiculous, if you ask me.” Beef shrugs. Still, Etho doesn’t miss the way his eyes seem a little too similar to an animal just before slaughter.

“A lot of things seem ridiculous in this universe, until they’re true.” Etho counters, voice quieter than normal.

Pause lets his tone slide for once. “I think that the best way to explain them... is to tell the legend of the first lost server... Evo. They say the Wa– supposedly, they found Evo. Used it as a plaything, before throwing it away.

“The thing about Evo–what really made it *stand out*, if you know what I mean–this server was filled with the most powerful players in the *universe*. Some stories say that these players came there powerful, others say that the gifts were given by the... Not-Admins.”

“I thought they just watc-looked?” Etho frowns. Something keeps him from saying that word, and he’s not sure why.

“Not always... not on the servers they played with.” Pause glances around again, and so does Etho. By now, the sky is completely darkened, lit up by stars that... huh. Etho isn’t so sure they’re smiling, right now. He shakes it off, looking to the woods instead, where vague shadows swathe everything in it in darkness. A shiver runs down his spine, and he looks back to Pause, who continues his tale after a moment.

“So... the players on that doomed server. There was the admin, Grian... he had wings-”

“Like an elytra?” The woods aren’t so menacing after all, and he cracks a slight smile.

“No, like *wings*, Etho. Impossible wings, from the beginning.”

“...I see.”

Pause squints at him, then sighs. “There was Martyn... or maybe Merlin. I’m not sure what his name was, to be honest. Don’t guess it matters, now. I’m not sure what his gift was, either. But *Pearl...*” Pause’s tone turns almost reverent, closer to a whisper. “She was made of *stardust and the universe itself*, and fell from the moon.”

This time, Etho can’t quite laugh. *Made of stardust...* yeah, he knows that’s possible, better than anyone else. He looks up to the sky again, and they provide no answers.

“Netty... she could grow *anything* just from the force of her *mind*, just like *that*.” Pause snaps his fingers. “And not just regular plants, she could grow trees, magical things with roots to the void that should have been impossible to plant otherwise.”

Beef interrupts, eyes glinting excitedly. “-oh, I’ve heard of her! I know there was another player who could hop through time—”

“I’m *getting there!*” Pause says back quickly.

“...Sorry, time hopping?” Etho’s nose wrinkles. Such a thing... he rolls his eyes. Made of stardust, sure. Time hopping? Never.

“Yeah, yeah, hold in there, I’ve not explained what made the server so *special* .”

“...I thought it was the players.”

“It was, but there was something *else*, another impossibility that drew them there.” Pause nods, then leans in for dramatic effect. “This server could hop forward through time itself.”

There’s a drawn out silence again before Etho speaks.

“Sounds like a load of mumbo jumbo to me.” Etho laughs, but it feels stifled, as if the air were trying to push it back in his throat.

“...it’s a story, Etho. Of *course* it’s all mumbo jumbo.” Beef shakes his head, staring into the flames of the slowly dying fire.

“Aren’t all stories started from truth?” Pause counters.

Etho’s mouth falls open, perhaps to counter, but nothing comes to mind. Instead he gives a stilted nod, and his mouth closes without further argument.

“Can I tell my story, then?” Pause rubs a hand over his face. “I’ve not even gotten to the good part yet!”

“Yeah, yeah” Beef snorts, “Go on, scare the crap outta us.”

“Anyways, to recap before Etho here decided to interrupt—don’t roll your eyes at me—these players were *special*. Blessed by the universe, or maybe something else—but they all joined together, to create a world that could jump through time itself.”

“What does that even *mean*? ”

In the woods, a twig snaps. Nobody hears it other than Etho, whose head flies up towards the sound, only to see nothing.

“Yeah, so this world... they started it as if the universe had only just begun, before all the resources we have today existed.” Beef glances to Pause. “At least, that’s how I heard it.”

Pause nods in response, sketching something new in the dirt with his cheek resting on his other hand. “That’s about right. Nobody knows if the admin made a deal with *them* or if they found a way on their own, but... that’s what it was.”

“That’s not possible.” Etho worries at the inside of his cheek. “Can’t go back. Not like that...” Memories filter through his head, of an age no other player should have seen, when it had simply been him and the universe, and the few animals that had come into existence at the time. *To travel to that point... for something else to go back too and watch...* his neck prickles, and he glances around. Is there a mob nearby?

The woods are empty.

Pause laughs, but it sounds *wrong* to Etho too. “Anything is possible, when you’ve been blessed like that, blessed by the very universe or void or.. whatever. When you’re being watched...” ...
“Who knows, Etho... maybe you too.”

“Nah, man!” Immediately, his hackles are raised, which is... ridiculous. This is just a story! Some stupid campfire story meant to entertain, that someone made up lifetimes ago. And yet... he’s being... no. No.

“I’m just saying!” Pause says, sounding far too amused for how Etho feels so *wrong* .

“Go back to the story, Pause.” Beef intervenes.

Pause grumbles under his breath, something about constant interruptions and a bad audience—and Etho can’t butt in indignantly, not this time. “Okay. So the ones who were... looking at the players, they started to intervene. They left gifts in bedrock and other impossible blocks, and the players had to follow clues to reach them. Most of the players willingly went along with it. They were *scared*, afraid of what could happen if they didn’t play the game how it was meant to be played. All but one. All but the admin... *Grian*. As the story goes, he broke the rules. Took gifts that weren’t his, the impossible blocks from builds... just a general pest, to be honest.”

“Now hang on, I always heard he blew up the builds, and that was what upset them.” Beef interrupts.

“Who on earth did you hear it from??” Pause raises his eyebrows, looking at Beef like he has three heads again.

“That’s just how I’ve always heard it told!” Beef protests. “What version did *you* hear?”

“The right one, obviously. ” Pause turns his chin upwards, towards the moon overhead, radiating smug energy. Beef opens his mouth to protest again, and as the two dissolve into bickering, Etho can’t help but glance upward at the sky again.

The stars feel *wrong*. Etho shivers, eyes growing wide, and he's glad his mask is firmly in place, hiding his expression. Although... the mask is just an illusion of protection, isn't it?

Where did that thought come from? He's always been protected under the stars.

The back of his neck prickles again, and he whips his head down and around towards the woods. A stick cracks, and his hand travels to where his sword would be strapped to his side, if he had one. Still, there's no movement, and Etho forces himself to turn his back to the shadows, because *there's nothing there*.

He's being-

A scoff of breath leaves him. This is *ridiculous*. He's not being ~~watched~~ there is no such thing as a Watcher, the universe loves him. That's the mantra he repeats even as puffs of air leave him faster and his eyes sting in the smoke.

He's being ~~watched~~

He's fine.

The world comes back into focus around him, the campfire crackling merrily as Beef tosses a new log into it. Pause is speaking again, and Etho realizes the story must have continued without him. He shifts, hesitating to give into his fear—not fear, he's never felt that before—whatever it is, but he slides off the log and in front of the fire, matching Beef's position. It's easier to breathe again, with his back guarded by the wood. Pause and Beef say nothing of his movements, although he can feel both their eyes on him, *watchi-* looking at him.

“Just getting warm. Getting chilly out here!” Even to him, his words sound strained.

Pause shrugs in agreement, and continues his story. This time, Etho doesn't look at the sky for reassurance.

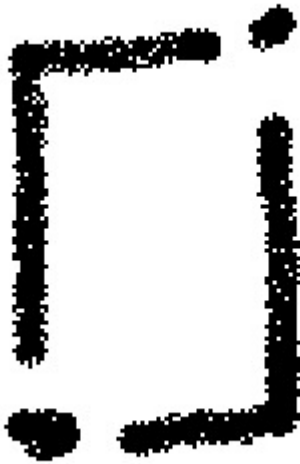
“--so they're doing the impossible, and one of the players could even hop back and forth, he called it the Downside Up--”

“Oh, *weird*. I thought it was the Other Side.”

“Sorry, the Downside Up?” Etho grins without any positive emotion tied to it. “Thought this couldn’t get any more ridiculous sounding!” *He’s being-*

“Yeah, that’s what they called the times they left behind whenever they hopped.” Pause says, before holding the stick from earlier out to Beef. “You remember Their symbol? I can’t.”

“Yeah, I got it,” Beef says, and he etches in the ground, brows furrowed in concentration. Etho cranes his head the opposite way as before, narrowing his eyes.



“What would they have had a symbol for?”

“To show it was from them! It was created from bedrock itself, and etched into the earth and stone and even *stars*. ” Pause sighs. “Look, Etho, Mr. First Player—don’t look so shocked, we guessed anyway—you’ve been around a while. It’s just a story. Let it entertain you. *Let me tell the story.* ”

Etho purses his lips, but nods. *It’s just a story. Stories are fake. Stories are rooted in truth and—no, no, this one isn’t.* He takes a moment, considering, shoving away all his newfound apprehension, then seizes on another strange fact.

“They could just.. Use bedrock?”

“Yes!” Beef’s voice rings out louder than Pause’s, but both echo through the woods for just a second.

“Etho, they could do *anything*. They aren’t players, or gods, they’re beings between. Nobody *knows* .”

“Right.” *Not players. Not gods. Simply something outside of that sphere, existing in the same universe.*

“And so *they*,” Pause jabs his stick at the word scratched on the ground, “started a game with their players, a wonderful game of clues and punishments and rewards. And the players played well! They played how it was meant to be played, all but one.”

“Right... you said before. Grain, right?”

“Grian.” Pause says, rolling his eyes. “Maybe it was Grain. That makes more sense, honestly.”

“Yeah, Grian, Grian, the admin, whatever—him. You said he fought back?”

“Well, not *fought*, exactly. More just... didn’t play by the rules. And *god*, he paid for it.” Pause closes his eyes, looking to the stars for a moment. “All of them paid for it.”

“What, they punished him—sorry, *everyone*, just for not playing by the rules?” It feels like a *warning*. Because if there’s *one* thing Etho has never done, it’s stay within limits. Another glance at the stars, and—the stars don’t feel like home anymore. *They’re walking things*

Beef nods. “Yeah... pretty much. Thanks to the admin’s refusal to play by the rules... in the end, everyone was punished. Least, that’s what I always heard, right, Pause?”

“Yep! At first, *they* let the players live under a false pretense of freedom, let each of them do what they would, just left clues and portals and gifts. But *finally*... the players wanted to go and take on the final fight.”

“The *dragon* .” Etho almost rolls his eyes. The dragon fight had always felt... well, boring,

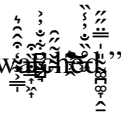
compared to what the rest of the universe offered. Somewhere in his head, music plays, the song he'd listened to when he'd undertaken the dragon on his own world. It's calming, much more entertaining to listen to than the eerie silence the End had held when he'd first gone. Supposedly, the End was *much* more life-filled now, but he'd not bothered to explore much of it, preferring to keep under the stars for now.

"...did it..go well?" he frowns. The End was *untouchable*, surely.

"Supposedly, when everyone jumped through, they were separated. Alone. Screaming for their friends, only to be faced with the eyes of a beast larger than *life*." Pause lowers his voice. "They fought the dragon *alone*, screaming for their friends, and they won anyway!"

"Doesn't seem so bad to me!" Etho feels a weight on his chest lighten. Sure, it was an odd punishment, to face the dragon alone, but he'd done it without issue. "How is that possible? To separate the players like that?"

"Anything is possible, if you're being w



The weight of the words returns tenfold, and it's crushing, feeling the eyes on him, knowing they're there knowing—

He gasps for air, forcing away the *fear* filling him. "*I thought you said not to say that out loud!*"

Pause breaks into laughter. "Chill, Etho, it's just a story! I meant it, like, for the atmosphere. It's not *real*."

Another branch breaks, and Etho startles, eyes wide with the same fear he hadn't understood, before.

"Did you just get scared by a *branch cracking*?" Beef frowns, but seems inclined to laugh.

"...no"

Pause snickers, "You did!"

“No, leave it, cmon—” Etho shoves some leaves into Pause’s area, hoping one will fly into his face. Pause just shoves them back at him, snorting.

“Awwww, scared some mythical beings might get ya?”

“Weren’t you telling me stories have truth to them, earlier?” Etho counters, and all three of them fall silent, illuminated only by the now-mocking campfire shadows and the dim moonlight. For a moment, Etho almost thinks Pause and Beef look afraid too, sharing nervous glances into the forest and above. Then Beef clears his throat, and the moment ends.

“Let’s move on—”

“Yeah—”

“Yep—”

“*As I was saying*, the promises of the universe weren’t given to the players when they defeated the dragon.”

“Wh—promises of the—” Etho feels his heart drop from his chest. Those promises were for *him*, once. “You mean...”

“Oh, you know, *and the universe loves you, because you are love*, all those words that beam into your head? They *changed* it. Made it different.” Pause shakes his head. “Powerful beings. Messing with the universe itself.”

“Again, impossible.”

“Is it?”

Of course it is!, Etho wants to say. *The universe can’t be messed with, not like that. The universe loves its players. We aren’t ever in any true danger!*

He's not so sure, sitting in this world.

"...what did they say?" Not that... he really wants to know, but... *he needs to know.*

"Oh, well... that's when they took the admin. Made him *one of them*. They say Grian threatened the other players, he changed. He became a-y'know."

"What do you mean, *one of them*? I thought you said they weren't players—" he doesn't *understand*, feeling a bit dizzy.

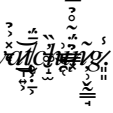
"They aren't. But... he used to be, at least." Beef shakes his head. "Took his wings, gave him new ones, took his humanity, freedom, *everything*. I've heard versions where he doesn't remember, others where he does... some versions where he's simply a prisoner, forever trapped in... wherever Watchers live."

"*Don't say the name!*" Pause hisses.

"*Alright!*"

"That..." Etho doesn't really know what to say. The hair on his arms stands straight up, and he peers into the woods. *Nothing*. "Good campfire story, Pause. Wanna sleep now?"

"It's not over!" Pause grins just a little too widely. "Just now getting to the best part!"

Etho *shudders*, Something is  "Alright, go on." he swallows. *Just a remnant of the past.*

"Well, the admin was taken, but that leaves the other players. Three of them... Merlin, BigB, and... another. They were thrown into a vicious cycle of death, forced to kill each other over and over in games that only had one victor... one survivor. And then they do it again, and again, and *again*."

"Oh." The rising fear stops, for a moment. Such games... *impossible*. At least that must be myth

and nothing more. “Who was the third?”

“Nobody knows. That was his other punishment—to be forgotten. No one knows his name, no one knows anything about him, except he and Merlin were close.”

Again, impossibility, most likely. It’s easier for Etho to dismiss that out of hand. A player forgotten? *Players can’t be forgotten by the universe.* “And the others?”

“Some of them were killed, along with the server. *They* set the server in ruins, burned it, destroyed it, and swallowed it wholly into the void itself, never to be visited again.”

“Seems harsh...”

“I don’t think so. I think that was the kindest punishment,” Beef mutters. “I’d rather that than anything else, if it were me.”

Neither Pause nor Etho have a response, and after a moment Pause clears his throat and continues. “Two escaped. Netty and another. ~~I think...~~ Beef is right. That was a worse punishment than dying... to live and always be watched. To live on and be powerless against the past, stripped of the gifts given.”

“They lost their *gifts*?” Etho’s eyes fill with horror, and his hand edges his pack, where his own gift (or at least... part of it) resides.

“Yep! And that’s it! That’s the legend of Evo! Cool story, right?” Pause seems... unbothered by it all. *Can he not feel it?*

Etho nods weakly. “It... that’s a story, alright!”

“C’mon, Etho, you know it’s just a story! It’s all fun!” Pause waves smoke out of his face, before pushing off the log to his feet. “Well! Good times, gentlemen. Should we sleep the mobs away before we all die a gruesome death?”

“Probably should, yeah,” Beef follows suit, opting to flop on his log without a pallet or even a

blanket. "Etho, you got first watch?"

"Yeah, I got it," Etho doesn't move from his spot, just stares into the campfire. "I'll wake you up when it's your turn."

"Okay then. G'night, Etho." Pause flops onto his pallet, and within minutes, both him and Beef are breathing steadily, completely out.

Minutes tick by, measured only by the steady creeping of the stars above. At first, Etho tries not to think, tries not to *exist*, even. The fire dances softer than earlier, flames barely eating the charred sticks. He sighs, but pulls to his feet to place another log in the fire. As he turns to the pile of wood, he's startled, turning his head so quickly his neck cracks to peer into the woods.

There's nothing there.

There's something there.

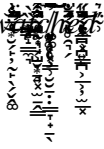
He swallows back air, and it chokes him. He picks up a log and holds it like a weapon, grasped firmly between both his hands. Even so, as he revolves in one spot, peering into the trees, nothing appears. He's alone. After a moment, as the fire dips dangerously close to spluttering out, he's forced to lay down his flimsy protection. Kneeling down, he shoves it in, then returns to his log and flops backwards on it to stare up at his solace.

He stares up at the stars, and the stars watch him back. It only takes a heartbeat for him to realize that *these are not his stars*. He shuts his eyes, willing them to *go away*, to leave him be, and when he opens them again they are still watching. Something cold stops his heart and he's suffocating under their cold care, and he doesn't understand, because the universe *promised*, and this is not the universe he thought he knew.

He is being watched.

Hours later, when he wakes Beef with shaking hands and no words, he flops down on his pallet, and he searches one more time, for the safety and love the universe has always given. For the first time, he cannot find it.

He is being w



End Notes

hey guys what if etho was the first player ever and what if myself and pebbtree made a whole concept/au about the universe and etho? and what if this is the first time he ever feels truly afraid? anyways, we plan on posting a lot of stuff about this in the future:) hope you guys like it!

pebbtree also posted art for this concept/fic [here!](#)! go give her some support:)

my tumblr is [oh-snappers](#) if you want to come ask questions about the au or anything else! kudos and comments are so so appreciated.

p.s HUGE thank you to stitchthesewords for giving me advice on how to write horror, since i'd never done this before:)

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