

## Orange Ball of Love

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## Orange Ball of Love

by [2point5](#)

### Summary

Etho Slab liked it when things made sense.

He was good at that, at making things make sense, at lining things up and figuring them out, looking at the facts and then going from there. He was a man of logic, a man of patterns, a man of lists and checkmarks. He knew what he was doing. He always knew what he was doing.

When you're paid to kill people, you can't afford to be unprepared.

Bryan "Bdubs" Centus did not make sense.

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Previously titled "The Ballad of Bull Ramos"

### Notes

okay look. i wasn't going to make this a ship thing, but then someone on tumblr said i should, so now it is. i literally never write romance, so if the last scene sounds weird or choppy, assume it's because i am too cool and sexy for this.

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

Etho Slab liked it when things made sense.

He was good at that, at making things make sense, at lining things up and figuring them out, looking at the facts and then going from there. He was a man of logic, a man of patterns, a man of lists and checkmarks. He knew what he was doing. He always knew what he was doing.

When you're paid to kill people, you can't afford to be unprepared.

His partner, Iskall, said she liked being unprepared. She enjoyed the vague confusion of day to day life, liked to come up with plans on the spot.

Ironically, she handled the budgets, because Etho had what she called "a shopping addiction". Etho called it "good taste".

Spontaneous shopping sprees aside, Etho liked when things made sense.

Bryan "Bdubs" Centus did not make sense.

Sure, *in concept*, he was pretty easy to understand: 5'7", 125 lbs, 38 years old. He was lactose intolerant, deaf in one ear, and was being medicated for adhd and narcolepsy. He was unemployed. He lived alone.

Someone wanted him dead bad enough that they were willing to pay Etho a million dollars.

None of that was what puzzled Etho.

Most of the time, that was more than enough information than he would need on a target. Most of the time, he didn't need anything else. Most of the time, he would have never even learned most of that to begin with.

What puzzled Etho was the fact that he knew that. And the fact that he kept learning more.

At first, he had only known his name and his address. That was all he needed. He knew everything he had to know, and he had no intention of learning more.

And then Bdubs had caught him.

He'd been trailing him for the last thirty minutes, trying to get a handle on his daily routine, learning where he spent his time, where he ate. Admittedly, Etho was a bit distracted, thinking about another case, another problem that had crept up on him, but it hadn't been too bad. Or at least, he thought it wasn't too bad.

They were right in the middle of the sidewalk, in between a ConCorp agency and a small obscure crystal shop, when the smaller man had just vanished. Etho took a moment, searching the crowd for the man, before scowling and turning to leave. He'd have to pick this up tomorrow.

Standing right in front of him, gazing at him with wide brown eyes, was a man.

Etho tripped a bit, nearly falling on the man, one hand ghosting his shoulder for a moment before he regained his balance and stepped back.

"Uh," He said, blinking. This was definitely the guy he was supposed to kill, he thought.

Everything, from his warm brown skin to his fluffy black hair that was streaked with gray at the temples, *everything* lined up with the profile. This was Bdubs. "Hey?"

"Why are you following me?" Bdubs asked, not quite accusatory, but not quite curious. He had a strange voice, like some cartoon character, all bouncy and passionate. "And don't deny it."

"I wasn't following you," Etho said, putting on his best confused face. "I don't know you."

"You literally have been following me! I doubled around twice!"

Etho blinked, glancing around. He had apparently been more distracted than usual. "Aw snappers."

"So you *were* following me!" Bdubs snapped, excitedly. "I knew it!"

Etho didn't respond, just shrugged. He wasn't really sure what to say. Bdubs had figured him out, and he was going to be dead soon, so it didn't really matter.

"Who sent you?!" Bdubs pointed at him, clearly trying to be threatening, but the fact that he hardly came up to Etho's collarbones was not helping. He was baring his teeth, not quite a grimace, not quite a smile, and it made him look vaguely constipated. "Who are you working for?!"

"I'm an independent assassin who was contracted to kill you," Etho said, brushing aside his hand. "And now that you've caught me, I have to get rid of you."

"Oh," Bdubs said, blinking. "Oh."

His eyes narrowed, his expression morphing into one of deep thought. He looked almost comically serious, his entire face the portrait of sincerity.

Finally, he smiled, a wide grin splitting his face, his eyes sparkling. "Oh, you're kidding?"

"No," Etho shook his head, wondering why it took him so long to reach that conclusion. "No, I'm serious. I have to kill you now."

Bdubs laughed, punching his arm. "Okay buddy. I'm Bdubs."

"Yeah I know," Etho frowned, baffled. If he was going to kill him anyways... it didn't really matter if he told him... "I'm Etho."

"Nice t' meet ya, Etho," Bdubs said, peeling his lips back in some sort of grimace. He really didn't understand the whole smiling thing, Etho decided. "Do you wanna grab a burger or something?"

Etho blinked. He had just told him he was going to kill him... but he didn't have to *right now*. He could hang out with this bizarre little cartoon of a man for a few hours, and then kill him later. He certainly wasn't going to tell anyone, especially if he didn't even believe he was actually in danger.

So Etho shrugged again. "Yeah, that sounds good. There's a pizza place near here, yeah?"

There *was*, in fact, a pizza place near there, a greasy chain that Etho had probably ordered from at least a dozen times, but still couldn't remember the name of. They got a pepperoni to split, and Etho abruptly realized he couldn't eat without taking off his mask.

He stared across the table at Bdubs, who happily shoved a piece of pizza in his mouth, fitting nearly the whole slice in his mouth in one go, choking it down with a swig of cola.

He looked happy, if not a little bit like a chipmunk, wiggling around on his seat in pure

unadulterated glee.

Etho looked away.

"You gonna eat anything?" Bdubs asked, sounding worried. "Or are you not hungry...?"

"I'm-" Etho gestured vaguely at his face, at his mask. "Y'know."

"Oh!" Bdubs said, his eyes wide. "Do you want me to turn around?"

"Nah, you're fine," Etho waved a hand dismissively. "I'm just gonna take a slice or two home, it's no biggie."

"Hm," Bdubs narrowed his eyes at him. "If you're sure..."

He continued to obliterate the pizza slice at a time, and faintly, Etho decided he never wanted to see a pizza ever again. He'd have to ask Iskall to start getting Chinese or something.

"So," Bubs said, cheerfully, stuffing a slice of garlic bread in his mouth with so much fervor that Etho's gag reflex activated. "What exactly do you do?"

"I told you, I'm an assassin," Etho said, picking at his nails while he waited for Bdubs' snickers to die down. "But I also work part time at a cafe."

"Ooh, a barista?"

"Yeah," Etho shrugged. "It's just for tax reasons. And also because my partner doesn't trust me with the bank account."

"Oh, you have a partner?" Bdubs looked a bit disappointed for a moment. "How long have you guys been together?"

Etho frowned, confused, before suddenly realizing what he was asking and laughing. "Oh, no, my business partner. I'm single."

"You're single!" Bdubs beamed. "Oh cool! Nice! Uh, sorry!"

Etho snorted, shaking his head. "Yeah, thanks."

"So, your *business* partner, what're they like?"

"He/she, not they," Etho corrected, grinning lightheartedly. "He's nice, I guess. Let me sleep on his couch when I forgot to pay rent one time."

Bdubs frowned at that, but didn't comment. "That's cool. I also have business partners. Two of them, actually, Tango and Keralis. They're both absolute jerks."

"Yeah?"

"...No, they're actually pretty nice," Bdubs huffed. "But I'm mad at them right now. You wanna know why?"

"Sure," Etho shrugged a shoulder. "Why are you mad at them?"

"Because!" Bdubs slapped the heel of his hand on the table. "They both have roommates and I don't."

“Oh?” Etho raised an eyebrow. “Why don’t you?”

“I apparently am ‘terrible company,’” Bdubs wiggled his fingers. “And also ‘don’t clean up my own messes.’ Which is kind of true, but that’s why I need a roommate.”

Etho chuckled, nodding his head. “Yeah, I can see why no one wants to room with you.”

Bdubs kicked at his shin. “Shush, you.”

Etho’s phone buzzed and he slipped it out of his pocket, glancing with mild annoyance at the screen. “Ah, that’s my partner now, actually.”

“Oh, is she okay?”

“Mm’yeah,” Etho said, casually shoving it back into his pocket. “She’s wondering where I am.”

“Shouldn’t you text her, then? Let him know?”

“Meh, I’ll do that later.”

“Okay,” Bdubs shrugged, picking up another slice. “Hey, if you don’t mind me asking, what’s the mask for?”

“Just don’t like people seeing my face. Too intimate, you know?”

“I have no idea what you mean, but yeah, sure.”

Etho chuckled. “I guess it’s an assassin thing.”

Bdubs laughed again, shaking his head.

They went into a sort of comfortable silence, both of them just sitting together. Etho found himself gazing at his target with something a lot warmer than he would have ever liked. He was supposed to kill this man, he was supposed to put a bullet in his skull. He shouldn’t be so happy to hear him laugh.

“So,” He said, finally. “What’s your power?”

“Oh, I can emit this, like, gas thing that puts people to sleep! It’s not super powerful, but I...”  
Bdubs suddenly trailed off, his expression morphing into one of concern. “Uh... wait, I was joking. I actually can... uh, taste... colors?”

Etho laughed at that, hard, shaking his head. “Okay, sure.”

“Yeah. I’m not lying, by the way,” Bdubs frowned, clearly lying through his teeth. “I’m very good at tasting colors.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“Watch this,” Bdubs closed his eyes, putting a slice of greasy pepperoni in his mouth and chewing. “Mmm... red. See?”

“Of course. That must be pretty useful when you’re eating in the dark.”

“It is!” Bdubs nodded, content. “What’s your power?”

Etho leaned back, stretching his hands up above his head, tilting his head thoughtfully at Bdubs. “Heightened senses. Better eyesight, hearing, smelling, everything.”

“Must be useful for assassinating people,” Bdubs joked. “Amiright?”

“More right than you know,” Etho smiled slightly. “Very useful.”

Bdubs chuckled, propping one foot up on the chair next to Etho. It was a move that some would consider arrogant, perhaps even a sign of aggression, but he was so obviously trying to look casual that it was nothing less than comical.

Everything Bdubs had done through this entire meal had fallen so short of casual, fallen even shorter of coincidental. His smiles looked like a cornered dog baring its teeth, or a cartoon portrayal of a man being electrocuted. Every movement he made felt like it was carefully, but poorly planned. It was- dare Etho say- kind of endearing.

No. *NO*, no, Etho didn't dare say. He had to kill this man by the end of the week, he couldn't get attached, couldn't get...

“You okay, Ethers?” Bdubs asked, curiously. He was laying down, almost, so that only his eyes were visible over the table, like some wiggly kid at a restaurant having a fit. “You look upset.”

“Ethers?”

“You're dodging the question,” Bdubs said, dismissively, waving a hand. “What's bugging you?”

Etho sighed, running his hands through his hair. “...You're making it very hard to want to kill you.”

“Oh,” Bdubs said, and then blushed, sitting up again. “Oh... thank you?”

Etho frowned, then decided that however the other man had somehow chosen to interpret that wasn't worth the headache. “You're welcome.”

It was quiet for a moment, and then, hesitantly, Bdubs spoke up. “Uh, do you... do you think that maybe we could exchange numbers? Like, just so it'd be easier for you to track me with your super assassin ninja technology?”

“Yeah,” Etho huffed out a laugh. “That'd be great.”

Bdubs lit up, holding up a hand and wiggling his fingers. “Gimme your phone!”

He gave his phone to the other man, receiving Bdubs' in return. The screen was cracked heavily, the back covered in stickers, and the lockscreen was a very blurry photo of Bdubs with another man, who looked absolutely confused out of his mind. There was no password.

Etho glanced up at Bdubs, who was hunched over his phone and giggling wickedly, before shaking his head with a soft grin and tapping over to the contacts app, entering his number and setting the contact as ‘Etho S.’ before hesitating and adding ‘(From the Pizza Place).’

“Heheheh... here,” Bdubs slid his phone across the table towards him. “Gimme mine back.”

Etho obliged, checking quickly to make sure he hadn't left anything embarrassing or incriminating open, before looking at what Bdubs had set his contact as. “...Bdizzle?”

“Yeah, it's my super cool nickname,” Bdubs bared his teeth happily. “Cooler than Etho.”

“Hm,” Etho chuckled, noticing that Bdubs had also taken a contact photo: a flattering shot of directly up his nose. “Cute.”

Bdubs made a noise at that, but when Etho looked up, his face was buried behind his phone.

“Uh,” Bdubs said, a little too loudly. “I took a photo of you. For your contact photo. Look.”

He shoved the phone in Etho’s face, almost knocking his glasses off, and he had to jerk his face backwards to get a look. It was slightly blurry, but Etho himself was fairly clear, looking down at his phone, eyes crinkled fondly.

Etho hesitated. On one hand, it was incriminating evidence: if anyone found Bdubs’ phone, his face was right there, next to his name. On the other hand, he was only one in a long long list of suspects. And he was a good liar.

“Nice,” He said, hoping he hadn’t been quiet for too long. “I’ll text you tonight, okay?”

“Okay!” Bdubs said, again, way too loud, before squirming in his seat and dropping to a whisper. “Okay, cool. Okay.”

Etho laughed, and it occurred to him that he’d been doing that a lot. A weird amount.

Fuck.

He excused himself almost immediately after, leaving Bdubs to pay. He rushed out to his car, taking a couple tries to start it with shaking hands.

He can not be getting attached. He cannot do this to himself.

He had never had this problem before, never. He’d literally shared dinner with his targets, had gotten close for ease of access, wormed his way into their hearts and lives, and then killed them with ease. This was different. This was so so different.

When he imagined killing Bdubs, it wasn’t as easy as usual. It wasn’t just *drown him in the bathtub, make it look like an accident, wipe fingerprints, leave*. It felt... worse. *Drown him, hold the body, don’t look at his face, don’t cry cry cry*.

Someone knocked on the window and he jumped, his knee hitting the steering wheel.

He was home. Not his apartment, no, that couldn’t be considered a home in any regard, he was sitting in Iskall’s driveway, staring numbly at his hands.

A pleasant looking, fat woman stood outside his car door, head tilted slightly, wearing a fluffy pink cardigan over a ruffled lavender blouse. After a moment, Etho hesitantly rolled the window down, blinking at her stupidly.

“You okay, love? You’ve been sittin’ in our driveway fer a quarter hour now.”

“Hey Stress,” Etho said, rubbing his forehead. “Yeah, sorry.”

“No worries, love,” Stress said, pleasant as ever. “Do you want to come in?”

“Yeah,” He said, trying to open the door, before remembering he had to unlock it first. And turn off the car, and roll up the window. Not in that order though. He couldn’t remember what order it went. “Uh.”

“I’ll take care of this,” She said, dismissively, reaching through the window and opening the door for him. “You go inside.”

“Okay, thanks,” Etho said, climbing out. “Uh. Thanks.”

“Of course.”

Iskall stood in the doorway, wearing a simple green hoodie and blue jeans, a worried expression on his face. “Hey, man. You never answered my text.”

“I have a problem,” Etho said, leaning down to bump his forehead to Iskall’s shoulder in greeting. “A big one.”

“Are you safe?” Iskall asked, immediately worried. “You’re not in any danger, are you?”

“No,” Etho said, then paused. “Maybe. *Fuck* I didn’t even think about that-”

“Whoa whoa whoa, what’s happening? Ethos?”

“Ugh,” Etho whined, rubbing his temples. “Okay, so, I have become... briefly... enchanted... by a target.”

“Oh,” Iskall said, blinking. “How do you mean... enchanted?”

“Like, he’s- okay, he’s not charismatic, but he *is*, and I liked listening to him laugh, but not... I don’t know what to do about it-”

“Is it a power? Is it... a crush?”

“No! No, no, neither of those, he’s just a pal,” Etho frowned. “... A pal...?”

“What’s going on?” Stress asked, coming up behind Etho and dropping his keys in his hand. “Everyone alright? Why are we hanging out in the doorway?”

“*Han tycker om en man*,” Iskall murmured to her. “We’re handling it.”

“What was that?”

“It’s fine, love,” Stress said, smiling knowingly at him. “You two go sit on the couch and talk this out, alright?”

She left them huddled on the couch, a cup of hot cocoa in Etho’s hands, for some “man talk,” as she called it with a wink, and Etho found himself once again trying to put words to this terrible night.

“So,” Iskall said, easily, stroking her beard. “You are... what was the word you used- enchanted, by a target.”

“Yes,” Etho muttered, tugging his mask down to take a sip of the cocoa. “And it sucks.”

“Is this, like,” Iskall windmilled her hand, making the same face he always did when trying to remember the English word for something. “Love?”

“No,” Etho said, immediately. “It’s not. I just... he’s like a... like a kicked puppy.”

“He’s a kicked puppy,” Iskall nodded, a small grin on his lips. “Of course.”

“I don’t want to kill him, Iskall,” Etho whined. “He’s too... like, he pokes at his ice with his straw, and he has a butterfly sticker on his phone, and he twists his right foot when he walks so it makes a squeaking sound. Does that sound like an evil person?!”

Iskall looked bewildered now, frowning at him. “Why did you notice those things, Ethos?”

“I need advice here, Iskall!”

“Okay,” Iskall shook his head. “Then cancel the job. You can do that.”

“No, I can do this! I have to!”

“Then... what do you want me to say here?”

“I don’t know!” Etho cried. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out! You’re lucky, your wife is a supervillain, the only people who want her dead are too moral to hire us!”

“I thought you said this wasn’t a love kind of situation-”

“It’s not! That was just... that was an example!”

“Was it?”

“Yes!” The room fell quiet, before Etho let out an admittedly very pathetic noise and slumped to the side, burying his face in the couch cushion. “Can I stay here?”

“Of course,” Iskall patted his knee. “Do you need anything?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

And with that, he left. That was something Etho had always liked about her, that she knew when to leave. A lot of people insisted on sticking around for too long, filling up the silence with their hot, stinky breath, and then wondering why Etho was mean to them. Iskall got it. Iskall always got it.

Etho’s phone buzzed.

He jolted upright, scrambling for it in his jacket pocket, pulling it out after what felt like too long.

*Bdizzle* : HEY ETHO.

*Bdizzle* : yuo didnt text so I fiigured you forgot

*Bdizzle* : NOT MAD. just wante dto say hi

*You* : Sorry little buddy. Just got home LOL

*You* : Also hi ^^

Etho relaxed slightly, embarrassingly, before remembering he was an assassin and this was his target.

He slept easy that night, curled up on the couch, his phone plugged in across the room, the volume on high just in case Bdubs decided to message him.

They texted every day, about all sorts of things, from art to the weather to the flowers that were

growing in the park. They just... chatted.

Eventually, they agreed to meet up at the cafe where Etho worked, before his shift, just to chat and hang out.

When he showed up, Bdubs was very nervously checking his hair in the reflection of his phone. He looked no different, other than the fact that his hoodie looked like it had actually been washed. He looked up when Etho walked in, immediately “smiling” at him with all the passion of a thousand suns.

Etho crinkled his eyes back, slumping into the chair across from him, waving cheerfully at his coworkers behind the counter, who were staring at them with wide eyes.

“Hey,” Bdubs said, happily. “This place is nice!”

“Meh,” Etho shrugged. “It’s fine, I guess. Pays the bills.”

“Uh huh, better than assassinating people, huh?” Bdubs grinned. “Amiright?”

“Right,” Etho nodded. “By the way, I’m still going to kill you. Just haven’t found the time or place.”

“Aw,” Bdubs said, then, blushing, “ *Wait* , that’s- awww!”

Etho snorted, shaking his head in amusement. “What?”

“You really like me, huh?”

“Not enough to spare your life,” Etho rolled his eyes. “Obviously.”

“Obviously,” Bdubs smiled, genuinely, an actual smile that made his massive bug eyes crinkle at the corners, his teeth barely peeking through his lips. “Just acquaintances.”

“Right,” Etho said, wondering if he was missing something. “Anyways, have you ordered something yet?”

“Uhh, are the vanilla lattes here any good?”

“Not really,” Etho leaned forward, resting his chin on his arm. “The caramel lattes aren’t bad though, if you don’t mind caramel.”

“Mmm... I like caramel,” Bdubs said. “Do you want anything?”

“No, I’m good.”

Bdubs nodded, standing up. For a moment, his hand landed on Etho’s head, messing up his hair slightly, before he pulled away, heading to the counter. Etho stared at his empty chair for a moment, trying to get his mind around the weird gesture, but by the time he’d figured out what had just happened, Bdubs had returned.

“The stuff here’s really cheap,” He said cheerfully. “And the employees are really nice!”

“Yeah, I mean,” Etho sat upright again. “I work here, clearly they only hire the best.”

“Mhm, so true, so true,” Bdubs said. “High quality service at its finest.”

“So, what have you been up to?”

“Oh, you know...” Bdubs hesitated, then sat up. “Wait, actually, you’re smart, right?”

“I like to think so.”

“I’ve got a- uh- riddle for you.”

“Okay?”

“If you were a superhero, and you were looking for a villain, and the only thing you knew about him was that he’s vulnerable to heat, what would you do?”

Etho hesitated, tilting his head. “Do you know what he wants? Like, what motivates him?”

“Yeah, he wants money. He’s been robbing banks for months.”

“Okay, then. Fake a money moving convoy. Most banks should work with you on that one, if he’s been holding them up. So, what you do is make a truck with fake money inside, spread word that it’s real, lure him in, and then hide heat coils in the walls, like a toaster. Once he’s in the truck, toast him.”

“You’re a genius!” Bdubs clapped excitedly, picking up his phone. “Ohh, Tango’s gonna love that one, thanks.”

“Mhm,” Etho grinned, amused. “Did I get it right? The riddle?”

“Yeah,” Bdubs said, then blinked. “Oh! Yeah! The riddle! You did great!”

“Cool,” Etho didn’t bother masking the laugh that bubbled out of him, but Bdubs didn’t seem to mind, just grinned even wider. “I’m glad.”

“Bubbles!” The woman at the counter called. “Iced caramel latte for Bubbles!”

Bdubs swore under his breath, darting to the counter as fast as he could, leaving a chuckling Etho in his wake.

“What the heck,” He whined upon his return, frowning at the cup. “Bubbles?”

“We do that on purpose, you know,” Etho grinned. “It’s a publicity stunt, so people come to see how we mess up their names.”

“That’s- really?!”

Etho shrugged. “Maybe.”

Bdubs sat with a huff, taking a long sip of his drink and immediately lighting up. “Hey... hey, this is really good!”

“Told you,” Etho sat back with a self satisfied smirk. “Caramel lattes are the way to go, my little friend.”

They met up again a few days later, at a park, and then again, at a restaurant, then again, and again. Over time, Etho learned more and more about him. Things he didn’t ever need to know.

Like, for example, he was a terrible liar.

Every time they met up, he would present Etho with a hypothetical- all of which were related to heroes and villains- and, the next day, Etho would see his hypothetical on the news. It was always the same hero group, too, the Big Eye Crew.

One of the members of said Crew was a short, brown skinned man with a cartoony voice and hair that stuck up on the right side.

So, Bdubs was the hero known as Morpheus.

Etho didn't care, he thought it was funny how convinced Bdubs was that there was absolutely no way Etho would ever catch on. He once made a joke about Bdubs being a hero that made Bdubs start squirming and stammering, but as soon as Etho said it was a joke, Bdubs relaxed completely, utterly content in the knowledge that his secret was safe.

And it was.

Etho would never betray his trust like that.

He'd met his coworkers, once or twice, although their disguises were apparently better, because it wasn't until the Polish man (Or was he Swedish? Or perhaps Dutch?) spoke that Etho realized that this was in fact *the* hero Lovesick. Which meant the man next to him with the tattoos must be Scarlet Fever.

He didn't say anything to them. He didn't want to. They seemed nice, but they weren't Bdubs, so he had no reason to show them any undue kindness.

The person who had ordered the hit had never followed up.

Etho was still planning to kill him, of course. He was attached, sure, but he was willing to fight past that to finish the job. He could do that. He had to. He could.

Just not right now.

It all came to a head late one night, about six months after they'd first met, when Bdubs messaged him out of the blue, just three short words.

*Bdizzle: can we talk*

Etho responded as fast as he could, faster than he could even process the words he wrote.

*You: Of course. Are you okay?*

*Bdizzle: the park. pls*

Etho didn't breathe until he stood in the park, his boots buried in the chill of the early autumn frost, his coat hood up in a halo of white fur around his head. It cut out the wind, and made his entire world sound just a little muffled.

But not muffled enough that he couldn't hear Bdubs' footsteps as he trudged up to him.

One of the many useless things Etho had learned about Bdubs over the months is that he had a strict bedtime. He could not stand to be awake past 9:30, or he got cranky. He did not like the night. He did not enjoy being up late.

Here, though, he looked like he hadn't slept in days.

His eyes were rimmed in red, his cheeks puffy and patchy, a little bruise on his forehead that looked to be fairly recent. His hoodie was hanging loose on his frame, a certain shaking delicacy in the way he held himself made him look like he was on the verge of collapse. But still, as soon as he saw Etho, he bared those teeth, and blinked those eyes, a terrible, transparent mask of happiness on his face.

“...What happened?”

“I have another hypothetical for you,” Bdubs said, instead. “It’s a doozy, though.”

“Hit me.”

“Imagine you and your best friend have a fight. And he breaks a promise. And- and you break a promise too. You both break promises. But he hurts someone you care about- almost kills them. And that’s why you broke your promise. Because he did it first. And you know-” Bdubs sucked in a breath, wincing slightly. “You know you should forgive him, because he feels really bad. But every time you close your eyes, you remember how he looked, how his eyes... and you don’t forgive him.”

Etho sighed hard enough to make his glasses fog up, stepping forward, one hand lifting to graze over Bdubs’ forehead. “...I wouldn’t. I would take my time, make sure I’m okay, make sure I have someone else to talk to. And then, maybe someday, I would go back. And then, maybe, I’d forgive him.”

“Okay,” Bdubs croaked. “Okay. And, let’s say you hypothetically really needed a hug-”

Etho didn’t let him finish, swooping in to gather him in a hug. He was so small, compared to Etho, his whole body fitting against Etho’s chest like a puzzle piece he had never known was missing. He was cold, shivering, almost, every part of him tense and nervous and ready to fight.

It was times like this that reminded Etho that he was a hero, a real, actual hero. He wasn’t just some dumb guy who stumbled into Etho’s life, he was a hero. His little hero.

“I’m scared, Etho.”

“I’m right here, buddy.”

A pause, one that was both so quiet, and so so loud, and they both wanted to fill it, but neither wanted to speak, and then, gently, Bdubs pulled back, staring at Etho with anxious eyes.

“Etho, do you like me?”

“What?”

“Do you like me? Because I like you. A lot. And I know this is stupid and sudden, but-”

“Shush,” Etho said, quietly. “Stop talking.”

“Do you?”

“I...” Etho hesitated, thinking hard, looking at the trees as if expecting an answer to write itself in the branches. “I wasn’t joking about the assassin stuff. You need to know that before I answer.”

“I know.”

“You do,” He looked back at Bdubs at that, trying to understand him and his strange, strange mind.

“Why did you stay, then?”

“Because I like you,” Bdubs said, with all the warmth in the world. “Because I like you, and you haven’t killed me yet.”

“...You’re so...”

“If you don’t like me, you don’t have to say anything. I get it. I just... I already lost a friend tonight, I figured what’s one more.”

“You’re not losing me,” Etho responded, looking away again. “I just... need to think. I don’t know if I like you yet. I like... I like what you do. I like what you say. I like... I like how you look. But I don’t know if I like you.”

“How long do you need to think about it?”

“Until the end of the world.”

“I can wait, then,” Bdubs said. “And I’ll love you until you have your answer.”

Etho laughed at that, although it wasn’t really funny, and then, before he could stop himself, he pulled down his mask, leaned forward, and kissed Bdubs on the forehead.

“Until then,” He said, gently, and he didn’t pull his mask up as he grinned. “I hope that will suffice.”

He could feel Bdubs’ taking in his entire lower face, the stubborn acne and pockmarks on the cheeks, the small scar on his chin from when he tripped and fell as a kid, his yellow crooked teeth that probably had some food left in the crevices, the dark blond proof that he hadn’t shaved in days.

And yet, Bdubs smiled, and glowed like a million Hermit Cities, all full of raving people screaming Etho’s name, and then Etho leaned in again, to kiss him again, this time on that silly mouth, and he knew, he *knew* that he loved him.

And everything made sense, and nothing made sense, and he still had to kill him, and he didn’t want to, and he liked him, and he loved him, and he didn’t care for all the money in the world.

And somewhere in the city, terrible things happened. Somewhere in the city, a man learned the truth about someone he loved, and it broke him. Somewhere in the city, a man woke to a ruined apartment and soot stained arms, and he cried. Somewhere in the city, a man broke a contract he had never meant to sign, praying the bait would work.

But here, in the park, two men held each other, and they were all that mattered here or ever again.

## End Notes

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