

Ad Astra

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/34950871) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/34950871>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandoms:	Minecraft (Video Game) , Dream SMP
Relationships:	Ranboo & Toby Smith Tubbo , Toby Smith Tubbo & TommyInnit
Characters:	Toby Smith Tubbo , Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Niki Nihachu , Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF) , Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Wilbur Soot , sneeg , Eret (Video Blogging RPF) , Jack Manifold
Additional Tags:	NPCs for plot , Alternate Universe - Space , Alien Biology , Alien Culture , Hellens ranting again , its about space this time and socioeconomic themes , Blood and Injury , Hurt/Comfort , Angst and Feels , Panic Attacks , Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD , copious swearing , Hitchhikers guide to the galaxy vibes , Taking care of eachother , Injury Recovery , tramua , implied child neglect , implied non physical child abuse , anger issues , References to Depression , Self-Harm , Minor Character Death , really we dont care about him , Canon-Typical Violence , space racism , Platonic Cuddling , Gratuitous Hand Holding , the forehead baps are back , mention of past suicide attempts , Aftermath of Torture , Kidnapping , dnf if you squint I guess , dream team being cool
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Event Horizon
Collections:	Forge's Screaming Extravaganza , International Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs , completed mcyt/dsmp fanfics that are pog , The fanfics that had me lying awake at night like omg , happy chemicals (no matter how sad the fic may be) , hello yes i can't stop thinking about these works , Completed fics I adore , MCYT , summer's favorite fics 5 - 9 - ? , Really Heckin Good Fics , cute things to read for serotonin , late night bittersweet reads , I LOVE SPACE FICS , All fics I've read (mcyt) , sbioneshots , So many books so little time!! , Satan's Favourite Blockmen , best dsmp fics ever , Ash's Favorite Completed MCYT Fics , Parsonsaj's Best of the Best of the Best , Tim's Completed Reading Bookshelf , An Mcyt Collection , thunder's library of legendary fics , what do you mean i have an obsession with minecraft fanfiction? , Long fics that deserve to be reread , completed fics , Completed stories I've read , Books I started but didnt finish yet <33 , I somehow ended up in the minecraft community again but I'm not complaining , lucarrqwqts absolute favs ;333 , good stories of the universe's
Stats:	Published: 2021-11-05 Completed: 2021-12-02 Words: 86,083 Chapters: 3/3

Ad Astra

by [Hellenite](#)

Summary

Tubbo's a smuggler who really only cares about having fuel in his tanks and making it to the next sol cycle, likes to think he's pretty level headed, but this spoiled Ender prince is really testing his resolve not to shoot him out of the airlock.

Notes

Hello!

I decided to break this up into chapters because as of right now I'm at a s t u p i d word count and I don't want to make y'all suffer with an unending block of text.

All descriptions are based off characters from the Origins SMP and not CCs! There is a little characterization from the DSMP thrown in for added pain, but ya'know, whatever, you're here for a good time and with that being said-

BUCKLE UP KIDS WE'RE GOING TO SPACE

Nebula

Chapter Notes

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

“There is no easy way from the earth to the stars.”

Seneca the Younger, *Hercules*

The regulator coupler twists smoothly under his wrench, eased by well oiled parts and a steady hand, increasing the amount of fuel that’s funneling into the engines by only a slight amount. It’s not a huge repair, but Tubbo can already tell the difference, antenna flicking lightly as the humming whine from the engines changes in pitch to something more steady.

He grins and flips the wrench into one of his lower hands, clambers out of the maintenance hatch in the floor, and toes it shut with a socked foot so he won’t accidentally fall into it later. Stretching his top arms above his head and the lower ones in front of him, Tubbo pops his back and flexes his wings out, only wincing in mild discomfort as the wound along his left side pulls uncomfortably.

Rubbing at it absentmindedly with his lower right arm, Tubbo begins putting his tools away in neat order, singing under his breath to the music drifting through the speakers overhead. The engines are well taken care of enough that they don’t rattle the Eshachi, but he can pick up their vibrations with his antenna, bobs his head in time to that pulsating beat.

Tubbo’s heard other pilots and travelers complain about the incessant trembling in the recycled air of their ships, how it drove them crazy, but it’s never bothered him. He misses it actually, whenever he’s planetside, hates not having the comforting thrum of his ship around him, the whining drone of the engines and smooth glide of machinery.

Clicking his toolbox shut, Tubbo hefts it under one arm and makes sure it’s properly stowed away, safety latches locking it into place so it won’t go hurling around the next time he has to do some evasive flying. He spreads one hand out along the side of the Eshachi, smiling fondly stroking over the metal plating, fingertips tracing across grooves and rivets, knows the shape of each one by heart.

There’s a lot of pilots that just fly for the paycheck or because they couldn’t be bothered to find anything else to do, but that’s not why Tubbo’s out here, not why he bitches and groans anytime he actually has to land. He’s a pilot because *he loves it*, because there’s nothing like hurtling through the black expanse of space with a thousand winking stars around you, or navigating the tricky tight press of asteroid belts.

And any good pilot worth their toolset knows without a shadow of a doubt that their ship isn’t just a piece of machinery to get you from point A to point B. It’s a partnership, a bond that can never be broken, and as long as Tubbo takes care of the Eshachi, it’ll take care of him,

their mutual trust keeping them both moving and out of danger, and that's all he could ever need.

With his repair work done, Tubbo scales the ladder built into the wall that leads up to the top deck, and steps into the cockpit. He drops into his chair and starts to run a systems diagnosis, just to make sure they're still on the correct course and nothing else needs attention.

A couple screens pop up in front of him and he waves through each one after he scans it over, only pausing on the autopilot readout, because wow, are they making great time or what.

The Eshachi is fast, but this is a little insane even for it, and Tubbo furrows his brow and expands the screen. According to the autopilot, they'll be back at HQ in less than an hour, which, doesn't make any sense, because Tubbo knows for a fact that before he went down to do repairs, he had a solid twenty hours of flight time left.

The realization hits him at the same time as a new popup appears on the HUD, taking over most of the viewport and blocking the trails of light whizzing by in hyperspace. *Well fuck me I guess*, Tubbo thinks hitting accept because there's really no other choice, just hopes it doesn't look like he hasn't slept in over a day as the hideous, scrunched up photo is replaced by a live feed.

"Good morning, BITCH!"

"Mornin', dickhead." Tubbo responds with a smile, crossing his arms as he reclines in his chair, and Tommy grins back like a madman, jerks his head at him, "I see you're still alive, despite your best efforts."

"I could say the same to you, fucker. They haven't kicked you out for insubordination yet?" Tubbo laughs, and Tommy scoffs, tossing his head to the side as he declares, "*I'm* an absolute *delight*. Honestly, I'm surprised they haven't made me fleet captain yet, Tubbs."

Rolling his eyes, Tubbo says with as much sarcasm as physically possible, "Ah, yes, of course. Because the Imperial Sunfleet is just, *so known for* giving out commissions to every shithead *teenager*-"

"HEY! I'm almost twenty and you know it bitch, fuck off. And just you watch, I'll be the first one, they'll make statues of me, carve the name '*Tomothy Innit*' across the galaxy!" Tommy sweeps his hand out to demonstrate the vast swath of prestige he's going to have, wings ruffling behind him in excitement, looking for everything in the world like every stary eyed recruit fresh off the transport.

He's mostly joking, but there was a time when they were both like that, eager to prove their talents and make a name for themselves, but now, Tommy sits there in his crisp blue and red uniform, Tubbo in his grey and orange bomber, thousands of lightyears apart.

"If that happens, I'm drawing dicks on all of them." Tubbo promises with a lazy grin and laughs at the indignant noise Tommy makes, speckled grey wings flaring out behind him, "Do *fucking* NOT! Or- or I'll- I'll-!"

“You can’t threaten me, fancy naval boy.” Tubbo snorts, ducks his head quickly to the side to try and hide a yawn that snuck up on him, snickers halfway coherently, “Don’t forget *I’m* the criminal here.”

It’s a stupid thing to say, kills the jovial mood instantly as Tommy straightens up, carefree smile melting off his face, “You’re not a criminal.”

They’ve had this argument before, Tubbo could easily lay out all the beats to it but it never changes, and his lower hands pick at some loose threads on his jacket, upper ones rapping a nervous staccato against the armrests as Tubbo shrugs, “Well, I mean, by practically every definition I am-”

“No, you *work* for the Syndicate which-”

“-is an *illegal* organization run out of the jurisdiction of the empire and-”

“*Tubbo.*” Tommy begins in a warning tone, and Tubbo’s quick to snap his mouth shut, shuffles his arms around himself and stares forlornly at the way his best friend’s entire posture droops, not for the first time mourning that they had to end up here, mumbles softly, “Sorry...”

“N-No, no it’s fine I just- you know that I-” Tommy sighs, scratching a hand through his hair, mussing it out of the regulation style, sounds like he murmurs mostly to himself, “I- I just wish you’d stayed.”

I wish you’d come with me, Tubbo thinks but doesn’t say, knows there’s no point, because while Tommy does love him, he loves his home planet more and it was no contest really. Tubbo only asked him once, mistakenly, amidst tears and furious packing, and the deafening silence that followed his plea was more than enough to convince him to never ask again.

“I couldn’t stay...you know that.” Tubbo says softly, and at the way Tommy nods his head in exhausted resignation, he can practically hear the silent answer to his unspoken comment, *and I couldn’t go with you.*

It’s quiet after that, and Tubbo’s antenna twitch in time to the humming song of the engines running, moving to the tempo of the Eshachi working around him, one two three, *breathe in breath out, you’re here*, one two three, *you’re fine, you can get out, you’re not trapped.*

Comfort settles in his limbs at the reminder, and he runs reverential fingers over the edges of the consoles like you would something holy, and in a way, it is, this ship having saved him time and time again, and Tubbo’s forever grateful for what the Eshachi gives him, what it represents.

Freedom

“Um...how’s your side? It healing alright?” Tommy asks as a blatant topic change, and it drags Tubbo from his thoughts, has one of his hands flitting down out of habit to press lightly along the edges of the blaster wound.

“Yeah...the um, the blistering has gotten a lot better.” Tubbo says as his fingers run over the bumpy med patch, doesn’t think it’d be a good idea to tell Tommy about how he ripped it open a few days ago running down some back alleyways.

The frayed nerves under his skin send sharp sparks of pain through his body at the pressure, torn muscles and ligaments pulling too much and not enough in different spots, leaves his entire left side aching, but it’d stopped oozing blood last time he’d check on it, so Tubbo was counting it as ‘*a lot better*’.

“G-Good, that’s good. You getting enough rest?” Tommy looks at him with a critical eye, squinting at his face for a long time searching for signs of overexertion that are hopefully not as present as Tubbo feels like they are, clucks his tongue and grumbles, “That old boar better not be working you too hard or I swear to the creators I will *kill* his ass.”

“I’m *fine*, Tommy. They’ve kept me on D rank jobs for the last two weeks, it sucks so many balls.” Tubbo complains, leaves the twitching skin on his left side alone to toss his hands out exasperatedly, “Which is such utter *bullshit*- the last time Dream got shot, he was only stuck on med leave for like, *a week*.”

He’s expecting Tommy to commiserate with him, because if there’s one being the navy hates more than Techno, it’s Dream, who, at this point, probably has a higher successful capture rate than the entire *imperial fleet* combined. Tommy has a bit of a weird fixation on the shapeshifter, alternating between being personally impressed and in awe of his prowess, and violently opposed to everything he does, swept up in imperial propaganda because he feels like he *has to*.

Usually the latter wins out, but instead of puffing up and yelling, like Tubbo so desperately wants him to do, so they can stop talking about serious things, Tommy just pushes his mouth to the side, “Doesn’t he have...like a whole team though?”

Tubbo’s hands clench around the armrests of his chair because he *knows* that tone, *knows* this argument too, *Queens past, not this again-*

“Have you thought about- i-if you’d just- stop being so *fucking* stubborn and *get* a partner-”

“Wow! Would you look at that! Entering Syndicate airspace gotta go Toms.” Tubbo yells to cut off the familiar reprimand, starts fiddling around with controls even though he’s about a solid fifteen minutes away from needing to drop out of lightspeed, “Have a good day at class, I’ll let you know when I head out again!”

“Tubbo do not hang up on me I swear to actual fucking-”

“Love you too okay bye!” Tubbo shouts as he quickly tabs out of the call, hits a couple buttons to send any incoming transmissions from Tommy’s handheld to his inbox and sags backwards with a long, drawn-out sigh. Scrubbing two hands across his face, Tubbo digs fingers into his tired eyes and wipes the grime out of them, very aware of how exhausted he is all of a sudden.

The Syndicate usually required that its members operate in teams, but Tubbo's stubborn as all fuck and a good pilot and Techno had eventually caved, was more interested in having him join under those conditions than lose his piloting skills to another organization. Besides, as Tubbo drags his hands down his face, looks over to the empty seat next to his in the cockpit, there's only one other person he'd ever have sit next to him, and he's thousands of lightyears away.

It's not that much longer before a different alert is demanding his attention, and Tubbo opens the audio channel with one hand, already starting the process of exiting hyperspace with his others, and a sweet voice filters out of the speakers, "Entering Syndicate controlled airspace, please state your identification credentials or purpose."

"Pilot ID M thirty two-N seventy nine, craft ID IK ninety-seventy five R zero." Tubbo recites absentmindedly, easing back on the throttle as the engines wind down, the blinding flash of hyperspace blinking out around him as HQ comes into view, the great, hulking shape of it backlit by a red giant, other ships passing him on their way out or back in, and Tubbo grins, takes over the controls as Niki says with a clear smile in her voice, "Cleared for landing in hanger six. Welcome home, Tubbo."

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The Declassified Galactic Survival Guide:

If one is to be traveling the greater beyond, one must have some understanding of how space chooses to govern itself, lest you fall victim to series of complicated rules and laws that honestly, make little to no sense otherwise.

The governing systems of the universe are as varied and sometimes as unknowable as the beings that populate it, which does make it rather difficult to try and find some common ground, but your author has come up with a pretty concise rule of thumb, assuming that is, that you have thumbs.

The long short of it is: space is needlessly confusing and there is no clear answer.

Your author personally recommends being in possession of a fast ship and little to no inhibition when it comes to shooting first and asking questions later.

But if pressed, would argue that at this present moment, and at about seventy thousand light years beyond the event horizon, as the universe is always expanding and growing more complicated by the nanosecond, that the largest governing powers would be divided between the Ki'Pao of Tanturn IV, the Verband Isen, a common garden snail, and the Sun Empire of Nirox.

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Tubbo throws his duffel at the unclaimed bunk in his room, doesn't bother taking his boots off and passes out face first onto his own bed. He's asleep for maybe half an hour before he starts getting too hot, props himself up enough to jerk his jacket off and then flops back over, but something's still not right.

He tosses and turns for a while, eventually gets fed up enough to yank a pillow and blanket off his bunk, spreads them out on the floor and lays with his back up against the bulkhead. The metal plating is freezing against the bare skin of Tubbo's back around his wings, just like the dark expanse of open space, and he hums sleepily, presses a palm against the floor to feel the vibrations of the space station working under him, is out within seconds.

He usually dreams about flying, adrenaline and pure elation pumping through his body as he navigates close quarters, the rush of having to make split second decisions and calculations, the familiar shape of flight controls under his hands, more instinctual than anything else ever has been.

It's no different this time, but as Tubbo stares down at his hands wrapped confidently around the controls of the Eshachi, there's suddenly golden bands embroidered around the edges of his sleeves, and when he blinks, they morph into shackles, chaining him to the console, restricting his movements, and he tries to jerk back, but there's a hand gripping his shoulder hard, a commanding voice snapping, *do as you're told, ensign-*

Tubbo wakes up with a jolt, both sets of arms immediately checking the other for anything around his wrists, but they're bare and he lets out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding, sits up from the floor with a groan. His body protests vehemently about him sleeping on unrelenting plastisteel, but Tubbo's well versed at ignoring minor aches and pains, runs the routine of popping his joints until they stop bitching quite as much.

His blaster wound is really twinging as he gets to his feet, but there's no blood soaking through the med patch when Tubbo pulls his shirt up to check, so he leaves it for now, more distracted by the hollow aching in his stomach. Tubbo fumbles his jacket from the floor and stumbles out of his room, wincing at the bright lights illuminating the hallway as he tugs it on.

Most of HQ is made up of a natural colored plastisteel, something closer to a warm grey and not the eye aching, vibrant white that the imperial fleet uses, and it's not so sterile, because unlike the fleet, there's not really rules here on what they can and can't do. There are several dorm halls in the station, but this one has been Tubbo's personal favorite to live on.

When people are home and not sleeping, they leave their doors swished open, giving brief glimpses into the small spaces they get to call their own, always welcoming to anyone looking to drop in for a minute. Personal preferences and décor styles bleed out into the hallway, posters going up on walls alongside small holo-stills, creating a colorful, glowing collage that Tubbo smiles at sleepily while he walks past.

Queens know what the local time is, not that it matters, all of them have busted as hell sleep schedules and come and go so much, they can't keep track of sol cycles anyway, so it's not surprising at all when Tubbo passes other Syndicate members on the way to the mess hall, some shuffling around in pajamas and others in dusty field gear.

The mess hall isn't huge, but it could maybe fit all of them if they were ever here at once, orange and red banners hang from the rafters and flutter a little in the recycled air pumping through the station, mismatched sets of tables and chairs or benches scattered around the room at regular intervals.

It's decently crowded right now, so it must be some normal-ish eating time, and Tubbo covers up a yawn with one hand as he waves hello with his others to the people that call out to him in greeting. He wanders up to an open replicator and has to punch in his ID at least twice before he gets it right, swipes through the options until he finds what he wants.

Tubbo grabs his glass once the replicator is done rehydrating the nectar, and it's not as good as anything from home, but it'll do, and he's looking for somewhere to sit when he hears, "YO! Lil' stinger!"

Craning his neck to see where the voice came from, Tubbo spots it after a brief search, a molten orange arm waving in the air across the hall, and he ambles over to their table with a smile.

"Hey man! When'd you get in?" Sapnap asks as soon as he's close enough, the bright light coming out of his eyes always hard to look directly at, but Tubbo makes an attempt, squints and shrugs his shoulders, "Dunno, few hours maybe? I passed out like, right as I got back."

"Ha, that's George after like, every mission. Ain't that right, Georgie?" Sapnap croons, leaning across the table to bat his sooty lashes at his teammate, and George rolls his eyes so hard, Tubbo's afraid he's sprained something, slaps a hand at Sapnap's grinning face, "Why is that funny? So *what* if I actually value getting proper rest."

"Awww, you need your beauty sleep, huh, Gogy?"

"*Please*. If anyone needs beauty rest, it's *you* Sap."

"You fucking bitch--"

"How'd your mission go, Tubbo?" Dream cuts in smoothly over his teammates bickering, pats the seat next to him with one long, bone white hand, and Tubbo plops down, sipping at his drink contemplatively.

It was a simple job, pick up some cargo here, drop it off there, don't get shot- *again* -don't shoot anyone super important, and it went off fine, but that's the problem. There *was* no problem, Tubbo had autopilot on for most of the trip and had to distract himself with doing repairs to the Eshachi, which he *loved* doing, don't get him wrong, but it wasn't as much of a thrill as making a run for it from local authorities.

"Eh, it was okay. Kinda boring." Tubbo eventually settles on, looks up at Dream's vapid, never changing smile, and the shifter hums, tilting his round head to the side, "Techno still got you on D ranks?"

"*Yes*." Tubbo groans, dramatically collapsing forwards onto the table, sticks his chin out and pouts at nothing in particular. He hasn't had to do D ranks since he first joined, and even then it was only for like, a *week*, just so they could make sure he wasn't going to cut and run with whatever profits he made before paying out his share.

Dream makes a sympathetic noise next to him, long fingers tapping a beat against the tabletop, "I'm sorry, I know that must really suck. Have you tried talking to him?"

“And *what* am I supposed to say to the fucking *Blade*? You know how stubborn he is.” Tubbo snips, rolling his head to the side to halfheartedly glare at Dream’s never changing face, the cartoonish smile and dot eyes so out of place for most conversations, this one included.

“Dude, just be upfront, threaten to quit or something.” Sapnap chimes in with, having finished bitching at George, and Tubbo sits up, clapping two hands together while he throws the others out, sarcastically gushes, “Oh! What a *great* idea! I’m sure he’ll be *super* intimidated at me saying I’m going to *leave the organization* that’s the only thing stopping me from getting arrested *immediately*.”

“Oh...right...” Sapnap deflates a little, likely because he forgot that not everyone here’s like him, that most people have records and rap sheets and someone dogging their tail, that a lot of them are here *specifically* because Technoblade, *the Blood God*, Scourge of Seventeen Systems, has got enough infamy and clout to drive off practically anything with a functioning brain stalk.

“Hey, Sap’s got a point- *not* the threatening bit.” Dream’s voice goes sharp in reprimand when Sapnap perks up, and he folds his arms together, grumbling under his breath as Dream uses a gentler tone when saying to Tubbo, “Directness is probably the best way to go with Techno.”

One of his hands lightly touches at Tubbo’s shoulder, there for the briefest second but it feels like Tubbo’s been electrocuted, all of the overwhelming energy Dream radiates zapping under his skin, and the shifter tips his head to the side, says kindly, “You’ve been with us long enough, he’ll listen to what you have to say.”

Tubbo snorts around the edge of his glass, isn’t so sure of that himself, but doesn’t press the issue, lets the conversation flow on to other things. He listens raptly while the other three regale him with their latest missions and bags, living vicariously through their stories even though bounty hunting has never been his favorite.

Just hearing Sapnap excitedly tell him about some chase through a crowded market, having to dodge blaster fire and the searing hot reach of thermal blades has Tubbo on the edge of his seat, antenna perked forwards at attention, wings flared open a little and quivering behind him. He’s missed the thrill of the chase so *badly*, wants to feel the heady adrenaline of swerving photon blasts, the unmatched elation knowing he’s outflown them, that he’s good and fast and he *left them in his startrails*.

It’s more that than anything else that convinces him to message Techno, and Tubbo taps out a quick question on his way back to his room, chewing on a thumb absently while his other hands type.

Bossman

<< hye, u got a sec t talk?

20:37

>> Office.

No time is given so Tubbo just assumes he's supposed to go now, spins on his heel and heads back out to the communal hub, waits at one of the elevator banks and punches the button for the top floor once he gets inside.

Anyone outside of the Syndicate would guess that Technoblade's office has to be something dark and brooding, with bloodstained weapons lined along the walls and heads on spikes, and while there are weapons hung up, they're all clean and well taken care of, reflect the yellowed lights bobbing around the room.

There's honestly more bookshelves than anything, piled high with holo-texts and real, bound paper copies, trinkets and other oddities scattered around the room, collected over decades of exploring countless worlds. The focal point of the room is a large desk backed by a wide viewport that looks out at the red giant, filling the room with its warm light.

It's cozy actually, any harsh angles softened by vibrant Syndicate banners or patterned rugs in reds and oranges, unmade bed pushed up to the wall in one corner, papers and holo-tablets spread out on the covers, and there's not many holo-stills up, but all of them show smiling faces, fearsome teeth bared in exuberant grins.

Sitting behind his desk is the Blood God himself, and even without the cape and trident, Techno is still an imposing figure, though the image of a fearsome, criminal organization leader is ruined somewhat by the sleep ruffled hair and reading glasses perched on the edge of his nose.

He's typing away at something on his console, steaming mug sitting by his elbow which means Phil must have just left, inclines his head when Tubbo comes in, "Take a seat if you're gonna be a minute, otherwise just start talking."

The bluntness isn't any indication to his mood, that's just how Techno is, but it definitely set those faint of heart on edge when speaking with the crime lord. Tubbo's not really afraid of him anymore, after you've seen a man almost cry trying to get the coffee maker to work while wearing pajamas with small fluffy animals on them, it kinda lessens any tension you might have, but that doesn't mean he's not a *little* nervous approaching the desk.

Mind your tongue, he could throw you out on your ass so fast, Tubbo thinks, wrapping his hands around the back of one of the chairs, knows that all that's standing between him and some imperial jail cell is his skills and the fact that Techno likes him, or more likely, is generally ambivalent towards him as long as he's useful.

“I won’t be long, just, wanted to talk to you about mission assignments.” Tubbo begins hesitantly, and Techno doesn’t stop typing as he grunts, “There’s a new group of D ranks that just came in if you want first pick.”

Tubbo grimaces, glad Techno’s so occupied and didn’t see the face he pulled, clears his throat and tips his head to the side, “Yeeaaaaah, about that... I um, *I-I* think I’m more than ready to be put back on the main roster and-”

“No.”

His sentence grinds to a halt, and Tubbo blinks his eyes wide, can’t help stuttering out a series of protests at the instant refusal, “W-What-? But- I- you didn’t even let me, a-and I’m fine and you let *Dream*-”

“Okay, first off, you were shot with a class A photon laser that shattered three of your ribs and tore a nice fist sized hole right through your abdominal muscles, so *no*, you are not *fine*.” Techno says, hands halting on his keyboard as he finally turns bloodred eyes on Tubbo, gold caps on his tusks flashing in the light of his monitors, “And second, Dream’s basically a stupid, unkillable fuck, got a healing factor that exceeds anything I’ve ever seen. But, the *real* reason he got back to active duty so quickly is because *he* has *two partners*...not just one, but *two*.”

Tubbo’s upper hands clench around the back of the chair at what he’s implying, his lower two dropping to wrap around his abdomen, careful with his left side, and of course Techno tracks the movement, shoots him an unimpressed look over the rim of his glasses, “Look, as soon as that wound heals, I’ll put you back on the main rotation. Or. You could finally get a partner, your choice.”

Tubbo seriously considers it for a moment if it would get him off D ranks, but he can’t think of anyone else he’d want sitting in his copilot seat, because there’s only one person he trusts entirely with his life, and he already said no, is on his way to being a Sunfleet captain. Thunking his head down on the chairback in defeat, Tubbo groans, “But it’s going to take *weeks* for this to heal properly.”

“Them’s the breaks.”

“Techno, *please*, I-I’m going insane doing supply runs. Please, just- can you give me *one* heist or arms deal, *something*.” Tubbo begs, tipping his head up to stare as plaintively as he can, and Techno sighs, turning back to his monitors with barely a change in facial expression, “I can’t, under good consciousness, send you out there with a hole in your side and no one watching your back.”

Irritation spikes through Tubbo because everyone always acts like he can’t take care of himself, that having another pair of eyes is going to do any better at keeping him out of harm’s way, and he can’t help snarking in frustration, “You goin’ soft or something, Blood God?”

He clicks his mouth shut immediately after, wary over what Techno’s going to do, but he just snorts, shoots him a look out of the corner of his eye, “Hardly. You’re just a good pilot and

not a complete idiot. You pay out your share with no complaints and aren't miserable to work with, it would be an inconvenience if you died, so, I'm trying to prevent that from happening."

"Well I'm going to die if you keep me on D ranks." Tubbo fires back with, knows it's a weak argument, watches Techno's lips curl up in a small smile as he says, "Eh, you'll be fine."

Tubbo doesn't know what to do now, he said his piece and Techno refused, so he rakes frustrated hands through his hair, trying to decide if it'd be worse to pick a new D rank supply run or stay at HQ until his side healed completely. Both sound absolutely terrible, and Tubbo wrinkles his nose, heartrate starting to pick up because he feels like he's trapped, like there's nowhere for him to go- *no way out nowhere to go just do as you're told* *ensign-*

"Look, I'm not trying to be uncooperative here, I think I'm a pretty reasonable guy...but- and I'm *not* sending you out on anything dangerous, but there's this A rank-

"Yes." Tubbo says instantly, shooting forwards to practically hang over the chairback, wings fluttering behind him excitedly, and Techno rolls his eyes, "Don't get too excited, it's just an escort, but it pays nice and- here, just read it."

He types a few commands into his keyboard, flicks around a holo-screen and Tubbo moves to drop into the chair he's been standing behind, absentmindedly chewing on one thumb while he flicks through the mission parameters, *pick up here drop off there blah blah blah-* heart seizing in his chest when he sees typed out in bolded, block letters-

Drop off location: Nirox, Sunfleet Academy

Sunfleet-

Nirox-

Tommy-

Queens, he could see Tommy.

It's been about three rotations since Tubbo's seen him, because Tommy is busy with school and Tubbo can't go anywhere near Nirox anymore, but if he's there on official Syndicate business, the high council will have no jurisdiction over him, despite the active warrants out.

He could finally see Tommy after *three rotations*, get to give him a real hug, hear his laughter without the snap and crackle of long-distance static, and Tubbo hardly pays attention to the rest of the file, already knows he's going to accept it for that reason alone, but then he makes it down to the payout and his eyes blow wide, "Queens of ages past-!"

"Ah, I see you've reached the bottom."

"Is- is this- there's *no way* this is real!" Tubbo exclaims, looking up at Techno in disbelief, and the man shrugs, "They may be imperial dogs, but the Ender are always good for the money. Only reason I didn't toss the request out."

Tubbo snaps his head down to the last line, counts and recounts the number before saying incredulously, “Ten *thousand* credits?”

“Heh, yeah. You taking it or not?” Techno asks, one eyebrow cocked like he knows it’s a stupid question, and Tubbo laughs quick and sharp because it is, shakes his head and lets the holo-screen drift back to the other side of the desk, “Of fucking course.”

Escorts are generally up there with supply runs, worse sometimes if you get a real dick, but Tubbo could literally not care less about who’s ass he’s going to be hauling clear across the galaxy, because with *that* kind of money, even after the Syndicate’s cut, *and* the added bonus of seeing his best friend, Tubbo would gladly take the devil himself.

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The Declassified Galactic Survival Guide:

When modern archivists are attempting to explain Nirox’s supremacy in this age, they often cite that it was Niroxan scientists that discovered and perfected lightspeed technology, thus providing an elegant answer that couldn’t be further from the truth.

Lightspeed technology was developed across a slew of planets and systems, but under the well-oiled machine that is Niroxan imperialism, such innovations were easily lumped beneath the Sunlight banner, any and all names lost to the flow of time unless they were of proper Niroxan heritage.

Since then, the Imperial Sunfleet has been the leading force for continued research into spaceflight, along with its greatest patron, as the Niroxan Emperor funnels most of the empire’s available funds into this institution.

With a vast array of planets to draw resources and taxes from, it comes as no surprise that the Sun Empire is one of the richest in the whole universe, but the largest contributor to this overall wealth is a seemingly unassuming, honestly miserably frozen little hellhole at the far reaches of one of the galactic arms.

Annwyl is generally one of the most depressing places to ever exist, shrouded in darkness for half of its solar year, which is eight times the length of literally any other inhabited planet, and should have little to nothing to offer the galaxy, but unfortunately, it’s the only place that grows End crystals like most other sensible planets grow weeds.

--

The path he takes to Annwyl isn’t as clear cut as most other pilots would probably fly, but Tubbo’s got his scanner open listening for where sections of the Sunfleet are, has to course correct anytime he’s in danger of running through their flightpath.

It’s more out of an abundance of caution than anything, all of the squadrons popping up are made of large battle class ships, their captains aren’t going to be interested in hunting down one lone smuggler, but you never know, and the last thing Tubbo wants to jeopardize right now is his chance at seeing Tommy.

Tommy...

His hands tighten around the controls just as he's jumped to lightspeed again, suddenly swamped with memories he's been desperately trying to keep alive, but to his growing horror, only seem to get dimmer by the rotation.

They fade out softly, crumbling in around the edges, and Tubbo can hardly remember now the sound of Tommy's quiet breathing from the bed next to his, the feel of his hand in one of Tubbo's, helping haul him up from the training mats, what it was like sitting shoulder to shoulder in the mess, the shape of his arms wrapped tight around Tubbo, grey wings engulfing him in an embrace that smelled entirely of *Tommy*, something he used to know by heart but would have trouble even guessing at these days.

Tubbo flips through his handheld while hyperspace streaks past, stares for a long time at the call log history. There's two missed calls from Tommy that came in seconds after Tubbo hung up on him, and that's it. He used to try longer than that before giving up, at the beginning even, would call until Tubbo caved and picked up, but this last time, he hadn't even left a voicemail, just sent a quick message.

Dickhead

11.43.2341

>> hope u get back safe. Let me know when would be good to call again

He hasn't responded yet because he's worried about jinxing it, wants to be on the way to Nirox before saying anything and that's it, there's no other reason for him to be avoiding Tommy, and *he's not avoiding him, okay*, but Tubbo's fingers hover over the message bubble with a tremor in them that he refuses to acknowledge.

Locking his handheld, Tubbo shoves it into a pocket so he doesn't have to think- *won't be tempted by it*, cranks up the music until it's screaming out of the speakers and huddles into himself in his pilot's chair, keeps his head facing straight forward, but he can still see the empty spot next to him out of the corner of his eye.

It's somewhat of a relief when he drops out of lightspeed, and hanging before him like a hole in space is Annwyl, its dark, craggy surface reflecting back what little light makes it out this far in the system. Tubbo begins punching in the coordinates that were in the mission briefing that'll take him to the pickup spot, begins the process of taking the Eshachi out of orbit with minimal turbulence.

As soon as he breaks through the atmosphere, an alert pops up on his dash from a source that's not registered in his systems, and Tubbo opens the audio channel one handed while he lazily steers towards his coordinates.

“Unauthorized breach of royal airspace, turn around now or face the consequences.” A deep voice intones over the speakers in the warping accent of the Ender, and Tubbo flicks fast through his files, huffing, “Relax! I have credentials, if you’d just-”

A new alert pops up, *data transfer requested*, and Tubbo more than eagerly pushes his files through the channel, static and soft, muffled echoing voices in the background, but eventually the air traffic controller intones, “Cleared for landing at Voidfall, standby for port assignment.”

“Righty-o.” Tubbo says absentmindedly, staring out his viewport at the glittering city that’s spread out before him, all elegant twining spires and arches of softly glowing light, and there, at the center of the city, rising like a huge, gracefully sweeping wave is a massive structure with more gold and- *Queens past* -End crystals than he’s ever seen.

It can’t be anything other than their palace, and Tubbo whistles long and low, thinks he’s going to be skirting past it and that’s why air control freaked out, but his hands twitch around the controls when his GPS is telling him the coordinates are *at* the palace.

“The hell...” Tubbo mutters, turning to double check he put the right coords in when the air traffic controller comes back on to say, “Craft IK ninety-seventy five R zero, proceed to Voidfall auxiliary port three.”

A new set of coordinates pop up on the screen and Tubbo inputs them into the system in bafflement, but they’re right and he’s confused, thankfully can go through the steps of landing the Eshachi with less than optimal mental capabilities. Queens, he really should’ve read the briefing more than he did, must be picking up a diplomat or something, maybe some noble’s kid, and Tubbo throws a hasty look over his shoulder, glad he keeps the Eshachi relatively clean.

He’s seen how some of the other Syndicate members keep their ships, shudders at the mere memory sliding down the ladder into the cargo hold, zips his bomber up because he can already guess with how far out it is in the system, the surface temperature of Annwyl is probably freezing.

Even though he’s expecting it, the instant Tubbo opens the cargo bay hatch, and glacial, icy air rushes inside, he sucks in a startled breath, regrets it almost immediately with the way it feels like his lungs freeze shut. He normally doesn’t mind the cold, but not like this, where it’s like the true cold of empty space, not just the comforting chill that seeps in through ships and stations.

His antenna flatten as close to his skull as they can, wings tucking tighter to his body, and he shivers, buries his nose in the collar of his bomber and wishes he’d packed his subzero temp one. He’s got to go out there though, can’t stay huddled in the relative warmth of the Eshachi, so Tubbo sucks in stinging air through his teeth and clomps down the ramp, finally stepping out onto the planet properly.

Tubbo’s never been to Annwyl before, hasn’t really ever had a reason to.

For starters, it's about as far as you can get in the galaxy and still technically be *in* it, located at the very end of one of Andromeda's trailing arms, and even for its own system, Annwyl is at the very outskirts, the local sun just a weak, pale dot in the sky overhead.

Honestly, the only reason anyone even bothers with Annwyl is the other reason he's never been here before because he can't afford them, but stepping out onto the landing port, Tubbo has to do a double take when he first sees it, mouth dropping open because they're just using *End crystals* like fucking *streetlamps* here.

Ever since getting the Eshachi, he's been fantasizing about one day upgrading its engines to run off an End crystal reactor, which is realistically a really stupid pipe dream. The *Imperial Sunfleet* runs on End crystals, there's no way Tubbo's ever going to be able to pay for that kind of tech, but still, he's daydreamed about it near constantly.

He's never actually seen one in person, and now, he's just standing under the rich teal glow of scores of them, and even though his antenna are tucked under his hair trying to keep warm, they can still pick up the massive amounts of energy vibrating all around him.

"What the fuck..." Tubbo mumbles under his breath, spinning in a slow circle with his mouth open, probably looks like some idiot tourist, but he can't help it, *they're everywhere*. Tall pillars made of a dark, glassy material ring the landing pad, End crystals clustered at their tops to make up for the weak light that comes from the sun overhead, but Tubbo can see more in the distance, glittering on buildings and spacecraft.

Queens of fucking ages past, Tubbo knew the Ender were wealthy, that was just common knowledge, like how water is generally wet and you can't breathe in space, but he didn't know *how* rich they were until now, and merciful Queens, are they ever rich.

Tubbo's drawn out of his boggling when he sees a figure moving out of the corner of his eye, spins quickly with one hand dropping instinctually to a blaster at his side, but relaxes once he makes out the tall, willowy figure of an Enderian.

They're dressed fancy, well-tailored clothes in teals and purples, brooch with a small End crystal glittering at the high collar of their shirt, and Tubbo figures this has to be his client, shuffles himself up straight in a more presentable posture and sticks a hand out, "Hey, I'm Tubbo, I'm gonna be your pilot."

The Enderian doesn't even move to take his hand, which is *not* a good sign, just glares down their nose at him with narrowed green eyes, something imperious and condescending in every line of their face as they drawl, "Pleasure. We'll begin loading his highness's things immediately, you should plan to take off in half an imperial hour."

"W-Wait, you're not- I- his *highness*?" Tubbo stumbles out, but the man is gone, disappearing in a rush of purple particles, and as more Ender pop in, carrying crates and bags, he thinks he might, *potentially*, have a problem, that maybe he should've read that mission briefing a bit more closely than he did.

But it's not until after all the servants have finished loading his cargo hold, and he's been standing around freezing his antenna off for the better part of an *hour and a half*, and the

royal pain in his ass *still* hasn't shown up, that Tubbo *knows* he has a problem.

Blowing air into his cupped palms to try and warm his frozen fingers up, Tubbo eyes the crates stacked in his hold, most of them inlaid with a faint sheen of bright teal and wonders how much he would get for those bare scrapes of End crystal, if it would be worth it just to hightail it right now. Before he can make that call, there's a soft noise behind him he's gotten very familiar with, and Tubbo turns to see the man from earlier with purple particles fizzing out around him, but he's not alone this time.

Standing next to him with a cocked chin, a dozen shining End crystals scattered around his attire, clustered in the circlet on his head, is a young Enderian that has to be the prince. He's tall like all the Ender are, lanky in a way that's just slightly unsettling, but the thing Tubbo notices immediately are his eyes, because where every Enderian he's seen so far has been near identical, same dark skin and hair, long faces and slitted green eyes, the prince has one searing, red eye.

"I have the honor and *distinct* privilege of introducing Prince Ranboo third of his name, tenth- *no*, excuse me, *twelfth* in line for the throne of Ender." The man says with a flourishing sweep of his arm, tail flicking behind him serenely, and Tubbo fights back a groan because he hates all of this pompous crap, turns to stare at the prince- *Ranboo*, and holds out a slightly shaking hand, "Nice to meet you Ranboo, I'm Tubbo, your pilot."

It's a perfectly normal thing to say, and yeah, Tubbo's teeth might be chattering but he sounded friendly enough, but Ranboo's mismatched eyes narrow, arms folding tightly behind his back as he snips, "If you must address me, it's either as '*your highness*' or '*Prince Ranboo*', do you understand?"

"Excuse me." Tubbo blurts out without thinking, and the prince sniffs, jerking his head to the side and sticks his nose in the air, "You're excused this time, I can't imagine *you've* had much experience dealing with royalty before."

Tubbo tries to keep his mouth from dropping open, has a few alternatives for what he could call king jackass over here besides *your highness*, but if he does, he's for sure losing this job which means not seeing Tommy and no nice pile of credits in his account. *Remember you said the devil himself*, Tubbo curls his fingers into his palm, drops his now clenched fist back to his side, *just get this pompous dickbag to Nirox and then you get to see Tommy, you can do this*.

"Crystal clear, your *highness*." He can't help the way he bites the title out, and it's so sour coming from his mouth, like when he used to clap a clenched fist over his chest and utter as one of hundreds, *sir yes sir*.

No matter how scathing his tone, it seems to appease his royal asshole-ness, his tail swishing briefly before going still once more, "Excellent, well let's get going then."

The prince doesn't even offer his servant, aide, guy, *whatever* any parting words, just sweeps past Tubbo into the cargo hold of the Eshachi, dark cloak with glowing, geometric designs fluttering behind him as he calls over his shoulder, "Pilot, where are my quarters?"

“Um-” Tubbo looks back from him to where the aide was, but the man is gone, last of his purple particles fizzing out around where he used to be, and Tubbo cocks his head to the side. The abrupt departure is a little odd, especially considering he’s more or less entrusting his prince to the care of some stranger, didn’t even make Tubbo promise to keep him safe or anything, just left like he couldn’t be bothered.

“Pilot? I asked you a question.” Ranboo’s huffy voice demands from behind him, and Tubbo turns with a scowl, already hating his tone, the pure condescension dripping from it, like he’s somehow better than Tubbo just because of the family he was born into, just because of the stupid glowing rocks around his head.

Sir yes sir sit down shut up do as you’re told ensign- and Tubbo grits his teeth against the nasty emotions rising in his chest, the burning anger he hasn’t felt in so long, itching in his fingertips like he needs to *shred something*, tromps up the ramp into the cargo hold and slams his fist into the button that’ll close them in from the endless frozen black wasteland that is Annwyl.

Inside, it’s even more apparent how tall the prince is, the long sweep of his horns almost but not quite brushing the ceiling, and Tubbo suddenly doesn’t know if he’s even going to fit in one of the Eshachi’s bunks, huffs out a mean laugh at the thought of his pompous ass having to sleep on the floor.

“W-What’re you-? I- were you *e-even listening to me?*” The prince snaps, ears flicking back and sending the gold jewelry he wears swinging around, righteous indignation snarling his lips up to bare his fangs, “Don’t forget *I’m paying you*, and when I ask you a question, I expect you to *answer*.”

What...

An absolutely miserable fuckhead.

No wonder the aide just left without saying goodbye, Tubbo would have too, but now he’s stuck with the little shit for the next day while they make the jump to Nirox. For half a second, he imagines getting them into orbit and hurling this spoiled Ender prince out of the airlock, and the immense satisfaction Tubbo feels is enough to calm his pounding heart.

It’s a little over a day, you just have to not kill him, he takes in a deep breath, closes his eyes briefly and imagines soft, grey speckled wings wrapping around him, warm hands warm smile warm voice, *play your cards right and it’ll be real tomorrow, you’ll get to hug Tommy, hear his laugh, see his smile*.

“Sorry-” Tubbo says in a clipped tone, let’s all the air out of his lungs and tries again, flicking his eyes open to see Ranboo glaring at him, stupidly long arms folded across his chest, “I-you’re right. Sorry for...not answering sooner.”

Ranboo harumphs and jerks his head to the sides, something really off about the way he holds himself, “Good, make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Think about Tommy, think about the credits, think about how you'll never have to see him again in thirty six hours, Tubbo violently repeats as he inclines his head, dredging up whatever that used to be in him that kept him still and quiet while he saluted in a line with dozens of others, "Of course, your highness. Please, let me show you where to put your things."

But as Tubbo's climbing up the ladder to the top deck, he remembers unwillingly how thin that band of control is, remembers what happened the last time it snapped, and he bites the inside of his cheek hard to keep the furious scream inside.

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The Declassified Galactic Survival Guide:

To speed along its ever growing borders, the Sun Empire has to have the biggest and bestest fleet in the galaxy, and to have the biggest fleet in the galaxy, you need scores and scores of willing applicants, and thus comes the other area of expertise that Nirox wields like a fine blade.

Propaganda.

It is much easier to inspire hordes of faithful followers if you tell them what you want them to know rather than what they should know, and that's what the Imperial Sunfleet does, goes around giving inspiring speeches in small towns throughout the galaxy, dazzling impressionable youth with shining medals and gold bands on their sleeves.

Who wants to be a farmer when you could be a Sunfleet captain? Sail the stars on a battle cruiser larger than your entire town, see the whole galaxy, protect the weak and meek and be a hero, and every year, countless teenagers flock to Nirox hoping to earn a commission in the illustrious ranks of the Imperial Sunfleet.

The real kicker though, is that less than half of those starry eyed recruits make it out of ensign, and fewer than that even make it up to the helm, because what Nirox is searching for isn't your ability to do your job with any degree of proficiency, it's how good you are at following orders and not questioning them.

--

They're only about ten hours into their thirty six hour trip and Tubbo has already decided that if he has to spend a single second longer than required with Prince Ranboo The Pretentious and Long Winded, he's going to fly them into the nearest sun.

The little shit has already complained about practically everything on the Eshachi, from the *color palette* to the lack of space, bitched about the bunk Tubbo pointed him to with little fanfare, and if it was literally anyone else, Tubbo *would* feel sorry for them because Ranboo can't even sit on it properly without banging his horns into the ceiling.

"This is absolutely ridiculous." Ranboo snapped where he was bent nearly in half, and Tubbo didn't know what the fuck he wanted him to do about it, fucking- *remodel the Eshachi while*

they were in hyperspace, shrugged his shoulders and repeated one of Techno's adages, "Them's the breaks."

After enduring an impassionate rant about how that had to be breaking Imperial OSHA guidelines for spacecraft, Tubbo made up some bullshit excuse that he needed to go check on things and beat a hasty retreat to the cockpit, waspishly mouthing along to the talking continuing behind him.

He'd plotted a direct course to Nirox, and after checking that everything was running smoothly, because he *was a good pilot*, Tubbo just kicked back in his chair, swung his legs over an armrest and absentmindedly fiddled with a puzzle cube in the relative peace and quiet.

Since the mission was now officially underway, Tubbo wasn't worried about running into any Sunfleet cruisers, because if he got pulled over, he could flap his mission papers at them and as soon as they saw Techno's horrendous scrawl at the bottom, they'd back right off.

Or, alternatively, he could just throw Ranboo at them and jump back into hyperspace while he talked the Sunfleet brass to death.

Tubbo has never met another being that talked quite as much as him, it would almost be impressive if it wasn't so fucking annoying, and it never stopped, like he was trying to fill up empty space with how great he was, in case you'd forgotten in the last couple seconds of silence.

He was probably just used to having courtiers around that fawned over him, servants that had no other choice but to smile and nod and make him feel special, and Tubbo was committed to at least being civil, but he wasn't going to kiss the brat's ass.

"Hey, pilot, your ship's wifi isn't working."

Speak of the devil, Tubbo thinks with a snort, barely holds back the sigh as he calls, "That would be because I don't have it."

"...seriously?"

"Do you have any idea how expensive it is? I can't afford that." Tubbo shoots back without thinking, forgetting that duh, *of course* he's got no idea, he's a prince from one of the richest planets in the entire galaxy, probably can't name the price of a single item in the Eshachi if his life depended on it, "I've got a deep space transmitter if you need to make a call or something."

"I- no thank you." Ranboo sounds a lot closer than he has been, and Tubbo sits up in apprehension, sees him hovering outside the entrance to the cockpit, fancy looking holo-tablet clutched to his front, tail uncurling and curling around one of his legs. There is nothing Tubbo wants less than Ranboo in his cockpit, just, *touching things* with his stupid long fingers and sniffing in disgust at everything, figures if maybe he plays along he can get the asshole to leave him alone.

Making an assumption after seeing the tablet, Tubbo turns back to his cube and adopts a very apologetic tone, "If you need to download something, you're gonna have to wait until we get to Nirox. Sorry about any inconvenience."

"Hm? Oh...no. I was just doing some reading for class...I'm at the top of my grade you know, scored the highest out of anyone in their second year at the academy last term." He pauses for a second, likely with the notion that Tubbo's going to praise him or something, but when he doesn't get any reaction, continues on at a fast clip, "But this year, I'm going to do better than the entire student body combined. I'll outscore *all* of them."

"Yippee." Tubbo says in deadpan, entirely absorbed in rotating the tiles on his puzzle, hoping Ranboo will take the hint and *go away*, but even with his lackluster response, Ranboo is not deterred in the slightest, "I'm going to graduate early. No one's managed that for my major yet, it's a *very* rigorous program by the way, one of the toughest at the academy, but *I'm* going to be the first. I might even go back for a second degree because, how hard could it be really?"

Queens past shut the fuck up, Tubbo mouths silently to himself, the hands that aren't fiddling around with the puzzle cube digging harshly into his sides, making him wince when he accidentally grips his left side too hard, but there's pent up aggravation tingling throughout his body and its either dig his fingers into himself or start yelling.

"-and then after *that*, I'll apply for a consulate position and- *h-hey*, are you *listening* to *me*? I- I'm trying to have a *conversation* with you, though, maybe that's *my* fault for assuming *you* know anything about the academy but-"

"*MY* apologies, *your highness*, but *I'm* trying to fly a spacecraft here." Tubbo snaps, throwing the cube down into his lap out of frustration, easily catching the implication that he's not *good enough* to get into the Sunfleet Academy, twists to look around his chair and jolts when he sees Ranboo's wandered into the cockpit, is standing behind the copilot seat.

Tubbo has the sudden and horrible image of the royal brat sitting his glittering ass down in *his copilot seat*, chokes on the spit in his mouth because no one has ever sat there and no one ever will, the only person that Tubbo would ever want a thousand light years away and *he already said no-*

But thankfully, Ranboo remains standing, just looks down to how Tubbo's sitting, eyes flicking between the brightly colored cube in his lap, to his legs thrown over the side of an armrest, and then up to where the autopilot is clearly visible on the HUD, looks somewhere by Tubbo's head and arches a brow in disdain.

I'm so much better than you, that looks screams, *you're the dirt under my heel*, and Tubbo's fingers clench to the point of bruising on his sides, *never were going to be anything*, the roiling mass of searing hot anger rising in him like a backlogged engine block, *a nobody going nowhere-*

"It's *really* complicated stuff, I won't *bother* you with an explanation, *your highness*." Tubbo simpers, batting his lashes at him, and he's expecting Ranboo to bitch and rage, maybe throw out some petty one liners, but he goes absolutely still, body untensing in the weirdest way.

It's like any personality he had is gone, and Tubbo's pretty good at reading people, you have to be to survive in this line of work, but he can't get a read on Ranboo at all anymore, like he's completely void of emotion, not a single sign of life in him.

Ranboo tips his head to the side with a vapid expression, disturbingly bland and congenial smile on his face, "Naturally, I imagine it's *quite hard* simplifying your entire craft down to its most basic essentials, especially when it's something you are *so* familiar with, know both inside and out."

"I- what are you getting at?" Tubbo snaps, feels like he's missing something here, and finally sits up to face Ranboo properly who merely shakes his head, nothing but blank disinterest in his eyes, "Nothing at all, I'm simply expressing an understanding of the limitations one such as yourself must subsist under."

"Uh...right..." Tubbo trails off uncertainly, brows scrunched together because it really feels like there's some conversation going on he's not aware of, but after he repeats what Ranboo just said a few times to himself, his eyes go wide, "*Wait- wait are you calling me stupid?*"

"Oh I would never, what a terrible thing to say." Ranboo says in a hollowly polite voice, turns on his heel without so much as showing a single sign of a comprehensible emotion, sweeps out of the cockpit with an airy, "I'm going to try and rest for a while, do work on keeping us on a stable flightpath...*if* you can."

Tubbo watches him go with his mouth hanging open, heat rising to his face with how angry he is, and as soon as the door to the sleeping area swishes closed behind Ranboo's stupid, golden heels, Tubbo hunches over, fists fingers in his hair and screams soundlessly. *Queens of fucking ages past*, he hasn't been this blisteringly, *achingly*, completely all encompassing *furios* in such a long time that he's a little light headed, hasn't felt this out of control since he still had gold bands on his sleeves and wasn't his own person.

He- he needs to *hit something*, to feel the sting in his knuckles and get some of this poisonous hate out of him, but they're in the middle of deep space so there's nowhere for him to go, and Tubbo's not about to unload his frustrations on the Eshachi. Feeling trapped and panicked and pissed off, he fumbles his handheld out of his pocket with shaking hands and just begins typing faster than his enraged mind can keep up.

Dickhead

23:54

<< u wudlnt believe the amount of bullshit im having to deal with]

<< This new misisojn is driving me up the FCUKGN WALL I cant

<< Aad this fuckign gdick has THE AUDCATITY TO TELL ME IM NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR FUCKIGN SUNFLEET

<< Like theyrnt not the actual trahs of the universe

<< Ahd he teeats me like im some fucking bakcwatrered idiot that just jumped in a flgihtseat and hit the ignaiton

<< Im going to kill im actually foing to kill him and the jail time will be worth it

Tubbo lets out a shaky breath and lowers his handheld, and he's still upset, hands tremoring faintly, but some of the frantic urgency to *do something* is gone. Tipping his head back against his chair, he takes a few seconds to calm down, *breath in breath out you're okay breath in breath out it's fine you're fine*, feels a faint vibration and snaps his head down immediately.

Dickhead

23:57

>> christ go off I guess king

>> you doing another supply run?

It's- it's like midnight on Nirox right now, but Tommy must still have it so Tubbo's message always go through to his handheld, even when it's in sleep mode, and he huffs out a tremulous laugh because Tommy knows him so well, begins tapping out a response.

Dickhead

23:58

<< no, escort this time. Client super rich and super spoiled

>> damn, what the fucks he like to piss u off this much??

<< take every entitld dick in top brass times ten

>> holy fuck

>> RIP u I guess

<< I am suffering help me u dick

>> wanna call?

Swiveling to check that the door at the end of the Eshachi is still closed, Tubbo types back *yes* before going in and lowering the volume for the video call preemptively, makes sure it's only coming out of the speakers in the cockpit and not the whole ship.

A second later, and the horrendous, scrunched face picture of Tommy is up on the HUD, and Tubbo grins, already feels some of the tension bleeding out of him as he hits accept, and then the entire cockpit is flooded with that too loud, boisterous voice, "HELLO BITCH!"

"Hey dickhead." Tubbo sighs happily, tucking his legs up under himself while Tommy grins at him, camera way too close to his face and giving him a weird fish eyed look, and Tubbo cocks his head to the side, "You in bed or something?"

"Yeah cause I just got done fucking *bitches*, Tubbs, it was off the wall you have *no idea* man-"

"You got a PT test tomorrow?" Tubbo interrupts with a cheeky grin and Tommy clicks his mouth shut, thuds his head back against his pillow, muttering sulkily, "*No- maybe, yes.*"

"Ha, sucks to be you." Tubbo crows, enthusiastically flipping off Tommy with all four hands while he struggles to just get one free where he's trying to keep his handheld steady. The video feed pitches around wildly, Tommy biting out curses as he tries to right it, snapping over Tubbo's delighted cackling, "Oh would you- *shut up you ass*, you've got it worse than me if you're spam texting me this much."

With a groan, Tubbo sags back in his chair, jerks around quick to make sure the door is still shut and whispers as loudly as he can, "You've got no idea. I'm- he's really just the worst, Toms, you've- you can't even *begin* to imagine."

"Is he worse than Corporal Danzer the ol' pissbag?"

"*Oooh man! Fuck* that guy, but *yes*. I didn't think it'd ever be possible, but *somehow*, he manages." Tubbo seethes, hands flying around while he rants, getting swept up in his frustrations, "He's so *spoiled*, thinks everything should just be fucking handed to him, *can't shut the fuck up* about himself it's insane, a-and on top of *everything*, he's *so rude*. Queens past, he like, bitched me out the first time we met cause I didn't use his title properly-"

"Oh for the love of *Christ*."

“-and he refuses to use *my* name, just keeps calling me ‘pilot’. Like I’m some sort of servant or something.” Tubbo gripes, hadn’t realized how much it’d been bothering him until he voiced it, but now he can’t stop thinking about it, how Ranboo acts like he’s not even worth the energy it takes to exist, “*Fuck- Queens, I just hate him so much- like it’s so bad, Tommy, just- the way he talks to me? I-It’s like being back there-*”

Tubbo stops himself before he can say any more, eyes suddenly stinging and he ducks his head, thought he’d stamped all of that down, that it wouldn’t be coming back up, but here it is, crawling to the surface with nasty little claws that sink into his mind and threaten to drag him back down there, *calm down get a hold of yourself sit down shut up do as you’re told ensi-*

“FUCK-!” He barks, banging his palms against the armrests, completely and utterly infuriated to the point that it feels like he’s choking, like there’s hands clenched around his throat in a stranglehold, and- and- *there’s empty canisters at his feet the scent of fuel reeking in the air a match passed to him* but there’s not- *you can’t go back there you’ve got to calm down get a grip remember what happened last time no half measures-*

A wounded, overly concerned noise trickles in through the speakers, and Tubbo latches onto it, tries to stop thinking about the woozy smell of fuel and the acrid scent of chemical fires, focuses on the smooth cadence of Tommy’s voice as he starts speaking, “I’m so sorry, man, I just- *fuck*, I’d punch him right in the dick if I was there mark my words.”

Tubbo lets out a shaky breath, looks up through bleary eyes and tries not to sniffle super obviously because he *isn’t* going to cry over this, not because of stupid mother fucking *Ranboo, Prince of Dicks*.

Tommy just smiles at him sadly like he knows what he’s thinking, says softly, “It’s going to be alright, Tubbo. Just try and keep away from him, and I know it’s hard, but don’t let him get to you, man. You’re the best pilot I’ve ever known and smarter than half the idiots in our- *m-my* class. This dickhead doesn’t know *shit*. ”

“You’re only sayin’ that cause you know I’d shoot you otherwise.” Tubbo mumbles, scrubbing the sleeve of his bomber across his face, little bit of joyful pride kindling in his chest when Tommy barks out a startled laugh, cackles, “Uh oh! *Big man* over here with a *scary* gun!”

Looking back up at the image of his best friend’s grinning face, stupidly warped by how close the camera is to him, makes such intense longing spike through Tubbo that he feels like the wind’s been knocked out of him.

It hits him then, the fact that he’s going to be on Nirox *tomorrow*, will get to see Tommy in person, real and alive and in front of him, and he must make some sort of face because Tommy asks with a hint of worry, “You alright? You look like- you just went really still.”

“Y-Yeah. I- *um*, I didn’t want to um, ya’know, *jinx* anything but, funny story, but I’m actually going to-” Tubbo stops short as an alert screams through the cockpit, and he jerks, hitting a few buttons on the console that’ll minimize the video feed, pulls up the windows for his instrument readouts and feels all the blood leave his face, “Oh fuck.”

“Tubbo? What’s wrong?” Tommy’s voice is barely audible over the shrill wailing of more alarms sounding, and Tubbo unwinds frantically from his coiled position, hands steady as they fly fast across the console despite how hard his heart is pounding, “Tubbo-!”

“I-I have to go- *fuck-!* Osiron just went fucking supernova.” Tubbo yells, the Eshachi shaking around them as they’re hit with the first pulsating shockwave, sending the video feed crackling into shrieking static, but Tommy’s face pops back up, eyes blown wide in panic.

“N-No, no-! Fucking-! NO! *Tubbo y-*” Tommy screams, whatever he was saying cutting out as the Eshachi is hit again, metal plating groaning as they’re forced off their path a little, and Tubbo’s got to drop them out of lightspeed or they’re going to be ripped apart in hyperspace. He eases back on the throttle, engines winding down as the bright blur of hyperspace is replaced with the searing, red hot light of Osiron in the distance.

Thick bands of burning gasses snarl off the surface of the star as it shudders, outermost layers expanding and contracting quickly as its core collapses, sending sheets of molten hot metals spitting out into space around it and Tubbo swallows thickly.

He spares a quick glance at Tommy, and it looks like he’s going to throw up, tears collecting in his lashes while his eyes dart all around the screen, but Tubbo feels a strange amount of calm flood through him as he grins shakily, winking, “H-Hey, I’m the best pilot you know, remember?”

“You *stupid-* -lease be okay for the- *-od please- I lov-*” Tommy’s breaking up too much as the radiation leaking from Osiron interrupts the transmission, and Tubbo’s *got to go*, needs to have all his attention focused on keeping them alive, yells in the desperate hope that Tommy will be able to hear him, “Love you, Tommy! See you on the other side!”

The feed cuts out with a sharp crack before he can end it himself, and Tubbo takes a shuddering breath as another shockwave hits them, bits of debris from freshly destroyed asteroids streaking past like small, fiery comets. This is bad, Tubbo’s never been this near a star when it’s gone terminal like this before, and it’s going to take some really tricky, really smart flying to get them out of this one.

“Dearly departed Queens, I-I know I’m not the most, uh, *devout*, but I could use all the fucking help I could get right now, amen or whatever.” Tubbo hastily fires off, switching all of the controls over to manual and takes command of the Eshachi, veering them sharply to the side as another barrage of debris comes hurtling past, alarms blaring throughout the entire ship as they’re swarmed with radiation.

A chunk of asteroid roughly the size of the Eshachi comes barreling towards them, blasted off its trajectory by a guttering wave of energy from the expanding star, and Tubbo hauls back on the throttle, flinging them into reverse and barely skating by its surface with a heinous scrape of metal. He misses the door swishing open amidst the noise of everything else, but it’s still not a surprise when Ranboo is suddenly yelling behind him, “*What* do you think you’re d-d-d-! *A-Ancients of the Deep!* What’s-?”

“Osiron went supernova!” Tubbo calls back, jerking the yoke to the side and spinning around a smattering of red hot chunks of nuclear hot metal, hears a loud thud and squawk behind

him, “You’re gonna want to buckle up!”

He meant in one of the seats in the main cabin, but Ranboo stumbles his lanky ass further into the cockpit and drops into the copilot seat, buckling himself in with quaking hands, and Tubbo looks at him a second too long in the eerie red light, indignation breaking through the calm his mind had descended into, at least until Ranboo flings a hand at the viewport and screams, “R-Rock!”

Tubbo whips back around, loudly cursing as he’s too slow maneuvering out of the way, cringes at the rumbling tearing sound that shudders through the Eshachi, throws the throttle all the way forwards and sends them hurtling past a slowly spinning asteroid that comes sailing up from somewhere below them.

He’s desperately trying to keep his focus on everything that’s happening, on swerving around pieces of debris that would tear through them in an instant, calculating how much he needs to course correct when Osiron shudders out pulsating waves of energy, but it’s hard to do when Ranboo keeps muttering frantically under his breath next to him, “*Ancients*, oh *Ancients*, I-I-it’s o-okay it’s oookaaaay- *not its n-not NO IT’S NOT- oh Ancients* we’re going to *d-die-!*”

“We’re not gonna die-” Tubbo bites out, pulling back on the yoke and narrowly avoiding two pieces of asteroid that collide together, cutting back quickly through the small shards they send flying, some banging into the Eshachi and making Ranboo wail, “*A-Ancients!* We’re d-dead! W-We’re gonna die-!”

“We’re not gonna die!” Tubbo yells heatedly, miscalculating how much thrust he needs to use to ride out the next shockwave, the Eshachi quaking around them as it’s battered by solar energy, accidentally sends them smashing into a chunk of molten asteroid and he smacks a palm into an armrest at the new round of alarms that sets off.

“A-Are you *insane*? There’s no *way* w-we’re gonna s-survive this!” Ranboo hollers, throwing out a trembling hand to wave erratically at the shit-fest in front of them, “I-I d-don’t care what *y-you think!* N-No one can m-make this-! Oh *A-Ancients*, this is it, I-I don’t wanna *die-*”

“Can you- *calm down!*” Tubbo screams, but a snarling blast from Osiron hits them then, and Ranboo’s stumbling stream of panic warps into a desperately scared wail that grates on Tubbo’s antenna, hands white knuckling around the controls as Ranboo yowls, “*P-Please Ancients* I-I don’t wanna die, *please*, *Ancients* I-I’m so s-scared, I-I-I w-what do we do? W-What do w-we *do- what do we do-!*”

“Will you just- SHUT THE FUCK UP! *For once in your life!*” Tubbo screeches, hits the throttle backwards too hard and hears Ranboo choke as he’s jerked forwards, takes a deep breath and tries to calm his frayed nerves, says with vicious conviction as he flies through a whole field of rocketing debris, “We’re *not* going to die, *I’m going* to get us out of this so just- *shut up and trust me!*”

Adrenaline is coursing through him like lightning, making all the hair on his body stand up on end, heart beating like it’s trying to escape his ribcage, but Tubbo’s hands are steady on the controls because he can *do this*, he *knows* he can do this, and mercifully, Ranboo decides

to believe him, or maybe he just passes out, but he's finally quiet and that's all Tubbo could ask for.

Osiron is nearing the ending stages of its explosion, light suddenly receding around them as it collapses inwards into a swirling core of bright orange, and Tubbo bites the inside of his cheek hard, knows they only have a few minutes before it expands rapidly. They're so close to the edge of the blast radius, Tubbo dares a glance up at one of his readouts, calculating in his head how much longer they have and it's going to be so close, he's only got the one shot, has to do this perfectly.

One breath in one breath out, hands flexing around the controls and Tubbo *moves*.

The engines are a comforting rumble around him, their whining pitch rising and falling as he moves the throttle forwards, like a great beast inhaling and exhaling, the smooth glide of machinery trembling in the air like well trained muscles, responding to Tubbo's touch without any hesitation. He knows this ship, knows it like an extension of himself, and it knows him, has never failed him before and it doesn't now, moving exactly as Tubbo wants it to.

There is only his heart beating fast but steady in his ears, a grounding vibration like the Eshachi working beautifully under him, hands sure around the yoke, controlled on the throttle, guiding them through the ever changing minefield in front of him, his mind working quick and calculating trajectories faster than the rocks can move, gliding past everything in dizzying spirals.

They clear the threshold at the last possible second, fiery light searing out behind them as Osiron enters the last stage of its explosion, knocking the Eshachi forwards with a tidal wave of blistering heat and radiation, sends them careening through space with a dozen alarms blaring. Tubbo fights for control back, but it's almost impossible, the force of the detonation ripping the yoke from his hands, and they're mercilessly pelted with shards of shrapnel as they spin uncontrollably.

Tubbo can hear the emergency bulkhead doors clang into place, cutting them off from the cargo hold which isn't good, means the hull's been breached somewhere, and he finally gets control over the yoke, spins them around fast and flings the throttle all the way down, flooding the engines with fuel. If they've taken a hit, doesn't matter how big, he can't jump to lightspeed, it'd only blow it open more and compromise the Eshachi, but he's got to get them out of here before the radiation leaking out of Osiron cooks them alive.

Typing on a holo-screen one handed, Tubbo pulls up a list of nearby inhabitable planets and planetoids, settles on the closest one with an atmosphere and guns it in that direction. He does his best to dodge debris, but they're so small now, it's hard to move past them, and a few more strike hard against the Eshachi's hull.

It doesn't sound like any more holes are blasted open, and it's the small mercies that count the most right now, like when the dusty little planet finally comes into view. Tubbo frantically begins the process for entering its atmosphere, prays silently they're not going to burn up on reentry, darts a quick glance at Ranboo who, to his surprise, is still conscious, though he's gone a weird ashy color.

He's staring straight ahead with his hands gripped on the armrests, claws Tubbo hadn't noticed before gouging into the material, tail going absolutely ballistic as it snaps and curls through the air, sending all of the gold dangling from his ears swaying around erratically. *Of all the people I might die beside...* Tubbo thinks with a streak of dark amusement, turns back to the viewport and eases them down through the thermosphere.

More alarms pop up instantly, warning him of overheating and Tubbo dismisses all of them with a quick flick of his wrist, grits his teeth at the distressing rattling the Eshachi starts making, his heart aching for his ship, *just a little longer, please, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry but just a little further-*

But Tubbo is a good pilot, and the Eshachi is a good ship, and it gets them down to the planet's surface alive, touching down less than graceful in the first clear spot of land Tubbo can find, settling with creaking groans as gravity aggravates all of its hurts.

Tubbo's quick to kill the engines, just in case there's a fuel leak anywhere, and they sit in the ringing silence as they power down, faint pinging coming from the metal hull as it begins to cool, both of them breathing harshly in the cockpit, and Tubbo turns to look at Ranboo the same time he turns to him.

His eyes are blown wide, pupils contracted all the way into razor thin slits from panic, but his mouth twitches, panting breaths huffing out in some semblance of deranged laughter as he looks at Tubbo in awe. A dark tongue darts out to wet his lips, and then he croaks in a hoarse voice edged with manic relief, "A-Ancients of the Deep...y-you...*you did it.*"

He sounds so flabbergasted, absolutely flummoxed that they survived, Tubbo can't help but bark out a tremulous laugh, collapses back against his chair as the terror finally hits him, body shaking uncontrollably as he wheezes, "T-Told you."

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The Declassified Galactic Survival Guide:

Out of every galactic entity to run across, the Imperial Sunfleet is not the worst by any means, unless you oppose them in some way, or carry out any activities deemed illegal by the Sun Emperor which runs the gamut from not paying taxes to the Empire to obnoxiously obvious slave trafficking.

Punishments for such transgressions come in a vast range depending on which branch of the fleet it is that has detained you, along with how frisky the commanding officers are feeling, but have been known to include indefinite incarceration in one of the many imperial prisons, along with incinerating your entire ship on the spot.

For this reason alone, your author suggests that if being pursued by any craft bearing the Sunfleet emblem, to just keep going and hope you can outrun them, because if not, running from imperial officers *is* an incinerable offense and one that's hard to make a comeback from.

While your author does say this to frighten you, it is by no means meant to be a deterrent to traveling the stars, one of the most rewarding, and hazardous, experiences any being should

definitely partake in, but is meant to act as a mere piece of cautionary advice to steer you in the right direction.

Survival in deep space can be tricky for the unwary, which is why this book was created, to help the reader, hopefully you, better navigate these obstacles by providing a comprehensible understanding of every culture and group the author, me, had the pleasure and displeasure of meeting before my likely untimely demise.

But besides this book, the most important thing to have when navigating the interstellar swamp that calls itself our reality is, and it is *not* actually a towel, like some, *other*, experts on the subject of writing long winded and rambling books about the universe might have suggested, but rather something much more simple.

The best resource you could ever have with you in the dark cold beyond of space is simply someone there with you, a partner you'd trust with your own life, might have to on many occasions, because just the knowledge that there's someone with you, that you're not having to face all of this alone, is what will get you through anything.

Chapter End Notes

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Hiya! I'm working on a book rn and if you'd like to learn more about it, [head on over to tumblr!](#)

Proto

Chapter Notes

Hello welcome back! Please mind the tags as they have updated!

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

Flipping the welding goggles up to get a better view of his patchwork, Tubbo huffs and chews on his lower lip, not super happy with the way he's sealed this section of the hull shut, reaches behind him to grab the prybar but stops when a waspish voice snaps, "You've repaired that section twice now, *stop it*."

"But it looks hideous, I almost got it *perfect*-" Tubbo's in the middle of saying when he's bowled over by Ranboo yelling, "I don't *care* if it's *perfect*! It just needs to get us off this void cursed rock!"

"It's *my* ship! I'll fix it how *I fucking* want!" Tubbo fires back, twisting to glare over his shoulder at where Ranboo is sprawled out in the shade of the open cargo bay, looking utterly miserable in only his pants and an ill-fitting tank from Tubbo. He rolls his lips back to bare his fangs but apparently doesn't have the energy for anything more, tips his head to the side and heaves out a huge breath, tail limply coiled over one of his legs.

A rush of genuine sympathy sweeps through Tubbo and he turns back around with a sigh, looks at his less than stellar patch job, and it kills him to leave it looking like that...but it'll survive a jump to lightspeed, and he forces himself to move on, snapping the goggles down once more.

They've been stuck on this planetoid for almost three imperial cycles now with no way to get any communications out. Some combination of all the radiation and just general damages has the deep space transmitter down, making it so Tubbo can't send out an SOS, has to resort to repairing the Eshachi himself.

He started working on it as soon as his legs could bear his weight, but with all the residual radiation and energy pouring off Osiron, Tubbo's a little limited on time. The day cycles here are impossibly bright and deadly, swelling with heat that threatens to cook anything that steps out from under cover, so he can't start repairs until the planetoid has rotated away from Osiron, temperature leveling out to something more...*survivable*.

It's still miserable work, even at night, the welding equipment heating up the already hot air around him to the point that Tubbo's just out there in a tank top and cargo pants, bare feet slipping against the slick hull of the Eshachi. He puts on the protective gloves because he doesn't want to burn his fingertips off, but it's too hot for anything else, leaves his arms exposed to the jumping sparks that fly off the welding torch.

Tubbo just grits his teeth and bulls his way through it, rubs burn cream into his splotchy red skin as soon as Osiron starts to rise and he's forced to take shelter in the oven the Eshachi basically becomes. He doesn't want to waste their fuel running the engines enough so that the aircon will work, leaves the cargo bay wide open and hopes a breeze will make its way inside where they rest up against the walls in the sticky shade.

But no matter how sweaty and uncomfortable Tubbo is, he learned it's five times worse for Ranboo, who practically melts into a puddle as soon as the sun comes up, strips down as much as his dignity will allow and basically passes out from heat exhaustion until night sets in.

At first, Tubbo chalked it up to him being a spoiled brat and attempting to weasel out of helping repair the ship, but after Ranboo literally collapsed on his feet trying to bring some tools up to Tubbo, he realized he might not be playing up how bad he was feeling.

"What're you- *oh shit!*" Tubbo shouted watching Ranboo's lanky form slip off the side of the ship like a marionette with its strings cut, a distressingly heavy thud following as he presumably hit the ground. Scrambling to his feet, Tubbo took a running leap off the Eshachi, wings buzzing behind him and softening his landing in the sand beside Ranboo's prone body.

Checking him over quickly, Tubbo was relieved to find he wasn't bleeding and hadn't broken anything, but it looked like he was out cold, couldn't even really tell if he was breathing. Tubbo felt wildly around for a pulse and eventually found it high in Ranboo's neck, beating erratically under a long ear, only problem was, Tubbo didn't know if that was normal or not.

There weren't many Ender in the Imperial fleet, definitely none in his old cohort, and Tubbo only knew what the resting pulse was for like, *three other species*, he didn't know jack shit about Ender physiology. "You better not die you stupid jackass." Tubbo muttered under his breath, another hand flitting down to feel Ranboo's forehead, skin warm to the touch but not sweaty in the slightest.

Was that a bad thing? A good thing? *Fuck*, he didn't *know*, he'd never even touched Ranboo before, Queens knew what his normal body temperature was supposed to be, but Tubbo had to do *something*, fucker just collapsed dead on his feet and that was obviously not ideal.

Hauling a surprisingly light Ranboo into his arms, Tubbo carted him inside the cargo bay and spread him out on the floor, attempting to be careful as he set him down. Ranboo was at least still breathing, chest rising and falling shallowly, and Tubbo flopped down next to him, chewing on a thumb and trying to think of everything he knew about Ender.

They were stupid tall and stupid rich, had some sort of problem with water, could teleport short distances and see relatively well in low light, which probably helped them out a bunch since their planet was a sad, frozen little rock at the very edges of their system, hardly got any lig- *oh shit*, that was *it*.

Annwyl was *frigid*, probably never got much warmer than above freezing, and where Tubbo had been slowly getting frostbite standing outside in his full gear, the Ender were all walking around in relatively light looking fabrics, completely unbothered.

Ranboo's got fucking *heat stroke* or something, and Tubbo immediately yanked his boots off, fingers working quick to unbutton his long sleeved tunic, exposing as much of his skin to the air as he could in the hopes it'd cool him off, but it's nowhere near close to freezing, was something more like twenty six degrees in here.

"*Fuck, fuckfuckfuckf-*" Tubbo stammered, rapping his hands nervously against the floor, trying to come up with *some* solution that didn't involve using up what fuel they had, finally lands on *something*.

Spinning around so his back was to Ranboo, Tubbo paused for half a second feeling like an idiot, but he couldn't think of anything better with no power to lower the temperature, slowly began fanning his wings to create a breeze.

The movement pulled at his blaster wound, aggravating already tender muscles and tissues, but Tubbo didn't have a lot of options here, and he'd rather tear his side back open than get stuck on this dusty rock with no fuel after running the aircon trying to cool Ranboo off.

Queens, he might have to though if this didn't work, and Tubbo may not like the guy, but he sure as hell wasn't going to let him lay there and have his brains be cooked alive, no one deserved that, not even snotty, spoiled Ender princes.

But thankfully, after a few minutes, he heard groaning behind him and looked over his shoulder to find Ranboo stirring, bringing a shaking hand up to rub at his face, eyes slitting open in the gloom and glowing vibrantly.

After that, Tubbo didn't ask Ranboo to help with any repairs, just offered him a tank top that was ridiculously short on him and left him to stew in the hold while Tubbo tried his damndest to fix the Eshachi as fast as possible but still to a standard he was happy with.

As the sols drag on though, Tubbo thinks he might have to concede on the repair work being as good as he'd like, both of them getting increasingly more exhausted and waspish in the oppressive heat, and if it was just Tubbo out here, he'd suffer through whatever to take care of the Eshachi like he wants, but it's not just him.

He has to factor Ranboo into this.

Osiron is threatening at the horizon when Tubbo calls it for the night, day technically, *whatever-* hauls his equipment under the Eshachi and drags leaden feet up the cargo ramp, stumbles past Ranboo who honestly looks as wretched as some beings he's seen dying of terminal illnesses.

He's not drenched in sweat like Tubbo, apparently Ender missed that in the lotto wheel of life, but his skin's gone weirdly ashy, dry and cracked around his knuckles and the edges of his mouth, eyes dull whenever they're actually open, clear fatigue on his face and it does stupid things to Tubbo's exhausted brain.

"Sorry...it's- the repairs takin' so long..." He mumbles absentmindedly, really, truly feeling bad for the bastard as he slides down a wall that's a disturbing amount of warm already, and Ranboo's tail flicks, only sign that he's still alive as he snips halfheartedly, "You should be."

“Piss off.” Tubbo slurs without any real bite, doesn’t have the energy to actually be angry, kicks his legs out and nods his head to the side, hopes he’ll get a few decent hours of sleep before it gets too hot even for that. He’s not sure how long it’s quiet for, drifting off into hazy half consciousness, so he isn’t even sure he’s really hearing it when Ranboo mumbles, “I- that’s...unfair of me, you...*you saved my life.*”

It’s the first decent thing that’s ever come out of his mouth, and Tubbo’s half awake mind is convinced he made it up, but then there’s this awful, too real hollow laughter echoing around the cargo hold, “Well...you did what you had to do to survive- I was just *there.*”

“Whaddya mean?” Tubbo thinks he says, head still a little fuzzy around the edges but it’s starting to wake up some, especially when Ranboo hums in long drawn out sounds, “You didn’t do it for me, *no one does*...I’m not even there.”

Tubbo sits up a little, blinking the wavy lines of sleep out of his eyes and stares at where Ranboo is laying facing away from him, and he hasn’t moved much, but his arms are snaked tight around his torso, like he’s trying to keep something from escaping.

“There’s...*nothing* there, a shadow on the wall- doesn’t matter...*never did-*” Whatever he’s talking about gets lost as he presumably slips into speaking Ender, the sounds long and low, like distorted echoes you hear at the edge of madness, and Tubbo furrows his brow, kinda concerned about the heat getting to him, “Uh...you good, man? I- sorry, I-I don’t really know what you’re talking about.”

Ranboo’s body jerks in breathy laughter, his reply whisper quiet and muddled with sleep, “Nothin’...it’s- nothing.”

But with the way he’s holding onto himself, claws digging into the bare skin of his arms like they’re going to draw blood, only slackening as he passes out from the rising heat, Tubbo gets the feeling it’s not *nothing*.

“Hey, your highness...Prince Ranboo? Hey! *Fuckhead!*” Tubbo yells, trying to get Ranboo’s attention, but he doesn’t stir, chest rising unevenly under his arms, and Tubbo thuds his head back against the bulkhead, mentally runs through a list of everything else he wanted to fix before taking off, and slashes it in half.

With those concessions, he’ll be able to get them off this hellhole before the next sunrise, but they’re going to have to make a stop at the closest port town to find a replacement for the deep space transmitter. Tubbo hopes Ranboo won’t be too pissed at the further delay in their trip, guy seemed pretty high strung about school, and if he remembers right, the new term started yesterday so he’s already missed some of his classes.

The new transmitter is not optional though.

Tubbo doesn’t care if Ranboo throws the biggest bitch fit in existence, he’s getting the damn replacement equipment even if he has to drag Ranboo along with him kicking and screaming. It’s been three imperial cycles since Tommy’s heard from him, and it makes his heart squeeze painfully just thinking about what he must be feeling.

The two of them have always been close, roomed together their first year and bonded instantly like only first years do in the face of all the staggering bullshit they're put through, but even after Tubbo left, thought he'd never hear from Tommy again, was surprised and probably shouldn't have been when Tommy kept messaging him through- *through everything*.

They call each other best friend, but Tubbo knows they both mean it to be something more like *brother*, so that's why getting a new transmitter isn't optional, because the last Tommy heard from him, Tubbo was flying past a star going supernova and has received radio silence since.

It'll be okay, he thinks, wrapping his arms around himself even though it's hot, but it provides some grounding comfort, has him sleepily thinking about speckled wings, *you'll get the parts and it'll be okay, Tommy'll be okay because you're okay and everything'll be fine*.

New gameplan in mind, Tubbo settles down to try and actually get some shut eye, dozes on and off through the hottest parts of the day, haunted by fever dreams of fuel canisters and lit matches burning like supernovas, and whenever he wakes up for a brief second, makes sure that Ranboo is still breathing before drifting off again.

Tubbo is up for good once it doesn't hurt to look outside and the air isn't scorching to breathe, pops his back and winces at the way his blaster wound twinges, pulls up his frankly disgusting tank to check on it and frowns when he peels the med patch back. It's always been ugly, keeps getting uglier the longer it takes to heal, but the edges are starting to look weird, going a livid shade of red that smacks of infection and Tubbo's breath hitches, shakily tapping the patch back down for now.

It's going to be okay though, *it's fine*, it doesn't really look that bad, he's just overthinking anyway, and wherever they stop for the transmitter will have a halfway decent apothecary anyway, *it's going to be fine*. There's nothing he can do about it now though, so he puts it out of his mind and struggles to his feet, goes about fixing their dinner.

It's real fine dining on the Eshachi without the portable replicator working, and Tubbo grabs a packet of nectar for himself and a dehydrated block of something for Ranboo, walks over to where Ranboo's still passed out and nudges him gently with his toes, "Hey, princey boy, time for another five star meal."

Ranboo's face scrunches up at the touch, and not in a *ugh I don't want to wake up* way, but in a *that really tickles* way, and now is *so* not the time, but Tubbo can't help himself, shifting his toes a little further and wiggling them into Ranboo's side. The noise he makes in protest is absolutely bizarre, high pitched and warbling, rumbles out of his chest like a startled housecat as he twists away from Tubbo's touch.

It's so unexpected that Tubbo can't help laughing, hunches over with how hard he's wheezing, and Ranboo turns to glare daggers over his shoulder which only sends Tubbo further into hysterics, because with his slitted eyes and flicked back ears, now he *looks* like a disgruntled housecat.

“I-I th-that’s- I just- w-what-?” Tubbo stammers around his giggles, forgotten packet of food dangling from one hand and Ranboo snatches it from him, elegantly ripping the plastic open with an easy swipe of his claws, the look in his narrowed eyes screaming *this could be you*.

Tubbo sincerely doubts it, confident he could take him in a fight despite the height advantage and whole, claw and fang situation, rolls his eyes with a snort and heads to the edge of the cargo ramp. It may still be hot, but the air is considerably fresher out here than in the hold, and Tubbo flops down with a light wince, crosses his legs together while he drinks his nectar.

He’s lost in thought about everything he’s got to get done before Osiron rises again, so it really catches Tubbo off guard when there’s movement next to him, and he snaps his head to the side to see Ranboo folding himself down a good distance away, but still parallel to Tubbo, eyes trained on the sky with a sort of soft contemplation.

It’s weird for Tubbo to see him out of his royal getup, no End crystals glittering in the night or flashing in his dark hair, divested of all his pomp and glamor, and he tries not to stare too much, but it’s like some barrier is starting to come down in Tubbo’s mind against his will.

Because like this, disheveled and haggard, no shoes on, one of Tubbo’s ratty tanks on his back and only some of his jewelry, Ranboo looks almost normal, like he could be any other member of the Syndicate stuck out here with Tubbo.

Resolutely pushing the thought from his mind, Tubbo aggressively drinks his nectar and tries not to think about Ranboo in a grey and orange bomber as the Enderain tips his head to the side, naked awe glowing in the depths of his crimson eye while he stares at the stars, “Wow...it’s really beautiful, even if it did almost kill us.”

Grateful for the distraction, Tubbo turns to look up at the sky himself, the darkness of night interrupted by huge clouds of red orange gases that swirl and spit with their own light, the last remaining bands of fiery power that Osiron discharged. It’s interesting maybe, but not the best Tubbo’s seen, and he shrugs his shoulders, mumbles around the plastic straw to his nectar pouch, “Eh, it’s alright. The Rioshan nebula is like, half this size but way more vibrant.”

“Wha- you’ve *seen* the Rioshan nebula?” Ranboo asks incredulous, and Tubbo looks over at him, a little surprised to see him staring back with wide eyes, nothing in them but open honesty and unbridled enthusiasm, and Tubbo says slowly, “Yeah, I fly past it all the time on my way home.”

“W-What’s it like? Like- is it as impressive as the holos make it out to be? A-And have you ever seen the micro pseudo-stars? They’re supposed to be some of the rarest phenomena in the galaxy.” Ranboo rambles in clear excitement, ears perked all the way up and quivering slightly, and Tubbo just blinks at him, feels like he’s seeing an entirely new person, begins a little hesitantly, “Um...yeah, i-it’s really impressive, um, very red? And I think I’ve seen the uh, micro things. They move around a lot so that’s probably why most people’ve never seen ’em.”

Ranboo makes a trilling sound at the back of his throat, wiggling up straighter as his tail flops around happily, “Oh that’s amazing! That’s just- oh, *oh!* H-Have you ever seen the Dilenium

cluster? Or the triplet suns of Xaxon Four?”

“Dileni-? OH! You mean the ballsa-” Tubbo cuts off what he was saying with a violent cough, afraid of ruining the childlike wonder on Ranboo’s face, and he doesn’t know where it came from, but he’s suddenly loathe to the idea of it going, “Y-Yeah, I’ve seen the um- the *Dilenium cluster*, it is ah, not all it’s cracked up to be. Xaxon’s suns are though. Queens, I’ve never seen a more amazing sunset in my life.”

“Really?” Ranboo hushes, hands all wrapped up together in his lap like if he behaves himself, Tubbo will keep talking, seems like he can’t help it though as he leans forward and gushes, “Tell me more.”

And for some reason, Tubbo does, detailing out all the places he’s been and the things he’s seen, talks about cutting his engines and cruising through nebula the size of planets, watching the billowing gasses sweep up and over the Eshachi, swirling together in brief bursts of light before breaking back apart, like being at the heart of a living moving breathing painting.

He tells him about skating as close as you can get to the black hole at the center of Andromeda, how light bends and warps around it like massive waves, curling back into itself and contorting like nothing on this plane has any right to do, the sheer amount of power radiating out of it making his antenna tingle for what felt like days after.

He gets so swept up in talking, Tubbo says things he’s never told another soul before, worried they’d think he’s lost his mind, but that fear isn’t here right now, and Tubbo talks about the humming song he can hear out in deep space sometimes, in the dark black of nothingness where the closest stars are a bare prick on the horizon, the figures he swears he’s seen dancing in the icy trail of comets, hands larger than stars carding through nebula.

Ranboo doesn’t say one word the entire time, sits with his knobby knees folded up to his chin, tail twitching and vibrating next to him while he listens in rapt fascination, eyes never leaving Tubbo’s face and there’s something in their glowing depths that makes Tubbo falter a bit in one of his stories.

He *knows* that look, recognizes it almost immediately because he’s seen it before, staring back at him in mirrors, sparking and alive like coiling solar flares. It’s the desire to *go*, to see and explore, a hunger for wide open starfields and nothing holding you back, it’s how he feels when he wraps his hands around the Eshachi’s controls, heart thundering under his ribs and the whole universe at his fingertips.

He’s like me, Tubbo thinks in abject confusion, voice trailing off because he doesn’t know what else to say, shaky inhales getting stuck somewhere in his windpipe, *Queens he feels it too somehow someway we’re the same in this*.

“Incredible.” Ranboo breathes, the first thing he’s said in a while, hunches over and props his chin up on his knees, a sweet, hesitant looking smile twitching his cracked lips up, “I- just, wow, I’ve read so much b-but *you’ve* seen and I- I just really appreciate you sharing your stories with me... T-Tubbo.”

It's the first time Ranboo's ever said his name, and he does so very cautiously, like he's afraid he's doing it wrong, almost looks scared where he's sitting across from Tubbo, ears flicked down low in subconscious mannerisms Tubbo is finally learning to read. He's such a bizarre combination of a person, scathing attitude and horrific brattiness alongside an unanticipated hesitance, meek shyness like he's not really sure how to have a normal conversation.

"Yeah...yeah no problem." Tubbo says slowly but genuinely, and as some of the tension seems to ease out of Ranboo, ears perking back up, he realizes he doesn't actually know anything about him, asks a bit impulsively, "I-Is that what you're um, studying? At the academy I mean."

"I- what?" Ranboo asks, tipping his head to the side and Tubbo winces, knew it sounded stupid and confusing coming out of his mouth, so he tries again, "Are you like, an ecology major or something? Or astrophysics? I dunno, just, something to do with galactic phenomena."

"O-Oh...no, I'm um, I'm an intergalactic affairs major." Ranboo admits with what sounds like reluctance, and Tubbo doesn't blame him. He never studied it personally, but he knew the IA program had a rap for being one of the driest, most convoluted, headache inducing subjects at the academy, and he wrinkles his nose just thinking about, Ranboo snapping quickly, "W-What-? What's that face for?"

"Huh? Uh, nothing? I just- it just sounds really boring, ya'know? And I thought that you'd..." Tubbo trails off because Ranboo is looking at him weird, probably thinking it's odd for Tubbo to weigh in on his personal life when they are anything but friends, and he sighs, "I dunno...it just seems like- wouldn't you rather be out *there* than stuck behind some desk?"

He's seen it a couple times before now, Ranboo just going absolutely still, any expression he had dropping away into blank nothingness, like he's some robot playing at being a living thing, and Tubbo watches it happen now, his tail freezing by his side, that distant apathy shuddering fast over his eyes.

It's absolutely haunting.

"Ha, what a ridiculous thing to say, why would you...ah, I bet the heat is getting to you by now too, which, I'm not surprised. You've spent so much time fixing the ship, I'm sure you're exhausted." Ranboo says smoothly, but it...doesn't sound right, like he's not actually present while he says it, "This ordeal has been tough on you, I understand that. When we get to Nirox, I'll speak with my father about increasing your payment, would that be acceptable?"

"I-I mean- yeah, i-if you're sure, but-" Tubbo tries but he's quickly cut off by Ranboo interrupting fluidly, "Consider it done. It's the least I can do in thanks for your services, which are quite extraordinary if I may say so. I'm curious but, if you don't mind my asking, where did you learn to pilot?"

"I- well, mostly just experience, I mean- I have *some* formal training but why're you-"

"You were a cadet, weren't you?"

Tubbo chokes on whatever he was trying to say, pulse ratcheting up briefly just *hearing* the word, thoughts scrambled in a hundred directions as he stares at Ranboo, and the prince inclines his head, says swiftly to his unasked question of *how*, “You still make your bunks the way the navy does, the baseline for most of your flight maneuvers is classic imperial doctrine, and you probably don’t realize it, but whenever you stand still, you do it in parade rest.”

It hits like a punch to the gut, and Tubbo woodenly turns away, hands starting to tremor with the knowledge of how much of *them* is still in him. He thought he’d gotten rid of all of it, stripped it down and thrown it away, but it’s *apparently still there*, like a scar he’s never going to be rid of, and Tubbo’s breath hitches, feels like walls are closing in around him and he scrambles to his feet, needs to move otherwise he’ll never shake the feeling of being trapped.

“I-I have a lot of, um, l-lot of work to do so-” He jerks his thumb to where the welding equipment is tucked under the Eshachi, backing away like Ranboo’s holding him at blasterpoint and he’s one misstep away from him pulling the trigger.

“Of course, take your time.” Ranboo says evenly, rising to his feet without a twitch from his tail or his face, and that’s all the dismissal Tubbo needs, heart jackhammering in his chest as soon as he thinks it, the fact that he’s still looking *to be dismissed* on some level shaking him to his core.

You’re not there you’re not there you’re not there, Tubbo repeats to himself over and over again, trying to get his hands to stop shaking while he patches the few remaining holes, shoves out everything that’s not fixing the Eshachi and takes in even breaths, *you’re out its fine you’re okay you’re free-*

But it doesn’t feel like he is, and Tubbo stares down at his bare wrists later, nicked and burned from some wayward sparks, and there’s nothing *there*, but he swears he sees a faint shimmering of gold out of the corner of his eyes.

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The Declassified Galactic Survival Guide:

Briefly talked about in earlier sections, but in dire need to be expanded upon, is the celestial snowball that put on airs and decided to be its own planet, otherwise known as Annwyl, home of the End crystal and the Ender.

Located a very unsensible distance from anything of major import, Annwyl was largely considered to be a galactic waste for many long eons, but as soon as some off their rocker Niroxan imperialized scientist put an End crystal in a short fusion reactor and created an explosion that leveled half their facility, Annwyl was now suddenly much more interesting.

The ensuing interest in Annwyl and subsequent fallout could be likened to the phenomena of that one unpopular girl in your school who abruptly becomes popular for some superficial reason, and then precedes to transcend entirely into peak *Mean Girl* status.

With the Sun Empire fully focused on getting their greedy little hands on as many End crystals as possible, the Enderian king at the time took it upon himself to forge a relationship of scarily dependent consumerism, basically making Annwyl the high roller drug dealer to the horrifically crippled Niroxan empire.

Since the Sun Empire's main goal is continued galactic expansion, and with End crystals powering their cruisers, it significantly cut down on fuel costs which lead to the construction of more ships that needed their own End crystals, ballooning out of control until we have the frankly concerning fleet we have today, and naturally, all of this made Annwyl stupid wealthy.

Being essentially the arms dealer for the largest empire in the galaxy comes with its perks, extended influence and reach, a solid stream of income from a market that will never die, unprecedented control and favoritism in the imperial senate, but as always, there are drawbacks.

The chief ones being, namely, the forever widening prosperity margin amongst Annwyl's social classes, but the only ones that care about *that* are the disparaged and they're out of luck, but the other is nestled right at the glittering heart of Voidfall palace, because what do you *think* happens when you stick a bunch of Ender together who have never known the meaning of no and massive amounts of credits are involved.

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"And what, *exactly*, am I supposed to do with *this*?" Ranboo snips, disdainfully holding the blaster out as far from him as he can, the very tips of his claws hanging onto the grip gingerly like it's going to explode in his hands.

Which is completely unwarranted, Tubbo specifically gave him the one that's *least* likely to explode, huffs and points sarcastically at it, "Point that end at someone, pull the trigger, and then they stop moving."

"I- I know *how a blaster works*!" Ranboo seethes petulantly, stretching out into one long line of aggravation as his tail lashes around behind his legs, "I just don't know what you want me to *do* with it."

"Point that end at-"

"Ugh! *End* you are *insufferable*!" Ranboo cries, throwing his free hand in the air and Tubbo can't help grinning, always likes it when he can get him worked up enough that he emotes properly, dropping the façade of aloof, uncaring royal for just a second.

They're currently docked at the port on Imuna, the closest planet that would most likely have the parts Tubbo needed to fix the transmitter, and it was a surprisingly easy flight, not just in terms of nothing catastrophic happening, but in the fact that Ranboo didn't complain at all.

When Tubbo told him what they were doing once they got out of the planetoid's atmosphere, Ranboo hadn't sounded like he could care less, telling Tubbo to do as he pleased, but Tubbo

didn't put any stock in his tone of voice, watched out of the corner of his eye as Ranboo's tail quivered faintly, saw how perked up his ears were.

He was *excited* about going to Imuna, and Tubbo had to bite his lip to keep from smiling, proud he's finally learning how to read the cagey little fucker. Ranboo watched wide eyed as the black of space dissolved into the blinding light of hyperspace, made an interested little noise in the back of his throat, and Tubbo had the sudden and impulsive desire to show Ranboo some of things he'd been rambling about the other day.

Unfortunately, there wasn't anything super interesting that Tubbo knew of between where they were and where they were going, so they'd be in hyperspace for the entire trip, but it didn't end up mattering much. Ranboo stayed curled up in the copilot chair even after they jumped to lightspeed, twisted to face Tubbo and peppered him with questions about his travels that grew longer, and more yawns filled as he began to nod off in the relieving chill of the Eshachi, eventually feel asleep a few hours in.

Tubbo hadn't said anything about him sitting in the copilot spot when they took off because he figured Ranboo would go back to the sleeping quarters after they jumped, and when he hadn't, Tubbo was *going* to say something, but then he had to fall asleep and Tubbo didn't want to wake him up, not when he was so clearly exhausted.

It was good that he was getting some actual restful sleep anyway, looked completely dead to the world whenever Tubbo would check on him, but it was really quiet in the Eshachi without all his questions taking up space, and Tubbo liked feeling his engines humming in the air again, but it was just...a little quiet is all.

Ranboo woke up with a jerk as soon as Tubbo begin entering Imuna's atmosphere, the jolt of reentry probably just startling him, and Tubbo gave him a quick smile to let him know everything was okay before turning back to his controls, easing them down towards Tignarth station, figuring it was easy going here on out.

And that's when the trouble began, because Tignarth was not a *nice* spaceport, and while Tubbo would blend in just fine, covered in space grim and with his Syndicate jacket on his back, he wouldn't turn any heads, but Ranboo, stupid seven foot tall idiot covered in gold and End crystals, would, and, *apparently*, did not own any normal clothes.

"Why does *every* fucking *thing* have *gold on it* or some shit?" Tubbo yelled, flinging glittering and very expensive looking clothes all over the place while Ranboo bitched behind him, "Uh, it's called a refined sense of style, you space hobo."

"Well you're a space *pimp* because this *is ridiculous!*" *Queens*, one shirt without filigree on it, was that too much to ask for, and finally, at the bottom of the chest, Tubbo finds some soft and too clean looking white shirts that'll do, hurls one at Ranboo's stupid head, "Here, just put that on and take off the rest of your jewelry and we should be fine."

But Ranboo, *for some reason*, seemed to lack a shred of common sense and just held the shirt out incredulously, snapping, "Um, no? This is a *nightshirt*. I'm not going out in public in my sleep clothes."

“Wear the damn shirt or Queens help me-”

“No! It’s undignified and I’ll-”

“I’m trying to keep us from getting mugged!”

Which lead to another argument that ended with Tubbo realizing Ranboo probably needed a blaster and now here they are, Ranboo glaring at him while he mistrustfully tries to buckle on the holster Tubbo gave him. He’s doing such a bad job at it, claws slipping over metal buckles, can’t seem to figure out how it’s supposed to rest on his waist, that Tubbo rolls his eyes and goes to help him.

“You are such a baby.” He sighs, easily prying the holster straps from Ranboo’s long fingers and slinging it around his waist much more comfortably, gets it fitted into place a lot quicker, Ranboo muttering above him, “I am an *adult*.”

Tubbo snorts and unthinkingly swats him lightly on the hip, “Nope, guaranteed certifiable big ass baby over here, can’t even do up his own holster.”

His eyes go wide as soon as he does it, just now registering *who* he’s messing around with, looks up at Ranboo with the full expectation that he’s going to get bitched out. Ranboo’s expression is complicated, brows drawn down low and scrunching his eyes up, mouth slightly parted like he wants to *say something*, but can’t get it out.

They’re standing close, Tubbo didn’t realize how close until Ranboo takes one quick step back and he doesn’t have to crane his neck to look up at him, shuffles back himself because what’s going *on* with him, teasing Ranboo and slapping at him playfully like they’re close or something.

They’re barely on polite speaking terms let alone *friends*, and Tubbo’s quick to clear his throat, spinning on his heel to go open the cargo bay, stops when he hears a soft, “Um, is it...we’re- *I’m* going to be safe out there, right?”

Tubbo looks over his shoulder at Ranboo, standing there twiddling his fingers together in his nightshirt and plain slacks, weather beat holster at his side and nothing hanging from his ears, but still, there’s something about him that screams *easy mark* to Tubbo’s well trained eyes, but he’s not about to *tell him* that.

“Yeah, don’t worry, you’ll be fine.” Tubbo says as reassuringly as he can, turns around to release the cargo bay’s doors, “Tignarth isn’t the nicest port, but it’s not the worst, promise. I’ve only been shot at...two-? No, *three* times here and most of them were my fault.”

“Wow. What a ringing endorsement.”

His voice is so dry and scathing that it makes surprised laughter bark out of Tubbo, though it quickly turns into a pained hiss as his jumping diaphragm aggravates his blaster wound, and Tubbo rubs at it absentmindedly as he goes back over to Ranboo’s side, “It’ll be okay, you’ve got me with you.”

“Fantastic.” Ranboo sighs in deadpan, but Tubbo feels a soft swish against one of his wings, the briefest touch from Ranboo’s tail like he’s trying to reassure himself that Tubbo is *there*, that someone’s next to him, and Tubbo smiles a little involuntarily, sticks close as the cargo hold grinds open.

Imuna is just as dry and sandy as the planetoid they got stuck on, which Tubbo is now lovingly referring to privately as *Satan’s Asscrack*, but it’s a lot cooler here, situated out far enough from its own sun that Tubbo has to zip up his bomber when a chilly breeze rushes past. Next to him though, Ranboo unwinds considerably, tipping his head up and letting the wind ruffle his dusty hair, a deep noise of satisfaction rumbling out of his chest.

Tubbo feels tension ease out of him that he didn’t know he’d been holding, happy that Imuna is cold enough to not make Ranboo miserable, but that’s *not* why he picked this planet. He buries his face in the collar of his jacket and tries to ignore the way his cheeks are burning, definitely not thinking about how he made sure to look up nearby planets’ relative temperature readouts before deciding.

No, Imuna was just close and Tignarth wasn’t as refuse riddled as some other ports, and *that was it, okay*, he wasn’t trying to be accommodating or whatever, I mean- he didn’t want Ranboo to *die* or anything, but his relative comfort was not Tubbo’s concern.

But as he leads them through the bustling streets of Tignarth, it becomes a harder and harder sell, because Ranboo is really perking back up in the cooler temperature, sticking close to Tubbo’s side as he whips his head around to look at everything, but Tubbo can feel his tail thudding into his wings every once in a while and it makes him smile.

Market stalls choke the street, striped canvas stretched tight over their roof and sides to provide some protection from the icy wind, vendors hawking their wares in rough voices, cycling through a dozen different languages trying to catch someone’s attention, and Tubbo knows most of them from his travels, but whenever they see him, they switch to imperial standard pretty quickly.

“Serah! Serah tsvuka! You need munitions? Or unregistered blasters? Any credits accepted, come take a look, serah!”

He pretends like he can’t hear them and they lose interest fast, latching onto the next person that walks by as he leads Ranboo to where he remembers a reputable parts shop to be, ducks through the strings of shells and beads at the entrance and calls out into the dusty space, “Hello?”

“One sec!” A voice answers from somewhere else in the shop so Tubbo pokes around for a minute, sifting through bins of loose scrap, finds a few coupling coils that look like they’re in pretty good shape and drops them on the counter already.

Ranboo’s head is swiveling around like an owl, taking in the racks of parts and the engine blocks hanging from the ceiling, puzzled little frown on his face and Tubbo points at the thing he’s staring at, “That’s an intake manifold for a Doxinide XR-Seven, they don’t make ’em anymore because they’re some of the only ships that could outrun imperial caravels.”

He doesn't really know why he says it, maybe because he's bored, or maybe because his head's starting to feel a little strange, alternating throbbing and going fuzzy around the edges. It's probably nothing, just a headache blooming from the drastic change in temperature between Imuna and Satan's Asscrack, it's not because of his wound- nope, definitely not, *it's fine*, he's totally fine.

Weird feelings aside, Tubbo's full on expecting Ranboo to hum politely in response to his comment, maybe say some textbook response like *oh that's interesting*, like most everyone does, not for him to turn to Tubbo and ask honestly, "What made them so fast?"

"Well, usually for ship engines of that size, the fuel gets run through a few filters and regulators to make sure there's nothing in it, but the Citawei are mad sons of bitches." Tubbo grins, makes a shooting through motion with his hands as he says, "They bypassed that completely and injected the fuel straight into the engine block, made the Doxidine fast as all shit but they would catch fire occasionally."

"Huh, is there not a way to get around that? It seems pretty useful." Ranboo says, ears bobbing up and down in thought, and Tubbo leans up against the counter, talking animatedly with his hands while he explains, "Right? But there's actually this problem with the piping, and the relative diameter Kul steel can be forged into before it shatters apart under pressures exceeding a certain PSI and-"

Usually, when he starts talking shop, unless it's another dedicated pilot or an engineer, he loses people pretty quickly, but Ranboo keeps prodding him along with relevant questions, leaned back up against the counter as well with his entire attention settled on Tubbo. It's a little unexpected, he's positive Ranboo has no idea what he's talking about for a good majority of his explanations, but he doesn't lose interest, is actually starting to pick up some things by the time the shopkeeper makes an appearance.

"Hey, sorry 'bout that, got a Slayer I'm tryin' to get up off the ground by sun high today. Anyway, what can I do'ya for, tsvukan?" The man says, wiping his hands clean on a rag, two long, thick whiskers hanging down by the sides of his mouth, and Tubbo turns around to drape his arms on the countertop, "My transmitter got damaged during a supernova eruption and I'm looking for replacement parts."

"Yeah no problem, do'ya know what model...hang on, you don't mean *Osiron* do you?" The man says, whiskers twitching out as his eyebrows shoot up, and Tubbo cocks his head to the side, says a little smugly, "Yup. Flew right through the initial debris field and made it out juuuust as it went terminal."

"Stars above, you must be one hell of a pilot." The man whistles and a hot streak of pride ignites down Tubbo's spine, feeling good to have his ego stroked like this, and then the shopkeeper cuts his eyes to the side, chuckles good naturedly, "You're lucky you've got such an amazing partner, probably saves your inky hide a lot, yeah?"

Tubbo blinks in confusion until he realizes he's talking to *Ranboo*, who would definitely take any assumed association between him and the Syndicate, *between him and Tubbo*, as an insult, coughs into his fist awkwardly and flexes his wings behind him, is quick to jump back

on topic before Ranboo can say something scathing and definitely rude, “U-Uh yeah...um transmitter parts?”

“Oh! Right, sorry what model do you have?”

They get started talking and figure out that the whole thing probably needs to be replaced, but thankfully Joson, the shopkeeper, has a few to choose from on hand, and normally, Tubbo loves talking about the specs of parts, but his headache has really picked up, and he’s finding it hard to follow the conversation.

“I can have some guys drop it off tomorrow if that’s alright. What hanger are you in?” Joson asks, scribbling something down on a scrap of paper, and Tubbo sways a little where he stands, suddenly lightheaded to the point that his wings buzz behind him to keep him upright.

“Um...” He starts, tongue feeling slow and heavy in his mouth, “I...uuuhh, it’s f-five? No. No, four, it’s hanger four. *Queens*, sorry, my head’s really killing me.”

“No worries, tsvuka. We can settle up tomorrow, just go get some rest.” Joson says and tears a slip off that he passes over to some of Tubbo’s fumbling hands, and yeah, he should go do that, he *needs* to go do that, but only one uh...one little *small problem*, and that’s Tubbo’s not really sure how to get to where he’s supposed to go.

There’s a hesitant touch at his shoulder and Tubbo swings widely towards it, ends up staring at a swath of white fabric before he remembers *oh, you have to look up*, and tips his head back to see Ranboo looking at him with a concerned tilt to his face.

“Are you okay?” He asks, but his voice doesn’t match up with how his mouth moves, words already over before he’s even finished shaping the sounds, and that’s not good, has Tubbo nodding a little more erratically than he means too, “Y-Yeah, I just- I...need some rest, I think.”

“Okay...okay let’s get back to the ship then.” Ranboo says in an odd tone, turns his head to Joson and it’s weird, not seeing all of his earrings swinging around with the movement, like he’s missing some of his personal flair, “Master shopkeep, if you could have your men deliver the replacement after sun high tomorrow, it would be greatly appreciated. I- we’ve had a very trying few cycles and m-my partner requires rest.”

Queens past we’re trying to blend in you overly formal idiot, Tubbo huffs, goes to swat at Ranboo in reprimand and misses by a wide margin, stares at the hand that missed like it’s personally betrayed him, feels like his brain’s melting out of his ears a little bit but jerks his head up when he hears, “Tubbo, come on, let’s go.”

They haven’t been inside that long, maybe an hour at most, and Tubbo knows Imuna’s a little cold, but he doesn’t remember it being *subzero*. As soon as they step outside, he has to lean back against the building’s side, vertigo spinning through him at the icy slap to the face, field of vision swimming like the entire earth is undulating beneath his feet. His hands shake where they prop him up and- actually no, *all* of him is shaking, wracked with spasms that make his teeth chatter and send his left side pulsating with pain.

He reaches careful fingers down and prods at the med patch like he's done a hundred times before, but now, even the slightest touch sends hot tendrils of aching discomfort shooting through his side, flaring up and out from the wound. Bringing a trembling hand up to the back of his neck, Tubbo wraps clammy fingers around burning hot skin and swallows past the dryness in his throat, tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth as he hears himself say distantly, "I...I think I might h-have an- an infection."

"You think you caught something? You do look...*paler* than normal." Ranboo mutters from his side, and then makes a low, echoing noise and nudges at Tubbo's shoulder, "If you're not feeling well, you need to get some rest. Can you walk?"

"Y-Yeah." Tubbo says with confidence he pulls out of someplace long buried, from days when you *had* to stand straight and silent no matter what, forces his legs to move, the impact of each step jarring his side and aching head, sends nausea roiling through him.

He's focusing so hard on staying upright that he's not really paying attention to where he's going, stumbles into a few other people that all snap at him in indignation, but Tubbo's so out of it he just mumbles incoherent sounds in apology, hoping they'll move on without blasters needing to be drawn.

After the third or fourth time though, a heavy weight settles around his shoulders and he's tugged into something soft, and Tubbo goes along like a ragdoll, rubs his face absently into the silken texture and feels it rumble through him as Ranboo mumbles, "Ancients, you're a wreck."

"*You're* a wreck." He slurs back petulantly, thudding his head into Ranboo's side in retaliation, which, turns out to be a bad idea and sends white bursts of light blooming across his field of vision, has Tubbo relying more heavily on Ranboo to stay vertical.

His fever must be picking up, because Tubbo feels like in between on blink and the next, they're back at the hangar, Ranboo more or less dragging him up the cargo ramp at this point. The pain that's flaring out from his blaster wound feels like it's settling in other places in his body, leaking down in between his bones, making his joints ache and grind together like uncoiled pistons.

There isn't a single point on Tubbo's body that doesn't hurt, and he stands at the base of the ladder looking up with a sense of horror crowding in his chest, hears Ranboo come up behind him and grits his teeth, gets started on the first few rungs. He isn't even halfway up when something pulls very, very, *very* wrong and it's like getting shot all over again, agony exploding out from his side, and the sensations ripping through him are enough to make Tubbo lose his grip on the ladder.

He falls back with a yell, wings snapping open automatically but they're sluggish responding to his frantic thoughts, and Tubbo's sure he's going to hit the floor hard when arms catch him unexpectedly, accidentally digging in too sharply around his side as they attempt to slow his fall.

Tubbo howls as red hot fire races up his skin, crawls like lightning through his nerves, twists his head to the side and buries his face in the freezing crook of Ranboo's neck, breathing out

harshly through his mouth as Ranboo stumbles under his weight, unintentional grabbing Tubbo too tight again and he whimpers at the sickly burn that bleeds out at the touch.

“What in the- a-are you okay? I- what even-?” Ranboo is stammering as he tries to lower Tubbo to the ground as delicately as possible, arms shaking with either nerves or fatigue, “A- Are you feeling light headed? I-Is it- w-what’s wrong? What hurts?”

“M’side.” Tubbo pants out, reaching back with one trembling hand to help guide Ranboo, slumps over onto the relieving chill of the cargo bay’s floor once he’s let go, presses his burning forehead into the plastisteel and sighs in relief.

“Your side?” Ranboo repeats incredulously, and Tubbo can feel him settle down next to him, talking mostly to himself while Tubbo attempts to not pass out, “But that doesn’t make *sense*, why would an *illness*...unless it’s- y-you meant like-”

Tubbo whines in the back of his throat when Ranboo’s hands start digging at him, flip him until he’s lying on his back and ruck his clothes up, hears him hiss out when he presumably sees the mottled skin on his torso, “When did *this* happen?”

“Aaahhh...few weeks ago?” Tubbo mumbles, wincing at the shockingly cold fingers feeling around the skin on his side, the careful claws peeling the edge of the med patch back, “Shoot out on Jurjo...ah, it’s cold can you not-?”

“*Ancients of the Deep!* I- when’s the last time you *cleaned this?*” Ranboo’s voice is too loud, clamoring harshly in Tubbo’s ears and he tries to squirm away, but Ranboo’s got a death grip on him, “Hey! Tubbo- *stop*, you *insufferable*- I- wh-where’s your med kit?”

“U’stairs somewhere, dunno...” Tubbo responds sluggishly, really wants to be left alone to sleep this off, that’s all he needs, a few hours of rest and he’ll feel better, Ranboo’s just theatrical and overdramatic, especially when he shakes Tubbo’s shoulders and demands a better answer, and Tubbo groans, “*Fuckin’, I don’t know!* Stop bein’ so loud...fuckin’ *piss ass.*”

Ranboo makes a series of incomprehensible noises in Ender that are clearly swears, but finally gets up and leaves Tubbo alone, his boots clanging on the ladder rungs as he heads topside. It’s blissfully quiet in the hold now, and Tubbo rolls over gingerly with a sigh, cradles his head in his arms and rides out the waves of pain that sweep through him like the tides, hazy, hot blanket of a fever high draping over his mind.

His thoughts are muddled, dreams and memories blurring together as he drifts at the edge of sleep, sees the searing light of a supernova behind his closed lids, but if he looks close enough, he can pick out a wicked smile, glasses catching and flashing in the light as a hand holds out a match to him, *there can be no half measures-*

Tubbo jolts awake when something heavy thumps down onto the floor, cracks bleary eyes open and thinks he’s still half asleep, seeing the mattress laying on the floor of the cargo hold, a pillow and blankets falling down after it.

A plastic box is thrown down a second later, bouncing on the mattress and rattling the contents inside, and Tubbo can only watch in delirious confusion as Ranboo follows it, landing on his feet soundlessly, begins jerking the mattress around until he's satisfied with it lying flat. He pads over to Tubbo who stares at his bare feet like an idiot, only thought in his head that either Ender don't have claws on their toes or that they trim them to wear shoes.

He's so dark, Tubbo thinks incoherently, giggling a little at the next thought that melts into his head like the slow drip of metal liquifying in intense heat, *does he ever lose himself at night slips away in the dark, bye bye Boo boy-*

Crouching down beside him, Ranboo doesn't even say anything before snaking his arms under Tubbo, tries to be careful lifting him up, but the movement drags at all the aching points on his body and Tubbo keens in the back of his throat, "W-What're you- *s-stop*, I was fine an' where're you-"

"You have a serious infection in that wound and don't need to be sleeping on the cold, dirty floor." Ranboo tells him in a no nonsense voice, moving unsteadily across to where the mattress is, sets him down like he's something breakable, and Tubbo protests weakly, "*I'm fine*, it's h-healing okay, I-I just need's a lil'sleep is all an-"

"It is not healing okay." Ranboo interrupts him curtly, turning to grab the med kit and begins rummaging around in it, "It is infected, and horribly so. At this point, I would be surprised if the infection hasn't spread to your bloodstream."

W-What?

N-No, no there's *no way-*

Panic makes his heart seize in his chest, and Tubbo's arms shake under him where he'd propped himself up, terror curling in his body and freezing everything it touches where he was burning up just a second ago. Tubbo's not a coward, goes into firefights with determination burning in his fingers, but there are a few things that'll send him over the edge of hysteria like nothing else and one of those is sickness, *infection*, the thought of his body wasting away around him, and his heart jackhammers under his ribs like it's trying to escape.

"Y-You're fucking with me." Tubbo stammers and scoots back on the mattress like he's going to make a break for it, but what would he even be running from, his wound's going to go with him, *there's no way out you're stuck you're trapped can't breathe can't think-* "You- you don't know what you're talkin' about."

Ranboo's found what he was looking for, turns back around with a few bottles and some gauze in his hands, says surprisingly even when he meets Tubbo's eyes, "I do, actually, and I need to flush that wound now or you're going to get sepsis."

"Sepsis..." Tubbo parrots back at a whisper, chest heaving like there's not enough air in here, and there is he can breathe he's *fine-*

But he's not, he's not, *he's not*, he can't breathe can't think, there's chemical smoke everywhere and gas in his lungs and every inhale brings those swirling embers inside,

threatening to ignite what's left, burn him up from the inside out, *no half measures*, Tubbo heaves in panic, walls closing in around him, *this is what has to be done*, he's trapped no way out what does he do can't escape h-help he needs *help, do it*, no one's there he's *alone* *Queens help he needs something someone anyone HELP-*

Something chilly is touching his face and Tubbo presses into it wildly, the billowing fire in his mind overrun with the cold kiss of bulkheads under his hands, the dark velvet of open space, engines humming their otherworldly songs around him, and he can breathe he can think, shudders out an exhale and is surprised when smoke doesn't go with it.

"Listen to me, I need you to take deep breaths, got it? In one two, out one two, can you do that?" Ranboo says firmly, and Tubbo can do that, he knows how to do that, sucks in one tremulous inhale, lets it sit aching in his lungs for two counts and then lets it out.

In one two, *you're fine it's okay*, out one two, *you're not there you're far away you're safe*, in one two, *you can get out you're not trapped*, out one two, *whole universe at your fingertips*, in one two-

Tubbo breathes out slowly, sagging forward into what he can now tell are hands on his face, everything about him feeling sticky and achy and wrung out and he shivers at the way nerves curdle his insides, and Ranboo jolts, dropping his hands quickly, "S-Sorry, I um, I know I'm probably really cold."

"I don't mind." Tubbo mumbles without thinking, teeth chattering together as another spasm wracks his body and he swallows past the foul taste in his mouth, fever making him lightheaded and more emotional than he normally is, sniffs loudly in the quiet of the hold, "I-Is it...a-am I going to be o-okay?"

Ranboo hesitates, ears flicking down as his eyes dart to the side and Tubbo can't stop the wet sob that tumbles out of his mouth, images of rotting decay spreading out from his side and consuming him whole infesting his mind, presses trembling fingers into his temples and stammers, "F-Fuck, *fuck!* I-I'm so *s-stupid!* Queens I just- a-and now, and I-I- *oh fuck- fuck- FUCK ME!* I'm such a *fucking* idiot! What do I-I do? *What d-do I do-?*"

"H-Hey! Stop! It's- it's going to be okay." Ranboo says quickly and ducks into Tubbo's line of sight, pinning him with his mismatched eyes, a fierce, determined light glowing from them, "I'm going to take care of it, I-I won't let anything happen to you, promise."

Inhales catching around the tears in his throat, Tubbo scrubs a hand across his face, too strung out and exhausted to be self conscious over it, "You p-promise?"

"Yes, but...it's going to get worse before it gets better." Ranboo grimaces at him guiltily, like he actually cares, isn't just doing this so he's stuck here with no ride home, hesitates before reaching a hand out and wrapping it lightly around one of Tubbo's forearms, "You just have to trust me, okay?"

How can he even ask that, they don't *know each other*, but...*you kind of do*, a voice whispers at the back of Tubbo's head, *you know he's an ass, that he's smart, loves the universe with the*

same searing infinity as you, isn't as spoiled as you thought, is a hard worker and doesn't complain when it matters.

You know that *he* trusted *you* to get you both safely away from Osiron, and that's what does it, has Tubbo nodding his head jerkily as he whispers, "Okay."

He lies back like Ranboo asks and fists a towel in his mouth, tries to keep his whimpering to a minimum as Ranboo snips the sutures open, digs days worth of grime out of his wound, slow, methodical movements that drag like searing fire up Tubbo's side, has his vision blacking out around the edges.

Queens it hurts, it hurts so much, the slow scrape of gauze against his abused flesh, drawing out fine bits of sand that dig like glass into his skin, and Ranboo's trying to be careful, stops when Tubbo begs him to, lets him catch his breath before starting again, but he's absolutely merciless in finding every speck of dirt and removing it from Tubbo's side.

When he feels Ranboo lean back, Tubbo sighs in relief, thinking the worst of it's over, and then there's one hand forcing his shoulder firmly into the mattress while Ranboo offers a quick, "Sorry", his other pouring what feels like actual fire into the open wound.

Tubbo screams, thrashing in his hold like a wild animal, but Ranboo's stronger than he looks, keeps him pinned down as he disinfects the gash, and Tubbo must pass out from the pain, comes back around panting hard on the mattress, eyes itchy from dried tears. His entire left side feels like it's being slow roasted, achy hot sensation of fire dragging over his skin, a dull throbbing from the area around the wound itself where Ranboo sewed him back up.

The fever drags him back into semiconsciousness, strange, half remembered dreams passing through his head, fading in and out along with the agony pulsing through his body. Everything's hazy and wrong, tinted with nausea and a growing paranoia, and it feels like Tubbo's rocking on the surface of a sticky hot sea, sour taste of bile in mouth that he can't seem to swallow past, whimpers in the back of his throat because he's miserable and *scared*.

A hand lightly brushes sweaty hair out of his eyes, and he deliriously thinks it's his mother, sees her standing so clearly in the kitchen with her gossamer wings and curly antenna, chases after the touch while mumbling in their native tongue, "*Ama...I don't feel good.*"

Her hand is gone lightning fast, and he nudges his head around trying to find it, wants her to card fingers through his hair, scratch around the base of his antenna like she'd do when he stayed home from school sick, humming gentle songs that distracted him from how horrible he felt.

"*Ama please-*" Tubbo begs when her hands won't come back to him, curls up tighter and holds onto himself, "*I don't feel good, ama, ama-*"

Hesitantly, weirdly reluctant, her hands settle on his head gently, fingers barely dragging through his hair and Tubbo sighs, snuffling wetly as he tips his head further into her touch, "*Ama...ama...*"

“I’m not... whoever you think I am.” A voice says that doesn’t belong to his mother, but the hands don’t stop, dragging icy trails across Tubbo’s scalp, like the chilly sweep of comets through space, “A-And I know it um, probably doesn’t mean much... b-but I-I’m here, for all that’s worth.”

And as Tubbo drifts off into a muddled sleep, lulled by the cold hands moving through his hair, teasing his mind out to float somewhere in the relieving calm of deep space, helping him forget the throbbing pain his body is consumed by, he has the hazy thought that it’s worth a lot, not being alone right now.

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The Declassified Galactic Survival Guide:

In this day and age, Annwyl is considered one of the crown jewels in the Sun Empire’s crown, and its reigning king enjoys unprecedented sway in the judicial halls on Nirox, pushes policies that will better their own planet and the never ending stream of wealth that floods into their coffers faster than their local sun can rotate.

It is often joked about but meant very sincerely that there are two rulers of the Sun Empire, the Niroxan Sun Emperor, and the End King of Voidfall, and if it were any other planet, the emperor would’ve wiped these notions clear from existence, but it’s *Annwyl*, the most unsensible place in the universe that has enough destructive power contained in small blue rocks to level the entire imperial fleet if they felt like it.

Unfortunately but not unsurprisingly, this dual pseudo-rulership helped spawn one of the most toxic court environments currently in existence, only outpaced by the now ended Plo-kin Dynasty from Ji’la which had so many assassinations and poisonings, people are still unsure who was ever actually *in* the royal court.

While certainly less enthusiastic than the Plo-kins, the Enderian royal court is no less deadly, on average sees an assassination or murder plot weekly, if not daily, as courtiers vie for favors with the king which in turn earns them favors in the wider Sun Empire, a deadly game of tit for tat that has only gotten more aggressive at Annwyl’s continually increasing prosperity.

The overall experience of growing up in Voidfall’s court has spawned generations of the most cagey, secretive beings in existence, and it’s said that the first thing young Ender nobles are taught above walking even, is the art of lying, and the best way to hide daggers inconspicuously on their person.

Which makes dealing with any Ender nobility an absolute nightmare because everything they do cannot be taken at face value, is probably part of some larger plot to gain the upper hand in the situation, and your author can attest to that fact because, after meeting several Ender diplomats and nobility that survived to adulthood, it is next to impossible to know where you stand with them, and they’ll never, even under pain of death, tell you.

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It gets a lot worse before it even starts to get better.

Tubbo's fever rises throughout the night, peaking out at something that has him feeling like he's floating outside his body, watching on in confused disinterest as insane dreams streak past him like supersonic debris. Nothing makes sense, he sees memories and confuses them for hallucinations, nightmares that he swears are real, stumbles through it all in a sweltering heat he can't escape because it's coming from *him* this time.

"I think I'm dying...I don't want to die." Tubbo morosely tells Techno where they're standing outside HQ on a balcony overlooking the red giant, empty space brushing against the exposed skin of his face like careful fingers, and Techno snorts, looks at him with one red eye and one green, "You're not going to die, you're strong enough to get through this."

"All I ever wanted to do was to fly, but I don't know if it even matters." He says to Tommy, stepping fast and light over a gilded insignia on the ground, knows that if it touches him, this game he's playing is all over, and Tommy hums softly in warping echoes, black wings spreading out behind him, "Don't say that. You have an amazing gift...you're the most incredible pilot I've ever known, Tubbo."

"I've never told anyone, but it's lonely sometimes, being out here. I...wish I wasn't so alone." Tubbo sighs, leaning on the porch railing of his childhood home, the twisting fiery bands of Osiron curling through the night sky, and his mother runs a hand across his back, gold capped horns catching in the light as she whispers like the void, "Me too."

Sometimes though, his head clears enough and Tubbo knows where he is, lets Ranboo prop him up and sluggishly drinks bits of nectar that he never wants to finish, only reason he does because Ranboo won't let him go back to sleep until he's drained the pouch.

"I don't like you." He grumbles around the plastic straw where Ranboo's poked it back into his mouth, and Ranboo snorts behind him, hand dropping away slower than necessary, tone scathing, "Trust me, the feeling is mutual."

But he shifts Tubbo when he winces, helps get the pressure off his left side even though it means he's more or less resting completely on Ranboo, and Tubbo always sighs, relaxing back into the chill he radiates like a bulkhead wall, falls asleep easily every time.

He doesn't have room in his head to parse it, but Tubbo always sleeps better after that, where he's drifted off next to Ranboo, dreams about the swirling oil slick of nebulae passing over his viewport, slipping past his hands like steam curling out of warm drinks, sees stars glow silver and gold in front of him, trailing out of his fingers where he swipes them across the sky, scattering them like glowing specks of glitter that bob and weave in the night.

He'll glance over in his cockpit every time, looking for someone, and the seat's usually empty, but sometimes, there's a piece of the void sitting there, glowing stars for eyes and stardust dripping down from long ears, and it'll smile at him, hesitant and small but *real*.

Eventually though, Tubbo's fever breaks and he wakes up clear headed one morning when grey light is filtering in through a gap in the cargo bay door, rolls over and groans at the way he feels like he's had the shit kicked out of him. Sitting up gingerly, he lifts the hem of his

shirt and twists to get a better look at the blaster wound, relieved to see it looking a more normal pink color around the even sutures.

Tubbo traces careful fingers across the edges of it, amazed when there's no pain at all, just the dulled sensation of his fingertips tickling along his skin, tips his head up and finds Ranboo asleep across the cargo bay, blanket wrapped around his shoulders and pillow stuffed under his head where he's resting against the side of some crates.

Next to him are neat little rows of things, and Tubbo's eyes track over them, picking them out to be various medical supplies, gauze pads and disinfectants, a few bottles of fever reducers, pouches of nectar, anything he could possibly need to take care of Tubbo organized nicely and within reach, and his heart turns over in his chest, eyes snapping back up to Ranboo's sleep lax face.

He could've left, there are plenty of other pilots on Imuna that could've taken him to Nirox, and he has the money to pay for it, could've caught a ride with literally anybody else, but he stayed, *he stayed* and he's here still and has been taking care of Tubbo this entire time for some reason.

Tubbo swallows past the lump in his throat, fingers twisting in the blanket puddled in his lap, and it's the good one, the extra soft, pale yellow one that has hexagons picked out on it in a darker shade, stares over at where Ranboo is propped up uncomfortably in a corner, out like a light with the scratchy, grey blanket around his shoulders.

It's probably not a smart idea, but Tubbo hauls himself up the ladder to the top deck *very carefully*, blasts off days worth of space crud and the smell of sickness in the sonic shower, ruffles hands through his floofed trying to get it to behave. He changes into the last set of clean clothes he has and tamps a new med patch over his wound, slides back down the ladder into the hold and finds Ranboo still sound asleep.

Stepping over quietly, Tubbo crouches down and peers at his face, and now that he's closer, he can make out the dark smudges under Ranboo's eyes, the stress lines in between his brows. *Has he been sleeping at all while watching over you*, and Tubbo reaches out without thinking, brushes away some hair falling over his eyes. Ranboo makes a noise in his sleep, tilting his head after the touch, and Tubbo runs careful fingers over his hair once, tucking the loose strands behind one long ear.

"Hey...Ranboo." Tubbo murmurs, moving his hand to gently shake his shoulder, lips twitching up at the whiny little noise he makes in protest, "Hey, wakey wakey sleeping beauty."

The searing red of his left eye slits open briefly before both are snapping wide, and Ranboo sits up, suddenly very awake, hands reaching out for Tubbo like they're afraid he's going to collapse, "Y-You're *up*, how- how're you feeling? Do you- i-is there something- does anything hurt?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine, I uh, feel a lot better actually...kinda sore but I'll live." Tubbo says with a shrug, and Ranboo's hands drop back to his side quickly as he nods, "Good! That's good, I'm really glad. Did you um, did you need something though?"

Tubbo scrubs a hand through his hair, flicks his eyes to the side and tries to sound unbothered when he says, “I- I was wondering...I’ve just, haven’t really eaten in a while and was- d-do you wanna grab breakfast or something?”

“You...want me...to go get food with you.”

Embarrassment flares hot in his face, and Tubbo digs his fingers into the back of his neck, *of course he doesn’t want to go with you, what were you thinking he’s a prince and you’re a nobody going nowhere*, “I-I mean you don’t have to if you don’t want to, I was just-”

“N-No! No, no I want- I mean, food sounds good, yeah... let’s go um, let’s go do that, the food thing.” Ranboo stammers and his shoulders bunch up around his ears, Tubbo only noticing then he’s still got one hand resting on Ranboo, slides it off fast and gets to his feet, hopping back a couple steps to give him room to get up, “Yeah okay cool, *cool cool cool*, yeah that’s um, yeah let’s uh, go.”

The streets of Imuna are quieter in the morning, air icy with the remnants of night, not warmed up yet by the sun glowing pale on the horizon, and Tubbo blows hot air out of his mouth just to watch it fog, feels frost nip at his nose and sucks in deep breaths of chilly dawn air.

His side is still bothering him and he’s a little light headed, but nothing compared to earlier, and Tubbo truly, sincerely relishes every second of their cold morning walk to find breakfast, squints happily at the sun rising in the sky and the wind hitting his face, smiles into the collar of his jacket at the tail thudding into the back of his wing every so often.

Most of the people they pass look like locals, either on their way to other jobs or setting up their stalls for any early stragglers fresh out of the ports, and when Tubbo sees what appears to be a large group of manufacturer plant workers stepping out of a doorway, he nudges Ranboo in that direction.

“Pro tip when visiting other places.” He begins as they duck through the automatic door after it swishes open, letting them into a small, humble looking tavern, but there’s something in the air that has Tubbo’s mouth watering immediately, “Always go eat wherever there are the most locals, *especially* if it looks like they do manual labor.”

And he’s not wrong, the food is incredible, and they sit up at the counter together, Tubbo tearing wildly through dumplings packed with stewed, salty hot greens, hums happily at the first real food he’s had in days. Ranboo’s a lot more reserved where he chews delicately through his meat buns, but after his first bite, he slits his eyes shut and makes that trilling noise Tubbo’s only heard maybe once before.

“So um...I just wanted to say thanks for- looking after me I guess.” Tubbo says while picking at a few leftover scraps of dough, feet tapping an uneasy beat into the stool’s rungs below him, “I- you didn’t have to, but I...really appreciate that you did.”

“Oh, um, y-yeah, o-of course.” Ranboo sounds a bit hesitant, and Tubbo turns to look at him, sees how his eyebrows are drawn together, confused set to his face like he’s trying to solve

some puzzle, and when they lock eyes, Ranboo jerks his gaze away, “I- well- you’re welcome.”

That’s weird, Tubbo thinks, can’t get it out of his head, the way Ranboo looked slightly alarmed, like he was worried this puzzle he was trying to solve had a high chance of blowing up in his face, and it descends into an awkward silence, Tubbo shredding the remainder of his dough with restless fingers.

“I-” He starts, hesitates before asking *you okay*, takes one look at Ranboo’s tense shoulders and decides against it, sighs instead, “You ever heard of the Hands of God?”

And that’s all it takes, has Ranboo swiveling wide eyes at him, and their conversation begins to flow more easily. They talk about space, about intergalactic phenomena that makes Ranboo’s ears wiggle in excitement, sometimes drift into explanations about engine blocks that Tubbo waves his hands around trying to illustrate, get into principles of physics and history and all of the wild places that exist.

It doesn’t matter *what* topic Tubbo brings up, but Ranboo will know something about it, and it’s not just surface level facts, he has a pretty good understanding on a vast swath of things, speaks with confidence and the assured manner of someone who *does* know what they’re talking about, and Tubbo boggles at how *much* Ranboo knows.

“Queens, how do you even *remember* all this?” He asks, licking the last of the dumplings’ juices from his fingers, and Ranboo shrugs like it’s no big deal, like he hasn’t been perfectly recalling things Tubbo has told him in passing or reciting what sounds like flawless academic notation, “I have an eidetic memory, I can’t forget anything. It...comes in handy, I guess.”

“Seriously? Shit, that’s really cool.” Tubbo huffs, sleepily props his head up in one hand and says around a yawn, “You’re kinda awesome, you know that?”

“I suppose...” Ranboo says quietly, taking his hands off the countertop and tucking them in his lap, back a single, stiff long line as he looks at Tubbo out of the corner of his eye, it’s green depths empty and dull, “You were saying, about coupling coils and kinetic energy loss though? Sorry, but could you explain again, I’m afraid I’m still a little confused.”

It’s not even an elegant topic change, but Tubbo can take a hint, though he’s confused by it, taps his feet into the rungs of Ranboo’s stool and says easily, “Sure. Okay, so the coupling coils are what keep the rotators moving at an energy neutral instead of at a deficit, which is super beneficial for spaceflight because-”

Tubbo’s not an idiot, he knows Ranboo doesn’t need any clarification, that he understood him perfectly the first time. He’s only asking in an attempt to shift the attention off himself, and as Tubbo rehashes his earlier explanation, he realizes *how much* Ranboo does that, is quick to distract whoever he’s talking to with questions about themselves that’ll pull him out of the spotlight.

And it’s absolutely bizarre, because Tubbo thought he had Ranboo all figured out, thought he wasn’t anything more than a spoiled, self-centered prince who had never wanted for

anything, that he believed the whole universe rotated around *him*, but he doesn't think that's the case anymore.

There's something really off about how Ranboo interacts with him, like he's not exactly sure what he should be saying or doing, deflects questions and comments that seem innocent enough, but have him clamming up faster than anything, always eyes Tubbo with distrust, like he's looking for what he really means.

A compliment about his *intelligence* should not have Ranboo reacting like this, like he's trying to find the hidden insult behind the words, and for the life of him, Tubbo cannot figure out why he's like this. He understands being emotionally reserved, keeping things private, but Ranboo goes into conversations with him like it's an attack that he's got to try and figure out how to survive.

It doesn't make any *sense*, he's a *prince*, grew up with everything he could ever want, would've been swamped with servants and courtiers from birth, and if Tubbo's remembering right, he has like, six, seven siblings, so his family would've been there as he was growing up, so why does it feel like somethings gone sideways about him?

The market is busier by the time they leave the little tavern, and Tubbo wanders without real purpose, doesn't really want to get back to the Eshachi just yet after he was cooped up inside for so long, trails along behind Ranboo with his hands in his pockets.

Ranboo's acting like a person again, tail swishing behind him as his head swivels back and forth while he surveys the stalls, ears jumping all the way up sometimes, but they always flick back into a more neutral position relatively quickly, like he's wary about anyone seeing his excitement.

What does that to someone, Tubbo wonders, watching Ranboo try and reign his more exuberant reactions in, feet stuttering across the ground when he passes stalls, as if he isn't allowing himself to show interest in things, *like it's not even social awkwardness, it's something else...something worse.*

Ranboo seems to finally notice Tubbo isn't beside him and spins around quickly looking for him, and when their eyes meet, when Ranboo sees whatever expression he must be making, he uncoils, nothingness slipping over his face like a mask, *like a set of armor*, and Tubbo's fingers curl harshly into his palms.

What happened to you

"Is everything alright?" Ranboo asks politely when he's made his way back to Tubbo, hands folded neatly behind him as he inclines his head, "Are you feeling okay? I shouldn't have walked ahead while you're still recovering, that's my mistake. Or did you perhaps see something you were interested in?"

What don't you want me to know, Tubbo thinks looking up into his horribly blank eyes, can't help remembering wanderlust burning in them like the hottest of star cores where they sat side by side on the dusty ground, is suddenly *desperate* to get whatever *this is* out of them.

“I-It’s fine, I’m good, promise.” Tubbo says quietly, scuffs the toe of his boot into the dirt and tries to think of something to snap Ranboo out of it, quirks his lips up when a particularly dumb sounding idea pops into his head, “I um, I actually wanted to tell you something.”

“Of course.” Ranboo says evenly, but his arms twitch ever so slightly, like he’s digging his claws into his palms, scared over whatever he thinks it is Tubbo’s going to tell him, and it’s stupid and impulsive and *really* childish, but Tubbo slaps a hand into Ranboo’s chest and calls, “Tag! You’re it!”

He hops back a couple steps, bounces on the balls of his feet and waits for Ranboo to move, and as expected, he doesn’t, but surprise actually cracks through his emotionless mask, has his brows drawing down, “I...*what?*”

“*Weeeeeell* tag is-” Tubbo drawls with a shit eating grin, laughs when Ranboo jabs a finger at him, more life bleeding back into his body as he snaps, “I swear to the *Ancients*, i-if you *explain* what *tag* is to me-!”

“Then what’s the hold up, Boo boy?” Tubbo snickers, jumping to the side playfully, rocking up on his toes and flares his wings behind him, “You afraid of getting absolutely *destroyed?*”

“Of course not you little- okay, no. *No*, no we’re not *doing this*, you, sir, are *injured*, and are just coming off a *two day* fever.” Ranboo says, cutting his hand through the air emphatically, tail lashing around his legs, and Tubbo grins like a fiend, mocking, “Sounds like someone’s a pussy ass bitch!”

“*I am not!* Y-You need to be resting!” Ranboo squawks, eyebrows shooting all the way up his forehead in indignation, and Tubbo could let it go now, agree with him and go back to the Eshachi, satisfied that he’s knocked Ranboo out of his own head, but he’s having fun teasing him, actually...kinda wants to play tag now.

“Mmm hear that?” Tubbo croons, cocking his head into the wind like he’s listening for something and grins wide at Ranboo whose shoulders are bunching up by his ears, cups his hands around his mouth as he shouts, “Sounds like someone’s a- *pussy ass BITCH!*”

He jumps back cackling when Ranboo lunges for him, spins on his heel and takes off at a sprint, ducking around people with well practiced ease, body instinctually moving in the thrill of the chase. Tubbo knows he needs to be careful with his side, can feel it twinging and pulling as he runs, but it’s bearable, and he doesn’t go all out, figures Ranboo isn’t going to be able to keep up with him anyway.

So Tubbo is really, *genuinely* surprised when Ranboo snaps into existence right in front of him, and its only rotations of smuggler honed reflexes that have him throwing himself back in time, Ranboo’s claws skimming barely an inch over his front.

“What the *shit-?*” He’s in the middle of exclaiming when Ranboo’s gone again, disappearing in a spray of particles and he has the split second realization of *oh right teleporter*, before his antenna feel something shift in the air and there’s a quiet pop behind him.

Tubbo's wings snap open faster than he can think, get him in the air right as the rush of something moving fast brushes past him, and he zooms out of reach of Ranboo's lanky arm, the Enderian making an irritated sound in the back of his throat.

"That's cheating!" Ranboo shouts, planting his hands firmly on his hips, but it looks like he's smiling, and Tubbo can't help grinning back, sticks his tongue out, "*You* started it!"

Ranboo huffs and shakes his head and Tubbo floats a little closer, crosses his lower arms and puts one of his upper hands on his face in a thinking position, "Aww, what'chu gonna do now Boo boy? Can't get me up here, huh? Awww, such a sad little-"

He tumbles back through the air in shock at the dark mass that's suddenly right in front of him, *two toned eyes flashing teeth*, panics immediately after as Ranboo goes falling out of the sky *like an idiot*, but he's gone before he hits the ground, reappears crouched on a nearby building's roof, tail whipping behind him as he grins like a crazy person.

"What the- *fuck!* You're insane!" Tubbo yells but there's laughter curling under his words, heart beating fast and excited in his chest, and he dips out of the way as Ranboo launches himself off the rooftop, disappearing and reappearing in the blink of an eye, and something like awe begins to melt through Tubbo as he zips over buildings.

Tubbo's gone up against a lot of interesting quirks over the years, but he's never faced a *teleporter* before, is really having to try now to keep out of Ranboo's reach, pulling ariel maneuvers that he probably shouldn't be doing, but his wound is the last thing on his mind at the moment.

Ranboo is *fast*, he's light on his feet and appears to have near perfect aim, dropping himself out of thin air uncomfortably close to Tubbo every time, finally manages to get him with a feint, popping into existence on Tubbo's left, anticipates he's going to swerve right and is already there, cold palm slapping lightly against his face.

"*Yes!*" Ranboo crows in excitement, falling back through the air with his hair whipping around him, eyes bright and full of so much life, teeth bared in a victorious smile and Tubbo feels out of breath, watching him dissolve into purple particles an inch above the rooftop.

It's like night and day, Tubbo thinks, pulse hammering in his veins as Ranboo appears on a nearby water tank, tail curling around behind him like a self satisfied monkey, *is this who he actually is, underneath everything, why does he hide it what's he afraid of-*

"What's the matter? Can't keep up!" Ranboo snarks, hopping back and forth on his toes, but the impish grin melts off his face as Tubbo winces, drops stutteringly out of the air, one hand clutched to his wound. His feet haven't even touched the roof before Ranboo is at his side, hands automatically reaching out for him, "A-Are you okay? What's wrong, where does it hurt? *S-See*, I *knew* this was a bad idea, b-but you're so *impossibly* stubborn and-"

"TAG!" Tubbo screeches, slapping at his reaching hands and launches himself back into the air, streaking off with a mad laugh as Ranboo screams behind him, "Y-You-! I-! Get *BACK* here!"

Tubbo does not *get back here*, he beats his wings faster, trying to get out of Ranboo's range but has to duck fast when his antenna pick up movement on his right, dives just in time for the long streak of Ranboo's body to go sailing past overhead.

His breathing is loud in his own ears, air rushing past as he just barely manages to keep ahead of Ranboo, a dull, throbbing pull radiating out from his wound but Tubbo doesn't *care*, laughs out of breath and loud when he feels a hand snag at his ankle, when he hears excited trilling.

Chasing after the swishing line of Ranboo's tail, Tubbo can't remember the last time he had this much fun, slips his eyes closed and spins in a tight barrel roll just for the hell of it, just to feel the cold wind weaving through his hair and hitting his face, the rush of life singing through him like engines humming out in deep space.

Ranboo drops onto the next flat rooftop they come across, feet faltering a bit as he stumbles to a stop, panting hard but he's smiling, wild and unrestrained, skips back a few steps when Tubbo lands, similarly winded. They stalk around each other in slow circles, both on the tips of their toes, waiting to see what move the other is going to make, and Tubbo dives for him just as Ranboo winks out of existence.

It's something like a dance, how they step around each other, a push and pull, Ranboo darting away but Tubbo's always a few paces behind, pursuing him more doggedly than he's done with some missions, hyper focused on wherever Ranboo is like he's the only thing that matters in the whole galaxy.

And it's not just him, Ranboo's eyes never leave his, pupils wider than he's ever seen, watching Tubbo for the slightest shift in expression, in his body, is able to read him better than Tubbo would have ever guessed, stays just out of reach like he's got a wiretap into his head and knows where he's going to be before Tubbo can move.

The next time Ranboo disappears, Tubbo closes his eyes and focuses entirely with his antenna, can pick up the faintest vibrations in the air, people talking in the street below- *where are you* -the thrum of engines whirring far above him- *know you're there* -heart hammering loud under his skin- *know you anywhere*-

There- a whisper of something, pressure compounding like a blackhole, making his antenna tingle and Tubbo doesn't think, hurls himself backwards with a snap of his wings, crashes into Ranboo right as he reappears, sends them both tumbling over in a tangle of limbs.

It's not the most graceful maneuver, knocks them flat to the rooftop and while Tubbo's fall is softened by landing on Ranboo, the sudden weight of Tubbo on him combined with hitting the rooftop punches a wheezing sound out of his chest, and Tubbo quickly rolls off him stammering, "S-Sorry, sorry!"

He really thinks Ranboo's going to start fussing at him, which, *fair*, but his breathing just picks up, chest jumping in silent spasms. Tubbo worries he's having like, an asthma attack or something because wouldn't that just be his luck, but then he hears it, the faintest giggling that builds and builds until Ranboo is howling with laughter, eyes squinted shut where he's tipped his head back.

There's a dark flush across his cheeks and the bridge of his nose, hair windswept and splayed out behind him and he looks more real and more alive than Tubbo's ever seen, the great booming cackles of his laugh suffused with such giddy *joy* that Tubbo finds his own giggles slipping free without his consent. He flops back on the roof, abdomen jumping under his hands while he laughs, feels his muscles relax, a heavy, pliant feeling pinning him down and he grins muzzily.

Imuna's sun is high in the sky, shrouded by its ever present cloud over, and Tubbo tucks two arms behind his head, sighs as he feels the sweat cooling on his skin and enjoys the contentment sweeping through him like solar winds. His side is protesting a little, but he feels good, body enjoying a real meal and a fun workout, happiness coursing through him like honey wine, and he thinks a little absently that he wishes every day could be like this when a chilly weight settles around one of his legs.

Tubbo props himself up in confusion, eyes going wide at the sight of Ranboo's tail loosely draped over his ankle, curled back around so its fluffy tip is batting a little at his knee, turns to look at him in bafflement. He's facing away, head resolutely turned to the side so Tubbo can't see his face, but his arms are wrapped tight around his chest like he's *waiting* for Tubbo to say something, to kick his tail off and yell at him.

Settling back down with a huff, Tubbo doesn't miss the way Ranboo tenses, ears pinned nearly flat to his head, but they shoot up when Tubbo shuffles closer, when he very slowly, very deliberately moves his right leg to hook their ankles together. Hesitantly, Ranboo's tail wiggles through the new gaps it makes, effectively coiling around Tubbo's calf like a snake, and Tubbo hums happily, scoots just a tad bit closer, until their shoulders almost brush, until he can hear Ranboo's quiet breathing.

And even though his head is turned away, Tubbo can see the way Ranboo's cheeks lift in a smile.

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The Declassified Galactic Survival Guide:

Annwyl likes to present itself as a unified front, one planet, one people, all enjoying the wealth and benefits to being the single largest arms dealer in the galaxy, but your author very deliberately uses the word *front*, because that's what it is, a story, *a lie*, about as thin as your sheet of standard cardboard.

The wage disparity between the differing social classes on Annwyl is staggering, with your average laborer struggling to put food on their table in stark contrast to stepping into Voidfall Palace, which is like descending into the realm of a mythical being, the absolutely astonishing amount of wealth on display mindboggling and frankly, a little frightening.

But this gap is only apparent if A; you, for some insane and insensible reason, have traveled to Annwyl, and B; have somehow managed to garner an invitation into the royal palace which is nigh unheard of, and the only reason your author can say with any certainty what Voidfall's interiors are like is *not* because they snuck in under guise of a being a scullery maid.

I have said what I needed to say as per my lawyers' instructions, and now, continuing on.

To the universe though, Annwyl and the Ender are a cohesive unit, might as well be a single entity, what with how all Ender are near identical, all possessing extreme height and overall noodlelence, dark of hair and skin and horns and tongues and any other bits, only splash of color being their vibrant green eyes, making them one of the most homogenous species in the galaxy.

And this is where problems begin to arise, because the wider universe cannot separate in their minds *Ender* from *stupid large sums of money*, and most enterprising bandit groups and other such institutions of loose morals and empty pockets, will just see the green eyes and black horns as ransom credits filtering into their account.

Which brings us nicely to your author's point, which is *not racist* and my editor can go fling themselves into a sun for suggesting as such, but it's to take extreme caution when traveling with any companion from Annwyl, know that you have automatically painted a very large target on both of your backs.

As always, your author does say this to scare you, and recommends you continue to keep your blasters cocked and ready.

--

"*Oh shit-*" Tubbo gasps when they get back to the Eshachi sometime late in the afternoon, stares at the only crate he doesn't recognize sitting in the cargo hold and immediately turns around, "*Fuck-* I-I totally forgot- I need to go pay, *shit*, what's his name? Damn it, I'm a *moron-*"

He pulls up short at the hand that threads through the crook of his elbow, looks back over his shoulder to see Ranboo staring at him unimpressed with his mismatched eyes, "Do you really think they would've left your parts if you hadn't paid?"

"W-Well, *no* but-"

"Exactly. It's already been taken care of so, you um, you don't need to worry." Ranboo says letting his hand drop, eyes darting off to the side, and Tubbo's brain is a little sluggish, tired after all of the day's activities, but he eventually puts two and two together and his mouth drops open, "D-Did *you* pay for *my* parts?"

"I- well, yeah. I know you really needed them and it's not a big deal anyway, they weren't expensive or anything so." Ranboo shrugs, hands twitching like they want to fold behind his back or grab onto something, clearly nervous over how Tubbo's going to react, as if he was going to have any reaction other than gratitude.

I'm sorry, Tubbo thinks, stepping up slowly, *I'm sorry for whatever happened to you*, places a cautious hand on Ranboo's arm and gets him to snap his head down, *but you don't need to be afraid of me*, smiles warm and real and kind, "Thank you, I- you didn't have to, and it was...real considerate of you. And don't worry, I'll pay you back."

“No need.” Ranboo murmurs, drifting closer like he’s a moon caught in a gravitational field, eyes darting all over Tubbo’s face, seems to steel himself before asking in a whisper, “Um... d-do you need any help installing it?”

It feels like it’s more of a big deal than it sounds, but Tubbo knows better than to draw attention to it, has enough experience to recognize the look in Ranboo’s eyes right now, the most baseline reaction for dealing with things you’re unsure of, *fight or flight*.

So Tubbo huffs, tries to keep it light as he tilts his head and waggles his eyebrows, “Oh, I could always use an extra set of hands,” sees the exact moment Ranboo gets the joke as his eyes crinkle up, and he turns to the side, tries to cover up his giggling snort with a cough.

Under threat of serious bodily injury, Tubbo is forbidden from carrying the transmitter box up the ladder, watches Ranboo load it up into his arms and vanish in a spray of purple, hears an answering thud and indignant squawk from the top deck a few seconds later.

“You alright?” Tubbo calls up the ladder, has a pretty good idea as to what happened and tries to keep the laughter out of his voice, muffles his snicker in his collar when Ranboo petulantly calls back, “Y-Yeah, *ow ow ow*, yeah I-I’m fine!”

“Did you hit your head?”

It’s quiet for a second longer than it should be, and Tubbo’s got tears in his eyes he’s trying so hard not to bust out laughing, loses it though once Ranboo whines, “*Noooooo-*”

He’s careful scrabbling up the ladder then, pops his head through the hole in the floor and coos over where Ranboo’s rubbing at his forehead, and he rolls his lips back to bare his fangs, though the image is somewhat ruined by the pitiful look in his eyes.

“Awww, poor baby man.” Tubbo sings, swinging himself up with only mild protests from his side, and Ranboo bites out a string of echoing words that has Tubbo tutting at him, “Ya’know, it still counts as swearing even when I can’t understand you.”

“Eat a dick.”

Tubbo collapses back with an overexaggerated gasp, two hands clutching at his heart and the others at his forehead, “*Ah!* My angel *swore* at me!”

“I- *what?*” Ranboo chokes out around a loud bark of laughter, and Tubbo gleefully adds another little tally to the mental scoreboard he’s decided to start keeping, pride flaring warm through him since this is the *third time* he’s gotten Ranboo to laugh today.

It’s a really nice sound, sonorous and bright and full of so many excited things, and it’s a shame he doesn’t do it more, but Tubbo has resolved to change that, takes great joy in trying to weasel reactions out of him. He keeps cracking jokes and saying stupid shit as they unload the new transmitter, taking note of what makes Ranboo snort and roll his eyes, what has him giggling into a palm, which jokes cause his eyes to scrunch up, what makes him lose it entirely, shoulders quaking while he laughs until he can’t breathe.

They bump shoulders and generally get in each other's way trying to navigate the cramped quarters of the cockpit, but it's nice, having another person there, even if Ranboo's horns poke buttons and throw switches constantly. He freezes every time he touches something accidentally, only stops when Tubbo rakes his hands down an entire panel, effectively fucking up everything but it's worth it because Ranboo relaxes by his side, tail stroking along the ends of his wings.

Together, they wrench out the old transmitter from the dash, and Tubbo lays all his tools out on the floor, points at each one and tells Ranboo the name of it only once, doesn't bother fighting the smile off his face the first time he asks for something and is passed the correct thing with no hesitation.

Swapping out the transmitter isn't a hard repair, and Tubbo doesn't really need Ranboo's help, but he's happy to have it anyway, feels like something tight and unpleasant eases out of him when he makes comments and receive responses, when he reaches back for a tool and fingertips brush his, when he hears another voice joining his humming along to the music trickling out of the speakers.

The new transmitter is in before he knows it, and Tubbo crawls out from under the dash, wipes his hands clean on his pants and crosses the fingers of his lower hands as he powers the Eshachi on, "Welp, fingers crossed, bossman."

Lights blink up on the dash, the HUD starting screen flicking over the viewport as everything begins its bootup process, and Tubbo taps around the controls, chewing absently on one thumb while he waits to see if they've got signal, pumps his fists in the air as the bar fills up green.

"Oh fuck yeah! Up top!" He calls, spinning around to slap two of his palms into Ranboo's, and is a little surprised when he moves to also high five Tubbo's lower hands, like he doesn't want to leave them out, and it's small and stupid and a silly thing to get worked up over, but Tubbo does.

He was so wrong in his earlier assumptions, Ranboo's not horrible, he's actually a really kind person, a stupid, silly goofball that cares a lot more than he lets on, and Tubbo doesn't know everything, but he's picked up some of it, knows that there's got to be something digging at him.

It's not an excuse for him to act how he does sometimes, but Tubbo *gets it*, knows what it's like to have parts of your mind tainted and darkened, understands that it's a hard thing to struggle against by yourself, and out here, with just Tubbo and no way to contact his friends and family, Ranboo's probably been feeling really alone.

And Tubbo's always had a soft heart, especially for those that care about others, for people that give of themselves without asking for anything in return, and honestly, anyone that looked at the stars the way Ranboo does, with naked love and depthless appreciation, will always have a piece of his heart.

It's not so weird all of a sudden, seeing Ranboo perched on the armrest of the copilot seat, eyes tracking over all of the controls, likely memorizing them just because he can, and

thinking *you're my friend*.

"Hey." Tubbo says softly to get his attention, smiles at how easily he looks to him, nothing but fond light in his eyes, "Do you want first call? I know your parents are probably worried sick."

That warm light is gone instantly as Ranboo goes still, body locking up around him, but it's not his usual shutting down, he's absolutely tense this time, jaw ticking back into something that looks painful, eyes emptying faster than Tubbo's ever seen, and it's like having whiplash, watching it happen.

"I-I-I-" Ranboo starts and stops, only movement coming from where his claws flex into his palms, digging in hard enough his hands shake a little, "No, that wouldn't be very polite of me. I am more or less a guest here after all, and I must insist that you go ahead and contact your family. Please excuse me a moment, I should really probably freshen up."

He's gone before Tubbo can get another word in, disappearing to the bathroom without so much as a single faltering step, and it rumbles like thunder in the deathly quiet of the Eshachi as the sliding door closes behind him with a hiss.

What in the world, where did that even *come* from? He was fine literally a few seconds ago, bopping his head back and forth to music and humming along, and Tubbo didn't say anything weird, didn't try complimenting him or try diving into personal questions, all he did was ask if Ranboo wanted to call his parents first and-

Oh

Unease twists in his gut like the lurid swirl of gasoline, and Tubbo stares down at the hands cradled in his lap, thinks he's starting to understand but he really doesn't want to, tells himself he's reading too much into things and distracts his racing thoughts with opening up the comm lines, a long list of missed transmissions filling the viewport.

His heart seizes, seeing all the incoming calls from Tommy that never connected, feels his handheld vibrating spastically as it starts getting delayed messages, swallows past the dryness in his throat as he scrolls through the list, doesn't even know where to start.

Since Osiron knocked the transmitter down on the forty fifth, there are eleven missed calls from Tommy alone, most of them containing a voice memo that Tubbo's hands shake over pressing play, tabs violently out of the first voicemail once Tommy's, frantic tear filled voice echoes out of the speakers.

Tubbo is hitting *redial* before he can even really think about it, teeth biting hard into the pad of his thumb while he waits for the call to connect, a few agonizing seconds of anticipation that end with a synthetic voice telling him to leave a message, and Tubbo growls, hanging up and tries again.

He goes through the same process about four more times, getting increasingly more strung out and frustrated the longer it takes, closes out of his latest attempt with more force than necessary, slams his feet on the ground and snarls, "*Queens damnit!*"

Calm down it's fine, it's fine, he's probably just busy it's okay, and Tubbo scrubs two hands across his face, suddenly very aware of how tired he is, how much his body hurts, or he's done with you, sick of your shit, sick of the disappearing and the drama, he bows his head, furious stinging in his nose and eyes, why did you think he'd ever wait for you, when have you ever done anything for him, all you do is cause problems.

You're wrong you're wrong you're wrong, Tubbo yells back at the nasty little voice, the one that stands behind him with an iron grip on his shoulders, he promised me, he snarls defiantly, but the voice comes back, this time curling like smoke and embers and gilded speeches that hide ugly truths, people change their minds, you did after all.

Fumbling his handheld out of his pocket, Tubbo stares at his own warped reflection in the dark screen, clicks it on so he can pretend like he doesn't see the water droplets dripping down onto it. A notification pops up immediately that reads '32 unread messages from: **Dickhead**, and Tubbo hesitates long enough that the bubble disappears and he has to shakily navigate his messaging app himself.

Squinting his eyes closed as he clicks on Tommy's name, his mind whirls fast with the worst possible outcome, tiny, bolded words spelling out how much Tommy hates him, has always hated him, blames him for everything, but Tubbo breaths in, tries to remind himself that Tommy promised him forever, slits his eyes open and begins to read.

-

Dickhead

11.45.2341

>> Fucking hell please be okay for the ove of the creators pleas eplase pleas eb okay

>> I know your probably busy flying an shit but message me as sosen as you can

>> creetaors I know you can do this but fuck please be okay

>> I love you so much fuck ik now I never say it enough but I do love you tubbo

>> please message me back

>> please be okay

11.46.2341

>> hey are you okay?

>> im really worried about you

>> fuckign shit

>> creators I can tdo this

11.47.2341

>> Tubbo?

>> you better not be ignoring me you shithead

>> Ill spam you every hour until I have to go to pt this afternoon

>> fact: you fucking suck and I don't like you and I totally used your old bunk to have insane sex on how do you like that bee boy?

>> fact: Jack is the worst roommate ever and if it wouldnt make me lose my commission id fire him from a photon cannon into the nearest sun, hey does your organization need any super sexy navigators by chance?

>> fact: you remember Joisahon from our year? The little bitch with the purple teeth? Yeah he flunked out, thought that'd make you smile

>> I hope youre okay

11.48.2341

>> hey just cheking in again, I bet you're jyst off doing real important things

>> or ya'know, maybe hiding the body of that dickhead you were carting around

>> I wont judge if that's what your worried about promise

>> Just talk to me say somehitgn anything please I don't care

>> I

>> message me when you can

11.49.2341

>> Hey

>> I

>> I miss you

>> but im starting to think youre not coming back

11.50.2341

>> Hey, I don't erally know if youre even ali-

>> if youre gonna get this but just in case, im gonna be gone the next week. Theyre taking us on our first offplanet training exercise so, no handhelds. You know how it is.

>> I really hope ill hear from you when I get back because, fuck

>> what am I gonna do without you?

>> see you on the other side Tubbo

The handheld clatters out of his slack fingers and Tubbo hunches forwards, fists his hands in his hair and cries, back jerking with the effort at keeping it down, knows he isnt alone like he so desperately wants to be right now. Tommy thinks he's dead, *Tommy thinks he's dead*, and a whimper escapes out of his clenched teeth because Tommy's going to keep thinking that for a full *week*, trapped on some shit ass imperial cruiser where he won't have a second of alone time.

Sliding out of his chair, Tubbo's trembling hands skitter after his discarded handheld, screen still open to his chat log with Tommy and he frantically begins typing where he's leaning up against the bottom of the pilot's chair.

Dickhead

11.51.2341

<< im okay

<< fuck im so sorry so so sos sorry

<< osiron knocked out transmitter an just got replacement

<< Eshachi got damaged an we had to land on some stupid shithole planetoid so I could fix it

<< made it to Imuna but then I got sick but fdont worry im oakay now boo took care of me

<< fucki im so dsoryr tommy like queeens you have no idea im so sorry I opout you through all of this gonna call in jyst a sec but shit im so sorry

Taking a few deep breaths, Tubbo clutches his handheld to his chest and hiccups quietly, wipes his sleeve across his eyes to scrub the last of the tears away and gets to his feet. He

settles back in his seat and goes through the motions of calling Tommy, tucks his other hands into his sleeves while he waits to be sent to voicemail, pushes out a shaky exhale when the voice tells him to leave a message.

“H-Hey, it’s me.” Is all he gets out in a normal-ish tone before the tears are back, pooling hot over his lashes and running down his face like molten rock, “*Fucking- Queens past-* I-I’m so sorry Tommy, so so so sorry. I-I-I never wa-wanted to make you w-worry like that and *fucking hell-*”

Tubbo buries his face in his palms and has to take a second, doesn’t care that his stuttering inhales are probably being recorded for Tommy to listen back to, “W-We’re okay though, p-promise. I- *shit*, everything’s been horrible b-but *I’m okay*, and I’m so s-sorry for making you think I-I wasn’t.”

Sighing, Tubbo picks his head up and cups two hands around the back of his neck, other two picking at loose strings on his jacket while he stares morosely at the timer ticking up, desperation burning in him like a supernova, “I...fuck, I know you won’t get this until later but I’m going to find some way to come see you, promise. Fuck the empire and fuck my w-warrants, they can suck my dick for all I care.”

It would just be cruel mentioning he’s going to be on Nirox in, *shit*, in like twelve hours, because by the time Tommy gets this, Tubbo will be long gone, and he doesn’t want both of them to be tortured with the knowledge of what could have been. Tubbo’s determined though, he’s going to find some way back to Nirox so they can see one another, reassure that the other is alive and okay and in one piece.

“I’m really sorry, Tommy. I- I’m so sorry...” He says softly, fingers digging in harshly at the back of his neck, “I-I’ve got to go, Techno is going to fucking kill me a-and I still have to... d-drop off Ranboo. I love you so much, I...I understand if you’re mad at me, for putting you through all this, but just...I mean I understand i-if you wanna, ya’know, but- I-I’ll see you around.”

He woodenly disconnects and sits in the ringing silence for a minute, a couple straggler tears rolling down his face, tickling under his chin as they make their way down his neck, get lost in the red collar of his bomber. Tubbo thuds his head back into his headrest and shoots air out of his nose, tries to quell the trembling in his limbs, knows he really has to call Techno, but doesn’t want to look like an absolute wreck when he does it.

Once he can breathe evenly for a few seconds, Tubbo slaps two palms into his cheeks and shuffles himself up straighter as his other hands pull up Techno’s personal line, waits with anxiety churning in his gut like chemical fires for the call to connect.

It picks up faster than he was expecting, the standard avatar profile image resolving into a warmly lit office, a nonplussed looking Technoblade sitting behind his desk, “Thank fuck, I was really starting to think I was going to have to notify your next of kin, pay out your reaming balance, things like that. Do you have *any* idea how much paperwork that involves? I’d be buried up to my eyeballs for *days-*”

“Sorry...” Tubbo mumbles ducking his head, thinks he’s getting bitched out but Techno just keeps going, rambling on about paperwork and other tedious things to the point that Tubbo glances up cautiously, heart twisting into knots when he sees how tight Techno’s hands are wrapped around his biceps, relief clear in his eyes, dark bags stark underneath them.

“So anyway. Thanks for saving me a lot of trouble I guess by not being dead or whatever.” Techno huffs, shrugs like he couldn’t care less, but the movement unwinds some of the stiffness from his posture, and Tubbo sniffs, flicks him a tremulous salute, “You know me, bossman, always considerate.”

“Heh. Yeah.” Techno reclines in his chair, arms folded a lot more loosely across his chest as he arches an eyebrow, “Well? You better have one hell of a story or I want a refund.”

So Tubbo fills him in, about Osiron and the emergency landing, how he’s been trying to find a new transmitter, leaves out the bits where he almost died from an infection in the wound that Techno’s been on his ass about since he got shot, doesn’t mention how Ranboo took care of him, nor their impulsive game of tag, or any of the quiet, little moments he’s found in between.

It’s during his long, ramble explanation that Tubbo remembers he’s actually on an *escort mission* from the *king of an entire fucking planet*, bites his tongue hard at the thought of how much shit Techno must have caught, when Tubbo disappeared off the grid with *the king’s fucking son*.

You just make everything worse cause problems for everyone around you the no good fuck up, and Tubbo tucks his legs up under him, curls into as tight a ball as possible messaging at his temple, “A-Anyway, that’s about it. Sorry the mission’s gotten so derailed, I-I know it’s probably caused a lot of trouble for you, um, I’m real sorry ‘bout that.”

“I mean, not really? I didn’t have to do any paperwork soooo.” Techno says, waving a hand nonchalantly in the air, and Tubbo furrows his brow, because that doesn’t make any *sense*, he- he has to be mistaken. How has this *not* been a problem? Ranboo’s parents haven’t heard from him in *days*, they have to have been contacting the Syndicate *incessantly* trying to find him, it’s not- t-they *had to* have been-

Techno just... isn't understanding him, that's all, because there's *no way* that Ranboo's parents haven't been frantic since he disappeared, that they haven't been scouring space looking for him, how could they not, *he's their son*.

T-They're his *parents*, they're *supposed to*- but at the back of Tubbo's mind, the pieces are knitting themselves together into an understanding he doesn't want, and it's Ranboo freezing like he's expecting an attack, *you want first call*, how fast any personality he had is disappearing from his face, like he's afraid someone's going to see his emotions, *your parents are probably worried sick*, like he's afraid someone is going to use that to *hurt him*.

And it feels like Tubbo's heart is disintegrating out of his chest, “I- we're- I'm like a *week* late in dropping off Ran- *his highness*, isn't- aren't- d-didn't the king or whatever like, call you or something?”

Please let me be wrong please let it be nothing there's no way it shouldn't be like that he's their son-

“Uuuh, no?” Techno drawls out in a murmur, eyes flicking off to the side as he starts pulling stuff up on his other screens, grunts and rests a hand on his chin, “Yeah, I got nothing from anyone on Annwyl, huh. Yeah...yeah that is a little weird. Maybe they...have him chipped or something?”

“Maybe.” Tubbo agrees in a whisper, but it's bullshit and he knows it, caught up in memories woven together in a new light and he hates it, makes him furious, seeing this ugly, obvious thing standing out like the nastiest of truths.

Are you even listening to me, Ranboo screams at him, and it's not because he's angry, *tense line of his body he never stops talking like he's trying to fill up empty space like he's trying to prove he's there*, and Tubbo's eyes slip closed, head falling back against his chair, *shadow on the wall not even there doesn't matter never did*, aching empty hole in his chest because it's Ranboo whispering *it's nothing* where he lays delirious and out of his mind, but that's not what he really means.

I'm nothing

Tubbo slowly opens his eyes, sees Techno watching him with a pinched face and he doesn't know everything, hasn't heard it hasn't seen it, but he's been at this game for a while, knows what to look for and Tubbo can tell he's starting to get it, like Tubbo's gotten it.

There is no one on Annwyl biting their nails waiting for a call to come through.

And it feels like he's going to throw up.

“I...should probably go.” Tubbo says slowly, frigidness seeping into his body, crackling in his chest cavity and threatening to shatter his bones, and Techno sighs, nods his head a few times, “Yeah...let me know when you get to Nirox, alright? And Tubbo?”

He stops where his hand was hovering over the *disconnect*, feels like the air is stolen out of his lungs with the way Techno is looking at him, all hard lines of resignation and concern. “Just...don't get too attached, okay?” He says, scrubbing a hand through his unbound hair, fluffing it up in the back so it sticks out weird, “I- it might not be what you think so...just...yeah, but let him know that...that we're always hiring. Try not to get almost exploded by a star this time, yeah? Talk to you soon.”

Techno cuts the call from his end and Tubbo is left alone with the restless energy to *move* burning through him. He lurches to his feet, unease spiraling in his core like the sweeping bands of light being consumed by a blackhole, staggering pressure mounting as he makes to head out of the cockpit and freezes in place.

Ranboo's standing in the open doorway but- it's not *his* Ranboo, the one that sat barefoot with him in the dirt and talked about the stars with such passion, the one that played tag with him and shyly curled his tail around Tubbo like he was afraid of doing anything more, the

one that laughed until he cried over dick jokes and idiot stories, the one that smiles real and alive and unrestrained.

No...this is *the prince*, gold glittering from his ears and capping his horns, haughty expression on his face, condescension souring his two toned eyes, End crystals shining from his clothes and glowing ominously from the circlet on his head, the one Tubbo hasn't seen in days now, forgot it even existed as he stares at it wide eyed, never seen something look so out of place before.

"If you're done, I think I'd like to call my father now." Ranboo says in a clipped tone, and even his voice is different, backslid into the cold, frozen one he first used when they met on the landing pad, and something in Tubbo's chest shakes loose.

"You don't have to do this." He bites out, fingers clawing harshly into his palms, anger and concern and sorrow roaring through him like a fire out of control, *how could they do this how could they they're your family*, and Tubbo has to take a steadying breath, whispers, "Not with me."

"I- *what* are you getting at?" Ranboo snaps, jerking his head back and making all of his earrings swing, *like chains on manacles*, and Tubbo sighs sadly, looks up at him and wishes he didn't understand like he does, "You know what I mean."

Ranboo's eyes jump around his face, mask cracking a little and his brows curve inwards, mouth pulling to the side as he begs quietly, "C-Can you give me a minute? A-Alone... *please?*"

"Okay...yeah okay. No problem, Boo." Tubbo murmurs, ignores the sharp inhale and moves to step past him, pauses with their feet on either side of the other, like stairsteps, like some strange puzzle with only two pieces, lays a hand on his arm and offers, "I'll be outside."

I'm not leaving you, is what he hopes Ranboo hears, thinks he understands him when there's the briefest flick at the back of his wings, like he's checking to make sure Tubbo is real, that he's there, *hesitates like he doesn't want him to leave*, but Ranboo pulls back first, edging further into the cockpit with an absent nod.

Tubbo slides down the ladder and tries to block out the sound of a call waiting to connect, the faint chiming fading away as he steps out of the Eshachi, but it still hasn't picked up by the time he reaches the end of the cargo ramp, and Tubbo rakes a hand through his hair, "Fucking hell..."

Ranboo's a good person, he's ridiculously smart and driven, has a good head on his shoulders, is really kind and compassionate, probably doesn't have any open warrants under his name, what parent *wouldn't* be stupid proud of him, shower him in affection and the praise he kinda clearly deserves.

In comparison, Tubbo's a bit of a fuck up, has made a few really stupid, *really bad* choices but his mother still tells him she loves him, sends care packages to HQ when she can and expects him home at the holidays, makes sure he knows he's important and good and not defined by his mistakes.

Family is supposed to be there for you, they're supposed to love you and protect you, and it isn't confined to blood, Tubbo's found his share of family over the years, first on Nirox in vibrant laughter and speckled wings, and now with the Syndicate, sharp grins and warm hearts and itchy trigger fingers.

Family isn't- they're not *supposed* to do whatever it is they did to Ranboo.

Did they ignore him? Turn their backs and not answer his questions, is that why he's so desperate when he thinks no one is listening, why he acts like he has to be on his best behavior for Tubbo to even *talk* to him?

Did they tell him to shut up whenever he'd ramble about the universe? Taught him to keep his interests to himself, slowly walling off who he actually is, burying it under whatever it is that he thought they wanted from him?

How could they, *how could they*, he's their son their brother, *someone to them*, how could they just abandon him, and it makes Tubbo furious, sits burning in his heart, the frantic, wild conviction to never take Ranboo back there, because *no one* deserves that.

Let him know we're hiring, whispers in Tubbo's head as he flops down at the edge of the ramp, fingers picking at loose grit in the pavement. It comes to him then, the unbidden, intrusive thought of Ranboo with a grey and orange jacket spread across his shoulders, and Tubbo flexes his palm out flat against the ground, pressing hard enough little bits of stone cling to his hand when he pulls it up.

It'd look good on him, he thinks watching the tiny dark pebbles drop one by one to strike against the earth, flying off in a dozen directions, *a better fit than that stupid crown, than all that fucking gold he wears*.

Tubbo's unoccupied hands briefly check around his wrists out of habit, always *always* paranoid to find gold bands stitched on the ends of his sleeves, and he hasn't worn that jacket in rotations but sometimes, it still feels like they're there, branded into his skin like a set of manacles he can never get rid of.

Twisting to look over his shoulder, back at the Eshachi, at whatever conversation is happening inside its walls, Tubbo wonders if Ranboo feels the same, like he's trapped, no way out nowhere to run, spreads a palm out over the insignia on his shoulder and wonders if maybe he just needs to know he has somewhere he can go.

You said you'd never ask anyone else, a snide voice hushes from the back of his head, and Tubbo wraps two of his arms around his abdomen, shakes his head because he *knows* that, and giving Ranboo an out isn't the same as asking him to be his *partner*, but there's something so inherently wrong to him picturing Ranboo standing by some faceless so and so's side.

It's selfish and terrible, because Tubbo *won't* ask him, *can't*, but he also doesn't *want* Ranboo flying out with anyone else, *Queens*, he wants-

And Tubbo hunches over, digs fingers into the back of his neck because he *shouldn't* be thinking this, he *promised* himself, promised Tommy, said there'd never be anyone else, and what's *wrong* with him anyway, they barely know each other, *but they do they do they do*, have already saved each other once apiece and, *careful hands cleaning out infection won't let anything happen to you promise*, and merciful Queens but *he wants-*

Tubbo's head jerks up hearing boot heels click down the ramp behind him, scrambles to his feet and turns to see Ranboo walking towards him, "Hey, d-did everything work okay or...?"

But he doesn't act like he heard, striding past Tubbo who has to step quickly out of his way or get run over, dark cape billowing behind him like an ominous cloud, and that might as well be answer enough. Tubbo's heart twists painfully and he lunges forwards, hooking one of his hands around the crook of his elbow, gets Ranboo to come stumbling to a stop as he murmurs, "You alright?"

"Of course. Is there anything I can help you with?" Ranboo says perfectly even, but under Tubbo's hand, he's tremoring faintly, a deep seated shake he's mostly managing to control, back ramrod straight and unnaturally still, and Tubbo pushes his mouth to the side, "What happened?"

"Hm? Oh. Nothing, I just spoke with my father, it honestly doesn't concern you." Ranboo says like it's a line he's rehearsed, finally twists and regards Tubbo with one empty eye, "Now if you could kindly let go, I would appreciate it."

Normally, Tubbo wouldn't hesitate dropping his hand, but he's got a gut feeling leaving Ranboo alone right now is *not* a good idea, loosens his hold but doesn't let go, steps a little closer, "I- I will if you really want me too, but I...don't think that's what you need right n-"

"And what, *exactly*, do I *need*?" Ranboo seethes, face still completely blank but his shaking has gotten more noticeable, rattling his earrings around and jostling Tubbo's hand, and Tubbo brushes his thumb back and forth over the glittering material of his shirt, says honestly, "I just- I think you need someone to be there for you, to...to help you not feel so alone-"

"*I am not alone-*" Ranboo hisses, spinning around so it knocks Tubbo's hand loose, ears flicking back as he curls his claws into his palms, and Tubbo looks up at him sadly, murmurs, "Aren't you?"

Ranboo jerks back like he's been struck, mask fracturing for just a second and Tubbo knows he's nailed it on the head, seeing the absolute distraught that pulls his face down before it's gone again, neatly tucked back under the surface of *apathy*.

"Don't project your feelings on me, just because you're sad and pathetic doesn't mean everyone else is." Ranboo snaps, balled up fists dropping to his sides and he's trying so hard to seem callous, like he's not affected, but he's backing up a little at a time, *running away*, and Tubbo steps after him, following along for every step Ranboo takes.

"I'm *not* projecting, I know there's something wrong, I know *you-*"

"You don't know *anything* about me-"

“Yes I do.” Tubbo insists, makes direct eye contact with Ranboo and watches panic drip into their mismatched depths, *run run run run*, in every tense line of his body because Tubbo’s not backing down, *he’s refusing to leave*, and his heart breaks because Ranboo doesn’t know how to *handle that*, “I know you’re smart, that you try so hard because you want someone to notice, but they don’t, and you’re scared that no one will.”

Ranboo freezes, doesn’t look like he’s breathing as his eyes go wide, pupils constricted all the way down into tiny slits, and Tubbo wets his lips, takes another cautious step forwards and keeps talking, “Dick jokes make you laugh, and I know you pretend like they don’t, keep trying to muffle your laughter and...it’s a shame ‘cause it’s really nice. Your laugh, I mean.”

The noise Ranboo makes in response sounds wounded, like Tubbo’s physically hurting him, and Queens, how fucked up has his life been that this is his reaction to compassion, “You’re kind and you care a lot, about people, about the galaxy. You have such a big heart, but it’s like...you’re afraid to show it, don’t want anyone to know what matters to you.”

Tubbo sucks in a startled inhale when a nasty thought crawls into his head, but it makes so much sense, and he hushes mostly to himself, “Y-You’re trying to protect yourself, that’s why...you don’t want to let them know how to hurt you-”

“N-No I’m not.” Ranboo croaks, blinking his eyes rapidly like he’s trying to stave off tears, air hitching in his lungs as he stammers, “Y-You’re w-wrong, you- I-I- *you’re wrong*.”

“Am I? Then tell me how that call with your father went.” Tubbo demands maybe a bit harsher than he means, but he’s starting to get upset, seeing the way Ranboo’s holding onto his composure by his teeth, “What’d he say to you? Was he worried about you at all? Did he even pickup or-?”

His words get lost somewhere in his throat when Ranboo tips his head back and cackles, and it’s nothing like earlier, loud and warm and alive, this is sick, it’s twisted and angry and sounds like a blizzard howling outside, and everything about Ranboo shifts like he’s never seen before.

“Oh, you think you’re so smart, don’t you? Think you have me all figured out, hmm?” Ranboo croons, one hand coming up to lightly rest on his face, and he tips his head to the side, smarmy sweet expression melting away like ice in a supernova, “I’m sure you’re *real* proud of whatever theory you’ve come up with, but what could you *possibly* understand about my life? When you’re just a dirty little nobody with a rap sheet.”

He’s deflecting you hit too close to home he doesn’t mean it, but it still hurts, *never were going to be anything nobody going nowhere*, pricks at Tubbo’s heart like little slivers of metal, like needles, but he doggedly takes another step forwards, says as calmly as he can, “You don’t mean that. I *know* you don’t.”

“I do, actually, but see, that’s your problem, *Tubbo*.” The way he says his name, it’s like slime, like refuse, something disgusting and beneath him, *sit down shut up do as you’re told* *ensign*, and Tubbo bites his tongue hard because he can’t deal with that right now, and Ranboo’s eyes narrow like he’s figured something out, “You can’t admit when you’re wrong, when you’ve made a mistake. You just tell yourself you’re right until you *believe it*.”

There can be no half measures do it now, a wicked sharp smile and glasses flashing in the night and Tubbo swallows hard, slipping down a slope slicked with fuel and accelerants, *how does he know how does he know how does he know*, forces it down and says tremulously, “Stop it, I-I know what you’re trying to do, b-but you’re just letting them *win* acting like this.”

“Ha, that’s adorable. You have a hero complex, don’t you? You’re just *inventing* problems to *save me* from.” Ranboo simpers, smiles cruel and scarily real looking, and Tubbo’s having trouble picking out what’s him and what’s the shell, starting to worry because it’s getting a little too convincing, “Is that why you joined Sunfleet in the first place? Because you wanted to go save the universe? Aw, what a sweet, *stupid*, naive little dream to have, but have you ever actually saved *anyone*?”

“I-I that’s n-not- I’m *trying* to help y-you-” But the words get lost somewhere down by his windpipe, choked out with the billowing black smoke that pours up his esophagus, *do you trust me*, and his hands seize up by his sides, fingertips tingling like he can feel the pricking of splintery wood against them, *it’s for the greater good do it now there can be no half-*

“Was it too much for you? All of the rules and regulations, I imagine it was, given where you are now.” Ranboo cocks his chin up and advances, and Tubbo takes a shaking step back, heart in his throat and he can’t *breathe*, not with those *eyes* pinned on him, *sit down shut up do as you’re told* *ensign take the match Tubbo*, “Makes me wonder though, why you are where you are, because with talent like yours, the admiralty would’ve been *loath* to let you go, so, that leaves two options.”

Ranboo holds up a clawed finger, smiles like every horrible thing that crawls out of the night, eyes wicked and reflecting the light of a fire burning out of control, “One, you’re a deserter, a coward who couldn’t handle the pressures of responsibility. Cut and ran at the first sign of trouble, and isn’t that what you’re good at, Tubbo? *Running*.”

H-He’s wrong.

He’s wrong, but he’s not, not really, and Tubbo can’t seem to get air in his lungs, sucking in lungful’s of what feels like smoke, fire crawling up the back of his throat, and he’s not a coward, he’s not he’s not he’s not- *but you ran*, a voice whispers like curling ash and sparking embers, *you ran and you’re still running you think you can leave it behind but it just comes with you-*

“Or two, you were discharged, dishonorably I presume, but really, what else could it be? You fly for the biggest lowlife in the galaxy, a warmongering *psychopath*-”

N-No- it’s not- h-he didn’t- he left because he *wanted to* not b-because of-

“-so, how bad is your rap sheet that he’s the only one that’d take you in?”

Printed in neat block letters cycling on headlines on the newsreels deep destroying fear of *what have you done what have you done what have you done-*

“What, *exactly*, did you do?”

He didn't mean to *he didn't mean to* i-it was an accident *he didn't know-*

Flames jump high around them, ring their feet like demonic halos, and in between blinks, Tubbo can *see it*, the entire shipyard engulfed around them, fire spreading like crazy as it ignites the fuel in engines and over the hissing and shrieking of buckling plastisteel he can hear it-

The screams

Tubbo cries ragged through his teeth, lower arms curling tight around him while his upper palms clap over his ears, trying to block them out, *he didn't know he didn't know they didn't- no one told him- he would never have- he didn't mean to-*

But you did you did you did it was your hand you took the match you struck it, and he shakes his head violently, chest heaving like he's going to pass out, valiantly tries to count breathes but there's no air here he's *suffocating-*

Just like all those people you burned alive

"*S-Stop-!*" He gasps, tears streaming down his face because this is consuming him from the inside out, he can't see he can't think, all there is a too sharp smile flashing glasses, an unlit match in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other, *the resistance thanks you Tubbo*, and he howls like the damned, "*Stop!*"

Something touches his arms, *they came for him of course they did slapped chains on his wrists and drug him away*, and he panics, throws it off him with a scream, the entire world pulsating reds and oranges around the edges, the fires he can never put out. Tubbo hears shoes scuff and jerks his head up, sees a dark shape looming over him, mismatched eyes, *one red like hell he's the devil he's a monster*, doesn't think, cocks his fist back and launches it forwards with a shriek.

His knuckles connect harshly with flesh and pain flares out at the contact, a dull thud letting him know he hit something and hit it *hard*, limbs pinwheeling past him as Ranboo is knocked flat on his ass. *Hurt him hurt him hurt him* howls in his mind like a typhoon, but Tubbo can't stop crying, shoulders shaking as he struggles to breathe.

He blinks enough tears out of his eyes to see Ranboo sprawled on the ground, horrorstruck expression on his face as something dark drips out of his mouth, his voice a broken, croaking wreck, "T-Tubbo...I-"

"*Fuck you!*" He screams, trying to be strong, trying to be angry and intimidating and uncaring, but it sounds more like a wail, and Tubbo's lower lip wobbles and he *can't*, spins on his heel with a sob and stumbles back to the Eshachi, hyper aware listening for the sounds of pursuit and relaxes when he hears nothing, fumbles closing the cargo bay.

The doors grind closed, shutting the light out one millimeter at a time, and Tubbo hiccups uncontrollably, slides lightheaded down one of the bulkheads until he's on the floor, curls up as tight as he can in the muffled darkness, flames still flickering at the edges of his vision, and tries to control his breathing.

In one two- *fire climbing high into the night he can't stop it -o-out one two- helpless scared what do I do what have I done -i-in o-one two- trying to run but his legs won't work metal cuffs that scorch around his skin -o-out out-*

He can't he can't he can't he can't and Tubbo bawls, throat clogged with snot, restricting what air he can get into his lungs, and he puts his head in his knees, keeps telling himself he's fine he's okay there's air he can breathe, but it doesn't *help*.

He keens in the back of his throat, wishes Tommy was here, that his mother was, wishes he was home, doesn't want to be here, alone, *wishes there was a tail coiled around one of his legs barking laughter in his ears cold hands and mismatched eyes my friend-*

"Damnit!" Tubbo sobs, banging one of his fists into the floor, snarls the others in his hair and tries to stop thinking, wishes he could get the smell of burning metal- *of flesh* -out of his nose, wishes that things were different, that he didn't have to deal with this, that he hadn't been an *idiot*, swayed by grand sweeping speeches and a golden tongue that could've charmed the devil himself.

He wishes he'd never met Wilbur.

--

The Declassified Galactic Survival Guide:

The universe is a very large expanse, continually expanding actually so there's never going to be an end, well, at least until the Big Bang runs out of kinetic force and snaps back like the most humongous and cruelest of rubber bands.

Which is going to be terribly inconvenient, but at that point, we'll all cease to exist anyway, though, given the nature of mortal existence, I'm sure someone will manage to file a complaint with the overall higher order regardless.

Given our very finite and exorbitantly meaningless life spans, it's vitally important that we make the most of them, and while some take this as a challenge, pursue a higher calling that will better existence as a whole, like writing a guide to the entire galaxy while trying desperately to keep it pocket sized for your convenience, it becomes very easy to lose sight of what really matters.

Your author would argue that the upper echelons on Annwyl have, along with Sunfleet admiralty, that they've gotten lost in a pursuit of something that is honestly pointless, and does little to benefit existence, besides racking up a large number and thinking it means you're better than everyone else, that you're entitled to whatever you want.

There is so much more to the universe than credits filing into an account, so many wonderous things scattered across existence that I couldn't begin to hope to name them all, from the infinite solar loop of Gihui Kiujlo to the tiny crystal frogginoids on Hjhhjhjhjhjh, life crawling from many cracks and crevices and yet, the universe can be a terribly lonely place.

What do all the marvels and riches in life matter without someone to share them with, how are we supposed to cope with the terrible facts of being alive if there's no one there to put that commiserating hand on your shoulder, to look you in the eyes and tell you they feel it too, they understand.

Honestly, the only thing that truly matters, will be what counts the most when that cosmic rubber band snaps back and destroys us all like a proverbial fly on the proverbial wall, are the relationships we keep and who we choose to share our existences with, for the brief time that we have them.

And I feel like a lot of people have forgotten this.

Chapter End Notes

...sorry?

Final chapter may be a tad late, I got stuck for a few days with writer's block so I'm a little behind schedule but I have an outline and a plan so it's getting done!

Thanks for the kudos and comments, come check me out on [twitter](#) if you wanna scream at me.

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Hiya! I'm working on a book rn and if you'd like to learn more about it, [head on over to tumblr!](#)

Main Sequence

Chapter Notes

Maybe one day I'll learn what a normal sized chapter is
Please mind the tags! Shit is getting real.

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

There is nothing in his head but hot haze and the scent of gasoline, and Tubbo loses track of how long he sits in the pilot's chair, eyes lost in the middle distance, hands hovering a hair's breadth away from powering up the Eshachi. High pitched whining screams in his ears, trapping him in a timeless void populated only with the anger smoldering under his skin and the hole in his chest, feels like it's dripping magma down through his ribs.

Tubbo stares unseeing out the viewport, eyes itching and hurting from all the crying, skin around them rubbed raw by his fingers, and tries to have a single coherent thought but nothing will come to him, it's all just brief flashes of incomprehensible feeling that snarls and spits like a dying fire.

Stinging pain radiates out from under his collarbones, races down his arms and pools in the tips of his fingers, zapping like when he accidentally touches the charge between rotating couplers, except for it doesn't fade, it just sits and aches and aches and *aches*.

It feels like he's been hollowed out, nothing left inside him but the smoldering remains that can sometimes prop itself up and pretend to be a person, but right now it's not, lays puddled in a soft pile of ash, fragile enough to be shattered apart with the faintest breeze. Tubbo imagines one coming past, stirring up that lifeless thing and scattering it to the winds, wonders if maybe then he'd stop *feeling* so much all the time, if it'd be worth it, to not exist.

He recognizes these thoughts, they come melting back in like terrible old friends, stick to his fingers and ooze up his arms whispering the entire time, *did you miss us we missed you can't get rid of us that way you know what you have to do we'll be with you forever otherwise-*

Tubbo knows better than to listen to them, but they freeze his fingers where they shake over his handheld, until the screen finally goes into sleep mode and he's left staring at nothing, but *it's fine it's better this way what would you have even said, who would you have even messaged there's no one-*

Tommy is busy and it wouldn't do to worry him, he's already shouldered more of this burden than he should've, has stuck by Tubbo's side despite the news stories and media coverage, and he can't take on any more of this, shouldn't be weighed down by problems that aren't his own.

His mother would answer automatically, would send him words of love and affirmation, but she's had to deal with all of this once and that was already too much, it's not fair to her, it was never fair to her, and she can tell him she loves him all she wants but that still doesn't change the fact that her son murdered innocent people.

And that's it, *there's no one else you have no one else of course you don't*- that's everyone he'd ever trust with this. Tubbo's not an idiot, he knows most of the rest of the Syndicate *knows*, but he'd never talk about this with them, can't forget how people stared after him those first few months, same thing on all their lips, whispered free in darkened corners when his back was turned.

That's him, that's the guy from Nirox, and Tubbo's hands spasm over the controls to the Eshachi now, vision gone blurry again with a new round of tears, *the one that burned the shipyard, the terrorist*.

He spits an angry sigh out through his teeth, viciously drags a sleeve across his eyes, aggravating already tender skin but he doesn't *want* to be careful, he wants it to stop, the fucking tears and the fucking remembering. Tubbo had been doing so *good*, had been keeping this as far away from him as possible, was actually, dare he say it, *happy* these last few months, blaster wound aside, felt like he was finally settling into a comfortable routine, a new life unplugged by tickling ash and unholy screaming.

But it's *back*, reignited reliving in his mind, and he's furious, has been sitting in the cockpit with anger eating away at his insides as the sun makes its lazy sweep across the sky, just debating on whether or not to leave.

He has no idea where the fuck Ranboo's gone, honestly, doesn't really care, but he's not in the Eshachi and he's not in the hangar which means he's *not* Tubbo's problem. He should leave, *he should leave*, because after *that*- he has *no idea* what the fuck *that* was, how Ranboo even knew half of it, like he knew exactly where the gaps in Tubbo's mind were, found the weak points and dug his claws in and purposefully drug the whole thing over.

It was intentional, and that's what Tubbo keeps coming back to, *it was completely intentional*, Ranboo *knew* what he was doing, *knew* what he was saying was hurting Tubbo, was unbalancing him on *purpose*, was *triggering him on purpose*.

That's why he kept asking questions like he already knew what the answers were, kept dragging it out even though it was clear Tubbo was upset, he was *trying* to hurt him, *it was intentional he did it on purpose he saved your life and then made you feel like your existence was pointless*, and it was beyond shitty, it was *beyond* fucked up, and he can't figure out *why Ranboo did it*.

Maybe it was stupid of Tubbo, to think they were friends, but even if he was wrong, he knows that's not how you treat people, that it doesn't matter if you hate them, because there's no excuse for trying to hurt someone like that, goes past mean, lands somewhere closer to cruel, to heartless.

For Ranboo to attack him in that way, lay in with no hesitation, means there's something horrible lurking under that fake smile, and as soon as Tubbo could stand up, as soon as he

could breathe and his vision didn't swim with dark spots, he'd scaled the ladder and decided to leave because why should he care about someone so awful.

But his hands hesitated over the ignition and have been hesitating since.

Because he *knows*, knows that there was someone, *his father his mother his sisters and brothers people at the court doesn't matter*, who taught Ranboo to act like that, either through desperation- *shadow on the wall doesn't matter never did*- or through first hand experience, and it gums up Tubbo's head into impossible snarls.

Ranboo's not a nice person, is clearly capable of being an absolute monster, but...that's not entirely his fault, and Tubbo didn't use to be one to make excuses like that for people, but that was before he had half his brains scooped out, messed with, and slotted back into place.

He *gets it*, he may not like it, is still furious and upset and betrayed, but he *understands* that it's not voluntary what other people do to you when they're trying to control you, and that's why he's stayed, warring with himself over what to do.

Where does he draw the line, where does he say *that's too much it's over*, because Tubbo's having a real hard time forgetting the cold hands in his hair, conversations that've never been boring, a game of tag and a fluffy tail batting at him playfully, loud barking laughter and a shoulder bumping into his, the most ridiculous head banging he's ever seen.

And it's just...how is he supposed to do this, how is he supposed to forget his friend.

The sun's set by now, dark enough Tubbo's struggling to pick out details in the hangar, mind swinging like a pendulum, *leave or stay leave or stay leave or stay*, only broken up by the niggling worry that, as far as he knows, Ranboo isn't back yet.

You shouldn't care why do you care remember what he said, Tubbo thinks flexing out his stiff fingers, *do you think he cares about you*, yes maybe he doesn't know, *probably hired another pilot is long gone from here and your dumb ass is just sitting around waiting for someone that's already left you*, Tubbo's antenna bob with the force of the thought, arms snaking around him trying to find comfort like speckled wings wrapping around him, small hand rubbing his back, a tail wrapped around his leg, *but isn't that what you always do, wait for people that are never going to go with you-*

Tubbo's jerked out of the reaching, grasping thoughts when he spots the shine of End crystals glowing in the gloom like the brightest of stars, and his pulse kicks into overdrive watching them bob towards the Eshachi. He scrambles out of his seat, mind suddenly completely blank, doesn't remember dropping down into the cargo hold, but the next thing he knows, he's storming down the ramp with his hands clenched into fists and a maelstrom screaming under his ribs.

Punch him hurt him drag him down into the swirling hell you're stuck in it was him he did it he put you back there let him know how it feels having flames lick at you constantly it's his fault punch-

But it comes howling to a stop when he sees Ranboo frozen out in the middle of the hangar, something clutched in his hands and eyes blown wide, and that's where Tubbo gets lost, because Ranboo has always been very *very* careful in controlling his facial expressions, but there's none of that now.

He looks absolutely terrified where he stands, like he's facing down the narrow boardwalk that'll take him to the gallows, and for a second, Tubbo is convinced he's going to collapse begging for forgiveness, like he *should*, but something nasty coats his mouth as he watches that expression get shuttered away, *don't hold your breath you know what he's really like now how much of any of this is real-*

"A-Ah, hello, sorry did I keep you up waiting on me? I got distracted w-while I was out, lost track of time, you know how it is." Ranboo's trying so hard to sound casual, but it's clearly failing, words tripping over each other as he picks his way hesitantly towards Tubbo, "Anyway I'm back now s-so we can leave if you like, or if you want to, um, want to rest some I understand and we can leave in the morning. I-It's whatever you want to do! I-I'm fine with anything really, you know me, I-"

"Get on. The ship." Tubbo bites out, breaking eye contact with a sharp jerk of his head, afraid he's going to start crying again because it's too much, having Ranboo in front of him pretending like they're friends, like he *didn't* say all of that shit to him. It *happened*, and Tubbo doesn't have a fancy memory like him, but those words are going to live with him for a *long time*, and Ranboo just wants to pretend *like it didn't happen-*

Ranboo's mouth shuts with an audible click, but he doesn't argue, hurries past Tubbo like there's something chasing him, like he knows he's done something wrong and is running from it, and Tubbo's hands shake.

The cold night air burns as it hits his face, only serving to make Tubbo aware of how hot he is, frustrated anger making his heart do double time, building up such a furious tempo he can feel it drumming in his ears, at the pulse points on his wrists, and Tubbo has to take a few steadying breathes before he can even think about heading back inside the Eshachi.

Given his tone, how curt he was, Tubbo figured anyone with two braincells to rub together would get that he's upset and wouldn't hang around, so he's not expecting Ranboo to be waiting at the base of the ladder, accidentally makes eye contact with him but is quick to break it, pretends like he doesn't hear the soft intake of breath.

"D-Do you need help with anything? I can- um, I-I could make sure we have everything we need o-or like, put up some stuff?" Ranboo's saying as Tubbo goes to close the cargo hold doors, can see him out of the corner of his eye fidgeting with the thing, a book maybe, in his hands, "O-Or not, *um-* yeah- yeah no problem, y-you got it, um."

Tubbo's hands twitch around the control panel as he closes the door, anger bubbling under the surface at how Ranboo's just trying to brush it off, act like nothing happened, and his wings flicker in agitation. If he cared at all, the first thing out of his mouth should've been an apology, not this, *miserable* attempt at pretending like they're friends, *because they're not they're not friends not after that how could they be-*

But it swamps through Tubbo then, backlash at the thought of leaving behind- *raucous laughter and cold steady hands light of the universe in his eyes and a tail coiled around your legs gaze intently focused as you talk*, and his heart *aches*, moves him towards the ladder in jerking steps.

Ranboo jumps back to give him space, being overly cautious and considerate *now*, but where was any of this earlier, when he was busy flaying Tubbo open with careful precision, and Tubbo's hands white knuckle around the ladder rungs, feels like his insides are boiling up, consumed by this horrible thing he doesn't know how to get past.

Why does he feel like this, *he doesn't want to feel like this*, heads for the cockpit immediately because it's always been his refuge before, grits his teeth when he hears boot heels stuttering behind him as Ranboo tries to follow after, "O-Oh! We're leaving now- *which is fine*, I-I'm totally fine with that. It'd be good to get off this planet anyway, too much sand for my personal tastes. W-What about you? I bet you've seen a lot of sandy planets given how much you travel, but-"

Whatever he's rambling on about cuts off abruptly as Tubbo throws his arms out, effectively stopping Ranboo from entering the cockpit, and they stand like that in a very tense silence, Tubbo with two arms out and back to Ranboo, shoulders hunched up around his ears, making it very clear he's not welcome in there right now.

Or ever again could you really stand having him sit next to you knowing what he thinks remembering what he said, and Tubbo bites into his lip hard, arms dropping to his side as Ranboo whispers behind him, "Right...right, I-I'll just-"

His footsteps trail off down the hall and Tubbo drops into his chair with a relieved sigh, massages fingers into his tired eyes and doesn't know how he's going to do this, survive the next twelve hours with Ranboo frantically trying to pretend he didn't tear Tubbo down into a crying mess.

He's selfish so selfish he doesn't care about you at all if he did he wouldn't treat you like this like you're not worth it, and Tubbo tries to focus on literally anything else, but he doesn't even have time to switch the engines on before Ranboo's voice is carrying into the cockpit, sounding more smooth and composed than just a few moments ago, "Hey, I couldn't help but notice the Eshachi is running off JR-eight engines, which I know isn't the latest model-"

If he seriously thinks that switching tactics to talk about *engine parts* will get Tubbo to respond, to somehow appease him enough that he stops being upset with him then the bratchild's got anothe-

"-and I just *happen* to know a reputable manufacturer in Mahari who I'd be *more than happy* to arrange an appointment with once we get to Nirox if you-"

-and Tubbo's eyes blow wide-

"Are you *fucking*- trying to *bribe me*?" Tubbo interrupts incredulously, hands dropping to grip around the armrests in shock, and when Ranboo starts firing out a string of nonsense

protesting that *he's not*, anger snarls to life like a fire and he snaps, "Queens past *you fucking are!* What the fuck! What the *fuck* is your problem?"

It aches down at the center of him, in his bones, knowing that Ranboo doesn't think he's worth an apology, that he'd rather not let go of his pride and arrogance for *one second*, just to tell Tubbo sorry, would rather try and *buy him back*, that Ranboo's next words are almost lost to a white haze of seething fury, "I-I'm *not* o-okay? It's not a bribe, I'm trying to be a g-good frie- person a-and if you'd just-

"Oh *fuck off* with that shit!" Tubbo yells, feels frustration bleed a furious heat up the back of his neck, *stupid spoiled rotten little asshole thinks money can fix all his problems what a dick literally fuck him*, begins angrily preparing them for takeoff and ignores the stammering that starts up behind him.

"L-Look I, uh, I-I get how maybe it could um, could seem that way, but- but i-it's not a b-bribe okay? Hey, T-Tub- it's *not*, okay-"

No alerts start the EC sending power to the engines- ignore him don't listen -get the turbines started double check all doors are sealed- you don't care you do not care-

"I'm just- I-I wanted to do uh, do some- something nice b-because because, because uh, I-I know you've- um, done a lot a-and I- just- I-I-I didn't know w-what to do, T-Tub- p-please *I-didn't-*"

It's getting worse the shake in his voice- doors sealed pressurize cabin no alerts- ignore him just ignore- turbines are almost done warming up fuel levels fine- aren't you doing what they did this isnt right-

"-I-I didn't know what to do, I-I don't *know* what to do- I-I-I-" Ranboo's voice warps into an echoing noise that makes Tubbo's antenna twitch, the sound dragging down into pitches only they can feel, and his hands clench around the controls when it jumps back up into actual words, "P-Please, I-I-I d-didn't I don't- I- p-please l-look a-at me- *A-Ancients please*, I-I n-nee- please T-Tubbo *please-*"

He's started making a clicking sound that's too much like hiccupping inhales and Tubbo thuds his head forwards, tears pricking at his eyes because he wants to be upset, wants to be angry and mean and make Ranboo hurt like he's been hurt, but it's tearing his heart to pieces listening to him cry, "A-A-Ancients please, *void h-help m-* look at me- *l-look a-at me* I-I-I'm h-here hel- p-please *oh A-Ancients please-*"

It's not right, it's not right listening to this, and Tubbo shudders, arms wrapping around himself tightly, joints aching with misery and so many uncomfortable, desperate things, he feels like he's going to collapse inwards like a dying star from the sad pleas echoing around him, *you can't do this to him it's not right you can't do what they did-*

And Tubbo finally turns around, sticks his head out from behind his chair and sees Ranboo, claws punched clear through the material of his shirt as he digs them into his arms, no tear tracks on his face though it's contorted like he's sobbing, and it doesn't feel like a victory, meeting his anguished eyes.

It feels like he lost, *like they both have*, watching Ranboo open and close his mouth, gasp for air like there's smoke in his lungs and he can't breathe, words trying to struggle out of his mouth, but the stuttering has gotten so bad they don't make any sense, a garbled mess that drips into the air like dark blood from a split lip.

Once Tubbo's eyes meet his though, Ranboo sucks in a chattering inhale that actually sounds like it reaches his lungs, voice catching and tripping up over the clicks he's still making, but at least he can speak, "I-I di- didn't- I- uh, I- d-don't know a-anything else- t-this is- a-all I-I um- all *I know h-how to do-*"

"You can't *do that*, that's- that's not how you make it right." Tubbo tells him softly but firmly, and Ranboo whimpers, earrings swinging around erratically while he shakes, "H-How do- um, how how do I-I-I do t-that? I-I don't- uh, don't know *w-what to d-do-*"

"Try apologizing."

It should've been obvious, but Ranboo isn't Tubbo, he isn't like a lot of people, and from what Tubbo's able to pick out, it sounds like he *genuinely* has no idea how to fix this. He's trying the only way he knows how, and it hits Tubbo like a punch to the gut, the realization that Ranboo *does* care in his own fucked up way, enough that he's completely lost all of the careful composure he wears like armor.

That's more telling than anything, because Ranboo's been guarded with him from the very start, holds his cards so insanely close to his chest, Tubbo's surprised they aren't locked away behind his ribs, and now, he's standing in front of Tubbo having a complete breakdown, more vulnerable than he's ever been.

Ranboo keens in the back of his throat like he's been stabbed, ducks his head and lets his hair fall into his eyes, ears flicked back low and trembling, clear he's so out of his depth, and Tubbo isn't heartless, it's killing him to watch this, but he can't back down, insists, "You *have* to apologize to me, it's- I-I'm not *asking you*, I'm *telling you*."

"W-Where- h-how- how do- do I, um, where d-do I-?"

"I-I'm not walking you through this." Tubbo says but his voice is starting to waiver, emotions leaking out like smoke through cracks, betraying the neutral façade he's trying to uphold like a shield, "Just- tell me how you're feeling, t-tell me you regret what you said, say something, *anything*, just- *be honest*."

Choking out a grating echo, Ranboo flexes his hands as he digs his fingers into his arms harder, nothing but incomprehensible noise falling from his mouth in stuttering panic, but Tubbo thinks he knows what he's trying to say, *I can't you don't understand I'm afraid they hurt me you're going to I can't*, whispers hoarsely, "Y-You hurt me, a-and you *did it o-on purpose*. I- know you're...dealing with shit, b-but I am *too*, and you can't *do that*, can't hurt people just because *you're suffering*."

Ranboo shakes his head frantically, a low sounding wail echoing inside his chest, and Tubbo feels a few wayward tears escape, begs desperately, "Please Ranboo, just- *try*."

“I-I-I um, uh, I-I- c-can’t- can’t- uh, c-c-can’t s-s-sto-op- I-I-I-” Ranboo finally manages to get out and tosses his head to the side, clicking harshly around frustrated growls, keeps trying to force words out of his mouth but only ends up chattering his teeth together, voice completely lost to his nervous stutter, and he hangs his head like he’s ashamed.

Tubbo’s knocked back through time, seeing Ranboo look so absolutely defeated, shoulders slumped and tail hanging limp behind him, sees *himself* standing in the guard station on Nirox, shackles around his hands as they forcefully take his fingerprints and biometrics, everything numb and a thousand lightyears away, and slowly gets to his feet.

In the moment, back there, he’d felt nothing but soul crushing hopelessness, scared and ashamed and desperate for someone to help him, but he’d been alone, had to help himself, and it wasn’t a good feeling, knowing he had nobody to fall back on, so that’s why Tubbo creeps forwards now.

Ranboo may have said things that hurt him, did it on purpose even, but he has to regret it, wouldn’t be having this kind of breakdown if he didn’t, and Tubbo still wants to *hear him say it*, but until they get there, he doesn’t deserve to be alone like this. Tubbo inches close enough that he can hear all of Ranboo’s jewelry jangling as he shakes, hesitantly reaches out and brushes careful fingers along his forearm.

It’s okay I’m here for what it’s worth you’re not alone it’s okay now, and Ranboo lets out a clattering exhale as Tubbo runs them lightly up to where his claws have gone through his sleeves. He’s not expecting to feel frigid moisture where he does, pulls his hand back enough to see a dark liquid staining the tips of his fingers, blinks at it like an idiot before he registers what it is and immediately tries to loosen Ranboo’s death grip.

Slipping his fingers in between the gaps left by Ranboo’s tensed ones, Tubbo is greeted with more dampness, *more blood*, and tugs softly, thumb working in careful sweeps across his knuckles and joints, murmuring whatever comes to mind, isn’t paying attention to the words tumbling out of his mouth, “Hey, hey it’s okay, it’s okay, Boo. You’re okay, I’m here, you’re not alone, you don’t have to do this alone, it’s okay- can you- can you just loosen your claws a little? Yeah, yeah just like that, that’s great.”

His tensed hands bend a little, relaxing in increments, and one small tug at a time, Tubbo works his claws free, quickly wraps his fingers through Ranboo’s and keeps them in place so they can’t clamp back down, blood drying tacky on his skin as he praises quietly, “That’s it, you did great. See? Not so bad now, told you it’d be okay, I’ve got some bandages, we’ll get you patched up, so don’t wo-”

“W-Why are you- um, s-so nice to m-me?” Ranboo whispers in a cracking voice, chest jumping quickly under staggering inhaleds, and his hands try to weakly jerk out of Tubbo’s but he won’t let go, “I-I-I af-after I- but you still um, you’re s-still b-being so- *so nice*. ”

Because I know how it feels, standing there alone with the entire universe bearing down on you, Tubbo thinks, looking up at mismatched eyes that refuse to meet his, *because I know you’ve gone through shit you didn’t deserve, that it hurt you to the point that you think you have to hurt others to be safe*, squeezes his hands gently, not in a controlling way but to let him know someone’s there, *because-*

“Because I thought you were my friend.” Tubbo hushes, hands prickling with a chill where they’re wrapped up with Ranboo’s but it’s comforting, reminds him of bulkhead walls under his palms, “M-Maybe because I still want to think that.”

Ranboo makes a choked noise in the back of his throat, hands twitching around Tubbo’s but they stop trying to pull away, and instead, tentatively settle into a more comfortable position, the sharp tips of his claws scratching lightly at Tubbo’s skin as he takes a steadying breath.

“I-I’m- s-s- I’m *s-sorry*.” Ranboo forces out, uneasily making eye contact, brows drawn down low and curved together sharply, “I-I shouldn’t’ve s-said, um, said those things t-to- to you, it was way out of line, a-and and I know I um, I can’t ask this, b-but please believe me when I-I say I, um, regret it and- a-and- and-”

“I believe you.” Tubbo interrupts gently, not thinking, worries a second later he’s hit on something else with the way Ranboo looks at him, like he’s been struck, *what’s with the- I cut him off crap shit fuck-* quickly tips their linked hands back towards Ranboo, gesturing at him to keep talking, “S-Sorry, I shouldn’t’ve interrupted, that’s my bad. Y-You were saying?”

Ranboo’s still looking at him weird, like someone’s just hit him in between the eyes, but he sways closer like a planet caught up in a strong gravitational pull, and Tubbo feels something flick at the ends of his wings, lips twitching up at the tail that starts curling around his leg. “Tubbo...” Ranboo whispers, thumbs tracing careful arcs along the backs of Tubbo’s hands, like the chilly sweep of comets through the night, “I just- y-you don’t know how- I- f-for me- I-I-I’m just, what I’m trying to s-say is-”

They both jump when something explodes against the side of the Eshachi and Tubbo fumbles trying to disentangle their hands, trips back into the cockpit with the unmistakable sound of blaster fire echoing loudly around them. He jumps into his seat, winces at the bright red lights flashing like lightning out in the dark of the hangar, the Eshachi rattling under him as it’s hit, and scrambles to get the shields up, cursing avidly when one shot hits the viewport and it makes a distressing crack.

“Fuuuuuck *meee-*” Tubbo sings, fingers flying over the console uncharacteristically clumsy, trying to hurry and finish up the takeoff sequence, and it’s dark so he can’t really get a headcount, but there is *a lot* of blaster fire which does not bode well for them. If there’s enough of whoever the fuck is having a problem out there, it’s possible they could force the cargo hold’s doors open while they’re stuck grounded, and Tubbo has zero faith in him and Ranboo surviving the encounter.

To start with, his side’s fucked and with how bad his hands are shaking, emotional fatigue weighing on him like a collapsed wall, Tubbo would be a shit shot right now, more so than usual, and then Ranboo is a Queens damned fancy noble boy who’s probably never been in a firefight, and they would literally die so fast.

An alert goes off then, unhelpfully letting him know the shields are already halfway burned out, but Tubbo’s having to reset everything since the engines stalled while he was running his mouth, doesn’t pay much attention to the dark shape dropping into the chair next to him, startles when he hears Ranboo ask over all of the shooting, “D-Does the Eshachi have any, um, a-any weapons or-?”

“Does the Eshachi have any weapons.” Tubbo snarks in a mocking, jumping tone, pulse loud under his skin and making his fingers shake, anxiety and adrenaline mixing in his stomach like a combustion engine, but he smiles tremulously when Ranboo bitches, “Seriously? Now. Seriously? A-Ancients you are *insufferable* and I’m the only that has to deal with it, of all of the *unfair situations* in the *entire galaxy*—”

For some, *insane* reason, Ranboo getting all snippy and haughty with him has Tubbo calming down, the burning panic easing back and being overtaken by the calm cool his mind usually descends into when shit has hit the fan and he has to *think*.

“There’s two forward guns that should still be working, red switch on your right turns them on and that yoke has triggers on it that—” Tubbo doesn’t even get finished before the whining drone of the weapons system coming online fills the cockpit, and then the entire hangar is lit up with the bright red beams that come rocketing out of the forward guns.

It’s suddenly a lot easier to see, and in the brief cracks of light, Tubbo can make out a few people scattering, gets enough of a look at one of them to recognize the jacket, and groans loudly and impassioned, “Fucking- *fuck me!*”

“What? What’s wrong?” Ranboo’s demanding, but Tubbo doesn’t have time for him right now, throws the throttle down as soon as the engines are primed, sends them lurching up out of the hangar with less care and grace than he’d normally like, but if that’s who he thinks it is down there, reinforcements are on the way.

Tubbo keeps the throttle all the way down, burning through stupid amounts of fuel as he streaks up through the atmosphere over Tignarth, and the Eshachi is fast, is picking up ridiculous amounts of speed, but still, he can see the navigation lights of other craft heading their way, and sings nervously, “Fuuuuck meee, Techno is going to- *eat my entire aaass*—”

“What the fu- *what are you talking about?*” Ranboo snaps at him, and Tubbo spares him a glance where he’s sitting in the copilot seat in his royal garb, looks absolutely surreal and out of place and yet...not, hands still clenched tightly around the weapons’ trigger, and Tubbo laughs shakily, “You ever have any combat flight training? Read a book on it maybe? Possibly?”

“I- no? W-Why do I need-?”

“Well shit. Welp, buckle up, Boo boy, ‘cause it’s about to get *real* bumpy.” Tubbo calls, antenna suddenly prickling as they stand up at full attention and he dips them sharply out of their ascent, the air shuddering around them as the hot light of a photon blast streaks past, missing them by millimeters.

He twists the yoke sharply and spirals by a craft that was surging up from below, and as it passes the viewport, the luridly bright blue and yellow the Brotherhood uses for *literally* everything flashes by, and Tubbo has never hated being right more in his entire life.

Darting a quick look over at the sonar, Tubbo counts three other craft the same size as the Eshachi and tightens his hands around the controls because that is not ideal, whips his head

back forward when an alert demands his attention and throws the thrusters into reverse, skating by another photon blast that rattles the Eshachi.

Today is just...

The worst.

“Who the *h-hell* are these people?” Ranboo yells, and if he wasn’t currently attempting to keep them from being shot down, Tubbo would mark the day on his calendar. Ranboo actually swore in standard, but as it is, he’s a little busy right now, answers absentmindedly while he swerves around another barrage, “Brotherhood, long- *shit*- long fucking story but they don’t like us.”

“C-Can I shoot at them?”

“Queens I swear, fucking- *yes!*” Tubbo hollers and has to dive again to avoid getting hit, the three Brotherhood ships effectively corralling him and keeping him from leaving the atmosphere, and he snarls through his teeth, streaking across the craggy surface of Imuna, desperately looking for cover or somewhere to lose the bastards.

It looks like there’s mountains to the north of Tignarth, and Tubbo guns it in that direction, has to cut swiftly to the side to avoid an incoming ship, and as he does, the Eshachi’s guns roar to life, red photon blasts grazing the side of the other ship, nicking its crap paintjob. In between everything else, Tubbo feels surprise flare bright in his mind, because that was a good shot, a *really* good shot, especially for someone with no combat flight training.

Probably just a fluke, he thinks distractedly, antenna picking up on the spike in electricity before the Eshachi’s sensors do, but Tubbo’s made it to the edge of the mountains, drops fast behind a rocky formation that explodes behind them in a shower of rubble. He weaves down through canyons and darts fast over craggy outcroppings, anything he can do to try and put distance between him and the Brotherhood ships, but they doggedly stay on him.

Tubbo’s heart is beating fast in his chest, thundering under his bones like the rapid spinning of the turbines keeping them airborne, adrenaline narrowing his concept of reality down to only the viewport and the flight controls under his hands, and this isn’t anything like getting them away from Osiron because he’s not just dodging unthinking debris.

There’s people on his tail, trying their damndest to bring him down, thinking and calculating and making decisions based on what *he* does, so he’s got to be two moves ahead, anticipate what the other pilots are going to do and then outfly them. It’s tricky and complicated, like a high stakes chess game where you die if you make a wrong move, and Tubbo *loves every second of it*, cackling like a madman when he cuts a sharp turn around a stone pillar and sees one of the green dots sharply drop off from the radar.

Dogfights are a vicious dance, a nasty waltz with photon cannons and the threat of highspeed impacts, where it’s just you and your opponent locked in a frenetic spiral, and Tubbo gets carried away by the deadly music of it all, the ethereal singing of his engines running at full blast, snap and crackle in the air right before a cannon discharges, choruses of other ships

darting past overhead trying to catch him, always trying to catch him *but they can't he's better than them fastest flier in the Sivem Quadrant nobody could beat him and nobody ever will-*

One of the Brotherhood ships drops fast out of the sky in front of him but Tubbo's already moving, sweeping them out in a graceful arc away from the incoming craft, humming under his breath to the drone of turbines being thrown into reverse harshly when there's high pitched whining ringing through the air, an electric streak of red cracking through the night followed by an explosion he hadn't calculated for.

Tubbo jerks them out of the way of some flying debris, mouth dropping open as the other ship plummets to the earth because *there's no way but there is there is there is-* risks cutting his eyes to Ranboo and grins wide at the wild look of pride on his face, fangs bared in victory and heady triumph.

Not a fluke then good shot sharp eyes

"Think you can do that again?" Tubbo asks, voice bright with excitement, loops quick around an incoming craft, the remaining two Brotherhood ships flying a lot more aggressively since one of their friends just got shot down, hears Ranboo say in almost the exact same mocking tone Tubbo used earlier, *"Think you can do that again."*

And Tubbo laughs too loud and a little mean, ferocious elation igniting in his chest like the explosive rumble of engines kicking on, electricity crackling through his veins and making all his hair stand on end, barrel rolls the Eshachi for the hell of it and sends them hurtling back towards the incoming craft, feral smile stretching across his face as the front guns whine and send a barrage of molten red photons streaking towards the other ships.

No hesitation itchy trigger fingers good shot sharp eyes he's got your back and you've got his they don't stand a chance-

The Brotherhood ships swerve out of the way, one going left one going right, and Tubbo swings after the leftmost one, chases down that hideous blue and yellow as it tries to escape his sights, and the other pilot's good, cutting some sharp turns and spinning around low overhangs, but *Tubbo is better*.

He pushes the throttle all the way down because he *can*, takes those same turns in a fraction of a time with double the speed, doesn't slow as he makes gaps that would kill them instantly if he miscalculated the distance, flies like this is a dance he's rehearsed a hundred times, hands moving them where they need to go before he can make the conscious decision.

Faster faster faster almost got 'im so close lil more, and Tubbo wiggles at the edge of his seat, hands darting across controls, wings flickering behind him in excitement, and he's looking for that opening, that perfect lineup for his gunner, *it's me and him and him and me partners can't do it without each other*, and the Eshachi swerves beautifully to sit right behind the Brotherhood ship and *there-*

The guns are blazing to life right as he thinks it, and Ranboo doesn't waiver, takes the shot with deadly accuracy and Tubbo's already angling them up, knew it was going to hit before the explosion even lights up the night. *We did it me and him flight controls under my hands*

and the trigger in his good eyes good reflexes a good gunner; and Tubbo crows in delight as another dot blips off the radar, just the one left, but it's unlikely to pursue now that it's alone, and he can finally rocket out of the atmosphere unimpeded.

Exiting Imuna's atmosphere rattles them a little bit with how fast they're going, and Tubbo belatedly remembers to ease back on the throttle, hands shaky with the excess adrenaline pouring off him, spits hysterical giggles out and probably looks absolutely deranged.

He always gets like this after he's won, body overwhelmed with the last lingering cocktail of thrill and anticipation and *victory*, and he can't help it when he turns to face Ranboo, stammering punch drunk and too loud, "H-Holy shit-! *HOLY SHIT!* Ha! We did it- y-you did it! Queens you're incredible like, *holy fucking shit-!*"

Ranboo had started to smile, but it crinkles in at the edges weird, and Tubbo is so not thinking clearly, lurches across the space between their chairs and tangles space dark hands up with his, because it's suddenly the most important thing ever to make sure Ranboo believes him when he says, "I mean it, Ranboo, y-you're- *t-that was incredible*, you're amazing. You've got sharp eyes and good aim and *fuck*- Boo, you're *so* smart and I-I mean it, I've *always* meant it- everything I've ever said to you."

Swallowing harshly, Ranboo looks like he's on the verge of a breakdown again, but his fingers slide hesitantly through Tubbo's, cold and grounding and comforting, bulkheads under his palms, engines singing in his ears, and asks at barely more than a whisper, "P-Promise?"

"Promise." Tubbo insists in a more subdued volume, tightens his hold around Ranboo's hands for a second and is pleasantly surprised that he squeezes back, cocks his head to the side in confusion though when Ranboo murmurs, "I-I d-didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"M-Mean it, I didn't mean w-what I um, what I said to you w-when, um, when I was...being awful." He explains quietly, dropping his eyes to stare down at their hands, thumb brushing carefully over the back of one of Tubbo's hands, "I'm really sorry, Tubbo, I didn't- I...I'm just really sorry."

"Thank you for apologizing." Tubbo says gently, ducking a little to meet Ranboo's eyes, "And I do forgive you, I- I think I forgot to say that, earlier."

"You don't have to." Ranboo hushes, stubbornly refusing to make eye contact, shoulders hunching up around his ears like he's trying to make himself as small as possible, and Tubbo backs off, feels a little guilty watching him unwind, "Forgive me, I mean. I-I think- it's just, I'd understand more if y-you didn't."

It's eerily similar to something Tubbo said a long time ago, when he went back home, to Apidae, fleeing a pile of warrants that was only growing larger the longer he evaded capture, and he desperately tries to remember what his mother told him, as he cried himself hoarse in her arms.

“Forgiveness is a lot like love, it doesn’t always have to make sense.” Tubbo begins hesitantly, ducks his head in embarrassment because he didn’t realize how mushy that’d sound coming from *him*, stares at their hands all jumbled together and feels his lips quirk up at how Ranboo’s trying to make sure all four of his hands are being held, “I know I don’t have to, but I do, because I trust you when you say you’re sorry...do you believe me?”

“Of course.” Ranboo whispers, shifting his fingers to more thoroughly fit around Tubbo’s own, sharp tips of his claws carefully scratching at knuckles and tracing around veins, and Tubbo gets lost watching them, so dark against his own complexion, like a piece of the void has detached itself from the beyond and settled into the seat across from him.

He’s thinking about it then, his lurid, half remembered fever dreams, *nebula spiraling out from his hands chunk of the void sitting next to him binary sun eyes stardust dripping from long ears amazing gift most incredible pilot I’ve ever known-*

A soft beeping filters through the haze in Tubbo’s mind, but he ignores it, the impulse to lean forwards, just enough to brush his antenna against Ranboo’s, melting through him like honey wine and midsummer flower garlands, and it clouds his head to the point he forgets Ranboo *doesn’t have antenna.*

The realization has him blinking back to himself, and Tubbo sits up quickly, now happy to have the distraction of the Eshachi demanding his attention so he can turn away, hopefully hide how red his face is. There’s a popup he recognizes flashing on the HUD, and groaning, Tubbo gently disentangles their hands as he begins pulling up the planet registry, Ranboo questioning softly, “What’s wrong?”

“We’re fine just...low on fuel, I uh, may have gotten a little caught up in the moment back there.” Tubbo admits sheepishly, swipes through looking for the next closest fueling station when an idea comes to him, and he flicks the entire screen towards Ranboo, “Would you, uh, wanna pick?”

“I- *really?*” Ranboo hushes, wide eyes darting from Tubbo to the list as he hesitantly pokes at it, scanning over names and coordinates fast, and Tubbo feels a slow smile spread across his face, watching the way his ears begin to wiggle, “Yeah, dealer’s choice. Wherever you want, Boo.”

Ranboo pauses for a second, but goes back to scrolling through the list with a little more confidence, makes interested noises every so often over something he’s reading, ears perked all the way up and quivering slightly, and when he smiles, carefree and excited, like he’s just gotten something he’s always wanted, it’s the loveliest thing Tubbo’s ever seen

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The Declassified Galactic Survival Guide:

In the Andromeda Galaxy it is undisputed that the crown of authority rests squarely on the, proverbial and metaphorical, gold dusted head of Nirox, and one also can’t argue the fact that Annwyl sits high and pretty on that crown, enjoying all the benefits of being Dad’s favorite,

but what is seldom talked about are the fastenings, the, less flashy, more practical aspects that hold the whole thing together.

Many would argue that Annwyl is the chief most important planet in the entire empire, which would make sense if you didn't know much about anything else, because the Ender hold supreme jurisdiction over the End crystals and eek them out as they see fit, so that should make them principle above all others, but your author stands to make the case that what is a power source without something to power?

There are imperial shipyards scattered across the galaxy, but none compare to the ones on Apidae, which, rotation after rotation, produce some of the finest examples of what modern construction is capable of, creating the outstanding and deadly flagships for every currently active Sunfleet squadron along with any personal craft for the emperor.

The craftsmanship in the Apidae shipyards cannot be accredited to the imperial foremen that oversee the sights, and though Nirox may try to argue that it is by their hand that greatness is exuded, it's rather due entirely to the facilities being staffed fully with the fatalistically hardworking and dedicated locals of Apidae, the Mellifera.

A heavily close knit and family-oriented group, the Mellifera thrive off teamwork and striving towards a communal goal, thus making them ideal engineers and builders which the Sun Empire was more than ecstatic to stumble upon during the height of their expansion, quickly capitalizing on it once they realized that the Mellifera turn out some of the most perfect engineering work to ever grace the skies.

There are not many surviving records of the first meeting between the then Sixth Sun Emperor, Jiron Kiezodius, and the Queen of Apidae, but, imperial sources state that she more than gratefully relinquished her title and powers of rulership to the imperial governor Jiron installed on her planet, thus giving up Apidae's autonomy but in exchange, received all of the many benefits of being a part of the Sun Empire.

For sources such as these, ones that do not come from the primary culture they are about, and, instead, are recorded years after the fact by someone from off-world, the most academically correct descriptor that is used when describing them can only and ever shall be: *utter horseshit*.

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Stopping for fuel on Tjhia-Yuet somehow turns into a sightseeing trip around the capital, Tanasal-Yi, an ancient, crumbling thing that sits strung out between the boughs of the biggest trees Tubbo has ever seen, greenery dripping off practically every surface, growing like crazy in the hot, humid air. He wasn't expecting Ranboo to pick Tjhia-Yuet because A, it was hot, and B, it was basically one giant tropical rainforest with an average moisture count in the air that made *everyone* sticky within seconds.

"Aren't you like, allergic to water?" Tubbo'd asked once he saw what Ranboo had selected, and with a roll of his eyes that was definitely more fond than anything else, Ranboo answered, "Yes, and that's why some enterprising inventor came up with water repellant. How did you think I dealt with all the rain on Nirox?"

“I dunno...” Tubbo said, turned to give Ranboo a shit eating grin as he put the coordinates in, shrugged his shoulders and suggested, “Kinda pictured you rolling across campus in a giant plastic ball.”

It had the intended effect, punched a startled, genuine laugh out of Ranboo and Tubbo mentally high fived himself as he jumped to lightspeed, relishing in the loud barking sound of it echoing around the cockpit, filling up all the lonely empty spaces that used to haunt the corners.

Turns out water repellent went on like sunscreen, and it’s not until Ranboo was rubbing it into his arms as they left the Eshachi, being extra careful around his biceps that Tubbo remembered what was happening before the Brotherhood attacked, *claws through skin black blood staining his fingers*, and lurched forwards, “*Fuck*, I-I totally forgot, do you need bandages or something, *shit*, I-I’m so sorry, Boo, does it hurt or-?”

Ranboo froze where he was, but thankfully didn’t stay that way, slowly jerked back into motion and finished rubbing in a small off-white patch of repellent into his skin, “I...it’s fine. T-They scab over relatively quickly, and as long as I, um, I don’t nick them a-again, they won’t bleed anymore.”

He sounded like he was speaking from experience, and Tubbo couldn’t stop it when his eyes darted down to his arms, looking for more marks, but his skin’s so dark, it’s impossible to pick out anything distinct, and Tubbo snapped his head back up when Ranboo quickly rolled the sleeves of his nightshirt down.

“Ranboo-”

“I-It’s not l-like that, okay? Um- i-it’s *not*- I-I just...our claws a-are sharp and I don’t, um, i-it’s not intentional.” Ranboo insisted a little too quickly, tail moving to coil tightly around one of his legs, but he flicked his eyes up to meet Tubbo’s stare, whispering, “I don’t mean to hurt myself...promise.”

Stepping over to him carefully, Tubbo had wanted to wrap hands comfortingly around his arms, but stopped at the last second, not sure how that’d be interpreted right now, had to settle for letting them fall back to his sides awkwardly. “I trust you.” He murmured, choosing not to add on the rest of the thought, *but I’m going to make sure you mean it*, “You can- i-if *you need*, you can talk to me about, um, about whatever. No pressure.”

“I- o-okay, um, can we uh, can w-we go, I um, I just need- *I-I mean*, I’d just...like to see the city.” Ranboo finished shakily and waved a hand lamely through the air, but Tubbo got what he was trying to say, *not now there’s been so much so fast I just need a distraction*, smiled at him kindly, “Sure thing, Boo, whatever you need.”

Tubbo had been to Tanasal-Yi a few times, but most of when he had been here before was at night, and he was either trying to steal something or make sure nothing *got* stolen, he’s never been here as, well...a *tourist* basically.

It’s a bit of a surreal experience.

The city is massive and ancient, spans an impressive swath of the forest with most of it being built up in the tree canopies, large, moss covered bridges connecting buildings to one another, everything constructed of prehistoric, petrified lumber so hard it feels like stone under your feet. Colorful strips of cloth are bound together in massive braids, large, wooden beads about the size of Tubbo's head spaced out along their lengths and hang down from branches overhead, clattering in the breeze like huge sets of chimes.

Naturally, Ranboo knew anything anyone could ever possibly want to know about Tanasal-Yi, rattled off facts and anecdotes to Tubbo while they explored, growing more animated the further they went, eyes lighting up whenever he was asked a question, talking with his hands in an excited way Tubbo hadn't seen from him before.

They went by all the main spots, the old council house that Tubbo yawned through but stuck with it because Ranboo's tail was wagging fast behind him as he read plaques, wandered up and down the floors with a dreamy air about him, claws skimming lightly over the sides of display cases.

Nestled in the heart of a monolithic trunk was an old, crumbling temple infested with plants that housed a giant statue of some local deity, but Tubbo lost it when he saw the thing had four arms, made Ranboo take a picture of him next to it trying to copy it's pose even though locals glared at them with their tails all fluffed up.

There was some art installation in the city center that others around them were cooing over and snapping photos of, nodding sagely and murmuring about the great significance of it, but Tubbo just tipped his head to the side, started cackling, reached up to tug Ranboo's head over too, and they both stood there laughing their heads off while the other tourists gave them a wide berth.

Walking along at Ranboo's side, their arms brushing together every so often, hands batting and nudging at the other when they saw something cool, or funny, loud excited voices and jumping laughter and wide grins, and Tubbo realizes he hasn't been this really, truly happy in a long time.

It's different than the bright sharp joy that came from a good laugh with Tommy over videocall, or hanging around with other Syndicate members, this feels a lot calmer, more steady, *more permanent*, settled in his bones like it's never going to leave, a contentment so strong, Tubbo feels like he could stay here, in this moment forever, and never want for anything else.

He thinks Ranboo feels the same, because as they walk, as Tubbo listens to him and makes eye contact and pulls him over to come look at things, he gets quieter and quieter, and it's not like before, where he'd clam up and shut down, it's like he's finally relaxing, isn't afraid of being forgotten, and what looks like rotations worth of tension finally starts to bleed out of him.

It's on a swinging bridge overlooking the whole valley, leaves as large as the Eshachi falling down around them where they stand leaning on a rope railing, arms pressed together, that Ranboo finally says, "I know what you probably think, that I was- t-that my family is abu- b- but they're *not*, they're...i-it's complicated."

Tubbo has to bite his tongue to keep from blurting out the furious objections that bubble up, *you were they are doesn't matter if they never raised a hand that's not how you treat someone*, doesn't trust himself enough to try and say anything, just leans harder into Ranboo and feels him press back.

"I- growing up in the court...it's...very *different*, you just- things are just different." Ranboo says like he's talking about the weather, about something inconsequential and mundane, eyes tracking the leaves that float past gently, "It's difficult, having attachments there, a-and that goes for everyone...m-my father included."

Don't make fucking excuses for them, Tubbo thinks with a snarl, fingers digging into his arms harshly, jaw ticking back and forth in anger because he's genuinely getting pissed off, listening to Ranboo try and justify the way he was treated, like it's any sort of reasoning for neglecting someone like that.

"My father does care for me, *I-I know* he does, he's just really busy a-and there's a lot of us." Ranboo shrugs, claws picking at loose fibers in the rope, shredding small sections of it but at least it's better than his arms, and Tubbo wonders when *that* started, if any of them even noticed, thinks with a sick jolt that they might just not *care*, "But he tries really hard! I actually saw him on my name day this year which was really nice, but you know, sometimes t-there's just...something more important that needs his attention."

Is that what he tells you how many times did it take you hearing that before you decided you were nothing at all, Tubbo shudders, tries to imagine where just *seeing his mother* was the highlight of his birthday, remembers years and years worth of packed houses and too much food, loud music and excited voices and a hundred hands ruffling at his hair, cakes with his name iced onto them sloppily, everyone crowded close to sing him happy birthday.

He wonders if Ranboo's ever had something like that, but it's a stupid thought, more than evident he hasn't, and Tubbo's fingers creak with how hard he's gripping at his arms, *you're their brother their son they shouldn't treat you like that make you feel unwanted unloved like you're nothing*, but he swallows it all down, knows that his righteous anger won't be taken well right now.

Instead, Tubbo steps closer, threads two of his arms through one of Ranboo's and wraps their hands up together, and looking up at his face, it's not blank like he'd feared it'd be, but the resigned set to his eyes is almost worse, like Ranboo sincerely believes it's okay, how they treat him, and Tubbo can't help saying, "You deserve more than that."

Ranboo doesn't say anything in response, won't look at him either, resolutely keeps his eyes facing forwards but they're not tracking the leaves anymore, lost in the middle distance somewhere. Huffing out a frustrated breath, Tubbo lets his head tip to the side, resting it on Ranboo's shoulder and hopes it's doing something to comfort him, lips twitching up when he feels a familiar chilly touch wind around his leg.

It's tranquil, watching the leaves fall, gentle music of wooden beads clacking around them, and when Tubbo hears that faint clicking sound, feels Ranboo's body jerking under his head, he laces their fingers together, holds on tight with the silent promise that he's not going anywhere, and Ranboo's breathing evens out, hand twitching to grip back just as strongly.

They stay until it's late afternoon, until Tubbo feels like it's safe to make lighthearted jokes about being sticky and hot, until Ranboo bitches back at him, but it's familiar, it's good natured, it's *them*, and Tubbo tugs Ranboo into the first shaded cantina they come across, orders them both something cold to drink and a bowl of these little, fried seed puffs that they're currently trying to toss into each other's mouths.

"Okay, okay, just- tip your head back a little- *no*, no that's too much!" Tubbo laughs waving two hands at Ranboo to get him to stop, the others trying to help illustrate to him how he's supposed to be sitting, and he does the complete opposite of what Tubbo's telling him, angles his head back in a truly ridiculous position that Tubbo can't help laughing at.

"Dude, you're over thinking it, just- watch where it goes and try to catch it." Tubbo snorts, plucking out another seed puff and holding it out in front of him, makes sure Ranboo's got his eyes trained on it, "Ready? Okay!"

He tosses the puff in a clear arc, but Ranboo moves too much to the right and it whaps lightly into his cheek, bouncing off to join its fallen brethren under the table. "Queens, you are- *so bad at this!*" Tubbo cackles, swirling the straw to his fruit drink around in lazy circles and Ranboo harumphs at him, crosses his arms and declares archly, "*You're just a terrible shot.*"

"What makes you so sure of that, bossman?" Tubbo asks and props his chin up in one hand, giggling when Ranboo flings a hand around dramatically, "Because *you* catch all of *my* tosses, so clearly, *I* have superior aim."

"Oh ho, look at him, big man takes down two Brotherhood ships and thinks he's the best marksman in the galaxy." Tubbo teases, grabs a fistful of seed puffs and tosses them one at a time up into the air, catching all of them easily, tips his head back to grin at Ranboo where he crunches around his snacks in victory.

Rolling his mismatched eyes so hard, Tubbo's afraid he's sprained something, Ranboo takes a sip of what is essentially battery acid, and scratches a claw lightly into the wooden tabletop, "This Brotherhood...who are they exactly?"

"Ugh, a bunch of *shithead idiots*-"

"*Tubbo*-"

"-basically, a rival organization lead by some guy Techno has an undying feud with. We usually fight over contracts and clients, things like that." Tubbo says waving a hand dismissively through the air, brings another up to nibble at his thumb in thought, "I mean... we *do* fight a lot but I don't know what set'em off back on Imuna though. It was kinda weird, usually more yelling happens before someone starts shooting."

Ranboo's quiet for a second, staring down at his claw digging into the tabletop, looking like he's lost in thought, blinks back to reality when Tubbo taps the spot in front of him a few times.

"S-Sorry, sorry, I was just...wondering what someone has to do to get into an undying feud with the Blood God and still be uh, *alive*." Ranboo says hesitantly, unhooking his claw and

tucking both his hands under the table, and Tubbo hates when people ask him this, because the answer is honestly really stupid and he grimaces as he admits, “It’s over potatoes.”

“What. No, *what- w-why in the world-?*”

“Look, that’s all I know okay? I didn’t ask for any more details.” Tubbo defends, holding up all his hands and Ranboo sputters, “*Tubbo. What- why- h-how did that not spawn further questions?*”

“Well when your scary new boss says he has a lifetime feud with some guy over *vegetables*, it kinda implies you shouldn’t be questioning him.” Tubbo stresses, looking at him very imploringly until a smile curls Ranboo’s lips up and he huffs in amusement, props his head up in his chin, “I swear, every new thing I learn about him has me further and further convinced he’s not a real person.”

“Right? Like, we actually have this joke back at HQ that Techno’s just some vivid group hallucination. There’s this like, crazy long list of theories pinned up in my hall that people keep adding to that proves he isn’t real.” Tubbo says with a smile, propping his head up as well as he leans across the table, and underneath, Ranboo’s feet bat into his playfully when he scoots forward, eyes bright, “Like what?”

So Tubbo dives into it, valiantly tries to remember everything written down, gets hung up telling the stories because Ranboo’s laughing so hard it’s making *him* crack up, and neither one of their drinks had any alcohol in it, but Tubbo feels like he’s a little drunk, lightheaded and giggly, warm, stupid haze buzzing in his head and fingertips.

They head back to the Eshachi as soon as they’re both finished with their drinks, and Tubbo has half a thought that maybe he should be worried a little, because what was supposed to be a short fuel stop turned into another day lost, but it doesn’t feel like time wasted, especially when Ranboo takes their linked arms and spins them around in time to the music some street musicians are playing.

“What’re you doing?” Tubbo laughs but follows along anyway, already moving his hands into the proper positions, and it’s a little awkward at first, not like dancing with someone back home during midsummer, but they make it work, and Ranboo looks down his nose at him, cheeky, shitty grin on his face and eyes glowing in the gloom, “Dancing, ever heard of it?”

“Piss off.” Tubbo snorts around a smile, steps back when Ranboo moves forwards, lets him lead them in something that’s very graceful but a little too formal for where they are, and Tubbo starts bouncing on his toes, encouraging Ranboo to loosen up some. He does in increments, steps picking up until he’s moving along with the jumping tune, swinging Tubbo out in messy arcs, losing some of his coordinated grace to what looks like sheer joy, and it’s a good look on him, has Tubbo smiling wide and bright.

The drums are loud in his ears, feels like they’re thudding under his skin too, a jovial, swelling song that sounds like summertime, like watching firebugs dance in the night and the sweet taste of honey wine on his tongue, and Tubbo tosses his head to the side, wings flaring and moving with him as Ranboo spins him under his arm, laughing loud in his ear when

Tubbo tries to spin him back, obligingly dips his head and ducks under Tubbo's arm anyway.

Usually, Tubbo only likes dancing with other multi-limbed beings, the whole, extra set of arms really threw off a lot of binary limbed people, but he's not really having that problem now, because no matter what set of hands he comes back with, Ranboo doesn't fumble taking them, easily transitioning between the two like they've danced together their whole lives.

The band picks up in tempo, and Ranboo doesn't miss a beat, as graceful and sure on his feet as when he was sprinting across rooftops, spins Tubbo fast enough that he instinctually flares his wings out, snaps them once, used to having a partner that could fly as well. He realizes a second too late what he's done but he's already propelled himself off the ground a short distance, and Ranboo stumbles where he's jerked forwards roughly, but Tubbo drops to his feet as fast as he can, steadying him before he can fall.

Ranboo still trips over him a bit, hands fumbling and catching around Tubbo's shoulders, leeching cold like bulkheads, head hanging down low by Tubbo's while he laughs, eyes squinted shut and crinkling at the corners, and he's so happy and so wonderful and Tubbo leans up without thinking, heartbeat loud in his ears and taps their foreheads together, traces his antenna along Ranboo's horns, humming in the back of his throat.

It's strange at first, the rigid, unyielding shape of them, how they don't bend and stretch to meet him like some base part of Tubbo's brain is expecting them to, but he forgets about it pretty quickly, tips of his antenna flicking over hair thin grooves and ridges, like the fine, delicate swirl of fingerprints, pick up on the foreign oils he must put in his hair, something dark and heady, like incense smoke, like stardust.

"What're you doing?" Ranboo murmurs quietly, his voice snapping Tubbo out of the fog his head had descended into, and he feels his face bleed violently red, steps back quick and drops his hands like he's been burned, high, nervous laughter tripping out of his mouth as he rushes to explain, "O-Oh! Um! Well, it's uh- yeah it's just, on my planet, ha, I mean, you know- w-well I mean you don't *so* it's- um, w-we're just- *like*, i-it's s-something you do with um, w-with like your f-fam-"

"Tubbo?" A voice he only vaguely recognizes interrupts and Tubbo has never been more frantically grateful to run into someone he knows out in the wider universe, doesn't even really care if this particular someone wants to shoot him because right now, he'd welcome it.

Thankfully though, when he turns to look over his shoulder, there's not a blaster in his face but rather just a lot of blue, and Tubbo finally puts the name to the voice seeing that wide grin, spins around with his arms out greeting excitedly, "Sneeg!"

Sneeg throws all of his arms out as well, steps forwards to give Tubbo a hug, and it's like muscle memory, moving arms under wings and making sure he doesn't accidentally lean in so close that their antenna tangle, and when Tubbo pulls back, he claps Sneeg on his upper pair of arms, "How're you man? It's been like, what- shit like *four* months?"

"Something like that." Sneeg agrees with a lazy grin, fluffy antenna bobbing as he inclines his head under his hood, "How'ya been? Heard through the usual channels you got shot

pretty bad on Jurjo, but you don't look that dead so."

Tubbo snorts and socks him on an arm good naturedly, "Damn right I don't. It'd take more than one lousy photon blast to take me out."

"Oh yeah? Well just so happens I *acquired* a new Hargha forty four if you're down for a little friendly target practice." Sneeg snarks, pale blue wings flaring out behind him in a parody of a threat display and Tubbo laughs from somewhere deep in his chest, snaps his own wings open and tips his head to the side cooing, "Aww, how cute, you think you could catch me, mothball?"

"I *know* I could honey breath-"

"I'd like to see you *try* garbage eater-"

"That the best you got hivemind headass-"

"Brainless lamp fucker-"

"Bumblebitch-"

And Tubbo busts out laughing, hunches over a little he's cackling so hard, takes sips of air in between bouts of giggling and gets out at least halfway coherently, "F-Fuck, I haven't heard *t-that* one before!"

"What can I say? I got the brains the brawns the *looks*, I am the complete package." Sneeg sighs dramatically, two hands flitted to his temple in a swooning pose while the others clasp together over his chest, and Tubbo snickers, stands himself back up and cocks a hip out, "Mmm, that's okay, we all have to lie to ourselves sometimes."

"Hey! You're one to talk you little- oh! Um, h-hi?" Sneeg suddenly sounds very unsure, raises two hands awkwardly in greeting, looking over and up past Tubbo's shoulder, and Tubbo blinks in confusion before he feels something flick into the backs of his wings, *remembers*, and exclaims, "Oh! Right!"

Twisting to the side, Tubbo sees Ranboo hovering behind him, hesitant set to his face and ears like he's not sure he should be here, and a spike of guilt snaps through Tubbo, quickly gestures in between them both, "Sorry! Sorry got too excited but, yeah this is my friend Sneeg, we've known each other for a while, and Sneeg this is Ra-"

"I'm his partner."

Tubbo's words choke off somewhere in his throat at how effortlessly Ranboo interrupted him, chin cocked back and eyes narrowing like he's daring someone to challenge it, and Tubbo's too dumbstruck to correct him, mind pinwheeling in a hundred directions trying to figure out what *the hell Ranboo's doing*.

"Oh? O-Oh! Hey that's awesome! I hadn't heard- how long you guys been working together?" Sneeg asks excitedly, and Tubbo opens his mouth, hopes something intelligent

will come out like, *sorry Sneeg he's just finally lost it I think it was all the radiation*, when Ranboo beats him to it, "A few months now, right about when he got back from Jurjo."

What the actual fuck-

"Ha, that the straw that broke the camel's back? Well, thank the light he's finally got someone looking after his stupid ass now." Sneeg says with a sharp grin, and Ranboo hums in agreement, "I know, I'm honestly surprised he's lasted this long on his own."

What the fuck are you doing why lie what's the point-

"Man you don't know the half of it, like this one time, we were doing this job on Rayl and he stuck a pipe bomb on a door, took a half step back and said, and I *quote*, 'It's fine I've done this before'. Blew himself halfway across the room."

What do you even get out of this why do you sound so sure-

"*Ancients*...that does sound just like him. I think he's a bad luck magnet or something, we just flew through a supernova eruption little over a week ago."

Why does it sound like it could be real-

Tubbo has completely lost track of what's happening, stares in between Sneeg being an ass and Ranboo in his regular people clothes, laughing along to embarrassing stories about him like this is a perfectly normal thing that happens, like they're just out here on a job and bumped into an old friend. It- he *doesn't understand*.

Ranboo's only said they were partners one other time, back on Imuna, and he was just playing along with a shopkeeper who assumed once he saw Tubbo's jacket, but there's literally zero reason for him to do this now, with someone that clearly knows Tubbo well.

He said it unprompted this time, like it's been on his mind, like he's been pretending it's real to himself in the dark hours after the sun's gone down, and maybe it's been lurking in Tubbo's subconscious, the idea of it, comes easing out when things are quiet between them or during the fast paced adrenaline fueled moments, where he's been struggling to picture anyone else at his side.

And maybe Tubbo's been pretending quietly too, that this is real, that they're not going to Nirox.

That Ranboo's his partner.

Maybe he wants this too, a whisper quiet, desperately optimistic voice hushes at the back of Tubbo's head, from the very depths of his heart, coiling like so many fearful lonely hopeful things, *maybe he wants to pretend too, that it is real, that you are here on a mission, that the Eshachi is both of yours, that that second seat is his*.

Ranboo tips his head back laughing at something Sneeg's said, just his dark hair and dark horns melting into the night, no ominous glowing crystals or the bright swing of gold, sleeves of his nightshirt turned dayshirt rolled up to his elbows, weathered blaster at his hip, and

Tubbo can almost tell himself Ranboo just forgot his bomber back in the Eshachi, draped across his bunk, swallows harshly, *maybe he wants what he's saying to be true.*

“-and anyway that’s why flying hogmonkies aren’t allowed on Sonus anymore, but I think I’ve embarrassed Tubbo enough for a lifetime, I should probably let you guys go.” Sneeg says with a short laugh, leans forward to thump Tubbo on the shoulder, rattles him out of the stupor he’s been in and sticks a hand out towards Ranboo, “Hey it was nice meeting you- er, I don’t think I actually caught your name?”

And instead of saying something normal and reasonable, actually kinda proving Tubbo’s thought that all the radiation from Osiron has fried his brain, Ranboo says immediately *like a crazy person*, “Ranbus the child kicker.”

Tubbo whips his head around to stare at him, but it doesn’t even remotely look like he’s joking, and he has to bite his tongue hard to keep the insane cackles that start to bubble up inside, *stupid moronic crazy idiot does he do it on purpose looking to make you laugh.*

“Riiiiight.” Sneeg drawls, awkwardly retracting his hand to scratch at the back of his head, jerks a few thumbs in the other direction, the one they just came from, and says, “Um, w-well it was nice seeing you Tubbo, uh, good to meet you Ranbus. You guys have a good rest of your night.”

“You too Sneeg.” Tubbo tries to say in a normal sounding voice but he doesn’t think he manages, not with the way Sneeg eyes him before heading off with one last wave, and as soon as he’s out of earshot, Tubbo spits bottled up laughter out and rounds on Ranboo, “What the *hell man?*”

“What? W-What’d I do?” He demands, shrinking back like Tubbo threatened him, ears flattening themselves to his head, and Tubbo’s laughter dies instantly, reaches out for him and is relived beyond measure when Ranboo takes his hands, “No, *no no no no-* you didn’t do anything wrong, promise. I was just- um, I was a little caught off guard, w-with that name you told Sneeg.”

“O-Oh, oh! W-Well, um, I figured I, uh, needed- i-if I was um, in the S-Syndicate, that I needed some made up name too.” Ranboo explains and yeah okay, that makes *some* sense if you’ve only ever heard rumors about the Syndicate and assume it’s some, super shady, super covert organization and not a bunch of idiots with nowhere else to go, and Tubbo arches his brows when he says, “You know most of us just use our real names, right? We’re not like- *secret agents* or anything.”

“Yeah okay, like *Tubbo’s* actually your name.” Ranboo says with an eye roll and Tubbo sputters indignantly, “Wha- Tubbo *is my real name* you *unfathomable dickhead.*”

“N-No it’s not! W-What kind of name is *Tubbo?*”

“What kind of name is *Ranboo?*”

They both just stand there staring at each other like the most scandalized people in existence, brows high on their faces and lips set into what’s trying so hard to be natural expressions, and

it's Ranboo that cracks first, quiet little snicker falling out of his mouth and that's curtains for Tubbo. His laughter erupts out of him, loud and full bodied, chest actually starting to hurt a little with how much laughing he's done, sways forwards and grins when Ranboo does the same, looks up at him and murmurs, "*Child kicker?*"

"I thought it sounded intimidating." Ranboo hushes, lips quirked up in a smile of his own, and Tubbo snorts, waves their linked hands back and forth, unintentionally tugging Ranboo a couple paces closer, but Tubbo doesn't mind it, says whisper quiet and warm, "You're an *absolute* lunatic, *Ranbus* the *child kicker*."

"You know what they say...birds of a feather and all that." Ranboo tells him, a mischievous light in his eyes, and with an eye roll to end all eye rolls, Tubbo headbutts him playfully in retaliation, can't stop smiling at this ridiculous idiot of a person.

They're still standing in the middle of the street and the crowd is moving around them obligingly, but jostles them from time to time, sends Tubbo stumbling close enough to feel the cold Ranboo radiates, top of his head about level with Ranboo's chin.

He realizes then that if they were to hug, Ranboo was the perfect height for Tubbo to tuck himself fully under his chin, can't stop wondering what that'd be like, if it'd feel like when Tubbo sleeps on the space station floor sometimes, just to feel that chill radiating all through him.

Tubbo shakes his head once, trying to knock some sense back into himself because *what is he even thinking*, takes a few steps back and pulls Ranboo after him as he turns them towards the spaceport with a soft, "Come on, it's late bossman."

And it is kinda late, not in the grand scheme of things, but in the fact that neither one of them has had a solid night's sleep in a few days, and for Tubbo, flopping down in his bunk for a few hours sounds *really good* right now, would maybe fix whatever has apparently gone haywire in his brain.

The streets of Tanasal-Yi are still pretty packed, the night market opening up now that the sun's set, and this far into the city, it's not going to get as raunchy as some other parts will, but Tubbo sticks close to Ranboo's side, hands brushing together occasionally as they're jostled around by the crowd underneath a swath of glowing red lanterns.

Today has been strange, not in a bad way just, it hasn't seemed real to Tubbo, feels a little like he's living a life that's not his, or that he's dreamt this all up, and it's really weird, bumping his knuckles into Ranboo's, tipping a tired head onto his frigid shoulder, feeling his tail swish past, and knowing that they're going to be on Nirox tomorrow, that Tubbo's going to have to help him unload his things, stand there in the hangar and tell him goodbye.

The thought has his feet stuttering over the ground, and Tubbo sucks in air sharp through his teeth, feels like walls are closing in around him, like a hand's bearing down on his shoulder, *do as you're told take the match Tubbo there can be no half measures-*

But it vanishes like cigarette smoke in the breeze when icy cold fingers curl through his, and he can breathe he can think, thuds his head into Ranboo's shoulder and doesn't really want to

leave this life that's not his, doesn't want to wake up, but he's going to have to.

Realistically, Ranboo is not going to go with him and it's been stupid of Tubbo to even entertain the idea. His homelife might be crap, but Ranboo has so much potential, is going to excel at whatever he does, why would he give up any of that to go slumming around with *Tubbo*, an ex-cadet turned smuggler for hire, the guy with arson and murder charges hanging over him?

Nothing good would come of it, Tubbo would just be dragging Ranboo down with him and Ranboo has to see it. He's so smart, always one step ahead, probably has already run the pros and cons on this and came to the correct decision that the cons far outweigh the pros, would explain why he hasn't said anything, why he hasn't asked if he can stay.

Tubbo's heart thuds painfully in his chest but it's fine, *he's fine*, what was he thinking anyway, why would someone like Ranboo ever want to go anywhere with him, and Ranboo might be enjoying himself for now, just happy to get out and see the universe, doesn't really care at what cost, but the reality probably hasn't sunk in for him, and once it does, Tubbo knows what choice he'd make-

Regret filled eyes and awkward wings, chewing on his lip he won't meet your eyes he doesn't want to hurt your feelings it's nothing personal he says but it is it is it is why won't he go with you what's wrong with you you thought you were friends he promised-

Ranboo's fingers flex around his, pulling Tubbo out of his own head like the cold touch of space chilled metal, and it's kind of worrying, how easy it works, because Tubbo knows himself and knows how he gets, is afraid he's starting to expect Ranboo to be around, to stay by his side.

Isn't this what you always do though, Tubbo thinks with a grimace, body suddenly feeling like it's filled with lead, collapsing inwards like a dying star, everything compounding back on top of him, crushing him out of existence, *get attached to people that are never going to go with you-*

Unease prickles down the back of his neck, and he shakes it off at first, thinks it's just leftovers from the brief anxiety attack, but then it comes again, and he hasn't survived this long ignoring his instincts. Tubbo picks his head up and scans the crowd, antenna twitching trying to find what seems off, and there's nothing, he's just being paranoid needs to- *no*, up ahead, *lurid blue and yellow stupid idiots can't shoot straight Brotherhood-*

It's fine, *it's not fine*, it's probably a coincidence there's just the one, *there's never just one*, but his antenna flick and Tubbo darts a look over his shoulder, doesn't want to be too obvious about it, but even in the brief glance, he catches the bright snatch of two more jackets clearly tailing them, spits through clenched teeth, "Fucking- *shit-*"

"You okay?" Ranboo asks softly, and Tubbo's heart jumps into overdrive because Ranboo might be a crack shot, but he's never been combat trained, and this is devolving into a firefight, Tubbo just *knows it*. He suddenly can't get it out of his head, the image of Ranboo falling with a smoking crater in his back, makes his voice shake as he demands roughly, "H-How far can you teleport?"

“I- what? Why’re you-?”

“You need to get out of here. *Now.*” Tubbo stresses, tries to be subtle shifting their movements through the crowd, eyes scanning fast looking for escape routes or cover to duck behind, but the guy up ahead starts moving towards them quicker, “*Fuck, R-Ranboo, get out of here.* Teleport as far away as you can and keep going, I-I’ll find you later.”

“What- T-Tubbo w-what’s going on?” Ranboo stammers as Tubbo forcefully disentangles their hands, pushing him out of the way as the guy gives up all pretense of being stealthy and begins shoving his way through the crowd, glint of metal in his hands, indignant shouts and heavy footsteps getting closer behind them as well.

“Go!” Tubbo yells, hands dropping to unholster his own blasters, and like the senseless idiot he is, he can see Ranboo start fumbling for his borrowed one out of the corner of his eye, shoves him back with a sharp, “*Get the fuck out of here!*”

“I-I’m not *l-leaving you!*” Ranboo’s voice pitches high into a yelp as shots ring out, thankfully has enough brains to duck since he’s a good foot taller than literally anyone else here. Hooking him around the arm, Tubbo bodily drags Ranboo behind a low wall, dipping fast when his antenna feel the sharp crackle of energy discharging over his shoulder.

Peeking over the side of the wall, Tubbo sights a target and fires off a quick shot, has to duck back into cover when the road in front of them gets peppered with return fire. “You need to get out of here.” Tubbo insists shakily, flinching as the top section of the wall gets nicked, sends shards of petrified wood flying everywhere.

For a second, it looks like Ranboo’s going to argue- *black blood soaking through white linen smoking crater right over where his heart is you were too slow too late not good enough your fault* -and Tubbo panics, lurches forward and clasps Ranboo on the back of the neck, practically begging, “*Please, Boo. I-I couldn’t live with myself if you got hurt, please go. I’ve got this.*”

“P-Promise?” Ranboo whispers, one of his hands coming up to grip harshly around Tubbo’s wrist, like he’s trying to stop him from leaving, frantic look in his eyes, and Tubbo smiles as reassuringly as he can, “Promise. Now go.”

Ranboo nods his head once and dissolves and it’s so weird, feeling him wink out of existence around his fingers, but Tubbo’s got other, more pressing issues on his mind, like the fact that the wall he’s hiding behind gets hit again, crumbling a good section of it and leaving him exposed.

Red hot beams immediately come streaking through and he scrambles across the ground to a less exploded section, pops up briefly to get two shots off, nicking the side of a pillar one guy is hiding behind and the other shot goes wide, Tubbo having to retreat when a barrage of shots comes his way.

“Queens damnit.” He hisses through his teeth, pulse hammering high in his neck, making his vision wobble because he maybe sort of lied to Ranboo saying he had this. Tubbo’s a *pilot*, he’s good at being fast and hard to catch and being really smart on short notice, but he’s not

much of a marksman, isn't that good at hand to hand despite having four, and maybe he'd be more confident if it was one on one, but it's not.

There's *three* of them and he's not Dream, he's not Techno, he can't go up against a whole slew of enemies with a single weapon in his hands and insanity in his head and yet, somehow, still come out the victor. He needs to get out of here, lose them in the winding, darkened streets of the city, and as soon as there's a brief pause in the balsterfire, Tubbo makes a break for it, wings launching him into the air and over a rooftop, more whining shrieks of red brushing hot as they streak past him.

Tanasal-Yi at night is not the best place to be flying, a hundred things to get tangled up in or crash into hanging down from the branches overhead, and Tubbo lands hard on the other side of the building, boots crunching on loose grit as he propels himself forwards, taking off at a dead sprint through the crowded side street. He slips through gaps in the crowd, following along to the flow of it as best he can, but he can hear shouting behind him, ignores the protests coming from his side and pushes himself harder.

Tubbo can't be certain, but these have to be the same Brotherhood from Imuna, it's too strange a coincidence otherwise, and he knows their organizations have a bit of a rivalry, but he's never had this much trouble with them before.

Usually, there's a reason they're trying to kill each other, and yeah, him and Ranboo did shoot down two of their ships, but they *started it*, so fair's fair, and that's the really weird part anyway, because Tubbo can't figure out *why* they were chasing them in the first place.

The sound of blasterfire cracks over the noise of the crowd and he ducks into the closest alleyway, weaves out into another side street and keeps going, doesn't bother checking to see if he's being followed. Tubbo moves fast, flies short distances up over buildings and across small gaps in the road, is good at finding side passages and shortcuts, keeps a mental map of everywhere he's been in case he needs to double back, but he *can't lose these fuckers*.

They dog his heels, shots getting closer and closer the more he starts to slow, wound tugging and pulling horribly, but there's a really crowded section of the night market coming up, and Tubbo slides under a booth, crawls out the other side and stumbles into an alley.

He dips around the side of a building because he thinks he's finally shaken them, has to stop for a second he's breathing so hard, side screaming in pain and Tubbo remembers this kinda hurt, is pretty sure he just tore his stitches back open and Queens, Ranboo is going to *kill him* when he gets back to the ship-

Tubbo whirls around when he hears boots crunch in gravel, hands fumbling to draw his blasters, but he slows to a stop, very carefully raises his hands in surrender and backs up cautiously as the three Brotherhood swagger into the alley, blasters cocked and aimed right at his chest.

I-If...*if* he gets back to the ship.

"Well, well, well, look what we got here." It's dark, there's bright lights behind them so the Brotherhood guys are shrouded in heavy shadows, but Tubbo would know that voice

anywhere, groans audibly and clenches his fingers into shaking fists as it continues, “One *sad little insect* out of the hive.”

“Aeku, always a displeasure.” Tubbo says in deadpan as the man finally steps forwards enough to make out his ugly mug, completely matte black and narrow eyes, smirking grin showing off rows of needle like teeth. There’s still that little gap in the bottom row where Tubbo punched one out a rotation ago, and dark, fiery pride licks up his spine at the sight.

Aeku tips his green, scaly head to the side, pouts a little ridiculously and coos, “Aw, what’s that, not happy to see me *worker bee*?”

The insult rankles at Tubbo like a crushing hand digging into his shoulder, *sit down shut up good obedient little drone know your place*, and he snarls, hands jerking down without thinking but he freezes when Aeku levels his blaster at him. Tubbo takes a few deep breathes but they rattle around in his chest like a set of bellows, fueling the fire that’s liking to life in his fingertips and his words come out as a snarl, “What do you want fishdick?”

“Hey, chill, we’re all friends here.” Aeku says with a smile, tipping his blaster to the side like it’s not cocked and capable of blowing a hole through Tubbo, saunters close enough to loom over him, gently nudging the barrel of the blaster under his chin, “I’m a reasonable sort of guy, worker bee, just give back what you stole and we’ll be on our way, okay?”

“Eat shit and *die you-*” Tubbo cuts himself off when the cold press of metal touches his windpipe, swallows harshly and feels the edges of the barrel dig into his jugular, tries to say more evenly, “I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Aeku caresses the underside of his jaw with the blaster, finger depressing the trigger enough so that it clicks faintly, grins cruel and slow and mean when Tubbo flinches instinctually, “Mmm, sure ya don’t.”

“I-I don’t!” Tubbo stammers, wracks his brain trying to figure out what the hell Aeku’s going on about, but the only thing he *bought* was a new transmitter, and it isn’t worth enough for him to want to steal anyway. He’s actually starting to panic a little, because Aeku doesn’t really threaten like this unless he means it, and Tubbo knows how jerky his trigger finger is, has a few scars to prove it, but he has *no idea* what the idiot is going on about.

Tubbo’s convinced he has the wrong person, is about to tell him as much, when Aeku keeps talking in that dangerous tone of his and the world suddenly drops out from under his feet.

“Well...if *you* can’t remember, maybe we’ll go find that friend of yours.” Aeku drawls, uses the barrel of his blaster to tip Tubbo’s frozen head up, so he’s staring directly into those dark, hateful eyes, “Ya’know, the tall lanky one...the one covered head to toe in *End crystals-*”

Tubbo can’t breathe, everything rushing out of him like the hissing steam that billows out from an extinguished fire, nothing but screaming static in his head as Aeku leans closer, whispers sharp through his teeth, “That’s a lot’a credits he’s wearing round that head of his...wonder how much it’s worth-”

No, nonononono, n-no- not him anyone but him, Tubbo feels like he's spinning through the void, out of control can't get his hands back around the controls because he knows what happens to Ender, hands shaking thinking about Ranboo- bright laugh careful hands wanderlust in his eyes cold tail around your leg incense smoke and stardust -being bound up and ransomed off, blaster pointed at his head-

“-bet it's a lot, bet it'd be worth the trouble, though...he doesn't look like he'd be much trouble-”

Don't touch him don't touch him don't touch HIM DON'T-

“-wonder if it'd be worth it, to see how much his family would pay-”

Nothing there doesn't matter never did would they care fuck you fuck you fuck yoU DON'T TOUCH HIM-

“-to get him back in one piece-”

Blaster pointed at his head finger depressing that trigger Ranboo collapsing in a crumpled heap-

And Tubbo doesn't think, launches himself forwards with a vicious scream, hitting Aeku with everything he has, hands scrabbling madly for his blaster as they go stumbling back. A fist slams into his shoulder but Tubbo remembers to move with it, head spinning wildly for oxygen, hands pulling at anything he can reach, blunted nails digging in and slipping over Aeku's scales.

The other two are shouting something but Tubbo doesn't have the brains to parse it, heart hammering loud and violent in his ears, hands growing slippery with sweat trying to pry the blaster from Aeku, to keep it from swinging in his direction, that stupid fish's fingers still wrapped tight around the trigger.

They're all tangled up together, grappling furiously at one another like wild animals, but then Aeku drives a fist into Tubbo's midsection, close enough to his wound that it tears a horrible noise out of him, and the bastard doubles down, hitting him over and over again until Tubbo's grip falters. Aeku's arm shifts quickly and Tubbo panics, driving a knee up in between his legs, regains some of his footing as Aeku wavers, grunting in pain.

Tubbo's got two hands wrapped around the blaster, the others braced on Aeku's arm keeping him back, and for a second, the blaster slips in his hold. Fingers fist in his hair then, around his antenna, yanking him back roughly and Tubbo screams, losing any leverage he just fought for, nasty static crackling through him as his antenna are pulled to the point that it feels like they're going to be torn from his head.

He swings a fist wildly, somehow manages to crack his knuckles across razor sharp scales, gets Aeku to loosen his grip and Tubbo tries to twist away, duck down out of his arms and run, feels it too late when something hard and circular presses into his side, *jerky trigger finger can't run this is it not gonna make it too late too slow not good enough-*

A shot rings out and Tubbo's entire body tenses automatically, lungs locking up and limbs going rigid, brain panicking, just waiting for the pain to hit, to feel the sticky hot slide of blood out of him, but he stumbles under an unexpected weight instead, something warm dripping down the back of his neck.

The weight slides off him as soon as Tubbo staggers more upright, and it's *Aeku*, thudding onto the ground in a boneless heap, blaster clattering out of slack hands, *sizzling crater in the back of his head*, and Tubbo blinks at it like an idiot, hears something shift and jerks his head up, doesn't understand what he's looking at.

Because *Ranboo*'s standing there, the barrel of his blaster still steaming a little, blood splattered back on the white of his shirt, eyes more narrowed and dangerous than Tubbo's ever seen, and he flicks that cold gaze to the front of the alleyway, fires off two more shots without *any* hesitation.

He must not make them because there's no pained screaming, just feet scrambling to escape and voices shouting in alarm, and Ranboo lowers his arms then, holsters his blaster with an eerier sort of calm. Him being here, it's like a fever dream, one Tubbo's not convinced is real, thinks instead that maybe he *is* bleeding out and this is his last, vivid hallucination before death takes him.

Tubbo sways on his feet sharply and Ranboo immediately darts forwards to catch him, grabs him around his shoulders as he slumps over, arm going behind his back to support him while his other hand frantically checks Tubbo for injury, demanding shakily, "Tubbo! D-Did he s-shoot you anywhere? Do you know if you're bleeding? Ancients I'm so sorry, s-so sorry I didn't find you- t-that I let *him h-hurt you-*"

Frozen fingers prod at his side, being extra careful as they dance over the med patch, and it knocks the smog out of his head with their icy shock, *he's here he's real he came back came to find you he saved you*, has Tubbo fumbling around desperately at Ranboo, "W-What are you *doing here?* I-I *told you to run-*"

"A-And you *p-promised me* you were going to be okay." Ranboo croaks, achingly cold fingers spreading out over Tubbo's ribs gingerly, providing relieving comfort to the pain throbbing from his wound, "I-I'm sorry I didn't find you sooner."

Tubbo raises one shaking hand and hesitantly fits it over Ranboo's check, thumbing some blue green blood away, can't stop seeing Ranboo standing there with a smoking blaster and a corpse at his feet, fist sized hole through the back of Aeku's head, *not an accident fatal shot it was intentional*, whispers hoarsely, "Y-You *killed him-*"

"Of course." Ranboo murmurs far too easily, and either he's in shock or something else is going on for him to be this calm, because he's just *killed someone*, is going to have that hanging over him for the rest of forever, and Tubbo shakes his head in confusion, thumb stilling under his green eye, "*Why?*"

Ranboo blinks a few times, slowly draws his hand off Tubbo's side and wraps long fingers around his wrist, claws trailing featherlight over knuckles and veins, smiles as soft and real as

clouds of stardust, like the faintest swirls of new nebulae, “Because...I couldn’t live with myself either if you got hurt.”

Tubbo’s fingers tense around Ranboo’s face, move enough so that he has a better handhold, can more easily tug him down until he’s able to tap their foreheads together. His antenna hurt, ache and tingle and twitch where Aeku abused them, but there’s comfort in sliding them along Ranboo’s horns, *incense smoke and stardust*, and Tubbo lets out a tremulous exhale, cold weight of a tail curling around his waist, claws scratching lightly at his skin, doesn’t know how he’s ever going to be able to leave this.

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The Declassified Galactic Survival Guide:

If you asked anyone on Apidae if they’re oppressed, they’re going to tell you no, because the unfortunate thing about oppression is that when it’s done *well*, most people don’t know it’s happening. Nirox is a well oiled propaganda machine, has the military strength and money to easily stamp out any opposition that arises, and with Ender council members, raised on deceit and subterfuge from birth, it all happens behind gilded curtains with most in the empire none the wiser.

What happened on Apidae is a microcosm of what happens in the wider galaxy, Nirox swans in to some unsuspecting planet, independently minding their own business and doing just fine, but if the empire determines they have something of value, Nirox will threaten and schmooze their way into getting what they want.

But if they *don’t* get what they want, if that planet puts down the appropriate appendage that would be touching the ground should you be a standing being, then, like the biggest, deadliest toddler in the galaxy, Nirox throws a bit of a temper tantrum.

Unlike most depressed recent graduates desperately trying to find employment in this economy, Nirox doesn’t need to show their resume or portfolio to convince anyone of their credentials, their reputation for planetary destruction precedes them, and any leader that’s actually good at their job will make the painful, but correct, decision as soon as there’s a host of battle cruisers in orbit.

It’s the simple reality of the galaxy we live in, but as always, no matter how fool hearted it may be, descent grows through the cracks of the foundation Nirox has tried to crush into compliancy. Every imperial year, it seems like some new faction has decided to rise up and have a go at the pair of shiny boots stamping them into the ground, usually comprised of young adults who are inexperienced enough in life to still hope.

The groups all go by different names, but the spirit is the same, one of change, one of revolution, *of resistance*, always led by someone charismatic and idealistic, young enough to naively believe that they’re the hero to this story, and every imperial year, there’s a new little notch added into Nirox’s belt of supremacy and a new martyr to be forgotten.

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Tubbo lays on his back staring at the top of the bunk until his eyes start to sting from not blinking, aware of every aching point on his body despite the pain killers Ranboo forced him to take after he'd stitched him back up.

"They'll help you sleep, Tubbo-"

He sighs and closes his eyes again, tries to shut his brain off so he can drift into unconsciousness, but it keeps ping ponging memories back at him, Aeku's voice slithering in one ear and out the other, his crumpled body on the ground, *Ranboo* standing over him smoking blaster in hand-

"-you need the rest. I'll be okay on my own for a few hours-"

-swerving fast around rocky outcroppings and photon blasts, flight controls under his hands and the trigger in Ranboo's, the nasty wonderful way he smiled in victory when he took down that first ship-

"-just, try and sleep, please. F-For me?"

-racing over rooftops, wind in his hair and striking cold against his face, lightning fast way Ranboo dropped out of empty air, no hesitation every time, sure and swift and confident, hand snagging around Tubbo's ankle, only person to ever catch him-

Tubbo beats a fist lightly on his forehead, as if he can get his brain to stop by knocking a few things loose in there, but ever to be contrary, it starts pulling up things he really *doesn't* want to think about, the things he's imagined like-

-what Ranboo would look like trying to hide his smile in the red collar of his bomber, how he'd decorate his side of the room back at HQ, arguing over what music to put on in the Eshachi, lanky legs propped up on the dash, wandering down an infinite rotation of foreign streets side by side, his head tipped back in laughter, no crown no crystals no gold just Ranboo, his Ranboo, his friend, his partner-

Growling in frustration, Tubbo rolls over and sits up, defeatedly hangs his head as he swings his legs over the side of the bunk, exhaustion and irritation crowding close in his chest, cinching his throat closed around every inhale. What's wrong with him, he knows Ranboo isn't going to be going with him, but he can't *stop* imagining it.

Why does he do this every time, hang on so desperately to the people that aren't coming along, even though they know and he knows it's what's best for them. He's gotten himself backed into a corner like this, and Tubbo knows they're not, but it feels like the walls are inching closer, and with a sigh, he gets to his feet.

He picks around the stuff on the floor, everything hastily brought back up as soon as they landed here, digs his jacket out from a pile of mostly Ranboo's things, fancy looking clothing discarded in a heap, ancient book sticking out of what's probably his school bag, tugs it on and heads for the ladder chute.

Silvery light spills into the cargo hold through the open bay doors, and Tubbo's grateful for it, limps his way carefully to the start of the ramp, mindful to not hook his bare feet on anything, humid, warm air ruffling his hair as he steps outside.

They're still on Tjhia-Yuet, Tubbo didn't even have a chance to make it out of the atmosphere before his scanner picked up several sources of the encrypted channel the Brotherhood used, radar lighting up as their ships started dropping out of lightspeed over the city, but it wasn't just them this time.

"The fuck." Tubbo muttered, leaning over with a wince to rap his bloodied fingers into the scanner, trying to see if it was malfunctioning but nope, it was working just fine, and had picked up at least two Irilian Raiders, their channels wide open as they seemed to be communicating *with* the Brotherhood.

And Tubbo wasn't the most up to date on his Irilian, but he knew their word for *Syndicate* and it was being used very liberally, made his blood run cold. Pissed off Brotherhood were one thing, Techno and Squid had kind of an arrangement that kept things from getting too out of hand, but the Raiders were different, had quite the reputation for being one of the most ruthless gangs in the galaxy.

They were usually content to leave well enough alone unless provoked, and yeah, okay, Tubbo *knew* they had a base or something on Imuna, but it was supposed to be a small one. He hadn't even *seen* any Raiders while they were there, so what in the fuck could he have done to piss *them* off, unless the Brotherhood *hired them* for some reason which was beyond absurd, and Tubbo's head started to pound just trying to untangle this whole fuckfest.

None of this was making any sense, why were Brotherhood after them in the first place, why were there Raiders here *now*? And what the fuck had Aeku been going on about, telling him to return what he *stole*? Tubbo hadn't been on anything more than supply runs for weeks, hadn't seen Aeku since before Jurjo, can't for the life of him try and fit this borked puzzle back together.

Tubbo thought for half a second about calling for backup, see if anyone was in the area, but if he did, Techno would for sure stick him on D ranks for the foreseeable future, citing that Tubbo clearly wasn't ready to be back out in the field, *despite literally none of this being his fault*, and he quickly abandoned the idea.

So instead of getting into a fight he knew he was going to lose, Tubbo took them further into the jungle, hid the Eshachi under a truly massive tangle of roots almost the size of the hangars back at HQ, and figured they'd lay low until the morning, when the Brotherhood hopefully got sick of looking for them and fucked off to go ruin someone else's day.

Ranboo took their newfound downtime as the perfect opportunity to drag Tubbo from his flight seat and stitch him back up, bitching the entire time in a tone that could only ever be called affectionate, and it hurt like hell, but Tubbo couldn't stop smiling, distracted himself playing with the tuft of fluffy hair at the end of Ranboo's tail while he worked.

That was over an hour ago, and Tubbo hasn't been able to sleep no matter how much he may want to, bare feet quiet walking down the cargo ramp and out into the night of Tjhia-Yuet.

The lichen growing along the roots overhead is bioluminescent and casts soft, white light down on where Ranboo sits at the edge of the ramp, looking up at the maze of roots like he would the stars. One long ear flicks as Tubbo gets closer, *must have good hearing then*, and he turns to look over his shoulder with a frown, “*You’re supposed to be resting.*”

“Can’t sleep.” Tubbo sighs, flopping down next to him and doesn’t even wince when his side pulls, he’s so used to it now, and Ranboo huffs, “How can you *not* be tired, you haven’t slept much in about *three days.*”

Chewing on a thumb in thought, Tubbo shrugs and bumps into Ranboo some, unintentionally drifting a little closer as he turns to look at him, “I know but, you ever get like...where you can’t shut your brain off?”

Ranboo’s irritated expression softens and he shuffles closer as well, until they’re sitting pressed together all along their sides, the chill he radiates seeping through Tubbo’s jacket and he exhales in contentment, dropping his head onto Ranboo’s shoulder.

It’s quiet for a minute, just insects signing in the night and the low, mournful call of some nocturnal animal, and Tubbo lets his eyes slip closed, sleep teasing at the edges of his mind, but he cracks them back open when Ranboo murmurs, “Do you um, d-do you want to talk about anything?”

Yes no I don’t know can’t stop thinking about you in a Syndicate bomber would you stay if I asked, and Tubbo bites the inside of his cheek hard, imagines stamping down those thoughts like how you stomp out a fire, says instead, “I dunno...just- stressed I guess, over the Raiders? I don’t know what they’re doing here, why they’re with the Brotherhood and its... yeah, I don’t know, it’s getting to me.”

“Oh...”

“I-It’s going to be okay though!” Tubbo’s quick to reassure, turns to look up at Ranboo but he’s looking away, hard to make out his face in the gloom anyway, “I- we’ll be okay, so don’t worry. The Brotherhood’ll probably get tired of it by morning and then we’ll be able to leave, I’ll have you on Nirox by noon local time tomorrow.”

He feels it when Ranboo’s tail lashes against the ground, dragging fast over the metal plating of the cargo ramp and flicking very briefly into the back of his wings, and Tubbo figures its nerves, bumps their shoulders together and says softly, “Hey, I promise we’re going to be okay, Boo. Trust me. I’m just...tired and over exhausted right now, and I really *wanna* sleep but my brain won’t shut up.”

They lapse into a brief quiet, and out of habit, Tubbo turns to do a quick scan of the area, but hardly any light makes its way down here and all he can see are vague blobs in the night. “It’s like that for me...back home.” Ranboo says hesitantly, breaking the silence, huffs out a breath and adds on, “A-At the academy too I suppose, so...I know what you mean. It’s exhausting.”

“What do you think about?” Tubbo asks quietly, eyes straining to make anything out in the dark, wonders how much Ranboo can see, tips his head up to get a peek at his glowing eyes.

He's staring off into the distance too, but shifts to look down at Tubbo, face illuminated in soft reds and greens.

"Lots of things." Ranboo says, blinks and for a second, his face disappears in the gloom, but then his eyes flick back open glowing like binary suns, "Mostly rehashing the day thinking about...everything I did *wrong*, t-try and figure out how to do it better tomorrow."

"Like what?"

Ranboo whips his head away sharply, body tensing up and going ridged, and Tubbo fumbles through the dark for his hands, accidentally thwapping around at his knee until he finds them digging into his biceps. As soon as Tubbo tugs at them though, they uncoil, and Ranboo lets him take his hands, fingers shaking around Tubbo's when he says roughly, "I-I'm not a nice person, Tubbo."

"You've saved me like three times now, so I find that hard to believe." Tubbo whispers, thumb tracing over the bumps and divots of his knuckles, and Ranboo just laughs, but it's not a happy sound, it's dry and hollow, a lonely wind blowing through a deserted world, "You just don't know who I actually am."

Tubbo smiles ruefully, staring at Ranboo's profile, can hardly see him in the dark but his eyes are narrowed and downcast, and it's honestly not that hard reading him, you just have to put in a little effort, "On the contrary, I think I know more of the real you than anyone else."

His eyes wink out of existence as he flinches, hands suddenly squeezing a little too hard, claws threatening at Tubbo's skin and he hisses through his teeth because Ranboo wasn't kidding, they are really sharp, but before he can say anything that pressure is gone and Ranboo just starts *talking*.

"I'm manipulative, I'm cruel, I try to find other people's insecurities and use that to get what I want. T-That's what I think about at night, the best way to *ruin people*." Ranboo spits, head bobbing as he barks out a nasty laugh, "You have firsthand experience of that, actually. Y-You were trying to be a good friend a-and I went after you *immediately*, e-even after everything you did for me. I was *trying* to hurt you."

"I know." Tubbo says sadly, doesn't recoil when Ranboo jerks his head to stare at him, eyes wide and incredulous in the night, voice jumping and frantic as he stammers, "T-Then you can't um- y-you can't say I-I'm *good* b-because I'm not I-I-I never *have been*-"

Picking himself up, Tubbo shifts until he's facing Ranboo head on, has never been so grateful to have four hands before, can keep two of them tangled up with Ranboo's and cup his face with the others, thumbs sweeping out under his mismatched eyes.

"Ranboo...trust me when I say you have more compassion and kindness in you than literally half of the galaxy combined." Tubbo says firmly, feels it when Ranboo shakes his head, dislodging his hands a little, but Tubbo's stubborn, doesn't mind chasing after things, readjusts his hold and says, "You've been hurt, *a lot*, and I know you don't like to acknowledge it, but it's true. And it doesn't make you a bad person-"

“I’ve ruined people’s *lives*, gotten servants fired or e-executed, drove an entire minor house into *destitution*.” Ranboo insists in a scratchy voice, inhales starting to stagger in his lungs, faint clicking edging in under his words, “I-I-I’m a *monster*, I-I’ve hurt so many people, i-including y-you, which you didn’t deserve at all. Y-You’re an amazing person and I’m just- I-I’m *just horrible*-”

“That’s not true, Boo, you’ve made mistakes, but that doesn’t mean that-”

“S-Stop trying to make excuses for me Tubbo, I-I don’t deserve it.” Ranboo mutters, and where Tubbo’s fingers trace around the sides of his face, he can feel his long ears dip and flatten, “I’m a, um, a terrible person and I-I have no one to blame but me, I did this *to m-myself*, it’s all my fault that I’m like this.”

Slightly different words out of someone else’s mouth, but he knows them and *it’s the same*, and Tubbo shivers, doesn’t like to think back to that night, stumbling with single minded hopelessness through the darkened streets, only reason he was still on his feet because he couldn’t find a blaster, and it’s the same and he *understands* and he hates that he does.

How can you tell me you love me after everything I’ve done I did this to myself I’m a terrible person you shouldn’t forgive me you shouldn’t love me, Tubbo remembers sobbing, collapsed on the floor in his mother’s house, so sure she’d turn him away in the first place, not drag him inside and crush him in a hug, and it curdles his insides, hearing something similar come from Ranboo now.

“Stop it!” Tubbo demands harshly, heart beating loud in his chest because he thought like that too, that what happened while he was with New Dawn was *his* fault, “Stop, *please*. I know, Boo, okay? I-I know what it’s like to have people in your head...what it’s like to not be *yourself*.”

It took him a year to shake that conditioning and he only had to deal with the abuse for a few months, Ranboo’s had a lifetime of it, and it shows when Tubbo feels his cheeks lift under his palms, can see in his mind’s eye that empty smile he wears sometimes, “You’re not like me Tubbo, you’re really a good person, a-and I’m not discounting what you’re saying...but you haven’t hurt people like I have, you wouldn’t understand.”

You should tell him, a voice that sounds suspiciously like his mother’s hushes, and Tubbo’s fingers clench into fists because the list of people he talks about this with is very, *very* small, *but you trust him and maybe it’d help, show Ranboo that your mistakes don’t make you less of a good person, that they shouldn’t define you*, and he sucks in a steadying breath.

“I am directly responsible for the deaths of sixteen engineers and construction workers.” Tubbo says evenly, strong and swift like a fatal blow, leaving no room for arguments, and Ranboo makes a choked noise, eyes going wide as he breathes, “What-?”

“Three rotations ago, a-after my dad- after I left the academy I was just- so angry and frustrated and pissed off at- *everything*, I got swept up in this group of ‘*freedom fighters*’.” Tubbo feels his lips pull back in a snarl, because Wilbur could call them whatever he wanted, but it was always just a mask for what they really were, “They- I-I- we were supposed to be- it was *supposed* to be a message, to the empire, burning the shipyard on Nirox.”

He's always hated talking about this, but the night seems to swallow up his words, takes them from Tubbo and keeps them. It's kind of nice, saying it out loud and hearing it disappear into the soft muffled air around them, like he's gently blowing out a flame that's burned for longer than it should have, "No one- t-they never *told me* workers were staying late, I-I didn't *know*- I never would have if I knew p-people were still there."

Ranboo untangles their hands slowly, and Tubbo's panic is knee jerk but ultimately, unwarranted, as Ranboo winds his hands through their jumble of limbs, frozen fingers moving to cradle Tubbo's face, sweeping bits of moisture across his cheeks as they settle, and Tubbo didn't realize he's been silently crying until then.

"It wasn't your fault." Ranboo murmurs, being so very careful with his claw tipped fingers as he brushes the tears away, and Tubbo sniffs, "It k-kinda was though. I took that match, I-I struck it, and sixteen people died. Sixteen families had to wake up a-and find out their loved one wasn't coming home and it was because of *me*."

That's what has always bothered him the most, that he did the same thing to those families that'd happened to him, made them suffer a loss like that, and it's taken Tubbo a long time to let it go, to forgive himself and move on, and he's still hanging on to some of it, but he can get out of bed now, he can fly his ship and see his friends and laugh with goofy Ender princes and not feel like he's cheating somehow, by being happy.

"I'm sorry...I-I don't know what to say." Ranboo says mournfully, fingers brushing over Tubbo's face like comets sweeping through the beyond, like the half remembered fever dream of standing out on a balcony overlooking the red giant, "You're a strong person, Bo, stronger than I'll ever be, but I'm still sorry you've had to live with this."

You're strong enough to get through this, dream Techno's voice whispers in his mind, but it changes halfway through, doesn't sound like Techno when Tubbo actually thinks back, and maybe he always knew who was really talking to him as he laid lost in a fever high, who's icy fingers never left his.

How can you not know you're a good person, Tubbo thinks moving one of his hands up Ranboo's face and into his hair, cards careful fingers through it, *how do you not see yourself*, smiles as he dips to nuzzle into the contact, *why can't you see what I see*, "I'm better now than I was, I learned how to forgive myself, and yeah, it's not always perfect, but I'm here."

"And I'm glad you are." Ranboo says softly around a sigh, tilting his head in invitation when Tubbo's fingers brush into the base of a horn, and he runs the pads of them up its craggily length as Ranboo trills in the back of his throat, murmurs, "I *really* am, Bo."

The nickname filters warm and slow into Tubbo's head, like the slow drip of honey back into the jar, has him thinking about small hands on his back and curly antenna, a kitchen that always smelled like baking things and filled with sunlight.

"That's what my mom calls me. *Bo*." Tubbo says without really thinking, traces his fingers back down Ranboo's horn and into his hair, ruffling through the dark strands and can feel where he's gone really still, likely overthinking, worried he's overstepped somewhere, "And I don't mind if you call me it by the way, it's...nice. I like hearing it."

It reminds me of home, he thinks and for Tubbo, home has never been a place, it's been people, and his is scattered across the galaxy like the vast twinkling net of stars in the night sky, and he kinda feels like maybe he's found another part of it, sitting across from Ranboo with his cold cold hands and binary sun eyes.

"I-I like it too um, w-when you call me *Boo*, I um- i-it's nice, it makes me feel-" And Ranboo huffs out an intelligible sound, sways closer until their noses are almost brushing, until all Tubbo can really see are his glowing eyes and the complicated mess of emotions burning bright in them. For some reason, it hits Tubbo hard then, how much he feels for this person, and it's scary and a little overwhelming, feeling the emotions lighting up under his skin like stardust out in the void.

"I...didn't tell you that, a-about what I did, to make you feel sorry for me. I told you because you think I'm a good person." Tubbo says, the hand in Ranboo's hair drifting down to rest on the back of his neck, thumb trailing along his skin, asks in the hopes he's going to get the answer he's looking for, "Do you still think I am?"

"Of course I do." Ranboo says without hesitation, and Tubbo grins slow in victory, *gotcha Boo boy*, shakes him a little and insists warmly, "Then so are *you*."

"B-But I-"

"Nope, it's too late, you've proven my point. If I can still be a decent person despite what I've done, then so are you, those are the rules, bossman." Tubbo chides fondly, smirks seeing the indecision war in Ranboo's eyes, so clear he wants to argue but not at the cost of insulting Tubbo. It's obvious the exact moment he gives up, low growl rumbling out of his chest as he leans forward to thud their foreheads together, snipping halfheartedly, "You are the most *insufferable* person and I *detest* you."

"Mmm, I'm gonna call bullshit on that one." Tubbo huffs and doesn't bother trying to stop his antenna as they reach out instinctively, still creaky and a little sore but it's nice, greeting Ranboo like he's family, and Tubbo knows they have to go their separate ways tomorrow, and it *hurts* because he's going to have to say goodbye, but he figures it's okay to pretend for one more night that this is his to have.

Ranboo makes a low noise in the back of his throat, twisting his head like he's trying to rub his horns into Tubbo's antenna, and he wonders if that's what Ender do when they greet one another, if it means as much as touching antennas do on his planet, hopes probably in vain that Ranboo's had somebody to share that with.

"You...remind me of my mother sometimes, she...always knew me the best...m-made me feel like I was there." Ranboo says softly, hands trailing off Tubbo's face, falling to rest comfortably on his shoulders as he pulls back a little and Tubbo leans back as well. This is the first time he's mentioned his mother as far as Tubbo can remember, heart twinging because he doesn't miss the use of the past tense, asks hesitantly, "What was she like?"

"I'm...not really sure, she died when I was young so all I have are vague memories." Ranboo goes quiet, eyes lost in the middle distance somewhere over the top of Tubbo's head, fingers twitching around his shoulders when he says, "I...I think I look like her...I t-think that's

why- um, w-why my family is...*distant* sometimes. She um, she became really ill after h-having me, a-and I uh, I-I feel like they blame m-me for- f-for-”

Tubbo gently tips Ranboo’s head down, and his eyes still look a little lost, like he’s thinking about every cold shoulder he’s ever gotten from the people that were supposed to love him unconditionally, is heaping that all back on himself, for something outside of his control, but they focus on Tubbo and that’s all that really matters, “Hey, hey you can’t blame yourself for that, Boo.”

“I do though.” He says in a hollow voice, sucks in a shaky inhale and ducks his head, refusing to make eye contact as he admits to his lap, “Sometimes...s-sometimes I wish I’d never been born.”

Heart seizing in his chest, all Tubbo can think about is a universe without Ranboo in it, *no wanderlust eyes no endless stream of facts no careful hands and barking laughter*, and surges forwards, one set of arms going around his waist, the other around his shoulders, tugs him close and mutters furiously into his hair, “Well *I’m* glad you were...I’m glad I got shot, that I took this mission, I- I’m so happy I got to meet you.”

Haltingly, almost like he’s trying to figure out *how*, Ranboo’s arms come up around him, snaking under his wings carefully, and Tubbo shivers, feeling those razor sharp claws skim at the delicate membranes, but they don’t even snag weird, settle into place like they’ve always belonged. Ranboo hooks his chin over Tubbo’s shoulder, rocks their heads together and whispers so softly, if he wasn’t right by his ear, Tubbo doesn’t think he’d hear it, “Me too.”

Tubbo moves one of his hands up to card through the hair at the back of Ranboo’s head, feels it rumble through him when he starts to make that trilling noise deep in his chest. The temperature difference between them has always been stark, but it’s even more obvious now how *cold* Ranboo is, leaching a chill like space frozen metal.

And it’s completely surrounding him like this, bleeding through his jacket and Tubbo sags bonelessly forwards, feeling safe and content and unconsciously snuggles closer, swayed towards sleep with the humming sounds Ranboo’s making, like the drone of engines running under his feet, trembling in the air.

His arms are starting to go slack as his eyelids droop, buries his head under Ranboo’s chin where the vibrations are the strongest and yawns out sleepy protests as he’s moved around a little, goes along pliantly when he’s tugged over. The cargo ramp isn’t comfortable to be laying on, but hands are pulling at him until he’s resting half on top of Ranboo, and Tubbo settles back down with a sigh, lulled further into unconsciousness by the icy chill under him, the humming he can feel in his ears, along his cheek.

Tubbo doesn’t think when he spreads a palm out flat against Ranboo’s sternum, gets lost counting his slow even breathes, the quiet rise and fall of his chest, slow thud of his heart and fingers work their way into his hair. They trace frozen designs into his scalp, carefully scratch around the base of antenna, and Tubbo doesn’t know what to do with the emotions welling up in him, feels like they have to be leaking out between the gaps in his ribs, spilling glowing stardust free into the world.

I should move I should really move, Tubbo thinks on the edge of sleep, shifts his head like he's going to pick it up and say something, but Ranboo's hand goes with him and he nuzzles back down, *we can't do this he's leaving tomorrow you're getting attached...you should get up...this is...a bad idea...yeah...yeah you need...to...um...need to...*

And Tubbo doesn't mean to fall asleep, but he does.

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The Declassified Galactic Survival Guide:

Revolution is the perpetually festering infection Nirox can't seem to shake, for no matter how many times they go to the doctor's, treat it right at its source, lance it out and scrub the area clean, it always sprouts up somewhere else, like the most unendingly stubborn fungus to ever exist.

Contrary to popular belief, Nirox doesn't jump straight into the firefights and casual genocide, rather turns instead to what they call diplomacy but what most in the academic sphere would refer to as, *intense psychological warfare and manipulation*.

If planetary takeover can be accomplished without violence, the empire will take that route, has had many successful gentle glides into power that left locals confused but accepting over the new state of things, kept the empire's newfound workforce in once piece to start on whatever task was planned for them.

But that's not to say Sun Emperors of decades past and the upper admiralty have ever held any reservations about moving the fleet wherever is most strategic for it to be, wielding thousands of battle cruisers like one would a monstrous hammer, uncaring to the collateral that collects along the edges of each swing.

Countless planets have been swept up in the carnage of these massive maneuvers, displacing millions who, out of homes and jobs and general resources, find themselves funneled back into the never ending cycling of the imperial cogs, providing more labor and more hands to carry plasma rifles, easily get swept under the tide of official dogma. It never stops, with revolution breeding more chaos and gaps for the empire to slip in, gives birth to new dissenters and it starts all over again, and after thousands of years, it hasn't stopped, and your author worries if it will ever.

--

The Brotherhood ships aren't gone the next morning, and it's after Tubbo's woken up tangled around Ranboo, stiff from sleeping on the ground, both of them coated in pollen and resolutely not talking about it, that they start playing a really stupid game.

Tubbo sits there chewing on his thumb looking at the scanner, Brotherhood and Raider channels still popping up, other hands hovering over opening a comm line to HQ like he *should*, when Ranboo leans over the back of his chair, one hand dropping to idly pick at the shoulder seams of his bomber and murmurs, "Should we...just wait them out? A-At least for a little longer..."

“Yeah...yeah that’s a good idea.” Tubbo answers far easier than he should, closes out of everything with the idea that he’s just going to check later, that as soon as the skies are clear, they’ll head out of here, straight to Nirox, tells himself it’ll only be maybe an hour or so delay.

They end up staying another full day.

Ranboo is beyond fascinated by the forest floor of Tjhia-Yuet, goes scrabbling down into twisted root systems as big as caves, comes back up with blurry pictures on his holo-tablet and clumps of dirt stuck in his hair, lets Tubbo dust him off while he talks a mile a minute, hands flying around as he tries to illustrate something he saw.

Tubbo flies up to perch on ferns bigger than the Eshachi and rubs his hands over fuzzy fronds as he slides down their stalks, flipping off into the air with a yell, goes tumbling past in freefall, only snapping open his wings at the last minute, comes hovering to a stop in front of Ranboo and grins cheekily, pride flaring warm down his spine with how Ranboo looks at him.

They race each other barefoot across meters of squishy moss, cool under their toes and springy to the touch, and it’s not as hot down here, not as humid, shaded by the massive trees soaring over their heads, and Ranboo vaults fallen chunks of bark in wild abandon, smile sharp and eyes alive, and with his heartbeat loud in his ears, smile stretched across his own face, Tubbo feels like something slots into place.

It doesn’t seem real, this place that they’ve found, and Tubbo is more than happy to play along, jumps around at Ranboo’s heels, acts like they have nowhere else to be, that it’s just the two of them in the whole universe and nothing else has ever mattered nor will it ever, and Ranboo smiles like he knows too, skips back, always one step ahead of Tubbo’s reach.

In the hot press of the afternoon, they come across a spring nestled around this massive section of roots, waters welling up from somewhere deep below, and Tubbo strips down to his boxers immediately when they find it, takes a running leap and throws himself into the air with a snap of his wings, cannonballing into the center of the small lake with an excited screech.

The water is absolutely freezing, but it hits him with the intense, clarifying rush of being *alive*, makes him aware of every inch of his body, viscerally feeling the air that sits burning in his lungs, and he cackles happily, tries to see how far down he can dive while Ranboo curls up on the bank, book in his lap and soft smile on his face.

When Tubbo can’t feel his toes, he paddles out of the lake, shakes himself off and buzzes his wings dry, flops down a safe distance from Ranboo and asks him what he’s reading, and without hesitation, Ranboo picks up wherever he is. Folding a pair of arms behind his head, Tubbo relaxes back and closes his eyes, gets lost in the rich dip and flow of Ranboo’s voice as he reads about far off explorations on uncharted planets, loses track of entire hours like that.

They head back to the Eshachi once the sun starts to set, golden light streaming down to the forest floor and undulating across the ground like massive waves, bumping into each other as

they walk, Ranboo's tail batting comfortably into Tubbo's wings. He starts making a game out of darting it away before Tubbo can flick it off, giggles high and bright when Tubbo finally gets fed up and snaps a hand back to catch it, fingers carding through the fuzzy tuft before it slowly slips out of his hold.

"Have any requests?" Tubbo asks before heading up to the top deck to make their food, hands looped loosely over the ladder rungs, and Ranboo smiles at him, all soft hint of fangs and tender light in his eyes as he shrugs, "Surprise me."

Tubbo's switching on the Eshachi to power the portable replicator, only thinking about dinner and what music to put on, can hear Ranboo scuffling around down in the cargo hold setting up something, when the scanner blinks and he remembers, *oh...right...* he's supposed to be checking to see if they can leave yet or not.

It's been hours since he last looked, and Tubbo feels anxiety snarl to life in his chest, licking hot up through his veins because he needs to see if the Brotherhood are still around, needs to get Ranboo to Nirox like he was supposed to...*fuck-* like he was supposed to almost *two weeks* ago now.

His hands shake over hitting the keys to refresh the scan of open comm lines, and he's *going to*, really he is, but...it's kinda late, Tubbo knows they're both hungry and by the time they're done with dinner, it'll be dark, wouldn't be safe to try and fly their way out of here then.

He'll just check in the morning, and Tubbo curls his fingers back into his palm, spins on his heel and leaves the cockpit, buries the anxiety flickering and sputtering in his chest as he taps in their selections on the replicator. A couple minutes later, and he's sliding down the ladder with their dinner safely packaged in some reusable containers, turns around and promptly forgets his worries, laughing so hard his side hurts because Ranboo's set up some moronic looking *table for two* type of nonsense.

There's a few crates stacked together right before the ramp dips down, what looks like his cape spread out as a table cloth, emergency lantern in the center and Ranboo grins like an idiot, drags out a smaller crate for Tubbo that's clearly supposed to be his chair with a grand flourish. The food is passable, the company some of the best Tubbo's ever had, and they don't talk about anything in particular, but the conversation flows as smoothly as if they've been friends for rotations, like they've known each other forever.

Music trails softly out of the speakers overhead and Tubbo shimmies and bops around to it as he's helping Ranboo clean up after they're done, sidles past him with his hands held out in invitation and Ranboo doesn't hesitate threading his fingers through Tubbo's. It's not super well coordinated, a jumble of limbs and jumping bare feet, just dancing because it's fun, because it's nice, being close like this, and Tubbo slings his upper set of arms around Ranboo's neck, smiles up at him when he feels a cold weight coil around his waist, pulling him closer.

Ranboo leans down for him without Tubbo even having to ask, stands still and lets him trail his antenna over his horns, and Tubbo flicks his eyes open this time, watches the slow little smile spread across Ranboo's lips, sweet set to his face, and Tubbo swallows past the lump in

his throat, spins them around in lazy circles, feels like he's skating just along the edge of a steep drop.

Once it's gotten dark enough the lichen starts to glow, Ranboo leads him outside and they lay back on the cool, moss covered ground, legs hooked together, one of Ranboo's hands tangled up with Tubbo's as he uses the others to point out the constellations he starts making up from clumps of lichen, grins like a fiend when he says something stupid that gets Ranboo to laugh.

Insects sing in the night, music of their wings rubbing together rising and falling like solar flares, and normally, Tubbo wouldn't, too worried about the shit he'd catch, but he hums along, feels it vibrating deep in his chest, a cadence and pitch a lot of people didn't get, told him they found it strange, but Ranboo just rocks their heads together, his own answering noises rumbling out of his throat.

And it's not exactly like home, but Tubbo thinks it might be better, the deep echoing sounds Ranboo makes more like the drone of engines thrumming in the air, how nicely their hands fit together, how determined Ranboo is to hold all of them at the same time, the fact that he manages, cool touch of his skin and the oils in his hair, incense smoke and stardust.

Today was honestly the perfect day, and Tubbo's lulled into a dreamy state with the fingers roving around his knuckles, half asleep thinking about tomorrow, about going back to that spring for another swim, maybe playing tag with Ranboo around some of the massive root systems, wonders what new things they're going to find, but threaded in and around and through everything is this feeling he can't shake, like he's forgotten something important.

Hmmm no everything should be fine the Eshachi is fine and the two of you are okay your side is healing well and Ranboo is here hands threaded through yours and he's staying right here no- wait- that's not right- w-wait no no no i-it has to- but Nirox and the academy and only eleven hours left- fuck you're an idiot-

And it comes crawling back into his head then, curling through his thoughts like cigarette smoke, like the slow pour of accelerant out of cans, the reminder that he's supposed to check the scanner first thing in the morning, and it feels like Tubbo's entire bloodstream lights up on fire.

He sits up suddenly, humming cutting off abruptly as anxiety cinches his throat shut, nervous energy rattling around in him urging him to *move to go get out of here while you can before the walls close in get out-*

A cold hand spreads out on his back, right under his wings, and Tubbo presses back into it, claws prickling lightly through the thin material of his shirt, panic sputtering but not dying as Ranboo murmurs, "Bo? You alright?"

No yes I don't know I don't wanna leave can't ask you to stay what am I doing, Tubbo presses a shaking hand into his forehead, eyes staring wide and unseeing into the darkness in front of him, quickly losing focus as he spirals down a slope slicked with fuel, lit match clutched in his teeth if he opens his mouth and says what he wants it's going to fall out and that's it *it's all over can't do this what have I been doing idiot moron got attached know your place little drone-*

“Hey, hey it’s okay Bo, I’m right here, you’re here with me, we’re safe, you’re okay.”
Ranboo’s saying, frozen hand rubbing careful circles around his back, fingers skimming along where his wings connect, and it shorts Tubbo’s brain out, but it doesn’t stop the anxiety jumping high and bright in his chest.

Because *he’s not*, he’s not okay he’s not fine, and Ranboo’s here now but he’s not going to be *tomorrow*, and Tubbo keeps pretending like that’s not happening, has been playing a really stupid, really dangerous game all day, acting like they have nowhere to be, like this is just what his life is, racing Ranboo across the forest floor of Tjhia-Yuet, swimming in freezing springs and dancing like idiots in the cargo hold.

But it’s not just him, *they’re both doing it*, and Ranboo’s been playing too, hasn’t bothered reminding Tubbo about checking the scanner or even asked if the skies were clear, hasn’t mentioned Nirox at all, like he’s consciously wiped it from his mind but Tubbo knows that he hasn’t, because Ranboo doesn’t forget anything.

Maybe he wants this too ask him never know except for you do get attached too easily no one ever goes with you keep waiting on people that’ll never follow after, Tubbo shudders and hunches over, fists his hands in his hair and quickly loses Ranboo’s voice trying to drag him back out of this hole he’s fallen into, *alone you’re always alone do this to yourself who have you been fooling playing pretend like this you’re dragging him down with you he doesn’t need that but you’re selfish let him go you just need to-*

Everything in his mind comes tripping to a stop, wrapped up and lead away like the trickling slow drip of water off melting ice, and it’s in his ears then, the most haunting sound he’s ever heard, dips and pitches into ranges only his antenna can pick up, doesn’t sound like anything he’s ever heard, except, it *does*.

Tubbo’s hands relax in his hair, eyes slipping closed involuntarily as he listens to the warping song of deep space, how it sings of the black stretches of nothingness where the closest stars are barely visible in the distance, where all there is, is you and the fathomless beyond.

Its voice curls like the billowing seep of nebula rising out of nothing, glowing a hundred colors and engulfing him in their white hot dance, small flares and flashes that light up the night, a vibrant tapestry come to life and coiling around him.

There’s suns that burn stronger than any man made accelerant, blackholes that drag and caress at the edges of his ship, tempting him further into their endless embrace, planets that spin and move and bear life into the universe, but in and between and under it all sits the empty black spaces of the beyond, where this siren call echoes from.

And he imagines looking into that endless night, the wide open void he loves so much, and watches as it splits a part of itself off, forming hands and claws and fangs and horns, binary sun eyes stardust dripping down from long ears, and it feels right, reaching back for it as he stretches out a hand for him.

He becomes aware of his surroundings in increments, *breath one two you’re fine*, icy weight draped across his back, *breath one two you’re here*, black press of night as far as he can see, *breath one two so’s he*, pointed pressure on the top of his head, *breath one two and you’re*

safe, soft exhales of song hitting his antenna that stop as soon as he untenses and Tubbo immediately mourns their loss.

“I-It- what- what was that?” He asks in a scratchy voice, leaning back into what he now knows is Ranboo, feels it rumble through him when he answers, “A lullaby, I guess...sorry, I-I know a lot of people find Enderian...*unsettling*. I-It’s an odd language.”

Maybe to other people, the ones that stay grounded and never venture out into the beyond, but the endless starfields of space have always had Tubbo’s heart and he finds himself answering honestly, “I thought it was beautiful.”

Ranboo’s arms tighten around him where they’re draped over his waist, and he doesn’t say anything, but Tubbo feels it when Ranboo turns his head, pressing his cheek into his hair, huffs out a tremulous exhale. Without thinking, Tubbo leans back into his touch, nuzzles their heads together and then freezes, realizes what he’s doing and knows he has to stop, that this has got to end.

Because Tubbo’s not exactly okay, has a record and a rap sheet, people dogging his tail, dark crags in his mind that lead down into places he’d rather not go, and yeah, Ranboo isn’t exactly okay either, but he doesn’t need extra shit on top of what he’s already dealing with. That’s all Tubbo does though, bring people down with him, fucks things up and then cuts and runs so he doesn’t have to deal with the mess he left behind, and with how he’s been acting these last few days, it’s going to be one hell of a mess when Ranboo leaves.

That’s why it has to stop, Tubbo will only hurt himself further in the long run and later, when they’re both back in the Eshachi, him curled up in a bunk and Ranboo on the mattress on the floor, just so he can actually stretch out, he makes the strict agreement with himself that there’s no more pretending and as soon as he’s up tomorrow, he’s checking the scanner and that’s that.

It makes his heart pound fast though, fingers clenched in the blanket as Tubbo stares wide eyed and unseeing into the darkness, but he’s resolved to do it. *If he wanted to stay he’d ask, Tubbo reminds himself over and over again, attempting to drive it through his thick skull, or he’d hint or try and weasel his way in but he hasn’t done anything you’ve just been projecting.*

And he’s right, *he knows he is*, but sleep refuses to come to him, and he tries to keep his tossing and turning to a minimum, doesn’t want to wake Ranboo, but Tubbo rolls over once, sees mismatched eyes glowing in the dark staring back at him, and that resolve crumples like a sheet of wet paper.

You said once you’ve woken up and you haven’t slept and it’s not tomorrow so it’s okay it’s still okay until then, Tubbo tells himself, crawling out of his bunk at the same time as Ranboo shimmies over on the mattress, can’t think about what he’s doing, snuggling down into a set of frozen arms, pulse thundering in his ears as he rests his head on Ranboo’s chest, but it slows easily, listening to the even beating of his heart.

He falls asleep quickly enough, but his dreams are all over the place, jumping from one to the next with little pause in between and Tubbo’s standing out in the middle of a blinding white

courtyard, golden insignia on the ground under his feet, and he jumps back automatically, but no matter where he steps, gold bleeds out from the soles of his boots, spreading across the ground like a gilded rot and Tubbo watches in horror as it rolls up someone else's long legs.

He blinks before he can see who it is and looks out over the sweeping prairies of home, yellow green grasses ruffling in the warm summer breeze, shipyards hulking on the horizon but they wiggle and twitch in the air, disappearing like smoke into the atmosphere and he suddenly can't breathe, ash in his lungs and pouring out of his mouth, hears something calling for him in warping tones over his shoulder, in the worn little house with yellow walls and octagon windows.

He turns and finds himself on a balcony at HQ overlooking the red giant, watching it expand out into a supernova and then contracting back into a proto star over and over again, looks at the person next to him and sees Ranboo, Syndicate bomber over his shoulders and two fingers pressed to his mouth, and when he draws them away, he has a lit match perched between them, holds it out to Tubbo with a blank expression.

Tubbo wakes up with a jolt, heart racing and sweat cooling on the nape of his neck, mind a thousand places, not knowing if he took it or not, but there's watery light streaming in through the open door which means its morning, meaning it's time to check the scanner, to wiggle out from under Ranboo's arm and pad barefoot into the chilly cockpit.

It means this game he's been playing is finally over.

Ranboo doesn't stir when Tubbo slips out of his slack hold, and he really *really* shouldn't, but Tubbo pauses crouched by the side of the mattress, reaches out and brushes the hair from his eyes, fingers lingering for a second too long on his cheek, trailing under one closed eye. Unconsciously, Ranboo tilts into the touch, sleepy sound falling out of his mouth that could almost be Tubbo's name and he leans back quickly, gets to his feet and picks his way carefully out of the bunkroom.

His chair is cold as Tubbo drops down into it, cracking the knuckles on his lower hands while the others begin turning on the Eshachi, lights blinking up on the dash as the computer starts its bootup process. The scanner readout sits off to his left, and Tubbo hits the combination of keys to refresh it but doesn't look at it right away, stares numbly out the viewport and watches light shift wildly across the ground outside.

Come on dipshit, you promised you said you would stop being a little bitch just rip the plaster off it was always going to end no use being upset over it, and Tubbo heaves out a sigh as he swings his head to the side, expecting the best which is also privately the worst, is relieved and shouldn't be when there's still Raider comm lines active in a nearby radius.

"What the fuck..." He mutters, fingers moving across the console again to run another scan, convinced he messed up doing the first one but nope. A new readout loads in and it's the same, Raiders close enough to be concerning and Tubbo slumps back, chewing absentmindedly on a thumb because this is actually becoming a problem.

As much as he may have unrealistically wished, they can't stay down here forever, they'll either run out of fuel or someone will find them, and Tubbo doesn't really want to take his

chances with whoever that would be. There's really only one thing he can do now, and groaning quietly, Tubbo opens up the messaging system the Syndicate uses, kisses any chance he had at active-duty goodbye and asks if anyone's in the area and could provide an assist.

It'll probably take a few minutes before someone responds, so Tubbo figures he might as well get ready, make sure the Eshachi is prepped for combat, runs a couple scans double checking the weapon systems are operational and the shield generator has enough charge. His eyes flick over each screen that pops up, making extra sure everything's fine before closing out of them, doesn't want to take any unnecessary risks right now.

Tubbo's confidant in his piloting skills, knows he's good and fast and hard to catch but...it's different, having Ranboo with him, knowing Tubbo's responsible for his safety, because the thought of anything happening to him has his heart constricting painfully in his chest. It's going to be okay though, someone from the Syndicate will message him back and it won't be such an unfair fight then, they'll get out of here in one piece.

Or that's what Tubbo tells himself as he shuffles back to the bunkroom, worrying at the pad of his thumb while he thinks because the Raiders are nothing to take lightly, and yeah, Ranboo's going to get out of this no problem, Tubbo will drop him off on Nirox and this'll all become a crazy story he tells his school friends, but *Tubbo's* the one that's going to be left with this mess.

He really, honestly has no idea what he did to piss off the Brotherhood originally, and it's really eating at him.

Shooting down two of their ships wasn't that big a deal anyway, they did worse to each other on the daily, and it for sure didn't necessitate them teaming up with the *Irilian Raiders*, which, now that *they're* on his ass, unless he can figure out what he did, Techno's going to bench him for the foreseeable future in an attempt to stop a gang war from breaking out.

His fingers flex spastically at his sides just thinking about being cooped up in HQ grounded, no flight controls under his hands, nowhere to go nowhere to run, just him and his thoughts and the too confined choke of station walls threatening to suffocate him. It makes Tubbo sick imagining it, and he's so caught up in his own head, he's not paying attention to where he's going, hooks his feet on something and tumbles to the ground with a yell.

"Was' happenin'?" Ranboo exclaims half awake, sitting up fast and throwing a hand back to steady himself, and Tubbo looks over his shoulder at what tripped him, sees Ranboo's school bag strap caught up around his ankles, its contents spread across the floor in a messy heap and sighs, "Nothing, it's fine, Boo, just tripped is all."

There's something lying next to Tubbo's knee, an ancient, craggily book of some sort, and he squints at it in confusion because it looks nothing like the other books he's seen Ranboo read from, all smooth and jeweled tone where this one is weather beaten and a worn brown, barely hears it as Ranboo yawns, "Mmm'okay. You alright?"

"Yeah..." Tubbo answers distractedly, sitting up enough to take the book in his hands, thinks he recognizes it now, dim memory of Ranboo standing at the base of the ladder on Imuna

with this clutched in his claws. Which is strange, now that he thinks about it, and it feels like he's on the precipice of something, toes angling out over the ledge, and he can't stop himself flipping it open to a random page, fingers immediately digging in and crinkling the paper.

With shaking hands, he thumbs back to the beginning and freezes, stares wide eyed down at the stark, muddy red insignia painted across the inside cover and pages, would know that shape and jagged, sloping lines anywhere. Scrabbling around, Tubbo doesn't think, sees Ranboo with his face all soft from sleep and hair a thousand directions, *he didn't he didn't he didn't it's not- has to be a mistake*, and thrusts the book in his face, demanding, "Where did you get this?"

It takes a second for Ranboo's eyes to focus, hazy with just being awake while he tries to figure out what's going on, *tell me the truth don't lie don't lie tell me where you got this don't lie*, screaming in Tubbo's head the entire time and maybe it's because he's just woken up, or maybe it's because he hasn't been so guarded lately, but Ranboo's eyes widen immediately.

And it's enough, it's enough to let Tubbo know he *knows*, that he's fully aware of *what* that book is, and everything hangs in a precarious balance for what feels like eons, *will he won't he owes it to you to tell the truth*, but it all winks out of existence when that honest expression gets shuttered away, Ranboo saying far too evenly, "It's one of my textbooks, sorry, was it cluttering up the floor? That's on me, I know I should pick up better, I can do that this morning if you-"

"Don't *fucking lie to me*." Tubbo snaps, running over the end of his bullshit with more harshness than he's had in a while, but it digs under his skin, licks at his fingertips like flames, *the fact that Ranboo's lying to his face*, "Do you think I'm *fucking stupid* or something?"

"Tubbo-"

"I know what *Irilian* looks like, Ranboo." Tubbo flips the book open and shakes it for emphasis, fingers clawing around the yellowed pages and Ranboo's gone really still, trying to hide his reactions, *trying to get out of this the little shit won't own up to anything liar liar he's lying to you after everything*, but Tubbo *knows* him, can practically see his mind running a thousand kilometers an hour thinking up excuses, "Now I'm going to ask you again. Where. Did. You. Get. *This?*"

Ranboo's eyes dart between his face and the open book lightning quick, and Tubbo just wants him to be honest, to look him in the eyes and tell the truth, to say what Tubbo's already guessing at, *it's not me it's you they're after you put us both in danger owe me the truth don't I mean something to you aren't I your friend why're you lying to me*, but Ranboo swallows once harshly and says, "I told you, it's one of my textb-"

"Queens of *fucking* ages past!" Tubbo shouts, jumping to his feet with the book clenched tightly in one set of hands, throws the others in the air and exclaims, "You're just- straight up *lying to my face!* I *know* this isn't a textbook, Ranboo! I *know* this is some Irilian codex or something, but what I can't figure out is where you got the damn-"

It hits Tubbo like a photon blast to the ribs, knocks the air out of his lungs and almost sends him stumbling back as he stares down at Ranboo incredulously, Aeku's slimy voice whispering in his ears, *just give back what you stole worker bee*, and he wouldn't *he didn't*- but Tubbo's holding an Irilian codex with no other feasible explanation as to *how*, "Y-You fucking *nicked* it on Imuna! Queens past! I can't *believe you-!*"

"I-I- s-she- she wouldn't, I-I *tried* to buy it but, uh, but she wouldn't sell it a-and-" Ranboo stammers, hands fisted in his lap around the yellow blanket, and Tubbo throws a hand out, yelling, "So that made it okay? That's- *THAT'S* the excuse you're going with? Of all the *spoiled, self-centered*- you can't have everything you want, Ranboo!"

Ranboo bows his head, hands gripped so tightly around the blanket, his claws have for sure gone through it, mutters under his breath darkly, "I-I *know*."

"Do you?" Tubbo counters, wings flicking behind him in agitation, gestures at him angrily with the book, "Because from where I'm standing, you fucking *don't*. Did you even *think* before you stole this?"

"I- I didn't think it'd be a big deal. It's just one book." Ranboo says quietly, ears flicked back low and pressed nearly to his skull, but Tubbo isn't paying attention to that, everything's gone crackling static in his ears, mind a howling storm of *he didn't even think about you about what'd happen to you doesn't care never did why do you always wait-*

"Of course it's a big deal! It's the fucking *Irilian Raiders*, their culture almost got wiped out by the empire, they're hyper possessive of *everything* they have left!" Tubbo shouts and that gets Ranboo to snap his head up, naked confusion pinching his brows down and he *didn't know*, didn't know what the significance was for stealing the codex, and it's clear in his voice when he murmurs, "I- what?"

"The Irilian wars, ever heard of them? How the empire nearly destroyed Iril because they refused to kneel." Tubbo spits, and he may not like the Raiders, but he *understands*, thinks about his own people his own planet, knows they would've been the same if Queen Ceratina hadn't relented, clenches his fingers into shaking fists, "And Nirox doesn't like things it can't control."

Ranboo stares at him unblinking, and Tubbo's breath catches in his lungs, actually very afraid of what his response is going to be, because Nirox is sneaky and manipulative and controls their own narrative so beautifully, even Tubbo didn't realize the ugly truth until his father died, knew then how little they actually mattered to the empire outside of being a useful set of hands.

But surely Ranboo knows, he's so smart and reads so much, can see through anything, and they've never talked about this, but it is suddenly so *vital*ly important that he's not a sympathizer, that he doesn't support what Nirox does to the planets it conquers, *what they did to his people*.

Tubbo's heart is beating hard enough he thinks he's shaking from it, but it stops completely when Ranboo's brows furrow and he gets that *look, sit down shut up know your place get back in line-* "T-That's not true. Iril entered into war with the empire of their own accord.

They were underdeveloped, and that's why so much of their culture was lost. I-It wasn't an *ethnocide* or anything."

It feels like the room is spinning, *sympathizer sympathizer sympathizer imperial dog he has to know must not care what do you think he really thinks about you*, and a staggered exhale stumbles out of Tubbo's mouth, heartbreak and misery tearing him open from the inside, *called you pilot when you first met wonder if it was a replacement for something else obedient little drone good worker bee know your place insect-*

"I know you...were radicalized for a time, and I-I'm so sorry you got caught up in that, but the empire isn't like whatever they told you-"

He's wrong he's wrong he's wrong he's wRONG, you knew before then before Wilbur before New Dawn knew as soon as your CO pulled you aside from morning training sorry for your loss-

"-it's a force for good and change a-and *progress*. Planets like Iril just hold different values, and there's always going to be casualties in war, but the empire signed a treaty as *soon* as they surrendered-"

Is that what they call it and not fucking 'after they were almost obliterated' just like your dad was crushed to death by a falling beam it was his fault they said not the foreman's not the empire's not the faulty equipment they were sent he should've moved-

"-so no, I don't really feel sorry for them. Nirox helps a lot of systems, Tubbo. The empire brings cultures and people together which, you should know, you used to be a cadet after all-"

Weak inferior no fault of your own can't fight against nature just keep your head down drone and do your duty to the empire all hail the sun empire, glorious and just, equality and progress for all standing in line with hundreds of others know your place ins-

"-but some planets...just can't be helped, they refuse to move forwards, to *progress*, they bring it on themselves-"

And something in Tubbo snaps.

"Shut up! Just- *shut the FUCK up!*" He screams, throwing the codex hard at the floor and finds solace in the horrible noise it makes, fingers burning with the need to rip and shred and *hit something*, to get this horrendous thing *out of him*, "You don't know *fucking* anything! All that reading's for nothing! *You don't know SHIT!*"

Sit down shut up know your place drone don't think above your station, and Ranboo scrabbles back as Tubbo lurches forwards, hands swinging wildly as he yells, "*Bring it on themselves? BRING IT ON THEMSELVES!* What? You think the Iril *deserved* to be *killed* because they didn't want to be *conquered*?"

Ranboo opens his mouth like he's going to say something, but Tubbo steamrolls over him, wings flaring open behind him in a threat display, not hiding a single inch of them, keeps his head up and shoulders squared like he's ready for a fight, "What about *me!* My people! My

planet! Do you think we deserve to be the empire's fucking manufacturing plant? That we brought it on ourselves!"

Tubbo barks out a harsh laugh before Ranboo can answer, pulse thundering in his veins, reverberating back through him like a thousand hammers ringing out in shipyards, like boots marching in step in blinding white courtyards, the sound of fuel canisters being unloaded, "What am I saying- *of course you do*, you're fucking *Ender*, why would *you* ever have cause to hate the empire? When all it's done is make *your* planet, your terrible *fucking* people wealthy and important."

Pilot this and pilot that like you're not a person not an individual one of hundreds part of the hive all he sees are the wings and the antenna know your place dro- and Tubbo snarls inarticulately, *he never actually cared means to an end a ride home a quick set of hands to get things repaired*, feels furious tears building in his eyes because he thought- *chaotic game of tag and bright eyes and careful hands and arms that held him at night -he thought* he mattered that Ranboo cared-

But he doesn't, stole that book without thinking about what it'd do to you, has been lying to your face for days now so many opportunities to fess up but he hasn't you're expendable he didn't have your back almost got you shot he was going to let you die-

"Were you ever going to tell me?" Tubbo demands, chest hitching with the sobs that are swirling at the backs of his teeth, leaking out around his fingers like fuel spilling out of a can lit match in his outstretched hands, "O-Or were you just- going to let me drop you o-off at Nirox a-and *not say anything?*"

Ranboo just stares at him, lips faintly parted but not moving, and the fact that he's not arguing with Tubbo, isn't doing anything to defend himself just hammers home that Tubbo's *right*, that he really doesn't care, not even enough to try and lie to him.

And it hurts, *Queens it hurts*, because Tubbo was beyond stupid, beyond naive, let himself get swept away despite the obvious warning signs, *and maybe they were right*, he thinks desperately, hates the way this is making him feel, weak and small and out of control, hands clenched into fists and world dropping out from under his feet, *maybe you are stupid and gullible and can't know any better.*

"You fucker! Do you have *any idea* w-what the Raiders would've done when, not *if- WHEN* they caught me and I didn't have the d-damn thing?" Tubbo's fully aware he's crying now but he can't stop it, the knowledge that he's never meant anything to Ranboo slowly burning him up alive, *never were going to be anything a nobody going nowhere*, "T-They've would've killed m-me! You would've gotten me *killed and you don't even care!*"

The silence is loud and agonizing, like the ringing in his ears after a night of explosions and screams, and Tubbo clenches his teeth, *I was going to ask you I wanted to ask you I thought we were friends*, swears he feels that match rolling around between them, *you sat in my copilot seat you flew with me you were going to let me die do I mean that little just one of hundreds*, fuel puddled at their feet soaking them both, *replaceable expendable a dirty little nobody with a rap sheet*, and with a sharp inhale he opens his mouth and lets the match go.

“I was wrong, I wish I’d never met you! You should’ve just let Aeku shoot me and saved yourself the fucking trouble. Sorry for the colossal inconvenience, *your highness*.” Tubbo seethes, sparks flying out with his words and curling hotly under his skin, and he spins on his heel, storms out of the bunkroom and drops down the ladder chute with an angry snap of his wings.

He’s not thinking, flames shooting high in his mind and drowning out everything else, and Tubbo doesn’t remember snatching his holsters out of the cargo hold, doesn’t remember getting outside, doesn’t really know how he got where he is, but there’s the familiar weight of blasters in his grip and fire burning his hands and he stops caring.

Red light snaps and flashes around Tubbo as he unloads his frustrations on snarls of roots, wood exploding and splintering where he hits it, but in his mind, it’s the upper brass of Sunfleet, foremen on old job sites, everyone that’s ever stood over him and looked down on him, made him feel small and weak and powerless, it’s Wilbur with his shit smarmy smile and empty promises and *fucking matches*, it’s *binary sun eyes and black horns and hair and fingers and-*

And Tubbo’s finger freezes, everything coming screeching to a halt, *not him not him anyone but him-* but the wildfire in his mind bubbles over like a seething pot, dragging him back down there and he hurls the blaster with a feral scream, darts forwards and crashes his fists over and over again into the shattered, smoking side of a massive root.

The impacts reverberate up his arms and rattle his chest, *like a thousand hammers in the shipyards boots marching one two one two out in white courtyards blows cracking down between his shoulder blades know your place-* and Tubbo screeches wordlessly, keeps going until his throat is scraped raw and his knuckles sheeting blood.

He stumbles back sucking in lungfuls of air like a bellows, looks down at his hands, trembling and coated in his own blood, at the shattered blaster laying in the grass, the absolute mess he’s made and the fire burning in his chest snuffs itself out, and Tubbo collapses, nothing left in him to keep him on his feet.

Hunching over, he digs battered fingers into cool moss and pants for air, everything coming back to him slowly like the drip drip drip of melting ice, and without flames roaring in his mind, burning his fingers driving him to *move*, Tubbo can think, about what he said what he did, *the Raiders the book and war and the empire and all of the screaming spitting anger you try and fail to keep a lid on and terrified red green eyes and-*

Oh no-

N-No no no-

No, Queens, what has he *done*?

Tubbo cries ragged through his teeth, squeezes his eyes shut like maybe he can escape that way, wish hard enough and maybe it’ll roll time back, force everything he said back down his throat and keep it there this time. He’s an idiot, *he’s such a fucking idiot*, and Tubbo slams a fist into the ground, yowls in pain at the searing ache that shoots up his arm.

You deserve it and more, he thinks, hanging his head and shudders once with a violent exhale, how could you do that how could you say that you were upset but that's not fair that's not right that's not how you treat people know better should be better.

It sits like brand on his mind, every screaming, hateful thing he yelled at Ranboo, his own emotions and insecurities clouding his vision like thick black smoke, kept him from thinking clearly, just flipped the switch and let the floodgates open, dropped that match right into a slick pool of fuel. "Fuck-" Tubbo spits, sagging to the side and just gives up, flops over on the ground and rolls onto his back, stares unseeing up at the canopy kilometers overhead.

In the middle of nowhere like he is, the forest is hushed, nothing really to distract Tubbo from his own thoughts so he's left to their tender mercies, doesn't bother fighting them this time, submits fully to the nasty wave of self hatred that crashes over his head and drags him under.

You fucked up that's all you do is fuck up you're the biggest disappointment to ever exist all you do is hurt the people around you waste of space not worth the effort it takes to breathe, they whisper in his mind like the tickling, cloying smell of cigarettes, and Tubbo screws his eyes shut, big, pathetic tears leaking out anyway, why are you here why are you still here wouldn't it be better for everyone else if you weren't go ahead pull that trigger take that plunge wish yourself out of existence.

And for a second, Tubbo imagines it, taking the last working blaster in his hands, cold press of metal under his jugular, fingers tightening around the trigger and then hopefully nothing but blessed silence.

But then he thinks about his mother, what her face would look like when Techno showed up at her door, about Tommy getting his hopes up with the messages on his handheld, only to have to go through the whole process again when Tubbo never messaged him back a second time, and his hands remain still by his sides.

These thoughts will pass, he knows they will, and even though they stick to his fingers like tar, are tacky and cling like something unholy, Tubbo knows he can get them off, just focuses on remaining still and breathing, keeps his hands flat on the earth and waits for the storm to pass.

You can't get rid of us you never will we'll always be with you only one way out and you know what it is, they titter like a flock of deranged birds, and Tubbo cracks bleary eyes open, watches the light shifting around overhead, feels the cool moss under his palms and the air he holds burning in his lungs, and lets it all out with a rush.

I know but I'm here and I'm not going anywhere, he sucks in a shaky inhale and sits up, wipes his snotty nose into the shoulder of his shirt, I'm not great I'm not perfect but I'm here and this is mine and you're not taking it from me.

Coward, they hiss, but Tubbo imagines swinging fists at them, screaming and hollering and stamping his feet, unloading all of his anger on *them*, and the thoughts go scuttling back into the recesses they crawled out of, leaving him with a dead quiet mind and exhaustion weighing on him like a collapsed wall.

He's here though, he's here and he's up and he's alive, and he might feel like shit, but the storm's passed and he's still in one piece, and that's all that really matters.

Tubbo rubs bloodied fingers into his eyes, winces because he's really starting to feel it now, the throbbing, pulsating pain lighting up in his knuckles, in the tendons of his hands, has half a thought of a gentle, freezing touch taking care of him before he feels like he's going to throw up.

With a groan, Tubbo brings his knees up to his chin, clasps a set of hands behind his neck and despairs over what he's done, every horrible, vile word parading back on to the center stage of his mind in all their ugly glory. He wasn't thinking clearly at the time, was projecting his own fears and problems into existence, but Tubbo can understand now like he didn't lost in that haze, that Ranboo didn't mean for any of this to happen.

He didn't know taking the codex would paint a target on their backs, couldn't've known Tubbo would almost get shot, that they'd be hunted down by a ruthless gang, and Tubbo *knows him*, should've known better, that the reason Ranboo hasn't said anything, why he lied, is because he's terrified.

Ranboo doesn't think like other people think, he goes into conversations with the expectation that you're trying to hurt him or undermine him in some way, treats every interaction like it's a fight he's got to win, and Tubbo *knew that*, understands exactly why he's so cagey and twitchy.

Because for his entire life, Ranboo was taught to keep to himself or suffer the consequences, had to learn to be mean and cruel just to survive, because someone in that festering hellhole of the royal palace took his kindness and compassion and great bleeding heart, and weaponized it against him.

So of course he hasn't said anything, he's probably been agonizing over how Tubbo would react, knew he was going to be upset and angry with him, and...and he was right, he was completely and totally right. Tubbo grits his teeth and screws his eyes closed, hot tears leaking out and rolling down his face, because he proved every one of Ranboo's fears correct, came at him with aggression and suspicion right from the start.

Kneeing in the back of his throat, Tubbo digs his fingers into his neck hard no matter how much they protest, knows that he has really, sincerely fucked up, feels with grim certainty that he's shattered whatever trust, the friendship, he's managed to tentatively build between the two of them.

Lost in anger like he was, he thought it was one sided, he thought- so many stupid wrong things, and now with a clear head and aching hands, Tubbo knows all the way down to his bones that Ranboo cares about him too.

You have an amazing gift most incredible pilot I've ever known stronger than I'll ever be, hushes warm and devastating in his ears, and its fingers threaded through his, how Ranboo's never balked over the extra set of hands or the wings or the antenna, leans down for him like he understands it means something, hums along to Tubbo's rattling noises and holds him like he's the most precious thing to ever exist.

He's never once acted like a supremacist has openly deferred to you on many occasions, Tubbo thinks miserably, yawning chasm creaking open in his chest, spilling ash and cinders out with every wheezing breath, *and yet you accused him of being a racist in the harshest way possible told him he should've let you die that you wish you'd never met-*

Queens of ages past, but he has no idea how to fix this, can't take back what he's said and Tubbo would apologize in a heartbeat, but it seems so insignificant in comparison, like one bucket of water hurled onto a raging electrical fire. Just the idea of dragging himself back to the Eshachi, standing before Ranboo and having to look him in the eyes, see how horrible and empty they are, knowing *he* put that there, makes Tubbo want to crawl down into the twisting root systems of Tjhia-Yuet and never come back out.

He gets it now, why Ranboo stayed gone for so long on Imuna, can't even begin to imagine what sort of mental gymnastics he had to do to convince himself to go back to the hangar. *I'm not the strong one he is*, Tubbo thinks with a sigh, picking his head back up and looks across to the shattered, broken crater he blasted in the side of some poor root, his blood drying rusty in splotchy patches, clenches his aching hands into fists and knows he has to go back.

Ranboo did it for him, wrapped up all the courage and staunch determination he had like a cloak and went back, faced Tubbo and tried to fix things to the best of his ability and it was incredibly brave, spoke more of his true character than anything else ever has.

And Tubbo *has* to do it for him, has to go back and stand before him and face his judgment, and the scariest thing isn't Ranboo's anger, because he has every right to be upset and Tubbo will take whatever he dishes out with a tough chin, but what actually scares him is the fact that it might not be *enough*.

Whatever happens though, Tubbo just has to accept it, and he dry swallows past the rising nausea, thinking about losing this wonderfully fragile thing they have, that he's suddenly realizing he doesn't want to live without. *You might have to it might not be enough*, and he knows okay, he knows and it kills him a little, but those are the consequences for his actions, that's what happened when he let that match go, and he has to learn to live with it.

Knowing he needs to go back and actually getting there are very different things though, and Tubbo spends a long time trying to talk himself into standing, but his legs refuse to cooperate, keep him rooted to the spot while light dances and shimmers across the ground. It's exhausting, trying to beat himself into getting up, and Tubbo's becoming frustrated, is in the middle of giving himself another lecture when his antenna flick, picking up on a sharp dip in the air currents.

Tubbo sits up a little straighter, cocks his head to the side and tries to place the familiar sensation, finally feels a faint trembling in the air he'd recognize anywhere, the whining hum of engines idling. It's such a banal thing for him, Tubbo doesn't pay it much mind for a second, but then it registers, *no ships down here besides us and that's not the Eshachi and we're being hunted and Ranboo's alone*, and he's on his feet in an instant.

He takes off like a shot in the direction the sound is coming from, beats his wings as fast as they'll go, dropping hard onto roots and catapulting himself off in a desperate bid for more

speed, adrenaline screaming through him and whitening his mind out in a haze of *faster faster faster left him alone gotta get back wonder how much they'd pay shUT UP-*

His heart is going to hammer out of his ribcage, doesn't seem like his lungs have ever held air or know how to breathe, muscles burning with fire as he tries to go just a little bit further every time, kick off harder, snap his wings down faster, just- *anything* to get him closer, to make it there sooner, *before it's too late*.

But no matter how hard Tubbo pushes himself, how frantically he's trying to get back, the noises begin to fade away, and he doesn't have enough space in his head or air in his lungs to process it, launches himself over another snarl of roots and there, finally, the Eshachi tucked out of sight and intact, and he knows peace for a second.

Didn't find us kept him safe good pilot good partner you did good it's okay breathe just breathe-

Tubbo's relief is short lived though, because as he's flying over the mossy clearing, he happens to glance down and sees scorch marks burned into the earth, same size and shape as Irilian turbines would leave. His entire body locks up, frozen numb with fear and terror and he tumbles out of the sky, hits the earth hard, shoulder popping and teeth cracking together, rolls to his feet with the world spinning around him as he staggers to the Eshachi, naively, desperately calling out, "R-Ranboo!"

There's no answer, *you're outside it's fine can't breathe where is he*, and Tubbo stumbles up the ramp, stands there shaking at the edge of the cargo hold, body heaving for oxygen, but he struggles to get enough air into his lungs to scream, "*Ranboo!*"

And only receives his own voice echoing back.

He checks everywhere he can think, practically tears the ship apart looking for him, panicked mind bombarding him with memories of Ranboo standing here laughing or ducking his head to get through there, shy smile curling his lips up as he looks out from under his bangs.

He's here he's here he has to be here can't accept- he's not- wonder how much they'd pay to get him back, but it's a small ship and Tubbo clears it fast, everything just as he left it save for two things.

Ranboo isn't anywhere and neither is the codex.

"*Queens, no-*" Tubbo wails, heart dropping out of his chest because this can't be happening, can't be real, *Ranboo drug off with his hands bound blaster pointed at his head tick tock where's the money-* how'd the Raiders even *find them*, the Eshachi is unregistered and untraceable so this has to be a mistake, must be a nightmare or something.

Maybe he went for a walk maybe he left you a note maybe he's okay, his brain supplies insanely, but Tubbo latches onto it, lurches into the cockpit with the idea that maybe Ranboo left something there when he sees the transmission log open on the HUD, blinks stupidly at the latest outgoing call.

IK-97-5-R-0 to IRIL-9: call duration 7m45s

B-But that doesn't make any sense, *that doesn't make any sense*, why would- he didn't- a mistake a nightmare this isn't real wake up wake up *wake up*- and Tubbo stumbles back under a sudden wave of dizziness, lightheaded and on the verge of hysterics as he crashes back onto his ass, staring up at the record of the call Ranboo seemingly made to the Irilian Raiders.

Why would he do that why would he do that- palms slick with sweat, crusty with blood, splayed out against the warm metal of the floor under him he can't breathe, *doesn't make sense what was the point we were hidden we were safe-* fire roaring under him, someone ticking the dial further and further up, increasing the heat increasing the panic increasing the terror, *why call them what did he say why would he do that almost like he gave himself up- n-no- no no nonononono-*

The entire world sways around him when Tubbo helplessly realizes that's it, that's exactly what happened, *he called them here and handed himself over trying to return that book did he know what he was doing Queens he's gone they took him you weren't here you drove him to this and he's gone because of you dead now because of you-*

"FUCK!" Tubbo shouts, throat constricting horribly with how hard he says it, bends himself in half and just screams, panic and fear and anguish funneling up from his chest and bleeding his vocal cords raw. Queens what does he do, *what does he do*, they have him, *blaster pointed at his head fear in his eyes*, they could hurt him- *jerky trigger fingers and too late of a response from people that don't care black blood spattering out onto a wall-*

"N-No! No!" Tubbo screeches, pulling at his hair to kill those thoughts where they stand, wraps his hands around to the back of his head and sobs, great ugly, heaving cries that make everything go fuzzy at the edges and a little incoherent.

This is all your fault shouldn't've left shouldn't've said those things terrible person monster bastard whatever happens to him is on you he's gone they took him they're going to hurt him panic need to have to do something-

He's got to go after them, that's the only thing he *can* do, and Tubbo uncoils like an overly tensed spring, jerking to his feet and crashes into the wall, vision swimming with black spots at the headrush. *There's more of them than you you're going to get yourself killed*, whatever sense he has left in his head tries to argue, and Tubbo spits as he drops into his chair, "I-I don't *care*."

His hands shake as they go through the process of getting the Eshachi ready, fingers leaving little smudgy blood prints everywhere they touch, and in his pulsating vision, sometimes the red flickers black. *Terrible idea what are you doing think moron can't do this alone*, and Tubbo whips his head sharply back and forth, because he knows that *okay*, but there's no one here but him, and he'd die a thousand times over before leaving Ranboo with the Raiders.

You're no good to him dead, the voice demands, and it sounds like something he's having a hard time placing, seemingly uncaring and gruff on the surface but there's a fiery kindness lurking underneath, *think, use your brain you know the answer just think*.

It's right though, Tubbo's not going to be of any help if he's dead, but he doesn't know what else to do, he's by himself, there's no one out here but him, and it feels like standing back in that station on Nirox, cuffs on his wrists and the entire universe bearing down on him.

No one to help you all alone got yourself into this mess have to get yourself out yawning crushing chasm of loneliness and desperation collapsing inwards like a dying star, and he curls into himself in his pilot's chair, hands digging in harshly on the armrests and biting into his sides, loosens when an unexpected little chime pings through the cockpit.

Tubbo flicks his eyes up, sees a notification demanding his attention, breath stalling in his lungs because he forgot, *rough voice warm hand on your shoulder offering you the skies come on kid let's go*, that he's not alone, not anymore.

The message is a mess, a jumble of text and emotes, but it's offering assistance, rich reds and oranges tracing around the edges of everything, *this is your home now*, and Tubbo doesn't hesitate hitting *call, we stick together we're there for each other*, wipes the tears from his face, *because that's what family's for*, and as the call connects, as a warm voice washes through the cockpit, he feels that crushing pressure ease out of his chest, "Heeey lil' stinger! What's up?"

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The Declassified Galactic Survival Guide:

Outside of the chaos the empire sows, like they're the worst neighbor in existence just determined to overflow your garden with stinging nettles and Jeuroalan snapdragons, which actually *do* bite and should be avoided at all costs, but away from all of the general buffoonery and unpleasantness of the Sun Empire, there have been a few independent organizations that have risen to fill the gaps of authority.

Most are nothing of import, are either too small or too unimportant to really make a mark on the lasting sweep of history, but a few stand out, one in particular so well known, so far reaching that it's either respected, feared, adored, or a confusing combination of all three, in practically every system of Andromeda, carries with it some of the most renowned names and titles to ever exist.

Founded primarily as a giant middle finger in the face of the empire, the Syndicate strives to collect those with exceptional talent and skills to add to their illustrious roster, compiling a deadly and accomplished cast of characters that is able to undermine the Sun Empire without worry for serious repercussion.

With a leader so ubiquitously known for violence and general bloodshed, to the point that he's ascended into being somewhat of an urban legend of misfortune, an omen of death as it were, many would assume that the Syndicate is universally seen as the harbingers of destruction and suffering.

But you know what they say about assuming.

It's generally very rude and doesn't give the other party a chance to explain their side of things, which is exactly what happens here, because the Syndicate isn't reviled in the slightest outside of the painfully white and gilded board rooms on Nirox, is seen instead as more of a friendly, big brother type of organization by the rest of the galaxy, a group of renegade do-gooders.

While usually for hire through the proper official channels, many Syndicate members have been known to help out pro bono in a tight pinch, so, if hard pressed and backed into a corner out in the wider cosmos, keep your eyes or other seeing sensory organs peeled for the distinctive jackets with their red collars, something that's earned Syndicate members the rather affectionate nickname of '*tsvuka*', or, in imperial standard, '*redneck*'.

--

"Alright, so here's the plan--"

Click slip and shuffle of new power cells being loaded into blasters, clacking and spinning as barrels are rotated, checking to make sure everything's working properly.

"-Sap and I create a distraction out front, focus their attention there. Tubbo, you go with George and get inside as quickly as possible, don't get seen--"

Slide of nylar straps over clothes, buckles being tightened and hauling lightweight but durable plastisteel armor into place, hurried hands wrapping his busted knuckles in tight bandages.

"-we need to get to the prince before they realize what we're doing, otherwise they'll move him...or cut their losses--"

Sharp intake of breath, dangerously hot arm around his shoulders, sound of a plasma rifle being racked in the background, piercing green eyes boring into his leaving no room for arguments, *we're here it's going to be okay we're going to get him back-*

"-so we get in, we get out, try to keep the casualties to a minimum, but don't hesitate." Dream says with deadly conviction, this time he's taken more emotive than Tubbo's used to, brows drawn down low over his luridly green eyes, "Our top priority is getting the prince out of here safe, got it?"

"Heard'ya loud and clear chief." Sapnap responds with ease, flicks Dream a lazy salute where he's lounging up against the side of their weapon's cache, blaster strapped on one hip and long handle of a thermal sword hanging off the other.

George just nods his head, sighting goggles perched up above his forehead and long dangerous sweep of his rifle looming over one shoulder, as always, close by Dream's side, doesn't take his eyes off him as the shifter slings his own weapons into place, "Good. We head out in about five minutes, make sure you have everything you need."

"He means make sure you go pee *before* the mission starts." Sapnap says almost immediately, eyes wide open and arched in a way that has George rolling his own, jabbing a finger in his

direction, “It was *one time!* Let it go! It wasn’t even that funny.”

“Uh, no? It definitely has happened at least twice and it’s the funniest shit, sooo.” Sappnap shrugs his shoulders, looking entirely unrepentant as George clicks his tongue against his teeth, posture shifting in that way that means he’s about to get into it, and usually, Tubbo finds their playful bickering fun, but he just- *binary sun eyes wide in alarm blaster pointed at his head black blood splattering* -can’t right now.

Pushing off from the wall next to Sappnap, Tubbo heads down the cargo ramp and into the early evening, sun just starting to set and casting everything a molten gold, sunrays slanting down through the branches overhead. He folds his arms across his chest, tucking his hands tight around himself and blows out a huge breath, trying to quiet the anxiety prickling in his chest and trembling his fingers.

In the distance, through the haze of a burning hot twilight, the barely visible shape of the hideout curls around the topmost trunk of a tree, parts of it disappearing up into the leafy canopy. It looks like it was an old outpost at one point before either the Raiders or the Brotherhood started squatting here, windows boarded up and leaking flickering light into the growing gloom, not giving anything away as to what’s happening inside.

Dark slick floors and walls boots loud out in the hallways flickering jumping lights and sparks shooting out of broken wires he’s on his knees hands bound behind his back tail coiled as tight as it can get around one leg shirt stained dark with blood jerks as the latch to the door creaks open-

Tubbo’s fingers bite into his sides harshly because somewhere in there is Ranboo, and the frantic desire to leave *now* to get there as fast as he can, bust through the front doors and make sure he’s okay, that they haven’t hurt him that he’s in one piece, is so strong, Tubbo’s close to dropping over the side of the branch they’ve landed on.

All your fault whatever happens to him is on you shouldn’t’ve left him shouldn’t’ve yelled should’ve been better Queens he has to be okay he better be okay or you’re killing everything in there don’t hesitate-

Boots scuff behind him, obviously and purposefully, and Tubbo looks over his shoulder, sees Dream ambling his way towards him, hands stuffed in his pants pockets and concerned tilt to his face. They don’t do many missions together, so it’s a little strange seeing him in one of his other forms, but besides his natural body, Tubbo knows this is the other one he takes the most, the one that looks like whatever George is, a homan or something.

“Hey...you doin’ okay?” Dream asks, coming to a stop by Tubbo’s side, and he snorts, turns away from his staring match with the hideout and looks Dream in the eyes, not used to the way they blink and move, “Not really.”

“We’re going to get him back.” Dream says, and he’s got one of those voices that’s impossible to ignore, bleeds sureness and confidence, sways practically anything over to his way of thinking, but it does little dousing the roaring screaming panic that’s consumed Tubbo since he heard those turbines.

“I just- can’t stop thinking about what’s h-happening in there like, is he okay?” Tubbo stammers, shifting around agitatedly on his feet, *have to go have to get to him your friend your partner can’t leave him*, “H-Have they hurt him? Queens what if they *have*, w-what if they got impatient, w-what if h-he’s he’s dea-”

“Tubbo, hey, stop.” Dream moves until he’s all Tubbo can see, mouth set in a grim line as he claps hands on his shoulders, warm weight of his palms grounding him somewhat, “Look, he’s going to be okay, he’s worth too much money, they’re not going to kill him. Not now at least.”

“They’re *Irilian*, Dream.” Tubbo stresses, and he can see the exact moment Dream has the same thought, grimace tugging the lines of his face down, and his heartbeat picks up sharply, “A-And he’s an *Ender prince*, you know w-what they’d- how much they- i-it- it could be a *message*.”

Squeezing his shoulders, Dream ducks his head and looks at Tubbo with the most determined eyes he’s ever seen, “We can’t think like that, okay? We’re going to get him back, I *promise*, Tubbo.”

“I-I can’t lose him, Dream.” Tubbo whispers thickly, few wayward tears slipping out and before he can rub his eyes into a sleeve, Dream tugs him forwards into a hug, arms wrapping tight over his shoulders. It’s unexpected, but he doesn’t hesitate snaking his own arms around Dream’s back tight, crushing them together as Tubbo buries his face in the collar of Dream’s bomber, quiet tears leaking out of his eyes.

Cold hands in yours loud barking laughter and sparking eyes, slow even beat of his heart at night, ridged shape of his horns under your antenna incense smoke and stardust, and Tubbo shudders out a wet exhale, everything suddenly splattered with *dark blood dripping down the walls over the floor staining his shirt smoking crater in his head not him Queens anyone but him* and he can’t do this how is he supposed to do this-

There’s another weight thudding into his back and it snaps his mind free, a body radiating heat like a roaring fire, arms wiggling their way into the tangle, bright hot and incessant, a careful hand placed on his shoulder, fingers strong and sure, steadiest in the galaxy. “We got you, man.” Sapnap huffs right behind his ear, tips his searing head into Tubbo’s, smooth, quiet flow of George murmuring next, “It’s going to be alright.”

This is your home now, colorful halls and smiling faces around every corner, *we stick together*, a mess hall big enough for all of them messages that never go unanswered, *we’re there for each other*, warm hearts itchy trigger fingers solid back pressed against yours, *because that’s what family’s for*.

And Tubbo’s not really one for empty reassurances, but he maybe lets himself believe them, sucks in a calming breath and squeezes Dream back, thuds his head into Sapnap, works one of his own hands free to briefly touch at George’s fingers wrapped around his shoulder.

It’s okay, you’re not alone, not anymore, Tubbo reminds himself as they all untangle, wiping the sticky residue of dried tears from his face, nods when Dream cocks his head at him, silent

answer to his unasked question, and Dream snaps his hood up, engulfing his face in shadow save for where his eyes gleam in the dark like winking navigation lights, “Let’s go.”

They race across the darkening branches of Tjhia-Yuet, swift footed and near silent, bounding over gaps and sliding under low hanging branches, making their way closer and closer to where the hideout squats like an ugly growth on the tree trunk. Tubbo’s pulse thuds loud under his ears when they make it to a hidden spot right above the facility, watches in trepidation as Dream and Sapnap get ready to drop over the side of the branch near the front entrance of the hideout.

“See you soon?” George asks quietly, stepping up to Dream and touching him lightly on the cheek, and Dream leans closer, one of his own hands coming up, threading their fingers together briefly as he smiles, “Wouldn’t miss it.”

George nods and moves back, their hands disentangling slow, punches Sapnap on the arm and gets a middle finger for his troubles, and then the two of them are gone, one last cheeky salute from Sapnap as he disappears into the gloom. Not wasting a second, George beckons Tubbo to follow him, takes over leading them towards their holding position, moving quick but steady around the back of the hideout, slides to a stop and ducks behind a massive clustering of ferns.

He holds a finger up to his lips and cocks his head, straining to hear anything in the night, and Tubbo slips his eyes closed, sensory input from his antenna amplified as he focuses solely with them. Air currents drift steadily past, *now now now please start now*, insects sing low and thrumming in the rising darkness, *can’t wait can’t leave him tick tock*, it’s calm it’s quiet it’s- *there*, whine of thermal blades shrieking feet scuffling pained shout electric snap and crackle of blaster fire-

“G-George they started we need to-”

“Give them a second.” George hushes, pulling his sighting goggles down over his eyes, fiddling around with their settings and Tubbo makes an irritated noise in the back of his throat, hands worrying at his own blasters. The sounds of fighting grow more noticeable and audible by the second, loud screams and shouted expletives, his leg bouncing faster and faster as time seems to drag on forever.

They could be hurting him right now cut their losses doesn’t look like he’d be much trouble need to go can’t wait every second lost dangerous tick tock tick tock blaster pointed at his head- anxiety mounting like a fire burning out of control, finally can’t take it anymore and whines, “George-”

“Alright, move it.” George orders and Tubbo doesn’t wait for him, slides off the side of the branch and beats his wings a few times to slow his descent, lands soundlessly on the roof of the hideout, George swinging down to join him not a moment later. There’s a door up here but it’s locked when Tubbo tries it, and George motions for him to move, slings his rifle over his shoulder and fires off a shot faster than Tubbo can process.

The handle explodes in a shower of molten metal and splintering wood, any noise they made swallowed up by the commotion out front, and Tubbo is quick to duck inside, blaster

clutched in each set of hands as he creeps into the dimly lit hallway. He's greeted by a series of doors and branching passageways, looks over his shoulder at George with a helpless expression and lets him take the lead, follows behind his sloped back as they dart down the winding corridors.

Tubbo's never done extractions, he's never dealt with hostages and all of the dark, dirty things that happen in buildings like this, defers completely to George as he moves through the facility in a sort of pattern that means nothing to Tubbo. *It's okay it's going to be okay they're here they came you're not alone*, Tubbo tries to keep his breathing quiet as he dashes after George's heels, grip around his blasters getting tighter and tighter the further they go, antsy waiting for a target.

For the most part, the passages they run down are empty, but there's a few times where George pulls them up short, hand raised in a fist as they flatten themselves to the walls, wait with their hearts in their throats as feet thunder past, angry, panicked voices shouting about those *thrice damned tsvukan* and *shoot to kill shifter scum* and that *dirty fucking faceless demon*.

And Tubbo has to stop George with a quick hand on his arm a few times, jerking him back into hiding where he was about to step out with his plasma rifle racked and unholy retribution burning in his eyes, and he mouths a sheepish *sorry* every time, but Tubbo shakes his head because he *understands*.

The universe is not kind and it's not compassionate, weaponizes what it can and won't stop to listen to things it doesn't understand, and to love someone that's been through such an ordeal is terrible agony, breeds twitchy trigger fingers and howling rage.

George would do anything for Dream, would burn this entire facility to the ground, wouldn't rest until he made sure the other was safe, would mercilessly kill anyone that stood in the way of that, not a single second of hesitance and Tubbo's come to realize he's the same.

He knows for a fact, can feel it shrieking and clawing all the way down in his bones as they race through this maze of a hideout, poking their heads quick into rooms only to find nothing, that if anything's happened to Ranboo, if he so much has a single nick on his face, Tubbo's going to round up every bastard in this building and shoot them between the eyes.

It sits snarling in his chest like that shipyard fire, burning hotter and more out of control than anything he's ever felt, and the entire universe has narrowed down to the feeling of blaster grips growing warm in his hands, breathing harsh but trying to be quiet, feet flying over dirty floors and the sound of fighting clanging high and deadly like war drums.

Where are you, Tubbo's back thuds into a wall, hand clamped hard over his mouth to muffle his panting breaths, head swimming and screaming for oxygen, *know you're here*, feet slipping over loose grit but he doesn't lose his footing, digs his toes in sharper and keeps going, *have to be here Queens please*, despair rising up like an inky pit of tar because they're finding nothing, every room is empty tick tock time is trickling away, *need you can't do this without you Queens please I'm sorry I'm so sorry-*

“*Tubbo!*” George hisses from up ahead where he’s eased a door open, looks back at him with a complicated expression and wrenches it the rest of the way open, slips inside which has to mean-

Head tipped back in laughter black blood splattering on walls glowing warm eyes blaster pointed at his-

Tubbo must black out for a second, next thing he knows he’s leaning against the doorframe, George crouched on the ground next to a lanky figure all huddled into themselves, knobby knees drawn up and ankles bound, sack tied over his head, *black stains down his shirtfront* and Tubbo doesn’t *think* as he lurches forwards because that’s blood, *that’s Ranboo’s blood dried down his chest and not him anyone but him you’re going to kill them all-*

He hits the ground hard, knees cracking into the cement floor under them, blasters clattering forgotten to the ground as his hands immediately reach out, stopped when an iron grip curls around one of his wrists, a low voice snapping, “Don’t touch him. You don’t know what they’ve done.”

“B-But I-I- *George-*” Tubbo wheezes, watching helplessly as Ranboo shrinks back from the two of them and agony races down his limbs, coiling and spreading like fire along trails of accelerant, *what’d they do right between the eyes every single one no hesitation*, “G-George I-I have- can’t just leave him- y-you don’t *understand-*”

“I do, okay? But he could be drugged or in shock. Touching him right now could trigger a panic attack, we need to be careful.” George says calmly, easing up on his grip as he turns to Ranboo, still speaking in that soft, even tone, “Prince Ranboo? Everything’s going to be okay now, my name’s George and I’m with the Syndicate. Tubbo’s with me, we’re going to get you out of here.”

Ranboo doesn’t act like he’s understood, hunches into himself and now that he’s closer, Tubbo can tell that he’s shaking, arms tensed in a way that means his claws are probably savaging whatever they can get at, and George scoots forwards a little, murmuring, “Prince Ranboo-?”

“Stop.” Tubbo interrupts gently, because *Prince Ranboo* is all cold shoulders and echoing silences, it’s empty eyes and a furious stutter, desperation fueled anger, it’s loneliness and pain and a hundred horrible things, it’s not going to do anything to help him, but Tubbo thinks he knows what will.

Quick fast darting over rooftops only one to catch you barking laughter and dancing barefoot in the cargo hold warm real smiles and eyes that shine brighter than any stars hand in yours like it’s always belonged nickname whispered out in the gentle dark hush of the night

Eyes never leaving Ranboo, Tubbo doesn’t reach out to touch him but he gets as close as he dares, makes sure his voice is summer warm and sweet, “Hey, Boo, everything’s going to be okay, you’re going to be okay, Boo, promise. We’re here to get you, okay? C-Can I get that bag off you?”

He doesn't untense exactly, but something in his posture changes and Tubbo shoots a quick look at George, and when he nods, Tubbo crawls across the floor, touches Ranboo's shoulder briefly and bites his lip hard when he jerks, startled sound leaving his mouth. "I'm not going to hurt you, Boo." Tubbo whispers hoarsely, hands very carefully and very slowly picking at the knotted cord wrapped around his neck, hates the way his throat jumps and works under his fingers.

When it finally comes undone, Tubbo drags the bag off gingerly, remembering to make sure not to catch it around Ranboo's horns, but something about it feels weird as he's slipping it over his head, reason for that becoming apparent immediately.

Ranboo's left horn is gone, broken off close to his skull, jagged end of what's left sticking out of hair that's matted with blood.

"N-No, no, no, no, no-" Tubbo stammers, can't stop himself from cupping Ranboo's face in shaking hands, fingers feeling the tackiness of drying blood all down the left side of his face and tips his head up, strangled cry falling out of his mouth once he sees how unfocused and hazy his eyes are, "No, *Queens*, fuck I'm so sorry, I-I'm so so *sorry*, *Boo*. *Fuck*- I'm s-so sorry."

Ranboo's eyes blink slowly, no recognition or anything in them, looks like he's sleep walking or something and Tubbo turns to look over his shoulder in panic at George, "W-What's wrong with him?"

Shuffling closer, George shines a light from his handheld into Ranboo's face, clicking his tongue when his pupils don't contract at all, "They dosed him with something, probably flunitrazepam or likatremonal. He'll be okay, just out of it for a while."

Nausea rolls like a flood in Tubbo's stomach, mouth filling with the sick taste of bile, eyes stinging fast and sharp with the threat of tears, but before he can start crying or throw up, their earpieces fizz to life, Dream's winded voice crackling through the connection, "*You guys find the prince yet?*"

"Yes, he's injured but it's nonfatal. How're you two?" George responds, twisting to his feet evenly, and it's Sapnap's equally strained voice that filters through this time, "*Just hunky-dory Georgie boy, wanna come play roundup?*"

"Tubbo." George's voice gets him to snap his head up, serious set to his face as he's slinging his rifle off his shoulder, "Will you be okay for a second? It's okay if you need me to stay."

"Y-Yeah, yeah no, I-I'll be fine, go do what you gotta do." Tubbo says shakily, reluctant to leave Ranboo alone as he gets to his feet as well, but he has to follow George out so he can latch the door behind him.

Pausing at the threshold, George shoots him more one demanding look, and he doesn't get half the credit he deserves, because standing there with his plasma rifle in his hands and *that* look in his eyes, he's more intimidating than Dream ever could be, "Comm us if you need *anything*, do you understand me?"

Tubbo almost says *sir yes sir* but catches it right as it's about to leave his mouth, stuffs it back into the box it slipped out of and says instead, "Of course...and George?"

He tilts his head to the side in acknowledgement, and Tubbo worries for a split second until he remembers *unholy retribution in his gaze he'll understand seething spitting fire aim right between the eyes no hesitation*, knows his voice is shaking with that terrible anger when he growls, "Don't miss."

"Never do." George says with a nasty grin, racking his rifle and loading a new charge into the barrel, and then he's gone, footsteps hushed as he heads for the front of the facility. Closing the door with a definitive thud, Tubbo slams the bar latch into place and whirls back around, heart dropping out of him when he sees Ranboo's slumped over again, head hanging down between his shoulders.

He hurries back over and kneels down at his side, hands quickly flipping out his tactical knife to cut through the cords binding his wrists together, tries not to panic at the slick glide of blood under his fingertips, "You're okay, Boo, y-you're okay. I-I'm here now, I'm so sorry, shouldn't've left you- a-all my fault, *Queens*, I'm so sorry--"

Tubbo snaps his mouth shut though when he hears the faintest sound of something, scrabbles around to Ranboo's front, and he's still staring forward unseeing, but his mouth moves the barest amount and Tubbo's heart pounds, "Boo? Y-You okay? What is it? I-I can't really hear you, b-but I'm here, okay? I'm here and everything's--"

"You're...not...r-real..." He whispers, voice cracked and horribly strained, sounding like he's screamed himself hoarse, *Queens he probably has they snapped his horn off not a clean break how much blood has he lost*, and Tubbo insists tremulously, "Y-Yes I am. I-I'm real, Boo, I'm here, I c-came to get you--"

Ranboo wheezes out something that might've been a laugh at one point, eyes slipping closed as he sighs, "Mmmm, that's how I know you're...y-you're not real... 'cause he'd never come b-back for *me*, he h-hates me."

It feels like he's been shot through the gut, had his wings torn from his back or antenna stripped from his head, such an intense pain that kills his ability to breath or think or do anything besides sit there in horror and feel like he's dying, and Ranboo wheezes, "See, *see* c-can't argue...know it's...know it's trueeee--"

"N-No, no-!" Tubbo blurts out, desperate to *make him understand* but he's cut off by Ranboo slurring in a mocking tone, "Yes, *yees*...can't blame him though, waste o-of time waste of... space, no use comin' back for *nothing*."

Shadow on the wall not even there doesn't matter never did they did that to him and now so have you, and Tubbo lurches forwards, cradling Ranboo's limp head in his hands, fingers spreading out under his long ears, "F-Fuck! No! *No, Boo!* Y-You're not nothing, okay? *Queens* damnit, you're not! You mean so much to me, and I-I can't, you have *no idea*--"

"*Liiiaaar*." Ranboo hushes in singsong, broken little giggle slipping out of his mouth as his unfocused eyes drag slowly from left to right, like he's reading something, "Not true, 'ave

always been nothin' and always will be, a mistake an accident...go take that long walk- *zip*, riiight over the edge. No teleportin' back up this time."

Tubbo can't speak, throat constricted tight with panic and agony, *over the edge what does he mean surely he hasn't-* and Ranboo just laughs, unfocused eyes drifting past Tubbo's shoulder as his head lolls forwards, "Yaaa'knooow...they took me thinkin' they were gonna get the payout of a lifetime. But they didn' even get the spare, they got less than that- *they got nooothering*. Sorry for the disappointment *sorry for the inconvenience-* never would've sent anyone, nobody cares-"

"*I do!*" Tubbo interrupts frantically, thumbs caressing under his eyes in jerky sweeps, turning Ranboo's hollow, unseeing gaze back to him, "I-I *do*, I'm *here* Ranboo, I-I came to find you-"

For a split second, his eyes seem to focus, but something dark shudders over them like a shadow passing across the earth, "N-No, you're not *real*, y-you're not- you're not you're not, you ha-hate me- t-terrible person waste of sp-space- I-I'm alone always been alone gonna die alone slip out of existence, *finally good riddance-*"

"*Stop!*" Tubbo sobs, falling forwards and tugging him into an embrace, one set of arms around his waist, other around his shoulders, hand firmly cupping the back of his neck as Tubbo brings their foreheads together, "*Queens s-stop, p-please!* Fucking hell, I-I'm so *sorry*, I-I-I should've n-never said those t-things- I don't hate you, Boo, n-never have, please believe me I-I think I lo-"

"He's really just the worst, Toms, you've- you can't even *begin* to imagine." Ranboo says in an odd tone, and Tubbo stops short, because it almost sounds like- but n-no, he's wrong, there's not a chance, but then he *keeps going*, "He's so *spoiled*, thinks everything should just be fucking handed to him, *can't shut the fuck up* about himself it's insane."

And Tubbo realizes with dawning horror that Ranboo's doing a scarily accurate impression of *him*, is reciting a conversation Tubbo's almost completely forgotten about, but he's remembering it now, how angry he was, *how much he didn't understand*, didn't think Ranboo overhead but *he's nailing it beat for beat*, "He's so *rude*. Queens past, he like, bitched me out the first time we met...*fuck-* Queens, I just hate him so *much-* like it's so bad."

"R-Ranboo-" Tubbo chokes out but he's apparently not done, voice pitching up and bleeding sharp with anger and fire that Tubbo's never heard from *him*, feels hot tears pour out of his eyes, "You don't know *fucking* anything! All that reading's for nothing! *You don't know SHIT!* You're fucking *Ender*, terrible *fucking* people- I was wrong, I wish I'd never met you-"

What have you done what have you done, and Tubbo squeezes his eyes shut, knows what's coming, miserable sobs making his back heave as Ranboo says with vicious finality, "Should've just let Aeku shoot me and saved yourself the fucking trouble. Sorry for the colossal inconvenience, *your highness.*"

The silence that crashes over the two of them is devastating, Tubbo doing nothing to muffle his heartbroken crying, and it's the worst thing in the world when he hears Ranboo whispers in his regular voice, "Told you...*I can't forget anything.*"

What you said is going to live in his head for the rest of his life lined up with everyone else that's ever hurt him you thought you were different were better weren't like that but look at what you've done, and Tubbo wails, thudding his head down onto Ranboo's shoulder, clutching at him now because he doesn't know what else to do, nasty all consuming despair engulfing his entire body, rotting out what was left in his mind that was keeping him upright.

"I'm so sorry, I-I'm so s-sorry!" Tubbo yowls, great, hiccupping sobs tearing from his throat, pain racing out from his chest and down his arms, pooling in his fingertips until they *ache*, *"Fuck- I'm so so-sorry-! I-I-I never should've- never should've s-said a-any of t-that! It wasn't true! N-None of it w-was true! Y-You mean everything to me, p-please believe me, please- Queens please!"*

And it's whisper quiet but it cracks like gunfire in Tubbo's mind, "I don't."

He screams ragged and desperate, hands dropping off Ranboo to clutch and claw at himself, arms wrapping tight around his chest because it feels like his ribs are cracking open, pouring out accelerant and fuel like an endless river, feeding the fire that burns over every inch of his mind, destroying everything it comes into contact with.

What have you done how could you do this to him this is it it's over reap what you sow what are you going to do without him need him can't do this alone fix it fix it fix it, his mind howls frantically, snide little voice whispering, *some things can't be fixed you know that,* and Tubbo coughs hard around a staggering inhale, *b-but I have to try engineer know how to fix things have to try-*

"Queens no- F-FUCK-! I'm sorry, I-I'm so sorry, fuck- I-I know you don't bel- I-I k-know I messed up, but i-is- is there a-anything I-I can do? P-Please, R-Ranboo, please." Tubbo begs, eyes itching and burning with the tears rolling out of them, taste of salt heavy in his mouth, heart almost squeezing itself out of existence as Ranboo hesitates, unsure eyes dragging slowly across the floor.

Sniffing hard to clear his throat, Tubbo tries to reign some of his desperation in because this is Ranboo's call, and he more than deserves that respect, "Y-You don't have to forgive me, I just- I just want you t-to *believe* me when I-I say I didn't m-mean it, t-that you're *not* nothing, t-that you *mean s-so much* to me. I-Is there anything I can d-do? W-Would you give me t-that *chance?*"

Dark tongue poking out to wet his lip, Ranboo rocks his head back and forth sluggishly, mumbling, "I-I- *m-maybe*...I don't *know*, I-"

It's not a no, and Tubbo latches onto it frantically like its a lifeline and he's drowning, jerks his head down and tries to meet Ranboo's wandering gaze, "T-That's okay, Boo, t-that's to-totally fine. All I-I'm asking for is- is a *chance*, please, I-I know I have n-no right, but *please.*"

One of Ranboo's ears flick, eyes stopping their slow roving and hesitantly lift to meet Tubbo's, something like recognition in them as he whispers, "Y-You're really h-here?"

“Y-Yes!” Tubbo says quickly, uncoils one set of arms and reaches out cautiously for his hands where they sit limp in his lap, doesn’t try taking them, just touches their fingers together, *I’m real I’m here I came back*, “I-I’m here, I really am, Boo. I came as soon as I could, I’m so sorry i-it took so long- I-I’m so s-sorry they *hurt y-you*.”

Ranboo’s still looking at him a little unfocused a little unsure, but his fingers twitch against Tubbo’s and it’s encouragement enough for him to keep going, lets everything that’s eating him up inside pour out, “Fuck, I-I never should’ve said what I did, *e-either* time. I-I never wanted to hurt you, please, *please* believe me. A-And it *kills* me that I-I have, fucking hell, I don’t want to be like *them* Ranboo, I really don’t.”

A wet laugh trips out of his mouth, and Tubbo shakes his head, smiling sadly at where their hands are barely touching, remembers every time they’ve been laced together, “I want to throw b-birthday parties for you, wanna be t-there when you need me, just- listen to you and tell you how smart you are. I-I want to keep flying with you and playing tag and all of the, *stupid* crap w-we’ve been getting up to. I want to make you laugh...”

Tubbo hesitates the briefest second, knows he’ll be putting his heart on the line but it’s worth it, Ranboo’s worth everything, and he hushes softly, “I want to make you *happy*, to give you a home, a real one, s-someplace you feel safe a-and *loved*...you mean more than the *whole galaxy* to me and I-”

“A-Are you l-lying?” Ranboo stammers, sounding absolutely terrified, and Tubbo snaps his head up, stares into eyes that are suddenly very clear and very focused, prays he’s not imagining the way they shine with desperate hope, and says with as much conviction as he can, “No, I mean every word, Ranboo, and I-I’m never going to hurt you like that ever again, I swear on my life.”

Ranboo doesn’t move for a minute, but then his throat jumps as he swallows hard a few times, brows knitting together, faint clicking starting up as he sniffs, and then his entire face crumples and he pitches forwards with a wail, hands scrabbling desperately at Tubbo’s back while he sobs, “*T-Tubbo- Tubbo-!*”

“I’m here, I-I’m here.” Tubbo says, dragging the two of them closer, hands moving across Ranboo’s heaving shoulders, cupping the back of his head and tucking him into the crook of his neck, sickly sweet, metallic tang of his blood everywhere, can’t stop his own tears as he promises, “I’m never leaving you again.”

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The Declassified Galactic Survival Guide:

Existence is difficult, there’s really no other way around it, and many try and dress it up and play it off like it’s not, surround themselves with wealth and luxuries, try to find purpose through power and standing tall, but it’s all just a thin film covering up the gnawing dread that fills every living thing cursed with sentience.

That doesn’t mean life can’t be enjoyable, that there aren’t things worthwhile to seek out and pursue, but it’s in the approach where it changes, either become more fulfilling or just spirals

you further down into the black pit of existential mouse that lives within us all.

Your author doesn't claim to have all the answers, and as per my legal team's recommendations, has been advised to tell you that I have none of the answers, but it is of my firm, personal belief that the easiest way to garner enjoyment and a sense of satisfaction is to partake in a concept that children are quick to conform to and adults are quick to forget.

Everything about life is meant to be shared, from the wealth and the prosperity and the power to all the things in between, all the sorrows and hardships, the uplifting moments that sing in your skin for days and the love that rushes strong and alive in your veins.

This guide was not only created with the intention of helping the reader navigate the cosmos, but also to provide you with a better understanding of peoples and cultures heretofore unknown to you, and maybe, provide some understanding and compassion for your fellow beings, to foster relationships that grow new points of communication.

It may be the ideals of a dreamer, but your author sincerely hopes that this work has somehow managed to bring this massive, convoluted, clusterfuck of a galaxy we call home a little closer, that this guide has helped erase some of the imaginary lines we draw in the sand, because at the end of everything, all we really have is each other, and that has to count for something.

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The last box is lifted out of the cargo hold and Tubbo just stands there dumbly staring at the empty space, uncomfortable with how much room is down here now, hears a throat being cleared and swings his head up. Ranboo's standing at the edge of where the cargo ramp starts, gold earrings and circlet winking in the light that spills in from the open hatch, hands knotted together in front of him as he darts his eyes away fast.

Remember when he used to look you in the eyes no problem but that was before you ruined everything shut up not the time

"That all of it?" Tubbo forces himself to ask, going for banal and normal, thinks he lands closer to something like *being strangled alive*, and Ranboo nods his head jerkily, earrings swinging back and forth one two one two, *boots out in the courtyard*, "I- y-yeah."

"G-Good. That's um- t-that's good." Tubbo says from what feels like underwater, stuffs his hands in the pockets of his bomber and rocks up on his toes, "So you, um, y-you double checked everything up top and-?"

"Yup. Yeah, um, yeah I got everything." Ranboo twitches his hands together and apart, and it descends into an uncomfortable silence, neither one of them meeting the other's eyes, *pressure mounting up and dragging inwards crushing collapse of a dying star*, and Tubbo swallows thickly, "S-So this is it then, huh?"

Please say no please stay please come up to the cockpit with me please don't leave-

"I...yeah."

And Tubbo flicks his eyes closed for a second, *what did you expect it's for the best he's better off here*, sighs hard through his nose and blinks the forming tears away, smiles crooked and un reassuringly, but it's all he can manage, "Well...it's been- i-it's been a wild ride, Boo."

Ranboo does something complicated with his face, ducks his head at a funny angle, still getting used to the new, uneven weight, and the shorn off horn looks a little better after Tubbo cleaned it up, shaved down some of the sharper bits, but it's never growing back.

He's going to have that for the rest of his life, a horrible memento from a frankly insane intergalactic trip that was only supposed to take thirty six hours, but has now lasted the better part of a month. *Fuck, it hasn't even been a month*, Tubbo thinks in mounting dread, eyes losing focus as he realizes how much life is going to suck for the foreseeable future, *you decided you can't do this without him after less than a month what in the fuck are you going to do now*.

Keep going, the part of his head that sounds like Techno, like his mother, chimes in with, and he wants to be able to snort and brush it off, chalk it up to melodrama, *move on*, but Tubbo doesn't think he can this time. He's not the same person that took off for Annwyl all those weeks ago, and it's abysmally sobering to have to go from thinking in terms of *we* and *us* to *me* and *I* again.

He's not sure how long he's going to be able to keep it up, but who in the world would he ever find to replace Ranboo, because there's no one, *one in a million absolutely incredible and you ruined it you broke whatever you could have had*.

Shuffling around awkwardly on his feet, Ranboo seems to come to some decision and crosses the cargo hold in a few long strides, unexpectedly grabs Tubbo around the shoulders and hauls him into a bruising hug. He dips his head down and buries his nose in Tubbo's hair, whispering warm and shaky, "T-Thank you for everything, Bo. I-I *mean it*."

Fuck you can't sound like that not fair why won't you stay just ask please I can't please ask I'd say yes-

"Of course." Tubbo answers just as uneven, burrowing his face into Ranboo's collarbones, into the scratchy material of one of his fancy tunics, missing the soft feel of his nightshirts turned dayshirts. Being swamped with Ranboo like this does horrible things to his composure, and Tubbo tries not to sniffle obviously, hanging onto him with a kind of desperation he shouldn't have.

Please don't leave can't do this without you need you never thought I'd be here but please just stay-

And then, too soon and too fast and *Queens don't*, Ranboo drops his arms, taking that first step back, the one that'll take him out of the Eshachi and Tubbo's life, and...and Tubbo just has to *let him go*.

"Welp...um s-safe travels." Ranboo murmurs, edging backwards like he doesn't want to go, but if he wanted to stay he would, *he knows how you feel this is his choice can't stop him*, and

Tubbo laughs tremulously, shrugs his shoulders and hopes it doesn't look like he's about to cry, "Unlikely, but I'll try. Good luck in school."

"T-Thanks." Ranboo says with his own unsure smile, finally turns on his heel with one last little wave and then he's stepping down the cargo ramp, out into the main terminal of Nirox's intergalactic port and it feels like a part of Tubbo rips itself off to go with him.

One of his hands comes up and twists harshly into the shirt over where his heart rests, pulse rapid fire fast and unsteady, like he really is missing a chunk of something important. *This is the best thing for him*, Tubbo reminds himself over and over again, but he's unable to move from his spot, staring helplessly after where Ranboo disappeared in the afternoon light.

Not much talking happened after they split off from Dream and the other's on Tjhia-Yuet, just exhausted silence and bleary relief, Tubbo half awake keeping an eye on the autopilot with one of his arms strung out over the gap in their seats, fingers threaded through Ranboo's. Things were complicated between them after the fight, after all of the things Tubbo said, and Ranboo had been willing to give him another chance, but it wasn't like everything was magically fixed now.

There was still tension, an undercurrent of mistrust whenever Ranboo looked at him or moved past, and Tubbo knew that wasn't changing overnight. He felt like the best thing to do was to give Ranboo some space, because in between what he said and the trauma of the kidnapping, this trip probably hadn't done many favors for him mentally, and he didn't need that kind of shit in his life.

So that's why Tubbo kept his damn mouth shut for once after they landed, watched Ranboo shuffle all his things back together without a word, figured it was obvious how he felt, what he wanted, was leaving it open for Ranboo to make whatever decision he felt was best for him.

And Tubbo didn't like admitting it, made him feel selfish and egotistical, but that wasn't the only reason he didn't bring anything up. He was *afraid* of Ranboo's response, scared of being told *no* again over half packed luggage, was also getting hopelessly tangled up in what it meant that he was willing to ask, sick with himself because it felt like he was betraying Tommy, abandoning him and everything they had.

Queens, Tubbo's got to stop thinking about this, it's over, *it's done*, and he *needs* to get going before any local law enforcement shows up and starts getting frisky. The port is bustling with traffic and the enforces do come by and check papers every now and then, so Tubbo *really* needs to head back up to the cockpit, begin the takeoff process now that...now that the mission is officially over.

It hits like a blow to the back of the head, the fact that this is it, that he's going to have to go back up to the cockpit *alone*, drop into his seat and know that Ranboo's not going to be sitting down in his across the way, eyes wicked bright and smile sharp as he takes the trigger in his space dark hands, and a few wayward tears slide quietly down his cheeks.

How is Tubbo supposed to do anything now, just- *go back to HQ like nothing's happened*, like he hasn't had his entire life unceremoniously flipped on its head. This absolute

clusterfuck of a mission is going to be at the back of his every waking thought for the rest of his life, like he's haunted, nothing he can do to escape the knowledge that he's lost another partner.

You don't know that you never asked you need to ask can't know unless you try

-but he *can't*, promised Tommy long ago that there'd never be anyone else, couldn't put Ranboo through more crap that he doesn't deserve-

You idiot do you think Tommy'd want that for you do you think Ranboo can't make his own decisions

-no but- it's complicated and he's scared okay, scared of letting go and moving on, doesn't want to leave Tommy like he's nothing-

Moving on isn't bad it doesn't mean you're leaving him doesn't mean you love him any less go ask

-h-he *can't*, doesn't know how, and Ranboo's gone anyway doesn't want this anyway so there's no point and-

He might need to know he's wanted and since when have ever you been afraid of a chase

His feet stutter where he's standing, pulse a roaring crescendo in his ears as he tries to decide what to do, wings flickering behind him erratically, and he knows he's the only one here, but Tubbo *swears* he feels fingers pressing lightly in between his shoulder blades, nudging him forwards while an affectionately irritated voice huffs, *go on you idiot I don't mind-*

And Tubbo's gone, boots pushing off sharply and propelling him forwards, down the cargo ramp and out into the blinding afternoon sunlight.

The port is incredibly crowded this time of day, other travelers milling about and Tubbo weaves through them fast, trying to catch a glimpse of night dark hair and long sweep of a horn, finally spots the trailing end of a fuzzy tail through a break in the crowd, cups two hands around his mouth and shouts, "*Ranboo!*"

Ranboo whirls around immediately, shock clear on his face as Tubbo dashes up to his side, mouth already dropping open in question, but Tubbo beats him to it, "Come with me."

"I- w-what?"

"C-Come with me, back to HQ. Join the Syndicate." He says quickly, feels a little like he's going to throw up, adrenaline shooting through his veins fast, only ever asked this once before and it nearly wrecked him, but Tubbo can't think about that, finally spits out what's been burning holes into his brain for *weeks* now, "Be my partner, come fly with me just- y-you can stay...i-if you want?"

In his mind, how it goes is something like this.

Ranboo stares at him like he's grown five heads, but that real, genuine smile Tubbo's come to adore stretches his mouth wide, scrunching his eyes up as he excitedly agrees, stumbling forwards to wrap their hands together, cool weight of his tail settling around Tubbo's waist, dragging him closer so he can lean up and trail his antenna across Ranboo's horn, and everything is perfect and good and better than okay.

But in reality, it goes a little something like this.

Ranboo stares at him blankly but his face eventually twitches, brows scrunching together over conflicted eyes, mouth pushed to the side like he's uncomfortable and doesn't know what to say, and that's never been the case before, Ranboo *always* knows what to say, and Tubbo feels like he's sinking through the earth, *you fucked up gotta hear him say it now idiot moron what were you thinking*, despair clawing up his throat like a demon possessed.

"I don't-" Ranboo starts, and Tubbo *can't* listen to him say it, *I don't want to can't I'm so sorry nothing personal I just can't go with you*, rushes out fast and a little insane sounding, wishes he'd stayed on his ship where he belongs, "You don't h-have to answer! Um. Y-Yeah just- think a-about it I guess, I-I um, I'll be here f-for another few hours i-if ya'know, you decide or whatever. Yeah okay-"

Tubbo doesn't wait for an answer, turns and bolts back into the crowd, sticky hot prickle of embarrassment rolling down his spine and agitating his wings. It's harder, finding space now between the throng of bodies, because he's got half of his attention straining to hear familiar footfalls at his back like an *idiot*, but there's nothing and Tubbo thinks he might throw up.

What was he thinking, *what was he thinking*, what possessed him to *do that*? How much of a fucking idiot is he really?

Tubbo clasps a set of hands on the back of his neck as he stumbles unseeing through the late afternoon crowd, fingers digging in harshly while he mentally kicks himself back and forth, *idiot moron what were you thinking he doesn't want to go with you fuck up reject just projecting should've stayed on the ship know your place drone nobody ever goes with you keep waiting on people that've already left yo-*

"TUBBO-!"

He whirls around hearing his name, hope surging bright in his chest, registering a second later that that kind of earsplitting volume couldn't possibly be Ranboo, and resignation threatens to swallow him whole, but then the crowd parts, and standing there impossibly in a crisp blue and red uniform, wings fluffed out behind him and disbelief etched onto his face is-

"Tommy." Tubbo breathes out, everything winking out of existence for a second before it comes crashing back in full force- *he's real he's here how why can't believe it-* feet stumbling as he tries to move fast enough, pushing through the throng of people like a madman, doesn't stop until a body hits his way too hard, nearly taking them both over, but Tubbo throws a foot out to steady them.

There are hands everywhere, Tubbo's fumbling around desperately at the starched material of Tommy's uniform jacket, fingers burying themselves in soft feathers, and Tommy's dig in sharp over his wings, arms wrapping possessively across his back, pulling Tubbo closer, engulfing them both in his wingspan, keeping the outside world muffled and far away.

"W-What the fuck *wh-what the f-fuck-!*" Tommy's stammering, pressing his cheek into the top of Tubbo's head, squishing his antenna a little in the process, but Tubbo couldn't care less, wiggles closer and just breathes in, finally remembering with aching clarity what Tommy smells like, *clean laundry and engine oil and fruity shampoo and love and late nights studying and home-*

"H-How are you here- w-why- I-I don't, *fuck* I haven't gone insane have I? That'd be real fucking annoying and just- *holy shit*, T-Tubbo, y-you're, you're actually here, you're *real*." Tommy says around high pitched, anxious laughter, snuffles hard and disgustingly wipes his nose in Tubbo's hair, "*Fuck*, never thought I'd see you again, bee boy."

"Q-Queens *Tommy*, I-I'm sorry, *so so sorry*." Tubbo mumbles into the warm space between his neck and shoulder, tears of his own leaking out as his fists tighten in the material of Tommy's jacket, "F-Fucking *shit*, I-I *never* wanted t-to make y-you worry like that and I- and I- Queens of ages past *I'm so sorry-*"

"Forgive you, you little shit." Tommy mutters right up next to his antenna, the timbre of his voice rumbling so close it makes all of his hair stand on end, and when Tommy laughs, it feels like the air's been stolen out of his lungs, "*Christ*, you're really the luckiest sonuva'bitch in the whole galaxy, mark my words, Tubbs. *Fucking hell*, love you, love you *so much* I-"

"OI! *Innit!* Get your stupid arse back here or by the creators-!"

"Or fucking *what* Manifold!" Tommy snaps bolt right up and screams, has the decency to spin away from Tubbo as he raises his voice to truly concerning levels, and it gives Tubbo a second to regain his composure before he absolutely loses it in the middle of the port.

He takes a few steadying breathes, one hand still firmly buried in Tommy's wing, fingers absentmindedly tracing along feathers while he drags a sleeve across his eyes, Tommy continuing his shouting match in the background, "Do NOT fucking test me right now bitch, or I'll put your ass in a photon canon for *real* this time, point that shiny head of yours at enemy lines and-"

"Oh eat a Snorlfoia dicksack! You can't go, fucking- *running off!* We haven't debriefed yet you *moron!* If this is what I get for looking out for your dumb arse...the fuck are you doing anyway?" Jack's grumbling gets clearer the closer he gets, and in the interest of preserving everyone else's eardrums, Tubbo finally steps out from behind Tommy, sheepishly waving at a gob smacked Jack, "H-Hey Jack, how's it um, how's it going?"

"Holy shit- *you're not dead?*"

Before Tubbo can answer, there's an arm slung around his shoulders and he's drug into Tommy's side, hears him huff out indignantly, "*Somehow*, despite his *continuing* efforts to do

otherwise.”

“Well fuck me, glad you’re alright, man.” Jack says a bit awkwardly, doesn’t nervously fidget or anything like that because *he’s* a good cadet and knows better, didn’t drop out and join a terrorist organization, isn’t responsible for burning a shipyard down.

There’s very few people Tubbo’s kept up with from the academy...well, none actually, besides Tommy, and he’s excruciatingly reminded of *why* that is watching Jack flick his eyes around, scanning the crowd looking for their CO, anyone that could rat on him for speaking to a wanted felon.

Tubbo knows logically it’s nothing personal, Jack doesn’t hate him and he isn’t a bad person for trying to cover their asses, but it’s one of the reasons he loathes Sunfleet so much. They put such an emphasis on always doing what you’re told, on *not* thinking and just following orders that it leaves all of them unable to make honest judgment calls, simply getting swept up in the imperial dogma.

It’s a fear that’s loomed over every conversation he’s had with Tommy since the incident, that one day he’d get in too far and Tommy wouldn’t be able to get back out of it, would look at Tubbo the way Jack does, the way the rest of them do, with pity, with a little bit of disgust, fear and suspicion haunting the corners of their eyes.

“Well...it’s good seeing you Undersc- I mean, uh, *Tubbo*, but we should *probably* get going.” Jack says, turning to look at Tommy imploringly from under the brim of his hat, the not so subtle head jerk he’s doing to try and convey to him that they *need to leave*.

It’s nothing personal you know how much shit they’d catch sit down shut up know your place, Tubbo thinks bitterly, curling his stinging fingers hard into fists, the movement pulling at the tender scabs over his knuckles as he goes to duck out from under Tommy’s arm before he can move it himself, but his grip tightens, refusing to let Tubbo go.

“Nah, me and Tubbo’ve got some catching up to do, so I’ll catch you later Manifold.” Tommy says nonchalantly, shoots a gaping Tubbo a quick wink out of the corner of his eye as Jack sputters, “Wha-! You *can’t do that!* Commander Hjuj’s *orders* were-”

“Just cover for me, tell CO I’m shitting my brains out and had to go to medical again. Thanks Manifold, you’re a real pal.” Tommy flicks Jack a lazy salute and pulls at Tubbo, ignoring his roommate’s protests as he drags them both out of the port, keeps an arm firmly around Tubbo’s shoulders despite that going against the code of conduct for dress blues.

“Tommy, don’t be stupid-” Tubbo starts, but gets bulled over by Tommy loudly interrupting him, using that particular tone of voice that means he’s decided to do something and no one can stop him, “There’s this new tea shop that opened since you’ve been gone and you’ve *got* to try it, they put these little- like- *jelly balls* in the tea and it’s real fucking good.”

The intergalactic port lets out into Nirox’s capital, Mahari, and it’s just as stunning as Tubbo remembers it, all sleek lined buildings chiseled out of a pale stone, aged green metal roofs reflecting dully in the bright afternoon light, and peppered here and there are people in the bright blue uniforms of the enforcers.

Tubbo tips his head to the side quickly when they pass a patrolling duo, heart loud in his ears and uncomfortable heat prickling under his collar, very *very* aware of the jacket he's wearing and whispers harshly to Tommy, "I can't *be* here, *Toms*. I-I- still um, ya'know...there's still w-warrants a-and-"

"No one'll mess with'ya man, not while I'm here. They got a problem, I'll deal with it, and I outrank them now anyway so." Tommy declares loftily, and Tubbo's about to argue with him out of habit because *no*, he *does not*, when Tommy holds up an arm, new set of gold bands flashing around the sleeve of his jacket.

"You made lieutenant?" Tubbo asks incredulously, didn't think Tommy was going to climb up the ranks, thought he was getting his degree and getting out, *it's been three rotations a lot can change maybe they finally got him one two one two boots out in the courtyard sit down shut up what does that mean for you worker bee-*

Fear spikes through him watching Tommy swing his arm up and tip his hat at a group of tittering girls, but Tubbo tries to snuff it out, because this is *Tommy*, he *knows him*, knows he's not *like that*, tries to find comfort in the self satisfied smirk on Tommy's face, an expression that softens into something a little more hesitant when he looks down at Tubbo, "Y-Yeah I um...kinda threw myself into things when uh...w-when I thought you were... ya'know..."

He doesn't bother finishing just shrugs helplessly and Tubbo lets out a shaky breath, *it's still him it's okay not one of hundreds he's still himself still your friend your brother calm down just calm down*, tips his head to rest on Tommy's shoulder, right arms looping behind his back under his wings, pulling them closer until they almost stumble while they walk.

The tea shop is close to the port, something cute and small and probably very trendy in Mahari these days, and it's filled to the brim with other cadets and officers, some calling out to Tommy while they make their way up to the counter, and he waves at them, but doesn't leave Tubbo's side despite the looks that get thrown their way, quick quiet hush of *tsvuka* spreading around the shop.

Tubbo ducks down into his collar and shakes his hair across his eyes, anything so he doesn't have to see all the dirty glances thrown his way, and it's a small mercy that none of them are pointed, no one in here recognizing *him*, just the color of his jacket and the emblems on his shoulders, relaxes when Tommy casually drapes a wing around him.

This entire time Tommy's been almost frantic to keep one point of contact between them, leaves a hand draped over Tubbo's shoulder while he points out the things he likes on the menu, nudges him forwards in line with gentle prodding from his fingers, pokes and teases and slaps at him in a blatant excuse to not break that contact.

And Tubbo revels at it, musses up and then straightens Tommy's feathers over and over again, almost forgot the feeling of them under his fingers, kicks at him amicably in line, mindful not to scuff his dress shoes and stares at how mismatched their footwear is, his nasty, worn to shit combat boots and the sleek black shine of Tommy's loafers, grabs at his hands and punches his arm and stands as close as he can get.

It's been over three rotations since they've seen each other like this, but it might as well have been no time at all, and they fall back together so easily, Tubbo almost forgets they've been separated for so long.

Tommy gets them rolling on a series of terrible ball related jokes that has them both wheezing like crazy people when it's their turn to order, but the person behind the counter doesn't bat an eye, doesn't ask for Tommy's name either so they must be used to it by now, gets them their drinks in record time.

"Come on." Tommy prompts when they leave the shop and the only warning Tubbo gets before he spreads his wings is a shit eating grin, stumbles back at the massive gust of air Tommy kicks up when he takes off. Tubbo snaps his wings open with an indignant shout and follows after, zipping along behind Tommy's incessant cackling as he makes for a nearby building, lands a lot more elegantly than Tommy does, all huge, loud back peddling of wings.

"Are we supposed to be up here?" Tubbo asks cautiously as Tommy flops down, legs dangling precariously over the side and straw poked in his mouth. He shrugs, takes a long, noisy sip of his tea and mumbles around what's in his mouth, "Since when've you cared 'bout rules?"

Tubbo snorts and acts like he's going to kick him over the side as he takes a seat next to him, shoulders bumping as he sips at his own tea, grinning around the straw when he feels the warm weight of a wing drape around his back.

"You owe me quite the story bitch." Tommy demands after he's swallowed his mouthful, arching an eyebrow at him, and Tubbo supposes he does, but so much has happened since the last time they spoke, since Tubbo messaged him, and he's a little nervous, voicing any of it.

"It's...kinda a long story." He mutters hesitantly, naively hoping that'll deter Tommy from asking again, that maybe he'll realize he needs to get going and Tubbo won't have to explain about *binary sun eyes and space dark hands and he wouldn't go with me*, but ever one to be contrary, Tommy shrugs and rattles his drink around, "S'okay, I got plenty of *balls* to get through."

"I- just...i-if you're *sure*, I-I know you probably have um, things you need to be do-"

"Tubbo. I have not seen you in over *three* rotations." Tommy cuts him off with sharply, blue eyes intense and serious like they only ever get when he's looking over maps and his instruments, and he reaches out, wraps one of his hands around one of Tubbo's, "I'm not going *anywhere* anytime soon."

Still the same bullheaded as always you know him could never forget him loyal to his core it's okay just tell him

"Okay..." Tubbo whispers, turning his hand over and lacing their fingers together, and just starts at the beginning. He talks briefly about the panic of Osiron, glosses over his shit repair job on the Eshachi and falling sick on Imuna, starts to stumble after that because things get increasingly more complicated and increasingly closer to the thing he doesn't want to think about, leaves his story riddled with holes and trialing off in unsure tones.

Fuck, this is so much harder than he thought, and Tubbo's taking a much needed break to drink his tea, mind scrambled but finally settling now that he thinks he's done, and then Tommy just *has* to ask, "What about the guy? That asshole you were flying, did'ya leave his body on Tjhia-Ya'whatever or something?"

Blaster pointed at his head black blood splattering across walls dripping down the front of his shirt not real never 'd come back for me- and Tubbo chokes on his drink, shooting a few of those jellied balls out of his mouth when Tommy whacks him hard on the back, exclaiming, "Holy shit! You good?"

"Y-Yeah..." Tubbo coughs, wiping leftover tea off his chin, but he must not sound convincing enough because Tommy's brows furrow and he leans in, ramming their shoulders together, voice soft and coaxing, "Hey...you know you can tell me anything right?"

Can I should I need to bury it not think about it hesitant eyes and pinched face course he'd never go with you all for nothing and I promised you, Tubbo thinks in a rush, worrying his lip with his teeth, and panic is starting to ease up his throat, cinching tight around his neck, feels like he's trapped.

He should go, get off this damn planet and leave everything behind, *could you do it could you leave him here fly off without those eyes looking at you from across the cockpit and that freezing hand in yours tail wrapped around your waist and laugh echoing in all the dark corners,* and a shaky sob escapes his mouth because he *can't* and he doesn't know *what to do*, "Oh *f-fuck*, Tommy, I-I messed up, I really *really* m-messed up a-and I-"

"Breathe, Tubbo, just- it's going to be okay, I'm here, we'll get it sorted." Tommy says with no hesitation, doesn't ask for any more details but is already on Tubbo's side one hundred percent, and he's always been like that, Tubbo realizes, has always made his own judgment calls.

Even right at the start, back when they first started training, he was the only one that'd sit next to Tubbo in the mess, didn't dump his tray on the floor and actually talked to him without all of the condescension every other recruit gave him, asked about his home in honest friendliness, never made him feel bad about where he came from.

He volunteered to be Tubbo's roommate immediately, would help him up from training mats like he was the same as the rest of them, four arms and all, never once treated him like he was second rate, like he didn't deserve to be there, and he stayed with him even after the news story broke, when Tubbo's mugshot was plastered all over billboards, took his tear filled explanation at face value and never doubted him for a second.

Tommy has always been there for him, has loved and trusted him through everything, and it feels like the biggest betrayal to admit to what's hanging on the tip of his tongue, *I found someone new a new friend a new partner a copilot*, and maybe it's because it's been so long since they've been together, has Tubbo emotionally compromised and more unsteady than usual, but Tommy squeezes his hand once and it comes tumbling out involuntarily.

It's all of it this time, *the truth*, every single thing he's kept bottled up for almost a month now, and Tommy's eyes blow wide, listening to Tubbo talk about Ranboo, *his Ranboo his*

gunner his partner, but instead of anger, instead of anything nasty and hateful and betrayed like Tubbo thinks, he actually starts to smile.

Tommy's still grinning actually, real and hopeful and so *deliriously* happy, when Tubbo gets to explaining what he asked, how Ranboo responded or- *didn't*, more accurately, flexes the wing around Tubbo and ruffles his hair, says warm and incredibly tender, "Dude, I am *so* happy for you."

"He didn't say yes, Tommy." Tubbo reminds him glumly, fiddling with his straw now that his tea is empty, stares out over the setting sun burnishing the buildings around them and wonders if Ranboo is done unpacking yet, if he's already forgetting about Tubbo.

I'm never going to forget you going to be with me the rest of my life fuck how am I going to do this-

Thoughts cutting off sharply though as Tommy scoffs and whaps his wing into Tubbo's back, "You didn't give'im a chance! Look, I don't know the guy, but from what you described, he's twitchy as *shit* man."

Tubbo hangs his head because Tommy's right, he *doesn't* know Ranboo, *but Tubbo does*, knew without a shadow of a doubt what that look on his face meant, *sorry but I don't think so thanks but no thanks*, and he presses a hand over where his heart rests, deep seated pain radiating out from the spot.

Fuck, he *does not* want to talk about this right now, it's still too fresh too new, like a wound that hasn't even had a chance to start healing, but Tommy's been pressuring him for rotations about getting a partner, and like a dog with a bone, he's refusing to drop it.

"You gotta give him time, let him think and sort through it, but I'd bet every credit in my account he's waiting for you back at the Eshachi." Tommy says confidently and it feels like Tubbo's heart is ripping in two, *no he's not no he's not didn't see his eyes didn't see his face sorry nothing personal*, and he grits his teeth as Tommy tips his head back and dumps the rest of his ice in his mouth, crunching through it loudly, "He'll go with you, Tubbo, I *guarantee* it. He'd be an idiot not to."

Something about the way Tommy says it, sure and even, like it's a given, like *anyone* would want to go with Tubbo when *he* wouldn't, has furious tears pricking in his eyes, all of the shaky, howling feelings he's kept a lid on for rotations rolling to the surface, and he whispers thickly, "*You* wouldn't."

"I- what-?"

"You wouldn't go with me, three rotations ago." Tubbo seethes, tips his head to the side and glares at Tommy, some of his anger billowing away at the hurt look on his face, the guilt that's dragging his usual happy eyes down, and regret washes in like a choking flood of gasoline, *always like this ruin everything you touch hurt the people you love just wish yourself out of existence-*

“I-I get it *okay*? Why would you *ever* want to go somewhere with m-me? Y-You’ve got a life here, have an actual future with promise, and I’m just a- *a nobody*.” Tubbo spits, sitting up fast and edging away from Tommy, pressing two hands into his eyes to try and staunch the tears, “A-And it’s the same f-for *him*, okay? He’s so smart, Tommy, he’s going to go s-so far and it’s- it’s not w-with me, I-I’m a *fuckup*, I-I’d only drag him down s-so it makes sense, okay? Y-You don’t need to say anything, *I get it*.”

“T-Tubbo I- i-it’s not what you think, I-”

“*S-Stop*, okay? I-I get it! I *understand*, y-you don’t have to expla-”

“Apparently I do!” Tommy snaps, and Tubbo peeks at him from between his fingers, color high on his cheeks and wings ruffling behind him like they only do when he’s really agitated, and Tommy fixes him with a hard stare, “Look, I stayed not because I didn’t *want* to go with you, but because I *had to*, okay? I can’t do what I need to do if I’m not part of Sunfleet admiralty.”

Somehow it hurts worse this way, that he stayed for *Sunfleet*, to *continue his career with Sunfleet*, the imperialist superpower that’s basically enslaved Tubbo’s planet and countless more. Actual anger snarls to life in his chest, the same vicious, spitting thing that drug him right into Wilbur’s clutches, and he looks at Tommy absolutely betrayed, “What’s *wrong* with you? I-I always thought you weren’t in it for the power! How can you support what they’re *doing*?”

“I don’t!” Tommy demands hotly, hand jerking out to the side in anger and Tubbo swivels to face him, matching him pace for pace in volume and dangerous emotions, “*You want to be an admiral!* The same fucking bastards that drive the fleet’s decisions! Do you not know what they’re doing out there? Or do you *just not care*-!”

“I’m not an idiot! Of course I know what’s really happening-”

“So you’re just *fucking okay with it then*? How could you support this! How *could you think what they do is okay*-!”

“None of what the fleet does is okay! *None of it!* But that’s why I stayed!” Tommy yells, cutting him off with the sheer volume of his voice, anger and frustration sparking in his eyes, but they’re completely overshadowed by the white hot *determination* burning like the strongest of stars, “The fleet is absolutely fucked a-and- and *out of line* all the time! It’s a fucking abomination and that’s why *I’ve* got to fix it!”

“*What-*” Tubbo breathes, feeling untethered and very lost all of a sudden, and Tommy cocks his chin back, nothing haughty about the gesture, just brash confidence and a steel will, “I’m going to change everything, Tubbo. The fleet is a monster as it is, but it has *such* potential to be a *real* force for good, a peace keeping force that actually helps people, and I’m going to be the one to do it.”

Any other time and Tubbo would chalk it up to Tommy’s usual braggadocio, but he knows him and *he’s dead serious*, chokes out in a strangled voice, “Are you *insane*? T-They’re *never*

going to let you do that. It's- to be an admiral you *have* to play their game, Tommy, it's- you're not going to make it with those kinda ideals."

"Attitudes like that is why nothing's changed." Tommy says evenly, and *fuck*, he's got *that* look on his face, *can't stop me now like to see you try get the fuck out of my way*, and Tubbo starts to panic, reaches out for his shoulders frantically and shakes him, "*Tommy. You're going to get yourself killed.*"

And he grins, too wide and too bold, has clearly gone insane without Tubbo around to keep an eye on him, tips his head to the side and declares, "I think I can take on a few stodgy old fucks, but thanks for the vote of confidence, Tubbs."

"Tommy *you stupid fuck!* it's not just *them*, it's the *emperor*, *it's the secret police*, he's not going to stand for-"

"Emperors don't last forever." Tommy shrugs nonchalantly like he didn't just spout treason, but the cocky light starts to fade from his eyes at whatever expression Tubbo is making, reaches a hand up to his shoulder and squeezes the one Tubbo has latched around him in a death grip, "I'm not gonna *kill* him, *relax*. He's just not going to live forever and I know the heir, we've talked a lot about...about the future. Eret's a good person, Tubbo, they share my ideals, so we're going to fix it, together."

Tubbo doesn't know what to say, for a second, is convinced he's not actually talking to Tommothy Innit, because this is heavy and real and Tommy has never really cared for those kind of things. He's always had Tommy in his head to be his stupidly loyal, funny, caring best friend that struggled to take things seriously, but Tubbo's seeing him in a new light like this.

He realizes then that the person he's thinking of has been frozen in time, a memory of someone that probably hasn't existed in a long while, and it's sobering, to know that Tubbo's not the only one that's changed, that they've both grown up in ways he hasn't noticed in their rotations apart.

"I have to do this, Tubbo...that's why I couldn't go with you." Tommy hushes, smiling at him sadly, setting sun creating a halo of light around his head and turning his blonde curls a shining gold, "I don't blame you for leaving, you had every right to, but if *good* people like you won't stay, nothings ever going to change."

It wasn't Tubbo, *it wasn't Tubbo*, Tommy stayed because of this insane dream of his, not because he didn't want to go, and Tubbo has to swallow a few times to clear his throat, frustrated that *rotations* worth of self hatred and doubting himself could've been avoided, "W-Why didn't you *tell me?*"

"I thought it'd make you feel guilty like...I was implying you were a bad person for leaving, I didn't want to hurt you...b-but I think I ended up doing it anyway." Tommy sighs long and drawn out, shoulders slumping in defeat as he looks at him with glassy eyes, "I'm really fucking sorry, Tubbo."

And it doesn't make everything better instantly, Tubbo still feels like he's had the shit kicked out of him, brain scrambling to resort and reorganize everything it knew, and it's hard, trying

to cram square pegs into round holes, but he thinks, maybe, he'll get the hang of it eventually, relaxes his grip around Tommy's shoulders.

"Thank you...for apologizing, I just- wish you'd told me sooner." Tubbo murmurs and isn't that the understatement of the century, but he can't change what's happened, Tommy said what he did because he thought it was the right thing to do, had no way of knowing how bad it'd haunt Tubbo for rotations to come.

And the only thing he can do now is decide how he wants to move forwards, but honestly, it's a really easy choice, and Tubbo uses the hands he has on Tommy to drag him forwards into a hug, tucking his face in the crook of his neck as he whispers thickly, "I forgive you."

"Thank you, you know I love you, you bitch." Tommy mumbles into the top of Tubbo's head, pointy end of his nose squashed into one of his antenna, arms wrapped tight across his back, and Tubbo smiles a little, works his fingers through soft, grey speckled wings, "Love you too, dickhead."

It's nice, being able to hug Tommy again, to hear his laughter and see the way his eyes crinkle when he smiles, but there's something missing, and Tubbo's really trying to figure out what that is when a hand runs across his back and there's no sharp prick of claws like he's expecting.

His entire mind is flooded then with every single memory of holding Ranboo, the long, wiry shape of him fitting better in Tubbo's arms than anybody else ever has, and his hands tighten into fists, slacken a second later because what's done is done, and he's tired of agonizing over it.

They head down not too long after that, because it really *was* getting late and Tommy had to get back before his commander found him and killed him, and Tubbo had to get the fuck out of dodge unless he wanted to spend the next however many years he had left rotting in a cold jailcell. Tommy drags him into one last hug right outside of the intergalactic port's gates, and Tubbo wraps his arms around him fiercely, trying to press everything about this moment into his mind for eternity.

"When I'm an admiral and Eret's on the throne, I'll clear your warrants, *I promise*." Tommy whispers thickly and Queens it hurts so much having to say goodbye again, Tubbo feels like he didn't get enough time, doesn't know if there ever will *be* enough time, snuffles and punches Tommy lightly on the arm, "Oh, wow, can't wait to be a free man in my *sixties*."

"Oh ew, *no*, I'm making admiral *waaaay* before I'm like- *old*. I'll be the sexiest commanding officer, just you wait, Tubbs, Imma be *dripping* in women."

Tubbo barks out a wet laugh, tips his head up to see the moronic expression Tommy's making, mouth pulled up in an ugly sneer and eyebrows wagging furiously, snorts and shakes his head, "*Queens*, you are just- actually the worst. Jack deserves a medal of honor for putting up with your crap."

"Ha, he'd probably agree with you. He's a good guy though...wonder if he'd come play revolutionary with me? He could be like my *fun little sidekick*, I could get him a unitard and

everything.” Tommy muses, rambling because he doesn’t want to go, trying to stall for time, but they’ve got to, and Tubbo’s the first one to step back this time, out of the shelter of Tommy’s wings with a crooked smile, “Yeah? Get him a hot pink, sparkly one and send me pics.”

“Righty-o, bossman.” Tommy flicks him a tremulous salute, edging back as well, towards the academy, towards gilded white washed walls and the better future he wants to build, leaves Tubbo standing at the gates that’ll take him out to the black endless void of the stars, to the freedom he’s fought to win for himself, “See you on the other side, Tubbo.”

“See you there, Tommy.” Tubbo says warmly, turns slowly with one last look over his shoulder, holds up two hands in farewell as Tommy does the same, opening his wings and taking off with a snap, disappearing into the wide, jeweled colored skies of Nirox.

Stuffing his hands in the pockets of his bomber, Tubbo heads back under the towering pillars that flank the front gate, skirts around shifty looking enforcers and keeps his face out of their line of sight as much as possible. The port’s crowded even this late in the day, it’s Mahari, it’s *Nirox*, center of the empire and all that, and Tubbo uses that to his advantage, ducking through large clumps of people with his head down.

He watches the white marble of the floor pass under his scuffed up boots, finally alone with his thoughts which isn’t as bad as he feared it would be, nothing comes scrabbling for him out of the darkness and it’s nice, having some peace and quiet for once. Seeing Tommy helped, soothed some of the anxiety and insecurities that’ve been wheezing out like the last noxious trails of smoke from an extinguishing fire, enough so that when Tubbo does get back to HQ, he thinks he’s finally going to start looking for a partner.

Its time, he thinks, to stop focusing on the past, letting it bog him down and keep him from moving forwards because Tubbo’s a pilot, looking back really shouldn’t be his thing, he’s good and he’s fast and he’s going to leave these thoughts and feelings that only weigh him down in his *startrails*.

Tubbo grins a little to himself, feeling better than he has in a few days and tips his head up now that he’s away from the front entrance, freezes in his tracks with white noise ringing in his ears seeing the Eshachi in front of him, *can’t be shouldn’t be you’ve lost it*, the figure on the cargo ramp, the one swinging long legs back and forth bag dumped at his side dark head swiveling in his direction *binary sun eyes*-

And Tubbo doesn’t think, takes off running and plows full steam into Ranboo, nearly takes them both over, but Ranboo throws a foot out and keeps them upright, arms going tight around his back, tail snapping and coiling around legs.

You came you’re here you waited, Tubbo latches onto him like a limpet, burying his face in the soft material of his shirt, and almost cries feeling the prick of claws along his back, digging in sharply above his wings, laughs short of breath and wild, “Y-You’re here! You’re-y-you- I-I- didn’t think you’d- t-that you *wanted*-”

“I forgive you.”

Tubbo shuts up immediately, lifts his head in a stupor to see Ranboo looking down at him with honesty and little fear in his eyes, but he's *trusting* Tubbo with this, with himself, and it makes Tubbo's nose sting with the hot prick of tears at this precious thing he's been given. He moves one of his hands up to cup Ranboo's cheek, drags a thumb under his red eye, *one in a million no one else like him your friend your gunner your part-* and Ranboo leans into the touch, tilts his head down without any prompting whatsoever.

"I'm sorry it took me so long..." Ranboo whispers, rocking their foreheads together while Tubbo's antenna run over his lone horn, *incense smoke and stardust and the great beyond and home*, that real, genuine smile Tubbo's come to adore so much twitching his lips up, "But I don't wanna be alone anymore, Bo."

"I'm here, Boo, and I'm never going anywhere else. You won't have to be alone ever again." Tubbo promises around a few wayward tears, but they're happy this time, elation glowing so strongly in his chest, there has to be light spilling out between his ribs, heat stuttering when Ranboo pulls back enough to knock their foreheads together, trilling deep in the back of his throat, "And neither will you."

The cargo ramp is retracted, hatch doors closing and locking with a muffled boom, last of the stuff stowed away, all systems operational, EC sending power to the engines, turbines whirring to life, their delightful thrumming song buzzing up through Tubbo's hands where they're wrapped confidently around the controls of the Eshachi, Mahari's space port disappearing below them, the wide, yawning maw of space opening before him like the greatest of gifts.

"Come on-" Tubbo says, turning to look across the cockpit, at Ranboo, with his glowing eyes and shy smile bearing sharp fangs, at his best friend, *his partner*, and Tubbo can't stop smiling, hand flexing around the throttle, about to send them streaking into lightspeed, into whatever their future holds, "Let's go home."

Chapter End Notes

Good lord what a ride.

Sorry for the monster 'chapter' but I figure y'all are kinda used to it at this point soooooo, if not hi yes hello welcome to my general nonsense glad to have ya.

Thank you to everyone that's left kudos or comments or done art or screamed at me on twitter! Y'all mean the world to me <3

Anyway! I'll be taking a break for the rest of the month, have a small little Christmas surprise in mind, but next feature-length fic will be January sometime? Maybe? We shall see!

As always, thank you for reading, see you on the other side.

-Hellen

Come check me out on [twitter](#) if you wanna scream at me.

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Hiya! I'm working on a book rn and if you'd like to learn more about it, [head on over to tumblr!](#)

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