

If I Lie, Maybe I'll Believe It

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Characters:	Niki Nihachu , Jack Manifold , Foolish Gamers , Foolish (Video Blogging RPF) , Cara CaptainPuffy , Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF) , Hannah Hannahxxrose , Sam Awesamdude , Eret (Video Blogging RPF) , Alexis Quackity , TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Wilbur Soot , Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , Toby Smith Tubbo , Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , Aimee Aimsey (Video Blogging RPF)
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Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Corrupting untruth
Collections:	Sleepy Bois inc foster works , I love sbi fics , Fics I'm obsessed with , Fics that have (and continue to) ruin me , MMR , fanfics that hurt me but i love them (authors should pay for my therapy) , Phil's the kind of a guy to look at the child and ask "Is anyone gonna adopt them?" and not wait for an answer , maybe this is an obsession , the reason i'm an insomniac , Sleeping With My Best Friend's Wife Makes Minecraft 100% More Funnier , Stories that I love , kettles favs , listen it's 3am and i'm crying i

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If I Lie, Maybe I'll Believe It

by [weepingvirtue](#)

Summary

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At sixteen years old, Tommy knew so many things.

He knew that people were predictable and selfish. He knew not to trust, not to take, and not to get comfortable for too long. He knew that the concept of family was as fake as the highlights in his last foster mother's hair.

Tommy had known for years that life was painful and had no extra love for some ratty foster kid like him. He knew that it was him and his copy of The Odyssey against the whole world. He knew that he only had to survive long enough to make it to his eighteenth birthday before he could escape.

But when Tommy ends up fostered in the Watson household completely by chance, he finds that maybe he never knew anything in the first place.

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or, the one in which Tommy Innit has never really experienced love, family, or belonging, and is suddenly surrounded by it all at once.

Notes

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

House Twenty-Three

Chapter Summary

Tommy is quickly swept from one home to another. What else is new?

Chapter Notes

Chapter CW: referenced child abuse

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

Fuck was the only thing to cross Tommy's mind before he crashed onto the concrete.

Vaguely, he registered the throbbing pain in almost every part of his body, screaming in the background, and the familiar stench of stale alcohol. When the ringing in his ears faded, he also heard the distant sound of sirens. Instinctively, his hands bunched the fabric of his shirt protectively. He was always getting in trouble for having blood on his clothes.

He closed his eyes and waited for the next blow.

Lots of yelling and one trip to the hospital later, Tommy was sitting in the passenger seat of his social worker's car.

He was tired and achy and still pumped through with adrenaline from the fight with his previous foster father. Tommy didn't like violence, usually. There was just something about breaking a bottle over one of his foster sisters' heads that made him see red. In all fairness, he *did* throw the first punch. On the other hand, adults weren't supposed to hit sixteen year olds *back*.

Or give them concussions.

His social worker, Hannah, was talking in a low, annoyed voice over her bluetooth as they drove. It was almost soothing to Tommy. It wasn't the first time he'd sat here as she discussed his options without his say, and it wouldn't be the last. He let her voice become background noise as he stared out the window. It was a clear night and the neon lights of Brownford blurred through his concussed eyesight. He stared anyway. He watched the place

he'd been living in for five whole weeks pass by in the rearview mirror as they got onto the highway. It was nearly empty, but that didn't surprise Tommy. It was horrendously late at night, or he guessed now it was horrendously early in the morning. He could just barely see the beginning of sunrise on the horizon. It was rare for Hannah to pick him up so late, but when she had arrived at the hospital with wide eyes the only words he caught were *emergency placement* before he was whisked away.

He didn't get to say goodbye to his foster siblings. Five of them, all varying degrees of much younger than him. Too young for the system to have *already* failed them so badly. He regretted leaving them. He wished he could've protected them longer.

Hannah sighed and tapped the device in her ear, and Tommy knew that meant she had hung up whatever call she was on. She was quiet for several moments before she let out another tired sigh and spared a glance over at him. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I really thought that home would be good for you."

Tommy rolled his eyes. Every home she had placed him in was considered "good for him." Every home had left a new kind of scar. This last home, it seemed, left a physical one- with the barely healed cuts of beer bottle glass on his arms and scrapes all across his skin from the concrete he kissed earlier. Not counting the nice bruise blooming on the back of his head. "In fairness to you, I did provoke him," he muttered, his voice slick with fake amusement. Hannah saw right through it. She always did.

"Abusive asshole. He'll be doing time. I only wish I was called in sooner," she said. Her voice trembled in anger. Tommy closed his eyes against the sound. They spent a few moments in silence before Hannah must have glanced over at him again. "Hey. Eyes opened, Tom. You know better than me that you can't sleep after a concussion."

Tommy scoffed and let his eyes slide open again. They had gotten off an exit and were now driving along the coastline. He could see the ocean in the distance. "Couldn't sleep if I tried," he mumbled, keeping his eyes out the window.

Hannah sighed. "They've found a nice emergency placement for you, Tom. Single parent, fostered twice before and adopted both of them. The Watson house has a real nice track record with kids like you," she said gently.

Tommy rolled his eyes again. "Problem children," he deadpanned. He knew that wasn't what she said, but it was what she *meant*. He'd been in the system for eight years now and he'd gone through more homes than he could count on both hands. The longest was just over a year. The shortest was four hours.

"You're not a problem child, Tom. We both know you're a good kid," Hannah said in a scolding tone. Tommy scoffed at that, keeping his eyes locked on the horizon. The adrenaline from hours ago was slowly fading, and now he only felt angry and a little sick. A headache pounded behind his eyelids and he let them fall closed again.

"Where are the kids going?" He asked. He tried to keep his voice steady, but he couldn't help the shake at the end.

If Hannah noticed the crack, she didn't say anything. "They'll be placed at emergency placement homes or back at the group home. Some will stay together, some won't. You know how it goes, Tom. You don't need to worry about it. You're not their parent," she said softly. Her voice was gentle but firm, like she was putting an end to the topic before it even started.

If possible, Tommy felt even sicker. But he was far too tired to argue further. "I was probably the closest thing to a parent they've had all their lives," he muttered angrily under his breath. If Hannah heard, she didn't reply.

They drove for the better part of an hour along the coast. Tommy knew it would be faster on the highway, but he had a sneaking suspicion that Hannah took this route because she knew he enjoyed the view.

Little things, he reminded himself.

The sky was pale blue with morning air before Hannah spoke again. "You *will* like this home, Tom. I know it. It's a nice small neighborhood, lots of friendly faces. And your foster brothers will be older than you. Twenty and eighteen. There'll be no one for you to watch over and worry yourself with," she said gently as they pulled into a suburban neighborhood.

He kept his mouth shut. Older siblings just meant more people to gang up on him, side with an already abusive parent, and make his life more of a living hell. *Adopted* foster siblings, at that. They were already a permanent part of the family. They didn't have to worry over every move about being sent away like Tommy did. And in Tommy's experience, adopted foster siblings were meaner- more protective of the family they earned and tried harder to get him sent away. Hannah didn't need to hear his pessimism.

He kept his voice steady and light. "I'll try to last more than a month this time," he said sarcastically. Hannah didn't appreciate the humor and grimaced instead.

"How about this? If this house lasts *two* months, I'll get you a new book from the bookstore. Hardcover and everything. Anything you want. How does that sound?" She said in a falsely upbeat voice, like she was talking to a toddler. Tommy scowled. He wasn't a child, and he didn't need to be bribed. It didn't matter what she offered. He wouldn't last long here anyway.

But he *did* want a new book. It had been a few years since he got one he managed to keep from house to house. The one in his backpack was ripped and stained, falling apart at the seams from reading and *rereading* until Tommy had memorized every word. And a hardcover would be satisfying to own. Something nice that he could call his and his alone.

He nodded.

Hannah grinned as they pulled into the driveway of a two-story house. Tommy studied it carefully. He hadn't realized they had been so close. If he wasn't concussed, he would've been memorizing street names and directions. It didn't hurt to know where he was when it came time to run.

The house looked old but well taken care of. White wood and grey stone. Green shutters on the windows. A brick chimney. A wooden porch with a bench welcomed him, with several bird houses overhead. The front lawn was a healthy green, obviously well attended to. Past the white fence, Tommy could see a large backyard with trees and maybe... a garden? He cringed. Another chore for him to take care of. The front door was opened and the porch light was on, like they were expecting them.

It was then that Tommy remembered it was nearly 5:30 in the morning. Hannah had probably called the house hours ago to ask about placing him. He had probably woken them up. He cringed again. Way to start off on the right foot. In Tommy's opinion, a sleep-deprived foster parent was almost as bad as a drunk or angry one. He jumped when Hannah slammed her car door. He hadn't realized she got out. He scrambled to follow her, slinging his backpack over his shoulder as she made her way to the front door.

They climbed the porch stairs and she knocked on the glass door. Tommy could see into the house clearly. The door led to a white living room with a grey sofa and loveseat and a brown rug. A glass coffee table was covered in stray papers and two coffee mugs. A television hung on the wall and he spotted several gaming systems that he was sure he wouldn't be allowed to touch on the cabinet underneath.

A figure suddenly blocked Tommy's view and he swore at himself again, hoping he wouldn't be accused of peeping before he was even let inside.

The door opened and they were greeted by a blond man in a green sweater and grey sweatpants. He was about medium height, but Tommy towered over him. He was far used to being the tallest in the household anyway since he hit a growth spurt when he was fourteen. Perhaps most ridiculous, he wore a green and white striped bucket hat on his head. Tommy stopped himself from snorting.

"Hannah! Welcome!" The man ushered them inside quickly. "Come in, come in. You must be Tom! I'm Phil. I'm very pleased you'll be staying with us." He smiled kindly, and Tommy tried his best to return the gesture. No use in antagonizing his foster parent so soon, after all. The man, Phil, looked tired but excited. He was far too happy for Tommy's liking. It only meant Phil was a good liar. He wondered how long it would take before the facade dropped. Phil led them through the living room into a kitchen-dining room area. Tommy wasn't entirely surprised to already find someone sitting at the wooden dining table.

The boy looked up and smiled kindly when they entered. He had messy brown hair- most likely mussed from sleep- and large circle glasses pressed to his nose. He wore a yellow tshirt and black sweats. It was very clear to Tommy that he had awoken the family from their rest, and they hadn't changed from their pajamas. The boy looked exhausted- purple bags under his eyes and his hands wrapped around a mug of what Tommy could only assume was coffee.

Phil stopped in front of the table. "Tom, this is Wilbur. He's my oldest. Wil, why don't you show Tom to his room. I'm sure he's very tired from his travels," he said happily. Tommy grimaced inwardly and tried not to let it show too much on his face. He was already exhausted of this family and their false positivity.

Wilbur nodded with a small smile and rose from the table. Tommy stared and he hoped his surprise didn't show. Wilbur was at *least* three inches taller than him- maybe more. The man was a giant. Tommy took note and tried not to be too disappointed. He was used to having the height advantage in a fight. He would have to adjust if Wilbur decided to strike.

"It's nice to meet you, Tom," Wilbur said in a warm voice.

Tommy took his chance. It was easier to correct the sibling than the parent. Though, with older siblings sometimes there wasn't much difference. "It's Tommy," he said quietly. He braced himself quickly, waiting for a scoff or maybe a light smack for disrespect, but Wilbur only smiled wider.

"Tommy, then," Wilbur said. "Let me show you to your room so you can rest, and then Techno and I can give you a tour of the place when you don't look dead on your feet, yeah?" His foster brother seemed genuine. Tommy let his tensed muscles relax a bit. He nodded and Wilbur brushed past him, leading him to a staircase.

Hannah grabbed his shoulder before he could slip away. "Remember to call if you need, Tom. For anything. I mean it," she said firmly. Tommy nodded, if only to get her away. He was exhausted by now, basically swaying on his feet. The fight, the pain, the hospital, the grief of losing even *more* foster siblings he cared for and relocating to a new family all in one night was starting to catch up to him. Hannah glanced at Phil. "And make sure he's being woken up every four hours for his concussion. It's dangerous to sleep longer than that until it starts to heal. I have his medication for you."

Phil nodded as Tommy broke away and followed Wilbur upstairs.

It was dark in the upper half of the house, which was nice. The lights downstairs hurt Tommy's eyes. Usually, he would be worried about not seeing his surroundings, not knowing the layout of the house before he fell asleep. But right now he was far too tired to care. All he wanted was to crash on any soft surface- or even a floor, really- and sleep forever. Wilbur led him down a hallway with carpeted floors, which Tommy liked. Less creaking meant he could sneak around easier to get food or supplies.

"Techno went back to sleep an hour after Hannah called. Sorry about that. He does want to meet you, he just has work in the morning," Wilbur explained as they approached a white door. He paused before continuing. "Techno is my younger brother. Sorry, should've started with that. This is the bathroom." He opened the door to reveal a very basic bathroom with white tiling. "You can find anything you need under the cabinet. Soap, toothpaste, toothbrush, shampoo- the works. Towels and linens are in that closet there." He gestured to the thin white door across from the sink. He continued on to the next door down the hall, leaving the bathroom door opened. "This is your room."

Wilbur opened the door to reveal a very plain bedroom. A white dresser, desk and chair, nightstand and a twin sized bed. There was a window with grey curtains across from the door. Tommy could see that it led to a small roof that he probably wouldn't be allowed to climb on and beyond that, the backyard.

Tommy blinked. There was only one bed. “This is my room?” He repeated, not entirely understanding. He couldn’t quite remember the last time he was offered a room to himself, let alone an emergency placement home. It must’ve been Puffy’s home- house number sixteen? Seventeen? The only house he lasted a year in and the only house to offer him adoption papers before he was inevitably kicked out again. And before that? Tommy couldn’t even recall.

Wilbur laughed. “All yours, man. Room is completely yours for as long as you stay. There’s some extra blankets and pillows in the closet if you need them. We would’ve gotten some clothes for you if we had more of a warning you were coming. There’s a lock on the door. Feel free to use it when you want, but maybe not tonight just to be safe with your concussion. We’ll need to check on you every couple of hours.”

Tommy’s mouth went dry. *A lock?*

Tommy had never had a lock before.

He let his backpack hit the ground. Wilbur frowned when it didn’t make much noise. “If you want, you can get ready for bed and I’ll bring you up some water and maybe an aspirin. I’m sure your headache is killer,” he said, his voice suddenly quiet.

Tommy nodded numbly and Wilbur disappeared, closing the door behind him. He blinked, taking in the room. *His* room. With a lock. He swallowed dryly and pulled his only pair of pajamas out of his bag- a thin pair of red flannel pants and a white tshirt, wrinkled and faded to a soft grey. He had changed quickly when there was a knock on the door.

Tommy waited. The door didn’t open.

He licked his lips. “Uh... come in?” He tried, a little unsure.

The door opened and Wilbur smiled back at him, holding a glass of water and a white bottle of pills. He entered quickly and placed both on the nightstand before turning to look at Tommy. “Get some rest. One of us will wake you up in a couple hours to check your concussion and see about your medication,” he said kindly.

Tommy scowled. “If you gave me an alarm clock, I could do it myself,” he argued, his voice much harsher than intended.

Wilbur just smiled. “It’s alright. We’ll take care of it. Get some sleep,” he insisted. And with that, he was gone. The door was closed.

Tommy was alone. In his own room. His own room with a *lock*.

He swallowed and got into the bed quickly. The mattress was soft and it made Tommy uncomfortable. The bed was only made with thin sheets and a single pillow- the extras still in the closet- but Tommy didn’t bother getting more. He chose to shiver under the sheet and stare at the ceiling for a moment before his eyes began to droop.

He knew in the morning he would have to pay for the kindness they were showing him. After Hannah left. When Phil's smile dropped and Wilbur stopped doing favors for free. He knew he would have to earn this room with the lock and he would have to make it up to them for waking them up so early in the morning. He knew he would be repaying them for checking on him during the night and keeping them up even later.

If he got to keep his own room- his own room with a *lock*- he didn't care. He would repay them every second he was here.

He let himself drift to an uneasy sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!

I'm so excited to be posting this fic! I actually have most of this story written already as its been a passion project of mine for months now. It'll be updated frequently and will probably end up around 30-35 chapters.

I'm still getting used to ao3! Any feedback would be greatly appreciated <3

Rules

Chapter Summary

Tommy learns the rules of his new environment- both real and unsaid. Also, the Watson brothers are weird.

Chapter Notes

Chapter CW: References to past abuse

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

There was a knock at the door.

Tommy was awake in an instant. He was a jumpy foster kid, after all. He could wake up to the slightest creak on the floor. But for a moment, Tommy was lost. He was in an unfamiliar room in an unfamiliar bed. His heart jumped to his throat before the door opened to reveal Phil.

His heart didn't relax, but it did slow a bit.

Phil smiled gently at him. Sunlight poured through the window. There was no clock in his room, but Tommy figured it must be late morning now. He squinted in the light. "Sorry to wake you, mate. Just checking you're still alive and all that. And to give you your medication. You can go back to sleep after," Phil said softly. He held out two white pills in his hand.

Tommy took them in his own shaky hands. Phil grabbed the water glass off the nightstand to hand to him, but Tommy had already swallowed the pills dry. Phil blinked, eyebrows furrowing a bit, before setting the water back down.

"How're you feeling, Tommy? Can you tell me your full name? The date?" Phil asked gently.

Tommy tried not to roll his eyes. This wasn't his first time with a concussion. It wouldn't be his last. *Don't provoke the foster parent.* "I feel fine. Just tired. Long night, y'know? My name is Thomas Innit. Today is June 16th," he said. He knew it was important to ask basic questions to people with concussions to make sure they weren't confused or disoriented. He tried not to sound ungrateful, but he wanted nothing more than to drift back to sleep.

Phil nodded with a satisfied smile. "Alright then. Get some sleep, Tommy. I'll be back in a few hours."

The door shut. Tommy groaned and flopped back onto the pillow.

The next time Tommy woke up, it was Wilbur knocking at the door.

He was already walking in when Tommy blinked open his eyes. His breathing picked up significantly when he saw his foster brother approaching him, but relaxed slightly when the brunet only held out two white pills.

Tommy sat up and took them quickly.

Wilbur didn't glance at the untouched water. "Can you tell me the name of your social worker, Tommy?" He asked carefully.

"Hannah Rose."

Wilbur nodded, satisfied, and left without another word.

Tommy went back to sleep.

The last time Tommy woke up, there was more than one voice outside his door. There was a quiet knock and he sat up quickly, not wanting to be caught off guard again. The door opened to reveal Wilbur and another figure behind him, talking in low tones. Tommy didn't catch any of the words and when they noticed he was awake, they shut up quickly.

Wilbur smiled as he walked inside. "Tommy, this is Techno. The elusive *other* Watson son," he said brightly as he held out Tommy's pills.

Tommy swallowed the medication as he took Techno in. He was shorter than Wilbur and probably Tommy as well, though he was still obviously tall and much more built than both of them. He wore a white button up and brown slacks- a sharp distinction from Wilbur's green sweater and jeans. He was pale and clearly stoic. Most startling about him was his long, bright pink hair tied back into a neat braid down his back. When he looked at Tommy through his thin framed glasses, there was no obvious kindness. Another sharp contrast from Wilbur- who was all seemingly smiles and sunshine. Tommy allowed himself to glare at the younger Watson brother. If there was someone to be scared of here, Techno was most certainly among them. It wasn't the first time Tommy had met a foster brother who was all apathy and cold violence. He was remarkably good at reading people, and he could tell right

away that Techno was the fighter in the house- if the bruises on his knuckles and white scar on his neck were any indication.

Techno raised an eyebrow at his harsh gaze but said nothing.

Wilbur's voice cut through the silence. "Can you tell us where you are, Tommy?" He asked kindly.

Tommy frowned. "I don't know." Then he paused at the brothers' matching frowns. "That isn't from the concussion. I just don't know. I was kinda out of it in the car. I could tell you my last house was in Brownford, if that's any consolation," he explained quickly.

Wilbur shrugged. "Good enough for me. I know you're probably still exhausted, but dinner is ready downstairs if you're hungry," he said gently. Techno remained silent behind him.

Tommy paused. He *was* hungry. It had been more than two days since he was allowed to eat at his last foster house, and while he had gone longer than that before, the stress of last night had certainly drained his energy. Eating would be good. But going downstairs with them would also mean the grace period would be over. He would get his tour, probably a long list of chores, and a number of house rules and punishments that went along with them.

Wilbur and Techno waited patiently. Tommy shrugged. "I could eat," he muttered.

The quicker he learned the house rules, the faster he could start paying them back for the first night's kindness.

Wilbur smiled as Tommy got to his feet, albeit a little shakily. He turned and led the way out of the room, Techno close behind him. Tommy followed them down the stairs. The smell of pasta filled the air and Tommy's mouth watered. Had it been two days since he lost food privileges at the Johnson house? Maybe it was longer than he thought.

The dining table was set with four plates. Phil grinned at them as he left the kitchen, carrying a large bowl of pasta with oven mitts. He set it down on the dining table quickly. "Good to see you up, Tommy! How're you feeling?" He asked.

Tommy's heart skipped a beat when Phil looked at him and he tried to force the panic away. "I'm fine. Thank you for checking on me as I slept. That was very kind," he said politely. He put on his best parent voice.

Phil ate it up. "I'm glad to hear it! And it was no trouble at all. We're glad you're okay. Hannah gave us quite a scare, waking us up so late to ask about emergency placement. Must've been an ugly house, huh?" He said as he walked back into the kitchen.

Tommy stiffened and the back of his head throbbed, as if reminding him. "Sorry to bother you so late," he offered weakly.

"*Dad*," Techno warned.

Phil's head popped back out of the kitchen. "Oh! I'm sorry, Tommy. Obviously you don't want to talk about the last house. Ignore me. And it was certainly no bother. We'd take you in

any time of day,” he said with a gentle smile.

Tommy doubted that was true, but let it be.

Wilbur and Techno sat down at the table as Phil brought out another large bowl, this time with salad. Tommy stood still in the doorway, his hands twitching. He wanted to ask if he could help Phil, just to get a jump start on whatever payment the family was owed, but wasn't sure if Phil wanted that. Some foster parents got offended when you tried to interfere too much. Some just preferred you to sink into the background. There were two open seats at the table, but Tommy didn't dare sit. He didn't want to accidentally take Phil's spot. He knew some parents were touchy about that. He winced when he noticed Wilbur and Techno staring at him. He wished this house was a little clearer. He could usually make out the way a house worked right away, but this family was blurred a bit. Whatever. He would figure it out soon enough.

Wilbur frowned. “Tommy, come sit,” he said, gesturing to the chair next to him. Tommy almost sighed in relief, sitting down quickly in his assigned spot. He sat up straight, put his hands in his lap, and kept his mouth shut tight. Not that it mattered much. It seemed as if Techno and Wilbur were already in conversation.

“-and Quackity called,” Wilbur was saying with a tight smile.

Techno rolled his eyes. “I don't care what he has to say,” he said gruffly. His voice was strangely monotone. Completely opposite from Wilbur's animated tone. It seemed like the two brothers balanced each other nicely. No room for a third.

“You can't stay mad at him forever, you know,” Wilbur said with a teasing smile.

It only made Techno's scowl deepen. “Watch me,” he growled.

Tommy filed the information away.

Phil laughed as he took his seat. “You know your brother is stubborn as a mule, Wil. I don't know why you push him on this,” he said lightly. He glanced at Tommy. “I didn't see any allergies in your file, so I hope pasta is okay. If you don't like it, I can make something else. Just let me know. Help yourself.”

Tommy stared, his head spinning. He hated new houses. He hated not knowing the rules. “How much can I have?” He asked. His mouth was dry again.

Phil frowned. “You're a growing teenager. Take as much as you need. I can always make more,” he said.

Tommy stared at him for a moment before Techno broke the silence with a snort. He reached over to start serving himself pasta. “As much as you need as long as I get enough,” he said in his monotone. Wilbur laughed, but Tommy only nodded and shrunk back into himself. He couldn't tell if Techno was joking or not- and he couldn't risk it. Not so early, anyway. If the other three noticed the change, they didn't mention it.

Tommy took a medium portion after the other three served themselves and he tried to refrain from eating it all at once. Some foster parents got mad when you ate too fast or too slow. Some would think he was ungrateful. Some would take away his plate. He tried his best to follow their pace. The Watson's made pleasant conversation throughout dinner. They asked about Phil's day. Apparently he was a writer and editor for an office in town, though he mostly worked at home. Then they talked about Techno's day. Tommy learned that he had just graduated high school a few weeks ago, just before his eighteenth birthday, and was now working at the local library before he started college. Judging from the conversation, Techno liked his job and liked books. Tommy filed the information away. He could use it to get on his foster brother's good side.

Tommy also learned that Techno did not like kids, judging by his rant on the town kids visiting the library.

"Stupid middle schoolers," he grumbled. "Keep messing up the adult section. They're not even *allowed* in the adult section."

Wilbur chuckled and turned to Tommy playfully. "Don't let him fool you. Techno babysits half the kids on the block when he's asked. He's a total softie," he laughed. Tommy's white knuckle grip on his fork lessened just a bit.

"Little kids are innocent and adorable. Teenagers are menaces," Techno argued.

Tommy couldn't help but agree.

When dinner was over, Tommy was the first from his seat. He brought his plate into the kitchen to rinse off in the sink before doubling back to help Phil bring in the serving bowls.

Phil thanked him just as Wilbur teased, "*Suck up.*"

Wilbur was smiling but Tommy's heart sank. He still helped Phil wash the dishes and wrap the leftovers, however. He'd rather be on the foster parent's good side than the foster sibling's. At least the foster siblings didn't have the direct power to send him back to the group home. Usually.

When the counter was clean and dishes were in the dishwasher, Phil turned to Tommy. "Do you want to go over some house rules, mate? And then Wilbur and Techno can give you a tour," he said with a gentle smile.

Tommy nodded eagerly. He hated not knowing the rules. And he hated not knowing the quickest escape routes in a house.

They sat down across from each other in the dining room as Wilbur and Techno argued in the living room. Tommy didn't pay them much attention once he realized the conflict revolved around Mario Kart placements. He probably didn't need to worry about that fight blowing out of hand. Probably.

Phil smiled and Tommy hated him for it. He hated that Phil smiled so easily. He wished he would just drop the act already so Tommy could at least know what to expect. "There's a lot

of freedom in this house. You're almost an adult, and I trust you to make good decisions. There's some basic things. Don't enter people's rooms without asking. Respect me and your foster brothers and the house. If you leave the house, let one of us know. I know it's summer and you're a teenager and you'll want to be out late, so let's say curfew at 11:30? I think that's fair and if you disagree let me know- we can discuss it. Try to keep things neat. We don't expect you to do chores right now with your concussion and getting used to the house and all, but once some time passes we might ask you to clean a few plates or vacuum occasionally. Nothing big. Freedom and privacy are important here. You can leave or lock your door as you please- though if I feel you're a danger to yourself or others I might need to tread on these rules a bit. If you have a problem with someone in the house, or any one of these rules, feel free to let me know. We can discuss it and come to a resolution," Phil explained.

Tommy blinked. That was... generous. This was definitely one of the least strict houses he'd ever been to. He was starting to think he understood what kind of house this was. Phil was the type of foster parent that didn't like to lay down the *unspoken* rules. He would let Tommy flounder until he could properly blame him for something. And then Tommy could be punished.

He swallowed dryly. "And what if I... break a rule?" He asked.

Phil frowned and Tommy winced, though his foster dad didn't seem to notice. "Well... I suppose we'll discuss that if it happens," he said gently.

Ah. So that's what kind of house this was. Phil didn't like to talk about discipline. Some foster parents didn't. Some parents wanted you to take what was given and never mention a word. Especially not in front of adopted siblings.

Tommy nodded just as Wilbur and Techno reentered the room. The oldest was scowling. "Phil," he whined. "Tell Techno the best Mario Kart map."

Phil smiled. "Rainbow road," he said easily. That, apparently, was *not* the right answer as both brothers let out a noise of indignation and Wilbur threw his hands in the air in frustration. Tommy winced at their reactions, but Phil didn't seem annoyed at the disrespect. Instead he chuckled at his boys. Maybe it was easier when you were a permanent part of the family- no chance of being sent back. Phil glanced at Tommy. "Boys, why don't you give Tommy a tour of the house?"

They both nodded and Tommy stood.

"Your hands are shaking," Techno observed quietly. Tommy grimaced and looked down. Indeed they were. He quickly shoved them into the pockets of his flannel pants when he noticed everyone looking at them.

He gave a forced grin. "Always am, big man. Only time I'm not shaking is when I'm asleep," he said lightly, hoping to get the attention off him.

Techno paused and then shrugged. Tommy followed the boys out of the room.

The tour was simple. Wilbur showed him the dining room, kitchen, and living room. He showed Tommy the gaming devices, offering to let him play which he politely declined. He didn't want to take too many privileges before he got settled. They showed him the bathroom and then the garage, which was jam packed with bins and boxes of miscellaneous items that didn't belong in the house. Among other things, Tommy spotted fencing swords, broken guitars and... smaller guitars- *ukuleles*?- and some beat up camping equipment. What a weird family.

Tommy followed them upstairs. The hallway was T shaped with six closed doors. He already knew the bathroom and his own. Wilbur opened the first door on his left. "This is my room," he explained. Wilbur and Techno both entered, but Tommy studied it carefully from the doorway. He didn't want to intrude on his foster brother's space, even if he was invited inside. The room was clearly well lived in- a complete opposite of Tommy's plain space. Posters of music groups and pictures of people covered the walls. Tommy spotted photos of Wilbur and Techno, Wilbur and Phil, and many others he didn't recognize. The full sized bed was covered in a grey blanket and more pillows than Tommy could count. Two bean bag chairs sat in front of the closet door. Almost every surface, including the desk, dresser, and floor, was completely covered in stray papers, used coffee mugs, and trinkets. Textbooks and opened notebooks were stacked on the desk. He spotted a keyboard pushed against the wall under the window with a wooden ukulele perched on top of it. Next to it were three different guitars- two acoustic and one electric- all three covered in colorful stickers and sharpie.

Tommy blinked. So music was Wilbur's vice. He filed the information away.

Wilbur smiled warmly. "Very messy, I know. I guess I just thrive in the chaos," he joked.

Techno snorted. "That's one way to describe it," he said with a fond smile. Wilbur glared playfully at him and elbowed him in the ribs as he made his way back out the door. Tommy stood completely still, taking it in. It was odd to see them so... domestic. Completely calm and guard completely down. He had to remind himself that they were once foster kids too. If he squinted, he *might* be able to see the roughness behind their smiles that foster homes often left behind, but right now he saw nothing. It must be nice to be adopted, he thought, and not have to worry about anything at all. Tommy wondered briefly if they even remembered the foster system and what it did. He wondered how long ago they were adopted, what houses and tragedies they saw, and if the system had supported them where it had failed him. Well, obviously the system worked in their favor. They were happy and adopted, and they clearly had a good relationship with each other and maybe even Phil. Tommy followed the brothers back into the hall silently as they bickered good naturedly. He wondered if adoption changed them completely or if they were always like this, even in the system.

He thought of Puffy's house. He pushed the thought away quickly.

He followed the brothers to the next door, which he was told was Techno's room. His pink haired foster brother opened the door to once again reveal a very lived-in room. Unlike Wilbur's room, Techno was the vision of neatness. Not a single stray paper or book out of place. Techno's room had a large bookshelf against the far wall, absolutely packed full of books of all different varieties. Tommy stared at it with a hint of jealousy, remembering the beat up paperback in his backpack and Hannah's promise of a hardcover of his very own. He

wondered if Techno would let him look through his collection. He doubted it. Techno's twin bed was made tightly with brown covers and exactly two pillows placed at the head. On the walls were pictures of family and friends, gold medals, and an intricate *metal sword*.

Techno caught Tommy staring at it and chuckled. "I fenced in school, won a few tournaments. Phil got me the sword as a present when he officially adopted me," he explained.

Wilbur smiled at Tommy's wide eyes. "He wrestled in school too," he supplied unhelpfully. Tommy nodded, trying not to look unnerved. So his instincts were right, then. Techno was definitely the fighter and someone to be on the lookout for. He didn't doubt that the younger Watson brother could seriously hurt him if he wanted to.

Wilbur opened the next door across the wall. This time, none of them went inside. "This is Phil's room," he said. "It's pretty boring. Basic parent room. There's a bathroom attached to it though which is pretty sweet. If you ever need anything, he doesn't mind you knocking." It did indeed look like a basic parent room, with a large bed in the center with green covers. There were two dressers pushed against opposite walls, each covered in trinkets, stupid hats, and gold jewelry. The walls were absolutely *covered* in pictures of Phil's sons. Tommy spotted group pictures, candids, and awkward smiles. His eyes landed on a larger picture of Phil with Techno, about ten years old, holding a large metal sword that was far too big for him. Wilbur, about twelve or thirteen, grinned with a mouth full of braces behind the two of them.

Tommy looked away. "Your dad seems to like pictures," he grumbled.

Wilbur laughed, not picking up on Tommy's tone at all. "Oh yeah, there's never a camera too far from his hand. These walls will probably be covered in pictures of you too in a few months," he said. He placed a hand on Tommy's shoulder good-naturedly, but he quickly flinched out of the hold and put some distance between them. He didn't miss Wilbur's frown or Techno's hard gaze. He didn't care. He wanted to go back to his room and be alone now. He didn't like to be touched. And he certainly didn't like that Wilbur was suggesting he would be here for long.

He followed Techno and Wilbur to the last room at the far side of the hall, which was Phil's office. Inside was a desk with a computer and several files and notebooks scattered around. A green beanbag chair was pushed into the corner. There was a bookshelf with more files, some pictures balanced on the shelves, and several large dictionaries and encyclopedias. Above the window were several framed degrees and certificates.

Boring.

Tommy took a step back as Wilbur closed the door again. "And that's about it!" He said with a smile. "There's the backyard and the garden, which you're always free to help out with or grow something, if you want. Just no weed. Dad already shot down that idea."

Techno rolled his eyes.

Tommy nodded. “Thanks, appreciate it. Is it okay if I shower?” He asked, shoving his hands farther into his pockets.

“Of course. You remember where the soap and stuff is?”

He nodded again and left the brothers behind to retreat back into his room. He closed the door behind him and held his breath as he listened. There was muttering in the hall as Wilbur and Techno talked, too low for him to hear. And then finally, he heard footsteps and one door close after another, indicating that they had each gone to their rooms.

He let out a breath of relief he didn’t realize he was holding. His heart was beating fast. Slowly, he started tapping on his leg in an effort to match his breathing. He flopped down onto the bed as he started to calm down.

Wilbur seemed nice enough, if only for now. He wasn’t so sure about Techno. And Phil was a total mystery to him. He resolved to try to spend as much time in his room and away from the family as possible. He could make this a quick two months.

He collected himself and prepared for his shower. The shampoo he grabbed was green apple scented and he thought of Michelle, the youngest foster sister at the Johnson home, and how he always made sure to pick up green apple lollipops for her when he was able.

He remembered the green glass bottle hitting her over the head.

Tommy waited until the water was rushing over him to cry.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!

Middle child Techno truthers rise.

The next chapter will be out within the next few days :)

Possessions

Chapter Summary

Tommy's always been fine owning his paperback book, a change of clothes, and little else. What's all the fuss about?

Chapter Notes

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

Tommy woke up the next morning to a knock on the door.

He groaned and rolled over. Despite sleeping almost all of the day prior, he still crashed right away when he got into bed last night. Now it was clearly morning again as he blinked open his eyes, pale sunshine pouring through his window. Another knock at the door. Tommy stumbled to his feet, grumbling, and walked over to open it.

Phil smiled back at him, holding out his concussion medication. “Sorry to wake you, mate. I was planning on going shopping today and Techno and Wilbur are out. Wanna come with?” He asked.

Tommy downed the pills quickly before trying to rub the sleep from his eyes. Phil had asked, but he knew it wasn’t a question. You didn’t get offered options a lot as a foster kid. His foster father clearly just didn’t trust him enough to leave him alone in the house. Tommy cringed inwardly as he imagined all the events and errands and plans he’ll be dragged along to in the next two months.

“Sure. Just let me get dressed,” he said quietly.

Phil brightened. “Of course! Take your time. I’ll be downstairs.” He turned, closing the door behind him. Tommy blinked.

He got dressed quickly, putting on the clothes he wore when he arrived. He cringed at the drops of blood staining the hem. He’d accidentally left his other shirt at the Johnson’s in Hannah’s rush to leave. He’ll have to do laundry when he got back from shopping. He went to the bathroom to brush his teeth and quickly ran a hand through his hair, not bothering with a brush. He knew Phil said to take his time, but he also knew foster parents didn’t like to be kept waiting. He rushed down the stairs and was surprised to find Phil not waiting at the front door, but in the living room with an opened newspaper in his hands.

He looked up and closed it when he heard Tommy get to the bottom of the stairs. “Ready?”

Tommy nodded soundlessly as he shoved on his ratty sneakers.

The car was uncomfortably quiet.

Phil kept trying to initiate conversation, trying to draw anything more than short answers out of him, but Tommy just wouldn't budge. He was more focused on memorizing where he was, anyway. When he had arrived, he'd been half asleep and far too out of it to pay attention to where he was. Now he had the opportunity to learn street names, directions, and the overall layout of the town. The neighborhood gave way to acres of woods and tall grass, which any foster kid could appreciate. Easier to run and hide in. Tommy had grown up in the woods, and he knew how to take care of himself out there. They drove past streets of small shops and restaurants. Phil pointed out the high school, closed for the summer. He mentioned that he was looking into registration for him, but Tommy only shrugged in response. He didn't plan on being here in the fall. He would be shocked if he made it through his two months. Phil showed him more landmarks and important areas as they passed, but Tommy expertly tuned him out.

They pulled into a department store parking lot and found a space quickly. Phil grabbed a cart as he and Tommy walked inside, humming along the way. He seemed to have accepted the fact that Tommy was not in the mood to talk. The entrance to the store greeted him with a gust of freezing air conditioning and bright fluorescent lights, making him wince. His concussion definitely did not appreciate the blinding overheads and his head pounded uncomfortably. Phil paid him no mind, leading the way further into the store while whistling the tune he had just been humming. Tommy rolled his eyes and followed, hands shoved deep into his pockets to stop their nervous tremble.

They stopped in front of a shelf of linens and bed sheets. "See any you like?" Phil asked, leaning onto the cart. Tommy glanced at the shelf and shrugged. He didn't care what his foster father bought for the house.

Phil didn't seem deterred. "Have a favorite color?" He asked with a soft smile.

He looked at the tiled floor, the metal shelves, anywhere but Phil. "I like red," he mumbled, almost embarrassed. It wasn't *embarrassing* to have a favorite color, of course. In fact, it was one of the first ice breakers that most foster families asked. Tommy just wanted Phil to have as little information as possible. The less he knew, the easier it would be for Tommy to leave. Or live.

Phil grinned and swiped a package with red plaid bed sheets and pillowcases off the shelf. "Good choice. These will look great in your room," he said, throwing it into the cart with satisfaction.

That got Tommy's attention. He whipped his head up to look at Phil. "My room?" He asked, incredulous.

Phil blinked, looking confused. Then his face broke into an understanding smile. Tommy hated it. “Oh, I guess I wasn’t clear,” the older man said. “We’re shopping for you.”

Tommy’s stomach turned. “I don’t need anything,” he insisted angrily. He didn’t need this family to buy him things. He didn’t need to be even more in debt. He would already be paying off his room for his entire stay.

Phil scoffed, pushing the cart onwards. “Of course you do. Your room is empty. Teenagers need decorations, don’t you think? Besides, you need some new clothes. Didn’t you wear that when you got here? And you could probably use a new pair of shoes, too,” he said absentmindedly.

Tommy swallowed down his anger. He wasn’t a *baby*. If he needed things, he could get them. He didn’t need Phil to buy him anything. He didn’t need Phil to have more things to hold over his head. He didn’t need more reasons to feel guilty when he left. Tommy was a big man. He could handle himself.

“I don’t want you to buy me things,” Tommy said quietly, picking up his pace to walk next to Phil.

Phil must have heard the edge in the younger’s voice, because he paused. He looked over Tommy carefully. “They’re just necessities- no need to feel guilty. I know Wil and Techno both felt bad about me buying them things too, when they were fostered,” he explained gently.

Tommy scoffed. “You fostered Wilbur and Techno when they were *kids*. I’m not a child. I can get my own things if I need them. I don’t need your pity,” he snapped.

Phil’s eyes ran over him again. He tried not to squirm under his gaze. “You have blood on your shirt, Tommy,” his foster father said quietly.

Tommy looked away.

Phil continued on. “It’s not pity. Think of it as... fueling my own savior complex. I’ll just get you a few things that you need, and we’ll both be happy, alright? Win-win,” he said. Tommy hated that his voice never rose, his tone always even. He was itching to see how far Phil would go before his happy parent persona dropped and revealed the truth underneath.

Tommy said nothing. Phil pushed the cart on.

They ended up with a new red alarm clock, notebooks and pens, a lamp for his desk, a laundry hamper, several new sweaters and tshirts, jeans, pajamas, and a brand new pair of white vans. Tommy doubted he would ever wear them, knowing that the white color would get scuffed and ruined in hours. He doubted he would wear any of it, to be honest. He had a feeling the price tags would stay on the items forever so that Phil could return them when he finally left. It would at least relieve a little of his guilt.

They walked through the book section as Phil mentioned something about grabbing new textbooks for Wilbur. Tommy’s eyes fell on the most beautiful collection of books he’d ever

seen. A neat, leather bound series of classics bound together by gold ribbon. The titles and authors were written across the leather in gold. He reached out and touched one. The cover was soft and the words were cold. The collection was beautiful. It looked like it belonged on Techno's bookshelf of well taken care of hard covers. Not the hands of some battered foster kid.

"You like the classics?"

Tommy whipped around to find Phil staring at him with a sly smile. He scowled and shoved his hands back into his pockets, embarrassed to have been caught. "I've read a few," he muttered.

Phil raised an eyebrow. "That collection is quite pretty. Do you want it?"

Tommy gaped at him. "It looks like it costs a fortune," he argued, feeling far too shocked to be angry.

Phil shrugged. "They would look nice in your room. And you like them. It's good to have a hobby, after all," he said nonchalantly, as if he were planning on buying Tommy lunch instead of an expensive book collection.

He snapped out of his shock. "It's not a necessity," he shot.

"Well, yes. But-"

"I don't want it," Tommy interrupted angrily.

"But-"

"No."

Phil paused, obviously conflicted. Tommy stormed past him.

Phil finally caught up to him at the registers, holding Wilbur's textbooks. They were both silent as Phil checked out. Tommy tried his best to tune out the final price, but he couldn't help the echo in his ears. He winced as Phil handed over his card. That was more than Tommy made in a month of working his odd jobs.

The car ride home was quiet as well. Again, Phil tried to make conversation, but when Tommy gave his usual clipped answers he seemed to give up. They rode in silence. Tommy didn't mind it.

When they got home Phil offered to help him bring the bags to his room. Tommy declined, thanking him quickly before lugging the totes up the stairs. He threw them onto his bed with a grunt and closed the door behind him.

He turned the lock.

It felt like a breath of fresh air. It felt like liberation. It felt like freedom.

He knew Phil probably had a key, but it didn't matter. This was the most privacy he'd had in his entire life, even before he was a foster. This lock was the most important thing in this household. He'd try his absolute best to stay here the entire two months if he got to keep it. The lock was a worthy prize for his efforts. He thought of Hannah's promise of a single hardcover and Phil's offer to buy him a whole collection.

He pushed the thought away quickly.

His hands shook as he unpacked, but it was nothing he wasn't used to. He wasn't lying to Techno when he said he was a perpetual shaker. One of his old social workers said it was ADHD. One of his old psychiatrists said it was pent up anxiety and PTSD. He never cared to find out which.

He folded the shirts and pants neatly and placed them in the drawers of his dresser. He hung up the denim jacket Phil bought him in the closet, trying not to look at the untouched blankets and pillows inside. Tommy went around the room, placing things in an attempt to make it look tidy and like he'd use them- at least for Phil's sake. He kept the price tags on everything, just in case. He tore the grey sheets off his bed and threw them in his brand new laundry hamper. The red linens replaced them quickly. Phil was right- the red did go well with his room.

Tommy looked around. The room did look better. A little less sterile. But definitely not his style. It was too neat. Still too bare. He glanced at his backpack at the foot of the bed. He briefly considered unpacking it. The bag contained his change of pajamas, a spare pair of underwear and socks, a bus pass with enough on it for a few more rides, his one battered paperback book, a flashlight, some cash, and a bank card with all his savings from his entire life on it. He hardly ever unpacked it. Not even at Puffy's. He always kept it in case he needed to leave in a hurry. It was for emergency survival.

He scoffed at the thought quickly. Of course he wouldn't unpack his backpack here. He shoved it into his closet and tried not to think about it any more.

He spent the rest of the afternoon rereading his book. The Odyssey was a particular favorite of his, and it was obvious by the condition of the book. The cover was torn and faded and taped back together several times over. It was splattered with yellow paint- the consequence of reading around spoiled bio kids in house number seven. The pages were water damaged- though with water or alcohol, Tommy couldn't remember. Several were held together with tape and he had sat for hours meticulously gluing the pages back to the spine when they got ripped out. On the inside of the cover in smudged blue ink was the message "*To Tom, Here's to a forever home in house number five! With love, Hannah.*" It had been his first house with Hannah as his social worker, and she was excited to help him. Of course, that house ended poorly, but Hannah couldn't have known at the time. When he had first read the message, he felt happiness. *Hope*. Now he thought it was a little sad. Even so, the book was easily his most prized possession. It had been a little advanced for a nine year old, but Hannah knew he

was an advanced reader and loved mythology. And once he knew what was going on, he breezed through the chapters.

Phil knocked on the door sometime in the afternoon to let him know lunch was ready, but Tommy simply replied that he wasn't hungry. He stared at the door handle. The door handle with the *lock*. But it didn't move. Phil didn't try to open it, even if he didn't know it was locked. He listened to the sound of his footsteps retreating and going down the stairs. His heartbeat slowed. He returned to his book.

He heard Techno and Wilbur return home. He listened to the sounds of the family interacting downstairs. The low murmur of conversation, banging on pots as dinner was made, and the occasional burst of laughter was a surprisingly nice background to his evening. It was nice to hear the noise of the house and not be a part of it, instead divided by the wooden door and a lock. He was used to being at the center of the chaos without a silent corner to sit in. He read on as the sun began to set, mouthing along to the words he had long before memorized as he flipped through pages.

Wilbur knocked on his door to let him know dinner was ready and Tommy replied he would be down in a minute.

He looked down at his shirt with red stains on the hem and then at the drawer of new clothes in his dresser. Carefully, he carded through the shirts until he found the cheapest one, a plain red tshirt, and slipped it on. He threw his old one in the laundry hamper with the old bedsheets.

He pulled off the price tag on the new tshirt.

He could always pay Phil back when he left.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!

Financial guilt go brrrr

Next chapter in the next few days <3

Also! Chapters will start getting longer now :)

Companionship

Chapter Summary

Tommy quickly finds out that Wilbur is a complete dickhead. What an absolute twat, amiright?

Also, he makes some friends that he actually likes. Maybe this house won't so bad after all.

Chapter Notes

Chapter CW: References to underage drinking, slight panic attack, very VERY brief mention of accidental self harm

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

Tommy learned very quickly that he was wrong about the Watson brothers.

He thought Techno was all fight- calculated and violent when he needed to be, and Wilbur was all pushover- kind and ready to please. He had apparently thought wrong.

He learned that Wilbur had good days and bad days. Today was a bad day.

Wilbur stormed downstairs in the morning with a fury. Phil and Techno didn't seem fazed as he stomped into the kitchen to grab a box of cereal out of the cabinet, and they didn't seem to mind when he sighed and scoffed and mumbled to himself angrily the whole time. Tommy stared, surprised. It was rare to see Wilbur without some kind of soft smile on his face in the past few days. He wasn't sure he liked this other side of his oldest foster brother.

Wilbur glared at him when he caught him staring and Tommy quickly redirected his gaze to his own bowl of cereal. It was too late, though. Wilbur stormed over, setting his bowl down on the table with a *bang*. "Something catch your eye?" He snapped.

Tommy's heart *raced*. He had assumed that his first fight here would be with Techno. *Maybe* Phil. And he certainly hadn't expected it to be so soon in his stay. His survival instincts screamed at him to back down and apologize. But Tommy had always been a bit of a little shit, and he wasn't about to be walked all over by some lanky *musician*.

"Always walk around like the world personally killed your cat?" Tommy snapped back.

That got Techno to look up from his newspaper.

Wilbur's eyes narrowed. The sight unnerved Tommy. "You're one to talk, foster *brat*," he spat back. Tommy heard something clatter in the kitchen and then Phil quickly emerged, wiping his hands on his pants with a slightly panicked look.

Tommy rolled his eyes with a smile. "I didn't ask you to come down here and ruin everyone's morning," he said lightly.

Wilbur scowled. "I didn't ask you to live here," he shot.

"Wilbur!" Phil exclaimed angrily. Techno started to rise from his seat.

It felt like a slap, but nothing Tommy wasn't expecting. He already *knew* he wasn't welcome here. He knew he was counting down his days. He was used to families firing that at him. Wilbur had gone soft after being adopted for years. He couldn't faze Tommy now. He couldn't hit him where it really hurt. His insults bounced off his skin easily.

Tommy laughed coldly. "I was wondering when you'd drop the act," he snapped back.

Techno grabbed onto Wilbur's arm to pull him away from the table. He muttered something quietly to his older brother, who just scowled. Phil paused. "What act?" He asked.

Tommy scoffed and Wilbur glared at him. "The act where you all pretend that you want me here and are nice to me and want me around. It never lasts long. Wilbur just cracked a little early," he spat, getting up as well.

Phil frowned. "It's not an act, Tommy--"

Wilbur cut him off. "Just get him out of my sight," he shot.

Phil turned to him, incredulous. "*Wilbur*, you don't--"

"Don't worry," Tommy interrupted angrily. "I was just leaving."

He dumped the rest of his cereal into the trash and stuck his bowl into the sink before storming to the door. Techno stopped him in the living room, grabbing him by the arm.

"Tommy--" he started.

"*Don't touch me*," Tommy hissed, turning on him instantly, hands balling into fists. Techno broke off immediately, taking a step away from him. He took a breath. "I'm going into town. I'm telling you where I'm going, okay? Just exploring. Not breaking any house rules. I'm *not* running away."

Techno nodded silently, his eyes wide. Tommy marched out the door and started his way down the street. He remembered the way into town from the drive to the store with Phil. His hands shook badly as he walked and he shoved them into his pockets.

It was still late morning and the town was bustling with people. Adults working and teenagers enjoying summer break and children playing on the sidewalk. They paid Tommy no mind and he liked it that way. He always preferred to fade into the background.

He passed several shops that caught his interest. A flower shop with the prettiest alliums he'd ever seen out front. A fruit stand that also sold fresh apple cider. A bakery with the most intricately decorated cakes in the window. He spotted an old bookstore down the road, but he didn't dare go inside. He didn't have any money on him and besides, he hardly deserved it.

He made his way into a brightly lit comic store. If he was gonna wander around town, he might as well act like a teenager. He never had much interest in comics, but it was better than standing outside in the summer heat. The shop clerk eyed him as he came in, but he ignored him. He started to card through a box of comics, not really knowing what exactly he was looking at. He pulled out a particularly bright one, *Spiderman*, and started flipping through the pages at random. Spiderman was the only comic he'd ever thought was worth reading.

"-could kidnap him," a voice behind him was saying.

Tommy stiffened.

"You cannot kidnap the new kid."

"*Watch* me."

He felt a tap on his shoulder and flew around. The boy jumped back, surprised. Tommy smiled at his reaction. "I do not consent to being kidnapped," he said lightly.

The boy grinned, obviously pleased at his response. He was maybe around Tommy's age, but a good half foot or so shorter. He had brown hair that hung low in his eyes but when he looked up, Tommy could see wide eyes and a crazed grin that made his heart skip a beat. He wore a green shirt and brown shorts.

"I'm Tubbo," the kid said with a wide smile. "That's Ranboo." He gestured to another boy a few rows down.

Tommy turned to look. The kid was taller than *Wilbur* if that was even possible. Ranboo's hair had a shitty split dye- half white and half black. He wore a black tshirt and jeans. He looked nervous, hunched over as if he was trying to hide. Not that his height or his hair were helping his case. He looked even more freaked out to be called over, slowly making his way to the pair.

Tommy raised his eyebrows. "*What* is with the freakishly tall kids in this town?" He demanded.

Ranboo blinked and then broke into a grin. "Tubbo's just freakishly small. He makes the rest of us look taller," he teased.

Tubbo elbowed Ranboo in the stomach, who immediately groaned. Tommy snorted. “No way dude. You’ve got height on Wilbur and he’s the tallest person I’ve ever met,” he said with a laugh.

Tubbo’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh! You’re the Watson’s foster kid! Niki told me there was someone new in the house,” he said excitedly.

Tommy immediately darkened, scowling. “I’m not a *pet*,” he spat, turning back to his comic.

Ranboo jumped right in. “Don’t mind him. That’s not what he meant, he just hasn’t ever thought before he spoke in his life,” he explained with a laugh. He moved back into Tommy’s peripherals. Tubbo followed close behind. “The Watson’s are really nice.”

Tommy scoffed- which seemed to surprise Ranboo and Tubbo- and kept his eyes locked on the comic book page. Spiderman was mouthing off to some supervillain. Tommy wagered that wouldn’t end well for him. Tubbo tried again. “We’re gonna head down to the arcade. Do you wanna come with?” He asked with a bright smile.

Tommy spared a glance at him. “An arcade? What are you, twelve?” He teased.

“Sixteen. Do you wanna come or not?”

Tommy sighed and placed the comic book back into the box. “Sure. Might pass the time a bit quicker.”

Tubbo and Ranboo grinned in a way that made Tommy almost regret his decision.

As it turned out, Tommy was horrible at video games.

It wasn’t like it was his *fault*. He hadn’t exactly gotten much time in front of a video game controller in his sixteen years. His bio family had an old television that barely kept a signal, and most foster families didn’t trust him to touch the expensive equipment of a gaming system. Tommy never considered his lack of video game skill a problem. He was plenty skilled in other areas- areas that were *actually* necessary and would help him survive. But the face Tubbo made when he told him he had never heard of *Galaga* made him briefly reconsider.

“You *what?!?*” Tubbo screeched, causing several other patrons to glance over at him.

Tommy shrugged, keeping his eyes locked on the arcade screen Ranboo was playing. It was hard to tell, but he was fairly sure Ranboo was winning judging by the bright lights illuminating the game box every few seconds. He winced every time it happened, which happened to be a lot. The bright lights and loud sounds of the arcade were definitely agitating him. He tapped on his leg as he watched Ranboo’s gameplay, trying to calm down.

“Never had the time for video games, big man. I jump from house to house. No one wants to give a foster kid a video game console that’ll be stolen or destroyed in a couple weeks,” he said nonchalantly.

Tubbo blinked at him like he couldn’t process what he was hearing. “But *Galaga*! It’s the most classic arcade game like... ever! You’ve had to at least *heard* of it,” he insisted, crossing his arms across his chest.

Tommy found the action amusing. He grinned as Ranboo won another bonus. “Not many arcades where I’m from, I’m afraid,” he said.

Ranboo cheered as the game flashed neon, displaying the *New High Score!* message in bright letters. “Let’s go! High score, baby! Woooooo!!” He whooped.

Tubbo rolled his eyes, but he smiled fondly. “They reset the scores every Monday morning, boss man,” he said teasingly.

“Well it’s Thursday, so it’s a good high score. It’s valid. Tommy, tell him it’s valid,” Ranboo whined.

Tommy grinned as Tubbo took Ranboo’s place, sliding several coins into the machine. “I don’t know, Ranboob. Seems like the only high score that matters is the Sunday one,” he taunted.

“It’s Ranboo.”

“My deepest apologies, Ranboob.”

Ranboo rolled his eyes with a smile as they turned their attention to Tubbo. The machine whirred to life, spurting loud noises and bright lights. Tommy tried to drown it out, tapping a simple pattern on his thigh. *four... seven.... eight...*

“Hey!” Tubbo shouted. He gained more annoyed glances from the people around them. Ranboo grinned. When Tommy hadn’t been paying attention, Ranboo had knocked Tubbo’s hand to the side. He lost the bonus and his starship let out a groan as it was defeated.

“No high score for you,” Ranboo remarked slyly.

Tubbo rolled his eyes, though Tommy noted that there was no anger behind the gesture. He frowned as he followed them deeper into the arcade. Tubbo and Ranboo were odd. They had an odd relationship of teasing and fondness that he just couldn’t understand. He wanted to join in. Sure, he had made friends in other towns, but none he actually liked spending time with outside of avoiding his foster homes. He liked spending time with Tubbo and Ranboo. They seemed to match his own level of mischief and fun.

He watched them play games well into the afternoon, cheering when they won and pouting when they lost along with them. He stared wistfully at a few games that caught his eye, but he had no change on him to pay. When Tubbo offered to cover him, he declined quickly and firmly- and that had been the end of the discussion.

Ranboo scored on Tubbo in an intense round of foosball and Tommy laughed.

Tubbo glared at him, again with no anger. It was an odd sight. “What are *you* laughing at? You don’t even know how to play *Pac Man*,” he shot.

Tommy only grinned wider. His heart felt light. He felt *happy*, genuinely excited to have friends-

“How long are you staying with the Watson’s?” Ranboo asked, eyes still on the game at hand.

Tommy’s heart sank. It was a loaded question, even if Ranboo didn’t know it. All at once, he remembered the events of this morning. He figured Phil would be waiting at the front door when he finally got home, ready to send him off for challenging his oldest son. He felt a pang of disappointment at the thought. He hadn’t been here long, but it was already so much better than the majority of his other foster homes. He would miss Tubbo and Ranboo when he left. They probably wouldn’t remember him. Hannah would frown at him, disappointed, and promise his hard cover book for the *next* house, which would surely also end in disaster. He would lose his room... his *own* room... with a *lock*-

“-ommy? Hey boss man, take a deep breath alright?” Tubbo was saying.

Tommy blinked. Tubbo was standing right in front of him, hand outstretched but not touching him, as if he wasn’t sure if he was allowed. Ranboo stared with wide eyes, hands frozen on the foosball handles. He could feel his heart racing. He knew he was breathing fast. He tapped his leg with shaking fingers. *One ... four....*

“Sorry. I’m fine, promise. Just happens sometimes. Foster kid and all, right?” Tommy tried for a grin, but he was sure it looked more like a grimace. Tubbo frowned and raised an eyebrow, like he didn’t believe him at all. Tommy cleared his throat. “Uh... I- I won’t be staying with the Watson’s long. Just a temporary home, emergency placement and all that. Don’t get too clingy with me, Tubso,” he joked.

Tubbo didn’t smile. “Surely that isn’t true. Phil’s great! He’ll keep you around. And besides, you’re with us now. You’ve gotta stick around for us, right?” he argued.

Tommy frowned.

Tommy followed them to the tiny diner on the corner as the sun got low in the sky. Again, he cursed himself for leaving his cash in his backpack at home in his hurry to leave as his stomach grumbled. Fortunately, Tubbo and Ranboo let him pick off their plates as he pleased.

It was kind.

“So what else is there to do around here besides the arcade and window shopping?” He asked, swiping a few fries from Tubbo’s plate.

Tubbo didn’t even glance at the action. Tommy beamed. “There’s a couple fun things around,” the shorter boy said with his mouth full of burger. Ranboo grimaced at the sight. “It’s a small town, but there’s the basics. Bowling, movie theater, beach. There’s the pier, but it’s a little far. We’d have to drive and my parents took my permit away after I crashed into a hill.” Tubbo grinned widely as he said it. Tommy felt a pang. It had never occurred to him that people his age were learning to drive. He forgot that sixteen year olds did that. No one had ever mentioned it to him, nevertheless let him behind the wheel of a car.

Ranboo picked at his chicken fingers absentmindedly. “During school there’s a lot of cool stuff around. Club things and sport games and theater performances and all that. If you stick around long enough, it’ll be fun,” he said, looking up at Tommy.

Tommy’s mouth felt dry. “Well... I don’t know about that big man.”

Ranboo shrugged and went back to his chicken fingers.

“Hey Tubbo!”

The three of them turned and Tommy spotted a group of four older kids heading toward them. Tubbo smiled and waved.

“Hi guys!” He exclaimed as they made it to the table. “Grabbing dinner?”

Tommy jolted. He didn’t realize it was dinner time. He wondered if Phil would be mad that he missed it at home. Phil hadn’t said it was a rule, but he had always seemed pleased when Tommy came down to the dinner table in the evening. He guessed missing dinner would just be added to the list of reasons for Phil to send him away when Tommy got back to the house.

“Yes,” a girl with bright pink hair and round glasses grinned. She wore a white tshirt and black shorts. Tommy spotted a tattoo on her thigh. Was that... *a frog with a guitar?*

Tubbo glanced at him. “Guys, this is Tommy. He’s staying with the Watson’s,” he said carefully. Tommy noted that he was careful not to say *the Watson’s foster kid*. His slip up at the comic book store clearly had not left his mind.

The girl grinned. “Oh! Wil told me about you. I’m Niki. That’s Eret-” she pointed at a tall person with short brown hair in a purple sundress. “-the kid with the orange jacket is Fundy-” she said, gesturing to the tall guy in orange and a black cap on his head. “-and that’s Jack.” The kid behind the three of them in a blue and black striped sweatshirt waved happily.

Tommy tried to take it in. He was horrible at names. He’d met too many people and stayed for too little time to remember anything properly. “You’re friends with Wilbur?” He asked, trying to keep the venom out of his voice.

Niki didn’t seem to notice, smiling happily. “Oh yeah, we’re best friends. He’s really excited to be fostering another brother,” she said lightly. The other three- Eret, Fundy, and Jack-

wandered to the counter to order their dinner.

Tommy scowled. “Didn’t seem that way this morning,” he grumbled.

Tubbo and Ranboo looked at him strangely as Niki blinked. Then an understanding frown crossed her face. “Ah. I guess Wilbur’s having a bad day today, huh? I was wondering why he wasn’t answering my texts,” she said grimly.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. “Bad day?”

Niki’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh, yeah! Wil gets them sometimes. He has good days and bad days. I’m sure you understand that. He sees a therapist for it though. He’s gotten a lot better. Definitely more good days than bad in the past few years,” she explained.

Tommy paused. He hadn’t known that. His hands shook under the table.

He forced himself to scoff. “Wilbur’s a dick,” he shot. He was hoping to send her away. He was tired of this conversation and any mention of the house. It was just a reminder of what was waiting for him when he got back.

Niki snorted, unfazed. “Yeah, but he’ll grow on you. He’s a softie, and he usually doesn’t mean actual harm. He just lets his head get the best of him sometimes,” she said with a laugh.

Tommy looked away, not wanting to continue. Tubbo picked up the slack for him. “Are you guys going to the rocks later?” He asked, popping a fry into his mouth.

Niki grinned and played with her fingers. Tommy knew a guilty tell when he saw one. “Yeah, we’re just picking up some dinner before we head up. Nothing worse than being up there on an empty stomach, right? You guys are welcome to stop by. Not that I encourage any minor at the rocks, but I know I did it when I was your age, and I know you’ve been before,” she said, pushing her hands into the pockets of her shorts.

Tubbo smiled as Ranboo laughed. “Not tonight, I’m afraid. Mother dearest demands my presence home before sundown. Maybe next time, though,” the shorter boy explained.

Niki glanced at the window behind them. “Better hurry up then, Tubbo. Sun’s getting low,” she warned. “I gotta go order. I’ll see you guys around. It was nice meeting you, Tommy!” She turned with a wave and returned to her friends across the diner.

“What’s the rocks?” Tommy demanded immediately.

Ranboo snorted. “Up in the cliffs behind the woods, there’s this clearing where kids go to party and drink and smoke. It’s surrounded by a bunch of boulders that overlook this massive cliff, so it’s called the rocks. Probably not the safest place for a bunch of teenagers to be intoxicated, but it’s never been too much of a problem. Mostly the parties are thrown by these two guys called Schlatt and Quackity,” he explained, swirling the straw in his water glass.

Tommy’s interest was immediately peaked. He was known as a problem child, and he tended to live up to the label. He enjoyed an occasional drink or hit, depending on his mood. Tommy

spent most of the places he stayed at the age of fifteen drunk, befriending bad people to feel good again. Of course, when his sense of morals kicked in, he felt like he could never take a sip of alcohol. He had encountered too many drunk parents, too many alcoholics who wasted their lives away on liquor.

But he was young. And he had been sober for a *very* long time now.

“Techno had a fight with someone called Quackity,” Tommy suddenly remembered. “Wilbur said that Quackity had called him and Techno said he would never forgive him.”

Tubbo snorted. “Your brother is a stubborn bastard,” he laughed.

“*Foster* brother,” Tommy corrected quickly.

Ranboo smiled. “Quackity challenged Techno to a fight a few months ago. Can’t remember the reason... something about honor. Anyway, Quackity lost miserably. I mean, I don’t know what he was expecting. Techno is a monster in the ring. And then Quackity, the idiot, stole this stupid fencing sword from him.”

“It was important to him,” Tubbo interjected quickly. “Named it Carl and everything.” Tommy snorted.

Ranboo continued on. “Right, whatever. It caused this huge rivalry between them. Techno eventually got the sword back. Nothing interesting ever happens in school, so of course everyone knows about it. I think at one point Techno socked him and split his lip. Quackity still has the scar and everything,” he explained.

Tommy broke into laughter. He couldn’t help it. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” he wheezed.

The table erupted in giggles.

Tommy, Ranboo, and Tubbo parted ways outside the diner. Tubbo had to get home before sundown, and Ranboo lived close to him so they walked home together. Tommy waved as they left with the promise that they’d see him again as soon as possible.

Then he started his death march home.

The sun was well below the horizon when he made it to his street. Dread pooled in Tommy’s stomach. His hands tapped uneasily on his thighs as he got closer. The front porch light was on and the door was opened. That was a relief, at least. Tommy didn’t have a key and the last thing he wanted right now was to disturb the family even more by ringing the doorbell.

He could almost picture Phil when he walked through the door- hands on hips with a scowl. He would chew Tommy out, yell at him for pissing Wilbur off and then disappearing for the

entire day. He would call Hannah to come pick him up, saying that this wasn't working out and Tommy was no longer welcome in the home. Or maybe Hannah was already inside, waiting for him to return so she could take him back to the group home right away with a frown and a disappointed lecture.

Tommy's heart was racing as he climbed the porch steps. The dining room light was on. Cold air hit his face as he opened the door. He hadn't even realized he was sweating in the summer air before he stepped through the threshold.

He took off his shoes as quietly as possible and crept towards the stairs. If he could make it to his room, he could at least try to hold this hard talk off until morning. He could try and claim he got home much earlier than he actually did, maybe work on his case a little before Phil came to berate him-

"Tommy?"

He froze, hand on the stair banister. He turned, cursing himself, and locked eyes with Phil sitting at the dining room table. He had clearly been sitting there for a while. There was a book opened in front of him and a mug of coffee in his hand. A small brown bag sat in the chair next to him.

He cringed. "Hey, Phil," he muttered, embarrassed to have been caught sneaking.

"Come sit."

Tommy's shoulders sagged. He couldn't help it. The highs and lows of today came crashing down onto his frame. His feet dragged as he made his way to the seat across from Phil. He sat down and pushed his hands between his legs to keep them from shaking. He bounced his knee nervously.

"How was your day?" Phil asked, closing his book.

Ah, so that's how Phil would go about this. He would drag it out, make it hard on Tommy. Make him admit to everything he did wrong and make him list every reason he should be sent away himself.

Tommy knew how to play *that* game perfectly well. He shrugged. "It was fine."

Phil sighed and clasped his hands together on the table. Tommy's heart constricted. He had seen the serious gesture several times in his life- right before he got the hard talk. "I wanted to discuss what happened this morning," Phil said carefully.

Tommy nodded, keeping his mouth shut tight.

Phil studied him for a moment before continuing on. "Wilbur has days that are hard for him. He has a difficult time controlling his temper when this happens, and he tends to talk without thinking and to say things he doesn't mean. He sees a therapist and takes medication, but of course nothing is perfect. I wanted to sincerely apologize for his actions this morning, and

I'm sure he will as well tomorrow. What he said doesn't reflect how he or any of us in this house feel," he explained softly.

Tommy frowned. That was an unexpected turn. Phil was bad at this, he decided. He was saying all the wrong things. This wasn't how you were supposed to deal with a foster kid. You were supposed to yell and make them apologize. They were guests in your home, and you didn't owe them your kindness. Tommy almost opened his mouth to say this when Phil continued.

"I'm sorry that he drove you out of the house. In the future, we'll work more towards keeping a regulated environment for the both of you so that you can both feel comfortable. On both good and bad days. Though, I do hope you actually enjoyed your day. The town can be quite lovely this time of year," he said with a gentle smile.

Tommy blinked. And then blinked again. His head spun. "So... so you're not mad at me?" He asked, confused. This had never happened before. Phil didn't raise his voice once. Not even a little. He put the blame on himself, and he had *apologized* to Tommy. An adult had apologized to him. He had always felt like he knew how foster houses worked, but here he was thrown into a completely new and unfamiliar territory.

Phil's eyebrows shot up. "Of course not. You're not in trouble, Tommy. You told Techno where you were going. You were home before curfew. Of course I can't exactly blame you for leaving- Wilbur can be a bit much. And you're allowed to leave when you want. This isn't a prison," he said.

Tommy's whole body released the tension he hadn't even known he was holding. His heart rate slowed considerably. He let his hands come up to rest on the table like Phil's. He *wasn't* in trouble. He wasn't going to be punished for this morning, or for leaving, or even for staying out all day. Phil was fine with it. Phil was calm. Phil didn't yell. He wasn't going to have to give up Hannah's promise of a book, his room with a lock, or Tubbo and Ranboo-

Phil's eyes brightened. "Ah! Before I forget. I don't mind when you leave, but it does soothe my worry when I can check in with you when you're gone. So I got you this," he said excitedly. He reached into the brown bag to his side and pulled out a new smartphone, still in its white box and wrapping.

Oh.

Tommy's whole world came crashing down.

His hands shook on the table as Phil smiled at him warmly. His head *swam*. What exactly was Phil playing at here? What kind of house was this?

"That's... for me?" He breathed.

Phil smiled wider and nodded. He placed the white box in front of Tommy. "All yours. I'll write down the family phone numbers for you. It's just so we can check in to see if you're alright or if you need to contact us for anything," he explained. He pulled a piece of paper from the bag and started to scribble down numbers.

Tommy's heart raced as he stared at the little white box. He had never had a phone before. Never- not even at Puffy's house. A phone was *everything* to a foster kid. It was a lifeline, a tool, a luxury. It showed that the family was locked in and around for the long run. It showed that Phil really considered him responsible and... at least a little bit a part of the family. Tommy couldn't tell if he was kind or just stupid.

"I can't take a phone."

Phil looked up at him and seemed to note his panic. "It's alright, Tommy. It's my pleasure to get it for you. A teenager should have a phone. Especially during summer. How else would you contact your friends?" He said gently.

Tommy shook his head roughly. He tried to control his breathing. "I can't... It's not a necessity. It's too expensive. You'll be stuck with an extra phone when I leave," he pushed out. His chest felt tight.

He tapped his leg with one hand and balled the other into a fist, trying to stop the shaking. Phil was saying something, talking to him, but his ears were ringing too loudly to hear anything. Tommy was *embarrassing* himself. Falling apart over a gift that he wouldn't even allow himself to keep. He couldn't have a phone. An *expensive* phone. Foster kids didn't get phones. Problem children didn't get phones. They were irresponsible. The phone would get lost or destroyed. Another foster parent would take it away, bio children or foster siblings would steal it, it would get misplaced in the chaos of everyday life. He remembered when he had asked Puffy-

-And Puffy frowned down at him, blowing brown strands of hair streaked with white out of her face. She was overworked and underpaid- Tommy knew that. He didn't know why he asked for a phone. He had just... he had been here for so long. Longer than anywhere else. And Foolish and Dream, her adopted sons, had phones of their own. He had overheard Foolish mentioning to Dream that Puffy was planning on adopting Tommy soon. He hadn't stuck around to hear Dream's reply before he raced off to his room, his heart racing excitedly.

Puffy cleared her throat. "I don't know if it's in the budget right now, Tommy. We'll get you one soon, I promise. I just can't yet," she said guiltily.

But the promise was more than enough for Tommy, who grinned and thanked her before leaving the kitchen with a light heart.

Dream was sitting in the living room when he walked in. He was older than Tommy by a few years and taller by a few inches. He scowled when Tommy appeared.

"She's not gonna get you a phone, you know," he snapped.

Tommy blinked. He didn't know where the hostility came from. "She said soon. We don't have the money right now," he argued half-heartedly. He knew Dream rarely backed down from his opinions.

Dream rolled his eyes. "You really believed that? She's not gonna get you a phone. It's expensive, and you're only temporary. She's not gonna keep you around for much longer," he hissed.

Tommy blinked. "But Foolish said-"

"You know what you should do?" Dream cut him off quickly. "To make her see that you need a phone? Break a few rules. Stay out late. That way, she'll need to have a way to check in on you- call you to come home. She'll have to give you a phone then."

"You really think so?"

Tommy missed Dream's sly grin. "I know so, To-"

"-mmy? Tommy, c'mon mate. Breathe with me now," Phil was saying.

Tommy snapped back to the present. He was sitting at the dinner table at the Watson's house. Phil was gone from his chair, instead crouching at Tommy's side with a hand on his shoulder and a worried expression on his face. He realized that he was dizzy from breathing erratically. He tried to match Phil's deep breaths.

"There we go," Phil praised as his breathing settled a bit. "Just like that. You're okay, Tommy."

He squeezed his eyes shut and was thankful to find no tears. This was already embarrassing enough. No need to add crying into the mix.

"Sorry," he muttered, voice hoarse.

He opened his eyes to Phil's surprised face. "No need to apologize, Tommy. It's alright. Happens to the best of us, right? Can you unclench your hands for me?" He reassured softly.

Tommy released the tension in his hands that he didn't know he was holding and was surprised to find blood in his palms. He must have been digging his nails in. He hadn't felt any pain.

Phil fussed over him, assuring him that it was alright, that he was okay, and asking him to breathe. When Tommy's breath finally returned to a steady pace, Phil dragged him over to the sink to clean his hands. He washed them quickly and applied some kind of cream before wrapping them in white gauze. Tommy was silent through it all. He was an expert at patching himself up, cleaning and covering to prevent infection, but Phil seemed to know what he was doing. Knowing Wilbur and Techno, he was probably a pro at cleaning them up. It was kind of nice- to have someone do it for him.

When he was done, Phil walked back to the table and picked up the phone.

"How about I keep this for tonight? Then tomorrow morning I can help you set it up and get properly settled with it so you don't get too overwhelmed," he suggested.

Tommy scowled. "I'm a big man. I can do it by myself," he snapped.

Phil only smiled. "Of course. For me, then. Settle an old man's heart, will you? We'll do it together," he said gently. Tommy frowned and finally nodded.

And when he finally made it to his room, twisting the lock, he was sure he was asleep before his head even hit the pillow.

Wilbur didn't apologize the next morning.

Chapter End Notes

Spot the Lovejoy reference hehe

Also just for clarity- italicized sections of text are supposed to be flashbacks/dreams/memories, just in case anyone was confused :]

Next chapter in the next few days!! Thank you for reading! All the love has been so so so nice <333

Secrets

Chapter Summary

Time goes on. Tommy goes against his better judgement and talks about his past. What could go wrong?

Chapter Notes

Chapter CW: Discussion of past child abuse/injury, self-deprecating/destructive thoughts

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

The days quickly melded to weeks in the Watson house. Tommy spent them reading, hanging out with Tubbo and Ranboo, and hiding in his room. When Tubbo and Ranboo stopped by looking for him, he had quickly given them his brand new number. They were the first phone numbers in his new phone before he even entered in Phil, Techno, and Wilbur's. Now they texted frequently in a groupchat nicknamed *Bench Trio* after Tommy went out with them and fell asleep on the bench in the park. Tubbo even had the stupid pictures to prove it, despite Tommy's vocal complaints.

Wilbur slowly defrosted, melting back to his kind and brotherly self. Techno remained strangely stagnant, never really turning a cold shoulder to Tommy but certainly not warming up to him either. And Phil was simply Phil. Tommy just couldn't figure him out. Sometimes he was too kind and it made Tommy uncomfortable. He kept waiting for Phil to snap, to finally raise his voice and say what he really felt about Tommy.

So far Wilbur was the only one who had made such a move, and that side of his foster brother had quickly disappeared. It wasn't long before he was joking around with Tommy and over eagerly trying to bond with him again. Tommy wasn't exactly sure which side he liked more. On one hand, Wilbur in a good mood meant Tommy could relax a little, crack a joke or two or ask questions. On the other hand, Wilbur in a bad mood meant he would tell the truth. Tommy was quickly getting tired of the performance the family was putting on for him.

Nothing much changed, though, as the days passed by. Tommy continued to skirt around the family. His hands never stilled, his leg never stopped bouncing. He was pent full of anxiety, waiting for the crash. Surely it couldn't be long now.

It was nighttime when Tommy finally put *The Odyssey* back down. His desk lamp gave the room a nice golden glow and Tommy felt... comfortable. He was slowly getting used to his new soft mattress and now he liked to lounge there while he read. It was nice to have a bed

that didn't leave his back aching in the mornings. In the past, he'd slept on air mattresses, cots, and even the floor. Not many times, but it was enough to leave a lasting impression. Tommy could definitely appreciate a comfortable bed now.

He hadn't been sleeping the best in the past few weeks, which was odd to him. Tommy could sleep anywhere, really. And he very rarely dreamed. But lately he had been waking up from nightmares that left him sweating under his sheets. He usually started his mornings not very rested at all.

That night, his nightmare started with Phil.

Phil was yelling at him. Tommy was worthless. Stupid. Lazy. He was just a broken brat that no one could ever love. It had been a mistake to ever let him into his home.

Tommy nodded in agreement.

Phil raised his hand to hit him and-

-and he was standing in Wilbur's room across from Wilbur and Niki. They both seemed annoyed at his arrival. Niki rolled her eyes.

"Go away, Tom." Wilbur hissed. "No one wants you here."

"Go back to where you came from," Niki said cruelly.

Tommy blinked back tears. "I don't remember where that is," he whispered.

Wilbur scoffed. "Of course you do, dumbass. Don't you remember the woods? The smell of alcohol? Are you too stupid to remember your home? Or are you too spoiled and selfish to think about your real family," he spat.

"My family is dead," Tommy breathed, hurt.

Niki stood from the bed and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. She leaned in close and when she spoke, her breath brushed against his cheeks like a breeze. It smelled of alcohol. "We both know that's not true, Thomas."

And then Tommy was eight years old, standing in the living room of his childhood home. He couldn't remember exactly what it looked like, and parts of the room blurred. His father lounged on the couch lazily. He stared at the box television across from them. A baseball game was playing. Tommy stared at him, but he couldn't make out his features. All he could see was a head of blond hair and a cruel frown.

He threw a beer can at him. "Another," he demanded without really looking at his son.

Tommy looked around, confused. He barely registered the item thrown at him and dodged without thinking about it. It missed by a mile anyway. "Where's mom?" He asked.

His dad glared at him. "You know not to mention her, Thomas. You know what you did to her," he growled.

Tommy's whole body tensed up, an unimaginable grief growing in his chest. "I'm sorry," he whispered, desperate. For what, he didn't know. Forgiveness? Love? More than an angry glance? He couldn't be sure.

"You can make it up to me by getting me another beer," his dad snapped. This time he threw a glass beer bottle. The shards scatters across the filthy hardwood floor and Tommy cried out as some pierced his skin-

"You can't stay here, Tommy," Puffy whispered.

He blinked. He was standing in Puffy's living room. She stood across from him and behind her, he could see Foolish and Dream sitting on the couch. Foolish with a confused frown and Dream with a triumphant grin.

"Why? I like it here. I thought you loved me?" He croaked. His face was wet with tears.

Puffy frowned. "I do love you, Tommy. I always will. But I just... I don't think you're a good fit here. I'm sorry. You fight with Dream. You act out. You break the rules and expect reward. I... I don't have the time. I have to work and I have to provide for my boys and I have to parent. I don't have time to deal with it. I'm so sorry, Tommy. Hannah is on her way" she whispered, like it was her worst secret.

Tommy's heart broke into a million pieces. He loved it here so much. He thought he had done so well. He loved Puffy. He loved Foolish and Dream. He had even done everything Dream had suggested...

Puffy's eyes quickly turned a deep black and when she opened her mouth, Tommy spotted sharp fangs. She snarled, "Get out, Tommy. You're not wanted." And she lifted her hand-

Phil's fist finally collided with his jaw.

Tommy screamed.

He sat straight up in bed, breath heaving. His vision blurred for a few moments and when it cleared, Tommy could see his clock read 3:26am. He tried to catch his breath. His heart must have been trying to beat out of his chest.

A frantic knock on the door almost made him yelp.

"Tommy ? Tommy, are you alright? You screamed," Wilbur's muffled voice carried through. Tommy took a moment to process, still half asleep, and then swore himself. He had never screamed out loud before. He had never caused a disturbance.

“Tommy, I’m going to come in. I want to check if you’re okay,” Wilbur tried again.

He took another shaky breath. “It’s locked,” he managed to croak out.

There was a brief silence and Tommy wondered if Wilbur had heard him. Then- “Can you unlock it, Tommy?”

He nodded even though he knew Wilbur couldn’t see him and shakily got to his feet. He padded over to the door and twisted the lock before opening it slowly. Wilbur blinked down at him. He had obviously been in bed. He was in a yellow sweater and black pajama pants. He didn’t wear his glasses and his hair was a knotted mess. He had bags under his eyes and he blinked as if still half asleep. But he still managed to look panicked.

“Are you alright?” Wilbur whispered.

Tommy stared at him. Wilbur stared back.

Finally, Tommy shrugged. “I’m fine. Just a nightmare. Sorry to wake you guys,” he muttered. He turned away and made his way back to the bed.

Wilbur remained in the door frame. “I wasn’t really sleeping, and Phil and Techno sleep like logs. You definitely didn’t wake them.” He paused. “Do... Do you wanna talk about it?” He asked gently.

“No.”

He frowned. “When Phil first fostered me, I had a lot of nightmares too. The foster system can be hard on a kid,” he explained quietly.

Tommy sat down on his bed. “I’m not a kid.”

Wilbur took it as an invitation to come inside, closing the door behind him. “Of course not,” he assured. “But it doesn’t change the fact that the system is hard. I always found it helped to talk about it, if you want.”

Tommy rolled his eyes. “I don’t need help,” he snapped.

Wilbur gave a small laugh. “Everyone needs help, Toms.”

He wasn’t sure how he felt about the nickname. He kept silent, rolling it over in his head.

Wilbur took it as an opportunity to look around. He had never actually been inside Tommy’s room, after all. None of the Watson’s had. It was a fact that Tommy held dear to him. As far as he knew, there was no one going through his things, invading his space, or going against his wishes.

“It’s bare in here,” he observed, looking at the plain walls and empty desk.

Tommy shrugged. “I don’t exactly own a lot of things,” he replied. He sat crossed-legged on the bed as Wilbur frowned.

“Phil said he took you shopping, though.”

Tommy nodded. “He did. He bought me these bedsheets. And that lamp and those notebooks. And the alarm clock,” he said, gesturing around the room.

Wilbur frowned. “That’s it? That’s all you wanted?”

He scowled. “I didn’t want *anything*. I don’t need your money. I only let Phil get some things so we could hurry up and get out of the store faster,” he snapped.

“Why?”

Tommy raised an eyebrow. *Why?* Good question. “I didn’t want to owe you more than I already do. A room to myself and three meals a day is more than enough. Phil has been very generous. And I don’t want to feel guilty when I leave,” he explained quietly.

Wilbur looked confused. “Owe us? Tommy, those things are common decency. You don’t need to pay us back for treating you with respect. You’re a human being. We’re not gonna deny you food or privacy or freedom,” he argued.

“Why not? It’s never stopped anyone before.”

There was something about night time that made secrets sharable.

Wilbur was silent at that. Tommy looked down at his hands. “When I leave, I’m going to have to leave all this behind. So the less I have to lose, the better,” he whispered.

Wilbur’s eyes softened. “Tommy, I... I know it’s not my place, and you might not want to hear it. But Phil... he fosters to adopt. You can stay as long as you want. No one is going to make you go,” he said gently, as if trying not to spook a wild animal.

Tommy looked at him sharply. The fact that Phil was fostering for adoption made sense and he was surprised he hadn’t seen it earlier. The room, the phone, the gifts. Tubbo and Ranboo’s reaction to the Watson’s. Niki’s persistence for him getting along with Wilbur. They were all prepared for the long haul. They planned on Tommy sticking around.

He felt nauseous.

“I can’t be adopted. I appreciate the sentiment, and I’m really grateful for everything you guys have done for me. But I can’t stay here,” he admitted quietly.

Wilbur frowned and sat down across from him on the bed. Tommy tried not to flinch back. “Can I ask why?” He questioned.

Tommy stared at the bare white wall of his room. He didn’t know why he was being so open with Wilbur. Maybe he was still too tired to care. Maybe he was hoping to keep on Wilbur’s good side. Maybe a part of him was desperate to connect with anyone in any family he stayed with. His nightmare was still fresh in his mind.

“You wouldn’t understand,” he grumbled weakly.

“I was a foster kid too, Tommy. I understand the warped view of family the system can give you,” Wilbur tried softly.

Tommy glared at him. “You *don’t* understand, actually. You were adopted when you were a kid. You were what, ten? How many years were you even a foster kid?” He demanded, suddenly angry and defensive.

Wilbur backed down quickly, looking guilty. “I was eleven. Techno was twelve. We were both in the system for a little over two years,” he admitted quietly.

Tommy scoffed. “Wilbur... I’m sixteen years old. I’ve been a foster kid for eight years—exactly half my life. I’ve been without a family for much longer than that. I’ve been through every house and every family dynamic you can think of. Someone like me... doesn’t belong in a family. I’m just meant to float around until I age out of the system.” He took a strangled breath. “Then I can float around the country until I die a young and tragic death in the streets of some... some *city* far away from the coast. That’s how these things go,” he rambled, anger suddenly building up in his chest.

Wilbur looked startled. “Tommy that’s... you can’t... you can’t *mean* that. You can’t think that will happen to you. You can’t actually believe that,” he said weakly.

Tommy stared at the wall behind Wilbur’s head with all the bitterness he could muster. “Why not? It’s the truth. It happens to people like me every day. I’ve been... I’ve been alone for too long now. I’ll never fit into a family the correct way. I can’t be a Watson the way you guys want me to,” he muttered.

“So don’t be a Watson,” Wilbur stated firmly.

“Huh?”

“I said don’t be a Watson. I’m not. I never took the name. Still go by Wilbur Soot, and always will.”

Tommy rolled his eyes. “You know that’s not what I meant,” he remarked.

Wilbur leaned forward, looking dead steady. “I know exactly what you mean, Tommy. But you’re wrong. There’s no correct way to fit into a family. There’s no right way to be a Watson. You’re not a cookie to be placed in our cookie cutter. The best way to be a part of a family is to be yourself. You have to be *you*, Toms,” he explained firmly.

Tommy stared. He didn’t even know who that was.

Wilbur sat back again, looking satisfied. He didn’t seem to notice how unnerved Tommy felt. Or how unchanged his opinion was. Tommy knew he couldn’t be adopted. It was too late for him. And besides, he couldn’t risk another Puffy incident.

“Why do you do that?” Wilbur asked.

Tommy glanced up, confused, and saw Wilbur gesturing to his legs. He looked down and noticed he was tapping his knee. He let out a nervous laugh. “Oh. It’s, uh, like a breathing

technique. A psychiatrist taught it to me a few years ago and I guess I just started doing it subconsciously. When I'm anxious my hands shake, so I tap the *four seven eight* pattern to match my breathing. Helps me calm down," he explained quietly. It was a little embarrassing. No one had ever asked before. He wondered if anyone had even noticed.

"You have scars on your hands," Wilbur observed, staring down at his tapping fingers.

Tommy snorted. "What is this, a therapy session?" He joked.

Wilbur didn't look up.

He rolled his eyes. "I've got scars everywhere, big man. They kinda come with the gig. Eight years of foster care has gotta show somehow. I mean, I came here through emergency placement. You've gotta know some fucked up shit was happening there for them to pull me so quickly, right?" He said with a tense laugh.

Wilbur didn't smile. "What happened?"

"Which time?"

He grimaced. "Any."

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Alright. These-" he held out his palms, littered with long white lines that travelled all across his hands and fingers. "-are from dear old dad. Alcoholic. Liked to throw beer bottles at a target when he was bored. A few of these are from other homes with the same deal. Glass on the ground is a hazard when you're *clumsy* or easily pushed around, right?" He said lightly. He was trying to keep the tone of the conversation bright, but Wilbur was clearly not having it. He pointed to a long white scar on his right bicep and rolled up his sleeve to properly show the full length of the elevated skin. "This is from house number fourteen. Bio kid lost his temper and pulled a knife back when I couldn't hold my tongue. They didn't even pull me from that house when it happened. I stayed there for three more months after I got out of the hospital. And these-" he lifted his shirt to show off the scars on his torso. "-are mostly from house nine. I don't even remember how I got 'em. I went straight from the hospital back to the group home and no one ever told me."

"*Tommy*," Wilbur breathed, looking sick.

He immediately felt defensive, pulling down his shirt. "Well you *asked*! What were you expecting, huh? Fell off my bicycle after mum and dad tried to teach me to ride? Don't ask stupid questions if you're not gonna like the answers," he snapped.

Wilbur clenched his jaw and said nothing. Tommy stared at him.

Finally, he cleared his throat. "Well this *has* been fun, Wilbur. But it is late, after all. Very much past my bedtime. So if you don't mind..." Tommy prompted.

Wilbur didn't move. "I don't understand you," he said quietly.

"What?"

“You’re right. I *don’t* understand, actually. Because I’ll never get how you can go through all that, go through house after house and heartache after heartache, and then say that you don’t want a family. You don’t want safety, and you would rather age out and be left on the streets to be alone,” Wilbur shot harshly.

Tommy tapped his thigh. “I know you don’t get it. I don’t expect you to. Now I would like to go to bed,” he grumbled.

Wilbur stood quickly, startling the younger boy. “I hate to tell you this Tommy, but you’re in for a world of hurt if you keep thinking like that,” he said sharply, heading towards the door.

“I’ve thought about it a lot more than you, Wilbur. It’s a lose-lose situation. It’ll hurt no matter what, but it’ll hurt less this way,” he shot back.

Wilbur slammed the door behind him.

The next day was a bad day for Wilbur.

Tommy had two panic attacks in his room.

Techno and Phil stayed painfully oblivious to it all.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!

The breathing technique Tommy uses is the 4-7-8 breathing technique, where you breath in for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 7 seconds, and exhale for 8 seconds. It's called relaxing breathing and helps with panic attacks :]

Also something fun to look out for! When our lovely protagonist is referred to as Thomas vs Tom vs Tommy vs Toms. It all represents how others look and perceive him.

Bit of a shorter chapter so to make up for it the next one should be out within a day or so <3

Coping

Chapter Summary

Tommy steps out of his comfort zone a bit. That might've been a bad idea.

Chapter Notes

Chapter CW: Panic attack, references to past abuse

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

Another few days went by sluggishly.

It was hot. A heatwave had been terrorizing the town all week. It was too hot to be outside comfortably. Tubbo and Ranboo had invited him over, but he wasn't sure about Phil's policy about visiting other houses. And he definitely wasn't sure how he'd feel about having Tubbo and Ranboo over at *his* place. So Tommy declined, and he didn't get to see his friends.

He was *bored*. The house was painfully boring. He did laundry. He cleaned the upstairs and downstairs bathrooms, much to Phil's awe and appreciation. He stared at the gaming consoles wistfully. He read through his favorite chapters of the Odyssey twice and was on a *third* time now.

It was evening on the fifth day of the heatwave and he was halfway through the classic when he heard music down the hall.

He knew Wilbur played the guitar. He heard soft strumming from behind his oldest foster brother's door quite often. But it was different this time around. The strumming was harsh and angry. The notes were minor and clashing. Tommy couldn't hear singing, but he did manage to hear the muffled mumbling of an excited musician.

Tommy sighed and glanced at the book that he had quickly lost interest in. He had to settle his boredom *somehow*, right?

He put the book down and made his way to Wilbur's room.

He quietly knocked on the door and the strumming stopped instantly. Wilbur exclaimed a quick "*come in*" and Tommy opened the door.

Wilbur was sitting cross legged on his bed with his guitar in his lap. An open notebook filled with words and scribbles was at his side, along with several loose pieces of paper scattered

around him. A blue pen was leaking ink onto his bedsheets. Tommy stopped himself from wincing at the sight. It was ridiculously hard to get ink out of fabric.

Despite his disheveled environment, Wilbur looked energized. His eyes were wide and he wore a crazed grin. He looked surprised to see him and his smile grew wider as Tommy stepped into the room.

“Whatcha doing?” Tommy asked, glancing around the mess of a room. He wondered if Wilbur would let him clean it. Probably not. It seemed like an organized chaos.

Wilbur’s eyes brightened. “Writing,” he answered simply. His fingers kept forming new patterns on the spine of his guitar as he spoke, even if he wasn’t strumming. Tommy watched, fascinated. He’d always wanted to learn an instrument.

“Sounds different from your normal stuff,” he observed.

Wilbur grinned- all teeth. “Working on something new. Needed a change, y’know?” He said with a passion in his voice that Tommy hadn’t heard before.

“Are you on drugs?”

Wilbur snorted. “No. Maybe too much caffeine and some antidepressants, but nothing illegal,” he said with a breathy laugh. “Just excited to be working again.”

Tommy hesitated, tapping his fingers along quickly. “Can I... can I listen? To you play? I won’t be a bother,” he asked nervously, staring at the wall behind his foster brother.

Wilbur paused for a moment, registering. Then his face lit up and he gestured to his side excitedly. “O-Of course! Yes! Always. My room is always opened to you. I love an audience. Techno doesn’t *get* art. I gave up on him years ago. And Dad means well, but he just tells me what I want to hear, y’know?” He explained, talking fast. He grinned wider, if it was even possible.

Tommy laughed and waded further into the mess before plopping down in the red bean bag chair to the side of Wilbur’s bed.

Wilbur looked at him with a fond gaze that made Tommy squirm uncomfortably for a moment. Then he went back to scribbling in his notebook.

The first chords Wilbur played were mean. They clashed- but in a good way. At least, that’s what Tommy thought. He liked this style better than Wilbur’s sappy stuff. It felt more real to him. Something that people actually experienced, maybe.

Tommy’s hands stopped tapping when Wilbur began to sing.

He was clearly testing out lyrics, stopping and restarted the same verses with different words or phrases. But it was *great*. Tommy had never heard Wilbur sing in person before. He had only heard the muffled and quiet lyrics of his other songs through two closed doors and a hallway. He didn’t listen to a lot of music. He had never owned a phone before this house or any kind of radio, but he could tell right away that Wilbur was talented.

He sang of grief, but not the sad kind. It was angry and bitter. Wilbur cursed the world and expected a curse back. He sang of forgotten promises and self loathing and betrayal of the worst kind. He switched topics constantly, putting new lyrics behind the same chords in an effort to find the perfect one. He described ripped letters, something stolen, bleeding hearts on sleeves. Tommy's hands gripped his jeans as he continued on to a haunting chorus full of minor notes and breathless dissonance.

Wilbur stopped to scribble something else down. Tommy remembered to breathe.

"It's your best one," he said softly, not wanting to disturb Wilbur from his work.

His foster brother looked up curiously, the blue pen tapping on the page absentmindedly. "You haven't heard anything else," he replied easily. He wore a small smile on his face.

"I hear it through the walls. It's sad stuff. This one is better," he argued, crossing his arms.

Wilbur laughed. It was a light, breathy noise that made Tommy feel warm. "Well I appreciate it. I've felt inspired lately," he said, running his fingers through his hair.

He went back to strumming. Tommy was perfectly happy to sit on in silence and listen.

Wilbur had gone through several versions of a chorus when there was another knock on the door. His foster brother made a grunting noise to whoever was on the other side as he stared at his notebook. The door opened to reveal Techno. His pink hair was gathered into a bun on the top of his head and he was sweating.

He blinked confusedly when he saw Tommy inside, giving him an odd look. Then he turned to Wilbur, who hadn't even looked up. "Some kind of party in here?" He asked, voice perfectly monotone.

Wilbur grinned and glanced at his brother, looking satisfied. "I've found the perfect audience member," he teased.

Techno rolled his eyes with a tiny smile and gave Tommy a look. "How'd he bribe you in here?" He asked.

Tommy shrugged. "I was bored. And I like listening to him play," he answered nonchalantly. His fingers tapped away. Wilbur grinned triumphantly.

Techno snorted. "If you say so. I came in here to borrow your fan. My room is a sauna. But if there's a concert going on, I guess I'll stick around," he said. He walked inside, leaving the door opened, and flopped down onto the yellow bean bag chair next to Tommy. Wilbur grinned and strummed a brand new chord.

Tommy made a noise of protest. "You have a *fan* ? I've been sweating to death in my room all week, and you have a *fan*?" He demanded.

Wilbur smiled without looking at him. "Phil bought us each one each years ago. He would've gotten you one as well if you weren't a stubborn bastard," he taunted.

Tommy's mouth shut tight and he crossed his arms, annoyed.

Techno looked over curiously. "My fan broke yesterday. Why didn't Dad get you a fan? It gets hot as hell in the house during summer," he asked.

Tommy said nothing.

Wilbur strummed a new pattern. "Get the fan out of the closet, Tech. You can use it in here and cool down. Tommy, you can bring it into your room when you leave," he said absentmindedly, writing something new down.

Techno got up to rummage in the opened closet. Tommy's chest tightened at the nonchalant kindness from his oldest foster brother.

They hadn't spoken about their talk a few nights ago. Wilbur hadn't brought it up again and Tommy wasn't one to start conversations. But from what he could tell, Wilbur hadn't told anyone else either. Tommy couldn't notice any visible change in Phil's behavior or his treatment in the house. He was grateful for Wilbur's discretion.

The fan whirled to life, blowing cold air in Tommy and Techno's direction. He allowed himself to relax. Wilbur strummed away, singing of heartache in the most heartbreaking way. Techno hummed along, seemingly perfectly content in the fan's air in his older brother's room. And Tommy sat there. Next to Techno. Across from Wilbur. Listening to both of them. Hands still on his lap. He just couldn't understand the light feeling in his chest. He didn't want to understand. He could worry about it later.

For right now, Tommy was comfortable.

He felt safe.

It wasn't long before Tommy began to doze.

Tommy woke up the next morning in his bed. He was still in his clothes from the day before. He glanced at the clock, reading 7:49am. The Odyssey was carefully balanced on his nightstand.

He groaned and rolled over. How had he even gotten here? He didn't remember waking up and going back to his room. He remembered drifting off in Wilbur's room. He remembered Techno's humming. He remembered the *click* of a camera shutter.

Even though it was morning, he changed into his pajamas.

He padded into the hallway sleepily. He could hear movement in the kitchen and his stomach growled. He hadn't had dinner last night. He frowned at the realization that he was hungry

again so soon. It had been a while since he skipped a meal. He would have to fix that if he wanted to remain strong in the next houses when food was restricted.

Phil was stirring pancake batter in the kitchen. He smiled over at Tommy as he entered.

“Good morning, Tommy. You’re up early. Pancakes okay?” He asked brightly.

Tommy rubbed his eye with the heel of his palm tiredly. “Uh... I’m not super hungry right now. Just woke up, y’know?” He said, looking away.

Phil didn’t seem fazed. “All good, mate. Wanna help?”

Tommy paused. It didn’t seem like Phil was ordering him. He shrugged, holding out his hands to take the bowl and wooden spoon.

Phil grinned and handed them over before turning back to the counter to set up the stove. Tommy stirred absentmindedly. He often cooked for his younger foster siblings in certain houses that let him have access to the fridge. He hadn’t cooked in the Watson’s house yet, but he guessed pancakes were as good a place as any to start. Phil grabbed a package of bacon out of the fridge as Tommy began to pour the batter into the pan.

“You might have added too much baking powder, mate,” Phil said with a small laugh.

He was joking, but Tommy’s hands still tightened on the bowl. “It makes them fluffier. Wilbur bitches about the pancakes if they’re not soft enough,” he argued quietly.

Phil gave him an odd look that he just couldn’t place. Tommy ignored it and grabbed a metal spatula out of a drawer to poke at the pancake’s edges. At his side, Phil placed several pieces of bacon on a new pan to sizzle.

They fell into a silence- Tommy constantly between feeling comfortable and tense. Fortunately, he didn’t have to wait long before the quiet was interrupted. Phil’s phone rang from the dining room. His foster father sighed.

“Ah, that’s work. Would you mind watching the bacon? It’ll only take a second,” he said, already walking away while wiping his hands on his pants. Tommy nodded, even though he knew Phil wasn’t looking at him or waiting for a response.

He let out a breath of relief when he found himself alone in the kitchen. Phil was kind, sure. But he was still a foster parent, and he still made Tommy understandably nervous. He was much more comfortable by himself, making breakfast for a family he wasn’t really a part of. This was all too familiar to him. It was almost soothing. He started another pancake and poked at the bacon as he heard Phil answer his phone in the other room. He worked around the kitchen to the background noise of Phil’s quiet mutterings in the living room, muffled through the walls.

He had finished five pancakes and was starting the sixth when Phil’s volume changed.

“-o. No! Are you dense?” Phil shouted. It was still muffled, but his tone was clearly angry. “It was a simple task! I didn’t realize you were too *stupid* to understand. Do I need to come

down there?”

Tommy immediately tensed, his heartbeat speeding up rapidly. He had never heard Phil shout before. He had never heard him raise his voice at all. And his foster father sounded *mad*. He glanced over his shoulder nervously. Phil made no attempt to enter the kitchen.

He continued to shout and berate whoever he was on the line with and Tommy tried to keep his hands steady. It was no use. They shook violently and he spilled batter across the counter. He swore and rushed to clean it before Phil returned. No need to provide any reason for Phil to direct his anger at him instead. He needed to attract as little attention as possible. He wished he was still in his room. He wished he had never come downstairs at all.

The yelling died down and he could hear Phil muttering in the living room now. Tommy tried to control his breathing, but it was no use. It was too hard and the kitchen was too hot and his hands just *wouldn't stop shaking* and-

“I have to run to the office, Tommy!” Phil called from further into the house. All anger from his tone had disappeared. “Emergency, sorry. I’ll be back in a bit. Handle breakfast for me, will ya?”

Tommy nodded soundlessly, knowing Phil couldn’t see him and not caring. He heard the front door close as his foster father left for the office.

He stared at the pancake in its pan, frying steadily. He tried to time his breathing along with the sizzle the food made and failed miserably. His fingers tapped rapidly- *four... seven... eight...*

House number two had a father who yelled. Actually, almost every house did. And Tommy’s own bio father shouted and swore and had angry fits that scared him more than anything. He was used to yelling. He shouldn’t be acting like this. Phil wasn’t even yelling at *him*. He didn’t need to be nervous.

He felt dizzy. But he *should* be nervous, right? It was too often that Tommy found himself on the other end of an angry tirade after a parent lost their temper. Foster kids were great ways to relieve stress, after all. Come home from a hard day of work and take all the frustration out on them. Tommy had broken several bones as proof. His heartbeat drummed in his ear, blocking everything else out. How long did he have until Phil came back? He wanted to be out of the house, even if he had to sit in the stifling heat outside. He wanted to be long gone, far from Phil’s reach and far from this family. He wanted *Hannah*-

When Tommy was eleven years old, a foster father came home *screaming* over a lost client at work. The bio kids ran for their rooms and Tommy couldn’t make it in time. He was grabbed by the back of the collar and hit and his foster mother screamed and nothing stopped and nothing happened and no one saved him, no one saved him and he was *all alone and and and-*

"Tommy!"

He startled and blinked. He was kneeling on the floor of the kitchen. His knees burned, as if he had fallen. He looked around, confused. His breathing was erratic. His face felt wet.

Techno was kneeling in front of him with a worried expression. His hair was in a loose ponytail over his shoulder. Tommy stared at it. Dazedly, he wondered if Techno would let him braid it.

“Breathe, Tommy. It’s okay. Match my breathing, alright?” Techno whispered softly. His monotone voice was surprisingly calming. Tommy tried his best to match him, occasionally falling short and slipping back into erraticness. Techno was perfectly patient through it, staying completely still and letting Tommy stare at the rise and fall of his chest.

“The stove,” Tommy wheezed. Phil had asked him to handle breakfast. He couldn’t fail, he couldn’t have another reason for Phil to be cross with him, he *couldn’t*-

“I took the pans off already. It’s okay. Just focus on me, alright?” Techno said gently.

Tommy didn’t consider Techno a gentle person, but maybe that was just because he didn’t spend much time with the guy. Techno was patient and soothing. His voice didn’t even hint at panic or annoyance. He waited for Tommy to calm down and didn’t seem to mind how long it took at all.

Tommy’s hands twitched.

Finally, his breathing mostly evened out with only the occasional hiccup. Tommy tapped rapidly on his thigh, his other hand shaking violently. He suspected the tremors wouldn’t calm down for quite a while.

Techno stared at him as he took a deep breath. “Are you alright?” He asked.

Tommy nodded. *Liar*. He didn’t *feel* alright. He felt like he had been hit by a truck. But he was exhausted and didn’t want to talk. More than anything, he wanted to go back to sleep now. He wanted to go back upstairs and lock his door and crawl under the covers of his bed. He wanted to run, get far away, get lost in the woods forever and never return.

“What triggered your panic attack?” Techno whispered.

He froze. He considered deflecting. He wasn’t one to share often, and definitely not one to reveal such a weakness. But Techno’s face was firm, clearly not going to back down. And Tommy was *so* tired.

“Phil,” he admitted quietly. His voice cracked. “Yelling on the phone. He didn’t yell at me. Just-”

Techno nodded. “I understand.”

Tommy gripped his hands into fists. The shaking didn’t stop. He sighed, frustrated.

“Phil doesn’t yell a lot,” Techno continued on. Tommy looked at him curiously. “My bio family used to scream all the time. Gave me panic attacks too when I first came here. Phil

doesn't believe that raising your voice solves anything. He almost never yells. But sometimes he gets frustrated. He's human too."

Tommy nodded along, only half listening. He didn't necessarily care about Phil's parenting techniques or Techno's past. He just wanted to be alone now.

Techno paused, studying him carefully. "How about we get you back to bed so you can rest? I'm sure that took a lot of your energy." He stood and held his hand out.

Tommy took it. Techno lifted him to his feet with ease.

He followed Tommy up the stairs and made sure he got into bed right away when they got to his room. He asked if he needed anything, but Tommy declined quickly. He hated the fussing. He didn't want the attention. Techno left after closing his door softly. Tommy listened to his footsteps, followed them down the hall and finally to the creaking staircase.

He sighed and closed his eyes. He was exhausted, but he wouldn't sleep again for hours.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading :]

Next chapter in a few days. All the support has been so so lovely thank you <3

Broken

Chapter Notes

Chapter CW: Underage drinking, brief references to underage drug use (just weed but be pls safe <3)

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

Wilbur Soot was the most insufferable person Tommy had ever met.

It was impossible to predict his mood swings. Phil and Techno never seemed to mind his irritability, always letting him ride it out. Always gentle and understanding.

Tommy was not gentle.

The heatwave broke at the start of Tommy's fifth week in the Watson house. It was still hot outside, the late July air almost suffocating, but it was livable. Tommy saw Ranboo and Tubbo again and wasn't ashamed of the relief that came with being around his friends.

Five weeks also meant his one month was coming up. He was nearly halfway through his expected stay in the household. That also meant a visit from Hannah to check in and see how he was doing. Monthly check-ins weren't required, but it was something that Hannah insisted on and Tommy couldn't help but agree. He couldn't lie and say he wasn't excited to see her. He had his ups and downs with his social worker, but she had been one of the most constant things in his life and she truly did want what was best for him. She tried her best, even if it wasn't always best for Tommy.

Wilbur was in one of his moods during lunch, stomping around the kitchen like it had personally offended him. He had shouted at Phil when he asked about his day and he was apparently giving Techno the silent treatment- not that Techno seemed to mind. Tommy tried his best to ignore him, eating his sandwich in silence. He had discovered that trying to stay out of Wilbur's line of sight was the best way for avoiding his bad temper.

The house phone rang and Phil rushed to answer it, leaving Wilbur to stew in the kitchen. His foster brother rolled his eyes, annoyed, and opened the fridge to find something to eat. He had already thrown away the sandwich Phil made for him and scoffed at Phil's offer to make him something else. Tommy thought he was being a brat. Not that he would ever voice that out loud.

"Tommy, it's for you," Phil called from the living room. Tommy frowned, putting his sandwich back on his plate. Who would be calling the house for him? The only people outside of the family that he talked to were Tubbo and Ranboo. Maybe Niki and her friends occasionally, but they could all get his cell phone number easily.

Wilbur glared at him as he made his way into the next room. Phil held out the phone. "It's Hannah," he said with a smile.

Tommy raised an eyebrow and took the house phone from him. He waited until Phil headed upstairs before speaking. "Hello?"

"Tom!" Hannah's voice crackled over the line. *"Hello! How are you doing?"*

He paused, confused. "Um... I'm good?"

"That's good! Listen, I'm just calling to let you know that I was sent out to the west coast for another kid. I know our one month check in is at the end of this week, but I don't think I'll be back in time," she admitted.

Tommy's stomach sank. "Oh. I- um, that's okay. No worries," he lied.

"Well listen, I'm checking in right now alright? You tell me how you're doing. And I'll try to get to your town by late next week to see you in person," she said. She sounded guilty. Tommy frowned.

"I- I'm okay. It's good here. Although, I think almost anything might be better than the last house," he said, trying for a joke. Hannah gave a small chuckle. "I, um, I have a cell phone now, actually. You can call that instead of the house phone so you don't have to bother the family."

He could almost hear the grin on her face as he gave her his brand new number.

"I'll definitely give it a call," she said. *"I'm glad you feel okay there, Tom. If you have a problem, you know where to reach me. Any hour. And if you feel uncomfortable saying something over the phone right now, I'll be there in less than two weeks. We can talk privately."*

Tommy nodded. "Okay. That sounds good. I'll see you in two weeks," he muttered.

"Less than two weeks," she reminded him. He could tell she was smiling.

"Less than two weeks," he corrected himself.

"I'll see you then. Be good Tom!" She gave her goodbye.

And then she was gone.

Tommy put the phone back on the port and frowned. Two more weeks. He tried not to feel disappointed. He knew Hannah wasn't his friend. She was just doing her job. But he also remembered his copy of *The Odyssey* and her message *Here's to a forever home* and her promise to be there for him if he needed it. He remembered his social worker before Hannah and his tendency to give Tommy the silent treatment as he handled his file- just another kid on the ever-growing pile.

He scowled and walked back to the dining room to throw out his sandwich. He wasn't very hungry anymore.

Wilbur's eyes followed him as he grabbed his plate. "Not a happy phone call, I take it?" He taunted.

Anger pooled in Tommy's stomach. "Fuck off," he hissed.

Wilbur grinned, looking slightly manic. He seemed excited Tommy had taken his bait. He suspected that's what Wilbur was always after when he was like this. Phil and Techno rarely gave him a reaction when he stormed.

"Who was it? You don't have any friends that call the house," he asked. His voice was mocking.

Tommy rolled his eyes and opted to ignore the question. "At least I *have* friends," he shot back.

Wilbur laughed cruelly. "Tubbo and Ranboo hardly count. They're just bored for the summer and you're new. It'll die out when they get tired of you," he teased harshly.

Tommy's chest tightened.

Techno looked up from his book with an annoyed expression. "*Wilbur*," he hissed.

Wilbur raised an eyebrow. "What? It's the *truth*. I'm only letting him know so his fragile fucking feelings don't get hurt when they leave," he argued.

Tommy let out a strangled laugh, getting an odd look from both of the brothers, and put down his plate. "*My* fragile feelings? Look at who you're talking to and then look in a mirror, asshole. At least I don't take my problems out on everyone around me," he snapped.

Wilbur frowned. "Oh, sorry. I forgot. You're totally heartless. Not a single emotion inside you. Does it ever get lonely in there?" He shot.

"Better emotionless than throwing a fucking tantrum every time I wake up on the wrong side of the bed."

Techno closed his book. "Maybe we should drop it-" He started.

"Stop babying him!" Tommy shouted, annoyed. "He's a grown ass man! You and Phil walk on fucking eggshells around him! He isn't supposed to act like this. I'm a *teenager* and *I* don't act like this. Maybe if you grew a pair and made him act like an adult, he wouldn't do this shit."

Techno blinked at him, surprised. Wilbur cackled. He was clearly enjoying the attention.

Tommy hated him.

“You’re a spoiled brat,” he spat at the older boy. “You’re selfish and explosive and you don’t care about anyone but yourself.”

Wilbur raised his eyebrows mockingly. “This isn’t even your house. You’re coming in here and telling me how to behave? Go out and rot on your city street, asshole,” he shot.

Tommy made a frustrated noise and tried not to look hurt. “You’re not even listening,” he sighed.

Wilbur stood up in an instant and slammed his palms down on the table. Tommy jumped, surprised. His hands shook nervously.

“And you’re a broken freak. What right do you have to criticize me? You can’t even argue without hyperventilating,” he hissed.

Techno rose from his chair slowly. “Wilbur, maybe you should-”

“Oh that’s real nice,” Tommy cut him off, glaring back at Wilbur. “Go after my problems. Have you seen your own? Checked in with your therapist lately?”

Wilbur laughed harshly. Tommy tried to resist a flinch. “You’ve got nerve, but it won’t help you on the streets. No one will miss you when you go. *No one* will remember you,” he shot.

Tommy’s breath quickened.

Techno grabbed onto his shoulder angrily. “*Wilbur stop it.* Enough! What are you even talking about-” He started.

Wilbur pushed him away roughly. He didn’t have the strength to actually shake Techno, but his younger brother let go of him nonetheless. “I’m telling the *truth*! You’re always going on about how you’re gonna leave? *Go!* No one’s stopping you! We never even wanted you here anyway!” He exclaimed, eyes wide and grin cruel.

Techno looked horrified.

Tommy ran.

He heard shouting, heard Techno calling his name, heard his heartbeat roar in his own ears. It didn’t matter. He ran for the door and then ran to the street. He took off. He was faster than Techno and he knew it. If he tried to come after him, Tommy would lose him easily. He ran. Tommy ran until he couldn’t think and couldn’t breathe. He ran until his calves ached and his chest burned. He ran until he couldn’t hear Wilbur’s voice echoing in his head and he could only hear his own heart. He ran until he couldn’t recognize his surroundings anymore.

And even then, he didn’t stop running.

Tommy was always running. It was all he knew how to do. Run from one house to another. Run from angry parents and jealous siblings and run from problems. Run from the bad emotions and run from the good ones too because it’ll hurt just as bad when they’re gone.

Run from the people who hurt him and run from the people who could love him because both were just as painful. Run on and on and *on and on and-*

Tommy collapsed.

His knees hit dirt and damp grass and he lurched forward onto his hands, heaving. His face was wet but he didn't remember crying. His throat burned but he didn't remember screaming.

He must have ran into the woods behind the town. He couldn't see a hint of civilization anywhere. He couldn't even remember which way he came from. He finally collapsed backward, leaning against a mossy tree. It was a little different than the city street Wilbur had suggested he find, but it would have to do. Wilbur wouldn't have even had the idea if Tommy hadn't given it to him in the first place. Now he would have to pay the consequences. This is what Tommy got for being open with his foster brother. He knew better. This is what he deserved.

This is what he deserved for allowing himself to relax in the Watson house. He shouldn't have let himself get comfortable. Tommy *knew better* than that. He knew *better* than to let himself feel at home in a place that wasn't his. He knew he wasn't welcomed in their life and that he was only put there by Hannah's request and Phil's good naturedness. He had just let himself forget.

Never again.

He looked around. There was no immediate shelter. Just trees and the occasional boulder for as far as he could see. He got to his feet shakily. His legs screamed in protest. Judging by the sun, it was about four in the afternoon. Tommy could follow it east to get to the coastline. He would be able to find out where he was from there. This was far from the first time Tommy ran away. He only wished he had enough foresight to grab his backpack before he left. He'd have to find a way to get it back later. For now, he settled on trudging through the forest eastward. The woods reminded Tommy of his bio family. Nature was more familiar to him than anything. He'd spent the first eight years of his life in a little cabin surrounded by tall trees for miles. When things were hard at home, he ran to the woods. When his father looked for a target, he ran to the woods. When he found his mother, the worst night of his life, he ran to the woods. In a way, the forest was his first real home, since he could hardly call the wooden cabin that.

He allowed himself to wonder about the Watson's as he walked. He knew it was Phil's job as a foster parent to call the police and then Hannah when he ran. He only hoped Phil's good naturedness got the better of him and he waited until nighttime to see if he would come home. To a foster kid, the only thing worse than staying in a home that you needed to run away from was being caught by the police and sent back. Tommy needed to put as much distance between himself and the house as possible.

He shoved his hands into his pockets as he walked. He honestly didn't know why he had run. He had endured worse verbal abuse from a family. And he had a pretty good life set up in the house. He knew he could've easily stormed to his room or even went to Phil. He could've let

Techno handle Wilbur and he could've wept alone in his bed without ever having to give up everything he worked so hard for in the past few weeks.

Not now though.

If they managed to catch him, Phil would send him away. Tommy would be deemed too much trouble, a classic problem child, and Hannah would come pick him up and take him away. Or, if Hannah was still out west, another meaner social worker would come to collect him.

Tommy's eyes welled with tears.

He didn't necessarily like the Watson's, but he certainly didn't dislike them. And he couldn't argue that this was the best he'd been treated in any house so far. He almost couldn't believe he'd run from it.

This was different, though. He knew it was. This was worse than when families he didn't care about insulted him or told him the truth about how they felt about him. It hurt more because he *did* care what the Watson's said about him. He *liked* staying at this house. And he hated to admit it, but he didn't want to leave.

It hurt because he had allowed himself to get hurt. He had been open with Wilbur and sometimes even went to him just to hang out. He liked spending time with his foster brother when he wasn't a total dick. This hurt more because Wilbur had taken something he had admitted to him in confidence and threw it back in his face. It felt like betrayal. Wilbur had betrayed his trust and had hit him where it hurt. And he had *smiled* at it.

And it was Tommy's fault for being open in the first place.

The sun was lower in the sky when Tommy heard music. More specifically, he heard the bass beat of a song cranked way too loud through a shitty speaker. He frowned and followed the noise uphill.

He followed a dirt road and found himself in a grassy clearing surrounded by huge boulders. He could hear waves crashing in the distance. He spotted a navy blue pickup truck along the perimeter. It was dirty and incredibly beat up. There were several speakers stacked up in the back of the truck, blasting music. They were all different brands and colors, as if they had all come from different places. Tommy noticed two guys digging around in the cargo bed.

"-don't care, dumbass. They can do what they want," the taller one was saying.

Tommy stepped into their line of sight. "Uh... hi," he greeted them.

The taller one looked over sharply and raised an eyebrow. He was dressed in a simple white tshirt and jeans. He wore a Yankees cap on his head and he had a slight beard growing. The

man grinned when he locked eyes with Tommy.

“You’re a bit early, kid. We’re still setting up, but we don’t mind the help,” he said, turning back to the truck. He lifted a large cardboard box and Tommy noticed the logo of a vodka brand on the side.

“Early?” He questioned.

The shorter guy snorted. He wore jeans and a navy jacket. An LAPD beanie covered his hair. “To the party. Are you stupid?” He laughed.

“What party?”

The men looked at each other quickly before bursting into laughter. Tommy probably would’ve been embarrassed if he was anyone else. Fortunately, he was Tommy Innit and he said what he wanted.

Most of the time.

The taller guy put the box down on the grass. “Oh I like you. You must be new around town, right? I’m Schlatt. This is Quackity. We host the parties around here,” he grinned, slapping a hand on Tommy’s shoulder.

He tried not to flinch. “Oh. Ranboo told me about you guys. This must be the rocks, then,” he realized. “It’s ugly.”

Schlatt barked out a laugh as Quackity lifted another box full of alcohol from the truck. “Ranboo, huh? Funny kid. I’m guessing you’re Tommy, then. Wil told me about you,” He said.

Tommy immediately tensed. “You’re friends with Wilbur?” He asked quietly.

Schlatt grinned with a strange glint in his eye. “Sure. Small town. And I get on with just about everyone. Y’know he texted me a bit ago to be on the lookout for his little brother. Ran away without a trace,” he taunted. Tommy froze and his hands twitched. He braced, getting ready to run. Schlatt only chuckled. “Relax, kid. I’m not a snitch. And I know Wilbur can be a real dick when he’s in his head. You can hang out here. Free of charge.” He paused, thinking. “As long as you help set up. You seem like a kid who can party.”

Tommy nodded, a small smile growing on his face. “Sure, no problem. What do you need?”

Schlatt grinned.

Tommy liked his new friends.

They were older than him, sure, but not by much. And they may have been a little rough, but Tommy had befriended much worse people in his life. They made jokes and bantered easily the entire time they unloaded the truck. Tommy wished he had his phone so he could get their numbers. They set up shitty folding tables next to the truck and unboxed the liquor as music blasted in his ears. Quackity brought out some beat up party lights to spread around the outskirts of the clearing. Tommy grinned the entire time. It was too loud to hear himself think, and it was nice. This whole afternoon was nice. It was familiar. He knew what he was doing in situations like these.

People started to trickle in after the sun started to sink below the horizon. He was amused when Schlatt set up shop at the dirt road entrance, charging money from the early party goers. He felt even more pleased when Schlatt didn't mention a charge at all around him. Quackity stayed by Tommy's side and joked about the people coming in. They were mostly young college students, he explained. Some high schoolers and some older, but all from around the area or knew someone who was. He grinned when Quackity pointed out the washed up football players who peaked in high school and the drugged out twenty-somethings who only showed up on the promise of good weed.

He grinned wider when Quackity offered him his first shot.

"I'm *not* encouraging you to drink," he said as he handed him a shot glass full of clear liquid. "Minors shouldn't drink. If Phil asks, I told you that. You just look like you need a drink, man."

Tommy chuckled and clinked shot glasses with the shorter boy. The alcohol went down easily. Quackity made a face.

"What the *fuck*?" He demanded. "You drank that like water. Literally, what the *fuck*."

Tommy shrugged. "I'm a foster kid, big man. This stuff comes with the gig," he said with a smile.

Quackity frowned. "I don't know, man--"

"Tommy!"

They turned around to find Schlatt walking towards them, pocketing a huge wad of cash. Tommy raised his eyebrows. He could definitely appreciate Schlatt's hustle. He grinned when he reached them at the table and grabbed a beer from the cooler. "Is this your first party in town?" He asked, twisting the cap off.

Tommy nodded. Quackity grinned. "Schlatt, this kid drinks like a hardened war vet. You've gotta see it. It's like... amazing," he gushed.

Schlatt chuckled and took a swig. "Show me."

Tommy smiled as Quackity poured him another shot. He downed it easily. Schlatt whistled in appreciation.

“Alright, kid. You’re pretty cool. You smoke?” He asked.

He nodded.

Schlatt grinned and slapped a hand on his shoulder. He guided him further into the party.

The bass of the music beat in time with his heart.

There were so many people here. There were more people in the clearing tonight than Tommy had seen in his entire time in this town. He *loved* it. He loved being just another face in the crowd. He loved blending in.

He was a little crossed, he’d admit. It was well into the night now, and he’d definitely lost track of how many shots deep he was a few hours ago. Someone had set up beer pong across the clearing at one point. Tommy didn’t want to brag, but he was a *god* at beer pong, so of course he had to play. Then he’d shared a joint with Schlatt and Quackity a little bit ago and downed a square of a punch bar. And maybe he’d followed it up with another shot.

Okay, maybe he was a lot crossed.

But that was okay. Tommy could handle himself. He knew his limits, and he knew how to get comfortably wasted without being a danger. At least, usually. Tonight he might have been having some issues with that.

He was having some bad feelings. He had an awful, guilty feeling in his stomach and he didn’t like it. He knew that before he was here, he was feeling bad. And every time he remembered what he was feeling, he took another shot. And he forgot again. He’d taken the punch bar square when he’d remembered *someone*, but he couldn’t remember who it was now. Something about family... or a guitar?

He took another shot.

So maybe he had gone a little past his limit. Just a little.

Maybe a lot.

He was on the outskirts of the clearing. He wasn’t much for dancing no matter how intoxicated he was, and he much preferred to remain on the outside looking in. He’d found Jack Manifold at some point and now they were trading easy banter- Tommy’s mostly revolving around Jack’s hideous red and blue 3D glasses.

“They’re *awful*,” Tommy argued loudly. “How could you even leave the house like that?”

Jack chuckled and sipped his beer. “I aim for eccentric at all times. I look good in everything,” the shorter boy said with an amused grin.

Tommy laughed. It sounded odd to his ears, so he laughed again.

Jack raised an eyebrow. “You drank any water tonight, boss man?” He asked.

He snorted. “*No*,” he laughed. “That’s stupid. That’s a stupid idea.” He narrowed his eyes to look at the older boy closer. “You’re *stupid*.”

Jack frowned. “Who’re you here with, Tommy? Do your... do your brothers know you’re here?” He asked.

Tommy’s stomach sank and his eyes widened. Oh *right*. Wilbur and Techno and Phil. *How could he have forgotten?* He muttered an excuse to Jack and stumbled off quickly to find the truck again.

He found Quackity pouring another mixer at the table. He grinned when he saw Tommy.

“Tommy! How’re you doing?” He grinned. His words were slightly slurred. His smile dropped slightly when he saw Tommy reaching for the almost empty vodka bottle. “Hey man, I think you need a break. You don’t look so good.”

Tommy didn’t look at him as he downed another shot. He didn’t feel it at all. He might as well have had nothing in his mouth at all. “I... ‘ts not working,” he muttered. His vision swam and he tried to concentrate on the blue label of the bottle.

“What’s not working?” Quackity asked. He put his red solo cup back down and turned his full attention to him.

Tommy frowned. He hated this. It just *wasn’t working*. He *hated this*. “Alcohol,” he slurred. “Still r’member.”

“What do you remember?”

“Everything.”

Quackity frowned. “Hey man, it’s alright. How about we start getting you home, yeah? We’ll find someone sober and we’ll take you back,” he said softly, like he was trying not to spook him.

His eyes widened. “I... no! *No!* I can’t... no. I ran away. I’m not... I’m not *going back*, I *can’t*,” he argued, stepping away from his new friend.

Quackity called out to him, *reaching* for him, but all he could see were the hands of his abusers. And Tommy *ran*.

He was always running.

He didn’t get far, of course. He was completely wasted and his vision swirled in front of him. He did manage to make it down the cliff and to the beach after some time, miraculously unharmed. No one came after him. No one was looking for him.

No one ever was.

The sand was soft beneath his feet, but the shifting surface made it worse. He was on the ground more than on his feet. He swore like a sailor, scowling and laughing at himself. He felt stupid and free and guilty and nauseous and incredible and awful all at once. He finally resigned to staying down on the sand. He could spend the night here and watch the stars. Tommy always loved the stars. Whenever he'd run away before, he'd always made sure to have a view of the night sky.

Maybe if he were more sober, he could've picked out each constellation.

"Tommy."

He jolted and looked over. Schlatt was standing above him with his arms crossed. He looked annoyed.

"I'm taking you home," he said with a frown.

Tommy blinked, surprised. "You followed me?" He asked. His voice cracked and he winced.

Schlatt rolled his eyes and held out his hand for Tommy to take. He was reminded of Techno helping him off the kitchen floor after his panic attack. He took it hesitantly and Schlatt pulled him to his feet. "'Course I followed you. You're a good kid, and I like you. I know you ran away, but spending the night on the beach is not as enjoyable as it sounds. I'm driving you home," he said firmly, guiding Tommy back towards the woods.

He frowned. "You... you were drinking. You're high. You can't drive," he argued half-heartedly.

Schlatt rolled his eyes again as they found the dirt road. Tommy hadn't gotten as far from the party as he'd originally thought. "I only had one beer and a third of a joint, and that was hours ago kid. I'm usually the designated driver once it gets too late. I wouldn't drive you if I wasn't a hundred percent sure it was safe," he assured.

The music got louder as they approached the truck. The party goers paid them no mind as they got into the car. Quackity was nowhere to be found. The music grew muffled and distorted once they closed the doors. Tommy stared out the windshield as Schlatt put the truck in drive. His hands shook wildly as they began the descent down the dirt road.

"I don't wanna go back," he admitted quietly.

Schlatt shot him a curious glance. "Why's that?" He asked.

Tommy shrugged. He didn't want to think about it. He preferred to sit in his high, letting his head swim in the passenger seat of Schlatt's beat up truck. He liked when he didn't have to think- he liked when he could just *be*.

Schlatt didn't seem to agree. "No, c'mon now Tommy. I know perfectly well that the Watson's aren't abusing you. I know Phil's a good guy and Techno and Wil are cool when

they aren't assholes. Why don't you want to go back? 's gotta be a reason," he demanded. His voice wasn't angry, but it was firm enough that Tommy still tensed.

"That's the problem," he said.

"What?"

"That's... that's the problem!" He exclaimed angrily. His words slurred together in an ugly way that he hated. It reminded him of his dad. "They're so *nice*! What fucking right do they have, huh? I'm not their fucking family. I'm not *one of you*. I don't belong here, and everyone's acting like I do!" He paused, considering. "And Wilbur's a dick," he decided.

Schlatt cackled. "Wilbur is a dick," he agreed. "But he's got a good heart, trust me. And about that *other* problem, kid. That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," he grinned.

"Huh?"

"Every human on earth feels like they don't belong. You're not special," he said, turning onto the main road.

Tommy refocused on the windshield. "Fuck off, asshole," he snapped.

Schlatt snickered. "You're hardly sober enough to be telling *me* off, kid."

He scowled and stared out the window.

They sat in silence until Schlatt pulled up in front of the white house with green shutters. Tommy stared at it blankly.

"I don't have a key," he realized.

Schlatt gave a frustrated sigh. "Call your brothers and tell them to open the door," he suggested.

"I don't have my phone."

Schlatt groaned and Tommy watched him pull out his phone. He hovered over Wilbur's contact information for a moment before quickly switching to Techno and pressing the call button.

They listened to it ring a few times before the dial paused. And then a very tired-sounding Techno groaned through the speakerphone- "*What?*"

Schlatt rolled his eyes. "Nice to talk to you too, asshole."

"*It's three in the morning.*"

"Yeah, yeah. Listen, I've got your little brother in the car. He doesn't have a key to get inside," he explained quickly.

He heard movement on the other end. “*You* what ?!” Techno demanded. He saw Techno’s bedroom light flick on from the street and winced.

Schlatt hesitated for a moment. “Yeah. Also... he’s high and drunk off his ass. Please come get him. Okay, bye!” He rushed out.

“*Wait, wh-*”

He hung up.

He turned and grinned at Tommy. “Alright, out you go. Get well soon. Hopefully see you again. You were fun, kid. Let’s party again when you’re not going through shit,” he said cheerfully.

Tommy scowled and stuck his tongue out at him. Not the most mature thing he could’ve done. Schlatt howled with laughter.

The truck sped down the street as soon as Tommy slammed the door behind him. He stumbled up the driveway and was approaching the porch when the front door flew opened.

Techno stared at him. Tommy stared back.

He opened the door fully and marched down to Tommy’s side. He braced himself for a scolding or maybe a beating, but Techno only slid his arm under his shoulder in order to help him up the porch stairs. Tommy took the help gratefully.

The house was dark and silent as they stepped inside. He tried his best to keep it that way, but he couldn’t help his grumbling and snickering and other drunken noises as the two of them tripped up the stairs. Techno sighed loudly as they stumbled down the hall and Tommy giggled.

Tommy suddenly found himself on his bed in his room. Techno flipped on the lights and closed the door behind them. He looked at Tommy expectantly and Tommy stared right back. Techno was dressed in a white sweatshirt and black sweatpants. His hair, for once, wasn’t tied back and instead hung loosely down his back. Tommy wanted to braid it. He wanted to braid it more than anything. He opened his mouth to ask, but Techno cut him off.

“What were you *thinking*?” He demanded angrily.

Tommy blinked, confused. “Right now?” He asked, scrunching his eyebrows. How did Techno know he wanted to braid his hair?

His foster brother rolled his eyes. “No, you idiot. You *ran away*. And then you, what? Went to drink and smoke it away with *Schlatt*?” He hissed.

Tommy had never heard Techno without his signature monotone or the occasional slight urgency when he told Wilbur off for something. But his voice was filled with emotion now. Whether it was anger or something else, Tommy couldn’t be sure.

“Didn’t mean to,” he mumbled halfheartedly.

“You *didn’t mean to?*” Techno exclaimed indignantly.

And *oh*, Tommy realized what this was. Techno was mad. Tommy had messed up, and he had messed up badly. Techno took an angry step towards him and *oh* Techno was going to *hit* him and Tommy flinched back violently, almost falling off the bed, and he was *begging* even if he didn’t know what he was saying and he couldn’t *breathe*-

Techno froze, eyes wide. Tommy took a panicked breath, words caught in his throat.

“Tommy,” his foster brother whispered. “We’re not going to hurt you. I need you to understand that. No one here will *ever* lay a hand on you.”

Tommy couldn’t hear him. Tommy was completely focused on his own breathing and steeling his shaking hands. Tommy wanted to run away again. He cursed Schlatt for bringing him back here and he cursed himself for getting in the car in the first place. This was all his fault.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. I’m *sorry*. Please don’t-”

“*Tommy*,” Techno cut him off. “Please, take a breath. Match my breathing. You’re okay, I promise.”

He stared at his foster brother’s shoulders rising and falling steadily. He tried his best to match it. Techno was good at this, he remembered. Techno was good at breathing and calming.

“Listen,” the older said once his breathing had slowed considerably. “Tommy, listen to me. What you did was wrong. You shouldn’t have run, and you *definitely* shouldn’t have gone to Schlatt. But no one here is angry at you. We’re not mad. You’re not going to be punished for this.” His voice was soft and gentle. It was so unlike Techno’s hardened exterior. The tone didn’t match his bruised knuckles or scarred skin.

“Wh-What?” Tommy croaked out.

Techno sighed and took another step closer. When Tommy didn’t flinch, he sat down tentatively on the edge of his bed. “We’re not mad. I understand why you ran, and I understand... Schlatt. Even if I don’t agree. We were just *worried*. We were scared for you. You’re new around here and you could’ve gotten really lost. The woods go deep and almost anyone could have found you. We had just about the entire town out looking for you. Hell, Phil and Wil are *still* out looking for you. Have been since you ran off,” he explained in a tense tone.

Tommy’s eyebrows furrowed with confusion. “They... they’re what?” He asked. He’d left hours ago. There’s no way they were worried that much... right? Wilbur *wanted* him to go.

Techno closed his eyes. “Wilbur said bad things, and he explained to me what they meant when you left. Wil shouldn’t have... there’s *no* excuse for his behavior, bad day or not. *Wilbur* is the one in trouble, not you. But Wil’s been worried sick all day. He’s the one who ran to Phil as soon as you left,” he paused, opening his eyes again. “He’s a bitch sometimes

and he knows it. He's working to get better and he doesn't always know when he goes too far. Wilbur... he's really excited that you're staying with us. He loves you, and he doesn't want you to leave no matter what he says. He's been out with Phil all fucking day checking every nook and cranny for you."

Tommy blinked. "I don't understand," he muttered.

"It's okay. It might not make sense right now, but it will."

He frowned and stared at the bright red bed sheets. They hurt his eyes but he didn't look away. After a few minutes of comfortable silence, Tommy sighed and flopped backwards, head hitting the pillow unceremoniously.

"Don't tell the Watson's," he murmured. "But I really like it here."

The pink haired boy across from him snorted. "Oh yeah? You don't act like it," he said in an amused voice.

Tommy groaned and pushed his face further into the pillow. "Can't act like it. Last time I loved a family... threw me away," he slurred.

He opened his eyes just as the older frowned. "What do you mean?" He asked quietly.

"Gave me adoption papers and took it back. Kicked me out," he mumbled into his pillow. Then he squinted at the boy. "Can I braid your hair?" He asked.

The pale boy blinked, surprised. "You braid?"

Tommy nodded. The room spun and he smiled, remembering. "I did all my foster's siblings' hair. Parents are assholes, never take care of the kids. I'm always the oldest... always the parent," he slurred.

The man said nothing. Tommy looked at him expectantly.

"I'm going to throw up," he said confidently. Techno barked out a laugh and reached down to grab the plastic garbage can from the floor. When had Techno gotten here? He handed it to Tommy silently, who thanked him earnestly before heaving.

Techno stayed the entire time. He only left briefly to get Tommy a tall glass of water, which he downed instantly. He stayed until Tommy's stomach was empty and tears flowed down his face and his throat burned with acid. He rubbed soothing circles on Tommy's back as he sobbed and he helped Tommy under the blankets when he was done.

Tommy dozed uncomfortably as the room swam. Techno left at one point to clean the garbage bin. The next time Tommy opened his eyes, Techno was back and he was on the phone.

"-in his room," he was saying. He paused, listening. "Schlatt dropped him off drunk and high out of his mind. He just spent the last half hour throwing his brains up." Another pause. "We can talk about it when you get home. Said some stuff he probably didn't want to." Techno ran

a hand through his hair. “Just get home, you’ve been out all day. You have to sleep. He’s home and safe now. Nothing to worry about. Can you...”

Tommy drifted to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!

JSchlatt not as the story's villian propaganda

Also crimeboys angst and bedrock duo fluff my beloved

Next chapter in a few days!!

Forgiveness

Chapter Notes

Chapter CW: mentions of underage drinking, mentions of past child abuse/emotional manipulation

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

Tommy awoke to a blinding headache.

He groaned and swore, turning over to glare at his clock. It was late in the afternoon. He also noticed a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin on his nightstand. He downed two pills quickly and drank half the glass before he flopped down on his bed again. Tommy was hardened against alcohol and he usually didn't get bad hangovers, but this was *killer*.

He remembered a lot of last night, unfortunately. He remembered Schlatt driving him home. He had a few hazy memories of talking with Techno, although the exact conversations alluded him. And he remembered throwing up until he was gasping for air.

He grimaced and looked over at his trash can. It was perfectly clean.

He closed his eyes against his pounding head and tried to drift back to sleep, but he quickly came to the conclusion that his headache would prevent that. He decided to go downstairs in search of something filling- maybe coffee or some soup. His vision spun as he stood and he waited a moment before it steadied again. He threw on a pair of sweatpants, stripping away his dirty shorts from the night before. After a moment of consideration, Tommy pulled off his bedsheets and threw them in the laundry hamper as well. A piece of fabric dropped to the floor and he picked it up curiously. It was a yellow sweater, several sizes too big for him. Tommy peeled off his dirty shirt and slipped into the sweater. It was comfortable and warm and smelled like coffee.

Tommy scowled as he made his way downstairs. He could hear movement below him and he dreaded it. He didn't want to talk to anyone ever again. Right now he felt like he would be perfectly happy fading into the soil of the woods and never emerging.

Phil was in the kitchen when he walked in, bustling about over the stove like usual. His eyebrows shot up when he saw Tommy. "Oh!" He exclaimed. Tommy winced at the volume and Phil smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting you to wake up anytime soon. Can I get you anything, mate? Water? Advil?"

Tommy paused for a moment, considering. Then he pointed an unsure finger at the coffee maker. Phil smiled, amused. "Sure thing, Tommy. I'll make you a mug. Why don't you sit down?" He said gently, walking over to grab the coffee grounds from the cupboard. Tommy

nodded and trudged to the living room before collapsing onto the loveseat. The leather was soft and Tommy relaxed against it. He pressed his forehead against the cold material.

It wasn't long before Phil returned, holding out a green mug. Tommy took it gratefully, wrapping his cold hands around the searing ceramic.

Phil took a seat on the couch. "Do you want to talk about last night?" He asked gently.

Tommy shook his head and took a sip from the mug. The coffee burned his tongue and he welcomed the sensation wholeheartedly.

Phil frowned. "I really think we should. It doesn't have to be now, and you can be nonverbal if you want, but I think it's important to discuss this." He paused. "And I think you should talk to Wilbur as well. If you're not comfortable with that, I can sit in on it to moderate, but it's important that you two talk."

Tommy stared into his coffee and nodded silently.

Phil waited for him to say something. When he didn't, he continued on. "When you want to be verbal again, Wilbur is in his room. There's no rush. Take your time, Tommy," he explained softly. Tommy nodded again and Phil took it as his cue. He got up and went back to cooking in the kitchen.

Tommy stared at the carpet as his head pounded in his ears. He didn't think he was *nonverbal*, so to say. Sometimes he just didn't want to talk. Sometimes speaking felt like an impossible task. It didn't hurt that his head was aching and his tongue felt like lead.

He stayed in the living room as he finished his coffee and listened to Phil hum in the kitchen. He couldn't get over how... *calm* everybody was. It didn't make any sense to him. Phil should be *furious* at him. He ran away and got wasted beyond his limits. He kept everyone up until four in the morning looking for him. And more importantly, Phil *should* have taken Wilbur's side over Tommy's. He was the adopted child, obviously more wanted. He'd lived here and had been Phil's son for over eight years. Phil had every reason to defend his child and send Tommy packing. It's what every other foster parent would've done. It's what Puffy did.

He finished his coffee and hummed experimentally. When his voice came easily to him, he got up and put his mug into the dishwasher. Phil smiled warmly at him as he left.

Tommy traveled up the stairs and stood awkwardly in front of Wilbur's closed door. He waited for a moment, not knowing what exactly he was waiting for. Maybe an excuse to not knock... or his own conscience telling him that he didn't need to do it. When neither happened, Tommy took a breath and knocked on the door. There was a quiet *come in* and Tommy stepped inside.

Wilbur was sprawled out on his bed and he sat up quickly when he saw Tommy enter. He was wearing his glasses and his green sweater. His hair was messed like he'd been running his hands through it all day. He opened his mouth to say something and then quickly shut it again. There was a moment of silence where they simply stared at each other. Then-

“I’m not your brother,” Tommy deadpanned. Wilbur froze, clearly not expecting such an opening. He continued. “You’re not my brother and this isn’t my family. I don’t owe you forgiveness just because we live in the same house.”

Wilbur’s jaw clenched and he nodded, looking down at his sheets guiltily. He seemed resigned to Tommy’s scolding.

“I *do* forgive you,” Tommy clarified, crossing his arms. Wilbur looked up sharply, eyebrows shooting up. “But not because we’re family. I forgive you because I know you’re a good person and everyone keeps on telling me you’re struggling. I know it’s hard.”

Wilbur stared at him with wide eyes.

“You struggling isn’t an excuse,” he continued, staring at the wall behind Wilbur’s head.. “But I know better than anyone that getting help is hard. Techno told me that you were out looking all day for me.” Wilbur nodded silently. “I... I appreciate that. Families usually send the police after me when I go. It... means a lot that you went out instead. I’m not going to apologize for pushing you because you shouldn’t have responded like that. And if you want to keep my forgiveness, you *have* to get more help. Phil and Techno might put up with your moods, but I won’t. If you want me to stick around so badly, you have to work on fixing it.”

Silence. Wilbur looked at him blankly.

Then he burst into tears.

Tommy shoved his hands into his pockets, uncomfortable. He was used to soothing crying foster siblings, but Wilbur seemed different somehow. He was older. And Tommy had never *caused* the crying before.

Wilbur finally sniffled, wiping at his face quickly. “I will. I’ve already upped my therapy to once a week instead of biweekly. We’re looking into altering my medication,” he explained with a watery hiccup.

Tommy nodded.

“Tommy, I... I’m *so* sorry. I didn’t mean... I don’t know why... I’m *sorry* . I didn’t mean even a word I said. I was just angry and my head... I’m *sorry* . I’ll never be able to apologize enough. I’ll be making up for it for the rest of my life,” he said. Quiet tears ran down his face.

Tommy looked away awkwardly. His fingers tapped gently on his leg. “It’s alright, big man. None of that, now. It wasn’t the worst thing that’s ever happened to me,” he said with a small laugh.

Wilbur looked pained. He hesitated slightly. “Do you... uh- I was going to... play my guitar. Do you... do you wanna hang out?” He asked, gesturing to the red bean bag chair. He sounded much too nervous for such a question.

Tommy snorted. “As long as you don’t combust, king. Take a breath,” he said lightly. He closed the door behind him and made his way into the room, collapsing into the chair.

Wilbur gave a watery grin. He reached over and grabbed his guitar off the stand at the foot of his bed.

Tommy closed his eyes as Wilbur began to play.

Tommy dozed for the rest of the day in the bean bag chair. Wilbur played soft music that didn’t hurt his hangover. He drifted in and out of consciousness for hours. At one point he woke up with a wool blanket draped over him. He only snuggled deeper into the chair and drifted off again.

He woke up again when his phone rang. He jumped awake, startled. He’d almost forgotten his cell phone was in his pocket. The sun was beginning to set now. Wilbur strummed his guitar absentmindedly, writing some notes in his notebook.

Tommy pulled his phone out of his pocket groggily and glanced at the contact. Tubbo’s face grinned back at him. He swallowed nervously and answered.

“Hello?”

“*Thomas Innit!* ” Tubbo shrieked. Tommy pulled his phone away from his head quickly, his ears ringing. It was so loud that even Wilbur glanced over with an amused smile.

“Oh, hey Tubbo. Listen-”

“*Listen ? You’re joking right? You go missing for an entire day, you don’t check your phone, you don’t text us back. I hear from fucking Jack Manifold that you were at the cliffs last night? What the fuck is wrong with you!?* ” He demanded.

Tommy smiled. Despite the angry tone, he could tell that Tubbo was more worried about him than anything else. “Yeah, sorry about that. Had to go- personal judgment. But I’m back now, all safe,” he said with a small laugh.

“*Are you sure? How’s your hangover? Jack said you were completely washed last night ,*” he said, defrosting slightly.

He grinned. “*Washed ?* You think so little of me, Tubso. I’m a hardened foster kid. I can hold my liquor,” he remarked. “And besides, Wil is soothing my headache with lovely guitar music. Nothing to worry about.”

Wilbur looked at him sharply. He wore an odd expression.

“If you say so, man. I’m just glad you’re alright. If you give me and Ranboo a heartattack like that again, you’re dead. I will personally remove all your bones. They’ll be decoration in my room,” he threatened.

Tommy barked out a laugh. “I’m counting on it. Personally, I think my bones would look magnificent in any space, but I’ll still do my best to avoid it.”

Tubbo laughed. Tommy laughed. They said their goodbyes. They hung up.

Wilbur stared at him. “You called me Wil,” he said softly.

Tommy raised an eyebrow, pocketing his phone. “So what? It’s your name,” he said, suddenly defensive.

Wilbur grinned wide. “You’ve never called me Wil before. You *like* me. We’re like brothers,” he taunted. He was joking, but Tommy could see the fondness on his face.

He rolled his eyes. “We are *not* brothers,” he argued tiredly.

Wilbur looked amused. “You’re wearing my sweater,” he said with a smile.

Tommy’s eyes widened and he looked down at the yellow material he was wearing. “It was on my bed!” He exclaimed defensively.

His foster brother cackled. “I checked on you last night and I must’ve left it. That doesn’t change the fact that you still put it on,” he teased.

Tommy rolled his eyes. “I didn’t know it was yours. I should’ve guessed. It smells. You *smell*,” he deadpanned, pulling the blanket farther up to his chin.

“Sure, Toms.”

“I hate you. You’re an evil man and I hate you. I can’t wait to leave.”

“Can I have my sweater back?”

“No.”

Everything seemed to calm down in the next few days after that Monday afternoon. The family acted as if Tommy had never done anything wrong at all. He wasn’t sure if he liked the treatment or not. It was... boring. He went about his day in a regular routine and it unnerved him. The normalcy was almost scary. He passed time waiting for the other shoe to drop- for someone to eventually snap again and finally punish him for what he did, but it never seemed to come. He was full of anxiety and anticipation with no release.

Tommy went on the car ride to drop Wilbur off at his therapy appointment on Wednesday. Phil offered to take him to lunch while they waited for Wil, but Tommy declined. He was perfectly happy to wait in the car in silence. When his foster brother returned an hour later, he was in a much more somber mood than before. Tommy pretended not to mind the change and pretended not to flinch when Wilbur slammed his door shut when they got home. He had a nightmare that night.

On Thursday, Phil sat Tommy down to talk about the previous weekend. He once again promised to work harder in creating a welcoming environment for Tommy as well as Wilbur, and offered to mediate any future disagreements- no matter how small. He reprimanded Tommy for his actions, but mostly focused on himself and what he'll do in the future. He was surprised to find tears in his foster father's eyes. It made him uncomfortable, though he supposed he appreciated the sentiment. He waved goodbye to Techno as he left for work. He had a nightmare that night, too.

Tommy went to the park with Tubbo and Ranboo on Friday. The shorter punched him in the arm on sight and Tommy groaned before bursting into laughter. He couldn't deny that he deserved it. Ranboo mentioned that he needed to re-dye his hair and invited Tommy over to his house Saturday to help. Indeed, Tommy could see dark blond roots peaking through the white-black split dye. Tommy declined, but wished him luck.

He had *another* nightmare that evening.

Dream scowled at him. His foster brother was always scowling, nowadays. Tommy didn't know why. Dream had always seemed happy to have him around in the last few months, but recently it was like his very existence irritated the older boy. Tommy didn't know what he did wrong, but he certainly tried to make it up to him. Dream never seemed to notice. Or maybe he just didn't care.

"I don't understand," Tommy whimpered. He was sitting on the floor of his bedroom and Dream loomed over him with crossed arms.

"What, are you stupid? She doesn't love you. Not like us. You're just another paycheck to her," Dream snapped.

Tommy's lower lip wobbled. That had to be wrong... right? Puffy loved Tommy. She was always saying it. She was the first one in so long...

Dream's eyes softened. "It's okay, Tommy. You might find a home before you're eighteen. It just won't be here," he said, sickeningly sweet. Shadows were starting to form around his feet.

Then Tommy was crying. He always seemed to be crying around Dream, nowadays. Maybe that's why his foster brother was so agitated by him. "I don't want another family. I don't want to go back," he cried. He was too old to cry and he knew it. He was far hardened by foster home after foster home and countless heartbreaks by now. But he cried anyway. Maybe

a year at Puffy's house had finally managed to make him weak. The darkness crawled up his legs, icy cold.

Dream shrugged. "Some people just aren't made for families, Tommy. Some foster kids are just meant to age out and die on a city street. It's just how it goes, sometimes. Don't feel bad," he said soothingly.

Tommy sobbed.

"Shut up, Tommy," Dream hissed, suddenly cold.

Tommy wouldn't- no, couldn't stop. His hands were shaking out of control, the tears just wouldn't slow, he couldn't breathe-

"This is why no one loves you," Dream snapped. And then his spring green eyes turned into something darker, something more sinister. "When you die young and alone, do you honestly think the Watson's will spare a second glance?" The shadows grabbed hold of him and the floor went to swallow him whole. And Dream raised his fist-

Tommy jolted awake with a gasping breath. He filled his burning lungs like he had been drowning and just broke the surface.

He blinked, trying to take in his surroundings. For a moment he panicked, not recognizing where he was. But then he met Wilbur's worried eyes and it all rushed back with a blinding fury. He had dozed in Wilbur's bean bag chair once again. It was quickly becoming one of his favorite places in the house- but he certainly hadn't meant to stay so late. Wilbur was staring at him with his guitar still in his lap. It was dark out now. How late was it? Tommy squinted and ran a hand through his hair, trying to calm down.

"You alright?" Wilbur asked gently.

"I'm fine," Tommy snapped back, much more harsh than he intended. He froze immediately, looking at Wilbur for his reaction, but the older didn't seem fazed.

"Another nightmare?" He questioned curiously.

Tommy scowled. "What do you mean, *another* nightmare?" He demanded.

Wilbur raised an eyebrow. "You toss and turn almost every time you fall asleep here," he said, almost guilty. Tommy's heart sank. "Sometimes you whimper and a few times you've even begged. It's okay to get nightmares, Toms. I won't judge you if you wanna talk about it."

Tommy squeezed his eyes shut as if it could block out the confession. His heart raced and his face was burning with hot embarrassment. Of *course* his nightmares were obvious. He'd just add it to the pile of ever-growing problems in his life. He felt a lump in his throat and scowled. He couldn't *cry*. He was too old to cry. Showing weakness was always a mistake. He knew this. He'd *always* known this-

“Who’s Dream?” Wilbur asked, impossibly quiet.

Tommy broke.

He burst into tears, everything he’d felt in the past few days pouring out at once. His nightmares and the anticipation of this week and every other awful emotion he’d been feeling exploded out. Tommy *wailed* and Wilbur scrambled to his feet quickly, rushing to his side.

“Hey, it’s okay Toms,” he assured him, kneeling down beside him with a slight urgency. “Can I touch you?”

Tommy’s throat felt like it had closed shut and his tongue felt like cotton in his mouth. He shook his head violently, only harsh sobs and whimpers able to pass his lips. He felt as if his skin would catch on fire if anyone touched him right now. Wilbur’s hands lowered quickly and Tommy shoved his own hands under his thighs to hide their severe trembling.

It went on for several more minutes- Tommy sobbing and Wilbur whispering quiet reassurances from his side. Tommy *hated* this. He hated that he couldn’t control himself. After what felt like hours, his breathing grew a bit more even and his voice returned to him weakly. “S-Sorry,” he croaked out. His voice sounded like nails on a chalkboard even to his own ears. He took a gasping breath. “You can... you can touch me now.”

He was immediately engulfed in an all-consuming hug. He tried to stifle his startled gasp to no avail. It was only then that he realized that Wilbur was shaking ever so slightly. Tommy slowly untrapped his hands in order to hug him back hesitantly.

He couldn’t remember the last time someone hugged him.

“I’m sorry,” Wilbur murmured. “I shouldn’t have asked. I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry.”

Tommy pulled away and looked at his hands as Wilbur stared at him. The tremble of his fingers was suddenly much more interesting than eye contact. “No, it’s okay. I’m just... I’m being a baby. Dream is an old foster brother,” he explained quietly.

Wilbur raised an eyebrow. “What happened with him?” He asked curiously. When Tommy didn’t answer, his eyes seemed to darken. “Toms, what did he do to you?”

Tommy looked up sharply. “Nothing! ...I don’t think. We were friends. It was just... a hard house, I guess,” he said with a shrug. It was an understatement if there ever was one.

Wilbur settled in next to him. “Tell me about it,” he requested gently. “If that’s okay.”

Tommy’s eyes settled on Wilbur’s guitar. He could decline and go to bed in his own room. He could tell Wilbur off for being invasive and be on his merry way. He could do a number of things that would never involve being open and vulnerable ever again. He remembered very clearly what happened last time he was unguarded with Wilbur.

He sighed, melting.

“It was the longest foster house I ever stayed in. Lasted a whole year and some change. It was an emergency placement home, too. Arrived at their doorstep with a broken nose and a garbage bag full of my things. And they... were nice. They were kind for no reason. I hadn’t really experienced that before in the foster system or even with my bio folks. I guess that’s why it hurt more when I had to leave,” he said slowly, eyes locked on the strings of the guitar.

Wilbur said nothing, waiting expectantly. Tommy went on. “The mom... her name was Puffy. Single mother who fostered and adopted two sons before, just like Phil. She had the curliest hair I’d ever seen. She used to let me braid it when I was bored.” He laughed softly at the memory. “And she really did try her best. She had been some kind of captain in the military in the past, but when she left they were always tight on money and she had two- sometimes three jobs at a time. We were home alone a lot, but we never minded. Her sons, Foolish and Dream... they were great. We got on great. Foolish was only a little older than me and he was funny and kinda clueless sometimes and we would make fun of him. We called him Foolish to tease him. It was nice. I got to... I felt like a kid for the first time ever. We made these giant forts and we went to school and visited town and... I really loved them,” he babbled dreamily. His head was full of happiness and good memories.

“And what about Dream?” Wilbur asked quietly.

Tommy paused, considering. This was the tricky part. “Dream... was good. He was older than us and taller. He was scary smart, and he taught me a lot. We were best friends... in the beginning. We did everything together. He looked out for me. I’d never had a foster sibling do that before. He taught me how to throw a proper punch without breaking my thumb and how to protect my head in a fight. And every time I bruised, he would teach me how to hide it and make it heal faster,” he explained.

“He *hit* you?” Wilbur demanded, sitting up straight with alarm.

Tommy winced and Wilbur seemed to hesitate. “He had to teach me *somehow*, right? I *wanted* to learn. We were friends, it wasn’t his fault...” he trailed off, looking at Wilbur’s concerned face. He hardened quickly. “Don’t look at me like that. Maybe this comes at a shock to you, but I haven’t exactly had the happiest childhood. Being hit doesn’t *scare* me. It’s normal. Stop *looking at me like that*,” he demanded, hands balling into fists.

Wilbur looked away, clenching his jaw. “Alright. So you didn’t mind it, and you and Dream were friends. What happened, then?” He asked.

Tommy studied the carpet. “I- I don’t know. It just... got worse. Dream got irritated with me. I annoyed him too much, I guess. He said I cost too much and I was making Puffy overwork- so I got a job in town. But when Puffy found out she freaked and made me quit and I think it made it worse because she thought kids shouldn’t work and it made her feel bad. Like a failure, I guess. Dream gave me lots of tips and tricks to help Puffy out but... I don’t think any of them worked, actually. I’ve never thought about it. They always seemed to make it worse and make her more stressed.”

Wilbur stared at him. Tommy tried to push the lump in his throat away.

“Puffy offered me adoption papers after eleven months. She’s the only one who ever did. They’re... the only ones who’ve ever wanted me before. My bio parents didn’t even want me. But... I could tell she started to regret the offer after. I took time to think about it, even if I did really want it. Commitment issues and all that. And in that time things got worse and Puffy got more stressed and Dream got... *mean*. And eventually Dream told me the truth... that Puffy didn’t really love me, none of them did, and she was just trying to get a payout from the foster system for adoption. He told me that I wasn’t a part of the family and that... that I would age out and die alone when I finally left.”

Wilbur’s hand found his and he gripped tightly. Tommy blinked and was surprised to find tears.

“And just after a year, Puffy took it back. She said I was too much trouble and she had to focus on her sons first. She said I fought too much with Dream... which was weird because we didn’t really fight. And she said that she loved me but I couldn’t stay. Hannah came to pick me up the same day.” He paused, blinding back tears. “It was a week before my fifteenth birthday.” Wilbur’s hand tightened in his. “And... and it *hurt*. It hurt more than any broken bone or broken family I’ve ever encountered because I thought... I thought they were *it* for me. I thought that I’d found a family that I could fit into, but I was wrong. Dream was too smart and pin-pointed me from the beginning. I’m not meant for a family, even if they love me. I only make things worse, and when I finally age out, being alone is what I deserve.”

Wilbur gaped at him. “*Tommy*,” he breathed. “*That’s* where that thinking came from? Some kid who was clearly manipulating you and Puffy?”

Tommy blinked, surprised. “What? No, I mean... I’ve always thought that. Dream just... reconfirmed. And he didn’t *manipulate* me. Or Puffy. He loved Puffy and we were friends-”

“Friends don’t hit each other,” he interrupted firmly. “They don’t tell each other they don’t love them, or that they’ll die alone and unwanted. Tommy- Dream was a bully. He wasn’t your friend. He gave you tips to get you kicked out faster. He didn’t want you around. You’re a smart kid- how can you not see that?”

Tommy paused, thinking hard. That couldn’t be right. Dream was always telling him that they were friends, that he was Tommy’s only friend. He taught him new skills, helped him with Puffy, and told him the truth. He helped Tommy in a million different ways. And he was stronger now for it.

Wilbur studied him carefully. “You don’t have to believe me,” he said gently, squeezing Tommy’s hand. “But from what I can tell, it’s true. And that family wouldn’t have been good for you if you had stayed.”

Tommy took a deep breath as a tear fell down his cheek. He swiped at it angrily. “You don’t *know* that. I messed up, and I ruined the only chance I had for having a family. It was *my* fault. I loved them. Sometimes... sometimes I think I still do,” he whispered, like he was admitting a dark secret.

Wilbur gave a weak smile. “That’s okay, Toms. There’s room in your heart for more than one family. There’s more space to love. You don’t have to stop loving them as long as you don’t

close yourself off from love entirely. They weren't your last chance. You're still so young, and you have time. And besides, you have us now," Wilbur nudged his shoulder with his own in a fond gesture. "And we love you enough to make up for them."

Another tear fell and Tommy allowed himself this moment of vulnerability. He was too tired to give his usual retort. He leaned over and rested his head on Wilbur's shoulder as he closed his eyes. Telling the emotionally draining story had exhausted him.

"You're a good brother, Wil," he muttered quietly. Sleep pulled at his eyes.

He felt Wilbur tense and then relax all in the same second. He felt a hand run through his hair gently.

"*Brother*?" Wilbur asked softly. He could almost hear the sly smile on his face.

Tommy groaned, squeezing his eyes shut tighter. "Don't let it go to your massive head, twat," he shot sleepily and Wilbur laughed excitedly.

They stayed like that until Tommy's hands finally stilled in his lap. He drifted back to sleep.

He had no nightmares.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!! The kind comments and kudos have been so so so so nice omg

Exile arc but make it fosters au

Tommy referring to Wilbur as Wil vs Wilbur in his internal monologue is a direct insight into how he's feeling about the family! The same as when he refers to Techno and Wilbur as foster brothers vs brothers. Just something fun ;]

Next chapter in a few days!

Reality Check

Chapter Summary

Tommy remembers just where he is. He shouldn't be getting too comfortable, right?

Chapter Notes

Chapter CW: very brief negative attitude about therapy

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

Hannah smiled at him.

Tommy glared back. She was more than a *week* later than she said she'd be, even after she was already two weeks late before that. August heat had become his new companion inside the house and out. It seemed to stifle him wherever he went nowadays. It was far closer to his two month visit now than his one month.

"Don't look at me like that, Tom. You know I wouldn't have been late if I didn't have to. And I checked in on you over the phone," she pouted.

Tommy solidified his monster glare. He wasn't *actually* mad. Maybe he was a little disgruntled. He just wanted Hannah to regret leaving him behind. *Again*.

Phil sat between the two of them on opposite ends of the dining room table, smiling awkwardly. He clearly didn't know what to do in such a situation. He shifted between trying to look like a scolding parent towards Tommy and a gracious host to his social worker. He was neither and Tommy knew it perfectly well. He had listened to Phil's rants about social workers for *hours*. Apparently, Wilbur and Techno had both had awful ones and Tommy just couldn't seem to convince him that Hannah was any different.

"Alright!" Hannah breathed in exasperation, looking down at her paperwork. "This living environment seems really great, Mr. Watson. You've certainly done an excellent job here. I know not many foster parents can spare new clothing for a new kid, nevertheless a single bedroom and cell phone!"

Phil snorted. "Foster parents like that exist if you look hard enough, Ms. Rose. But I know Tommy hasn't exactly had such experiences," he said with the fakest smile Tommy had ever seen. He winced at Phil's passive aggressiveness. He'd been like this for hours- all through

Hannah's arrival and her tour of the house and finally their sit-down to talk about Tommy's environment.

"*Phil*," Tommy pleaded, leaning forward.

Hannah only smiled softly. "Of course. Well, I'm certainly grateful that Tom has found a home he can feel comfortable in. Now, is there a place Tom and I can talk privately? It'll only take a few minutes and then I'll be out of your hair," she said, stacking her paperwork neatly on top of her clipboard.

Tommy brightened. "We can go to my room. C'mon, I'll show you," he said, trying to hide his excitement. He knew Hannah was proud of finding the Watson's for him and he wanted to show off his new privileges- for her sake and his own.

Phil watched them as they disappeared upstairs. Tommy showed the way quickly, passing Techno and Wilbur's closed doors. He knew they were both inside Techno's room waiting for Hannah to go. He also knew they would pounce on him as soon as he was alone.

He closed the door behind them and twisted the lock with a grin. Hannah matched him with a soft smile and sat down on the edge of his bed. "You seem to like this place, Tom. I'm really glad," she said, balancing her clipboard on her legs.

Tommy nodded and leaned against the door. "They're alright. Certainly not your worst work," he said with a nonchalant shrug.

Hannah rolled her eyes. "It doesn't hurt that you've been on good behavior. Phil tells me you've had almost no problems," she said, looking down at her notes.

Tommy tried to hide his frown. That wasn't entirely true. Far from it, actually. Phil had hid Wilbur and Tommy's fights and him running away from his social worker. He also hadn't mentioned the panic attacks or nightmares. Phil had said it was for the best, and it wasn't lying if Hannah didn't ask. Tommy couldn't help but agree.

"Is there anything you need to tell me?" She asked, looking up at him.

Tommy shook his head.

His social worker frowned. "Tom, you know you can tell me anything- good or bad. I don't want a repeat of any bad houses. If there's something going on, you have to tell me," she insisted.

He crossed his arms. "There's nothing going on. Literally nothing. It's almost *boring* how little there is to tell you. That's probably something to be happy about, right?"

Hannah chuckled lightly. "That's true. I know you like to understate things and hide when you're not feeling good, but you do seem content at least. And I know Phil has never had any strikes recorded against him in our system. I guess that means this ends my visit, then," she said with a smile.

Tommy's face fell. He wasn't necessarily *happy* that Hannah was here, but she was familiar. And the sinking feeling in his stomach grew as he realized that she wasn't taking him with her. He often left his foster homes with his social worker after the first month visit. Now he'd have to stay for at least another month unless he called her with an emergency. His heart twisted at the realization and he couldn't tell if it was happiness or disappointment.

"It isn't *all* great," he mumbled half-heartedly, staring at the floor.

Hannah stood up and tucked her clipboard under her arm. "No home will ever be perfect. This one is good for you, Tom. Please try not to self sabotage too badly this time. If you want, I can relink you with your therapist. I know she's been asking about you. Or, if you want, I can ask Phil to find you a new one somewhere in town," she suggested.

Tommy scowled. "I don't need therapy. I'm not a kid anymore. There's nothing wrong with me," he snapped.

Hannah only gave a disapproving look. "Well then, I'll be off. You'll see me again at the two month mark. Is there a particular book you had your eye on?" She glanced fondly at the copy of *The Odyssey* on his nightstand.

He raised an eyebrow. He'd almost forgotten about Hannah's promise and nearly kicked himself for it. That's what this has all been for, after all. Nothing else. He thought about Techno's large collection of books and the particular blue one that caught his eye.

"The Iliad, maybe," he said hesitantly. "Or some other Greek crap. I don't know."

Hannah chuckled. "Fitting, I think. I'll see what I can do," she grinned.

Tommy shoved his hands into his pockets awkwardly. "...Have you heard from Michelle?" He asked quietly. The littlest foster girl from the Johnson house had not left his mind.

His social worker gave him a fond glance. "She's doing well in the group home. She recovered nicely. You know how kids bounce back quick. She's asked about you a few times. All the group home kids have, actually. They miss your stories. None of the older kids play with them like you do. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to stop by sometime and pay a visit," she mused.

Tommy's heart pounded in grief and guilt. "Of course."

Hannah smiled. "I'll see you in another month, Tom. Be good."

And then she was gone and Tommy was alone in his room with a lock. With another month to kill.

He listened through the door to the sound of Hannah and Phil speaking in low tones at the base of the stairs. Then he heard the front door open and close, and the house was quiet once again.

He just barely managed to count to eight before he heard Techno's door open and a loud knock alerted him. He suppressed a grin and opened his door to see Wil and Techno's

matching looks of concern.

“How’d it go?” Wilbur immediately sprang, pushing past Tommy into the room. “Are you okay? You’re not going anywhere, right?”

Tommy rolled his eyes with a smile as he sidestepped to let Techno enter as well. “I’m *fine*. It went fine. You’re stuck with me for at least another few weeks. Why won’t you believe me that Hannah is *nice*?” He said, flopping down into his desk chair.

Techno and Wilbur exchanged knowing looks that made him frown. “We’re just making sure,” Techno explained in a gravelly voice. “We know how social workers can be.”

Tommy scoffed. “I’d know better than you. Trust me, Hannah is *not* a wrongen. And besides, I can handle myself. You don’t need to worry about me,” he insisted.

Wilbur donned a wicked grin. “That’s just what *brothers* do, Toms,” he teased.

Tommy groaned and threw his head into his hands. “I knew you’d make me regret it. I just knew it. I don’t know why I don’t listen to myself,” he grumbled.

Wilbur turned to Techno with a triumphant smile. “Did you hear, Tech? I’m Tommy’s favorite brother. He called me his brother first. He likes me best,” he taunted.

Techno didn’t look concerned. “I don’t think you’re helping your case here,” he said in his signature monotone.

Tommy looked up to find both of them smiling and allowed himself a small smirk as well. “Techno’s definitely my favorite brother,” he confirmed. “He doesn’t bother me any chance he can get or make my life infinitely worse like Wil.”

Techno grinned. “*Ha!*” He exclaimed, rounding on Wilbur who jumped, surprised.

Tommy broke into a fit of laughter.

Tommy watched Techno load up the Wii.

He was still resigned to touch any game controller. If he accidentally broke something, he didn’t know if he’d ever be able to pay it back. So he told the brothers he was content to just watch and settled into the couch.

Wilbur threw a blanket at him as he grabbed his controller. Tommy caught it easily and draped it over his legs. “So what? You afraid to lose epically in front of two masters?” Wilbur teased. Techno slid the Mario Kart disc into the console.

Tommy snorted. His fingers tapped under the blanket. “You *wish*,” he replied steadily.

Wilbur plopped down on one side of him as Techno settled into the other side. Tommy was surprised when he didn't tense. He didn't know whether that was a good thing or not.

He listened to Wil and Techno bicker over the map while Phil whistled in the kitchen. His foster father was making an elaborate soup for dinner- something Tommy had accidentally expressed he'd liked before. He was celebrating Tommy's one (and a half) month with them. Something twisted in his gut at the thought, but he wasn't sure what. It was overwhelmingly domestic- something Tommy had always hated. But now a warm feeling grew in his chest. Paired with the nausea in his stomach, he wasn't feeling great.

He cackled as Wilbur ran head on into a banana peel and Techno sped ahead of him. "Oh, you *bitch*," the oldest spat. He threw a green shell that missed by a mile and Tommy broke into laughter again.

By the time Phil called for dinner, Techno had placed first in four different matches- much to Wilbur's despair.

"It isn't *fair*," he whined as they sat down at the table. "Techno has bigger hands than me. He's better at the controller."

Tommy broke into another fit of laughter as Techno grinned. Phil hummed as he placed the pot on the table. "Wil, you're nineteen years old complaining about Mario Kart," he said with a small smile. Techno reached for the ladle. "And besides, you have musician's fingers. If anything, *you* should be better at the controller."

Wilbur whined again as Tommy waited to take his usual medium portion of dinner. He was always careful to let everyone take theirs first so he could match the average amount. It was tedious and sometimes he was more hungry than he'd admit, but he didn't mind too much. It was good practice for when he left again.

"Tommy," Phil said as the table settled again. "Hannah tells me that you might want to visit your old group home. I would be happy to drive you there, if that's the case. She mentioned that you used to read to the little kids." His foster father grinned as Tommy's heart sank.

Wilbur turned to him with wide eyes. "You *read* to them? You're a grandpa, Toms," he teased with a smile.

Tommy put his spoon down with a frown. He wasn't hungry anymore.

"You can borrow a few books from around here, if you want. I'm sure they'd like to hear something new," Techno suggested offhandedly. Phil nodded quickly.

"No... it's okay," Tommy finally found his voice. "It's a long way away and there are other kids to do that now-"

"Nonsense!" Phil interrupted. "It really wouldn't be a trouble, Tommy. I used to volunteer at group homes myself, and I know how much the bonds between the older and younger fosters mean to the little kids. We could go this weekend, if you'd like-"

“No!” Tommy shouted harshly. He froze as he saw the three family members’ surprised expressions. “I- I mean... no. I don’t want to. Sorry. I don’t know why Hannah told you that,” he mumbled.

Wilbur and Techno exchanged a look as Phil frowned. “Tommy, is there something wrong-” he started.

“I’m *fine*,” he snapped back. “Please forgive me for not wanting to return to a foster group home where I spent most of my shitty childhood. I cared for the little kids because I *had* to, because no one else would, not because I *wanted* to.” His voice cracked and then he muttered, infinitely softer, “I- please... *please* don’t make me go back.”

Phil stared at him with a concerned expression. “Of course, Tommy. No one is forcing you. I apologize for asking,” he said in a gentle tone that made Tommy’s skin crawl.

He stood up quickly, grabbing his bowl to take to the kitchen. He knew Phil didn’t have a rule about leaving the dinner table early. “I’m not hungry,” he muttered. He dumped his soup down the sink and stalked back to his room.

He woke up in the middle of the night, still in his day clothes. The Odyssey was still opened on his chest. And he could hear the soft strum of a guitar in the next room.

Tommy had gotten into the habit of following the noise to Wilbur’s room whenever this happened, no matter how late it was. Wilbur never minded and always seemed to enjoy the company. Sometimes Tommy suspected that Wil played his guitar late at night in the hope that he would come and spend time with him.

The pit in Tommy’s stomach had not disappeared.

He rolled over and pushed his pillow to his ears to block out the sound.

He drifted back into an uneasy sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!

Protective Dadza + bastard brothers Techno and Wil supremacy

Shorter chapter today! Next one should be longer to make up for it :]

Next chapter in a few days! <3

Burden

Chapter Summary

School is starting. Maybe Tommy will stick around longer than he thought. He doesn't need to be happy about it, though.

Chapter Notes

Chapter CW: panic attack, VERY brief mention of underage drinking/drug use, mentions of past death

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

“You *what?*” Wilbur exclaimed.

Tommy winced slightly, his fingers tapping along to the music playing in the living room. Wilbur and Techno had been playing some Wii game, but now it was paused and the music played never-endingly in the background.

He shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you, big man. Education is important to me,” he said with a frown.

Phil studied the paperwork in front of him. “It’s definitely impressive, Tommy. You should be proud of yourself,” he muttered, almost to himself. Tommy let the praise wash over him.

Tommy was surprised when Phil mentioned that he had registered him in the local high school. He was even more surprised when he realized school was starting next week. And perhaps most surprising, Tommy had managed to last in the same house all summer.

“When did you take *college calculus?*” Wilbur demanded, grabbing the sheet out of Phil’s hands to stare incredulously at the text.

Tommy shrugged again. “Summer course last year. It was offered for some extra credit and I took it. There wasn’t much else to do in that town,” he said nonchalantly. It was a lie. He’d spent his month in that town either drunk or high out of his mind and he went to the class hungover more often than not. But he’d still passed with flying colors and got the credit anyway.

He’d gone to school all over the east coast. He had to register in a new system every time his address changed, which was often. A lot of foster kids’ schooling went to shit because of that

and Tommy had always been determined to not let it happen to him. If he was ever going to survive long enough on his own, he'd need an education.

"What, are you some kind of genius?" Techno asked, also staring at his transcript history list.

Tommy scoffed. "No, definitely not. I just work hard in school. It's important to me. And I needed to know a lot if I was ever going to tutor the younger kids in the homes," he explained, annoyed.

Phil raised his eyebrows. "You're a high school junior with enough credits to be a college sophomore. You might even have more credits than Wil," he said.

Wilbur made a noise of indignation.

"Grades like these are insane, especially for a foster kid," Techno mused. "What colleges are you looking at? You have some really good choices if you keep this up."

He snorted and crossed his arms. "I'm not going to college," he stated firmly.

All three looked at him in surprise. "Why not?" Wilbur asked with wide eyes. "You clearly have the brain for school. You could go really far."

He rolled his eyes. He'd had this conversation a million times before. "I'm a foster kid, Wilbur. How would I afford higher education? I couldn't do it on my own. I barely have enough money saved for six months rent. And even if I got a scholarship, it would just be too hard to keep up with schooling and bills and a job. I'd much rather graduate high school and go off to find work," he explained casually.

Phil stared at him. "Tommy, I'd be happy to support you through college. You wouldn't be doing it alone-" he started.

"I won't be here that long," Tommy snapped back. Phil's mouth closed, his jaw clenching. He didn't mean to upset his foster father and he *did* appreciate the offer. But he was starting to get sick of this family's optimism and belief that he was sticking around for good. He *wasn't*.

Phil cleared his throat. "Well, in any case, the guidance counselor isn't sure what to do with you. The best thing would be to enroll you in the honors senior classes, but you already have those credits, and then what would you take next year?" He asked.

Tommy stood up. "Have them enroll me in the senior classes. Maybe my next school will have something more advanced for next year," he said, perhaps more harshly than he'd meant.

The three of them stared at him as he stomped back to his room.

Phil came to find him the next day.

“We’re going back to school shopping to pick up some things for Techno and Wil. You wanna come? I’m sure you could use a few binders or folders,” he said with a warm smile.

Tommy glanced up from his book to look at his backpack, full of his survival tools and now also the notebooks and pens Phil had bought him after his arrival. “I don’t think I need anything,” he replied.

Phil frowned. “Why don’t you just come along for the ride, then. Some fresh air could be nice,” he said.

Tommy couldn’t tell if it was an order or not. He put his book down and got to his feet quickly.

Phil frowned, giving him an odd look before retreating back downstairs.

Tommy sat next to Techno in the backseat of the family car.

Wilbur played some god-awful contemporary band that he swore was the next big thing from the front seat. Tommy didn’t know much about music, but he had to disagree. Wilbur was much more talented than them.

Techno was reading off his supply list to Phil, making sure he wasn’t forgetting anything. It was rare that Techno got nervous, but Tommy could tell he was worried about school. Wilbur, and now Techno as well, attended a small private college about a half hour outside of town. When Tommy had asked about it, they both said they didn’t mind commuting and were even glad they had the option to stay at home. He didn’t understand the sentiment. He’d always known he’d go far away the second he graduated no matter where he was staying.

He sent Ranboo and Tubbo a picture of his school schedule as Phil pulled into a parking spot at the department store. “Alright!” His foster father exclaimed. “Straight to the school section, guys. This should be a quick trip. No distractions, please.”

Wilbur diverged immediately to the music section the second they walked into the store. Phil groaned and followed him, pushing the cart along. Techno glanced at him warily. “I don’t suppose you actually want anything, do you?” He asked, glancing back at his supplies list.

Tommy shook his head.

Techno shrugged and walked off in the opposite direction to find his supplies. Tommy stood alone in the entrance of the store. His phone pinged and he pulled up the *Bench Trio* groupchat.

Ranboob - 1:32pm

there’s no way you’re in those classes, right?

guidance must've messed it up

Big Man Tommy - 1:32pm

no they're right

do we have any classes together or not?

Tubbs - 1:33pm

I can't believe our best friend is a genius

We have lunch together :)

Big Man Tommy - 1:33pm

i'm not a genius

that's it?

Ranboob - 1:33pm

you cannot actually be surprised by that

you're in the advanced senior classes

literally what the hell

Big Man Tommy - 1:33pm

so i'll just never see you guys

and i'll be alone forever

dying in school

Tubbs - 1:34pm

We'll walk w/ u 2 and from school

Mybe I can switch my free period 2 match urs :)

Big Man Tommy - 1:34pm

tubbo you are the greatest human being to ever exist ever

Ranboob - 1:34pm

hey :(

Big Man Tommy - 1:34pm

what can i say big man?

tubbo just has something about him

Tommy glanced up when he realized he should probably stop standing in the store entrance. He made his way into the building with his hands shoved into his pockets. He was disappointed but not surprised by the limited classes with his friends. Usually starting a new school didn't worry him. He always enrolled under the impression that he wouldn't stick around for long. Making friends, impressing teachers, and joining clubs didn't concern him when he'd be leaving in a few weeks anyway. But now that he had friends that he cared about, he had to admit he was a little stressed.

Maybe he should look at the school supplies. Just in case.

He followed the direction that Techno walked off in but found nothing that indicated school items. He passed clothing lines, kitchen supplies, and a wide variety of vacuum cleaners. He knew he visited the supply section with Phil the first time he was here, over two months ago now. But he couldn't remember where that was or how he got there.

Tommy turned around and couldn't remember which way he came from. Great. He was lost in the department store.

He considered calling Phil, but that would just be plain embarrassing. He could only imagine Wilbur's snickering and Techno's smirk if they found out he'd been lost and called for help. He instead opted to wander and hoped to spot one of the Watson's in his travels. It was the best he could do. He pretended to shop, feigning interest in the products on the shelves. It was boring. When he couldn't force himself anymore, he pulled out his phone again.

Big Man Tommy - 1:47pm

Sent (1) New Image

Tubbs - 1:47pm

Wtf is tht

Big Man Tommy - 1:47pm

it's me

obviously

Ranboob - 1:48pm

that is your chin

at the worst angle

Big Man Tommy - 1:48pm

still me

assholes

Ranboob - 1:48pm

where even are you

why are there ten vacuums behind you

Big Man Tommy - 1:48pm

back to school shopping

in a completely different, absolutely unrelated topic

would either of you happen to know how to get to the school section from the vacuums

or maybe just the exit

Tubbs - 1:49pm

Mans is lost in the deptment store

Big Man Tommy - 1:49pm

i am NOT lost

i am a big man who does not get lost

its not my fault that your dumb town's only department store is built like a maze

new conspiracy theory: it's built this way to trap people inside so they buy more things

Tubbs - 1:49pm

I beleve it

Ranboob - 1:49pm

i think you're on the left side of the store

school supplies are on the right

Big Man Tommy - 1:50pm

ranboo is the new greatest human to ever exist ever

Tubbs - 1:50pm

I'm gunna fight ranboo 2 the death for the title

Ranboob - 1:50pm

you're on >:)

Tommy started his march to the opposite side of the store. Somewhere in the middle of the building, he found the book section again. And to his surprise, he found Techno standing in the middle of it.

“I thought you were getting school supplies,” he said as he walked over.

Techno looked up and smiled when he saw him. “If Wilbur’s allowed a distraction, I am too. Besides, I just wanted to look,” he said.

Tommy glanced at the shelf his brother was looking at. “Greek tragedies, huh? Don’t you have enough of those?” He snickered.

Techno smiled. “Paying attention to my bookshelf then?” He teased.

Tommy rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “It’s hard to miss. It’s packed full of mythological shit.” He grinned as Techno scoffed.

“English majors should know about Greek literature,” he defended himself.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. “English majors don’t need an entire Greek literature *library* in their room, Tech.”

“Anything catch your eye? Phil tells me you like to read,” he said nonchalantly, keeping his eyes on the shelf.

Tommy immediately sobered, shoving his hands back into his pockets and looking away. “Not anything of yours,” he mumbled, thinking of the book he’d requested of Hannah. Techno gave him an odd look as he turned to walk back down the aisle. He noticed his foster brother grab a new Greek myth book before he followed him out.

They found Wilbur and Phil in the music section. Wil was carrying a large stack of scale paper, a bag of guitar picks, and a new capo in his arms.

“Dad,” he whined. “I *need* them. I’m a *music* major. I need music things.”

Phil smiled thinly. “You have three scale paper notebooks, probably well over a hundred picks scattered around the house, and at least five different capos. You definitely don’t need any more,” he said kindly but firmly.

Techno put his new book in the cart as Wilbur continued to whine. “But this paper has more scale lines per page! And these picks are specifically for ukuleles! I only have a few of those! And this capo is *so cool*-”

“Wil,” Phil interrupted. “C’mon now. We’re getting school supplies. You know you don’t need those things. In a few weeks, if you still want them, I’ll be happy to get them. You know money is tighter now that we have three kids going to school.” He turned back to go through the cart, already full of binders, notebooks, and pen packages.

Tommy stiffened and Wilbur glanced at him quickly. Phil continued down the aisle, humming obliviously with Techno at his side. Tommy's heart raced. They were tight on money, and it was all *his* fault-

"Tommy," Wilbur said quickly. He hadn't moved from his spot and he hadn't stopped looking at him. His tone was cautious. He knew right away that money was a sensitive spot for Tommy because of Puffy. "It's not the same. Phil just doesn't know... he can't watch his wording. We're *not* tight on money. It's not your fault. He just didn't want to buy me those things. It's okay."

But it *wasn't* okay. Tommy was a burden, as usual. He was sapping up the resources of the house, being selfish and taking more than he could give. He was spending more than the foster home was giving Phil to take care of him, and Phil was too kind to say anything to him about it. He couldn't remember buying anything in the last two months, but that wasn't the point. Phil was limiting what they could get, limiting things they needed for *school*, and it was all Tommy's fault.

There was a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Tommy," Wilbur said again. "Breathe, okay? It's alright. Just breathe."

But it turned out the hand on his shoulder was Dream's and his foster brother hissed *this is all your fault, Tommy. You're a waste of space and resources. When will you finally leave them alone?* And Tommy gasped for breath, hands shaking wildly.

He suddenly hated the department store. The lights were too bright, the air too cold and sterile, the shelves of products too taunting. He squeezed his eyes shut and took a shuddering breath. The hand on his shoulder tightened and Tommy flinched out of its grasp.

"Tommy, can you hear me? I'm going to guide you outside, alright?"

He let himself be led away with a hand in his own. He couldn't really pay attention to where he was or where they were going. He could only focus on breathing and the fact he was a problem and *escape* and his trembling fingers.

Fresh air hit his face like a slap. He gulped like a fish out of water and finally they came to a stop. Tommy peeked open his eyes and found they were outside the store. Wilbur was trying to get him to sit down on the metal bench by the front doors. Tommy sat down quickly and put his head in his hands, trying to get his bearings.

A hand rubbed circles on his back. Wilbur waited patiently for him to calm down. The Watson's were patient, he remembered. No one would rush him through his attack. At least, not now. Not until they got too sick of this and decided he wasn't worth the trouble. Not until they got tired of his panicking and taking care of him and he had to leave again and it would be all his fault-

"I got my first guitar when I was eight years old," Wilbur said suddenly.

The change in subject got Tommy to raise his head curiously. "Wh-what?" He croaked. Why would Wilbur be talking about that right now?

Wil nodded. “My bio mom gave it to me for my birthday. She played the guitar too, and I was always pulling at her strings and twisting the tuning knobs and it annoyed her. So she got me my own guitar to mess with. It was ridiculously small- made for a child. But every day I would come home and sit down with the guitar and look up different chords in her books to learn,” he explained gently.

Tommy took a shaky breath. “So what?” He snapped.

His brother continued on like he hadn’t said anything at all. “My dad used to sit and listen to me play. He didn’t have a clue about instruments, but he knew what sounded good or bad. He used to make this funny face whenever a chord came out sour. He bought me my next guitar when I grew out of the first one. They both helped me put stickers all over it.”

Tommy raised an eyebrow. “Why are you telling me this?” He demanded.

“You’re not panicking anymore.”

He paused. Indeed, his breathing had evened out considerably. He felt less dizzy and more aware. And he was staring at Wilbur with wide eyes.

Wil shrugged. “Something my therapist does. Distraction from a panic attack is just as good as waiting for someone to calm down and sometimes safer, too. Sorry, I didn’t want to bombard you with sappy stories. It was just the first thing I thought of,” he explained.

Tommy leaned back against the bench, rubbing his eyes with shaking hands. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

Wilbur smiled gently. “It’s alright, Toms. Nothing to apologize for. I understand,” he assured.

He pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes and took an erratic breath.

“We can wait out here until Phil and Techno are finished. I don’t mind. Big stores make me nervous sometimes, too. And Phil knows what I need to get already,” Wil said.

Tommy groaned. “I’m *sorry*, okay? I’m sorry I’m such a mess and I’m sorry I’m taking your money and I’m *sorry* you couldn’t get your new capo and-” he started.

“*Tommy*,” Wilbur interrupted quickly. “Forget about the stupid capo. You’re not taking our money. We’re perfectly fine, I *promise*. We are not struggling and you are not a burden on us,” he said firmly.

He looked away. “Foolish said that, too,” he muttered.

Wilbur had nothing to say to that. They sat in silence as Tommy tapped on his legs.

“I’ve never heard a foster kid speak so highly of their bio parents. You sounded really fond of them,” he finally said. His voice cracked at the end and he cringed.

His foster brother pretended not to notice. He smiled warmly. "I do. I love my bio parents the same way I love Phil," he said kindly.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "What happened to them?" He asked. Wilbur frowned and Tommy's eyes widened, backtracking quickly. "I- I mean if you don't mind me asking. I know that's a personal question and-"

"It's alright," Wilbur said firmly. "I don't mind. They... died in a car crash when I was nine. They were on their way to pick me up from a sleepover. I was scared and called them in the middle of the night and they immediately came to get me, no questions asked. A drunk driver hit them on the highway. I had a lot of guilt about it for a long time. Sometimes I still do."

Tommy didn't know what to say to that. His hands started to tremble again and he shoved them between his legs.

"I didn't have any other family, so I went to the foster system. I only went to four houses before I ended up at Phil's. I was his first foster and I learned I had enough love for two families. There's room for both of them," he said with a small smile on his face.

"I'm sorry. For your loss," Tommy whispered.

Wil smiled. "It's alright. I've come to terms with it and I've grown from it. Of course, I wish they were still alive. But I'm grateful for Phil and I love this new family I've found and made for myself. I wouldn't trade it for anything," he explained.

Tommy frowned. He didn't understand such a sentiment. He wondered if he could ever learn to, or if Wilbur was just stupid.

"What about you? Do you mind talking about your bio parents?" Wil asked.

"Yes."

"Oh," he frowned. "Okay."

They sat in silence until Phil and Techno came back out, hauling paper bags of school supplies.

On the first day of school, Tommy woke up early. He got dressed quickly and threw his backpack over his shoulder. Now along with his survival tools, it was also packed with a new binder, notebooks, and a pack of pens that Phil insisted he take. Tommy had taken them begrudgingly. The house was quiet as he walked downstairs. He knew Phil didn't have work for another three hours and his brothers didn't have classes until the afternoon. All of them would be asleep long after he was gone. At least, that's what he thought. He was surprised when he walked into the dining room to find Phil sitting at the table, reading the newspaper. There was a plate of eggs and toast at his side.

“Oh! Good morning, Tommy,” Phil said with a smile, looking up. He put the paper down on the table. “I made you some breakfast, if you want it. I know first days can be stressful, and it’s always best to start on a full stomach.”

Tommy froze, confused. That was... kind. “Why are you awake?” He asked, sitting down in front of the plate hesitantly. He knew Phil was rarely up before the sunrise.

Phil raised an eyebrow. “I couldn’t miss your first day of junior year, right? What kind of parent would I be? And I wanted to make sure you ate something and were prepared for the day,” he explained gently.

Tommy blinked. “Oh... okay,” he mumbled. Phil continued to be a mystery to him.

They sat in silence as Tommy ate, the only background noise being Phil’s occasional hum and the flip of the newspaper page. He had just finished his plate as Tubbo texted him that they were outside. He stood up quickly to put his dish in the sink. “Before you go!” Phil called, standing up as well. Tommy noticed he was holding his camera. “First day picture?”

Tommy hesitated, throwing his backpack over his shoulder. “Oh... I don’t know. I’m not one for pictures...” he stalled nervously.

“Nonsense! It’ll be quick,” Phil said. He raised the camera to his eye. “Smile, Tommy.”

His fingers twitched in time with the click of the camera shutter.

Phil wished him luck as he rushed out the door. Tubbo and Ranboo were waiting for him at the bottom of the driveway. “Good morning!” Ranboo exclaimed happily. Tubbo groaned beside him.

“Not a morning person?” Tommy asked, taking his place by their side. They began their walk to the high school.

“Tubbo would sleep twenty five hours a day if he could,” Ranboo said with a laugh. “I think it would help if you tried some coffee, my guy.”

Tubbo scowled and pulled his sweatshirt hood over his head. “Coffee is the grossest concoction known to man. I will never succumb,” he shot tiredly.

Tommy snorted. “Don’t like coffee, big man? I could make you brews beyond your wildest dreams,” he said. They crossed the street quickly.

The shortest rolled his eyes. “You couldn’t pay me enough to try it,” he grumbled. Tommy chuckled as Ranboo scoffed.

His heartbeat picked up as they got closer to the old building. Ranboo guided them to the front doors, where dozens of students were already grouping.

Tommy took a deep breath.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!! <3

Does the formatting for text messages make sense? Let me know!

Also expect lots of domestic fluff next chapter (to make up for all the angst that will follow it ;])

Next chapter within the week!

Domesticity

Chapter Summary

The Watson's are... domestic. Tommy has never experienced anything like it before.

Chapter Notes

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

The first month of school flew by fast.

Tommy busied himself with his studies. His advanced classes weren't anything he wasn't used to, but he still had to work to keep up. The difficult content paired with what was probably undiagnosed ADHD was always hard to work with. Tommy had to work twice as hard as his peers. He spent a majority of his time at the desk in his room, taking notes or writing formulas

Another month passing also meant Hannah's second visit, which also didn't happen. A few days before she called and said she was too busy, and that she'd see him soon. She offered to send his new book by mail, but he declined. It felt wrong to him, somehow. And once again he felt left behind and betrayed by his social worker, and then guilty for feeling that way.

Tommy had taken to tutoring Tubbo and Ranboo for their math and science classes during lunch and free period. Tubbo was good at chemistry, but bad at geometry. Ranboo was good at pre-calc but bad at biology. Tommy was good at everything, and even better at explaining difficult concepts. Tutoring the younger kids all the time had made him a great teacher, much to their advantage.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Wilbur picked him up from school. It was on his way home from college anyway and his last class of the day ended just before Tommy's, so he was always waiting in the parking lot when he pushed out the double doors. Sometimes he brought Techno with him to drop him off at his shift in the library. His pink haired brother always asked about the new books Tommy was reading in English. Tommy was always happy to oblige.

On the last Thursday of September, Wilbur and Techno pulled up in front of the doors. Tommy got in the backseat quickly and threw his backpack on the floor, groaning.

"Hard day?" Techno asked. Wilbur looked at him in the rearview mirror as he pulled away from the curb.

Tommy only groaned again in response, laying down to lounge across the backseat.

"You should really wear a seatbelt."

Tommy shot him the middle finger. Techno chuckled.

“Are you sure Tubbo or Ranboo don’t want a ride home?” Wilbur asked, flicking on his blinker.

He pressed his hands against his eyes, trying to relieve his headache. “No, Ranboo plays volleyball after school and Tubbo has chess club and then science olympiads. He swears he’s gonna build a bomb,” he grumbled unhappily.

Wilbur frowned. “You don’t wanna join any clubs?”

“You don’t seem very concerned about Tubbo’s bomb. And clubs are a waste of time.”

Techno laughed. “So you’re grumpy because your friends are spending their time in clubs?” He asked.

Tommy scowled. “No. I’m grumpy because my group members for this physics project I have are idiots and my trig teacher hates me,” he complained.

His brothers snickered. Tommy didn’t appreciate it.

“Techno,” he said, sitting up with a frown. “Does the town library have any books on the theory of relativity? The school library had nothing.”

Techno raised an eyebrow. “Sure. There’s lots of physics stuff. Do you want to come in and check one out?” He asked as Wilbur pulled into the library parking lot.

Tommy crossed his arms. “I don’t have a library card,” he muttered.

“They’re easy enough to get.” He paused at Tommy’s distinct frown. “How about I check a few out for you? I’ll bring them back when I come home.”

Tommy nodded gratefully and Techno got out of the car. He quickly jumped over the center console to sit in the front seat.

“You could just use the door, y’know. You’re getting footprints on my console,” Wilbur grumbled, putting the car back in gear to take them home.

Tommy grinned. “I take better care of this car than you and Techno combined. Who was the one out here last Saturday washing it?”

Wil frowned. “You didn’t need to do that,” he said quietly.

Tommy shrugged. He’d heard it before. “Gotta earn these rides somehow, right?” He said, focusing his attention on the window.

His brother sighed in frustration. “We already talked about how you don’t need to earn things, Toms. I’m more than happy to drive you,” he said in a resigned tone. Tommy only shrugged again and turned up the radio. He’d never believe him, so there was no use

listening. Wilbur was once again playing some indie band that wailed just a bit too loud for the speakers of the car to make a coherent sound. Tommy cringed.

“You should upload your songs to Spotify,” Tommy said suddenly.

Wilbur glanced at him, confused. “My songs?” He asked.

Tommy nodded. “These bands you’re always playing are terrible,” he said firmly. Wilbur let out a startled laugh. “Your songs are better. I think you could get a lot of traction if you made an account.”

Wilbur chuckled. “Maybe you’re right. My unlisted youtube videos probably aren’t helping my career,” he mused.

“You have a youtube?” Tommy asked excitedly.

“Not one that you’ll ever find, gremlin.”

Tommy huffed and turned his attention back to the window. Wilbur pulled into their driveway. Phil was sitting on the porch bench, reading a book. He looked up with a smile as they got out of the car.

“Afternoon, boys! How was school?” He called when they got closer.

Wilbur smiled as Tommy let out another groan. Phil only chuckled.

“Tommy thinks I should make a Spotify account,” Wilbur grinned proudly. “What do you think, dad?”

Phil raised his eyebrows and grinned. “I think that’s a great idea! I’m mostly surprised you hadn’t already. You’re lucky to have Tommy as your agent, Wil,” he laughed. Wilbur nudged Tommy’s shoulder fondly and he felt his face grow warm. Phil continued. “I left some cookies on the counter to cool, if you guys want any,” he said, looking back to his book.

Tommy grinned and rushed inside. “Thanks dad!” He called over his shoulder.

He was already holding two warm cookies when he realized Wilbur wasn’t behind him. He bit into one as he peered back into the hallway curiously. He spotted Wilbur through the clear glass of the front door, still on the porch with a stupidly wide grin. It made him look ridiculous. Tommy shrugged and went back to open the door.

“Here,” he said, handing Wilbur a cookie. His brother took it wordlessly and Tommy raised an eyebrow at the odd behavior. He glanced at Phil for explanation, but found him in a similar state- comically wide grin and... were those tears in his eyes?

Tommy made a face. “You guys are weird,” he shrugged. He turned to retreat back to the kitchen for more cookies.

“You called him dad,” Wilbur whispered under his breath. Tommy almost didn’t catch it.

He froze in the hallway as the door swung shut behind him. He *what?* He considered for a moment, and then pretended like he didn't hear, quickly returning to the kitchen. His heart raced and his hands shook too much to actually enjoy the treats.

Tommy sat on the couch, reading his new physics theories book from the library under a wool blanket that Wilbur had thrown at him. Techno and Wil were back to playing Mario Kart. Their competitiveness amused and sometimes scared Tommy. There seemed to be some deep-rooted sibling rivalry between them involving the game.

"Fuck!" Wilbur shrieked as Techno landed yet another red shell, whizzing past him with a gleeful laugh. Tommy looked up as Techno placed first and Wilbur crossed the finish line in fifth. He swore again and threw his controller down onto the couch. *"You're the worst. I need a break. Tommy, play for me,"* he snapped, stalking into the kitchen.

Tommy blinked in surprise as Techno looked over at him. *"Oh, um... I'm doing homework. I really shouldn't. I like just watching,"* he said quickly.

Techno rolled his eyes and pulled the book from his hands, earning a noise of protest from him. *"You've been doing homework for hours. You can take a little break. Just one game, c'mon,"* he argued. He shoved the Wii controller into his hands. Tommy stared at it, unsure. Wilbur reemerged to sit on the arm of the couch, holding a bag of chips. He seemed to have calmed down considerably with the help of his new snack.

Techno loaded up a new game and looked at Tommy expectantly. *"You have to lock in,"* he said, raising an eyebrow.

Tommy cleared his throat. *"Oh. Right,"* he mumbled. He looked at the buttons of the controller. Which one would lock him in? There were so many to choose from.

Wilbur looked alarmed. *"Tommy,"* he said seriously. *"Have you ever played Mario Kart?"*

His tone made Tommy cringe. *"Um, no... not really. But I've watched you guys play a lot. I just need to know... which buttons to press,"* he muttered, embarrassed.

Techno and Wilbur both stared at him with wide eyes. *"Have you ever... played Wii before?"* Techno asked, sounding unsure.

Tommy shook his head.

The room erupted into chaos.

In the next game, with lots of guidance from the brothers, Tommy placed in seventh. It wasn't completely awful, and Techno and Wilbur cheered him on excitedly. His chest felt unusually warm and he went into the following race with a ridiculously huge smile on his face.

And if Tommy heard Phil's camera click, he pretended not to notice.

Techno came to his room after school the next day.

“Hey,” he greeted him. His long hair was tied back in a low ponytail and he was wearing a ridiculous sun hat on his head that made Tommy snort. “I’m going out to the garden to work. Wanna come?”

Tommy hesitated, setting down his book. He’d been forced to work in gardens before. It was one of his least favorite chores. The hot sun and disgusting dirt made him uncomfortable, and he was usually made to clean up any soil that followed them into the house. Not only that, but Tommy was horrible with plants. He killed anything he touched.

Techno frowned. “You don’t have to. Just thought I’d ask. I usually garden to relax, but it’s not for everybody. You can just come sit outside, if you want. It’s nice out,” he assured him.

Tommy considered briefly. That sounded better, at least. He’d seen Techno and sometimes Phil out in the garden before. They never seemed overly stressed about it. He nodded and got to his feet, tucking his book under his arm as Techno grinned. They made their way outside together.

Techno was right, it turned out. It was nice outside. Cool September air made it the ideal temperature. Tommy settled in the grass under the oak tree next to the white gate, facing Techno in the garden. It was close enough to talk to his brother if he so wanted, but far enough away that he didn’t feel inclined to assist. It was perfect, and Tommy sighed contently as he cracked his book back open. In between pages, he glanced up to watch Techno kneeling in the dirt, shoveling and planting in a pattern that seemed to make sense to him. He hummed as he worked, a trait that Tommy suspected he’d picked up from Phil. Although Wilbur was the musical one, it seemed all the Watson’s enjoyed their tunes no matter how much Wil said they were musically inept.

Tommy had gotten through three chapters when they heard the back door open and he glanced up again. Wilbur was standing on the porch, holding a small ukulele. “What’re you doing?” He called to them.

Techno looked up and brushed a stray piece of hair out of his face. “Enjoying the weather. Are you gonna come serenade us?” He called back with a fond smile.

Wilbur cracked a grin and descended into the backyard, feet bare in the lush grass. He sat down next to Tommy and brushed shoulders with him good naturedly. “How much did Techno pay you to be out here with him?” He asked, positioning his ukulele in his lap.

Tommy smiled and refocused on his book. “Techno’s the favorite brother, remember?” he shrugged. “If you stepped up your game, maybe I’d spend time with you too.”

Wilbur snorted. They both knew Tommy spent more time with Wilbur than anyone else in town, and enjoyed his presence just as much as Techno's when he was feeling good. He strummed out an airy major chord and Tommy closed his eyes, enjoying the noise and the day and the company he was in. He felt light and content, something so rare to him. His hands were completely still on the page of his old book. Tommy almost couldn't remember the last time he relaxed like this- or at least while completely sober. A small part of him felt nervous at the sentiment, twisting uncomfortably in his gut. He tried to push the feeling away. He could worry about it later. For now, he wanted to feel okay.

"How many times have you read that book?" Wil asked while strumming a simple chord progression. Techno looked up curiously.

Tommy glanced at him, surprised. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Wilbur shrugged. "The Odyssey. I must've watched you read that book front to back five different times. Maybe more. I think it might be the most beat up book I've ever seen," he said, looking down at his fingerings.

Tommy hugged the book to his chest, suddenly feeling defensive. "It's *my* book. It's like the only thing I own. I didn't ask your opinion on it," he shot, frowning.

Wilbur looked back up in surprise. "Oh! No, I wasn't insulting it. I was just curious. Sorry if it came off wrong," he explained quickly.

Tommy relaxed slightly, untensing and letting the book fall back into his lap.

"Where'd you get it?" Techno asked over his shoulder, digging into the soil with his trowel. Leave it to Techno to act indifferent in something he was clearly interested in. He raised an eyebrow when Tommy hesitated. "You don't have to tell."

Wilbur looked at him expectantly. Tommy mourned his relaxing afternoon. "I just want to read," he mumbled. Techno nodded and went back to gardening without second thought. Wilbur strummed another chord.

Tommy blinked, confused. No one pushed him. They weren't mad.

This family would never make any sense to him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!! <3

A bit of fluff before Tommy inevitably trips up again ;]

Next chapter out within the week!!

Protection

Chapter Summary

Tommy trips up. It was only a matter of time, right?

Chapter Notes

Chapter TW: Blood, vague violence, mentions of past child abuse, negative attitude about therapy, anxiety attack

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

The last period of the day dragged on ridiculously slow.

He tapped his pencil on his desk. His leg bounced excessively. His fingers tapped out of control.

“Tom,” his trigonometry teacher snapped. “For the last time, pay attention. You’re distracting your peers *and* me.” She returned to drawing formulas on the whiteboard.

Tommy stilled and sunk low in his seat, embarrassed. His classmates snickered around him and he tried not to feel too bitter. It wasn’t *really* Tommy’s fault. He’d finished this lesson on his own days ago, and his teacher had been dragging out the same problem all period. Not only that, but it was the last class of his day before the weekend and he was planning on going into town with Tubbo and Ranboo after the bell. It was a rare day where his friends weren’t busy with any other commitments after school and Tommy couldn’t help but be excited, if not a little restless.

His leg gradually started to tap again as time dragged on. His teacher shot him a nasty glare. “*Tom*,” she hissed. “If this continues-”

The bell rang.

Tommy jumped to his feet and raced out the door before she could say another word.

He navigated the halls easily, slipping past large groups of kids and people stopping at lockers. He told Ranboo and Tubbo that he’d meet them behind the school, but he still looked out for Tubbo’s head of shaggy brown hair or Ranboo’s tall stature as he walked.

He pushed out the back doors of the school and frowned. The area was still empty. He’d have to wait for them to show up. He settled against the brick wall of the building contently, letting

his bookbag fall off his shoulder. He hummed as he waited, drumming his fingers against his thighs in equal rhythms. He was checking the time on his phone when he heard talking from around the corner. Curious, he picked up his bag and walked over to peer around into the large crevice between two walls of the school.

Tommy recognized Ranboo instantly, backed up against the corner. Three older boys surrounded him. They seemed to be giving him trouble. Tommy could spot the nervous look on his face anywhere. Now, Ranboo was a big guy- but he was passive to a fault and would have a serious problem even squashing a fly. Usually Tubbo stood up for him, but now Tubbo was nowhere to be seen.

One of the boys reached out and shoved Ranboo into the wall, muttering something threatening. Ranboo winced as his shoulder collided with the brick. Tommy let his bag hit the floor, feeling a strange sense of protectiveness wash over him. “*Hey!*” He shouted angrily. All four of them turned to look at him. “Leave him alone, assholes.”

The blond one on the left snickered. Tommy recognized the football jacket on his back. He was big, sure. But Tommy was fast. He knew how to avoid trouble and how to defend himself. He’d visited the hospital countless times from defending his foster siblings. To Tommy, Ranboo was no different than them.

“Beat it, kid. Unless you wanna hand over twenty bucks too?” He shot. The brunet to his right laughed.

Tommy’s hands balled into fists and he stormed closer. “I said leave him alone. Are you stupid?” He snapped.

The blond frowned and the other two scowled. Ranboo wrung his hands nervously. “Tommy...” he started uneasily.

“How much you got in your wallet, kid?” The brunet stepped closer in an attempt to be threatening. Tommy snorted. It was a ridiculous display of aggression that wasn’t unfamiliar to him. He raised an eyebrow, amused.

“Do you always spend your time being assholes, or is this like a Friday thing?” He asked.

The blond threw a punch.

Tommy ducked quickly as Ranboo cried out. The older boy was slow and easy to dodge. Tommy straightened back up with a laugh. He chuckled as he dodged the next punch as well. “You’re *awful*,” he teased. The blond seethed. “How do you go around picking on kids and stealing money if you don’t even know how to fight?”

The third boy went to shove him and Tommy sidestepped him with an arrogant laugh. Ranboo looked alarmed. “Tommy, *stop*. Let’s just leave. Don’t-” he started.

“*Tommy*,” the blond growled. Recognition flashed in his eyes. “You’re the Watson’s foster pet. Techno teach you to fight?”

His stomach hollowed immediately. He forced a smirk, trying not to look affected. “Got beat up by Techno before, huh?” He taunted, deflecting. He narrowly dodged another blow, crouching low to the concrete.

One of the brunets finally landed a kick while he was low, hitting his stomach solidly. Tommy toppled over as the breath was knocked out of him. He rolled and was on his feet instantly, breathing hard.

Ranboo jittered, looking ready to run. The blond laughed cruelly. “Can’t take the hint, kid? This isn’t your fight, and the stupid tall kid deserves to give up a couple bucks. What’re you gonna do? Cry to mommy about it? ...Oh, *wait*,” He spat.

Tommy saw red.

He threw his first punch at one and shoved at a second, dodging and weaving like a madman. He felt himself be hit and he heard a sharp crunch. He heard Ranboo cry out. It was all background to him. His only goal was to make them *hurt*. He blacked out as he fought, relying on instinct and rage.

The next thing he knew firm hands were hooked under his arms and pulling him off the blond, who had been knocked to the ground. Tommy noticed the football player was bleeding and an eye was swollen shut, much to his satisfaction. He watched the older turn his head and spit a pool of red. He was fairly certain he saw a tooth in the mix and he laughed cruelly. Tommy let himself be pulled, breathing hard and grinning maniacally. His body felt like it was on fire.

The hands pushed him around the corner and Tommy found himself back by the doors of the school. He sucked in a breath, feeling the air in his lungs. His ribs stung. He let himself lean against the brick tiredly.

He locked eyes with Tubbo, whose hands had moved from under his arms to pin his shoulders against the wall. He looked angry and worried all at once. Behind him, Ranboo bounced on the balls of his feet nervously, holding Tommy’s backpack in shaky hands. Tommy blinked, confused. When had Tubbo gotten there? How long had he been fighting?

“You’re an *idiot*,” Tubbo shot angrily. He started to dig in his backpack for something. Tommy stared at him, confused. He reached up to brush his hair out of his face and was surprised to feel wetness on his skin. He pulled his hands back to look at his fingers and found red.

Tubbo finally pulled a water bottle and an old napkin out of his bag and handed them to Tommy quickly. “Drink something and clean your hands. We’ll have to get you home to patch you up,” he said firmly.

Tommy let himself be instructed without complaint. He brought the water bottle to his lips shakily. He was perfectly fine with helping himself after a fight. He’d done it dozens of times prior. But he had to admit it was nice to not have to worry solely by himself.

Tubbo went back to digging through his backpack. Tommy let his head lean back on the wall as he tried to catch his breath. He took the time to take inventory of his injuries. After glancing at his hands he found knuckles that would definitely have ugly bruises and palms covered in blood. Though whose blood it was, Tommy wasn't sure. His head ached and judging from the blood he found on his forehead, he probably had a nasty cut. He knew for a fact his nose was broken. The feeling was too familiar and the steady drip of blood onto his lips wasn't new. He felt sore in several spots around his body where he suspected he'd been punched or kicked. His ribs, right bicep, both forearms, left leg. He took in a shaky breath. Ranboo was staring at him with wide eyes. Tommy managed to smile back at him. The movement hurt his face.

"You're definitely gonna have a black eye," Tubbo said, pulling out more napkins. "I don't even know what to do about your nose. I've never... I don't-" he stammered nervously. He looked entirely out of place and Tommy felt bad for the first time. He didn't want to make anyone uncomfortable. He just wanted to protect Ranboo, and maybe show those idiots that he wasn't to be messed with.

Tommy reached up and braced himself. He squeezed his eyes shut as he cracked his nose back into place with a sharp *crunch* and a groan. His eyes fluttered back opened to Ranboo and Tubbo's horrified stares. "Oh," he remarked, dumbfounded. "Sorry. I should've warned you."

His friends continued to stare with wide eyes. Tommy cringed inwardly. This was the last thing he wanted. Sometimes the reaction afterwards was worse than the fight itself. Although, judging by his pain that might not be the case this time. He swore as a deep ache settled behind his nose. The feeling probably wouldn't fade for a couple of days.

"Ice," he muttered halfheartedly. "It needs ice."

Tubbo seemed to snap out of his worried stare. "Right. Okay. Let's get you home and we'll get some ice and bandage you up-" He started.

"No!" Both Ranboo and Tubbo jumped at his sudden outburst. "I... no, we can't go to the Watson's. I've been *fighting*. That's like... capital offense for foster kids. I've been kicked out of houses for less," he groaned. "*Fuck*. I'm sorry. I just couldn't.... I had to..."

"It's alright," Tubbo assured quickly. Ranboo remained eerily quiet. "Don't panic, Tommy. It'll be okay. Techno fought all the time. I'm sure Phil is used to it."

Tommy only shook his head, sinking lower against the hard wall.

"Okay," Tubbo decided firmly. "It's Friday, right? Wilbur and Techno don't come back from class until the evening. And you said this morning that Phil went to the office to work. We can go in and fix you up before anyone gets back. No one will have to know that you were fighting. You can say you fell down the stairs or something."

Tommy snorted. That was a ridiculous excuse, but he did feel a little better. He nodded slowly and they began their trek to the Watson house. He thought he heard the pained groan of the blond boy around the corner as they left.

The walk went quickly. Tubbo kept a firm hand on his arm to guide him down the streets. He didn't need the help and told his friend just that, but the shorter was determined. Tubbo's resolve was not something to mess with- a lesson Tommy had learned very early on. Ranboo trailed behind them silently. His quietness would have worried Tommy if he wasn't so focused on getting home and staying out of trouble. For his own sanity, he'd have to worry about Ranboo later. At least for the time being.

They approached the white house with green shutters slowly. Tommy breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that both Wilbur and Phil's cars were gone. The driveway was bare. The house would be empty. No one would have to know. He'd be fine.

Tommy paused in the driveway, glancing at his friends. He'd never had Tubbo or Ranboo over before. He still hadn't asked Phil about it, and he wasn't sure how his foster father felt about company. He didn't want to intrude on the rules any further, especially since he'd be walking on thin ice when Phil found out he was hurt. He turned to his friends nervously. "I can take it from here. Thanks for helping me. I'm sorry I ruined our day in town," he said, looking down at the concrete.

Tubbo frowned. "You didn't ruin anything. Are you sure, Tommy? We don't mind helping. You could probably use the assistance," he asked, crossing his arms. Behind him, Ranboo looked at him with a confused glance.

Tommy nodded. "I'm sure. Thanks, though. I really appreciate it," he said quickly. He held out a hand to Ranboo. The taller startled, looking confused. Tommy raised an eyebrow and pointed to his backpack, still slung over his shoulder. Ranboo seemed to untense, sliding the book bag off and handing it to Tommy.

"We'll talk about this later, okay?" Tubbo remarked, casting an odd look at both Ranboo and Tommy. "Call us when you're ready or if you need anything."

"I will, thanks."

Tommy entered the house alone.

His shoulders sagged and he let his backpack fall ungracefully in the living room. He'd worry about it later. He made his way to the bathroom, careful not to get blood on anything. The last thing he needed was a drop he'd missed to give him away. Blood was hard to clean and even harder to get out of fabric, though he'd mostly perfected his scrubbing method over the years.

Tommy shouldered the already-cracked bathroom door opened. Who'd left the lights on?

He nearly screamed in surprise. He found himself face to face with Techno, a hairbrush still in his hand. His foster brother looked equally surprised to see him, and the look on his face only got worse the longer Tommy stood there.

"What are you *doing here*?" Tommy demanded at the same time Techno spluttered a quick, "*What happened to you?*"

Tommy turned on his heel and retreated back into the hallway, heart racing. As *if* this couldn't get any worse. Of course Techno of all people was home. Maybe he could run away again, grab his backpack and go, and no one would ever have to know-

Techno grabbed onto his shoulder before he could make it to his bedroom. Tommy yelped, both in pain and surprise, and flinched out of the grasp. Techno let go quickly. "*Tommy*," he said urgently. "Slow down. What *happened*? Are you okay?" He asked worriedly.

Tommy flew around to glare at his brother. "Why are you *here*?" He snapped angrily. It seemed the world was against him today, and Tommy felt the frustration building in his veins.

Techno looked taken aback. "I- what? I skipped class. Who cares? Tommy, tell me what happened. Who *hurt you*?" He snapped back.

He almost couldn't believe his shitty luck. He knew it was ridiculous, and it wasn't Techno's fault, but he suddenly felt so *angry*. All the confusion and negative emotions he'd been feeling in the house came roaring back. He wanted to direct it all at the first member of this fucking family he could find, and that just happened to be Techno.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Oh, skip the fucking brotherly act. You don't care... Y-You don't *care*, Techno!" his voice was rising and he could barely contain his anger and his hands were shaking and *oh it's happening again*. Techno's eyebrows furrowed, confused. "*You don't care! Don't fucking act like you do. It's not my fucking fault you're here. Leave me alone. Don't fucking bother me. It would be so much easier if this fucking family learned how families actually work,*" he spat. He pushed past Techno to get back to the bathroom. He at least wanted to wash the blood from his hands. Techno was right on his heels. He'd never leave him alone.

"*Tommy*," Techno's voice was worried. Not at all angry, like Tommy had wanted. Why couldn't he get this stupid family to hate him? They'd leave him alone if they did. "You're having an anxiety attack. Let me just look at your injuries, okay? You don't have to talk about it. I just want to help-"

"*Fuck off!*" Tommy shouted. He turned to slam the bathroom door behind him, but Techno shouldered in anyway. He let out a scream of frustration and grabbed something, *anything*, a plastic soap dispenser off the counter and *threw* it at Techno. It bounced off his chest harmlessly and Tommy let out another shriek of anger.

Techno held up his hands in surrender. "I'm sorry, Tommy. I *am*. I'm not good at this. Phil knows... he knows how to help. I want to let you be, but I don't think you should be alone right now, Toms. It's-" He started gently.

"Stop *calling* me that," Tommy spat. He turned the sink on to the highest heat and ran his hands underneath, wincing and relishing in the pain. If he couldn't get Techno to leave him alone, he'd at least start to clean anyway. "I'm not your brother. We're not a fucking family. We're not even *friends*. We just live under the same roof. Your dad is paid to let me stay here and I just have to last long enough to age out. We're *not brothers!* Don't *call me that!*" He was yelling, screaming. His throat ached. He didn't even know what had him so worked up.

He just knew that he was *mad* and this family confused him and he was angry that Techno ended up being home and fate had twisted against him once again. He was worked up because Techno would tell Phil about this, about the blood and yelling and fighting, and Phil would make him go. And Tommy *hated it here* but he also never wanted to leave and he hated that, too. He felt so full of hate and bitterness in that moment that he wanted to tear his hair from his head. He wanted to scratch at his skin until nothing was left and he wanted to be *left alone*.

Why wouldn't anyone leave him alone?

He was *tired* of pretending to be a part of some happy family in a little coastal town. He was tired of the domesticity and everyone pretending that it was fine and that he belonged there. He *didn't*. He didn't deserve this family, or Tubbo and Ranboo, or the room with the lock on the door. He deserved his lonely city street, just like Dream said. And he was so *fucking exhausted* of pretending otherwise. Pretending hurt almost as much as not.

Techno looked alarmed. Tommy stared at the red washing down the sink drain, seething. He finally allowed himself to look up at the mirror and his heart sunk. No wonder Techno was so concerned. The cut on his forehead looked nasty and was dribbling blood down his face, slow and steady. His right eye was swollen and bruised. It looked like maybe he hadn't set his nose right the first time, judging by the crook on the end and the blood on his lips. He reached up and closed his eyes, resetting the nose a second time with a sharp *crack*.

"*Tommy!*" Techno cried out in horror, reaching for him. Tommy flinched as his foster brother pulled his hands away from his face. If possible, he panicked even more. He'd never heard Techno yell like that. The older's hands wrapped around his wrists to stop him from doing anything else and *oh* Tommy had been in this situation a million times before. Adrenaline coursed through him and *a foster parent was restraining him* and his whole body shook and Tommy *screamed*-

He fell to his knees, pulling at his arms in a panicked effort to get away. He was screaming and he just *couldn't see*. He pulled his wrists free and he lashed out, throwing a wild punch that hit nothing at all. "Please," he sobbed, begging, cringing at the sound of his own voice. "Leave me alone. I'm sorry. I'm *sorry, please*."

"Tommy." A soft voice whispered, slightly alarmed. "Shh. It's okay. You're safe. *It's okay*, I promise."

It felt like hours. Tommy's trembling fingers gripped onto the bathroom rug and his shoulders shook as he sobbed. No one bothered him. The voice... *Techno* let him cry in silence. No foster parent came to hit him or tell him to snap out of it, to grow up. No one came to take him away. He was left to cry his eyes out by himself and he was thankful for it. He was at least glad he washed the blood off his hands before he grabbed at the carpet.

He took a rattling breath and finally looked up. Techno was sitting on the sink counter, watching him with raised eyebrows and a patient look. Tommy squeezed his eyes back shut. His head pounded and he groaned. His whole body ached.

“Let me clean you up, Tommy,” Techno’s gentle voice whispered. Tommy’s hands tightened on the threads of the carpet.

“*Leave me alone.* Fuck off,” he spat back, voice hoarse. He peeked open his eyes to stare at the blue color of the rug. Above him, Techno hummed in thought.

“C’mon, Tommy. Sit down. It’ll be quick,” Techno insisted.

Again, Tommy felt anger deep in his chest. But now that he had exploded, he was exhausted. He glared at Techno as he got to his feet shakily. He sat down on the closed seat of the toilet and stared at his trembling hands. He wished they would stop. He wished everything would just... stop.

He watched Techno grab a washcloth from the closet and run it under the warm water and soap. He crouched down in front of Tommy and gently began to wipe at his face. The washcloth came away red every time Techno lifted it.

It was soft. Techno was gentle. The action unearthed a deep memory of his mother. The anger and grief in his chest grew and tears welled in his eyes again.

“You don’t have to tell me what happened,” Techno whispered. “Just tell me what hurts, okay? I don’t wanna miss anything.”

Tommy pointed to the areas around his body weakly. Techno rolled up his shirt sleeve and they both were surprised to find the already nasty bruising forming on his left bicep. Tommy winced as Techno ran the cloth over it, scrubbing away the dirt and grime.

Tommy swallowed. His throat hurt. “These kids were picking on Ranboo,” he croaked. Techno looked up with a raised eyebrow. He didn’t press him and he didn’t look particularly interested, which almost helped Tommy feel more comfortable talking about it. “I couldn’t just... *watch*. I hate bullies. So many of them in the homes...”

Techno nodded knowingly. “So you took on a bunch of bullies and got beat up?” He asked.

Tommy allowed himself a weak grin and Techno raised an eyebrow in surprise. “No... no. You should see the other guys. I know how to fight,” he boasted weakly. His voice cracked at the end. Techno looked amused.

“Of course you do,” he said gently. He swiped the washcloth over Tommy’s knuckles. “I should know by now not to doubt you. So they were bullying Ranboo and you defended him?”

Tommy sat completely still for a moment, considering. Then, he whispered in an impossibly weak voice, “They mentioned my mother.”

Techno nodded. He could understand that, at least.

They stayed in silence as Tommy sat in his pain. He wondered what time it was. He wondered when Phil and Wilbur would be home, and what they would say. He wondered

what Techno would tell them. He opened his mouth to ask, but a different question came out instead.

“You fought in high school?” He muttered, remembering the bully’s words and Tubbo’s reassurances.

Techno snorted and straightened up to clean off the washcloth again. “Yeah. Had a bit of an anger problem. And like you, I hated bullies,” he explained in an easy-going tone.

Tommy scrunched his eyebrows and stared at the carpet. “They said they knew you. They said I was your foster pet and you must’ve taught me to fight. They didn’t like when I asked if you had beat them up before,” he mumbled, deep in thought.

Techno *laughed*. The sound was both startling and welcomed. It was a clear, nice noise and Tommy felt something warm in his chest under all the grief and rage. “Oh yeah, I bet they didn’t. I’m sorry if that made it harder for you, though,” he said with a soft smile.

They fell back into a silence. Techno straightened up and rummaged through the closet. Tommy raised his eyebrows when he pulled out gauze, bandages, and the same pale cream Phil had used on him when he cut into his palms with his nails during his first week. He let Techno bandage him up, wrapping gauze around his knuckles and smearing the cool cream against his cuts. He closed his eyes as his foster brother placed a bandaid across his nose, and another larger one on his forehead. When he opened his eyes again, Techno was staring at him.

He felt safe enough to ask. “Is Phil gonna kick me out?” He whispered, like it was a horrible secret.

Techno raised an eyebrow. “Of course not, Tommy. Why would you think that?”

Tommy’s shoulders fell like he was exhausted. “Because... because I got into a *fight*. I got into a fight and I *yelled* at you and I freaked out and... and that’s a lot of trouble for a foster kid. It’s easier for Phil to just send me away and let some other foster parent handle me and then I wouldn’t bother you guys so much and no one would have to deal with me and-”

“Tommy,” Techno interrupted gently. “We’ve told you a million times before, and we’ll never stop reassuring you. We *aren’t* sending you away. Especially not for doing things that kids do. You’re a *teenager*. You’re going to get into fights and yell and do teenager things. And no one is blaming you for your emotions. They are more than valid and we understand and we want to help. We’re *not* sending you away. We love you, and we’re here for you.”

It felt like a blow to the stomach, a million times worse than the fight earlier. He ran his newly-wrapped hands through his hair, edging on panic once again. “Why do you... why do you guys *say* those things to me? I don’t understand and it’s... it’s driving me *crazy*,” he demanded.

Techno looked confused. “It’s how families act, Tommy. You may not think you’re a part of our family, or you may not want to be, and that’s okay. But this is how families behave,” he explained gently.

Tommy looked away. It was a lie, it must have been. Foster families didn't say things like that. Even Puffy's house didn't behave like this. And his own family, his real family, would've laughed in his face or maybe beat him if he'd ever said words like that.

His mother might have talked like that. He wished he could remember. Again, he felt an impossible grief deep in his chest at the thought of her.

Techno straightened up once again. His soft expression had melded into something else. Something harder. "What're their names?" He asked. "The kids who were picking on Ranboo."

For maybe the first time since he arrived, Tommy felt genuinely intimidated by Techno. He wore a stoic expression, all hard lines and edges. His eyes looked cold. "I... I don't know. I've never seen them before," he mumbled.

Techno nodded. "I'll find out." He looked at Tommy with a raised eyebrow. "Do you need anything? Water? Maybe a pain killer?"

Tommy shook his head. "I just want to sleep," he admitted weakly.

Techno nodded and then Tommy was alone in his room. He twisted the lock as he shut the door.

He collapsed onto his bed with a groan. Truly, he wanted nothing more than to fall into a fast sleep. But there was one more thing he had to do first.

He pulled out his phone and called Ranboo.

"Hello?"

Tommy cleared his throat and hoped it wasn't evident of his breakdown. "Ranboo. Hi. I'm just checking in with you, letting you know I'm fine and all that," he said, staring at his ceiling.

There was a moment of silence. And then Ranboo's nervous voice, *"Oh! Well... thanks for letting me know. I was worried. I'll let Tubbo know, if you want. I'm sure you're exhausted,"* he said quickly.

Tommy nodded, though he knew Ranboo couldn't see him. "Are you... are you alright, big man?" He asked.

Another long silence. He heard Ranboo swallow and clear his throat. *"Um... yeah. I'm good, Tommy. Don't worry about me."*

"Ranboo," Tommy said firmly. "I'm serious. Tell me what's up. Did I cross a line today? Did I go too far? Please let me know, man."

Ranboo was quiet for a long time. Tommy waited patiently. If the Watson's could be patient for him, he could be patient for his friend. Finally, Ranboo's voice crackled through the speaker. *"It was just... a lot, I guess. I appreciate it, don't get me wrong. I've never had*

anyone... fight for me before. I guess it just startled me. I get nervous easily, as you know, and violence makes me anxious. But... but I do appreciate you defending me. I'm sorry if it seems I'm ungrateful," he said quietly.

Tommy mulled over the words. "Right. Okay, I understand. I'm sorry for making you uncomfortable. And I'll try not to let it happen again," he assured him. He tried not to think about how much he sounded like the Watson's assuring *him*. He tried not to think about how before this house, he might have called Ranboo a bitch and told him to grow up. He might not have even called to follow up at all. He tried not to think about what that meant about him and his future.

"Thank you."

Tommy rolled over on his bed. "You really do mean a lot to me, big man. You and Tubbo. I'm really glad you guys stick around," he mumbled, embarrassed by the sentiment. It must've been his exhaustion and pain and leftover emotion from his breakdown. Nothing else, of course.

"You mean a lot to us too, Tommy. I hope it comes off that way and you don't forget it. We're really glad we got to meet you and we get to be your friends."

Tommy snorted. "Alright then. I'll talk to you guys tomorrow, okay?"

"Of course."

They hung up and Tommy stared at the white ceiling of his room. This day had felt like a week all in one. He rolled over his emotions hesitantly. He didn't like the amount that he'd been panicking in his house, and he didn't like these feelings inside him. He especially didn't like unearthing feelings about his mother. He'd buried her in his mind long ago. For the first time in a long while, he considered taking Hannah's advice and calling up his therapist.

He pushed away the thought quickly. He didn't need a therapist. Therapy was something he did as a kid, when he was taken away from his dad. It was something he did when he was young and didn't know what else to do with the abuse he was dealt on a daily basis.

Tommy was strong now. Foster families and bullies and Dream had taught him to be strong. He didn't need help. He didn't need therapy.

He didn't need the Watson's, their help, or their love.

The next morning, Tommy told Phil and Wilbur he fell down the stairs when they pointed out his black eye and bruises with sickening concern. They would never have believed him if Techno hadn't confirmed the story immediately, without even looking up from his coffee.

The odd feeling in Tommy's chest grew. He hated it.

Chapter End Notes

Tommy: "I hate that I like it here and I want you to hate me so it's easy to hate you"
Techno, who has never processed a single emotion in his life: "...Phil....."

Thanks for reading!!!

Did you know anxiety attacks can sometimes lead to extreme bouts of irrational anger?

Tommy's attitude about therapy is unhealthy! It's supposed to be! If you think you need help, don't be afraid to reach out to a professional :]

Next chapter out within the week <3

Understanding

Chapter Summary

Tommy has to distance himself. It'll be better for everyone.

Chapter Notes

Chapter TW: mentions of past child abuse, underaged intoxication, self-deprecating thoughts

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

“What’re you gonna be for Halloween?” Wilbur asked lazily.

Tommy rolled his eyes. He was sitting at his desk, *trying* to get his homework done. He had been making decent progress before his oldest foster brother came to drape himself over his bed and strum his ukulele in the most distracting way possible. He stared down at the differential equations on his worksheet. “I don’t dress up for Halloween,” he replied, distracted. He scribbled down some numbers and missed Wilbur’s shocked expression.

“Nothing? Ever? When was the last time you dressed up? Or went trick or treating?” Wilbur demanded, sitting upright.

Tommy rolled his eyes again. “You seem a little old to be worried about trick or treating, Wilbur,” he shot back. He circled his solution and moved onto the next equation.

“Tommy,” he said seriously. “When was the last time you dressed up for Halloween?”

He sighed and set down his pencil. Wilbur obviously would not let this go. “I don’t know. Maybe when I was six or seven? I made a ghost costume out of an old sheet and then got the lights beat out of me for ruining the linens. *Happy?*” He snapped. His hands shook against the wood of his desk. He picked up his pencil again and tried to get back into the rhythm of homework.

Wilbur set down his ukulele. “*Tommy*,” he scolded. He looked sick- all the nonchalant contentment leached out of him.

Tommy threw down his pencil, frustrated. “What do you *want* from me, Wilbur? It’s true. I’m doing homework. I’m not dressing up for Halloween. Now leave me *alone*,” he spat angrily.

Wilbur looked surprised. He grabbed his ukulele and got up quickly, scowling as he went. He slammed the door behind him on the way out. The noise made Tommy jump, and his pencil jerked across the page. He groaned in frustration and began to erase it. Tommy had been trying his best to distance himself from the family after his fight, but they had been making it unnecessarily hard. Wilbur in particular was especially clingy with him, and sometimes Tommy missed the red bean bag chair in his room and listening to him strum at his guitar. But this was for the best. He had to remember that this would be best for everyone. He'd gotten too attached to this family, and it would hurt more when he had to leave.

He couldn't let that happen again. He'd barely survived leaving Puffy's house. Leaving this family might end him. He couldn't take the risk. He had to distance himself before they could send him away. That way, he could leave in peace with no problems or resentment. Just any other foster house.

He groaned and threw down his pencil again. He'd never be able to concentrate on differential calculus now. This family was making things increasingly difficult. He pressed his hands against his eyes, trying to relieve his growing headache. He considered taking a nap. It was a dangerous move. His nightmares had been worsening considerably over the weeks, and he didn't want to risk another panic attack or accidentally drawing his foster brothers to his room.

He was tired, though. He collapsed onto his bed for a quick nap. Then he would start his calculus again, fully rested. Right.

But Tommy couldn't nap. Instead, he stared at the ceiling as his heart pounded in his ears. He hated this. He hated feeling this way. He almost missed the crowded rooms and annoying kids of the group home. He almost missed angry foster parents and sneaky foster siblings. That made *sense* to him. He knew how to live like that and he knew how to regulate his emotions to match that environment. This? Here? It felt like he was treading water in an endless ocean- no shore in sight. Every time he thought he was getting better- getting used to the way things worked here- he went and ruined it again. The faded bruises on his knuckles were testament to that.

What was he supposed to do?

Phil stared at him with disapproving eyes. "Why are you still here, Tom?" He asked harshly.

Tommy winced. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry Phil."

Phil rolled his eyes. "You're selfish. You're a selfish kid and a brat. You're not where you belong, and you won't do anything to fix it. You don't deserve to be here, and you keep on pretending that you do. Does it help your conscience, Tom? To tell yourself you're worthy of their love and money and a home to convince yourself that it's true?" He snapped.

Tommy was crying. He felt like he was always crying recently. He cried and cried until a lake of water grew around their feet. The water rose steadily as he sobbed.

“Stop crying. You’re too old to cry. I thought you said you were strong.”

Tommy bit his tongue, but the sobs still came. The water rose to their waists. He felt slow in the water and panic built in his chest. How was he supposed to run now?

“Tom,” Phil snapped. But when Tommy looked, it was his bio father standing before him. His face was a blur- just a tall man with a head of wavy blond hair. If Tommy concentrated, he could make out Phil’s eyes. “Why are you still here?” His father snapped.

Tommy stared as tears fell down his cheeks. He watched as the figure constantly morphed between his bio father and his foster father, changing and adapting to eventually create someone new with features that matched them both. Tommy couldn’t remember what his biological dad looked like, but he was sure the man had looked like Phil.

Or maybe not.

His dad slapped him and the tears fell faster, rolling down his face in rivers. The water rose to their chests.

“Stop it, Thomas,” he growled. “You’re embarrassing me and you’re embarrassing yourself. You’re weak.”

“I’m not,” Tommy croaked. The words were strangled by sobs, catching in his throat.

His dad chuckled and his face morphed to look more like Phil’s. “You’re a weakling, Tom,” Phil spat. “You can’t go a single day without panicking. You can’t let go of your past. Is that how grown ups behave?”

Tommy sobbed. The water rose to his neck. “Stop,” he pleaded. “Please.”

His dad scowled. “Begging. Typical. Will you beg this family to let you stay once they get tired of you? Like you begged Puffy?”

Tommy was treading water. “I- I... no. I didn’t... I won’t,” he stuttered.

Phil smiled kindly. It hurt worse than the slap. “Thomas,” he whispered. “It doesn’t matter if you beg. We don’t want you. Puffy didn’t want you. No one did. Even when you begged your own birth mother, she couldn’t love you enough to stay.”

Tommy choked on his grief.

His father stared cruelly. “And look what happened to her,” he growled. “Look what you did to her. Maybe if you could’ve been loved, it would have turned out differently.”

Tommy submerged. He panicked, unable to find his way back to the surface. He sunk into the depths... deeper and deeper...

Tommy tried to breathe and inhaled tears-

He gasped, sitting up straight in his bed.

Tommy tried to catch his breath.

He didn't remember falling asleep, but his room was dark. A quick glance at his clock told him it was well into the night- or rather early in the morning. He must've missed dinner hours ago. No one had come to wake him. Usually Wilbur did, but he guessed Wil was still mad at him for earlier. He pressed a shaky hand to his head, wiping away sweat and dried tears. He must've been crying in his sleep.

He scowled and rolled over, trying not to think about it. If he could just let it sink into his subconscious, never to be remembered again, he'd be okay. Bury it deep, don't think about what it means. It was just a stupid dream, anyway. What do dreams know?

His stomach growled and he got to his feet, wiping clammy hands on his pants. He hadn't eaten all day. Surely Phil wouldn't mind if he took something from the kitchen as a late night snack, right? He saw Wilbur and Techno do it all the time.

He padded down the stairs quietly, feeling his way through the darkness. When he reached the kitchen, he felt it was safe enough to flick on a light. He blinked at the sudden brightness, squinting. It was rare that he saw the kitchen at night. The last time was when Techno decided to make ramen at the ungodly hour at two in the morning and Tommy kept him company, sitting on the counter and laughing at his horrendous cooking skills.

He pushed away the memory quickly. It was a stupid thought. He pulled open the refrigerator in search of something easy he could sneak away that no one would notice was missing.

He raised an eyebrow. A plate of food was plastic wrapped and placed on the top shelf. A post-it note on it read a messily scrawled- *Tommy* . It was clearly Phil's handwriting. A strange feeling grew in Tommy's chest. So they had saved dinner for him after all. He felt himself start to smile and forced a scowl instead. It was just a stupid plate of food. No need to get sappy.

Tommy grabbed the plate and quickly put the food in the microwave to heat up. He was setting the timer when he heard the front door creak open.

He froze and glanced at the clock. Who was coming in at nearly four in the morning? Heart pounding, he grabbed a rolling pin out of the nearest drawer. Not that a rolling pin would do

much in terms of self defense, but it was better than nothing. He peaked around the corner cautiously.

Wilbur was standing in the living room, closing the front door behind him. He was wearing his brown trench coat, and his hair was mussed. When he turned to face him, Tommy noticed the red blush on his cheeks from the October chill outside.

Tommy raised an eyebrow, lowering his rolling pin. He opened his mouth to ask just what Wilbur was doing, but his foster brother beat him to it.

“Tommy!” He exclaimed loudly. He grinned stupidly, like seeing Tommy was the most exciting thing he’d ever experienced. He rushed towards him and Tommy backed away quickly, scowling.

“Shut *up*, Wil. It’s almost four. Do you wanna wake the entire house?” He hissed. Wilbur didn’t seem to hear him. He raised his arms for a hug, and Tommy quickly dodged the attempt. Wil didn’t seem fazed by his rejection, instead waltzing past him to enter the kitchen like he hadn’t done anything at all. He laughed as he went.

Tommy smelled the alcohol on his skin.

He cringed and took another step away from the older boy. “Are you *drunk*?” He demanded, incredulous. He followed after Wilbur into the kitchen to put the rolling pin away.

Wilbur snorted and opened the fridge. “No, ‘course not. Are *you*?” He slurred.

Tommy rolled his eyes and grabbed a glass from the cabinet, filling it with water from the sink. “Here,” he said firmly, setting the cup on the counter. “Drink this.” He redirected his attention back to the microwave and started it.

Wilbur cooed. “Water? For me? You’re too kind, Toms,” he grinned. Tommy cringed at the words and didn’t turn to look at him. He didn’t want to give him the reaction. He was staring at the numbers on the microwave steadily tick down when Wil threw a lazy arm over his shoulder. Tommy flinched and tried to pull away, but the taller held him in place. “*Tommy*,” he drawled. “Why are you ignoring me?”

His nose scrunched as the stench of alcohol invaded his personal space. He turned his body and shoved his foster brother away. Wilbur only laughed as he was pushed. He stumbled and rebalanced a few feet away. “You smell like a bar,” Tommy snapped. “Drink the water and go to bed, idiot.”

Wilbur pouted, sticking out his lower lip. “You don’t wanna hang out with your big brother?” He whined.

Tommy rolled his eyes again and glanced at the microwave timer. “Not with you. And you’re not my brother. Go away,” he said firmly.

Wilbur turned around dramatically- almost a twirl. He threw his arms out and his trench coat swirled around him. His emotions seemed to have completely turned around. “I don’t *get* it. I

don't *understand* you," he slurred sadly. He clunked into the dining room and collapsed onto a chair, draping his arm over the back and lowering his head.

Tommy huffed and ignored him, keeping his eyes on the appliance. Wil continued on. "It's like- it's like one minute... you love us. We're your family and you want us. And then.... It's like now you took that all back. It's like- it's like now you want nothing to do with me," he whined.

"I *don't* want anything to do with you," Tommy confirmed harshly. The microwave beeped brightly and he quickly opened the door. His fingers burned as he touched the plate and he welcomed the pain.

Wilbur threw himself over the table, hunching over and putting his head in his hands dramatically. "*Why?*" He demanded. "You- We were getting there. You called me your *brother*."

Tommy glared at him. "I was being stupid. Emotions are tricky, and all that shit. Go to bed, Wilbur. You're beyond drunk," he snapped.

Wilbur lifted his head to glare back. "You're a real brat, you know that?" He spat.

His dream flashed through his memory- Phil spitting out *You're a selfish kid and a brat*. Tommy tried not to look hurt. "You're preaching to the choir," he mocked defensively. "Now *go to bed*."

"You're a *child*," Wilbur shot. "Don't talk to me like my father."

Tommy slammed his palms onto the counter, frustrated. "Well clearly *someone* has to," he snapped. "Phil obviously doesn't parent you."

Wilbur leapt to his feet, face red. "Don't talk about Phil," he growled, suddenly quiet. He seemed to have sobered in an instant.

And Tommy knew that was his cue to shut his mouth. But Tommy liked to push buttons, and Wilbur deserved it. Besides, if he could get his oldest foster brother to hate him, the rest of the family would follow suit quickly. He could get this house to act like any other foster family, and he could leave with no strings attached and no regret.

"Why?" He shot. "He's not your dad, either. Don't be stupid Wilbur. He got a massive check for adopting his first foster and then adopted the second one that came along, too."

Wilbur's hands balled into fists. "*Phil isn't Puffy*, Tommy. You don't know what you're talking about! You don't even know how fathers *act*," he shot back.

Tommy flinched and took his foster brother in. Rage in his eyes, alcohol on his breath.

"Fathers act like you," he said quietly.

Wilbur's eyes widened and the anger seemed to drain out of him all at once, leaving behind something sickly. Tommy stormed past him, leaving his plate of warm food on the counter.

He didn't stop until he was back in his room, closing the door quietly behind him.

When he was finally alone, Tommy shoved his face into his pillow and *screamed*. The noise was muffled and vibrated in his ears. He didn't care. He screamed some more. The release felt good. He let it wash over him, let himself feel the rage and sadness in his chest. He shouldn't have said that to Wilbur and he knew it. He was just... so *angry*. And at that moment, Wilbur looked just like his birth father. From what he could remember, at least.

A soft knock on the door interrupted his pity party. Tommy scowled in its direction. "Go away," he called back.

The knock came again and Tommy groaned in frustration, getting to his feet and stomping over to open the door. He flung it open in his fury and his eyes landed on Wilbur. He was holding his dinner plate with a sheepish look.

"Go away."

"I brought your dinner," Wilbur replied, ignoring the demand.

"I'm not hungry. Go away."

Wilbur rolled his eyes. "Let me in, Toms. *C'mon*. You should eat more, anyway," he pleaded.

Tommy stood still, considering. He hated Wilbur right now, and wanted nothing to do with him. But the food *did* smell good. Phil was good at cooking chicken, and the potatoes he got from the garden were always unnaturally delicious. He sighed and stepped aside to let Wilbur in.

His foster brother smiled weakly and entered, handing him the plate. Tommy rolled his eyes and shut the door behind them. He sat down at his desk to eat.

"I'm sorry. Y-You're right, I was being an ass," Wilbur said, sitting down on the edge of Tommy's bed. It felt too much like this afternoon. His stomach twisted painfully.

He rolled his eyes and popped a potato into his mouth. "Always are," he replied, keeping his eyes on his plate. He heard Wil sigh.

"I just... I just want to *understand*. I don't get why you backed off so quickly. I thought we were getting somewhere," he said. It sounded like begging. Tommy once again thought of his dream and winced.

"Why do you *care* so much?" Tommy snapped back, agitated.

Wilbur was silent at that, eyes wide and unfocused. Tommy watched him mouth quiet words that he couldn't make out. He seemed to be thinking hard, and Tommy guessed the alcohol wasn't helping his case. "B-because," Wilbur finally stuttered out. "Because you forgave me."

Tommy paused at that. He wasn't sure what to make of it. "Huh?"

Wilbur looked away sharply. The blush on his cheeks hadn't faded, and now Tommy wondered if it was from the liquor rather than the cold outside. "You *forgave* me. I was awful to you... I- I was an *ass*. Sometimes I still *am*. I made you run away and hate yourself and I made you think you weren't welcomed here. And you still forgave me and spent time with me and made me feel better when it was the furthest thing from your responsibility or what you should've been worried about," he rushed out. Tommy blinked, surprised. Wil continued on. "You told me we weren't brothers. We weren't friends. You didn't forgive me because you had to or because you felt obligated. You... you thought I *deserved* it."

Tommy stared at his foster brother. He didn't think his forgiveness from over two months ago had meant so much to him. Now that he started, it didn't seem Wil could stop. He kept on, slurring his words in passion and panic and intoxication. "When I have bad days... and 'm awful to my friends- they just forgive me. Because they're supposed to, because that's what friends *do*. And when I hurt Phil and Techno... they tell me 't's okay, and that they forgive me. They're *obligated* to forgive me. And that feels horrible. But... you're different, because you don't let me get away with that shit." Wilbur swallowed, looking a touch manic. Paired with the brown trench coat, Tommy thought he looked a bit intimidating. "You're *different*, Tommy. You didn't have to forgive me and you did. You're a good person, and you deserve good things. So it hurts me when you make such an effort to convince yourself that you *don't*... It hurts when you tell yourself that you don't belong here, or that you have to distance yourself from us," he said quickly.

Tommy stared at him. Wilbur stared right back. "If you don't deserve good things," his foster brother finally whispered, like it was a dirty secret. "What does that say about me?"

He didn't know what to say to that. He wasn't emotionally equipped to handle it all. Tommy could hardly handle his own emotions. He didn't know what to do with Wilbur's as well. "...I'm not a good person," he finally admitted. It was obvious to Tommy, but Wilbur's eyebrows shot up like it was a revealed secret. "I'm not. You deserve good things because you're good, Wil. Even if you make mistakes. You're a good person who does bad things sometimes. I'm a bad person who does good things sometimes. One is better than the other." His voice was a breathy whisper. Wilbur's eyes narrowed. "One deserves a family and a house and friends. The other doesn't. You deserve good things and forgiveness and you deserve your friends and family. You've earned them, Wil. You deserve to be here. I don't."

Tommy felt cold after the admission. His fingers shook and he shoved them between his knees anxiously. The look on Wilbur's face unnerved him. He nervously bounced his leg.

"Tommy," his foster brother said quietly, ever so gentle. "You're... you're a good person. Why on earth would you think otherwise?"

A million reasons flashed through his mind. A million problems that were his fault- a million fights and a million excuses and a million bad things.

Wilbur looked at him strangely. "I want... I want us to be friends. I want us to be brothers. And if you don't want that, that's fine. It's *okay*. But don't push us away because you think you don't *deserve* it. Don't cut yourself off because of your past. You still have a future."

Tommy's hands stilled.

“Go to bed, Wilbur,” his voice was deathly quiet. “Drink some water and go to sleep. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Wilbur closed his eyes, as if the words hurt. “You don’t make sense to me. I thought I knew everything before I met you,” he muttered.

Tommy had nothing to say to that.

“I thought I knew how the system worked because I went through it. I thought I knew how to make friends because I made them. I thought I knew how to become a brother because Techno came to us. And now you... you don’t make any sense,” he continued. He opened his eyes and Tommy was startled to find them wet.

“Go to bed,” Tommy insisted. He stood up suddenly, leaving behind the cooling plate of food. He wasn’t hungry anymore. “I don’t want to talk to you anymore. Go away.” His stomach was twisting painfully. Wilbur’s words hurt more than any physical fight he’d ever been in.

Wilbur stared at him for another long minute. Then he got to his feet, stumbling slightly, and stormed from the room. Tommy shut the door behind him with a sigh of relief. His heart was beating quick and his hands shook embarrassingly fast.

He turned back to look at his empty room. It was better this way, he reminded himself. This was the way it had to be. He didn’t owe Wilbur brotherhood, or even friendship. And if sometimes Tommy longed for it... well that was wrong too.

For Halloween the next week, Techno dressed as a king. He made some remark about how it was funny because he was an anarchist. Tommy didn’t really get it. Phil was a crow. He cawed at the laughing children when they knocked on the door before dropping the largest candy bars Tommy had ever seen in their candy bags. He never seemed to grow tired of it, no matter how long Tommy watched it happen. Tubbo and Ranboo texted him pictures of their costumes. Tubbo was a mad scientist, which wasn’t a far off costume for him. Ranboo dressed as some horror game character Tommy didn’t recognize. He wore a suit and a white mask. Tommy wasn’t particularly concerned about finding out who he was. The both of them were going with Niki and the other older kids in town to the cliffs. They had invited Tommy to come. He had declined.

Wilbur went as a ghost.

Tommy couldn’t tell if he was honoring or mocking him. He decided both were equally as horrible.

He spent Halloween in his room.

Chapter End Notes

Fatherless behavior.

Thanks for reading!! The kudos and kind comments have been so so lovely :]

Next chapter out within the week <33

Isolation

Chapter Summary

The fall is hard, but this is the way it has to be.

Chapter Notes

Chapter TW: Negative attitude about therapy and mental health, depression, very brief suicidal thoughts (stay safe <3)

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

Tommy was running.

He wasn't sure what he was running from. He just knew that something bad was coming, and he had to get as far away as possible.

He was on an empty road. That wasn't right- he was running . He knew from years of experience that the safest routes were woods and back roads so no one could track him. He tried to diverge to the side, but the road grew under his feet. It didn't matter what direction or how fast he ran, he couldn't leave the black concrete road.

He didn't stop running. It was coming. He didn't have time to waste.

He wished he knew what it was.

As he ran on, he found himself in a nameless city. Concrete and steel in every direction, skyscrapers as high as he could see. It was cold. He shivered violently as the wind blew through his thin tshirt.

"You made it."

Tommy whirled around, heart racing, to spot Dream on the sidewalk. He was in an alleyway, half concealed by darkness and shadow.

Tommy slowed to a stop and felt his feet move against his will, bringing him closer to his friend. "What're you doing here?" He asked, breathless.

Dream grinned- all teeth. "I was waiting for you. I wanted to make sure you got here okay. What kind of foster brother would I be if I didn't check on you?" He said, dripping sweetness from his lips.

Tommy's heart felt cold. His hands were turning blue in the freezing wind. He tapped his fingers on his legs to keep them warm. "You're not my brother," he shot back.

If it was possible, Dream grinned wider. "No, you're right. And whose fault is that?" He mocked.

Tommy looked away sharply, hurt. The wind snapped at his neck and a chill ran down his spine.

Dream turned to show Tommy into the alleyway. "Here, look. I got everything prepared for you. It's more than you deserve."

Tommy peered around him curiously. Wedged in between two concrete buildings, covered in grime and vulgar graffiti. A thin blanket and ratty pillow, a half filled crinkled water bottle, and a beat up paperback book- The Odyssey.

He felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. "What is this?"

Dream raised an eyebrow. "Your new home, of course. Where did you think you were?" He asked, confused.

Tommy stared at the book on the dirty floor; his stomach twisting painfully. "I didn't... I don't... what are you talking about?" He demanded.

Dream laughed and the sound somehow made Tommy even colder. He crossed his arms, shivering. "Tommy, you're eighteen now. You have nowhere to go this time. This is where you belong," he explained cruelly.

Tommy turned and looked at him, incredulous. "Wh-what? I'm not-" How old was he again? He couldn't remember. "I... wha-what about the Watson's? I was... living with them. I- This can't be-" He stuttered.

Dream tilted his head like a confused puppy. "Tommy- what do you think you were running from?"

He felt like he'd be slapped. He fell to his knees onto the ratty blanket, shivering and holding back tears.

Dream continued on. "You ran from them. Just like you run from everything. You ran from everyone so you could come here. You spent your whole life running to get to your city street all by yourself. Far from the forests of your youth. I didn't even need to help you get here," he explained with a smirk.

Tommy squeezed his eyes shut. That couldn't be right. He... he couldn't remember leaving the Watson's. When was the last time he saw Wilbur and Techno? Did Phil just let him go? How far was the city from the Watson's home? If he could just get back-

"They don't want you, Tommy," Dream said, reading his mind. "They're not your family. You don't have one. You had years to find one and you blew it. Now you're too old. Hannah can't

swoop in and help you. There's no one else who will take you in or deal with your bullshit," he snapped.

Tommy finally allowed himself to sob. The heartache built up in his chest and Dream's final sentence made the dam break. Tears flowed down his cheeks and the icy wind made them sting.

"This is the life you've been preparing for all your life." Dream squatted down next to him, taunting him.

He reached over and smacked him sharply. Tommy only took it and cried harder.

"You're alone," he continued on. "And you did this to yourself. This is your fault, Tommy. You're not lovable, and you never tried to be. It's no wonder none of the families ever wanted you to stick around."

"Stop," Tommy gasped, trying to catch his breath between the sobs. "Go away. I don't want you here."

Dream grinned as if he'd told him an incredible secret. "You will. I'm your only friend. You'll want me here when you realize you're truly alone, Toms," he said sweetly.

Tommy reared on him suddenly, like a wounded animal. "Don't call me that!" He snarled. He threw a punch at the taller boy that missed by a mile. His limbs felt sluggish, like he was moving through honey.

Dream dodged easily and straightened back up with a lazy smile. "Why? You think that's Wilbur's claim? Do you think that because he gave you a stupid nickname, he likes you? He wants you around? Don't be pathetic, Toms. Remember who called you that first, after all. She certainly didn't want you."

Tommy's hands trembled and he grabbed at the thin blanket, trying to find some purchase. The old material did nothing to warm his shaking fingers.

Dream looked at him and Tommy might have thought it was sympathetic if not for the superior smile on his face. "I warned you of this, and you didn't listen. I tried to help you, and you were too stupid to take my advice. It's no wonder none of the families wanted you," he spat.

"Please," Tommy cried. "Go away. Go away, Dream!"

Dream only grinned wider, his lips stretching into something almost inhuman. "Tommy, this is your fault. This is your fault, Tommy. Tommy, Tommy-"

"-Tommy?"

His eyes shot open.

Tommy lurched to his side, heaving to try and catch his breath. There was a hand on his shoulder and he cried out, flinching away and throwing a weak hit towards the offending area.

The hand disappeared. Tommy tried to get his bearings.

He was laying on his side in the grass. He let the blades of green run in between his fingers as he tried to remember. Above him, the sun was low in the sky. When he finally caught his breath, he let himself fall back and rest his head against the soil again, closing his eyes.

As his heartbeat slowed, the afternoon came back to him. He had come outside after school to read in the cool November air. He hadn't remembered falling asleep. He wondered how long he was out.

He peeked open an eye to his side and spotted both Techno and Phil. Techno was kneeling at his side with a hand still outstretched and a neutral expression. Phil stood off his shoulder with worry all over his face. They were both dressed in their gardening clothes. Tommy groaned and let his eye fall shut again.

"We were just coming to work on the garden," Techno's voice said gently. "We didn't know you were out here."

He could hear movement and then Phil's voice said, "You were having a nightmare, mate. Do you wanna talk about it? It looked bad."

He shook his head and waited for the sound of them leaving. It didn't come. Reluctantly, he squinted his eyes open to look at them.

Techno was frowning. He raised an eyebrow when he saw Tommy make eye contact. "You've been having a lot of nightmares, Tommy. Maybe it'll help to talk to someone," he suggested softly.

Tommy scowled. "I have not. I'm fine. Leave me alone," he snapped.

Phil gave a weak smile. "Well... you have, mate. You're not exactly quiet about them. They must be hard," he said. Tommy's stomach dropped. "If you don't want to talk to us, that's okay. I can get in touch with your old therapist, if you want. Hannah gave me her name. Or we could find someone else--"

Tommy sat up straight, seething. "I *don't* need a therapist. There's nothing wrong with me! Now leave me *alone*," he spat.

Neither seemed surprised by his outburst. Phi raised an eyebrow, forever patient. It made the anger in Tommy's stomach worse. "No one said there's anything wrong with you, Tommy,"

his foster father said gently. “You can see a therapist for a number of reasons. All of us see one every once in a while.”

That was news to Tommy. He knew Wilbur saw a therapist every Wednesday, but he’d never seen Techno or Phil go. Then again, he didn’t know where they went half the time. They very well could’ve been going once a week as well.

But Tommy remembered seeing a therapist when he was young, and he remembered all the problems that came with it. “I don’t care,” he insisted. “I don’t need one. Good for you guys, but I’m *fine*.”

Phil and Techno exchanged worried looks as Tommy got to his feet, tucking his book under his arm. He could feel them watching him as he stormed back up to the house. He almost wasn’t surprised to see Wilbur waiting for him on the back porch, sitting against the house with his arms around his knees.

“What do you *want*, Wilbur?” Tommy demanded, stomping past him to get to the door.

Wilbur didn’t flinch at his harshness. It almost seemed like he had expected it. “You were screaming. The whole house heard,” he replied easily.

Tommy tried not to wince. He didn’t want to think about it anymore. He threw open the back door in a rage.

“You were screaming Dream’s name,” Wilbur said quietly.

Tommy froze in the doorway, heart racing. He took a moment to process the news. He almost considered turning around, collapsing next to Wilbur, burying his face in his foster brother’s shoulder. For a moment he almost let himself burst into tears and sob like he did in his dreams and tell his oldest brother everything- everything he’d been thinking and dreaming about and everything that had ever happened to him.

The moment passed. He walked through the doorway, slamming the door behind him.

Tommy had been depressed before.

Sure, of course he had. He’d been diagnosed and medicated and treated. There had certainly been moments in his life that could trigger it, and he had dealt with them. That didn’t mean he was depressed *now*. Tommy was *fine*. He didn’t need to be put back on medication, or see his therapist, or find help. He knew what depression looked like, and this wasn’t it. He was perfectly okay.

And if he didn’t have the energy to get out of bed most days, that was *normal*. He was a mooney teenager. That was to be expected, right? He needed the extra rest anyway.

And if he fell behind in his classes and his perfect grades finally dropped, then who cared? He had enough credits to graduate anyway. The only reason he was still in school was because it gave him an excuse to get out of his foster houses before he turned eighteen. He didn't *actually* need these classes. He could deal with a few F's.

And if he found himself staring a moment too long at Wilbur's medication sitting on the bathroom counter or peering out his second story window and wondering how much the fall would hurt-

Well, he had nothing to say to that.

Tubbo called for the fourth time that afternoon. Tommy declined the call for the fourth time that afternoon.

There was a knock at the door. Tommy buried deeper into his bed covers.

"Tommy?" Phil's voice called from the other side of the door. "Dinner's ready. Are you going to come down?"

Tommy opened his mouth to reply, but no sound came out. He hadn't spoken a word all day. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I'm not hungry," he croaked. He wondered if Phil had heard the quiet statement. He hoped he wouldn't try to open the door before he remembered that it was locked anyway.

There was a moment of silence and Tommy wondered if Phil had silently walked away. Then his voice came again, even quieter this time. "Tommy, you haven't eaten dinner with us all week. I haven't seen you eat at all, actually. Why don't you at least come sit with us, okay?"

It was true, but Tommy also hadn't lied. He just wasn't hungry. He hadn't been hungry all week. He'd been too busy sleeping and laying in bed to eat. He survived off of quick snacks he stole from the kitchen in the late hours of the night. He let his eyes fall shut and hoped Phil would just go away.

His foster father had other plans. Another knock startled him from his drowsiness. "Tommy, why don't we have a quick talk, alright? Nothing serious. Can we chat?" He asked. His voice sounded even, but Tommy could hear the concern underneath. He felt bad. He didn't want Phil or anyone else to worry about him. It wasn't worth the energy.

He couldn't let Phil see him like this. "No," he replied simply.

There was another long moment of silence. Tommy expected his door handle to turn anyway, and when Phil realized it was locked he would get the key. Any other foster parent would have.

Instead, the door handle never moved. “Alright,” Phil finally conceded. “It doesn’t have to be now. But soon, alright? There will be a plate of dinner in the fridge for you when you’re hungry again.” Not if, but when.

Tommy listened to him walk away. The sound of footsteps going down the stairs was music to his ears.

He rolled over and tried not to think about it.

His phone buzzed and when he looked, he noticed he had seven missed calls from Ranboo.

Tommy declined the call. The number became eight.

November became colder and the nightmares got worse. Tommy walked through life in a sleep deprived daze. He got used to his new state. His grades didn’t improve, but they stopped falling. He stopped declining his friends’ calls and ignoring texts, but his friendships grew stagnant. And he could never seem to escape Phil’s worried gaze.

Tommy’s life wasn’t ruled by anger, grief, and fear anymore. Now it was emptiness.

“You’re sick, Tommy,” Wilbur said firmly.

Tommy glanced up from his textbook from his spot on the couch. Wilbur was standing above him with arms crossed. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Phil watching them. He wondered briefly if Phil had put Wilbur up to this, but when he saw the determined look in his foster brother’s eyes he shook away the thought.

“I feel perfectly healthy, actually,” Tommy said, returning his gaze to his textbook page. “I have an above-average immune system because I’m an above-average man.”

He could almost feel Wilbur roll his eyes. He kept his eyes firmly locked on a passage about organic chemistry. Newman Projections had to be more interesting than this conversation, right? “I’m not talking about your physical health, Toms,” Wilbur snapped back. “You’re not well mentally.”

Tommy raised an eyebrow as he turned the page. “I’ve been in the foster care system for almost nine years, Wilbur. It’s hard to find anyone like that who’s mentally sound,” he said, uninterested. It’s not like this was news to him, anyway.

Wilbur huffed, frustrated. “Tommy, you need to see a therapist. I know you don’t want to, but I think it’s time we put our foot down. You have to go,” he stated.

Tommy didn’t even look up. “No,” was all he replied.

It took a moment for Wilbur to register such a response. “*No?* Tommy, don’t you want to get *better?* You don’t eat, you don’t sleep, you don’t *talk*. You mope around all day and you don’t have the energy to do *anything*. Is that how you wanna live?”

“Sure.”

Wilbur threw up his hands, exasperated. The action was enough to make Tommy glance up. The look on his foster brother’s face was incredulous. “I don’t *understand*. You have a *good* life here, Tommy. Why do you want to throw it away?” He snapped.

Tommy rolled his eyes just as Phil cleared his throat from across the room. “Leave him alone, Wil,” he called gently.

Wilbur flew around, face alight with anger. “*Why?* You’re just as worried as I am! Why don’t you *do* anything about it?” He demanded.

“Give him space. You were like this too, when you were sixteen,” Phil insisted.

Tommy’s stomach twisted at the thought of being compared to his foster brother. Wilbur glanced back at him. “I wasn’t like *this*,” he muttered, his eyes full of grief.

Tommy slammed his textbook shut. “I don’t need you two talking about me like I’m not here. I’m *fine*! And I’m *trying* to do homework,” he snapped. The other two’s attention turned to him, surprised. This was probably the most they’d gotten out of him in weeks. Phil opened his mouth to say something and then seemed to reconsider. His mouth snapped shut.

“Tommy, I’m just trying to *help*,” Wilbur shot, sounding aggravated. Again, Tommy’s heart skipped a beat. He remembered Dream’s help all too well.

“I don’t need help. I don’t need *anything* from you. In fact, the only thing I need is for you to *leave me alone*. I’m trying to study,” he shot back. He opened his textbook back up and tried to find his place again.

Wilbur stared at him, ears turning pink. He was angry, Tommy could tell. But he just couldn’t bring himself to care. If Wil was mad at him, so be it. It wouldn’t be the first time. He’d dealt with worse. He tried to hide his shaking hands behind the pages of the book.

His foster brother let out a noise of frustration. “*Tommy*,” he insisted. “I can’t watch you self-destruct like this. You *have* to do something.”

“No,” Tommy replied, staring daggers at a diagram. “I don’t.” He pointedly ignored the stares of his foster family and tried to tune them out. He lost himself in words he didn’t totally understand and pictures that confused him. Maybe he should start paying attention in class, after all.

When he glanced up again, both Wilbur and Phil were gone.

An odd feeling grew in his chest and he pushed it away quickly, letting the emptiness back in. It was easier to feel nothing than everything.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!

It's gotta get worse before it gets better.

Tommy's attitude about his mental health is unhealthy! His thoughts about therapy are unhealthy! Don't hesitate to reach out to someone if you're struggling.

Next chapter out within the week :]

Roadtrip

Chapter Summary

Isolation is exhausting, especially when the people around you just won't let you self destruct.

Chapter Notes

Chapter TW: very brief reference to suicidal thoughts (but not actually), mentions of past child abuse

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

“Do you want one?” Tubbo asked, holding out two sticks of gum.

Tommy shook his head, fearing the mint would only make him nauseous.

Tubbo shrugged and shoved both pieces in his mouth, chewing obnoxiously. Tommy wondered briefly if he was trying to get a rise out of him. In the past, he certainly would’ve told his friend off for his loudness. Now, he let the noise fall into the background as he continued to stare into space.

It was the last class of the day, the free period he and Tubbo shared. The rest of the students in the room dutifully scribbled away at worksheets or typed on laptops. Tommy had neither, nor did he care. So he let himself space out as he waited for the bell to ring. Tubbo had apparently given up on his English essay. The looseleaf paper was full of black scribbles and crossed out sections. Tommy had tried briefly to help him, but had eventually lost interest and Tubbo had quickly followed suit.

“What’re your plans for the rest of the day?” Tubbo asked, leaning back in his chair. “Ranboo is coming over to help me test this new circuit I’m working on. You in?”

Tommy didn’t look at him. He found that looking at his friend made his chest ache, so he refrained from it most of the time. “No, I’ve got homework. Maybe another time,” he said, unbothered.

He saw Tubbo frown in the corner of his eye. “Why aren’t you doing homework now, then? That’s what this period is all about,” he questioned.

Tommy wasn't concerned with being caught in his lie. "I just can't come over, big man. No big deal. Next time, probably," he insisted.

"Did we do something?"

That got Tommy's attention. He glanced over and was struck by the sadness on Tubbo's face. Guilt pooled in his stomach. "N-No. No, of course not," he stumbled out. He looked his friend in the eye and his heart twisted. He missed Tubbo and Ranboo. Of course he did. Hanging out with his friends was just... draining. And it hurt when he remembered he wouldn't be here forever. He should've never let himself get close enough to end up like this. "Of course not, Tubs. I just haven't been feeling my best, that's all. Nothing to worry yourself with."

Tubbo's frown only grew. "Tommy, of course I'm going to worry about that. I care about you. You're one of my best friends. I want you to feel your best," he said gently. Tommy looked away, eyes stinging. Under the desk, his fingernails dug into his palms. He couldn't let himself cry in class. "If there's anything we can do, just let us know alright? You don't have to be alone."

A lump formed in his throat. He refused to look back at his friend. "I appreciate it, big man. Really, I do. I wouldn't worry about it too much, though. Not like I'll be around much longer anyway," he said quietly.

In his peripherals, Tubbo's eyes widened. "*Why would you say that?*" He demanded, voice hinting on alarm.

Tommy swallowed. "Well, there's only so much a family can take of me. I've been here far too long, anyway. It's only a matter of time now before I get sent back to the group home and they find me a new foster family," he explained, resigned.

When he saw Tubbo's untense slightly, it occurred to him that his friend might have thought he was referring to his own life, not his foster home. Air roared in his ears.

Tubbo looked concerned. "Tommy-" He started.

The bell rang. Tommy was out the door before he could hear another word.

It's not that he didn't want to be around Tubbo or Ranboo. He wanted to- desperately. He just felt like a burden when he was with them. His low energy and mooney words couldn't have been easy on them. And besides, the more he could distance himself now, the less it would hurt when he left later. He was getting pretty good at the whole self-isolation thing again, something he'd neglected when he first arrived in this town.

He pushed out the doors of the school, just another face in the crowd of students. The air was cold and Tommy shivered. Phil had never gotten him any winter clothes, and Tommy would never ask for them. He shoved his hands into his jean pockets and started his walk home.

He stopped short when he spotted Wilbur's car in the parking lot. He raised an eyebrow. Sure, it was Thursday. But Wilbur had stopped picking him up on Tuesdays and Thursdays a month

ago, as per Tommy's request. What was he doing here? He debated just pretending like he never saw the car and continuing on his walk. Wilbur could have been at the school for a multitude of reasons. His semester at college was starting to wrap up, and both his foster brothers had more free time when they weren't cramming for their finals. He could've been visiting friends or teachers, picking someone else up, or any other number of reasons.

He turned to keep walking when he heard his name being called. Cursing, he looked over his shoulder and locked eyes with Techno through the rolled down window of the car. He scowled and made his way over to the vehicle.

"What're you guys doing here?" Tommy demanded when he was close enough. He stopped in front of the passenger door and peered inside. Wilbur turned down the radio with one hand and waved at him with the other. In the passenger seat, Techno just smirked.

"We're picking you up, duh. Get in," Wilbur replied easily. He refocused his attention to the radio, fiddling with the knobs to get the right station.

Tommy blinked, surprised. "Why?" Was all he could get out.

Wilbur glanced at him with a raised eyebrow, like he'd asked the stupidest question in the world. "Because it's Thursday, and we don't have class. Also, it's forty degrees out and you'll freeze to death in your tshirt. Now get in already," he explained in an exasperated tone, like he'd said it a million times before.

He felt anger burn through his veins. His hands balled into fists. "I asked you not to pick me up anymore. I don't need your rides," he snapped into the car.

Techno rolled his eyes and finally opened his mouth. "Holy shit, Tommy. Drop the tough guy act and get in the damn car. You're shivering in place," he shot back.

Tommy paused as they both watched him. He considered briefly and when he realized he couldn't feel his fingertips, he sighed and opened the back door before clambering inside.

Wilbur grinned at him in the rearview mirror as Tommy scowled and crossed his arms. He stared out the window as indie music filled his ears and the car rolled into movement. Techno and Wil made casual small talk in the front, talking about finals and the frigid weather. Tommy tuned them out, slouching against the door. The faster this was over, the better.

He perked up when he saw Wilbur make an unfamiliar turn. This wasn't the way to the house or to the library, which were the only places they usually went after school. He straightened up when he found them on a highway he didn't recognize. He looked at Wilbur, but both his foster brothers seemed unconcerned with the diversion.

"Where are you going?" He finally piped up.

Techno and Wilbur's conversation paused as Wil glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "Roadtrip," he said simply.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Okay. *Where?*" He asked again.

Wilbur's grin was mischievous. "Secret," he replied.

Tommy scoffed and ignored Techno's snicker. "Fine. Secret roadtrip. Can you drop me off at the house first? I have homework to do," he said, resigned. He redirected his eyes out the window and tried not to look bothered.

"You don't, actually. Tubbo already texted me that you didn't. And we both know you're just gonna go lock yourself in your room and stare at the ceiling until nighttime, anyway," Wilbur shot back good naturedly.

Tommy's hands shook, but he couldn't identify the emotion. Anger, fear, or something else- he wasn't sure. They were *taking* him somewhere, somewhere he didn't know and wasn't familiar with. "Wilbur," his voice trembled slightly. Only then did Techno and Wilbur bother to look at least a little concerned. "I don't want to be here. Take me back to the house."

Wilbur hesitated. He knew this was breaking a family boundary. Phil was big on those. No one was forced to do anything they didn't want to. When Tommy asked to be left alone or for his brothers to leave his room, he got what he wanted. He wasn't forced to partake in family dinners or other events. Phil insisted on setting hard boundaries for each of them. If Tommy insisted on being taken home and Wilbur refused, it would be a major betrayal.

Wil bit his lip and glanced at Techno, unsure. Tommy couldn't see Techno's face in the seat in front of him, but he could only assume it was similar. Wil glanced back at him in the mirror. "We're not going anywhere bad, Tommy. I promise. It'll be fun. Brother bonding," he tried to persuade him.

But Tommy was having none of it. He could feel panic building in his limbs, and his breathing was starting to quicken. "Wilbur," he tried again. Then he reconsidered. "*Wil*. I don't want... I don't *want* to." He hated the way his voice shook. Like always, he wished he had better hold over himself. He wished he didn't panic so much, but it wasn't something he could control- and he could definitely feel a panic attack coming on.

Techno cleared his throat. "Tommy, we're just going a little north. It's alright. We'll be back in an hour, max," he tried.

Tommy swallowed weakly. "I'll- I'll call Phil," he threatened.

That certainly got a reaction from them. They all knew that Phil would be furious with the way things were progressing in the car right now. He wondered if Phil knew where they were going. Judging by the way his foster brothers exchanged nervous looks, he doubted it.

The realization only made the panic rise faster. Tommy suddenly found it hard to breathe. "Pull over," he demanded in between sharp gasps.

Wilbur, thankfully, listened to that command instantly. The car pulled over to the grassy side of the highway quickly and Tommy threw open the door before the vehicle had even fully stopped. He felt his knees hit the grass before he even knew what was happening and he hunched over, gripping the blades in his hands and trying to catch his breath. He was remembering *something*- he just wasn't sure what. Whatever it was, it was making him panic

hard. Realistically, he knew that Wilbur and Techno weren't out to get him, and that the roadtrip probably *would* be fun, if not at least tolerable. He wasn't sure what was making him anxious like this.

Wilbur turned off the car as Techno knelt at his side. "Breathe, Toms," came his soothing voice. Tommy closed his eyes against the sound, breathing ragged. "It's alright. We won't bring you anywhere you don't want to go. You're okay. Take a deep breath for me. That's it," he whispered.

Tommy tried to breathe deep, but the air caught in his throat and he was left coughing into the dirt.

Wilbur's voice came from somewhere behind him. "Talk to us, Tommy. What do you need?" He asked.

And Tommy just didn't *know*. He didn't know what was wrong with him or how to stop it. He hated not knowing. All his booksmarts would never help him in a situation like this. The only thing anyone had ever taught him to do when he panicked was to breathe and try to distract himself. But Tommy couldn't catch his breath and he couldn't focus on anything except that he was in an unfamiliar place with no idea where they were going and they were *taking* him somewhere and they didn't care about what he wanted and-

And Tommy was eight years old in the back of his brand new social worker's car. He was crying hysterically, still too young to know to hide his emotions. "I don't want to!" He screeched.

His social worker scowled. Tommy couldn't even remember his name. All he knew was that he was a bored, middle aged man who had hated his job and every kid that fell onto his desk in file form. "Thomas," he scolded. "You're going whether you like it or not. You need to be there. The court won't sign away your father's rights if not."

Tommy only cried harder at the mention of his dad. He missed him. He wanted to go home. He hated this new place and these new people and the group home. He didn't understand the way they behaved, or the rules that he was expected to follow. The grown ups acted different than his dad, and he couldn't comprehend it. They kept saying he would be placed with a new family soon, and that a cute kid like him would be adopted before he knew it. He hated it, he hated them. He wanted his dad and the cabin in the woods and the smell of pine and the bitter drink his father was always holding.

He wanted his mom.

"If you keep up with that, they'll send you out of the courtroom and this will all be for nothing. Get a hold of yourself. You're a big kid now, Thomas. Don't be pathetic," he spat.

"You can't make me go!" Tommy screamed back. He tugged on his seatbelt and pulled at the door handle of the car. His social worker had smartly turned on the child lock before they started the journey. Tommy was stuck in place. He hated feeling trapped- it reminded him of

the wooden closet in the hallway of his house. He could feel himself starting to panic, his breath coming out more uneven. His social worker glared at him through the rearview mirror and did nothing.

He watched and did nothing.

Tommy hyperventilated until he passed out. He woke up later being carried into the courtroom, across the room from his father. His social worker claimed he was sleeping, he was so stressed after all, and Tommy was forced through the trial. It was the last time he saw his dad. He was forced into the foster system. Forced from house to house. Forced to go wherever they deemed fit and they never cared what he thought, what he said, how he felt-

Tommy hunched over to throw up, but he hadn't eaten all day. He dry heaved until the memory passed and was distant again.

A hand rubbed circles on his back and he welcomed the touch. He felt cold all over. Slowly, his breathing started to slow again. He gulped down large gasps of air, feeling his lungs fill and deflate.

"That's it," Techno was murmuring. "Keep breathing. You're doing great."

He let the words wash over him. Tommy was *tired*. His panic attack and memory had drained him completely. If he had the energy, he would've been angry at his foster brothers for taking him so far from his bed. He'd have to wait forever before they got back again.

He peeked open his eyes and let the sunlight blind him for a moment. Techno knelt to his left, a gentle hand on his back. Wilbur squatted in front of him. He looked sick to his stomach.

"I'm sorry," his oldest foster brother cried the moment he saw his eyes open. "I'm so sorry, Tommy. I was just trying to do something nice. I didn't mean for this to happen. *Fuck*, I ruin everything. I'm *so sorry*," he said.

Tommy's instincts flew into gear. He was just too tired to remember he was supposed to hate his brother. "'s okay, Wil," he mumbled. "Sorry for panicking. Didn't mean to scare you. I'll be okay." It was a memorized statement, given to dozens of foster siblings over the years. He refocused to find Wilbur's face dissolving into something softer, something safer. Tommy relaxed without knowing he was previously tensed.

"Let's get you home, alright Toms?" Techno suggested gently. "We're sorry for bringing you out here. We'll get you back and let you rest."

His pink haired brother was close. And warm. Tommy leaned over and rested his head on his foster brother's shoulder. He felt the older stiffen before relaxing quickly, settling into the grass to make Tommy more comfortable. He shifted closer, letting his whole body lean against his brother's side. He let his eyes fall closed.

"Where were we going?" He muttered.

There was a moment of silence. He could almost see Techno and Wilbur exchanging looks, a silent conversation between them, debating. Finally, Techno took a breath. The motion lifted Tommy's head slightly before it fell again. "We were going to the beach," he explained gently. "There's a boardwalk about twenty minutes north of us with all these little shops and restaurants. Dad used to take us when we were younger. We wanted to surprise you with a day trip because we know you haven't been feeling great."

Tommy hummed and let his eyes crack open again. "Is there ice cream?" He asked.

Wilbur barked out a laugh and Tommy looked at him, surprised. He had looked so sad and guilty through all of this.

The brunet grinned. "Of course there's ice cream. Best ice cream parlor in the state, in my opinion. I haven't had it in months." He said happily.

Tommy was silent for a moment, considering. He was tired. He was *so* tired and drained. He wanted nothing more than to collapse into his bed for the rest of the day and wallow. He wanted to turn over this rediscovered memory and analyze it and then forget it again. He wanted to be alone.

But he didn't.

Tommy was tired. Mostly, he was tired of his act. He was tired of isolating himself, and he was tired of pretending he didn't care. It was the most exhausting part of all of this. He could let it go for an afternoon, at least. "I could go for some ice cream," he mumbled, almost embarrassed.

The grin on Wilbur's face made him look away, face flushing. Before he knew it, he was back in the car. Techno sat in the backseat with him, and Tommy rested his head against his brother's shoulder as Wilbur pulled back onto the highway.

He was warm and Tommy was freezing. There was no other reason.

The boardwalk was pretty.

Wilbur and Techno pointed out the little shops and tourist attractions and Tommy followed them around quietly with his hands shoved into his pockets to keep them warm. Both Wilbur and Techno had fall coats on and didn't seem concerned with Tommy's thin tshirt. That's what he thought, at least, before Wilbur silently passed him the thick red flannel he'd been wearing under his jacket. Tommy's first thought was to protest, but the cold got the better of him and he slipped it on with no complaints.

The weather was fine, after that.

They meandered down the salt-encrusted wood. Techno and Wilbur bantered lightly, occasionally trying to get Tommy to join in. He stayed mostly silent, enjoying the sounds of the waves crashing on the shore and the last of the birds cawing in the air before they flew south for winter. He wouldn't admit it, even to himself, but he enjoyed listening to his foster brothers talk as well.

Finally, they stopped in front of a little ice cream shop at the very end of the boardwalk. It was a small venue with faded pastel blue walls and a white counter that was clearly old but still clean. Techno and Wilbur both ordered a large cup of strawberry and chocolate, respectively. Tommy finally decided on vanilla and when Wilbur started to tease him on the basic choice, he requested the ice cream worker to absolutely cover it in rainbow sprinkles. That shut Wil up quickly.

Tommy reached into his bookbag to pull a few dollars from his savings, but froze when he saw Wilbur slide a bill across the counter with a smile and tell the employee to keep the change. He watched Wil leave the store and Techno quickly followed. He hurried after them, feeling guilty.

He followed his foster brothers down a route that stemmed off from the main boardwalk, down across the beach and out over the calm water. The wood underneath his sneakers creaked and moaned, but neither of the older boys seemed to mind it. He watched them both sit down at the end of the pier with their legs dangling over the side, overlooking the ocean. It was like they'd done it a million times before. Maybe they had. He stood behind them, unsure if he was allowed to trespass in such a family tradition, before Wilbur looked over his shoulder and scooted to the side, tapping the space in between him and Techno.

Tommy sat down and let his legs hang over the side. The ocean spray made his ankles cold.

"Phil brought us both here when he asked to adopt us," Wilbur said suddenly. Tommy looked at him sharply, a strange feeling twisting in his stomach. "We'd both been here plenty of times before that, of course. But he brought us both here on separate times and bought us ice cream and we sat right here. And he asked to adopt us," he said, a far away tone in his voice.

Adoption was a sensitive topic for Tommy, for obvious reasons. And he'd been living with the Watson's for almost six months now without any of the family members offering their stories. He wondered why they had brought him here and why Wilbur had shared that fact with him. He considered brushing it off and changing the topic. But Tommy was tired, and the sound of his foster brothers' voices were lulling him. He leaned forward and let his head rest against the wooden railing before them. "Tell me about it," he muttered. He didn't *really* care. At least that's what he told himself. He just wanted to hear Wilbur and Techno talk while he rested. He was tired of walking around. That's all.

Wilbur shot him a fond look. "I was eleven, and I'd been living with Phil for a little more than a year," he started with a soft smile. "I was this angry, moody kid who was still healing over his lost family. I didn't want a new one because I didn't want it to seem like I was replacing them. I stormed around a lot and was basically an angsty little shit back then."

"Back then?" Techno teased, scooping up another spoonful of ice cream.

Wilbur scoffed and shot a playful glare across Tommy at Techno. “I didn’t understand how Phil could’ve wanted a kid like that. I thought he was lying. And then one day he said he wanted to take me to the boardwalk, and we came down here and he bought me chocolate ice cream and we sat right here. And he said he wanted to adopt me and that it was my decision and I didn’t have to feel forced to give an answer right away.”

Typical Phil. Tommy could almost hear his foster father saying the words to him.

The thought made him nauseous and elated all at once. He set down his ice cream. It didn't look appetizing anymore.

Wilbur continued on without noticing the sick look on Tommy’s face. “I said no at first, of course. But Phil explained to me that I wouldn’t be replacing my family by accepting a new one, and there was room for two in my life. He told me to think about it, and I did. I asked to be adopted a month later. The papers took four months to process, and we fostered Techno a little after it was official”

Tommy nodded. It was sickeningly sweet and domestic, something he had always struggled with. Learning the family’s backstories was hard for him because it made them so much more real. Not another foster sibling, but a human with a life and feelings. If he wasn’t already so drained from the day, he might’ve let himself slip back into self isolation until they went home.

His eyes were drifting shut. Wilbur’s shoulder brushed against his fondly and the motion warmed his chest. He took a chance. “What about you, Techno?” He mumbled. He knew Techno was infinitely more closed off than their older brother and always less forthcoming. But Tommy was starting to drift off now, just slightly, and Techno’s voice had always been the most soothing to him.

Techno snickered to his right. “Sure. I was fostered a couple months after Wil was officially adopted. We’d been together in a foster house about two years prior, so he knew me. When my file came across Phil’s desk, Wilbur practically *begged* him to take me in,” Techno said, tone light.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. That was certainly an interesting fact. He filed it away. To his left, Wilbur made an indignant noise. “I did *not*. That’s not what happened at *all*,” he protested, sounding equally as amused.

“Sure, whatever you say,” Techno continued. Tommy could hear his smile. “But yeah- similar to Wil. I stayed with them for a little more than a year, dealt with my own shit from other foster houses and my bio family. In summer, Phil suggested we go to the boardwalk and I knew what was happening because Wil was basically bouncing out of his sneakers. Bought ice cream, sat here, yadda yadda. Phil asked to adopt me and I said yes on the spot. Didn’t even have to convince me. I knew a good home when I saw one,” he said with a hint of pride.

Tommy hummed and repositioned himself against Wil, so his head was laying on the taller’s shoulder instead of the wooden beam. Wilbur let him in easily and Tommy could almost picture the stupid smile on his face. He would’ve looked if he had the energy to open his eyes.

“You can’t sleep here, Toms,” Wilbur said gently, a hint of laughter in his voice. “We still have to make it back to the car.”

Tommy hummed again. “I’m not sleeping,” he mumbled back. Both boys snickered at his drowsy tone. “Just resting. Long day.”

They sat in a comfortable silence as the other two finished their ice cream. Tommy dozed, but never really slept. A particularly icy wind shook him from his lethargy and he cracked open his eyes.

“Why’d you bring me here?” He asked, voice soft.

For a moment, neither said anything. Then Techno took a breath. “We were planning to come anyway. Enjoy one of the last nice days of autumn. We figured you’d like it,” he said. It was a lie, and Tommy caught it easily. He huffed in response.

Wilbur picked up the conversation. “We were planning on coming. But we also knew you haven’t been feeling your greatest,” he explained softly. *That* got Tommy’s attention. He felt himself wake a bit more, his hands starting to fidget again. “I guess we just wanted to... remind you that we’re still here for you. You don’t have to consider us family, or even friends. And we know you prefer to be alone, nowadays. But we know self-isolation and depression when we see it. We were both foster kids without families, too. So this trip was more of a nudge. We’re here and we’re not going anywhere, no matter how much you want us to. You’re not alone here, Tommy.”

Tommy’s eyes were full of tears and he swiped at his face angrily before they could fall. He didn’t need anything to make him feel colder in the chilly air. He sat up and immediately registered the lack of warmth from leaving Wilbur’s side.

“Thanks,” he mumbled. He was too drained to protest, after all.

Wilbur and Techno exchanged looks that Tommy thought might have been positive. He poked at his abandoned ice cream cup half heartedly.

“What about you?” Techno asked, staring out at the water. “What’s your story?” He didn’t sound particularly interested, but Tommy was familiar enough with this family now that he recognized the way Techno’s eyebrow twitched and his posture straightened when he was paying attention.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. “I haven’t been adopted,” he said bluntly. Did Techno forget that little fact?

Techno snorted. “No. But what about the foster system? Before that?” He prompted.

To his left, he noticed Wilbur stiffen slightly. Tommy stared at a well-worn plank of wood, studying the way the material warped and corrupted against decades of sea spray. “I’ve been a foster kid for more than eight years. Been to maybe less than two dozen houses. More than most. Who’s counting, though?” he replied, feigning disinterest. He couldn’t tell what Techno was getting at, and he almost didn’t want to find out.

Wilbur finally piped up. “No, we know that already. What about the rest of it? What about before? You know about my parents, after all,” he further explained. He at least bothered to sound more interested than Techno.

Tommy’s heart sped up, shaking the grogginess from his head. This was an off-limits topic. It always had been. “I don’t know anything about Techno’s family,” he protested weakly.

Techno snorted. “Raised by my grandparents. Father out of the picture, mother too young to be trusted with a kid. Signed away her rights before I was even born. They were good people. Died of old age when I was eight, one after the other in the span of two months. Nothing tragic. No other family- sent to the foster system. It wasn’t a big deal,” he said nonchalantly.

Tommy disagreed immensely. It seemed like a *very* big deal. And he was sure it had been a big deal when Techno was young, too. There’s no way a kid could’ve brushed it off so easily, no matter how stoic Techno always seemed to be. He wondered if this coping mechanism of Techno’s was healthy or not. Had he really come to terms? He remembered Phil saying that Techno also saw a therapist occasionally. Maybe that’s where the attitude stemmed from.

“Oh,” was all Tommy could muster.

“What about you?” Techno asked expectantly.

His mind was still foggy from sleep. “I don’t talk about it,” he muttered.

Techno didn’t seem to get the hint. “Why not? If you don’t mind me asking?” He said gently.

Tommy’s stomach hurt. “Because it’s *sad*. There’s no happy ending or coming to terms with anything and I’m not going to pretend like there is. People push and poke for answers and then when I tell, all I get is looks of pity or sappy words. I don’t need that shit,” he spat.

Techno seemed to back down at that. Wilbur wasn’t deterred. “It doesn’t need a happy ending, Toms. It’s your story. It isn’t finished yet,” he said, ever the poet. Tommy scowled. “You don’t have to tell us if you don’t want to. But I always found that talking about it helped a lot.”

“You’re different,” Tommy shot back. “Talking is good for you. You loved them. I didn’t.”

Lie.

Wilbur didn’t flinch. “That’s okay,” he said gently. “You’re not being interrogated here, Tommy. We’re just curious, is all.” Tommy said nothing. Wilbur took it as his cue. “You told me once... that your dad was an alcoholic?”

His hands balled into fists. He didn’t think Wilbur remembered that night, in his first month, where he showed him the white scars on his hands and told him where he got them. It didn’t matter. He didn’t want to talk about it. This was going too far.

He nodded. He didn’t know why. Maybe he was still drained or maybe he was trying to put off returning to his state of self-isolation for just a little longer. Whatever the reason, Tommy

hated himself as he continued. “Yeah. Drank whiskey like water. I knew how to make most bar orders before I could tie my shoes,” he said quietly.

Techno hummed. “Where is he now?” He asked. It was a harmless question, and one that Tommy should’ve expected- but it still stung.

He cleared his throat, but his voice still came out hoarse. “He was forced to sign away his parental rights when I was eight. Served some time in jail for abuse and neglect.” He paused, considering. “He’s dead now,” he explained quickly.

Lie. Another lie from a liar’s lips. Tommy knew exactly where his father went after he got out of prison and knew exactly where he was now. He thought that hell would freeze over before the old bastard finally croaked.

Wilbur frowned. “I’m sorry for your loss,” he said, echoing Tommy’s own words when he found out about Wil’s parents.

Tommy focused on the rolling tide below them. “I’m not,” he replied, voice bitter. An uncomfortable silence washed over them. He tapped away on his leg, counting patterns over and over until he lost track and had to start over. Finally, Techno opened his mouth.

“What about your mom?” He asked.

Grief. It washed over him, smothering him like a blanket he couldn’t lift. The breath knocked right out of him and for a moment Tommy couldn’t take in air fast enough. His hands trembled. Techno’s eyes widened in an uncharacteristic display of emotion, sensing he’d hit a nerve.

Tommy got to his feet quickly, trying to disguise the way every part of him shook as just shivering in the cold. “I want to go home,” he said bluntly. He turned on his heel to start walking back to the car as the other two boys scrambled up to follow him.

The car ride home was silent, and Tommy felt guilty. It *had* been a nice day, and he had ruined it every step of the way. But it was hard to bring himself to care as he dozed in the backseat, trying to block out the grief and bitterness in his chest.

Phil didn’t ask where they’d been all afternoon. Tommy had a suspicion that one of the other two told him what happened, anyway.

Tommy clambered right up to his bedroom and fell asleep before his head even hit his pillow. The day had been draining and much more than he’d done all month. He was so exhausted that he didn’t even have the energy to dream.

He slept the most peacefully he had in weeks.

When he woke up again, it was to the sound of a guitar strum. He glanced at the clock quickly. A little after three in the morning. Wilbur was right on time. Tommy rolled over and prepared to tune it out when he hesitated.

He got to his feet sleepily and padded out into the hallway. He knocked on Wilbur's door before he could convince himself not to. Wilbur called him to enter and Tommy opened the door quietly.

Wilbur was sitting criss-cross on his bed in his yellow sweater and pajama bottoms. His guitar was in his hands and an open notebook sat to his side. He looked surprised to see Tommy, and he couldn't blame him. It had been more than a month since Tommy had found his way into Wil's room.

"Can I listen?" Tommy asked, edging on shy. Wilbur stared at him with wide eyes for a moment before breaking into a wide grin and nodding.

Tommy closed the door behind him and made his way to the red bean bag chair. Wilbur tossed him a blanket and he caught it easily, settling in and draping it over himself.

He closed his eyes as Wilbur began to play. He sighed as Wilbur began to sing softly. How could he have forgotten how talented Wilbur was? How much he enjoyed his place in the red bean bag chair? How much better he slept with his foster brother around?

Tommy had no nightmares as he listened to Wilbur play.

And the next morning, if Tommy hung up Wilbur's red flannel in his closet instead of returning it to him then- well, neither of them said anything about it.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!! All the love has been so so sweet <3

Another crumb of foster Tommy lore for the road hehe

Next chapter in a few days!

The Climb

Chapter Summary

The holidays are hard. The Watson's make it easier.

Chapter Notes

Chapter TW: Mentions of anxiety attack (but not actually)

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

The holidays were hard for foster kids.

There was so much emphasis on *family*, which was a hard spot to begin with. Not only that, but *every* foster house was different. They all celebrated different holidays, participated in different traditions, and had different behaviors. It was hard to find your place in a new home that was preparing for the holidays.

The Watson's celebrated Christmas.

That was just fine with Tommy. He hadn't celebrated anything growing up, and he didn't have a specific holiday he followed. He just chose whatever holiday the house he was staying at celebrated, or they had a nameless holiday celebration in the group home. Christmas was familiar. That was the most common holiday in the houses he was placed with. But Christmas also brought about a number of questions and stresses for Tommy.

For starters, how was he expected to behave during this time? He didn't think any of the Watson's were particularly religious, but sometimes families only focused on religion during the holidays. Did they like a loud, cheery house or a quiet, sentimental one? What traditions would be expected of him? Every house was different. Specific ways to dress the tree, hang decorations, bake cookies. It was all very confusing and usually vague. Especially in a household like this one, where rules and punishments were so loosely defined, Tommy couldn't really be expected to know right off the bat. Hopefully.

Maybe the most stressful part of Christmas was the gifts. Would they be getting him anything? Would he be expected to pay them back? Maybe most troubling, did he have to get any of *them* presents?

He already had. Tommy usually did, when it came to Christmas. He found that even the cruelest foster families enjoyed being remembered on Christmas and would even lighten up

for a few days afterward. Although, there had been a few that punished him for wasting his money and buying them gifts. That was a parents' job, after all. But when it came to the Watson's, he'd had presents picked out and stashed away for weeks. He'd even offered to tutor some kids after school almost all November and December to earn the money for them.

He had presents for Tubbo and Ranboo, too. This area was a little more unfamiliar for him. Tommy had never had friends to get Christmas presents for before. Did friends get each other gifts? Would Ranboo or Tubbo get *him* anything? Would he make them feel guilty if he gave them presents and they had nothing for him? That was the last thing he wanted.

Worry ate away at him all December.

The opposite effect seemed to be taking hold of the other family members. Techno and Wil, both done with school now until the spring semester, meandered around the house with a certain glee that Tommy assumed must have been due to the fast approaching holiday. Techno picked up more shifts at the library with his free time and would bring home books he thought Tommy would find interesting. The day he came home with a thick Greek mythology book for him, Tommy almost burst into tears.

Not that he'd ever admit that, though.

Wilbur took his new free time to focus on his music and to bother Tommy in equal amounts. It was rare that Tommy came home from school to a quiet house. He could almost always hear the distant sound of a guitar or piano. When Tommy was in a better mood, he would bring his homework into Wilbur's room to listen to him play while he studied. When he was in a more passive mood, Wilbur would drape himself over Tommy's bed with his ukulele and strum away while Tommy worked at his desk. The background noise was a nice ambiance to do his homework to, and if Wilbur didn't talk too much he was allowed to stay. When Tommy was feeling self-destructive and chose to isolate, the family would find his door shut and locked tight. But Wilbur would always leave his own door open so that Tommy could still hear the soft playing of music behind his physical and mental walls, and when he finally left his cave Wilbur's door was always open to say a quick hello.

When Tommy asked him about his recent increase in musicality, Wilbur had excitedly told him he was working on an EP. He didn't know exactly what that was, but when he looked it up later he found out that Wil was working on a small album. Tommy could barely contain his excitement. He loved Wilbur's music, and truly believed he would go far with his voice and talent. Almost every day after that Tommy asked to listen to the EP songs, hanging onto every word and chord like it was something special. Wilbur basked in the attention, and Tommy loved being around just to hear it.

Phil spent more time at home as well during December. He was mostly home anyway, working in his upstairs office or in the kitchen. But now he'd taken to working in the dining room so he was always nearby and ready to chat. He claimed his office got too cold and stuffy during the winter, but Tommy suspected he really just wanted to be near his family as the holiday got closer. He sometimes asked Tommy if he wanted to help with breakfast when he was up early enough, and Tommy always said yes. It took a long time, but he felt like he was finally defrosting a bit towards Phil. He supposed not *every* parent could be a monster, right?

Right?

Besides, Phil's voice was quickly becoming another calming presence in Tommy's life. His foster father was always careful to mind his boundaries and watch his emotions. He was quick to suggest a break if he felt Tommy needed one or to whisper encouraging words when Tommy messed something up. Phil never shouted or even raised his voice- not once. He wondered if Techno had told Phil about Tommy's panic attack after Phil yelled over the phone a few months ago, or if Phil truly just wasn't an angry person. He couldn't remember the last time he met a father that wasn't angry.

Another milestone passed in December- Tommy finally had a friend over. Tubbo had practically *begged* Tommy to help him study for his geometry midterm, and Tommy was working on fixing his relationships. He had waited until Phil was happily humming in the kitchen one Saturday morning to shyly ask if he could have Tubbo over, just to study for school and nothing else.

With the way Phil reacted- tears in his eyes and a bright smile on his face- Tommy would've guessed his foster father was more excited he was having a friend over than *he* was. Tubbo had come over that afternoon and they spent the day together. Tommy had proudly showed him his own room and things.

He'd never owned so many things before, and he'd never had a friend to show them to.

Tubbo was a good friend, listening intently and smiling along with Tommy's excitement. They studied and then Tubbo pulled out his Nintendo Switch when he decided he couldn't read anymore. Tommy was slowly getting better at Mario Kart. When Tubbo went home, Phil had passed Tommy a mug of hot chocolate and assured him that his friends were welcome here anytime, at any hour. Tommy didn't know how much he believed that, but his heart warmed nonetheless. He chalked it up to the warmth from the hot chocolate.

The morning of Christmas Eve, Phil knocked on his door. Tommy looked up from his book and called him in.

"Good morning," Phil greeted him as the door swung open. "How're you feeling today?"

Tommy knew what he was asking. "Fine," he mumbled, averting his gaze and looking back down at the book page.

He could sense Phil's smile. "It's kinda a tradition for us on Christmas Eve to go up to the boardwalk. It's cold, but mostly empty and quite pretty during winter. Do you want to join us? You don't have to, of course," he said.

Tommy tensed immediately, looking up. Phil must've seen the fear on his face, and he quickly jumped to remedy it. "It's not for anything special! I know Wil and Techno took you there a few weeks ago. It's nothing to worry about, mate," he assured.

An odd feeling filled Tommy's insides. Phil had taken both Wil and Techno to the boardwalk to ask to adopt them, which was something that Tommy feared for himself. But now that Phil had assured him that was *not* what was happening, something else took the place of fear.

Relief? Disappointment?

Tommy pushed it away.

He closed his book. "Sure, I'll come," he finally replied. It beats spending Christmas Eve alone in his room, right?

Right?

The grin on Phil's face made him feel weird. He looked away.

"Phiiiiiiil," Wilbur whined. "Techno's bullying me."

Phil chuckled from Tommy's side. His warm breath created mist in the cold air when he laughed. "Tech, don't bully your brother," Phil said lightly. He was holding his camera at his waist.

Wilbur and Techno were walking in front of them down the wooden path, talking too low for him or Phil to hear. But clearly something that Techno said had offended his older brother.

"Bullying builds character," Techno deadpanned over his shoulder at them. Tommy snorted and Phil rolled his eyes good naturedly as Wilbur squawked indignantly. The noise only made Tommy laugh harder.

He shoved his hands in his pockets. He was wearing one of Techno's old blue winter coats. It was two sizes too big and the sleeves were rolled up comically to allow his hands to poke through, but it was warm. Phil had promised to get him winter clothes next week, which Tommy had of course protested. Whether or not Phil listened would be discovered next week, he guessed.

Tommy snapped back to attention as Wilbur shoved Techno to the side with a cackle. Techno, not one to ignore a challenge, reared around and elbowed his older brother in the ribs, sending him tumbling in the opposite direction with a triumphant laugh.

"Boys!" Phil called with exasperation. Tommy looked at him curiously, expecting him to be frustrated with their roughhousing and ruining the Christmas tradition, but Phil's eyes were bright. A fond smile was on his face. He looked at his kids like they were his entire world. Quickly, he lifted the camera up and snapped a candid of their bickering.

How could Tommy impose on that? How could he trespass on such a special tradition? Why had he agreed to come again? He knew better. Why did he keep doing this to himself?

Without realizing it, Tommy had fallen a few steps behind Phil. He wanted to put some distance between him and the family. He was a spectator here, not a participator. He had to remember that. *Don't be stupid.*

But when Phil looked back at him to see why he'd fallen behind, the look on his face was the same. It hadn't changed at all. Bright eyes, brighter smile. He had noticed Tommy starting to slow right away and had turned back to him immediately.

It startled Tommy so badly that he stopped in place, the breath knocked right out of him.

The rest of the family stopped and waited for him, no questions asked.

Tommy didn't get it.

They settled on the edge of the pier, ice cream in hand.

The ice cream shop was empty and mostly closed down. Who got ice cream in winter, anyway? But the single employee behind the counter seemed eager to help them, and wished them a very happy holiday on their way out after Phil had left a very gratuitous tip.

Wilbur got his usual chocolate and Techno got his strawberry. Tommy ended up with vanilla again, though he had absolutely doused it in chocolate sprinkles and caramel syrup. It was kind of funny, the way it worked out. Chocolate, strawberry, vanilla. Wilbur had called them the Neapolitan bros on the way out of the shop, making Tommy snort. Phil had chosen some pecan-butterscotch monstrosity. Who ordered nuts in their ice cream? It was a slap to the face of mankind, Tommy thought.

They sat in a row along the edge after Phil had snapped a picture of the three of them looking over the railing. Phil, then Techno, then Wilbur, and then Tommy on the end. He shivered as a chill ran up his right side. At least Wil was on his left to keep him warm. He was thinking about it when Phil suddenly cleared his throat. Wilbur nudged his shoulder and threw him a smile. Tommy raised an eyebrow, confused.

"So, just like every year," Phil started. "I would like to start this off by saying how incredibly proud I am of you boys. Every twelve months you continue to grow and get better and it astounds me every single time. I'm so excited to be seeing you grow into fine adults."

Tommy squirmed, uncomfortable. He felt out of place and once again like he was intruding on something special. Phil wasn't looking at them, instead staring out across the sea, but he seemed to sense his discomfort anyway.

"And Tommy, I'm so proud of how far you've come. Even in six months, we can see how much you've grown and changed. The positive effect you've had on our house is obvious, and I hope you can say the same in reverse. We're glad you're here, and we hope you're here next Christmas Eve as well," he said lightly.

Tommy choked silently. Wilbur leaned against him and he didn't bother to pull away. Whether Wilbur was providing comfort or just cold, he wasn't sure. He didn't care.

“This is an old tradition we do every year,” Wil said, glancing at him with a smile. “It’s something my parents and I did, and then Phil and I did when I came here. And then Techno joined in. And now you.”

Tommy nodded. He was starting to regret coming here more and more.

“First you say three things you were grateful for in the past year, and then you say three things that you want to improve in the next year. It helps ground you and my parents always thought it set a good precedent for following goals and positive reflection and all that. You have to say it to the ocean, because the ocean listens,” Wilbur explained fondly.

Tommy blanked. He couldn’t think of anything. This was stupid. Would he let them opt out?

Phil grinned and turned his face towards the sea. “I’ll go first. This year I was grateful that my job let me work from home more so I could see my sons. I was grateful that Tommy came into our lives and I was able to provide a space for him here. And I was grateful that each of us took steps towards improving our mental health, even if it was small or seemed insignificant,” he said kindly.

Techno and Wilbur nodded. Tommy felt sick. He didn’t want to be here anymore. He hated this sappy shit. Why couldn’t they just eat their ice cream and let their hands freeze and then go home? Most families made cookies or sang carols on Christmas Eve. Of course this family took the day as a miniature therapy session. His hands jittered nervously.

Phil went on. “Next year, I want to make our house more welcoming and healthy for each of us and provide safe environments. I want to be around more to help out when needed. And I want to work more towards making my sons feel loved and validated.”

Techno rolled his eyes. “Those were your goals last year,” he protested. “And the year before. You’ve already done that.”

Phil shrugged and gave a sheepish smile. “There’s always room for improvement.”

Techno huffed. “Well, I’m grateful that my first semester at college went well and I was able to adapt quickly, because I know a lot of people can’t. I’m grateful for the opportunity to stay home and with my family while I complete my education. And I’m grateful Tommy managed to deal with us for at least six months,” he said gruffly.

Wilbur cooed. Techno shoved him, making Tommy jump. His heart beat quickly. He felt like he was going to have an anxiety attack. *Not now.*

“Next year I’m going to improve my writing skills and maybe start my novel. That’ll look good for college, eh? I’m gonna work on my left hook. Shit’s sloppy,” he said. Wilbur snorted and Phil let out a startled laugh. “And I’m going to improve my library. Expand it a bit.”

Tommy set down his ice cream. His hands were shaking too much to hold it still. He took a deep breath and tried to control his panic. He tapped on his leg. Four... seven... eight...

Wilbur grinned. “Last year I was grateful to have met Tommy and let him into our lives. I was grateful that I found a medication that worked for me. And... and I was grateful that I took steps to improve my mental health after I hurt others,” he said softly. The ocean sprayed in response. “And... and next year I want to keep improving my mental health. I’ll work towards it every step of the way. I want to improve my grades a bit. And I want to improve my musicianship so I can finish my EP.”

They turned to Tommy expectantly. He took a rattling breath. “U-uh...” he stuttered.

“Take your time, Toms,” Wilbur assured him. “There’s no rush.”

Tommy tapped away nervously and stared out at the ocean. It was better than looking at the others. At least he understood that part of the tradition. The ocean could keep his secrets. He stared at the rolling waves and tried to pretend the Watson’s weren’t there to hear him.

“I’m... um... this year I- I was grateful for my privacy. Having a room to myself and a lock and people who knock. Very grateful for that.” He paused. What else? They had each mentioned him... maybe they would appreciate it? “I was, uh, grateful for... this house? You guys are... different. And good. Being here is a nice change,” he swallowed and pretended he didn’t see Wilbur grinning. “And... I’m grateful for my freedom, and having options here. That’s... that’s pretty cool,” he finished lamely. He risked a glance at the others and spotted a wide smile on all their faces. Gross.

He tried not to think about how different his answers were from all of theirs. He cringed internally and hoped no one would point it out.

“What about something you want to improve, Toms?” Wilbur prompted.

Tommy scrunched his eyebrows and drew a blank. He’d always been bad at thinking about the future. There was only the past and present. What could he say? He wanted to improve his next house experience to make it more like this one? Improve his fighting skills to defend himself in the group home? Get a job to continue saving for his apartment when he aged out? He didn’t think the Watson’s would appreciate that too much.

“You don’t have to, Tommy. It’s alright,” Phil interrupted his thoughts gently. He hadn’t realized it, but his hands had started shaking violently. The others were looking concerned now.

Great. Another important family moment he had ruined.

“I’m cold,” he grumbled. It was a shit excuse and they all knew it. It was the second time now he’d forced the family away from the pier. But Phil nodded along nonetheless.

“How about we head back home, then? We can start the cookies,” Phil suggested. Wilbur and Techno nodded quickly. Tommy nodded with them.

Right. Cookies. That was familiar. He could do that.

He shoved his trembling hands into his pockets, ice cream long forgotten.

Tommy woke up to the smell of cinnamon the next morning.

He laid and stared at the ceiling for a moment. The sun was peeking through his curtain and the warm smell enveloped him. He felt... content. He was alone in his own room with the lock twisted closed and a family that genuinely seemed to care about him downstairs. He was warm and healthy and there were no aches and pains anywhere in his body.

He'd had worse Christmases.

He threw on Wilbur's red flannel from his closet and padded down the stairs slowly. He could hear laughter in the kitchen, and his stomach swooped. He normally dreaded talking to the family in the morning, but this was exciting. Even Tommy could appreciate the Christmas spirit. The faint sound of a ukulele strumming holiday carols filled the air and Tommy snorted at the absurdity of it as he got to the bottom of the stairs.

"Merry Christmas, Tommy," Phil called when he traveled further into the house. His foster father was wearing a Santa hat and a ridiculous green and red apron as he stirred pancake batter in the kitchen. Tommy smiled and returned the greeting before turning to his brothers.

Wil was also wearing a Santa hat, which made Tommy immediately burst into laughter. His oldest foster brother pretended to scowl at his reaction and threw an arm over his shoulder, letting his ukulele rest on the dining room table. "Where's the holiday spirit, Toms? You don't want a hat as well?" He teased.

Tommy snorted and shoved him off, which made Wil laugh in return. "I think you have it covered enough for the both of us," he replied with a grin. Techno chuckled from the living room and Tommy peered around to look at him. He didn't have any festive hats on his head, but he was wearing a large red jumper with a Christmas tree on it. Classic ugly sweater. His hair was neatly braided down his back and for a moment Tommy appreciated the intricacy. He wondered if Techno would let him do it sometime.

Techno pushed his glasses up his nose bridge. "Wil's right. You've got no spirit," he said, perfectly monotone.

Tommy made an indignant noise. "I'm wearing red! My flannel is holiday wear," he argued half-heartedly.

Wilbur elbowed him as he moved past before collapsing on the couch next to Techno. "That's *my* flannel. And it doesn't qualify as Christmas-y. Get an accessory from the table, child," he commanded.

Tommy crossed his arms. "I will *not* be doing that, thank you," he replied firmly.

An hour later, Tommy sat on the couch with an elf hat on his head and an obnoxious Christmas light necklace around his neck. Techno and Wilbur had cooed at him after they forced the apparel on and he had flipped them off.

He had kept them on nonetheless.

The Watson's opened presents on Christmas morning. That was just fine with Tommy. Sometimes when he stayed with families that celebrated on Christmas Eve it felt like they got all the festivities out and then on Christmas day it was boring. He thought it was amusing to watch Wil jitter through breakfast with eyes occasionally darting to the tree in the living room. Techno teased the older the entire time.

"I want to open mine first!" Wil exclaimed dramatically after breakfast, collapsing down on the couch next to Tommy. He squirmed to make room between them but Wil instantly leaned against him, keeping him close. Tommy found that he didn't mind.

Techno rolled his eyes as he took his place on the loveseat. "You're a grown adult, Wil." He said, bringing his knees up to his chest. His tone was light. Wilbur stuck his tongue out at him.

Phil made his way to the tree. It was painfully obvious whose presents were whose. Tommy hadn't been sure if he was allowed to take some of the wrapping paper kept in the garage, and he didn't want to spend his savings on buying his own roll. He'd wrapped each of his gifts in newspapers from the recycling bin. His three presents sat ugly among the other neatly wrapped, festive presents with bows and ribbons. He thought it was embarrassing, but apparently the rest of the family thought it was endearing. He cringed as Phil picked one up.

"Here, Wil," Phil said as he handed Wilbur three presents. "You can go first."

Wilbur cheered as Techno grumbled. Tommy laughed and settled against the couch to watch, bringing his knees up to his chest like Techno had.

Phil had gotten Wilbur two bags of ukulele picks and a brand new capo. It was stark white and designed intricately with gold detailing. Wilbur grinned and immediately wrapped the new tool around his ukulele. Tommy had to admit, it did look nice. There were two presents from Techno, and Wilbur scowled as he opened the first. They watched as he pulled out a laminated booklet of printed paper. When Tommy looked closer, he noticed that the title read "*How to Get Better at Mario Kart: An Easy Guide.*"

"This is harassment," Wilbur pouted as Techno and Tommy howled with laughter. Phil snapped a picture with a wide grin as Wil frowned. The second gift was more appropriate. Wilbur pulled a navy weighted blanket out of the gift bag and smiled, holding it close to his chest.

Tommy frowned and tapped his fingers as Wilbur picked up his gift, a box wrapped in the Sunday comics. Wilbur unwrapped it quickly and stared, which made him nervous. "Is this..."

a recording mic?” He asked, voice quiet.

Tommy looked away quickly, embarrassed. “Uh... yeah. It’s for your EP. So you can record things that sound nice instead of the shitty phone quality. I, uh, I still have the receipt if you hate it,” he muttered.

Wilbur looked at him and Tommy couldn’t tell what emotion he was feeling. “This must’ve cost a fortune, Toms,” he said weakly.

Tommy shrugged. “It wasn’t bad. It’s just from the music shop in town. It’s actually from me and Niki. We went to the shop together with Ranboo and she covered the rest of what I couldn’t afford. So it’s technically from both of us,” he explained nervously.

He jumped as he was engulfed in a tight hug. He heard the snap of Phil’s camera.

“I love it,” Wilbur whispered. “It means the world to me. *Thank you.*”

Tommy felt his face turn red and he rubbed the back of his neck as they pulled apart, embarrassed. “Yeah well, sure. Whatever,” he muttered. He pretended not to notice that Wil’s eyes were misty.

Techno went next. Phil had gotten him an antique typewriter. It looked like it weighed a ton, but Techno had no problem lifting it up to look at it. “It’s beautiful,” he praised with a bright grin. Phil smiled. Tommy knew Techno liked old fashioned things. The typewriter would probably sit proudly on his desk for years to come. Wilbur had gotten him a hardcover copy of Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, which made Techno laugh for some reason. There was a message on the inner cover from Wil that Techno didn’t read aloud, but it was clearly heartwarming judging by the look on his face. Techno grinned as he unwrapped Tommy’s present. A new sunhat for gardening that wasn’t god-ugly like his old one, and two notebooks with Techno’s name monogrammed across the front.

“For your novel,” Tommy explained hastily.

Techno raised his eyebrows and thanked him earnestly. Tommy watched as he ran his fingers over the indents of his name in the leather covers.

Wilbur grabbed Phil’s camera from his hand when it was his turn. Phil chuckled, muttering something about *his boys* and grabbed the first of his presents. Techno had gotten Phil a polaroid camera, which Phil had proudly held up to show off. The others awed at the item in amusement and Wil took a picture of him, mimicking a proud parent photographing his child. It made Tommy laugh and Phil rolled his eyes fondly. Wilbur got him a set of golden shooting star earrings, which he said were beautiful as he immediately went to work putting them in his ears. Tommy always forgot Phil’s ears were pierced. Most of the time his long hair and bucket hat covered up the gold jewelry. He also unwrapped an intricate dreamcatcher, detailed with black crow feathers. Phil thanked Wilbur warmly.

Tommy squirmed as Phil picked up his present. It was folded in bubble wrap with the newspaper wrapped on top. He had begged Tubbo to get him some because he was terrified of breaking the present before Christmas.

Phil unwrapped the paper carefully and gasped. “*Oh*,” he whispered with wide eyes.

Tommy had to admit that he was proud of this one. It was some of his best work- not that he was bragging. He’d spent weeks trying to get it. Ever since Techno had mentioned that he and Wilbur had been fostered together before they both came to Phil, the inkling had been in his mind. He’d called Hannah, who’d put him in contact with the local system, who put him on the line with several administrators, who’d told him to contact a specific home, and then he’d called a family. The whole process had taken weeks and probably broke more rules than he could’ve counted, but it was worth it. Phil deserved it, after all.

When Phil looked up there were tears in his eyes. “Where could you possibly have gotten this?” He asked, voice weak. Tommy’s heart picked up nervously. Was he mad at him?

Techno sat up as Wilbur raised an eyebrow. “What is it?” The brunet asked curiously.

Phil turned the framed picture around to show them. It was an old photograph of Wilbur and Techno, aged ten and eight, long before they got to Phil’s. They were tiny, still young children with none of the height they possessed now, and wore matching green and red pajamas. It was Christmas time as well when it was taken. Tommy had learned that Wilbur and Techno shared a foster house from December to April of that year. When he spoke to the foster mother on the phone, she’d said the two of them were fast and close friends. Wil had his arm thrown around his little brother, his hair mussed and a big smile on his face. Techno gave a toothy grin, missing his two front teeth. His hair was brown and short back then and Tommy almost wouldn’t have recognized him if it weren’t for the thin-framed glasses and the scar on his neck.

Tommy’s fingers tapped rapidly. “I, uh, I called some people. I figured there had to have been a picture somewhere, and I was right. I just thought... you have so many pictures of your sons... but none of them as children, so... I hope that’s okay,” he said quickly.

Phil stared at him with raised eyebrows. The fondness on his face made Tommy uncomfortable.

He was encased in a hug in an instant. Tommy froze in the embrace.

“It’s perfect. It’s amazing. *Thank you*, Tommy. I love it. I can never thank you enough,” Phil said tearily.

Tommy let out an embarrassed laugh and allowed himself to be hugged. “Alright, big man. It was my pleasure,” he replied.

The living room relaxed into an excited contentedness. Wilbur had snatched the photograph from Phil and now he and Techno marveled over it- pointing things out and reminiscing about that house. “This was the last house I was fostered in before I came here, y’know,” Wil beamed. Phil watched on with a bright smile. At least the tears in his eyes had disappeared.

“Your turn, Tommy,” he said happily, reaching back towards the tree. Tommy startled when he realized there were still four presents underneath. He honestly still hadn’t been sure the Watson’s were getting him anything until that moment. His chest felt warm at the realization.

He let the first one fall into his lap and tried not to let his hands shake too much as he unwrapped it carefully. Tommy didn't get presents often. Most families didn't care or didn't have the money to spend on a kid that was temporary during Christmas.

It was from Phil and he let out a startled gasp as he opened it. A brand new Nintendo Switch, still in the box and everything. Tommy looked at his foster father sharply but Phil beat him to it.

"I know you don't like expensive things if they're not necessities, but I'm not returning it. Video games are necessities to teenagers and you're keeping it. No ifs, ands, or buts about it," he said firmly.

Tommy swallowed the lump in his throat. "Phil, I... thank you," he stuttered.

Phil smiled warmly, satisfied. "You're very welcome, Tommy. Merry Christmas," he said.

The next present was from Techno. He slowly unwrapped it. He uncovered a thick hardcover book. The cover was a brilliant blue. In gold lettering were the words *The Library of Greek Mythology*.

"It's a good place to start with mythology," Techno said as Tommy stared at it. "Real mythology- not just The Odyssey. I bookmarked the story of Theseus. It's one of my favorites, and you've always reminded me of him. I think you'll like it a lot."

Tommy choked, his hands shaking around the brand new pages. A *hardcover*. Of his very own. One to keep and hold and read forever. A Greek myth book, just like the ones in Techno's collection. "I love it," he whispered, voice weak.

Techno grinned. "Open it," he said.

Tommy flipped open the front cover and a small blue card fell out. He picked it up curiously. A library card.

"Not that I don't love bringing books home for you, because I do," Techno explained with a smile. "But you could always come hang out with me there. And you love reading so much, it just makes sense to have one. It's in your name and everything."

His heart beat in his ears. "I... I... thank you, Techno," he stammered.

He ignored the snap of Phil's camera.

The last was two gifts from Wilbur. His oldest brother leaned against his shoulder as he opened it, clearly excited. Tommy carefully unwrapped a white cardboard box. It was a mini keyboard, one small enough to sit on the side of his desk.

"So you can learn!" Wil exclaimed in excitement.

Tommy let out a strangled laugh. "Wh-what? How did you know I wanted to learn?" He asked with a small smile.

Wilbur rolled his eyes and nudged him fondly. “C’mon, Toms. You’re always looking at my keyboard. I can teach you! You’ll be great,” he said.

Tommy grinned as he opened the last gift. He felt unbelievably light and warm. He hadn’t felt this way since... he couldn’t even remember. He felt *loved* and he felt love in return. It was foreign and strange and welcomed. He’d never felt so happy in his whole life.

Tommy uncovered a familiar sight. *The Odyssey* stared back at him. It was a brand new copy, not a rip or tear in sight. No stains, no damage, no age at all. It was a pure, new book. *His* book, but not his at all.

“It’s new. Your old one is so destroyed, I figured it must be hard to read,” Wilbur explained with a smile. “This one should be better.”

Tommy frowned, his fingers shaking. His rose-colored glasses faded away quickly. This book wasn’t *his*. Looking at the book brought everything back. He crashed back down from his high in a blinding fury. Remembering his book reminded him of Hannah, which reminded him of the foster system, which reminded him of where he was right now.

Wilbur was trying to replace his book. *His* book. He’d poured hours into that book, gluing pages back in and carefully taping the rips. That book was his only possession, his most *prized* possession. He’d managed to keep it with him for almost six years. He didn’t need a new copy of *The Odyssey*. He didn’t want one. He didn’t want a *family*.

How could he have forgotten?

Wilbur frowned when Tommy didn’t respond. “You don’t have to take it. I just thought you might like it. I can return it if you want,” he said gently, sounding sheepish.

Tommy nodded silently and handed the book over. He was afraid if he spoke, he would break. Wilbur took the book without hesitation and set it on the other side of him, hiding it from view. He didn’t mention Tommy’s trembling hands or wobbling lip. For that, at least, Tommy was grateful.

Techno helped Tommy set up his new Switch and was perfectly patient when he got overwhelmed and needed to take a break. Having something so new and expensive and *his* was disorienting. His phone was different because he needed it to contact Phil and the family. It was a necessity. The Switch was completely for leisure and that was unfamiliar to him. It felt wrong if he thought about it too much.

“Looks good,” Techno praised from his side on the couch as they finished his avatar. Tommy grinned as the device pinged. Incoming friend request from *Technoblade*.

Tommy raised an eyebrow and glanced at him for an explanation. Techno looked embarrassed. “Old last name. Techno Blade. I usually go by Watson now, but you’ve gotta admit Blade sounds cooler. When I made my Nintendo account I was like fourteen and very edgy and liked it better for online,” Techno explained with a sheepish smile.

Tommy rolled it over in his head. Blade. It reminded him of the intricate sword hanging on Techno’s wall. It was fitting. “Okay, Blade,” he finally decided. Techno grinned at the nickname. “Let’s play. Tubbo’s been letting me play Mario Kart on his Switch, and I’ve gotta say I’ve gotten pretty good. Not to brag or anything,” he taunted, loading up the new game.

Techno rolled his eyes with a smile and picked up the controller.

Tommy didn’t win. Techno was too good, casually coming in first place almost every round. But he *was* getting better. He almost always placed top five and even battled Techno for first one map before falling to second.

He felt light and happy and *alive*. It was domestic and close, and best of all was that Tommy didn’t mind it. He liked sitting in the living room playing video games with Techno as Wilbur and Phil clanked about and chatted in the kitchen. The background noise of their laughter was soothing and Tommy was grinning before he knew it.

“What’re you so happy about?” Techno threw a light look at him. “I just crushed you.”

Tommy grinned wider. “Just... happy, big man. It’s all good,” he admitted gently.

The smile on Techno’s face would be on his mind forever.

Tommy felt brave. “Can I... *could I braid your hair*?” He rushed out. Then he paused, the words catching up to him. He cringed in embarrassment.

Techno raised an eyebrow. “Course you can. If you knot my hair though I’ll make sure you never win a Mario Kart match for the rest of your life,” he threatened with a smile. He turned and settled so Tommy could do his hair.

“You’re not surprised I can braid?” He asked. He was used to the raised eyebrows and questions that usually came along with the skill.

Techno chuckled and Tommy didn’t understand why he was laughing “No, not anymore,” was all he said. Tommy shrugged and got to braiding, separating the long hair into neat sections. For all his gruffness, he had to admit that Techno took excellent care of his hair. The strands were silky smooth and rigorously brushed. Not even a hint of brown peeked through the roots. Tommy never saw him dye it. He wondered how his foster brother managed to stay on top of it so thoroughly.

At some point Wilbur came in to silently hand him several strands of holly, which Tommy was quick to braid into Techno’s long hair. Techno hummed softly as he worked and Wilbur watched from the arm of the loveseat, occasionally bantering and poking fun at Techno’s contentedness. Tommy tuned them out as he intertwined the sections. He’d always enjoyed braiding. The neat patterns and repetitive motions were calming. He had learned the most

intricate ones growing up and he practiced on anyone he could, foster siblings or parents or even Hannah. His hands were completely steady as he folded the strands over and under, occasionally adding a holly stem to the pattern so the holly berries stuck out neatly. He had settled on a Dutch fishtail braid, and he had to say that it looked nice with the plants Wilbur had given him.

Wilbur whistled appreciatively as Tommy tied off the bottom, finishing it. "Oh wow," he marveled. "I think he beats your usual braids by far, Tech."

Techno looked at him curiously before getting up, presumably to find a mirror. Tommy grinned, heart full. In the kitchen, he heard Phil praise Techno's new hairstyle and Wilbur snickered from the armchair.

Tommy's hands stayed still and he didn't shake the smile on his face for the rest of the day.

Chapter End Notes

Here take the holiday fluff episode that I actually wrote last December lol

Thanks for reading!!! <3

Next chapter within the week :]

The Fall

Chapter Summary

And when you've reached the top, there's no where else to go but...

Chapter Notes

Chapter TW: severe panic attack, mentions of past child abuse, nonverbal coping, vague mentions of disassociation, negative attitude about therapy
pls be safe <3

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

Tommy should've known. Christmas was too good. It could've only gone downhill from there. He should have been used to it by now. He should've seen it coming.

Things were hard for Tommy going into January. The nightmares came back in full force. The longer he stayed in the house, the more he was reminded of the last time he lived in a house like this, and how much he hurt from it. His mental state crashed down hard after Christmas and he spent a lot of time in his room, ignoring the family and the world. He barely had the energy to get out of bed, nevertheless use his new Switch or even look at the keyboard sitting untouched on his desk. *The Library of Greek Mythology* sat with the spine unbroken on his nightstand. He couldn't even consider opening it.

Phil knocked on his door gently a week after New Year's. "Tommy. Come eat some dinner, mate. I know it's hard," he called kindly. Soft and understanding, as always.

Tommy scowled. This was stupid. Phil was stupid. Tommy was a big man and he didn't need to be babied. He especially didn't need to be babied by *Phil*. Phil wasn't his parent.

Phil knocked again and the noise made his ears ring. "Tommy, is it alright if I come in for a moment?"

"No."

Like always, he waited for the door handle to turn anyway. Like always, it didn't move.

There was a moment of silence that he chalked up to Phil thinking. Finally, his foster father's voice called again. "Tommy, you know I don't like breaking boundaries. But we established when you first came here that I would reserve the right to come into your room if I felt you

were a danger to yourself or others. I just want to check on you, and I would like your consent, but I *am* going to come in, okay?" He said, sounding guilty.

Tommy sat up, heart racing wildly. "No. *No*. Go away! I don't want you here and I don't want you to come in. *Don't*," he said hastily, voice cold. There wasn't any particular *reason* he didn't want Phil inside, other than he didn't want to concern the older man or be subject to his worried gaze. He wasn't hiding anything and his room wasn't messy. He just didn't want anyone inside. He was going through an emotional episode and he didn't want spectators. This room was *his* and they'd said it time and time again. He had the right to send people away and none of them had ever broken that rule before.

"Tommy-" Phil started.

"*No!*" Tommy's voice came out shrill, almost a shriek. He didn't mean for it to sound so panicked. But the thought of *Phil* of all people breaking a house boundary made his body race with adrenaline. If Phil was capable of doing this, what *else* would he do?

Stupid, the little voice in the back of his head whispered. It sounded like Dream. *Stupid. Weak. Be a grown up. You've had worse. This is nothing new.*

And he *had* gone through worse but it wasn't like this. He wasn't led on for months with the promise of privacy and then had it ripped away in a single afternoon. The broken promise hurt more than never having the privacy in the first place.

Phil sounded torn. "Tommy, it'll only be a second. I just want to check if you're okay. I know you don't want me in, but this was a rule that was established when you came to live here and you told me you'd respect those rules. You haven't left your room in days. You've skipped school. You refuse to talk or eat. I think right now that you could be a danger to yourself, and as your guardian it's my job to ensure your safety."

Tommy shrieked as he watched the door handle open and Phil stepped inside. His foster father winced at the sharp noise. He reached around his bed and grabbed the first thing his hand touched- a pillow- and flung it at Phil. It bounced harmlessly off his shoulder.

"Get *out*," Tommy demanded angrily. His eyes filled with tears and he couldn't stop it. He knew he was being ridiculous but he just *couldn't stop it*.

Phil looked devastated. "Tommy. *Toms*. I promise, I want to give you your space. But this is important. I'm sorry." He took a step closer to him and Tommy scrambled back to the headboard of his bed, heart racing.

He wasn't entirely sure why he was having such a reaction. His head was foggy and he couldn't really think and all his instincts were screaming that this was *wrong* and to *get away* and-

"Breathe with me, mate. It's okay. I promise it's okay," Phil said. He reached a hand out as if to calm him but was too far to touch, and he didn't make any effort to come closer. Tommy couldn't breathe no matter *how* much he wanted to follow Phil's lead, and right now he didn't particularly want to follow anything his foster father said. He was having a panic attack-

something far too familiar to him in the last few months. He flattened his back against the headboard and gripped at the sheets, trying to find any kind of purchase as he hyperventilated.

He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to calm down, but it only seemed to make it worse. The darkness made him dizzy and disoriented and his eyes flew back open with a strangled gasp, his vision swimming.

“Tommy, would it help if I left now?” Phil asked quietly, voice edging on alarm.

If possible, that only made Tommy panic more. “No,” he wheezed out. “Stay.” His eyelids fluttered as he used already limited oxygen to speak. “*Help.*”

And Phil’s eyes widened and he took a step forward, whispering reassurances and pleas to just *breathe* and that it would *be okay* and *Toms-*

“Toms,” his mother whispered to him.

Tommy gasped, trying to breathe and focus on her voice at the same time. It was hard, too hard, and he quickly found that he couldn’t do either. The realization that he wasn’t getting oxygen only made him panic more, and his hands scrambled to his throat in alarm. The edges of his vision blurred.

“Shh,” she hushed him. “Thomas. It’s okay to be afraid. But don’t get overwhelmed. I’m here and you’re going to be okay. I promise.” She placed a hand on his chest, feeling his racing heartbeat. He was tiny for his age, still only seven years old, still far too young to be feeling like this, and he had folded in on himself in the corner of his little bedroom.

He took a strangled breath and she smiled. He liked making his mom smile. He took another breath in the hopes she’d smile again.

“There we go, just like that. That’s perfect, Toms. You’re perfect. It’s alright,” she reassured over and over and over until it was the only thing he could hear. The roar of his heartbeat faded until her voice was the only presence in his head. She grabbed onto his trembling hands and held them in her own. She was warm and her skin was soft. She was familiarity. Safety. Tommy felt his lungs fill with air and he gasped like a drowning person breaking the surface, taking in oxygen as fast as he could before it could disappear again.

His father had taken his bedroom door off the hinges, removing the barrier that Tommy often used to shield himself from him. When he had complained, his father took the door out to the backyard and chopped it into firewood. Tommy had watched it burn with tears running down his face, which his dad was quick to smack off him. It was warranted. Tommy knew he deserved it.

At seven years old, Tommy knew so many things. He knew his mother wanted better for him. He also knew that she couldn’t do anything for him. He didn’t know why. He knew that she

cried a lot and he knew that things had always been this way. He knew she tried her best and he loved her for it. He knew that he loved both his parents. Of course he did.

“It’ll be okay, Thomas,” his mother whispered into his hair before placing a gentle kiss on his temple. “You’ll be okay. We’ll be okay, Toms-”

“Toms,” Wilbur said from the doorway. Tommy’s eyes flew to his foster brother. When had he gotten there? He took inventory of the room as best he could. It was hard to focus on anything at all. He was so dizzy. Phil was at his side, still not touching him but hands outstretched as if he was ready to in an instant. Concern painted his face. Wil stood in the doorway, hair messed. Behind him, Tommy could see Techno peering over his shoulder from the hall. “Keep breathing, Toms. It’ll be okay You’ll be okay,” the brunet said firmly. He sounded so sure, so *familiar*; Tommy almost believed him.

He took a choked breath and felt air in his lungs.

It took a long time for the attack to fade. The three of them stayed the entire time, forever patient and gentle and caring. Tommy hated it. He hated *them*. He hated them for loving him. Why couldn’t they just *get it*?

Phil was whispering to him but Tommy didn’t register a single word. He could feel Wil and Techno’s eyes burn into him from the doorway but he couldn’t look at them. As his body relaxed and his heart rate slowed, Tommy found he could only stare straight ahead in a daze. His voice was dead in his throat. All the energy drained out of him, leaving him lifeless and tired.

“-That’s it, mate,” Phil’s voice finally caught up with him. “Do you want some water?”

Tommy stared at his wall numbly and didn’t acknowledge him. It felt like an impossible feat.

“Tommy?”

A tear slid down his face.

Tommy was nonverbal for five days.

He’d heard the word before- from psychiatrists to foster parents to even Phil using the term a few times. But he’d never really understood before now. He’d never known the times where he just couldn’t seem to speak had a name. And he’d never been nonverbal for so long.

He couldn’t stop thinking about his memory.

Tommy didn't remember his mother. It was an ugly truth that he hated to admit. In his effort to bury the emotions that came with her memory, he'd also managed to lose sight of *her* in the process. He couldn't remember any times where she'd helped him through a panic attack, which was why the memory shocked him so badly. He didn't remember her. He couldn't remember her face. Or her voice. He didn't know what she liked to wear or her favorite color. He couldn't remember where she worked or what she did. He couldn't remember the color of her eyes.

He knew she liked to read.

At sixteen years old, Tommy knew so many things. He knew she had curly blonde hair, just like him. And his dad. He knew she was sweet and quiet and cried more than she should have. He knew she was gentle and she was there for him and she just couldn't help him the way she was supposed to. He knew that he used to get bad panic attacks when he was a kid, mostly caused by his dad. He knew that they had pretty much stopped after he got away from the house. And he knew that he'd had more panic attacks in this house than any other.

He didn't know why.

But he knew the reason would be ugly.

So Tommy sat in silence and thought and dissociated. Sometimes he stared at his ceiling and could feel every minute tick by across his skin. Sometimes he blinked and hours had passed before his eyes. Sometimes he would find Wilbur or Techno or Phil in his room when they weren't there before. Sometimes they would talk to him. Most of the time he didn't, *couldn't* listen.

Phil was worried. They all were. After the second day of silence, Tommy had heard Phil on the phone in the hallway with who he inferred was Hannah. The conversation was hushed and frantic and he couldn't pick up exactly what they were saying, but he knew what was being discussed. And he knew what Hannah's response would be. This wasn't the first time Tommy had frozen up like this. They just had to wait for him to defrost.

But he didn't. He couldn't. Another day passed. And then another. He'd never gone this long, and he knew he was worrying the people that cared about him. But he just *couldn't stop*. He couldn't find a spark of energy in him. He couldn't focus on anything except the memory and the devastating heartache that was sweeping through him all at once. Nine years of grief in five days.

On the fifth day, Tommy sat up so fast that Wilbur jumped in his desk chair. His foster brother had been gently strumming his ukulele as time passed. He'd been doing it for days, waiting patiently for Tommy to come around.

Always patient. Always kind.

Tommy stared at him. Wilbur stared right back.

He frowned. He couldn't remember what he had been thinking about. He looked away.

“Phil made cookies today,” Wilbur prompted gently after he saw Tommy wasn’t going to say anything. His voice seemed to boom in the quiet room. “Do you want one?”

Tommy looked at him blankly. Wilbur didn’t look away, holding his gaze with conviction. He didn’t prompt him, instead waiting patiently for him to choose to answer or not.

Finally, after several minutes of uncomfortable silence, Tommy nodded.

Wil was up in an instant. Tommy heard the sound of him on the stairs and then quiet talking from the living room. And then the brunet was back, holding two chocolate chip cookies. Tommy hesitantly took one when he held them out. Wilbur settled back onto the desk chair with the other.

He must’ve zoned out then, because the next time he came around the cookies were gone and Wilbur was back to strumming. His foster brother watched him curiously as he refocused on the room.

Something about his gentle look reminded him of her, but he couldn’t tell what. He choked on the lump in his throat and Wilbur stopped strumming, startled. Something built in Tommy’s chest. Something hot and bitter and *sad*.

And finally- “*I can’t remember my mom*,” he croaked out. His voice was raspy and cracked on the last word. His throat burned. He didn’t care. After days of being unable to talk, now it felt like he had to get it all out right away.

Wilbur stilled. He seemed surprised he had spoken, but more unsure of how to respond to that. It didn’t matter to Tommy. He didn’t need Wil to say anything at all.

“I- I *know* about her. Sometimes I see her in people,” he rasped. “In you just now. In Techno’s face when he studies. In Phil’s voice when he whispers. Sh-she’s *everywhere*, and I still can’t... remember her. I... I *failed* her. She... did everything for me... and I’m too selfish to even remember what she looked like.” It felt like a betrayal to say aloud. His heart raced rapidly.

Wilbur frowned. “Tommy, you were a *child*. It was almost a decade ago. That isn’t your fault. I have pictures of my parents, and if I didn’t I’m sure I wouldn’t remember exactly what they looked like either,” he assured him softly.

Tommy’s eyes welled with tears. “*No*... no, I don’t... I- I *can’t*” he stuttered, stumbling over his words in an effort to get them all out at once.

“It’s okay, Toms,” Wil whispered.

Tommy’s heart broke into a million pieces. “She used to call me that, too,” he admitted weakly. He swiped at his face angrily.

Wilbur had nothing to say to that. Tommy went back to silence.

Phil sat at his desk chair that night.

He'd gotten Tommy to eat some dinner and drink water. Now he sat and waited expectantly. Tommy supposed Wil had told them that he had spoken earlier, and what he had said. Tough luck for Phil though- Tommy was back to being too drained to even open his mouth.

"You don't have to speak, Tommy. I just need you to listen, alright?" Phil finally said. Tommy looked at him curiously to show him that he was listening. It was the least he could do, after worrying him for so long.

Phil nodded, satisfied. "First off, I want to establish that no one is mad at you. No one wants to change anything about you, and no one wants to rush you through this. I know this is hard, and I want you to take as long as you need. I want you to remember that this environment is safe and you are loved here. You don't need to focus on anything except getting better," Phil said, kind but firm. "You don't even need to talk if you don't want to. Wilbur had trouble with this too, when he was younger. He was selectively mute for a long time. I promise it's not a problem in this household, and you'll be accepted all the same."

Tommy nodded, dazed. Emotion swelled in him, but he couldn't identify it.

Phil paused for a moment before continuing. "I want to be here for you and because I love you, I want you to get better. It doesn't matter how long it takes or how hard it is. The three of us are here to support you in any way you need.

"However, there's only so much I can do. I'm not a trained professional, and I won't always know how to support your needs. I know you don't particularly like to share, especially not to me, but I'll continue to say that I think talking is one of the best ways to get through something. I know you don't want to, but I'm going to ask you again to see a therapist and get professional help."

Phil paused and waited for a reaction. Tommy gave him nothing. He stared right through his foster father, his stomach churning.

Phil swallowed. "I can call your old therapist, or I'll find you a new one. We can go through twenty if it finds you one that works. Whatever you want. We'll find a schedule that you're comfortable with. I just need you to work towards getting better, and this is the first step," he explained with a small smile.

Tommy stared blankly.

"We can start whenever you feel comfortable. Don't feel like you need to rush through this. We'll always be patient, and we can schedule an appointment when you feel ready. Does that sound okay?" Phil asked, folding his hands in his lap.

Slowly, Tommy shook his head. *No*.

Phil blinked, and then blinked again. He looked taken aback. He raised an eyebrow. "What's the issue? How can I make this better for you?" He asked, clearly confused.

Fucking Phil. Understanding to a fault. Tommy wanted to scream. Instead, he raised a shaky hand and pointed to his desk. Phil locked onto a notebook and pen, still opened with Tommy's physics homework. He passed it to him silently.

Tommy flipped to a blank page and stared at it for a moment, considering. Then he hastily wrote out *I'm not going to therapy*. The words were ugly.

Phil read over his shoulder and scrunched his eyebrows. "Tommy, I know you don't want to go. I'm not going to pretend like I understand your reasoning. But you're really leaving us no options. The way you're progressing isn't healthy and I'm going to be seriously worried about your future if this continues," he said, calm but still firm.

Tommy scowled. *My future is not yours to worry about. You're not my dad.*

Phil froze and something like hurt crossed his face for a millisecond. It was gone before Tommy even had a chance to feel bad. His foster father's smile settled into a firm line. "I'm not your biological father- you're right. But I'm your guardian, and it's my job to take care of you to the best of my abilities." Tommy rolled his eyes. "You're not well, mate. That's okay, but only if you work to get better. You have to put the effort in. I wouldn't push it so much if you were taking other steps to bettering your mental health, but you're *not*."

Tommy only angrily underlined his last sentence again. His pen broke through the paper towards the end, tearing the sheet. Tommy threw down the pen, frustrated, and let out a strangled noise. Tears welled in his eyes and he cursed himself and Phil and *everything*-

"Tommy," Phil said gently. "It's okay. Take a breath. I'm not forcing you to do anything you don't want to. Everything is okay."

He took a watery breath and glared daggers at the ripped page. Phil watched him curiously for a long moment. Tommy hated the attention. He hated this. He hated Phil. He hated himself.

He wanted to go home.

He didn't realize he'd whispered the last part out loud until Phil's eyebrows shot up.

"I didn't realize you felt that way, Tommy," he replied steadily. His voice was calm and cool. Almost stoic. All emotion carefully tucked away.

Tommy realized he was crying again and angrily swiped at his eyes. This was embarrassing enough. No need to add crying to the mix. He tried to find his voice again and hiccupped. Phil waited patiently, not necessarily worried but certainly curious.

"I don't," he croaked out, mad at himself.

Phil raised an eyebrow. "Where are you from?"

And Tommy knew what he was doing. He'd gone through this a hundred times before, with foster parents and Hannah and therapists. Ask a harmless question and get him talking. Phil just wouldn't let go of his "talking helps" philosophy.

A deep ache developed in his chest. Something like heartbreak. All he could remember was his mother and the memory and the little house in the woods.

He licked his lips but they still felt dry. "Up north," he responded weakly. His voice scratched painfully. "Little town, maybe fifty people. We were the only house for miles. This little wooden cabin deep in the woods."

Phil looked surprised. Tommy knew it was fake. This was all in his foster file. Maybe Phil never bothered to read it. "Did you like it there?" He asked quietly.

"No," Tommy replied immediately. Easy question, easy answer.

Except it wasn't, really. He missed the woods and autumn surrounded by trees. He missed the garden where they grew fruit and vegetables and he missed his mom pointing out the different plants- which ones he could eat and which would hurt. He missed her teaching him how to live.

He startled suddenly. He hadn't realized it then. She was teaching him to run. She was teaching him how to live when he left.

She must've known she wasn't coming with him.

If possible, the realization only made him more devastated. A choked sob caught in his throat and he hunched into himself, much to the alarm of Phil.

"Go," he demanded in between gasps.

Phil stood and hesitated, watching him carefully. Then he turned and let Tommy be, closing the door gently behind him.

Tommy fell asleep with tears on his face, too exhausted to dream.

Chapter End Notes

ha ha lovejoy reference ha ha the fall ha...

Thanks for reading!!

The next few chapters will focus on Tommy's mental health (just as a warning to those who are sensitive to the subject)

Next chapter out within the week <33

Freezing

Chapter Summary

Healing is hard, but hurting is exhausting. Tommy just can't seem to get warm.

Chapter Notes

Chapter TW: negative attitude about therapy

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

Tommy pretended like nothing happened.

January went on and eventually blended into February. The family skittered around him and Tommy pretended not to mind. He pretended like he didn't know why they were so nervous. Severe mental breakdown and days of dissociation and nonverbal coping? Tommy had no idea what they were talking about. So strange that no one would meet his eyes, really.

He went back to school and talked to his friends. He started working hard in his classes again. He did chores and read his book and stared out the window blankly. Anything to distract him. There was no time to think. He couldn't give himself the time to think. The harder he worked, the more he would forget.

Right?

Tubbo seemed to grow increasingly frustrated every time Tommy reached out to them. Ranboo seemed to grow more distant. Maybe they could tell it was fake, that he was using them to forget. Tommy pretended not to notice the growing tension. He pretended not to care. He didn't need Tubbo and Ranboo. He didn't mind being a little lonely in school- it was nothing he wasn't used to. If they didn't want him, there was always Jack and Niki and Eret to hang out with outside of school. They didn't know him well enough to notice anything was wrong. And if Niki sometimes gave him a knowing look of pity, he pretended not to notice that, either.

Tommy was very good at pretending.

Pretend that everything was fine. Pretend that he was perfectly okay, happy even, and pretend that nothing was bothering him at all. Pretend to be perfectly content in his small town home on the coast and pretend to be okay with the domesticity of brothers, of a dad, of love. It was fine. Everything was *fine*.

Right?

He discovered he liked long walks. He went all over town, memorizing every turn and alley. He eventually journeyed into the little bookstore across from the bakery- a self-made barrier finally crossed. He surprised himself when he felt nothing as he looked at the long lines of shelves packed with old books. He had expected to feel excited, longing, maybe an urge to sit down and read something. But he felt empty as he stared at the old shelves. Disappointed, he didn't go back. Sometimes he found himself far away, down by the beach. He could stare at the rolling waves for hours and never notice where he was. Once he wandered into the forest and got lost before following the sun back home. He went back to the forest a lot, after that. Tommy liked the silence. He liked being alone with no one to look at him like they pitied him, or were worried about him, or were waiting for him to snap. He liked to sit under big trees and let his fingers and toes slowly lose feeling in the frigid air. He would often get back to the house with blue lips and white fingertips, nearly scaring Phil to death. Tommy refused to stop his new hobby, much to his foster father's chagrin.

Also much to the displeasure of his family, Tommy often found himself seeking out Schlatt and Quackity. When the pair weren't up at the rocks, they were down at the beach or parked in the department store parking lot. They let Tommy drink with them, though they were more reluctant to let him smoke. He liked spending time with them, even if it pissed Wilbur off more than it should have. Schlatt and Quackity didn't ask questions or prod at him. They seemed to understand the need to get away from the family, or at least they didn't poke at it. It was easy to stare at the waves or the flickering lights of the store name and let his head grow fuzzy. It was nice. He frequently caught Schlatt texting Wilbur when they were together. Tommy pretended not to notice, and told himself he didn't care.

Tommy did it all. He was the perfect foster kid. He did his homework and chores. He was sociable and did well in school. He kept his room tidy and exercised. He kept his distance and was respectful. He didn't ask for anything, never complained about anything, didn't even come close to crossing any boundaries. He'd spent years perfectly sculpting the persona, and it was surprisingly easy to slip into it after so many months away. It was a painfully easy adjustment. What more could a foster family want?

A lot, apparently. The Watson's seemed increasingly unhappy with Tommy's falseness. He'd never stayed with a family that didn't like the foster kid role he'd built. Then again, he'd never stayed with a family like the Watson's before. They were weird. Tommy would never really understand them and... that was okay with him.

He told himself that it was okay with him.

"Tommy," Phil called gently.

Tommy looked up from his book with raised eyebrows. He'd buried himself under almost every blanket in the living room he could find when he got back from the woods, and now he read on the couch as he warmed back up. He locked eyes with Phil, sitting at the dining room table with his laptop opened. He looked kind but worried, understanding but stressed- a look that wasn't uncommon on him in the past month. Tommy looked away quickly.

“I just got an email back from Hannah. She sent me the information of your old therapist. We can schedule a video conference, if you want. Or we can take the drive. It might be nice to say hello,” he said quickly. He made it seem like it wasn’t a big deal, but Tommy could spot a nervous face from a mile away. Phil was worried. Phil wanted him to go. Phil wanted him to get better.

Phil could forget it.

“I don’t want to see her,” Tommy said simply, returning his gaze to *The Odyssey*.

Phil sighed and closed his laptop. He stood up and his joints cracked. Old man.

“Tommy,” his foster father prodded again.

He made a noncommittal noise.

Phil crossed his arms. “Tommy,” he said, more sternly.

Tommy glanced up again. He was starting to regret not going right to his room when he got home. He was used to Phil’s attempts to get him to agree in the past month, but he seemed more insistent this time. He didn’t drop it when Tommy lost interest.

“How about you go with Wil to his appointment this afternoon? Just to meet his therapist. You don’t have to stay. I’ll bring you home whenever you want,” he argued softly.

Screw Phil. Forever gentle, even when Tommy was being unreasonable. It made his skin crawl. When he was being a bitch, he expected to be treated like a bitch. Didn’t Phil know that was the way this went?

Tommy snapped his book closed with a huff. “If I go say hi, and stay for like five minutes, will you get off my back about it?” He shot, annoyed.

Phil immediately brightened, a huge grin crossing his face. Tommy ignored the feeling in his chest. “That would be lovely, mate. I’d really appreciate it,” he said, barely containing his relief in his poor attempt to stay neutral.

Tommy rolled his eyes and got up to put on his shoes.

Wilbur let Tommy sit in the front seat.

Tommy raised an eyebrow as Phil slid into the driver’s seat. “What’s wrong with you?” He demanded to his foster brother.

Wilbur gripped his chest in fake hurt, pretending the question was a personal offense. “You wound me, Tommy. That’s hardly something to ask before you join someone at their therapy

appointment,” he complained with a dramatic smile. He seemed far too chipper for someone who was about to go pour their heart out to a licensed professional.

Tommy rolled his eyes. “Why aren’t you sitting in the front seat? Asshole,” he shot.

Wilbur shrugged with a shit-eating grin. Tommy wanted to smack it off his face. “You deserve it. You’re always stuffed into the backseat. Besides, I want to lounge,” he explained as he crawled into the back. He immediately draped his long legs across the seats, leaning against the door.

Tommy sat down in the passenger seat as Phil glanced at Wilbur in the mirror. “Seatbelt, Wil,” he reminded him.

Wilbur groaned. “It ruins the lounging, dad,” he complained.

Phil chuckled as he started the car. “A cracked head also ruins the lounging. Seatbelt on. C’mon mate,” he said.

Wil grumbled but he heard the click of the seatbelt. Tommy settled against the door, crossing his arms and folding in on himself as much as possible. The faster this was over, the better.

The drive went quickly. Tommy knew it like the back of his hand. He went often to drop Wilbur off at therapy. Wil was sometimes too tired to drive home himself after a session, so Phil or Techno were always there to drop him off and pick him up. Tommy just liked the ride.

But today he got out of the car with Wilbur. He listened to Phil call goodbye, promise he’d be here when they were ready, and wish him luck. He cringed as they crossed the parking lot and he entered the building for the first time.

It was sterile. It reminded Tommy of every office building he’d ever been in. Doctors and lawyers and therapists and social workers- they were all the same. Every office smelled too clean and too fake. The chairs were uncomfortable. The magazines on the table were a decade old. The secretaries were always grumpy. This office was no different.

Wilbur walked right up to the desk and signed them in. He didn’t seem to pick up on Tommy’s discomfort. And before he knew it, they were both swept into a smaller room with a desk, a long couch, and an armchair. A man stood up to greet them.

“Wilbur! Welcome,” he said kindly. “And you must be Tommy.”

Tommy stared. The man was tall. What was with this town and tall people? Maybe a bit taller than him, shorter than Wilbur. His hair was dyed a dark green- almost black- and he maintained a kind smile. He looked... ordinary. Not like other therapists or psychiatrists he’d met, with their neat suits and carefully combed hair. This man wore a plain green dress shirt and brown pants. He looked like anyone else.

“I’m Sam,” he introduced himself, holding out a hand.

Tommy shook it with a frown. No last name. Not Dr. Sam, or Mr. Sam. Just Sam.

"Nice to meet you," he mumbled.

Wilbur grinned like a madman and collapsed down on the couch comfortably, like he'd done it a million times before. He seemed perfectly comfortable. Sam sat across from him in the armchair. Tommy remained standing. He didn't plan on staying long, anyway. He shoved his hands into his pockets awkwardly and looked around the room. There was nothing interesting. A couple of professional looking degrees on the wall. A bookshelf packed with psychology books and self help guides. On one of the middle shelves where it was easy to reach was a stuffed animal- a white dog with a red collar. The nametag on the collar read *Fran*.

"Would you like to sit, Tommy?" Sam asked kindly.

Tommy glared at him and then felt bad about it. Sam wasn't the one who pressured him here. He was just doing his job and getting paid. "No thank you," he decided firmly.

Sam didn't seem offended. Instead, he smiled warmly. "That's fine. It's nice to meet you. I've heard a lot about you, of course," he said. He reached over and grabbed a notebook off his desk before flipping through the pages distractedly. "You've been living here for...nine months now?"

Tommy took a moment to stare daggers at Wilbur, who only smiled sheepishly. His foster brother didn't look very apologetic. He refocused on Sam, who was still studying his notes intently. "Uh, yeah. About that long."

"That's a long time for you, isn't it?"

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "I don't know. I guess," he grumbled half heartedly.

Sam glanced up with a small smile. "Well, I suppose any amount of time feels like an eternity for a foster kid. I've met with many in my time. It's hard to adjust, even if it's been years," he explained.

Tommy scoffed. "I wouldn't know."

Wilbur was watching intently.

Sam raised an eyebrow. "Oh? What's the longest you've stayed with a foster family? Or a group home?" He asked curiously.

Tommy studied the stuffed dog on the shelf with intensity. "Thirteen months," he answered, embarrassed.

Sam didn't seem all that surprised. Maybe Wilbur had already told him. Maybe Tommy just didn't seem like the kind of kid that sticks around long. "So you've never lived anywhere much longer than a year? That must be difficult," he said sympathetically.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "It's fine."

"When was the last time you lived in a stable household?" Sam asked, writing something down.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "Never."

Sam seemed to pause at that. "Well... when were you introduced to the foster system?"

"When I was eight."

Sam tapped his pen against the spine of his notebook. "I see. And your childhood home wasn't stable? What are your biological parents like?"

Tommy felt his hands go cold. "They're dead," he snapped icily.

The therapist didn't seem fazed at the aggression. "I'm sorry to hear that. It must've been hard to lose them, even if it wasn't the healthiest environment," he said sympathetically.

"It wasn't hard."

Sam blinked. "Sure. But-"

Tommy cut him off quickly. "Sorry, can I help you with something? I'm just stopping in. Aren't you supposed to be doing a therapy session?" He demanded, gesturing to Wilbur sitting patiently on the couch.

Sam stared at him for a moment before chuckling. "I *am* conducting a therapy session," he said simply.

Oh. Tommy felt anger and dread pool in his stomach. His hands balled into fists. He was an idiot. "*Whatever.* This is stupid. I'll see you in the car, Wilbur," he shot, turning on his heel.

As he closed the door, he heard Wilbur's quiet "*You're good at that*" and Sam's steady reply of "*It's my specialty.*"

Tommy resisted the urge to scream as he stomped out of the building. His hands shook as he pushed through the glass doors. He stood in the parking lot for a moment, staring at the family car before letting himself go. Tommy shrieked in frustration. It felt good and he did it again, feeling the noise vibrate in his head. He knew Phil could hear and see him from the car. He knew there were businesses taking place inside. He knew the action would tear his throat and make him dizzy. He didn't *care*. He didn't care about any of it. He hated this place. He hated Wilbur and Phil for bringing him here. He hated Sam. He never wanted to see the man again.

He heard the car's door open. "Tommy?" Phil called worriedly, climbing out of the vehicle.

Tommy huffed and shoved his hands into his pockets as he made his way to the car. "So that was your big plan, huh?" He demanded when he got close enough. "Let me go say hello and let Sam trick me into a whole session?"

Phil blinked, surprised. "Wha- no. I only asked Wil to inform Sam you were coming. I had no idea what Sam would say to you," he said earnestly.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Right. Of course. You've never done any wrong in your life. Fucking *Philza*, always fucking perfect, always neutral. Here's an idea: leave me the *fuck* alone. I don't need your fucking help and I don't need Sam's help either," he snarled, hands trembling with anger.

Phil's eyebrows shot up. To his credit, he didn't seem offended by the words. His face showed no trace of anger at all. It only made Tommy more frustrated. "It's okay, mate. I'm sorry you feel that way. Why don't I take you home, alright?"

Tommy's hands balled into fists. "I'll walk," he spat. He turned on his heel and began his journey back home.

Phil spluttered. "Tommy, it's almost four miles and it's freezing," he argued. "Please get in the car."

Tommy ignored him and disappeared around the corner.

He made a note to wear a warmer jacket next time he threw a fucking tantrum.

Tommy pulled his light coat tighter around him and breathed on his hands. He'd been colder, and he'd stayed in the cold longer than this, but he still had a long walk home ahead of him. It didn't help that he kept purposefully taking longer routes and backroads so Phil wouldn't find him. The last thing he wanted to do was look Phil in the eyes.

He regretted his outburst, sure. He always did, when this kind of thing happened. He knew that Phil was trying his best, and parenting him was no easy feat. Tommy knew that he wasn't healthy, and he knew he should be trying to get better. He just couldn't shake the feeling that he *shouldn't*, that Phil was out to get him, and therapy would be his undoing.

Maybe that wasn't such a bad thing.

He pushed the thought away. He checked the time and then how much longer the walk would take him. Tommy scowled. He enjoyed staying out in the cold, but he wasn't interested in losing his fingers anytime soon. Shakily, he tapped on a phone contact.

"What's up, kid?" Schlatt answered instantly.

Tommy cleared his throat and tried not to sound as unsteady as he felt. "You guys around? I could use a ride and maybe hang out a bit," he greeted, trying for casualness. He shoved his free hand into his pocket.

Schlatt chuckled. “Nah, sorry kid. Maybe tomorrow. Big Q and I aren’t in town. Business stuff, you know how it is,” he explained.

He tried not to sound disappointed. “Oh, for sure. Alright, big man. See you around, then,” he said quickly. He hung up before he could get a response.

Tommy hesitated. What now? He couldn’t bear to call Phil. The embarrassment and guilt would kill him. Wilbur was still in his appointment, and Techno would chew him out. Everyone would be mad at him. Tubbo and Ranboo didn’t drive yet. Who else was there?

With frozen fingers, he tapped on another contact.

“Are you out of your *mind*?!” Niki exclaimed angrily as she pulled up to the curb Tommy was waiting on. Her face was plastered with worry and frustration. Tommy winced as he slid into the passenger seat of her car. “It’s thirty degrees out and you’re two miles from home! What on *earth* were you thinking?” She demanded.

Tommy shrugged sheepishly and buckled his seatbelt. He refused to look at her and instead reveled in the feeling of his fingers and nose defrosting.

“*Tommy*,” Niki insisted. “You have to talk to me. What’s wrong? What happened? Why were you out here?”

Tommy slouched down in his seat, trying his hardest to disappear. “I yelled at Phil,” he mumbled half heartedly. Niki was reminding him more and more of an angry mother scolding her child.

Niki’s eyebrows shot up. “So you ran almost *three miles* from home in the freezing cold?” She asked.

Tommy slouched down even farther. “No,” he muttered. “We were... I was at Wilbur’s therapist’s office. Phil wanted me to go.”

Niki turned on her blinker and frowned. “You didn’t like therapy?”

Tommy scoffed. “No. I only went because Phil wouldn’t fuckin’ leave me alone about it. He’s driving me insane,” he snapped.

She glanced at him steadily. “You know he only wants the best for you,” she argued gently.

He scowled. “If he wanted the best for me, he’d leave it the fuck alone.”

Niki said nothing as she drove on. Tommy stared out the window and tried unsuccessfully to zone out. At least he was warm.

He raised his eyebrow when Niki pulled into the diner parking lot. She only smiled at the odd look he gave her. "You look sick, Tommy. I know you don't eat. Wilbur tells me. Let me get you lunch," she explained softly.

She was out of the car before he could protest.

Tommy felt awkward sitting across the booth from Niki. Sure, they'd hung out before. But never one-on-one. He'd always had Ranboo or Tubbo with him, or Jack and Fundy were around somewhere. When Niki was over the house, she hung out with Wilbur. She was his best friend, after all. He was sure she'd already told his foster brother exactly where they were and what had occurred. He liked Niki, but she reminded him of a cool older sister that he couldn't really relate to- someone that he'd always strive to impress and always somehow disappoint.

Niki didn't press him about his family problems. Instead, she questioned him about school and books. She told him all about her reading assignments for college and asked him about his favorite works. He slowly defrosted and soon enough, he was eagerly talking to her about his most memorable reads- books from the library or snatched from foster families' bookshelves or donations to the group home. She laughed at his jokes and offered him her fries when he eyed them.

Maybe Niki was okay.

"So like, realistically, how many times do you think you've read The Odyssey?" She asked after he told her about his prized book.

Tommy shrugged and popped a fry into his mouth. "No clue. Hundreds, probably. I've had the thing since I was nine. Took me about a year to read it through the first time because I was so little. I didn't understand a lot and the book got beat up pretty quick. I had to steal the big dictionaries from the school libraries to look up words. My foster mum at the time took a sharpie and blacked out all the bad words when she saw me reading it so I couldn't see them, which was probably for the best now that I think about it." He let out a laugh. "I read it all the time now though. I don't need to. It's mostly memorized. I could probably recite most of the book no problem. It's just a habitual thing. Something to do when there's nothing else, y'know?" He explained nonchalantly.

Niki raised an eyebrow and set down her strawberry shake. "You never get bored of it?" She asked.

"Nah. I probably should, I know. Objectively it's not a great book and it's hard to read if you don't know what's going on. I just... I don't know. I just like reading, and it's the only thing I've had to read consistently over the years," he said with a shrug.

Niki pushed her mozzarella sticks around her plate. "The Watson's have lots of books. I used to borrow from Techno's collection all the time when I was in high school," she pointed out.

Tommy's expression immediately darkened. "Yeah, whatever. I ruin most things I touch. I'm not allowed to touch most foster siblings' things," he grumbled.

Niki looked at him strangely. “Did Techno say you couldn’t touch his books?” She questioned.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. “Well... no. But that’s just how things are. That’s how it works,” he explained.

She frowned. “Maybe. Not with the Watson’s though. Have they ever told you not to touch something, *ever*?”

And Tommy knew what she was doing. He wasn’t stupid, no matter how humiliated he still felt after this afternoon. He pushed his plate of chicken fingers away, suddenly not hungry. “No, and that’s just as much of a problem,” he muttered, deflating.

“What do you mean?”

Tommy huffed and closed his eyes. “It just means that I’ve been in this sort of limbo for the past couple months. There are no defined rules so I’m always worried about breaking them! I’ve just been waiting for some colossal screw up to happen because no one told me what I was allowed or not allowed to do, and Phil will send me away because of it,” he said slowly.

Niki blinked. “You know Phil isn’t going to send you away, Tommy. I’m sure they’ve told you dozens of times by now,” she protested.

Tommy rolled his eyes. “I’ve heard it a dozen times from a dozen different houses, too. It doesn’t mean anything. It never has,” he said.

“But have you ever lived in a house like this one?”

Tommy paused. No, he hadn’t. Maybe Puffy’s was the closest. But Puffy wasn’t around like Phil is, and Dream and Foolish weren’t there for him like Wil and Techno are.

“Maybe. I don’t know,” he conceded with a shrug.

Niki looked at him curiously and he squirmed under the attention. He was starting to get uncomfortable again. He wondered when Niki would let him leave.

“What do you have against going to therapy, Tommy?” She asked finally.

Tommy’s heart skipped a beat and his hands shook slightly under the table. “I don’t have anything against going to therapy. I think it’s good when people go and get the help they need. I just don’t need it. I don’t need to go,” he mumbled.

“But wouldn’t you agree that you’re maybe not the mentally healthiest person right now? You’ve clearly got a lot of trauma from other foster families,” she argued.

He looked away sharply. “It’s nothing I can’t deal with. I don’t need help. I can do it on my own,” he shot, more cruelly than intended.

Niki didn’t flinch. “Everyone needs help. Humans are social creatures. We reach out to others when we’re in distress. It’s okay to want or need help. It doesn’t make you weak,” she said

firmly.

Tommy slouched down in his booth seat. “‘m not weak,” he grumbled.

“Do you think Wilbur should start working on his mental health alone? Do you think it would be good if he stopped seeing his therapist because he thought he didn’t need to? Wilbur’s a tough guy, surely he’s strong enough to not need help, right?” She shot at him.

Guilt pooled in his stomach. He remembered Wilbur’s bouts of rage and aggression vividly. They certainly still came about, but rarely now. He couldn’t imagine where he’d be right now if Wilbur hadn’t changed his therapy sessions and got more help. Probably back at the group home. “No,” he mumbled. “No, he shouldn’t do that.”

“But isn’t that what you believe? Or is it just for you?” Niki was pushing at him hard, clearly not about to let up like Phil always did. Tommy squirmed and his hands trembled under the fire.

“It’s just for me,” he finally admitted, not meeting her gaze. “Only me. I can’t get help. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

His hands balled into fists and he finally blew up, letting the anger pour out of him. “Because the last time I saw a therapist, they took me away! They ruin everything for me! I’m a minor and if they think I’m not in a good environment, they can recommend to have me removed. It’s happened dozens of times, and I can’t let it happen again. I... I *like* it here, even if I don’t always act like it, and I don’t know what I’ll do if the system takes me away again. I don’t think I’ll survive it,” he shouted, voice hoarse. “It happens all the time with foster kids. Wilbur and Techno can see a therapist all they want. They’re not going anywhere. *I am*. Happy now?”

Niki stared at him. “Tommy... I’m not going to pretend to understand how the foster system works, because I don’t. But the Watson’s are good people. Anyone can see that. If you want to stay, no one is going to take you away.”

And Niki was right, she *didn’t* understand. Because that wasn’t how the system worked at all. They did what they wanted, put Tommy wherever they felt, and didn’t give two shits about what he wanted or needed.

“My first therapist took me away from my bio dad. Put me in the foster system to begin with. She started all this, and I’m not going to let it happen again. I *can’t*,” he snapped.

“But wasn’t your dad abusive?”

Tommy cursed Wilbur’s mouth and his inability to keep things to himself. “*No*,” he snarled. Then reconsidered. “I mean... *yes*... I guess. But... but he was my *dad* and I didn’t want to leave and they took me anyway and then I got put in houses that were even *worse* and-”

He didn’t realize he was starting to panic until Niki reached out and touched his hand.

Tommy took a shaky breath. "I know it's irrational. I *know* I'm wrong. But I can't *stop* myself. Phil keeps pushing me to see a therapist and all I can think is that he wants to get rid of me, that he's looking for a way to get me sent back without having to take the fall himself. I can't stop thinking that he's just trying to save my feelings and when a therapist tells me I need to go back to the group home he can say he's sorry and that it wasn't his fault. I *know* that's not right and I still can't let it go," he admitted quietly.

Niki frowned and grabbed hold of his hand. "Tommy," she said gently. "Phil just wants to help you. He's not gonna let you get sent away. He wants you to be a part of the family so badly. I can see it just by looking at him. He won't let anything happen to you." She raised an eyebrow. "Besides, Sam has been Wilbur's therapist for years. He sees all of the Watson's from time to time. He knows what goes on in the house and he knows that it's a good environment. Sam would never recommend removal for you," she explained softly.

Tommy considered. Maybe that was true. Sam did already seem to know a lot about him. And he had probably been getting updates on his life through Wilbur at each session, whether direct or indirect. He probably knew what went on in the house better than Tommy did himself.

He wasn't sure if it was worth the risk, though.

"Promise me you'll think about it," Niki pleaded, letting go of his hand. "And you can always come talk to me. I won't tell Wilbur. My lips are sealed."

Tommy chuckled weakly at that. "Alright, fine," he agreed. He paused, looking at her quickly. "You're good at this, y'know."

Niki grinned. "I'm a psychology major," she admitted happily.

Tommy laughed.

Phil rushed to him the second he walked through the door.

"*Jesus*, Tommy," he scolded, grabbing onto his shoulders. Tommy flinched, immediately thinking that Phil was going to push him. It took him a moment to realize Phil was examining him- looking for injury. "I was about five minutes away from calling the *police*. You don't answer your phone, you just storm away, it's *twenty degrees outside*-"

He took a rattling breath and Tommy jolted when he realized there were tears in his foster father's eyes. A strange feeling bloomed in his chest. "I'm sorry," he breathed. Phil looked at him with a watery gaze. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that. I wasn't thinking straight. I'm sorry for worrying you."

Phil nearly collapsed against him in relief, wrapping his shoulders in a tight hug. Tommy stiffened before relaxing quickly, allowing himself to be embraced. It was warm, and he felt awful for worrying Phil so much. “God, Wil and Techno took the car and went looking for you. I was sure you’d be freezing on a street corner somewhere, and that it would be all *my* fault, and-” Phil babbled weakly.

“I’m sorry,” Tommy repeated, cutting him off. Phil pulled away to look at him. “I called Niki and she came to pick me up. She brought me to the diner to talk to me. I should’ve told you I was okay and where I was. I didn’t mean to waste your time.”

Phil nearly collapsed all over again. “You weren’t *wasting our time*, mate. We were just so worried. I’m sorry for making you go with Wilbur. I shouldn’t have pushed. *God-*” He started again.

Tommy shoved his hands into his pockets. “No... no. You were right. I overreacted, and I shouldn’t have. Niki... helped me see that a little. You’re right... I- I do need help.” He took a shaky breath. “I just... I don’t think I’m ready yet. I will be... just not right now. I hope that’s okay,” he admitted quietly.

New tears sprang up in Phil’s eyes. Tommy looked away. *Gross*. “Of course. Of *course* that’s okay, Tommy. Anything you need, you’ll have. We’re here for you. We’re not going anywhere. Take all the time you need,” he said quickly before wrapping Tommy up in a tight hug again.

Tommy let himself be hugged.

If he hugged back, Phil didn’t mention it.

Chapter End Notes

We'll get there... slowly...

Thanks for reading!!!

Next chapter within the week <3

Self Help

Chapter Summary

Healing is slow, but... sometimes it's worth it.

Chapter Notes

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

“No!” Tommy screeched.

This couldn’t be happening.

Techno cackled as his avatar crossed the finish line in first place. Tommy threw down his controller in frustration. He was getting better at Mario Kart, but Techno was on an entirely different level. On his other side, Wilbur laughed mockingly. “At least I’m not the only one getting my ass kicked now,” he taunted.

Tommy threw a light glare at him. “You’re just *bad*, Wil. I’ve been playing for less than a year and I’m *way* better than you,” he joked back.

Wilbur faked a look of deep offense. Techno laughed at the whole interaction.

“Another go, c’mon Tech,” Tommy demanded, picking his controller back up with determination. Wil laughed as Techno groaned.

“We’ve been playing all afternoon,” Techno complained. “You’re not gonna win.”

Tommy pouted. “No no no! I’m close! C’mon, big man. Last game. You wouldn’t turn down a challenge, would you *Blade*?” He taunted.

Techno eyed him carefully before picking up his controller again. Tommy whooped in triumph as another game began. Wilbur rolled his eyes good naturedly and went back to scribbling in his notebook.

It was a close match. Tommy crossed the finish line in second place, right behind Techno.

He let out a cry and threw his hands into the air. “*Fuck!*”

Techno cheered. “Face it, Tommy,” he gloated. “You’re just not there yet.”

Tommy grumbled and got to his feet to steal a snack from the kitchen. He resolved to practice the game every day until he could beat Techno in a race. It was his new goal.

He thought about Wilbur's Christmas tradition as he opened the fridge. Three things he wanted to improve for the future. He couldn't think of anything then. Now, it came kind of easily.

Mario Kart, piano, baking.

Wilbur was steadily helping him learn the piano over the past month. Tommy would climb onto his foster brother's bed with his mini instrument on his lap and listen to Wil explain the notes and keys as he sat at his own full-sized keyboard. He could play most scales now, and he was working on two-handed playing basic rhythms. Wilbur was a good teacher, no matter how much Tommy went out of his way to bother him during lessons.

The baking aspirations came from Phil. It wasn't uncommon for Tommy to help Phil around the kitchen, assisting him with breakfast or dinner. More recently, he found that he enjoyed helping Phil with cookies and muffins. Baking was calming and had nice results. He wasn't much of a decorator. He'd admit that the only time Phil let him do the frosting on a batch of cupcakes turned into a disastrous mess. But he *did* like the actual act of baking- measuring the ingredients and learning techniques and making something *good*. When he had mentioned his new hobby to Niki, she had immediately given him a part time job application for the town bakery to fill out when summer came around. She said she was excited to work with him, and promised to teach him how to frost things nicely.

He hadn't felt any dread about the thought of still being here in the summer. He hadn't even thought about it until he got home later and wondered when that fear had faded away.

Tommy pulled a coke from the fridge and tried not to worry about how *good* he felt. The past month had been full of patience and healing- something he was getting more and more used to. He tried not to think about how quickly Phil had forgiven him and how he had melted back into the family easily. He had defrosted slowly, warming back up to his brothers and friends. He tried not to think about what that meant for his progress on getting the family to hate him. He tried not to think about how much he was setting himself up for hurt when it came time to leave.

He tried not to think about anything, really. There was only the present. And two foster brothers waiting in the living room for an intense Mario Kart battle.

Tommy made his way back to the couch, coke in hand, and tried not to think about the never-ending pattern in his life of things turning to shit when he felt good. Like clockwork, one of the few constants in his life. It was inevitable.

But there was time to think about it later. He picked up the controller.

Tommy went to therapy with Wilbur the next week.

He complained and whined. He sulked about the house leading up to the trip. He pouted and was rude and said things he definitely didn't mean. But no one was forcing him to go, and he knew he had to at least make this effort. He wanted to show Phil that his patience and forgiveness wasn't wasted on him. Wilbur promised that he didn't need to talk or even stay the whole time. He just wanted him to see what a regular therapy appointment here looked like, and get to know Sam a bit more.

Tommy could do that.

That's what he kept telling himself as they all got into the car, his heart hammering in his ears. That's what he told himself as he counted street signs on the ride to the office. That's what he told himself as he followed Wilbur into the building.

"Good to see you again!" Sam greeted them as they stepped into the room. Tommy glanced around. The space hadn't changed at all. It was boring. This was all so boring, and Tommy had much better things to do than this. Big man things.

He realized Sam was watching him expectantly. He quickly took a seat next to Wilbur on the couch, ears burning.

"I wanted to apologize for the last time we saw each other," Sam said gently, sitting down in his own chair. "It wasn't my intention to upset you with my questions."

Tommy crossed his arms and looked anywhere by the therapist's face. "'t's fine," he mumbled.

He noticed Sam picking up his notebook as Wilbur leaned back on the couch. "Well let's pick up where we left off last week, alright Wil? We were working on regulating how you project certain emotions. Any progress on that?" Sam asked, flipping open the pages.

Tommy focused his attention on the stuffed dog, sitting patiently on a shelf filled with books. Wilbur's appointments only lasted an hour. Tommy could last an hour here and listen to Sam and Wilbur's back and forth conversations. He was used to sitting in meetings he didn't care about. He could do this. *He could do this*. This was nothing. He let his fingers tap freely on his leg.

Wilbur nodded in the corner of his eye. "It's still a mixed bag," he said slowly. "I'm getting over isolating myself to stop from projecting bad emotions onto others. But... I don't know. I feel like maybe just staying by myself in my room is better than sitting in the living room sulking in silence on bad days, y'know?"

Tommy raised an eyebrow. He remembered perfectly well last week, when Wilbur had stubbornly sat on the couch with a look of murder on his face and silence on his lips. He had figured Wilbur was just being a twat as usual. He hadn't realized Wilbur was making an effort, or how hard it was for him to sit there.

Sam nodded. "Why do you think that? Do you think you're bothering your family when you do that?" He asked gently.

Wilbur shrugged. Tommy noticed his thumbs twiddling back and forth- almost nervously. “Maybe the illogical side of me does. I *know* realistically that no one is bothered by me and I even know Techno *wants* me to be there. I know he’s proud of me for trying and I’m sure the rest of the family is, too. I just... feel bad, I guess. I don’t want to be more of a burden than I have been.”

Tommy’s eyebrows shot up at that. He’d never known Wil thought of himself like that- like a *burden*. Wilbur had been adopted by Phil for more than eight years. Surely he knew that he was wanted? Had Phil not made it clear that he would do anything for his kids? Tommy had picked up on that within his first week.

He wondered briefly if foster kids ever stopped feeling like a burden.

What if he was stuck like this forever?

Sam scribbled something onto his page. “It can be hard to overcome the illogical sides of our thoughts. How does being around others compared to isolating yourself affect your feelings when you have bad days?” He glanced up curiously.

Wilbur was quiet for a moment. Tommy used the silence like a shield, letting himself sink into it. He didn’t want to know this about his foster brother. He didn’t want to sit here and listen to these things. He didn’t want to know that even after so many years, Wilbur still had it hard no matter how often he sought out help. He didn’t want to think about what that meant for himself. If Wilbur still needed help, how would Tommy ever get to the same point? Wil had a good nine year headstart on him. How would he ever catch up? How would he ever get better if he’s a hundred times worse than Wilbur to begin with?

Wilbur opened his mouth, closed it, and then spoke slowly. “I... It’s weird. A lot of the time I feel bad, because I’m bothering people when I could be by myself... y’know? I know when I’m around my family and I’m having a bad day, I might hurt them- and that’s scary. But also, like... the other day I was thinking these awful things while sitting in the living room and I- I could smell Phil’s cooking in the kitchen. I could hear my younger brothers playing video games upstairs.” Tommy spluttered, feeling the tips of his ears warm. “It didn’t make it *better*, exactly. But it made it livable. I felt like I was going to survive it, which is something that never happens. So... I don’t know. It feels both good and bad. Maybe the pros outweigh the cons. I don’t know,” Wilbur admitted.

Tommy shot to his feet before he could stop himself. Both Wil and Sam looked at him in surprise. He shoved his trembling fingers into his pockets as he shouldered his way out of the room. He could hear Wilbur calling after him but it was purely background noise to the buzzing in his ears. The air outside the room was colder and tasted sweeter, somehow. He gulped it in as he made his way down the hall to the front door of the building. He was *wrong*. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t last an hour. Not even close. Tommy was fine to an extent with listening to Wilbur talk about his problems, but he just couldn’t handle hearing about *himself*. He couldn’t know that he eased some of the problems in his foster brother’s life. It put a strange feeling in his stomach- one he couldn’t quite describe. Even in his pockets, his hands jittered nervously. And hearing Wilbur call him a *brother*... his *younger brother*.

Younger brother.

Tommy had never been one of those before.

Not really. He was far used to being the oldest kid in the room. He never minded. He liked taking care of little foster siblings, and older ones were always threats anyway. Even in Puffy's household, where he was the youngest, he was always *foster* brother or *foster* kid. Not brother. Not son. There was always that ugly label marking him. Wilbur had called him brother before, sure. In fact, he annoyingly insisted on it. But there was just something so damn domestic about *younger* brother. Something homely and warm and familiar. Something nauseating and comfortable all in one. Being grouped in with Techno as *younger brothers*... being grouped in with Phil as *the rest of the family*... the sense of belonging that came along with the easy words made him feel slightly ill. It made his face feel warm.

He paused at the clear front doors of the building. He could see Phil's car across the parking lot, waiting patiently for Wil and himself. He could easily walk over and get inside, wait for Wilbur to be done, and go home. He could bear Phil's disappointed eyes for another few weeks if it meant never learning another little detail about Wil ever again. Tommy didn't want to be a source of good in his life. It would just make him feel more guilty when he left.

And he *would* leave. No matter how much the Watson's insisted otherwise or how much he dragged his own feet at the idea. He would leave eventually, just like he always did. It was just how his life worked, and it was stupid and painful to think otherwise. He *had* to remember that.

Tommy stood at the doors and stared at the car for what felt like hours. His trance was finally broken by a firm hand on his shoulder. He jumped and whirled around to find himself staring at Wilbur. He looked tired and a little pale, but his smile was kind.

"C'mon," was all he said before he passed Tommy and pushed open the double doors.

Tommy raised an eyebrow as he clumsily followed after him, only tripping slightly before he found his balance again. "Wh-what? What about your appointment?" He caught up to his foster brother and looked at him curiously from his side as they walked.

Wilbur let out a quiet laugh that wasn't really humorous. "It's over, Tommy. It's 4pm. Have you been standing there for a half hour?"

Tommy blinked. *Yes*, he guessed, *he had*.

When they climbed into the car, Phil asked them how the appointment had gone. Tommy couldn't meet his eyes, guilt building deep in his gut. He waited for Wilbur to rat him out, to tell Phil exactly how Tommy had stormed out halfway through and hadn't come back. But all Wil said was "*Fine*," before he settled into his seat and closed his eyes.

It was hard, breaking old habits.

Tommy knew that. He always had. He was an expert in human behavior, or so he thought, and he knew that people rarely changed their ways. When he was very little his mother told him with bitterness on her lips that his father had promised to stop drinking once he was born, and *that's* when Tommy knew for sure that people were stagnant and predictable.

But sitting in on Wilbur's appointment had kind of shaken him. His foster brother was making an attempt to change his ways, even if it felt like the hardest thing to do. And Tommy *knew* he was doing that- had been doing that for the past few months- at least deep down. He had never really *thought* about it, though. He knew it was happening, but he never really stopped to think about what it meant.

Tommy had asked Wilbur to change, and his foster brother was fighting tooth and nail to do so. He'd just have to add it to the list of things that didn't make any sense to him in this household.

Tubbo threw him the red Switch controller, which he caught without really looking. The Mario Kart music played in the background, adding a nice soundtrack to his thoughts. Tubbo's basement was cozy, and Tommy himself had burrowed into the couch with several blankets piled on top of him. He'd been cold all day, and Ranboo had helped him create his nest when he noticed his white fingers.

Ranboo collapsed onto the cushion next to him with a grin. "Okay," he said slyly. "We're not going easy on you. If you wanna beat Techno eventually, you have to be *good*."

Tubbo laughed from behind the old television. He had been trying to connect the HDMI cord of the Nintendo Switch to the big screen for the past ten minutes, with little success.

"Big man," Tommy said in exasperation. "Let us help you. This is getting sad."

Tubbo scoffed. "*I'm* the scientific genius here. I can connect a stupid cord. How am I supposed to build mini bombs if I can't connect the Switch to the television, huh?" He demanded. They watched as he tried to straighten his back and hit his head on the corner of the TV. Tommy snickered.

"I would advise against making any type of bombs- just generally," Ranboo said with a raised eyebrow, although he sounded unconcerned. He was well aware Tubbo was all talk. The shorter certainly had the brains and ability to make weapons of mass destruction, but they were only sixteen after all. And it wasn't like Tubbo had the attention span to focus on something that long, anyway.

"Got it!" Tubbo exclaimed happily as the television came to life.

The Mario Kart music suddenly amplified as the audio devices switched and Tommy winced at the sudden loudness. Ranboo glanced at him before picking up the remote to lower the volume. "Everything alright?" He asked without looking at him.

Tommy looked at him sharply. "Huh?"

Ranboo shrugged. “You get all jumpy when you think too much. And your hands are more jittery than usual. I’m just wondering, is all,” he explained as he set the remote down.

Tommy frowned as Tubbo took the seat on the other side of him. “I don’t... I just...” He stammered. He took an unsure breath. “I don’t know. Have you ever...? I mean... have you ever... *ugh*. How did you know that your families loved you?” He finally stuttered out, unable to look at anything but his own hands. Tubbo and Ranboo stared at him with blank expressions and Tommy jumped to clarify. “I mean, like, they’re your biological parents, and they’re *good*. And they obviously love you. Obviously. They’re supposed to and they tell you so. But... but how did you *know*?”

Ranboo looked at him curiously. “I’ve never thought about it,” he admitted.

What a luxury, Tommy thought.

“I guess it’s in their actions,” the taller continued. “The words they say match what they do. And I trust that it’ll always match. I don’t have any fear that it won’t.”

“I feel safe,” Tubbo piped up. “Comfortable. I feel the same way around my family as I do with my friends. It’s not always perfect, but everyone works to make it better.”

Tommy sat with that for a moment. He guessed that made sense.

“Why?” Tubbo asked as he scrolled through the game start menu. “Things getting too good over at the Watson’s?”

Tommy spluttered. “Wh-what? No. I mean... things are fine. It’s normal.” He paused for a second before muttering out a tiny, “*Yes*.”

Ranboo laughed lightly, seemingly unfazed by Tommy’s unsureness. “That’s good, then. Things are good. You deserve good, boss man. Don’t overthink it like always,” he said. The game started up and they began to select their characters.

Tommy frowned as he also picked up his controller. “It just... I’m worried how it’ll affect me. And everyone. Y’know, when I leave,” he muttered.

Tubbo snorted and Tommy looked at him curiously. “Oh c’mon, Tommy,” Tubbo glanced at him playfully. “You’ve held onto that threat for so long now. We all know it’s not happening.”

They refocused on the television. Tommy felt like he’d swallowed a rock.

Did they think that? All of them? Did they all think he was sticking around long-term?

Did *he* think that?

The statement lodged itself in his brain, and he didn’t stop pondering over it all day.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!!

We're getting there... ever so slowly. It would be such a shame if it all fell apart again...
(but not before lots of fluff first >:])

Next chapter within the week!

Countdown

Chapter Summary

Nihilist (noun): someone who believes in nothing, has no loyalties, and no purpose other than, perhaps, an impulse to destroy.

Chapter Notes

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

Tommy's birthday came around faster than he expected.

He'd never really celebrated his birthday. They didn't do birthdays in his childhood home. He hadn't even really known his birth date until he entered the system and started seeing it on his forms. Short-term foster homes couldn't afford, or weren't interested in, celebrating all their foster kids' birthdays. Longer-term ones were different, where they usually liked to wish him a happy day or get him a card if they remembered the date from his foster file. He never made it to his fifteenth birthday in Puffy's house because she had given him up a week beforehand. His fourteenth birthday passed in his first month there so they didn't celebrate. And birthdays weren't really something to celebrate as a foster kid, anyway. It was a constant, ugly reminder of his countdown. Another year passed without finding someone to love him. Only so much time left until he aged out.

Tommy was turning seventeen.

The thought made his heart race. *This was it.* One more year until he was on his own. Three hundred and sixty-five shitty, anxiety-inducing days of jittering his leg and waiting for it all to end in disaster. Once he turned eighteen, he'd officially age out of the system. Not that foster care had ever done much for him, but he'd always had a roof over his head and clothes on his back. There was always someone to call in an emergency. There was a safety net. That wouldn't exist anymore once he became an adult. There was no group home to live at, foster parents to take him in, or social worker to call when things got bad. When he got in trouble after he turned eighteen, he'd be totally and completely on his own. Hannah would give him about two weeks worth of motel vouchers and then he was out of her hands and left to figure it out for himself.

Forever.

Tommy thought of a cold city street and shivered.

One year left also meant now was time to start planning his future. He had enough money saved in his account for about six months of rent and scarce groceries. He could add to that amount with his summer job. It was time to start looking at apartments. Another foster kid told him once that it was best to start out in a college town. There, he could find lots of

roommates around his age that would lower the cost of rent, a steady bus system for transportation, and they typically let kids put a deposit down before they turned eighteen. Rooms in those kinds of apartments typically leased out about eight months to a year ahead, revolving around the college semesters, so now was the time.

“Can I borrow your laptop?” Tommy asked the day before his birthday.

Wilbur raised an eyebrow and looked up from his guitar strings. He was sitting cross-legged on his bed, a notebook full of lyrics and chords at his side. “Again?” He asked. “This is the fourth time this week. What’re you working on?”

Tommy shrugged, standing in the doorway of his brother’s room. “School project. Can I? If not, I can always catch a ride with Tech to the library,” he said nonchalantly. He crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe, trying to seem innocent.

Wilbur studied him for a moment. He always seemed to know when Tommy was lying. But finally, he shrugged and gestured to his laptop resting on his desk before returning his attention to his strumming.

Tommy grinned and trekked across the mess of a room to grab the laptop and settle into the beanbag chair by the closet. He glanced at Wilbur, decided he was properly distracted with his music, and opened the incognito tab.

Tommy didn’t *mind*, necessarily, if Wilbur knew he was looking at housing for next year. He knew that this was always the end plan, and he had never been shy about it. But no matter how often he insisted on this, he knew Wilbur would still be upset, and maybe mad at him for looking to leave. Wil would try to stop him, or make it into some big deal- both of which was something Tommy wanted to avoid more than anything.

He hated to admit it, but the college town where Wilbur and Techno’s college was located certainly had cheap housing. He’d looked at several apartments nearby before deciding that the thought of seeing either of his foster brothers after leaving the family was too unbearable. He’d refocused his search to farther north, but when he got within an hour or two from his hometown he had to end the session. The next time he’d borrowed Wilbur’s laptop, he looked at places out of state, but that was hard because he liked being close to the coast.

Everything was difficult.

This time, Tommy revisited some apartments that he’d made note of the last few times. Over the past week or so, he’d narrowed down his search to about four or five places. Each had three to four bedrooms- plenty of space for roommates. He’d already messaged two of the listings and had received pleasant replies from potential housemates. One apartment in particular was located across from a bakery. He figured it would be nice to transfer from Niki’s bakery into this new one without a break in paycheck. The close proximity didn’t hurt, either.

That apartment was about two hours southwest of the Watson’s. He pulled up the listing as Wilbur strummed out a new song. Four bedrooms and two bathrooms, across the street from a bakery and a bus station. Plenty of space for roommates. The current tenant, a boy under

the screen name *Purpled*, was going to community college nearby and had messaged him with excitement about being potential roommates.

How bad could it be, really?

“Any big plans for tomorrow?” Wilbur asked absentmindedly.

Tommy jumped a bit, startled and defensive over the computer screen. He relaxed when he saw that Wilbur was hardly paying attention. He scrolled through some room pictures with a frown. “What’s tomorrow?” He asked distractedly.

He could feel Wilbur’s eyes on him and glanced up to see a surprised musician. Tommy racked his brain for a moment, trying to figure out where he messed up.

“Oh!” He finally realized. “*Oh*. Right, yeah. I guess I was thinking it was later in the week. Sorry.”

Wilbur snorted and played a minor chord. “*Right*. So big plans for the big day?” He asked again, faking exasperation.

Tommy looked back at the computer screen. *Quite the birthday present*, he thought as he opened the site to make a deposit. “I don’t know. Maybe I’ll sleep in. Go to the comic book store or something. I’m not picky,” he muttered, utterly uninterested.

“That’s it?”

He shrugged as he typed in the memorized numbers of his bank account. “I don’t celebrate,” he said.

He could almost sense Wilbur’s eye roll. “Why am I not surprised? Of course you don’t,” the older deadpanned. “Well if you’re up for it, we could go do something? A movie or the arcade or something. Nothing highkey, as to not offend your nihilist mindset, of course.”

Tommy rolled his eyes in response. “I’m not a *nihilist*. I’ve just never had anything to celebrate. You know as well as I do that getting older is not in a foster kid’s best interest,” he responded.

Wilbur didn’t reply.

He messaged *Purpled* quickly, letting him know that he was putting a deposit down to move in after an early graduation next year. “That’s fine though,” he mused. “If you want to do something. It’s not like I’m doing anything else.”

He submitted the deposit. Tommy was officially renting an apartment, starting exactly one year from now.

He felt a little sick. He chalked it up to normal buyer’s guilt.

Wilbur’s phone buzzed at his side. His eyebrows furrowed as he looked at it.

“Tommy,” he asked, sounding slightly concerned. “Did you just make a purchase on my laptop?”

Tommy’s heart dropped to his feet. “Wh-what?” He stammered, quickly closing his opened tabs.

Wilbur looked at him strangely. “I have a program that lets me know when purchases go through on my laptop. It lets me know when Techno’s using it without my permission. You know how he is with his online shopping...” Tommy didn’t know, actually. “Did you buy something?”

“I used my own money,” Tommy argued defensively. “I didn’t spend anything that wasn’t mine.”

Wilbur raised an eyebrow. “No, I know that. My bank info isn’t saved onto my laptop, anyway. So what’d you buy? Self birthday present?” He asked. He absentmindedly strummed the intro to one of his EP songs. Tommy basked in the music for a moment.

“I guess,” he muttered. He closed the laptop and stood up, eager to leave.

He could feel Wilbur’s eyes bore into his back as he made his way back to his room.

The morning of his seventeenth birthday, Tommy slept through his alarm.

Not that he was getting up for anything particular. He was in the midst of spring break. He had no class to attend or homework to complete, and he had no plans for the day. He’d told Wilbur he would probably sleep in today, anyway.

He hit snooze twelve times.

He only eventually opened his eyes when a knock at the door startled him awake. He groaned in response and the door opened, taking the sound as permission for entrance.

“Happy birthday, mate,” Phil said softly, seeing Tommy was still half asleep.

Tommy simply groaned again and closed his eyes.

“I made pancakes, when you’re ready to get up. Extra fluffy, just like you like ‘em,” Phil cooed.

“Wilbur’s the one who likes them like that,” Tommy mumbled half-heartedly into his pillow. Phil was clearly not reading the room or his sleepiness, it seemed.

His foster father laughed. “Sure, Toms. We know you don’t like anything at all,” he joked. Tommy snorted, too tired to be offended. “Well, whenever you’re ready to come down. No

rush.”

Tommy groaned once again and sat up. “No, no. I’m getting up. I’m awake now,” he grumbled, only a little miffed about having his rest disrupted.

Phil grinned and left him alone in his room. Tommy got to his feet and stretched, relishing in the feeling of his spine cracking. He glanced at himself in the mirror as he went to grab a sweatshirt.

Seventeen.

Tommy had never particularly cared about his appearance. He generally liked to feel clean. He enjoyed washing his hair and brushing his teeth. He used a comb every once in a while, and tried his best to look at least a little well-kempt- if only for the sake of stricter foster parents or social workers. But Tommy had never paid attention to how he *looked*. He had never cared. It had never mattered.

But as he glanced in the mirror, he couldn’t help but pause and really *look* for a moment. He was seventeen years old. He was certainly taller than he remembered. A little tanner from spending more time outside in the park or forest. His hair was longer- still a messy wad of curls on his head, but in a way it looked nicer. More healthy. Brighter. Techno had joked a little while ago that he would be able to start braiding Tommy’s hair soon, and he hadn’t given it much thought until now. There was at least enough to tie it back a bit. A particular stress line on his forehead that he’d always hated had faded considerably. Perhaps most noticeable, at least to him, was the light dusting of facial hair across his chin. Not especially visible to the eye, but certainly by touch. Tommy dragged his fingers across the still unfamiliar texture, and it took him a moment to realize his hands were completely still.

Strange.

He threw on a red sweatshirt and made his way downstairs.

“Happy birthday!” Wilbur cried the moment he stepped into the kitchen. Tommy barely had time to take in the room before he was completely engulfed in a hug. He grunted as yellow fabric and the smell of coffee swarmed his senses.

A laugh bubbled up in his chest and burst through his mouth before he could stop it. He felt something in Wilbur’s hold shift at the sound and his brother pulled away to look at him. Tommy laughed again. And *again*. It was unfamiliar and exciting and *warm*.

A firm hand clapped him on the shoulder and he glanced over to find Techno grinning at him. “Happy birthday, Theseus,” he smiled, all characteristic monotone momentarily gone. Tommy smiled back at him and pulled himself from Wilbur’s arms.

“Thank you, big men,” he said as he brushed past them to the counter. He swiped a strawberry out of the bowl of fruit and popped it into his mouth with a sly grin.

Wilbur watched with amusement. “Good mood today, Toms? I thought you didn’t celebrate,” he teased.

Tommy shrugged and reached for another strawberry. "I've been doing new things all year. What's one more change?" He said nonchalantly. He looked on with levity as the smiles on Techno and Wilbur's face grew.

"Good changes, I hope?" Techno asked.

Tommy shoved his hands into his sweatshirt pocket. "How could I argue otherwise?" He replied, turning his attention to the stove, where a stack of pancakes was waiting. He almost missed Techno and Wilbur's exchange of pleased looks. *Almost.*

"Tommy!" Phil exclaimed as he entered the kitchen. "Happy birth, mate. Ready for breakfast?"

Tommy nodded with a smile.

Wilbur took him to the bookstore. Techno let him sit in the front seat. Phil said he had some work to finish up at home, and sent them on their way without him.

"Any books you've been looking at recently?" Techno asked him as Wilbur fished some coins out of his pockets for the parking meter.

Tommy looked at him, surprised. He knew that they were going to the bookstore, but it hadn't occurred to him to *buy* anything. "Oh," he replied, sounding stupid to his own ears. "Um. Not really." He didn't want to admit it, but he'd hardly even touched the new book Techno had gotten him for Christmas.

Techno didn't seem concerned. "Me neither. Feels like I haven't been able to find anything good lately," he small talked as they both watched Wil push the coins into the machine.

"So!" Wilbur exclaimed as he finished. "I say the plan is book store, bakery, comic shop? That sound good?"

Tommy raised his eyebrows. The book store was more than enough for him. Besides, he'd just spent a good portion of his life savings on an apartment. Now was not exactly the time to be buying bakery goods.

He begrudgingly followed his foster brothers into the book store.

Tommy couldn't hold onto his false passivity as they browsed. He could barely contain his excitement at all, no matter how embarrassing he thought it was. His fingers brushed covers and pages before he could stop them, and he found himself reading more summaries and first pages than he'd cared to admit. Techno and Wilbur followed after him dutifully, trying to hide their amusement and failing miserably. The two of them had eventually managed to wrestle a thicker fantasy novel out of his hands and brought it to the counter.

“Birthday present,” Techno grinned as Wilbur pulled out his wallet at the register. Tommy pretended to pout as his heart raced excitedly. He watched as the cashier slipped *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* into a bag and handed it to Wilbur with a smile. “It’s a classic, anyway,” Techno continued. “It would be a crime to *not* read it.”

The bakery proved to be equally exciting. Niki greeted them cheerily from behind the counter, wished Tommy a *very* happy birthday, and then disappeared into the kitchen. Wilbur whistled appreciatively at the intricate frosting of a cake on the counter. Tommy stared enviously, wishing he had the skills. Niki returned with a vanilla cupcake with strawberry frosting on a little saucer, a lit birthday candle stuck in the middle.

“Make a wish!” She cried excitedly, handing the dessert over the counter to him. Tommy took it in surprise, his eyebrows shooting up. *A wish*. He’d seen foster siblings do this before.

What was there to wish for?

“I’ve never had a birthday wish before,” Tommy admitted, eyes locked on the flickering candle. He tried to ignore the effect the statement had on the room- Wilbur recoiled a bit and Niki’s face fell. “Any suggestions?” He asked. He looked up at Techno, the only one who hadn’t reacted.

“Anything you want?” Techno said with a raised eyebrow. He leaned against the glass counter.

Tommy scrunched his eyebrows and looked back at the candle.

He closed his eyes. *I want to be selfish. I want to stay here forever.*

He blew out the candle.

Cheers made his eyes fly open and he grinned. Niki said the birthday cupcake was on the house and they went on their way.

The comic shop was more crowded than the first two stores. Tommy snorted as he watched Techno and Wilbur try to assimilate among the shelves. While both of them were certainly nerdy, he couldn’t imagine either of them being into this kind of stuff. Techno enjoyed classics too much, and Wilbur was too cynical. They were both here solely for him. He made his way immediately to the section completely dedicated to Spiderman- the only superhero he really cared about.

“Spiderman?” Wilbur asked as Tommy picked up a copy of *The Amazing Spider-Man Volume Three*.

Tommy shrugged and flipped open the first page. “Poor kid with a big heart randomly gets superpowers. What’s not to like? He’s supposed to be relatable to everyone,” he said almost defensively. He knew his brothers weren’t teasing him, though. Tommy skimmed a little more before settling on volume three and making his way to the register line.

“That’s it?” Wil asked as they trailed behind him. “Just a comic book? Don’t you want... I don’t know. A Funko Pop or something?”

Tommy chuckled. “Comics are expensive enough as is. Besides, what the hell am I gonna do with a Funko Pop? It’ll just take up space in my backpack,” he said with a grin.

He missed Wilbur and Techno’s frowns.

When they got to the counter Techno snatched the comic out of his hands and paid for it despite his protests. Wilbur mussed his hair from behind and leaned an elbow on his shoulder, which must have been uncomfortable for him since they weren’t *that* different in height. “Birthday boys don’t pay for anything on their birthday,” he teased.

Tommy grumbled and pushed him off as Techno paid. “That’s stupid,” he argued half heartedly.

Wilbur laughed. It was a clear sound. Nice. Tommy’s shoulders relaxed without him realizing. “C’mon,” Techno said, herding them to the door with the comic in hand. “We’ve gotta get back.”

Tommy frowned. “Why? It’s not even dinner time,” he asked as he was guided out the door.

Wilbur jangled the car keys in his hand. “Don’t you wanna play Mario Kart? Techno might even let you win since it’s a special day,” he joked. They made their way back down the street to the car.

Tommy looked at Techno with a raised eyebrow. Techno just side-eyed him.

“I don’t need pity,” he finally decided with a triumphant smile. “I can beat you all by myself. You know Tubbo and Ranboo and me all crammed this weekend. I *crushed* em.”

Techno chuckled. “I’ll believe it when I see it, Toms,” he monotoned back.

Tommy huffed and climbed into the car.

There were three cars parked in front of the house besides Phil’s.

Tommy sat up from his place in the front seat. “Who’s here?” He asked. He was sure he’d seen those cars around.

Wilbur raised an eyebrow but wouldn’t look at him. “Probably just the neighbor’s guests parking in front of our house,” he said calmly.

Tommy looked at Wil strangely. His oldest brother was a terrible liar.

They hopped out of the car quickly and Tommy watched as Wil and Techno walked up the front porch. He kept a firm hand on the car door handle. The front door was opened.

Wilbur turned to look at him from the porch. “Well?” He called with a grin. “Aren’t you coming?”

Tommy hesitated. He hated surprises, and it was clear from the giddiness in Wilbur’s face that there was one waiting for him behind the door. Anxiety settled in his chest, heavy as a rock.

Techno frowned and held out his arm. In his hand was the paper bag from the book store, within it a brand new novel, a comic book, and a half eaten cupcake safely secured in a plastic container. Bought just for him by his brothers as reward for simply being born.

He took a breath and his hand left the car handle. He made his way to the porch and took the bag from Techno’s hand with a sheepish smile. They let him enter the house first.

Tommy yelped.

“*Surprise!*”

A shout- no, a *roar*. Mixing voices and volumes hit him like a wall as they entered the living room. Tommy jumped, stunned, as around fifteen pairs of eyes landed on him. He barely had a chance to take it in before Tubbo launched himself forward and hugged him tight around the shoulders.

A white banner with stark red letters hung above their heads, reading *Happy Birthday Tommy!!* in messy paint. Above Tubbo’s head, Tommy spotted many familiar faces. *All* familiar faces. Ranboo, Niki, Jack Manifold, and Phil. Eret, Fundy, Schlatt and Quackity. Tubbo pulled away from him with a crazed grin. “Happy birthday, boss man!” He exclaimed.

Tommy laughed before he could stop himself. Wilbur and Techno came around him to join the crowd. The grin plastered on his face almost hurt his cheeks. “Wh-what is this?” He breathed.

Tubbo lightly punched his arm. “It’s a surprise party, idiot,” he laughed.

Tommy laughed as well, a firm mix of awestruck and confused. “For *me*?” He looked around the room in amazement. All these people... here for him? To celebrate *him*?

“Well it’s *your* birthday,” Tubbo said. He grabbed hold of Tommy’s arm and led him further into the room. “C’mon, let’s get something to eat.”

The next few hours were spent full of laughter, food, and happy chatting. Wilbur got his guitar at one point and played through a couple of his EP songs, much to Tommy’s delight. When it was time for cake, Phil brought out a familiar sight- the intricately decorated cake from the bakery. Niki noticed his gaze and promised he could start working at the bakery starting as soon as next month. “And I’ll teach you how to make things just like that,” she grinned, gesturing proudly to her cake. Tommy made the same birthday wish again as he

blew out the candles, because that meant it had twice as much chance to come true, right? And when it came time to wrap up the night, they each happily handed him a birthday card, which Tommy quickly realized usually contained some amount of cash or a gift card. He spluttered, both guilty and confused. But no one would take back the generous gifts, and Tommy ended up holding about a hundred dollars in cash and two Amazon gift cards of twenty dollars each- far more money than he'd ever physically held in his life. Tubbo and Ranboo proudly handed him a brand new Switch game- Animal Crossing New Horizons- which they swore would be his absolute favorite. Wilbur and Techno gifted him a red weighted blanket- "*Because you're always so cold and anxious*"- and Phil happily presented a framed photograph of Tommy and his two brothers on the boardwalk, backs to the camera as they looked out at the ocean and *no Tommy was not crying*-

In a daze, he managed to bring all his new things up to his room as the last of the guests left. He let the items collapse onto the bed and he took a moment to study his new possessions. Comic book, novel, blanket, Switch game, and a photograph. He quickly stuffed the cash and gift cards into his wallet and then buried it back into the bottom of his backpack, where he usually kept it for safety. He almost couldn't believe how this day went. He couldn't imagine a better way for any of it to have gone.

It might've been the best day of his life.

He was startled out of his trance by the sound of his phone ringing. He read the contact *Hannah* and felt his heart skip a beat until he remembered he was *mad* at Hannah.

"Hello?" He answered, tucking his phone between his shoulder and ear as he put his backpack back in the closet where it belonged.

"*Tom!*" Hannah's voice crackled back across the line. "*Happy birthday! Seventeen years old! Y'know, I remember when you first walked into my office, not even a teenager yet!*"

He spread out his new blanket across the bed. The heavy beaded material felt nice in his hands. "Mhm," he agreed, uninterested. It wasn't like he needed any reminders about how long Hannah had been his social worker, or how long he'd been in the system at all.

"*What big plans did you have for the day? Anything exciting?*" Hannah asked happily.

"Not really," he lied coldly.

There was a beat. Then- "*Tom.*" Hannah's tone was suddenly serious. "*Is everything alright?*"

Tommy took a second to collect himself. "Is everything alright? Some social worker you are, huh? And where have *you* been in the past couple months?" He demanded, tone cold.

Hannah sighed. "*Oh. Well you know I've been very busy, Tom. And you haven't called. I haven't heard of any incidents or reports. I know things are going well there,*" she explained.

He laughed with no humor. "How would you know? Y'know, we always agreed to meet once a month. You promised to *always* see me once a month. You know how many times you've

been here since I arrived? *Three.*”

“I know, Tom. I’m very sorry. You know that’s our own personal rule, not a system standard. I had other things-” She started.

“That’s how we’ve *always* done it,” Tommy insisted. He tried to keep the hurt from his voice, but some still managed to leak through. He cringed at his own tone.

“I know. I’m sorry. You’re right- I broke our promise. I just-”

“You promised me a book,” Tommy interrupted again. “If I lasted two months. You said you would get me a hardcover book of my own if I *somehow* managed to live in one house for more than two months. You know how many months I’ve been here?”

“Of course I know-”

“*Ten,*” he shot furiously. “Ten months. Almost a new record, huh?”

“I know. And I’m so proud of you. I’m sorry for not being around as much. You’re right. I’ve put you on the back burner and that isn’t fair. I’m sorry. How about we get lunch next month? You can show me a good spot in town and you can tell me about the Watson’s, okay? Next month?” She said, sounding slightly desperate.

Tommy grumbled, which she must have taken as a yes.

“Great. That’s really great, Tom. I can’t wait to hear it all. Now tell me! How was your day? Get any good gifts?” She said. He could hear the smile on her face.

And Tommy didn’t know why he said it. He knew he should’ve kept his mouth shut. It was no one’s business but his own. He just kind of wanted to shove it in Hannah’s face. Show her that things *weren’t* as great as she thought, even if they really were. He wanted to self-destruct a bit after such a high and prove that even a seemingly *perfect* household wasn’t enough to handle him. He wanted to show Hannah that she had failed, as petty revenge for forgetting about him for so long.

“Self birthday present,” Tommy snapped with bitter smugness. “I put a deposit down on an apartment. I can move in exactly three hundred and sixty five days from now.”

“Oh,” Hannah said, deflating a bit. *“Oh. That’s great, Tom. I’m glad you’re excited about it. I’m sure you’ll tell me more about it when we meet.”*

“I will.”

“Good. I-” She started.

“I have to go,” he lied suddenly. He was mad at Hannah, but the sad tone in her voice made him feel guilty and a little sick. “Sorry. We can talk later.”

“Of course-”

He hung up.

“An apartment?”

Tommy whirled around, breath knocked right out of him. He found Wilbur standing in his doorway, holding a plate of birthday cake. His face had fallen, the air between them suddenly cold and distant. All of the warmth of the day completely drained away.

Tommy’s mouth dried and he swallowed nervously. “I-” He started.

“Why would you rent an apartment?” Wilbur asked, setting down the plate on his dresser.

Tommy shoved his hands into his pockets to hide their jittering. He tried to convince himself that he had no reason to be nervous. “Wh-what?” He said defensively. “Because I’m seventeen now.”

“So what?” Wilbur demanded coldly. The only indication of his actual feelings was the tips of his ears turning red.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. “So *what?* Wil, I age out in a year. I know you’re not stupid. I need a place to live, obviously,” he replied.

Wilbur looked taken aback. “A place to *live?* Why would you waste the money? How many times have we told you that you’re welcome to stay here?” He shot.

“And how many times have I told you that I’m not staying?” Tommy snapped back. “I’ve never hidden that little fact. If you want to get your feelings hurt about it, then that’s on *you.*”

The brunet made a noise of indignation. “I don’t *understand* you!” He exclaimed.

Tommy rolled his eyes. “So you’ve told me.”

Wilbur continued on. “What’s so bad about being here? What have we done to you that made you hate us so much? *What-*”

“Just *stop!*” Tommy interrupted angrily. “Just... *enough.* You’re not being *fair*, Wil. Obviously I don’t hate you. You guys are great. *Amazing.* You guys are too good to be true. But don’t make me out into some kind of villain because you’re upset I did exactly what I said I would.”

“But why would you-”

“Just leave it *be*, Wilbur. It’s okay,” he interrupted again.

Wilbur scoffed. “Leave it *be?* So what? We’re just supposed to live life pretending we don’t see the countdown ticking over your head?”

Tommy spluttered at the absurdity of the statement. “Yes? *Yes!* It’s *always been there!* I’ve been living with it for nine fucking years! It’s *always* been a ticking clock counting down to when I turned eighteen, and it always will be,” he shot incredulously.

Wil's hands balled into fists. "But it doesn't *have to be*. Why can't you understand that? You can stay here as long as you want. We're not kicking you out the moment you become a legal adult, you idiot," he snapped.

Tommy's hands matched Wilbur's, and he resisted the urge to scream. "I'm *not your brother!*" He shouted, frustrated. "I'm not a part of this family!"

"Well I wish you'd make up your mind about that."

It hit him like a slap in the face.

"Why can't you just be happy for me?" Tommy finally conceded, voice weak. "I won't be homeless out of the system like so many others. I've worked and saved responsibly for *years* for this. Why can't you just say congratulations and move on? Why do we have to end today this way?" He looked away, suddenly unable to look at his foster brother, and tried to will away the mistiness in his eyes.

Wilbur's face softened. "I can't," he admitted gently. "I care about you too much to do that."

"Well. Happy birthday to me, then," Tommy laughed without humor. He began to clear off his bed, ready for the day to end.

"I'll fix this," Wilbur promised. "It's going to work out in the end."

"Is that what Sam tells you?" He shot harshly over his shoulder. He ignored Wilbur's wince. "There's nothing to fix. This *is* it working out in the end. This is how I've hoped it would go for almost a decade now."

"Tommy-"

He turned to face the taller boy. "Thank you for today," he said firmly. "Really. It was the best. I couldn't have asked for anything better. Thank you, Wil. But I'm gonna go to bed now."

Wilbur blinked, taking in his words. Then he nodded once curtly, bit the inside of his cheek, and walked out. Tommy closed the door behind him.

He could almost believe everything he said. Maybe if he just had another birthday wish...

Could you wish for more wishes?

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!

And thus I've concluded the second arc of this story. The third one is looking to be about 8-9 chapters or so, and then of course an ending. This was one of my favorite chapters to write :]

The next chapter (to kick off the final arc lol) will have heavy content/trigger warnings and will handle some dark storyline, but nothing that's not already in the story tags. Many of the following chapters will have dark themes as well. Of course these warnings will be at the start of each chapter! Just a gentle caution before we get into it. Please be safe!

All the support has been sososo kind and it's sososo appreciated. Next chapter out within the week!! <33

Flying

Chapter Summary

There must be something wrong with him. Tommy just can't seem to find his footing. Things have never looked better which means things have never felt worse.

Chapter Notes

Chapter TW: Discussion of a past suicide, suicidal thoughts, underaged drinking/intoxication, self-deprecating thoughts, mentions of past child abuse, mentions of past domestic abuse

This chapter is a bit heavy! Please be safe <3

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

Phil called for him from his office two weeks later.

He put down his Switch controller and Techno paused the game of Mario Kart they were currently racing in. Tommy frowned at the sound of his name as Techno and Wilbur made mocking noises, *oooh*-ing at him like school children. He tried not to think about how much it felt like being called to the principal's office. His feet dragged unintentionally as he climbed the stairs. It was almost dinner time. Phil was just probably caught up in work, and wanted Tommy to prep something in the kitchen. That's all. There was no need to kill his good mood just yet.

"Hey," Phil grinned as Tommy opened the door to his office.

Tommy nodded in acknowledgment and looked around curiously. He had very rarely been inside Phil's office. The few times he'd visited, the room was dark and neat- usually freshly tidied. Now, it seemed Phil was in the middle of a chaotic project. The bright lights made the space look like a completely different room. Papers and notebooks were scattered everywhere. Phil's lit computer screen reflected fluorescent light back onto his face. Tommy spotted his foster file on the desk, opened. Phil had marked several lines of the documents with post-it notes. The observation made his stomach sink. Tommy had never read his own file- most foster kids weren't allowed the information, and he had never been overly curious. But now he wondered what it exactly said, and what Phil had found interesting enough to mark in it.

Phil followed his line of sight, landing on the file next to his arm. He smiled warmly and closed it with a steady hand. Tommy's eyes shot back to his foster father's face nervously.

"Wanna sit?" Phil asked.

Dread settled in his chest. Tommy shoved his hands into his pockets to conceal their trembling. He glanced around carefully. There was a green bean bag chair in the corner where Wilbur sometimes settled to bother his father with his guitar, or where Techno sat to read in silent company with his dad. Tommy had never rested there, or ever bothered Phil in his office without his foster father calling him there first. He settled into the wooden chair on the opposite side of the desk and stared across at Phil anxiously.

"Am I in trouble?" Tommy finally found his voice.

Phil blinked, looking surprised. "Oh! Of course not, Tommy. Sorry, I know this setting might have made you nervous. I just know that the boardwalk has made you anxious in the past, and I figured that you wouldn't want the attention of Techno and Wilbur," he explained kindly.

Tommy froze, his heart in his throat.

What?

His fingers tapped rapidly on his thigh. He felt like he was trying to swallow a rock. Phil must have seen the panic on his face.

"It's alright, Tommy," he tried to reassure. "It's nothing to worry about. I don't mind being here instead. Traditions aren't rules, and-"

And *oh*, Tommy drowned him out quickly with the roar in his ears. *Oh*, Phil was completely misunderstanding. Tommy wasn't starting to panic over the *setting*- it was the *conversation* and *oh* Phil was going to make a mistake and ruin everything. *Oh*, Tommy's world was about to come crashing down and he needed to stop him and-

"Tommy," Phil's voice broke through again. "I wanted to ask you-"

"*Don't*," Tommy interrupted harshly before he could stop himself.

Phil's voice died in his throat. He looked at Tommy curiously. Tommy stared right back, heart hammering in his chest. He felt like he was going to throw up. There must be something wrong with him. This wasn't how foster kids were supposed to feel in these situations. Most kids spent their whole lives waiting for this moment. It was the most coveted part of the system. This was what it was all for, after all.

He loved it here. He knew he did. Just two weeks ago was one of the best days of his life. It was domestic and warm and happy. Tommy should have been happy. *Why* wasn't he happy?

Why couldn't he just be happy?

This was what he wanted, after all. He wanted to be selfish. He wanted to stay in this house. He wanted to keep his room with the lock and grow his bookshelf and beat Techno in Mario Kart and learn the piano with Wilbur and help Phil make breakfast in the mornings. He wanted to go to school with Ranboo and Tubbo and work in the bakery with Niki over the

summer. He wanted to see a therapist and get help without any fear of being sent away. He wanted to prove Dream wrong, and every other foster parent and sibling that ever told him that this moment was impossible for him. He wanted to show his bio dad that he wasn't ruined- that the man hadn't ruined him, that Tommy was still lovable even after all he did.

He wished he knew if that was a lie.

Tommy wasn't sure how exactly he convinced the Watson's that he was worthy of all this. He didn't know how he pretended to be lovable and whole enough to get to this point. He didn't get how he managed to trick them. The Watson's were good people. They were a good family, and there were so many foster kids that deserved them more than he did. He couldn't let himself drag them down with him by becoming a part of their family. He couldn't be selfish. He didn't deserve it.

"Is something wrong?" Phil asked gently.

Screw Phil. Screw his kindness and patience and gentle tone. Tommy opened his mouth to tell him off and every little voice in his mind screamed stupid this is stupid you're such an idiot what are you doing please don't do this-

"I... I'm *sorry*," Tommy finally croaked out. Phil simply stared at him, confused. He could see the papers clearly on his foster father's desk, the documents dutifully collected and organized just for him, sitting right next to his own foster file. The file that he wouldn't even need anymore, if he just put his name on the dotted line of that simple white document...

Tommy choked and tried to force himself to speak. "I'm sorry, I- I'm *sorry* Phil. But don't do it. Don't ask, and then I don't have to say no, and then we can all still be happy and you don't have to send me back and we can pretend this never happened, okay? And-" he babbled.

"Tommy," Phil said firmly, eyes wide. "Mate, what are you on about?"

He took a rattling breath, and then another. "I... *I... Don't* adopt me. You *can't*. You don't actually want to. And when I say no you'll have to send me back because you foster to adopt and I'm sorry I ruined that for you but I just- I just... you *can't*-" His voice gave out and he struggled to catch his breath. The edges of his vision were fuzzy.

Phil was staring at him with a million emotions behind his neutral gaze. Tommy wished he could identify a single one. He wished he had any idea of how Phil was feeling right now, and he wished his foster father wasn't so completely impossible to read.

Tommy had so many wishes.

He took a panicked breath and tried to calm down. He was making this worse. He was making himself look stupid and scaring Phil and-

"Tommy," Phil whispered.

He swallowed the lump in his throat and pushed his shaking hands between his legs. He nervously met his foster father's eyes.

"You don't have to say yes. I'm not sending you anywhere, no matter what you say," he explained gently. Tommy's eyebrows shot up, surprised. "You are welcomed here for as long as you want, whether you want to be a part of our family legally or not. Family is more than names on a document. You're a part of us whether you say yes or no."

And *oh* that was the wrong thing to say because what the *fuck*? That was... that wasn't *right*. Phil wasn't supposed to keep him here after he said he didn't want to be a part of his family. And Tommy *didn't* want to be a part of this family, or any family. He was going to be perfectly happy by himself in his little apartment. He'd told it to himself so many times that he almost believed it. This was wrong, all wrong, and he didn't know how to fix it.

"You're under no pressure to give an answer, Toms," Phil said cautiously, as if trying not to scare away a wild animal. "And if you don't want me to officially ask, then I won't. But just know the offer is there, and you can take as much time as you need to decide. Or never decide. I promise it won't affect how I look at you or how you're treated around the house."

"Did Wilbur put you up to this?" Tommy demanded, remembering the brunet's promise to fix things that weren't even broken.

Phil smiled weakly. "This has nothing to do with your discussion with Wilbur. I've been planning this for months. And if you're worried about losing your deposit, I'll gladly reimburse you if it'll keep you around," he explained.

"No."

Phil raised an eyebrow. "Sorry?"

Tommy looked away, losing the courage to look his foster father in the eyes. "My... my answer is *no*. You don't have to ask. If you promise you won't send me away because of it. No, I don't want to be adopted by you, or anyone else. *No*, I don't want to be a part of your family, or any others," he spat, far too cruelly than he'd originally meant. He stared at the carpet at his feet, unable to look up as he lied through his teeth. "And I *don't* want to be your son. You don't need to reimburse me for anything. I won't be staying longer than my welcome."

He could feel Phil's eyes on him. He could feel his heart hammering in his veins. Most of all, he could feel Dream's laughter in his ears. He could hear the older boy's taunts. He could see his mocking smile. Tommy could *almost* see his bio father's cruel grin, words hitting his skin that this was what he *deserved*, that he'd always been destined for this- to be alone. He could almost see the careful frown on his mother's face.

He wished he could remember what it looked like.

"That's okay," Phil finally said. Tommy risked a glance at him. His foster father always held a carefully crafted composition- perfectly neutral and unreadable. But even Tommy could see the hurt in his eyes. Even someone as emotionally ruined as Tommy could spot the disappointment all over his face.

He swallowed bile.

“That’s okay,” Phil repeated, sounding more sure of himself. “You don’t have to. And you’re free to change your mind, if you ever want to. No one will push you on it. I love you, Tommy. I just... want you to know that.”

Tommy nodded, feeling a burn of shame grow across his cheeks and ears. “Can I go?” He asked quickly.

Phil nodded once before Tommy was out the door.

What the *fuck*?

Tommy paced his bedroom, his door carefully locked. His hands constantly switched between trembling and tapping and being shoved into his pockets. He couldn’t find a good place for them. He couldn’t seem to figure out what to do.

He glanced at his backpack, full of his school things and also his survival items. He could run. No one could stop him. He could run and make it pretty far before Phil even noticed. He had the extra money now to survive for a long time without being found.

Tommy shoved the thought away. *Stupid*. Why would he run? Phil already promised he could stay and he wouldn’t be treated any differently. No use wasting a perfectly good home life to prove a point.

But that was the problem, wasn’t it? Things were too good. He should have known it would end up here. Hurting Phil, hurting the family. And continuing to leech off them all the way. They were too nice to send him back to the group home, even if he deserved it now more than ever. They would let him live in their home and take up their space and use their resources without ever forcing him to be a part of the family- and that was the problem. Guilt swelled in Tommy’s gut. There wasn’t enough room in the house for another foster with Tommy here, living in the extra bedroom. Phil would never get another child as long as Tommy was here. Techno and Wilbur would never get another sibling. They would let him live here until he was eighteen and then what? What happens then? Tommy let out a groan and flopped down onto his bed, burying his face in his hands.

What a mess.

For not the first time, Tommy considered knocking on Phil’s door and taking it back. Apologizing and taking the papers and signing on the dotted line. It would be so much easier than this, wouldn’t it? Tommy could become a permanent part of the family. He would never have to worry about being sent back ever again. He could learn the piano and any other instrument he wanted with Wilbur. If he had infinite time, he might be able to beat Techno at Mario Kart. He could collect books to keep in his room and he could *own* things without keeping a mental tab of what he owed and the debts he had to repay. He could work in the bakery with Niki. He could see Ranboo and Tubbo whenever he wanted. He could learn to

drive. He could go to college. The timer constantly counting down over his head, ticking steadily to his eighteenth birthday, would vanish.

Selfish wishes. Tommy remembered what happened the last time he was a part of a family. He would only ruin them. He loved the Watson's too much to do that to them.

If he had to suffer to protect them from himself, then so be it.

A knock on the door startled him from his thoughts.

"Tommy?" Techno called. "Can I come in?"

Tommy wondered if his foster brothers knew about Phil's question. They must have, right? And they must have known his answer by now, too. He got up and opened the door with a scowl.

Techno's look answered his question. He knew. Pity was painted all over his face.

"Don't look at me like that," Tommy growled.

Techno tried to mask his sadness, but it only made him look pained. Tommy rolled his eyes and retreated back into his room.

"What are you doing?" His foster brother asked, taking a cautious step inside and closing the door behind him.

"Wallowing."

Techno frowned as Tommy collapsed back down onto the bed with a grunt. "Any particular reason?"

Tommy rolled his eyes again and threw an arm over his face. "Don't act like you don't know. If you're here to lecture me, or to tell me I'm making a mistake, just get it over with," he snapped.

Techno sighed and sat down on his desk chair to face him. His leg bounced in anticipation and Tommy found himself matching the pattern with his fingers. He stopped quickly. They waited in silence as Techno seemed to try and find his wording.

The older rubbed the back of his neck. "I said yes right away when Phil asked. I knew within the first week of being here that I wanted Phil to be my dad, and I wanted this to be my forever home. I knew, just like maybe I always knew, that a family like this was hard to come by, and I didn't want to waste my chance. You won't find a brother like Wilbur anywhere else. And you definitely won't find a parent like Phil. They're both one of a kind. It's a miracle they managed to find each other, and bring me in, and eventually you too. What are the chances that people like us all ended up under the same roof, right?" Techno said slowly.

Tommy raised his eyebrow and lowered his arm slowly. What was the point of this?

“I thought I didn’t deserve a family either, when I was younger,” Techno admitted quietly. Tommy stilled, watching with wide eyes. Such a confession was completely out of character for his brother. He sat up in interest. “My mom gave me up before I was even born. My dad was never there to begin with. I was raised by my grandparents, but they were old and tired, and they didn’t really have the energy or patience to raise another kid. And then they died, and I had no one. I thought that was the future I deserved, that it was something I was meant for. We all think like that, in the system. We bounce from house to house without ever finding love or acceptance anywhere, and it makes us think we’re unlovable.

“I thought I would be unlovable forever. And then my social worker told me that there was a family out there specifically asking for me, that a foster brother from my past had remembered me and wanted me again. And I felt... I felt *loved*. I came here and I was absolutely smothered in it. And that’s really hard to adjust to, when you’ve been living without it for so long. It felt weird, I wasn’t used to it, and sometimes I felt like I didn’t deserve it. I was only alone for two and a half years. I can’t even imagine nine. Or seventeen. I know it’s hard, and it feels impossible. I’m not gonna tell you that you’re making a mistake or lecture you. But I want you to know that you’re not alone and you are loved, even if it feels like it’s something you can’t achieve.”

Tommy said nothing, voice dead in his throat. Techno looked at him with a strangely blank expression. “You don’t need to say yes. You don’t even need to say no. It’s not gonna change the fact that you are loved, and you’ll never stop being loved. You deserve a family, even if you ultimately decide you don’t want one. You deserve good things. We’ll remind you every single day if we have to.”

Such emotion from Techno was unnerving. Tommy had never seen anything like it in his ten months of living here. It made him feel nervous. What exactly was Techno playing at? If he really meant that Tommy didn’t need to change his decision, then what was the point of all this?

Techno cleared his throat, suddenly looking awkward. “If you wanna talk about it, I’m here for you. We all are, actually. It’ll be okay,” he muttered.

Tommy stared at him blankly until Techno got to his feet and gave him one last weak smile before leaving the room. He felt sick.

What was he supposed to do now? His fingers jittered nervously against his leg.

He pulled out his phone.

Tommy’s head was fuzzy.

The car was warm and the bass of the music playing through the aux pounded in his ears. Quackity was singing along, wailing in an off-key and joyful tone, and Tommy couldn’t

make out any words. He didn't mind, though. He preferred it this way, if he was honest. His veins were warm with liquor, cheeks red from intoxication, and the only thing that existed was here and now in this car with Schlatt and Quackity, and the music they were being smothered by.

Quackity's voice cracked on a high note and Schlatt howled with laughter from the driver's seat as he turned his blinker on. He was painfully sober, but he always said Quackity drank enough for the both of them on nights like this. Tommy watched the streetlights pass by in a blur with a grin. He didn't know how long he'd been out with his friends. He'd turned his phone off hours ago, after Ranboo had texted him about a weekend sleepover. Tommy couldn't remember why, but the text message had made him feel nauseous. In fact, he'd felt ridiculously sick the first few hours they'd been together. Not like he could remember anymore, and not like he cared. He was perfectly content to sit in the backseat of Schlatt's truck with alcohol in his blood and Quackity's singing in his ears.

He sat up when they pulled onto a familiar street.

Schlatt glanced at him in the rearview mirror, sensing his movement. "Alright there?" He asked over the music.

Tommy frowned, eyebrows furrowing. He wasn't sure. He couldn't remember.

They stopped in front of the white house with green shutters. *Oh*. Tommy's stomach dropped. He looked back at Schlatt nervously. *That's why he was sick*.

Schlatt seemed unsympathetic. "C'mon, kid. It's past three in the morning. I can only kidnap you for so long before Wilbur comes for my throat. Go get some sleep," he said.

Tommy nodded, voice caught in his throat, and opened the car door. He listened to Quackity's slurred goodbye, the sound of the car pulling away from the curb, the bass beat growing more and more distant as the truck left him there alone. Tommy stood in the driveway and stared at the house. All the lights seemed to be off, which was good. The family might not even have noticed he was gone.

He knew that was a lie. He tried to convince himself anyway.

It was nice outside. The late April night had none of its usual chill. Tommy closed his eyes, feeling the air on his skin and the liquor in his cheeks, before sighing and making his way into the house. He crept upstairs as carefully as he could, avoiding the creaky parts of the floorboards that he had memorized. He noted that Wilbur's light was still on, glowing from the crack underneath his door. Tommy held his breath as passed.

His room was warm. It was too warm. He opened his window and stood still for a moment. It was much cooler outside. He hesitated, knowing this was probably a bad idea considering how drunk he was, and then climbed out onto the little roof overhang under his window. He took a seat and leaned against the house with a contented sigh.

He didn't know how long he sat out there. He knew that the night sky was bright and the moon was full. He knew that he should've grabbed a sweater before he came out here. And

he knew that he shouldn't have drank as much as he did.

Tommy knew so many things.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

He yelped in surprise and turned towards the voice. Wilbur was sticking his head through Tommy's bedroom window, staring at him incredulously.

Tommy relaxed after a moment when he realized it was just his brother. "Oh. Scared the shit outta me, Wil," he grinned.

Wilbur narrowed his eyes. "Are you *drunk*?" He demanded.

He waved a nonchalant hand towards him. "Drunk is an ugly word. Look how pretty tonight is. Don't spoil it with ugly words," he sighed, letting his head fall back to rest against the house.

Wilbur raised an eyebrow. "You shouldn't be out there if you're drunk, Toms. It's dangerous. I don't want you to fall. Come back inside," he said, voice softening.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "But 'ts so pretty tonight. Come sit with me, Wil," he said, patting the space beside him. "You'll keep me safe."

Wilbur hesitated, looking carefully at him and then the roof beneath them, before slowly climbing out. He took a seat next to him. They both stared out into the backyard in silence.

Finally, he spoke. "I didn't hear you come in. Schlatt told me he dropped you off. I was just in your room to check on you. I didn't mean to invade your space," he said quietly.

Tommy shrugged. "I don't mind," he dismissed. It was a little colder now than it was before, but the liquor in his veins was more than enough to keep him warm.

Wilbur was quiet for a moment more before speaking again. "I didn't know you had even left before Schlatt told me you were with him. I wish you wouldn't go to him so often," he admitted.

Tommy scoffed. "As if you don't do the same thing. Don't lecture me, Wil. You and I are in the same sinking boat," he said, closing his eyes. His head spun in the darkness. It was a nice feeling.

"I'm an adult," Wilbur argued.

"Not adult enough," Tommy reminded him. He opened his eyes again and let his vision swim for a moment before blinking away the blurriness.

Wilbur grumbled.

Tommy hummed quietly, giving soft background music to the gentle breeze in the oak tree.

“That’s one of my EP songs,” Wilbur pointed out.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. He hadn’t realized, but he shrugged anyway. “‘t’s good,” he said with a grin. “Why wouldn’t I know it? You know, when you’re a famous musician and shit I’m gonna get to tell people I knew you once.”

Wilbur didn’t say anything to that. Tommy finally pried his eyes away from the sky to look at him. His brother looked mildly sick. He licked his lips before opening his mouth. “Why…” Wilbur started, sounding nervous. “Why’d you say no, Tommy?”

Tommy tilted his head, confused. Maybe if he were sober, he’d know how to answer that, or what it meant. Instead, he asked another question. “Why’d you guys foster me?”

Wilbur looked at him curiously. “What do you mean?” He asked.

Tommy looked back at the oak tree. His fingertips were tingly. “You and Techno… you had been adopted for, what? Six years? Six *years* before I got here. There weren’t any other foster kids before me. Phil… Phil adopted Techno and that was it. I know how the system works. His name must’ve been taken off the list… the one of potential fosters. Otherwise the social workers would’ve jumped on him to take in more kids,” he explained.

Wilbur snorted. “You know too much, Toms. Even when you’re drunk,” he teased.

Tommy frowned. He knew so many things. “So why did Phil put his name back on that list after so many years?” He continued. “Why… am I here?”

The brunet grimaced. “It was a long decision. It kind of took over the household for a while. I guess we all just felt like there was something missing. There was the empty room down the hall. The fourth chair at the dining table. And Phil had preached to us about helping when we could all our lives. He believes that we should always do our best to help those that are less fortunate than us. He’d been wanting to foster again for a long time, but he was worried about how Techno and I would react and how it might affect us,” he explained slowly. Wilbur moved a little closer to him and Tommy leaned against his brother’s shoulder without thinking about it. “But after a lot of discussion we decided that we needed to. We looked at a *ton* of foster files, but none of them felt right. And then Phil let the agency know that he would take in emergency placements. And, well, here you are. We couldn’t have imagined it working out any better.”

Tommy was quiet, taking the words in. He was having a hard time registering certain phrases.

“Emergency placements don’t last this long,” he finally whispered. “They’re… they’re for emergencies. For kids to go temporarily before another place for them can be found. The group home was full when I left my last home, and I was supposed to go back there when… when space opened up.”

“Phil requested you stay here,” Wil said with a soft smile. “He asked the agency for full foster status and it was granted. It hasn’t been an emergency placement for months. Since Phil registered you for school here, at least.”

Tommy barely heard the words. “I shouldn’t still be here,” he insisted. “Emergency placements are temporary.”

Wilbur snorted. “This *is* temporary. Because of you, at least, you’ll only be here another year maximum,” he said with an edge of bitterness.

Tommy didn’t pick up on it. “Why... only a year?” He slurred.

Wilbur laughed, but it was cold. “Because you’re renting an apartment, Toms. You’re leaving, remember? This is what you wanted. You wanted to leave.”

Tommy frowned. That didn’t sound right. “I thought... birthday wishes were supposed to come true,” he scowled. He brought his knees up to his chest. “That’s what everyone’s told me.”

Wilbur looked at him strangely. “Did you wish to stay?” He asked.

Tommy’s scowl disappeared in an instant, replaced by a shit-eating grin. “Can’t tell birthday wishes, Wil. That’s the whole deal, right? They’re a secret,” he teased.

Wilbur scoffed and refocused on the yard below them, eyebrows furrowing in annoyance.

Tommy looked up at the sky, letting moonlight hit his skin. “Y’know, I’ve had emergency placements last a long time. Puffy’s house was an emergency, too. Lasted... over a year there. People feel bad for you when you’re hurt. Wanna keep you around for a while. Makes people feel better about themselves,” he laughed.

Wil raised an eyebrow. “What? That’s not true.”

He snorted, utterly amused in his intoxicated state. “Sure it is, Wil. You feel sorry for me. You want to fix me, make me all happy and shit. I’ve seen it a million times before. I showed up on your doorstep with a concussion and bandages and you... you decided you had to do something about it. I went to Puffy’s house with a broken nose and black eye and she kept me there as long as she could. You... feel good about yourself when you think you’re helping me. You’re gonna look at me and tell me that I’m wrong?” He giggled.

Wilbur scowled. “You’re wrong,” he said bluntly. “That’s not how family works.”

Tommy laughed again, a little manically. “Well, I suppose I wouldn’t know, then,” he teased.

Wil didn’t look amused. He hesitated before speaking again. “Tell me about your family, Toms,” he whispered.

Tommy side eyed him curiously. “So what? You think because I’ve been drinking, I’ll just spill all my secrets?” He asked with an amused smile. Wilbur looked away. Tommy stared at him before speaking again. “You know everything, anyway.”

“Tell me about your mom,” Wilbur requested gently.

Tommy stiffened, the smile dropping from his face instantly.

“You were nonverbal for *five days* because of her. We pretend it didn’t happen, but it *did*. It was scary, Toms. The only times you’ve ever talked about your life before foster care, you’ve never mentioned her. She’s always carefully crafted out of the story,” he continued on, gaining confidence as he went. Tommy squeezed his eyes shut, as if that would drown his foster brother out.

“She’s none of your business,” he snapped, all the amusement from his voice gone and replaced by ice.

“I know you’re a liar,” Wilbur pushed, seemingly set on this new goal of his. “I’ve read your foster file. It was in Phil’s office. You told us your bio dad was dead, but he’s not. You’re legally an orphan, but he’s still listed on the paper. He’s alive. Are you lying about your mom too?”

Tommy pushed away from the brunet angrily. The air suddenly felt cold. Freezing. His face flushed hot. “No,” he snarled. “No, that’s not a lie.”

“And why would I believe you-”

“I found her body,” Tommy whispered.

There was just something about night time that made secrets sharable.

Wilbur froze, eyes wide and mouth still open. The whole night seemed to grow silent. The whole world was holding its breath.

When Tommy was ten, he fell out of a tree. His sneaker lost traction on a branch and he found himself in the air before he could catch himself. He hit the ground, miraculously unharmed, with nothing but a severe daze. He remembered when he opened his eyes, the world was completely silent and still. It was like the sky was watching him, waiting with hope to see if he would rise again. When the daze passed and his hearing came back, the world roared back in his ears, along with his foster mother’s distant yelling. It was too loud after so much silence.

He felt the same way right now.

Tommy stared at the oak tree without really seeing it. He wrapped his arms around his knees for warmth. Alcohol was making his head fuzzy. He shouldn’t be saying this. He *knew* he shouldn’t be saying this. And yet-

“She committed suicide,” he admitted, grief heavy in his chest. He suddenly felt breathless-the high of an almost decade-kept secret pouring out all at once. “My bio dad always said I killed her. I was too much of a nuisance. If I was lovable, she would’ve stayed.”

Wilbur *choked*. “*Tommy-*” he started, incredulous.

“They thought it was my father,” he continued on, not hearing Wilbur at all. “He beat the shit out of us enough that the cops thought my dad might’ve killed her. But he was down at the

bar with... *so* many witnesses to confirm he was there. She swallowed a whole bottle of painkillers when I was in the next room... and that was that.”

“Tommy-” Wilbur tried again.

“But I guess the investigation might’ve been good. All the police around meant they could see what was happening in the house. My dad was arrested for child abuse three weeks after. One of the cops said that might’ve been my mom’s plan all along. Bring the authorities in to investigate and find out the truth. To *save* me. But they... they didn’t know. They didn’t *know* her. How would they *know that*?”

He choked back a sob. He didn’t remember when he started crying. “I wanted to know when my dad would be home, and I thought she was napping. I tried to wake her up. We weren’t supposed to call the police in my house. But I couldn’t... she wouldn’t wake up. So I called. I think if my dad had gotten home before the cops got there, he would’ve killed me. It took the police two hours to find me when they arrived because I was hiding in the woods.”

Wilbur pulled him into a hug and Tommy allowed himself to be enveloped, burying his face in the older’s shoulder. Every part of him was trembling- not just his hands.

"I'm sorry," Wilbur whispered, weak. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have asked. I should've known better. I'm so sorry, Toms."

Tommy hiccupped. "You... can't tell the Watson's," he begged, dazed.

The body against him froze, stiffening up immediately. "...Why not?"

He wiped his tears on Wilbur's sweater. The older didn't seem to mind. "They can't know," he insisted. "They *can't*. I like it here." He pulled away, letting cool air hit tear-stained skin. Wilbur laughed weakly.

Tommy didn't know what was so funny. He didn't get it.

"I don't understand," Wilbur said, looking almost amused, though still mostly sick.

Tommy grumbled. "You don't understand anything," he slurred. He leaned his head back against the house and closed his eyes, exhausted. His stomach turned uneasily.

"Did you think we would judge you?"

Tommy squeezed his eyes shut harder, but somehow it still didn't block out the noise. Odd. The brunet carried on. "Did you think we..." He paused. "Did you think the *Watson's* would hate you for it? Something you couldn't control?"

Tommy's eyes opened a sliver. His eyesight was hazy. He licked his lips and his mouth still felt dry. "I've lived in almost... two *dozen* foster houses. The shortest stay was when I was thirteen, a record four hours and twelve minutes," he started tiredly. "Religious family. Took one look at my file and kicked me out. Hannah hadn't even left town yet. They decided they couldn't love someone so *cursed*. Someone... who destroyed families. What if I caused it to

happen again in my new family?" His voice cracked weakly. "Hannah took it out of my file, after that. Moved it to confidential, said it was for my safety."

"*Tommy*," the brunet next to him sounded heartbroken. "You don't-"

"I do," he interrupted firmly. "I *do*. I destroy families. It's followed me my whole life. Wherever I go."

"You didn't *cause*-"

"I *did*," Tommy said, staring at the sky.

"You *didn't*," Wilbur's voice was insistent and vicious. Tommy looked at him sharply, startled by the harshness. "You didn't *cause* anything! None of this was your fault! How could anyone ever think that?" He demanded. "*You were eight*."

"I was old enough," Tommy insisted.

Wilbur sat up, looking angry. Tommy was entirely too tired to flinch. "You were a *child*. You're a *child*, Tommy." Wilbur snarled, though it clearly was not directed at him. Wilbur stared out at the backyard like he was making sure the whole world was listening.

"I think Dream told Puffy," Tommy whispered, not really registering Wilbur at all. "I think he found out somehow. He was so clever. And I think he told her. I think that was the final straw against me before I had to leave."

"I doubt that was-"

"I couldn't bear it," Tommy interrupted with a sigh. "If it happened again. If it happened *here*. They can't know. I couldn't bear it if they looked at me the same way everyone else did."

Wilbur paused, seemingly thinking hard. "Tommy, we... the Watson's won't judge you. They'll know you're not at fault," he said slowly.

"Can't risk it," Tommy insisted, slurred.

Wilbur looked down at his hands. "Is that... is that why you said no?" He whispered, like he was too afraid to hear the answer.

Tommy closed his eyes, a million thoughts and emotions flowing through his limbs, elevated by drunkenness. He felt shaky and uncertain. This wasn't enjoyable anymore. How long had it been since Schlatt dropped him off? Was it too late to go back?

"Tommy," Wilbur said more firmly. "Did you not want to be adopted because you were afraid we would find out about your mom?"

He swallowed the rock in his throat. "No," he whispered. "That's not why."

“Then why?” Wilbur asked, looking at him directly. “I just want to understand. What was the reason? Why-”

“I love this family,” Tommy said under his breath, like it was a scandalous secret. Wilbur froze, looking at him with wide eyes, and he went on. “I do. I- I tried not to. I tried more than anything to hate you guys and to stay distant and to make you hate *me* because then it would all be so much easier, right?” He took a deep, shaky breath. “But I love it here. I love this family. That’s why I had to say no. I can’t be selfish.”

Wilbur scrunched his eyebrows. “I don’t get it. You said no because you love us? I don’t-”

“The things I love,” Tommy said with a definitive sigh. “Get ruined. I destroy them. And I love the Watson’s too much to let it happen. If I have to be sad forever to keep them okay, then so be it.”

Wilbur stared at him for a silent, eternal second. “That’s wrong,” he finally said with a frown. “That’s a horrible, self-deprecating thought, and I think you know it, Toms.”

Tommy sat up straight, tilting his chin upwards like he could absorb the moonlight directly into his skin. He paused, getting his bearings, and stood up. He only wobbled a little. Wilbur looked on in alarm.

“You’re right,” Tommy admitted, pushing his hands into his pockets. “You’re always right, Wil. I’m just a stupid kid. What do I know about love and family? Everything I’ve ever experienced has been twisted and wrong and I know it perfectly well.” He kicked at the roofing halfheartedly.

Wilbur stood up next to him, looking troubled. “Tommy...” he started.

Tommy threw his arms out dramatically. Wilbur winced as a wild hand hit his chest. “Why even bother, right? We both know I won’t change. Why bother even trying with me when you know what a battle it’ll be every single time?” He said with a strangled laugh. His chest felt tight.

Wilbur frowned. “You’ve already changed, Toms. And you’ll keep changing. It’s human nature to learn and grow.”

Tommy closed his eyes against the voice, letting his arms fall to his sides and looking up at the stars. “When I was little I didn’t think I was human. I could look at you and see a different fucking species. Nothing in common at all,” he admitted. When he opened his eyes, the stars seemed to glitter.

Wil bit the inside of his cheek. “Why don’t we go inside? It’s warmer,” he said softly. He placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, but Tommy was quick to shrug him off.

“Sometimes,” Tommy sighed, closing his eyes again. “...Sometimes I think my mom had the right idea. She always said she would take me wherever she went, anyway.” He opened his eyes and ignored Wilbur’s look to peer over the side of the roof.

Wilbur wrapped a strong arm around his waist immediately and pushed him back against the house, away from the edge. “Inside,” he demanded, voice stony and firm. All the softness and patience had disappeared from him in an instant. “Now. I’m not kidding around, Tommy.”

Tommy managed to give a mischievous grin. His face felt warm. “Scared you, huh?” He joked as he passed his foster brother to get back to his bedroom window.

Wilbur didn’t laugh.

When they were back inside, Wilbur locked the window. Tommy collapsed onto his bed with a contented sigh. He felt light- almost like he was flying.

“I’m flying,” he told Wil seriously.

“You’re wasted,” Wilbur shot back. “I’m getting you some water. Don’t move, Toms. I’m being serious.”

He watched Wil leave the room and closed his eyes. He felt so *light*. Like the secrets of his past were fifty pounds on each shoulder, always weighing him down, and he suddenly took them and threw them away forever. He would never have them back now. He would be light and weightless for the rest of his life, flying as high as he could.

He didn’t know if that was a good thing. He wasn’t sure if he was scared of heights.

Wilbur returned with a glass of water and a waste basket in hand just in time for Tommy to grab the trash can from him and heave. He cried as his stomach turned.

Wil stayed the whole time, making him drink water when he was done, and eventually covering him with a blanket when he was too tired to keep his head up any longer. It reminded Tommy of another time and similar situation a lifetime ago, and another Watson brother who cared too much, but it was all hazy. Everything was hazy. For maybe the millionth time, Tommy wished he would be sober forever.

Tommy knew it was getting late into the night, and he knew that it was getting around the time his father came home angry and violent. He knew that the world seemed to grow quiet around this hour, like it was holding its breath and hoping against the odds for him to come out on the other side.

Tommy knew his family wasn’t normal. He knew that perfectly well.

At eight years old, Tommy knew so many things.

He went to ask his mother. She always knew exactly what he wanted to know. Tommy knew so many things, but his mom knew everything in the whole world.

“Mom,” he whispered, trying not to startle her. He knew she needed sleep more than anything.

She was so tired today.

And the next few minutes were spent as a blur of tears and panic. Of staring at the home phone and fear. Of talking to the nice lady on the line with instructions to stay where you are and don't touch anything, okay?

And the next thing he knew, Tommy was deep in the forest. It was the most familiar part of his life. The trees and grass were more comforting than his own bedroom. He could have navigated the low branches and bushes with ease in the dark, but now he let stray twigs and thorns brush his skin and trip his feet. The pain was welcomed in comparison to whatever else was going on in his head. He didn't know what was going on. He didn't know what he was feeling. He didn't know what to do.

What was he going to do?

And maybe for the first time, Tommy knew nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

Whew. Thanks for reading!!

Spot the Lovejoy reference hehe

This arc is a bit of a downward spiral for Tommy (though it'll get better pinky promise). Please be safe while reading! If you're struggling or dealing with negative thoughts, please don't hesitate to reach out to someone <3

Next chapter within the week!

Unlovable

Chapter Summary

Tommy has always been running. It's the only thing he's good at.

Chapter Notes

Chapter TW: Blood

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

Tommy never seemed to drink enough to forget. There was always that nagging memory that made him remember absolutely everything, no matter how hard he tried not to.

He pretended that warm night in April didn't happen. He had always been good at pretending. Wilbur didn't bring up any of the hard topics they discussed, though Tommy had a horrible feeling that he had told the rest of the family judging by the soft looks and gentle tones he was getting. Not to mention the ridiculously frequent knocks on his door "just to check in."

Tommy tried to convince himself it was fine. Everything was *fine*. If he told himself enough times, maybe he could ignore the life falling to pieces around him.

He went to school. Finals were coming up fast, and Tommy had fallen quite a bit behind in the past few months. He hung out with his friends. He helped Phil with dinner. He avoided Wilbur's gaze as much as possible.

He tried for normalcy.

He wished he knew what that was.

The month of May brought warmth back into his hands and sunshine back to his life. If only the cheery weather could be reflected in his mood. He wanted, maybe more than anything, to be content with how things were. This new arrangement in the household was making him nervous. Although Phil had promised that Tommy didn't *need* to say yes, or even make a solid decision on adoption at all, he still felt like the entire family was watching and holding its breath for him to come around. The new situation was making him feel worse, as now he couldn't pretend he was living in the Watson house as just a foster and he couldn't pretend the Watson's didn't actually want him around.

Tommy wasn't *that* good at pretending.

He turned a page.

In the Odyssey, things were easy- not to call Odysseus' quest simple by any means. But Tommy always liked the book because the hero knew what he was doing. He fought the monsters, solved problems, and *won*. There was never any question about it. All Odysseus wanted was to go home, and he accomplished just that. He wandered for ten years, fighting battles and surviving, before going back home again.

Maybe a small part of him always resonated with that.

Tommy flipped to a new chapter. Isolation seemed to be his way of coping with things, and he was doing just that. He'd been holed up in his room for the better part of the week now, reading. He'd gotten through The Library of Greek Mythology in three days and then sped through The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe in another two. The only thing left now was his old classic- where the hero always prospered with his intelligence and bravery, and the monsters burned away like ash.

He flipped a page and scowled when it came loose from the spine. He shoved it back in and made note of the page number to tape it later. He closed the book with a frown.

The book was falling apart as quickly as he was, it seemed.

Maybe for the first time in his life, Tommy was bored of reading his book. He certainly preferred to be in his room though. It was better than whatever waited for him on the other side of the door. He had found himself arguing with the family more often than not. It wasn't solely his fault. Wilbur was argumentative and Phil frustrated him. Techno's passivity bothered him. Tommy was defensive by nature. Thus, when Phil's attentive gaze was on him too long or when Wilbur picked a fight, an argument almost always broke out. It was tiring-exhausting, even- but Tommy just couldn't seem to stop. Maybe some small part of him believed that fighting enough would make the Watson's finally realize he wasn't worth the effort and send him away.

Maybe.

So overall, it was safer in his room. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on him. It was the Watson's generosity that allowed him a room to hide from them to begin with. And it was because they cared too much that they were arguing in the first place. Something like this had never happened to him in the system before.

Not that any of this was something he'd experienced before.

Tommy had always thought he'd seen it all. Every type of house and family. Every kind of foster kid and parent. He'd lived in twenty-three foster houses- far more than anyone else in the group home. He'd always considered himself an expert on behavior, family dynamics, and relationships simply because he'd lived through so many. He had navigated even the roughest houses with ease, taking the blunt of every blow with the intelligence and bravery of Odysseus.

So why was this house so *different*?

It was all making Tommy anxious beyond belief. The constant attention and worry was driving him insane. It was dinnertime in the house, and three Watson's and one foster kid were sitting at the table.

"Tommy, could you pass the butter?" Phil asked.

The words had barely left Phil's lips when Tommy reacted. "I don't know what you *want* from me," he replied angrily, throwing down his fork and knife in frustration. It was an explosion following the slow build up of resentment and irritation over the past month. He just couldn't keep it in.

The table quieted, all eyes on him. Phil blinked. "I... I want you to pass the butter," he repeated with confusion.

Tommy pouted. "You're all *looking* at me," he snapped angrily.

Phil raised an eyebrow. "You're talking. Why wouldn't we look at you?" He asked.

"No," Tommy insisted irately. They just weren't getting it. He paused, trying to find his words. How could he possibly explain that he was talking about *always*, not just right now? "You're just- I *just*-"

Silence.

He huffed in annoyance, words dying in his throat. He was both angry at the family and angry at himself for not being able to describe his emotions. Slowly, he reached over and picked up the tray of butter to pass over to Phil. His foster father took it without a word.

Techno cleared his throat awkwardly. Tommy picked up his utensils again. Dinner resumed.

Tommy *knew* he was being unreasonable. This was not the time or the place for a serious talk, and he also knew that Phil probably had no idea what was upsetting him. To Phil, being extra nice and attentive was just a part of life. It was how he showed love. It was something Tommy just couldn't seem to get used to, and something that was irritating him to no end.

Phil hummed thoughtfully. "Y'know Tommy, maybe we could start looking into regular therapy for you. If that's something that still interests you," he said without looking up from his plate.

Tommy froze and his eyes narrowed. "Why?" He demanded. "Does my behavior bother you?"

Phil's eyebrows shot up. "Of course not," he replied steadily. "I just know we were working towards that. We haven't discussed it in a while. I wanted to know how you felt."

Tommy set down his fork. "If you're trying to patronize me-" he started angrily.

"That is not my intention," Phil interrupted firmly.

"Well then I don't know why you'd bring it up right now," Tommy shot back.

"*Tommy,*" Wilbur said with a raised eyebrow. "You're being a prick. Take a breath."

He spluttered as Phil refocused his attention on his oldest son to scold him. Tommy tuned them both out. He got to his feet and stormed up to his room before anyone could stop him.

Tommy arrived home from school. He quickly realized that was a mistake.

He took in the living room as he set his backpack down by the door. Techno was on the couch, reading. Wilbur paced the length of the carpet. Neither of them looked up as he walked into the house. He crept as quietly as he could to the kitchen. Grabbing a snack before heading upstairs to do homework without starting something with either of his brothers would be the best case scenario here. Of course, Tommy should know by now that things never turned out the way he wanted them to.

"How was school?" Techno called without looking up from his book.

Tommy cringed and opened the refrigerator door. "Fine," he answered bluntly.

Techno didn't reply. Tommy grabbed an apple and retreated back towards the door to grab his backpack. The tension in the living room made him pause. "Why aren't you in class?" He asked. He knew that both Wilbur and Techno had school at this time on Wednesdays.

"I have a bone to pick with you," Wilbur replied harshly. On the couch, Techno groaned.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Well I don't really have time today, king. I'm sure we can save it for the weekend. I've got homework," he snapped. He continued walking.

Wilbur followed him like an angry shadow. "You've been a twat all week," he shot.

"And I'm sure I'm about to hear all about it," Tommy sighed, unconcerned. He grabbed hold of his bag.

"You're being such a *brat*. Every time I think I can feel bad for you, you go back and throw it in my face," Wilbur argued angrily.

Tommy froze and turned to glare at the taller. “I don’t *want* you to feel bad for me. Actually, I can’t think of anything I want *less*. Fuck off,” he growled, feeling his heart in his throat. Annoyed, he pushed past his foster brother to make his way to the stairs.

“Back to holing up in your room?” Wilbur shot, throwing a glare over his shoulder as he went back to pacing.

He shouldered his backpack. “Yep,” he agreed easily. He was far too tired of fighting to make any kind of snarky reply, and he had far too much homework to worry about in the meantime.

Wilbur scowled. “Of course. What else was I expecting?” He snapped. “A single display of emotion one day, a month of hiding the next. I know how this goes.”

“Mhm,” Tommy replied, disinterested. He made his way to the stairs.

“I don’t know why we even bother,” Wilbur shot. “You’re such a pain in the ass to deal with. I can’t imagine why dad said you could stick around.”

Tommy froze, hand on the stair railing.

“*Wil*,” Techno warned, head snapping up from his book page.

Wilbur whirled around with a grin. “*What?* We all know it’s true. What’s the point in pretending?” He taunted.

Tommy turned and studied his oldest brother carefully. *Oh*, he realized. *Oh, of course*. Wilbur was having a bad day. He should’ve guessed from the jittery pacing and arrogant tone. Not to mention Techno sitting there, watching him. *Oh*, he realized all at once. *This was going to be bad*. He knew that Wilbur didn’t mean the things he said when he got this way. He knew that the older would probably regret it fiercely when it passed. And he knew it was no use picking a fight now. Wilbur would only strive to get a reaction out of him, to create a game in which he was not the only player. He wanted to drag Tommy down with him because he knew Tommy was the easiest target in the house- impatient and unattached to Wilbur’s own feelings.

Tommy knew so many things.

He turned his back on the living room. It wasn’t his problem.

“Go!” Wilbur shot. “Run away! Continue to be perfectly predictable, Tommy. It’s the best thing about you.”

Tommy raised an eyebrow and considered. He had a foot on the first stair. He could just agree and escape, let Wilbur deal with it himself when he came to his senses. He could take the words to heart and curl away in his bed to mourn on his own.

But they’d been fighting for weeks now. What was one more?

“So are you throwing a little tantrum because you’re bored?” Tommy asked with a raised eyebrow. He set his backpack back down. “Don’t you have something better with your life to

do?”

Techno closed his book sharply. Wilbur grinned wider, having found his new game player. “Well this is just so much more entertaining,” he teased coldly.

Tommy rolled his eyes. “Get a job,” he snapped.

“Get a family,” Wilbur shot back just as fast.

Tommy winced and tried to hide it. Techno sprang to his feet and grabbed hold of Wilbur’s arm. “Wil, *enough*,” he said firmly. “I’m serious. Go back to your room.”

Wilbur didn’t seem concerned with his brother’s pleas. He turned to Tommy with a gloating smile. “Need Techie to defend you? I thought you were some big independent man,” he smirked.

“You’re really too old to be picking fights like this, Wil,” Tommy replied steadily. “It’s getting embarrassing.”

Wilbur faked a look of offense. “You’re one to talk,” he shot back.

Tommy sighed. “Nothing new then, big man. If we’re done here, I have homework to do,” he said, turning to head back to the stairs. Before he could take a step, Wilbur reached out and clamped a hand on his shoulder, keeping him in place. A thousand memories flashed behind his eyes at once and he yelped before he could stop himself, flinching out of the grip and whirling back around instantly.

Wilbur *laughed*. It was a cruel sound. Techno bit his lip nervously before calling out loudly, “*Phil!*”

The brunet turned on his brother, eyes narrowing. “Oh, that’s real nice. Tattle-tale to *dad*. Grow up,” he snapped.

“You’re being a dickhead,” Techno replied, shooting back an equally cruel glare. Tommy took a step backwards towards the stairs anxiously. He’d never seen Wilbur and Techno legitimately argue. They were practically twins, bound at the hip through shared experience and family. Although a fighter, Tommy had never witnessed Techno grow angry enough to deal with Wilbur’s moods with something other than reluctant passivity before. He could hear Phil’s footsteps approaching from upstairs, and for the first time in a long time Tommy was glad for his presence.

“You’re defending him over *me*,” Wilbur cried.

Phil descended the stairs. “What’s going on in here?” He asked, sounding concerned.

Neither Wilbur nor Techno turned to greet him. They stared at each other with level glares, a battle of two forces of opposite ideals and equal power. “What do you need defending from? You’re being an ass and you know it,” Techno growled.

Phil stepped off the stairs to stand next to Tommy, watching the scene unfold intently. Wilbur scowled, hands curling into fists. "I'm your *brother*," he whined.

Techno's expression didn't move an inch. "So is Tommy," he replied steadily.

Tommy took a step back like he'd been slapped. Phil frowned.

Wilbur's eyes grew slightly manic, "He's *not*," he shot back coldly.

"*Wilbur*," Phil finally intervened. "I think that's more than enough. Your behavior is not appropriate right now."

The brunet scowled. He turned to glare at Tommy, who had inadvertently taken a defensive step behind Phil without realizing it. "He doesn't even want to *be here*. He doesn't *want* to be your brother, Techno. He doesn't even *like* you. He doesn't like anything!" He exclaimed angrily, clearly betrayed by Techno's belief.

Phil frowned. "Wil-

"That's not true," Tommy piped up, defensive. "But maybe you would know that if you were even a little bit likable."

Phil whirled around to face him, incredulous. "*Tommy*," he scolded. "Now is hardly the time-"

"Says the boy who's *unlovable*," Wilbur interrupted cruelly.

Oh.

The words hit him straight in the chest and wrapped around his heart, squeezing tightly. He gasped, the breath knocked right out of him, and couldn't even bring himself to react when Wilbur *laughed* at his response. He heard his bio father echoed in the words, along with a million other adults and foster kids and his own thoughts rattling in his ears.

Unlovable. Unlovable. Unlovable.

The words were strangling him. He choked.

"*Wilbur!*" Phil shouted. *That* got the room's attention. Phil hardly ever raised his voice. He was always gentle and patient. Now, though, he seemed *pissed*. "You're done. Up to your room. The longer you wait, the more privileges you'll lose. Go *now*."

Wilbur scoffed. "I'm an *adult*," he argued.

Phil didn't budge. If anything, he only seemed to grow angrier. "And you live under *my* roof. I'm your father, and I'm telling you that you're *far* out of line here. I won't allow you to ruin

any progress both you *or* Tommy have made in the past few months with your tantrums.”

Wilbur paused, taking the words in. Tommy watched carefully. He’d never seen Phil genuinely punish one of his children or use this tone, and apparently it was new to the Watson sons as well judging by their stunned faces. Wil stared at his father before a crazed smile slowly grew on his face.

“I can’t believe this,” he laughed with no humor. “You’re siding with *him* over *me*. He would rather live alone for the rest of his stupid life than spend a single extra *second* in this house, and you’re choosing *him*. ”

Phil raised an eyebrow. “I’m not *choosing* anybody. I’m being a parent and breaking up a conflict. This is a safe household, and you’re posing a threat to that. I have a right to intervene as I see fit as the adult.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Wil,” Techno supplied unhelpfully.

Phil opened his mouth, most likely to scold Techno, but before he could Wilbur locked hateful eyes on Tommy, who was watching quietly from the foot of the stairs.

“This is your fault,” he growled, fire in his eyes. “I can’t remember why we ever wanted to keep you around. You make our lives harder.”

Tommy frowned, the rock in his chest growing impossibly heavier. “Look in a mirror sometime,” he shot back, though his voice shook. It was rare that words genuinely hurt him. He’d been dealt so much verbal abuse in his life that most of the time insults bounced right off of him. But to hear an insecurity he kept so close to his heart thrown back at him by the person he loved and trusted the most- there was no coming back from it. *Unlovable*. The boy who’s unlovable.

It was a weak comeback. Wilbur only laughed. “A twat as always. You never fail. No wonder no one can bear to have you around for long,” he shot.

Tommy’s hands trembled and his heart sank. Something was building behind his eyes, though he wasn’t sure if it was tears or a headache. He opened his mouth to make some pathetic rebuttal. Something, *anything*-

And for the first time since he arrived, Tommy watched Techno throw a punch.

It hit Wilbur square in the nose with a solid *crack*. Phil cried out, immediately lunging for his boys to break up the altercation, shoving them apart with an urgency rarely held by the calm man. Wilbur screamed, hands coming up instantly to protect his face from further damage, upper lip already bright red with blood. Techno backed up instantly, shaking out his hand. He didn’t seem sympathetic in the least.

Tommy watched in horrible fascination, unable to stomach it but unable to look away.

The room erupted into chaos- shouting and wailing. Phil grabbed hold of Wilbur to keep him in place just in time before he could throw himself at Techno in retaliation, hands balled into

untrained fists. Techno laughed at the failed attempt, something cold in his eyes, which only seemed to egg on his brother further. Wilbur strained against Phil's firm grasp, desperate to return whatever pain he could to Techno, tears of agony, anger, and betrayal in his eyes.

Tommy felt sick. His stomach rolled in horror. This was all his fault. If he hadn't come here, the family never would have ended up like this. Nothing like this had ever happened before he arrived in the house. He was tearing them apart, just like he knew he would. He *knew* this would happen, and he had selfishly stuck around anyway.

He brought a hand to his mouth, nauseous. He ran, barely making it to the bathroom before he retched.

Phil knocked on his bedroom door. "Tommy?" He called. "Can we talk?"

Tommy wrapped his arms around a pillow protectively, bringing it tight to his chest before giving Phil permission to enter.

"I wanted to talk to you about yesterday," Phil explained, closing the door behind him. "We're going to have a family meeting and I hope you'll join us for it, but I wanted to talk to you alone first."

Tommy shrugged, pulling the pillow closer to his chest. "I'm really sorry, Phil," he muttered. "I know better than to argue. That was all my fault. I should've just walked away."

Phil raised an eyebrow. "No, mate. It's not that at all. This isn't your fault in the slightest. Why do you feel that way?" He said, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

Tommy frowned. "Because I knew I should've just gone upstairs and ignored him. I guess I didn't realize it was a bad day for him. Or the extent of it. I just should've known better," he said quietly.

Phil tilted his head. "This wasn't your fault, Tommy," he said gently. "I'm not here to scold you. I just want to make sure you're okay."

Tommy groaned.

His foster father raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to talk about what Wil said?" He asked.

"No," Tommy shot immediately, perhaps too cruelly. "In fact, I never want to think about it ever again."

Phil frowned. "I understand that. I do hope you'll at least listen when we discuss it together. You don't have to talk if you don't want to."

Tommy shot to his feet furiously, throwing the pillow aside. He spun around to glare at Phil, feeling his ears redden. "Why are you like this?" He exclaimed, voice cracking. "I provoked Wilbur. I argued with him *knowing* that it would only turn out badly. And I made your sons *fight*. Wilbur was *bleeding*. How are you not mad at me? How am I not in trouble right now?" Although angry, his sentences came out more like pleading.

Phil blinked. "I'm not particularly happy with any of my boys right now, you included. But you're certainly not in trouble for defending yourself. Yes, it would have been better to just walk away. But you're a human being, Tommy. It's only human nature. I'm not going to punish you for that," he explained. "I know you're sorry and you regret it. That's more than enough for me."

Tommy let out a frustrated noise.

Phil stood up, keeping a respectful distance from him. "Let's go downstairs and talk about this. I promise we can work something out."

With a huff, Tommy begrudgingly followed him out the door.

Wilbur and Techno were already sitting on either side of the dinning table. Techno looked utterly bored, leaning back casually in his chair and staring at the ceiling. Wilbur kept narrowed eyes on his brother with rapt attention. He had abandoned his ice pack yesterday and now a cotton bandage sat across his nose. A brilliant purple bruise marked across one side of it.

Tommy stared at them, a sinking feeling in his stomach. He copied Phil and lowered into a seat slowly.

It was silent. Tommy squirmed uncomfortably, looking anywhere but at any of their faces. He could almost feel the tension in the air. He felt as if he could reach out and touch it. "I want to start," Phil finally said. "By saying that this space will *not* include insults, raised voices, or bad intentions. We're going to be respectful, and talk this out like mature people. Okay?"

A murmur of agreement came from both Techno and Wilbur. Tommy nodded along numbly. He watched as Phil sat back in his chair, looking at them intently. He seemed to be waiting for one of them to start.

Wilbur leaned back in similar fashion, keeping a level glare on Techno. "I'm not sorry," he admitted coldly. Tommy looked at him sharply and Wilbur finally made eye contact, maintaining a steady glower. "I *do* feel bad that it came out harsh, of course. And I know I wouldn't have said it at all if I wasn't having an episode. But it needed to be said."

Phil frowned. "No, Wilbur. It didn't. I feel as though you're not being very fair right now, and I want to get to the bottom of it," he said gently.

Wilbur sighed. "I'm only leveling the playing field here. You wanna talk about feelings? *Fine*. I feel like Tommy has been unfair to all of us, and I'm tired of it," he shot.

The rock in Tommy's chest sunk to his stomach. *This is worse*, he thought. It was worse now because Wilbur was perfectly in his own head. There was no excuse now for being cruel other than the fact that Tommy really deserved it.

"Tommy doesn't owe us anything," Phil replied calmly, raising an eyebrow. "We discussed this very thoroughly when we made the decision as a family to foster again."

Wilbur rolled his eyes. "I don't care about any of that. I don't care about his decision. Sure, I think it's obvious I wish he would've chosen differently, but I was perfectly prepared to accept that. What I don't think is fair is the fact that he storms around here like we *ruined* things. Like we personally offended him by trying to love him," he snapped.

Tommy sat forward. "I'm right *here*, dickhead. Don't talk about me like I'm not in the room," he demanded.

"Tommy," Phil scolded immediately. "You agreed to no insults at the table."

His eyebrows shot up. "He's insulting *me*! Just because he isn't swearing doesn't mean--"

"It's not an insult," Wilbur interrupted coolly. "It's only the truth, and you know it."

Phil frowned. "Okay. Let's talk about this, then. Tommy, do you feel as though your behavior recently has been appropriate?" Tommy stared, fingers jittering nervously. Phil watched him curiously. "It's not a trick question. There's no right or wrong answer. I just want to know what you think."

Silence. Tommy just didn't know how to answer that one. There was no winning it. He would be reprimanded no matter what. Wilbur would win either way.

"He's the definition of one step forward three steps back, Phil," Wilbur argued when Tommy didn't say anything. "It's like one minute he opens up and then the next he hates our guts."

Anger pooled in his stomach. "Every time I open up, you throw it back in my face!" Tommy snapped back hotly. "Don't act like I'm the fucking ass here! *Every* time I have *ever* talked to you about anything important I end up regretting it. I don't know why I never fucking learn. My fault for being an idiot, I guess."

Wilbur's eyebrows shot up, surprised.

Techno leaned forward, finally looking interested in the conversation. "You're *both* being idiots," he said flatly. "And you're both in the wrong."

Phil looked at him curiously. "How so, Techno?" He asked.

Techno pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, maintaining a level gaze on the table. "Sure, Tommy hasn't been completely fair," he started. Tommy made an indignant noise. "But that isn't his fault. You can't change how you were raised in less than a year, no matter what the circumstances are. And you can't deny that the progress he's made has been more than impressive." He turned his stare onto Wilbur. "You can't help your bad days any more than Tommy can help his ones. It doesn't change the fact that you've hurt him when they

happen, and in turn he hurts you when they're over as defense." Wilbur scoffed and opened his mouth to argue, but Techno cut him off quickly. "You're angry at Tommy because you had a vision for how fostering another brother would go, and it's not living up to your expectations," he said. "That's no one's fault but your own."

"Oh, fuck off," Wilbur spat.

"Wil," Phil quickly reprimanded.

"He *hit* me," Wil shot back immediately. Tommy flinched, glancing at the white bandage across his nose. "He didn't even say sorry. Why isn't *he* in trouble here?"

Techno raised an eyebrow. Tommy thought it made him look arrogant. "You deserved it. You don't know when to stop, and you were hurting Tommy and I in the process. I didn't want to hurt you, Wil. You know I love you, but it was too much," he explained firmly.

Phil frowned. "You know violence isn't tolerated in this household, Tech. You *are* in trouble here," he said sternly.

Techno shrugged. "And I welcome any punishment you deem worthy. I feel like it was necessary, and I won't apologize for it. Though I do recognize that I broke the rules of the house, and only for *that* am I sorry," he monotoned.

Wilbur's hands balled into fists. "I'm your *brother*. I've been your brother long before we were ever in this house. You *punched* me!" He cried.

Techno stared at him and for a brief second, Tommy could see a look of guilt. Then it was gone, and apathy was all that was left. "That's true. But if how you treated Tommy yesterday is how you treat brothers, then I don't know if I even want that," he replied easily.

Tommy's heart sank to his stomach. His fingers trembled and he held his breath, feeling ill. Wilbur's eyes widened. "Tech, he's made it perfectly clear that he doesn't *want* to be brothers. You *know* that. Tommy doesn't want to be a part of this family at all," he argued angrily, disbelief laced through his voice. He looked utterly shocked and a little sick at his brother's confession.

Techno didn't flinch. He glanced at Tommy for a moment. He wished more than anything that he could read Techno's face, get even the smallest clue as to what he was thinking or feeling. But it was all completely blank.

"It doesn't matter," Techno said. "We promised to treat Tommy the same no matter how he answered. Whether he wanted to be a part of the family or not. If you treated him like a brother before, then you can treat him like a brother now. Anything less is cruel."

"You're being ridiculous," Wilbur spat back. He crossed his arms, leaning back in his chair dismissively.

"Well you're being an ass," Techno replied just as fast.

Phil sighed. "I see we're not getting anywhere, then."

Tommy swallowed. *No*, he thought. *They were getting nowhere at all*. And he knew exactly why. He had driven a wedge between them, made Techno and Wilbur take opposite sides of a battle with Phil to flounder as mediator in the middle. It wouldn't end happily. Tommy had seen family disputes like this a million times before, though not with him at the center. One person was always slighted, an edge of bitterness and resentment at losing always there. This close-knit family unit would be ripped apart at the seams. And it was entirely Tommy's fault.

"I'm sorry," Tommy said softly, drawing surprised looks from all three of the family members. "*Fuck*, I... I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have... I never meant-

"This isn't your fault," Phil said firmly. "This is no one's fault, Tommy."

Tommy's jittering hands balled into fists. "*Isn't it, though?*" He demanded, feeling wetness grow behind his eyes. This was all getting to be too much. "My *existence* is to blame. My very *being* here is causing this."

Wilbur raised an eyebrow. "What? No. That's not what I was trying to say-

"But it's what you *meant*," Tommy insisted, voice growing by the second. "Even if you didn't know it. You *know* that this falls to me. It always does."

"Tommy-" Techno started, sounding pained.

"I tried to *warn* you!" Tommy cried. "And I'm sure Wilbur blabbed to all of you about it, huh? I tried to *tell* you this would happen! I... I know you're all good people, and you tried to convince yourselves otherwise. But how can you even deny it now?" His voice died in his throat. He met eyes with Phil. "I'm killing your family. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to. I should've known better," he whispered.

Phil frowned. "Tommy," he said, ever so gently. "That isn't true at all. You've done more for this family than you even know-

"I've cursed this family," Tommy rambled, hearing a dozen foster parents repeat the same thing in his ears. "I was selfish, and I tried to stay longer than I should have because I liked it here. It wasn't my place, and I'm so sorry for it." He stood up, shoving trembling hands into his pockets. "I'm so sorry for making you all deal with me for so long. I'll leave, and you won't have to bear through this anymore. Wilbur and Techno can be brothers again, and Phil can have his family back. You can foster another kid and get your completed family. I'll be out of your hair before you know it."

He paused. Three pairs of wide eyes were staring at him, too stunned to speak. Tommy's stomach churned uneasily. "I'm *sorry*," he repeated. "For causing all this. And I'm sorry for loving you."

He dashed out of the room and up the stairs before he could hear anything else.

His heart hammered in his throat and wind rushed in his ears. He slammed his bedroom door shut behind him, twisting the lock, and tried to breathe. *Four... Seven.... Eight...* This was for

the best. This was how it *had* to end. He always knew it. He'd been pushing it off for months now. He was only supposed to be here for two months, *maximum*.

He glanced around the room, snatching his backpack off the ground. He emptied it of the extra things, leaving behind only his original survival essentials. He grabbed an extra tshirt and pair of jeans from the drawer and stuffed them inside. Then he glanced around. Tommy spied his switch charging on the nightstand, his new comic book on the desk, the mini keyboard Wilbur got him propped up by the closet. He closed his eyes, pained. He would need to leave everything but what he came here with behind. He slapped the money for the extra clothes on the dresser and slung his backpack over his shoulder.

Frantic knocking on the door startled him from his mission. "*Tommy,*" Phil called from the other side. "Let's talk about this, please. You don't need to go anywhere."

"Go away," Tommy demanded. "Leave me alone."

"Tommy, please. I promise, things are fine. You're not hurting this family. We love having you around," his foster father pleaded.

"You don't need to lie to me anymore," Tommy insisted. "Now go *away*."

There was a beat of silence. Then, "...Okay," Phil said slowly. "No one is lying to you. I understand if you want to be alone right now. But I'll be right in the living room when you're ready to talk."

Tommy listened intently to the sound of his walking back down the stairs. He swore. Phil waiting in the living room would mean he couldn't escape out the front door, and he probably wouldn't make it to the back door without being spotted. If Phil didn't think his threat held true, then he'd just have to prove him wrong.

He picked up his phone and dialed the only number he knew completely by heart.

"*Tom!*" Hannah greeted him brightly. "*I'm just getting to town for our lunch! How's tomorrow sound?*"

"Today," Tommy said firmly. "Right now. I need to talk to you."

"*Oh,*" Hannah's voice changed, suddenly much more serious. "*Is everything alright?*"

"No," he replied, keeping his eyes locked on the closed bedroom door. "No, it's not. Can you meet me at the diner in fifteen minutes?"

"*I can make it there in time. Are you safe, Tom? What can I do for you?*" She asked, sounding slightly panicked.

"Just be there," he said, slipping his other arm through his backpack strap. "And don't call this number back. I'll just meet you there."

"*Okay,*" she said steadily. "*Okay, I'm on my way right now. I'll meet you there. Stay safe, alright?*"

“Okay. Thank you. I appreciate it,” he said.

He hung up and placed the phone on the nightstand next to the framed photograph of him with Wilbur and Techno on the boardwalk.

It was raining. Tommy opened his window and climbed out onto the little side roof, closing the opening behind him. He stood still for a moment, feeling water pelt his skin and run down his face. Peering over the side, he made his calculations. If he couldn’t make it out the front or back door, this was his best bet. It wasn’t that far of a fall. He’d suffered through worse.

He sat down on the ledge, cautiously pushing himself off until he was holding himself up by his elbows. Then he changed his position, lowering himself further until he dangled from the roof, holding onto the edge with shaky hands. He let go, crouching and rolling as he hit the wet ground to soften the blow as much as possible.

Tommy stood up with a wince. Not the most graceful fall, but he was mostly unharmed. He hopped the white fence of the backyard quickly, not trusting the gate to remain silent. Then he began his journey to the diner, crossing his arms over his chest for warmth in the downpour.

Silently, he mourned. He hadn’t even lasted a year.

Hannah was waiting in a booth when he arrived. She jumped up and rushed over, looking frantic.

“Are you alright?” She demanded, fussing over him. She took his chin in her hand to examine his face. “What happened? You’re soaking wet.” She wiped the wetness from his cheeks and he hoped she thought it was solely from the rain.

He gently pushed her away. “I’m fine. I promise I’m okay,” he insisted.

Hannah frowned, looking unconvinced, and sat back down. Tommy sat across from her. She pulled something out of her bag and handed it to him across the table- a blue cardigan. “You look sick. Warm up a little. Let me get you something to eat,” she said firmly.

Tommy nodded, feeling numb. He slipped the cardigan on, feeling the warmth from the dry material spread across his skin. He almost couldn’t believe he was here, doing this. His chest felt tight.

“Tom,” Hannah pleaded. “Please. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Tommy took a deep breath, feeling nauseous. “I... I can’t stay at the Watson’s anymore,” he rushed out all at once.

Hannah raised an eyebrow. “What?”

"I'm asking you to rehome me," he begged, placing his hands on the table. They shook violently. Hannah paid them no mind. She was far used to Tommy's trembling.

"Why?" She asked. "What happened?"

He swallowed nervously. "I just... I don't..."

He stopped, voice dead.

Hannah gave him a sympathetic look. "I know Phil had asked for adoption papers a while back. Is this a self-destructive act, Tom? You know we've talked about this behavior. I could-"

"*No!*" He interrupted, angry. "*No*, trust me. It's anything but that. I just... I'm not comfortable there anymore. I'm asking you for a transfer. Please."

She frowned. "Tom, you know I really can't remove you without good cause," she started, sounding uncertain.

Tommy pouted, putting on his best beaten-down foster kid face. "You *promised*. You said you would get me a rehome if I wanted it. You know I wouldn't ask you of this if I didn't need it. *Please*, Hannah. I never ask you for anything. You fell through on our monthly visit promise. Please don't let me down on this one," he said, throwing in as much guilt-tripping as possible. It was manipulative, Tommy knew. But it was inevitable now. He needed to get out of the Watson house for their own protection, and he would do it by any means necessary.

Hannah looked uncertain. "I have hesitations about this, Tom. About your well-being. I would hate to pull you from one of the few healthy environments you've experienced just because you're trying to prove a point," she said slowly.

Tommy scowled. "I'm not proving anything," he lied. "*Please*, Hannah. Please, just rehome me. I can spend my last eleven months in the group home if that's what it takes. You don't need to worry about me or find me any other foster homes if it'll make your life easier. Please, just remove me from the Watson house."

She bit her lip, meeting his eyes, and seemed surprised to find them wet. "Fine," she finally decided. The tension in Tommy's chest didn't fade, though the guilt did dissolve from his stomach. "Fine, I'll take you back with me to the group home and remove you from your foster house. I will *not* give up on finding you a foster home, though. That's my job. And I still have eleven months."

"Thank you," Tommy breathed in relief. "Thank you, Hannah. You're the greatest social worker to ever exist."

Hannah rolled her eyes, a small smile growing on her face. "Yeah, whatever. Promise me you'll order something to eat, though. You look like a breeze would knock you over."

Tommy nodded enthusiastically. He ordered a burger when the waitress came over and dutifully ate all of it. He would do anything Hannah asked of him for this favor. He listened

intently to her for the rest of their lunch, learning about what she's been up to in the past few months and the drama of the agency. He spotted Jack Manifold at a table against the far wall and intensely kept his eyes on the table, determined to not draw attention to himself.

He followed Hannah to her car and swallowed the bile in his throat. It had definitely been awhile since he sat in the front seat of his social worker's car. He slipped into the familiar vehicle, slightly overwhelmed by the feeling of distant nostalgia.

"Do you need anything from the house before we go?" Hannah asked, starting the car.

Tommy glanced at the backpack at his feet. His mind flashed to a million things sitting in his bedroom. Birthday presents and Christmas presents, gifts of kindness and necessities bought by Phil. He thought of Wilbur and Techno. Of the Mario Kart controllers sitting in the living room, baking trays in the kitchen. He thought of Wilbur's guitar and piano, Techno's giant bookshelf of books, and Phil's camera. He thought of his friends. He thought of the Watson's.

Rain hit the windows, like the entire world was crying. Like for the first time, the universe actually felt bad for him.

"No," he lied. "I don't need anything."

Hannah nodded. They began the drive.

Chapter End Notes

Whoops, my hand slipped.

Thanks for reading!!!

I've been working on sooo many WIPs this week I feel like I've been writing for several days straight lol so perhaps be on the lookout for some new series ;]

Next chapter within the week!! <33

Goodbye

Chapter Summary

Adventures of the foster group home are not very adventurous. Actually, Tommy thinks he would rather be almost anywhere else. Almost.

Chapter Notes

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

Tommy hadn't been to the group home in a long time.

He was usually stuck there for long periods of time in between foster houses. He hadn't been back in well over a year now, as he had gone right from his last foster house to the Watson's and then stayed there for so long. He had been placed in many group homes in the past few years. This one, about an hour north of the Watson's, was his most frequent one. It was a bit disheartening to see that not much had changed, though he hadn't been expecting much. It was still overcrowded and messy. The walls were a grey-beige in every room, with chips of paint missing in various places. Every floor was covered with a musty brown colored carpet that was never vacuumed enough. Toys and other pastime activities were scattered around. Kids usually bunked up around four to five in a room, depending on age. Tommy was almost always the oldest kid in the room, and as such he usually was stuck in a paired room. This time, he was sharing a room with a quiet twelve year old boy who mostly kept to himself. That was perfectly fine with Tommy. He wasn't in the mood to talk much, anyway.

"Tommy!" A tiny voice cried as he was making up his bed.

He turned and was instantly met with little hands wrapped around his lower waist. He looked down and grinned.

"Michelle," he greeted warmly. He bent down and scooped the seven year old up. Or, he supposed, she must be eight now. The little girl squealed excitedly as she was whisked up. *"Oof,"* he groaned, feigning weakness. "You're getting so big. What're you now, fourteen?" He paid particular attention to the scar on her scalp, running down to the top of her forehead. It had healed up nicely from last year.

Michelle laughed excitedly at his fake question and pushed against his shoulder. "Eight!" She corrected gleefully. Tommy was pleased to see he had remembered right. She wrapped her arms around his neck quickly. "I thought you were never coming back!"

Tommy chuckled and readjusted the child in his grasp so he could hold her with one arm and continue spreading out his sheets with the other. "Now why would you think that?" He asked. "How could I spend so long away from my favorite foster sister?"

His former foster sister giggled. “Everyone said so. Said you’d found a family. Left us behind,” she said brightly.

His chest tightened and he forced a smile. “Like I could ever leave you behind, kid,” he said, straining to keep his voice level.

Michelle kicked her legs out to be put down and Tommy set her on the floor gently. “Guess what!” She grinned, jumping up and down on the balls of her feet. He noticed her two front teeth were missing.

“What? You’re gonna get even taller?” He asked, picking his backpack up and setting it on the bed.

“I’m getting adopted!”

Tommy froze and looked over his shoulder at her. Michelle was smiling ear to ear, twirling brown hair between little fingers. It was impossible to not feel excited for her. Especially after knowing everything she went through last year.

“That’s amazing, Michelle,” Tommy said with a genuine smile. “How could you not? Who couldn’t love a kid like you?”

Michelle squealed again and bounced around the room with glee only a child could possibly possess.

They were interrupted by a knock on the already-opened door. Hannah grinned at Michelle, turning knowing eyes to Tommy. She was holding a clipboard and several books in her arms.

“Michelle, I told you to let Tom settle in a little,” she said, though there was no scolding in her voice.

“He had all last night to do that!” Michelle ran right up to Hannah. “Tommy came back for me! Did you know that? He said so! He wanted to see me before I left with my new family!” She cried happily.

Hannah’s eyebrows shot up with an amused smile. “Is that right?” She asked.

Tommy nodded seriously, reaching down the ruffle Michelle’s hair. “Oh yeah. I heard she was leaving and got here as soon as I could. How could I not?” He said.

Michelle let out a laugh of glee, seemingly overwhelmed with her own happiness.

Hannah grinned. “Michelle, why don’t you go finish packing? I know you’re not done. Tom will still be here when it’s time to leave,” she said.

The girl nodded excitedly and bolted from the room, pure energy.

Hannah turned her attention back to Tommy. “There’s no one the kids love more than you. I’m sure they’ll be all over you by the end of the day,” she reminded him.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. “Her scar healed up well,” he said, changing the topic quickly. He turned back to his bag.

“Her foster parents paid for the surgery out of pocket. Chose to adopt her right after. She’s leaving tonight. I guess your arrival couldn’t have been better timed. You’re her favorite, after all. You should hear her talk all the time about the foster brother who saved her,” Hannah said with a smile.

Tommy scoffed. “I didn’t save her. If I had, she wouldn’t have had that scar at all,” he said sharply.

Hannah shrugged. “We do what we can with what we have,” she said.

He sighed and tucked the last corner of his blanket under the mattress. Hannah cleared her throat. “I just got back from the Watson’s,” she said. “Finishing up the transfer paperwork.”

Tommy gave a noncommittal hum.

“They’re pretty distraught,” Hannah said, clearly trying to get some reaction from him.

Tommy hummed again.

“*Tom*,” Hannah said seriously, exasperated. “They’re completely devastated. Phil said he didn’t even know you left. You snuck out the *window*?”

He shrugged and placed his backpack back at the foot of his bed. “He was waiting at the front door. I knew I wouldn’t make it away if I didn’t sneak out,” he explained stiffly.

“I know perfectly well that Phil was not keeping you prisoner, Tom,” Hannah said coldly.

Tommy flew around, hands balling into fists. “Who *cares*?” He shot, trying to keep his tone even. He failed. “It’s *over*. It’s done. Who cares what they think now?”

His voice cracked.

Hannah frowned. “*Fine*. If you’re willing to live with these consequences, who am I to judge? I have their exit interview here, if you want to read it.”

“I don’t.”

“Well I’ll leave it here anyway. And here. As promised,” she said. She handed him one of the books from her pile.

Tommy took the hardcover and looked at it. *The Iliad* stared back at him. It was the exact copy that Techno owned, sitting proudly on his bookshelf at home. He looked at Hannah curiously.

“I promised a hardcover if you lasted two months. You asked for *The Iliad* or something Greek. Well, you lasted far more than two months. So there’s your prize,” she explained

He swallowed guiltily. It didn't feel like much of a win.

"Your exit interview will be tonight. I'll try to find you after dinner," she said. "I'll see you then."

Tommy nodded soundlessly and she left. He sat down on the edge of the bed and cringed. He still hadn't gotten re-accustomed to how stiff and uncomfortable the beds were. He repositioned so a bedspring wasn't jutting into his skin.

He glanced at the manila folder Hannah had left at the foot of his bed, containing the Watson's last words to him. He had left without saying goodbye. That might've been what made him feel the worst. He shouldn't read it. A clean break would be best. It would hurt less. The faster he could forget about the Watson's, the better.

He grabbed the manila folder and opened it.

He scanned through paragraphs of legal jargon and organization policies. Signatures of understanding and contractual obligations. His thumb brushed against Phil's signature before he could stop himself. The pen was clearly shaky, his normally neat handwriting an utter mess. He swallowed his guilt and flipped through the pages until he found what he was looking for. His fingers touched the words of the exit interview- questions Hannah had asked and what Phil had written in response.

Hannah asked, *"How do you feel Thomas progressed in this household?"*

Phil answered, *"Tommy made exceptional progress in the house, far surpassing expectations from any of the family members. He showed consistent emotional growth and a willingness to seek help and get better throughout the duration of his stay."*

Hannah asked, *"Do you feel you were an adequate foster parent to Thomas during this time?"*

Phil answered, *"No one is perfect. I always tried my very best to provide opportunities for Tommy to grow and make decisions for himself. I provided privacy and general freedom. I tried my best to treat him as I would my adopted sons, as I saw him as my son. In the end, though, I realize I could've done better. I just wasn't enough, I suppose."*

Hannah asked, *"Did Thomas interact well with the members of your family?"*

Phil answered, *"I always thought so. My sons tried to incorporate him into their everyday lives. There's no denying there was a special bond between them. My sons loved Tommy like a brother, and I loved him like a son. There were some problems with my oldest, as he sometimes suffers from mood swings caused by mental illness and this resulted in some altercations. I didn't realize these problems had such an effect on Tommy, and for that I have failed as a foster parent."*

Hannah asked, *"Do you understand the decision to remove Thomas from the household?"*

Phil answered, *"No, I do not. I understand he was upset, but running from the problem is not the solution and I think the agency's decision of removal was poor. Tommy has experienced very little healthy situations in his life, which is very clear in his interactions with others. I think this household was his first good experience in a long time, and running from it is a product of being overwhelmed by unfamiliar emotions. Our doors will always be opened for Tommy, as a foster or not. I only wish we could have said goodbye, and we had believed him when he said he was leaving."*

Hannah asked, *"Do you plan to foster further with our agency?"*

Phil answered, *"No, I do not."*

Tommy slammed the folder closed, unable to read any more.

Hannah was right. The littlest kids had managed to surround Tommy by dinner time.

"Tommy! Tommy!" Michael cried, jumping up and down. Tommy grinned and scooped him up, walking down the hall from dinner with a trail of four or five more children at his heel. He winced as Michael grabbed a fistful of his hair. *"Gold,"* he cooed.

"Alright, alright. Release my hair, king. It's the only thing I have going for me," he said in amusement, pulling his head away from the small child's grasp.

"Me too!" Shroud whined, pulling on his shirt as they walked. "Up, please!"

Tommy raised an eyebrow, readjusted Michael to one arm, and scooped Shroud up in another. Both the boys laughed hysterically, using Tommy's arms and shoulders as a jungle gym as he gave them a free ride back to their rooms. His main concern was making sure they both didn't fall. Tommy was tall, and a tumble from his height would certainly hurt a child.

"We missed you!" Michael said, repositioning himself in Tommy's arm. "Gone for so long!"

Michael was only four when he was entered into the system. Children moved out of the daycare facilities into general group housing when they were six. He must've been eight now. Shroud must've been about seven, if Tommy recalled correctly. He was usually good at remembering these things.

"Well I'm back now," Tommy said gently, approaching the younger children's wing of rooms. "You'll get to harass me all you want, gremlins."

Michael giggled and Tommy set both of them down in their hallway.

Shroud tugged on his hand. "You'll read to us?" He asked, dark eyes wide.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "I don't know, big man. I think it might be time for bed," he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Pleeeeeease," Michael begged, putting on his best puppy eyes. Tommy groaned, feeling his resistance waning. "You do all the voices!"

Tommy sighed and nodded. The boys gloated as he followed them into the room, where three other children were waiting expectantly.

He glanced at the pile of old and torn children's books stacked at the foot of one boy's bed. "What do you want to hear?" He asked.

"New!" Michael demanded, climbing into his own bed. "A new story, please! We've heard all the others."

Tommy knelt down on the carpet, where it was possible for two bunk beds and the single bed to all see him. "Okay," he decided. "I have a good one. Long ago, there was a hero called Theseus..."

Tommy sat down for his exit interview the next morning. He had skillfully avoided Hannah the night before, trying to put it off for as long as possible. But she had cornered him at breakfast, looking annoyed, and managed to get him into an empty office. They had gone through all the legal stuff together, most of which Tommy knew by heart.

"I have to ask you just a few questions. I know you don't want to. It won't take long, alright?" Hannah said gently, scribbling into her file.

Tommy nodded.

"How did you feel about your overall treatment in the household?" She asked.

He blinked. "It was fine. Good. They gave me a phone. And a room to myself with a lock and everything. I was treated like a human, I guess."

Hannah nodded, writing. "Do you feel like there was an appropriate punishment-reward system in place in the household?" She asked.

He nodded. "I wasn't punished for anything. Phil was really understanding about everything. It was kinda confusing, to be honest. But he was very supportive of things I did, and offered to help whenever he could," he admitted.

"Do you feel you were treated fairly within the household?"

Tommy frowned. "More than fair. They were too understanding and gave me too many chances."

Hannah raised an eyebrow, scribbling away. “Okay. And do you feel you interacted well with the members of the family?”

Tommy thought of a guitar and Mario Kart. Gentle touches and matched breathing. Understanding and patience.

Arguments and hurt. *Unlovable*.

“Yes,” was all he said.

Hannah nodded and wrote a long paragraph in her notes. Tommy sat in silence, watching her with nausea rolling through his stomach.

“Don’t you wish you said goodbye?” Hannah asked without looking up.

Tommy glared at her sharply. “That’s *not* an interview question,” he scowled.

She peered up at him over her clipboard. She didn’t seem apologetic. “No, that was me personally asking you. It seemed to me from my talk with the Watson’s that none of them would have closure about this. I doubt you will, either,” she said softly.

He rolled his eyes. “I *have* closure. I talked with them. I told them I was leaving. It’s not my fault they didn’t believe me,” he argued half-heartedly.

Hannah scribbled down a last note and closed the file, getting to her feet. “If you say so. The phone in the main office is always open to you, though. Just in case you change your mind,” she said lightly. She left him alone with his thoughts.

And that’s how Tommy found himself in the building’s main office, the Watson’s file in hand. Most foster kids weren’t allowed to use the office phone without express permission and supervision from a social worker. He was different though. Tommy had been around so long that no one particularly cared what he did. The staff knew him well, and he had privileges that most other kids didn’t.

He stared at the list of phone numbers of the household nervously. He didn’t *need* to do this. He had wanted a clean break. There was just something about the way Hannah described them. *Devastated*. He couldn’t bear to be the cause of it. He felt obligated to offer them at least something. They had done so much for him, after all.

He picked the phone number that might be the most understanding and dialed.

“Hello?” Techno answered immediately.

The sound of his voice knocked the breath out of his lungs. All the thoughts and plans for what he was going to say left his head in an instant, replaced only by regret and longing.

“Hello?” Techno repeated. “*Who is this?*”

Tommy licked his lips and tried to find his voice. “Tech,” he whispered.

There was a moment of silence. Then, “*Tommy,*” Techno responded, sounding pained. “*Are you okay?*”

Of course, that was the first thing he asked. Not anger, or accusations, or bitterness. *Was he okay?* He squeezed his eyes shut as if it would block out the emotions building in his chest.

“Yeah,” he replied quietly. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“*Where are you?*” He asked quickly.

“Group home.”

“*Where? They wouldn’t tell us. We can come get you, Toms. It’s no problem-*” Techno started.

“I’m fine, Techno,” Tommy interrupted quickly. “I’m where I’m supposed to be. I don’t want you to worry about me anymore.”

“*Tommy,*” Techno insisted. “*Please, it doesn’t need to be like this. Come home. We can work this out.*”

“I only wanted to call and tell you that I was okay,” Tommy ignored him. “I left without saying goodbye, and I feel horrible about it. You guys deserve better than that. I’m really sorry. You’ve treated me really great, and I didn’t return the favor.”

“*Listen to me-*”

“I just wanted to give you guys some closure, because I know how shitty it feels to be denied that. I’m okay and I’m safe. I’m sorry for leaving so suddenly. I hope you can understand why I did it. And I’m sorry for any problems I caused. I hope you can forgive me,” he said quietly. He blinked, feeling his eyes water.

“*Tommy!*” Techno shouted, sounding angry for the first time. “*Will you stop being such an idiot and listen to me?*” Tommy’s voice died in his throat once again and he paused, hand holding the phone shaking. “*You were faced with a problem and you ran. We’ve made it clear to you time and time again that we’re here for you, that we love you, and that we were willing to work together to help you. I’m sorry you felt like you had to leave. God, we- we didn’t even realize you left until fucking Jack Manifold showed up at the front door. Come back, and we can make it better.*”

“This is for the best,” Tommy insisted, chest tight. “You’ll understand that someday. I’m sorry if I’ve hurt you in the process.”

“*Hurt us?*” Techno demanded, incredulous. “*I know you think you’re protecting us, but you’re wrong. Tommy, you’re my brother. Our family won’t be whole again until you’re home.*”

“I’m not your brother.”

“*You are,*” Techno said firmly. “*You’re my brother whether you like it or not. Wilbur didn’t word himself the best, and he’s beating himself up over it. He didn’t mean to make you think*

you weren't part of the family. It pains me that you think so low of yourself that you believe even being near us will bring us down. It's not true. It's never been true. And we want you to come home." He paused. *"Please."*

Tommy's tight grip on the phone was starting to hurt his hand. He ran shaky fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to call to let you guys know. And I really wish you the best. Thank you for all you did for me," he said softly.

"Tommy, please--"

He hung up.

Tommy flipped through the pages of The Iliad idly, not really taking anything in. The book somehow felt dirty to him, like touching the paper was poisoning his fingertips. He shifted, trying to reposition a bedspring out of his back, and failed.

May blended quickly into June in the group home. Tommy tried to keep busy. He took his finals remotely and passed with flying colors. He managed to find a part time job down in town in a corporate bakery. It wasn't the baking and frosting that Niki had promised him back in her town, but at least he was working near the craft. He didn't mind lifting bags, stocking shelves, and staring at the bakers wistfully as he worked. If he told himself enough times, eventually he'd believe it, right? When he wasn't working, he was back in the group home. He'd always enjoyed helping with the children. He had a special knack for knowing just what they needed, based on his own experiences when he was their age.

"You could always stay here," Hannah had said nonchalantly one day. "Take up a job as a full time caretaker after you age out. You know we're always in short supply. And the kids love you so much."

Tommy had frowned, picking up scattered toys to throw back into the storage bin. "I love these kids, and I wish I could do more for them," he said slowly. "But I think if I stick around after I'm not a foster anymore, it'll kill me."

Hannah didn't push him, after that.

Tommy flipped another page. His temporary bedroom was hot. There was little temperature control in the building, and June heat made simply laying in bed more than uncomfortable. Wistfully, he thought of Wilbur's borrowed fan still in his closet at the Watson's.

He pushed the thought away quickly. He had to stop doing this to himself. He was only making everything a million times harder.

It was difficult, though. He saw them in everything. The radio in the backroom of the bakery played indie pop. Nothing was as good as Wilbur. The local library that he visited to read and

use the computer reminded him of Techno. He saw Phil's artistic hands in photographs on walls. It especially hurt when he saw something funny and reached to his pocket for his phone to take a picture for Tubbo and Ranboo before he remembered again. June meant Techno's nineteenth birthday passed. Tommy had spent the day staring wistfully at the office phone, aching to just leave a message.

The alarm clock next to his bed sprang to life, making Tommy cringe. He reached over and turned the alarm off with a groan. Another requirement of Hannah's deal with him- Tommy would have to see the on-hand therapist once a week. She was insistent that his decision was self-destructing, not self-preserving. Tommy disagreed, but he was grateful to Hannah for pulling him and *had* agreed to do anything she wanted in return. He closed his book with a sigh. He clearly wasn't going to get much reading done today, anyway.

He made his way down the hallways with a scowl as he headed towards the building offices. The therapist in the group home, Dr. Reynolds, was nothing like Sam. Dr. Reynolds wore stuffy suits and his office was full of books and magazines from twenty years ago. And when Tommy finally sat down in his office, there was none of the warmth or gentleness that Sam possessed.

"Let's pick up from where we were last week," he started, flipping open his file as he sat down in the chair across from Tommy. "Do you remember what we talked about?"

Tommy crossed his arms. "Do you?" He shot back.

Dr. Reynolds sighed. "Yes, Tom. Everything we discuss is recorded in my files. I'm just trying to start the conversation," he said boredly.

Tommy leaned back in his chair. "Well I'm just testing you, then," he said with a sly smile.

Another sigh. "We were talking about working through self deprecating thoughts. But judging by your reaction, I'm guessing you haven't been making much progress," Dr. Reynolds said with a raised eyebrow.

He scoffed. "No, no. I've been working hard on it. In fact, I think I've completely recovered. I'm the greatest, right? No one even compares to big man Tommy. Are we done here?" He shot out.

Dr. Reynolds leaned forward in his chair. "Tom, I know you don't want to be here. But this will be so much easier if you just work with me, okay?"

He nodded, feigning seriousness. "Of course. I'm working with you, king. No worries here. None at all," he said sarcastically.

Dr. Reynolds groaned. "*Tom*," he scolded.

Tommy tilted his head up to stare at the ceiling. "Listen, big man. You know I don't want to be here just as much as *you* don't want to be here. So let's just call it a day, yeah? I'll tell my social worker we had a full session of enlightening discussion, and you can get rid of me," he negotiated boredly.

“Why do you think I want to get rid of you?” He asked cautiously.

Tommy scoffed. “Because-” He paused, realizing, and brought his eyes back down to glare at the therapist. “Almost got me there, I’ll give you that.”

Dr. Reynolds sighed. “Your self deprecating thoughts are going to kill you one day, you know. They’re already destroying your limited relationships. How long until they destroy you as well? Don’t you *want* to get better?”

Tommy’s heart sank to his stomach. He tried not to look affected by the words.

Dr. Reynold’s took his silence as an answer. He refocused on his notebook. “So, let’s start again, shall we? Self deprecating thoughts.” His stomach rolled uneasily. The therapist continued. “Oftentimes when people experience severe self esteem issues, it comes from the projection of someone else. When you hear self deprecating thoughts in your head, where do you think they come from?”

Tommy licked his lips. “Foster parents,” he said weakly. “The mean ones.”

Dr. Reynolds nodded and scribbled something down. “And whose voice do you hear?”

“H-huh?”

He glanced up from his book and raised an eyebrow. “The thoughts. Is it your own voice? Someone else?”

Tommy swallowed. He didn’t want to be here anymore.

Don’t you want to get better?

“Tom,” Dr. Reynolds pressed again.

“My bio dad,” Tommy finally admitted. “It’s my biological father. Always him.” His voice cracked.

“Interesting how you address him as biological father, instead of just father,” Dr. Reynolds observed.

“He’s a sack of shit,” Tommy shot back, defensive. “He doesn’t deserve the title of just father.”

The therapist nodded. “Of course. But usually when foster children reassign parents as *bio* parents, they’ve identified new parental figures. When you think of your birth father as *bio* dad, is there someone else you consider as just *dad*?”

Oh.

Chapter End Notes

If you don't remember, Michelle was in Tommy's last foster house and was the reason he got an emergency placement in the first place. She was also the reason for Tommy's first cry in the Watson house ;]

Thanks for reading!!!

I know you're all mad at me (/lh /hj) but it will be just a few chapters before we see the Watson's again (just a warning for those who are expecting it). Also! The next chapter is a bit heavy, and will contain themes of child abuse revolving around both violence and food. If you are sensitive to these topics, please be advised and these warnings will of course appear again before the next chapter :]

Next chapter within the week!!! Thank you for all the kind comments and kudos the support is sososo appreciated <33

House Twenty-Four

Chapter Summary

Reverting is hard, but forgetting is necessary. Tommy must survive. He's always known how to do that.

Chapter Notes

Chapter TW: Vague(ish) descriptions violence, blood, child abuse (specifically revolving around violence and food!!) If these topics are difficult for you, please stay safe <33

For the purposes of coherency, Aimsey is written with they/she pronouns interchangeably in this story :]

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

Tommy was rehomed the first week of July.

“*Hannah*,” he whined in the car for the millionth time that week. “Please. I told you I could stay. I don’t mind the group home.”

Hannah frowned and turned on her blinker. “You know it’s not about that, Tom. Please, give it a rest. The group home fills up, and you’re first in line for a foster placement. This is just how things go, and you know it,” she explained in exasperation.

He groaned. “I’m aging out in ten months. Does the agency really think I’m gonna find a family in that stupid amount of time?” He complained.

“No,” Hannah said simply. *Ouch*. Tommy thought she could have at least lied about that. “It’s just about spacing.”

“Why can’t I go to a *different* group home?” Tommy knew he sounded bratty, but at this point he didn’t care. He had been resigned to living out the rest of his foster time in the group home. The thought of living in another foster home that wasn’t the Watson’s made him nauseous.

Not that he wanted to go back to the Watson’s. He didn’t. He *didn’t*.

He’d been repeating the lie in his head for weeks. It didn’t make it true.

"Tom," Hannah pleaded. "Please. It won't be that bad. You can readjust to another family. You've done it a dozen times before."

"*Two* dozen," he corrected coldly. "And look how those turned out for me."

"Enough!" Hannah snapped, frustrated. "I understand you're annoyed. This isn't my choice."

"You're my social worker!"

"I still have to do my job!" Hannah shot back. "I told you this might happen when you requested removal from your last house. If you didn't want to be refostered, then you should have stayed."

Tommy's mouth shut tight. That certainly got him to be quiet. His heart ached.

After a couple minutes of driving in stifling silence, Hannah sighed. "I'm sorry," she admitted quietly. "I know you want to stay in the group home, but I have to follow the agency's policies. You know I only want the best for you."

Tommy grumbled.

"This house isn't that bad," Hannah continued on. "They've only had a couple problems in the past, and they take in lots of kids like you."

Tommy groaned. He knew *exactly* what kind of house this would be. Foster parents that relied on agency money from fostering, and therefore had far too many kids in the house. Strict, mean, and crowded. He'd lived in several houses just like it. He didn't voice his theory to Hannah. Judging by her mood, he already knew he was correct.

Without meaning to, Tommy thought of the Watson's white house with green shutters. He pushed the thought away with another groan and focused his attention out the window.

Tommy was right. He almost always was.

He'd nearly forgotten because he was constantly so confused by the Watson's behavior, but he was an expert on foster families. This house was familiar if only in atmosphere. He was able to predict his next several weeks by only stepping through the door. He was immediately greeted by a wall of noise. Screaming children and distant yelling rattled his eardrums. He winced as he glanced around. Too tidy for so many kids to be living here. There must have been a strict chore policy.

"Mrs. Williams!" Hannah said brightly. He turned and spotted a tall woman with graying brown hair in a green floral dress. She didn't smile when Hannah greeted her and she quickly shoved a younger foster kid, a boy with curly brown hair, towards them with instructions for him to show Tommy around while she spoke to Hannah. His social worker gave him a

reassuring pat on the shoulder, told him to call her if he needed anything at all, and left him alone.

Tommy was shown to a bedroom. He learned there were six kids living in the house, seven including him. Four boys in one room, three girls in the other. He quickly took in two sets of bunk beds pushed against either wall, and two dressers squished between them. He was given the bottom bunk of the right bunk bed and left alone. *Good*. All the people around were giving him a headache already, and the atmosphere of the house bothered him. Tommy liked neatness. It was something instilled in him from an early age and enforced throughout his experience in the system. But this room was too clean. No sign of life at all- completely sterile. He never would have guessed three other boys were living in the space. He could only assume the other bedroom looked the same.

At noon, his new foster mother came to give him his schedule.

"Wash the dishes, vacuum the carpets, sweep the porch. On weekends you'll be out working in the garden. Dinner is at 5pm sharp. We expect you to be clean and at the table by then," she explained, glancing around his bedroom. He suspected she was looking for anything out of place to blame on his arrival. He nodded along silently, trying to ignore the growing coldness in his gut. "You're a big kid. We'll need you to wrangle the littler ones now and again. Brats, the lot of them. Never listen. You'll listen, won't you Thomas?" She reached out to brush his face and he tried his best to hold completely still. If she noticed his flinch, she didn't say anything.

Don't antagonize the foster parent.

When she left, he locked eyes with the only other foster kid in the room. His name was Mark, and he couldn't have been more than thirteen. Tommy smiled at him, hoping for an ally, but Mark only rolled his eyes and refocused on his book. His face fell and he left his new foster brother alone to continue exploring the house.

There was a lock on the refrigerator.

Tommy should've expected that. He'd lived in a few houses that applied the same system, and he should've known an income house like this would use it as well. Food was expensive. They couldn't have a bunch of greedy kids eating more than their fill. A deadbolt on the pantry and fridge doors with only the foster parents knowing the combination was an easy fix to that. That also meant Tommy had figured out the punishment system of the house. Restriction of food. Again, nothing new, but he was certainly less prepared for it than he used to be now that he had experienced three meals a day and free reign of the kitchen. He thought about Phil's green cooking apron and scowled.

Mrs. Williams all but confirmed his suspicion when she caught him in the kitchen. "Out," she scolded. "There's nothing for you in here. Unless you want to lose dinner?"

Tommy quickly made his way outside.

He tried to introduce himself to his new foster siblings, all younger than him, but they seemed utterly uninterested. He figured kids moved quickly through here, and they got new

foster siblings often. Arrivals were nothing interesting. He resigned to sitting on the porch and watching his three foster brothers and a foster sister play soccer in the yard. He fiddled with his fingers as he observed, nervous.

At his last house, Hannah had given him a goal of two months. Here, he had nothing. Only the promise of turning eighteen in ten months and freedom once he aged out. He imagined that Hannah not giving him a goal was almost her giving him permission to leave when he needed to. She would forgive him from fleeing a house like this. How could she not?

She clearly had not forgiven him for leaving the Watson's. He wasn't sure if he had forgiven himself, either.

At dinner, Tommy met his foster father as he came home from work. He was an average man-medium build, short brown hair, bushy mustache. Tommy was pleased to see that he was taller than Mr. Williams. He was less pleased when his foster father demanded a beer when he sat down at the table. One of the smaller boys jumped up immediately to get him one. Tommy frowned. The portions of dinner allotted to the kids were small, but not necessarily cruel. He suspected he would feel differently after a few weeks of eating so little.

He was tasked with getting the younger kids to bed by a strict bedtime of 8pm. He wondered if the curfew also applied to him. The older kids, Mark and another girl around fifteen years old, didn't seem concerned with the deadline, but both were still in their rooms by the time. Tommy figured he would play it safe and copy them until he knew for sure.

The smallest girl, Lily, asked to be picked up when Tommy started to guide them to their rooms. He scooped her up without hesitation and ignored the glare his foster father shot him from the living room. "Y'know," the older man called. "You shouldn't spoil 'em like that. She'll never leave you alone." He refocused on the television before Tommy could reply. He buried whatever anger he felt at the statement deep in his chest, under layers and layers of resignation and survival skills he'd carefully collected over the years. This was familiar, he reminded himself. He knew what to do here. He readjusted Lily in his arms and she wrapped little arms around his neck. With his free arm he guided the other girl, Rose, to the stairs. They were twins, he realized. He could tell from how similar they looked. Matching pin straight brown hair and gentle frowns. They couldn't be more than seven years old. As they walked, he wondered if they had been separated in the past, or would be in the future. Siblings rarely stayed together in the system, after all. Their youth was probably the only thing keeping one with the other.

And when Tommy finally collapsed into his own designated bed, he realized how... *dead* he felt. How cold. This is how he was, he remembered, *before*. Before the Watson's. Running from his own feelings because it was safer to feel nothing at all. Silently, he mourned what could have been. He mourned his own progress. Gone in a single day, reverted by the need to survive. It was a different kind of grief than he was used to. It was a grief of his own doing. The anguish followed him into his dreams.

"What are you doing?" Wilbur asked.

Tommy turned on the grass. On the front lawn of the Williams' home was his brother, watching him with wide eyes. He was wearing the yellow sweater and black sleep pants that Tommy had first seen him in, and a confused frown split his face.

Tommy spluttered. "Wh- what are you doing here, Wil? You don't belong here," he said, more harshly than intended.

Wilbur closed his eyes like he was in pain and stepped further onto the lawn. When his eyes opened again, they were dark. "I'm a foster kid. Don't all foster kids end up here eventually?" He asked calmly.

Tommy turned and looked at the house. "No," he argued weakly. "You're not a foster kid, Wilbur. You have a family."

"That doesn't really matter, does it?"

He looked back at the taller, anger in his gut. "Of course it does. You have a father and a brother. Why would you throw that away to come here of all places?" He demanded.

Wilbur simply tilted his head, like he was confused, and watched him.

Tommy sighed. "Go home, Wilbur," he said in resignation. "Please."

The brunet took another decisive step onto the lawn. "You shouldn't care what I do. You're not my brother," he said, voice turning cold.

Tommy flinched. He couldn't help it. It felt worse than a punch to the face. "You're right," he said weakly. "But whatever life you have at home is better than this."

"I sent you here," Wilbur said stonily. Tommy winced again at the reminder. "I didn't care what happened to you. You shouldn't care what happens to me."

"I know," Tommy whispered. His vision blurred, and he realized he was crying.

"Don't be stupid, Tommy," Wilbur shot.

"I know."

His brother looked at him carefully, like he was memorizing his face. "I'm going to go inside, then," he said firmly. He took another step towards the house- towards Tommy.

"I can't let you," Tommy cried. He took a step to the side, blocking Wilbur from progressing any further. "You have to go home. You deserve better than this."

"You have to go home," Wilbur mimicked back to him in his own voice.

He swallowed another cry. "Stop it," he muttered.

"Don't be stupid, Tommy," Wilbur parroted again. "You have to go home, Tommy. Don't be stupid, Tommy. You deserve better than this."

“ Stop, ” Tommy begged.

Wilbur made his way to the front of the house and placed a firm hand on his shoulder. “Go home, Tommy,” he whispered. “You’re not a foster kid. You have a family.” Tommy’s own words, thrown back in his face. They burned his skin and he fell to his knees, shoulders shaking.

Wilbur ran a gentle hand through his hair and Tommy leaned into the motion without meaning to. When he spoke, it was the voice of the group home’s therapist.

“Isn’t there someone else you consider as just dad?”

Tommy got a job in town.

He tried his best to stay outside of the house whenever possible. He did his chores early in the morning and then left for work. Mrs. Williams had begrudgingly approved of him having a job, though he could tell she wasn’t happy about it. He found summer work washing dishes in the afternoons at a local restaurant, and he got along well enough with the other teenagers working there. His foster parents kept strict eyes on his schedule and he was reprimanded for leaving the house too early or arriving back too late from work, which left no room for pit stops or free time away from the family. At the house, he tried his best to keep the kids occupied and away from the glaring eyes of foster parents. He’d taken to braiding Lily and Rose’s hair in the mornings and teaching them how to do it themselves. He liked to play soccer in the yard with Mark and the oldest girl, Aimsey. Sometimes one of the younger kids joined, and Tommy reveled in teaching them the ins and outs of the sport. It was an easy way to stay out of the house and to exhaust themselves so they would be tired by the impossibly early curfew.

On weekends, Tommy spent hours caring for the garden. He’d never been particularly adept at gardening, and he was far used to killing anything he tried to grow. However, his time in his last house had improved his skills considerably and he quickly found himself working without thinking about it. He could picture Techno’s hands carefully tending to the plants, watering flowers, harvesting vegetables, and mimicked the memories with ease. Tommy whistled while he worked, again copying Techno. He knew he hummed Wilbur’s songs more often than not and didn’t even try to stop himself. It helped the time pass quicker.

He went without incident for his first three weeks. It was almost a record.

He was helping Lily and Rose get ready for bed when Aimsey closed the bedroom door.

Tommy looked over his shoulder curiously as he pulled a blanket over Rose. “What are you doing?” He asked.

Aimsey scowled. "They're starving," they whispered, gesturing to the bunk bed where the girls laid. "They're going to get sick."

Tommy knew that. Everyone was hungry. He had tried to bring little things home from the restaurant when he could, but he couldn't bring anything substantial without the risk of getting caught. "I'm doing my best," he said back quietly, getting defensive. "I'm not their parent."

Aimsey rolled her eyes. "It's not your fault, dipshit. I'm not accusing you of anything. I just need you to help me," they said back. Tommy raised an eyebrow curiously and said nothing. She continued on. "I know the combination to the fridge," they admitted. "I saw Mrs. Williams put it in a few weeks ago."

"Why don't you go get something for them, then?" Tommy snapped, feeling his own stomach growl.

"I need someone to keep watch," Aimsey replied, equally as hostile. "If I get caught, it's all downhill. And I can't ask any of the other kids to take that hit with me."

Tommy stood up straight and crossed his arms. "But you feel okay with asking me, huh?"

Aimsey smiled slyly. "You look like you can take a beating," she said, looking at the scars on his hands. "Are you gonna help me or not?"

He glanced at the younger girls, and thought to the other foster kids in his own room. "Yeah, alright," he agreed. "It's not like I'm doing anything else anyway."

They waited until the house was still and dark for about an hour before making a move. "Put thick socks on," Tommy advised while they sat. "It'll help mask the noise."

"The floor is carpet," Aimsey argued, though she stood up to grab a new pair.

"It's wood in the kitchen," Tommy replied boredly. "And a carpeted floor still creaks. Trust me." Aimsey shrugged and put on the new pair of socks without complaint.

When he felt it was safe enough, he guided the both of them downstairs. Aimsey was thankfully quiet on their feet. Tommy had been worried about coaching her through the house silently, but she was perfectly stealthy. He wondered briefly how long they had been a foster, and if they had learned to be quiet the same way that he had.

Tommy positioned himself at the entrance of the kitchen where he could see both the stairs and Aimsey at the same time. He bounced on the balls of his feet quietly as he watched her punch the code in. He heard the distinct noise of the lock clicking opening and turned quickly to watch the kitchen glow to life with the light from the refrigerator.

"Don't take too much," Tommy whispered. Aimsey shot him a glare as they grabbed whatever they could hold from the fridge. "I'm serious. If they think someone's taking something, they'll change the code and then we'll have nothing again."

“We’re *hungry*,” Aimsey shot back, just as quiet. “They’re not keeping track of what’s in here. We can take more just this once.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Tommy snapped. “Think ahead a bit. They depend on food to keep us in line. Of *course* they’re keeping track of what’s in the fridge.”

Aimsey stuck her tongue out at him and grabbed an apple.

Tommy rolled his eyes. “Oh, real mature. Use your brain, asshat. It’s not worth taking it all tonight if we can’t take more tomorrow,” he shot.

She moved on to the pantry to grab nonperishables. “I can hear your stomach growling from *here*,” they replied.

He opened his mouth again to call her an idiot, or maybe to agree. Neither of them would ever find out, though, because the hall light switched on at that moment.

Tommy sprang into action instantly, pushing Aimsey away from the cabinet and snapping the lock back shut on both the door and the fridge before his foster sister could even move. He heard descent on the stairs and pushed Aimsey further into the kitchen, towards the back door.

“Go outside,” he whispered urgently. “I’ll open your window later and let you back in. Only one of us needs to take the fall.”

Aimsey seemed to snap back to reality as Tommy opened the door. “*What?* What are you—” They started. He pushed them outside harshly and she stumbled, still somehow managing to hold onto her haul of food.

Tommy closed the door behind her and locked it as whoever was on the stairs landed on the floor. He swallowed and made his way back to the kitchen, hoping Aimsey had at least the sense to step away from the door so they weren’t visible. He hadn’t even realized what he was doing until now. He had traded himself for them without even thinking about it. It was purely instinct, even if it had been her idea in the first place.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Mr. Williams growled as he stepped into the kitchen.

Tommy let his eyes lock onto the floor and tried not to look as nervous as he felt. “I was hungry,” he said weakly. “I was just seeing if there was anything out I could grab.”

“It’s five hours past curfew,” his foster father shot.

“I’m sorry,” Tommy said quickly. His voice caught. “It won’t happen again.”

“So you were down here planning to steal our food? Take more than you deserve?” The shorter man took a menacing step towards him and Tommy took an equal step backwards. Mr. Williams cast a glance at the pantry and then fridge, confirming that both locks were both firmly in place.

“I was just hungry,” Tommy repeated, weak but firm. “It won’t happen again.”

“Damn right it won’t happen again. We don’t tolerate rule breakers in this house,” his foster father barked.

Tommy remembered when he first arrived at the Watson’s, and he thought that a sleep deprived foster parent was almost as dangerous as an angry or drunk one. Now he realized that was wrong. The most dangerous was a foster parent of all three.

He took the backhand silently. He saw it coming from a mile away and had played out all the outcomes in the seconds it took for the firm hand to reach him. It would’ve been worse if he ducked. His foster father just would’ve gotten angrier, and would’ve hit harder the next time. Tommy knew how these things went perfectly well. He took the backhand without a reaction and let it throw him to the side, bringing a hand up to his face for nothing except instinct. He took another hit to the stomach and before he knew it, Tommy was on the floor.

He dazed. *This is fine*, he thought as another burst of pain blossomed somewhere else in his body. *This is fine*. If he told it to himself enough, he would believe it. If he lied to himself enough, it would make it okay. *I’ve done this before*, he chanted to himself. Another blow. *I can do it again*. Another. He played one of Wilbur’s EP songs in his head, tried to focus on the music and nothing else. This is *fine*. Another. Another. Another.

It took him to the end of the second song to realize he was alone. It took him another song to find the energy to sit up. Aimsey was still outside, he remembered. He had to move. Shakily, he got to his feet and relished in the fact that he only limped slightly.

Little things, he reminded himself.

He made his way back upstairs as quietly as he could. He wasn’t sure when exactly his foster father had left and he didn’t want to wake him again. He crept into the girls’ room quietly, careful not to wake Lily and Rose, and pushed open the window.

“Are you out of your *mind*?” Aimsey demanded immediately. She had pulled herself up on the little roof below the window, similar to the one outside his bedroom at the Watson’s, and was sitting by the edge.

Tommy grinned and felt his lip split. Aimsey let out a quiet noise of startled frustration and passed him several food items through the window, which he stored under clothing in various drawers of the dressers. Finally, they climbed into the room and shut the window behind them.

“You’re getting blood on the cracker box,” she hissed, though they sounded more concerned than annoyed.

Tommy ignored them and pushed the last drawer shut quietly. Aimsey rolled her eyes and got onto the floor, reaching for something under her bed. He watched as they pulled out a tiny first aid kit and a plastic water bottle. He sat down next to them and reached for the kit, but she smacked his hand away.

“Don’t touch,” she shot. “I don’t want your blood on my things. *Gross.*”

He rolled his eyes and resigned to leaning against the bedframe of Aimsey’s bunk.

“You didn’t have to do that, y’know,” Aimsey said quietly as they pulled out a washcloth and bandages. “I didn’t ask you to help me so you could take the *fall* for me.”

Tommy shrugged and took the washcloth when they offered it to clean his hands. “I can take a beating,” he said, echoing her words back to her. “And it’s no use getting both of us in trouble. Besides, you needed to get the food up here for the kids.”

Aimsey said nothing. She simply took the washcloth from his hands to wipe at his face. He had a black eye. He could already feel it. At least his nose was still intact. There was only so many times in his life that he could reset it. “You’re a good foster sibling, y’know,” Tommy said after they pressed a bandaid to his cheek. “I’ve met a lot. Not many would go through the trouble to help the kids.”

They glanced distractedly at the bunk where Lily and Rose slept. “I came here with them,” she explained quietly. “I’m not their actual sibling or anything. But they’re both so... *little*. It isn’t fair.”

Tommy nodded, eyes closing momentarily. He’d been thinking that for years. “You’re a good sibling,” he repeated. “Doesn’t matter if you’re related by blood or not.”

He opened his eyes to find Aimsey smiling softly. She grabbed a small instant ice pack for his ribs and handed it to him. “I’ve never had siblings before,” they admitted. She repositioned so she could lean against the bedframe next to him. He cracked the ice pack, feeling the cold spread across his palms before pressing it to his abdomen. She refocused on Lily and Rose. “I couldn’t imagine it, in a place like the foster system. I can only hope they’re adopted before they’re split apart.” They glanced at him. “You have any siblings?” She asked.

Tommy closed his eyes again, feeling ice spread through his limbs and not from the ice pack. His head throbbed, adrenaline fading into a familiar sick sensation.

“I have brothers,” he whispered.

Aimsey nodded knowingly. “You’re a good brother, Tommy,” she said, repeating the compliment back to him.

I’m not. The words died on his lips. *I’m not. I’m not. I’m not.* He gave his brothers up, hurt them to prove a point. What kind of good brother did something like that?

The boy who’s unlovable, Wilbur answered in his head.

Oh. Right.

At least here, he could pretend it didn’t happen. He could pretend he had brothers and a dad. He could pretend that he was a good brother that stuck around and worked through his problems instead of running. He could pretend Wilbur had never said anything so soul-

crushing to him. He could pretend there were people that loved him somewhere, even if they weren't here. He could pretend that they wanted him back, and he just needed to last long enough here so he could return later.

Tommy was good at pretending.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!

When I first wrote this chapter a while back, I made Tommy's foster sister Beau instead of Aimsey. Then I switched it back and forth between the two for a while because I'm indecisive, and now I think I've ended up with a combination of the two personalities (which I may like better anyway lol). I just liked Aimsey's and Tommy's relationship here a bit more.

Psssst. Guess what. I may have started a bunch of new works based around this series, including a prequel focused on Wilbur, Techno, and Phil's experiences before and during Tommy's stay AND a potential sequel (that depends on how I decide to finish this story hehehe). If that maybe interests you, consider user subscribing so you don't miss the updates :]

Next chapter within the week!

Confrontation

Chapter Summary

Ghosts always come back to haunt.

Chapter Notes

Chapter TW: Blood, child abuse revolving around food and physical violence. Please be safe <33

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

Tommy woke up with tears on his face.

He couldn't remember what he had been dreaming about. Ghosts, maybe. One of the younger boys snickered at him as he brushed the wetness away and Tommy tried not to look embarrassed. He winced when he sat up, stretching out knots from his back. His ribs screamed in protest, bruised and battered.

It hadn't taken long for his foster parents to label him a "problem child" after his first conflict, and since then he'd been taking the blame for nearly every issue within the house. He didn't necessarily mind, and he would rather take the blunt of it over subjecting any of the younger kids to the same treatment. His body certainly had several protests, however, as he observed the bruises and lesions that decorated his skin- made worse by lack of dinner over the past four days. He was currently surviving solely off of the staff meal he received at work on days he picked up shifts and whatever rations Aimsey offered him from the stash in her room. The two of them had made plans to make another stealth trip to the kitchen to restock, but after Tommy took a beating for missing a section of rug to vacuum Aimsey had firmly refused to entertain the idea of putting him in harm's way again. At least until they eased up on their harsh treatment. Tommy didn't think that would ever happen, but kept that to himself. Aimsey was clearly harboring enough guilt as it was.

Rose jumped on him as soon as he left his bedroom with an excited squeal. He stifled a groan, not wanting to scare her, and begrudgingly picked her up. He winced as she kicked a particularly deep bruise and readjusted her so she would stop moving so much.

"Rose," Aimsey scolded, walking up on the two of them in the hallway. "I told you not to bother Tommy. He's tired."

Tommy pushed out a smile as the three of them made their way to the living room. "I'm never too tired for Rose," he said lightly. Rose giggled happily. Aimsey shot him an exasperated look.

Tough crowd, he thought.

July had melted into August within the blink of an eye and somehow impossibly slow at the same time. The air outside was stiflingly hot and sticky, and yet most of the kids stubbornly spent their time on the lawn. The heat was better than whatever was waiting inside the house. Hannah hadn't visited for his one month with the Williams'. When he had found the courage to ask, his foster mother had coldly said that they didn't allow agency workers within the house if it was not a scheduled visit following the system policies. Tommy didn't think that was entirely legal, but the fact that Hannah hadn't come meant there was at least some grounding on the claim.

It was a stark comparison to exactly one year ago, when Hannah visited him for the first time after almost two months in August and Phil had shown her around the every inch of the house with almost smug superiority, as if he was showing her how good Tommy had it there in spite of everything she had done.

He pushed the thought away when a familiar tightness closed around his chest. The memory made his heart ache.

He set Rose down in the living room and grabbed a dust cloth out of the cabinet. It wasn't uncommon for Tommy to help any of the younger kids with their daily chores. He even liked it occasionally. It gave him a decent distraction and allowed all of them to be outside earlier. Rose and Lily were too young to do a thorough job on most of their work, anyway. Aimsey helped him with his own chores where they could, though she sometimes had more things to do than he did himself. As the two oldest in the house, the both of them were both sometimes handed more than they could handle. Aimsey was a little over a year younger than him, but she frequently had more responsibilities as they had been in the house longer.

Tommy was growing to almost like mornings like this, Quiet, the sun just rising above the horizon, and cleaning repetitively with the foster siblings he was closest with before his foster parents woke up to critique their every move. Aimsey tossed him a rag when he wasn't looking and snickered when it hit his head lightly. He rolled his eyes good naturedly and grabbed the piece of cloth from where it landed on his shoulder.

Little things. He had to focus on the little things if he ever wanted to keep going.

He helped Rose wipe down the lower bookshelves as she babbled about the dream she had last night. Above them, he could hear the tell-tale footsteps of his foster parents getting ready for the day in their bedroom. He tried not to let his smile fall.

"You're an idiot," snapped Aimsey, sounding genuinely angry for maybe the first time.

Tommy almost laughed, but something more like a groan left his mouth instead. He had brought home a small container of french fries from the restaurant for his foster siblings to share. Unfortunately for him, his foster father had spotted the food clutched in his hand the moment he walked back through the door from work, and now he was sporting several new bruises and had no fries to show for it. Worst of all, his foster parents said he could no longer have a job because of his disrespect. The thought of staying inside the house 24/7 with no income made him feel nauseous.

He was sitting in the girls' bedroom far past the curfew. Aimsey had her first aid kit out, but its supplies were running pitifully low and it was all thanks to Tommy. He wasn't even sure if he could make it to the store now to replace it for them. Guilt swam through his limbs, hand in hand with the sweeping pain.

"Sorry," he muttered dazedly.

She rolled her eyes. "I just don't know why you bother. You know they're looking for any excuse to knock you around," they scolded.

Tommy frowned and swiped at his face. His hand came back red. He could feel the small cut on his cheek, stinging when his fingers got too close. "They were just fries," he argued half-heartedly.

"A small order of fries for seven of us to share wouldn't have made a difference. It was a stupid risk with no reward," she shot, pulling a handful of bandaids from their kit. Lily rolled over in her bed and they both froze, holding their breaths. The last thing they needed was for Lily or Rose to wake up and see what was going on.

He continued when Lily didn't make any more moves. "Well someone has to do something! You're out of rations and half of us are being denied dinner this week. I'm trying to keep us *safe*," he snapped quietly. His right bicep let out a deep ache and he groaned again, letting his eyes fall shut.

Aimsey didn't say anything. They knew perfectly well that things were precarious in the house right now. The two of them had overheard their foster mother talking on the phone about buying a new boat. Tommy figured that was what his monthly foster allowance was going towards. And they were probably cutting more corners to be able to afford it. That meant smaller meals, more punishments, and a stricter house.

Tommy could feel tears building behind his eyelids. He was *tired* of this. He *hated* this. He was so exhausted from living like this, with this ever-building grief in his chest. It was getting harder to bury his emotions under the layers of nothingness he was usually so skilled at crafting.

He missed the Watson's.

He'd admit it freely now. He missed his brothers and Phil. He'd made a mistake, and acted rashly to prove a point. Tommy felt something so fierce and tragic in his chest whenever he

thought of them. It was almost like remembering his mom. It was the memory of someone held so dear, so loved, and so far from him. Someone taken from him by his own doing. He held back a sob. The last thing he wanted was for Aimsey to see him cry. Slowly, he opened his eyes again.

He instantly locked on Tubbo's face, peering at him from behind the window.

Tommy yelped, barely holding in an all-out scream. Aimsey jumped, startled. He squeezed his eyes shut again, willing the phantom image away, but when he opened his eyes Tubbo was still there.

What?

He shot to his feet and raced to the window, ignoring Aimsey's confused noise, and threw the pane open. Tubbo was there. Actually there, kneeling on the little roof below the windowsill. He had looked curious while gazing into the house. But now that Tommy was closer, his face twisted into something colder- almost unrecognizable. Tommy only stared at him, voice caught in his throat. Tubbo was *here*. Tubbo was right in front of him. Tubbo was looking right *at him*-

"You look like shit, big man," Tubbo said.

Tommy spluttered, a million thoughts trying to pass through his lips at once. Instead, only a stuttered, "*Wha-*" got out before Aimsey cut him off.

"Who the fuck are you?" They demanded, pulling Tommy firmly away from the window to take his place protectively.

Tubbo blinked in confusion, seemingly only just realizing she was there at all. "I'm Tubbo," he said plainly, as if that explained anything at all. Tommy shook his head dazedly and opened his mouth to ask a thousand questions at the same time, but was interrupted.

"Is he up there?" Came Ranboo's distinct voice from somewhere down below them.

He felt tears well in his eyes at the sound. *Ranboo* was here. His best friends were actually here, right before him. In fact, Ranboo had probably boosted Tubbo up onto the little roof in the first place. It wasn't a dream. "What are you *doing here*, Tubbo?" Tommy demanded, a bubbly feeling growing in his chest.

Tubbo raised an eyebrow. "We're here for *you*, obviously. What else would I be peering into strangers' windows for?" He explained unhelpfully. "This is the third house we've stopped at, actually."

Aimsey looked at Tommy accusingly and he could only blanch in response. He was *what*? "How did you find me?" He asked weakly.

Tubbo laughed, but there was hardly any humor in it. "You think so little of me, Tommy. There isn't a government file in existence that could keep me out. I hacked in, obviously," he said smugly.

Tommy tried to shake the shock from his limbs, ignoring how little that statement made sense and how many laws Tubbo might have broken tonight. He glanced back at the bunk bed, where the girls thankfully were still sound asleep. “But... *what* ...” He stuttered out, unable to find the words he needed.

“You *left*,” Tubbo shot, aching blunt. “You didn’t even say goodbye.”

The happy bubble growing in his chest popped, replaced by cold reality. His hands were suddenly freezing, his heart roaring in his ears. “I know,” he said quietly.

The shorter frowned. “We didn’t even get a phone call. Did you think about us at *all*?” He demanded.

Tommy felt his heart shatter into a million pieces. *Ah*. This wasn’t a happy reunion. Of course it wasn’t. Tubbo wanted his closure. Tommy had treated him like shit, and now he was here to take his revenge. To remind Tommy of all the wrongs he committed and all the regrets he held close. “Of course,” he whispered, unable to find any strength at all. “Every day.”

Aimsey looked between the two of them inquisitively. “Is this your brother?” She finally asked.

He felt like he’d been slapped. Tubbo answered for him. “No,” he monotoned without looking at her. He kept his eyes firmly on Tommy.

Tommy swallowed. “No,” he agreed. “Uh- Aimsey, this is my friend Tubbo. From my last house. Tubbo, this is my foster sibling Aimsey.”

Aimsey raised their eyebrows curiously and Tubbo scoffed. “Your *last* house? *Foster sibling*?” He said indignantly. “You’re an idiot, Tommy.”

“I know,” he agreed again, voice cracking.

Tubbo looked at him strangely. “You’re bleeding,” he suddenly said, coldness in his voice gone immediately.

“*What*?” Ranboo’s voice from down below demanded instantly.

Tommy’s hand flew instantly to touch the cut on his face, which apparently was still steadily dripping blood down his cheek. He cringed as Tubbo seemed to refocus on him, studying him closely. He suddenly felt the deep urge to hide himself away. He didn’t want anyone to look at him. Not like this. *Especially* not Tubbo.

“*Tommy*,” Tubbo breathed, taking in his state for the first time. “You look-”

“*Whatever*,” Tommy snapped. “Leave it alone.” His hands instinctively moved to cover whatever bruise he thought was most visible.

Tubbo paled. “What... Tommy, what *happened* to you?” He demanded.

“What’s going on?” Ranboo called from below, unable to see. Tubbo ignored him.

Aimsey took a step in front of Tommy, crossing her arms. "It's none of your business," she snapped defensively. "What the hell are you even doing here? If our foster parents see you, we're as good as *dead*. Get lost."

Tommy remembered where he was for the first time. They were hardly even bothering to whisper. It was a miracle the twins hadn't woken up at all the commotion, and an even bigger one that his foster father wasn't currently at the bedroom door. He would already be in trouble for being caught out of bed. He couldn't even imagine what would happen if his foster parents found them talking to an outsider on the roof. He cringed at the thought, taking a fearful step away from the window.

Tubbo stared at the two of them, a sick look growing on his face. "I'm... *what*? Tommy, you look *bad*. Like, *I should call the police* bad. I'm calling your social worker. What the *fuck*?"

"Don't!" Tommy snapped instantly at the same time Aimsey let out a panicked "*No!*"

He took another nervous step away from the window. "Are you stupid? That'll only make it worse." He took a strangled breath. Looking at his friend for too long made his chest hurt. Tubbo just didn't understand the severity of this. He'd been in situations like this dozens of times, and he knew perfectly well that getting the cops involved almost always ended badly for him. "This isn't your problem, Tubs. Go home. Forget about it. Forget you ever saw me. I don't know why you came looking for me, and it'll be easier for all of us if you forget me."

Tubbo gave a look akin to disgust. "Are you joking? You don't know why we came for you? I thought you would be over this self deprecating crap. We're not leaving you behind. Especially in a place like this. You thought you could just leave us without a word and we wouldn't even look for you?" He shot.

Tommy's limbs felt numb. "I'm just a foster kid," he whispered weakly. "We leave without a trace all the time."

Tubbo frowned. "You're my *best friend*, idiot," he snapped, though there was little malice in it.

"Hey!" Ranboo protested from below.

Tubbo rolled his eyes. "*One* of my best friends," he corrected himself. "When have we ever made you think you were just some *foster* kid?"

Tommy blinked. "It's not- you didn't..." he stuttered. "It's nothing *you* did. It's just who I am. It can't be helped."

Tubbo scoffed. "That's bullshit. Wilbur and Techno were fosters too, and they would *never* pull what you did," he snapped in anger.

Tommy had a million arguments against that. Wilbur and Techno had been fosters for far less time, been a part of a family far longer, had at least a half decent bio family. They both had Phil and each other. They had both been adopted for years and had nothing to run from. Tommy had lived in three times the amount of foster houses that Techno had, and *six* times

the amount of Wilbur. In fact, Wilbur had already been adopted by Phil before Tommy was ever even orphaned. He had almost a decade-long head start. It wasn't a fair comparison. But then again, Tommy had not exactly been fair to his friends. He knew he didn't deserve fairness. Any protest he had died on his tongue at the mention of his brothers. He felt tears on his cheeks. When had he started crying?

Tubbo immediately softened again when he saw Tommy's tears. "Hey, man. I- I'm sorry. I know it's not your fault. But it's not too late to fix this," he explained gently. "We miss you. No one has been the same since you left. Phil's practically besides himself. Wilbur--"

"Don't," Tommy cut him off fiercely, a mix of anger and grief swelling up in his chest. "Don't talk to me about Wilbur. I don't want to hear it."

Tubbo looked at him with pity. Tommy hated it. He'd always hated that look. "Tommy," Tubbo said quietly. "The Watson's love you. Wilbur didn't mean a word he said. You should see how he mopes around without you there."

"You don't know what he said to me," he insisted.

"I do," Tubbo countered quickly. "We all do. Wilbur was perfectly transparent. No one faults you for leaving. It was an awful thing to say, especially after what you told him." *Oh*, Tommy thought bitterly. *So the secret was out, then*. The whole world knew about his mom. His greatest sin. He flinched, feeling exposed. "We just want you to come home now."

Tommy crossed his arms. "Give it a rest, Tubbo. I'm serious. It's over. I'm not coming back. I really am sorry you came all this way just for me, but I can't help you now."

"Wilbur stopped playing music."

Tommy froze, heart in his throat. *Oh*. That was certainly new information. A strange feeling grew in his heart. He pictured the songs Wilbur wrote, the ones he held so dearly to his own heart, bursting into flames. Never to be played again. "I wouldn't have come here if it wasn't important," Tubbo continued. "I *drove*. Do you know how dangerous it is for *me* to *drive*?"

He nodded soundlessly. Yes, he did. Tommy knew everything about his friends. He knew perfectly well that Tubbo was a shit driver. It was a miracle they hadn't crashed on the way here. With a jolt, he realized he didn't even know where *here* was. He knew the name of the town, and the foster house address, but he had no idea where the town *was*. How close was he to the coast? To the Watson's? How long did it take Tubbo and Ranboo to get here, and how long would it take them to get back empty handed? Guilt grew steadily in his gut, a sick feeling spreading through his veins.

"We're taking you home," Tubbo insisted. "C'mon. Don't make me beg, boss man."

Tommy blinked. He looked at Aimsey, who seemed equally as bewildered. "Tubbo, I can't just *leave*," he explained in confusion. "Don't you think I would've left by now if I could? The second I go, the cops are after me. If they find me at the Watson's, Phil will be charged with *kidnapping*. Either way, I'll end up back here and in big trouble. Is this your big plan?"

That seemed to throw a wrench in the plot. Tubbo frowned. “Oh,” was all he said. Tommy rolled his eyes. “Why don’t you call Hannah, then? Ask her to remove you?”

Tommy scoffed. “I’m not allowed near a phone. And even if I was, Hannah isn’t allowed in the house without an agency-scheduled visit. She can’t remove me without probable cause or an emergency,” he snapped. Did Tubbo think he was *stupid*? Of course he’d thought of all this before.

The brunet raised an eyebrow. “But she removed you from the Watson’s,” he argued quietly.

Tommy looked away. “That was more of a once in a lifetime deal. And she had probable cause,” he deadpanned.

“No, she *didn’t*,” Tubbo snapped, suddenly angry. “She had *no* reason to remove you. The agency is *bullshit* and-”

“I *asked* her to remove me,” Tommy interrupted quietly. Tubbo froze, deflating, and looking at him strangely. “It was a one-time situation. The Watson’s didn’t want to tell you that bit? I requested to be rehomed. And I’m not going back.”

Tubbo took another quiet moment to respond. “I’m not going to pretend to know your reasoning,” he finally muttered. “I’d guess it’s because you’re an idiot, but whatever.” Tommy made a small noise of protest. “I know you, big man. I know you loved the Watson’s. I know you loved me and Ranboo. So I’m asking you to stop being an ass and to come home. *Please.*”

Tommy closed his eyes, feeling his face flush red. “Listen, Tubbo. I love you guys. I do. But even if I *wanted* to go back, which I’m *not* saying I do, I’m kinda stuck here. This just has to be the way it is. I’m sorry, okay? I really am. Maybe when I’m eighteen and aged out, I’ll come find you guys again,” he explained quietly.

Tubbo blinked. “But-”

Tommy heard the familiar sound of his foster parents’ bedroom door flying opened. He swore in harmony with Aimsey and glanced around. There was nowhere to hide in such a little room. He couldn’t even fit under one of the bunk beds. He turned back to the window, feeling nauseous. Tubbo was looking at the two of them curiously, obviously confused by their reaction.

“Tubbo, you need to go,” Tommy said seriously. “Now. *Right* now!”

Tubbo frowned. “But... What about you?”

Tommy grimaced. “I’ll be fine,” he whispered. He sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than his friend.

The brunet raised an eyebrow. “What’s happening?”

He rushed over to the windowsill as Aimsey took cover in her bed, trying to feign sleep. “Tubbo,” he begged. “I’ve never asked you for anything in the whole time I’ve known you.

I'm asking you now, *please*, don't watch."

For just a moment, the fastest moment of weakness in his entire life, Tommy considered going with him. Of climbing out the window and getting in their car. It would be easy to hug his friends and drive far away. He would be on the run for a few months, with the police and the agency after him. Hannah would never forgive him, but wouldn't she understand after putting him in a place like this? He could stop by the Watson's every once in a while and beg forgiveness, see if they might want to be at least friends when he turned eighteen and could stop running. He could do it. He could save himself right now-

The moment passed. He remembered that he didn't deserve salvation. He swung the window back shut and locked it.

Tubbo took several paces back towards the edge of the roof so he was more engulfed in shadow. "*What-*" came his muffled voice through the glass.

The bedroom door flew open. A tear fell down his face.

Tommy didn't believe in any gods. But right now, he prayed. To the world, to the universe. He didn't know what he wished for. For Tubbo to stay? To go? He didn't know which was worse. He hoped the universe knew the answer.

But the universe was cruel and he had always known it. When Tommy had a chance to look up again, the window was empty.

Tubbo was gone.

Aimsey didn't ask him about that night, and Tommy never broached the subject. He preferred not to think about it at all. He wanted to forget it had ever happened to begin with. It was easier that way, wasn't it? He pretended that Tubbo had never shown up at the window, that his past hadn't caught up to him, and he still had time to live without whatever consequences were waiting for him outside the perimeters of the Williams' house.

Tommy's wrist was broken. He told himself it was okay. He was allowed outside the house to the local drugstore to get a brace. While he was there, he picked up more supplies for Aimsey's first aid kit to make up for all the help she'd given him. He also bought a pack of granola bars for the kids in the case of an emergency. He hid his new items under his shirt as he walked back to the house. Tommy showed his foster parents his new brace and went on his way safely upstairs to stash the new possessions in Aimsey's room.

He told himself it was okay.

Tubbo and Ranboo were gone. He told himself it was okay. He'd told his friends to fuck off and forget him. He told himself it was okay. He'd never see them again for as long as he lived.

It wasn't okay.

Tommy waited until he was alone in the shower to finally cry. There were so many things he cried about. So many things to mourn. He cried over this new house and his new pain. He mourned his friendships, gone by his own hand. He cried over his family, both his bio family and his real one. He cried over Techno and how he had left him behind. He cried over Phil and how he had betrayed his trust, his *family*. He cried over Wilbur.

He had so many things to cry over regarding Wilbur.

He mourned the loss of brotherhood. Late night talks and protective hugs. Good natured nudges. The smell of coffee. Fingers in his hair. The sound of guitar strings at four in the morning. He mourned Wilbur's music, the only connection his brother still had with his biological parents. Another thing destroyed by Tommy's very existence.

Tommy cried.

He wasn't fair of him. He didn't have the right to cry, and yet he did it anyway. He'd done this to himself. He'd refused to accept love when it was offered, scared of what it had meant, and now he was suffering the consequences. He was the biggest hypocrite he'd ever known, and he had certainly met many of them.

"I'm right back where I started," he managed to whisper to himself, nearly drowned out by rushing water and his own sobs. Because that was the horrible truth, wasn't it? The Watson's could say that he changed for the better, Tubbo and Ranboo could insist that he was different now, but it just wasn't true. He had gone through all those whirlwind emotions, learning and growing and rediscovering life, and it was all for nothing. He was right back where he was before he ever crossed the threshold of a white house with green shutters. That familiar, aching hollowness had settled back into his bones shockingly fast and his old instincts had taken over the moment he realized where exactly he was. There was no stopping it. He could pretend to be a new person all he wanted, but it wouldn't change the fact that this was who he was at his core.

A circular tragedy. Tommy could think he was getting better all he wanted, but he would always end up back here by his own doing. He could learn to love in theory and maybe even in practice, but when it came down to it- it just wasn't a welcomed trait in his world. This world, the world of hard foster parents and life or death, had no room for love. He had forgotten it as quickly as he had learned it, and wasn't that the truest tragedy there was?

He missed the Watson's so completely that the very thought of them made a severe grief settle in his chest. It felt like drowning on dry land. It was the worst feeling in the entire world. It made him feel sick. His regret was all-consuming and inescapable. He had gotten used to not knowing, or not *understanding*, what he was feeling at the Watson's. This was

worse, though, because he knew *exactly* what he was feeling now. He was guilty. Remorseful. Confused. Heartbroken and frustrated and utterly *sorry*. He was sorry for everything. Every single second of it.

Tommy had made a lot of mistakes in his life. He was weighed down by his sins and regrets, too concerned with the past and present to ever consider the future. But he was sure that he would never be able to forgive himself for this. He would never forgive himself for making such a massive mistake, for being such a coward. He was scared, he had run, and he would never be able to make up for it. He had hurt his family and he had hurt himself. There was no excuse besides the rottenness deep in his core.

Tommy had never truly missed anyone before. He'd never had real friends, and he'd never had a family that loved him like the Watson's claimed they did. He moved through life so quickly that he hardly ever got close enough to anyone to legitimately miss them. He had even stopped missing his biological parents after a few years in foster care, arguably too short of a time. There may have been a point where he thought he missed Puffy, but that might have only been regret too. Regret for messing up again, for forfeiting yet another family, for failing once more. He wasn't sure anymore. If he really thought about it, the only part of Puffy's family he missed now was the safety they provided. He missed them the same way he longed for any "good" foster house. But now he knew he was better off without Puffy and her family. He didn't really miss them. Not in the way he knew he should.

Tommy was alone, and he always had been. For a brief, fleeting moment in time, he had felt loved. Come and gone as fast as the changing tides, he had gained and lost a family. It was his own fault.

He felt the loss of his family deep in his bones, like he was missing a limb. A part of him. It was ridiculous. Tommy hadn't even known them an entire year, and now it felt impossible to survive without them in his life. What a cruel twist of fate. Tommy had never needed anyone in his life. He was solely independent, and liked to be on his own. Being known was a risk he couldn't ever take. Staying in one place for too long went against everything he believed in. So it was almost comedic how much he longed for it now.

Tommy wanted to go home. He wanted to be known. He wanted to be loved.

Hadn't he always?

He cried, drowning slowly under a running faucet and his tears.

Chapter End Notes

Circular tragedy enjoyers rise up

I'm back!

Thank you all for being patient on my little hiatus I really really appreciate it and all the kind comments were soso amazing!! (Some of you are just the sweetest most amazing people that brought me to tears just by how much love and support you managed to put into a single comment omg)

I know I said I was going to take a break from writing, but I actually think I wrote more in these three weeks than ever lol. I unfortunately had to give up the superhero AU I was working on due to the circumstances. BUT! I also got several chapters into Wilbur's prequel story, mapped out Techno's prequel, AND outlined a brand new AU! I even finished this story, but I'm not entirely sure if I like it yet so I might write another ending in the complete opposite direction and see if it works better. Woooo!!!!

On a more serious note, I'm going to very gently ask that Techno's passing is not discussed in the comments or on any of my stories (especially Whispers of the Ghost, even though that story deals with illness/death. I've deleted any comments relating to the similarities and will continue to do so). It's a very sensitive subject to myself and others and while I understand that many people probably don't even read my after-chapter notes and won't know, I hope this is common courtesy across the platform <3

I hope everyone is doing okay :]

Oh hey! Miss the Watson's? Want to see an angsty family reunion and perhaps some messy emotional growth? You'll probably want to stick around for the next update! ;]

Next chapter within the week! I'll be resuming my usual Sunday/Monday upload schedule now. Thanks again for everyone's patience I really appreciate it <33

Intervention

Chapter Summary

When one door closes...

Chapter Notes

-
- HEY!! EVERYONE FREEZE!! Because we have FANART by the LOVELY CinnamonTree!!! Check it out [here](#) and [here](#) !!! They're soso lovely :]]
-

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

Tommy couldn't say he was surprised when Hannah showed up at the front door in late August with several police officers. He felt like nothing could surprise him anymore. It was a whirlwind of noise and movement that he was just too tired to follow. The sirens were just too loud and the lights were just too bright. He kept his eyes on the ground, moving where the officers directed him until he found himself on the front lawn with the other kids. He focused only on holding Lily close to his chest as she sobbed into his shoulder, careful not to drop her in his daze. She was scared of the commotion, and Tommy didn't blame her. Maybe if he could feel anything anymore, he would be scared too. He knew Aimsey had Rose somewhere, along with his smaller foster brothers. He was too overwhelmed to bother looking for them. He could only concentrate on his sole task and nothing more. Distantly, he could hear Mark arguing with a police officer, and he was too exhausted to even tell him not to do that. It just wasn't any use.

It was all numb.

Lily had quieted to the occasional snuffle when Hannah found him sitting by the curb of the house, his foster sister in his lap.

"I'm sorry," she started gently.

Tommy only nodded slowly, keeping his eyes locked on the pavement at his feet.

"We have to go now, Tom," she coaxed.

He wrapped tighter arms around Lily protectively. "It's not fair," he whispered for maybe the millionth time in his life. He just couldn't bring himself to look anywhere but the ground. "It

isn't *fair*."

"I know."

And then he was back in the passenger seat of Hannah's car, his backpack at his feet. He had put Lily down with Rose, exchanged a knowing nod with Aimsey, and left. And Tommy *knew* he should say something or *do* something. He should yell or cry or *something, anything*. But absolutely everything was lost on him. He only felt cold. Hollow. It was familiar and he hated the familiarity. He hated that this was his life. He hated that he had felt this way before and he hated that he would feel it again. Tommy stared out the window and watched with his heart in his throat as the Williams' house faded from view. House twenty-four: just another tragedy to add to the long, ever-growing list.

Tommy left, and they were gone. They were *gone*, and he would never see them again. And he had to be okay with it just like he always did. He would never see Lily or Rose grow, or trade jokes with Aimsey, or play soccer with Mark ever again. He had left them behind just like he always did. Must be a running theme with him, regarding families.

An hour passed before he found his voice again. He already knew the answer and he knew it would hurt to ask, but he just couldn't help it. He never could. "What will happen to the kids?" He mumbled.

He listened to Hannah give him the usual rundown. Emergency placement or group home. Some together and some separated. His heart shattered into a million pieces at the thought of the twins apart from each other, or Aimsey away from their foster sisters. She'd protected them so diligently.

He didn't say any of his thoughts aloud. He couldn't. His tongue was dead in his mouth. He was too tired to do anything but stare out the window and wait for house twenty-five to eventually come into view. He hugged his braced hand close to his chest and watched the world speed by, internalizing all the unfairness and grief deep in his chest. The sun was setting on them on the horizon. He wondered how many times in his life he'd been a passenger in Hannah's car in the dark, letting nighttime hide them from whatever terror he was running from.

When Tommy was little, he thought he deserved the unfairness. He told himself it was penance for what he'd done to his mom and what he let happen to his dad. One of his first foster mothers had told him that wicked children got what was coming to them, and Tommy had always assumed that a life filled with grief was that retribution. Now, though, he wasn't sure. He'd heard so many times over the past year that he was loved, that he had a support system and friends and family. Didn't someone who was so loved deserve good things every once in a while? At least a little bit?

Tommy didn't know. He was seventeen years old, and he knew nothing at all.

Eventually, they pulled onto the familiar street of the group home. *Ah*. No emergency placement for him, then. There wasn't another foster house waiting for him at the end of their journey. Maybe Hannah had finally resigned to letting him live out his remaining months in the home. She must know by now that another foster house would only end in disaster for

both of them. More paperwork for her, more heartache for him. Tommy could live in his little shared room, take care of the smaller kids when he could, and see the therapist once a week for the next eight months. He could go to school online and graduate early, work somewhere in town, and then move into his new apartment when the time came. There was no need for a family in the mix. It was for the best. Tommy didn't think his heart could handle another heartbreak.

Hannah was silent as they walked into the building, and that was perfectly fine with Tommy. If he never spoke again, it would be too soon. He made his way back to his room as she diverted into the main office, all the while telling himself *this is okay*. If he told himself the lie enough, he'd believe it. He *had* to. He threw open the door to his room without knocking. Whatever poor foster kid he was bunking with would have to get over the intrusion.

He immediately threw down his backpack on the floor and let down a small shriek of frustration, bringing his hands to his head in an unsuccessful effort to soothe his building headache. He had perhaps never felt closer to a full breakdown in his entire life. *This is okay. This is okay. This is okay-*

"Tommy?" Techno whispered.

Tommy realized too late that there were people in the room. He turned and locked onto Wilbur and Techno sitting on his bed, looking at him with wide eyes.

He couldn't even bring himself to be surprised. Sure, why not? The day had already been heartbreak after heartbreak. His entire *life* was heartbreak after heartbreak. Why not let his estranged foster brothers and biggest regrets sit on his bed to watch him breakdown? What else did he have to lose now? He simply straightened up and stared back at them, too exhausted to even smile. "What are you doing here?" He croaked.

Techno was frowning. Tommy couldn't even bring himself to glance at Wilbur. It was too painful. "Tubbo told us," Techno said slowly, like it hurt him. "He... saw. Phil called Hannah. He's in the office right now, waiting to sort some paperwork out with her and CPS. We practically had to restrain him here so he wouldn't get in one of the cop cars with her."

"Oh," was all Tommy could manage.

Techno stood up and glanced at Wilbur quickly, who didn't move. Tommy took him in for the first time in almost three months. He wore a black long sleeve and jeans despite the stifling heat of the group home. His hair was pulled back in an intricate Dutch braid, not unlike the one Tommy had done for him last Christmas. Tommy noticed that his knuckles were more bruised and marked than usual, which meant he'd either been spending more time in front of a punching bag than he should or he was back to picking fights. Both were just as bad. Techno pushed his hands into his pockets after he caught Tommy staring, looking uncertain. "I'm sorry," he said, uncharacteristically soft. "I'm sorry this happened to you."

Tommy shrugged uncomfortably, shoving his hands into his pockets to match Techno. They were on opposite sides of the room, and it somehow felt like they weren't far enough apart and they weren't close enough all at once. "This is my life," Tommy admitted quietly, voice weak. "You guys were the anomalies. This kind of stuff is the norm." It felt like talking to a

stranger and he hated it more than anything. He hated what he had done. He hated that this was all his fault.

“It shouldn’t be. It doesn’t have to be,” Techno argued, standing still as a statue.

Tommy looked away, thoroughly overwhelmed. The events of the past few hours, the past few days, weeks, months were catching up to him and he felt the sudden strong urge to collapse right onto the bedroom floor and melt into the ground. He’d spent so long convincing himself that he was strong, and he could survive long enough if he just pushed away his emotions for another day. But he’d just gone through another tragedy of a foster house, and before that he’d ripped himself away from the only family he’d ever really loved. Heartache after heartache after heartache all hitting him at once, he felt his eyes begin to mist. He couldn’t believe they were *here*. Techno and Wilbur were right in front of him. Phil was just down the hall.

He almost laughed at the absurdity of it all. Something more like a choke came out instead.

Wilbur finally looked up and his expression knocked the breath right out of him. His oldest brother looked *devastated*. It was written all over his face. For the first time, Tommy recognized that maybe he hadn’t been completely alone in his grief over the past few months. He knew he’d hurt the family. He’d realized that too little too late, but he’d known it all the same. He didn’t realize the *extent* of it though. Tommy never imagined he meant this much to anyone in his entire life.

The bruise on the center of his face had healed nicely, leaving no traces of what had been.

“I’m sorry,” Wilbur whispered in a defeated tone. “I’m so, *so* incredibly sorry, Toms.”

A thousand emotions crossed Tommy’s mind at once. He missed Wilbur more than anything. He was still shattered by what his foster brother had said to him. He wanted brotherhood and he didn’t even want to be friends all at the same time. He craved to collapse next to his brothers and cry his eyes out and accept the love he was offered. He needed to stay as far away from them as possible. He wanted to go home. And in his ears, the word *unlovable* echoed until it was all he could hear.

And then, impossibly louder. He wanted to go home. He wanted to go home. *He wanted to go home.*

“I think I can forgive you,” Tommy said back softly. “If you forgive me, too.”

For once, it wasn’t a lie. He really believed it.

Wilbur’s face broke and he hunched over himself at the words, shoulders shaking. It took Tommy a moment to realize the brunet was crying. Maybe in another life, Tommy would’ve had the emotional energy or maturity to comfort him. In a different timeline, he would’ve collapsed next to his brothers, hugged them tightly, and promised it would all be okay. Instead he only stared, feeling incredibly awkward and heartbroken and elated all at once. Maybe if Tommy had ever learned to process his emotions, it could’ve been different.

One day. He promised himself he would be able to one day.

For now though, he looked to Techno for support. He knew he always could. His brother, ever eager to help, smiled gently and gestured towards Wilbur encouragingly. Tommy took a breath, sat down on the bed next to Wilbur, and put an uncertain hand on his shoulder that he hoped was at least a little comforting. It must have been decent because Wilbur shuddered, sniffled, and sat up straight again with a quick swipe to his face.

“Sorry for not saying bye,” Tommy muttered, embarrassed.

Wilbur let out a startled, watery laugh and Techno joined him quickly. All at once, the tension shattered. Tommy felt a weak smile across his face. *This is okay. This really is okay.*

Another figure joined them in the room and Tommy hopped to his feet and embraced Phil before he could think twice, wrapping shaky arms around the shorter man’s shoulders the second he stepped into view. Phil didn’t hesitate to hug him back tightly. Phil never hesitated, he remembered, to show him that he was loved. He was fiercely protective of his sons.

And only then, in his father’s arms, did Tommy finally allow himself to cry.

On Tommy’s eighth birthday, four months before it all went wrong, his mom told him that someday he would be loved. It wouldn’t be now, but it would be soon. She promised him that one day he would feel so much love that he would drown in it. Then she kissed his forehead and sent him outside to play.

Tommy hadn’t understood at the time. Didn’t his parents love him? Or at least his mom? Didn’t his own mother love him? He just couldn’t comprehend why he couldn’t have love right there and then.

It took Tommy a long, *long* time to realize that it was impossible. His father was just too angry and his mother was just too sad. There wasn’t any room for anything else. It took him years to realize that she had resented him all along- for keeping her in that house, for tying her to an abusive husband, for limiting the life she never got to live. It wasn’t his fault, and it wasn’t really her fault either. It took him even longer to understand that, if he ever really did in the first place. He struggled with such a revelation for a long time. He internalized it and buried it and tried to forget it.

He understood now, though. The actions of his biological parents didn’t make him unlovable. Not even close.

Tommy's life was hard. He knew that. He always had. He'd known it at eight years old, and he knew it now. At seventeen years old, Tommy knew so many things. He knew that people were predictable and selfish. He knew not to trust, not to take, and not to get too comfortable

for too long. He had known for years that life was painful and had no extra love for some ratty foster kid like him.

But at seventeen years old, he also knew that there were people in his life that reminded him he never really knew anything at all. He knew that there were people who loved him, and he knew that he had love to give in return. He knew that he had a family, even if they were far from perfect. And even if he spent the rest of his months in the group home, even if the Watson's decided they didn't want him back after all, even if everyone decided they were all better off right there as they were, Tommy knew that he had a family that loved him. He had brothers and a father that would protect him fiercely and he had friends who would go to the ends of the earth for him.

What more could a ratty foster kid ask for?

Tommy's mother had promised him that he would drown in love, but she was still wrong. He was surrounded by it, wrapped in it, enveloped in it. The love in Tommy's life was overwhelming but not fatal. He could learn to tread water. He wouldn't drown. Tommy's mom was wrong. Love wouldn't drown him, it would keep him afloat.

Tommy stood in the main office of the group home two days later, bouncing on the balls of his feet nervously. After he finally felt safe enough in his father's embrace that night, he'd all but collapsed from exhaustion. He had settled into an uneasy sleep only after he made them promise to come back to the group home to see him later that week, which each of them eagerly agreed to. He'd taken two days to recover- sleeping and eating and crying. He'd had to meet officials, talk in interviews, and was subjected to countless examinations.

Now, Tommy was working on fixing the things he had broken. It was a long list, but he was ready to put in the work. He knew better than ever now how important it was to fight for the people you loved.

Hannah raised an eyebrow expectantly at him from across her desk. She had a sort of smug expression across her face that made his face feel warm. For the first time in a long while, he was happy to have been proven wrong.

"Can I do something for you, Tom?" She feigned ignorance.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Don't make me beg," he pleaded in exasperation. He absentmindedly scratched at the brace wrapped around his wrist, all nerves.

She only smiled softly and opened a file that was already on her desk. "You don't have to. Phil put in a request to foster you again months ago," she explained, looking at the neat paperwork.

He felt weak. "Oh," he said lamely. "Right."

Hannah pulled out several pages of legal forms. "I can send you to the Watson's home, if you want to go and if they'll take you," she said firmly. His hands jittered at the prospect. "But I can't remove you without reason or probable cause again. That little stunt clearly didn't work out, and almost cost me my job. Not to mention all the grey hairs you're giving me."

Tommy tried for a sheepish smile. "You're too young for grey hairs," he teased.

Hannah grinned. "Flattery will get you nowhere here, kid. Promise me you won't pull anything like that again and I'll sign the papers," she said, amused.

His heart leapt to his throat, a rush of adrenaline coursing through his limbs in pure excitement. "I promise. You won't have to worry about me ever again," he said immediately.

She sighed good-naturedly and uncapped her pen. "We both know that isn't true," she said lightly. "I'm proud of you, y'know." Tommy scoffed, feeling the tips of his ears redden. "No, really. I know you don't like the reminder, but I've been your social worker for about eight years now. You've been my longest file. I've watched you grow from this timid kid into a fine young man. I'm proud of how far you've come, Tommy."

He looked away, feeling his eyes mist. "Don't get sappy on me now," he shot, though there was no malice. A warm feeling bloomed in his chest at her words. She'd never called him by his nickname before. "I'm just going to another foster house. Nothing special."

She glanced at him with a knowing smile. "Right," she agreed with the obvious lie. "Of course. Nothing special."

Hannah signed the papers.

Techno was the first to find him when the family arrived back at the group home on the third day.

Tommy was standing in the activity room with Michael on his shoulders when his brother walked in. Techno raised a surprised eyebrow at him and he only grinned in response, which was quickly interrupted by a sharp wince when Michael wrapped little hands in his hair and *yanked*.

"Onward!" Michael cried excitedly. "Adventure!"

Tommy gently pulled his hair away from the child's tight grasp. "Alright, king. Gentle on the hair, remember? I'm trying not to be bald by the time I'm thirty, thank you," he said with amusement. He shrugged his shoulders a few times so Michael bounced and the child let out a delighted giggle. He glanced at Techno. "We're playing knights," he explained.

Techno's eyebrows shot up and an entertained smile grew across his face. "Is that so?" He asked.

“I’m the knight!” Michael answered with a toothy grin. “We’re adventuring! Oh, and Tommy’s my horse.”

Techno *laughed*. The noise startled Tommy, but it was a welcomed surprise. Gently, he slid Michael off his shoulders and placed him on the floor. “How about we take a break? It’s almost lunchtime. Don’t you want a good seat in the dining hall?” He persuaded.

Michael’s face lit up. “Yeah!” He said in excitement. “And we’ll play after?”

Tommy pulled a serious face. “Of course,” he said firmly. “A horse always waits for his knight.”

They watched as the child raced out of the room with a laugh

Techno turned to him knowingly. “You never fail to surprise me. I should start expecting it,” he said, looking at the door Michael had run out of. Tommy shrugged and bent down to gather several disregarded toys left behind by the other children. He suddenly felt awkward, alone in the room with his brother. Techno cleared his throat. “Did you get that looked at?”

Tommy glanced up and realized he was pointing to the brace on his wrist. He frowned and straightened up with an armful of items. “It’s a velcro brace from the drugstore, Tech. What do you think?” He said, unable to make eye contact. He tossed the toys into one of the storage bins.

“We can take you to a doctor,” Techno suggested.

A protest nearly escaped his lips. He caught it at the last second, a barely contained scowl already forming across his face. Techno raised an eyebrow as he forced himself to relax, to look unbothered. He was working on accepting love and support when it was offered. That meant *not* pushing away those who wanted to help him.

Oh, this was going to be a *brutal* healing process.

“Maybe,” Tommy replied, shoving his hands into his pockets and looking away. “That might be good.”

Techno smiled in a rare gesture of warmth. “Whenever you’re ready,” he assured.

Tommy swallowed nervously. “Thank you.” He paused, considering. “For everything, I mean. All of it. You’ve always gone out of your way for me, even when you didn’t have to. You stood up for me when I didn’t really deserve it, and you’ve looked out for me even when I was being an idiot. You’ve been this, like... pillar of safety in my life. I... appreciate it. I didn’t get a chance to thank you for that in the house... or over the phone.”

Techno’s eyebrows shot up. “Of course,” he said, impossibly gentle. “That’s what brothers do.”

A strange feeling bloomed in Tommy’s chest. It was almost familiar.

“Right,” Tommy muttered, dazed. He felt numb. “Brothers.”

Before Techno could smother him in more domesticity, Phil and Wilbur made their way into the room. Tommy nodded in greeting as Techno turned.

Phil paused in the doorway. He had that sentimental look on his face that he often had when he looked at his family. It was the look that made Tommy feel nervous, or sometimes guilty. Like he was overstepping into something he shouldn't be involved in.

"Tommy," he said with a giddy smile. "Ready to go?"

Wilbur and Techno looked at him in confusion. Tommy felt warmth start to spread in his chest.

"Go where?" Techno asked. "A doctor?"

Phil rolled his eyes good naturedly. "Well *yes*. But we're going home first," he explained with a gentle smile. When Wilbur and Techno both continued to look lost, Phil proudly held up Tommy's signed foster paperwork.

Techno stared at the form blankly. Wilbur turned to Tommy sharply, confusion written all over his face.

Tommy shoved his hands into his pockets and looked away, embarrassed. "I, uh, *might* have asked Hannah if my file could be opened to foster homes again if anyone had been looking to foster. It was *not* about you. You just happened to be first on my long, *long* list of applying families who wanted me. Don't get a big head," he mumbled.

Wilbur stared at him. A series of emotions crossed his face but when he spoke, his tone was neutral. "So... we can foster you again? You're... okay with that? You're not gonna stay here?" He asked, sounding a bit strained.

Tommy rolled his eyes, but there was no malice. "...If you guys will have me. If it's okay with you all. Eight months in the group home just sounds so... not pog and-"

He was cut off sharply as he was suddenly embraced in a tight hug. He was instantly overwhelmed by the fabric of Wil's sweater and the smell of coffee- a distinct scent that he had grown to associate with safety and familiarity. He couldn't seem to untense, but he didn't feel anxious either. When they pulled apart, Tommy gave a weak smile.

Phil smiled warmly at his boys. "Ready to go home, Toms?"

Tommy paused, a million thoughts crossing his mind at once. *No*, he wasn't. What if he messed up again? What if he started to withdraw, isolate, hurt the ones he loved? What if the Watson's realized that they actually didn't love him and didn't want him around anymore? He knew for a fact that he couldn't lose another family. His heart couldn't take it. He wondered briefly if opening back up to the Watson's was even worth the risk.

His thoughts were interrupted when Techno reached over and ruffled his hair. Tommy made a noise of indignation and ducked away. "I can practically see the gears in your head turning," Techno teased. "Don't think too hard, Theseus."

Tommy blinked. *Right.* Okay. He could do that. He could live his life without overthinking. He could learn to do that. He could live surrounded in love but not drowning in it, and never think twice. He could do that.

It would be okay.

He looked at Phil. "Yes," he said softly. "I'm ready to go home."

It was awkward and messy and a bit tense. It was a little strained and a lot embarrassing and all of it was difficult. It was full of jittery fingers and racing hearts and bated breath. It was far from a fairy-tail ending.

It was perfect.

Tommy stood alone in his group home bedroom for what was hopefully the last time. The last hour had been a whirlwind of emotions and discussions and all kinds of overwhelming experiences. Now, though, he was alone. The quiet sounded strange in his ears. His backpack, neatly packed with his few belongings, was ready on his bed. The Watson's were waiting in the office for him. To take him home, to carry on with life. He was eager to join them and to start the car ride back to the house. But there was something he needed to do first.

"I'm sorry," Tommy whispered to himself and to the beige walls of the room. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, *I'm sorry*. I'm sorry for everything, I'm sorry for everything I've done and for everything I've caused. I'm sorry for ever being born. I'm sorry for existing in the first place." He wasn't sure if he was apologizing to himself or the world. He wasn't sure if there was a difference, or if it even mattered.

There were a dozen instances he could recall in which the world seemed to freeze in place. The silence in his ears roared and the whole universe watched him alone in his room, waiting expectantly for him to continue. After Tommy was constantly beaten down, the world was quiet as it held its breath and hoped against the odds he would rise again. It happened when his biological father came home too angry. It happened the last night he looked his mom in the eyes. It happened in foster homes and during important moments and it happened the night he confessed his darkest sins to Wilbur. The world was silent right now- watching and hoping he would rise once again.

He took a breath. Released. Closed his eyes and prepared himself. "I forgive you," he told himself. The world let out a sigh of relief, spurring back to life around him. "It's going to be okay." And all at once Tommy forgave himself. For all the misdeeds he had committed and for the people he pushed away. He forgave himself for dealing with his trauma in the only way he knew how and he forgave himself for doing what he had to in order to survive. It was okay. It was all going to be okay. Tommy forgave himself, and he would fight tooth and nail to keep it that way.

It wasn't flawless. He knew he would struggle. It was the best he could do.

Tommy had always known too much for his own good, but none of the right things. His head was full of survival skills and his heart was buried under layers and layers of bitterness and fear to protect himself from the constant grief. He didn't like making connections to others because being left behind would hurt more than being alone in the first place. His hands jittered when he was nervous and he bounced on the balls of his feet, always ready to run when the moment inevitably came. Tommy's life had been heartbreak after heartbreak, abandonment after abandonment, and a never-ending process of being ultimately on his own. His existence was haunted by his biological father and then his mother, and later it was haunted by the people he thought he could love but didn't get the chance to- Dream, Puffy, Foolish, and so many others. He hated asking for help, being worried over, or even being looked at. He had always hated any reminder that he existed at all. He'd gone his entire life knowing, or rather *thinking* that he was unlovable and destined to be alone. He'd always believed that he destroyed the things he loved, and therefore had to separate himself before that could happen so he could protect them.

Tommy was far from the perfect foster kid, and they were far from the perfect family. He still loved them and the Watson's still loved him, anyway.

He guessed he still had a lot to learn, after all.

Tommy took a breath and walked out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Ohohoho yeah it's healing time babey

Thanks for reading!!

This was one of my favorite chapters to write ever and I hope it shows hehe

If you didn't get a chance to check out the fanart in the beginning notes please do so!!
It's soso cool thank you cinnamon <3

Next chapter within the week!! Thank you for all the kind comments and kudos they're all soso wonderful

Home

Chapter Summary

A series of fortunate events

// or, flashes of life from Tommy's first week back

Chapter Notes

Fine, take your fluffy comfort filler chapter as my sincerest apologies for the last couple angsty ones ;]

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

Tommy's room was exactly the way he left it. Even the cash he'd left behind for the clothing he took was still on the dresser, right where he'd slapped it down. No one had touched anything. It was almost like a time capsule. He stepped into the room and was instantly transported back to last May, when he hadn't screwed up so royally yet. It was like a breath of fresh air and a punch to the stomach all at once.

Phil had taken him to the doctor and got him a nice new cast for his wrist that he was sure cost a lot. He didn't ask, and Phil didn't divulge the information. His foster father was also adamant on ice packs and salves for his cuts and bruises.

"It's a bit hard to look at you," Phil had admitted in the car after the doctor's. "Y'know... with all the evidence of pain all over you."

"Sorry," Tommy had mumbled, staring out the window.

Phil laughed at that. "No, mate. It's not a failing on *you*. It's a failing on *me*. That I couldn't do anything for you. It's hard to remember that you were hurt and I was helpless to it."

Tommy didn't really know what to make of it.

So now he sat in his bedroom and stared at the ceiling. The white paint was more than familiar to him at this point. He'd memorized all the little cracks and imperfections ages ago. Distantly, he could hear Wilbur strumming his guitar. With a sigh, he sat up.

The Watson's were careful to give him his space when he got back. There was an edge of tension in everyone- where it seemed the family didn't want to push Tommy too far and Tommy didn't want to impose on the family's routine more than he needed to. It had been

about a week now though, and he felt like he'd hardly seen any of them outside of family meals.

Tommy had been a bit nervous about sitting down for dinner with the Watson's for the first time since his return. It took him a few agonizing minutes to remember that Phil didn't drink, there was no alcohol in the house at all, and he was allowed to take what he needed and talk when he wanted. For maybe the first time, Tommy didn't restrict himself at all when taking a portion. Wilbur had teased him for it before a more somber look crossed his face, and he didn't mention it again after that. Tommy ate so much that he was sick after dinner. Lesson learned.

Tommy glanced around. When would this period of hesitancy end? It was awkward. The whole point of coming back here was for things to go back to normal. At least, as normal as anything could be in Tommy's life. His fingers tapped against his thigh as he thought. To his left, his phone pinged.

Another relic of a past life- his cell phone. He'd been hesitant to handle it again when he came back. None of the Watson's had moved it from the charging cable in his room when he left, and it had been waiting on his nightstand when he returned. Three months of notifications were overwhelming- not to mention the texts and calls from worried friends. So now Tommy preferred to let it sit untouched, at least until he felt more stable in the house. Sheer curiosity made him glance at the brightened screen, and that's how he learned that Tubbo and Ranboo were waiting for him on the front lawn.

The sight of them on the grass knocked the breath from his lungs as he stepped outside. They were careful not to touch him, though he could tell how badly Tubbo wanted to punch him for being an idiot based on how frequently his fists clenched and unclenched. Tommy was both resentful and grateful for the restraint. On one hand, it was a reminder of how Tommy had messed up, how things were different now, how he had caused this all to happen. On the other hand, it meant that his friends loved him and wanted to help him and were ready to put his needs first until he was ready. Tommy was the one who initiated contact first, pulling the both of them into a tight and silent hug, too overwhelmed with appreciation to even get a word out. Things would get better, and Tubbo and Ranboo were testament to that.

And that's how they ended up laying in the grass on the front lawn, staring up at the sky. They stayed close enough that Tommy could reach out and touch either of them without moving much, to remind himself that they were really there. The clouds painted themselves the most lovely shades of pink, purple and gold as the sun began to set over the horizon. Tommy stared, completely enamored with the beauty of the world and everything else. It was a wonder, how simply just being around his friends could improve his mood.

"We missed you," Ranboo murmured gently.

Tommy didn't frown. He didn't need to. "I know," he replied, equally as soft. "I missed you too. I'm sorry."

Tubbo snorted at his side. "No apologies, boss man. If I hear another one, I'm coming for your teeth," he said brightly.

Tommy laughed. He was almost surprised at how easily it came. The action felt unfamiliar to him, and so he laughed again just to prove himself wrong. It was the lightest he'd felt in a long, *long* time. They each broke into giggles, each for their own reasons, and that was perfectly fine with him. And sure, things were a little awkward. How could they not be? Things were a bit delicate, and that was okay. Tommy didn't mind at all. He would take on a lifetime of awkwardness just to keep everyone close to him.

"Boys!" Phil called from the porch. "It's dinner time. Tubbo, Ranboo, would you like to join us?"

His best friends called out matching agreements, and Tommy's heart soared. They stood, shaking grass from their clothes, and walked back to the white house with green shutters. Jokes and laughter and *love* filled the air, and the world bathed itself in gold as the sun sank below the horizon.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Sam asked.

Tommy sat on the couch in Sam's office, alone for the first time. He was nervous, hands tapping away at his legs in repetitive patterns. He didn't want to be here, and he felt like he'd been on the verge of an anxiety attack for almost a half hour now, but this was necessary. He was determined to heal and to not hurt the people he loved anymore. This was the first step. Phil had proven time and time again how much he loved Tommy and wanted him around. Any thought of being sent away now was clearly in his head.

If only he could make himself really believe it.

"Which part?" Tommy mumbled, keeping his eyes locked on Sam's stuffed dog. The therapist didn't seem to mind at all and kept the conversation going easily when Tommy began to zone out. He was patient and kind, and Tommy found himself *wanting* to talk to him sometimes, even if he was nervous. This was only his first session since he'd come home, and he already felt much better about seeing a therapist even though he wasn't adopted. He knew that it wasn't a ploy for Phil to get him sent away again, even if his mind wanted him to think it. He just needed to stay on track.

"Any of it," Sam said gently. He paused when Tommy looked lost. "Okay, how about this- Let's talk about you leaving. You don't need to talk about your feelings, or what hurt. Let's just walk through what happened."

Tommy's fingers jittered worriedly. "It wasn't... It was just..." he broke off, trying to find his words. What *did* happen? "It was a culmination of everything building up, I think. I was just... so hurt. And frustrated. And scared. I'd told Wilbur about my mom and it was this... this big weight off my shoulders that he accidentally threw back in my face. I loved the family so much and the memories of her were still so fresh after finally talking about it and... I guess I was worried that I might cause something like it to happen again. I can *say* that I ran

to protect them, but I think I was really trying to protect myself. It was stupid, obviously, and it definitely did more harm than good, but I think that's what happened. I think I was hurt by a lot of things that weren't inherently hurtful, and I ran to shield myself from it."

Sam raised an eyebrow, but he didn't seem surprised. "What were you hurt by?" He asked.

He absentmindedly picked at the edges of his cast. "I don't know. A lot of things. Everything. Stupid things that shouldn't have hurt me and did anyway. I hated what Wilbur said and I hated myself for being open with him in the first place. I was hurt that they kept trying to love me despite everything I did to try to make them do the opposite. I was upset that Phil had asked to adopt me, because I knew I couldn't be adopted then and it would only hurt them to say no and to stay there all the same," he rambled. "They fostered to adopt and they would never send me away, even if I said no, and I was upset at *myself* for ruining them like that. I was hurt by their kindness, which was stupid, but I thought that I would only be dragging them down with my presence. I thought that *I* was hurting them just by existing."

Sam hummed. "And now?"

Tommy frowned. "It's... different. It's not *great*, I won't lie. That's just not realistic. But now I can recognize that a lot of those thoughts were just self-hatred, and I was really hurt by *myself*- not the family. It was always me," he admitted softly.

Sam gave a small smile. "That's great, Tommy. You've come a long way in such a short time. Let's discuss the times you weren't hurt by yourself. You said you forgave Wilbur. How are you doing with that?" He scribbled something short into his notebook.

Tommy pursed his lips. A sensitive subject, but a necessary one. "I *did* forgive Wilbur," he said slowly. "I know I didn't need to, and I wasn't doing it out of pity or obligation. It's still hard. Sometimes I look at him, and it's all I can hear. But... but I know he didn't mean it. I know it came from the darkest part of him, and who am I to judge that? I've done the same thing. We've hurt *each other*, and we've done it more times than I can count. I can forgive him anyway, and he can forgive me. I think... that's what I'm learning about family. About brotherhood."

"What's that?"

"It's like... sometimes things are bad. It would be impossible to say things were perfect all the time. But Wilbur *loves me*. He loves me so fiercely that sometimes I can see it just by looking at him. Sometimes he's cruel when he doesn't mean to be, but sometimes... he teaches me piano because he knows I want to learn. Sometimes he lets me sit in his room hours past midnight because the nightmares are worse when I'm alone. Sometimes he asks me for my opinion on the music he's working on even when he would never trust Phil or Techno with the same question. Sometimes he ruffles my hair or pulls me into a hug for no reason or makes me a cup of coffee without me even asking. He changed his entire life to try and make mine easier, and he's always working to make sure he's improving *for me* and... I don't know. It's *love*. It must be. He's my brother and he loves me. I can forgive him because I love him, too. Isn't that family?"

Sam's smile widened, ever so slightly. "Family is a tricky definition. Is that what you think of, when it comes to family?" He asked lightly, like he already knew the answer.

Tommy's eyebrows furrowed and his fingers stilled over the rough material of his cast. "I never knew what family was," he started quietly. "At first I thought it was blood, because that was all I knew. And then I thought it was legal forms and names on a dotted line, but that wasn't right either. I went through so many different types and structures of family, both good and bad, but there wasn't love in any of it. Family was obligation and rules, people to tie you down and to live with you when there was no one else. They were a last resort, and only a few foster kids were deserving of it. Only the best-behaved, only the smartest, only the most responsible ones got to have a family. But then I did all of those things, and I still didn't get one. And so then I thought the very concept of family was fake and corrupted, like it was some institution sold to suckers who believed in fairy tales." He took a shaky breath. "And then... I don't know. I think about family now and I think of... love. Of warmth and togetherness. I think of gentle touches and favors without asking and being there just for the sake of being there. There isn't... no one expects anything of me. I don't owe anyone. I think that's the big thing. I don't owe the Watson's for buying me things or doing things for me or for loving me. When I asked Tubbo and Ranboo, they said that their families felt like safety. Like they never had to wonder if their actions would match their words. I feel that way with the Watson's. I really do. That must be family, right?"

Sam looked up from what he was writing. "You've thought a lot about this, I see," he observed.

Tommy shrugged. "I've had a lot of time to think. And I wanted to make sure I got it right this time," he said with a bitter laugh.

Sam flipped to a new page in his notebook. "So you've recognized your self-esteem issues, forgiven Wilbur, and came to terms with the Watson's as your family," he listed off.

Tommy allowed himself a grin. "I'm great at this therapy shit," he gloated.

"Maybe we can talk about your need to overachieve at a later date," Sam replied with a raised eyebrow, though his smile was genuine.

Another half hour of talking and Tommy was walking outside to Phil's car, where the man was waiting for him patiently in the parking lot. He felt... light. It was a nice feeling. He knew that oftentimes Wilbur felt sad or reclusive after his appointments, weighed down by his thoughts, but Tommy felt... good. Still a little unsteady and a lot anxious, but good. Phil smiled warmly as he climbed into the passenger seat.

He raised his eyebrows. "Okay?" His father asked cautiously.

Tommy buckled his seat belt and nodded firmly. "Okay."

Phil grinned.

“Everything alright?” Wilbur asked as Tommy flopped down into his bean bag chair with a sigh.

He crossed his arms. “Therapy was fine, if that’s what you’re asking,” he replied easily. Tommy felt calm this morning. He felt... content. It was beginning to happen more frequently, and he didn’t exactly know what to make of it.

Wilbur strummed a major chord. He’d added new stickers to the guitar in his lap since Tommy had last seen it. “Talked all about me?” He asked, plucking a happy tune.

Tommy snorted. “You bet your ass,” he shot, though there was no malice. He *had* forgiven his brother, for more reasons than one. He was perfectly fine to sit in Wilbur’s room and listen to him play music. In fact, it was one of his favorite habits. That didn’t mean Tommy still didn’t have to work on his relationships. Sam had heard all about Wilbur in their session yesterday.

Wilbur picked through another chord and then melted into one of his song intros absentmindedly. “I know I’ve apologized for about a million things in the past few days, but I have another,” he said gently.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. “I don’t need to hear it, Wil. I promise we’re all good,” he said.

Wil’s hands slowed to a stop on his instrument. “This one is important,” he insisted. “It’s only something I recently realized.”

Tommy stared at his brother for a long moment, thinking through all the possible ways this could go. Then he nodded, just once, and sat up to listen.

Wilbur took a breath. “One of the reasons you were mad at me was because after you told me something about yourself- something *important*- I tended to throw it back in your face. I almost always had a bad day following it, and I spent a long, *long* time trying to figure it out,” he started, sounding uncertain. “I did, eventually. You telling me all these bad things about yourself... It hurt me. It hurt me that *you* were hurt. And I was mad at the world for allowing things like that to happen. I was mad at the system, and life in general for what had happened to you before we even got the chance to know you. And that isn’t your fault. I’m blaming myself for allowing it to affect my behavior. But I really need to apologize for it. I got bad days and wanted to take out all my anger on the first person I saw, and you were almost always the person to take the bait. I’m really, *really* sorry.” He took a shaky breath. “I guess... I still have a lot of trauma from the system. Sometimes when I look at you, I see myself. I can see what might’ve happened to me if Phil hadn’t taken me in. And on my bad days... it’s really hard not to hate myself. It gets reflected on you because I see myself in you. I’m *sorry*.”

Tommy blinked. “...Okay,” he said slowly. “Thank you.” It wasn’t forgiveness. He would have to work towards that, and saying it was okay right away would’ve been a lie. Tommy was trying not to lie anymore- to others or himself. It was just an acknowledgement,

acceptance that it happened and a willingness to move on. Tommy didn't forgive Wilbur for this particular slight just yet, but he would. Eventually he would.

Even still, Wilbur breathed a sigh of relief. Tommy relaxed back into the bean bag chair at the sound. The tension was gone, and now there was only the occasional guitar chord in the air. Tommy hummed along to the melodies he already knew by heart, perfectly happy to sit in comfortable silence with nothing but music between them.

His brother glanced at him. "I can't say it feels good that you had to go through some horrible traumatic experience to decide you actually want to stick around with us," Wilbur admitted, though it was sheepish at best. There was nothing accusatory in his tone.

Tommy cringed, looking away in embarrassment and regret. "It wasn't that," he said quickly. Then he paused. "Well, okay, I guess it helped a bit. But I always wanted to stay. You know that. I... I guess I just needed a reality check. I needed to come to terms with a lot of things, and I needed to face myself."

"You weren't what I was expecting, y'know," Wilbur said with a small smile. "When we decided to foster again."

Tommy let out a startled laugh, tilting his head to the side. "So I've heard," he teased.

Wil snorted. "Shush. I mean... I was expecting a little brother. Not a foster. Not someone like you," he went on.

Tommy shifted. "Sorry to disappoint," he interrupted again.

Wilbur rolled his eyes. "Will you *shush*? I'm trying to say that this was *better*. You were better than what I was expecting. It's a compliment, you gremlin," he shot teasingly.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "Funny way of saying it," he replied with a small smile. "You might've been better off, y'know. With a little brother that had melted right into the family."

"No," Wil said instantly. Tommy had been joking, and he was taken aback by how firm his brother suddenly sounded. "No, it wouldn't have been better. Not at all."

His face broke into a grin, pleased at such a response. "Are you sure? Not even a little bit? Y'know, most people find me annoying at first," he joked.

Wilbur threw him a glare with no malice and strummed a major chord, eyes bright. "I've got no idea why," he shot sarcastically.

Tommy felt another laugh burst free from his lips. He was perfectly content, and the feeling was almost familiar. He was determined to make it a common occurrence. He would make sure of it. "You're bullying me."

Wilbur strummed another chord, feigning disinterest. "Bullying is good, sometimes," he replied easily.

He laughed again. It came easily. There was just something so comforting about bantering with Wilbur. It was so... cozy. "This is so *domestic*. We're like brothers," he said with a bright smile. Wilbur's hands stilled on the guitar. Tommy stared at him for a long moment, watching his reaction carefully. Finally, he scoffed. "God, Wil. Don't *cry*."

A scream escaped his lips before he could stop it.

Tommy lurched upright, unable to catch his breath. It was pitch black and for a moment, he didn't recognize where he was. Adrenaline raced through his veins, making his hands tremble, and even while still half asleep he could feel the wetness of tears on his face.

In his panic, he registered the door flying open. He couldn't help it- he screamed again. Monsters crawled around his brain and his thoughts were filled with the shadowy horrors of his past. He felt hands wrap around his wrists and he thrashed in his fear. Someone was talking, but it was drowned out by the roaring in his ears. A thousand foster parents laughed in his head.

"*Don't!*" He begged, pulling against the hands, trying desperately to get away. "I'm sorry, I'm *sorry*. Please, don't. *Please*." His voice was hoarse and panicked even to his own ears. The hands loosened and he ripped himself backwards, scrambling away until his back hit the bed frame. "I won't do it again, I'm *sorry*. I'll be quiet, I promise. P-Please don't-"

"*Tommy...*"

The lights flickered on and Tommy flinched so violently that the back of his head smacked into the wooden frame. In a fearful daze, he took in red bedsheets, white walls, and two brothers. Wilbur was sitting on the edge of the bed, hands still outstretched, face covered in pity. Techno was standing at the far wall at the lightswitch, watching him with hard eyes.

Tommy blinked, heart racing in his ears. They stared back at him. Down the hall, he could hear Phil's bedroom door open. He took a shaky breath before curling up around himself, cradling his braced wrist close to his chest, and *sobbing*.

It wasn't *fair*. This wasn't fair. He couldn't remember what he had dreamed about. Something horrible. Something painful. A memory or a nightmare or maybe a terrible combination of both. His skin tingled with phantom aches that hadn't been there in a very long time, but Tommy still felt them like it was yesterday. And it just wasn't fair! He was safe now and he had come to terms with so many things. He shouldn't still act like this. He shouldn't feel like this. He was supposed to be *better* now.

Fingers reached out to brush his arm gently and Tommy cried out, trying to press himself further against the wall. "Don't *touch me*," he hissed between choked whimpers. Wilbur froze, hands retreating like his skin had burned. "I'm sorry. Please... please don't touch me."

I'm sorry." By the door, Phil and Techno muttered in hushed conversation. Tommy couldn't tell if they were annoyed or worried or both.

"It's okay," Wilbur said softly, not deterred. His voice sounded slightly strangled. "I won't touch you. It'll be okay. You had a nightmare?"

Tommy nodded, heartbeat finally starting to slow slightly. "I... I didn't mean to. I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to wake you," he cried, swiping at his face.

Phil slowly made his way into the room, taking his place cautiously at Wilbur's side. "It's okay," his foster father repeated, just as gentle. "It happens. We don't mind."

He wasn't sure how much of that he believed. He was trying to be more trusting and to accept help when needed, but surely this was crossing a line. Waking the entire house up in the middle of the night? Screaming bloody murder loud enough to draw all three of them to his room? Crying and refusing touch, panicked by only the sight of them? That must have been too much. They would see that he wasn't making as much progress as they thought. They would think he was too much trouble. And maybe they would realize that all this wasn't worth the effort after all.

"I'm sorry," Tommy insisted, voice breaking. "I'm alright. You can go back to sleep. I'm sorry, I'll be quiet now."

Phil hesitated, clearly thinking hard. If this was before Tommy had run away, Phil would have left him alone. He would have nodded gently, promised advice and comfort if wanted, and went back to bed. His foster father always preferred hands-off parenting. Letting his sons figure their problems out and deal with the consequences of their actions for themselves. He liked to play the supportive role, giving his children space and coming to their aid when they inevitably came to him. But maybe he was realizing that this way of parenting wouldn't work for Tommy anymore. He had run away last time. Maybe Phil wanted to change that narrative.

So his foster father instead sat down on the edge of the bed and threw a knowing look over his shoulder at his sons. Techno and Wilbur seemed to understand. They exchanged matching expressions that only brothers could possibly read and made their way back outside, closing the door behind them.

Phil watched him intently. "Do you want to talk about it?" He asked softly.

Tommy frowned, running trembling fingers over his legs. "No," he decided weakly. "I... I don't even remember it. It's stupid. I'm sorry."

The older man didn't seem surprised, or even bothered. "That's alright. Y'know, when Wil and Techno first got here they had nightmares too. Woke the whole house up all the time. I used to say that I would've gotten more sleep with a newborn," he explained, voice light with fondness.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "I haven't just gotten here, though. I've been here a long time now," he whispered, like it was a horrible secret.

Phil gave a soft smile. "But you just got back," he answered easily. "And you've been through a lot. Not just in the past few months, but in your life. Nightmares are normal and nothing to apologize for."

He felt another tear fall down his cheek and he wiped it away quickly, angry at himself. "I'm supposed to be better now, though. I made good decisions. I'm going to therapy. I shouldn't... I shouldn't feel this way anymore," he snapped, more irritated with his own emotions than anything else.

Phil's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Oh, Tommy. That's not how it works at all. You can't just... *decide* to get better and then *be* better. Wanting to improve yourself was a giant, amazing first step. But therapy isn't supposed to instantly fix you," he said firmly.

Tommy sniffed. "Then what's the point?" He demanded, voice cracking.

"Therapy... isn't a cure. It's supposed to give you the tools you need in order to deal with what you're going through. You're not going to improve right away, or maybe even for a long while, and no one is expecting you to," Phil explained.

Slowly, he leaned forward so the bed frame wasn't digging into his back. He winced at the sensation, the ghost of bruises echoing across his skin. "I don't understand," he whimpered.

Phil puffed out his cheeks, looking like he was thinking hard again. "Healing is a long, *long* process. You can't expect results right away. You're not going to be a completely different person after a few therapy sessions. Mate, you might spend your entire *life* healing from this," he said slowly.

Tommy whined, heart sinking. "My... my whole *life*?" He asked, incredulous.

The older man shrugged. "It could. Tommy, you were subjected to intense trauma for sixteen *years*. That doesn't just go away overnight," he said gently. Impossibly, the man didn't seem afraid of the notion. Like dealing with Tommy's trauma for the rest of his life was something he'd been more than prepared for.

He made a frustrated noise. "So I'm gonna be fucked up forever," he muttered bitterly.

Phil's eyebrows shot up. He reached out a tentative hand and when Tommy didn't make a face or pull away, he placed it on his arm gently. The warmth was comforting and he almost sighed at the touch. "Not at all. There's nothing wrong with you," Phil insisted, voice firm. "You're reacting the way you had to in order to survive. Nothing wrong with that, right? It worked. You're still here. That's all we care about."

Tommy scowled. "S-So you took me back... *knowing* that I wouldn't be better. Or at least for a long ass time. You knew it wasn't worth it and you did it anyway," he realized, voice weak.

Phil tilted his head to the side, like he'd heard something particularly interesting. "You're worth it, mate. Nothing else matters. The steps you're taking are incredible, but we didn't want you back because we thought you would be... *different* or *better* than you were. You wanted you to come home because we love you. We love you just as you are. We missed you

when you were gone. You're a part of our family, and you left a hole in our hearts when you left," he explained, voice quiet but firm, like he didn't doubt even a single word.

Tommy took a breath and choked.

Oh.

Phil smiled reassuringly. "You don't have to believe me, but we do. We love you as you are, Toms. We want you to be safe and healthy, but we're not expecting an overnight change. That's not realistic. Sometimes it'll feel like you haven't made any progress at all. Nightmares will happen. Bad days will happen. Doubt will happen. It's okay. We love you anyway," he whispered. "We'd still love you if you didn't change at all- if you decided to never take your first step. We love you for *you*. Not for who you could be."

Tommy looked away sharply. He always hated when the family said things like that to him. It was hard to understand, and he hated being confused. But this time... the words warmed him. They wrapped around his heart and squeezed tightly. He hadn't realized that he started crying again until he was wiping at wet cheeks.

"Okay," Tommy whispered back, voice cracking. It was all he could manage.

"It's okay if you don't understand yet," Phil said, impossibly gentle. The worst part was that Tommy really believed him. It was alright if Tommy couldn't comprehend such a statement. It was okay if he couldn't process love in the way that the rest of the family wanted him to.

But he *did* get it. He did, and he held it close to his soul.

"I love you," Tommy muttered, almost too quiet to hear. He'd never said it before. Not to Phil, or to any family since his mom died. The words were unfamiliar on his lips, leaving a strange taste on his tongue.

Phil's face brightened so much that Tommy had to look away. "I love you too, Tommy," his father said.

He swallowed the lump in his throat, trying desperately to push away the embarrassing doubt that was bubbling up in his veins. He couldn't stop all of it. "...Are you sure?" He asked weakly. He cringed at the sound of his own voice, how his tone sounded like a child seeking reassurance. Maybe it was appropriate here, just this once.

Phil smiled. The sight was warm and comforting. It always was. "Yes," he said firmly, without any hesitation.

Tommy nodded, just once, before leaning into his father's touch, utterly exhausted. "Okay," he whispered again. There were no other words to be said.

Tommy crossed the finish line in first place, his Mario Kart avatar cheering.

He blinked, not quite comprehending what he was looking at. His trance was only broken by Techno throwing his controller down next to him, letting out a strangled, “*No!*”

Tommy blinked again, a smile growing on his face slowly. “I won,” he said softly, almost not believing the accomplishment. “I beat you! I’m better at Mario Kart than you!”

Techno scowled. “I *let* you win,” he shot grumpily. Ever the sore loser.

Tommy grinned even wider. “You *didn’t*! I won fair and square! You *suck*,” he gloated.

Techno picked his controller back up, frowning. “Let’s go again,” he said quickly, starting a new race.

He laughed, setting his controller down. “Nuh-uh! I think I’ll end on a win. Retire young. Maybe go to Disney World,” he teased.

“Tommy, play me again,” Techno demanded. If they played again, there was no doubt that Techno would win. He could write this off as a fluke, and forget it ever occurred. How could Tommy let that happen?

He stood up with a dramatic stretch, heart light. They were interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. “Wil!” Tommy cried immediately. “You’ll *never* guess what just happened.”

“Shut up!” Techno shot, though he was beginning to smile as well.

Wilbur made his way into the living room curiously, car keys still in his hand. He eyed the television carefully, where the game was still paused. “I beat Techno,” Tommy grinned. Wilbur’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “*I’m* the new Mario Kart champion. Techno is all washed up.”

Wil turned wide eyes to his brother. “Really?” He asked, sounding disbelieving.

Techno grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest. “I *let* him win,” he pouted in a tone that was not believable at all.

Wilbur laughed gleefully and Tommy’s heart soared at the sound. “What will you do with your winnings?” The oldest joked.

Tommy set his hands on his hips proudly. “Long vacation. Something tropical. Maybe I’ll retire from Mario Kart forever. Keep the ol’ record squeaky clean,” he teased.

“*Tommy*,” Techno whined.

He snatched up the controller again, high on his victory. “Okay, *Blade*. Just to show I’m not a one hit wonder. I’ll crush you again,” he said, sitting back down on the couch. Techno started a new match instantly.

Tommy lost the next race. And the next one. It didn't matter. Wilbur and Phil would forever call him the greatest Mario Kart player of all time. Techno complained adamantly, but his smile always proved that he didn't mind at all. He would always maintain that he let Tommy win, even when Tommy eventually won again several days later.

Techno never loses. If anything, he insisted, it was a draw.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the slightly later than usual update this week! I decided the day of my normal upload that I hated the ending arc I had written and had to completely redo it hehe. I'm also in finals week for my summer semester at university AND I've been hyperfixated on a new AU that you'll probably start seeing in the next few days soooo

But yes, sorry! I actually wasn't planning on posting these blurbs! I originally wrote them to develop the family in my head when trying to write their healing and they weren't supposed to be in any chapter, only existing so I could better write the ending. But I need a little extra time for the ending arc now, and I think they're cute ;]

Thanks for reading!!

I'm gonna try my very VERY best to get the next chapter out on normal Sunday/Monday upload days, but please bear with me :] I know you're all absolutely lovely and will tell me that it's no worries and not to stress myself, but I have to make it known anyway lol
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Before

Chapter Summary

A series of hard conversations.

Chapter Notes

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

“We should talk, Tommy,” Phil said, voice soft.

Tommy stiffened, fingers freezing against the pages of *The Odyssey*. It was the middle of the day. The living room had been empty for hours. Wilbur and Techno had started going to class again as September drew closer, and Phil should be working right now.

But somehow the man had found the time to bother him. Tommy scowled and refocused on the paragraph he was on.

“Nothing to talk about, big man,” he muttered.

Phil sighed and made his way further into the room. “There’s a lot to talk about, actually. I think we’ve pushed it off long enough now,” he said firmly.

If possible, Tommy’s scowl deepened. He didn’t think enough time had passed. In fact, he didn’t think he *ever* wanted to have this conversation. He was perfectly content to keep living on the thin line he’d been walking since he arrived back. The family’s interactions hadn’t been exactly genuine- not like before. But they hadn’t been bad, either. It was like everyone was scared of crossing some invisible boundary that Tommy didn’t know existed. They were overly accommodating and gentle, like they were trying to repent for whatever sins they thought they committed. Tommy thought the whole thing was ridiculous. It was *him* who should be tripping over himself to make it up to them, not the other way around.

“Tommy,” Phil pressed again.

He snapped his book shut and groaned. “What do you want from me, Phil? I left. I’m fucking sorry. I learned my lesson. Everything is better now,” he shot, more harsh than he intended.

To his credit, Phil didn’t flinch. Instead, he sat down on the opposite side of the couch, making sure to keep plenty of space between them. Tommy was still a bit sensitive to touch and tended to wince away when hands brushed his skin.

“That’s not what this is about, and that’s also not true,” Phil stated.

Tommy rolled his eyes. Distractedly, his fingers ran over the worn cover of his book. The texture was achingly familiar and the sensation calmed him slightly. He knew he didn't have anything to fear here, especially when it came to Phil. The man would sooner jump off a cliff than ever lay a hard hand on Tommy. But he also hated confrontation, dreaded it like nothing else, and there wasn't much of an escape now.

"I've been a bad parent," Phil confessed quietly. And *oh*, that wasn't what Tommy was expecting at all. That wasn't... that wasn't right. Or true at all. "I took a bad approach when it came to raising you. I was scared of making things worse. I didn't want to accidentally push you away, and as a result I wasn't there for you in the way I should have been. In all the ruckus, I forgot that you were a child and you were hurt long before you ever stepped foot in this house. I was trying to let you deal with things by yourself because I knew I made you nervous, but the truth is that you're just a kid and I should've been there for you anyway."

Tommy bristled, annoyed. "I'm not a kid," he snarled, though his voice came out weak. "I'm a big man."

Phil chuckled. The sound was strained. "The biggest," he confirmed. "But you *are* a kid. Children need care and attention. When you said you wanted to be left alone, I believed you and I shouldn't have. It's my responsibility as your guardian to take care of you and I fell through."

He raised an eyebrow. "What are you talking about? That's just... not true at all. Phil, you're like- you're like the best parent I've ever had. By a long shot," he said, unsure.

Phil gave a weak smile. "But the bar was already on the floor," he said, eyes sad. "I could've been *better*. I should have been. It's my job to be better, and I let you down. I know apologies won't change the past, but I'm so incredibly sorry. And I hope my actions from now on reflect that. I'll be better. I'll be the dad you deserve."

Tommy blinked, surprised. What the *fuck*? This was not how he expected this conversation to go. He figured when he eventually sat down with Phil, it would be a scolding. For running away, for causing them such distress, for being a shit kid in general.

"But-" he started lamely. He licked his lips, trying to find his voice. "But, Phil, it was *my* fault. You can't blame yourself for my actions. You're a great dad. It was my fault."

Phil smiled sadly. "No, Tommy," he said. "It wasn't."

His voice was so sure, so firm, that it almost sounded true.

Tommy sat up, feeling indignant. "Yes it *was*! I was an asshole and I was mad at the world and I hated you for being decent enough to love me. I ran away and I caused you all so much stress and... and I'm still not even better. Not even close." The last part came out in a choked whisper, a horrible secret that Phil already knew.

Phil's face softened. "And what kind of family are we? Where we made you think we would be better off without you around? What kind of father am I, where you had to run back to your abusers just to get away from us?" He said, voice as guilty as his eyes.

Tommy's eyebrows furrowed. "No, that's- that wasn't... Phil, that was *my* choice. It was a shitty one, but it was *mine*. It doesn't make you a bad parent," he insisted.

"It doesn't make me a great one," Phil countered easily.

Tommy straightened up, pushing his book to the side. "Phil, you're a *fantastic* father. In fact, you- you should be *mad* at me. After everything I've done, any other parent in the entire world would be seriously pissed off," he said, voice hard.

Phil blinked. "Mad at you?" He questioned, genuinely confused. The look on his face told him that the idea of being mad at Tommy was completely foreign. Tommy nearly rolled his eyes. How could Phil ever think he was a shitty parent?

"Because I left, and I didn't even tell you. I didn't listen. Everyone in the whole world was telling me that it would be better here, that this was where I should be, and I was too stubborn to listen to any of it. I ran away, and I made you all sad. Tubbo and Ranboo had to break several laws just to *see* me, and I tried to call Techno to explain myself but I definitely only made it worse, and- and Wilbur stopped *playing music*-"

"Tommy." Phil's voice sounded so strained that it made him pause. "Can I touch you?"

He raised an eyebrow and nodded. It only took a second for the older man to reach over and pull him into a tight hug. Tommy couldn't help the contented whine that escaped his lips at the sensation, warmth spreading through his limbs. It felt safe, his father's arms wrapped around him protectively. It felt like nothing bad would ever happen to him again.

"We weren't mad," Phil murmured into his hair. "We weren't angry at you for leaving. You had every right to leave when you wanted. We were upset because we were *worried* for you. Because we thought that we had hurt you and we were worried that you would get hurt elsewhere as well. And we were right to be nervous, it turns out."

Tommy closed his eyes, feeling the guilt sweep through him. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

Phil pulled away slightly, just to look him in the eyes. "You don't need to apologize, mate. You did nothing wrong. It was *me* who messed up. We wouldn't ever fault you for leaving. That was one of our first rules, right? This isn't a prison. You can leave when you want. If you wanted to be fostered again, of course we would've been sad, but I wouldn't have *stopped* you. We weren't trying to force you to be a part of our family. That would be pretty messed up, I think," he explained gently.

Tommy sniffed, feeling his eyes water a bit. "But... you said you saw me as a son," he said quietly.

Phil gave a small smile. "I *do* see you as my son, the same way I'm sure Wilbur and Techno see you as a brother. It doesn't mean you have to think of me as a father, or them as your siblings. I wasn't lying when I said it was okay if you didn't want to be adopted. You can be just a foster. You don't need to see us as family," he said.

Tommy rested his head on Phil's shoulder and was pleased when the man leaned into the touch. "I do, though. I did before I even left. I just... I don't know. *I don't know.*" He paused, taking a breath that did little to calm him. "Wilbur... didn't think it was okay. That I didn't want to be adopted."

Phil took a long moment to respond, seemingly thinking carefully before opening his mouth again. Finally, he sighed. "I'm going to tell you something about Wilbur and it'll stay between us, alright?"

Tommy nodded against Phil's shirt, feeling his heart skip a beat.

"Wilbur struggles a lot, when it comes to family. Much more than Techno ever did. He... he feels a lot of guilt about his birth parents. He gets nervous in the car sometimes, and when he first got comfortable here with me he had a lot of separation anxiety when I wasn't in view. His biological parents died very suddenly and he's afraid of being left alone again," Phil explained quietly. Tommy nodded along. He knew some of this. "When Techno came to live with us, Wilbur basically attached himself at the hip. He was very protective. You can imagine how Techno reacted to that."

Tommy snorted. He was sure Techno *hated* that. His brother liked his alone time, and he was sure being smothered like that fresh out of the system was more than irritating.

"Wilbur didn't have too much to worry about, though, because Techno wanted to stay here the moment I told him he could. He relaxed a bit when he realized Techno wasn't leaving him. You're a bit of a different story, mate. It's not your fault, and it doesn't excuse Wilbur's actions. Before we fostered again, all three of us agreed that it would be alright if the new kid didn't want to be adopted, or even stay. Wilbur had trouble following that promise. It was shitty, but there *is* a little context to it." He paused, looking at Tommy with fond eyes. "He was scared of losing you, and he lashes out when he's afraid. He's been doing that since he was small, and it isn't much different now."

Tommy bit the inside of his cheek. He'd already forgiven Wilbur. It had been hard, and he hadn't forgiven him for everything yet. But he had come to terms with most things between him and his brother.

"So you're saying he's a clingy bastard," Tommy mumbled, trying to keep his voice light.

Phil chuckled. "Not my exact wording, but sure." He turned to look him in the eye, face turning slightly more serious. "But Tommy, it's *not* an excuse. Wilbur was cruel. He didn't mean to be, but he still hurt you a lot."

"I hurt him, too," Tommy argued half-heartedly.

"Not in the same way. Not even close," Phil insisted, voice soft. "You didn't mean it. You didn't know. He actively went out of his way to hurt you. It doesn't matter if it was due to his mental state or not. I know... I know that you've forgiven him, which is something that you didn't need to do, and no one would have faulted you for still holding a grudge. I know that you guys are working together to get close again, and I would be lying if I said I didn't love seeing my boys being brothers. I just... want you to be safe."

Tommy was silent for a long time, thinking hard. Phil didn't seem to mind. He never did. Tommy tapped on his thighs, unintentionally moving to the rhythm of one of Wilbur's songs.

"I had a foster sibling once who was gonna study psychology in university," he finally said. Phil straightened slightly, interested. "She was older than me, and she swore up and down that being in the foster system fundamentally changed your psyche. It was like a scar that ate away at the good parts of yourself, and the mark would always be there no matter how much time passed or how much you healed. You couldn't escape it because it was a part of you, the same way that my eyes were blue. It didn't matter if I wore colored contacts my entire life, and everyone saw my eyes as brown instead. They were always blue, and I would always be a foster kid."

"That seems a little extreme," Phil mused.

Tommy shrugged. "Maybe. She was a little extreme, I guess. But she was right, in a way. Maybe not to the same extent, but it *is* a scar... a mental one. No matter how many houses you're shoved into or how many years you spend bouncing around, it's all the same." He looked down at his hands, studying the little white lines that littered his skin. "My scars hurt sometimes, even though they healed over a long time ago. Sometimes I can still feel some kind of phantom ache in my palms, or a prickling on my arm, or stinging in my stomach. There's no one actively hurting me, but the pain is still there. And I don't think mental scars are different. Wilbur's been here a long time but... it's impossible to not feel old wounds, sometimes."

Phil smiled fondly. It was almost sad. "You're very mature, Toms," he whispered.

Tommy hummed. "I don't mean to be," he muttered back.

"I know." Phil's voice was gentle. "You're just a kid, and you *deserve* to be just a kid. I don't think you've ever gotten to feel that way in your entire life."

Maybe.

"Tommy, I don't want you to be nervous here," Phil said, lifting his head to speak clearer. "You shouldn't need to be careful around Wilbur, or hole up in your room to feel safer when you're with us. You're a kid, and you deserve to feel secure in your own home. You deserve a childhood full of love and support."

He nodded weakly. He could understand that. It was something he never could have comprehended before he came here, and it was something he was so grateful for learning now.

"I want to be better. And I want you to feel that you can come to me when you need help. I want you to feel okay even when you *don't* want to come to me. Does that make sense?" Phil continued.

Tommy nodded again. It was a difficult ask for someone like him, but he could manage. He was determined to believe Phil, to heal properly, even if every instinct in his body screamed that it was bullshit.

“You’re a good parent,” he murmured. He leaned back over to rest against Phil’s arm again. “Not perfect, but no one is. Wilbur isn’t perfect, and neither am I. And Techno...” He trailed off.

Phil hummed. “Techno is Techno,” he finished for him. The smile on his face was audible even if Tommy couldn’t see it.

“Techno is Techno,” Tommy agreed. There wasn’t any other way to describe him, and he liked it that way.

Phil wrapped his arm around his shoulder gently, and Tommy pressed his face into his side. He reveled in the feeling of physical touch, especially when it was with his father figure. His bio dad never touched him gently in his entire life, and he could count on one hand the times it had happened in the foster homes. He had to force himself to speak again, not wanting to break the moment but knowing it was necessary.

“So you weren’t mad at me?” His voice was so small. “Even before I came back?”

“Not at all.”

“Even when Wilbur stopped playing music? Or when Techno started fighting again?”

“Not mad, Toms. Never.”

Tommy swallowed, pushing his face further into the man’s shirt and almost hoping he could stay there forever- safe in his father’s arms with assurances whispered in his ear.

“I thought you were,” he mumbled, embarrassed. “Everyone’s been so tense. It’s like... things are normal but they’re not at all. And it’s weird.”

Phil nodded against the top of his head, running slow fingers through his hair. Tommy sighed at the feeling. “We’re just nervous, I think,” Phil admitted quietly. “We want you to be safe, *feel* safe. And I guess we’re worried about accidentally hurting you again. It’ll get better, I promise.”

“I believe you. It’s already better,” Tommy decided, thinking of guitar strings late at night and Mario Kart placements. He thought of Phil staying with him after his nightmare, refusing to leave him alone until he stopped crying, and... how could Tommy not believe him?

“Fuck!” He exclaimed as the bag of flour he’d been trying to open popped, spraying white powder across the room.

Niki laughed as it landed in her hair and across the countertop. She wiped at her cheeks, smudging the flour across her skin.

His first day working at the bakery was unfortunately not going as he'd hoped. So far he'd used salt instead of sugar in a cake, dropped a pan of muffins, and now he'd probably be spending the rest of the afternoon sweeping the kitchen clean of flour. Niki had assured him that it was just nerves and it happened to everyone on their first day, but Tommy still felt pretty shitty about it.

"I'm so sorry. Fuck, I'll grab a broom," he rushed out, setting the bag down.

Niki only laughed again. "Don't worry about it, we'll clean it up after we finish this cake. Part of the fun of baking is the mess, right?" She grinned. "Besides, I'm convinced they make those bags hard to open on purpose. It's a conspiracy."

Tommy snorted through his nose, still grabbing a damp paper towel to wipe the flour away from the counter they were using. He was sure his face was bright red in embarrassment, maybe only hidden by the flour coating his skin.

Despite his screwups, Tommy *was* good at baking. Niki was always quick to reassure him when he started to doubt it. She said he had the unique ability to always know when something had spent just enough time in the oven, and could measure out the right amount of ingredients first try almost every time. The only thing he truly struggled with was the decoration.

"You're overthinking it," Niki teased as they frosted the cake. He held the frosting tube in both hands, tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth as he concentrated. "You're trying to make it too perfect, and then you're disappointed when it doesn't come out just right."

He frowned as she took the frosting gently from his hands. "But if I'm not trying hard, it won't look nice," he protested.

She smiled. "Not necessarily. You just have to let it happen. If you try and force the frosting to move a certain way, it'll almost never look the way you want it," Niki explained, coating the final side of the cake with sticky blue frosting. She did it effortlessly with none of the sugar catching or cake ripping behind her spatula.

Tommy sighed. "I hate it. Why don't I just bake the cakes, and you decorate them. I think we'll both be happy," he whined.

"You said you wanted to learn!"

"Well I've learned that it *sucks*."

Niki scoffed good-naturedly. "It's all or nothing, kid. Here." She handed him a new tube of white frosting with a rose shaped piping tip. "All you need to do is put a glob in the corners. The piping will do the rest. Don't think too hard and it'll turn out exactly how it's supposed to."

He sighed, taking the frosting into his hands and studying the cake carefully. It was hard not to feel discouraged when the previous batch of cupcakes he had frosted turned into a mess of drowned sugar. Still, he tried to breathe and to loosen the rigid grip he held on the bag. He

had survived much worse than decorating a cake. If he could bear life-threatening injuries and world-ending emotional turmoil, surely he could frost this stupid thing.

Niki talked his ears off as he worked. He knew she was just trying to distract him and make him feel more comfortable and he willingly welcomed it. She babbled on about her college semester, the new book she was reading, the time she and Wil egged a teacher's car for bullying Techno in class, anything to fill the air. Indie music played from the radio in the corner faintly and Tommy hummed along to the songs he knew from Wilbur's playlists.

The bell of the front door chimed and Niki deserted him to greet the new customer. He finished the edges of the cake, stepping back to observe his work. It wasn't... terrible. Not great, but certainly not a monstrosity like all the other ones he'd done. He grinned, wiping his hands on his apron.

Familiar voices drew him from the kitchen and he stepped into the space behind the counter to find Wilbur and Techno talking to Niki. They both smiled when they saw him and he nodded in greeting.

"What're you guys doing?" He asked, leaning against the counter.

Wilbur pursed his lips. "What? We're not allowed to stop in for baked goods now that you work here?" He teased.

He scoffed in defeat. Silently, Techno reached across the counter and swiped at his cheek. When Tommy made a noise of surprise he pulled away with an amused grin and showed his thumb, covered in blue frosting from his face.

He felt his cheeks redden.

"Tommy's a natural," Niki praised, reaching under the counter to grab his brothers' orders. "He'll be baking circles around me soon enough."

"No one could possibly beat you," Wilbur promised, taking his cupcake from her hands. "Though I'm sure the gremlin is close."

"Hey!"

Niki laughed, setting Techno's wrapped pumpkin bread on the counter. "Well in any case, he's doing great. Thanks for bringing him back to me," she said. She confirmed the sentiment by reaching over to ruffle his hair, which Tommy answered with a whine.

"I'm sure," Techno said. "Is that why he's covered in flour?"

"It's cocaine, obviously. I'm selling drugs out of the back of the bakery," Tommy shot back. He glanced down and tried to wipe away the evidence, but only succeeded in spreading the flour across his apron.

Techno snorted and picked up his bread. Niki rolled her eyes. "As long as I don't see it, not my problem," she shrugged.

Wilbur's eyes lit up. "She'll never have to know," he said in a mock-whisper. "We'll find somewhere else to sell. A drug van or something."

"A camaravan," Tommy nodded knowingly.

"No drug vans! No drugs!" Niki scolded with an amused expression. "Take your sweets and get out of my store!"

Wil clicked his tongue. "Touchy, touchy."

He ducked as a pen flew over his head.

They left the store with wide smiles and the promise to see them later, and Niki and Tommy returned to the kitchen to finish the afternoon orders. Niki praised the cake he had decorated, telling him that it was a huge improvement from his previous tries. They completed the rest of the baking with relatively little issues. Tommy only knocked over a mixing bowl once. Niki insisted that he did the frosting on all the rest of the cakes because *practice makes perfect* and *you'll never get any better unless you stop whining*. He grumbled, but obliged.

Frosting a cake wasn't that bad once he got used to it. He tried to listen to Niki's advice and stop forcing the icing to settle the way he wanted it to. Instead he let it glide and didn't overthink it. Somehow, the frosting always came out better that way.

There was *not* a metaphor in that. It was just a cake, Tommy was just a baker trying to do his job, and Niki was just a boss trying to mentor him. Nothing more, nothing less.

Tommy knocked on Phil's office door for the first time, heart racing nervously. He almost hoped that the man wouldn't reply, but of course a muffled "*Come in!*" answered immediately. He took a breath, shoving down his nausea, and turned the doorknob.

Phil seemed surprised to see him step into the room, and Tommy could hardly blame him. He very rarely invaded his foster father's space without Phil calling him there first, but this was important. Today was important. Phil sat up in his chair, drawing his hands away from his keyboard. "What's up, Toms?"

Tommy swallowed, words suddenly dead in his throat. He'd practiced this moment maybe a hundred times, memorizing what he would say, and rehearsing over and over in the mirror and even with Sam. But all at once, the script flew out of his mind. He was left gaping in the middle of the room, hands trembling.

Phil didn't push him. He never did. He simply smiled kindly. "You're welcome to sit in here, if you'd like," he said. "As long as you don't mind me occasionally mumbling my ideas out loud, of course."

Tommy nodded weakly, grateful for Phil's understanding. He quickly debated on where to sit, whether it would be more respectful to sit in the wooden chair across the desk, before eventually collapsing down in the green bean bag chair usually reserved for Wilbur or Techno. He stared at his hands and tried to get his thoughts back in order. Phil thankfully seemed unbothered by his strangled silence, happy with just his company, and went back to typing on his computer.

His fingers tapped restlessly against his legs. He wasn't having an anxiety attack. Not yet, at least. He was just *nervous*. He was scared. He feared the question just as much as the answer, no matter how hard Sam had tried to convince him otherwise. They'd discussed this topic over the course of several sessions, but it hardly felt any easier now. He took a deep breath. *Four... seven... eight.* The smallest mercy was Phil's consideration. It was clear that Tommy was nervous about *something*, and they both knew that pushing him to speak or sending him away would make it worse. Phil loved him, and he was perfectly contented to sit in his presence quietly until Tommy was ready to talk. He licked his lips and tried again, feeling a bit calmer.

"I- um. Today... today is one year," he muttered.

Phil paused his work again and looked over curiously. "One year?" He repeated, confused.

Tommy nodded slowly and shifted, sitting up a bit straighter. "One year that I've been living here. The, uh, the actual date was in June, and I'm sure you guys would've made a big deal out of it and shit. But I left and accidentally missed it. If you subtract the time I wasn't here, the new date is today. I've been living under this roof for three hundred and sixty-five days," he explained.

Phil pushed back from his desk, settling his hands in his lap. "*Oh,*" he breathed. His eyes grew misty and a strange feeling bloomed in Tommy's chest at the sight. "I'm so sorry I didn't realize. We can--"

"I don't want a celebration or any of that shit," Tommy interrupted quickly. "I'm not... I'm not telling you to *guilt* you or anything. I just, uh, wanted to let you know. I wanted to talk to you."

His foster father let out a small laugh, though the tears in his eyes remained. "You're a blessing, Tommy. I'm so proud of you. A year is a big accomplishment," he said, voice brimming with pride.

Tommy swallowed the lump in his throat. His fingers tapped away nervously and he stood back up, feeling safer on his feet. Phil raised an eyebrow, but didn't move. "I... uh... sorry. I wanted to ask you a question," he mumbled, staring at the bookshelves behind his father's head. He felt like he might burst into flames if he made eye contact.

"Yes?"

He frowned, trying to regain his wording. "You... you can say no. Please don't agree because you feel *bad* for me, or some other stupid reason. I- I don't even know if this is still an option

because... I *know* I really fucked up. I messed up bad and I know you forgave me, but that doesn't mean you have to say yes. And-

"Toms," Phil cut in gently. Tommy paused, voice catching in his throat. His heart pounded in his ears. "It's alright, mate. Whatever you have to ask, it'll be okay. I promise."

Tommy believed him.

He took a shaky breath, his fingers tapping rapidly along his sides. "I- I wanted to ask if maybe... if you would still be interested in adopting me." Phil froze, eyes wide. Tommy rushed to fix his mistake. "I- I mean, you don't *have* to. It's totally fine if you've changed your mind. I made a mistake, and if you're not comfortable with it anymore, I understand." In all his ramblings, he hardly noticed Phil getting up from his chair. "I'm technically a flight risk, and I've hurt your family, and I was cruel when you showed me kindness. I just... I really love this family. It would mean everything to me to be a part of it legally. *But you don't have to*. Please, I'm not pressuring you-

He was enveloped in a tight hug before he could continue, the breath knocked right out of him. He tensed, feeling unsure, and his fingers froze in place. He only relaxed when Phil pulled back and he could see the bright smile on his face. The tears in the man's eyes threatened to spill over.

"*Of course*," Phil whispered, breathless. He kept his hands on Tommy's shoulders, his hands almost shaking in his excitement. "God, Tommy, of *course* I'll adopt you. I would be so honored. I would be so proud to call you my son."

Oh.

Oh.

"Oh." A choked noise, half a laugh and half a dry sob, escaped from Tommy's lips. "Oh," was all he could muster. He didn't quite comprehend what he was hearing. "...Are- are you sure? You can take the time to think about it-"

"We've thought about this for months, mate."

Tommy swallowed. Right. Slowly, *so* slowly, he felt a smile grow on his face. The churning in his gut dissolved into a giddy, fluttery feeling. He internalized it, holding it close to his heart, protecting it like a spark trying to burst into a flame. "Okay," he whispered, more to himself than Phil. The look on the man's face would be branded into his brain forever. "Okay."

His father somehow still had all the paperwork stored in his desk. He tried not to think too hard about what that meant, or the warmth that bloomed in his chest at the sight. They walked through the documents together. Tommy was more than familiar with almost every type of legal foster document there was, but this was completely new to him. Phil was careful to explain anything that he felt Tommy might not completely understand and was patient when he was asked to repeat. Tommy remained in the office, hands gripping the sides of his chair in nervous anticipation, as Phil called Hannah to let her know that he would be

dropping the paperwork off at her office tomorrow. There was a long process ahead of them, battling out the case in family court, but even Tommy couldn't pretend not to hear the eagerness in his social worker's voice as they discussed the details. And Tommy should have been bored by the end of it- spending so long just reading legal paragraphs and signing where Phil directed him to- but he drank up every second like a man in a desert desperate for water. He'd never done anything so exciting in his life. He'd never felt so... safe.

He was... safe. And warm. And his fingers were still against his legs.

When he was fourteen, Dream told him that he wasn't deserving of a family. Tommy had always thought it was true, even long before he had ever met Dream. He had repeated the lie so much that he believed it, and he had been resigned to being alone for the rest of his life. He was born an only child to parents who had too many problems to truly love him in the way that they should have. Maybe one day he could forgive them for it, or at least understand it. But he was fourteen when Dream confirmed all his worst fears. Tommy was only three years older now than he was then, but it felt like a lifetime. There was an eternity between fourteen and seventeen, wasn't there? It seemed impossible that he had ever believed that, but how could he ever blame his fourteen year old self for being naïve? He had never been given the proper tools to help himself beyond basic survival. That wasn't his fault, and there was nothing he could do to change his past now. He *could* change his future. He had the tools- he just had to use them. He could make his future what he wanted it to be.

Tommy was a foster kid. Distrustful, defensive, and so horribly alone. He'd been in the system far longer than anyone in his agency, and he'd been in more foster houses than he could count on both hands twice over. He never had the luxury of worrying about his future. There was only the present, always influenced by the past. But maybe... not anymore.

Maybe Tommy could forgive Dream too. He could understand him, in the dark parts of his brain that knew what it was to have nothing and want something for yourself and no one else. Dream was a foster kid just like him, and he was fiercely protective of the family he had won after a hard-fought battle. Tommy had been an intruder, a threat to the normalcy. Now that he had a family of his own, he could understand that fierce possessiveness as well. To hold what he had earned close to his heart and not let anyone else in. He would never do what Dream had done, but... he might have understood.

Maybe in another life, Tommy and Dream could have been brothers. But he was glad they weren't in this one.

When he was fourteen, Dream told him that some people weren't meant for a family and Tommy was one of them. And now... he had proven him wrong. A startled breath escaped from his lips at the realization. Dream was wrong. His biological father was *wrong*. Tommy had a family. He was loved. His bio parents and his social workers and lawyers and foster parents and siblings were all wrong about him. They hadn't ruined him, despite their best efforts. They hadn't made him the monster they always said he was. Tommy was just a kid- not a curse or a burden. He was a human being, and he deserved love. He deserved a family, and he was *not* going to break them just by loving them. He knew that now. It would be hard to remember, but he was determined to know it.

Phil settled a gentle hand on top of his, comforting and familiar. “You alright, mate?” He whispered, setting the finished paperwork to the side.

Tommy blinked. What an odd question.

“Yes,” he answered. His voice didn’t waver. It was a strange feeling, forming his words around his smile instead of the other way around. “I’m... I’m good. I’m really good, dad.”

Phil grinned, and this time he just couldn’t stop the happy tears from falling.

Chapter End Notes

It happened!!!! They're healing your honor!! WOOOO

Psst. You may notice that this work is now a part of a series! You also may notice that there's a new work posted *right now*!! It's a story of life with the Watson's from Wilbur's POV and will deal with life before Phil all the way to Tommy's stay. The first chapter is out! (Though please don't expect that work to have regular uploads until this fic is done.)

Check out the series!! :]

Next chapter within the week! We're almost there!! <3

After

Chapter Summary

It's already done, but somehow telling his brothers is so much harder than the first step.

Chapter Notes

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

Tommy sat criss-crossed on Techno's bed, running shaky fingers over the brown covers.

"Are you sure?" Techno asked for maybe the hundredth time in the past hour.

He rolled his eyes, flopping backwards and letting his head hit the pillow. "Tech, if I have to say it another time I'm taking the whole thing back," he grumbled, though not unhappily.

"But really? You *really* want to be adopted? I just... don't want you to be doing this for the wrong reasons."

Tommy rolled over, staring up at his older brother. Techno's hair was pulled back in a low bun, stray strands falling loose everywhere. Tommy ached to braid it, to neatly brush it and shape it into something breathtaking. His knuckles had thankfully cleared of any bruising.

"You're starting to sound like you don't want me," he whined, a hint of doubt panging through him.

Techno's eyebrows immediately shot up. "*No*," he insisted instantly. "That's not it. Of course I want you here. I think I've made it clear that you're my brother, and I'm so fucking happy that you felt good enough to get this far."

"But you think I'm overcompensating or some shit?"

Techno sat down on the bed next to him, leaning back on his two hands. It had been two days since Tommy had filled out the adoption paperwork with Phil. It was submitted to Hannah, and soon it would be submitted to whatever agency that handled foster adoptions. There was no going back, and Tommy didn't *want* to go back. Phil had graciously agreed to keep quiet about the whole thing until Tommy told his brothers himself, needing to work up the courage to have the same conversation *again* at least two more times. The first discussion had nearly been too much for him, after all.

"I know you're really set on healing, and I think you're doing a great job. Really, Tommy, I'm so proud of you. I just don't want you to rush things if you're not ready because you think you owe us, or owe yourself," Techno explained quietly. "Not even four months ago, you were dead-set on *not* being adopted."

Tommy hummed. "A lot can change in four months," he mused.

"I know. And I'm proud of you, Toms. I know you're working really hard, and we are too. I'm just worried about you." He paused. "That's what big brothers do, I guess. We worry."

Tommy stifled a laugh, feeling his heart swell at the thought. "I get it," he said after a minute. "I understand your worry. I promise I put in a lot of thought about this."

"You're not trying to prove anything?"

He snorted. "Not to you," he muttered.

"I'm serious, Toms," Techno grumbled.

He groaned and sat up again, nudging the taller's shoulder with his own. "C'mon, big guy. I've wanted to be adopted since like last *Christmas*, even if I was an ass and wouldn't admit it. I've considered you guys family for months now. Why not make it official?" He shrugged.

Techno wrapped an arm around him and Tommy leaned into the touch contentedly. Now that he was getting over pushing people away and the others were getting over walking on eggshells around him, he found himself in the arms of his family more often than not. He'd never particularly liked to be touched in the past, especially by foster families, but now he basically melted whenever someone held him close. Wilbur had almost cried the first time Tommy wormed his way under his arm to rest his head on his chest.

"Just makin' sure," he murmured.

Tommy leaned his head on his brother's shoulder. "Phil and I had a talk about his parenting style and shit," he explained. "And it'll be better this time. I want to be a part of this family, and I trust Phil and you guys to help me stay part of it. I promise that I didn't ask for any of the wrong reasons."

Techno nodded knowingly. "To be fair, I *told* Phil that you might need a different approach. No one ever listens to me," he huffed.

He smothered a smile with his hand. "So you and Wilbur did fine with that kind of parenting? When you guys first got here?" He asked.

His brother was silent for a long time. Tommy hardly minded, perfectly content to sit with his head on the soft fabric of Techno's red sweatshirt. Finally, he opened his mouth. "When Wilbur and I were your age, Dad mostly let us deal with our own problems," he started slowly. "Of course, he was *there* for us when we wanted him and I guess he knew that we would always eventually come to him if something got out of hand. I think more so with me than Wilbur. I'd been independent my entire life before I came here. My parents weren't around and my grandparents didn't really care. Wilbur's a little different, the clingy bastard."

Tommy laughed.

"It was... better that way, I think. Because in the foster system, we learn not to count on adults for help. Whether you were in four houses or *twenty*-four houses, it's ingrained pretty

early on. Phil cares more than anything, but he's smart. He knows that smothering us would probably only make things worse, and he's right most of the time," Techno said, sounding almost fond. "It's been a long time since Phil took in another kid, obviously, and I guess he just assumed that he could use the same parenting tactics that he used with me and Wilbur. I mean... you're not exactly a child. You're a kid, of course, but you're unfortunately probably more mature than Wilbur and I combined. We were both ten when we came to live here. Parenting a sixteen year old and a ten year old is very different, and I think Phil gave you too much space."

Tommy nodded. He knew some of this and had already discussed most of it with Phil. He didn't want to cut his brother off, though. If it would calm his nerves about the whole adoption thing, then he would listen forever.

"Wil and I both needed a lot of help, I guess. Wilbur had trouble speaking and sometimes he got really mean. Sometimes he still does. I was really angry, and I took it out on the people around me without meaning to. But we got better with it as we got older and with Phil's help. We didn't really need that kind of accommodating parenting anymore by the time we were sixteen. You still do. Nothing wrong with that."

"I'm not sixteen," Tommy mumbled half-heartedly.

"You were when you got here. Just barely sixteen, too," Techno reminded him with a fond smile.

He huffed. "Well, I get it. No one's perfect- not even Philza, the greatest man ever," he decided.

Techno snorted and Tommy's heart swelled again. He sat up, only a little sad at the lack of contact, and brought his hands to his lap.

"How am I gonna tell Wilbur?" He dared to ask.

His brother looked thoughtful. "Are you worried he won't take it well?"

Tommy flopped back onto the bed with a whine. Techno watched on in amusement. "I don't know *what* I'm worried about. It's not like he'll take it badly, right? He wanted me to be an official part of the family more than *I* did. So I don't know where the anxiety is coming from," he admitted with a soft shrug.

Techno clicked his tongue. "I don't know if I can answer that for you," he said gently. "Probably best not to drag it out, I guess. The sooner, the better." He paused. "And let me know when you *do* tell him so we can properly celebrate together. As a family, and all that." His smile was wide and genuine.

As a family. Tommy liked the sound of that. He nodded. "'Course, big man," he muttered. "Thanks for being cool and shit."

Techno tilted his head. "Well *someone* in this family has to be," he teased, gently kicking at Tommy's leg.

He scoffed. “Yeah, yeah. I love you, you prick,” he sighed.

Techno didn’t do emotions. Everyone knew it perfectly well and it wasn’t something he hid about himself. He preferred stoicism and silence over everything else and liked to show that he cared in little ways that didn’t directly draw attention to himself. But when Tommy glanced over, he could’ve sworn the tips of his brother’s ears were bright red beneath all the pink hair.

“Yeah,” Techno breathed, looking away in embarrassment. “Love you, too.”

Tommy did not want to tell Wilbur.

He wasn’t sure *why*, though. It’s not like he thought his brother would be mad at him, or push him away, or tell him he wasn’t wanted. Wilbur wanted him to be a part of the family more than anyone else.

He dragged it out all week. Every time he found himself with a good opportunity, where the two were alone with ample time to talk, he found himself with the words stuck in his throat. He could tell Phil and Techno were growing antsy, waiting for him to spill the secret so they could talk about it as a family. Tommy hated to make them wait, but he just couldn’t seem to do it.

His fingers bounced all afternoon, all through dinner, all evening.

At nine o’clock sharp, there was a knock on his bedroom door. Tommy looked up from the *Odyssey*, which he had not been reading a word of, and called the knocker in.

It was Wilbur. His heart caught in his throat.

His brother didn’t look upset, though. There was no indication that he knew anything at all about the secret being kept from him. He smiled warmly when Tommy stared back at him and slowly held up his hand.

Wilbur was holding his car keys, the metal jingling softly as he moved. “Wanna go for a drive?” He asked, eyes bright.

And that’s how he found himself in the passenger seat of Wilbur’s old car as they cruised down the highway. The incoming wind from the rolled down windows made his eyes water and the indie rock blasting from the speakers made it impossible to talk, but it was *nice*. They didn’t seem to have a destination. He knew Wilbur sometimes went out late at night, though he never knew where and he had never invited Tommy. He’d always kind of assumed his brother sought out Quackity and Schlatt during those times, or maybe he’d gone down to the beach. Seeing how comfortable he was now though, hands tapping on the steering wheel as he mouthed along to the lyrics, made Tommy think that this was an entirely more likely

option. He went for drives and blasted music through his stereo until it was impossible to think of anything else besides the bass line.

Tommy didn't know why he was invited this time around, but he was glad Wilbur decided to include him. The swell of music and his brother singing along as wind rushed through his hair made him feel... safe. It was the first time all week that he didn't have some life-hindering anxiety coursing through his veins. Even if the source of his nerves was sitting right next to him, Tommy couldn't find himself to worry at all.

Wilbur didn't turn down the music until they pulled into the drive-thru of a fast food restaurant. "What do you want?" He asked, voice a bit breathless.

Tommy blinked at him in surprise and then looked over his shoulder at the menu. "We just had dinner two hours ago," he pointed out.

"And you barely ate anything," Wilbur said with a knowing smile. "You've barely eaten all week. So tell me what you want or else I'm ordering you a kids' meal."

Tommy huffed, but his annoyance was quickly swallowed up by the growling in his stomach. He muttered out a request for a burger and fries, much to Wilbur's delight.

They ate their food in the parking lot, the dashboard illuminated by the orange glow of the street lamp overhead. Wilbur pushed his chair all the way back and then kicked his feet up against the steering wheel, letting his knees rest against his chest. With his height, it couldn't have been a comfortable position, but he seemed perfectly content.

"Wanna hear something cool?" Wilbur asked after a long silence, popping a fry into his mouth.

Tommy nodded wordlessly and watched as the brunet drew his phone from his pocket and connected it to the aux cord. It took a few moments before a familiar guitar strum flowed through the speakers and Tommy's breath caught.

"Your song," he breathed out, awestruck.

Wilbur laughed, his cheeks turning slightly pink under the lamp light. "It's done. I think I'm going to release the album I've been working on tomorrow, or maybe the next day. But it would mean a lot to me if you listened to it first. You're my biggest supporter, after all," he explained with a wide smile.

Tommy stared at him with wide eyes. The album Wilbur had been working on for months and months- released *tomorrow*. He could play the songs on his phone, listen to Wilbur sing at work, hear the music he loved so much any time he wanted without having to pester Wil to play it for him.

He would still pester Wil to play it for him, of course.

The air was filled with soft guitar chords that Tommy knew by heart, bass that he hummed to himself constantly, lyrics that he'd helped Wilbur come up with himself.

“This is incredible, Wil! It sounds amazing! Holy crap!” He exclaimed in his excitement, the food in his lap long forgotten.

Wilbur let out another startled laugh, grinning from the praise. “Yeah, well, it’s dedicated to you,” he explained with a nonchalant shrug.

Tommy continued to stare. “To me?” He asked, not quite comprehending.

His brother nodded. “Of course, Toms. There’s no one else I’d rather give my music to,” he said.

Oh. The breath knocked right out of him. He couldn’t believe that he meant that much to anyone. That Wilbur might dedicate his craft to someone like Tommy. That his brother might work for weeks and weeks, well into the early morning hours, to gift him something as important to Wilbur as his *music*.

His eyes welled with tears before he could stop himself. The guitar faded out, replaced by a new song with a softer strum- the next track on the album. “Thank you,” he muttered, voice quiet to keep it from breaking. It was all he could manage.

Wilbur smiled, eyes warm. Tommy wanted to bury his face in his brother’s sweater and hug him tightly, but the console dividing their seats made it difficult. He instead opted to bring his knees up to his chest and wrap his arms around his legs as they listened to the song play out.

“Is this why you invited me for a drive?” He asked after another peaceful silence. “To show me the album?”

The brunet hesitated, running his fingers over the seam of his jeans. “Yes and no,” he finally decided. “I did want to get you alone so we could listen to it, but... but I’ve also noticed you’ve been really anxious the past couple of days. You haven’t been eating and you’ve been avoiding me. I just don’t want you to fall into old habits, I guess. I’m worried about you.”

Tommy’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re *worried* about me?” He repeated, confused.

Wilbur shrugged again, looking sheepish. “That’s what big brothers do, right? They worry,” he admitted.

He ignored how eerily similar those words were to Techno’s earlier this week and tried not to think about how he now had two big brothers to watch over him. Tommy studied Wilbur carefully, but found no malice. There was no double meaning behind the words or guilt tripping. He couldn’t find any proof that Wilbur knew about his secret at all. He just genuinely considered them brothers and family, despite Tommy not being adopted in his eyes.

His heart fluttered at the prospect.

“It’s been a weird week,” is all he said.

Wilbur nodded in understanding. “Yeah, I get it. I just want to make sure you know you can talk to us if you need. Even if it’s not me, you can talk to Techno and Phil whenever. If

something is bothering you, please don't be afraid to bring it up," he said gently.

His stomach flipped. "I... I *do* need to talk to you. I need to tell you something. I'm just nervous, so give me a second," he muttered.

Wilbur raised an eyebrow and he nodded again. Tommy focused on the stereo in front of him. He breathed in time with the music. At least his hands hadn't started shaking again.

There really wasn't a problem with telling Wilbur what he had decided. He knew perfectly well that his brother wouldn't be anything other than happy for him. They could be a real, legal family with all the paperwork to boot. Wilbur wouldn't have to worry about Tommy leaving him behind ever again because now Tommy didn't *want* to. He wanted to stick around for as long as he could, spend every second he had with his new family, make up for all the time they'd missed out on and lost.

This was just the last barrier. Wilbur was the last family member to tell, and after that it would be real.

It would be real once the words left his mouth. Once Wilbur knew that he had asked to be adopted, that the paperwork had been filled out and sent off, there wouldn't be anything left stopping them from being a family.

Tommy wanted to be a family so fucking badly, but the thought still terrified him somewhere deep in his heart. He still had a lot to overcome. This was the first step to a million obstacles that he still needed to face.

"Okay," he breathed, releasing the air from his lungs. "I've, uh, felt pretty good since I came back to the house. I've come to terms with a lot of things about myself and my life, and I've done a ton of thinking."

Wilbur frowned. "...Okay?"

He took a deep breath. "And I had a bunch of important conversations with Phil about family and my existence in the house and I just... I feel better than I did. I feel like I have the chance to be a kid, to be a *human*, instead of a foster. Y'know?" He rambled.

At least Wilbur could understand a sentiment like that. He nodded knowingly.

"So, uh, last week... I asked Phil to adopt me."

Wilbur froze, eyes wide. Brown eyes stared at him in shock. Tommy wasn't even sure if he was still breathing.

"And Phil of course said yes," he went on, rushing to finish so Wilbur could take a breath. "We finished all the paperwork. It's already submitted. It's up to the courts now. I mean, I guess they could always say *no*, which would fucking suck. But Hannah says that almost never happens in cases like mine, and I shouldn't worry so much, and Phil agreed. So... yeah. I'm gonna be an official part of your family, if that's okay. We can be brothers- but like *actual* brothers."

“Really?”

Tommy glanced back at Wilbur to find his eyes slightly glossy. He nodded, trying to find the courage to continue. “Phil’s been keeping it a secret, and I told Techno a couple days ago. I just... didn’t know how to tell you. Sorry for keeping it from you for so long,” he explained quietly.

Orange light illuminated the car, reflecting off the dashboard, bathing both of them in a warm gold. If he closed his eyes, the distant cars driving past on the highway could become background singing to the guitar on the stereo. The texture of Wilbur’s car seats beneath his fingers could feel like home.

“You want to be a part of our family? You want to be my brother like... forever?” Wilbur whispered, voice weak. He was staring at Tommy like he’d never seen him before, eyes blown wide.

Tommy nodded.

“Even when I’m an asshole?”

He choked out a startled laugh. “Especially when you’re an asshole. *Someone* has to put you in your place sometimes,” he teased.

Wilbur blinked, not registering the joke at all. He sat up, placing his feet back on the floor. “Really?” He asked again. “You’re not joking?”

“I wouldn’t joke about something like this, Wil,” Tommy insisted gently. “Phil is adopting me. I *want* to be adopted.”

His brother took a deep breath that sounded a bit strangled. Another moment of silence passed between them and Tommy’s stomach rolled nervously. He started to doubt for the first time. Was he upset? Was he mad that Tommy kept this from him all week? Did he not want Tommy to be a part of their family after all?

Wilbur pushed himself across the center console and wrapped Tommy’s shoulders in a tight hug, earning a sound of surprise from the blond. It couldn’t have been comfortable, with Wil’s stomach pressed against the console and reaching over so far, but Tommy wouldn’t have traded it for absolutely anything. He hugged back fiercely, burying his face in a familiar yellow sweater and breathing in the smell of coffee. He willed himself not to cry, but quickly found that it was an impossible task. Happy tears quickly found a home in the sweater, and he could feel Wilbur’s land in his hair in turn.

When Tommy was young and dreamed of a family, it was perfect. They melded together instantly, a group of perfect people who always said the right thing and never fought over anything because good families didn’t have any problems. In the dream, the universe sparked when Tommy looked at them for the first time- like love at first sight- and he knew that they were the family for him right off the bat, feeling it deep in his soul.

Reality proved to be far from fantasy, but that was okay. This was *better*. This was something they had worked for, something he fought tooth and nail to achieve, and that made the prize so much more valuable. This was something that he could cherish forever, wrap it up in his hands and hold it close to his chest because he'd *earned* it. He had endured blood, sweat, and tears for this family and he was *proud* of it.

Tommy could love them because he had seen them at their worst the same way that they had seen *him*. He had made a lot of mistakes in his life, but so had Wilbur. So had Phil and Techno. That's what life *was*- a series of mistakes until you reach where you need to be.

Tommy knew so many things, but the most important one was that this was exactly where he was meant to be.

"I'm so proud of you, Toms," Wilbur mumbled into his hair. "I won't let you down again."

Tommy snorted and nodded.

They went back through the drive-thru before they went home just to get milkshakes, much to Tommy's delight. He cranked the radio up to maximum volume the second they pulled away.

They screamed the lyrics over the roaring bassline with wide smiles, high on sugar and happiness. Tommy had never felt more elated in his entire life. He'd never felt safer. He'd never felt more at home.

There would be mistakes. Love was not a cure for everything that had happened and for all the harm Tommy had withstood throughout his life. Far from it, actually.

But it was a start. What more could he ask for?

When they pulled back into the driveway, Phil and Techno were waiting at the front door with expectant looks. He hadn't even made it into the living room before Wilbur shot his brother the widest grin he'd ever given and they *knew* the secret was out. Phil tackled them both in a hug with a laugh and Wilbur pulled Techno in, who huffed but conceded to the group pile. There weren't any words. It wasn't needed. It was enough.

It was done. They were a family. There wasn't anything left to do, and he was glad for it.

Tommy let himself get squished to death, surrounded by family and love. He figured if he was done for, this would be a good way to go.

The hold eventually released, though, and Tommy released a breath he didn't know he was holding.

"Welcome home, Theseus," Techno murmured.

Chapter End Notes

If you saw me post this a day late no you didn't.

Y'know that clip of cc!Wilbur talking about that memory he has of sitting in his stepbrother's car late at night with the music blasting and feeling safe? Yeah :']

This chapter is a little shorter (sorry) because of Tommy's characterization! It's supposed to be less monologue and more dialogue because Tommy is supposed to overthink less and talk about his problems out loud more. I just hate writing dialogue lol. The next (and final!!!!) chapter will be much longer pinky promise.

Hey, here's an interesting thing! According to google, here are some of the themes/words this story focuses on: Need, adoption, forgive, sense, anger, surprise, breath, meal, silence, year, privacy, resentment, argument, gratitude, and nightmare. Kinda neat to see it lined up like that, right? I think it's really cool. I don't have any writing/MCYT social media so you guys have to deal with my ramblings in the end notes hehe.

Next (and last :']) chapter in a week <3

((Oh hey... that part where Tommy mentioned family court denying his adoption forms... that would be so sad... but of course that wouldn't happen... what a cruel and angsty sequel that would be.... If only a certain author might be writing something like that maybe... oh nooo... ;])))

Endings

Chapter Summary

Happy endings don't exist, but this feels pretty close.

Chapter Notes

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

Tommy hated happy endings.

He always had. They were just so... fake. Happy endings were sold to children and idiots to make life seem less unbearable, and Tommy had never had any use for them. They weren't realistic. Life was hard and there was no room for happy endings in his painful world. Tommy had always preferred endings that matched his own- unfair and tragic. *That* was what the real world was.

This wasn't a happy ending. It *wasn't*. Happy endings don't really exist because life goes on past them. Tommy scowled at the thought as he walked, hands shoved deep in his pockets, and tried to push away the elation growing in his stomach. Happy endings were stupid and he didn't believe in them.

No matter how much this might have felt like one.

Phil grinned at him over his shoulder, camera settled neatly at his hip. His eyes were brimming with pride, smile stretched wide across his face. The look was gentle and fond- something reserved for Tommy and Tommy alone. In front of him, Wilbur and Techno raced ahead. The both of them had discarded their light jackets under the bright September sun, sweating as they ran down the uneven wood of the boardwalk. Tommy tried not to show his amusement and utterly failed, smiling brightly as Techno pulled ahead of his brother with a triumphant shout. He didn't know where they were racing, or what the winner got. He had a feeling it was more friendly sibling rivalry than anything else, and he would be listening to Wilbur complain about his loss for the rest of the day.

He breathed in salty air and allowed his eyes to fall shut for just a moment, lifting his chin to the sky in a futile attempt to absorb more sunlight. It was a beautiful day. *For a beautiful occasion*, Phil had said. Tommy was inclined to agree. There was hardly a cloud above them, crystal blue that matched his eyes stretching for miles and miles. Beyond the wooden railings of the boardwalk and warm sand, the ocean crashed gently on the shore. Tommy had always loved the coast. The gentle roll of the waves calmed him, providing familiar ambiance to their stroll. His eyes fluttered open again.

Tradition didn't mean much to Tommy. It was hard to care about tradition as a foster kid, bouncing from house to house. He had been in the system for too long to ever hold onto his

own traditions, and he never stayed long enough anywhere to hold onto anyone else's. But the boardwalk was something special to the Watson family. Trips to the beach, walking across corroded wood and tasting salt on their lips meant something important here. It represented family. It was love. Phil had asked his boys to become his sons here, and their family had grown. Tommy hadn't thought much of the tradition a month ago, when the question slipped from his lips in Phil's office. He hadn't remembered it, and he wasn't sure if he would've cared at the time. The thought of coming down here only for Phil to tell him *no* still made his stomach roll in horror.

They were here now, though. It was Wilbur who had suggested the trip. *For tradition*, he'd said. Tommy suspected he really just wanted ice cream from his favorite shop. But nevertheless, a new family of *four* had piled into the car. He wasn't sure if they were celebrating, per say, or if this was more of a casual trip. He wasn't sure if he cared either way. Phil had submitted his adoption application a month ago. They had celebrated at home, with a big dinner and lots of friends and tight hugs and wide smiles. He had barely spent even a minute outside of Wilbur's tight embrace, his oldest brother unwilling to let him go out of sheer glee- the absolute clingy bitch. They had already celebrated. The novelty had come and gone. This trip to the boardwalk was more... wrapping up loose ends. It was closure. Fulfilling tradition no matter the circumstances.

Tradition didn't mean much to Tommy, but the Watson's meant everything to him. So here he was, walking down the boardwalk after his brothers with a laugh on his lips.

"Toms!" Wilbur called over his shoulder, several yards ahead of him and Phil. "Aren't you coming?"

Tommy raised an amused eyebrow and glanced at his father, who just shrugged. He didn't have much interest in racing. It was hot, and the beach air was sticky. He was perfectly content to stroll at Phil's side and simply watch his brothers compete.

"Slow poke!" Techno challenged, even farther ahead of Wilbur. His voice was almost drowned out by the wind. "Last one to the ice cream shop has to wash the dishes when we get back!"

Oh. His eyes widened. Phil barely had time to laugh before Tommy took off, tearing down the boardwalk with an excited grin. His feet barely touched the ground as he flew, catching up to Wilbur easily, a smug smile plastered to his face. "*Hey!*" Wil shouted, incredulous as Tommy passed effortlessly.

Tommy had always been good at running. It used to be the only thing he knew how to do.

Wilbur broke into a newly energized sprint, hot on his heels. Tommy let out a startled cry and increased his pace. The only sound was the slap of sneakers on wood and the wind in his ears. Another laugh escaped his lips, strangled by fast-rushing air and tight lungs. He didn't care. The look on Techno's face as he glanced over his shoulder and saw the both of them fast approaching far made up for it.

Techno touched the door of the ice cream shop first, boosted by his head start and natural ability. Tommy finished not far behind him, slapping a hand on the wall and spinning around

to watch the family's reaction. Techno grinned wide, face flushed from the sprint. Strands of pink hair had broken loose from his braid and framed his head. Wilbur approached with a pout, slowing to a jog long before he reached the door.

"No fair!" He whined.

Tommy showed off a shit-eating grin, pleased with not coming in last. "You're slow, Wil! You were miles ahead and I still passed you," he teased.

Wilbur finally slammed a hand onto the shop with an exaggerated frown. "I'm not *slow*. I'm fast as fuck. You two are just freaks. It's unnatural," he said with a sniff. Tommy and Techno exchanged a high five as Wil whirled around defiantly. "Phil!" He cried, raising his voice to be heard. "They're bullying me again!"

Phil was still halfway down the boardwalk, strolling leisurely and making no effort to run himself. He was barely more than a silhouette under the bright afternoon sun, but Tommy could still imagine his fond smile. "Good!" He called back, amused voice carried by the beach air.

Wilbur huffed, crossing his arms. "At least I'm faster than dad," he pouted to his brothers.

Techno leaned against the shop wall comfortably and raised an eyebrow. "I don't know," he drawled. "I think he might blow you away if he actually tried. He just doesn't want to hurt your feelings." There was no way of knowing if he was joking or not from his tone.

Wilbur stuck out his tongue as Tommy snorted. "He's *old*. I'm faster than the elderly," he insisted.

"*You're* old, Wil."

Wilbur threw his hands up in exasperation. "I'm not *old*. You two are just children. *Teenagers*. I'm still young. Full of life. Fast as *fuck*," he argued, a small smile on his face.

Tommy shoved his hands into his pockets, fingers unnaturally still. "You have aged poorly and swiftly. Besides, you're definitely not faster than Phil. He's the only man ever, and he would put your speed to shame," he grinned mischievously.

Wil rolled his eyes, trying and failing to conceal his growing smile.

They waited patiently for Phil to reach them. Tommy didn't mind the delay. He would probably sit out here all day if he could, listening to the waves crash on the shore and his family's voices banter back and forth. He leaned against the wall like Techno, lifting his face up to the sun once again with a soft smile. For not the first time, he wished he could lounge in the sunlight all day.

"You're like a cat," Techno mused. "Sunbathing."

Tommy snorted at that. "I'll have to find a nice spot in the house where I can rest in the sun," he said thoughtfully. He already had several places in mind. When he lowered his head again, he found his brothers' faces to be incredibly gentle and incredibly fond. He was trying to get

used to it, but it still knocked the breath right out of him. The fact that anyone could look at him with such an adoring expression still blew his mind. He felt his cheeks warm and he looked away quickly, telling himself that it was from the sunshine and the run, not his embarrassment.

Phil patted Wilbur's shoulder comfortingly as he reached the shop, grinning when the brunet stuck out his bottom lip. "You won't get any pity from me, mate," he said lightly. "They won't be fair and square." Wilbur's pout disappeared in an instant when he saw he would get no additional attention, replaced by rolling eyes and a good-natured shove. He had no reason to whine. They all knew Tommy would probably help him with the dishes at home, anyway. Not out of obligation or a fear of chores, but just to spend time with his oldest brother. To remain close.

They bought their ice cream with relatively no problems. Wilbur only teased him a little for choosing vanilla, and Tommy only teased Phil immensely for putting nuts in his ice cream. *A monstrosity*, he called it. Phil had only chuckled and ruffled his hair, much to Tommy's delight.

And then they made their way to their spot- to the little boardwalk that branched off the main one, built over the sand on the beach and directly overlooking the sea. Phil had gifted Tommy a picture of him and his brothers in this place for his birthday, looking out over the railing to watch the waves. It was one of his most prized possessions, resting on his nightstand at home where he could always see it. This spot was special to his family, and it was special to him too. They stood silently for several moments, lost in the sound of waves crashing and the taste of sugar on their lips. Tommy rested his elbows on the wooden railing, fixated on the shifting horizon with a light heart.

Tommy was happy. It was something he was getting more familiar with every day and it was something he was trying not to take for granted. He was so unaccustomed to feeling this way that he had often gotten overwhelmed this past month, lost in his own swell of excitement and love and companionship. They weren't panic attacks, though they sometimes felt similar. This was something kinder. Something that would fade once he truly got used to loving and receiving love in return. For now, though, tears built behind his eyes, thoroughly overwhelmed by the warmth of family and the closeness of this particular tradition that he had been included in.

Techno nudged him gently with his elbow, settling against the railing next to him. "Don't get lost in your head, now," he reminded softly. "I can see you thinking."

Right, of course. Tommy blinked once, twice, three times, trying to clear any mistiness from his eyes with some success. The silence settled back over them, comforting as a warm blanket. Tommy grabbed hold of it, wrapping it around them, letting himself be smothered. There weren't any words. There was no need for them. They all knew how the other felt at this moment.

Tommy had almost finished his little cup of ice cream when Phil settled on his other side. "What're you thinking about?" He asked gingerly.

Phil was always soft, he remembered. His father was gentle and safe and always careful around him but never babied him. “You,” he answered honestly.

His father chuckled. “Oh yeah?”

Tommy nodded, keeping blue eyes locked on blue waves. “It’s just... nice. I feel good,” he explained. His words did not do justice. There was no way to describe the joy in his soul and the love in his heart. It didn’t matter- Phil seemed to understand all the same. He always did.

Wilbur slung an arm over his shoulders from behind, slotting his head between him and Phil. “You’re a sap,” he chimed. Tommy immediately shot his brother a scowl, but clearly the malice didn’t meet his eyes as Wilbur only grinned mischievously in response. “It’s true! You’re all... mushy.”

Tommy spluttered. “*Mushy?*” He demanded, offended.

Wilbur nodded seriously, grimacing like it was horrible news. The amusement didn’t leave his face. “Mushy,” he confirmed knowingly. “It’s cute.”

“*Cute?*”

Wilbur nodded again, knowing perfectly well what he was doing.

Tommy straightened up indignantly, throwing out the coldest glare he could muster. “I am a big man, not *cute*,” he shot, shrugging Wil’s arm off of his shoulder.

He squawked in outrage and ducked as Wilbur ruffled his hair.

“You’re ruining the moment,” Techno said, not sounding upset by this fact at all.

“Your *face* is ruining the moment,” Wilbur teased back.

Techno rolled his eyes and huffed. “Phil,” he whined in desperation, throwing a pleading look over his shoulder.

Phil only chuckled, seemingly unconcerned with the fraternal bullying. If anything, he seemed pleased by the bonding, even if it was unconventional. “What have I said about bullying, Wil?” He asked, sounding slightly exasperated.

“That you completely encourage it and I have your full support,” Wilbur sang back.

Phil rolled his eyes. “That is *not* what I said, you little shit,” he deadpanned.

Wilbur shrugged and repositioned himself to stand besides Techno, nudging his shoulder with his own in a friendly manner. “Alright, let’s do it!” He declared, clapping his hands together. “Phil?”

Tommy raised an eyebrow. “Do what?”

Techno laughed. “Tradition, obviously. What else are we here for?” He said, voice light.

He turned to Phil in confusion. "But... It's already done. There's no point in asking now," he pointed out.

Phil gave a soft smile. The brim of his bucket hat flipped slightly in the breeze. "Doesn't have to make sense, does it?" He asked. "It's about the principle."

Tradition meant less than nothing to Tommy. He wasn't a sentimental person. He wasn't going to feel excluded or less part of the family if Phil didn't ask to adopt him at the beach. That clearly didn't matter to Phil.

"Tommy," his father said brightly. "Can I adopt you?"

He scoffed at the ridiculousness but couldn't keep the smile from growing on his face. This was all stupid, and the question meant nothing. The adoption paperwork was done. Still, it was... nice to have been asked. Sea spray hit his ankles and the sun above warmed his cheeks. His tongue tasted like sugar and his limbs were jittery from the earlier run. Tommy glanced at the horizon, where blue sky met blue ocean, and then at his brothers.

"Sure, big man," he decided, rolling his eyes to make it seem like the question didn't affect him as much as it really did. "Go for it. You have my full support and all that."

Phil laughed and reached over to ruffle his hair. On his other side, his brothers cheered.

"It's done!" Wilbur whooped. He stubbornly pulled Tommy into a hug.

"Ugh, Wil! You're so cringe," he whined, not at all miffed at the action. He could practically feel his brother's wide grin from the top of his hair. Tommy let his head rest on familiar soft fabric, the faint scent of coffee almost muffled by the smell of the sea. The universe watched them carefully- four people brought together by chance and held together by sheer force of will- and released a breath.

Maybe tradition wasn't so bad, after all.

Tubbo threw a pencil at the back of his head.

Tommy straightened as he felt an eraser pelt his scalp, whirling around with a glare. He was met with a wide grin of innocence

"Dickhead," he swore. "Why are you assaulting me?"

Tubbo picked up another pencil from his desk, holding it in his hands menacingly. All around them, the classroom was oblivious to the attack. Students worked away diligently, taking full advantage of the last free period of the day before school let out. Senior year was proving to be difficult and most kids were taking the time to get ahead on homework and studying. Tubbo, apparently, had other ideas.

“You look stressed,” Tubbo said, poking the back of his shoulder with the pencil eraser.

“I’m studying,” he deadpanned back.

“Tests don’t start for another week!”

Tommy sighed, rolling his pen between his fingers thoughtfully. “Better to get ahead while I can. You should be studying, too,” he insisted.

Another poke to his shoulder and he groaned. “Play me in tic-tac-toe,” Tubbo demanded. He opened his notebook to a new page and began to draw the game.

“Tubs, man, I just want to finish this chapter. Give me five minutes,” Tommy sighed, flipping to the next page in his textbook.

Tubbo poked at his shoulder again, repeating the action with a wide grin until he eventually groaned and slammed the textbook shut. The brunet cheered in victory as Tommy turned around in his chair with an exasperated scowl.

“You’re so clingy,” he mumbled, only slightly miffed at being interrupted. He grabbed a pencil to draw an “X” in one of the slots.

His best friend only smiled wider.

It was weird, being in senior year. Somehow he never imagined himself making it this far. He never considered the fact that he might survive to his last year of public education. And he certainly never would have thought he would attend the same school twice- two years in a row. He passed familiar teachers in the halls and students that remembered him from last year said hello when they found themselves in the same classes. It was completely new to him, and it was nice.

It was nice to be known, he thought. It was nice that people knew his name, knew his face. It was nice that he was more than a shadow, a background character existing for only a brief moment before moving on to the next story.

“What’s with the studying?” Tubbo hummed, drawing an “O” on the game.

Tommy hesitated, tapping his pencil against the desktop absentmindedly. It was embarrassing, honestly. He hadn’t even told his brothers yet. The discussion had only occurred in the safety of Phil’s office with the door closed.

“Just want to get ahead this year,” he shrugged, playing his next move.

Tubbo snorted. “Oh please, you could have graduated a year ago. You’re not in any danger of failing. Tell me what’s up,” he insisted.

Tommy bit the inside of his cheek, keeping his eyes locked on the paper between them. He drew a new “X” to block Tubbo’s win and sighed.

“I’m... I think I’m going to go to college,” he admitted quietly, like it was a horrible secret.

Tubbo's eyebrows shot up. He knew perfectly well what Tommy's plans were for after high school. Tommy never wanted a higher education. It was an impossible dream, drowned out by the harsh reality of his situation. He wouldn't be able to afford more than a semester or two on his own, plus the toll of rent, groceries, and everything else while working and studying all at once- it was just too hard. It wasn't worth the effort to him. Tommy always planned to work right out of high school.

That was until Phil offered to help him.

Tommy didn't want Phil's money. That much hadn't changed since his adoption was decided on. He didn't join the family for financial stability- though that was certainly a nice aspect- and he still sometimes cringed internally when Phil spent more than what was necessary on him. He still fully planned to work after his graduation. He honestly hadn't even surrendered his lease to his apartment yet.

Just in case.

But when Tommy finished his first week of senior year, Phil had pulled him into his office to talk about their options. It was surprising and... exciting. University had never even been a possibility to him before.

College wasn't for everyone, Phil was careful to assure him. There was no harm in not going, or choosing a different path. Working was a perfectly acceptable option and there was nothing wrong with staying with his original plan. Phil just wanted him to know that he was more than willing to help out if Tommy decided that pursuing a degree was something that interested him.

"Really?" Tubbo asked, dumbfounded.

Tommy nodded, rolling the pencil between his fingers. "Phil offered to pay half my tuition. He probably would've insisted on paying all of it if I hadn't fought him. I just figured... if I stayed at home and didn't have to pay for room and board, I could afford it. I could commute like Wilbur and Techno, and even keep my job at the bakery," he explained, almost nervously. "I mean... I haven't decided yet or anything. But... it's a possibility. I have the option now."

Tubbo stared at him with wide eyes before his face split into a thrilled grin. "That's really great, Tommy!" He exclaimed. "That's... that's exciting! We could go to the same college! Picture this: big men Tubbo and Tommy, out on the campus."

Tommy let out a surprised laugh. "We'll get so many women. The ladies love educated men," he teased.

His friend laughed in response, something knowing in his eyes. "What will you study?" He asked.

He shrugged, drawing his final "X" and earning his victory with three in a row. "Dunno. I've never thought about it because it never mattered. What are *you* going to study?" He replied, setting the pencil down.

Tubbo didn't seem dejected at the loss of their game. "Computer science," he answered easily. "Ranboo says I should major in physics, though. Nuclear science and all that. Seems hard."

Tommy snorted. "Stick to computer science. The world would be a safer place with you far away from our power plants," he said.

The bell rang and the classroom sprang to life, students gathering up their things to escape for the day. Tommy slung his backpack over his shoulder and made his way into the hall with Tubbo at his side.

"Maybe I'll study biology," he mused as they walked. "Be a healer and shit."

"You mean a doctor."

"Same thing! Or maybe I could study video production. I think I'd make pretty good films. My editing skills are unmatched," he countered.

"You struggle to turn your computer on sometimes."

He huffed as they pushed out the front doors. "You're such a downer," he whined. Then he paused, spotting Wilbur's car waiting for them across the parking lot. His heart did a nervous tumble.

"I could study social work," he whispered, almost a question.

Tubbo glanced at him. "Do you *want* to study social work?" He questioned.

"Yes." He was surprised the answer came so easily to him. He'd spent his entire life trying to get as far away from the system as possible. He knew he would run the second he aged out. And yet- "I think I could make a difference."

It was an understatement. He related to the kids there like no one else, handling the children better than even the most skilled caretakers. He had been lost to the system like so many other kids, like Techno, like Wilbur. If he could change even a single life, save just one kid from the fate he had suffered, wasn't that worth it?

Tubbo smiled softly. "That sounds like a plan," he agreed.

Tommy grinned and they both made their way towards the car before he paused again. "Where's Ranboo?" He asked, glancing around. He didn't spot their lanky friend anywhere.

Tubbo hesitated, biting his lip. "He's not coming. Dealing with some things," he muttered.

His eyebrows shot up. "Is he okay?" He demanded.

His friend shrugged, looking away. "It's Ranboo," he replied, like that was an answer. "He'll come to us if he needs it. He'll be fine."

Tommy frowned. He knew firsthand what a dangerous mentality that was. Tubbo saw his look of uncertainty and sighed. “He’s *fine*. It’s a family matter, he went home early, and he made me promise not to talk about it. Can we go now?”

He narrowed his eyes, giving Tubbo another suspicious stare before turning away. “Fine,” he conceded. “But you owe me a new Animal Crossing recipe for your secrecy.”

Tubbo groaned as they trekked across the parking lot. “You have all the ones I already own,” he argued.

“Better find a new one, then.”

Wilbur waved at them from behind the steering wheel. His new schedule this semester allowed him to pick Tommy up four days a week and Tubbo was taking full advantage of this perk- at least until his after school clubs started up again. Techno sat in the passenger seat with his backpack in his lap, nose deep in a textbook. Tommy had no idea how he managed to read in the car without getting sick.

It was easy, getting into the car with his best friend. It was safe, listening to Wilbur’s new favorite band blast through the speakers. It was familiar, his two brothers sitting in the front seats as they turned down roads Tommy knew like the back of his hands by now.

It was nice to be known and to *know*.

In his pocket, his phone buzzed. He pulled it out quickly and frowned when he saw he had a new email from an address he didn’t recognize. He opened the message to find a long paragraph and an attached image.

It was from Aimsey. They had attached a picture of themselves with Lily and Rose, grinning up at the camera from a background he didn’t recognize. A quick scan of the message let him know that the three of them were being fostered together in a new house, and the family was good.

A knot he didn’t realize he’d been carrying unraveled in his chest and he breathed a sigh of relief. They were okay. He hadn’t even realized how worried he was until now.

He wasn’t sure how Aimsey got his email address, but he was glad for it. He was glad they were okay, and he was glad they could stay in touch now. He turned his phone around to show Tubbo the picture with a wide smile on his face.

More friends he could now hold close to his heart. The list was ever-expanding, and he couldn’t wait to watch it grow.

There were so many things that Tommy knew about his new family.

He had a sharp eye and he practically spent his time bound at the hip with whatever member he was closest with at the time. It was easy to pick up on their habits and personalities. There were a million things that he loved about each of them.

Techno always has hair ties of different colors around his wrists. When he sees a blue shell coming for him in Mario Kart he slows down and lets one of his brothers gleefully pass so it hits them instead of him. He has a unique laugh he reserves specifically for when he crushes them in video games. He sends Tommy different fruits and crafting recipes in Animal Crossing without saying a word. He never covers the scar on his neck but he never talks about it, and he doesn't respond when asked. He reads the newspaper every morning and steals the crossword from Phil sometimes to complete when he sits and listens to Wilbur play guitar. He irons his shirts but his shoelaces are always untied, and somehow he still never trips. His hair is meticulously brushed and his glasses are perpetually crooked. He teases Phil for being old and defends him with the fierceness of a feral animal in any other conversation. He keeps a stash of instant noodles in the cupboard specifically for when he accidentally skips dinner, lost in his writing, and suddenly finds himself with a growling stomach at 2am. He always checks if Tommy is awake and wants some as well. Tommy usually is and does.

Techno fiddles with his fingers when he's nervous and writes pro and con lists for every dilemma he's faced. Blatant displays of affection make him uncomfortable and he'll deny caring about absolutely anyone until it really matters. He'll try his hardest to protect and support the people he loves in little ways that don't draw attention to himself. He stood firm against Wilbur, his longest friend and first example of a family he'd ever really known, to insist that Tommy was their brother and deserved the love and support he was owed. Techno was loyal to a fault and his principles never wavered, not even for a second. Tommy would never be able to repay him for all he'd done.

Phil insists on wearing his green and white bucket hat everywhere no matter how much they make fun of him for it. He collects gold jewelry like a dragon hoarding treasure, and he wears a different set of intricate earrings almost every day. He started fostering after volunteering at group homes and he insists that it's the best decision he's ever made in his life. His entire world is his sons. He totes his camera around with him constantly, capturing both the little moments and the big ones with equal care. The only time Techno ever loses a video game is when he's going against Phil. He has a very specific look that he reserves only for his family, when he's feeling especially sentimental. He's the kind of person that truly believes he can make the world a better place through his actions, and just being around him makes Tommy believe it too.

He's always careful not to overstep any boundaries, and he doesn't hesitate to triple check with any of them if something might cross a line. Phil respects that they all came from different backgrounds, that they're a mismatched family brought together by love and consideration rather than blood, and he never tries to pretend otherwise. He listens to the different traditions and habits that his sons have picked up from various households. He has never shown bitterness towards Wilbur for still loving his biological parents, and even talks about them with him when his son is feeling especially guilty- not out of obligation but out of love. He insists that he's not old but his knees crack when he goes up the stairs, and he pretends not to hear when his boys tease him for it. He likes to keep his hair short, but when

it's long enough just before a haircut he lets Tommy put little braids through it with a bright grin on his face.

He saved Tommy's life in more ways than one. He's the first adult Tommy had ever truly trusted and he's never regretted it no matter what mistakes were committed. Phil is the first adult to ever apologize to him and his actions have reflected his words tenfold since that day. There's nowhere safer than in Phil's arms and he knows without a doubt that his father would fight to the death for him. He would do anything for Tommy without a moment of hesitation, and Phil's very presence in his life has changed it for the better forever.

Every sweater Wilbur owns has a coffee stain somewhere along the hem. His hands are always marked with ink, either from writing in his notebook or drawing new doodles along the body of his guitar. He goes to hang out with Schlatt and Quackity at least once a month, even though he knows he'll feel worse when he gets back. He keeps a blanket in the corner of his room specifically for when Tommy falls asleep there, and always plays the softest music he knows so he doesn't accidentally wake him up.

He's annoyingly persistent and becomes hyperfixated on a new interest at least once a month. He once made Tommy sit through a three hour documentary on capybaras and gave his own facts the entire time, somehow just as knowledgeable as the narrator. Tommy only pretended to hate it. Phil drives him to the graveyard where his biological parents are buried every year on their death anniversary, and they mourn together. He still feels guilty. He follows his brothers around like a shadow, refusing to let them sit with their bad thoughts alone, and insists on distracting them with whatever new facts he's learned in the last week. He hits his head on door frames when they're not in the house, not adapted to the low ceilings with his height, and he whacks Techno upside the head when he teases him for it. He calls Phil a nerd in every conversation but is no doubt his biggest fan. One of his favorite pastimes is sitting in his father's office and poking fun at him, trying to distract him from stressful work.

He struggles sometimes with his mental health, but he continually works to get better and to protect the people he loves. His issues are not an excuse for him to act without consequences, and he is not afraid to apologize when he's in the wrong. Wilbur loves with his heart on his sleeve- passionately and completely. There isn't anything he wouldn't do for his family or friends. He'd accepted Tommy into their home instantly, going out of his way constantly to show that he was welcomed without question. He was the first foster sibling that Tommy had ever really accepted and he was the first example of family that Tommy had ever really known. Tommy owed Wilbur everything. They owed each other. They each had saved the other- and wasn't that what brotherhood was?

Tommy flipped to a new page of the Odyssey. The book was the only item he'd managed to keep hold of for more than a couple years. It was his most prized possession, a battered trophy of all he'd gone through and survived. The cover was just as scarred as him, the papers torn and stained with the mistreatment of foster families, and that was okay. Tommy still loved the book. He wouldn't trade it for anything and he was proud of how far it had come.

The grass under his legs tickled his skin and he shifted, trying to shake the sensation. The sun warmed his face but the cool breeze kept him from feeling hot. The September air smelled

like rain and the crisp scent of the season change. The faint wind carried the strum of Wilbur's ukulele.

They both leaned against the oak tree in the backyard, shoulders pressed together as they watched Techno and Phil dig away in the garden. They were harvesting the last of their vegetables before the cold took over the land. Techno wore the sunhat Tommy had gotten him for Christmas, and the sight warmed his heart immensely. He had pierced the brim of it with several gold and green jewelry pieces from Phil's collection, and the gems waved gently as his brother moved around. Tommy had done the braid holding his hair back, an intricate twist resting carefully on the back of his head.

Tommy's finger traced a textured page from his book, following a rip that he'd taped over years ago. Different hands had fixed the paper, marked with different scars, but it was the same person. That was odd, wasn't it? It was odd how much a person could change in just a few years, and it was odd how much of him was still the same.

Techno whistled as he worked, following the tune of Wilbur's song. Tommy leaned his head back to rest against the hard tree bark, his book long forgotten. He opted instead to watch his family, to bask in the sound of their existence and the domesticity of this small moment. He still had trouble believing that this was real sometimes, that a family had wanted him permanently, that people liked having him around for more than a few months. That was something he was working to overcome. It was something he *would* overcome. He was determined.

Tommy still had a lot to do. He had a lot to work on and he knew he would struggle. He knew it would be hard, and he would hate every step of the process.

But he also knew that he had a family to support him now. It would be difficult, but they would be with him every step of the way. It wasn't a cure, but it was a start. It was enough to keep him going just a little longer, and that was what mattered.

"Wil," Tommy breathed, turning his head slightly to look at his brother.

Wilbur glanced up, plucking a tune as he did. "What's up?" He asked, equally as gentle.

He tilted his head. "Will you teach me how to drive?"

The brunet snorted, surprised. "I don't know. I think the streets might be safer with you in the passenger seat," he teased.

Tommy smiled in return, warmed by the sun and his family's presence. "I never thought I would learn," he admitted quietly. "No foster family would ever trust me with their car, and I wouldn't be able to afford a car of my own for years and years."

Wilbur's face softened. "Course I'll teach you, Toms," he promised. "As long as you don't wreck my car."

He grinned mischievously, which earned a groan from his brother.

Techno muttered something to Phil, who laughed earnestly. Tommy watched them with a strange sense of familiarity in his chest. It was nice. There was no other way to phrase it.

Tommy had spent most of his childhood in the woods, more often alone than not. He'd been horribly lonely for most of his life, even far after he left his childhood home behind. Being outside was as natural to him as breathing, and now he had three more people to share it with.

Techno tossed a handful of dirt in their father's direction, which earned a startled yelp from the older man. The blond grinned in challenge and his brother's eyes widened before Phil chucked a handful of dirt back. He barely had time to dodge, laughing all the way.

Wilbur strummed his instrument lazily, leaning maybe subconsciously farther against Tommy. It was a good feeling- to be close, to be wanted.

He wasn't adopted yet. His forms wouldn't be processed for another few months. But they *would* be. Tommy wasn't concerned about the wait. Hannah had assured him he had nothing to fear from the courts and maybe foolishly, he believed her wholeheartedly.

For maybe the first time in his entire life, Tommy was excited about his future. He was excited to finish high school and maybe go to college, to learn to drive and spend time with his friends. He looked forward to going to work, to learning all the techniques Niki used to bake the best cakes in the whole town. More than anything, the thought of going through life with his family at his side was exhilarating.

Tommy hated happy endings, but that was okay because this wasn't one.

This wasn't a happy ending because there was still tomorrow. There was still the day after that, and then his entire life.

Wilbur smiled at him, and Techno and Phil continued to toss dirt back and forth good-naturedly as they worked, and Tommy was happy. There was still so much to do, but he was happy anyway. He had so much growing left, he still had so much to learn, but he knew enough for right now.

At seventeen years old, Tommy Watson knew *so* many things. But the most important thing was that he was loved just as he was and capable of love in return.

Isn't that what it was all about?

Tommy exhaled and closed his book.

And there it is.

Wowow!! I'm emotional!! I started writing this fic in August 2021 with literally zero intention of ever posting it. I've written a lot of stories for a lot of fandoms, and this is the first one I've ever published. I only decided to post it in February after I had written chapter 21!! That's kinda crazy. Thanks for sticking with me, and for making my first experience as an ao3 writer so memorable. This was definitely a huge passion project of mine, and I almost never wanted to end it because it's so important to me.

I have an outline for a sequel! I wanted this story to wrap up nicely so badly that I couldn't bring myself to put the angst in hehe. The concept I put in last chapter's end notes as well as some other things will be happening (sorry) right at the start of the sequel. It'll deal with Tommy's adoption papers and the courts, emotion growth and regression, a roadtrip, some old faces, and we'll see lots more of Ranboo and Tubbo :] I will be taking a short hiatus before I start writing it, so make sure you subscribe to me or the series so you know when it's posted!

Also on the list! Wilbur and Techno's prequel will start updating regularly after my hiatus. If you haven't seen the first chapter yet, check out the series tab! I'm also planning on writing an ALTERNATIVE ENDING for this story that will pick up around chapter 26 that is less than cozy, so if you're a sucker for sad endings like me look out for that hehe.

Also on the WIP list: I have a zombie apocalypse au AND a canon divergent blindinnit exile story in the works (and also a million one-shots that I'll have to build up courage to post lol). Again, make sure to subscribe if you like my writing and want to see more (and different) pieces :]

Thank you thank you thank you for all the kind comments and kudos. You guys have been the absolute sweetest and hopefully I'll see many of you in the comment section of my other works! I don't have MCYT social media, so this is really the only way I can communicate with you all. Thank you again, really truly from the bottom of my heart, I can't express how much I appreciate every single comment I got.

Thanks for reading <333

End Notes

Hey!! Check out these super cool things made for the story:

Amazing art found [here](#) and [here](#) by the amazingly talented CinnamonTree

This awesome spotify playlist based on IILMIBI! Tommy found [here](#) by Nethertulips <333
(every song is a banger)

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