

The TommyInnit SMP

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The TommyInnit SMP

by [ChaoticSparklez](#)

Summary

Tommy could feel Tubbo growing nauseous from the amount of blood flooding the bathroom's white tile floor.

“Just don't fucking look then!” He snarled in a harsh whisper, no louder than his pained grimaces when he stuck the blade into his arm again. He held his own dull eyes in a deadlock in the mirror.

‘Look, I really think we should go get Phil...’ Ranboo said gently, trying to be subtle while he guided the hand holding the knife away from his skin. When Tommy noticed he slammed back into control, plunging the knife so deep into his forearm that the red tip poked through the opposite side. It hurt like bitch but Tommy stayed quiet like he's supposed to.

Tommy grinned madly at the fresh river of crimson making its way past his pale skin, collecting around his legs. “Blood for the blood god,” he whispered.

‘Blood for the blood god,’ they chanted back.

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Or, classic found family AU but Tommy was rescued from a cult and Phil may be adopting more children than he expected...

## Notes

Sup, I'm back bitches with some more angst and trauma. Today I'll be branching way the fuck off from the actual SMP, so much so that the Minecraft tag seems unwarranted, but there ain't a standalone Dream SMP tag and I want clout so...

I'd like to preface with the usual, none of the characters in this story are supposed to represent their real-life counterparts in any way, just the sort of personas they have during their block men roleplay. I very much don't want the CCs reading this, especially none of the minors, for reasons that should be abundantly clear. However, if for any reason they want it gone, it's gone.

Secondly, this story is about DID, or Dissociative Identity Disorder, formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder. I do not have DID, the only knowledge I have on the subject comes from YouTubers like thePizzaSystem. (I used to watch DissociaDID but they and their

partner have been kinda problematic so) If you didn't know, DID is a trauma-based disorder, meaning it's not something you're born with, but rather a defensive mechanism the brain creates when a child (less than age, like, 7) is subject to prolonged, life-threatening trauma. This is a very serious subject in reality, so by no means is my portrayal of the disorder a proper representation. I'm not trying to belittle or sensationalize DID, I just think it's incredibly interesting and a challenge to write in fiction. A lot of the terms I'll be using are commonly used by people with DID, if there's any you don't understand I'll be happy to answer any comment or maybe link to a more helpful source.

I know this is fanfiction, and I don't really need to say all this, but writing this for my own interests and sharing it online are two very different things, and I want to be as responsible as possible. Stay safe everyone, if any of the tags bother you, then please do yourself a favor and don't read. I don't really add individual content warnings for each chapter, but if shit gets real dark I'll give a heads up. Thanks y'all, hope you enjoy ^-^

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

# To Bee or Not To Bee

## Chapter Summary

Sure, Tommy's driving but it's not his fault if they veer into oncoming traffic now and then.

## Chapter Notes

The first two chapters are going up at the same time. Yes, yes, I know, I'm very generous. Pronouns are gonna be dicey in this one, just assume everyone uses he/they for now.

Ugh I know in the summary I put some dialogue in italics but I am way too lazy to do that consistently. Here's a hint so it's hopefully not too confusing:

"This is said out loud."

'This is not.'

Have fun.

(Edit 7/4/23: I removed a few lines for a plot line that was hardly mentioned and needlessly dark, you probably won't even notice but it allows me to get rid of the "implied/referenced rape/noncon" tag)

Life has been a blur for a long while now. Tubbo finally lost track of how many months it's been since he first saw the sun. Honestly? That's what makes it all worth it. He doesn't care about the lack of stability, the fact that no adult seems to treat him like a person, nor the gaps in time that appear in his memory- as long as he can watch the clouds roll by sometimes, he's just fine.

Sure, it's difficult sometimes. He'd find himself in places without knowing why or how, in the care of people he didn't remember meeting, getting in trouble for problems he never caused, only to be whisked away until the scenery was new and the process restarted. It was a chaotic monotony that Tubbo grew to ignore. He made peace with the never-ending spontaneity that was life.

As long as he never had to return to that basement.

He can endure any punishment, any pain or fear or confusion- he can endure because that's all he can do. Because he is alive and free and in love with the beauty in the world.

"I remember when I lived in a farmhouse, with a bee farm in the backyard," Tubbo says to his frankly uninterested audience. "This guy had to wear this really funny suit, it was all white and had this see-through stuff over the face. He said it was so the bees couldn't sting him. I got to wear it sometimes! He would spray this stuff over the hive and I would take out the sides of this box and scrap the honey off into a bucket. I also helped make the honey that they sold in little bottles to the market. I really liked living there. I was really sad when I left."

Tubbo rambles smiling without hesitation, ignoring the dozens of eyes that display their boredom. It's his turn to talk goddammit, that's what therapy is all about.

"Thank you, Thomas." The tired, grey-haired group leader tells him, a signal to end his rant. "Did anyone else want to share?"

Tubbo leans back into his seat, drifting out of focus while someone else filled the silence. He's still got a content smile, feeling pleasant after speaking about his love of bees. He can't really remember what prompted the memory, but it doesn't matter. No one is allowed to judge you in therapy. That's practically rule number one.

It's a session he attends biweekly. Paid for by the foster organization that's funded by a pitiful portion of the local government budget. Tubbo has been going for two years now, with various leaders, psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists and other unlucky teenagers like him. It's a special program for youth with pretty bad mental disorders. The only catch is that no one says explicitly what's wrong with them, they can only talk about stresses and experiences and relationships. Usually it's fairly easy to deduce the cause of their symptoms, but it's not kind to point it out.

Tubbo knows he's an enigma to the other teens, one that no one cares enough to solve, and that's perfectly fine with him. He's had ample time to perfect his ability to appear neurotypical, and while the sessions never pressure him to perform, he still uses the opportunity to practice.

He's also the only one who volunteers to attend the sessions. He actually quite likes talking about himself- or just talking in general, he never seems to be able to enough- so he enjoys the hour and half of listening to interesting tales and disclosing his favorite things about his week. Sometimes he'll be asked some sort of intimate question, why he uses the words he does, why he has so many scars, why he never mentions his childhood, and he'll be honest but only in a half truth sort of way.

Tuning back into reality, he catches the tail end of someone talking about their favorite music artist. Tubbo's never heard of them, but something sparks a warm feeling in the back of his head.

Ranboo is listening intently, Tubbo can sense him excitedly grasping every word this person says about the band. Tubbo lets him take over their hands, as Ranboo always fidgets when he listens to someone talk, and it only relieves them when he's able to do it himself.

There's an opening in the conversation, and Ranboo jumps instantly, "What's your favorite song, uh, by them?" Tubbo is grateful no one bothers to notice the change in his tone. Sometimes it sucks that Ranboo's voice is like two octaves below his own, it can be a bit silly, and hard to explain away. He feels Ranboo nod their head while the person responds, drinking in the shared interest. Tubbo smiles, knowing Ranboo has a hard time talking to others, so to see him so emboldened makes his heart glow.

Soon, however, the session is up and Tubbo resumes his hold to wait outside for their ride. He can't really remember who is supposed to pick him up, only that someone is. He imagines Tommy should be here in not too long.

But right now it's raining. It's dark and cloudy and the clouds are dark and black and the rain glitters under the street lamps and the headlights of all the cars around him. He's got his rain jacket on, the hoodie pulled up, but still his hair is quickly pressed onto his forehead and he doesn't care. He loves the rain, loves everything about it. The smell, the feel, the sheer awe of all this water falling from the sky. He used to spend hours wondering how that heavy liquid could reach the sky in the first place, and needlessly to say, that magical day in science class cemented it as his favorite subject.

Another presence makes itself known in his head, waiting calmly to the side while Tubbo enjoys the weather. Tommy steps closer to watch as a big beat up red minivan pulls up in front of them. Tubbo sighs and breathes deep one last time before withdrawing completely, Tommy already motioning to enter the van as the back door slides open with a clank.

The driver is an older teen, 18 to be exact. A tall, gangly motherfucker with a mess of brown hair and a yellow sweater, a gray beanie even darker from the rain sitting on his head. Wilbur asks him, "How was therapy?"

"Fuckin' borin'," Tommy replies, the same as every week before. "It's so fucking stupid, sittin' in a dumb circle talking about feelin's and shit."

"Dr. Rebbart told dad you quite enjoyed it," Wilbur jokes, pulling into gear to start the drive back home.

"S'cuse me? What the fuck happened to patient confidentiality? I have rights, you know," Tommy says crossing his arms defiantly.

Wilbur chuckles, eyes back on the road as he pulls to a red light, "Little gremlins don't have rights, Toms."

Tommy just sticks his tongue out, leaving it until he sees Wilbur glance through the rear view mirror at him. The older teen laughs and puts on the radio so Tommy can zone out until they get home.

'No seriously, how was it?' He hears Sam ask in the headspace.

‘I got to talk about bees!’ Tubbo cheers happily, and Tommy internalizes rolling his eyes at the other’s enthusiasm.

‘Good for you, Tubbo! You think we could convince Wil to win us that bee plush from the arcade machine?’ Sam prompts the boy. Tommy’s actually a bit annoyed by him, always treating them like children.

‘Oh yeah, I bet I could convince him! He owes us after that apple picking incident anyway.’ Tubbo replies, and Tommy remembers that incident well. He still has to sleep with a shoulder brace after all.

‘Wait, what happened’ Ranboo pipes up, as he typically does for references he wasn’t around for.

‘Well, Wilbur said he would hold the ladder while I climbed up to grab this really red apple I saw on a really high branch. But then he stepped on a rotten apple and got strung by a wasp and I fell off. I couldn’t stop laughing ‘cause he was freaking out so much.’ Of course Tubbo would’ve been laughing, Tommy was the one who felt all the pain at that moment. He broke his fucking shoulder blade because of that fall- not that he hadn’t had worse.

Really Tommy should get the pity gift, but he also knows how much Tubbo would love that plushie.

“Hey, Wilbur,” he blurts out on a whim. “I’ve been thinking, since you broke my arm and all, I think you outta win me whatever I want from the arcade.” He bites his lip, waiting for Wilbur’s reaction.

‘Holy shit, the mad man,’ Tubbo comments, excitement growing at Tommy’s request.

Wilbur looks startled for a moment at the reminder of the accident, but returns to a cocky grin once he hears the request. “Whatever you want?” He asks incredulously. “Surely there’s gotta be some limit. I’m not made of money,” he laughs.

“Ten things,” Tommy bargains.

“Two.”

“For a broken shoulder?! Is that all my pain’s worth to you?” Tommy fakes a look of hurt, grasping his shoulder dramatically.

Wilbur rolls his eyes and sighs, “Uuuugh, fine. 5 things.”

“Nine.”

“One.”

“Okay! Five things, take it or leave it,” Tommy quickly interjects, hoping Wilbur will settle.

Thankfully, he smiles and agrees as they pull into the garage to the house. Tommy jumps out of his seat, pushing his wet hair out of his face irritably. The rain is so annoying. If he wanted

to be wet then he'd take a damn shower.

"Phil's working late tonight, he says to do your homework," Wilbur tells him as he unlocks and swings open the front door. Tommy makes a point of rolling his eyes. He walks into the foyer and sees the TV on, some boring teledrama he doesn't care about, with his pink haired brother Techno gazing lazily at it. Tommy hops the back of the couch and drops into the seat opposite Techno.

"Sup big man?" Tommy chides, crossing his arms behind his head as he leans back into the cushions.

"Yo," Techno replies, his voice a deep monotone illustrious thing. He spares Tommy a glance and nods before returning his attention to the television.

Tommy keeps his eyes on the show for all of three seconds before he groans and sinks into his seat. "Techno, this show is so boring! Can we watch something else?"

'I quite like this show actually,' Tubbo chimes in.

'Fuck off,' Tommy responds.

"No," Techno says and that's that on that. Well, Tommy doesn't like that answer so he groans again and stands up as if it's the most taxing movement he's ever made. He scrawls over to the kitchen, grabbing a coke from the fridge before slinking off to his bedroom to busy himself. He kicks closed the door and throws on his headphones, clicking a button on his laptop so music starts playing. He looks up a specific song without paying it much mind, collapsing on his twin bed once it plays.

It's that song the person in the session mentioned. He can feel Ranboo's gratitude as he listens content in the back of his mind.

'That's very kind of you, Tommy,' Tubbo mentions.

"Just shut it," Tommy mutters under his breath, aware that no one would hear him if he talks normally but not wanting to take the risk anyway. He lets his eyes close as the music takes his mind away. He can hear Ranboo humming along, only slightly off-key but Tommy doesn't mind. Tubbo's really happy right now, so he doesn't feel the need to stop him.

His fingers dance in the air by his thigh, beyond his control, but he stays at the front. They might understand that this house is probably the safest place they've ever stayed in, but Tommy knows better than to trust the people in charge of housing him. Too many times he's let his guard down and every time someone gets hurt and he can't do a damn thing about it. Even now, anger builds behind his nerves when he thinks about the last place they lived.

Sam senses his frustration and reminds him, 'At least he's in jail now.'

"I'd rather him fucking dead," Tommy grumbles. The anger only grows as he pictures the man's face. That sweet, soft smile that lured them into his good interests. The calm lies he told with grace. The rough hands that left angry red stains on his face, that slammed the door

to the cellar basement shut to muffle his screams. The cold of the cement flooring and the never ending aches, hunger, *fear-*

‘Tommy,’ Tubbo grabs his attention with a soft, but stern voice, pulling his hands away from their grip on his thighs. Tommy only then notices the ache in the joints of his fingers from where they were attempting to claw into his skin. He’s breathing quickly but feels nothing but numb, as if he were still lying there, cold, shivering on the ground of that cellar. He can’t feel Ranboo anymore, he must have left when Tommy started thinking about that man and what he did to them. The music is on some other track, some random tune from his ever growing library. Tommy thinks Wil showed him this song, and he likes it. It calms him.

‘We need a shower. I can handle it, you should rest, Tommy.’ Sam offers gently, stepping forward to take control when Tommy decides to step back.

‘Thanks, big man.’ Tommy replies, relinquishing control and letting himself drift back into the void of his headspace, comforted in the presence of Tubbo and Sam. He doesn’t bother looking out their eyes, but he hears Sam’s careful footsteps echo as he walks down the hall to the bathroom.

# The Art of Falling Apart

## Chapter Summary

What the fuck kind of teenager enjoys watching the news? Tommy would rather throw up, thank you very much.

## Chapter Notes

Chap 3 is halfway finished, I've gotta change some stuff cause I literally wrote two scenes that are the exact same thing but with different characters like wtf

Ya'll gonna get some explanation here, will it answer any questions? No probably not. I'm not sorry.

Oh right, and this takes place in the US but in a fictional state called Dakota because why the fuck not?

The headspace used to be a dark, damp cave that Tommy hated with all his being. It was fucking terrible, cold and lonely, but it was all he knew. It was all he deserved.

The rock walls were cramped and cold, once discovered Tommy and Tubbo ached every moment they had to spend there. The real world wasn't an option then, the whole idea of a separate reality in their mind where no one could touch them was supposed to be their safe space, yet when the caves formed around their mind and left them in the dark- nowhere was reprieve.

But at least Tommy had Tubbo. He can't remember when Tubbo first appeared, but he wouldn't doubt the boy's presence to have been there from the beginning. A brother. A friend. A constant, the only constant in his whole life.

Tubbo would always be there to comfort Tommy. In all the hours that Tommy escaped to the caves, once a pitiful silence while Tommy cried alone, now had Tubbo's soft voice to encourage him, to tell him to hold on to hope. To rest. To forget what he has seen.

Their friendship was an endless cycle of shielding the other from the reality of the outer world. Though, while Tubbo fought endlessly to stay joyful, a steel wall that never ceased to smile, Tommy held the pain with contempt. Every single moment in his own body was torturous, every unimaginable feeling left stains inside his eyelids and bruises over every inch of his skin. It was a pain that echoed in the caves and returned again and again.

He was as good as dead without Tubbo. He is forever grateful to him, even now, because he can only remember the safety of him, and nothing else.

He can't even recall the rescue. Only that there was a time before, and the life he has now. One, filled with darkness and fear and death and the other, somewhere else. Anywhere else. The new outer world, bigger and brighter and faster. Frustrating, but survivable.

And, sometime after the discovery of this new world, Tommy found an exit in the cave. The head space became a serene copy of every new constant in the speedy flow of time. The blue sky, the grass, the trees, the rooms, the colors- every color, all of the colors, never again clouded in red, red, red-

They met Sam. He was every single voice spoken to him that wasn't filled with disgust or hatred or command. He had a mask, but he had eyes clear and kind. He would speak constantly and consistently in his soft tone, so trustworthy despite it all being gibberish to him. That was okay. Tommy didn't know many words back then, but he knew Sam never did wrong. Sam built them a room with a blanket and a window, where they could sleep in shelter but still be able to see the stars. He constructed a fireplace, kept the warmth going without fail. He made chairs and toys and books so Tubbo and Tommy could enjoy their time there.

And so, with safety in his mind, he finally ventured into this new life in the outer world. Every day was filled with people, so many people who talked fast and loud, who wore bright colors and dragged him from place to place. He grasped this new sensation, the ability to harbor even an ounce of control. He was taught language, thankfully. At last able to comprehend what was being spoken around him, finally able to learn and discover and once he had a taste he never ever wanted to stop, not until he's learned all there is to know. Not until he's never lost again, never confused, never kept in the dark.

He's never tried to put to words the grainy fragments of the time before that stayed in the cave. He never wanted to. He never will.

Instead, this newfound knowledge allowed him to describe his little world. Where Sam built them a house. Tommy named the caves, 'The Dark,' and Tubbo loved the sky.

And the world outside. Tommy is a kid. Tommy is an orphan. Tommy was raised in a cult. Sometimes he still doesn't quite know what it means, but that's what he's told. All he knows is the life he has, and nothing before it matters. Nothing in the time before matters, because he is never going back.

—

"Wilbur!" Tommy shouts, pulling his arms back swiftly as his foster brother's bony hand pushes his controller to the side.

"No, you aren't allowed to win this round," Wilbur says with a breathy smile, round eyes on the screen with intense focus while he sabotages the younger boy.

‘He’s just mad he lost the first three,’ Tubbo states, ever the spectator to their game. Tommy feels the occasional longing from the boy to play himself, but he’s far too focused on victory to do anything about it.

“Stop cheating and accept defeat!” Tommy yells with his controller held all the way around his torso, out of Wilbur’s reach. That distraction cost him a while two places, jumping from 2nd to 4th, on the final lap of the race. He presses the buttons on his controller so hard his fingers ache but he is determined to win.

He’s made it to 3rd on the final bend, the finish line in his sights and a red shell in his item box. He grins madly, waiting until the last possible frame to release the projectile, spinning out Wilbur’s character inches from the goal. Tommy sweeps by him and secures second place, cheering as he throws his hands up and Wilbur curses loudly. The older teen ends up in fifth, and in the final total he’s three ranks below Tommy.

“Suck it, bitch!” Tommy cheers, “Not even your pitiful cheating can stop me!”

“Oh, piss off,” Wilbur scoffs, shoving Tommy’s shoulder away playfully.

“You’re lucky I didn’t bet money on this victory, big man, I’d be rich.” Tommy sits back into the couch all smug in his MarioKart prowess.

His foster brother laughs, standing up to turn off the console as he checks his phone. Tubbo makes a sad sort of noise in his head. “Aw, Wil, can’t we play one more? I’ll go easy on you if you want,” Tommy tries to interject but Wilbur’s already slipped on his shoes.

He makes a dismissive hand gesture, “Maybe some other day, Toms. The boys will be by to pick me up soon,” he explains, slipping on a bright pullover and unlocking the front. “I’ll see ya, Tommy. Tell Dad I’ll be back before curfew.”

“Bye, Wilbur,” Tommy waves, sighing in his seat as he turns to stare at the TV static. “Well this is no fun,” he says, aloud.

Tubbo sighs alongside him, ‘Yeah, I really wanted to play a round.’

‘Could always try single player?’ Sam suggests.

“I could train you so you’ll match my karting skills, so you can beat Wil too!” Tommy jumps up excitedly, turning back on the console and grabbing the player one remote.

‘You reckon we could work together?’ Tubbo ponders, drifting his way forward to co-front.

“What, like I steer and you throw shit sort of thing?” Tommy loads up the game and sets it up to the easier setting since all Tubbo’s done is watch him and Wilbur play. Once at the character selection screen, Tommy lets Tubbo take full control, still aware of their senses but relinquishing motor function.

He’s instantly aware of the joy Tubbo emits when he’s finally able to play. “Ooh, I’ve always wanted to play the mushroom man!” He whispers excitedly, trying not to be too loud while he talks in the open.

Tubbo doesn't sound too different from Tommy, but his accent is definitely closer to Wilbur's, and a little higher pitched. They can still talk to each other with their inner voices, but Tommy knows it feels more natural to talk out loud when you're in control.

'You mean Toad?' Tommy asks just as said character is selected.

"Toad? He looks nothing like a toad!" Tubbo laughs before giving intense focus to his vehicle selection. He doesn't bother reading the words above the stats bars, the screen may be only a few feet away but the letters are small and confusing anyway. "Which one is speed?" He asks, knowing that stat is supposed to be the highest so he can win.

'The top one,' Tommy answers, 'it says acceleration.'

"I think you just made that word up."

'What? No I didn't!' Tommy says incredulously.

Tubbo laughs again, finally on the screen to pick the trophy he'll play for. He selects the starting one, the one shaped like a mushroom, "I have to win this one," he explains, "I am the mushroom man after all."

Tommy very much enjoys watching Tubbo play. The grace he held the remote with now replaced by fumbling fingers and rapid button presses. Tubbo is never consistent, but has fun regardless, slipping from last to fifth then hitting a wall and turning around straight back into last. He'll get a bullet bill and shoot back to third then drive off road and struggle to keep up.

It's quite entertaining. At some point Ranboo comes along, watching and cheering from the sidelines, giving snippets of advice where he deems fit.

"Fuck!" Tubbo yells, hitting yet another fake item box and spinning out.

'See, the fake ones have a red tint to them,' Ranboo points out.

'Plus it was in the center of the grass! The other items are lined up on the road, Tubbo,' Tommy adds.

"I thought it was a special item!" Tubbo defends himself, jolting the controller around despite it not affecting the character in any way.

As they enter the final race, Techno emerges from the upstairs with a short greeting, grabbing a soda then sitting next to Tubbo on the couch.

Instantly, Tubbo feels a wave of anxiety. He actually really likes Techno, he's mysterious but a big softie on the inside, but he's never interacted with him directly. Usually Tommy does all the talking. Tubbo keeps his mouth in a tight smile as he tries to focus on the final map.

"Is this fifty CC? I thought you were actually good at the game?" Techno ponders after a long sip from his can.

"Uhh," Tubbo freezes, trying to come up with an answer so he'll sound like Tommy.

‘Tell him you’re trying to unlock all the characters,’ Tommy supplies quickly.

“I’m, uh, trying to get all the characters, yeah,” Tubbo says, struggling to keep his kart on the track with Techno distracting him.

He can feel Techno eyeing him but tries not to falter, instead grabbing an item box and tapping in quick succession to boost ahead.

“Not gonna unlock much in fourth place...” Techno says, a tiny hint of suspicion in his voice.

“So I’m off my game today, there’s nothing wrong with that,” Tubbo defends with a soft tone. But it isn’t anything like Tommy’s usually boisterous attitude so it only proves to further Techno’s unease.

Tubbo’s focus is draining quickly, his hands shakily losing their rhythm, faltering on the buttons and making the character lag even further behind. Tommy really really wants Tubbo to have his turn, to finish the race because he’s never gotten to play before, but the anxiety has made the game no longer fun, so he steps in to front again.

Tommy looks over at Techno’s narrowed eyes and sighs loudly, pulling up the menu and quitting the game immediately. He picks up the remote he used when playing with Wilbur and tosses it into Techno’s lap.

“You didn’t have to quit?” Techno says, taking the remote into his hands.

“Well I obviously wasn’t making much progress with you distracting me, prick,” Tommy speeds through the menu, keeping the CPU difficulty at 100 CC and selecting his go-to specs: bowser with a sick-looking bike.

Techno isn’t as shit at the game as Wilbur, but Tommy’s not feeling the same drive to win as before. He’s fronting alone, since Tubbo and Ranboo escaped back into the headspace with Sam trailing them, and the anxiousness of Techno’s suspicion is still lingering in his thoughts.

So he’s quieter as they play, resigning after a single four-race game to let Techno watch TV. He only got fifth and Techno got second overall, but he doesn’t much care. He fiddles with his phone while Techno turns on the news. Tommy doesn’t get why Techno likes the news channel, it’s always super boring and serious, talking about the weather and crime and shit. But something about the program today catches his attention.

“More updates have come in concerning the upcoming trial of David Calpurnius, the leader of an underground satanic cult that had been uncovered three years ago.”

Tommy slowly pales, glancing up from his phone to the news anchor’s face as she spoke. His eyes catch the man’s mugshot in the upper right corner, as his heart sinks low into his stomach.

“Charges against him include dozens of counts of child endangerment, first degree murder, kidnapping, desecration of human remains, and many, many more. This trial has had a slew of setbacks as many of the victims were children ages 6-16, and have since been

reassimilating into society with health professionals advising that including their testimonies in trial would undo the years of recovery they've since received."

The words stick like glue to his ears, dampening the noise until all he can hear is static, yet the voice filters through. Tommy isn't breathing.

"Calpurnius's attorney successfully filed for an appeal after his client's guilty verdict in the spring of 2016, citing the use of inadmissible evidence to sway the jury's opinion. This was because of a mislabeling of evidence found in the police investigation of the cult's main base, which was raided in April of 2014, in which dozens of bodies were found and 8 children rescued. The preceding for the appeals trial will take place in November in the Dakota State Court of Appeals in downtown Haptan. After this commercial break, we will be discussing the recent events of..."

Techno's takes the transition as a signal to change the channel but Tommy hardly notices. Both hands are frozen in a tight grip, one around his phone and the other balled in his shirt. His eyes have fallen to his arms, in short sleeves no less, the only image in his vision the scars and scars that litter his skin. They trail like snakes up his wrists to his shoulders, some raised and colored an angry red, while others are stretched thin and almost see-through. He can feel his heart racing while his mind goes blank, gaze stuck to his hands. His fingers are thin and wobbly, bent in odd places and he's even missing the top of his left pinky.

Why now? Why is he reminded of his mutilation now? Why did the man on the TV strike such fear into his heart? He can only think of The Dark, of the time before when these scars were fresh and never ending. Of screaming and blood and the smell of it, of scratching at his own skin because it wasn't his, it was someone else's. Someone else's blood, someone else's body, someone else's name, someone touching him, holding him down. He can't remember, he doesn't want to remember.

He's on his feet, unable to hear Techno calling for him. He races to the bathroom and vomits in the toilet, sinking to his knees and feeling dizzy like he's dying.

Tommy hates this body, all the mangled scars and his broken psyche, every step forwards just shatters him more and more, until the pieces of him are scattered so far it's impossible to find them all, let alone piece them together again.

He lays his head in his hands, eyes glazed and unfocused, screaming in his own head for Sam. Feeling trapped in this reality he hates, he hates with every fiber of his fucked up being.

'Sam,' he cries, he can vaguely see Techno lift his head, stare into his eyes, but Tommy doesn't stare back, 'Sam, please...'

~~~~

Sam was definitely unprepared to be thrust into control. One second he's helping Ranboo decorate his room, and the next he's kneeling over a toilet bowl with Techno looking over him clearly concerned. The taste of bile stains his mouth, and his heart is still racing from the remnants of panic. Tommy's memories have disappeared into the headspace along with him.

He coughs, using Techno's arms for support as he stands on shaky legs, closes the lid and flushes.

"Uhh," Techno says, obviously out of his element and very confused, "I, uh, can get you some water. Do you want to, like, go with me? Or I can take you to your room? You know what, stay here, I'll be back." Techno maneuvers Sam into sitting on the toilet lid then quickly scurries to the kitchen to grab a water glass.

Sam takes the second alone to breathe and call out to Tommy in his head, hoping to get some context for this switch but receives nothing back. That's fine, he can deal with Techno for now and then figure everything out later. It feels like something happened that freaked Tommy out, so he needs to rest and recuperate with the others. Sam can handle the real world.

"Thanks," Sam says with a scratchy throat, as Techno returns and hands him the glass of water.

"Are you okay? I mean, obviously not but like, what happened?" Techno is staring quite bewildered. He seems a little uncomfortable but it's outweighed by the sheer concern for his foster brother's health.

Sam tries again, combing through whatever he can to figure out what's going on. He can remember MarioKart, Wilbur leaving, Techno playing with him, Techno turning on the news... then nothing. He drinks the water slowly, buying some time to think of an answer. "I don't know," he says after a long pause. "I got..." he thinks back to the vomit in the toilet, "really nauseous, all of a sudden." He attempts to shrug nonchalantly but his shoulders are very stiff, "Must've been something I ate."

Techno's eyes are unblinking, and Sam doesn't know if he truly believes his explanation. Techno can be much harder to read than most people, and Sam hasn't spoken to him at all before now. But thankfully, the teen sighs and mutters, "Okay. Go lie down for a while, hope you're okay with me telling Phil. 'Cause I'm going to. Like, right now."

Sam nods, standing up on his own this time and making his way to his room as Techno heads back to the kitchen. Sam closes the door behind him and lets out another breath, getting into bed and closing the blinds for a nap. He's not really sure what day it is, if he should be napping so late with school tomorrow or not, but his body is exhausted, and he needs to speak to Tommy anyway.

He closes his eyes, not waiting for sleep to come before he dives back into the headspace.

Taking The Plunge

Chapter Summary

I think we all need a moment to ourselves to unwind. A little fresh air, a little swim, a little death...

Chapter Notes

ello, give it up for ranboo making me cry while begging sam to lock him in the prison, I am so not caught up with the events of the DSMP but honestly? its wild. I love being out of the loop

chapter 4 is following after this, idk why I'm posting the chapters in pairs, i guess that's just a thing, who knows if that pattern will continue

shits gon get confusing, hope you're ready!

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

Tommy is in the midst of a panic attack, even in his own headspace. Anxiety thrums through his nerves despite the lack of a physical body. Each hand grasps one of his brothers, Tubbo and Ranboo, as he laughs breathlessly, teetering on the edge of sobbing. “I don’t even know what’s wrong with me,” he says, between gasps for air, “So much, it’s just so much...”

Tommy knows he’s not making much sense but that’s not exactly his first priority at the moment.

“It’s okay, just keep breathing,” Tubbo states calmly.

“Yeah, you’re doing fine, Tommy. You don’t need to think about it right now.” Ranboo follows, running his gloved thumb over the back of Tommy’s hand.

“Heh, okay, easier-“ he chokes, “easier said than done.” Tommy lets go for a moment to wipe his eyes but grabs onto the hand instantly after and whimpers, “Where’s Sam?”

“He switched with you,” Ranboo explains, “I’m sure he’ll be back once he’s safe outside.”

“Oh gods, Techno’s gonna ask so many questions,” Tommy recalls, picking up his breathing again while both boys squeeze his hands tightly.

“Hey, hey, c’mon big man, you gotta calm down.” Tubbo says, using his free hand to rub soft circles into Tommy’s back.

The three are sitting huddled together on the floor of their living area, on a soft rug colored green and red, something one of their past homes had in the foyer. Tommy leans onto Tubbo’s shoulder and Tubbo’s arms wrap around him to pull them closer.

“The TV...” Tommy whispers, letting tears freely flow onto Tubbo’s sleeve. “They... it mentioned the cult.”

“Oh no,” Tubbo responds, a worrying tone in his voice, “what... about it?”

“They appealed the ruling,” Tommy’s stomach drops again just repeating the information, alongside Tubbo. The two might have minimal understanding of the legal system, but they know this means that man could be free again. He doesn’t what to think about what could happen if he found them.

“There’s no way they’d overturn it, surely not,” Tubbo mutters, perhaps more to himself than Tommy. Ranboo looks confused.

Tommy removes his hand to clasp onto Tubbo’s shirt, as if it’s the only thing keeping him together. “Tubbo, I can’t- they can’t find us. We can’t go back. We’ll die, Tubbo. I’ll die if they take us.”

“Phil wouldn’t let that happen,” Ranboo argues, trying to calm them down, “Not Phil or Wilbur or Techno, they’ll protect us. I trust them, it hasn’t been that long but I trust them.”

“Yeah, Phil is a good one, Tommy. He’ll keep us safe, we don’t have to worry.” Tubbo agrees, holding Tommy tight to his chest.

“I can’t go back, Tubbo, I can’t-“ Stuck in his repeating thoughts, Tommy rambles on and cries.

“No one’s going anywhere,” Sam announces as he enters the room, immediately kneeling in front of the three of them to wrap them all in a hug. “I promised I would never let anything happen to you three again, and I am not breaking that promise. Ever.”

Tommy and Tubbo lean into Sam’s hold. It takes a few minutes for Tommy’s sobs to die down. He glances up at Sam’s soft eyes, “Is Techno mad?”

“No, I told him I got nauseous, but someone’s going to have to explain to Phil, eventually. I can do it if you don’t want to,” Sam assures him, petting his hair.

“Does Phil know about the cult?” Tubbo asks.

“He has to,” Tommy mutters, “Every other fucking foster parent knew. He just hasn’t brought it up yet. I don’t think he told Wil or Techno.”

“Techno did seem very confused,” Sam adds.

“I can talk to Phil, he’ll probably want to ask questions. I don’t mind answering what I can,” Tubbo offers, as the group withdrawals to a more comfortable position.

“I don’t want him to know,” Tommy rubs his hands over his eyes, “What if he- what if he sends us back? He can just- just throw us out! Why wouldn’t he? Why would he keep us?” Tommy cries, Sam once again pulling him close with Tubbo not far behind. Sam can’t handle the fear in the boy’s eyes, he’s never looked smaller, curled up in a ball of stress, holding onto Sam’s arms for dear life.

Tommy is still so young, Sam knows he should never have to feel this way, to be so afraid of losing everything in a single moment. To live in fear of returning to his abusers, to the people who did unspeakable things to him. He knows those memories lie in The Dark, waiting to be released at the first sign of unrest. Sam hates this powerlessness, he wishes he could go back and time and prevent Tommy from ever enduring the horrors of his short life.

But, all he can do now is reassure him that they are safe and protected, and by the gods he will never ever let anything take them away. He presses his chin into Tommy wild hair, whispering through his mask, “We’re gonna be okay, Tommy. As long as I’m here, nothing will hurt you. We’re gonna be just fine.

“I promise.”

—

Tubbo is woken up by a few knocks on his bedroom door, with an invitation for dinner. The windows are dark, and Tubbo has no idea how long he slept or what time it is, but he knows his stomach is hollow and his throat burns. He changes into a long-sleeved shirt, not as comfortable being around others with his scars showing as Tommy is, pulling the one he was wearing over his head and throwing it somewhere in the dark. He tugs the navy sleeves down once the shirt is on.

He pauses with his hand on the doorknob, taking a few deep breaths to hype himself up before exiting the room and making his way to the dining room. He’s still a bit nervous, Tommy tends to act quite protective over their interactions with the others in the household, and usually his brothers are only able to front willingly if they are somewhere where no one expects them to act in one way or another. It can be frustrating, as Tubbo wants to experience the world just as much as Tommy, but he knows the overprotection is just to keep them safe. The jarring differences in personalities has most definitely caused them unnecessary struggle before, and anyone who’s gained even an inkling of what goes on in their head almost always took full advantage of that fact.

There was a time, perhaps the first or second house they stayed at, where Tommy came clean from the get-go about the voices in his head, how he wasn’t alone in his body. That did not end well. Tubbo isn’t certain about what happened- those memories were safeguarded quite

heavily- but the next thing they knew they were on the streets begging for a phone to call their social worker, a limp in their step and days without food.

Tubbo shook his head, still in the shadow of the staircase, just out of sight of the others, to clear his thoughts and be ready to interact with other humans. This may not be a life or death situation but his racing heart would tell him otherwise. Maybe he will pretend it's just another therapy session, that this is his hour to fill the gaps of conversation and no one will notice the difference. He notices how difficult it's been to take that final step into view. Every moment that passes makes it harder and harder to stay in the moment, like he's drifting out of reality, or being tugged more like. But he can't focus on that, he needs to be here, for Tommy, for his foster family. He can do this.

Yeah, he's got this, he's gonna do great, he's gonna get a good grade in social interaction, something that is both attainable and reasonable to-

But the ground under Tubbo is no longer the wood flooring of the stairs, he is instead on his hands and knees in the coarse, cold dirt. He looks down at his hands, bewildered to see them covered in bits of soil and mud. His socks are gone, too, his feet practically black from the grime and the dark of night. He feels simultaneously on the edge of passing out, and filled with adrenaline.

His dirty palms grasp a nearby tree trunk to hold himself upright as he struggles to his feet, suddenly out of breath and eyes darting around to see in the pitch black. He's in a... forest? What the hell? The lights of houses are as small as stars, blinking far off through the gaps in the trees. From a distance, someone is yelling for Tommy. His panicked brain can't decipher the voice's owner, every nerve in his body is screaming to run away, to escape the threat so he isn't caught. By who? Who cares! He's running.

Sticks and rocks and twigs burn the soles of his feet but the pain is nothing to him, survival is the most important focus. His navy sweater is plucked with holes from the brush, threads caught on low branches and pulled until the stitching gave. He's so cold, his feet are basically numb and so are his fingers, the latter coated with rough scuffs as he pushes against tree bark. He's far too disoriented to navigate, he hits every root, every branch, trips over logs and rocks. He doesn't know where he is, he doesn't know where's he going, all he knows is that he can't be caught-

Tubbo gasps as he breaks the surface of the water, scrambling to find a hold to escape the rapid current. His feet can't reach the rocky floor of the river, and his head barely stays above for longer than a single gasp. He feels the telltale signs of shock, his muscles frozen and cramping while he tries to stay afloat. Ice cold water fills his lungs like sand, and he chokes, fighting so hard to swim, fighting for his life to escape the watery hell. It feels like forever before his hands catch a thick root on the river's edge. He pulls with every bit of energy left in him, desperate, crying from the effort.

At last he's out of the water- or at least his upper half is. His legs have decided to quit working, lying limp in the water while he struggles to drag himself onto land. Gods it's cold, it's so fucking cold, he can't even see straight he's shaking so bad. The dirt's been washed away to reveal his cut-covered palms, blue fingers, sweater locked to his skin, soaked. He can't even think of what to do now, he'll die of hypothermia soon. He can feel it creeping up

his spine, the sickening warmth, the lie of comfort that already stole his legs' mobility. His ankle is bent in an odd direction, pulsing from the frozen heat, nerves so badly damaged that they aren't even shaking.

Exhaustion grips his entire being. Tubbo is tired, he feels like giving up already. He'll die not even knowing how. How he got there, how he ended up in a river, where the hell this river even is. No lights are visible, not even the stars. The voice shouting his name is farther away. Tubbo knows if he doesn't get up, doesn't get help, doesn't escape this mess- then he will die. He will die and Tommy will die. And Ranboo and Sam too. But it's impossible to get up, impossible to call for help.

The cold fakes him out, wrapping him in a warmth that suffocates him. His breathing is staggered and rigid, sending bolts of pain through his lungs if he breathes too deep. He's dying. That's okay, right? He's lived a lot longer than expected. Tubbo was brought into existence fully aware that death would follow close behind. A pitiful laugh falls from his numb mouth.

This is why he's here. To save Tommy from death. Before he succeeded by survival, by staying alive through all the bullshit odds stacked against them, and now? He'll succeed by dying in Tommy's place. Preventing his brother from enduring the cold, creeping embrace of the void.

If he deludes himself enough, he can see the watchful eyes of the Blood God gazing at him through the river's waves. As if waiting for just the right moment to whisk him away to eternity. He holds up a shaky hand towards the gaze, like reaching for a life raft, like he's moments away from reuniting with a lost love.

The cold fades. The sun rises. The light blinds his irises. The bright white surrounds him. The forest sings. The Blood God emerges from the water, leaning down to pick up the boy. He is cradled to a warm chest, his body limp like ice against the searing heat. He melts. He drifts to sleep, exhaustion carved into his bones.

He smiles.

He dies smiling.

Chapter End Notes

you're welcome >:)

Filling In (The Blanks)

Chapter Summary

A new face brings new experiences. Whether you want them or not.

Chapter Notes

sorry, you're confused? well allow me to make everything worse

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

Calm mid-afternoon breezes lazily loom in the springtime sunlight. A small fox, red fur sparkling gold, naps in the clearing under a stray beam of light. It's after a long day of hunting, stalking possible prey, tiny birds that never cease flapping, rabbits hopping between dense bushes, the mice that dance about the tufts of grass. Sharp claws and pointy teeth rest and strengthen, still coated light in blood. He rests happy and full on the bed of flowers.

The fox is roused by a low ringing noise. His ears perk, fluff catching the light breeze, the cool air of spring. The ringing slowly grows louder. It is unlike any noise of prey or predator. Unease lines the fur of his coat as he slowly gathers on his feet, but nothing about the noise signals impending danger. He is simply alert.

There is a boy wandering. His battered shoes scrap the dry grass and rocks and twigs snap under his heels. *Hunter*, the fox assumes, quickly stalking behind a dense bush, hidden from sight. The ringing is all he hears now, even as the human grows closer. The boy is not adept to sneaking in the forest, he hardly tries, unfocused eyes gazing drearly at the surrounding trees and brush. He stares at the bush, but the fox is certain he cannot spot him.

"Hello?" The human calls, in human garbles, gibberish to the unknowing fox. The ringing is quite intense now, causing pain in the fox's sensitive ears. He suppresses a whimper, ducking his chin to the ground and pawing at his ears to rid the noise. The fox is unaware the human boy steps closer, leaning over the green bushel to stare at the small animal. When a shoe enters his vision, the fox freezes, glancing up to the human, beady eyes meeting red and green.

The boy is unlike any hunter the fox has seen before, crisp white shirt and black pants offers no camouflage to the forest green. Over his mouth and nose is a piece of cloth, half black and half white, similar to the covers a human would use to protect their fragile skin from the cold,

but it is not cold. The fox presses his ears back, still aching from the high pitched noise, but doesn't feel the need to escape the threat.

"Are you okay?" The mask shifts, words falling uselessly on the fox's ears. He chitters back anyway, still pawing incessantly at the tufts over his ears to rid the noise. Why is it ringing so loudly? What is causing this noise? The tall boy doesn't seem to hear it, he is crouched with a hand moving towards the fox, brows furrowed in concerned confusion.

The fox is too agitated to fret over the reaching hand, he contorts his body to roll his skull against the dirt, trying to rid whatever is causing him pain. Nothing is working. It keeps getting louder and louder until the fox feels his brain turn to mush, melting under the intense frequency. He squirms harder when he feels the hand on his back, sliding to his neck-

Then silence.

The echo of the sound reverberating off wooden walls, the floor smooth and cold. His eyes open. The forest is gone, as is the daylight, instead he sees a frozen room. His hearing returns in the form of muffled speech, the clanking of metal on dinner plates, laughter, the buzz of a ceiling fan. He, himself, is frozen. Far further above the ground than he is used to. Is he standing atop something?

The fox looks down to see... socks, the ends of pant legs, white hairless hands where there used to be paws. So undeniably human. Even the room he is in now, looks to be a hunters interior. The voices he hears are speaking more human garble. Have they spotted him? No, he is in the dark, a shadow besides a doorway leading to a room of light. Where the people are.

What is he? He cannot be human, he is not human! He is a fox, he is terrified to be trapped in a hunters den. Without a sound he crouches low to the ground, where he feels more secure. He tries placing the pale hands on the floor but he is unbalanced. These damn human limbs are meant to be bipedal, he feels shaky and wobbly but it will be impossible to escape if he is not fast on his feet.

So he rests on his heels, searching around the closed space for an opening, and spots the glare of the moon from an open window. He quickly shuffles towards it, staying low to the floor and making as little noise as possible. The hunters in the side room are still active, so he assumes he hasn't been noticed. Good.

The window's framing is quite small, and has a thin mesh screen covering where the glass would be. He rests the fragile skin of his hand against it, pushing before deciding to use a foot instead. He climbs atop a table, gripping the edges while he raises a foot - wow these limbs of his are so thin and long- and with a wince extends his leg to force out the screen.

It makes a too-loud sound of hard plastic shattering, creaks of the surrounding wood walls, and the fox knows he's been heard when the voices cease. Someone calls out to him but he is gone, diving through the opening headfirst and bolting before he can fully get to his feet.

He is so so lost in this environment, he's never seen it before. All wide lawns and rows of houses and concrete streets, but there! The end of a field, the tree line! He can escape there and lose his captors in the woods, his element.

His feet move more by a foreign muscle memory than his own control as he sprints across the groomed grass, the voices in the house now outside as well, yelling after him. Once in the forest grounds, the foliage of roots and branches hinder his escape, no thanks to this uncomfortably tall and lanky body. This makes no sense, how he got here, where he is, what he is, why this body? But he can't make sense right now anyway, too rushed by his thrumming nerves to stop and think.

He trips on a tree root, the rim of his sock catching on a sharp branch, ungiving when he forces his foot away. In an angered panic, he rips the cloth down his pale foot, then does the same for the other, leaving both in the dirt as he gets back to his feet and stumbles further into the forest. The voices are not far behind, but they don't seem to be faster than him, if he can just find a stream, or a tall tree, or a cave-

Time skips. Space skips. He is somewhere else, further in the brush. He is exhausted, far more than how he felt before. His dirty hands and feet ache, covered in scuffs and scratches, and one ankle is hot fire burning with every step. But he is still running, the sound of rushing water egging him on, drawing him to a large boulder in a clearing, jutting out over a river.

The water whips by violently in the night, cascading like thunder over rocks and crashing against the tall edges. It's a dead end if he stays like this, and the voices are steadily drawing closer. So he decides the only option is to jump.

He focuses his gaze on the opposite edge- it's impossible to tell the distance in the low light- and he crouches again, placing his hands on the edge of the stone and pulling his balance back. He tenses his trembling muscles, like a spring loaded. Then, with every ounce of strength he propels himself forward, diving towards the grassing dock, where the water carved into a tree root, exposed gangly stems digging through the soil to feel the river.

Time slows as the edge gets closer and closer but he's losing height fast, the water approaching faster. No amount of will crosses the distance. With a loud all encompassing splash, he's submerged in the freezing drink. The cold envelopes his motor function and he sinks like stone and gets swept by the current, vision fading before he can even think to swi-

He wakes up shaking, exhausted. Looking up to the pale sky and the mask of the boy he saw earlier. He is cradled in the teen's arms, held like human baby with his tail curled inside the curve of his soft belly. The fox chirps confused and worried, but makes no move to escape.

"I think Tubbo's gonna like you," the boy says, but the fox can't understand him.

—

Ranboo watches out open eyelids, unfocused, a blurry window, a while before he even realizes he's awake. It's like he's standing beside himself, floating on air, watching a movie

rather than living. But he breathes, it's painful but it's instinct. Something in his mind wants desperately to be dreaming, or believes this is heaven, or purgatory. Not alive. Just not alive.

But he is breathing. Painfully. The stagnant air reeks of disinfectant and plastic. This situation feels familiar but nothing comes to mind. The walls of the room meld with the floor and all the furniture, Ranboo has more reason to believe it's a painted backdrop rather than an open space. Like he's on a stage. He is under the spotlight but no one is in the audience. No one makes a sound. Ranboo was never a very good actor.

He almost misses it, the slumped figure resting on a plastic chair. A blond man, instinctually familiar but unrecognizable. Sleeping. At the foot of the bed.

Right, Tommy's caretaker. His caretaker, technically. He doesn't feel a particular attachment, but if the man is waiting for him to wake up, then that must mean he cares, right? Or perhaps he wanted to waste no time dealing punishment the moment he awakes.

As time turns the bright shadows of the afternoon into a hint of dusk, more distinction makes its way into Ranboo's senses. He holds up both hands in front of his face, finally noticing the long bandages carefully wrapped from his forearms to knuckles. They are white, pristine. Either changed recently or only covering superficial wounds. They almost remind him of his gloves in the inner world. He figures he'll just pretend they are.

Further down the bed, his right ankle is stuck in a tight covering, sort of rigid but not quite a cast. It's suspended by a white strap from the ceiling. The rest of him is covered by a thin blanket, also white. Geez, everything had to be white here. It gives him a headache.

Looking over his shoulder he sees a few machines, one beeping along with his heart rate, one attached to an IV which fed into his arm, some work station for whichever nurse is assigned. He wonders when a nurse or doctor will show up, he's been up for a while now, and his throat is far too dry for comfort.

He could wake up the man, still sleeping in the chair. But he looks well tired, even with the hat pulled over his eyes his hair is still disheveled, clothes wrinkled. Ranboo can't do that, wake him from the sleep he desperately needed. Judging by the room and the machines, Ranboo knows he's technically the reason for it. How he got here? That's not something he can conjure. All he can do is wait and observe.

His brain must be on some sort of delay, because the man wakes up to the sound of the door opening before Ranboo heard it. Ranboo looks away before they can make eye contact, glancing instead at the young nurse that walks in. She gives him a kind smile, greeting him, "Hello, Thomas! I'm happy to see that you're awake. My name is Nurse Nihachu but you can call me Niki." The nurse has shoulder length pink hair, most of it tied back in a low ponytail. Ranboo responds with a short nod and a small smile of his own.

A hand rests on his good ankle, and Ranboo's eyes dart over to see the man staring back with some unspeakable emotion on his face. Guilt makes him look away again, to a spot on the white blanket that's about as interesting as speck of dust. The nurse has walked closer, accessing the computer and typing away, pausing only to look at Ranboo or the various machines.

She exchanges the IV drip for a full bag, then takes her stethoscope from around her neck and puts it in properly. "Can you take some deep breaths for me?" She asks, and he nods again as she slips her hand holding the cold metal dial under the collar of his gown onto his bare skin. He breathes shakily, trying to keep it even but a sharp pain at the apex of his inhale causes him to cough. The nurse hums, frowning a bit, then motions for him to lean forward so she can press the metal bit to his back. He does so, shivering as the touch, the position unlocking a new ache at the base of his spine. He breathes slower this time, stopping just when his lungs burn and exhales as slow as he can. She withdraws the stethoscope and types something in the computer before turning to him and the man.

"There's still some lingering pneumonia, but it's not nearly as bad as when he first arrived. We can start the treatment for that immediately now that you're awake. Is there anything else bothering you, Thomas?" She waits patiently, meeting his eyes with her soft brown ones.

He doesn't want to speak aloud, he's never spoken without someone else fronting with him, and his head is painfully empty right now. He instead takes a shaky hand and placed it over his Adam's apple, hoping she'll understand.

She cocks her head, "You need some water?" He nods, grateful that she guessed right. "Okay, I'll be back with a cup for you, Mr. Watson can fill it in the sink, alright?" Niki smiles and ruffles his hair- which is probably gross, he can feel it's greasiness just by the weight on his scalp- before exiting to get a cup.

Once the door closes, the man leans forward with a sigh, hand still laid atop his ankle. Ranboo really doesn't want to look at him, not wanting to see whatever emotion he's wearing, whether it be sadness or pain or anger or disappointment. But he also knows that ignoring him will make things worse, so his eyes quickly dart between the man and his own fidgeting fingers, unable to settle on one or the other. "Tommy, mate," the man says, and Ranboo's mind finally supplies the name, Phil. Phil Watson, his current foster dad, though probably not for too much longer. His voice is low, sounding tired, maybe disappointed. "I don't have any idea of what could've triggered you, but you gave us all a hell of a fright yesterday," Phil attempts a humorous tone but doesn't hide his concern.

It's extremely difficult to maintain eye contact, even if the words don't sound like scolding, he still expects some sort of punishment for whatever happened that led him to this moment. It's one of those situations where Ranboo is locked in the front, alone, forced to deal with whatever mess someone else made. He learned quickly that nothing he could say would deter a punishment, so he's resigned to stay silent but attentive, offering little in the way of response except confirmation.

"What happened?" Phil finally asks, eyes seemingly pleading for an answer. Ranboo knows already that he and everyone that is Tommy are unpredictable. They are a puzzle that is unsolvable, pieces too small and spread too far to collect let alone assemble. Those two words have been asked a million times before and never has Ranboo once given an answer.

And it's difficult to shake his head and look away, just like every time before. But to expect someone to understand that he just doesn't know, that's too akin to hope, and hope has done nothing to help thus far. He hides his eyes because he doesn't want to expect the other's expression, whether it be anger or sadness or betrayal or confusion, when he can't actually

say anything. He's better at dealing with surprises than calculating responses. Better to let the adults respond to their own emotions, since Ranboo can hardly handle his own.

Phil lets the silence hang long enough for Niki to return with a cup. She fills it and hands it to him, letting him and Phil know that the psychologist would stop by in an hour, and to hit a button on one of the monitors to call for her if he needs anything. She leaves, and Ranboo wonders when the last time he ate anything was, not that he'd ask.

Phil continues his questioning after watching him gulp the water greedily, "Is there a reason you can't tell me, mate?" Of course there is, but Ranboo isn't in the state of mind to tell him. He focuses his gaze wearily out the window, hoping Phil will get the hint and drop it.

"I'm not mad," the man continues, "I promise I'm not angry at you for running. I just want to help," his hand grips Ranboo's ankle a little tighter, and the boy has to suppress a flinch. "I can't help if I don't know what's going on. Talk to me, please."

Ranboo meets his eyes, then quickly looks back to the window, uncomfortable with the amount of desperation in Phil's expression. He's not used to someone caring about him. Hopefully Tubbo or Tommy will come along soon so Ranboo doesn't have to deal with this anymore.

He needs a nap.

Chapter End Notes

believe it or not the first draft of this chapter was twice as confusing, you should be thanking me

but i digress, thank you for reading, all the lovely comments are so great like I'm seriously crying y'all give me life

An Act of Prime

Chapter Summary

MarioKart (c), ruining relationships since 1992.

Chapter Notes

wow wow wow another chapter another three drafts until I can stand reading it, the things i do for this fic i stg

anywhom, anyone else have FEELINGS about Tommy's recent actions???? like building panic rooms that reflect traumatic events so he can quote, "get over it"???? boi thats not getting over trauma thats just subjecting yourself to more of it, and thats MY job

but WHATEVER i guess wilburs just BACK now and he's gonna start some shit because why the hell not?? plus he was mean to ranboo so i dont like him >:(

fuck if i know where I'm going after this, there's gotta be a plot somewhere I just have to conjure it up and wow finals are destroying my energy reserves, graduating art school is really fun guys!!!! if i say it enough itll be true right? right???

yeah yeah poor me, get y'all's vaccines if you're old enough, hopefully when life resumes i'll find the motivation to write more or whatever but until then ill be procrastinating my own interests by just playing minecraft forever

hope you like this chapter, love you all, stay safe ^-^

In the headspace, there's a small shed-like room that everyone refers to as the Control Room. It's the doorway between the inner world and the outer world, where a person will go in order to front or just linger in the body's consciousness- backseat driving, one might say.

The Control Room has no decor or windows or anything. Once you enter the doors, you're met with the brief white walls of the small room then it instantly becomes the view out of your eyes in the outer world. Theoretically, there's an inbetween but it's nothing memorable.

Right now, the long double doors are locked- in prime, is what they call it. Prime is when someone is locked in the room, stuck fronting the body with no one able to enter or exit. It's annoying as hell, since no one can communicate between the inner world and the outer world, the room bars all interactions. The brothers all have some instinctual connection usually,

being able to call for each other if distressed or other. But during prime, it's just a waiting game until the doors unlock once more.

There's a lot of things Tommy doesn't understand about the room. Why it exists, what decides when prime begins or ends, what function this room had before he and Tubbo escaped The Dark...

What happens on the outside when no one is in the room?

Usually, the room is only empty while the body sleeps, but there are moments Tommy can remember- only flashes, thankfully- when it was just him and Tubbo and they were both in the inner world together. It definitely happened more often than just when they slept. But unpacking that would mean unpacking the rest of their past, so Tommy prefers to just take what he can get and move on.

He sits outside the Control Room, where the double doors are locked tight, currently in prime. He doesn't know who is in there, but it's either Tubbo or Ranboo, since he hasn't seen either of his brothers in a while. He spoke to Sam earlier, the man guarding the entrance to The Dark as he normally does. For what reason, he has no idea, before Sam has described this instinctual need to act as the gatekeeper- the Warden, he likes to call it- but couldn't say much else.

With his back to the wall of the house, Tommy waits for something to do and watches the bright sun in the clouded sky. Time is another strange mystery in this place. It's definitely not aligned with the days in the real world, often existing in a state of some stagnant time of day. Right now, it's a few hours after sunrise, but sometimes it's the afternoon, sometimes it's the middle of the night. Sometimes the sky is paused at the perfect moment of sunset, where the horizon is painted with purples and orange, blurred gradients reflected by the ocean. He still doesn't know what causes the time change or the weather, if there's any correlation to the outside world or not.

What a strange land he resides in. He knows by this point in his life that his perspective of living is not universal- normal people don't struggle as much as he does, and not one person has warned him of the contrast between the outer world and the inner one. In fact, no one has ever described the experience of a headspace to him, maybe it's been mentioned in some obscure media, but nothing to convince him that his experiences are normal in any way. Actually, the only time he can remember explaining his situation to someone, he was ridiculed and thoroughly punished for it. He was told he was lying for attention, that he was crazy, or broken, that he had too wild of an imagination- it's for their protection that they pretend to be normal.

And, trust him, it's so hard to pretend. He sometimes wishes he could just choose one or the other- the inner world or the outside- even if it means he'd be separated from his brothers. At least then he could manage this fucking whirlwind that is life. He's fucking exhausted of trying so badly to be right, to stop panicking at the stupidest things, to not be kicked around between families, to stand his ground and prove his worth, to believe he has any worth to begin with when every single person around him reminds him again and again that he's a waste of space.

Because he knows, he fucking knows he's a burden. Everything he has, everything he *is* has been given to him with flippant hands, and every time he is accused of being ungrateful. He uses his gift of language to push others away, uses his given space to rot in silence, abuses his safety by becoming a husk of a person.

But he can't die. He refuses to, death isn't what scares him, it's what- no, *who*- waits beyond that. The accursed being that stole lives, stole blood, stole *his* life and *his* blood, the merciless master that held his child-mind in his clutches, that yanked at his psyche no matter the time of day, or the progress he's made.

He is afraid of the blood that isn't his, that spills across entire hallways and fills fountains of youth, that he has tasted, that he has bathed in, that haunts his vision every moment his eyes close. He's given so much of himself to the god, his will, his blood, his body, his devotion, none by his own volition. All that remains is his mortal soul, which he intends to guard until his last dying breath.

There's a click, Tommy shoots his head up towards the Control Room, where the sound came from. Nothing looks different than the last time he gazed at the doors, but he has this distinct feeling that it's no longer prime and he could enter if he wanted to. Well, with nothing better to do, he gets to his feet and pushes open the door, greeted by the empty white room before it fades to black and he wakes up in the real world.

Ranboo is desperately afraid to sleep during prime. In normal circumstances, sleeping was a fast pass to reenter the inner world, to use the time to be together with his brothers and not worry about whatever else was going on in the real world. But during prime, sleeping is only a dark void that takes over his senses. He is awake in his mind but not physically, he is stuck in a comatose bag of flesh and lacks stimuli, forced to listen to his own thoughts and scathing memories while he waits for prime to end or to wake up.

He's been up for hours now, the sun far past set, he can't look out the window anymore because it's too dark outside- he only can see the blurry reflection of the room he's in. The bags under his eyes weigh heavy on his face but he can't close them, although he knows his body needs the rest. The lights in the room are dimmed to signal that he should be asleep right now. Phil was struggling to keep his eyes open so he left about an hour ago with a promise that Wilbur would be there to take his place soon enough.

Maybe if he felt talkative he would tell the man that this isn't his first rodeo, that he's woken up alone in hospital rooms plenty of times before, that they didn't need to try so hard to pretend like they care.

He sees Wilbur's pale yellow sweater through the window of the door before anything else, as the older teen speaks to Niki, that nurse from earlier. He has a soft, tired smile that falters into a concerned grimace a few times during their conversation. He wishes he could hear

what they were talking about, but he knows it's likely himself. It's only a few minutes before Niki opens the door, allowing Wilbur to enter behind her.

She smiles at him, a little surprised to see him awake and says, "Hello, Tommy. I'm just here to check vitals, I won't be long. And your brother is here to spend the night, I hope you don't mind." She nods at Wil before fiddling with a few of the machines and logging stuff into a laptop. She looks as exhausted as he feels, likely nearing the end of her shift, which Ranboo knew from TV usually lasts 12 hours at a time. He can't even imagine working that long. Wilbur takes a seat in the same chair his father once sat in, hunching over his tall frame into a slouch.

"Hiya, Toms. Shouldn't you be resting?" He asks, a cheeky grin adorning his tired face, Ranboo would ask him the same, if he bothered. At the lack of response- Ranboo seems to find his hands much more interesting than engaging with the teen- Wilbur waits a moment, then tries again. "Are you feeling alright? I bet I could bribe Niki for some sleeping meds if you need 'em."

Niki scoffs, "Wilbur, please. That's not happening."

"She has to say that," he chuckles. "I can be pretty persuasive, though, just say the word." Ranboo darts his eyes between Niki's sad expression, Wilbur's questioning gaze, and his own fidgeting fingers, feeling like the awkward elephant in the room. Niki doesn't stay for too much longer, bidding the two farewell as she returns to her rounds, leaving them alone in the dim room.

Wilbur's eyes stay on him, but Ranboo doesn't want to meet them, feeling more exhausted and missing the inner world with each passing minute. "You know," the older boy says, "when dad told me you weren't speaking, I had a hard time believing him. I was like, 'Tommy? Quiet? No way, I don't believe it for a second!'" He animates his words with the wave of his hands, leaning back in the plastic chair as he continues, "and yet..." Ranboo can feel his gaze on him, waiting for some sort of reply. One that Ranboo doesn't plan on giving him.

Wilbur lets out a soft sigh after a minute, letting an easy smile rest on his face. "Well, I guess it doesn't matter much. Hey, you must be pretty bored, eh?" He asks, his grin growing steadily as he reaches into his bag and pulls out a Nintendo Switch, "I brought MarioKart. Don't think that just because you're sick I'll go easy on you." Wilbur's sly grin and devilish gaze melts Ranboo's standoffishness a little, knowing that Tommy really really likes the racing game, but it gives him a painful longing for his brother all the same.

Still, he hesitantly takes the small red controller that's offered to him, finally meeting Wil's hopeful gaze. He can feel instinctually what Tommy's reply would be if he were fronting, but Ranboo lacks the energy to perform at all and doesn't want to give Wilbur false hope that he'll be normal anytime soon. Instead, he watches Wilbur set up the Switch's display at the foot of the hospital cot, then move his chair closer to the head to get a better angle.

Ranboo tries not to cower at the close proximity of the older teen, justifying his movement as necessary for him to view the screen, but at the same time, he's seen the way Wil interacts with Tommy during their competitions and is quite sure he wouldn't be able to handle that

level of physical contact. In his hands is the small plastic controller, dwarfed by his long fingers. The buttons seem so tiny, same with the analog stick, if Ranboo thought a calculator had small buttons, these are practically minuscule. He attempts to hold it the way he vaguely remembers Tommy holding it, thumbs over the stick and the four buttons, then he can feel the corners under his index fingers, almost like holding a small book. Except way more cramped, he doubts his sore fingers will enjoy the positioning for long.

Wilbur breezes through the various menus and Ranboo doesn't bother understanding the stats, simply picking whichever option was directly right of the default selection. Wil doesn't question him, though he takes a bit more time deciding which character to pick, reading each name and stat before coming to a decision. Once on the race selection screen, he shifts his gaze, giving the tiniest shake of his head to warn Ranboo before he asks, "In the mood for any in particular?" He emphasizes this by rolling over each of the cups for a second.

Ranboo shrugs, since he's never played any of them before. Wilbur picks one and they start. Ranboo, of course, misses the starting boost and drives irrationally for a bit before realizing he has to actually hold the button down. Then he needs a minute to press every other button and test the analog's sensitivity. He hasn't even begun reading the various labels and numbers on the screen, never mind trying to escape twelfth place. The split screen on the already tiny display makes it even more difficult to understand, but soon enough he's aligned with the track, driving smooth and collecting items. He discovers drifting while trying to figure out how to use his bullet bill, and forgets he even has the item while he practices turning with the drift.

It's like that for the whole race. Wilbur slipping in and out of third- the computer characters are ruthless, Ranboo can't even catch up with the pack. It ends before he completes the last lap, with his character whining in defeat and his thumbs tense and aching.

Wilbur had been so ingrained in his plight for first that he doesn't notice Ranboo's ranking until the list pulls up and reveals his zero-point score. Wilbur was willing to play quieter than usual but seeing his brother's lackluster performance settles the suspicion he holds even further. He turns to gaze at the younger with furrowed brows, though more contemplative than disappointed. "Are you... sure you're alright, Toms? It's like you've never even played before," he points out, letting the game stay on the rankings screen so the next match doesn't start prematurely.

Ranboo feels a bout of nervousness creep up his chest, feeling like he's caught in the act, like Wilbur is convincing himself that the young boy was a stranger rather than his foster brother. His hands shake, losing the awkward grip he has on the controller so it fumbles down onto his lap.

Wilbur's glare softens into a much more concerned look as he reacts to Ranboo's trembling, asking, "Tommy? Not gonna lie, you're kind of scaring me." Wilbur's hand reaches to his hair to smooth it back nervously, then hovers near the other's lap, as if considering taking Ranboo's hand in his own. He decides against it, leaning away but continues to search for the other's line of sight. "Did someone say something? Were you threatened by someone? I just- what on earth could've happened for you to jump out the fucking window?"

Now that catches Ranboo's attention. He had been clued in to the idea that he tried to run off in some way, but no one mentioned any details as to how thus far. Ranboo didn't know he jumped out a window. Shit, was it the one in their bedroom? Was that how they got the sprained ankle? His eyes dart over to finally lock onto the brunet's, as if they contain the answers he seeks. "What happened, Toms? Why won't you say anything?" Wilbur asks, voice pleading yet hardly above a whisper.

'I don't know,' Ranboo wants to say. 'I don't know, I don't know, I wish someone would tell me.' It's all so confusing, Ranboo knows Wilbur could never understand what it's like to always wake up alone in random places, with random wounds and being spoken at by random faces. How hard it is, how much energy it takes to read between every word said, to analyze every expression, every tone of voice, body language, hidden intention- all when he has no idea how he ended up there in the first place.

It seems so easy to play ignorant, to play dumb and mute like Ranboo chooses to, but it's exhausting, because if you can't give answers then there's zero hope in receiving any in return. He's so tired, in pain, so very angry at himself and this situation, for how little he can contribute, how he's powerless to help himself or anyone. The rush of emotions makes his head ache, he shuts his eyes, hanging his head low as he wills back the pressure building in his skull.

But, then his mind alights at the presence of a familiar warmth in the back of his head. His eyes shoot open once more, filling his lungs excitedly as if he hasn't breathed at all in the last few hours. He is unconcerned with Wilbur's confused expression as the room around him fades into a blur, now solely focused on the newcomer finally come to rescue him.

'Oi! Took you long enough to open up, 'Boo, I've been waiting around all day!' Tommy's grating voice rings through his ears, a sound he never knew he'd miss so much.

'Oh thank the gods, Tommy. I'm so tired. I don't know what the fuck is going on and I just cannot deal with Wilbur right now.' Without a second thought, their hands go limp as Ranboo withdraws from the front, happily letting Tommy take control and only lingering as to not leave him in the same confused position he was.

As soon as he's fronting, Tommy quickly takes in their surroundings, noting the bland walls, the various machines, the nighttime, his cast, his bandages, and lastly Wilbur, who is still eyeing him suspiciously.

"What the fuck are you lookin' at?" He blurts out, a little annoyed by how scratchy his throat is. He lifts his hand to soothe his neck, and is startled by the tiny fresh-healed cuts and abrasions that cover his fingers and palm. 'What the fuck- Ranboo?' He asks inward.

'I was hoping you could answer that,' his brother replies, sounding drained. 'They found us half-dead in a forest. Wilbur said something about jumping out a window,' Ranboo fills him in on the little information he knows.

He startles again when Wilbur makes a peculiar noise after hearing him speak. "What-" Wilbur sputters, his confused gaze shifting to concerned disbelief, "what kinda game are you on about? What do mean 'what are you looking at?' You haven't said a word all day!" Wilbur

throws his hands around wildly, and Tommy has to push down their collective flinch to avoid ducking in preparation of a strike. Wil hasn't tried hitting them before but there's a first for everything and he looks angry.

"Hey, hey, calm it down, big man," Tommy attempts to placate the situation, "I'm sure we can come to some kind of understanding without getting mad, yeah?"

"I mean, why now?" Wilbur continues, ignoring the younger teen, "You've been worrying everyone being all distant and quiet and now you just up and ask me why I'm staring? Why didn't you say anything before? Jesus- Toms, what the fuck happened?!" Which each question Wil hypes his frustrations higher and higher until he's looming over Tommy's lanky form, completely ignorant to the frightened, jittery mess he's been reduced to.

"P-please Wil, I don't know what t-t-to tell you, man," Tommy relents in holding his bandaged arms up higher to protect his throat and jaw, twitchy and ready to pull over the rest of his face if needed. The stuttering is more Ranboo's anxiety than his own, but together their nerves are compounded and Tommy can't do much other than panic.

'Fuck- I'm so sorry Tommy I think this is my fault,' Ranboo rambles in their thoughts, 'every time I thought about talking I couldn't- nothing came to mind and I didn't know what to say, I just couldn't do it, I-'

"Surely you have to know something! I mean, what am I supposed to believe here?" Wilbur rants at the same time, "One minute we hear you walk down the stairs and the next you're out the bloody window?! And you just kept running! No matter what we said, you just kept- and you almost drowned?! Thank god Phil found you before you-"

"Stop it! Shut up! Just- just stop fucking yelling at me!" Tommy shouts at both Ranboo and Wilbur, squeezing his palms over his ears, gripping the greasy strands that fall around them. He stays like that for a few minutes, oblivious to Wilbur's dumbfounded expression and Ranboo's palpable guilt, only hearing his heart beating rapidly in his sore chest. He waits until his breathing calms and he can get the necessary air in his lungs to stop his head from spinning.

When he's finally stable enough to open his eyes, some nurse lady is in the room, staring daggers at Wil but quickly switches to concern when she locks eyes with Tommy.

'That's Niki...' Ranboo supplies hesitantly, unsure if Tommy would appreciate the input or not.

'Thank you, Boo,' he replies, unclenching his tense fists and falling back into the reclined cot, utterly drained.

The nurse- Niki, walks over to his side, eyeing the machines then sighing in relief when nothing is out of place, the only concern being his sporadic heart rate but that was steadily slowing by the minute. "Are you okay, Tommy?" She asks, voice kind and full of genuine concern. She gives a small smile, saying, "If Wil is giving you a hard time, I can kick him out if you'd like?"

“Nah, he’s just being a bitch. I can deal with ‘im,” Tommy replies, grinning in return. He doesn’t miss the way her eyes widen, as if she hadn’t expected him to speak and was surprised by his tone and language.

But she shakes off the surprise in an instant, going back to the laptop station to type something in. “Well, in any case. I’m glad to see you’re feeling well enough to talk! You should really be resting, though,” she says, a warm sort of pride in her eyes.

“Tell that to the big man over ‘ere,” he jokes, pointing a thumb over at Wilbur, who still seems to be reeling from Tommy’s outburst, if not looking a little guilty for causing it.

“Wilbur,” her voice drops to a much colder tone, a strange mix of Phil’s scolding and Techno’s monotone drawl, “leave the child alone,” she tells him.

Wilbur huffs, though he’s more joking than actually miffed, “It’s not my fault he’s been worrying everyone. Can’t a guy care about his bro?”

“Yelling and demanding answers is not what caring looks like, Wil,” she deadpans, eyeing him disappointedly.

They have a staring contest of sorts, both with narrowed eyes and postured disdain before Wilbur clears his throat and stands up, “Niki, would you go out in the hall with me? I would like to discuss something... private.”

Tommy presses a hand to his chest dramatically, “You wound me, Wilbur,” he sighs.

Niki laughs at this and waves Tommy off before heading outside the room with Wilbur. They close the door behind them and speak so lowly that Tommy can’t hear much else than the slight hum of their muffled conversation.

He then feels a wave of secondhand guilt emitting from where Ranboo lingers in the back of his mind, ‘Sorry- sorry about that, I feel like that was my fault...’

“Nonsense, big man. Wilbur was being a prick and I got fed up with him,” Tommy says aloud, waving off Ranboo’s apology with a physical gesture. He continues in his head, ‘Go rest with Tubbo and Sam, I can take over from here.’

‘O-ok, if you’re sure,’ Ranboo agrees hesitantly. ‘If I get a clue about what happened, you’ll be the first to know.’

‘Right, see ya Ranboo.’

‘See ya.’

The empty feeling of being alone in his head isn’t always the worst. Sometimes, he dreads the lonely hours just passing time in the real world, but he can get pretty antsy being stuck in the headspace for a long time. He loves his brothers, more than anything, but there are times when he just wants to chill with Phil and Wilbur and Techno, without having to worry about anyone’s input.

Tommy spots Wilbur's abandoned controller on his plastic seat and scoops it up without hesitation. He starts the next race, laughing maniacally as he leaves Wil's character in the dust.

They're two laps in by the time he returns.

Words Spoken, Words Received

Chapter Summary

Tommy reaffirms that trust is fickle, while Ranboo unveils a ghastly secret.

Chapter Notes

hello hello hello

sorry this took way to long to get out, i finished the first part and was so unhappy with how little was accomplished that I had to write a whole nother scene to compensate, but I can gladly say im quite proud of this chapter now, i hope everyone likes it too

ive been grappling with the sheer number of characters I have in this fic and the various situations I have to account for, its a little overwhelming at times, I just want to keep throwing conflict in again and again but i almost never have a resolution to said conflict in mind- and each character has their own arc right but its hard to have them all run concurrently, and yet some rely on others so i'm just like stressed lol

i think what i'll do, is make this a series and have the first work be tommy/tubbo/ranboo/???? centric then flesh out the other characters like sam/phil/wil/techno in a sequel idk we'll see, cause there's definitely more characters I want to add and explore (as you can see form the character tags) but getting the moment to add them in is proving more difficult than i thought

whatevs ill figure it out, thank you all for reading! hope you enjoy the chapter, i'll probably drop a quick note at the end as well so enjoy!

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

It's raining on the drive home from the hospital. Phil is thankfully content with the quiet drone of the radio, so Tommy can rest his head against the cool window, simply admiring the blurry scenery and the sound of raindrops hitting the windshield.

The discharge consultation had left Tommy completely drained, the psychiatrist taking no heed to his fragile mental state, demanding he explain the nature of his scars and his reason for running away. It was obvious the man wasn't clued into Tommy's past, assuming every notch in his skin was self-inflicted, almost denying his release to put him on the hospital's suicide watch. It took about five attempts at repeating the same thing to convince the doctor that, no, the wounds are from his very traumatic childhood which he doesn't remember, no,

he doesn't think about offing himself, no, he can't remember running away, no, he doesn't want to spend another fucking night in that bland hospital room he wants to go *home*.

Phil stepped in then, scolding the man for bullying a child and acting so unprofessionally, and was able to get Tommy's release in order within the hour.

So now he's finally going home- which, he's pretty sure he's never thought of a place as home before, but that's a thought for another time- with a black brace around his ankle and an appointment with a specialist in a week.

A specialist for what, exactly? Who knows. Tommy's been to practically all of them. Speech therapy? Check. Physical therapy? Check. Psychotherapy? Check. Behavior management therapy? Fucking check. All boring people with long-ass professions treating him like broken glass. Not all of them were useless, but by this point he knows his whole life will be filled with these people trying to parse out the workings of his brain in order to rewire him. Not only is it annoying but it's fucking shameful too, having to have a whole team of adults to saddle the mind of a single, dumb teenager, too broken to fix himself.

'Don't be so hard of yourself, kid,' Sam whispers to him, the man having joined his subconscious at the prospect of returning home. Tommy would never admit it but he's anxious to go back, still half-expecting Phil to reveal his return to the foster home, the other half worried about punishment for the hospital bills. It's the uncertainty he hates with a burning passion. And the idea that he's allowed himself to feel comfortable nestled in this little family. He should know by now that it's all temporary, and letting himself feel secure will only make the process of being sent away hurt exponentially.

He lets the idea revolve around his thoughts so he can convince himself to believe it, pointedly ignoring Sam's wistful sighs. He doesn't notice pulling into the driveway, only that Phil is suddenly turning the car off and the scenery he watched before is now a garden and fencing next to the large house. Tommy already has his hand on the car door handle when Phil says to him, "Wait, Tommy."

Tommy freezes immediately, not expecting his punishment to come so soon, but it makes sense that Phil would want to deal with him away from his sons' prying eyes. He turns slowly, locking blue eyes with Phil's tired greens, afraid to look away. He can feel Sam tense in the background, sliding into protector mode, which makes him feel a little better, knowing he's not alone in whatever will happen to him. Tommy doesn't say anything, waiting for Phil to continue.

Phil stares for a minute more before sighing, "I want to trust you, mate, but I have to ask; you're absolutely sure you don't remember what happened two nights ago?" His tone sounds tired, but genuine, sounding less like he's mad that Tommy is keeping secrets but more concerned than anything else.

"I'm sure," Tommy squeaks, trying to convey his honesty. In truth, he's a little worried himself. Judging by both Ranboo and Sam's lack of information, he can only assume Tubbo was the one who was fronting during whatever happened that night, but neither have seen him since. Logically, he can't be anywhere but in the headspace, but the fact that he hasn't come back yet is quite concerning. There's a second possibility as well, of someone *else*

getting them in that situation, but Tommy's sure it's only the four of them in his head. Besides, none of them tried assuming control before they introduced themselves in the headspace. The thought that it could be the case, that some random entity is roaming around in the headspace, able to take control whenever they feel like it? Actually terrifying. Of course, Tommy won't voice this to Phil, but the notion of understanding he gets from Sam tells him the other man has considered that option as well.

Phil sighs again but seems to believe him, "Ok. I know it sucks but for your safety I'm gonna have to set some more ground rules. The first two still stand, of course, don't go into someone else's room without knocking and getting permission, and no drugs or alcohol," he explains, as Tommy nods his head along. He remembers getting a talk like this when he first got to the house, except more laid back and he was only paying half attention. "But, because of what happened, you can't leave the house unless you're accompanied by one of us, or I have confirmation that you'll be chaperoned by some other adult. Once it's dark out, you'll have to stay indoors, no exceptions. Family dinners are mandatory, if don't feel well enough to join, you can pass, but you have to tell me, okay? If you ever feel unsafe enough to want to escape or run away again, I need you to tell me. I can't stress this enough, mate."

"Wait, so you're not sending me back..?" Tommy questions once Phil finishes his spiel. The man looks at him bewildered for a moment.

"What? No, no of course not! I'm not going to kick you out just for having a bad night. It happens. Lord knows it's happened plenty of times for the other boys..." Phil sighs, recalling memories Tommy would never know, of the difficulties of the two harbored teens he now calls his sons. When he looks back at Tommy, there's a strange determination in his emerald eyes. He reaches over the center console, palm open and inviting, "Could you give me your hand, mate?"

Tommy stifles a shudder of hesitation but complies, placing his marred skinny fingers over Phil's open palm. Delicately, ready to pull back the second he deems necessary. Phil holds his hand gently, squeezing it as careful reassurance. "Tommy, I know it's hard to trust when so many people have let you down. I want to prove to you that you are worthy of love and safety. I will never fault you for making a mistake, okay? As long as you talk to me and work with me to make sure we can avoid those mistakes in the future.

"I think you're a brilliant kid who's dealing with the failures of the adults in your life. I think you're scared that one wrong move will ruin your chances at a stable life, and I want to promise you, that won't be the case with me, alright?" Phil ends with a very serious expression, his hand grounding Tommy to the moment because he feels like he would float off otherwise.

Hearing that... Tommy's eyes grow a bit cloudy, and his chest heaves with the effort of trying not to flee, not to escape into himself to avoid these complex emotions. He feels thrown into a tidal wave of confusion, and fear, uncertainty, but most of all, he feels this intense urge to let everything go, to let himself be swept away by the offer of care and comfort. To fall into Phil's arms and allow himself to be held, to spill every secret he's ever kept, to never think about that darkness, that loneliness, that hopelessness, ever again.

He wants to envision a future for himself, where he can grow and finally experience the world without fear trailing behind him. Where he can jump into every opportunity and always know he'll have a home to return to. Where he'll never have to fight for food, for safety, where he can keep belongings and just belong somewhere.

And here is Phil, offering in no uncertain terms everything he's ever desired. Things that almost all other normal children received by default, yet he was never granted. Promises like that were always just out of reach, an empty wish for desperate foster kids who have been let down too many times.

But then Sam utters, '...so what's the catch?' And suddenly the skin of his hand is set on fire, burning under the direct contact with Phil's palm. He tenses, every thought of trust in the older man's passivity tossed out the window as his nerves scream in unison, believing that if he pulls his hand back he'll be surely met with violent outburst. The grip on his hand hasn't changed, yet he feels trapped, frozen in place with the hold preventing his escape.

Sam, being the amalgamation of all the kind voices spoken to Tommy after his freedom from The Dark, has always been the voice of reason when it comes to who they can trust, who has the intentions to do right by them, and who is secretly hoping to take advantage of Tommy's abundant confusion. So to hear him question the authenticity of Phil's words sows the seeds of doubt so far into his psyche that it physically pains him. All his rotten scars are aching as if the delicate skin is unraveling, bringing fresh blood to the reopened wound, a sharp ghostly blade driving a ridge between the edges.

"Yeah," Tommy croaks, breathing sharp to calm his nerves, "okay, yeah. I hear ya." He isn't sure what he's agreeing to, exactly, but he knows he wants the conversation to be done already. You'd think by his rapid heartbeat he was being interrogated or something.

Finally, Phil breaks eye contact and returns his hand, not exactly happy with the agreement but he reaches for the door handle anyway to step outside. Tommy follows after a moment, inhaling a few more shaky breaths before he exits the car, stepping out into the misty air. By this point the rain has let up, only a sprinkle of drizzle filling the air.

Phil is at the door, sliding the key into the lock while Tommy walks on unsteady feet behind him.

'Are you alright?' Sam asks, concerned but understanding.

'I just don't know with these people, Sam. Are they acting all nice for the hell of it?' Tommy explains, thinking hard over the interactions he's had with Phil, comparing them to every other interaction with the adults that wove through his short life. 'Haven't been put up to any chores, haven't been yelled at, or asked to support my weight. I just don't get it! What are they playing at?' He hopes no one questions the frown on Tommy's face as they enter the foyer, and luckily there's no one around. He heads up to his room and Phil doesn't stop him, passing Techno's closed door and Wilbur's half-open, revealing the older teen sitting on his bed playing guitar. He's almost interested in listening in, but he goes into his own room anyway.

Tommy closes the door behind him and falls into his bed, rolling his eyes at the small stack of school papers on his desk. It's the stuff he missed while in the hospital, but he has no intention of even looking at it anytime soon. He lays on his back, eyes unfocused on the ceiling, cradling the hand that Phil held before over his chest. It still burns, less like a bonfire and more like the smoldering embers of a fire long gone out. His scars pulse with his heartbeat, the bright red ridges throbbing in tandem with the blue veins beneath them.

"How long have we been here, Sam?" Tommy asks, his words floating up towards the ceiling. He usually finds it difficult to keep track of the date when he's in and out of houses so often the days blur together, so he mostly ignores it. It's approaching mid-fall, he knows, and he arrived during the tail end of summer.

'About ten weeks now,' Sam answers as Tommy fiddles with the hem of his shirt. 'Almost three months.'

"That's a long time," he states, not sure what the comment means. Well, maybe he does. In all the other houses for the past three years the first few weeks would go by quickly, with a mirage of open arms and patient scolding, but then like a switch the adult's patience wore thin and Tommy wouldn't last much longer than that. Sometimes that meant he'd be punished more often, more severely, bruises would become commonplace, as would losing privileges like a bed, privacy, outdoor access, food.

None of these have been held over his head thus far. Not a hand raised, punch thrown, or threatening tone used against him. He feels the safest he's ever felt while living here, but the walls and securities he's built to protect him and his brothers won't go down as easy.

'What about the accident two nights ago?' Sam contemplates, 'Could something have happened to force Tubbo to escape? From how everyone's described it, the attempt was irrational but-'

"That's what they all say," Tommy finishes the thought, finding a new catch onto Sam's theorizing. "That's literally what every single adult has said when we were forced to protect ourself."

'Exactly. I think Tubbo felt he was in danger, to the point where his only escape was through the window. Of course no one in the family would bring it up if one of them did it.'

'Wilbur seemed mad at the hospital,' Tommy admits, in their shared thoughts because he does not want to risk Wilbur overhearing him. 'He got real angry and started yelling when I talked to him.' Ranboo seemed to think it was his fault regarding his muteness the entirety of the visit beforehand, but maybe Wilbur was angry because he was hoping that Tommy would never speak again. That him suddenly speaking up was a foil to his plan- whatever that was.

Tommy doesn't want to believe Wilbur is some evil mastermind, but what other explanation is there? Tommy knows the other's care for him is only conditional, and surely even if it's genuine, it's still only temporary. Especially when every secret Tommy has kept close to himself is inevitably revealed. When the whole world will know just how truly and severely Tommy is broken. Surely he'll be incapable of being loved then.

‘I think we need to talk to Tubbo, first. Get his side of the story,’ Sam interjects.

‘And if he doesn’t remember?’ That was another problem, when traumatic events happen, it’s likely the memory of it will be hidden from their knowledge, only to be brought out by some trigger or during therapy. It’s possible Tubbo will also have no idea what caused the panic.

‘What do we do then?’ Tommy asks, knowing Sam wouldn’t know the answer any more than himself.

‘We’ll figure it out,’ Sam assures him, ‘I promised you that I would keep you all safe. I don’t intend on breaking that promise.’ Tommy wants to ask how Sam’s promise is different from Phil’s, but he knows why. Sam is apart of him, Sam understands him better than anybody in the outer world, Sam’s own well-being is directly tied to his. He can’t say that about anyone else. It’s him and his brothers against the world.

They only have each other, and no one else.

Ranboo is excited to see the small fox creature approach him while he sits under the shade of a tree in the headspace, resting on the lookout after searching for Tubbo for a while. He’s been concerned ever since prime ended, combing through the various areas of the inner world to look for his missing brother. Sam passed him by earlier while heading to the Control Room, most likely to update Tommy and keep him company.

The curious fox bounds up to him, staying about three feet away safely out of arms reach, then sits on his haunches, watching him. They lock eyes, Ranboo unsure of how to interact with the small animal, until it lets out a small chitter, gets to its feet, and points its nose in a certain direction. Ranboo makes a questioning “hmm?” He cocks his head to the side, hoping it’s some universal sign of ‘what do you want from me?’

It scampers forward towards where it’s facing, then swivels his head to face Ranboo, then forward again. He can’t help but think of a dog, beckoning its owner to follow. Ranboo figures the fox will lead him somewhere interesting, so he takes the cue, standing from his seat and following the red-furred creature.

He stays silent as he walks, keeping a respectable distance from the fox whose nimble body navigates the terrain with ease as they cross into the forest. They head in a direction not dissimilar to where Ranboo first met the fox. It hops between the splashes of sunlight dotted across the forest floor, while Ranboo carefully steps over roots and bushes, tripping over his lanky legs every so often. He hears the quiet rush of a creek before he catches sight of the water, running along a carved path through the brush, the edges adorned with wildflowers and tree roots.

Ranboo’s never really taken the time to explore the inner world, he notes. He can’t remember much from his time in The Dark where he was found by the others, he mostly feels content staying in the house with Tubbo or Tommy. These woods are quite nice, though. Very relaxing and pretty, a perfect capture of the beauty of nature in the outside world.

He doesn't have much experience with nature in the real world, he usually only fronts when Tommy's alone in whatever room is safest, when he can help it. He likes to listen to music and play with different objects. He loves feeling smooth surfaces and twisting things in his hands, tangling his fingers in fabric or tapping a rhythm against a hardwood surface. Tommy knows of his likeness to tactile sensations, and Ranboo's glad he doesn't get made fun of for it. He just feels so awkward and nervous when his hands aren't occupied.

It's not the same in the headspace, that anxious energy seems to only exist in the physical world, as here he can go forever without fidgeting. He never has to worry about prying eyes or judgement, he's actually quite easygoing when he isn't surrounded by foreign bodies and loud noises.

He loses track of the scampering creature after a few minutes' walk, its bushy tail disappearing into a particularly thick patch of green once he's in sight of the creek. He glances around, then closes his eyes to try and listen for the small patter of paws. But instead he hears... humming?

It's coming from somewhere farther down the waterway, a soft voice that lilts with the light breeze. It's eerily familiar, emphasis on the eerie, carrying like a ghostly whisper through his ears. He pulls back a large leaf to spot a small clearing, an empty grassing knoll with a shallow pool adjacent to the creek where the water spins in lazy circles. There sits a boy with his bare feet dipped in the water, staring blankly into the drink.

"Tubbo?" Ranboo asks, voice cracking with disbelief. He really can't believe his eyes. There is his brother, dressed in a soaking wet and tattered sweater, hair pressed wet to his head, slowly dripping down the rest of his person. Gone is the brunet with a shining smile, instead he's ghostlike, with cold blue lips and skin slightly transparent, glowing a soft grey. When he looks over at the sound, his eyes are void, a far cry from their usual liveliness.

At the sight of the tall teen, Tubbo smiles with a hint of sadness, blinking the steady cascade of water out of his vision. Despite his soaking wet appearance, the spot under him is completely dry. The water around his ankles remains undisturbed. "Hi, Ranboo," he says, no clear emotion in his features.

Ranboo, on the other hand, is clearly shocked by his brother's appearance, his mouth hung agape. He's at a loss for words, opting instead to inch his way closer to the ghostly boy, kneeling on the grass next to him and pushing aside some of the drooping locks from his forehead. The hair feels as wet as it looks, and cold too, but after he lets go there's zero residue on his fingertips. "What the... what happened to you, Tubbo?" He asks, bewildered, staring at the many wrongs about the image in front of him.

Tubbo glances away, deep in thought, eyes glazed over unfocused on the swirling pool. "I'm not sure," he admits, far too nonchalant given the situation, "I remember... drowning. It was really dark out, and I kept slipping under the water. I don't really know how I got there." He shrugs, startling a few drops from the ends of his hair to fall away.

"Wait, so," Ranboo holds his forehead with a gloved hand, "you- you were the one who ran away? Why? I mean, what could have- what made you run like that?" He tries to make sense

of the fragments of the event in his head. It would be so much easier if memory wasn't such a rare occurrence between them.

"I didn't run," Tubbo states simply, still turned towards the water, still leaking from his soaked appendages, and Ranboo theorizes his wet appearance as a reflection of his mental state than physical. As if anything is really physical in the inner world. "I was already running. Someone was chasing me, I couldn't stop."

"But that-" Ranboo fumbles, searching desperately for the right words, "that doesn't make any sense! It wasn't- me or Sam or Tommy, so who- why did we run in the first place? I don't get it!" He waves his hands around, more due to frustration than nerves.

Tubbo eyes leak, somehow even glassier than before. He sounds like he's choking when he says, "I'm sorry. I really tried."

"Wait, Tubbo-"

"I tried, okay! I didn't cry, I didn't give in, even though it was so *cold* and so- so fucking hard but I wanted to-" Tubbo clenches his eyes as he yells, lacking the usual gusto, sobs empty in a hollow chest, "I wanted to stay awake and stay alive but then *he* found me-"

"Wait- what? Who- who found you? Phil?" Ranboo rambles, trying to keep up with his brother's panicked explanation.

Tubbo's crying stops suddenly, anguished expression lax and back to a neutral, emotionless gaze. Like a switch flicked off. He takes a few hurried breaths before forcing his breathing to calm. "No," he says in an eerie monotone. "*He* did. He came to me from the river. He brought me here. And he brought you here as well."

"What? Tubbo, you're not making any sense," Ranboo pleads. His mind can only think of the fox who led him to the clearing, but he doubts that's the person Tubbo is referencing.

"They always said he would. That once our blood runs cold he would collect the payment he is owed," Tubbo continues on, cryptic as all hell, seemingly not heard Ranboo. "I didn't know it back then, and when I did I wanted to think they were lying, that they were cruel and chasing false gods for the sake of hurting others, reaping the innocence of children and harvesting the blood of the pure." Tubbo is practically in another dimension now, fully detached from the environment in which he rests, unaware that Ranboo is beside him. "But we are all in debt to him, a debt we pay once our mortal lives have ended."

"Tubbo, I- I don't know what the fuck you're talking about, bud," Ranboo laughs nervously, but he's certain Tubbo isn't listening.

But then his brother's head snaps toward him, cold lifeless eyes locked onto his own, "We were never alive, Ranboo. We were born for the purpose of wasting away, to suffer for the sake of greed, a sacrifice for the followers endowed with the knowledge that would grant them whatever they wish. We aren't martyrs, we aren't children, we are husks of blood and without that we are nothing but ash."

Ranboo really wishes he knew what the fuck Tubbo is talking about, he can hardly recognize the demented voice of his brother, hardly interpret the callous emotion he's speaking through. "But- but Tubbo, we aren't dead, we're alive, we were just in the hospital. Techno found us. We're alive," he repeats it again and again, fighting to reach his rationality. "We're okay. We'll be okay. Please- you're scaring me, Tubbo. I want you to be okay, too."

Tubbo's cold lips purse for a moment, a frown etching over his features. He seems to consider the phrase for a minute, and Ranboo swears he could see some opacity return to his brother's washed-out skin. The fox chooses that moment to emerge from a nearby stump, slinking over to Tubbo's side and rubbing against him. Its beady eyes stare up guiltily.

"You're lying," he says, suddenly, sounding pained, "I- I know we died. I *felt* us die. I felt every moment of it. I felt his arms around me, I felt death drag me down, I felt the cold soak through me until I couldn't feel anymore-" he stops when Ranboo grasps his hands tight, pulling both close to his chest.

"Tubbo! I don't- I can't- I don't know what happened, but I do know that we are alive, that I am alive and *you are alive*," Ranboo pleads to him, hoping his clasped hands and rapid heartbeat will force warmth back into his brother's ice-cold palms. "Tommy is alive and Sam is alive and- *we*, Tubbo, we are alive," he says with finality, forcing Tubbo with their close proximity to look at him, to see the desperation in his eyes. He whispers, "please believe me."

Both sets of eyes are welled with tears straining against their lashes. Ranboo can see Tubbo searching his face for any mistake, any untruth, any reason to believe that he's being deceived, but finds none. Every moment that passes Tubbo's appearance becomes more solid, more saturated, the liquid dripping from his scalp and clothes lessens, his hair poofs up slightly, no longer weighed down by the water. He nods once, shakily, before diving into Ranboo's chest, pulling his arms to wrap them around his brother. Ranboo returns the embrace tenfold, tightening with every sob stifled by his shoulder.

"We're okay," Ranboo assures the crying teen, "It's going to be okay."

And Tubbo believes him.

Chapter End Notes

yall see quackity's dsmp vid? i honestly love his style of lore and stuff, and holy shit is he ruthless towards everyone now like I thought what he was doing to dream was bad (but i love it anyway) but to purpled?????? my dude! at least the cute karlsapnapity marriage still exists in fanfics but wow i miss them, quacks really losing it but at least he has dream to take it out on... right?

also also also also oh my god the fucking SAD-ist animatic???????????????? GOD TIER holy shit i cried watching it then i read the fanfic and cried like ten more times,

the AMOUNT of TALENT consolidated in one video is astronomical, i feel blessed to have my own eyes witness its beauty

im also having a great time cause i started an smp for me and my friends, where although i'm the only person who watches dsmp its still a lot of fun and everyone is open to roleplay and i get to be god >:) you wont catch me building no prisons tho i wont make the same mistakes as dream

anyway this has gone on long enough, remember to comment! yall give me life i stg

bee safe! have a great day!

The Lore of Life Essence

Chapter Notes

what???? another chapter so soon???? its more likely than you think

not that anything of importance happens but here yah go, come get yalls juice, i'll talk more after you read it

~)

(i havent proofed this as much as i usually do so forgive any mistakes pls)

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

Life is blood. Blood is life.

Pain is bleeding. Pain is warmth because blood is warm. Blood is always warm, always fresh from wounds, sticky and numbing and red.

Blood is metallic, it smells like acid, it tastes like iron. It's shiny, it glows under warm light. Blood is everywhere, all the time, in every place, under every inch of skin.

Tubbo had lived in blood for many years, many years all jaded and blurry in his mind, but he can never forget the warmth, the stickiness over his fragile skin, the feeling of it dripping onto his tongue, dripping from his mouth.

He's well intimate with the feeling of blood oozing from his wounds, never a moment slowed, always slinking out like a thread pulled from his stitches. He knows too well about the different kinds of blood. The bright red of a shallow cut, the deep burgundy of an artery ripped open. He knows the more blood flows, the harder someone cries; the longer it spills, the softer they scream. Skin pales the less blood flows through the veins underneath, eyes go grey in the minutes counting down to fading away, breathing comes to a steady stop as the body runs out of blood to push.

Blood fills a glass, placed in front of him from his place in the cage. Blood pours into his mouth, parched, thick, disgustingly so. But he hasn't had water in days, he's lost feeling in his hands from their shackles behind his back. Blood fills his throat, greedily sticks against the sides of his teeth. It goes down with difficulty, weighing heavily in his stomach, shrunk, cramped, only hours from eating itself from the inside.

Blood is sustenance. He is knelt over the latest victim, eyes glazed, face indiscernible, clothes torn like his own skin. A hand on the nape of his neck forces his head onto the body's stomach, mouth over a particularly deep wound- the knife still in the hands above him- lapping up the spilling liquid like a gracious meal. The cuts of his arms leak over the corpse,

mixing with the dark red like swirling paint. The blood is warm. The blood is life. The blood eases the pain of his throat, numbs the pain of his hands.

Blood is warm. Blood is...

It's dripping down his body like he's caught in a rainstorm. The beat of his heart is unnoticeable, hardly a tremor under his frozen skin. He reckons it's stopped long ago. Eyes half-lidded, someone holds the trembling body in long warm arms. Is the blood his? It flows too quickly, streaming like rain rather than syrup, is the blood his own?

It is too cold to be blood. But then again, his body is frozen like ice, it's only natural his blood would be bleeding freezing cold as well. He's sure the arms holding him are taking him to a basin to collect the straying liquid, his life essence that pours indiscriminately.

He knew, he's known since he was able to know, that this time would come eventually. The weak never last long in the basement, to live is to replenish your own life as quickly as it is wrenched away. Thus far Tubbo sacrificed as much as he regenerated, only to come to a close in a dark nowhere, soaking wet and freezing in the autumn night. He lacks the strength to lift his chin but he knows the Blood God is looking down on him, his arms warm like blood, warm against his cold and dying body as he is carried away to oblivion.

Though his chest is weak, he stutters in a shaky breath and whispers out, "Have I... done well..?" He coughs immediately after, his stomach seizing with effort as he curls into the strong arms lifting him.

There is a response, surely there is, he knows by the shaking of his shoulders, the face that comes into view, hovering over his half-open eyes. He is a blurry image with shadows over a worried frown and long hair, nothing like Tubbo would imagine a god to look like but who is he to judge. No sound emerges from the moving mouth. In fact, ever since he escaped his watery grave, he could only hear a low ringing through the silent air. He reckons the water clogged his ears, or maybe ghosts are actually deaf.

"I'm sorry I... ran out of blood..." Tubbo croaks, mostly because he doesn't know what else to say to the god, "...can't be... a vessel..." And he truly is sorry, Tubbo had not been nearly as useful in the past three years, having been convinced to end his involvement in the blood rituals. The odd times he'd seen blood were accidents or punishments, nothing more than bloody noses and pierced skin, never a moment long enough to pay his respects.

He wonders where the god is taking him, the world still surrounded in dark, they could be walking through a tunnel or in a vast void- he'd be none the wiser. An afterlife was never mentioned before, not in the basement, not on the surface. In fact, the ignorance of an afterlife was the foundation for the guidelines of the cult. He always knew he'd end up on the receiving end of that notion, yet never considered it further.

Brighter lights surround him with the ringing intensifying, Tubbo imagines this is the cross between the living world and the afterlife. His limp body is passed between hands, he feels a dark ache in his chest at the thought of leaving his god. Was he not enough? Or was this the moment they parted? Tubbo to the endless void and the Blood God to wherever gods go. Whose arms is he in now? They jostle him around like a sack of flour, pinching at his numb

limbs and tying strange plastics over his face and mouth. Between the flashing lights and endless colors, nothing is discernible in his blurry vision.

Without the arms of his god, there is nothing left for him to hold onto. His eyes slip close, fluttering as the weight of the cold descends deeper into his bones, past the state of numb into a comforting warmth. It isn't the same as blood, rather the complete absence of it. Without blood he is lighter than air, lifting out of the arms that hold him and towards the voided sky. With feeling faded, and pain numbed, and blood forever drained, Tubbo allows his brain, the consciousness he shared with his brothers to fade-

to die.

—

Prime time. Again. Tommy sighs, groaning aloud as he half-heartedly slams a fist against the closed doors of the Control Room. He had just exited, after laying to bed in the outer world as Sam informed him that Tubbo was back. He only caught the furry red tail sweep past him before the doors firmly shut.

And now they are locked in prime. He should be concerned, far more than he is, but he's also thoroughly exhausted. Dinner with the Watsons was tense as hell, with Phil trying to make small talk and stop Wilbur from pestering him, all while Techno gave him this confusing glare. He wasn't sure how to feel other than stressed and pressured. So he ate quickly and excused himself for bed early, bypassing the invite for an after-dinner movie and racing up the stairs as quick as his braced ankle could cart him.

With a hand still on the white door, he sighs again, "Not much to do about it now." He really hopes that flash of fur was just a figment of his imagination, surely Ranboo or Sam have been locked inside instead of some random creature. Although...

Looking ahead, he sees all three of his brothers, Ranboo and Sam flanking Tubbo, who looks quite strange. He's not completely opaque, skin a ghastly grey and eyes dulled. He's wearing a sweater Tommy knows is missing from his closet in the outer world, with several holes in the sleeves, patches of wet cloth marking the wrists and lower hem. He looks tired as well, in a similar vein to Tommy, walking with a sluggish gait, a hand clasped around Ranboo's white glove. He's also missing any shoes or socks, which is odd, but Tommy doesn't think he'll comment on it.

"Big T! How I've missed you, brother! Where have you been?" Tommy tries to ignore his uncanny nature and crosses the distance between them, only slightly limping from the memory of his ankle brace in the real world. He pulls his brother into his arms, hugging him tight.

"It's a long story," Tubbo replies, returning the hug. Be it the expectation of night in the outer world, or the quiet calm that surrounds them, the sun quickly sets over the horizon, bathing the four in an orange glow as the sky approaches its navy night. They pile into the house, settling over a shag rug while Sam lights the fireplace. Tubbo falls into Ranboo's lap, snuggling up to the tall teen unabashedly, Tommy meanwhile sits a little away, until Ranboo lifts his free hand to gesture the other over. Reluctantly, in his dramatic fashion, Tommy

crawls over to his other side before leaning into his brother's chest, inches from Tubbo doing the same. He lets his eyes close from the comfort, soother than any touch he's felt in the real world.

"Right," Sam begins, rolling out the serious tense air to combat the warmth of the fire, taking a seat just out of arms distance from the three. Normally, he'd join in the group huddle, but he'd rather get to the bottom in regards to the event a few nights before. "I think we need a run-through of that night before Ranboo woke up in the hospital, so we can figure what really happened." He lays out the information, and while Tommy is tired and needing a good rest he sits up, a bit more attentive to the conversation.

"I remember going downstairs to dinner, but I stopped before the last step, before anyone saw me," Tubbo says, with his eyes closed leaning against Ranboo.

"Any reason?" Sam inquires.

"Nervous," he mumbles, "'m not like Tommy, I feel like they see right through me..."

Tommy snickers at that, the irony of the still somewhat transparent appearance Tubbo has, poking at his brother's grayish skin. "I certainly can," he jokes. "Still haven't explained the whole 'ghost Tubbo' thing, by the way."

"Heh, ghost Tubbo, Toast," Ranboo adds, and the others burst into giggles.

"Alright, in a minute," Sam interjects before they can derail the conversation any further. "What happened next?"

"I don't know," Tubbo says with a shrug, "I felt a little dizzy, like I was falling asleep without wanting to, then the next thing I know I'm in the woods and covered in mud and shit."

"You can't remember anything before that?" Sam presses, sounding concerned.

Tubbo just shakes his head. "I kept feeling this panicky urge to run, I think... yeah, I think I was already running before then, but I could hear someone- no, more than one person- shouting my name and I ran again. It was like, I wasn't in control."

"That's worrying," Ranboo comments, rubbing his hand along Tubbo's shoulder to comfort. "Could you, like, hear anything else?" He asks, less inquiring about any noise but more if there were any other thoughts that weren't his own.

Tubbo thinks for a moment, "Just this one voice in my head, repeating 'run' and 'hunters' again and again. It sounded scared, I couldn't recognize them."

"Hunters, huh?" Sam muses, his chin in his hand.

Tubbo nods, "Then I blacked out again and woke up in the water. I managed to get out but- I was so sure I died before anyone found me." He shivers at the memory.

"You said *he* found you, though," Ranboo reminds him.

“Oh, right. *He* found me, and carried me off to wherever people go when they die...” Tubbo explains.

“Who is *he*?” Sam asks, not privy to the conversation Ranboo and Tubbo had earlier.

“Techno?” Tommy guesses.

Tubbo shakes his head, “No,” before meeting Tommy’s pointed gaze, “*him*. The Blood God.”

“You met him??” Tommy shoots up at that, stating incredulously, “What do you mean you met him?”

“Well, I thought I did,” Tubbo says, looking away again, “I could’ve been, you know, delusional, after almost drowning.”

“But you saw him, right?” Tommy asks, sounding excited, “What did he look like? Did he say anything to you? Was he anything like they said?” With each demand he scoots closer to Tubbo.

Sam stops him with a hand on his shoulder, “Tommy,” he warns gently. “Calm down, let Tubbo speak at his own pace.” Tommy deflates, slumping back against Ranboo in his original spot.

“He was... quite warm. I felt safe and... protected, like nothing could hurt me. It’s ironic really...” Tubbo drawls, lost in the memory.

“Why is that?” Ranboo asks quietly, voice gentle and non-accusatory.

“Cause he’s a right bastard, that’s why,” Tommy grumbles, crossing his arms, a stark difference to the excitement he showed before.

“No, no,” Tubbo argues, “No, he’s not- he’s not the one who hurt us, he’s- I think he saved us, really.”

Tommy scoffs, “Sure, he did. Since when has ‘e ever gave a shit about some kid?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Ranboo interrupts, “I think I’m missing something. Who is the Blood God?”

Tommy’s sure they’ve explained it before, but he isn’t one to goad Ranboo for his memory issues. “He’s the reason we were in the cult. The one they sacrificed for and shit.”

“He’s the bringer of life and death for humans and gods, keeps our blood flowing and warm,” Tubbo explains. “Without him we are without blood, and without blood we are nothing but—”

“Nothing but ash, yeah, yeah, we fucking get it, Tubbo,” Tommy cuts him off with a curt pout. “Really wish we’d just forget all that shit they spewed at us, couldn’t even understand a fucking word of it, then.”

“I did some more research,” Tubbo admits sheepishly. “When we lived with that librarian.”

“Fuck me, man,” Tommy turns away, frowning. Sam adjusts his mask in his peripheral but Tommy can’t bear to look at him right now, too caught up with the harsh memories of darkness and blood, so much fucking blood. “Didn’t ask for this shit.”

“Neither did I,” Tubbo says, looking down.

Tommy winces suddenly, feeling like a brick has been cast against his skull, the echoes of a door knock vibrating in his ears.

“Tommy?” Sam notices, concerned and reaching out to him, “You okay? What’s wrong?”

“Fucking- agh!” He clasps his head in his hands, feeling another crushing bang whip through his brain. Ranboo is holding him close but he can’t feel it anymore, his consciousness slipping into the familiar void that pulls him back.

Before anyone can say another word, Tommy blinks out of existence, the three brothers left staring at the space he used to occupy with dumbfounded expressions.

Chapter End Notes

hah sup bitches you like that cliffhanger? yes im so evil i love it, we love upping the stakes for no goddamn reason but here we are so

am i any closer to figuring out what the fuck is happening? no, of course not

will i be stringing you all along anyway? :) yes

so so there was that comment about tommy's condition being more alike to osdd rather than did, osdd is known as other-specified dissociative disorder, as far as i know its sort of the catch all for symptoms that don't necessarily fit into the other dissociative disorder categories

i cant help but agree with the comment, cause i know from my youtube did peeps that while alters speaking to each other while confronting isn't impossible, its much more rare than i make it out to be in this fic, so if I were to give tommy a proper diagnosis then yes, i would say osdd fits better

however, i think because this is a work of fiction I'll be keeping the tags centered around did since its more commonly known, and ive already made it clear that this is not supposed to be an accurate representation of the real-life disorder, just a vehicle for my own creative storytelling and narrative development. i highly recommend looking more into the different types of dissociative disorders if youre interested because, well, its very interesting! and i would hate it for anyone to use my fic to invalidate their own or someone else's experiences, this is all for fun! the only people i want to hurt are my own fictional characters and no one else, yeah?

anywhom thank you for the comments, they truly give me life, even if i don't respond to all of them - you can probably tell by now that i only respond to critiques or suggestions because writing thank you over and over again to praise just seems fake to me, i hope you know that i love each and every nice thing people say, i just have anxiety so :\

will the next update come in a timely manner? probably not, we'll see how inspiration strikes, but ill see you then! whenever that is

thank you again for reading, i appreciate yall so so much <3

The Human Experience

Chapter Summary

In which the body just cannot catch a break.

Chapter Notes

sup im back at it again with some more angst

gonna give a small warning before we start here cause there's a lot of self-harm in this one, its about as graphic as the rest of the violence in the story so don't worry too much but just remember to read at your own comfort and discretion

also drum roll please, its time for the introduction of the beloved boy we've all been waiting for! enjoy!

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

Waiting by the mysterious white door turns out to be a decision unlike any Fundy has made before.

It's all too easy for him to slip by the human before the door shut, driven only by his own curious nature. What hid behind the door felt so strangely familiar, yet he couldn't place it, so that made him all the more itching to find out where it leads.

The moment the click of the lock resounds in his keen ears, the white walls of the room dissipate, flashing to an entirely new space, in a foreign body laying up on a soft mattress. The room feels too dark, Fundy was used to his eyes adjusting to low-light with ease, and quickly too, yet as he blinks and opens his eyes wide the shadows don't recede any further.

Under some instinct he rises from his laid position, finding it difficult to get his long wobbly appendages under his body like his joints had been elongated and twisted unnaturally. When he glances down he sees pale white limbs wrapped in cotton sheets, regrettably similar to the ones he had in the dream. Though perhaps it wasn't a dream, unless he's dreaming now- is he dreaming now? No, no he remembers awaking, he is through the white doors. He did not sleep.

Then he is...human? No, no. He can't be human, humans are hunters, humans are danger. He lifts the strange fleshy hand before his eyes, flexing the crooked fingers and cringing at the way it moves. It is attached to him, that's for sure, and he has control over each segmented joint- but beyond that, the movement feels volatile, like moving a phantom limb. He brings the hand closer, never having seen one up close, only glimpses of the white flesh holding metal, or wrapped in leather gloves, but now it is right in front of him. It inches towards his eyes like a curious animal until the feather-light skin makes contact with his face.

He pulls back, wildly unnerved by the sensation. It is without fur, both surfaces smooth and soft and slightly spongy. More delicate than the pads of his paws, warmer than his nose had been. It's all sorts of wrong, to be living in the body of a human, going against every instinct in his foxy mind.

How did this happen? His head reels from vertigo as he swings the long legs over the edge of the bed, finding his eyes much higher above the ground once he steadies on his feet. He stumbles forward, forced to take his time in each step, unlike in the dream where he only could run run run. Having all the balance weighted in the small soles of his bare fleshy feet proves incredibly difficult for him. His knees scratch and burn easily on the carpet of the room when he falls, turning bright red under the moonlight. He wishes for more light but there's nothing he can do until the sun rises.

He makes it to a mirror, tall and leaning against the wall, he collapses on his knees and holds each side in a tight grip, leaning forward to see every detail of his new form.

"...human..?" He croaks, once again surprised by the lack of chittering, the way his mouth forms the word just as it came to mind. His face is that of a human male, a pup, with few bumps and blemishes yet no facial hair. Long dainty eyelashes, ears pressed to the sides of his head, hidden under dark blonde locks of hair, his own wide blue eyes stare back at him, with an emotion he can read as shocked.

He takes the time to pull and squish the skin of his cheeks, seeing how his eye sockets expose bright pink waterlines, investigating the dull teeth that fill his mouth, testing the sharpness of the pathetic canines along the upper jaw. He bites down on his lower lip until the tooth bursts through the delicate skin and draws red blood along the pink lip, which he laps up with his tongue. The pain of the bite is hardly noticeable, with how easily the skin can tear and bubble with the red liquid the sting is easy to ignore.

The next minute he spends staring at the human in the reflection, who glares back with a mischievous gaze. He can't help but feel a wave of swirling anger in his gut appear on the foreign face, eyebrows furrowing and lips downturned, and he explores the limits of his newfound skin once more but this time with more violent movements. He scratches the sides of his jaw until it's only sharp lines of angry red. He pulls at multiple strands of hair until it pops from his skull. Takes the shaky hand into his mouth and bites down until the dull teeth bruise and break the spongy flesh, reveling in the metallic taste on his tongue. He doesn't know why, but he hates it, this body, he hates having this control over a foreign entity, how he can look in the reflection and see both himself and a total stranger.

He wants to be dangerous, yet hidden from sight, he takes the gaze of the mirrored human as a challenge, a low growl rising from his throat. The sound rumbles through his tongue and

esophagus, lower-pitched than he's used to, all wrong, completely unnatural.

"Not human." He says with authority, taking a thin section of his wrist into his mouth again, trying to bite as hard as his brittle jaw allows, feeling more pain as the teeth upset a nerve. Once more blood spills, and he feels a sense of victory blanket the aggression. This is a battle of minds, him against the fleshy prison he's trapped in. Logically there's no chance of winning but he doesn't care, he is so mad at the wrongness, so disgusted by the mere thought of being a human, or living in a human house, sleeping in a human bed. He is a fox! He is a terror to tiny birds and mice, he rips feathers from bone and swallows it whole, he grinds furry limbs between his sharp jaws, mashes organs the size of peas into mush that glides down his throat- he is not human.

And yet the reflection tells a different story. He spits the bloodied wrist from his mouth and growls, "No, not human! Never human! Beast!" He throws a clenched fist to the glassy surface and it ripples but doesn't break. Already the knuckles ache, but he welcomes the pain, reeling the hand back to throw it again. This time, a jagged crack appears over his image, extending from either side, long and breaking the picture in two.

But it's not enough. The dark eyes taunt his misery, burning holes through his steeled resolve, a mantra of human human human- "No!" He yells and punches a final time, shattering the glass and pelting his exposed skin with the shards that fall from the frame. He grins until he looks down at the wreckage and sees those daunting eyes reflected in a particularly big piece of glass. "Stop it! No look, no human! No look!" He growls again, balling his worse-for-wear hand tighter and slamming it onto the shard, but it is too small to break under the force of the blow. Instead, the momentum carries the skin across the edge and marks a deep cut into his palm.

Angered by the lack of progress, his action only painting the eyes awful glare in red, he does it again and again, pounding against the broken bits and the subsequent carpeted floorboard to mar the reflection further. When that doesn't work, he clamps the wide piece in his ragged fingers and shoves it between his teeth, cutting his tongue in the process while he forces his jaw closed. The glass shatters with a hefty crunch and more fragments coat the inside of his mouth, lodging between his gums and under his tongue. He spits the broken pieces mixed with blood and saliva onto the carpet, watching with a red grin the lack of coherent image staring back.

An urgent knock at the bedroom door shocks him from his trance, and he kicks himself away from the sound, frantic and cowering already. There's a muffled voice that shouts, "Tommy, are you alright? I heard some weird noises from in there, are you hurt?"

Fundy's eyes quickly dart around to the various furniture, calculating which would offer the best hiding place. He considers the desk for a moment but a second round of knocking makes him choose the bed instead, dropping to his stomach in order to shuffle his lanky body flat under the mattress frame. The burst of fear-laced adrenaline covers any hint of pain from his wounds but the burn is only dormant- he can feel it lying in wait for the moment his fight or flight runs out.

"Open the door, Tommy. Please, I'm very worried. I don't want to open it without your consent." The same voice echoes through the doorframe.

Another lower-pitched cadence joins in, “Just open the damn door, Phil. If he hasn’t answered that’s all the more reason to concern.”

Although practically impossible, Fundy shoves more of his body into itself and back against the wall, trying to make every inch of his being covered by the shield of darkness offered by the bed. His heart beats rapidly, feeling more afraid and cowardly under the night glow than ever before. If he didn’t already hate this body, he would now, burdened by the weakness of eyesight, blind in the low-light that once was his nocturnal advantage.

Metallic clicks signal the lock disarming, and in a final act of childish peril, Fundy shields his hands over his eyes and clenches them shut, inviting the darkness and his hiding spot as his only defenders. Only pups are foolish enough to believe closing their eyes and wishing away the danger would protect them, he knows that, but it is all his instincts can follow through with. Every other learned method of survival was stripped the moment he became human.

The door slams open and thunderous footsteps enter the room, dividing to survey the room, one pair frantically wrestling sheets a foot away from his folded limbs, while another checks the closet, and a third the window. The light presses harsh between his fingers now, an overhead lamp having been switched on. There goes his first line of defense.

“Jesus- he’s not here? Did he fucking run off again?” A new voice arises, higher than the other two.

“Nah, the window is locked. He’s still here.”

“What the hell even happened?” By the clatter of shards of glass disturbed, the new voice seems to be investigating the broken mirror. Fundy can picture the human crouching over the broken pieces, only a slight head turn away from finding his position, but unbridled fear keeps his eyes closed shut. And worse- he feels another presence culminating at the back of his mind, angry and hurt and confused.

“Oh... Phil,” the close distance of the voice forces his eyes to open, knowing he’s been caught, seeing the face of a brown-haired human leaning completely on the floor, head tilted to see under the bed, sadness coating his eyes like a pair of glasses. With renewed fear he pushes the floor harder, willing every molecule in his body to melt into the wall, between the crease of the carpet, up into the springs of the mattress. He spies a spotted trail of blood- what must have betrayed his hiding spot- that leads to his injured hands and arm, now undoubtedly leaked further over the floor and stained onto his face. His last-resort primal instincts kick in and he bares his teeth, letting out a threatening growl to ward off the hunters- despite being trapped under a heavy piece of furniture in the human’s own abode. But that matters not, there is only survival or death.

Tommy can feel everything the moment he comes to in the real world, and boy is it *overwhelming*. He’s not in control, that much is certain, and he’s not that sure where he is either. Everything is blurry for a good minute with all the sounds attacking his ears without

making much sense. What he's most aware of is the burning sting of his hands and arm, the ache of his jaw and his skull, like a bomb had gone off inside of his mouth at some point. What's worse is that his jaw is currently in use, vibrating painfully as whoever fronts growls like a feral animal. At who, you might ask?

None other than Wilbur, whose face finally comes into view tilted and pressed sideways against the carpet, then Tommy has the thought that he's *under* something, and if the pair of shoes and various clothing items that he previously thought had vanished into thin air were anything to go by, he's under his bed.

Wilbur's expression is one full of concern and confusion, gazing at him hiding under his bed like he's cornered a raccoon under a shed. "Hey, hey," he coos, "it's okay Tommy, you're safe, no one is mad," he goes on repeating the calming words with the same gentle tone. The rando fronting seems to take him at his words, closing his hurt jaw and staying silent, but it starts back up again when giant feet flank Wilbur as he lies on the ground.

Tommy wants to hiss at the pain of his body contorting even further under the bed, like he's trying to dissolve into the wall, unaware of the fact that it *hurts like a bitch*. 'Oi!' He yells in his own mind, fighting for control of his limbs to stop trying to fold in a way they weren't meant to. 'Stop that! What the fuck are you doing?!'

Wilbur shoos the other two away as Tommy's eyes dart every which way, trying to find the source of this new voice. "Not human!" His mouth moves on its own, driven by this mysterious entity. As if that answers his question. He really wishes this person would stop talking because by the taste of it his mouth is *literally bleeding*.

The teen on the ground in front of him looks back with a bewildered gaze, "What are you- it's fine, Tommy, they're gone now, it's just us. Can you come out now?"

They lock eyes for a moment, as Tommy can feel the gears in his head turning, the stranger gauging whether to trust Wil or not.

Tommy takes the moment to pull control away from the other, reaching one of his bloodied hands towards Wilbur, a sign to help release him from this mattress frame prison before his claustrophobia kicks in.

Wilbur takes the lifeline but the stranger is not having it, hissing and kicking and clawing as Wil tries to forcibly remove him from his hiding spot. Wilbur takes a few hits but doesn't relent, grappling the wild child out into the open- Tommy will have to thank him later (despite the fact that everything is *ruined* now)- pinning him to his chest with an arm around his midsection. His wounds burn severely from being dragged along the carpet but that seems like the least of his worries.

"Let go! Let go!" The not-Tommy yells again.

'Yo! Calm the fuck down, dude!' Tommy yells back while Wilbur adopts a more determined, yet gentle voice.

“Hey, hey, slow it down there, Toms. Everything is okay, it’s alright, you need to stop hurting yourself,” Wil cuddles, a calm contrast to the death grip he has around Tommy’s body. In the struggle, Tommy gets a better look at the damage and is horrified by the war-torn scene before him.

His long mirror is shattered into pieces, all fallen in disarray on the carpet, some covered in copious amounts of blood and clumps of *hair*. His arm has fucking *bite wounds* along the side, and his palms are all covered in cuts presumably from the broken glass. The carpet around him looks like a murder happened, with red staining the off-white fibers, leading under the bed in a thick bloody trail, continually dripping from his arms and mouth as his body thrashes around.

Tommy keeps trying to calm the other down alongside Wil, telling it to listen and to please stop freaking out because it bloody *hurts* and there is literally no danger to be fighting against.

Eventually, his body is too exhausted to fight any longer, so it just sort of... falls limp, breathing heavily and Tommy feels immediate relief as he’s thrust into control. The foreign party slips into the back of his consciousness without further argument.

Finally handling the situation, Tommy slumps further into Wilbur’s arms, feeling drained and on the verge of passing out. Only the gods know what time of night it is.

“Tommy?” Wilbur whispers, realizing the fight is over and relaxing his grip, though not enough to let the younger teen go. “Are you okay? What happened there, bubs?”

Tommy certainly does not have the mental fortitude to unpack how that nickname makes him feels, so instead he ignores it completely and gives a tiny nod. He opens his mouth to talk but is instantly reminded of the blood and various debris encased in his mouth, and he leans back in disgust to see Wilbur’s favorite yellow sweater now adorned with a bright ugly red stain on the center of his chest. He cringes and says guiltily, “Sorry ‘bout that.”

“It’s okay, Toms, I’m not mad,” his foster brother assures him, bringing a hand to his scalp to card his fingers through the blond’s hair, careful to avoid the patches of blood where the locks had been ripped out. They sit there for a moment, Tommy breathing and shaking from the adrenaline crash, Wilbur whispering calm words to him while holding him against his chest. To be honest, it’s the safest Tommy has ever felt in his life, but he may just be delirious from the pain, which pulsates in intensity with every other breath. Some of the smaller scrapes and cuts have clogged already, but some others are still flowing in a steady stream, leaving red trails over his arms and neck, further staining the sweater that surrounds him.

After what feels like hours- though it couldn’t have been more than five minutes- there’s a hesitant knock on the door. “Everything alright, mate? I haven’t heard any yelling in a bit,” Phil’s timid voice rumbles through the wood, sounding nervous.

Wilbur doesn’t answer them immediately, which surprises Tommy. Instead, he leans further down and quietly asks him first, “Are you alright with Phil and Techno coming in? Or if we move to the bathroom or kitchen? We need to get you all fixed up but only if you’re feeling up for it.” Tommy leans away enough to stare at him with wide eyes. Not once in his life had

someone asked if he was ‘feeling up for it’ after one of his episodes, he was so used to punishment instantaneously after the fact, or during even, or being locked out of the house or in a closet or basement until he passed out or literally *anything* but trying to accommodate his feelings. He’s almost too shocked to answer, but then Wilbur gives him a light scratch on the neck to remind him.

“I- uh,” he grimaces at the ever-present taste of blood and the sharp pains of the embedded glass shards that still litter his mouth, “p-please don’t- don’t tell Phil, the- the human stuff, yeah? Please, Wil,” he stutters more than usual, finding it harder to keep his eyes from clouding with tears, lest he break down from the emotional stress.

Wilbur keeps eye contact, so much so that Tommy’s defenses falter and a few silent tears spill from his eyes. He knows once he starts he won’t be able to stop, and the burning ache in literally every part of his body was really starting to get to him. The mere thought of Phil discovering just how broken Tommy really is...

He doesn’t want to think about it.

“Okay,” Wilbur ends up whispering gently, his warm gaze too vulnerable to Tommy’s tear-stained cheeks and glassy eyes. “Okay, I won’t tell him. But you’ll have to talk to us eventually, bubs. Okay? We just want to help.”

Tommy nods again, and with that confirmation, Wilbur calls out to the other two family members to come in and surprises Tommy yet again by *picking him up* as he stands. He’s coddled as if he were a toddler and not 13, but even at the shocked expressions staring at him from the doorway, he can’t find it within himself to care. He just holds his arms tight around Wilbur’s shoulders as he’s carried to the bathroom down the hall, the others following behind with a nervous flurry of questions.

Tommy was very adamant about not going back to that bloody hospital, so they spent the remainder of the night with a small mirror, tweezers, and a phone flashlight picking each and every tiny shard of glass stuck in the sides and roof of his mouth, up until the first signs of the morning sun sprung from the horizon. All while the stranger watched from the back of his mind, conflicted yet curious about how deeply Tommy trusted these mysterious humans.

Needless to say, he got to take the day off from school.

Chapter End Notes

it makes me really happy to see comments from actual systems out there who enjoy my work! I hope you all know that i love and appreciate everyone and I understand that every situation is unique! like ive stated before, I would never want my portrayal of this complex disorder to invalidate anyone else's experiences, i completely recognize that i'm taking a lot of creative liberty in making the rules that my characters go by, and that I'm only using the label of did as a framework for my stories- i've probably said that far too

many times at this point but I want to be adamant about my perspective as a singlet (i think thats what a person without did is called sometimes??) and assure all my lovely readers that you are valid and worthy of love and respect

anyway, thank you all so much for reading once again, please feel free to comment! I love reading comments so much, they never fail to make me smile- whether its praise or panic or just calling me out for causing you pain B) i love it all

bee safe everyone! i'll see y'all next time!

Until It Goes Away pt. 1

Chapter Summary

If Tommy's mind is a high-rise then he is balanced precariously on the edge at all times, one foot hovering over the edge waiting for the ground to reach him before he plummets down down down...

Chapter Notes

gosh i really struggle to put in some comfort between all this angst, sometimes i feel a little guilty like i'm stringing you all along with the promise of a story when it feels like theres nothing there, i mean, i guess its good i enjoy writing it anyway but i think i'd be pretty frustrated if i were just a fellow reader

like, a plot seems fun, but who needs plot when you just kick around your characters like orphaned puppies? maybe i'll satiate myself with a one shot sometime, since i have a few in mind but they wont be nearly as long as the Bad End fic i wrote

i feel like maybe i indulge in the freedom of this.. container ive made for myself a little too much, where im more concerned with abusing the innerworkings of the world ive created rather than figure out and tell a complete story, does that make sense? am i just talking nonsense? probably

anyway, enjoy part one of this chapter, part two is already in the works dont you worry, thank you for reading ^-^

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

A lot of things change in the Watson household after that night.

All of the sharp objects in the house disappear overnight, including various things made of breakable glass, razors, scissors, hell, they even switch out the utensils for plastic ones.

Tommy isn't allowed to lock his door anymore. He can still close it, thankfully, and the others will respect him enough to knock, but the lock is removed. Same with the bathroom doors.

His biweekly group therapy meetings have been exchanged for a twice a week trauma therapist, something Wil drives him to after school. He expected some shrink talking down to him like a scared rabbit but instead, the lady was pretty alright. He's gone to three

appointments so far and has never been pestered about revealing all his dark past and deepest secrets. He talks about school and playing video games with Wilbur, what he usually does on the weekends, how he likes his foster family, surface-level shit Tommy has no problem rambling about for the hour time slot. Her assigned "homework" is to find something that he thinks is cool before each session, which is so simple he usually forgets to do it up until she asks the next time.

Then there's physical therapy for his fractured ankle (on top of the still-healing shoulder blade), so that's three out of seven days of the week where he has to spend an hour and a half with a smart-nosed doctor hellbent on figuring out all his little problems and trying to fix them. At least he finds it easier to zone out during physical therapy, he'd much rather deal with the ache of exercise than emotional exhaustion.

The house dynamics change too. The older family members all announce each time they leave or return, making sure to stop by Tommy's room if his door is open to say hi if he's awake. Wilbur makes a habit of inviting Tommy to sit and watch when he practices the guitar, while Techno allows him to do his homework on his bed, nearby to help if he needs any (not that he would ever take him up on that offer). Phil tries picking up the shows he thinks Tommy would want to watch and reminds him constantly that he's there if he is needed, that all Tommy has to do for help is just ask. He even lets Tommy borrow some collector's Bleach manga, which is a very high honor that he is proud to hold.

And things are... stable, to say the least. Tommy hasn't had another incident since Fundy's little freak out two weeks ago (the boy in question finally making a room for himself in the inner world), it helps that he feels safe in his home, isn't severely bullied at school, and doesn't have to fight for food or attention. Who knew those few amenities would do so much for his mental well-being and stability? (He did. He knew, he's always knew.) It's almost to a point where Tommy feels a spark of hope again, that the Watson's might actually be the forever home he'd been waiting for.

But that spark terrifies him. Everything may seem fine, but he can't shake the feeling that it will all disappear at any moment. That a day will come where Phil raises a hand, where Techno stops allowing him to waste his time, where Wilbur uses his confidential information to reveal to the rest of the family the deep-rooted fuck-up that is his psyche. Every time that idea of hope appears, he's reminded of how much of his life is a desperately hidden lie. It's always combatted by his fervent protection of his own family (that now includes the strange fox boy), and some secondary emotion that he can't bear to acknowledge, lest he unpack a severely ugly part of himself that he would rather ignore until it goes away.

A side advantage of the routine is the ease of hiding his brothers since stress is what usually causes prime or frequent switching, so the exchanging of control is much swifter and easier to cover for. Though, Tommy finds himself encouraging his brothers to stay in the inner world where they are safe, to let Tommy deal with the outside reality on his own now that he's got it under control. He greatly prefers this life of ignorance, pretending he's just as normal as every other person, and even when he spends the majority of his time fronting, growing distant from the family in the headspace that got him to this point, it's so much more manageable than the life he had before. Before the Watson family, before Sam and Ranboo, before the rescue... things have changed, and he's grateful for it.

He really is.

But he's also *exhausted*.

Like *thoroughly* exhausted.

He wakes up without feeling like he slept a wink; he doesn't even go into the inner world while the body rests anymore, his consciousness drained and undreaming. In fact, the last few days he's been fully in control constantly. Every day passes like the time has lapsed, he ends up forgetting the date, or mid-conversation he'll forget what he's saying, or find himself talking to someone completely different without realizing. He'll sit down for a test at school, space out for a minute, then come to mid-shower at home. He'll lay for hours in his bed staring past the ceiling, the fatigue sunk deep in his bones so he can't sleep and all he can do is think. Think why is he here, why is he living, what is the point? It's like a one step forward, two steps back sort of thing, the second he starts to believe things can get better, he's reminded otherwise.

There's never a moment in the day anymore where his head doesn't ache. At some points during school he'll drop whatever he's holding suddenly, overcome by a creeping numbness in his hands. It gets harder to stomach anything, so he skips lunch, awakes too late for breakfast, mumbles his way out of dinner. He knows avoiding eating isn't helping his exhaustion any, but it beats feeling a constant nausea after even the smallest of meals.

At least the Watson family is there to distract him.

Right now, he's playing his favorite game, MarioKart, with Wilbur on a weekday, the sun having just set as it does early once the winter months arrive. Phil is cooking dinner, and Techno reads on the couch while Wil and Tommy go head to head. It's become a sort of weekly routine, one day out of the week Wil challenges Tommy to a tournament in which they play four cups back to back, the winner gets bragging rights until the next competition. It's a highlight of the week to Tommy, getting to be loud and not fake his excitement for once, just submerge himself in the playful banter and rivalry that really makes him believe he's a part of the family.

It almost makes him forget about the tantalizing weariness that plagues him every other moment of his life.

Almost.

They are halfway through the third cup, the two boys neck and neck in the rankings, Wil only ahead by a single point, but with six races left it's still anyone's game.

"Suck it, bitch!" Tommy yells, laughing after throwing a red shell at Wilbur's dumb little character, causing him to spin out and get lapped by several CPUs.

"Oh, it's on, you little gremlin!" Wilbur chides back, quickly boosting with a new item once he's back on the road. He's way behind Tommy now, but with a lap left he's still got time to catch up. It's times like these where Tommy misses his other brothers, Tubbo and Ranboo,

when they would watch him play and commentate, but he also enjoys being in the moment. Something that's much easier to do when he's fronting alone.

But, of course, his body's failings choose that moment to creep up on him, and in the final stretch, Tommy is shocked to find his kart slowly losing speed as if the in-game gas pedal stopped functioning. "What the fuck?" He says aloud, glancing down at the controller to see nothing out of the ordinary besides his hands shaking, which is normal for him. "What did you do to my controller?!" He accuses Wilbur, who finishes with ease and looks at him quizzically.

"What? I didn't do anything, just finish the race!" Wilbur gestures to the screen, where Tommy's character has slowed to a stop, only a single bend from the finish line.

Tommy tries pressing harder on the button to accelerate but finds that his fingers have completely abandoned their motor functions, becoming numb and unsteady. His thumb jitters over the button, but no matter how much he wills it to press down, it stays where it is.

By the time he's given up on using his thumb, instead dropping the small controller in his lap to press with one of his knuckles, the race finishes, Tommy falling a few places on the leaderboard because of his DNF.

It's not that big a deal, it's really not. But Tommy can't help but feel a wave of disappointment rush over him, compiled by the frustration of his failing abilities over the last few weeks. His aches, his nausea, his exhaustion, and now he can't even finish a fucking MarioKart race? How useless can he be? The one thing he can actively enjoy anymore, the only thing, and once again he's proven too incompetent to do it anymore, something as simple as a racing game. It's terrible. It's horrifying because all this pent-up anger just cycles throughout his mind, apparently unable to release through his words, or actions, or anything. He feels like a ticking time bomb, completely encased in steel and about to self-implode at any moment. And being aware of this pent-up frustration just leads to more self-depreciation, a merciless anger towards himself that never seems to go away, fueled wildly by his setbacks.

Before he knows it, he's stuck staring daggers at the controller, and Wilbur is kneeling in front of him, a hand on his knee shaking him lightly. The console having been turned off an unknown amount of time before. "Hey, c'mon Toms, talk to me, what's wrong?" Wilbur's frightened voice brings him back to the present, and Tommy notices he's crying when warm tears fall onto his trembling hands. His fingers are splayed out in a neutral position, and when he tries to clench them they don't listen.

"I c-can't, I don't-" Tommy chokes out his words, finding it difficult to translate the cyclone of emotions enveloping him. "My hands won't- won't fucking move. They- why won't they move?" His voice cracks at the end of it, his throat catching on a sudden sob. He feels this tug at his senses, like he's being pulled up and away from his body, confined to a ghost watching the scene play out in front of him. Is this how Tubbo felt when he died? Terrified? Nothing at all?

It's like it happens from across the room but Wilbur takes one of his useless hands, clasping it between his own steady palms. "What do you mean, Toms? Do your hands hurt? Or do they

feel numb? Talk to me, bubs,” Wilbur tells him, squeezing his hand as Tommy’s gaze locks onto the touch.

He can see that Wilbur’s hands are covering his own, that he’s holding him tight based on his raised veins, the tips of his fingers turning slightly pale. He can determine what it’s supposed to feel like, but in reality, he feels hardly anything. It sends his thoughts into a panic, the only outer tell being his steady flow of tears, but the rest of the turmoil is stuck inside him. Why can’t he feel his brother’s grip? What the fuck is wrong with him? For his limbs to stop working and his senses getting all despondent and dull, he has no control over anything and he feels terrified.

He doesn’t feel alive anymore, and it seems to have happened so suddenly. One moment ago he was winning at MarioKart, and now he’s died and only haunts the self that was once alive. Wilbur is practically on a different dimensional plane like he’s peeking through a veil at their interaction. He can feel the rumble of sound waves but hears nothing, can see the outline of hands in his vision but it could just be an illusion.

How long would it take for him to dissipate completely? Did time matter when he’s so often lost to it? Would his brothers carry on living without him?

Is this how Tubbo felt when he died?

No, no he’s already thought of that, or did he? He did but he never came to a conclusion. Tubbo was carried off by the Blood God, believing himself relieved of the continuous burden that his existence supplied, in the arms of the one who has haunted them their entire life. Tommy is alone, surrounded by the people who have given him a home, granted him care and respect, treated him with patience and compassion, and yet he is alone in his death. Death arrives like a life-raft throw overboard that he holds for dear life, yet it drags him away from safety, further out into the dark waters, under the waves, gasping for breath.

His purgatory is being an arm's length away from his protectors, unable to reach out or even move the slightest bit.

“Techno, Techno, he’s not like, having a stroke, right?” Wil asks his brother, who joins him in trying to coax Tommy out of whatever faraway state he’s in.

“No, that’s when the jaw goes numb,” Techno says, voice at its usual monotone but still holds heavy concern as he takes the youngest’s free hand. His thumb traces over the various raised scars, some prominent and red while others are ghostly white, “Could be some kind of nerve damage...”

“Why won’t he say anything, Tech?” Wilbur continues jostling Tommy’s knee, trying to catch his attention, but his eyes are glassy and unfocused, still streaming silent tears. “What can we do?”

“He’s dissociating, probably triggered when his hands weren’t responding,” Techno observes, waving a hand in front of Tommy’s spaced-out gaze, receiving no response. He grunts with a frown, then stands, “I’ll go get Phil,” he mumbles before striding off into the kitchen.

Without the presence of his brother, even if he'll only be gone for all of ten seconds, Wilbur worries more and more, frightened by the unresponsiveness of the youngest. "Tommy, hey, Tommy, it's okay. We're here for you, alright? We're here to help. It's gonna be okay, please buddy, you gotta come back to us," he rambles on, feeling frustrated tears building behind his eyes. "You look so scared, bubs," he says, "it's scaring me, too. I just want you to be okay. No matter what, we're here for you, okay? Big brother Wilbur will make it better, I promise." He wipes away the tear tracks under Tommy's eyes, though they are replaced soon after.

Again, no response. Wilbur feels a pit of dread spread up his chest, he takes a chance and forcibly directs Tommy's chin so his eyes are looking straight at him. "Can you hear me, Tommy? Please, tell me if you can hear me, Toms, I'm so worried," Wil begs, ruffling his hair, poking his cheek, waving in front of his blank gaze, trying anything to wake his brother up from his trance.

At some point, perhaps the moment Phil rushed into the room, Tommy's eyes focus suddenly, transfixing on a spot just over Wil's shoulder, a look of abject horror present in his expression. The tears fall more heavily, and his breathing picks up. He's less spaced out and more avidly trapped in a nightmare now, it seems.

Wilbur, of course, notices the shift immediately, just as Phil crouches by the couch, "Tommy? Toms, what is it?" Wilbur pleads to the young teen, "What are you seeing? Please, Tommy, talk to me. Tell us what's going on."

Phil places a wide hand on Tommy's shoulder, worriedly looking over his current state, "What happened, Wil?"

"I don't know! We were playing MarioKart and he suddenly freaked out about his hands not working, and now he's not responding," Wilbur explains, "He- it's not like when we were in the hospital and he wasn't speaking, he doesn't even seem aware of anything."

"Dissociating," Techno helpfully reminds him, from his place near the doorway where he stands awkwardly.

Wil pops his head up at the reminder, taking his phone out of his pocket and tossing it to Techno, "Tech, call Niki for me, tell her it's urgent."

Techno doesn't complain, despite his instruction being more a demand than a favor, and quickly pulls up his contact list and leaves the room to do so.

Phil feels very very lost right now. Sure, he's dealt with his fair share of freakouts when it's come to his adopted sons, but been during their worst panic attacks both boys had been aware of their surroundings, were able to respond to inquiries and nonverbal cues. This dissociating thing. It's completely out of his element. All he feels he can do is offer comfort for when the boy wakes up, repeating the same assurances that Wil stammers.

They stay like that for a short while, an unnerving silence permeating the air, only interrupted by Tommy's labored breathing and the continuous mumbling of Wil. "Do you think he can

hear us?” Wilbur asks his dad, both hands holding Tommy’s in a comforting grasp, as Niki instructed Techno over the phone, to be there for the young teen if he broke out of the trance. Tommy’s gaze is more rapid than before, confused and darting every which way, unable to focus on anything around him.

“Not sure, mate,” Phil answers truthfully, “sometimes, I feel he doesn’t *want* to listen to us, like he doesn’t believe what we tell him.”

“He never tells us anything,” Wilbur adds, “he seems like he trusts us, but won’t reveal anything happening in that head of his.”

Phil sighs, feeling a particular brand of impatience, one that understands that trust and bonds take time but wishes it could be over with. His attachments have always been precarious, reflexive, reckless, one might say. But for the children he forms them with, they can’t afford to love so recklessly, they’ve been hurt too many times, let down by too many people.

He’s always guiltily yearned for the years of childhood wasted by the ungrateful parents of his two sons before he fostered them, but Tommy is a whole different story. He had *ten years* of his life ripped away by the monstrous people in that cult, ten entire years to belittle and destroy the bright wonderful child that could have been. Then three more years in a system that was so unkind to his situation, exactly the opposite of what a traumatized child deserved.

And what he is left with is the broken boy in front of him, frozen still with fear, trapped in his own head with god knows how many painful emotions he was never taught to cope with. The only skill he adapted was hiding everything inside, shutting every inconvenient part of himself away as to not burden anyone else.

Niki arrives, letting herself in through the unlocked front door and rushing into the living room where the family gathers. “I came as quick as I could,” she says, taking a seat next to Wilbur as he makes room for her. She’s on her day off from work, so her scrubs are forgone for casual sweatpants and a cropped tee, her hair tied up in a messy bun leaving pink strands to fall over and frame her face.

Wilbur catches her up on the situation, the third time explaining Tommy’s status much more lackluster than the panic he felt originally. Now the concern simmers quietly at the base of his stomach, like the creeping feeling of nausea he sometimes gets in the early mornings.

“When did it start?” Niki inquires, brushing some of Tommy’s blonde locks from his face, flicking her fingers in front of his eyes seeking a reaction.

“Fuck, I don’t know, like twenty minutes ago?” Wilbur retreats from his comforting hold, letting Niki take his place so he can collapse back into the sofa, wringing his anxious hands through his own fringe.

“That’s concerning,” Niki frowns, “has he been breathing like this the whole time?” She asks, referring to his short staccato intakes. When Wilbur nods, she presses two fingers to Tommy’s jugular and looks at her watch. She counts his heart rate, looking more and more concerned as she calculates the bpm. “131,” she mutters, dropping her hand, “we need him to calm down soon, he’s definitely not getting enough oxygen with that level.”

“We’ve been trying everything,” Wilbur dejects.

Phil shoots him a look, but then turns to Niki and asks, “What can we do?”

Niki thinks for a moment, drawing ideas in her head as to how to bring Tommy back to his senses. “Ok,” she says with finality, leaning back so she can see the eyes of each of the Watsons.

“Here’s what we’ll do...”

Chapter End Notes

thank you for reading, and all the kind comments, they really make my day.

also not to plug but i am like.... streaming.... kinda.... sometimes..... if you would....like to check it out.....

the link will be in..... my bio.....

(sorry ,,the amount of periods is exessive,,, i have anxiety,,)

Until It Goes Away pt.2

Chapter Summary

We are only as real as the memories that define us.

Chapter Notes

its so often that i find myself just writing absolute bullshit, hating it, jumping in the middle somewhere and going on a long tangent then discovering i could place the first thing i wrote right in the middle of that and be like "oh it all coming together"

am intellectual

come get yalls angst ill see you post chapter

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

Floating in an empty room sounds a lot more comforting than it truly is. Without context, embracing the void is as simple as breathing, letting a numbness surround you until you are only a speck of dust floating in the sunlight. Just existing. A small, insignificant reminder of all the things in life that are just something to fill the space, an indicator of the passage of time.

But sometimes, you are not just an indicator, you *are* time passing, you are the space you fill, you are *proof* that everyone else exists, and they are proof that you exist too.

People aren't dust, people aren't floating, the world is never an empty room.

It's not comforting to be here.

It's like his consciousness exists in two places at once. The first, real life. He is sitting in a chair, crying, both hands held by two strangers he knows and trusts, being fussed over, whispered about, living. The second, a room completely white, perpetually stuck in a frozen time and empty space. In this room he is floating, nonexistent, a reminder that time once passed, and not alive. Definitely not alive.

The two worlds overlap, stuck in a cross-fade. Like a television playing two broadcasts on the same screen simultaneously, like two sounds merging wavelengths, like two images morphing into one entirely new, uncanny frame. And what's worse, the controls of each

world are nowhere to be found. He is stuck floating and not floating, living and not living, alone and the only thing in existence.

In one his thoughts are tears, silent and worrying, the only tell that he is aware and absolutely terrified. In the other, his thoughts are compounded, echoing cries for help that go unheard.

There is no cause and effect in this state, no action that begs a reaction in either reality. It seems to be the only situation where the butterfly effect ceases to exist, where motion and speech and thoughts are trapped in a timeless loop. But perhaps, the only unwarranted inaction is limited to his own voided perception, which, by all means, is both boundless and unbelievably confined. He is but a witness to the screen of his dual-weld life, both lives equally substantial and imaginary.

It is hell. What's worse is when a hand grabs his face in one of the realms, bringing a flash of that horrid color into his vision, overlaying the scene like a cheap filter. It's the real world, it's Wilbur's face filling his line of sight, and it's Wilbur who appears as a nightmare of the past. It's like a flashback, something he's accustomed too, but instead of a full memory it's merged with reality, and suddenly Wilbur is the one bleeding from his mouth, covered in the red, it's Wilbur's metallic life essence that feels sticky in his hands. He can't move his hands because they're soaked in it, warm and numbing, ugly blood. Even Wilbur's soft brown eyes appear screaming, filling the whites with reds that leak onto his face.

This is a death he knows, a death he witnessed and mourned, a death he never wanted to forget lest he forget the most concrete part of himself. And yet it's been imitated in his fractured mind, reimagined like a sick joke with Wilbur instead of the intended victim. Tommy can't feel much but he knows he's breathing frantically, knows he's screaming in his head, knows he's crying in real-time. He just prays to whatever gods will listen that the image in front of him is not real, is the farthest from real, that this image of death is just that, an image. Wilbur is alive. Wilbur is alive? His eyes bleed and the blood mixes with the blood and snot dripping from his nose and mouth. He is dying. Wilbur is dying. Wilbur is dead. Wilbur is dead.

No no no no no no no no no no-

On the other side of the door to that room, three brothers and one brother in training laze around a well-decorated house. Shelves border each wall, filled with pictures and knickknacks, some more interpretive than others- being only solidified memories.

The recent addition of Fundy to the headspace has been a puzzling one. It turns out the boy is a young hybrid, and able to morph his appearance between fox and fox-human in the inner world on command. He still insists he isn't human, however his hybrid form is, for the most part, anatomically a young boy aged nine or ten, but with fox ears and a tail and sharp canines. Being the youngest in the group, he brings a fresh, joyous energy to their living

space, taking his first few days there to inspect each and every object in the house, exploring every room, becoming absolutely elated to have a room of his own.

His room is less of a bedroom and more of a burrow, stockpiled with various items belonging to the others, shiny things, and endless pillows and blankets. He's got tiny spaces only his fox form can fit into that lead outside, and his own berry bushes in the garden that he can enjoy to his heart's content.

Ranboo has taken to teaching Fundy basic human things, like reading and writing, drawing, painting, weaving flower crowns, some tasks more daunting than others for the fox's short attention span, but he picks them up quickly regardless.

There are days where he refuses to change from his fox form, days when he spends hours hidden in the dark corners of his personal space, the only sounds of life being the small sad chitters muffled by the enclosure. The brothers are understanding, thankfully, all haunted by their own demons from pasts that no one particularly wants to discuss.

On this particular day, Fundy busies himself with a new gift from Tubbo, a coloring book of woodland creatures. Though he only goes through and colors in all the pictures with foxes, he seems to enjoy it very much, fascinated by the way the crayons bring color into the black and white image like magic.

The crayons themselves are a hallmark to the way objects exist in the headspace. See, Tubbo first discovered the wax coloring sticks when they were given a used pack of them in the hospital, only a few days after the rescue. They were well worn, all the labels faded and torn, a few colors missing and the tips dull or broken. Tubbo has never encountered a fresh set, only packs in various stages of use, so the set Fundy has is the same. It's worn and torn, dull and broken. Colors like blue and black are small, stubby sticks while yellow and orange are long and almost unused. But they work just fine, trailing over the white pages as Fundy colors them, not noticing the lack of pigment staining his hands, or the pattern of the wax on the paper's grit, because there isn't any. The crayons work exactly as Tubbo expects them to, which is perfectly. Never getting any duller, never shortening, never smudging, just leaving marks of color and nothing more. The labels are blurry and impossible to read, because Tubbo couldn't read them when he first held the box, the colors bright and saturated, because he knows they're supposed to be, it's like that for every summoned object in the inner world.

Like the soccer ball laying out in the field with its grass and mud stains, having existed far before Tommy encountered it. Like the ripped edges of Ranboo's blanket over his bed, a reflection of a real world consequence, rather than an accident in the headspace. Like the chipped mugs placed in the pantry, each from different houses in the outer world, some with blurry images and other with silly phrases like "best dad" and "ugh...mondays." These aren't imagined solely from any of the brothers, but a recreation of things they've each seen and held, now existing in a continuous, imperfect state in the headspace.

Which is why Tubbo startles when the red crayon in Fundy's hand suddenly snaps in two, and all the color on the page vanishes. Fundy doesn't seem as surprised, grumbling, "Aw, what? I not done yet..." he frowns and sits up on his knees.

Tubbo stands, tense and alerting Ranboo who looks up and asks him, "What is it, Tubbo?"

“Something is wrong,” Tubbo states, feeling a pit of nerves alight inside his chest the moment that crayon broke. And maybe Sam says something, but he stops listening, suddenly feeling compelled to rush out of the house. It’s like he’s been caught by an ocean tide, swept away with urgency, tripping on the frame of the doorway in his hurry.

His feet pull him to the Control Room, where the doors are closed but unlocked, and behind them Tubbo can hear a muffled, panicked voice muttering, “no no no no no” again and again. It’s Tommy. He knows it’s Tommy. And he realizes it’s been days since he last saw him. He’d been so caught up adopting Fundy into their little family, when was the last time he asked how Tommy was doing?

Before he knows it, the door is opened by his own hand and he sees the room. The white room he’d usually only see for a moment before waking in the outer world, but now it’s open to him, and in its center stands Tommy, his back facing the doors. He’s hunched over and shaking, hands held limply in front of him, staring dead ahead and mumbling under his breath. The words are so rushed, morphing from a string of ‘no’s to sentences slurred together, almost impossible to understand. Tubbo hears Wilbur’s name in the midst of the rambling.

“Tommy?” Sam appears from behind him, leaning in through the doorway. He walks closer in a few long strides, hesitating before actually touching the boy. “What happened?”

“I don’t know, he’s- is he still in front?” Tubbo walks around the room to see his brother’s eyes, and is shocked to find them frozen wide open in fear as more incoherent words spill from his mouth. “Big T?” he asks worriedly, “snap out of it, Tommy, it’s me, Tubbo!” Without thinking he grips the sides of Tommy’s shoulders, shaking him to try and break him from his trance.

Tommy doesn’t even seem aware of Tubbo’s presence. He just keeps mumbling, “no no no- Wil can’t die he can’t- no no no no he’s dead he’s dead he’s- no no no-“

“What about Wil, Tommy?” Tubbo pleads, switching to grasping both hands tightly in his own. “Please, what’s going on? You’re scaring me.”

“I have an idea,” Sam again appears behind Tommy, with a concerned yet determined frown. “Go outside, Tubbo.”

Tubbo doesn’t want to let go of his brother, but the commanding tone in Sam’s voice takes precedent over his own wants, so he nods and hesitantly releases Tommy’s shaky hands and making his way to the room’s only entrance.

Sam wastes no time in crouching, hooking one arm under Tommy’s knees and supporting his shoulders with the other then hoisting him up, until he’s holding the quivering boy close to his chest. Immediately some switch seems to activate, as Sam struggles to stay cognizant in the inner world, feeling the senses of their physical body overwhelm him and fade Tommy’s meek figure out of his arms. He can just barely see the scene in the real world, hands held by a pink-haired stranger dripping with freezing water but he can’t comprehend it right then, he has to focus on getting Tommy out of the Control Room.

He stutters in his footing, finding it hard to differentiate movement between the worlds, his body's limbs twitching in one and marching forward in the other. But eventually he makes it to the door, to Tubbo's fearful expression, and uses the last of his mental strength to shove the boy into Tubbo's arms, grab the door and slam it shut. Instantly the control of the real world takes over and the white room vanishes.

Techno returns from the kitchen with a glass of ice, like Niki asked him to. It's a sad scene, his two family members and friend surrounding a young, traumatized teen, waiting on bated breath for a sign of awareness, of clarity from whatever dark veil has covered him.

Once he passes the cup to Niki, he stands back to let her do her job, thinking about the events that have transpired and those still to come. He knows Tommy has a lot of problems and prefers to share exactly none of them, but he can't help but feel like this episode is a turning point for all that. It's scary because the situation is so out of their control, and seemingly out of Tommy's as well. He may have just started settling in, but is this house truly the best care for him? Though, it's not like some mental facility would be any better. Sure, the professionals will help but not the isolation.

He's better off in less qualified, but trustworthy care, right? What he needs is people he can trust, and he knows this cause he's been through it too. For the longest time, Wilbur was the only person he could trust, the only one who had his back, who offered care and protection. They both had so many issues, but couldn't even begin to reflect or heal without some stability in their life to ground them. It was Phil that first gave them the food and shelter, the comfort and care, the mere opportunity to stop focusing all of their energy on simply surviving, and instead, finally learn to understand themselves and grow.

Tommy is such a stubborn force. He's loud and boisterous, fiercely loyal, puts up this front as a tough man who never complains, never bothers. Even at his own expense.

But he's also lonely. Companionship has to be offered again and again for the choice to stick. He watches every set of eyes with distrust, always on the lookout for false intention. In any moment of panic he shuts away, as to not alert anyone else. He is so used to suffering in silence, and it pains Techno to think of any time an episode like this has happened without anyone else around. When he only had himself to assure his safety, or when those fears of danger turned out to be true.

It can't continue. The best thing to ever happen to Techno and his brother was opening up in the comfort of a place they could call home, and Techno promises to himself that he'll do anything to assure the same for Tommy.

Something changes when Niki enacts her plan. She takes the ice from the cup and wraps Tommy's palm around it, holding it within her own hands as she stares into his eyes. She has everyone stand away from his line of sight, setting herself directly in front of him, and nods to Wilbur. Wilbur, who returned from his room holding his acoustic guitar, sits next to

Techno with his back to the wall, and begins quietly strumming and humming one of his softer songs.

Techno is too jittery to sit, opting to lean against the wall with his hands shoved in his pockets, while Phil stands next to him, back straight and rigid.

Now the room is quiet, a pleasant quiet, with Wilbur's acoustic ambiance covering the rough breathing of the younger teen. Then, after a few seconds, Niki jolts in surprise when Tommy's eyes blink rapidly, his hands tense like he's trying to pull them away but preventing himself from doing so. His gaze focuses on Niki's face, then glazes over, then refocuses again, going back and forth, until suddenly Tommy inhales, clenching his eyes shut and squishing his face like he ate something sour. Then all at once his muscles fall limp, and he blinks his eyes open, calm and conscious like nothing ever happened.

Sam takes in the scene. There's a melting cube of ice between his hands, which rest in the soft grip of a pink-haired girl sitting in front of him. There's music playing in the background, coming from behind him, a guitar and light humming. His eyes are dry and irritated, and judging by the sticky trails on his face he just finished crying. His chest also aches, like he's run a marathon and was struggling to breathe once he finished. Lastly, the girl is definitely talking to him.

"Tommy?" Her quiet voice drifts past his ears. "Are you okay?"

"Uh," Sam drawls, looking around the room for clues as to what happened. When he turns his head he sees his two foster brothers and Phil watching him from the wall outside the kitchen. "I think so?" He says when he turns back to the girl.

"Can you tell me where you are right now?" She asks patiently, her eyes warm to look at.

"I'm- at home, at Phil's house," he corrects himself, suddenly aware that it's been far too long since he's fronted. He has no idea what the guardianship situation is.

"That's good, okay, do you know what day it is?"

"Today? Uh..." Sam desperately racks his brain for an idea of the date, or even what day of the week it is. Did Tommy go to school earlier? He can't tell, it's nighttime and his backpack isn't nearby. "...no," he admits, lowering his gaze.

"It's Wednesday, December 9," she clarifies.

"Oh."

"It's okay, Tommy, don't worry about it," she assures him, and he can't help but believe her. Her tone is so soft, she could confess to drowning a puppy and he would gladly give her affirmation. "Can you tell me my name?"

He feels the despair return tenfold as he shakes his head, feeling a childish jolt of fear from disappointing her.

Her grin falls some, not from disappointment but out of concern, before righting her expression and correcting him, “It’s Niki, we met at the hospital?” She attempts to jog his memory.

He wishes he could explain that the memory wasn’t his so he doesn’t know, he *can’t* know. He just shakes his head again.

“What were you doing before you started spacing out?” She continues, sounding more concerned by the minute. “Do you remember?”

“I- no, I can’t,” he says truthfully, knowing he’s severely lacking context clues to bullshit his way out of this.

He turns his head when he hears someone, Phil, clamber around his chair, coming to view crouching next to Niki. Phil asks him, “what’s the last thing you remember?”

Sam freezes, eyes locked to Phil’s, feeling panic rise in his chest. That’s not a question he can’t answer without raising a severe amount of suspicion. It would be so easy, so much easier to just spill the beans, but Tommy’s worked so hard to keep their situation a secret. He can’t give up that easy, but it’s truly been so long since he’s experienced the physical world, he has no idea how to answer Phil. And after witnessing Tommy’s downright hysterical state in the inner world, his role of mediator is about a hundred times worse with zero context.

He almost envies Ranboo’s method of shutting the fuck up until help arrives. But then again, *he’s* supposed to be the help in this situation.

The music stops, Sam hears the sound of a guitar being placed on the floor and someone approaching his chair. He turns and places his pleading eyes upon Wilbur, who doesn’t return the same worried expression as his father. His eyes are narrowed, suspecting, and Sam gulps when he gets right up in his face, staring into his eyes with deadly scrutiny.

Wil’s next accusation makes Sam’s blood run cold.

“You’re not Tommy.”

Chapter End Notes

dude i really tried to get up early so i could do chores before work but my brain was like abolsuLUTely not you will LIE in bed and STAy there

and im like why but then i remember that i'm rationing my meds right now and not taking nearly as much as i need to function

always remember to stay on top of your meds kids, the balance of your brain chemicals depends on it (don't worry about me it should be better after tuesday being an adult is just hard)

gotta get the angst from somewhere amirite?

in DSMP news, tommy decides to fight quackity with socialism! i mean, he's only one mutual removed from HasanAbi so its possible! oh my god first we got a dream/azan crossover i would die if we got a tommy/azan crossover next i wonder if it would be more or less cringe cause wow dream and hasan simply cannot communicate with one another

and hey, with that, techno is only two mutuals removed from VAUSH maybe we could get some actual anarchy discussion!! (but i know that techno is more about making his arc lighthearted so that aint gonna happen but a gal can dream)

anyway, as usual, kudos and comments are appreciated and loved, as are all of you lovely readers (also 100 bookmarks!!! thats insane to me!!1)

be safe, be gay and gay bee, follow my twitch, i'll see you all later <3

The Reveal (TM)

Chapter Summary

The gang finally lets their secret out, in a less than conventional manner.

Chapter Notes

you have no idea how happy i was to see all the excitement in the comments in the last chapter, thats why i fucking speedran this one, i literally bragged to all of my friends it was so great

i hope The Reveal (TM) lives up to the hype ^-^ (thank you to PidgeScarlet for dubbing this lovely chapter)

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

“You’re not Tommy.”

It’s those three words that send a shockwave of bitter, cold anxiety throughout his entire body.

Sam has to fight back the urge to laugh nervously, knowing this is far from the appropriate situation for it. “What? That’s ridiculous, of course I’m Tommy,” Sam argues, though not as defensive as he may have hoped.

This has never happened before, they’ve never been accused of not being Tommy, only having all outbursts attributed to Tommy as a whole. No one had ever expressed the idea that Tommy isn’t *only* Tommy. The closest anyone had gotten were his seemingly random mood swings, and even then, nothing good came from those theories. And Sam is certain that the accusation will not yield anything positive.

Wilbur frowns as if his answer is the wrong one, still engaging in their staring contest, and Sam curses to himself. It’s been so long, way too long for their secret to just be exposed like that. He should have known Tommy’s growing trust in the older brunet couldn’t lead to anything good.

Niki seems to be better kept together- for once Sam is grateful for an adult acting all skeptical- placing a placating hand on Wil's shoulder and telling him, "Now, Wilbur, that sounds a little extreme."

He jolts his arm away like the contact burned him so Niki retreats, almost frightened. "No, I know what I'm talking about," Wilbur says, finally breaking his suspecting gaze and looking at Niki, "This- this has happened before! At the hospital, that wasn't Tommy then! Sure, he looked the same but everything else was different!" The more he explains, the less certain he sounds, and yet this only fuels his need to gain affirmation.

"Wilbur," Phil warns, though his voice is more tired than scolding, maybe this more... outlandish side of Wilbur isn't anything new to the foster father. "Now is not the time--"

"No, you have to listen to me!" Wilbur quickly jumps up from his crouched position, taking to pacing the room as his gestures border on manic. "When we were- yeah, we were playing MarioKart! And Tommy is, like, really good but at the hospital he was- was really bad! Like he'd never played before! Then all of a sudden he starts talking again and playing like himself!" He then halts his pacing and drops to his knees in front of Sam, who leans away clearly frightened, and grabs his shoulders. "Where is Tommy? What happened to him? Tell me!"

"Wilbur!" Niki forcibly pulls him back until he lets go, hunching back on his heels. "That's enough, Wilbur," she scolds him, and though Sam is terrified to be yelled at by Wilbur he's eternally grateful not to be on the receiving end of Niki's anger. She stands up, pulling Wil by the arm until he's standing too. Their height difference makes the sight almost comical. "Come with me to the office, we need to talk." She leaves no room for response, opting to drag him to the side room herself while he stutters over his defense.

"Niki! I know I'm right! You gotta listen to me! That's not Tommy!" He continues yelling as he's being dragged away. When the door finally slams shut and the living room is plunged into silence, Sam only hears his heartbeat drumming through his skull, fast and so loud, he's sure the remaining occupants can hear it too. Techno leaves his comforting corner by the kitchen to sit next to his father, giving Sam a watchful eye as he does so.

Sam gulps down his fear and meekly asks, "She's not going to... hurt him, right?" Because despite his terror he knows Wilbur is a kind brother to Tommy and the others, and Tommy would be upset if he got hurt because of him.

Phil looks bewildered by that notion, "No, mate, she's just telling him off, for good reason."

"They'll come back once they've calmed down," Techno adds in his gruff voice. And sure enough, Sam can't hear any more of their altercation, either too well hidden by the walls or simply because they're talking it out civilly. "I don't get why Wil would make such a crazy claim just because of your lousy MarioKart skills..."

They're left in silence once more, both Phil and Techno alternating between looking at each other and at him. Sam thinks a moment too late that they're waiting for him- for *Tommy* to defend his MarioKart prowess. "Look, mate," Phil begins, sounding unsure of himself but wanting to voice his concerns, "I get it's hard to talk about, and you're likely tired, but you

understand we need to know what's going on, right? We can't help if we're left in the dark." And Sam swears they've had this conversation before, and once again he's left without an answer because he can't determine if they can or if they actually *want* to help or not. And help has never meant support before, not to Tommy or any of them. Help was locking them in closets until they pass out, or talking away their things. Help was smacking them around until they comply, until they concede that they're abnormal, that they deserve so much worse. 'Help' was an adult's misnomer for 'I will make you obey.'

"I don't think you understand, Phil," Sam tries to explain, "you can't help-" "shit, he almost said *us*-" "me, you can't help me. No one can."

"Has anyone tried? Like genuinely tried?" Phil questions, "I know it's hard to trust but I don't know what else I can do to prove to you-"

"Have you been paying attention, Phil? Techno?" Sam asks, suddenly emboldened to explain himself. He feels the receding tide of the panic attack now and, in its wake, sees how ravenous his stomach is, the body's exhaustion, he knows Tommy hasn't slept for days and definitely isn't eating as he should. He uses the guilt of letting Tommy get this way fuel his resentment for Phil's *act* of caring. "I haven't eaten a full meal in forever, haven't slept in a week, I'll bet to you that my grades are close to failing." He doesn't actually know that, but the hunch is strong enough on this one for him to go all in.

"I don't have *friends*, I don't have any *hobbies*, I don't *fit in here*." Sam continues, feeling a rush of anger but not finding the energy to care. "I just don't understand why you won't send me back already, surely I've fucked up enough to warrant my stay any longer." His tone is venomous, not at all separated from his disappointment in himself, for leaving Tommy to fend for himself and his place in the real world, for forgetting to be there for him and protect them like he should. It's the type of disappointment he wants Phil and Techno to feel as well, for failing as his guardians to ensure he's taking care of himself.

And by the looks of guilt on their faces he figures he's successful. But Techno is more stubborn than that, "How can we *know* if you don't *tell* us?" He counters, crossing his arms defensively.

"Why should I?" Sam argues back, his voice rising a little. "No one has ever actually helped before! I don't even know what that means! What does it mean?" His veins pulsate with the heat of his frustration, and he knows he should probably calm down before he slips up. However the anger is, unfortunately, quite cathartic. "I don't understand you people, it's like you're toying with me! All I ever do is break down and act out and mess up but you all insist on going about like nothing is wrong! But I'm wrong! *I'm* wrong!"

"There's nothing wrong with you-" Phil tries to interject but Sam is not having it.

"But there is! Everything is wrong with me! I just know *better* than to elaborate on every single thing that I feel and experience. I keep my secrets to *protect* myself." Already this feels like he's giving up too much information. It all feels so very wrong, and underneath his blanket of simmering anger there's a low-growing panic that warns him about his vulnerability.

“And look where that’s got you, Tommy,” Techno huffs, his note of sarcasm pushing Sam over the edge.

“I am *traumatized*, Techno! I can’t fucking help it!” He all but yells, tense in his seat with the need to pace or run or *something* but his legs refuse to move.

“It’s not like you’re trying!” The older teen finally matches the energy thrown at him, and Phil is looking way out of his element. “You know? Everyone else is! We’re doing everything we can and you just won’t-“

Techno cuts himself off, staring wide-eyed at the boy in front of him. It seems immediately after his last sentence, Sam loses the critical connection to the outer world he needs to continue fronting, being dragged away from control as he grips his head in his hands. His breath catches, he knows the feeling is an involuntary switch that’s moments away from pulling him back into the headspace completely. He felt the slow tendrils of fog surround him when he started arguing, though he was sure he could fight it off and stay in the moment. But it seems he couldn’t in the end. Maybe Phil says something, but it isn’t long before the world shuts away from him.

It’s Fundy who awakes in his place.

The boy looks up at the faces staring at him, completely lost as to where he is, who these people are, literally *anything*. He thinks Ranboo once mentioned this sort of thing could happen, but he doesn’t remember any advice or nothing, and the first two times he was out in front weren’t all that great. He tries not to panic, since Tommy got really mad the last time he freaked out. At least he doesn’t feel the need to tear away his false skin anymore.

“Uh, hi?” He says awkwardly. If he were any better at reading the room he might’ve noticed the tension, but really he’s just confused. He does, however, recognize a frown on the pink-haired man’s face. “I in trouble?” He points to himself. The cushion he’s sitting on shifts under his movement and catches his attention, covered in a coarse, tightly knit fabric, and he kicks his legs against the side of it as he waits for his answer.

“What the fuck?!” He hears another man exclaim from a room nearby, where he and another pink-haired stranger emerge. He remembers the man from when he was hiding under the bed, his kind eyes and voice gone as he stares at Fundy with an angry-looking frown. He shrinks a little in his seat.

“Wilbur!” The pink lady hits him lightly on his head, “What did I just say?”

“Be nice, be gentle, yeah I fucking *know*,” Wilbur mutters, disgruntled. He shakes it off and strolls up to Fundy, bending down to his eye level and wiping the frown from his face and replacing it with a softer, more sympathetic expression. “Hey, buddy. Mind telling me your name?”

“Mmmh,” Fundy considers the question. He knows Ranboo and Tubbo told him to say he was Tommy, but he’s not sure how serious that is. Isn’t it wrong to lie? He doesn’t want to get in trouble. “I Fundy,” he states, smiling, proud of his decision to be genuine. If he still had his tail it would be wagging right now.

Although he's a little worried about his answer, as everyone in the room seems to fall silent at that. He looks around waiting for approval, but all eyes are different shades of shock. Wilbur eventually, under his breath, whispers, "Holy shit, I was right." Then he smiles right back, albeit a bit crazy in the eyes. "Hi, Fundy! My name is Wilbur," he says, brightly.

"Is this some kind of joke?" The pink man states, nowhere near as cheerful as Wilbur. It makes Fundy worry again.

Wilbur whips his head around to stare at the other, "Be *nice*, be *gentle*, Techno! That's no way to treat our little Fundy here!" Wilbur scoops up Fundy's hands, pulling him close to make a show out of his kindness towards the young pup. Though Fundy has a hard time differentiating this caring attitude from the patience Wilbur showed him when he broke the mirror.

The pink lady is standing above him now, giving him a strained smile as she asks, "Hi, sweetie. Do you know where you are?"

"Mmmmm no," Fundy replies, after giving the room a once-over. But then he spots the staircase, and the window he used to escape that one time, "Oh! I is here, before! But I run away..." He frowns when he remembers that night. He was really scared then, unsure of his surroundings, still believing he was just a fox and was in danger of being hunted by the big bad humans. Who knew he'd come to accept being (at least partially) human himself? He shakes his head to rid the memories and looks back to the lady. "Um, who you?" Then he sees the older man, "and you?" Then he locks eyes with the pink man, who still scares him quite a bit, "a-and you?" Being surrounded by people he doesn't know sends a small shudder of terror through him. Sure, the pink lady and Wilbur are being kind to him, but can he trust the others? "Uh-h, I is safe? B-bo say I is safe b-but..."

"You're safe!" Wilbur assures him, squeezing his hands between his own. "I know it's scary, bud. Let me introduce you!" He releases one of his hands to gesture to the old man, "This is Phil, he's really old, so old he couldn't hurt a fly. You can trust him." Wilbur's head nods so Fundy nods back, only taking his gaze away to look at Phil's eye roll for a second.

Next he lightly grabs one of the pink lady's arms, "This is Niki. She's a nurse, and one of my very best friends! She's super nice and makes the best cookies." Niki stares at Fundy with calm eyes, though she still seems a bit shocked, almost disbelieving. Wilbur then turns to the other pink-haired human, placing a hand on his broad shoulder. "And this is my brother, Techno! He may be a grumpy guy right now, but usually he's very nice, too." With that, his focus is back on Fundy, who's a lot more cheerful now that he's not surrounded by 'strangers.'

"Oh! Uh, I brother!" Fundy says, practically bouncing in his seat as he latches to the familiar word. "'Bo is brother, and Sam is brother, an-and Tommy is brother, an-" he counts them out on his fingers before Techno cuts him off.

"Wait, wait. What did you just say?" Techno questions, leaning forward again. At least his voice is much less accusing than last time.

Fundy's hand drops, "uhhh brother?" he asks with a tilt of his head.

“No. You said *Tommy*.”

“Uh-huh!” Fundy cheerfully agrees. “Bo say Tommy is brother, too!” He knows he is his brother despite not seeing much of him. Sam and Tubbo and Ranboo talk about him a lot, though. He knows Tommy likes Wilbur very much, and the others, too.

Techno unfortunately doesn’t seem happy with his reply, but can’t push any further because Fundy’s empty stomach erupts in a loud grumble that reverbs through the tense, silent room. It feels really weird to Fundy, and he laughs at the silly sound.

“You sound hungry, bubba!” Wilbur comments, standing up and offering a hand for Fundy to stand as well. “How about we go make some food, you’ve gotta tell me what you like, though.”

Fundy excitedly takes his hand and gets up to follow him to the kitchen. He doesn’t even know what he likes, truthfully. Normally his choices of prey are birds and small animals, or berries if he finds any, but something tells him it doesn’t work like that for humans.

Wilbur, still leading him by the hand in a gentle, guiding grip, stops at the doorway to the kitchen and calls back one last time, “Maybe Niki can help out?”

Niki is still standing, quietly immersed in her thoughts as she stares after the duo. “Um, in a few minutes, Wilbur,” she answers, glancing at Phil. “I think I need to speak to Phil, first.”

“Okay!” Wilbur accepts the answer and completes their trek to the kitchen.

Niki joins them around twenty minutes later, as Fundy enjoys the turkey and cheddar sandwich Wilbur made for him. Wilbur had laughed when Fundy told him his favorite food was “bird,” but compromised with the sliced turkey Phil bought for their school lunches. He was *really* shocked when Fundy admitted he’d never had a sandwich before, *ever*. That was an actual crime, in Wilbur’s opinion, so he sought to rectify that immediately.

While he ate he kicked his feet and watched Wilbur and Niki talk about trivial things. Sometimes one would break away to include Fundy, like ask a question or see if he’d comment, but often Fundy wasn’t really following along with their conversation, not able to understand all the words they say and how quickly they talk.

Eventually, the boy’s eyes began to droop, and despite having half a sandwich left, his bites became thoroughly interrupted by long, billowy yawns. With some prompting, Wilbur led Fundy up the stairs with sleepy steps, tripping occasionally as his lids slipped closed. By the time they arrived at his bedroom, Fundy all but gave up on keeping awake, practically asleep on his feet. The boy was too wiped to change into sleepwear, so Wilbur laid him over his covers and found a spare blanket to coat over top of his curled-up body.

And if he stayed aware for a minute longer, he would’ve felt the gentle peck of Wilbur’s lips on his hair and a quiet, “Goodnight, love,” before his footsteps carried him away.

“Niki, please tell me you can explain what’s going on.” Phil all but pleads to Niki the moment Wil and Tom- *Fundy* leave the room.

“I know, I know, just-“ Niki forces out a sigh, all but collapsing on the chair facing perpendicular to Phil’s couch. “Let me think for a moment,” she puts her head in her hands, closing her eyes and taking a few breaths while she gathers her thoughts, “in- in the office Wilbur told me about that incident when he tried eating glass and was hiding under the bed? Apparently, *Tommy* was arguing that he ‘wasn’t human’ and that paired with his behavior at the hospital made Wilbur believe he was... that he had some kind of identity disorder.” She explains, talking slowly and choosing her words with care. “It- it sorta falls in line with what I’ve heard from you guys, and what we saw today. The, uh, abrupt episodes of abnormal behavior, the memory loss, the dissociation, I don’t know anything about his past but if he’s been through a lot of trauma...”

“I think we can assume that’s the case.” Phil supplies with a dark edge to his tone. He purposefully tried to stay ignorant of Tommy’s extensive case file in order to respect his privacy, but now he’s thinking that wasn’t the best idea. It’s very obvious that something happened, probably so much more than something, and not knowing has kept him from fully understanding the extent to his foster son’s troubles.

“I think his trauma is, well, it’s manifested in a way that has separated his- his conscious into two-“ *or more*, she thinks fearfully, remembering the fact that she’s had to reintroduce herself *twice* now- “two separate identities.”

“Tommy and this... Fundy,” Phil concludes, thinking with a frown of what this realization ultimately means. His foster son is actually... two sons? In one? Did he unknowingly get some sort of discount?

Techno clears his throat, any lingering irritation now fizzled back down to a lowly concern as he theorizes, “He mentioned *brothers* as well. So, there could be more of them?”

“It’s... likely. But I’m not a psychologist. Hell, I’m not even a nurse yet.” Niki says, shaking her head, a bit overwhelmed by the recent events. She looks at Phil, “I just... wanted to warn you, Phil. These kinds of trauma-based disorders are very difficult to treat. I know you weren’t expecting fostering Tommy to be easy but... this is a whole new level.”

“Nonsense,” Phil disagrees with newfound confidence. “I don’t care what kind of problems he has, or what else will come up in the future- I do *not* give up on my children.”

“Yeah,” Techno adds with his signature gruff, “he’s not going anywhere.”

Niki smiles softly as that, “I figured as much.” Then she breathes again, smooths back her hair, and lifts herself from the chair, straightening her posture. “I’ll try to find some resources

that might help. Specialists or some community groups, yeah? I'll text you."

Phil nods and grins, "Thank you, Niki. We owe you a great deal."

"Don't thank me yet," she laughs, "you've got a long journey ahead of you." She gives a small wave and heads into the kitchen to join the other two in their late-night snack.

"So..." Techno drawls, feeling jittery at the lack of commotion after their eventful night. "What do we do now?"

"Be patient, mate," Phil answers without hesitation. "Nothing has changed, we're still a family, we stick together no matter what."

"Yeah," Techno sighs, "I knew you'd say something like that."

Chapter End Notes

so my biggest fears for this chapter were the characterizations of wil and tech mainly, i think both come off particularly aggressive, and while im hoping their infatuation with their brother is justification enough its hard to feel confident about them since i did that two week time skip at the start of chapter 9 - like tommy's wormed their way into their hearts so him acting all secretive is frustrating and stuff

this may be the end of the first 'arc' of this fanfiction, i definitely want to pursue other conflicts like the court case that hasn't been mentioned since like, the second chapter and now that the secret is out i can move on pretty confidently, although there's still the process of introducing the other alters to the family (btw did you all like the decision to make fundy the one to sort of break the ice? i felt like he was a good contrast to the aggressive wilbur, although it does cause wil to swing his mood a little, but that seems pretty on brand with both his youtube persona and dsmp persona)

i also have plans for a new alter! its definitely going to put my writer skills to the test but im thoroughly excited, also i'll probably remove the karl and puffy character tags for now, because i did plan for them in the start of this work but i think they'll need to be added at a later date since i'm not sure where they fit atm and, you know, plans do change

i will give one hint, though - our lovely minecraft superstar dream will be entering the equation soon, please, let me know what role you think he will have i would love to read your theories on how he will fit into the story (i already have my ideas but i can be swayed *wink emoji*)

thank you all so much for reading and commenting and kudos and all that, we're almost to 10k hits!!! that so exciting!! i hope you all will be happy to know that my mom is proud of me for becoming "famous" on this website

bee safe everyone! and remember that just because june is almost over doesn't mean you cant still be proud of your identities! pride month is every month imo! <3

Waiting for Time to Slow (and Waiting Quite a While)

Chapter Summary

This is a death he knows, a death he witnessed and mourned, a death he never wanted to forget lest he forget the most concrete part of himself.

In other words: PTSD is one hell of a drug.

Chapter Notes

eyo im back, its been a bit

this is the beginning of arc 2, or maybe a wrap up of the first arc? its like the transition between them, we get to catch up with how tommy's feeling before diving into the next conflict, yeah?

its a little longer than my usual word count, but im sure that isnt a problem

as always, i hope you enjoy ! ^-^

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

Tommy is quite familiar with sudden horrific flashbacks that never fail to cause problems when they arrive. It must be some curse that followed from his rotten childhood, just to further his suffering when life isn't as terrible as it should be.

There's no warning when it happens. He's heard the word "trigger" before but it's always something innocuous, random objects or words or emotions that naturally come and go yet for some damn reason, on a whim, it forces him back into his head to relive the painful moments of childhood that he just wants to forget forever.

So he doesn't blame Wilbur for triggering the worst flashback Tommy has ever experienced in his short life.

The basement was a dark, pitiful place. It housed the children between ceremonies where they existed in the most useless state, only sheaves of blood and mouths undeserving of nutrients. There were four rooms in the basement: the ritual room, the drain room, the dark room, and the pit.

They were one of them, a nameless orphaned child, only born within the cult to serve a single purpose, as a tool of the cult's ritual blood sacrifices. They were not taught that a world existed, that they existed, that there was anything beyond the basement and the ceremonial stage. They had no concept of language, or reading or speaking, no knowledge of emotions or actions or anything of their surroundings.

(It made memories hard to understand because they were just so confused, so small and afraid and in so much pain, unable to beg or question or even think-)

One of the perhaps more fortunate aspects of their pitiful life in the basement was that they were forbidden from seeing the faces of the people who controlled them.

The priests and patrons wore thick, full covered red robes, eyes hidden in a translucent veil, and the children were constantly donned with blindfolds wherever they were led to. The only time the blindfolds were removed were during the infrequent, but extremely long periods of time they were caged in the dark room. It took hours to adjust to the near absence of light, but luckily, time was all they had. The days spent shackled in that dark prison held little substance, always quiet, always damp and cold, no water or food, only the ever-present smell of blood day in and day out.

Without stimuli, hours passed like molasses. They could never tell if their eyes were opened or closed, never know if their limbs were still attached, having long gone numb from the shackles. The only feeling was the gnawing hunger that poisoned their midsection, and even then it always devolved to nothing but background noise eventually.

There was a day where they laid motionless against the cold bars of the cell, staring unseeing into the void beyond them, when a warmth unlike any other appeared close to their skin. In the connected cage was a child, just like them, reaching his hand through the bars of the adjacent cell and touching their arm.

It was the first time they felt a comforting touch, a roughened and callused palm that surveyed the skin of their arm as though he was confirming their existence.

Words filled their ears, the strange sounds that sometimes came out of the looming cult members' mouths, formulated in random ways that never made sense to them. Somehow, this child knew the secret to the pattern of sounds, and was trying to tell it to them. It may as well have been a lost cause, except for one name that rebounded in their ears again and again, one that is packed so deep within their psyche, veiled behind walls of trauma yet they are reminded every day.

“Thomas.”

He would say it to them. And they would repeat it back.

“Thomas.”

“Dah-mah.”

“Thomas.”

“Dah-ma-sh.”

It was the only word he could teach them. And even then they wouldn't know what it meant until years and years after. For all they knew, it was just how people greeted each other.

The only other moments without the blindfold were the various times they witnessed the pit.

The pit was used for thinning the children, entertainment for the cult leaders, more like, when two children were given daggers and forced to fight in a battle to the death. Everyone had to watch, the other children lined around the ring with oppressive robesmen commanding behind them. Every match ended bloody and quickly, and emerged a pattern they would recognize in the years to come. Either the combatants fight, metal slipping through skin as they painted the ring, the victor cementing their survival by drinking the blood of the fallen in their final breaths. Or, if they refused to fight, a cleric would enter the ring and slaughter them both.

They would never understand what began such matches, but they do know what it's like firsthand to survive one.

Those memories are often buried so deep, comprehension and reflection are downright impossible. They didn't even have their name then. What possible way is there to determine the thoughts of a child who knows nothing? Who only endures the life that is thrown at them, never once experiencing autonomy? Who is doomed to feel a multitude of violent physical and emotional sensations, yet has no concept of meaning to identify them? It's all colors and shapes that reflect snapshots of time, and the only discernible feelings are the endless hours of pain and nothingness.

That's why it hurts so much for the memory to resurface of their one first time in the pit. (And even worse that it tries to merge with reality, despite it having happened so long ago.)

They stare at ~~Wilbur~~ (no no it's not him he wasn't there) hunched against one of the sidewalls, his eyes sparkling with an unrecognizable emotion, speaking in those words they could never understand, and can't recall clear enough to decipher. His skin is sickly, pale and sunken just like their own. He is tall, taller than they are, with knobby legs and long torso. They are years younger than him, half his age at the time. The cleric in blood red robes in charge of overseeing the match pushes them forward with some kind of sharpened weapon, a promise of a short death if they do not fight the other. A flickering beacon shines directly overtop, the closest they've ever been to sunlight, that shields the audience in a thick darkness. Only they are far too aware they are being watched.

They're crying. They don't understand. ~~His brother~~ (that isn't possible, it's can't be possible, Wilbur wasn't *there*) stumbles towards them. He is already bleeding, having been punished and beaten before ever stepping into the pit, after the two of them were discovered together. They, however, were not. They were blinded, but unharmed, forced into a small room where they could just barely hear him *screaming*- then given the knife and pushed into the pit with him. They feel a tightened dread constrict their chest, as he throws his weapon to the side and wraps his hands around their knife, pointing the blade towards his inverted chest, bruised and skinny and scarred. His mouth is still moving, like he's trying to comfort them while encouraging them to kill him. Their confused, incomprehensible thoughts race in circles. They don't know who is supposed to survive this fight.

But they know what happens if they refuse. They know he will not kill them, so if they deny his death then they both will die. They know this, and they hate it.

They choose life.

They know blood. They've lived in blood. Yet ~~Wilbur~~-(he looks just like him, why? why does he look like Wilbur?) his blood is unlike anything they've ever felt before. It spills from his chest like a waterfall, burning their hands, the putrid red reeks of death, but it's not fast enough. He still breathes. They retract the knife and stab into his neck. He falls to his knees. They stand over him on shaky legs and pull it out one last time and it falls from their hands, hitting the stone ground with a wet clank.

And more words drip from his tongue as his lungs bleed and suffocate him, words that in no conceivable way could they understand at the time, yet in this nightmare, they rattle as though emerging from water, completely unmatched to the mouth that's moving, a mockery of Wilbur's voice.

"What are you seeing?"

"Please, Tommy, talk to me,"

"Tell us what's going on,"

Their learned instincts have them kneel beside his collapsed body while his breathing slows, pressing their mouth to his open throat and drinking the blood that spills like some kind of animal. It tastes like pain. The blood is no different from any other source, but it hurts, weighing heavy on their tongue like thick mud. They cry as it stains their throat.

They don't know what they are.

But it's not human.

Despite Sam removing him from the situation, Tommy is still quite out of it while the doors to the Control Room slam closed behind him. The flashback that molded itself into a nightmare about Wilbur bleeding and dying is suddenly replaced by a wide-open sky. Nothing but blue. No sun, no clouds, only the smooth baby blue and the tips of evergreens reaching up and up. Tubbo, who had been tasked with supporting Tommy's deadweight body, unsurprisingly can't carry him for long and drops his legs in favor of lifting him by his underarms.

Moving by muscle memory alone, Tommy's feet catch the solid ground and bring him to balance, taking some of the weight from Tubbo's hold. His neck angles back, staring straight up. Tubbo leads him wherever, he doesn't care. All he sees is the sky. His eyes swim in the blue, soothing his aching tear ducts, lids straining even while half-closed. That nightmare still hangs in the back of his thoughts, and every few seconds the sky flickers into a crimson hellscape, the heavens bleeding and the trees molt into suffering corpses reaching for salvation. It only lasts a millisecond, but he still fears that one of the times it flickers, it just won't change back.

This is the headspace. That's the first coherent thought to return to him. His eyes lazily drift away from the blue and onto the tree line, then the grass, then the house, then Tubbo. With each new target to refocus his gaze, tiny drops of awareness sprinkle over his brain, like a rainfall of sensory details and bits of memory. Once he reaches Tubbo, who faces forward while lugging Tommy along, his internal emotions catch up to him and suddenly he's equal parts annoyed and guilty at himself for freaking out over something as stupid as finishing a MarioKart race. Leaving the mess to be cleaned by someone else in the inner world.

Finally he's back to being alive, standing straight and stopping their stumble towards the house a few feet away. Tubbo notices his awareness returning when he tugs lightly on his arm and feels resistance. They lock eyes and though Tubbo's brunet fringe falls over his vision Tommy can still see the hailstorm of emotions in his features.

Tommy smiles and soon Tubbo's head is buried in his chest, the back of his shirt in a tight grip as Tubbo's arms wrap around his midsection. The sudden intimate gesture stabs him through the heart, where all at once he feels the countless hours he missed his brother and the guilt of choosing to stay submerged in the outer world, how it was easier, how it felt *right*. The choice was so so difficult to make, every day, especially with his exhaustion preventing him from entering the inner world, even during the slim times the body would sleep.

But now he can only feel the consequences of that choice, the ache in his chest where Tubbo presses against him, the worry he caused to his family, to *both* families. How he acts so destructively towards their shared body, how he doesn't *want* to share, how, even outside of captivity, he cannot own a single thing only for himself. And then the further guilt for even *wanting*, for being selfish towards the brothers he owes his life to.

He can only beg for forgiveness, now.

“Don’t scare me like that,” Tubbo’s voice catches his attention, muffled by his shirt.

“Sorry, Big T,” Tommy says, apology lighthearted but genuine.

When Tubbo pulls away he lightly pounds against Tommy’s chest, scolding, “Do you know what it feels like, to not hear from you for a week then suddenly you’re screaming about dying and shit?! Where have you been? Why haven’t you talked to us?” He huffs and crosses his arms, stepping back and craning his head to glare at Tommy. “I thought things were getting *better*. What even happened? Why were you in the Control Room like that?”

“I-I don’t know, Tubbo-“

“Did they hurt you?” Tubbo’s eyes shine with dread and his face loses some of its saturation, he rambles, “Are we safe? We aren’t dying, are we? I’ve never seen you like that before-“

He gets cut off when a gloved hand lands on his shoulder and they hear a soft but stern, “Hey, Tubbo,” Ranboo steps to the side and from his almost ten inch overreach he looks down at the panicky teen. “Don’t you think Tommy should get some rest before you start berating him?”

“Agreed,” Tommy mutters, grateful for his tall brother stepping in before Tubbo could go full freak out mode. It’s not like Tommy can fault him, of course, but having just got out of the worst panic attack ever, he’s a little too drained to deal with someone else’s emotions.

Tubbo seems to consider his overreaction and calms down with the other near, letting out an sigh. “Fine,” he says, turning and walking back into the house.

“Strange one, that Tubbo,” Tommy comments to Ranboo as his way of saying ‘thanks for stopping *that* conversation in its tracks’ because he’s going to need a minute before Tubbo makes him talk about his *feelings* and shit.

Ranboo’s eyes float on Tubbo as he leaves, then dart over to Tommy to ask, “You alright?”

“Yeah,” Tommy breathes the word, feels the way it sweeps out of his lung with the air as he slouches. “Now, yeah,” he continues, “we can, uh, talk about it when Sam gets back,” although he’d prefer to *never* talk about it so he can forget and move on with his life again.

Ranboo hums a note of agreement. He starts to walk away, but stands rigid and looks back, “You-” he coughs awkwardly, “you should come see Fundy’s new room. It’s, uh, pretty cool.” He doesn’t wait for an answer before following where Tubbo went.

Tommy smiles fondly. Ranboo’s sheepishness can really be adorable sometimes. It’s lifts some of the anxiety from his chest. No matter how the others react, he at least knows one person will have his back.

With that calmly in his mind, Tommy approaches the round door of the house, slipping through and leaving it open. He expects something equally as calm inside, but instead Tubbo is kneeling next to the small Fundy as he claws at his fluffy ears and presses them tight to his

skull. Ranboo's crouched nearby as well, a concerned expression similar to Tubbo's with his hand on his back.

"Fundy? Hey, Fundy, what's wrong?" Tubbo asks, lips in a tense frown.

Fundy whines in return, jaw tightly closed but keening at the back of his throat. "Sam mad," he pushes out, "Sam mad Sam mad Sam yell." He claws more at his ears like they're something foreign attached to him, whining louder, repeating, "Sam mad Sam yell mad Sam mad-"

Tommy can't help but feel a strange irritated empathy strike his thoughts, watching the young boy fight the invisible force that overwhelms him. Words slam against his teeth and pour out, "Well? Help him, then!" He doesn't know why. But he means it.

Fundy finds him in the doorway, not expecting him to be there, his eyes wide as he comprehends the command. He doesn't react, he just disappears- pops out of existence like a flash of light.

"What?!" Tubbo exclaims as Ranboo's hand falls, suddenly lacking the shoulder it was set on. The shorter teen stands, a little peeved, "Wha- why did you say that?" He directs at Tommy. "What did you do?"

"It's a switch, innit?" Tommy says, on the defensive but with a clear tone of consideration. "Fundy has to go help so Sam can come back."

"Looks like it," Ranboo agrees, eyes calmly resting on Tubbo to try and get him to keep his cool.

Tubbo still huffs, getting to his feet, "Can't somebody else do it?" He questions, "He's too young, he can't act like you."

And as much as it pains him to say it, Tommy answers, "Don't think that's something we can decide, Big T."

It doesn't seem to placate Tubbo, however, as he argues back, "And what about you then, huh? Haven't you been the one making all the decisions lately? Did you even once think to ask us how we feel?"

"Tubbo-" Ranboo tries to mediate again but to no avail.

"No! No, I want to hear Tommy defend himself! Why do you insist on taking all the burden when you know we are here to help?" A bitter edge takes over Tubbo's tone of voice, though Tommy knows it's just from his constant worry for his family. An earnest origin, but a little too aggressive on the approach.

"Do we have to do this right now?" Tommy mutters, suddenly aware of how badly he wants to just run off right now. He's already in the doorway while Tubbo is across the room, so he has a head start.

His disinterest in continuing the conversation does not bode well for Tubbo's mood. He's never seen the short brunet with such a deep-set frown. "Why not?" Tubbo presses, crossing his arms and huffing as he takes a seat on the couch. He pats the seat next to him not-so delicately, "Come on, have a seat and let's talk."

Ranboo, despite the command not aimed towards him, quickly sits in an adjacent seat, just as Tommy hears Sam approach from behind him. There goes his chance at running away. Sam rambles, looking distressed, "Hey, uh, guys I might have really messed up--"

"Oh good! Sam's here, Sam, come sit down we were just about to discuss everything," Tubbo calls out, glaring at Tommy to do what he said.

As much as he so desperately wants to sprint the fuck out of there, Tommy complies and shuffles forward, finding a chair that faces Tubbo but is out of arms reach.

"We..." Sam pauses, still in slight distress, hand raised like he's going to object but decides against it, "o-okay, let's talk, yeah." He rushes to sit next to Ranboo.

Tubbo doesn't say anything further, just waits and stares at Tommy waiting for him to start talking, which causes a surprising amount of tension to roll over the room, only made worse by Sam's worried fidgeting.

Tommy takes a deep breath and sighs it out, letting his back slouch and mentally preparing himself for this ruthless intervention. "I will admit, I wasn't doing very well, and I neglected to ask for help or communicate with you guys in any way," he starts out, feeling awkward with his serious tone of voice. "I didn't know it was quite that bad, until something triggered a flashback and I was stuck in the middle of this nightmare, except it was so so much worse than that."

"It had to do with Wilbur?" Tubbo inquires, much calmer and collected now that Tommy is being cooperative.

"It was like, the memory was replaying, you know? But instead of- of who was in the memory, it was Wilbur. And he was dead." Tommy shivers as he recalls the nightmare, how uncanny to see someone from his past with Wilbur's face, especially while they are *dying*.

"I should probably mention," Sam interjects, still tapping his foot nervously, "I don't think I- I played it off as well as I could." He looks embarrassed thinking about his actions.

Tommy lets the anxiety about *that* simply roll off of him, feeling much too tired to fret over fixing this whole mess. "It's okay. It's my fault for letting it happen in the first place."

"But I- I may have admitted, well more like yelled, that we aren't doing so hot," Sam confesses, "and Wilbur- oh gods Wilbur, he accused me of, quote, 'not being Tommy,' end quote."

"You... told them I hadn't been sleeping?" Tommy doesn't like that one bit, it's his own fault he can't function correctly, he doesn't want to burden the Watsons about it. And Wilbur's accusation? That's certainly a bridge to cross in the near future.

Sam meets his gaze, “Or eating properly. And that we don’t have any friends or hobbies, I think- I was just so angry-”

“You haven’t been eating or sleeping?!” Tubbo, who was once calm and listening patiently, jumps up to attention in his seat, “Tommy! This is what I mean about asking for help!”

“I know, I know,” Tommy groans, “There’s something wrong, with me, I think.” He pauses, eyes glued to the floor as he contemplates his precious choices, “I don’t know how to fix it.” His admission brings about a bone-deep ache that sinks him through the couch cushion, it feels a lot like shame.

“You can start by accepting you’re not alone in all this,” Tubbo says, his tone much softer than it was before.

“I’m not alone,” Tommy repeats, “but- isn’t it pathetic that I can’t take care of myself on my own?” He clenches his eyes shut, feeling the all too familiar self-degradation fight against his mind. “I *should* be able to function like a normal person. But I’m not- I’m not normal and I hate it. I just want to live my life and not have to feel so tired all the time, and not worry about any stupid triggers,” he rambles, getting more worked up over his situation as he goes on, “We’ve been out of that *hell* for years now, and it just won’t leave me *alone*. I just want to forget and rest and-“ he inhales, a phantom numbness lacing through his tongue, as if still coated in the blood of his nightmare, “and maybe never wake up again...”

It’s quiet in the still room for a moment, then he jolts in his seat when he feels Tubbo slam into him, landing on his knees next to him and enveloping his upper body with his embrace. He knows Tubbo is crying from the tiny sobs that quake in his chest. He finally opens his eyes to see Ranboo wiping away tears as well and Sam looking away sadly.

“Sorry,” Tommy whispers, so only Tubbo can hear his apology. He brings a shaky hand up to cradle the other’s head, “Don’t cry, Big T.”

“B-but I don’t- I don’t want you to n-never wake up,” he cries, stuttering around his sobs.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Tommy says softly, returning Tubbo’s embrace and holding him while he calms down. This is the precise reason why he hates talking about his feelings, he always says something to make everyone else sad, and he doesn’t want them to be sad. He wants to harbor all the sadness for himself so everyone can be happy. He thinks about saying this, but doesn’t, knowing it’ll only worry Tubbo more.

Sam clears his throat, taking command over the room, he says, “We should make a schedule. That way we can make sure no one is exerting too much of themselves in the outer world.” Tommy feels Tubbo loosen his grip, then slide away from their embrace altogether. The simple action alights a sense of nostalgia, with how long Tommy and Tubbo only had each other for comfort in the dark. And how they always had to let go eventually because the world moves on no matter what.

But at the same time, the withdrawal from an embrace is an untold promise for one in the future, so instead of mourning the end of a connection, he can look forward to the next one.

Sure, there will be the hugs that unknowingly are the last he'll share with a person, but the fact that said intimacy exists in the first place is worth the loss.

'It's definitely worth it', Tommy thinks, as Tubbo settles in the seat next to him, pink cheeks glowing with a smile when Tommy holds his hand as Sam continuing planning aloud his schedule idea.

—

Tommy wakes suddenly in the dark of night, with the overwhelming urge to vomit. He nearly trips over his feet a few times as he races out into the hallway, trying to make it to the bathroom before his stomach erupts over everything. Thank the gods for Phil putting a nightlight in the hallway restroom, because he does not waste a single moment to attempt to hit the lights before he crashes to his knees, slams open the toilet lid and starts gagging.

His guts spill into the bowl as Tommy tries his best to stay as quiet as he can, but it's difficult when his body is so keen to eject its contents. He coughs once more and spits out the acidic sludge in his throat. It burns steadily, each gasp for air fanning the flames, sending sharp pains throughout his windpipe.

He hates throwing up, absolutely hates it. It's why his aversion to eating goes to hell pretty quickly, since he knows a repercussion of skipping meals is further throwing off his digestive system whenever he decides to establish routine again. Like in the past, more often than not, he is forced to front whenever the body gets sick, for reasons he's never been able to figure out. And for him it happens pretty often. They've always been skinny, and lanky, and sickly. Sure, he recovers quick enough, but he can never seem to break the cycle.

He's wiping the sweat from his face and conjuring up the ability to get to his feet when the bright lights on the ceiling flicker on, blinding his eyes. He blinks and adjusts, and there's Wilbur in the doorway.

The sleepy teen is standing with a glass of water outstretched, his bed hair swept in all directions, glasses askew, wearing flannel pjs and bunny slippers. Tommy immediately chokes a little, biting back his laughter at Wil's ridiculous look. He takes the glass with his shaky hands and coughs out, "Thanks, Wil."

Wilbur smiles, stifles a yawn, and crouches next to the youngest, gently placing the back of his hand on Tommy's forehead while he greedily drinks the water. "You feeling alright?" He asks.

Tommy exhales, his burning throat soothed for the moment and says, “Just a bit sick, innit?” Despite not really wanting to, his eyes dart back to the scene of the crime, spotting the light-colored chunks floating in the water. He grimaces at the fact that whoever ate didn’t actually eat very much at all, yet it was enough to flip his stomach. And while he slept, too. He hardly ever gets to just sleep. He flushes and quietly stands using Wil’s sloping shoulder as support.

“Going back to bed? If not, you can come to my room, I’ll play you something,” Wilbur offers as he also gets to his feet.

Tommy considers it, knowing that sleep doesn’t come easy to him, and that he doesn’t particularly want to keep planning all this routine stuff. It’s for good reason, Tommy knows, but really he just needs a break. He nods.

Wilbur sets up a pillow against the wall at the foot of the bed for him when they get back to his room. He sits at the head and pulls his guitar into his lap, planting a few fingers on the frets and strumming a soft arpeggio of some select chords. The steady flow of notes is all that fills the air for a little while, and Tommy finds his eyes half-lidded and his mind clear for once in his life. It’s the most peaceful time of day, the dead of night, made even more tranquil by his foster brother’s talented hands. At some point, an equally sleepy Techno slips through the door and perches on the edge of the bed, watching his brother play with fond eyes. He also wears slippers and pajama pants, hair in a loose bun and wide wired glasses hanging off his nose.

The peace lasts for a long while. Not long enough for the sun to light the sky, Tommy realizes he still doesn’t know the time, but long enough for his gut to settle.

Continuing to strum, Wilbur catches his eye, a frown on his face that seems to want to say something but keeps deciding against it. Tommy doesn’t feel compelled to break the silence, so he just waits for Wil to make his choice. He pauses his fingering for a few seconds, “You are... Tommy, right now,” he says, gaze fixated on the other, steeled for his reaction, “right?”

All time freezes and his heart skips a few beats. A million thoughts jump through his head at the few words. Why did he ask that? How could he know? Who let this happen? All that work for nothing. Was it Sam? Was it Fundy? What was he supposed to do now? Come clean? Why does he sound so nonchalant?? “Uuh,” he drawls, attempting to not panic, “whu—who else would I be..?”

Wilbur keeps his pout neutral and takes a quiet breath, leaning away to put his guitar back on the stand before facing Tommy. “You don’t have to lie anymore, yeah?” He says with complete seriousness. Then, he gives a soft smile, “We met Fundy earlier,” he admits.

So, it was Fundy.

Honestly, Tubbo was right. Fundy’s too young to understand the necessity of playing pretend, so while Tommy thought he’d feel anger, really, he’s just tired. Fighting to defend their way of life, to keep it hidden away for safety, for security; it’s exhausting. Tubbo was right to say he needs to rest. He feels like he’s been needing a rest since the day he was born into this unforgiving world. He wants to assume it’s over, that this is the make or break moment,

where Wil either accepts him for who he is or reveals that his time here is up. “You’re not... mad?” He pleads, looking up with fearful irises, between Wil and Techno.

“Of course not, Toms,” Wilbur assures him, followed by Techno’s nod of agreement.

“Woulda been nice if you told us earlier, though,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck with a sigh, “Coulda saved us some trouble, I bet.”

“Sorry,” Tommy looks down for his lap, guiltily running his fingers over the hem of his pants. He only then realizes he’s still in his day clothes.

“Don’t be,” Techno grunts, “We’re just glad we know, now.”

“And Fundy was a delight, I say,” Wilbur adds.

“Any idea who was fightin’ with me before then?” Techno wonders, untying his ponytail to weave together a loose braid.

Tommy seems a bit dazed by the even tone of their comments, he never expected anyone to react so calmly to discovering his most protected secret. He thought he’d be discarded like every other time, called a liar, a freak, an attention seeker, or straight-up broken. Yet, these brothers of his are collected and curious, respectful, so so out of the ordinary.

Something seals the truth in his mouth, though. He thinks of the answer but suddenly his lips are stitched closed. They- Wil said they met Fundy, but they don’t know any of the others. Or, he doesn’t think they know the others.

Would it be worth it to keep their identities secret? Sure, Fundy being the youngest puts him most at risk, but... why does he want to lie so badly? For once the truth seems so easy to just rid from his mind, it will make everything easier. Everything.

And yet... this dark stab of fear stops him. What should he say, though?

‘I don’t know,’

‘Sorry mate, can’t tell you,’

‘That’s a bit too personal, innit?’

That just sounds even more suspicious.

Thinking hard about it makes his head hurt, and a familiar foggiess creeps in. Luckily, Techno notices this and waves a hand in front of Tommy’s glazed-over eyes, bringing him back to attention.

“You still with us?” He says.

When Tommy nods, Wilbur asks, “Do you do that often?”

Tommy looks at him, “Do what?”

“Space out like that. Your eyes go all unfocused and you stop responding,” he explains, demonstrating the expression by staring off to the side and wiggling his fingers in front of his eyes without breaking his gaze.

“Oh,” Tommy mutters, “uh, yeah.” He can’t help but feel a little singled out with that comment, he doesn’t really need anyone pointing out his weird quirks. “Lost in thought, innit? That’s the phrase?”

“It’s called an idiom,” Techno corrects.

“I’m not an idiot, *you*’re the idiot.”

“No, it’s-“ Techno cuts himself off with a sigh, “whatever, it doesn’t matter.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Tommy jests, deciding this conversation has gone on far too long and he needs to go back and discuss their secret getting discovered with the others. Mainly the boundaries of who can navigate their control, and privacy, and what information can be shared outside of their headspace. He gives a bit of a dramatic yawn, reaching his arms up above his head and sliding off Wilbur’s bed. “Think I’m ‘bout ready to get back to bed, yeah? I’ll see you guys in the morning,” he bids them farewell and shuffles back to his own room.

“Goodnight, gremlin,” Wilbur says before he leaves.

Techno follows with a, “Night.”

As his bedroom door slips closed behind him, Tommy huffs a sigh of relief, filing away that social interaction for consideration later, but knowing he did an okay job playing off that bombshell. He wonders how this revelation of their secret will play into their scheduling, if the others want to be introduced or to introduce themselves.

Then he wonders if planning their switches will even be viable for long. When prime time is so sudden and random, and communication between the front and the rest of the inner world is nonexistent. Won’t hurt to try at least, he supposes. It helps that their secret isn’t a big deal anymore, perhaps now the others will grow with the body, and cultivate their own personalities, and fit into the routines of the world in their own way. It hurts a little, that tiny part of himself that begged to be free before, now begging to be individual, to be just himself and no one else. It tugs at his soul like a parasite, whispering taunts of how, he may not be alone anymore, but one day he will beg for the loneliness once again, once he realizes how little of life is actually his when he shares it with so many others.

That one day, his family will be just as claustrophobic as the darkness in his past.

Well, there’s little more he can do than just go with the flow, even if said flow keeps him awake for the remainder of the night. Watching the ceilings for any cracks, any sign that his life is falling apart around him. It sucks to have that thought always in the back of his mind, since, if he’s constantly convinced the world is ending, how will he know when it *actually* happens? Will he get doubly anxious? What if he writes it off as the usual constant worry and panic? He can’t let himself be convinced to stop looking for the signs of danger, that’s when it’ll happen. The world can only end when he isn’t watching, so he watches.

He watches. And waits.

And waits.

Chapter End Notes

as you can tell by how long its been since the last chapter, this one definitely gave me a run for my money. idk if it was because i was in the middle of moving, or if the start of a new arc was overwhelming to me (probably a mix of both) but i did it! very much thanks to the help of my friend jackson, who gave me ideas to start out the chapter, since i just wanted to drop right into the trauma, you know?

thank you all for reading and the comments and kudos, it means the world to me (please feel free to skip the remaining note i have a question but its also kind of rant-y)

i also wanted to ask everyone a few questions about writing trans characters, cause I know where I stand (sorta) but I want to know how everyone else feels about it

so I am cisgender, I identify as the gender I was assigned at birth (however, my own gender doesn't mean all that much to me, i just don't feel any dysphoria that I think is necessary to identify otherwise, and I sure as hell feel a lot of imposter syndrome if I consider identifying as nonbinary, so cis woman is fine with me)
but whatever enough about me, i really really want to write more trans characters, and so I want to ask if having characters as trans (but not going into the inner or outer personal conflicts that come with transitioning) is better trying to write the experiences of a transgender character when I myself am not transgender

I know I didn't ask this question when deciding to write about a disorder that I don't have, but I've taken the steps to be open and honest about my responsibility to do my research and stuff right? but for gender, idk it feels different cause I know a lot of people have a lot of strong feelings about how trans characters should be portrayed, especially by someone who isn't trans by any means. but, I also would like to explore the gender side of things, cause from my experience online, gender and transgenderism is a pretty integral part of having multiple identities

anywho I'd love to know what you all think, do you care if trans characters are explored by non-trans authors? or does it not matter to you unless it's shitty? would you rather the trans identity in a trans character being a more background aspect of their character's conflicts? or do you think that, if a character is trans, they shouldn't be void of gender-centric conflict? please let me know, I am very curious

and remember, be safe, be gay and gay bee <3

To Trust, To Fear, To Hate (Myself)

Chapter Summary

Sam deals with his whirlwind of emotions.

Chapter Notes

hullo

it has been far too long and for that, i apologize, this new arc has been kicking my ass and i've been suffering from creative withdrawl as i deal with the usual end of summer existential crisis, maybe i'll talk more about in the end notes but its a little personal so i doubt anybody cares lmao (not that that's ever stopped me before lol)

i hope you enjoy this chapter! it's the fourth draft, because the first three were trash /(-_-)\

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

A little known secret of Sam's; he hates himself.

Well, not exactly hates, per se, but he is ashamed of the circumstances of his own existence.

He is a protector. From the moment he laid eyes on the two battered children, Tommy and Tubbo, those few years ago at the entrance to The Dark, he knew he would guard their well-being to the last breath. That he would take it upon himself to protect their innocence, whatever was left, but more importantly, their future. He would gladly act a shield for anything in the world, in either world, that attempts to harm them.

And yet he is inherently a failure.

The worst time of their life was undoubtedly their upbringing, as a victim of the sadistic rituals of the cult that harbored them. A time Sam wasn't present for. He only knows some of the terrible trauma that was inflicted upon them, from the fragments of memory that echo hauntingly from the caves, and its aftermath, the endless obstacles that stand between Tommy and Tubbo and a normal, functioning childhood. His only goal is to protect them, and yet he could not protect them for so much of their short life, he was absent in the long, dreary years

that they needed him the most, and it very well ruined their chances at stability, both in their mind and in the real world.

Sam isn't quite an adult yet. He thinks himself to be one, not because he considers himself mature, but because he has to be. He is an adult because his brothers need an adult, an older, responsible guardian who knows right from wrong, who can read the intentions of the people they interact with, who can guide them in the right direction, and help maintain their health. Only the gods know that no other person has been qualified or willing to step up to the challenge. Sam is the only one, with the entirety of the world on his shoulders, barring everything bad, protecting them from danger. He hates himself because he is this way, and yet can only hold the boys close to him as they cry, because he couldn't protect them in the past.

He can't erase the past.

Hell, he doesn't even *know* the past. It would kill him to know, it would, even the vague details, the post-trauma is too much. Hearing his brothers fall into themselves, lifting their arms as they fail to hold themselves together, it's enough to rip his heart to shreds. He could not bear the past. He envies ignorance, and for that he hates himself. He is so scared of the world, yet never experienced the full horrors of his brothers' trauma, and for that he hates himself.

He fronts the fear with his Warden persona. When he is guarding The Dark, he is stone-faced, unmovable, sturdy and strong. Outward dangers are ineffective, insecure worries are petulant thoughts, his own hatred a tightly wound coil locked away in the recesses of his frame. He cannot be broken, he is strong so his brothers are safe. He is unafraid so his brothers may never fear again.

Sam awakes with the body on a morning three days after the last brief time he fronted. He is prepped, having discussed thoroughly the recent events regarding the Watson household with Tommy and Tubbo the night before. He is aware Wilbur has been researching on his own the possible diagnoses for their cognitive separation. He is aware Techno has offered to teach Tubbo how to play chess, and suggested they join the club he attends after school. He knows Phil explicitly warned them not to answer their phone from any number they don't recognize.

He will admit it's a strange thought, to hold his family's knowledge, yet act as himself. How will understanding that he is not Tommy affect the way the Watson's treat him? How much of himself isn't an act?

As if by instinct, the clothes he pulls from the closet are a mock copy of Tommy's usual style, a red-sleeved white tee and cargo shorts. But he looks at it for a moment too long, an echo of a snippet of conversation emerging in the back of his thoughts.

"They want to meet you, you know." Tommy told him, very sure in his statement. "Phil especially, he's really excited to get to know everyone in our system."

System, he said. One of the byproducts of Wilbur's interest in their condition; new terminology. Supposedly, this will help them express their symptoms in words the family (and future professionals) can understand, however it worries him. The fact that the outer world is privy to the study of people like them, that is. They are different from other people, *so* much different, he knows, and he knows that makes them valuable. He has this often overwhelming fear of their capture, of their forced cooperation to advance the means of science. Call it irrational, but the circumstances of their childhood is enough reason for him to be wary. Whether for blood, for power, for faith, for sex- there is a demand for people like them. It's the fatal disadvantage of their existence to be helpless, untapped, abnormal, *valuable*.

Sam can only grasp his racing thoughts when his lungs remind him that he needs to breathe. He gasps, unaware he was holding his breath at all, clutching the t-shirt in a white-knuckled grip. It takes a few seconds to gain function of his hands and uncurl then from the fabric.

That's a habit he'll have to keep note of while he fronts, drifting off in his thoughts like that. In the headspace, there's no responsibility of maintaining an active presence, so he's free to divulge his thoughts as much as he needs to. But that's not the case when he's piloting their physical body.

The shirt fell to the floor, so he picks it up and replaces it where he found it, opting instead to pick out a dark green long-sleeve and navy jeans.

...Are these clothes something he's established now? Is this his style, a means of identifying himself now that his first priority isn't to pretend? So he thought the green was a nice color, that didn't mean it's suddenly a *symbolic portrayal* of his character or anything.

It's all very confusing. Sensations in the outer world are stronger than what can be summoned in the inner world. It's something he's attributed to the feeling of intensity, of the threat of danger requiring his constant concentration. His time spent in prime was normally shrouded in a haze of adrenaline, to be fronting alone by his own volition seems uncanny to him, especially when the most concerning thought in his mind is his own *identity*.

He shakes off the obtrusive emotions, gearing himself for the journey to the lower floor to start his day. There's a calendar by the doorway, something new- it has a well-rendered photo of a Nintendo character with the month displayed in a bold font. The days past are crossed out with a sharpie, meaning today is Saturday. His stomach gives off a low rumble, which catches him off guard, but he knows it's a good sign. It means the body is back to a somewhat normal eating schedule.

He doesn't blame Tommy for falling victim to disorderly eating so easily. He grew up in an environment where food did not necessarily equal survival. Its scarcity was a punishment, a means of control, so eliminating their instinctual need to eat regularly was a defense mechanism. Hopefully he won't have to rely on it ever again, not with the reassurance of his brothers and his foster family.

Sam makes it to the staircase and descends, noting that both Wilbur and Techno's bedrooms are open and empty, meaning they're either in the living room or out of the house. It must be the latter, since Sam sees the living room barren. The only light streams from the windows,

except for a lamp in the office. He sneaks to the door with silent footsteps, peeking through the cracked door at Phil hunched over his desk.

He's never been in this room before, he only knows it from where Niki took Wilbur to scold him that night before. The room has a slate gray carpeting, large floor to ceiling bookshelves on the adjacent walls, a ceiling fan. There's a modern desk and a laptop, some reading chairs and a few mild sources of light in the form of hooded lamps. Sam leans a bit too much on a loose board and it creaks quite loudly, catching Phil's attention as he glances over to him.

"Oh! Didn't hear you come downstairs, please, come in and have a seat wherever," Phil gestures with a warm smile, turning back to his work on the laptop as to not scrutinize the boy.

Sam takes a seat on the other side of the desk, trying not to imagine the room as some sort of doctor's office as it makes him uneasy. His sense of awkwardness from being in the body doesn't leave him, lying in wait at the back of his mind. He wonders what Phil wants.

Phil eyes him over the laptop screen, noting his silence, he says, "just finishing up something, I take it you're Sam, right?"

"Right," Sam replies, his fingers twitch unnervingly so he fiddles with the sleeves of his shirt. He doesn't like this feeling, like he's a child waiting for instructions. It reminds him all too much of the body he's piloting.

Phil types a few keys then gently pushes the laptop to the side, so he has a clear view of Sam. "So," he begins, adjusting his posture, "Tommy let me know you can be a bit distrusting, that's why I wanted to meet you today while the boys are out of the house."

"Where are they?" Sam inquires, not too sure why him being the reason the brothers were kicked out for the day makes him so uncomfortable.

"Well, Techno does weight training on Saturdays, so he's probably at the gym with the rest of the fencing team. And Wilbur is in the school's jazz band, they have a concert coming up so they're most likely rehearsing their lineup," Phil explains all this with a twinkle of pride in his gaze.

Sam nods once. He's not exactly privy to extracurriculars. He knows Tommy likes to play soccer sometimes, and Tubbo wants to learn chess, but he's never considered himself desiring some kind of hobby. He's the Warden, after all. He doesn't have time for those things.

"How old are you, Sam?" Phil begins with a question, giving Sam his full attention, but in a patient sort of way.

"16," Sam answers, a bit unsure if that's the right number but trying to sound confident regardless. He can only compare himself to others when it comes to quantifying his mental age. He knows he's older than the body, the eldest of his brothers, maybe not quite as old as Wilbur or Techno. 16 is as good a guess as any.

Phil seems to nod in agreement to his answer, “Ah, I was pretty certain you were a tad older than Tommy. Not that I’ve anything to go off of, this is all fairly new to me,” he says this abashedly, rubbing the back of his neck. “Wilbur has a better grasp than I do, but I’ll still try my best, of course.”

“It... has a name, right?” Sam forced out the question, despite the tremor of terror it sends through his chest at the thought. He gulps and tries to steady his racing thoughts.

Phil cocks his head, eyes analyzing Sam’s subconscious responses, “We won’t know for certain until we see a specialist and get a diagnosis, but Wilbur seems to think it’s some type of dissociative disorder.”

“What is... that?” Sam’s never heard that word before. “Dis-so..?”

“Dissociative,” Phil repeats, clearly enunciating the word, “It’s a sort of coping strategy, a response to stressful situations. It’s when someone is able to separate their mind, or their thoughts, from their physical body.”

‘The headspace,’ Sam thinks, getting an understanding of how the world views their circumstance. He doesn’t quite want to share this with Phil, though, still irrationally terrified of the information somehow leading to their capture. But it makes sense that the headspace is a product of their traumatic upbringing.

“I’ve scheduled an appointment with a specialist for next week, someone Niki recommended,” Phil continues, “they’ll likely want to meet the entire system, though Tommy mentioned to me once that it’s not that easy-“

He’s cut off by his smartphone ringing loudly on the edge of his desk. Phil frowns, flipping over the phone to see the screen and quickly cancelling the call. He sets it back down and sighs to collect himself. Before he can even open his mouth, the phone goes off again, and this time Phil doesn’t even look at the caller ID before he declines it.

His eyes glance towards Sam, “Tommy told you not to answer any strange numbers, right?”

Sam nods slowly, a bit curious as to what the big deal was. He understands stranger danger, but the extra reminder lets him know there’s something more going on. When the ringer sounds a third time, Phil huffs and silences it, sliding it into his back pocket. “What’s going on?” Sam questions.

Phil looks at him as if considering whether to tell the truth or not. “I wouldn’t want to worry you,” he says.

“I’d be more worried not knowing.”

“Right,” Phil sighs, leaning his elbows on the desk, looking more tired than he did before. “There’s a PI- a detective, who’s been calling nonstop. They’re trying to contact the other children who were rescued from that cult, for the upcoming trial.”

Phil goes on, explaining the whole situation, the fact that they needed the victims to act as witnesses against the cult's head and founder. There's some other information too, but Sam stops listening. The moment it clicks in his head, that they're trying to find them, to find Tommy, to bring him back within arms reach of the bastard that not-so singlehanded ruined their childhood, their mental state, their view of the world. It alights every fear that's been swirling around in his mind for... basically the entirety of his existence.

It's like his heart stopped beating. Like the air trying to enter his lungs has burned through all its oxygen before he can use it. If he struggled to keep his calm before, he's thrashing in the water now. The frantic thoughts race through his mind- *they're looking for you, they're trying to find you, they're trying to take you, you can't let that happen, you can't, you can't, you won't, you'd rather die, you'd rather-*

'Sam?' A voice so small, echoes in his mind.

Breathe.

"Fundy," the name falls from his mouth desperately, softer than a whisper. His hands are shaking, and while his vision is still blurred by panicked tears, he can see Phil knelt in front of his chair, speaking to him in a low voice. He's concerned, he sounds concerned. He's worried about Sam.

'Sam okay?' Fundy sounds worried. He sounds *scared*.

"Breathe, okay? Just follow my breathing, in and out, in and out, okay? C'mon, Sam, you're okay. In and out..."

The void calls to him, tendrils of the headspace wrap themselves around him and try their damndest to drag him into the depths- no, he won't let them. He has to stay focused, breathe, just fucking *breathe*, Sam-

They're going to find you.

No, no, Phil said they're been calling his phone, that they could likely call *his* phone, it's inevitable, a given, just when he thought they could be safe for once in their *goddamned life-*

They've already found you.

"No, no, no, I promised, I promised-" He can't tell if he's speaking aloud or in his mind, everything is underwater, it feels like his mouth is a desert yet his lungs are flooded, moments from imploding in his chest.

His focus snaps back into the real world, but it's painful, keeping his eyes open and tracked onto a singular image. He searches Phil's face, trying to find something recognizable. Phil's hand is on his knee, squeezing in a slow rhythm while he repeats, "Breathe with me, Sam, please, in and out, in and out," setting the pace with his own exaggerated inhales and exhales.

Slowly, very slowly, his heart stops racing but it thumps hard against his rib cage as if trying to break free. The hand on his knee burns, it burns but not like the way he expects. He expects the touch to be volatile, a violation of his comfort, and yet... it's warm, grounding. It's a hand not meant to strike, but to soothe, to be the solid ground that seems so far from reach, his tether to the outer world. He's still staring at it, at Phil's hand wrapped around the crux of his kneecap, questioning why he feels this way. Touch has never been comforting to them, touch has always been a threat, a tool to put them in their place. It doesn't make any sense that Phil's touch would be any different.

Funny's presence seems to perk up at his observation, the young boy waiting patiently in the back of their mind while Sam works out his emotions. He gets the idea to try something, not knowing if it will work but willing to take the risk. Sam has no idea what Funny is planning but in a moment he feels this strange sensation come over their body as Fundy manages to take control for a short time. Their arms raise and extend out towards Phil and Fundy says, "Can hug, Phil?" His voice is an octave higher, a clear sign that Sam wasn't the one speaking.

It takes Phil by surprise, but his face brightens immediately, a smile wider than he's ever seen from the man crinkling his eyes. "Of course, son, of course," he says gently, leaning forward to meet their open arms. Fundy steps back the moment they make contact, and Sam is frozen still as Phil's arms wrap around him. It's a little awkward, with the fact that Phil is kneeling on the floor and Sam is in a chair, but as he's pulled forward, he experiences a warmth unlike anything he's ever felt before. The arms are towering, like solid walls of protection completely surrounding him, yet he isn't trapped. He's *protected*.

Sure, he's the protector, but when was the last time he's ever been on the other end of that dynamic? Has he ever been hugged before? No, no he hasn't. That's pitiful, isn't it? To have never been hugged, never been comforted and protected and fucking *safe*- there's a wetness on his cheeks, it trails down his jawline and soaks into Phil's shirt. It's a moment of weakness, something he's never allowed himself to have, he should feel ashamed, but all he feels is love. He is loved, in Phil's arms. He cries harder, clenching his eyes as he allows himself to be pulled closer into the warmth.

"You're safe, son," Phil whispers, "I've got you."

Chapter End Notes

Hmm ok so I've been working on another multi chapter fic (probably not more than like 3 or 4) which feels sorta like cheating on this story but the feeling of the other is A Lot Different (very dark, Very Dark)

I'll probably post the first chapter soon cause it's up and ready to go (it freaked out my friend when he beta'd it so get excited)

I've been feeling kinda ick lately cause I feel like I sorta wasted my four years at college cause the field I chose is very self-motivated and I am anything But self-motivated

So I might like fuck around and become a child psychologist???? A pediatric OT to be exact, my mom brought it up since I'm quite interested in psychological disorders and I love children (contrary to the way I treat them in my fanfictions lol) I think it's a career path that I could really get into but now I'm just salty since I already paid and went to art school only to go back to school for a completely different degree

I really just wish I could've had this elation like 2 years ago, it would've been so much easier since I had all the resources like right in front of me

Anyway that's my predicament right now, writing does help take my mind off of it and I don't feel so useless since it's obvious people like my writing (for some reason) so that's good

I'll figure it out, cause like, there's all the time in the world right? I'm almost 22 and only getting older, might as well pursue whatever the fuck I want ͡_('ʘ')_͡

Thank you all again for the nice comments and the kudos and just for reading! Y'all really make this fandom worth it (also if you write and haven't seen a comment by me, totally let me know!! I will gladly intake any content I can get my hands on I am starved)

As always, bee safe, get vaxxed, and have a wonderful day!! (^-^)/

In the Arms of Family

Chapter Summary

The system can't hide forever.

Chapter Notes

heyo im back from writing a whole nother short fic
as you may have noticed, an ending is in sight
so lets ramp up the conflict a little, yeah?

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

Fundy presses his face against the car window as they drive up the highway, the bright fairgrounds lighting up the twilight sky in the distance. He's completely in awe of all the different colors, the tall structures and twinkling lake that reflects the cloud line. When they first started driving, Fundy sat frozen in terror, not wanting to ride in a giant machine that usually meant sudden death for unlucky foxes like him. However, being inside the vehicle was a whole new experience, a million times better than ending up under its rubber wheels. Soon it was a ride, and now it's a magic method of travel, zooming through asphalt faster than he could ever dream of running.

He honestly has no idea what a 'county fair' is, but Wilbur says there'll be fun rides and sweet treats so he's really excited. He's practically bouncing in his seat, eyes glued to the flashing lights and towering machines that spin and flash and twirl. Do humans really go that high up? It makes sense, humans lack the traits to fly so they use these giant contraptions to lift and swing them around. It looks dangerous but his nerves buzz with excitement.

The sun is on its way to set in an hour, the orange clouds dusting over the horizon. It's quite a pretty sight, though Fundy is more focused on the flurry of activity coming into view. So many humans (it makes his metaphorical tail twitch anxiously) and all kinds of stalls with bright banners and music he can hear even over the stereo.

He's broken from his gaze when a hand ruffles the back of his head. "Calm down there, bud, we're not even parked yet," Techno says, chuckling slightly.

Fundy looks back to him, meeting his gaze with a smile, "We go fair, Tech! Never go before."

“It’s super fun,” Wilbur comments from the front seat while he fiddles with the radio. “You see that giant wheel in the center? That’s a Ferris wheel, it spins you all the way to the top so you can see the whole city!” He points vaguely out the window, but watches Fundy’s eyes light up as he sees it.

“Woah,” he awes, before pointing to himself, “I ride?”

“Of course,” Phil says, his eyes on the road but a smile wide on his face. “If we wait a little, we could probably get a great view of the sunset from up there.”

“Ride with me?” Fundy peeks around the seat, catching Phil’s gaze through the rearview mirror.

“Yep! We’ll ride it together.”

—

After they park, Fundy grabs Techno’s hand and holds it while they approach the main gate. As they wait in line, Wil steps up next to them and holds Fundy’s other hand, which delights the boy to no end. The feeling of being secure between his brothers is insurmountable.

He squeezes each held hand in a rhythm while Phil buys them tickets for some of the attractions, and Fundy takes in all the new and fun things he’s never seen before.

The main thing on his mind is the sheer amount of people around him, they’re everywhere, dressed in all sorts of colors and patterns, some laughing or talking or looking around just like him. There’s even a few strangers that meet his eye, but he looks away quickly whenever that happens. His arms swing between his two brothers as they point out the different stalls and rides. The words on the signs mean nothing to him, but luckily everything is covered in pictures of foods and toys and animals.

Wilbur leads him to their first stall, painted with red and green stripes and a picture of a bottle with a target over it. The stall is run by a tall man with a long beard and a wide rimmed hat, standing in front of three shelves with various colored bottles lined on each of them. The counter at the front has three crossbow-like objects fixed to the table, aimed in the direction of the bottles. He’s more focused on the several gigantic stuffed animals that hang from the ceiling of the stall. There are pigs dressed in funny hats and vests with a gold badge, a red patterned bandana over the snout. Some shelves beside the bottles have the same stuffed animals but a third of the size.

“Step right up and show off your shootin’ skills!” The man announces, waving his arm towards the wooden shooters. “Shoot and knock down three bottles for a small prize, or shoot out six for a large one! You only get eight shots, do you have what it takes?” The man peers down at Fundy with a wide grin, which makes him more anxious than anything.

However, he tugs at Wil’s hand and points to the giant cowboy pig, “Wil! Pig, Wil!”

Wil follows his gaze, “You want the stuffed pig, buddy?” He asks, to which Fundy nods enthusiastically.

“Pig!”

“Good eye, Fundy. That’s a pretty cool prize,” Techno agrees from his other side.

Fundy bounces excitedly, releasing the hands of his brothers so he can try out the crossbow. It seems simple enough, just point the tip towards a bottle and pull the trigger. He doesn’t have any ammo at the moment, though. He looks back to the Watsons, “I play? Please?”

“One sec, bud,” Phil smiles at his excitement, pulling out his wallet to grab a few dollars to give to the man running the stand. He exchanges the money for a small basket of ping pong balls, which he sets next to Fundy’s bow.

Wil leans over to show Fundy how to load it, grabbing a ball and setting it near the tip of the bow against an elastic band. Then he pulls it back until he hears a sharp click, and the band and ball are locked in place. “Go ahead, bubs, give it a shot,” Wilbur says as he steps back, letting Fundy take the handle to aim.

Fundy scrunches his face with certainty, lowering his head so he’s eye level with the path of the crossbow. He lines it up with a bottle on the middle shelf, waits a moment to hold his breath, then pulls the trigger. The ball shoots down the barrel from the release of the elastic, flying in an arc towards the target.

It hits the neck of the bottle, but only causes the glass to shake a little, tipping slightly before righting itself. Fundy frowns, disappointed at the missed shot.

“Oh, that was close! Nice shot, kid, but you’ve got to tip the bottle completely in order to win your prize,” the man jeers, crossing his arms as he leans against the counter.

Wil’s hand pats his shoulder, “That’s okay, Fundy, you’ve still got seven shots left!”

Fundy whines slightly but steadies himself to take the next shot.

—

The closer the family follows the line to the gates of the Ferris wheel, the more Fundy realizes just how tall the structure is. He sees the humans enter the casings of steel to rise to the top, and exit when they reach the bottom, but he still can’t ignore the thought of falling from such a height.

He’s standing between his brothers once more, Phil tasked with carrying the medium pig plushie behind them, he’s holding Wilbur’s hand while eating a strange chocolatey treat on a stick with the other. The snack is left forgotten as they approach the front of the line, his eyes glued to the spiraling colors that fog his line of sight to the topmost booth. It would be mesmerizing if he could appreciate the sight without picturing himself hanging off the edge by a single hand.

“Looks pretty cool, huh?” Wilbur squeezes his hand once to get his attention, mistaking his wide-eyed focus on the giant wheel for fascination instead of terror.

“T-tall,” Fundy whimpers, tracking the highest booth as it glides over the top of the arc, swaying with the momentum.

“It’s not that bad,” Techno placates with a hand on Fundy’s head, petting him comfortingly. “Plus, the city looks so cool from the top. You won’t even have to see the ground.”

“Your big bro’s Wilbur and Tech will keep you safe, bubs,” the taller teen lets his hand go to instead wrap an arm around his shoulders, pulling him to his hip in a protective hold. That does ease some of Fundy’s worry, especially seeing Phil and every other adult so at ease with the process of loading and unloading the ride cars. And no one’s fallen yet, that he’s seen, so that’s a good sign.

Still, he shakes in the cold plastic seat once they enter into a car. He’s pressed between his brothers with Phil on the opposite seat as a counterweight, feeling nervous and sweaty as the giant machine starts and stops with jerky motions while it loads and unloads more riders.

When the cars are full, the ride is a lot smoother, slowly gliding up and around the circle, swooping to the entrance platform but sliding right past it. When they reach the top a second time, Wilbur points in his line of sight out the left side of the car, away from the fairgrounds. It’s the city, at the perfect moment with the sun mid-set in the background. The silver buildings are shimmering, backlit by the colorful skies, orange clouds reflecting in the dozens of windows. The rest of the sky darkens so quickly, right before his eyes, the transition from day to night an absolute spectacle to observe. Street lamps alight, and bright windows make checkered patterns on all the tall buildings. Instead of the shiny tops of cars, the roads are all yellow and red flickering lights, neon signs on storefronts pierce through the onset darkness.

The ground approaches them and the buildings disappear behind ever towering trees, as the ride makes another rotation. This time, nearing the apex, Fundy looks to the fairgrounds instead, only slightly unnerved by the people growing smaller and smaller the higher they go. The colored lights that circle the entire site glow brighter by the second, and the orange overcast dissolves into a blue fog as the sun disappears behind the city and subsequently the horizon.

But there’s a glint from atop one of the structures that catches his eye right before they descend on the ride again. He focuses on the small flash of light and sees a vague outline of a person crouching on the roof of an attraction, poised behind a large sign with an array of lights flashing periodically. The person is in dark clothes, probably moments from being completely camouflaged by the night. Their hands are holding a metallic device in front of their eyes so all he sees are two circular glass lenses. Pointed directly at him, they follow his car down to the platform, but he can’t see them anymore once they exit the ride.

He decides it’s nothing important.

—

His favorite ride has to be the green dragon coaster. It's a really long car that swoops around a track going up and down over hills that makes him go weightless in his seat for a moment. Unlike the Ferris wheel, he has a protective strap over his lap on this one, and at the top of the steepest drop (not that steep at all really), the dragon shoots out a burst of fire and roars loud. He's shrieking with laughter from the fun of it.

He only wished his brothers could ride with him, but they said they were too old to. Fundy almost couldn't get on himself, since, while the same age or perhaps younger than some of the other children on the ride, he was the tallest by far, which meant he (as Tommy) was perhaps also too old for the ride. Thankfully that didn't stop him, so he got to ride it.

8 times!

After that he feels a bit dizzy, so Phil tells him that's enough times and they go browse more of the games and prizes. It gets a bit chillier as the night continues, so Wilbur volunteers to run back to the car to grab a sweater for him as the rest of them wait at a bench under a large tent for him to return. Techno spends the time showing Fundy the pictures he took on his phone while he was riding the dragon. Each photo has Fundy eyes closed and shouting excitedly, slightly blurry as the ride was moving, his hands first gripped tight to the safety bar but eventually he had his hands raised for the coming drops. It's a little strange to try to recognize himself in the pictures because, he is *Tommy* in the photos. He has curly blond hair, dulled teeth, no foxy features whatsoever. He doesn't quite understand why his appearance in the inner world doesn't translate to the outer world, but it's not something he feels the need to dwell on. Besides, if Tommy is happy (even if it's just the Tommy in the photos) then he is happy.

The arrival of night creates a dilemma for the young boy, he notices while waiting for Wilbur's return. As a fox, he knows he is nocturnal, that the night is the prime time for his energy to alight, the time to hunt. But as a human, the night doesn't offer him his piercing vision, nor the drive to hunt for food. Instead he is sleepy, his mind filled with fuzz as he holds the pig plushie he won squeezed against his stomach. He doesn't notice leaning further and further into Techno's side, cheerily lost in the memories of the dragon ride while his eyes lose focus.

When Wilbur comes back, he helps pull the sweater over Fundy's head and get his arms through the sleeves. He can't help but coo at the youngest as he takes a seat across from him.

"Awww, oh my goodness, Techno. He's so cute, look at the little sleepy boy!" Wilbur lightly pulls at Fundy's cheeks, prompting him to whine in complaint.

"Nnn no sleep," he argues drowsily, "I awake." The boy points an accusing finger at the tall teen, "You sleep." His eyes are hardly half-open, the majority of his weight still leaning into Techno. Now that he's warm wrapped up in a sweater (as well as absorbing as much body heat get from his brother as possible), the fog increases tenfold, as sleep tugs at his consciousness.

"You don't sound that convincing, bud," Techno chuckles, snaking an arm around his shoulders so he can curl against his chest. Fundy responds in kind, digging his face into the crook of Techno's shoulder with a huff.

“I no sleep...” he says again, this time with a yawn that rolls through his entire body, threatening to sway him off the bench if Techno wasn’t there to hold him steady.

“I think it’s time we get going so a certain baby boy can get his beauty sleep,” Wilbur teases, poking his face yet again, but Fundy is too tired to retaliate.

He vaguely feels someone lift his limp body into their arms and carry him away. Crowds of indiscernible chatter surround him, as do bright lights and loud music, but it all might as well be a dream. It’s all far away, a blur to his dulled and drowsy senses.

The shut of the car door is enough to jolt him awake, but the second they start driving the purr of the engine puts him right back to sleep. The last thing he remembers is the low whispering of the others in the car, but he doesn’t know what they’re saying.

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“Oh, that’s good, I like that,” Ranboo comments aloud, despite only Tommy being around to hear him. He’s got their cellphone in his hand, open to a drawing that Fundy made of the toy he won at the fair. It’s not a masterpiece by any means, not even close to proportional even to the stuffed animal. But it’s pink, and it’s got ears and a tail, so it’s pretty good.

‘Eh, I think it could use some work,’ Tommy replies.

The two are walking home from school, alone. Well, Ranboo is doing the walking, Tommy is just along for the ride. Usually, Wilbur or Techno will drive them, but both brothers have after school stuff, and Tommy didn’t feel like waiting around for them to finish so he thought, ‘hey, I’m old enough, I can walk home on my own.’ And there you have it.

The walk isn’t horrendous, maybe thirty minutes at a leisurely pace, all sidewalks and safe crossings, only some minimal distance between neighborhoods where no houses lie. That’s where they are now, on the path beside the main road where it’s all trees on either side, a good ten-minute journey before the houses start popping up again. Ranboo really likes walking. Sure he enjoys the scenery of car rides, but while walking he can really appreciate all the nature around them. He can hear the birds, the trees swaying in the wind, the pleasant drone of the power lines, it’s all very cathartic.

Until it isn’t.

Ranboo has a fidget toy in the other hand, something that he fiddles with so the hand holding his phone doesn’t shake. The hat they’re wearing presses on his head in a strange way, so he’s a bit more jittery than usual, have to frequently scan the area around him if there’s even the slightest movement at the corner of his vision. That’s usually in the form of a car, or a bird, or

just a stray tree branch. But if there's nothing of interest, then he goes back to looking at his phone.

'Hey, uh, Ranboo? You see that car up ahead?' Tommy pipes up after a while.

Ranboo looks up and sees the car, all black with shaded windows, the license plate incredibly plain and there's no other stickers or any decal on it. It looks to be going much slower than the normal speed of the cars on this road. "Uh, yeah? What about it?" He's seen some elderly people drive before, it's not super uncommon for people to drive slower than usual. Although something about the car gives him an unnerving feeling.

'It's been there for like, a mile now. I think they're following us?' Tommy says, the implications making his internal alarms ring to an almost deafening degree.

He stops in his tracks, eyes locked to the car's rear window when it too slows to a stop, not proceeding any further down the road. There's a moment of stillness, of the sounds of nature fading to nothing around him while his heart beats rapidly in his ears. His hands shake, abruptly so, he almost drops the phone. His feet itch to drop everything and run.

'Ranboo, Ranboo call Phil. Ranboo, please, you gotta call Phil,' Tommy repeats, the uncomfortable tug of him trying to take over motor function proving unsuccessful as he's stood frozen solid.

Then, like a bolt of lightning, his instincts flash as the car backs up and makes a U-turn, now pointing directly at them. He takes off just as the car accelerates, sprinting away from the road and straight into the forest. The trees and branches and bushes fly by in a blur as he traverses the terrain, Tommy panicking inside his head, pleading for him to at least dial the emergency line as he runs. But he's too focused on getting as far away as possible, weaving in and out of various natural paths as to dissuade any pursuers.

He doesn't think about how he has no idea where they are, how there are no houses in sight, no directions, hell, even the sun is shielded by the overhead canopy of leaves. His breaths are quick and succinct, labored as he keeps the pace, dodging low hanging branches and overgrowth. Shoes dirtied and clothes shredded by passing thorns, he can't help but feel a very strange déjà vu take over his instincts. His feet move on impulse and take him as far as he can run before his lungs give out.

After a long while, he coughs and crouches behind a dense group of bushes, elbows and knees digging into the dirt as he struggles to intake enough oxygen and stop his head from spinning.

'Hey, it's okay,' Tommy comforts him, 'You did great, I don't see or hear anybody. I think we're safe for now.'

"That was-" Ranboo coughs again, taking a deep breath before he says, "That was scary, oh gods."

'But it's fine now, we got away,' Tommy assures, 'We should really call someone now.'

“Right, right,” Ranboo mutters, making the motion to pull his cell phone from his pocket.

Oh.

He dropped it.

“Fuck.”

—

It’s been maybe half an hour. Someone definitely should have noticed they’ve gone missing now, right? Would anyone even know where to look? What if they believe they’ve been kidnapped? No one would even think to check the woods!

Off in every direction for miles looks exactly the same. He can’t tell where he’s been, or if he’s heading the right way, or if he’s just traversing deeper and deeper onto these hellish woods. Tommy’s keeping a running commentary as they walk, noting the landmarks or anything familiar.

‘Pretty sure we’ve passed by that tree six times now.’

“It’s a tree, Tommy. They all look like that.”

They have to stop and fish out a leftover snack from lunch in their backpack. It’s only a bag of crackers, but the crunch fools his stomach anyway. He just really wishes they had brought a water bottle.

‘We could try drinking the pond water?’

“That’s a terrible idea. We would literally die.”

The woods are a terrible place. With every step he feels a dozen different plants and sticks and bits of dirt ghosting over his clothes and skin. He hisses when a fuzzy leaf touches his hand, the feeling awkward and almost burning from the texture of it.

It’s a little better when he passes under a low hanging tree with wide shiny leaves. He rips one from the branch and feels along the waxy surface. His fidget toy was also lost during the escape, so he wraps the wide leaf around two fingers and rhythmically glides along its surface with the other hand to calm himself. It’s easier to distract from all the other oppressive senses.

He takes off their hat to focus a little better, trying his damndest to think of ways out of this situation. Maybe he could climb a tree? Look over the canopy to see if he can spot civilization?

‘I think you overestimate your tree climbing skills,’ Tommy supplies unhelpfully. He’s been quieter as to let Ranboo think and cope with their environment.

Another hour goes by and Ranboo's really starting to feel thirsty now. He tries searching through their backpack again, just to make sure, but all they have are notebooks, headphones, and writing utensils. He does find a candy bar at the bottom of the bag, however, and decides to save it for later.

His feet are aching. Going from a dead sprint to walking for an hour straight is starting to wane on his ankles and knees. His joints feel stiff and threaten to give out, but he keeps going. They don't really have a choice.

His tongue is really dry and sticks awkwardly to the roof of his mouth. It's irritating, and worse yet his fidget leaf tears in half so he has to throw it away. Of course he didn't think to get extra of those leaves. So he has to wring his hands around each other, scratching at the skin until it's red to ease his nerves. He's becoming quite hyper-stimulated, the repetitive sounds of the forest around him once calming now drones in his ears like his head is filled with bees. Now with every movement and every noise that peaks over the rest, his heart jumps, his attention snapped in half like a twig as he has to survey his surroundings again and again and again. It's really tiring.

He tries to cover his ears with his palms, but then the need to fidget overcomes his wrists and he starts scratching at the sensitive skin of his scalp.

'Hey, hey, Ran. Please don't- you're hurting yourself,' Tommy calms him, reminding him that *he* is not the one with the pain receptors. Despite his overbearing connection to the stimuli affecting their physical body, he forgets that Tommy still has the butt end of the pain stick, so to speak.

"Sorry," Ranboo mutters, but he doesn't stop. He can't make his fingers move the way he wants, they just keep scratching and clawing at his ears, the jerking of his eardrums covered and uncovered and covered again only increases his anxiety.

'Maybe you could put on the headphones?' Tommy suggests.

"We lost the phone," Ranboo says, struggling not to dig his nails into his ears at the sound of their dry voice.

'But it'll still muffle the sound, right?'

Oh, yeah. That's right, the plush ends of the headphones would definitely dampen the noise around him. He stops and throws the bag on the ground and unzips the front pocket, taking out the wireless headphones.

Wait, wireless?

"Tommy, how far does the Bluetooth signal go?"

'Uh, fuck if I know? Why does that matter?' Tommy sounds confused.

"We can find the phone!" Ranboo exclaims, feeling a sense of hope for the first time that hour, as he quickly presses the button to turn on the headphones then closes the backpack and

swings it over his shoulder. He puts the headphones on over his ears, the starting up tune greeting him, but it makes the noise that says the connection is unlinked.

‘Big man! You’re a genius!’ Tommy cheers in his head, which makes that feeling of hope grow in his chest.

With the headphones on, Ranboo feels a sense of determination, as the muffled environment is so much easier to handle with his sensitive hearing. He figures the best direction to walk is forward, so forward he goes, returning his hands to their wringing as he walks.

They had been walking for a long time. He can’t remember how long. Sometimes, Ranboo would stop, look around, then walk in a different direction because he felt like the way they were going was just *wrong*. Tommy chattered on and off, both boys seemingly getting tired of the situation they’re in. Everything green blurs together after a while. He just hopes they can find a way out before darkness falls.

Beep beep.

He stops on his tracks, suddenly able to hear his heartbeat for a few loud moments before a quiet song they had been listening to earlier begins playing. Tommy cheers and Ranboo lets a wide smile stretch his chapped lips.

It’s not over yet, though. They still have to find the phone.

Ranboo walks a lot slower, scanning his eyes over the ground and kicking around piles of leaves to see if anything is hidden. He lets the music guide him in his search, not that it helped direct him or anything, but the song wraps his head in a warm blanket, any lingering unease dissipating as determination fills the space.

A third song is at its opening verse when he spots the red phone case face down near the base of a tree. He’s so happy he could cry, clutching at the phone like it’s a lifeline, thanking whatever gods are watching for their good graces.

‘Nah, big man! It was all you!’ Tommy praises, laughing in their shared joy.

The lock screen shows they’ve been missing for about two and a half hours, and they’ve got 52 new messages and 30 missed calls. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” Ranboo repeats under his breath, unable to hear himself but he’s too happy to care.

The phone flashes to a new screen and the ringtone plays in his ears as he reads the incoming call. He hardly registers the contact name when he accepts it.

“Hello?! Hello, Tommy? Tommy! Please tell me you’re okay, holy shit-” It’s Wilbur, his voice shot from crying.

“W-Wil, please- I don’t know where I am, there were these people following us and I just started running but now we’re lost and I don’t know what to do-“ Ranboo rambles, feeling tears huddle in the corners of his eyes as the relief and the stress of the last two hours washes over him.

He hears the jingle of keys and the rumble of a car engine, someone nearby asking questions and then demanding the phone. “Hello? Tommy?”

“R-Ranboo,” he corrects, but it feels silly to him, the last thing that matters is the right name. Why would he say that? “Sorry, that was dumb, I-“

“No,” Phil stops him, his voice meticulously calm, “no, it’s okay, Ranboo. Thank you for telling me. Do you know where you are right now? Are you hurt?”

The crash from all the panic and discomfort makes it hard for him to breathe, now that the comfort of safety is in sight, suddenly all he can think about is how *stupid* he is for getting them into this mess.

“I- I don’t know,” Ranboo struggles to get the words out. He doesn’t feel any pain, but remembers that Tommy is still there, “Are- are we hurt?”

‘We can worry about that later,’ Tommy assures, probably clued into Ranboo’s internal struggle.

“I think I’m okay,” Ranboo directs to the phone. “It’s- I don’t know where I am, Phil, I’m so-so sorry,” he can’t stop the tears from falling, his legs feel weak and he leans against the tree for support.

“That’s okay! That’s okay, you’re doing great, son. I’m so proud of you, alright? I just want you to be safe. We just- wait, wait, Wilbur has an idea,” Phil says, before he pulls the phone away and puts it on speaker mode.

“Hey, bubs, can you hear me?” Wilbur calls to him, to Ranboo’s confirmation. “Alright, can you open your messages to Phil?”

Ranboo does what he asks, thankful he can still hear the call in his headphones while he navigates his phone. He opens the chat log to a long string of ‘*please pick up the phone*’s and ‘*say something, this isn’t funny*’s that fill his screen. The obvious worry he caused makes his heart sink. “O-okay, I’m there,” he says.

Wilbur instructs him to open the contact page and send them his location. An automatic message pops up of a large green area on a map with a blinking blue dot in the center. There’s a grey stripe on the left side.

The phone on the other end chimes with the new message. “Yes! Great, Ranboo! We’ll be there soon, that’s just down the road,” Wilbur’s excitement is lost on him, but his words aren’t.

He keeps his eyes on the grey. That's the road! It's not that far! He presses the message which opens the maps app, and his little blue icon is pointing north. He turns his body and the phone towards the west, towards the street and starts walking immediately. He's so out of breath, so very tired but his feet carry him anyway, picking up speed as he yearns to just have a rest, to feel the warmth of his house and his family.

'We're almost there,' Tommy whispers him comfort, 'We'll be home soon, you did good, Ranboo.'

Ranboo just snuffles in response, so so ready for this nightmare to end. He comes into view of the road the moment the Watson's van screeches to a halt on the shoulder. Phil jumps out of the passenger side before the car comes to a complete stop, but quickly runs to meet Ranboo in the middle of the short field between the road and the tree line.

He lets his body collapse into the man's arms, crying against his sleeves as he's hugged tightly, like he'd disappear if let go. Shortly after, Wilbur joins the huddle, wrapping around his father and brother and holding just as tight.

Later, they'll have to recount everything that happened and deal with the aftermath, but right now, Ranboo just wants the hugs, the warmth, the comfort.

And luckily, his family is there to give him just that.

Chapter End Notes

so ive decided that rolling along with this make it up as i go style is starting to wear off my motivation for this story, so now that i finished TWBB (my other recent fic) i made a new note and planned out how i want to end this series

its worked in the fact that i'm feeling more passionate about this fic again, it really helps that an end is in sight, and trust me when i say. its gonna be one hell of an ending

the hell is for me though like itll be hell writing it haha

some other news, i know i talked before in end notes about adding a new alter and a Dream character but i've decided that I'm going to settle for this set of characters (including those in the system) right now and just finish the main story that i wanted to lead to originally, that means i still have a lot of ideas written down though, so if once its over i want to write some spin offs or fluff/angst additions for the series in the future, it should be easy enough to make it happen

also the ranboo in this fic has hyperesthesia, which means that he's more sensitive to basically all of his senses, it can be a condition of its own or a symptom of ADHD or autism, which i've made to be geared more towards ADHD in this case - if you can't tell basically all the alters have some form of ADHD in varying degrees of intensity (you'll

never guess why) ((its cause i have it lol)) but let me know what you thought! if it all made sense or felt realistic, i'd love to hear yalls feedback, it gives me so much life

have a wonderful day everyone, bee safe!

^_^

(also i turned 22 the other day if anyone wants to wish me a happy bday but you dont have to lol time is an illusion)

Turning the Tide

Chapter Summary

And here I thought the summary scene would *never* happen.

Chapter Notes

what do you mean its only been a week since the last post, its not like ive been writing this nonstop from the moment i uploaded the previous chapter o.O

what can i say, im excited to get to the ending!

not quite there yet, though

enjoy!!

(a bit of emphasis on the 'self-harm' tag for this one, be safe everyone!)

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

Phil is fucking furious. More livid than he's ever been before. As soon as he hangs up with the local police line, he immediately dials the number that's plagued him for weeks. It's changed four times, and each one is blocked on his phone but now with a vengeance, he picks the most recent and calls.

The moment someone picks up, he goes off, "You better start explaining right now why you've been stalking my child before I start filing for a restraining order. Do you have any idea the stress I've had to deal with today? Finding out my son was moments from being kidnapped by an unmarked van? Are you out of your fucking mind?!" Phil practically yells into the phone, all pleasantries thrown out the window. He hopes the fact that the kids are in the next room over assures them they are not the target of his raised voice. (None of them do well with yelling, it's why he prefers to leave it as a last resort.)

"I understand your concern, Mr. Watson," some receptionist drones to calm him, "however, seeing as all attempts to communicate with you have been met with refusal--"

"Damn right I've refused! I told you, my family will not be involved in the case," Phil seethes, pacing in the kitchen with a kettle steadily boiling on the stovetop. "I will not ask again. Back. Off. I don't care even if your orders are from the Queen herself, we will not be involved with this--"

Suddenly, a knock at the front door. A loud, authoritative knock that breaks his train of thought.

“I understand your grievance, Mr. Watson. We’ve sent a representative, Agent Matthews, to discuss your role in this upcoming trial. She should have arrived by this time,” the lady on the phone explains, and before Phil can get another word in, she hangs up.

“Dammit,” he curses, slamming his phone onto the counter and breathing with his head in his hands for a moment, before the cautious sound of the door opening reminds him of the current situation.

“Phil?” Techno’s voice calls to him, monotone, but as his father Phil knows he’s hiding his concern. He leaves the kitchen to the foyer and sees Techno holding the door cracked a few centimeters, he can’t tell who’s behind it. “Did you... really call the FBI?”

“Techno, please take your brothers upstairs,” Phil gives the command, steeling himself for the coming conversation as Techno shuffles away and coaxes Wilbur and the half-asleep Ranboo up the stairs. He only hears one door close so they’re likely together. Thankfully.

Phil opens the door, but blocks the way with his body, crossing his arms and staring at this lady in a dark suit. She’s on her phone, and when she looks up to acknowledge him, she flashes a badge and has the audacity to look bored. “Agent Sarah Matthews, I take it you’re Phil Watson?”

“There’s no way in hell you’re with the FBI,” Phil accuses, cold and callous. He knew he’d been dealing with some unsightly investigators but the fucking FBI? Not likely. (Or by the gods, this country is doomed.)

“Retired,” she says simply, despite the fact that she’s hardly any older than he is. Who the hell retires in their mid-thirties? “May I come in?”

Phil wants so badly to refuse, to shut the door in her face, but if he does they’ll just continue harassing his children, and he’d rather deal with this lady than have to handle that backlash of trauma. So he steps back and holds the door while she walks past him, into his house. He notices now that the agent has a briefcase, the cliché black steel with a combination lock on the latch. She spots the dining room and invites herself to take a seat at the head.

He almost bites back his instincts to ask if she’d like some tea, but then he thinks about his options here. These people obviously won’t take no for an answer, it seems, so the best plan of action is getting as much information he can get then play whatever card he needs to get them to leave his family alone. Legal threats don’t work, hostility is met with aggression, but maybe he can argue that Tommy really has no business with their mess. (Though from what little news reports from three years ago he could find about the day of his rescue, that idea may not be all that promising.)

“Tea?” He asks in the doorway to the dining room, she’s hasn’t made eye contact yet, busy setting up her briefcase and inputting the code to unlock it.

“No,” she answers, straightforwardly. She gets the case open and pulls out a yellow folder with a summary page stapled to the front while Phil pours himself a cup of tea. “I’ll be upfront with you, Mr. Watson,” she begins, finally meeting his eye but only to direct him to sit at an adjacent seat, “Your foster has a very complex and messy history, to put it simply, the state was inept in its handling of the case that saved his life 3 years ago, and now it’s come to bite us in the ass.”

Now seated and level with her eyes, Phil is privy to the intense frustration that she stifles behind her veil of professionalism, and he feels... empathetic. For his short time fostering Tommy, he’s only seen a single branching path of the devastation that cult had caused, a victim forced to create a system of support where none existed out of pure survival. Now the cultists have a hold on the entire defense system representing a failure on every level, not only to the children whose futures were tainted or snuffed but to justice itself, letting mishandling prevent the punishment for the unspeakable horrors inflicted upon them and many others.

“We’ve had to construct an entirely new trial, hardly any evidence from the first is permissible. Appeals are inherently vulnerable to doubtful juries.” She continues, her hands clasped over the folder on the table. Her fingers twitch every now and then but she constrains them in a tight grip. “Your son’s testimony is crucial to upholding the charges against David Calpurnius. If any are dropped, it could set up a dangerous precedent for the rest of the cultists currently behind bars. Do you really want your son’s abusers roaming free?” Agent Matthew’s eyes are glued to his now, a genuine sort of desperation hidden in her gaze. Her hands still cover the file in front of her, this is the first piece of information meant to sway his opinion, but obviously, she has more ready.

“My son has gone through enough suffering by the state’s failings,” Phil argues, a set frown on his face. “Not to mention running the risk of dangerously hurting them when your people harassed them walking home from school this afternoon. Why would I have any reason to believe Tommy is the one who can uphold this entire case?” He knows from his own research there were more victims than just Tommy, sure it’s cruel, but there must be another survivor who can handle this responsibility.

The agent watches him, studying his features for a moment, a piercing gaze that looks past his eyes into his very soul. It’s a scrutiny Phil’s uncertain how to feel about. Once deciding on her next course of action, she flips open the cover of the folder and shows off the first several pages by spreading them out slightly. He can see that each had a bold name at the top, a black and white photo of a child, and some red-colored text beside the image. Judging by the bruising covering what little of the faces he can make out, these much be the victims they recovered during the rescue three years before.

His heart cries from the grim glimpses of the other children, knowing the pain his own child went through and currently goes through is something these young faces shared. Some of them look so young, younger than the pitiful photo of Tommy at 10 years old, whose pale skin is vivid despite its monochrome print.

She clears her throat, moving his attention back to her cold gaze, “As you probably know, there were 8 victims total that were rescued from the police raid in 2014, ranging from ages

6-16.” She pauses again, just to collect herself, to breathe once before she continues, “But what hasn’t been reported in the mainstream news is, your son is the oldest survivor currently alive.”

That makes Phil freeze for a second because from what little he could find, he’s sure Tommy was not the oldest one rescued. “What?”

“The oldest rescuee, within three months of returning to a normal life, committed suicide after suffering a psychological breakdown in his grandparents’ care,” she states like she’s reading from a notecard, despite not breaking rigid eye contact with Phil. He imagines she’s just that engrained with the information in the case file. “The second oldest was found dead in their high school bathroom six weeks ago, having overdosed on their prescribed medication. This was the day after the appeal’s success was broadcasted.”

It feels like a shot through his chest to hear this, as a father and just as a caring person, to hear the fatal consequences of this entire situation. It makes him angry once again, but more towards the people that caused this mess. Though, his sudden feeling of justice he knows is shared by the investigator also scares him, because he can’t possibly put Tommy or any of the system in a situation where they’ll have to relive and broadcast their trauma.

“Then, certainly you would understand my desperation to keep my son out of this mess,” Phil pleads, trying to keep his voice quiet and steady.

“I wouldn’t ask if there was another choice,” Sarah replies, for once dropping the facade of stone to mirror the tone Phil used, “But right now they’re filling the jury with people who have no idea about the true extent of the pain these men have caused. It’s likely Calpurnius’ lawyers will try to discredit the account of the younger survivors because of the age they were rescued. Two of which have been diagnosed with cognitive disabilities that limit their ability to communicate their experiences. I have no doubt the prosecution will exploit these facts to sow doubt in their testimonies.” With every word, Phil feels a little less sure about his intentions to keep Tommy away from participating in this trial. The hopelessness that stems from this mess is palpable to him, his instinctual empathy prevents him from disregarding everything she says in order to shield his son.

And as if she can clearly read the doubt in his thoughts, she adds, “I should also mention, that stunt this afternoon wasn’t orchestrated by our team.”

“What?!” Phil yells, heart dropping to the pit of his stomach, not once considering the phone calls and the stalking to be the work of separate groups.

At least she has the decency to look away as she explains, “We aren’t 100% on the identities of these men, but we have theorized them to be highly radical members of an obscure Internet forum, which houses a dedicated following to the cult’s faith and its founder.”

“And they’ve been stalking my son?” Phil whispers, dumbfounded.

“So it seems. They were rumored to be the ones who put a hit on the person who originally rattled out the cult leaders. It’s only logical they’d have an interest in eliminating the few people who could testify against their leader.”

The room seems to have shrunk by several meters in every direction, the air thin and yet heavy and dense, impossible to breathe. His family, a target of the followers of this damned cult. It's anxiety he hasn't experienced many times before, the feeling of being unsafe in his own home. How would he know if they tried to break in in the middle of the night to steal his son? How does he know they wouldn't resort to killing his whole family? What good of a dad is he if he can't protect his own children?

"Mr. Watson," Sarah interrupts his racing thoughts, snapping her fingers in front of his unfocused gaze, but he's too shocked to feel offended, "We will offer protection, of course, regardless of your decision to involve your son in the upcoming case. We're already working with the local police agency to provide 24/7 security and escort for your sons to continue attending school without the risk of being followed again." She waits moment for the news to sink in before continuing, "But I hope you return the favor by convincing Thomas to help us."

"Thank you," Phil breathes out his relief. But the space is immediately filled with the anxiety of doing just that. It seems too impossible of a task to ask the system to put themselves in that situation. To stand in the same room as the leader of their abusers, to speak about the horror done to them while being dismissed at every comment by the prosecution. It's a task too hefty for most adults dealing with post-trauma, let alone a 13-year-old. Not to mention the system's condition. Would they have to reveal that information to the world? Their disorder makes them particularly vulnerable, he could never ask that secret to be willfully spilled to a crowd who will scrutinize them with every word. Not even the investigator knows about that. Should he tell her it's not that simple? It isn't his place to reveal the system to anybody, especially not someone who could use that information to further their own desires. It's too much of a breach of trust to even consider.

"You don't have to decide right this second," Sarah assures him, "The trial won't take place until a few months from now." She begins to gather up her things, slipping the folder back into her briefcase and shutting the lock. As she stands, she hands him a business card, "Give us a call when you've made your decision, within the week. If Thomas decides to help, we'll need to schedule appointments with our lawyers to brief him as a witness. We'll likely also contact his current therapist and a few teachers, and discuss accommodations for the trial. All for his protection and to ready him to take the stand."

With the card in his hand, Sarah gestures for Phil to lead her to the front so she can leave. He waves her off, deep in thought about their conversation, what he was going to tell his sons, how he should warn them about the online group stalking them. He's still staring at the closed door when he hears footsteps on the staircase.

"Dad?" Phil turns to see Wilbur looking at him with worry, halfway down the steps, while Tommy crouches at the top, spying from behind the banister. Despite the stress of today's events, Phil can't help but smile at the image. It reminds him that no matter the decision, the system isn't alone anymore, they'll always have their brothers and Phil behind them.

He sighs, closing his eyes so he can bring his focus to the present, to the discussion about to ensue. He's stressed, but not nearly as stressed as the system will be to hear the news. He

hopes he can let them know about the situation and offer his comfort and support all the same. He doesn't know what he would do if anything were to happen to his boys.

This is fine.

This is totally fine!

Everything is fine.

Phil told him to think about it, so he's thinking about it. Sure, he probably didn't mean pacing the room at 3 AM unable to sleep because he's stressing about the millions of things that could go wrong should he agree to participate as a witness to the trial for the man who ruined his life- but hey, it's not like Phil told him he *couldn't* do that.

'He means it can wait until morning,' Tubbo states, calm and cool, a terrible mask for the worry he knows they share.

'I can't possibly understand how something this detrimental to our well-being could wait until morning!' Tommy argues back, extremely frustrated and it shows in his quick but quiet pacing back and forth across the room. One, because he's stressed, and two, because he knows he would feel a lot better if he could speak aloud but he can't risk someone waking up because of him. So instead he has this pent-up *something* in his chest, like after he's tried downing a soda in under two minutes, except he has to continually stifle the desire to let it out.

His hands are sore from clenching and unclenching over and over again, his palms coated in tiny red crescents where his fingernails pressed into his skin. After the long talk, everyone had gone to bed but Tommy couldn't stay asleep for more than a few hours. He kept feeling overwhelmed with vivid scenarios of being captured, stuck in a cage, tortured, interspersed with actual memories of just that.

Then there's the near-constant feeling of a blindfold covering his vision, cold metal cuffs on his wrists, hot white pain that makes his scars throb. He can check, again and again, to see if he's bleeding, to check if the chains are there or not, and visually, nothing. There's nothing, he's perfectly fine.

But the feelings stay. The memories of those feelings stay rooted in his body, working his nerves into a frenzy over the phantom pain. Why him? Why does it have to be him? What is so important about him and his brothers that heeds this level of interest? Why does his life have to be intertwined with that fucking cult?

'Tommy, big man, please. Try to get some sleep, I can see you shaking,' Tubbo says, during one of the long moments Tommy stares at his hands lost in thought. And it's true, after the panic attack and the running and the flurry of emotions (Ranboo was so convinced the arrival of that FBI lady meant they were sending him away again), the body is damn near depleted of

energy, every muscle tense and weak, jittery from his messed up nerves. His knees wobble with every step, threatening to collapse at any moment, yet he paces anyway.

He can't even fathom a response, too focused on the whirlwind of spiraling thoughts, his cursing of the unfairness of it all, why he had to bring this evil to the Watsons. He's literally on the cult's radar again, they were *this close* to being kidnapped today. Why him?

His blood?

They, indeed, are a vessel for the blood god, so something must be special about their blood. Their life essence. Their thin blue veins branching throughout their pale arms. The scars on his arms could flow like rivers. He's seen it before. They're *filled* with blood. No matter how much is lost they just keep making more. Their body is meant to be harvested, like a fucking crop. That's what they were born for, that's what the cult *made* them to be.

Suddenly, the panicked mood switches to something darker, something born of spite.

'They want my blood?' He thinks to himself, wanting to laugh at the madness of it. He sneaks out of his room, pausing to make sure everyone else is asleep before he tiptoes to the bathroom, closing the door and locking it without a sound.

'Tommy?' Tubbo questions, bewildered by this shift in attitude.

Tommy doesn't answer, instead he kneels on the tile floor and opens the under-sink cabinet, reaching to the back corner under a stack of towels for the hidden object.

Around a week after Fundy's appearance, when all the sharp objects around the house suddenly disappeared, Tommy was alone with his thoughts at school when he spotted a small kitchen knife left behind on a cafeteria table. It was a dumb little paring knife, meant for fruits or maybe to just spread butter on toast, with a flowery handle longer than the blade. But it was sharp, and Tommy pocketed it and hid it in the bathroom at home, quote, 'just in case.'

He didn't have an idea at the time, but now he's glad he thought ahead, looking over the blade in his hands like he's found a hidden treasure.

'Tommy, what are you doing? Where did you get that?' Tubbo presses, growing very concerned, his anxiety adding to the manic feeling filling Tommy's bones.

"They can't have my blood, Tubbo," Tommy whispers aloud, as if that's justification for the downright nostalgic way he stares at the knife.

'No, Tommy, whatever you're thinking, don't. Okay? Please just go back to bed,' Tubbo pleads, on deaf ears. When Tommy begins pressing the knife against the rough skin of his arm, Tubbo's panic shoots through the roof. 'I'm going to get Sam,' he states, then in an instant, Tommy is alone in his head.

His breathing has increased rapidly by the time he musters the strength to draw blood, exhaling all at once as the sting envelopes his whole arm. But there's something relieving in the pain, the fact that it's real pain and not just shitty illusions his brain makes him feel. He's

smiling, happy by his decision, adding another jagged cut to his forearm, right near the bend of his elbow.

It's like peeling off a scab, every time he lifts the blade to see the lines underneath, the perfection of it, of the river of red that paints his pale skin, starting to collect in tiny puddles on the bathroom floor. The house is quiet but white noise rings loud in his ears. The air that clouds his lungs, hissing through his teeth from the pain, heart beating like a drum. Despite being alone in the room, the space feels too crowded, like there's an audience of people watching, waiting, eyeing his blood with the same maniacal grin as him.

When Tubbo returns with Ranboo in tow, Tommy's frantic determination to bleed himself dry has escalated, making the cuts deeper, messier. He can feel Tubbo growing nauseous from the amount of red flooding the white tile floor.

"Just don't fucking look then!" He snarls in a harsh whisper, no louder than his pained grimaces when he drags the blade against his arm again. His grin is manic, his breathing rapid and making him lightheaded. Or maybe that's the blood loss, who knows.

'Look, I really think we should go get Phil...' Ranboo says gently, trying to be subtle while he guides the hand holding the knife away from their skin. When Tommy notices, he slams back into control, plunging the knife so deep into his forearm that the red tip pokes through the opposite side. It hurts like a bitch. The pain sends waves of tremors through his body but Tommy doesn't whimper, suppressing the fiery sting and staying quiet like he's supposed to.

He grins madly at the fresh river of crimson making its way past his pale skin, collecting around his legs. "Blood for the blood god," he whispers.

'Blood for the blood god,' Tubbo chants back on instinct, sounding tired.

'Tommy?' Sam appears, just as Tommy withdraws the blade from his limb, biting his lip until it bleeds to suppress his weak cries of pain. With the knife exiting his skin, the blood runs quicker, bursting from the wound like air leaking from a balloon. 'Put the knife down, please.'

The knife clatters against the tile flooring, his hand hanging open in the air as he gazes unflinching at the mess he made. In his moment of weakness, Sam swiftly takes control, pushing Tommy to the back of his own mind as he tries to stand on shaky legs.

Sam gets his feet under him, feeling weighed down by the weakness of their body, but as he stands his socked feet soaked in blood slip on the wet floor and he falls back to the ground, his back now slick with the sticky red. Sam lets out a yelp when he lands, feeling wiped and exhausted and a little scared by how much blood has spilled from their body. It feels like too much to try standing again so he raises his non-bleeding arm to bang against the drywall loudly, hoping to wake someone up. "Why, Tommy?" He asks simply, tired just by holding his head off the floor.

'They can't have it, Sam,' Tommy explains in a small voice, 'It's our blood, they can't take it from us.'

‘So you try to kill yourself?!’ Ranboo asks, baffled.

‘Well, no,’ as Tommy’s mania begins its descent and his thoughts clear, he feels confused about his original intentions. ‘I just- the blood, it’s the reason we’re in this mess.’

“No, Tommy,” Sam breathes, his emotions dousing his flaming heart down to embers, the bafflement bleeding into sympathy. He steels himself to slam a fist against the wall again, a few times, thankfully hearing footsteps in the hall as a response. Help is on the way. “Our blood isn’t the problem, we need that to live. It’s the cult, they’re the problem. We are the victim of their crimes.” He explains softly, eyes glued to the shaking doorknob as their savior realizes it’s locked and instructs someone else to get a key.

The blood is warm on his skin, like he’s bathing in it, the streaks of red climbing up the sides of his thighs. It makes him uneasy, but to the body, it’s something familiar, comforting.

‘Sam will keep us safe, Tommy. Let’s go rest in the house, okay?’ Tubbo offers with the mental equivalent of a hug to Tommy in their shared mind.

The response is a sudden void as the three return to the inner world, Sam now left alone just as the door opens. He doesn’t count himself as a particularly emotional person, but the sight of the Watsons panicked and worried expressions brings a wave of guilt and sadness over him. Tears gather in the corners of his eyes as he whispers, “I’m sorry,” before breaking into sobs. The pain, the panic, the stress all weighs so heavy on their frail body. He just wants to sleep, but sleep has to wait until the injuries are taken care of.

Luckily, Techno arrives with the first aid kit just as Wilbur gathers him into his long arms, Phil on the phone in the background presumably calling for an ambulance.

As he’s comforted by his brother’s embrace, his thoughts turn back to what he had been contemplating before a frantic Tubbo called for his help.

A mix of revenge and careful planning. There’s no way in hell he’s allowing their captors to evade righteous justice, but there’s also no way in hell he’s allowing Tommy to carry the burden of representing them in a trial. So what can he do to help?

The answer: The Dark. It’s where all the memories of their time in the cult’s hands lie. He’s only seen glimpses, only heard ominous cries that sometimes bleed through the cave walls. The answer has to be in there, and if his theory is correct, he should be able to unlock those memories for himself should he search through the dark cavern. It’ll be hell, that’s for sure, but he could spare Tommy and Tubbo the heartache of reliving that trauma by putting the burden on himself. Then he could represent them in court, once he’s attained all the memories, once he’s lived those experiences through the dark, decrepit prison that lies in wait beyond the cave entrance.

It’s as good a plan as any, so he smiles to himself as Wilbur and Techno help him down the stairs to the awaiting ambulance. Once he’s stable, once *they’re* stable, he’ll be ready.

To finish this once and for all.

Chapter End Notes

so were nearing the climax, which mean the length of time between this and ch 16 will likely be pretty long, since i'll be going into way too much detail about court shit that probably doesn't matter but i'm doing it anyways

its also basically the last chance to spill all of the information i've summoned in my (frankly, overworked) brain about the backgrounds of the characters and what really happened doing those years in the possession of the cult

hope the excess amounts of dialogue in this wasn't too like info-dumpy, let me know what you think

next stop, the second to last chapter!!!!!!!!!! get hyped yall (except please dont i am terrified of not meeting expectations lol)

have a wonderful day everyone, (^-^)/

Our Ties to Reality

Chapter Summary

Sam's absence leaves Ranboo a little lost on his way to the school's bathroom.

Chapter Notes

updated the chapter count, hey, remember when I said I planned out the ending?

ya, me neither

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

“Hey. Hey, Ranboo. Come back to me, bud. Whatever you’re seeing, it’s not real.”

Ranboo blinks a few times, finding himself gasping like he hadn’t breathed in several minutes. His gaze is still stuck on the doorway to the computer lab but with his newfound awareness, he looks back to Techno sitting across from him. His foster brother is quite well-versed in hiding his emotions although the look of concern for Ranboo’s acting is front and center.

“Sorry, I just... zoned out again. Um, where were we?” Ranboo attempts to evade any explanation, glancing down at his schoolwork to see an entirely different language staring back.

The past week and a half have been very difficult for the system. Sam had ventured into the caves in the headspace after they agreed to stand witness for the trial. Not only is it difficult to navigate normal life with Sam’s everlasting support temporarily absent, but some of the effects of his investigation inside the memories they hold are also starting to bleed into the real world.

For the last half hour, Ranboo swore he saw someone exit the computer lab, a large figure in a blood-red cloak, who just stood there and watched him. Techno was talking to him, time was passing, yet the figure stood still, menacingly, taunting. He couldn’t concentrate at all with the vision staring at him, unable to tear his gaze away. It was like being frozen with fear. Even now he feels the tendrils of panic readying him for evasion, still convinced the danger is upon him.

When Techno broke his gaze, the figure disappeared, but Ranboo can’t help but feel like it’s still there somehow, just out of sight.

Right now, Techno is helping Ranboo out with an English assignment during lunch period in the library. There's almost no one else in the large open room bar the librarian at the front desk and a student or two with their noses in books. Ranboo is trying his best to focus on what he is writing and what Techno is telling him, but the alarms in his head still ring *danger! danger!* every other minute which screws up his focus.

At the sight of his eyes glazing over once more, Techno calmly closes his book and sets it aside, saying, "We can stop for now, if you need a break."

"No, no, I can keep going," Ranboo argues, picking up his pencil and staring down at the book in front of him. Some meaningless words stare back. He doesn't actually know what page they're on.

Techno softly places a hand on his wrist and Ranboo silently appreciates it. The hand is solid, something that can physically tie him to the real world. Even if everything feels like a dream, Techno is real. He can't say the same for himself. The bandages wrapping his left arm feel like sandpaper on his healing wounds, making writing or doing anything at all distracting and painful. And every other moment feels like he's floating a foot above the body, only a spectator to the routine of schoolwork and lecturing. He should probably tell all this to Techno, but he doesn't want to bother.

In what feels like a blink of an eye, the next class is starting. Ranboo is sitting in the front row closest to the door, directly adjacent to the analog clock on the wall counting down to the final period of the day. It seems everyone is privy to his bad day, going by the occasional glance from the teacher and the stares of his peers. And that he hasn't been called out despite not writing a single note or paying much attention at all.

Yet there are eyes on him, he knows. He just can't see them. Between the moments of dissociation Ranboo has his focus on everywhere and everything surrounding him; the scratching of pencils, the sliding of chairs, someone trying to stifle their phone going off, the constant *tick tick tick* of the clock. If this wasn't an everyday occurrence at school he would think he's going crazy.

Again, just out of the corner of his eye he sees a face in the window, veiled in red just like the other vision, and despite being on the second floor it looks like the figure is standing right outside, waiting, watching him. A growing nauseous feeling forces his hand to raise and ask to use the bathroom. It's the middle of a PowerPoint lecture but the teacher writes him a pass without question. He tries to ignore the curious gazes of his peers as he shoulders his backpack and leaves the room. No one stops him to ask why he's taking all his belongings to the bathroom with him.

Free from any windows to the outside, Ranboo can breathe a sigh of relief as he takes his time journeying to the bathroom. There's no one else about in the halls, but that feeling of being watched won't go away. It's reminiscent of the three seconds of pure frozen panic he felt when Tommy pointed out that van stalking them the week and a half beforehand, but now those three seconds play on repeat in his head. There's no danger, he knows that, but the body is still in constant fight or flight mode. Maybe it's because he's out of the house, or maybe it's got something to do with the upcoming meeting about the witness stand.

It'll be Sams's first appearance since his decision to venture into The Dark. No one's really sure how well it'll go down. Tommy and Tubbo prefer to keep any memories surrounding the caves as far from them as possible. Ranboo may have come from there himself, but he can't remember anything from it, and he'd prefer to keep it that way. He does, however, remember how difficult the adjustment period was after escaping those caves. The inner world was so bright, he thought he had died. He couldn't speak to anyone or focus, he lacked depth perception and object permanence, had trouble retaining short-term memory; all still inside the headspace. He can't fathom having to front while in that state.

Ranboo only wished he could comfort Sam, act as his support and ground just as Sam has done for all of them. But they already discussed beforehand that he can't. Sam refuses to allow any of the system to listen in on his involvement in the meetings, especially regarding the memories from The Dark. So he'll have to front alone.

Well, great, now Ranboo's anxious about Sam's well-being on top of his general paranoia of being watched. He huffs and walks a little faster, hoping to get to the bathroom quickly and splash some water on his face to ground him.

He heads down the staircase towards the hall where he last saw a bathroom when something in the air changes. A few of the ceiling lights flicker, the silence is heavier, like all other life in the building just stopped- not to mention he's not where he expected to be. This hallway looks completely different, like he wandered into a part of the school he's never been to before. The signs next to all the doors look like they're written in some other language, the tiles on the floor seem irrationally placed, unlike the checkered pattern throughout the rest of the school.

Surely he took a wrong turn somewhere. He can either backtrack to the classroom and search again or maybe he could keep going until he finds the bathroom then figure out where he's actually ended up after. Despite his unease, he pushes forward. This hallway extends quite a far distance, it almost feels like he's descending into the earth. The shadows on the walls grow and his footsteps stop echoing against the cold tile.

He grips tightly to the shoulder straps of his backpack, unease growing like a tumor inside him. The overall tone of the atmosphere has taken a dive, as if the lights have been cut. Ranboo feels less and less sure that he's still at school, and more like he's walked into some dark parallel dimension. What's worse is the ambiance. Whispers creep into his thoughts and that feeling of being watched is a hundred times worse.

Is this still the school building? It seems more like a nightmare, steadily walking through the decrepit halls, the walls bleeding further into a state of neglect and disrepair. His heart thumps loudly against the walls of his chest as he struggles to find familiarity in the environment.

That's when his eyes land on a door. A large gate made of thick metal, rusted and worn, familiar but in the worst way. Instantly his nerves become frantic, an instinctual direness pulling him towards the door while every other cell in his body wants to run away. His hand is out before him, shaking, until he reaches the handle. Then suddenly he's in the doorway, watching the light sliver and shrink while the door locks with a heavy *clank* behind him. He's in almost complete darkness now, the air is ten times colder and he's frozen with fear. The

corrupted whispers in his head grow louder, chanting in some unknown language, he feels compelled to continue.

Stairs descend into a void, where a chill breeze wafts up and through his curls. He feels a hand along the cold brick as he walks down, hating every inch of the rugged stone but he needs the physical support. The blindness is triggering enough, he doesn't need to go falling down the stairs now. Ranboo feels so lost, like he's stumbled into a different reality altogether. There's a constant tremble through his spine, a suffocating silence that makes it difficult to breathe, not to mention the freaky voices that seem to echo around him. He can't decipher any of what they're saying, but it feels directed at him, somehow.

At the bottom of the stairs, it's too dark to see any further. Amidst the strange sounds is a low drone, a haunted whirring that fills the space with an oppressive air. He walks blindly into the darkness, holding a hand out in front of him to avoid crashing into anything.

He catches himself mid-squeal when a gloved hand grabs him by the upper arm and spins him around, then he's face to face with one of the veiled figures, the ones that have been following him all day. He struggles, thrashing in an attempt to free himself, yelling, "Let go of me!" He's barely spoken all day yet his voice is shot.

"What are you doing out of your cage?" The figure speaks in some demonic baritone, his words pounding through Ranboo's skull like he was hit by a bat. "You'll regret finding a way out, worm."

Panic shoots through his veins, at the apex of his fight or flight, every ounce of energy now directed towards getting the heck out of there. He pulls away with his entire weight, using his free hand to try to dislodge the tight grip on his arm. "Let go, let go!" He repeats it again and again, more desperate each time he pleads. It's his worst nightmare come to fruition, the exact scenario he's feared the most over the past weeks. He's going to be taken. They're going to be enslaved again, kept in the dark and abused and their blood drained from them like fucking cattle. This is it. Their mirage of freedom is finally coming to an end. They'll never see the sunlight again, never feel a comforting touch, never hear Wilbur's voice, never confide in Techno, never hug Phil, never speak, never hope, never leave-

"*Okay!* Okay! I'll let go, just please- you gotta calm down, Ranboo, please, just take a deep breath."

The ringing in his ears starts to subside, he realizes he has his eyes clenched shut, so much so that all he sees are stars when he opens them. He's on the edge of hyperventilating, his pulse thumping loud against his skull, and now that he's free from the heavy grip, his arms wrap around his chest like it's the only thing holding him together. The shaking hasn't gone away yet but after a few moments, he's finally able to make out his surroundings.

Techno is standing a few feet away, palms open and unguarded, a sharp concern lacing his features. Behind him are a few school administrators by the staircase, one is radioing to some other higher up while another is on the phone, speaking lowly in private, the third is watching the situation as it plays out. The floor is a dark gray concrete, the walls bricked high with several computer towers and large machines around him. He doesn't know where he is, or how he got there. He looks back at the only familiar face. "T-Techno?"

“Hey, bud,” his pink-haired brother responds, speaking calmly and without accusation, “are you back with me?”

Ranboo nods slowly, still glancing around at the unfamiliar room like he’s caught in a trap. “Where am I? Is it- Is it safe?” He whimpers.

“Yes. You’re safe, you’re okay now. Can I hold your hand or something? You mentioned that helps, right?” Techno assures him, inching closer. When Ranboo nods again, Techno takes his frail hand in his own, holding tightly and squeezing to remind him that he’s real. “We’re in the school’s basement,” he explains, once he’s sure Ranboo is aware and listening. “They saw you wander down here on the security cameras but you weren’t- you know, all there,” Techno taps the side of his crown as a gesture, putting in lighter terms that Ranboo was clearly having an episode.

“Oh,” he responds, feeling embarrassed. Really he should know the difference between a hallucination and real life by now, but it felt so real, like he was transported into a nightmare. “S-sorry, I didn’t mean to-“

Techno cuts off his apology, “Nonsense, it’s not your fault, okay? Now, let’s go wait in the front office, Phil should be here soon to pick you up.”

“But school isn’t over yet-“

“Don’t worry about school,” Techno squeezes his hand again, looking him dead in the eyes with complete seriousness. “You’re more important, alright? School can suck it,” he says, which makes Ranboo laugh a little.

The lady watching from behind them clears her throat, nodding her head towards the stairs when Techno looks to her. He shrugs and starts leading Ranboo up the stairs, back to the normal school hallway.

The other adults follow behind them, the one on the phone now writing something on a notepad while the other argues over the small radio. “Heading to the office, now, over,” they say.

“Anyone care to explain why the basement door was unlocked in the first place?” A disgruntled voice plays through the speaker.

The radio guy looks at the woman who got their attention before. “Don’t look at me,” she defends herself, “Matt told me he locked it after the lunch period.” The other relays this to the radio.

“Well you can tell Matt to meet me after his afternoon shift. Count yourself lucky no one got hurt, Greene.”

Ranboo tunes out any further conversation, letting Techno guide him through the halls and only focusing on their connected hands. He still feels all floaty, but his energy has been completely drained from the visions and his constant panic.

He decides he's had enough for today. One of the skills the system has been practicing is positive triggers, which makes switching between them faster and easier to cope with. Taking over control of the body while confronting isn't that difficult, but attempting to bring someone from the inner world to the active body can be very disorienting. It's why they've always had the habit of only purposefully switching while the body is sleeping. It makes logical sense, seeing as negative triggers are the usual cause of prime, and some brothers have a heightened sense of emotional distress despite not being anywhere near the front.

Techno and Ranboo are directed to sit on the metal benches by the front office, in view of the main door and the parking lot. Techno won't be leaving when Phil arrives, he's staying with Ranboo for now but then he'll continue the school day and attend his club meeting after.

Ranboo is too drained to care about his usual personal boundaries and huddles close into Techno's side, letting his eyes relax as he asks, "Hey, Techno?"

"Yeah, bud?" Techno replies easily, not seeming to mind the physical contact.

"Can you talk about chess for a little while?" Ranboo makes his request with a small smile, already looking forward to the oncoming presence sliding into the headspace.

"Uh, sure," Techno agrees without question, beginning to explain a legendary opening move that the starting player makes on their second turn in order to put themselves at a disadvantage. "It goes pawn to e4, then after the other player moves, king to e2, completely exposing the most critical piece in the game at the first chance. It's the ultimate F U to the opponent, throwing away the upper hand for a gag," he explains, talking animatedly as a sign of his passion for the subject.

"That's a pro-gamer move right there," Ranboo mumbles, mind growing fuzzy as he senses the incoming switch. He hopes Techno will remember to fill Tubbo in on what happened once he's in the front seat.

Techno chuckles, "It's been dubbed 'The Bongcloud Attack.'"

He can feel the piqued interest of Tubbo only catching the tail end of that explanation, but by then the familiar void of falling into the inner world is all he can think about. There he'll be surrounded in peace and his family, free from any overwhelming stimuli. The safety of the headspace.

The freedom of home.

Chapter End Notes

so i was naive to think i would actually follow a plan of action for the remainder of the fic, of course i didn't, i can only write when its spontaneous, when i feel motivated, which is at random points throughout the week

this chapter, like all others, is mostly self indulgent. i think its relevant to the plot still but it strays from the path i wanted to take which was ultimately following sam in his decision, that will still come but its gotta be by my own brain's timeline which is simultaneously never and always - so its in the works

ive been thinking of the ventures im planning for after I finish this fic, anybody up for a volleyball anime style dsmf fic? like haikyuu but beachtrio instead of those anime twinkies - not a crossover, i haven't watched more than three episodes anyway

or a squid game au, cause i freakin loved that show

anyway, i'll crawl back into my cave to write the rest of this fic now, see ya

bee safe and have a good day (and leave a comment, please <3)

The Dark pt.1

Chapter Summary

Sam meets the one who calls himself "The Architect," whatever that means.

Chapter Notes

hehe sorry its been a long while school is kicking my ass

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

The entrance to The Dark stands before him, a familiar sight of the sharp mountain incline. A protruding rock hangs over the cold metal door, locked closed with a comically sized latch barring its access. Sam has gazed in and around this area for many years, though his Warden persona feels dampened by his intentions this time, as he has to actually enter The Dark rather than guard it.

Taking those final steps to close the distance between him and the door is harder than he expects, he feels the eyes of his lone escort, Tommy, watching his back standing hesitant. His usual bare arms below his signature shirt sleeves are wrapped tight with bandages, dotted in red along the inner forearms. The injuries they cover aren't necessarily real in the inner world but represent their weight on Tommy's psyche. Sam wishes there was more he could do to help him heal, but hopefully, this plan of his will better the entire system in the long run.

The young teen clears his throat awkwardly and offers, "No one will be mad if you change your mind, you know."

"I know," Sam replies, trying to sound more confident than he feels, pushing all his might into his legs to move him forward. As opposed to his thoughts, which are moving faster than ever before, conceiving of every possible scenario that could befall him in those caves. Would he even know how to navigate them? And if its name is apt, how will he see? He knows there has to be some transition from the physical space of the caves themselves and the memories they contain, but how to access them? He has no idea. There are so many questions he hasn't thought through yet, he's starting to feel a little overwhelmed. "Hey, Tommy," he says before he can stop himself, already self-critical of his next question for its conceivable harm but his anxiety needs more information to be assuaged, "What do you remember about The Dark?"

Sam for a moment wishes for Tommy to just ignore the question, to not even attempt to trigger any memories he's left quietly untouched. But to his surprise, Tommy doesn't seem

distressed in the slightest as he answers, though his brow furrows as he thinks about it, “Well, it’s dark, that’s for sure. But you can still see, kinda. Everything’s really flat and gray, and cold, if not the same cold as the real world, it’s just... heavy. I can’t describe it.”

“It was just you and Tubbo there, right?” Sam presses, wondering why he’s never thought to get this information beforehand. The boys just don’t talk about it, really.

“Yes, but there- there was...” Tommy starts the thought but it seems to vanish mid-sentence. “I- I feel like there was... something- I’m missing something but I can’t remember,” he holds his forehead with the palm of one hand, sounding irritated at his lack of memory. “Why can’t I remember?”

Sam lays a comforting hand on Tommy’s shoulder and assures him, “Hey, don’t worry about it, okay? Thank you for answering my question, I don’t feel as nervous about going in there,” he says with a soft chuckle.

“Sam, big man, you’re telling me ‘The Big Man Sam’ himself is nervous? You’re lying, you’re kidding me, say you’re lying right now,” Tommy tries holding a stern expression but breaks into a grin fairly quickly.

“It happens occasionally,” Sam smiles in return, giving Tommy a few pats before withdrawing and taking a step back. “I’ll be seeing you,” he says, turning towards the cave entrance and taking in the clear sky one last time, his eyes trailing from blue to the large stone overhang. Underneath, the sun is blocked completely.

But before he can take his first step, he hears, “wait-“ followed by a pair of skinny arms wrapping suddenly around his torso. Tommy buries his face into the back of Sam’s shirt, holding on like this is the last time they’ll see each other in a while.

It stays like that for a few minutes, Sam allowing the teen to hug from behind while he grazes his fragile arms. Soon enough, Sam breaks free only to spin around and capture the young lad in a bear hug. He doesn’t mention the tears soaking into his shoulder, instead fitting his hold with as much emotion as possible, wanting his farewell to be a promise for a swift return.

A small delay later and Sam finds himself a few strides from the entrance, under the harsh cover of stone that separates the sky’s light from the caves. He takes in the door, a large grey slab of metal with a steel latch holding it closed. It’s a strange mechanism, looking more like a dramatic display than a protective lock. Sam finds the hinge of the latch and quickly elevates the opposite end, pulling the steel away from the door until it’s free to collapse against the sidewall. With the lock dismantled, he takes the long handle that emerged out of the metal to pull with all his might. The steel slides against the ground, crushing pebbles and debris into dust under the movement of the large metal door. Once it’s open enough for him to find through, he stops pulling, letting go to catch his breath.

Then he breathes out steadily and enters the cave.

The door rumbles to a close behind him, the outside light dimming until it diminished altogether. Sam stands still for a moment, looking around as he let his eyes adjust to the dark. Sure enough, after a few seconds, the ambient light restores his vision, like a pale fog filling the room. He notes the heaviness Tommy mentioned, feeling grounded and slightly constricted. The air weighs down on him, but it's not enough to deter him.

Sam considers feeling his way with the wall but by now the room is open for him to see, it's an empty hallway, a hollow space that extends out as if carved into the stone. There's no end wall, the way extends deeper into the ground, and along the sides there are various tunnels that offshoot from the main area.

It's fairly barren, Sam doesn't know what he was expecting, exactly. From what he heard from the boys, this place is the barrier between their active selves and their past memories, but Sam never gathered how it worked.

Well, he's here to find out.

He starts walking, keeping an eye out for any signs of direction or, anything, really. His footsteps are not as loud as he would expect from such an open place. It's less of a hallway and more of a gallery, with a ceiling far above concealed by the fog.

It's odd, the walls are completely smooth, all the same slate grey color, not appearing to be carved from stone at all. They look almost generated as if modeled by a computer. There are no signs of life, flaw, or detail even. He reaches a point where the hall curves downward, descending into a staircase. That same fog lights a decent area around him, but he sees the stairs extend for quite a far distance.

At least he isn't afraid, anyway. There's an odd weight to the air and no one else around but otherwise, he feels calm and secure, like he's been here before. But he can't recall.

He heads down further. Each click of his soles against the steps feels muffled, there's no echo, no reverb, it's unnatural, for sure.

Time passes. The stairs end in a small room with three connecting tunnels. There's nothing to distinguish them.

Sam sighs to himself, muttering, "Who designed this place anyway?"

"Hello?" A billowy voice echoes from one of the adjacent tunnels, slightly tinny with a voice crack on the end. It's no voice Sam has ever heard before, yet it leaves an odd warmth in his chest.

He freezes in place, trying to quickly decide if he should flee or call back. He really wasn't expecting to run into anybody. He's yet to make a decision when the figure appears in the archway of one of the tunnels.

It's a man, quite tall and imposing, wearing a long grey robe with a hood that casts a dark shadow over his face. In the center of the robe's midsection is a large white spiral, a strange icon that sticks out in Sam's mind.

They are still a room apart, so while he has surely seen Sam already, the man calls out, “Who’s there?”

Sam stands with a bit more confidence, straightening his back when he responds, “My name is Sam. I’m the Warden of this place. Who are you?”

The stranger takes a second to stare at him, “Really?” He says in disbelief. Two ghastly hands lift from the sleeves of the robe to grasp the sides of his hood and pull it to rest around his shoulders. He reveals his dark tousled hair, and although no longer shadowed, his eyes are still hidden by the long bangs. “Sam? It’s you?”

“Uh... yes?” Sam is hesitant about his enthusiasm, acting as if they’ve met before. He almost startles backward when the man makes it to his side in a few long strides, stopping a meter away.

“Yes! The Warden!” The man gestures towards him with a flair of his arms, and now that he’s closer, Sam can see that he doesn’t appear to be that much older than himself. He continues, gathering the ends of his sleeves, “You are the Warden, that you are.” He says this with finality, no hint of elaborating further.

Awkwardly, Sam asks again, “So, uh, who are you?” Then after a moment, he adds, “And how do you know who I am?”

“Yes!” The man (teenager?) exclaims, “Forgive me, it’s been a long time without another soul.” He shows off a toothy grin that takes Sam aback with how much he looks like Tommy, just by the smile alone. “My name is Karl Jacobs, I am the Architect.”

And once again they seem to be at a stalemate, waiting for the other’s response. The hood may be down but Karl’s eyes are still obscured by his fluffy brown hair, cut just long enough to reach the tips of his cheeks. Sam could easily fill the silence but he’s trying desperately to read this stranger, conflicted by his pull of familiarity when he wants to remain cautious. There’s no malicious tone in Karl’s voice, no aggressive body language, but the fact that he can’t see the other’s eyes is throwing him off. Like some instinctual programming is making him wary of this person who in any other light would be considered harmless.

“By the way, what are you doing here, Sam?” Karl eventually asks, on a more serious note, as if he only now put together the situation.

Strange mannerisms aside, Sam is here for a reason, and if this person really is a part of the system, maybe they can give him some answers. “I need help,” he says, “we have to present as a witness to an important trial, I need the memories of the past so I can step in for the others.”

“Our... trial? You mean, retribution, yes? Justice against the ones who wronged us?” Karl asks innocently, though Sam is concerned how he knows what ‘retribution’ means but not ‘trial.’ Then, to himself, Karl mutters, “They always said justice is swift for the wrongdoers in light, is that not the case?”

“What?” Sam says, caught off guard by the odd language, “I mean, yes, retribution, it happened but- the people who found us, they messed up. The founder will be free if we don’t speak up.”

That seems to kill the mood instantly, as Karl’s eyes widen with fear and he stutters, “The founder? Freed? That’s not- that can’t be right. The Old One, he will stop at nothing to enact his sins. I only promised to let you out so we would remain safe!”

“Let me out?” Sam repeats, “How do you mean?”

“I mean, I created this world as a safe haven until I was sure the light world could grant us safety from his torment, you are only meant to guard against the threat of his image not-“ Karl rambles, but seems to catch himself, gazing toward Sam as he bites his tongue. “It doesn’t matter,” he says, then he turns around and begins walking back to the tunnel where he appeared from, “This is very bad, Sam, surely you will tell me there is an outside soul that can protect us?”

“Wait, wait, I don’t understand, what are you talking about? Where are you going?” Sam quickly follows after him, feeling much more confused than he was five minutes ago.

“Just what are you doing here, Sam?” Karl asks again, stopping suddenly and spinning in place to face him.

Sam catches up to him and huffs behind his mask, “I need our memories of the past, so I can be a witness for a trial and-“

“Absolutely not!” Karl cuts him off, sounding repulsed by the idea. “These memories aren’t something you can handle, Sam. You’re a child.”

He frowns at that, “You don’t look any older than me.”

“I may not look it, but I am ageless,” Karl says this like it leaves a bad taste in his mouth. “You shouldn’t be here.” Then he takes off again down the tunnel, pulling the hood of his robe back up over his head as he goes.

Sam feels like his head is spinning, this Karl makes no sense to him. It seems like every word out of his mouth is a riddle and he can’t keep up. There’s a memory of this man somewhere, he knows they’ve met before but he can’t reach it. He calls out, “Wait! Please, just wait-“

A feeling of falling, like he tripped over something in his path and suddenly Sam finds himself in the midst of a flashback.

. . .

“You’re not coming?”

It’s just like the first room he saw when he entered The Dark, but now he’s watching himself standing before Karl, The Architect, looking betrayed in some way.

“No,” Karl replies to his question, *“This is something you must do on your own. Please do not worry, your brothers will follow soon.”*

“But you are staying?” The Sam of this memory questions again, with genuine concern.

“Once you leave this place, you cannot return.” And this is something Sam almost scoffs at like it’s been repeated to him a thousand times. *“You are the Warden for the light world, and I, for the dark.”*

A familiar irritation, for the way Karl seems to talk around his words, not truly listening to what he expresses yet answering with unwitting confidence. It makes Sam feel like a child in the face of an all-knowing guardian.

“Sam, I see your pout,” Karl smiles jovially, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder, *“The truth is that once you’ve witnessed the true light for yourself, you will find no need for a dark world such as this. I will be the threat to your new safety, and I have fought too long to befall it by my own function.”*

“But what about you?” Sam argues with a childish passion, more a whine than a demand. *“I’m supposed to just leave you?”*

Karl’s hand falls back to his side, seeming dejected by Sam’s insistence, *“Yes, Sam. For good reason. Your memories will remain with me as well.”*

“I won’t even remember you?!” Sam stomps in a petty rage, physically taken aback by the statement. *“You’re just- you’ll make me forget you ever existed? That’s not fair!”*

The Karl in this memory displays a subtle change in stature, considering Sam like he’s never witnessed a tantrum like this before. Sam, in hindsight, is surprised as well, he thought he could count on one hand the number of times he’s behaved that way, his role has always been of cold stature, a sound mind and just decisions. What else about himself is unknown, lost in some forgotten-

. . .

Sam falls back into himself in the present time, or what he surely hopes is the present time, he really wouldn’t have a way of knowing, would he?

He clasps his forehead and staggers, feeling a rush from the resurgence of the memory as it attempts to fit back into his psyche. His vision blurs but he sees that Karl has taken notice and has turned around to observe him. The ties to reality braid back together and he rights himself, sputtering, “We- we haven’t just met, you- you gave my role-“

“You are my creation, yes. Well...” As soon as he agrees, Karl seems to backtrack, finding some other train of thought that alters his answer. After a moment he settles on, “I never granted existence but I granted your purpose.”

“And then erased my memories of this place!” Sam bites, feeling a sudden surge of anger. It’s a rush similar to his past self in the wake of this exact situation, this stilted conversation

where Karl speaks as if he's so all-knowing and Sam can add nothing of relevance. Like a belligerent child.

"It was my intention from the beginning, you are acting irrationally over something decided far before you came to be," Karl responds, shaking his head, "it would be a stupendous task to move forward in the light world without first barring the connection to the past."

"Maybe at first, but not now," Sam takes a step toward Karl, keeping his irritation under wraps while he speaks with severity, "I need to know what happened. We won't be safe without it. Or-" he's hit with an idea suddenly, his mood heightening, "you can do it. You can step in, right? You already have access to all of it."

"I fail to understand what you're implying, Sam. I hold the past so it cannot reach the light world."

"But what if you go to the light world?" Sam stands a bit straighter, eyes Karl a bit more pleadingly. "You won't let me handle the memories, but you can. You could have the information they need to lock away the founder."

Karl frowns while he considers, fiddling with the sleeves of his robe. "No. I apologize, but I cannot."

"What? Why?" Sam exclaims.

"My affiliation with the light world is much different from yours and your brothers, Sam."

"So?"

"So," Karl hunches so the hood obscures the majority of his face, "I can never go back there. My connection was severed when I moved the Control Room to the surface." Then, under his breath, "Besides, I would never survive if I returned there again."

"I don't understand," Sam pleads, just feeling confused overall now.

"Indeed," Karl agrees, "now leave this place," and says nothing more, walking away with purpose in the opposite direction, further down into the caves.

Sam wants to yell again but all that escapes him is a frustrated growl, and the moment he steps forward to follow the scenery quickly blurs and he finds himself stepping into the main room again, somehow facing the exit. Bewildered, he spouts, "What the hell?!" and looks around for any sign of the Architect. He has no idea how he got back to the exit, a second ago he was deep within the caves, it makes no sense.

He doubts turning around and trying to find Karl again will be productive, especially if he's capable of just straight up teleporting Sam away. The only option is to leave The Dark and focus on keeping his family safe, memory or no memory. Whatever it takes.

And maybe try to find out more about this Karl along the way.

Chapter End Notes

I would go into detail but I don't think anyone really cares. I've got hella ADHD and as an adult having ADHD it just makes all the shit in life you're supposed to just learn and adapt into hell, basically. My meds may solve the anxiety problem but that don't mean I've got executive function lmao. I am "writing" but its hard to feel good about it, although this idea of blaming Karl for everything has provided some inspiration. I'll ride that for now.

I've got a tiktok now, does anyone want to see my tiktok? I don't think anyone does, I mean, it's kind of dead anyway but if you like ukulele music I play my original songs on there. (its the_gaybee)

Oh, and kids, don't do drugs. Thanks, bye.

The Dark pt.2

Chapter Summary

Sam attempts to connect some dots.

There are a lot of dots.

(wtf why does Karl talk like that lol)

Chapter Notes

got like three more existential crises planned for next week so imma post this real quick before i lose the willpower

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

The large hallowed entrance to the Dark echoes with the sounds of Sam's effort as he pushes against the vault door. He's tried every which way, attempting to get the metal to slide even the smallest amount but to no avail. It seems that in his short amount of time in the caves, the door has welded itself shut as if it were never openable in the first place.

He huffs, annoyed, and looks around again. That sense of deja vu is back, but it's not an old memory that floats to the surface. This time, it's a quick flashback to when he first stepped through the door, and saw just how peculiar the design of this place was. The long grand hallway, the various offshoots; like a time-lapse of his previous tour of the large space. But something is different.

Sam blinks back to his present self, the memory still fresh in his mind, and his eyes dart to a seemingly random archway. It looks just the same as every other branching path, but he could have sworn in the memory he saw a bright glow erupting from the depths of this one tunnel. He knows for a fact he didn't see it the first time, but his vision of the past could. It's a strange thing to wonder, this inconsistency in his memory, but he hasn't the time to dwell on it. He follows the hunch, descending down the dark tunnel without a second glance.

It's a little too quiet for his liking, his footsteps don't reverberate as loudly as he expects them to. The gray walls are unchanging, the slight slope of the ground giving him a strange sense of vertigo where his mind can't tell if he's walking on flat ground or if he's about to tip over. He keeps one hand sliding against the left wall for both stability and comfort, the cold surface

of the stone keeping him from drifting away from his body. That's another thing, the déjà vu is getting stronger, making him nauseous with how often his vision flashes to a snippet of himself traversing this very tunnel. At least he can feel confident that it leads somewhere important, not that he has any clue what to do once he finds wherever this is leading him. For now, he just needs to focus on keeping his feet moving, and not losing his mind in the constant reminders of a time he never knew existed.

—

“What's out there?”

Asks the newly born Sam, when first learning about the outside world. He looks exactly the same as the present, perhaps a bit more naïve. But his eyes are on the Architect, Karl Jacobs, who leads him down the tunnel to something new.

“It is complex, far too much to relate to you, Sam. All I knew of the light world was pain and fear, but now, I know the true purpose is something beyond our comprehension,” Karl rambles on with his strange wording, the vague tone revealing his conflicted feelings on the matter.

The young Sam gleams with interest, despite not understanding much of what he says.

“What's the purpose?”

“I cannot tell you,” Karl replies, sounding apologetic, *“but it is more than suffering. It has to be.”*

—

The world tilts a bit too far to the side and Sam slouches against the cave wall. He knocks his head against the wall a few times in succession, it doesn't hurt, but it grounds him. The feeling of vertigo fades but what's left in its wake are the rush of emotions, his present confusion and frustration overlaying the past.

He doesn't understand, now or then. Why must Karl speak so cryptically? He's starting to piece together some of his time when he first lived in these caves, when he shadowed Karl and learned about his role. It's all returning so suddenly, but Sam can stay upright, so he keeps walking.

Soon enough, he comes upon a control room. The structure looks identical to the one that exists on the surface of the inner world. He's seen it many times, he's even been inside that room. It never occurred to him that there would be another room just like it.

“It functions the same as the one you are familiar with.”

Sam startles as the voice appears behind him, seemingly out of thin air. He turns to see Karl standing further up the tunnel, walking towards him, but doesn't sense any ill intent. There's a fog of nostalgia that follows the robed man, clinging like the hands of death. “Does it still work?” It's the first question to come to Sam's mind.

“No.” At first, Karl answers boldly, but on second thought says, “or, perhaps I am not certain.” Then, he meets Sam’s gaze, “I dare not attempt to use it. Never again, once I made the decision to move it.”

It is strange, Sam thinks to himself, how their mind in the outer world would function if both control rooms were in use. Although, co-fronting isn’t anything new. He gets another moment of déjà vu, a short time-lapse of his wandering through the tunnel to get to where he is now. A straight shot, a right turn, the slight curve of the tunnel as it descends at a steady pace. The realization hits him, and he looks up at the ceiling as if staring through the rock to see if his inkling is correct. “This isn’t...”

“The second room exists directly above this one, correct.” Karl nods, following his eyes. “I suppose you are considering entering inside of it.”

“The vault door wouldn’t open,” Sam argues, feeling defensive. He stands a bit straighter, his mind a bit clearer than before.

Karl pays no mind to his theatrics, instead gazing deep into his eyes for a few moments. Then he sighs and looks away, relenting, “I had been a fool to think you would give up so easily, you have always been a stubborn child.”

“Hey-“ Sam begins, greatly offended, but Karl cuts him off.

“I will take you to the library. It is there you will find the memories you wish to attain,” Karl explains, expression neutral and guarded once again. He isn’t happy about this decision, but Sam is glad to finally get some answers.

Karl leads Sam away from the white doors, backtracking through the side tunnel to the grand hallway, then he walks toward the first offshoot to the left of the entrance area. Sam wonders whether all of these tunnels lead to somewhere specific or if it’s just for show. Either seems equally possible to him, with how mysterious its architect is. What reference did Karl have for creating this place?

“Are you the only one here?” Sam asks, a little unnerved by the silence of the tunnels. That, and the persistent stream of memories of his time here before keep echoing voices of other occupants, all too vague to make out.

Karl glances back at him, still walking towards whatever destination. “The only soul awake, for the very least. Correct.”

Sam tries not to groan aloud at another cryptic answer. Really, what does he expect? “What does that mean, ‘the only soul awake’?”

“I am not all-knowing, Sam,” Karl replies in that familiar annoyed tone he has whenever he’s asked to clarify, “Many unknowns hide in these caves. Perhaps on the surface as well. I am not the brilliance of this body’s mind, I can only use the tools granted to me.”

Finally, something comes into view. Down a short set of stairs is a wide room, rows and rows of indistinct bookshelves filled with brown journals. The only difference between the books

is the widths of their spines, but all other features are identical. He can't even imagine how one would begin to sort through this. He gazes around without a clear focus, looking towards Karl when he realizes he's at a loss.

And it's like Karl was waiting for this exact response, observing his reaction as it unfolded. Sam takes note of this but doesn't point it out. "This is only the beginning," Karl explains, gesturing his hand in a wide sweep surveying the room, "From the moment you and your brothers were granted safety on the surface, I had devoted my existence to inscribing our memories."

Sam watches as the robed man approaches a shelf, pulling a random book and laying his palm against the cover, as he continues, "As an observer, I am forbidden from any judgment. I only seek to preserve our recollection of the past, not interpret, or analyze. It is why I was appalled by your request." The Architect sighs, gently returning the book to its place.

"You wrote all of these? On your own?" Sam asks, bewildered by the scale of this task Karl describes if he's to assume every branch of these tunnels leads to another part of the library. "That doesn't seem possible. How did you even access those memories in the first place?"

"Not all answers can be explained, young one." Karl says, "A short few years is an eternity here, yet another symptom of this dark world." Then he meets his gaze, telling Sam directly, "You must be familiar with the fog of the mind, the merging of perception and recollection. It is a curse that bleeds through the walls, a tether to the horrors that befell our youth. I know not of how or why the world works this way." Karl looks away again, out over the rows and rows of nondescript bookshelves. He continues, "These novels are simply placeholders, a material symbolic of the immaterial information they tell. They cannot be read, but they unlock the memory for you to view in the headspace."

"So, if I were to open one of these books, it would just trigger a flashback?" Sam's eyes follow the line of sight of the strange man in front of him, the author of supposedly their entire shared past.

"That is correct, it is a guided perspective of a time already experienced."

"And you've done it all? From the beginning to the present day?"

Karl seems to ponder this question for a moment longer than the others Sam has asked. "No, in truth, I have only transcribed the events leading up to our rescue, and nothing past that. I am not sure what prevents me from doing so, but no amount of pondering has pushed me past this obstacle."

Sam is honestly surprised to hear Karl's level of vulnerability, for him to be so open about his inability to do the one task he's set for himself. He tries to think of something affirming, but can't conjure anything before Karl continues.

"It is the time when you arrived," the Architect explains, looking Sam in the eyes once more, a strange wonder alighting his gaze, "I was not aware at the time, but you were the catalyst for the reconfiguring of the headspace. Until then, I could not fathom forging the connection to the surface, I would not allow the door to be opened."

“Why me?” Sam ponders aloud, feeling apprehensive about the information Karl is revealing to him, did he really keep his family in the dark for longer than necessary, while a brighter, kinder land existed just above the ground?

“I could trust no one for the task of keeping them safe. Not even myself, because I feared the light to such an extent.”

“And that’s why you never recalled the rescue,” Sam realizes abruptly, not waiting a moment to consider what he’s claiming, “and you- you knew I was a consequence of our freedom.”

“Meeting you was a shining moment, a clear image of the future one could hold in their hands and live.” Karl lets a stray tear glide down his cheek, turning away a little to hide his face. “I could not bring myself to guide my family to this hope, whether fearing my role as protector, or having my fears of the light world confirmed, but upon welcoming you into this place...” He wipes away at his eyes, before shining a proud smile toward his younger brother, “You were everything good, proof that the light world would be better than the life we suffered. And for that, I commend you.”

Sam doesn’t know what else to say, his head keeps spinning around these ideas, Karl having been here the whole time, his role as the Warden assigned to him because he was born out of their escape, not to mention all of his memories from when he first wandered these caves. Every word Karl spoke to him in the past keeps fitting together like puzzle pieces alongside the information he’s just been given, it’s actually starting to hurt his head quite a bit. He feels the world tip to the side and he stumbles back to support himself against the wall.

The Architect rushes forward to offer a hand, spouting, “Sam!” He grips tight to the boy’s shoulder and opposing arm, helping to keep him from falling. “Sam, look at me, can you do that?” He requests, a hint of something frantic underlying his voice.

Despite the room spinning around him, Sam raises his attention to Karl’s face, though he struggles to focus with any clarity. There’s something in the peripheral of his thoughts that’s keeping him from the present moment, but he can’t figure out what it is just yet.

“Yes, yes, I’m right here, Sam,” Karl praises with a gentle hand on the side of his face, keeping his gaze from trailing off. “Don’t think about what has happened before, you are here right now, with me. You are here. Nothing will-“

““Nothing will hurt you,”” Sam surprises himself by finishing Karl’s sentence, and it seems his older brother feels similarly.

Though Karl’s surprise melds into joy in a matter of seconds and he says, “Very often your brothers would have these spells, where it becomes difficult to parse the present and the past. I have spun this dance many times, it prides me to know you can recall it.”

“I’ve done the same,” Sam adds, “I never knew you taught me how to help them calm down, I always thought it was instinct.”

Karl chuckles fondly at that, “I suppose that is a downside to forgetting about this place.”

“You think?” Sam comments, raising his brow, “I can’t believe we’ve had another sibling living down here this whole time. You must have been so lonely.”

Seeing as Sam is oriented upright once again, Karl takes a step back to give him space. He has a slight frown on his face, giving a great deal of consideration to Sam’s statement.

“*Can you keep a secret, Sam?*” The echo of Karl’s past voice whispers in the back of Sam’s mind, he almost confuses it for the present, but figuring it’s a memory, he watches the older boy’s puzzled expression and lets the recalled conversation continue-

“*Of course!*” His younger self gleefully replied. “*You can tell me anything, I promise I won’t tell.*”

“*It will not be important for very long. But before you and your brothers depart, I must reveal to you one certain detail, the real reason why I cannot follow you to the surface...*” By his tone, Sam can tell the Karl in his memory is conflicted, similar to the face he’s making now.

“I suppose I am.” Present Karl replies, and at the same moment, finishes his sentence in the memory.

“*I no longer fear death, as much as I fear survival. If given the chance, I would end our life.*

“*I believe I am as much of a threat to our existence as the people who wronged us.*”

—

A black unmarked SUV with tinted windows pulls up to the sidewalk in front of the Watson residence, parked and waiting for Tommy to leave the house. Said boy is watching from the living room, holding a backpack tight to his chest as he stressed about the upcoming meeting. Phil waits beside him for a message on his phone, a comforting hand laid on the boy’s shoulder.

Tommy’s thoughts race around in his head, worrying over Sam’s absence, wondering if they’ll be able to call to him in time. This whole high-security escort is also messing with his head, with memories of being stalked by that van continually activating his fight or flight. He bounces his legs under where his backpack rests, feeling like he’d float away if not for the weight of it on his lap.

It’s been really hard without Sam around. Not only are they more sensitive to triggers it seems, but recovery in the inner world seems to be less efficient. There’s an undertone of helplessness when Tommy tries to comfort his distressed brothers, where he feels too young and dumb to be the solid rock for another person to lean on, especially when he himself feels two steps away from a full breakdown.

But the end is coming. This whole trial thing, once they do their part and put in this effort it will all be over, right? Then they can finally start living without this shadow of fear trailing behind them. At least, that’s what Tommy is hoping will happen.

“Alright-y Tom, time to go,” Phil announces after a small *bing* on his phone. He stands and Tommy follows, leading them to the door and Phil opens it.

That FBI lady stands before him, dark glasses covering her eyes and her hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. “Mr. Watson,” Agent Matthews greets Phil, then with a nod, “and Thomas, please follow me.” After agreement from Phil, she turns and walks back to the black SUV, pulling open the back door to allow Tommy and Phil to climb inside, closes it after them, then gets in the driver's seat.

After buckling in, the air feels tense. Tommy expects the entire drive to be silent, already prepping himself by shrinking into the seat. That is, until Phil breaks the silence, saying, “Geez, I don’t think I’ve ever ridden in one of these fancy cars. Makes you feel like you’re someone real important.” He nudges Tommy’s shoulder playfully.

Tommy can’t help but smile, gracious for Phil’s attempt to lighten the mood. “Like the president,” he adds, sitting up, “or the Queen of England!”

“Exactly!” Phil laughs, “You officially reached ‘the Queen’ status, Toms.” He reaches over to pat Tommy’s shoulder like a proud dad would, smiling as Tommy beams in return. “I know you’ll do great.”

They both knew Phil wasn’t talking about being royalty, the older man’s eyes gleaming with sincerity. It hasn’t exactly been a secret that Tommy and the system have had it rough over the past two weeks. Tommy doesn’t expect it to get any better following this first meeting, in fact, it will probably be a long time until they can even start to get better. The moment Sam recovers those memories, once he begins to verbalize them, Tommy knows something very very bad will be unlocked inside of their shared brain. It’s nothing concrete, but the vague idea of worse things to come has a heavy presence in his mind.

Thinking about it again makes him frown, to which Phil notices and squeezes his shoulder lightly. “Remember, son,” he begins, looking deep into his eyes, “no matter what, I will always be here for you. I will never give up on you, and I certainly won’t let anything or anyone hurt you again. You have my word.” There’s no mistaking his sentiment, and Tommy finds it difficult to reply while his eyes threaten to spill tears, but he nods. He believes Phil, he’s the only one in the world he can trust.

“Thanks, dad,” Tommy whispers, the loudest he can muster without whimpering.

The rest of the drive is filled with Phil’s small talk with minimal response from Tommy, who feels the incoming dread slowly build the closer they get to their destination. He’s glad Phil can keep his attention away from the tinted windows so he doesn’t daydream too much, or dwell on his anxieties. He and his therapist theorized that the situation will no doubt be stressful, but the best way to support an easy switch between Tommy and Sam would be for Tommy to remain calm and grounded. It’s much easier said than done but the last thing Tommy wants to happen is for him or someone who isn’t Sam to be forced into prime without warning.

That’s the other thing his therapist warned about, keeping their system a secret. His trauma and post-trauma may be aired to the world but the identities must stay confidential to the best

of their abilities. Not only could it be detrimental to their safety, but their credibility in the courts as well. Tommy realizes now that, despite being absent from the details, his name and face will be at the forefront of his testimony. He doesn't know how to feel about it, but that's a bridge to cross when they get there.

The SUV approaches a plain building with the sign 'Social Security Administration' above the door. Tommy guesses it's a front for whatever operation they are carrying out here. Perks of being ex-FBI, probably.

They wait a moment after parking around back for Agent Matthews to exit the driver's seat and speak to someone nearby before she opens the rear door for the two to step out. They follow her to the building's back entrance and then through a series of office corridors. There doesn't seem to be anyone besides them and a few security guards, but then again there are plenty of closed doors that he has no idea what's in them. The room they end up in is pretty small, like an interrogation room with white walls and a large mirror on the left side. The agent leads them inside and turns to face them, gesturing towards the mirror. "This is a two-way mirror, meaning you can't see it from in here, but there's a small viewing room connected to this one. Myself, my partner, a scribe, and the state attorney will be on the other side of the glass," she states, then adds, "And Mr. Watson."

"I'll be alone?" Tommy questions, feeling a rise of panic.

"You'll be interviewed by our psychologist, Dr. H. Bomb. He should be here any moment now," she explains, then points to the seat for Tommy to take.

"S-sorry, can I go pee first?" Tommy panics slightly, worried to switch in front of the psych and the damn *viewing room*??? He wonders if he should warn Sam about that if he's able. Or maybe it's for the best that he doesn't know.

"Alright, Agent Tom can lead you there, and I'll get Mr. Watson settled in the other room. Dr. Bomb should be here when you return," Agent Matthews gives the orders and Tommy walks behind a large man as he directs him to the bathroom.

It's a ways away, and Tommy can't help but interrupt the awkward silence with, "My name's Tom, too, you know."

At first, the man only glances back at him but doesn't seem like he'll respond. Then after a moment, "Good man," he says with a nod. Tommy proudly nods back.

He's grateful that the man stays outside when they reach the bathroom, although it's a bit concerning that he expected otherwise, but no matter. It's a single room, so Tommy takes a seat on the ground near the sink, relaxing his posture as best he can, thinking about Sam and trying to reach him.

It's odd because usually his brothers are connected to him via these invisible threads, and he's found that tugging the cord is what calls to the other for a purposeful switch. Before, it was all so random and sudden, switching and times of prime, being co-con was the only semblance of control they had, but working with their new therapist has opened a lot of pathways for communication between them while also piloting the body. So that's why

Tommy is a bit put off by the fact that he can't sense Sam at all, it's like he's nowhere in the headspace, completely nonexistent. He tries to reach out to him anyway, but it's like he's grasping onto empty air. It's strange, very strange.

He gets an idea that maybe he can leave the control room without triggering a switch, so there's at the very least no resistance between Sam and the front. He closes his eyes and wills his mind to take a step out of the conscious of the body, and with a familiar clouding of his senses and a fog covering his thoughts, he finds himself outside the white double doors. He's still feeling a little frantic, especially knowing no one is fronting right now, but he still tries to stifle his worry. He knows his brothers are waiting for him, and that's all that matters.

The rest will sort itself out... Hopefully.

The doors lock behind him as he walks away.

Chapter End Notes

i apologize to the people who really want this story to be done we are in the same boat
im getting there, i think
thank you for reading

The Betrayal

Chapter Summary

Sam would do anything for his brothers, for the ones who gave his life purpose.

Turns out, Sam isn't the only one who feels this way.

Chapter Notes

hiiiiii all the wonderful readers

i want to thank everyone who's stuck around, i will apologize that ive been gone for so long, a lot has happened since the last update, some of which you already know but most things are just me and my life - i wont go into any details but i promise i am nearing the end of this fic, ive got ch 20 basically written and started the last already (you may have noticed the updated chapter number) so the wait should not be nearly as long as the one before

i hope you enjoy the direction i've taken this work in, and thank you for reading

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

Sam feels like he's going a bit crazy. Deep down he knows he wants to put his trust into Karl, because the guy is his brother, they come from the same mind and share the same body so Sam really wants to write off the red flags that keep waving in front of his eyes.

But some part of him is very adamant about questioning Karl's trustworthiness. First and foremost, the robes. Sam himself may have never experienced the cultists yet still he feels distinctly put off by the symbolism. He doesn't understand why Karl would willingly wear the attire of their captors, unless that's out of his control. Second, there's an apparent power imbalance. Karl has a hold over his memories, over all their memories, and Sam doesn't even know the extent. If the library is a sign of what he's capable of, Sam doesn't want to think about how he could use that control against the others in some way. Amnesia is already a problem in their daily life, but it could always be worse.

The memories are another thing. Sam keeps going over the resurfaced conversations they had when they all still resided in the caves. Karl admitted to him that he was a threat to their livelihood, yet hasn't made any mention of it. And lastly, something just isn't adding up.

Through the past few days, Karl has been giving Sam a run through of the timeline of their life, including the major events that awoke certain alters. He even spelled out their daily routines, how his brothers would cycle in and out of their hectic life, sharing the burden of the situation they were in. It made sense, and gave a surprising amount of justification for how his brothers behave nowadays. Useful, yes, but Sam noticed a particular detail.

Karl never mentioned himself in the timeline. By his account, there was no event that sparked his existence, no routine that he played a part in- apparently, he's been here the whole time.

But Sam doesn't buy it. Karl holds too many secrets for Sam to have any trust in him. And he thinks Karl is suspecting him as well. Ever since he showed Sam the library, Karl has acted more aloof, showing less of his face to Sam and somehow behaving even more cryptically.

Sam feels the need to confront him, but he's not sure how to go about it. Or if it's even necessary. He just has to let it lie.

Because he's unaware of how different the flow of time is inside of the caves as opposed to the real world, after the lectures Sam sits in front of the control room and waits for his cue to enter. He's only a little concerned that he'll somehow miss it. Since coming to the underground part of the headspace, his connection to whatever was happening in the front has been significantly dimmed. He's only had the slightest inkling of how his brothers are operating while he's gone, and that's when he's not knee deep in a memory or listening to Karl ramble.

Tommy will likely handle the transition, and that boy can have some intense emotions that bleed through the fog that separates them, it's definitely possible that he'll reach Sam if he tries.

As he waits, Karl comes in and out of the tunnel adjoining the room, keeping his distance from the doors and Sam. Sam may or may not find some amusement in the man's pacing, but he's feeling more suspicious than ever.

"Are you just going to keep doing that?" Sam asks, not doing much to hide his tension.

Karl wrings his hands beneath the long sleeves of his robe as he answers, "There's another room I wish to show you. I believe it is of great importance to the case." He doesn't meet Sam's gaze, and Sam is all the more unnerved because never before has Karl seemed vested in the case in any manner.

Still, he doesn't have a strong enough reason to refuse, so he stands up and agrees, following after Karl to wherever he leads. The silent unease traces his every step as Sam walks behind the Architect, once again fueled by the lack of an echo despite the narrow space. The longer they walk in the quiet the more antsy Sam feels, like his skin is crawling, begging him to get away. He's thinking about his brothers and the outer world, his role as the Warden, his duty to return when he is called. Why did Karl choose now of all times to show him this new room? What could possibly be so important that hasn't been brought up before?

Another tunnel reaches its end, and all of Sam's nerves suddenly collapse into a soul crushing void. Karl has stopped in front of the cell, unable to tear his eyes away from the metal bars,

the burgundy stains on the floor and the chains hanging off the walls. Sam may have never set foot in this prison himself but he feels the dark and terrifying aura deep in his bones. Whispers fill his head of screaming and begging, crying and sounds of pain. Some noises he can distinguish, like the voices of his brothers, but the rest are incoherent and strangely inhuman. His heart hurts to be in the vicinity of the cell alone.

If Karl was acting strange before, he's only more erratic now, never still for a single moment and muttering under his breath to himself, not loud enough for Sam to hear. A part of Sam wants to dismiss the actions, since he feels a similar way towards the structure, but this on top of everything else is giving him a really bad feeling.

He looks to Karl for some kind of reasoning, any response at all, and it takes a while for Karl to regard him again. "I a-apologize, Sam," He stutters for the first time, surprising Sam, since the guy always sounds so confident in his cryptic speech, "something is hidden inside this cage. In one of the stones along the back wall, I- I would show you but I am u-unable to enter myself." Karl ducks his head in shame of his confession. Sam has no doubt that Karl is telling the truth, especially seeing how the man is quite literally shaking from the fear.

Though Sam can relate, his stomach turning at the prospect of stepping foot inside the cell. "Is this... something... pertinent?" Sam asks, wanting nothing more than to get away from this place as soon as possible.

"...indeed," Karl replies with his head still bowed, his voice small but pleading.

"Ok..." Sam forces out a breath, steeling himself to go inside of the damned place he can only associate with pain and death. He tenses and walks into the cell, his back rigid as a stick as he approaches the back wall, trying to identify the stone Karl mentioned.

He startles when he hears the piercing sounds of rusted metal squeaking, and the shutter of the decrepit door as it shuts him inside. Instincts slam him into the exit, frantically screaming to stop this madness, "What? Karl, why?! Let me out! What is this?!" He can hardly hear his cries over the violent thrashing of the metal bars as Sam shakes the cage.

Karl is already at the end of the room, watching his panic at the base of the stairs they entered through. "I am sorry, truly, I did not want this to happen," The Architect sounds sincere but Sam couldn't care less.

"No! This can't- you can't just lock me in here! Stop this! Don't leave me!!" Sam yells with every ounce of anger and betrayal, "How could you?!" He feels the tears dripping down his face, his mind racing with hauntings of the past, of all the terrible pain inflicted within the walls that contain him.

The silence is somehow worse when Sam stops struggling to wrench the door open, instead sinking to his knees and sobbing in hopeless frustration. Karl watches him for a bit longer but ultimately hurries away back up the stairs, and Sam is left alone in the cold dark. The memories trapped there threaten to drag him away from the present, gripping him by his ankles and pulling him to the void.

All he can see is blackness, and all he can feel is sorrow.

About ten minutes ago, Sarah dismissed herself with the excuse of an incoming call, and ever since Phil has felt a terrible dread snaking through his thoughts.

Reflexively, Phil sends his location to Wilbur's phone, and quickly texts about his concerns. He doesn't even check for a response, he just puts his phone in his back pocket and charges out the door.

"W-wait, sir! Where are you going?" The other associate calls out to him when he reaches the door. Phil just ignores them, the only objective for him is to find his son(s) and protect them. His worries are further confirmed at the sight of the other guard standing at the turn of the hallway, the guy Phil knows was chosen to escort Tommy to the bathroom earlier. The fact that he's waiting around here and yet Tommy is nowhere to be seen?

He's going to raise hell.

Stepping right up to the tall man in a black suit, Phil demands, "What is going on here? Where is my son?"

The agent doesn't react, standing his ground and crossing his arms, he says, "Sir, you aren't allowed entry into this part of the building."

"Where is he, then? Where is Tommy!?" The pitch of Phil's voice raises along with his panic. He's standing half a head shorter but that doesn't stop him from staring the man down.

"Thomas isn't here anymore, Mr Watson."

Phil rips his death glare away from the agent and onto the new speaker, the one Sarah pointed out to be Dr H Bomb earlier. The supposed psychiatric has a sly grin on his face, and fury burns in Phil's eyes. "What are you talking about? I'm not leaving without my son!" As he yells he closes some of the distance between them, fists clenched but not outwardly threatening. His mind is spinning at a rapid pace, trying to make sense of this whole situation.

"The boy you know to be your son is long gone, Phil, the true prophet belongs with the people who understand his potential," Hbomb explains, "We thank you for your temporary care, but your guardianship has ended."

Phil can't believe what he's hearing. Have they set this whole thing up from the start? It even sounds like they know about the system, and maybe have a part in controlling how they function, given the whole 'Tommy isn't here' thing. "No, I refuse- you can't just take him away. I promised! I promised him I would protect him!"

Hbomb gives a noncommittal shrug, "It's already been foretold, this process of securing the prophet. We are all pawns in the Blood God's plight." Then, he stops to press two fingers to an earpiece, the same that all the agents had, and responds with an affirmative. "And you

have our gratitude for the boy's protection. Without you, this process may have been much more difficult," the doctor says with an honest expression but Phil can pick out his condescending tone.

"Go to hell," Phil spits at him.

The man is unfazed, simply nodding his head towards the entrance he arrived from, "You may take your leave now. A driver is waiting to escort you to your home."

Phil switches his gaze between the doctor, the agent, and the hallway he last saw his son, wanting to fight with every ounce of anger he holds but knowing that there's no point. Tommy isn't in the building anymore, he can't do anything here. As he's led to the exit, his heart is heavy with worry and grief for allowing this to happen. He curses himself for being so gullible, for putting his son's safety in the hands of a stranger. He feels like collapsing into a pit of despair, but he keeps his thoughts to himself and pulls out his phone.

It seems that Wilbur got his message, replying with similar concern and a promise to drive there as fast as possible. Phil almost wants to remind him to be safe and obey the speed limits but it would be hypocritical. He knows his son's ferocity takes after his own, and this is no matter to take with caution.

He will get his son back.

"Excuse me for a moment," Agent Sarah Johnson addresses the room, drawing away her right hand from its hold on her earpiece. She just received the signal for the next act of the scene.

"Is something wrong?" The worried man asks, the awarded guardian for the subject she's after. He's something pitiful, sure, and completely ignorant to the power he's had living under his roof for the past few months.

She keeps the judgement to herself, crafting an easy smile on her face as she replies, "Not at all, Mr Watson. I have an important call to take. It will only be a minute."

The answer seems to placate him for now as he sighs, though Sarah still throws a look at her partner to keep an eye on him.

She exits the room, following a memorized route through the office space until she reaches the next stage. There she regards Agent Tom, "Make sure no one comes within earshot."

"On it," the man replies, then he walks down the hallway she entered from. Sarah smiles when she sees the bathroom door ajar. This has been a moment in making for the last three years, to finally return the prophet to his proper home.

She strolls into the small room, delighted to witness the sedated teen. Only stories of this scene have been told to her, to one day experience for herself. She thanks the gods that every

piece of their plan has fallen into its rightful place.

This vessel, the blond child slumped against the tile wall, is the most valuable item in the mortal realm, the closest they will ever get to being blessed by the Blood God. It is sacred. Sarah stands beside the boy's outstretched heels, and gives a stern command, "Awaken the prince of blood, rise the immortal Guide." Her voice feels more powerful than ever before as she waits for the command to run its course.

It doesn't take long for the boy's head to snap up, his eyes alighting and swiftly locking onto hers. His movements are robotic as he straightens his back, sitting in a more alert position while he waits for direction.

It's more wonderful than she ever imagined, seeing the complete takeover of a human mind, reducing it to a dutiful minion incapable of independent thought. She calms herself, determined not to mess up now that they've come so far. Her next question, "Am I speaking to the Architect?"

For a long minute, the boy stares unblinking into her eyes, like he didn't hear her say anything at all. This is an expected response, a positive one, given the long period of time without instruction. A trace amount of deprogramming is more than likely in that timespan.

She accepts the silence, watching the child for any signs of response. After a few minutes she repeats the question, but still empty eyes stare back at her. She huffs, knowing she doesn't have the time to wait any longer. Sarah takes a long step backwards and says "up" with the snap of her fingers. Instantly the command registers and the young teen gets to his feet as quick as he can, his eyes never breaking contact. "Follow," she instructs, then turns on her heel and walks out of the bathroom.

The boy's stare lowers to her heels and he traces her steps, staying a few feet behind but keeping up with her pace. She continues further down the hall where she comes upon an emergency exit, then proceeds to knock on the door in a short pattern. It opens from the outside, the usual alarm already deactivated. The door is held open by a fellow suited figure as Sarah and the silent teen exit the building and approach a van. A van that would be familiar to the young boy, if he had any wits to recognize it. The back doors are open and awaiting Sarah and the boy to climb inside.

She knows it's too soon to cheer to a mission success, but with how perfectly the plan is going, she can hardly contain herself. Sitting the boy down in one of the seats, she asks again, "Am I speaking to the Architect?" She keeps her eyes on his, which had snapped to focus once he sat still. The van rumbles to a quiet start and begins to drive off just as Sarah sees the boy blinking rapidly, finally breaking eye contact as he cowers with his hands clasping the sides of his head. She waits and watches as he stills once more, then casually raises his head.

Karl doesn't recognize the woman sitting in front of him, but there's no other soul who could have summoned him. He nods once but then verbally responds with, "Yes, ma'am." He hasn't even begun to process what he's feeling after taking control for the first time since they left the cult, he's far too focused on paying attention, waiting for his instruction from the stranger before him.

Her smile only widens, but it's far from reaching her eyes in any genuine joy. "Good. I'm glad you were successful in resuming your programming. Father will be pleased."

Karl knows he isn't supposed to show any emotion, especially pertaining to information processing, but hearing her words connects some dots regarding her identity. She must be the daughter of the Old One.

"But just in case," he hears her continue, a rattling in her pocket as she pulls out a small capsule with two bright red pills inside, "I have the means to help you keep yourself stable, okay?" She shakes it once in front of him to get the message.

Karl nods but he feels a rush of fear that he's forced to suppress. He really can't show any weakness now, with the knowledge that his brain will be drugged to mush if he reveals anything troubling.

The lady busies herself with something else, while Karl lets his external connection ease a little so he can think through his situation. As a much younger child, Karl found it easy to remove the negative emotions from his mind while he followed instruction, but inhabiting their older body proves a much stronger tie between physical response and emotional tides. Maybe it's the fact that he is unharmed, but never before has Karl been able to associate feelings with his inner dialogue. His role as an observer prevented it.

But now he's alert, he's tall, he's educated, and he's fit with every memory disregarding the last three years. For those years he had troubled over his devotion to the ones who shaped him. Being the immortal prince of the cult's prophecy is the only path he's ever faced. But suddenly living through the return, this event he's been awaiting, he wonders if he will ever be ready for his future to come to fruition.

His heart feels heavy, sorrow gripping his chest from the guilt of his betrayal. To imagine Sam trapped alone in that cave, he can't bear it. This had to happen.

Initially he tried to deny the presumption, his only justification for isolating himself within the caves was to keep the others as far away from the cult as possible, so he hoped Sam was alluding to a choice in the matter when he asked for his help. It was only upon his insistence that Karl forced himself to accept that his control over their mind would be manipulated in order to return to his owners. He only saved himself future trouble by removing Sam as an obstacle ahead of time.

His attention snaps back to focus when he hears the woman clear her throat. "I assume you've held dormancy for the last few years, without a summon. It was untimely, the police interference, but expected. What were your instructions?"

Karl only waits a beat before answering, "Guard the memories, keep the other occupants from corrupting the Vault, wait for the signal to resume control." It's a list of commands he's been repeating to himself this whole time, unwilling to let his brothers find out, but he didn't dare forget. Even while he suffered through the pain of their memories, and felt reluctance to move forward once he received the signal, in the end his loyalty to the cult outweighed his desire to protect his brothers.

“And you were successful?”

Obviously, Karl thinks, but of course he doesn't say this. “Yes, ma'am.”

“Good,” she grins, and Karl can't help but feel unsettled. “It was a pain in the ass to make all the preparations, but I'm happy to say it's been worth the wait. Soon, *tonight*, we will finally find the answer to the long awaited prophecy.” She looks proud of herself, eyes dreamily gazing away as she imagines the end result of her plight. Karl waits patiently for her to continue. After a minute, she seems to snap out of it. “We are almost to the bunker, so let me explain what will happen next,” she begins, “Your final task before you can fulfill your prophetic destiny is a ritual named the Blessing of the Blood God. Once we step into the sacred room, you must not speak. You must follow every direction I give you and you will not make a sound. Got it?”

The change in mood makes Karl's head spin, but regardless he answers, “Yes, ma'am.” He feels a little sick to his stomach at the mention of a blood ritual, though he doesn't know why he believed their involvement in these rituals would end once they were older.

“Good,” the smile on her face is something Karl tries to avoid looking at. At least when he was younger, he was far too docile to pay attention to the expressions of the people who directed him, but now his mind seems to be too active. It's far too easy for him to doubt his own obedience, especially when he can't find the sincerity in what he's doing.

Before he knows it, the van pulls to a stop and in the woman's hands are a blindfold and a small rope. She lets him tie the blindfold himself then restrains his hands, and Karl can't prevent the panic rising up his throat. He underestimated the effect that his loss of agency would have on him, in the past it never bothered him, he was so used to being pushed and pulled around without question. But now his awareness, his unaltered perception bleeds through to his entire being, and suddenly he's never felt more scared, more unsafe in his life.

The fear binds his mouth, leaving him without use of his hands, his vision, or his voice as he is led out of the vehicle and into another building. The woman tugs at his wrists to direct him while he stumbles blindly ahead, not bothering to speak to him or warn him of any obstacles. Their footsteps are loud and reverberate down long hallways, the air getting colder and colder around him the farther they go. A door opens before him, and the room they enter is already occupied by several others chattering to each other. They go silent as soon as the door closes behind him, and the woman clears her throat.

“Elders, I present the return of the prince,” she announces, pushing Karl forward with her hand on his shoulder. A few people grumble incoherently while some others give a casual cheer. “Today after many months of waiting and careful planning, we join together to finally receive the blessing of the Blood God. After which, we will reestablish ourselves as the guild of the only true religion of this realm, and shed the shackles of mortality.” As she finishes, grunts of approval ring from the audience, which Karl guesses to be the higher ranks of the cult.

Without pause, Karl is shoved forward once again until he's stopped and a door opens. Once inside, the door glides closed and his blindfold gets pulled down around his neck. He blinks a few times to adjust, then he sees the figure before him.

A large, very detailed tapestry hangs on the short wall, depicted the Blood God himself, a dark and tall figure with the garb of a medieval military commander, his eyes are dark and his hands and weapons are coated in a shiny spray of blood. Karl has never seen such a tribute before, normally his image is clouded in a dark mist in every painting, but here he can see every distinctive feature of the divine idol.

“This is your final test, Architect.” With how enraptured Karl was by the artwork, he almost forgot about the other person in the room until she spoke over his head. “Now the only one to determine your fate will be the Blood God himself. So, you better start pleading for your life.”

Without warning, the woman produces a ceremonial dagger and slides it into his back, just above his right hip, the blade long enough to exit through his front. The sudden pressure breaks him from his stupor but just as quickly the blinding pain starts to take its hold on his body. She gives him a shove and he drops to his knees, too in shock to do anything but slump in on himself. His heart is racing in his chest and he can’t seem to get enough air in his lungs.

Something is said to him that he can’t make out, but then the door is closed and he can only see the floor he’s collapsed on and the majestic artwork of the god who’s supposedly the only one who can save him.

How amusing, a cynical thought raises, the parallel between his own position and how Sam was left fallen to his knees and crying to him for help. Help that only he could offer.

He finally starts begging.

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Wilbur can’t remember the last time he felt this hyperactive, with his heart beating a mile a minute and mind racing, it was probably before he started his medication. Before then, he would despise the undriven passion that electrified his bones every time he was the least bit worked up, but now he’s almost grateful. He’s swerving through the evening traffic with extraordinary precision, keeping a steady 45 mph despite the crawl of the other cars.

Techno, on the other hand, has his heart racing for a different reason, his pale white knuckles gripping the handle above the passenger door for dear life as his brother wildly steers the machine that will most likely be the death of them. But he can’t bring himself to stop Wilbur, or even tell him to slow the heck down because he’s too busy praying that they can intercept whatever evil scheme is planned around their brother. So he takes the instinctual fear of dying in a car crash and channels it towards thinking up different ways to *dismantle* any person he catches trying to hurt his family.

“Yes! Yes, fuck-“ with a wild turn of the steering wheel, Wilbur exits the highway and breathes out a heavy sigh of relief, “Finally, that traffic was fucking awful.”

One by one, Techno's tired fingers release the handle as he reclines into the seat and Wilbur resumes a less thrilling speed. He looks down at the phone in his lap to check for any new messages, and sees that Niki responded. They must be lucky that the location Phil and Tommy were taken to was at least in a reasonable distance to Niki, as she already found a street corner to spy on the building. Her text says that a black van pulled out of the lot and she's asking if she should follow it.

He relays this to his brother. Wilbur only thinks for a second before he responds, "Yes, absolutely. Follow the bastards." He is 100 percent certain that is the van Ranboo described on that day they were almost kidnapped, despite never having seen it for himself. But if it's leaving the same lot his father and brother were taken to before being separated, then there's no doubt in his mind. Tommy has to be in that van. "Actually, call Niki," Wilbur instructs, "We have to find out where that van is going."

"But what about dad?" Techno argues, though he lacks his usual passion, he knows deep down his father can hold his own. The phone is already dialing Niki's number.

"They have no reason to hurt him," Wil reasons, and he believes it. "He'll be fine."

"Fine," Techno repeats, just as the phone picks up and Niki starts directing Wilbur to her location.

A few minutes later, they join together in an empty parking lot. Niki points to a warehouse across the street, where a white van is parked around back. "I definitely saw him go in there," Niki recalls to the brothers. "He had a blindfold and I think his hands were tied."

"Those fuckers," Wil curses under his breath. He hurls the back of the van open and takes out the weapons they brought with them. Being teenagers, it's nothing to brag about, just a metal bat for Wilbur and one of Techno's swords bought from the renaissance fair for his 17th birthday. It's the one time Wil wishes Phil kept a firearm in the house, although he hasn't any idea how to use one, at least the intimidation factor could have helped. He closes the car door, passes his brother his sword in its sheath, and hoists the bat over his shoulder. "We have to get him back," he finalizes.

"Wilbur, don't be stupid. Who knows how many goons are in there?" Niki chastises. "And you can't possibly think they are above killing you."

"He's right," Techno says before Wilbur can argue back. "We don't have any options, every moment he's with them is one step closer to them causing irreparable harm." He gives Niki an honest look, "Think about how long it took for him to open up to us, there's zero chance he's holding it together right now."

She switches her gaze between the brothers, back and forth, before sighing in defeat and wrapping the two boys in a hug. It's quite awkward since she's a lot shorter than both of them but it's an adorable moment nonetheless. "Fine," she relents, "but no one is allowed to die, alright? You three have to come back in one piece, or else." She doesn't finish the threat, she doesn't need to, her daunting expression says it all.

"Yes'm," Techno agrees with a short salute as Wilbur's head nods repeatedly.

Niki walks back to her car to wait and update Phil. She watches the boys sprint to the back entrance and disappear behind a doorway.

She prays for their safety, and success in saving Tommy.

Chapter End Notes

hello dont hate me too much i know im evil but we all knew this

the only way it was possible for me to write this was in bits and pieces, one section at a time, and every section has been rewritten and trashed and rewritten - its similar to how im treating my therapy and working on my confidence in what i do and where im going, theres a lot of trial and error and working through the apprehension i feel like all the time because ive convinced myself that im just not worth much at all

but anyway, ive been writing a couple of other works over the past few months, some im pretty excited to share and others not as excited but i do want to share it all - its not that i don't love my writing, i do, i absolutely adore this talent of mine, but just the mere idea that others will have the freedom to judge it harshly is enough to prevent me from doing so

i'll be posting a one-shot soon, i think itll be called "famous last words" and its a 5+1 prompt type thing so keep a look out for that if you enjoy my angst

last note: i got into grad school! this bitch is gonna bee a social worker!! i hope everyone is having a good day and yall are pursuing your dreams because no matter what your brain might say, you are worth it <3

A Lesson in Grief and Agency

Chapter Summary

Sam learns how the universe was formed, in every sense of the word.

Chapter Notes

ur welcome

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

Anguish.

Sam would define this word as a middle ground between furious and sorrowful. It's the agony of hopelessness, a bitter fire burning beneath captive skin. It's all Sam can think about, his hatred and his betrayal and his overwhelming sadness. Even as the world spins around him, he lays steady, shaking, crying into his arms. This cold stone floor holds his posture, cradles his heartache, preventing gravity from dragging him through the floor, swallowing him whole.

No. He instead must bury in his own shame and guilt and suffer. There is so much cruelty in this life already, it drives a stake through his heart to be deceived by his own brother. His anguish, it triggers a direction in the memory he is lost in.

He sits in a pool of blood, surrounded by bright yellow lights and noises of life. His hands cup under the body of another boy, someone older than his current age, someone familiar- someone cherished, he remembers- now cold and lifeless. A fatal neck wound spills the crimson fluid without stop, so much it overflows his hands, and he drinks the excess. As much as the idea makes present Sam want to vomit, the memory he pilots seems unbothered with this task, drinking the blood like his life depends on it.

A gruff voice chants above his head, "Praise be to the Blood God! May he bless our tribute and accept the honored sacrifice."

Anguish rings in his ears like a siren, the blood congealed in his throat as his eyes string. All his movements cease, and he turns to look at the commanding voice, the tall cultist in red robes holding a sacred text.

Those damned veils.

The child has never seen the faces of the oppressors that command him, it would serve as a sacrilegious crime to be witnessed by one of the vessels. The only faces the child knows are the ones of his fellow prisoners, other gaudy, lifeless kids like him. He just watched his closest brother die before him, by his own hand, watched the life drain from his eyes and then drank his blood like a dog.

Sam may only be observing a memory, but the emotions of the body are overpowering, and perhaps his own anguish is compounding. Without a moment's hesitation, his hand clenches around the knife at his feet and he charges toward the speaking cultist, plunging the dagger into the man's shin. The wounded adult yells in pain and collapses, and that's when Sam grabs the edge of the face covering and tears it away. The room explodes into commotion but it all slows to a crawl when he takes in the man's face.

It's a guy. It's an old man who could be any other old man. His features align with the patterns of the other children, but everything is more defined. His skin is wrinkled and patchy, nose ballooned, stubby hair surrounding his jaw and mouth. There is surprise in the child's mind, suddenly fitting a face to the monsters that control his very existence. He was so certain they were shadow people, or people with the faces of animals, or no face at all.

When time picks back up again, it feels like it's fast forwarding, as Sam is tackled and bound and pulled into a separate room. Everything is too loud to process, the body shuts down after the rush as if the mind is trying to disappear from reality.

He comes to when he sees the man's face again. The prone adult is on his knees held by his arms between two other towering cultists, though his veil is nowhere to be seen. Sam once again locks eyes with the man he stabbed, he can see the humanity in the window to his soul and his memory is so so confused. He may be a child but he knows there's no difference between him and the man, only age, only height, only power. Now that he's reduced to a helpless captive, just like himself, his child mind struggles to find his disgust for the monster in front of him. He only feels pity. He can't do much but watch, his hands shackled to the familiar chains beside him, as one of the cultists holding the man withdraws a dagger.

The blade is set pointing upwards just under the soft chin of the man, and with a gravelly voice, he whispers, "This is no fault but your own." Then the dagger is pushed up through his jaw, blood instantly pouring from his wound and his tongue, he chokes and spits and Sam feels the spray on his own skin. Then the two cultists drop him, and exit the room, leaving Sam alone with the adult's corpse before him, convulsing as the life leaves his body. He doesn't even have room to crawl away when the pool of blood reaches the hems of his shorts.

The child just cries and cries, over the loss of his companion, over the guilt of causing death to another. He's far too young to understand grief and anguish, but Sam knows. These emotions are nothing new to him.

Once properly numb to the sight, the child has to let the time pass because it's all they can do. There's no reason to hope for a new environment when none will ever arrive. But then the corpse will suddenly come alive again, sputtering out the final wet breaths, dying a horrible slow death in front of him. It shocks him from his slumber and triggers another panic attack but soon enough it becomes still once more. It takes days for the body to grow completely cold. The congealed blood that cements their feet to the floor is so disturbing that he mimics

the corpse to avoid the sticky feeling, keeping as still as possible until his whole body is numb and tingly.

It makes the dissociation easier. Sam stays in the monotonous timespan but he can tell when the actual consciousness begins to separate from reality. He knows because he is familiar with the strange feeling, when the shadows of the mind draw you away from the outside world. In the present this action can be almost instantaneous, but it's obvious to him through the memory that the process was learned.

So now he can witness the body without a host, something he didn't think was possible. The eyes are still open, his lungs still breathe and he's taking in information but there's no reaction. Some part of him is concerned but he's mainly fascinated by the mere fact that this is still retained memory. Going off what Karl told him, memory is tied to the host, but then again Karl isn't someone trustworthy anymore. Who knows how many lies he fed to Sam in the short time knowing him.

In some time, the routine comes around of a cultist entering the room to give him water. What Sam discovers first is that his eyes automatically follow the robed figure, but he can't detect any signs of distress, physically or mentally. He's like a doll.

And the cultist seems to notice as well, taking caution and testing the tracking of his eyes, then when he lifts the basin of liquid, Sam's head tilts back as if executing a command and his mouth opens. There's a moment's pause before the cultist does what he indicated, pouring the lukewarm water down his throat, the child swallowing mechanically. Then once he's done drinking, he returns to his neutral position, unmoving except for the faded blue eyes that never once glance away from the veil. The man leaves the room quickly and it isn't long before a few others take his place. Sam is still staring at the doorway when they enter, then once again follows their movements with rapt attention. Their conversation echoes above his head, utter nonsense to his doll-like state.

"See for yourself, it's just like David described."

"Finally, a proper vessel. I was beginning to lose faith in the prophecy."

"Do not say such things, we must never doubt the words of the Old One."

"We have to begin the program at once."

"I'll contact him and send a Mother to fetch the preparations, hurry along."

"Blood for the Blood God."

The others respond in unison, "Blood for the Blood God."

Sam is still waiting, motionless and small on the floor of the room, just staring up at the talking heads. He hasn't the slightest idea of what they are saying, but it seems important, like he wasn't supposed to hear it.

Time slips by as the memory jumps forward to a point where Sam is now sitting in a chair with for once no binds around his hands or feet. In front of him sits a woman without a veil, holding a hefty hardcover book. She's staring into his eyes mere inches before him, as if waiting for a response. Then she slowly says, "Awaken the prince of blood, rise the immortal Guide. Are you awake?"

His head nods, up and down, sort of jagged and unnatural. He doubts his reaction is anything more than an assumption of context. But the woman seems pleased by his response, leaning back in her chair and opening the book to the first page.

"Excellent. Welcome to the site of your teachings, young prince. Here you are safe from harm as long as you remain obedient. Can you agree?" Once again, the asking tone leads him to nod. She nods in return. "Good. Today marks your first lesson, your entrance to the true title of prodigy, a coronation of royal beginnings."

She looks down at the old book, and begins to read.

In the beginning of the universe, the Blood God formulates his master plans for the Earth's conception. His power is all encompassing, however, it draws from the essence of life itself. Before humans, before civilization, the Sun is his first child, burning endlessly in the vacuum of space.

The Architect is his second son. Born from the matter that revolves around the Sun, the Architect grew the Earth from a tiny seed under the guidance of the Blood God. He built the rivers and mountains, the streams and the caves, the oceans and the sky, all for the purpose of creating a flourishing environment for the Blood God's fledglings. Thus began all of humankind.

At first, the Architect lived among the humans. He presents to them tools and shelter, fire, community, trades, he shares his knowledge of organization so the humans can be self-sustaining. He taught the humans how to properly praise the Blood God, and he taught them the art of war. Once blood was shed as quickly as new life formed, the Architect left the mortal realm with a prophecy in his wake. A recipe for an elixir of the gods, a drink that will allow a human to rid themselves of age. Humans would drive themselves mad searching for the key to figuring out the prophecy, and almost all of them failed.

That is, until the Old One arrived.

"Tell me about the meta, I assume you followed through on your instructions."

It's the fifth time Sam has found himself in this room, it's such a stark contrast to the prison cell he'd grown used to. This room is completely white with a white tiled floor and bright lights descending from the ceiling. He always awakes in this very chair, unbound and facing

away from the entrance. And the woman is always sitting before him, asking if he's the Architect, and he answers yes.

Throughout these sessions, Sam has learned that along with the history of the universe, they were taught to speak and read English, which he had no idea about. He always assumed being kept in this prison meant they wouldn't be privy to an education, but it seems Karl experienced a much different life than his brothers. At least he assumes these are Karl's memories he's viewing. It's the only logical conclusion.

"There's a wide open room, it's really dark but I can still see the floor and walls. Last time I saw a tunnel leading down into the darkness," their voice is much quieter than it is in the present, and slightly higher pitched. It's quite hoarse since they rarely get to use it, and expressionless. The monotone unnerves Sam, he's used to the energy of his brothers when they speak.

Karl is currently describing what he sees in the headspace when he's asleep, a project that the woman has been leading him through for the past few times he's seen her. She calls it "the meta," a shorthand for "metaphysical realm". She's listening closely now, writing notes in a notepad on the desk beside her. "Did you go down the tunnel?" She asks.

"No, something kept me from walking that way."

"Was it the voices?"

Karl stares blankly at a point above the woman's head as he considers the question, blinking mechanically a few times. "I heard crying, but it's soft. And screaming too, coming from far away," he answers.

She writes another few lines, then continues, "Have you seen anyone?"

"No."

"Good," the woman nods, "remember, if you encounter another child, you must keep your true purpose a secret. If our objectives in the meta are compromised, then all the work we've done will be lost. We cannot allow that to happen, understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," it's impossible to tell if Karl feels any certain way about their exchange, and for a moment Sam just feels pity. Of course he's still angry and betrayed, but maybe Karl didn't have as much a choice in the matter as he thought. In fact, Karl was born from the emptiness of the body's conscious, the full blown separation from reality with nothing more than a working doll in its place. It's too bad that his brother had to be a product of these monsters' little experiment. Not just born out of survival, but because they engineered someone like him to exist.

"Excellent," the lady gives him a pleasant smile and closes her notebook. "That concludes our meeting for today, you may go back to sleep, prince." With a final nod, Karl picks a spot on the far wall and lets his awareness fade, returning the body to its uninhabited state. It never ceases to weird Sam out, the way they move so mechanically with no one piloting, always awaiting a command from the adults around them. But it also scares him, it's

everything he's ever worried about when he considered their past, before he entered the caves and learned for himself. Their agency is so precious, so fleeting, but his worry stemmed from physical containment. Now, as he's seen this mindless state, he realizes the hold over their freedom is so deeply ingrained, it's possible their own bodily control can be overridden.

He has to find a way out of this. He needs to stop Karl before they lose everything he's worked so hard to achieve.

He will not fail.

—

From his spot on the floor, the image of the Blood God is even more terrifying, its skewed perspective makes Karl afraid to break his eyes away from the empty glare. Even as he's collapsed on his side- the unwounded side, if he had any foresight he would've fallen the other direction to at least put pressure on the wound, but here he is- with his hands squished beneath him, he tries to make sense of his suffering. He was so certain- why was he so certain? He had no reason to believe them- that no harm would come to him, that if he played his role then he would be acquitted, he would leave this body and return to his god's care. And yet he lays, a most diabolical traitor and suffering fool, bleeding steadily away until there's nothing left. This isn't even his body, just the one he was forced into.

Even after learning the torture his brothers endured to get to this point, he still chose his masters. He left his brother behind to die alone in a cold cell reminiscent of a time the boy never lived. He willingly followed his oppressors into an unknown location to be blindfolded, stabbed, left to rot. He doesn't know how long it's been, but he can't be much longer, that's for sure.

So why isn't anyone saving him? Even as his eyes search the canvas, Karl can't find any semblance of comfort. He was taught that the Blood God would protect him, his son, he was the prophet, he wouldn't just die. He was told he would hear the voice of the deity before him, would feel his soul drawn towards the sky into his open arms. But the eyes of the portrait are cold and uncaring. What a fool, he is. He can build himself up as the Architect just as he was told, but all along he is just a child. Tears carve a path down his face, he doesn't believe he's ever cried before, he's only witnessed his baby brothers in their sorrowful moments.

Why does he cry now? He is the reason this mess is upon him. He can feel the echoes of a recent happiness, of the safety he craves, but it is so far away from where he is now. They could have returned to that happiness, had Karl never awoken.

Someone slips into the room behind him, he isn't aware until pale arms lift him by his shoulders and under his knees, curled into a helpless ball against the shirt of his carrier. At once he can feel just how long and gangly his limbs are, so much longer than he can recall when he awoke last. It hits him then, just how much they've grown. And he realizes how

much more time they have to grow more and more, to become an adult even, and how he's wasted that opportunity. They *would've* grown older, they *would've* become an adult, but instead, they will die in agony, far far away from anyone who might've cared.

Every step jostles his hips, which sends sharp pains through his midsection, the wound pulling and pushing, pulsating and heated. He's too weak to move his neck, so his field of view is limited to the turning of his eyes. He can see the person carrying him is the same woman from before, Sarah, but now she's wearing the same veil as the cultists, only without the robes. Ahead he can make out a dark open space, with rings of candles flickering slowly, illuminating other cultists. Sarah steps onto a platform and settles Karl so he's kneeling in a small pool of liquid in a shallow basin. In front of him is a wooden pole with a hook at the top, a far bit above his eye level. He hears her speak at him, "It's time to finally reach salvation, young prince. May humanity reap the blessings of your sacrifice." He doesn't understand.

"P-please," he sputters with the last of his energy, "please, I don't w-want to die." His pleadings fall on deaf ears.

She then takes his hands by the bindings and raises it until it catches on the hook, all while Karl groans in pain as his wound is stretched further and further. Hanging by the wrist cuffs aches like nothing he's ever felt, as his upper body is forced to lean away from his center of gravity. He could correct himself and maybe even offer less strain on his stab wound if he sat up on his knees, but he's far too exhausted to move. He can hardly breathe with his chest extended forward like this, his muscles weak and barely able to make space for his lungs to expand.

In this position, he can feel the steady flow of blood leak down his side and into the shallow pond. He cries are more ragged now, his chest spasming painfully with each sob. It may be the low light or maybe the tears but his vision is getting too blurry to make out what's around him. He feels like he's about to lose consciousness, like tendrils of sleep are tugging at his mind, but he knows it's more than that. Is this what he was anticipating? Is the pull of death the same as the Blood God coming to collect his soul? Then why is he so afraid? Why is he crying so profusely, if this is just the intended finale to the prophecy he's been told countless times?

He doesn't want to die.

But there's nothing he can do. The cultists have long been talking or chanting or whatever but Karl hasn't registered any of it. The language is all mumbled and distorted, sounding far away. All he can do is let his eyes slip closed, and welcome death for all its worth.

I'm sorry, Sam.

In his final moments, he feels compelled to open his eyes one last time, and just in time to see the swoosh of a metal bat as it collides with Sarah's head. The resulting twang breaks the

running mantra of the other cultists, and one of them lets out a yelp that's quickly silenced by a sharp sword slashing through their throat.

Wilbur and Techno make no noise in the darkness, hiding under commotion and ripping their way through the old fucks in the robes one by one. Another sickening thud as the bat meets a skull, choking sounds by an elder with a gash in his sternum, just a ruthless slaughter and a scramble of the remaining cultists as they attempt to escape. The two brothers had never been so explicitly violent, but their movements look so rehearsed, the way they dance around each other leaving death in their wake.

The child is already unconscious, and while Techno deals with the survivors, Wilbur tears away his sweater to wrap tightly around his little brother's bleeding wound. He then breaks the bindings and squeezes the teen tightly against his chest. It's a little awkward without the boy's bony arms also wrapping around his shoulders, but Wilbur hoists him up despite it, and shouts for Techno to leave.

They can't speak while they make a mad dash to the exit they arrived from, busting open the heavy door to the cold night, out of breath, but the bloodstains are at least hidden by the moonlight.

Niki, watching them escape, flashes her headlights to point them in the right direction, and they quickly sprint towards her car. Wilbur practically dives into the back seat, aiming to take the blow while he cradles Tommy tighter, as Techno stops by Niki's open window. "Take them to the hospital," the pink haired teen commands, and Niki pales at the splatter of blood across his face but nods in agreement. Then he turns to his brothers, "I'll go find Dad."

"And get changed, you look like a serial killer," Wilbur says with a cheeky grin, the humorous tone a stark contrast to the current situation.

"Says the guy holding a half-dead child," Techno shoots back but Niki shoos him away before they can bicker any further. He gets into the Watson van and pulls out, presumably to find Phil.

Niki quickly finds the address to the ER and zooms out of the parking lot at a frightening speed, but Wilbur hardly notices. He instead sits up in the seat and reorients his brother in his arms, checking for a pulse while he gazes upon his pale cheeks and tear tracks. He doesn't realize he was holding his breath until he feels the dim heartbeat under his brother's skin and the air escapes him in a proper sigh of relief. "He's still alive," he whispers, though loud enough for Niki, and he hears her sigh as well. He doesn't expect a further response, as Niki is dead focused on driving as fast as possible without causing any accidents. Wilbur almost feels sympathy for whoever endures his own reckless driving, now that he's experiencing Niki's wrath. At least it's a dire cause. He finds himself rambling, "They had him hung by his wrists on a fucking hook, Niki, bleeding out into a tub... like a damn animal. I couldn't believe it. I hope they're dead, I hope that bitch bleeds out on the ground and dies cold and alone." It's a dark way of speaking that Niki has never heard Wilbur use before, she flashes her eyes at him through the rear view, half shocked and half sorrowful.

A few minutes from their destination, Wilbur calls the hospital ahead of time to alert them to their arrival. That way, when Niki pulls up to the entrance there is already help waiting to

take Tommy in. The time passes in a blur as Wilbur sits in the lobby, soon to be joined by Niki, and then later Techno and Phil. Techno looks marginally better without all the blood stains but under the bright fluorescents his eyes are obviously exhausted. Thankfully, the only stray blood caught during Wilbur's havoc was on his sweater, now somewhere in a hazardous waste bin, assumed to be only Tommy's blood soaked into it. He dreads the moment he'll be asked to explain what happened tonight.

Someone comes by to speak with Phil after an hour, to inform him of Tommy's volatile status. Wilbur overhears the doctor saying, "Fortunately, he survived surgery with two blood transfusions and a brief cardiac arrest. We have him in intensive care at the moment to stabilize his vitals. Once we confirm you're the legal guardian, you may visit him." They speak in a hushed voice but there's little commotion happening and Wilbur has nothing else to attach his attention to.

"What about us?" Wilbur speaks up, leaning away from his chair to see the doctor better, "We're his family, we have to see him."

"Only the legal guardian can visit at the moment," the doctor replies, and at least he has the decency to sound apologetic. Wilbur feels an urge to argue further but Techno's hand on his shoulder stops him, and he slumps back down into the uncomfortable chair. He just can't get the image of his little brother, his frail, darling brother held by just his wrists and dying, being bled like a pig at a slaughterhouse. All he wants is a tiny bit of closure, to be assured by his own eyes that Tommy isn't actively hurdling towards death.

He's got his head in his hands, trying to quell the images racing through his mind when Phil returns to the seat across from the three teens. Phil is a little lost in thought himself as he considers whatever the doctor told him. Techno clears his throat, quiet enough for just them, and asks, "Aren't you going to see him?"

Phil blinks out of his slight stupor and nods, "Soon, they'll have to search his records to make sure I'm his guardian. He won't be awake for a good while anyway." He meets his son's gaze, then glances between the three of them, "Oh, Niki, did we ever catch you up to speed?"

Niki gives a patient smile, "No, but I could tell it was important when Techno called me."

"Shoot," Techno adds, playfully, "I knew I forgot something."

Wilbur's head suddenly darts up, face blanched as he looks at his father, remembering that he'll have to confess what happened hours ago eventually. He isn't sure how Phil will respond to the fact that they most definitely killed a few people, even if it was for the sake of Tommy's life.

"Right," Phil says, feeling a sense of suspicion about Wilbur's expression. "Neither of you have told me anything either."

The two brothers lock eyes for a moment then look away, trying to act casual. Wilbur can't meet his father's gaze. "Ha ha... maybe it's best you don't know."

“I can’t remember the past couple hours anyway, it’s all a blur,” Techno argues alongside his brother, equally hesitant to reveal anything incriminating.

“Boys,” Phil’s tone down drops to a more serious level as he crosses his arms, narrowing his eyes at them, “Where did you find him?”

“We went to the address you sent and saw that van pulling away,” Wilbur cracks immediately under the pressure, “I figured it was the same as the one the stalkers used so I told Niki to follow them. She saw them take Tommy inside a warehouse.”

Techno looks unsurprised by Wilbur’s confession, “Honestly, why do I bother trying to cover for you?”

“You three went in alone??” Phil yells louder than expected, flabbergasted.

“Niki stayed in the car,” Techno corrects.

“I tried to tell them not to go,” Niki explains, keeping her voice level to get Phil to calm down.

Wilbur attempts to placate him by adding, “We came prepared, of course. I would never be stupid enough to go in unarmed.”

Phil’s paled expression tells Wilbur he wasn’t very successful, “You...” The worried father investigates their faces, as if looking for a lie in what he’s heard. While he resents the idea of his sons in danger, he spies a splotch of red that Techno missed near his hairline, slowly reaching out to wipe it away with his thumb. The shock has yet to wear off about almost losing Tommy, and now he’s faced with the realization that all three of his sons could have very well died tonight. He doesn’t say anything else but tumbles forward, enveloping the two boys in a bear hug. Despite the battle having long since ended, the panic still grips at his chest, an untold grief weighing down on him. No one is dead, thank the gods that no one is dead, but he can’t fathom just how close he was to losing everything he’s ever loved.

Wilbur awkwardly pats his father’s back as the man cries, while Techno sits in an uncomfortable silence waiting for his release. Wilbur just hopes that this confession is enough to satiate him, so they’ll never need to reveal what actual horror went down that night. Truth be told, Wilbur doesn’t think he’d be able to conjure it, the only thing he remembers was the burning desire to find and rescue his baby brother. He knows whoever stood in his path likely met an untimely fate, but the details escape him. It’s probably for the best.

Niki taps Phil on the shoulder politely to alert him when the doctor returns. They look a bit uncomfortable about Phil’s already unstable emotional state, but they inform him that he’s been cleared to see his son. Wilbur watches his father as he’s led away, a solemn hope laying heavy on his chest but he isn’t sure how likely good news will come.

For a while, Tommy felt confident leaving the body in the hands of Sam and wanted to forget the troubles of reality by playing cards with his brothers. Really only Tubbo and Ranboo play with him, since Fundy doesn't understand the rules of the games (he mostly says 'Go fish!' every time he thinks it's his turn, even when they moved into a different game altogether) but it's a bonding experience regardless. However the uplifting tone turns upsetting when the sun suddenly disappears from the sky outside their little house in the headspace. They're used to the time of day displayed changing without warning, but it's obvious something is very wrong when it happens so suddenly.

Tommy immediately stands up, shaking off the spark of 'danger!' that crawls up his spine. He leaves his cards on the floor and without a word he heads outside, feeling the need to see for himself what changed.

When the headspace turns to night, he can always count on the light of the moon and the stars to still illuminate the environment, albeit more desaturated and tinted blue. But he can't see the moon or any of the stars when he looks up, just an endless void that seems more like a static image than a glimpse of space. It's not completely dark, as he can still see the area around him, but the lack of light source is just more unnerving.

"No moon?" He hears Fundy whimper from behind him, and he turns to see that his brothers followed him outside. He didn't even notice, too absorbed by the weirdness of the empty sky.

"I've never seen the sky look like that before," Tubbo ponders, gripping tight to Ranboo's arm.

"Yeah... I don't think it's supposed to do that," Ranboo adds.

"What's going on?" Tubbo looks to Tommy, directing the question at him.

"Is Sam trouble?" The young fox boy looks afraid, shielding himself behind one of Ranboo's tall legs.

Tommy would laugh at the sight of his shorter brothers clinging to the tallest on any other occasion, but he's worried too. "I don't know," he says.

In addition to the endless abyss of the sky is the fact that the world around them is dead silent. Gone are the noises of the wind or the critters in the woods, everything is creepily still.

Tubbo sounds so small when he states, "We need to find Sam."

At the mention of the oldest again, Tommy's gaze darts to the background, remembering how he left the front not so long ago. To his shock, he can't immediately spot the Control Room. It's a square, all white building, it's supposed to stick out in the lush scenery that surrounds them, but it's nowhere to be found. Wide-eyed, Tommy hastily runs towards where he remembered seeing it last, as if he's just somehow too far away to see the building in the darkness.

The grass under his feet suddenly turns to metal, and it feels hollow beneath him. He steps back and sees that he reached a divot in the grassy field, a perfect square of smooth metal,

right where the Control Room should be. He doesn't believe it, the room has always been there, it's never straight up vanished before. Then again neither has the sky, until now.

The absence of the room is what really sets off Tommy's internal alarms, he had felt the panic simmering before but now he's full blown spiraling. "I-I- I don't understand. Are we dead? Does this mean we're dead?" He rambles to himself, "Or- or we're in a coma, or something? No- that- it's just prime when that happens. It's got to be something so so much worse. D-did Sam do this? No, no I refuse, he wouldn't- at least I don't think he would--"

"Hey, hey, slow it down, big man," he's broken from his spiral when Tubbo wraps an arm around his shoulders, speaking slow and calming to him. "We can't jump to conclusions, not yet anyway."

"Something is wrong, Tubbo. You don't understand, something is- its really bad! We can't control the body anymore, what if- gods, what if we never see the outside world again?" Tommy spills his worries to his brother, clutching onto his shirt, "W-Wilbur and Phil and Tech, what if we never see them again? Tubbo, we might never see them again!" He lets the tears flow, sinking into Tubbo's arms as the other hugs him close.

"We will, Tommy," Tubbo mutters, trying to sound confident, "I promise we will." And maybe it works, as the comfort of his brother's embrace is enough to ease his panicking thoughts.

Tommy is still visibly shaken, but he hauls himself up and stands back. "L-lets go find Sam," he decides. Tubbo nods and follows him as they head back to where Ranboo and Fundy waited outside the house. It seems the youngest got scared enough to shift into his fox form and he's now tensely curled up in Ranboo's arms. When they get close enough, Tommy can hear small fearful chitters muffled by Ranboo's shirt.

"Oh baby," Tubbo coos with a worried frown, gently petting the creature's back in slow strokes. Seeing the hybrid cowering in his nonhuman state, Tommy feels a pang of envy at his ability to remove himself from the conflict, but squashes it down just as quick. Fundy is just a little kid, and shouldn't have to bear the burden of fixing their troubles. At least he is safe in the care of his brothers.

"Let's go to the vault," Tommy says, considering for a moment if he should ask Ranboo and the little one to stay in the house. It could be safer than walking directly towards where he imagines the danger to be, but then again, he detests the idea of splitting up. He wants them to stay close. "All of us."

The others don't protest, following Tommy's lead and staying close by as they make the short trek to the caves entrance.

"We're not going in, are we?" Ranboo asks, his voice a little shaky.

"Sam said not to," Tubbo adds, but leaves room for Tommy to make the decision.

He thinks for a long moment, looking back on his conversation with Sam when he saw him last. "Hey, Tubbo," he speculates, "Do you remember anything about the Dark?"

“It’s pretty dark, I guess,” is his first thoughtful answer, the same as what Tommy had said to Sam before.

“Obviously,” Tommy rolls his eyes, “I mean, what else do you remember?”

They walk in silence as Tubbo actually considers what he can remember, coming to the unsettling conclusion of, “I... don’t know. I can’t think of anything. I know it was just us and...” he trails off, looking puzzled.

“And there was something else, right?” Tommy presses, “I feel like it wasn’t just us.”

“Yeah...” Tubbo’s furrowed brows tense as if he’s trying to search his mind for clues, and coming up empty. He glances up at the taller teen, “I mean, you were there too, Ranboo. Right?”

“Sorry,” Ranboo mutters, “I can’t remember anything about it.”

The three walk in silence, other than the soft whimpers of the small fox, and no sooner does the entrance come into view. That metal door, sealed like a vault, the void of the sky making it look all the more ominous. Tommy stops a fair distance away, about as far as he walked when he came here with Sam. He feels hesitant to go any further and the others don’t question it, waiting beside him, all eyes on the door.

—

He’s never really known how to describe it, but even while in the inner world, Sam could feel a thin connection to the state of the body in the outside world. He had an inkling of who was fronting, if they were in prime or not, or if the body was awake or sleeping. As the Warden, he tended to stay to himself while he carried out his duties, only coming to front when he was requested or if they needed help. He knew if he fussed over every little sign of change in the body, he would drive himself and his brothers mad with worry. It was best that he focused on what was asked of him.

Coming to the present moment after a long, arduous flashback of Karl’s memories, Sam notices the distinct shift in tension in the air. He feels lighter, somehow, not so claustrophobic in the dark tunnel, in the dark prison cell. The body is unconscious, he knows. Karl is still in the control room, but likely powerless now. It’s the assurance Sam needs to finally get himself out of this decrepit cage. A part of him thinks it must be too late now, if their body is not asleep but instead comatose, wrapped in a death that was taking it’s sweet time, but he has to hope.

He takes a moment in front of the cell door, with its metal bars and rusted hinges, and pushes without much strength. It opens easily, squealing as it swings in an arc. He’s a bit surprised at the lack of resistance, but that only confirms that whatever hold Karl had on the mind is

neutralized, at least for now. He takes his first step of freedom, determination filling his body, then breaks into a sprint.

He makes it to the main hall, pausing to get his bearings. He's not used to the open space, even if it's only a fraction of how free and open the sky on the surface above is. The walls seems to be shimmering, unable to keep a stable shape or appear as anything solid. Choosing the tunnel he remembers leading to the control room, he resumes his quick pace, running like he's racing towards the metaphorical finish line. By what he can tell from the body's state, he theoretically could take his time, but he's far too pent up to walk. There's no way to quantify how long he spent buried in flashbacks, trapped in a tiny cell, but it was long enough to make his freedom a prime motivator to stop Karl and fix whatever mess he's got them into.

He slows his gait once he reaches the end of the tunnel, in the open doorway to the control room. For the first time, Sam takes in the white walls of the small room and finally understands its design. It's the same room that he's seen again and again throughout every memory that Karl experienced. That's the final confirmation that Karl really did create this world in their mind, that he was given more power and influence than anyone else in the system. Sam wants to be resentful but really, this fact only cements his pity regarding his brother's existence. Being the only one so intertwined with the monsters that abused them, it's a betrayal that will never leave Karl's mind regardless of his intentions within the system.

Said traitor is curled into a ball in the center of the room, crying into the hands covering over his eyes, his long robes spread over him like a blanket. It's the smallest Sam has ever seen him, gone away is the 'ageless deity' he paraded before. Now he's akin to the age Sam witnessed in the flashbacks, even younger than Tommy presently. His parental instincts override any lingering resentment or anger, he's sure, as soon as he walks into the room and gazes over the small, crying child.

Karl doesn't fight back when Sam leans down to cradle the young boy in his arms, pulling the frail body against his chest and lifting him. He only covers his eyes with his sleeves, hiding himself from Sam's worried stare. So with the child safe in his arms, and the body left out of commission, Sam sees no other reason to remain in this drab dark cave.

He keeps his eyes ahead and his hold steady, taking his time with each careful step back towards the main cavern. At some point the tiny sounds of weeping quiet and eventually stop. But Sam doesn't attempt to stir him, letting the boy calm himself and work through whatever he's thinking. Instead Sam wonders if this has been the real Karl all along, this sad, scared little boy with an artificial purpose, made to believe he was this demigod who would fulfill some predestined prophecy. Maybe he's just in a certain state right now, and will return to his adult-looking self once he's calmed. Sam supposes only time will tell.

For now, he's protected, and he will continue to be protected. Not as a priceless vessel of untold riches, but as his brother.

Once he reaches the main hall, he takes a peek down to see how Karl is fairing, and he sees wide brown eyes staring back. He doesn't believe he's ever been close enough to Karl to see his eyes before, and especially not with the hood of his robe covering him. There's no doubt in his mind that Karl is only a kid, with eyes like those. "Sam?" His small voice practically whispers, so small Sam probably wouldn't have noticed if he wasn't already looking at him.

“Yeah?” He replies, with the same gentle voice he reserves for the boys’ bad days, when anything above a whisper is too much to handle.

“Do you think... the prophecy is real?” Karl asks him, a deep worry laced in the question. It’s obvious that he expects a certain answer already, but he needs to hear it from someone else.

Sam only pauses so he doesn’t seem too eager when he says, “No, Karl. I don’t.” He’s still at a slow pace but they’re almost to the exit now. He stops a few paces away, able to hear the muffled voices of his brothers bickering outside the door. He smiles, longing to see them again, but before he does he sets Karl down on the ground and kneels before him. “Listen, I need you to hear this before we go any further,” he says, a little louder than before but only to show his genuine confidence in what he’s saying, “Everything that has happened is not your fault. No matter what, you are my brother and I will protect you from now until the end of time. I don’t care about anything else.”

The seriousness of his statement makes Karl all teary-eyed again, unable to fully comprehend what Sam is offering. “B-but I hurt you, I- I tricked you,” Karl stammers.

“And it wasn’t your fault,” Sam reiterates, “None of it, you were just doing as you were told, I can’t be angry about that. All we can do is keep going.” He lays a gentle hand on Karl’s face, using the other to sweep away his messy bangs, and continues, “I can tell you have a brilliant mind, Karl. Once you leave this place, you will have all the opportunity in the world to prove just how brilliant you are, so much more than any prophecy could ever claim.”

The voices from outside seem to be getting a bit louder, as if they are approaching the door. Karl notices as well, his gaze switching between the sounds and Sam’s determined expression.

The young boy nods, his glistening tears rolling silently down his face as he grasps tight to Sam’s hand. Sam is about to stand when he considers something, and looks back to Karl. “I think we should leave the robes here, I know the others won’t take kindly to seeing them,” he suggests, not wanting to accidentally trigger one of his brothers and ruin their chances at trusting him before they can actually talk. He waits for Karl’s nervous approval before helping the young boy remove the oversized robes. Underneath, Sam is surprised to see a clean set of white clothes, a simple t shirt and shorts. He expected the arrangement, it’s the only clothes they were given during their captivity, but the state of them is what surprises him. In every memory he’s witness, their clothes have never been clean, always stained red or brown or yellow. In some instances, he wouldn’t even be able to tell that the clothes were white to begin with.

He doesn’t say anything, but carefully removes his own hoodie, colored dark green and quite scuffed, and helps Karl put it on. Karl does so without argument, and they both stand up. Sam can’t help but smile at the way the hoodie hangs off his short limbs, hiding his skinny figure in the thick fabric. Sam gives his hand a squeeze.

Then, together, they finally breach the exit door and step out into the strange night.

The vault door's sudden clicks and screeches stop the bickering of the three brothers as they turn to stare at the door. They were just arguing over who would go in to look for Sam, but it looks like Sam came to find them instead. Standing in the open doorway is the man himself, looking worse for wear but still standing strong, with a young boy holding his hand and half-hidden behind him.

"Sam!" Tommy bursts from the stupor first, clamoring over to his brother with open arms, causing him to let go of the younger boy so he doesn't fall over. At the sight of Tommy practically tackling Sam, Ranboo and Tubbo join in on the group hug, until Sam is dog piled on the grassy floor. Karl stands to the side and watches the reunion, a little awkward and uncomfortable.

"Guys! Guys, please," Sam laughs as he begs the teens to let go of him. They eventually relent and Ranboo helps Sam up off the ground. He takes a step back to beckon to Karl, introducing him to the others. He doesn't dwell on anything that happened in the caves, giving only his name and the fact that he stayed behind when they first left the underground. Karl seems a bit overwhelmed by the commotion, and he stares at Sam with a frown as the teen forgoes telling his brothers the true nature of Karl's existence. Sam returns the gaze with the same determined expression he used in the caves, with an untold promise to uncover the details later.

Tommy speaks up to introduce himself and the other three, a little confused as to where this kid came from, when he realizes that Fundy isn't with the group anymore. "Fundy?" He asks aloud, turning to where he saw the young fox only minutes ago.

"He wandered off?" Tubbo ponders, surprised considering how frightened he was about this whole debacle.

Sam sees the worry grow on their faces so he clears his throat to get their attention, "I'm sure he can't have gone too far," he assures them.

"Oh, the room is back," Ranboo mentions without much fanfare, staring off in the distance to where the white box stands once again, as if it never disappeared in the first place. Tommy and Tubbo turn around in shock, confirming the return of the control room.

"I think you found Fundy," Sam states, following their gazes. He can still feel the body is unconscious, but they are locked in prime right now, with Fundy stuck inside the room until they wake up or prime relents. Not the best candidate to figure out their condition when they do finally awake, but it's not like they have a choice.

"Well, fuck," Tommy curses, turning back to Sam and asking, "any idea where we'll wake up?"

Sam doesn't have the answer, so he looks to the one who does, and Karl flushes under his gaze. Seeing his hesitation, Sam takes a deep breath and addresses the group, "We should return to the base and talk there." It'll be easier to diffuse the situation in a familiar place, if anyone reacts badly to the news. No one objects.

Tommy, Tubbo, and Ranboo take the lead, resuming their bickering about who *would* have gone to find Sam if he didn't interrupt them, while Karl shuffles behind Sam, staying close. Sam looks back to check on him every few seconds, watching the kid get progressively more tense and shaky the farther they get from the cave. He's in a staring contest with the grass, completely lost in thought and no doubt dreading the conversation to come.

Once they reach the house, the brothers enter but Tommy waits in the doorway, watching Sam collect Karl's shaking hand to lead him inside. Karl's anxiety seems to be set aside momentarily as he takes in the new structure, marveling at the interior. He tugs at Sam's hand and asks, "Did you build this yourself?"

"Yep. Of course everyone has contributed, but I laid the foundation, so to speak." Sam answers proudly. He notices Karl locking eyes with Tommy nearby and the boy's anxiety returns as quick as it left. Sam sighs at Tommy's look of suspicion but doesn't mention it, gently pulling Karl towards the living room where Ranboo and Tubbo have already made themselves comfortable, one practically sitting atop the other. Tommy slides around him to join the pile, stretching his long legs over both the boys' laps, much to their disdain but they don't argue for too long. Everyone is quiet when Sam leads Karl to a seat then sits next to him.

"So, you gonna explain why the sky is all weird and shit?" Tommy announces, crossing his arms and leaning back, only narrowly missing Tubbo's face with his knee. In return, Tubbo simply shoves his legs off of his lap and Tommy scrambles trying to right himself.

Sam is proud to see a small smile on Karl's face seeing their antics, and feels a bit more confident that this will all work out eventually. Although he isn't sure how to answer his question. He looks to Karl to see if he would know.

"It is?" Karl asks, having not noticed the void-like darkness that filled the sky above them before they entered the building.

"Yeah, the sun's gone, and there's no stars either," Tommy resumes his wary stare towards the boy, hesitant to trust this new person, despite the weird familiarity he sees in his face.

But Karl doesn't seem to notice, looking away to ponder his answer, not even aware of the tension lingering in the room. "I suppose..." he begins, turning to gaze at Sam, "I'm... uncertain."

Sam can hear the strange dialect bleeding back into Karl's words, but he takes it in stride, assuring him, "That's alright, we can figure out all that later," then he says to Tommy, "Can you start with the last thing you remember?"

"Yeah," Tommy agrees, still glancing at Karl with uncertainty but willing to do what Sam asks of him. "Uh, we were at some government building, me and Phil. I asked to use the bathroom so you could step in, like we planned. That's it," he explains with a shrug.

Karl flashes a look of guilt, knowing he is the reason Sam couldn't follow through with their plan. He takes a nervous gulp of air and says, "You... when you left the control room," he

pauses to collect his thoughts, now feeling their eyes on him, waiting. “I was summoned, when the room was empty.”

“You what?!” Tommy exclaims, completely bewildered at this revelation, but Tubbo shushes him to let Karl continue.

And after a few deep breaths, he does just that, “I awoke in a vehicle, with a woman asking for me.”

“She knew who you were?” Sam questions.

“Yes,” Karl nods, “she knew about the programming, and she mentioned being the daughter of the Old One.”

Tommy looks on the edge of his seat, about to interrupt again until Tubbo pulls his shoulders back, keeping him quiet.

Karl continues walking through what he experienced, getting blindfolded and led through a cold building, seeing the portrait of the Blood God then being wounded for the ritual. When he gets to the end of what he remembers, being strung up on that post and bleeding to death, he feels tears gather in his eyes but refuses to let them fall. “Then, I think... I believe someone intervened. They struck the woman before I fell asleep,” he concludes, staring down at the hem of Sam’s hoodie.

“So, we’re safe?” Sam clarifies, allowing a bit of hope for their well-being in the outside world.

“I hope so,” Karl practically whispers, unable to lift his eyes from his lap. The guilt of betraying his family keeps swirling around with the pain of being betrayed by the people who brought him to existence. He feels sick thinking about losing his chance to fulfill the prophecy, his only reason for being. What use does he have as a traitor to both sides of his loyalty?

“Why did you follow her?” Tommy then asks, venomously, ignoring the stern look from Sam. “You could have gotten away, but you just let her take us!”

“I was following instructions,” Karl answers simply. “I did... beg for my life, in the end. It was too late.”

“And where were you?” Tommy finally meets Sam’s gaze. Sam isn’t surprised by his aggression, but before he can answer, Karl speaks for him.

“I deceived him,” Karl admits with a slight desperation, “I was aware that he would gain control once given a signal, so I instead lured him away and prevented him from doing so.”

Not even Tubbo can stop Tommy from jumping to his feet in a sudden rage and spouting, “What??”

“Just who are you, Karl?” Tubbo asks, voice full of distrust.

Karl sinks into himself, wishing he could blink and find himself back in the dark caves. Even the never ending loneliness is better than this confrontation. Still, he stutters, “I-I am the Architect. I am the prince of b-blood and the immortal guide-“

“You’re a part of the cult!” Tommy shouts, pointing at him accusingly. “This whole time! You knew the torment they caused us and yet you still followed their command!”

“I was not given a choice-“ Karl defends, weakly, only to get cut off by Tommy again.

“Bullshit! You chose to put our lives at risk!”

“I was already being transported when I awoke, there was no way to escape-“

“But Sam could’ve!” Tommy argues over him, stepping towards him and growing louder the closer he gets.

Hearing enough of the fighting, Sam takes a guarding stance in front of Karl, shielding him from Tommy’s wrath. “Stop! No more yelling,” he commands with a serious expression. He waits for Tommy to shut his mouth and take a step back before he continues, “There’s nothing we can do about what’s already been done. We all have been led astray by our instincts before. You didn’t act this way when Fundy and Tubbo ran away and got us hurt.”

“Fundy’s a kid,” Tommy says through gritted teeth.

“And Karl is not?” Sam gestures to the young boy curled up in the chair, trying to steady his shaking limbs by hugging his knees to his chest. Silent tears gather in his eyes.

Tommy doesn’t have a quick reply for that, instead holding a staring match with Sam, trying to translate the hurt and betrayal he only knows how to express through fighting. He startles when a gloved hand rests on his shoulder, Ranboo having stood up and approached him without even noticing. “I think Sam is right, we shouldn’t fight now” the tall teen says with a calm voice. He gently tugs Tommy back into sitting on the couch.

“I’m s-sorry,” Karl whimpers through his tears. “I cannot- I never wanted to h-hurt anyone, the- the prophecy was sup-p-posed to save us...”

“We were the prophet?” Tubbo asks, sounding surprised.

“What prophecy?” Tommy echoes, a lot more confused than angry now, glancing at his brother seated beside him for a moment before looking to Sam.

Sam breathes in and lets out a long sigh, feeling drained from his situation of captivity in the caves already, now doubly so having to mediate this mess of a conversation. “The fountain of youth,” he answers, devoid of emotion, “A child born from blood becoming a vessel for the Blood God’s prince, to receive the blessing of immortality. Once reunited with his Father, his blood flows as a potion to combat aging.” He recites from what heard in Karl’s memories.

“It was a lie, I know now,” Karl comments quietly. “I was a pawn of their making.”

“But not anymore,” Sam assures, sitting back in his spot, a comforting hand laid on the young boy’s arm. There’s still some tension in the room, but it’s quiet for the moment, each brother contemplating the new information. The silence breaks when Sam stands up abruptly once again, all eyes on him. “I’m waiting by the control room, for when Fundy awakes and prime ends,” he explains with certainty. “You can accompany me, if you wish,” Sam offers to Karl, a bit apprehensive about leaving him alone with the others. “Only to wait,” he clarifies, addressing the rest of the room, “no one else can front until I give the okay. I will make sure we are safe and back in Phil’s care. Understood?”

The three couched boys all nod before launching into a whispered conversation amongst themselves, and Karl stands to accept his offer to follow him. The walk is calm, at a much more leisurely pace. Sam isn’t in any rush to escape the situation, but he wants to be certain that he can take over as soon as he’s able, to ensure their safety.

He takes a seat in the grass near the doors of the white room, gesturing for Karl to do the same. Karl is once again lost in thought, still getting over his recent crying, but once he’s sat, he seems to remember something and gazes up at the voided sky. “Oh...” he mutters, considering the state of it. He doesn’t seem afraid, in fact, his eyes betray a certain familiarity to the image. “That is... I have seen that emptiness before.”

“You have?” Sam questions, following his gaze.

Karl nods slowly, “It was when I first came into existence. Before I was told how to shape the inner conscious into a metaphysical realm.” He sweeps his hand above him, almost like he’s reaching out to touch the void. “That is all I saw before I created the caves.”

“Hmm,” Sam makes a noise of acknowledgment, thinking. It makes sense that without a basis, there would be no imaginary world to occupy between the time spent awake in the real world.

“I was not aware that the surface’s environment would be under my control,” Karl continues, before turning to Sam, “It is possible that you can fix this issue.”

“How so?” Sam prompts, meeting his eyes.

“Think of what is supposed to appear. Allow your mental image to superimpose to the meta. It is usually a more passive process, as I had not witnessed the surface long enough to have complete control,” as Karl speaks, Sam notices that his childlike form has seemingly aged in front of him, looking closer to his own age than the young kid he found in the white room. Sam’s hoodie fits him better than before, and his fluffy brown hair is back to hanging over his brows. He’s still quite skinny, with pale skin and knobby knees, but his eyes are more analytical than afraid.

Sam does as he says, taking a moment to close his eyes and picture in his mind the color of the evening sky. He hasn’t any clue of what time it is in the real world, so he chooses a time a few hours before sunset, when the clouds float amongst a deep blue and the sun hangs just above the tree line, the beginnings of twilight painting it with faint purples and oranges. Once he’s satisfied with the mental image, he opens his eyes and smiles at the sight of his creation.

“It is... astounding, Sam,” Karl says, awestruck, “Is this truly what exists in the real world?”

“Yep,” Sam proudly agrees, “Just wait until you see the sunrise, that’s sure to take your breath away.”

Karl is silent for a minute with his eyes glued to the reanimated sky, but just when he opens his mouth, their attention is drawn to shouting back near the house.

“Sam!!” Tommy’s yell makes Sam smile grow wider, feeling nothing but affection for the younger’s passion. “Sam! The sky is back, Sam!” As if he couldn’t believe it, Tommy spins in a circle with his neck bent back to stare up at the newly colored sky. Sam chuckles at the sight. Tubbo and Ranboo follow out the door in a similar surprise.

There’s no doubt in his mind now, Sam concludes. They will be alright. As long as they have each other, everything will work out in the end.

Chapter End Notes

the end of this journey is drawing near. despite all the troubles and long periods of silence, i really did enjoy writing this story, i hope it can stand as an inspiration for anyone reading this to write to your hearts content, and to never be afraid to branch out to topics you want to try, even if they seem daunting or out of your league. creative writing is a medium that literally anyone can pursue, for fun or to hone your writing skills or to just get your thoughts out of your skull and onto paper, and fanfiction is no exception - my love for fanfiction and writing has followed me from my childhood into my adult life, and i doubt it'll ever fade anytime soon, i still read into the late hours of the night, i can't get enough, i fill my head with stories until i physically can't keep my eyes open

to end my ramble, i just want to thank everyone for reading and all the kudos and all the kind words, yall really inspire me to keep writing and posting - its funny because i haven't interacted with any canon dsmp for like a year now, but i still adore this community and all the stories it produces

i'll be around, i hope everyone is having a good day <3

Laying to Rest

Chapter Summary

While reflecting on our experiences, we are given a choice. Drown in the mistakes we made, or look forward to better days.

Chapter Notes

we are finally at the end lads, hope this chapter makes you feel all warm inside

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

Fundy isn't really sure what he expected when he decided to enter the white room after wandering away from his brothers. All he could think of was Tommy's panicked voice and hiding from the scary sky above, so then, when he saw the room reappear in the distance, he just went for it.

He's never been trapped in the room when the body wasn't awake, so hearing the doors close behind him gave him a bit of fright since, instead of opening his eyes in their shared human body, he found himself drenched in darkness. Then he encounters a dream.

The first feeling in his body is a freezing pressure encasing him in ice. His limbs are numb and he tries to breathe only to swallow lungfuls of water. Immediately he begins thrashing, willing his legs and arms to propel him to the water's surface, fighting against the wild current that only serves to pull him down, down, down.

It's so cold and the water is painful against his skin, the majority of the pain leaking through his abdomen and wrapping around his hips like a snake. He can't think beyond the hurt and his burning instincts to stop drowning, but with every foot closer to the surface he's dragged down twice as far. It's a hopeless endeavor, he wants so badly to give up and rest his aching body but he can't die, he can't. There is no death perceivable enough for him to accept, just the enigma of some abstract afterlife, whatever continues beyond the age when their body is no longer fit to stay living.

He can't die because he needs to see Sam again, he needs to watch the third Cinderella movie with Wilbur, and he needs to hear the end of the book that Techno had been reading to him while he drifts asleep. So despite the exhaustion, and the lead filling his hands and feet, he keeps struggling to reach the surface, kicking, clawing, screaming for air, he fights and he fights and he will never stop *fighting*-

The first sound that isn't water sloshing in his ears is his own low whine erupting from his throat. It's a mix between a groan and a whimper, similar to the pained sounds he would make as a fox, but he is distinctly human. His side is on fire, like one of his organs has been replaced by a lump of burning hot coal that's slowly melting him from the inside out, closer to his back than his stomach. He deeply regrets entering the room, coming to realize that he's waking up and now has to feel every bit of pain that was smothered by sleep before.

He's still kicking his legs, though not as forcefully as in the dream, he knows he's not under the water anymore but it's like his instincts are trying to escape the pain. His whimpering quiets somewhat, and he's aware of two more things: one, his hands are over his eyes, and moving them causes an unimaginably bright light to flood his vision which gives him a headache so he keeps them covered, and two, there's a foreign hand gently sifting through his hair, pushing apart the greasy strands and rubbing small circles on his skull. The owner of the hand, he assumes, is sitting by his bedside, whispering in a low voice trying to comfort him. They're saying short phrases like, "it's okay, bud," and "I know it hurts." The voice is recognizable but it's hard to place when he's so overstimulated.

"Nnnnnnh light," Fundy mutters, pressing harder over his eyes until stars dance behind his eyelids.

The hand pulls away and the person says, "Is it too bright? I think I can turn it off for you, I'm sure the nurses won't mind..." Then he hears footsteps and the flick of a switch. When they return to their seat, Fundy tries again to shift his fingers aside to peek out at his surroundings. Sure enough, even without the overhead light, there's enough ambiance in the room to see pretty much everything. He's on a white bed with a light blue blanket, connected to some steadily beeping machines through tubes and wires. Two bags, one red and one clear, are hanging on a metal hook beside him, and to his left is a panel with a big red button on it. Then he sees Phil, who is waiting patiently for him to take in the room, his eyes looking tired and weighed down by the dark bruises under them.

His delight in seeing his caretaker pushes him forward, intending to wrap his arms around the man, but the slightest movement sends shockwaves of pain through his abdomen. He cries out and hugs himself tightly instead, curling into a little ball as his instinctual self-comfort but it only hurts more and more. Tears make their way out of his eyes and soft whimpers escape him. He doesn't want to be awake anymore, it's too painful, he wants to go back to his brothers. The thought only makes him bawl harder.

Fundy's the one with the least amount of understanding when it comes to switches. The others have tried explaining before but he can't wrap his head around it. Especially not now, when the pain is so much that it fogs his brain and prevents him from thinking of anything else. It reminds him of the dream, the ache of his body drowning him, pulling him under so it's impossible to breathe, shivering like he's freezing, despite being overly warm in reality. He whines louder, the sound reverberating in the back of his mouth, it doesn't help his headache much at all.

Phil's hand is petting his hair gently, so much so he can barely feel it, and he can barely hear Phil's whispers towards him as well. Just snippets of "shh, shh, calm down" and "breathe in and out, in and out." It's hard to listen, the pain surrounding him in a tight grip. Vaguely, he

hears Phil leaning over him, careful not to touch him, to press the button on the monitor. Fundy keeps trying to pull his knees to his chest but the agony of his wounds keep him locked in place, shaking like a leaf in a windstorm.

The door opens, a nurse rushing to his side. "Oh dear," the muffled voice peeks through his clouded senses, "I didn't imagine him waking this soon."

"Can you do anything to help the pain?" Phil asks, sitting back and rubbing a gentle hand along his back.

The nurse clicks around on a mouse and keyboard, checking some of his vitals before he reaches over to a separate console. He presses the button twice, Phil watching it light up and make a small noise. "Yes, I'm giving him a very small dose of morphine. If he needs any more, you can press the button again, but it won't administer unless at least five minutes have passed," the nurse explains, and a few moments later, Fuddy feels a strange, cold sensation on the bend of his right arm. It's like the cold seeps into his veins, and it's so weird that he feels tempted to scratch at it until it stops but he holds back, too hurt to do anything but shiver.

He stays like that for a while longer, feeling the pain slowly ebb and numbness take its place in his stomach. He can hear the conversation much clearer now, between the nurse and Phil.

"I apologize, Mr. Watson. Typically it takes 4-6 hours for the patient to wake up after such an invasive surgery."

"It's alright, mate. He's never been one to sit still for very long," Phil assures them, a hint of an adoring smile in his voice. "Do you think my other children can come to see him now?"

"I don't see why not," the nurse says, "I'll request a gurney to transport him to a regular room, then I can escort his siblings there."

"Thank you," Phil breathes a great sigh of relief, still petting Fundy's back in slow strokes, aware that his shaking has subsided. He meets the young boy's eyes, smiles and asks, "Feeling better, bud?"

Fundy nods, still a little weirded out by the cold sensation flowing through him, but at least it doesn't hurt so much anymore. "Where Wilby?" He mumbles, looking around the room again as if he missed his brother the first time. He only spots the nurse, who smiles back at him. He feels a small fear of being in the same room as a stranger, but it's snuffed out by the numbness. The nurse doesn't look intimidating anyway, he's a normal-looking guy with honey-colored, short and curly hair. And his smile emits a feeling of warmth, so Fundy decides he trusts him.

"You'll get to see Wilbur real soon, son. Promise," Phil tells him, and Fundy nods, feeling a bubble of excitement at the prospect of seeing his older brother again. Wilbur is always really nice to him, it's no wonder Tommy loves the tall teen so much.

Steps approach the open door as another nurse pulls a rolling bed into the room. Phil gets up and pulls his chair away from the cot, Fundy whining a bit at the loss of contact, as the new

bed is set alongside it. The newcomer rattles with the railings of the cots until the adjacent walls are lowered, making a level gateway for Fundy to be moved. The young boy tenses, knowing how much the pain erupted in his stomach the last time he tried to move. He looks at Phil with fear in his eyes.

“Mr. Watson, if you could help support Thomas’s neck and legs while I lift him from this side,” the honey-haired nurse sidles up to Fundy’s right, gesturing for Phil to take the opposite end of the second cot, “that way, we can make this as painless as possible.”

Phil nods and stands in position, reaching his long arms over the empty bed to cradle Fundy’s neck and legs, just as the nurse instructed, while the other man gently slides one hand under his back and the other under his thighs, lifting him just the smallest amount to push him into Phil’s awaiting hold. Even the slight movement is enough to make Fundy tear up again, tensing his whole body and gripping both arms against his chest. But it fades just as quickly once Phil lowers him onto the white sheets, and the nurse withdraws his hands. Fundy sighs in relief, allowing his limbs to relax. He feels exhausted already from the minor debacle, but he wills himself to stay awake so he can see his foster brothers.

“See? That wasn’t so bad,” the nurse placates while adjusting some of the connecting tubes and wires, wheeling the appropriate machines around the old bed so they can be transported alongside him. He gives a sleepy yawn in reply, stretching a hand out for Phil to hold as the other nurse clears the way for them to leave the room. Despite trying his best to avoid it, the rumbling of the wheels against the tiled floor rocks Fundy to sleep as they transport him.

A good twenty minutes after Phil followed the doctor, the three teens were sitting silently in the waiting room, introspecting about the events of the long night when Wilbur suddenly startles in his seat. He hastily grabs his brother’s sleeve and points to the front desk of the ER, where two police officers converse with the staff. The sight of the cops makes Wilbur’s heart race, relighting the anxiety of knowing they potentially killed multiple people tonight. His head spins with every other crime that could implicate him and his family, the fact that no one reported Tommy missing, the various traffic laws they broke, trespassing on private property, hiding evidence regarding the *murders* they committed.

Techno attempts to free his sleeve from the white knuckle grip Wilbur has on it, replacing the tense grasp with his own hand, and speaking softly to him, “Wil, calm down, we’re gonna figure this out. You just gotta breathe.”

“Techno, they’re gonna *know*. And if they don’t know then they’ll figure it out soon enough. I don’t wanna go to prison, Tech. I don’t think I’d survive prison,” Wilbur rambles.

“No one’s going to prison,” Techno assures him, patting the worried teen’s back with his free hand. “I think we have to tell them where we found Tommy, but there’s nothing there to implicate us. We can just say we found him alone and injured.”

“You hid the weapons?” Wilbur whispers, meeting his brother’s eyes with a pleading stare.

“Yes, Wil, I hid them,” Techno says with a nod, “I won’t tell you where, but only because I don’t trust you to spill the truth the moment you’re pressed.”

Wilbur doesn’t take offense. He closes his eyes and tries to calm his breathing. It’s only a minute before someone approaches them, clearing their throat to get his attention. He looks up to see the officer standing above him, giving him an uneasy once-over. Then the cop pulls up a chair, and his partner follows, sitting too close for comfort but Wilbur doesn’t do much other than squeeze his brother’s hand tighter.

“We’re here to investigate an incident of a young teen getting stabbed. I was told you brought him in,” the uniformed man says, staring at Wilbur, who gives him a quick nod. “What’s your name, son?”

“Wilbur Soot Watson,” he answers, keeping his voice level and his anxiety buried deep.

“And how old are you?”

The line of mundane questions continues for a while until everyone is introduced. Only the first cop asks the questions while the other one writes the responses on a small notepad. Wilbur also gives his younger brother’s name and age, and Phil’s name. He’s doing well with staying calm, that is until the focus turns to recent events.

“So how did this incident occur?”

Wilbur gulps, trying and failing to make his heart beat at a normal pace. “We- uh, it started a few weeks ago. My brother was a- he was rescued from a cult, and they- two weeks ago we found out they were stalking him...” he goes on to shakily explain the lead up to today, getting tricked into a plan revolving around the trial, Phil and Tommy being escorted to a government building, Phil frantically texting him that Tommy was in trouble, finding the offending van at a random warehouse, “We- we didn’t think to call anyone, we just ran in and found him, lying in a pool of his own blood. There wasn’t- no one else was there.” He lies with an ease that surprises him, but then again, he knows he has more respect for Phil than some cop. He’s more afraid of getting arrested than disappointing the guy.

After his explanation, the cop leans over to speak privately to his partner, talking too quietly for anyone else to hear. Techno is still rubbing Wilbur’s back, offering a silent comfort for which he is grateful.

The officer turns back to the teens, “Just a few more questions,” he tells them. “Did any of you see the license plate of the van you followed?”

“I didn’t look for one,” Wilbur replies, then looks to Niki in case she had the answer.

“It was unmarked,” Niki says.

“And do you recall the address of the building where you found the victim?” It’s the first line the second cop says to tell throughout the questioning, and he waits pointedly for the answer, pen at the ready.

“Uhh,” Wilbur tenses, mentally cursing himself for not keeping track of where they went that night.

“I remember,” Techno speaks up, listing the street name and building number for the officer to copy.

With a final nod, the two cops stand. “Right. We’ll do an investigation of the building and come back once the victim is awake,” the main guy explains while readjusting the hem of his pants. “Would you mind giving us a phone number to contact if something comes up?”

Wilbur really despises how they keep referring to Tommy as ‘victim’ but he keeps his criticism to himself and offers his number to the officers. They leave with a short ‘thanks for cooperating’ and once they finally exit the building Wilbur lets out the breath he’d been holding. As he runs a shaky hand through his hair, the older teen grumbles, “I always forget how much I hate cops.”

“Yeah. ACAB,” Techno gruffly agrees.

It’s nearing one in the morning when a young nurse approaches the three, the rest of the waiting area is fairly empty save for a waiting spouse and two elderly people. The nurse wears a cheery smile despite the tired atmosphere, clapping his hands together and asking, “I assume you three are related to Thomas Watson?” The teens nod, not bothering to clarify that Niki is just a family friend. The nurse continues, “Good! Your brother has been moved to a regular room, and you three are welcome to visit him now. Follow me.”

Without argument the teens allow the nurse to walk ahead, leading them to see the young boy they’ve been fretting over for the past several hours. Wilbur attempts to calm his nerves by holding the hands of his brother and friend as they walk quietly. Internally, he wonders if they’ll actually be seeing Tommy, or if one of the alters will greet them instead.

They get to the room, where Phil already sits beside a certain sleeping blond teen, and the nurse politely excuses himself so the family can have some privacy. Niki and Techno take the seats across the bed but Wilbur goes in straight for a hug from his father, suppressing a whine as he digs his face into the man’s shoulder. Phil is only marginally surprised by the gesture.

“The cops showed up for questioning,” Techno explains, sounding tired and slightly irritated.

Phil nods in acknowledgment and returns the hug, rubbing soft circles against Wilbur’s back as a token of his paternal comfort. Once Wilbur disconnects from his hold, he takes a seat next to Phil and puts all of his focus into looking over Tommy’s sleeping form. Wilbur cards through his hair, subtly checks for his heartbeat, eyes over every visible inch of skin for any marks he could have sustained. Only his arms and above the collar show, but it’s enough to satiate his simmering concern for his brother’s wellbeing for now. He knows under the blanket are a few dozen stitches and layers of gauze, but at least his skin isn’t such a deathly pale anymore.

With the assurance that Tommy isn’t dying anytime soon, Wilbur slumps into his chair, leaning his head against his father’s shoulder. He’s been running on fumes for a while now, especially once the adrenaline of actually saving his brother had faded.

He hears Techno mumble to Phil, “Did they say when he’ll wake up?”

Phil shifts to wrap an arm around Wilbur, letting his son lay more of his weight on the older man, and replies, “He actually woke up not too long ago, but fell asleep again on the way here.” He squeezes Wilbur a tiny bit closer and tells him, “He asked for you specifically, ‘Wilby.’” He says the nickname with a teasing smirk, one that Wilbur can’t help but match.

But then his eyes wander back to the sleeping child, and his face falls to one of sadness, guilt-ridden. “I just, I don’t understand why anyone could ever want to harm him,” Wilbur laments, sneaking a hand into the limp palm of his brother. “He’s so precious, so innocent, I can’t- I can’t imagine causing him pain.” Silent tears make their way down his cheeks.

“I never should have trusted that woman,” Phil says, coldly. “It’s my fault they were able to hurt him again. I was this close to losing him, losing all of you,” he gazes sadly towards the teens at the other side of the cot.

“It’s not your fault, dad,” Techno assures him, “We just wanted the harassment to end.”

“But I walked straight into their trap, I basically handed him over without question.” Phil’s pitiful voice relays just how heavy the burden of allowing Tommy to be taken weighed on his conscience.

“But we got him back,” Wilbur says with a tired sigh. “We got him back, and now we can move on.”

“Wil’s right,” Niki adds, “Now is the time to rest and heal. I don’t think those people will bother you anymore.” She sends a knowing glance to the twins when she says that, letting the unspoken violence earlier than night show in her gaze.

The four’s attention is drawn to the blond boy when he emits a questioning whine, blinking his eyes awake and trying to adjust to the bright lights. He seems to be fairing better than the first time he awoke, so Phil doesn’t fret over hitting the light switch. Already the mood is brighter now that the child is stirring, all eyes waiting patiently to greet the sleepy boy back into the world.

His eyes first draw to Wilbur, and he mumbles, “...Wilby?”

With that single word, Wilbur is certain that Fundy is the boy in front of him, and with a warm grin, he lifts the hand he’s holding and answers, “Hey, bubba. My sweet boy, how are you feeling?”

“Mmm hurts,” Fundy uses his free hand to wipe at his eyes before he takes in the other participants in the room. He brightens upon seeing his other brother and the pink-haired lady. He doesn’t see her very often, but he knows she’s super nice and makes tasty baked goods.

Phil leans forward to ask, “Do you need some more medicine, mate?” When Fundy nods, Phil directs Techno to use the same machine the nurse had explained to him, giving the boy another small dose of pain relief.

Fundy frowns a little at the weird cold feeling in his arm again but tries not to pay it any mind. He opens his mouth to say something, to greet the other two people in the room, but just then he hears what sounds like a knock on a door. He looks at the door to the room he's in but doesn't see anyone through the small window, and it doesn't seem like anyone else heard the knock. It's not scary, per se, but a little unnerving. His instincts tell him to turn around, despite knowing there's only the head of the bed and a blank wall behind him, but he does it anyway, feeling a weird dizziness as the sterile scenery of the hospital room immediately switches to the empty whiteness of the control room in the headspace.

The knock happens again, and his brain tells him it's the double doors in front of him, although his physical senses are still occupied by his presence in the real world. With mindful steps, Fundy detaches from the body's motor functions and approaches the white room's entrance, suddenly feeling a little guilty considering he wandered off without telling the others and snuck into the room when he knows it was really important.

He pushes one of the doors open, peering up to see Sam standing there. Any thoughts of guilt are instantly swept away as he barrels into Sam's chest, hugging his brother with as much strength as he can muster. "Sam!" Fundy cheers. "Sam back!"

As with Fundy, any lingering worry in Sam's mind cleared the moment the hug was initiated, and with a soft voice he says, "That's right, Sam's back." He gently peels the young boy off of him and holds him at arm's length, switching to a more parental tone, "Fundy, you know you're supposed to stay with your brothers and tell someone when you go into the room." He gestures behind them to the doors that have now closed. Sam's aware that no one's fronting, but the fact that they are awake and Fundy was able to walk out on his own gives him enough certainty that they'll still be safe even if the body is uninhabited for another minute.

Fundy's guilt returns and he glances at the grassy ground, "I sorry." Then he chirps back up and says, "But I see Wilby! And Niki and Techie, and Phil!"

Once again Sam can't help but melt at the boy's cheeriness, but he's also glad that they've been reunited with their family at the very least. "I'm happy you got to see them, bud," he tells Fundy earnestly, "You should go to the house to tell the others. Oh! And I almost forgot to introduce you to Karl!" How could he have forgotten the newest member of their family? He keeps a hand on Fundy's shoulder as he turns to where he last saw Karl, introductions at the ready.

Only to be met with an empty field, no trace of anyone else to be found. The doors to the control room lock quite suddenly, and Sam can tell that it's prime once more.

Whoops.

—

Something seems to have distracted the young blond, and with a turn of his head, his eyes suddenly unfocus, staring at some invisible point far beyond the wall he's facing. Wilbur frowns, recognizing the look on his brother's face, it's typical to see during a dissociative

episode. At least he's not panicking, or seemingly trapped in a nightmare. He just looks dazed and absent.

Wilbur squeezes the hand he's holding, noting the lack of tension in the limb. "Hey, bubs, you with us?" No response. By then the others have caught onto what's going on, and wear similar looks of concern.

"Was it the drugs?" Techno muses, looking back at the machine his father instructed him to use.

"No, he was just fine earlier," Phil says. His face scrunches with worry as he thinks of the first time he saw this kind of expression, that night they discovered the existence of the system when Tommy had some sort of breakdown and was unable to focus on reality. He isn't sure what could have triggered something like that, so he holds out hope that whatever episode this is won't be as severe this time.

Niki fiddles with the pink strands that have fallen from her bun, trying to think. "It could be a switch? Maybe someone else is attempting to wake up," she reasons, deciding to take out her hair tie and redo the bun altogether. It's more of a nervous habit than something pressing, but she knows there's no danger at the present moment.

Techno watches his youngest brother's face for a sign of awareness, raising a hand to wave in front of his spacey gaze. "Hullo? Is anyone home?" He asks. Wilbur shoots him a glare, apparently finding his method unamusing. Techno ignores him, further attempting to rouse a response by flicking his fingers and saying, "It's safe, buddy. You can wake up now."

That seems to have an effect, as the moment the words are uttered the boy's eyes quickly dart over to Techno's, both sharing looks of surprise. The youngest's expression suddenly devolves into something fearful, seeming like he wants to survey the rest of the room but he's too afraid to break eye contact.

"Tommy?" Wilbur prompts him, and his head turns and blue eyes lock onto Wilbur's in a heartbeat, further confusion etching across his face. A silent debate occurs in the child's mind, and he takes a chance and glances around him, taking in the fact that he's in a long bed surrounded by four people whom he can't seem to recognize.

Karl's panic rose within him as soon as he was summoned, and now being in this unfamiliar room with more than a single person waiting, attentive to only him, is making his nerves jitter in a way he struggles to contain. He's confused as to why he would be summoned if no one has asked for the Architect specifically, though his worries ease slightly upon hearing the name of one of his head mates being asked for instead. He returns his gaze to the brunet that is touching him, cradling his hand not forcefully but with a sort of grace, gentle. He shakes his head slowly, not looking away.

He can feel the ache of the wound he remembers receiving the last time he was summoned, but it's much duller, and he doesn't feel as faint. He can piece together that he's in a medical room, likely being treated for said wound. He's just glad he can't feel the blood pouring from his body anymore. But still, Sam explicitly said that he would be the one to assume control the moment he was able, so why is Karl here at all?

Wilbur lets the worry fade from his eyes, as he looks back at his brother with a cool, calming expression. “Not Tommy? That’s okay, what’s your name, bud?” He questions with the utmost care.

“I’m not supposed to be here,” Karl blurts out, feeling too much anxiety to figure out how to actually answer the question. His default was always ‘the architect’ but he isn’t really that anymore now, is he? Especially with the prophecy being one big lie, his role completely shattered when Sam pulled him from the caves. He still feels like a danger to the body, to his family, with the knowledge that he almost walked them to their deaths, even if his intentions have fully reversed. He can’t trust himself, no more than his brothers (barring Sam) can trust him. The anxiety crests enough to cause his limbs to start shaking, already obvious to the teenager holding his hand. The contact, despite the comfort it’s supposed to be, feels like a chain around him. He’s too afraid to pull away.

“You have just as much a right to be here as anyone else, bud,” Phil offers in a soothing voice. It makes Karl’s head spin, he’s not used to anyone speaking to him that way. Even his Mother spoke as his superior, as an instructor, not a carer.

Feeling the shake of his hand, Wilbur decides to slowly let go and grip the railing of the cot instead, leaving the option open no longer forcing his comfort. That minor action abates some of Karl’s tension, the freedom of his limbs making it a little easier to breathe. Wilbur tilts his head slightly, and asks, “Have we met before?”

Karl shakes his head again then turns when he hears Techno clear his throat. “Do you know what happened this evening?” The pink-haired man appears to be less patient than the others, and since he’s the one who triggered Karl out, Karl isn’t sure how to feel about him. But he squashes the indecision and nods to answer his question. It feels all too similar to the intervention in the headspace with his brothers.

“You were there?” The brunet on the other side further clarifies and is met with another nod. The answer makes his face scrunch up, in anger or maybe concern, Karl can’t tell. “Was it your first time awake in the body? That must have been frightening,” the teen says.

“N-no,” Karl finds his voice again, feeling sure enough that he won’t be punished for now, if the non-threatening aura of the room is anything to go by. “I have... been awake since we were much younger. B-but I had never been away from... the bunker,” he explains, struggling to find a word for the cult’s base where he grew up. From their memories and glimpses of the rescue, he surmised that it existed underground, at the very least.

“You remember living with the cultists?” The older blond man sounds surprised, and he is. As far as Phil is aware, the recent therapist working with Tommy had informed him that he didn’t remember much at all from their time in captivity. It’s why Sam was tasked with exploring their hidden memories.

“I remember everything,” Karl says. “I was programmed to remember. I was instructed to guard their memories, including my own.” The look of shock on the group’s faces isn’t lost on him. He feels anxious again as if he said the wrong thing. “My- my name is Karl Jacobs,” he explains, trying to rectify the tense mood, “I am the- I mean, I was told that I am a vessel

for the prophecy of the Blood God. This night was the- the final ritual to complete the prophecy.”

His rambling doesn't seem to be working to fix the tension, all wide eyes staring at him as if he grew a second head. He hates the feeling of crass attention, so he turns away, trying to find something else to look at. That's when he sees the tube inserted into his arm, kept in place by a bandage and a plastic clip, leading away to a stand with a red... bag... of blood? His blood? An ice-cold fear suddenly fills his entire being, mistaking the drip for a siphon, believing they are stealing his blood in the same way the cultists tried to do earlier in the night. Karl's pulse skyrockets, the intense fear causing him to scratch blindly at the insertion, feeling surrounded and helpless. He can't understand why they aren't safe, he thought they escaped the cult's clutches again. Did he just leave one exploitative regime only to fall into another?

Hands grasp at his frantic limbs, stifling his attempts to remove the needle in his arm, the repetitive beeping in the background getting faster and seemingly louder in his ears. The brunet holds his left arm down with one hand and his palm with the other, speaking rushed and panicked, “Hey! Stop, Karl, it's okay! Calm down!”

The pink-haired teen gripping his right arm with tentative force is rambling in a similar fashion, “What's gotten into you, kid? Stop, you're going to hurt yourself.”

Having lost agency over his limbs, Karl begins trembling violently, feeling the desperate need to escape overflowing his fear of being reprimanded for his misbehavior. His legs thrash underneath the thin sheet. The other teen, the woman also with pink hair except more faded and growing in brown near the roots, stands from her chair.

“Please, no-“ Karl whimpers, “It's a lie, Sam said it was a lie. The prophecy isn't real. My blood isn't special. Please, please, just let me go.” His last words break into a sob.

The lady leans over him, kind eyes grabbing his attention as she says, “Hey, Karl, can you look at me? I promise you're okay, look,” then she reaches past the teen sitting next to her, cradling the red bag filled with blood near its base. “You see this, right here?” She points out a small cylinder that separates the bag from the tube. He's stopped kicking but still struggles to breathe as he nods obediently. The other teen scoots his chair back to give her space to crowd a little closer, and she gently pulls the cylinder forward so he can see, “Look, you see how there's air in here? The fluid in the bag is dripping down so that none of the air can enter the tube. But that also means that nothing in the tube can flow back out, do you understand?”

The pressure on his arms is lessened, though the brunet still holds his hand, with less force, as Karl tries to wrap his head around what the woman is explaining to him. If nothing can flow out, then it's just one way, and that would mean the blood is flowing into his arm, not the other way around. So, they aren't taking his blood?

Seeing as his panic is subsiding, Niki continues, “It's called an IV, the hospital uses it to replace the blood you lost during surgery. It's connected to a needle that's secured to a vein in your arm here,” she points to the spot near his wrist with the plastic attachment.

“It's... someone else's blood?” Karl questions, still believing it to be stolen in one way or another.

“Yes, but it’s donated,” she clarifies with a gentle voice, “See, sometimes adults will volunteer to give their blood to help people who need it, like you. They only take a pint, not enough to harm the person at all.” It’s an odd question that she’s never heard before, but she takes it in stride. She can only think about what Wilbur told her when he found Tommy, strung up and bleeding out into a tub, presumably for his blood to be collected. It sickens her, for a child to be subjected to that.

It seems to click in Karl’s mind then, that he is safe, and they aren’t trying to hurt or exploit him. And some unexpected giddiness replaces the void as the panic recedes. With a manic grin he wonders aloud, “Then, then my blood is... no longer pure? I’m finally free?” It looks like the others aren’t sure how to respond to that, but Karl is elated. This means they have no reason to take his blood anymore! If he is tainted, no longer the vessel that had been meticulously cultivated ever since his untimely birth, then there is no longer anything of value in his veins! The sudden tide of emotions makes him feel all floaty, and a little tired. He releases the remaining tension in his body and finally relaxes into the hospital bed. Finally, he is free. Finally, he can rest.

With his eyes closed, he can’t see the looks of confusion and concern traded between the other occupants in the room, silent lips mouthing each other questions that none seem likely to answer. Niki takes her seat again, glad that she could offer the respite the boy needed at the very least.

There are still thoughts that form a conflict in his mind, but he isn’t afraid anymore, and he’s decidedly done being summoned. It’s a rehearsed gesture, stepping away from control, with his destination in the headspace in mind- he lets Sam enter the control room, where he’ll find it empty.

Karl opens his eyes, happy to see Sam’s hoodie still on his person, the once green now multicolored with a swirl of green and purple in the center of his chest spiraling outward, as he stands at the foot of the mountain, near the entrance to the vault. He feels a slight tug of guilt, leaving the rest without warning, but he needs some time to sort his feelings out. Despite the familiar draw of the underground, Karl makes his way up the steep mountainside, carving a subtle path towards the summit. He will be alone, but that is expected, desired even, he needs the isolation.

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After what seems like forever, though it can’t have been too long, certainly shorter than Fundy’s time in the room, Sam is allowed to enter through the double doors and awake in the real world. He’s greeted by varying looks of surprise and worry on the faces of the people Fundy mentioned to him, Phil and Wilbur on his left, the latter holding his hand, and Niki and Techno on the right. He lets an easy and relieved smile form on his face at the sight of his foster family- and Niki, but really, she’s family too- after all the anxiety he held for so long, hope finally breaks the surface of the ocean of doubt in his mind.

The first thing he feels is the welling of tears in his eyes, happy tears, elated tears, as he squeezes Wilbur’s hand. The teen smiles back at him, returning the gesture. The overall mood

seems to lighten as well. Sam doesn't feel even a lick of anxiety when he asks, "Can I get a hug, please?" He raises his other arm to invite the brunet to fulfill his request. Wilbur tears up, barely holding himself back as he stands to lean over him, cradling his neck with one arm and wrapping the other around his torso, mindful of his stitches. "It's Sam, by the way," he remembers to add after a moment, but he isn't afraid the gesture will be rescinded simply because he isn't Tommy, he just wants them to be aware of his presence.

"Hey, Sam. I've missed you, bud," Wilbur whispers into his hair, and despite not spending too much time together, Sam can tell that he's being genuine. It's overwhelming to be back in the body after so long, so much so that his teary eyes overflow onto Wilbur's shirt. He feels the awkward hand of Techno rubbing circles into his back and sees Phil looking at him with adoration, maybe a touch of guilt.

Once he's back against the cot, he's hit with just how tired the body really is. There's a clock on the wall that reads close to 2 AM, much later than their usual bedtime. That, and all the stress of whatever medical intervention they needed, as well as multiple switches throughout the day, leaves him feeling quite drained. It's then that Phil directs the teens to head on home, stating that they need to rest just as much as Sam and that he'll keep an eye on the young lad. Wilbur begrudgingly agrees, and Niki offers to drive them since she's used to long nights where her attention is needed full time. It's just as well because Wilbur looks dead on his feet and Techno is doing his best to hide it but his dark bruises under his eyes and the occasional yawn show that he's not fairing much better.

They leave, and Phil makes himself comfortable, well, as comfortable as he can in the awkward plastic chairs, leaning back and letting out a sigh. A weighted silence fills the room, and while Sam wants nothing more than to close his eyes and drift back into the headspace, there's a certain uneasiness that prevents him from letting his guard down. "Phil?" He asks weakly. The man cocks his head to acknowledge him, so he continues, "Is it... Is it okay if I fall asleep? I mean, we'll be safe, right?"

Phil's heart breaks at the worry in his voice, sitting back up to assure him, "Of course, son. I promise I won't let anything bad happen to you, never again."

"I'm just-" Sam takes a breath so he doesn't start crying again, "I'm so afraid, that if I fall asleep then I'll wake up somewhere else. Somewhere dark, and unfamiliar. Or worse," he shivers, an image of the dark basement of the cult flashing in his brain. The chains on the wall, the distinct smell of blood and filth. Hearing the chants of a ritual happening in the next room over. He just wants it to end, he just wants to be safe and happy with his family, with the people who will protect him. He wants it so bad, it aches in his chest like it's eating him from the inside out.

Phil holds out his hands, gingerly, palms upward so Sam can hold them. They stay like that for a moment, just looking into each other's eyes. Phil's hands squeeze around his as he promises, "Sam, you are my son. You, and Tommy and Tubbo and Ranboo and Fundy, and this Karl now, apparently," he smiles as the list goes on, feeling a bit silly since he's talking about the same person, just the differing identities his son has, but it never strays from pure honesty. "You are my children, and I will fight to the ends of the earth to keep you safe. I know I've let you down, I put my trust in the wrong people when I should have been more

cautious, but I will do everything I can to make it up to you. To all of you,” he wraps up his monologue, removing one hand to sweep aside the young boy’s bangs, cradling his skull with a softness Sam has never felt before.

Sam remembers a conversation like this, once, after that incident where they had run away from the house, which he later would find out was Fundy getting spooked since it was his first time awake in the body. Phil had held his hands then- Tommy’s hands, but Sam was present- and promised in no uncertain terms that Phil would care for them, but Sam wasn’t buying it. Now, though, now Sam can’t find that distrust anymore. He’s hidden behind his veil of doubt for so long, for his entire existence, simply because he couldn’t afford to let his guard down. But over the past few weeks, he’s learned that even he isn’t capable of doing it all on his own. He’s a child, as much as his brothers, as much as the body- he needs help, and he needs assurance. Despite every obstacle and every shred of apprehension, Phil has stayed beside them. There’s no wariness in the fact that Phil has proven himself worthy to care for them, and not only worthy but willing. That’s all he’s ever wanted. For himself, for his family, for every challenge that life will throw at them- all he needs is love, and love is all he needs.

“Thank you,” he whispers to Phil before he lets his eyes close.

A tired, “I love you, son. Sleep well, I will be here when you wake,” laces through his mind like a lullaby as he drifts off, welcoming the dark like an old friend.

One month later....

“-earlier today, the investigative team following the kidnapping and attempted murder of a young boy released their findings regarding a connected warehouse collapse in a nearby county. Four weeks ago, six bodies were found in the rubble, but today the police have finally confirmed the identities of the bodies, the main person of interest being Sarah Calpurnius, the only daughter of the leader of the Cult of the Blood God, a satanic cult that was believed to be disbanded three years ago. This, of course, comes after the leader David Calpurnius had his second trial in the state’s appellate court. The sentence of life with the possibility of parole in 20 years that he appealed was furthered to multiple life sentences after the discovery of a hidden furnace in the cult’s base of operation, where countless charred remains of men, women, and children were found. Dozens of unmarked graves were also discovered littered around the property, victims ranging from infants to elderly persons, some unregistered and some reported missing decades before.

“We can only hope that this disturbing series of events has finally reached a conclusion, especially since no other cult members have resurfaced. The ward of the state released this message, stating that all the rescued children are in proper homes and receiving the best care that the state of Dakota has to offer, their identities have been strictly protected and-“

Techno hears the sound of the Watson van pulling into the driveway, so he swiftly changes the channel to Discovery, playing some random ocean documentary. Phil, who was listening quietly in the kitchen, notices the change and huffs a sigh of relief. The first week after that night was incredibly stressful, as the police told them that the address Wilbur gave to them was already burning to the ground when they got there. They had to stop the fire before they could even begin to survey the scene. The main room where the fire had started was charred and impossible to analyze, they found a few bodies, all burned beyond recognition. At least the commotion forced the police to investigate the cult's commune further, leading to more disturbing sights previously undiscovered. Thankfully, Tommy was kept out of it, and it turns out there was never a need for him to serve as a witness at all. Sarah had only spun that story to force them to trust her. Phil shakes his head, trying to rid the angered thoughts from his mind. He transfers the oven-fresh cookies from the tray to a large plate, waiting with a grin for the upcoming announcement of their youngest's arrival.

Sure enough, the door soon bursts open, and said youngest bellows out, "Phiiiiiiiiiiil, we're home!" Tommy takes off his shoes and tosses his bag onto the couch. Only after a grunt of displeasure does he notice Techno sitting there, shoving his backpack aside from where it landed on his lap. "Oh, hey, Tech!"

"Tommy, didn't notice you come in. Maybe you should be a little louder next time," he mutters sarcastically. Wilbur follows inside a moment later, hanging his coat on the rack and helping Tommy remove his as well. Tommy is unable to stop bouncing on his heels, feeling hyperactive after the plan he and Wilbur hatched in the van on the drive home from therapy.

Phil emerges from the kitchen then, holding a plate full of chocolate chip cookies and a welcoming grin. "Hey, mate, glad to see you!" He balances the plate in one hand to ruffle Tommy's hair with the other, laughing when the younger blond shakes him off.

"Stop it, Phil!" Tommy whines, ducking away to plop onto the couch next to Techno. He puts his long legs over the other's lap, expecting to be pushed off but surprisingly, Techno just huffs and lets it happen. "Whatcha watching, big T?" Tommy squints at the TV. "Looks boring."

"It's about whales," Techno shrugs, gazing disinterestedly at the screen. "You're right, it's a little boring. I just had it on while I waited for you two to get home."

Tommy grins madly, "Aww, Tech! Did ya miss me?" Because of his brother's nonchalant answer about the TV show, he swipes the remote and sets it to the input for the switch. Wilbur takes a seat on the floor at Techno's feet and Phil places the cookies on the table and sits in the armchair.

Techno doesn't grace him with a reply, he just shrugs again and sits back as Wilbur boots up the switch.

"Whatever, I know you did," Tommy fills the silence with ease. "Anywho, Wilbur had the best idea while we were driving home!" He goes on to explain how they've been brainstorming to include more participants in their ritual MarioKart tournaments because it's usually just Wilbur and Tommy, but Tommy wanted a way for his headmates to play too. At first, Wil suggested Tommy take turns with Tubbo and Ranboo and whoever else wants to

play, but Tommy complained that Wilbur would just win every time then since Tommy was the only skilled player.

“So, I thought, what if we both traded off? We could make teams with me, Tech, and dad, then Tommy and his brothers on the other. That way we’re both switching, granted ours is a bit more physical,” Wilbur finishes the explanation, turning to gauge his brother and father’s reactions.

Tommy, bouncing in his seat, adds, “Tubbo and Ranboo are already on board, they’re listening in right now.”

‘I’m gonna kick Techno’s ass,’ Tubbo boasts, despite having played exactly one half of a race in his life.

‘I’d like a rematch against Wilbur at some point, but after I get some practice,’ Ranboo also chimes in.

“Pfft, good luck with that,” Tommy rolls his eyes, muttering so the others know he’s not directing it at them.

Techno and Phil don’t argue, in fact, the latter agrees, “That’s a great idea, mate. I’d love to join, but I can’t promise I’ll be any good.”

“That’s what makes it fun!” Tommy cheers, “And don’t worry, I’m sure you can’t be much worse than Ranboo.” He giggles when Ranboo protests in their shared thoughts.

Wilbur sets up the game, clicking through the screens with ease while Phil reminds Tommy to do simple wrist stretches before he starts. It’s something his physical therapist suggested, seeing as the nerve damage in his arms sometimes caused temporary paralysis. While Tommy flexes his wrists in different directions, he rambles about their plan for the tournament, “Okay, so what I think we should do is start with me versus Wil, then Techno versus Tubbo for the second race, Ranboo and Phil for the third, and we end it with me and Wilbur again, yeah? Sound good?”

“No arguments here,” Wilbur replies, passing the second controller to Tommy once he gets to the character selection screen.

“A little unfair that you get two rounds, but whatever,” Techno shrugs, sounding perturbed but his half smile gives him away. He snatches a cookie from the plate.

They play for the next hour and a half, all laughter and competitive shouting, to the point where Phil is certain the neighbors will be complaining. The first race is really just head-to-head Tommy and Wilbur fighting for first since they set the computers to the lowest setting. Then Tubbo does some strategic planning for his turn, purposefully falling back to get the blue shell and then saving it until the final lap. Techno still pulls ahead, but Tubbo definitely gave him a run for his money. Phil and Ranboo’s race is much more leisurely, they don’t rush ahead of the pack and mainly exchange comments about the look of the map, occasionally pointing out shortcuts and laughing when the other falls off the track. The final lap is the most rambunctious, the battle turning physical as Tommy and Wilbur constantly try to throw

the other off, messing with their controller or blocking their view. In the end, Tommy gets first place and wins the cup, doing a little victory dance as the end screen shows his character on the podium. Wilbur complains about the cheating but he's still smiling brightly, adoring the sight of his brother so carefree and joyous. He's so happy to be together with his family, laughing into the late hours of the night despite having school the next morning, since they decided to continue the fun with a movie.

Things aren't perfect, of course. Tommy and the system are still healing from their run-in with the cult, and no one has heard from Karl since that night. Sam refuses to trust anyone outside the family, and Fundy won't front unless Wilbur is nearby. Tommy struggles to manage his time in school or make any friends that exist outside of his head. He still awakes with visions of that dark basement, the smell of blood lingering on his clothes and screaming in his ears. But he can always count on someone coming to comfort him, for Phil to hold him close and whisper promises, or Techno to regale an old Greek mythos, or Wilbur to play him a quiet song on his guitar until he falls back asleep.

Life is full of pitfalls and hills to climb, but they aren't afraid anymore. Not when they have a family to support them, unconditionally, without fail or feeling like a burden. They can always be certain that no matter what life throws at them, they'll make it through.

They'll be okay.

Chapter End Notes

that's all folks! i hope you enjoyed this wild ride of a fic, thank you to everyone who's stuck with me and all the support and nice comments, i for sure couldn't have gotten this thing finished without y'all

i'd like to personally thank my friend jackson, who's been my hype-man since day one, he's always encouraged me to keep writing and posting even when i lack the confidence, i think everyone deserves a good hype-man in their life, a real one to keep you going

i have many plans going forward, so this isn't goodbye, just to this story, i very much want to encourage anyone who wants this story to be continued to feel free to write your own additions or whatnot - i will gladly read anything that is thrown at me and advertise them if you wish, its an absolute honor to have people feel inspired by my works

also, one of my plans include another DID story in a different universe with a different arrangement of characters, this one involves the dream team hehehe but thats the only hint you're getting until I actually write the thing

if anyone still has questions about this story, anything i forgot to tie up in the end, please ask away! or let me know your favorite part! or anything really! (this is me begging for comments lol)

i hope everyone has a wonderful day!

ps. if youre too shy to comment, I also read bookmark notes if that's your preference!
oki byeee~ <3

End Notes

Post-reminder that this is a work of fiction and is not representative of any of its characters' real-life counterparts, nor is it an accurate portrayal of DID. Updates are not consistent lol, sorry.

Works inspired by this one

[the enderman system](#) by Anonymous

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