

standing at a lightswitch

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/33644302) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/33644302>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Dream SMP
Relationships:	Ranboo & Toby Smith Tubbo , Toby Smith Tubbo & TommyInnit , Wilbur Soot & TommyInnit , Ranboo & Toby Smith Tubbo & Wilbur Soot & TommyInnit , Ranboo & Toby Smith Tubbo & TommyInnit
Characters:	Toby Smith Tubbo , Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Wilbur Soot , Clay Dream's Sister Drista (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Reincarnation , Alternate Universe - Modern Setting , Toby Smith Tubbo-centric , Families of Choice , Found Family , Platonic Relationships , Wilbur Soot and TommyInnit are Siblings , Cuddling & Snuggling , Platonic Cuddling , Hurt/Comfort , Fluff and Angst , Protective Toby Smith Tubbo , Protectiveness , Toby Smith Tubbo Angst , Traumatized Toby Smith Tubbo , Child Soldiers , Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD , Anxiety , Anxiety Attacks , (everybody is friends now and it's freaking Tubbo out) , Body Dysphoria , Goat Hybrid , Toby Smith Tubbo , Platonically Married Ranboo and Toby Smith Tubbo , Ranboo and Toby Smith Tubbo Have a Child Named Michael , (those last three tags are past tense) , Trans Floris Fundy , Enderwalking Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , Dissociation , Depersonalization , Queerplatonic Relationships , Queerplatonic Ranboo/Toby Smith Tubbo , Not RPF
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Reincarnation AU
Collections:	International Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs , em's to read list , all time fav ficss that are mainly tubbo centric ones or ones i find randomly <3 , Ash's Favorite Completed MCYT Fics , Parsonsaj's Best of the Best of the Best , dsmp fics I adore , I love you to the moon and back <3 , Ma favourite dsmp fics (mostly crimeboys)
Stats:	Published: 2021-09-02 Completed: 2021-11-22 Words: 43,336 Chapters: 3/3

standing at a lightswitch

by [DeadPatrol](#)

Summary

“I would nuke someone for you,” Tubbo says plainly with all the confidence in the world. Because he *has*. He’s done it before and he would do it again in an instant — a thousand times over.

It strikes him with a sudden gripping fury. He needs Ranboo to know. He needs Ranboo to know it like Tubbo knows it, deep and intrinsic. Utter truth.

“That’s... nice?” Ranboo says, hesitant, cautious, nervous.

“Your face is nice,” Tubbo spits, because that’s also the truth.

“Thank you?” Ranboo’s voice pitches up into incredulity.

Ranboo doesn’t get it. And Tubbo desperately tries to convince himself that that’s alright. He will soon. It’s a work in progress.

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Modern Setting Reincarnation AU: With the server reset impending, Tubbo made a Deal With The Drista. Now, Tubbo is the only one in the new world who remembers their past life and the events of the Dream SMP, and he's on a mission to reunite with all the people who don't remember him. This time, he will protect them.

The Truth

Chapter Summary

In which Tubbo reunites with some strangers.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to my Reincarnation AU. In short, Tubbo made a Deal With The Drista to remember the events of Dream SMP after the impending server reset, and as a result, all of the characters are now in a modern day setting and Tubbo is the only one who remembers their past life. Just to clarify, this is meant to be the Dream SMP characters in a modern day setting, not RPF.

Title from [Dashboard by Modest Mouse](#).

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

Ranboo's fingers skitter nervously across the steering wheel. He *tap-ta-taps* out an unsteady rhythm, just barely keeping in time with the song playing quietly over the radio. The radio is still tuned to a station from about a thousand chunks back. Every once in a while, the connection will fizzle out and lose itself, drifting in and out of reality. Ranboo's fingers never stop moving, keeping up the beat — uncertain yet unerring — until the white noise radio static hums back into something comprehensible.

Tubbo leans against the car door, his forehead smushed up against the window glass. Tubbo's eyes never leave the road, but his smile grows a little wider every time he feels the burn of Ranboo's gaze land on him for brief and flickering seconds. Making Ranboo nervous is funny. There isn't anything to worry about. Not yet, at least. Everything is going well.

Ranboo doesn't have anything to be afraid of, least of all Tubbo. It's a truth he knows in his bones, even if Ranboo's not quite with the program yet. It's not a problem. Ranboo will figure it out soon enough.

Tubbo lifts a hand to the buttons on his door and rolls down his window.

A wordless noise startles out of Ranboo as he realizes what Tubbo is doing. Ranboo's hand jumps to the window lock button before his hesitancy and second-guessing catches up with him and freezes him in place.

The window finishes rolling all the way down, filling the space with the tear of wind whipping through the small vehicle.

"Uh?" Ranboo's eyes flick to Tubbo again, asking a million questions without saying much of anything at all.

Tubbo answers just as much as Ranboo asks. Tubbo hums back, feeling the grin split his face and bare too many teeth than would be considered polite for strangers. Tubbo feels the burn of Ranboo's gaze flicker nervously away once more.

What, is Ranboo afraid he'll jump out the window?

Actually, that is a reasonable fear. That's definitely something he'd do.

For now, Tubbo only folds his arms across the open window and rests his chin on top of them. The sky is littered with a scattering of rolling clouds, but the sun peeks through just enough to settle warm against his arms and lap. The wind cards its way through his hair, tangling the strands between wild, intangible fingers. It buffets his face, cheeks already sore from the smile that hasn't left him all day, maybe longer. Actually, he doesn't think he's stopped smiling since he asked the pounding tug in his chest to lead the way five hundred chunks south of the international airport right up to knock on the door of that shitty motel, and Ranboo answered. A stroke of luck, but he'll call it genius.

Keeping his eyes open against the wind makes them tear up a bit, but he doesn't dare close them for a second. His eyes trace carefully over every street, building, alleyway, crosswalk, and bus stop that speeds past. There's nothing to be scared of, yet, but the thought of missing them — getting so close only to let them slip through his fingers because of one moment's lazy mistake — now *that* makes a quiet fear squeeze tight around his throat and chest.

It takes a couple more half-fuzzed-out commercial breaks before Ranboo builds up the courage to open his mouth again. "So, uh, what actually *is* the plan here?" Ranboo asks over the roar of the wind and the hiss of radio static. "Sorry if that was rude, or, uh— I'm not, like, questioning you or your— uh, I'm sure you know what you're doing."

"Simple. We find the others," Tubbo answers, turning to lean back into the car and waving a hand vaguely towards the horizon line, or the red light they're stopped at, or the city in general.

"You keep saying that..." Ranboo's tone is skeptical. Excellent. Tubbo will lure that snark out of hiding soon enough. Tubbo catches more and more glimpses of the mocking sarcasm he knows and loves as Ranboo slowly grows more comfortable around him again. Maybe it would go faster if he stopped intentionally making Ranboo nervous. In his defense, it *is* funny, but the novelty is wearing off fast and the glimpses are making him homesick.

"Well, I don't know. Not much else to do, is there? Figure we might as well," Tubbo admits with a shrug that he tries to play off as casual.

"Uh-huh... And who, exactly, are we looking for?" Ranboo asks the stranger in his car.

The cold wash of reality makes the grin fade in bits from Tubbo's face. He smiles, but it's a lopsided and semi-sweet thing. It's too easy to pretend that everything is exactly how it used to be until Ranboo goes and says something like that.

"Just some friends of mine," and that's half the truth, but not even close to the whole of it.

Tubbo loves Ranboo too much to lie to him, except for when he does.

The truth hurts, and Tubbo loves Ranboo too much to hurt him.

Ranboo takes an aimless right turn at a random intersection, his eyes fixed on the road to avoid looking at Tubbo. “Are you sure they’re here?”

Tubbo wiggles his hand in a side-to-side motion. “Eeh, maybe. I can definitely feel they’re close. They’ve got to be somewhere around here.”

“Ah, yes. *Feel them*. Of course.” Ranboo takes one hand off the steering wheel to gesture broadly at the city surrounding them on all sides. “Have you considered just... I don’t know. Calling them?”

A bark of a laugh forces its way from Tubbo’s throat. The grin is back with a vengeance, and the force of it makes his face ache. “Wish it were that easy, bossman!”

Ranboo’s hand returns to the wheel and his fingers dance lightly across the surface, a nervous habit. “You can, uh, use my phone, if you don’t have one, if that’s the problem. Sorry, was that rude? I didn’t mean to just assume you don’t have a phone. But really, it’s no problem. Obviously. I mean, I’m driving you across the country. Borrowing a phone is at least a step below that in terms of, like, effort to go through to help you out, man.”

“Thanks. I—” Tubbo chokes on his nonchalance. He’s suddenly slammed with the full force of the reality of the situation.

The sight of Ranboo’s face — not the clean split of a black and white divide, but an unremarkable uniformity dusted by tan and blush, painfully human — makes a special kind of cognitive dissonance rear its head and *scream*. Tubbo forces himself to breathe through the slam of nausea, forcing it down and away.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

It’s so, so easy to pretend. When Ranboo is here next to him, chatting away like they’ve known each other for years, decades, eons. But Ranboo doesn’t know him. *Ranboo doesn’t know him*. Ranboo is doing all of this for Tubbo, some stranger, a dude he’s never met. Tubbo may not know this Ranboo, not really, but the overwhelming selflessness that draws Tubbo to his side remains.

“I— appreciate it,” Tubbo breathes haltingly, tripping over words spilling out of his mouth.

There aren’t enough words in the world to say everything he needs to say. There are a million things that want to come rushing out of Tubbo’s mouth all at once: the quick quip of an inside joke, an assurance of safety whenever Tubbo is around, a love confession well worn, the painful truth, the absolute truth. Tubbo presses his lips tightly together, biting the inside of his cheek hard. Ranboo doesn’t know him. And Tubbo doesn’t know Ranboo. Not here, in this time, in this place. Not anymore.

The car falls into silence.

A patch of green rolls by the window, a square of public park nestled in the middle of this sprawling city. Water arcs high into the air from a fountain in the pond. In the distance, a set of playground equipment hosts a handful of squealing kids. Tubbo immediately looks away. Fuck. Fuck. He misses Michael. He misses home. He misses the Ranboo who knew him. This was a terrible idea, actually. He should have just stayed in the UK. He should have just let the server reset his memory like everyone else.

Tubbo twists his fingers, rubbing mindlessly at the spot where a gold wedding band might have once occupied in another life. A nervous habit.

Ranboo takes a turn at the next street, and the park disappears behind the peeling paint siding of someone's home. Tubbo blinks until the tears that threaten and burn at his eyes abate to manageable submission. They drift out of the radio tower's signal area, and the radio fuzzes out once more. This time, Ranboo reaches out and hits the power button on the dashboard, and the only thing left is the quiet rush of wind from Tubbo's open window.

In the silence, Tubbo can hear the quiet sound of Ranboo's mouth opening and closing, hesitant. Finally, Ranboo voices the question that's been hiding behind radio static and red lights. "Why... me? Why am I here?"

Now it's Tubbo's turn to hesitate. "You suggesting I find someone else crazy enough to drive a stranger they just met across the country?" He hopes the chuckle he gives is convincing.

It's not.

Ranboo says nothing, and the silence stretches like an open wound. Tubbo twitches, annoyed. Irritated at himself.

"I don't know," he snaps, a little bitter, a little harsh. "You're the one who offered me a ride. You tell me, bossman." The deflection is weak, the sharp edge of his words trailing off into a half-hearted grumble.

He's being too obvious, not even trying at this point, but honestly, he's tired of it all. He's homesick for a place that's gone forever. He figures he's allowed to be a little bit sad.

"Okay," Ranboo says cautiously, like approaching a cat all bristled-up and hissing. "It's okay if you don't, uh, want to talk about it. I'm sure you have your reasons. But, uh, it's okay if you do— want to talk about it."

Tubbo feels the gentle burn of Ranboo's gaze on the side of his head, and he feels sick.

Tubbo whips his gaze to Ranboo, staring him down dead in the eyes. He turns his whole body to focus his attention, his whole being, on the stranger in the driver's seat.

"I would nuke someone for you," Tubbo says plainly with all the confidence in the world. Because he *has*. He's done it before and he would do it again in an instant — a thousand times over.

It strikes him with a sudden gripping fury. He needs Ranboo to know. He needs Ranboo to know it like Tubbo knows it, deep and intrinsic. Utter truth.

"That's... nice?" Ranboo says, hesitant, cautious, nervous.

"Your face is nice," Tubbo spits, because that's also the truth.

"Thank you?" Ranboo's voice pitches up into incredulity.

Tubbo can't help the unwelcome laugh that rips its way from his throat. It's either laugh or cry at this point, and if he starts crying he doesn't think he'll ever be able to stop. So he laughs until his whole body shakes with it, and even Ranboo chuckles nervously along.

Ranboo doesn't get it. And Tubbo desperately tries to convince himself that that's alright. He will soon. It's a work in progress.

Tubbo's eyes float back out the window, returning to their ever-vigilant watch of the city streets. There's a flash, so brief, he almost misses it. But it's there. A flash of light, color, a bright signal flare from some deep part of his mind bursting violently to the surface. The deep pull in his chest tugs him right out of his seat, leaning straight out the window and throwing himself up onto the window frame, twisting his whole body to catch that fleeting glimpse, to hold on for just another moment. He won't lose them. He can't.

"Tubbo— Tubbo! *Tubbo!*" Ranboo shouts with rapidly increasing panic.

Tubbo feels a hand grab tight to the back of his jacket. Long fingers lock on to the fabric in a desperate grip, latching on to him, steady and grounding. Ranboo's lanky form is stretched out across the car, leaning over the center console. He's got one hand on the wheel and one hand firmly attached to the back of Tubbo's jacket.

"Turn around! I saw them, I saw them!" Tubbo insists, leaning further out the window.

"Get back in the car, man! Seriously!" He hears Ranboo shriek over the wind whipping in his ears. "I promise we will turn around first thing after you *get back in the gosh dang car!*"

The genuine fear spiking in Ranboo's voice is enough to have Tubbo obeying the order on instinct, even if only to put himself in closer proximity to a distressed Ranboo. Keeping Ranboo safe is always top priority, and keeping Ranboo safe usually means putting a swift and immediate end to anything that makes Ranboo sound like that.

Sitting back in his seat, Tubbo glares at Ranboo with a spark of irritation. How dare Ranboo use the power he doesn't know he has over Tubbo to make Tubbo be safe and protect him from what was undeniably a stupid and dangerous move. Thoroughly thwarted, Tubbo reaches out and tries to make a grab for the steering wheel instead. Ranboo is quick to bat his hands away with a sharp noise from the back of his throat.

"We're going! We're going! Jeez. Calm down."

True to his word, Ranboo makes a U-turn and drives back to retrace their path.

Tubbo leans over the center console, his attention wholly focused on the sidewalk opposite them, searching with unwavering intensity for that glimpse of home.

"Um," Ranboo says, raising objection to Tubbo leaning across his lap and blocking his vision. "Please. I'm trying not to crash here."

Well, he can suck it up. There are more important matters at hand than a little violation of personal space among friends— strangers— whatever. Ranboo should be grateful that Tubbo's still inside the car.

Ranboo sighs deeply, seeming to sense Tubbo's thoughts when he hasn't said a word. "Okay."

Tubbo hums, pleased, and pats Ranboo's arm without taking his eyes off the sidewalk.

“Should we get out and walk? Might be better for, uh, you know, people finding,” Ranboo suggests, leaning sideways around Tubbo so he can see out the windshield.

A glimpse. A flash of light off the surface of a rounded glasses lens. The sharp sound of ecstatic laughter, ringing too loud to be anything but achingly familiar.

“There! There they are!” Tubbo shouts, slapping a hand against Ranboo’s arm frantically.

“Okay! I’m pulling over!” Ranboo accedes instantly, quick and steady and perfect.

Ranboo swerves the car over to the shoulder of the road. It’s not technically a legal parking spot, per se, and there’s a parking meter a few yards away demanding payment that gets thoroughly ignored, but none of that matters at all. Tubbo’s got his door open before the car stops moving and he’s already out the door when he hears the stick grind forebodingly as Ranboo slams the car into park. Ranboo hastily slaps the button for the hazard lights, ever diligent. The car’s steady *blink, blink, blink* fades into the background of city noise as Tubbo darts away.

He’s too far away. He’s so close. Every second is another moment they could slip away. He needs to get to the other side of that road if it kills him.

“Wait! C’mon, man! Please don’t die! I’m gonna feel so bad if you die,” Ranboo calls out urgently, using his truly unfair reach advantage to grab Tubbo by the back of his jacket once again.

Tubbo forces the beaming grin off his face just long enough to glare at Ranboo.

Ranboo raises an eyebrow. “Huh, so it turns out this is the only way to— Tubbo!”

Tubbo slips his arms out of his jacket and dodges straight into traffic, leaving Ranboo holding nothing but the limp fabric. It’s warm out, he doesn’t need the layers anyway.

He can hear Ranboo give chase after him, quickly shouting apologies to the cars that slam on their brakes to avoid hitting the teenagers in the road.

Tubbo flies across the pavement. The rubber of his shoes snaps against the ground in quick steps, barely hitting the earth before he’s up and off again. Ranboo’s longer strides echo his, reassuring the frantic, desperate beat in his chest.

Tubbo skids to a stop on the safety of the sidewalk, whipping his head around to catch another glimpse of that bright spot in his heart. Ranboo comes up beside him, breathing heavy, and before he’s even stopped moving he throws out a hand and wraps it in a vice lock around Tubbo’s wrist, holding on for dear life.

“You are *not* doing that again! Also! I take it back! I *am* gonna charge you for the help! You owe me *so much* money for this!” Ranboo tightens his grip, all that polite nervous hesitation gone without a trace. Good riddance.

Tubbo cackles, the pure blinding joy he feels burst in his chest overwhelming that desperate need to search, if only for a moment.

Tubbo rams his head affectionately into Ranboo’s side, feeling Ranboo’s breath rush out of him at the impact.

“Oww,” Ranboo whines, a bit too dramatic to be entirely genuine.

The material of Ranboo's button-down shirt is warm and soft against Tubbo's forehead. He can feel the pulse of Ranboo's heartbeat inside his ribs, steady and familiar. Tubbo stays leaning against Ranboo for a moment longer, feeling like a thief, yet utterly unashamed.

"C'mon, don't slow me down now, bossman. We're so close," Tubbo says brightly, pulling away before he decides to stay there forever. He has things to do, after all. Can't afford to be distracted.

Ranboo good-naturedly continues to allow Tubbo to lead the way, never once letting go of his hold on Tubbo's wrist. Tubbo is perfectly willing to use that to his advantage, tugging Ranboo along after him as he sets off down the street, following the urgent pull in his chest.

Ranboo, still dutifully carrying Tubbo's jacket tucked under the arm that's not currently latched onto Tubbo, clears his throat. "I might be more help if you tell me what I'm supposed to be looking for. I can see over the crowd better than you can."

Tubbo glances over his shoulder at the exceptionally tall boy being dragged along in his wake. "You calling me short?"

"I'm not *not* calling you short," Ranboo hums with saccharine audacity.

Tubbo hip-checks him for that one. "We'll see how tall you are when I take out your knees, dickhead."

That gets a laugh from Ranboo, a bright and bursting thing, like it's bigger and louder than it expects itself to be.

Then he sees them.

Ranboo's saying something, but Tubbo can't hear a word of it.

His ears ring with the deafening pound of his heartbeat.

Two people stand at the street corner.

One stands hunched in at the shoulders, a wave of brown curls falling loose over the rounded edge of wireframe glasses, the pull of a smirk resting comfortably at the corner of his lip, a deep well of shadows bruising dark under his eyes, well-hidden nerves showing through only in the twitch of his fingers.

The other orbits in unsteady circles, dancing around him in constant motion, rapid-fire words on his tongue blending together, only broken up by the burst of unrestrained laughter that pulls the crinkle of crow's feet from the corners of his eyes.

Both of them remain insultingly tall.

The buzzing thing in his chest sings. *Home*.

"Tommy!" Tubbo shouts at the top of his lungs. "Wilbur!"

Wilbur and Tommy's heads turn upon hearing their names, like flowers turning to greet the sun. Tubbo can't help the way he beams when their attention falls on him. He feels a missing piece slotting into place perfectly, just like it was always meant to, filling the space that had been yawning, devoid, empty for so long. His chest floods in a rush of something warm and bubbly and

revered. Something inside him wants to sing, or laugh, or maybe scream and break down crying in the middle of the sidewalk.

“Who’s—” Ranboo’s cut off with a huff of breath when Tubbo yanks him forward.

Tubbo races across the remaining distance, covering the final stretch to the finish line. He comes to a stop too close in their space for strangers, too close to be anything but familiar.

“Oh, heyyy...” Wilbur starts, but his confidence trails off rapidly as the seconds tick by and he fails to come up with a name. Tubbo sees the fear enter his eyes, the awful dawning horror when you can tell that someone recognizes you but you have no idea who the fuck they are.

Tubbo is maliciously gleeful, entirely willing to enjoy watching him flounder. The asshole. Prime, how Tubbo missed him.

“...You.” Wilbur finishes with a wince after several agonizing seconds of dead silence. He’s quick to give a charismatic twist of an awkward smile and a casual shrug in the roll of his shoulders, as if to say *isn’t this embarrassing for the both of us*.

Tommy is on the same page as Tubbo — as in this world, so in the next — and he doesn’t hesitate to burst out laughing at Wilbur’s expense. Tubbo laughs too. Tubbo couldn’t stop himself if he tried.

“I’m sorry, man, but where do we know you from?” Wilbur asks, his tone friendly, not quite suspicious just yet. But he will be.

Tubbo could lie, it might make Wilbur more comfortable, but Tubbo doesn’t intend to do him any favors.

Tubbo opts to go for the simplest route. “Oh, you don’t.”

Wilbur is silent for a beat. “...Right.”

In the silence, Tubbo’s grin stretches out across his face, bearing too many teeth for polite company.

“Yeah... he just kind of does that,” Ranboo speaks up softly, an awkward chuckle and a small polite wave drawing Wilbur and Tommy’s eyes up to him for the first time. “I’m so sorry about him, really.”

Tommy is quick to pick up the thread of conversation with a smile and easy chatter. “So, what? You go around yelling names until someone answers? You on a gameshow or something?”

“No? I don’t think so?” Ranboo wavers, pausing to consider the possibility. “Although that would make more sense, honestly. Hey, Tubbo, are we on a game show and you just haven’t told me?”

“Nope,” Tubbo chirps with a smile.

“Ah, so man’s lost it, then.” Tommy nods in stoic understanding as if this is a perfectly routine and expected occurrence. Tommy isn’t able to hold down a straight face for more than a couple seconds, and a gleeful bark of laughter escapes as his face falls back into a grin.

Ranboo shrugs, a matching smile fighting its way onto his face. “You get used to it.”

“Alright, so who the fuck are you, then?” Wilbur challenges, undeterred by their antics. His tone is still friendly, but his eyes are cold and guarded.

Unfortunate, really. This would be so much easier if Wilbur would just get with the program and didn’t ask stupid, unnecessary questions.

“I’m Tubbo, and this is Ranboo,” Tubbo says with a wave of his hand to indicate the taller boy. “He’s American.”

Wilbur’s face screws up at one side, the corner of his mouth twisting down and one eyebrow raising in a blatant show of disbelief, wordlessly calling them on their bullshit. He doesn’t trust them one bit, and he wants them to know it.

“No,” Wilbur draws the word out, incredulity layering his tone.

Tubbo tips his head, uncertain which part of that statement in particular Wilbur is objecting to. It’s all true, after all.

“No really, he is! Ranboo, say something American!” Tubbo shakes the arm that Ranboo’s holding, craning his neck to look imploringly up at the taller boy.

“Uh—” Ranboo puts his hand up in the universal sign for *I did not ask to be involved in this*.

Wilbur splutters. “No! That’s— not— no way his name is *Ranboo*.” Wilbur enunciates the name harshly, spitting his blatant disbelief.

Ah, there’s that good old unfettered distrust. Like a balm to Tubbo’s soul. The familiarity of it makes Tubbo want to melt. He’s never felt more welcome.

“Uh, yeah, no. It’s not,” Ranboo mutters, a hand reaching up to rub at the back of his neck, eyes flickering away to avoid looking at anything in particular. His tone is grim like he’s admitting to a dire mistake. “Tubbo just started calling me that and I kinda... went along with it?”

Tubbo goes still for a moment when he realizes his error, but the next moment shrugs it off with an easy smile. Oh well. Nothing to be done about it now. Ranboo certainly doesn’t seem to mind.

“Well, alright. What *is* your name, then?” Wilbur’s bravado is out in full force, a flashy display that screams *I already know your tricks, so don’t even try*. Tubbo can’t believe he ever fell for it before.

Ranboo hesitates for a long moment. Tubbo feels the way his long fingers squeeze nervously around Tubbo’s wrist. “Uh... You know what? Probably best not to give my name out to strangers, actually. No offense.”

Tommy laughs. “What, you don’t trust us *Ranboo*?” Tommy tries to mimic Wilbur’s harsh enunciation, but the levity in his tone breaks the illusion.

“No, actually. Not at all.” Ranboo shakes his head, a smile creeping back onto his lips.

“Right. And your name is... Tubbo?” Wilbur turns his scrutinizing gaze in Tubbo’s direction with a tilt of his head. Wilbur is uncomfortable, nervous tension lining every inch of his defensive posture. Good. Tubbo doesn’t like to see him too comfortable.

“Yup,” Tubbo offers easily, popping the P.

“If we’re all getting fake names, I want to be Big Man,” Tommy offers enthusiastically, excess energy buzzing in his step as he paces in place.

“No,” Wilbur shoots him down without a second’s hesitation.

“Yes,” Tommy insists breezily, completely immune to the fond eye roll Wilbur sends his way. “Big Man Tommy, Haver of Wives. So very many wives. I say to them, ‘you are too good to me, I do not deserve you.’ And then they leave.”

“Oh,” Ranboo mutters, sounding like he doesn’t know what else to say.

A wheezing laugh startles out of Tubbo, tearing from his chest uninvited, but oh so welcome. He always forgets the effect that Tommy has on people who aren’t used to him. He’s not worried. Ranboo will have all the time in the world to grow reaccustomed to Tommy. Tubbo will make certain of it. Now that Tubbo has found them, nothing short of total planetary annihilation will take them away from him.

Total planetary annihilation, or maybe the paranoia of one Wilbur Soot. Tubbo’s eyes carefully trace the way Wilbur crosses his arms over his chest, defensive, and the deepening of the deadly serious furrow that creases his brow. Wilbur knows just enough to know he’s out of his depth, and it scares him. He’s not concerned for himself, of course. Not even in a new world would this man place that much care on his own wellbeing, but the way Wilbur angles his body to keep himself between them and Tommy speaks volumes.

Tubbo grins. It’s maybe a little too menacing.

“So, write any good songs lately?” Tubbo asks with faux innocence, just to freak Wilbur out.

Tubbo watches the dread creep into Wilbur’s expression. In an instant, the man’s stance goes rigid and tense all over, his shoulders straightening out as if Tubbo shocked him with a live wire. Tubbo cackles with giddy delight.

“Wait, wait, no, really! How do you know us?” Tommy asks, skipping around Wilbur and ignoring the man’s growing horror to lean in close to Tubbo like kids sharing secrets.

Tubbo watches the way Wilbur’s fingers twitch in an aborted motion to reach out and pull Tommy back behind him, and his grin splits his face impossibly wider.

“Well, I know you’ve probably got a pet spider. Shroud?” Tubbo’s honestly just guessing, but he knows that he’s hit the jackpot when Tommy’s eyes widen, sparkling with something like awe, the pull of relentless curiosity when you realize the world is bigger than you thought it was before.

Tommy hums, managing to wrangle his expression into a mockery of something cool, calm, and collected. “Hmm. You know too much. I’m sorry, but I must kill you now. Unfortunate, but it had to happen.”

Tubbo bursts into giggles and Tommy’s charade breaks the moment after, looking nothing short of absolutely elated.

“Tubbo! My friend!” Tommy takes a bold step forward, crossing the invisible line between the them-and-us. Wilbur jerks forward, pulled like a magnet, visibly itching to pull Tommy back

behind him, away from the potentially dangerous strangers. “Do tell me more about how to read minds. Give me your secrets, I promise I will only sometimes use them for evil.”

Tubbo sticks out his tongue at Wilbur. Ha, Tommy likes Tubbo better and he doesn’t even know Tubbo.

Ranboo eyes Wilbur warily, feeling the threatening aura pouring off the man increase tenfold with the promise of swift and immediate violence.

“Welp! Okay. This sure has been... something!” Ranboo says with wavering cheer, trying to maintain a nervous amiability. “I think we’re gonna go now, you know, before we get the cops called on us. Or stabbed. Which is feeling more and more likely.”

“Aww, but I don’t want to leave!” Tubbo whines, spinning to face Ranboo. “Can we at least take Tommy with us? We can keep him, can’t we?”

“No, actually!” Ranboo says already starting to back away in small steps without taking his eyes off Wilbur. “How about not that?”

“Please Ranboo?” Tubbo pleads, forcing Ranboo to pay attention to him with a tug of his arm.

“Yeah, Ranboo, please?” Tommy slides right into place beside Tubbo, turning his puppy dog eyes on full force directly at Ranboo without an ounce of hesitation.

“Oh wow,” Ranboo utters on a nervous exhale. Then quietly, under his breath, “you guys are really good at that.”

Tubbo decides to take that as a victory, bearing a smug smile to match the satisfaction warming his chest and bubbling in his veins.

Tubbo hums, graciously allowing Ranboo to retreat a few paces now that he’s gotten his way. “Do you remember where we left the car? I think it was a bad parking spot—”

“Definitely not a parking spot,” Ranboo amends, muttering to himself more than anything. “It was actually in front of a bus stop, I think. Very illegal.”

“—so we should go get that before someone tows it,” Tubbo finishes. He spins to face Tommy, ignoring the way the motion makes his arm twist awkwardly in Ranboo’s grip. “You wanna go for a ride?”

Tommy’s quick to answer, “Yeah!”

“Tommy, no!” Wilbur shouts, distressed.

“Don’t be a pussy!” Tommy yells back at double the volume, already skipping away on light feet.

“Do not get in stranger’s cars!” Wilbur’s voice pitches up rapidly, all his facades disintegrating in an instant as his hand flies to grab at his hair in a show of undisguised horror.

Ignoring the rapid-fire argument that breaks out between Wilbur and Tommy, Tubbo turns back to Ranboo, swinging their linked arms with an infectious glee. “You’re American. You live around here, right?”

Ranboo hums, “Not at all, actually.”

“Well, you must know some good places to eat,” Tubbo continues, breezing past that minor obstacle. “I’m hungry. Also, I don’t have any American money.”

“You want me to buy you lunch?” Ranboo asks, part incredulous, part defeated, like he can already tell how this is going to end and is preemptively disappointed in himself for giving in.

“Yes, please,” Tubbo sing-songs with a smile, feeling buoyant enough that nothing in this world or the next could bring down his good mood. “If you would.”

Ranboo stares at Tubbo dead-faced for a silent moment. Then, he heaves a deep sigh.

“Yay!” Tubbo cheers, lovingly ramming his head into Ranboo’s side.

Ranboo grunts at the impact, his breath forced out of his lungs.

“You owe me so much for this,” Ranboo mutters, his voice thick with affection. He carefully moves his arm to keep Tubbo’s from twisting awkwardly as it becomes clear that Tubbo does not intend to move from their new position.

“I love you. I would nuke someone for you,” Tubbo says into Ranboo’s side, utter truth.

“So you’ve said,” Ranboo chuckles, draping Tubbo’s jacket over his shoulders.

Tommy bounds over to Tubbo and Ranboo, walking backward to face Wilbur as he shouts, “Wilbur! I’m going with the weirdos! I’ll be back in... eh, eventually. Or maybe I won’t! Who knows! Buh-bye!”

“Tommy Innit!” Wilbur snaps furiously.

“Ooh, the full name,” Ranboo quips in a hushed tone.

Tommy groans, long and dramatic. “Well if you’re so worried about me just come on, then!” Tommy turns to Tubbo and Ranboo, shaking his head in mock disappointment. “I’m sorry about him.”

“S alright, I know how he is,” Tubbo dismisses with a wave of his hand, finally pulling away from Ranboo’s side.

“What an incredibly strange and concerning thing to say!” Tommy gasps, delighted.

Ranboo leads the way back to the car, which is indeed parked in front of a bus stop. He even insists they take the long way around, crossing the street at a pedestrian crosswalk rather than just dodging in front of traffic. Tommy is quick on the uptake, slotting right into place like coming home. He orbits around the pair in relentless motion, keeping stride with Ranboo one moment before bounding over to Tubbo’s side the next. Wilbur trails a few steps behind, scowling the whole way. Maybe Tubbo should be nicer to him. He’s stuck with them now, after all, whether he likes it or not. He might as well not be unpleasant the whole time.

Tubbo smiles and lets the rise and fall of Ranboo and Tommy’s conversation wash over him contentedly. The last fading rays of the warm summer sun sink into his skin, their shadows

stretching out in front of them, leading the way onward. Tubbo closes his eyes, trusting Ranboo to guide him steady and keep him safe. He just wants to feel this moment.

It's not the same, but it is home.

Chapter End Notes

Did you know, only a small percentage of readers leave a comment?

The Whole Truth

Chapter Summary

In which Tubbo and Wilbur have a friendly conversation.

Chapter Notes

THIS CHAPTER WASN'T SUPPOSED TO BE 17k. I'M SORRY IT TOOK SO LONG. Anyway, this chapter comes to you live from the chaos of two jobs, my final semester at college, and moving apartments. Enjoy. Thanks to Nana and Grace for encouraging me every step of the way. This wouldn't have happened without them.

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

Tubbo paces circuits around the hotel room, patrolling a pointless perimeter no one cares enough to breach. That's what he tries to tell himself, repeating it over and over in his head, digging it into the skin of his aching palms with blunted nails. There's no one in the world that would care enough about this odd assortment of strangers, not enough to track them across the country and break down their door in the middle of the night. Not in this world, at least.

No one is out to get them. Of course. Why would they be? There are no politicians here. No revolutionaries. No one with access to the launch codes for nuclear missiles. Just three teenagers and a man barely scraping his thirties. No one of importance, no one worth hurting.

Tubbo paces the length of the room and doesn't stop until he hits a wall. It's a nice room. Expensive. Two double beds with far too many pillows, a flat screen TV, a fancy armchair with feet carved from dark wood, some neo-impressionist art on the walls, a tiny mock kitchen consisting of a sink, a mini-fridge, and a microwave. They are high above the ground, the sixteenth floor. It's defensible. The walls are solid. They are safe.

The curtains are just how Tubbo left them, drawn tightly across the window, undisturbed. The very first thing he did when they got to their hotel room was close those fucking curtains. Too risky. A big window like that leaves them wide open to crossbow fire.

Tubbo is careful to never put himself in full view of the glass health hazard, maneuvering to position himself with his body tilted so he's shielded by the cover of the wall. He nudges the heavy fabric aside — not much more than a sliver, just enough to spy on the world.

The pitch dark city decorates itself in soft points of glimmering light, rows of skyscraper windows shining like strings of lanterns. The pale moon above glows steady and true, ever the dependable constant. It's harder to make out the stars, tiny pinpricks awash in the noise and light of the city. The stars are softer here, but then again, a lot of things are.

Tubbo's eyes scan intently, skimming across the nearby rooftops, open windows and balcony doors, the street lamp illuminated pavement far below. There is nothing to note. There is no shadow of a hooded figure. There is no gleam of light off a nocked flint arrowhead or the smooth, glassy surface of an ender pearl. There is no one out to get them.

They're safe. Of course. Why wouldn't they be?

"Eleven," Wilbur says dryly, deliberately loud in the quiet room.

Tubbo turns around, letting the curtain slip closed once again.

Wilbur lounges on the hotel room's single clawfoot armchair, upside down, of course, because he refuses to do anything the easy way. Wilbur's socked feet tap idly against the wall, his legs thrown over the backrest. His brown curls brush against the ostentatious carpet every time he tilts his head. Despite himself, Wilbur still manages to hold himself like a king on the throne, or a president in office. The standing lamp beside the chair casts ominous shadows across his face, silhouetting the slow smirk drawn across his lips and making his eyes gleam under murky shadows.

The dramatic prick.

Tubbo knows for a fact that Wilbur picked that spot specifically for the sinister lighting. Unbelievable. Tubbo can't believe he puts up with him.

"Oh shut up, you're being annoying," Tubbo grumbles, rolling his eyes while he shifts his weight from hoof to h— foot to foot.

"You walk on the balls of your feet, did you know that?" Wilbur points out, voice pointedly cheerful and innocuous.

Tubbo freezes. Does he? Sure enough, he's comfortably balanced on the balls of his feet, his heels never touching the ground.

Feeling horribly seen, Tubbo hovers awkwardly, uncertain what to do with himself. Changing the way he stands after Wilbur has drawn attention to it would feel too much like giving in, giving the game away, giving Wilbur another piece to add to his puzzle. Tubbo should just ignore Wilbur, act as if he said nothing at all. But now Tubbo's doubting himself. Because standing on the balls of his feet like a goat with a digitigrade joint structure isn't something humans do.

And he is.

Human.

Well, it doesn't matter now. Tubbo froze. He let his hesitation draw out too long, his uncertainty painfully obvious. He's already given himself away, because a person with nothing to hide doesn't stop dead-still over something as simple and innocuous as standing on their fucking toes.

Wilbur smirks, slotting another puzzle piece into place. An easy victory.

Of course it wasn't going to be long before Wilbur found a way to get under his skin. Now that Wilbur's caught the scent of blood, he won't stop picking at the scabs of wounds barely healed.

Wilbur keeps dropping casual remarks like bombshells, gleeful to watch Tubbo stumble under the blast when one hits too close to home. Wilbur makes a game out of it, studying what makes Tubbo

flinch and what doesn't even make him flick an ear — not that Tubbo would do that. Human ears don't flick.

With a huff, Tubbo drops his weight into his heels, trying not to unbalance himself in the process. It's whatever. It's not like Wilbur will catch him more flat-footed than he already has.

Tubbo accedes Wilbur the victory, accepting that he's been caught without putting up a fight. Unlike some people, Tubbo's never prided himself in being a sore loser.

Tubbo spreads his hands and rocks back on his heels pointedly as he stares Wilbur down, unflinching. "Better?"

"Didn't say there was anything wrong with it," Wilbur lilts with a jaunty twirl of his hand. "Interesting, 's all."

Tommy groans. Tubbo and Wilbur both immediately break eye contact, losing all interest in the staring contest as their attention snaps to Tommy instead. For all their animosity, Wilbur and Tubbo can agree that some things are more important. One of those things is Tommy, without a doubt, forever and always.

Tommy's head pokes out from where he sits on the floor, nestled in the narrow crevice between the hotel's two double beds. He's half-dragged the downy duvet off one of the beds, one blanket corner still caught tucked under the mattress, but the rest wrapped around his shoulders like a particularly heavy cape. His head rests lazily against the white sheets of the half-uncovered bed. Lanky legs are splayed out across the walkway of space between the beds and the TV, providing the most inconvenience for the least amount of effort.

More than anything, Tubbo wants to pull Tommy out of the room, to pull him aside like ducking into the shadow of a ravine's secret tunnel. He wants to ask Tommy how Wilbur is, if he's hurting Tommy, if he can be trusted. It's possible that everything is different here. The Wilbur Soot who walks city streets and lounges upside down in armchairs could be different than the ghost that haunts Tubbo's memory. Tubbo wants to believe, but he doesn't know for sure, and he knows better than to put his trust in a blind hope.

Although, one look at the dark, distrustful look on Wilbur's face says there's no way Tubbo is going to be able to sneak away with Tommy where Wilbur can't keep an eye on him. And there's no guarantee that Tommy would trust Tubbo enough to answer honestly, anyway.

Only once everyone's eyes are on him does Tommy's groan break off into a whine. "Will you shut up? I can't hear the TV over the sound of you two bitching at each other. I'm trying to watch the American version of *The Office*. Do go on, American Dawn, I am so sorry about them. Rude, honestly. They have no respect for the fine art of paper sales. It is simply too high-brow for them. They don't understand you like I do, American Dawn. Our connection is special." Tommy ends out the rant in a croon, clutching the TV remote lovingly in his hands as he makes exaggerated heart-eyes at the TV, which is indeed playing reruns of *The Office*.

Ranboo snorts, the sound quickly resolving into a laugh. He stretches out a long leg from where he's reclined on the blanketless bed, using a foot to poke at the back of Tommy's head. "Her name's Pam."

"Don't care," Tommy says firmly, batting blindly at Ranboo's foot with one hand, never taking his eyes off the television.

Tommy flips the remote nimbly in one hand and proceeds to hold down the volume button without remorse, turning the TV up to an obnoxious volume and drowning out everything else in the room.

Ranboo laughs and Tommy cracks up the second after, all too pleased with his own antics. Tubbo can just barely hear the sounds of their voices, carrying on under the television's blaring farce of human life, all too bland when held up against the real thing. It's easy enough to ignore the TV ringing deafening in his ears when the sight in front of him is so much more vibrant, consuming all his senses with a ferocity that makes him want to curl up and live in this one moment forever.

The clock on the bedside table glows a steady red — 3 AM. Tubbo smirks at the thought of whatever poor suckers got stuck in the hotel room next to theirs. Hope they enjoy listening to *The Office*. It'd be a shame if the walls are soundproof. Probably are, in a fancy hotel like this.

Wilbur covers his ears, knobby elbows knocking against the solid wood of chair legs, and shouts loud enough to cut through the noise, "Tommy!"

Tubbo's just grateful to have Wilbur's eyes off him for a second. He knows that Wilbur's just doing all this to put him on edge, but goddamn if it isn't working. From the fleeting there-then-not flick of Tommy's gaze, Tommy knows it too. Tommy laughs louder and turns the volume up until it vibrates in the floor under their feet, a bright and distracting point to be made.

The surge of gratitude for everything that Tommy is breaks over Tubbo like a wave, like a bottle over the back of his head. But Tubbo doesn't breathe any easier for it, no matter how foolishly he might expect to. The tight band around his chest refuses to give, not even for a gracious moment. The grace that fills his chest like a mist — growing humid and heavy until he can feel the gentle drag of it in every inhale — just has to find a space to co-exist in the constricted space of his lungs.

Tubbo is careful to keep his breathing steady and slow. Fill his chest, and let it leak out. Then do it again. Never stuttering, never stopping. Just keep moving.

Tubbo takes a step away from the window, trying to distance himself from the pull of quiet fear that thrums under his skin. He stumbles, landing off-balance on flat feet. He's never been one to give up easy, though. After one step, and then another, he catches onto the new rhythm. Tubbo is nothing if not adaptable.

There's an itch that tugs him forward, leading nowhere. Tubbo follows it.

He passes the first double bed — stepping carefully over Tommy's outstretched legs — and then the second, and he ignores the flicker of Tommy's eyes dancing off his skin. There's concern there, but not enough to warrant an apology. If Tommy wants to make the mistake to be concerned about Tubbo, that's his own fault.

Forgotten bags of fast food sit on top of the mini-fridge, half-eaten burgers long since gone cold. His stomach rumbles traitorously, and Tubbo's struck by the gnawing hunger he's been ignoring for too long. Tubbo hesitates and the subtle change in motion almost sends him tripping over his own unfamiliar feet. He catches himself with a hand on the wall, off-balance, and huffs irritation at himself. He really should just go back to comfortably walking on the balls of his feet, but he's too stubborn to give up now.

He spares a glance at the food, his own burger sitting untouched among the pile of wrappers, plastic silverware, and scattered fries. His stomach twists threateningly, and he dismisses that pipe dream before he makes himself sick.

Working at a burger restaurant really kills your appetite for the stuff. Tubbo tries to pretend that that's all there is to it.

Tubbo paces a useless perimeter along the length of the room. He walks until he hits a wall and there's nowhere else to go.

The front door is just how Tubbo left it, the deadbolt and chain lock both slotted into place, undisturbed. He slips up onto the balls of his feet, giving himself the extra inch he needs to peer through the spyhole. He scans the fisheye-warped hallway outside their door. Empty, except for the thing. The *thing*. The flicker of an unseen shadow on the wall. The looming figure around every corner, always there just as soon as he looks away. The threat his brain insists is just beyond his line of sight.

Tubbo touches the chain lock, twisting it around his finger and giving it a quick tug, just to reassure himself that the metal links won't crumble apart at his hand.

There is no one out to get them. They are safe.

Tubbo keeps watching the hallway.

From the corner of his vision that's specifically dedicated to keeping an eye on Tommy, Tubbo watches light and noise blend together, painting a scene Tubbo has only half the mind to appreciate. Tommy twists to face Ranboo, chattering something lost under the crush of a too-loud TV commercial break. Ranboo's eyes fix on Tommy as he tilts his head and rolls his shoulders in a way that Tubbo has learned to read — *I'm about to do something you won't like*.

Sure enough, Ranboo snaps forward and snatches the remote from Tommy's loose fingers. Tommy opens his mouth and shouts something muffled, using a hand to make furious grabby motions at Ranboo, but too comfortable to actually get up and move out from under his duvet cape.

With a flick of the remote in Ranboo's hand, the TV volume sinks back down to a reasonable level, and Tubbo can hear Tommy's indignant offense break the surface of the noise level.

"—bitch!" Tommy screeches, making the barest effort to swat at Ranboo's feet. "I'll smother you in your sleep!"

"You know what? No volume for you." Ranboo hits a button and the TV mutes completely.

Tubbo's ears ring in the abrupt silence. Suddenly, his breathing feels too loud, rasping against his throat.

Ranboo is just a bit smug as he leans back against the headboard — an ostentatious thing, all polished whorls and solid wood. It matches the clawfoot armchair, kind of. They're similar enough to pass as a matching set to an inexperienced eye, but Tubbo's done enough woodworking in his life to note the inconsistency. He wonders if anyone else can see it but him.

Tommy slumps over, leaning against the side of the bed. "Aww, but Ranboo, now I can't hear American Dawn! She needs me and my sage advice. Listen to me, American Dawn! Don't date American Tim, he is a creep and a weirdo. You can do so much better than him."

"The closed captions are on, you can still watch the show," Ranboo reassures him, and then after a moment of processing, "And she can't hear you."

Tommy glares, affronted by Ranboo daring to tell him the truth. “I’m going to order so much room service.”

“No. Don’t do that,” Ranboo says sternly but without heat, like scolding a puppy for chewing on the furniture.

Tommy grins fiercely. “I am. I am going to order steak. And I will tell them *oh, just put it on the bill*. You will pay for my steak, Ranboo. You can handle it, rich boy. You and your tory credit card. Don’t worry, I will share some of my dessert with you. Just a little bit, though. Now hand me the hotel phone, bitch.”

“That’s not what a tory is,” Wilbur interjects with the tone of a man who’s had this conversation before and fully expects to have it again.

“Oh, well if I get some of the dessert — that *I* paid for, *unwillingly* — then I see no problem with this whatsoever,” Ranboo quips, unrestrained sarcasm blooming from every word. Ranboo is comfortable enough to give as good as he gets, and the sound of it warms Tubbo’s heart.

“Glad we agree,” Tommy chirps brightly, bearing his teeth.

After a moment of dead-silent stare down, Ranboo gives. “Say please.”

Tommy’s mouth opens automatically, the word already tripping off his tongue before he catches himself. Tommy’s never been one to give in to demands. His nose wrinkles up, disgust and distrust. Sure, he wants it, but the look on his face says he expected more of a fight. If he can’t find a fight, he will make one. The pair fall back into a standstill, Tommy and Ranboo staring each other down in silent challenge and waiting for the other to break.

Ranboo’s fighting a losing battle against the smile creeping its way onto his face, and Tommy isn’t even trying to hide his grin.

This is everything they deserve. The thought hits Tubbo with a violence that makes his fingers curl into tight fists. He’s glad his face is still mostly turned towards the door because he’s sure Wilbur would have a field day with whatever his expression just did.

Now that it’s broken into his mind, Tubbo can’t shake the way the thought echoes in his head, resounding louder and louder. They deserve to be happy and safe and warm, wrapped in heavy blankets and surrounded by sturdy walls and ordering room service and eating anything they want and watching the TV too loud, all laughing and smiling without a thought for how it could all go so wrong.

Tubbo would fight the world to give them this, just this, for as long as they want it. And he *will*.

Because it’s only a matter of time before someone comes to take it away from them. Tubbo knows. Tubbo’s not naïve. Not anymore. There is always someone out to get them. This is a truth that’s been proven time and time and time again. But that’s alright. They’ve got Tubbo to protect them, for as long as they want him. Tubbo knows. He would do anything for them.

There’s an itch in his chest that tells him to *move*. It led him to Ranboo, it led him to Tommy and Wilbur, and now it leads him to the window, insisting that there is danger. It hasn’t led him wrong yet.

The itch claws desperately at Tubbo, begging him to keep moving. So he does. He pulls himself away from the door, turning to face the room again.

And he's met by sharp eyes gleaming under deep shadows.

Tubbo doesn't let himself startle, doesn't let his breath hitch — keeping his breathing smooth, keeping himself steady. Wilbur watches Tubbo carefully, tracking him from the other side of the room. The man is indifferent to the squabble that seems to have cropped up between Ranboo and Tommy over control of the hotel phone. His eyes never leave Tubbo.

Feeling bold, or maybe just tired, Tubbo flips Wilbur off.

Wilbur grins.

Tubbo huffs, trying not to let himself smile. What a massive fucking prick. Prime.

“M going to the bathroom,” Tubbo excuses himself to no one, because Ranboo and Tommy are busy fighting over the phone and Tubbo doesn't care if Wilbur hears him.

The steady burn of eyes against Tubbo's back cuts off abruptly as the bathroom door clicks shut behind him.

Tubbo breathes out and tries not to let it shake.

Tubbo feels safer with walls around him. It helps, but not much. He shivers, feeling bare and vulnerable without a set of netherite armor weighing him down, defenseless without a nuke launch keycard in his pocket.

Tubbo would do anything to protect them, but the worry that Tubbo may not be enough is one he knows better than to doubt.

From the other side of the door, Tubbo can make out the sound of a phone dialing, of Tommy's delighted crow of victory, of Ranboo's exasperated sigh. They are fine. They are safe. Tubbo can just... stay in here for a moment.

Tubbo looks up, scanning the room. Time to find something to distract himself from the fine trembling that crawls over his skin, a way to ignore it until it goes away. Maybe he can read the back of the shampoo bottle, that never fails to—

Something moves in the bathroom mirror.

Tubbo jumps out of his skin, only half strangling the wretched scream that tears out of his throat. He didn't check the bathroom, *fuck*. He's so *stupid*. And now he's going to die for it.

His hands fly to his hip, reaching for a sword he doesn't have. He's defenseless. He's weaponless. He's fucking useless. And now he's as good as dead.

His arms go up, covering his face in a last-ditch effort to shield himself from the attack.

But nothing comes.

The only sound in the world is Tubbo's ragged, harsh breathing echoing off the porcelain-tiled bathroom walls.

Tubbo realizes he squeezed his eyes shut and forces them open.

He's alone.

Tubbo's gaze flicks back to the mirror with an awful sinking in his chest. He can't suppress the flinch at the sight of the person in the mirror. A stranger, a figure he doesn't recognize.

The boy in the mirror stands rigid, muscles pulled taught like he's expecting a fight, arms brought up to protect his unscarred face. He's breathing heavy, his chest heaving and stuttering on every rocky exhale. He's raised up on the balls of his feet, giving him a couple extra inches of much-needed height and the swift mobility to dodge at a moment's notice. Blonde hair falls over his eyes, bangs shaggy and overgrown. There are no curling goat horns buried in his hair.

Tubbo tries not to throw up.

There's a knock at the door, and Tubbo flinches so hard he almost hits the ground.

"Tubbo? You okay in there, buddy?" Ranboo asks with a nervous warble to his tone. "You kinda screamed, a little bit. Just... checking. Making sure you're all good."

"Y—yeah," Tubbo calls back, raising his voice enough to be heard and hating the way it scratches in his throat and catches at the edges of his teeth. "Be out in a second!"

Ranboo hesitates. "...Are you sure?"

Tubbo closes his eyes, pressing the heels of his palms into them until his dark vision swims. Through the trails of pinprick light that spark behind his eyelids, he can see Ranboo clearly. Tubbo knows him well enough to hear the way he stands in the waver of his voice — hunched over, curling at the shoulders, hovering hesitant, one hand raised, still in a fist from knocking, not touching the door knob, but eyeing it nonetheless.

Tubbo knows that if he gave Ranboo even half a reason and the permission to open the door, he would be here.

Tubbo breathes out, slow and full, just to feel the way it shudders out of his chest. He tries to live in the dark space behind his hands, to convince himself for a moment that nothing else matters.

"I'm just— ugh, my brain's being dumb," Tubbo answers, honest. Too honest. Nowhere near the truth. "All good."

"Oh. Okay." Ranboo doesn't sound convinced in the least, but he doesn't press Tubbo. "Well, we're — I mean. Whenever you're ready."

"Thanks," Tubbo says, but it comes out hoarse and quiet, a whisper of something too big to fit through his traitorous mouth.

Ranboo's footsteps retreat, reluctant and lingering.

Tubbo does not have a breakdown. He does not sit on the floor. He stands until his legs don't tremble. He breathes until his chest stops shaking. He covers his eyes and presses his palms in until he sees the stars that burn and he does not cry.

In the silence between rasping indrawn breaths, Tubbo can just barely make out the low murmur of conversation.

The sound of Tommy's voice slips in under the thin line at the bottom of the bathroom door, "Is he alright?"

Ranboo sighs, long and conflicted. "I don't, uh, no, I don't think so."

"Well, I mean, obviously not," Tommy huffs. "Been pacing all night, hasn't he?"

"Yeah. Yeah." Ranboo mutters. "I'm not—"

"Not what?" Wilbur asks after a beat, sounding just indifferent enough to betray his total interest.

Ranboo startles, shocked that anyone was paying attention to him, "Oh, uh, I don't—I'm not... Well, I'm not sure how to help him."

"You don't know what's got him all worked up?" Wilbur's prying, fishing for answers. Tubbo knows that tone well enough.

Ranboo, all too trusting, answers with unfiltered honesty. "No, I don't actually know him all that well. We just met today— er, yesterday."

"Really?" Wilbur says brightly, perking up in new interest. "You two seem... close."

"Well. Uh. It's not— We're not— I don't..." Ranboo stutters to an uneasy stop, tripping all over himself.

Enough is enough. Whatever cutting remark Wilbur was about to turn on Ranboo next is abruptly silenced by the resounding *click* of the bathroom doorknob twisting under Tubbo's harsh grip. He throws open the bathroom door, spilling warm yellow incandescent light all over the room — shedding new light on four strangers, out of place.

Tubbo takes a breath that doesn't dare shake.

"Leave Ranboo alone, Wilbur," Tubbo chides casually, not even sparing the man a glance as he flips off the bathroom light switch and plods out into the room. "He's delicate."

"Hey," Ranboo objects, playfully offended, and Tommy bursts with laughter. "I am not."

Ranboo looks like he wants to say more, his eyes lingering on Tubbo and his throat working with half-formed words. Tubbo's eyes slide to the mock kitchen, avoiding meeting anyone's eyes. The kitchen is undisturbed, still littered with half-eaten burgers and cold french fries.

He should eat something.

"You alright, Tubbo?" Wilbur echoes Ranboo's care, twisted with cloying derision. Tubbo would be quick to dismiss it if not for the layer beneath, something genuine lingering under all the staging. It hurts to hear the concern in Wilbur's voice — even if that concern is only for the danger posed by the volatile stranger in the room who's very obviously and rapidly nearing a breakdown.

Tubbo wishes Wilbur would just stab him and pull the answers from his dead body. It'd be easier than this — less emotionally taxing, certainly. Tubbo's died for Wilbur plenty of times before, he

knows he can handle it.

Tubbo picks up a fry and twists it around in his fingers. He tries to convince his traitorous body to eat without throwing up. The stress that twists his stomach says that's not going to happen.

"You can talk to us. We're all friends here, aren't we?" Wilbur presses and Tubbo twitches.

We are, we are, we are, something deep inside him sings, something he does his best to slam a lid on.

"We're not friends," Tubbo answers evenly, and it's not a lie.

Tubbo doesn't think he'd consider Wilbur a friend. He did, once, when he was young. But they haven't been friends for a long time. Wilbur is a necessary evil, perhaps. Something important to him. Family.

Wilbur hums, watching the way Tubbo's face twitches with interest. "Well, as an acquaintance, then. Are you alright?"

Ever so slightly, the window curtain shifts. The impression of a shadow flickers across the wall, a fragment of a streetlamp disturbed by the motion. Tubbo can't tear his eyes away.

"Mhmm," Tubbo mutters in response, distracted.

Tubbo sets the fry back down absently, giving up on that particular lost cause. He doesn't need it. He's still got plenty of lost causes he's holding on to.

Tubbo paces the length of the room, lured by the siren's call of danger, crossing over to check the window again.

"Twelve," Wilbur counts as Tubbo passes him by.

Tubbo ignores Wilbur and puts his back to the wall, careful to stay out of sight and covered from crossbow fire. He nudges the heavy fabric away just enough to peek outside, and it's a marvel when his right arm and fingers bend without any stiff pain from old burn scars.

Tommy groans, "Seriously! Can you two stop fucking *politicizing* at each other for ten minutes?"

Wilbur's head cocks, his eyes sliding back to Tubbo with a new light. "No, no. Tommy's right. You talk like a politician. A shit politician, but still." Wilbur grins, shifting some things into place in his head. "All sorts of wiggle room, never quite saying what you mean or revealing your whole hand."

Tubbo hums without taking his eyes off the low-light illuminated street below. "I'm as much of a politician as you are," Tubbo says plainly, telling the whole truth and none of it at all.

It's a familiar game, reading his tells, managing his mood, placating his paranoia, never telling a lie because he can smell them like blood in the water. Between Manberg and Pogtopia, Tubbo has learned to play the game well.

Wilbur's good, maybe the best. Tubbo respects him for that. Wilbur's operating without a baseline, and he's still matching Tubbo step for step, always getting more than he gives up. Tubbo may have learned all his tricks from the best, but the damning truth is that he's never gotten close to replicating it.

With an arduous sigh, Wilbur leverages himself up in the armchair. Drawn by the motion, Tubbo's eyes shift back to him. Wilbur swings his legs to dangle over the edge of one armrest and lays so that his head falls over the other, effectively draping himself across the length of it. He's too tall, his legs and head hanging awkwardly off either side, but he seems unbothered. Wilbur turns his upside-down gaze to rest on Tubbo, shining in the low lamp light like cat's eyes, like eyes of ender, like something powerful and numinous.

Tubbo tenses. Wilbur's posture is lax, but he's not smiling anymore.

"Tell me, Tubbo. What are you afraid of?" Wilbur shoots, point-blank. "Who's after you? 'Cause if we're all about to get shot up 'cause you've got some shitty ties to the mob, I'd very well like to fucking know about it."

Tubbo bristles. How dare he. How *fucking dare he*. As if Tubbo would ever be the one to put them in danger. As if Tubbo's not giving everything he can to keep them *safe*.

Tommy and Ranboo watch uneasily from the sidelines as the tension in the room ratchets up. They're doing their best to act like they're not paying attention, their eyes both solidly glued to the muted television, but it's clear where their interests lie. Tommy's leg bounces, buzzing with anxious energy. Ranboo's hands fiddle with the remote, picking at the buttons with a fingernail. Neither of them would make very good spies. Then again, neither was Tubbo, in the end.

Tubbo takes a jagged step forward to get in Wilbur's face and snaps, "Tell me, dickhead. What's got you on the run? Get yourself exiled from England, too?"

Wilbur doesn't flinch, doesn't so much as twitch a finger. He raises an eyebrow, all smooth and calm, meeting Tubbo's heated gaze with nothing more than casual amiability — as if Wilbur's being perfectly reasonable and Tubbo's the only one making a scene by acting out.

Wilbur's blatant composure makes Tubbo stumble. The embarrassment and regret that floods him and flushes across his face is instant. He snapped so quickly over nothing at all, too jittery to keep himself composed. Tubbo shifts back half a step, awkward and halting. He breaks eye contact and turns his eyes to the floor like he's trying to burn holes in the carpet.

The room goes quiet and stays that way. Tubbo's breath comes out in stuttering hitches he tries and fails to smooth out. He glares at the floor and resolutely doesn't look at Wilbur. He doesn't cry. He hasn't cried in a long time, and he's not about to break that streak now, over *nothing*.

"We're not on the run," Wilbur answers, which is more than Tubbo was expecting. His tone is level and unruffled, but there's a soft lilt to it, an unrehearsed yet earnest attempt at something less than utterly incendiary. "Just visiting, actually. Here to meet up with some friends, see the sights, all that."

More than a little caught off guard, Tubbo pauses. Warily, his searching stare creeps back to Wilbur from the corner of his eye. He's looking for the barest hint of a sign, a tell, a lie. He finds none.

In a room full of politicians, information is currency and secrets are the most valuable thing you have. Giving them away freely, willingly, without getting anything in return is stupid. It's a risk, a deadly show of vulnerability.

Wilbur meets him with a steady gaze, resolute and dangerously compromising. Tubbo doesn't know if he can trust it.

Tubbo hesitates, wetting his lips, whetting his tongue. "...Really?"

Wilbur tilts his head. At this angle, the shadows that fall over his face are softer, illuminating the gentle crinkles worn into the corners of his eyes.

"Yeah. Got some friends in the U.S. I haven't seen in a while. Figured a roadtrip'd be a nice vacation. Plus, Tommy's never been." Wilbur's voice echoes distant memories of nimble fingers dancing over guitar strings, lulling verses hummed around a campfire late at night when the rumble of TNT explosions rang in young ears and no one could sleep.

It's an olive branch. A thin twig, probably riddled with hidden thorns, but an offering nonetheless.

"What brings you across the pond?" Wilbur pokes, testing the stability of a bridge barely built.

Tubbo doesn't want to trust it, but he finds himself leaning into the first gesture of genuine care shown to him before he can stop himself. Against his better judgment, he wants to trust Wilbur. He wants to trust him so badly. He should know better — he *does* know better — but all the same, he can't stop himself from wanting.

"Uh, same, actually. I'm trying to find some friends of mine," Tubbo answers, tentative on a throat that scratches his words to bits. It's not the whole truth, not even close, but it's a start at something like trust.

Wilbur is quiet, waiting patiently. It's Tubbo's turn to ask a question.

It feels like a trap because it *is* a trap. But maybe Tubbo is willing to let himself be trapped here, in this room with the people he cares about and everything they deserve.

Tubbo only thinks for as long as it takes to clear his throat, then the clumsy and rushed question comes tumbling out of his mouth. "Are you and Tommy related?"

Wilbur's smile bears teeth, a little bit sharp-edged and victorious, but the creases around his eyes soften in equal measure. "Tommy's adopted."

Tommy laughs, never missing a chance to quip back, "You picked me, and now you're stuck with me!"

Tommy leans over the edge of the bed, chin propped up on his crossed arms. The television plays on silently, entirely forgotten as Tommy's attention finds a more interesting anchor. The grin on Tommy's face comes easy and teasing, openly invested in their drama without a hint of shame. Ranboo's not much better. He's not staring outright, but the lingering sidelong glances are less than subtle. Absolutely awful spies, the both of them.

At least they're more relaxed now. The tension that drowned the room leaks away with every even breath. Tubbo feels a little bit bad for making them nervous, but he doesn't have time to linger on the constriction that tightens around his heart. He has to stay focused. The game's not up yet, but it will be if he lets himself get distracted.

Wilbur kicks a leg placidly, knocking his toes gently against the wall. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen," Tubbo hands the information over easily, eager for his turn. "How many times have you died?"

Wilbur's face does something complicated, screwing up in a split between suspicion and concern. Tubbo briefly worries that he asked too soon, pushed too far, but when Wilbur speaks, it catches Tubbo off guard. "What are you doing by yourself in a different country at seventeen?"

"Not your turn," Tubbo whines, deflecting quickly. He tries not to think too hard about the genuine care in Wilbur's voice before it can get under his skin and leave him uncomfortably reeling.

Wilbur's eyebrows scrunch up in the barest admission of frustration and puzzlement. He huffs irritation, but the veneer is thin. "Can't say that I have died before, seeing as I only get the one."

Oh. That's... new. They're within the perilous territory of a hardcore server now. They only get one life. Good to know. He'll have to be careful about how he uses it.

Tubbo tries to get a grip on his lost composure, grasping at the anxiety, or the resentment, or anything at all to keep him grounded. He has to bite his tongue to keep himself in check, stop himself from boiling over with enthusiastic, desperate, needy curiosity. He really does try, but everything holding him down slips through his fingers like water. He's never been good at holding on to grudges, for better or for worse.

Giddy threads slip into Tubbo's voice, a dam cracking before it breaks. "What are you working on right now? Like, what do you do as a job?"

It's risky, revealing where his interests lie, but he can't help it. He's so curious he can hardly stand it. And here Wilbur is with an open palm offering *information*, that most valuable and precious thing. Wilbur *let him ask*, Wilbur's giving him *answers*. There's so much he wants to know — how they live in this world, how their lives are different here, what's stayed the same, everything, all of it.

Wilbur's eyes all but light up, echoing Tubbo's enthusiasm right back at him. Wilbur smirks, quietly pleased with making progress in their game of back and forth, no longer at a stalemate. *Isn't this better?* Tubbo reads, written all across Wilbur's face. Tubbo rolls his eyes, but it's blisteringly fond.

"Not your turn," Wilbur parrots back to Tubbo, his smile edging on the borderline of dangerously genuine.

Tubbo blows out a puff of air, biting his tongue to keep himself from going on and asking more. He wants to toss his head, impatient, but he doesn't do that because humans don't do that.

"How do you know what you do about Tommy and I?" is the question Wilbur decides on after a pause.

Tubbo swallows, his throat is tight and dry. He hums in a way he hopes sounds thoughtful and falters for a long moment.

Wilbur goes on, filling in the silence with a noise of frustration and a restless kick of his legs. "It doesn't make sense. There's no logical pattern to what you seem to know and what you don't. You know our names, you knew where to find us, you knew the name of Tommy's pet goddamn tarantula, but you weren't sure if we were related or what my job is. Anyone who's done a five-second Google search on me would know what I do for work."

Tubbo shifts uncomfortably. His hands want to shake, but he forces them still.

“I’m the head of a non-profit political activism organization, by the way,” Wilbur boasts, radiating well-worn pride as he freely indulges the question Tubbo asked out of turn.

“Of course,” Tubbo mutters quietly. Something deep inside him gives off a warm glow, pleased and fond. It’s nice to see Wilbur proud of a community he’s created, it brings back tattered memories of blackstone walls and a flag unburned.

“And then, there’s what you’re *wrong* about,” Wilbur continues, and Tubbo feels the smile fade as cold, pressing dread creeps slowly along his fingers.

“Exiled, again? Have I *died*?” Wilbur raises an eyebrow, staring Tubbo down intently. “Tubbo. You’re a smart kid. You’re not asking these for no reason.” Wilbur hums consideration with a tilt of his head. “Unless you’re just trying to throw me off, which I hate to admit, is working.”

“This feels like more than one question,” Tubbo objects weakly, stalling for time.

Wilbur is unimpressed, eyes hard and relentless. “It’s one question. Where are you getting your information?”

Tubbo scowls, crossing his arms over his chest and diverting his gaze back to the floor. He scrambles to come up with an answer, or better yet, find an excuse not to answer at all. But then the game would stop. Tubbo doesn’t want to go back to drawing blood from stones. He still has so much he wants to ask. He wants Wilbur to trust him enough to answer. This is a two-way bridge, but he’s not sure if he wants to build it.

“You won’t like the answer,” Tubbo tells the carpet, an honest truth all on its own. “And you won’t believe me, anyway.”

If anything, Wilbur’s face only lights up brighter, a shark scenting blood in the water. “Humor me.”

Tubbo huffs, the sound contorting into a disbelieving laugh halfway through. He can’t fucking believe he’s doing this — that he would even consider it. He scrubs a hand across his eyes and tries to convince himself this isn’t a terrible idea. But there are no excuses on his tongue, no room for anything at all in Tubbo’s head besides the endlessly selfish need to be known.

The room is unnervingly quiet. Tommy and Ranboo are frozen static still in awful anticipation. Neither of them make a sound. It feels wrong.

Tubbo doesn’t dare look in their direction. He keeps his eyes firmly on the ground. He doesn’t want to see their faces, to know what they’re thinking. He tries to pretend they’re not there at all, but it’s a futile effort. Tubbo can’t escape the way their attention digs into his skin, burning down to the bone and deeper, deeper. A brand of possession on his soul.

Knowledge has not made Tubbo better, or kinder, or stronger. It’s only made him worse. It haunts him in the shadows on the wall and the itch under his skin. And he would give this burden to them — why? Because they *asked for it*?

Philza put a sword through Wilbur’s heart when he asked. Tubbo thinks he gets it now.

He will give them anything they ask for. He will protect them from everything that would harm them. He can’t do both.

“Tubbo?” Ranboo speaks, quiet, barely more than a whisper.

Tubbo doesn't look, doesn't meet his eyes, and he tries to convince himself it's for Ranboo's sake.

Tubbo's mouth opens before reason can catch up with him. “I made a deal with the devil.”

The blood in Tubbo's veins fizzles, electric. His pulse beats through his body too hard, like four hearts in sync. It shakes his whole being, right down to his trembling fingertips. The world might come crashing down in that moment, but Tubbo wouldn't know, consumed in his entirety by the thing in his chest, the brand on his soul.

“Metaphorically?” Wilbur breaks after a beat of dead silence, leaning forward hungrily.

Tommy gives a weak chuckle, too quiet, too nervous. Wrong. “Hey, maybe we should—”

“Literally.” Tubbo bites the word off before he can stop himself.

“Why?” Wilbur's speech grows eager and rapid, sounding as breathless as Tubbo feels. “What did you get? What did you give?”

“Not your turn,” Tubbo interrupts desperately, but he can't halt the way the words echo off every corner of his mind.

The horrible, awful, wonderful, extraordinary part is: Wilbur sounds like he believes Tubbo. Or at least, he trusts that Tubbo thinks he's telling the truth. Tubbo doesn't know what to do with that. He wants Wilbur to trust him; he hopes Wilbur just dismisses everything that slips through Tubbo's teeth as lies and delusions; he wants to tell Wilbur everything; he wants to protect Wilbur from the painful truth; he wants Wilbur to remember him; and some battered, childish, naïve, persistent part of him just wants Wilbur to be happy.

Every inch of Wilbur's wild, wired posture screams his desire to dig deeper, but he relents. Wilbur sighs testily, but it's a showman's pretense through and through. He leans back in his seat, slow and deliberate, releasing the tense muscles pulled taut over his frame one by one, like he hadn't noticed he had leaned forward in the first place and he's just correcting the misstep. Wilbur lets himself go lax and boneless once more, and Tubbo suddenly feels he can breathe again.

Tubbo tries to get himself back under control, struggling to force order onto his racing thoughts. The reverberating force wracks his body in fine tremors until it feels like everything he is will fall apart, shaking himself to pieces on the sixteenth floor of some upscale hotel.

He needs something to stall with. A simple question, something easy. He gives himself a moment, just long enough that he can be sure that there is air in his lungs, and then he asks, “Who are you here to visit?”

“Just some friends of ours,” Wilbur flicks a hand dismissively, impatient to move on from Tubbo's painfully obvious attempt at stalling.

“Humor me,” Tubbo echoes, tripping on the hard edge of pleading with a voice that shakes right along with the rest of him.

Something in Wilbur's expression gives. There's a flash of something hushed — understanding and considerate — the sort of weakness that only shows itself in fleeting glimpses between battlefields

and political offices.

With a lazy roll of motion, Wilbur turns over in the armchair. He props his elbow on the armrest and rests his chin in his hands, allowing Tubbo aching seconds to collect himself under the guise of self-indulgence.

Once he's comfortably settled, Wilbur starts rambling. His voice lulls along gentle dips and peaks — a familiar, winding path. "We're not here to visit anybody in particular, just staying with some friends of mine along the way — an old friend of my dad's, a couple of mates from Uni, a business partner, you know. Well, 'friends' is maybe the wrong word, but I know them and they have a place for us to sleep that isn't a shitty motel or another night sleeping in the van. Although I'll admit, Dream's couch is looking a lot less appealing after an all-expenses-paid stay like this," Wilbur says with a smirk and a cheeky side-long glance at their altruistic benefactor.

"You're welcome," Ranboo mutters, sounding pleased under that thin layer of sarcasm.

Ranboo's smile, tentative and playful, is a victory to be coveted, but Tubbo can't feel it. He can't feel anything under the wash of cold dread and the alarm bells ringing in his ears. Light beyond the curtain shifts and shadows clash on the wall. There are phantom footsteps outside the hotel door. Somewhere, netherite gleams enchanted and a crossbow is loaded with fireworks. Tubbo shakes his head, half of a flinch and half of an instinctual threat display with no horns to back it up.

"Wait, wait. No. You—" Tubbo scrambles to find words panicked. "You can't be serious— Surely not."

Wilbur's eyes snap back to Tubbo with an impact that burns against his skin, but Tubbo knows where his focus should be. On Tommy, who's curled up on the floor under a stolen duvet. On Ranboo, who's leaned up against the headboard and surrounded by bed pillows. On the people that matter most, more than anything else — the people Wilbur is leading right into deadly clutches.

Dream. Fucking *Dream*. And Wilbur just expects him to— what? Open up his door and invite them into his home? Maybe serve them a nice home-cooked meal before he stabs them in the back? Maybe he'll even have the courtesy to wait until they're asleep before he holds a sword to their throats so they don't have to see it coming.

Tubbo's eyes swing to meet Wilbur's gaze with a desperate ferocity, a brutal force that makes him grit his teeth and dig his nails into his palms. All the words in the world and yet none at all clog up his throat until the pressure threatens to burst. He stares, pleading, desperate, begging, and he hopes that there is some part of Wilbur that understands.

Tubbo fights for a way to ask, *can everything be different here? Please tell me things are different. And for the sake of everything I've lost to get here, please don't be wrong.*

Please, please, please let Tubbo be wrong. If he even can be wrong, with all the foreknowledge in two universes, he wants it to be now. Just this once.

"Who's after you?" Wilbur blurts gracelessly. Like someone who doesn't have a clue what he's doing. Like someone who knows *exactly* what he's doing. Like someone who wants to be underestimated. Like someone trying to throw Tubbo off enough to answer without thinking.

Wilbur's quick to throw his hands up, a show of placating surrender. That's the only thing that stops Tubbo from snapping at him again — that, and the look on his face. The line of Wilbur's mouth

isn't sly or amused, it's pressed thin into something deadly serious, something that demands attention and respect.

"Look. I don't care. Honestly, I don't give a shit what kind of trouble you're in. But if it's going to put Tommy in danger—" Wilbur's glare is harsh and cold to match his tone. "—that's a problem."

Aggrieved, Tubbo hisses, "No one is after me."

It's the truth, though it tastes like lies on his tongue.

Tubbo's never the one being exiled. Tubbo's never the one being hunted down. No one is ever after Tubbo. But someone is *always* after Wilbur. After Tommy. After Ranboo.

Tubbo would give anything to keep them safe. Even if they don't know the danger they're in — *especially* when they don't know the danger they're in. Even when there's no real danger to protect them from.

Wilbur's eyes narrow and he tilts his head, considering. "I don't like it when people lie to me, Tubbo."

Tubbo clenches his teeth together until they hurt and stays stubbornly silent.

Without breaking eye contact, Wilbur shifts. It's a subtle movement, sliding an arm beneath the core of his body for leverage. His motions are smooth and languid like a cat, like a snake poised to strike.

And then Wilbur is in front of him.

Wilbur springs out of the chair with a flourish, kicking off the wall for momentum and twisting his body, using a steady hand on the chair as a pivot point. It's vicious and deadly quick, the kind of attack you don't walk away from. Across the room, Ranboo shouts, voice warbling with shock and distress. But he's too far away to do anything.

Wilbur pitches himself forward, right into Tubbo's space, coming to a stop inches away from colliding bodily with Tubbo. Wilbur breathes heavy exertion and Tubbo feels the puff of air ruffle his bangs. Tubbo gets an up-close and personal view as Wilbur's face splits into a beaming grin.

"You didn't flinch!" Wilbur exclaims, bright and gleeful, the rapid switch in tone sending Tubbo sprawling onto the backfoot.

"Uh," Tubbo falters, the tickle of an involuntary nervous giggle threatening his throat. What the fuck.

Wilbur's grin stretches impossibly wide across his whole face, pulling at the crow's feet engraved at the corners of his eyes. Tubbo holds Wilbur's gaze, and he knows they've crossed a point of no return. In his own fucked up way, using some method of convoluted logic Tubbo couldn't hope to untangle, Wilbur has decided. Wilbur has claimed Tubbo as one of his.

Tubbo swallows nervously. Tubbo isn't sure he wants to be Wilbur's — he isn't sure he can survive it another time around. But, he doesn't think he has much of a choice. The thing in Tubbo's chest buzzes with laughter and calls him a fool. As if Tubbo wasn't Wilbur's already.

Just a little bit, something in Tubbo eases. Accepted.

“What the heck was *that*?” Ranboo shouts, breaking through the silence with fervent appall.

The moment shatters and Tommy immediately breaks into hysterics. He startles himself with a bark of laughter, and then he can’t stop. His whole body shakes with uncontainable laughter that clamors out of him in bursts until he tips off the edge of the bed and collapses into a pile of blankets and giggles.

“You’re so fucking creepy, man!” Tommy cackles between gasps for air. “Lay off, you fuck!”

Tommy is more than accustomed to his brother’s peculiar brand of misshapen affection, but Ranboo is less than comforted. Ranboo gets up off the bed with a floundering scramble and marches over to Tubbo and Wilbur’s corner of the room.

Ranboo hums low in his throat, a rumbling warning. “No, no, nononono. Nuh-uh! No more weird, messed-up trust exercises! Stop that!”

Ranboo latches onto Tubbo’s wrist, tugging Tubbo away from Wilbur. Like an echo on his skin, Tubbo can feel the impression of where claws should be, tipping the ends of Ranboo’s long fingers in wide, long, blunt claws, perfect for digging and carrying. With one last glance to Wilbur’s manic-bright eyes, Tubbo lets himself be pulled away.

Ranboo drags them back over to the relative safety of the bed, all but physically setting Tubbo down as if his legs will give out from under him. Tubbo sinks into the plush mattress and, oh wow, this thing is really soft. Tubbo runs a hand curiously over the sheets, marveling about the lavish texture under his trembling fingers. Definitely not sheep’s wool.

Ranboo hovers, quiet warbling notes of anxiety leaking steadily from his throat. Tubbo allows himself to be fussed over, mouth slipping into something approximating a smile as Ranboo’s fluttering hands refuse to settle in any one place, checking Tubbo over again and again.

“‘M all good, bossman,” Tubbo murmurs, catching one of Ranboo’s hands between his own and squeezing it reassuringly.

Tubbo cringes, his hands still shake and refuse to stop. In an instant, he knows Ranboo can see it too — can feel the way Tubbo’s hands tremble around his own. Tubbo pulls his hands away and Ranboo whines distress, making a tentative effort to grab Tubbo’s hands again. Tubbo grimaces and shoves his hands under his thighs, sitting on them and pinning them down.

Tubbo tries to ignore the way Ranboo looks like a particularly sad kicked puppy, distracting himself with the sight of Wilbur bouncing around the room, skipping from foot to foot in an exuberant little dance. As soon as Wilbur feels Tubbo’s attention on him, he beams.

“You’re not worried about us, no! Well, you are, but not *like that*! You’re worried *for* us,” Wilbur proclaims to the room at large. “You’re locked in a room with three strangers and you don’t see us as a threat at all, do you? You see us as something to *protect*! Why?” Wilbur whips back around to face Tubbo, spinning on his heel with a flourish. The grin across his face is fierce and radiant — glowing pride, joy, victory, and the thrill of the hunt.

Check, but not checkmate. There’s still a long game ahead of them yet.

“Pretty sure it’s not your turn,” Tubbo indulges a small laugh and tries to pretend that laughter is the only thing that shakes in his chest. He does his best to imitate Wilbur’s grin, but he always falls

short in a million little ways. In the end, all he has to give is a wobbly smile and an assurance. “But... yeah, yeah. I do.”

The bed dips as Ranboo leans his weight against it, one arm braced against the mattress as he lowers himself down to crouch on the floor in front of Tubbo. They’re at eye level now, on an even playing field. Tubbo averts his gaze, an old habit.

He can’t meet Ranboo’s eyes. He can’t, he can’t, he can’t. He ignores the way Ranboo frowns and searches his face — pretends that he’s the one with the aversion to eye contact. The questions Ranboo doesn’t voice are harder to answer than Wilbur’s prodding. It’s possible that Ranboo might stop if Tubbo ignores him for long enough. He’s still naïve enough to try.

“I had it all wrong. I should be asking, who do you think is after *us*?” Wilbur smiles fiercely, burning brighter and brighter as he paces a staccato *pa-pa-pa-pa* of socked feet against the plush carpet.

The swirling orbit of Wilbur Soot’s madness pulls at Tubbo, drawing him back into the game.

Tubbo opens his mouth to retort, but then Tommy laughs.

“This is fucking nuts, man!” Blonde hair and blue eyes pop up over the edge of the mattress as Tommy sits up from the nest of piled downy duvet between the two beds. Tommy leans in towards Tubbo, dipping the mattress in the other direction, catching Tubbo in the shifting well of two gravitational pulls. “You think you’ve met the devil? For real?”

“C’mon, this isn’t—” Ranboo tries, pleading.

“Yeah,” Tubbo cuts in firmly, staving off Ranboo’s offered shelter before he has a chance to grow soft with it.

Tommy is one hundred percent on board to ignore Ranboo outright, and he at least seems to have the good grace to be less internally conflicted about it. “Was he all—” Tommy mimes two pointy devil horns on top of his head and bears his teeth. “Red skin and pitchforks and all that?”

Tubbo laughs, quiet and rough in a way that tells him he’s going to have a sore throat when he wakes up in the morning. Today is the most he’s spoken in... weeks, perhaps. There wasn’t much use for words, after the reset, before now, in that awful, empty in-between space. He’s gotten rusty. No wonder he’s losing to Wilbur. Well, that’s not fair. Wilbur’s always been a better public speaker, a better politician, a better president.

“Well, I mean, she does have a pitchfork. She calls it Fork.” *Or so you’ve told me*, stays firmly locked behind his teeth, rattling around in his sore-throat-to-be. It’s a challenge even saying as much as he has.

He’s not really giving anything away, he justifies. Most everything he knows about Drista comes from tall tales told by Tommy himself. So Tubbo’s not giving away invaluable information, he’s just... reminding Tommy of stories he’s told. That’s okay. Tubbo can do that.

“*She*? The devil’s a woman?!” Tommy shouts. “What— really? Oh my god, I bet she’s hot.”

That startles a bark of a laugh from Tubbo — a sound that was hiding away somewhere deep and unreachable, pulled free effortlessly with less than a thought by Tommy’s careless comfort. Tommy

leans in closer, bit by bit leeching away the buzzing tension that shakes Tubbo's body.

"Tommy! No!" Tubbo laughs, disbelief and relief spilling from him. "She's, like, fourteen!"

"Ahhh! Nevermind, nevermind! Not hot! The devil is so not hot! She is a *child*! What the fuck!" Tommy screeches.

Tubbo smiles, it's a weak and small thing, but it's bright and real and painless in a way he didn't know he could manage anymore. Tommy throws himself backwards with a dramatic scream that trails off into a whining groan. With Tommy's weight suddenly lifted from the mattress, Tubbo overbalances and tips back, knocking into Ranboo lightly.

"Sorry, sorry," Ranboo leans back with a whisper, giving Tubbo his space.

Tubbo doesn't want him to leave. Quickly, Tubbo slides one hand free from where he had trapped it under his leg to pat at Ranboo's arm, a reassurance, permission, a silent request to stay. "S'alright."

The mattress shifts again as Ranboo silently draws his arm back. Tubbo is just a little bit sad as he watches it go, but he won't force Ranboo to stay. As Tubbo follows the motion, he finds Ranboo holding out a hand, palm open and exposed, somewhere in the neutral ground between an offer and a request.

With fingers that tremble, Tubbo reaches out and takes Ranboo's hand. Ranboo releases a breath, all stunned and pleased like a wishful hope being unexpectedly fulfilled.

For a beat, Ranboo stays frozen still, not daring to move. Putting a stop to that, Tubbo pinches the delicate human skin between Ranboo's thumb and finger. Ranboo huffs and settles, only hesitating a moment before rubbing the pad of his thumb gently across each ridge of Tubbo's knuckles like worry stones.

"...Do you think the devil is mad that I called her hot?" Tommy asks cautiously, leaning up over the edge of the mattress to peer at Tubbo. "She's not gonna drag me down to hell, is she?"

"Nah," Tubbo dismisses easily, feeling contentment seep into his bones and weigh heavily there alongside the buzzing in his skin. "She's got a soft spot for you, actually. She thinks you're funny."

"The devil thinks I'm funny?" Tommy's voice comes out breathless, choked with awe and horror, like he's won first place only to find the prize is an eternity of torture. His face bounces between expressions rapidly before he cracks into pieces with nervous giggles. "Oh god— I mean— aw fuck! Wait— Is that? Like, is that wrong? Should I be going around saying 'oh god'?"

"Please don't answer that," Ranboo begs, his grip squeezing a comforting pressure around Tubbo's hand. "It is four AM and I am way too tired for... any of this, actually. Can we just... go to bed and have this conversation in the morning? Or never. I've decided that I really don't need to know about god's opinion on blasphemes."

That sounds nice. Curling up under a heavy blanket on sheets softer than anything he could dream of making with his own two hands, resting his head on Ranboo's arm or against his chest and pretending for a night that there's nothing missing — it sounds more than nice. It sounds like more than he deserves, but maybe something he can have.

But.

Tubbo doesn't need to feel the burn of Wilbur's eyes on him to know that he can't rest yet. The tension that buzzes just under Tubbo's skin refuses to let him close his eyes. The game's still on.

"Go to sleep, Ranboo," Tubbo insists, giving Ranboo's hand a returning squeeze and looking away when Ranboo's face falls. "I've just got a couple more questions to ask Wilbur."

"A couple, huh?" Wilbur teases with a flash of a predatory grin in Tubbo's direction, still trotting lively little circles around the room. "What makes you think you get two?"

"I answered both of yours," Tubbo shoots back. "It's fair."

"Playing fair is a loser's game," Wilbur says it like a joke, like something to be dismissed. That's how Tubbo knows he means with his whole heart. "You didn't have to answer the second question, you did it of your own volition."

Tubbo groans. "Prime, you're insufferable."

"Prime?" Wilbur jabs, his grin growing wider, and it takes everything in Tubbo not to scowl at his own endless missteps. "Can't say I've heard that one before. Where's it from?"

Tubbo tries to force himself up from the bed, shifting to stand on legs that shake and pulling his hand away from Ranboo's grasp. He doesn't even make it that far. Feeling the shift, Ranboo's gentle hold immediately solidifies into a steadfast grip.

"Mm-mm, no," Ranboo hums, holding tight.

Tubbo kicks Ranboo's leg, stubborn and vindictive, but he makes the mistake of meeting Ranboo's eyes, and then he can't do much of anything at all. Ranboo smiles, and Tubbo just stops, stilling perfectly. Ranboo, who is growing more bold and self-assured by the hour. Ranboo, who catches Tubbo's gaze and smiles like he's done something worth smiling for. Ranboo, who wants him to stop, and so he will.

Ranboo's smile splits a little wider. "Shh, just sit. There you go. Nap time for Tubbo."

Tubbo huffs, but he can't even begin to stop the creeping smile that forms to match Ranboo's.

"I'll bite you," Tubbo warns, making the barest show of effort to wiggle his hand free.

"I don't think you will, actually," Ranboo says, smiling at Tubbo all the while. And he's right. "I'm not letting you go. You've fallen into my trap. You're stuck with me, now."

Tubbo takes a shuddering breath. He wants. Prime, does he want. But he is nothing, fucking *nothing*, if not eternally stubborn. And he has a goddamn job to do.

Tubbo doesn't try to stand again, he gives Ranboo that, at least — for Ranboo, he can let the rigid muscles along his arms ease in increments and leave his hands trembling all the worse. But he can't sleep.

Tearing his eyes away, Tubbo sweeps his gaze across the room. The locked door, the curtain-covered window, Wilbur. There's still a game to be lost.

"Your friends, the ones you're staying with, what are their names, Wilbur?" Tubbo asks, his voice steady and even, his gaze trained on Wilbur's cheshire grin.

Ranboo follows Tubbo's line of sight back to Wilbur. Shifting subtly on light feet, Ranboo turns his body ever so slightly to keep himself between Tubbo and the bright point of motion that is Wilbur. Tubbo is more grateful for that than he should be, even if it's a pointless gesture. Wilbur wouldn't hurt him. Not directly. Maybe even not intentionally, but that one is harder to trust.

"Why do you want to know?" Wilbur sing-songs, teasing like he already knows the answer.

"Names please," Tubbo chirps, his artificial cheer bleeding sarcasm all over the nice hotel bed sheets.

Wilbur waves a hand dismissively and easily rattles off, "Technoblade, Quackity, Schlatt, Dream."

Tubbo's face screws up with something sour and bitter before he can smooth it out. Ink, pig's blood, gunpowder, protein powder, netherite scraping across a whetstone, the hum of an enchantment table, blackstone under calloused fingers — a hundred senses that don't matter at all assault his memory in a snap of a moment before they fade in the next. Wilbur traces the reaction, but he says nothing, cataloging it silently.

"Do you know you can trust them?" Tubbo demands sharply, cutting straight to the heart. Wilbur can fuck around and play his games all he likes, but not with this. Not anymore. Tubbo's done trading his friends for empty promises. "Are you *certain*?"

Tubbo's leg picks up a rapid pace, bouncing jittery anxiety against the floor. He fights to cling to some semblance of lost optimism, the fool's hope that everything might be different this time around, but it's hard to grasp against the resurging itch that urges him to breathe faster, to stand up and pace, to check the window again.

Ranboo runs the pad of his thumb against the back of Tubbo's hand, rubbing small circles over smooth skin where the phantom texture of burn scars should be. It makes his skin itch, but Tubbo won't tell him to stop.

When Wilbur speaks, his voice is even and grounding, the kind of reassuring lilt that says *here's the plan* and gathers them all to huddle close in the sturdy walls of the Camarvan. "I've known Quackity and Schlatt for years. They're old Uni mates of mine from back when I did a semester abroad. Met in student government."

"Uncle Tech was around all the time when we were growing up," Tommy chips in. "Practically helped dad raise us after mum died."

"That he did," Wilbur nods, keeping his voice level and smooth, never breaking eye contact with Tubbo. "Hell, Dream damn near saved my life, once."

Tubbo grimaces, assaulted with too-fresh memories of a crater, a sunrise, a manic laugh, and the awful dread on Tommy's face. "That's not actually comforting to hear."

"They wouldn't hurt us, none of them would," Wilbur insists, firmly, holding Tubbo's gaze with a steady intensity.

"You'd better be right, Wilbur," Tubbo breathes, and the poisonous little thing growing in his chest like hope is painful and unwelcome. "Because if you're wrong, I don't care what you mean to anyone here, I'll put you back where you fucking belong."

“Sure,” Wilbur tilts his head and smiles something lop-sided, only growing softer in the face of all Tubbo’s protective malice, the contrary bastard.

“Okay.” Tubbo exhales sharply and tries not to crumble. “Okay.”

Ranboo gently nudges Tubbo’s fingers, and Tubbo uncurls his fists obligingly. He doesn’t know when he clenched them. Ranboo takes the opportunity to thread their fingers together loosely, humming a pleased little note. With slow, avid sweeps, Ranboo traces patterns over empty space, the blank spots where Tubbo’s skin should be marked by pickaxe callouses, firework burns, and little nicks from wires, metal scrap, and welding torches. The only blemishes that mar his skin are four red crescents, marks left from blunt human nails digging into soft human skin. Tubbo observes his own trembling hand with the same curiosity Ranboo does, looking at something new and unfamiliar.

“I’ve got another one,” Wilbur says into the silence, pulling Tubbo from his momentary distraction. Tubbo looks up, and Wilbur tips his head, considering. “Who am I to you, Tubbo?”

Tubbo freezes, his whole body going cold and numb and unfamiliar. For an awful moment, Tubbo looks in Wilbur’s eyes and he *knows*.

“No one.” The lie falls out of his mouth with a blank sort of desperation, emotionless and thoughtless and empty.

Wilbur frowns, disappointed. “I’ve been honest with you. Haven’t I, Tubbo? I’ve told you everything you wanted to know. Where did all your talk about playing fair go?”

“I—” Tubbo stutters, and this time the nervous giggle manages to slip out of his throat before he can choke it down. Ranboo’s hand squeezes around his comfortingly, and Tubbo’s fingers twitch like the touch burns. “I don’t think I can answer that.”

“It’s not that hard,” Wilbur presses, taking a meandering step closer to them. Tubbo feels Ranboo’s hand tense around his, closing in. “Just tell me what you think of me. Your honest opinion, don’t hold back.”

Tubbo shakes his head, keeping his teeth pressed tight together, not trusting himself enough to open his mouth. Because he knows if he does he’ll give Wilbur anything he wants — and by the gleam in his eyes, Wilbur knows it too.

Wilbur’s not scared of Tubbo. Not anymore. Tubbo really fucking wishes he still was. Because now that Wilbur recognizes Tubbo isn’t a threat, isn’t going to hurt them, that Tubbo’s even worried about them and trying to keep them safe in his own fucked up way, there is nothing stopping Wilbur from prying and picking and prodding until he’s satisfied and Tubbo is an empty shell where secrets once lived.

Wilbur’s playing with a puzzle he doesn’t have all the pieces to — a puzzle Tubbo’s not sure he wants Wilbur to solve.

There’s a part of Tubbo — the naïve part that refused to die to a dozen withers and grows in the empty spaces where scars were — that wants Wilbur to figure it out. Because if Wilbur figures it out, that means Tubbo doesn’t have to say it. It’s easy. It could be so, so easy. All he has to do is give in, tell Wilbur everything he wants to know. Then, maybe, Wilbur would believe him, would

remember him, would know him for all he is. Surely any consequence would be worth it, to be known, to have that fleeting taste of something real.

And the part of Tubbo that has been built into secret nuke blueprints and a thousand empty walls assures him that he's already lost. He lost this game the moment he stepped into it, the moment he called Wilbur's name, the moment he burned that book and summoned Drista to a snowy seaside mansion. He is the human error — a dangerous outlier in a careful, complex construction. He's taking up the space where the real Tubbo should be — a human with no horns and no scars and no illicit memories — living a lie in a body that belongs to someone else.

This was a game of second chances, the prize a new, fresh start for everyone free from any strings attached or payment required. And he's lost.

Everything in Tubbo screams, *you've already lost, so there's nothing to lose, and wouldn't it be so, so nice to just give in. Accept it. Earn your acceptance.*

But Tubbo's grown to learn the hardest lessons best, and he knows better now than to trust himself.

Tubbo isn't to be trusted. But neither is Wilbur.

Tubbo doesn't know what to do.

And the thing in him sings, *would it be so bad?* Would the world come crashing down if Tubbo said *I knew you, in a past life. All of you. And it was bad. And it was good. And I loved you like family. And I cared about you too much to let you go, to let you have your second chance. Am I too selfish? Would you tell me to leave if you understood the full gravity of what I've done? What I've taken from you?*

He's tired. He's so tired.

Tubbo's breath hitches, scraping along the ragged edges of his sore throat and catching on the points of unfamiliar canines.

"I hate you," Tubbo answers, and the truth comes out warbly and weak.

Tubbo stares down at his hand so he doesn't have to deal with whatever stupid fucking face Wilbur is making right now. Ranboo rubs an attempt at comfort along his knuckles where a gold ring should overlap a sword scar and his skin itches and burns — wrong, wrong, *wrong*.

"And you're kind of a massive fucking prick," Tubbo spits. He blinks hard to scrape away the burning behind his eyes that threatens to spill over.

Tubbo grimaces and scrunches up his nose. Still, he's helpless to stop the tear that drips off his chin and splatters, leaving a wet mark on the perfect, too-soft sheets.

"And you never know when to st-stop," To his growing horror, Tubbo can't stop the words spilling out of his mouth.

Anger builds in the pit in his chest, clawing against the bones of his ribs and pulling his lungs tight. He fights desperately to even out his breathing, take a deep breath, cut this shit out, but he can't, he can't, he *can't*. Everything is wrong. His skin itches and burns in waves that crawl across his whole body. It's all wrong. He shouldn't even be here.

“A-ha-and I wish I didn’t c-ha-are about you. F-fuck!” Tubbo chokes through hot tears that spill without his permission, scorching tracks down his face.

“Hey, hey, it’s alright,” Ranboo pleads in a whisper.

Slowly, Ranboo reaches up, careful fingers aiming to wipe the wet trails on Tubbo’s cheeks away. Tubbo flinches away. It’s a reflex, an ingrained instinct trying to prevent Ranboo from burning himself on the water. Ranboo recoils like he’s burned anyway — except he wasn’t, because that’s not something that happens anymore. Ranboo is human and *wrong* just like everyone else.

Unable to take it anymore, this sitting still, this nothingness, Tubbo staggers to standing on legs that won’t bend right, ripping his hand from Ranboo’s hold and pulling it close to his chest. The look on Ranboo’s face says he’s fighting to keep himself from reaching out again, watching Tubbo with something miserable and torn in his eyes.

Tubbo shakes his head, trying to clear it, trying to make everything make sense.

“I need— I’m sorry, I— please leave me alone.” Tubbo’s voice wavers as he stumbles back and *moves*.

He needs to move. There’s nowhere to go. He just needs to keep moving.

He paces, up and down the length of the room and then back again, tracing the same path over and over. The vibrating energy that races under his skin and pounds through his heart refuses to grow satisfied, screaming for him to move, move, move — to fucking *do something*.

Tommy pulls his legs back from the narrow line of space between the TV and the beds, and when Tubbo rounds yet another loop of the room, he tries to catch Tubbo’s attention with a look of concern. Tubbo keeps his eyes trained steadily in front of him, not looking at anything except the space where his foot goes next, the next stretch of ostentatious carpet he has to cover.

The line of Tubbo’s throat aches, pulled taught with everything he fights to swallow down. If Tubbo opens his mouth, he doesn’t know what is going to come out of it. He doesn’t want to risk finding out. So he locks the muscles of his jaw tight and he does not scream or sob or spill secrets or make any noise at all.

Now if he can just stop crying. That’s the next step.

Wilbur shifts his footing, awkward and out of step. Tubbo watches the lamp-light shadow that doubles Wilbur’s performance against the wall because he can’t risk looking at the man himself.

Wilbur’s ever-present guise of certainty and confidence speaks, “We should—”

“Leave ‘im alone, Wil,” Tommy cuts him off, no longer content to observe the game from the sidelines. And Wilbur listens, at least for the moment, because it’s Tommy. “You’re just being mean. He’s not gonna—”

There’s a knock at the door.

Tubbo’s halfway across the room, but he’s turning on instinct before he even realizes what he’s heard — before the sound can process to meaning in his brain.

Finally, his chest screams. *Now fucking MOVE.*

Tubbo's already moving.

You knew this was coming. Because it always does. And you were RIGHT. This is what you were afraid of. And you are ready for it.

Tubbo is ready. He's ready, this time. He's not losing anyone else. Never again.

With a snap, the tension in Tubbo's body gives way. He moves, smooth, practiced, violent. He covers the distance to the door in an instant — he's done it a thousand times before.

One hand reaches for a sword at his hip, but his fingers slip through empty air where they should meet the cool touch of a netherite pommel. A hand over his shoulder comes back empty as well, no well-worn wood of a crossbow handle.

Weaponless, defenseless, useless.

When he passes the mock kitchen, he slips a plastic butter knife from the pile of fast food utensils into his hand without slowing. He doesn't have a sword. But he can improvise.

He reaches the door before anyone else in the room can even react, unlatching the locks and tearing it open with a brutal efficiency. Without an ounce of hesitation, Tubbo puts himself between the stranger, *the threat*, and everything in this world he cares about.

The threat is a young adult, maybe early twenties, with dark hair braided down their back. They've got a shiny pin on their suit lapel that reads "they/them". No visible weapons, but that doesn't mean anything. The threat stands next to a service trolley loaded with various covered dishes, plates, and glassware — one ornate serving dish balanced in their free hand.

When the door slams open, the threat startles and bumps their cart. The glasses rattle. It sounds like splash potions clinking together. Small and easy to conceal, any one of those covered dishes could be hiding potions of weakness, of slowness, of harming.

With tears still streaming down his face, Tubbo stares them down.

"Uh," the threat hesitates, taking a step back. "Ribeye steak with potatoes and hazelnut-cherry iced parfait for... Tommy Innit?"

With a clatter of noise from inside the room, Tommy appears behind Tubbo. Before Tubbo can do anything, Tommy slips between Tubbo and the doorframe. A sharp whine of warning and distress tears from Tubbo. He throws out a hand to grab Tommy, to pull him back inside the safety of the walls. Quick as anything, Tommy weaves under Tubbo's reach and comes to stand too close to the threat.

Tommy plucks the serving dish from the threat's hands before turning on his heel and pushing Tubbo back inside the room.

"Thank you!" Tommy calls out hastily before slamming the door closed and locking it.

The moment the door snaps shut, Tubbo is up on the balls of his feet and peering through the spyhole. He watches the threat blink and recover for a second before pushing the cart to clatter along, continuing on their way down the hallway. He watches until they've left his field of vision. He keeps watching.

They're safe. They have sturdy walls around them. No one is after them. But it doesn't matter to the thing in Tubbo's chest, the tension strung tight across his shoulders and through his rigid spine not easing in the slightest. The buzzing under his skin rattles him, sending waves of tremors through every inch of his body. He needs to move, but he can't. He's frozen dead-still in this one spot, watching the hallway, waiting for the moment the door opens again.

Tommy presses a hand warm and firm against his arm, and Tubbo doesn't react with more than a huff of acknowledgement, unable to take his attention off the fish-eye warped hallway.

"What the fuck, man. C'mon, you can't just— fuckin'— do that." The hushed waver in Tommy's voice is disquieting to something deep and intrinsic in Tubbo.

It's not often that the world gets to see anything less than Tommy Innit at one-hundred percent in all things, and those times are more often than not followed by a sword at his throat, a crater in the ground, an exile sentencing. When Tommy needs something the most, he asks for it quietly.

Tubbo opens his mouth, tries to find some words to reassure Tommy, but there's nothing. There are no words in his throat. His lungs are empty and they don't move at all.

"C'mon," Tommy says on a whisper as he tugs gently on Tubbo's sleeve, and it's all Tubbo can do to nod.

Tubbo forces himself to peel away from the spyhole. Each step away from the door is aching and anxious, but Tommy asked, and Tubbo would give him anything.

Tommy stops and sets his tray of room service food down, brushing the remnants of their cold fast food to the side to make room for something new, but Tubbo keeps moving. Now that Tubbo's moving again, he falls back into a soothing pattern, pacing the familiar length of the room from the door to the window. His feet don't click against the floor in a restless *tik-tik-tik* like hooves should, and he tries to pretend for a moment that it's only the carpet muffling the sound.

Pulled along by gravity, without any thought required, Tubbo peers out the window again, shifting the curtain to the side just enough and not a fraction more.

"Thirteen," Wilbur notes blandly.

"Piss off," Tubbo croaks, his sore throat and his overwhelmed brain barely managing that much.

Wilbur, remarkably, stays silent.

Cars glide along the pavement, flickering in and out under the rolling rhythm of street lamps. Tubbo counts his breaths until he can feel them again, his lungs resuming the pace once they find it, easy and familiar. Tear tracks dry into tacky streaks on his face, but he's too busy breathing to do anything about it. He feels numb and weightless, and he's self-aware enough to recognize he's coming down off the adrenaline of his paranoid panic attack.

The smell of butter and herbs and fresh seared steak wafts through the room, and Tommy coos pleased excitement over his meal. It smells good, rich and mouth-watering. Tubbo's stomach twists and his dying appetite rots on his tongue.

"Was a bit of a dick move to wind you up like that, huh?" Wilbur remarks, settling back down in his armchair and pulling one leg up to his chest. "Sorry."

“S’alright,” Tubbo rasps, keeping his voice low to avoid the ache that claws at his throat. His words are underlain with utter truth, maybe more than anything else spoken in this room. Tubbo’s forgiveness comes easy and immediate and without condition; it always has, for better or for worse. “Buttons are made to be pushed.”

Someone in an apartment across the street flicks on a light. Tubbo watches with muted interest as they step into the freshly illuminated kitchen, opening the refrigerator and rubbing at their eyes.

“Just one more thing. Last one, I promise,” Wilbur says into the silence, speaking with the utmost confidence, like he knows for a fact that Tubbo won’t refuse. Maybe he does, Tubbo wouldn’t put it past him to have figured that out by this point. It’s not like he’s been doing a very good job of pretending otherwise. “You don’t even have to give me a real answer, just tell me if I’m totally off base, yeah?”

“Sure,” Tubbo agrees tiredly, not believing Wilbur’s promise in the slightest. The man really does never know when to stop.

The person in the apartment across the street pulls out a carton of something before closing the refrigerator again. They take a drink straight out of the carton, not bothering with a glass. They take their carton and plod out of the kitchen, flicking the light off as they go. Tubbo watches mutely and thinks about nothing at all.

Hardly dissuaded by Tubbo’s lack of attention, Wilbur leans his chin on his knee and rambles, “We’re not friends, you said that yourself. But!” Wilbur throws up a finger for emphasis, sounding jaunty and self-satisfied. “You care about us. That much is rather painfully obvious, what with the whole protective rage and all. You can drop the silverware, by the way. You’re not gonna be defending anyone against the room service with that — unless you want to be defending yourself in court.”

Tubbo’s fingers tighten around the handle of the cheap plastic knife until it creaks. He doesn’t want to set it down. He feels more comfortable holding it, with something even vaguely weapon-like in his hands. That’s probably not a good thing. Tubbo carefully sets the plastic butter knife down on the windowsill. He tries to tell himself he doesn’t need it, channeling the same vehemence he uses to ignore the way his fingers twitch and tremble.

“You care about us more than you should — you care more than we’ve given you reason to. But I don’t think you’re a stalker. You don’t act like a stalker. If you had some kind of unhealthy obsession with us, you wouldn’t be pulling away at every opportunity. Nah, you’ve got something else going on.”

Tubbo shifts, letting the heavy curtain fall closed. He can’t find the energy in himself to move, though. He finds himself still and empty, staring blankly at the delicate weave of the cream-colored fabric.

“A ‘deal with the devil’, you said. But you haven’t said what for. Money? Influence? Power? Now, Tubbo, no offense, but you just don’t strike me as the type.” Wilbur clicks his tongue dismissively. He seems like he’s on a roll, so Tubbo doesn’t bother interrupting to tell him just how wrong he is.

“A deal for information, then, sure. But why? What do you stand to gain?” Wilbur questions, but he doesn’t stop for an answer. “Given that I accept your claim about a devil’s deal, you could have had anything in the world you wanted, and yet somehow you ended up here, in another country, in a hotel room with three strangers.”

“You want the three of us here, in this room. For some reason, you wanted *this*. But honestly, Tubbo, I don’t have a clue what you want from us,” Wilbur admits, speaking low and soft. “And I think, neither do you.”

Tubbo nods silently.

Wilbur is right. He doesn’t have a clue what he’s doing. This, just this, is more than he could have asked for — more than he deserves. Now that he has this, he doesn’t know what to do except hold on to it, stay close and protect and make himself useful for as long as they’ll let him.

“Now. Why do you care? What do we mean to you, Tubbo?”

Checkmate. Wilbur sets his piece on the board, closing in, and that’s it. There is no escape. Game over.

Tubbo lets air flow into his lungs, and then holds it there until he feels it, and then lets it seep back out again. The quiet beat of his heart counts out a steady rhythm. He stares at the curtain and doesn’t see anything at all. He’s done. He’s giving in.

Quietly, Wilbur continues. “You play the game well, I’ll give you that. You somehow managed to earn the total loyalty of someone you met *yesterday*,” Wilbur looks pointedly at Ranboo, but Tubbo doesn’t follow his gaze. “And you’ve managed to win over Tommy in a matter of minutes. That’s impressive. But you aren’t playing with an end goal in mind, so there’s simply no way you can win.”

Tubbo knows that. He knew from the start that he had already lost. But Prime if he wasn’t going to take the chance to play one more game against Wilbur — even a losing one.

“I impressed you?” Tubbo asks, and it’s small and childish.

Wilbur smiles, “You did. You did good.”

The thing in Tubbo’s chest settles, growing warm and content. And maybe it’s just another cheap tactic, Wilbur telling him what he wants to hear just to get on his good side, but Tubbo doesn’t care. He’ll take Wilbur’s praise, even if it’s an imitation of the real, unattainable thing. He will cradle it close to his chest and let it warm his heart all the same.

He’s lost. There’s nothing left to do now but accept it.

“I...” Tubbo trails off, hesitating. He doesn’t know what he wants to say. He opens his mouth, but he’s not sure what’s going to come out of it. Wilbur is silent, patient. “I will tell you everything. Anything you want to know. But...” Tubbo’s words stick in his throat, and he swallows raggedly. “Please. Not tonight. I’m just... tired.” He breathes out, shaky. “And... be careful what you ask for. You might not like the answer.”

The gleam in Wilbur’s eyes reflects his desire to know more, his need to dig deeper with obsessive intensity. He’s caught opportunity in his sights, and in no world is he going to let it go unexploited.

Tubbo tries to steel himself against the oncoming interrogation that he’s opened himself up to, but his resolve wavers and folds. He can’t fight anymore. He’s drained, running on dead-empty nothing. Wilbur will ask, and he will give.

Tommy holds out a hand in silent communication. Ranboo passes him a pillow without needing to be told. Tommy reels back and chucks the pillow, smacking Wilbur square in the face. The pillow thumps to the floor softly, landing on the carpet by Wilbur's chair.

"Bitch," Tommy crows, laughing as he shoves a spoonful of parfait into his mouth. "Shut the fuck up!"

Tubbo's smile is weak and lopsided, but Tommy calls it from him like it's no effort at all.

The familiar wear threaded into the carpet tugs at his feet, and so Tubbo paces. He's so, so tired, but he can't stop moving. He doesn't know what else to do with himself. He traces the path to the door, passing Wilbur's armchair, Ranboo on the bed, Tommy at the kitchen counter, and he looks at none of them.

Tubbo slows to a stop at the door, the last dregs of his energy only getting him so far. He pauses long enough to peer out the spyhole, out into an empty hallway. He tugs at the chain lock and it *clinks* cool iron reassurance under his fingers. He turns and paces the length of the room back to the window, pulled mechanically like a magnet. It's nice, movement without thought. Easy and simple. He can do this. Even if his vision wants to blur together at the edges and trembly legs want to give out from under him, he can do this.

Ranboo is perched on the edge of the bed, sinking weight into the soft mattress, watching Tubbo all gentle and cautious. That's good. It's reassuring to the buzzing core of his chest. Ranboo's safe, but Ranboo's not happy. The small frown that slants his face itches at Tubbo, *fix it, make it better*.

The air conditioning kicks on with a snap of noise from the other end of the room. Tubbo jumps out of his skin, twisting to face the danger. His heart jolts in his chest, pounding erratically against his ribs. The heart is a muscle, and Tubbo's is wound up in all the same tension that pulls his shoulders taught.

"Tubbo, you've gotta lie down, man," Ranboo says.

Tubbo just shakes his head and forces himself to keep moving. He doesn't know how to say that he can't, that if he stops moving he'll collapse and fall apart completely. The ache in his throat tells him he wouldn't have much luck with words, anyway.

"...It would make me feel better," Ranboo tries, and Tubbo pauses. "If you came and sat down with me."

Tubbo hesitates, swaying back and forth slightly where he stands. Finally, he rasps, "You are evil."

As the frown falls away from Ranboo's face, Tubbo feels a tightness in his chest ease. "Does that mean it's working?"

"Manipulative. Evil," Tubbo accuses, his feet already carrying him to Ranboo's side. "The absolute worst."

Ranboo extends a hand, reaching out eagerly as Tubbo approaches. Tubbo gives Ranboo his hand and lets himself be pulled forward, lets Ranboo tug him down into softness. Ranboo herds Tubbo to the head of the bed, patting a spot right in the middle for Tubbo to sit. Tubbo shuffles over obligingly on knees that sink into the mattress and sits with his back up against the headrest.

“Good, good,” Ranboo hums, smiling pleased contentment. “Here, I’ve got— Let me— Here.”

The mattress shifts and gives under Ranboo’s weight as he waddles around on his knees, gathering up bed pillows that had been displaced in the night’s chaos. He shuffles back to Tubbo’s side, a pillow cradled under each arm. With hands steady and purposeful, Ranboo tucks a pillow on either side of Tubbo, nestling him in plush and silk. A warm hand tipped in phantom claws lands lightly on his shoulder, hardly any pressure at all, just the impression of a request. Tubbo tips and lets his body loll forward obligingly, and Ranboo hums as he slips another pillow behind Tubbo’s back. The butterfly pressure of the hand on his shoulder shifts, guiding Tubbo to lean back and sink into the soft cushion.

Across the room, Tommy perks up as he recognizes Ranboo’s new task. With a bounce in his step and a mischievous grin on his face, Tommy snatches up the pillow from the ground by Wilbur’s armchair and passes it along. Ranboo accepts the offering with a gracious smile and slots it into place. Tommy laughs and starts grabbing even more pillows from the other bed, adding his contribution to the rapidly growing pile that surrounds Tubbo.

From the distant look on his face, it’s clear Ranboo’s attention has been utterly absorbed by building — the simple, thoughtless task of putting everything where it belongs, making it right. Tubbo watches him work languidly, letting his static-edged vision settle on the lull of steady, hypnotic motion as he lets himself be grounded.

Ranboo’s face lights up as he seems to think of something, because the next moment he’s leaning across the length of the mattress, stretching a long arm out to reach the foot of the bed. Ranboo grabs the end of the downy duvet that clings to the bed corner, reeling the heavy blanket back up onto the bed from where it had been spilled all over the floor.

“Tubbo in a blanket!” Tommy cheers, grabbing a corner and helping Ranboo add it to the pile.

“What will he do?” Tubbo echoes on reflex, something tender and fatigued muddling all other thoughts in his brain.

“Sleep,” Ranboo finishes dryly, leaving no room for argument.

“Mmm,” Tubbo hums, doubtful and dismissive.

Good things aren’t ones he gets to keep. This, too, will end — will be taken from him. And when it is, it will surely hurt enough that he will regret having accepted it in the first place. But until then.

Until then, Ranboo adjusts the blanket with serene focus, tucking the sides of it around pillows and wrapping Tubbo up in the delicate pile. He pauses when Tubbo shifts, broken from the trance enough to look to Tubbo curiously. Indulging a nudge from something placid and quiet in the core of his chest, Tubbo lifts a heavy arm with bones that weigh more than they should and lifts one corner of the blanket.

Wordlessly, Tubbo stares at a point just below Ranboo’s chin, not quite bold enough to meet his eyes. It’s a silent request, something he doesn’t have the words for.

Ranboo understands anyway.

“Can I?” Ranboo asks quietly, not declining, but staring at the offered space like he’s not sure what he’s seeing is real.

“Yeah, of course,” Tubbo manages to scrape from the bottom of his lungs. And then, because he needs Ranboo to know that he means it, “Please.”

Ranboo takes the offered open corner of the pile, lifting the blanket enough to crawl under. He’s all start-and-stop jagged movement, hesitating at every odd second. He keeps glancing at Tubbo cautiously, ready to pull away at the slightest indication of discomfort, waiting for the moment he’s gone and crossed some invisible boundary.

Tubbo snorts, amused. There’s no need for all that. If Ranboo crossed a boundary, Tubbo would simply bite him.

After what seems like far too long, Ranboo settles himself under the makeshift nest of pillows and blankets, stretching out long legs until he’s comfortable.

“Is this still okay?” Ranboo checks, and Tubbo wastes no time leaning into him in response. “Ah, alright.”

The texture of Ranboo’s dress shirt is smooth and silky against his forehead. When breath shudders into Tubbo’s lungs, the air smells like laundry detergent.

Idly, Tubbo picks at one of the buttons on Ranboo’s shirt. “Do you have pajamas?”

“They’re out in the car, I think,” Ranboo hums, and Tubbo feels the sound rumble through the cavern under his cheek.

“You can use Tommy’s,” Tubbo offers without thought. “You’re taller, but they should fit alright.”

On the rare occasion that Tommy would stay the night at their mansion in Snowchester, he would steal Ranboo’s pajamas. They were too long in the sleeves for Tommy — too long in the *everything*, really, and Tommy always had to roll up the pants so he would stop tripping over them and tie the waistband really tight just to get them to stop falling off — but they worked well enough. Tubbo guesses that Tommy’s pajamas should fit Ranboo well enough, too. They’re closer in height now than they were before. Tubbo doesn’t see any reason there would be a problem with this plan.

“Uh, no thanks. I’m fine,” Ranboo says carefully, like he’s worried that rejecting the offer might just make Tubbo double down and insist.

And he would be right, because Tubbo is *not* content to let Ranboo go to bed in a days-old dress shirt. Not while he has something to say about it. Tubbo cracks open the eyes he hadn’t realized that he’d closed, argument ready on the tip of his tongue, but Ranboo wiggles enough to free one of his arms from the blanket pile and uses it to pat Tubbo on the head, awkward and hesitant.

And Tubbo melts.

“Oh, well.” Ranboo sounds surprised, like he wasn’t expecting Tubbo to go limp and boneless under even the slightest positive physical affection. Really, he should have seen this coming. To his credit, he’s quick to accept this new situation, patting Tubbo again with a bit more certainty this time. “M’kay.”

Tommy skips across the room, stealing a fuzzy knit blanket from where it was artfully draped across the back of Wilbur’s armchair.

“Hey,” Wilbur complains, but his tone is amused and mild as the blanket is dragged away.

“Need it! Thanks, Wil!” Tommy snickers and dances away with the fuzzy blanket half tucked under his arm and dragging across the floor.

Without stopping, Tommy grabs his plate from the counter and shoves a whole baby potato into his mouth. Then Tommy weaves back over to the bed, chomping happily on his too-large bite with puffed-out cheeks. He tosses the fuzzy knit blanket over Tubbo and Ranboo and then proceeds to throw himself onto the bed, the staggering motion almost managing to dump all his food onto the sheets. Tommy shrieks, muffled by the mouthful of potato, scrambling to tip the plate dangerously in the other direction before leveling it out.

“Please don’t spill your food on me,” Ranboo pleads, deadpan. “Also, don’t choke.”

Tommy tries to speak through the mouthful and only manages some garbled nonsense — the words are lost, but the way he extends the piece of seasoned and buttered potato on the end of his fork towards Tubbo is a clear enough message on its own.

Tubbo’s stomach twists threateningly, and Tubbo’s face does something to match. But Tommy isn’t deterred, shaking the potato in Tubbo’s direction insistently and garbling some more angry almost-words. Begrudgingly, Tubbo takes a bite.

“*Please* don’t choke,” Ranboo repeats with stress as Tommy cheers through his muffled mouthful.

Tommy chews and swallows quickly, only to turn to Ranboo and crow, “Bitch.”

Before Tubbo’s even through forcing himself to chew the piece of potato, Tommy’s already extending a bite of steak. Tubbo scowls, but he eats that too.

The taste of steak and potatoes is as familiar as the sight of rolling green-leafed potato fields and cow farms plentiful enough to feed a growing nation, but the flavors here are new. Butter and salt and rosemary, rich and heavy on his tongue — scarcities that were too hard to find and too time-consuming to make when you had resources to mine and houses to build and wars to fight.

Tommy extends a bit of parfait on a spoon, and Tubbo eats it unthinkingly, sleepy and lost in thought. It’s sweet and utterly unfamiliar — honey and milk and sweet berries and cocoa beans are the only things he can think to compare it to.

Tommy coos, “Like a little baby! Ahawww— pffhaha!” Tommy breaks off into a laugh at Tubbo’s unimpressed stare.

Tubbo eats a couple more bites obediently until he really does feel like he’s going to throw up, and then he pulls away and buries his face in the soft of the downy duvet.

“I’m going to order more room service,” Tommy declares. “Tubbo, what do you want?”

Ranboo whines dismay for his credit card, and Tubbo can’t help but agree. He doesn’t think his heart can handle another knock at the door.

“Don’t,” Tubbo mutters into the blanket against his scratchy throat.

“Please don’t,” Ranboo agrees.

Tommy huffs, groaning a long, drawn-out, “Fiiine,” and then shoves another spoonful of parfait into his mouth.

It helps, having Tommy by his side and Ranboo’s chest rising and falling under his cheek, but he doesn’t think he’ll ever be rid of the buzzing that runs restless and anxious through his skin. Even with his lightly trembling body wrapped in warm blankets, he can’t sleep. Something in him fights to keep himself awake and aware, screaming *danger* every time his drooping eyelids slip closed.

Tubbo knows with awful certainty, the moments he feels safest are the most dangerous. So, he keeps watch, eyes scanning across the room, watching for a shadow on the wall or a knock at the door. His eyes slide over Wilbur as he makes his vigilant patrol, and each time Wilbur gets a little more exasperated.

“Are you coming, Wil?” Tommy asks, bouncing idly on the other bed as he kicks off his socks.

“No fucking way am I gonna sleep with a suspicious motherfucker like this one in the room,” Wilbur says with a pointed gesture at Tubbo. Tubbo meets his gaze and sticks his tongue out petulantly. Wilbur doesn’t break eye contact with Tubbo, and his next words are slow and deliberate. “Go to bed, Tommy. I’m gonna keep an eye out, just in case.”

“You’re so pa-ra-noid,” Tommy clips the syllables of the word, a teasing smile spread wide across his face.

Tubbo, grudgingly, feels safer knowing that Wilbur will be awake and keeping watch for the few remaining hours of the night. Probably exactly why Wilbur pointed it out. Although, Tubbo considers, Wilbur probably also feels safer if Tubbo is asleep and too unconscious to be a threat. A win-win for the both of them.

Tubbo shifts until he’s nestled entirely in the curve of Ranboo’s arm, limp and too heavy to move another trembling muscle.

“I love you.” Tubbo yawns, and this time he can feel the way Ranboo’s chest stutters in shock for a fraction of a second. “Do you believe me?”

Ranboo takes a long moment before he puts his words together. “I believe you. I don’t understand why you would — like, *at all*,” Ranboo huffs a quiet chuckle. “...but I definitely believe you.” Ranboo says it with a steady surety, but the sharp edge of wonder says his certainty is a surprise to himself. “You love me.”

“I do. I do,” Tubbo murmurs, burying his face harder against Ranboo’s ribs, like he could live in just this one moment for eternity.

Tubbo tries to match his own breathing to Ranboo’s, and he keeps trying until his lungs don’t falter and shake. He lets the gentle rise and fall of Ranboo’s chest and the steady pulse of his heartbeat become the only thing in his small world, quieting his thoughts until he’s too tired to question it, to ask himself what he’s done to earn this, to rack himself for a justification, a reason he should get to rest.

“I knew you in the last life. All of you.” Tubbo mumbles the secret into the haze of silk and laundry detergent, words slow and tranquil like they don’t matter at all. “I’m trying. I’m trying so hard to make it better this time.”

Ranboo hums, the vibration rumbling against his cheek. Whatever Ranboo says next is lost to the haze as Tubbo falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

More Reincarnation AU soon to come.

Did you know, only a small percentage of readers leave a comment?

Nothing But The Truth

Chapter Summary

In which something goes terribly wrong and yet nothing changes at all.

Chapter Notes

There is mouseover text in this fic now! Hover your mouse over the relevant text to see an English translation! (Sadly, it doesn't work on mobile, though.)

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

Snow falls in slow and heavy clumps, bound crystalline together in the clouds and carrying a measure of that untouchable unreality with them down to the world below. The snowflakes *pat* against the window and melt there, giving away their structure and dissolving into water against the radiating heat. The drips run in rivets down glass window panes until the chilling wind can whet them to icicles and hang them from the windowsill.

It is warm here. The vast, empty space under grand vaulted ceilings is filled with the flickering glow of heat that breathes from the fireplace. The walls of the mansion are new, still young and unbroken. They creak pacifying whispers under hushed breath, naïve enough to think they can calm the whipping winter winds that skim ocean waves and batter themselves against window panes.

Michael squeals excitement and Tubbo glances up from the papers spread out on the kitchen table in front of him. Benson the chicken flutters to land on the bridge handrail, squawking and ruffling her wings. Michael chuffs and chases Benson, happily darting after the chicken as they chase each other back and forth across the bridge.

The bridge dangles above the gaping maw of his ossuary nation, never full, never satisfied. The crater of L'Manberg echoes Michael's snorts back again and again. The playful noises join the melody that reverberates quietly between jagged grey stone and mirror-still pools. Once a sound hits these walls, it stays trapped, caught up in the endless echoing cycle. It echoes forever and never forgets. You can press your ear to the sun-warmed stone and hear voices from years past singing, yelling, cheering, screaming.

Tubbo hears his own voice embedded in the chorus that these walls sing quietly to themselves, lonely. He tries to visit when he can. He is responsible for this place — he is still its president, after all. No one else is going to keep the crater company, and it is so very lonely here.

Tiny piglin hooves clatter against wooden floor beams and bright sunlight reflects in a golden sheen off the sword securely rattling in the sheath at his back. The sight of it makes Tubbo itch. Tubbo keeps trying to give him a netherite one, something better to protect himself with, but Michael

refuses to give up his battered and worn golden sword. Tubbo huffs a breath and pushes the itch away. Tubbo understands. Some things are too important to let go of.

Michael lets out a victorious *knuff-knuff-knuff* when he catches Benson. She squirms and squawks her annoyance until he bundles her safely under his arm. Michael darts back to Tubbo, eyes shining bright, and he grunts and chitters to Benson. She clucks, her head bobbing with each of Michael's quick steps.

"Having fun, Michael?" Tubbo laughs.

Michael snorts at the sound of his name, holding Benson out with two hands and presenting her proudly.

"Good job, you caught her!" Tubbo smiles and gives Michael a thumbs up. Michael understands enough Player — more than they realize, sometimes — but he still finds that physical gestures and body language are better at getting across the language barrier. Actions speak louder than words. That's what people keep telling him, at least.

Benson, displeased at being held aloft, beats her wings and squirms until she frees herself. As soon as her feet touch the floor she's darting away down a hallway to hide, claws scratching against spruce floorboards. Michael watches her go with a quiet chuff, then turns to look up at Tubbo hopefully. Tubbo can only smile sadly in return.

Tubbo shakes his head. "I can't, not just yet. I'll play after the work is done."

Michael's ears droop, and Tubbo leans over and knocks his forehead gently against the top of Michael's head. The touch of coarse pink fur prickles against half his skin and the ivory of exposed bone is smooth and solid on the other. Tubbo closes his eyes and leans into the pressure for a long moment.

The fireplace crackles and a log snaps, releasing a shower of sparks. The sparks dance and whirl as they're sucked up into the chimney and flung out to scatter on the breeze, drifting and whistling along rocky crater walls.

"Why don't you go find some toys to play with for a bit, yeah? I promise I'll be free to play soon."

Tubbo leans back to sit up in the chair, and as he pulls away Michael quickly hops up and bonks their foreheads together one more time. Tubbo laughs and rubs at the spot before he makes a shooin' motion with his hands. Tubbo gives his best attempt at a grunt and snort, ill-suited vocal cords warping around the gruff way of saying *I love you*. Michael snorts, echoing the sound back, and skips over to the stairs that lead to his bedroom, hooves clicking against each step up.

Tubbo smiles and watches him go, absently brushing some cookie crumbs off the papers, messy remnants of afternoon snack time. There's a blotch of chocolate chip staining the blueprints, a dark smear across delicate white lines detailing a bunker buried far beneath the sand of a snowy desert, but that's alright. He sees the lines and angles in perfect detail every time he closes his eyes, repetitive patterns burned there by long exposure. At least it wasn't one of the tomes — bound in cow's leather with sugar cane pressed pages, ancient and yellowing at the edges. If the margin notes written in Philza's messy scrawl are to be believed, they might even be one of a kind — records of history from a time before the world was made, written in a lost language Tubbo can't hope to decipher. But he'll try. He has to try.

The salty sea tang of squid ink hits his tongue and stains his lips black, and Tubbo realizes he's chewing on the end of his quill again. He sets it down on the kitchen table and leans back in his chair, the spruce wood creaking quietly under his weight as he rubs a hand over tired eyes. He leans back and back and back until the chair tilts up onto two legs, and then tips further until it *clicks* against the crater wall behind him.

Tubbo's head falls back until his horns scrape against the rocky cliff face. With empty eyes, he stares up into the thick clouds that blanket the world, a dull glow of fading sunlight and dusting of snow are the only things that leak through. The pale stretch of sky is cut through by the jagged overhead above, dangling vines rooted firmly in a thin slash of a crevice. He reaches up and picks a leaf from the vine, absently tearing little pieces free to keep his hands busy.

Somewhere, a siren outlined in blueprints echoes off blast-carved cliffs, singing warning. It resonates with the staccato beat of sea waves crashing against frost-bitten shores and the trickle of river water dripping from dangling vines.

He reaches out, one half of a whole, and presses a keycard to a lock on a frost-painted stone podium. A siren grows louder. Across a stretch of shallow, rocky ocean, the devil laughs as she presses a keycard to a podium that flashes green, acceptance, finality, a deal sealed.

Tubbo licks his lips and tastes ink and salt and seawater. He idly rips the bit of green leaf to shreds. He stares up at the sky blankly, waiting for the moment of inevitability, the moment he watches the warhead puncture the thick blanket of clouds and plummet down, down, down, until—

Tubbo wakes up warm and soft. A slow and heavy kind of consciousness seeps into his brain bit by bit, brewing and dripping steadily into his skull where it gathers and condenses.

He can feel the comforting weight of Ranboo's presence around him, radiating warmth and contentment. One of Ranboo's arms lies curled across his back and along the curve of his shoulder, and the other hand is tucked away in the dark hollow of space between them, cradling Tubbo's sleep-loose fingers and running an idle thumb in steady patterns across the ridge of his knuckles.

Ranboo is still sitting more or less upright, but Tubbo must have moved in his sleep at some point last night. The memory of falling asleep to the gentle rise and fall of Ranboo's chest under his cheek plays in his mind, taking the place of the last dregs of dream-memory and sweeping them away to the dark corners of his mind. Now, Tubbo finds himself snuggled deeper into the wall of their impromptu pillow fort. His head is awkwardly shoved against the bony wall of Ranboo's ribs and the pillow against the headboard, his neck craned at an angle that's sure to come back to bite him later. Already, he can feel the way his sore neck and shoulders want to ache with dull little pulses of discomfort.

Tubbo shifts lazily and he feels the way Ranboo's breathing changes — aware, curious, attentive. Ranboo's thumb stills, hesitating over Tubbo's knuckles. Tubbo curls his legs up before stretching them out until his whole body shakes with the good stretch. Then he yawns and wiggles down, burrowing himself deeper into the blankets until he can only see a sliver of dull morning light leaking into the dark warm space beneath.

After Tubbo settles, and then a beat more, when he stays still and quiet, Ranboo wraps his arms tighter around Tubbo, pulling him close. Tubbo hums and smiles as he pushes his forehead into the side of Ranboo's thigh. He's too boney. Tubbo grumbles. He needs to feed Ranboo more.

Tommy is still asleep, Tubbo can hear it in the heavy push-pull of Tommy's breathing from the other side of the room. The click of plastic silverware and the crumple of paper bags is accompanied by the quiet shuffle of socks on carpet, clear signs that Wilbur is already awake and moving with his sunrise.

Tubbo just closes his eyes and lets himself drift, fading in and out with the *th-thump* pulse of a steady heartbeat and the rise and fall of each breath.

There is no need, here. It might come as a surprise — if he were awake enough for that sort of thing. As it is, Tubbo can feel the distant murmur of the emotion floating somewhere else, somewhere beyond the warm, sleepy haze. It's the first time in a long time that there hasn't been need — need to wake up, need to move, need to fight. There's no need to do anything except rest here and breathe.

Tubbo's eyes blink open again some indeterminate amount of time later, answering to the sound of Tommy's whining groan.

"Get up, child," Wilbur says, fond and exasperated.

"Nooo. Don' wanna," Tommy grumbles.

Tubbo grasps with fumbling fingers at the blanket and tugs, peeling an edge back enough to peer out. Wilbur nudges Tommy, and Tommy curls up tighter and throws the blanket over his head.

Wilbur huffs and pulls the blanket away, "We've gotta get moving if we want to reach Techno's before dark."

Tommy whines and curls up tighter, throwing out a hand to smack at Wilbur without opening his eyes.

Morning light seeps in along the edges of the curtains, glowing dull green-yellow-white. Tubbo doesn't need to see the cloudy sky or feel the press of humidity against his skin to know there's a storm coming. He can feel it in his bones, pulsing along the phantom fractures and seams that used to ache.

A little smile spreads across Tubbo's face and rests there. Rainy days are good days. It's a truth that's been ingrained in him. Rainy days are good for the crops, good for fishing, good for war. Nobody wants to fight in the slippery mud and chilling rain.

"Good morning," Ranboo says quietly, tapping his fingers against the back of Tubbo's hand.

"G'morning," Tubbo mumbles and winces at the way his throat aches. Yup, he's definitely going to have a sore throat today.

Ranboo unwinds his arm from around Tubbo's shoulders and gently, slowly, so Tubbo can see the motion coming from a chunk away, brushes Tubbo's overgrown bangs out of his eyes. Tubbo blinks, chasing away the last dregs of sleepy haze and nudges up into the pressure of Ranboo's hand. The corners of Ranboo's eyes crinkle as he smiles down at Tubbo, soft and adoring, but Tubbo frowns, his gaze catching on the dark purple shadows under Ranboo's eyes and the way his eyelids droop.

“I didn’t wake you up, did I?” Tubbo asks. Ranboo’s head tilts, confused, so Tubbo clarifies, “Nightmares.”

Tubbo doesn’t remember waking up to a nightmare at any point last night. Usually, he’s up for hours after he thrashes himself awake, breathing frantic and panicked, a cry tearing from his throat. Although, it wouldn’t be the first time Ranboo had sat with him through the night, soothing his sporadic whimpers with wide eyes and low, hushed tones. It’s nothing that demands apology — the apologies already worn down to nothing but a brief murmur in the night. The routine is something they trade back and forth like weightless favors, familiar enough that Tubbo is more inclined to wake up to Ranboo’s nightmares than his own. Or. It was.

Ranboo’s smile takes on a sad tilt, and the lack of familiarity shows in his freshly apologetic tone. “Ah, no. No. There wasn’t— you didn’t.”

Tubbo just narrows his eyes, only somewhat disbelieving. “Did you sleep at all?”

“Er,” Ranboo hesitates, fingers stilling for a moment as his smile takes on an awkward, apologetic slant. “Not... really?”

Tubbo lightly kicks at Ranboo’s leg and scowls. “Idiot. Should have slept. Now you’re gonna be tired and *boring* all day.”

“Sorry, sorry!” Ranboo laughs, bright and fond. “I was... thinking.”

“Yeah?” Tubbo smiles back, the sound of Ranboo’s laugh making something sick-sweet melt in his chest. “What about, bossman?”

Ranboo’s eyes flicker away from Tubbo’s, darting off across the room. “Nothing.”

Lie.

The thing in Tubbo’s chest buzzes. Tubbo tilts his head curiously, rolling closer so he can peer up at Ranboo’s averted gaze. Some of Tubbo’s skepticism must show on his face, because Ranboo immediately starts babbling nervous elaboration.

“I just— sometimes I do this thing, when I’m sleeping I— it’s weird. I didn’t want to freak you out. But that’s not the reason— Well, I mean, it kind of is, but, also, I guess I just didn’t want to wake up, you know? Because what if this is all a dream? It’s stupid, but you... well, you know. You’re kind of unbelievable. Not in a bad way! I just... wanted to stay here, in this moment. I didn’t want you to... disappear.” Ranboo stutters to a stop, trailing off with an uncertain kind of pleading desperation, a need to be understood that Tubbo feels echoed deep in his bones.

“So you stayed up all night doing nothing? Boring.” Tubbo blows a puff of air, letting it ruffle his bangs and tickle the fingers Ranboo has buried in his hair.

He doesn’t need to say *I won’t disappear. I won’t ever leave you behind. I will be with you forever, for as long as you want me. All you have to do is ask, and I would give you anything.* It’s self-evident. It’s written into the carbon of everything he is. It’s wrapped around his finger in a band of gold and a promise spoken in an empty church of a religion now forgotten. Saying it out loud is redundant when every move he makes speaks that utter truth.

Ranboo smiles, and it's soft and sad and a little bit disbelieving. Maybe Ranboo doesn't get it, yet. But that's okay. Tubbo will prove it to him, again and again and again. As many times as it takes.

"I wasn't bored," Ranboo insists with a low, rumbling chuckle, moving his fingers to scratch lightly at Tubbo's scalp. Tubbo hums and closes his eyes, melting into the feeling. "Wilbur was awake, too. We had... a talk."

Tubbo opens his eyes and follows the line of Ranboo's gaze, landing right where Wilbur stands. "Oh."

Ranboo doesn't elaborate, and the smirk on Wilbur's face says that he's not planning to make himself useful any time soon — that he finds it funny that Tubbo doesn't know something. Wilbur wordlessly flicks a hand before returning to cleaning up last night's mess of stiff stale french fries and greasy burger wrappers, casual and dismissive. Ranboo shifts as he glances back down at Tubbo, uncertain and nervous, but he doesn't say another word.

They talked about him. Of course. What else do you talk to a stranger about besides your threaded link, the one tentative thing you know you have in common.

But Tubbo doesn't press. Between book clubs and long walks in the dark of night and journals labeled Do Not Read, Ranboo has never kept secrets with the intention to harm Tubbo, and that's more than he can say about most of the people in his life. So, if Ranboo doesn't want to tell him what he and Wilbur talked about, or his real name, or where all his money comes from, or why Tubbo found him hiding in that shitty motel, or why he's so easily swayed to drop everything and follow a stranger across the country, that's all fine. Tubbo doesn't need to know anything Ranboo doesn't want to tell him.

Tubbo has his own secrets, after all. For all the hours upon hours Tubbo spent locked away in a building with no windows and yellow-and-black hazard painted in unheeded warning on the walls, Ranboo would welcome him home with not a question but *how was your day?* It would be hypocritical of him to demand anything more than what he's willing to give.

Tubbo hums and throws an arm around Ranboo's middle, burying his face in the narrow space between the pillows and Ranboo's ribs. From that muffled space, Tubbo demands just one thing, "Tell me if he said anything weird to you. I'll rupture his spleen."

"Pffthahaha! What the fuck?" Tommy barks through his laughter, giving up the pretense of sleep to roll over in bed and face Tubbo and Ranboo.

Tubbo feels Ranboo's arm return to laying gentle pressure along his shoulders, and he sighs contentment when Ranboo twists to curl protectively around him.

Wilbur kicks the foot of the bed, rattling the frame lightly. "C'mon. If we're not out by eleven the staff's going to be pissed at us, and I don't want to spend any longer driving in the rain than I have to."

Tubbo grumbles darkly, muttering threats under his breath, but Ranboo loosens his hold enough for Tubbo to move, and so Tubbo forces himself to sit up and wipe the sleep from his eyes.

Tubbo eventually stumbles to standing with a yawn that cracks his jaw. Ranboo isn't much better, shuffling along under the groggy, sleepless weight. Thankfully, there's not much that needs to be

done. Ranboo never even brought his suitcase up from the car and Tubbo travels light — he's never needed anything except a pickaxe and a sword, and he hasn't even got that.

The four not-quite-strangers stumble out of bed in rumpled, day-old clothes and shuffle downstairs. The lobby is just as ostentatious as the rest of the hotel, all black marble desks decorated with porcelain flower vases and glittering chandeliers draped delicately from rafters of dark rose-tinted wood, artfully exposed and polished to a shine.

The Big Innit Hotel was never this nice. Tubbo smirks and nudges Tommy, teasing dig on the tip of his tongue, but Tommy meets his eyes and Tubbo's breath catches and chokes in his sore throat. Right.

Tommy tips his head curiously, but Tubbo just shakes his head and waves the thought away dismissively, "Nevermind, bossman. Wasn't important."

Ranboo awkwardly splits off to the front desk to check out, and Tommy tugs Wilbur in the direction of a snack vending machine. With nothing better to do but wait, Tubbo wanders off to stand at the front doors, following the soft glow of cloud-filtered morning light. The motion tugs at his chest, *keep moving*, and he steps outside to stand on the smooth face of the parking lot.

The sky is viridescent, the grass and leaves breathing vibrancy into the thick, humid air. Humidity sticks to his skin, water weight seeping into clothes and making them weigh heavy. A warm breeze blows across the dark pavement, stirring in wild anticipation of the coming storm. Tubbo breathes in the early morning mist and ozone, tasting metallic electricity like copper in the back of his throat.

A familiar melody resounds in his chest, a tune often sang to the tone of momentary peace on the war front. He gives in to the moment and sways, letting the wind pull him along as it will, moving to the beat that urges his fingers to slide along ukulele strings. Overwhelmingly whimsical and just a bit too hard on the edge of melancholic, Tubbo opens his mouth and lets the thing hiding in his chest seep out on the words of a song. He's never been proud of his voice, not like Wilbur was, but he can belt out a tune just as well as the rest of them.

His foot slips off the round edge of a sidewalk curb, and the song catches and stutters in his throat for a brief weightless moment before he rights himself again. He laughs, bright and full and featherlight even on solid ground and stumbling feet.

"Tubbo?" Ranboo says, quiet and tentative.

Tubbo twists, looking over his shoulder to see Ranboo standing in the doorway, fingers tangling together nervously. Checking out must have been a quick process, or maybe Tubbo's been out here on his own for longer than he thought.

The storm wind ruffles his hair and tugs at his shirt, and Tubbo smiles blissfully. "Mm?"

"How are you?" Ranboo asks, leaning against the door frame, his head dipped forward just enough to avoid hitting the head jamb.

A soft, dove-grey cloud rolls on the distant horizon. A single raindrop splatters on the smooth black pavement, then another. There is a deep-rooted concern in the back of his brain, an instinctual fear for the ever-present danger of Ranboo getting caught out in the rain. But he doesn't have to worry

about that anymore. Ranboo is different — maybe not better, maybe not worse, but certainly different. The hope-filled thing in his chest buzzes, *maybe everything can be different*.

“I’m good,” Tubbo chirps, twirling a bit in place just to feel himself spin with the breeze. “In fact, I am excellent.”

“Good, good,” Ranboo laughs, and his smile is all caught up in the infectious energy that floats in the open air and fizzles in Tubbo’s chest.

Ranboo opens his mouth, looks like he wants to say more, but he startles when the door beside him slams open with a bang.

“What’s up, bitches! I’ve got American snacks!” Tommy crows, presenting his haul of vending machine food proudly.

Tommy bounds out the door, and Wilbur follows smoothly in his footsteps. Ranboo just sighs with a fond, lopsided expression and steps outside, letting the door swing shut behind him.

“Well, this is goodbye, then,” Wilbur says, sidling up to their little group as Ranboo and Tommy crowd in close to huddle around Tubbo.

“So it is,” Tubbo hums and nods agreeably.

“Nice meeting you.” Wilbur smiles, all courteous and pleasant, politely dripping venom all over the conversation.

“You as well.” Tubbo matches Wilbur’s tone and smiles back, bearing every one of his pointed, omnivorous teeth.

“Aww,” Tommy wilts, all his cheer and excitement draining out of him the instant he’s reminded that they have to say goodbye. He turns doleful eyes on Tubbo, his voice low and somber. “Bye, Tubs-o.”

Tubbo is unruffled, his bright smile never fading. Tubbo has every intention of following them, tailing along after them anywhere they’re going. The exhausted look on Wilbur’s face that he’s hardly bothering to conceal says he knows it too. Tubbo smirks at him and Wilbur rolls his eyes, exasperated, but the sharp edge of fondness is clear. It’s not like Wilbur has any intention of letting him go either — not until he’s satisfied, at least. Wilbur still hasn’t gotten the answers Tubbo promised him, after all.

Tubbo gives a little wave and chirps, “See you around, Tommy!”

Wilbur snorts, amused, and doesn’t say a word.

Tommy opens his arms and Tubbo doesn’t hesitate to pull Tommy into a hug, clinging tight to him and relishing in the familiar warmth of Tommy’s arms wrapped around his back. Tommy’s snacks crinkle in their plastic wrappers, getting smushed in the fierce grip of Tommy’s hug. When Tommy eventually, reluctantly pulls away, he only looks more dejected.

Tubbo reaches up, rising on to his tip-toes, and gives Tommy a gentle pat on the head. “It’s alright. We’ll see each other again soon, big man. Promise.”

Nothing in this world or the next could keep him away. For as long as Tommy wants him, he will be there.

With one last wave goodbye, the whole parts. Wilbur and Tommy split off in the direction of their van while Tubbo and Ranboo head towards the car in the back of the lot, passing rows and rows of sports cars and luxury rides in deep blacks and rich jewel tones. The beat of footfalls, one after the other, keeps time with the song Tubbo is humming under his breath.

“So, we’re following them?” Ranboo asks the moment they’re ostensibly out of earshot.

“Of course!” Tubbo confirms, skipping along to match Ranboo’s longer stride.

Ranboo chuckles and unlocks the car. “M’kay.”

Ranboo dutifully ducks into the driver’s seat, tucking himself into the space of the small car. Tubbo slides into the passenger seat with elation buzzing in his veins, keeping up the rhythm as he *ta-t-taps* out a musical beat against the smooth plastic of the dashboard. Ranboo slots the key into the ignition and the car lights up, hitting a crescendo as the vehicle comes to life around them.

“Let’s gooo!” Tubbo cheers, drumming his hands against his knees in wild, uncontained joy.

Ranboo laughs, bright and loud, and turns the key. Only, the car doesn’t rumble to life. A sharp *clack-clack-clack* and the groan of metal grinding cuts into the rhythm, bringing everything to a shuddering, uncertain halt.

Ranboo stills and pauses, and Tubbo stops tapping. Ranboo tries to turn the key again, and the car gives a pathetic metallic knocking sound.

Slowly, Ranboo deflates and sinks forward. His forehead collides quietly with the steering wheel and he lets out a heavy sigh as he closes his eyes. Ranboo slides his hands against his face, rubbing the heels of his palms into the dark circles under his eyes.

After a long, silent moment, he mumbles into his hands, “...I forgot to change the oil.”

“Aww, well that’s alright,” Tubbo reassures affably, leaning over to nudge a hand comfortingly against Ranboo’s shoulder. “Don’t beat yourself up about it.”

“Should’ve remembered,” Ranboo mutters, slouching lower into his seat.

Tubbo hums and rubs a circle into Ranboo’s shoulder absently while he thinks. “We can hide in Wilbur’s trunk. Big fucking van. He probably won’t notice. Or we could steal one of these rich fucks’ Mercedes, take it for a joyride.”

Ranboo huffs a laugh. Tubbo feels pleased contentment curl in his chest at the sight of Ranboo’s small smile returning to spread across his face.

“You really are unbelievable,” Ranboo mutters into his hands, bewildered awe creeping along his low, hushed tone. “I—”

“Go on,” Tubbo urges, leaning across the car to knock his forehead against Ranboo’s shoulder.

“You’re not gonna... You’re real, right?” Ranboo asks, not lifting his head from the steering wheel as he peers up at Tubbo from the corner of his eye.

“I think so,” Tubbo answers honestly, tipping his head in mild contemplation. “Could be a ghost, maybe.”

Ranboo snorts, a sound just half an intonation away from the Piglin word for *gilded-golden*, and lifts a hand. He touches long fingers with phantom claws firmly against Tubbo’s arm, pressing in warm and steady and real. “Not a ghost, I don’t think.”

“That’s good,” Tubbo croaks weakly, struck stunned-still and just a little too overwhelmed by the solidity of the moment, the simple, quiet reverence, the soft smile on Ranboo’s face.

He is here. He is real. This is real.

Oh.

A raindrop splatters against the windshield.

“My mind isn’t the most... reliable, sometimes,” Ranboo admits haltingly, words caught up in over-thought. Ranboo huffs a rough chuckle before he continues, “It’s kinda funny. I don’t remember people that I should know, a lot of the time. I’m pretty used to people I don’t recognize acting like my friends, and just, playing along because I don’t want to be rude, you know? So, it took me a while at first to realize I actually just hadn’t met you before. But it’s, like, the opposite this time. I—I feel like I know you. You’re... familiar. You feel familiar in a way that other people don’t. But I don’t know you. Or, I should? I don’t know.”

Tubbo desperately wishes Ranboo would stop talking, stop telling him secrets. Something deep and scarred in him shifts, uncomfortable and restless, sending fearful little spikes zinging along his fingers. Tubbo’s hand twitches in an aborted motion, an itch to clasp over Ranboo’s mouth and halt the outpouring of vulnerability.

An admission like that, a lack of certainty, asking for confirmation — it’s putting yourself on the chopping block for manipulation, begging for a puppeteer to come along and grasp your strings. The thing in his chest that screams *protect them from everything* says Ranboo is being too risky, too vulnerable, trusting too quickly, giving away weaknesses to people he doesn’t know, people who might use them against him.

(Tubbo would never, never, *never*.)

“If only Wilbur liked me as much as you do,” Tubbo chuckles uncomfortably, an awkward attempt to shift the topic of conversation into safer territory, away from the danger of open vulnerability.

When Ranboo glances back at Tubbo, the conviction — *you would never, never, NEVER* — burns startlingly bright in Ranboo’s eyes. Tubbo leans back a fraction in shock, reeling like all the breath has been stolen from his lungs.

Ranboo straightens up a bit as something crosses his mind. “Oh, actually. Speaking of Wilbur, would you call him?”

Ranboo slides his phone from his pocket, holding his thumb to the screen until it lights up and clicks unlocked, and then holds it out to Tubbo. Tubbo heaves in a breath that feels like relief, accepting the offered phone with only a little fumbling.

“His number’s in there. If the problem is just the car battery, he might be able to give us a jump.”

“When did you get Wilbur’s number?” Tubbo raises an eyebrow, glancing over at Ranboo.

“Ah, uh, last night.” Ranboo’s eyes flicker away, a little nervous, a little guilty at the reminder of their unheard conversation.

But Tubbo doesn't care about that — there are so many sex jokes on the tip of Tubbo’s tongue. He immediately turns to Ranboo with a devilish grin and glee dancing in his eyes. Ranboo catches the look on Tubbo’s face and huffs amusement, sensing Tubbo’s thoughts without him even having to voice them. Tubbo splits into delighted cackles, and Ranboo just rolls his eyes as he opens his door and ducks out into the heavy green humidity.

Tubbo traces the flow of movement as Ranboo circles the front of the car, then watches him disappear from view as he pops the hood to check the engine. With nothing else to distract him, Tubbo looks down at the bright screen of the phone in his hands. He hesitates. He... doesn’t actually know how a phone works.

Whatever. He can figure it out. It can’t be that much different than a communicator. Tubbo swipes a finger across the screen like he’d seen Ranboo do, trying to figure out which one of the colorful little squares will call Wilbur.

Tubbo’s grumbling to himself in dark frustration and severely missing the holographic displays he’s used to when he’s saved by the crunch of tires on loose pavement. Tubbo twists in his seat, peering out the back windshield to see Wilbur and Tommy’s van roll to a slow stop behind them.

“Tubbo!” Tommy cheers, leaning dangerously out of the passenger side window before the van has even stopped moving.

“Tommy!” Tubbo throws his car door open and bursts out into the new world.

Tubbo keeps the momentum as he skips over to the still van and throws himself forward, head-butting Tommy’s chest and driving the breath from him unexpectedly.

“Oww,” Tommy whines before smacking at Tubbo’s arm in retaliation. “Warn a guy! That shit hurts!”

“Looks like you’re having some trouble,” Wilbur says conversationally from over Tommy’s shoulder, leaning into Tommy’s space as he tips his head towards the propped open hood.

Tommy squawks, shoving a hand into Wilbur’s face and pushing him away. Wilbur laughs and retreats back to the driver’s seat. Tommy follows after him, leaning back inside the vehicle, but only after a raindrop plops into his messy, ruffled curls.

“I think the engine’s seized,” Ranboo admits with a sigh and shuts the hood, careful not to let it slam. “We probably need a mechanic... or a new car, actually.”

“Well?” Wilbur prompts, his steady burning gaze falling on Tubbo. Tubbo tips his head in confusion, and Wilbur rolls his eyes with a wave of his hand. “Get in, then.”

“No, really?” Tubbo lights up immediately, grinning brightly as the bubbling excitement returns ten-fold. “Thank you!”

Tubbo crawls into the back seat of the van without hesitation, without giving Wilbur a second to reconsider. Tubbo scrambles across cracked and worn faux-leather seats, held together in places by strips of duct tape. There's a guitar case shoved into the trunk at an awkward angle, so the neck of it sticks out into the back seat. Tubbo ducks under it before plopping himself down and buckling in. His feet knock against a couple of empty soda cans tossed in the footwell, morning light gleaming off the angles where the aluminum has been dented in at the sides.

After hauling his suitcase into the trunk, Ranboo follows behind more cautiously, eyes roaming the interior of the van curiously. Ranboo settles in carefully, gaze catching on glow-in-the-dark stars tacked to the ceiling. He looks like he wants nothing more than to reach up and touch them, but his hands remain politely folded in his lap.

"Can't be rid of you for even a second, huh?" Wilbur says dryly as Ranboo closes the door behind them.

"No such luck!" Tubbo agrees, smile lighting up his face impossibly brighter. He kicks his feet happily as he sways to the tune of whatever is playing over the stereo, rattling the soda cans and adding their tinny cymbal-crash to the melody that beats along in his chest.

Wilbur clicks the gearshift into drive, hits the gas, and they are off and moving. There's a nervous little skip of hesitation that interrupts the smooth drag of Wilbur's fingers across the wheel as they pull out of the hotel parking lot, and he is so very resolutely not looking in the rearview mirror that it loops right back around to being painfully unsubtle.

"The car really did break down," Tubbo says casually, quietly reassuring the paranoid part of Wilbur that itches in the same way across a thousand different worlds, the nagging fear at the back of his brain that is always searching for a threat where there isn't one.

Wilbur hums — not quite believing, maybe, but he accepts it without argument. "We can give you a lift to a mechanic. They'll be able to give you a tow."

Tubbo nods his thanks. Stopping at a mechanic will delay them from tailing Wilbur and Tommy, but all things have their solution. He already knows where they're headed, after all, and judging by the way Tommy hasn't stopped grinning since Tubbo got in the van, it shouldn't be too hard to coax Technoblade's address from him.

"Thank you for giving us a ride. You didn't—" Ranboo interrupts himself with a yawn. He shakes his head minutely and blinks to clear his eyes before he picks up again. "You didn't have to."

"Hmm, you're right. Actually, I've changed my mind. Get out." Tommy demands, twisting in his seat to grin at Tubbo and Ranboo.

Tubbo flips him off with a pleasant smile, and Tommy cackles joy, loud and bright.

Tommy drags a heavy case up from the footwell of his seat, unzipping it and flipping it open to reveal reams of plastic pages filled with the shiny circular surfaces of CDs. Tommy takes control of the car stereo with ease, like he can't imagine a reason why he shouldn't, ejecting the old disc and slotting it back into its empty sleeve before flipping through the massive CD book to find something new.

The rain picks up as they drive headlong into the storm. Rain slides in drops and rivets down the windows and patters against the roof over their heads, blending into a steady white noise that hums

in the background. With a flick of Wilbur's fingers, the beat of the windshield wipers joins in the chorus, carrying on their *thunk-thunk*, steady and constant and wonderful.

Tubbo leans his head against the window for a moment, feeling the cool press of glass against his cheek and staring aimlessly up at the grey-green sky. He doesn't have to close his eyes to see himself back in the Camarvan — wind rattling the steel walls and stirring lapping waves on the surface of the lake outside, a temporary truce between warring fronts, enforced by the crack of lightning and overseen by rolling grey clouds.

"Want some?" Tommy asks, drawing Tubbo's attention back into the here and now. Tommy's got a bag of Twizzlers extended, a couple of the cherry-red strings dangling precariously and all but falling out of the bag.

Tubbo takes the offered bag and splits off a couple, handing them over to Ranboo.

"They kinda taste like shit," Tommy says contemplatively, humming as he chews through another one.

"Hey! You take that back!" Ranboo pipes up, mock-indignation warming his voice. "Twizzlers are good."

Tommy whines, high and mocking right back at him, "Oh, I'm sorry your American candy is shit, just like you, Ranboo. Don't be mad just because strawberry laces are so clearly superior."

Wilbur stretches out a hand towards Tommy without taking his eyes off the road. "Pass me the Chex Mix."

"No!" Tommy shouts, offended and grinning.

"What do you mean, 'no'? Those are my snacks, I bought them!" Wilbur, indignant, reaches out to snatch the bag from Tommy's lap.

"Well, whose hands are they in? Huh, Wilbur?" Tommy shouts back, gathering up the armful of colorful plastic wrappers in a swift movement and hugging them close to his chest. "Mine! That's what I thought!"

"Give me my snack, you insufferable child!"

"Not yours! We're in America now! Possession is nine-tenths of the law!"

It hasn't ever taken much more than that to pull Tommy and Wilbur into an argument, insults and threats shot carelessly across the van in between bursts of laughter.

Tubbo leans back and watches the others in the van shamelessly with a soft smile. He bites off a piece of the Twizzler absently, his attention focused in whole on the easy ebb and flow of conversation around him. For a gracious moment, he exists without seeking or wanting or fearing for anything.

Tubbo is flush and full of something he can only think to describe as *wholeness*. He never got to be a part of a real herd before, but he imagines this is what it must be like. It is the feeling of being surrounded by laughter and conversation and presence — the simple act of moving as a group of people, being a part of that group, being a piece of a whole, being something bigger than yourself.

His body is too small to contain it. It rings in his ears and overflows in his lungs and bleeds out through every scar that used to denote his skin.

Ranboo yawns again, the sound quiet and unobtrusive against the bickering in the front seat.

Tubbo leans over and pokes Ranboo's arm hard. "Go to sleep."

Ranboo's face screws up like that's the worst idea he's heard all day, but the sleepy blink he gives tells a different story.

Tubbo leans across the divide, his shoulder reeling out his seat belt like a lifeline until it catches and jerks to a stop. He's still too far to properly smush himself against Ranboo like he wants to, so Tubbo just lets his forehead fall across the gap and *thunk* against Ranboo's hunched shoulder. He feels it dip as Ranboo relaxes under him. Ranboo tugs gently at his own seat belt, leaning in to meet Tubbo halfway. Tubbo buzzes with the contact, humming contentment as he presses himself into Ranboo as best he can.

"You shouldn't let me lean against you," Tubbo scolds bitterly, leaning further into his side. It makes a hypocrite out of him, but it's nothing he hasn't been before. "I'm a stranger, you know. You don't know me. I could be luring you into a false sense of security." His words tail off into a mumble against Ranboo's shoulder, growing quieter as the last dregs of tension leech out of him. "Don't trust so easy. You're gonna get yourself hurt. Gotta be more careful."

"Okay, Tubbo," Ranboo says placatingly and pats his head gently, letting him spill resentment out in messy little mutterings.

"I love you," Tubbo bites out in retaliation, and he grins victory at the way Ranboo stills so suddenly, every time, without fail. He feels Ranboo's steady heart stutter for a moment, feels the skip-beat of it in the pulse against his forehead. It only lasts a half-second before Ranboo smooths out, huffing something fond and exasperated and disbelieving on a single breath.

Ranboo is silent. In the quiet, Tubbo can hear him thinking and over-thinking, processing something as he turns it over and over again in his mind.

Tubbo just nuzzles in further to his place at Ranboo's side, seeping up every bit of warmth that he can. Tubbo lets Ranboo spin his threads, twist himself in knots and double back to unweave them just as quickly, waiting for whatever ends Ranboo will come to. When Ranboo puts his thoughts together, he'll have something to say. And Tubbo will be here, waiting patiently to listen, whenever he's ready.

The van rocks gently, rumbling over every bump and crack and dip in the road. Dim street lights fuzz and glow under the raindrop smears on the windows. The green blur of a traffic light passes them by. The crinkle of a plastic wrapper snaps open with a pop of air, flooding the van with the smell of milk chocolate and sugar. Tommy sniffs the treat exaggeratedly and smacks his lips loudly just to hear the way Wilbur groans fond annoyance.

"Why?" Ranboo asks quietly, pressing the sound into Tubbo's hair and breathing it along his scalp. Such a small word for so much thought. Such a big question for so little words.

"Why do I love you?" Tubbo asks incredulously, like it's the stupidest thing he's ever heard. He feels the dip of Ranboo's nod against the top of his head. Tubbo huffs. "I don't know. I just do,"

Tubbo says easily, because that's really all there is to it. "I just— If this isn't love, I don't know what is."

"I'm a stranger. You don't know me," Ranboo gives a tiny chuckle, amused by Tubbo's stubborn conviction as he echoes Tubbo's words back at him. "What if I can't live up to whatever image of me you've got in your head? What if I'm not... whatever you think I am?"

"Doesn't matter," Tubbo states firmly, utter truth. "You're willing to let me love you, and that's enough."

Ranboo snorts, smiling disbelief into Tubbo's hair. He mutters admittance, "I don't have a clue what's going through your head. I have no idea what you think of me, but it must be something pretty impressive. I don't know if I'm all that."

"You're Ranboo," Tubbo says. Simple as that.

"I'm Ranboo," Ranboo mutters, and it's true in all the ways it's not, true in the only way it needs to be.

When Tubbo finally turned up in the right place at the right time, knocking on his door in the middle of the night, Tubbo gave him the name Ranboo, and Ranboo had accepted it. It's a gift, his to do with whatever he likes.

Ranboo hasn't given up the gift yet.

Ranboo will be Ranboo for as long as he wants to be. And Tubbo will love Ranboo for as long as he is able.

"I love you," Tubbo says it again just to feel the heart-breath stutter and slip under the easy truth, every time, without fail. In any place and any time, some things remain the same.

Tubbo doesn't expect Ranboo to say it back. In fact, if Ranboo did, Tubbo might just smack him for being so reckless. Ranboo shouldn't love him yet, shouldn't trust a stranger so entirely without reason. But Tubbo doesn't need anyone to love him. All he needs is someone willing to accept his love and let him love them. It doesn't matter to him if his feelings are one-sided. When he gives, he doesn't expect anything in return. He is content to exist, just like this.

Ranboo runs careful fingers through Tubbo's hair, combing out the knotted strands. It's a mess, all tangled and wild; he didn't have a brush to go through it this morning. He can feel the tug of pain when Ranboo gets caught on the rough parts, but Ranboo doesn't seem to mind. He works steadily, threading fingers through matted patches and smoothing them out until they resemble something like peace.

It doesn't take more than a minute for Ranboo's breathing to slow. It rises and falls deep and shallow across the span of his chest, measured and steady and even. Ranboo's posture droops incrementally, his chin falling to rest heavily against the top of Tubbo's head, even as his fingers continue to card lazy little scratches against Tubbo's skull.

"Go to sleep," Tubbo demands again, flicking Ranboo's side where his ribs lie close to the surface. "M not gonna disappear."

Ranboo huffs out a breath of air, sliding his hand through Tubbo's hair and only catching lightly on the remains of uncombed knots. It's a valiant effort, but a mess like this isn't sorted in a day. Tubbo will have to put some effort into it himself.

Eventually, Ranboo nods, the sleepy dip of his chin rolling against Tubbo's head. "M'kay."

Tubbo knows the moment Ranboo closes his eyes, because he slides into sleep weightless, the last of him slumping over to lean against Tubbo in whole. The van continues to rock gently over city streets, lulling right along with the low melody of whatever Tommy has playing over the stereo.

In the tranquil quiet, Tubbo leans against Ranboo and allows himself to engage in the most dangerous activity of all — he thinks.

Tubbo has them all so close now, and it's more than he ever could have asked for. He doesn't know what he'd do if he lost them. He will give them anything, of course, for as long as they want him, but the creeping thing at the back of his mind whispers *how long will that last?* And it's not wrong.

Wilbur is willing to keep Tubbo around because Tubbo is interesting and Tubbo promised him answers, but he doesn't believe Tubbo, not really. Of course, Tubbo hasn't given him any solid proof — all he has is Tubbo's word. And while Tubbo is good with his words, he's not good enough to keep. He's holding onto Wilbur's interest by a tentative thread, and that's not good enough. He needs to find a way to *keep it*.

The second Tubbo becomes more dangerous than he is interesting, Wilbur will drop him. And Tubbo is *very* dangerous, even if Wilbur doesn't see the full extent of it yet. Wilbur will leave, sweeping Tommy away out of harm's reach, and Tommy will go because it's Wilbur.

For all his worries about Wilbur, at least Tubbo understands him. Tubbo knows what makes Wilbur tick and how to use it to his advantage. Tubbo doesn't understand a thing about Ranboo. Ranboo is kind and selfless beyond measure, always so willing to give, but once that good samaritan kindness, or polite obligation to a stranger in need, or *whatever* it is runs out, Ranboo will leave too. Tubbo doesn't know what motivates Ranboo to be so selfless, and so he has no way to predict when that seemingly bottomless well of goodwill will run dry.

Ranboo stuck around the first time because Ranboo loved him. Here, Ranboo doesn't love him. That's a good thing. He shouldn't. It would be reckless of him to love a stranger he met in a day. Tubbo just has to make him fall in love all over again. A task easier said than done, especially given that Tubbo has no idea what Ranboo saw in him in the first place.

Tubbo has to keep Wilbur's interest and he has to make Ranboo fall in love. Then they will let him stay.

That's all he has to do.

"He asleep already?" Wilbur asks, tossing a glance in the rearview mirror.

"He was up all night," Tommy points out, licking the remnants of bright orange Cheeto dust from his fingers happily.

"So was I," Wilbur says, bearing the deep purple bruises under his eyes with pride — as if his perseverance through suffering somehow validates the necessity of his suffering to himself.

“You’re just gonna collapse as soon as we get to Tech’s,” Tommy jabs playfully, taking a massive bite out of a chocolate Hostess Cupcake. He crows muffled delight through a stuffed mouthful as soon as he discovers the vanilla frosting filling inside.

Right. Technoblade. Tubbo hasn’t really stopped long enough to consider it, but this might be... awkward. Well, for Tubbo, at least. Of course, Techno won’t remember the last time they saw each other — or the heart-stopping sight of a nuclear warhead puncturing the snowy cloud cover that followed. Only Tubbo gets to remember the red-white-blue burst of fireworks, the swipe of the whetstone gliding smoothly across the reflective face of the axe, the sickly-sweet and iron-heavy smell of pig’s blood, the pull of a lever, the drop of an anvil, the drop of a nuke.

Tubbo’s mind wanders, his eyes staring aimlessly out the rainy window as Wilbur and Tommy’s voices carry on in the front seat. He lets the weight of Ranboo pressed into his side anchor him, and he drifts.

He doesn’t regret it. Any of it. Not really. He did what needed to be done. Maybe he would have done it differently if he had another chance, but probably not. He knows himself well enough to know that.

Quackity was right. It was only a matter of time before Technoblade rode in on the pale horse of death to finish what he started. The Butcher Army and Tommy’s betrayal and every little moment in between, they only sped the process along. Long before the withers, he promised them *a smoking crater from which no new country could rise in its place*. For all that Tubbo can say about the man, he can’t call him a liar. Technoblade always keeps his promises.

Tubbo was never going to give up L’Manberg and Techno was never going to let it stand, like an unstoppable force and an object doing its best impression of something immovable. Doomsday was inevitable from the start.

When he closes his eyes, he can still feel the crunch of snow under his hooves, feel the ache in his arms from rowing to the stolen direction of the little red compass needle, feel the top-heavy weight of the unbalanced axe in his curled fist, feel the chill of dry air in his throat. The landscape The Syndicate buried itself in was harsh and inhospitable, all snapping cold and dry air that sucked the breath from your lungs. Nothing like the heavy, wet breeze that blew in from the ocean of Snowchester, covering the small coastal nation in rolling waves of mist and fog — the peace it brought that he hadn’t yet known.

He remembers Quackity, headstrong and determined and so, so scared. He remembers Ranboo, agreeable and uncertain and far too trusting for his own good. He remembers Fundy, boiling fury and eager smiles and quick to give himself over for any cause to fight for.

Oh, wait, Fundy. Fundy. Tubbo’s heard assurances of Quackity’s name leave Wilbur’s lips, but Tubbo doesn’t know what happened to Fundy. Where is he, in the new world? Is he okay?

Well, Tubbo thinks as his unfocused eyes slide back into reality, glancing over at Wilbur through the narrow slit of the rear-view mirror. Wilbur must feel the eyes on him, because the next moment Wilbur’s burning gaze catches his and holds. *He could just ask*.

Tubbo opens his mouth and lets the words slip out, hesitating. “Does... is there... do you...”

Something tells Tubbo this is a bad idea. Wilbur hardly trusts him as it is, and prying about his son out of nowhere isn’t going to help matters. That isn’t even to acknowledge the selfish, fearful voice

at the back of his head that insists *asking* opens himself up to *being asked*, and he doesn't know if he's prepared for that right now. The promise he made still hangs heavy over his head, poised and ready to drop like an anvil at any moment.

With a grimace twitching at his lips, Tubbo lets his gaze shift away, breaking eye contact. "Nevermind."

"Ask." Wilbur is demanding, singular, leaving no room for argument.

Tubbo bites his lip, but he doesn't even get through a respectable second of hesitation before he releases all his breath in a huff. He's never been able to deny Wilbur anything. "The name Fundy mean anything to you?"

Wilbur's face darkens immediately. He looks for all the world like he's contemplating murder, protective. But still, he opens his mouth and bites out, "Yes."

Tubbo puts a hand up, placating. "I was just..." What? Curious? Concerned? Tubbo scowls at himself. This was a stupid idea. He knew he shouldn't have asked, but he did it anyway, like a reckless idiot. "Nevermind. Whatever. Sorry. Forget I asked."

"Is Wilbur going on about Fundy again?" Tommy groans, tuning back into the conversation, only half paying attention as he uses his sleeve to wipe away the smear of chocolate and vanilla cupcake frosting across his chin. "God, don't let him break out the baby pictures," Tommy complains as he pulls out his phone and opens an album full of baby pictures. Just as quickly, Tommy is twisting in his seat and extending the screen towards Tubbo, showing off glowing pictures with a proud beaming grin scrunching up his face. "Isn't she adorable? Aww, look at her little hands! Awwhaha!"

Tubbo blinks, eyes adjusting to the sudden brightness. There's a child staring back at him from the screen, unrecognizably human. He blinks again, trying to clear his vision, but the image stays the same. The human child peers up at the camera through a shock of wavy orange hair and what are undeniably Wilbur's eyes. He can't be any older than four.

Tubbo's brain stutters and reels, trying to connect what he's seeing to what he knows.

He knows, factually, Fundy was born not that long ago. He remembers sitting under the shadow of L'Manberg's walls, leaning against the sun-warmed steel of the Camarvan with Tommy as they waited anxiously, listening to Wilbur's wails, Eret's reassurance, Ponk's encouragement intercut by brisk orders for more water or a clean rag or another potion. He remembers fingers stained red with sweet berry juice and milk for a change, cradling the little swaddle of blankets in his arms, petting gently through soft grey fur, only just beginning to flush orange. He remembers groaning and complaining every time he was stuck with babysitting duty, a task that Tommy flocked to with excitement and shining pride.

He knows, factually, that foxes age faster than humans. One human year is over five and a half years for a fox, in terms of maturity. Hell, Fundy was only a kit for ten months before he was standing on his own, serving as a member of Schlatt's political cabinet and carrying a war-worn sword right alongside the rest of them. He remembers celebrating Fundy's third birthday in Las Nevadas, the pop and fizz of a bottle uncorked in uproarious celebration.

He knows, factually, that the child in the photo is Fundy.

It still doesn't make sense.

"...He's so little." The mutter slips from Tubbo's lips. He leans in closer, staring intently with wide eyes, trying to make it make sense.

The toddler on the screen sits in the lap of an older man, blonde-haired and smiling wide with pronounced crow's feet crinkling the corners of his eyes. In the backdrop, a figure with a wild mane of long pink hair shuffles past, motion blur fuzzing away at their edges. Wilbur sits on the couch next to the blonde man — his father — Philza — looking for all the world like overwhelming pride has him bursting at the seams. A hand-painted paper banner stretches across the wall, *Happy 3rd Birthday!*

Tommy chatters on, swiping a finger across the screen and flipping through the images. The screen flashes bright and colorful pictures at a rapid pace — Fundy, Wilbur and Philza and Fundy, Fundy and Philza, Fundy, Fundy, Fundy and Wilbur, Tommy and Fundy, Fundy. Tubbo can't really hear Tommy, lost in the buzzing shock, but he hums along anyway, leaning in ever closer to the incomprehensible truth.

Ranboo shifts in his sleep, disturbed by Tubbo's movement. Tubbo is quick to snap back to the present moment, sliding himself back into place to support Ranboo's tilting weight. Ranboo wiggles a little bit, settling down into a comfortable position with his cheek nuzzled into Tubbo's hair, but his breathing stays even and he doesn't wake.

"She's almost four, can you believe it?" Tommy coos.

"He is?" Tubbo says, quiet and awed.

"He?" Wilbur asks, gaze sharp in the rearview mirror.

Oh. How long has Wilbur been watching Tubbo like that? Tubbo freezes, pinned by the knife-point precision of Wilbur's studying gaze. Tubbo really should be keeping a more careful eye on Wilbur, he should know better than to let the man go unchecked, even for a moment. Tubbo should be expecting it at this point, after everything, but still he's thrown off. In his defense, Wilbur never cared this much about him before. He's not used to having Wilbur's eyes on him at every opportunity.

"Uh," Tubbo stumbles. "Yeah?"

"You keep using he/him pronouns for Fundy," Wilbur states, sharp like a blade, but it's not cutting. He keeps his tone level above the surface, not digging in like he could be — not demanding, but requesting. "Why?"

Wilbur's deadly serious. He cares about Fundy, that much is clear. Maybe more than anything else. The way Wilbur holds his gaze says he's not letting this go.

Tubbo takes a deep breath and says, "Fundy... might prefer different pronouns when he— uh, she? Gets a little bit older."

Wilbur looks considering. He blinks, and in the next moment, his eyes are back on the road, releasing Tubbo without another word, without further interrogation. That, more than anything, sends Tubbo reeling on a blank.

The seconds tick by in silence, and Tubbo keeps waiting for the next bomb to drop, but it never does.

Tubbo can't help the words that burst from him, spiking incredulity and confused irritation all across his tone. "What? You're just gonna *believe* me?"

Wilbur sighs, his eyes staying on the road. "Look. You know things. I don't know how, but you know things. If you say Fundy might prefer different pronouns, then I'll keep that in mind. Not saying I believe you completely, but I won't just dismiss it without reason."

Tubbo stills, not a single thought forming in his mind. "...Oh."

Tubbo's not sure what his face looks like right now, but it must be a sight. Wilbur flicks a glance back in the rearview mirror and snorts a surprised laugh, a sound that quickly spreads to an amused smile across his face.

Tubbo slides his gaze back over to Tommy, clearing his throat before he quietly asks, "Can I see more pictures, please?"

Wilbur nods silent permission, and Tommy lights up like he was already planning on it whether Wilbur wanted him to or not.

Tommy leans over the back of his seat in a way that most definitely does not comply with vehicle safety regulations, flipping through his photo gallery to find the best pictures to show off. There are lots of pictures of Tommy himself, but there are even more pictures of Wilbur, Philza, and Fundy. Sometimes Tubbo catches a glimpse of a camera-shy pink smudge in the backdrop, caught blurry and half out of frame. Tubbo doesn't ask. He's fairly certain he knows the answer, anyway.

Tubbo smiles and nods along as Tommy retells story after story, giving Tubbo a glimpse into all the things he's missed. It seems like every photo has some long, intricate explanation behind it, places and people and years weaving into each other to create a grand tapestry Tubbo will never get to properly experience. They slide steadily back through time, and the people in the photos get younger and younger. Tubbo allows himself to get lost in the narrative Tommy lays out for him.

It's mindless when Tubbo points at a particular picture and says, "Oh, does Fundy chew on his fingers? Michael did that too. Took us forever to help him break the habit."

For a moment, they pass under a bridge. The white noise of rain against the roof cuts out and everything in the world goes silent.

And Tommy tips his head curiously and asks, "Who's Michael?"

Then they emerge on the other side, and everything crashes in at once.

The rain returns in a torrential downpour, hitting the windshield with an unending clatter and rattling against the walls all around him, surrounding him, swallowing him in the sound.

"Are you... crying?" Tommy asks, looking alarmed. He's quick to lean even further out of his seat, reaching a hand out towards Tubbo to hover uncertain in the space between them. "Hey, hey, no! It's okay! What—! What's wrong?"

Tubbo swipes a sleeve across his face, smearing messy tear tracks across his cheeks. Tommy's looking at him with alarm and concern, and now Wilbur's eyes are back on him, too.

"What, uh," Tubbo stutters out, forcing himself to take a deep breath so his voice doesn't shake. "What happens to kids without parents, here? Like, orphans. What's the deal with them?"

Wilbur and Tommy share a look, silent communication passing between them in an instant. Tubbo doesn't meet either of their eyes, hiding his face in his sleeves and closing his eyes tight like he can pretend he's somewhere else.

"Well, there's the foster care system. Kids get passed around between foster families for a while until they find a good fit and get adopted," Tommy explains, tone aiming for a casual levity but falling just short. "I mean, you hear lots of horror stories, but really it's not all bad. 'S how I ended up with Wilbur."

"Good." Tubbo chokes a little bit, holding back a sniffle as he clears his throat. "Uh, that's good."

Tubbo likes that. It seems like a better system than getting left in a box on the side of the road and hoping for the best.

"Yeah, yeah, they try to make sure kids go to good homes, stable families with lots of money and stuff. Do background checks and regular check-ins and all that," Tommy continues rambling, the frantic, wavering edge to his voice smoothing out into something incrementally more soothing. "Are you— are you *alright*?"

Tubbo nods into the fabric of his sleeves. He doesn't trust himself to speak. He's not ready to emerge back into reality just yet — he can still feel the warm drip of tears soaking into his sleeves.

There's a shift of weight and warmth against Tubbo's side as Ranboo moves in his sleep, disturbed by the sudden noise or maybe the motion of Tubbo curling into himself. Tubbo digs the heels of his palms harder into his eyes and tries to stay perfectly still, tries not to sniffle or make a noise, waiting for Ranboo to fall still again.

Tubbo wants to ask where Michael is, if he's in the foster system, if he has good parents, if he's safe, but no one would be able to answer him.

It doesn't matter, anyway, because there's nothing he can do about it. Not yet, at least. They're not gonna let Tubbo adopt a kid, here. He's not stable. He's not rich. He's not a good family.

He'll just have to plan. He can get money, no problem. He can get lots of money. Then he'll figure out what a *good home* is and he'll make one. He can do that. And hopefully, maybe someday, he'll get to see Michael again.

Tubbo feels a hand press against his arm, hesitant at first, but not for long. Tommy's quick to squeeze comforting pressure into his arm. It's grounding, warm and real and solid, dragging him back into his body in this present moment.

Tubbo takes a deep breath and tries to make it steady. He takes everything on his mind and shoves it all away to deal with later, later, later.

When Tubbo finally pulls his face out of his hands, the wet spots on his sleeves stick clinging to his face before they give and peel away. He has to blink as his eyes readjust to the light, blurry vision

returning in spots and squiggles.

Tommy is leaning far too close into his space, watching Tubbo from inches away. Up close, Tubbo can see with perfect clarity the way that Tommy's eyes are bright and pinched at the corners, eyebrows upturned in a soft sort of concern. Tubbo flicks his eyes to the side, looking out the window, looking at anything else than that uncomfortable, burning concern.

Tubbo makes the mistake of glancing in the rearview mirror, and he shouldn't be surprised when he meets Wilbur's gaze, but he is, he always is. Wilbur looks like a dog at the end of his leash, fixated with single-minded intensity on the curious thing before him.

Wilbur's jaw works slowly, rolling words around in his mouth. He wants to ask, to pry, to dig. Maybe it's the red flush to Tubbo's face, glazed by tacky tear tracks, or maybe it's the lingering promise that Tubbo will answer anything he asks, in good time, or maybe it's the way Tommy knocks harshly into Wilbur as he retreats to sit properly in his seat, hissing something demanding under his breath, but Wilbur's eyes eventually return to the road in front of him.

Wilbur is all sharp edges. He can't dull himself, wouldn't even know how to if he tried. But he can relent. And he does.

Tubbo is intolerably grateful. He hates it. He hates that he can't face the truth, can't even think Michael's name without breaking down. He doesn't know what he'd do if Wilbur pried it from him and forced it into the open where he would have to see it, think about it, live with it. Maybe just curl up sobbing. Maybe scream until his throat went horse and his voice left him. Maybe just go numb forever and give up entirely.

Ranboo shifts again, murmuring something in his sleep. The sound is a raspy croak, rumbling through his chest. Tubbo shushes him, holding still and quiet so Ranboo won't wake up, but judging by the way Ranboo picks up his head and yawns, it's a little too late for that.

Ranboo lifts an arm, rubbing at his eyes as he drifts back into wakefulness.

Tubbo tries to keep his tone low and hushed, relentlessly squashing any part of it that wants to wobble. He doesn't need Ranboo waking up to tear tracks and wavering sniffles. "Go back to sleep, Ranboo."

Ranboo makes a noise like he's clearing his throat, but it pitches into something else at the end. It's too breathy, too rattling, too clipped to pass as anything but deliberate. It almost sounds like—

“𐌹𐌸𐌰𐌿𐌹𐌸𐌰𐌿?” Ranboo mutters sleepily, the dissonant language crackling off ill-suited human vocal cords.

And spoken like that, beloved, Tubbo would recognize his name anywhere.

“U-uh?” Tubbo stutters on a nervous, involuntary chuckle that wavers without his permission, because surely not. Surely he’s misheard. “Come again, bossman?”

It's like earlier, when Ranboo snorted. He hadn't meant to say *gilded-golden*. Piglin language is just easy to misconstrue. Ranboo hadn't meant to say Tubbo's name like that. He hadn't. Tubbo is just shaken up by the memories rattling in his brain. He's hearing things, hearing what his traitorous brain wants to hear.

“𐄂𐄃𐄄𐄅𐄆!” Ranboo crackles in exclamation, pulse register phonation rumbling under the syllables like an earthquake, rattling Tubbo to his core.

Ranboo is leaning up and off of Tubbo in an instant. Ranboo leans back and peers down at Tubbo as he blinks himself awake, his hands grasping onto Tubbo’s shoulders like Tubbo might disappear under his fingertips. The smile spreads across Ranboo’s face rapidly, growing overjoyed, looking like he can’t believe his eyes.

Gone is the curl to Ranboo’s shoulders that hunches himself down and makes himself look smaller than he is. He’s stretched out to his full height now, his head just barely brushing the roof of the van.

“𐄇𐄈𐄉𐄊𐄋𐄌𐄍𐄎?” The words creak, edging on crumbling cliffs. Tubbo can’t tell if the static ringing he’s hearing is coming from Ranboo or his own ears.

“Is he alright?” Tommy asks, raising an eyebrow, but Tubbo can’t answer him. When Tubbo remains frozen silent, Tommy turns to Ranboo instead. “You’re making some weird noises there, pal.”

Tubbo wants to ask, *You can hear it, too?* But he can’t. He can’t. He can’t. Tubbo can only stare. His perception blurs into the surreal. He can’t move, he can’t speak. It’s all he can do to feel the pressure of Ranboo’s fingers gripping tight to his shoulders and observe the way Ranboo’s eyes roam over him. Like he isn’t even occupying the space of his body, Tubbo watches.

Ranboo’s eyes never meet his — avoiding eye contact habitually in a way that is all too achingly familiar but sits *wrong* on human features — but they sweep carefully over every other part of him. Ranboo is intent and aware, but his eyes are hazy, not quite awake.

Ranboo’s hands slide up from Tubbo’s shoulders, frowning a bit at the sight of wet tear-track smears across Tubbo’s cheeks, but he strays far away from them, careful not to touch. Ranboo continues to reach up, up, up, gaze catching and lingering on Tubbo’s blonde hair. Carefully, Ranboo slides fingers through the strands, but it’s different this time. Tubbo has grown used to the way Ranboo would comb through his hair, aimless and repetitive. Now, it’s all the more salient when Ranboo’s nails scratch light and curious, returning again and again to circle the spots above his temples — right where curling horns used to grow.

Ranboo opens his mouth and the sound that comes out echoes the resonance of a comforting little *vwoop*. It’s contorted by the limitations of human vocal cords, but still. Unmistakable. Undeniable.

“Pull over,” Tubbo says numbly, voice dull and toneless in shock.

Tommy twists in his seat, looking to Tubbo with a concern that hasn’t faded in the least and a confusion that only seems to grow by the moment. “What? Why?”

Why?

Why?

“Fucking pull over!” Tubbo snaps, maybe a little too loudly, but he can’t hear himself at all over the swell of white-noise buzzing in his ears.

Because something is wrong. Something is very, very wrong.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

This wasn't part of the deal.

Ranboo's fingers still suddenly in his hair. A trickle of distress leaks into his warble and shines bright concern through the clouded lens of his hazy eyes. His hands float to Tubbo's face carefully, uncertain and confused. He must recognize the cold fear that has etched itself into the downturn of Tubbo's lips, the tenseness in his jaw, the frozen-wide blow of his eyes. Of course he would. He would know it well, a familiar sight.

Ranboo's hands stay where they are, gently cupped around Tubbo's jaw and wrapping around the sides of his neck, thumbs hovering over wet tear tracks, never touching, but his eyes break away to sweep the surroundings. Up so close, Tubbo can see with perfect, awful clarity the change that has consumed Ranboo.

Before, Ranboo had traced his gaze over duct-taped faux-leather seats, a footwell littered with empty soda cans, the little glow-in-the-dark stars tacked to the ceiling, the tentative new friends in the front seat — equal parts caution and curiosity on his face as he slowly took in the new space around him.

Now, Ranboo's eyes flick methodically — windows, doors, locks. They don't linger anywhere for longer than they need to. It's a danger sweep, something vigilant, practiced, and terribly knowing.

It should be wrong. It should ring in his head, wrong, wrong, wrong. But it doesn't. And somehow that's worse. Because Ranboo was supposed to be different. He was supposed to have the chance to be different, this time.

Ranboo doesn't even make it through a full sweep of the car. Something slips, and he goes from intent to lost in a matter of seconds. His gaze just drifts, meandering from spot to spot without a focus to ground him. His gentle hold on Tubbo's face loosens and falls, his distress fading away without a trace.

When his hazy eyes find their way back to Tubbo, he takes in the dread woven into Tubbo's expression anew, and his face scrunches up in concern all over again. “ $\overline{\Phi} \sqcap \overline{\Xi} \overline{\Xi} \circ ? \triangle \Xi \triangle \overline{\Phi} \}$
 $\triangle \asymp \circ \wedge \sigma ?$ ”

Too much.

It's too much.

All at once, the crush of panic bursts bright like fireworks behind his eyes, in his chest, along his fingertips. It overflows uncontrollable in his lungs, stuffing them full and binding them tight. It twists and rots in his nauseous stomach. It buzzes inside his head, slamming echo off every inch of the inside of his skull. It's crawling over his skin and inside him and consuming him until it's all he is.

Tubbo is on the other side of the van before he can think, ripping himself out of the hands caging him in. His head slams against the window painfully in his blind scramble to throw himself back. Ranboo's whine only gets louder, less human.

“What's wrong with him?” Tommy asks, alarmed. He's panicking because Tubbo is panicking, voice picking up in register until he's bordering on screeching.

“I don’t know!” Tubbo cries hysterically, and it’s not a lie. He doesn’t understand how this *happened*.

“Alright, alright. Calm down,” Wilbur demands, firm and harsh and leaving no room for argument. His tone is steady, grounding, in control. Tubbo tries to focus on that and nothing else, but the ringing in his ears is just getting louder. “There’s a service station right here. We’re pulling over, okay?”

A wild, uncontrollable giggle is bubbling up in the back of Tubbo’s throat like vomit. Tommy’s looking at him desperately for answers, like he might somehow know how to fix this. But Tubbo doesn’t know what to do. He needs to do *something*, but he doesn’t even know where to start. He’s panicking. He needs something. He needs to do something. He needs to *get out of this fucking van*.

Tubbo wrenches the door open and stumbles out before they’ve even fully stopped moving. The rain slams down, instantly doing its best to soak him to the bone. It strikes against his goose-bump tender skin in pin-prick bursts. Shivers wrack his body, and Tubbo can’t even pretend it’s from the cold, because he still feels like he’s burning alive.

Tubbo shoves his head into his hands and tries to think.

“What the hell,” Tubbo mumbles, quiet and shaking in panic. “What the hell.”

Something is wrong. Something is wrong with Ranboo. Everything was fine, and now something is wrong. He doesn’t even understand what happened. And Prime. Fuck. Ranboo’s in no state to tell him anything.

It could get worse. He doesn’t know what made it start. He doesn’t know how to stop it from getting worse. He doesn’t know anything.

Fuck. Tubbo has to fix this. He needs to. Tommy and Wilbur can’t help, they don’t even know enough to be worried. This is his responsibility.

Tubbo’s mind spins, rapid-fire thoughts whirling, slipping out of his grasp at every turn. He can’t do this. He can’t be like this right now. He can’t afford to panic. He needs to figure out what the fuck is going on so he can *fix it*.

From behind him, Tubbo hears the panicked call of rasping little croaks. Tubbo hadn’t closed the car door in his haste, and that’s where Ranboo sits, straining at the doorway Tubbo had left open behind him, leaning out as far as he dares without getting caught in the torrent. Ranboo’s calls grow more rattling by the second. Ranboo edges closer and closer to the wall of rain as Tubbo stands still and unresponsive, and he tries to figure out what to do.

In all his humanity, Tommy isn’t so bound. He’s already opening the door and following Tubbo out in the rain with a shouted curse, shoes soaking into parking lot puddles.

Tubbo regulates his breathing forcibly. He breathes in, and holds it, and breathes out, strict and rigid. He shuts down hard on the way his lungs burn and scream *not enough*.

Without thinking, his shoulders raise, tense and square and perfectly level. He slips into something familiar, a headspace that fits like a hand-me-down suit jacket, just a little too big in the shoulders, a little too long in the sleeves. He needs it desperately right now, comforting in its reliability. He needs to be in control. He has people who need him to be in control.

He suppresses the shake in his limbs until it's nothing. He takes every bit of excess, every frantic double beat of his heart, every little scrap of emotion that floods and builds and swarms in his brain, and he crushes it down, down, down. He forces it all into a box and locks it away somewhere, out of mind, to be dealt with later.

It's not healthy, probably. But it gets the job done.

"Alright, alright," Tubbo mutters under his breath, trying to convince himself to pull his head from the dark enclosed safety of his hands.

Tubbo takes a deep breath and he swallows the last bit of himself that isn't necessary for the task at hand.

It's easier with the freezing rain soaking into his jacket, blessedly cool against his panic-flushed and fever-hot skin. It's easier with Tommy, somewhere, distantly, grabbing too-tight to his shoulder and shouting his name and looking at him like he expects him to have all the answers. It's easier when he has a plan, when he has a task set out in front of him.

He has a plan. It's a shit plan, but it's all he has. All he has to do is follow it. He can do that. That's all he has to do. He is the task. That's all he is. That's all he has to be. He can manage that.

Tubbo looks up and lets his hands fall away, resting at his sides perfectly.

"Okay," Tubbo cuts in, halting whatever tirade Tommy was about to launch into. Tubbo's tone is cold and distant, even to his own ears, but the part of him that would care about that is locked in a box in the back of his mind at the moment.

Tommy stumbles, caught off guard, and he looks to Tubbo earnest and anxious. "Y-yeah?"

"Tommy. With me," Tubbo orders, brisk and even, a command that has Tommy startled and scrambling to obey. It won't last long, the shock of the switch is the only thing keeping Tommy quiet. Tubbo needs to be quick about this, before Tommy's shock wears off, before the trembling in his fingers can catch up to him.

Tubbo's eyes flick to Ranboo, who is watching Tubbo intently, leaning far enough out of the van now that rainfall scrapes his skin and drips into his hair. "And you!" Tubbo shouts, raising his voice to be heard over the roar of downpour crashing against pavement. He points a stern finger at the van and ignores the way it shakes. "Stay in the van!"

With that, Tubbo turns on his heel and marches towards the gas station.

Tubbo has resources to gather.

He may not have answers. But he knows how to reach someone who will.

That is the plan. He is the plan.

Ranboo rumbles, a rolling hiss that's only getting more and more frantic. "△≡△⊕' { △↖○^σ?

⊕⊗⊕≡⊕? ⊕○⊗⊗? △≡⊗↖⊗ △↖⊗ ⊕○⊗ σ○⊗^σ? ≠⊕⊗△ {⊗, ⊕⊗⊕≡⊕!"

Nausea spikes hard in Tubbo's gut at the alarm in Ranboo's tone. But what really makes him want to throw up is the homesickness brought on by the familiar rumbling language. Tubbo chokes on

the surge of emotion until he can shove it down, down, down. It all goes in the box, and Tubbo keeps moving.

Tubbo shoves the door open and lets himself in, the entry chime ringing out like a siren to herald his arrival. On the other side of the parking lot, Ranboo snaps, pulled like a tether, and steps out into the rain.

Ranboo hisses, loud and aggrieved, as he dashes across the rain-soaked pavement and darts into the dry safety of the gas station building. Under buzzing fluorescent lights, Ranboo rattles and growls, shaking himself uncomfortably like a wet cat. He's not sizzling and melting — of course, even in this state he's too human for that — but he doesn't look happy about it, either.

Tubbo is quick to snatch a handful of paper napkins from the dispenser next to the baked goods display, then rushes back over to Ranboo's side.

"Told you to stay in the van, bossman," Tubbo grumbles softly, the twist of a scowl sitting on his face. He tries to pat Ranboo dry as best he can with the napkins, but they're cheap and thin and not doing much more than falling apart to mush. "Now you're all wet."

Ranboo only gives a rumbling croak in response. He crowds in close to Tubbo and hovers over him, ducking down so Tubbo can reach up and wipe the water away from his face.

Tubbo sighs.

This is fine. This is fine. He is in control. He has a plan. He is going to fix this and everything is going to be fine.

The band around his chest constricts, winding a little tighter. The tremor in his fingers shakes a little bit worse. The box rattles.

"We need flint and steel and something to write with," Tubbo recites, rattling off sharp and steady. His eyes fall on Tommy, shoulders hunched and strung anxious. Tommy is watching Tubbo with a furrowed brow, and he pairs it with a stubborn scowl to match. "Tommy?"

"Why?" Tommy demands, stance squared and not moving a muscle.

Tubbo huffs out a breath and takes his gaze away dismissively, already sweeping the gas station shelves for what he needs. He doesn't have time to waste on unhelpful, pointless arguments. If Tommy's going to choose now to be obstinate, Tubbo's just going to do it himself. He doesn't need Tommy's help, it's simple enough to do on his own.

"Why?!" Tommy says again, louder, never content to be ignored. He side-steps and puts himself in front of Tubbo's vision, taking up as much space as possible.

"Tommy," Tubbo says, tone low and cold. He's not in the mood for this. He doesn't have the time for this. He needs to fix this, now. Before anything else goes wrong. He has to. He doesn't have a choice. All he has is the plan, the task at hand. He is nothing without it.

If Tommy doesn't want to help, that's fine. But Tommy doesn't get to stand in his way and make himself a problem just because he's upset.

Ranboo is already fading, posture loosening and attention drifting. He takes a step away from Tubbo, eyes wandering to the colorful rows of backlit drink displays. The moment Tubbo feels him slide away, Tubbo snaps out a hand and locks his grip around Ranboo's wrist, anchoring him in place. Ranboo just pauses and blinks at him, unseeing, lost in the haze.

"You haven't even told us what's going on!" Tommy crosses his arms over his chest, anxious and not knowing how to express it unless he's yelling. Tommy tries to keep his heated glare on Tubbo, but the flicker of his eyes to Ranboo's dazed face reveals the source of his worry. "He's hissin' an' shit! He's being all *weird* and you won't tell us why! You promised! You said you'd tell us shit — you weren't goin't keep shit from us anymore!"

"Oh, I promised, did I?" Tubbo says as he tips his head and smiles, awful fake and sickly-sweet. The smile wipes away quickly, and all that's left is Tubbo, standing anchored adrift, lost with all his panic locked in a little box but still managing to tremble his fingers with cold fear. "Listen. I can't. I — I can't explain this to you, Tommy. I just can't. Actually, I reckon you should be grateful you don't understand. I just need you to trust me."

"*You should be grateful,*" Tommy mocks, high and scathing. He winds himself up tighter, drawing his crossed arms close to his chest as he spits bitter accusation, "God, you know who the fuck you sound like?"

Tommy doesn't say Schlatt, but Tubbo hears it anyway.

"Either move out of the way or go wait in the van with Wilbur." Tubbo tries to shove past Tommy, but Ranboo is weighing him in place and Tommy refuses to be ignored for even a second.

"I'm not just gonna— fuckin'— do whatever you tell me to. I'm not just gonna — *oh, yes Tubbo, right away, Tubbo.* Quit actin' like I'm some dumb kid! I'm not stupid. I want to help!"

"Well I don't want your help," Tubbo hisses back, bearing his teeth.

Tommy's scowl deepens, hurt and anger welling up with the way his shoulders raise and tense.

"Fuck you." Tommy's tone is low and quiet and cold.

The entry chime sounds, splitting the tension sharply as Wilbur stalks into the gas station. Tommy and Tubbo both turn to face the rain-soaked arrival. It only takes one glance between the two of them for Wilbur to put together an image he doesn't like. Wilbur's gaze doesn't linger on Tubbo, a cold, apathetic dismissal. Wilbur's done with their game, interest lost the minute Tommy got hurt, and now he's going to take Tommy and leave.

"Tommy, c'mon," Wilbur says without hesitation, already opening the door to step back out into the rain.

And maybe that's for the best.

Wilbur and Tommy will go back to the van, and Tommy will yell his feelings out, and Wilbur will listen and give him the attention and assurance he needs. That is a good thing. Wilbur will drive the van out of the parking lot, and they will carry on with their road trip. And Tubbo will be here, at the gas station, with no car, and with a Ranboo that can't focus and can't tell him what's wrong, and Tubbo can't breathe—

“No.” Tommy immediately stomps off in the other direction, turning his glare on the morning’s selection of donuts, cookies, and muffins.

“Tommy,” Wilbur insists, letting the door fall shut as he steps inside after Tommy.

“No!” Tommy repeats louder, turning on his heel aggressively and walking very purposefully away in the direction of the slushie machine.

Tubbo’s arm twists uncomfortably as Ranboo tugs at it, trying to walk off again after he’s forgotten Tubbo’s holding on to him.

Tubbo takes a deep breath.

This is fine. Tubbo is in control. Tubbo has a plan. All Tubbo has to do is follow it. He can do that. He can do that. He can do this.

Tubbo ignores Wilbur’s whispered argument and Tommy’s not-so-whispered responses. That’s not important to the task. All Tubbo has to do is find three things. He needs something to write with, something to write on, and a flint and steel. That’s all. He can do that. He is the task.

He tugs at Ranboo’s arm, trying to redirect him to walk down the aisle. Ranboo follows easily, eyes catching on various trinkets and snacks between absent little *vwoops*. Tubbo has to bat his hands away from more than one unintentional attempted theft, but Ranboo still ends up with a box containing a stick of strawberry chapstick clutched in his free hand.

There’s a pen sitting on the cashier counter which Tubbo swipes without remorse, but Tubbo doesn’t see any books in the gas station. He sees a rack of magazines, but the pages are glossy and sleek, not good for writing on, ink would bead right off the surface of that. He needs something different. The wet napkin mush squeezed tight inside the curl of his clenched and trembling fists gives him an idea. It doesn’t need to be paper, it just needs to hold ink and burn. He grabs another handful of fresh, dry napkins and shoves them in his coat pocket.

Tubbo paces another circuit around the gas station, scouring every bit of it that he can while carefully avoiding the slushie machine where Wilbur and Tommy are lurking in their argument. He can’t find any flint and steel. What kind of store doesn’t have something as basic as a flint and steel? Tubbo feels frustration and helplessness prick at the corners of his eyes, but he viciously pushes it down.

“Will a lighter work?” Tommy asks, startling Tubbo out of his skin.

Tommy stands at the end of the aisle. He’s avoiding Tubbo’s eyes, scowl still etched firmly in the harsh downturn of his lips, but he’s holding out a plastic container with a pair of brightly-colored little tubes like a peace offering.

Tubbo nods stiffly. “If it’ll start a fire, it’ll work.”

“Cool,” Tommy nods back, the rigid pull of his shoulders releasing just a bit. “Let’s go burn some shit.”

Tommy spins on his heel and walks back towards the front of the store. Tubbo follows, tugging Ranboo along behind him. At the cashier’s counter, Wilbur is leaning with his arms crossed and a dark look on his face.

Tommy drops the lighters on the counter, immediately looking to Wilbur expectantly.

“I’m not buying lighters for you,” Wilbur says dryly, hard edge lingering at the curve of his tone. He’s not happy with Tommy. He’s not even looking at Tubbo.

“No, you are, because I want them,” Tommy states, taking the chapstick from Ranboo’s hand and throwing that on the counter as well. He glares challenge at Wilbur, a silent battle of wills, but it’s not even a breath before Tommy breaks. His shoulders droop, expression falling into something quiet and pleading. “Please.”

With a face that melts achingly soft for only a fraction of a second before he slides something exasperated and indifferent in its place, Wilbur gives. “Fine.”

“Thanks, Wil,” Tommy smiles, speaking warm and quiet. Immediately, he tacks on, “You look like a drowned cat, by the way.”

Wilbur just smirks fond annoyance as he flips his wallet open. “And you smell like a wet dog.”

With a pocket stuffed full of newly acquired lighters, napkins, and one stolen pen, Tubbo tries to figure out what to do next. Outside is a no-go, the rain will disintegrate their napkins and bleed their ink before they can even attempt to burn the thing. There’s not enough room in the van, not if Tubbo’s plan works, so that’s out too. Tubbo doesn’t suppose the cashier would be too happy about him starting a fire inside the gas station, but then again, they look just dead enough inside that they might not mind.

As if sensing Tubbo’s thoughts without needing to be told, Wilbur turns to the cashier with a polite, charismatic smile. “Could I get the restroom key, if it’s not too much trouble?”

The cashier, who has *definitely* overheard them loudly discussing burning shit, glances down at the receipt for the lighters they’ve just finished ringing up. Their expression doesn’t change from dead-flat apathetic. “Sure.”

Perfect.

“Thank you,” Wilbur sing-songs with a dazzling smile, taking the offered key along with his receipt.

Wilbur leads the way, as always, with Tommy, Tubbo, and Ranboo following in his wake. Wet socks squelch uncomfortably inside his shoes with every step. Prime, this is the worst. Tubbo really wishes he had his hooves back. What cruel flaw of evolution decided that having nerve endings on the bottoms of your feet was a good design choice?

“I’m still mad at you,” Tommy informs him sternly, leaning over to nudge his arm into Tubbo’s.

“And you’re still a bit of a dickhead,” Tubbo replies, matching his tone.

In retaliation, Tommy shoves himself bodily into Tubbo’s space again and refuses to leave his side. “But we’re in this together, yeah?”

Tubbo sighs, letting the steady comfort of having Tommy near ground him. “We are.”

Wilbur herds them into the gas station’s lone family restroom and clicks the door locked firmly behind them. Wilbur immediately takes up a position leaning against the locked door, surveying the

room from the edges in a cold observance. Tubbo shouldn't feel so safe having Wilbur standing guard between him and the only exit, but the tension leaks in increments from his shoulders regardless.

There's a toilet, a sink, and a baby changing station, all circling around the drain embedded in the center of the tiled floor. There's more than enough room for the four of them in the odd rectangular room, and with any luck, it'll fit a fifth.

Tubbo doesn't waste any time. Tubbo pulls the handful of napkins out of his pocket, flipping down the baby changing station and spreading them out across its surface. They're a little bit damp from his pocket, but they'll have to do. This has to work. There isn't another option.

When Tubbo lets go of Ranboo's wrist, Ranboo's attention drifts back to him curiously. Head tilted in question, Ranboo rumbles, “Φ∏±±○?”

“Right here, bossman,” Tubbo assures him, giving him a pat on the arm.

Tubbo watches as Ranboo's focus fades out again. In a matter of seconds, Ranboo goes from something bordering on clarity right back into that hazy cloud, eyes drifting away without seeing, without recognition. Ranboo catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror above the sink, and that's where his fractured attention catches. He wanders closer to the reflective plane, leaning in until his breath fogs and muddles the image in front of him. Tubbo lets Ranboo poke at the glass — as long as he can't wander off and get lost in an unfamiliar place, he should be okay.

Tubbo pulls the pen and the lighters from his pockets, cringing at the way his water-logged jacket clings. It sticks to his skin and weighs him down, stiff and cloying like an old suit with the stitching worn to fraying at the seams. Damp fabric sticks and itches uncomfortably along his arms and back, but he determinedly ignores it — his discomfort is not relevant to the task at hand. Besides, it's helping. It's grounding. It's keeping him inside his body, which is something he desperately needs at the moment.

Tubbo sets the pen down, *click*, and takes a breath. He sets the lighters down, *click-click*, and he takes a breath. It isn't enough. His lungs scream like they need more, but that's just the panic talking, and the panic is in a box right now and it can't get to him. He is only the task. That is all he needs to be.

Here's something only three people in the world know: anyone can call on a god. All it takes is the right words and a bit of fire. It's stupidly easy, which makes it all the more surprising that the knowledge has managed to remain so scarce for so long.

Anyone can call on a god, but it's up to the god if they *answer*.

Drista might come if he calls her. But then again, she might not. Drista liked him well enough when he had nukes and he was being *fun*, but he doesn't have anything she wants, not anymore, and Tubbo's not exactly her favorite person in the world.

Now, Tommy, on the other hand...

“Hey, Tommy,” Tubbo says slowly, letting his gaze creep over. Tommy is quick to perk up, already watching Tubbo as he hovers uncertain and scrapes a shoe idly against the bathroom drain. “Help me summon the devil?”

Tommy splutters and laughs, startled. “What the fuck?”

Tubbo tries to pull a smile that he doesn’t quite feel. It’s hard, all the emotions are in the box, but Tommy laughs, bright and full and unafraid, and it gets a little bit easier. “Yeah, I... could use your help, if you don’t mind.”

Tommy is already sliding into place at Tubbo’s side, peering over his shoulder to eye the spread of sparse resources on the changing table. He raises an eyebrow, incredulous and amused. “You gonna summon the devil with a bunch of wet napkins?”

Tubbo nods, his smile pressing thin and serious. “That’s the plan.”

Tommy trips on whatever quip was about to come out of his mouth next, glancing back to Tubbo with earnest curiosity. “Wait, can you really?”

“Sure, it doesn’t actually take all that much. See, it’s like sending a letter, only you burn it instead of delivering it to their house,” Tubbo explains, picking up the pen and holding it out to Tommy, the return of an offer extended.

Tommy accepts it, snatching the pen eagerly and spinning it between his fingers with a grin that’s only a little bit menacing. “You ready to start explainin’ shit, then?”

“Yeah,” Tubbo acquiesces, solemn and steady. “I— Yeah. I am. Whatever you want to know.”

Tommy’s grin splits wider, and he shoves his way remorselessly into Tubbo’s side. “Cool.”

Tommy is relentlessly warm against his side, putting off heat in waves even after being soaked in the freezing rain. Tubbo can’t help the way he dips and bonks his forehead against Tommy’s shoulder — couldn’t stop himself if he tried. The shivers and shakes that tremble through him fall quiet-still and truly steady without him trying at all.

“Now, tell me what to write, Tubs. Instruct me. I am your muse— or, no. Wait. I am the one who does the writing. I’m the scribe, or something. I’m your knight, but like, with a pen, ‘cause the pen is mightier than the sword,” Tommy rambles, growing more animated as he goes.

Tubbo snorts a laugh into Tommy’s shoulder, and the smile that graces his face feels easy and light.

Tubbo breathes and it feels like enough.

“Alright, then,” Tubbo declares, drawing himself back up and into the world. “Tommy, if you would?” Tubbo extends a hand and Tommy passes him the pen, on the same page without needing to be told. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

Tubbo copies down the first letter of the unspoken language — lost to time somewhere amongst the ages — carefully tracing the lines from his memory onto the delicate surface of a damp napkin. They trade the pen back and forth, passing it between them easy as breathing as they huddle close, shoulders and elbows bumping while they make steady progress. Tommy works quickly, a little too quickly, and he accidentally rips a hole through more than one napkin, but they start again on a new page, and Tubbo has more than enough to give.

“This is some weird cult shit, man,” Tommy grouses, but he doesn’t stop writing, never taking his eyes off the odd angles and twists of the unfamiliar language.

It would probably work just as well written in Player. It's not the language but the intent that matters, after all. But Tubbo has never tested that before, and he *needs* this to work.

Wilbur watches on, passive, but his unwavering gaze betrays his interest. At least now, with Tommy laughing and smiling, he looks less like he wants to abandon Tubbo on the side of the road again. Ranboo, meanwhile, seems to have figured out how the motion sensor in the sink faucet works. He keeps running the sink curiously, darting his hand out of the way before it can get caught under the stream. Assured that the two of them are okay for the time being, Tubbo focuses his attention back on the task.

Tommy finishes copying the last word and then extends the pen back towards Tubbo expectantly. When Tubbo doesn't immediately take it, he glances up, confused.

Tubbo just shakes his head. "That's it."

"That's it?" Tommy exclaims, and Tubbo nods. "Yes! Alright! Now what? Do we get to burn it? Do a little bit of arson?"

"Would you like to do the honors, big man?" Tubbo slides the lighter across the changing table.

Tommy snatches it up with a grin. "You know me, I'm always down for some crime."

Tommy flips the lighter around in his fingers, holding the colorful plastic body securely in the palm of his hand before using his thumb to flick the little metal bit at the top. It scrapes and sparks a couple times as Tommy fumbles inexpertly, but soon enough the flame catches and burns.

Tubbo gasps, leaning in to study the little fire-starter. "Oh! Well, isn't that clever!"

He wants to take it apart and study how it works, make his own, make it better. He bets he could. It doesn't look that complicated. It isn't nuclear science.

"It's just a lighter, man. It's not that impressive," Tommy laughs, drawing the flame away from Tubbo before he can lean in too close.

"Light those fuckers up!" Tubbo cheers.

Tommy joins in, shouting, "Yeah!"

"Over the sink," Wilbur cuts in, and the smirk across his face is bright and amused. "Not on the changing table. People use that. Don't be an inconsiderate dick."

Tommy groans dramatically, but he breaks out into laughter the second after when Wilbur shoots him a disappointed look.

Tubbo gathers up their hard work and piles it into the sink, a messy little heap of napkin and ink. Ranboo moves like he's about to run his hand in front of the faucet's motion sensor again, and Tubbo snatches his hand back, locking their fingers together. Ranboo tips his head and *vwoops* something like a question, hazy eyes landing on Tubbo and their interlocked hands.

"☐i ☐π≡☐," Ranboo rumbles, words crackling oddly off his human tongue as he leans down to press his forehead against the top of Tubbo's head. "△≡△☐ ☐△≠≠ω^ω☐ ☐☐ ☐π≠ ∴i^σ{?"

“You think this’ll fix him?” Tommy asks, setting flame to a blank napkin and dropping it into the sink pile.

“I have no idea,” Tubbo admits, clutching tightly to Ranboo’s hand as he watches the flame slowly eat away at the glowing-ember edges of the damp napkins. “But it’s the best plan I’ve got.”

Tubbo, Ranboo, and Tommy crowd around the sink, huddling close to watch flecks of grey ash break loose and drift up into the air. Even Wilbur steps away from the door to join in their anticipation. The four stand in silence with bated breath, transfixed by the orange glow of flame gradually licking away at dark black ink.

“What’s supposed to happen now?” Tommy asks into the quiet, not taking his eyes off the charred remnants of their hard work, up in flames.

“Nothing,” Wilbur snorts, amused and dismissive in his skepticism. “You’re lighting napkins on fire in a gas station bathroom.”

“Well, it’s got to finish burning first,” Tubbo says anyway, fingers squeezing anxious around Ranboo’s hand.

Tommy groans, impatient. “What, like, completely?”

“Yeah,” Tubbo takes a breath, tasting the familiar wisp of smoke on the air. “Then... I don’t know. She just shows up. ‘S what happened last time.”

“And what if she doesn’t?”

Tubbo doesn’t answer. He doesn’t even consider it.

The pile of napkins gets a little bit smaller and the pile of ash gets a little bit bigger. The smell of smoke sits heavy, but it burns clean. No gunpowder. No rotten stench of wither and decay. The four of them watch the flame eat away the last scrap, dissipating evaporated ink into the air and sending their message out into the world. The room holds its breath, anxious, anticipatory.

Nobody moves. Nobody makes a sound.

Nothing happens.

Until the pop of displaced air pressure has all of their heads turning at once.

And there, in all her glory, is Drista. With legs dangling indolently above the dirty bathroom tile, she sits perched atop the baby changing station like she owns it, because she *does*. Tubbo makes no mistake, this is her world. He’s just living in it by her own good graces. His world lies elsewhere, lost among forgotten memories and nuclear fallout.

Tubbo breathes a sigh of relief.

Drista’s green hooded robes are nowhere to be seen, diaphanous fabric and glimmering golden embroidery traded out for a hoodie and jeans — a sign of the times, if ever there was one. It seems even their gods — ancient and unchanging as they are — get to start anew here.

The only thing that remains the same about her wardrobe is the mask. It sits where her face would be, if she were close enough to human to bother with mimicking such a thing — a smooth circle of

white terracotta, or quartz, or maybe bone. One of the ancient tomes referred to it as end stone, but Tubbo's never heard of such a thing. It's smooth, polished to a brilliant shine and perfectly featureless, save for the scratches and chips marred into its otherworldly surface by time.

Drista turns her blank mask on Tubbo and he shivers, just a bit. He can feel the weight of her judgement on him, a heavy gaze even if she doesn't have the eyes for it. Faced with all-encompassing power like that, fear is instinctual. The thing in his chest buzzes, resonant.

"Oh. It's you again," Drista says, voice going flat and disappointed as she takes in her surroundings. Then again, she tends to sound like that even on a good day. "What do you want?"

Tubbo opens his mouth, but before he can get a word out Tommy is already screeching loud enough to make Tubbo's ears ring. The sound redoubles in the enclosed space, resounding ear-splittingly loud off tiled walls. "AAAAA! Holy shit!"

"Tommy, please," Tubbo winces, clasping his free hand over one ear. "Think of my eardrums."

"Well I didn't think it would actually work!" Tommy squawks, not quieting in the slightest. He throws out an arm to gesture frantically at Drista, looking to Tubbo with a wild-bright disbelief, as if to say *are you seeing this?* Without waiting a moment for a response, Tommy is already swinging back around to Drista with a fervent mix of fear and excitement. "You're the devil?"

"And you're an annoying child," Drista says with a tip of her featureless head.

Tommy looks surprised and a little sad, and his voice drops back to quiet when he whines, "Aww, I thought Tubbo said you liked me."

"I *do* like you," Drista says, slightly offended, as if that wasn't obvious.

"You're kinda sending me mixed messages here, devil lady." Tommy huffs, curiosity and indignation boldening his stride as he takes a step closer.

Drista follows in kind, leaning forward from her perch. She leans until she tips forward into the open air and floats there. She glides forward, feet never designing to touch the ground unless she wants to. Wilbur and Tommy both take an instinctive step back, an incredibly human survival mechanism buried deep in their hindbrain screams *unknown, danger, powerful*. Tubbo and Ranboo stand unmoved at the front of the group.

Drista floats closer, and the thing in his chest grows. It vibrates against his heart, resonating stronger and pulling deeper from within him. It pushes harshly against the inside of his rib cage, tugging forward like a magnet to the source in front of him — insistent on coming home.

"If I may," Tubbo cuts in, stealing her focus away from Wilbur, who looks to be rapidly approaching the hard edge of a panic attack, and Tommy, who's spluttering and growing red in the face like he's about to start yelling again. "Something's gone wrong with the reset. Fix it, please."

"There's nothing wrong with the reset," Drista dismisses, waving a hand as she sits back idly, reclining on thin air. "Well, except you, of course."

"But just look at him!" Tubbo insists, nudging Ranboo pointedly. Ranboo lets himself be pulled forward with the motion, looking to Tubbo with a curious blink before his attention wanders to Drista. "He's gone all strange."

“𐌊𐌆𐌇𐌋𐌌𐌔𐌕𐌖𐌗𐌘𐌙𐌚𐌛𐌜𐌝𐌞𐌟𐌠𐌡𐌢𐌣𐌤𐌥𐌦𐌧𐌨𐌩𐌪𐌫𐌬𐌭𐌮𐌯𐌰𐌱𐌲𐌳𐌴𐌵𐌶𐌷𐌸𐌹𐌺𐌻𐌼𐌽𐌾𐌿𐍀𐍁𐍂𐍃𐍄𐍅𐍆𐍇𐍈𐍉𐍊𐍋𐍌𐍍𐍎𐍏𐍐𐍑𐍒𐍓𐍔𐍕𐍖𐍗𐍘𐍙𐍚𐍛𐍜𐍝𐍞𐍟𐍠𐍡𐍢𐍣𐍤𐍥𐍦𐍧𐍨𐍩𐍪𐍫𐍬𐍭𐍮𐍯𐍰𐍱𐍲𐍳𐍴𐍵𐍶𐍷𐍸𐍹𐍺𐍻𐍼𐍽𐍾𐍿𐎀𐎁𐎂𐎃𐎄𐎅𐎆𐎇𐎈𐎉𐎊𐎋𐎌𐎍𐎎𐎏𐎐𐎑𐎒𐎓𐎔𐎕𐎖𐎗𐎘𐎙𐎚𐎛𐎜𐎝𐎞𐎟𐎠𐎡𐎢𐎣𐎤𐎥𐎦𐎧𐎨𐎩𐎪𐎫𐎬𐎭𐎮𐎯𐎰𐎱𐎲𐎳𐎴𐎵𐎶𐎷𐎸𐎹𐎺𐎻𐎼𐎽𐎾𐎿𐏀𐏁𐏂𐏃𐏄𐏅𐏆𐏇𐏈𐏉𐏊𐏋𐏌𐏍𐏎𐏏𐏐𐏑𐏒𐏓𐏔𐏕𐏖𐏗𐏘𐏙𐏚𐏛𐏜𐏝𐏞𐏟𐏠𐏡𐏢𐏣𐏤𐏥𐏦𐏧𐏨𐏩𐏪𐏫𐏬𐏭𐏮𐏯𐏰𐏱𐏲𐏳𐏴𐏵𐏶𐏷𐏸𐏹𐏺𐏻𐏼𐏽𐏾𐏿𐐀𐐁𐐂𐐃𐐄𐐅𐐆𐐇𐐈𐐉𐐊𐐋𐐌𐐍𐐎𐐏𐐐𐐑𐐒𐐓𐐔𐐕𐐖𐐗𐐘𐐙𐐚𐐛𐐜𐐝𐐞𐐟𐐠𐐡𐐢𐐣𐐤𐐥𐐦𐐧𐐨𐐩𐐪𐐫𐐬𐐭𐐮𐐯𐐰𐐱𐐲𐐳𐐴𐐵𐐶𐐷𐐸𐐹𐐺𐐻𐐼𐐽𐐾𐐿𐑀𐑁𐑂𐑃𐑄𐑅𐑆𐑇𐑈𐑉𐑊𐑋𐑌𐑍𐑎𐑏𐑐𐑑𐑒𐑓𐑔𐑕𐑖𐑗𐑘𐑙𐑚𐑛𐑜𐑝𐑞𐑟𐑠𐑡𐑢𐑣𐑤𐑥𐑦𐑧𐑨𐑩𐑪𐑫𐑬𐑭𐑮𐑯𐑰𐑱𐑲𐑳𐑴𐑵𐑶𐑷𐑸𐑹𐑺𐑻𐑼𐑽𐑾𐑿𐒀𐒁𐒂𐒃𐒄𐒅𐒆𐒇𐒈𐒉𐒊𐒋𐒌𐒍𐒎𐒏𐒐𐒑𐒒𐒓𐒔𐒕𐒖𐒗𐒘𐒙𐒚𐒛𐒜𐒝𐒞𐒟𐒠𐒡𐒢𐒣𐒤𐒥𐒦𐒧𐒨𐒩𐒪𐒫𐒬𐒭𐒮𐒯𐒰𐒱𐒲𐒳𐒴𐒵𐒶𐒷𐒸𐒹𐒺𐒻𐒼𐒽𐒾𐒿𐓀𐓁𐓂𐓃𐓄𐓅𐓆𐓇𐓈𐓉𐓊𐓋𐓌𐓍𐓎𐓏𐓐𐓑𐓒𐓓𐓔𐓕𐓖𐓗𐓘𐓙𐓚𐓛𐓜𐓝𐓞𐓟𐓠𐓡𐓢𐓣𐓤𐓥𐓦𐓧𐓨𐓩𐓪𐓫𐓬𐓭𐓮𐓯𐓰𐓱𐓲𐓳𐓴𐓵𐓶𐓷𐓸𐓹𐓺𐓻𐓼𐓽𐓾𐓿𐔀𐔁𐔂𐔃𐔄𐔅𐔆𐔇𐔈𐔉𐔊𐔋𐔌𐔍𐔎𐔏𐔐𐔑𐔒𐔓𐔔𐔕𐔖𐔗𐔘𐔙𐔚𐔛𐔜𐔝𐔞𐔟𐔠𐔡𐔢𐔣𐔤𐔥𐔦𐔧𐔨𐔩𐔪𐔫𐔬𐔭𐔮𐔯𐔰𐔱𐔲𐔳𐔴𐔵𐔶𐔷𐔸𐔹𐔺𐔻𐔼𐔽𐔾𐔿𐕀𐕁𐕂𐕃𐕄𐕅𐕆𐕇𐕈𐕉𐕊𐕋𐕌𐕍𐕎𐕏𐕐𐕑𐕒𐕓𐕔𐕕𐕖𐕗𐕘𐕙𐕚𐕛𐕜𐕝𐕞𐕟𐕠𐕡𐕢𐕣𐕤𐕥𐕦𐕧𐕨𐕩𐕪𐕫𐕬𐕭𐕮𐕯𐕰𐕱𐕲𐕳𐕴𐕵𐕶𐕷𐕸𐕹𐕺𐕻𐕼𐕽𐕾𐕿𐖀𐖁𐖂𐖃𐖄𐖅𐖆𐖇𐖈𐖉𐖊𐖋𐖌𐖍𐖎𐖏𐖐𐖑𐖒𐖓𐖔𐖕𐖖𐖗𐖘𐖙𐖚𐖛𐖜𐖝𐖞𐖟𐖠𐖡𐖢𐖣𐖤𐖥𐖦𐖧𐖨𐖩𐖪𐖫𐖬𐖭𐖮𐖯𐖰𐖱𐖲𐖳𐖴𐖵𐖶𐖷𐖸𐖹𐖺𐖻𐖼𐖽𐖾𐖿𐗀𐗁𐗂𐗃𐗄𐗅𐗆𐗇𐗈𐗉𐗊𐗋𐗌𐗍𐗎𐗏𐗐𐗑𐗒𐗓𐗔𐗕𐗖𐗗𐗘𐗙𐗚𐗛𐗜𐗝𐗞𐗟𐗠𐗡𐗢𐗣𐗤𐗥𐗦𐗧𐗨𐗩𐗪𐗫𐗬𐗭𐗮𐗯𐗰𐗱𐗲𐗳𐗴𐗵𐗶𐗷𐗸𐗹𐗺𐗻𐗼𐗽𐗾𐗿𐘀𐘁𐘂𐘃𐘄𐘅𐘆𐘇𐘈𐘉𐘊𐘋𐘌𐘍𐘎𐘏𐘐𐘑𐘒𐘓𐘔𐘕𐘖𐘗𐘘𐘙𐘚𐘛𐘜𐘝𐘞𐘟𐘠𐘡𐘢𐘣𐘤𐘥𐘦𐘧𐘨𐘩𐘪𐘫𐘬𐘭𐘮𐘯𐘰𐘱𐘲𐘳𐘴𐘵𐘶𐘷𐘸𐘹𐘺𐘻𐘼𐘽𐘾𐘿𐙀𐙁𐙂𐙃𐙄𐙅𐙆𐙇𐙈𐙉𐙊𐙋𐙌𐙍𐙎𐙏𐙐𐙑𐙒𐙓𐙔𐙕𐙖𐙗𐙘𐙙𐙚𐙛𐙜𐙝𐙞𐙟𐙠𐙡𐙢𐙣𐙤𐙥𐙦𐙧𐙨𐙩𐙪𐙫𐙬𐙭𐙮𐙯𐙰𐙱𐙲𐙳𐙴𐙵𐙶𐙷𐙸𐙹𐙺𐙻𐙼𐙽𐙾𐙿𐚀𐚁𐚂𐚃𐚄𐚅𐚆𐚇𐚈𐚉𐚊𐚋𐚌𐚍𐚎𐚏𐚐𐚑𐚒𐚓𐚔𐚕𐚖𐚗𐚘𐚙𐚚𐚛𐚜𐚝𐚞𐚟𐚠𐚡𐚢𐚣𐚤𐚥𐚦𐚧𐚨𐚩𐚪𐚫𐚬𐚭𐚮𐚯𐚰𐚱𐚲𐚳𐚴𐚵𐚶𐚷𐚸𐚹𐚺𐚻𐚼𐚽𐚾𐚿𐛀𐛁𐛂𐛃𐛄𐛅𐛆𐛇𐛈𐛉𐛊𐛋𐛌𐛍𐛎𐛏𐛐𐛑𐛒𐛓𐛔𐛕𐛖𐛗𐛘𐛙𐛚𐛛𐛜𐛝𐛞𐛟𐛠𐛡𐛢𐛣𐛤𐛥𐛦𐛧𐛨𐛩𐛪𐛫𐛬𐛭𐛮𐛯𐛰𐛱𐛲𐛳𐛴𐛵𐛶𐛷𐛸𐛹𐛺𐛻𐛼𐛽𐛾𐛿𐜀𐜁𐜂𐜃𐜄𐜅𐜆𐜇𐜈𐜉𐜊𐜋𐜌𐜍𐜎𐜏𐜐𐜑𐜒𐜓𐜔𐜕𐜖𐜗𐜘𐜙𐜚𐜛𐜜𐜝𐜞𐜟𐜠𐜡𐜢𐜣𐜤𐜥𐜦𐜧𐜨𐜩𐜪𐜫𐜬𐜭𐜮𐜯𐜰𐜱𐜲𐜳𐜴𐜵𐜶𐜷𐜸𐜹𐜺𐜻𐜼𐜽𐜾𐜿𐝀𐝁𐝂𐝃𐝄𐝅𐝆𐝇𐝈𐝉𐝊𐝋𐝌𐝍𐝎𐝏𐝐𐝑𐝒𐝓𐝔𐝕𐝖𐝗𐝘𐝙𐝚𐝛𐝜𐝝𐝞𐝟𐝠𐝡𐝢𐝣𐝤𐝥𐝦𐝧𐝨𐝩𐝪𐝫𐝬𐝭𐝮𐝯𐝰𐝱𐝲𐝳𐝴𐝵𐝶𐝷𐝸𐝹𐝺𐝻𐝼𐝽𐝾𐝿𐞀𐞁𐞂𐞃𐞄𐞅𐞆𐞇𐞈𐞉𐞊𐞋𐞌𐞍𐞎𐞏𐞐𐞑𐞒𐞓𐞔𐞕𐞖𐞗𐞘𐞙𐞚𐞛𐞜𐞝𐞞𐞟𐞠𐞡𐞢𐞣𐞤𐞥𐞦𐞧𐞨𐞩𐞪𐞫𐞬𐞭𐞮𐞯𐞰𐞱𐞲𐞳𐞴𐞵𐞶𐞷𐞸𐞹𐞺𐞻𐞼𐞽𐞾𐞿𐟀𐟁𐟂𐟃𐟄𐟅𐟆𐟇𐟈𐟉𐟊𐟋𐟌𐟍𐟎𐟏𐟐𐟑𐟒𐟓𐟔𐟕𐟖𐟗𐟘𐟙𐟚𐟛𐟜𐟝𐟞𐟟𐟠𐟡𐟢𐟣𐟤𐟥𐟦𐟧𐟨𐟩𐟪𐟫𐟬𐟭𐟮𐟯𐟰𐟱𐟲𐟳𐟴𐟵𐟶𐟷𐟸𐟹𐟺𐟻𐟼𐟽𐟾𐟿𐠀𐠁𐠂𐠃𐠄𐠅𐠆𐠇𐠈𐠉𐠊𐠋𐠌𐠍𐠎𐠏𐠐𐠑𐠒𐠓𐠔𐠕𐠖𐠗𐠘𐠙𐠚𐠛𐠜𐠝𐠞𐠟𐠠𐠡𐠢𐠣𐠤𐠥𐠦𐠧𐠨𐠩𐠪𐠫𐠬𐠭𐠮𐠯𐠰𐠱𐠲𐠳𐠴𐠵𐠶𐠷𐠸𐠹𐠺𐠻𐠼𐠽𐠾𐠿𐡀𐡁𐡂𐡃𐡄𐡅𐡆𐡇𐡈𐡉𐡊𐡋𐡌𐡍𐡎𐡏𐡐𐡑𐡒𐡓𐡔𐡕𐡖𐡗𐡘𐡙𐡚𐡛𐡜𐡝𐡞𐡟𐡠𐡡𐡢𐡣𐡤𐡥𐡦𐡧𐡨𐡩𐡪𐡫𐡬𐡭𐡮𐡯𐡰𐡱𐡲𐡳𐡴𐡵𐡶𐡷𐡸𐡹𐡺𐡻𐡼𐡽𐡾𐡿𐢀𐢁𐢂𐢃𐢄𐢅𐢆𐢇𐢈𐢉𐢊𐢋𐢌𐢍𐢎𐢏𐢐𐢑𐢒𐢓𐢔𐢕𐢖𐢗𐢘𐢙𐢚𐢛𐢜𐢝𐢞𐢟𐢠𐢡𐢢𐢣𐢤𐢥𐢦𐢧𐢨𐢩𐢪𐢫𐢬𐢭𐢮𐢯𐢰𐢱𐢲𐢳𐢴𐢵𐢶𐢷𐢸𐢹𐢺𐢻𐢼𐢽𐢾𐢿𐣀𐣁𐣂𐣃𐣄𐣅𐣆𐣇𐣈𐣉𐣊𐣋𐣌𐣍𐣎𐣏𐣐𐣑𐣒𐣓𐣔𐣕𐣖𐣗𐣘𐣙𐣚𐣛𐣜𐣝𐣞𐣟𐣠𐣡𐣢𐣣𐣤𐣥𐣦𐣧𐣨𐣩𐣪𐣫𐣬𐣭𐣮𐣯𐣰𐣱𐣲𐣳𐣴𐣵𐣶𐣷𐣸𐣹𐣺𐣻𐣼𐣽𐣾𐣿𐤀𐤁𐤂𐤃𐤄𐤅𐤆𐤇𐤈𐤉𐤊𐤋𐤌𐤍𐤎𐤏𐤐𐤑𐤒𐤓𐤔𐤕𐤖𐤗𐤘𐤙𐤚𐤛𐤜𐤝𐤞𐤟𐤠𐤡𐤢𐤣𐤤𐤥𐤦𐤧𐤨𐤩𐤪𐤫𐤬𐤭𐤮𐤯𐤰𐤱𐤲𐤳𐤴𐤵𐤶𐤷𐤸𐤹𐤺𐤻𐤼𐤽𐤾𐤿𐥀𐥁𐥂𐥃𐥄𐥅𐥆𐥇𐥈𐥉𐥊𐥋𐥌𐥍𐥎𐥏𐥐𐥑𐥒𐥓𐥔𐥕𐥖𐥗𐥘𐥙𐥚𐥛𐥜𐥝𐥞𐥟𐥠𐥡𐥢𐥣𐥤𐥥𐥦𐥧𐥨𐥩𐥪𐥫𐥬𐥭𐥮𐥯𐥰𐥱𐥲𐥳𐥴𐥵𐥶𐥷𐥸𐥹𐥺𐥻𐥼𐥽𐥾𐥿𐦀𐦁𐦂𐦃𐦄𐦅𐦆𐦇𐦈𐦉𐦊𐦋𐦌𐦍𐦎𐦏𐦐𐦑𐦒𐦓𐦔𐦕𐦖𐦗𐦘𐦙𐦚𐦛𐦜𐦝𐦞𐦟𐦠𐦡𐦢𐦣𐦤𐦥𐦦𐦧𐦨𐦩𐦪𐦫𐦬𐦭𐦮𐦯𐦰𐦱𐦲𐦳𐦴𐦵𐦶𐦷𐦸𐦹𐦺𐦻𐦼𐦽𐦾𐦿𐧀𐧁𐧂𐧃𐧄𐧅𐧆𐧇𐧈𐧉𐧊𐧋𐧌𐧍𐧎𐧏𐧐𐧑𐧒𐧓𐧔𐧕𐧖𐧗𐧘𐧙𐧚𐧛𐧜𐧝𐧞𐧟𐧠𐧡𐧢𐧣𐧤𐧥𐧦𐧧𐧨𐧩𐧪𐧫𐧬𐧭𐧮𐧯𐧰𐧱𐧲𐧳𐧴𐧵𐧶𐧷𐧸𐧹𐧺𐧻𐧼𐧽𐧾𐧿𐨀𐨁𐨂𐨃𐨄𐨅𐨆𐨇𐨈𐨉𐨊𐨋𐨌𐨍𐨎𐨏𐨐𐨑𐨒𐨓𐨔𐨕𐨖𐨗𐨘𐨙𐨚𐨛𐨜𐨝𐨞𐨟𐨠𐨡𐨢𐨣𐨤𐨥𐨦𐨧𐨨𐨩𐨪𐨫𐨬𐨭𐨮𐨯𐨰𐨱𐨲𐨳𐨴𐨵𐨶𐨷𐨹𐨺𐨸𐨻𐨼𐨽𐨾𐨿𐩀𐩁𐩂𐩃𐩄𐩅𐩆𐩇𐩈𐩉𐩊𐩋𐩌𐩍𐩎𐩏𐩐𐩑𐩒𐩓𐩔𐩕𐩖𐩗𐩘𐩙𐩚𐩛𐩜𐩝𐩞𐩟𐩠𐩡𐩢𐩣𐩤𐩥𐩦𐩧𐩨𐩩𐩪𐩫𐩬𐩭𐩮𐩯𐩰𐩱𐩲𐩳𐩴𐩵𐩶𐩷𐩸𐩹𐩺𐩻𐩼𐩽𐩾𐩿𐪀𐪁𐪂𐪃𐪄𐪅𐪆𐪇𐪈𐪉𐪊𐪋𐪌𐪍𐪎𐪏𐪐𐪑𐪒𐪓𐪔𐪕𐪖𐪗𐪘𐪙𐪚𐪛𐪜𐪝𐪞𐪟𐪠𐪡𐪢𐪣𐪤𐪥𐪦𐪧𐪨𐪩𐪪𐪫𐪬𐪭𐪮𐪯𐪰𐪱𐪲𐪳𐪴𐪵𐪶𐪷𐪸𐪹𐪺𐪻𐪼𐪽𐪾𐪿𐫀𐫁𐫂𐫃𐫄𐫅𐫆𐫇𐫈𐫉𐫊𐫋𐫌𐫍𐫎𐫏𐫐𐫑𐫒𐫓𐫔𐫕𐫖𐫗𐫘𐫙𐫚𐫛𐫜𐫝𐫞𐫟𐫠𐫡𐫢𐫣𐫤𐫦𐫥𐫧𐫨𐫩𐫪𐫫𐫬𐫭𐫮𐫯𐫰𐫱𐫲𐫳𐫴𐫵𐫶𐫷𐫸𐫹𐫺𐫻𐫼𐫽𐫾𐫿𐬀𐬁𐬂𐬃𐬄𐬅𐬆𐬇𐬈𐬉𐬊𐬋𐬌𐬍𐬎𐬏𐬐𐬑𐬒𐬓𐬔𐬕𐬖𐬗𐬘𐬙𐬚𐬛𐬜𐬝𐬞𐬟𐬠𐬡𐬢𐬣𐬤𐬥𐬦𐬧𐬨𐬩𐬪𐬫𐬬𐬭𐬮𐬯𐬰𐬱𐬲𐬳𐬴𐬵𐬶𐬷𐬸𐬹𐬺𐬻𐬼𐬽𐬾𐬿𐭀𐭁𐭂𐭃𐭄𐭅𐭆𐭇𐭈𐭉𐭊𐭋𐭌𐭍𐭎𐭏𐭐𐭑𐭒𐭓𐭔𐭕𐭖𐭗𐭘𐭙𐭚𐭛𐭜𐭝𐭞𐭟𐭠𐭡𐭢𐭣𐭤𐭥𐭦𐭧𐭨𐭩𐭪𐭫𐭬𐭭𐭮𐭯𐭰𐭱𐭲𐭳𐭴𐭵𐭶𐭷𐭸𐭹𐭺𐭻𐭼𐭽𐭾𐭿𐮀𐮁𐮂𐮃𐮄𐮅𐮆𐮇𐮈𐮉𐮊𐮋𐮌𐮍𐮎𐮏𐮐𐮑𐮒𐮓𐮔𐮕𐮖𐮗𐮘𐮙𐮚𐮛𐮜𐮝𐮞𐮟𐮠𐮡𐮢𐮣𐮤𐮥𐮦𐮧𐮨𐮩𐮪𐮫𐮬𐮭𐮮𐮯𐮰𐮱𐮲𐮳𐮴𐮵𐮶𐮷𐮸𐮹𐮺𐮻𐮼𐮽𐮾𐮿𐯀𐯁𐯂𐯃𐯄𐯅𐯆𐯇𐯈𐯉𐯊𐯋𐯌𐯍𐯎𐯏𐯐𐯑𐯒𐯓𐯔𐯕𐯖𐯗𐯘𐯙𐯚𐯛𐯜𐯝𐯞𐯟𐯠𐯡𐯢𐯣𐯤𐯥𐯦𐯧𐯨𐯩𐯪𐯫𐯬𐯭𐯮𐯯𐯰𐯱𐯲𐯳𐯴𐯵𐯶𐯷𐯸𐯹𐯺𐯻𐯼𐯽𐯾𐯿𐰀𐰁𐰂𐰃𐰄𐰅𐰆𐰇𐰈𐰉𐰊𐰋𐰌𐰍𐰎𐰏𐰐𐰑𐰒𐰓𐰔𐰕𐰖𐰗𐰘𐰙𐰚𐰛𐰜𐰝𐰞𐰟𐰠𐰡𐰢𐰣𐰤𐰥𐰦𐰧𐰨𐰩𐰪𐰫𐰬𐰭𐰮𐰯𐰰𐰱𐰲𐰳𐰴𐰵𐰶𐰷𐰸𐰹𐰺𐰻𐰼𐰽𐰾𐰿𐱀𐱁𐱂𐱃𐱄𐱅𐱆𐱇𐱈𐱉𐱊𐱋𐱌𐱍𐱎𐱏𐱐𐱑𐱒𐱓𐱔𐱕𐱖𐱗𐱘𐱙𐱚𐱛𐱜𐱝𐱞𐱟𐱠𐱡𐱢𐱣𐱤𐱥𐱦𐱧𐱨𐱩𐱪𐱫𐱬𐱭𐱮𐱯𐱰𐱱𐱲𐱳𐱴𐱵𐱶𐱷𐱸𐱹𐱺𐱻𐱼𐱽𐱾𐱿𐲀𐲁𐲂𐲃𐲄𐲅𐲆𐲇𐲈𐲉𐲊𐲋𐲌𐲍𐲎𐲏𐲐𐲑𐲒𐲓𐲔𐲕𐲖𐲗𐲘𐲙𐲚𐲛𐲜𐲝𐲞𐲟𐲠𐲡𐲢𐲣𐲤𐲥𐲦𐲧𐲨𐲩𐲪𐲫𐲬𐲭𐲮𐲯𐲰𐲱𐲲𐲳𐲴𐲵𐲶𐲷𐲸𐲹𐲺𐲻𐲼𐲽𐲾𐲿𐳀𐳁𐳂𐳃𐳄𐳅𐳆𐳇𐳈𐳉𐳊𐳋𐳌𐳍𐳎𐳏𐳐𐳑𐳒𐳓𐳔𐳕𐳖𐳗𐳘𐳙𐳚𐳛𐳜𐳝𐳞𐳟𐳠𐳡𐳢𐳣𐳤𐳥𐳦𐳧𐳨𐳩𐳪𐳫𐳬𐳭𐳮𐳯𐳰𐳱𐳲𐳳𐳴𐳵𐳶𐳷𐳸𐳹𐳺𐳻𐳼𐳽𐳾𐳿𐴀𐴁𐴂𐴃𐴄𐴅𐴆𐴇𐴈𐴉𐴊𐴋𐴌𐴍𐴎𐴏𐴐𐴑𐴒𐴓𐴔𐴕𐴖𐴗𐴘𐴙𐴚𐴛𐴜𐴝𐴞𐴟𐴠𐴡𐴢𐴣𐴤𐴥𐴦𐴧𐴨𐴩𐴪𐴫𐴬𐴭𐴮𐴯𐴰𐴱𐴲𐴳𐴴𐴵𐴶𐴷𐴸𐴹𐴺𐴻𐴼𐴽𐴾𐴿𐵀𐵁𐵂𐵃𐵄𐵅𐵆𐵇𐵈𐵉𐵊𐵋𐵌𐵍𐵎𐵏𐵐𐵑𐵒𐵓𐵔𐵕𐵖𐵗𐵘𐵙𐵚𐵛𐵜𐵝𐵞𐵟𐵠𐵡𐵢𐵣𐵤𐵥𐵦𐵧𐵨𐵩𐵪𐵫𐵬𐵭𐵮𐵯𐵰𐵱𐵲𐵳𐵴𐵵𐵶𐵷𐵸𐵹𐵺𐵻𐵼𐵽𐵾𐵿𐶀𐶁𐶂𐶃𐶄𐶅𐶆𐶇𐶈𐶉𐶊𐶋𐶌𐶍𐶎𐶏𐶐𐶑𐶒𐶓𐶔𐶕𐶖𐶗𐶘𐶙𐶚𐶛𐶜𐶝𐶞𐶟𐶠𐶡𐶢𐶣𐶤𐶥𐶦𐶧𐶨𐶩𐶪𐶫𐶬𐶭𐶮𐶯𐶰𐶱𐶲𐶳𐶴𐶵𐶶𐶷𐶸𐶹𐶺𐶻𐶼𐶽𐶾𐶿𐷀𐷁𐷂𐷃𐷄𐷅𐷆𐷇𐷈𐷉𐷊𐷋𐷌𐷍𐷎𐷏𐷐𐷑𐷒𐷓𐷔𐷕𐷖𐷗𐷘𐷙𐷚𐷛𐷜𐷝𐷞𐷟𐷠𐷡𐷢𐷣𐷤𐷥𐷦𐷧𐷨𐷩𐷪𐷫𐷬𐷭𐷮𐷯𐷰𐷱𐷲𐷳𐷴𐷵𐷶𐷷𐷸𐷹𐷺𐷻𐷼𐷽𐷾𐷿𐸀𐸁𐸂𐸃𐸄𐸅𐸆𐸇𐸈𐸉𐸊𐸋𐸌𐸍𐸎𐸏𐸐𐸑𐸒𐸓𐸔𐸕𐸖𐸗𐸘𐸙𐸚𐸛𐸜𐸝𐸞𐸟𐸠𐸡𐸢𐸣𐸤𐸥𐸦𐸧𐸨𐸩𐸪𐸫𐸬𐸭𐸮𐸯𐸰𐸱𐸲𐸳𐸴𐸵𐸶𐸷𐸸𐸹𐸺𐸻𐸼𐸽𐸾𐸿𐹀𐹁𐹂𐹃𐹄𐹅𐹆𐹇𐹈𐹉𐹊𐹋𐹌𐹍𐹎𐹏𐹐𐹑𐹒𐹓𐹔𐹕𐹖𐹗𐹘𐹙𐹚𐹛𐹜𐹝𐹞𐹟𐹠𐹡𐹢𐹣𐹤𐹥𐹦𐹧𐹨𐹩𐹪𐹫𐹬𐹭𐹮𐹯𐹰𐹱𐹲𐹳𐹴𐹵𐹶𐹷𐹸𐹹𐹺𐹻𐹼𐹽𐹾𐹿𐺀𐺁𐺂𐺃𐺄𐺅𐺆𐺇𐺈𐺉𐺊𐺋𐺌𐺍𐺎𐺏𐺐𐺑𐺒𐺓𐺔𐺕𐺖𐺗𐺘𐺙𐺚𐺛𐺜𐺝𐺞𐺟𐺠𐺡𐺢𐺣𐺤𐺥𐺦𐺧𐺨𐺩𐺪𐺫𐺬𐺭𐺮𐺯𐺰𐺱𐺲𐺳𐺴𐺵𐺶𐺷𐺸𐺹𐺺𐺻𐺼𐺽𐺾𐺿𐻀𐻁𐻂𐻃𐻄𐻅𐻆𐻇𐻈𐻉𐻊𐻋𐻌𐻍𐻎𐻏𐻐𐻑𐻒𐻓𐻔𐻕𐻖𐻗𐻘𐻙𐻚𐻛𐻜𐻝𐻞𐻟𐻠𐻡𐻢𐻣𐻤𐻥𐻦𐻧𐻨𐻩𐻪𐻫𐻬𐻭𐻮𐻯𐻰𐻱𐻲𐻳𐻴𐻵𐻶𐻷𐻸𐻹𐻺𐻻𐻼𐻽𐻾𐻿𐼀𐼁𐼂𐼃𐼄𐼅𐼆𐼇𐼈𐼉𐼊𐼋𐼌𐼍𐼎𐼏𐼐𐼑𐼒𐼓𐼔𐼕𐼖𐼗𐼘𐼙𐼚𐼛𐼜𐼝𐼞𐼟



Drista folds her arms, irritation falling through the tip of her head. When she speaks, her words are abrupt and clipped. “Yeah. Well, you did. So.”

Tubbo shakes, cold anger rolling through his fist clenched tight at his side. “Well. What goddamn good—”

“No. I’m not— I can’t just *fix* him.” Between one moment and the next, Drista pulls a pitchfork from nowhere and everywhere. The weapon is twice her height, triple prongs tearing jagged gouges into the bathroom ceiling. She lets the weight of it drop, and the pommel cracks into the floor. The tile under her shatters and disintegrates into nothing, destroyed utterly, not even leaving dust and broken shards behind. “You’re literally being so rude right now. Stop. I *will* just kill you.”

Somewhere behind him, Tommy makes a sound like he’s been hit. Wilbur doesn’t make a sound at all.

Tubbo narrows his eyes and opens his mouth, hissing reply on the tip of his tongue, but Ranboo cuts in with a creaking warble and a nervous hand resting lightly on Tubbo’s shoulder. “ $\square\psi\neq, \Pi\Xi, \cup\omega\overline{\Phi}'\} \triangle\cup\cup \vdash \Pi\{ \overline{\Phi}, \heartsuit \triangle\neq \neq\psi, \textcircled{\Delta}\triangle\cup \heartsuit \boxplus \square\Delta\wedge \textcircled{\text{J}}\neq \triangle \heartsuit \textcircled{\Delta}\Pi\overline{\Phi}\psi, \textcircled{\text{J}} \overline{\Phi}\square\triangle\overline{\Phi}'\} \triangle\cup\neq \textcircled{\Delta}\square\overline{\Phi}.$ ”

Drista waves a hand at Ranboo, glaring unimpressed at Tubbo. “See? He literally said he’s fine.”

“ $\wedge \square\overline{\Phi} \triangle\square\triangle\overline{\Phi} \textcircled{\Delta} \{ \triangle\heartsuit\boxplus, \triangle\textcircled{\Delta}\overline{\Phi}\Pi\triangle\cup\cup\neq. \neq\Pi\overline{\Phi} \textcircled{\Delta} \heartsuit — \textcircled{\Delta}'\heartsuit \textcircled{\text{J}}\wedge\psi.$ ” Ranboo rumbles, hazy eyes fighting to stay focused. His grip on Tubbo’s shoulder tightens nervously. “ $\textcircled{\Delta} — \textcircled{\Delta} \{ \psi\Delta\psi\neq\neq\overline{\Phi}\square\textcircled{\Delta}\wedge\textcircled{\Delta} \square\textcircled{\Delta}\triangle\neq?$ ”

“You can understand him?” Tubbo shouts, his tone going high and desperate. “What’s he saying?”

“Of course I can,” Drista’s tone doesn’t rise above the flat-level of disinterest, like this is something Tubbo should just *know*. Her attention shifts from Tubbo to Ranboo, and she’s all too blasé when she says, “Your husband over here thinks you’re dying or something. Can you, I don’t know, control him? Make him stop yelling at me.”

“ $\square\Xi,$ ” Ranboo croaks, looking more than a little lost in the drifting haze. “ $\triangle\psi\cup\cup, \textcircled{\Delta}\square\Pi\boxplus \neq\square\Pi \overline{\Phi}\psi\cup\cup \square\textcircled{\Delta} \heartsuit \textcircled{\Delta}'\} \square\textcircled{\Delta}\triangle\neq?$ ”

“I already did, but alright.” Drista clicks her tongue, or at least, makes a sound like it. “He says it’s *fine*. Seriously.”

Tubbo isn’t convinced. His scowl deepens, not appeased by Drista’s apathetic attitude.

Ranboo’s grip on his shoulder loosens, fingers sliding down to weave with Tubbo’s again. Ranboo leans down to bump his forehead against the top of Tubbo’s head, and Tubbo releases a breath. He lets it go.

Drista huffs. “Look. I don’t know what to tell you. I can’t help you. I don’t control the reset. There’s nothing I can do, unless you want me to tell XD what the problem is.”

Tubbo very much does not want her to tell XD what the problem is. Tubbo isn’t sure how the god would react to Tubbo’s secret deal with the devil, but he knows XD doesn’t take kindly to liars and

cheaters. And Tubbo is both.

Not only that, but Tubbo has managed to circumvent the order, and he's sure that XD wouldn't appreciate that one bit. At the very least, he wouldn't be allowed to keep his memories. That's for certain. Prime only knows what XD would design as a punishment beyond that.

Or, somehow even worse a fate than death, XD might find him *interesting*.

Tubbo huffs. "Fine. You've made your point."

"Good," Drista bites, matching his snide tone. Then, she sighs, gesturing with the massive pitchfork casually, as if it doesn't weigh a thing. "Just let him sleep it off. I'm sure it'll be fine. Stop worrying so much." She carelessly drops the pitchfork, dismissing it with a flick of her fingers before it can hit the ground, letting it fall back into nothing. "Bye."

"Bye," Tubbo grumbles back begrudgingly, still not quite over his anger.

And with that, she's gone. There's no sign of her but the pop of air rushing to fill the vacant space, leaving Tubbo's eyes to adjust to the sudden change in depth perception when the thing they were focused on has suddenly vanished. The thing in his chest quiets immediately, settling back down into the depths of him and returning to its quiet, steady humming.

In the ringing silence that follows, Ranboo rumbles, pressing the vibration of non-verbal comfort against the top of Tubbo's head.

Tommy, meanwhile, *screams*. Tommy takes a deep breath and unleashes a resounding shriek from his core, holding nothing back from the bone-rattling cry.

"What the fuck! *What the fuck!*" Tommy screeches, immediately pacing the length of the small room at a rapid pace, nearly tripping over the newly disintegrated hole in the tiles every time he crosses it. "And I mean this wholeheartedly, *what the absolute fu-uck!*"

It isn't more than a couple seconds before Tommy sinks into babbling, starting strings of sentences that go nowhere or just making incoherent noises from the back of his throat.

In the space where Tommy actually has to stop to breathe, Wilbur mutters a quiet, "This... is real. Oh, this is *real*."

Tubbo just sighs, letting his eyes drop closed and tipping his weight into Ranboo's side. Ranboo doesn't seem bothered by the noise, too busy rumbling quiet content into the curls of Tubbo's hair.

"*U○Ωω ∇○π.*"

"Yes it's real! Were you not there for the fuckin'— For the— Oh my god. Oh my god. What the fuck!" Tommy shouts, letting himself trail off into a crying whine before picking right back up in another full-bodied scream.

"I—" Wilbur halts. Tubbo is waiting for whatever Wilbur is about to say next, but it never comes. It's the first time in a very long time Tubbo has heard him at a loss for words.

"I did warn you," Tubbo mutters sheepishly, the sly curl of an amused smile tugging at his lips. It's not an apology — that'd be more than Wilbur's earned from him yet.

When Tubbo finally brings himself to crack open his eyes, Wilbur is watching him with something like awe, something like fear, something like realization.

Tubbo laughs.

It's the only thing he can do. He doesn't really mean to, but now he's started and he can't stop. He clutches to Ranboo's side as his legs go weak under him, struck down hard by the absurdity of the situation. He laughs until he can't breathe and tears drip off his face, the sound shaking from him in rattling gasps and hiccups.

Tubbo has them now.

Wilbur believes him. *Wilbur believes him.*

All it took was the destruction of his entire worldview.

Well, Tubbo has Wilbur's attention now.

And Tommy is alive.

And Ranboo is here.

And they're not going to leave.

Everything else is secondary.

Everything else can wait.

Chapter End Notes

And with that, the set up is complete. Now we can REALLY get into it. >:)

[Art for this chapter](#) by Imansburg on Tumblr!

PebbledRat on Tumblr drew THREE WHOLE comics of art for this chapter [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#)!

Skater on Tumblr drew [art and a comic for this chapter](#)!

Wildy on [Ao3](#) and [Tumblr](#) has been working on a prequel comic!

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