

we've got a knack for fucked up history

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/35907361) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/35907361>.

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) , Wilbur Soot , Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Reincarnation , Alternate Universe - Modern Setting , Toby Smith Tubbo-centric , Platonically Married Ranboo and Toby Smith Tubbo , Ranboo and Toby Smith Tubbo Have a Child Named Michael , Goat Hybrid Toby Smith Tubbo , Body Dysphoria , Anxiety , Anxiety Attacks , Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD , Child Soldiers , Traumatized Toby Smith Tubbo , Toby Smith Tubbo Angst , Dissociation , Depersonalization , Protectiveness , Protective Toby Smith Tubbo , Hurt/Comfort , Fluff and Angst , Families of Choice , Found Family , Wilbur Soot and TommyInnit are Siblings , Cuddling & Snuggling , Platonic Cuddling , Enderwalking Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , Queerplatonic Relationships , Queerplatonic Ranboo/Toby Smith Tubbo , Not RPF , Blood and Injury , Violence , Implied/Referenced Suicide , (Tommy in exile) , Implied/Referenced Character Death , (Tommy again) , Harm to Animals , (mentioned) - Freeform , technoblade never dies
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Reincarnation AU
Collections:	Ash's Favorite Incomplete MCYT Fics , dsmp fics I adore
Stats:	Published: 2021-12-24 Updated: 2022-12-01 Words: 59,005 Chapters: 5/6

we've got a knack for fucked up history

by [DeadPatrol](#)

Summary

“So then what’d you get?” Tommy interrupts, pulling Tubbo’s focus back into the moment.

Maybe it’s the vulnerability penning him in on either side, the easy way Ranboo slumps into him and trusts Tubbo to hold his weight, or the way Tommy grins and asks question after question like he can’t even imagine being ignored or denied. The deep trust and simple kindness seep into him like an infectious, terminal disease — that’s what he’ll blame it on when his brain is more than a soft mush of warm and alive.

Tubbo smiles bitter-sweet and utters, “I got to keep my memories.”

*

After the server reset, everything changed. Everything except Tubbo, that is.

(Sequel to "standing at a lightswitch". Can be read as a stand-alone if you're bold and have a vendetta against context.)

It could always be worse. Until it is.

Chapter Notes

“Do you wish to stay
connected? The seen blurs
into the just heard. A bird outside the wide
open window. The warm day
of March. It changes. It has

all changed.”

-- [“Catastrophe Theory II” by Mary Jo Bang](#)

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

The drive out of the city is long and quiet.

Towering buildings slowly trickle past, growing shorter and shorter until they give away completely to the rolling level monotony of farmhouses and crop fields. Tubbo can’t say he’s not impressed. He’s gotten enough dirt under his nails to be intimately familiar with exactly how much work it takes to prepare, to upkeep, to harvest — and there are just *so many* of them here. It’s an incredible thing to behold, abundance and excess stretching off into the horizon.

At one point, they pass a field being tended to by a hulking thing, a massive redstone machine made of green-dyed iron and pure brilliance, and Tubbo gasps and presses himself against the window to get a better view. Prime, Tubbo wants one of those. He wants to make one so much it hurts. This must be what utopia is — a redstone machine automated to tend a crop field that stretches farther than he can see.

Wilbur drives with a white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel. Just one glimpse at the distant, unfocused look in Wilbur’s eyes, the way he stares blankly at the empty stretch of freeway ahead — that is more than enough to tell Tubbo everything he needs to know. Wilbur is stuck inside his head, caught somewhere in the space between processing and denial. Tubbo watches Wilbur in the rearview mirror and feels a little bit like he’s looking at his own reflection.

It probably isn’t helping matters that Wilbur didn’t sleep at all last night — probably not before that either. The purple smears under Wilbur’s eyes seem to bruise deeper as the day progresses; the sun reemerging from dissipating storm clouds only serves to cast the shadows under his eyes darker.

The most concerning part is the silence. Tubbo doesn’t think he’s ever seen Wilbur this quiet for this long. Even in the worst-case scenarios — of which there were many — Wilbur always had something to say about it. Tubbo doesn’t know if he should feel nervous or grateful. Tubbo decides not to worry too much about it. A quiet Wilbur might spell trouble later, but not yet. Right now, Tubbo has bigger problems to keep an eye on. The slumped-heavy weight pressing in against his side is testament to that.

It took a while to get Ranboo to go back to sleep. There was more than one attempt, Tubbo repeatedly catching and pinning Ranboo's focus down, pulling him close to lay against Tubbo's side again and again. Tubbo had hoped that the familiarity of leaning into his side — etched into sense-memory from many, many long nights — would be enough to Pavlov Ranboo into finally sleeping, but no. Every time Tubbo would finally manage to get Ranboo to settle still, something far out the window would have Ranboo sitting up distractedly and leaning away to press his face against the glass. Ranboo spent a long time staring out the window and watching the scenery go past, attention continuously re-captivated by every stretch of monotonous landscape like he was seeing it for the first time.

Ranboo's drifting focus was broken up only by occasional rasps of $\overline{\Phi}\Pi\equiv\equiv\bigcirc$ and $\overline{\Phi}\bigcirc_{\mathfrak{m}}\mathfrak{m}\mathfrak{b}\mathfrak{z}$ and $\triangle\mathfrak{I}L\equiv\mathfrak{I}\mathfrak{z}$. Every time Ranboo's gaze caught and stuck on Tommy, the approximation of his name crackling off his too-human tongue, Tommy would light up and laugh, trying to keep Ranboo's attention long enough to get him to say more. Tommy was utterly undeterred by the fact that he couldn't understand a word of it, enthusiastically nodding along and giving meaningless yet earnest *mm-hmms*. It was a bit irritating, directly counterproductive to Tubbo's mission of getting Ranboo to sleep, but he would never ask Tommy to stop.

Tubbo's not sure what did it in the end, but eventually, finally, thankfully, Tubbo managed to get the message across, *go to sleep*. With his weight slumped against Tubbo's side and his head buried in Tubbo's hair, Ranboo drifted off.

After that, Tubbo breathes a bit easier — small steps of progress towards a solution settling his pulled-taught heart. Only, now he's faced with a different problem. Or, it isn't a problem. Tommy elbowing his way into the backseat, crawling close to sit pressed up against Tubbo's other side isn't a problem. It isn't. It is sitting in the backseat of Wilbur's van, Ranboo and Tommy pressing in warm and real on either side of him, and that's all it is.

It isn't a problem, but it feels like it should be a problem for all it makes him want. It makes him want to close his eyes and drift off, following Ranboo into blurry sleep depths. It makes him want to stay awake forever, keep careful, watchful guard over the two precious things he's somehow managed to catch hold of. It makes him want to curl up and cry, and he's done far too much crying in the last twenty-four hours.

They are far too trusting, too kind, too willingly vulnerable. It makes him feel sick, the vivid knowledge of exactly how that trust could be turned on them so easily, every possible way it will harm them playing on repeat inside his head. And yet, here they are — brave enough to put their whole selves on the line, or maybe naïve enough. Braver than Tubbo, that's for certain. Tubbo almost admires them for it. Almost. He's learned his lesson about bravery, and he's not intent to make the world have to teach it to him again.

Tubbo tries to tune it out, empty his head of all the things that want to fill it to bursting. Pushing out all the fear and melancholy and bravery, he tries to ground himself until the only thing he can feel is Ranboo and Tommy breathing, just out of sync. He can count exactly how long each of their breaths takes to fill their lungs, expanding their ribcages out to press layers of bone and muscle and skin and cloth unevenly into Tubbo's sides. Ranboo's breaths are longer and shallower, settled with sleep and whistling with the hardly-audible wheeze and rattle from scratching up his throat on the alien crackle of the Ender language. Tommy's are faster and fuller, quick and light little hitches stuttering his breath every time they pass a religious billboard with the words *MASTURBATION IS SIN* slapped on it and he has to hold his quiet, bursting laughter inside his chest.



“Do you think he’s gonna be alright?” Tommy asks.

Tubbo opens his eyes. He hadn't realized he'd closed them.

“‘Cause I think there's something *seriously* off. He's actin' like he got possessed, or something — speakin' in demonic tongues an' shit.” Tommy gestures with a thumb, pointing at the road behind them as he grins impishly. “Saw a billboard with a number for an exorcist service. We should call them.”

The drive out of the city is long and quiet, except for Tommy. In all fairness, Tommy is being quiet in the only way that Tommy knows how to be. He's keeping his rambling and questions low and hushed, apologizing every time he gets carried away and Ranboo shifts in his sleep. But Tommy keeps pulling Tubbo into easy conversation, and suddenly the drive doesn't feel so long anymore.

“He's not possessed,” Tubbo snorts, slow smile creeping onto his face. “He's speaking Ender.”

“*Why*, though?” Tommy's tone is flat and low as he leans across Tubbo, pressing impossibly further into his space to poke at Ranboo. Tubbo bats his hands away and Tommy snickers. Tommy relents and takes his hand back immediately, but he remains leaning into Tubbo's space, warm and solid and alive all against Tubbo's side.

Tubbo tries to lean away from the contact, but he stops himself just in time.

It still comes as a shock, how easily Tommy allows Tubbo so close. Tommy initiates physical contact so readily, without hesitation, without a thought, without a flinch. Every time Tommy reaches out and presses against Tubbo, Tubbo fights the automatic urge to move away and apologize.

After the prison, after dying, after the revival, after everything, Tommy didn't like being touched anymore, and that was fine. It was easy, de-conditioning himself from all the little ways he was used to reaching out and taking Tommy's hand, or punching his arm, or ruffling his hair. Tubbo would do anything to keep Tommy safe, to make him feel safe, and if all it took was not touching Tommy without his permission, ingraining the instinct in his brain — *DO NOT TOUCH* — then that was nothing.

It was easy. And it should be just as easy to undo. But habits are hard to break. And every time Tommy leans into him, again and again, Tubbo has to suppress a flinch and remind himself, *this is okay, now*.

It might take some getting used to.

“Mmm, not sure. I don't know what's wrong with him,” Tubbo mutters. Maybe the honest words only come pouring out because Tubbo's muddled brain is too absorbed and caught up in the weight and warmth of the moment. His thoughts feel heavy and sleepy, too content to so much as think about what he's saying — too much effort. “He remembers some stuff, and I think it's messing him up.”

Tommy quirks an eyebrow, smiling. “How do you know? I thought you couldn't understand him?”

“I can't.” Tubbo says it simply, statement of fact, shrugging off anything else that might want to come with the admission. From the mush of his thoughts, he struggles to pin down how exactly he knew. It's silly, but the thing that made him realize was— “It's just— he touched my horns.” Tubbo gestures up, waving a hand through the missing dead air gaps curled around his head.

Tommy's face scrunches up in confusion. "You don't have horns, though?"

"Yeah, exactly!" Tubbo confirms, nodding along in muted, lethargic enthusiasm. "I did, before. And the only way he'd know that is if— if he remembered."

"You used to have horns?" Tommy gasps, growing steadily louder in his shock and excitement. Ranboo shifts restlessly against Tubbo's side, and Tommy cuts himself off quickly before dropping back down to a whisper. "Sorry, sorry. But— really!? What, like a demon? Is that why you got a deal with the devil? Are *you* the one possessed by demons?"

Tubbo has to hold back his laughter, silently shaking through his chest and shoulders in bright little quaking bursts. "No, like a goat. I had goat horns. All the other bits too — hooves, tail, ears, you know."

The pang of longing only hits Tubbo after the words have left his mouth and echoed back to his own ears. The smile on his face dips and falls, just a bit. He was doing such a good job of not thinking about it, too.

Tubbo is expecting Tommy to ask about his lost goat traits — *what happened to your horns?* He does a half-assed job of steeling himself in preparation, taking a long breath and holding it at the bottom of his lungs. Tubbo doesn't really want to talk about it, but if Tommy asks, he'll answer.

But when Tommy tips his head and leans in close, what comes out of his mouth instead is, "Hey, why didn't the devil have horns?"

"Is she supposed to?" Tubbo asks, confused and curious as his thoughts are derailed, swinging off in a new and unexpected direction.

"Yeah! The devil's supposed to be all fire and evil and red pointy horns," Tommy says as he flips his phone into his hands, quickly typing something in to bring up a screen full of pictures.

Tommy leans in to show Tubbo his phone screen, and Tubbo automatically moves to shift away. Tubbo doesn't get far with Ranboo walling him in on his other side, and ends up pressed in all the closer to them both for it. Tubbo corrects himself, because *this is okay, now*, and he leans in close to see, knocking into Tommy's shoulder on the way.

Tubbo takes in images of red skin, curling horns, bat's wings, and spade-tipped tails. Sometimes he has a pitchfork, most of the time he is shirtless. Tubbo can't stop the bark of surprised laughter that bursts from him. Ranboo sleepily shifts again, and Tubbo leans back into place with a smile and a quiet snicker.

Apparently, when XD designed the new world, he decided to make the image culturally associated with "the devil" an evil shirtless man with bright red, comically bulging muscles. Tubbo wonders if Drishta has found that out, yet. She's gonna be pissed when she does. It's gonna be hilarious.

Tommy waves a hand, clicking his phone off and slipping it away. "Why's she look like that? Just... you know, a normal girl with a creepy mask?"

"S how she wants to look, I guess," Tubbo laughs, fighting to keep his voice low. "She used to have all of these fancy flowing robes before, but that's really all that's changed."

“Before? Like when you made *the deal with the devil*?” Tommy pitches his voice deep, emphasizing the words dramatically. “When you were a goat? And that’s... what Ranboo remembers, you think?” Tommy asks slowly, looking to Tubbo for assurance as he strings the ideas together.

“Yeah, yeah.” Tubbo nods, smiling.

Tommy grins brightly back, wiggling against Tubbo’s side. “Oh, man. This is so cool.”

Tubbo catches a flicker of movement in the rearview mirror, the first sign of life in a long while. Tubbo glances up and meets Wilbur’s gaze, his flat and dull eyes slowly gaining some of their brightness back in brief and flickering sparks. Tubbo expects him to chime in, but the silence stretches on uninterrupted. Wilbur doesn’t speak, but he is listening.

“So! You made a deal and you gave the devil nukes? Seems like a bad idea,” Tommy points out, prodding Tubbo in the ribs with a finger.

Tubbo squirms away half-heartedly, wiggling himself further into Ranboo’s side to escape. He reminds himself sternly, *this is okay, now*, and he doesn’t flinch away when Tommy pokes him again.

“Well! I mean, the world was ending anyway, and I already had the nukes. They were just going to waste, gathering dust in the lab. Might as well go out with a bang, you know?”

Tommy scrunches up his face in a mild sort of bewildered distaste, as if the thought has never crossed his mind. Maybe it hasn’t. What an odd thought.

“So then what’d you get?” Tommy interrupts, pulling Tubbo’s focus back into the moment.

Maybe it’s the vulnerability penning him in on either side, the easy way Ranboo slumps into him and trusts Tubbo to hold his weight, or the way Tommy grins and asks question after question like he can’t even imagine being ignored or denied. The deep trust and simple kindness seep into him like an infectious, terminal disease — that’s what he’ll blame it on when his brain is more than a soft mush of warm and alive.

Tubbo smiles bitter-sweet and utters, “I got to keep my memories.”

There’s more to it than that, of course. There’s always more to the devil’s details, but it doesn’t seem to matter at all. Here, in this moment, everything is simple and easy, and so is the truth.

“Well, I hope it was worth it,” Tommy spouts off confidently, earnestly, without a doubt, like he hopes Tubbo is happy and that’s the only thing about this whole situation that matters.

Tubbo doesn’t know how to respond to that.

The van slows to a stop, tires crunching against rocky, unpaved roads. Tubbo glances up, concerned that Wilbur’s finally gone and passed out at the wheel. But Wilbur is awake enough to be shifting the car into park, and one of those distant farmhouses Tubbo keeps seeing pass by is suddenly very close. Close enough that Tubbo might even be able to reach out and peel a chip of paint off the flaking porch railing if he leaned out the window far enough.

“We’re here, everyone out,” Wilbur drawls, shoving open his door. He only stumbles slightly as he narrowly avoids stepping directly into a puddle.

Tommy is already swinging out the door, a buoyant cackle ringing out into the air as he calls, “Oh, Technooo! We are here! Let us in!”

Tubbo forces down a shiver at the sudden emptiness, his side abruptly left open to the chill air blowing in from the wide-open door. Ranboo’s weight falls just a little bit heavier on him without Tommy there to brace against.

Ranboo. Right. Tubbo should... wake him up.

Tubbo reaches out a hand. And then hesitates.

What if it didn’t help? What if Ranboo wakes up and all that comes out of his mouth is Tubbo’s name uttered in crackling Ender? What if Ranboo never comes back to himself, lost to the drifting haze forever? What will Tubbo do then? He doesn’t know. He isn’t sure he wants to find out.

It wouldn’t be so bad, the selfish, greedy, malevolent parts of Tubbo say, overwhelming him enough to curl his outstretched fingers into a fist — because if Ranboo remembers, then Tubbo gets to have *his Ranboo* back. Or, fleeting glimpses of him, at least. That’s not what he wants. Except it is. It is. He wants it. To be seen, to be known, to be understood, even just a little bit. He wants it so badly his teeth ache. He bites down hard on the notion, digging his omnivorous, human canines into his cheek until he tears the skin and tastes iron.

The grief is dull and pulsing, ever-present and all-encompassing, but quiet enough to linger as a constant, ceaseless backdrop. In the split and scattered seconds he allows himself to slip under the rising tide at his feet, Tubbo grieves for the Ranboo he lost and he grieves for the Ranboo who might never have a chance to be. The reset was supposed to be a new start, a clean slate where Ranboo could have his bliss and ignorance. Ranboo shouldn’t have to remember any of that awful shit — not the way TNT will ring in your ears for days after you get too close, not the awful certainty that anything can be taken from you if you do not defend it with everything you are, not the way a sword feels while it’s inside your chest. If Tubbo wants to make himself miserable with the burden of those memories, that’s his decision alone. He’s not going to drag anyone else down with him, least of all Ranboo.

Somewhere, under all of it, he’s terrified. This wasn’t supposed to happen. Something has gone wrong, and he *still* doesn’t know how to fix it. The little, fearful part of him shakes. And that part, more than anything else, is unacceptable. Tubbo forces himself to be anything else, to soak in the everything and let it all overwhelm the fear until it’s crushed down to nothing — because he is better selfish, greedy, and malevolent than *scared*.

Tubbo forces his hand through the empty space, pushing himself to stop thinking and *move already, damn it*. His hand reaches Ranboo’s shoulder and his fingers don’t want to uncurl, but he makes them do it anyway. The stretch in his tense fingers is a familiar ache — just like the rest of him, they’re well used to doing whatever needs to be done. Tubbo shakes Ranboo’s shoulder and tries to approximate something like gentle.

“Ranboo? Ranboo, hey. Wake up.”

Ranboo doesn’t stir, so Tubbo pokes his face. Ranboo’s eyebrows scrunch up and he twitches. He grumbles an unintelligible, questioning sound, and Tubbo pokes him again. Ranboo’s eyes flutter

open only to squint closed again against the afternoon sunlight.

Tubbo holds his breath. In this moment, it could go either way. Both possibilities exist in the nebulous space between an indrawn breath and the words that follow, both realities hanging equal in the balance.

“Tubbo?” comes Ranboo’s sleepy mutter.

Tubbo sighs relief. It’s relief, and that’s all it is — even if only because he takes the first wispy threads of traitorous disappointment and crushes them down violently into the box.

Ranboo opens his eyes and meets Tubbo’s gaze, clear and focused.

“Uh, yup, yeah.” Tubbo trips over the tangle of emotions, stumbling as too many thoughts are swept away all at once. “Right here. Still real.”

Ranboo rolls his head sleepily and smiles, a soft little thing that just barely lifts the side of his mouth. Tubbo smiles back, but it comes out wobbly.

Ranboo’s face falls immediately, dipping into a clumsy, awkward trepidation. Suddenly, he is very much awake, or at least fighting to get there. Ranboo rushes the words out, stumbling to ask, “Hey, so, I didn’t do anything, uh... *weird* while I was asleep, did I?”

Tubbo takes a breath and opens his mouth, but not a single thing comes out. He desperately wants to say *of course not, everything was fine*, but the lie sticks in his throat and he chokes.

Tubbo’s eyes flick away, fleeing desperately from the growing self-conscious disappointment on Ranboo’s face. Tubbo huffs, then he takes another breath and tries again. His words abandon him, leaving him grasping and floundering silently. How the fuck does he answer that? *You started speaking a language you wouldn’t know the name of and I maybe got scared and summoned the devil in a gas station bathroom. But don’t worry, it didn’t even help because I still don’t have a clue what’s going on and I’m worried that I’m hurting you just by being here.*

The silence stretches.

“I did.” Ranboo sighs, bringing a hand up to rub tiredly at his face. His voice is solid and dull, utterly certain and resigned to that certainty. He presses his hand against his eyes and hides his face, ducking down and hunching in by increments. He huffs a breath and gives a weak chuckle. “Okay. Okay. I’m sorry about that. I don’t know what I did, but I just— sorry.”

“Hey, hey! No. Stop that.” Tubbo scowls, grabbing Ranboo’s hand and pulling it away from his face. “Don’t apologize. It’s— Are *you* alright?”

“Yeah! Yeah, I’m fine,” Ranboo hurries to assure him, waving his free hand to cut through the air. His eyes flick out the window, settling anywhere but Tubbo’s face. “Don’t worry about it! It happens all the time! I promise I’m fine! It’s just weird, and usually pretty awkward for everyone when I wake up! I know it’s weird, I’m sorry if I freaked you out.”

Tubbo should be the one apologizing, but the words dissolve to smoke and twist away into the empty air. All he can think to say is, “It’s okay, bossman. Let’s go inside, yeah? We can...” *talk about it* sticks in his throat. Tubbo would really, really rather not.

“Er, we can—” *deal with it* catches hard and he almost gags on it. Tubbo doesn’t want Ranboo to think he’s a problem that needs to be *dealt with*. Ranboo already thinks that about himself enough without Tubbo saying the wrong thing and tripping all over his stupid words. The last thing he wants is to see Ranboo’s face fall, the perceived confirmation that Tubbo sees him as a problem ringing in his head.

Tubbo makes a sound somewhere between a sigh and a groan, tipping his head back in frustration as he struggles to put together a single fucking sentence. It should not be this hard. “It’s not a big deal. I might have... panicked, a little bit. But honestly, I’m just glad you’re alright, Boo.”

“Yeah, yeah, mm-hmm, yeah,” Ranboo mutters, nodding along, polite and placating and vacant of meaning as he tangles himself up in his own thoughts. The motion stutters to a halt as something processes in Ranboo’s head, cogs grinding to an abrupt halt behind his eyes. “H— uh, what was that?”

Tubbo raises an eyebrow in question, tapping fingers absent-mindedly against the back of Ranboo’s hand. Ah, fuck. Tubbo shouldn’t have mentioned the panicking bit. That’s probably what Ranboo’s gotten caught on.

With a subtle tip of his head, Tubbo feigns ignorance, hoping against hope that Ranboo might drop it and forget about it. “What?”

“You called— Oh, wait. That’s— oh. Okay. Yeah.” Ranboo blinks, murmuring nonsense as a million unknowable thoughts knot and weave somewhere Tubbo can’t reach.

Tubbo releases Ranboo’s hand finally, gesturing to the house they’ve parked beside in a needless, awkward gesture. “Right, then. Shall we go meet Technoblade?”

Something nervous unwinds in Tubbo’s chest as Ranboo snorts amusement, the little smile creeping back to sit at the upturned corner of his lip. “Well, with a name like that, how could I refuse?”

“You’ll like him,” Tubbo nods with absolute certainty, a statement of fact.

“Alright,” Ranboo says, easy and accepting, his smile growing to spread a little wider.

Tubbo slides out of the van, and with a thump that he can feel reverberate all the way through his bones, his feet connect to solid earth. The driveway is made up of hard-packed gravel and rainwater puddles, the gathered pools reflecting little splotches of clouds and sun. With a breath and the stretch of his arms over his head, Tubbo takes in the smell of wet mud, petrichor, farmland, horses, dogs, familiar, welcoming, nauseating, all in one. Ranboo follows after not a moment later, ducking down to avoid hitting his head on the van with a small, practiced motion.

Tubbo shakes out his legs, the muscles grown stiff after so long crammed into the middle seat. He leans down into a quick and familiar stretch, bending close to the ground as he extends his bad leg as far as it’s willing to go today. It shouldn’t surprise him that his range of mobility is better now, without the scar tissue stretched across his skin and the nicks carved into his bones, but when he blinks opens his eyes, he finds he’s much closer to the ground than he expected to be. His reflection stares back at him from a puddle that’s just a little too close, and the wide-eyed look of the stranger on the water is one he’s unfamiliar with. He only stumbles a little bit as he rights himself, and he almost wishes he’d fallen, if only for the familiarity of it.

Tommy and Wilbur are already on the porch, standing gathered around the front door. Wilbur bangs his fist against the door, knocking as loudly and relentlessly as he can, all the while hollering at the top of his lungs, “Technooo!”

“Let us in!” Tommy screeches, joyfully joining in the screaming between fits of laughter.

Tubbo meanders idly, not quite intent to join in on Wilbur and Tommy’s efforts to make Technoblade consider moving even further out into nowhere.

Lying between Tubbo and the house is a massive puddle, the shallow mirror showing off the dark storm clouds retreating on the far horizon. Tubbo braces himself, then he bolts forward and launches himself over the length of it. He lands hard on the other side, stumbling and pinwheeling his arms to avoid falling right back into the water. Fuck, he really should have done more stretches. Or maybe gotten better legs. He should test to figure out if his balance is better or worse now. He’s not sure the mobility he’s gained back in his right leg makes up for the loss of his hooves. Maybe he’ll get better about having feet after some practice. Maybe it’s just something else he’ll have to adjust to.

Ranboo steps over the puddle in one stride of his long legs, a smug little smirk pulling at his lips. Tubbo sticks his tongue out at him. Ranboo just grins wider, so Tubbo flips him off.

Putting his back to Ranboo in retaliation as Ranboo laughs brightly, Tubbo spins in place, surveying their surroundings. Technoblade sure does like living secluded out in the middle of nowhere — first the arctic, and now this. There isn’t another building for thousands of chunks, as far as Tubbo can see. They’re surrounded in every direction by neat, endless rows of farmland. Each perfectly even row dotted by low-growing bushy crops, their little purple flowers just beginning to wilt as harvesting season approaches.

Tubbo wonders if Technoblade has one of those redstone harvesters. He wonders if Technoblade would let him see it. Take it apart, maybe. He’ll have to ask. Or, he’ll have to get Ranboo to ask. Technoblade likes Ranboo — he’s more likely to say yes if Ranboo is the one asking.

Nestled in the midst of all these sprawling fields is a circle of well-worn grass and gravel. It’s just three buildings, and nothing fancy, at that. The house is a plain thing, boasting no grand vaulted ceilings or towering castle spires. Tubbo is a little disappointed, but he can’t say he’s surprised. He was hoping for a little flare, at least, but Technoblade’s always had boring taste. There’s a large shed not too far off from the house, probably filled with tools and seeds and the components to create creatures of mass destruction.

On the other side, there’s a barn. The barn is the most interesting thing around. It’s huge, easily larger than the house itself, and it’s got a paddock for horses, too. Tubbo can definitely hear dogs baying from that direction. Every time Tommy and Wilbur yell, the dogs raise their voices and howl right back at them. Tubbo shivers. He keeps a careful eye on the barn.

Tubbo thinks the whole thing could do with some walls. It’s a bit too open, honestly. But as much as Tubbo hates to admit it, it is... cozy. Peaceful, almost.

Ranboo makes a questioning sound, and Tubbo turns in time to watch him pull something from his pocket. Ranboo looks confused in the quirk of his eyebrow and amused in the quirk of his lip. He turns to Tubbo, holding out the puzzling little thing, and asks, “Why do I have chapstick?”

Suddenly, the constant knocking cuts out with the creak of a heavy door being shouldered open. Wilbur and Tommy burst out into hollering victory, voices raising impossibly louder in unison. “Techno!”

Tubbo turns and there’s someone new standing in the open doorway.

It’s not Technoblade.

Tubbo can’t figure out who it is, actually. They stand at least a head shorter than Wilbur and Tommy, looking all the smaller next to the unreasonably towering height of those two lanky bastards. The stranger is wide across the shoulders, built broad and dense like they are made up of too much matter compacted into a smaller frame. When they swing the door open all the way, Tubbo watches the muscle shift through the length of their arm, stretching whipcord lines of tensile strength smoothly under the surface of their skin. It’s the kind of muscle built from precise, swift, repeated movement. Maybe plowing fields by hand. Maybe sword fighting. Probably both.

The person in the doorway doesn’t register as Technoblade in Tubbo’s head — not the way Ranboo and Tommy and Wilbur do. There is no immediate snap and rush of familiarity. Tubbo feels like he’s looking at a stranger.

Logically, Tubbo knows that this is Technoblade. He must be. Wilbur and Tommy are grinning easily, familiar in all the ways Tubbo is lacking, and it’s easy enough for Tubbo to match the frizzy mane of bright pink hair to the motion-blurred and half-out-of-frame figure lingering in the back of the photos Tommy showed him. It makes sense. And yet.

Tubbo tips his head and studies the stranger— Technoblade, trying to pin it down and figure it out. It’s not like Technoblade is especially different. He’s no more changed by the reset than Ranboo was. He’s human now — no more stubby tusks or wrinkled snout or wide, triangular ears — but he’s got the same physical stature as Technoblade did, the same intimidating aura that makes him seem taller than he is. But there’s just something... off.

It takes Tubbo a long moment to realize what it is.

He’s not wearing armor.

Anyone who knew Technoblade knew him by the purple sheen of enchanted netherite. Even people who had only ever heard legends of Technoblade in passing knew enough to picture him as he was, covered in netherite plates as if he was born into them. Tommy told him once that Technoblade slept in his armor, and Tubbo didn’t doubt him for a second. Tubbo wasn’t even sure Technoblade was physically capable of taking it off. Until—

Until, of course.

Until Quackity had the axe up against the horse’s neck and Tubbo demanded it of him. Until he was sitting in the back of Tubbo’s boat, seemingly unbothered in his resignation as he complained about how slow the ferryman was rowing him to his death. Until he was standing with his hands clenched white-knuckled around the iron bars and the anvil was dropped from twenty blocks — fatal, ostensibly.

Tubbo’s only seen Technoblade outside the armor once — except he’s never seen Technoblade outside the armor at all. That wasn’t Technoblade, not really. Technoblade was dropped in the snowbank outside an arctic cabin, picked up and carried by Ranboo along the way, delivered back

home once the dust settled on the second crater of L'Manberg. They never had Technoblade. All they ever had in that cage was a person.

Tubbo's attention snaps back the moment Technoblade speaks. It's instinctual. The same way you freeze to listen when you hear something crash and break. A danger sense. Not necessarily a threat, but the awareness of the possibility of one.

"Why are you so loud?" Technoblade asks, not really looking for an answer.

"Cause you fuckin' locked us out and weren't answering the door, you bitch!" Tommy answers anyway.

"I regret this already." Technoblade shakes his head, dangling emerald earring catching the light and glimmering as it dances on its golden chain.

The little sunlight glimmer at his rounded human ear is the only piece of jewelry Tubbo can see. No rings rest on his worn, calloused fingers. No piercings accompany the stress wrinkles and laugh lines that decorate his face with age. Not a single bracelet breaks up the white hash of faded scars that web his arms. Technoblade doesn't even have a crown. For some reason, that doesn't bother Tubbo like the lack of armor does.

Wilbur steps into the doorway. Technoblade stands in his way with a minuscule smirk on his lips, like he's waiting on one of Wilbur's quick barbed quip to fulfill the secret passphrase. Only, Wilbur doesn't have anything to say. He just shoves past, not stopping long enough to open his mouth or even spare Technoblade so much as a glance.

"Hello, Wilbur," Technoblade drawls, eyes trailing after Wilbur as he slumps inside.

"Keep an eye on the kids," Wilbur yells as he disappears inside the house. "Do not let any of them out of your sight!"

Technoblade leans against the door jam, looking back into the house as he informs Wilbur, "There're no sheets on the guest beds."

"Don't care!" Wilbur shouts with his whole heart, followed by the immediate slam of a door.

"Alright. Have my room, sure," Technoblade says amicably to the empty air.

Technoblade turns a raised eyebrow back on the three people occupying his front yard. His eyes flick from Tommy to Ranboo to Tubbo. For a moment, they are silent, regarding each other with a companionable resignation to the situation they've found themselves in.

Into the ticking silence, Technoblade says to himself, "Pretty sure I remember Phil only having two kids." Without waiting long enough for anyone to give a response, he turns back into the house and shouts, "Hey, Wil! What's with the extra kids?"

Muffled in the distance, Wilbur laughs.

"Hello!" Tubbo chirps, because making a good first impression is important.

The accent makes Technoblade's raised eyebrow escalate.

"What did you let Wil drag you into?" Technoblade asks.

From within the depths of the house, Wilbur shouts indignance just loud enough to be heard through the walls. “I didn’t drag them into anything! They dragged *me* into it!”

“Sooo,” Technoblade starts, slowly turning to Tommy when Wilbur proves himself to be unhelpful. His expression is seeping a barely concealed desperation, growing more lost and helpless by the second. “What’s the deal?”

Tommy doesn’t answer because he’s too busy laughing so hard he can’t breathe, sputtering bursts wracking his lungs and making him cough between hysterical cackles.

“Oh, man!” Tommy slaps a friendly hand on Technoblade’s shoulder. Tommy props his arm on Technoblade and leans his whole weight there, and the man doesn’t so much as budge an inch. “So much crazy shit’s gone down, Blade! You’re never gonna *believe*— oh my god!”

“Alright.” Technoblade looks elsewhere, immediately dismissing Tommy as just as much of an information black hole as his brother.

“We summoned the devil in a gas station bathroom!” Tommy informs him, grinning down at Technoblade wildly.

“Uh-huh?” Technoblade goes on, letting Tommy ramble the whole story in fragmented stop-and-start bits. He accepts Tommy’s weight and his words in a casual, blasé way, more than used to Tommy’s everyday exaggerations.

Technoblade’s eyes glance over Ranboo and Tubbo again. When Technoblade’s eyes land on him, Tubbo freezes. Quickly, he forces his body to relax, to seem friendly and unbothered. First impressions are still important, even when it’s only half of one. Technoblade’s eyes take Tubbo in from head to toe, a recognizable danger sweep. Tubbo wonders what Technoblade sees when he looks at him.

Ranboo isn’t so frozen in place. He steps up to the front porch, awkwardly hesitating before extending a hand. “Sorry about, you know, showing up unannounced. I’m— uh, I’m Ranboo.”

Ranboo makes a good play in the awkward olympics, but Technoblade always aims to overachieve. Technoblade visibly cringes on his hesitation for half a second before reaching around Tommy to shake Ranboo’s hand, looking like he’d rather be doing literally anything else than talking to a new person.

“Yup. You’re— Here. And that’s fine. I’ve got enough room. Clearly, Wil’s gone and dragged you into something. Sorry about that.” After a pause, he remembers to add. “I’m Technoblade.”

“Weird name buddies,” Ranboo says with a creeping smile, then immediately pales and regrets opening his mouth and letting those words out without thinking. “Oh *wow*. Sorry. Did *not* mean to say that. Not that your name is weird. It’s a good name.”

“Yeah,” Technoblade huffs a laugh from deep in his chest, a grin bubbling up over his own face. “Weird name buddies.”

They’ll get along great. Tubbo knows it.

Technoblade glances back over to Tubbo again, gaze landing squarely on everything Tubbo doesn’t want him seeing. Tubbo watches Technoblade’s eyebrow raise again, asking the same question in

Tubbo's head. *Who are you?*

Tubbo looks up at Technoblade, meeting his gaze resolutely as he forces himself to take a quiet, steadying breath.

This is going to be... interesting.

Chapter End Notes

It took a while 'cause finals & work have been kicking my ass, but here it is!

[Art for this chapter](#) by Imansburg on Tumblr!

And PebbledRat on Tumblr drew [a comic for this chapter](#)!

Work title from the song [Spitting Venom by Modest Mouse](#).

Come talk to me on [Tumblr](#)!

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

a thought of storm-drenched fields in a white foam of light

Chapter Summary

“They heard the shriek that tore out of its sheath
But as a feeble moan. . .yet dared not breathe,
Who stared there at him, arching—like a tree
When the winds wrench it and the earth holds tight—
Whose soul, expanding in white agony,
Had fused in flaming circuit with the night.”
-- [“Electrocution” by Lola Ridge](#)

Chapter Notes

Content warning for this chapter! Tubbo experiences a flashback. The flashback contains imagery of blood, injury, violence, implied suicide (Tommy in exile), temporary major character death (Tommy, again), etc. If this sort of content is difficult for you to read, leave me a comment or send me a message on Tumblr, and I would be happy to provide you with an edited version of this chapter with some or all of the triggering content removed so you can enjoy it without any undue distress.

Also, disclaimer! I have never personally experienced a flashback. I have done my research and have given my best effort to accurately portray my understanding of the experience, but I’m certain it is not perfect. I am always open to criticism and suggestions on how to improve!

Thank you to [Spook-202](#) for editing this chapter! <3

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

The walls of Technoblade’s house are lined with swords. In the living room, in the kitchen, along the dark hallway stretching off deeper into the house — open display racks make a tremendous effort to take up as much space as physically possible. It’s like Technoblade hated the ugly paint color and decided the best course of action was to cover it all up with a truly copious amount of swords. Tubbo agrees that the swords are nicer to look at, but he doesn’t think the creamy, vaguely yellow shade of off-white is quite *that* bad.

From where he’s standing in the kitchen, pressed into the corner of the room between the cupboards and the refrigerator, Tubbo scans along the sword racks and starts identifying them idly. He picks out a small collection of sabres, their slim, lithe blades and the graceful curve of their guards polished to a shine, practically glowing in the golden light of the setting sun. The brutal bulk of the broadswords is easy to spot among the various blades. He counts at least five — one hung above the fridge, three situated above the doorway like a coat of arms, and one, inexplicably, sitting out on the countertop. There’s an oily sheen on the blade, as if Technoblade were whetting it before

they arrived — or maybe he was using it to butter bread. Maybe Technoblade hasn't done the dishes in a while. Tubbo wouldn't put it past him.

Tubbo takes careful note of the swords he doesn't recognize. Most of them are odd things, all flimsy and strangely curved, utterly absurd in their impracticality. He tries to figure out how they would be used in this world. It seems like important information to have. The evolution of weapons can tell you a lot about the political landscape of the era and the kinds of wars they were made for. But for the life of him, Tubbo can't imagine a single use for something so impractical.

The new world is more peaceful than the last, and the evidence of that lies right before his eyes in a guard that provides no protection whatsoever, no counterweight to speak of, and a blade at least a hand-span wide and five times as long, dulled like it's never even *heard* of combat, never mind seen it. There's no way in hell that something so unwieldy and poorly smithed would be used in an actual conflict. It reminds him of Wilbur's sword — showy, but ultimately useless — the point it makes more important than the point at the end of the blade.

Perhaps the strangest thing is that they're all *iron*. Everywhere Tubbo looks, there's just the dull grey sheen of metal. No dark matte netherite. No gleaming diamond. Not even any gold. They're not even enchanted, for Prime's sake! What's the point of having a bunch of display swords that don't even look impressive?

With his arms crossed tight over his chest, pressed into the corner of the room, Tubbo's gaze grazes across the dull edges of swords hung from walls, and he does not touch them. He doesn't dare reach out and take one, not even the dusty shortsword tucked away and forgotten in the alcove by the doorway, half hidden behind the lopsided kitchen cabinet with the uneven door. He knows himself well enough to know that if he gets his hands wrapped around the grip of a sword right now, he's not going to let go of it again until he's dead. His fingers twitch traitorously, so he curls them into fists and pins them behind his back, leaning hard against the lip of the counter top to put pressure on them and keep them there.

Tubbo does not need to be holding a sword. Not even if it would make him feel better.

The blood-orange sunset light radiating from the far window hits the blade of the shortsword, but it doesn't quite gleam. There's a dull patch near the hilt, maybe even a few flecks of rust—

Tubbo's fingers twitch, and he realizes he's still staring at the shortsword. He forces himself to look away, to look at the collection of odd, impractical swords, the ones that don't make him want to do something dangerous and irrational. Tubbo is trying to keep himself alive. Stealing from Technoblade is not the way to do that.

Things are going well so far. Technoblade hasn't said a word to Tubbo since he stepped in the door, the shorter man shuffling inside and giving a brief nod as greeting before breaking away to flee from the threat of further social interaction. Technoblade and Tubbo were very much in unspoken agreement, content to stay on far opposite sides of the living room without speaking or looking at each other or acknowledging the situation at all. But Tommy had other ideas.

Tommy would stand in the middle of the room, leaning a hip casually up against the arm of the couch, his body tilted just enough to keep them both in his range of attention. With a light, unending chatter, Tommy would lure Technoblade in, starting an easy conversation about how the farming's been going. From the very edge of his vision, Tubbo would watch Technoblade ease. Technoblade is comfortable with Tommy, enough to relax the tension in his shoulders when he answers Tommy's endless questions about how big the fields are and how much time it takes to

water them and when they can eat the crops and if he really uses poop to make the plants grow, enough to let his guard down.

And then Tommy would flip, his eyes flickering to the opposite corner of the room, springing a friendly little trap with a bright smile directed Tubbo's way. "Tech knows so much about farming, he could tell you all about it, oh man. You know, he's got a tractor! Not a big one, just one of the little ones. He won't let me drive it, which is so rude of him. But it's still pretty cool. You like tractors, right Tubbo?"

"Uh, yeah," Tubbo would stumble to answer, feeling Technoblade's fleeting attention on him as the air around him grew steadily warmer, like he was trapped inside a furnace with no way out.

If Wilbur's attention is a pinpoint burn, carefully focused and narrowed down to something intense and needle sharp, then Technoblade's is a slow heat creeping in from all sides, suffocating, boiling him alive.

Then Tommy would laugh and snap like a cool breeze, saying something teasing to Tubbo as Technoblade's eyes wandered awkwardly away again. Tubbo would give a nervous little chuckle, and Tommy would grin like victory. For a moment, Tubbo would breathe a little bit easier, until Tommy reached out and dragged Technoblade into the conversation again.

Tommy bounced back and forth between Tubbo and Technoblade, drawing a line of unwanted attention taught between the two of them. Every time Technoblade's eyes strayed near Tubbo, Tubbo would go tense, tense, tense, his whole body going stiff and his breathing going perfectly, rigidly even until Technoblade looked away again. Technoblade wasn't any better. Every time Tommy redirected Tubbo's attention Technoblade's way, Technoblade would shuffle in place and mutter a short answer before flicking his eyes towards the door, looking like he was contemplating making a break for the exit.

If anything, the nervous, silent pressure building in the air only made Tommy more determined. Tommy liked Technoblade. Tommy liked Tubbo. Tommy wanted them to like each other. Tommy had decided that the two of them would be friends, and he was going to keep drawing them into enforced friendly conversation until *something* gave.

Only, Tubbo predicted that the thing that gave first would be Technoblade's patience.

Which is why Tubbo is standing in the kitchen, hiding.

Technoblade laughs, a hard-edged, sudden, bursting thing that shocks Tubbo into alertness. He snaps to attention, standing ramrod straight the second he realizes his mind had been drifting. That's... not a good sign. When he drifts, it usually means he's going to— well. He just won't let that happen. He's going to keep himself grounded. It'll be fine, of course. There's nothing to panic about here, anyway. Tubbo's hands are trapped safely behind his back, pressed hard against the counter by his body weight, but he can still feel the squeeze of arms wrapped around his chest. Tommy chatters, wheezing laughter as he finishes whatever absurd comment had Technoblade splitting the quiet flow of their muffled conversation in the next room over.

So, yes. Things are going well. Tubbo will not ruin that by idiotically stealing the shortsword, the one with a little patch of rust, right in the corner angle where the hilt meets the blade. It's a small spot that's easy to miss when you're cleaning a sword, but Technoblade is meticulous. Those little flecks of orange-brown say Technoblade probably doesn't pay that much attention to it, probably

wouldn't notice for a while if it happened to go missing. Tubbo forcibly tears his eyes away from the sword again. He scowls at the pantry instead.

Stealing from Technoblade is, in fact, the *last* thing he wants to do. Stealing from Technoblade is a quick and easy way to court death, and Tubbo's been doing such a good job of keeping himself alive. He's got a year-long streak going, and he's not about to break it over a shitty, rusty shortsword. It's not even diamond. Definitely not worth it. He doesn't even want it that bad. His fingers twitch.

This is stupid. With a huff, Tubbo turns and faces the other wall. He narrows his gaze out the window, onto the landscape of the farm outside. In the distance, Tubbo can make out Ranboo's lanky form pacing back and forth along the edge where grass and gravel bleeds into rows of endless crops. Ranboo's got his phone held up to his ear and a nervous-tense hunch to his shoulders, curling in on himself with one arm wrapped around his middle.

Ranboo's been out there for a while. Half an hour, maybe. Something like that. He never even made it into the house, really. He was standing on the front porch when his phone started buzzing. At first he looked surprised, all wide eyes and frozen breath, then irritated as his eyebrows creased together in the middle and his lip twisted down, before finally settling on resignation as his face smoothed into tired blankness and the breath escaped him in a whoosh.

Ranboo asked if there was somewhere he could take the call, and Technoblade had gestured to the whole wide open field with the small quirk of a smile. "As long as you don't mind the dogs. Sorry about them, they're kinda— loud. Maybe stay away from the barn if you don't want 'em barkin' at you."

"Thanks," Ranboo mumbled, his voice dipping with the exhaustion that had overtaken him.

Tommy made a little noise and leaned over towards Ranboo as he asked, "Is everything alright?"

Ranboo nodded, a tiny smile gracing his face at Tommy's earnest concern. "Yeah, it's just my boss. You know, work."

"Ah, work," Tommy said, nodding sagely. "Tell your boss you quit."

"No, actually. I'm not going to do that," Ranboo laughed easily, some of the brightness returning to his voice.

"Do it! It solves, like, ninety percent of your problems!" Tommy insisted, shouting after Ranboo as he stepped off the porch.

"Still no!" Ranboo shouted back, smiling. "I like my job! I want to keep it, thanks!"

Ranboo's eyes went back to his buzzing phone and stuck there, caught on the dull glowing screen. He nearly stepped right into a puddle, for a moment too consumed by the little crease of dread between his eyebrows to watch where he was going. Ranboo stumbled, and when he looked up with a start, his eyes landed directly on Tubbo.

A little crinkle of concern by Ranboo's eyes joined with the dread-crease, and he stepped closer to Tubbo before he quietly asked, "Are you okay if I—"

Tubbo was already waving Ranboo off with a shake of his head, "Yeah, yeah. Of course."

“Are you sure?” Ranboo asked, putting a tentative hand on Tubbo’s shoulder.

Tubbo opened his mouth with an easy dismissal, but paused with a bit of confusion as Ranboo’s phone fell suddenly silent and the screen went dark. Tubbo tilted his head at it and said, “Your phone stopped buzzing.”

Ranboo smiled with a little huff, “It’s alright. He’ll just call me back in—” The phone screen lit up bright and started buzzing away. Ranboo huffed. “Two seconds. But really, are you sure you’re alright for now?”

“Yes! I’m fine!” Tubbo rolled his eyes, already shooing Ranboo away and brushing Ranboo’s hand off his shoulder. “Go talk to the boss, bossman.”

Ranboo stepped back with a smile, holding his hands up in playful surrender. With a swipe of his thumb across the screen, Ranboo turned and walked away.

Tubbo watches Ranboo now, pacing lines in long slow steps, stopping every once in a while to say something into the phone before resuming his steady circuit around the property line. He looks stressed, all hunched up and drawn in. Tubbo resolves to sit with him when he comes inside, even if that means going back into the living room. Or maybe Tubbo can just convince Ranboo to sit on the kitchen floor with him. Tubbo bets he could get Ranboo to agree without asking too many questions. Ranboo might even prefer it. He’s always been the solitary type, and there are far too many people around. He’d probably be grateful for the opportunity to hide in the kitchen and soak in silence.

Tubbo’s eyes land on the sink, cluttered with dirty dishes, and briefly considers attempting to make something for Ranboo to eat in this mess of a kitchen. That idea is very firmly shut down by the fact that Tubbo doesn’t want to so much as touch anything of Technoblade’s. Technoblade will have to order Tubbo to do it if he wants Tubbo to be touching anything in this deathtrap hoard of a house. Tubbo already doesn’t even want to be touching the floor. The idea of rifling through Technoblade’s cupboards and cooking his food makes Tubbo’s skin crawl with chills.

Tubbo could solve both their problems by going outside and joining Ranboo, but Ranboo wanted some space for himself to speak privately. Maybe when Ranboo is done talking to the boss on the phone, then Tubbo can go outside and they can sit outside together. That would be nice.

Selfishly, irrationally, Tubbo hopes that Ranboo’s phone call keeps him outside, just a little bit longer. Outside is safer. Tubbo doesn’t want Ranboo anywhere near the—

A floorboard creaks, and Tubbo straightens with the shock of an electric current, nervous little zings of adrenaline zipping from his heart out through his fingers. The groan of old wood echoes out through the lull in Tommy and Technoblade’s muted conversation. Tubbo was drifting again, his mind wandering dangerously. He scowls and pinches the bit of his arm that he can reach with his hands still trapped securely behind his back, because that’s what you’re supposed to do, pinch yourself. But it’s not grounding, really. It just kind of hurts a bit.

Out in the living room, the quiet shuffle of rubber-soled boots takes a step to the left, moving further into the house. Technoblade chuckles, insistent when he says, “I’m not going to make your bed for you. You can do that just fine on your own.”

Rapidly, Tubbo re-orientes himself, struggling to find something to latch on to, tracking the quiet sound of footsteps over floorboards.

“Please!” Tommy whines, the thump of heavy-footed steps muffled by socks. He laughs and skips a step, dancing closer to Technoblade as he playfully complains. “You really should treat your guests better than this. Where’s the hospitality, Tech! You are a bad host. You are ruining my American experience.”

“Alright. Still not makin’ your bed for you,” Technoblade says flatly, a front that breaks down rapidly into chuckles and half-pleading. “C’mon, I already agreed to wash the sheets. You can’t keep complainin’.”

One particularly loose floorboard squeaks under Technoblade’s boot. Technoblade is stepping closer to Tommy. Tubbo can hear it, tracking their positions as they move across the living room. Tubbo stops breathing, the sound of it far too loud.

“Well, I simply can,” Tommy says with a laugh, the whisper of socks across hardwood just barely audible. He’s putting himself even closer to Technoblade. He’s too close, putting himself in range. He’s handing Technoblade the reason and the means all at once. Tubbo’s seen the walls. He knows the weapons that line them, ready at any opportunity. Tubbo tenses, holding himself perfectly still and not daring to breathe.

Tubbo’s back aches from the tension in his rigid posture.

“Bruh. Look, I’ll wash the sheets for you. That’s it.” The floor creaks like the best informant a spy could ask for as Technoblade steps away. Tubbo tracks his movement as he keeps going, walking down the dark hallway, further into the heart of the house. “You make your own bed.”

“Fiiine,” Tommy gives, his sock-quiet steps shuffling in place, not following. “But just know, I am not happy about it.”

“*You’re* not happy?” Technoblade laughs, trying to sound exasperated alongside his undisguisable amusement. “You brought strangers into my house! Without tellin’ me! I got *no* warnin’! What do I say to them, Tommy? It’s so awkward. This is *awful*.”

Tommy laughs and Technoblade sighs. With the click of a doorknob, the whine of old door hinges, the groan of heavy boots on worn stairs — Technoblade descends into the depths of the basement.

Tommy yells after him, “You’ll like them when you stop being a bitch!”

And Tubbo waits for the snap of reconsideration, for the footsteps to pause, for Technoblade to come back up those stairs, one groaning step at a time. But he just keeps going down, and Tubbo—

Tubbo makes himself breathe, pushes his ribs out until his lungs expand and air rushes into them. The inhale is stuttering and shaky, and the swirl of oxygen makes his head spin and his lungs burn with *not enough*.

It’s fine, the danger has passed — no, there was never any danger, because Technoblade wouldn’t hurt Tommy. He wouldn’t. Not here. They’re friends. They’re family — and maybe that’s a cause for concern, but they seem to like each other, too. Technoblade wouldn’t hurt Tommy. Everything here is fine. Technoblade and Tommy are on good terms now. Even before, Technoblade has always had a soft spot for Tommy. Technoblade wouldn’t hurt Tommy, except for when Tommy’s blood is smeared in little spots across Tubbo’s fingers. Except for when Tubbo’s trying to conserve bandages, trying to methodically peel them away from old wounds on Tommy’s arms and chest, making the hard call on which cuts have scabbed over enough and can be left to heal on their own,

and then unwinding those bandages all the way so they can be moved to the fresh, dripping scrapes on Tommy's knuckles and face, and Tubbo's trying to be careful, but he's learning how to work with four scarred fingers on his right hand now, and as if that wasn't enough, his hands won't stop shaking, buzzing with the energy consumption required for the rapid transition of going from dead to alive in less than an instant, and he's being careful, really trying, but he's still trailing smears of blood in uneven, trembling lines along Tommy's arms, and Tommy had tried to forcefully give them up and bandage Tubbo first — instead, really — but there was nothing to fix, just flash-scarred firework burns, already set by respawn, and when Technoblade throws a punch, it breaks Tommy's nose, because even when Technoblade isn't fighting to kill, he's still fighting to *win*, and even when Tommy is tilting his head back and wincing as he pinches the tender bridge of his nose hard and swallows blood to wash down his stubborn pride, he's still not satisfied, not over it, he wants another shot, he wants to do it again, he's going to do it again the second he's given the opportunity, because he's *right*, and he *knows* he's right, and if Tubbo's not going to stand up for himself and do something about it, then Tommy's just going to do it himself, again and again, throwing himself at the wall until his nose breaks, and even after he's hit the ground, Tommy is still yelling *you killed Tubbo*, and Tubbo really just wishes he would stop, so Tubbo puts a shaking hand on Tommy's shoulder and shoves him into the pit, head too full of nothing at all, because he hopes Tommy knows what he needs, because Tubbo has no idea what Tommy needs, clearly, because Tommy needs to get that pent up electric charge out of his skin so, so incredibly desperately, and apparently this is the way to do it, because Tubbo hopes Technoblade wouldn't hurt Tommy, except for when Tommy gets *reckless*, and then—

And then there's a cutting hard-line pressure along his knuckle ridges and wrists and arms and elbows. Tubbo's weight presses him into the ridge of the countertop at his back, and as soon as he realizes he can feel it, he pushes himself back hard, makes it intentional, tries to make it stick. The squared lip of the counter's edge digs into skin, and it just kind of hurts a bit, but he can *feel it* and it's *real*.

Tubbo sucks in air, and it burns all the way down. He's gasping, maybe, or he would be if he could expand his lungs that far. As it is, he's just breathing too fast, shallow and choking little things so tightly restricted inside the narrow space of his ribcage. There's a sound like whining low under his breath on each exhale, but quiet enough to be safe, quiet enough not to be heard.

His lungs scream *not enough*, but his head spins *too much*. Blood fizzles and burns in his veins the way it does when you've got too much oxygen in you, and still his lungs scream that there's just *not enough*. His dizzy vision fuzzes and swirls, and when he leans unsteady against the counter at his back, he can't seem to pull anything grounding from it.

His teeth buzz in his skull. He runs a dry tongue along them, one by one, checking for something familiar in the ridges and peaks and valleys, but only finds sharp and unfamiliar edges. He tries biting his tongue, digging pointed teeth in with experimental pressure, and it just kind of hurts a bit. He's not sure it helps.

The tide is rising. He can feel it lapping at his chin. It wants to pull him back under, push him down into the pit. He sucks in a breath that's wobbly and stuttering, and he holds it there until his vision fuzzes, and then spins, and then grows dark at the edges, and then he lets it out slowly through his nose. His lungs burn more, more, *not enough*, and he ignores the dark-tinted warning flashing at the edges of his vision as he slowly, aching slowly, draws in another breath.

Tubbo forces himself to relax. And failing that, he settles for not actively hyperventilating.

That, right there, is exactly what he was worried about. That is the reason why he needs to keep himself grounded. That is what happens when his mind starts to drift. Given any opportunity, any scrap of idle moment left spare in between welding nukes and building walls and plowing farms, his mind will drag him down. The warning signs are always there, clear in the way his brain floats away from whatever task is in front of him, drifting off to think of other things, making him unaware of his surroundings, detaching him from his body. He *needs* something to work on, something to keep him focused and grounded, needs it like breathing. Only he doesn't have anything. There isn't anything that needs doing. Everything is fine. Everyone is safe. Nothing needs his attention. He doesn't need a sword. He doesn't. He just needs—

He needs to breathe.

Tubbo takes a deep breath. It's a mistake. Unbinding the muscles around his ribs, allowing his chest to push open further, it makes his lungs scream for more. The whining sound is louder now, unacceptably so. The inhale stutters and shakes, his lungs fighting to take in more, more, more air. He clamps down on that and holds his breath, keeps it there until his vision grows dark and spins and glows, and then lets it out slowly through his nose.

He is fine. He is in Technoblade's kitchen. With the slow drag of every inhale, he can smell the distinctive traces of mud and petrichor and farm and horses, permeating even inside the house. He can feel the lip of the counter top press at his back, sinking biting lines into his arms and hands. He can hear the vibration of the refrigerator humming along at his side. He can see the sunset light pouring in from the far window, spilling into the kitchen and spreading golden-cream-yellow across the walls and cabinets, shining off the swords lining the walls and reflecting their light redoubled to paint the opposite wall. He is fine.

There is nothing here to worry about. Technoblade is not going to hurt Tommy, even if Tubbo's brain is desperately trying to convince him he will. It's not that Tubbo doesn't like Technoblade. Even before, in the old world, Tubbo never really held a grudge against him. He's seen up close and personal exactly how that ends, and he's not keen on trying it out for himself. Technoblade is a fine guy. Technoblade just makes him... nervous. Tubbo is aware enough to admit that, if only to himself. Tubbo and Technoblade just have a lot of history between them. But that doesn't matter anymore. Technoblade doesn't know him, much less remember anything Tubbo's done to him, so it's not a problem. Tubbo is the only one to remember, and Tubbo won't hold a grudge, so it's fine, now. No one is hurt. Technoblade is not going to hurt Tommy.

Tommy is—

Tommy is shuffling across the floorboards, trailing the heavy *thump-thump* footfalls of stomping feet that don't know their own weight, can't account for their ever unexpected tallness. Tubbo tracks the motion as Tommy treads out through the hallway and back into the living room, and Tubbo feels dread seep icy through his chest. Where did Tommy go? Where was he before? Tubbo lost track of him. How long has Tubbo been distracted, lost in his own thoughts? The light coming in from the window tells him it couldn't have been long. The shadows cast against the kitchen wall creep slowly and fade in increments. It couldn't have been more than a few minutes. But still. Fights are lost and won in a matter of seconds. Tragedy doesn't have a timeframe.

Socks muffle the slide of feet over old, well-worn floor, and suddenly Tommy is there, rounding the corner and peeking into the kitchen. Tubbo almost forgot he could do that. The space here feels so distant, like he was standing in an utterly different reality, separated by thin walls and glass windows, unreachable. Tommy's eyes sweep around until they spot him, tucked into the corner by

the refrigerator. Tubbo straightens, suddenly aware of how he's standing. He loosens his shoulders and makes his posture uncurl, but his hands stay firmly pinned behind his back.

There is no red-purple-black bruise swelling along the broken bridge of Tommy's nose. There is no blood-stained bandage wrapped sloppily around Tommy's split knuckles. There is no trail of blood smeared on his arms by unsteady fingers. There is nothing to worry about.

"How's the kitchen, big man?" Tommy asks with a chuckle, a lightness in the bounce of his step as he skips forward into the isolation of the room. He's watching Tubbo carefully, a little concerned, but smiling like he's got everything in the world under control.

Tubbo has to clear his throat before the words will come out. "You know. Just, uh." The words abandon him, and Tubbo uses his shoulders to shrug out something approximating a response as he glances around the kitchen. He can't think of a single word to describe it. His head is flooded with too much nothing, swirling empty and unreachable.

Tommy hums and nods understanding, all the while a grin looses itself from its restraints and spreads across Tommy's face. Tommy spins a bit in place, surveying the kitchen for himself, but his eyes keep flickering back to Tubbo, and the grin keeps growing.

"It's honestly pretty boring around here. I was expecting a bit more from the home of The Blade," Tommy says, sighing heavily with disappointment. "He doesn't even have a TV! He's just got all these books, which is fine, but I don't *read*. Books are for losers— and Tech, because he can still be cool, I guess. Wilbur reads books and he's *definitely* a loser, biggest loser you've ever seen. But I am not like him. You won't ever see me reading a book."

Tubbo thinks of the pair of dog-eared and spine-cracked novels sitting on Tommy's side of the van's dashboard, the rest of the series set stuffed into the glovebox, but he doesn't say anything. He thinks it might be funny to tease Tommy about the blatant lie and absurd, pointless posturing, but the thoughts slip through his mind and wash away with the tide.

Tubbo raises an eyebrow in Tommy's direction, and enough of him must come through with that small gesture alone. Tommy catches the look on his face and laughs, skipping backwards dramatically while he sputters and puffs his chest and grins.

Tommy's back foot hits a floorboard that *squeals*, and Tubbo winces. Tubbo thinks Tommy really should stop doing that. Technoblade is still in the basement. If Tubbo can track Tommy just by his footsteps while they're on the same floor of an unfamiliar house, then Technoblade can definitely tell *exactly* where they are. He's under their feet, listening to every creak and groan amplified, knowing exactly where they stand in his territory. But Tubbo doesn't speak, and Tommy keeps moving.

In the next moment, Tommy is stepping in closer, putting himself close to Tubbo. Tubbo's cornered with his back against a wall, at a strategic disadvantage — but it doesn't feel like closing in, it just feels like coming home. Somehow, Tubbo's got enough room to breathe, now. Lightly, treading so very softly so he can't be heard, Tubbo moves forward and gravitates nearer to where he's supposed to be.

Something new catches the light.

On the far wall, where all the fading orange-rose sunlight reflects off polished swords and casts their bright patches of golden light, something moves. Tommy takes another step forward, and one

of the glowing patches of light sways in time, a perfect reflection of the motion.

It takes Tubbo longer than it should to realize that Tommy's got his hands behind his back.

It's not a sword. It's too small to be a sword. But it is something. Tommy's got it hidden behind his back, and he's got a mischievous grin that spells trouble spreading across his face.

"Tommy," Tubbo starts, his words forcing their way out of him in jagged chunks. It's nothing. It's probably nothing. But there's a cold dread building in him, filling all the empty space in his head and seeping through the cracks in his skull to drip down into the pit of his chest. "What's—"

"Oh, this?" Tommy perks up, his sly tone playing against the way his eyes crinkle with excitement.

Tommy rolls his shoulders in a faux-casual shrug as he brings his hands forward, brandishing them out towards Tubbo with dramatic flare. There, clutched in between his two outstretched hands, gathering fingerprints all over its gleaming surface, is a crown.

Tubbo's breath catches in his throat, and his lungs *scream*.

Tommy's eyes shine. He's watching Tubbo, waiting for the shock to fade, waiting for the approval, the mischief, the awe. Tommy skips a step closer and Tubbo doesn't shift, doesn't move an inch, doesn't so much as breathe. Tommy looks down at the golden circlet, radiating wicked pride as he flips it around in his grip, watching the colorful inlaid gems gleam.

"Pretty cool, yeah? It's Tech's crown. I stole it." Tommy's grin is all teeth when he glances up at Tubbo conspiratorially. "You're all sad and quiet and shit, and it really is boring around here. Need to do *something* to keep things interesting, aye? You wanna see it?"

Tommy takes another step, going too far. He extends the crown, balancing the thing on one finger as he holds it out towards Tubbo. It wobbles, it tips, it's going to fall if he's not careful. And he's not being *careful*. He's still smiling, radiating gleeful, expectant, *reckless*. Tubbo's going to be sick.

When Tubbo doesn't move, doesn't speak, doesn't breathe, Tommy takes the crown back, holding it close to his chest as he twists it around in his hands, a nervous and uncertain little fidget. All Tubbo can see is the way he's leaving *more fingerprints all over it*. Tommy rambles, "It's real gold, you know? Phil got it for him when—"

But the world fades out, and there's no sound. There's only the buzzing in his ears.

This is okay. This is fixable. They just need a plan. They need to put it back. They need to put it back *now*. Before Technoblade comes back up the stairs and sees what Tommy's done. The fingerprints. They need to wipe it clean, get rid of every trace, put it *back*, but Tubbo doesn't even know where Tommy *got it*, or why he *ever* thought this would be a good fucking idea.

Fuck, Tommy got it from Technoblade's room, didn't he? Tommy shuffles uncertainty in place, and the floorboards *scream*. Technoblade knows exactly where they are, in his territory. He's under their feet. They can't put it back. He'll hear them. Fuck, he already *knows Tommy's been in his room*. It's too late, a foregone conclusion. Technoblade wouldn't hurt Tommy, except he's already done it. And there's not a single goddamn thing Tubbo can do to stop him from doing it again.

Tubbo can't stop it, because despite all his good intentions and best laid plans, Tubbo's never been able to win a single fucking fight, and Technoblade never loses, never dies, and Technoblade

wouldn't hurt Tommy, except for when Tommy puffs up, all hot air and empty threats, glaring at Technoblade in his obstinance while Wilbur grins and laughs, and Tubbo is still learning how to navigate four bloody fingers around a roll of ragged, used bandages, and Tubbo thinks *at least Schlatt never hit me, at least Quackity never hit me*, for all the evils of Manberg, nobody Tubbo loved ever hit him there, and Technoblade doesn't count, because Tubbo forgave him already, but Tommy is still yelling *you killed Tubbo!* And Tubbo just wishes he'd *stop* and *fucking listen for once*, because Tubbo doesn't *want* him to fight Technoblade for Tubbo's worthless goddamn honor or whatever, because it's not going to change anything, it *had* to happen this way, it was already a foregone conclusion, and the ends justify the means, but Tommy needs to discharge that electric emotion building deadly and ready to overload under his skin, and if this is the only way he can think to do it, then so be it, so *fine, let them duel in the pit*, so Tubbo puts a hand on Tommy's shoulder and *shoves*, and—

Tommy moves. He steps closer to Tubbo. He's got a hand tentatively outstretched. He looks panicked. He's saying something. Concern-fear written bold in the crease between his eyebrows and underwater muffled tone of his voice. Tubbo can't hear him. Tubbo can't even hear himself. Tubbo's saying something, making noise, but he doubts it's coherent, maybe a whine, maybe a snarl. Either way, the result is the same. Tommy's outstretched arm flinches away and his hands both go back to clutching at that golden death warrant, signed with his fingerprints.

The crease between Tommy's eyebrows furrows deeper, something concerned and afraid and angry in all his helplessness, because Tommy's been helpless long enough to know that he *hates it*, and Tubbo is going to be sick. Tubbo is sick. Tubbo is sick of Tommy's reckless, self-endangering behavior. It's like he's constantly trying to get himself killed. And if Tubbo wants to protect himself from the pain of losing Tommy again — again, again, again — then it falls on Tubbo to pull Tommy out again, to pull him back from the knife's edge he keeps dancing on, but Tommy gets mad. Every time. Tommy gets friendship-ending levels of angry at Tubbo when Tubbo tries and fails to save him from the consequences of his actions, and Tubbo *hates it* when Tommy is angry with him, because Tommy never stops dancing on the edge of that knife, but when he's angry he won't even let Tubbo close enough to pull him back, and that's *worse*, a million times worse.

And Tommy is angry. He keeps getting closer, and he's near enough that Tubbo can see the hazy blur of fear and panic in his eyes, and he's saying something, loud and abrasive against ears that won't even work right, shouting, “—thing! Look, look! It's alright! It's just a stupid— hey, hey, I'm gonna put it back. Look, I'm putting it back, yeah? C'mon, man! I'm kinda— this is— stop with the— talk to me, man! Tell me how to help! Can you even hear me? I'm—”

The sound fades out, replaced by the ringing wash of static waves, and Tubbo can feel the tide rising up to swallow his ears and muffle the sound and pull him under and—

Tubbo tries to do something quick and grounding. Behind his back, Tubbo digs his nails into his arms, but it doesn't *help*. It just *hurts*. He can't fight back. He's tried everything, and nothing ever *works*.

Tommy's hand is on Tubbo's shoulder, grasping, clinging desperately tight to keep him grounded, to keep him here, but it's no use. Tubbo's mind is skipping like a record, and there's nothing he can do, this is just how it goes, Tommy fucks up again, gets in trouble again, and everyone's acting like it's fine. Like it's expected. Like this is *just how it goes*. Tommy does something stupid, again. Tommy gets in trouble, again. Tommy gets injured, Tommy gets exiled, Tommy gets killed, again, again, again. It's commonplace, at this point. No use getting worked up over. Philza's hand is on Tubbo's shoulder, and the quiet trickle and drip of water under the raised platforms of New

L'Manberg sounds like static in his ears. Philza looks at him with kind eyes and the best intentions and tells him to *start letting go, because one of these days Tommy's not gonna make it out alive, and it will hurt less that way*. Tubbo thinks about Wilbur. He wonders if Philza is speaking from experience or reflecting on what he wishes he'd done. Dream's hand is on Tubbo's shoulder, the chipped edges of obsidian are uneven ground under his feet, and Dream is standing at Tubbo's back, looming over him, and their shadows fall over Tommy's face, over the crease between Tommy's eyebrows, concerned and afraid and angry in all his helplessness, and Dream tells him to exile Tommy. Tubbo thinks about letting go. So he puts a hand on Tommy's shoulder and shoves him into the pit, and history repeats itself, and—

Tubbo's mind is skipping like a record, and—

Tubbo's boots sink into the soft soil. The loose dirt is overturned in patches, bits of tree root and unearthed stone sent flying, scattered across the scorched ground. The trail of footprints he leaves grows clearer the further he gets from the nether portal, the further he gets from the hard-packed and well-worn earth, the further he gets into blast radius. The sky is dark and the rain is coming down hard. He can't see the top, but he only needs to see the first block to know where it ends. There is only one outcome. It's inevitable. A foregone conclusion. At the center of the blast radius, a one-by-one tower with one way down, and—

Tubbo's mind is skipping like a record, and—

Tubbo doesn't want to have a breakdown. Which is perfect, because he can't. He doesn't know how. He doesn't think he could cry if he tried. He walks down the Prime Path to New L'Manberg, and he feels fine. People say *it's okay to experience grief, if you need to*, but Tubbo doesn't feel much of anything. It feels expected. Like this was always going to happen. Inevitable. Nothing he could do to stop it. Most things feel that way, nowadays. People say *it's okay to cry, if you need to*, and Tubbo doesn't cry, so he must not need to. His body keeps on moving. He's letting go, he's moving forward, he's doing a good job. Time keeps moving, but the days don't go anywhere. Tubbo doesn't cry, and it feels like an improvement. In a vague, distant sort of way, he feels proud of himself. And then he gets back to his office. And then he shuts the door. He keeps moving, but there's nowhere to go. Nowhere to go but down. And then his body hits the floor. And then he breaks down sobbing, loud, heaving things that tear at his chest and rip from his throat and leave him gasping for breath. He feels like he's dying, and that's inevitable, too. He feels like he's dying. But he's not. And then he's laying on the floor in his office, staring at the underside of his desk, staring at the dust bunny caught under the foot of his chair that wobbles back and forth with the push and pull of air from Tubbo's lungs, staring at the weave of the gray wool carpet as he picks at the scratchy texture with one of his four fingers. Little shudders wrack his inhales and sniffles clog up his nose, the dust bunny sways to the unsteady rhythm. Tear tracks dry tacky against his cheeks. And then he falls asleep there, debating whether or not he can cancel the diplomatic meeting tomorrow, and—

Tubbo's mind is skipping like a record, and—

Tommy is *alive*. This fixes everything. Tommy is fine. Tommy came back. Tommy is *alive*. Tommy was never dead to begin with. The ends justify the means. Tommy is here, Tommy is *alive*, and that is the only thing that matters. This fixes everything. And—

Tubbo's mind is skipping like a record, and—

Tubbo treads along the even lines of the grid, his arms extended out like he's walking a tightrope, because the obsidian under his feet is slick from the rain that's just begun to pelt down, and he doesn't plan on slipping up, even though he can still hear Technoblade and Tommy screaming at each other, the volume echoing dizzying in his ears, and Tommy's still shouting *You killed Tubbo!* But his balance holds up this time, enough to get him to the next platform, so he goes about the familiar motions: break the circuit, sweep up the redstone lines into a pile of dust, scoop it into his hands and carry it over to toss off the edge to the obsidian grid, watch it scatter into a puff of glittering red dust on the wind, check the dispenser for any leftover TNT, find it empty, all the potential fulfilled with explosive force, kick the redstone repeaters so they come loose and fly off the edge, putting the force of all the fury and frustration he's not sure he feels behind the blow, then watch them tumble down into the crater below, let his eyes catch on the floating lanterns that survived the onslaught as they spin and swirl in the hot air thermals from the lava exposed at the bottom of the crater, Tubbo thinks *L'Manberg had lava under her skin*, and Tubbo thinks *this is beyond the point of repair*, and Tubbo thinks *maybe Schlatt was just better than me*, and Tubbo thinks *history really is doomed to repeat itself*, and Tubbo thinks it's just like Quackity said, *inevitable*, and Tubbo thinks that it's all the same, repetition 'til the end of time, variations on a theme, and nothing ever changes, not in a way that matters, and as Tubbo treads his way across the rain-slick surface of the obsidian grid with his arms outstretched, he thinks he might slip and tumble down into the lava at L'Manberg's heart and let her gaping maw eat him alive, but he reaches the other side, and he's got a redstone circuit to break, and a dispenser to check for TNT, and—

Tubbo's mind is skipping like a record, and—

Tommy says *we need to kill Dream*, and Tommy says *we need to do it together*, and Tommy says *it's our responsibility*, and Tubbo thinks *this isn't going to work*, but he's smart enough to keep his goddamn mouth shut, because Tommy doesn't like the truth, and Tommy is never going to stop dancing on the edge of that knife, and Tubbo would rather die by his side than die alone, and *all good things must come to an end eventually*. Tommy's got a pent up electric charge under his skin, like he was struck by lightning, and he *needs* to get it out before he overloads, and apparently this is the way to do it, so off they go, throwing themselves into danger for reasons Tubbo can't even pretend to understand, so Tubbo lets that elevator carry him *down*, knowing that they're already dead, inevitable, and all he can think is *it's about time, anyway*, and—

Tubbo's mind is skipping like a record, and—

Somehow, they survive. Tubbo's not sure what to do with himself now. In the face of all the inevitability, it seems strange that he hasn't just died already. He's lived a full life, he thinks. He's done everything he can think of, and now there's nothing left in the world to do. Time keeps moving, but the days don't go anywhere. Time stretches on infinitely in front of him with no end in sight. Someone better might take up knitting or baking, but he's never been good at those sorts of things. So he builds. He hefts slabs of frost-painted stone, freezing to the touch, and lays them down, one on top of the other, building an endless stretch of wall without purpose, existing entirely to go on to the next day. He builds, and it becomes Snowchester. It doesn't really help. He still feels like he should be dead, honestly. But somehow, in spite of every inevitability, they survived, and—

Tubbo's mind is skipping like a record, and—

Tommy dies in the prison. History repeats itself. Tubbo doesn't cry, this time. Tubbo is proud of himself for the improvement. Ranboo calls it denial. Tubbo calls it living to see another day. Ranboo puts flowers around Tommy's house because there's no grave to leave them on. Or, if there

is, it's locked away inside a maximum security prison. Tubbo thinks he should feel something about that. Instead, he just kind of wonders if the bees will like the flowers. He hopes so. It would be nice if the flowers weren't useless. Ranboo is more torn up about this whole situation than Tubbo is, which might be strange. He hopes Ranboo doesn't think he's strange for not crying. He wonders if he should fake crying, if that might make Ranboo feel better. Misery loves company, and all that. Ranboo's breathing is getting shaky, and if he keeps this up he's going to start crying. Tubbo hopes Ranboo doesn't cry. He doesn't want Ranboo to burn himself. Ranboo asks *do you want— can I hug you?* Tubbo says *uh*, and hesitates a moment before he says *sure?* Because he thinks a hug might make Ranboo feel better, and he doesn't want Ranboo to burn himself. Then Ranboo's hand is on Tubbo's shoulder, and—

Tubbo's mind is skipping like a record, and—

Tommy is *alive*. Tommy gets out of prison *alive*. Tommy comes back, he's here, *alive*. And Tommy says *everyone's making me talk about it! Stop making me talk about it! Stop treating me weird!* And Tubbo can do that, Tubbo can act as if nothing happened, because really, nothing has. The means are pointless in the face of the ends. Tommy is *alive*, and that is the only thing that matters. This fixes everything. It's fine. It's expected. This is *just how it goes*. It's commonplace, at this point. No use getting worked up over. History repeats itself. So Tubbo can accept Tommy in with open arms, without a second's hesitation, ushering Tommy inside, and Tommy's still kicking the snow off his boots as he says *I need your help*, and he says *we need to kill Dream*, and he says *Dream mentioned that Technoblade owes him a favor, alright? We can't let Technoblade get to him. We need to watch if he does, alright? What we need to do is stake out until it happens and then we go in and we— we— we— we chop off his head, alright? We aim for the head and we slice it right off, alright? You two, what do you think?* And Tubbo thinks of an anvil falling on a neck that never breaks, and Tubbo thinks *that isn't going to work. We've already tried that*. And Tubbo thinks history repeats itself. But Tommy needs to kill Dream. Tommy's got a pent up electric charge under his skin, and it's been building for so long, and he *needs* to get it out before he overloads, and apparently this is the way to do it, only it's never worked before, only they've *done this before*, and it *never works*, and Tommy *never listens*. The same people, the same places, the same results. History repeats itself, and nothing ever changes. And Tubbo is tired. He's so, so tired. Tired of the conflict, tired of following people who throw themselves headfirst into fights better left avoided, tired of the same people and the same places and the same results. That's the whole reason Snowchester exists, the bastard child of L'Manberg and knowing better. A new place, where they can be new people, and maybe, just fucking maybe, they can see new results. It would be so easy to let sleeping dogs lie, to let Dream rot in prison, to never open Pandora's Box, to live safe in Snowchester, protected by nukes and experience and knowing better, but Tommy's never been easy, never been satisfied. Tommy says *I just want to feel safe, again*, but every time Tubbo opens his doors and ushers Tommy inside and lets Tommy kick the snow off his boots, he's gone before the fireplace can even melt the snow he's left behind into sad, pathetic little puddles of slush. The only thing Tubbo can think is that Tommy doesn't want to feel safe. Not really. Tommy says *I just want to feel safe, again*, but Tommy doesn't know what he wants. He's been living in danger for so long he doesn't know what to do with safety when it's handed to him on a silver platter. So Tubbo will open his doors. Tubbo will make Tommy a bedroom in the mansion he will never stay long enough to see, and Tubbo won't be surprised when Tommy steps out into the snow again, throwing himself into danger for reasons Tubbo can't even pretend to understand. So if Tommy needs to kill Dream, and if he's certain that this is the only way to discharge that pent-up electric charge under his skin, then Tubbo's not going to stand in his way, and when Tommy limps home, battered and bruised and bloody and *dead*, Tubbo will open his doors and let Tommy in again, just long enough to kick the snow off his boots. And Tommy has the audacity to look shocked. When Tubbo wishes him well and says *good luck* and opens the doors to let Tommy go seek his revenge, Tommy has the audacity

to insist that *we need to do this together. It's our responsibility*. Tubbo wants to scream, but he can't move. He wants to tell Tommy to go to hell, but that won't do any good. Tubbo's tried being good and forgiving and kind. Tubbo's tried being responsible and unyielding and brutally honest. Nothing works. Nothing changes. History repeats itself. Ad infinitum. He doesn't know what to do anymore. It feels like there's nothing he hasn't tried. And now there's nothing left in the world to do. Nowhere left to go but *down*. Down to the buried part of him that wants to lock Tommy in his fucking basement. He wants to tie Tommy to a chair and never let him leave just so that Tubbo can keep him *safe*. He can make a prison in the mansion. They've got the space for it, certainly. They have the money for it. They can pay Foolish to do it. Hell, they can pay *Sam* to do it. Sam didn't seem to have any moral qualms about locking Tommy up the first time. And Tommy won't be lonely, he'll have Michael and Ranboo and Tubbo, of course. It's the only thing Tubbo hasn't tried. It feels like the only way to keep Tommy from getting hurt again, from dying again, from making Tubbo grieve again, again, again. And Tubbo is so fucking tired of it all. But he can't do any of that. (He can. It would be so easy.) It's not what Tommy wants. (Tommy doesn't know what he wants.) Tommy would hate it, and the only thing Tubbo has ever wanted was for Tommy to be safe and happy. (But right now he's not safe *or* happy. And wouldn't being safe but unhappy be better than nothing at all?) Maybe Tubbo would do it if he cared a little bit more, or a little bit less, or knew how to have a breakdown properly, but he doesn't, and the snow on Tommy's boots is starting to drip, and—

Tubbo's mind is skipping like a record, and—

Technoblade's hand is on Tommy's shoulder. Tubbo stops, completely and immediately, going unnaturally still. He freezes like prey. The whine in his throat cuts off. The heaving of his chest abruptly halts, caught on half the jagged edge of an inhale. Everything stops. Tubbo watches the hand, zeroed in, unable to see anything else. There is nothing in the world that matters except for the way Technoblade's hand rests firmly on Tommy's shoulder, too close to his neck. If he dares to make the wrong move, Technoblade could break Tommy's neck. Technoblade wouldn't hurt Tommy, except he might. And Tubbo can't do anything to stop him.

Technoblade says something, his voice low and quiet. Tommy is not nearly so hushed. He's snapping back, words harsh and biting, and Tubbo wants to slap a hand over Tommy's mouth, but he can't move. All he can do is watch Technoblade's callous-worn hand resting too close to Tommy's neck.

Technoblade repeats something, again, again, insistent. *Tommy, Tommy*. His fingers squeeze tight around Tommy's shoulder, oh god. It's an awkward angle, Technoblade has to reach up to get his hand on Tommy's shoulder, to get his hand around Tommy's neck, but there's nothing stopping him. And Tommy's talking over him, his words blending everything into a blur of noise, getting louder. It's all quick, frantic, spelling threats and insults and objections between panicked wordless shouts. Technoblade reaches up and puts his other hand on Tommy's opposite shoulder, oh god, oh god, and turns Tommy, forcing Tommy to face him. The new angle makes something gleam, light reaching over to spill shining fingers on every cut face facet of precious gemstone across the golden death trap dangling carelessly from Tommy's clenched white-knuckle grip. The edges of Tubbo's vision swim and glitter as the crown jostles and sways, and still he can't take his eyes away from Technoblade's hands on either side of Tommy's neck.

Technoblade's voice is hard edged and rumbling low, the harsh brunt of it demanding a compliance that Tommy will never give. *I need ya to trust me on this one, Tommy*. Tommy's head turns away, obstinate, and for a second he's looking right at Tubbo. And Technoblade turns his head to look, too. And Tubbo can't move, can't breathe, can't take his eyes off the raised scars and embedded

wrinkles along Technoblade's knuckles, waiting for the inevitable second when fingers wrap around Tommy's neck, thin and lithe and breakable.

Technoblade looks away, burning everything in his path. *Go... uuuh, go take a breather, alright?* From the fuzzy-dark edge of his vision, Tubbo watches Tommy's face screw up, his nose scrunching and his lips peeling back. Tommy whips back around to face Technoblade, and he's right back to shouting again. Because Tommy's never been easy, never been satisfied. Tommy yells *You killed Tubbo*— but no, no, that's not— he's saying something else. Tubbo can't make out the words, all too fast and loud and jumbled, ringing frantic in a way that stabs fear into Tubbo's chest, but it doesn't matter, because it's all the same. Tommy won't budge, won't give in to what anyone tells him to do, won't listen to reason, even when Tubbo is dying to convince him. And Technoblade says *Tommy, Tommy, please, Tommy*, and it's all useless words on uncaring ears. And then Tommy's neck twists and his eyes flick back over to Tubbo. There's a hitch of silence before Tommy takes a breath and he's spilling curses, throwing himself back as he rips himself out from under Technoblade's hands, and he's crossing his arms tight over his chest, glimmering crown pinned up against his side, as he spins on his heel and stomps out of the room.

Tubbo stands in frozen disbelief. He tracks the sound of socked feet angrily stamping over creaky floorboards. Tubbo jolts with the cacophonous slam of a bedroom door somewhere far down the dark hall. The sudden noise makes all of Tubbo's muscles tense up, and then immediately unwind. Suddenly, he can breathe again. All the tension seeps out of him in a long second, two, three, as the silence stretches. Tommy is out of the room, out of range, out of harm's way, at least for the moment, and that's more than Tubbo can ask for.

Tubbo feels infinitely better now that it's just him and the possibility of death alone.

The room is wobbling. His vision is blurry. That might be the lack of oxygen. It doesn't feel like there's enough oxygen here. Tubbo's not entirely sure where *here* is, but that seems less important.

The fuzzy shape of Technoblade moves. Tubbo flinches, knocking back into the hard edge behind him. But Technoblade only lowers himself to sit on the floor, unfolding his legs out in front of him and stretching them with a heaving sigh. Technoblade puts himself below Tubbo, sitting with his back to the cabinets, far enough into the room that he's not blocking the exit. The position looks kind of awkward, his body slanted at just enough of an angle that he's not facing Tubbo head-on, so the handles of the lower cabinets are poking him in the back. It's all very disadvantageous. Tubbo thinks that that's probably the point.

Technoblade is quiet, but the silence isn't quite purposeful. His eyes roam around the room, flicking from spot to spot restlessly. He's looking for something to say and coming up blank. All the while, his eyes never stray near Tubbo, huddled in the dark crevice untouched by torchlight, lingering couched on a set of cobblestone stairs that lead down to nowhere, probably an old mining tunnel that half-collapsed in on itself— no, the corner by the refrigerator. That's. That's where he is. He can hear it humming. He can feel the press of the counter lip against his back. He's in Technoblade's kitchen. And Technoblade is sitting on the floor with his back leaned uncomfortably up against the cabinet handles, eyeing the jar of sugar on the top shelf like it might have some good tips for conversation starters.

"Sooo, can you tell me where we are, Tub— uuuh, Tublow?" Technoblade trips over the unfamiliar name, flipping it up into an uncertain hazard of a guess.

Tubbo nods. He doesn't bother opening his mouth. He knows he's not going to be able to get the words out. But he knows where he is. He is in Technoblade's kitchen. He is in the corner of Technoblade's kitchen. He is in the far corner of Technoblade's kitchen where the refrigerator meets the cabinets with his back pressed up against the hard lip of the countertop. He nods again.

Technoblade's eyes flick over to Tubbo at the movement, but just as quickly flit away again. Maybe it's more social awkwardness than an intentional calming tactic that has Technoblade avoiding Tubbo's eyes, but it helps all the same. Tubbo thinks that if anyone looked at him for too long right now, he might just burn up and die, combusting like a fire charge and taking every miserable scrap of wood and stone and life down with him. The tension echo aches, flexing through fingers that bend too easily along too many joints, all five of them. They burn like electric wires, too much current doubling back with nowhere to go. His frazzled brain screams need for a conduit, for grounding metal, but he does *not* need to be holding a sword.

It's frustrating. His body won't listen to reason. He *knows* there's nothing to fear here, and still his traitorous muscles tremble and ache and burn. Still his body is unconvinced, despite all the evidence in front of him. Technoblade isn't even *looking at him*.

Tubbo appreciates it just as much as he hates it. Technoblade's eyes on him means bad things. But somehow, when Technoblade isn't looking at him, it's worse. Technoblade's eyes slide just to the right, not quite meeting Tubbo's eyes, a decorated stage, a crowd, a whizzing firework just too far to the right of it's target, a hasty crossbow string pulled back with a second shot to—

But that doesn't matter. Tubbo forgave Technoblade a long time ago. He forgave Technoblade the moment he woke up in the fighting ring, decorated in Manberg's colors. It makes sense. He knows it wasn't Technoblade's fault. He knows Technoblade was peer pressured into it. He knows that if Technoblade hadn't killed him, they both would have died by Schlatt's order. He knows there was no way to win, three against a nation. He knows it only gained them allies in the end. (The ends justify the means. The ends justify the means. The ends justify the—) He knows. He was there, front row seats to witness the hesitation that lit up Technoblade's face. But every time Tubbo closes his eyes, it's still the brunt of Technoblade's shadow falling over him, backlit by every bit of sun, outstretched rocket launcher, an apology on his lips, lit up—

It doesn't bother him anymore. He's over it. He *should* be over it. He doesn't understand why he can't just fucking *get over it*. It didn't even hurt as much as the second time, when Technoblade loosed the hounds of war and Philza laid out the sand and skulls and death and Dream rained TNT down to bedrock. That was worse. That was so much worse than just some stupid fireworks two feet too far to the right. But it doesn't sit with him the same.

Really, Tubbo's only complaint is that Technoblade faltered. He hesitated. He flinched. He closed his eyes and looked away. The first shot went off just to Tubbo's right. Not enough to kill him. The second shot was enough, but the damage had already been done. Respawn only wipes away fatal injuries, the killing blow. Anything you can live with remains.

If Tubbo could do it again, if he could change it all, he would make Technoblade get it right the first time. Maybe he should have been more rude to Technoblade — said something to make Technoblade hate him a little bit, just enough not to hesitate. Tubbo would rather see sick satisfaction than the regret, the hesitation, the apology, and then nothing at all. He'd rather Technoblade didn't look away.

And Technoblade isn't looking at him. It makes him feel a bit better, just as much as it makes him feel sick.

"Can you tell me your name?" Technoblade says, feigning a smooth confidence. "Totally because you need groundin', and not at all because I forgot your name."

Tubbo opens his mouth with a small inhale, and it's all he can do to keep breathing. Breathing is good, better than not breathing, but he needs to speak. He takes a deep breath and the words are there, he can feel them, caught at the bottom of his throat. He's fine, he can do this. He sucks in another breath, and when he pushes the air out again, he manages a noise. It sounds like something halfway between a hum and a whine, but the noise is flowing now, and it's easier to wrangle his vocal chords and tongue and teeth and lips into molding the sound into, "Tubbo."

"Yup. Good job." Technoblade nods. "...I have no idea if that's right or not, but hey, you answered. That's a good sign. You doin' alright? You want some, uuuh... water?"

Tubbo shakes his head no.

"I've got juice. Not sure how good it is, though. It's been in the fridge for a while. Should probably check the expiration date on that. When does orange juice go bad?" Technoblade's eyes slide over to the refrigerator, two feet too far to Tubbo's right, and Tubbo freezes dead still. Technoblade cringes and looks away, turning his head in the complete opposite direction. To the bowl of onion and garlic bulbs on the counter, Technoblade says, "Listen, man. I'm a little out of my depth here. If you can't talk, that's cool, but I'm gonna ask you some yes or no questions. That alright?"

Tubbo nods.

Technoblade nods back, echoing the gesture thoughtlessly. "Cool. Alright. Is the talkin' helpin'?' Because I can shut up and just be quiet. But if the talkin' is helpin', I can ramble all day. So talkin', yes or no."

Tubbo considers it. The first and fiery reaction bubbling under his skin screams *no, stop talking, go AWAY*, and it makes his fingers tremble in clenched tight fists and fills his chest with bubbling lava that rises and rises and floods every empty, thoughtless bit of his head with heat and panic-fear-rage. But he knows better than to give in to what the fire under his skin demands. It *is* helping — having someone around that's real, that's breathing, that's speaking, that's forcing his head to focus on the here-and-now. That's better. That's helping. As long as Technoblade is here and talking, drawing answers from him, Tubbo isn't going to sink back into his own head. He's better grounded and burning than *gone*. So, Tubbo nods yes, a sharp-quick and decisive motion.

Technoblade breathes out, the sound whistling incremental relief against his human teeth as he slouches down just a bit. He immediately straightens back up with a wince as the cabinet door handles dig into his back, but the relief is still there. "Alright. I mean, I'm just takin' stabs in the dark at this point. I know talkin' helps some people. Not me, but you know, other people. If it's helpin' you, then that's good. Personally, I just need to be left alone. Just gotta plow a field or run sword drills without anybody talkin' at me."

Tubbo's eyes glance back at the absurdly impractical swords on the kitchen walls, then back to Technoblade with an incredulous raised eyebrow. Tubbo didn't think Technoblade would see, but his peripheral vision must be good, or maybe he can just sense when he's being made fun of, because he huffs a rumbling laugh.

“Not my precious anime merch,” Technoblade drawls flatly with the humorous pull of a smile, laying sarcasm on thick to smother the way the words sit embarrassingly sincere. “Phil would murder me if I put a scratch on his Benihime replica.”

Tubbo blinks at Technoblade. He isn’t sure what anime merch is — maybe a classification of swords meant for flare and display? It seems strange to him that *Technoblade* of all people would waste time and space collecting anything deliberately useless, much less swords.

Technoblade raises a hand, lazily gesturing at the swords on the walls. “These ones are just for lookin’ at. Anythin’ actually dangerous got put in the shed as soon as I heard Tommy was comin’.”

Ah, well that explains all the iron, at least. Tubbo nods understanding. All of the diamond and netherite must be in the shed.

“It’s a cool art form. Good exercise,” Technoblade rambles through Tubbo’s silence, gaze flitting around the kitchen distractedly. “It’s nice to de-stress and just lose yourself in it, push yourself until you can’t think anymore and your brain goes quiet. You know?”

Tubbo does know. He knows exactly what that’s like. Out in the empty frozen stillness, laying stone slab after stone slab, layer after layer, building up and across and out and infinite. Just going and going, pushing his body to its limits, going until every muscle trembles and his fingers ache and his hot panting breaths fog the air and all else fades away. Not thinking about anything except the next slab of freezing stone under his calloused hands.

“Can—” The sound catches and chokes in Tubbo’s throat. He hisses frustration on the remnants of his exhale before he takes a new breath and tries again. “Can I?”

Technoblade keeps his eyes on the jar of sugar as he tilts his head. “What? Sword drills?”

Tubbo nods slowly, uncurling his fingers and curling them again, wrapping tight and squeezing pressure along his arms, pressing soft, blunt nails into his skin before letting go again.

Technoblade looks skeptical. It’s reasonable, his hesitation to give the emotionally unstable teenager a weapon. He’s probably going to say no, and Tubbo knows that. It’s fine. He’ll find something else. Maybe find a shovel and a pick and just start digging a hole. It’s not as satisfying, but honestly it’s probably the better option. Tubbo ignores the way his too pent up lava submerged heart burns and fizzles dangerously, something snarling beneath the surface as he spins cold justification to himself. Instead, he thinks about how Technoblade probably has tools he can borrow — Technoblade seems like the only person so far with the good sense to keep a full set of tools on him.

“Yeah, sure,” Technoblade says, and Tubbo’s thoughts trip to a stop.

“Wha— really?” Tubbo asks, curling his blunt nails into his arms before letting them go, then doing it again.

“I mean, I’m not gonna let you run around with a sword *unsupervised*. And you’re only gettin’ a practice blade. But if you’re planning on bein’ a danger to yourself or others, I’m pretty sure I’m more than capable of disarmin’ ya,” Technoblade rattles off with a lazy wave of his hand through the air. It’s quick and flat, a promise in statement of fact. His eyes flicker over to Tubbo and cringe away again before he thinks to add. “No offense.”

“None taken. You’re right,” Tubbo says easily, unbothered by the truth. His words come on the first try this time, his tone gaining back bits of light brightness at the unexpected prospect of getting his hands on a sword again, even just a training blade.

“Right now? Or are you gonna keep hauntin’ the corner of my kitchen? ‘Cause, uuuh, I do need to make dinner at some point,” Technoblade chuckles, no judgment in the question despite the poorly chosen phrasing.

Tubbo’s mind automatically jumps to crafting several more diplomatic ways of phrasing that, but the rough edges of Technoblade’s blundering is soothing in it’s own way. There’s no intentional manipulation there, just unfiltered thoughtlessness.

Tubbo realizes that the tug at his lips is forming the barest slip of a smile. He takes the first hesitant step, moving away from the corner of the room as he says, “Lead the way, Technoblade.”

Technoblade levers himself up off the kitchen floor with a heavy sigh. He takes a moment to stretch out his back with a groan before he spares one final glance Tubbo’s way, then steps out of the kitchen. Tubbo follows, just far enough behind to be out of range. Just in case. Tubbo keeps his hands clasped behind his back — polite, respectable, non-threatening. He knows how it makes him look: pulling his shoulders back, making him seem smaller, makes him seem confident, steady, trustworthy, but not domineering, reasonable, agreeable, easily controlled. He knows how it hides the way his fingers flex behind his back, stretching and curling and tensing and folding over and over themselves. It hides the way his skin boils just below the surface, running hot and itching and burning every inch of him. So he does as he makes himself — he follows.

Technoblade steps out the front door and onto the driveway, treading through rainwater puddles that shine dark blood-orange like the clouds with the last of the setting sun. He stops in front of the shed, and the lock cracks open under his careful fingers. He steps into the dark shed, and Tubbo waits outside until he reemerges a moment later. Technoblade hops backwards, awkwardly maneuvering out of the shed with his back to Tubbo. He hops on one leg and tries to pull the door shut behind him with his other foot, his hands too full to be of use.

“Not really sure what you can handle, so I just grabbed, uuuh,” Technoblade looks down helplessly at the heap of swords bundled in his arms. “A lot of them.”

Technoblade carefully lowers the heap from his arms to the ground, laying them out on a somewhat dry patch of gravel and grass. Tubbo’s eyes sweep over the spread of swords. They’re all dull around the edges, made from rubber, metal, wood in varying styles and weights. Technoblade waits for Tubbo’s choice with his eyes averted, apparently watching something very interesting in the distance.

Tubbo hesitates. It’s the kind of offer made to be taken for granted, so unexpectedly good that you don’t think to stop and question it for fear of having it taken away, snatching up promises without stopping to examine them too closely. The kind of placating generosity meant to hide something. Only, Tubbo thinks the only thing Technoblade is trying to hide is how much he cares.

Tubbo kneels down and Technoblade’s eyes flick to track the motion for a fleeting second before they sharply pull away again. Tubbo traces fingers over the polished smooth grain of a wooden sword, ignoring the way they tremble without purpose. It’s not the kind of two-handed sword he’s used to and the guard looks like it’s too small to really protect him from anything, but it’s shorter than the others, short enough for him to wield comfortably. He already knows he’s going to suffer for the shorter hilt, though.

Tubbo wraps his fingers around the grip of the wooden sword and hefts. He stumbles a bit as he stands. The weight isn't nearly as heavy as he was expecting it to be. The sword is light in his hands, the leather wrapped grip resting easy and familiar against his fingers, nestling perfectly into the soft skin where his calluses should be.

Without thinking, he shifts his grip, fingers sliding along worn leather as he tries to fit two hands on the shorter hilt. He can barely manage it, but there's not enough room to leverage a good, strong swing. He scowls, face twitching up into irritation. Yeah, that's definitely going to fuck him up. He can't block anything like this. Anyone with a heavier swing will tear right through him and his pitiful blocking defense. The longing for his own sword rips through him violently. He misses it. He misses it like a limb. Every inch of enchanted, netherite-coated diamond hand crafted perfectly for the sole purpose of keeping him alive. Without it, he's already dead.

"I can lead you through some drills," Technoblade offers, gaze lingering comfortably on the wooden sword in Tubbo's hands.

"Nah, I got it, bossman," Tubbo dismisses, drifting a few steps over into the grass. In another time, he might be overflowing with excitement to learn from *The Technoblade*. But not now. Technoblade might be the best, but Tubbo's not trying to think about learning anything from him right now. In fact, he's trying to *stop* thinking.

Tubbo finds a nice patch of grass and shifts up onto the balls of his feet as he settles his weight down, sliding into a steady stance. From there, he doesn't even think. He just does. He's done this enough times that the movements come to him easily, carved deep into his muscle memory. He would say it's as natural as breathing, but it turns out he's not very good at breathing, actually. He's better at wielding a sword than he is at breathing. That's probably sad, or maybe something to be proud of, but he's not going to think about that right now. He's not going to think about anything.

The flow is more than a little off-balance, one-and-a-half handed, not enough weight behind his swings, not enough balance on his too-flat feet, five fingers on his right hand where there should be four. The movements are messy, amateur in technique, screaming self-taught, but they are so, so very practiced. The forms he slides between are well worn, more familiar than breathing, familiar like home.

He lets his breathing sync to the flow of motion, puffing out in short bursts and drawing cold air in from between his teeth. Step forward. Thrust. Slide back. Block. Block, from the side this time. He's not built for blocking. Doesn't have the build for it. He can't keep that up for long. Turn the block into a parry. Use their momentum against them. Feint. Sideswipe. Overhead swing. He doesn't have the leverage for a big swing like that, and the move leaves both his sides open and unguarded. Only a last resort. Feint. Drive them back. Step forward. Feint. Duck back. Feint too much and they start taking risks. That's dangerous. That's how he gets them, if he's careful. Swing. Thrust. Advance. Overhead swing. A last resort. Tubbo feels nothing. He thinks nothing.

Tubbo's awareness of Technoblade fades and sharpens. There's moments where he loses himself and there's nothing in the world but the leather under his grip. Then in the next he's hyper aware of every quiet huff of breath, every flick of eyes on his side, every inch of his skin boiling and searing and flaring into unsustainable temperatures. He pants heavily, his breath spiraling and threading into a thin puff of heat. He feels the chill that chases out the fading sun settling cool against his sweat-beaded skin, but only in the way that he feels nothing at all.

Logically, it's probably good that Technoblade is still here, keeping an eye on him just in case Tubbo hurts himself by accident. There's still a lot of damage you can do with a wooden sword, Tubbo thinks. And then he scowls. He's still *thinking*.

Tubbo drives the sword a little bit harder, shoving more force into the swing, cutting unsatisfactorily through empty air. He lets the blade clatter sloppily against the ground, digging a harsh gouge into the dirt and grass just to feel the push back reverberate up through his arms. He pushes himself a little harder, puts a little more reckless force into swings that turn brutal. He is not thinking. He is cutting through the thoughts, but all he meets is dead empty air. There's no impact. There's no resistance. There's no point. There's nothing stopping him, and it feels *wrong* because there's *always* something stopping him. And he's still thinking. Fuck.

Technoblade's eyes burn through Tubbo. Tubbo growls frustration and clenches his hand hard around the leather grip. Technoblade's just sitting there, and he's not even *doing anything*.

"You should fight me," Tubbo gets out between heaving inhales.

"Not sure that's the best idea," Technoblade says, deliberately toneless.

"No, you should," Tubbo insists, sounding every bit reasonable. Tubbo twists and looks imploringly at Technoblade, ignoring the tremor that runs through the aching muscles of his arms and down into the sword, quaking subtly. "It would be good."

Technoblade meets Tubbo's eyes, looks right at him, searching for something. Tubbo very steadily holds his gaze and he doesn't flinch or curl in or freeze and lock up. He is standing his ground. He is reasonable. He wants Technoblade to fight him, and Technoblade's not going to do that if he thinks fighting Tubbo would be boring, if he thinks Tubbo is the kind of fighter who flinches and freezes.

"...Alright," Technoblade finally utters into the long silence. Slowly, he stands, dusting bits of gravel and sand off his pants. There isn't even a second of consideration before he picks up one of the practice swords, closely familiar with all of them. His choice is a long, broad blade, two-handed, dull black rubber blunting every edge. Good for blocking. "I get the feelin' you're not gonna give if you need to, so I'm just gonna go on defense."

Tubbo nods, accepting that easily. His skin vibrates in anticipation. He skips back a few paces to give Technoblade room in the grass, and then he slips his weight down into his core, settling into his body. Tubbo raises his sword, and his arms tremble in a mix of excitement and deeply ingrained, unreasonable fear.

Technoblade shifts, too. He grounds himself heavily, settling feet firmly against the grass. Tubbo already knows how this match goes. He's done it before. Tubbo has the height advantage between the two of them, even if only by a couple inches, but that's all he has. Technoblade has the power and the weight. Underlying the bulk of him is a lithe grace, boasting maneuverability Tubbo couldn't hope to match. Technoblade brings his sword up. He's familiar with the weapon in hand, and Tubbo's still fumbling with a hilt that's too short and a blade that's too long. Just one more advantage, point Techno. A score already settled before the fight's even begun. Tubbo is outmatched in just about every imaginable capacity. He has no hope of winning. And yet.

Tubbo wants to know what it's like. He wants to understand. He wants to see what Tommy sees in it. Every time the emotions running under Tommy's skin crackle electric like a caged lightning strike, Tommy throws himself into danger and beats it until it beats him back. Tubbo wonders if it

helps. Tubbo has never understood, but he wants to find out. Because Tubbo's got lava in the crater behind his ribs and it's burning him alive, eating him up to ash from the inside, and he needs it *out*. And apparently this is the only way to do it. The only thing left he hasn't tried.

Maybe it makes him a hypocrite, but Tubbo's never blamed Tommy anyway.

Technoblade takes a long breath, and Tubbo watches the way his chest expands. Then he lets it out, a steady stream of white fog into the cooling dusk air. As the air leaves Technoblade, his muscles go loose and ready. Technoblade gives a nod. And Tubbo throws himself into danger like a last resort, the last thing he can do.

Tubbo goes all out. He doesn't think. He doesn't stop. He just goes and goes and goes. No feinting, no blocking, no dodging, no hope of survival. Nothing but every single reckless, brutal, furious strike he can manage. He *knows* Technoblade can take it. He can't hurt Technoblade. He can't. He can't. He can't. He knows because he's *tried*. He's tried so hard and so many times. He gave everything he had and poured his whole being into trying to hurt Technoblade and he still couldn't do it.

Technoblade is unbothered, letting Tubbo slam strike after strike against the flat of Technoblade's defense. Of course. Even going all out, Tubbo can't get a hit on Technoblade. Every time Tubbo's wooden sword gets close to laying a single scratch on his skin, Technoblade is there to smoothly swipe it away. Parry, deflect, block. Never retreating, holding his ground easily as Tubbo throws himself at Technoblade again and again. The wooden sword strikes the dull rubber edge, knocked away before he brings it back and twists the momentum into another swing. No pause. No stopping. No freezing. Just burning.

Technoblade knows there's no way Tubbo is going to be able to hurt him if he tries. So Tubbo *tries*. Because he knows it even better than Technoblade does — he can't win. It's just Technoblade and Tubbo and a sword. And Technoblade never dies.

Technoblade is maybe the only person in the world who can take the brunt of Tubbo's rage and walk away like nothing happened, and Tubbo almost loves him for it.

Tubbo goes in for an overhead swing. He doesn't have the leverage he needs. It's sloppy. It leaves his sides open, but Technoblade doesn't take the opening to gut him. He doesn't need to. Tubbo's blade meets the blunt edge of Technoblade's sword, and the hard strike reverberates through his arms. The sword slips out of Tubbo's hands, his fingers trembling too hard to hold on anymore. The wooden sword clatters against the gravel and spins through a dark puddle, kicking up splashes of night-soaked rain water. Tubbo follows it down. He crashes to the ground hard, his knees giving out as he hits the grass, collapsing into a pile of trembling limbs and heaving gasps for air. He's breathing so hard his vision swims and spins.

"You alright?" Technoblade asks casually, slowly lowering himself down to crouch by Tubbo's limp, collapsed form.

Tubbo nods, closing his eyes as he tips his head back. He can't speak, there's barely enough room in him to focus on getting cold air into his lungs. So he breathes. And that's all. He fills his lungs and lets the swirl of air cool his chest, and then he pushes it all out and lets the white steam cloud escape him. Technoblade sets his sword down. Tubbo's sword lies lost and forgotten, soaking in a puddle of reflected stars. For the first time in longer than he can remember, Tubbo is better at breathing than he is at wielding a sword.

After a long time, maybe forever, Tubbo mutters, “Thanks.”

“Sure.” Even with his eyes closed, Tubbo can feel the way Technoblade hovers awkwardly, watching Tubbo carefully. “Just keep breathin’. Please don’t pass out on my lawn.”

“M sorry.” The words twist out of Tubbo’s mouth. He’s not really sure where they’re coming from. He’s not thinking, his head blissfully empty.

Technoblade audibly cringes. “Oh god. Please stop talkin’. I will pay you to stop havin’ emotions at me.”

Tubbo laughs, the sound light and startling between his panting breaths.

Technoblade brightens, and Tubbo can hear the smile in his voice when he continues, “Imagine bein’ sorry you got destroyed in a sparrin’ match. Cringe. If you wish to defeat me, train for another one hundred years.”

Tubbo stops trying to hold himself up, letting himself fall over into the grass with a huff. He lays on his back and keeps his eyes closed, living in the dark, quiet space inside his head. He lets all his trembling muscles go loose, relaxing into the hold of the solid earth beneath him.

“You good?” Technoblade asks, the tilt of concern picking up his words.

Tubbo nods, his hair rubbing against the grass, and he can’t keep the pleased smile off his face.

“Alright. I’ll, uuuh, be right back.” Technoblade hesitates, still hovering over Tubbo carefully.

Tubbo nods. He can feel when the heat and presence of Technoblade moves away, standing up with a huff. Tubbo listens to the crunch of boots over gravel as Technoblade heads back towards the shed, stopping along the way to collect the wooden sword that spun out of Tubbo’s grip and gather up all the spread of training swords that went unused. The shed door swings open with a *crreak* of old hinges, and Technoblade’s footsteps vanish inside.

After a breath, two, three, Tubbo lets his eyes slide open. He watches the wispy puff of white steam that escapes his heaving chest, dissolving into the air like it never existed. He listens to the quiet almost-silence of the night, accompanied only by the little shuffles of small animals rustling through the crops and the humming buzz of insect wings. He stares up at the first pinpricks of stars littering the dark indigo sky.

Technoblade’s footsteps return, and the shed door creaks closed before the snap of a padlock seals it shut. Tubbo traces the bright little points of light in the dusk sky and listens to Technoblade’s light footsteps as they crunch back over to him.

Technoblade enters his field of view, standing over him awkwardly. Tubbo grins up at him and doesn’t bother moving at all. Technoblade crunches back down by his side, setting something heavy across his chest. With monumental effort, Tubbo picks up his trembling arms and runs shaky fingers over the mystery object. His fingers touch the smooth surface of a narrow leather sheath, and by the way it weighs heavy across his chest and the way it rattles when he nudges it, there’s a sword in it.

Tubbo looks up at Technoblade curiously.

Technoblade fumbles, like he's not sure how to explain himself. In the end, he just lands on a roughly uttered, "Keep it."

Tubbo decides to cut him a break and looks back up at the stars. He runs his fingers up and down the sheathed blade, exploring his new gift idly. It's a short blade. Still a bit longer than he's used to, but not by much. The rattle of it sounds metallic, not the familiar ringing tone of diamond or netherite, but better than nothing. It's got a narrow guard, not so good for blocking, but Tubbo's not built for that, anyway. The pommel is heavy, good counter weight, good balance. The hilt is long, long enough for two hands, long enough to sit comfortably in Tubbo's grip.

It's not perfect. But it's all he needs.

It's a very nice gift that Technoblade has given him. It gives him away. Every little near-perfect detail — everything about the sword screams the care and attention that Technoblade doesn't have the words for. It shows Technoblade was watching Tubbo carefully, watching him closely enough to spot the way his stance was more suited for two-handed fighting, the way he was off balance because he expected the blade to be heavier, the caution in the way he was more familiar with a double edged blade that he always expected to bite him back. He wonders how much of that Technoblade caught, and how much was a lucky guess.

Tubbo unclips the sheath and slides the blade out, just enough to lightly trace his finger over the edges of it. Sure enough. Double edged.

"Don't you think it's dangerous, giving me a sword?" Tubbo teases, slipping the blade back into its sheath.

Technoblade just laughs. "I mean, I'll take it back if—"

"No. Mine." Tubbo curls his trembling body up around the sword, grinning wildly all the while. "No take backs."

Technoblade sees the fierce grip Tubbo keeps on the sword and the cautious way he eyes Technoblade in spite of his playful words, but there's nothing in his face but understanding. He gets it. He gets it in a way Ranboo and Tommy and Wilbur don't. Not anymore.

Tubbo doesn't thank Technoblade again, because he thinks Technoblade might just get up and walk away if he did, and against all odds, Tubbo wants Technoblade to stay.

All he does is breathe, laying flat on his back and letting the grass cradle him close to the earth, feeling the cool night air seep through his skin and sink into his bones, running his fingers along the comforting feel of metal and leather, allowing his trembling limbs to relax as he watches the new stars grow steadily brighter against the dark sky, something familiar under his hands and something new and different right in front of his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

[Art for this chapter](#) by PebbledRat on Tumblr!

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

am I home or merely caught between two unmarked graves

Chapter Summary

What have I

To say in my wrong tongue

Of what is gone To know something is

Lost but what You have forgotten what

You long forgot If I am

What survives I am here but I am not

Much of anything at all To be what's left

-- ["Inheritance" by Camille Rankine](#)

Chapter Notes

Thank you to [Spook-202](#) for editing this chapter! <3

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

Tubbo is never going to move ever again. He is just going to stay right here. Everyone else can deal with it. Dream could axe down Technoblade's front door in full netherite right this instant, and even then Tubbo doesn't think he could get up off Technoblade's couch if he tried.

It's a very nice couch. It's soft. The kind of soft he can feel himself sinking deeper in to every time he shifts, every time he breathes. Tubbo doesn't know what it's made of, but he's going to ask Technoblade how he crafted it. That is, after he lies here for a bit longer, because Tubbo doesn't even think he's capable of opening his eyes, much less holding a conversation.

Every single one of his muscles aches in the best way. The relieving stretch of every forgotten muscle that's gone too long without use, all satisfied at once. His whole body trembles lightly, the little quaking vibration that lets him know he's alive. It's a faded and steady background, not really noticeable except for when he tries to move and the trembling grows worse. But he's not doing a lot of moving at the moment. Or ever again. Because he lives here now. He lives on Technoblade's couch, and anyone who disagrees can piss off.

The shaking is fine, the shaking isn't a problem, except maybe in his hands — but that's nothing he hasn't dealt with before. The tremors are only really noticeable in his fingers, and that's probably because he can't stop moving them. He can feel the strain there, aching along all his knuckles and

joints and pulsing through his angry-red palms, but still he runs his fingers over the sword, a nervous habit.

With his eyes closed, he does it again and again, the same repetitive, unthinking motions. Slowly, he skims the flat of the blade, feeling the smooth run of metal so clearly under his unscarred, uncalled fingers. Steady, certain, trembling fingers travel up the length of the blade, brush over the leather wrapped hilt, and come up to rest at the pommel, rubbing languid circles over the rounded, polished surface like a worry stone.

The sword sheath is slung across Tubbo's left shoulder, another gift from Technoblade, another bribe to keep Tubbo from having a messy emotional breakdown in his house, again. Tubbo had to tighten the strap all the way just to get it to lay workably across his back. Technoblade is shorter than Tubbo is, but he has a bulk that Tubbo lacks.

The sheath digs into Tubbo's sore and aching back, pressed roughly into his skin by the couch cushions he's sunk into. It's a line of sharp pressure he can trace easily from his left shoulder to his right hip. It's wonderful. The feeling is familiar in a way that makes him feel safe. The bite of metal and leather digging into his back is a constant reminder. A reassurance. He won't ever forget it's there.

With eyes closed, Tubbo traces his fingers back down the smooth metal surface. He's pretty sure he couldn't open his eyes if he tried, and he doesn't bother trying. He doesn't need to look at what he's doing, anyway. His fingers tremble, but only err in equal deviations. He won't hurt himself by accident. He's done this far too many times to be caught off guard by it. So he lies back into the couch cushions and lets his eyes weigh closed, wobbling fingers climbing their way steadily back up the polished surface of the blade.

Exhausted. There's no other word for it. He's exhausted every bit of energy in his bones and every thought in his head, leaving him utterly empty. Even his brain feels muted and floaty. All of his thoughts come in brief flickers somewhere he can see off in the distance, but not quite touch. He doesn't try. He doesn't have the energy to chase them and pin them down. He just lets them come and go like breathing, watching across the distance.

It would be nice to fall asleep. It would be *so* nice. He could fall asleep right here — he could just sink down into Technoblade's couch and disappear from the waking world. However, Tommy is doing his best to make that dream impossible.

Tommy's voice rises and falls in sharp and muffled tones, muttering to himself as he works his chaos. There's the slam of a cabinet door in the kitchen, the refrigerator opens and closes for at least the fourteenth time, the clatter of something landing in the sink, something that probably shouldn't be in the sink, judging by Technoblade's long-suffering sigh that follows.

"Do you need somethin', Tommy?" Technoblade shouts mildly towards the kitchen, all pointed and sarcastic.

There's a pause of silence before the clattering resumes, even louder than before.

Technoblade heaves another sigh and quietly mourns. "My kitchen organization, man..."

Footsteps grow louder as Tommy quickly rounds the corner of the kitchen doorway, trampling through the living room. Tubbo traces his path without opening his eyes, without faltering as his fingers slide back down the blade. Tubbo can hear the barest hesitation in Tommy's stride and then

a dramatic, wordless whine, but Tommy doesn't stop, he keeps moving, and Tubbo listens to him disappear down into the dark hallway with the skittering rush of socked feet.

There's the slam of an old door — a bedroom, probably — and then the clattering continues. He's done this four or five times now. Tubbo's not sure what he's doing. He thinks Tommy's not sure what he's doing, either.

Tubbo sighs, a heavy breath that seeps from his chest and escapes through his nose. The couch cushions take the subtle motion as opportunity to envelop him further, creeping up to hold him tighter. Tubbo thinks he might be able to fall asleep right here, but Tommy is clattering around in the bedroom, and he will be back in a matter of minutes. He will trace the same path, keeping all of Tubbo's attention awake and aware, focused peripherally and eternally on the soft stomping of socked feet and the rattle of a picture frame against a wall in the next room over.

“Wow, he has not changed *at all*.” Technoblade chuckles, his tone just as teasing as it is proud. “Kind of impressive, honestly. I was kinda hopin’ he’d grow out of the whole stompin’ thing, but no. Same old Tommy.”

Tubbo cracks a smile. He still doesn't open his eyes — he can hear Technoblade well enough, the wood and fabric of the armchair creaking lightly every time he shifts awkwardly.

Technoblade hasn't stopped talking since they came inside. Even when Tubbo doesn't respond with much more than a half-smile or the brief snort of a laugh, Technoblade just keeps rolling with the constant, low-level commentary. Most of it is lost to Tubbo, the words faded and muddled as he drifts too close to sleep. But Tubbo appreciates it anyway.

A lingering tension pulls in the air, the magnet tug that demands Tubbo be closer to Tommy persistent and unwavering in spite of Tubbo's best attempts to ignore it, in spite of the way Tommy clearly doesn't want to be anywhere near Tubbo.

Technoblade doesn't seem to notice the tension at all. Or, more likely, he's hyper-aware of it and has no idea what to do about it, so he's elected to simply ignore it. He's doing a commendable job, really.

It makes things better, a little bit. The chatter helps to keep Tubbo's mind from drifting off into darker depths. Technoblade is a funny guy — always has been. It's been a while since Tubbo's been around him outside of a major national crisis for long enough to appreciate that.

“Where are your parents, kid?” Technoblade asks suddenly, breaking the comfortable flow of mellow commentary.

Ugh. That sounds like a real question, one that expects an answer. Tubbo finally cracks open his eyes, peering over at Technoblade through his lazily slitted eyelids. Technoblade is seated with an uncomfortable slump in the armchair, just rigid enough to give himself away completely. He's awkward and tense, but trying very hard to convince himself he's not. His body and eyes are turned away from Tubbo, but it's not even a couple of seconds before his eyes flick over nervously, a mild sort of worry written all over his face.

“Do they, uh, know where you are?”

Without his permission, Tubbo's eyes flick to the collection of photos hung on the living room wall, bracketed by a bookshelf on one side and a rack of swords on the other. From out of one frame at

the bottom right of the photograph collection, Philza grins. It's a maniacal thing, bearing teeth through his laughter. Long blond hair falls into his eyes, plastered to his face and all down his back by the water soaking his hair and clothes. The prosthetic leg under his rolled-up pants glints brightly, the mix of metal and sunlight leaving a bright white spot burned into the photograph. He's got a hose in his hands, spraying blindly but still managing to squarely hit a much younger Tommy, flailing off in the distance.

For a long moment, Tubbo doesn't reply.

Tubbo doesn't say *Philza is the closest thing I have to a parent, and he doesn't even know my name*, because that would require a lot of explaining that he doesn't want to do. If he has to answer at all, he'd like to do it in as few words as possible.

Tubbo doesn't say *I don't have parents*, because it doesn't take a genius to predict how Mr. Orphan Obliterator over here would feel about that. Tubbo is trying to maintain at least some good standing with Technoblade. He's still got that year-long streak to maintain, after all.

In the end, Tubbo yawns and mutters, "They're fine with it."

It's not quite a lie. Philza *was* fine with it when Tubbo and Wilbur left, setting off for a new server, arriving on the land of the Dream SMP with signed invitation in hand. He sees no reason why this would be any different.

Something about this answer must backfire, because when Tubbo's gaze drifts over to Technoblade again, he only looks more concerned. Technoblade's eyebrows draw in and pinch in the middle, and he's looking at Tubbo steadily now, his whole don't-look-at-Tubbo-directly-for-too-long thing forgotten.

This sucks. This is the exact opposite effect Tubbo was going for.

Tubbo looks away and closes his eyes again. He just resumes rubbing small circles into the polished metal of the sword pommel. He doesn't have the energy to figure out what he said wrong, so he's simply going to ignore Technoblade's concerned skepticism until it goes away.

The room falls quiet. The only sound in the room is the scratching and rattling coming from Tommy's claimed bedroom down the hall and the quiet push-pull of Technoblade's breathing, steady in the background except for every hesitant pause. It's like Technoblade can't quite make up his mind on whether to press Tubbo on the matter or find his way back into the flow of light, meaningless, muttered conversation. In the end, he just lapses into silence, unsure what to say.

Good.

Tubbo doesn't care enough to carry a conversation. He would prefer to be asleep, actually. So he just lets the quiet moment take his thoughts and wander away with them. His thoughts don't go far. He can still see the photo of Philza and Tommy, lingering where it's been freshly stamped into the backs of his eyelids.

What an odd sight. Philza and Tommy, laughing and smiling. But... he supposes it wouldn't be odd at all, here. They're comfortable with each other, familiar to each other, something closer to family than they were before. Tommy knows Philza, here. He said as much before.

That is something Tommy gets to have now — a relationship with Philza, the man he admires, the legend he looked up to from tales told around campfires, free from the strife and pressure of too much bad blood and poor first impressions, the conflict that brews when necessity gets in the way of compassion. It isn't something Tubbo had ever considered before. He knew the reset would change things, but he didn't stop to imagine how exactly it would play out, what would come of a softer world, easing the strain on relationships between people. But it makes sense. Of course, Tommy and Philza would get along. Even when they were at deadly odds, they still managed to foster *something* from the wreckage. With the conflict gone, there's nothing to stand in their way. Nothing to stand in the way of water fights and sunlight, bright grins captured forever in photographs and hung on walls to be cherished and returned to, over and over.

Tommy hasn't changed, not really. Tommy is the same in all the ways that matter. But the environment around him has allowed for him to have so much more. It's in the way Technoblade says, *I need ya to trust me on this one*, and Tommy *does*.

It's not just Tommy, either. Tubbo can see it in Wilbur, in Technoblade, in every photograph on the wall, hung up next to swords that won't ever need to taste blood, swords that have the luxury of existing only to be beautiful.

What must it be like?

What would have happened if he never made that deal?

What would the new Tubbo's life have been like, here?

Who would he be without the long exposure of fireworks bursting behind his eyelids and inside his skull — without the scars he earned carved into his skin?

Maybe Philza would have found Tubbo in a box on the side of the road, just like last time. Maybe Tommy and Fundy would have grown up with another kid around the house. Maybe Tubbo would have been able to feel as comfortable around Technoblade as Tommy does.

In his mind, Technoblade's voice echoes, *I need ya to trust me on this one*, and Tubbo tries to imagine himself in a world where he could.

Softer.

That's all he can think. He tries to conjure the image of the person who's supposed to be here, on this couch, in his place, in those photographs, but he keeps coming up blank.

Maybe there would be another kid running around with grass stains on bare feet, soaked to the bone with fresh water and smiling into the sun. Maybe that kid would run behind Tommy's back to use him as a shield without hesitating, without feeling like he had to put himself in front, and he wouldn't flinch when Philza turned the hose on him, and he would be...

Softer.

The real Tubbo would have been softer. Just like everything else, here.

Fuck.

Tubbo has suddenly decided that he has changed his mind. He needs the conversation back. He needs Technoblade to start talking again, right now. He can't keep thinking about this. He needs anything else to distract him.

"I like your house," Tubbo rasps, his voice coming out just a bit rough, like he caught his vocal cords off-guard. "'S nice. Did you make it yourself?"

Technoblade bursts out laughing. Tubbo scrunches up his nose. He thought it was a reasonable question.

"Wow, you can tell? It's that bad, huh?" Technoblade laughs even harder. Tubbo's not sure what he said that was so funny, but he's just glad Technoblade is talking again. He likes the sound of Technoblade's bright, huffing laugh. "Well, Phil did most of the work, so, eh, we can blame him for any obvious home-made-ness. I just cleared the land and put up the walls where he told me to."

Tubbo nods, and he feels a wobbly little smile come over him. Now *this* is a conversation he can relate to. "Philza makes cool builds."

"That he does," Technoblade agrees warmly.

Tubbo doesn't open his eyes, letting the dark space he's created for himself surround him, letting his fingers skim back down the blade, letting the couch cradle him close and secure. He just breathes. In and out. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't need to. Technoblade is content to carry on the conversation all by himself.

"You know, there was one time when Phil—" But Technoblade cuts off.

They both hear it at the same time. A door creaks open down the hall. Tubbo holds his eyes closed and breathes. In and out. It could just be Tommy. But the muffled clattering and rattling and grumbling continues uninterrupted, a steady background to the beat of slow footsteps that pad out into the hall. The footsteps get closer, and the thing in his chest doesn't waver, tugging unerringly towards the muffled cursing that remains behind closed doors. It's not Tommy.

Technoblade doesn't pick up the conversation where it severed, his attention has shifted. Tubbo doesn't open his eyes to see what Technoblade is looking at. He already knows.

"Tommy?" The asshole who interrupted Technoblade's white-noise conversation says, and Wilbur's voice rasps lightly, still sleep-heavy and muddled.

"He's in the next room," Technoblade responds, and Tubbo hears the armchair creak as Technoblade sits up a bit.

"Well, yeah. I can tell that, thanks." A yawn breaks up the honey-warm amusement coating Wilbur's sarcasm. "Woke me up with all his crashin' 'round."

Wilbur pauses for a moment before he takes a breath, words on the tip of his tongue, but he never gets the chance to spill them.

A door slams open. Tommy bursts out of the room, brushing right past Wilbur without a word, furiously ignoring everything around him. He stomps through the living room and back into the kitchen, doing unknowable and unspeakable things to Technoblade's kitchen organization as he resumes his chaos.

After a beat of almost-silence, filled by what can only be the sound of Tommy slamming every single cabinet door one by one, Wilbur traces Tommy's steps and pads out into the living room. Wilbur pauses and stills, searching for answers. His sharp gaze grazes over Tubbo briefly and then flits away again.

Tubbo breathes. In and out. Tubbo doesn't need to open his eyes to know that Wilbur and Technoblade are sharing a look.

Wilbur sighs.

"Wilbur. Wilbur, please. He's destroyin' my house, Wilbur." Technoblade's voice pitches lower, dropping to something mock-serious and pleading. He doesn't even bother to hide the way he chuckles to himself.

"Yeah, I've got 'im," Wilbur huffs, and Tubbo can hear the crack of a smile on his lips.

"Thanks, really appreciate it," Technoblade drawls as Wilbur trails after Tommy, his footsteps disappearing around the corner and into the kitchen.

Tubbo breathes. In and out. He's too tired to open his eyes, and he doesn't try. He just listens to the voices in the kitchen, the muffled murmur of Wilbur's lilting voice and the way Tommy's clattering gets pointedly louder in response. Something metal *clangs* and falls, crashing to the floor loud enough to make Tubbo twitch and tense before his exhausted and trembling muscles give up and go lax again.

Tubbo wishes Tommy would be a little bit quieter.

Tubbo almost laughs at what an utter lie *that* is.

If Tommy were being quiet, Tubbo would actually be worried. Tommy's constant noise is a blessing hardly bothering to disguise itself. Tommy may not want to be around Tubbo right now, but he's considerate enough to surround Tubbo in his presence from rooms away. Tubbo knows exactly where Tommy is. Tubbo knows that he's alive and moving and breathing and feeling. He can keep an eye on Tommy and he doesn't even have to open them.

Tubbo's inability to fall asleep has nothing to do with the noise and everything to do with Tommy — Tommy's too far away, Tommy won't stay still, Tommy's upset with him.

Maybe, *maybe*, Tubbo could sleep if he weren't worried about Tommy, if Tommy were close and happy and safe. Tubbo knows he isn't going to fall asleep any time in the foreseeable future — in the recent months, he's more prone to involuntarily pass out from exhaustion than he is to fall asleep, honestly — so instead Tubbo slides his fingers back up the blade and tries to sink back into the couch far enough that he'll disappear.

"Sooo," Technoblade casts out for a line of conversation, awkwardly shuffling to brush aside the silence that's fallen over the muttered argument in the kitchen. "Read any good books lately?"

Tubbo's nose wrinkles up at the bitter memory of frustration and annoyance. The last books he read were ancient tomes, records of history recounted by people who heard the stories second hand, collections of rumors about gods and worlds older than gods. They sucked.

Tubbo grumbles, "No. Just boring ones."

“What kind of boring books?” Technoblade asks after a beat, doing his best to keep the conversation going as the muttering in the kitchen grows softer and louder by turns.

“Necessary ones,” Tubbo’s voice drags heavy with exhaustion. He wants this conversation to end. He wants to sleep. But he can’t sleep, and he doesn’t want to think about where his mind will wander in the silence, so the conversation must go on.

“Ah, yes. I too have read many textbooks in my life,” Technoblade hums with solemn understanding. Tubbo has no idea what he’s talking about.

“Tell Philza he has terrible handwriting.” The bitter and half-hearted annoyance seeps out of Tubbo, muddled and sleepy.

The memory of all those yellowing sugarcane pages pulls a little scowl into Tubbo’s lips. It was bad enough that he had to translate ancient script without all the extra hours he spent deciphering Philza’s terrible chicken scratch notes in the margins.

“Alright, will do,” Technoblade huffs, amused and indulgent.

Tubbo hums with sleepy, righteous satisfaction. Forget old photographs and wonderings of things that should have been, if Tubbo ever sees Philza again he’s going to force him to sit down and practice handwriting until it’s legible. Centuries old and the man has still never learned how to use a quill and ink. Tubbo learned how to do it twice, with both hands. Unbelievable.

Tubbo smooths his thumb over the sword pommel. The round, smooth metal surface is warm from his body heat, little traces of life and love worn into it — quick to fade when his hands trail away, but just as quick to return and gather under his attention and care.

The kitchen has gone silent. Tubbo isn’t thinking about it. Tubbo is breathing. In and out.

Wilbur is there. Wilbur knows how to help Tommy. Probably.

Tommy trusts Wilbur to know how to help him, at least.

But Tommy is quiet.

And that is worrying.

Tubbo breathes. In and out.

“What are you studying?” Technoblade asks the dark space behind Tubbo’s eyes.

“Nothing right now,” Tubbo mutters, humming with distant thought as he answers sluggishly.

“Why bother? Already figured out nuclear fission. Seems like I might’ve peaked.”

“Oh, of course,” Technoblade hums, warm and wry, but whatever quip he had in store is lost to the sound of footsteps. Two sets of them — heavy, socked feet trudging reluctantly after confident barefooted padding.

Wilbur and Tommy emerge into the living room.

Tubbo breathes. In and out. It’s even and slow, weighed down by sleep. Tubbo is asleep. Most definitely. He is asleep and he does not have to deal with whatever Wilbur has just dragged into the

room.

Whatever look Wilbur and Technoblade share must convey whole conversations, because in the next second Technoblade sighs overwhelming relief, whispering under his breath, “Oh thank god.”

Technoblade quickly stands from the armchair, pushing through the stiff creak of old bones as he jumps to his feet. “Boy, that other kid sure has been out there a long time. What’s his— Rainbow? Rambo? I’m gonna go check on him — or feed the dogs, or something. Wilbur, you got this?” Technoblade asks, and he’s already opening the front door and stepping outside without waiting for an answer. “Awesome, thanks Wilbur, you’re the best.”

The front door clicks shut, and the living room stills. The air settles around them, a silence finding its place around the space of Tubbo, Wilbur, and Tommy.

Tubbo really wishes he could follow Technoblade and escape this conversation. But he can’t. Because he is asleep. Most definitely.

Wilbur snorts with amusement, and Tubbo doesn’t need to open his eyes to see the fond grin on his face. There’s a lingering empty space, the ringing silence where Tommy would take that open split in the air to laugh, or playfully mock Technoblade for running away, or complain loudly about Wilbur dragging him in here. But nothing comes. Tommy is just *quiet*.

Tubbo presses down the anxious tension that wants to line his trembling muscles and Tubbo breathes. In and out.

Wilbur heaves a dramatic sigh as he crosses the room. Tubbo hears the wood creak in protest as Wilbur flops down on Technoblade’s abandoned armchair. Tommy reluctantly shuffles a couple of steps forward, dragged by the invisible thread Wilbur’s got tied to his heart.

Tubbo tries to sink deeper into the couch, keeping his eyes closed and his body lax. Maybe he can get away with pretending to be asleep. Or better yet, he could just fall asleep for real, actually. Tommy is near, now. Tommy is close enough that Tubbo can hear his breathing, the way it catches and hesitates on every exhale like the words are all trapped inside him and they won’t come out. That’s enough, surely. Enough for Tubbo to sleep.

But Tommy is *quiet*, and it makes Tubbo’s hair stand on end.

Tommy doesn’t say anything. He just stands there, looming silent and too-still, frustration building with each increasingly harsh exhale. The shaking in Tubbo’s limbs gets worse with the silence.

And then Tommy snaps — but he doesn’t have the words. Tommy just whines, all loathe and trailing as he breaks into jagged movement, pacing two steps before spinning sharply right back around. He groans, the sound muffled like he’s burying his head in his hands.

Tubbo keeps his eyes firmly shut, because he is *asleep* and he does not need to have this conversation right now.

Tubbo hears the fierce footsteps coming as Tommy steps close, close, close, shoving his way through the tense air to put himself directly into Tubbo’s space. Tubbo pulls back quickly, unthinking, *DO NOT TOUCH*.

Tubbo sighs disappointment at himself.

It was a thin façade, but Tubbo had hoped he could at least pretend to be asleep, just for a little while. Whatever. He's already given the game away.

When Tubbo gives in and cracks open his eyes, Tommy is there to meet him. Tommy's eyes are burning, his face faintly red-flushed with frustration. He looks like he'd be hot to the touch. He looks like he'd be warm.

Tommy's eyes flick away immediately, averted just as visibly as he bites his tongue. Tommy twists like he wants to start pacing again, but he doesn't even take a single step away before he snaps right back around to stare Tubbo down. Tubbo meets his gaze evenly, too tired to do anything else. Tommy throws his head back and groans, even louder this time, tangling his hands harshly in his hair.

All Tubbo can think is that Tommy looks like he would be warm to the touch.

Slowly, Tubbo hugs his arms around himself. The movement traps the sword pressed hard against his chest, digging into his ribs and the soft parts of his belly as he leans further back into the couch.

Tubbo's gaze drifts and he stares fixedly and blankly at the wall across from him. It's still an ugly shade of creamy and vaguely yellow off-white. It's still covered in swords and bookshelves and photographs that Tubbo doesn't want to look too hard at. On the bookshelf, there are a pair of reading glasses, the light catching on the small rectangles of glass. There's a small wooden figurine of a polar bear, hand-whittled in all its flat edges. There's a crude clay dish, lopsided and sloppily glazed, indents all along the sides shaped by small fingers. He takes all this in, and nothing else.

Tubbo does not look at Tommy. He does not reach out and touch Tommy, or grab Tommy's hand, or drag Tommy down to the couch.

Tubbo breathes. In and out.

Tubbo sees the motion from the edge of his vision when Tommy turns and paces — three rapid steps away, a sharp turn, three ragged steps back. The pull in Tubbo's chest waxes and wanes, building stronger for every step Tommy takes towards him. Tubbo's breathing matches to it, like Tommy's pulling all the air out of him every time he turns away.

Then Tommy bursts like a dam, the words spilling violently from him as he rambles. "Look, man, I fucked up. And I'm bein' all weird and I just— I made you upset and scared and I— I need you to tell me things! No, no, no, no— I don't, I— You don't have to tell me *shit*, and I mean— listen to me, Tubbo. I mean this." All at once Tommy pushes further into Tubbo's space, forcing Tubbo to see the truth, bold and unhidden in the deadly serious and determined scowl on his face. "You don't have to tell me *anything*, alright? I mean it, I really mean it. You don't tell me anything you don't want to. But! I just want to *help*, man. And I don't know how! So I'm doin' all this shit that I think is gonna make it better and I'm makin' it worse and—" Tommy trails off into a rough whine, like he's strangling a scream.

Suddenly Tommy twists away, pacing a couple of restless steps before he sharply turns around and throws himself back into Tubbo's space again. He ends up even closer than before, pushing himself as dangerously close to Tubbo as he can get without tripping into him. And Tubbo doesn't breathe. He can't. Not with Tommy staring him down with nothing but the harsh truth behind his eyes and the determination to back it up, closing in on him until there's nowhere to hide.

Tommy burns hot, eating through all the air in the room, and he crackles like a log breaking down as he shouts, “I know I’m annoying and I know I’m a bother but I don’t want to just make things worse all the time! Tell me how to help and I’ll do it! I just need you to tell me!”

“Tommy,” Wilbur cuts in, and Tommy freezes in place, swinging his gaze around to meet Wilbur with wide eyes and too much open trust. Wilbur is quiet in the ringing room, but no less firm for it, a guiding hand nudging in the right direction as he offers, “Little less.”

“Right, right, sorry,” Tommy groans and falls back, taking a step away from the couch and trusting Wilbur’s word the whole way.

Tommy paces back towards the middle of the room as he reigns himself in, and Tubbo watches his back with wide and frozen eyes. Tommy buries a hand in his fluffed up hair and takes a deep breath, and Tubbo realizes he needs to breathe again.

“You don’t owe me shit. And I *know* that.” Tommy starts again slowly, easing into what he’s trying to say as he struggles to find his words. He twists back towards Tubbo, pulled home. “But I still— But I’d— I don’t—” Tommy growls, and from up close, Tubbo watches the frustrated crease between his eyebrows get more severe. “If you want to talk about it, and if you want to talk about it *with me*, then, then— just— tell me what to do. I just— I don’t want to make you upset, Tubbo. I don’t. I want to help. And I don’t know how. So I need you to tell me what to do to make it better.”

Tommy comes to a stop, burnt out, his face well and truly flushed red with all the emotion burning wild and eating him up inside.

He looks warm.

Tubbo should probably say something like *it’s okay* or *I forgive you* or *it was my fault, too*, but he can’t put the words together past the noise in his head — all Tubbo can think is he really wants to hold Tommy. Everything else is a fuzzy blank. He really, really, really wants to just curl up next to Tommy. He wants to drag Tommy down to his level, make him sink into Technoblade’s very nice couch, and curl up next to him. That’s a dangerous thought. The kind of thought that has Tubbo reaching out mindlessly, just to grab Tommy’s hand, or wrap an arm around Tommy’s side, or sit next to Tommy and feel the warmth of him nearby, or lay on top of Tommy like a big cat, trapping him on the couch so he can’t get up and leave, like he can stop Tommy from doing anything more stupid and reckless than laying on the couch and being warm.

Tubbo’s first instinct is *DO NOT TOUCH*, and it halts his half-aborted reaching in its tracks, his fingers can only twitch before he clamps down on the muscles and forces them still. Then he remembers. He remembers how Tommy elbows his way eagerly into the backseat and doesn’t hesitate to shove himself boldly up against Tubbo’s side. Tommy initiates physical contact so readily, without hesitation, without a thought, without a flinch. Tommy doesn’t think twice. It makes Tubbo think twice.

This... this is okay, now. Things are different, here. Tommy is different. Not at the heart of him, but just softer around the edges. Tommy might be okay with this, now.

Hesitantly, Tubbo flicks his gaze up to watch Tommy’s face. Tommy immediately perks up at the attention, gone all intent and eager. It takes Tubbo another second before he can make himself open his mouth.

“Can—” Tubbo’s words catch and he has to clear his throat. “Is it alright if I hug you?”

Tommy startles, then softens. He splits and smiles bright excitement, like he was waiting for Tubbo to ask, like all the distress from moments ago melted away without a trace as soon as he got it out of his head.

“Yeah, yes— really? Are you sure you— ‘cause I don’t want to, like, upset you or stress you out, but— really? Yeah!” Tommy spills quick words while he’s already stumbling forward, tipping into Tubbo’s space.

Tubbo can’t stop himself from reaching out, drawn towards Tommy like a magnet snapping into place, pulling himself up to desperately wrap his arms around Tommy, latching tight onto him so no one could pry him away if they tried. And Tommy is latching onto him right back, matching Tubbo beat for beat as he curls his fingers into cloth and digs in, viciously stubborn.

Tubbo was right. Tommy is warm, warm, warm. He radiates heat like a furnace, burning up inside and out.

The sword slides off the couch and hits the floor with a *clang*, knocked loose and forgotten in the shuffling. Probably for the best. Tubbo doesn’t want Tommy accidentally getting hurt on Tubbo’s sharp edges.

Tommy hasn’t even sat down yet. He’s half-crouched and bent at the knees in a way that can’t possibly be comfortable. Tubbo doesn’t care. He’s not letting go. He digs in harder, and for once he’s grateful for his stupid blunt human fingernails, otherwise he’d surely be ripping holes into the back of Tommy’s shirt.

Tommy bubbles up in a laugh as he squirms, wiggling around until he manages to actually sit on the couch. Tubbo just clings tighter, taking the opportunity to drape himself over Tommy’s lap, pinning him down with every ounce of bodyweight and determination so Tommy couldn’t get up and leave again even if he tried.

Before Tommy’s even settled into the depths of the couch cushions, Tubbo adjusts his grip on Tommy’s waist so he can lock his arms around him, immovable. Tubbo buries his face in Tommy’s shirt and blocks out the rest of the world. All that matters is the steady rise and fall of Tommy’s chest against his forehead and the *thu-thump* sound of his heartbeat.

Tommy is warm.

Tommy is *alive*.

Tommy is clinging to Tubbo right back.

Tommy hesitates just slightly before he cautiously pats Tubbo’s head. When that gets no reaction other than Tubbo squeezing his arms around Tommy tighter, Tommy confidently rests his hands against Tubbo’s back. Tommy shifts and Tubbo’s heartbeat spikes with a little burst of fear, like Tommy is going to try and stand up and go away and *leave*.

Tubbo presses himself harder against Tommy’s chest, constricting his arms tighter, grabbing at him desperate, desperate, desperate. But Tommy doesn’t go anywhere. He only leans forward, folding over Tubbo and draping himself across Tubbo’s back. Tubbo feels every shift of movement as Tommy settles, first his forehead *thunking* against Tubbo’s spine, and then his head rolling across Tubbo’s ribs as he presses his ear against Tubbo’s back.

Tubbo hears Tommy's heartbeat all around him, *thu-thump, thu-thump*, and he wonders if Tommy hears Tubbo's heartbeat the same way.

"Does this mean you're not mad at me anymore? Cause I'm sorry, I really am." Tommy's fingers tap against the line of Tubbo's ribs, little flickers of nervous energy pressing into Tubbo's bones. He alternates rubbing broad circles, giving light little pats, and tapping his fingers, switching every few seconds, anxiously uncertain. He's not really sure what else to do, and he's figuring it out as he goes along.

"Not your fault," Tubbo snuffles into Tommy's shirt. He might be crying again, but he doesn't care. Tommy is warm. Tommy is alive. That is the only thing that matters. "Never your fault. M' sorry. Didn't mean to be mad at you."

Tommy cackles, crackling like a bonfire as he nuzzles into Tubbo's ribs. "Aw-haww, Tubbooo."

"Sorry, didn't think I'd make you this upset," Tubbo admits, and his voice wobbles in a way that makes him want to hide his face in Tommy's shirt and bury himself there. So he *does*, because Tommy is here and warm and isn't mad at him anymore, and this is okay, now.

"Of *course* I was upset!" Tommy says firmly, squawking outrage like the thought of anything else is repulsive. "When you're all freaking out, I'm gonna be upset! Especially when it's my fault! I care about you, man!"

Tubbo's face scrunches up and his nose wrinkles with discontent. Well, that's not ideal. Tubbo doesn't like the idea that Tommy is going to be upset every time Tubbo panics. Tubbo panics a lot, and Tubbo hates when Tommy is upset. It'd be better if Tommy didn't care about him so much, probably. But, he can deal with this. He'll have to. Because he doesn't think Tommy is going to stop caring about him anytime soon.

Wilbur's gaze is on them, and Tubbo can feel it burning into his unguarded side. Tubbo wishes he'd fuck off. Tubbo doesn't really want Wilbur here, but Tommy is attached to him, can't be without him, would follow him anywhere. So Wilbur can stay, Tubbo supposes. If letting Wilbur's burning stare dig into his side is all it takes to keep Tommy close, warm, alive, then so be it. It's a small price to pay. He can hardly even feel Wilbur's burning gaze over the furnace-heart heat of Tommy surrounding him, anyway.

Tubbo breathes. In and out.

Tubbo just buries his face in Tommy's shirt and shakes. Tommy wraps all around Tubbo, holding him tight like Tubbo is the one who might disappear.

Tubbo doesn't know how long they sit there. Long enough for Tubbo to lose track of time. Long enough for the fervor hot fire of desperation to die down into something less burning and more content. Long enough for Tubbo to fall asleep, maybe. It isn't far off — the muddled drag of sleep brushing gently against his mind. Tubbo can feel himself drifting off, everything within him collapsing down, walls and guards folding away. He's gone all loose and pliable, soft from the warmth surrounding him.

"I think you two should get off to bed," Wilbur says, his tone quiet-soft and gently nudging.

Tubbo digs his fingers into the fistfuls of Tommy's shirt and presses himself harder into Tommy's chest.

Tommy is a perfect mirror image to everything that Tubbo feels — Tommy's obstinance matching up in sync with the vague and muddled thoughts running through Tubbo's mind as Tommy rolls his head to turn away from Wilbur and mutters, "Nah."

Wilbur huffs, and the smile is audible when he puts on a tone of something like commanding. "C'mon, up. The both of you. You can't fall asleep on the couch."

"Can, actually," Tommy informs him helpfully, and Tubbo agrees.

Tommy shifts, and Tubbo can feel the stretch of muscles under his skin pulling and moving against the backs of his closed fists. The tendons and muscles lining Tommy's back tense and pull, working to lift the weight of Tommy off him. Tubbo's still got his head burrowed in the dark space against Tommy's chest, but he doesn't need sight to know that Tommy is leaving. It's an ingrained understanding — Tommy is leaving, Tommy is always leaving. And Tubbo should let him go. But Tubbo is tired and worn and greedy.

Tubbo weighs himself heavy across Tommy's lap. He gives in to the inescapable press of something just out of reach, and he lets the weight of the world drag him down. Tommy wiggles, but Tubbo squeezes his eyes shut and clenches his fists tighter and refuses to let Tommy up. Tubbo isn't going to move unless he absolutely has to, and maybe not even then.

Tommy's weight leaves, but he doesn't go far and he always comes back. Tommy only shifts around enough so that he's facing Wilbur, and Tubbo can feel the force of Tommy's glare from the spiteful aura alone. Tommy's restless tapping stills only for a pointed fraction of a second, and then he's curling up tighter around Tubbo and resuming the soothing, aimless fidget. *Tip-ta-tap-ta-tip-tip-tap.*

Tommy is trapped with Tubbo's weight on his lap, and Tubbo is stuck to Tommy like a magnet. Neither of them are getting up any time soon.

"We're not tired at all, are we Tubbo? We're actually very awake and don't need to go to bed," Tommy plays through a grin, and Tubbo hums half-hearted agreement, because he would back up Tommy's ridiculous, blatant lies even in his sleep.

The sharp graze of Wilbur's watch slides over them carefully, studying. Tubbo knows that it doesn't take a genius to see that his guard is down — lowered even further than Tubbo thought was possible, at this point. It's obvious in the hunched curl of his spine, the shaking in his lax limbs, the desperate-tight clench of his fists, the wet tear marks hidden away on Tommy's shirt, and most perhaps damningly of all, the way that he's turned his back to Wilbur at all, for even a second, more than a second, long enough to lose track of time and still not care. It's plain to see, and Wilbur's never been one to watch a golden opportunity pass by unexploited.

Tubbo feels the weight of weighing as Wilbur evaluates his options. It takes longer than expected before Wilbur takes a breath in. His eyes flick over Tubbo and Tommy lightly before he settles on something. Tubbo already knows what it is.

"Well, if you're not going to bed, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?" Wilbur begins, slowly, carefully, delicately. He sounds almost hesitant, but no. Not that at all. Not in truth.

Tubbo sighs, resigned. There isn't a good answer. But there never is, and he should stop expecting one. Either Tubbo complies and gets up to go to bed, letting Tommy up — which he won't. It's not

even an option. And Wilbur knows that — or he answers Wilbur's questions, feigning a claim at wakefulness and cognizance that they both know Tubbo doesn't have.

The anchor is stuck just as surely as the boat, and Tubbo's not raising himself for anything. So really, there was never an option at all.

Caught between the illusion of choice and a sticking place, Tubbo grumbles, "Oh, fine, Wilbur. Do what you like."

The intensity of Wilbur's attention grows like electric needle pinpricks across Tubbo's exposed side. Tubbo's fingers twitch, seizing involuntarily in the fabric of Tommy's shirt. Tubbo takes a slow, deep breath and carefully releases his grip. The moment he loosens that rigid tension, his knuckles ache awfully, blossoming into little points of strain. The tendons in his fingers protest and burn, but he keeps moving and slowly uncurls his fingers, steadily letting go.

The prickling itch doesn't abate, and Tubbo resists the thoughtless urge to rub his side like he could get the phantom feeling to go away. His hands shake. His fingers twitch.

Tubbo doesn't like the feeling — exposed and anxious and a little bit bored, but all of that is smothered under the growing irritation that Wilbur just won't let him *sleep*.

Tubbo considers just ignoring him, but that will only make Wilbur's interest worse. There's only one way to get Wilbur to shut up and stop caring, and that is to give him exactly what he asks for. Nothing is more boring to Wilbur than easy compliance. So Tubbo will give him exactly what he wants.

Not yet, though. In a second.

First, Tubbo shifts around, rolling over in Tommy's lap. The quick and light tapping of Tommy's fingers against his back halts uncertainly. Tommy peers down at Tubbo with a silent quirk of his eyebrow that asks all the questions for him. Tubbo just huffs and leans over, stretching an arm out off the couch as far as he can reach. He has to lean half out of Tommy's lap, and he tips dangerously close to falling off the couch altogether. Tommy jerks into motion and snaps an arm out to wrap around Tubbo's shoulders, tethering him from sliding off onto the ground.

Tubbo keeps reaching, stretching over the edge of the couch until he can feel it, brushing his trembling fingers over the hilt of the sword. It's gone cold, all the body heat seeped out of it from the time it's been forgotten on the floor. A shiver spreads across Tubbo's skin, but he doesn't let that deter him. Tubbo paws at it, just barely able to nudge it with the tips of his fingers. He manages to hook a finger around a loose bit of grip and drag it a little closer. Then, he wraps one hand securely around the hilt and hefts the heavy length of metal up so he can pull it into his lap.

With sword victoriously in hand, Tubbo settles right back down over Tommy, resting with his back against Tommy's legs and his knees pulled up, curled up over the length of the couch. Tubbo handles the sword carefully as he clutches it to his chest. It burns cold down the whole length of it, and Tubbo smiles. The smile is a weak thing, trembling like the rest of him, but it's there. The cold is something he didn't realize he would miss. He hasn't seen a single snowy biome the whole time he's been here, but he can feel the memory of it frozen into the cool metal under his fingertips.

It's a risk, cradling a sharpened, double-edged thing so close to his chest, letting it near enough that it could gut him if he's not careful. But Tubbo's got his back pressed to Tommy's legs and his

shoulder nudging against the soft skin under Tommy's ribs, and Tubbo's not sure he's thinking of Tommy or himself.

Tubbo will just have to be cautious, perfectly steady and vigilant enough for the both of them.

"That's so cool," Tommy's tone is just barely on this side of hushed. Just under his back, Tubbo can feel the way Tommy jitters with excitement, his knees bouncing and feet tapping in tiny motions, like he can't possibly bear to be still with the energy running through him. "I can't believe Tech' just *gave* you a whole real sword— just handed it to you! I'm not allowed to have swords. He says I'll hurt myself, but, mmm, he is wrong. He can hide them, but he can't stop me from finding them and stealing them, and I do it all the time— don't tell Techno, but I steal them all the time because his hiding spots are bad and easy to break into. Oh man, but that's so cool. You know how to use a sword like Tech' does? It's real impressive when he does it. Just chops right through shit like it's nothing. It's so cool. You could beat him, though. You could take him in a fight. Definitely."

Tubbo lets the weak smile spread across his face, wisps of contented happiness tugging gently at his face until it's real and he can feel it in the ache of his cheeks.

"Definitely," Tubbo agrees.

Trembling hands guide shaking fingers from the pommel to the hilt to the blade, and the electric charge of Tubbo's heart settles with the grounding metal skimming cold under the pads of his fingers.

Okay. Now he's ready.

"M not awake enough for this crap," Tubbo whines, making his complaints fully known before Wilbur has a chance to get the first word. He's tired, and he doesn't want to focus on anything but the comfort of the sword resting on his chest and Tommy against his back. Tubbo can feel Wilbur's pinprick attention on him, but he doesn't look over to meet Wilbur's gaze. He just grumbles, "You don't play fair."

"What do you mean? You're *sooo* awake." The grin on Wilbur's face carries in his words, teasing and light as he stretches his vowels and rolls his eyes. "You shouldn't have a problem answering some questions. That is, unless you're too tired and need to go to bed."

"You're a bitch and I hate you," Tubbo states matter-of-factly, but the weak and hard-earned smile on his face doesn't wane.

Tubbo runs his fingers slowly back down the blade, the dragging motion an echo of something quick and sharp — like the swipe of a whetstone, but missing all the desperation and pressure.

"Oh," Wilbur starts casually, like a realization, like Tubbo wouldn't know an opening move when he hears one. "You're left handed, then?"

Tubbo sighs deeply, already tired of this.

Tubbo pauses, glancing down at himself as the cogs click and grind in his sleep-heavy brain. He's holding the sword with his left hand, the sheath slung over his left shoulder. It's a reasonable conclusion to draw. But that's not what Wilbur's asking. Wilbur watched Tubbo write on those napkins in the gas station bathroom.

Wilbur already knows Tubbo is left handed. The question isn't about which hand he uses. The question is *are you going to talk, now?*

It's a foot in the door. It's a technique Wilbur didn't teach him, but one he had to learn to recognize anyway. It goes like this: once you answer one small, easy, non-threatening question, you are more likely to continue answering. *Did you sleep well last night?* becomes *how come someone said they saw you out by the woods around midnight?* becomes *you were sneaking off meeting with those fucking traitors, weren't you?*

Tubbo slides a lazy glance over towards Wilbur, eyeing the trap laid out in front of him.

Wilbur smiles, kind and polite and insultingly unassuming. Tubbo considers flipping him off, but it feels like a lot of effort.

The whole game is a waste of energy, honestly. Wilbur doesn't need to get his foot in the door, he's already inside the fucking house. Tubbo doesn't know why Wilbur is bothering with it. Probably because he enjoys it. The thrill of the hunt, or something. Whatever. Tubbo already promised he would tell them everything, and Tubbo is a man of his word — but of course that's a foreign concept to Wilbur.

Wilbur's running around chasing something he's already caught. The ridiculousness of it makes Tubbo's smile twitch into a smirk.

"No," Tubbo hums as he steps into the trap. He pauses as he thinks better of it, looking up and away idly as he considers his answer, wrapping the snare around his own leg as he lies back in the cage and waits. "Well, yeah. You see, I lost most of the mobility in my right hand. I had to reteach myself, afterward. So I guess I'm ambidextrous now."

Wilbur blinks. There's a silence, just for a moment. Wilbur is looking for the lie, looking for the clever twist of a misdirection that tricks Tubbo into the upper hand. He'll find none, or he'll make one up. Either way, Tubbo closes his eyes, running his trembling fingers back up the cool metal of the blade, and the smile that comes to him is easy. All wrapped up in Tommy's arms, he has already let himself be caught. Now he's just waiting for Wilbur to catch up.

"Oh, well that's—" Wilbur's voice is strange, just a bit too quiet. Tubbo would say it's edging on something, but it doesn't seem to have an edge at all. When Wilbur continues, it's collected and dismissive enough to sound unaffected. "What happened to your hand? Looks fine to me."

"Fireworks. Blew 'em up," Tubbo answers simply, too tired to give more effort than that.

Tubbo lifts his right hand from the sword, his gaze flicking to scrutinize the motion of his hand like it belongs to someone else. Slowly, he stretches his unmarred fingers, flexing muscles and tendon and skin in a way that should be painful, but isn't anymore. He tests how far he can push it, how far he can curl his fingers in, how wide he can splay them out from his open palm. His knuckles, unscarred. His skin soft and uncalledoused. His fingers all attached.

It doesn't feel real. But it feels like the truth when he grins with too many teeth and says, "Worst part was only being able to count to nine. It's all— different now, though. What with the reset and all."

Wilbur is silent.

Tubbo is going to regret this later, probably. He's not thinking about that. He's too tired to care. His heart is asleep and can't be bothered to pick up and race like it should. He's worn out and he's giving in. He can deal with the consequences tomorrow.

Tommy reaches over and pokes at Tubbo's hand. Tubbo goes still and easy, uncurling his fingers again and opening his palm so Tommy can grab his hand. Tommy presses the pads of his fingers into the unremarkable stretch of Tubbo's palm, squeezing curiously like he might be able to feel a metal prosthetic hidden under the surface of his skin.

"You mentioned that before," Wilbur mutters, and he does a good impression of delicate. "What is the reset? Mind explaining it a bit more?"

Tubbo shrugs and holds back a yawn. "Sure. It's... Well, it's kinda... Okay, it's actually really interesting how it works, see?" Tubbo perks up as he thinks about it, slotting his thoughts together in his mind as he goes. Fragments of memory come back to him, scraps of too many hours studying ancient tomes by lantern light. "So, you've got a server, right? Or a— what's the other word? What do you guys call it? A universe. You call it a universe, here. And it's a bunch of planets and dimensions and such all connected to each other, all working together and feeding into each other. It's like a leaf, or something. It's got a bunch of cells that make up the leaf, and they all do their job to help the leaf grow and keep it healthy. That's us. We're the cells, all running around and living and dying and stuff."

Tommy maneuvers Tubbo's fingers around, poking and prodding and pushing and pulling. Tommy hums along idly to what Tubbo's saying, giving distracted little *mhmms* as he fidgets with bending Tubbo's fingers one by one.

"We're inside a leaf?" Tommy asks, scrunching up his nose like he wouldn't be caught dead living inside a leaf.

"Yeah!" Tubbo nods along, enthusiastic through the drag of exhaustion. "Except the leaf is a metal — a me — a metaphor, so it's not a real leaf."

Tubbo is not looking at Wilbur. He doesn't care. He doesn't care what Wilbur's face is doing or what Wilbur is thinking. The only thing that matters is Tommy's hand resting warm and alive all along his own.

There are still traces of regret lingering on Tommy's face, stuck in the creases at the corners of his eyes. Even though Tubbo already forgave him, Tommy is still sorry, and he's trying to make up for it. Tommy is extra gentle when he maneuvers Tubbo's hand, and Tubbo feels an apology in every press of his fingers.

Tommy stretches his boney fingers out and presses his hand up against Tubbo's, moving their fingers together like a mirror. Tommy's hands are broader and his fingers are longer. Tommy snickers quietly. Tubbo picks his head up off Tommy's lap only to drop right back down and ram the back of his skull into Tommy's legs in retaliation. Tommy just laughs louder.

"See, universes are just like everything else. They are born, they grow, they live, and then they die and decay," Tubbo continues, ignoring Tommy snickering. Tommy keeps fidgeting with Tubbo's hand, but his eyes are bright and attentive. Wilbur may have been the one to ask the question, but Tubbo is only talking to Tommy when he answers. "A server reset is like... it's like pruning a plant. You keep the multiverse healthy by cutting off all the dying bits. The server was reaching the end

of its life, so XD moved everything of his out of that old server and then—” Tubbo mimes shears with his hand, and Tommy mimics the gesture. “Cut it off.”

“...Right,” Wilbur drops after a beat, gone unusually quiet. He doesn’t seem keen to interrupt, hesitant to misstep and break whatever spell has fallen over Tubbo as he spills unfiltered thoughts aimlessly into the air.

Tubbo is almost proud. It takes a lot to make Wilbur shut up and listen, and apparently he’s managing to do it without even trying.

“So, XD moved all his pets over into a new server, and we all just—” Tubbo pauses at the sound of a *click*, a door knob turning, a door creaking open. Tubbo tilts his head back, leaning over the side of Tommy’s lap to see Technoblade pushing open the front door. “...Go on like nothing happened.”

There’s the rush of a cool breeze skating over Tubbo’s skin as the night’s chill seeps into the warm house. Technoblade trods into the entryway, stepping away from the door to reveal Ranboo standing behind him, all hunched up and wringing his hands together anxiously.

Tubbo stops talking, letting his sleepy gaze linger on Ranboo and Technoblade, standing quietly in the entryway as they take off their shoes and jackets. Ranboo’s fancy shoes are thoroughly caked with mud, but he doesn’t seem to mind as he sets them down on the tile floor. Technoblade mutters something quiet to Ranboo, and Ranboo smiles back at Technoblade. A quiet warmth floods Tubbo’s smile at the sight of him.

Somewhere else, Wilbur is silent. Frighteningly silent. There’s surely a lot he’s not saying, and danger lurks in those unknowns. When Wilbur is quiet, Tubbo doesn’t have a clue how to handle him, how to respond to him to keep him stable, how to maneuver that double-edge to save Wilbur from himself and whoever he turns on.

Tubbo might bother to feel afraid if he wasn’t so tired. Right now, Tubbo can’t even feel the fear under the overwhelming relief that the room has finally gone quiet, and Tommy is warm and breathing and alive beside him, and Ranboo is safe and close and peering into the room to meet Tubbo’s eyes.

Wilbur is quiet for the time being, and as long as he stays that way, Tubbo might be able to fall asleep — even if Tubbo is certain that letting this silence go on is a mistake he’ll regret. A high cost for a worthy reward. Just a few minutes of quiet.

“How do you know all this?” Wilbur mutters slowly, and Tubbo wants to throw the sword at him in frustration.

“Does it matter?” Tubbo groans. Tommy grabs at both of Tubbo’s hands, squishing all of Tubbo’s fingers flat together before pulling them apart with a focused intensity, like the bend in the first joint of Tubbo’s middle finger is the most interesting thing in the room. It’s the only thing stopping Tubbo from throwing the sword at Wilbur. “S not like there’s anything I can do to prove it to you.”

“Let’s just say I believe you,” Wilbur proposes with a false levity, trying to sound unaffected and failing miserably as something nervous crawls up his throat. It’s all such a poor cover up. It’s like Wilbur’s not even trying. *I believe you, and it scares me*, he says between the nervous cracks in his façade. “Let’s say you really made a deal with the devil. Let’s say the universe got reset and you’re the only one who knows, alright? Why are you telling us?”

Wilbur is breaking down around the edges, and Tubbo doesn't have the effort in him to lift his head up and look at Wilbur again. Tubbo just stares blankly at the front door, letting the force of Wilbur's suppressed panic roll over him. It's the same as always — Wilbur seeking information he doesn't need to know, asking questions that Wilbur *knows* he won't like the answer to, clawing desperately after anything that looks sharp enough to hurt him. It's all just so draining. And Tubbo is tired. He's tired of trying to save Wilbur from himself.

Tubbo doesn't answer, and he can hear Wilbur shuffle in his seat.

"I'm just trying to understand here, man," Wilbur reasons with no one, growing utterly unreasonable. "'Cause what we saw back there? That was impossible. So I can't— I can't just say you're making it all up, you understand? You're— I'm not going to just trust you blindly, but, please, give me *something*."

"Uuuuh," Technoblade drawls, shuffling awkwardly into the room. "I see you're still havin' a *moment* in here, so I'm just gonna—" His footsteps head away, cutting through the living room to escape down the basement stairs. "Bedsheets. Laundry. Needs dryer sheets. Yup."

The basement door clicks closed behind Technoblade, and the only sound is Ranboo's quiet footsteps slowly treading into the room, approaching carefully as each nervous little step brings him into the tension-thick air, uncertain if he's supposed to be here, but getting closer anyway.

Why are you telling us? sits heavy in the quiet.

Tubbo doesn't answer.

The truth is, he doesn't care if Wilbur knows. He doesn't care what Wilbur might be thinking right now. He doesn't care how Wilbur feels about the truth Tubbo's told him. He doesn't care if Wilbur believes him, or doesn't, or *can't* believe the drastic rearranging of the foundations of his worldview. Wilbur can't use the information to hurt Tubbo, so it doesn't matter to him if Wilbur knows or not, secrets of the immortal workings of the universe be damned.

Tubbo doesn't have the energy to look at Wilbur, to fight him, to fight for him. Tubbo is curled up in Tommy's lap and he does not care what Wilbur says or thinks or feels. Nope. Not at all. Wilbur's stare prickles against Tubbo's side, but Tubbo doesn't need to look at Wilbur. Tubbo's not even thinking about him. Tubbo's eyes are only on Ranboo and the nervous twist to Ranboo's hands as he takes a tentative step closer, the smile that lights up Ranboo's face when he catches and meets Tubbo's eyes.

Tubbo doesn't care about Wilbur, but...

Tubbo actually *cares* how Ranboo feels.

Tommy and Ranboo are the ones who matter, and Ranboo shouldn't have to know.

Tommy is easy. Tommy will take whatever Tubbo tells him in stride, twisting it all around in his mind until he finds the sense in it. More importantly, he won't let it hurt him. He'll just let it awe him. It doesn't bother him that they're in a new server, or living like cells in a leaf, or living as the pets of a god he's never met. He's exhilarated by it, even. Like the world is larger and grander and more magical than he thought before.

Tubbo can tell Tommy, because Tommy sees himself half way up a mountain and is thrilled by the possibility of reaching the top, but all Ranboo sees is the drop to the rocks far below.

Ranboo would think and think and think and twist himself all up about it. It's part of what Tubbo likes about him, that consideration. But Tubbo doesn't want Ranboo to hear anything that would upset him. Tubbo likes him too much for that.

Tubbo is resigned to let Wilbur cut himself up on the knowledge, but Tubbo doesn't want to hurt Ranboo.

Tubbo doesn't answer Wilbur's question, and Wilbur doesn't have the courage to ask it again.

And Ranboo — Ranboo is edging closer to the couch, looking down at Tubbo and Tommy with a nervous quirk of a smile to his lips and a soft crinkle to his eyes.

Ranboo's eyes flicker to Tommy and his voice is tentative when he says, "Your uncle said you guys... well, he said it was *getting intense in there*. Is everything... alright?"

"It's all good, now. Tubbo's telling us the secrets to the universe," Tommy confirms with a nod and Tubbo yawns.

"Oh, so we're talking. Having some big discussions, huh?" Ranboo says, his smile lop-sided and his hands still twisting anxiously.

"Come sit down," Tubbo says at the same time that Ranboo says, "Do you want me to—"

"Alright," Ranboo laughs, and Tubbo smiles at him.

Tubbo curls his legs up, pulling them close so Ranboo has a place to sit on Technoblade's very nice couch. Ranboo takes the wordless invitation, hardly even hesitation before he carefully sits down in the offered space. Ranboo sinks into the cushions immediately, and Tubbo feels the whole couch shift and settle with the addition of the weight of Ranboo's presence. Tubbo hums, pleased, and the smile on his face ingrains itself a little more deeply.

Tubbo stretches his legs out again, settling them across Ranboo's lap and trapping him in place. Now he's got Tommy and Ranboo, and everything is perfect.

Ranboo settles his hands lightly over Tubbo's shins, like he's asking permission to rest there. Tubbo digs his heel into Ranboo's thigh and smiles, and Ranboo looks at him like something he can't name.

Tubbo thinks he's glad he's here.

Tubbo breathes. In and out. And it's the first time it's felt this easy.

"You tell your boss you quit, yet?" Tommy asks, leaning over Tubbo to nudge Ranboo's arm.

Tubbo wiggles his hands free and shoves at Tommy's chest to get Tommy off of him. Tommy cackles and grabs Tubbo's hands again, pressing them together and holding them squished together inside his grip.

Ranboo chuckles along, fingers resting feather light against Tubbo's shins, but giving himself away with the quick motion of nervous fidgets as he tells Tommy, "No. I want to keep my job, actually."

Tubbo yanks his hands down to his face, pulling Tommy's hands down with them. He's quick as anything as he darts forward and tries to lick Tommy's hands. Tommy shrieks, struggling to pull his hands back up, away from Tubbo's mouth, but Tommy still refuses to let go of his locked grip around Tubbo's hands.

"You're *disgusting!*" Tommy shrieks between breaths for laughter, fighting back madly.

Tubbo cackles as best he can with his tongue still sticking out of his mouth. Ranboo snorts, and the smile on his face splits wide and unrestrained.

"Everything alright at work?" Wilbur asks curiously, and he's managed to wrangle himself into something like composed. The curl of his question comes out smooth and even, completely concealing the sharp edges of anxiety that seep out in the quiet jittering of his leg tapping against the floor.

Ranboo's head snaps up as soon as he realizes Wilbur was talking to him.

"Uh," Ranboo stumbles, and his fingers tighten nervously around the loose fabric of Tubbo's pants leg. "Yeah! Yeah, just— something with work. It's fine. Just... ink cartridges and stuff."

Tubbo watches as Ranboo goes still, his body winding into a rigid ball of tension against the soft couch cushions. The only part of him that keeps moving is his fingers as Ranboo picks at a loose thread on the fraying cuffs of Tubbo's pants. His eyes shift off to the side, very carefully not looking at anything or anyone.

Tubbo blinks at him slowly. Why is Ranboo upset? Tubbo wiggles his hands, trying to worm his way out of Tommy's grip to reach out and grab at Ranboo, but Tommy squeezes his hands firmly in place.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Wilbur asks after a moment, the beat of his anxious tapping stilling, and the pause is just long enough to make him sound oddly genuine. "I mean, after what happened this afternoon, it's alright if you need to call someone, or take some time to gather yourself. I was pretty worried about you, man."

"Yup!" Ranboo is quick to reassure, high and strangled as he waves one hand through the air and tightens the other in a tense grip around the fabric of Tubbo's pants leg. "No, yeah. I'm fine! It happens all the time, really. I'm sorry if I... did anything? Weird? I didn't mean to freak you out, or anything."

Tubbo wiggles his hands more determinedly, shooting a glare up at Tommy. Tommy just grins down at him and squishes Tubbo's hands. Tubbo sticks his tongue out again threateningly, and Tommy drops Tubbo's hands with a sound halfway between a yelp and a giggle.

"That happens often, then?" Wilbur prods, his tone shifting into something earnest and curling curiously, less of a front and more of a distraction. Wilbur brushes aside Ranboo's unasked question, taking the opportunity to push onwards and dig in a little bit deeper.

Tubbo tries to lean up. A whine escapes him when all of his abdominal muscles protest, pulsing with ache and soreness. *Owowow*. Why does this human body have to be so weak? Ugh, he needs to start working harder. Tubbo pushes through the tremors that spike in his exhausted muscles, forcing himself to lean up just far enough to stretch out and snag Ranboo's hand from the air. And then he collapses back limply into Tommy's lap, dragging Ranboo's hand with him. Ranboo's

stupidly long arms reach with no problem, and he just looks at Tubbo with a quiet sort of curiosity and amusement, allowing Tubbo to steal his hand away.

Tubbo grins at him and holds his hand, victorious.

Wilbur shifts, and the armchair creaks. Ranboo blinks and snaps up to attention, his eyes swinging back towards Wilbur as he realizes he hasn't answered the question yet.

"Oh! Uh, yeah. It's sort of a recent thing, but it's been pretty frequent. It's nothing to worry about, though! I don't really remember anything I do while I'm like that, but it doesn't, like, hurt me or anything. And I haven't hurt anyone! So, don't worry about it. I've— I'm figuring it out. I'm handling it. It's just sleepwalking." Ranboo trails off into a murmur, sounding like he's trying to convince himself more than anyone else.

Ranboo doesn't take his hand away, even when his fingers tense and twitch in Tubbo's hold. Tubbo cradles Ranboo's hand and rubs his thumbs idly over the back of his hand, watching the way the skin shifts over the illusion of bones underneath.

Tommy's restless hands settle over Tubbo's chest, burning little points of brightness *tip-ta-tip-tip-tapping* out a rhythm across the bones of his ribs. Against his shin bone, Tubbo feels the hesitant feather-light landing of Ranboo's free hand, coming down to pick at the fabric of Tubbo's pants. Tubbo hums contentedness, warmth swelling in his chest and spilling out from him in the smile on his face.

"Sleepwalking? Ranboo, I don't..." Wilbur hesitates, choosing his words carefully. "How much... how much do you know?"

Ranboo freezes, uncertain. He opens and closes his mouth a few times before he manages to settle on a weak and nervous, "How much do I know about what?"

Tubbo presses the pads of his fingers into the spaces between Ranboo's bones, feeling his knuckles roll. Tubbo isn't really sure if it's helping. Ranboo doesn't even seem to notice, his attention is drawn away, draining down into the endless black hole that is Wilbur Soot. But, Ranboo always does this for Tubbo when he's uprooted by a useless panic, so maybe it will help Ranboo.

Tubbo just keeps rubbing small gentle circles into Ranboo's palm, trying to replicate the memory of motion that Ranboo has done for him so many times. Tubbo's still not sure he's doing it right, but maybe he'll get better at it with practice.

All of Ranboo's panic bubbles up to the surface, and the twisting mess of Wilbur's anxieties are hardly concealed, both of them echoing back in a feedback loop of directionless worry. Tubbo loves Ranboo, but he really does worry too much. It's not good for him.

Tubbo huffs, and Tommy glances down at him. Tommy raises an eyebrow at Tubbo, and Tubbo lets his face fall flat, giving off every ounce of exasperation and begrudging fondness. Tommy splits a grin. *Can you believe these dorks? Getting worked up over nothing at all. It's already over, nothing to do about it now. No one was hurt. No one even died.*

"Right, sorry. That's a hard question to answer," Wilbur mutters, and the wood creaks as he leans back in his chair. "I— where do I start... You don't remember anything? From the gas station?"

Ranboo shakes his head no, and his eyes are wide and nervous. Ranboo's attention is locked on Wilbur, but he looks off just to the side of him — matching him for intensity, even if he doesn't quite meet Wilbur's stare.

"I'm sorry, about whatever happened. I—" Ranboo rushes to explain before Wilbur can go on. "I really am handling it. It's fine. I set up cameras in my room, to watch myself, after I figured out what was going on. I mean, it's only been a couple of weeks, I think, so I haven't really had time to — but it's not— it's not *bad*. It's like... I can't talk and I can't understand what people are saying to me, I don't think. Sometimes, I manage to get outside and wander out of the house. But, I've never gone too far! So, it's fine, really. I'm handling it. I'm figuring it out. Don't worry."

"No, Ranboo, it's alright," Wilbur is quick to placate, his voice gone careful and deliberately soothing. "It's okay. We're not mad, or anything. I just— I think there might be... There's more going on here than you realize."

"It's just sleepwalking," Ranboo insists again, but it's just as weak as before.

"Sleepwalking?!" Tommy squawks, spluttering before he spills out, "That wasn't fuckin'—"

"Tommy," Wilbur cuts in swiftly. Wilbur's gaze snaps to Tommy, and Tommy splutters louder. "Please."

The tension in Ranboo winds up tighter, Tubbo feels the way Ranboo's fingers curl and clench with anxious energy under his hands. Tubbo watches Ranboo's gaze flick back and forth between Tommy and Wilbur, still too wide and nervous, and he never once meets either of their eyes.

Tommy turns to Ranboo, eyes just as wide, but only earnest and bright. Tommy leans over and shoves at Ranboo's arm with fierce affection when he shouts, "The devil knew your name, man! You literally talked to her, like she wasn't— like it just—!"

"The *devil*? Now, hold on. I don't—" Ranboo puts a hand up like he's telling Tommy to wait, closing his eyes as a warble of frustration and panic escapes him.

Ranboo takes a breath, and lets it out as a heavy sigh. When he opens his eyes, everyone is still looking at him, and his eyes flicker away like he can escape their sight.

When Ranboo speaks again, his voice is forcefully level and calm. "...Does someone want to tell me what happened while I was sleepwalking?"

"Sleepwalking," Tommy mutters right back at him, rolling his eyes.

It takes Tubbo an extra long second to process the words, but as soon as he does he releases one hand and lets go of Ranboo's for just long enough to smack Tommy's chest chidingly, then he goes right back to rubbing little circles along each of Ranboo's knuckles.

"Be nice," Tubbo grumbles before the sound turns into an unwilling yawn.

"Why do you keep *saying it like that*?" Ranboo whines, his voice cracking right back into something distressed and anxious. "It's just— Just, tell me what happened, please?"

Wilbur takes a breath, composing a difficult explanation, and Tubbo knows the sound of that deep in his chest. "After you fell asleep in the car, you started... sleepwalking. Like you said, you didn't

seem completely coherent. I don't think you could understand anything we said to you."

A part of Tubbo thinks Ranboo shouldn't be hearing this, that it's going to cause him more distress. But. This isn't something Tubbo could avoid Ranboo ever finding out about. Tubbo has to resign himself to that. Ranboo was going to find out, sooner or later. And it's better that Wilbur be the one to take on the job of explaining it to him, anyway. Wilbur is better with his words, and it's in his best interest to avoid making Ranboo upset. Wilbur will be able to put Ranboo at ease better than Tubbo could. So, Tubbo will trust Wilbur with this. Just this one thing. As long as Tubbo still has Ranboo safe, trapped under his shins where Wilbur can't get him.

Wilbur's tone is calm and even, relaxed like he's explaining nothing of importance at all, nothing to panic about. "Tubbo... Tubbo was a bit worried about you. We ended up pulling over, and we went into a gas station, and Tubbo— uh. Well. He, uh. I'm— not sure what he did."

Tubbo lets his eyes slip closed. He was there for this part, he remembers this. He doesn't need Wilbur to tell it to him again. Tubbo just lets the perfectly practiced soothing sound of Wilbur's voice roll through the room, washing over him languidly. He's more focused on the feeling of Ranboo's hand under the pads of his fingers, and the strange way that human skin feels, thinner, more flexible, delicate and soft.

"We wrote a bunch of scribbles on a napkin and then burned it to summon the devil," Tommy joins in helpfully, his voice picking up in excitement.

Tubbo hums happily and smiles against the cozy, dark space he's slipping into. "We did."

The memory of Wilbur's face, comically frozen in shock and fear as Drista floated into the room is one he's going to hold on to forever. It was fantastic. Maybe he can do it again, just to see the look on Wilbur's face go pale and slack.

"You... summoned the devil," Ranboo repeats incredulously, disbelief crushing his tone flat.

There's a tug at the leg of Tubbo's pants, and Tubbo cracks his eyes open just enough to lazily watch Ranboo pick nervously at the loose threads fraying at the cuff of Tubbo's pants. Tubbo squeezes Ranboo's hand gently, his aching fingers shaking with the strain of even that small effort.

"Yeah!" Tommy insists, gleefully ignoring Ranboo's blatant skepticism like he can't see the eyebrow Ranboo raises at him. "I didn't think it was gonna work! But it did! She was real— oh, she was *so* real, Ranboo! She was floatin' an' shit! She had this huge pitchfork! It was so crazy! She— she called me a child! Can you believe that? Big words comin' from her! She looked like a— just like a little fuckin' kid! I don't— you were talkin' to her, and we couldn't understand you, but she could! You were speakin'— fuck, what did— Tubbo, what's it called?"

Something pokes Tubbo's cheek and Tubbo flinches away from the sudden intrusion. Tommy pokes his face again, because of course it's Tommy, and Tubbo grumbles, twisting his face away with a toss of his horns. No, wait. Not horns. Whatever. He just wants to *sleep*. He's so tired. Let Wilbur explain it. Wilbur's good with words, better than Tubbo.

"Gender— or blender, or something. You were talkin' kitchen appliances, man," Tommy states firmly with the utmost confidence.

"...Tubbo could understand me?" Ranboo asks quietly, and Tubbo can feel the burn of Ranboo's eyes on him.

Tubbo doesn't open his eyes — too tired — but he blindly pats at Ranboo's hand. Tubbo tries to give something like reassurance, but even the low hum is fuzzy and sleep-warm. Calm down, Ranboo. Stop panicking. It's all okay.

"No? I don't think so," Tommy says, considering, and the sound of his voice carries the doubtful tip of his head.

"It seemed like the only person who could speak to you was— the devil," Wilbur explains with an audible grimace, reluctant to give in and outright state the reality of that morning as truth. He's still trying to hold on to some suspension of disbelief, some attempt to cling to a false rationality.

Tubbo snorts, amused.

Next to Tubbo's ear, Tommy's chest rumbles with a laugh, bursting bright and gleeful. "Oh man! I can't believe you missed it! Well— I mean— you were *there*, but you were possessed or whatever. That's why we summoned the devil! To bring you back, or something. She was *so fucking cool*. She was *terrifying*! I thought we were gonna die for sure. She said something about the XD, and *nukes*, and—"

"Wait, wait. Hold on. Slow down. Go back to— you said you *summoned the devil*?" Ranboo warbles, incredulity sharpening his tone. "*How*?"

"I, uh, don't really know," Tommy admits with a hum, his leg bouncing with barely restrained excitement under Tubbo's back. "Wet napkins?"

"You—" Ranboo starts, then cuts himself off with a puff of air. "Alright."

"It's alright if you don't believe us," Wilbur offers, his deliberately soft tone layering over the sharp edges of dread and anxiety, saying everything he wants to hear. "I don't quite believe it myself."

"I—" Ranboo stops, and he's at a loss for words for a long moment. Tubbo can all but hear the clicking of gears in the silence as Ranboo rapidly tries to sort it all out. "Okay. Okay. You summoned the devil, sure. And you did this to... make me stop sleepwalking?"

"I don't know," Tommy admits with a wry lightness. "Er, not really sure what the plan was, honestly. Tubbo didn't really say."

"And the devil did... what, exactly?" Ranboo asks carefully, trying not to stress the words but failing miserably.

"We're not sure," Wilbur answers, his paper-thin facsimile of confidence and omniscience faltering under the pressure. "Nothing, maybe. She... she said there was nothing she could do. Seemed pretty adamant about that."

"Nothing she could do about *sleepwalking*," Ranboo presses, and Tommy and Wilbur are uncertain and silent in the face of Ranboo's questioning.

Wilbur isn't doing a very good job, Tubbo thinks. A rather lackluster explanation.

Whatever. Not his problem. Not right now, at least. No one is in danger at the moment. Everything will be fine, at least for a little while, at least for long enough to close his eyes.

Tommy says, “You know what I think— I think you were *possessed*. I think it’s demons— maybe just a little demon or something. They got all into your head, and Tubbo had to call the devil to tell the demons off for takin’ over your brain.” And Tommy says, “You got demons in your head, king. You should work on that. Burn some sage, or burn a building down, some light arson, you know? Maybe appease the devil, a little bit. I think that’ll fix it. Or maybe try talking to the demons, first. You can talk it out, surely.” And Tommy says something about talking to kitchen appliances, Tubbo thinks. It’s all sort of hazy and quiet, fading away bit by bit.

The sound of the conversation drifting over Tubbo’s head fuzzes into the background, rolling and lulling through the room as they go around and around, passing ideas as they add their voices to the puzzle, trading pieces, trying to fit them all together, but nothing slotting into place quite right. They’re missing too much, the gaps in the picture too wide.

There’s something soft filling him — his limbs, his head, his chest. Fuzzy and muted sounds carry on, and it’s all Tubbo can do to keep breathing, keep air moving through his heavy chest. He trusts Tommy and Ranboo to keep him, to be warm and alive, and to stay that way for long enough that Tubbo can close his eyes. All Tubbo does is breathe, in and out, reassured by the steady mutter of voices over his head, the grounding press of legs against his back and under his shins, the tap and tug of fingers along his ribs and at his ankles, the warmth of Ranboo’s human hand in his. He is hazy and warm and alive, less inside his body than he *is* his body. He’s content, maybe, if that’s what this is.

Tubbo’s hands are cold. At some point, the thought occurs to him, itching at his brain. His hands are cold. His fingers twitch and curl in, but they meet nothing, empty. With a furrow sinking into his eyebrows, Tubbo cracks open an eye, squinting against the lights. Something is wrong. It woke him up. Why are his hands cold?

Tubbo glances down, the light searing bright into his eyes. He fumbles to flex chilled fingers, reaching out half-blind. His hands are empty, fingers still trembling pitifully and aching like hell along every joint. But his hands are empty. At some point, Tubbo slipped into sleep and his grip had slackened and fallen loose from Ranboo’s hand. He didn’t even realize he’d drifted off.

Tubbo’s quick to pick himself up and reach out, butchering the idea of a smooth motion with all his shaking and half-blind fumbling. But it’s only a second before he finds something warm, the gentle force of Ranboo pressing back into Tubbo’s searching fingers. There’s a heartbeat beneath the thin and delicate skin, human blood and skin and bones all wrapped up together to carry that soft *th-thump*. Tubbo hums, prying his eyes open just enough to see Ranboo’s wrist in his hands, to see Ranboo watching him, to see just as much as he feels Ranboo picking up Tubbo’s hand and holding it again.

Ranboo gives a little smile, but it’s wobbly at the edges, marked by the anxious and over-thoughtful pinch in his eyebrows.

Next to Tubbo’s ear, Tommy’s heart carries on, *th-thump, th-thump*, beating against his ribs like it wants out. Tubbo tips his head back, letting it fall over Tommy’s lap, and peers up at Tommy. Tommy’s already looking at him. Tubbo has to squint against the radiant brightness, the wild and immutable thing that only knows how to push onward.

The irritating prickling against his side gives it away, but Tubbo still glances over to meet Wilbur’s stare, disquieting and burning curious.

Oh, they’re all looking at him.

“You’re all looking at me,” Tubbo mutters sleepily, confusion coloring the slip of his words.

Ranboo snorts, and the puff of air is warm and fond.

“Why?” Tubbo says like a demand, but it’s sleepy and lacking any kind of force behind it.

“We were hoping that maybe you could fill us in,” Wilbur answers, and the expression on his face is split between amusement and unease. “There’s... quite a bit that we don’t understand. I’d like to hear it from you.”

Tubbo blinks at them slowly.

It’s too bright in here.

Tubbo rolls over without thinking, and *owowow* that hurts. Oh, wow, his muscles ache and scream furiously. Nope. Not happening.

Tubbo goes loose and settles with a huff. He’s not moving anywhere, not even to shelter away in the dark by pressing his face against Tommy’s shirt.

“What do you want?” Tubbo grumbles, letting his head tip back and closing his eyes again, seeking even a little bit of respite from the brightness around him.

“Just tell us about the devil, man,” Tommy nudges, poking Tubbo’s forehead right at the scrunched up wrinkle between his eyebrows. Without really thinking about it, Tubbo nudges back against Tommy’s hand, knocking his forehead into Tommy’s hand firmly. “What’d she do? Why’s Ranboo speakin’ gender? Ah,” Tommy catches himself, derailing like a realization. He sounds solemn when he says, “Sorry, king. Couldn’t understand you. I don’t speak gender. I like women too much.”

“Tommy, that’s sexuality, not gender,” Wilbur corrects tiredly.

“Not important,” Tommy declares. “Answer the question, sleepy boy. Why’s Ranboo speakin’ to blenders?”

“S called Ender,” Tubbo corrects, followed immediately by a yawn that rumbles through his chest.

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” Tommy says, and he curiously taps his knuckles against Tubbo’s forehead.

Tubbo butts back, idly pushing back against Tommy’s knuckles. The challenge of pressure feels nice, sturdy and solid against his skull. Tommy presses back harder, and Tubbo matches his challenge.

“It’s just nonsense, it doesn’t mean anything,” Ranboo argues weakly. Tubbo cracks an eye open, meeting Ranboo’s gaze around Tommy’s arm. Ranboo is looking to Tubbo hopelessly, seeking a far fetched affirmation.

Tubbo squeezes his fingers around Ranboo’s hand. He won’t lie to Ranboo — except when he does. But not about this. Not about Ranboo. Tubbo won’t hide things about Ranboo from Ranboo. Ranboo deserves better than that after so often being a stranger to himself.

So Tubbo spills unfiltered honesty when he says, “Well, I don’t know. Maybe. I don’t speak Ender. Seems rather pointless to have a whole language you can’t communicate with, though. How are

Endermen supposed to talk to each other?”

“Endermen?” Wilbur prompts, and Tubbo gives.

“Yeah. Tall fuckers.” Tubbo lets go of Ranboo’s wrist with one hand, tilting his hand up and spreading his fingers like long Enderman claws in explanation. He’s not really sure it explains much of anything, but it makes sense to him.

“The fuck is an *Enderman*?” Tommy asks, and his hands fidget restlessly, tapping against Tubbo’s ribs and pressing down on Tubbo’s forehead with more and more force until Tubbo can’t keep pushing back against him.

“You know,” Tubbo says with exasperation as he lets his head fall back against Tommy’s lap, trying to come up with an explanation for an *Enderman*, which is frustratingly, stupidly difficult. Everyone knows what an Enderman is. There’s not a single species from any dimension that *hasn’t* seen an Enderman before. They’re literally everywhere. “Big. Kinda purple, but mostly not. Uhhh, don’t look ‘em in the eyes, that’s important. Oh, this is really cool, actually. They’ve got these, like, really highly specialized nail beds, super reinforced so their claws don’t break when they’re digging up stone and stuff.”

“Okay,” Ranboo says slowly, and he hasn’t stopped holding Tubbo’s hand, so Tubbo must be doing something right, at least. “And you think I... can speak to Endermen?”

“No, you *are* an Enderman,” Tubbo corrects, and Ranboo’s hand jerkily tightens around Tubbo’s. “Er, you’re half of one. You used to be. Hey, why do you guys think the reset made everyone human and not— I don’t know, cats or something? Kinda species-phobic, if you think about it.”

“I’m... Not? I’m just not, actually,” Ranboo insists, and Tubbo huffs.

“Well, I mean, *yeah*. Not anymore, obviously. I’m not a goat anymore, either, now am I?” Tubbo gives a weak and empty toss of his horns— not horns. Prime, this is frustrating. Why is this so hard to explain?

Tubbo throws his head back and whines, “Can I go back to sleep?”

“No, you have to tell us about *me*,” Tommy demands, poking at the soft spaces in between Tubbo’s ribs. “What am I?”

“Annoying,” Tubbo cackles to himself, bearing his teeth in a wide grin.

Tommy crows a startled noise of offense. “No, you prick! Tell me I was something cool, like a wolf. Or a dragon!”

“You’re the same,” Tubbo yawns, settling back into Tommy’s lap with a sleepy hum. “Always been human, always been Tommy.”

“That’s boring,” Tommy complains, deadpan. “Tell me something else.”

“Er, I mean. You’re all different. Just in other ways. Everyone is... littler. Younger. ‘S weird,” Tubbo mumbles, struggling to find a way to describe the way they’ve all gone strangely soft around the edges.

They're the same at the core of them, but all the edges are dulled, the surface level worn down to smooth and easy. It's in the way Tommy doesn't flinch anymore, it's in the way Ranboo speaks freely without holding his tongue, it's in the way that Wilbur hasn't yelled at him even once. The only thing Tubbo can think to compare it to is when they were young — before L'Manberg, before the wars, before the weight of other people's lives and deaths made its home on their shoulders and called itself responsibility.

Tubbo can feel the prickle and itch of Wilbur's eyes on him sharpen, and Tubbo knows what's to come before Wilbur even opens his mouth.

"How long..." Wilbur pauses for a long moment, considering his words, his phrasing, his timing — finding the best way to get what he wants. "How old was I? Before. Last time."

That's an odd one. Tubbo can't say he saw that question coming. The information seems harmless enough.

"Uh," Tubbo tips his head and considers, counting on his fingers. What was it, thirteen years in limbo? "Forty? Forty-one? Something like that."

That won't be the end of it, Tubbo knows. Wilbur doesn't waste his words, and a pointless question like that can only serve as a foot in the door, an opening move, the luring lead-in to something bigger. Now that he has opened the floodgates, Wilbur has questions — questions that Tubbo promised he would answer.

"You never answered me last time," Wilbur starts, and from his tone alone Tubbo knows that he isn't going to like how Wilbur ends. He never does. "Why bother telling us any of this? Why do you care? What do we mean to you, Tubbo?"

You're a selfish fucker and I hate you, Tubbo thinks. I can't be rid of you no matter how hard I try, 'cause you keep coming back when you shouldn't, sticking around and getting your claws into things that are better left alone, dragging everyone down with you as you spiral into a brutal and glorious show of self-destruction.

What he says instead is, "You're mean. Don't like you."

Then Wilbur opens his mouth and says, "I wasn't asking about me."

Tubbo goes very, very still.

"All of us. It's not just me." Wilbur rolls the words out slowly, taking his time laying them down. "Tommy and Ranboo too, obviously. But there's more to it. You knew the names of my friends. Dream in particular seems to tick you off. See, you were very concerned with the people we're staying with and whether or not they're safe. You don't trust them at all. I would think you know something about them that I don't, but you asked *me* if they could be trusted, deferring to *my* judgment, like I would know better than you would."

Tubbo wonders if it's too late to pretend to be asleep.

"Now, Tubbo. None of that is a coincidence. So I'll ask again: who are we to you?"

Tubbo breathes out harshly, and he doesn't say a word. He doesn't want to talk about it. But there's no easy way out of this conversation. He could lie, but something tells him that Wilbur isn't going

to settle for anything less than utter truth.

“I knew you all, in the old world,” Tubbo mumbles, like if he’s quiet enough, the words will fade away just like the rest of the room has.

In the empty silence, Tubbo hears Ranboo’s indrawn breath just as much as he feels the flutter of Ranboo’s pulse under his fingers. “Yeah. Um, you said that. What do you mean, exactly?”

“Don’t know what you want me to say,” Tubbo grumbles, keeping his eyes closed so he doesn’t have to face whatever Ranboo looks like right now.

Wilbur wants to know who they were to him, but Tubbo doesn’t know the word for it. What do you call someone who has seen you at your worst, in the pits of malice and selfishness and vengeance? What do you call someone who was right down there alongside you, staring you down with equal parts hatred and understanding? What do you call the people who stick by you even when you wish they’d leave, and what do you call the people who leave when you wish more than anything that they’d stay?

“We were— whatever.” There’s no word for what they were. Or if there is, Tubbo hasn’t found it yet — not in ancient tomes, not in peace treaties, not in the blueprints of nuclear weapons. It must be rare, if it exists at all. “Close, or something.”

“Who?” Wilbur asks. “You and Dream?”

Tubbo is struck by nothing at all. He feels still and numb like dead-empty nothing. There’s not a thing in his head but the fuzz of sleep-grey static.

Tubbo doesn’t speak, but the mumbled words come out of him anyway. “Don’t want to talk about Dream.”

“Alright,” Wilbur says gently, and Tubbo wants to bite him. Wilbur will set it aside for now, constructing a guise of kindness and debt, but he will not forget, and it’s bound to come back around sooner or later. “We don’t have to talk about him now,” Wilbur allows in a show of generosity, but Tubbo doesn’t want to talk about Dream *at all*.

“Who was I?” Ranboo’s fingers suddenly jolt and tighten around Tubbo’s hand, shocked, like he doesn’t know where the words are coming from and didn’t have the time to stop them.

Tubbo picks up where he hadn’t noticed he’d stilled, rubbing little circles into the palm of Ranboo’s hand. He pauses for a second before he hums and tells Ranboo, “Doesn’t matter.”

“Oh,” Ranboo mutters, deflating softly. It’s half disappointment and half a relief, a release of tension that echoes down to the tips of his fingers as he loosens his grip on Tubbo’s hand. “Why not?”

“Doesn’t matter who you were before,” Tubbo tells him, tapping his heel against Ranboo’s leg chidingly. “You’re just you.”

Ranboo takes his time with his words, considering. “I think it matters — it matters to me. I care who I was, if I was a good person, what you thought of me...”

“Well, you shouldn’t,” Tubbo informs Ranboo assuredly, clipping his words with utter conviction. “‘S like I said: you’re different. So. Doesn’t matter who you were or what I thought of you.”

Ranboo is quiet for a moment, twisting his threads with an idle consideration, and Tubbo can feel the gentle burn of Ranboo’s eyes on him the whole time.

Ranboo comes to a decision quietly, “Tell me anyway.”

Tubbo hums, tapping against Ranboo’s knuckles. “No.”

“The devil called you his husband!” Tommy chimes in *extremely unhelpfully*.

And Tubbo goes rigid.

There’s a long beat of silence where no one says a word.

Oh, this is going to be an awkward one to talk his way out of.

“You’re—” Ranboo splutters at the space where Tubbo doesn’t immediately deny it.

“It was for tax purposes,” Tubbo deflects, digging in hard and stubborn.

“What do you *mean* it was for tax purposes?!” Ranboo cries dramatically, his voice climbing in pitch.

“You know!” Tubbo exclaims, struggling for an explanation, keeping his eyes very, very firmly shut. “There was a tax! And I wanted to make sure Michael had someone else to take care of him! And after Doomsday and everything, you were—”

“Hold on, hold on,” Ranboo cuts in, his hand squeezing tight around Tubbo’s until Tubbo can feel his own heartbeat thudding in his veins. “We were married? Start there.”

Tubbo flushes. It is suddenly far too warm on this couch. He tries to pull his hands up to bury his face in them, but he only manages to hide his face with the one, because Ranboo’s grip on Tubbo’s other hand goes steely tight and he won’t let go.

“This sucks. I want to go to bed now,” Tubbo whines from behind his hand. To his horror, a nervous giggle builds in his throat and slips through his fingers.

Tubbo feels like he’s admitting to a horrible mistake, maybe because he is. Marrying Ranboo may have been a terrible and impulsive plan, but at least it was a plan. Caring for Ranboo as much as he does — that was very much *not* a part of the plan. But it happened. It snuck up on him when he wasn’t paying attention, building slowly in the background of every moment they spent together — every time Tubbo held his erratically shaking hands behind his back and Ranboo transcribed legible reports for New L’Manberg’s presidential cabinet; every time Ranboo went deep down into the mines and Tubbo laid down brick after frozen brick, talking nonsense into their comms just to keep each other company, just to make sure someone knew they were still alive and breathing; every time Ranboo checked on Michael and made sure he got to bed while Tubbo couldn’t make himself leave the lab, hounded by something fierce and paranoid in his chest that there is no word for.

Tubbo is helplessly attached to Ranboo. He cares about Ranboo to a dangerous degree. And what a horrible mistake that was. Because Ranboo knew it, and Ranboo cared about him just as much.

And if Ranboo hadn't cared so much about their little family, he never would have—

Tubbo slowly opens his eyes. Through the cracks in his defense, where the light slips in between his fingers, Tubbo can see Ranboo looking down at him, eyes just a bit too wide, caught frozen on an exhale, at a loss for words.

It's okay. It's okay. Ranboo is alive. Tubbo can feel his pulse beating warm under his fingertips.

It's going to be different this time. Tubbo is going to make sure of it.

"I don't know what you want me to say," Tubbo repeats weakly around a half-choked involuntary giggle.

"Um," Ranboo fizzles out, and he's still staring down at Tubbo.

Tubbo thinks Ranboo doesn't know what he wants Tubbo to say, either.

"Bad choice." Tommy snorts derisively, utterly confident in his announcement to the room at large. "Him? *Ranboo*? Mister— fuckin' — *mimimi I'm so tall and rich and mysterious. Oooh, look at me and my highly specialized nail beds. Aren't they impressive?* I wouldn't have allowed that. I simply wouldn't have allowed it! When the marriage officiant got up after all the mushy shit and did the whole— *does anyone object?*" Tommy's voice goes high and mocking, and Tubbo feels the shift of movement under his back as Tommy gestures along with his imagined character. "I would have stood up and said *me, bitch! I object!*"

Tommy is good at filling the silence, at easing the air of tension that grew thick and choking around them. Tubbo lets his eyes slip closed to the familiar rambling of Tommy's sprawling tangents.

"I mean," Tubbo mutters, tiredly turning his head to knock his forehead into Tommy's ribs. "You weren't exactly around to stop me, big man." That's all he needs to say, but the words keep pouring out of him anyway. "You were dead."

There's a silence in the room.

Tubbo blinks his eyes open again, just a sliver, just enough to see what's happened to make everyone so quiet.

"What do you mean," Wilbur's voice has gone flat and quiet.

Tubbo's eyes flick over to meet Wilbur.

Tubbo doesn't even realize it before he's slowly curling his trembling fingers over the comforting leather grip of the sword hilt.

Wilbur's expression is cut in hard lines, carefully and deliberately blank, but he doesn't hide the way he stares Tubbo down.

Wilbur's face is a mask of something calm, but Tubbo can see the way he's cracking. Wilbur can't stop the way his foot subtly shakes and bounces against the floor, his concealed emotions showing through in the erratic twitching and tapping of anxious fingers against the armchair.

Wilbur is trying very, very hard to present himself as calm and collected, and he's failing.

This is bad. An unstable Wilbur is a forewarning, a herald of very, very bad things. It brings the smell of heavy gunpowder to fill the air in enclosed, dark spaces. It brings a wave of paranoia that makes people stop listening to reason. It brings a spiral that catches everyone in its crushing gravity, and no one escapes.

Tubbo has seen the pattern often enough to know the signs, but for all his foreknowledge and experience, Tubbo still hasn't figured out how to *stop it*.

Wilbur's face is blank, except for the growing cracks, revealing uncertainty and anxiety and fear of the unknown beneath the surface. But Tubbo doesn't know what Wilbur's thinking, doesn't know how to appease him, doesn't know what he can say to fix this.

It's his responsibility. It *should be* his responsibility. He can see the danger, even when no one else can. But it feels like the only thing he can do is resign himself. Again, and again, and again. He can watch the sky all day and read the clouds perfectly and know exactly what's to come, but all of the knowing in the world won't stop the storm from coming down on you. He's caught helpless in the spiral of the storm just as much as everyone else.

And Wilbur is staring him down, inevitability written in his face.

Tubbo is tried and tired. The awful truth is, there's not a thing he can say to stop it. So he doesn't even try.

Tubbo closes his eyes and curls away, ignoring the protesting ache that spikes in his muscles. He turns his back to Wilbur and buries his face in the warm fabric of Tommy's shirt.

Shutter the windows. Let the storm carry its course. Wait for the sun.

"Tubbo?" Wilbur asks, the flat of his voice striking like the flat of a blade. A warning.

Tubbo curls up tighter. He does not care. He doesn't care what Wilbur does, or says, or thinks, or feels. Nope. Not at all. He doesn't need to look at Wilbur. He's not even thinking about Wilbur.

"Tubbo."

Tubbo twitches like a flinch, but he doesn't respond — the sharp prickle and burn when Wilbur looks at him thoroughly ignored.

Tubbo doesn't care one bit. Nope. He is going to sleep.

The sound of Wilbur's indrawn breath is shallow around the tight band of poorly-hidden panic squeezing Wilbur's chest, but the room is silent enough that Tubbo can hear it anyway, like wind against the walls.

"Wil," Tommy cuts Wilbur off before he can say another word. Tommy's voice goes easy and light when he says, "Calm yourself." Tubbo feels the shift of movement as Tommy does something with his hands, and Tommy continues lightly, "I'm fine. See? Trust me."

Tubbo appreciates the effort. Tiredly, he knocks his forehead into the bottom of Tommy's ribs with the muted wash of affection. It won't do any good, but it's a nice gesture.

Tubbo waits for whatever comes next, holding himself tense, expectant, guarded. But the silence stretches. There's nothing. It's just quiet.

Wilbur breathes out harshly, releasing his held breath with scathing force. He wants everyone to know just how much he doesn't like this. But. He lets it go.

Oh. Wilbur trusts Tommy.

Wilbur will take Tommy's assurance of truth over the screaming paranoia in his head. That... isn't something that's happened before. A Wilbur who actually listens. A Wilbur who can find trust in the person closest to him. A Wilbur who allows Tommy to settle him with a word. That's something new. Without a doubt, that is a different Wilbur from the one Tubbo knew.

Wilbur is changed here, too. Softer. Of course he would be. Everything is. Wilbur is not immune to the softness that infects everything, here. But, somehow it still comes as a surprise. It seems like it should be impossible — a world where Tommy says *listen to me, trust me*, and Wilbur *does*.

Maybe... maybe that's a person Tubbo can trust, too.

He's not sure. Life has taught Tubbo too well for him to be blindly hopeful, it's ground the lesson into his skin and bones enough that he should know better. But Tubbo's biggest fault remains persistently unchanged — he's always been an optimist at the heart of him.

That's the core of it — the buried heart deep, deep down. People don't change. Not when it comes down to it. They can change their actions and change their words, but everything inside stays the same.

So Tubbo won't trust easy — *can't* trust easy. But... maybe he will trust eventually. Maybe the softness of this world will get to him, too.

"Why don't you three go to sleep," Wilbur suggests evenly. He's still treading unstable ground, paranoia cracking just underfoot with the weight of his aloof tone, but he's managed to reign himself in to something approaching steady and calm. Tommy asked it of him, and for that he's willing to trust that he can let it go — at least until tomorrow.

Tubbo nods silently into Tommy's shirt. He wants to go to bed.

"C'mon. Everybody up," Wilbur commands casually, the floorboards creaking as he hops up from the armchair. "Off to bed with you."

Ranboo and Tommy pause, hesitant, and— oh, right. Tubbo has to get off of them.

He really doesn't want to.

"Get uuup!" Tommy complains, wasting no time poking Tubbo's cheek.

Tubbo scrunches up his face and leans away from the prodding with a reluctant grumble. The lights in the room are still as bright as ever, and Tubbo squints without Tommy's shirt to hide in. With a tremendous effort, Tubbo lazily rolls off the couch and lands on his hooves, careful to keep a firm grip on the sword. Standing makes the ache in every one of his muscles spike disapprovingly, but after he's had a second to adjust, they dull into a steady, bearable background noise.

Ugh. It's cold in here, now. Tubbo fights back a shiver. The room temperature feels abrasive against his skin after being surrounded by warmth for so long.

Something nudges against Tubbo's arm, and Tubbo blinks his eyes open again, unsure when he closed them. Tommy's already popped up from the couch, groaning dramatically as he finally gets to stretch out his legs and pace around the room. Wilbur's nowhere to be seen, but the front door is propped open and Tubbo can hear the slam of the van's trunk door closing outside. Ranboo lingers near, and— oh, yeah, he's got his hand on Tubbo's arm.

Ranboo is quiet, but his considering is loud. Tubbo blinks slowly and waits, listening for whatever Ranboo needs to ask. He has something he wants to say, Tubbo's sure. But Ranboo stays quiet.

Ranboo shakes his head lightly before he lets go of Tubbo's arm and steps back — a small, tired smile leaving earnest little crinkles at the corners of his eyes. "Goodnight."

Tubbo's hand reaches out and snags Ranboo's sleeve before he can step away any further.

Ranboo startles. But the seconds pass and Tubbo doesn't move, caught on the edge of something he can't force out of his throat. Ranboo stills, waiting for Tubbo to find the words.

"I—" Tubbo tries, but it's more difficult than he expects. It's all muddled and fuzzy in his head, and all the words he tries to put together sound misshapen and wrong. Nothing feels right, nothing feels like what he needs to say.

Tubbo gives up. He tips forward and butts his head into Ranboo's shoulder. It's still not right, it's not enough. But it's all he can do for now. He hopes that a little bit of whatever jumbled mess is in his head will spread to Ranboo through the solid contact of Tubbo's forehead against Ranboo's arm.

Tubbo can figure it out tomorrow. They have time. They are alive, and when they wake up in the morning, they will still be here. There will be time to sort it out.

Tubbo feels a hand brush through his hair, gently skimming over the tangled snares. Tubbo leans in and presses a little bit harder, like that alone could possibly be enough. It'll have to do.

"I call the room on the end!" Tommy announces.

Tubbo feels the shape of Ranboo stretch and twist, like he's glancing over his shoulder at Tommy as Tommy's footsteps skid and slide down the dark hallway.

"Are you coming?" Ranboo asks, his hand resting warm against the back of Tubbo's head where all his thoughts are trapped.

Tubbo shakes his head no. He can feel the subtle shift of motion as Ranboo tips his head like a question.

"I think..." Tubbo tries to get out the feeling in his chest, but it takes him another long moment to find words that fit. "I'd rather sleep alone tonight. I want to sleep on the couch, if that's alright."

"Yeah, that's fine," Ranboo assures him easily, his tone quiet and gentle in the little space around them. "Uh, I'll ask Wil if he knows where the blankets are."

Ranboo's hand slides away from the back of Tubbo's head, and Tubbo sighs as he leans back up to standing, only wobbling a little bit as he balances upright.

“Go lay down. You’re going to fall over if you fall asleep standing up,” Ranboo chides, his smile warming his words.

“You’d catch me.” Tubbo smiles back at Ranboo, bearing teeth in his victorious certainty.

Ranboo snorts and doesn’t deny it. “Go to sleep.”

“M’kay,” Tubbo mumbles and collapses right back down onto the very soft couch.

Tubbo buries his face in the wonderfully dark cushions and cradles the sword close to his chest, very careful with his handling to keep its sharp edges tame and inert. Tubbo knows how to use a sword, and he’s learning just as well how not to use one.

Tubbo breathes. All around him, he’s surrounded by the quiet sounds of life, carrying on like the thudding of a heartbeat. Cloth drags over wooden floorboards as Wilbur brings in their bags from the van. Water splashes against iron in a steady stream as Tommy brushes his teeth in the kitchen sink. Doors creak open and click shut faintly through the hall as Ranboo curiously searches through unexplored closets and bedrooms.

The murmur of voices floats in and out of Tubbo’s perception. Tommy and Wilbur are talking, he thinks. Wilbur says, “...not tired yet, at least for a while. I’m planning on staying up to chat with Techno for a bit before I go back to sleep. I’ll be around. You let me know if...” before that fades away too.

Something nudges Tubbo’s arm. He grumbles himself awake as the nudging grows more insistent.

“Wake up,” Tommy demands, moving on to shaking Tubbo’s shoulder. “Put on pajamas, Tubs-o. And brush your teeth, too.”

Tubbo growls something incomprehensible, swatting blindly at Tommy’s face. Tommy laughs brightly, and Tubbo grunts as a pile of red cloth is abruptly dropped on his head in retaliation. Tubbo reaches up and pulls the clothes away from his face, blinking awake to the blurry sight of Tommy prancing away.

“Wil said to tell you that he couldn’t find your bag in the van, so I was very generous and gave you some of my pajamas,” Tommy tells him grandiosely.

“Don’ have’a bag,” Tubbo mumbles with a yawn as he stumbles to standing, shuffling past Tommy towards the direction where he thinks the bathroom is.

“You didn’t bring any clothes?!” Tommy squawks, aghast.

“We are *definitely* taking you shopping soon. You need clothes,” Ranboo chimes in from... somewhere. Tubbo squints in the general direction of the sound of Ranboo’s voice, but it’s far too bright in here and Tubbo is far too tired to bother. Tubbo doesn’t like his tone of voice anyway. All disappointed and vaguely judgmental. Prick. “I honestly can’t believe we haven’t done that already.”

“You—! I can’t *believe* you don’t—! How did you even get—” Tommy’s voice cuts off to muffled shouting as Tubbo shuts the bathroom door.

Tubbo blinks. Right. He’s in the bathroom. He’s supposed to do something in here...

Right. Get dressed. Put on pajamas. He can do that.

Maybe he should brush his teeth first. He doesn't want to get toothpaste on his pajamas by accident, and he's tired enough that he probably will.

There's a sharp knocking on the door before Tommy shouts, "Can you hurry up, man?!"

Tubbo jolts back to awareness, blinking hard.

The human Tubbo in the mirror is dressed in too-big pajamas, his sleeves falling off his hands and his feet covered in a pool of soft fabric. He's not sure when he did that. Everything is fuzzy around the edges, his motions settling in to follow a well worn routine of daily tasks, thoughtless and automatic.

"Impatient," Tubbo accuses, stepping out of the bathroom.

Tommy is standing on the other side of the door, grinning brightly with his own bundle of cow-print pajamas shoved under his arm. "No, you're just taking too long."

Tommy brushes past Tubbo with a laugh and shuts the bathroom door behind him. Tubbo yawns and shuffles his way back over to the couch with his eyes closed. He doesn't blink open his eyes again until his knees bump into the soft couch cushions. Once again, Tubbo collapses boneless into the couch, and he swears it feels softer and more comforting every time he does it.

"Hey, you left this in the bathroom," Tommy says with a tap against Tubbo's side some time later.

Tubbo groans complaint as he's pulled back into awareness against his will. The thing taps against his side again, and Tubbo recognizes the iron and leather rattle of the sword sheath. Ah, that's important.

Tubbo languidly stretches out a hand, and Tommy drops the sword sheath heavily into his waiting palm. Tubbo should... probably let go of the sword. It would be a bad idea to leave it where he could roll onto it in his sleep. It pains him to do it, but with a scowl, Tubbo fumbles the sword into the sheath and secures it shut. Against the ache and protest of his muscles, Tubbo leans over and sets the sword down, leaning up against the arm of the couch — well within reach, just in case.

"Um," Ranboo's voice starts, and Tubbo glances up to see Ranboo shuffling his feet, lingering just a couple blocks away. He holds up a pile of cloth for approval, colorful fabrics folded neatly in his arms. "I found blankets."

"Thank you, 'Boo," Tubbo mutters sleepily.

Tubbo reaches out with grabby hands, and Ranboo passes him one of the fuzzy blankets. Tubbo lazily hooks a hoof— foot— whatever into the corner fold of the blanket and kicks it out until it covers him. The blanket is messily bunched up and still only half-unfolded, but he's surrounded by the warm and fluffy material all around him, and that's good enough. Tubbo hums happily, burrowing into the blanket.

Ranboo sets the other blankets down, leaving the rest folded on the arm of the couch. Tubbo snakes an arm out from under the blanket and grabs Ranboo's sleeve before he can step away, holding on tightly and refusing to let go. Ranboo stops at the tug, glancing down as he realizes that Tubbo's latched on to him.

Ranboo makes a questioning noise in his throat.

“Pajamas,” Tubbo demands through a grumble, because he *refuses* to let Ranboo get away with sleeping in his clothes for the second night in a row.

Ranboo huffs, amused. Tubbo is tempted to bite Ranboo — retribution for not taking his demands seriously — but Ranboo can be forgiven for the way his voice is pouring with affection when he appeases, “M’kay, Tubbo.”

Tubbo yawns and releases Ranboo’s sleeve, satisfied. “Love you.”

Somewhere, bedsprings squeak as Tommy flops down onto Technoblade’s bed. Somewhere, the stairs creak as Wilbur descends into the basement. Somewhere, Ranboo gently brushes a hand through Tubbo’s hair and says goodnight. And Tubbo is asleep before he even realizes.

Chapter End Notes

Faerynova on Tumblr drew [art](#) for this chapter!

More art for this chapter by PebbledRat on Tumblr [here](#) and [here](#)!

Skater drew [even more art](#) for this chapter on Tumblr as well!

Come talk to me on my [Tumblr](#)!

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

Identify war by what it takes away (PART 1)

Chapter Summary

“there will always be one like you:
a child who gets the picked over box
with mostly black crayons. One who wonders
what beautiful has to do with beauty, as he darkens
a sun in the corner of every page,
constructs a house from ashen lines,
sketches stick figures lying face down-
I know how often red is the only color
left to reach for. I fear for you.”

-- [“Pomegranate Means Grenade” by Jamaal May](#).

Chapter Notes

Technoblade Never Dies.

Heed the updates tags! This chapter contains references to harm to animals! Specifically, Tubbo thinks about threatening Carl during The Butcher Army and he thinks about the dogs from the hound army that were killed on Doomsday.

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

Sleepily, Tubbo shovels another pancake into his mouth. They’re alright, he supposes. They’re very soft and sweet. The spongy bread tears easily as he pulls off another chunk and shoves it into his mouth, chewing slowly as he wakes up even slower.

He tried dipping a chunk of pancake into the thick brown syrup, but that stuff was *overwhelmingly* sweet, sweeter than honey, enough to make him wrinkle his nose and spit it out back onto the plate. No thanks. He’ll just eat his circles of sweet bread — pancakes — plain.

Tommy talked them up a lot. Tubbo thinks they’re fine. They’re definitely not *basically the greatest breakfast food ever* like Tommy claimed. They’re sort of like cake without all the frosting and berries. Kind of lackluster. Maybe they’re better when they’re warm.

Tubbo slept through breakfast, apparently, because no one woke him up. Not for lack of trying. Curled up on the couch, he slept all through the racket and chaos of everyone making and eating their food without stirring at all. Judging by the splatters of batter across the counter and the smears of raw egg hastily wiped up from the floor, it was not a quiet morning. Tubbo *seemed like he needed the rest*, so everyone decided to let him sleep in, or so Tommy told him. But they left a neat plate of food on the kitchen counter for him, full of pancakes and eggs and potatoes, which were fried in a new and interesting way.

Tubbo's rolled-up sleeve slips down his arm again, the cuff falling past his hand and narrowly avoiding landing in the puddle of brown syrup. Quick, Tubbo shoves the half-finished pancake into his mouth, holding onto it with his teeth as he pushes his sleeve back up. With a grumble, he tries to fix it so it will stay this time, but as he's doing that the other sleeve comes loose and slips down his arm as well.

This isn't going to work. The shirt is too big on him, unfeasibly long and falling off every time Tubbo moves too quickly. Of course it is — it's Wilbur's shirt. Ranboo and Tommy took one look at Tubbo that morning and refused to let him wear his own clothes. Apparently Tubbo's clothes are in the wash because they're *dirty and old and they smell like BO*. As if Tommy is one to talk. At least Tubbo owns more than one shirt.

Half-awake and half-processing the world around him, Tubbo could only watch on in silent resignation as Tommy — who was already ransacking Wilbur's suitcase — lit up with a grin and dug out a navy blue button up shirt. And now here Tubbo is. Wearing Wilbur's shirt. With the too-long ends tucked into his pants and his sleeve cuffs sliding off his hands.

Over and over, he can roll the sleeves up, but it all comes undone the second he tries to do anything with it. He figured he would be better at wearing shirts too big for him by now. But it seems that it never gets easier.

With a sigh muffled by a mouth full of pancake, Tubbo attempts to roll the sleeves back so he can use his hands again. It will come unraveled. He pushes his sleeves up anyway. It's all he can do.

There's a screeching from outside, the unmistakable sound of Tommy's voice breaking the quiet peace of the morning. Sleepily, half a beat later, Tubbo's attention rises to peer around the corner of the kitchen. The front door is propped open with half a broken brick, letting in the pouring sunlight. Cool morning breeze filters through the house, carrying with it the chattering sounds of birdsong and playful voices.

Distracted from his tranquil bubble of pancake chewing, Tubbo thoughtlessly picks up another couple of pancakes from the plate and meanders towards the door, following the sound of rising voices and laughter.

With pancake in hand, Tubbo steps outside into the late morning. The night's chill still hasn't let go of the scene quite yet — the wooden slats of the porch are cold under his feet, but clear sunlight is filling the air and steadily warming everything it can reach. There's a thump as a heavy suitcase hits the gravel driveway, landing half propped up against the open trunk of the van as it's quickly forgotten.

Tommy screams as Wilbur lunges at him, dodging away from his reach as Wilbur's fingers close around empty air. Technoblade stands by on the sidelines, watching with vague amusement as chaos unfolds.

"Come *here!*" Wilbur demands as Tommy cackles and dances away.

"No!" Tommy shouts.

Tommy startles into a wordless scream as Wilbur snaps out and catches a grip in the loose fabric of the sweater Tommy's wearing.

Wilbur reels Tommy in and Tommy goes flailing and screeching the whole way, “You’re clingy and awful and terrible! The worst!”

“If you’re gonna wear my sweater without asking permission, like a gremlin with no manners, then —” Wilbur’s words cut off abruptly as Tommy shoves a hand in his face, struggling to push Wilbur away from him.

Wilbur isn’t deterred in the least, winding his arms around Tommy in a trap of a hug. Tommy valiantly tries to wiggle his way out of the hold Wilbur’s got on him, but Wilbur only clings tighter.

“Awwwhaha! Tommyyyy,” Wilbur coos, to which Tommy spits curses like he’s dying.

“Clingy bitch! I hate you!”

“You’re wearing my sweater, Tommy! Did you want attention?”

Tommy laughs and shoves fruitlessly at Wilbur, fighting against his inescapable fate as he lies through his teeth. “No! It’s cold out! Fuck off!”

“Tommyyyy,” Wilbur coos. “You can just ask.”

“Why would I *ask* for your attention?” Tommy demands incredulously, rolling his eyes as he goes limp and heavy in Wilbur’s arms, making Wilbur bear the burden of holding him up.

“Fine.” Wilbur huffs, releasing Tommy all at once.

Tommy trips and catches himself before he can slide to the ground. Tommy is quick to skip up onto his feet and slip away, cackling brightly as he dances just out of Wilbur’s reach.

“Here, see,” Wilbur instructs, his voice gone smooth and helpful. And then Wilbur turns to Technoblade.

Technoblade jolts as Wilbur’s attention narrows in on him, glancing away like there might be someone else stood just behind him that Wilbur’s looking for. Tommy follows Wilbur’s gaze and zeros in on the new target, his prancing slowing to a distracted halt as he spots the new direction of the game.

“Techno, can I have a hug?” Wilbur asks, smiling pleasantly.

“Uuuh... sure,” Techno allows, sounding vaguely unsettled as he suddenly finds himself pulled directly into the center of Wilbur and Tommy’s tug-of-war.

Wilbur trots over to Technoblade with a smile, deviousness written in every crack of his crow’s feet and dimples, radiating innocence like he’s never had an ulterior motive in his life. Technoblade opens his arms and lets Wilbur wrap around him, tolerating Wilbur’s sudden hug without a word.

Technoblade doesn’t voice his disillusion, but he doesn’t need to — everything he doesn’t say conveyed in its entirety with the silent raise of an eyebrow. Wilbur ignores him, feigning obliviousness. Technoblade only rolls his eyes and fondly tolerates Wilbur using him like a pawn in the game, a prop in the show.

Technoblade pats Wilbur’s back awkwardly, and Wilbur stays quiet and still for a moment too long — the performance stutters to a stop.

Technoblade mutters, strangely, “You’re alright, kid.”

Wilbur tilts his head just slightly, hiding his face. Wilbur is quiet.

Tubbo doesn’t really know what to make of the scene.

Whatever moment they had fallen into shifts as Tommy gasps and splutters indignantly. “Just cause I don’t want a hug from *you* doesn’t mean I— Techno is *cool*! Why d’you get a hug from *Tech*?! Like I can’t ask for a hug?! Watch me, bitch! You’re not the only one who can— Techno, can I have a hug?”

“I guess,” Technoblade allows blandly, but he can’t hide the smile twitching onto his face.

Tommy struts confidently over to Technoblade and collapses into him, throwing his arms around them both. Technoblade huffs as the taller boy collides into the hug, shifting his stance to support the force of both Tommy and Wilbur’s affection. Wilbur’s smile grows sly, radiating smug victory as he wraps an arm around Tommy, pulling him in.

Tubbo takes another bite of pancake, chewing thoughtfully as he surveys the scene.

Weird.

They’re all being weird.

Where’s Ranboo? If Ranboo’s acting all strange too, Tubbo might just give up on the day and go back to sleep.

The green grass and gravel gives away at the fence line to sprawling rows of perfectly even fields, and then again to the forest trees, a dense and dark shadow-silhouette of a horizon line far off in the distance.

Tubbo scans the area, idly chewing on a bite of soft and sweet pancake. Lots of crops. No Ranboo. The only movement to be seen is the gentle sway and rustle of leaves caressed by the morning breeze and the flutter of scattering songbirds.

Tubbo hums, swallowing his bite of pancake before he raises his voice to ask, “Hey, Tommy? D’you know where Ranboo went?”

Tommy’s head pops up, un-burrowing from the hug as he twists around and zeroes in on Tubbo. Tubbo suppresses a fidget as Wilbur and Technoblade’s eyes land on him too, a latent flinch of expectation. That kind of reaction is stupid. He doesn’t even know what he’s expecting. Technoblade dips a small nod of a greeting. Wilbur doesn’t even do that much, the lingering self-satisfaction in the smug pull of his smile making it seem like he had already known Tubbo was there all along.

Tommy brightens into a grin, distractedly fighting to wiggle free from Wilbur and Technoblade’s arms. Tommy’s already forgotten the game in the instant it took to move his attention on to something new.

Technoblade lifts his arm and Tommy dodges out from underneath, skipping as he cheers, “Tubbo! My friend!”

With the support beam gone from underneath them, Wilbur and Technoblade break apart, falling back into their own space. Wilbur pulls away first, but not before Technoblade gives him one last gentle pat on the back.

Tommy flashes Tubbo a wide grin, spinning his attention off in a new direction as he chatters brightly. “About time you got out here! Ranboo’s over by the—” Tommy gasps, interrupting himself with the way he lights up. “The barn!”

“The barn?” Tubbo asks curiously, hopping down the porch stairs to come stand by Tommy’s side.

“Yeah!” Tommy is already darting away, kicking up dust and dirt as he spins in the direction of the taller build. “C’mon!”

“Oh! Uh, alright!”

Tubbo follows, trotting after Tommy dutifully. He shoves another bite of pancake into his mouth and can’t help the way he smiles happily.

Today will be a good day, he decides.

Tubbo can feel Wilbur and Techno watch them as they go, but that’s fine for now. It doesn’t feel like a threat — like maybe it’s not a watchful eye tracking everything they do, waiting for the final mistake. Maybe it just feels like someone is looking out for them. Maybe he’s wrong, but that’s how it feels.

“Ranboo!” Tommy calls with self-assured demand, cupping his hands around his mouth to be impossibly louder.

Tubbo spots Ranboo just as he looks up, his head swiveling with a startled jolt to the sound of his name. Ranboo is crouched down low in a universal sign of *friendly and non-threatening*. He’s got one hand leaning against the paddock fence for balance and the other stretched out in offered greeting towards the cat sitting on the fence post a couple blocks away. The barn cat, with their impassive stare and their flicking tail curled around their paws, looks utterly uninterested in Ranboo’s extended hand of friendship.

Ranboo looks happy. He’s more relaxed, now. Tubbo can read it in the relieved slump of his shoulders and the quiet way he breathes, easier than Tubbo’s seen in a long time.

Oh. Ranboo needed some time to himself. The realization hits him now, seeing Ranboo without the line of tension to his shoulders, without the pinch creased between his eyebrows.

Tubbo’s... glad. It’s good that Ranboo’s gotten to have some time alone outside. But he can’t help feeling a little guilty. Of course, Tubbo should know that Ranboo wasn’t any happier to be trapped in that house than Tubbo was, even if for different reasons. Being suddenly thrust into a stranger’s home was bound to be overwhelming for him. Ranboo’s spent a long time already pent up in a stranger’s van, surrounded by people on all sides. It seems that even a little break to recharge — however long he’s been out here trying to make friends with barn cats — has done him well.

Tubbo should have noticed. He should have given Ranboo that space the second that Ranboo wasn’t taking it for himself — should have told him to go outside or something.

Ah, well. Tubbo will have to do better next time.

“Ranboo!” Tommy calls again, grinning wide with all his buoyant excitement as he bounces over.

The barn cat flicks their ear irritably at all the noise and commotion, stretching before jumping down from the fence post and sauntering away with a swish of their tail.

“Huh?” Ranboo responds distractedly, but his eyes are elsewhere as he watches the cat go sadly.

“Come see! Come see the— Techno got a horse and I’ve never seen her in real life before but he sent me pictures and she’s *beautiful*. Oh, she’s the most magnificent woman you’ve ever seen! Guarantee it! And now I’m *here* and I can finally meet her!” Tommy croons eagerly, swaying dramatically on his feet.

“She’s a— can you really call a horse a woman?” Ranboo asks dubiously through his smile, straightening up to standing with a hand braced on the paddock fence.

“She’s got spots. You know I like a woman with spots, Ranboo,” Tommy blithely brushes off Ranboo’s protest, beaming with a confident grin and an eyebrow raised with suggestive nonsense.

“What does that even *mean*?” Ranboo laughs.

Tommy nods along like Ranboo has wholeheartedly agreed with him, grinning right back at him as he nudges his way to bump into Ranboo’s side. Ranboo stumbles a bit, jerking his arm up in surprise like he’s trying to make room for Tommy, but in the next second Tommy is gone, just as quickly darting away again. Ranboo blinks like he’s not sure what just happened.

Tommy spins on his heel and cups his hands over his mouth, shouting commands back towards the house, “Techno! Techno! Come open the barn! You have to let me see my horse!”

From the muted distance, Technoblade rumbles back in a shout, “She’s not your horse, Tommy!”

“She is! I named her!” Tommy cries with the most righteous outrage, loudly and utterly assured of his stance.

A dog barks.

Tubbo jolts, shocked like lightning.

Then, it’s not just one. It’s two. Three. Suddenly, there’s an army of dogs barking. They’re loud and getting louder, all the noise feeding into each other as they join into an echo chamber. Tubbo flinches once and doesn’t stop, his muscles locking ramrod straight with apprehensive tension.

Somewhere, Ranboo grimaces and says, “Ah, Tommy. I think you might’ve... yelled a little too loud.”

“Good!” Tommy declares with a grin, and then he throws his head back and mocks a howl.

Echoing howls rise through the barn, filling the quiet morning with the growing warning of hauntingly familiar howls and the low reverberation of rumbling growls.

Tommy bubbles giggles with ecstatic delight, “Oh, that’s so cool!”

Tommy mirrors the sounds right back, giving a too-human attempt at a bark. The dogs answer, raising their collective voices like the threat of a storm siren.

The sound is sharp, digging into his head. It's too clear, without the presence of the muffled firework bursts ringing in his ears. It's too clear just what those dogs could do to them. Tubbo knows it. He can see it when he closes his eyes, the flash of gray fur closing in on all sides like a tidal wave. He can feel it, the phantom pain of canine teeth tearing into his calf. He can hear it, a sharp bark piercing to his eardrum, a growl so close he can feel it sinking in his chest, a howl rising up like victory over a TNT-blasted crater.

If this is what it means to hear clearly, then Tubbo thinks he prefers being half-deaf.

Tubbo jerks to attention at the sound of footsteps crunching on the gravel, approaching from behind. Tubbo forces himself to turn slowly, a posture feigning casual and relaxed. It's just Technoblade.

The noise keeps going. But that's all it is. It's just noise. Tubbo huffs at himself, and he ignores the way the breath constricts in his chest. That was stupid. Now he's all rigid over nothing. Tubbo makes himself relax, forcing ease into the tension that desperately wants to line his muscles. It's okay. Today will be a good day. He decided.

"Tommy, please, you gotta stop rilin' up the dogs," Technoblade pleads flatly as he reaches the barn, twirling a padlock key idly around his fingers.

Tommy only laughs, bouncing over to Technoblade's side at the barn, rattling the doors loudly. "Let us in!"

Technoblade heaves a sigh, grumbling as he twists the key in the padlock with a metal *clank*. "Y'know, Tommy, it would be a lot easier to give you things if you waited long enough for me to *give them to you*."

"Well I could, but where's the fun in *that*?" Tommy asks, not waiting for an answer as he skips ahead and slips into the barn.

The dogs must catch sight of Tommy, because the moment they do, the barking gets so much louder.

Technoblade huffs a sigh as he follows Tommy into the barn. Ranboo's quick in his footsteps to trail uncertainly behind, peeking his head into the barn cautiously before the rest of him follows.

Tubbo... hesitates.

Someone needs to stay outside and keep watch, certainly. Can't see anyone coming if they're all trapped inside the barn. Someone needs to be lookout. The dogs are still barking, but that doesn't have anything to do with the way Tubbo's feet drag. That's just all the more reason they need someone out here watching their backs. Can't hear threats coming over all that noise.

Tubbo glances around and his eyes catch on the bright red dye of a redstone machine, tucked away under a tarp beside the barn. It was right there, and hadn't Tubbo been wanting a closer look at one of those? It was smaller than some of the hulking machines they'd passed on the drive yesterday, but sometimes smaller just meant a better starting place.

"Technooo?" Tubbo calls, raising his voice loud over the sound of dogs, never quite taking his eyes off the shiny red hull of the redstone machine. "Can I take apart your thing?"

“My thing?” The drawling response comes, hardly audible over the sounds of the dogs and the back and forth chatter of Tommy and Ranboo.

“You know, the red thing! The little redstone build.” Tubbo gestures to the redstone machine, throwing an arm out, even though Technoblade can’t see it.

“Red—?” Technoblade mutters, cutting himself off before he asks, much louder and more incredulous. “The tractor?”

“Yeah!”

Tractor. That’s what they’re called. Right. He wonders if the name has to do with keeping traction on the ground. It doesn’t look like a flying machine.

“Technooo! Can I take it apart, Techno?” Tubbo asks again, raising his voice to be sure he’s heard.

Tubbo rocks on his heels, staring at the little bit of red he can see under the tarp. Technoblade is silent for a long moment, and Tubbo’s about to ask again— or maybe just forgo permission and start taking it apart anyway. He takes a step towards the tractor — permission and forgiveness and all that.

But before Tubbo can get more than a couple curious steps closer, Technoblade’s answer comes flatly, “...No.”

Tubbo halts, his face slipping into a disappointed frown. “Aww...”

Tubbo hesitates, his eyes flicking back and forth between the tractor and the door to the barn. He probably couldn’t get away unnoticed with pulling it apart, not now that he’s drawn attention to himself.

“*Please* can I take it apart?” Tubbo tries again, asking nicely.

“Nah.” Technoblade mutters, sounding amused.

“Why not!? I want to, though!” Tubbo whines like a disappointed demand. He huffs, quickly working out a bargain with every bit of negotiation he’s learned from Tommy. “I’ll put it back together better when I’m done!”

“So anyway,” Tubbo can just barely hear Technoblade muttering, ignoring Tubbo’s very reasonable negotiations. “We’re not worrying about that.”

“Boo! You’re no fun.” Tubbo pouts.

Technoblade refuses to answer, pretending he can’t hear Tubbo as Tommy’s voice raises like more pressing concerns.

Tubbo huffs, kicking at the gravel before he twists in a circle, watching the horizon line and refusing to look back at the tractor. Whatever. He’s just find another one to take apart. There were certainly enough of them out just wandering the fields on the drive here. Shouldn’t be too hard. And this time, he won’t make the mistake of asking permission first. Much better to just seek forgiveness. That’s easy. People forgive all kinds of things they shouldn’t.

Technoblade must do something with the dogs because they slowly quiet. Howls of excited greeting simmer down to little yaps and huffs. The tension doesn't leave Tubbo's shoulders, though. But that's fine. He's on watch, anyway. It's good to be tense when you're keeping watch. It helps keep you focused.

Tubbo stands outside the barn, watching the horizon, keeping an eye out for anyone trying to sneak up on them. And he watches. And he watches. But there's nothing out here but the rows and rows of crops. There's not even any birds around, anymore.

The problem with standing outside the barn and keeping watch is it's *boring*. It'd be better if he had something to do while he kept watch. He never minded the outpost at Walltown. It was a whole structure built just for keeping watch. But he always had something to work on, a wall to build, foundations to lay, holes to patch.

Now, all there is to do is wait. And listen.

When he breathes real quiet, Tubbo can just barely make out the sound of Tommy talking inside the barn. "She's bald, but you're not allowed to make fun of her, Ranboo."

"She's... bald? The horse is bald." Ranboo questions, his voice pitching down into a flat incredulity.

There's a quiet shuffle of movement, and Tubbo can just barely hear Technoblade's muttered smile as he informs Ranboo, "She's piebald."

"Like a cow!" Tommy whispers agreement. Endless exuberance pours out of him in muffled brightness as he squeals in hushed tones, "I call her *Henry*."

Tubbo takes another bite of his half-forgotten pancake. Chewing idly as he watches the doors to enter the barn. They sound fine. They sound like they're having fun, even. They went into the barn with the barking dogs, and they're fine.

Tubbo wants to be able to do that.

Tubbo takes a step towards the barn doors.

And then another.

Step by step, Tubbo wanders into the barn, peeking his head inside. It smells like hay and dry dirt and shade on a hot summer day.

It's so casual. He's not tense or forcing himself to move in small steps at all. Just a casual stroll. His brain is definitely not screaming at him to turn around and leave, go back outside where it's safe. It's safe in here. He definitely feels safe in here.

His friends are here. Tommy and Ranboo are crowded around a stall door, Technoblade standing at their backs. They aren't afraid at all. There is no reason to be scared.

"Awwwhaha!" Tommy sighs sweetly, his tone going all too wistful and soft when he coos. "Oh, she's the love of my life."

"She is a *horse*. I feel like we're moving past that a little too quickly, here," Ranboo objects with a laugh.

“She’s still the most beautiful and brave woman ever,” Tommy declares adamantly, stretching his arm out into the stall with a sweet coo. “I don’t care if you’re bald, Henry. You’re perfect just the way you are!”

Tubbo surveys the area carefully. There’s a row of stall doors along one side of the barn. The opposite side of the barn is for storage, it seems. Tools and bags of feed and saddles line deep shelves all along the length of the build. Tubbo recognizes the handiwork enough to spot Philza’s craftsmanship. The focus on space for dedicated storage is a dead giveaway, even if Tubbo didn’t know well enough to look for the elegant wooden engravings on the stall doors.

The quieted racket of dogs yipping and huffing and scratching at the gate comes from the very end of the barn. The last stall in the row. Tubbo finds himself staring at the latch on that door, watching it rattle every time a dog paws at it. It’s a morbid sort of fascination. The gate will go still, and Tubbo watches it with frozen, awful anticipation until it rattles again with a *clank*, something on the other side trying to get out. Death knocking on the door.

But it’s fine. Tubbo tears his gaze away with a shuddering exhale, and turns to check on the three crowded around Henry’s stall. They don’t care. They aren’t afraid. They don’t flinch and tense every time the gate latch rattles. They feel safe. Tubbo should feel safe, too.

Tubbo tries to distract himself. He lets his attention wander. Not scanning, not watching and waiting, just... looking.

There’s a huff, a deep exhale from something big. Tubbo turns his gaze to the source, the stall closest to him, and—

Oh.

That’s—

He recognizes that war horse.

Carl’s dark eyes stare out at Tubbo, watching him with what feels like can only be recognition, acknowledgement, judgment.

Tubbo feels pinned to the spot, caught staring back.

“Uh. Hey.” Tubbo mutters.

Carl huffs at him, a resounding sound from such a large animal.

Cautiously, Tubbo takes a tentative step forward. When Carl doesn’t do anything more than watch him with the flick of an ear, Tubbo takes another step closer, bringing himself right up to the low stall gate.

Tubbo fidgets, tearing off a chunk of the pancake in his hands. After a long beat of silent hesitation, Tubbo extends a hand, offering the pancake out over the gate in his flat palm like an apology.

Carl sniffs at the offering, grazing his big wet nose against Tubbo’s hand before accepting, taking the small chunk of pancake and licking Tubbo’s hand for good measure.

“Hi.” With careful and quiet reservation, Tubbo reaches out, softly patting Carl. “Sorry for, uh, threatening to kill you that one time. But really, you must get that all the time — you know, being a

war horse and all. No hard feelings.”

Carl says nothing, pushing his head out over the low stall door to steal the rest of Tubbo’s pancake. Tubbo lets him have it, flattening his palm so Carl can eat it out of his hand.

Carl snorts.

Tubbo thinks he’s forgiven.

Carl sniffs at Tubbo a bit more, huffing big breaths that ruffle the loose fabric of Wilbur’s too-big shirt as he searches for more bites of pancake. When it becomes clear Tubbo doesn’t have any more, Carl retreats into the stall, stepping back with heavy hoof beats against the straw-blanketed floor.

Tubbo watches Carl go, and feels something settle deep in his chest.

Elsewhere, Tommy coos, “My horse!”

And Technoblade argues flatly for the umpteenth time, “She’s not your horse, Tommy.”

“I named her, so she is my horse. She’s mine.”

“No.”

“She’s my horse!”

“Just saying that doesn’t make her your horse, Tommy.”

Tubbo steps back from Carl’s stall on light feet, floating across the floor of the barn. The world feels slow and quiet around him, despite the clamor of animal life and Tommy’s argued shouting.

“At least let us in to see her, Tech’, *please!*” Tommy demands, and Tubbo doesn’t even need to see his face to know the puppy dog eyes he must be pulling.

“You know what? Sure. Fine.” Technoblade gives in with the greatest begrudging agreement, like this was something Tommy weaseled out of him and wasn’t something he was planning on doing anyway.

Tubbo’s feet slide through dirt and loose straw, leaving prints of scuff marks in their wake. Somehow, it still doesn’t feel like they touch the ground. Tubbo feels something like calm detachment settle over him, sinking deeper with every breath. But even so. He can’t get the tension to leave his shoulders. Tubbo huffs a sigh and it tastes bitter.

A particularly energetic dog barks, whining for attention as it paws violently at the stall door. *Cl-clang-clang cl-clang*. The gate latch rattles heavy with the clash of iron on iron.

Tubbo breathes deep, his chest stuttering and catching the whole way. Tension stubbornly lines his shoulders, but nobody else is affected at all. Technoblade — standing outside the door to Henry’s stall with a careful, watchful eye and a fond smile as Tommy coos at the horse — doesn’t so much as glance at the door to the dog pen.

Nobody else is affected like he is. He shouldn’t be reacting like this. It’s trauma, or something. Maybe he needs therapy, like Tommy did. Then he won’t be so scared of nothing.

Well. He can therapize himself, he figures.

Tubbo glances at the dog pen as the gate rattles again, his eyes snapping to the noise to the tune of the spike of fear in his chest.

Exposure therapy. That's what Tommy did.

Easy enough.

Tubbo takes a step towards the dog pen.

And another.

And another.

With every bit he creeps forward, he can hear them clearer. Their claws clicking against the floor and scratching at the wooden gate. He can hear them sniffing, their noses pressed right up against the crack at the bottom of the stall door.

They can hear him, too.

They can tell he's getting closer.

As soon as one dog figures out he's nearby, the barking picks up again. Excited whining grows louder, pressed right up against the door like they're fighting to get out, to get to him. Once one dog picks up on it, the rest are quick to join in. The sound of barking redoubles, breaking out into howls and whines. It sounds like dying.

Tubbo takes another step closer.

"You have to let me ride her. She's my horse." Tommy argues like it's a statement of fact.

Tubbo tries to focus on the sound of Tommy's voice, comforting and familiar even in the depths of every fear.

One dog growls into a yip, and Tubbo swears he can hear the teeth against his ear.

"She's not your horse, Tommy," Techno repeats, stressing the words.

"She's mine and you have to let me ride her."

Tubbo realizes he's reaching for his sword when the cool touch of metal is already resting against his palm.

Technoblade hums. "In a bit. Not right now. You're supposed to be helping pack the van, you know."

"Wilbur can do it." Tommy insists breezily. "I have a horse to ride!"

He takes a deep breath, and it shakes out of him.

He lets go of the sword. He doesn't need it. The dogs aren't going to attack him. They're not.

He gets as close to the pen as he's willing to. And then he forces himself to move closer.

Exposure therapy.

A step.

This is good. This is how he gets better.

A step.

He has to make himself get over this. It's a stupid fear.

Tubbo realizes his hand is on the sword again.

He pulls his hand away with a jolt like the metal burned him, rubbing his palm a little desperately and frantically against the front of his shirt.

He—

He shouldn't be doing that. He doesn't need the sword. The dogs aren't going to hurt him. He doesn't want to hurt the dogs. He doesn't want to.

Quickly, with fingers that tremble at manageable levels, Tubbo fumbles to undo the buckle of the sword holster. The sword falls from his back with a sharp *clang*, and Tubbo is stiff enough that he doesn't flinch with the noise.

Suddenly, Tubbo is very, very not okay.

Tubbo tries to take a deep breath, and the trembling thing gets caught in his throat and won't come back out again.

Tubbo forcefully takes another step closer, leaving the sword in the dirt behind him.

"Tubbo?"

Ranboo.

Tubbo freezes up, going completely still. He can't take another step, but the startled exhale shakes out of him, and it feels like a moment of temporary relief.

"What are you doing?" Ranboo asks curiously, stepping close enough that Tubbo can just barely see the dark shape of his dress shirt from the very edge of his vision.

Tubbo doesn't turn to face him. Tubbo's eyes are locked on the gate latch, waiting for the death rattle to turn into a mechanism failure. He doesn't think he could look at Ranboo if he tried, and he certainly isn't trying.

In his moment, Tubbo realizes that he is maybe avoiding Ranboo a little bit.

Maybe he's worried about how Ranboo will act after everything that happened last night.

Or maybe Tubbo's not thinking about that.

Maybe Tubbo is very, very determined ignoring that.

He has much bigger — self inflicted — problems to think about right now.

The gate latch rattles, and Tubbo flinches hard enough that all the thoughts scatter out of his mind.

The dogs in the pen crowd around the gate, sniffing curiously at every crack around the door. Every time one jumps up against the gate, barking excitedly, the latch rattles.

Tubbo freezes and flinches and shakes.

He steps closer.

Behind him, like listening to sound underwater, Tubbo hears the scrape of metal against concrete. With a slow step and a long stride, Ranboo comes to stand beside Tubbo, holding the sword in his hands with a hesitant concern.

“You good? You just kinda, uh, left this here,” Ranboo asks, all muffled and cautious.

Ranboo tries to hold the sword out to Tubbo. Tubbo just shakes his head no. He doesn’t take his eyes off the dog pen.

“Alright,” Ranboo starts with a long pause, his fingers tapping in a nervous fidget against the sword sheath. Ranboo puzzles his way through a tangled thought, tipping his face down into Tubbo’s line of sight. “Um?”

It’s probably a good thing that Tubbo can’t speak right now. Because if he could, he’s certain he’d ask Ranboo to go away. Tubbo wants Ranboo as far away from here as possible. He doesn’t stop to examine too closely why exactly that is. It’d be more charitable to say he wants Ranboo out of danger, out of harm’s way. But that wouldn’t be the whole truth.

Instead, Tubbo just keeps his eyes on the latch. He doesn’t look at the silent question on Ranboo’s face.

He takes another step closer.

Tubbo can do this. This is fine.

Ranboo isn’t scared of the dogs. Ranboo is far more concerned about *Tubbo* than he is about the dogs of war just locked up blocks away by a single wooden gate and an iron latch. Ranboo isn’t scared of the dogs, and Ranboo is scared of everything. So, Tubbo is fine. There is nothing to be afraid of.

Tubbo takes another step.

Chapter End Notes

Hello. It’s me. It’s been a while. This is the first part of Chapter 4. This chapter was supposed to be a lot longer, but I’ve been hitting some absolutely devastating writer’s block. So. Here is what I have so far. There will be more to come. Sorry to leave you right in the middle of the rising action, but I wanted to give you at least a little bit of content while you’re waiting. Part 2 of this chapter will hopefully be up soon.

Come talk to me on my [Tumblr](#)!

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

Identify war by what it takes away (PART 2)

Chapter Summary

“there will always be one like you:
a child who gets the picked over box
with mostly black crayons. One who wonders
what beautiful has to do with beauty, as he darkens
a sun in the corner of every page,
constructs a house from ashen lines,
sketches stick figures lying face down-
I know how often red is the only color
left to reach for. I fear for you.”

-- [“Pomegranate Means Grenade” by Jamaal May](#).

Chapter Notes

Happy chapter 4 part 2! This chapter is a DIRECT continuation of the last chapter, so please go read chapter 4 part 1 before reading this for the best reading experience.

Again, continuing content warning for references to harm to animals and animal death. Tubbo thinks about the Hound Army during Doomsday and the fact that he had to kill dogs in the fighting.

Huge shout out to Nana and Grace for being my best writing buddies, and a big thank you to Brighty for keeping me inspired. Love you guys. This chapter never would have gotten done without you.

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

Tubbo takes another step towards the dog pen.

Ranboo continues to hover by his side, inching their way along in half-steps, creeping inevitably closer towards the shadow cast by certain doom. Ranboo’s fingers tap against the sword sheath, but he’s a silent presence. Tubbo can’t even hear Ranboo’s breathing against the clamor of dogs barking and jumping at the rattling gate — against the dizzying pounding of his heart.

Ranboo is a ghost of a presence, a step to the left and half a step behind, and Tubbo wants him *gone*.

He wants Ranboo to go *away*. More than anything. It’s not safe here. That’s what the buzzing in Tubbo’s head is screaming at him. It’s not safe here and Ranboo is putting himself in danger, again. He’s not even *doing* anything. He’s just following Tubbo, standing a little bit behind and a little bit

to the left, rocking back on his heels and tapping his fingers when Tubbo freezes still between steps.

Tubbo wants him gone. Needs him gone. He's not meant to be here.

Tubbo grits his teeth. And takes another step.

Having Ranboo here almost makes it easier, in a fucked up way that only makes sense in the pit of his mind. The burning in Tubbo's chest smoke choking his throat feels just enough like *hate* that he can pretend. He can pretend he's angry. It doesn't matter at what. And Ranboo is near and convenient.

Tubbo can pretend the tension that clenches his fists tight is a need to get away from Ranboo, from the silent half-presence lingering irritably at the corner of his vision. That's the only thing his racing thoughts will catch and burn on, if he lets them. And he's perfectly willing to let them. A step away from Ranboo. A little bit faster — forcing himself forward and away a little bit harder.

Anything that keeps him moving.

'Cause if he's still moving, that means he's still alive.

His breath burns hot in his chest and his head swims. He's not getting enough air, but if he opens his mouth he's sure he'll just start hyperventilating. So he keeps his mouth shut and draws in slow breaths of not-enough through his nose.

He needs to get away from Ranboo, the shadow of a target for his misplaced anger, and he's lost track of why, if he ever knew at all. All he's doing now is burning.

Tubbo can see the hazy edge of Ranboo lingering in the corner of his eye, and he hates Ranboo for it a little bit.

It takes him longer than it should to realize he's stopped. He can't take another step. He can't move on.

He needs to. He needs to keep going. But the dogs have quieted, just a bit. And it's worse. It's so much worse. He can see them now. He can see their faces, shoved up against the narrow gap at the bottom of the gate. Nothing but flashes of quick movement under the door — a dark, wet nose, glimmering with something thick that could be slobber, or could be blood; a lower jaw with a jagged horizon line of teeth, and a tongue that swipes over them with anticipation; half an eye, watching him, watching him unerringly. They're sniffing him out. They can smell him getting closer. They know he's here.

Tubbo can't take his eyes away. Their lips curl back over their glistening teeth as they shove themselves closer. Falling over each other, snapping at one another as they fight to shove themselves as near as they can through the narrow space. One of them growls, and a graying, bristle-furred muzzle peels back across rows of teeth. Then they fall silent. Sniffing. Clamoring to get closer. Eager for the hunt.

They're just dogs. They're just dogs.

This is fine.

The dogs aren't going to hurt him. The dogs don't want to hurt him. No one is going to make the dogs hurt him.

Ranboo said he liked feeding the hound army whenever he would visit them in the Antarctic Commune. The same dogs that could have torn him to shreds would eat steak scraps out of Ranboo's hands. Dogs are different outside of war times, just like people. Just because dogs hurt him once doesn't mean they'll do it again. Philza and Technoblade didn't hurt him, after Doomsday. No one was making them hurt him.

Tubbo tries to force another step forward.

Tubbo doesn't move at all.

“‘Ello?!” is all the warning Tubbo gets before Tommy is at his side, standing in Tubbo's space and peering to follow Tubbo's gaze, like his head belongs on Tubbo's shoulders. “What are you two— oh, ho, ho! The dogs! The *hounds!*”

Tommy's voice brightens and he spins away, carelessly stepping closer to the dog pen than Tubbo could make himself dare. He looks delighted, wiggling in half-steps like an uncoordinated dance. The dogs whine and growl and *demand*, and Tommy coos with a bright smile.

“‘Ello *dogs*.” Tommy intones, lowering his voice to a loud grumble to match their clamoring. “They're really lovely— really cool. Not as cool as Henry, though.”

“Can I—?” Tubbo tries to ask, but his voice comes out hoarse and quiet, catching hard in his throat. Ow, the tension has bled to all his muscles, making his throat tight and hard to speak. He coughs once to clear his throat and tires again, less painfully. “I'd like to see the dogs, please.”

Tommy, crouched down by the dog pen and sticking his hand under the gap for the dogs to sniff and lick, looks up at Tubbo with bright eyes. “Yeah?”

Tubbo's eyes can't leave the sight of Tommy — crouched down by the gate, his sides exposed, his eyes on Tubbo, his attention hardly at all caught on the fingers he's dangling bare centimeters from the hounds' teeth. Like he doesn't care. Like that doesn't bother him. Like there's no reason it should.

Slowly, Tubbo nods. He can handle this. He's handled so much worse. And he needs to be better. He needs to be able to not react, to be like Ranboo and Tommy are.

“I would like to see the dogs,” Tubbo repeats stiffly.

Exposure therapy.

Today will be a good day, and he will be better.

“Sure thing, man!” Tommy agrees eagerly. He pops up to standing, hollering towards the front of the barn, “Technooo! I'm going to open the gate! Hope you're ready for *dogs!*”

“Heh? Tommy—” Technoblade groans. “Eh, sure. It's about feedin' time.”

Tommy leans up and peers over the top of the gate, his hand on the latch. The dogs immediately get louder, baying and howling and throwing themselves against the gate. Tommy coos and sticks a

hand into the pen, too close to the snapping teeth. Tubbo closes his eyes like a flinch, and he keeps them pressed closed with a shudder.

He remembers to breathe. One more shaky, indrawn breath.

Tubbo tries hard to settle himself.

He can do this.

Tubbo hears Tommy raise his voice over the dogs to ask, “Why do you have so *many*? Aww, yes, hi, hi, hello! Good dog!”

Technoblade's voice is growing closer on shuffling footsteps when he answers. “Eh, most of ‘em are old farm dogs from around here. They’re a little too old to work now, but they’re still good dogs.”

The buzz and hum of conversation carries on around Tubbo. Ranboo hesitantly chimes in to ask something, but Tubbo’s not really listening. He’s not really paying attention to anything. Nothing besides the frantic beat of Tubbo’s heart. Nothing but the calm, regulated pattern of his breathing. Nothing besides the sight of Tommy’s hand on the latch, burned with a shudder-snap into the back of his eyelids.

Tubbo takes a shaky breath and forces himself still.

Tommy says something, lost to the dogs and the ringing in Tubbo’s ears. And then the heavy latch *clanks*, and the stall gate opens with a groan.

Tubbo’s eyes snap open. He stands frozen in place, breathless. He does everything he can to brace himself and do *nothing*. It’s so much harder than it should be.

The dogs leap out of the open gate, tripping over each other in a rushing swarm. Tommy is closest. They surround Tommy, jumping up on him like they’re trying to take him down to the ground. People are easier to tear apart when they don’t have their feet under them and they can’t fight back. Tommy makes a loud sound — a laugh, not a scream. Tommy almost gets knocked over, saved by a lucky hand bracing hard against the stall gate. Tommy screeches like death when a dog leaves a smear of slobber down the front of his chest.

Tubbo’s fingers curl and clench and shake and he doesn’t do anything at all. He doesn’t breathe. He just watches.

The dogs keep pouring out of the stall — an army of them. They aren’t distracted for long. Not all of them. They spot the barn doors, wide open to the morning sun lit fields beyond. Their eyes lock there, ears pinning up and jaws opening to flash their teeth and let their tongues loll.

Tubbo is between them and the doors.

“Uh oh,” Ranboo mutters, somewhere just behind Tubbo.

Tubbo blinks and the dogs are racing towards him, intent bright in their dark eyes.

Tubbo doesn’t move, and it’s the hardest thing he’s ever done. His hands scream for a sword, and he locks them in place by his side. He doesn’t bring his arms up to shield his face. He doesn’t back away. He doesn’t couch down to curl around his unprotected stomach. Tubbo doesn’t move at all.

The dogs rush past Tubbo, knocking into his legs as they dart towards the doors.

Tubbo's breath catches hard in his throat, and it feels like a sob.

A dog must bowl into Ranboo because he makes an *oof* sound like the air is knocked out of him.

Tubbo stands frozen still as the dogs pass, spilling around him like an ocean wave trying to drag him under. They howl behind him, from behind him, where he can't see them, and it takes every bit of strength Tubbo has not to flinch and spin to face them.

The wave of dogs trickles to a slow stop, their baying and barking escaping into the morning until there are only a few left lagging behind. One dog prances at Tommy's feet — twisting around his legs to trip him, jumping up at him to flash teeth near his face, and nipping at the loose sleeves of Wilbur's stolen sweater with a growl.

Tubbo can hear another pair of dogs panting just behind him. The sound makes his skin crawl. He doesn't turn around. He doesn't. He is calm. This is fine. There is nothing to be afraid of.

Technoblade huffs and groans as he crouches down. Technoblade mutters something to the dogs. The dogs bark at him in return. Tubbo flinches. The sharp sound echoes awfully in the barn, and Tubbo feels a little bit like he's been stabbed. The tense pain in his chest sure is sharp enough to feel like it.

"Tubbo?" Ranboo asks, all mild concern with nothing pressing or alarmed to be found. There is nothing to be afraid of. "The dogs didn't knock into you too hard, did they?"

Tubbo doesn't respond. He doesn't do anything at all. He doesn't move, he doesn't speak, he doesn't think. If he does, he's not sure what he'll do. Nothing good.

Tommy laughs, all excitement and delight as he skips towards the barn doors, following quickly after the escaped dogs. Already halfway out of the barn, Tommy calls back, "C'mon, Tubs-o! It's dog time."

Tubbo can't take his eyes off the dog trailing at Tommy's heels.

Tubbo turns slowly, his eyes locked on the dog as it trots after Tommy. Tubbo's muscles groan and ache like they've been rusted in place for a very, very long time. Tubbo watches Tommy step out into the sun, the dog at his heels, and Tubbo can't follow.

Ranboo's fingers curl around the sheath of Tubbo's sword, two human hands clutching anxiously at it in the periphery of Tubbo's vision. It's an absent movement, not so much a thoughtful distraction as a way of being. The slump of his shoulders is easy and loose. Nothing to be scared of. Even Ranboo's endless anxious thoughts can't find a reason to be concerned. Ranboo's eyes are on Tommy, with the dogs in the sun.

Ranboo steps to follow after them.

It's a moment before Ranboo halts, half-step back-tracking as he turns to glance back at Tubbo.

Ranboo stops quietly to wait for Tubbo.

Ranboo looks just to the side of Tubbo's eyes, somewhere closer to his right ear. It doesn't matter though. Ranboo could look anywhere he likes. There's no possibility of eye contact. Tubbo's eyes

are firmly on the straw-littered floor at the barn doors.

“Um,” Ranboo starts, the pause in his uncertainty more awkward than usual. Tubbo isn’t looking at him, but Ranboo’s eyes stray further away anyway, drifting until they are nowhere near the vicinity of Tubbo’s face. “Are you coming? Do you want to...?”

Ranboo doesn’t even finish the question, the remainder of his words consumed by hesitation and self-doubt.

Tubbo clears his throat. No words come out. He knows Ranboo is being weird. Nervous. Overthinking. Second guessing. Tubbo even knows why, probably. Last night’s conversation lingers in the air like a choking smog. That conversation is a whole mess of missteps that Tubbo hasn’t had the opportunity to talk his way out of yet. If he can fix it at all.

The utter truth and the brutal lie all wrapped up in the word *husband* sits on Ranboo’s shoulders and hangs over Tubbo’s head.

But Tubbo can’t even think about that right now.

He can’t. He can’t. He can’t.

Everything is already so much.

He doesn't have the capacity to do anything about it right now. He doesn't have the space or the processing power to deal with that.

He has to be better. He has to be better to deal with this. And he can’t even be “better” enough to look at a fucking dog without thinking about—

Tubbo clears his throat again.

And then Tubbo gives up and shakes his head quietly, *no*.

“Okay.” Ranboo accepts way too easily, and Tubbo hates him. “Do you want—?”

Ranboo extends the sword in offering, but Tubbo cuts him off abruptly with a violent shake of his head.

Tubbo can’t have a sword right now. He can’t be trusted with it. He doesn’t even want to think about it, Tubbo and a sword and *dogs*, the things that he—

(He can’t stop thinking about it.)

“Alright.” Ranboo slowly takes the sword back, curling it in his hands close to his chest. Ranboo’s eyes stray to Tubbo for a moment and immediately flick away, further away. Then he nods resolutely, his mouth pressing into a nervous, twisted line. “I’ll just...” Ranboo hesitates, oscillating on his feet as he glances down at the sword in his hands. “Uh. Hold on to this. For now. I guess. I’ll— um. Yeah.”

Tubbo gives a clipped nod. That must be enough outside confirmation to settle Ranboo’s anxious indecision, because Ranboo nods back once in a small echo of mirror motion. Then Ranboo turns and escapes the barn, settling into the sun.

Somewhere, Tommy cheers. The dogs bay. Ranboo gives a startled laugh that cuts off part way through, and Tubbo stands in place and tells himself that the silence is not because Ranboo's throat has been torn out by dogs.

Technoblade doesn't say anything. He just lingers in the silhouette of the open barn doors, the flat outline of his shadow looking out into the sun. Not stepping outside. Not going where Tubbo can't reach. Technoblade simply stands there and watches.

Somehow, it doesn't feel like a threat.

Somehow, it feels like an invitation.

Tubbo forces himself to move. The motion is all jerky and stiff with rigid tension — his muscles strung tight, his brain on edge, his fingers dangerously jumpy. But mechanically, step by step, he makes his way to the barn doors. He moves until he settles at the edge of the shadow cast by the barn, staring outwards half-unseeing, floaty, and somewhat detached from his body.

Tubbo stares out at the field.

Technoblade stares out at the field.

They are quiet together.

It's nice.

Technoblade has a lot of dogs.

That's the main thought in Tubbo's head right now, floating around near the front. The only thought he's willing to acknowledge right now, at least.

Technoblade has a lot of dogs, and Ranboo and Tommy are far off, a speck in the distance. Even from so far away, it's clear to see Ranboo and Tommy are overjoyed. The dogs all run around their feet and chase after sticks thrown for them, and Tommy and Ranboo laugh and smile like there's nothing to be scared of. From this perspective, they seem so much farther away than they are. Maybe it's just Tubbo that's far away from where he's supposed to be.

Tubbo's brain keeps trying to tell him with all the frantic immediacy of a blaring alarm that the dogs are attacking Ranboo and Tommy, chasing them down with the intent to kill.

But they're not.

It's fine.

It's fine.

There's nothing to be afraid of.

Ranboo and Tommy are laughing. They're playing. Still, Tubbo's brain says the dogs are going to catch them and sink their teeth in. Any second now. It's just a matter of time. Tubbo tries to look away.

He can't.

Tubbo looks at the dogs, and all he can think of is the memory of teeth. Sharp teeth. Teeth that won't let go. Digging into his calf. Leaving deep, bloody punctures and gashes. When a war hound gets its teeth in you, it doesn't let go until it's dead. There's only one way to get it to let go.

Tubbo has— or, had a lot of scars from dog teeth.

Tubbo killed a lot of dogs.

The truth is, Tubbo doesn't hate dogs. He hates what dogs have done to him.

Tubbo hates what he was made to do to dogs.

Apart from the muffled sounds outside, beyond, somewhere unreachable, Technoblade's footsteps crunch over straw and dirt and little chunks of gravel with startling clarity. Tubbo keeps his eyes on the floor and doesn't move.

Technoblade's gait is steady and sure, but the way he stops a couple of blocks away from Tubbo and lingers there with conspicuous awkwardness is not.

The silence stretches.

Tubbo thinks about getting himself to move, to stop standing obtrusively in the middle of Technoblade's barn. He really considers it. And then he gives up. He's stuck here. If Technoblade doesn't like Tubbo standing around in his barn, then Technoblade can try to get Tubbo to move. He'll probably be more successful at it than Tubbo has been. It helps Technoblade's odds that Technoblade could physically pick Tubbo up and carry him away. Tubbo wouldn't even fight him at this point. But Tubbo *would* sure as hell whine and be pitiable and pathetic about it, so at least Technoblade wouldn't get to feel good about it. No moral victory for you today, dickhead.

Technoblade scuffs one heel against the ground and clears his throat, then he pauses another long moment before he speaks.

"Sooo... What are you up to... Tubbo?" Technoblade, to his credit, only hesitates for a second before remembering Tubbo's name.

Tubbo hums and mutters plain, exhausted truth. "Exposure therapy."

Tubbo doesn't bother using the energy to turn and look at Technoblade. And Technoblade doesn't require it of him. In fact, Technoblade seems more than happy to face out into the field and avoid looking at Tubbo altogether. They make a matching pair, that way.

"Ah." Technoblade nods casually, as if this is a common occurrence around here. "How's that goin' for you?"

"Admittedly, it's going pretty poorly," Tubbo admits with a half-shrug, and the motion aches painfully across his tension-tight shoulders.

"You're scared of dogs?" Technoblade asks, being polite by framing it like it's a question.

"Nope," Tubbo answers plainly without picking his eyes up off the dogs in the distance, because when someone stronger than him asks a question about his potential weaknesses, he finds it's best to lie.

“Yup. I can definitely see that,” Technoblade agrees amicably, nodding along with his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes averted stoically.

There’s a long stretch of silence, blanketed by the muted and distant sounds of Tommy and Ranboo and dogs.

Somewhere, muted and distant, Tubbo’s mouth opens and croaks, “‘M not scared of dogs.”

This time, it’s not a lie. Funny how that works.

The truth is, Tubbo isn’t afraid of dogs.

The truth is, what dogs can do terrifies Tubbo.

The truth is, “I don’t want to kill any more dogs.”

Today is a good day. The thought echoes again and again in his head. Somewhere, Tubbo’s eyes start tearing up. He brings a sleeve up to wipe at his eyes with the sleeve of Wilbur’s too-big shirt, and it feels distant and wrong. What is wrong with him? He never used to cry this much.

“I can’t have the sword. I don’t want to kill any more dogs,” Tubbo mumbles the words half into his sleeve, quiet like he’s afraid someone will hear him. It’s stupid. It would be a lot smarter to just shut up. But he keeps talking. “I don’t want to. I don’t.”

“Mhmm.” Technoblade states flatly, “Well, uh. Have you tried *not* killin’ dogs? Personally, I find it pretty easy. I could give you some tips.”

Tubbo can’t help it. He laughs wetly into his sleeve, hiding his face against the bunching material of Wilbur’s dress shirt.

Through a wobbly, creeping half-smile, Tubbo admits defeat. “Ar’you saying you’d mentor me, Technoblade? Teach me all th-he—” Tubbo hiccups, his tight chest spasming for a painful second. “Fuck. Sorry. The ways of not killing dogs?”

“Uhhh, sure.” Technoblade shuffles his feet, swinging his gaze around the barn, maybe searching for a dog, or maybe for anything else to look at that isn’t a rigged social landmine. “You know, I’m super not great at this, actually. All this— uh, comfortin’ crying people. But if there’s one thing I’m a master at, it’s the fine art of appreciatin’ dogs. Now *that* is somethin’ I can do.”

Tubbo sniffs, smearing a line of snot across the cuff of Wilbur’s sleeve.

“Alright.” Technoblade drops silent, tapping his hand against the side of his leg in an awkward fidget. It’s a long stretch of silence and glancing around before Technoblade gestures at one of the latched stall door and says, “Why don’t you just go inside the, uh, the empty stall over there? There’s nothin’ in there right now.”

I need ya to trust me on this one, Tommy.

And Tommy did. Against all odds, Tommy lives in a world where he could.

Tubbo tries to imagine himself in this world where he could.

Tubbo nods.

Tubbo turns slowly and takes a robotic step, forcing himself along by the same small and strained movements that he's been using to do everything in this death trap of a barn. He can feel the strain etch fractures into his tense muscles, cracks grinding in a stone that's not meant to move like that.

It's surprisingly easy to go where Technoblade directs him, as long as he shuts his brain down and doesn't think about any of it. A turn to the right and four steps to the door. A simple latch that clicks up and metal hinges that creak. A step down onto a concrete floor dusted with a layer of dirt and loose straw. Simple. Quiet. Manageable.

Tubbo is quiet in his too-loud head, floating outside his body just a little bit. But this is easy. This he can do.

Tubbo reaches the middle of the barn stall and stops.

He stands and breathes. He faces the wall and thinks about none of this.

Tubbo can hear the way Technoblade shuffles his feet behind Tubbo, standing heavily in the gateway. Technoblade huffs very slowly and pauses like the hesitant breath before a question, and then he asks, "You alright?"

Tubbo doesn't turn to face Technoblade, keeping his blank gaze steady on the wall at the back of the empty stall. He doesn't want to see death coming. Fuck it all. He wants to be surprised, just this once.

Tubbo nods.

"Cool..." Technoblade mutters, his voice resounding oddly. Tubbo imagines he must twist to glance back over his shoulder. Tubbo wouldn't know. He's not looking. "Uuuh, wait here for a second. You can sit down, if you want to. Or don't. You know."

Before Technoblade can turn to go, Tubbo turns and asks, "Are you intimidated by me?"

He's not sure where the question comes from. Tubbo doesn't particularly care enough to think about it, just drags a shoe through the dirt and straw on the concrete floor.

From the edge of his vision, Tubbo watches Technoblade raise an eyebrow and give Tubbo a long glance, up and down.

In that moment, Tubbo becomes viscerally aware of how he looks — hunched up with his shoulders tense around his ears, curled in small on himself, wearing a shirt two sizes too big that he can never seem to grow into, tear tracks stuck to his face and snot on his sleeves.

"No." Technoblade's tone is flat and inarguable.

"I think you should be," Tubbo tells him, because it feels important. He's not sure what he's arguing for. He's not sure what he's trying to convince Technoblade of. But it feels necessary to say. A fair warning.

Technoblade blinks blandly, letting the silence stretch.

Technoblade states flat and disaffected, "Alright."

Feeling satisfied of something, Tubbo nods.

Technoblade nods back, as if they're having some kind of silent communication. If they are, Tubbo's not sure what the message is.

As Technoblade's footsteps quickly shuffle away, Tubbo lowers himself to sit on the concrete floor. His back is to the door. He thinks he'll just sit here in this box and wait for tragedy to find him.

Tubbo pauses for a moment of clarity and then rolls his eyes at himself. He's acting too much like Wilbur for his liking. He blames it on the shirt. The clothes make the man, or something. Tubbo wonders if linen can make you predisposed to dramatic sacrifice.

With a deep sigh, Tubbo gives up the pretense, shifting over across the ground to rest his back against the wall of the stall. Being willfully ignorant has never done him any favors. But then again, neither has knowing. So he guesses it doesn't matter either way.

At least if Tubbo dies here, it'll be some place that smells like home. That's a plus, at least. He could be dying in a garbage heap.

If Tubbo closes his eyes and breathes really deep, he can even convince himself he smells redstone and spruce somewhere on the distant breeze, somewhere just beyond the stale air of the barn, just beyond the manure and dirt and crops and animal sweat. Redstone and spruce, somewhere else.

It's not long at all before footsteps return. Technoblade's boots thump and shuffle over the ground, followed by the dogged click of claws against the concrete, *click-click-click-click*.

Technoblade clicks his tongue against his teeth, and commands, "Sit, Em."

There's a quiet pause. Tubbo can't help the anxious way his eyes flick to the open stall door. Just a few blocks away from Tubbo's stall, half obscured by the wall, Tubbo can see the edge of Technoblade's boot. Tough leather soles, pants with dirt crusted onto the cuff, a stance that makes him look taller than he is and nowhere near as intimidating as he should be.

Tubbo can't see the dog, but he can hear the breathing.

Tubbo watches in a shift of motion as Technoblade crouches down to squat close to the ground, bursting with overwhelming affection as he coos, "Good dog, who's a good dog? Best dog. Aww, yes you are. Good dog."

Tubbo forces his eyes to slide back to the wall.

Technoblade is being all mushy with the dog. It's kind of cute, in an odd way. It's like watching two killing machines with bodies made out of knives cuddle. You can't help but feel the soft triumph deep in your chest. Love in spite of the things you were made for.

Technoblade's boots trudge against the concrete floor, and Tubbo keeps his gaze distant on the wall. He takes a deep, steady breath. He doesn't feel steady. But he feels less like he's about to break out of his skin and burn up.

Technoblade clears his throat and shuffles in place outside the stall door, blocking the only exit.

Quietly, Technoblade mutters, "Heel."

Then, louder, Technoblade asks, "You... doin' better?"

Tubbo nods. When he speaks, it's steady. "I'd like to see the dog."

Tubbo doesn't look away from the wall.

"You sure?" Technoblade asks, sounding like he'd much rather not be asking, but he can't make himself believe Tubbo's obvious bullshit in good conscience without at least a little more convincing. When this inevitably goes poorly, Technoblade wants enough plausible deniability on record to be able to throw his hands up and tell Wilbur he wasn't at fault. Tubbo can relate.

"Yup. Today is a good day," Tubbo says with a chipper confidence that comes pre-rendered. "Besides, therapy is supposed to be good for you, or something."

"Right. Exposure therapy." Technoblade chuckles and it sounds half out of place, like there's supposed to be something more fitting for this scenario, but he can't quite find it. "No offense to your... therapist, but *throw yourself head first into the dog pile* isn't what I'd consider stellar advice. Actually, do you know their license number? Just asking. There's some, uuuh... *unrelated* malpractice I'd like to report them for," Technoblade pries consideringly, talking quick and light in the way that's a joke, but not a joke at all.

Tubbo braves a glance up from the wall, swinging his eyes up slowly to stare blank-faced and unimpressed at Technoblade. Technoblade's expression is pinched and awkward, but smiling with mirth through his nervous comedy routine. He looks like he'd be sweating, if pigs could sweat.

Tubbo raises an eyebrow and asks, "Are you going to let the dog in or not?"

Tubbo is sick of feeling weak and afraid. The sooner he gets over this, the better.

"Yeah," Technoblade sighs resignation, and he lumbers one heavy step down into the arena of the barn stall.

The dog follows at Technoblade's side, keeping their eyes up and focused on Technoblade dutifully. Tubbo's eyes are immediately on the dog, tracking their slow trot into the stall. The dog's fur is a steel grey underneath the coating of tan-orange-brown dirt that they've been rolling in, like a blade rusted from disuse. There are pieces of straw caught sticking up in their coat, all along the tousled fur at the ridge of their back. Silvery bristles grow around their muzzle to show their age. A winner, then. War dogs don't live long enough to grow silver hairs unless they win.

Technoblade clicks his tongue, and the dog sits.

"This is Em. She's my service dog," Technoblade grumbles, his eyes down on the dog.

Tubbo says, "Hi, Em."

Technoblade speaks blandly, he could almost sound bored if not for the anxiety shifting his feet and averting his eyes. "You can't kill this one."

"Really?" Tubbo's voice pitches up with skepticism and curiosity.

Tubbo squints at the dog. She looks like a normal dog to him. Does the dog have admin protections? She must really be something special, if that's the case.

Tubbo had never met an animal with admin protections before. Not even Fran, and she was old as hell. Tubbo wonders what a dog has to do to get admin protections on this server. Em is a war dog

— maybe she fought an admin and won.

Tubbo can't help but feel vaguely impressed.

"I mean. You probably *could*, if you really tried." Technoblade huffs like a laugh, and Tubbo can't tell if Technoblade is mocking him or not. He isn't particularly bothered — he's too busy keeping a wary and respectful eye on the war dog with a taste for admin blood. "She's gettin' pretty old, I don't think she'd put up much of a fight. But like," Technoblade's voice falls flat and insistent, the hard edge of a threat to contain a desperate plea. "Don't."

"Got it." Tubbo nods.

No trying to kill the dog. Tubbo can agree to that. That's easy. He doesn't want to kill the dog. He really, *really* doesn't want to kill the dog.

He will if he has to.

And he always has to.

But he doesn't want to kill Technoblade's dog.

There's a pause of silence, just for a moment, and Tubbo rushes to speak before Technoblade can say anything else, or give the dog a command.

"You're not going to make her attack me?" Tubbo checks, just to be sure.

"Nope." Technoblade's tone is smooth and flat and even.

Tubbo glances up, just once, quickly flicking his eyes to Technoblade's face. Technoblade still isn't looking at Tubbo, and his expression is lax and unbothered despite the awkward tension in his stance.

Tubbo looks back at the dog.

"Okay."

"Truuust me," Technoblade says breezily, taking a step back so he can lean against the opposite wall of the barn stall. The dog follows, taking a seat at his feet.

Tubbo decides not to ask why he should, or why Technoblade has decided to make helping Tubbo his problem, or what Technoblade is gaining from all this. Those questions seem too big to answer.

Tubbo knows the rules. Technoblade won't make the dog hurt him. Tubbo won't hurt the dog.

Simple.

"Alright, Technoblade." There is a twitch of a smile on his lips and a sarcastic undercurrent of mirth in Tubbo's voice when he says, "Release the hounds."

Technoblade snorts, and there's the barest hint of a smile on his face. He leans down, bracing one hand against the wall of the stall as his knees creak. Technoblade ruffles a hand against the dog's head, scratching behind her ears in a way that makes her tail *thwap* against the concrete.

Technoblade mutters in a honey-sweet voice, “Good dog, Em. Release.”

Tubbo tenses himself and waits for something terrible to happen.

A moment passes.

And then another.

Technoblade doesn’t move, and the dog stays sitting by his side.

Tubbo glances quickly up at Technoblade, and then back down at the dog again. He can’t figure out what’s stopping them. Are they waiting for something? Do they expect him to do something?

Tubbo expects Em to snap towards him, or at least turn to look at him, to keep a watchful eye on the threat in the room. But she doesn’t. She stays at Technoblade’s feet as he leans back up and stands, her tail stirring up dust and leaving a spot of the stall floor swept clean. She just keeps looking at Technoblade, attentive and awaiting more pets.

“You can call her over, if you want,” Technoblade says, his disinterested tone a poor disguise for how oddly helpful he’s being right now of his own free will.

Tubbo can feel the slow-building warmth of Technoblade looking at him. But it doesn’t feel like a furnace. It just feels like summer. His gaze is evaluating, but not in a condemnatory way. Just keeping watch. Just making sure.

“Huh.” Tubbo mutters to himself, uncertain, and he keeps his attention on the dog when he nods, “Uh, yeah. What do I say?”

“It’s really not that complicated. You can say, like, here, or come, or just her name.” The dog’s ears perk up, and she tips her head at Technoblade like a question. Technoblade reaches down again to scratch under her chin. “Just don’t think too much about it.”

Tubbo watches the dog, and he decides to stop thinking — overthinking — it. If he’s going to do this, he needs to be here, present. No distractions. It’s just a dog. There’s nothing to be afraid of.

Technoblade said he wouldn’t make her attack him. Technoblade isn’t going to make him kill the dog. Tubbo *can’t* kill the dog. And somehow, it feels like a relief.

“Em,” Tubbo speaks, and he ignores the way his voice cracks into a waver on the syllable.

Em perks up at the sound of her name, her attention swiveling over to meet Tubbo’s eyes. Tubbo freezes in place, going rigid all at once.

They lock eyes. And neither one of them moves.

Em doesn’t lunge at Tubbo. She eyes him curiously, but makes no attempt to step away from the lazy way she’s leaned up against Technoblade’s leg, soaking in his idle scratches. Em watches him from across the stall like a stranger, and Tubbo—

“Em, here.” Tubbo taps his hand against the concrete, getting specks of dirt and stuck to his palm.

Em stands up, takes one step away from the wall, and stops to shake herself out. A couple pieces of straw fall free from her violent shake and drift to the stall floor. The sound of her name tag rattles

against her collar, the sound of metal striking metal. Tubbo tenses, but relaxes the moment after.

Em pushes out her front paws, bowing down in a deep stretch as she yawns. Her teeth flash dangerously, the ever present possibility of a threat. But her face scrunches up and wrinkles as the yawn ends in a sneeze.

Em gets back up to her feet, and she trots lazily to Tubbo's side of the stall.

"Oh! Uh! Uh!" Tubbo panics, just a bit. She's still walking towards him, getting closer, and Tubbo doesn't know what to tell her to make her stop. "Techno, what do I do?"

"Aahp! Sit." Even with an edge of panic to his voice, Technoblade rushes the order without ever raising his voice.

Em sits.

Tubbo breathes out, and the sigh is just a little bit shaky. His heart is beating fast under his skin, and he really wishes it wouldn't do that.

"See? It's fine. It's cool. Eeeasy," Technoblade says smoothly, all suave and confident, as if he didn't just very audibly panic seconds ago.

Em twists to glance back over her shoulder at Technoblade, like she's asking a question.

Technoblade answers, "Sit, wait."

Tubbo clears his throat, wiping his dirty hand against this pant leg just for something to do besides sit here and tremble. "Sorry, sorry."

"Listen, man. It's so easy, alright? It's like talkin' to a two year old. Just tell her what you want her to do," Technoblade drawls, and the simplicity of it makes something in Tubbo's chest ease.

"Uh," Tubbo mumbles, still at a loss. He doesn't know what to tell the dog to do. He doesn't know what he wants her to do.

After a long second, Technoblade pipes up to helpfully suggest, "You can tell her to crawl. That one's fun."

Curiosity slowly creeping in to outweigh the receding fear, Tubbo carefully says, "Em, can you crawl?"

Em's ears perk and she sinks down to her belly, her paws stretched out in front of her. Slowly, she starts pulling herself slower towards Tubbo, wiggling her way along the dusty stall floor.

Tubbo snorts, bringing a hand up to cover his mouth as his face breaks out into an unmanageable smile.

"Good dog," Technoblade mutters, and his smile is audible.

Em slowly crawls her way towards Tubbo, creeping towards him nose-first as she stretches out her neck further than Tubbo thought was physically possible. Her black nose has a little splotch of pink, and it wiggles as she sniffs at Tubbo curiously.

Hesitantly, Tubbo picks his hand up off the ground, his fingers curling in with tension. It's just like Carl, he tells himself. Keep your palm flat, and they won't bite you.

Tubbo feels a little bit silly when he realizes he's more afraid of a little dog than a two thousand pound war horse, and it makes it easier for Tubbo to uncurl his fingers, spreading them flat.

Tubbo extends his flat palm out towards Em like an offering. A mutual understanding.

Em creeps forward, stretching out to sniff the ends of his extended fingers.

Em's wet nose bumps into Tubbo's fingers, and he flinches back automatically.

Tubbo's hand snaps back to his chest, and his breath catches in his throat.

Em doesn't snap, she doesn't lunge, she doesn't even flinch. She just looks at Tubbo curiously, her tongue darting out of her mouth to swipe over her nose. It's like she's wiping at the spot where they touched, however briefly.

Tubbo exhales harshly, steeling himself with fierce determination as he slowly re-extends his shaking hand.

Em's nose twitches continuously, sniffing eagerly as she leans in to meet Tubbo halfway. The cold, wet sensation of her nose bumps against Tubbo's hand. An involuntary noise escapes Tubbo — somewhere in the dead quiet space between a whine and a gasp. But he forces his arm to lock in place. He lets Em sniff his hand, and only flinches away a little bit whenever she breathes on him.

Em's tongue flicks out, licking at the smears of butter grease from the morning's pancake. Tubbo feels the warm swipe of her tongue over his fingers, the hard press of teeth against his skin, and he clutches his hand back to his chest before he can think.

"N-no!" Tubbo's fear snaps out quick and harsh, barking in a desperate plea.

Em doesn't move, sitting still in place with her eyes trained on Tubbo. Em shifts forward on her paws, crawling her way closer towards Tubbo. Tubbo quickly scoots back, sliding down the wall away from her.

"Stay there!" Tubbo commands hurriedly, trying to sound firm and in-control but losing ground fast.

Em stops, but her eyes stay zeroed-in on Tubbo. Her gaze is intense and unerring. She's waiting.

From across the room, Technoblade speaks up, and it comes as a surprise. Tubbo completely forgot he was there. Technoblade asks, all even and calm, almost bored, "Did she lick you?"

Tubbo nods. He can't take his eyes away from Em, like the second his eyes are off her, she'll break free of whatever control Tubbo has over her.

"Aaah," Technoblade hums understandingly. "Now, see, do y'know what she's doin'?"

After a moment, Tubbo says, "uh... she's looking at me."

Because she is. Em is staring him down with intent. She blinks, and Tubbo blinks back at her. And neither of them moves a muscle.

“She’s watchin’ *your behavior*. Em’s a service dog — for PTSD. She’s lickin’ you ‘cause she can tell that you’re anxious. But you can just tell her to stop.”

Tubbo makes half a sound, all questioning and incredulous. “Wh—? How is her *licking me* supposed to be helpful?”

Tubbo glares at Em, unable to take his eyes off her. It feels like he’s asking her the question rather than Technoblade. Em stares at Tubbo and licks her muzzle.

Em’s sides heave with a sigh, and Technoblade’s voice answers, “It’s part of her job to recognize and interrupt anxiety behaviors. When she can tell I’m panickin’ or havin’ a flashback, she’s trained to do things that are distractin’ and groundin’. Like lickin’ me.”

Tubbo wrinkles up his nose and he tells Em, “That’s gross.”

Em just blinks at him.

“I mean. She can also do other stuff. It’s nice to have her lay on my chest.” Technoblade hums, the sound of it deep and soothing. “Let me tell ya’, deep pressure therapy? It’s *amazin’*. Ten out of ten.”

Tubbo imagines letting Em lay on his chest. He imagines being trapped underneath her weight, pressed down into the dirt. He imagines her face, inches away from his throat — Em staring him down, close enough that Tubbo can feel the heat and awful iron-thick stench of her breath against his face.

Tubbo shudders.

“No thank you.”

Technoblade shrugs, and it’s no big deal. He gestures widely with one hand before it settles to fidget with one of the buttons on his shirt. “She doesn’t have to do anythin’ you don’t like. She can just sit there if that’s what you’re comfortable with.”

Tubbo stares Em down. She stares back at him.

Tubbo glares. He isn’t going to lose.

Tubbo asks, “Can I pet her?”

Technoblade shrugs again, “Sure.”

Tubbo doesn’t move.

Tubbo and Em sit at a stalemate, deadlocked in their staring contest.

“Uhhh... She usually sleeps in the house, but she likes to sleep in the barn with the other dogs durin’ the summer.” Technoblade speaks into the silence, somewhat nonsensically. “And honestly, I’ve been doin’ pretty well recently. Haven’t needed her as much at night.”

Tubbo risks a quick glance up at Technoblade, but Technoblade isn’t looking at him. Technoblade has taken off his glasses, polishing the lenses against the bottom of his shirt in a practiced fidget.

When Technoblade slides his glasses back onto his face, he's turned away, staring at the other side of the empty stall wall like those wooden planks are the most interesting thing in the world.

"No screamin' night terrors for at *least* a week." Technoblade's tone says he's bragging, and the sardonic pull at the corner of his lip says his pride is just as ironic as it is earnest.

Tubbo can't figure out why Technoblade is telling him this. Maybe Technoblade thinks it will help. Or maybe he just can't stand the awkward silence. Tubbo decides he doesn't care enough to figure it out. He's got bigger things to deal with right now.

Tubbo turns his focus to Em, and her ears perk up when Tubbo's gaze lands back on her. Her tail wags once, thwapping against the floor on a single beat. She's ready for battle.

Tubbo looks in her eyes and steels himself until he feels the same.

"Well, unless you count that one time on Friday, but really, if you wake up screamin' *after* the sun rises, then really you're just gettin' a head start on your day." Technoblade nods stoically like he's sharing deep wisdom. "Get the screamin' done early."

Tubbo lets Technoblade's rambling wash over him, a quiet rumble of background noise. He shifts his focus entirely to the challenge staring him down.

Tubbo extends his hand towards Em.

Her tail thwapping against the floor, Em scoots forward to bump her nose against Tubbo's curled fingers, wet nose wiggling as she sniffs at him. Tubbo recoils back, but only an inch. Slowly, he boxes his aching shoulders, hunching up with a stomach-sick tension as he twists his hand over, exposing the flat palm of his hand. Em buries her nose against Tubbo's palm enthusiastically, snuffling against his skin in unpredictable intervals. The huff of warm breath burns against his tingling palm when Em breathes out. *Sniff-sniff-sniff-huff. Sniff-huff. Sniff-sniff-huff.*

Tubbo stays frozen perfectly still and bears it.

Em drags herself forward across the ground, her claws scraping against concrete. Tubbo shudders and his fingers curl.

Em lifts her head from Tubbo's hand and looks up at Tubbo. Tubbo looks back at her.

Em's dark eyes watch him, then flicker away. Just for a moment. Nervous. Her eyes flicker back quickly, like she's checking to see if he's still watching. She keeps looking away from him, skittish of the prolonged eye contact.

Tubbo feels a little bit bad for making her nervous.

Tubbo looks away from Em, careful and deliberate, just a couple inches to the right of her face. Instead, he watches her ear — the outside coated in short, silvering fur, and the inside a soft hazel-cream. He can see the veins underneath her skin there, carrying her lifeblood from her heart to the tips of her ears.

Em claws her way closer to him, scratching claw marks into the dirt coating the floor. And then, with a huff, she settles her paws against the ground and lowers her head. Tubbo watches her from

the corner of his eye. He's tense, tense, tense, wary of her in a way that shakes him, but he does not move away from her.

Em's chin comes down to rest heavy against Tubbo's thigh. She huffs out a long, deep breath against his leg, and Tubbo can feel the heat of it through the dirt-stained cloth of his borrowed shorts. He can feel the weight of her skull, the warmth of her blood, the threat of her teeth resting against his leg.

Tubbo glances down at Em, and she looks up at him with dark eyes.

Neither of them move.

Em huffs, and Tubbo breathes.

Unsure what to do with himself, too nervous of what he *could* do, Tubbo hesitates. Slowly, he lowers his hand, giving a tentative and awkward pat to Em's back. Her back is boney, and he can feel the bones of her spine and ribs under his hand.

He knows what it feels like, to cleave an axe through a dog's spine. He knows the split and the crunch and the squish of it. He knows the sound of it. When a dog dies, they scream.

Carefully, Tubbo smooths his hand down the bumpy ridges of Em's spine. Her fur leaves his hand coated in the tan-orange-brown of dirt and dust, but he doesn't mind. It buries itself under Tubbo's nails like it belongs there, like coming home.

There are little bits of straw stuck in Em's grey fur, probably from sleeping in the barn. With dusty fingers, Tubbo picks free a stray piece of hay, flicking it aside. Tubbo keeps his eyes on Em's face when he can, watching for any signs of tension or fear or aggression. But Em only huffs and closes her eyes, resting her chin heavily on his thigh.

Em moves, muscles rolling beneath her fur, and Tubbo freezes dead still in place. Em shifts, tipping over onto her side, so her back is pressed up along Tubbo's outstretched leg. Her tail thumps softly against his shoe, again and again.

Em twists her head upwards, and she looks up at Tubbo through dark eyes.

Tubbo smiles.

And then Tubbo cries.

A couple of stinging tears drip down Tubbo's chin, and he laughs at himself quietly as he reaches up to wipe them away. The ends of Wilbur's sleeves haven't even had time to dry, and here he is getting them soaking wet again.

Tubbo buries his face in one of the sleeves as he sniffles against the pressure building in his nose. His other hand, he keeps resting lightly against Em's side.

Tubbo speaks, his voice hoarse and his throat painfully tight. "Please don't make me kill her."

"Bruh." Somewhere, Technoblade sounds disbelieving and confused. "I'm not going to make you kill my dog. Just pet her. It's fiine. Relaaax."

Tubbo pets the dog.

Her fur is dusty and full of straw, and Tubbo opens one eye behind the shelter of his too-long sleeve so he can pick the straw out.

Tubbo snuffles, and he wipes another long smear of snot against Wilbur's sleeve.

Tubbo admits to Technoblade, the words quietly dripping from him, "I don't want to kill any more dogs."

Technoblade doesn't respond.

Technoblade, like a wise warrior, picks a new line of attack. "Sooo, uhhh, did you like the pancakes?"

Tubbo nods, wiping away another teardrop. "Yeah."

"Cool. Cool. I tried doin' somethin' different since we didn't have any buttermilk. Also, I think Tommy put extra bakin' powder in when I wasn't lookin'." Technoblade continues to ramble, talking about anything just to keep the mild conversation going while Tubbo quietly gets used to the dog. "See, I'd ask if you if they were alright, but then again, I'm, like, ninety percent sure you've been locked in some government lab for the last seventeen years, sooo maybe not the best person to ask about pancake recipes."

Tubbo can't help the amused snort that escapes him. Tubbo glances up at Technoblade briefly. It's so hard to tell when Technoblade is joking, or when he's delivering the truth as a punchline so you can't get mad at him until he's punched you in the face.

Technoblade catches Tubbo's eye and grins at him, sly and amused, like he's inviting Tubbo in on the joke. Tubbo looks back down and continues to methodically pick the straw out of Em's fur, but the smile lingers at the corner of his mouth.

Technoblade rumbles, "Listen, you don't have to tell me I'm right, I know I'm right. Oh man, though, *Wilbur* has absolutely lost it. I keep tellin' him, the simplest answer is the most plausible. *Time travel* is not plausible, Wilbur."

Tubbo laughs, the sound quiet and hoarse. "Time travel?"

"Right?" Technoblade sounds incredulous and righteous, playing up the emotion behind his words for entertainment's sake. "And no, I'm *not* just sayin' that because I have a vendetta against the government. C'mon, what's more likely? Another government-sponsored organization doin' unethical stuff with human subjects, or inventin' time travel. Sure, Wilbur's got his points, but c'mon. It's common sense."

"Wilbur thinks I'm from the future?" Tubbo asks with a helpless smile, a giddy horror and amazement coloring his soft tone.

He thought...

Well, he didn't know what he thought. He thought Wilbur would just understand, somehow. That he would look at Tubbo and just know. That he would read all of Tubbo's secrets like they were written on his back, whether Tubbo wanted him to or not.

But Wilbur is wrong.

Tubbo doesn't know what to think about that.

"Honestly. He's always so dramatic." Technoblade shakes his head, bringing up a hand to adjust his wire-frame glasses in an unconscious fidget. "He's completely ruined my basement, by the way. I had a system to those cork boards. And now my red string is everywhere, completely tangled. It's going to take me *hours* to fix those walls before the next secret meeting."

Technoblade sounds like he's joking.

Tubbo one hundred percent believes he's telling the truth.

"Oh, hey." Technoblade pauses awkwardly, fiddling with the ends of his frizzy pink hair in a nervous gesture as he avoids eye contact. "Uuuh, by the way, if you were to happen to be on the run from, say, a shady government-sponsored organization, and you need somewhere to hide for a bit... You can stay here. Like, they can't find you here."

Tubbo smiles as he picks a piece of straw from the scruff of Em's neck fur and plays along with the bit. "Oh. Yeah?"

"I happen to also be on the run from the government," Technoblade says it slow and savory, like an accomplishment. He's grinning from ear to ear, glowing with pride. "So I can personally *guarantee* this place is absolutely, one-hundred percent fool proof."

"Why are you on the run, Blade?" Tubbo asks, curious and light, like catching up with an old friend.

"Eh, you know, a little bit of this, a little bit of that, some minor terrorism on the side." Technoblade says with a laugh, "The US government *hates* me, man. It's hilarious."

Technoblade pauses, eyes flicking to Tubbo, suddenly nervous as he hastens to add on a quick plea of, "Don't tell Tommy."

Tubbo laughs, earnest and unfiltered. Em picks her head up, and Tubbo's laugh chokes into a startled gasp. Tubbo freezes in place, his hand flinching away where it had been buried in her warm fur.

Tubbo knows. He knows Em isn't going to hurt him. At least, not until Technoblade tells her to. And Tubbo isn't going to hurt Em until he has to, until someone tells him he has to. But Tubbo is so careful to stay still as Em lifts her head and sneezes, sending a puff of dust and straw scattering across the floor.

Em lifts herself off the ground, not by much, just enough to drape herself across Tubbo's lap. She drops her weight over Tubbo's legs, her head in his lap, and closes her eyes again like she intends to stay there.

Tubbo shakes, just a bit.

He doesn't want to shake anymore. He wants to be okay with this. He wants to be better.

Tubbo takes a deep breath, and he pushes through the way it stutters and catches in his chest.

He wants Technoblade to start talking again. That made it easier.

Tubbo's voice catches in his throat, but he manages to wrangle himself into something composed when he asks the very first thing that comes to his mind, "I thought, um, I thought you and Tommy were... good?"

Technoblade hesitates just a second before he thankfully picks up talking again, his voice low and steady. "Well. I mean. He's Phil's pseudo-kid, sooo," Technoblade shrugs, his bland nonchalance betraying his depth of feeling. "I gotta put up with him."

"He trusts you, you know," Tubbo tells Technoblade, and he looks up to meet Technoblade's eyes. Technoblade watches him back, and Tubbo holds his gaze. Tubbo tells him, like Tubbo can hardly understand it himself, "Tommy trusts you."

Technoblade shrugs and looks away, breaking the eye contact uneasily. "I haven't given him a reason not to. I haven't needed to."

That's the heart of it.

Technoblade hasn't had a reason to betray Tommy's trust. That reason doesn't exist here, in a softer world. Technoblade would, if he had to, but there's no need. No need for war dogs. No need for a fear of something that could rip your throat out, because why would it have reason to hurt you?

"I mean, Tommy's great," Technoblade mutters, slow and rambling, and he fiddles with his hair in a nervous gesture. "Tolerable," Technoblade corrects. "Barely."

Technoblade stops and considers, and then adds, "He's better than he was a couple years ago, at least. Less screamin'. You think I'm jokin', but *Fundy* was quieter than he was, alright? A literal *baby*."

Tubbo slowly settles his hand on Em's back — carefully, carefully, carefully stroking his hand down her side. She doesn't move. Tubbo considers this a win.

Technoblade sighs deeply, letting his head fall back against the wall. "I'll have'ta go back and visit, soon. It's been, what, a year now? Should probably go check in with Niki, too."

The two of them settle into silence and it's... comfortable.

Em breathes, and when Tubbo presses his flat palm against her flank, he can feel the rise and fall of her chest. Tubbo slides his fingers along her silver-grey fur. Em stays relaxed where she lays draped across his lap. Slowly, Em's coat grows smooth and clean of straw and dirt. Tubbo feels the dark crust of dirt beneath his nails, and he's satisfied with the fact that it's not blood — not today.

Today is a good day.

"From an outside perspective— give me your thoughts, here," Tubbo says quietly, his eyes on the dog in his lap. "I think I could use some advice."

Technoblade side-eyes him and says, "I mean, I don't know why you'd want *my* advice, but sure."

"I don't, particularly," Tubbo admits with a shrug. "I just wanted to hear someone else's thoughts, is all."

"Why not ask Wilbur?" Technoblade suggests, as helpful as one can be in a desperate bid to avoid a potentially awkward social situation.

Why not ask Wilbur. Why indeed.

“...I’m not sure how I feel about Wilbur,” Tubbo says slowly, tasting the words as he sorts them out in his head. “I know how I feel about you.”

“That I’m amazin’ and clearly give the best personal advice on the planet, despite havin’ only known you for two days?” Technoblade hums thoughtfully, “If there’s anybody you should trust for sound judgement, it’s *definitely* the guy who gave a sword to the teenager he met yesterday.”

“I can trust you. You’re... predictable.” Tubbo muses, because for as long as Tubbo has known him, Technoblade has always been clear about his intentions. Every ounce of Technoblade’s destruction came announced. Tubbo may not particularly *like* Technoblade, but, “I know you.”

Technoblade shifts on his feet. “...Alright.”

Tubbo hums and runs his flat palm down Em’s back.

“...What would you do if you could just... start again. If you had a— well, not a clean slate, but a cheat. A way out.” Tubbo speaks slowly, considering his words as he speaks them into the warm fur of something just like him. “What are you supposed to do with that?”

“Kinda like fleein’ the country, huh?” Technoblade asks, and he sounds amused around the edges. Technoblade hums, deep in his chest, and weighs his response for a long moment. “Startin’ a new life is a surprisingly good way to make friends,” Technoblade speaks from experience with the twist of a wry smile and a sidelong glance that feels like memory. “You gotta rely on the people around you. You gotta be able to trust each other to keep everyone safe.”

After a moment’s pause, Technoblade grins and adds, “...It’s also just fun to change your name and take on a new identity. Seriously, who’s goin’ to judge you for changin’ it up?”

“Emperor of one land, anarchist of another,” Tubbo mutters, smiling.

“Exaaaactly,” Technoblade drawls, nodding agreeably. “Really dig in to the hypocrisy.”

Tubbo pats Em’s side gently, and he thinks.

“You—” Tubbo struggles for a moment, trying to figure out what he wants to say, trying to figure out how much he should say.

Tubbo doesn’t say, “You’re a ghost of the man I knew.”

Tubbo doesn’t say, “You should be afraid of me, I think. But I’m glad that you’re not.”

Tubbo doesn’t say, “You don’t even know any of this, so it’s alright if you don’t forgive me or anything, but I *am* sorry for, like, the attempted murder. To be fair, you did kill me first. So. A little bit deserved, I reckon. But, the cycle of revenge and all that. And it kinda only made things worse. I can see that now. Wasn’t really thinking right, at the time. Had a lot of pressure on me. Probably wasn’t the best idea I’ve ever gone along with. And I’m not sorry I did it, but I’m sorry about what it did to you, if that makes sense.”

The silence stretches, and Tubbo doesn’t say anything at all. Nothing except, “Thank you for letting me pet your dog.”

“No problem,” Technoblade answers. “She likes new people.”

Tubbo doesn’t feel like a new person. But he supposes he’s close enough.

“And seriously,” Technoblade continues, sounding marginally more serious, and sounding like doing so pains him. “If you need, like, documentation. Passports. IDs. A Costco membership card. All you have to do is ask.”

Tubbo snorts, the easy smile returning to his face. He tries not to let the appreciation show on his face, because he thinks the force of the earnest emotion would make Technoblade uncomfortable, but he’s pretty sure he fails. “Will do, bossman.”

Technoblade bears it anyway. He nods and relaxes back against the wall, watching Tubbo and Em sitting content together in the corner of the barn stall.

Tubbo considers his position — stuck in a shirt too big, snot smears on his sleeves, covered in hay and dirt, sitting on the concrete, pinned down by the terrifying dog laying in his lap.

Somehow, despite everything, Tubbo feels better.

Today is a good day.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact for this chapter: Em was a member of the Hound Army that attacked New L’Manberg on Doomsday. After surviving Doomsday, Em ended up sitting in a boat in Technoblade’s cabin.

Come talk to me on my [Tumblr](#)!

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

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!