

black skies have changed into blue

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by [GoodTimesWithScar](#)

Summary

It's not every day you almost hit somebody with your car - but then again, it's not every day that the somebody in question falls directly out of the sky and into the road in front of you.

(or, a proposed "after" for martyn's datastream defender lore.)

Notes

weewoo !! u may have already read this on my tumblr dot com but it's on my ao3 dot org now too !! chapters will come out once a day to echo the serial release of the original thumbs up have fun

(title from hit song dear fellow traveller by sea wolf. don't ask me why it's a these two song to me because i have an explanation but i'm incapable of putting it into words.)

Chapter 1

It's not every day you almost hit somebody with your car - but then again, it's not every day that the somebody in question falls directly out of the sky and into the road in front of you.

Oli slams the brakes as fast as he can physically manage, parks the car, hops out. (If traffic comes up behind him on a little road like this, only a couple of streets from his house, then they can wait for him to check on the *body* before he lets them past, alright?) Lying in front of him, tensed but not appearing to be grievously injured, is a man.

"Hello?"

The man's eyes flick open, his gaze wild and alert at once, and he scrambles back across the tarmac. "Who are you?"

"No - no, I'm not - you just fell in front of my car, that's all, I'm not a cop or anything."

"Don't need to be a cop to be dangerous," the stranger insists, fists balling against the road as though he'd rather be reaching for a weapon. "Where is this?"

"You're - we're in Sheffield," he hazards, "like, north Sheffield, not in the middle of town or anything. How did you fall out of the sky like that?"

"Sheffield?" the man repeats.

"Yeah?"

"What's your name?"

"Er - I'm Oli. Oliver."

The stranger stares at Oli like he's trying to bore a hole through to the other side of his skull. "OrionSound?"

Oli pauses. How in the everliving fuck does this random stranger know his *gamertag*, of all things?
"What? Yes. What?"

"Right," the stranger mutters, "not over yet, I guess." He hops up, offers a hand, which Oli, bewildered, shakes. "My name is Martyn."

Ah - *that* would explain it. If, albeit, it is still a fucking insane coincidence. "You've been in some of our lobbies before. How did you work that out from name and location?"

Martyn stops short. "Hold on. Lobbies?"

"Yeah - on Pirates, right? And Rats. I always just sort of assumed you must be mates with Owen or something."

"Lobbies like - like in-game?"

"... Yes?"

Martyn looks around, as though he's processing this quiet side street for the very first time. He flexes his fingers on either side, half-concealed under fingerless gloves. Then he makes eye contact with Oli again. "Let me just get this straight. You've met me in-game, and this is *not* that. This is real."

"Yeah," Oli frowns, "what? Of course this is real. I'm sorry, am I missing something?"

And Martyn laughs, mirthless, like Oli's not privy to the greatest cosmic joke he can imagine. "Little bit, yeah. Right. I *did* get out. And I'm in Sheffield, and *OrionSound* of all people found me. And... I need to call my mum."

"You need my phone?"

"Oh, god, *not* now, I need a minute."

Against his better judgement, Oli makes a choice. "Well, if you need somewhere to go, just for a bit, we're not far from my house?"

Martyn laughs again. "Right! Sure. Let's do that. Fuck. Fucking hell, you've got a *car*, been a hot minute since I've seen one of *those*. Let's go."

So that's how Oli ends up letting Martyn, a man he's never met before but also knows quite well, into his car and into his home. It's not even one o'clock yet.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Martyn, as it turns out, only has three phone numbers memorised.

Chapter Notes

ah shit forgot to post this last night sorry here you go ao3ers

Martyn, as it turns out, only has three phone numbers memorised.

One of them is his own. The second is his mother's, which he tries, and receives the unfortunate information that the number has been disconnected and leads nowhere.

He finally has some luck with the third, the landline phone number of his house - while nobody picks *this* up, either, it does connect to *somewhere* at least. Martyn is able to leave a voicemail explaining that he's out of the situation he was in that meant he couldn't come home, and that he'll be there by tonight.

"Where's *there*?" Oli asks, kind of hoping Martyn won't need a lift to Bristol or anything out of the way like that.

"Nottingham," Martyn replies, guarded.

Oh - that's not so bad, then. "I can give you a lift down, if you need?"

"Aren't you busy?"

"Oh, no." Oli's remote working today; as long as he keeps an eye on his emails, nobody should even notice he's gone, and if he can always call in a family emergency if Martyn does take him up on the offer to drive. It *is* a family emergency, after all, it seems - just not Oli's family.

Martyn perks up at the response, though. “Oh, I getcha. Job market, eh?” He makes a cutting motion across his throat, with noise to match.

“No, I’ve got a job! A pretty good one, actually. That’s why I can afford this on my own.”

“Ah.” A silence, and then Martyn flicks the phone back on in his hands. “Oh, god. *October 2023?*”

“... Yes?” *Why did you not know what month it was? Or, from the sounds of it, what year?*

“God, my mum’s gonna be out of her *wits*, that’s awful.” He flicks at the screen - then, sheepish, asks, “What’s your passcode?”

“Here, I’ll -” Oli takes it out of his hands, taps in the shape of a circle “- what d’you want?”

“Oh, I was just gonna google myself.”

Oli pulls up Google. Waits, expectantly.

“Er - Martyn Littlewood.”

And oh, jesus, yeah, that’s a missing persons case. Last seen *April 2021*, no wonder he was bloody worried about the year, suspect investigated but no proof identified, case well and truly cold.

Martyn must see it in his face the way he’s started, because he grimaces. “That bad?”

“About what you’d expect,” says Oli, turning the phone around to face Martyn. He snatches it, which is unexpected but honestly not out of character for the stuff he remembers from Martyn in-game.

Wait.

“Hold on - how were you getting on SMPs with us lot if you were... whatever you were?”

Martyn grimaces harder. “Long story. Difficult, too. Let’s just say there’s a lotta people who I last saw lunging for my neck, and they’re not gonna stop because I’m here.”

“Are you a wanted man? Do I need to barricade the doors, close the blinds, what?”

“Nah, nah - just keep me away from your computer.” He pauses again to consider that. “Actually. If *you’re* here, does that mean everyone else is too?”

“What, the other people on the server? Well, they’re not *here*, but I could message people if you want, say you’ve... I don’t know, turned up at Sainsbury’s?”

“I’m an ASDA man myself,” Martyn cracks, and then frowns at the screen. “So can I go on your Discord? I won’t send anything. I just want to know.”

“Erm - sure.”

He taps through, immediately lights up. “Scott!”

Ah, yeah, he *had* been DMing Scott this morning. Something about axolotls, if he’s not mistaken. “Yeah! He’s all the way in Brighton, though, I don’t know if I could swing *that* much of a lift.”

“And Bek. And Eloise, and - oh my god, I *need* to know what Sausage’s real name is.”

“I’ve never asked.”

“You just call him Sausage, all the time?”

“S’funny, innit?”

Martyn nods solemnly. “It *is* funny.”

He sits like that for a while, scrolling through Oli’s DM history, muttering names under his breath. “I mean,” says Oli, “we can add you, if you like.”

“God. Yeah, you prob’ly can. Let me try it.”

A few seconds later, and Martyn’s handing back the phone to Oli with a pending friend request to InTheLittleWood in tow. “Don’t know why you didn’t offer that before, if you’re so excited.”

“Couldn’t,” Martyn says nonchalantly.

“Right, and does that have something to do with this missing persons case of yours?”

His face falls. “Yeah, actually. Something like that.”

“Ah.”

They decide to wait until either his mum calls Oli back or Oli is officially clocked out of work to get back in the car. Until then, it seems like it’s time for Oli to get Martyn up to speed on the last... two and a half years, good *lord*, that’s a while...

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Oli leaves Martyn with his laptop in the living room while he brews the pair of them a cup of tea each in the kitchen. When asked whether he'd like milk and/or sugar, Martyn hesitated for *way* too long before saying he'd just like to have the same thing Oli was having. So, two teas with milk and three sugars it is. Let it never be said Oli breaks British stereotypes.

Chapter Notes

okay we're back on schedule god damn it

Oli leaves Martyn with his laptop in the living room while he brews the pair of them a cup of tea each in the kitchen. When asked whether he'd like milk and/or sugar, Martyn hesitated for *way* too long before saying he'd just like to have the same thing Oli was having. So, two teas with milk and three sugars it is. Let it never be said Oli breaks British stereotypes.

When Oli brings the tray back through with the teas, Martyn is still glued to the laptop, looking fairly shellshocked. "What's that look for? You found anything?"

"No, just... thought I'd go find some of the YouTubers I was subscribed to, see what I missed. Didn't realise Minecraft had come back in such a big way."

Oli chuckles and takes a seat. "Yeah - I mean, it was a *lot* of us playing on Rats, did you never wonder?"

He looks up at Oli, raised eyebrows under that headband of his. "That was Minecraft?"

And...

Yeah, no, Oli's not even gonna try and broach the implications of that question.

“Tea,” he says instead, gesturing to the tray on the coffee table between them.

Martyn sets the laptop down to the side and picks up a mug (*Don't Talk To Me Until I've Eaten This Mug*, a personal favourite of Oli's). He cups it gently, as though he's not used to the heat - and maybe he isn't. “Never used to drink tea,” he comments, “though mainly that's cause my mum wouldn't let me put the sugars in when I was twelve, and I pretty much swore it off out of spite after that.”

“Well, it's not for everyone.”

He sips at it anyway - flinches away from the surface, from the burn, most likely. “Nothing wrong with it,” he reassures once it's safely back on the tray, “just needs a few minutes to chill.”

“If you wanted ice tea, you could've just said so,” Oli quips.

“No, it's - it's good! I like the...” His hands flail aimlessly, gesturing at a meaning Oli finds himself entirely incapable of grasping. “I promise.”

“Alright.”

They sit in quiet for a few minutes after that, Oli drinking from his own cup and watching the laptop for any correspondence from his coworkers. He's got some code that needs correcting, which a supervisor sent over, but he doesn't think his brain is gonna be switching gears from *this* situation back to C# any time soon.

Eventually, Martyn picks the cup back up and tries again. This time he seems to be able to get a good mouthful of tea down, and another few teaspoons' worth down his face and on his shirt. “Oh - are you alr- do you need some kitchen roll?”

“Uh,” says Martyn, eloquently. “Probably.”

So it is kitchen roll that he fetches, and it is kitchen roll that Martyn uses to attempt to dab his new tea stains out of his shirt. It's also at this point that Oli notices something unusual. “Is your *arm* okay?”

“Hmm?”

“That looks like scarring, right? I mean, I assume it was a while ago, but -”

“Yeah, no, yeah, that’s old. Told you, didn’t I? Cats are vicious.”

He’s grinning, but Oli doesn’t exactly want to take a joke from the old Minecraft server as the only explanation. “Seriously. It’s not more stuff to do with this missing person situation, is it?”

The grin drops. Now, Martyn looks more resigned than anything. “Yeah. Wasn’t, like, torture or anything. I just got a bit banged up. You know how it gets.”

“Erm - well, I *don’t*, actually.” He’s never *got a bit banged up* in a way that left him with lasting scarring all down his limbs. “So now would be a great time to get some more explanation, if you have one.”

“I don’t,” says Martyn, quick as anything.

“So, what, I just send you home, and things go back to normal, except you’re in the Discord now?”

He studies Oli. There’s something really cold in there, a light that went out a long time ago. It’s clear that going back to normal isn’t really on the cards for Martyn, that even if this missing situation is all neatly resolved, it’s left him a different person from the one that his family know.

(But again - how do the *video games* square with all of this?)

When Martyn speaks, eventually, it’s not to answer the question. “Oh, fuck, *Doc*.”

“... Doc?”

“He’s - it’s this guy I knew, back home, he’s - god damn it, he still *lives* there, if I - fuck, fuck, I

can't go home, I can't."

This sudden switch from broken bleakness to a high-emotion panic is one that Oli neither anticipates nor knows how to respond to. "Hey - slow down, Marty, give it a minute," he says, hoping that by delaying Martyn he can give himself more time to think about how to help with whatever the problem is.

"Fuck," and is Martyn starting to *cry*? "I can't go back, not if he's gonna hear about it, and he *will*, I'm gonna be on the fucking news for how long I was in there, fucking -"

"Martyn," Oli says, loud and authoritative enough to cut off his catastrophising. (Well, the concern might be entirely validated; Oli doesn't know who this Doc guy is, after all. Still, he didn't get that Psychology degree for nothing, and he'll use the buzzwords if he wants to use the damn buzzwords.) "It's okay. You're not home, not right now. Nobody knows where you are, not this guy, not even your mum yet. Which would probably be a terrifying thing to say in any other case, but I'm guessing it's not as bad for you."

Martyn nods mutely, tears on his cheeks.

"So - alright, and you don't have to tell me anything if you don't want, that's fine, but I'm just asking - who is that? To you?"

"He's, er." Martyn's voice cracks, wet and directionless. "He's just a guy I know. Used to fix my consoles up for me, upgrade 'em. Sold me some pretty sweet parts for the PC, too, even had a GPU on hand when the shortage was happening. God, NFTs aren't still big, are they?"

"No, thank god, that bubble burst a long time ago," Oli can't help but smile. "Sounds like he was alright. What was the catch?"

"Um. He... kinda hired me? For something? That was pretty dangerous, but he didn't have anybody else for the job? And then I realised he was - basically breaking a *lot* of labour laws, quite recently, did not realise how big of a dickhead he really was until... I don't know how long it's been. Anywhere from *last night* to *a few days ago*. But if I go home... well, he's gonna be there, and he's gonna want that job done, and he's not gonna care that I've quit."

Oli takes another sip of his tea while he processes all that.

Martyn sits up straight, very suddenly, and announces, “I was not being sex trafficked.”

One choked-on swallow later, which thankfully goes back into the mug for the most part, and Oli is laughing from the shock. “No, no, I didn’t - ack - didn’t even cross my mind, Marty, don’t worry. But that’s... good to know.”

“Yeah,” says Martyn.

“Yeah.”

He picks his own mug back up and, slowly but surely, drains the rest of it. There’s a constant wince in his expression that suggests he doesn’t really like tea, but Oli’s not about to stop him from drinking it if he’s decided to drink it. When he’s done, he clears his throat. “But, uh, yeah. If I go back home, Doc’s gonna catch wind, and he’ll probably find a way to get me right back into the mess I just got out of. And I don’t want that, obviously, so... I’m gonna have to... do something else.”

“I mean,” says Oli, making another probably-stupid decision, “my sofa’s free if you need to crash?”

“No, I should - I’ve gotta make good on my word to Mum, don’t I? Gotta show my face. Just... carefully, and quietly, and not answering to any strange men with retro games playing on their third monitor when they’re not using it.”

“Alright,” he repeats, but it feels more like willingly sending this clearly young adult straight back into the terrible situation from which he’s just escaped than it does bringing him home.

And, seriously, *where* do the video games fit in?

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

“D’you want me to order pizza?” Oli asks, somewhat redundantly, because Martyn is twenty-two (according to the police report) and a gamer, of course he’s not gonna turn down free pizza.

“Oh, god, yeah,” says Martyn. And, a second later - “Please.”

Chapter Notes

AH SHIT FORGOT AGAIN

this is the chapter with the severe derealization episode in it so. content warning for that thubs up

“D’you want me to order pizza?” Oli asks, somewhat redundantly, because Martyn is twenty-two (according to the police report) and a gamer, of course he’s not gonna turn down free pizza.

“Oh, god, yeah,” says Martyn. And, a second later - “Please.”

He fires up the Domino’s website obediently, pulls up the deals and picks one that’ll leave him some leftovers for when Martyn’s long gone tomorrow. Meateor for himself, as usual, and then he spins the laptop round on his knees to present Martyn with the options. “What are you having?”

Martyn stares at the screen, unblinking, for a few too many seconds.

“... Something wrong?”

He clears his throat. “Yeah, no, just. Um. Been a while.”

“D’you just want a margherita, then? Keep it easy?”

“No, I don’t - I was -” he grimaces, shakes his head roughly, and thumbs at the fabric of his shirt where the tea stain sits “- trying to remember what I liked.”

“Vegetarian?”

“No,” Martyn responds immediately.

“Olives? Mushrooms?”

“I’m not picky -”

“Pineapple on pizza?”

Martyn snorts. “Okay, yeah, I don’t much like pineapple on anything, I’ll give you that.”

“But as a concept.”

“No problem with it.”

“Then, Marty, my friend, you’ve lost the plot.”

He sits another moment, deliberating. Then - “Sweetcorn.”

“Yeah?”

“I like sweetcorn on pizza.”

“Alright,” says Oli, and spins the laptop round again to check the options. “Vegi Supreme or Chicken Feast?”

“I’ll take the chicken,” Martyn says, resolute.

Oli sends the order through, with potato wedges on the side, because it’s his money and he’s gonna pick the extra items for the deal. Then, once the little order tracker with the fake AI has popped up and started telling him stupid jokes to amuse him for the next 25 minutes or so, he turns back to look at Martyn. “Can I ask something?”

He raises his eyebrows. “Ask what?”

“And you don’t need to tell me if it’s, like, personal or whatever, just... what *were* you eating? If you haven’t seen pizza in however long?”

Martyn makes a face. “Whatever, honestly. It wasn’t a big worry for me - I mean, not like I could - yeah, it was just whatever. Not dead yet, so I’m clearly not malnourished.”

Oli cocks his head. “Whatever like whatever you were given, or whatever like you were scavenging?”

“Like - uh - like - I mean, I wouldn’t say *scavenging*, that’s - like whatever I could find? I know I’m not explaining this very clearly, it’s -”

“No, no, I said you didn’t need to tell me! Don’t have to say anything you don’t want to.” (It’s not like Oli doesn’t *want* to know, but he doesn’t *need* to know if it’s going to make Martyn uncomfortable to explain it.)

“Anyway. It wasn’t *bad*, it was just... y’know how Covid makes it so you can’t taste anything? Little bit like that.”

“Original Covid did. I don’t know about all the new variants.”

“Ah, yeah, heard about those! Did they ever run out of Greek letters?”

“Don’t think so, thank goodness.”

“Yeah,” Martyn nods.

Beside Oli, the little Domino’s robot lets him know that their pizzas are now going in the oven.

It feels odd, to be sitting here on the sofa, taking an extended lunch break with somebody who he’s only known from Minecraft servers and scratchy in-game prox chat. It feels odd to know that he’s doing hospitality for a man six or seven years younger than him, a friend who’s never answered out-of-character about himself before today. It feels odd to know that he’s actually looking at the real Martyn - not some rat, not some pirate, just... some guy.

Oli swallows and steels himself for what he’s about to say. “Erm - again. Don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to. But... besides this whole Doc thing, what was your life like? Your normal life?”

Martyn’s expression flips into something unreadable for a second, then mellows again into neutrality. “Yeah, uh - nothing special, really. Born and raised in Nottingham, did alright at school, got the grades for uni but I ended up deferring. I was trying to get a job in my gap year but I didn’t really wanna end up behind the counter at GAME or McDonald’s or anything, and nowhere else ever got back to my applications, so... spent a lot of time at home, playing video games. No girlfriend, no mates who really stuck after college; not much worth writing home about. I wasn’t much of anything, really, not then.”

Oli is, he decides, going to ignore the implications of that comment. “Family?”

“Mum, dad, sister who’s been moved out for a few years. Dog. Oh, I hope he’s still alive, that’d *suck* if I never see my dog again.”

“Fingers crossed,” says Oli.

“What about you? What’s the home life of OrionSound like, when he’s not at the computer?”

“Oh, Marty, my entire life is at the computer,” he quips. “I work in software development. I actually did my degree in psychology, but you’d be surprised, there’s not a lot of room in the market unless you’ve done a load of other certifications as well. I guess I *could* have got a therapy licence, but as it turned out, I’d spent enough time in first year making terrible visual novels that by the time I got into the workforce I technically knew how to code. AI snapping at our heels now, of

course, but it's probably gonna eat itself by Christmas, so I'm not too worried about that."

"I dunno," says Martyn, "I've seen some pretty advanced AI."

"So, yeah. I spent a few years freelancing, contracting for one place or another - I'm quick, which people seem to like, although that's mostly so I can get back to gaming as soon as possible. And then... like two and a bit years ago? Yeah, would've been two years this past July... then I got a *really* nice position at CHESTCorp, it's mostly remote work, I drive down to London every few months so they can "review my performance in a controlled environment", whatever *that* means, and they pay well enough that I can afford this place on my own, which is -"

Oli stops talking when he notices Martyn's face has gone white as a sheet.

"What's wrong?"

"I knew it," Martyn murmurs.

"What?"

"I knew it," he says again, stronger, "I *knew* I shouldn't have trusted you, I knew you - I thought - he told me this would happen, I've *seen* it happen, I should've just learned from my mistakes the fucking *first* time, but clearly I'm stupid."

"Marty, what are you -"

"Didn't wanna believe this shit could follow me out here, but evidently it - oh. Oh, no, *no*, you fucking - it's not over, is it? I'm still - that's why nobody picked up the phone, it wasn't real, you couldn't synthesise my mother's voice, I'd know! You're CHEST, of *course* you're CHEST, the one person I thought - I mean, I *hoped* - you're fucking cruel, is what this is, it's cruel, and you're not fooling me twice. Don't know how you got the food this realistic, but -"

"Martyn," Oli tries to interrupt, "are you okay?"

"Shut the fuck up," Martyn says through gritted teeth. "You've given the game away now, CHEST

agent. Should've known it wasn't real. Should've known I couldn't get out that easy. Or you caught up before I got out, one of you fuckers, planted something, or - I don't know, made me think I was finally out of this stupid place. Made me think it was fine so I'd start giving up secrets. Well, you're not getting another word out of me, you fucking idiot. Some interrogation room you've got here, huh? This your best simulation? Get a better model for your TV, I'll tell you that for free, the reflection's too smooth."

Well. Er. "Martyn," he tries again, "I think you might be having a flashback?"

"Nothing *back* about it, you bastard. Giving me false hope like that. Thank god I don't actually know Doc's name, or you'd have been able to track him too, wouldn't you? Fuck you. Don't *ever* bring my family into this again, any of you."

"Okay," Oli says slowly, rifling through his psychology knowledge for grounding techniques, "you think this isn't real, right now?"

"I *know* it isn't real," Martyn spits, "and it's getting worse the more I'm poking at it. See, look -" he stomps a foot at the floor "- you're losing resolution trying to keep it running."

The carpet, which has not changed and is certainly not lower resolution than it was when they got here, endures being scuffed at. Oli doesn't want to actually lay a hand on Martyn right now, though; he's got a bad feeling that'll end in something much worse than being kicked. Instead he dips into the kitchen across the room, pops an ice cube out of the tray faster than he's ever needed to, and brings it back over to the sofa. "Here," he says, chucking it at Martyn's lap, "that real enough for you?"

Martyn catches the projectile reflexively. He stills, silent, both hands cupped around the ice cube, staying in the air.

Then, gradually, his eyes unfocused... his arms lower.

He opens them and stares down at the piece of ice in his palm, and, slowly and almost imperceptibly, begins to rock forward.

The Domino's tracker chimes again. Their food has finished cooking, and it's being delivered by Amal. Oli almost wants to laugh at the absurdity of it.

Whatever Martyn's running from, it must go a *lot* deeper than he thought.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Oli doesn't try to broach the subject again until the pizza is delivered and the ice cube is a soaked-up puddle in a napkin on the coffee table.

When he does, though, it's with his hands in his lap and his best efforts to not sound like a scolding teacher. "You wanna tell me what that was about?"

Chapter Notes

there comes a point where you need to stop apologising for your consistent forgetfulness and start blaming it on your dissociative disorder. anyway here we are it's done enjoy

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

Oli doesn't try to broach the subject again until the pizza is delivered and the ice cube is a soaked-up puddle in a napkin on the coffee table.

When he does, though, it's with his hands in his lap and his best efforts to not sound like a scolding teacher. "You wanna tell me what that was about?"

Martyn, in lieu of answering, pulls open the pizza box and wiggles a slice free from the still-stringing cheese. His fingertips bounce it between them, ginger; he bites down and clearly regrets it. Still, he chews, mouth caught in a conflict between ventilating the heat and keeping his secrets sealed tight shut behind it.

"Come on," Oli continues, gentle as he can push it. "I can't help you if I don't know what the problem is."

Martyn swallows. He looks like he's deliberating.

He must decide, whatever the stakes of this crisis are, that Oli's worth it, because he does reply.

"You know," he says, quiet, "I wasn't kidding when I said you should keep your computer away from me."

"Do you want me to take it upstairs?"

"I mean - bit late now. But yeah, that'd probably help."

So he probably has the conviction that something, somebody, is listening in through the machine. That's understandable; if whatever his situation was involved him being able to join some random strangers' games, he probably had a computer, and it was probably monitored, which would explain why he's so terrified of being tracked. It makes about as much sense as anything else in this exchange does.

Even if it didn't, though, Oli still would have taken his laptop back upstairs, tapped out a quick notice that he'd be unavailable for the rest of the day, and tossed it on his bed - and his phone beside it, after a moment's thought. Martyn's comfort is what really matters here.

"There we are," he says on his way back in, "the highest-tech thing in the room now is probably the microwave."

Martyn offers him a thin smile, which feels more like progress than anything else.

"Right." He sits back down, takes his own piece of pizza (which by now is a far more edible temperature than it must have been when Martyn tried it), and gets the whole thing down before he takes another shot. "You want to start, or shall I?"

He exhales amusement. "Go on then. Tell me what *you* know."

"Not a lot," Oli admits, "apparently. You don't make a lot of sense. You fell out of the sky, you still seem fairly surprised that things are real, you didn't know we'd been playing Minecraft - and you were calling me CHEST *agent*, which isn't a job title my company offers, as far as I'm aware. What, were you born in a video game?"

"I told you I was born in Nottingham."

"That might have been a cover story!"

"Nah. Wouldn't lie about that. I am a real boy, Gepetto, you can believe me on that one."

"Well, there's *one* thing I know for sure about you," Oli says. "All this talk of being *in there*, though. I don't know. VR?"

"Something like. You -" he hushes his voice, even though it's the middle of the afternoon and the neighbours won't be home "- you're, like, a normal CHEST employee, then? Front end stuff?"

"Yeah. I told you, I'm a software dev. If it's a front, I'm not in on the secret."

"God," says Martyn, "okay, so you're still not *safe*, but... okay, telling you this now, you're not getting the whole truth. But your company sucks and you should quit your job."

"Sucks like questionable QA policies or sucks like torturing teenagers in the basement?"

"I - shit," says Martyn, "a lot of those agents might have been folks like me, huh. Damn. Least I never killed anyone."

"I seem to remember you being pretty handy with a knife."

"Yeah, 'cause none of that was *real*, I was a bloody rat in a maid dress. You can't be on at me for killing people *there*."

"Suppose Jimmy killed the gardener."

"Exactly!"

"So, what, CHESTCorp have figured out how to turn VR into R, and you got caught up in it?"

"Ehhhh," Martyn takes another go at his slice of pizza, "kind of. It's real experimental stuff. You're lookin' at test subject number... I don't know, actually. Definitely number one outside of CHEST."

"And now that you're not a test subject any more," he finishes, "you're having trouble readjusting."

"I guess. It's just... y'know, like, it's *nice* to be back, but... weird. Incredibly weird."

"Two and a half years would do it," Oli nods.

They take another lull to properly eat. Oli hadn't realised before this how starving he is; he would have thrown something together from the groceries he'd picked up if he hadn't had a guest to entertain. Martyn, too, seems fairly intent on ingesting an entire pizza by himself. His mother's voice sounds inside his head, urging him to slow down, but Oli ignores it. If Martyn ends up with stomach problems it'll just be another stark reminder that he's not... trapped in a virtual reality simulator, he supposes.

"So, er," he picks back up, once they've cleared the wedges and made more than a dent in the pizza, "what now?"

"Hmm?"

"You've gone through all that. Nobody's going to believe you, I assume, if this stuff's as top-secret as it seems to be."

"Kinda thing you'd need a two-hour primer with your therapist for," Martyn nods, "and *a lot* of faith in doctor-patient confidentiality."

"But, what, do you just... go home?"

"I'd like to," he says. "I would really, *really* just like things to go back to normal."

There's a silence. *But they can't* rings clear as a bell in the air between them anyway.

Martyn looks down at the last three slices of pizza. “You should take me home.”

“You’re sure?”

He swallows. “Yeah. I’ll just... I’ll be a big surprise for my parents when they get back home from work. And then I’ll add you guys on Discord, and hopefully we’ll be able to talk more on there?”

“Hopefully,” says Oli, meaning it more than anything. His entire life’s been pretty much flipped on its head by this encounter. “We’re always wondering about you, y’know. Or, I mean, *I* am. Owen probably thinks you’re there from Apo, Apo probably thinks you’re there from Owen, all that, but... Hard *not* to wonder who the hell you really were, when you would never act like it was actually a game.”

“I mean, it’s all a game, isn’t it, really?” Martyn muses, half-distant. “Just in the long dream now.”

“Is that from the End Poem?”

“Is it?”

Oli shakes his head. No time for all that. “So I’m driving you back to Nottingham, and... you’ll DM me when you can?”

“Yeah.”

It’s the best he can ask for.

Martyn refuses to tell Oli his exact address, just asks him to drive close enough that Martyn can walk the rest of the way home. It’s understandable - a CHESTCorp employee knowing Martyn’s exact location is, apparently, an incredibly dangerous thing - but still a little concerning. He’d at least like to be sure that Martyn won’t be getting poached back by this Doc guy at the earliest notice. Still, Martyn’s comfort remains the most important thing, and so he leaves his Google Maps at home.

It’s a bit of an autopilot drive, even without directions. Oli feels the wheel under his fingers, the

pedals under his feet, like they're abstracts. He looks over once or twice and sees Martyn glued to the window, to the mirrors, hypervigilant; he hopes that Martyn feels a little more real now than he did before.

They're idle at a semi-populated roundabout when Martyn straightens his back. "Second exit, then pull over," he announces.

"Almost there?"

"Pretty close."

Oli obliges.

Martyn, with just the barest tremor in his fingers, pops the car door and steps out.

"You're sure you're gonna be okay?"

The words leave Oli's mouth in a rush, the emotion behind them probably more visceral than Martyn is expecting, if the way he startles at them is any indication.

"Because - 'cause if you need a hotel, or cash, or -"

"No," says Martyn, "no, I'm fine. Promise."

He hesitates, hand on the open car door, a few more seconds.

"And thanks," he finishes, "I don't - I'm not - I don't know. Appreciate it."

Oli understands what he's getting at. "Stay safe, okay?"

"Nah, I'm gonna throw myself right in the Trent when you're gone," Martyn smiles, and Oli

dutifully ignores the crack in his voice. Blame it on the last vestiges of teenagehood.

“And if you do end up needing to - I suppose erase all traces of your old life online... then it’s been an honour.”

“Yeah.”

“... Good luck.”

“Talk to you later,” Martyn says, and slams the car door closed.

All Oli can do, once he’s ambled out of eyeshot, is mechanically drive back home.

So that was InTheLittleWood. Friend group cryptid, unethical experiment, man with more trauma than Oli could ever begin to help him deal with... but man he was able to feed, and house, and walk through an emotional response, which is better than nothing at all. The one person in the world who Oli could almost hit with his car and have that be a better situation than the one he’d just escaped from. Still a mystery, too; he’s left Oli with far more questions than answers, left him returning to an empty house and wishing he’d been selfish enough to make Martyn stay a little longer, talk a little more.

Oli picks up his phone where he’d tossed it in the bedroom.

He has one new email to his work address.

Human Resources 3:04 PM

to me ∨

Subject: Performance Review

Dear Oliver,

You have been scheduled for a performance review. You are required to report to our Shoreditch location by 09:00 tomorrow, Thursday October 26th. Failure to comply with this request will result in disciplinary proceedings, which may lead to your subsequent termination.

Regards,

*Dan
Human Resources
CHESTCorp UK*

Ah.

That's... well.

The word *termination* is doing a lot of heavy lifting in that threat.

... Okay, so they're working to a deadline now. That's fine. He can deal with that. Martyn's been dealing with far worse, right?

The friend request, at least, flips through from pending to accepted.

TheOrionSound — Today at 15:14
[Attachment: Screenshot_20231025_151408.png]

InTheLittleWood — Today at 15:14
Shit.

Chapter End Notes

weeeeeeeeeee that's it please make sure to like comment and subscribe etc etc

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