

bones in the ocean

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bones in the ocean

by [bunflower](#)

Summary

“The Angel of Death, the ferryman of the Styx, the terror of the western seas. One of the most feared captains ever to sail, and yet, I have to wonder... how did a man like you end up all on his own? We searched the area where you were found—not another soul in sight. So,” He fixes him with a long look, allowing the silence to hover like a dark cloud, the words rolling off of his tongue with all the venom and smugness he can muster, “—tell me, Philza. Where is your crew?”

—

OR: Technoblade is a naval captain, and Phil his unwilling prisoner. Somehow, they manage to come out of it as friends in the end.

Notes

this work is a collaborative effort between myself and wolfythewitch, who will be doing the art and character designs for this AU! together, we both came up with ideas for the characters and the story, and i'm very excited to get to share this universe with you!

see the end notes for our social media, and to view the art so far on wolfy's twitter!

AU name from the song "bones in the ocean" by the longest johns!

—

chapter warnings: threats of starvation as punishment, near-drowning

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

Chapter 1

There's a prisoner in the brig of Captain Blade's ship.

This is not an unusual occurrence by any means, but the nature of the manner in which he's found himself responsible for said prisoner is. After all, it's not every day that you find a renowned pirate captain shackled to the wall in the port you're meant to be replenishing supplies in, but he won't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Even if said horse bites. Hard.

Technoblade's hand still aches from getting a little too close during the arrest.

Now, thanks to the acquisition of said prisoner, he's been forced to reroute. The Navy has a price on the head of every pirate who sails these waters, and the man currently glaring daggers at him is no exception. A dozen Navy ships have sunk to his name, and many more men, countless riches plundered from passing traders and merchants who happened to fall in his path. Pirate Captain Philza, the Angel of Death, has made himself into a living legend—or rather, a curse.

He's long overdue back in the mainland for his hanging.

Technoblade takes no pride in escorting men to their deaths. There is no glory in trampling upon someone who's already been defeated, but he is well aware of the devastation that's been wrought in the name of piracy. If the rumors he'd caught as a child from the passing merchants at the docks weren't enough to instill a fear of the skull and crossbones, then his time in the Navy certainly was. He's seen more men fall to the likes of piracy than any other danger out on these waters, and he's certainly not about to feel *pity* for one of the most formidable pirate captains on the seas.

No matter how hard it is to reconcile the Angel of Death with the man he sees before him.

The man in his cell is small and skinny and not at all what Technoblade had pictured. His skin is mottled with bruises from his struggle against the crew of the Anemoi, his hair wild and tangled. He looks more animal than man, and sounds the part, too, having hissed and howled insults as he was dragged through the town's square and to the docks. It's almost sad, in a way, to see a man reduced to such a state. He'd expected the man to match the legend—though perhaps in hindsight, that isn't quite fair of him. Still, for a man with such a foreboding reputation, he can't help but be a little disappointed by how easily Philza surrendered—though his predicament hadn't exactly made it easy for him.

“Marooned, huh?”

“Fuck off.” His prisoner's voice is sharp. Scathing. He's purposely avoiding the naval captain's gaze, looking almost *bored* of his confines despite his company standing outside the cell. It's enough of a show of disrespect to spark fury in Technoblade's gut, but what else could he expect from a *pirate*?

“What'd you manage to do to piss of yer' crew that much?”

Philza grins, all sharp teeth and glaring daggers.

“Wouldn't you like to know?”

And Technoblade *laughs*.

It's been a while since he's met anyone brave enough to speak up to him like this. He shouldn't have expected anything less from a silver-tongued pirate.

"Keep your secrets, then," he says, with a wave of his hand. "You'll have plenty of time to think about it down here. 'Fraid you're on your own, though. This isn't actually a prison vessel—just the one cell."

"Aww, mate, you're not gonna pay me a visit?" There's a smirk on Philza's lips, eerily predatory and yet the sparkle in his eyes is something inquisitive, and he can see the way his gaze seems to linger hopefully. Solitude is bad for any man, even a pirate. And the cabin boy shouldn't have to be subject to the pirate's taunts any longer than he must. And Technoblade *is* curious about the man, no matter how hard he tries to hide it. And so he takes a deep breath and *sighs* and watches Philza's grin widen with delight.

"You *do* care!" he says teasingly, with a little clap of his hands. Technoblade merely raises one eyebrow.

"I'll visit you, *if*—" he fixes the man with a long look, and Philza holds up his hands placatingly, "—and only *if* you're on your best behavior."

Philza laughs, and crosses his heart with a little faux salute for good measure.

"You have my word."

The word of a pirate, of course, means nothing.

"Meals will be once a day, in the evening. Misbehavior will result in the absence of those meals. We only have to keep you alive long enough to reach shore, so I wouldn't try anythin' funny. Understood?"

"Crystal clear, mate."

"Good."

"..."

"..."

"So... are we done here? Can I get back to my nap, or are you just gonna stare at me all day?"

Technoblade huffs.

"Yeah, I'll leave you to it," he deadpans. "Got any questions before I go?"

There's a soft inhale, so faint he barely catches it. He catches a fist clenching at the prisoner's waist, a straightening of his back as his gaze flits briefly away from Technoblade and toward the stairs that lead to the deck. Philza hums quietly and taps his fingers, pondering the question for far longer than necessary before he finally speaks again.

"...Did you manage to catch any of the others?" The man's tone is light, but Technoblade is no fool. He catches the gleam in those sharp blue eyes—sees the slightest tilt of the head like a cat ready to pounce. And *oh*, isn't *that* a pleasant surprise. It seems he has some sort of leverage to work with after all. Maybe it'll keep that tongue of his in check a while longer, for the sake of Technoblade's sanity for the next few weeks.

And so he stays silent, and watches as the pirate's face crumples ever-so-slightly in response. Nothing much—a slight twitch of the brow, a downturn of his lips—but a reaction, nevertheless; a show of expression other than the smug arrogance he'd been radiating ever since his capture.

Interesting. There will be time to unpack that later, but for now...

“It's a two-week journey if the winds favor us. Try anythin' funny, and we'll be movin' your grave to the bottom of the sea instead of the gallows.” He stays just long enough to see the man's lip curl and a particular finger raise in his general direction before he sweeps up the stairs, leaving the pirate to wallow alone in the brig with only his thoughts and the dim light of a candle to keep him company.

The days pass by slowly.

Captain Blade spends his time loitering about the deck, muttering soft instructions to his crew, and secluding himself away in his quarters. He pores over maps and charts their course again and again, and yet there's nothing that can keep the steady nagging out of his mind. On one such afternoon, he lets out a muffled groan as once more his mind caves into the persistent urge, leaving him unable to focus on his work a moment longer.

He wants to visit Philza again.

He's taken to bringing the man his evening meals under the pretense of “checking on the prisoner”, but the truth of the matter is that the pirate captain, oddly enough, *intrigues* him. The prisoner's stubborn resilience is an annoyance, but impressive nevertheless, and his sharp tongue is growing less scathing with each passing day. There's a mutual understanding of sorts between them: they are enemies, but they each nourish the barest hint of respect for the other, and so their conversations maintain a sort of civility while Philza eats.

Though... “civility” might be a stretch. Pirates aren't exactly known for their manners, and Technoblade's already had food lobbed into his hair once when the meal was deemed unsatisfactory. He'd stormed out of the cell in a rage, leaving Philza to plaintively whine about his empty stomach, as if it hadn't been his fault it was empty in the first place. He'd spent an hour after washing and untangling his messy braid, all the while muttering curses about ungrateful prisoners.

In hindsight, it may have been a *bit* funny.

Regardless of the reasons, he can't deny that *something* draws him to keep visiting each evening. He knows he should be horrified by his actions—that the Technoblade of the past would be disgusted to see him mingling with a criminal, but he's grown bored of the monotony of his leadership over flat waters, and speaking with their prisoner is the closest thing to *excitement* he's felt in a long time.

And so it becomes routine.

Today is no exception. Once more, Technoblade finds himself meandering down to the lower levels of the ship, into the furthest corner where little light reaches, save for the flicker of a candle and the faint stream of light through the cracks of the floorboards above. He isn't fond of the brig—hating the way it secludes, dreading its narrow walls and tight corners—but prison isn't designed to be comfortable.

Philza is waiting for him when he arrives. He looks different today—sat beside the bars, one hand clutching white-knuckled around the cold iron. His shoulders are hunched, his back stiff, his eyes glazed as he stares off into nothingness, jolting only when the steps creak loudly beneath Technoblade’s boots.

“Philza?” He can’t keep the note of concern out of his voice, taking in the dark shadows under the man’s eyes and the messy, unkempt state of his hair, which curtains his face like a veil as he abruptly turns his cheek.

“*Captain.*” Philza’s voice is short. Clipped. It lacks the usual mirth, instead low and hollow and almost threatening. It’s enough to catch Technoblade off guard, and he’s abruptly reminded that the man is in chains for a reason. He isn’t down here to visit a friend, he’s down here to check on the *prisoner*. He straightens, squaring his shoulders and assuming a commanding posture, staring down at the man who glares right back up at him, coiled tight like a venomous snake ready to spring. It’s a striking contrast to his attitude for the last few days—often lounging about his cell, sprawling out on his back or kicking up his feet. He looks defensive—feral, almost—his lip curling and his muscles tensing like a cornered animal.

“What’s wrong with you?” And *oh*, that didn’t quite come out how he intended, but he’s never been the best at softening the blow, and so the harsh words spill from his lips before he gets a chance to bite them back. Philza’s reaction is instantaneous—a soft hiss as he recoils from the bars of the cage, stalking away from Technoblade and pressing himself back into the corner.

“You try being trapped in a cage without sunlight for a week and tell me how you feel, *mate.*” The final syllable is practically spat in his direction.

Technoblade scoffs.

“Maybe you should’ve thought of that before convertin’ to a life of piracy. Have you ever considered a career change?”

Philza laughs at that. It’s brittle and hollow and lacks any of the warmth it had in the past, making the hairs on the back of his neck prickle like the hackles of a cat as he squirms beneath the pirate’s gaze. It’s piercing, level and cold as ice as the man seems to take a moment to stare into his very soul. He makes a soft sound, somewhere between a hum and a growl, and Technoblade isn’t sure he liked what he saw there.

“Have *you?* Being the navy’s personal *dog* doesn’t suit a guy like you.”

“Better than murderin’ and pillagin’ innocent people for a livin’,” he snaps right back, and swallows back the uncomfortable flicker he feels in his throat when he catches the slightest flinch in response. He’s poking an angry bull, but by the gods does it feel good, after the days of insults and mockery he’s received.

“Innocent?” Philza hisses, baring his teeth. “You think the Royal Navy is innocent? You think you’re out there doing *good?*” He laughs, and this time it’s bitter and condescending and makes Technoblade’s blood *boil*. “Mate, have I got news for you. I’m no saint—never claimed to be—but your boss? The crown? He’s an absolute piece of shit if I ever saw one. You’re no better than I am.”

That’s *it*.

Technoblade tosses the food in his hands aside, ignoring the childish whine of annoyance his prisoner makes at the sight of his meal splattering against the wall. He strides up to the bars,

wrapping one hand around them, drawing himself up to full height as he shapes his voice into something far calmer than he's actually feeling, forcing his lips into a strained smile.

"Captain Philza."

"That's my name mate, don't wear it out."

"Your reputation precedes you, y'know."

"Does it, now?" Philza watches him coyly from where he's now leaning against the wall, arms folded around his chains and gaze half-lidded, his lips curled in an arrogant, cat-like smirk.

"The Angel of Death, the ferryman of the Styx, the terror of the western seas. One of the most feared captains ever to sail, and yet, I have to wonder... how did a man like you end up all on his own? We searched the area where you were found—not another soul in sight. So," He fixes him with a long look, allowing the silence to hover like a dark cloud, the words rolling off of his tongue with all the venom and smugness he can muster, "—tell me, Philza. Where *is* your crew?"

Philza goes abruptly silent, his smile vanishing.

It's a low blow, Technoblade knows it is, but by gods, he's had just about enough of the pirate's conniving lies and teasing tongue. Only... Philza suddenly averts his gaze, but before he does, Technoblade catches the faintest flicker of something dark amidst the blue—a flash of some deeper sorrow. He blinks, and it's gone, replaced with something far closer to rage. Philza's smile does not return. The room feels dark, and quiet, and *sad*.

So perhaps Technoblade feels the faintest regret after all.

The silence between them stretches on for far too long before Technoblade eventually clears his throat.

"Right. I'll have the cabin boy bring all of yer' meals from now on." Philza looks nearly ready to argue at that before his jaws click shut once more, a sneer twisting his features into something ugly. Technoblade plows on. "Just a few more days. I'll see you when we reach the shore." He fails to mention that the arrival at the port would be their final meeting. He doesn't think he can stomach attending the execution. Not after he's started to see the man before him as Philza, rather than "Captain Philza" or the "Angel of Death" or even just a mere pirate.

No. He can't watch. Nor can he stand to feel that spiteful gaze linger any longer on him. And so, like a coward, he turns and flees, and tries not to remember the too-human look of grief in the prisoner's eyes.

The brig is eerily quiet behind him.

There's a storm brewing.

Technoblade can smell it in the air, can feel it in his bones. Any captain worth his salt knows to recognize the first warning signs long before the arrival. The sky is clear and blue and bright, but he's long since learned to trust his gut, and so with short, clipped words he orders his crew to their positions, bracing the ship for what's to come. Sails are secured, lifelines tied, hatches battened

down while Technoblade scrutinizes their work with a careful eye.

You can never be too cautious out on the sea.

They're miles away from any coastline, still at least a day's journey from their destination if the winds are in their favor. They'll need to navigate the storm cautiously. Luckily for his crew, Captain Blade has always been the epitome of overpreparation. The crew of the Anemoi has full trust in their captain to see them safely through the storm and to shore.

Their prisoner is less confident in his abilities.

Technoblade brings him his evening meal, one last time. As promised, the cabin boy had taken over this duty, but he'd received word that the prisoner was starting to refuse the meals. Not keen on losing their captive before reaching shore, he's decided to take it upon his own shoulders to make the man eat. He'll force him if he must—never mind that the prisoner doesn't need to be at his full strength for a hanging. He expected to be cursed at, to be screamed at and mocked, or even to receive the same silent treatment he'd been given at the end of their last talk. But what he does not expect is *exactly* what happens.

The man takes one look at him, tips his head back, and *laughs*.

“Heh?”

This only serves to make Philza laugh even harder, his head thumping against the wall and his chains rattling as he giggles like a child; until his cheeks tinge pink and tears glitter at the corners of his eyes. Only then does he stop, heaving for breath and waving a hand around to fan his flushed face. Technoblade just stares blankly, unamused.

“You're fucked,” he wheezes, doubling over as far as the chains will allow him, the meager scraps of food abandoned at his feet. “Should've stayed at port for this one, mate.”

Technoblade's lip curls into an ugly sneer at the callous tone.

“Hope you're not too attached to this piece of junk, it's not gonna make it out of this storm in one piece.” Philza gives a condescending pat of the wooden floorboards he's resting on, all the while holding Technoblade's gaze with that same cool arrogance he's come to loathe in the past two weeks.

“It's just a storm. We've braved a dozen before.”

Philza's delight only grows.

“Keep telling yourself that, mate. But if I were you, I'd be saying your prayers now.”

And the boat *lurches*.

Technoblade steadies himself against the wall as Philza's cackles grow louder and louder, as the ship begins to steadily bob and the nearby candle is snuffed by a strong gust of wind that cuts down the passageway and into the narrow space. Bewildered, he glances up toward the deck as footsteps begin to pound overhead.

There's no way it could have reached them so soon—there hadn't been so much as a cloud on the horizon when he'd descended to the brig. Unless...

This isn't just any storm.

“I think that’s your cue, Captain,” the pirate grins, and tosses his head toward the steps. “Go on now. Good luck!” And then he’s laughing again—laughing as Technoblade surges up the stairs in a thunder of pounding boots against wooden planks, laughing even as the door slams shut and leaves him in total darkness.

Technoblade throws open the door and steps outside.

Water sprays his face, salty and cold and unexpected as he steps back up onto the deck. The ship gives another violent rock, and it’s then that Technoblade notices the line of clouds beginning to brew on the horizon, heavy and dark and swirling in a way that’s making the waves froth around them, tossing the ship back and forth before the storm has even set upon them. It’s approaching, thundering toward them with a sound as loud as the heavens themselves beginning to crumble, and it isn’t slowing.

They’re not going to be able to outrun it.

Technoblade curses, vaulting up to the quarter deck to stand beside the wheel, where his helmsman is already grappling to keep their course steady.

“Stow the cannons!” he shouts, gripping the rungs with white-knuckles, taking over as his helmsman goes to do just that—all other hands preoccupied with securing the sails. If they can’t outrun it, they can’t risk having them open. Storms out on these waters can tear sails and masts alike, and a broken mast would spell certain doom for the entire crew. It takes half of his men to secure them, leaving the rest floundering to douse the lamps and other hazards around the deck.

It’s pandemonium in the minutes before the storm surrounds their ship in darkness.

Amidst the din of stampeding feet and panicked shouts, he can still hear the faint, cackling laugh of Philza ringing out. For some reason, it fills him with a sense of eerie dread.

The storm sets upon them with savagery only the sea itself possesses. The crew of the Anemoi is competent and quick to act under the pressure, but the winds are violent and the waves high, and their vessel is quickly thrown off course. They fight an uphill battle against the ocean’s wrath, and it’s akin to a single, foolish man taking on an entire army singlehanded. They are helpless in the tide, tossed about and turned around, the wind howling around them like an angry chorus. Thunder booms around them and lightning crackles across the sky, the heavens opening up to flood them with a torrential downpour so heavy they can scarcely see through the spray.

And then disaster strikes.

Lightning splits the sky once more, and the central mast goes down in a pillar of fire and flame and smoldering wood, the crew reeling as it smashes into the deck with a devastating boom. Wood splinters beneath its weight, tearing a hole in the hull, and the deck quickly dissolves into chaos as water begins to spill into the lower levels of the ship. And then it’s every man for himself, all pretense of order abandoned as the crew realizes their fate and begins to make for any semblance of safety.

The ship is going down, whether to the tear in its hull or the might of the waves bearing down on them. One way or another, they may only have moments left in this world.

Technoblade isn’t a religious man, but as he stands alone amidst the shouts and screams of his crew, he finds himself following Philza’s earlier advice and praying to whatever god might hear him for a way out of this.

Philza.

Regretfully, he shoots a look at the now-flooded stairwell. Their prisoner had been forgotten in the scramble, and he pities him, for death by drowning is an unpleasant and dishonorable way to go. Chained and barred as he was, it's unlikely he's still alive, even if by some miracle he's managed to find a pocket of air in the flooded lower level of the ship. Technoblade can't spare the time it would take to save him. There's no use in rescuing a man already on death row—not when the fate of the rest of his crew is still on the line.

He shouts orders as best he can, but they're lost to the rush of wind and rain and *sound*, leaving his crew to fend for themselves. Technoblade makes to guide some of the stragglers to the lone dinghy at the ship's starboard, but it's already gone—though lost to those who had come first or the sea's cruel grasp, he isn't sure. It doesn't matter, because, in the next moment, a wave sweeps over the deck and knocks his men overboard, ripping a sorrowful cry from him as he watches their heads bob *once, twice* in the water before being sucked into the dark depths below. He can do nothing but watch as their souls are lost to the sea, for it takes all he has to cling to the railing himself, lest he is swept away.

And then he sees it.

The biggest wave of them all, towering over the ship, so massive in size that it dwarfs one of the navy's largest vessels in its shadow. Technoblade freezes in place—the screams and shouts of the men around him muted beneath the roar of blood in his ears as he looks into the eyes of death itself, and finds that he fears it.

For all his strengths, for all his wits, for all his cunning, Captain Blade has but one Achilles' Heel:

He's never been the strongest swimmer.

So when he's tossed overboard alongside his remaining crew by the wave as it crashes over the deck, he sinks like a stone. He fights his way back to the surface on pure strength alone, but he's only able to catch half a breath before he's knocked right back under by the next wave. Seawater fills his mouth and throat, and reflexively he coughs, which only worsens the burn in his lungs. The world is swirling around him, and he's got no clue which way is up or down as he's tossed about like a ragdoll in the swirling currents of the storm. He claws desperately for purchase in the frigid waters, but to no avail as the depths of the sea suck him further and further below. It becomes harder and harder to keep fighting the longer he's under, the steady cold dragging the breath from his lungs, numbing his limbs and slowing his heart to a dull, steady beat. A pleasant emptiness begins to fill him, the burn in his lungs diminishing to a tickle as he stares, half-lidded, at the ruins of his ship as it sinks to its watery grave. Like any good captain, he is ready to sink alongside it, to surrender to the encroaching darkness.

And then strong arms curl around his waist and *heave*.

He breaches the surface in an explosion of air and sound, his lungs heaving as he chokes on the liquid in them, unable to catch his breath. Something strikes the space between his shoulder blades, *hard*, and the next cough sends the water spilling from his lungs in a rush, burning his mouth and nose until he can finally, blessedly breathe. It's only then that he hears the panicked shouts over the roar of the storm, and feels the way the hands on him have begun to slip. He clings desperately to his savior, unintentionally shoving them beneath the waves for a moment before they resurface with a cough and an angry snarl.

“Fucking—*shit*—swim, you *idiot!* You'll drown us both!”

He doesn't recognize the rasping voice at first; not until the water clears from his eyes and he catches a glimpse of bright blonde amidst the dark, choppy waters around them. It's Philza. His own *prisoner* is saving him from certain death, miraculously free from his cell, though there are still chains clinging to his wrists. His enemy's teeth are bared in a desperate snarl, and then a boot strikes his shin, and he's reminded promptly to kick. He treads water like his life depends on it, all the while clinging to the pirate like a lifeline as the man makes for the nearest piece of rubble floating amidst the towering waves.

Only, it's not rubble at all.

It's the ship's lone dinghy.

Dazed and bewildered, he finds himself not much help at all as the man drags them both aboard. His head is spinning, his limbs heavy and limp beneath him, his breathing wet and gurgling, his gaze half-lidded as he slumps against the floor of the little boat, which is already covered with a layer of water that steadily rises with each wave that crashes over them. He's content to just lay there, gasping for breath, but a boot nudges his ribs none-too-gently, forcing him to roll over and stare up at his rescuer. Captain Philza blinks down at him, the wind tugging at sodden blonde strands, fresh crimson staining down his cheek from a cut above his brow, a wild grin stretching across his face.

He's on his feet in a second, the boat rocking violently beneath his feet, threatening to pitch him forward back into the waves. He hears a surprised shout from the pirate, who nearly loses his own balance, gripping onto the side of their little raft with white knuckles and a glare so sharp it could cut steel. Technoblade pays him no heed, drawing his weapon with an unsteady snarl.

Philza swats it away like a child's toy. It clatters to land in the puddle at his feet.

"The fuck, mate?"

"Don't need a pirate savin' me..." His tongue feels clumsy and unfamiliar in his mouth, the world swirling around him—and it isn't just because of the waves. His knees tremble beneath him like the legs of a newborn calf, threatening to give way at any moment. Still, he'd rather die a fool than subject himself to the likes of playing the damsel in distress for a *criminal*.

Philza snorts.

"If you wanna go for another swim, be my guest."

Technoblade opens his mouth for a snappy retort, but a strong wave sends him crashing back to the ground. He catches himself with his wrists in inch-deep water and stays there, feeling more like a drowned rat than a dignified naval captain. Thoroughly humiliated, he lays there until he catches a glimpse of worn boots stepping his way once more.

"Y' were plannin' this," he slurs, as deft hands force him upright again, the cool metal of a bucket pressed into his hands. "You were goin' to escape durin' the storm..."

"Yep." Philza pops the 'p' with a harsh clap to Technoblade's shoulder. "Now start bailing. We've got a long way to go to get to shore."

He's not really sure how they make it back to shore in a tiny dinghy manned by a crew of two, but somehow they do it over the span of a couple more days at sea, the storm having thankfully propelled them in the right direction. He spends half of it unconscious, much to the chagrin of his rescuer, who spends his waking hours spitting snide comments and cracking awful jokes. He laughs along to shut him up faster—*not* because he finds them funny—and they only increase in frequency. Needless to say, his pounding headache caused by near-drowning and subsequent dehydration has been sufficiently worsened by the constant chatter of his companion. Philza is an endless stream of noise, talking to himself when Technoblade won't—or *can't*—reply, keeping himself occupied with mindless tales of his escapades which Technoblade definitely doesn't care to hear.

He's only leaning forward because Philza's speaking too softly, okay?

He hates every minute. Though, somehow, it's not the worst two days of his life.

He's not sure if it's the gratitude muddling his thoughts, or if he's actually someone charmed by Philza's eccentric personality. Perhaps it's a bit of both, in the end, because he can't look at the man he once considered the enemy without feeling those arms lifting him up and seeing blonde hair like a halo of light amidst the storm.

An angel, indeed.

An angel of *death*, though? He's still not certain.

Despite the rumors, he can't seem to correlate this goofy man to the one of myth. The tales spoke of a man as merciless as the sea itself, of certain death for any ship unfortunate enough to cross his path. The Philza he sees is lighthearted and warm, if a bit guarded, and the stories he tells are not ones of cruelty and death, but of triumph and wit and adventure.

He listens as the pirate weaves stories of great battles and dangerous stealth missions, of glory and conquest and comradeship. What strikes him as most peculiar is the way the man's pride seems to vanish when he speaks of his crew—callous words sprinkled with obscenities somehow radiating only the most gentle fondness and appreciation. It's not hard to see the man's love for his ship and the men at his side, especially when he accredits his success to them, and it makes Technoblade wonder what could have possibly happened to turn them against him so strongly.

He doesn't dare breach the subject, for fear of being tossed overboard.

Philza touches upon it though. He often gets so caught up in reminiscing that he forgets what got him in this situation in the first place, and when that happens the mood goes from bright and cheery to something far more somber.

“My first mate,” Philza says, while paddling late at night. “He's a good lad. Found him when he was just a boy, stowed away in our grain barrels.” There's a smile on his face, bright as the sun, the shadows under his eyes seeming to dull for a minute as he loses himself in the memories. “Kid's smarter than a whip. Swear he has the stars memorized by now. A voice like a songbird, too—puts my pipes to shame when he gets the crew singing.” He sighs, abandoning his paddling to stare up at the stars, which cast a perfect mirror in the still waters around them. “I suppose I thought of him like a son, of a sort, but—”

He breaks off, his voice peeling off into breathy, nervous laughter. The shadow over his eyes returns.

“Guess he didn't quite feel the same, huh?”

Technoblade, half-conscious and in a world of pain, merely grunts.

Philza goes quiet again after that. His stories peter off into short tales that lack his usual fire, and so Technoblade spends the remainder of their journey teetering on the edge of consciousness but never quite fighting his way fully back into reality.

When their boat mercifully bumps against the old wood of the docks of a small seaside town's port, he barely notices as strong arms hoist him up and out of the boat. There's a warm pressure beneath his shoulders and knees; an odd feeling of weightlessness as the world tilts around him from behind half-lidded lashes. He's suddenly all-too-aware of his body's exhaustion, of the dryness of his tongue and lips and the odd gurgling in his lungs that tells of water not properly expelled. There's a commotion around him, a multitude of shouts. He vaguely registers Philza's voice, oddly calm amidst the panic, and then new arms are lifting him up, pulling him away from the pirate.

There's a soft jingle of coins.

"This should be enough to cover his care."

Blairily, he opens his eyes to see Philza staring down at him with an inscrutable expression. The man's face twists into a smile when he catches Technoblade watching, and then he's winking and raising a single finger to his lips with a tilt of the head.

"See you around, mate."

The last thing he sees is Philza vanishing into the crowd, his merry laugh breaking through the soft murmurs of the people gathered around him.

And then the pull of unconsciousness becomes too great to ignore, and the world goes dark once more.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

“Don’t you miss the tides? The wind in your hair? The smell of salt? The rocking of the hull beneath your feet, the rigging against your hands? Don’t you miss the water stretching as far as the eye can see? I know the ocean calls to you. She calls to us all.”

Technoblade turns, slowly.

“The ocean’s in your blood, Techno. You can’t just walk away from her forever.”

Chapter Notes

annndd we're back! i've decided to shift my focus to this work, and put my other wips on hold for the time being so that i can devote my best to bones!

i wanna say thank you so much to everyone who's shown support for this project! the outpouring of comments and fanart has been so cool to see and i may or may not have a folder on my phone where i look at all of it and cry /pos

okay, without further ado, onto the chapter!

—

chapter warnings: permanent injury, amputation, depictions of violence and mention of past character death and mourning.

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

Six months later, and Technoblade finds himself in a familiar port, sans one hand and a ship.

After the sinking of his ship and subsequent loss of his entire crew in the wake of the freak storm, he’d taken it upon himself to resign his mantle as a captain of the Navy. No self-respecting captain allows his ship to go down without him, and yet, intentionally or not, that’s exactly what he did all those months ago. He can scarcely get a good night’s rest without remembering the sounds of splintering wood and strangled screams and the feeling of icy water crashing over him again and again—let alone getting behind the helm again.

And his hand?

It’d been taken from him as punishment for his failure. It was only fitting, really. He’d stood before his superiors, in disgrace and disarray, and confessed his sins for all to hear. How he, a captain of the Royal Navy, had abandoned his ship and his crew to a watery grave. How he’d stretched out that same hand, and in turn taken the hand of a criminal, of a *pirate*, and accepted his aid. And his superiors had looked upon him with cold disdain and asked him but one question:

“Which hand?”

His fighting hand.

It still hurts, most days. The metal of the prosthetic is cold and unyielding, rubbing against the scarred joint in a way that makes his bones ache with phantom pain. It's a constant reminder of what he'd done, of the mistakes he'd made, and of the cruelty of those he'd sworn his allegiance to for the majority of his life. He's learned to live without it as best he can, training into the late hours of the night, relearning what had once been instinct, retraining his muscles to balance on the opposite side. It's discouraging work, and some days he takes more steps back than forward, no matter how the sweat drips from his back from the labor of his efforts.

He's begun to lose hope in ever regaining what was lost.

He works at the docks now. It's mediocre work, but he's good at it.

He misses the sea.

Sometimes he stands at the window of his room and stares out at the tide as it pulls in and out from shore. He watches the sailors as they pass by on shore leave, milling about purchasing supplies and regaling their loved ones with stories of their trip. He sits in the pub and listens to the pirates, and for once doesn't shudder with distaste at their fanciful, exaggerated tales of heroism and daring escapes; instead, clinging to them for whatever comfort of familiarity he can get his hands on. It's not his position to apprehend them anymore, anyway. And so he leaves them be, and dwells in his envy, and tries to remind himself that the situation he's in rests on his shoulders; that the only one to blame for his distance from the sea is himself, for he could have found his resting place there instead.

He blames the storm, sure—the wind and the waves and the thunder each deemed his enemy. He blames the pirate, Philza—his captor, turned his rescuer—for being the reason they traveled those waters, for pulling him free from the sea's grasp to live another day with the guilt of the lives of his crew resting upon his shoulders.

But most of all, he blames himself.

He keeps a journal. In it are the names of every single member of his former crew—every life lost to the wreck. He inks their names, again and again, committing them time and again to his memory for fear of ever forgetting how much they meant to him. They were his comrades, and he their captain, and he thinks he'll live forever with the burden of being the only one to make it out of the wreckage alive. There are no bodies to recover, no belongings to return to their grieving families. Everything went down with the ship, now resting somewhere on the ocean floor.

All he has left is the memories.

He distracts himself with his work, mostly. He puts his shoulder to the grindstone and works the docks from sunrise until sunset, carrying crates of cargo and helping the ships make port, securing them to the docks with lines, and helping to lower the gangplanks. He wakes up, watches the sun rise over the horizon, goes to work, and returns just in time to see it set. He loses himself in the familiarity, though a persistent tug remains in the back of his mind, forever calling for something he can't have anymore.

It's on a day like any other that the monotony finally comes to an end.

He's helping a crew of tired merchants unload their supplies to the dockside market. The docks are unusually busy today, teeming with crews from all walks of life, pirates and wealthy lords walking alongside one another without so much as batting an eye. He's feeling a bit of the stress from such a crowded dock, struggling to navigate around clusters of unaware bystanders as he and the other dockhands carry the precious cargo. He sets down his barrel and leans on it for a moment as the hot tropical sun beats down on the back of his neck, wiping the sweat from his brow with his sleeve as he casts his gaze out over the scene before him.

And then, across the crowd, he sees him.

A shock of blonde hair, tied up messily with an old bandana. A worn green coat, a dirty face, a cocky smile. He stands amidst a smattering of men beside the docks, alongside a small, sleek vessel, built for speed and swiftness across the waters rather than the brute force of the Navy's ships. His laughter rings out through the open air amidst the cry of the gulls and the roar of the waves, and for a moment, Technoblade is back in the dinghy, clinging desperately to consciousness as he's regaled with tales of adventures past.

And then he's back, and the laughter has stopped.

And Captain Philza, the Angel of Death, is staring back at him.

He's moving before he can even think—pushing through the crowd on feet with wings, faster and faster until he's practically jogging. He rushes at the man, intent on—well, he's not quite sure yet. He's torn between a few options, but nevertheless skids to a halt directly in front of him, watching as a myriad of emotions flicker across the pirate's face. Shock, confusion, anger, speculation, and —

Happiness?

“Hey, mate,” Philza says brightly.

And Technoblade punches him.

Philza reels, the sound filling the air with a heavy *thunk*, the crowd around them falling silent to watch the confrontation unfold. A crow, previously perched unnoticed on the man's shoulder, takes to the sky with an indignant squawk. Philza staggers backward, clutching at his jaw, and for a moment, Technoblade forgets how to breathe. He's just punched *Philza*. The most renowned captain in the seas, a man with two dozen sunken ships to his name and a reputation of death and destruction that follows him like a shadow wherever he goes. The Angel of Death, the menace of the western sea, former captain of the Styx herself.

And then Philza straightens, looks him in the eye, and *laughs*.

“S'pose I deserve that one,” he chuckles, and Technoblade is left to stare as he rubs at the rapidly darkening mark along his jawline. “Fucking hell, mate, felt like getting hit by a brick.”

“Uh.” It's only then that he realizes his knuckles aren't stinging.

He's just punched Captain Philza with his prosthetic. His *iron* prosthetic.

“Sorry?”

Philza waves him off, even as a few concerned companions step forward toward him—a young blonde boy sputtering insults while his smaller companion grabs at his sleeve to stop him. He spits out a little blood and blinks the fresh tears out of his eyes, his smile never faltering. He looks so

jovial, so unconcerned, that it's almost hard for Technoblade to remember why he was mad in the first place.

"S'all good, mate." He pauses his ministrations, wincing as he presses a little too hard against his new bruise, and casts a thoughtful look down.

"New hand?"

Ah. Now he remembers.

All of the emotion from the past six months comes flooding over him, unbottled and unrestrained. He grabs the man by the shirt, yanking him forward until they're nearly nose-to-nose, and his anger only grows when that damned smile, coy and mocking, refuses to slip away at the threat. He wants to wipe it right off of the man's smug mug. It's the least he deserves for what he's done, for how he's ruined his life; for as much as Technoblade blames himself for the loss of his crew, he blames Philza for the subsequent loss of his career and his hand.

"You *bastard*," he growls.

"That's me," Philza quips, his grin suddenly all-too-sharp.

"I lost *everything*."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic." The pirate wrenches himself free. "Hardly *everything*. You're still alive, aren't you? You're still here?" He huffs. "Could've left you there, but it seems ol' Philza's still a big fuckin' softie, after all."

"You *should've* left me!" And *oh*, he's shouting now, shoving his finger in Philza's face. "At least then I wouldn't be the only one left!"

"I saved your life!"

"You *ruined* my life!"

Philza bares his teeth then.

"You ruined your own life, joining them."

Technoblade's hand aches with phantom pain.

"Don't you *dare*. You cost me my ship, my crew, my hand—!"

"Now that just isn't fair," Philza snarks, but his brow is furrowed, his obnoxious smile beginning to drop, his hackles raising. "You wanna blame me for saving you? Fine. But don't take your self-pity out on me. We've *all* lost people. Get over it."

Crack. His knuckles, this time flesh and bone, connect *hard* with the pirate's nose.

Philza reels.

"Oh, you *motherfucker*."

And then Technoblade draws his sword, and the fight begins.

There's a shrill scream from a passing woman as the crowd parts around them, tripping and stumbling in their haste to get away from the weapons that have been drawn. Someone is calling

for them to stop, but Technoblade pays them no heed, surging forward to clash against Philza's cutlass. The pirate grits his teeth, a low, breathy snarl slipping past his lips as they duel, his steps light and swift as he dances around Technoblade's blows.

His fighting style is *infuriating*. It's in such striking opposition to Technoblade's own that it makes him nearly impossible to hit. Whereas Technoblade fights with force and hard, heavy strokes, Philza is light on his feet, ducking and weaving around every strike, his own lightning-fast as they nick at Technoblade's arms and calves. They're shallow, but they sting like all hell, and Philza's face quickly shifts back to that damned smirk, and soon the spaces between blows are filled with teasing laughter and short, mocking quips.

"That the best you can do, mate?"

Technoblade grunts as the tip of the blade catches his cheek, streaking the side of his face in warm crimson. He retaliates with ferocity, landing a graze across the pirate's ribs, delighting in the hiss it elicits.

"*Stand still!*" He hisses, when Phil darts away once more, narrowly avoiding a strike that sends a few wisps of his hair floating through the air. And Philza laughs again, bell-like and bright as he hurdles up onto a nearby stack of crates, brandishing his weapon as he stands to finally tower over his opponent.

"C'mon, then! Let's see what you've got!"

He's quickly catching on to the smallest of indications—a slight tilt of the head, a shifting of the feet as the man prepares his next attack. He finds himself almost enjoying the fight as it progresses, the initial adrenaline of his anger dwindling into a pleasant focus as he meets the man strike-for-strike, beginning to even the playing field and following the pirate around as he leads them on a lap of the docks, leaping from obstacle to obstacle and pushing through startled crowds. They play cat and mouse, exchanging blows and insults, the cries of the bystanders swelling into a muted roar as they have eyes only for one another. It doesn't help that the captain never stops laughing—taking clear delight in their battle. It's almost contagious, and he catches himself chuckling aloud when the man stumbles, providing the perfect opportunity for Technoblade to *shove*, throwing his next blow completely off course and very nearly sending him head-first into the water.

"Not too bad," Phil grins, through his bloodied nose and newly-tattered jacket as they both step back for a moment to catch their breaths. "Gonna have to patch this thing up again, thanks to you. You're quicker than I thought you'd be."

"Thought I'd make it easy for you?"

"*Nah*," Philza says with a shake of his head. "'S fun, though. Haven't had a fight this good in ages."

They return to battle with renewed vigor. Technoblade strikes harder, faster—filled with a sudden, inexplicable determination not just to kill, but to *win*. He doesn't just want revenge—not anymore. He wants to beat this man. He wants to prove him wrong. He wants to prove *himself* wrong, wants to do what once came so easily to him. And so he grits his teeth and pushes forward, and waits for the perfect opportunity to strike, putting Philza on the defensive this time, backing him into a corner, pressing him further and further back until he has nowhere to go but forward, surrounded on all sides by water as they make their way down one of the docks.

And then he sees it. An opening.

He abandons his sword in favor of kicking out, catching Philza right in the sternum with the heel of his boot. The air whooshes out of the man's chest in a rush, and his knees wobble. Technoblade takes the opportunity to knock them out from under him, sending him toppling to the ground.

And then, just like that, it's over.

Philza wheezes on the ground, clutching at his ribs while grappling blindly for his cutlass, which Technoblade kicks out of reach. His own lungs are heaving, his head spinning, but—he's done it. He's bested his enemy; he's bested the Angel of Death himself. His opponent looks up at him, cheeks flushed and hair askew, bleeding from his lip and bruises painting his face, gritting his teeth as the point of Technoblade's longsword dips beneath his chin, pulling it upright. The pirate looks up at him, wild-eyed and defiant but defeated, and then he does the inexplicable.

He *smiles*.

"Knew you had it in you, mate," he says.

"...What?"

Philza laughs at that, and with one hand carefully guides the blade away from his throat, brushing the dirt off of his shirt with the other. And then he stands, and Technoblade lets him, too confused by the sudden change in mood to do anything but stare—though his sword remains fast in his grip, held close in preparation of some dirty, underhanded trick.

He is a pirate, after all.

"That hand of yours? 'S not holding back shit, mate. You're holding *yourself* back. You just beat me, right?" Philza's grin widens then, and it lacks the malice it held before; this time something a little warmer, a little more genuine. Technoblade's grip on his sword loosens. He stares numbly at his prosthetic, used to block blows and knock his opponent off-balance, and for the first time begins to appreciate its help. He'd thought it useless, but perhaps there's something to be appreciated after all.

"Useless? Nah, mate. Just took some time to get used to it, I bet." It's then that he realizes he's spoken aloud, and his opponent is watching him with a curious look in his eye, something akin to amusement and fondness flickering across his face. "You've still got plenty of room to improve, mind you—" and Technoblade glares, because he'd beaten him, hadn't he? "—but you're wasting yourself on these docks."

That makes Technoblade pause.

"...There's nowhere else I can go." *Gods*, he longs to return to the sea. But the Navy won't take him anymore, not after his shame, and he doesn't want to waste away his days aboard a fishing vessel or guarding some stuffy merchants on their voyage.

Something shifts in Philza's face, then.

"Isn't there?"

"...What are you sayin'?"

"Well..." Philza tilts his head ever-so-slightly toward the vessel docked beside them, where a ragtag crew is still watching with eager, awed eyes.

"*No*. Absolutely not."

“Well, you see, Techno—can I call you Techno?”

“No.”

“You see, Techno, I seem to find myself in possession of a ship, a crew, and a quest. But there’s one thing I’m still missing.” And he eyes Technoblade like some prized possession, an eager glint in his narrowed blue eyes and a cat-like grin stretching across his lips. “I’m in need of a *captain*, Techno. And I’m pretty sure you’d fill that position just fine.” The business-like nature of his words does little to disguise the playfulness of his tone, as if he’s treating this recruitment as some sort of game.

“A captain?” Technoblade raises an eyebrow, perplexed, and folds his arms, doing his best to loom over the shorter man. Philza is unfazed.

“Yep. Been thinking of retiring from the whole ‘captain’ thing, ‘s all. Leadership isn’t quite what it’s cracked up to be. Could use someone to fill those shoes.”

“Uh-huh.”

It’s a weak excuse, and they both know it. After all, the pirate had practically poured out his life story to the former naval captain while they were both stranded at sea. As conniving as the man might be, there’s no hiding the flicker of reservation in his eyes—not from a man who’s spent a fair number of days interrogating prisoners in the past. He can read Philza like an open book—and he can practically *smell* the distrust rippling off of him in waves as the pirate shifts uncomfortably with his back to his waiting crew. Philza catches his eye and quickly moves on, his shoulders squaring and their gazes locking.

“They’ll listen to you. They saw you beat me, you’ve earned your merit.”

“You want me to—to become a *pirate*?” The words are bitter and distasteful on his tongue, scarcely suppressing a shudder at the thought of becoming what he’d spent his whole life fighting.

“Only temporarily.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“Just one trip—one treasure. That’s all.”

“Me. A pirate.”

“Aww, mate, you’ll be a natural!”

He doesn’t know whether to be flattered or offended by that implication. He curls his lip either way, and Philza snorts, shaking his head as Technoblade starts to turn, starts to move away, prepares to leave this moment behind forever. He wants nothing to do with piracy, nothing to do with being a criminal. He’s spent his whole life fighting against it, working his way up the ranks, clawing for every scrap—every opportunity he could to succeed in the Navy. The last thing he wants to do is throw it all away on a fool’s whim, to abandon his morals for some foolish pirate who just so happened to save his life. He steps away, makes it a few feet into the ground, ignoring the murmurs of the bystanders. And then—

“Don’t you miss it?”

Technoblade freezes.

“Don’t you miss the tides? The wind in your hair? The smell of salt? The rocking of the hull beneath your feet, the rigging against your hands? Don’t you miss the water stretching as far as the eye can see? I know the ocean calls to you. She calls to us all.”

Technoblade turns, slowly.

“The ocean’s in your *blood*, Techno. You can’t just walk away from her forever.”

And it’s true. Even now, she calls to him. Amidst the cries of the gulls and the surge of the ocean against the docks and the bustle of the trading crowds, he can feel a tugging in his heart, a bittersweet nostalgia that chokes him, that urges him to take to the seas once more and follow his true calling. He remembers the melancholy of watching ship after ship depart from the harbor, of watching white sails catch the wind and leaving him standing alone, watching each vessel leave, while he stayed stranded on land. He thinks of the future—how this could be his life forever, cursed to live beside the sea but never venture back into her domain—and it’s more than he can bear. He knows what Philza is saying is true, and it’s clear the pirate knows it too, because he’s watching him with the smug satisfaction of a man who knows he’s won. But of course, he takes just one step further to gloat.

“Besides...” Philza hums contemplatively, stroking at the stubble on his chin. “If I remember right, you owe me a favor.”

Damn him.

“So, what do you say, *Captain*? Shall we set a course for the horizon?”

“...”

“Well?” Phil stretches out a hand expectantly.

And Technoblade takes it.

“One. Trip. That’s all.”

Philza laughs brightly, nods, and shakes it.

There’s no going back now.

“We’ll set off shortly then! Gather your things and meet the crew back here by noon. We’ll be waiting for you on the ship, so don’t take too long!” And just like that, he’s moving, giving Technoblade no indication of what he’s just signed himself up for—no course of action or even the briefest of introductions to his new crew. Just a smile and a wave and a wink, and the barest of instructions.

Somehow, it’s almost freeing.

“And Techno, mate?” Phil stops, halfway up the plank, and looks over his shoulder.

“Yeah?”

“Call me Phil.”

here's some really cool art of the fic if you wanna look! i might do a fanart segment at the end of every chapter from now on?

official art/designs by wolfy:

chapter one - <https://twitter.com/WolfyTheWitch/status/1411332902206337028?s=20>

phil sketches - <https://twitter.com/WolfyTheWitch/status/1412007262424424448?s=20>

techno design - <https://twitter.com/WolfyTheWitch/status/1411715640226811906?s=20>

phil design - <https://twitter.com/WolfyTheWitch/status/1410980030126059521?s=20>

fanart (follow all of these talented artists!):

chapter one art by @jester_u

-https://twitter.com/jester_u/status/1411844115084550145?s=20

the bois by @d1nnple - <https://twitter.com/d1nnple/status/1411708238052028417?s=20>

chapter one comic by @krispispider -

<https://twitter.com/krispispider/status/1412017946449223682?s=20>

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

“We’re not stealing,” Technoblade interjects.

“Mate, we’re pirates.”

“I’m not.”

“Techno, mate, you’re literally the captain of this ship.”

Chapter Notes

wow! thank you so much for over 30k hits already! i'm so overwhelmed by the immense support for this fic so far, and i'm so beyond excited to share the rest of the story with you all <33

also, i'm sure you all already know, but this fic/universe now has an animatic that wolfy created! check it out below!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QUITpbhpG4>

no major warnings for this chapter, but it does contain mentions of underage gambling! the minors do not drink in the end, they get water in a fancy mug

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

Technoblade is welcomed aboard by a crew of unfamiliar faces and one incredibly smug pirate.

Philza stands with his back up against the railing as Technoblade scales the gangplank, his heels crossed and his arms folded, looking for all the world like a cat who got the cream. His brow quirks at the meager belongings he’s brought with him: an old leather satchel—containing a few precious tokens, his scarce funds, a few books, and his journal—and a small case of clothes. He won’t need much else out on the high seas.

“That it?” Phil asks. He doesn’t sound patronizing, for once—just curious. “Have everything you need, mate?”

“Yep.”

Phil straightens, taking a breath before spreading his arms wide with a bright smile.

“Welcome, Captain Technoblade, to the Argo.”

There are three dozen faces staring at him, each bearing a different expression. He catches disbelief, curiosity, annoyance, excitement, boredom—the list goes on and on. He doesn’t recognize a single one, and frankly, it’s disquieting to be stepping into a vacant captaincy position

not knowing anyone.

Save for Philza.

He doesn't count.

The pirate doesn't give him a moment to breathe, handing off Technoblade's belongings to the blonde boy from earlier before leaping straight into introductions, throwing him right into the center of the crew's attention.

"This is Niki," Phil says, with a voice warm with affection, clapping a hand on the shoulder of a slight young woman in a vest with pale pink hair. "She's your helmsman. You need to get somewhere, she's your girl. She's one of the best navigators on these seas."

Technoblade eyes her. She holds his gaze defiantly and simply smiles in return.

He's sufficiently intimidated.

"Tubbo. Gunner. Kid has a penchant for explosive getaways, and could hit a gull in the crow's nest with one eye closed."

A young boy with a red bandana in his hair grins cheekily up at him as Phil ruffles his dark hair. He's small, but looks as though he could probably pick Technoblade up and throw him if given the chance, and his eyes glitter with a manic sort of delight at the praise, his chin lifted with a confidence he's sure the kid has earned.

"Nice to meet you, boss man," he chirps, and Technoblade gives him a nod, wanting to say more but not getting the chance as Phil charges ahead with his introductions.

"This is Eret. They're not—well, they don't really—do anything in particular? That is, they aren't actually officially a part of the crew." Phil grins, clapping a hand down on their shoulder. "They invited themselves along, actually. Crazy bastard's done it all—doctor, politician, historian—but they jumped at the chance to risk their life out on the seas."

"I'd never tried being a pirate before," Eret laughs, and finally turns toward Technoblade.

Milky-white eyes blink up at him from behind dark lashes, unseeing and yet shaking Technoblade to his very core as he stares down at the stranger. Their face is gentle, their expression kind, and yet he feels as though they are staring into his very soul. It's not as if he's never seen a blind person before, but there's something different about this—something not quite natural, almost magical in its nature. He's unsettled, though in a way that's not entirely unpleasant, as Eret extends a hand his way in greeting. Tentatively, he takes it and watches as their smile broadens, their eyes crinkling at their corners as they tighten their grip, tracing his knuckles.

"Don't be so nervous, Captain," they say softly, low and soothing. And then they laugh. "It's the eyes, isn't it?"

He mumbles an affirmation, feeling rather ashamed.

"It's only natural to be curious, though I think I'll keep my secrets a little longer. You see, I traded my sight for a different kind of sight—one you'll understand soon enough, I think."

Technoblade gives a nervous laugh and moves to pull away, only for the grip on his hands to tighten. Eret leans close, their voice dropping to scarcely a whisper, so close he can feel their breath tickling his ear.

“Don’t be afraid to mourn, Technoblade. They wouldn’t want you to.”

And then they pull away, and with a soft smile take their leave, retreating back down to the lower decks and leaving Technoblade staring numbly after them.

Phil, apparently unbothered by this strange turn of events, continues to move down the line, introducing every crew member by name and listing their respective duties while Technoblade struggles to keep up. He’s floundering by the end, murmuring soft greetings and doing his best to keep up with the influx of new information overloading his mind. And then finally they reach the end of the line, and Technoblade is grateful to be finished, ready to retreat to his cabin and take a moment to himself, except—

“And this—” Phil gestures to the scruffy boy from before, with the tousled blonde hair and bright green bandana and toothy smile. “This is Tommy.”

“A kid? What do you do, then?”

“I’m basically your second in command, big man.”

“He’s the cabin boy,” Phil deadpans.

Tommy splutters. Technoblade fails to bite back a laugh, but the petulant glare he receives, in turn, is enough to silence him, the teenager whirling on him as he seems to come to a very abrupt realization.

“You punched Phil,” he hisses up at Technoblade, his lip suddenly curling.

“I did.”

“You punched *Phil*,” the boy repeats, and he looks halfway between being impressed and being ready to punch Technoblade’s lights out.

“Y’know, yer’ startin’ to sound like a broken record here.”

“*Phil!* Captain Philza!” Tommy shoots a wide-eyed look at Phil, who laughs and shakes his head.

“Not captain anymore, mate.”

“And to be fair, he *kinda* deserved it,” Technoblade chimes in.

Tommy blinks. Phil shrugs. The kid eyes him up and down for a moment longer, before heaving a dramatic sigh and sticking a finger right in his face.

“...*Fine*. But touch him again and I’ll throw you overboard, captain or not.”

“Noted.”

And Tommy backs off, leaving behind a rather bemused Phil, who watches him go with a small smile and soft eyes. Technoblade, meanwhile, is utterly perplexed that Phil—the same Phil who laughed in his face, who he found disgraced and disowned by his former crew and left to die—could have earned such fierce devotion. And yet the members of the crew that still linger seem to agree with Tommy’s sentiment, many gazes lingering on the dark bruises across Phil’s jaw, a few expressions going cold as they turn back in Technoblade’s direction, shoulders squaring and backs straightening.

The message is clear.

He might be their captain by name, but their loyalty lies with Phil.

“Alright, you lot. Back to your stations, make ready to set sail!” Phil claps his hands, shooing the stragglers away, chuckling warmly as they murmur and mutter about. Technoblade catches the barest fragments of their conversations—speculation and opinions aplenty about his origins. It seems Philza might have neglected to let his crew know he wouldn’t be the one leading them on this journey, but thankfully, he seems to have proved his worth enough in the earlier fight for them to follow his lead.

“Right, that’s all of them.” Phil watches the crowd disperse with a fond smile. “Any questions?”

“Yeah,” Technoblade says, brow furrowing in confusion. A very important role seemed to have been neglected in the scuffle of the introductions. “Who’s my first mate?”

And Phil *grins*.

“No. No way. Nope.”

“Hate to tell it to you mate, but technically, it *is* my ship.”

“...”

“Aww, come on. It won’t be so bad,” Phil says around his smile. “I’m one of the best out there. Unless...” and his eyes gleam, darting playfully sideways. “Well, I’m sure Tommy wouldn’t turn the position down, if you’re so sure.”

“Absolutely not.”

Phil claps Technoblade’s shoulder, heedless of his warning growl.

“Guess that settles it, then! Happy to be working with you, mate.”

Technoblade wakes up to the sound of the sea and the caw of a crow.

The first light of morning is beginning to trickle in through the porthole of his cabin, and with a muffled groan into his pillow, he pushes himself upright again. The cool ocean breeze is filtering in through the crack beneath his door, tugging playfully at his hair as the boat sways lazily beneath him. Suddenly, faced with the sprawling sea out his window and the smell of salt and the steady creak of wood with each sway, everything suddenly feels very real.

This is it.

He really did it.

He joined a *pirate* crew.

He betrayed his ideals.

He’s back at sea again.

He’s struck by a rush of bittersweet nostalgia so strong it nearly bowls him over, leaving him

clinging to the edge of his bed. He's missed it so much. Being back on the tide feels like slipping on an old, worn glove. It's so comfortable and familiar, fitting to him like a missing piece of his soul, and so he pushes aside his reservations for just a while longer, and allows himself to pretend that he hasn't just sold away his life's work for a fool's hope, for one last shot at something he no longer deserves.

He carefully straps his prosthetic on, grimacing at the press of cool metal against his scarred skin. It's a feeling he'll never quite get used to—the presence of that familiar weight, coupled with the absence of any true feeling. The first time he'd truly come to terms with it had been a few months after his recovery. He'd caught it between a crate with a force that would have shattered bones, and hadn't even noticed until he'd tried to pull away and felt that familiar tug.

He hadn't slept that night. Nor many nights after.

His gaze sweeps idly across his cabin. It's a simple thing—nowhere near as extravagant as his previous accommodations in the Anemoi. It's outfitted with a simple desk, bookshelves, and a broad window that spans across nearly the entirety of one wall, allowing him a breathtaking view of the sea. It's smaller than he's used to, and the amenities are cheaply made, yet somehow he feels far more secure in it than his old home by the docks.

He's interrupted by another caw, this time louder than the last.

When he turns to look, a crow is peering through the glass at him. It tilts its head, and seems to ponder him when their gazes lock. For a moment, Technoblade doesn't dare to breathe, utterly perplexed by this turn of events—after all, birds shouldn't be this far out from shore—before he remembers the bird had been resting on Phil's shoulder back at port. It must be a pet of some sort, though the way it scrutinizes him makes him feel as though it's too intelligent to call it that. The bird studies him a moment longer before making a soft, throaty noise and departing in a flutter of dark wings, leaving him alone in his quarters once more.

Gods, his life just keeps getting weirder. He's still not fully convinced he's awake—moving about in a dream-like daze. Everything's happened much too quickly, his whole life changing in the blink of an eye, and it'd be too easy to just believe that it's all a dream, that between one moment and the next he'll wake up in his bed back at shore. But then his hand—skin and flesh and bone—meets the cool metal of the door's handle, and he feels that steady breeze whistling through the cracks, and he knows that this is all so very real.

He just has to take the first step.

And he does. Technoblade pushes open the door to his cabin, and is met by a rush of wind and the familiar roar of the sea. He steps out onto the main deck, and a few murmured voices greet him. The sun has barely risen, so most of the crew are still asleep in their hammocks below deck, save for the few that took the night shift to man the necessary stations. They blink drowsily at him as he moves swiftly to the bow of the ship, overlooking the sea as it sprawls infinitely on in every direction. It's so large, so wide that most men find themselves panicked and afraid their first venture at sea, but Technoblade has only ever looked upon it with the fondness and familiarity of an old friend.

He takes a deep breath and tastes salt on his tongue.

It's good to be back.

He used to take slow mornings like this on his old vessel. He'd rise before the sun and watch it slowly creep over the horizon, casting everything in that beautiful gold of dawn. It had always been

the highlight of his days, no matter how much he enjoyed his duties, because, even if only for a moment, it had been just him and the sea.

Now those memories are tainted with the bitter sorrow of loss, but he can still look on them with fondness, even if this morning doesn't feel quite the same as it once did.

He savors the sea's company for a moment longer before turning his attention to the ship herself, drinking in every inch. She's in pristine condition, well-loved and immaculately cared for, and he runs his hands along the shrouds with appreciation. She's smaller than his old ship, but quicker, too, swift and sleek on the wind. He has no doubt she'd give the *Anemoi* a run for her money, were the latter still afloat. His old ship had been built for battle, not speed, with a dozen more cannons and a heavy hull that would scrape against even the slightest shoal. The new ship still feels cold and unfamiliar next to the weathered wood of the *Anemoi*, but he's sure with some time he may come to see it with the same affection.

But for now...

He needs to talk to Phil. He's got no idea where they're headed, or what the plan is. He's got a title and the power that comes with it, and pretty soon the crew is going to be looking to him to lead—except he has absolutely no idea where he's meant to be leading them to.

“Damned pirate.” He squints at the meager crew around him. There's no sign of that familiar blonde or ragged green coat anywhere in sight. He looks to the helm, and there's nobody there, save for the sleepy-looking, pink-haired woman hovering at the wheel. She gives a little wave and he nods stiffly back, his lip curling as he turns away to continue his search. He's halfway to the mate's quarters, fully intent on barging in to demand his answers, muttering softly under his breath. “If he's sleeping in while I'm out here tryin' to pick up the slack...”

“*Hey, bitch!*”

Technoblade sighs, and turns to face the scruffy kid charging his way like a bull. Dirty-faced and bright-eyed, he boasts a confident grin as he strides up to Technoblade, puffing himself up until they're nearly nose-to-nose.

“Hey, kid,” he grunts dryly. “You seen Philza around? Been lookin' for him all mornin'. He didn't fall overboard, did he?”

Tommy rolls his eyes.

“Just look up, dumbass. Didn't they teach you *anything* in the Navy?”

Sure enough. He looks up, and hears a cackling laugh from the crow's nest far above. From its depths, he sees a hand raise, give a little wave, and then promptly flip him off.

“Yeah, Phil pretty much lives up there,” Tommy says, stifling a mocking laugh into his bandana. “If he's missing, chances are he's pretending to be a bird again.”

“Fuck off, you little shit!” Phil calls down, and a mop of messy blonde hair peeks over the rim of the nest. “I heard that! ‘M just keeping an eye out! Can never be too careful in these waters.” Tommy dissolves into choking wheezes, clearly not taking any offense to Phil's crass words, his cheeks tinging pink as he gives a little shake off his head. To his merit, Phil is also smiling, his brows falling from where they've been knit in mock annoyance as he peers down at them from his perch. The wind tousles his hair, and Technoblade watches as the man leans into its touch, eyes fluttering shut. Golden hair haloed by the morning sun, he spreads his arms a little, his fingertips

catching the breeze, and for a moment he truly does look as if he's flying. He looks peaceful. Free.

Technoblade is struck by the sudden, inexplicable desire to join him.

And then the moment ends. Phil shakes himself and in one swift movement swings a leg over the side of the nest, leans back, and plummets.

"Philza!" The panicked shout springs from his lips before he can bite it back—but there's no need to worry. Strong hands shoot out and snag in the shrouds, catching easily on the netting and bringing his descent to an abrupt halt. Phil dangles lazily, blinking down at him as his messy hair curtains his face, his gaze twinkling mischievously.

"Aww, mate, were you worried about me?" He asks with a shit-eating grin.

Technoblade let loose a long, weary sigh.

It's going to be a long journey.

"No. Get down here, time for you to fill me in. I'm not captaining your ship if yer' not gonna let me know where the hell we're goin' in the first place."

Phil's expression sours, but he obliges, carefully scaling back down the ropes and dropping to land lightly on his toes beside them.

"Tommy, mate, can you go get the maps?"

"Aww—what? I was actually gonna go, uh—clean the cannons with Tubbo?"

"Tommy." There's a weary smile on Phil's lips, but his tone is firm. "You two can gamble later. Maps first."

"But Phiiiiilll—"

"Now, Tommy."

The boy scampers off with a glare and a petulant whine.

"He's a menace."

"Yep," Phil laughs. "That's our Tommy. Good kid though. Hard worker. He 'n Tubbo both. Package deal, those two. Can't be seen without each other most days." He sighs, running a hand through his hair, something more shadowed hovering in his gaze now. "I'm glad to see him smiling. They've had a hard run in life."

"Seems to be pretty common with you pirates."

"Yeah, well, you don't exactly tend to resort to piracy if you've lived a prosperous life, mate." Phil's tone is dry and humorless as he stares out at the sprawling waves, his smile faltering a bit. "I don't know much about what those two went through, but they're pretty wary of others. Took me a long time to get 'em to open up." And then his smile returns. "Tommy's taking to you pretty quickly, though. Think he admires you, mate."

"Are we talkin' about the same Tommy?"

Phil chuckles.

“Aww, mate. Don’t be like that. Took me a while, too, but you’ll start seeing the real Tommy through the attitude soon enough, I promise.” Phil’s face has softened, his gaze a little unfocused as he speaks, his voice almost nostalgic.

“You sure have a lot of kids on this ship. Looks more like an orphanage than a pirate crew to me.”

“Yeah. They just kept popping up.”

“You adopt ‘em all or...?”

“Gods, no. They’re not my kids, and I’m not their dad. Most of them wouldn’t want anything to do with that. They’re just some strays that needed a warm bed and a purpose in life. I was happy to give them that.”

“Just the one, then?”

Phil’s smile vanishes in an instant.

“Yeah.” His answer is quiet. Stiff. His hand drifts to the gold chain trailing out of his pocket. “Just the one.”

Technoblade doesn’t push it, and Phil is quick to keep moving. He gives a strangled laugh and sweeps past him, gesturing toward the helm of the ship.

“Shall we, *Captain?*”

He looks *far* too smug saying that.

Wordlessly, he follows the man up the stairs and to the wheel, where the young woman from the day before—Niki, if he remembers correctly, is already waiting. She stands with a hand on the wheel and the other stretched out in a little wave, her smile bright and her eyes curious. Phil is quick to join her, lounging lazily, leaning back against the wheel with his arms folded and his eyes half-closed. The wood creaks slightly, and Technoblade watches as the woman’s eyes narrow ever-so-slightly in Phil’s direction.

“Hi, Phil!” Her voice sounds just a little *too* bright.

“Hey, Niki!”

Thwack.

“What the *fuck?!*” Phil yelps, jumping backward and rubbing at his shoulder. Niki shakes out her fist with a baleful glare, before giving a small, polite smile.

“Please don’t lean on the wheel, Phil.”

“Ah—right, sorry mate,” Phil says sheepishly, scratching absently at the back of his neck.

It seems he *can* be humbled after all.

“Good morning, Captain!” Niki’s gaze falls to him now, and he squirms under the weight of the pure happiness she seems to radiate, unable to hold her gaze for long. She laughs softly and mercifully returns her focus to Phil with a little tilt of her head. “What’s our course, Phil?”

“Keep her pointed west for now. We’ll be going against the wind for a while, I’m afraid.”

Niki nods dutifully, just as Tommy scrambles back into view with an armful of maps. Phil crouches down on the deck, and Technoblade moves to kneel beside him as the intricate inkings are spread out, depicting the western seas in fine detail. Phil runs his fingers along the coast, tracing the smattering of tiny islands dotting the shallows, humming contemplatively under his breath.

“So what do you need me for?” Technoblade asks after a couple of minutes of silence, quickly growing impatient with the odd curtain of secrecy Phil is putting up between them. Phil shoots him a reprimanding look, but sighs and sits back, allowing his finger to rest on one of the isles along the west coast’s northernmost edge. He knows those waters—the Sword Coast, known as a well-traversed path for merchants sailing to foreign lands, a shortcut between neighboring countries.

It’s also a common hunting ground for lurking pirates looking for a bounty.

“What do you say to a little minor crime, Techno?” Phil asks, with an excited gleam in his eyes.

“We’re not *stealing*,” Technoblade interjects.

“Mate, we’re *pirates*.”

“*I’m* not.”

“Techno, mate, you’re literally the captain of this ship.”

“We’re not going to steal from innocent traders.”

Phil makes a face. He looks a bit like a kicked puppy, his lip protruding in a pout. It does very little to sway Technoblade, who fixes him with a firm look.

“Just a little theft,” Phil counters.

“No.”

“One ship?”

“Absolutely not.”

“We won’t even sink it! They can walk free after, I promise.” Phil crosses his heart with a playful smile and a mock salute.

“No, Phil.”

“...There’ll be *gold*...”

Oh.

Phil cackles at the look in his eye, clapping a hand on his shoulder.

“I knew it! I knew there was some hope for you yet. The Coast it is. We’ll make a pirate of you yet, just you wait!”

And before he can object, Phil is marking a spot on the map and passing it off to Niki, who takes it with a smile and tucks it carefully away in her pocket. The rest of them are gathered up into Tommy’s arms, who bounces from toe to toe, tapping his foot and staring up at Phil with wide, eager eyes and a hopeful smile.

“Can I go play with—I mean, can I go clean the cannons with Tubbo now?”

Phil quirks a brow, studying the boy, who, to his credit, only shrivels a little beneath the scrutiny. And then he sighs, running a hand through his hair with a weary chuckle.

“Yeah, go ahead, mate. Just be back up top before noon.”

There’s a delighted cackle from somewhere below deck, and Tommy’s gone in a blink.

“*Kids*,” Phil sighs, but he doesn’t look annoyed in the slightest.

“Phil,” Technoblade starts, but the man isn’t listening, already shouting instructions as he jogs away to the crew, who rejoice at the prospect of some good old-fashioned piracy. There’s a chorus of cheers, a clattering of feet as they move to comply, shifting the sails and hoisting the familiar colors—a skull and crossbones decorating the sky within minutes, rippling proudly atop the mast.

He knows the symbol of pirates.

Technoblade just never thought he’d be the one standing under it.

The rest of the day goes by without much fuss. He spends the majority of it mingling with his new crew, struggling to commit names to faces. It’s hard to readjust back into life at sea after so many months away, but the crew is surprisingly helpful—Niki and Eret in particular, who never seem to be more than a few yards away when he needs them. Phil, on the other hand, seems to be avoiding him for the most part, though he covers for Technoblade’s rustiness—murmuring soft commands when he forgets and flitting about the deck to double-check the lines and adjust the sails. For the most part, though, Phil does exactly what Tommy said—perching up in the crow’s nest, always scanning the horizon.

His first day as captain ends with a gathering of the entire crew out on the deck, huddled around the light of the oil lamps as drinks are poured and rations passed around. Tommy and Tubbo lead the crew in a raucous chorus of unfamiliar shanties that would twist Technoblade’s tongue and leave him stumbling were he to give it a try. For his part, he sticks to himself, leaning against the railing and watching from the sidelines as the merry crew dances and sings and celebrates the start of a new journey.

“A toast to our new captain,” Eret says warmly, once the clamor has dulled to a steady murmur, most of the crew’s younger members shambling off to their hammocks for the night and leaving only a small group beneath the stars. They lift their glass with a gentle smile. “And a toast to the former as well.”

Phil smiles from where he’s standing across from Technoblade, leaned similarly away from the proceedings. He mirrors Eret’s movement with a nod of his head, but there’s an odd look in his eye as he drinks—the pint set down too quickly for him to have drunk more than a swallow. He notices Technoblade staring and abruptly turns away, slipping into the crowd, but not before Technoblade sees the strand of a golden chain dangling between his fingertips.

Huh.

Technoblade excuses himself not long after Phil vanishes, murmuring a soft thanks to Eret before

retiring to his quarters.

He's asleep before his head even hits the pillow.

The next day is about the same. Uneventful, save for Tommy and Tubbo, who keep the crew entertained with their antics. Loud shouting and thundering feet announce their arrival each time, and though Technoblade is fairly certain they both have other duties they should be attending to, nobody else on the crew even bats an eye at them as they spar and boast and goad each other on into doing things they shouldn't. He turns his back one moment, and the next, Tubbo has made his way out onto the ship's figurehead, clinging tightly to it with his jaw set determinedly while Tommy dissolves into wheezing laughter back on the deck.

"Told you I could do it," Tubbo says breathlessly when he makes it back safely, looking a little pale and wide-eyed but no worse for wear. Niki shoos them both below deck a moment later, after catching a glimpse of the horrified look on Technoblade's face.

The sound of muffled laughter below deck keeps Technoblade on his toes for the rest of the day, but thankfully, they don't do anything *too* adventurous after that, allowing him some semblance of peace of mind as he eases into his new duties.

The second day ends much like the first, with story and song and quiet conversation beneath the stars.

On their third day at sea, they find a stowaway in their midsts.

Chapter End Notes

if you want us to see your fanart or theories of this AU, make sure to use the hashtag #BonesAU on twitter or tumblr!

fanart spotlight (follow all of these talented artists!):

the bois by @_ilomi_ - <https://twitter.com/ilomi/status/1413867319063977985?s=21>

techno portrait by @vaesi_vlasta - https://twitter.com/vaesi_vlasta/status/1413953028185595912?s=21

chapter two comic by @krispispider - <https://twitter.com/krispispider/status/1413860390417571850?s=21>

castaway boys by @applesnackk - <https://twitter.com/applesnackk/status/1413916651221929991?s=21>

bones phil pog by @kijarue_ - <https://twitter.com/kijarue/status/1413638836488376326?s=21>

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

“Tubbo, what’s the status on the hull?” He turns to the gunner, who grins proudly, his face soot-smearred and positively giddy with joy.

“Minimal damage, Captain! Just a few scratches!”

“Good. Then let’s press on and make for—”

There’s a bang, a shout, and a splash.

Chapter Notes

woooo chapter 4 pog! i'd say we're getting to the fun stuff now, but every chapter so far has been an absolute delight to write!

i've seen a lot of fun predictions, but let's see how many of you predicted this little twist :)

—

chapter warnings: gun violence, injury, npc character death and general violence

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

Technoblade’s not sure what to expect when he slips into the stores late one night after hearing an odd noise from below, but whatever it was...

It wasn’t this.

Because when he slips into the room, there’s a sudden clamor—a clattering of pots and pans as they’re knocked to the floor, the scuffle of boxes and barrels hastily pushed aside as something—someone makes for an escape. He moves without thinking, lunging forward, his fingers curling around the collar of whatever unfortunate crewmate has just been caught stealing more than their share of rations, and—

An unfamiliar face blinks down at him.

Wide grey eyes, a youthful face half-covered by an odd mask, and messy blonde hair make up the countenance of the stowaway, who begins to thrash and tremble fiercely in Technoblade’s grasp. He towers easily over Technoblade but makes for perhaps the least imposing figure he’s ever seen; hunching over and holding up his hands placatingly as the captain holds him firmly in place.

“The hell’re you doing on this ship?” he snaps, yanking him around to properly face him.

“*Don’t hurt me,*” the kid wails, with a paling face and a wobbling voice, and that’s when all hell

breaks loose.

“Ranboo!”

There are suddenly two more figures in the room, and hands pulling his own roughly away from the boy, who stumbles back into the waiting arms of—

Tubbo?

The gunner is glaring fiercely at him, standing in front of the frightened stowaway, his arms spread as if to shield him away from Technoblade. Tommy is the one holding him, carefully guiding his hands back down to his sides, his blue eyes wide and fierce as he too presses between his captain and the thieving stowaway. There’s a commotion above them of pounding feet and muffled voices, the interaction no doubt waking up the rest of the crew, but Technoblade has eyes only for the two members.

“The fuck are you doing?” Tommy cries, as if *Technoblade* is the one at fault here. The kid has puffed himself up to his full height, teeth bared in a snarl that reminds him that his cabin boy still has quite a vendetta against him.

“What am *I* doing? He’s a stowaway!”

“You were gonna hurt him!” The cabin boy’s voice pitches accusingly.

“I wasn’t—” Technoblade groans in exasperation, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I wasn’t gonna hurt him, Tommy. But he’s not exactly supposed to be here, y’know.”

“I’m sorry!” The stowaway pipes up from behind his guards, looking for all the world like he’d rather be anywhere than here. “I’m sorry, Mr. Captain Technoblade, sir! I had nowhere else to go, and Tubbo told me I—” he cuts off abruptly, swallows, and shoots a guilty look in the shorter boy’s direction. “Tubbo told me I could come with him…”

Ah.

Technoblade heaves a long sigh, and opens his mouth to reprimand them, just as another body comes thundering into the room, cutlass drawn and shoulders poised and ready for a fight.

“Tommy? Tubbo?” Phil gasps out, looking panicked; his hair askew and blue eyes wide and wild as he scans for the boys. When he sees what’s happened, his demeanor changes in the blink of an eye, his sword lowering to rest cautiously at his hip. His lips tighten, his eyes narrowing as he locks gazes with the stowaway, who immediately flinches and lowers his head to study the ground. Phil seems to study him for a moment, his expression curious and calculating as he puts two and two together.

And then he sighs.

“Another? Really?”

What?

“He looked so lost!” Tubbo whines plaintively.

“Wasn’t the cat enough?”

Cat? The ship has a cat?

A fluffy calico cat meows loudly from the corner, making her presence known. She hops down from her perch atop a stack of crates and begins winding her way around the stowaway's ankles, who picks her swiftly up and cradles her to his chest. A steady purr fills the silence as he scratches her ears.

"They were a package deal," Tubbo argues.

"And you couldn't have told me this, *why?*"

"*Well,*" Tubbo grimaces. "It *was* sort of a last-minute arrangement..."

"*Oh my gods.*"

"*Please* don't be mad."

"Tubbo, who is that?"

"He mayyy or may not be the son of the last port's governor...?"

"Oh, for *fuck's sake.*"

"Sorry." Tubbo looks rightfully ashamed.

"The whole Royal Navy's going to be on our tail, Tubbo!"

"As if they weren't already," Technoblade pipes in, only to clamp his mouth shut when Phil shoots a heated glare his way.

"They're gonna think we kidnapped him! Every port for a hundred leagues is gonna be on the lookout for our ship within the month!"

"*It wasn't his fault!*" A new voice cries, before immediately softening, the stowaway stepping out from behind Tubbo's arm to approach Phil. "I—I asked him to, okay? I didn't really give him a choice, I just—" his fists clench at his sides as he hangs his head. "I just needed to get away. I couldn't stay there anymore."

There's a beat in which the very universe seems to hold its breath, and Technoblade along with it.

And then, gradually at first, Phil's anger softens. His brows relax, his snarl fading, his cutlass sheathed safely back away in his belt. He seems to hover in front of the boy for a minute, casting long looks between the three of them, his head tilted. He looks thoughtful—reminiscent, even—as he steps away from the kid, turning instead to Technoblade with the slightest incline of his head. It's only then that Technoblade remembers *he's* supposed to be the one in charge.

"Uh, well.." He fumbles for the right thing to say, shooting a quick glare over at his first mate for putting him on the spot in front of a kid who looks ready to cry at any minute. He really doesn't care all that much if the kid stays, so long as he proves his worth, but it's the principle of the matter. Stowaways aren't exactly welcome when you've rationed your food for a specific crew size—and when said stowaway is the son of an important government figure with a fleet of Navy ships at his disposal. "The damage is already done, isn't it? Proof or not, they're gonna be on our tail no matter what."

"I suppose we *are* too far away from port to really turn back, now..." Phil offers softly. There's a quiet, horrified gasp, and then—

“Please don’t throw me overboard, Mr. Captain Technoblade,” comes the quiet plea. Phil muffles a snort into his sleeve, while Technoblade just blinks.

“...Why would I...?”

“I can’t swim well, don’t make me swim back!”

“Kid, I’m not gonna—I’m not gonna throw you overboard, relax.”

“But you’re a pirate!”

“I’m not—” he groans. “Look, I’m just fillin’ a vacancy here, don’t get it twisted, kid.”

“So you’re not...?” Ranboo’s brows knit.

“Nah, mate, he’s a pirate, through and through.” Phil quips, only adding to the confusion. “He just doesn’t know it yet.”

“I am not.”

“*He’s in denial,*” Phil stage-whispers conspiratorially.

“Look—” Technoblade shrugs off Phil’s gleeful wheeze. “Ranboo, I just—you know you *chose* to stow away with pirates, right? Pirates? We’re not—we’re not exactly the good guys, here. We’re on the wrong side of history, I’m pretty sure.”

“I don’t believe in sides,” the kid answers softly, with a fond look Tubbo’s way. “Just the people on them.”

Phil’s chuckle abruptly dies, and Technoblade is overcome with a sudden, funny feeling in his stomach. He opens his mouth to respond to that, to give some sort of argument for the life he’s always believed to be *right*, but-

“So he *can* stay?” Tubbo interrupts, with wide eyes and the slightest quirk of a hopeful smile, grabbing on tight to one of Ranboo’s hands.

“Well...” He looks once more to Phil, who gives a slight nod.

“I’ll keep an eye on them, mate.”

“Then...fine. We wouldn’t exactly have made port for at least another few weeks, so you didn’t *really* give me much of a choice, but...” and he watches as all three of the boys begin to grin, bright and cheerful and delighted, and it makes the prickle of his annoyance fade in the slightest. “Yeah. Yeah, he can stay.”

There are a few celebratory *whoops*.

“But—” Technoblade interrupts. “Ranboo, was it? I’m not gonna let you off the hook that easily. None of you. You three did kinda...lie? To Phil and I? So I’m gonna leave yer punishment up to him.”

Phil *grins*. The boys cover a little at the sight of it.

“I’m sure I can find plenty of chores that need doing around the ship.”

“Aww, but— *Phiiiiilll.*”

Phil merely quirks an eyebrow.

“No ‘buts’. Now off to bed, the lot of you. Get Ranboo a proper hammock, I’m sure the bed can’t be comfortable. I’ll see you all first thing tomorrow morning to scrub the deck.”

With a chorus of grumbled, half-hearted complaints, the merry trio begins to shuffle their way out of the room and up the stairs.

“Those two are gonna be the fuckin’ death of me one of these days.” Phil’s voice is harsh, but his expression softens as he watches the three friends scamper up the steps and to the crew’s quarters for the night.

Technoblade finds himself grinning.

“...Not their dad, huh?”

“*Shut.*”

Though Technoblade is loath to admit it, Ranboo fits perfectly into their jumbled puzzle of a crew.

He accepts his portion of the punishment without complaint and is quick to help wherever else he’s needed. In the early mornings of the days that follow, he can be seen at Eret’s side, the two murmuring softly to one another as the sun begins to crest over the horizon. He helps Jack cook and keeps Niki company at the wheel, but most of all, he sticks religiously by Tubbo and Tommy’s sides. The three are rarely seen apart, a trio of complete and utter chaos for anyone unfortunate enough to be subjected to their mischief. Ranboo turns out to be the perfect “innocent bystander” for their pranks, playing a convincing facade of ignorance after successfully distracting their unsuspecting victims long enough for Tommy or Tubbo to plan their “attack”.

They’re inseparable.

Their energy is contagious, though. Even in his short time as captain, Technoblade can see the effect the three have on the crew. They’re the ship’s backbone of morale, their smiles infecting everyone in their path. They keep the crew on their toes on sleepy afternoons, and entertain them with far-fetched tales of action and adventure as the sun sets over their evening meals out on the deck. Even Ranboo catches on to the whimsical fun of storytelling, and soon enough he’s gained enough confidence to weave tales of his own—of magic and monsters out on the open sea, the likes of which Technoblade’s never seen rivaled. He laughs, he shouts, and he opens up in a way Technoblade wouldn’t have thought possible from his first meeting with the quiet, slouched kid in the cargo hold.

Technoblade himself even starts to religiously attend the celebrations, if only to pull away from the boring routine of eating meals alone in his cabin. The crew welcomes him into their midsts each time, shifting to make room to sit on a stray barrel or box, or even just the cool wooden floor of the deck. He tells himself it’s to keep a close eye on the crew’s morale, but the first time he slips into the crowd to join them, he catches a glimpse of wide grey eyes latched on him, glittering with awe and excitement, and he can’t bring himself to leave until Ranboo’s gone off to bed for the night.

Okay, so maybe he’s grown a *little* fond of the kid. But he’s not soft on him—no, that title belongs to Phil.

Phil spoils the kid *rotten*. He slips him extra rations around mealtime, which is good, since the boy's practically skin and bones anyway. He's constantly praising him for even the most minor of accomplishments—something Ranboo seems to eat up greedily, his eyes crinkling with a smile at every passing affirmation. He speaks gently to the stowaway—more gently than Technoblade thought was possible for his boisterous first mate. And he smiles at him, in a way that isn't all warmth and sunshine, his expression always lingering with something more haunted—something sad.

He catches his first mate watching the kid fondly one day as he scrubs the deck alongside Tommy and Tubbo. He leans up against the railing, arms folded, looking all the part of a stern supervisor—were it not for the slightest upturn of his lips. Technoblade leans next to him with a hum that Phil barely acknowledges. He sits quietly beside him for a few minutes, just watching the kids work, before finally he breaks it with a soft murmur.

“Another one of your strays?”

“Can't seem to help myself,” Phil answers softly, but there's a distant look in his eye when he speaks—a certain stiffness to his shoulders. It doesn't go unnoticed by Technoblade. He's used to seeing Phil bright and loud and frankly *annoying* at times—but never so quiet. It's disquieting—almost eerie, even. It feels *wrong*, and he doesn't like the way it makes his stomach twist with something worryingly close to *concern* for the pirate. He wants it to end as soon as possible, and so he figures the best way to confront it is head on, right at the source. He has a sneaking suspicion about what the cause might be.

“Look. Is this—” Technoblade winces at his bluntness, but it's too late to backtrack now, so he pushes forward nevertheless, intent on getting to the bottom of Phil's odd behavior. “Is this about yer' kid? The one you talked about when we were...y'know...”

“I didn't think you'd remember that,” Phil admits quietly.

The far-off look in his gaze remains, even as he turns away from the sea to face Technoblade. His hands are clenched, white-knuckled around the railing.

“Listen, I'm not—I'm not tryin' to pry, but it seems like yer' still pretty hung up on this. If you need—”

“I don't want to talk about it,” Phil says flatly.

There's no arguing with such a blunt dismissal. Technoblade grimaces, an awkward silence filling the space between them. He'd given it his best shot, at least. No harm in that.

“Right, uh—” he coughs. “I'm just gonna go, uh, see if Niki needs any help at the wheel.”

“You do that,” Phil replies softly. He doesn't seem to be paying much attention at all, his gaze glassy and returned once more to the rolling sea.

Technoblade leaves him there, staring out into nothingness.

The Navy's scouting ship catches up with them a few days later.

It's a small thing, manned by a young crew of only a dozen men or so. It isn't meant for combat, nor are its men, but their captain is wily and headstrong, and quick to issue a fool's challenge against the *Argo*, which far outguns them. The crew, of course, is more than ready to reciprocate, bristling and armed to the teeth as the two ships sit at a standstill, cannons poised to fire at a moment's notice.

"They're not gonna back down," Phil hisses to him. "We're not getting out of this without a fight." Technoblade curses the reckless impudence that seems to infect young navymen like a plague—though he knows he was once much the same.

"They're here for the kid," Technoblade growls.

Ranboo, wedged safely behind the two and half of the rest of the crew, makes a soft, worried noise.

"We won't let them take you back, mate," Phil murmurs in reassurance, though his gaze is not fixed on their newest addition, but rather the threat at hand. His hand strays to his holster, his fingers resting comfortably on his pistol. He looks like a cat ready to spring, and Technoblade doesn't doubt his reflexes for a moment.

"Maybe if I just went with them—maybe they'd leave you alone?"

"Maybe..." Technoblade doubts it.

"I could try. You guys shouldn't have to fight them, not for *me*, so maybe—"

And *then* Phil turns swiftly to Ranboo, placing a gentle yet firm hand on his shoulder, coaxing him to look into his eyes and away from the ship beside them. Once the boy has stopped trembling so fiercely, he speaks, so softly Technoblade nearly misses it.

"Ranboo, mate, what do *you* want?"

"I—" And the kid hesitates, wide-eyed and stiff-shouldered, before he glances over at Tommy and Tubbo, standing shoulder-to-shoulder at the cannons, jeering insults at their opponents. "*I want to stay with you.* I don't want to go back."

"Then you won't. Simple as that." And Phil's gaze turns icy as he directs his attention to the enemy. He draws himself up to full height, his lips flat, his expression cold, and suddenly it's all too easy to remember exactly why he boasts the name "Angel of Death". He lifts his pistol in the sky and fires once—the sound echoing off the ocean's surface, drawing their enemy's attention directly to him.

"Hi, mates," he says with false cheer, blowing the smoke from the end of his weapon and fiddling casually with the trigger. "I'm gonna give you lot one chance to run. We don't want a fight, and you're hardly prepared for one. Turn around now, and we'll leave you be."

A gun fires, the bullet narrowly missing Phil and lodging itself in the mast with a shower of splinters.

Phil sighs.

"*Don't say I didn't warn you,*" he hisses under his breath, and shoots a questioning look Technoblade's way. Technoblade nods stiffly. They gave them a chance.

Phil moves to raise his hand to give the order, but Technoblade grabs it, pulling him close with a

muttered warning.

“Don’t—don’t kill anyone, alright?”

Phil’s eyes narrow, but he gives a short nod before pulling away, jogging off and shouting orders to their crew.

“Fire when ready, boys!” His call rings out through the air, and Tubbo’s delighted cackle answers. “Aim to capture, not kill!”

There’s a booming volley of cannon fire that tears through the opponent’s hull like it’s made of glass.

The Navy doesn’t stand a chance.

The battle lasts half an hour, tops. Technoblade spends most of it exchanging gunfire with the opposing captain, gritting his teeth against the familiar smell of gunpowder and smoke, and finding surprising joy in the exhilaration of battle. He can hear Phil amidst the chaos—his orders and laughter alike ringing true through the explosions and shouts. His shootout is a brief exchange, the enemy quickly betraying his cowardice and abandoning the fight to retreat into the midst of his crew when he can’t land a shot. Technoblade’s regard for the man immediately sours. No proper captain would have abandoned a fight so easily.

The battle ends not long after. The other ship just isn’t built for war, and when half of the *Argo*’s crew swings over to board the ruins of their slowly sinking ship, there’s a near-immediate surrender.

Technoblade’s crew dissolves into cheers when the last weapon is laid down, but he has no time for such trivialities. He watches the proceedings critically, nodding in approval when their opponents are guided safely off of their sinking vessel and onto the ship’s dinghy to be transported safely to the brig.

They’ll drop them off at a port somewhere.

“Tubbo, what’s the status on the hull?” He turns to the gunner, who grins proudly, his face soot-smearred and positively giddy with joy.

“Minimal damage, Captain! Just a few scratches!”

“Good. Then let’s press on and make for—”

There’s a *bang*, a shout, and a splash.

Technoblade turns, firing without hesitation and striking their final opponent—the ship’s wayward captain—down from where he’s been hiding amidst the wreckage of the sinking ship. He drops bonelessly, and doesn’t move again. Technoblade has half a heartbeat to process that he’s just killed a man he once would have considered an *ally* before a soft noise pulls his attention away again. At the side of the ship, Phil is clutching at his shoulder, where red is beginning to blossom across the white of his undershirt. And Ranboo—

Ranboo is nowhere to be seen.

The splash.

“*Shit,*” Phil wheezes, dropping to one knee to hide behind the railing. “Techno, the kid—he went

overboard. I pushed him out of the way ‘n he fell, he can’t—*fuck*— he said he can’t swim!”

Neither can I, Technoblade wants to shout, but nevertheless rushes past his first mate, feeling a bullet narrowly graze past his cheek as he tosses his jacket aside, swinging one leg over the railing and preparing to plunge into the icy waters. His breath catches in his chest, his blood roaring in his ears as he remembers the way it tried to drag him down last time, the heavy darkness threatening to sink him along with his ship. He has half a moment to ponder it, to weigh his fear for his life over his responsibility for his crew, and in that moment all he can feel is the steady, cold creeping of terror into his heart.

And then he sees it.

A flash of shimmering black and white scales, a flash of a fin as it breaches the water. A merfolk blinks up at him, all wide eyes and flattened, fin-like ears, fingers curling around a floating piece of debris as if to shield himself from prying eyes. He looks different—his hair now bicolor, black and white, his skin dusted with dark freckles and scales alike, but nevertheless, it’s *Ranboo* staring up at him, alive and well and decidedly *not* human.

“Welp,” Ranboo says nervously, popping the ‘*p*’, flashing sharp white teeth that suddenly make his use of a mask far more understandable. “...Surprise?”

Technoblade doesn’t have an answer for that.

“The kid—is he okay?”

“I think he’s gonna be just fine, Phil,” he laughs breathlessly, running a hand through his hair as he watches Ranboo splash around amidst the wreckage.

Phil just groans in response. It’s then that he remembers the man’s injury, then that he sees the crimson still steadily spilling between shaking fingers. Ranboo seems to have things handled just fine, decidedly *not* drowning, and so he turns his attention back to the more pressing matter, shoving back his wonder and disbelief for something a little more practical.

“S not that bad,” Phil says, as Technoblade pries his hand away to inspect the injury. “Didn’t —*ghhhh!*” The man hisses and recoils as he prods a little too hard at the entry wound. “Didn’t hit anything important.”

“Stay still,” Technoblade snaps. “There’s no exit wound, idiot. Yer’ just gonna make it worse.”

“Ahh, *shit*,” Phil whines petulantly, just as Eret sinks to their knees beside him, their hands moving to replace Technoblade’s as they apply pressure. They are the epitome of cool confidence as they work, carefully probing the injury’s expanse, nodding when they put pressure on a particular spot that makes Phil groan.

“We’re going to have to get this out right away,” Eret murmurs. “We can’t risk infection—not this far off from shore.”

“Right,” Technoblade mutters. His hands are shaking—badly. He’s not sure why, because he’s helped with field medicine a dozen times before, with injuries far more grave. Whether it’s the adrenaline of the fight or the wave of emotion he’s currently fighting to suppress, he’s off his game, and Eret knows it.

“Can somebody help me?” They call softly to the crew that’s begun to gather. “I need a pair of eyes and steady hands. I’ll talk you through it.”

"I can do it!" Comes a soft voice from the crowd. And *Ranboo* pushes his way forward, dripping wet but noticeably more human, save for the slight point to his ears and a small smattering of iridescent scales across his cheeks above the curve of his mask. He kneels beside Phil, offering a tentative smile that the man tries and fails to replicate, the gesture turning into more of a grimace as Eret cleans the site around the wound. "I can do it," *Ranboo* says again, this time more softly.

"You sure, mate? It's not—'s not gonna be a pretty job," Phil pants, his face paling by the minute.

"You saved me, Phil," *Ranboo* murmurs. "So I'm going to help you."

"As charming as this is," Eret interjects, "—we don't really have time for it unless you want our first mate to bleed out right here. *Ranboo*, grab the scalpel and follow my lead."

Ranboo nods diligently, and *Technoblade* steps away as they begin their work, Eret muttering soft instructions that *Ranboo* dutifully follows. The kid is good, he'll give him that. His hands are steady and he follows each order precisely, never once flinching away when Phil jerks or groans in pain, his jaw set in quiet determination. Soon enough, a bullet clatters to the deck, and Phil's shoulder is being swathed in pristine white bandages. The man whines dramatically, a little pale in the face, but the urgency of the situation has died down enough that the crew is able to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Right," Eret says. "That should do it. Good work, kid."

Ranboo smiles tentatively, before slowly turning to face *Technoblade*, his lips turning down into a worried frown.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs, hanging his head.

Technoblade blinks.

"Oh, fuck *off*," Phil exclaims.

"I think," *Technoblade* quickly interrupts, "—what he means is, for what?"

"They—they came here for me, didn't they?" *Ranboo* says softly, guilt and shame lacing every word. "And I let you all fight for me, even though I'm not a part of your crew. You fought for me. Phil got *hurt* for me. I understand if you want me to leave now."

"Weren't you the one who said people, not sides?" *Technoblade* questions. *Ranboo's* face flickers at that, a mix of doubt and worry and *relief* all at once. "I'm not gonna lie, I really didn't *wanna* fight all those guys, but we weren't just gonna let them take you. Besides, they wouldn't exactly have just let us go, anyway. We're sorta...pirates?"

"He admits it!" Phil cackles from his place on the ground.

"Anddd I regret speakin'."

Despite Phil's interruption, *Ranboo* looks soothed. Tubbo and Tommy have made their way over, and while Tommy's attention is divided—shooting occasional concerned glances Phil's way—Tubbo has a firm hand on *Ranboo's* arm, rubbing circles into his sleeve with his thumb.

"You don't have to go anywhere, boss man," he murmurs. "Not unless you want to."

"We'll have to talk about—" And *Technoblade* gestures to all of *Ranboo* wordlessly, "—*this*, later, obviously. But yeah. Yeah, kid, you can stay."

Ranboo blinks up at him with shining eyes, crinkling in their corners in a way that lets Technoblade know he's positively *grinning* beneath his mask.

“Welcome to the crew, Ranboo.”

It's late that night that Technoblade finds himself eating alone in his cabin for the first time in days. No crewmates have dragged him from his quarters, everyone too exhausted by the earlier fight for the usual raucous celebration and song. He can hear a steady, quiet murmuring and occasional laughter from out on the deck, but his room stays painfully quiet, leaving him alone with nothing but the overwhelming crush of his thoughts.

He feels disoriented, torn every which way by the storm of emotions that has decided to sweep over him. The adrenaline of battle has faded, as has the urgency of their situation, and so he sits alone at his desk with trembling hands and struggles to forget what he's just done.

He killed a man today.

It isn't his first killing, not by a long shot, but today felt... *different*. It felt like a choice, a conscious decision...

A declaration of loyalty.

And not one he's entirely sure he agrees with.

But there hadn't been time to hesitate, no time to weigh the options, because he'd heard that gunshot and turned and saw *red*—red as the blood staining Phil's shirt, dripping between his fingertips as he sagged to the ground. He'd seen that cocky grin falter into an expression twisted with pain, and his heart had seized and his hands acted, and now there's a man dead at his hands. He can still see the body fall when he closes his eyes, can still feel the recoil of his pistol and the cool, deadly precision with which he'd aimed it.

He killed a man today.

One who could have been a crewmate mere months ago.

There's a sudden *tap-tapping* at his window, and a soft, croaking *caw*. He looks up, and Phil's crow is there once more, peering curiously in at him. Scrubbing roughly at his face with his sleeve, he moves to unlatch the window, allowing the bird to hop in with a gentle flutter of wings and a grateful noise.

“Hey there,” he breathes, his voice hoarse. It blinks up at him with a throaty croon, and tilts its head, as if curious. “It's nothin', really,” he assures the creature, to which he receives a loud caw and another flutter of wings before he's dealt a gentle peck to his prosthetic fingers. It makes a soft *clinking* noise, and the bird flutters back in surprise, head bobbing and weaving as he observes the strange phenomena.

“Ever seen one of these before?” he asks, lifting it up and carefully bringing it close for the crow to inspect. “It's fake. All iron 'n wood. Can't feel a thing when you do that,” he adds, when the bird gives it another peck. “Kinda wish I could though, even if yer' bein' a little pest.”

The bird seems to ponder this. Then, promptly, it hops over to his other hand, and pecks that one instead. Technoblade squawks in protest, shooing it away, but not before it gets another few pecks in for good measure.

“Okay, okay!” he grumbles, rising from his chair. “I get it. What do you need? Food?” He glances around, and finds nothing but the crumbs of his dinner on a silver tray. Luckily, the crow doesn’t seem to mind table scraps, and soon it’s nibbling greedily at the remains, filling the silence with soft crunches and happy coos. This continues for a while, until the thoughts in Technoblade’s mind grow to loud to bear.

“Y’know, I’m not really sure how I ended up out here.”

The bird caws pointedly.

“Okay, I know *how*. I just—I’m not really sure why. All my life I’d sworn to arrest criminals like Phil, and now...” He sighs, his hand thunking heavily against the wood of his desk as he rests it down again. “Look at me. I’m the captain of a pirate ship. I’m everythin’ I said I’d never be.”

The bird is quiet.

“I think what’s worse is... I don’t hate it. I told myself I would, but...” He swallows, his throat suddenly dry, threatening to close up on him as he’s overcome with a surge of conflicting emotion. “Six months ago, I would’ve called these people my enemies. I would’ve sent ‘em to the gallows without even thinkin’ twice.” And he sees Phil, bound in chains in the brig, locked away in darkness where nobody can see his smile. He sees Tommy and Tubbo with nooses around their necks; imagines a hand ready to pull the lever. He sees Eret, their head held high and proud in front of a firing squad.

“I would’ve watched them die, and I wouldn’t have felt *anything*.”

He feels sick.

“And now they’re my crew, and they—they look up to me to lead ‘em. Hell, I killed a man for them today—and sunk a ship! I didn’t even hesitate. But sometimes I’m still ready to turn ‘em in to the first fleet I see, because they’re *criminals*, but—”

There’s a burning in the corner of his eyes. He blinks it away.

“I don’t even know if that’s the real me talkin’. I don’t know what I believe.”

The crow has stopped eating. It’s silent, just watching him.

“...I don’t know what’s right anymore.”

Chapter End Notes

argo crew official designs by wolfy -

<https://twitter.com/wolfythewitch/status/1415299746353205255?s=21>

fanart spotlight (follow all of these talented artists!):

the bois on a boat by @maarz1an -

<https://twitter.com/maarz1an/status/1415102747792318464?s=21>

techno by @rebellstars - <https://twitter.com/rebellstars/status/1415057520486453248?s=21>

phil by @dudkaart - <https://twitter.com/dudkaart/status/1415054810248880130?s=21>

shipwreck by @postmortls -

<https://twitter.com/postmortls/status/1414786895054180355?s=21>

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

“I’ve always wanted to fly,” Phil breathes. “The wind in my hair, the weight of gravity off my back, nothing holding me down. Sailing is the closest I can get to that feeling.”

“Maybe in the next life you’ll get your wings,” Technoblade jokes lightly, but Phil’s eyes glimmer with a childish excitement at that, and he doesn’t dare shut it down for a moment.

“You think so, mate?”

Chapter Notes

ahhhhh i'm so happy with how this chapter turned out! thank you so much for almost 2.5k subscriptions and 63k hits!

this is the most attention i've ever gotten for a fic and the reactions have just been so overwhelmingly positive! i appreciate every single comment, and i read every single one i get! thank you all again <33

—

chapter warnings: past character death, depictions of a hanging, past mutilation & imprisonment, depiction of scars and injury

The mornings are Technoblade’s favorite part of being out on the open sea.

The light of the sunrise across the waters is like a painting—a hundred different colors decorating the horizon, coloring the rippling waters like stained glass. He picks up his old routine with ease, starting each morning with that same beautiful sunrise, standing alone at the bow of the ship to watch it first crest over the sea. It’s quiet, and peaceful, and everything he so desperately needs before starting his day as captain. It grounds him.

Eret has begun to join him.

She’s as much of a constant as the sun itself. Elegantly poised and dressed just as pristinely, even as she blinks sleep from her eyes, she often drifts to his side to join him at the railing. She doesn’t often speak, but rather, partakes in the silence alongside him. She cannot see the sunrise, but she seems to appreciate it nevertheless as the early morning light warms her cheeks. The silence is comfortable, and despite their lack of conversation, he finds himself eagerly looking forward to her company each dawn.

“Technoblade,” she says one morning, and reaches to take his hand. He surprises himself by meeting her halfway, allowing delicate fingers to curl around his wrist. “Could you describe it to

me?”

His mouth opens and closes, faltering around the right words to say. He’s not sure he could ever capture the beauty of it; he’s not sure any words he could think of would be enough to paint a picture of it for her.

And she laughs, thumbing gently across his skin.

“That’s alright,” she hums. “I’ve seen it before. But how does it make you feel?”

He’s struck by that question. He considers it for a long time, staying silent. To him, the sunrise is one of the most beautiful things he’ll ever see in his lifetime. The first time he saw it rise out at sea still sticks with him, as does the awe and emotion he’d felt that day. It stirs up an odd, warm feeling of nostalgia in his belly when he thinks of it—a pleasant tingle that works its way all the way down to his toes. The sun has always been that beauty, that constant—even in his hardest days, and so to him, it’s a companion—a friend. It’s a promise of a new day, of a fresh start each morning, and it makes his heart sing with a delight he can’t quite put to words.

He opens his mouth to try and answer, but Eret is already smiling.

“It *is* beautiful,” she agrees, and with that, she lets go of his wrist and leaves him alone once more.

Mid-afternoon, a few days later, finds Technoblade out on the main deck, peering up the long ladder to the crow’s nest. A familiar face grins cheekily down at him, all sharp teeth and bright eyes as Phil beckons him up to join him.

“How’d you even get up there?” He asks bluntly, gesturing vaguely toward his shoulder. Phil’s injury was scarcely a week old—there was no way he should have been scaling the rigging just yet. Eret definitely wouldn’t approve, but he also knew Phil considered himself far above any orders of medical reprieve.

“I climbed,” Phil chirps impishly back. “Come join me?”

Technoblade rolls his eyes, giving a long, skeptical look at the ladder. He weighs the possibility of his venture carefully in his mind, his prosthetic suddenly feeling very heavy and very stiff as he eyes the long climb up. Phil seems to notice his hesitation because his smile softens into something far less daring and something a bit more... supportive.

“You can do it, mate,” Phil offers. “One hand over the other.”

Technoblade frowns. A part of him wants to forgo trying altogether, to brush Phil off with a laugh even if it means he has to endure the relentless heckling from above for the remainder of the afternoon. But another part of him really wants to try—to give it his best shot, to push himself to see if he can do it. Once upon a time, this task wouldn’t have even required thought, but now it instills just the faintest flicker of fear in him as he imagines a misplaced hand and a long fall. A stubborn defiance burns in him, intent on snuffing out that fear once and for all.

And so he nods once, steps up to the rungs, and begins the climb.

It’s long, laborious, and almost painful. More than once, his grip nearly slips, threatening to send

him plunging back down. He hooks his prosthetic around the rungs and uses his other hand to cling and propel himself upward, his lungs heaving for breath, the slight chill of fear numbing his limbs and fueling him to reach the top.

And reach it he does, throwing himself gratefully over the ledge and savoring the sweet feeling of solid ground beneath him.

“Knew you could do it, mate.”

When he looks up, wheezing, from his place on the floor, Phil is staring at him with his lips curled into a warm smile, his gaze-half lidded and soft with unfiltered affection. The second the pirate catches his gaze, he looks away, his smile broadening back into that usual impish grin, but not quickly enough to hide it. Technoblade hesitantly smiles back, finding himself suddenly wishing the pirate would look at him like that more often, rather than his usual obnoxious mask of bravado and sarcasm. To be looked at like a friend rather than an enemy...

He wants that.

He's not sure when that change happened. Perhaps it was when Phil first saved him, and just took some time to set in. Perhaps it was when Phil offered him a spot beside him at the crew's evening meal. Perhaps it was when the man took it upon himself to ensure Technoblade was properly eating and drinking despite his duties. Perhaps it was during the many times he caught Phil looking upon the youngest of the crew with undisguised warmth, his prickly exterior receding. Perhaps it developed over time—perhaps it isn't even real, a result of being trapped on a ship with very few people to confide in. All he knows is that in his time as the captain of the *Argo*, something pivotal has occurred. He no longer looks on Phil with that old twist of disgust or anger or loathing, but rather, finds himself feeling something different entirely.

A fondness, of sorts.

He finds himself laughing at the bad jokes, listening eagerly along to his whimsical stories, and gravitating toward the man as they make their obligatory rounds about the ship. Phil, for his part, doesn't seem to have changed much, treating him as casually as always—but the man's callous remarks don't sting anymore. Instead, it's easier to see the warmth behind the flippant insults; the way Phil's smile softens in the morning when Technoblade first greets him, and the way his teasing tends to encourage him to push himself past his self-perceived “limits”.

So, yeah.

Maybe Phil isn't *so* bad after all.

“Isn't it great up here?” Phil asks suddenly. The man has balanced himself on the rim of the nest, his legs kicked up over the sides and swinging freely. It can't be comfortable, but the man's posture and expression scream *peace*, his eyes fluttering shut and even the slightest worry lines wiped clean from his brow. He's seen Phil like this before, each time very much the same. Phil is at his most relaxed up here in the sky, with the wind in his hair and the sun on his face. He looks younger, more at ease; his careful walls that Technoblade's only just begun to recognize lowered when he's all on his own.

“You look like a bird,” he responds dryly, when Phil once more extends his arms like he did that very first day on the ship. Phil laughs and waggles his fingers playfully, giving an experimental little “flap” of his arms. Perched even higher above, atop the flagpole, Brian gives a rasping *caw* of agreement, rustling his wings against the steady ocean breeze.

“I *wish*,” Phil says. “I’m jealous of you, you little shit.” The last part is directed up at his feathered companion. Technoblade wishes he understood that longing in Phil’s eyes, or the way he leans into every caress of the wind despite the way he sits so precariously balanced. Seeing the ground below him is dizzying, a sharp spike of adrenaline shooting through his veins when a particularly strong gust nearly knocks him back—almost taking his hat right along with it.

He’s pretty sure he’s not meant to be in the sky.

“I think I’d prefer to stay on the ground,” he mutters softly, moving back to cling to the mast for support, keeping his gaze trained firmly on his first mate and decidedly *not* on the deck far below. Phil watches him with poorly disguised amusement.

“It’s not so bad, once you get used to it.” He lowers one hand to settle it on the rim of the nest, but keeps the other slightly lifted, toying with the breeze as it dances across his fingers. “When I was a kid, I used to think that if I spent enough time up here, maybe the gods would take pity on me and I’d grow wings.” Technoblade muffles a snort into his sleeve, and Phil gives him a wry smile. “You laugh, but I fully believed it would happen. Broke my arm jumping from the rigging and everything. Nearly gave my parents a heart attack.”

Technoblade imagines a young Phil, teetering precariously on the ship’s railings, his arms akimbo as he walked the narrow edge, pretending to fly as the ship bobs in the waves. He finds himself smiling, and it isn’t teasing this time.

“I’ve always wanted to fly,” Phil breathes. “The wind in my hair, the weight of gravity off my back, nothing holding me down. Sailing is the closest I can get to that feeling.”

“Maybe in the next life you’ll get your wings,” Technoblade jokes lightly, but Phil’s eyes glimmer with a childish excitement at that, and he doesn’t dare shut it down for a moment.

“You think so, mate?”

“Maybe,” Technoblade answers honestly. He’s never really thought about what lies beyond life. He’s always been more for living in the present, for working with what he’s got and not worrying about what could have been or what might be. Still, it’s not unpleasant to imagine Phil in a different life. He pictures him with the wings of the crow he loves so much, laughing as he bobs playfully through the clouds, boasting a bright smile free of hardship. He wonders what Phil would be like in another life, were he not shackled by the constraints of this one. Would he be happier? Would he have resorted to the life he does now?

Would they still have grown up as enemies?

Is Phil even still his enemy?

“That’d be pretty cool,” Phil replies softly, unaware of his conflict. The man kicks his feet a little more, his boots thumping noisily against the wood. “What would you wanna be, mate?”

“...I don’t know,” Technoblade answers honestly.

“No matter what,” Phil says, and his voice goes soft, “—I think I’d want to be free.”

And Technoblade can agree with that. It’s the reason all sailors take to the sea, in one form or another. The endless sprawl of ocean, as far as the eye can see; the lawless beauty of the open sea, free from the restraints of society, where even the lowliest of men could find themselves again. He wanted to find himself too, once upon a time. He thinks he might have forgotten his original intentions somewhere along the road.

Maybe this is what it took to finally remind him again.

“Phil, I think—”

“Captain?” A soft call interrupts them from below deck. Niki is peering up at the crow’s nest, one hand shielding her eyes from the sun’s bright rays. “Are you up there?”

“Sounds like you’re needed, *Captain*,” Phil teases. “Go on, I’ll follow you down in a moment.”

And the moment ends.

He excuses himself with a mutter and starts the laborious task of scaling back down the ladder, which, unfortunately, is decidedly harder than climbing up it. By the time he makes it down, he’s a mess of heaving breath and rosy red cheeks, but to her merit, his helmsman does not comment on his state of disrepair. By the time he’s finished answering her question—charting a course for the nearest port for a brief supply run—he’s managed to regain some of his composure. He squints back up at the crow’s nest as she takes her leave, and sees no evidence that Phil’s made any attempt to actually join him.

He sighs.

“Phil?”

A blonde head pops over the rim. Phil blinks sheepishly down at him, boasting a rather strained grin, his injured shoulder clutched in a white-knuckled grip.

“You can’t get back down, can you?” Technoblade deadpans.

“Nope.”

They’re in Technoblade’s quarters, a kit of medical supplies spilled across his bed, Phil sitting cross-legged atop the blankets while Technoblade gathers both a damp cloth and his nerves. He turns to Phil with a baleful glare and raises the towel at the rather guilty-looking pirate.

“Right, c’mere you stubborn bastard.”

Phil squawks as Technoblade none-too-gently prods and pokes at the injury, taking a peek at the torn stitches and watching as fresh blood bubbles up at the surface. He takes a towel and dabs carefully at the wound, grimacing a little as his patient gives a dramatic groan and tries to pull away.

“Hold still, yer’ just gonna make it worse.”

“It *hurts*,” Phil whines plaintively.

“Yeah, well, maybe pretendin’ to be a bird with a bullet wound to your arm wasn’t the best choice, then,” Technoblade gripes unsympathetically, tugging the offending arm close again as Phil hisses. “Gonna have to redo those stitches. You really did a number on them.”

Phil huffs, and otherwise does not respond, though he holds carefully still as Technoblade begins the painstaking process, only muffling muted noises of protest into the sleeve of his shirt as he

works. Technoblade can feel his venomous gaze lingering on his back, despite the silence, and he pointedly ties the final knot a little tighter than necessary, grinning as the pirate yelps. Phil glares daggers and *yanks* his shirt back up over his shoulder.

“Anyone ever tell you yer’ an awful patient?” Technoblade grunts, as he sets his supplies aside to admire his handiwork.

“Once or twice,” Phil answers with a rueful grin as he rolls his shoulders. As Phil stretches, joints popping as his fingers curl toward the ceiling, his shirt slips over his other shoulder, revealing pale, freckled skin and something else entirely.

Technoblade’s blood runs cold.

“Phil,” he says lowly, and his tone is enough to make the man freeze in place, still half-stretched. “What’s that?”

Blue eyes go wide—round with surprise and shock and a mixture of humiliation and sorrow that makes Technoblade’s gut twist painfully. The man averts his gaze, following Technoblade’s own to the patch of skin beneath his collarbone—puckered and ghostly white and scarred, a perfect ‘P’ seared into his skin. He’s quick to pull his shirt back over the injury, but not before Technoblade has had the chance to get a nice, long look at it.

Long enough to make him feel sick.

“I was just a *boy*,” Phil breathes, so softly Technoblade nearly misses it, and in his voice is the most raw emotion he’s ever witnessed from the pirate—quiet and *aching* and desperately vulnerable. And though Technoblade dreads the answer, knows he will hate it no matter how Phil chooses to respond, he can’t just leave it at that. He has to know. He needs to understand.

“...How old?”

“Twelve, I think,” Phil rasps. “I was twelve when it happened, at least. Eleven when they caught us. Celebrated my birthday in chains, awaiting my own execution.”

Oh. Oh, gods.

He knows the severity of the punishment for piracy. He knows that even the youngest of them face those consequences—but even still, the vision of a young Phil—*too young*, far too young to ever face such horrors—bound in chains and sitting alone in a cold, dark cell awaiting his execution... He swallows back his nausea, and look to the Phil of the present. The man is eerily still, his face ghostly pale and his jaw clenched tight, his shoulders trembling beneath the weight of his memories. He has the sudden urge to reach for him—to stretch out a hand of support, to ground him. And so he does, his fingers resting lightly on Phil’s knee as they sit side-by-side, and Phil doesn’t try to move away. Instead, he takes a deep, shuddering breath, and continues, his voice eerily faint—almost detached.

“My parents were pirates. I was born into it—the family trade, of a sorts. I was born on the sea, out on the open waters, never knew any different. Didn’t really know what we were—what people thought of us—before it happened. All I knew was that I liked sailing, and sometimes things would get dangerous, and I’d have to hide below deck ‘til it was over. We ran afoul of a Navy ship one day and lost. Before I knew it, my whole family was in chains—and me along with ‘em.”

And Phil goes on to weave a tale so sorrowful, so bitter and laced with horror that Technoblade can scarcely bring himself to listen.

He tells the story of long nights in the dark brig of a Navy ship, sandwiched tightly between his parents and his crew. He recounts a long, tumultuous journey to the shore, where they were shoved in a prison cell too small for their company. He recalls the terror of a child, forced to wait alongside his parents with the knowledge of his impending death. He speaks of cold chains and cruel hands pinning him down as a white-hot iron drew nearer and nearer, until—

Phil's jaws abruptly shut with an audible *click*. His hand drifts to his collarbone.

“My parents found a crack in the corner of the cell. They and the others worked day and night to widen it. In the end—” and he lets loose a long, trembling breath. “In the end, I was the only one small enough to fit through it. I was the only one who escaped.”

Technoblade's breath catches.

“I stuck around port as long as I could,” Phil's voice tinges with bitter, hollow detachment. His eyes look dull—almost grey. “I waited for them. They told me to go, and I didn't.” His fingers dig into the fabric of his pants, white-knuckled, his hair falling forward to curtain his eyes. “I waited too long. I stayed just long enough to watch their executioner pull the lever.”

Technoblade feels numb, his jaw opening and closing as he struggles to think of what to say—what to do. His heart *aches* for the man, who he now looks at through a different light. It's easy, now, to see the tightness in his smile as he speaks, and the crease in his brow when he laughs. There's a gurgle to his breathing—a sheen to his eyes as Phil pushes back whatever sorrow he *should* be feeling with a strangled laugh. It's a ghost of what true delight should be—a mask, a facade. It looks *wrong*.

The silence has gone on too long. Phil barks out another watery laugh.

“Sorry, mate,” he murmurs through a hiccup as he scrubs at his eyes, Technoblade watching helplessly on. “Not really sure why I'm dumping all of this on you.” And Technoblade can see him start to shut down again—getting ready to close up his walls once more, and he speaks up before he even has a chance to think.

“No, it's...” he flounders for the right words to say. There's an openness between them now, a raw vulnerability he never expected. He doesn't want to mess this up. “Thank you.”

Phil's head jerks up, his chuckle quieting.

“...For *what*?” He sounds breathless. Disbelieving.

“For tellin' me. For trustin' me. You didn't have to do that.” And he means it. For the man—a man he'd once considered an enemy, his *prisoner*—to be so open with him...

It means something.

There's a flicker of warmth somewhere in his heart, amidst the regret and rage he feels for the suffering his first mate endured at the hands of the ones he'd once sworn allegiance to. He'd heard similar stories a dozen times before—had witnessed many a hanging in his days as a captain. Never before, though, had it ever struck such a chord in him. He'd never liked death, but the notion of pirates as the *enemy*, as a plague to be swiftly stopped, had been repeated in his training like a mantra. Pirates were criminals, the cause of endless death and destruction so long as they roamed the seas, and were meant to be treated as such—or so he'd thought. He still disagrees with Phil's morals—would still rather imprison than kill, would rather trade than steal, but...

Does any man truly deserve *death*?

He tries to imagine his days back as a naval captain. Would he have imprisoned Phil along with his family as nothing more than a criminal? Would he have sent a child to their death? Would he have hesitated at all? How many men had he sent to the same fate before the night of the storm? How many more, had his life not been changed that day?

And then it hits him.

He would have sent Phil to his death.

“Oh, *gods*,” he breathes aloud, his voice hoarse.

He sees Phil. Phil, shooting him one last long, searching look that goes ignored as he’s escorted from the hull by a half dozen guards. Phil, bound in cruel iron shackles at his hands and wrists, kept in a cold stone room until the guards come and roughly drag him to an old wooden platform. Phil, lifting his chin high and grinning even as the noose is slipped around his neck, biting into fragile skin. Phil, dangling limp and cold, his lips tinged blue, that smile forever forgotten by the world. His heart hammers in his chest, his stomach roiling, his blood roaring in his ears as he struggles to fight back the horrible images.

“—*no*? Techno, are you with me, mate?”

Phil is staring at him with wide, round eyes glimmering with undisguised concern, a hand outstretched and his fingers curling comfortably around Technoblade’s prosthetic. He doesn’t flinch at the cold of iron and wood instead of skin, his gaze fixed solely on Technoblade.

All at once, everything is clear.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Phil is starting to sound like a broken record, although this time his voice is so very small, full of careful, hesitant confusion and quiet, desperate hope.

“I would have escorted you to your death.”

Phil’s lips part in a broken little ‘o’. His eyes flash with *something*—grief, hurt, anger; he can’t tell. There’s a long moment where he looks away; a moment where the silence hangs too heavy and Technoblade is left to stew in the weight of his guilt. And then he raises his free hand—the other still curled carefully around Technoblade’s prosthetic—and touches his face. Technoblade flinches at the first contact, but the pirate’s hand remains, scrubbing gently away beneath his eyes, swiping away tears he didn’t know were flowing.

“*Aww, mate*,” Phil murmurs, and he leans into the pirate’s touch against his better judgment. It’s been so long since someone touched him—since he received more than a passing clap on the shoulder. Phil makes a soft sound at this, and he smiles; a smile that is both warm and gentle as the morning sun, and yet somehow sad. “I don’t hold that against you. It was what you knew.”

Technoblade shakes his head weakly, and Phil’s hand cups his cheek, stilling the movement.

“*Nobody* is innocent,” Phil says firmly. “Me least of all. There are a lot of things I regret, and a lot of faces that keep me up at night. Perhaps I do deserve to be hung, like they say.” Technoblade opens his mouth to protest, but Phil raises a hand to silence him. “What I’m saying, Techno, is that I don’t think there’s a *right* side. I used to, but I’m not so sure anymore. You were doing what you thought was right, and so was I.”

“You would have *died*, Phil.”

“Hey, now,” Phil says dryly, his lips twitching up in the faintest hint of a smirk. “Don’t count me out that easily, mate.”

Technoblade laughs. It sounds frail, even to himself, but it’s genuine.

“Yeah...fair enough. You *did* somehow survive a sinking ship from a jail cell.” And then he blinks. “...How *did* you escape?”

“Leverage, mate.” Phil winks.

Technoblade grins, and that warm flicker returns.

“Despite everythin’,” he says, as Phil’s hand drops from his cheek to curl lightly around his own—this time the one made of flesh and bone. It’s a firm yet surprisingly gentle grip, and he squeezes right back, shocked by how familiar the gesture already feels. “Despite everythin’, you saved me.”

Phil nods, his smile dropping to something smaller and more reserved.

“Why?”

“Despite my reputation,” Phil says, “—I don’t like to watch good men die. You’re a good man, Techno. I knew that from the moment I met you. You just needed some encouragement.”

“You pulled me from the water.”

“I did.”

“You paddled us to shore.”

“I did.”

“You,” he pauses, swallowing back emotion. “You paid the doctor. You paid for my treatment.”

Phil nods, looking a little abashed by the acknowledgment of his good deeds, his cheeks flushing pink.

“Thank you,” Technoblade says again, locking gazes with the man.

“Anytime, mate,” Phil replies quietly.

And then something clicks.

“Wait a minute... where’d you get the money for that? You were a prisoner, we searched you for ___”

Phil gives a nervous grin.

“You *stole from my ship.*”

“Well, I couldn’t let all that gold go to waste, could I?”

“Oh, you *bastard,*” Technoblade says, and the word is said with far less venom, and much more affection. He can’t stay mad for long, not while looking at that smug, shit-eating grin, and the two of them dissolve into merry laughter together, leaning on one another for support. The grim atmosphere quickly evaporates.

The night is filled with the quiet chuckles as the two of them spend the rest of their night together, eating, drinking, and sharing together in the retelling of their very first meeting, taking turns weaving the tale into something far grander than anything that actually occurred. It's a tale to tell to the crew one day, should they get the chance.

It's the happiest Technoblade's felt in a long time.

"...Who would've thought?" Phil laughs suddenly, running a hand through his hair as he tips his head back.

"What?"

"A pirate and a former naval captain. *Friends.*"

Technoblade smiles warmly.

"...Yeah. Friends."

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

It starts with an eerie noise, halfway between a song and a wail. It rises from a shoal not thirty meters from the boat, stretching on and on before falling silent.

It sounds beautiful.

It sounds like death.

“Sirens,” Phil whispers from beside him, his eyes wide and his lips half-parted.

Chapter Notes

me: yeah i'll update on saturday

also me: speedruns 3.5k words at work

i hope you enjoy this new chapter! this is one i've been excited to write for a while, and i'm curious to see what it does to your theories!

—

no major content warnings apply to this chapter

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

Technoblade, it turns out, has a bit of an affinity for animals.

Or maybe it's just Phil's crow.

The first time the bird fluttered up onto Technoblade's shoulder instead of Phil's, the pirate had sputtered in feigned indignance, though he couldn't keep the grin off of his face.

“Oh, Brian, *you little shit*,” he waggles a finger in the bird's face, who nips playfully back and ruffles its wings. “Playing favorites already, are we?” And he shoots an accusing look at Technoblade, who can't keep the grin off of his own face as the bird nuzzles closer into his neck with a happy croak.

“What can I say?” Technoblade drawls, lifting a finger to scratch at the soft feathers atop the crow's head. “Animals just like me.”

After that, the bird sticks a lot closer to Technoblade, as if to spite Phil. The look on Phil's face when Brian gives him the cold shoulder only to cuddle up next to Technoblade instead never fails to make Technoblade laugh, if only to add insult to injury.

It's all in good fun, though a part of Technoblade does enjoy the bird's company. It's nice to have a companion when his work gets dull or things get too quiet. Brian is always quick to answer him

with a throaty *caw* or a softer croon when he voices his thoughts aloud, and it's easy to pretend he's having an actual conversation with the bird.

It's better than admitting how silly he must look.

He was genuine when he told Phil about his tendency to bond with animals. He'd made quick friends of the dock's mousers back when he worked at the port, and a quicker friend yet of the ship's own feline companion. The little calico kitten—Crumb, Ranboo had called her; named after she'd been found covered in her namesake in the pantry of his old estate—is fierce and cuddly all at once, and though her bite packs a punch, she's swift to sweeten up to Technoblade when he offers her some dried fish.

So, yeah, he's pretty good with animals.

He usually prefers their company, anyway.

Phil is far too noisy.

His hidden talent comes in handy sooner than he expected.

They've dropped anchor not far from the shore of a small island. The crew is taking advantage of the brief reprieve to splash and swim in the clear blue waters around the ship. Technoblade still isn't much of a swimmer—he hasn't so much as set foot in the ocean since that night so many months ago. He stands and leans against the railing, watching as the crew's younger members tumble around in the waters. Tubbo and Tommy are taking turns dunking on another, squawking and shrieking playfully. Somewhere beneath the glittering surface, he can see the flash of black and white scales, and every once and a while the boys are tugged under from below. Ranboo's perplexing form had been accepted into the crew with surprising ease, after the revelation during battle. Tommy and Tubbo seemed to have known beforehand, much to his chagrin, because they scarcely so much as flinched when Ranboo first transformed again after the incident.

It doesn't surprise him.

The three are practically inseparable. It only makes sense that they'd have known Ranboo's secret from the very beginning.

He has his own suspicions that said secret might be the very reason Ranboo fled his family in the first place. There's a shadowed look in the kid's eyes when he speaks of his parents, no matter how fond the stories seem, and Tubbo seems to tense whenever the subject of him returning is brought up in conversation. But it's not his place to share, and if the kid does tell his story, it'll be when he's ready to, and only that.

Regardless, the kid is enjoying himself, and that's good enough for now. They all deserve a break, particularly after that last fight.

Phil most of all—not that he'll take one.

His injury is healing well, despite his best efforts to keep reopening it with his constant antics. Eret's tongue-lashing in the wake of his new stitches had subdued the pirate enough to keep him from scaling the crow's nest too frequently, although Technoblade still catches him up there now and then. The stitches have been removed, leaving behind only an angry red scar, and the sight of it still makes Technoblade's stomach twist.

A few inches difference, and it could have been Phil's heart instead of his shoulder.

It could have been *Ranboo*.

Phil's quick thinking saved the kid from a bad hit. A potentially fatal one, at that. He's got no clue why the men were firing at the very person they were supposed to bring back in one piece, or how Phil managed to get to Ranboo's side fast enough, but he won't sully his gratitude with pointless wonderings.

He doesn't want to lose a kid on his watch.

And neither does Phil.

The man is watching over the crew as they swim, just as Technoblade is. He leans casually next to him, looking for all the world like the perfect picture of indifference—were it not for the way his eyes continue to dart toward the children as they splash around. He's whistling a merry tune under his breath, leaning into the wind as he always does, but Technoblade can see the way his muscles are coiled beneath the surface, ready to spring at a moment's notice.

That's something else he's begun to notice about Phil, now that he can read him better. Phil is always on guard, always on edge—even when he seems reckless and carefree. When he says he's keeping an eye out in the crow's nest, he truly *is*, nearly every moment dedicated to scanning the horizon. Phil seems to be prepared for every bad situation, and Technoblade is loath to think what could have caused the man to live in such a way. Beneath his shining smile, there's a tension that doesn't seem to go away, a suspicion in the way he glances behind him when his back is turned to the crew.

He remembers how he found Phil—cuffed to the wall and abandoned by his crew for the Navy to collect—and thinks that perhaps his suspicions aren't unfounded.

Still, he wishes he could pry a more genuine smile out of the man now and then. He's annoyingly persistent in his stubborn attempts to tease and bother Technoblade with awful jokes and relentless banter, but the smile never fully carries over to his eyes—save for when he's up in the crow's nest, and the weight of the world seems to trade itself for a pair of wings.

An awful *squawk* jolts him out of his thoughts.

Beside him, Phil makes a soft sound of surprise, and Technoblade follows his wide-eyed gaze to the rigging. At first, he thinks it must have been Brian—the crow is nothing if not persistent in his harassment of various crew members, but when he looks up to the ropes he sees white feathers instead of black, struggling violently where they're tangled amidst the gaps.

“The *hell?*” Phil voices his thoughts. “Is that...?”

“A bird,” Technoblade affirms. “Must be from that island. But what's it doing this far out?”

“Questions later, mate—I think the poor thing's stuck.”

And so it is. Tufts of down flutter from the sky above, panicked noises filling the air, and Technoblade is scaling the rigging before he can even think about his panic from the weeks prior. He reaches the bird, and reaches out a hand to steady it, but the creature is having none of it, its struggles renewing with fresh vigor and fear.

“Hold still,” he says softly. “I'm not gonna hurt you, it's alright. *Shhh*. Everything's alright.”

His hand stills in soft white feathers. The bird seems to still as well, as if sensing no malice from him.

“That’s it. I’m just here to help you, that’s all.” His voice drops to a soft murmur as he works at untangling the fragile wing from the coarse ropes. “How the heck did you manage this, huh? Silly thing.” The bird makes a softer noise at that, only to shriek in pain when the wing finally comes free from its confines. It clings frantically to the ropes, the wing draping limply beside it, and it’s clear the poor creature is hurt. And so he gathers the bird close to his chest with a sympathetic noise, and begins the arduous task of climbing back down with only one hand.

His landing is less than graceful, but Phil is there to steady him when he stumbles.

“Awww, mate,” Phil coos down at the frazzled bird. “Poor guy’s wing must be broken.”

“Looks like it,” Technoblade grunts, holding the bird gingerly, absently trailing his fingers through the puffed-up feathers atop its head in an attempt to soothe it. “It must’ve tried to land on the ropes and gotten caught in ‘em.”

Phil smiles sympathetically.

“Let’s get him all bandaged up then, huh?”

Phil is surprisingly gentle, Technoblade discovers. Though his hands are rough and worn from years out at sea, they are anything but clumsy as he carefully winds pristine white bandages around the bird’s injured wing, setting the splint with a few old scraps of wood for good measure. He talks Technoblade through the whole process, his voice low and soothing so as not to disturb their patient, who has somehow managed to fall into a slumber—though, from exhaustion or pain, he can’t tell.

“You’ll want to remove the bandages every now and then and help him stretch his wing out,” Phil instructs.

“I will?”

“I already have a bird. And Brian gets quite jealous,” Phil quips with a grin. “Besides, aren’t you the one who said ‘animals just like you?’ How could we just waste that talent?” His tone is teasing, but Technoblade can’t find it in himself to rise to the bait, nor can he suppress the little flicker of fondness he feels when he looks down at the slumbering bird on his lap.

“Guess yer’ right,” he grumbles, and can’t help but smile himself.

“You gonna give him a name, mate?” Phil suddenly inquires, leaning forward with an eager smile.

Technoblade blinks.

“Uhhh,” he starts, and grapples for something, *anything* at all. “...Floof?”

Phil’s laughter fills the room as Technoblade’s cheeks burn.

“Wait, I—”

“Nope. No changing it.”

“Phil, hang on—!”

“Nah, mate, this is too good to pass up,” Phil wheezes. “Pirate Captain Technoblade and his

fearsome pet parrot, *Floof*.”

“It’s better than *Brian*.”

“*Is it?* Is it, mate?”

“...”

“Floof it is.”

Floof and Brian turn out to be thick as thieves. They’re just as bad as Tommy and Tubbo, a plague of mischief upon the crew when Floof starts to fly again.

And if Technoblade catches Niki giving him and Phil a knowing look one night as they watch their birds playfully squabble over a scrap of dried meat, he pays her no heed.

Even if he can see the similarities, too.

The peace, like all good things, doesn’t last.

They’re still a good many leagues from port when it happens.

It starts with an eerie noise, halfway between a song and a wail. It rises from a shoal not thirty meters from the boat, stretching on and on before falling silent.

It sounds beautiful.

It sounds like *death*.

“*Sirens*,” Phil whispers from beside him, his eyes wide and his lips half-parted.

“*Sirens?*” Technoblade echoes, as a chill shoots down his spine. “I thought they were a myth—an old wives’ tale.”

“*Gods*, no,” Phil replies, and his face has gone ghostly pale. “They’re real, mate. Very real, and very deadly. We shouldn’t be here—our course shouldn’t have taken us this close!”

And then he’s moving, surging across the deck like thunder, shouting frantic orders to those that will listen.

“*Sirens! Cover your ears!*” He cries, and there’s no disguising the panic in his tone. The crew is quick to comply at the sudden seriousness of their first mate. “With your hands, with your shirts, with your coats! Tie yourselves to the ship, if you must!” He’s a blur of motion, his feet more like wings as he surges below deck, presumably to warn any unsuspecting crew members. The ship is in disarray as the crew moves to protect themselves, and Technoblade urges the members they can spare below deck, where they’ll be further from the dangerous song.

There's no time to waste. The song only grows louder with every second that goes by, even as he and Niki move to steer the ship away from the haunting cries. The sound, muffled as it is through Technoblade's hands, leaves his brain in a state of static, and he finds himself moving in a daze, almost as if sleepwalking. Thankfully, he has enough control to ground himself to the wheel alongside Niki, and together they guide the *Argo* away from the shoal while their crew cling desperately to the railings and rigging to resist the deadly urge.

He can see fins, almost shark-like save for their unusually bright colors, cutting through the water around the rocks. The song seems to grow almost *angry* as their ship turns away from it, rising to a piercing shriek that makes Technoblade's head *ache* and his teeth grit.

And then, finally, it's over.

"Everyone alright?" Technoblade asks, once the wailing has faded to a distant cry on the wind. There are a series of murmured affirmations, some of the crew looking rather dazed but no worse for wear. "Good. Good work, Phil. That was quick thinkin'. That could've been bad. Really bad."

Silence answers him.

"...Phil?"

Nothing.

The crew seems to wake up at that. Technoblade's heart begins to beat with a new ferocity as he searches the crowd for the face of his friend, and comes up short one first mate. He can hear them echoing Phil's name, the urgency rising until murmurs grow to shouts and frantic feet pound across the deck in search of the man.

The searches come up empty.

"Did anyone see him? Did he cover his ears?"

And then he sees Niki, her ears covered snugly by a familiar green bandana. She looks horrified, one hand clasped over her mouth as her face grows pale. Beside her, Tubbo and Ranboo stand side by side, arm in arm, looking as if they've seen a ghost. All three shake their heads.

"*Shit.*"

Technoblade practically *throws himself to the port side of the ship, where the rocks are now mere dots on the horizon. And then he hears it, or, rather—*

The sirens have gone silent.

"*Turn this ship around!*" he barks. "All hands on deck!" There's a clamor as the crew rises to his command, fueled by the same urgency that burns like fire in his veins. Every second is too long, every moment another moment that Phil could be hurt—could be drowning—could be *dying*. No matter how the wind favors them, it still takes too long to get them close—but not close enough to see anything at all. They're still a few dozen meters out, and Technoblade can feel nothing but the all-encompassing panic as he strains to catch any glimpse of motion amidst the rocks and waters.

"Get us closer, damnit!"

"*We can't!*" Niki cries, and she looks stricken. "The waters are too shallow! We'll sink her on the rocks if we aren't careful!"

“Then I’ll go.”

Technoblade moves swiftly to the side of the ship, where the lone dinghy sits ready for use. A few crew members are quick to help him, and he clambers in as they begin to lower it toward the water. Tommy and Niki move as if to join him, but he waves them off with a grimace.

“Can’t risk it,” he says firmly. “I’ll go by myself. If I don’t make it back, you’re in charge, Niki.”

Niki nods solemnly. Tommy looks indignant, but thankfully doesn’t protest, seeming to recognize the urgency of the situation. Technoblade’s stomach drops along with the dinghy, and then the ropes are tossed and he’s paddling harder than he’s ever paddled in his life.

It seems to stretch on for hours, though it’s likely only minutes. His whole body is alight with adrenaline, his blood roaring in his ears and his heart fluttering frantically in his chest. He’s not sure he’d hear the sirens now, even if they were still singing. The only thought on his mind is of Phil—foolish, idiotic, *self-sacrificial* Phil, who probably spent more time worrying about the crew than *himself*.

“Don’t be dead,” he hisses from between gritted teeth as he rows. “If you’re dead, I’ll kill you.”

As he rows closer, his breath rasping out in ragged pants, his arms burning as he singlehandedly rows faster than half-dozen men would, he catches hints of a murmured conversation flitting across the ocean’s surface from behind the rocks.

“So there I was—a dozen men—just one shot left—so then I—and then—”

Phil.

He’s still alive, thank the gods. But he won’t be for long when Technoblade gets his hands on the bastard.

He’s still a few feet away from the rocks when he stands, leaping from the boat and barely leaping the distance. His hands burn from where they catch on rough stone, but he barely bats an eye, clawing his way upward until he’s able to catch a glimpse of the scene in the tidepools below.

Phil is alive.

And he’s *smiling*.

The pirate sits, sprawled casually, in the lap of a siren with long, dark, flowing hair and tanned skin. She’d be considered beautiful, were Technoblade to have eyes for such a thing, but beautiful like the sea is beautiful—powerful and dangerous and untamed. She cradles him like a babe as he gestures wildly, mid-way through some eccentric story. Phil is grinning goofily, his gaze fixed on her every movement, his voice soft and breathy despite the excitement of his tale.

“Tell me, my lady, would you like to hear the tale of the day I fought the dread Captain Squidkid?”

She nods and giggles along as if entranced, her gaze equally fixed on his as her tail—black as the night sky and gilded with gold like a thousand shimmering stars—lazily flicks water up from the tides below them.

And then she lifts a hand toward his face.

Technoblade opens his mouth to shout a warning, but his words die on his lips when her hand moves to tip his chin up. Phil’s words die too, his story petering off into a soft gasp as he looks up

at her. There's a brief moment of silence, and then the siren dissolves into light laughter, shaking her head.

"Is that all it takes to shut you up?" Her voice is light. Teasing, almost. And Phil hums, sitting up a little and taking one of her hands in his own.

"Can I tell you a secret?"

"Go on."

"I always thought the sea was my one true love," Phil says, with a sappy grin on his face. "But her beauty pales next to you, my lady."

There's a faint dark tinge on the siren's cheeks as she stares down at the man cradled across her lap, one of her fingers twirling playfully around a loose, sodden strand of his hair. Phil flutters his eyelashes up at her, his own cheeks a bright pink, his grin so wide it must hurt. She moves closer, as if to kiss his forehead, and that's when Technoblade makes his appearance known, vaulting over the stone to land a few feet away from them.

"Get away from him," Technoblade snarls, leveling his pistol at her with his teeth bared.

"*Techno!*" Phil sounds scandalized.

The siren merely chuckles.

"Relax. I'm not going to *eat* him."

"Really? 'Cause I kinda thought that's what sirens like to do." He cocks the weapon, his heart hammering in his chest at the sight of his first mate in the clutches of certain death. "Phil, *move*, quick!"

"Why would I run from love, mate?" Phil looks a little dazed, but he fixes Technoblade with the most incredulous look he can muster.

"Phil, that's not *love*, that's *magic!*"

"Oh, no, dear," the siren laughs, bright and melodious like a bell. "I haven't sung to him since he first went for a swim. This is *all* him."

Phil giggles. Technoblade just stares.

"Yer' kiddin' me."

"Well, she *is* very pretty." Phil has the decency to look sheepish, at least. The siren croons at that, holding him closer while Technoblade continues to glower. He slowly lowers his weapon, though he keeps a wary eye on the woman, ready to strike should she show any signs of aggression.

"I'll admit, this is the first time I've gotten this reaction," the siren murmurs, blinking fondly down at her hopeful pirate suitor while Technoblade watches on, aghast. "Usually they just scream once they get close enough to see my teeth."

"They're *beautiful*," Phil assures her immediately, and the pink deepens across her cheeks. Technoblade very nearly gags. "I wouldn't change a thing."

"Oh, aren't you just the sweetest? And so handsome, too," she coos, and pinches his cheek. Phil grins roguishly beneath his blushing, and cuts a smug look toward Technoblade.

Gross.

“*Oh my gods.*” Technoblade pinches the bridge of his nose. “You’ve gotta be kiddin’ me. Phil, you just jumped off the ship and scared the crew half to death, and I find you sittin’ here, flirtin’ with a *mermaid?*”

“Siren, dear,” the woman murmurs. “And please, call me Kristin.”

“I’m gonna marry her,” Phil proclaims later, in a dizzy stupor as they both stumble back onto the deck of the *Argo*.

“Phil, you just met her.”

“Phil has a *wife?*”

“No, Tommy—”

“Not *yet.*”

“*Bruh*hh.”

Chapter End Notes

hi phil and kristin! i hope you're enjoying reading my silly little pirate story. :)

i'm not sure if you'll catch this end note, but if you do, i just want you to know how much it means to me that you're taking the time to read bones. this work was a big passion project of mine, and never in a million years did i imagine you'd know about it, let alone read it! it means the world not only to me, but to all of the other writers in the community. it's really rare to find ccs that appreciate fic as much as you guys <3 phil, you're the whole reason i started writing again after so many years, so an extra special thank you to you :]

i hope you like the rest of the story!

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

“I wish I could just get rid of it,” Phil whispers suddenly, and in his voice, there’s a world of pain—anger and bitterness and grief and confusion all twisted together into something ugly. “I wish I could just toss it into the sea and be rid of it.”

Chapter Notes

i said i wouldn't post again til saturday to give myself a break, and then wolfy and twitter convinced me otherwise. most updates will not be this frequent!

—

chapter warnings: npc character death, connotations of drowning, heavier/angsty discussions

“Turn right,” Eret suddenly says, one morning as the crew has gathered for breakfast. “Point us north.”

Technoblade blinks.

“Heh?”

“North, Technoblade.”

“Yeah, I—I heard you, I’m just...” he gestures with one hand at Niki, who looks just as confused. “We’re kinda supposed to be makin’ port in a few days, the crew’s gettin’ restless and we’re gonna need more supplies soon.”

Eret lifts a brow at him. Their blank gaze seems to latch onto his own, as if staring right through him and into his very *soul*. They take his hands in their own, and he suppresses a shiver as he’s forced to stare into their gaze. Their expression is solemn, their brows furrowed as they stare up in his direction, and Technoblade is struck by the oddest feeling. It’s something he’s felt before in Eret’s presence, a strange, perplexing *difference* between them. It’s not a feeling he can name, but all he knows is that Eret is mystifying in a way that most humans ought not to be—and that they always seem to know far more than they let on.

“Trust me, Technoblade,” they murmur.

And so, against his better judgment, he nods.

Phil makes a soft noise of complaint at his right, and he fixes his first mate with a stern look. Phil has a little pout on his lips—likely at the thought of leaving behind the siren he’s so smitten with. But when their eyes meet, the man holds up his hands placatingly, his lips twitching into a grin, and there’s no disguising the intrigue in his eyes as he glances back and forth between the two of

them. There's a knowing gleam amidst the blue despite his protests, and now Technoblade is realizing that Phil, too, must know more than he cares to share.

He *was* the one to let Eret aboard, after all.

“Alright,” he agrees aloud, and there's a murmuring amidst the crew that have gathered. “North it is.” He heard Tommy squawk in protest—catches the dull *thud* as Ranboo's elbow promptly collides with his friend's ribs—but Tommy isn't the only one who looks displeased. Eret is a newcomer, a bystander—not technically a part of the crew by any agreement, merely along for their travels. It's only fair that they're wary of their course being controlled by someone who seems to merely be along for the ride. The crew is disgruntled by this abrupt change in plans, having been looking forward to respite at shore, and, frankly, Technoblade is as well.

This is a leap of faith. He has no reason to trust Eret, and yet he *does*, and it's terrifying and comforting all at once.

He trusts them. And he doesn't trust easily.

Eret smiles at his affirmation, and nods, seeming to understand his reluctance.

“We'll speak soon enough, I promise,” they assure him, their voice a low whisper, quiet enough that the rest of the crew can't hear what they're saying. Technoblade nods, as small of a gesture as he can manage. And then they release his hands and settle quietly back at their spot on the stairs, pick up their meal, and go back to eating as if nothing has occurred.

The crew just watches, perplexed.

How very odd, indeed.

The next night he finds Phil alone at the stern of the ship, occupying Technoblade's usual spot at the railing.

The man doesn't even seem to notice his arrival, or he simply doesn't care. His gaze is fixed on the dark horizon—on the glittering of stars across the glassy surface of the sea, which, for once, is calm. Phil's posture is rigid, his shoulders straight and his teeth clenched, his jaw working fiercely. There's a storm brewing beneath the surface—one that casts a glassy, grey sheen over the usual blue of his eyes and shrouds his face in shadow. His brows are knit with some inscrutable emotion, something dark and hollow and foreign against his friend's usual cheer.

It's disquieting.

A glint catches his eye. It's one he's seen before. A familiar chain dangles from Phil's fingers, the very same he'd held so many nights ago at the celebration of Technoblade's captaincy. Only this time, it's not just a chain he sees, but a *locket*—tiny and delicate and intricately detailed, its contents concealed in the shadow cast by Phil's palm. Phil scarcely seems to notice it's there, too wrapped up in whatever dark thoughts plague his mind, and when the chain begins to slip dangerously from his friend's fingertips, Technoblade finally decides to step in.

“...Phil?”

No matter how soft he kept his voice, the man still startles at the suddenness of it. Thankfully, his fingers curl instinctively tight around the locket, pulling it close to his chest as he tilts his head toward Technoblade with the slightest nod. That nod is all he gets. No smile, no fond murmur of “hi, mate”, not even so much as a friendly glimmer in his eye. Just a nod.

They sit in silence for a while longer, Technoblade feeling uncertain and out of place. The last time they’d spoken like this, it had ended in Technoblade being the one to be comforted, Phil shrugging off his own pain for his sake, and that’s the last thing he wants right now.

He wants Phil to *feel*. For both their sakes.

Phil is the one to break the silence.

“I must look a right mess, huh?” he rasps, with the faintest twitch of his lips that doesn’t reach his eyes. And it’s true, though Technoblade won’t admit it. Though Phil has never cared much for his appearance in the time they’ve known each other, this is something different entirely. His hair is messy and dull, his chin scruffy in a way that isn’t as charming as it is worrying, and there are deep shadows beneath his eyes to accompany the furrowed lines across his brow. He looks *tired*, in a way that frankly doesn’t suit him, and the sight of him in such disrepair makes Technoblade’s gut begin to tie itself in knots.

“You haven’t been sleeping.” He’s not sure if it’s a question or a statement, but Phil nods nevertheless.

“Nightmares,” Phil answers simply, and doesn’t elaborate. Technoblade doesn’t ask him to. He knows what the nightmares can be like—how guilt can take them and twist them into something haunting, into something that makes you twist and writhe and shout silently until you wake in a cold sweat with your sheets tangled around your legs like a vice. He knows nightmares, and he’s seen the same shadow on his own face in the mirror too many times to count.

Instead, he tilts his head ever-so-slightly down toward the golden chain, and Phil’s eyes follow his movement. There’s a soft intake of breath, fingers curling tightly around the locket before relaxing, revealing the polished surface once more—the hinges now closed to conceal its contents.

“I wish I could just get rid of it,” Phil whispers suddenly, and in his voice, there’s a world of pain—*anger* and *bitterness* and *grief* and *confusion* all twisted together into something ugly. “I wish I could just toss it into the sea and be rid of it.”

What is it? Technoblade wants to ask, but instead—

“Would that help you?”

And Phil sighs, laughing that hollow laugh again as his face contorts into something wicked and terrifyingly empty.

“...I don’t think it would, mate.” Phil’s eyes look strangely wet, and he’s blinking furiously as he turns away, his warped smile flattening out into something sorrowful. “But I sure as hell wish it.”

Phil’s free hand rests on the railing beside his. Carefully, he takes it, and counts it as a win when the man doesn’t pull away, simply stiffening beneath his touch. He runs his thumb over well-worn knuckles and calloused fingers, and slowly but surely the tension begins to ebb from his friend, until he’s practically leaning into the touch with a soft noise of both sadness and appreciation.

Technoblade is not the only one starved of the comfort of touch.

“He was my son,” Phil murmurs then, when he’s slumped so far to the side that he’s resting comfortably against Technoblade’s side, his cheek pressed close to his shoulder. The exhaustion seems to have set in now, and his words come out slightly clumsy and muffled, his lashes drooping as he speaks. “Not by blood, but something deeper. I loved him as though he were my own, and I raised him all the same.” He falls silent then, his words faltering off as if unsure, his voice dulling to a faint rasp.

“Tell me about him,” Technoblade quickly urges.

“His name was Wilbur,” Phil answers. “His name was Wilbur, and he had a smile so bright it could clear the storms away. He was just a boy when I found him, stashed away like a rat in our stores.”

“Like Ranboo,” Technoblade offers.

Phil smiles at that.

“Like Ranboo,” he agrees. “They’re a lot alike. Both eager and quick to learn, and just as clever. Wilbur had a silver tongue and he knew how to use it. It was his greatest weapon. He was never too great of a shot.” And he laughs again, and this time it’s more genuine, though still tinged with grief. “He grew up like me, out on the seas. He learned to love the taste of the salt in the air and the wind at his back. You would’ve thought he was born there.”

Phil’s words are soft, a faint flicker of warmth behind them no matter how heavy his sorrow. It’s clear these are still fond memories, even if they’ve now been tainted with something bitter.

“He was only a teenager when he became my first mate, and I wouldn’t have wanted anyone else at my side. He got us out of so many messes with that mind of his. Hell, half of ‘em were my fault, but he never held it against me.” Technoblade chuckles at that, knowing all-too-well exactly what sort of “messes” Phil tended to create with his antics. “I was so proud of him. He grew up to be everything I wished I could be at his age. I was glad I could give him even a *taste* of it.”

Technoblade remembers Phil’s haunted past, and the bitterness of a boy forced to move on without his parents—returning to piracy with an unfamiliar crew and ship and only the brand on his skin to remember his family by; clawing his way upward hand over hand to reach the top. He thinks of Phil’s careful watch over their youngest crewmates and his apparent insistence on taking in those who have nothing.

Phil’s “strays” suddenly make a lot more sense.

He opens his mouth to speak, but Phil beats him to it.

“I must have failed him, somewhere along the line.” Phil’s smile evaporates, the glassy look in his eyes returning. His other hand shifts, and the golden chain begins to dangle once more over the dark waters. “I must have let him down, because he was the one to leave me, that day you found me.”

“Your *son* left you there?”

“...He did.”

There’s something ugly rearing its head in Technoblade’s chest now. The sight of Phil, so hollow and shattered, and the sound of his voice so dull and lifeless has white-hot rage surging through his veins, accompanied by a deep pang of sorrow. He wishes he could take away the sting of betrayal

—take away all the paranoia and anger that accompanies it like Phil's own shadow. He wishes he could chase down this son of his, if only to grasp him by the shoulders and shake him and ask him “*Why?*”

How could you?

How could anyone leave their own father to die, shackled to the wall like a pig for slaughter, ripe for the picking for any passing Navy crew or rival? He remembers Phil's face that day, remembers the shellshock beneath his stubborn anger and taunts as they'd forced him to his knees and tied his arms behind him. He remembers the way the man pointedly ignored them, his gaze trained defiantly on the horizon, where the silhouette of a ship was beginning to look more like a speck of dust.

Phil's ship.

Phil's crew.

Phil's *son*.

Leaving him behind.

The bitterness on his tongue fuels his words as he gently squeezes Phil's hand, watching the dangling chain with newfound malice.

“Whatever happened between you, whatever he did—you didn't fail him, Phil.” The man shudders at his words, disbelieving, his breath puffing out a short ‘*ha!*’ as he shakes his head. “Phil, I'm serious. The way you talk about him, the stories you've been tellin' me. If there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that you loved him, and if you treated him anything like you treat Ranboo and the others, you must've been a damn good father.”

There's silence when he finishes. For a few minutes, the two of them simply watch the chain sway back and forth in the wind. The simplest movement could send it plummeting into the depths, and Phil's fingers twitch as if they just might let it go at any moment. The man's eyes are closed as he ponders Technoblade's words, hiding his emotions away from prying eyes. Technoblade does not press him, instead merely continuing his ministrations, tracing careful circles in his friend's palm while he waits.

And then slowly, Phil lets loose the breath he's holding, and turns into Technoblade's waiting arms.

Technoblade does not protest, instead wrapping the smaller man tightly into his firm embrace, humming softly as hands cling to the back of his shirt. He hides his friend away from the world, although the deck is abandoned, no prying eyes to be found at this time of night. Phil is silent in his hold, but his grasp is made of steel, as if he's scared Technoblade might disappear at any moment.

Or leave him behind.

“I'm not goin' anywhere, Phil,” Technoblade rumbles, even as he feels a tug in his stomach urging him to remember that this is *temporary*, that he'd sworn he wouldn't stay. “I'm here. This ship? This crew? We're not gonna do that to you. *I'm* not gonna do that to you.”

Whether Phil is reassured or just nodding along for show, he's not sure. But the man does not pull away from his hold, even after Technoblade has finished speaking, and so Technoblade curls an arm around his waist and one at the base of his skull, and folds him in even closer.

He's not sure how long they spend out beneath the stars. However long Phil needs; until the man is blinking drowsily against him and Technoblade is carefully guiding him down the steps toward his quarters. It's cathartic, in a way, being the one to comfort, rather than to be comforted, and it's something Phil clearly desperately needed, if his exhaustion is anything to go by. But...

There's one thing Technoblade notices, amidst the revelations and the emotions twisting his own heart. In all that time that he'd held the man, between all the stories and the opening of his heart...

Phil does not cry.

But Technoblade wishes he would.

On their fifth day pointed north, they find a shipwreck.

The devastation is absolute.

What's left of the ship—the rest likely resting soundly at the bottom of the sea—is in ruins. Shattered planks of wood, a tattered flag sporting the familiar skull and crossbones, the remains of the rigging, all bobbing lazily across the surface of the water like some morbid display. The air is still acrid with the tang of gunpowder, the wreckage stained dark with the soot of cannon fire. The ship had been utterly obliterated, leaving next to nothing behind to tell its story.

Whoever had done this had left them no chance of survival.

Technoblade's heart aches for the missing crew. Whether they now rest at the bottom of the ocean along with their ship, or in the brig of another vessel, their fate is sealed. An enemy like this would not spare any mercy to their prisoners. He's never been one for needless violence, and the sight of such clear *death* is enough to turn any man's heart.

“Steer us wide of the wreckage,” he urges Niki. “Don't get too close, we don't want to risk damaging our own hull.” His helmsman nods dutifully, her brow furrowed and her lips pursed in concern as she surveys the scene. There's no attempt to disguise her worry—Niki wears her heart on her sleeve, and it's something he's come to greatly respect. As sturdy and steadfast of a crewmate as she is, she's also one of the kindest listening ears he's ever met.

Next to her, Eret suddenly smiles.

A sharp cry splits the air.

“Man overboard!”

There's a commotion—a thundering of feet like a herd of cattle as those above deck all move to the source of the shout. Tommy's staring with wide eyes out at the wreckage, his hands white-knuckled on the rail. Technoblade follows his gaze toward the source of his worry, and his breath catches in his throat at the sight of two motionless forms draped over a floating piece of debris, unmoving.

Before Technoblade can stop him, the kid's already thrown himself over the edge, plunging into

the water with a great *splash*. There's a scuffle beside him as Tubbo moves to gather a spare line, tossing it into the water beside Tommy as he moves with confident, quick strokes toward the motionless figures beyond. Technoblade has half a mind to scold him when he returns, but Phil's shoulder brushes his own in silent support, the look in his eyes assuring him that if Tommy hadn't dived in, his first mate probably would have.

For a moment, Technoblade fears they might already be dead, for how still they lie, and for the carnage that surrounds them. But Tommy reaches their sides in moments, fumbling for pulses, and the relieved grin he shoots up at his waiting crew is enough to assuage Technoblade's worries.

"They're still alive!"

The two are lifted aboard the *Argo* with no lack of effort. The whole crew works together to carefully haul them onto the deck, settling them carefully down on spare rags hurriedly gathered from below. He can hear Eret's voice above the clamor, calling for Ranboo's help in assisting the injured. The whole crew crowds around them curiously, every set of eyes trained on the strangers and their fate. From where he stands, he can only catch brief glimpses of the two—a young, fox-like face curled close to the elder's chest, and a mop of soggy brown curls.

It's only after the two are brought below deck that he realizes Phil is no longer at his side.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

And then he catches a glimpse of that damned locket, popped open in one of Phil's hands, that picture finally visible. Brown curls, a charming smile, a cunning gaze... The same face as the man currently unconscious in their infirmary.

The look in Phil's eyes tells him everything he needs to know.

"That's him. That's Wilbur."

And Phil nods, stiff and forced, his gaze downcast.

Chapter Notes

bones update pog!!!

i am SO excited to share this chapter with you! more revelations i've been waiting forever for to share <3 fun fact, i actually wrote most of the first scene before i wrote any of the rest of bones, back when wolfy and i were still in the planning stage/

—

chapter warnings: threats of gun violence, mentioned past character death, neglect of self-care

The Navy is coming.

Somehow they know the crew of the *Styx* is in port, and they're closing in—fast.

"Wil, we need to move!" Phil sets about gathering his belongings, strapping his cutlass to his belt and pulling his worn jacket over his shoulders. Wilbur stands motionless, merely watching as Phil rushes about the room. "*Wil!* We don't have time for this! We need to get back to the rest of the crew. The Navy knows we're here, they'll be searching the streets any minute!"

"I know."

There's a familiar click. Phil finds himself staring down the barrel of a gun.

"...Wil?"

"You're not coming with us, Phil."

For a moment, all Phil can do is stare. He stares at the way Wilbur's hand trembles ever-so-slightly as he fiddles with the trigger. He stares into the eyes of the boy he's come to call his own, and in them he sees cold resolve, unflinching even as it's met by Phil's own steely gaze.

And then the emotions hit. Shock, anger, denial, hurt, *betrayal*. Wilbur is pointing a gun at him. Wilbur's finger is on the trigger. Wilbur is—

Wilbur is staging a mutiny.

“What are you doing?” He asks, even though he knows the answer, fighting back the harsh words he wants to shout and trading them for something cold and calculated. His hand begins to slip down toward his belt, but Wilbur catches the movement and jerks the weapon, aiming right for Phil's heart.

“Don't.”

Phil freezes.

“Hand over your weapons.”

“Wil, you can't just leave me with—”

“Hand them over.”

Phil sighs. Almost robotically, he moves to unfasten his belt, his aching heart beginning to foster an unpleasant numbness as Wilbur snatches his belt, weapons and all, away. Now defenseless, he stands with his hands raised placatingly, praying to whatever gods are listening that this is some awful trick, that at any moment now his son will lower his gun and crack a smile and laugh and everything will be okay again.

“Right, mate, you've had your fun, now—”

“Don't. Move.”

He freezes.

“You're gonna stay right here, Phil.”

“Like hell I am,” he snarls, the shock giving way to sharp, fiery anger. “Stop with the bullshit, Wil, where the hell is all this coming from?”

“Fine. We'll do it the hard way.”

Wilbur approaches, pistol still raised, and Phil flinches as the mouth presses to his skull, burning and freezing all at once. It stays there far too long. His eyes flutter shut, fully expecting the subsequent *bang*, but—

Instead, cool metal clicks around his wrist, and then to the lamp on the wall, shackling him firmly in place. He gives an experimental tug, but his only reward is the sharp pain of the cuffs biting into his skin. He could pull free, probably, but it would take time and would hurt like all hell to do it. He drops his hand and instead lifts his chin to meet Wilbur's gaze, his heart in his throat and the blood roaring in his ears.

“Wil, *please...*” His own voice fails him, trailing off into something soft and rasping and *fragile*, and he hates the way his anger has faded into something so vulnerable. He searches desperately for any sign of hesitance in his son, any hint that he's being forced, that he's being forced, that he might feel *regret*—

“Don't make this harder, Phil,” Wilbur says lowly, pointedly avoiding his gaze as he fumbles to

strap Phil's weapons to his own belt.

"What do you *mean*?" Phil is practically begging now, bitter weakness dripping off his tongue as he strains uselessly against his bonds. "Wil, c'mon, you're joking, right? I— *I don't understand.*"

Wilbur doesn't answer him.

"Wilbur, please, whatever this is—whatever you want, you can have it. The ship, the hat—just—*don't do this.*"

Wilbur's eyes flicker with *something*.

"I don't want anything from you, Phil. But I have to do this. You know that."

With a deft hand, his son reaches up and pulls the hat free from Phil's head, promptly placing it atop his own mess of brown curls. Phil's chest is filled with a hollow ache. It's a sight he'd dreamed of witnessing ever since the boy became his first mate, but—not like this. Never like this.

"I'm sorry, Dad."

"Wilbur, *please.*"

And then Wilbur's moving away from him, Phil's cuffs rattling as he makes one last desperate grab for his son's hand, missing it by mere inches. Wilbur pauses at the door, if only for a moment, but he doesn't turn to look back at him, not even once. But he speaks, and his words are enough to fill Phil's heart with the deepest spike of dread yet.

"Goodbye, Phil."

"Wil? Wil, come back! *Wilbur!*"

The door slams shut. The world goes quiet.

"...Wil?"

He shouts himself hoarse in the minutes that follow, screaming for his son as he turns his back and walks away from him. He shouts until his voice splinters into nothingness, his voice rasping with anger and hurt, heedless of the attention he must surely be drawing to himself.

When the Navy finally comes to collect him, he doesn't even have the energy to fight back.

The survivors of the shipwreck have been brought safely below deck.

Technoblade finds Phil exactly where he expected.

He claws his way up to the crow's nest to find his first mate huddled within, his knees drawn up to

his chest and his face buried between them. He doesn't speak as Technoblade heaves his way clumsily into the narrow space, instead merely looking briefly up with tired eyes before nuzzling right back down and hiding his face once more.

"Hey, Phil," Technoblade says softly.

Phil doesn't respond.

"Figured I'd find you up here," Technoblade continues, his voice hushed so as not to disturb any of the crew below, or attract prying ears. "You kinda vanished on us back there. One minute you were there, and the next..." He waves a hand lamely, his voice falling flat as Phil finally looks up at him, his expression hollowed and his eyes speaking of complete and utter *exhaustion*. Not the physical kind, no—but emotional, a weight so heavy Phil nearly looks ready to crumple beneath it.

"Sorry," Phil says half-heartedly, his voice so quiet Technoblade nearly misses it, his gaze still vacant. "Just...got a lot on my mind right now, 's all."

"No kiddin'."

"Mmmm."

And Technoblade sighs, which is enough to pull his friend's focus on him for a moment, and briefly away from...whatever's bothering him. Phil's brows furrow, but he seems to sense that there's no animosity anywhere to be found in Technoblade's heart, because they quickly relax into something more sorrowful.

"Sorry, mate," Phil says again, and Technoblade's quickly getting sick of hearing him say those words. "I just—I didn't expect to ever see him again."

"...Him?"

And then he catches a glimpse of that damned locket, popped open in one of Phil's hands, that picture finally visible. Brown curls, a charming smile, a cunning gaze... The same face as the man currently unconscious in their infirmary.

The look in Phil's eyes tells him everything he needs to know.

"That's him. That's Wilbur."

And Phil nods, stiff and forced, his gaze downcast.

There's so much Technoblade wants to say in response to this new revelation. He's angry—*furious*, even—and he wants nothing more than to storm into the infirmary, grab the young man by the collar and toss him right back overboard where he belongs. But Phil is right in front of him, with wide, shellshocked eyes and a tremble in his hands, and he can't leave his friend to deal with this alone.

"Oh. *Oh, Phil.*" He reaches out a hand, and Phil is quick to take it, and they sit together for a while, just breathing. Phil's hand is shaking in his, a fine tremor running through his whole body and into his fingertips. He can hear the hitch of Phil's breath—sees the sheen in his eyes that shows he's barely keeping it together. He can't begin to imagine the emotional toll this must be taking on him. Phil thought he'd lost everything, and now all at once it's back, and he's being forced to confront demons he'd thought long banished.

Phil is the first to break the silence.

“I never thought I’d see him again,” he admits, in the softest voice yet. “I didn’t...” He trails off, his free hand clenching until his knuckles go white and his fingernails surely bite into his skin. He looks so confused, so *lost* that Technoblade is half-tempted to pull him into another embrace like the one nights ago. But the stiffness in Phil’s shoulders is like a rubber band ready to snap, and he’s not sure the man wants to be held right now.

And so all he can do is sit and wait for the dam to break.

“He said goodbye.” Phil’s voice is practically a whisper now, his nails biting into Technoblade’s skin with how hard he clings to him. “He said *goodbye*, he wasn’t supposed to—why is he back, Techno?”

Technoblade doesn’t have an answer for him.

Phil spends most of his time at Wilbur’s bedside, despite the man having yet to wake.

He sits in an old wooden chair that must surely make his bones *ache*, his head in one hand and his bleary gaze trained on his son’s sleeping face. His back is hunched and his shoulders stiff, and his hands shake when he spoons broth carefully between half-parted lips, running a thumb along the hollow of Wilbur’s throat to urge him to swallow. There are dark circles under his eyes and a pallor to his skin that speaks of nights without sleep, and no matter how Technoblade tries to urge him away, he can’t be swayed. The best he can do is coax him into eating meals, which are consumed half-heartedly at best, but at least it’s *something*.

He doesn’t speak much. Not to the crew, save for occasional short commands, and hardly more to Technoblade. Technoblade’s never seen him like this, not even when he was imprisoned in the brig. He’s withdrawn and quiet and cold, and he looks so much older and more tired than he ever should.

He looks like he’s spent the last few days staring at a ghost, rather than his unconscious—but still living and breathing—son.

It’s scary.

Phil is a man who practically radiates energy—his enthusiasm contagious, his sarcasm biting. He’s silver-tongued and sharp-toothed and as bright as the sun—but not quiet. *Never* quiet. And yet whenever Phil speaks, however short it may be, his voice is as soft as a whisper, and as raspy as sandpaper. It’s *wrong*, as wrong as the lack of a smile or laugh or teasing remark. Technoblade hopes desperately that this odd spell will pass quickly enough, but he knows that will only happen when Phil either works himself into a faint or their sleeping patient finally decides to wake up.

The latter is the least likely option, surprisingly.

And yet...

It’s on the third day that Wilbur finally wakes.

Technoblade is at Phil’s side, and Eret’s there, too. The two of them are busy urging the man to get

some rest—in a hammock by Wilbur’s side, if he must—when the man makes his first signs of movement. Phil and Eret are still lightly squabbling, distracted by half-hearted arguments that the former clearly doesn’t have the energy for, but Technoblade sees how bandaged fingers begin to twitch—how dark lashes begin to flutter against pale skin.

“Phil,” he starts, but there’s no need. A soft groan cuts through the air like a knife, announcing the awakening of their guest, and Phil *freezes*.

Wilbur is awake.

Brown eyes flicker open, bleary and dazed and clearly still unaware, pale cheeks flushed fever bright as the man tries to take stock of his surroundings. At his place beside Technoblade, Phil does not utter a word. He’s as still as a marble statue, and just about as ghostly white. Eret is quick to move to Wilbur’s side, pressing the back of their hand to his forehead with a quiet hum. The man shifts beneath their touch, his eyes widening into something almost panicked. He begins to thrash, knocking Eret’s hands away, and that’s when Technoblade and Phil step in, each moving to take a side, carefully pinning his arms to his sides as the man begins to kick and shout in his delirium, and then—

He goes abruptly still. His glassy gaze seems to finally focus, fixed with apparent shock and horror on none other than *Phil*. Phil flinches, and Technoblade reaches out a hand to steady him that is turned away, Phil not even noticing the invitation. His friend looks ready to either shout, burst into tears, or turn tail and run, and the white-hot rage he’d felt earlier when Phil had told him of Wilbur’s identity sparks anew. He bares his teeth, whirling to face their ailing patient with some choice words and perhaps more, but he turns to see the man almost in *tears*, his gaze shining with more than just the fever.

And then Wilbur *speaks*.

“...Phil?”

He hears Phil make a soft, broken sound behind him. He turns and watches as the man’s mouth opens and closes wordlessly. His hands loosen their grip from the man’s shoulders as if burned, and Technoblade’s unsure if it’s a conscious decision or something rooted in his shock. He looks as if he desperately wants to say something, *anything*—but what do you say to someone you once cared for, someone who turned their back on you?

It turns out Phil doesn’t need to worry about it, because, in the next moment, Wilbur’s eyes roll back and he falls back into incoherent mumbling. Or—mostly incoherent. Just one word is decipherable from the jumble of slurred syllables.

“...*Curse...*”

There’s a harsh clatter as Phil’s chair tips back, the man having stood so abruptly that he practically *threw* his seat. He does not attempt to pick it up, instead staring at Wilbur with the closest thing akin to *fear* that Technoblade has ever seen on his friend’s face.

“...Curse? Phil, what does he—?”

And Phil *bolts*.

He’s out of the room before Technoblade can even open his mouth to call after him.

“*Island...*” Wilbur murmurs, as if an afterthought, and promptly falls back into unconsciousness.

Eret is the one to bring them together again later that night.

Phil is coaxed back down from the crow's nest by the temptation of a meal—his hunger finally making its presence known now that their patient is safely out of danger. Technoblade opens up his quarters as a place to meet, and the three of them sit cross-legged on the floor, none of them bothered enough to care for the elaborate dining table just a few feet away. They don't speak of Phil's earlier outburst, at least, not at first, though Technoblade can see the way Eret seems to almost lean toward the man, ever perceptive as they are. They don't speak of Wilbur's words at first either, which is fine by Technoblade, because it means he can finally ask the question that's been on his mind for the last week.

“Eret.”

“Yes?”

“Are you a witch?” He hesitates only after saying it, afraid he may have managed to offend their honorary crewmate, but Eret just tips their head back and *laughs*, bright and merry. “Hey, wait a minute—!” Technoblade flushes. “It's not that weird of a question, I mean, didn't you literally see the future or somethin'?”

Eret just laughs harder.

“Hang on—you knew Wilbur was gonna show up, I'm right! Yer' at least psychic or somethin'.”

“Not *psychic*, Technoblade. Not a witch, either, though some of my dearest friends are. I just get a little help from time to time, that's all.” They don't elaborate, leaving Technoblade to glower like a petulant child. He wants to know *more*. He's never witnessed much magic up close. It hadn't exactly been prevalent around him growing up, let alone in the Navy. There had been rumors, of course—rumors of psychics and witches and magical beasts—but that had been all they were, to his knowledge. Rumors. Myths. Legends.

Phil snorts quietly over his food, as if it had been obvious and Technoblade was a fool to be asking.

“Phil,” Eret says calmly, interlacing their fingers and resting their chin atop them as Phil's chuckles quiet down. “If you're trying to hide your emotions from me, by the way, you're doing a very shit job.” Phil very nearly chokes on his drink, his cheeks flushing bright pink, but Technoblade is a little too preoccupied to tease him like he normally would, because, well, of all things for Eret to say, he hadn't expected *that*.

The bluntness of the statement is slightly curbed by the actual *contents*. It takes Technoblade a moment to understand, and when he finally does, Eret barks out a laugh, their eyes crinkling in the corners and their fingers squeezing his own tightly.

“Wait, so yer'—yer' a...”

“An empath, dear,” Eret confirms. “Among other things.”

“Other things? How much are you hidin'?”

“My secret to know, and yours to find out, Technoblade,” Eret whispers conspiratorially. They don’t give him a chance to respond to that, instead plowing right ahead to confront Phil, who has pointedly kept his mouth shut during the entire exchange. “I haven’t forgotten about you, Philza. Your hand, please?”

Phil seems to hesitate for a moment, before carefully placing his hand in the other’s. As Technoblade watches their fingers curl together, he’s vividly reminded of that morning so many weeks ago, where Eret had requested the same thing of him, and then...

“Oh, Phil,” Eret murmurs sympathetically. Phil’s jaw clenches, and he does not speak. “I see.”

“See *what*?” Technoblade can’t help himself. Eret *tsks* disapprovingly.

“I think—” Eret keeps going, ignoring him as they rub circles into the back of Phil’s hand with their thumb, “—you’ll find that it’s not as simple as you might believe, Phil. Although I don’t doubt how much it must hurt.”

Phil does not answer them.

“There will be time to discuss this more together later, if you want.” The offer goes unanswered, so Eret continues on. “But first, I think we somehow have something more pressing than even that.”

Technoblade nods.

“This... *curse* Wilbur was mumblin’ about. Is that what yer’ talkin’ about?”

“Yes,” Eret replies quietly. “Though I don’t think it’s *my* story to tell.”

Phil clears his throat.

“Well, it’s—you see, I—” he swallows, looking for all the world like he’d rather be anywhere than here. His hands are shaking again at his plate, making the silverware rattle. He sets it down and rests his head up against the wall, drawing his knees up close before speaking. “—I’m cursed.”

Technoblade just stares, disbelieving.

“It started nearly a year ago. Little things. Small accidents on the ship—stuff we could’ve passed up as old equipment or bad practice.” Phil’s hands are clenched so tightly it must hurt. “But it started getting worse. We’d get thrown off course, be it storms or enemy ships or, hell, sirens. We’d...we’d lose men. Quite a few of them.”

Technoblade doesn’t like where this is going.

“The crew started to blame me for it, I think. They caught on—saw that I wasn’t getting any of the bad luck while they were getting all of it.” His smile is fragile and forced, his eyes tired. “I think they were right, though. I’m cursed. Too much has happened—hell, even in the last few months! You’ve seen it with your own eyes, Techno.”

“The storm that night.”

“... Yeah, mate.”

“You—you *knew* it was goin’ to be bad. You were laughin’ down in your cell. The curse... That’s how you knew?”

“I knew it wouldn’t be just any old storm. Not with my luck.” His gaze softens into something

sorrowful. “I didn’t know it would sink your ship. I’d like to say I’d have warned you if I did, but...”

“...Yeah. Enemies.” Technoblade grimaces. He’d almost forgotten the way they’d first treated each other in the wake of their bonding over their time at sea. *Almost*. There’s no time to pity their former selves, though, and so for now he forges ahead as more and more incidents suddenly became so much more apparent. Phil’s constant vigilance at the mast—his rampant paranoia, always watching out for the younger members of the crew, and—

“That battle... You saved Ranboo, pushed him outta the way. They weren’t even supposed to be shootin’ at him in the first place.” Phil nods solemnly, a hand drifting up to rub unconsciously at his shoulder. “Yer’ tellin’ me that’s the curse?”

“Everyone around me suffers...” Phil’s lips are a thin line, a fine tremble returning to his hands that Technoblade’s learned to recognize as sorrow. “...I’ve learned to prevent what I can.”

And damn, if that isn’t one of the most heartbreaking things Technoblade’s ever heard Phil say. And he’s heard a *lot* in the last few weeks.

“It’s only fair, right?” Phil’s voice wobbles, high-pitched and breathy and dripping with bitterness. Technoblade wants to take his hand—to pull him into a hug—to force him to finally lay down and sleep if nothing else, but he finds himself still hanging on to every word Phil says, no matter how they pierce his heart. “If it’s my fault, I’ve gotta keep an eye out for everyone. I can’t let anyone else get hurt because of me.”

“*Phil*.” Eret’s voice is calm, yet commanding, and it silences the train of self-deprecation right in its tracks. “Have you ever considered that it might not be *you* that’s cursed?”

“...What do you mean?” For the first time since the beginning of their conversation, Phil sounds just a little bit hopeful.

“There are tales,” Eret says, folding their hands and leaning forward, their voice lowering into something soft and thoughtful. “Of an island with the treasures of a hundred kingdoms. A land of gold and jewels, the shores teeming with pearls and jewelry.”

Technoblade laughs. His companions do not.

“...It’s true,” Phil answers, just as quietly. “I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

“You’ve been there?” Technoblade casts a speculative glance his friend’s way, but Phil doesn’t flinch, his expression anything but joking. “It’s real, then?”

“Every bit of it.” There’s a small smile on his face now, a distant look in his eyes that speaks of awe and wonder and the treasure of a lifetime. “My crew and I found it—after years of searching, we found it. It was everything we dreamed—shores of gold, more riches than we could ever need in a lifetime...”

“There’s another story to this tale, Philza,” Eret interjects. “A warning...and a curse. ‘Any man who takes from the island shall be followed by death itself.’” They let their grim words settle between them, and the silence hangs heavy. “Did any of your crew take from those shores?”

“Yeah, course we did, mate, we’re *pirates*. We didn’t—we didn’t know about the curse, but—” Phil frowns. “The *Styx* went down. We saw the wreckage. The treasure must’ve sunk with it.”

“*All* of it?”

There's a beat of silence.

"...Shit." Phil's voice is weak—almost breathless.

Technoblade groans.

"Phil, tell me you don't have a piece of treasure from a cursed island somewhere on this ship...?" His voice trails off as he finally turns toward his friend, and sees the state he's in.

Phil's face is as white as a sheet. He's barely breathing, his lips half-parted as dawning horror seems to sink in. And then, with trembling hands, he pulls a familiar golden chain from his pocket, and that damned locket begins to swing almost tauntingly between his fingers.

"...Of course." It makes sense, in some terrible way. The universe has always been cruel like that.

There's a moment of silence that drags on far too long, in which the three of them simply sit together, unmoving, not even speaking.

And then Phil *moves*.

He's up and out the door before Technoblade can so much as say a word, the doors slamming open with a *bang* like a gunshot. Technoblade follows his friend a few steps behind as he thunders across the deck to the side, uncaring for the way he startles the dozing crew below with a chorus of confused shouts and murmurs. Phil skids to a halt at the rails, takes a deep breath, and with all of his might, throws the locket as far as he can into the depths of the sea.

It hits the surface with a quiet *plunk* and sinks out of sight.

"I did it," Phil says breathlessly. It's followed by a high, faint giggle as he sags against the wooden rails, his head in his hands, his shoulders shuddering. "Can't believe that was all it took. *Fuck.*"

"Phil," Technoblade starts, reaching out a hand as if to steady his friend's shaking form. "Are you...?"

Phil laughs again, this time sharper and much more *bitter*.

"I thought *I* was the curse. My crew did, too. But all this time, so many problems, so many people dead, just because I couldn't let go of my damn—"

He suddenly recoils with a hiss as a wave crashes up against the side of the ship, spraying his face with water. The whole ship rocks with the force of the blow, salty seawater washing up over the deck and leaving behind piles of foam and seaweed.

Phil's words trail off into nothing, his friend's gaze fixed firmly on the deck, his face growing paler and paler by the second, because—

At his feet sits a familiar golden locket.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Without so much as a warning, Technoblade marches up, seizes Wilbur by the collar, and hoists him upright to meet his gaze.

“This isn’t my fight,” he says quietly, “—but if it was, you’d have been thrown overboard days ago.” And his grip loosens, allowing the man a moment to breathe, wide brown meeting angry red. “Fix this. Soon. I’ve given Phil the benefit of the doubt in letting you stay aboard my ship. Don’t make me regret it.”

Chapter Notes

bones bones bones bones

new chapter! we're really getting into it now, friends, hang on tight!

just a friendly reminder that i don't have a definite upload schedule, and that my posting is honestly completely random. i'm a college student working full time and taking summer classes while trying to write this, so my posting is totally up to when i have the proper time and motivation! thank you all for your patience and support <3

—

chapter warnings: this chapter contains heavy self-deprecation, a portrayal of a near panic attack, and threats of gun violence.

“Guess I should’ve known it wouldn’t be that easy.”

“Ehh, can’t exactly fault you for tryin’.”

“We’re gonna have to do this the hard way, huh?”

“Yep. Cursed island, here we come.”

“Guess your ‘one little trip’ might be a bit longer than you planned, eh, mate?”

“...Bruh, I’ve been scammed.”

“...Techno?”

“Yeah?”

“I can’t help but feel like I made a mistake.”

“What do you mean?”

“The locket. I shouldn’t have tried to throw it away like that.”

“Hey, it was worth a shot. No harm, no foul.”

“...Maybe.”

“Somethin’ wrong?”

“Just a bad feeling, mate.”

The ginger-haired boy—the one that washed up with Wilbur—is back.

It’s not the first time they’ve seen him since his rescue. He slinks about the boat like a sly fox, sticking close to Wilbur’s side for the most part. He seems friendly enough—bright and eager, willing to lend a hand as needed, and able to strike up a conversation with just about anyone.

He has an odd fascination with Phil, though.

Right now, he’s watching Phil with an odd look in his eye. He stands near Ranboo, peering out from behind him as if he can somehow hide himself from view. His brows are furrowed—though not in anger, but more—confusion? Curiosity, perhaps? He’s behaving rather like an animal, shying away from prying eyes yet maintaining the tiniest little glitter of mischief in his gaze. He fits right in with Tommy, Tubbo, and Ranboo, all three of whom have apparently ‘adopted’ the boy into their ranks. Hence why they’re all currently above deck, levying their pistols and boasting about a shoot-out that Tubbo is almost guaranteed to win. They’re all focused on the game—setting wagers and egging each other on with taunts and teases—save for their newest addition, who can’t seem to take his eyes off of Phil.

And Phil notices *him*, too.

With a sigh, his first mate finally turns toward the boy, and gives the slightest little wave.

“Hi, mate.” His voice is soft—that same tone he always used with Ranboo when the boy first joined the *Argo*’s crew.

The boy—Fundy, if Technoblade remembers right—smiles, bright and wide, and waves back. If he had a tail, it’d be wagging, for the way he rocks on his heels and straightens up with a twinkle in his eyes. He looks as though he wants to say something, but then there’s a commotion as Tommy drags someone else up from below deck amidst teasing and laughter.

It’s Wilbur.

The man has been healing well after finally waking up. He’s been able to safely roam the ship on his own, his recovery excelling and his stubbornness even more so. Much to Phil’s evident displeasure, he’s made fast friends with the crew’s younger members—particularly Tommy, who clings to him like a second skin, watching eagerly for his approval at every turn. Even now, as

Tommy leads Wilbur toward the group, he's watching the taller man with a hopeful glint that makes him look so young and childish—like an eager little brother up to no good.

"I don't know about this," Wilbur says with a smile as he's brought to the center of the group. "I'm not exactly the best shot—I've always been more of a talker than a fighter, if I'm quite honest."

Phil makes a soft noise of affirmation beside him, although Technoblade doesn't think the man did it consciously. His friend is rigid beside him—the shoulder that brushes his own tense and unyielding. He and his son, to Technoblade's knowledge, have scarcely seen one another since Wilbur first woke up—let alone *spoken*. The tension is palpable, and the hollowed look in Phil's eyes makes fury spark anew in his gut. He wants to wipe that smug smirk off of Wilbur's face.

Anything to see Phil smile again.

Tommy's voice rings out loudly across the waters, surely waking any dozing crew members with his fervor.

"Awww, c'mon, man! Show us what you've got!" His eyebrows waggle. "...Or are you too *scared*?" Tommy, not giving him even a second to respond, practically *shoves* the pistol into Wilbur's hands, the man muffling a quiet laugh as he finally accepts.

Phil tenses beside him.

"It'll be fine," he murmurs softly to his friend. "If he tries anythin', we're both right here."

Phil gives a stiff nod. He doesn't look convinced.

Wilbur's attention is now fully devoted to the weapon in his hands, scrutinizing it as though it isn't entirely to his liking. Nevertheless, his grin widens at the other boys' urging, and he fixes them with a look that promises nothing but a good show. Wilbur gives the pistol an experimental twirl, weighing it, before releasing the safety with an audible *click*, squinting down at the mechanism through thick lenses.

Phil, suddenly finding himself staring down the barrel by chance alone, recoils as though he's been shot. He staggers backward, his hands jerking upward as if to raise them, blue eyes wide and panicked for just the briefest moment before clarity strikes him. He's quick to lower his hands and plaster a smile back on his face, but it's fake and forced and far too strained—and he's not fooling anyone.

Least of all Wilbur.

The gun is back in Tommy's hands in an instant, the man pulling away as if it burned his hands to even touch, his gaze wide-eyed and fixed on his father. He opens his mouth as if to say something, but no sound comes out, save for a soft exhale as Phil makes a swift and abrupt exit from the scene without another word. He slams the door to Technoblade's cabin shut behind him and leaves the merry mood to shrivel up into nothingness in his wake. Wilbur slumps against the railing. Tommy retreats back to Tubbo's side. Ranboo looks after Phil as if he wants to follow. And Technoblade...

Without so much as a warning, Technoblade marches up, seizes Wilbur by the collar, and hoists him upright to meet his gaze.

"This isn't my fight," he says quietly, "—but if it was, you'd have been thrown overboard days ago." And his grip loosens, allowing the man a moment to breathe, wide brown meeting angry red. "Fix this. *Soon*. I've given Phil the benefit of the doubt in letting you stay aboard my ship. Don't make me regret it." His lip curls, and for a moment he allows himself to stare into the eyes of the

one who betrayed his friend. He doesn't know what he expects to find there—malice, maybe, or something more sly, more discreet—but all he finds is overwhelming *guilt*. He's taken aback, and his grip slackens enough for the man to pull away, clutching at his throat with the other hand raised placatingly.

As he stares into Wilbur's devastated expression, he's struck by the sudden realization that things might not be as simple as he thought.

He opens his mouth—to question or to threaten, he's not sure—but whatever words begin to form are quickly cut short by a loud noise from his cabin. Something shatters, splintering against the hard wood of the deck, and Technoblade decides this conversation can wait. Wilbur can wait.

Phil needs him more.

He gives one last glare of warning before stepping away, struggling to maintain a facade of calm dignity as he crosses the deck to his cabin in just a few quick strides. He slips inside without a word, careful to shut and latch the door behind him before summoning the will to look at whatever scene of destruction might meet him.

His ceramic plate from the previous night's dinner is in a thousand tiny pieces across the floorboards, and Phil is on his knees beside it, looking as though it personally insulted him. On the outside, his friend is bristling—his eyes narrowed, his teeth gritted, his shoulders squared as if readying for a fight. But Technoblade can see his mask starting to slip, a hitch to his breathing that speaks of incoming panic and a glint of fear raw in his eyes as he stares down at the shards.

“Phil?” He moves slowly, as if approaching a wild animal rather than his friend. He might as well be one, for the way he puffs up at the sound of Technoblade's voice before he recognizes him, his teeth baring in the faintest hint of a snarl before he works to school his expression into something neutral.

“Hey, Tech,” Phil says, dropping the final syllable in a way that screams *exhaustion*, lifting a trembling hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. “I—uh—sorry about the mess, mate. I'll clean it up, just give me a moment, I— *shit!*” His hand slips on the wood as he shifts, and he moves to brace himself, his fingers skidding across wood and ceramic alike, a sharp hiss of pain escaping him. Technoblade is quick to drop to his knees beside him, gingerly curling his fingers around slender wrists and pulling his friend's hands away from the mess, humming in gentle disapproval as fresh blood begins to bead up along his new cuts.

“Phil, it's okay. I'll clean it up. You just—” and he sighs, squeezing the man's wrists for a moment, “—go sit on the bed, okay? I'll get somethin' for those scratches.”

Phil makes a noise of protest but allows himself to be guided up from the floor and over to the mattress. His shoulders are shaking by the time they reach it, and he leans his weight heavily on Technoblade's shoulders. He practically drags Technoblade down with him when he flops onto the bed, fingers still tangled in his coat, and Technoblade is helpless but to go along with him, abandoning his hopes of tidying the mess in lieu of pulling his friend into a tight embrace. Phil immediately buries his face in his shoulder with a jagged sigh, his grip around Technoblade's waist so tight it almost hurts. Technoblade doesn't let go.

“I don't know if I can trust him, Techno,” Phil admits softly. He sounds *tired*. “Last time I saw him with a gun in his hands, it—*fuck*—it was pointed at me.” Technoblade can feel Phil's chest stuttering for breath from where it's pressed against his own, and he trails his fingers gently between his friend's shoulder blades, rubbing tiny circles there.

“Breathe, Phil,” he urges softly, putting aside his friend’s words for now, focused only on bringing him down from the panic. He can’t afford to get angry. Not when Phil is barely keeping it together as it is.

“I’m sorry,” Phil says, and the words nearly break his heart. “This is stupid, I’m being stupid—I shouldn’t be freaking out—*fuck*, this is such *bullshit*—!”

Technoblade shushes him, his arms tightening around Phil until he makes a quiet little ‘*oof*’.

“It’s not stupid, Phil. If you think feelin’ stressed because a guy who betrayed you was pointin’ a gun at your face is dumb, then so is me bein’ scared of water.”

“What would the crew say if they could see me?” Phil rasps, as if he hasn’t heard Technoblade at all, and then he laughs—sharp and bitter. “Captain Philza, the Angel of Death, panicking over getting a fucking pistol pointed at him.” His breath quickens into another breathy giggle. “I’ve survived a hundred battles—hell, I’ve been shot and stabbed and on my deathbed. But I can’t even handle looking at my own *son* without falling apart. ” His head tips forward, until his brow is resting in the crook of Technoblade’s neck, the fight draining out of him until he’s nearly limp against him. “Maybe it’s a good thing you’re Captain now.”

“Phil…”

“No, Techno—it’s—*gods*.” Phil’s head raises so that he can properly drop his chin onto Technoblade’s shoulder. “Look at me, mate. I can’t lead like this. I don’t—I don’t know if I ever will again. I’m a fuckin’ wreck, a disaster waiting to happen. If you hadn’t been there when we found Wil…” Phil’s eyes look hollow and distant. “If you hadn’t been there, I would’ve just frozen up. The whole crew would’ve been without a captain while I wallowed in self-pity.”

Despite the way his breathing has begun to mellow, Phil doesn’t seem keen on moving from their embrace. Frankly, Technoblade doesn’t want to, either. He tells himself it’s for the sake of Phil, but his friend is a comfortable weight against him, fitting perfectly into his arms like a missing puzzle piece. He doesn’t know the last time he held someone like this—besides Phil, at least. It’s been a long time. Too long. He doesn’t want it to end just yet.

He doesn’t know how to comfort Phil. Half of it is true—Phil had fled at the first sight of his son, and had he been in charge, the crew would have indeed floundered at the loss of their captain. But there’s something else motivating Phil’s words: the bitterness of a former captain left to die by his crew. Phil’s confidence has been extinguished by that event like a candle in the sea, and Technoblade doesn’t know whether he’ll ever fully be able to rebuild to his former glory. There’s something simply *sad* about it, because, for all the rumors he’s heard of Captain Philza in his days in the Navy, never once had anyone doubted his ability to *lead*.

And yet, here they are.

Phil is one step away from the edge of a precipice, and Technoblade is clinging desperately to him, as if to hold him back from the fall. One wrong move—one misspoken word—and the ledge will crumble beneath his friend’s feet.

‘*It’s okay*’ feels like a blatant lie, and ‘*it’s going to be alright*’ might turn out to be promising false hope. He has no idea what the future holds for them. And so he settles for something else—something he hopes might still offer some comfort.

“I couldn’t do this without you,” he murmurs honestly, his heart aching when Phil moves just a little closer at his words. “Give yer’self some credit. Even if—even if you aren’t the captain

anymore, yer' still the one who brought this whole crew together, right?" When Phil finally, mercifully gives the smallest of nods into his shoulder, Technoblade continues on. "I might not really know what things were like before—what *you* were like before, but the Phil I know? The one who's stubborn and reckless and bullheaded and frankly, a bit of a bastard?" Phil gives a hiccupy giggle. "That's the one who's my first mate, not the other guy. That's the one—"

He nearly chokes up, his own emotions swelling as his tongue stumbles over the word that's started to become like second nature each time he thinks of the man. The man who's currently curled up in his arms, suddenly so small and vulnerable and *trusting*, when months ago they had been at each other's throats, ready to kill without hesitation. Those same blue eyes that were once narrowed in feral defiance from behind iron bars now blink fondly up at him, the smallest of smiles tugging at the pirate's lips.

"That Phil?" Technoblade continues, and delights in the genuine *smile* his next words elicit. "That's the Phil who's my friend."

Phil's been distancing himself from the crew.

It starts out small—the man spending a little more time than average up in the crow's nest. He's still around to perform his duties, but the rest of the time, he's either up on the mast or hiding somewhere else out of sight. Despite Technoblade's best efforts—despite all of the reassurances—it progressively worsens as the days go by, and soon enough Phil is absent from nearly every gathering, even mealtimes.

The crew has begun to notice.

Although Technoblade knows the reason behind Phil's actions—Phil's paranoia steadily building now that the person who betrayed him is back onboard—the rest of the crew does not, and the man has pointedly kept his mouth shut about the relationship between himself and their unexpected guests.

Wilbur has done the same.

They hardly spare each other even a *glance*. If Technoblade didn't already know their history, he would've thought them to be total strangers.

Like the crew does.

They don't see Phil's careful glances over his shoulder. They don't see the tension in every movement, the new edge he holds himself with, the faintest flicker of fear in his eyes when someone comes up behind him. All they see is a first mate who will scarcely talk to them, let alone spend time with them, and the effect is devastating on the crew's morale.

Life on the seas is long and arduous, and tensions often begin to run high toward the tail end of a voyage—when all the crew's members have had enough of one another—and enough of being trapped on a floating hunk of wood in the middle of the ocean together. The whole crew has begun to show the side effects; teasing words reduced to sharp insults, friendly smiles souring with exhaustion and stress. With a first mate absent from the dynamics and two new additions to the ranks, the strain is steadily growing with every passing day.

It's only a matter of time before they all reach their breaking point.

It starts with a celebration and a song.

A gentle melody rings out across the ship, light and trained and beautiful—nothing like raucous shanties Technoblade has grown fond of. The voice is just as unfamiliar as the tune and lyrics—smooth and soft and gentle, yet somehow commanding. Curious, he steps out of his cabin to find the crew gathered together around none other than *Wilbur*. The man is perched up on a barrel, a flask in one hand, doing his best to lead the crew in a merry song that nobody else knows the words to. It doesn't seem to matter much—his audience is captivated by just his voice alone. All of them—save for one.

Phil leans against the railing, far from the crowd. His face is shadowed, curtained by his hair as he pointedly looks anywhere but at his son.

Technoblade approaches quietly, so as not to draw attention.

“You okay?” he asks.

Phil laughs dryly.

“Haven't heard him sing in a while,” he says simply.

There's a rowdy cheer from the crew as the song ends—a chorus of shouts and applause. Glasses are raised and bottles alongside them, and beside him, Phil lets out a long, weary sigh before pushing himself away from the crowd and moving to join them. There are a few happy greetings murmured as Technoblade follows—loudest of all Tommy, who swaggers over with a grin so wide it must hurt.

“Technoblade! Blade. Captain. My *man*. Nice of you to join the party,” Tommy exclaims, slinging an arm around his shoulders as Technoblade squirms to get away. Beside him, Phil chuckles, clearly taking delight in his suffering. He shoots a pleading look his friend's way, and the man finally caves, rolling his eyes with a fond smile and moving closer.

“It's a bit early in the day to be celebrating, don't you think, mate?” Phil quips, deftly snatching the bottle from Tommy's hands and darting playfully away amidst squawks of protest. “The *last* thing you lot need is more rum. Besides, what are we even celebrating?”

“Our new crew members, of course!”

The bottle in Phil's hands hits the ground with a sharp *clatter*, rum and glass alike spilling out across the deck.

“What the *fuck*, Phil?”

Technoblade is at his side in a heartbeat.

“That's not exactly yer' decision, here, Tommy,” he grunts, sweeping the shattered remnants into a pile with his boot as best he can. Tommy has the decency to at least look abashed, whereas Wilbur and Fundy look startled and hurt, respectively.

“Sorry,” Wilbur murmurs, though he doesn't sound very sorry at all. “Guess we got a little carried away.”

Technoblade fixes him with a firm look. Surprisingly, Phil does as well. His friend's body is angled between Tommy and Wilbur, his shoulders rigid, and it takes Technoblade far longer than he'd care to admit to realize what he's doing. He's *protecting* Tommy, even if unconsciously, all his frustration and pain temporarily disregarded at the slightest hint of a threat toward his new crew. Technoblade knows then, without a shadow of a doubt, that Phil is willing to do *anything* to keep history from repeating itself. Only...

"What the fuck is wrong with you lately, Phil?" Tommy snaps, pushing past his protective stance to glare at him with his arms crossed, standing rigidly at Wilbur's side. Most times, it's hard to remember that half of their crew are children—but now, Tommy looks eerily *young*, his eyes narrowed defiantly and his brows furrowed almost petulantly. Tommy is being *clingy*—clingy to a random stranger he barely knows, treating him like he's been a part of the crew for months rather than days. It would be heartwarming, probably, to see him so attached so quickly, were it not for what Technoblade *knows*.

"Tommy..." Phil starts, but the kid just keeps going.

"No, Phil! You've been acting like an *ass* all week—all gloomy and brooding! You've been treating Wilbur like shit, and Fundy too, and they haven't done anything to you! You let Ranboo join, so why not them, too?"

"Tommy, that's not—"

"Not what, Phil? Fair? Like you're *obviously* being to them?"

"Tommy..." This time it's Wilbur speaking, stretching out a hand as if to rest it consolingly on Tommy's shoulder. And Phil *snarls*, hand moving toward his belt, where his pistol rests, waiting.

"*Don't touch him.*"

"Phil!" Technoblade and Tommy's horrified voices overlap this time, Technoblade pushing himself between his first mate and his son before he can even think. He turns his back on Wilbur, instead reaching for Phil, his fingers curling firmly around his friend's wrist. "C'mon, man. It's not worth it—he's not gonna do anythin'."

"You don't know that," Phil hisses, and he sounds simultaneously furious and heartbroken, his voice wet and his eyes starting to get glassy as he struggles to glare over Technoblade's shoulder at his son. "You don't know what he might do, I can't let—I can't let anyone else—"

Out of the corner of his eye, amidst Phil's rambling, Technoblade can see the crew watching them. Niki looks aghast, one hand raised to her mouth. Tubbo looks torn between delight and anger. Ranboo just looks scared. And he knows without a doubt that Phil would never want his crew to see him like this—with tears pricking at the corners of his eyes—looking so desperate and vulnerable and *lost* that it makes Technoblade's heart *ache*. He steps a little closer to Phil in an attempt to shield him from view, all the while murmuring soft reassurances.

"Phil," he says, his other hand going to his friend's shoulder. "I won't let anythin' happen to them, I promise. But you need to calm down. Yer' gonna start sayin' and doin' things you'll regret."

"I don't think I'll regret any of this. It's clear *he* doesn't."

"I don't know if that's true—"

"*Look, Dad—*" Wilbur's jaws snap shut, his face going pale—and Phil's along with it. It's a simple slip of the tongue—their situation momentarily forgotten—and yet this new revelation is

enough to elicit several surprised murmurs from the crew surrounding them. Eyes widen, mouths hang agape, and Technoblade catches a glimpse of Tommy's face, twisted with revulsion and fury and some sort of deep *hurt*.

"He's your *son*?" The kid sounds scandalized. "You said you didn't have a *wife*, let alone any family!"

Wilbur flinches at that.

"I—" Phil's mouth opens and closes wordlessly, his fist clenched white-knuckled at his side. He shoots a desperate glance Technoblade's way, practically *begging* for an escape, and so the captain sighs and moves forward, stretching his hands out placatingly.

"Tommy, I'm sure he didn't mean to hide—"

"So you're telling me you're treating *your own kid* like shit?" Tommy's teeth are bared as he barrels over Technoblade's soothing words, and he looks at Phil with so much venom Technoblade can practically *feel* its sting. "You just up and moved on with the rest of us, huh?" Tommy has always had a heart for others—dangerously so, sometimes, and now his empathy is showing full-force, wild and unkempt and almost feral—with Phil on the receiving end of his wrath.

"Tommy, that's not what—" Phil's voice is weak and *aching*, his brow furrowed with confusion and sorrow.

"Were we ever more than just a replacement? Are you gonna abandon us, too?" And *oh*, maybe this isn't just empathy speaking—but instead, a messy pile of emotions and insecurities from the past bubbling up, raw and ugly, to the surface. Past wounds reopened, like a hot brand to an old burn. Tommy's scars run deep, and this seems to have torn him as deep as any betrayal. "Like Tubbo and I haven't been through enough of that? What about Ranboo, huh? Was he next? I thought you were better than this, Phil!"

"*Tommy*," Phil gasps, one hand half-lifted to his heart, a pained look in his eye.

"Tommy, that's enough," Technoblade tries, only to be met with that same white-hot rage and desperation. "You don't mean any of this, I think we all just need to calm down and—"

"Fuck off! I want to know why Phil went and abandoned his kid like he didn't give a—"

"*I abandoned him!*"

Wilbur.

The young man has stepped forward, his chest heaving, his arms outstretched as he steps between Tommy and Phil. Behind his glasses, his eyes are shining with unshed tears, his lips twisted into a grimace. He looks distraught, guilt and shame practically radiating from him, and Technoblade is torn between his empathy and his anger.

"...What?" Tommy sounds nearly breathless in his confusion.

"Phil didn't leave me. I left *him*."

"Wilbur, what does that mean?" Tommy searches the man with wide eyes, his anger faltering as confusion takes its place. "What are you saying, man?"

"Wil..." Phil is staring at Wilbur with a dangerous mixture of bitterness and *hope*, so wild and

desperate that Technoblade almost feels guilty when it crumbles beneath the weight of the rage. Wilbur's confession has finally sunk in, and now Phil is bristling anew, teeth gritted and eyes blazing. Wilbur lifts a hand as if to placate his father, and Phil recoils, swatting it away none-too-gently.

Wilbur makes a soft noise of hurt.

"Phil, I'm not gonna—"

"What? Put a gun to my head? Chain me up? Leave me to die? *Again?*" Phil's voice is deadly sharp, any hint of grief evaporating in the face of the flames of anger.

"*What?*" This time, Tommy's horror is directed at Wilbur, the boy whirling on the man so fast he actually flinches away from him. "You—you did *what?*"

Wilbur just hangs his head.

"... You *bitch!* You dick, I fucking trusted you!" Tommy is nose to nose with the taller man, bristling like an angry cat ready to swipe.

"No, that's not—I didn't mean—"

"Really? Because I'm pretty sure that's *exactly* what you did." Phil's voice is dangerously low, every ounce of repressed fury and hurt boiling beneath the surface of each syllable. "I was gonna *die*, Wil. You left me to the fucking Navy! If that ship hadn't sunk, if I hadn't escaped—they would've *hung me*, Wil."

"You didn't...you didn't escape?" Wilbur asks, suddenly sounding very small and very scared. "They actually caught you?"

Tommy makes a soft noise of confusion, backing down a little as he glances between the two of them, clearly still enraged and uncertain where to direct his emotions.

"You cuffed me to the fucking wall, Wilbur," Phil snaps. "What the hell did you *think* was going to happen?"

"I thought—"

"Guys?" Jack's call breaks through the chaos, the note of fear in his voice splitting through the argument. "Not to ruin this, uh, *lovely* family reunion, but—" and he points west, eyes wide, "—I'm afraid we've got company."

Technoblade follows his gaze to the horizon. A massive ship looms like a shadow in the distance, heavy sails catching the wind and quickly gaining on them as they float, anchored comfortably close to shore.

"*Shit,*" Phil breathes.

Technoblade just nods.

A familiar blue flag ripples in the breeze far above, emblazoned with a crest he's come to loathe.

A royal warship.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

"I can pull rank—I can vouch for you, Techno. You don't have to do this. You don't have to stoop to piracy." He spits the last word as if it's a curse, his nose wrinkling in distaste, though his eyes remain wide and pleading, one hand outstretched. "I can get you back in the Navy. I can get you your rank—a ship—a crew. Whatever you want, Techno."

And for a minute, it's tempting.

Chapter Notes

oh man i'm so so excited to share this chapter with you all! we're really getting into the thick of it now, with about six chapters or so to go!

i hope you enjoy reading this chapter as much as i enjoyed writing it <3

—

chapter warnings: general violence, gun violence, & vague depictions of injury.
basically everything you'd expect from a pirate fight!

The *Argo* and her opponent are at a standoff.

Side by side, but neither firing, they drift alongside one another as their crews stand at the ready. The tension is palpable, both sides waiting for the cue—for the first shot to be fired. Technoblade waits on bated breath, his heart pounding wildly in his ears, cold dread creeping into his veins like ice.

He knows this is not a fight they can win.

The *Argo* is *dwarfed* by her opponent—both in sheer size and in numbers. If they fight, if this ends in bloodshed—there's no telling how many they could lose in the battle.

Or if any would survive at all.

Beside him, Phil is rigid. He's just as nervous—his years of experience out on the seas more than enough to tell him the challenge they face. He casts a sideways glance at Technoblade, and when their eyes meet, the captain sees just the faintest flicker of fear in his first mate's eyes. Not for himself, no, but for the crew under their command. Technoblade's heart sinks for Tommy, and Tubbo, and Ranboo—and all of the others under his command who will have to face this threat underprepared and overwhelmed.

There's just one alternative.

“Parlay,” Technoblade murmurs.

“Techno?” Phil’s voice is soft. Questioning.

“We have to negotiate somehow.”

“Techno.” Phil’s face is shadowed, his gaze distant. “They don’t negotiate with pirates. Trust me.”

“We have to *try*, Phil. We can’t win this.”

“...I know.”

And that’s how they ended up like this—half of the enemy ship’s crew gathered on the deck of the *Argo* alongside Technoblade’s own men, Technoblade and their captain standing face to face, a foot away, weapons drawn but not pointed, merely eyeing one another up.

And Technoblade blinks.

“...Dream?”

“*Commodore* Dream, actually.” His friend—George, if Technoblade’s memory serves correct—says lowly from Dream’s left. He thumbs the pistol at his belt, making no attempt to disguise the threat.

“No, wait—George, hang on!” Dream protests, a note of disbelief in his voice as he steps up to scrutinize Technoblade. His lips twitch in the barest hint of a smile, though his sword remains drawn and ready. “Technoblade? Techno, is that you?”

“*Captain* Technoblade.” Phil’s voice, however hushed, is just as sharp, more of a hiss than anything.

“Captain? Techno, you’re the *captain*?” Dream huffs out a laugh, and his demeanor suddenly drops into something far less threatening. He runs a hand through his hair with a grin, shaking his head. “You’ve gotta be kidding me. Technoblade, a pirate?”

Technoblade manages a weak grin amidst the complete and utter *shock*. His whole body is still on edge—his muscles tense, his brain firing a million miles a minute. Though there are no words to describe how relieved he is to see a familiar face, they’re still on opposite sides of this ‘war’ now, and Dream has never been anything less than *ruthless*. He’s a threat at best, and the *Argo*’s doom at his worst. He can never be too careful around his former comrade.

“...Surprise?” he says dryly, laughing along with Dream, though he can’t find any humor in the situation. He’s just been caught red-handed aboard the crew of a pirate ship, blatantly betraying his former ideals yet again. He doesn’t think his punishment will be just a hand this time, somehow.

“I’m not gonna lie, when I heard pirates wanted to negotiate, well—I was a little confused. But this—this changes things,” Dream says, lowering his weapon to clap Technoblade on the shoulder. Technoblade grits his teeth and suppresses the urge to tug his arm away.

“It does?”

Dream grins.

“I mean, it’s pretty obvious you’ve gotten a little desperate here, Techno. I mean, *piracy*? I know

things have been hard, and when you lost your ship you decided to throw a little pity party—but hey! This is your chance! Your big shot!”

“It is?”

“Imagine it. Captain Blade—returning triumphantly back to his duties with a whole pirate crew in chains! Captain Philza's crew—the *Angel of Death* himself! They'd welcome you back with open arms!”

“You want me to...?”

“Oh, *c'mon*, Techno! We both know this isn't what you want. The Navy was your dream! You've fallen low—I get it, man, you were desperate—but I can turn a blind eye just this once.” He winks. “Our superiors won't know anything you don't want them to.”

Technoblade recoils. He can feel the eyes of his whole crew on him—can feel their shock, the hair on the back of his neck rising along with the tension.

“Dream, just let us go,” he reasons, refusing to answer his offer. “Just this once. Do it for an old ally, if nothin' else. There are kids on my crew—a civilian, too. They don't need to get caught up in this.”

Dream's expression hardens.

“They got caught up in this the second they chose piracy, Techno. You know the punishment as well as I do. The gallows will be full this week.”

Tommy makes a quiet, panicked noise somewhere behind him, and Technoblade bares his teeth, white-hot anger flaring in his gut.

“Yeah, that's *not* happenin', Dream.”

Dream has the audacity to look surprised.

“What *happened* to you, Techno?” he questions, and there's a note of genuine concern in his voice. “The Techno I knew wouldn't do this—wouldn't stand with criminals.”

“Guess I had too much taken from me,” he answers, the fear in his heart crumbling beneath the weight of his anger. “Can't find it in myself to believe everythin' I hear anymore.”

He can see Dream's gaze drifting to his prosthetic. The expression he boasts is one of pity, and it makes Technoblade's stomach turn, his rage only growing.

“I'm sorry to hear that, Technoblade,” Dream says, and it sounds genuine. “But I can't just let you leave, either. Which leaves us with just one other option.”

Technoblade nods solemnly and raises his sword.

“Typical pirates! Never know a losing battle when they see one,” a young man Technoblade doesn't recognize suddenly proclaims. He's at Dream's right hand, his expression dark and similarly poised to fight—dark, messy hair spilling out over a white bandana that's certainly not to Navy code.

“Wait a second,” Phil says from his left. His lips are downturned in a frown, his brows furrowed—his shoulders tense, his gaze searching. “I know you. You're Captain Bad's boy, aren't you?”

Sapnap? The hell is a pirate's kid doing in the Navy?"

"Shut *up!*" The boy snaps immediately, and in an instant, his sword is angled toward Phil, his teeth bared and ready to fight. "This one's *mine*," he declares with a boastful smile that Phil is quick to match with a cocky grin of his own, branding his cutlass. Technoblade growls, raising his own weapon to defend his friend, but he's cut off by Dream's blade against his, a loud ring echoing across the water as they clash.

"I don't want to fight, Techno," Dream says, and he looks genuinely sorrowful. "But you're picking the wrong side, and I can't let you go any further."

"Fuck off," Phil spits, as he strains against Sapnap's strength, the two of them locked in a standstill. "You don't know *shit*— you think the Navy's any better?"

Dream laughs.

"It's better than being a criminal, *'Angel.'*"

And then they fight. It's messy and brutal, and he can hear cries and shouts and the sounds of metal clashing—accompanied by the awful noise of fabric and skin alike ripping beneath the blows.

Technoblade faces Dream.

Captain versus captain—as it should be. He won't allow anyone else to face such a dangerous foe. He's reluctant to trade blows with someone he once considered an ally—a partner, even—but the adrenaline of the consequences should he *not* fuel his every movement, keeping him on his toes and preventing his blows from losing their force.

He has to win.

Dream, on the other hand, is decidedly holding back.

"I can pull rank—I can vouch for you, Techno. You don't have to do this. You don't have to stoop to *piracy*." He spits the last word as if it's a curse, his nose wrinkling in distaste, though his eyes remain wide and pleading, one hand outstretched. "I can get you back in the Navy. I can get you your rank—a ship—a crew. *Whatever you want*, Techno."

And for a minute, it's tempting.

He imagines returning to the Navy with honors, having not only captured the Angel of Death but also his ship and his crew. He imagines the praise and prestige and a shining new ship, and the proud gazes of the superiors that once scorned him...

He imagines Phil in chains again.

The foolhardy hope in his chest dies.

"...We can be partners again."

And there it is.

It's the most tempting offer out of all of them, more so than any success he might gain from his betrayal. He and Dream—a team again. Though he's never quite considered them *friends*, per se—not like Dream has, at least—their partnership when they'd crewed the same ship had been *legendary*. There's no denying that they work well together, and unlike others, Dream never saw

him as just a tool—just a weapon to be commanded, just another soldier. They weren't friends, no—but they were *equals*, and that was more than Technoblade had been able to say for a long time before meeting him. They worked well together, they got the job done, and Technoblade never had to be anything more or less than what he wanted to be.

It'd be easy to fit back into it. Like slipping on an old glove—that comfortable detachment he'd grown used to feeling back as a naval captain. The assurance that just as nobody needed to care for him more than was necessary, so too did he not have to care for them in turn. Except... he'd never been good at that, had he? His passion, his care for his crew—never fully reciprocated. His heart for those around him—thrown back at him with strict orders and punishment and constraining rules that promoted indifference and callousness in leadership, rather than compassion.

He'd felt so *much* when he'd lost his crew. He still thinks of them—still regrets with every inch of him, with every fiber of his being. The Navy had seen it as a waste of resources—a loss of mere numbers—a betrayal of their ideals. He'd been punished for the latter, rather than the deaths of a few dozen men whose families would never see them again. And maybe that's what makes his hand still ache with phantom pain—maybe that's what makes the memories taste so bitter on his tongue. He hadn't even been punished for the right thing.

But he has a chance to go back. Right here, right now. This moment will be his only shot—Dream the only person with the confidence and capability to return his merit to him. He could have it all back—go back to the way things used to be, like nothing ever happened.

Except he'd never forget. He'd have the weight of his crew's deaths on his shoulders—not just the former, but his current—Tommy and Tubbo and Ranboo and Eret and Niki and Jack and—

Phil.

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches the look on Phil's face, and something else in him shatters as well.

Some part of him must have betrayed his brief moment of hesitation, because Phil is looking at him with something akin to a mix of *hurt* and *shock* and *sorrow*, his movements stalling as if he's simply too surprised to even move. It twists into something ugly—something dangerous and furious and so raw that Technoblade flinches away from the intensity of his glare. He wants to assure him, to immediately spit his rejection of the offer out for all to hear, but—

Sapnap lunges forward, scoring a shallow slash along Phil's shoulder, and their fight begins anew, leaving no time for reconciliation—though his first mate keeps shooting him rapid, desperate glances as though he can't quite believe what he just saw. And Dream's moving too, as if sensing Technoblade's change of heart, quickly taking up the offensive and pushing their blades together until they're nearly nose-to-nose.

“Are you sure you wanna do this, Techno?” And *oh*, there's a note of hurt in Dream's voice amidst the cold anger, a desperation in his blows that hadn't been there before. “You're really gonna give it all up? For what? A bunch of *criminals*?”

“They're my *friends*,” Technoblade hisses back, and Dream laughs at that. It sounds wrong—twisted, somehow, laced with a bitterness that speaks volumes of how the man might have viewed him, had they stuck together. It makes Technoblade's heart pinch, but there's no time to dwell on it, because Dream's blows just keep on coming, stronger and faster and each one more and more dangerous than the last.

“They're *pirates*, Technoblade. They take and they steal and they *kill*, and you think they're your

friends?” Dream’s eyes glitter with something unrecognizable. “You might be their captain now, but one wrong move and they’ll toss you aside—leave you behind.”

Technoblade opens his mouth to respond, to retaliate—but something stops him. The image of Phil, in chains, left behind by not only his crew but his own *son*. Do all pirates really think so little of relationships? Is there some unspoken code, an understanding that no attachment is permanent? Could it happen to him, too?

The thoughts die almost instantly—banished to the back of his mind—because all he can think of is Phil’s shock; his utter *devastation* when he’d been betrayed.

“No,” he hisses through gritted teeth, and shoves back, sending Dream stumbling. “They wouldn’t.”

“What makes you so sure?” Dream demands. He sounds like a cornered animal, almost *desperate*, and it’s unlike anything he’s heard from him before. “How do you know they won’t turn on you?”

“I trust them.” It’s short, simple, and painfully *honest*.

Dream gets a glint in his eyes, then.

“But do they trust *you*?”

“...What?”

“Do they know, Techno? Because I do. I know exactly who you captured that day—just who you were ordered to escort. Do they?”

Oh, *gods*. Technoblade knows exactly what his plan is. To force him into an alley with no way out—to leave him with no other option but to run to the Navy with his tail between his legs—to run back to *Dream*. The commodore has always been sly, always been conniving, but this is a side of him he’s never seen. This is dangerous—this is a *threat*, manipulation at its finest.

Perhaps even the strongest men can be corrupted by power.

“Don’t, Dream.”

“Do they know, Techno?” Dream asks, even louder this time. “Do they know you imprisoned their own first mate? Do they know you were going to escort Philza to his *death*?”

He tries not to look. He really does. But out of the corner of his eye, he sees the reactions of his crew. Tommy’s face falls, devastated, then twists into something ugly and angry. Ranboo makes a soft sound of disappointment, scarcely audible over the sounds of battle. Niki gasps, and tears of anger and hurt make her eyes glassy. Eret, pressed carefully behind Tubbo and Jack—though they, too, hold a sword—just looks sad, but not surprised.

He had meant to tell them. He and Phil had agreed that they couldn’t hide it, that sooner or later the truth would have to come out. But in the midst of the chaos—of sirens and battles and stowaways and *Wilbur*—there hadn’t been any time to think of it.

And now they know.

He looks away, ashamed, his cheeks flushing in shame and anger alike, his grip on his sword tightening until his knuckles *ache*. In front of him, Dream smiles as though he’s already won.

“Do you really think they’d want you as their captain now? Now that they know the truth?” And his grin softens into something more hopeful, that damn hand extending as if he truly expects Technoblade to take it. “Come back to the Navy, Techno. There’s nothing for you here.”

The crew knows his secret. Phil *saw* his hesitation. He knows the confrontation he’ll face—the trial that awaits him in winning back their trust. Some might never forgive him again after learning the truth—that he was once one of the very men they fight now, vying for their deaths. So maybe Dream isn’t wrong. Not entirely.

But Technoblade already let down one crew.

He’ll be damned if he does it again.

“Sorry, Dream.” His voice is firm. Final. His opponent’s face falls, darkening into something bitter and hurt and furious. “I think I’ll have to pass.”

“You’re going to regret this, Techno. You’ll come crawling back,” Dream insists, as their blades fall together once more. This time, Technoblade fights with a new vengeance. He fights for his crew.

He fights for his *friends*.

They don’t talk much after that, both of them too focused on the fight. The air is filled with the sound of the clashing of swords, the choked grunts and snarls as pirate faces sailor, neither group willing to back down for a moment. For either, victory means life, and loss—death. Technoblade has no heart for killing—he never has—but it’s every man for himself, and one death to prevent another is a fair enough exchange in his eyes if it means one less friend to lose.

And then...

“What the *hell*?” Dream’s question is less venomous and more confused, his blade stilling mid-swipe. His gaze is fixed upward, his brows furrowed and his mouth agape, utterly bewildered. Technoblade follows his gaze upward and feels his heart *drop*.

“Oh, you *bastard*.”

Phil is standing on the yard.

Phil is standing on the yard.

He’s poised with one arm outstretched, brandishing his cutlass at Sapnap, who clings to the rigging as though he’s chased the pirate all the way up. Despite the way the wind whips at his hair, Phil is grinning as he stands, balanced, confident and catlike, out on the narrow surface. He crooks a finger at Sapnap with the slightest little tilt of his head, his grin widening.

“C’mon, then, mate. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

A bait.

“...Or are you *scared*?”

Sapnap takes it. He teeters out onto the yard, his own sword outstretched, and moves with surprising agility to confront Phil where he stands. They clash once more, and every movement has Technoblade’s chest lurching, his heart in his throat. One wrong move—one wrong step—and either one could face a devastating fall. But Phil is smiling, chest puffed and eyes bright, and he

looks more at home up there than safely down on the deck.

A bird, indeed.

“You *idiot*,” he hisses under his breath, just as Dream shakes himself from his shock to continue their own battle. “If *he* doesn’t kill you, I’ll kill you myself.”

Dream laughs at that.

“I can see why you like him,” he quips, twisting his blade with an expert flick that catches the corner of Technoblade’s ear, nearly knocking his hat off. “He’s *fun*.” And he laughs, shaking his head. “But I’m afraid my first mate’s more capable than he thinks.”

Above, there’s a pained grunt as Sapnap lands a hit—shallow but long—across Phil’s bicep.

“Phil can handle himself,” Technoblade answers, just as Phil’s next blow nearly sends Sapnap’s blade flying from his grip. His chest warms with pride and smug satisfaction.

“Oh, I have no doubt. I’ve heard the rumors. Captain Blade, befriending the *Angel of Death*. I have to say, I’m a little impressed.”

Technoblade bares his teeth.

“But there’s something else,” Dream adds, almost as an afterthought. His grin turns sharp, like a cat toying with a mouse.

“What’s that?” Technoblade snaps impatiently, not in the mood for any more of his games.

“You’re forgetting about my sharpshooter, Techno.”

No.

There’s something else Technoblade forgot.

Dream hates to lose.

He turns with wings on his feet, and his heart *stops*.

He can see George taking aim from where he crouches in hiding—sees the way the barrel levels at Phil’s heart. Technoblade is moving before he can even think, pushing through the crowd, parrying swipes and shouldering past enemy after enemy, taking a line of men down in his wake. His heart pounds, his blood roaring in his ears, his muscles burning with the strain of his efforts and a dozen nicks and scrapes. It doesn’t matter. Nothing else matters. He has to get there—he *has* to make it in time, he needs to go faster, to move, to protect his friend—

The gun lowers.

Bang.

Phil teeters backward, his lips half-parted in an ‘o’ of surprise, his arms splaying to either side. He takes one precarious step backward, then another—and then his heel is slipping, slipping over the edge, and he’s falling backward with nothing to catch him but the wind.

“*Phil!*”

Technoblade sees Sapnap make a grab for him, as if in some last-second surge of regret, but it’s too

late. His fingers grab at nothing but open air.

And Phil falls.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Icarus, they'll call him.

A man who flew too close to the sun.

Chapter Notes

sorry to leave you all at a cliffhanger last chapter, but i couldn't resist. i hope the wait for this one wasn't too long <3

not gonna bother with long notes this time! enjoy!

please heed chapter warnings for this one.

—

chapter warnings: depictions of near-drowning, injury, violence, & suicidal ideations.

Phil is flying.

His stomach is weightless, the wind in his hair, tugging playfully at his jacket. His arms are outstretched to either side, his wings featherless—and yet they catch the wind just as well. The world around him moves as if in slow motion, white sails billowing in the wind above, rippling like strange clouds against a sky of blue. If he reaches up, he could very nearly touch them—but they're quickly moving away, far out of his reach.

Phil is falling.

He can hear screams and shouts—Technoblade's voice rising above the din, full of the pure terror that has yet to take hold of Phil himself. He feels sorrowful for a moment—pained that he could be the one to cause his friend such emotion—but then another voice catches his ears.

Wilbur.

His son is screaming his name. His son is reaching for him from what feels like a mile away, as if he can somehow stop the inevitable impact to come. His face is twisted with such an awful emotion, marring his handsome features with an agony no man should ever have to bear.

How fitting, Phil thinks, that his son should be here to finally ensure his end. The first attempt hadn't been successful—Phil too stubborn to die in chains. But perhaps this is more fitting. Fallen, not to the bullet that had struck at his feet instead of his heart, but by his own recklessness. Doomed by his own foolishness, by his desperate reaches for the sky itself.

Icarus, they'll call him.

A man who flew too close to the sun.

He smiles.

The water gets closer.

Wilbur reaches.

His fingers close around empty air.

He doesn't feel the impact.

Not at first.

He hears the sound—loud and awful—and feels the cold rush of water around him. But not the pain. Instead, only an odd numbness surrounds him, like a blanket swaddling him from the agony. The water tugs at his hair as he sinks, even the breath in his lungs paralyzed by the force of his fall. He finds himself staring up at the sunlight as it sparkles off of the surface, and revels in its beauty.

He's oddly tired.

He's no stranger to drowning. Every pirate worth his salt has had his fair share of scares, but this feels different somehow.

This feels final.

He wishes he could apologize to Technoblade for leaving him. After all, the man had promised to stay by Phil's side, and now Phil is becoming a hypocrite. Maybe it won't be so bad, though. He gets the feeling Technoblade won't be long to follow. Be it a sword or the gallows, his crew seems fated to join him one way or another.

He just wishes he wasn't the first.

His eyes are getting heavy. His lungs no longer burn—long since filled with water after the first reflexive breath. It still doesn't hurt, and he's grateful for that small mercy. He doesn't fear death, but he'll take whatever comfort he can get as he drifts into her arms. He's tired. So tired. He's ready to rest, rocked to sleep by the gentle ebb and flow of the tide as it pulls him lower and lower, further and further from that beautiful sunlight. No more bubbles trail up from his lips, the water dark and still and oddly *peaceful*. A pleasant heaviness has begun to creep over him, starting in his limbs and spreading until it pulls on his chest and on his eyes, urging him to close them for just a minute.

And so he does.

It's quiet. Dark. Cold. He can't think straight anymore, but the emotions remain—a bitter regret on his tongue that he can't quite reason with. He's missing something. Someone, perhaps. Everything's slow. Muddled. He can't bring himself to care anymore.

He just wants to sleep.

And then a hand grabs his wrist.

He opens his eyes, and amidst the dark waters he sees a swirl of brown curls and wide, fearful eyes. Strong arms curl around him, and then they're moving up, up, up—

When his head finally breaches the surface, he can't even bring himself to draw breath. It's too much work. His head lolls against his savior's shoulder, his eyes fluttering weakly. Every movement takes more than he has to offer. It would be so easy to just *rest*.

A hand strikes between his shoulders—hard. He reflexively gasps—then coughs as the water in his chest bubbles, finally spilling free as he heaves, allowing him to draw in a shaky, merciful breath. And *gods*, does that breath hurt. The world spins around him, darkness tugging at the corners of his vision, and he's unable to so much as twitch his limbs to help lighten the burden. It hurts too much to breathe, and it would just be so much easier if he *didn't*, if he just rested instead. But there's a muffled, insistent voice in his ears, half-garbled by seawater as waves wash around them.

“—*il?* Phil, *c'mon*. Stay awake. Keep your eyes open. Phil—Dad, *please*.”

And so he obeys, drawing in another shaky, ragged breath, and trains his eyes dazedly on the horizon, unable to lift his head to look upon his son's face. He hears a shout, followed by a splash.

“Dad, hold on to me. Don't let go. Hang on tight, we're gonna get you up there. You're gonna be fine, it's okay, just *hang on*.”

Phil does his best to comply. His fingers are stiff and shaky as they curl into the fabric of Wilbur's shirt and around his shoulders. Wilbur's arm tightens around him, and then they're moving up again, faster than before, and there's an odd lightness as they pull free from the waves. Strong arms loop beneath his armpits, heaving him up and over the railing, and he grits his teeth against a shriek of pain as they press none-too-gently against his ribs. There are panicked shouts and worried murmurs amidst the clashing of steel—the sounds of battle still ongoing.

He struggles to take a breath, and finds water still gurgling in his chest, cutting his efforts painfully short. His cheek presses against the cool wooden deck, his gaze hazy, mere jumbles of colors flashing in his vision rather than definite shapes. He needs to cough, but he can't find the strength to do it, and his lungs are beginning to scream anew, the darkness folding in and threatening to drag him back under, and—

“Phil, *breathe!*”

There are hands on his chest. His ribs creak and groan and crackle beneath their weight, and he can't tell the difference between the new fractures and the ones caused by the fall. His lungs stutter, each breath wet and gurgling, his eyelids fluttering as he stares dazedly out at nothing—

And then a particularly hard push sends the rest of the water finally flooding from his lungs and out onto the deck. And suddenly he can *breathe*—one great rattling breath, then another, and again and again as he greedily gulps down lungful after lungful. He tries to curl in on himself, but careful hands tug him close, draping him across someone's lap, keeping his head carefully propped upright.

“That's it. I've got you, I'm here. *Gods*, I'm here.” A shaking hand rubs circles at the back of his neck as he shudders and coughs and wheezes, supporting him through it all.

“Holy *shit* man, is he okay?”

“Yeah, Tommy, he's—he's gonna be okay.” There's a muffled acknowledgment, followed by the ringing of steel as a sword is drawn anew. There's a fearsome shout as Tommy returns to battle. But Phil has no care for it, for as much as he worries for the boy, his frenzied, panicked, pain-muddled thoughts only have care for one thing.

“...Wil?” he whispers disbelievingly around the burn in his lungs, struggling to focus on the face that swims above him. There’s a sad, choked noise.

“Yeah, Dad. It’s me.” Calloused fingers comb his hair out of his eyes, wiping the water away as it streams down his forehead. “You’re gonna be okay. Deep breaths. We’ll get you some help and it’ll all be okay.”

Disbelief and *confusion* and something much softer all tangle together, twisting his heart as he stares up into wide, familiar brown eyes brimming with fear and desperation and *love*. Phil’s lips struggle around something to say—anything to convey what he’s feeling, but instead, all that comes out is a question.

“You—” and he coughs, his whole body wracking with the effort, curling unconsciously into his son’s chest and grasping weakly at whatever part of him he can reach, “—you saved me...?” His heart flutters with a weak, foolish, *desperate* hope. His heart is in his throat, his emotions torn raw and ragged, and he’s melting into every gentle, careful touch from the hands he’s so fervently missed.

Wilbur sounds heartbroken when he answers.

“Of *course* I saved you.”

“... *Why?*”

Wilbur’s face falls.

“Oh, Phil,” he says quietly—almost as if in *mourning*. “You’re my *dad*, that’s why. I love you, you idiot.”

Phil’s heart twists in an ugly mix of fondness and the bitterness of a long-kept grudge.

“...Didn’t—” he sputters around another wracking cough, “—didn’t seem to make much difference last time.” His voice sounds so breathy, so *weak*, but he’s able to channel enough spite into it that Wilbur visibly flinches. His mouth opens and closes, and then his eyes are glittering, and—*oh*, his son is *crying*, and his grip is tightening on Phil and pulling him close and Phil doesn’t have the heart to try and push him away.

“Phil,” Wilbur says again, and his voice is hoarse and wobbly and thick with tears. “I’m—*gods*, I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. I didn’t want any of that to happen.” Phil opens his mouth to snap a reply he doesn’t really mean, but Wilbur keeps going. “They were gonna *kill* you, Phil. The crew. They blamed you for the curse—they needed a scapegoat, and you were the easiest option.” Wilbur’s hands are trembling where they cling to him. “I—I overheard them, and I convinced them not to—I—I told them I wanted the pleasure of doing it myself.” Wilbur’s face screams *guilt* and *sorrow* and *anguish*, tears carving pathways through soot and blood alike on his cheeks. “It was the only option. The only way to keep you safe.”

Phil makes a soft noise in the back of his throat. He raises his hand instinctively to wipe the tears away from beneath dark lashes, but his arm falters—a combination of his exhaustion and his doubt stopping him halfway. It doesn’t matter, because Wilbur takes his hand in his own and lifts it up to his cheek with a choked sob, nuzzling firmly into the touch.

“They wanted to do it right away. I—I convinced them to wait until we got to port, and then I—” His nose scrunches, his eyes squeezing shut as his whole body seems to bow beneath the weight of his regret. “I did what I thought I had to. To keep them safe. To keep *you* safe.”

“... You notified the Navy.”

“It was only to keep you from coming after us. You weren’t supposed to get *caught*. Damn it, Phil, why did you get caught? I’ve seen you escape shit like that a hundred times, so why—?” He takes a deep, shuddering breath. “Why didn’t you get away?”

Phil is silent. His mind is moving a million miles a minute, paging desperately through this new revelation that contradicts everything he thought he knew to be true. His mouth opens and closes, only a strangled noise escaping him—raw *confusion* and *hurt* and *concern* and *sorrow*. Wilbur’s free hand suddenly finds his own cheek, rubbing carefully at something damp, and it’s then that he realizes his son isn’t the only one with tears in his eyes.

“I thought you didn’t care,” Phil admits quietly. “I thought—I thought I had nothing left, at that moment. No ship, no crew, no—” He shudders. “No *family*. There was no point. ”

There’s a soft, shaky inhale. Wilbur’s hand tightens around his own.

“... You gave up?” Phil can see the dawning revelation in Wilbur’s eyes, a look of horror so broken and tragic it makes his hand curl tighter around his boy’s face, as if to ground him. “I—oh, gods, Phil, I didn’t—you shouldn’t have—I don’t...” There are tears speckling his son’s lashes from beneath soot-smearred lenses. “...I did that?”

“You were all I had, Wil. Not—not anymore, but...” Phil sighs, his weariness suddenly tenfold, all the years of suffering heavy on his shoulders along with the weight of the sea on his lungs. “I expected it fr’om the crew, but not—not from you...”

“I’m sorry,” Wilbur says again, and his nose buries itself in Phil’s sodden hair. “We didn’t realize until after...the curse kept following us, and we knew it hadn’t been you, but—it was too late. I looked for you in every port after. Every time. I didn’t—I didn’t know they’d caught you. This whole time, all these months, you could’ve been *dead*, and it would’ve— *gods*, it would’ve been my fault.”

Phil doesn’t have the energy to respond anymore—barely has the energy to keep his hand up even with Wilbur’s help, but he hopes the look in his eyes is enough to ease Wilbur’s pain, if only a little.

He’s alive.

He’s still here.

And so is Wilbur, holding him.

“... You’re not...leaving me?” He has to know—has to hear it for himself. Maybe it’s selfish, but he needs to hear it from Wilbur’s own mouth—needs to see the promise in his eyes and know it’s true. He can’t take another heartbreak—can’t let his sunshine slip through his fingertips again.

“*Never again*, Phil,” Wilbur swears, and presses shaking lips to Phil’s hairline. “I’m never leaving you again. I promise.”

And Phil *shatters* at the gentle touch, the sobs he’s been holding back for so long finally breaking free of his walls. They spill over, ugly and messy and noisy, and he buries his face in his son’s chest as his whole body *heaves* with the weight of his sorrow and relief alike. Hot tears burn at his eyes and stream down his cheeks, his breath hitching with sporadic hiccups and keens, and he can’t bring himself to care much at all that crew and enemy alike could be watching him. All he knows is that everything he’d believed—everything he’s thought to be true was *wrong*.

He was not forsaken without regret.

He is not alone.

He is still loved.

His son is back, and will not leave him alone again.

And so Phil, for the first time in nearly a year—in the midst of battle and strife and gunfire and swords and screams—finally lets himself cry.

And Wilbur holds him.

Wilbur holds him, and whispers gentle apology after apology, and runs trembling fingers through his sodden hair and in circles on his back as he weeps. It's easy to forget the bloodshed, the chaos, the danger when he's being held so safely in his family's arms. And so he does.

For a brief moment, it's just the two of them.

And that's enough.

And then there are hands on him—rough and unfamiliar. They grab and pull, yanking his arms behind his back as he twists in their grip. He grits his teeth and hisses and fights as best he can, but he's *exhausted*, and every little movement takes more energy than he has, sending fresh fire through his chest. He can hear angry voices in the background, a commotion and clatter as Wilbur presumably fights back against their foes.

“Get your fucking hands off of him!” His son cries, and Phil's eyes flicker open blearily to see his son in a similar position, two men holding his arms behind his back. His teeth are bared, his eyes wide, his muscles straining against his captors as he fights to get to Phil. “*Don't touch him!*”

He sounds angry—and scared. So scared.

A knee presses down on Phil's spine, shoving his chest roughly into the deck, and he feels the eerie, familiar pressure of cool metal clicking shut around his wrists. He doesn't even try to slip out of them—too focused on just drawing each breath through the haze of pain and exhaustion sinking its claws into him.

“He's already hurt, you piece of shit! The *hell* does he need cuffs for?”

Phil wants to reassure his son, to call out him, to murmur soft words of comfort or spit words of anger at their enemies, but the hands on his arms are now trying to pull him upright, and the pressure in his chest doubles, squeezing and *burning*, and when he's lifted onto his knees he can *feel* his ribs shifting, and it's enough to rip an agonized cry from his lips as he twitches and writhes against his will, and Wilbur is still shouting, and—

The butt of a pistol strikes the back of his skull.

The world goes dark.

They've lost.

Outnumbered and outgunned from the very start, the crew of the *Argo* is now gathered on the deck of their own ship, surrounded on all sides by the enemy. Bound in cuffs and rope alike, they've been disarmed and forced to kneel against the wood. Tommy and Tubbo are side by side, their shoulders bumping one another reassuringly. Ranboo is by Eret, his hands bound in front of him, clinging carefully to the elder's shirt. Eret looks surprisingly calm, their eyes shut and their posture relaxed, even in the face of the rough hands of the enemy on their shoulders. Niki is glaring daggers at the man that holds her, who boasts a rapidly darkening bruise across his cheek for his efforts. Every one of them is made to kneel, save for one.

Technoblade stands facing Dream, disarmed and at his mercy.

Phil and Wilbur are nearest to him. His friend is half-supported by his son, pressed close up against him, and half by the man who's hoisting him upright by his collar. He's completely sodden, with an awful wet whistling to his breathing, his face lined with pain, and a glassy sheen to his eyes, but he's *alive*. Blessedly, mercifully *alive*. He looks like he's been to hell and back, and gods know he needs medical attention as soon as possible, but he's awake and breathing and that's more than Technoblade could ask for.

"I'm disappointed, Techno," Dream says, almost softly. He's thumbing the hilt of his sword, looking almost bored. "I wouldn't have pinned you as the type to choose the losing side."

"...Nev'r would've j'st surrendered, you navy piece of shit." Phil, ever so articulate, suddenly chimes in.

Dream's eyes flash.

He makes a quiet sound—soft and contemplative, a hum in the back of his throat. And then he moves, brushing past Technoblade to crouch beside Phil, his head tilting, cat-like and analytical. Phil recoils with his teeth bared, though his gaze lacks its usual heat, subdued by the dull haze of pain. When Dream reaches for him, though, he *reacts*, an animalistic noise tearing from his lips that's joined by Wilbur's shouts beside him.

"Don't you *dare*—I'll fucking kill you, you hear me?"

Phil tries to twist away, but his captor's grip is like steel, and his own movements weak. Dream tugs at his collar, and his shirt falls to the side to reveal the brand, stark against his skin.

"Huh." Dream does not sound at all surprised by this development. Instead, his voice drips with smug satisfaction as he forces Phil's chin up to meet his gaze. "So that's twice now that you've evaded a date with the gallows, Angel." And he stares into Phil's eyes, lips twitching into a proud little smirk as the man stares defiantly back, his chest heaving for every breath. "You know what they say, though. *Third time's the charm.*"

He lets Phil's chin drop, and the pirate immediately sags forward, his guard's arms surging to catch him around the shoulders before he can fall forward entirely. He shakes them off with a groggy hiss, and Wilbur moves to support him again, bumping their shoulders as Phil's head droops to rest against his own.

Technoblade's gut twists with concern for his friend as he watches his eyelids flutter, struggling to even stay conscious. He wants nothing more than to rush over to him—to pull him upright and free his hands from their bindings, to affirm just for himself that Phil is truly okay. He hasn't had the chance to check up on him at all after his fall—has no idea just how badly he's hurt or how

desperately he might need help. He hasn't had the chance, not with Dream breathing down his neck. Not with the lives of his crew hanging in the balance.

Dream cuts a glance at Technoblade. His expression is unreadable. His tone when he speaks, however...

"...And here I thought we'd have one last battle, Techno. A fight for the ages, and yet...you've disappointed me. If we weren't meant to be allies, I thought we'd at least get an end for the ages. But this?"

He walks down the line, eyeing Technoblade's crew with disdain, his gaze half-lidded and his smirk dropping into a sneer. With each member he passes, his gaze flickers over to Technoblade, watching for any hint of a reaction.

He stops at Tommy.

"It's a shame it has to end like this. The gallows, Technoblade? It's an unfitting end for someone like you. You could've been so much *more*." There's a note of nostalgia creeping into his voice, but it's quickly crushed by something much darker. "It's too bad you chose to join them—to be branded and hanged for your crimes. A warning for anyone stupid enough to follow in your footsteps."

Dream meets Tommy's gaze. The kid bares his teeth in a wobbly, defiant grin, even as Dream kicks out, nudging at him as he kneels.

"*Kids*, Technoblade? Really? Have you fallen this low? Are you *this* desperate to have a crew again? So desperate that you'd rope *children* into your filth?"

'I was just a boy.'

"It's *all they know*, Dream." He doesn't care if he sounds desperate, because Dream's hand is on his sword, and there's a flicker of *terror* in Tommy's eyes amidst his bullheaded front of bravery. "It's all they've ever known."

"They *chose* this path, Techno. Just like you," Dream hisses, and his voice darkens into something angry. His sword lifts, and trails carefully upward to rest across Tommy's throat. A silent threat. There are muffled cries from the crew, Tubbo's furious shout of protest cut short by a harsh blow from his own captor. "They should know what awaits them for their crimes."

And Dream's hand tenses, as if to pull his blade, and Tommy flinches with a cry he can't quite suppress, and—

"Dream, *stop!*"

And he does. His hand stills, his gaze flickering briefly back over to Technoblade.

"...And why should I listen to the words of a traitor? Of a pirate? Of a *criminal*?"

"That hasn't stopped you from listenin' to me all this time, has it?" Technoblade grits his teeth, and forces back the venom from his voice. "Just this once—just one more time. I think I've got somethin' worth your time."

Dream's lips twitch in the barest hint of a smirk. He gives a slight nod, feigning disinterest, though it's clear Technoblade has his rapt attention.

"There's somethin' you've always wanted, Dream. Somethin' nobody else can give you. You don't want glory, no—you want *excitement*. Somethin' *legendary*. Fine, then. A duel, Dream. One last time—for old times' sake. If I win, we go free."

Dream tilts his head curiously.

"And if *I* win?"

Technoblade swallows.

"I'll go back with you. We all will."

"...To the Navy? Or will you join them in the gallows?"

Technoblade's heart screams to follow his crew—to share their fate, even if it brings him to the gates of hell at their sides. But he knows what Dream is looking for—knows he'll only take the bait if there's smug satisfaction to be gained from it. Dream doesn't want him dead. That's *boring*. He wants the satisfaction of having Technoblade under his thumb, equals on the tin but underneath, a debt forever owed. That's what Dream wants. And so, his heart hanging heavy and his chest positively *aching*, Technoblade responds with the answer he doesn't want, and the one he knows will only widen the gap between himself and his crew.

"...I'll join you."

Phil makes a muffled noise from where he kneels, half-slurred with pain and exhaustion and the first signs of a concussion. There's blood trailing from between blonde strands, slipping down a pale cheek and beneath the collar of his shirt. His eyes are grey and hazy, but his teeth are gritted in a fierce snarl. He looks downright feral, and Technoblade can't tell where his angry curses are directed as he begins to hiss and spit anew.

He prays they aren't meant for him.

"You have a deal, *Captain Technoblade*."

Dream offers his hand.

And with a deep, steady breath, like the calm before a storm, Technoblade shakes it.

The fight is fast and brutal. Neither of them hold back this time, and every blow is for the kill. Technoblade takes no delight in the hits he lands—can't allow himself to feel even the slightest relief. He can't afford to let himself relax, even slightly, for fear of making one wrong move that would cost him everything.

He's not fighting for sport, or for his honor. This isn't one of his old, friendly sparring matches with the commodore. There are lives on the line: the lives of his crew—his *friends*. They watch with wide eyes and bated breath, and he knows that they are depending on him to give it his all.

They're depending on him to *win*.

Every scratch is another step closer to the gallows. Every stumble is a push toward chains and a cold, dark cell. Every misstep lowers the noose just a little closer to Phil's neck.

And so he doesn't fight for himself. He fights for *them*.

He can feel himself wearing thin as the fight stretches on. No matter how hard he's practiced, no matter how long he trained back at shore, there's nothing that can replace the real experience of battle. And while he's been lacking in that area recently, Dream has not, and the difference between them is staggering.

So Technoblade adopts a new strategy.

Fight smarter, not harder.

He remembers his fight with Phil, back at port. Leaping over barrels and crates alike, exchanging insults and foolhardy dares, grinning and bold and *free*, somehow. He remembers Phil's agility—so similar to Dream's—quick and light-footed and cunning. Their fighting styles are similar, but so too are their personalities, in a way. Brash, bull-headed, intelligent—and proud.

And then it hits him.

If he can beat Phil, he can beat Dream.

The thought fills him with a renewed confidence—a vigor unlike anything he's felt before. If he imagines it, between parries and dodges and the burn in his shoulders, he can almost pretend he's fighting Phil. He imagines a cocky laugh and a bright smile, and teasing remarks firing back and forth. It grounds him, settling into his bones and easing his frantic mind, until he's able to focus on the fight and the fight alone. There's no more stress, no more panic, no more *guilt*—only the calm, careful confidence of a battle he's rehearsed a hundred times over.

'Knew you had it in you, mate.'

Phil believed in him. He believed in him even when he didn't believe in *himself*, when he was at his lowest with no further to sink. When they were mere strangers—enemies, even. Phil had confidence in him.

It's time for him to believe in himself.

And he does.

He fights with the strength of a hundred men—with the ferocity of a lion—with the anger of a scorned man—with the devotion of a captain defending his crew. He pulls underhanded tricks, disregarding everything he'd been taught, tripping and sidestepping and taunting in true pirate form. And Dream can't keep up—can't match his blows anymore, quickly lagging behind. His confident smirk begins to waver in the face of Technoblade's newfound energy, and the sight makes his chest flicker with satisfaction.

He presses on.

He nearly has the advantage—nearly overtakes his enemy, ready to cut him down where he stands—when he freezes. He's not sure what comes over him, but his hand stills in the air, his breath catching as he stares at his would-be victim. It's a fair fight, an even match—one they both agreed on and knew the consequences of. And yet...

Technoblade can't bring himself to deal the final blow.

His hesitation costs him—because while he hesitates, Dream does not.

His arm stings with a deep gash as Dream lunges forward with a short, stabbing strike. He staggers backward, reeling from pain and shock alike, and that's when it happens.

His heel catches a loose floorboard, his boot scuffing along old wood as he struggles to quickly correct his mistake. But there's no time—Dream moving to take advantage of his mistake, a wide grin creeping across his lips as he seizes the opportunity. Technoblade hears shouts from his crew—catches a startled cry rising above the chorus—sees his friend straining against his captors with all the energy he has left as if he can somehow stop this. He flinches, and raises up a hand as if to stop the blade as it comes cutting down toward his unprotected chest, and then—

Clang.

The sword stops dead in the palm of his iron prosthetic.

And Technoblade *grins*. With one sharp twisting movement, the blade is ripped abruptly from Dream's fingertips. In a glittering arc of steel, it spirals once, twice, thrice through the air before vanishing into the cold, dark depths of the sea.

This time, Technoblade doesn't hesitate.

"Yield, Dream."

Technoblade stands the victor, one hand clutched over his arm as fresh red spills from between his fingers, while the other angles the tip of his sword to bite at the hollow of Dream's throat, just enough to draw a few beads of blood. A myriad of emotions crosses Dream's face then—fury, humiliation, frustration, even a bit of *shock*.

There's a stunned silence. Nobody dares to speak—scarcely even *breathe*. Fate itself seems to hang precariously, as if only the slightest ghost of the wind could send the world crashing down. All eyes are on them—on *him*—and on the man at the tip of his sword.

The world waits.

And then, slowly, Dream's snarl eases into something softer—something akin to a *smile*.

"...I yield."

"A deal's a deal, Technoblade. But next time we meet, I won't be so generous."

"Noted. Now get the hell off my ship."

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

“Oh, I keep secrets?” Technoblade’s fist clenches at his side. Phil should count himself damn lucky that he hasn’t already taken a swing. Or, rather, perhaps unlucky, because Technoblade retaliates with something much worse. “And when, exactly, were you gonna tell the crew about your little curse?”

Phil flinches as if stung.

As do the crew.

Chapter Notes

bones brain go brrr, i ended up finishing this chapter much sooner than expected!

remember, things sometimes have to get worse before they get better. hang on tight, the story's not over just yet!

—

chapter warnings: vague suicidal ideations, survivor’s guilt, mentions of hanging, depictions of injury

Phil is asleep for a long time after his fall.

They bring him into the infirmary, where Eret swathes his chest in fresh bandages and tends to his various scrapes and bruises. He falls unconscious within moments of them laying him down—balanced precariously between Wilbur and Technoblade until they lower him safely down. He’s terrifyingly pale, save for the bright flush of his cheeks which screams of a fever caused by pain and exhaustion. His breathing hitches with every breath, and his body writhes when Eret applies even the slightest pressure to his chest.

“He’s lucky,” Eret says after Phil’s eyes have fluttered mercifully shut. “If he had hit the water at a different angle, he could’ve shattered his arms or legs, or even his skull.”

Lucky isn’t quite the word Technoblade would choose. Phil looks so small, so *broken* that it makes his stomach turn to even look at him. It’s scary to see a man, usually as bright as the sun, look so dim and *tired*. His skin is painted with bruises from the impact, his head wrapped in bandages from where he’d been struck. There are welts around his wrists from too-tight cuffs, and the sight of them makes his rage burn anew.

He wishes he could find the one that did this to him, and give him the same treatment.

Wilbur looks at them with nothing but sorrow beside him.

“I tried to stop them,” he murmurs.

“You did what you could,” Technoblade reassures him. There’s a companionable air between them that hadn’t been there before; a mutual understanding, a shared sorrow. Even if Technoblade doesn’t understand exactly what transpired, something had changed between him and Phil during the fight. He’d seen the way Wilbur fought to stay by his father’s side—heard the way he defended him with a tongue like fire. He’d seen the flash of loyalty in Wilbur’s eyes, the same devotion that Phil had managed to kindle in Technoblade’s own heart. He’d seen the way Phil leaned into Wilbur’s touch, the way Wilbur had supported him without question even in the face of the enemy. Those aren’t the actions of a man ready to betray his captain. They’re the actions of a son who, despite everything, loves his father.

And if Phil trusts Wilbur, so does Technoblade.

Wilbur seems to return the sentiment.

“I’m not sure what happened between you,” he says quietly at night, as he spreads a damp cloth across Phil’s brow. Fundy rests beside them, Phil’s hand in his own, his cheek squished up against the mattress as he dozes. “But I can’t blame you for it. I’d be a hypocrite if I did.”

Technoblade gives him a weak smile. It’s as much of a thank you as he can manage around the sudden burn in his eyes and the closing of his throat. He pointedly turns away to scrub his face with his sleeve, and Wilbur watches him with curious, intelligent eyes. There’s no judgment to be found there, only genuine curiosity.

“You love him.” It isn’t a question.

“...Yeah,” Technoblade rasps. His voice sounds wet. His eyes still burn.

“That’s good,” Wilbur murmurs. His lips twitch into a small smile. “Phil’s never been good at letting people in. I can tell he cares about you, though.” He sighs heavily and leans down to brush a stray lock of blonde away from Phil’s cheek. “I’m glad he finally has a friend.”

Technoblade can’t help but match his smile.

"I'm glad I have one, too."

The crew treats him differently after the battle.

They try not to. He can see it in their eyes—feels it in the way they seem to tread lightly around him. They’re trying not to betray their distrust of him, but he sees it all the same. That casual familiarity he’d come to know, come to *love* is now gone, leaving behind something stiff and forced. They still listen to him, still obey his orders, but it’s less out of respect and more out of *fear*. Or, for some, begrudging acceptance.

He can’t bring himself to blame them, no matter how the distance makes his heart ache.

He betrayed their trust. He kept a secret from them—an important secret, one that was bound to impact the ship’s dynamic. He’d posed as one of them when he’d once been their enemy, once

been one of the very people trying to hunt them down.

He'd imprisoned their captain, and then taken his place.

On the first day he'd joined their ranks, he'd noted their loyalty to Phil. Tommy's bullheaded bravery when confronting him, and the suspicious glances of the others as he'd been introduced in the wake of his battle with one of their own. Their devotion to Phil is one forged out of love. How Phil managed to capture their hearts in the short time he'd known them is beyond him, but he'd managed to do the same to Technoblade.

And now Technoblade is known as the one who nearly escorted Phil to his death.

But everything is about to change, he hopes. It will all be explained in time, and they'll be able to get back to normal in no time, because Phil's already assured him of his forgiveness, and if Phil can forgive him, surely the rest of the crew can, too.

They'll be able to sit everyone down and explain it together, and over time they'll learn to trust him like they did before. He looks forward to that moment with an eager heart, sick of having secrets to hide. He's ready to lay it all on the table, to work past it and *move on*, for the sake of Phil and the crew as much as himself.

The moment comes much sooner than he expected.

Phil is awake.

Phil is awake and *moving*, against Eret's best wishes. He appears from below deck late the next afternoon, one arm slung carefully around Wilbur's shoulders, his son's hand at his waist. He's pale and grimacing and wobbly on his feet, but the mere sight of him is enough to bring the crew clamoring to meet him halfway. There are worried murmurs, happy exclamations, and warm wishes as they surround him, and Phil's lips twitch up into a tired but genuine smile.

"You are an *idiot*."

"Hello to you, too, Tommy," Phil replies, and makes a soft, pleased noise as the taller boy leans down to pull him into a gentle embrace. It's short, but Phil leans into it, his eyes fluttering shut, and Tommy seems to cling to him like a vice in the brief moment they're together. He shakes himself when they inevitably pull free, trying to act nonchalant, but Technoblade can see the way his gaze flickers across Phil, scanning him attentively for any signs of discomfort.

"You're okay?" He asks simply, averting his gaze with a flush when Phil positively *grins*.

"Awww, *mate*," Phil coos. "I'll be okay. Don't you worry about me."

"I wasn't worried!"

Ranboo approaches next, and does not hesitate to embrace Phil. He nestles his chin atop the smaller man's head and makes a strange, soothing noise in the back of his throat akin to a purr. They don't separate for a while, Ranboo's arms carefully entwined around Phil's shoulders as they sway ever-so-slightly, and when they do, the kid's eyes are wet with relieved tears. Phil makes another quiet noise, a careful hum as he gives Ranboo's hands a firm squeeze.

"I'm alright, mate. Really."

“You scared me,” Ranboo admits. “I thought we lost you.”

“I’m not going anywhere, mate. Can’t get rid of me that easily.”

The rest of the crew follows suit. Niki surges forward into Phil’s chest and squeezes him so tight he yelps, but he’s smiling all the while, even ducking down to cup her cheek and swipe away the tears that are flowing freely down her cheeks. Jack approaches from behind, clapping Phil gently on the shoulder, and all the while Eret maintains careful proximity, should Phil need their help.

It’s a joyous occasion, a time for celebration in the wake of their unexpected victory and their first mate’s recovery, and the crew’s morale is visibly strengthening with each moment Phil spends in their midst. It’s sorely needed, and Technoblade delights in the way his friend’s eyes crinkle with mirth and soften with every passing touch and murmured affection.

And then Phil’s gaze lands on Technoblade, and his smile *drops*.

“Phil,” Technoblade breathes, and rushes to meet him halfway as the man moves toward him. His heart flutters, and he moves to wrap the smaller man up in a hug, surging forward with a breathy laugh, nearly ready to scoop him up and either spin him and toss him overboard for his stupidity, and then—

Crack.

His head snaps sideways, his cheek smarting. Phil staggers backward, his palm still raised, his teeth bared in a snarl.

“Don’t touch me.”

It wasn’t a hard blow—just enough to startle him, Phil’s strength immensely hampered by his injuries—but it’s the thought of it that truly stings, because Phil just *raised a hand against him*. Phil is glaring daggers at him, bristling and poised to strike again, and for a moment, all Technoblade can feel is complete and utter confusion. And then he sees the look on Phil’s face, and it’s the same devastated anger he’s seen once before, back during the fight, during his confrontation with Dream, when—when—

“I can’t believe it,” Phil hisses, as the crew murmurs in shock around them. “You bastard, you *motherfucker*—you were actually gonna do it, weren’t you?”

“Phil, what the fuck?” Tommy’s voice is high-pitched and indignant.

“*Phil*,” Wilbur says softly, and moves as if to support him when Phil nearly doubles over with a strangled wheeze, his feet stumbling beneath him. Phil waves off his help, his gaze hardening as he straightens once more, clutching at his shirt as he draws himself back to full height. The bandages beneath are suddenly glaringly obvious. Phil pays his injuries no heed, and the full heat of his anger is blistering as he turns it on Technoblade.

“Was it *that* tempting, Techno? Turning us in for what? A ship? Your old rank?”

In Phil’s eyes, Technoblade can see the pain of his past betrayal. He knows this is a response not out of anger, at least, not fully—but out of *fear*. His friend is cornered and desperate and afraid—afraid of another betrayal, of turning around only to be stabbed in the back again. He understands it, but it doesn’t make it any easier to swallow. Not when the anger is so misplaced—not when he’s backing Technoblade into a corner himself.

“Phil, that’s not—”

“That’s not *what*, Technoblade? I *saw* you.”

He did. Technoblade knows he did. He remembers Phil’s stricken face *vividly*, the way his friend had frozen mid-battle at the sight of Technoblade’s hesitation. Even if only for a moment, he’d genuinely considered trading their lives away for his own selfish comfort—for a shot at his old life. His heart aches with guilt at even considering Dream’s offer, but he knows guilt isn’t enough right now. Not when his weakness could have cost him not only a victory, but also the lives of his crew.

The lives of his *friends*.

“*Phil*, I know I messed up—I shouldn’t have even considered it, I just—” He runs a hand through his hair with a shaky sigh, and feels the heat of Phil’s gaze burning at his skin. “Look, for a moment...for a moment, I was tempted. I’ll admit that. But I couldn’t, Phil. I can’t. I won’t—not ever. You’re my crew, my *friends*.”

And Phil scoffs, tossing his head back.

“You say that, Techno, but I saw the look in your eyes. You would’ve taken it. If we hadn’t been there, if we hadn’t been around to see it—if it had just been you and Dream with nobody to play witness—you would’ve turned on us in a heartbeat, wouldn’t you?” Phil’s words are like claws in his heart, cruel and unfair—because he’d just proved he wouldn’t, hadn’t he? He’d fought Dream for *them*, for the sake of the crew, to keep them alive and *safe*. And yet here Phil is, spitting injustices at him, as if he was really going to turn them in. Technoblade’s anger burns white-hot in his veins, wild and dangerous, his own tongue loosening as the stress and pressure bottled up for so many weeks finally uncork.

“Y’know what, maybe I *do* understand why yer’ crew left you in the first place,” Technoblade snaps right back, his tongue as sharp as the sword at his belt. “Keepin’ secrets, accusin’ me of bein’ a *traitor*— maybe the mutiny was all just an excuse to get a better captain.” He regrets the words as soon as they leave his mouth—his tongue tasting as though it’s been coated in bitter poison. He regrets it, even more, when he turns and catches Phil’s gaze.

Phil’s eyes flash with hurt, his mouth dropping open with a protest that dies before it’s even begun. He looks as though he’s just been slapped, and Technoblade can see Wilbur surging forward from the crowd like a bullet, shoving his way between them. Wilbur’s face is cold fury, his shoulders squared, his gaze narrowed as he turns on Technoblade.

“Shut up,” Wilbur hisses. “You have no idea what you’re talking about, so don’t you dare—”

“You think he didn’t tell me?” Technoblade interrupts, taking a step forward until he’s nearly nose-to-nose with the younger man. “You think I don’t know *exactly* what you did?”

Wilbur’s lips are a thin line.

“Imagine turnin’ on your own father—imagine leaving him to *die* and takin’ everythin’ he loved with you. But no— *I’m* the traitor.” He pushes past Wilbur in his moment of weakness to shove his finger in Phil’s face. “As if it wasn’t your fault I’m here in the first place. *You* were the one recruitin’ *me*, *you* were the one with the damn favor. I never wanted to be here in the first place.”

“I just wanted to give you a second chance—”

“You *used* me,” Technoblade spits, and he knows that isn’t fair—knows Phil would *never*— but he’s experienced enough of it in his life to leave lasting scars, and he’s hurt and angry and it just

feels so *good* to let it all out. “You just needed someone to cover for you—to take the fall because you were too *scared* to be captain yourself.”

“Techno...”

“What, Phil? Don’t tell me it isn’t true. I wasn’t your first choice—just the first one you happened to find. I wasn’t meant for the job—I was just *convenient*.”

Phil doesn’t respond. There’s a war being waged behind his eyes, and the silence drags on and on. Technoblade is the one to break the silence.

“You’re just too much of a coward to admit it.”

“I’m the coward? How long were you planning to keep everyone in the dark about what you did to me? About what you were *going* to do?”

“Oh, *I* keep secrets?” Technoblade’s fist clenches at his side. Phil should count himself damn lucky that he hasn’t already taken a swing. Or, rather, perhaps *unlucky*, because Technoblade retaliates with something much worse. “And when, exactly, were you gonna tell the crew about your little *curse*?”

Phil flinches as if stung.

As do the crew.

“Phil?” Tommy is the first to speak, and the waver in his voice is almost enough to make Technoblade regret spilling the news like this. *Almost*. “Phil, what does he mean?”

“I—” Phil’s mouth opens and closes, his jaw working as he grapples for something to say. He shoots Technoblade a quick look, full of shock and betrayal and *hurt*, but Technoblade stands firm. “I was gonna tell you guys, I promise, I just—I didn’t—”

“Phil’s cursed,” Technoblade snaps impatiently, and Phil shoots him another look, this time almost *scared*.

“It’s not like that—fucking hell, mate, hang on a second here,” he exclaims, holding up his hands placatingly as several speculative gazes turn his way. “*I’m* not cursed. It’s not—it’s not like that—it’s this locket, and it—”

“You’re cursed,” Jack says, stone-faced, “—and you weren’t going to *tell us*?”

“I was!” Phil cries, and *oh*, Technoblade’s heart does tug a little at the flicker of panic he hears there. “Fuck—I swear to you, I was going to tell you, I just—”

“Is this why the Navy showed up?” Ranboo asks softly.

“*Twice*?” Tubbo chimes in, and his glare is as sharp as daggers.

“Phil, you should have *told us*,” Niki says softly. She looks sad.

Eret’s just quiet.

And so is Tommy.

The kid’s face is a mix of several emotions—confusion and anger, to name a few. But there’s also *hurt*, and it’s directed at both of them, furtive glances flickering between the two as if he can’t

quite decide who to direct his emotions at. His mouth opens and closes, as if to chime in, but no sound escapes him.

For once, Tommy is silent.

The whole crew is watching—waiting. Whether for Phil’s excuse or for Technoblade to continue, he’s unsure. Nevertheless, he can feel the weight of their gazes on him—can feel the hair on the back of his neck rising, prickling uncomfortably as his feet shift beneath him. They’re watching—watching *him*—and it’s a painful reminder of how they’ve treated him since the battle. Someone’s eyes always on his back—keeping a careful eye out for even the slightest hint that he might turn on them. The bitter sting of their distrust is back full force, and it leaves him searching desperately for any sign of a friendly face—even just one person that might still believe in him after everything.

His gaze settles on Wilbur.

Wilbur, Phil’s son. Wilbur, Phil’s former first mate. Wilbur, silver-tongued and quick-witted and recklessly loyal, standing resolutely at Phil’s side even as the crew doubts their leaders. Wilbur, who was somehow able to rebuild his bridges, while Technoblade sits desperately grasping at straws as they slip through his fingertips. Wilbur, who will undoubtedly join the crew of the *Argo*—who will settle comfortably back into place under Phil’s wing.

And where does that leave Technoblade?

He’s no longer needed, he realizes, as he stares at father and son. Phil refuses captaincy out of his own self-doubt, his faltering sense of worth—and now he’s been proven wrong, the one who turned on him back at his side. Phil can resume his position now—can take up the mantle with Wilbur at his side, and Technoblade can go back to his old life at the docks, far away from piracy and crime and everything he’d sworn never to touch.

He doesn’t need to be captain anymore.

“...What?” Phil’s breathless question jerks him out of his thoughts, and it’s only then that he realizes he’s spoken aloud. His friend is staring at him with nothing but blatant shock and dawning horror, his lips half-parted and his head tilted as though he doesn’t understand.

So Technoblade clarifies.

“It’s true, isn’t it? I can go now—I can leave. I’ve sure as hell fulfilled my end of the deal at this point. Besides, ‘s not like anyone would *protest*, least of all you.”

“You promised me you wouldn’t leave!” Phil’s voice wobbles, his exclamation sudden and unexpected, and some of the anger is blunted by the note of fear Technoblade catches. He searches his friend’s face, and sees wide-eyed desperation and a lip caught between his teeth, one arm curled around his bandaged chest as he heaves for breath. “You said you wouldn’t be like the others—you *told me you wouldn’t leave me.*”

“You don’t exactly need me anymore, do you?” Technoblade snaps back, and relishes in the way Phil recoils. He gestures with one hand to Wilbur. “You’ve got *him* now, don’t you?”

“*What?*”

“Go ahead—take it all back. I know you want to. You can be captain again—you’ve got your first mate back, after all. You don’t need me to fill in anymore.”

If Technoblade looked a little closer, perhaps he’d see the way Phil’s words are fueled by hurt and

panic and desperation and the pain that still lingers with each breath. Instead, he's blinded by those very same emotions, which taint his heart and twist his tone into something bitter and vengeful, and spur his words on into something cruel—something he doesn't mean.

"You don't need me, Phil," he says. "*And I don't need you.*"

There's a soft intake of breath. Wilbur makes a furious sound, halfway between a gasp and a snarl. Technoblade doesn't spare him the time—not even so much as a glance. His focus is entirely on Phil. Phil, who looks at him with an eerily blank expression, his blue gaze unreadable beneath the storm on the surface, his fingertips twitching where they rest at his side and curled around his ribs. Phil, whose breath hitches with every other attempt, stuttering haphazardly over splintered bones yet to fully heal. Phil, who worries his lip between his teeth and does not respond, instead merely gazing at Technoblade with that same damned look, empty in a way that makes Technoblade's blood simultaneously boil and *freeze*, because he wanted a reaction—but not like this. He backtracks, stumbling, because the light in Phil's eyes has died and the anger is beginning to fade in its wake, and then—

"...Maybe you're right."

Oh.

There are tears brimming in the corners of Phil's eyes; a glassy sheen distorting blue into grey. There's an angry flush to his cheeks and his teeth are gritted halfway between a grimace and a smile—a smile that looks *wrong*, so uncharacteristic of him in the way that it twitches and wobbles and threatens to *break* at any moment.

"Maybe I was wrong," Phil rasps. "Maybe you are just like the rest."

And *gods*, does that sting.

"You're one to talk," Technoblade answers immediately, voice as cold as ice. "I thought I could trust you—I thought I could count on you. I thought you *believed in me.*"

"*Don't you dare,*" Phil says, and he watches his friend's lashes flutter desperately, tiny droplets beginning to gather there. "Don't say that. Not when—not when I trusted you with *everything*, Techno. I showed you my *heart*, and you—you fucking—" he gestures wildly, messy and angry and uncoordinated, "—you were willing to throw it away. After everything, you were willing to give it up for—for the fucking *Navy.*"

"Not this again."

"Excuse me?"

"Look, I understand you've had some bad encounters with them, but—"

"Shut the fuck up, Techno. Don't you dare say another word. I can't believe this—I can't believe *you*. They took everything from you—even your *hand*, and you're still gonna try and defend them?"

"I made a mistake, Phil—I was punished accordingly."

"For what? *Surviving?*"

"For siding with a criminal."

A beat.

“...Right.” Phil’s voice sounds surprisingly flat. “I forgot. That’s all I am to you, isn’t it?”

“You were rightfully arrested for crimes of piracy—”

“They were going to *kill me*, Techno! Get your head out of your ass!”

“You chose this, Phil,” he reminds him. “You’re the one who chose this life—you’re the one who decided to stay! You could’ve stopped, you could’ve renounced piracy after—” he bites back what he wants to say, but the meaning is still clear—Phil’s face crumpling in anguish and rage alike. “—But you didn’t. You chose to stay a pirate—to be a *criminal*. You *knew* the consequences—and those? Those were the consequences.”

“Don’t you go there, Technoblade,” Phil breathes, his voice suddenly painfully quiet. “You know it wasn’t like that. You know *exactly* what I went through. What I saw. What I *lost*.” And his voice pitches into a breathy giggle—one that lacks any humor at all. “You’re a damn hypocrite, Technoblade. I *chose* to be a pirate? And what about you? A Navy officer turned *criminal*. You became the very thing you say you hate so much—you became *one of us*, Technoblade.”

“*You* were the one who caused this in the first place! You and your damned curse—without you, I’d still have my rank—my ship—my *life*! My crew would still be here! You took *everything*!”

“What? I *saved* you!”

“Well, sometimes I wish you’d just left me! At least then I wouldn’t be here—at least I wouldn’t be a pirate—a *criminal*.” He spits the last word out like a curse, uncaring for the way it makes the crew shuffle around him, shock and confusion and concern giving way to indignance. “You know what they taught me in the Navy, Phil?” The words are flowing, spilling from his lips before he has the chance to think, to contemplate the consequences. His rational mind is forfeit, giving way to the righteous fury that burns like a fire in his veins, and every dangerous little thought he’s had since the start begins to rear its ugly head. “They taught me that the only thing a pirate is good for is the gallows. And I’m startin’ to think they might be right.”

“*You don’t mean that.*”

“I’d rather be *dead* than what I am now—than what you made me become.”

Silence. And then—

“...Maybe you should’ve gone down with your ship then, mate.”

And Technoblade *freezes*.

Phil does too, his eyes widening and his lips half-parted, one hand extended as if he can snatch it back out of the air. But it’s too late, because Technoblade doesn’t see any of this—doesn’t see the regret and devastation across his friend’s face. Instead, all he sees is red, and all he can hear is the roar of his blood in his ears as his stomach sinks like a stone, icy tendrils creeping through his veins at the confirmation of the very thought that’s been nagging at the back of his mind since that fateful night.

“...Maybe I should have,” he agrees softly, and in an instant, the fight drains out of him—leaving him shivering and hurt and bitter and *tired*. And so he retreats, making no attempt to excuse himself nor to console his friend, who looks on the verge of tears himself. He leaves Phil alone—surrounded by his crew and yet so very *alone*—and does not look back.

The door to his cabin slams shut.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Phil sits alone in the crow's nest.

It's quiet.

The crew's been asleep for a while. Even Wilbur went to bed not long ago, finally excusing himself from Phil's side to get some shuteye. Phil doesn't begrudge him his rest, though he misses the company.

It's awfully lonely up here.

Chapter Notes

bones go brrr

remember what i said last chapter! things will get worse before they get better, but they will get better!

—

chapter warnings: depictions of a panic attack, survivor's guilt, suicidal ideations, past character death

The second the door shuts behind him, Technoblade collapses.

He sinks onto his mattress with his head in his hands, and tries his best to swallow back the frustrated sob that rises in his chest. The white-hot anger he felt earlier has vanished entirely, leaving him feeling empty and hollow and torn utterly raw. Cold metal presses against his face alongside calloused skin, and the sensation is almost sickening. He hates that he can't even feel, hates the way the iron rubs harsh against his cheek—hates the way it constantly reminds him of exactly how and who he failed.

Bang.

He muffles a shout behind gritted teeth as his prosthetic slams into the wall. Just as expected, there's no pain—save for the sudden jolt at the base of his arm, like lightning up his deadened nerves. There's no familiar crushing pain of knuckles against wood, no bruising or splitting of skin that might have once been satisfying.

Nothing.

“*Damnit,*” he rasps, curling in on himself. His hands are shaking. His heart is in his throat. There's a ringing in his ears alongside the roar of blood, and he feels dizzy—disoriented. His emotions are so messy, so tangled together that he can't tell what's what, and it makes him altogether panicked

and angry and scared. Never before has he felt so utterly out of control. It feels like everything is spiraling, slipping like sand through his fingertips, and he hates every second. He's a captain, damn it, or he was—he doesn't even know if he's that anymore. All he knows is that he's curled in a ball on his bed like a child, after laying into his best friend with a dozen cruel words he'd never truly mean, and he's falling apart at the seams—falling and falling with nobody to catch him.

“*Gods,*” he chokes out, his flesh hand tangling in his hair and *pulling* while he muffles his breathing into wood and iron. He needs to keep it together. He can't afford to fall apart now. He needs to collect himself, to get his thoughts together—to fix this new mess he's found himself in. Every time he closes his eyes, he sees Phil's face. Wide, blue eyes, filled with unspeakable sorrow and *hurt*—hurt he'd caused, with his own words, harsh and biting and unspeakably cruel. He'd said so much he hadn't truly meant—so much in his lack of control. He'd made Phil cry, for gods' sakes. He'd backed his friend into a corner in order to escape his own spotlight, and inadvertently thrown him into his worst nightmare. He'd exposed Phil's secret and then left him behind to deal with it on his own, and he feels nothing short of a *monster* for how he'd continued on to throw Phil's past back in his face as a weapon.

He needs to fix this. Needs to fix everything. But his anger is getting in the way because Phil had said awful things too—words that had pierced and stabbed at his heart like cruel blades, words that had stolen his breath away and left him hollow and aching. He'd forgotten just how sharp Phil's tongue could be—dulled over time by their friendship into something more playful. He'd lost his fear of it, and had suffered the consequences.

'Maybe you should've gone down with your ship then, mate.'

His breath catches in his throat. His hands still. His very blood seems to freeze.

He can't breathe. There's air in his lungs, but he can't breathe. It's like he's drowning all over again, clawing frantically at his chest, his throat—but nothing comes. There's no water, but that same heaviness presses down on him, familiar darkness tugging at the edges of his vision. He flounders with no purchase, his fingers reaching for something—*anything* to ground him. He's drowning. He's drowning on dry land and it's *terrifying*, and this time there's no Angel to save him from the tides. He'd already scared him away.

There's a soft creak. The door swings open.

A gasp. Quiet footsteps.

Slender fingers wrap around his hand and *pull*.

He thumps against a smaller set of shoulders. His nose buries in soft pink hair, his cheek resting at the crook of a neck. Careful hands curl around the small of his back and tug him close—a comfortable pressure against him. He breathes in the sweet smell of freshly baked bread and slowly begins to tune back into the sound of a soft, sweet voice.

“—no? Techno, can you hear me?”

Niki.

He tries to speak, but all that comes out is a soft gasping noise—almost a *whine*. It's *humiliating*, but Niki doesn't scoff or scold him for his weakness, instead just locking her arms a little tighter around him and bringing a hand up to support his head. Steady fingers curl in his hair and begin to

card through it as he shudders uncontrollably in her arms, another painful noise escaping his lips as he tries and fails to suppress a sob. His face flushes and he buries it into her blouse to hide away his shame. Her chin lowers, tucking him carefully beneath her, and he relishes in the way it makes him feel *safe*.

“Oh, Technoblade,” she says sadly, but mercifully without pity. “I’m sorry we didn’t notice sooner.”

“Notice—?” And his breathing hitches, halfway between a hiccup and a sob, his voice wet and garbled and nothing like his usual poise. “Notice *what*?”

“You’re hurting.”

“I’m not—?” He breaks off, his mouth opening and closing around a protest that suddenly lacks any strength, because, *oh*, maybe he *is*. Maybe this ache in his chest isn’t just his lungs. His eyes burn, tears clinging to his lashes, and Niki shushes him gently. It’s still hard to breathe, the pressure on his chest still heavy. His old Navy mantras crescendo in his mind—a constant reminder to be strong, to suppress, to hide away every tiny display of weakness so that others can’t take advantage. They’re loud and painful, but Niki is quiet and gentle, and she’s speaking steady, calming words that he clings to like a lifeline. Soon enough, her soft murmurs are overcoming the chorus, and he’s able to make out her words.

“—at’s it, you’re doing great. Just breathe with me, okay, Techno? You’re doing just fine.”

After a moment, he complies, matching his shuddering inhales with the rise and fall of her chest with great effort. She’s patient with him, coaxing him with gentle instructions, and after a few minutes, the haze finally begins to clear from his vision. Whatever just happened has left him shaky and weak, but Niki remains at his side, uncaring for the way his tears dampen her shirt.

“Why—why’re you here?” he manages around his ragged gasps.

“I don’t think you should be alone. What you said...you need someone right now, I think.” And then she smiles. “I’m here, Techno. If you want to talk.”

He swallows, hanging his head, torn between guilt and gratitude.

“I don’t—” he chokes out, once the ache in his chest has dulled and he’s able to breathe on his own. “I didn’t mean it, that wasn’t—that wasn’t supposed to happen.” He’s not sure what he’s talking about—his panic, or the argument, but Niki just gives him a sad smile and a squeeze.

“I know, Techno,” Niki answers softly.

“I’m sorry,” he says simply, hating the way it makes his throat close up. He’s not sure what he’s apologizing for, either. He’s wasting her time, keeping her away from her duties, and he’d said so much—so much that must have hurt her. And yet, here she is, coming after him, worrying about him and taking care of him, and it just makes him cry harder, his emotions a jumbled, tangled mess. Never before has he let it all out like this—never before has the careful lid been opened or the mask been taken all the way off, and now he just can’t make it *stop*.

“*I forgive you*,” Niki says with a weak smile. “But only for what you said—not this. You don’t need to apologize for this.”

“But I’m—”

“You’re hurting, Techno. And something tells me you’ve been hurting for a while.” Her hand in

his hair stills, simply resting, and she allows him to pull back to fully look at her. Her eyes are soft, and warm, and so full of *compassion*. It's then that he realizes how much she must truly care, to be choosing to spend time with him even after everything he'd done, even after he'd hurt her and those around her. It's then that he realizes that despite his mistakes, she's still here. Despite his shortcomings, he's not being punished. Despite everything, she still considers him a *friend*.

Something in Technoblade breaks, then.

"...Yeah," he finally agrees, his voice hoarse. "Yeah, I think maybe you're right."

They sit there for a while in silence, just breathing together. Her presence is grounding, and with time he's able to reign in his emotions enough to truly *think*. It's both a blessing and a curse. The roar in his ears finally quiets, his bitter, self-loathing thoughts dulling to silence—but the memory of what just happened remains. His words are as crystal clear as when he'd first said them—as are the ones that had been spoken to him. And *gods*, do they hurt, every single one of them.

"I didn't mean it," he murmurs again, and every word takes more effort than he has to spare. He feels exhausted, his tongue heavy in his mouth and his limbs like lead beneath him. "...Not all of it."

"I'm sure he didn't, either," Niki assures him, though her smile wavers. She spares a quick glance over at the door, mercifully closed behind him. Her expression is unreadable.

"...Phil?" He can't manage much more than that, but Niki seems to understand.

"Eret's with him. And Wilbur."

"...How is he?"

Niki's face is sad when she answers.

"He's hurt, too. In more ways than one."

He remembers Phil's face, ghostly pale, his arm clenched over his still-healing ribs, his head still swathed in bandages. He remembers grimaces of pain amidst the man's anger and sorrow, and the way he'd leaned heavily on Wilbur when they'd first come above deck. He remembers the way Phil's breathing had hitched with his rage and the exhaustion that had seemed to overtake him at the end.

"*Gods*," he breathes.

"It'll be okay, Techno," she quickly reassures him. "Maybe not right away, but...just give him time. Give *yourself* time, too."

He wants to argue. Wants to protest that he needs to fix things *now*, that he can't just let things sit the way they are. He wants to rush out and fix things before they have a chance to sit—before the crew or Phil have time to dwell on everything he's just said. But the pull of exhaustion is strong—stronger than his impulses, and it's quickly dragging him down. Niki's fingers in his hair are gentle and soothing, and he finds himself sinking heavily into his mattress. A pleasant blanket of numbness is steadily creeping over him, his eyes heavy and his thoughts muddled. He's *tired*, and he wants nothing more than to rest and forget it all, if only for a moment.

"*Sleep*, Techno," Niki murmurs, and he feels his friend's lips brush briefly against his brow. "Go to sleep."

And he does.

Everything is different now.

If things were bad before Phil woke up, they're *worse* now. If relationships were frayed before, they've all but *snapped* now, and the results leave Technoblade floundering desperately for any sort of purchase to stand on.

The crew treats him differently. *No*, not just *differently*, because that's what he expected—that's what he planned on. But this is another level entirely—a sort of isolation that renders him helpless. They don't come to him anymore—not for orders or advice or even just to *talk*—and they scarcely respond with more than a clipped word when he addresses them. They stumble over his title, a begrudging, “yes, Captain”, or “no, sir”, or even *nothing at all* replacing the fondness with which he'd gotten used to hearing his name spoken. The argument has left the crew with a shattered dynamic—an uncertainty about just who is supposed to lead them, and Technoblade can't even correct them because he isn't sure, either. He'd thrown the rank back in Phil's face, but Phil hadn't moved to accept it, leaving them at a stalemate.

And why would he, a nagging voice in his mind cries out. *He told you he didn't want it, he told you he was scared.*

He can feel the gazes of his crew watching him. Always. There's always an extra set of eyes out, burning at his back, but when he turns, they've all returned to their work. There's no more warm familiarity—no more pats on the back or shoulder bumps in passing, nobody daring to come so close. Conversations die when he enters the room, words faltering halfway as they all turn to stare at him—faces varying from *cold* to *concerned* to *pitying* to *defiant*. He's not sure which hurts the most. Perhaps it's when he leaves the room and hears those conversations start anew behind closed doors, and knows they're aimed at him. He can never make out the words, muffled behind old wood, but their tones are sharp and angry and bitter and *accusing*, and he takes them to heart all the same—the words he imagines they're saying—the words he tells *himself*. The distrust in him is palpable and *painful*, but he can't bring himself to blame them.

'They taught me that the only thing a pirate is good for is the gallows. And I'm startin' to think they might be right.'

They'd all heard it. His Navy beliefs, drilled into him since day one, recited like prayer during his time out in the fleet. His old training, long disregarded—abandoned the moment he'd killed a man to protect Phil so long ago—dusted off and repurposed as a weapon, aimed to *hurt*. In his anger, he'd meant to hurt just one in particular, but they'd *all* heard it. They'd all fallen victim to his venom and vitriol, and now he's suffering the consequences of shattering his every bond with the crew he'd come to love so dearly. He'd hurt them *all*.

Technoblade knows he didn't fail to strike home where he intended, though. The tears in Phil's eyes had been enough confirmation of that. He remembers the way he'd wished so many times for Phil to cry—to finally open up and let it all out. This was different, though. A different kind of tears. Tears forged in *bitterness* and *heartbreak* and *betrayal* and *grief* because he'd plunged his fingers into the scar of Phil's past and ripped it wide open for the world to see. Tears that once seemed impossible instead flowed freely, casting blue eyes in a glassy, hazy grey distorted by the anguish of a friend turned enemy once more. Tears so precious they should never have been

witnessed by so many.

Tears that are *his* fault.

He and Phil haven't spoken since their argument.

He sees the man in passing, flitting among the crew like a *ghost*, never really speaking, just wordlessly fulfilling his duties before vanishing again. There are dark shadows under his eyes that never really go away, and despite Eret's best efforts at convincing him otherwise, he never really seems to *rest*. That is, unless he's somehow managing to sleep up in the crow's nest, because when Phil isn't doing his duties, he's up there. He never seems to *leave*, always keeping a steady gaze on the horizon, his shoulders squared and tense and his face unreadable, a hundred different emotions behind his eyes. His whole body seems to bow, the fire of his smile put out. The closest he ever gets is when Wilbur is near, and even still, it's not the same. A small, hesitant twitch of his lips that quickly fades, like the light of a candle, snuffed out by the wind. It vanishes the second Wilbur leaves his side, replaced with something hollow and ill-fitting. Technoblade's almost *grateful* Phil spends so much time up in the rigging—so that he doesn't have to face the consequences of his actions.

He can't always avoid them, though.

The first time, the crew are all out on the deck, altering the course of the ship to maneuver it safely out of the way of the shallows of a small archipelago. Phil is there, too, and though he makes a point to keep his distance from Technoblade, the captain is unlucky enough to catch his and Tommy's conversation over the wind.

"Hey, Phil?" Tommy softly asks, sounding so quiet and unlike himself.

"...Yeah, mate?" Phil responds, his voice rasping and fragile and on the edge of cracking, and he does not turn to meet the kid's gaze. His shoulders are visibly tense, his whole body curling in on itself. He looks ready to flee at a moment's notice.

"Look, big man," Tommy says, wringing his hands together in front of him. He's wobbling nervously in place, unusually hesitant, any semblance of his usual mask of bravado abandoned. Behind him, a few paces away, Tubbo and Ranboo watch on just as nervously. They'd been huddling conspiratorially together not moments ago. "I just—I just wanted to say, about the whole '*curse*' thing, I—"

And Phil *flinches*, so violently that Tommy does too, holding his hands up placatingly.

"No, Tommy," Phil snaps, and that's final. The conversation dies in its tracks—with a first mate on the verge of panic and a wide-eyed kid looking both ashamed and *hurt*.

That's the first time Technoblade sees it—the *hurt*, the lingering distrust.

The second is much quieter.

He leaves his cabin one night for fresh air, and what he finds instead steals the breath from his lungs. It's a cruel mirror of that night so long ago, in the first weeks of their journey. Phil is bent over the railing at the bow of the ship, staring out into nothingness—and that damned locket is clutched in his hands. He grips it so tightly his knuckles are white—his hands shaking violently, the chain rattling in his grasp. His face is curtained by messy blonde hair, but as a cloud rolls across the moon he sees a flicker of his friend's face in the light; his teeth gritted and his head bowed, tears shining like liquid silver on his cheekbones.

The night is quiet, save for the waves as they wash against the hull, and the soft caw of the crow on Phil's shoulder. The bird presses close, tugging carefully at unkempt strands. It's the most gentle he's ever seen Brian be with his owner, but Phil doesn't even seem to *notice*.

He's too focused on the locket, his fingers curling around it in a fist, closing the chain up between his fingers. Technoblade watches as he brings it up to his lips, murmuring something Technoblade can't quite catch over the roar of the tides and the wind. It could be a prayer, it could be a curse—but it doesn't matter, because in the next moment, Phil's face contorts into something horrible—pained and furious and anguished. He lets out a *shout*, and for half a moment, Technoblade's sure he's about to throw the locket once more into the ocean. But then his fist comes crashing down into the railing, and his whole body folds, and he buries his face into his hands and muffles a sob into them, and Technoblade feels his heart *shatter*.

He wants to go to him—just like he did all that time ago. He wants to pull him into his arms and hold him as he breaks, to spill out apologies, to get on his knees and beg for forgiveness for the horrible poison he'd spilled, for the hurt he'd caused. It would be so easy—just a few steps, just a soft greeting—*anything* to start the conversation the both so desperately need.

But he's a coward.

He's a coward, and he's bitter, and he's angry, and so he just watches. He watches Phil shatter, all alone beneath the stars, and does nothing to help him rebuild. He lingers only for a few moments, just long enough to see Phil sink to his knees, before he pads quietly across the deck and back into his cabin, latching the door shut behind him.

He doesn't sleep that night.

Phil sits alone in the crow's nest.

It's quiet.

The crew's been asleep for a while. Even Wilbur went to bed not long ago, finally excusing himself from Phil's side to get some shuteye. Phil doesn't begrudge him his rest, though he misses the company.

It's awfully lonely up here.

His ribs ache from the climb. He knows Eret would pitch a fit if he knew he was up here—just like he has been for the last few days. As guilty as he feels for causing more work for the surgeon, though, he can't bring himself to stay away from the sky.

Not for the first time, he wishes he could fly. Fly up, fly away from it all. It'd be so much easier than where he is now, grounded, stranded on the deck in the middle of the ocean alongside the mistakes of his past. At least if he could fly, he wouldn't have to face it anymore. At least if he could fly, he wouldn't have to feel anymore. At least if he could fly, he wouldn't have to see their faces—wouldn't have to see the hurt he's caused, because—

Gods, he's caused so much pain.

'Without you, I'd still have my rank—my ship—my life! My crew would still be here! You took

everything!'

He muffles a scoff, dry and humorless. He laughs because it's true—because Technoblade had spoken with nothing but honesty, and *gods*, does it hurt like hell. If he hadn't stolen the locket, if he hadn't been cursed, if he hadn't let himself get captured like a damn fool after his mutiny... Technoblade would have never suffered half of the strife he'd been through. Technoblade's crew would still be alive. Technoblade wouldn't be missing a hand, wouldn't have nearly drowned, wouldn't have lost his ship or his rank, *wouldn't be blaming himself the same way Phil does*.

Technoblade deserves to be free of that guilt, at least.

Phil is no stranger to survivor's guilt. Technoblade isn't the only one who's lost a crew. He knows the weight of grief—has known it nearly his entire life. He knows the burden of sorrow and the pain of being left behind. He'd hoped to spare his friend from that same grief, but he'd been a fool. He'd only made it worse. He and his damned tongue—his mouth he never seems to be able to keep shut. He's always prided himself on his wit, but now he just feels disdain. He'd lashed out again—hurt someone he loves. He'd done it to Wilbur, too—accused him of so many awful things without hearing him out first.

His gaze drops from the distant horizon, turning his sights to the deck below—to the door of Techno's cabin. His heart aches, longing to go down and join him, to talk and laugh and eat together like they did before. But he's gone and fucked things up—let his fear take control again, let himself act like a cornered animal instead of a friend. Rationally, he knows somewhere deep down that he's *safe*, that even if Technoblade had considered the betrayal, he'd still stayed and fought for them. But his heart is a tangled knot of insecurity and bitterness and sorrow and *hurt*, and so Phil did what he does best and pushed the people he loves away.

He buries his face in his hands. Pinches his brow between his fingers with a strangled sigh.

"*Fuck,*" he breathes, with a shaky laugh as he realizes his hands are trembling again. He's never been proud of the way he shakes like a newborn kitten when his stress gets too much—never able to fully school it all away beneath a calm facade. It makes him feel like he's falling apart—makes him feel *weak*. He never wants to feel helpless again. He's felt that cold chill once before; he still remembers the cold press of chains against his skin and the rattling breaths of his crewmates around him, the only indication that he wasn't alone in the darkness. He remembers the panic in his mother's voice and her hands, normally so gentle, worked bloody and raw and pushing him roughly toward the narrow gap in the wall.

He remembers holding onto those same hands through the gap, pressing them to his face as he cried, listening to his mother's muffled voice through the stone.

'We love you, Phil. It's going to be okay. We'll see you soon. We'll be right behind you. Run—run as fast as you can, and don't look back. We love you. We love you so much.'

Phil laughs again. It's more of a sob this time. He hates that, too—hates how now that he's broken once, he can't seem to *stop*, unable to pull the pieces back together, shattering again and again like a *kid*. He's *Captain Philza*, for gods sakes—or he *was*—and once upon a time, he was a *legend*, someone to be feared, someone to be respected. And now what is he? A disgraced first mate? Maybe not even that. There's no telling if the crew will ever follow his command again. Everything he strived for, worked for his whole life might be *gone*. *Everyone*, too. He had just started to have hope again, to *trust*. He'd had Tommy, and Tubbo, too. Taken in two grubby thieves off the street and given them the coat off his back. He'd had Niki—dear, kind Niki, who'd taken one look at him at the docks and decided he needed *someone* to keep him in check. Jack, the lonely fisherman who'd taken one look at him, on the run from the Navy, and had hidden him away in

exchange for a spot on the crew. Ranboo, running away from his past, running away from his “family” and straight into the arms of a new one—a *better* one. A dozen more, all joining him *willingly*, proud to serve under Captain Philza.

And now he’s cursed them all.

And they *know*.

He knows he should be angry at more than just himself. He knows Technoblade said things that were unfair—knows his friend had turned on him just as violently. But for once in his life, Phil can’t find even the faintest flicker of rage in him. He doesn’t have the energy to seek it out, to rekindle it. He’s just too *tired* to want to feel anything more than this empty hollow ache in his chest.

He’s alone again, isn’t he?

No ship under his command, no crew to trust his guidance. He’s lost them again—lost them of his own stubbornness. He doesn’t blame them for not trusting him—doesn’t blame them for the cold and hurt glances they send his way. He makes it easier for them, at least, staying clear lest his curse try to claim another victim. Gods know it would. It would be just his luck—another incident, another tragedy to spur on a second mutiny. Maybe this time they’ll try something different. Maybe this time, he’ll be left on an island, or handed directly to the Navy, or, better yet, made to walk the plank. It would suit fate all too well to play into the irony—having survived his fall from the sky and into the waters of the sea, only to fall to the very same people who had screamed his name in his supposed last moments.

It would be fitting.

But he’s got Wilbur, at least. Wilbur, and the boy he’d brought with him—Fundy. His *grandchild*, though not by blood, but by some odd twist of fate.

It seems like adopting stowaways runs in the family.

He’s got his family. It should be enough.

But he misses his *friend*.

He closes his eyes. Feels the wind’s familiar tug at his hair—his one constant companion in a lifetime of hardship and change.

He wants to fly.

But all he ever seems to do is fall.

Wilbur greets Technoblade one morning at his door with a sharp smile and a mocking salute.

“Captain,” he says, with a curious little tilt of his head. There’s something dancing in his eyes, conniving and bright but not necessarily *malicious*. But even still...

“*Wilbur*.” Technoblade is immediately suspicious.

“I’ve got a little gift for you, Techno,” Wilbur chirps with a wink, and then he reaches to the side of the door out of sight and *yanks*. There’s a muffled curse and a furious hiss, and a familiar heap of green coat and shaggy blonde hair is promptly shoved through his door. Technoblade’s arms curl instinctively around Phil as they barrel into one another and topple backward, the smaller man landing on top of him with a shocked yelp as they crash into the hard wooden floor. For a moment, the two of them lie winded together, and then Phil is pushing himself upright with an indignant cry, lunging for the door.

“Wilbur, you little *shit*, don’t you dare—”

The door slams shut.

“Right, then. You two aren’t leaving until you sort this shit out.”

The door locks with a *click* behind them.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

“Listen, Phil—”

“Whatever you have to say, mate, I don’t want to hear it.”

“I just—”

“I’m sorry, I thought you didn’t want to associate with criminals.”

Chapter Notes

time for long-overdue talk. i hope you all enjoy the new chapter <3

—

chapter warnings: discussion of past character death, vague suicidal ideations

“Wilbur, open the door.”

No response.

“Open this door, or I’m kickin’ you off at the next port.”

Silence.

“Well, that’s just fantastic. Next thing y’know, he’ll be callin’ himself captain...”

He turns around, and his words falter, his half-hearted attempt at a smile slipping from his lips in an instant. Phil has dropped into one of the spare chairs in the room. He’s hunched over, his head in his hands and his hair falling forward to curtain his face. His shoulders are trembling—though, with sorrow or anger, Technoblade can’t quite tell.

“Guess I should’ve seen this coming, huh?” Phil asks, followed by a breathy, hollow chuckle.

“Kid’s always been stubborn as shit—guess he got it from me.” He looks up at Technoblade then, and his gaze is sad and tired, his eyes red-rimmed and puffy underneath. “He won’t let us out until we talk. He means every word of that.”

“Guess we’ll be here a while, then.”

Phil doesn’t respond.

True to his word, Wilbur doesn’t let them out.

It's nearly sundown, and they've seen neither hide nor hair from him. Technoblade's practically paced a trench into the floorboards, whereas Phil is eyeing the window as if considering taking a swim. They're both tired, and hungry, and stressed, and Technoblade is damn near his breaking point. He's sick of the unspoken tension, of the quiet, of the thread between them that's damn near ready to snap with so much as a glance in the wrong direction. The silence is practically unbearable—nothing like the comfortable quiet they'd once shared.

He's had enough.

If Phil won't talk, he will.

"Listen, Phil—"

"Whatever you have to say, mate, I don't want to hear it."

"I just—"

"I'm sorry, I thought you didn't want to associate with *criminals*."

"No, Phil, that's not—"

"What was it you said? '*The only thing a pirate's good for is the gallows*'? Come to escort me there yourself—*again*?"

"Phil, will you just—will you just shut up and *listen to me* for once!"

Phil's jaws *click* shut.

"Yes, *captain*," he spits out, and then falls silent. Technoblade fixes him with a pointed glare, but the heat of his anger dies when his gaze falls once more on the dark circles beneath his friend's eyes, and the tremor in his shoulders. It's easy to forget he isn't the only one affected by what happened—both of them having had old wounds ripped wide by the argument. Both of them are at fault—both of them suffering. But all it takes is one look at Phil to remind him, because his friend should never look so worn—so closed off from the world around him in his pain. He doesn't look so much angry as he does defensive, like a cornered animal biting at the hands that reach for him. There's a shadow in his gaze, something dark and haunted and pained, and his hand is drifting to his chest, toward the bandages where beneath he knows the man is forever marked. His bitter words from their fight, spat in fury and self-defense and a frantic scramble to get the last word in, suddenly echo in his mind.

'You could've stopped, you could've renounced piracy after—'

After his parents' execution.

Gods.

He suddenly feels sick.

"...Phil," he starts again, this time softer. Phil's fists clench, white-knuckled, so hard his nails bite into his skin and start to draw blood. Technoblade moves instinctively to grab his friend's wrists and pull them close, but the second his fingers brush skin, Phil rips his hands out of reach with a low hiss. Icy blue eyes dart up to meet his gaze challengingly, every inch of Phil bristling and ready for a fight.

Technoblade is tired of fighting.

“Listen,” he starts, and takes a step back, taking the hint and giving the man his space. “I know we’re both...” He trails off, gesturing vaguely at the space between them. “But just...can you just hear me out? We can’t exactly go anywhere, and I really—I just wanna *talk*, Phil.”

Phil’s gaze lifts to meet his. There’s anger there, but it’s dulled by exhaustion and sorrow, and it seems as though the fight is quickly draining out of him.

“...Fine,” he finally answers. “‘S not like there’s much else to do, mate.”

Technoblade settles down into a chair across from Phil. He settles his hands in his lap and tries not to notice how his prosthetic suddenly feels a lot heavier. He tries not to think about Phil’s red-rimmed eyes and trembling hands. He tries not to think about the daunting conversation ahead of him.

“I wanna apologize,” he says, deciding to forgo any further procrastination, “—for what I said back there. That stuff I said about yer’ past—about pirates—I didn’t mean it. Not any of it.” And he sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose, unable to meet Phil’s gaze. “Maybe I did before. Maybe I did not even that long ago. But not—not anymore.”

Phil doesn’t answer. He remembers a time, not that long ago, where he’d thanked the man for opening up—for allowing him to see his darkest secrets. And now he’d gone and exposed them for everyone—his past, his family, his curse. He’d taken that chance away from Phil—taken away that comfort, too.

“I shouldn’t have brought it up. Not after you trusted me with it.”

“No,” Phil answers softly. “You shouldn’t have.” His words hang in the air for a few minutes before he draws in a shuddering breath, pinching his brows. “...And I shouldn’t have, either.”

Technoblade blinks, but Phil just keeps going.

“I’m—*shit*, sorry, I’m not...?” He waves a hand, pinching his brow in his fingers. “‘M not good at this shit, mate, but... I didn’t mean what I said, either. I just got caught up in it.” His jaw works, like he wants to say more, his eyes a storm of emotion. “I was scared, and I didn’t—I wasn’t being fair. I didn’t give you a chance to explain yourself.” Every word is tense and forced, and Technoblade is once more reminded of how *similar* they truly are. Neither willing to back down, neither willing to show weakness, both of them uncertain and clumsy when it comes to emotions.

“‘S okay, Phil,” he murmurs honestly. It’s true—the ache in his chest has dulled, the burning heat of the moment all but ashes. Now that he can see Phil—truly *see* him in all of his broken pieces—the bitterness has no place in his heart anymore. “We both said things we didn’t mean.”

“I said you were just like the others.”

“Yeah, and I spouted nothin’ but old Navy propaganda at you. I think that’s pretty justified.”

“But I called you a *traitor*.”

“And I told you you deserved to be hung.”

“I told you to—to—”

“It’s nothing I haven’t told myself.”

“*Techno*...” Phil looks heartbroken. “Surely you don’t really think that?”

Technoblade doesn't—*can't* meet his gaze. He doesn't want to talk about that. Not right now. Luckily for him, Phil seems to recognize this.

"*Gods*, we're just a mess, aren't we?" Phil barks out a bitter laugh, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. "A disgraced pirate captain and a Navy turncoat. What a lovely pair we make."

"Funny, isn't it," Technoblade rasps dryly, his own lips twitching. "The universe has an odd way of workin'."

"Mmmm." Phil leans back. "Wouldn't change it though, I don't think. 'S kinda charming, in a fucked sorta way. Pirates and the Navy—enemies from the very start. A captain and his prisoner. Who would've thought the two of us would end up as friends in the end."

His face falls.

"Or—well—" His voice falters, his expression suddenly lost and confused and a little bit sad. He shoots a quick look Technoblade's way, immediately backtracking when he makes eye contact. Technoblade's stomach lurches as he realizes the source of Phil's difficulty. He swallows back his own grief at the thought—at the idea of losing the one true friend he's ever had. He's not ready to let go. Despite everything, he doesn't want to.

And so, slowly, carefully, he extends a hand Phil's way, holding his breath as the man gives it a wary look. The whole world seems to hold its breath for a moment, and Technoblade alongside it. Then, tentatively, Phil takes it, their fingers curling comfortably together. His friend's eyes are wide, fixed on their interlocked hands as if he can't quite believe it. Technoblade is quick to abolish those fears.

"You're my *friend*, Phil," Technoblade says softly. "Even with everythin' that happened, yer' still my friend. The first one I've ever really had. Nothin's gonna change that. Unless—unless that's not...?" He trails off, searching Phil's face for any sign of hesitation. He'd never doubted this before, not for a second. But they'd also never fought before—not as friends. Never like this. Never so harsh. Never so *personal*.

"*Mate*," Phil breathes. "You're not....?" His mouth opens and closes, his fingers tightening around Technoblade's. "I thought you wanted out. Out of the crew—out of *piracy*. Back to your peaceful life at the docks. Or—or with the Navy."

"*No*." Technoblade's immediate rejection surprises even himself. "I don't think I can ever go back. Even if I wanted to. I *left*, Phil. Abandoned my post after they took my hand. There's no greater shame than fleeing from disgrace. Dream was my only way back in."

"Oh." Phil's brow furrows. Technoblade can see the wheels turning in his mind; can practically see the images of the battle replaying behind blue eyes.

"Phil, listen to me," he says firmly, squeezing his friend's hand tightly and forcing him to look into his eyes. "My hesitation back then? Me considerin' his offer? That was a *mistake*. It seemed so easy—so temptin' to just go back to how things used to be. But I could never do that. Not to you, or the crew. I would *never* betray you, not for anythin'. I swear it to you on my life."

"That's—that's good," Phil breathes. "That's—*fuck*, mate, I—" His breathing hitches, his free hand pulling away to scrub at his eyes with his sleeve. His words dwindle into sniffles, the air between them growing quiet. The silence drags on for a while, the both of them reeling in the whiplash of their emotions, struggling to pull themselves together in the wake of their revelations. They don't let go, though, clinging to one another amidst the storm even as their walls threaten to

come crashing down around them. But even as the sky begins to clear, as the trembling begins to still and the tears slow, there's still one more wave in their path.

There's one more thing left to be said.

Technoblade is the first to take the plunge.

"I can't forgive you, Phil," he murmurs gently. "Not entirely. Not yet."

Phil cracks a wry grin through bleary eyes.

"S only fair, mate. Can't say I've forgiven everything, either."

Technoblade winces, but nods. It's a stumbling block, that's certain, but the hopelessness he'd felt before is gone. Days ago, he would have considered this a failure—a dead end with no escape, a mountain too steep to climb. But Phil's hand in his is steady, as is his gaze, and instead of fear, it fills him instead with a wild, desperate *hope*.

They've given each other a second chance.

That's enough.

"Right," Phil suddenly says with a laugh. "I think that's enough crying for today, don't you think, m—?"

Phil breaks off mid-sentence. His gaze is fixed on the far side of the room, on Technoblade's old wooden desk, on its contents—

On his journal.

It's opened wide, left open from the late hours of the night where Technoblade had sat, poring over the names again and again, murmuring quiet apologies to whoever might be listening. Their names are scrawled in dark ink, and Technoblade has no doubt that Phil's keen eyes can read them, even from this far away. And judging by the haunted look in the man's eyes, he knows exactly what they mean.

Phil makes his way over. Slowly, carefully, quietly. His gaze never leaves the book as he stops beside it, one hand extending to trace the ink with his finger. There's a deep sadness in his eyes that keeps Technoblade from snapping at him—from chasing him away. Phil mouths each name, his free hand white-knuckled at his side, and turns the page. His mouth is a thin line as he seems to register the sheer *number* of names written time and time again on the parchment.

And then, finally, Phil speaks.

"I'm sorry." The apology, simple and small and fragile, hangs heavy in the air. Technoblade isn't sure who it's for—him, or his fallen crew. Phil's chin is practically in his chest, his head bowed low, his hands clenched at his sides as he takes a step back, away from the ledger. Technoblade doesn't need to ask to know what words are ringing through his mind, because they haunt *him*, too.

'You were the one who caused this in the first place!'

Technoblade can barely breathe.

"Phil, wait," he says softly, and his heart aches as his friend's face turns away from him, ashamed. Phil looks angry, his gaze shadowed, his expression dark—but the anger is no longer aimed toward

Technoblade.

“You were right, mate,” Phil murmurs. “It *is* my fault. If I hadn’t taken that damned locket, your crew would still be here. They’d still be alive. And so would mine.”

It’s then that Technoblade remembers—Wilbur and Fundy had been the only ones to be pulled from the wreckage.

“I’m sorry,” Phil says again, and his shoulders shudder with his next exhale, his whole body bowing beneath the weight of his sorrow. “*I’m so sorry*, Techno. For everything.”

Technoblade moves without thinking. His hands are on Phil’s shoulders before he has a moment to consider the potential consequences, his fingers reaching to curl around his cheek and tilt his chin upward, forcing his gaze up from the floor. There’s a heartbeat after where he realizes what he’s done, and Phil does too, his eyes widening and his shoulders tensing. But Phil doesn’t pull away. He stands eerily still for a moment, neither daring to even breathe, before he finally leans into the careful touch.

There’s a glassy shine in Phil’s eyes, pale blue a dull grey in the wake of his guilt. His cheeks are flushed pink with shame, and he can’t seem to meet Technoblade’s gaze—not fully. There’s a world of weight upon his shoulders, his whole body trembling as though ready to crumble. Technoblade can’t reconcile this man with the one he was fighting with before—can’t bring himself to feel the same anger he once might have. They’re both tired, and hurt, and grieving, and he doesn’t have the energy to keep striking out—going for the low blows again and again. And neither does Phil. Technoblade can practically *see* the guilt consuming him—knows that same very same guilt like the back of his hand. He knows he’s to blame for it as well, at least partially. And he’ll be damned if he lets Phil think he’s responsible for another second.

“Phil, listen to me,” he says quietly. “What happened wasn’t yer’ fault. You couldn’t have known what was gonna happen when you took it.”

“But I still took it.”

“You did,” Technoblade agrees, “—but if you’d known about the curse, you wouldn’t have stolen it?”

“*Gods*, no...” Phil’s eyes squeeze shut. His head tries to duck away, but Technoblade holds him firmly there. “But I—because of me—*fuck*, I don’t—?” his voice pitches into something almost frantic, desperately grasping at straws. “So many people are dead, Techno. So much has gone wrong, and I don’t—I don’t know how many more will get hurt. I don’t know when it’s gonna end.”

That’s *it*.

“It’s gonna end when we put that damned thing back where it belongs.”

Phil’s eyes water anew.

“...We?”

“Yeah,” Technoblade says, and he surprises himself with the strength of his resolution. “*We*. You ‘n me.”

“Techno...” Phil’s hands raise shakily to return his touch, clinging tightly to his shirt. “This is gonna be like sailing into the gates of hell itself, mate.”

“I’ll follow you there, then,” Technoblade swears.

And Phil *laughs*. His strained grimace splinters into a watery smile, his whole body surging forward to wrap Technoblade up in a firm embrace, his chest hitching with a sound halfway between a giggle and a hiccuping sob. Technoblade catches him easily, his arms curling carefully behind the smaller man’s shoulders and waist, lifting him up a little as a surge of protectiveness flares in his chest.

“I told you I wouldn’t leave you,” Technoblade murmurs. “I promised, and I don’t go breakin’ promises. Especially not ones I make to you.”

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Phil chuckles through tears, still not letting go.

“Maybe,” Technoblade answers, his lips twitching into a weary smile of his own. “But you’re stuck with me. I still owe you, right?”

Phil snorts, shaking his head weakly into Technoblade’s chest.

“You owe me a *lot* for how much you’ve made me cry, mate.”

“For you, the world, Phil.”

Phil rolls his eyes. It’s less convincing amidst the tears.

“Dumbass.”

“Yeah, but you love me.”

“*Shut.*”

“Awww, are you cryin’ over little ol’ me?” Technoblade teases around the burn in his own eyes, and Phil grumbles in mock annoyance, his cheeks flushing. “You’re gettin’ sentimental, old man.”

“I’m not *old*,” Phil protests weakly. “Mate, we’re like the same age.”

“*Nah*,” Technoblade protests jokingly, resting his chin atop the shorter man’s head. “I’m still young ‘n spry. The crew’s waitin’ for you to start complainin’ about your old bones any day now—I’ve heard Tommy and Tubbo placin’ bets.”

“*Mate*,” Phil wheezes. He trails off into soft giggles, relaxing in Technoblade’s arms, his grip tightening to something much more comfortable, no longer squeezing the life from him or crushing his ribs. His brow furrows, some of the tension returning to his face. Technoblade hums disapprovingly, reaching up to gently pat at the side of his friend’s face.

“What are you thinkin’ in there, Phil?”

Phil sighs.

“...That was *bad*.”

“It was.”

“I don’t want to fight like that again.”

“Me neither,” Technoblade agrees quietly.

“I’m not—I’m not good at this whole ‘friends’ thing, Techno. You should know that ahead of time. I’ll probably end up fuckin’ shit up again.”

“Mmmm...” Technoblade pretends to look contemplative. “You really think I’m gonna be any better, Phil? Which one of us was a Navy captain again?”

Phil giggles, breathy and light, punctuated by another hiccup.

“Right, so we’re both emotionally-repressed fucks raised out in the middle of the ocean. What could go wrong?”

“A lot, apparently. ‘S not every day you render Tommy speechless.”

Phil’s grin splits a little wider. His giggles are louder now, his shoulders shaking from the effort.

“Oh my—*fuck*—mate, *stop*, my ribs—!” He’s practically doubled over, one arm folded across his ribs, his forehead pressing into Technoblade’s collarbone as his cheeks flush pink. It’s the most genuine smile Technoblade’s seen from him in a few days, and it makes the pain and weariness of the journey lessen at the sight of it. Obliging, he does not press the matter, but he hums chidingly as Phil playfully bumps at his shoulder, only to recoil with a hiss as he aggravates his ribs yet again. He snorts at the man, warm affection flickering where white-hot rage had burned not long ago.

It’s a much better feeling.

“We’re gonna have to bust outta here soon,” Technoblade grunts, once Phil’s giggles have died down. “The crew’s gonna think we’re in here killin’ each other, with all of the fuss you’re makin’.”

Phil flips him off, breathless. Technoblade shakes his head with a wry grin, then sobers.

“This...isn’t gonna fix everything, Phil.”

Phil’s smile falters.

“...The curse.”

“They have to know, Phil. They need to know what they’re gettin’ into.”

“I know,” Phil says, and takes a steadying breath. “I just wish... I dunno. Gotta just get it over with, I guess.” Technoblade’s heart aches for the choice he took away from Phil—for the position he’d put him in. But while he’d been the one to point the accusatory finger in the beginning...

“...It’d be nice to have you with me, mate.”

Technoblade smiles, and reaches down to squeeze Phil’s hand.

“I helped get you into this mess. I’ll help get you out.”

Phil gives a shaky grin.

“Might need to do some recruiting after this one, Techno. Something tells me we’re gonna be short-staffed for the big journey.”

“Nah,” Technoblade says. “Yer’ underestimatin’ how much these idiots love you, Phil. They’ll follow you, too.”

“They’ll follow *you*.”

“...*Phil*.” Technoblade’s throat suddenly threatens to close up with emotion—his heart pounding wildly with *joy* and *affection* and *gratitude* all at once.

“Aww, don’t look at me like that, mate.”

“But, you—”

“I hired you in as the captain, right?” Phil winks. “You’re not gonna try and cheat your way out of it, are you?”

“...I guess not.”

And Phil holds out a hand to shake, his gaze sparkling with something warm.

“Shall we, *Captain*?”

Technoblade takes it.

“After you, Phil,” he rumbles, and they turn to confront the next challenge—together.

Telling the crew goes about how he expected.

Phil gathers them around him, amidst confused murmurs at the sight of their captain and first mate once again side by side. Technoblade sticks close nearby, as promised, his shoulder brushing Phil’s, and his gaze leveled challengingly for any poor soul daring enough to try and interrupt. Phil weaves his tale—a tale of golden shores and promised bounties, of a missing piece to the legend and the tragic aftermath that followed. He speaks of storms and misfiring pistols and tragic accidents, and of a mutiny in self-defense. Technoblade watches as Tommy’s eyes soften, as his face turns toward Wilbur with something apologetic murmured on his lips. He watches as Wilbur’s expression warms, too, and he pulls the kid into a sideways embrace, ruffling his hair as he squawks quiet protests.

Phil holds out the locket in his trembling hand, and a dozen eyes follow the golden chain as it swings back and forth. Their faces are painted with a myriad of expressions—shock, confusion, even *fear*, but to his surprise, Technoblade doesn’t see any anger. Even as Phil’s words falter, even as his head begins to hang in shame, even as his voice trails into a hollow apology, the crew doesn’t turn their wrath on him.

“I’m sorry for not telling you sooner,” Phil says, his expression downcast. “You lot deserved to know exactly what you were getting into, and I was a coward for not being honest from the start.” He seems to hesitate for a moment, before continuing, this time with a voice that can’t quite withhold his sorrow. “If you want to leave, we’ll make port one last time before making for the island. You’re free to leave—take what you’ve earned and make off your safety. It won’t be held against you.”

Technoblade watches the crew ripple with surprise, a few soft murmurs filling the quiet night air.

“Phil and I are goin’ to try and break the curse. One way or another, we’re gettin’ to that island—

or dyin' trying." His voice is strong as he steps forward to address the crew. "I know you don't owe me any loyalty. I know I've done nothin' but throw away your trust in me. I don't expect things to be the same way they were, but... All I'm askin' is for a chance. If not for me, then for Phil, at least." He shoots his friend a long look and hopes Phil is able to feel his heart in every word. "He deserves to be free."

Phil shoots him a watery smile, and Technoblade knows he understands.

"Right," Phil breathes shakily, rocking back on his heels. "Now you all know."

For a moment, the crew is quiet, just watching them. With every second that passes, Technoblade can feel Phil's tension growing—can see the way his hand twitches nervously toward the cutlass at his belt. He's *scared*—terrified he's just heartbeats away from being turned on again—from losing *everything*.

But Technoblade knows better, even if Phil doesn't.

Phil is loved. He just needs them to *show him*.

Niki is the first to approach Phil.

"Niki, I—"

Crack.

Phil staggers backward, clutching a hand to his cheek. Seconds later, Niki lowers her hand and pulls him into a fierce hug.

"You *idiot*," she says, her voice muffled into his collar, her eyes wet with tears. "Why didn't you tell us sooner?"

Phil doesn't respond. He just lets out a long, tired sigh and returns the embrace, resting his chin atop her head. The others are quick to join after that, Tommy and Tubbo squeezing close to ruffle Phil's hair and pat his back. Ranboo weasels up close, too, making that same happy rumbling noise he had before as he eases into Phil's arms. Jack leans in to bump his shoulder against Phil's, with a crooked smile and a wink that makes the man muffle a snort. Wilbur has his hand on Phil's other shoulder, just resting, occasionally squeezing when Phil leans into his touch.

"Can't get rid of us that easily, asshole," Tommy quips, and Tubbo cackles his agreement. "Besides, not like there's anything better to do. Port is *boring*. Been there, stole that."

"Can't fight a curse without your gunner, boss man," Tubbo agrees.

"You gave me a second chance," Ranboo murmurs. "I think you deserve one, too."

Technoblade watches on with a fond smile, but can't deny the ache in his chest as he watches them. There's a small spot to Phil's side, a space he could probably fit in if he squeezed. It would be so easy to fold himself into their midst, to be one of them again. But his feet feel frozen as if nailed to the deck, and his breathing is hitching with something *pained* and *lonely* and—

"You coming, mate?" Phil calls. He's wriggled an arm free, his hand reaching playfully out for Technoblade's. Hopeful eyes turn his way, Tommy's teasing grin softening, Ranboo's purr strengthening, Niki reaching out a hand beside Phil's.

It's like looking at the sunrise. Warm and beautiful and *perfect*, in a way he'll never be able to capture in words. It's a part of him he didn't know he was missing, the missing piece to his broken fragments—the part that will put everything together again. It's an open invitation, a hand outstretched, a second chance he doesn't deserve and yet has somehow been gifted. It's everything he's ever wanted and yet thought he'd never have. Technoblade has never been a greedy man—always giving more than he gets, never asking for what his heart truly desires.

Just this once, Technoblade allows himself to be selfish.

“...Yeah,” he finally says, and stumbles forward. Phil's hand meets him halfway, tugging him close, and he falls against his friend as steady arms curl around him. Phil's head immediately burrows into the crook of his neck, Niki's arm entwining with Phil's across his waist, Tubbo's hand lifting up to snatch the hat off his head before Tommy's fingers begin to playfully ruffle at his hair. He hears Jack mutter something teasing but fond, and Ranboo's hand is clasped tightly around his own. It's a jumble of bodies and limbs and emotions and tears, his shirt dampening beneath Phil's cheek. It's messy and the sun beating down on their backs makes it a little uncomfortable, but every touch has him nearly sobbing, every gentle assurance of love like music to his ears.

Here, in their arms, he's warm.

He's safe.

He's loved.

He's *home*.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

“It’s finally going to be over, Phil,” he murmurs, so soft Technoblade almost misses it. “We’re gonna be free from this damned curse once and for all.”

Phil’s answering laugh sounds suspiciously watery.

“Yeah,” he breathes, and holds Wilbur just a little closer, muffling a sniffle into his own sleeve. “Yeah, Wil. We’re gonna be free.”

Chapter Notes

eyyyy we're back :D just a few more chapters to go now!

thank you so much for the growing support on this fic, it means the absolute world to me.

—

chapter warnings: mild horror elements

Eret is waiting for them when they return to the cabin.

After a night of celebration—as merry as it’s been in a while, with Wilbur leading the crew in a short but joyful chorus—Technoblade and Phil had decided to retire early to the captain’s quarters. Though their bond had been clumsily mended, there’s still a lot to talk about, and Technoblade finds himself exhaling weakly in relief when Phil closes the door carefully shut behind him. His friend is smiling fondly, waving a cheery goodbye to whatever crewmates still linger outside, and his voice is light and friendly as he speaks.

“Right—that went pretty well, I think. How ‘bout a drink, Techno? Gods know we could both use—fucking *shit!*”

He turns, and finds himself staring directly into the clouded, milky-white eyes of Eret.

Technoblade bursts out into laughter as Phil staggers backward, clutching a hand to his chest. Eret laughs too—deep and rumbling and musical, the corners of her eyes crinkling as she waves Phil off with a smile.

“Sorry,” Technoblade wheezes. “I was gonna tell you, but—” He breaks off into another peal of laughter, Eret not far behind.

“Oh, fuck *off,*” Phil hisses, but there’s no real venom behind it, even as he swats playfully at the

back of Technoblade's head. He moves toward Eret with teasing intent, but, as if sensing him, Eret darts gracefully away, just out of reach, moving to settle comfortably on the edge of Technoblade's bed with her long skirt draping loosely as she crosses her ankles. She looks stern then, the light atmosphere beginning to fade as Technoblade and Phil both sense her urgency and settle down into chairs across from her.

"I hope you boys are done fighting each other," she says calmly, as the two of them sheepishly duck their heads like scolded children, "—because there's a much bigger battle ahead of us."

"The island?"

"The island." Eret's face hardens a little more, her brows furrowing and her hands folding white-knuckled in her lap. "Phil, how long until we reach its shores?"

Phil frowns, and moves swiftly to the table, where the maps and charts have been spread out.

"Two, maybe three days? If the wind's in our favor." His lips twitch in a nervous smile. "Guess we've just gotta hope for smooth sailing 'til then." His stress is evident—his shoulders hunched, his breathing a little shaky as he trails his finger along the dotted coastline, in search of the one island that truly matters. When he finds it, his hand rests there, his eyes wide and desperately hopeful. His voice is more of a whisper when he next speaks, quiet and almost *breathless*. "It's so close, mate. We're so close."

Technoblade grins, kicking up his feet to cross at his knees.

"You're almost free of it, Phil. Just a little longer." And then he makes the mistake of looking sideways, of glancing in the direction of their other companion, and—

Eret looks solemn.

Technoblade's heart sinks.

"...It's not gonna be that easy, is it?" Technoblade reluctantly questions. Phil's expression falls as he hears him, turning to face Eret with a questioning look. Eret takes a moment to respond, her hands still folded carefully as she raises them up to her mouth in thought.

"...I don't know," she responds, and for the first time, Technoblade sees genuine confusion on her face. That in and of itself is unsettling, but paired with the confession...

"It's not over yet," Technoblade murmurs, and it's less of a question that he intends. Beside him, Phil makes a sharp noise of protest, his head jerking to stare accusingly at him, though he looks more fearful than anything.

"You're joking," Phil says, in a quiet, rasping voice. "We've come this far. We're *so close*."

"Phil," Technoblade interjects softly, but his friend shakes his head, cutting him off.

"No," Phil says firmly. "I can't believe that. I *can't*. I have to believe it's almost over, I can't—I can't keep running around in *circles* like this!"

"That's not—"

"*It's almost over*." Phil's tone leaves little room for argument. "I have to keep telling myself that. Otherwise, I—" he bites back a curse, looking away from them, his fists white-knuckled as he clenches them at his side. "...I don't know what I'll do."

“Phil...”

“We’re gonna put that damned locket back where it belongs, once and for all,” Phil hisses, a wobbly smile plastered across his lips. “We’re gonna put it back, and we’re gonna break the curse. No more accidents—no more *death*.” And then he’s moving, slipping toward the door with none of his usual poise—more of a panicked flight than a graceful departure.

“Phil, hang on—”

Phil pauses at the door, one hand on the trim.

“I just need some time alone, mate,” Phil murmurs. “...I just need to think.”

And Technoblade hesitates. A part of him wants to go along with his friend, to keep him company even if he argues against it, and another part of him understands, in some awful way. He knows what it’s like to have the world turned beneath his feet—he knows what it feels like to be desperately grasping at straws. He knows how terrible it is to be alone at those times—how much he would rather have had someone to lean on. But he also knows *Phil*, and Phil isn’t him. They’re so vastly different in so many ways. Phil’s always been a more solitary man than him, always one to take space when he needs it, and so Technoblade forces himself to *trust*, to have faith in his friend.

He knows Phil won’t run away from him again.

“...Okay,” he agrees quietly. “But if you need to talk—if you need anythin’...”

“...I’ll come find you,” Phil finishes.

They share a long look, and then Phil nods and slips through the door, leaving Technoblade and Eret alone in the silence.

“That went well,” he says dryly.

Eret hums.

“He’s scared,” she says. “And desperate.”

“Could’ve guessed that.”

Eret *laughs* and waggles her empty hands.

“As could I.”

And then her smile falters, that serious expression returning once more.

“Do you really think it’s gonna be that bad?” Technoblade questions.

“*I don’t know*,” she repeats.

“But you *always* know.”

“Not always,” she answers. “Sometimes there are things concealed from my eyes. Sometimes the whispers in my ears go quiet. Sometimes there are things that fate decides to leave as just that—fate. I’ve learned to trust even that which I cannot see.”

And she turns her cloudy gaze toward Technoblade, her smile returning.

“Sometimes, blind trust is all we have.”

The ship is oddly quiet in the mornings.

Although Technoblade is usually at his side, the man had opted to rest up after a long week of fighting—in more ways than one. Phil, on the other hand, had spent his night restless in bed, staring up at the ceiling as the boat steadily rocked, unable to find solace from his racing thoughts. With the day of their journey’s end rapidly approaching, there had been little else on his mind but the curse—and its end. The thought of finally being free is enough to make him nervous and excited and fearful all at once—leaving his head spinning and his heart racing, and his body thoroughly unable to sleep.

And so he’s awake, out on the deck, staring out at the waters.

Alone.

Or perhaps not so alone.

There’s a soft pitter-patter of feet behind him—lighter than Tommy’s, quicker than Tubbo’s. He turns his head curiously, and a mop of ginger hair and a young, freckled face greets him. It’s the boy who washed up with Wilbur—the one who’d held his hand until he’d woken up, the one he’s yet to have spoken to in all of the chaos. The one who, somehow, is apparently his *grandson*, in some odd twist of fate, and the one who’s now staring at him with wide, tentative eyes and his hands clasped carefully in front of them.

“...Hi, mate.”

“Good morning!” The boy’s brow furrows, as if he’s unsure how to proceed.

“Fundy, right?” Phil asks, managing a small smile when the teenager nods his head so violently his hair flops into his eyes. It’s then that he notices a little white streak amidst the ginger, standing out stark against his freckles.

“It’s nice to meet you—uh, finally,” the boy chirps, with a careful little smile of his own. “Wilbur told me a lot about you, and we, uh, haven’t really had much of a chance to talk yet.”

“Sorry, mate,” Phil murmurs sheepishly, and holds out a hand to shake. “‘S not normally like this, I promise. There’s usually a lot less—” he gestures vaguely, “—yelling?”

Fundy laughs at that, and some of the tension eases. For a moment, it’s silent between them, the only sounds the gentle roaring of the waves and the caw of a crow somewhere in the distance. Phil is the first to break the quiet as the curiosity becomes too great to bear any longer.

“Wil said—you’re Wilbur’s kid, right?”

Fundy’s nose scrunches.

“Kinda?”

“What’s that supposed to mean, mate? I mean, obviously ‘s not by blood, right? I would know.” He hesitates. “...Right?”

The boy shakes his head with a quiet laugh.

“No, I’m not—I’m not *actually* his kid, it’s just—Wilbur sorta adopted me? At least, that’s what *he* says. We haven’t known each other that long, but I was kinda on my own, and he—well, he gave me a second chance.”

Phil’s heart aches in a way that’s not altogether unpleasant, his smile suddenly wobbly.

“Sounds familiar,” he murmurs.

Fundy’s grin widens.

“Yeah,” he says, brighter this time. “Wilbur’s pretty great. I didn’t really think I *needed* a dad? But he’s always calling me his son, and it just kinda caught on.” His freckled nose scrunches as his brow furrows in thought. “Which sorta makes you my grandpa, doesn’t it?”

“*Mate*,” Phil wheezes, taken aback. “I’m not old enough to be anyone’s grandparent!”

“Yeah, but it’s the principle of the matter, right?” Fundy’s eyes glitter with something bright and teasing. “If he’s my dad, then you have to be my grandpa. No takebacks.”

“Oh, you *little shit*,” Phil laughs, reaching forward to ruffle the teenager’s curly ginger hair. Fundy leans into the touch, his gaze softening just a little.

“...I’m glad you’re okay,” he admits quietly, after a moment. “I didn’t really get a chance to meet you, before you fell, and—well—we’re *family*. Wilbur always told all these stories about you, but I never thought I’d actually get a chance to *meet* you.”

Phil’s chest flickers with unexpected warmth.

“...Wil told you stories about me?”

“Yeah!” Fundy chirps, and if he had a tail, it’d be positively wagging as he leans forward. “He told me all about your adventures, and what you were like as a captain! He told me all about how you once stole a crown right from underneath a queen’s nose, and how you once even fought *Captain Squidkid*.” His eyes are round with childish curiosity, his lips pouting in a silent plea. “Was it true? Did you really fight Squidkid?”

Phil laughs, shaking his head wearily.

“I did, mate.”

His heart is warmed by the news. Even in their separation, Wilbur hadn’t forgotten about him, just as he hadn’t forgotten about his son. He’s glad to hear that Wil still thought the very best of him, even despite what he did. It eases some of the pain in his chest, and makes his chest flicker with the faintest warmth of *nostalgia*, because he remembers telling some of those very same tales to Wilbur—remembers *experiencing* some of them with his son at his side. And despite it all, Wilbur had still looked on them with fondness—had still thought of him as someone treasured enough to tell stories of to his own son.

He pulls himself free of his thoughts to see Fundy looking speculatively at him, his brow furrowed, as though he’d just asked a question and Phil had been too absent to catch it.

“...Come again?” He asks weakly, with a guilty smile. Thankfully, Fundy doesn’t seem to mind, although his expression remains oddly solemn, considering how boisterous he’d been around the

ship in the last few days. It's oddly off-putting. Luckily for him, Fundy doesn't let him ponder this any further, cutting his misery short and instead ripping the metaphorical bandage right off.

"Phil," Fundy starts, his head tilting curiously to the side. "Why *aren't* you captain anymore?"

Oh.

He supposes he has to confront it at some point, but he never expected it to be so soon—or so personal. He takes a long moment to steady himself, his fingers white-knuckled on the railing, directing his gaze anywhere but the childish face that looks at him with nothing but curiosity. With Technoblade or Wilbur, they'd know—they'd understand why, even if not fully, and it would make the conversation a lot easier to bear. Here, he's opening up his heart to a kid he barely knows, and he's not quite sure if he's ready for that step.

"...It's a long story, mate," he sighs. "And not a happy one."

"Wilbur—Wilbur told me about what happened. About the mutiny?"

Phil winces. Fundy backtracks, raising his hands placatingly.

"If it's too much, I can stop, I just—" and he frowns, his eyes losing some of their sparkle as he seems to look into Phil's very soul. Whatever he finds there, it makes him look *sad*. "He always said you loved your crew. That being captain made you *happy*. What—" He seems to hesitate for a moment, as though balancing precariously on the edge of a cliff. "...What changed?"

And Phil is silent.

For a moment, he just sits, contemplating. It's a question he's asked himself time and time again, and yet never before has he been able to come up with a clear answer, even for himself. He's *scared*, that's part of it—but another part of him is *angry*, and another part still yet *sorrowful*. A part of him wants to chalk it up to just being a coward—a tired old former captain with too little left to lose, but that's not quite it, either.

"...I still love my crew," Phil breathes, his voice only a little shaky as he struggles to navigate his tangled thoughts, attempting to pull together something coherent. "I do, it's just—even if I know *why* Wil did it, I can't—I can't just *forget* that it happened. Even if he was trying to protect me, the others wanted me *dead*, just for bein' in charge." He swallows back the emotions in his chest; pushes down the creeping guilt and sorrow for those he'd lost without even *knowing*, somewhere deep down at the bottom of the ocean. "I thought they were my friends—my *family*, even. But they turned on me without a second thought, and I—" His voice pitches, and he schools it back into something more level. "I thought I could trust them. But I couldn't. And I guess...I guess I'm not really sure if I'm ready to trust anyone else. Not after that. I just—"

He breaks off, pinching his brow between his fingers.

"Sorry, mate," he breathes, with a rasping chuckle. "That's probably more than you wanted." He can feel Fundy's eyes on him, prickling and burning at the back of his head no matter how far he turns his face away. He wants to flee, to scale the rigging and squirrel safely away in the comfort of the crow's nest, where his only companions are the sky and the sea. It would be better than this—this hot shame, biting at his belly, scolding him for his weakness, for dumping his burdens on a random kid who claims to be his grandchild.

"It's okay, Phil."

Phil blinks, looking up.

“It’s okay,” Fundy says again, and Phil is surprised to see a face free of judgment or pity. Instead, the kid is slowly creeping toward him, hesitant as he extends an arm as if to gently pat at Phil’s shoulders. Phil lets him, and exhales quietly as the boy scoots closer until they’re pressing nearly side-by-side. “If there’s one thing Wilbur taught me,” Fundy murmurs, “—it’s that it’s okay to be sad. It’s okay to be angry.”

Phil’s mouth opens and closes wordlessly, his heart in his throat as he listens.

“I don’t know much about you, Phil, but... I think you’re too hard on yourself,” Fundy says honestly, and Phil finds himself fighting back a rising tide of emotion. He counters it with a tired grin, one that’s genuine as warmth flickers in his chest—raw affection for a kid he hardly knows.

“...I can see why Wil likes you,” he murmurs, and lets the tender words hang in the air for only a moment—a moment too long, because Fundy takes advantage of the warmth with a teasing grin that promises trouble.

“Aww, thanks, Gramps,” he teases, before Phil lunges to wrap an arm around the boy’s neck. He holds him in place and playfully ruffles Fundy’s hair as the kid squawks and tries to pull away, only letting him go when they’re both breathless and smiling from ear to ear. They settle into companionable silence as they both heave for air, the occasional chuckle filling the quiet spaces between breaths.

It’s warm and pleasant, and it feels like *family*.

“Hey Phil,” Fundy says again, after a long moment.

“Yeah, mate?”

“Do you think you’ll ever want to be captain again?”

Phil thinks of a proud figure with flowing hair and an iron hand—of a warm laugh and a smile like the sun, one that had slowly become more and more familiar the longer he’d stuck around. He thinks of his own time as captain, and the joy he’d felt, now dulled by a pain he won’t ever forget. He thinks of a broken man sans a ship and a crew, a great captain reduced to a mere dockhand, and he thinks of the way he’d risen from the ashes when offered the chance. He thinks of red eyes, soft when they look upon the crew, and of the heartbreakingly hopeful expression on a tired face when he’d been offered the chance to lead again.

“*Nah*,” Phil says, and his smile feels genuine as he reaches out to ruffle the kid’s hair. “I think Techno’s got that covered just fine.”

Technoblade is on babysitting duty.

Or—that’s what it feels like.

He’s standing on the upper deck, watching as the ship’s favorite three hooligans attempt to scale the rigging at the same speed as Phil usually does. Tubbo, Ranboo, and Tommy alike are shouting at each other from various places on the ropes, each egging each other on, higher and higher. Phil, of course, is doing nothing to stop them—cackling from high above in the crow’s nest—a spot he definitely *shouldn’t* be, if Eret had any say in the matter.

“Faster!” Phil cries, grinning as though he hadn't just fallen from that height scarcely more than a week prior. “C’mon, you can do better than that!”

“Phil,” Technoblade groans. “The last thing we need is any more accidents, quit encouragin’ ‘em.”

Phil grins cheekily, and promptly ducks away out of sight, leaving Technoblade on his own to wrangle the wily teenagers.

“Right—okay. C’mon, you three, quit temptin’ fate!” A series of aggravated sighs and moans answer his call, and he receives a rather rude gesture from the leader of the pack—Tommy’s teeth bared in a toothy grin.

“Fuck you, bitch!”

“Tommy.”

Tommy’s voice drops, but not quiet enough to evade Technoblade’s keen ears.

“You’re just jealous,” he mutters. “Jealous ‘cause you know you’d never be able to climb as well as us *big men*.”

Technoblade can feel his blood pressure rising by the second.

“If you don’t come down, I’m tellin’ Jack he just got three new volunteers to help him out in the kitchen.”

“Awww...” Tommy gripes, hesitating from where he’s nearly halfway up the ropes. “But Phil said we could!” He turns his gaze skyward, toward the seemingly empty crow’s nest. “*Phiillll!*”

Silence answers him.

“You *could* always scrub the deck instead,” Technoblade offers. Tommy flips him off, but begrudgingly begins the climb back down. When he reaches the bottom, he crosses his arms and furrows his brows with a petulant huff, looking for all the world like the child Technoblade tends to forget he is. He opens his mouth to crack a joke, but his words die in his throat when he catches the stiffness of Tommy’s shoulders and the way his gaze darts away to avoid him. There’s a strange darkness in his eyes, and the way his feet shuffle beneath him reminds Technoblade far too much of how he’d looked during—

During his fight with Phil.

Gods, he hadn’t really addressed it with the crew, had he? They’d accepted him back into their midsts before he even explained himself, and the thought makes his stomach turn with revulsion, his tongue bitter with the words he’d thrown out without thought or reason—the words intended not only to hurt Phil, but everyone around him.

“Right, okay,” he breathes, just as the boys have turned to walk away. He hears their footsteps pause. “Can I talk to you three? It won’t take long, I promise.”

I hope.

There’s a chorus of reluctant agreements, the three of them approaching him with clear wariness in their eyes. He hates how it makes his heart ache—hates how *visible* the distance has gotten between them. Weeks ago, these three had looked up to him—had prided themselves in having him as a captain, and yet now here they are, none of them even willing to look him in the eye after the

things he'd said.

“Look,” he says, once he has their attention. Ranboo shifts uncomfortably, his hands clasped behind his back, eyes darting to-and-fro. Tubbo doesn't meet his gaze—not that he'd know, with the way the boy's hair covers his eyes. Tommy's just quiet, one eyebrow raised, his arms folded and his lip threatening to curl. “I know I said some pretty awful stuff back there, when Phil and I were fightin', and I know you three heard a lot of it. I just want you to know that I didn't mean it—not any of it. I said a lot I shouldn't have, and—”

“You were a *dick*, mate,” Tommy says bluntly. “Just admit it.”

“...Yeah,” Technoblade admits weakly. “I was.”

“*Say it.*”

“I...” he fumbles for a moment, glancing around him for any prying ears. “I may have been—uh—just a bit of a dick...”

“*Ha!*” Tommy's celebratory shout echoes loudly across the open water. “He admits it! The Blade admits it!” Ranboo and Tubbo are laughing now too, loud and cackling and bright, holding onto one another as if they've just heard the greatest joke.

Technoblade blinks.

“Heh?”

They just laugh *harder*.

“*Gods*, you should—you should see the look on your face!” Tubbo wheezes. “It's just *too* good, boss man.”

“Yer' tellin' me...” Technoblade can practically feel the gears in his head turning as he scrutinizes his devious crewmates. “Yer' tellin' me all of this was to get me to say *that?*”

“...Yeah,” Ranboo mumbles sheepishly, scratching at the back of his head. “It was kinda Tommy's idea—Tubbo and I just went along with it.”

“So yer' not...?” Technoblade blinks again. “Let me get this straight. Yer' not actually upset with me?”

“Maybe a *little*,” Tubbo replies, his lips twitching as he fights back a grin. “But I'm not gonna lie, you kinda just made up for it with that.”

Tommy, red-faced, can only nod as he tries to catch his breath.

“Sorry,” Ranboo murmurs, awkwardly patting Technoblade on the shoulder. “Once these two are set on something, it's *kinda* hard to get them to stop.” And then he laughs. “It *was* pretty funny, though.”

“It was fucking hilarious!” Tommy snorts, straightening to reveal teary blue eyes and a heaving chest, still struggling to catch his breath. He tugs at his bandana, waving a hand in front of his face as if to cool down. “Holy *shit* man, thank you. Truly. You just made my entire day.”

Technoblade manages a small smile, torn between annoyance and affection as Tommy continues gloating, preening like a bird, repeating Technoblade's words over and over as if to commit them to

memory.

“So...we’re cool?”

Tommy *grins*.

“Yeah, we’re cool.”

Technoblade sighs in relief, but Tommy’s hand on his shoulder stops him before he can turn to walk away.

“Make Phil cry again, though, and I’ll tell the whole fuckin’ crew you cuddle with your pet bird.”

It’s early evening when Phil and Technoblade retire to the captain’s quarters together, a bottle of rum split between them and soft laughter filling the air. They’re not far from their destination, and so they spend the few moments left of their journey together. Phil is once more telling the story of one of his greatest battles, and though Technoblade’s heard it at least twice before, he can’t help but smile and chuckle along, savoring the way his friend’s face crinkles with genuine happiness and mirth as he speaks of sword fights and successful thievery.

“After today, we’ll just have one more story to tell,” Phil says, and Technoblade finds himself grinning broadly despite his earlier reservations. “A fuckin’ mess of a story, mind you.”

“*Yeah*,” Technoblade bemoans playfully. “Might wanna leave out some of the last couple days—nobody’ll wanna hear about the two of us fightin’ like a couple of children.”

Phil snorts into his drink.

“*Gods*, I still can’t believe that happened. If we ever start that shit again, you have my permission to just push me right overboard.”

“Same,” Technoblade agrees, and it takes him a minute to realize why Phil has just begun to cackle anew—raucous and loud, so hard his cheeks burn pink.

“Mate,” Phil wheezes. “You’d sink like a fuckin’ *stone*—no way in hell I’m letting you near the water again without some swimming lessons from Ranboo.” Technoblade grins sheepishly, with a little wave of his iron hand, and Phil just keeps on wheezing. “Oh my *gods*, why did you ever choose a career in the middle of the *ocean*, you idiot?” The words lack any of the bite they once might have, Phil’s expression only affectionate as he reaches out to playfully pat Technoblade’s shoulder. “You’re a damn fool, Technoblade. Can’t believe you’re *my* captain, and not the other way ‘round.”

“Awww, Phil,” he retorts. “You’d be lost without me.”

Phil sobers, his laughter petering out into silence.

“...I would,” he murmurs honestly, fixing Technoblade with a look that’s altogether both fond and sorrowful, full of so many emotions that he can’t quite pinpoint.

“I told you once, and I’ll tell you again,” Technoblade says. “I’m not goin’ anywhere, Phil.”

Phil looks conflicted then, worrying his lip between his teeth, his gaze shadowed as he looks away from Technoblade as though unable to meet his gaze.

“...Phil? What’s on your mind?” he questions softly, disliking the way Phil’s lips twitch into a smile that’s so clearly fake. His friend takes a moment to steady himself, clearly conflicted, before he finally speaks.

“Techno, about what you said—about leaving, once this is all—?”

“*Land ho!*”

Phil is up and on his feet in a heartbeat, sending their birds scattering to the far corners of the room with indignant squawks and a flurry of feathers. Technoblade is quick to follow, the two of them bounding up the stairs and onto the deck in seconds. Side-by-side, they stand at the helm, peering out at the distant horizon, which has grown dark and stormy grey in the short time since they last saw it. Beneath the threatening clouds and the rolling fog, a sliver of land is silhouetted against the sky—dark and foreboding.

“There it is.” Phil’s voice is soft with disbelief. It’s followed by a breathless giggle, and a warm hand on Technoblade’s shoulder. “Holy *shit*, mate, there it is! We found it!” He staggers backward, and Wilbur is there to catch him with a laugh of his own, his hands braced securely on his father’s shoulders. Phil is quick to sweep his son into a firm embrace, his chin nestling in the crook of the young man’s shoulder, squeezing so tight it forces Wilbur’s breath out in a quiet ‘*oof*’. Nevertheless, he’s quick to return the hug, a warm smile spreading across his lips—one of sheer and utter *relief*.

“It’s finally going to be over, Phil,” he murmurs, so soft Technoblade almost misses it. “We’re gonna be free from this damned curse once and for all.”

Phil’s answering laugh sounds suspiciously watery.

“Yeah,” he breathes, and holds Wilbur just a little closer, muffling a snuffle into his own sleeve. “Yeah, Wil. We’re gonna be *free*.”

Technoblade watches them with a fond smile, giving a playful scoff when Phil shoots him a plaintive look. With a lighthearted roll of his eyes, he steps forward with his arms wide, and is pulled into the embrace. He’s wedged firmly between Phil and Wilbur, and doesn’t protest as arms curl around his neck and back and shoulders alike, holding him tight. Phil cackles, teasingly ruffling his hair, while Wilbur awkwardly pats at his shoulder.

And Technoblade *smiles*, uncaring, even as he hears the rest of the crew’s footsteps approaching, because these are his *friends*. They’re his family, and he wouldn’t trade them for the world, even if Wilbur’s giving him a shit-eating grin and Phil’s chest is shaking with laughter directed at *him*. Technoblade abandons all sense of shame—any semblance of formality—and clings tightly to them, drinking in the sense of relief and accomplishment they all share at the sight of the end of a long journey. *Gods*, he’s never been happier in his life, and their smiles are so contagious that his cheeks are starting to hurt from the strain.

He doesn’t know what he did to deserve this. To get to celebrate with them, when he’s scarcely been more than a chapter in the book of their lives. But he won’t protest, not when his best friend is looking at him like he’s the very world itself. Not when Phil is *smiling*, pure and true and bright, free of all the burdens Technoblade’s been unfortunate enough to witness firsthand. Phil is *happy*, and so *Technoblade* is happy, because, at the very least, Phil can finally get the closure he deserves.

“We did it, Tech,” Phil mumbles, his face half-buried by pink and brown hair alike.

Not yet, a nagging voice in his mind reminds him, but Phil is looking at him with such *hope* and *relief* that he can’t bring himself to protest with any real heart.

“Yeah,” he agrees, with a rough chuckle of his own, before pulling reluctantly free of the hug, his hair tousled and messy and his cheeks pink from smiling. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, though, old man. Put the locket back, and then we can get a drink and call it a day.”

Phil’s nose wrinkles at the jesting insult, but he nods all the same.

They prepare a landing party. Niki, Tubbo, Tommy, Ranboo, Jack—even *Eret* insisted on coming, insisting Ranboo would be able to guide her just fine once onshore. Not that Technoblade would have it any other way. Eret knows this island better than any of them, save for Phil and Wilbur, and they’ll need her guidance. The rest of the crew are left to man the ship, with careful instructions to stay close to shore for a quick evacuation should anything go wrong.

The party files into the ship’s dinghy, with Phil, Technoblade, and Wilbur at the bow, staring out across the water at their destination. Phil and Wilbur are deep in discussion, hushed speculation and plans that Technoblade can barely catch over the murmurs of the rest of the crew. Just behind him, Eret is silent, but her hand reaches for his own and he’s quick to oblige. She hums as she takes it, and he watches her expression carefully, feeling suddenly very young and very vulnerable as he allows her to peer once more into his soul.

“Have heart, Technoblade,” she murmurs after a moment. “You’re stronger than you know. No matter what we face, have faith in yourself.”

And she smiles.

“...And those around you.”

The journey is short—though made precarious by the fog. It seems to rise from the very island itself, making it difficult to see more than a few feet in front of the ship’s bow. The rapidly darkening sky is lit only by the flickering flames held in their lanterns, and it does little to cut through the creeping chill in the air. The crew has fallen silent, scarcely a whispered word passed between them as they peer through the mist, searching for any sign of land.

For a moment, Technoblade fears they may never find it—that they might be swept up in the fog, lost and forgotten.

And then, like the water around their hull, the fog seems to part.

“*We’re here*,” Phil breathes, but his voice is not one of hope, but of *horror*.

The sight before them sends shivers down Technoblade’s spine.

Once golden shores now glow an eerie white beneath the dense fog that rolls across the waters, threatening to drown them beneath its cold weight. No birdsong greets them, nor the sparkle of pearls or jewels. There’s no land in sight, only broken fragments of alabaster, the air permeated by a heavy, nauseating silence. As the bow of their dinghy scrapes up against shore, it’s accompanied by a sickening crunch that makes Technoblade’s teeth clench and his stomach roil.

This is no island of gold.

It's an island of *bone*.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

An hour into their aimless wandering, they come across a skeleton.

Leaned up against a pile of bones, it's nothing of importance at first—at least, not until it moves.

Chapter Notes

two more chapters... i hope everybody's ready for the final act <3

enjoy!

—

chapter warnings: horror elements (disturbing and unsettling content), past character death, depiction of dead bodies (skeletons and bones)

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

Phil is the first to step onshore.

His face is pale, his movements hesitant and careful as his boots crunch down onto land—or, well, *bone*. It snaps sickeningly beneath his heels, and Phil's whole face twists in disgust and revulsion, growing more and more ghostly white by the second. Technoblade is quick to follow, though the rest of the crew aren't so certain, lingering as long as they can in the safety of the dinghy.

“The *fuck* is this?” Tommy is the first to break the silence.

“I—I don't...” Phil's brow furrows. “It wasn't like this before, what the hell...?”

“No, it wasn't,” Wilbur agrees, not far behind them, looking just as concerned. “It was *beautiful*—golden shores and jewels, just like the stories said.”

“Well, it *is* cursed,” Technoblade mutters half-heartedly. “I don't think a cursed island has to play by the rules of, well, *anythin'*.” He can't deny the flicker of unease in his chest, though. The island is unsettling, from the eerie silence to the constant *snap* and *crackle* beneath his feet.

He tries not to look down.

It doesn't help.

The island is truly made of bone, as far as the eye can see. Which isn't far—not with the dense fog surrounding them at every turn.

“*Stay close*,” he orders the crew. “Don't split up from the group. We don't know what could be

out here.” At that, Tommy pulls just a little closer to Ranboo and Tubbo, his bravado faltering. Technoblade is quickly finding himself regretting bringing the kids along—regretting putting them in *danger*. He’s not sure what they’re going to face out there, but he’s guessing it won’t be as simple as just returning the locket to its home. Judging by the look on Phil’s face, his friend senses it as well. Any semblance of false hope is *gone*, his brows furrowed and his eyes narrowed in determination, his hand resting comfortably near the holster of his pistol. As the two of them lead the way into the fog, Technoblade sticks so close his shoulder bumps against Phil’s.

“You okay?” he asks softly.

“I’ll be better when this is all finally over,” Phil admits, not meeting his gaze. Technoblade pointedly bumps their shoulders together again, not missing the way Phil leans into the touch. He doesn’t fight it, taking just as much comfort from the gesture as his friend.

“We’ll get through this, Phil,” he murmurs.

Phil meets his gaze, and any semblance of false bravado is *gone*. Instead of the reckless confidence he’s come to treasure, Technoblade can see nothing but *terror* amidst the blue.

“Will we?” he questions, and his voice is so rasping and *fragile* that Technoblade’s heart *aches*. He looks like a child, lost and confused and *scared*, and Technoblade wishes all of this was already over, if only to see his best friend’s smile and reckless bravado return. But he’ll settle for what he has.

“We will,” he vows. “You ‘n me. We’ll break this damned curse and then we’ll burn this island down right along with it.”

Phil’s lips twitch into a weak smile.

“To the gates of hell, huh mate?” he teases softly, and Technoblade’s cheeks burn pink at the memory of his fierce profession of loyalty.

“I think we’re already there,” he says, giving Phil a little shove. “Don’t make me regret it, old man.”

An hour into their aimless wandering, they come across a skeleton.

Leaned up against a pile of bones, it’s nothing of importance at first—at least, not until it *moves*.

It’s just a twitch at first. An odd rattle that didn’t come from a bone being crunched beneath the heel of a boot. Nobody notices, save for one. Somewhere at the back of the pack, Tommy lets out a *shriek*—high pitched and terrified, jumping backward so violently Tubbo and Ranboo have to brace him.

“What the *fuck*?” Tommy spits, gesturing wildly at the skeleton they’d passed.

Technoblade blinks.

The skeleton is still and unmoving, its head cocked at a funny angle, its hands resting on its lap. It looks, for all intents and purposes, like a perfectly normal skeleton.

“You alright, mate?” Phil questions, one brow raised. “‘S just a skeleton, Tommy, like all the others.”

“It *moved!*” Tommy hisses accusingly, his eyes narrowed as he shakes Tubbo and Ranboo’s hands free of his shoulders. “I fucking saw it!”

Technoblade eyes it doubtfully.

“I don’t think it’s moved in a long time,” he mutters, stepping closer and waving a hand in front of the motionless skull. “Looks pretty dead to me.”

“Don’t patronize me, dickhead!”

“Tommy, don’t you think—?”

“*First time in the Bone Zone?*”

Phil’s mouth snaps shut.

“Who said that?” Technoblade asks, glancing around at the crew. It hadn’t been a voice he recognized, but they’re all on their own out here, so it had to have been—

“Me, bonehead.”

The skeleton is moving.

The skeleton is *moving*. Not only that, it’s *speaking*, waving to them as it pushes itself up from the ground with a rattle and a creak. It stumbles a little, swaying almost drunkenly before righting itself. There’s an assortment of gasps and shouts and obscenities as the crew backs away from the unseemly sight, and Technoblade’s own gut lurches in an odd mixture of horror and complete and utter *confusion* as he ponders this newest development. And then it kicks in.

“...Right. Cursed island.”

“That’s right!” The skeleton turns toward him with a cackling laugh, its jaw unhinging and nearly popping out of place with the force of its laughter. “No rules here, pal. Who needs a brain or a heart, anyway?”

“Wait a second,” Phil says, and Technoblade watches as he steps forward to get a closer look at the skeleton. They eye each other up for a moment, and he can see the way Phil’s eyes linger on the stranger’s ragged clothes and the ax at his hip bone. And then Phil *gasps*, his eyes widening as he takes a step back, and behind him, Wilbur looks like he’s seen a ghost. “Charles? Charles, mate, is that you?”

The skeleton *laughs*.

“Glad to see you still recognize me, Captain. I was wondering if you would.”

“Oh, gods,” Phil says, looking equally amazed and sickened. “What the hell? Mate, you’re a *skeleton*, and you’re—you’re *alive?*”

“Nope,” the skeleton says brightly. “Dead as dead can be.” He thumps his empty ribcage, right over the spot a heart should be. “Went down with the ship, just like the others.”

“...Oh.”

“Hey, it’s not so bad! I don’t get hungry, I don’t get sick, but sometimes I do get this awful *rattle* in my chest.” As if to prove his point, Charles gives a hearty laugh, and his ribs rattle like some morbid maraca.

Phil looks sick, even as the skeleton dissolves into more raucous laughter.

“Phil, you know this...skeleton?”

“Yeah,” his friend croaks weakly. “He was a part of my crew. Before—well...”

“Before we sank like a stone!” The skeleton guffaws, clutching at his nonexistent belly.

Phil pales even more. Any whiter, and he’d be a ghost himself. Technoblade quickly decides it’s time to step in.

“Listen, Charles—”

“Poodwattle, *please*. My mom calls me Charles. Or—she *did*, until, y’know...” The skeleton waggles his bony fingers.

“...Right...” Technoblade trails off awkwardly into silence.

“So how can I help you, Captain?” Poodwattle’s eyes—or, rather, the odd lights within the depths of his skull—turn toward Phil. “Or...” They turn to Wilbur next. “I suppose you’re the captain now, aren’t you?”

Wilbur flinches.

“That’s not—”

“Sorry about that, by the way,” Poodwattle continues, turning back to Phil as though he hadn’t heard Wilbur’s protest at all. “Curse ‘n all, thought it was just you. You know how it is. Ended up as just some old bones in the ocean anyway, so... no hard feelings?”

Phil’s mouth opens and closes silently, his throat bobbing.

“...Yeah.” His voice sounds weak—*flat*. “Sure, mate. No hard feelings.”

Poodwattle *grins*— or at least, Technoblade *thinks* he does. It’s hard to tell when his head is just a literal skull, but the former pirate tips his head and gives a little salute that he’s pretty sure is meant to be teasing. The second his back is turned, Technoblade sees his friend’s expression *crumple*, his gaze darting away to study the ground with newfound intensity.

“Poodwattle,” Wilbur interjects, and Technoblade is momentarily surprised by the man’s steady, confident tone before he remembers that Wilbur was a captain too, once. To this very same skeleton, no less. “We’re here to break the curse.”

“Course you are,” Poodwattle chirps, waving him off. “Why else would you be here?”

Wilbur blinks.

“But you...?”

“How do you think you’ll be breaking this curse, then?” Poodwattle continues as if Wilbur hadn’t spoken at all. There’s a funny tone to his voice, almost smug, as if he knows something they don’t, and the thought unsettles Technoblade. With Eret, he’d never been teasing, but rather *guiding*,

being mysterious in a way that was somehow comforting. This, on the other hand, is anything but.

“We need to put the locket back,” Wilbur answers confidently.

“Ah, is that it?” The skeleton’s eyes seem to glow brighter, holding Wilbur’s gaze without wavering, as if scrutinizing his very soul. Wilbur shifts uncomfortably beneath its intensity.

“We need to return what we took,” Phil interjects, stepping forward to stand side by side with Wilbur once more, some of the strength returning to his voice. “...Right?”

Poodwattle doesn’t answer Phil—doesn’t even *acknowledge* him. He’s still staring at Wilbur.

“*Is that it?*” he repeats.

Wilbur swallows.

“Wil?” Phil looks at his son with wide, questioning eyes, and for a long moment, he’s silent. And then something seems to dawn on him, a look of understanding crossing his face, along with something sad. “... You still have it.”

Wilbur nods, small and stiff. His hand is at his belt, where a single pistol rests comfortably in its holster.

“I didn’t want you to see it—not after what happened,” he explains quietly. Technoblade remembers it vividly—the way Phil had flinched violently away from Wilbur’s hand when he’d held Tommy’s weapon. “I tried to get rid of it—I tried to throw it into the sea, and it brought the Navy down on us. A warship, just like Dream’s, against a tiny little sloop. We didn’t stand a *chance* against them.”

Phil hums a soft acknowledgment, his hand lifting to rest on the young man’s shoulder, his smile a little strained even as he murmurs gentle comforts.

“S okay, mate. I understand. I know you can’t get rid of it, no matter how hard you try. I tried to get rid of the locket, too, and—well, we saw how well that went.”

Wilbur’s eyes flicker with dawning understanding, but he still looks conflicted.

“It’s my fault the *Styx* went down.”

Phil grimaces.

“We *all* stole from the island, Wil. We were *all* cursed from the moment we stepped off of its damned shores. The others paid with their lives...but we don’t have to. We have a chance to make things right again.”

“*Not if you keep this up!*” Poodwattle interrupts. “I don’t think you wanna find out what happens if you stick around too long.”

“...What happens?” Ranboo asks tentatively.

Poodwattle doesn’t answer—just raises his bony fingers and gives them another waggle. Ranboo flinches.

“Better get a move on,” the skeleton says, crooking his head at Wilbur. “What say you, Captain?”

“I’m not the captain.”

“No?” Poodwattle’s fiery gaze sweeps over the rest of the crew, looking them up and down as they squirm beneath his gaze. He laughs quietly at the sight of the kids huddled together before turning on Eret, who lifts his chin as if he can *feel* his gaze.

“Fascinating,” the skeleton says. “...You made a sacrifice.”

“I did.” Eret’s voice is strong.

“Was it worth it?”

“...I hope it will be.”

Poodwattle nods, apparently satisfied. And then his glowing eyes flicker to Technoblade, and he immediately straightens. There’s no expression to read, not on a skeleton, but Technoblade gets a distinct feeling that he’s *known*, somehow. As if this skeleton can truly *see* him, just as Eret can—all of his strengths and weaknesses laid bare.

“Captain.”

Technoblade nods slowly.

“A navyman turned pirate?” Poodwattle’s voice is heavy with curiosity, his head tilting as he studies Technoblade like some sort of exhibit. “Now, what made you decide to do that...?”

Technoblade spares a glance at his crew. They’re all watching with bated breath, clearly unnerved, shoulders stiff and eyes wide. He catches Phil’s gaze, and his heart is warmed by the look of amusement he sees there, amidst the storm of other emotions. It’s a question they’ve asked each other time and time again, and one he’s never really been able to answer. Nevertheless, the skeleton seems to have found his answer, because he tips his head back and *laughs*, the sound echoing across the empty field of bones.

“What’s so funny?” Technoblade asks, lifting a brow with a frown.

“*You* are,” Poodwattle says around a chuckle, fanning his face with a spare hand he’d picked up from the pile beside him. “You’re *fascinating*, Captain. I can’t wait to see how this story ends.” And then his laughter quiets down; his chuckles dying off into quiet wheezes, until he’s calmed himself enough to speak in a voice far more serious than before. “But enough of all this. You have a curse to break, and no time to waste. Best get a move on if you want any chance of succeeding.”

“...We don’t exactly know where we’re goin’,” Technoblade cautiously admits.

“So what you’re saying is you need a guide...?” The skeleton leans forward, leering over them.

“...You need someone to take you to the heart of the island?”

Reluctantly, Technoblade nods.

“Well, why didn’t you just say so!” Poodwattle straightens with a clap of his skeletal hands, his tone brightening. “One tour of the Bone Zone, coming right up!”

The journey isn’t far.

In fact, it feels as though they must have walked past it a dozen times in their wandering. Poodwattle navigates the terrain like it's home, entertaining them all the while with poor jokes and mildly horrifying tales of his own death. The crew is *silent*, nobody daring to stop him. There's a growing feeling of nervous anticipation with every step, each one of them beginning to realize just how *close* they are to their destination, and just how *dangerous* things could be. On an island where the laws of nature seem to be failing, Technoblade has no idea just what awaits them on the other side should they fail.

An eternity of emptiness, condemned to guide others to their fate like Poodwattle?

Or perhaps even worse.

He tries not to think about it too much.

"We're here."

Technoblade stops so suddenly Phil nearly bumps into him behind, his friend voicing a soft noise of concern as he moves to pass him.

"The heart of the island is through the gateway," Poodwattle says, and for once there is no humor in his voice. He fixes them all with a long, searching look. "I don't know what you'll find there, but I hope you're able to break free." There's something sorrowful about the way he says that, but he leaves no time to dwell on it. He turns to face Wilbur, then Phil, and then finally Technoblade.

"...Good luck, Captain."

And the skeleton gives them one last crude imitation of a salute before *crumbling*. Like water, his bones spill across the ground, as though his very soul has been severed—and every connection along with it. The skeleton's remains bump and roll and rattle until they're no more than a small heap on the ground—just like the rest they've been walking on.

Phil makes a soft, strangled noise behind him.

"Oh, *gods*."

Wilbur, crouched beside him, is silent. His horrified face speaks louder than any words could.

Phil's eyes are fixed on the ground—on the bones beneath his feet. He's got one hand clasped over his mouth, his face rapidly paling, his shoulders shuddering as he tries to step back. Unblinking, he stares at a tattered scrap of cloth amidst the ivory fragments. And then at a worn boot, half-buried beneath the remains of a broken tibia.

And slowly, Technoblade begins to understand his panic. Because he, too, is seeing objects he recognizes—familiar scraps of clothing tucked amidst the rubble. Clothing he can match to faces—to *names*.

His crew.

These skeletons are their fallen crews.

Technoblade staggers back, covering his own mouth as his stomach heaves with immediate revulsion and *horror*. His knees wobble, his feet stuttering, and then he's falling back, bones snapping beneath him as he crashes to the ground.

"What the *fuck*?" Wilbur cries out, half-bracing Phil and half-struggling to stand *himself*.

“Shit, shit, *shit*,” Tommy mutters, his face ghastly pale as every step backward just shatters more bones beneath his feet. “These are *people*, oh *gods*, what the hell?!”

As if it wasn't obvious before. They'd all thought it, surely, but they'd all clung desperately to a fool's hope. Animals, surely, not *people*— and yet skulls stare back at them now, so close they can no longer pretend, and the proof of their worst nightmares has come to light and there's nowhere to turn that they can't see it. Technoblade's heart is in his throat, his nausea growing by the second, but he takes one look at his panicked crew and pushes himself back to his feet. His legs tremble beneath him, every motion taking more energy than he has to spare, every instinct screaming at him to *look down*. But he ignores it, swallowing back the *terror* and *guilt* and *anguish* and replacing it with the calm mask of a leader. For once, he's grateful for the lessons the Navy taught him—for the way he'd been schooled time and time again on how to suppress even the strongest, wildest emotions. His crew needs him—not his shock or his sorrow, but his level head and his calm confidence.

“*Eyes on me*,” he orders, his voice cutting harshly through the panicked gasps and cries. The world goes silent, every head turning his way, even Phil's—his blue eyes glassy and dazed, looking every bit as overwhelmed as Technoblade himself feels. “Nobody look down. Keep yer' eyes on me, and *keep movin'*. The curse wants us to panic, we can't give it that. Not when we're this close.”

He gets a few shaky nods; some soft murmurs rising up from their scattered party. He's quick to make his way to Phil's side, squeezing the crook of his friend's shoulder.

“Are you okay?” he asks, and *gods*, he's getting sick of having to ask Phil that question. Phil gives a shaky nod and a wobbly smile, gripping Technoblade's arm so tight it *hurts*. “Right, I don't believe that for a second, but... 's not like I have any other options right now. Y'think you can hold out 'til this is all over?”

Phil grits his teeth and nods again.

“...Yeah.” His voice is gravelly, thick with unshed tears. Technoblade's heart aches for him. He wants to mourn just as much as Technoblade does, because even if these people had betrayed him, they'd once been his crew—his *family*. But there's no time to cry for the fallen, not now. Not *here*. “Yeah, mate, just—you lead the way. I'll be right next to you.”

Technoblade gives him a weak smile and a nod, and turns his face toward the arch. It's a terrible sight—the ribs of a whale, stretching above them like some terrible tunnel. Within it is a patch of fog so dense that nothing can be seen beyond, no matter how close to it Technoblade gets.

“Right. Everyone, hang on to one another. Don't let go. Form a chain.” His order is quick to be obeyed, Phil's fingers intertwining with his, Wilbur on his other side with Tommy and the others not far behind. His grip on Phil's hand tightens as he begins to move forward with trepidation, his other hand lifted to shield his eyes as if to help peer through the mist.

“Whatever is through this tunnel, we stick together. Keep close and don't stray,” he commands, casting one last look back at his crew. “We can get through this—together.”

And then they walk through the tunnel, one at a time, with Technoblade leading the way into the abyss.

There's nothing at first. Just a wall of fog—so dense it's dizzying, with no way to tell which direction is right or left. He can barely see his feet beneath him, nor his hand in front of his face. All he can do is hope he isn't leading his crew into some awaiting chasm, ready to swallow them

up just as the mist has. He can hear shallow, nervous breathing behind him, half-muffled by the mist, nobody daring to speak for fear of disturbing some greater horror.

And then it clears.

There's no warning—just a sudden, abrupt ability to *see*; a cave carved out of the mist as if with a cleaver. He's quick to urge his crew forward, bundling them all safely together at the side of the circle as he carefully ensures each one of them is still present. The kids are shaken but determined, Jack and Niki side by side as they glare out into the mist, ready for any danger that might try to get the jump on their party. Eret is with the kids, his hand on Ranboo's shoulder, his gaze half-lidded and brow furrowed in thought. He looks *concerned*, and that's enough to set Technoblade's instincts into overdrive, the hair on the back of his neck raising as he whirls to scan their surroundings for a threat.

There's nothing.

Just an empty space, the ground beneath their feet still a ghostly white. A void, just the same island they've been seeing all this time, just an endless sprawl of bone—

Save for one thing.

A single chest sits atop the bones. Old wood, half-rotted with time, its hinges rusty and worn. It's already open, no lock to be found, and within, a heap of gold and jewels can be seen, glittering in the light of the lanterns. The crew is silent for a moment longer as they, too, notice. Where they once might have delighted in the sight of such riches, the air around them is heavy and *wrong*, and there's something eerie about the treasure the longer Technoblade stares at it. Something about it is unsettling, though he can't point his finger at *what*, and he knows without a doubt that it is not to be touched or tampered with.

“Stay back,” he says, finally breaking the crew free of their hesitant silence. “Nobody get close. Don't touch it.”

“That's...” Wilbur sounds strangled. “That's all the treasure we had left on the ship. The *Styx*. Before she went down.”

Phil hisses his acknowledgment from between clenched teeth. He's got the locket in one hand now—golden chains draping between his fingers, the mechanism popped open to reveal the inside. He's still got Wilbur's old portrait within, and Technoblade watches as he studies it for a moment, as though conflicted. There's only a slight shake to his hands to betray his nerves as he and Wilbur walk side by side toward the open chest, staring down at its contents with conflicted expressions. Wilbur's hand slowly drifts toward his hip—toward the holster on his belt, though he doesn't draw his pistol quite yet.

They stand over the chest for a moment, silent. And then—

“Guess we're meant to put it back, now.” Phil's voice is surprisingly steady. Technoblade watches his friend's throat bob, his shoulders squaring as he stares down his fate.

“Guess so,” Wilbur echoes.

And neither move. A silent question passes between them.

“...Right. You first, Wil,” Phil breathes. “I started this—I need to be the one to finish it.” His voice is shaky, but his gaze is strong as he stares at the chest, raw determination painting his face.

Wilbur nods solemnly. With a surprisingly steady hand, he pulls the pistol free from its holster, and for the first time, Technoblade is able to get a good look at it. It's truly a work of master craftsmanship, finely polished wood inlaid with intricate gold details. He understands why Wilbur would have claimed it—why he would have held onto it for so long, even without the curse, but Wilbur's gaze holds nothing but disdain for it. Without any hesitation, he tosses it onto the top of the pile of coins in one swift motion.

Phil is next. He readies himself with a shaky breath, holding the locket above the chest and watching it sway steadily from side to side. His eyes are wide and slightly glazed, and the tremble in his hands is back with full force. But Wilbur's hand on his shoulder is steady, and he leans forward to murmur something in his father's ear that Technoblade doesn't quite catch.

It makes Phil smile.

His grip starts to slip, his fingers slackening their grip, the chain dropping the locket further and further—and then at the last second, it stops.

“Forgot something,” Phil says, and pops the locket open. Carefully, slowly, he pulls the tiny portrait free from within, cradling it in his palm. He studies it for a moment, his expression soft and contemplative. Then he smiles again, and tucks it carefully in the pocket over his heart.

“Not ready to give that up just yet,” he murmurs, and next to him, Wilbur looks close to tears, his smile wobbly and relieved. And then Phil steels himself, and with one last steadying breath, glares down at the locket that's taken from him again and again—his ship, his crew, his confidence, and nearly his son.

“Go to hell.”

The locket drops with a *clink* into the chest.

For a moment, there's silence—the universe collectively holding its breath. Phil stands motionless, eyes squeezing shut, lips mouthing a silent, desperate plea.

And then all hell breaks loose.

There's a roaring sound, not unlike thunder in the heart of a storm. It sounds like the very world itself is ripping apart at the seams, accompanied by an awful rattling sound as the island's foundations shake and shiver beneath them, sending bone piles cascading down. The tunnel behind them crackles and falls, splintering into a dozen pieces, the fog around them swirling and threatening to envelop them all. The crew huddles together, Phil and Wilbur rushing back toward the rest of them with outstretched hands. They're pulled into the midst as the crew of the *Argo* forms a tight circle, bracing themselves for whatever threat awaits them.

Behind him, Eret suddenly gasps.

“Something's wrong,” he breathes, and his eyes are wide, his face pale. “Something's terribly wrong, I can't—I can't feel them anymore, *I can't see—!*”

Technoblade's blood runs cold.

There's an awful shriek—a keening wail that rips through the thunder, everything else dull in comparison to the piercing, mournful cry. Beside him, Phil doubles over, clutching his hands over his ears, and he can hear the confused shouts and agonized hisses as the rest of his crew follows suit. The sound seems to resonate on and on and *on*, his very bones aching as the pitch increases, and even his hands can't block out the awful, haunting wail as the volume continues to rise, his

thoughts muddling into nothing until—

It stops.

There's only silence now, and as Technoblade raises his head, he sees that the fog has cleared. All that's left is a fine mist at their ankles, rippling like the surface of the water, hiding the ground from view. That—and the sky, now a muted grey, the same shade as the mist, sprawling as far as the eye can see with no sign of the ocean in sight. It's suddenly as if they aren't on an island at all, but rather, another world entirely. There's no sound—not the thunderous rumble or the wailing cries—nothing at all, save for their ragged breathing and muted whispers.

Everything is still. And then—

“Hey, Captain,” a youthful voice calls.

Technoblade's heart skips a beat.

He looks up, and into the ghostly face of his former cabin boy.

Chapter End Notes

***a special note: for this chapter i got explicit permission from poodwattle to use them as a character, and to use he/him pronouns exclusively for the sake of readers who don't speak english as their primary language. poodwattle uses both he/him and they/them, so please be respectful of that!

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

He'd always wondered if they blamed him for their fall. But now, looking at them, as they point accusing fingers, weeping and wailing and steadily dripping water from their clothes and mouths, he finds it would have been better not to know.

“A good captain goes down with his ship,” his cabin boy whispers accusingly. “But you left us, Technoblade.”

Chapter Notes

one more chapter to go <3 i'm so overwhelmed to be nearing the end, but i'm also so incredibly grateful for all of the support you've all given me while writing it. i hope you enjoyed this story as much as i enjoyed writing it <3

NOTE: in light of the recent situation involving techno's health, i heavily encourage reading chapter warnings before proceeding with this chapter.

—

chapter warnings: horror elements, past character death, ghosts/the undead, vague suicidal ideations, graphic depictions of injury, temporary character death.

For the first time since the storm, Technoblade stares at the ghosts of his crew, and they stare back. His cabin boy is there in front of him, and yet he's *not*—his skin transparent and pale, a chill cooling the air around him, his feet hovering just off of the ground, bones visible beneath the skin in some places as though he can see right through. The kid looks at him, sad and sorrowful, and Technoblade can't bring himself to speak—can't even manage a word.

This is some trick. It has to be. And yet the cabin boy of the *Anemoi* stands in front of him, evidently as real as any of his current crew. He heard his voice—saw his lips move along with it, can see them moving now—though he can't quite understand the words over the roar of blood in his ears. He can hear muffled murmurs behind him, catches the faint startled gasps of his crew, and in the corner of his eye he watches as more ghostly figures make an appearance, surrounding their group on all sides.

He's not the only one with ghosts of the past, evidently.

Time moves slowly as Technoblade watches as the rest of the crew face off against their own trials. He can see Ranboo cowering from two tall figures, dressed in the richest of fashion, with ugly sneers on their faces as they back him into a corner—can see Tommy and Tubbo, averting their gazes from a cluster of raggedy, dirty-faced teenagers that point accusing fingers and plead for help alike. Fundy cowers like a dog with his tail between his legs, looking desperately around at *nothing*, calling out for the others as though he can't hear or see any of them at all. All around

him, his crew are struggling, and he's struck by a paralyzing helplessness that makes his breath stutter and his fists clench at his sides.

And Phil...

Phil.

Phil's on his knees. *Phil's on his knees*, his back hunched and his shoulders trembling, his head bowed low, his hair hanging over his eyes. His hands are tangled in his hair, his whole body shaking, his teeth gritted as his chest hitches with silent sobs. Over him stands a pair of ghostly figures—a man and a woman, with necklaces of rope around their necks.

His parents.

“Oh, Phil,” he breathes, momentarily pulled from the throes of his own grief, because Phil is *broken*, sobbing, unashamed, as the spirits whisper cruel words in his ears, harsh accusations, each one sinking claws deep into Phil's heart—his friend visibly flinching each time they open their mouths. He can't hear the words being said, but he can see their expressions—twisted unnaturally with rage and sorrow and pain, all of it directed at Phil.

“*I'm sorry,*” he sees Phil mouth, again and again, and *again*. Phil shakes his head against something his mother says—only to freeze when a hand cups his cheek. Technoblade loses sight of him as Wilbur steps in between, confronting something else entirely. Wilbur is facing what looks like *Phil himself*, except it's not Phil—not as Technoblade knows him. But—he does recognize him. Messy blonde hair and chained wrists, hollow eyes and an empty smile, a man who looks for all the world like he's lost *everything*.

“*Please,*” this strange Phil says, and his voice is ragged and hoarse and *desperate*. “Wilbur, don't do this. You don't have to do this.”

“Stop,” Wilbur breathes. “I—I didn't want to, I had to do it, I—” He takes one wobbly step back, and another, a shaking hand reaching for a pistol that's no longer there. “You're not him—you *can't* be, he said he forgave me, he wouldn't...?” Wilbur trails off, mouth opening and closing wordlessly, a shine to his eyes that hadn't been there before, his face twisted into something pained and afraid.

He's right there, Technoblade wants to scream, because Wilbur's father is *there*, kneeling on the ground just beyond him, suffering similarly. But Wilbur's eyes are vacant and glassy, locked in his own battle, and no words will reach him in this state. He moves to help, to do something—*anything* to help them, but he's stopped in his tracks by a voice calling out to him once more.

“*Captain,*” his cabin boy says, and he's instantly reminded of his own predicament. He turns slowly—his heart in his throat and his knees trembling, to see his cabin boy staring him down, a chilling smile spread across childish lips. Only his cabin boy isn't alone this time—instead, flanked by dozens of others, the fog swimming with achingly familiar faces. Men and women, young and old alike—each one with a name he knows like the back of his hand, names he's written time and time again, recited like a prayer each night as he commits their faces to memory, refusing to forget what he'd lost. And now here they are, their ghostly faces just how he remembers them to be—except sadder, somehow. More gaunt, hollow-cheeked and pale, their eyes dark and haunted, almost skeletal in appearance. And their clothes...

Their clothes drip water with every step.

Technoblade chokes back a cry, stepping back to the sound of the horrendous crunching beneath

his heels. They follow, their feet not even touching the floor, and on their faces, he can see nothing but sorrow—the bitterness of their untimely deaths following them beyond the grave. White-hot shame rips through him at the sight of them, every night spent lying awake suddenly paling in comparison to what he feels now, truly facing the ones he'd failed. It feels as though he's being crushed, the weight of the sea back upon his chest, forcing him, trembling, to his knees. He's drowning again, clawing at empty air, reaching for the hands of his crew as they sink further and further below, into the dark depths where he can't follow.

Where he *chose* not to follow.

He'd always wondered if they blamed him for their fall. But now, looking at them, as they point accusing fingers, weeping and wailing and steadily dripping water from their clothes and mouths, he finds it would have been better not to know.

"A good captain goes down with his ship," his cabin boy whispers accusingly. "But you left us, Technoblade."

"...I did," he breathes, and his voice comes out watery and pained. He feels like a *child*, scolded and ashamed, the very same way he felt all those months ago when he'd first stepped into his superiors' office to deliver the news. That very same humiliation, the soul-crushing guilt, the white-hot anger misdirected every which way—all of it comes rushing back. His cheeks burn and his stomach roils and he can't even manage to lift his gaze. He doesn't dare. He can't stand to see their disappointment a moment longer, nor their looks of utter betrayal. His mouth works around silent apologies, but none of them are enough—none of them could truly atone for what he'd done, for what they'd lost because of him.

And then he hears it.

"Why?"

It's such a simple question, and yet it bears the weight of the world. Why *did* he leave them? Why didn't he go down with his ship, like every captain of legend? Why did he fight so hard to live, against all odds? Why did he accept the hand of a complete stranger—of an *enemy*?

He doesn't have an easy answer, no matter how hard he tries. Nothing could ever be reason enough for their demise—no excuse worthy.

"You left us, Captain," the boy continues, and he's angry now, his gaze narrowed in the same disdain and disgust Technoblade *feels*. "For a *pirate*."

And, *gods*, it hurts because it's *true*—because they're the same damned words he's been telling himself since the very beginning, every single one of them. Back when he and Phil were little more than strangers—acquaintances at best, and enemies at their worst, when he needed someone to blame for his own mistakes again and again. He'd asked himself *why* then, too, because he'd gone and accepted the hand of a pirate not once, but *twice*, abandoning his former morals at the first sight of a second chance. He'd taken the hand of the one who, though inadvertently, had been the *cause* of their deaths, and he'd been a fool to think that it would go unnoticed.

"I—I couldn't—I don't..." Any words fall short, because he's torn halfway between protesting and apologizing, a war being waged in his heart between the urge to seek forgiveness and the *wrongness* of it all. He'd left his old crew for a new one, and they *know*—they've seen it all, all his sins laid bare at their feet for judgment. He'd left them behind, little more than a memory and some names in a book while he went on to start a new journey, with Phil and Tommy and Tubbo and Ranboo and Niki and—

His chin jerks, searching desperately, a coward moments away from *flight*, searching for any kind of escape or shelter amidst the crowd of his crew. They're all still fighting—some literally, guns and swords drawn, others still fighting an emotional battle. No one's there to help, though, and the longer he waits, the closer his crew gets, closing in on him and circling him like a trapped animal, and with every step back, bones crunch beneath his feet, and there's nowhere to go, nowhere to run, and—

"They're not real, Technoblade!" He hears Eret's call over the din, like a beacon of light amidst the storm, and sees her hand outstretched toward him as if she can somehow reach him through the chaos. She stands tall and proud, untouched by any spirit, her chin raised and her expression calm. Her eyes are wide and unseeing, and yet in them, they hold *everything*—a silent promise, a quiet plea, and urge to *remember*.

And remember, he does.

He recalls Eret's words—the first he'd ever heard from her lips. The ones she'd told him all those months ago, at their very first meeting.

'Don't be afraid to mourn, Technoblade. They wouldn't want you to.'

They wouldn't want you to.

And suddenly it all makes sense.

"...You're not them," he breathes, and the ghosts *freeze*.

"What?" His cabin boy asks.

"You're not them," he repeats, lifting his chin as a bit of confidence returns. "...My crew—they wouldn't want me to blame myself. They wouldn't—they *don't* blame me for what happened." And as he says it, something new sparks in his heart—something altogether foreign, and yet as comforting as a familiar embrace.

Acceptance.

There's something else there, too. A silent reassurance, a steady *something* he can't quite name, almost as if a warm hand is resting upon his shoulder, urging him on. He can't see them, but somehow he knows they're there all the same.

His crew. His *real* crew.

"It's not my fault." His words echo, altogether soft as a whisper and yet oddly loud, across the fog. "There was nothing more I could have done." And for the first time, he actually believes it, lifting his gaze to meet his accuser's with as much fire as he can muster.

Across the field of bone, he sees Eret *smile*.

And then, all at once, everything shifts.

In the blink of an eye, his crew vanishes, leaving nothing behind but the fog. It's quiet. Cold. Empty. He's momentarily torn between relief and regret, his heart aching, a gaping hole left where they had once stood.

And then he sees himself.

It's like looking into a mirror—a perfect reflection of himself staring right back at him.

Only something's different.

Something's *wrong*.

Instead of a red coat, he's wearing blue—the same deep royal shade of the Navy, a familiar crest emblazoning shining golden buttons. His hair is shorter, braided neatly back, his clothing neatly pressed. He looks dignified. Wealthy. Powerful. He can see pale skin where cold iron should be—any trace of his prosthetic gone, as if the injury had never happened at all. He looks younger too, in a way Technoblade hasn't felt in months, the strain of his troubles gone from his shoulders, leaving him proud and unburdened.

And his face...

His mirror's expression is twisted with something dark and cold. Something he recognizes, though he wishes he didn't. He looks upon the crew, and in his eyes there's no warmth—no fond affection, no teasing humor or the love he's come to treasure. Instead, all he sees is *disgust*, raw and untempered. There's nothing but hate in his reflection's eyes, and every bit of it is directed toward his crew—toward *Phil*.

“*Pirates*,” he hears his own voice spit like a curse. And he sees his crew react, questioning gazes turning their way, muffled noises of shock filling the air amidst the sounds of battle. And his reflection turns back to him, the heat of his gaze *burning* as he looks into fiery red and sees nothing but bitter disappointment and disdain. “*This is what we've become? A criminal?*”

He'd thought he had no greater regret than his crew—than the dozens of innocent lives lost beneath his leadership. But now, as he stares into the eyes of the man he'd once been—as he listens to the mantras he'd once recited with his whole heart, he's beginning to realize there's something else he fears more. Something greater than the guilt, more terrifying than the storm or the ghosts of the ones he'd failed along the way.

Himself.

The man he'd once been. The man he fears he might still be, somewhere deep down.

“We were great. We *helped* people. And now what have you done? Aligned yourself with *pirates*? The very lot you swore to stop when you joined the Navy? The same filth who've done nothing but cause destruction and ruin wherever they sail?” His mirror's lip curls. “Pathetic. We were destined for greatness, Technoblade. To do *good*. Now you're nothing better than everything you swore to put an end to.”

“Put an end to?” Technoblade recoils with a hiss, his grip on his sword white-knuckled as he faces off against himself. He knows these words—knows the vile things he used to believe, but it doesn't make it any easier to hear. “These are *people*! They're not some pests—some plague to eradicate! They're our *friends*. They're our *crew*!”

“They've *killed people*!”

“*So have we!*” Technoblade shouts. “All those people—all those lives sent to the gallows? We're no better than them—we never were!”

“They pillage and destroy, ruining innocent lives, and you're going to *defend them*?” His counterpart's words are eerily reminiscent of the ones Dream had spoken to him not long ago.

“You're going to *join them*? What happened to our dream? What happened to everything we grew

up believing?”

“Everything we grew up believing was *wrong!*” Technoblade’s voice comes out louder than he expected, pitching into a shout, his chest heaving for every breath. “*All of it!* Do you really think killing is goin’ to solve everything? Is an eye for an eye really goin’ to stop this madness?”

“The Navy says—”

“The Navy says *what?* We cared for our crew. We loved them like they were our family. And they told us it was *wrong.*” Angry tears prickle in the corners of his eyes, but he shoves them back. “We were told to *lead,* not love. And when we lost them? All of them? We weren’t even punished for that. We were punished for *letting Phil escape.* For acceptin’ his help. For not going down alongside them like a good soldier.” He spits the words out like they’re poison, and they might as well have been for the way they twist at his heart.

“We should have gone down with them!” His former self spits, in a cruel echo of the words he himself had said not all that long ago. “The Navy was right! No good captain lets his ship go down without him! The Navy trusted us with that rank, with that crew, and we failed!”

“We were nothin’ more than a *weapon* to the Navy! A pawn to be used to gain more power! To hurt other people!”

At that, his counterpart goes quiet.

“They didn’t care about us,” Technoblade says, and all at once things are starting to make sense at last. “To them, we were no more than a name—*Captain Blade.* We weren’t anythin’ more than numbers—than another ship in the fleet.” His mirror’s face is stony, not meeting his gaze. “We were nothing. But these guys?” And he gestures to his crew as they wage their own battles around him, facing off against their own demons. “They’re *family.* They *care.*” He’s seen it in their eyes—in their smiles—in their warm embrace, even after he’d gone and hurt them. He knows this—would believe it without a doubt now. They love him, and he loves them back. They’re his life—more than a place in the Navy or a rank or a title could ever be.

“Do they?” Accusation drips like acid from his mirror’s tongue.

“They do.” Technoblade stands resolute.

“What about *him?*”

“...What?”

“Captain Philza. The *Angel of Death.* The man you call a friend—responsible for the death of our crew and the disgrace of our name.” His mirror’s eyes narrow with nothing but complete and utter *disdain,* every ounce of vehement rage and blame laid at Phil’s unknowing feet. “You let him get away with ruining our life, Technoblade. And not only that—he saw us as a *traitor.* He was willin’ to turn his back on us in a *heartbeat* if it meant savin’ his own skin from another mutiny.” He casts a long look at Technoblade, and in his eyes he can see the very same pain he’d felt in his heart during their fight. “He doesn’t see us as a *friend*—just a means to endin’ the curse.”

“That’s not true.” Those words mean *nothing* to him. Not anymore. Somehow, having his own doubts and insecurities flung back on him isn’t nearly as painful as he’d expected. Not when he’d already confronted them. Not when Phil had already reassured him.

“He’s just a *pirate!*” His past self hisses. “Just like the rest! A criminal!”

“He’s my *friend*.” And yet even that isn’t the truth—not the whole of it. Phil is his first true friend. His brother. His other half. The missing piece he never knew he’d be lucky enough to find. So much more than words could ever say, and yet he wishes he could, if only to convince the man he once was that he, too, could one day have this. This *loyalty*, this devotion—born not of service to the crown, but of mutual respect, of a growing fondness and *love*. He wouldn’t trade it for the world, and he knows it’s something he so desperately needed when he was in the Navy. *Someone* who would show him compassion, who would share with him the same passion he devoted to others.

“I see.” His mirror’s face is cold. Unmoved. His fingers fiddle methodically with the hilt of his pistol, secured firmly in its holster, and for a moment Technoblade fears he might be shot. His hand moves toward his own, ready to pull it if necessary, and to—

What? Shoot himself? There’s no telling what the repercussions could be, even if it’s only a product of the curse. And so he stays his hand, waiting on bated breath, and watches as his counterpart’s expression suddenly flickers with something dark and foreboding.

“It’s clear you’ve been away from your rank too long. *Far* too long.” His mirror finally says, and there’s something unnervingly *dangerous* in his tone. “...But we can still fix this.”

“...What?”

And Technoblade watches, paralyzed, as his former self sets his sights on a new target.

Phil barely even twitches—still surrounded by the ghosts of his family. His gaze is vacant and glassy, tears streaming down his cheeks, his hands over his ears and tangled in his hair as if to block out the sound of their accusing voices. Behind him, Technoblade can see Wilbur—straining against his opponents, shouting for Phil as the ghosts close in around him. There’s a hand on Phil’s shoulder, his mother staring down at him with an expression of betrayal, the ghost of a noose still dangling around her neck.

Phil doesn’t hear Wilbur’s screams, nor the way his son reaches desperately for him.

He doesn’t see the pistol, even as it aims for his heart. Not right away.

“The only good pirate is a dead pirate,” his former self says, and only then does Phil look up. Only then do his eyes widen, his lips parting in an ‘o’ of surprise, his expression crumpling into something lost and confused and betrayed. The tears look motionless on his face, like tiny crystals frozen in time. Even his breathing seems to stop—his chest eerily still, the whole world holding its breath with him. And then—

“...Techno?”

The pistol cocks with a *click*.

Technoblade doesn’t even think. He just *moves*.

A shot rings out.

Bang.

Once, they might have called Phil *Icarus*.

But this time, it’s Technoblade who falls.

For a moment, the world moves in slow motion.

There's a sound like thunder—like the very universe rupturing at its seams. There's a blur of color through the tears in his eyes, familiar red and pink dancing across his vision. It should be comforting, seeing his friend's face at the end of all things. If there was any way he'd want to die, it would be at the side of his captain. Even like this, at his friend's hand. Dead by the bullet of his brother's pistol. It's fitting for a man who's known little else but betrayal.

He's lived a good life.

He's catered to fate's whims enough for any man—suffered the cruel twists a dozen times over. He'd finally made it to what he'd thought was the light at the end of the tunnel—the promise of peace just within reach. He'd gotten his family back—his son, his *boy*, the one he'd believed to want him dead instead standing resolutely at his side until the very end. He'd found a new family along the way, too—Tommy, stubborn, fearless, *brilliant* Tommy, who'd shown him a new look at life. Niki, with her compassion and fire alike burning bright, always there to keep him in check. Tubbo, with a sharp tongue and an even sharper aim; a heart of gold carefully tucked beneath the constant smudge of soot on his clothes. Ranboo, fleeing from the confines of a cage and into the open arms of a new family—one that wanted nothing more from him than *himself*. Jack, who'd shown him loyalty when all he'd known was betrayal. Eret, who'd stepped into his life with a smile and the careful reassurance he'd so desperately needed, who'd asked for nothing in return. And one stubborn navyman, once an enemy, now the second half of his very soul. They're his all, his everything—his entire *world*.

And then the world crumbles, and the light slips from between his fingers.

And Technoblade falls, scarlet petals blooming across his chest.

“No, no, *no*—!” He crashes to his knees beside Technoblade, pulling the man into his arms. “Oh, gods—*fuck*—Techno, what the *fuck* were you thinking?”

Technoblade groans, flinching as Phil's hands press desperately against the growing stain spread across his pristine white shirt.

“Sorry, Phil,” he gasps out, and Phil bites back another curse—another insult—instead just pressing down harder and substituting a desperate prayer. “Couldn't—couldn't just watch it happen—couldn't let you die.”

“And you decided *you* were gonna take my place?” Phil hisses, and his voice lacks the intended venom, instead coming out crackling and fragile as his eyes begin to sting with tears. There's so much blood. *Gods*, there's so much blood, and it isn't stopping. Technoblade grimaces in pain, trying to shift away from Phil's touch, but Phil just presses harder.

“Had t' pr'tect you...” Technoblade slurs.

“I can protect myself, you asshole,” Phil chokes out around a sob. “You *idiot*, why'd you go sacrificing yourself for a fuckin' pirate like me, mate?”

Technoblade laughs, flashing bloodstained teeth.

“Cause yer’ my friend, Phil,” he says, and his voice is so raw and honest it *hurts*. “I pr’mised you th’ world... couldn’t j’st...” His friend’s voice falters, fading off into something faint and breathless. Phil’s blood freezes in his veins, and he pats desperately at Technoblade’s face, watching as bleary eyes slide back up to look at him with no lack of effort.

“Couldn’t just *what*, mate?” Phil shakes him gently, the tears flowing freely now. “Don’t leave me hanging, c’mon, you gotta finish. Keep talking, *please*.”

“S’rry...”

“Don’t apologize, don’t you dare. That’s my job, you dick, so listen up.” Technoblade doesn’t seem to hear him, only a soft, breathy groan escaping blood-flecked lips. “You fuckin’ bastard, you don’t get to tune this out—don’t—*don’t!*” His voice dies off, no true anger left to fuel his words, leaving behind a voice that is hollow and empty and *desperate*. “Techno, *please*, don’t do this. Not for me. *Not for me*.”

“Anythin’ f’r you...” Technoblade’s protest is weak. Phil laughs, and it comes out wet and gurgling, hot tears streaming steadily down his cheeks.

“I’m *sorry*, Tech,” he whispers, his grin stretched painfully fake across his lips. “I’m so sorry, for *everything*.” Technoblade’s still mad at him, right? They still have so much to talk about—so much to fix. There’s no way he can just let go now, not when they still—

“S okay... f’rgive you...”

No.

Phil backpedals desperately, searching for something—*anything*.

“What about my stories, huh? You haven’t gotten to hear all my adventures yet, mate, don’t you wanna hear them?” Technoblade smiles weakly, a look of fond amusement in his pain-bleary gaze, and Phil’s false bravado fails him, his smile crumbling in the blink of an eye. “Techno, c’mon, don’t... Please—*don’t go*.”

Technoblade doesn’t answer him.

“Techno, *please*. Look at me? You have to stay awake. You can’t leave. You promised you wouldn’t leave.” His hand slips down Technoblade’s cheek as it shakes, leaving a bloody streak across rapidly paling skin. Technoblade’s gaze is half-lidded, his breathing shallow and weak, the hand resting on Phil’s neck beginning to feel oddly cold against his skin. “Techno, c’mon, *please*. You made a promise. To the gates of hell, right?” He chokes back a sob, hating the way Technoblade leans tiredly into his touch. “Not without me. *Not without me*, Techno. You can’t leave. You *can’t*.”

Technoblade’s head lolls in his grasp, his eyes fluttering dazedly, his pupils dilated and his gaze glassy. Fresh blood bubbles at his lips as he tries and fails to form words, instead only producing a horrible, rasping gurgle.

“Shhh, don’t talk,” Phil whispers, his voice hoarse and fragile in his throat. “It’s okay—it’s okay, Techno, just stay with me.” He searches the gathering crowd with his heart in his throat, begging for *someone* to do something—*anything*. The pressure isn’t enough. Technoblade is *dying*. He needs help. Help that Phil can’t give him. “Eret? *Eret!* Somebody do *something!*”

“Phil...” It’s Wilbur that speaks. He looks sad. Resigned.

“No.” Phil’s hand presses harder to the wound, heedless of the way fresh crimson bubbles between his fingers no matter how hard he tries to stem the flow. “Don’t you *dare* give up on him! He didn’t give up on us. We can’t give up on him. We can’t—we *can’t*—!” His voice breaks, splintering off into a hundred tiny shards, each one as fragile and terrified as the last. He swallows back any further protests with a strangled sob, pressing his forehead desperately to Technoblade’s. His friend manages to lean into the gentle touch, his eyes fluttering shut as he does so, his lips twisted in a grimace.

“I’m here,” Eret drops down to her knees beside him, her hands moving to replace his, Tommy’s bandana bundled up and pressing firmly against the wound. “Technoblade, I need you to stay awake. Can you do that for me?”

“Mmmnnn...” Technoblade stares up at Eret, only managing the weakest of noises. His fingers twitch, and Eret takes one of his hands, the other still resting limply on Phil’s shoulder. Phil scoops it up, holding it to his lips, pressing a frantic kiss to worn and bloodied knuckles, heedless of the taste of copper. Eret’s face is scrunched, her brows furrowed as she must surely feel Technoblade’s pain, but she’s spilling out comfort like a mantra.

“That’s it, you’re doing so well, deep breaths for me,” she murmurs, her touch feather-light as she ghosts over the wound. “The bullet’s still inside, we’re going to have to get it out before I can—*shit*—!”

Technoblade suddenly thrashes in her grip, his fingers squeezing painfully around Phil’s, his head jerking back as he chokes on his own blood.

“Hold him!” Eret cries, and Phil is quick to comply, pinning Technoblade’s shoulders to the ground and muffling a cry of his own at the sight of the terror in his friend’s gaze. Technoblade is in pain—Technoblade is *scared*, and all he can do is help keep him still and pray that there’s a chance. Eret begins to fumble with the fabric of her skirt, tearing a large piece free to use as makeshift bandages, and then—

Eret suddenly goes still, her lips parting in a small ‘o’. A look like understanding crosses her face, and suddenly, she’s not pressing down on the wound anymore. Phil watches, and sees the exact moment she gives up—the exact moment her face shifts into something calm and accepting.

“No,” Phil breathes, and with a noise akin to a *snarl* he pushes Eret roughly away, lunging forward to replace her hands with his own over the wound. There’s so much blood—gods, Technoblade’s whole front is stained crimson, Phil’s hands slippery with it—but he can’t give up. He won’t. Even as Technoblade’s body begins to feel colder and colder beneath his palms, and his friend’s eyes flutter shut and do not open again, he presses down, keeping the pressure. He can’t stand to think, can scarcely *breathe* around the wild flutter of panic in his chest and the wild pounding of his heart. He can’t let himself panic, can’t let the emotion take over, can’t let the pressure ease for even a moment, because Technoblade is bleeding out beneath him and it’s his fault, and he can’t—

Technoblade’s breaths suddenly make an odd rattling noise. His whole body seizes in Phil’s hands—once, twice, *thrice*—

And then goes eerily still.

“Techno...? No, no, *no*—! You fucking idiot, *don’t you dare*—don’t you *dare* close your eyes, you hear me?”

Technoblade doesn’t respond. His eyelids don’t even flicker.

“Technoblade, *open your eyes* . Wake up. *Wake up!* Please. I’m sorry. *I’m so sorry*, please—don’t go...”

Nothing.

Just cold, overwhelming *silence*.

And Phil *screams*.

It’s dark.

And then it isn’t.

He wakes to soft white light, gentle and comforting.

He wakes to the sound of gentle waves, with no ocean in sight.

He wakes to a sea of familiar faces, full of warm smiles.

“...Hey, guys,” Technoblade murmurs through the sudden thickness in his throat and the tears in his eyes.

And the crew of the *Anemoi* smiles back at him.

“Hey, Captain,” says a quiet voice, and his cabin boy—his *real* cabin boy—smiles fondly down at him, offering him a hand up. He hesitates only for a moment before taking it, stifling a sob at the warmth he feels—the boy’s skin no longer ghostly and pale. In a heartbeat he’s surrounded by the ones he’d lost, all of them murmuring fond greetings and laughing teasingly as he scrubs uselessly at his eyes. A joy unlike any he’s ever felt overwhelms him as he looks upon his former crew and sees nothing but love in their eyes, pure and true.

“Is this it, then?” he asks softly, and his joy flickers at the memory of tear-filled blue and quiet, broken sobs as the world faded.

A woman—the ship’s cook, motherly and gruff and warm-hearted—steps forward and takes his hand in hers. His hand. His *real hand*, flesh and blood, no longer iron and wood. Her touch is gentle as she thumbs over his calloused knuckles, and her smile soft and free of judgment as she holds his gaze.

“Only if you want it to be,” she says simply.

And *oh*, Technoblade doesn’t *know* what he wants. Now that he’s here—now that the worst part is over, and he’s here with them, seeing their smiling faces and feeling their love, he wants nothing more than to stay with them. To run away from pain, to finally be free of the trials and tribulations of life. It would be *so easy*.

But then he thinks of Phil, and his crew. The crew he left behind—the crew that’s waiting for him. He thinks of Niki’s gentle smile and even gentler touch—thinks of Tommy and Tubbo’s antics and fearless loyalty—thinks of Ranboo’s kind heart and selflessness—thinks of every other crewmate who welcomed him into their lives with open arms, even at his lowest.

He thinks of Phil.

Stubborn, reckless, foolish, *wonderful* Phil, who gave him a second chance when nobody else would, not even himself. He thinks of warm smiles and bright laughs, of silly conversations in the crow's nest, and of heavy-hearted ones in his cabin. He thinks of shared drinks and exaggerated tales of adventure, and of murmured words and gentle touches when they both needed it most. He thinks of fights—of vicious words spat in the heat of the moment—and of forgiveness, yet to be earned. He thinks, and he thinks, and he thinks—

He thinks he wouldn't trade it for the world.

"I'm sorry," he says, and to his surprise, their smiles only widen. "I—I don't think it's my time. Not yet. Not now."

The cook grins at him, squeezing his hands in hers.

"I think you're right, dear."

"I wish I could stay," he says, and he means it. "I wish I could be with you all again."

"In time."

He looks upon the crew of the *Anemoi*, and smiles. He doesn't bother to wipe the tears that stream down his face, unwilling to hide them any longer. He's never hiding his heart again. Not for anyone.

"Take heart, Captain," she says. "It's time to move on."

"Yeah," he rasps, his smile wobbly but *true*. "...It is."

And as he lets go of her hands with one last nod, the world fades once more.

Technoblade opens his eyes to a familiar mop of blonde hair and a teary smile.

With a soft '*oof*', he's pulled tight into waiting arms, and a sob is muffled into his hair.

"Stupid, stupid, *stupid*," Phil murmurs, his voice hoarse. "You *bastard*, you fucking *idiot*, don't you *ever* do that again." Hot tears dampen Technoblade's skin, Phil's words trailing off into a breathy, near-hysterical laugh. "Oh my *gods*, I thought—I thought you were *dead*."

"I was," Technoblade murmurs groggily, his arms lifting to curl tightly around Phil's shoulders, unashamed of the way he's begun to cry tears of his own. He's relieved to find it doesn't hurt—his chest aching only with phantom pain rather than a gaping wound. He's tired, and sore, but *alive*. "I was, but I'm back."

"Fucker," Phil whispers, but there's no real heat to his voice. Trembling fingers reach for his wrist, and he allows it as Phil seeks out his pulse. Phil's brows knit only for a moment before his whole body sags in relief at the presence of a strong, steady pulse.

"I'm back," Technoblade whispers again, pressing himself closer to his friend, and it's then that he sees his crew gathered around him, all kneeling on the soft white sand, their faces teary-eyed but

smiling, and—

Wait.

Sand?

He blinks, and sure enough, he can feel soft sand beneath his feet and can smell the salty tang of the ocean spray once more. Above him, the blue sky is clear and bright, and he can hear the cry of gulls not far off in the distance. The beach they're gathered on is beautiful—pristine white sand as far as the eye can see, dotted with palm trees and seashells, and not a single bone in sight. It looks almost ethereal, and for a moment, Technoblade wonders if this is it—if he's actually dead, and everyone else along with him. But Phil sees his expression and *laughs*, bright and musical and *happy*.

"It's real, mate," Phil murmurs, bumping his forehead gently against Technoblade's before pulling back, allowing him a view of the sparkling blue waters behind him. "You did it mate. You broke the curse."

"...How?"

From beside Phil, Eret smiles.

"You proved it wrong," she answers simply. "You looked yourself in the eye—the man you used to be—and rejected it." Her grin widens. "You *did* save a pirate, after all."

"I saved a *friend*," Technoblade corrects softly, and he watches Phil's cheeks tint a pleasant pink, the man ducking his head, abashed. He can't quite hide his smile from Technoblade, though.

"You *sacrificed yourself*," Eret murmurs, "—for someone that you once would have killed without hesitation. I think even the curse couldn't predict that."

"Nobody ever said I was *smart*," Technoblade rasps, his lips twitching into a smirk.

Phil laughs brightly at that.

Silhouetted against the warm sun, his golden hair practically *glowing*, his happiness so pure and genuine and uninhibited, Phil is *happy*. With his family around him, safe and sound, and the weight of the damned curse finally free from all of their shoulders, the joy is contagious, and soon he's laughing along with Phil, so hard his jaw aches and his chest heaves for air. He doesn't know how long they spend like that, but it's long enough that he feels lightheaded and dizzy with glee, so much though that he and Phil can both barely keep themselves upright anymore.

"We did it," Phil breathes, and his eyes are shining as he glances over at Wilbur, who watches them from a spot not far away, his arms folded and a soft, fond smile on his lips. "I can't believe we actually did it. Fuck. It's really over, isn't it?"

"It is," Technoblade murmurs, and swallows back the tide of emotions that threatens to overcome him. He's exhausted and sore and in desperate need of a drink, but the sheer and utter *relief* overpowers everything else, though, the weight of the world finally lifted from their shoulders. It's over—for *all* of them. No more aimless wandering—no more danger at every turn.

No more *curse*.

Phil is free. Wilbur is free. Everyone they care about—their friends, their crew, their *family*—is free.

And Technoblade is free, too.

Free of the guilt, free of the sorrow, free of the pain. His heart feels light and giddy and warm, and for the first time in months, he's able to smile without restraint, to laugh without the burden of the past. It's something he never thought possible, and yet here he is, laughing and rolling around in the sand with his best friend, free of any and all regret. It's more than he could ever ask for, and yet maybe, just this once, he thinks he might finally deserve it.

"How the hell did you do it, mate?" Phil asks, once they're both thoroughly exhausted, sprawled out in the warm sands alongside one another, watching the crew set about preparing the dinghy to return to the *Argo*.

"Do *what*?"

"Come back to us like that," Phil says, and his gaze is suddenly soft as he rolls onto his side to face Technoblade, his cheek speckled with sand and his hair falling into his face. He looks a mess, but he's so damn *happy* that none of it matters, and he leans into Technoblade's touch as he playfully brushes a loose strand from his friend's eyes.

Technoblade grins fondly at him. He thinks of his crew, sending him off with a smile, pushing him back into the living world, and decides that's a tale for another day.

"Ah, well, you know what they say, Phil," he murmurs conspiratorially. "*Technoblade never dies.*"

"...Mate, *nobody* says that."

"They will now."

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

He'll miss this. More than anything, he thinks he'll miss these nights the most—the laughter and the dancing and the song—the camaraderie and trust between them.

One voyage.

A debt repaid.

Chapter Notes

i won't bother with any long rambling at the start, so without further ado...

enjoy <3

***no warnings apply to this chapter

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

It's a night for *celebration*.

Weary but victorious, the crew of the *Argo* has gathered together in a raucous celebration, the likes of which Technoblade has never seen. There are smiles and laughter and *song*, Wilbur leading the crew in a grand, hearty chorus, all care for the tune thrown to the wind as they simply delight in the beauty of *existing*, of living to see another day, of having emerged victorious from a battle long-fought. The sails billow, the wind on their side, carrying them swiftly back toward port, and the setting sun smiles upon them as the sky begins to grow dark, stars dotting the horizon. The sky is clear and the waters calm, and the very world seems to breathe a sigh of relief along with them.

The crew is all gathered together—save for one. Technoblade worries for the briefest of moments that something is amiss—that not everything is as happy as it seems—because Phil is once again missing from the festivities. He spots him not far off, standing alone at the bow of the ship like he used to, and his heart drops as he catches a glimpse of hunched shoulders, his friend nearly doubled over the railing.

And then just as quick as the fear arrived, it vanishes as he catches the sound of a quiet laugh and hushed whispers. He creeps forward as quietly as he can, and his heart warms at what he sees.

Amidst the waters, he catches a glimpse of dark, glittering scales, Phil speaking in a soft voice as he leans over the railing, a smitten smile playing out across his lips. His cheeks tinge pink as he leans forward, crooning sweet nothings that Technoblade surely isn't meant to hear, but he can't even bring himself to tease his friend—at least, not yet. Instead, he watches and waits, enjoying the musical sound of Phil's giggle, and the way his friend looks so relaxed and at ease, finally free of the burdens that weighed him down for so long. He doesn't dare shatter this moment, not until Phil murmurs a soft goodbye, one last smile gracing his face as he leans down, blowing a kiss to the

rippling water below. And then the sea is silent once more, and as Phil straightens he catches Technoblade's knowing look. His cheeks darken, flushed a brilliant scarlet.

Technoblade coughs.

"Oh, *fuck off*," Phil says, but there's no heat behind it as he trots over to Technoblade's side, slinging an arm around him with a soft giggle. He leans his full weight onto him, and the captain grimaces as he nearly topples over, his arm curling carefully around the smaller man's waist to support him.

"She followed you out here?" Technoblade asks.

"I'm in *love*," Phil croons, ignoring the question entirely, with a sidelong look at the sea. "I'm going to marry her, Techno. She's perfect. More beautiful than the sky or the sea, more precious than any treasure."

"You're *drunk*," he retorts playfully, and Phil gives him a wink. "Only you would try and marry a giant siren. Only you, Phil."

"I *will*," Phil vows. His eyes glitter with poorly disguised amusement, along with that damned bullheaded determination. Technoblade knows he plans to make good on his words one day. "... I'll need a best man, though," Phil adds, almost as an afterthought. He shoots Technoblade a meaningful look.

Technoblade's breath catches. He fumbles for the right words to say, torn between reminding Phil of his impending departure or letting him delight a while longer. Luckily, Phil moves on all on his own, his gaze glassy and lovestruck as he watches the crew celebrate.

"She's *perfect*, Techno. Never thought I'd get so fuckin' lucky. Didn't think I'd even live long enough to settle down."

"If you stopped fightin' people on the yard, you might have a better shot," Technoblade teases. Phil's brow wrinkles, scoffing out a laugh.

"Where's the fun in that?" He says, before dropping his cheek onto Technoblade's shoulder with a muffled hum. Technoblade snorts, but holds still, allowing his friend to rest there.

"Comfy?"

"*Mmm.*"

They're silent for a few moments, listening to the gentle strumming of a stringed instrument, soft murmurs, and the clinking of glasses.

"...I missed this," Phil eventually says, his gaze trained on his son and grandson, who have paused their singing to regale the crew with a story of adventure. Wilbur is grinning from ear-to-ear, his arms spread wide, his voice carrying out loudly across the waters. "I missed seeing him happy like this."

Technoblade smiles knowingly, understanding far too well but lacking the words to say it. He winds up instead resting his chin on Phil's head and pointedly ignoring the muffled complaints about "his boney chin" as Phil squirms beneath him. His friend eventually settles with a dramatic groan, and they relax into a companionable silence.

Together, the two of them lean against the railing, watching over their crew as those gathered

begin another song at Wilbur's lead, this time one of comradeship and celebration. Technoblade can't help the way his heart stirs at the words, at the promises of merriment and companionship. Beside him, Phil is singing along—Phil is *singing*, and that alone is enough to make his head snap to the side in shock. For the first time, he watches as his friend joins in the song, his voice lifting to join the chorus, still boasting a warm smile and a twinkle in his eye. His voice is a little raspy, a few notes out of tune, and yet still, it's beautiful all the same. He remembers all of the nights watching Phil stand alone and at a distance, a pained look in his eye with the locket cradled close, and decides this is *much* better.

He's not sure how long the song goes on for, but eventually, Phil leaves his side, the comfortable warmth against him vanishing. He watches his friend amble toward the crowd with a crooked grin and a raised glass, calling for more ale, and can't suppress a teasing laugh when the man nearly trips in his excitement. His laughter softens into something fond as he watches the way Phil reaches out to ruffle Tommy's hair, uncaring to the way the boy squawks in protest, before reaching up to do the same to Ranboo, who leans into the touch. He can see the look on Phil's face from here, and it makes his heart flutter. No matter how much he tries to deny it, his friend is a sap for his crew, his blue gaze soft with adoration as he stares down at the ones who would follow him to the ends of the earth if he asked.

A smile still on his lips, Technoblade turns to face the sea, leaning over the railing as another melody fills the quiet night air.

He'll miss this. More than anything, he thinks he'll miss these nights the most—the laughter and the dancing and the song—the camaraderie and trust between them.

One voyage.

A debt repaid.

The sea calls to him, the moonlight sparkling across the calm waters. It's a night not unlike the one he and Phil spent together in a dinghy, paddling for shore. It's been months since then—almost a year, and yet he can still remember the look on his face when they'd made it to shore—that damned grin, so smug and certain as he'd left Technoblade with little more than a few passing words.

'See you around, mate.'

He can't imagine a world without Phil—not anymore. The bastard had been worming his way into his heart since day one, and now, as he stands on the precipice of a life on his own once again, his heart aches to imagine waking up to steady ground beneath his feet instead of wood rocking in the tides—and to imagine waking up to silence, rather than the call of a crow or a bright laugh from up above. He's torn, split between the life he'd dreamed of for so long and the life he's come to love.

And yet it's time, he thinks. He's had his fun—he's had his shot, his second chance at leadership. He made the most of it, but he's fulfilled his end of the deal. They don't need him as captain anymore. Phil has earned the loyalty of this crew a hundred times over, and now he *knows* it—believes it with his whole heart. He can see it in the way Phil allows himself to turn his back on the others, in the way he doesn't flinch anymore when a hand brushes a pistol or someone catches him off guard with a familiar phrase. His friend is *healing*, and so is *he*, and with Wilbur at Phil's side, ready to help him lead, maybe it's time for Technoblade to take the time to figure out what he really wants from the safety of the shore.

They've set sail for his old port.

It hadn't been a conscious decision—at least, not one they'd talked about. Technoblade thinks that a part of Phil knows the journey is coming to an end, however subconscious, and the old port had been a convenient stop anyways—an easy place to stock up on supplies and ground themselves before their next voyage. He'll leave them there, he thinks, and finally return to the quiet life he'd known before.

“Techno,” he hears, the soft call interrupting his thoughts. Phil is looking expectantly at him, his glass raised high into the air. When he's captured Technoblade's attention, he continues, and his voice cuts across the murmurs of the crowd, a hush falling upon the crew.

“A toast,” he says, “—to our Captain.” He's smiling, a little lopsided but shining bright nevertheless, and his voice is clear and strong. “To the best man I've ever known, and to the greatest friend I could ever ask for.”

There's a chorus of cheers and the clinking of mugs as the crew shout their agreement, and, not for the first time tonight, Technoblade's heart aches. For a moment, he forgets himself, and turns back to the sea as the weight of his thoughts threatens to drown him, the guilt and sorrow at the thought of leaving them almost enough to bring him to his knees once more. He can hear his crew adding their own toasts to the mix, none of them yet noticing his reluctance, and as the wind tugs at his hair he wishes it would sweep him away, if only so he didn't have to spoil such joy.

The crew has gone quiet. They've finally noticed. With a heavy heart, he turns to face them, and prays that his words ring true.

“A toast,” he says, “—to the ones who believed in me when I couldn't believe in myself. A toast to the *Argo*, and her safe voyage, for many years to come. A toast to clear waters and blue skies, and safe landings at every port you find.” He finds his smile returning as he speaks, and suddenly the words aren't so hard anymore.

“No matter where the tides take us, or how far apart we may drift, I...” Technoblade's throat is suddenly thick with emotion, his mouth opening and closing around the words that suddenly fail him. Nothing he could say will ever be enough—will ever be able to express the emotions he feels for them—the way they've stolen his heart and made it their own, and the way he wouldn't have it any other way. They showed him sympathy when the world turned a blind eye to his suffering. They welcomed him with open arms when no others would, even when he looked on them with nothing but disgust. They taught him what it was like to love, and be loved in return. They showed him the meaning of *family*, and he'll never forget the lessons they taught him along the way, nor the way they raised him up from his worst and helped him to become something new, something *greater*—something he could finally be proud of.

“...I will always remember your kindness to me,” he says, through a voice that is rasping and fragile and falling apart at the seams, and yet the smile on his face is the most real he's ever worn, and his heart is filled with nothing but warmth as he looks upon the people he loves more than the universe itself. And then he does the only thing he can think of—the only action that could truly express his gratitude.

Technoblade takes off his hat, places it over his heart, and *bows*.

These are the only people who will ever have this honor. The only ones deserving of such humility. Nobody else in this world has ever shown him such compassion, and so he'd get on his knees and *grovel* if they asked. His friends—his *family*—deserve nothing but his undying respect, and if this is what it takes for them to understand the magnitude of their impact on him, then he'll stand with his head bowed for as long as he needs to. Anything for the people who gave him *everything*.

For Ranboo, for Tommy, for Tubbo, for Eret and Jack and Niki and Wilbur—and for *Phil*, the *world*.

And if his smile grows wobbly as his crew gathers around him, pulling him into warm embraces and ruffling at his hair, he pays it no heed, instead savoring each and every touch and fond murmur as he's pulled back into their midst, fitting comfortably back into their complicated puzzle of a family as if he'd been there since the very beginning.

He spends the night drinking, laughing, and singing alongside the ones he loves, and for a moment, allows himself to forget. It's easy to shrug off his woes and pretend, if only for a night, that things can stay like this forever. When he retires for the night, it's with a grin and a wave and a light heart, eager for the comfort of his bed and a well-earned rest.

He doesn't see the way Phil's smile finally falters as the door shuts, leaving him standing alone beneath the stars once more.

Eret joins him for one last sunrise, the morning they're meant to make port.

He hears the soft pitter-patter of footsteps, accompanied by the gentle *swoosh* of a skirt, and he doesn't even need to turn to know who it is. His one steady companion each and every morning, the one who'd helped guide him through the good times and the bad. They're always welcome at his side.

Especially today.

"Was it worth it, Eret?" he asks softly, recalling the skeleton's words back on the island. His friend's shoulder brushes gently against his as they move to join him, settling their elbows against the railing and allowing their eyes to flutter shut against the warmth of the morning sun. A small tilt of their head is the only indication that they've heard him, and the silence stretches on for what feels like minutes before they finally respond, in a voice that is altogether both as soft as a whisper and as loud as thunder.

"...It was," they say, and in their voice, there's no room for doubt, "—because I was able to help you to *see*."

Technoblade smiles.

"Thank you."

For everything.

Eret merely nods, but he can feel their warmth clearly, as if he were the empath and not the other way around.

"I can't see them anymore," Eret says, and they're smiling despite their words. "They've finally moved on. You finally let go."

Technoblade smiles, too.

"I did," he agrees, returning his gaze to the sunrise, watching as molten gold spills across the

sparkling sea. It's the dawn of a new day—a fresh start for all of them. He doesn't know what lies beyond, but for the first time, he no longer fears the unknown. His heart flickers with something else instead—a fluttering eagerness, a childish excitement. There's something else there beneath the surface—a quiet urging he can't quite fully ignore, but he shoves it to the back of his mind for now, instead setting his sights on what awaits him.

It's finally over.

He's going home.

A captain no longer, he'll be back to his quiet life at the docks. No more thievery, no more danger—just the smell of the sea and the steady life of a dockhand, free of the Navy's scrutiny. It's everything he dreamed of at the start of the voyage—the thing that kept him going when he began to question what he was doing, and now here it is, just hours away from his grasp. He no longer owes Phil, his debt repaid a dozen times over, and he no longer has reason to stay any longer, he tells himself.

One voyage, he'd promised. Just one.

Now, at the journey's end, he finds himself looking forward to the next beginning.

Beside him, Eret hums thoughtfully. He turns his gaze back to them, and finds them no longer smiling, their brows knit with thought as they turn his way.

“Do you want me to describe it to you again?” he asks, offering Eret his hand.

They take it and yet shake their head all the same.

“I already know your sunrise, Techno,” they say with fond exasperation. “But...do *you*?”

The question stops Technoblade in his tracks.

What *is* his sunrise?

He searches his heart for the answer and comes up empty. He'd thought he'd known what he wanted, he'd thought he knew what a second chance looked like. And yet now, as he stands on the verge of something new, he no longer feels the same welcome anticipation he once did. The promise of a new start is no longer as enticing—not when it looks like this. Not when the only sunrise he'll see will be from his window at port, buildings and boats alike silhouetted against a sky that will never again be as open as it is now. Not when he'll watch the sunrise alone, his mornings filled with silence rather than soft conversations with a friend.

“...I don't know,” he admits, and feels no shame in it. Eret has never judged him, and they won't start now. “I don't know what it looks like, not anymore. Maybe I did once, but now...” And he sighs, running a hand through his hair, taking off his hat to stare down at it, a symbol of everything he's gained and everything he's yet to lose again. “I don't know what I want, or where I'm goin,” he says, and it feels like a lie, even to him. “I...”

He trails off, looking expectantly at Eret, as if they'll give him the answers he so desperately needs. He should have known better, but even amidst his disappointment, he feels a flicker of fond amusement, because they merely smile at him, tilting their head as they turn back toward the sunrise, their hair gilded with the golden strands of the morning light.

“I guess we'll just have to wait and see, won't we?”

“Well... I guess this is it.”

Technoblade and Philza stand together on the docks, only a foot of space between them and yet miles apart. The *Argo* is ready to set sail once more, her former captain lingering just long enough to ensure she’s well-stocked for the next voyage. The crew is all on board, ready to depart. It’s just the two of them now.

“Guess so,” Phil says softly.

I’ll miss you, Technoblade wants to scream, but his lungs refuse to work. *I’ll miss you, I love you, I’m not sure if I can do this without you*. Instead, all that comes out is a nervous laugh as he extends his hand to Phil one last time. He takes it, and their hands fit together as naturally as they always have, just resting there.

“We’ll see each other around.” Technoblade isn’t sure who Phil is reassuring—Technoblade or *himself*. He nods, but still, he doesn’t let go, clinging on for dear life as though a tighter grip will keep Phil from sailing away again. Their crew watch from above, clinging to the railings of the ship, pretending not to eavesdrop—though Technoblade knows they’re hanging on to every single word. Tommy’s face is shadowed, but the kid is leaning toward him as if every word he speaks is made of gold. Ranboo and Tubbo are huddled together, whispering conspiratorially, shooting him occasional glances. Fundy stands just behind the group, his gaze latched onto Phil, his hands clasped carefully in front of him as if in prayer. Niki and Wilbur look thoughtful, though Wilbur looks disbelieving while Niki’s lips are downturned in a frown. She’d cried when he’d hugged her farewell. Eret is unbothered, of course, leaning casually against the railing with that all-knowing smile. As he looks upon them, he feels his heart swell with emotion, bittersweet on his tongue. He’ll miss them all dearly, each and every one of them, from Tommy’s reckless enthusiasm, to Eret’s soothing support, to Niki’s gentle comfort, to Phil’s—

Phil.

His first friend, and the truest. His soulmate, in a manner of speaking. Phil completes him in a way that no rank or ship or crew ever could—more than just another friend, deeper than family. Never in a hundred years would the Technoblade of the past have predicted his soulmate would be a raggedy, bull-headed, sharp-tongued pirate, and yet now, as he looks at Phil, he wouldn’t trade him for anyone else. He wonders if Phil sees him in the same light—if he thinks of him with that same fondness.

Somehow, now, under his careful gaze and gentle touch, Technoblade thinks he might.

All good things have to come to an end, eventually. But that doesn’t mean Technoblade can’t make it last just a little longer. When Phil finally moves to let go, the pair of them holding on for far too long already, a protest escapes Technoblade before he can stop it, his grip tightening.

“*Wait.*”

Phil freezes, his eyes going wide and curious and *hopeful*.

“...Yeah, mate?”

Technoblade swallows.

“I... I have something for you.” And from his pocket, he pulls two small objects, his fist curled white-knuckled around them and shaking ever-so-slightly. Phil’s mouth opens in surprise as he slowly uncurls his fingers to reveal two sparkling emerald earrings, cast in gold and glittering like the sea itself in the afternoon sun.

“Techno...”

“They’re from my ship,” Technoblade admits. “The *Anemoi*. They were the one thing I managed to save when it went down, and I—” he swallows as his voice threatens to break, and continues, “—I wanted you to have them.” And he watches as Phil’s face flickers, his smile threatening to break, if only for a moment, as the man is overcome with emotion. “You can keep ‘em, or sell ‘em, I don’t really care. I just... I wanted to say *thank you*, Phil. For everythin’.”

“...*Techno*.” Phil’s voice is breathless, squeezing Technoblade’s hand so hard it *hurts*. “I’m the one—*fuck*, mate, you’re gonna make me cry—I’m the one who should be thanking *you*.” But his fingers curl around the emeralds nevertheless, and carefully he cradles them, staring down at them with awe, as if he’s holding the entire world in his hands. And then he’s looking up at Technoblade, his smile so wide it must hurt, and then careful hands are reaching up toward him and brushing his hair away from his ear, and—

Oh.

Phil pulls back, and there’s a new weight dangling from Technoblade’s ear.

“How about we match?” Phil says, and offers him the matching piece. “Friendship, and all that.” For a moment, Technoblade is overwhelmed by the sheer *love* he feels for the man in front of him, in all his rough edges and bright light, because *gods*, what did he ever do to deserve someone like Phil? Phil, who smiles even while being left behind again, who locks his heart away behind open bars and yet deemed him deserving of it—Phil, who looks at him as though he’s the most precious thing in the entire universe.

All he can manage is a shaky nod, and with as much tenderness as he can muster, he moves to comply. He brushes blonde strands carefully away from Phil’s ear, cupping his jaw with one hand while the other carefully slips the earring into place. The man leans into his touch, eyes fluttering shut as his smile softens into something more gentle—more *vulnerable*, and Technoblade wishes more than anything that this moment could last forever.

“Don’t go getting into any trouble,” Phil says quietly.

“That’s my line,” he answers, letting his hand drop from Phil’s face, linking fingers with him once more, warm hands against cool metal. “Try not to get shot again.”

In response, Phil just pokes a finger against Technoblade’s chest, right where the bullet had struck.

“...Right,” Technoblade laughs. “Don’t let Tommy get his wish of becomin’ captain anytime soon, then.”

Phil grins wryly.

“Little shit has it out for me.”

“Better stay on your toes then, old man.”

“Not that old, mate.”

“I can practically hear yer’ joints creakin’ from here.”

“Shut.”

They’re drawing this out too long. They can both feel it—he sees it in Phil’s eyes as much as he feels it in the ache of his chest. He can hear it in the way their banter falls flat, their voices too heavy to carry the humor they once might have. It’s time. He takes a deep, trembling breath, and squeezes Phil’s hands one last time, forcing a smile wide across his lips.

“Goodbye, Phil.”

“...Bye, mate.”

He doesn’t want to let go. But with every passing second, it just gets harder to move on. Phil’s fingers slip out of his, and he wants nothing more than grab them back, to hold them against his chest and never let go again. But he doesn’t move—watching as Phil withdraws, folding his arms and leaning back and smiling in a way that *hurts*, because Technoblade’s own feels so strained and forced. He doesn’t want to go, he’s not *ready*, he’ll never be ready. But as the crew gathers around the railing, all shouting their last goodbyes, waving their arms and smiling as bright as the sun, he finds he can’t stay any longer.

And so, like a coward, he turns and *runs*.

He hears Phil’s startled shout, just one voice amidst a chorus of shock and confusion. He hears his name, hears pleas for him to wait cut abruptly short, and out of the corner of his eye he sees a hand outstretched and lips half-parted. He forces back the urge to turn around and *go back*, because this is what he wants, isn’t it? A chance at a normal life again, away from voyages of crime and death and danger, away from the sea which has stolen so much away from him. No more curses, no more battles, no more drunken nights in his cabin listening to Phil rattle on and on about his adventures.

He runs and he runs and he runs, until his lungs heave for breath, his legs burning beneath him because he hasn’t stretched them like this in ages. He needs to get away, *far away*, far enough that he won’t be able to see white sails billowing in the distance, far enough that he won’t have to watch his happiness sail away without him.

And then a bundle of white feathers tangles itself in his hair, tugging and screeching with a vengeance, and he’s forced to stop.

“Floof—what—?” Technoblade gets a hold of the frantically beating wings, gentle as always as he attempts to pry the cockatoo out of the mess he’s made of his hair. “What the hell’re you doin’?” His voice is chiding as he scolds the bird, who bites at his metal fingers with a ferocity he’s never seen, all the while struggling and beating his wings against his hold. Reluctantly, Technoblade lets go, scared he’ll hurt the creature, and with another squawk Floof takes to the sky, circling him once, twice, before lifting up to meet another shape far above. A familiar crow, who welcomes the parrot with a merry *caw*, the two of them turning to catch the winds that carry them back down toward the docks.

Technoblade is struck by a sudden homesickness as he watches them go, the likes of which he’s never felt before. And suddenly he knows deep down in his heart, that if he doesn’t turn around now—if he doesn’t follow the story through to its end—he’ll regret it forever.

And so he turns to watch the ship leave.

He turns, and watches with bated breath as the *Argo* begins to pull away from the docks.

She's truly beautiful, even as battle-worn as she is. Small and sleek, her sails billowing in the wind, she's nothing short of perfection—every sailor's dream. He's never seen her from this angle before—never watched her as she pulled away from port before. It's as beautiful as it is heartbreaking, and he thinks he'll spend many a morning at his window, dreaming of the day she'll finally return, and his crew along with her.

And then he sees it.

Standing at the railing is Phil. His friend's arms are folded as he leans against the old wood, staring out at the crowded docks, and even from this distance, Technoblade can read him better than anyone else. His face is shadowed and distant, his shoulders hunched, his hair falling into his eyes with no attempt to hide it. His smile is *gone*, leaving behind something hollow and despairing.

Phil stands alone at the stern of the ship.

Phil stands *alone*.

Technoblade is moving before he even has the chance to think.

He's pushing past strangers, shoving aside nobles and sailors and merchants alike, parting the crowd like a fish through water. His feet pound against the old wooden dock, his blood roaring in his ears along with the indignant shouts and cries of the people unlucky enough to get in his way. There are angry faces in the corners of his vision, rude gestures, and even a few Navymen looking suspiciously his way for causing a commotion—but he has eyes only for the horizon, for the sleek ship that's just untied its last lines, that's just beginning to slip out of reach.

“*Wait!*” The cry erupts from his lips unbidden as he runs, a hand stretching out to the ship even as the wind tugs at its sails, pulling it slowly away from the dock. “Wait for me!” He doesn't know if they hear him, but he doesn't care—he won't stop, no matter what. Not now—*not ever again*. He finally had people who cared about him—who loved him, and he'll be damned if he ever lets go of them again.

The end of the dock is ahead of him, the ship just out of reach. There's nothing between him and the *Argo* but open sky and sea.

He doesn't think. All he knows is that he refuses to be left behind—refuses to be separated from them. They're his crew, his *family*,

And so he jumps.

Technoblade is many things. A leader, yes. A fighter as well. He's level-headed and silver-tongued when he needs to be, but even the greatest of men become fools when it comes to matters of the heart.

It's only when he hits the water that he realizes the full extent of his mistake. His arm sinks like a *stone*, and yet still he fights it like hell, kicking and thrashing with all of his might to try and climb back to the surface. He can see the hull of the ship in the near distance, so close and yet so far, and as the bubbles spill from his lips and spiral around him, he can feel his panic rising, his wild desperation finally giving way to fear.

He's sinking now, losing the battle with the weight of his arm, and in the chaos and confusion and the overwhelming fear he doesn't even think to loosen it, to free himself from the weight. It wouldn't matter, anyway. He should've asked Ranboo to teach him to swim. Should have taken

Phil up on his teasing offers, because now he's about to meet the very same fate he avoided that fateful night, and this time it's not out of some cruel twist of fate or a dark curse, but rather, his own foolishness. He wants to laugh at the irony of it all—surviving a storm, surviving Navy attacks and sirens and an island of bone, only to fall to the likes of *himself*.

He's drowning— *again*.

And then strong arms curl around him, and he's being tugged up, up, *up*.

His head breaks the water with a gasp, and his ears are filled with weary, rasping laughter and he can't see anything but the familiar, smiling face of his savior.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” Phil says, and he's grinning from ear to ear as Technoblade clings to him, a teasing light in his eyes. Technoblade snorts weakly, unable to summon the will for an indignant protest, too busy holding on for dear life and hacking up an entire ocean's worth of water. Phil kicks out strongly, easily supporting his weight in the calm blue waters as Technoblade coughs and splutters, cringing as his throat burns with the taste of seawater.

“Couldn't stay away,” he finally rasps, and can't keep the grin off of his own face. He buries it into Phil's shoulder to hide it away, relishing in the warmth beneath his fingertips, and vows to never let go like that again.

“If you wanted me to teach you to swim so badly, you should've said something, mate,” Phil chuckles, his voice pitching into a petulant yelp when Technoblade gets in a cuff around his ear. He tosses his head back and laughs—that damned giggle that used to get under Technoblade's skin now a welcomed warmth; a warmth he finds himself relaxing into with a laugh of his own, soft and gentle and *happy*. Phil notices this, and his teasing gaze softens, his grip tightening around him. “Awww, *mate*. Don't go cryin' on me.”

“M not cryin',” he protests. “Just went for a swim, 's just saltwater.”

“Whatever you say, Captain,” Phil says, and the title alone is enough to make Technoblade's breath catch into a silent sob. “Can't believe you just fuckin' jumped off a pier after us.”

“Well, I told you I wouldn't leave, didn't I?” He watches as Phil's smile grows wobbly, and suddenly he's not the only one blinking back tears. “I don't go breakin' promises that easy.”

Phil opens his mouth to respond, but a rope lands beside them in the water, and Phil's grip around him tightens, his other hand reaching for the aid.

“*Hang on tight, mate*,” his friend instructs, and his arms curl reflexively around the pirate's neck as he hears the shouts of his crew heaving them upward. Moments later, they're safely on board, Technoblade collapsing to his knees while Phil rubs circles between his shoulders. There's water and tears alike streaming down his face, and he doesn't have the energy or heart to fight it as Phil cups his face between his hands, swiping gently beneath his eyes with a calloused thumb.

“Missed me that much already?” Phil asks, and his tone is joking but the words make Technoblade's chest heave anew, and without hesitation he flings his arms back around his friend, pulling him into a warm embrace. Phil's warmth is a comfortable weight against him, and neither of them has any intention of pulling away any time soon. Phil laughs, his chest fluttering against Technoblade's, and it's contagious. “Almost dying once wasn't enough for you?” the pirate quips. “You had to go and try again?”

“You're one to talk,” he mumbles, his face pressed into the familiar green jacket, heedless of the

way frigid water continues to steadily drip from him.

“Can’t believe I had to save your soggy ass *twice*,” Phil complains.

“Guess I owe you again, don’t I?” Technoblade jests.

Phil *grins*.

“Guess you do.”

“What’ll it be, then?”

“I’d say another voyage would cover it just fine.”

“And what if I wanted to stay?”

Warm hands find his, and squeeze.

“Captain Technoblade, the man who never dies. You’ll be a *legend*.”

“Don’t forget his first mate.”

Phil laughs, and in his smile is the promise of another adventure—and of dozens more to come.

“Well, you said it first, mate. To the gates of hell, right? As far as I’m concerned, we’re not there just yet.”

“...Yeah,” Technoblade agrees.

“To the gates of hell.”

Chapter End Notes

here we are, finally at the end of another story. <3 this has been such an incredible journey from start to finish, and i’m so incredibly grateful to everyone who supported me along the way and made this possible. an extra special thanks goes to wolfy, my partner in crime, who not only created beautiful designs and art for this au, but also helped come up with so much of the plot we know and love! another big thank you goes out to leo for literally always being there to listen to me ramble, brainrot, and vent throughout the process of writing this fic. thanks to the angst council gc, genderblade gc, the burrow server, and everyone else who’s lent their support along the way, whether it be through fanart, comments, or even just the silent supporters. i love you all so much, and i’m so blessed to have gotten the chance to share my writing with so many incredible people.

until we meet again in the next story, dear readers <3

epilogue (two years later)

Chapter Summary

It's been two years since he first set foot aboard the *Argo*.

Two years since a reckless, bullheaded, arrogant, wonder of a pirate offered him his hand, and he took it.

Chapter Notes

it's been more or less two years since i first began writing this story, give or take a few days. since that very first day, a lot has changed—some for the better, and some for the worse. still, i'm grateful for the opportunities i was given to create such an amazing world and for so many people to follow along with it.

without this story, i wouldn't have made so many wonderful friends and met so many incredible people i never thought i'd get the chance to speak to. this fic has changed my life, and so i thought i'd offer one last small parting gift to the bones universe, and to the fandom that helped me through some of my hardest times.

happy two years, bones in the ocean.

It's been two years since he first set foot aboard the *Argo*.

Two years since a reckless, bullheaded, arrogant, *wonder* of a pirate offered him his hand, and he took it.

Two years since he first laid eyes on a motley, patchwork crew of the very same people he'd devoted his life to hunting down. Two years since he learned to call those people his friends.

Two years since he stared into the gates of hell itself, his family at his side, and found that even death couldn't defeat him.

Technoblade isn't a religious man. He doesn't say a prayer when the tides are rough and the winds howl. He doesn't spend his time praying to the gods that forsook his first crew to their untimely end. Still, he can't help but murmur a quiet word of thanks to whatever twisted strings of fate brought Philza into his life.

Without Phil, he'd be a pile of bones at the bottom of the sea. Or, worse, he'd still be the same man he was in that stiff blue coat, chasing down a dream built on the lies he'd once helped sew.

Technoblade isn't a great man.

He's never pretended to be anything more than what he is—a disgraced captain given a second chance undeserved. One who took the hand of a criminal, and became one himself. He's made mistakes that cost lives that weren't his to give away, and friendships he'd be nothing without.

Still, what he has is a part of who he is, and he has a crew—a *family*. A family that looks to him with admiration and adoration he feels he doesn't deserve, and yet...

Technoblade isn't a great man. In their eyes, though, he is at least a good one, and he's content to spend the rest of his days that way.

The sound of soft laughter fills the air. The boat rocks lazily beneath his feet, the old wood creaking every now and then as though to join in on the amusement. The wind tugs at his hair, loose and tangled and damp from the mist of the sea. Beneath his prosthetic, the wood of the railing is as firm and steady as it always has been. As Technoblade looks out across the sea of faces he's come to call his own, a smile finds its way across his own.

"C'mon, Techno," calls that familiar, lilting voice, and when Technoblade blinks the world back into focus, it is to an outstretched hand.

He knows that hand. He knows the feel of calloused fingers intertwined with his own. He knows exactly where the little scar is along the knuckle of the ring finger, and how it got there. He knows what it looks like clasped around the finger of a giant siren, pledging undying love and loyalty in front of a crowd. He knows what that hand looks like clenched and angry, digging crescents into pale skin with filthy nails. He knows what that hand looks like, wrist bruised and encased in metal, shackled to the wall of the brig.

He knows what it looks like tinted by the blue of the sea, reaching down to save him.

"Well?" The voice startles him. Phil grins expectantly, wagging his fingers.

The crew is clapping along to a steady beat, the sound of Wilbur's fiddle filling the air. Niki stands beside him, her voice joining the rowdy chorus as she leans against the musician, who has become a steadfast companion over the years. Wilbur, though reluctant at first, had been more or less manhandled into joining the *Argo* thanks to her stubbornness, and they've been inseparable ever since. Wilbur brings out the worst in Niki, and she does the same for him in turn, and Technoblade couldn't be more grateful.

Tommy and Tubbo are already dancing—arm in arm, cheeks flushed and grins wide, a little tipsy even though the night is still young. Technoblade's heart tugs a little when he realizes he can now see traces of stubble along Tubbo's cheeks. Tommy has a peg for a leg now, too, though it hasn't hampered his penchant for trouble in the least. Ranboo, too, has grown into himself, confident and poised, and Technoblade can rest easy knowing that any injury will now be tended to by their capable, competent hands. Eret chose well in taking them under her wing.

She stands now against the mast, smiling just as wide as the crew's youth as she claps along with their stomping feet. Though she'd sworn she'd only see them through until the end of the journey, it seems as though the journey never truly ended for either of them.

"Techno."

Warm hands close around his. Phil gives him a little tug, a playful pout on his lips.

"You still with me, mate?" Though playful, there's a note of concern in his first mate's voice. Once indistinguishable from the rest of his sarcasm and spite, Technoblade now knows the ins and outs of his inflections as naturally as his own heartbeat. "'Cause I *could* just ask Kristin to dance, but I'm not sure how that would turn out with the whole..." He gestures vaguely. "...being a giant siren thing..."

“You’re the one who decided to marry a fish,” Technoblade responds dryly, but reluctantly, he stands. “I don’t see how this is *my* problem.” Phil feigns a look of offense, but there’s no mistaking the tell-tale melodic chuckle coming from the waters below. He counts his blessings that his friend somehow managed to fall for the one siren that didn’t want to eat him at first glance.

“Don’t tell me you’re *scared*,” Phil crows, that bastard smirking as he gets the attention of the rest of the crew. Technoblade suddenly feels very, *very* cornered. “A captain who can’t swim *and* can’t dance?”

“Never said I couldn’t dance,” he answers, allowing himself to be guided out as the crew hollers and cheers. “Just didn’t want you to be steppin’ on my toes when you can’t keep up.”

The music starts anew.

The Technoblade of two years ago stood on the sidelines of celebrations. He hid himself away in his quarters while the muffled sounds of music and stories filtered in through the cracks of his door. He would have never been caught dead dancing, or singing, and yet here he is now, being passed from partner to partner, wincing as Tommy, quite purposefully, stomps on his toes and cheering as Eret twirls around in her flowing skirt.

As the sun sets and dusk turns to night, and the deck of the ship is illuminated by little more than flickering lamps and the starlight high above, even the chill of the ocean winds can’t reach him. He’s warm—warmer than he’s been in a long, long time. As warm as Niki’s embrace and Tommy’s smile and the feeling of Phil’s palm in his as his friend tugs him over to the keg for another round.

Gone is the chill of grief. Gone is the feeling of hopelessness. Gone is the constant feeling of longing for something *more*.

He doesn’t need anything more than what he already has right here.

This is enough, and always will be.

End Notes

have fanart, theories, or just wanna share your thoughts about the fic? use the hashtag #BonesAU on twitter, tumblr, or instagram!

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