

## **pick me up, take me home**

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## **pick me up, take me home**

by [meridies](#)

### Summary

With barely three hours notice, single father Phil receives a new child to foster. And unlike his two other adopted children, Wilbur and Techno, Tommy is seemingly hellbent on creating chaos. As their close-knit family begins falling apart, all four of them are forced to learn what it truly means to have one another.

### Notes

my first gifted fic for the lovely nc!! hope you enjoy this early halloween treat <3

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

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

The first night, he locks his door and doesn't emerge for around twelve hours.

Phil looks at the closed door and doesn't know exactly what to do.

All of the books he had read on fostering had mentioned something like this; children who go through foster care and who have been bounced around many different families struggle with being open and communicating well. They're more likely to be boxed in as "trouble" kids in school. Especially coming into a family where there's already two other children, both of whom are already legally adopted and everything, it has to be difficult.

So Phil doesn't knock on his door, and instead leaves him to it. He does put a plate of food outside though, wrapped in aluminum foil, and goes back downstairs to the dinner table. Wilbur is eagerly talking about the passing grade he had scraped in his class, waving around a fork with bits of potato and sausage on it, while Techno is poking around at his plate, head down and sullenly silent. Techno hates mashed potato nights. Says they're too bland. Phil doesn't point out the fact that Techno hates all spicy food, and if he thinks that mashed potatoes are bland, he's really cutting himself off at the heels in terms of food arrangement.

Two hours later, when Phil goes back upstairs to see if there's any sign of the new foster child in their house, he finds an empty plate, scraped clean, aluminum foil balled up on top of it. With a small smile, he takes it back downstairs to wash it. It's there, at the sink, warm soapy water running over his hands, where he truly thinks about how they're going to manage the rest of the week.

Both Techno and Wilbur had arrived in his house with twenty four hours of notice beforehand, but the child in the spare upstairs bedroom hadn't— Phil had only been given around three hours of a notice. Three hours wasn't much time at all. It certainly wasn't enough time for Techno, whose eyes had widened when he'd heard the news and closed the door on Phil later that day, and it may have been enough time for Wilbur, but Phil was never quite sure where the younger boy stood on things. Either way, it didn't feel like enough time for Phil.

Three hours passed in a blink, and then there was a kid on his doorstep, a foster care worker about to exit her peddling sedan behind him, waving the kid on.

"This is Tommy," she said, and Phil glanced over at him. Tommy Doe, standing there with his head ducked and fingers stuffed into his pockets, barely glancing up once. He's got a shocking mop of blonde hair, uncombed and messy. Phil wonders how much time Tommy was given in advance, or if he had known about his new house placement for even shorter than Phil. Phil tried to commit the entirety of the moment to his memory, and turned his attention back to the social worker. She said, "We're sorry for the late notice, but we're sure you know how it is."

"It's alright," Phil assured, even though he could feel the stress and exhaustion creep it at the corners, residual from the afternoon, "I don't mind. I'm happy to take him."

"That's wonderful to hear," the social worker said, with a smile that was far too forced, and Phil recalled her name: *Gloria*. Didn't seem very glorious. Phil kept that thought to himself. "Now, have you been briefed about everything?"

Phil nodded. He was achingly aware of Tommy's presence, achingly aware of how awful and awkward that must have felt. From his midnight talks with Techno and sushi dinners with Wilbur, he was all too aware of how painful it could be to have people talk about you like you're not even there. The last thing that he wanted was for Tommy to feel isolated and alone on his first day in a strange new household.

So instead of taking Gloria aside, having a conversation about everything that they should probably talk about, Phil just ushered Tommy inside, who still hadn't spoken a word, and waved Gloria goodbye at the door.

All of his belongings were in trash bags. He had two of them. The first was clearly full of clothes, the second had jagged corners and edges poking out. Likely personal possessions, things that he'd carried with him. Phil offered to carry one of them upstairs for him, but Tommy set his jaw, hard, and stubbornly took both of them by himself. Tommy took one look around at the bare walls and barely-made bed that Phil made Wilbur do in the fifteen minutes between them returning from Ikea and Tommy returning, and then dropped his bags off in the center of the floor.

Phil didn't ask Tommy to speak, or demand anything from him. Instead he simply gave him a small tour. Tommy barely spoke the entire time, and as soon as Phil said it was okay for him to unpack, closed the door on him. Phil stayed at the top of the staircase another second, just in case Tommy would emerge needing anything, but there was no sound from within.

That was two hours ago; two hours later, Phil reaches for the next plate and plunges it into the warm, soapy water to scrub off any residual food. It's rhythmical, washing dishes. Gives him time to think. And Lord knows he doesn't get nearly enough of that recently. Not with whatever's going on with Techno and school, which his oldest son still won't speak to him about, and not with whatever Wilbur gets up to in his spare time.

(He came back the other night smelling like weed, eyes bloodshot even in the darkness. He didn't say anything to Phil, and nothing to Techno, and the entire night Phil stayed awake, wondering what, if anything, he had done wrong. Was Wilbur struggling? Or was that just a fun thing that friends were doing together these days? Was he wrong for feeling worried?)

Either way, he reaches for the next plate. He's glad that Tommy is eating. He had been slightly worried about that when he hadn't emerged for dinner. Though, who is he to judge what it's like for new foster children? For the first few weeks, he won't hold anything to it.

At nine at night, long after both Wilbur and Techno have retired to their rooms for the evening, leaving Phil to his nightly routine of watching old television reruns while attempting to get any work done, Phil walks carefully upstairs only to see Tommy's door, still closed.

"Hey, Tommy?" Phil calls, and knocks on the door.

There's no response, but Phil doesn't mind. Instead, he just speaks through the door, and hopes that the boy on the other side can hear him and understand him.

"In case you were wanting to know, there's toiletries, like a toothbrush and toothpaste and deodorant, in the cabinet next to the bathroom. If you don't feel comfortable asking me about it, I'm sure Techno or Wilbur will be happy to show you where. Or really, where anything is.

"Tomorrow morning, after I drive Wilbur and Techno to school, if you'd like, we can go shopping and you can pick out sheets and decorations for your room. Only if you'd like though, I don't want to force you into anything."

He clears his throat again, and says, “Hope you have a good night. If you need anything, all three of us are here.”

There’s still no response, though Phil hears the slightest shuffling noise, the slightest sound of movement. It’s relieving. He doesn’t want Tommy to be completely isolated on his first night.

Phil turns to leave and sees Techno, headphones slung around his neck, and he has an eyebrow raised as he watches Phil.

“Giving him the rundown, huh?”

“Anything he needs,” Phil says, likely knowing that Tommy is still listening and still able to hear him.

Techno stares at him for a moment, and then there’s the slightest curled lip, and then he puts the headphones back onto his ears and tunes Phil out entirely. Phil goes back downstairs and tries not to think about what he had just witnessed.

Techno’s sarcastic, but he’s nice. That’s one of the things that Phil prides him on. He doesn’t think that Techno’s upset that there’s a new person in the house, not when he’s always been there, not when he was the first person to make Phil realize that he wanted to help people just like him.

Tommy’s dead silent. Techno’s irritated. Wilbur’s reclusive.

Phil, a tired single father, exhausted but ready to take on a new child, loads the dishwasher and tries to let the white noise rush over his mind.

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The morning serves no better. He wakes up at six thirty, eyes bleary from lack of sleep, because he has to drive Wilbur to jazz practice in the morning for his guitar, and they moved practices up from after school to the hour before school because the district decided that it was inhumane to keep students there after school for long. Techno is forced to come along as well, because Phil can’t be damned to make the same trip twice barely ten minutes apart (the drive to school is fifteen minutes, one turn onto the freeway and five minutes along the alameda). Tommy will be in his last year of middle school, so Phil will have to get used to driving two different routes this year. It’ll be chaotic. Hopefully he’ll make it work.

When he returns back, eyes stinging from exhaustion, he pours himself a cup of coffee and drinks it, black. Somehow Techno’s gotten into coffee too (though how, Phil could never tell you) but Techno’s the type to drink it with just as much cream and sugar as there is coffee itself. It’s hardly coffee at that point, Phil would argue, but he takes one look at the time and simply doesn’t have the energy to think about arguing that.

He doesn’t see Tommy in the kitchen, and sees no evidence that Tommy’s been downstairs at all, so he pokes his head upstairs to see the light on in the bathroom and water from the sink running. Good. Phil breathes a sigh of relief, exhaling and rushing out of his lungs all in one go. He doesn’t want Tommy to be sheltered and secluded away in his room all day.

Finally, as Phil is onto his second slow cup of coffee, computer open at the kitchen counter as he scrolls through the latest emails and tries to fire off a few work emails that need to be dealt with, he sees someone shuffle out from the staircase and walk into the kitchen.

Tommy looks at Phil with bold hostility and freezes. Too late, Phil wonders if he should have stuck to his room and given Tommy some space to himself for his first morning. Though he's sure that it's easier to deal with just Phil, who won't push or prod, rather than Techno and Wilbur who might be slightly more argumentative.

"There's cereal in the cabinet and milk in the fridge if you want to eat anything," Phil offers.

Tommy looks sullen, but crosses over to the cabinet Phil points to and flicks over their cereal selection with judgemental eyes. Finally, he retrieves the plainest box of cereal they have— Honey Nut Cheerios— and pours himself a bowl. He plonks himself down at the counter, with a spoon and milk, and begins eating. He doesn't say anything. Absentmindedly, Phil wonders if Tommy is going to turn out more like Techno or more like Wilbur. He's certainly shaping up to be just as quiet as Techno is.

Phil clears his throat, and asks, "Did you hear what I said last night?"

Tommy glances over at Phil, eyebrows knitted together in a low, sullen glare, and doesn't say anything.

"If you wanted, we could go to Ikea or another store today and you could pick out decorations for your room," Phil offers.

"Whatever," Tommy mutters, the first word Phil's heard him speak at all, and Phil doesn't let the lukewarm response bother him. Instead, he goes over to the sink and rinses out his cup of coffee, and then loads the cup into the dishwasher. He does all of these actions very deliberately and very clearly so that, if Tommy is at all embarrassed about asking how normal things work in his new home, he doesn't have to.

"I'll get ready, and then maybe in thirty minutes we can go?"

Tommy slouches over his bowl of cereal and says nothing. It's not an outright no, and not an outright yes, but Phil takes it in stride. The first week is always the hardest. They'll figure it out together, surely. And eventually everything will fall into pieces, as much as possible.

He retreats back to his room and stares at himself in the mirror. He looks nearly as tired as he feels.

When he goes back into the kitchen, Tommy is nowhere to be found again.

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Tommy is an expert at dealing with new houses.

That's why he finds himself, of course, creeping through the kitchen at barely two in the morning less than forty-eight hours after moving into this latest foster home, poking and prodding through different cabinets until he's got a decent idea of where everything is and where he needs to find things. There's a knife block on the counter that he steers clear of, not wanting to go near them, and a bottle of prescription medication on the counter. In the dim light, Tommy picks it up and tries to read the table.

There's fancy sounding medical words on it, for medication that Tommy doesn't know how it functions. It's for Techno though, his new older brother. With a frown, Tommy sets the orange

bottle back onto the table. It's not really his business to be poking around in other people's private possessions, but he's a snoop at heart and naturally curious, and that's a dangerous combination for him to be having when he's attempting to make a good first impression.

He takes a few things. Looks through the drawers of Phil's work desk and finds a few dollar bills. There's a crisp twenty in there. He'll hardly notice if it's gone, Tommy reasons, and slips it into his pocket. No one will really notice. He doubts they pay much attention to anything around here. Besides, if anything does happen, he can always blame Wilbur or Techno. He doesn't think Techno is the type much for stealing, but Wilbur certainly seems like it. The other day he heard Wilbur climb in through the window below him, instead of entering the house like the usual way, through the front door.

Tommy files the information away for future use, if he ever needs it, and turns to go.

"You don't have to steal, you know."

Tommy freezes.

His hands are full of chips and snacks and candy, pockets bulging with coins and cash that he's found. Wilbur, the tall brother, the one who's loud and laughs at everything, is standing there. He's slouched against the cabinet in a way that radiates arrogance.

"I'm not stealing," Tommy says, though it's very clear that he is.

In response, Wilbur crosses over and wrenches the Pringles can out of Tommy's arms, and all the other food falls to the floor as well. It's terrifically loud in the middle of the night, and Tommy flinches. He doesn't dare bend down to pick everything up, though, because then the coins in his pocket might rattle and he doesn't know whether Wilbur is the type to snitch on him or not, and god, it's only been a week, he can't leave that quickly, not when everything had been going so well so far—

"You don't have to steal," Wilbur repeats, as if Tommy hadn't heard him. "Phil isn't like that, he'll give you what you need."

Tommy summons together the last scraps of his angry defiance and crosses his arm. "You don't know that."

Wilbur raises an eyebrow. "Uh, of course I do?"

"I'm not doing anything wrong," Tommy hisses. "It's not a crime to be hungry, is it?"

"You're carrying half the pantry into your room," Wilbur says amusedly. "Plus, I bet your pockets are full of shit too. Empty them."

"No."

"What else are you hiding?"

"I'm not hiding anything," Tommy says petulantly.

"What's in your pockets, then?"

"Nothing," he says. Mutinously. It's no good, because Wilbur grabs a hold of his wrist, thumb pressing into the nerve directly on the soft spot beneath his palm, and Tommy hisses. With Wilbur's other hand, he digs a hand into Tommy's pocket and pulls out a handful of crumpled,

half-ripped bills. There's a clink of coin, and Tommy burns. He flushes with shame. Wilbur hums, self-satisfied, and dumps the lot of it on the pristine, spotless granite counter next to them both.

Tommy does his best not to stare at it. It's all spread out over the counter, evidence of what a terrible and shitty person he is. He digs his toe into the wooden flooring and tries not to burn himself up from the inside. Faintly he feels like the edges of him are being swallowed up by flame. Is this what suffocating to death would feel like?

"So, would you call this stealing?" Wilbur says, arrogant, self-satisfied, the corner of an awful smirk playing at his mouth. "Or what else would you say it is, hm? Polite borrowing?"

Tommy opens his mouth, tries to say something, and no sound emerges.

Finally, he asks, "Are you going to tell Phil?"

That's his biggest concern.

He couldn't care less what Wilbur thinks about him, him *or* Techno. In fact, Tommy kind of likes the battle. He likes the retaliation. And because, deep down, he knows that no place he stays in will ever truly last, so he might as well have fun while he's at it. He was built for chaos, wasn't he?

But quietly—whispered so silently, that even in the dead of night, Tommy can barely hear his own soul speaking—quietly, he wishes that he gets to stay.

And this—the paper bills, the coins clinking together in his pocket, the snacks and chips scattered all over the floor like burnt pieces of his heart—they all paint a picture that screams, *you will not get to stay*. All it'll take is one word from Wilbur to secure it.

"Of course not," Wilbur says. "Why would I?"

Tommy's taken aback. "Because—"

"We've all been here," Wilbur says, and gestures to everything. "Trust me, my first month wasn't pretty. I don't think I said a total of five words. So be pleased, you're doing better than me."

Tommy doesn't know what to say.

Luckily, he doesn't have to say anything, because Wilbur continues, regardless of whether Tommy had wanted to speak or not. "Just be honest with Phil, alright? He likes honesty. And if you really want to go, he'll let you. There's no requirement to stay."

"Great," Tommy says flatly. Vainly, he fights for a surge of nonchalance and irritation to cover up every scaling emotion he's felt in the past five minutes. He doesn't want to let Wilbur see how much he's been affected by this. "That sounds positively delightful."

"Stop being sarcastic," Wilbur says. "Go to sleep. It's late."

"It's not that late."

"It's late for me," Wilbur amends, "And you're being too noisy poking around down here. Seriously, you're terrible at this. Why'd you pick all the noisiest food?"

*Nutrients*, Tommy wants to say. He spent a whole afternoon in his second foster home, when he was left on his own to flounder for the entire day, going through the cabinet and booting up the old, lazy Macintosh they had to research exactly how much he needed to eat each day to keep

functioning like he did. He picked things that would give him quick rushes of energy, like sugars and carbohydrates, and stacks upon stacks of protein bars. That way, if he needed to make a quick escape (see: foster home number three, night eight) or missed three meals in a row (see: foster home number five, night one) he had things that he could use to sustain himself with.

He doesn't know if Wilbur knows anything about what it's been like. For all he knows, Wilbur's lived half his life with Phil, cozing up with a silver spoon in his mouth. Tommy curls his lip and decides that *yes*, that's definitely true. He's probably eaten caviar every day for breakfast. He was probably the type of foster kid who was adopted at birth and has no memories of his actual family. No wonder he fits in so well. No wonder he gets along with Phil so easily.

"Just cause," Tommy says. Shiftily, after too-long moments of silence.

Wilbur shrugs, bends down to pick up a family-size bag of chips that's unopened, and stuffs it back in the cabinet. He's much noisier than Tommy was, and impossibly, he doesn't seem to care.

"Now go to sleep before you keep me up," Wilbur orders, and flicks a hand at Tommy uncaringly. "And go put all that money back where you found it."

Face burning, stomach twisting itself up in knots, Tommy watches Wilbur retreat back to his room, flick the lights off, and close his door. It takes him a long time before he works up the courage to creep back upstairs to his own room.

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Two days later, Tommy jerks awake from a fitful sleep to a loud, persistent banging on his door. His head is foggy and tired and he feels almost dazed. Like he's missed out on a whole few hours, and now his groggy body is paying the price.

"Open up," Wilbur demands, and bangs again on the door, nearly rattling it off its hinges. Tommy scowls, curls his lip. If he's only there to demand that Tommy comes downstairs for dinner again, Tommy's going to lose his shit. He marches over to the door and wrenches it open.

"What do you want?"

"Were you sleeping?"

"None of your damn business," Tommy spits.

"It's seven PM."

"I know what time it is," Tommy scowls. He almost forgets that he's trying to be shy and quiet and keep the attention away from him until he knows what he's dealing with.

"No need for the attitude," Wilbur says, almost mockingly, like he's talking to some toddler. "I just wanted to know if you were coming."

"Coming where?"

"To the theater," Wilbur said, like it was obvious. "We're going to go see a movie."

"Who's we?"



“My friends and I,” Wilbur says.

“I don’t even know your friends.”

“They want to get to know you.”

“I don’t want to get to know them.”

“Come on,” Wilbur says, sounding exasperated, “Be a team player. I don’t think Phil’s even heard you talk yet.”

In response, Tommy closes the door right in Wilbur’s fat face.

He’s only been here for a week, and already, he hates everything. He hasn’t stepped outside of his room once, not when everyone else has been in the house at the same time as him. Every night, Phil puts down a dinner plate in front of his door, and Tommy carefully counts three hundred seconds in between the quiet knock and the sound of Phil leaving to go back downstairs before he opens his door again. The only time he’s truly interacted with someone, apart from Phil taking him to Ikea that first morning, is Wilbur. Privately, Tommy doesn’t like Wilbur much. He would never say that to his face— not until he’s at least a little more sure of how the family dynamics are working out in this strange little family. So he has no intentions of going out to talk with Wilbur and whoever his fancy little sophomore friends are. Plus, he suspects that they don’t really want to get to know him. After all, who would?

Tommy waits, ear pressed to the door, to see if Wilbur will continue bothering him or if he’ll just leave, and to Tommy’s great relief, he does. Turns tail and goes down the stairs, out the front door. Tommy can hear chattering voices coming from out his window and is extremely grateful that Wilbur didn’t pressure him into saying yes. He hears his name though, in bits and pieces. It’s attached to the phrase *new annoying brother*.

He goes and lies back on his bed. He’s not sure whether he’s relieved to hear that or not. He’s certainly *something*, though, because there’s an odd emotion scalding through his chest, like a piece of printer paper being burnt from the outside in.

Maybe he will go down for dinner in the next few days. When everyone’s there. Just to prove a point.

After all, he’s Tommy— isn’t he meant to create chaos?

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Within fifteen minutes of Tommy coming downstairs for his first family dinner, everything goes to hell.

For starters, he approaches the dinner table before either Wilbur (holed up in his room, playing guitar on a call with his friends) and Techno (similarly holed up in his room, but probably heavily focused on an English essay or such for school) arrive. Tommy takes the seat on the edge of the counter, closest to the window, with his back to the wall. It’s where Techno always sits.

So the first big piece of tension is that when Techno comes out of his room, rubbing his eyes— Phil really needs to teach him about the painful aftereffects of too much blue light— he takes one look at Tommy, sitting there, narrows his eyes, and says, “Move.”

Tommy looks at him, scowls, and says, “No.”

“That’s my seat.”

“I don’t see your name on it,” Tommy retorts.

“Move or I’ll make you,” Techno says.

Tommy sneers. “I’d like to see you try.”

Not-so-surreptitiously, Phil scoots the knife block out of the way. He means for it to be a joke, because Techno was truly the best in the family with knife skills (Phil always assigns him to cut the onions for dinner because he’s so good at it) but Tommy obviously doesn’t see it as a joke. His entire body goes rigid, and his eyes flick between Phil and the knife block and Techno, too quickly.

*Shit.*

He hastily tries to tell Tommy that it was a joke. But that only brings more attention to it. And that only makes it worse, because now Phil can see that Techno is piecing together Tommy’s reaction, and Tommy can tell that Techno is, and there’s tension rising in the air that’s vivid and painful and brutal to witness.

“Let’s go set the table,” Phil says, and does his best to drag the two of them away from each other. “Techno, come and get the food with me.”

Obligingly, Techno follows Phil back to the kitchen, but he’s bristling with tension. The second they’re around the wall separating the two rooms, he turns to Phil and demands, “Make him move.”

“I’m not making anyone move,” Phil says, as reasonably as he knows how. “Tommy got there first, it’s his right to sit in any seat he wants.”

“But that’s my seat.”

“Is it really that bad to sit in a different seat for one meal?”

“Yes,” Techno says, patiently patronizing, but with irritation bubbling through at the edges, like milk about to foam over, “Because you let him sit there once, and then he sits there the next day. And then the next. And before you know it, I’ve lost *my* seat at the dinner table.”

“For goodness’s sake,” Phil sighs, “There’s no assigned seats. You’re being ridiculous.”

It is, apparently, the wrong thing to say. Techno glares at him, clamps his mouth shut and doesn’t respond. He picks up the bowl of steamed broccoli and takes it back to the table without another word.

*Shit. Shit, fuck, fuck, fuck.*

The second piece of tension is that immediately after Techno retreats to the dining room to be with Tommy (which should have been a warning sign for Phil), Wilbur comes out of his room, fingernail bleeding. He must have torn it somehow, likely from one of his guitar strings, and he’s demanding a bandaid. Phil sighs, but obligingly goes to the first-aid cabinet to retrieve one, as well as some Neosporin. He sets about directing Wilbur to wash his hands with soap and water to get some of the blood off, and that’s his second big fuck-up of the night.

Because when he comes back into the dining room after appropriately bandaging Wilbur's bloody finger, the next thing he sees is Techno, hand slammed down on the table, butter knife clenched in one hand, and Tommy, pressed all the way into his chair (previously Techno's chair), glaring fiercely at him. That's the first thing— the second thing is that they're shouting at each other. Something ridiculous. Something minute. Something so impossibly stupid that it makes Phil angry, because how hard is it for the two of them to get along? This is Tommy's first meal, Tommy's first family dinner with all four of them, and Techno is seventeen, surely he should be older, more mature, more responsible than this—

“Stop it!” Phil shouts, and positions himself between the two of them. “Techno, sit down.”

Techno glares at him. Evenly, slowly, Phil repeats, “Sit. Down.”

He sits. They sit. They all sit. Tommy glares, chest heaving, and clenches his fists underneath the table. Wilbur is dead silent. He doesn't know what happened.

(Truth be told, neither does Phil).

None of them know particularly what to do, least of all Phil, so instead he sits in painful, awful silence for the next thirty seconds. Tommy is practically fuming. Phil tries to think over everything but the only words that come to mind are *what happened?*

The rest of dinner passes in frigid silence. Phil does his best to assist conversation. He asks about how school was for everyone and cringes the second the words are out of his mouth. It's the most basic thing to say at the dinner table, and how could Tommy's first family dinner with them have gone any worse?

Techno barely eats the entire time. Instead, he just twists his fork around in marinara-covered noodles, pokes at his broccoli, and sits in stubborn silence. Finally, when it's all too painful to bear, Phil says, “Let's begin washing up.”

Wilbur stands up and begins to organize dishes to take back to the kitchen. Clearly, he's just as desperate to leave the situation as everyone else is.

“Tommy,” Phil says reasonably, “Can you help with the dishes?”

“No,” Tommy announces, “I don't want to. So I won't.”

“That's unfair,” Techno says instantly. “Phil, are you really going to let him get away with that?”

And Phil knows that no matter what option he chooses, he's going to commit his third fuck up of the night. But Tommy is so new— it hasn't even been a month— and Techno's been with him for almost seven years now, so Phil sucks it up and weighs the pros and cons and says, “Tommy, you can go to your room if you'd like. Techno, you're on dish duty.”

Techno gapes. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“No swearing at the table,” Wilbur repeats, and there's a mocking tone to his words, like he knows that Techno's going to get in trouble for it.

“Bullshit,” Techno snaps, completely ignoring Wilbur. “So what if he's new? Why can't he pull his weight? He'll be out of the house within the month anyway, mark my words.”

Wilbur's eyes widen. So do Phil's.

Horribly, so do Tommy's.

*Shit.*

"Don't say that," Phil warns, and tries to keep his temper in check, because it would be horribly unfair of him to lose it now, now that he's spent the last hour and a half fighting to keep the peace between his three children. "Apologize to Tommy."

"No," Techno says. He stands up from the table, takes his plate, and he's gripping it so hard that Phil can see how white his knuckles are. "I'm not going to apologize to him."

"Techno—"

"Asshole," Tommy mutters, so quietly that Phil can barely hear it, and that's when everything truly goes to shit.

"What did you just call me?"

"I called you an asshole," Tommy repeats, eyes still on his half eaten plate of food, hard and flinty. "Actually, asshole is short for *raging egotistical jealous baby*, but I didn't want to be rude, so I cut it short for you."

"Excuse me?" Techno demands.

"You're excused," Tommy says, and sneers at him. "Go and run away now."

"Tommy," Phil says sharply, "Don't be rude."

"He was just as rude to me!" Techno interrupts.

"You're older than him," Phil says, turning his attention to his oldest son. "Be the mature one and apologize."

*Fuck.* That was the wrong thing to say.

"Hear that, Tommy?" Techno says. "Phil thinks you're not mature."

"You know that's not what I meant—" Phil tries, but Tommy interrupts him.

"It's not like you're acting more mature either! You're acting like a baby."

"You're acting like—"

"Fuck you," Tommy says venomously.

"Fuck this entire family," Techno sneers. "I'm going to my room."

"Techno," Phil says warningly, "Reign in the attitude right now—"

"Fuck off, Phil!" Techno snaps, and the plate falls from his hands and smashes.

Everything goes dead silent. Tommy flinches so hard he nearly knocks his silverware off his plate to the floor. Techno stands there, eyes a cold, hard challenge, and then turns on his heel and marches back up to his room. His feet stomp on the stairs, purposefully noisy.

Phil swallows and reigns everything in himself back into control. He can deal with this. He's dealt

with Wilbur's attitude and Techno's quiet bitterness for years now, he can manage one more temper tantrum. Still, as he skirts around the broken plate and the spilled food to go fetch the broom, he can't help but wonder *what happened?*

Something must have happened while he was gone and out at work. There was no way things had escalated that quickly, not in his household, and Techno was awkward and socially anxious enough that he never got into fights, not unless he was truly riled up about something.

He comes back to the dining room to find Wilbur, silently stacking cups to take back to the kitchen, and Tommy, still sitting there, frozen. There's an awful mix of pride and fear on his face. Something that shouts *I wanted this to happen* and *this is the exact opposite of what I wanted*.

"Leave them," Phil instructs, to an awkward, sheepish, silent Wilbur and a clearly mutinous Tommy. "I'll wait for Techno to calm down, and he can come and clean up dinner."

"Fine," Wilbur says loftily, and prances away to his bedroom. Tommy does similarly, but the worst thing about the whole situation is that Phil can tell by the slight lift and bounce to his shoulders that Tommy had a goal, and he accomplished it perfectly. There's the barest hint of a smile playing on his lips as he walks away, and Phil sighs.

He picks up the jagged pieces of the plate. Crouches down and retrieves a few more shattered pieces from underneath the table, and once every big piece is accounted for, he begins sweeping to try and catch all the tiny, minute ceramic shards. He doesn't want any bloody feet in the house.

He can't stop thinking. Everything went to hell so quickly. How on earth was he supposed to fix this? There was no way he could simply slap a bandaid over it, and just have it be done. Clearly, there was something deeper going on, something that demanded fixing.

What had happened between Techno and Tommy? How had Phil missed something so outrageously dramatic?

The tension in the morning is thick enough to cut with a butter knife. Phil feels like he's walking through jungle vines, having to duck under or hop over anything that's in his way lest he trip. Techno still hasn't emerged from his room, even this early in the morning.

Is he going to skip school? He can't imagine Techno doing that. But regardless, Phil goes up and knocks on Techno's door. There's no sound coming from inside, and when Phil cautiously edges the door open, he only sees a dark room and a fast-asleep lump underneath the bed. His alarm clock is unplugged.

Phil stands there and watches Techno's chest rise and fall, slow, and can't find it in him to wake him up this early for school. Not when Techno stayed up until ten last night cleaning everything from dinner. Not when it's been such a chaotic week.

Phil lets him sleep.

## Chapter End Notes

i'm updating the next two Saturdays!! if you enjoyed, please leave kudos or comments, they rly make my day and i would love to hear what you all think <33

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

tysm for all ur comments on the first chapter, i really appreciate them <3 enjoy!!

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

The first week of his new school, Tommy sits in the back of the classroom on purpose, even if it's not where his seating assignment tells him to sit, but most of the time he gets put in the back anyway. Something about a 504 and an accommodation plan. Nearly every teacher asks to speak to him on his way out the door, and Tommy scowls as he's forced to wait back. It makes him noticeable. It makes him stand out. It makes him hate everything.

So the second week, because everyone knows his name already, apparently, as the weird younger brother of the already two weird brothers (one more to the family, what's it to them?) he decides that fuck it, they might as well know him for something interesting.

So he vandalizes the school property.

In hindsight, not his best idea. It's especially not his best idea because of the look Phil gives him when he enters the principal's office to see Tommy sitting there, head down.

Shit.

“What happened?”

“Your son was caught vandalizing school property,” the principal says, in a plain, matter-of-fact tone. “He graffitied an explicit phrase on the back of the gymnasium about an hour ago.”

In an instant, he sees Phil's face drop. Tommy's stomach falls with it.

There he goes.

“What did he write?”

“I think he can tell you,” Principal Ryans says, and gestures to Tommy with a patronizing, presumptuous voice tone. “Can't you, Tommy?”

*Fuck you, Tommy thinks, fuck you, fuck off, fuck all of you.*

“I wrote *fuck Northside Middle School*, ” Tommy says, and fights to keep his tone perfectly bored.

“Tommy,” Phil says, and he doesn't even sound upset, that's the worst part. He just sounds disappointed. It hurts something inside of Tommy, like a whetstone sharpening the fiercest knife. Something that slices directly through Tommy, bitter and cold. “Really?”

Tommy shrugs. Phil's gaze on him doesn't waver, but after a moment he turns back to the principal.

“I'm sorry about him,” Phil says, like Tommy's practically invisible, like he barely exists at all.

His tone makes Tommy want to jump up and scream. “Has the school decided to take disciplinary action?”

The rest of the conversation washes over Tommy in brief waves, lapping at the shore like at the ocean. Tommy’s only been to the ocean once; that was with his family. His first family. His actual family. He remembers digging his toes into sand, feeling how the temperature changes from hot and dry to cold and wet the deeper he dug. He remembers the slimy, ticklish sensation of kelp wrapped around his ankle. He remembers seeing a seagull fly overhead, screeching out to the sea, before swooping down and stealing a bagel directly out of some sad beachgoer’s hand. Tommy had laughed. He had laughed very hard. The air tasted of salt and fresh wind.

Now, sitting in this principal’s office, he hears words like “*Two day suspension... I’m not sure that’s necessary, Principal Ryans... community service? A disruptive influence, even after a week... a difficult past... really, I think it’s all part of the adjustment period, surely you must understand...*” and that’s when Tommy stops listening.

It was worth it, he thinks determinedly. And it was fun, at least, marking up something that wasn’t supposed to be marked up. That was the joy of it. Also, the fact that his graffiti will stay there for at least the next few weeks, and will showcase that Tommy was there, that he wasn’t just a one and done deal.

It’s alright by him. He was on his way out anyway. No wonder—he just wasn’t meant to stay in one place for long.

Two weeks might be a new record for him, Tommy thinks. Maybe, if he tries hard enough at the next house, he can make it one.

But instead of being expelled, suspended, or immediately rejected from Phil’s family, the principal gives him a few merciless hours of community service. Using steel wool and water, he can scrub his own *explicit message* (and really, the word *fuck* is barely explicit at this point, every kid uses it) off the walls of the gymnasium. Right after school, too. That way everyone can get a good look at the stupid foster kid, already making bad decisions. Phil says that he’ll pick Tommy up once he’s done. He can give him a call.

Tommy takes his little bucket and his scrubbing brushes and heads out back, where the sun beats down hot upon the back of his neck even though it’s in the high fifties. He can feel himself start to sweat underneath his sweater. Slowly, painstakingly, he gets to work.

It takes him only a few minutes to realize that there’s someone else already there, sitting and watching him.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Tommy sneers. “Don’t you have anywhere better to be?”

“I was here first,” the boy points out.

“So?”

“So can’t I be here as well?”

“You’re annoying.”

“Thanks!” the boy says, and he grins. He’s got a chipped front tooth. “I get that a lot.”

“What’s your name?” Tommy asks.

“Me?” the boy says. “I’m Tubbo.”

“Tubbo?” Tommy says, and scrubs harder at the stupid word, all marked up in stupid fresh, black paint, “Well, Tubbo, you can fuck right off.”

Tubbo blinks. “That’s not very nice.”

Tommy grits his teeth and the black paint begins to bleed away. He’s almost done with the first word. Shit, he probably should have picked a shorter phrase. Maybe it would have been better to use the school’s acronym instead of it’s full name. That was a dumb mistake of him.

Next time, he won’t do that.

“So?” Tommy says. “I don’t care.”

“I’m just trying to make conversation,” Tubbo says. “I thought it would be nice to have a friend.”

“Oh, you thought?” Tommy says. He’s angry. It bleeds through him. He can feel the anger and the vile pouring out of him, in chunky, coagulated messes. “I don’t need friends. If there’s one thing you need to know about me, it’s that I work alone.”

Tubbo doesn’t say anything for a long time, and Tommy steps back to admire his handiwork. It’s almost done with the first word. You can hardly tell what it says anymore. Good. He reckons he’s got about another thirty minutes to go before every last piece of graffiti is washed away. Why wouldn’t the janitors let him use those power sprays that they use when they’re cleaning the sidewalks? Those would be much more efficient. Plus, Tommy would have fun turning the blast on anyone who came by his way.

Tubbo doesn’t speak for so long that Tommy turns to check if Tubbo is still there, and to his dismay, he is.

“Have you seen the movie *The Incredibles*?” Tubbo blurts.

Tommy curls his lip and doesn’t say anything. Tubbo, apparently, takes that as a green light to continue talking.

“There’s this villain in the movie— his name is Syndrome, and his whole thing is that he wanted to work with Mr. Incredible but Mr. Incredible told him that he works alone. And then Syndrome becomes a villain because he got rejected by his hero when he was a kid.”

Tommy sighs. He can see exactly what Tubbo is getting at with this, and he hates it. “I’m not a fucking supervillain.”

“No, I didn’t say you were,” Tubbo interrupts, “Mr. Incredible is the one who says that, the hero of the story. Not the villain. If anything, *I’m* the villain. Because you told me that you work alone, and that would be the start of my villain origin story.” He scuffs the toe of his shoe into the pavement. “You know, if I had one.”

“You’re a weirdo.”

“I know,” Tubbo says brightly. “That’s what Wilbur used to tell me all the time, too.”

Tommy pauses briefly. “You know Wilbur?”

“We used to be friends!” Tubbo exclaims, and then quiets. “Kind of. Not really, though. Maybe



acquaintances. Yeah, I would call us that.”

“Well, obviously there was a reason why he stopped being friends with you,” Tommy says, and turns away just fast enough that he doesn’t register Tubbo’s alarmed freeze. Maybe, if Tommy had seen that, he would have backtracked. Maybe.

Tubbo revives himself and says, “Wilbur’s great though, really great. He was really nice to me.”

“Well, I’m not going to be nice to you,” Tommy huffs, and begins scrubbing away at the second letter, “So you can fuck off.”

“I’m bored.”

“I thought I told you to go away.”

“If you had a superpower, what superpower would it be?” Tubbo asks, completely out of the blue. He slides down the wall so that he’s sitting, ten feet away from Tommy, and crosses his legs. He raises a hand to shield his eyes from the beating sun, and then tilts his head towards Tommy.

Tommy doesn’t respond, and wishes that his superpower would be to make annoying people disappear.

“I would want to be invisible,” Tubbo says. “That way no one can see me.”

“That’s kind of the point of being invisible, dipshit.”

“If I had a swear jar, I think I would be rich right now,” Tubbo comments. Tommy bristles.

His second home had a swear jar, and every single time Tommy said “oh my God” or “hell” or God fucking forbid anything beyond that, he had to put a quarter in. He didn’t even have that many quarters, so his foster parents had ended up having him do extra chores every time he swore. Tommy could go the rest of his life without hearing the words “swear jar” ever again. Terrible memories.

“Fuck off,” Tommy says, and takes a few steps backward to survey how his work is going. He’s got half of it rinsed off at this point. Not bad. Maybe he can get away with only doing half the work, but he doubts it. The principal is already proving himself to be a hardass, and Tommy hates it.

“So what would your superpower be?” Tubbo asks. “I gave you mine, now you have to tell me yours.”

“I would want to have the ability to make anyone go away,” Tommy mutters. He’s definitely sweating underneath his jacket, even though most of the residual summer heat has faded away. Why is it so damn hot?

“So, are you new here?” Tubbo asks, and completely ignores every hint that Tommy throws at him.

Tommy scowls. “Yes.”

“I think you’ll really like it,” Tubbo says. “I can introduce you to all my friends if you’d like.”

Tommy laughs unkindly. “No way you have any friends.”

“Ouch,” Tubbo says mildly. “That hurts.”

Tommy drops his hand to his side. He can feel the steel wool dripping down. He turns to look at Tubbo again, who's sitting there. He's in this stupid green shirt that's all buttoned up wrong. Who would wear that?

Tubbo doesn't turn to look at him, and instead busies himself with picking up spare bits of gravel and rock and tossing it out onto the field. The first one goes far, arcing high overhead. The second one lands just a bit short.

Awkwardly, Tommy drops the act. He says, "Sorry."

"It's alright," Tubbo says, and then turns to look at him. "You're right. I don't really have many friends."

Tommy surveys him with grudging interest now that they're actually talking *to* each other, rather than Tubbo simply talking to Tommy and Tommy trying to ignore him.

Carefully, he says, "If I had a superpower, I think I'd want to fly."

Tubbo grins. "Epic."

"Epic," Tommy repeats. Tubbo is the strangest kid he's ever met in his lifetime. And Tommy has met many kids. That's saying a lot.

They don't talk again for the entirety of the twenty-seven minutes it takes Tommy to fully clean off his entire graffitied message. He says goodbye to Tubbo then, who waves goodbye, and then leaves in the opposite direction as him. Tommy sits on the sidewalk curb, pushes the sleeves of his sweater up, and puts his feet in the gutter. He sits there and waits until he sees the familiar wheels of Phil's car arrive right next to him.

---

Two days later, Tommy hops into the passenger seat, lets his backpack fall to his feet, and closes the door behind him.

"I made a friend at school the other day," he says absentmindedly to Phil. It's the barest invitation to a conversation that Phil's ever seen. Tommy stares out the car window at the suburbs passing by, like the mundanity of it is the most interesting thing he's seen all year.

"That's nice," Phil says. "What's their name?"

Tommy hums. "Tubbo."

Phil recognizes that name. Tubbo is the boy who Wilbur would talk to every so often, in an after school club. They stopped talking a few months ago, but Phil was never quite sure why. From what he gathered, it was a bit of a mutual falling out, a mutual distancing. Still, he's glad that one of his sons is friends with Tubbo again. He quite enjoyed having Tubbo around the house.

"Do you have any plans to hang out with him outside of school?"

"Maybe," Tommy says, and keeps his eyes firmly on the dashboard, and Phil realizes that Tommy is trying to ask him something, without actually asking him straight out.

Okay. Fine. Phil knows how to deal with this. His son is Wilbur, for God's sake. Phil knows all

about word games.

He says, “Do you want to hang with him outside of school?”

“Eh,” Tommy says, with a shrug, “I don’t really mind much.”

“There’s the mall downtown, if you wanted.”

“Wilbur always hangs out there with his friends.”

“Do you not like Wilbur’s friends?”

Tommy shrugs, going slightly tense, and Phil steers the conversation back into safe territory.

“There’s also the movie theater.”

“I hate movies,” Tommy says. “I can’t sit still.”

“What do you like doing with friends?”

Tommy raises one shoulder and drops it nonchalantly. “Not much.”

Phil clicks the left blinker and takes a slow, steady turn down their home street. “You don’t have any favorite activities?”

“Not really.”

“You’ve got to have something, right? At least one memory with a friend?”

Is he pushing? Is he pushing too far?

Tommy seals it, and with another uncaring shrug that feels far too forced, says, “Never really had any friends before, so.”

In silence, Phil pulls into their driveway. He purposefully delays his actions so that it’s not an awkward, quick end to the conversation whenever they exit the car. The engine turns off, and everything goes deathly silent.

Neither of them say anything for a long moment. Phil can tell, somehow, that Tommy has staged this entire conversation and is looking for a specific answer. What that response is, he has no idea.

Phil settles with: “Is it nice, having a friend?”

“It’s alright, I suppose,” Tommy says.

“That’s good to hear,” Phil says. “If you wanted to invite Tubbo over, I’m sure we could figure out something fun to do.”

“Yeah.” Tommy stares out the window. “Maybe.”

There’s silence again, and finally, Tommy opens the door. A shock of cold air floods in; Phil hadn’t realized how stuffy it had been inside the car without the air conditioning. Tommy grabs his backpack, slings it onto his shoulders, and marches up to the front door. Phil follows him.

That’s the end of the friend conversation for the day.

---

Phil gets the call right at the end of his shift, and he looks down at his phone and hates that he has the number saved into his phone because they call so often.

One of his kids is in the principal's office again. They must be. And Phil has a sneaking suspicion of who it is. His suspicions are only further confirmed when he picks up the phone only to hear that his— and here, the administrative assistant pauses, which only puts Phil in a worse mood—*son* is in the principal's office, and they're requiring a meeting with him and Phil in order to continue.

Phil sends a quick text to Wilbur and Techno, apologizing and saying that he won't be able to pick them up from school and they should either find a ride or walk back, and head directly to the middle school. Tommy's already in the seat. They're already waiting for Phil.

It doesn't look good.

"This is the third time this week he's been called to the office," the principal says apologetically, and Phil glances over at Tommy, who's sitting there, hunched over like he wants to curl into himself, and back to the principal, with red-marked papers sprawled over his desk. Signs of failure. "At this point, we're looking at multiple disciplinary infractions. You're aware how serious this is?"

"I'm aware," Phil says. That doesn't stop him from being angry, though. "You know he has a 504 Plan, right?"

"There's only so far the school can take that," the principal says. "Of course, we're willing to have accommodations for everyone, but—"

"But these aren't accommodations for just everyone," Phil interrupts, because of course it's all so clear to him suddenly. No wonder Tommy's been so upset and irritated recently. Christ, he should have checked in more, been more active, been following up with the school and the superintendents about how they're managing an accommodation plan. "I'd like to see your specific accommodations for Tommy, please. If the district is really following through with his 504 Plan, I seriously doubt we'd be having this meeting right now, Principal Ryans."

There's a pause. A brief moment. Phil stares him down and doesn't budge. Beside him, Tommy is a violent and angry presence. Phil can feel the anger radiating from him like heat waves off black concrete.

It takes them fifteen minutes to go over the details of the conversation, but only five for Phil to realize that they needed to have this meeting a long time ago. If he didn't know any better, he might threaten to take it up with the principal's superiors. Clearly, something went awry in the system, a long way back, and Tommy's 504 Plan was never clearly followed through on.

Everything is wrapped up and done in the next few minutes, and Phil gets out of his chair and beckons to Tommy.

"Come on," he says, and Tommy leaps out of the chair, bristling with nervous, pent up tension. He follows Phil out of the room. Phil hears, rather than sees, the papers crinkle in Tommy's hands, folded and crumpled over themselves like a stack of origami papers.

Tommy's motions are angry. Too angry. He wrenches the car door open, slings his backpack off his shoulders and onto the car with too much frustration, and the second the car door slams shut

behind him, he explodes.

“That was such bullshit,” Tommy spits. “They don’t know what the fuck they’re talking about.” Fingers tap irritably on the door, flick the door lock back and forth. For a second, Phil thinks about asking Tommy to sit in the back seat, but dismisses it just as quickly.

Phil doesn’t say anything, and turns the key in the ignition. He doesn’t want to show Tommy how upset he is, and instead just wants to get home so they can work things out in private. But the rage boiling off Tommy is vivid and electric, and Tommy can barely keep still. It’s igniting something in Phil too.

“Wasn’t that bullshit?” Tommy demands, and turns to face him.

“Put your seatbelt on,” Phil says instead.

Tommy yanks at it two separate times before he manages to free it from the lock and buckle it. Though, he does so with a huff. He glares out the front windshield and there’s not a single part of him that’s ever still— one hand is tapping the door, the other foot is bouncing. The other hand flicks between radio stations, going between static to classical music to NPR to hip hop to pop to some Christian choral music that Phil’s never heard before, and that’s when his temper finally cracks and leaks and he points a warning finger at Tommy and says, *stop*.

Tommy swallows hard, and he does.

“It’s frustrating,” Phil says patiently. He fights to keep his tone still. He knows, logically, he shouldn’t be upset at Tommy. This third meeting in a week is because of the school and district failings, not because of Tommy. But he’s angry, because things have been so confusing and chaotic lately, and he really needs to schedule a meeting with a psychologist at some point, because he might explode if he has no proper way or outlet to express himself.

“And bullshit,” Tommy mutters.

“And bullshit,” Phil adds, which makes Tommy crack the smallest smile. “But Tommy, three times in a week? Really?”

“It’s not my fault,” Tommy protests instantly, “That stupid teacher put me in the front row, what else am I supposed to do, I can’t sit that close to the front—”

“Your classes are only an hour long.”

“That’s a long time,” Tommy says.

“It’s possible,” Phil responds.

There’s bitter, sullen silence, and Phil glances over at Tommy to find him slumped down in his seat, seat belt digging into his neck, and Phil is about to ask him to sit up straight when Tommy does it. His arms are crossed and he’s looking out the window like he’d rather be anywhere but here.

“They’re all so stupid,” Tommy says finally, voice roughened with pent-up irritation, and Phil sighs.

“Please try and promise me there’s not going to be a next time for things you can control,” Phil says.

Tommy doesn't say anything for a while, and then finally he uncrosses his arm, shifts in his seat, and when they reach a red light, holds out his pinky.

"Promise," Tommy says, as close to solemn as Phil will likely ever see him get, and Phil links pinkies with him. Then they break apart, and that's the end of it.

---

Tommy returns from the movie theater four hours after he left. He gives Phil the change like he promised (one movie ticket was eight dollars, and snacks shouldn't have cost more than twenty, even with two people buying them), and then immediately heads to his room. He looks happy, though, which is nice, and Phil appreciates that. He likes seeing Tommy happy. Unfortunately, he doesn't get to see it much.

Still, Phil counts out the change, puts it into his wallet again, and returns his energy to his work. But it only takes a few minutes—thirteen of them, to be precise—before he's interrupted again.

"Phil," Techno says nonchalantly, entering the kitchen, "Did you know Tommy snuck into an R-rated movie today?"

Why is every conversation with Techno becoming a minefield?

Phil says, "I didn't."

"He did," Techno said. "That's why he wanted to go to the movie theater, even though he says he doesn't like them. I saw him and his friend sneaking in."

"Tubbo," Phil nods. "He told me they were hanging out this afternoon."

"That's not the point," Techno says impatiently. "Did you not hear that they were in an R-rated movie?"

He knows it's probably the wrong thing to say, but Phil says, "So?"

Techno looks at him incredulously. "So? So? So you didn't let me see any R-rated movies until I was thirteen but you let him see them?"

"Tommy's thirteen, you know."

"I know that!" Techno says. "That's not the same."

Phil asks, "How is it not the same?"

"Because he's only been here for a little bit," argues Techno, though there's something in his tone that lets Phil know that Techno's aware he's fighting a losing battle. He's only being controversial to be controversial. "He's not even mature. He's a troublemaker. He's a problem child. You're really encouraging that?"

"I'm not encouraging it," Phil says wearily.

"He snuck into the theater," Techno argues. "Isn't that wrong?"

"You did the same when you were his age."

“That’s not the point.”

“Why are you so upset over this?” Phil asks, because the root of the issue isn’t about the watching R-rated movies thing or the age thing. It’s something different altogether. He’s aware enough to know that.

“I’m not upset,” defends Techno. “I just think you should know.”

“Well, now I know,” Phil says. “Consider your message delivered.”

Techno looks at him, almost a glare, and then opens his mouth to say something before snapping it shut abruptly. He turns away. Phil frowns at him and tries to find the right words to fix whatever he’s inadvertently broken.

“It’s not that it doesn’t matter,” Phil tries to explain. “I’m just wondering why you’re so keen on throwing Tommy under the bus.”

“I’m not *throwing him under the bus*,” Techno mutters. “I’m a paradigm of justice, don’t you know that, Phil?”

“Very funny,” Phil says sardonically. “Seriously, Techno, what’s gotten into you lately?”

“What’s gotten into *me* ?”

“Yes,” Phil says. “I feel like you’ve been angrier and more upset. Is something going on that I should know about?”

As soon as the question leaves his mouth, Phil feels bad for pushing. Techno can be going through his own things, of course he can, and he doesn’t have to share that with Phil at all. He’s perfectly entitled to his own privacy.

But Phil remembers the long days before he set up Techno’s first meeting with a psychiatrist, the way the house was miserable and thick, almost suffocating, the way Phil had to practically drag Techno out of bed in the mornings to get him to function properly, the way Wilbur was silent and wide-eyed for his first few months, not knowing what to do, and Phil reminds himself that it’s his job to take care of his kids, it’s his *responsibility*.

“There’s nothing,” Techno says. “Nothing that matters.”

“If there was something that mattered,” Phil says, “Would you tell me?”

It takes Techno too long to respond.

“Sure,” he says nonchalantly, and Phil knows that he’s being lied to.

In a last ditch attempt, he tries to fix things. “I’ll talk to Tommy about it.”

“I don’t care,” Techno mutters. “It’s whatever.”

It’s not. It’s not *whatever*. But Phil feels like he’s grasping for the barest hems of a conversation, trying to understand what’s going on with Techno, and he feels like he’ll never quite be able to understand. There’s a conversation that needs to happen between Techno and Phil, at some point, but neither of them are quite ready for it yet.

Tommy. R-rated movies. Movie theaters and popcorn. That’s what Techno leaves him with. Phil doesn’t know quite what to do with it.

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Tommy hops into the backseat, closes the door behind him, and yanks on his seatbelt. Techno scowls, freshly picked up from his last class for the week, and rolls the window up. He turns the air conditioning all the way up, even though it's too cold for it, and Tommy huffs and reaches forward over the console to turn it off. Techno slaps his hand. Phil sighs and begins driving home.

“Anything interesting happen in school today?” Phil asks, glancing at Tommy through the rearview mirror.

“I got a perfect score on my history exam,” Tommy says. “No biggie, though.”

“No biggie?” Phil repeats, stunned. “That’s amazing, Tommy.”

Tommy shrugs, though Phil can see the way his hands are jittering at his side, bouncing up and down with nervous anticipation. “It’s whatever.”

“What was your test on?”

“Feudalism,” Tommy says. “My World History class.”

“That’s really good,” Phil says. “I’m really proud of you.”

Tommy begins to bloom, like a flower poking up from dirt, unfurling into sunlight. Astonishingly, Phil gets to watch it happen, real time. “I guess.”

Phil turns to Techno and says, “Did anything interesting happen at school for you today?”

“Not really,” Techno says, and nothing more.

Tommy’s report card goes up on the refrigerator, pinned high up with a magnet from some distant location that Phil neither remembers nor cares about. It goes directly next to Techno’s all A’s report card from last semester and Wilbur’s first music composition, right there where everyone can see.

Phil doesn’t know whether that makes Tommy upset or pleased, but he suspects it's the latter from the way his shoulders relax slightly any time he walks into the kitchen and sees it. From that reaction, Phil resolves to put up more things of Tommy’s on the fridge. Every child needs some validation at some point, and it’s Phil’s job to provide that. Besides, how could he not be proud of everything that Tommy’s accomplished?

Phil doesn’t see the way Techno looks at Tommy’s grade and stiffens. He doesn’t notice when Techno takes down his own report card and surreptitiously puts it in the recycling, buried between spam letters and random bills that have already been paid, for it to be thrown out.

Phil asks him about it, a few days later. Techno lies and says that the report card is back in his room.

From there, the question is dropped.

---



“Are you coming grocery shopping with me?”

“If you want,” Tommy says uncertainly. “I don’t have to.”

“I don’t mind,” Phil says, and gestures for Tommy to follow him to the front door. “We’re just getting groceries for the week, why not join?”

“Sure,” Tommy says, and follows him to the car. They drive to the nearest supermarket and Tommy grabs a cart while Phil retrieves all of their reusable bags from the trunk. Phil has a small shopping list written on yellow notepad paper, folded up inside his pocket. They need more fresh fruits and vegetables, and a few more essentials for if anyone wants to ever cook something that requires more than the barest effort. As they walk from the parking lot to the grocery store, Phil dictates all of the things that they need to get, and Tommy nods along imperiously.

“Rice... eggs... cream cheese...” Tommy repeats, and then looks back up at Phil. “Anything else you want me to get?”

Phil shakes his head. “I’ll be in the veggie aisle if you can’t find me.”

From there, they split up. Tommy returns a few minutes later with everything Phil requested from him, and Phil gives him another three items to retrieve. They continue this little game where Phil goes on a slow and steady circle around the entire supermarket, making sure they cover every aisle, while Tommy bounces across the entire place more than a few times, going from the dairy aisle to the breads to the fresh deli.

“Last thing—” Phil scans through his grocery list, sure they’ve got everything, and then wheels the grocery cart to a stop at the front of the snacks and candy aisle. “Pick out whatever snacks you want.”

He gestures, and Tommy stares down the aisle with wide eyes like he’s never seen it before.

“Anything?”

“Within reason,” Phil amends, because he can see the spark of curiosity bursting to life behind Tommy’s eyes. “No pure sugar. But you can pick whatever you want, for the most part.”

Tommy immediately turns to the nearest bag of chips, restaurant style with lime and cilantro, and examines them critically before tossing them into the overflowing cart.

Phil sorts through all the food that Tommy puts in the cart, making sure that everything is theoretically appropriate for three growing teenage boys, and catches sight of a jar of salsa with *extra spicy* on it in bright red letters. He turns it to Tommy and asks, “You’re a spicy food person?”

Tommy nods. “All your food is too bland.”

Phil laughs. “I agree. Catering for three teenage boys with wildly individual taste is a struggle sometimes.”

“I think you could do with some more spices,” Tommy argues. “I don’t know if I can live off of salt and pepper for the rest of my life.”

*The rest of my life.*

Phil laughs, almost strained, and makes some sort of joke about expanding his culinary horizons. If it comes off as uncomfortable, Tommy doesn't notice and doesn't comment. Phil is absurdly grateful for that. *Rest of my life?* They haven't spoken about adoption yet, haven't talked about what that would entail. Besides, he's only been living with Phil's house for a few months. They have so much time before they have to begin thinking about anything serious.

And Phil would be lying to himself if he said he wasn't excited about the idea that adoption is on Tommy's mind. He knows that things in their home have been chaotic lately, but every family goes through its rough patches, and the four of them are no different.

"You know, in my last foster home, you had to race to get to the food first," Tommy comments. "Since there were five kids in the house, and the parents weren't really wealthy enough to support all of us without the support from the system."

Phil pauses from where he's selecting through cans of organic, unsalted kidney beans. Tommy sounds so matter-of-fact, so uncaring.

"What?" he asks numbly.

"Yeah, like—" Tommy gestures with a hand, "You know, you come home from school all at the same time and you have to make a presence, just so they know you're there and needing food."

Some parts of Tommy's story begin to fall together in his head, clicking together like individual pieces of a puzzle.

"That sounds really awful," Phil says, throat closing slightly, "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

Tommy shrugs. "It's a good thing I'm so fast, huh?"

Phil makes his decision and puts two cans of a particular brand into the shopping cart, and then turns down the next aisle into the bread and tortilla section. He doesn't know exactly what to say. Phil's terrible at these sorts of conversations, even though he thinks that if you asked any of his three kids, they would tell you that he's the best parent they've ever had.

"Good thing," Phil echoes. Then his brain jolts him back into motion and he says, "Did you ever—report any of this?"

Tommy frowns. "To who?"

*To whom.* "To your social worker." What was her name? Gloria?

Tommy's face goes perfectly, impassively still, and he turns away. He shrugs. "Eh. She wouldn't have listened anyway."

Phil can't help but ask, "Are you sure?"

Tommy sneers. "Of course I'm sure."

It's that exact moment when Phil realizes, in the midst of Tommy's false bravado and bristling arrogance: *I want Tommy to stay.*

He couldn't bear to see Tommy leave, not when Phil's gotten to know him so well, not when he's seen such tremendous progress and growth after only a few months of living with him. Sibling dynamics are argumentative and difficult; they always are. But it'll work out, Phil just knows it.

He wants Tommy to stay.

But he doesn't dare mention that to Tommy, not before the kid's ready, and instead just lets the conversation drop. But he makes the promise to himself, right then and there, that he'll never let anyone else ever mistreat his son again.

He'll do anything for his kids, anything. He'll give them the entire planet if that's what it takes for them to be loved. That's what Phil thinks as he drives home, hands tapping the steering wheel, braking only slightly jerkier than usual.

"Groceries," Phil calls, when he unlocks the front door, and he hears the familiar patter of feet crossing the house to help him. Wilbur slips on his shoes to go retrieve bags from the trunk, while Tommy carries one of them in.

Phil sets his two bags on the counter and goes to the bottom of the staircase. Techno must be back from school yet, right?

"Tech," Phil calls, "Come and help with the groceries."

"Coming," Techno calls, voice slightly muffled. He must be in the bathroom. Phil leaves him to it and begins sorting through what needs to stay frozen versus what can go in the cabinets.

Because Tommy was the one who came grocery shopping with him, Phil exempts him from unloading the groceries. Tommy takes full advantage of this and sets about slicing and toasting a bagel that they've just bought. He also takes great pleasure in the way Wilbur's lip curls at seeing the extra spicy salsa. Phil fights the urge to roll his eyes. It's such a small thing to begin fighting about, and he really hopes they don't get into another fight. He doesn't have the time nor the energy to bear it.

"Techno's gonna hate this, you know," Wilbur says darkly, and sets the jar precariously next to the jam jars in the fridge door.

"What is this, the Techno House?" Tommy interrupts loudly. "The world doesn't revolve around him."

Wilbur sneers at Tommy and holds up a middle finger.

"Wilbur," Phil reprimands, and Wilbur sighs heavily and rolls his eyes.

"Fine," Wilbur says loftily. "But don't expect him to be happy about this."

"It's a jar of salsa," Phil says.

"That's not the point."

Nothing is ever the point around here, Phil thinks, and more often than not he feels like he's grasping at straws, trying to understand the intricacies of the situational dynamics around him. He feels like he misses more of the straws than he actually gets, though.

Finally everything is put away, cabinets shut and refrigerator closed. Techno misses the entire thing, and Phil makes a mental note to ask him to help out in the future if it's possible. Still, he doesn't really mind.

Techno emerges from the upstairs after nearly ten more minutes, movements slow and seemingly exhausted. Phil, who is busy listening to Tommy ramble on and on about the different levels of

capsicum in peppers (he really knows quite a lot about the level of spice in things) gives Techno the smallest wave and then turns back to Tommy's conversation.

Techno retrieves something from the cabinet, pours himself a glass of water, and takes a seat at the edge of the counter. It's where Wilbur usually sits.

Phil barely notices the way he limps, just the barest amount, favoring his left side so slightly. What he does notice after a moment, though, is this:

Phil frowns. "Techno, is your nose bleeding?"

Techno glances at him, eyes wide and almost worried, and tentatively touches the tip of his nose. His finger comes away red with blood, and his collar is stained with it.

"Shit," Techno curses, and heads immediately to the bathroom. Wilbur, who's been silent, glances between Phil and Tommy, and seemingly making a decision, follows Techno anyway.

Phil gives them all of five minutes before he follows. He doesn't want to instantly ditch Tommy's conversation, because he'd rather do anything than show favoritism to one child or another, but he can't help but worry about Techno. He knows it's just the littlest thing, just a normal nosebleed, but he's a parent, and it's in his blood to worry.

There's muted conversation from the bathroom, but when Phil knocks on the door, and the conversation quiets. Wilbur's head pokes out from behind the bathroom door.

"Yeah?" he says.

Phil tries to look past him, but Wilbur is keeping the door stubbornly open only the barest inches. "Techno, are you okay?"

"He's fine," Wilbur says, waving a hand. "The dry weather and such. It's winter."

"Does it matter?" Tommy calls from the kitchen, mouth full of bagel and cream cheese.

"Of course it matters," Phil says firmly. "Wilbur, you're sure he's okay? There's not a reason why Techno's not talking to me himself?"

Wilbur looks at Phil, eyebrows furrowed, expression unreadable.

"Yeah," he says finally. "He's fine."

The bathroom door closes. Phil, against his better judgement, listens to see if they say anything. But no more words are exchanged between his two oldest sons.

---

Three months after Tommy arrives, Phil wakes up in the middle of the night and simply can't fall back asleep.

Instead, he goes to the kitchen to fix himself a midnight snack. There's a rolled up newspaper from Sunday— it's Tuesday already— that hasn't been read yet. Phil doesn't want to go on his phone, so he turns on the dimmest light there is and unfurls it.

Only a few minutes later, there's a distinct sound of a key turning in the lock.

Phil pauses.

Wilbur enters, dressed in an overly large corduroy jacket that he must have thrifted from somewhere, with a beanie pulled low on his head, and locks the door behind him. He slips his shoes off and locks the door behind him. Then he turns around, sees Phil sitting underneath the kitchen light, and freezes.

So does Phil.

"Are you high?" Phil asks, feeling his stomach go bottomless.

He doesn't know why he bothers asking. He already knows the answer. Wilbur is definitely high. He's got bloodshot eyes and he reeks. There's a singed hole in his sweatpants that looks like it came from a cigarette or a blunt. At his side, his hands are trembling slightly. Jonesing.

They both stare at each other, for a long time, and in those few seconds, Phil thanks God that Techno is asleep and so is Tommy. He doesn't want them to see Wilbur like this.

"What have you been smoking?" Phil says eventually. It's a better question than *are you high*, because Phil already knows the answer to that one.

"I'm fine," Wilbur says, and pulls his beanie down so it's lower around his ears. Phil wonders who he was just with.

He doesn't particularly mind if Wilbur smokes. He'd certainly prefer for Wilbur to stay sober, but Phil has been through high school and college and graduate school, and he's done more than his fair share of stupid, illegal activities.

That doesn't mean he *wants* his fifteen year old son to be coming home, on a school night, high out of his mind at two in the morning. If he does this on Tuesdays, Phil shudders to think of what he might get up to on the weekends when Phil doesn't impose such a strict curfew.

"Are you smoking weed?" Phil repeats, and when Wilbur doesn't respond, continues tiredly, "I already know, Wil. I'd appreciate a straight answer."

"If you already know, why do you need me to answer?" Wilbur demands.

"Because you've been doing this for the last two months," Phil says impatiently, "And I'm your father, I have a right to know what you're up to."

"*Adoptive* father," Wilbur points out cruelly, and that's when Phil truly grasps the gravity of the situation. Wilbur never calls him that unless he's truly angry. Techno is the type to make mocking comments about the state of their family, and how they're not biological, how that technically makes all of them separate even if legally they're tied together. Wilbur is the type to fight him on that. He says, *blood doesn't make someone family. You're being ridiculous.*

Adoptive father. Shit.

"Okay," Phil sighs. You're upset."

Wilbur only glares at him, stuffs his hands into his pocket. Phil tries asking, "What are you angry about?" but that doesn't work. Wilbur simply turns his gaze to the floor.

“Seriously,” Phil says, and he hates that he can clearly hear the irritation in his voice, because it’s making Wilbur clam up even further, “I can’t fix anything if I don’t know. And I want to help you, Wil, I really do, but I can’t do that if you’re keeping me in the dark.”

Wilbur still says nothing, and that’s when the worst thought strikes Phil’s mind, and he hates himself for asking it.

“Are you *dealing* drugs?”

“No,” Wilbur snaps, affronted. “Jesus, who do you think I am?”

“You’ve been coming home almost every night high,” Phil points out. “I have a right to worry, right?”

“Fuck,” Wilbur mutters. “And what if I was, huh? What would you do then?”

“I wouldn’t be very happy,” Phil admits. “You’re fifteen, and there are better ways to earn money that don’t involve you doing illegal activities.”

“Well, I’m not dealing drugs,” Wilbur says. “So you don’t have to pretend to worry about that.”

“I’m not pretending—”

“Oh really?” Wilbur snaps. “Then what is it? Because this is the only time you’ve paid attention to me in the last week, so you can try and tell me that you’re not pretending, but I know better.”

Phil takes a step back. Then another step. Wilbur digs his thumb into his side and glares at him and refuses to back down.

What do you even say to that?

Voice quiet, Phil says, “What makes you think that?”

“I don’t know,” Wilbur says defensively, when it’s very obvious that he knows exactly what he’s talking about, “I think it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?”

“Wilbur,” Phil says, “You know that I care about you so much, so, so much. I know things have been busy lately, and there’s a lot going on, with Tommy and everything—”

“Great,” Wilbur sneers. “Tommy. Just who I wanted to be reminded of.”

“What’s wrong with Tommy?” Phil says, and his heart sinks. He doesn’t know if he can bear all three of his children hating one another. Isn’t Wilbur supposed to be the mediator? The middle child? The one who can calm down arguments easily, like he’s always done?

“Nothing’s *wrong* with Tommy,” Wilbur says. “It’s just that it’s very obvious you care about him more than you care about me or Techno, that’s all.”

“How can you think that?” Phil demands, before he realizes that he should be trying his best to remain neutral and cool throughout this awful conversation. “I love the both of you so much, Tommy doesn’t change that.”

‘Sure,’ Wilbur says callously. “But you’ve been so obsessed with Tommy that you haven’t even noticed that I didn’t sleep here the last two nights. Techno hasn’t come out of his room in a day. He got into a fight with someone after school last week and you didn’t even notice. And if you had noticed, would you have cared?”

Phil stares and his mouth drops. *What?*

“He got into a fight?” he says quietly. He can hardly believe it.

“Yeah, and he won,” Wilbur declares, sounding proud of his older brother even though it’s nothing to be proud of. “You didn’t notice, though, did you?”

Phil can hardly believe his ears. “Are you serious?”

“No, I’m lying,” Wilbur says sarcastically, making it evident that he isn’t lying at all. “But why would you care? After all, Tommy’s here now.”

“Why are you jealous?” Phil asks. “There’s no need to be jealous of your brother.”

“Brother,” Wilbur repeats, and stares at him for a long, long moment. Too late, Phil realizes that there’s something inside of Wilbur, something aching and hurt and trying to be nurtured, that Phil may have accidentally stomped on without meaning to, crushed right into the earth it’s trying to grow out of.

“I’m going to sleep,” Wilbur mutters, and pushes past Phil. The smell of weed coming off him is strong. He goes directly into his room, slams the door behind him, loud enough to rattle the entire house.

Phil stares after him and fights to urge to yell.

He shouldn’t. He shouldn’t be upset. Wilbur is a teenager. Techno is a teenager. Tommy is a teenager. They’re all kids, they’re all doing their best. *He’s* doing his best. What else is he expected to do? He’s not making Tommy leave, and that thought won’t even cross his mind. But there’s times when he *has* to give more attention and energy and time to people, especially when they’re all still figuring out how things should work out.

The thought keeps him up, nearly until dawn. That night, Phil doesn’t get any sleep.

## Chapter End Notes

if you enjoyed please leave kudos or comments!! they rly make my day <3

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

hi, im a liar and this is now 4 chapters instead of 3, the last one ended up being over 18k so i just decided to split it up into 2 parts for pacing. i'll still update next saturday, so no worries there!! anyway i hope u all enjoy <3

p.s. there's a scene where someone is drunk n in trouble w the police (no violence, just being inside a station), so feel free to skip that section for your comfort!!

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

Tommy regrets throwing his lunch away.

He doesn't regret it in the sense that he's hungry, because really, he isn't. He regrets it in that now he looks like an asshole, sitting there with nothing to eat, while Tubbo offers him half of his peanut butter and jelly sandwich. For Christ's sake. They're both in eighth grade and Tubbo still makes those dumb little sandwiches for lunch every day.

They're sitting there, at the picnic tables just outside the middle school courtyard, watching the rest of the school move around them. The line at the cafeteria is ridiculously long, so even if Tommy had wanted to get something to eat, so Tubbo wouldn't be as ridiculously nice to him, he wouldn't have had time to do so.

"You sure?" Tubbo asks, looking a bit concerned.

"I'm sure," Tommy says, and waves a hand.

He doesn't know why he's gotten into the habit of throwing away the lunches that he takes to school. It probably has something to do with the fact that he doesn't want to be seen as the little foster kid who has a homemade lunch every day. It might also have something to do with the fact that he's trying to give off a certain image (which has most definitely been ruined by his being friends with Tubbo). It also might have something to do with the fact that Tommy is simply trying to distance himself from everything.

He can sense that the end is approaching. He's not stupid.

He knows that the end is approaching because of a few very distinct things. The first is that he's not dumb, and he can tell that there's a hierarchy to the siblinghood he's being forced to partake in, and Tommy is both the newest and the youngest and that places him directly at the bottom.

The second is that because of this hierarchy, he can tell that it's really Techno and Wilbur who determine whether he stays or not, and Tommy knows deep down that they're going to make him leave. It's inevitable.

And it doesn't matter that for the first time in his life, he's scraping passing grades, even excelling in some classes, and it doesn't matter that he hasn't been brought to the principal's office at all in the last two weeks, not even once. None of those things matter.

What matters is—



Tommy looks to the side. Tubbo slides his bag of chips over, already popped open, and gratefully Tommy takes some. They're cheesy and spicy and make sitting there a little less awkward. Though Tommy knows he'll probably go home after school and binge eat his way through his snack drawer, up in his room.

"I'm not hungry anymore," Tubbo says, and at Tommy's skeptical glance, nods vigorously and pushes the rest of the chips over. "Promise. Plus I'll have snacks at home after school if I really want them."

"If you're sure," Tommy says doubtfully, and they spend the remainder of the lunch in plain silence. The rest of school moves around them, in a flow of homework and laughter and conversation, and Tommy kicks his feet up on the bench and rests against his backpack.

"Any big plans for today?" Tubbo asks.

"No," Tommy says, and dares to say, "Everyone's upset, it's ridiculous."

It's true. The house feels very tense right now. Tommy isn't entirely sure what to make of it, but he's self-aware enough to know that a lot of it is his fault. And it's true, that it is his fault. After all, he was the one who goaded Techno on, that first night at the dining table, and he's the one who's been stirring up the divide in the house. He knows it's his fault.

The lunch bell rings, and Tommy curls his lip and looks up at the sun, high overhead. He doesn't like sharing much of his family life with Tubbo, but he suspects that Tubbo already knows a lot more than he lets on.

Tommy goes to his history class, sits directly in the back of the room where he knows he'll focus best, and the rest of the school day passes in a daze.

---

After another school day ends, on one brilliantly sunny Friday afternoon, they go out to the hills behind the suburbs. Even though it's November, it's one of the last sunny days they'll have left in the year. Tommy steals Wilbur's bike, and he has to lower the seat just slightly which is infuriating. He can't wait until he's taller than everyone else around him, and no one will be able to step on him ever again.

He and Tubbo bike out, through the tall, waving grasses, yellowed with autumn and drier than starch. Tommy squishes a mosquito on his arm when he sees it land, and the two of them end up tugging their bikes all the way up the hill because it's too steep to pedal all the way up.

"Here," Tubbo says, breathing heavily. "This is good?"

"Mhm," Tommy manages, out of breath as well, and the two of them flop down onto the stiff grass. A cricket chirps directly next to Tommy's ear and he swats it; it jumps away to go bother someone else.

"School is stupid," Tommy says. It's been on his mind a lot recently.

"It's so stupid," Tubbo agrees. "Mr. Springer keeps giving us spelling tests in Language Arts. I keep failing every one, it's terrible."

“You are such a shit speller,” Tommy laughs. It’s true. Tubbo can’t spell for anything. The other day (two weeks ago, about) Tommy tried convincing Tubbo to help him graffiti something with him. Just because he had the spray paint already, from his first failed attempt, and besides, he wasn’t dumb enough to vandalize school property again. They were planning to go to one of the abandoned warehouses off the freeway and just draw shit there.

It was really fun, and Tommy had a lot of fun knowing that Phil thought he and Tubbo were at the mall while in fact they were being little juvenile delinquents all on their own. The other fun part was that Tubbo kept misspelling words, to the point where Tommy gave up on him and Tubbo just started drawing instead of writing.

“It’s not my fault,” Tubbo protests, even though he’s grinning. “I’m dyslexic.”

Tommy grins. Tubbo isn’t as bad as he had first thought. They actually get along quite well together. And Tubbo is kind enough to take a joke, but firm enough to tell Tommy when his jokes go too far. Tommy is boastful enough to make self-deprecating jokes, but aware enough to know when to apologize. Somehow, they’ve become inseparable. Tied at the hip like two parts of one whole.

That’s the perks of being outcasts, he thinks. You end up joining forces because no one has something more in common with each other than two people who are alone.

Apparently Tubbo wasn’t always an outcast like Tommy was. Wilbur used to be friends with him, and then something of the sort happened and Tommy isn’t entirely sure of the details. Either way, he and Tubbo are both equally shifty around Wilbur’s friends. Tommy doesn’t trust them. He’s seen other foster kids like Wilbur, seen the way they throw themselves away just for one night of fun. He doesn’t intend to become one of them.

Believe it or not, but Tommy actually has big plans for the future. He wants to do something with his life, and he doesn’t want to throw it away.

“You should tell Mr. Springer about that,” Tommy says. “He would give you an exception. Probably.”

Tubbo shrugs. “Maybe. I don’t really care about Language Arts, though. I do alright with everything else in that class.”

“I hate Language Arts.”

“You’re such a history person,” Tubbo says, and elbows Tommy. “Nerd.”

“I’m not a nerd,” Tommy protests instantly. “I just like learning about all the wars and shit. It’s interesting.”

They sit there in the grass and look at the sun a bit longer.

“Superpower,” Tubbo says suddenly.

“Breathing underwater,” Tommy responds instantly. “You?”

“Supersonic hearing,” Tubbo says. “Like a bat.”

“So you can hear all of the shit people say behind your back.”

“And so you can go into the ocean and never come out. Like a fishboy.”

Tommy curls his lip. "I'd be a merman."

"A mermaid?"

"No," he says, but Tubbo is already cracking up with laughter, and Tommy pulls sharply on one of the loose threads in the hems of his jumper, tugging on it until the red yarn is all the way untied.

"A merman. Like the people with tridents and shit. Have you ever seen Harry Potter?"

"You're such a nerd," Tubbo laughs, and Tommy rolls his eyes.

"Am not."

"The biggest nerd," Tubbo says. "You read Harry Potter. You played Dungeons and Dragons when you were a kid. You watched—"

"Shut up," Tommy says, embarrassed, but he's laughing too. "If I'm a nerd, then you're a nerd. No escaping it."

Out of nowhere, Tubbo says, "Perks of being able to control electricity?"

Tommy thinks. "You could do that thing in Spiderman where he goes into the electrical lines."

Tubbo pokes him. "Your hair would look even more ridiculous than usual, though."

Tommy flattens his hair protectively, even though it doesn't do much. His hair will permanently be a mess, he thinks.

"I think it would be cool to turn the lights off without getting out of bed," Tubbo ponders. "That way when I'm really lazy at night I don't have to move."

"Do you think that if there's a power outage, you would go out as well?"

Tubbo laughs, loud and bright into the open sky. "Not unless you're made of electricity."

"Like the guy from Spiderman." Tommy faintly recalls that movie, from a long time ago, even though he hasn't seen it in a while. He's never been one for movies; he gets more from the social interaction of watching them with people rather than anything else.

"Exactly," Tubbo nods.

A cricket chirps again, louder next to Tommy's ear, and the sun is slowly starting to sink over the horizon. Frogs croak in the background, relishing in the dampening night air, and Tommy shivers. He should have brought a warmer jacket with him. Tubbo's all bundled up in a big puffy jacket that damn near swallows him. He really looks stupid in it. Tommy's got his worn-through shoes and thick wool socks and a sweater with shallow pockets, hand-me-downs from families before him. This sweater belonged to his previous foster brother, a guy named Jacob who didn't care much for Tommy at all. Now, Tommy takes it with him, a little piece of his other lives.

"It's freezing," Tubbo says.

"Ice powers," Tommy says absentmindedly.

"Like Frozone?"

Tommy nods, and Tubbo continues, "Pros are that you can control ice and it would be nice during the summer. Cons—"

“Sucks during the winter,” Tommy nods.

“Would suck to have ice power right now,” Tubbo says. “I’d rather be warm.”

“Yeah,” Tommy echoes. “Warm.”

Night falls before long, and Tommy waves Tubbo goodbye at the peak of the hill. Tubbo’s an odd kid, Tommy thinks, as he carefully wheels Wilbur’s bike back down the hill so he doesn’t spin out of control. He’s never met anyone quite like Tubbo before, and Tommy is very glad that he did. Somehow, they fit like two peas in a pod.

He hops on Wilbur’s bike once he reaches flat ground, and sets off on a looping, winding course back to his home. The streetlights are all flickering on, now that it’s late at night, stars blinking into life overhead. It’s one of the last clear days they’ll have before winter strikes, and Tommy relishes the feeling of the wind catching at his clothes as he pedals faster and faster. He takes a turn way too fast and a spike of adrenaline pulses up into his throat, feeling the bike tilt sideways, and then he rights himself again and grins.

Whoever knew that being allowed to go out on your own could be so freeing? He’s never had this before. He’s never had someone like Phil, before, and he thinks that will only make the inevitable hurt so much more.

He locks Wilbur’s bike back into the garage silently and tries to make as little noise as possible. So far he’s been getting away with being on Phil’s good graces, which Tommy thinks is very admirable considering how well the man’s been dealing with him this whole time.

Wilbur’s door is closed, though yellow light pours from underneath the door frame, signaling that the boy inside is very much alive and awake. He can hear muted music coming from the walls, and he presumes that Wilbur is writing yet another song. Tommy would never admit it to him, but all of his songs are actually pretty decent. Tommy hears them enough to make a decision. His older brother never shuts up.

He marches upstairs, scratches at his elbow, and realizes that there’s still a few strands of dried grass sticking to the fabric of his shirt. He plucks them off, piece by piece, and drops a sticky burr on the floor for someone else’s socked feet to deal with. He pulls on a pair of fresh pajamas, and then turns the corner to the bathroom.

Techno’s already in there, sorting through the bathroom cabinet. Tommy scowls at him.

Techno sold him out. Ratted him out, more like. And he didn’t even get anything from it! What was the point of telling Phil that he and Tubbo snuck into an R-rated movie the other day? There was no reason for it, and it didn’t benefit either of them in any way. All it did was make Tommy more irritated and Techno more upset. And Techno may have a brilliant poker face, but Tommy can tell when someone is upset whether they’re trying to hide it or not.

One good thing about Techno trying to snitch on him is that now Phil talks to Tommy a lot. A lot more than he does to Techno. Part of that is because Tommy’s been making more of an effort to get out of his room lately, interacting with people besides his bedroom walls. Phil, with a heart as pure as gold, obliges him. Probably thinks that it’s wonderful that Tommy is coming out of his shell. Probably doesn’t even notice the way Techno is retreating back inside of his.

“Scoot,” Tommy says imperiously, approaching the doorframe, and Techno curls his lip, looks at him, and stubbornly does not move an inch.

“No.”

“I said *scoot*, ” Tommy says, this time with emphasis, and when Techno doesn’t oblige, scowls and pushes past him regardless. Some asshole put everything of Tommy's on the top shelf, so he has to practically clamber up the bathroom counter in order to reach it. He puts a knee up onto the counter, wobbles slightly, and prays that Techno isn’t cruel enough to push him off. He doesn’t put it past him, though, and sorts through all of the junk on the top shelf. He frowns.

“Did you use all of the toothpaste?”

“No,” Techno says.

“Liar.”

“You can use the other kind.”

“I hate the other kind,” Tommy scowls. It’s strawberry flavored, like it’s made for little kids. It’s disgustingly fake and makes his mouth taste like a sickeningly sweet shortcake. Techno knows that he hates it. He’s such an asshole.

“That’s too bad,” Techno says. “Maybe if you weren’t out all night.”

“I’ll have you know that I was out with permission,” Tommy retorts. He clammers down from the counter and looks at the tube of strawberry toothpaste in his hand, bright pink and decorated with a cartoonish, smiling strawberry. “What were you doing again? Sitting here and being lonely?”

“I was doing work,” Techno says. “Being productive. Being a decent person.”

“Yeah, and where does that get you again?” Tommy resigns himself to a terrible taste in his mouth for the rest of the night and squeezes a large glob of the strawberry toothpaste onto his toothbrush. He braces himself for a moment before running his brush under the water and beginning to brush his teeth. “At least I was having fun.”

“Do you ever shut up?” Techno says, sounding exasperated. “I can’t deal with you at all right now. You’re unbearable.”

“Tough luck, big guy,” Tommy says. “I never shut up.”

Techno runs water over his toothbrush, sticks it back in the cabinet, and makes a point of shoulder-checking Tommy as he brushes past him. It’s ridiculous.

Offhandedly, Techno says, “Maybe I’ll put in a word with Phil. This house would be really quiet without you, don’t you think?”

“Like he listens to *you*, ” Tommy retorts. He knows how the words will land, and to his credit, they land perfectly. Techno’s eyes widen, and then piece by piece, he shatters, little by little, and Tommy can see the exact moment when he pulls himself together again. Aiming for the kill, Tommy says, “By the way, why do you call him Phil and not *dad* ? Isn’t he technically your dad?”

Voice brittle, Techno says, “Yes. He is my dad. I got used to calling him Phil, and it’s never changed.”

“Wow,” Tommy says. “I don’t think you’ve ever been this civil with me ever, big man.”

“I can’t wait for you to leave.”

“Fat chance,” Tommy retorts. “I’m staying here as long as I get to. Phil’s gonna have to kick me out before I leave.”

“Only a matter of time,” Techno says.

“I hate you.”

“The feeling is mutual.”

“Whatever,” Tommy says, and rinses off his toothbrush. He sticks it back into the cupboard, too, even though he has to reach up on his tiptoes to reach the top shelf. Techno stands at the doorway into his room, and he’s still looking at Tommy, and Tommy’s looked in the mirror enough to recognize exactly who looks back at him.

Then Techno’s bedroom door closes, and the feeling of being two sides to the same coin vanishes in the next instant.

---

Phil can’t stop thinking about what Wilbur said to him.

*This is the only time you’ve paid attention to me in the past week. So you can try and tell me that you’re not pretending, but I know better.*

Yesterday he scheduled an appointment with a therapist, just to talk things through. It was nice enough, he supposes, but she told him that the only real way change is going to happen is if they’re all vulnerable with each other. If they’re open and honest.

Phil looks at his three sons, bickering ridiculously over who ate the last of the cornflakes, the fight slowly getting darker and angrier until it’s apparent that the argument isn’t over cornflakes at all, and nothing is going to change unless Phil steps in. He thinks, *there’s no way this is going to work.*

It’s a dark thought and he hates himself for thinking it.

He drives the three of them to school, far too early for him. Wilbur takes his guitar case and slings it over his shoulder to carry into the band room. Techno marches out next. This time, it’s Wilbur’s turn to sit in the front seat, and so Techno’s been cooped up next to Tommy for the last fifteen minutes. Then Phil drives the additional ten minutes to the public middle school, where Tommy always asks to be let out of the car two blocks earlier than he should be. Phil doesn’t really know why he asks, but he deals with it all the same.

He deals with a lot of things lately.

He goes back to the house, finds it very cold and very empty, signaling the oncoming winter, and looks up the weather for the next week only to realize that it’s set to snow in a few hours. How had he almost missed the first snow of the winter?

Phil goes over to the thermostat and clicks it up a few degrees, and then grabs a sweater while he waits for the house to heat up, inch by incremental inch. Too late, with a spike of worry, he realizes that it’s going to be cold today, and he should have made sure that all three of his kids wore their winter jackets. Did they bring gloves and hats? Are they wearing proper shoes? How could he have been dumb enough to forget that?

In a weird, odd rush of anxiety Phil goes to the coat closet they have in the front of the house, and to his immense relief he sees that all three black coats are taken off the hooks and presumably being worn. Thank God.

Phil forcibly commands himself to get some work done, and clears his inbox and makes it through two separate Zoom meetings before the rest of his day is cleared. He still has a few more hours until it'll be time to pick everyone up from school (and thankfully he doesn't have to go into the office today, so he'll be able to pick them up).

It's a quiet day. Wednesday days are always quiet for him. They're the one quiet day of the week — Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays he goes into the office, and Fridays there's always something busy happening. Besides, Wednesdays tend to be happy days in the family. Everyone's excited on a Wednesday.

Out of curiosity and boredom, Phil goes up to the second story of the house, and pauses there, hand on the railing.

He remembers the day when Techno first arrived.

Phil had known that he was arriving, on a cold, misty morning, twenty four hours in advance. He had fostered a few children before, but they were all young, and they all moved on to different houses before long. After doing much more research, and looking into things more, and realizing that he really was cut out to be a father, Phil decided to foster kids who were older. After all, once you pass a certain age in the foster system, your odds of being adopted are much lower. Everyone tends to want the young kids who don't have any memories of the system, who can grow up knowing that you've been their parent the whole time.

*No*, Phil decided. There's a kid out there whose only fault is being a teenager. They deserve a loving and caring parent, too.

He learned a lot of things about Techno very quickly. He learned that Techno didn't like raw fish and only tolerated sushi if it was vegetarian without ginger added. He didn't like spicy food, but if Phil offered to make Mexican food with homemade chipotle salsa, Techno would never turn it down. When he was anxious he rubbed at the skin of his elbow until it was nearly red. He was, and still is, brilliant at English and writing essays, but it took a lot of time and energy for him to make it through even one page of math homework. He was quiet at first but the first time he made Phil laugh, with the driest sense of humor possible, he practically glowed. And Phil, who is a man who loves laughter, resolves to laugh a lot more with Techno.

And even just two months in, he could see the way that made an impact.

He remembers when things were difficult, though, but those memories are blurred, like he's seeing them through frosted glass. The first family dinners that were terrible and silent, tense and pulled taut. The days when Techno refused to talk to him, refused to interact, closed himself off to the world. The way he mentioned to Phil, offhandedly, that it would be nice to have someone else to talk to. Someone who was maybe a brother.

Phil comes back in pieces: his hand, on the banister, one foot, half up on the stairs, eyes zoned out on a tiny piece of plaster on the wall. With a shake Phil brings himself back into the present. Outside a window, he can see the sky is a stormy, cloudy white, and snow is already dusting the windowsill, sprinkling down in light waves. It swirls down from the sky and Phil knows before long that the entire town will be covered in snow.

"It's fucking freezing," Tommy hisses, a few hours later, when and brushes snow off his shoulders

and arms as he ducks into the car. Phil nods along and ticks the heat up in the car a few notches. “My hands are freezing.”

“First snow of the year,” Phil says agreeably. “I forgot to even check the weather today.”

Wilbur hops in the car next, and is immediately followed by Techno, who takes the front seat. The drive back home is silent, and when they get back, Wilbur doesn’t even bother taking five minutes to himself before preparing to leave again.

“Do you have any plans for today?” Phil inquires. Wilbur shrugs.

“Not really,” he says. “I’m going out with some friends.”

“Alright,” Phil says easily. “Make sure you bring a coat and gloves with you, it’ll be cold.” It’s pointless to say when Wilbur’s already in a bulky corduroy jacket and a beanie, feet in thick-soled black boots.

Wilbur waves a hand. “It’ll be fine.”

“Wil,” Phil warns, and Wilbur grins.

“Of course I’m bringing my coat, you can stop fussing.”

“Try and be back before midnight, alright?”

Wilbur rolls his eyes, but nods. “Whatever.”

“Do you want us to save any dinner for you?” Phil says *us* like it’s a given, when in reality he’s probably going to be making dinner and the two remaining kids will eat at separate times so they can avoid each other. One of these days Phil is going to force both Tommy and Techno to sit down and talk, so they can finally figure out everything that’s going on between the two of them. Maybe that will lessen some tension in the air. On the flip side, it might make everything worse.

Wilbur shakes his head. “I’m good, I’ll get dinner with them.”

“Alright.” Phil smiles. “Have fun, be responsible, don’t—”

“Make bad decisions,” Wilbur finishes, and slips his shoes on. “Of course, dad.”

*Dad.* It makes Phil’s heart glow inside of his chest, just a little. He doesn’t really mind being called Phil— it’s his name, after all, and it’s how he introduces himself to his kids when he first meets them— but hearing the name *dad* come out of Wilbur’s mouth leaves him somewhat speechless.

He locks up the door behind Wilbur, who bounces off down the sidewalk, and resigns himself to a quiet night. Techno’s up in his room, so is Tommy, and they have reruns of the Great British Bake Off on television right now, which Phil puts on without a second thought. It’s relaxing, quiet, and before he knows it, he’s asleep.

---

Phil gets the call at midnight.

It’s from a number he doesn’t recognize, but something in Phil’s gut sinks, stabbing into him like a



dull rock. He picks it up, hears the first four words, and his blood runs cold.

It takes him fifteen minutes to drive through the cold sleet, pelting down in icy pellets, and another five minutes to go inside, pushing past all of the people who are there for one reason or another, to check in with some cop at the front desk. His hands are shaking and he stuffs them in his pockets to try and stop it. Thankfully, the officer who called him sees that he's just as panicked and frightened as his son must be, and simply points him towards a holding cell in the back of that room.

There, in that room, lit up by neon fluorescent lights that are so bright they're blinding, in his awful orange jacket, is Wilbur.

"Hey dad," Wilbur says, dragging out the vowels, and grins up at Phil loopily. "I think I'm in trouble."

"Oh, Wil," Phil says, stomach twisting itself in knots, heart pounding double time. His mind is spinning wildly. "What on *earth* have you done?"

"Nothing," Wilbur says sullenly, and his words are slurred. "I didn't *do* anything. Everyone ditched me, that's what happened."

Oh, God.

Oh God, oh God, oh God. He's drunk. He's *beyond* drunk. And he's drunk enough that he's in a police station, with a cop who doesn't even look upset but just looks tired. Tired that he has to deal with what must be another young teenager making stupid decisions.

"They ditched you," Phil repeats, and his stomach curls up into a tighter knot, and he can barely breathe. "Who ditched you?"

Wilbur sneers at him. "I'm not a snitch."

"I think it would be best if you just take him home," the officer comments quietly, voice muted.

Wilbur pipes up, "Am I getting in trouble?"

Phil turns away from him. "Are there going to be legal repercussions for this?" he asks, almost not wanting the answer. The officer shrugs, hands palm-up like he's unsure of what to say.

"It depends. Probably some community service. And it'll go on his record, too, unfortunately."

"Am I getting in trouble?" Wilbur repeats, a little louder.

Phil ignores his son. "Is there any paperwork that I have to do?"

"Probably some things that you have to sign. To be honest, we see kids like this all the time. It's not that big a deal, but..." The cop trails off, shrugs again, and gives Phil a wry smile. "Just don't let it happen again, alright?"

Phil squeezes his eyes shut and tries, desperately, to get a grip on his emotions. Fuck, he's in his late thirties, and he's already had enough stress in his life to give him two heart attacks over. Seeing Wilbur arrested in a police station is simply the cherry on top of a perfect life.

Phil can't stop looking at his son, knees pulled up to his chest and humming random notes absentmindedly under his breath. He's fifteen. Almost sixteen, but still. Too young. Much too

young. And Phil doesn't know what to do, he's never had someone act out like this before, and he's just so very lost and confused. His chest hurts.

It takes him about another fifteen minutes before all the paperwork is sorted out. No one wants to press charges against Wilbur, and Phil privately thanks that his son is white and from a wealthy family, because things would surely be different if it were any other combination. Eventually everything is sorted out, and before long, they're exiting the stark, bitter fluorescence of the police station into the cold, damp evening. Yellow street lights cast long shadows over the parking lot. Phil crosses towards the sedan and it only takes him a few moments to realize that Wilbur isn't following him.

He turns around and says, "Get in the car."

Phil's trying not to feel angry. Trying so damn hard. But his stomach has practically vanished, coiled up so tight that it's sinking lower and lower into his stomach, cramping and small, and his brain feels like it's filled with television static, looping words over and over. He can barely think straight.

"Are you mad at me?"

Wilbur's voice is small. Now that he's out of the harsh fluorescent lights of the police station, he looks very young and very tired. The bags under his eyes are prominent.

Where has Phil gone wrong? What did he do to make Wilbur act like this? Surely this isn't normal. He can excuse a lot of teenage behaviors, but some of this is going too far. How is he supposed to fix this?

"Just get in the car," Phil repeats, voice cold, and Wilbur opens the front seat before Phil jerks his thumb and says, "Back seat."

Silently, Wilbur gets in the backseat. Neither of them talk. He looks very pale and very shaky all of a sudden. Phil hopes that he doesn't throw up. He silently prays for it, shifting the car into drive and pulling out into the street.

They only make it three blocks out of the police station before Wilbur starts to cry.

Phil stares at the flashing lines in the meridian and keeps driving. He rolls down the windows, just in case Wilbur needs air. He doesn't seem to need it, though, and instead pulls his knees up to his chest and tucks his head into the fabric of his jeans and just cries.

Slowly, the tension inside Phil leaches out, piece by piece. His stomach uncurls and his own nausea vanishes until he just feels perfectly empty. It's an odd feeling. Surely, he should feel upset in some way. Upset or irritated or frustrated or sad or angry. But he doesn't really feel any of those; all he feels is just a quiet resignation.

They pull up to the driveway, and Phil parks the car in utter silence. Wilbur's stopped crying, and all that he does is sniffle every so often. He looks so very tired. And so very young.

He sits Wilbur down on the porch before they go inside, and Phil quietly thanks God that it's one of those nights where both Tommy and Techno appear to be asleep before midnight.

"When we go inside, I want you to go drink some water and then take a shower," Phil says softly, and waits for Wilbur's nod before continuing. "I'd prefer if you didn't wake up your brothers, so try and be quiet."

“Mhm.”

“And you can sleep in tomorrow. We’ll talk when you’ve woken up.”

“Mhm,” Wilbur manages.

Phil takes another look at his kid and thinks *how could I have placed so much responsibility on him? He’s just a kid. He deserves to be a child.*

“Drink some water,” Phil reminds. “Then shower. It’s very important.”

Wilbur nods, looking pale and clammy, and then Phil unlocks the door. To his credit, they’re both as quiet as possible. He slips off his shoes and drops his jacket on the front couch and then heads directly to the kitchen, where Phil sits and watches as he gulps down two full glasses of water. Wilbur leans over the counter, elbows braced on the granite, and hangs his head.

“Breathe,” Phil reminds him, and faintly, Wilbur nods.

Phil waits outside the lower bathroom just in case Wilbur needs anything from him. The shower turns on, a faint hiss of water, and he hears sounds come from within, Wilbur stumbling a little bit. Phil leans against the wall, sits cross-legged, and tries to comprehend the awful events of the evening.

What’s happening to his family?

What’s happening to them?

“Phil?”

Phil turns, hearing his name, and sees, out of all the people in the house, Techno poking his head out from the kitchen. He’s in a high school hoodie, long and floppy, and his hair is ruffled from sleep. He looks nearly dead on his feet. His eyes are bright with sleep deprivation and he only looks concerned, almost scared.

Phil says, “Go back to sleep, Tech.”

“Is Wilbur okay?”

Techno looks very lost. He looks just about as lost as Phil feels right now.

“He’s fine,” Phil replies. *He’s going to be fine. He’s going to be fine. It’s going to work out. It will.*

“Good.”

The shower runs in the background, and Phil can hear the squeaking of the shower curtain as it rustles. There’s the click of a shampoo bottle or a body wash bottle, probably one of the two. Techno glances between Phil and the closed bathroom door, and then says, “Is he in trouble?”

Phil takes a leap of faith and decides not to lie. “A little, yes.”

“But he’s going to be okay?”

Phil nods wordlessly. Techno nods as well. Then he turns around and heads back to sleep, even though Phil knows his eldest son well enough to know that for the rest of the night, Techno is not going to sleep at all.

---

Thursday is Wilbur Day, apparently.

Tommy doesn't know what happened Wednesday night, but he and Techno are smart enough to put the pieces together. They take one look at each other and realize that when Wilbur doesn't get in the car for school, and Phil doesn't comment on it, that they'll just mutually shut up.

Tommy decides that he'll walk home from school, even though the frost is crunchy beneath his feet. He walks through the sweetgum trees and when he cuts through the local park, the spiky seeds that drop from them have become so thick that it's like walking through the world's most painful carpet. He needs new shoes, but he's very hesitant to give up on the ones he has now. They're chunky and black, and the soles are so worn-through that he can tell where he is on the suburb sidewalks at any point by the feel of the pavement underneath his feet. These shoes have been with him through two different houses (though admittedly, both houses lasted for a very short time, and therefore that doesn't mean much) and he doesn't really want to give them up now.

Tommy winces as he trods over another sweetgum seed, the spikes stabbing directly through his sole, frost seeping into his wool socks, and traces a path back over to the pavement. Maybe he can ask Phil if Phil would go shoe shopping with him over the weekend. It's time to get new stuff, isn't it?

Tommy unlocks the door with his newly christened house key (Phil gave it to him a few weeks ago, and told him that it was a sign of his new responsibility as a member of the household, and that he could only continue to have the house key if he was to be responsible with it). When he gets inside, the first thing he sees is Wilbur, sitting on the couch. He looks marginally happy. He's wearing that god-awful corduroy jacket that Tommy wants to burn. It's burnt orange with a white fluffy lining and it has too many pockets to count. Phil is sitting next to him, and they're watching some trashy show that looks dumb. Tommy remembers watching a seven PM premiere of that show, something about FBI and behavioral analysis cases. They're all made up, they're all such bullshit.

"Welcome back from school," Phil says. "How was it?"

Tommy shrugs. "Decent."

"How's Tubbo doing?"

Tommy shrugs again. "Decent."

There's silence for another moment, and Wilbur mutes the television, even though his eyes don't stray away from whatever action is going on.

"I need new shoes," Tommy blurts.

Phil looks at him and nods. "Do you want to go shopping tomorrow?"

Tommy shrugs, trying not to show any sign of major interest. "Whenever works, I guess."

Phil seems to pick up on his reluctance to appear interested in something and says, "I'll pick you up after school tomorrow with Wilbur and we can go together."

Ah, Tommy thinks. *With Wilbur*. This Thursday has definitely become Wilbur Day, then, because there's clearly something going on that Tommy doesn't know about. A scene plays out on the television, some character on a computer, talked even though they're muted. Tommy shuffles his feet and isn't sure what to do, when Wilbur offers:

"Do you want to join?"

It's the barest thread of acknowledgement that isn't bitter or aggressive or just plain rude. It's just nice. It's maybe the nicest Wilbur has ever been to him in a long, long time.

Wilbur's form of communication with Tommy has to do with pettiness and wordplay, and Tommy is simply too tired to deal with those most of the time. So hearing something genuinely nice from Wilbur is enough of a shock that Tommy shrugs and says, "Sure. If you want."

In response, Wilbur scoots over on the couch so that there's enough room for Tommy to sit down. He does so, cross-legged, and his knee pokes against Wilbur's.

"What are we watching?"

"Criminal Minds."

"Ah."

"We're only halfway through the episode," Wilbur says, and it's the barest olive branch, offered just so slightly in Tommy's direction. "I could explain it to you. If you wanted."

Tommy glances between Wilbur and Phil and realizes that there's something happening here, something that is going to bloom into something tremendously larger than themselves.

"Sure," he says, trying his best. "Explain it to me."

Wilbur clears his throat, voice somewhat hoarse, and begins explaining. Tommy barely listens. Because the truth is that it doesn't matter what Wilbur's saying, not at all. It doesn't matter the plot of the episode or the character development or whether they find the bad guy at the end of the day.

What matters is that he's sitting there, listening to his foster brother explain something to him, looking at Phil, who's sitting next to them, and Tommy realizes that *this is going somewhere*.

---

Phil taps his thumbs on the steering wheel and listens to Wilbur talk long and at length about a new store at the mall that's opened up with musical equipment, and how if he saves up enough money he can buy these new strings for his guitar, which are different somehow in a way that Phil doesn't understand. Offhandedly, he mentions going to the mall with his friends. It's a small comment, snuck in there, but Phil sighs and recognizes it for what it is.

Wilbur is not very happy with Phil. Not happy at all. And it's partially his fault, and partially not—because even though Phil still thinks of him as a kid in his mind, he's old enough to be responsible for his actions, and old enough to know the awful mark of a criminal record. So:

"No," Phil says simply, and Wilbur crosses his arms and shuts up. His eyebrows furrow together in a Wilbur-patented glare, and he seems to debate a few choice words before finally falling silent.

Phil takes a turn, then another, and continues driving along the Alameda. They're only a few minutes away from home when Wilbur says, "It doesn't really matter, anyway."

"Mhm," Phil says.

"We're not really talking right now."

*That's* news to Phil, that Wilbur and his friends aren't talking.

"Oh," Phil says, and he kind of hates himself for feeling happy. He doesn't think that Wilbur's ex-friends are great influences on him.

Wilbur's face falls. "You're happy."

"No," Phil protests instantly, and then amends, "I just—I don't think they're good influences on you. I hope you can find better friends."

Wilbur huffs, crosses his arms, and tugs at the seatbelt, which is child-locked in place. "It's fine," he shrugs, though it's obviously not fine at all. "I guess I'm better without them."

Phil has never met Wilbur's friends. He supposes that should have been another sign that they weren't very good for him.

Phil looks at his middle son carefully, and sees that even though Wilbur's trying to play it off well, he's still very obviously frustrated and irritated beyond measure. Whether at Phil or at himself, Phil can't tell.

Dinner arrives, and Phil takes one look through the cabinets and the fridge and realizes that he needs to go grocery shopping again.

"We're getting takeout tonight," he says. "Any ideas?"

"Pizza."

"We got pizza last time," Tommy scowls, curled up on the sofa with his eyes on some loud and bubbly cartoon. "Plus you always want pineapple on it. That's disgusting."

"You're disgusting," Techno says, pressed into the opposite end of the couch.

"Fuck off."

"Language," Phil says, and Tommy whips his head around to glare at him, eyes a cold challenge, before relaxing minutely once he recognizes that Phil is the one speaking. Phil immediately picks up on that body language and resolves to not comment on Tommy's language use so publicly again. He can tell when someone is obviously uncomfortable with something, and he has no intention to make Tommy feel like that ever.

Phil sucks in a deep breath and offers, "How about we plan out a schedule? We can cycle through whose turn it is to pick what takeout we're getting. That way it's even for everyone."

"That sounds stupid."

"That sounds fine," Techno says, immediately contradicting what Tommy says. Tommy curls his lip at him and when he thinks Phil isn't looking, flips Techno off.

"Do you care who goes first?" Phil asks, and is immediately surprised when both Techno and

Tommy say, *Wilbur*.

Huh. The two of them agreeing on something. That's new. And apparently it's new for them, too, judging by the open-eyed and startled look that they give each other.

Wilbur, holed in his room doing homework, picks Chinese food, and Phil leaves him and his two other kids in the family room bickering in front of the television while he goes to order over the phone. He returns a few minutes later, checks his watch and sees that they'll be eating in around thirty minutes, and is incredibly relieved to see that there's no shouting and no yelling. Instead, Techno and Tommy are sitting in painful, awkward silence, arms crossed, body language defensive, clearly uncomfortable with each other. It puts an odd, painful wrench into Phil's heart.

They should have a conversation about it. They really should. Maybe over dinner tonight?

Phil thinks back to the first family dinner they had and winces. Maybe not tonight. But some night. His therapist said that it would be a good idea, after all, for everyone to get their ideas and feelings out into the open. There's something about vulnerability and shame that are good for the soul to express.

The doorbell rings, Phil retrieves the boxes of food, and the four of them sit around the dinner table. No one talks for a long, long time.

"Pass the sauce, Tommy," Techno says finally. Brittle and cold, barely interacting.

Wordlessly, Tommy pushes the sweet n' sour sauce further away from Techno. Phil, tired of his son's antics, just picks it up and passes it across the table. Tommy curls his lip and pokes at the noodles on his plate.

"So," Phil says, trying his best to make conversation, "How was everyone's day today?"

"Fine," Tommy says. He likes silence just as little as Phil does, clearly. "We had a fire alarm go off even though it was snowing. So we all had to go across the street to the field."

"I'm assuming it wasn't an actual fire," Phil says.

Tommy shakes his head. "Just a drill. But it was fun because I missed out on math class, and I hate my math teacher. Pre-algebra sucks."

"Techno knows a lot about algebra," Wilbur says offhandedly. "He's in calculus."

The attention slowly shifts to Techno, who shrugs.

"We're learning about solving equations," Tommy says. "I hate it."

"Well," Techno says, tone just slightly too curt to be kind, "That sucks."

"Don't be rude," Phil reprimands lightly.

Techno doesn't respond, and instead reaches for another spring roll.

"I could try and help you," Phil offered, "But Tech knows, I'm not very good at math either."

"He's shit at it," Wilbur says. "Don't trust Phil with your homework, Tommy, he'll just mess it up."

"Ha," Tommy says scornfully. "Like you're much better."

“I’m not bad,” Wilbur says. “At least I passed pre-algebra, though.”

“He’s terrible,” Techno says, monotone. “I’m with Wilbur on this one.”

Phil laughs. “I can’t believe you’re all teaming up on me.”

“It’s okay,” Tommy interrupts. “Not like Techno’s much better either.”

Once again, the dinner table falls silent. Techno returns his gaze to his plate. Phil fights the urge to squeeze his eyes shut or swear, and instead sucks in a deep breath and tries his best to move past it. Maybe Tommy isn’t purposely trying to goad Techno. Maybe it’s just his sense of humor, and it’s falling flat.

“So besides classes,” Phil tries, because the silence is choking and thick, “Is there anything else that you did?”

“Tubbo and I went to the basketball court after school,” Tommy blurts. “Did you know you can climb all the way up the net? You just have to be tall enough. Tubbo helped me up.”

“Liar,” Wilbur says. “You would fall off.”

Tommy scowls at him. “Would not. Besides, Tubbo would catch me.”

Wilbur laughs. “Tubbo would not. He couldn’t even make it up to the net himself.”

“What happened to you and Tubbo?” Phil asks offhandedly. “I feel like I never saw him around here until he became friends with Tommy.”

He doesn’t mean for it to be an invasive question, but apparently it comes off as that anyway. Wilbur pauses briefly, and the conversation hits an awkward lull, and then Wilbur clears his throat and says, “We just stopped hanging out. Simple as that.”

“Shame,” Tommy says under his breath. “He’s too cool for you.”

The conversation hits dead silence, and then Techno abruptly clears his throat, pushes his chair back from the table, and says, “I’m done for today. I have lots of work to do.”

“We’ve only been eating for a few minutes,” Phil says. “Come on, sit back down.”

“I’m good,” Techno says icily. “I’m not hungry anymore.”

He turns and takes his plate from the table and leaves. Phil hears him clattering around in the kitchen, hears the sink faucet running, and then Techno leaves to go upstairs. Phil has lived in this house for a long, long time, and he knows exactly what it sounds like when Techno’s bedroom door closes on him.

Excluding Techno’s mood at the dinner table, it’s actually good that Tommy has a friend he can rely on. Ever since he met Tubbo, he’s pretty much all that Tommy talks about, and there’s barely a moment when the two of them aren’t hanging out of some sort.

Phil rather likes Tubbo, and he’s met Tubbo’s parents before, who are just as kind and interesting as their son is. But ever since Tubbo’s merged out of being friends with Wilbur, Phil’s seen them less and less. The last time he saw them was a few months ago, during a parent-teacher conference night. The banalities of being an adult. He’s very thankful that Tubbo is inducted back into the family.



That's the other thing— Tommy has friends, and he has teachers who have emailed Phil and complimented his son on how well he's doing. He's carved out his own little life here, made a space for himself, a place that can't be filled without him. It's all that's been on Phil's mind recently. The way that Tommy, maybe not even meaning to, has created a space in Phil's heart that only he can fill.

Phil goes upstairs once dinner is done, and it's Tommy's turn to do dishes, so Phil leaves him and Wilbur alone in the kitchen. Carefully, Phil knocks on the closed bedroom door and waits for a response.

"Techno?" Phil asks. There's a moment of silence, and then the door opens. Techno raises an eyebrow at him, before allowing him to enter. He goes immediately back to his bed, sitting cross-legged, and puts his headphones back on.

"Hey," Phil says, even though Techno is firmly paying attention to his computer rather than Phil. "How's it going?"

There's no response. Phil, who is tired and exhausted and has had his hands full dealing with Wilbur's easy acquiescence to the curfew the first few days and is now trying his best to persuade Phil to change it back, is doing his best to stand another passive-aggressive conversation.

"Techno," Phil says again. "Come on. Let's talk."

"I'm not really in the mood for talking right now."

Phil sighs, closes Techno's door behind him. His room is decently clean, at least much better than Wilbur. Wilbur is an absolute slob, and would be much worse if Phil didn't get on his case about cleaning so often.

Phil takes a seat on the edge of Techno's bed. Techno types something else out on his computer and doesn't say anything. Phil resists the urge to look over at the screen— he respects Techno's privacy, and everything else about it.

"How are your college apps going?" he asks. Something to break the ice.

"Fine," Techno says. "I met with my college counselor last week. She thinks it's going well."

"That's really good to hear," Phil praises. "Are you still thinking of applying Early Decision to Loyola?"

"Maybe," Techno says. "I'm undecided."

"Wherever you go, you know I'll always be proud of you," Phil says, and waits for a moment until he can see Techno begin to comprehend the words. "You know that, right?"

It takes a long time before Techno says, "Sure."

Time for the next part of the conversation, which will inevitably be worse and busier and more dramatic. The question has been brewing in his mind for the past few weeks, ever since that one trip where he and Tommy went grocery shopping. Phil isn't entirely sure what Techno's reaction will be, but he assumes that it won't be good, and that's why he goes to ask him first.

The thing is that it's not even a question at all. It's just a statement. Because at the end of the day, Phil isn't going to kick Tommy out simply because he and his older brother don't get along. Phil has seen the terrible, traumatic aftereffects of the foster care system, and the way it's wrecked

havoc on his three sons. He has no intention of putting someone back in there, not when he's grown so close to them.

"I wanted to ask you about something important," Phil says, and finally Techno gives him his full attention, taking his headphones off and closing his computer.

"Yeah?"

Phil sucks it up and asks, "What do you feel about adopting Tommy?"

There's absolute brittle silence. It cuts through the air, and it feels like it turns the entire room to ice. Phil waits and watches Techno to see if there's any reaction, and all Techno does is go completely, completely still.

When he finally speaks, his voice is splintered. "You want to adopt him?"

Phil nods. "I've been thinking about this for a while, and I think it's time. I think he's sort of become part of our family, over these last few months, right?"

Techno's fingers begin to tap an anxious, jittery pace at his side, but he still doesn't tear his eyes away from Phil. "You can't be serious."

"Of course I am."

"You're seriously going to adopt him?" Techno says, and his face scrunches up in distaste. "*Him?*"

"I know that you don't really like Tommy," Phil says slowly, trying to find the right words, though from the look on Techno's face it's clear that he's already messed up in this conversation, "But I feel like he's become part of the family. Besides, you warmed up to Wilbur eventually, right?"

He tries for a joking tone, and nudges Techno with his elbow, and it's like a hammer hitting glass. He can see the exact moment Techno breaks.

"Wilbur's different," Techno says, voice painfully quiet.

Phil thinks back to the first few months Wilbur arrived and finds that all of the memories are so old now, at least a few years, that they're blurring in. He remembers that Wilbur arrived just as quiet as Tommy had, but was easily sociable and made friends much quicker than Techno did. He remembers the moment when he and Techno first bonded, and he found Techno sitting outside Wilbur's door, one of the first few nights, talking to him through the closed door. Afterwards, there were small arguments—there always were—but everything went fairly smoothly. He wasn't a "problem child." Not like one might characterize Tommy as. Even though Phil is knowledgeable and self-aware enough to know that Tommy isn't a problem child, and that he has his own emotional trauma and conflict to work through, and that it's incredibly unfair of Phil to pin that all on Tommy just because he doesn't fit the ideals of what a perfect child would look like.

"Tommy's different too," Phil says. "I think it's worth a shot, and I wanted to hear what you think."

Techno opens his mouth, closes it, fingers jittering at his side, tries again to speak and says nothing, and then:

"Are you just replacing me?"

*What?*

Phil opens his mouth to say something, even though he has no response at all for that. He finds himself completely speechless.

“I’m not replacing you,” Phil says, though his lips feel numb. “I’ll never replace you. You’re irreplaceable.” When Techno doesn’t respond, Phil hesitantly dares to ask, “Why do you think that?”

Techno shakes his head. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters—”

Techno shakes his head again, more forcefully, and every inch of his body is vibrating with anxious, pent-up tension. “It doesn’t. It really doesn’t.”

“Of course it does,” Phil says, and a sharp feeling crawls into his throat, eating away at him like acid “Everything you say matters, Techno, that’s why I’m asking you.”

“You already have an answer,” Techno says harshly, hurt bleeding into his voice, “So why does it matter what I think?”

Phil opens his mouth to say something, even though he doesn’t know at all what he wants to say, and finds himself completely speechless. He’s seen Techno angry before, he’s seen Techno upset, fuck, his son has lived with him for nearly the past decade, but he’s never seen Techno sound like this before.

“It matters what you think because you’re part of the family,” Phil says, fighting to keep this throat from closing up, his eyes from stinging, “I care about you, and I care what you think.”

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” Techno mutters, barely listening to Phil, and clenches his hands at his side, white knuckles digging into the soft skin of his palm, “It doesn’t. It doesn’t matter at all.”

“Of course it does!”

“Tommy doesn’t belong here,” Techno says. “He doesn’t belong in my family!”

“He’s your *brother*. ”

“He’ll never be my brother,” Techno says savagely.

There’s painful, terrible silence between the two of them. Phil’s shaking. Techno’s shaking. They’re both shaking enough to bring the entire house down on top of them.

What is Phil supposed to do now?

“Why would you say that?” Phil says, and Techno’s barely listening, curled in on himself like a clam. “Techno, why would you say that?”

Techno doesn’t say anything. What is there to say?

Everything feels like it’s crumbling to pieces.

“Just go away,” Techno says. His fingers are trembling. “Please, go away.”

There’s nothing left to say. So Phil does, and he closes the door behind him, and he does his best to clear the horrible fog from his mind.

“Hi,” Tommy greets cheerfully, elbow deep in soapy, warm water, stacking plates on clean counters, “Fun talk?”

“Yeah,” Phil manages. “Fun.”

For the first time in a long, long time, Phil goes to his room and cries.

## Chapter End Notes

ty to everyone who's reading this, u all mean the world to me and i appreciate u lots. as always, please leave kudos n comments if you enjoyed <3

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Notes

happy halloween everyone!! hope this final chapter is satisfying <3

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

“Do you want to make dinner tonight?”

Wilbur curls a lip. “No.”

“I don’t care,” Tommy says.

“Whatever,” Techno shrugs, impassive to the end.

“Or we can just order takeout,” Phil tries.

Again, he gets no response. Even though he’s got all three of them sitting down in the family room together. None of them are even on their phones or anything. They’re all just staring at different things. Wilbur is picking at his cuticles again, messing with his nail beds until there’s a spot of blood and he sticks his finger in his mouth. Tommy wrinkles his nose at him. Techno tugs a knee up to his chest and stares at nothing. Phil tries not to stare at him. Not after the terrible conversation they had last week, which ended so painfully.

He cried himself to sleep twice in the last week. It’s a little embarrassing to admit. But everything at once had just become so overwhelming, so terrifyingly large, and he just couldn’t deal with it.

“Alright,” Phil decides, because none of his children are going to decide for him, “Let’s order takeout. Any suggestions?”

“Chinese,” Wilbur says, and Tommy says, “pizza,” and Techno says, “burgers and fries.”

“Can we narrow those down maybe?”

Tommy shakes his head. Wilbur shrugs. Techno doesn’t respond.

Christ. It’s like trying to teach a stone how to breathe.

Finally, after more than a few maddening minutes of coaxing each of the boys to give each other their opinions and finally resolve on one takeout method, they cohesively agree on ordering Chinese food. Phil relays their order over the phone to the delivery service, and barely thirty minutes later they’re all seated around the dining table, poking through boxes of steamed vegetables and chow mein and white rice and sweet and sour spring rolls. No one talks for a while, and Phil weighs his options, and finally says, “I wanted to talk to you all about something.”

All three of them pause. There’s a shuffle of feet under the table. Techno keeps his eyes on his plate, while both Wilbur and Tommy turn to look at Phil.

“What?” Wilbur asks eventually, though Phil suspects he already knows the answer.

“I feel like there’s been a lot of tension in the house lately,” Phil says, and tries to remember the meticulously planned script he had rehearsed in his mind beforehand, and with his therapist. Neither of them give any reaction to his words, but Techno pokes around at the food on his plate absentmindedly. Phil takes a breath and continues, “I want to know what you all have been feeling about this. And if there’s any way for us to work through everything together.”

“Tension,” Wilbur says after a moment, almost laughing. “That’s an understatement.”

“I know,” Phil says. “I think it would be worth bringing it up with the entire family.”

“We’re not a *family*,” Techno points out, somewhat cruelly.

“Yes, we are,” Phil says. “We’re all family.”

Techno points. “Is he family?”

Tommy, sitting, curled in on himself, eyes flinty. He pokes at a piece of steamed broccoli with chopsticks and refuses to look up.

“Of course,” Phil says. “Of course you’re family, Tommy.”

“Thanks,” Tommy says bitterly. “I’m sure Techno is really happy with that.”

“Peachy,” Techno says.

“You’re both so ridiculous,” Wilbur mutters.

“Excuse me for not wanting *him* in the house,” Techno says, and gestures towards Tommy. “Who would?”

“Techno,” Phil reprimands sharply, because he can already see the way Tommy is bracing himself internally, closing himself off. Sucking in a deep breath, Phil reminds himself to stay calm. They’re never going to go anywhere if he’s angry. Carefully, he says, “I just want to have a conversation about it. Because I know things have been difficult recently, and... and I want you all to be happy.”

“If you want me to be happy, you can get rid of him,” Techno says.

“Stop being such a bitch,” Tommy sneers, the first show of attitude all night. “Your inferiority complex is showing.”

Techno’s hand curls around his chopsticks like he’s considering stabbing Tommy with them, knuckles white. “You know, everything was fine until you arrived.”

“It wasn’t my choice!” Tommy says. “It’s not my choice to be here!”

“So leave,” Techno says. “I think Phil would let you go at any point, wouldn’t you, Phil?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Phil says, and raises his hands in a desperate attempt to get things to slow down. “No one said anything about making Tommy leave.”

“Techno did,” Wilbur says.

Phil remembers when Wilbur used to be the calmest person in the family. He was always the mediator between them. When did he suddenly become so antagonistic? Is that Phil’s fault as well?

“You didn’t have to say anything,” Techno adds superciliously. “You’re playing favorites again, like you always do.”

Phil’s immediate response is to say, *I don’t have favorites*.

But almost as soon as he opens his mouth to say it, he realizes that it’s not what Techno or Wilbur or Tommy needs to hear. They need to hear something totally different.

So Phil swallows down his immediately defensive response and instead says, “What can I do to make it better?”

“You can stop giving Tommy the time of day,” Techno says.

“That’s not going to happen,” Phil responds. Tommy sneers at Techno and kicks him underneath the table. Phil sighs.

He tries again, “What would make things better for the three of you? What can I do to make this home better? Because I don’t like being angry all the time, and I don’t think you do either.”

The Chinese food is going cold in front of them. It’s been a while since any of the four of them have taken a bite, and Phil’s abruptly aware that this dinner isn’t going the way it was supposed to go at all.

He remembers his therapist saying something to him about *vulnerability* and about *shame*, and how those are the things that bring us together as humans. That there’s no growth without pain.

Techno, apparently, does not take it as such. He mutters, “I knew you were angry at me.”

Phil blinks. “I’m not angry at you in particular. That’s not what I meant.”

“That’s what it sounded like.”

It’s all so complicated. There’s so many leases that he has to wrangle together. There’s so many pieces of the puzzle that Phil feels like he’s missing.

“What if we tried just not arguing with each other?” Wilbur says, which is surprisingly the only reasonable comment Phil’s heard throughout this entire conversation.

“Fat chance,” Tommy says.

“I think we could just try,” Phil says, well aware that he’s getting close to sounding desperate. But he doesn’t know what else to do.

“Try,” Techno says sardonically.

“Yes,” Phil says. “Try.”

After all, isn’t it the most they can do? It’s a start, and it’s the smallest start, even though it’s going to be slow going and chances are it’ll take them nowhere.

But Phil gets all three of them to agree to it— to at least a week of no arguing. And now, there’s really no place to go but up.

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Later that night, after Tommy's taken a shower and let the slimy, awful, exhaustive words of the conversation drip down his back and wash off with the bubbles, he goes out to the backyard.

His room is nice, but it feels too suffocating for the events of the night. Besides, it's right next to Techno's, and Tommy doesn't really want to think. Or act. Or do anything. A part of him wishes that he had never arrived at Phil's house at all, but overwhelmingly, he's glad that he did. He doesn't think he would be having nearly as much of a good life if he was in a different foster home.

To his surprise, there's already someone outside.

"Hey," Tommy says awkwardly. Wilbur looks towards him. Tommy frowns and asks, "You're smoking?"

There's a plastic bag filled with dark green and brown bundles on the floor in front of him. It's odd because Tommy remembers very clearly the night that Wilbur got in trouble, and he wonders why Wilbur still has all of his drugs if Phil has put him on such a strict curfew. Shouldn't he be trying towards sobriety? But out in the backyard at night, it's dark enough that no one is able to see them from inside. Beside, Techno is holed up in his room, and Phil is probably intentionally giving all three of them some space.

"Yeah," Wilbur says, evidently uncaring about any of the consequences. "Wanna join?"

Tommy weighs his options, then shrugs. "Why not?"

He takes a seat on the pavement next to Wilbur, cross legged. Wilbur glances over at him, and then looks back to his task. He takes some rolling papers out from his pocket, all combined together almost like a pack of gum, and places them on the floor right next to the weed.

"Have you ever rolled a joint before?"

Tommy shakes his head.

"It's like this," Wilbur says, and holds the thin paper out to Tommy so that he can show him. Tommy, not entirely sure why Wilbur wants to show him or why he even cares enough, pays attention regardless. He's seen people do this before, but no one's offered him a lesson. "It's not hard, it just takes some practice."

He pushes the weed down so that it's more compact, and then gestures with his chin for Tommy to pass him a filter. Tommy fumbles for the thin rolls and drops one into Wilbur's hand, who puts it at the end of the joint, and then carefully tucks his thumbs at the line where the paper meets the other side of the paper and rolls. He does it so deftly and efficiently that at the end, Tommy can hardly believe that the joint wasn't factory-rolled. It looks nearly perfect.

"There you go," Wilbur says, and examines it. "Decent, I'd suppose."

"I guess," Tommy echoes. "It looks nice."

Wilbur scoffs and repeats, "Nice."

Tommy shrugs and doesn't know what else to say. Wilbur fishes out a Zippo lighter from his jacket pocket, lights the end of it, and takes a slow, deep inhale. Tommy can see the way the smoke fills his lungs all the way, and when he releases, it takes almost two different breaths for the smoke to



completely leave. The smell of weed washes over him and Tommy wrinkles his nose.

“Will Phil think I’ve been smoking?”

Wilbur laughs dryly. “Phil doesn’t give a fuck.”

“I don’t think he—”

“Well, he does,” Wilbur amends, “But he’s too nice to ground you for it, and instead he’ll just give you a lecture about not living up to expectations or something. It doesn’t really matter much.”

“I mean, we talked about that at the dinner table, right?”

“That’s not the same.” Wilbur says, and takes another drag. “We’ve never had a conversation like that. Not that I remember.”

“Was it productive?”

Wilbur snorts. “Productive? What are you, a therapist?”

“I just want to know if I get to stay or not,” Tommy mutters. “It’s kind of up to you and Techno at this point.”

“Not really,” Wilbur says amiably. “Techno might be a bitch, but he’s not going to make Phil kick you out.” Wilbur quiets, and then dramatically stage-whispers, “He likes to think he’s the most important one, you see.”

Tommy huffs. “I can see that.”

“Don’t let him get to you,” Wilbur advises. “He’s been stressed. I think he needs to see his psychiatrist daily instead of weekly.”

“Huh,” Tommy says blankly. “So in this scenario, is he the problem child?”

“Nah,” Wilbur says. “He’s not the problem child.”

Tommy snorts. “Of course. You’re the problem child. Look at you, breaking all these laws.”

Wilbur brings the joint up to his lips again, takes a long drag, and then purposefully exhales the smoke in Tommy’s direction. Tommy wrinkles his nose and tries his best to wave it away.

“You’re the problem child here,” Wilbur says, and points a finger in Tommy’s direction, “And I’m not the ‘too mature for his age, so is now acting out to get attention’ child either, that’s Techno.” He sets the joint aside on the pavement between them. Tommy scoots to the side slightly and makes a special note not to accidentally crush it. It’s almost half gone at this point, burnt down towards the filter.

“I’m not the problem child,” Tommy says sullenly.

Wilbur laughs. “That’s rich.”

“If anything, you’re the problem child,” Tommy points out.

“Really?” Wilbur says, and laughs harder. “How so?”

“Doing all of the illegal shit. You know.”

Wilbur smiles. "Marijuana is legal here."

"That's not marijuana, that's hash," Tommy says, and Wilbur grins.

"You really know your shit, huh," he says, and he picks the joint up again and turns it towards Tommy. "Want a hit?"

Tommy wrinkles his nose. He's met lots of kids while in his time in the foster system, and he's met plenty of people who spent all their time high. He never would have quite expected it from Wilbur, though, who seems so well adjusted. So smart, so capable. So unlike every other foster kid that Tommy knows.

"No," Tommy answers. "I'm good."

"Keep it that way," Wilbur advises him. "We don't need a second me in the household. One is enough."

"I thought you just said you were the normal child."

"We're all normal in our own ways," Wilbur says. "Personally, I think this house needed a Tommy."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Wilbur says. "It's been too quiet. You throw some variety into things. Every family needs an argument once in a while. Even if we're not supposed to argue anymore."

"It's been a pretty long argument," Tommy mutters, and then takes a look at Wilbur and can't help it; he laughs again. Wilbur grins and wiggles the burnt half of the joint at him.

"Sure you don't want some?"

Tommy huffs. "I've never smoked before." He pushes Wilbur's wrist away from him. "You stink."

Wilbur curls his lip. "You do too."

"Shut up."

"You shut up."

"I hate you."

"The feeling's mutual."

"Fine," Tommy says, almost surprising himself, and stretches a hand out. "I'll try it."

With two fingers Wilbur passes him the joint, and it's nearly burnt down halfway at this point. Wilbur was holding it a certain way so Tommy tries to copy him, and carefully he raises it to his mouth.

"Hold the smoke in your mouth at first," Wilbur advises. "Don't inhale all the way."

"Fuck you," Tommy retorts, wanting to seem much more confident than he actually is, but he still ends up nearly hacking his lungs out the second he inhales. It fucking burns, the smoke hits the back of his throat and it tastes so much like the opposite of what Tommy would have expected.

Wilbur laughs, even though it's kind. "Pass it back, now."

Tommy sucks in a few breaths of clean air before trying another hit, and this time he doesn't cough nearly as much. He passes it back to Wilbur, then, who doesn't seem to care that Tommy's mouth was just on it and takes a hit himself.

The moon rises high, high, high overhead until it's so big and yellow that it nearly turns the night right into the day. Tommy slips his shoes off and wiggles his feet into the damp grass. It's dewy and soft beneath his feet, even though it's kind of freezing. He relishes the feeling of anchoring himself to the ground, because he feels like he's floating a little bit. It's a nice feeling.

"Take a shower when you go back inside," Wilbur says. "Or else Phil might actually be upset."

"I thought you said he didn't care."

Wilbur shrugs. The joint is nearly down to the filter now, and he sets it at his side. "I don't want to get in trouble for any of your stupid shit."

"You offered it to me," Tommy says, eyes gleaming. "I was peer pressured."

Wilbur laughs. "I know why Techno hates you, now."

"Everyone hates me, apparently," Tommy says. His tongue is much looser now, even though he doesn't think he's really *that* high. Do people actually have different tolerances for weed like they do for alcohol?

"It's not your fault," Wilbur says, and then he's passing the joint back to Tommy for him to take what looks like the final hit. The smoke is much harsher than the first time, and Tommy coughs again, feeling like he's ripping his throat to shreds. Wilbur plucks the joint from his hands, and ashes it into the grass beneath their feet.

"Damn right it's not my fault," Tommy says. "I feel like Techno's been the worst of us."

"Be nice to him," Wilbur says warningly. "He's my brother too, you know."

"Yeah," Tommy sighs. "I'm aware."

"Now stop talking about serious things," Wilbur advises. "Let's just let go for a little bit. Take a breather."

He stretches out his legs and leans back his head, and Tommy copies him so he's staring at the ceiling of stars. The moon is yellow overhead, like a fat wheel of cheese. Far away he can hear some sounds coming from the road, cars driving by. Crickets chirp in the background, loud and vibrant right next to Tommy's ear. The cold from the ground seeps through his toes, up to his legs, until he's just relaxing. The world seems very comfortable and still.

They stay there until Tommy's too cold to think much longer.

---

Phil sees the light in the backyard switch on and fights the urge to see who's out there and what they're doing. He owes everyone some space, he feels.

In the two hours between the time when the backyard light goes on and the backyard light goes off, Phil debates what to do. He tries to get some work done, to distract himself with productivity, but his mind spins and refuses to sit still.

He recognizes their voices as they walk inside; Wilbur and Tommy. That means Techno must still be upstairs, on his own. Without really thinking too hard, Phil goes up and knocks on Techno's door.

"Techno?" he calls. "Techno, open up."

There's shuffling of fabric, a rustling, and then footsteps headed closer to the door. Finally, it opens. Techno glares at him. He's almost as tall as Phil is now, hit his growth spurt late, unlike Wilbur, who towers over the both of them easily.

"What do you want?" Techno says.

Phil gestures, and says, "Can I come in?"

Techno looks at him, and then stands to the side, and, feeling absurdly like someone passing a bouncer into a club, Phil enters Techno's room and Techno shuts the door behind him.

Techno is the one neat person in the family. Phil doesn't think he's ever seen a room more meticulously organized than Techno's is, not even his own. It's particularly neat tonight; Phil and Techno are eerily similar, perks of living together for the majority of the past decade, and Phil can tell that Techno's been stress-cleaning, just like Phil does.

"How are you feeling?" Phil asks.

"What are you, my therapist?"

"I can call her if you want," Phil offers. Techno rolls his eyes.

"I'm fine. I just wanted some time to myself."

"Do you want me to leave?"

Techno chews the inside of his cheek and then shakes his head. So Phil stays, sits on the edge of Techno's bed, and Techno joins him. They sit there, staring at the far wall of perfectly spaced out and organized items in silence.

Quietly, Techno says, "Is Wilbur mad at me?"

Phil says, "I don't know. I haven't talked to him."

"Oh." Techno shifts. "I thought you were talking with all of us individually." When Phil shakes his head, Techno shrugs. "Do *you* think he's mad at me?"

"I don't think he's ever been mad at you," Phil says.

"Hm." Techno doesn't say anything more. He pulls his legs up to his chest and rests his chin on top of his knees and looks very, very young— like the seventeen year old boy who's still struggling with finding his family and his place and himself. Rather than the person Phil has absurdly been expecting him to be.

"I'm sorry," Phil blurts.

Techno tilts his head curiously. “For what?”

“I’ve had these too-big expectations of you,” Phil says, “That no one can ever expect to fill. And instead of treating you like you deserve to be treated, I’ve been getting upset at you for things that are perfectly normal and human. That’s not fair of me, and I can only imagine how stressful these last few months have been for you.”

Techno looks at him, and Phil isn’t sure whether he’s said enough, so he continues, “I’m sorry. I know words only go so far, but I promise that anything you need, anything at all, I’m here to give it. I love you much, so impossibly much, and you mean the world to me Techno, you really do—”

Suddenly Techno throws his arms around Phil, eyes wet and shining, and hugs him fiercely. Phil hugs him back, and he can feel Techno shuddering in his arms, desperately gasping for breath, like it’s the first time he’s truly breathed in years.

“Hey,” Phil murmurs, and runs a hand through Techno’s hair, “Breathe, alright? Breathe with me.”

He purposely slows down his breaths so that they’re slow and steady, in for five and out for five, and eventually he feels Techno begin to copy the rhythm. Phil doesn’t let go of him the whole time, and simply holds him through it.

“I just feel very alone,” Techno whispers, and Phil hugs him tighter.

“You’re not.”

“I know.” Silence, for another moment, and then he repeats, “I know.” It sounds like he’s trying to convince himself of it.

“Good.”

Neither of them move for much, much longer. It takes Phil two full hours after stepping into Techno’s room that the two of them talking has kept the both of them up past midnight, past one in the morning, and it’s nearing towards two. They’ve practically talked themselves hoarse about anything, really— about school, about life, about a television show they both saw advertised and thought about watching, about adopting a cat just for the hell of it. Phil only notices the time because Techno’s yawning continuously, evidently exhausted, and the tiredness is getting to Phil too.

“I’m going to go sleep,” Phil says, and can’t stop a yawn from emerging. Techno’s eyes, once red and watery, look much brighter. Like he’s a whole new person.

“Okay,” Techno says quietly. “Me too.”

“Good,” Phil says.

He stops at Techno’s door and says, “I love you, Techno. So much.”

Techno swallows and says, “I love you too, dad.”

So Phil leaves with the promise of a much better tomorrow.

On his way out, he passes by Tommy’s door; it’s ajar, and Phil looks inside, expecting to see Tommy dead asleep, but he’s really just on his phone, scrolling mindlessly through something or other, curled up and facing the wall.

“Hi,” Phil whispers, and knocks at the door frame. “Tommy, are you going to sleep soon?”

Tommy blinks up at him from the bed, and in the dim light coming from his phone screen, his eyes are wide and dilated and dark. “It’s not that late.”

Phil checks his watch and says, “It’s two in the morning.”

Tommy blinks. Swipes down on his phone. Does a slight take aback when he sees the time. “Oh.”

“Oh,” Phil agrees. “Are you going to go to sleep soon, then?”

Tommy yawns, wide and long like a cat, and puts his phone on his bedside table. “Maybe.”

“Alright,” Phil says. “Whenever you’re ready.”

He backs out of the room and begins to close Tommy’s door, in the way he knows Tommy always sleeps with his door closed, when there’s a sleepy mumble from Tommy. Phil pauses.

“What?”

“You can leave it open,” Tommy mumbles.

“Okay,” Phil says. There’s a brief, fluttering feeling in his chest, something that swells up and out like sunlight after a rainstorm. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure,” Tommy says.

“Goodnight,” Phil says.

“G’night,” Tommy mumbles, and there’s a faint rustle of bedsheets. Phil slowly backs down the hall, not wanting to make any abrupt noise, and tires to stop his smile as he begins walking down the stairs.

They’ll figure everything out, won’t they?

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“You,” Tommy says determinedly, picking the most miniscule pieces of olive from his pizza, “Are the worst person ever.”

Tubbo grins and reaches for another slice. “I thought it would be interesting.”

“I think olives are disgusting.”

“It’s better than pesto,” Tubbo says, with a pointed glance at Tommy.

“Fuck off,” Tommy says plainly. “Pesto is good on pizza. Gives it flavor.”

“Not with ranch,” Tubbo retorts, and Tommy resists the urge to grin. He likes pizza with ranch. “That’s just nasty.”

Tommy continues picking out pieces of black olive from his pizza until he’s fairly certain that this slice of pizza is safe to eat. They ordered it a while ago, so it’s practically cold at this point, and they’re eating from paper plates on top of the local elementary school’s cafeteria. There’s a way to

get on the roof using the drain pipes on the side, but you need a friend to help you up. It's harder in the winter, too, when everything is colder and you're holding on with gloved hands. It was an even bigger struggle getting the pizza up here, too, without spilling it.

But looking out over the rest of the elementary school, even with his hands freezing, Tommy doesn't think he's ever been more content.

"I think it's gonna snow soon," Tubbo says, and looks up at the sky. "We might not want to be here long."

Tommy wrinkles his nose but concedes the point. The sky overhead is nearly white, pearly grey clouds, and threatens to upheave snow onto the entire city. The last large snowfall that they had, the middle school had given them two full snow days off, while the snow plows drove through and tried to clear the streets. Phil made them all go shovel snow so that he could actually move the car into the garage, and Wilbur and Tommy got into the smallest snowball fight while Techno scowls impatiently at them from the sidelines. Astonishingly, Tommy had never gotten into a snowball fight before, but he did very well. To the point where even Techno laughed unkindly when Wilbur's jacket collar was filled with dripping ice.

"Might want to head back home soon," Tommy agrees.

His sentence falls flat. He knows why. He and Tubbo have talked a long time about Tommy's home life, to the point where Tommy genuinely considered whether he was being annoying by mentioning it so much. But Tubbo understands, because he used to be close friends with Wilbur—that is, until Wilbur suddenly decided that Tubbo was much too *weird* for him and left for better friends, friends that were cooler, more popular. Tommy holds a bit of a grudge against Wilbur for that, because he knows what it's like to be so alone, and he resents Wilbur for making Tubbo feel bad.

Tubbo clears his throat and says, "Sorry if this is blunt. Do you know if you're staying?"

"No," Tommy says. "I mean, I'm not sure. I guess we'll see."

He doesn't know what's going to happen.

It's scary, it's terrifying to think that these next few weeks might be his last. He's had times like this before, where he's thought that for certain he was going to stay. But it never happened. It never did, because it was always a few months and then he ended up right back in the system, bouncing around.

He knows the feel of it so well. At this point, he doesn't think he'll be surprised. Just so very empty.

Where's he going to go next?

Carefully, like he's trying to make everything better, Tubbo asks, "Superpower?"

Tommy looks down at his slice of pizza, cheese diving off the edges in melty stretches, and thinks about what's going to happen to him if he leaves.

"Stopping time," he says. "I'd want to stop time."

Tubbo nods, kicks Tommy under the table. "Good moment to stop in."

"Yeah," Tommy says, and summons a wobbly smile. "It is."

“Right before it’s about to snow,” Tubbo says. “What would you do with your stopped time?”

Tommy thinks for a minute. “I’d go steal shit. Like from the mall or something. Who’s going to stop you?”

“Wouldn’t it be funny if you could move people? Like if everything stopped, but you could just move someone else around so one moment they’re in a supermarket and the next they’re at the park?”

“That’s so boring,” Tommy sighs. “Where’s your sense of spirit? We could break into a bank together.”

“Neither of us are smart enough to break into a bank.”

Tommy wrinkles his nose. “I bet we could figure it out.”

“Well, how long are we talking with stopping time? Like is there a limit for it, or is it just forever?”

“It depends,” Tommy thinks. “I’d like twenty four hours.”

“Twenty four hours to wreak havoc,” Tubbo cheers. “Maybe you’re onto something with the stealing. I would steal with you.”

“Let’s rob a bank, Tubbo,” Tommy says. “Let’s fuck things up. Why not? Life is so short.”

“Only if we get to do it in a fun way,” Tubbo says. “Ocean’s Eleven.”

Tommy grins and laughs, and for a moment he can forget that he’s sitting on top of a roof, olive-flavored pizza in front of him (no matter how much he thinks he’s gotten all of them, the entire pizza still tastes like it) with the sky above them, wide and unyielding. He can almost forget that there’s so much more going on, so much that he might never get a chance to experience soon.

The first few flakes of snow begin to fall from the sky, and Tommy grimaces up at them. Slowly, they begin to pack everything up. Tubbo tosses the remainder of their pizza into the dumpster off the side of the building, and then carefully lowers himself down. It’s much easier to jump down than it is to climb up.

They part ways once they reach the sidewalk of the main street, and Tommy turns down his street and watches the way the snow gathers in front of him. It sticks to his shoes and peels up behind him. Already, the streetlamps are turning on.

He hopes that he’ll get to stop time soon.

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Tommy slings his backpack off from school, peels off his layers (he’s got a stupid puffy coat that Phil makes him wear every day when it snows, a fleece underneath that, and then a long sleeved shirt— nevermind a hat and mittens, both keeping him warm), shakes out his shirt from where it’s sweaty and stuck to his back from his backpack, and curls his nose. He needs a shower. The teacher had made them run the mile that morning in P.E., and he’s all sweaty and gross from it. Tommy *hates* running the mile— it’s ridiculous and always a competition somehow, and he’s never been one for physical exercise despite always being scrawny and lanky and tall. So he ended up walking



most of it, running the last lap purely for show, and now his entire body aches and he can't wait to take a shower.

The bathroom door is closed, and Tommy frowns at it. Of course Techno's in the bathroom when Tommy gets back from school. They had talked about being forced to run the mile the day before. Shouldn't he know better?

"Techno!" Tommy calls impatiently, and knocks on the door. "Open up."

There's no sound coming from the bathroom, and curiously, Tommy peeks his head around the hallway to see if Techno is in his room. He's not anywhere to be found. Tommy tries the knob to the bathroom again and finds it locked.

Ah, fuck. Tommy's met enough foster kids to know that locking yourself in a bathroom is never a good move.

"Techno?" he calls again, and knocks on the door, even though he knows they're supposed to be in an argument right now, and nothing is supposed to work itself out this easily. He grits his teeth and asks, "Are you okay?"

There's a hastily muffled noise, and Tommy tries the doorknob again, just to have something to do with his hands. He taps his foot against the floor, in uneven, jittery beats. He has half a mind to call Phil and make him come home from work early to drag Techno out of the bathroom just because Tommy doesn't know what to do when people get all emotional like this. Besides gloat, of course.

There's a quiet snick, the sound of the latch turning. Tommy tries the doorknob again and this time, it turns slowly. He opens it. Techno's got the sink water running, the cold knob turned all the way on.

"Are you okay?" Tommy asks.

"I'm fine," Techno says, voice muffled into the hand towel, and it's clear that when he removes his face, he's been trying to cover up the fact that he's crying. Tommy knows the signs of that all too well. The red-rimmed eyes, the blotchy cheeks, the odd brightness to one's eyes that comes with quiet, weeping tears rather than loud, pitiful sobs.

"You're crying," Tommy says numbly, which is probably the wrong thing to say.

"I'm fine," Techno repeats, voice too forcefully clear to be honest.

"Bullshit," Tommy snaps.

Techno glares at him, and Tommy glares back. He's not going to back down.

"Why were you crying?"

"No reason," Techno says, and clears his throat.

"Tell me."

"No."

"Tell me, tell me, tell me—"

"You're so annoying," Techno sighs. "Has anyone ever told you that?"

“So many times,” Tommy says. “Why, want to tell me again?”

“Can’t you just leave me alone?” Techno says, sounding exhausted, and suddenly Tommy realizes that he’s very much exhausted too.

He doesn’t know why he says it, but what comes out of his mouth is: “You know, being angry at each other is fun sometimes, but it’s really tiring the other ninety five percent of the time.”

Techno stares at him, expression unreadable, before huffing a small laugh. “You might be onto something there.”

It’s true, even though it feels a little stupid to admit it. He can’t believe that they’ve spent so much time fighting that it’s clouded pretty much everything.

“Well?” Tommy offers. “Want to tell me about it?”

“Nothing happened,” Techno shrugs.

Tommy narrows his eyes. “Liar.”

“It’s dumb, really.”

“Well, obviously not, if you’re that upset about it.”

“It’s stupid,” Techno said.

“You can talk to me about it. I’d never tell.”

Techno looks at him. “I don’t believe that.”

“Seriously,” Tommy says. “I keep my promises.”

He nearly takes his hand out of his pocket to give his pinky to Techno before realizing that that’s just another way for Techno to make fun of him, and Tommy really doesn’t want to give him any more ammunition. Even if he does feel slightly bad for him, seeing him so beaten down like this.

Finally, Techno says, “You can’t tell Phil I told you this.”

It’s a little bold of Techno to ask Tommy to keep secrets, when Techno was so quick to snitch on him, but Tommy shrugs and says, “Sure. Pinky promise.”

Techno looks at him, and then they link pinkies for the quickest possible moment.

Techno clears his throat and says, “Phil wants to adopt you.”

Tommy blinks.

“He what?” Tommy manages, throat tight and strangled. Phil— Phil *what?*

“He told me a few weeks ago,” Techno continues. “I think Wilbur knows, too.”

Tommy opens his mouth, trying to shape the wild, intangible feeling inside of him into words, but nothing comes out. He closes his mouth again and gapes at the clean bathroom counters and eventually realizes that he needs to breathe, he hasn’t sucked in a breath in too long.

“You good there?” Techno says, trying for amusement, but it comes off almost concerned.

“I’m good,” Tommy manages. “It’s just— he—” He gestures weakly with a hand. “Are you lying?”

“Why would I lie to you?” Techno says blankly.

“I don’t know,” Tommy says defensively. “Maybe you would.”

Techno shakes his head. “It doesn’t really matter.”

“Yeah, it does,” Tommy says, still stunned. “It matters so much, holy shit.”

Techno shrugs. “To you, I guess.”

“But if you’re so upset about it, why not just talk to Phil?” Tommy says, a little confused, and Techno blinks down at the bathroom counter.

“I don’t want Phil to be more upset at me than he already is,” Techno says quietly, and that’s when Tommy realizes the heart of the problem.

Techno is... jealous.

Maybe jealous isn’t the right word. But *something* is there, something that is hurt and betrayed and just desperately wants to be loved. Whatever it is, it’s been hiding in the darkness for too long. For a moment, hearing Techno like that, Tommy can see so clearly that the two of them are like two sides of the same coin.

“I’m not jealous,” Techno mutters, and too late Tommy realizes he had spoken out loud.

“You definitely are,” Tommy says, and then realizes that’s too blunt to say to someone who’s just been found crying, so he hastily tries to amend it to, “I mean, it’s okay if you are. There’s no reason for you to feel bad about it. It’s okay. I guess.”

“I’m not,” Techno repeats, and Tommy fights the urge to scoff at him. Techno’s completely jealous. He totally is. But Tommy’s nice, and he can tell when someone is hurting even though he tends to be hurting them more often, and abruptly he feels very guilty for what he said to Techno that first night when he came down for dinner.

The thing is, Tommy is very good at reading people. It’s a skill that you acquire after a long time of needing to manipulate people in order to be comfortable. He’s not particularly happy with it, but he can’t deny that that skill has helped him far more than it’s hurt him. That’s why he could tell, even from those first few days, that Techno had an issue with him.

Self-sabotage is something that Tommy is intimately familiar with. There’s a reason why the longest time he’s ever been with a family is eight years, and there’s a reason why they gave him up in the first place.

“You know, I feel a little bad for Phil,” Techno says absentmindedly. But Tommy can tell that the words have been eating him up alive from the inside out.

“He’s the nicest person I’ve ever been with,” Tommy says. “Trust me, I’ve been bounced around before.”

“I got lucky,” Techno said, “Phil’s my second home.”

“Did you like your first family?”

Techno shrugs. “To be honest, I can’t really remember them.”

“Huh.” Tommy wishes he had that. He feels like he can remember every single moment from every single one of his foster families beforehand, and he hates it. He hates that he can remember what the house smelled like on Saturday mornings when one of his previous foster mothers made chocolate chip pancakes for him. He hates that he can recall the sound of the freeway, directly next to one of his windows, because the cars on it ran day and night, over and over and over without break. The memories feel seared into his mind, branded there in black.

“How long have you been living here?”

Techno takes a moment to think about it, and then he says, “Since I was ten. About seven years.”

Seven years is a very long time. Tommy says that, and Techno shrugs.

“It’s been a good seven years.” Pauses, then: “It’s been hard, I guess. At some points. Like when Wilbur arrived, things were difficult.”

Some things begin to click in Tommy’s mind, then.

It might be the wrong assumption to leap to, but Tommy says, “He’s not going to kick you out just because he wants to keep me.”

“Really?” Techno says dryly, and that’s the heart of the problem. “Even when Wilbur got here, I thought, okay, I can understand the desire for one more kid. I’m quiet, I hardly make any noise. It’s okay for him to want a child who actually does something interesting. I can deal with that.

“Then *you* arrived— out of nowhere— and he just dropped everything for you. And it’s so ridiculous, because you’re a terrible kid! You’re the problem child, you’re literally the picture-perfect delinquent. And somehow, he kept you around.”

“Thanks,” Tommy says, even though Techno’s words are reaching deep into his soul and prodding at something long hidden away from light. “I try.”

Techno glowers. “Yeah. I can tell that you try. It’s ridiculous. Everyone can tell that you’re faking this whole delinquent act. It would be so much easier for all of us if you finally became the nerd you really are.”

“Well, it’s not like you’re much better,” Tommy retorts. “You act all shy and anxious but the entire school was talking about that fight, I know you’re not all that you’re cracked up to be.”

“Fine,” Techno says, throwing his hands into the air. “So we’re both faking it. Deal?”

“Deal,” Tommy says.

He sticks out a hand, and Techno looks at it. It takes an awkward moment of silence before Techno reaches out his hand as well, and they shake once, twice, on it.

Tommy hesitantly cracks a grin, and that’s when everything changes.

The thing with Tommy is that most of his friends who were stuck in the foster care system had arrived as children, and had no memories of their families or their friends from before. Most of them were babies, handed away at birth. For some reason, Tommy thinks they had it easier.

At eight years old Tommy went into the system, and his family left him behind.

He was too young to understand, too young to fully comprehend why and how and what had just happened to him. But as he was shuffled around from house to house, seeing and passing through but never managing to make a mark that was important enough for him to stay, he saw very clearly what it was like to be alone and adrift.

He remembers his first Thanksgiving with another family. They made their stuffing in a different way, something that tasted completely different to how Tommy's original family made it. He could barely eat more than a few bites. All he could think about was that his family, his actual family, was probably sitting there, all together, eating their stuffing that was made the correct way.

He was lonely. So terribly lonely.

And that loneliness makes you act out in terrible, terrible ways. It makes you do things that you don't want to do, even when you know that they're wrong, even when it makes you hate yourself. Things like spray painting expletives onto the school walls and trying to antagonize everyone you come in contact with. Things like purposely failing all your exams just so you'll have a reason to point to when you leave again, that way you can say *see? It was my fault all along. There's the reason, right there in print.* Things like not allowing yourself to get close to anyone ever, because you know that you'll leave before long.

Techno leaves Tommy in the bathroom after they shake hands, and Tommy looks at himself in the mirror for a long, long time, even after he turns the shower all the way to its hottest temperature. Steam clouds the bathroom; it feels like he's breathing in thick soup, cleansing him from the inside out.

He needs a haircut. That's something.

The shower water is hot, working out all the knots from his skin, washing away everything. Tommy imagines that it washes away all of his anger with Techno, too. He imagines that it leaves him brand new, someone who's ready to stay.

By the time he turns the water off, he almost believes it.

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Phil looks through the winter report cards from his children after dinner ends, and he's extremely pleased to see that they're all averaging at least B's (with the exception of Techno, who is a perpetual overachiever, and has straight A's). Wilbur's done exceptionally well in his geography class, which is his only A, and Phil hopes that his grades will begin to go up once he starts going to sleep on time and not hanging out with such bad influences. The improvement is already evident.

Tommy's gotten one C, in pre-algebra, but Phil isn't entirely surprised to hear that, not after all of Tommy's complaining about the course. At least he only has one more semester of it, and then he'll be in high school, where math is only going to get harder. Shit. He does great in history, though, and the same in science.

Phil looks at the three report cards and then tries to make space on the fridge for them. Wilbur's old music compositions are on there, the ones that he's been talking about turning into actual songs for the longest time now. He's been writing new ones, though— Phil can hear him, even now, strumming the same four chords over and over until he hits a tune that he likes. Phil moves his compositions to the top, and they've only slightly covered up Tommy's perfect score on his history

exam, from a few months ago. Phil remembers it, and he remembers how excited Tommy was when he showed it to him. Even if he didn't want to reveal how much he was proud of it— Phil could tell.

He clears space for three new report cards, all of which he's incredibly proud of, and steps back.

Wilbur emerges from his room, heads directly to the freezer, and only spares the briefest glance to the new report cards up on the fridge while he searches for whatever particular flavor of ice cream he wants.

"You did really well this semester," Phil says. "I'm really proud of you."

Wilbur's ears go red, and he pulls out a carton of mint-chocolate-chip ice cream before responding. "Thanks," he mutters, and starts doling himself a bowl.

There's silence for a moment, in which Phil absentmindedly goes through the newspaper on the table, before Wilbur speaks up again.

"Really?"

"Yes," Phil says. "Of course."

"I think I'd like to maybe study geography," Wilbur says. "I really like my teacher."

"I can tell," Phil says, and thinks about the parent-teacher conferences he had, in which he'd met most of Wilbur's sophomore teachers. "It's a fun class. I've never been one for geography myself."

"It's interesting once you get into it," Wilbur says, and stirs his ice cream into a soup, the same way both Techno and Tommy do whenever they have it. "Right before finals we learned about cultural geography. That was pretty cool."

Phil doesn't know what cultural geography is, but he says, "It must be really great when you like what you're learning about."

"Yeah," Wilbur says. "I think spring semester is going to be pretty fun."

"Good," Phil says, and relief approaches, like the gentlest waves on a beach. "I'm glad."

Neither of them say anything for the rest of the time Wilbur's in the kitchen, and he rinses out his bowl and puts it in the dishwasher before retreating back to his room. Phil looks up at the clock and thinks curiously— Tommy hasn't come downstairs after dinner, seeking out dessert in nearly two hours. Phil frowns, but leaves Wilbur to his bowl of ice cream and heads upstairs. Phil is only somewhat worried about what he might be getting up to all on his own— and besides, he's never known Tommy to turn down a chance at dessert.

He knocks on Tommy's door, and there's no response.

"Tommy?" Phil calls, and knocks again. When there isn't a response in more than a few moments, Phil sucks it up and says, "I'm opening the door."

Slowly, he turns the doorknob and peeks inside.

All the lights are off, but some colored light is coming from a computer perched on the bed, flickering in its brightness. Phil looks at it for a moment, and belatedly realizes that it's Techno's

computer, not Tommy's— it has Techno's stickers on it, ones that clearly marked it as his. The second thing that Phil notices is that Techno and Tommy are sitting in bed together, but more than that, they're asleep.

Faint music plays from the computer's speakers, and slowly Phil realizes they must have fallen asleep watching a movie together.

He doesn't want to wake them up, so instead he slowly closes the door again, doing his best to avoid the one creaky patch of floorboards by the bathroom as he goes back down the stairs. There, in the kitchen, he takes a moment to stand and just truly appreciate everything. His heart swells, and for a moment, he thinks he's going to cry.

Everything is working out. He knows it is.

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There's a knock on Tommy's door, and Tommy huffs, stashes all of his snacks under his heavy comforter, and goes to peek through the door to see who it is. To his surprise (or not), Wilbur is standing on the other side of the door. He's got a beanie pulled low over his ears, only the smallest tuft of brown hair showing.

"What do you want?"

"To talk," Wilbur says, and pushes his way past Tommy. Tommy closes the door behind him. Wilbur surveys the pile of blankets on the floor, for Tommy had dragged them off to make himself more comfortable,

"Phil?"

"He's asleep," Wilbur says, and closes Tommy's door behind him. "I checked."

"Hm."

"You have snacks in here?"

"Depends," Tommy says loftily. "What kind?"

Wilbur narrows his eyes. "I know the Pringles went missing yesterday, dipshit."

Tommy scowls, but opens the bottom drawer of his bedside table and retrieves the can of chips to pass them over to Wilbur. His snack stealing habits haven't changed much, even though he logically knows that he doesn't need to hoard food to keep from being hungry.

"So," Tommy says. "What did you wanna talk about?"

"Anything," Wilbur says, with an expansive shrug. "I'm bored and I don't feel like doing anything."

"Too fed up with your little guitar playing?"

Wilbur points a warning finger at Tommy. "I'll have you know that I'm almost done with my second song."

Tommy scoffs. “Yeah, I know. I hear you sing it every single night. I’m right above your bedroom, you know.”

“I hate you.”

“I hate you too,” Tommy says, and steals the Pringles right out of Wilbur’s hands.

There’s a faint knock on the door, and then someone asks, “Wilbur? Are you in here?” Techno’s voice echoes softly through the door, and Tommy and Wilbur exchange glances before Wilbur shrugs and says, “I’m here. You can come in if you want.”

The door creaks open, closes shut, and Techno, dressed in overlarge sweatpants and a school hoodie, comes in and takes a seat, completing the triangle of the three of them. He looks tired. They all look tired. The perpetual pain of being a teenager.

“Just the three of us,” Tommy mutters, which earns him a quiet laugh from Wilbur. Even Techno cracks a smile, though he looks unamused.

“Did you want anything?”

“I heard voices and I thought I would join,” Techno says, and nothing more.

Wilbur scoots slightly to the left, and then opens one of Tommy’s many snack drawers.

“Hey,” Tommy protests sharply, but Wilbur’s already dug out a chocolate bar. “That’s mine.”

“Now it’s mine,” Wilbur says. “Catch.”

He tosses it to Techno, and it lands perfectly in his lap. Tommy scowls, makes a half-hearted grab for the chocolate bar, but doesn’t care enough to actually try.

“I can’t believe the two of you are coming in here and just monopolizing my bedroom,” Tommy huffs. “I wish you both would leave.”

Techno raises an eyebrow at Wilbur, who grins, and says, “I mean, if you really wanted us to…”

“I don’t care,” Tommy shrugs, even though he doesn’t really want them to leave. They haven’t had a conversation that’s just the three of them ever, without Phil there to supervise. Maybe it’s time to see if it would go well.

“So,” Wilbur says. “Anyone have any deep, dark secrets they want to share?”

Tommy shakes his head and so does Techno, and then Wilbur says, “Me either.”

Techno pokes him. “Liar.”

“Not lying.”

“My life has been so boring lately,” Wilbur sighs. “Trust me, all I’ve been doing is hanging with Phil all the time. He doesn’t leave me alone.”

“That’s your fault,” Tommy says pointedly.

“I would be hanging out with my friends, but—”

“Your friends are so shit,” Tommy blurts. “You should just come and hang with me and Tubbo.”



We're way cooler and so much better than those idiots."

Wilbur doesn't say anything for a while, and busies himself with shaking the Pringle can so the remainder of the chips slide towards the front. There's a moment of silence, in which it feels like Tommy isn't even breathing, and then mildly, Wilbur says, "Tubbo's pretty cool, huh?"

"Yeah," Tommy says tightly. "He's the best."

He knows he's being a little aggressive, but Tubbo's pretty much the only friend Tommy's ever had in his life, and he's not going to let Wilbur talk shit about him in any way.

Thankfully, Wilbur doesn't. He says, "If you guys are going to the theater this weekend, could I join?"

"You really want to hang out with a bunch of middle schoolers?" Techno says, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"I'm just saying," Wilbur defends, "They invited me first."

"Why not?" Tommy says. "You can come."

He looks at Techno, judges his options, and then says, "We're going to sneak into the horror movie."

Techno, who once would have likely rioted against this, only shrugs and fiddles with the crumpled wrapper of the candy bar. "It's not that good. I saw it last weekend."

"Fuck it," Wilbur says. "Let's sneak in."

Tommy grins. "Epic."

"They also leave the back door unlocked," Techno adds, and Tommy stares at him. "That's where they keep all the movie snacks."

Tommy gapes. "You're such a little thief."

Techno curls his lip at him. "You're so much worse than me."

"I've never beaten someone up before," Tommy says pointedly. "That makes you worse."

"Still can't believe that you did that," Wilbur mutters. "You seriously won that fight?"

"It was fine," Techno shrugs. "Easy."

Wilbur nods approvingly. "I never thought you would be the type to get in a fight with someone, but here we are."

Techno smiles wryly. "What can I say? I live to exceed expectations."

"Can't believe Phil didn't notice," Tommy adds quietly. It might be a little bitter of him to bring it up, but he also knows that a part of the reason Phil didn't notice is because of him. Tommy has a knack for taking up space; he's loud, energetic, and he knows what to say to get people to notice him. That's for certain one of his talents. So coming into a new house, he knew the ways to get attention.

"It's fine," Techno says airily, and waves a hand, even though Tommy knows that it isn't fine at

all. “He’s got his own things going on.”

“Yeah,” Wilbur adds. “Like dealing with all of us.”

“He wouldn’t *have* to deal with all of us if you two weren’t such bitches,” Tommy mutters, and receives a curled lip from Techno for his comment.

“Bold of you to call *me* a bitch,” Techno says. “I think you’re the main troublemaker here.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“I think Tommy’s right,” Wilbur admits, even though Techno glares at him for it. “I’d like to have the ‘problem child’ role down, I think I’m doing a pretty good job at it.”

“What about me?” Tommy says. “Don’t I have a role?”

“You’re not even adopted yet,” Techno says. “You can’t have a role until you’re legally part of the family.”

Immediately after Techno says it, he looks somewhat apologetic. Tommy blinks. So does Wilbur, and he grimaces and says, “I don’t think that’s—”

“It’s okay,” Tommy says, a half-hearted attempt at easing the sudden tension in the room. “I don’t even know if I want to be adopted, anyway.”

The tension leaches away, but thick, dampening silence replaces it.

“I mean,” Wilbur says, after a while and with a careful glance at Techno, “You’ve been here, what, five months already?”

“It’s been a while,” Techno says.

It has been a while. It’s been almost five months— four months, twenty-eight days. Which, in the grand scheme of things, isn’t that long in a thirteen-year-old’s life, but it’s certainly been the best five months of Tommy’s life regardless. And also, somehow the worst five months. It’s interesting, the way the memories are mixed like that. That he’s had some of the best memories and also some of the worst.

“How long were you both here before you got adopted?” Tommy asks, and both of them glance down at the floor, trying to put words to all the numbers.

“A few months,” Wilbur says. “It was the longest I’d stuck around in a home before. I think that was— well, that was one of the reasons.”

Curiously, Tommy asks, “What were the other reasons? That made you want to get adopted by Phil?”

“I don’t know,” Wilbur says quietly, and looks at Techno for help. Techno, knees pulled up to his chest, head bowed, stares at the floor and says nothing. Wilbur seems to struggle for words for a bit longer before finally saying, “I think it was knowing that I made friends here and never wanted to leave.”

“Must be nice,” Tommy says, too bitterly for the time of day.

“But Phil was the most important,” Wilbur continues softly. “Friends, school, teachers— they can all change, they can all go away. But I woke up one day and knew that Phil wasn’t going to go away. He was going to stay.”

Techno lifts his head in interest and tilts his chin towards Wilbur. “What day?”

“The day I was sick and throwing up during flu season,” Wilbur reminisces. “About a year and a half ago.”

Techno lets out a small chuckle. “I remember that. You were in the bathroom for six hours.”

Wilbur turns to Tommy and tells the story, “I woke up and couldn’t move, practically, I was that sick. Phil called me in sick to school, sent Techno on his way, and then stayed home from work.”

He lapses into silence for a moment. None of the three talk for a long moment, until Wilbur says quietly, “He made me chicken noodle soup. Cut up the onions himself and everything.”

No one says anything, and hushed, like he’s sharing the darkest secret with the world, Wilbur says, “I hadn’t had chicken noodle soup in nearly six years.”

“That’s nice,” Tommy says quietly. He pulls his legs up to his chest, and much like Techno, wraps his arms around them and rests his chin on top of his knees.

None of them say anything for a long, long time. Tommy thinks that the sun is well on its way to rising before Techno says, “I remember that. That was the happiest I’d seen you in the longest time. Even when you were throwing up off the side of the bed.”

“You’re one to talk,” Wilbur says, “You were happy when I was adopted too. I know. I could tell.”

“Was not,” Techno mutters, but it’s with a small smile, and Tommy knows he’s only poking fun.

“What about you?” Tommy asks quietly. “What made you want to be adopted?”

Techno stretches his legs out onto the floor, lets his hands rest on his thigh and taps an uneven, unsteady beat. It takes him a long time before he finally manages to answer.

“It’s very stupid,” Techno says. “It was a small thing.”

“That’s okay,” Tommy says. “Sometimes the small things are the most important.”

“It was when he put my report card on the fridge , ” Techno says. “It wasn’t even a good report card. I had gotten a B in algebra and in physics. So I remember seeing that paper up on the fridge and wanting to tear it down, because I didn’t want to walk past the fact that I had failed at something every single time I came into the kitchen.”

Tommy blurts, “You know a B isn’t—”

Wilbur’s hand comes up and grabs his wrist lightly. Tommy stops, clamps his mouth shut, and lets Techno continue.

“I remember I asked him about it once, a few days later,” Techno continues. “And he said that he was proud of me, no matter what grades I had gotten or what they looked like. He was proud just because I tried and did my best.”

He falls silent and twists his fingers together in his lap. “I think that was the moment for me. And the next week, we started figuring out adoption together.”

Tommy hums but doesn't say anything. Instead, he just sits there and stares at the carpeted floor.

Techno turns to him and asks, "Do you think you've had a moment like that yet?"

"I'm not sure," Tommy says. He knows he's being quiet, he knows it's very unlike him for him to be this sentimental and this thoughtful. But it's a big decision, adoption. It's a very big deal. Surely it warrants a little bit of seriousness. A little bit of gravity. "I've thought about it. A lot. Especially recently."

*Especially with everything*, he wants to say, but doesn't, *especially with you two. Especially with Phil.*

"Well," Techno says, "Have you made your decision?"

Tommy sets his jaw, looks at the far wall. He has a poster of a band up that's peeling away at the corners, stuck to the wall with tacky putty. He needs to tape it back up if he wants it to stay. There's a record disk on one of the tables, one that he bought on a whim from a record label shop down the street, simply because he liked the way it looks. They don't even have a record player; they don't even have a way to hear it. But it's sitting out on his desk, collecting dust and pieces of lint, waiting for someone to finally press play.

"Yeah," Tommy says eventually. His voice feels too loud for the dark room. "I think I have."

"Then I'm going to sleep," Wilbur decides, and pushes himself up from the wall. He twists his back and groans, and Tommy winces as he hears more than a few vertebrae pop in his spine. It reminds him to straighten his own posture. Up against the wall, he's hunched over like a crab.

Tommy glances over at the alarm clock on his side table and blanches. It's nearly three in the morning. They've been up all night.

"I'm going to sleep too," Techno agrees, and stands up. He does his best to comb his hair back into something manageable, but it's too close to Wilbur and Tommy's bird nests of hair to really make a difference.

Tommy drags his blankets back onto his bed, and then watches as Wilbur traipses down the staircase to his room on the lower level, and as Techno heads over to his own room. He's about to vanish into the doorway when Techno stops suddenly, head ducked like he's making a decision, and then he turns around.

"Whatever you choose, I think it wouldn't be that terrible if you stuck around," Techno says mildly.

It's the nicest, least sharp, least sarcastic thing that he's ever said to Tommy, and Tommy grins toothily. He recognizes the words for what they are.

An invitation.

"Thanks, Techno," Tommy says, and taps two fingers to his temple in a small salute.

The brothers turn backs on each other and close their doors, directly opposite the hall.

Tommy crawls into bed, slips his feet under the covers, and stares at the ceiling in darkness for ages until his eyes adjust to the level of light.

"Phil," he says in the morning, over a bowl of fruit and buttered toast, "Have you thought about

adopting me?”

---

It’s a long, arduous process. Nothing like what Tommy had assumed. Then again, he had always known it wouldn’t be magical and instantaneous.

But for some reason he had hoped that it would be like in the movies— that he would go home, find a stack of white documents next to his bedside table, neatly placed there by Phil, with a nice, beautiful fountain pen that wrote in looping black ink for him to sign his name with. Then, immediately, he would do all the things that real children get to do.

Instead, it takes a few legal meetings. A few long, hour long, sessions in which Tommy has to speak to his foster care worker and talk about how much he really wants to stay with Phil. Then Phil does and talks about his thing. There’s financial aid to figure out and financial security that has to be balanced. Tommy has to change his name. He doesn’t know how he feels about the last name Watson, but he supposes it’s better than whatever Wilbur went into the system with ( *Soot?* Really?) and at least he doesn’t have a weird name like Techno was given (Techno Blade? That must be so awkward). He’s also mildly thankful that now he can introduce himself as Tommy Watson rather than Tommy Doe.

Tommy Watson looks at the glossy, pressed flat certificate in his hands and tries not to glow with pride.

It’s there. In writing. His name. His family.

He’s staying.

---

That night, Phil says, “We’re having a family dinner tonight,” and for once since Tommy arrived on the doorstep of Phil’s house, he really means it.

Family dinner. The two words mean something much bigger and much heavier now that they’re a family— legally, for real, signed in ink, something that can’t easily be taken away. It’s the four of them, isn’t it? The four of them against the world.

It’s Italian food for dinner tonight, and Techno takes over the sauce making and stands over it, adding spices so slowly and methodically that Tommy purposefully trods on his foot as he walks by, complaining that it’ll be midnight before they actually get to eating. Phil watches it all from the room and tries not to smile foolishly. There’s a feeling of harmony, a feeling of peace. Something has settled in their home that feels like a *home*.

“Tommy, you’re doing dishes tonight,” Phil instructs, when they’re all done eating, and Tommy frowns at that, eyebrows knitting together in a concentrated glare. Wilbur tries to kick him under the table, but misses and kicks Phil’s shin instead. Phil turns a skeptical glance towards him, and Wilbur ducks his head sheepishly. “Just for that, Wilbur, you can help him clean up.”

“Not fair that Techno gets off scot-free,” Wilbur complains.

Smugly, Techno says, “I’ve been stressed lately. I deserve a break.”

“*You*,” Phil says pointedly, “can help me clean the counter. Everyone’s helping out tonight. We can go back to switching chores out on the weekdays.”

“Fine,” Techno groans, but good-naturedly takes his plate into the kitchen to begin cleaning up. Wilbur puts on some music— some lo-fi indie band that none of them have heard of or particularly enjoy, but Phil sees Techno and Tommy share one look and mutually agree that they’ll let Wilbur play his crappy music if he wants to.

When they’re all done, Phil asks, “Anything for dessert?”

Techno shrugs; Wilbur gives an unconcerned, unaffected look, and Tommy is the one who pipes up: “There’s that ice cream place down the street that opened up a few weeks ago. I haven’t been yet.”

“Ice cream?” Phil checks, and receives slightly more than nonchalant approval, which is good enough for him. The four of them pile into the minivan, and there’s the briefest scuffle about who gets to sit in front when both Tommy and Wilbur somehow, miraculously, silently agree and concede the front seat to Techno. Phil has to stop himself from gaping at the three of them. Never in his life would he have expected to see the three siblings behaving so decently to each other, and especially not after the events of the last few months.

They pull into a small parking lot off the side of the ice cream place, and get their cones.

Wilbur finds the four of them an empty picnic table for them to sit and eat at. Wilbur steals the cherry off of Techno’s banana split sundae, and Techno lets him. Tommy’s peanut butter chocolate chip ice cream drips down the side of his cone and trails down his hand and wrist. Techno points it out. Tommy wrinkles his nose, but grabs a napkin and sucks the chocolate off his fingers.

They sit there until there’s more stars in the sky than they can count.

## Chapter End Notes

as always, if you enjoyed, please leave kudos/comments, they really make my day.

thank u all for reading this fic too!! fun fact, this was supposed to be a 1k oneshot and now it's over 30k words, so there's that. if u want to read more of my stuff, you can always subscribe to me on ao3 so you can read all the sbi+co content that i'll post (and trust me, i have much more to post!)

i really appreciate all the love, it means a lot. ty for reading <3

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