

to be a wanderer, wandering

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to be a wanderer, wandering

by [ghostbandaids](#)

Summary

When Tommy was hungry, he would crouch in the underbrush and wait for a rabbit to come by, shooting it with an arrow before spitting it over a small campfire.

When he was tired, he would rest against a tree or maybe climb into one for the night.

When he was lonely or scared or sad, he had no solution. Walking through the forest alone was better than being tortured by Dream, better than a pool of lava or a tall tower of dirt blocks, he reasoned. And he was only a temporary forest-man. Still, the quiet grated on his ears.

An AU in which Tommy runs away from not only Dream but the entire SMP, finding a new life and peace (and maybe an orphan who needs a home). When he's forced out of hiding seven years later, he's a changed man

Notes

this fic will be removed if ccs ever express discomfort with work like this, title from *since i saw vienna* by Wilbur Soot

CW: tommy has a small panic attack towards the end of the fic

anyways, I read Aarky's fic *The Clouds Unblocking the Moon* and I couldn't stop thinking about baby ranboo and tommy leaving for a long time before returning so I decided to write a remix! he's always been so single-minded when it comes to getting the disks in the SMP so I'm manifesting some character development for him with this fic.

for reading comprehension: Esempi = SMP

1/31/22 - minor edits for sentence structure and readability

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

- Inspired by [The Clouds Unblocking the Moon](#) by [Aarky](#)

The first couple of weeks were the hardest.

Tommy was constantly hounded by Dream, forced to throw his armor into a hole every day and plaster a smile onto his face to avoid making the other man mad.

Wilbur visited him a couple of times before slowly drifting away. Without Tommy to lead him to Logstead, he got lost and forgot where he was going, floating through trees and lakes aimlessly until Tommy managed to find and retrieve him.

Eventually, he didn't visit at all, and Tommy lamented the fact that he must have forgotten completely. It made sense; the last couple of months they'd spent alive together had been far from happy.

He wouldn't deny that it stung a little, Wilbur had been one of his closest friends. But so had Tubbo and that had gotten him abandoned in the middle of nowhere.

There was nothing for him here, he realized as he lay in his tent shivering on a rainy day, drops coming through the tent flap. His own friends had exiled and forgotten about him. Dream, with all of his cheerful acting, couldn't quite hide the manipulative edge of his personality.

Why should he stay here? Why should he live alone or follow orders from anyone when he never had before? There were plenty of countries surrounding this one, countries that had never even heard of the wars that refused to stop ravaging their cities and friendships.

And so he packed all of the food he had, made some rudimentary armor and tools. Hidden in his tent was a sword from the war, netherite. He took that too and left. *Good riddance*, he thought, wondering if anyone but Dream would even notice that he was gone.

He could have gone to his father and brother in the Antarctic empire, but they were mid-peace-talk with Esempe, and he didn't want to disrupt what they'd worked for years to build. They hadn't even sent a soldier to check on him, so they couldn't have cared *that* much. Besides, he wasn't planning on leaving forever.

His hands were firm as he led the nose of his small boat through the shore waves and out into the ocean, tempted for a second to turn around and go back to Tubbo, beg for forgiveness. He vetoed the thought — Dream would kill him on sight.

Maybe he would come back someday and Tubbo would beg for his forgiveness instead, he thought bitterly.

Against the bright sun, he aimed his boat towards the endless water and rowed with his eyes closed to avoid getting salt in them, only occasionally glancing up to check the horizon. It didn't matter where he ended up as long as it was far away.

His shoulders screamed for respite, but he refused to stop, rowing in the same circular motion until they burned and his ragged shirt was soaked through with sweat. When he saw a tree-lined shore in the distance, he let himself rest his arms and drift towards it.

The bottom of the boat dragged against gravel, and he hopped out in what would have been a graceful movement if he hadn't caught his ankle on a rope and been unable to stop his aching body from pitching forward into the grass. He blinked in surprise and laid there for a moment, exhausted.

After pushing off the ground and brushing himself off, he dragged the boat into the underbrush and hefted his pack onto his shoulders. The dry leaves crunched underfoot, the only accompaniment to his halfhearted march.

In an oak forest, he came upon his first village. He would have liked to get a hot meal and stop for the night, but the villagers looked at him with such strong suspicion that he walked straight through. On a peeling wooden billboard at the town border, a poster with a drawing of his face and the word *OUTLAW* fluttered in the wind, making it clear that he was still in Esempe.

Digging his hand into the tack that held it in place, he pulled it off the board and folded it into his pocket with a grin. He didn't know who'd drawn it, but they'd gotten his jawline and nose perfect.

He hoped that Dream wouldn't receive report of his travels until he was long gone.

In the second village, people sold fish in a market and spoke a soft, lilting language that he didn't understand. He felt some of the tension slip from his shoulders with the realization that he must have left the country, but he couldn't stop moving, not yet. He hadn't gone far enough.

Back in Esemipi, he'd constantly been faced with the monsters that the masses of people drew like fireflies; undead and skeletons and creepers. Out in the forest, it was quiet. They didn't seem to bother him with the same malevolent spirit.

One plus to being located in middle-of-nowhere, he thought. Still, he did his best to keep the fires going at night, lest one get curious.

When he was hungry, he would crouch in the underbrush and waited for a rabbit to come by, shooting it with an arrow before spitting it over a small campfire.

When he was tired, he would rest against a tree or maybe climb into one for the night.

When he was lonely or scared or sad, he had no solution. Walking through the forest alone was better than being tortured by Dream, better than a pool of lava or a tall tower of dirt blocks, he reasoned. And he was only a temporary forest-man. Still, the quiet grated on his ears.

As he walked, he noticed that the trees grew taller and their foliage changed from leaves to spiny needles. Frost came in the night along with puffs of his breath, condensed. He took to walking by moonlight and sleeping in the day when the sun could thaw him out, shivering persistently nonetheless.

In the third village, he saw a lined coat hanging in the window of a trading post and went in immediately. He offered to hunt, to work, to give something for it.

Anything. Well. Almost anything.

The shopkeeper shook his head and said that the post was only for travelers with things worth trading, things that he couldn't get himself. Tommy stared at the contents of his pack, strewn on a table. Some sticks, some string, rabbit pelts: nothing that a village-child couldn't gather in minutes.

Against his side, he felt the hard edge of a music disk digging into his skin where he always carried it. It had been Tubbo's last gift to him, passed silently as they stood on the edge of the obsidian wall and Dream beckoned for him to come forward. A facsimile of his life before exile.

Rare? Yes. One of the rarest things in the world as far as he knew. But would he trade it? *No*. He'd rather freeze.

He left the village and climbed into a tree for the night, but the cold was threatening—icy and insidious in his lungs—so he didn't let himself fall asleep in fear that he might not wake up.

Listening to the branches shift in the darkness, he thought about what the disk meant to him, why he'd always refused to let it go. He didn't even have a music box or the time and resources to mine diamonds and make one, so he couldn't even listen to it.

It was because it reminded him of the beginning, a bench against the sunset, a dream of independence. Tubbo at his side.

But L'manburg was blown up, and Tubbo had exiled him.

It was because it reminded him of his resilience, his stubbornness.

But was it stubbornness to devote his life to a music disk? Or *stupidity*? It had started wars, lost friends, enslaved him in his refusal to give it up. One day he would die, and it wouldn't matter if he was holding a disk in his hands or not.

Stubbornness was giving his loyalty, his life, his disk, and a prideless surrender for his country

Stubbornness was a spark, a drawn sword, a fight-til-the-end.

Stubbornness was a warm coat, rebirth.

It was not a plastic disk, warped with age and memories.

From that day on, Tommy chose to let go.

He chose to survive.

When the sun rose, Tommy returned to the post and held the disk out to the man, his hand shaking slightly, but his expression was resolute. The shopkeeper exclaimed with delight and immediately handed over the coat.

“Anything else you want?” he asked. “This is worth more than a piece of fur, you know.”

Tommy was about to say no when he saw a guitar hanging on the wall. Wilbur had always played for him, even as a ghost, his wispy fingers barely able to move the strings. The music must have been a happy memory. And if he could play Cat and Mellohi on it, he wouldn't really be losing the song, the memories.

It was a dizzying moment in which he realized that he was completely and utterly free from the object people had used to control him. It was just a piece of plastic in his hand; he didn't really need it to remember the things that mattered.

The coat was warm, and the man gave him a book of chords as a gift. Tommy had never liked silence and now he filled the forest with his voice, often practicing and humming even while he walked — tripping over the occasional tree root was a price worth paying.

He walked through snowy plains of tall pine trees and saw a village, the outlines of buildings faint in the distance, but decided that it was too cold for his taste and moved through.

The soles of his shoes wore through somewhere along the way and he found himself learning how to stitch so that he could use a sliver of wood threaded with twine and a piece of taut rabbit hide to repair them.

The next village was too large for him to feel safe; the miles between him and Esempi wouldn't make much of a difference if he tried to hide in a place well-traveled by messengers from every country — he swore that he even saw a couple of Antarctic Empire soldiers intently questioning a crowd of villagers.

And so he kept walking, the steady thrum of his footsteps a metronome for the songs that he composed.

It was over a week before he saw another village and decided to stop there and get supplies. It was small and welcoming which he found reassuring. Well-fed children ran through the streets, weaving through villagers with water on their heads and sheep-leads tugging in their hands. Maybe, just maybe, this was a place that he could stay.

In the tavern, he paid for a bowl of soup and at the request of the people inside it, played a couple of songs on the guitar with the simple chord progressions he'd already learned, ignoring the burning in his fingers.

When he'd sat and savored the warmth in his chest for as long as he could, he stood and asked the barmaid at the counter — a kind-faced, older woman — if there was an inn. Thankfully, she understood his question and responded in his language, accented.

“No,” she said. “But there was a farmer who went to live in the city with his son and left behind his home and fields to be filled.”

She told him later that the offer wouldn't have been made for anyone, that the sweet sound of his voice reminded her of her own children. He didn't know it at the time but that didn't stop him from thanking her profusely before getting directions and walking to the farmhouse, a small empty thing. But it had a hearth for a fire, and it had a bed for him to curl up in and that was all he needed.

Outside, there were stretches of barren fields.

Techno had farmed fields once, potatoes, he remembered fondly. And if Techno had done it, he could too, right? And so Tommy decided that he was going to become a farmer — a temporary farmer of course.

He traded all of his extra belongings for sacks of potatoes, coat included — it was warm here and he didn't need it anymore. He kept the guitar though, sometimes going to the pub to play for the patrons if he needed a little extra money.

Before Ghostbur forgot him, he'd given Tommy a compass that would always lead him to Tubbo. Tommy wanted to destroy it but couldn't quite bring himself to actually do it. After a couple of sleepless nights spent staring at its needle, pointing in the direction that he'd walked from, he pried up a board in the farmhouse and hid it there, along with his netherite sword. A temporary resting spot just like the village was for him.

The crunch of a hoe into the ground became his metronome. He tilled the earth, cut the potatoes so that their eyes were divided into little chunks like he'd watched Techno do as a kid, and pushed them gently into plots of dirt. When one section was being planted, the potatoes in another would have grown ready for harvest.

So he filled his days with the gentle rhythm of harvests and plantings, visits to the village where he tentatively made friends with the people living there. He sold to the inn and in the market, pricing the potatoes low since he didn't really need the money.

He learned all of the music-disk songs on the guitar and moved on to composing his own, shamelessly writing a couple of heroic ballads for himself among the folk songs the villagers requested. And he learned their language, forcing himself through painstaking conversations until he could understand its basics and eventually speak it fluently.

A year went by without him realizing and he let it slip to the barmaid — her name was Laika — that he had turned eighteen.

“An adult!” she exclaimed, her face illuminated by candles. “Our little farmer has come of age.” A cheer went up from the patrons.

“Watch it!” he said, “To say that is to imply that I was ever a child.”

“My mistake,” she replied, and they laughed.

Days passed in that comforting cycle of working the earth and he realized one day, bathing in the river, that he'd changed since running away. His personality had always been strong, unwavering. Now, he saw that he looked strong too, broad-shouldered and toned from the strain of hoeing and lifting and carrying. Tommyinnit really was an adult.

“Thank you, potatoes,” he murmured with a touch of disbelief and went back to scrubbing his hair, which now dropped past his shoulders and tangled if he didn't braid it.

The farmhouse slowly became a home: his guitar on the wall, a warm quilt or two strewn on the bed. His prized piece of art, the outlaw poster, tacked above his writing desk — he looked young in that poster now, though his mischievous smile remained unchanged.

Word from other countries seldom reached the village and he found himself caring less about getting news as time passed. Yes, he would eventually return. But he had fields to harvest and songs to play so it wouldn't be this month, not this year.

He heard whispers from a traveler in the tavern that the treaty between Esempe and the Antarctic empire was on the verge of collapse, something about the two countries struggling to finalize their agreement. News must have traveled like a snail because that treaty had been almost-signed when Tommy was exiled, years ago.

“Why,” he asked the man, humoring him, “has this years-old treaty not been finished?”

“It's all rumors these days. Something about a son, missing or dead,” the man replied, the accent of a foreign dialect heavy on his tongue. “They are mourning and blame Esempe for the loss.”

“Technoblade?” he asked, thinking that his brother would never die or disappear. Maybe he'd gotten caught up in another round of tournaments, another obsessive hobby like potato farming. It couldn't have been Wilbur, long-dead and long-mourned.

“I'm not from there, don't know the name. But whatever happened to him makes them demand blood.”

They stared at each other in solemn solidarity. Two of the largest nations at war would mean drafts, alliances, shortages. The opposite of the peace he'd grown used to.

Tommy let out a puff of air and hoped that his father wasn't stupid enough to fight Dream. It was almost enough to make him go back, see if Technoblade was okay or if the rumors had stemmed from the death of someone else.

In the end, he decided that it would only cause more trouble, and no one had cared that he'd been exiled. *Why did it matter where he was now?*

Plus, the potatoes needed harvesting.

He threw down a coin to pay for the traveler's ale and left, trying to put the threat of bloodshed out of his mind. For a second, the thought that he was also a son of Phil, that he had left, flitted across his mind. He crushed it. Dream had informed them of his exile. He was not missing; they had known where he was from the beginning. And it was their own damn fault for leaving him with the green bastard.

His hair grew with his potatoes and he eventually succumbed to letting a beard grow in as well since he couldn't be bothered to shave each morning.

Lately, he'd noticed a feeling of being watched when he went into town, a sensation of eyes on his back that he could never quite catch when he turned around. He told Laika about it one day, and she lamented the fact that he was going senile so early.

"I always wanted you to treat me like an adult, but this is too far!" he yelled as she swatted him with a rolled sheet of paper.

Her words didn't assuage his suspicion. Sometimes, he heard quiet footsteps behind him in the town or saw a flash of darkness going around a corner when he tried to catch it. Bins of potatoes that he'd counted the night before regularly fell a few short in the morning. He didn't know what the thing wanted, but he took to leaving meals on his doorstep when he went to sleep.

They were always gone in the morning.

The first time he actually saw it, it was an accident. A thump outside woke him up and in a bleary state of almost-asleep, he thought that one of the villagers must have knocked, so he opened the door to answer them.

Instead, he was faced with the sight of a small child, stumbling away from his home with the sandwich he'd put by the door and wearing Tommy's muddy work boots, many sizes too large. Looking back and seeing Tommy, the kid lurched forward and fell to the ground before picking himself up and running into the forest.

"Hey!" Tommy yelled, but the boy was long-gone. A strange purple haze had seemed to surround his blurring feet, and he'd moved much faster than Tommy expected.

The next day, Tommy went to the cobbler and bought a pair of shoes that he hoped were the right size. A gift for a new mother, he used as an excuse when questioned by the man. He placed them

next to that night's meal and laid in bed, not moving when he heard the shuffling noises of someone trying and failing to be quiet.

The next morning, his own boots were replaced next to the empty plate.

As far as he knew, there were no orphans in the village. It was a small town, and all of the children here were loved and taken care of — it didn't make sense that one of them was alone in the woods. *Alone*. Tommy hated the idea of being alone almost as much as he hated silence.

He could hardly stomach the idea of the boy without a family. The thought reminded him of his life before Phil, of his life in a tent far away from the family that he hadn't managed to hold onto tight enough.

He didn't like to think of these things, and so he cooked soup, twice as much as usual. He ate one bowl with ravenous hunger and waited until the sky darkened before setting the other on the path to his house.

It took an hour of waiting before the kid emerged hesitantly from the copse of trees, evidently confused as to why the food was further away from the house than usual. Sitting on the porch, Tommy saw that he was wearing the shoes he'd left on the porch. *Good*.

Then, a gust of wind blew towards the boy and he whipped his head up, nostrils flaring in animalistic fear. Tommy sat frozen, but it didn't seem to matter. The boy barely managed to grab the bowl before a purple haze surrounded him and he was gone.

Tommy blinked and the cloud of color cleared from the path, but he'd seen it twice and was pretty sure he wasn't hallucinating.

Definitely not human, then.

It explained why the kid was hiding. Hybrids were always being ostracized or threatened by one royal decree or another — either seen as a danger to the populus or as a resource to be harvested. Tommy didn't mind hybrids, to be honest. He'd gotten rather used to Phil's stray feathers on the floor and Tech's occasional bloodlust a long time ago; to him, hybrids often seemed kinder than the humans who hunted them.

Tommy didn't stop putting the food on the path, and the boy didn't stop coming, so he must have been hungry. He refused to let Tommy approach him and was immediately agitated when looked at, disappearing in his now-trademark puff of sparks and smoke.

It didn't discourage Tommy. Phil had always compared him to a raccoon: a food hoarding, skittish, combative thing of an animal. This kid wasn't much different, and Tommy had time — as much as he needed.

His nightly ritual became leaving the plate of food on the path to his house and sitting on the porch, usually with a book or a journal, not looking up when he heard the boy approaching. He inched the plate closer to himself each night, hoping that he wouldn't hit the extent of the boy's courage and have to find a new strategy.

It worked better than he expected in the end. Reading a book of folktales lit by the torchlight that seeped from the farmhouse windows, he heard a shuffling that meant the food was being retrieved

and listened for the footsteps to fade again. But they didn't.

Instead, they approached him, and the boy plopped down beside him, bringing a cloud of air that smelled like a cold night and faint sulfur. Tommy didn't say anything, pretended not to notice at all, only tilting the book towards the boy slightly and starting to read out loud.

"Once, there was a man named Steve who woke up in a place unknown, surrounded by a world he'd never seen before. A strange world filled not only with animals but also with monsters ..."

When he reached the end of the chapter, he slowly closed the book and stood up, stretching his cramped legs. The movement startled the boy into standing and looking at him suspiciously. This close to his face, Tommy could see that at least half of it was darkened like that of an Enderman, one of his eyes sparkling green and the other a brownish-red.

"Guess you'll have to come back tomorrow night to hear the rest, buddy."

Tommy lifted a hand to wave as the boy walked silently back towards the woods. The boy turned, looking at him with confusion before mirroring the gesture.

"Goodbye."

And the boy was gone, but he came back each night to hear the story of Steve, demanding to know more about the towering red mushrooms, the diamonds he found deep underground, a ferocious dragon in another dimension.

They moved past that book and into another. Slowly, the boy started to gesture in a rudimentary sign-language. When he opened his mouth for the first time, only an Enderman-like rattle came out.

"It's alright," Tommy said, softly. "Just clear your throat and try again. You've got this."

The boy pointed to his chest and said a single word amidst the guttural hissing: "Ranboo."

And that was his name.

Ranboo refused to come into Tommy's house but never refused a meal. Ranboo liked to wander the potato fields but wouldn't come into town, ignoring Tommy's protests that the villagers were perfectly nice people. If he was scared by a loud noise or sudden movement, his figure would blur with purple sparks, and he would appear somewhere else, uncontrollably.

"Have you ever been able to use that intentionally?" Tommy asked him. Ranboo shook his head back and forth.

"I bet you could. Enderman hybrids are known to be better teleporters than Enderman themselves," he continued. "Just try it, push all of your energy into your pearl —" He tapped his chest, "— and picture yourself appearing next to me."

With a pop, Ranboo tumbled to the ground next to Tommy who started cheering.

"Yes!" He pumped his fist into the air. "I'm so proud!" It was the first time he'd seen Ranboo smile.

After that, he had to convince the boy to walk instead of teleporting incrementally at his side.

“Not saying that it’s bad to use your talents, little man, but if you ever want to grow and have muscles like this, you better stretch your legs a bit,” he would say, flexing his arms. Then Ranboo would grab him and teleport him into the river before dashing away, laughing.

Despite the progress he’d made, Ranboo always left to sleep, returning from the forest with twigs in his hair and dirt on his clothes. There wasn’t snow around here, but the rainy season was fast approaching, and Tommy knew that Enderman struggled to survive during it.

When he saw thick gray clouds light pink by the sunset, he winced but sat on the porch to read to Ranboo as usual. Lately, he’d taken to passing the book to the boy and helping him stumble through the words.

It was when they finished the chapter that he heard the light drizzle on the overhang of the roof, which quickly turned into a deluge. Ranboo stuck an arm out cautiously and when a single drop of water hit it, pulled back as if from an insect sting.

“Hurts,” he pouted.

“I know,” Tommy replied. “You can stay on the porch for the night if you want. Or—” he said, swinging open the farmhouse door, “you can come inside.” The firelight was warm and inviting, a contrast to the cold, misty weather outside. Ranboo glared at the door.

“It doesn’t lock,” Tommy said absentmindedly as he went inside. “So you can leave whenever.” He found a folding cot and threw one of his blankets over it before collapsing into his own bed, weary from carrying crates down to the village all day.

He couldn’t stop the smile that spread across his face when he heard the door open and close several times — Ranboo testing out the fact that he was free to exit and enter — before he settled on closing it softly behind him and coming inside.

When Tommy woke up the next morning, the boy was still curled up in the cot, face content.

And that was how Tommy kind-of-accidentally-managed to adopt a child.

Phil would have been horrified, as Tommy’d barely been able to keep himself alive without constant reminders to eat, bathe, and sleep. But something had changed since he left and he found it easy to remember all of the things that Phil had done as a father, enjoyed doing them for someone else.

They read together and played in the forest. Tommy taught Ranboo how to cook and tried — and failed — to rid him of his raw-potato-eating habit. He occasionally enlisted Ranboo in harvesting and planting, brushing off the guilt of child labor with thoughts of how proud Techno would be.

And then it wasn’t just his hair and potatoes growing with time; it was Ranboo too, shooting up like an enthusiastic green stalk once he was exposed to the food and warmth of Tommy’s home.

“Slow down,” Tommy would joke, ruffling his hair. “Or I won’t be able to carry you anymore!”

But it didn't matter how tall Ranboo got, Tommy would always be able to scoop him up with his strong arms and parade around with him lofted in the air, ignoring protest. He knew that if Ranboo really wanted down he could teleport away in a second, but, despite his pleas for freedom, he never did.

Tommy had forgotten what it was like to care for someone, to be needed by someone. It was nice. Even in L'manberg, he'd focused more on himself and his disks than anyone else.

Ranboo's split head of hair grew along with Tommy's, and he convinced a lady from the village to teach him how to do french braids because he thought it would look nice. She told Tommy that he needed a haircut. He told her that his long hair reminded him of the strongest person he'd ever known.

Maybe he would braid Techno's hair someday.

Some nights, Ranboo cried in his sleep, and Tommy would gently wake him up and rub his back, ask him what was wrong.

"Hunters," Ranboo would mumble. "They locked me up, and — My mom, she—" He never got much further than that before the sobs returned.

Tommy stopped locking doors altogether after that.

Some nights Ranboo could only fall asleep when Tommy played the guitar for him. And after that first night in the rain, he refused to close his eyes without Tommy in the room.

The happy days far outweighed the bad and before he knew it, Ranboo must have been around nine, Tommy twenty-four.

Coming back from the market one day with a wagon of empty crates and Ranboo swinging from his shoulders, Tommy saw a stranger rushing up the path towards them and took a defensive stance. He hadn't forgotten how to fight. Probably never would.

"Whoa," said the man, holding up his hands. "Don't shoot the messenger." He laughed awkwardly. "Which is exactly what I am."

"Got something to deliver, then?" He set Ranboo on the ground and stood in front of him.

The man snapped to attention. That was when Tommy realized that he didn't have an accent, and that his uniform was lined in bright green.

"Under the decree of King Dream, it is to be made known to Esempe's neighboring countries that a war might be upon us in less than a planting season." *A little over a month in a climate this warm*, Tommy thought, astounded. *Was this Dream retrieving him to take part in yet-another fight?*

The man continued, "As I have done for each eligible man in the village, I am informing you: feed

your children, gather your crops and train a woman to tend them, for it will not be long before your country pulls you to arms.”

His head spun. Another battle? At least the messenger didn't know the role he'd played in those of the past.

“Why?” he asked, voice cracking. He remembered swords and arrows, a firework shot, barely missing Tubbo's heart. There was only one life for each person to live, and war stole too many.

“The son of Philza, Tommy, is finally declared dead, missing for 7 years. The Antarctic Empire will settle for nothing less than total destruction as retribution.”

Tommy choked, his knees hitting the dirt as he fell to the ground. “No,” he said. “No. Tommy was exiled. They knew that he was exiled.”

“King Dream did not inform the empire of the exile for weeks after its performance. By the time Philza was notified, there was no sign of his son. It has been assumed for many years that our king may have disposed of him due to his ... unbridled oppositional force.” The messenger tilted back on his heels. “You didn't hear that last part from me though — I am nothing but an obedient servant.”

“Be ready,” the messenger said before striding into the night, leaving Tommy rocking back and forth beneath the night sky.

“They didn't know,” he said, his breath coming too fast. “I left, and they didn't know. They don't know that I'm alive — they think I'm dead.” He felt dizzy, head spinning. “All this time that I thought they didn't care, they thought I was dead.” His breath was too much and not enough at the same time.

It was all too much.

And then, a small hand touched his face: an anchor. And a small voice started to hum, the staticky throat of an Enderman overcome by 4 years of human speech. It was Cat, the goodnight song that Tommy always played on the guitar.

“You've got to sing it with me,” Ranboo said in between notes of quiet humming, sounding upset but so, so brave. “Sing it with me or it won't be the same, dad.” And that last word was what made Tommy take a real breath, look up at Ranboo and the stars that created his silhouette.

Dad.

He'd never taught the word to Ranboo, never told him that he was anything less than a friend or a guardian.

Dad.

A father, a protector. Someone who cared. Ranboo must have heard the village-children use it, but he'd never said it, not once in four years until now.

He pulled Ranboo to his chest and wiped the tears away from his eyes. They finished the song together.

“Will everything be okay?” Ranboo asked hesitantly.

“Yes,” Tommy answered. “But we've got a long trip ahead of us. We have to leave tomorrow.”

“What can we take?”

“For you, I’ll carry whatever I can.”

In the end, all Ranboo wanted was the book of folktales, the first words that he’d ever seen and understood. He insisted that they bring the guitar along, and Tommy surveyed the room. Someday, he would return. When there was a guarantee of peace. But he could not let Ranboo’s life — his son’s life — be threatened by war.

They took the last crop of potatoes to market, and Tommy used the money to buy thick, warm coats and mittens for both of them. He said goodbye to Laika, telling her that he would return and that she better still be alive when he did.

“Not that old!” she yelled at his retreating figure. He didn’t turn around, but a single tear slipped from his eye. Everyone was older, now. Even him.

He told Ranboo to wait for him on the path and walked up to the farmhouse, dreading what he had to do next. Shuffling back and forth on the wooden floor, he waited until one of the boards made a protesting squeaky noise before prying it up. Dust poured from the hole into the sunlight and revealed his netherite sword and compass, lying underneath the foundation.

The weight of the sword was both familiar and disgusting in his hands. He’d killed people with it when he was still a child. *No more*, he thought. *No more death at his hand.*

The weight of the compass was comforting, the needle eager to lead him home.

He and Ranboo set off into the forest.

It seemed happier on the way back; Ranboo ran from sunbeam to sunbeam and picked flowers and danced underneath the stars while Tommy played the guitar. Things moved through the trees at night, but Tommy’s fires were always bright enough to keep them at bay.

They passed the large village where troops burgeoned and villagers moved in silent, scared groups, fearing the rationing and the deaths of their sons.

They passed the icy village, where people huddled in close to fires for warmth and Tommy carried Ranboo on his back so that they didn’t have to stop for the night and freeze.

Once, they saw an Enderman in the trees and Ranboo looked at Tommy who nodded before averting his eyes. The hissing noises that followed were strangely familiar, so close to a human language that he might have placed them as a dialect from overseas.

Then, the moment passed and Ranboo teleported back to Tommy with a soft *vwoop* and a spray of purple particles.

“He said hello!” Ranboo shouted, grinning and clearly excited.

“Oh yeah? Anything else?” Tommy didn’t mind hybrids, but he would be lying if he said that undiluted monsters didn’t make him a little uneasy.

“He asked if you were treating me well, or if you were a treat I’d brought for him.”

“And did you say that I was a terror of a man?” Tommy asked lightly, laughing.

“I told him that you’re the best dad of all.”

Tommy gasped in mock horror. “You lied to him!” He roared and chased after Ranboo with outstretched arms. “I’ll get you for ruining my evil reputation!”

They passed the third village and then the second, stopping only shortly to get food or sleep in a real bed. Ranboo didn’t slow him down on the return as much as his aimless wandering had on his escape.

He started to tell Ranboo stories of his family; the kind king with wings, the beast of a man who refused to die, a new president who had given up everything to retain his nation and an old president who couldn’t bear his nation going on without him. Talking about them, he realized how much he’d missed them. He wondered if they’d be as different as he felt.

Then, they passed through the first village he’d seen, and Tommy knew that they were in Esempi. Ranboo noticed too.

“They’re speaking our language!” he said, having only heard it from Tommy in the past.

“Yes,” he said. “We’re nearly there, now.”

He was worried that the villagers would know who he was, but they showed no sign of it. He’d been so young when they’d hung the posters and watched his exodus. He bought cloaks for himself and Ranboo, thinner than what they’d needed to travel the snow-land, with hoods to cover their faces.

Before he knew it, they were at the castle of Esempi, gazing up at the spires of its grandeur. Ranboo had never seen anything like it and seemed transfixed. A regiment of young soldiers came marching out of the castle gates, displaying the power of the king.

Ranboo didn’t even notice, his eyes caught on the towering architecture. “People built this?” he whispered.

“Yes, Tommy answered. “But those people are not friends of ours, right now.”

“That doesn’t make it any less beautiful,” Ranboo said in awe.

“No,” Tommy replied, “It doesn’t.” He gave Ranboo another minute of contemplation before pointing at a spot in the courtyard. It was past the many checkpoints needed to enter the castle legally.

“Would you mind jumping us there?”

Ranboo took his arm and in a dizzying rush of sulfur, they tumbled to the ground, hidden behind a tree. The hilt of Tommy’s sword dug painfully into his back and he clenched his teeth.

“Thanks, ‘Boo,” he said, looking to see who was guarding the courtyard door. It was Sapnap, looking as ferocious as ever as he shifted back and forth on his heels. Shit. Behind him, a meeting

was taking place to decide the fate of entire countries.

“Would you mind doing another? I know it’s hard to carry me too, but I promise this will be the last one.” Ranboo nodded and took his arm.

Then, they were behind Sapnap in the hallway, Tommy catching Ranboo as he stumbled and holding a finger up to his lips. They pressed into the thick velvet drapes, horrid green things that they were, and moved closer to the door of the meeting room.

“Listen to me,” Tommy whispered. “There are dangerous men in there, but I won’t let them hurt you, alright? So don’t be afraid.”

Ranboo smiled. “Okay,” he said.

What a brave son he had, Tommy thought.

Familiar voices leaked through the door frame. Tommy grasped Ranboo’s small hand in his own. *Don’t be afraid*, he told himself as he’d told Ranboo moments ago. *You are strong*.

“— killed my son!” he heard Phil yell. “After I’d already lost one to war, you still had the audacity to take another away and slaughter him as if I’d never find out.”

“Hey,” Dream replied, voice as eerie as Tommy remembered. Cocky and arrogant and *slimy*. “He probably killed himself out there, all alone, forgotten. Wasn’t me.”

“That is enough!” Phil yelled, voice full of rage.

“I think we’re done discussin’ here,” a deeper voice muttered — Technoblade.

When Tommy strode into the room, he was met with the sight of Phil’s sword extended, dark wings flaring behind him and twitching with anger. Techno standing at his shoulder looking like he’d aged more than just seven years. And Dream, that bastard. Tommy couldn’t see his eyes but underneath his mask, he smiled like he knew that Phil wasn’t really going to kill him in his own country — smiled like a man who was itching to declare war.

Tommy unsheathed his sword with one hand and used it to press down on Phil’s until the man yielded, more out of confusion than weakness.

“How did you get in here?” Dream growled. “This was supposed to be uninterrupted.”

Tommy threw off the hood and stood as tall as he could. Dream cocked his head. Tommy’s long hair and bulky form must have been unidentifiable.

“Surprise, bitch!”

He heard a gasp from behind him, almost a half-sob. Techno’s monotone laugh echoed through the room.

“Ha,” Tech said. “Welcome home!” the faintest trace of happiness present in his voice. And to Phil: “I told you so! You just can’t get rid of him, no matter how hard you try.”

“I heard that,” Tommy muttered under his breath.

“Seven years, Tommy!” Phil yelled, his anger still-present. “Seven fucking years I thought you

were dead, and you decide to show up *now* ?”

“I came as soon as I knew the truth,” Tommy replied, smiling sadly. “I thought that you knew where I was from the start of my exile, that you didn’t care if I was alone.”

Phil’s face dropped as he turned to face the masked man. “Dream. You bastard.”

“While this is all very touching, I think that we’ve got the makings of a war to discuss,” Dream said from his end of the room, smirking. “This doesn’t change anything.”

“This changes everything,” Techno said. “We won’t force our people to fight for a nonexistent cause when you were the one who lied to us all along.” Tommy felt Ranboo shift against his cloak, drawing near to make himself less noticeable.

“What if I had something that Tommy has been missing for a long, long time?” Dream asked, acting as if he had some sort of grand thing to reveal. Instead, he pulled a music disk out of his belt.

Tommy had almost forgotten about the one that he’d traded for a coat all those years ago, the moment when he’d realized that stubbornness was loyalty and survival, not a piece of plastic. He’d completely forgotten that Dream still had its twin.

He started to laugh.

“Tommy,” Phil warned.

Tommy leaned down and whispered into Ranboo’s ear, “Mind grabbing that for me?” And before Dream even realized what the whirl of purple sparks meant, the disk was snatched out of his hand and put into Tommy’s.

Dream exclaimed in surprise and anger.

Techno let out a low whistle.

“You think that this matters to me? You think that I care more about a music disk than peace?” Tommy asked.

“You did, once,” Dream said, tense, watching the child with the poise of a predator.

“We’ve changed,” Tommy said. “I’m not the same Tommy you exiled. I’m all grown up.” He threw the music disk at the fireplace with more force than he’d ever used before, his muscles straining with power. It fell, a perfect arch.

Straight into the flames.

They all watched as it burned, a song reduced to ashes. But not the memories, Tommy reminded himself. The memories stayed.

“There will be no war,” he said, his voice commanding and unwavering. “This is over.” He turned and walked out of the room, heard the footsteps of his brother and father behind him and the stuttering protest of Dream.

They held a composed facade until they were out of the castle and to the stables before Phil turned to him with tears in his eyes and pulled him into a close hug. Techno patted his head awkwardly.

“I’m so sorry,” Phil said. “All this time I thought I’d lost you, that I —”

“— that we,” Techno interrupted, “were too late. That there was no body left for us to bury.”

“It wasn't too late,” Tommy said. “And it wasn’t your fault. It’s pretty hard to get rid of me anyway.” He sniffed. Then he felt a tugging on his hand.

“Oh,” he said. “This is Ranboo, my son.” Phil smiled.

“That was something quite impressive, young man,” Phil said, kneeling down to meet the eyes of the boy.

Ranboo blushed. He was clearly unused to seeing hybrids unafraid in public, much less royal hybrids complimenting him. He took the route of diversion.

“My dad has told me all about you!”

“Has he now,” Techno said. “Good things?”

“Awful, awful things!” Ranboo shouted. Tommy buried his head in his cloak, not hiding embarrassment but trying to hide his laughter.

“I see that he inherited your humor,” Phil said. “Did you really have to go and make me a grandpa? I’m trying to savor my youth.”

“Sorry,” Tommy said, “But these days, everyone’s older.” The confrontation had left him exhausted; he tried not to let it show but burning the disk had hurt him inside, just a little. It didn’t matter. He made himself straighten his shoulders.

Then he heard Ranboo’s peals of laughter as he tried to steal the crown off Techno’s head mid-teleport and the cracks in his happiness were mended — just like that.

If Techno had really wanted to avoid Ranboo, he could have, but he stood uncharacteristically still as Ranboo successfully grabbed the crown and placed it on his own head. And Tommy swore he saw one side of the man’s mouth curve up in an almost-smile.

“How’s Tubbo?” Tommy asked.

“He’s alright, a good leader. He’ll be better when he learns that you’re safe.”

“And Wilbur?”

“The same. Sometimes here and sometimes not. I’ve done research on getting him back but none of it seems too promising yet.”

“Yet,” Tommy said. In his mouth, the word tasted like hope. Then he said, “He knew where I was, you know.”

“I suspected it. His memory’s not too great these days. He’s home though, asks about you all the time.”

“Really?” Tommy had thought Wilbur had forgotten him completely. Maybe he’d just forgotten how to find him.

“Really.”

A smile climbed onto Tommy's lips and took up residence.

He watched as Ranboo continued his merciless assault by dropping from the sky onto Techno's back.

"I think that it's time to go home," he said, though at the moment he felt pretty close to it already. In his pocket he could feel the weight of the compass, waiting to guide him.

"I think that too. Oh, and Tommy?"

"Yes?"

"I'm proud of the man you've become," Phil said, his wings curving protectively around the group, and Tommy realized something.

He was proud too.

End Notes

thank you for reading! I thought about writing tommy's reunion with tubbo and ghostbur but it was late and I was tired. I like to think it was happy though, maybe I'll write it sometime. also, if you're looking for more SBI content, stay tuned because I'm feeling a foster care AU vibe for my next fic.

come yell at me on [twitter](#), just made an acc and i'll be a devoted moot 4ever if u follow me

Update 12/30: insertcleverpennamehere (tumblr: insert-penname-here) drew some AMAZING fanart so please check it out [here](#) if you have the chance!

1/1: wtf you guys are too good to me, please please please go look at [this](#) art by silray_99 (tumblr: haxi0lw) and prepare to be in awe

I'd love to hear what you thought if you have time or any feedback!

Works inspired by this [pic](#)
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