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TRAFFIC ZINE

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TRAFFIC ZINE

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TRAFFIC ZINE

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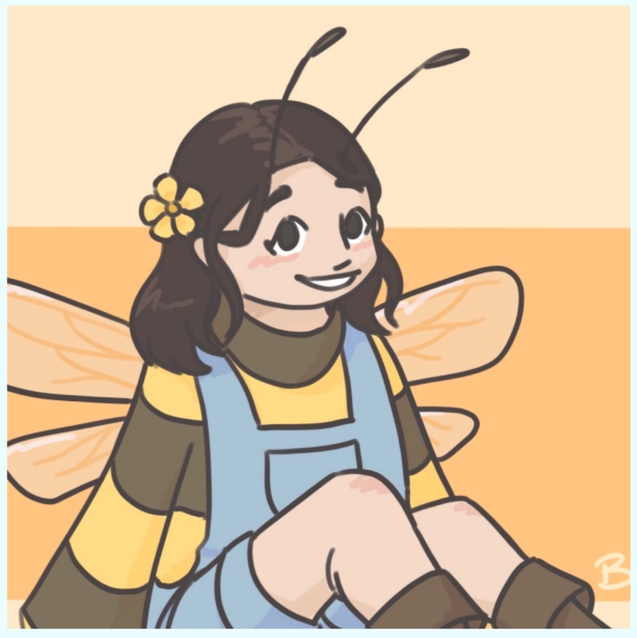
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VIO

VYEOH

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GIN

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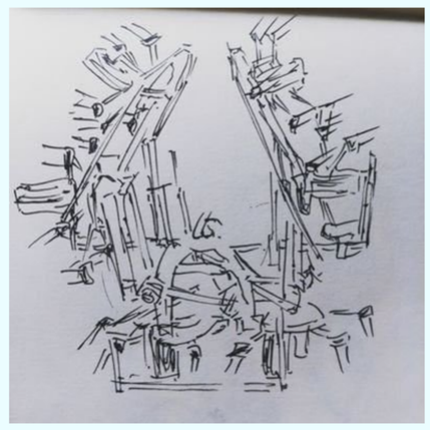
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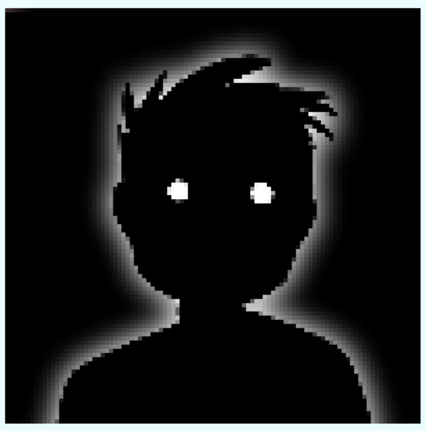
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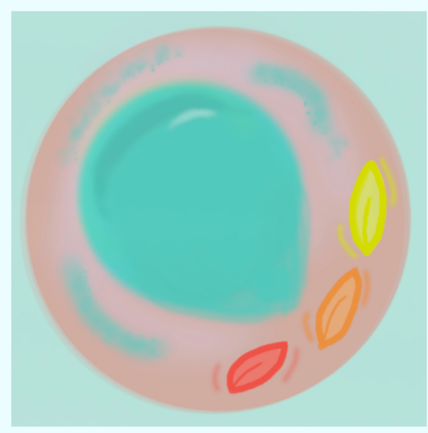
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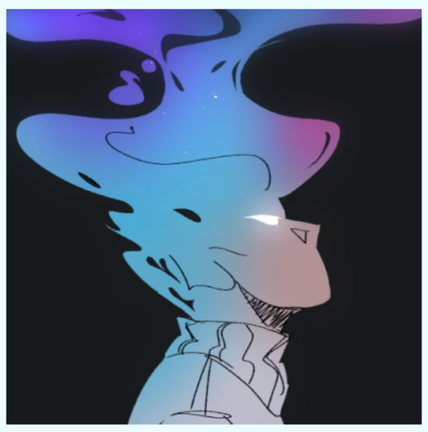
CHARLIE
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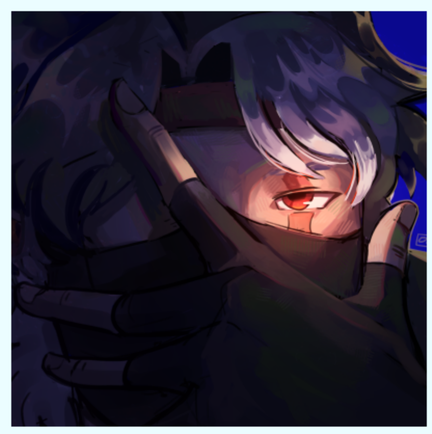
PADDY
PADDYSOL



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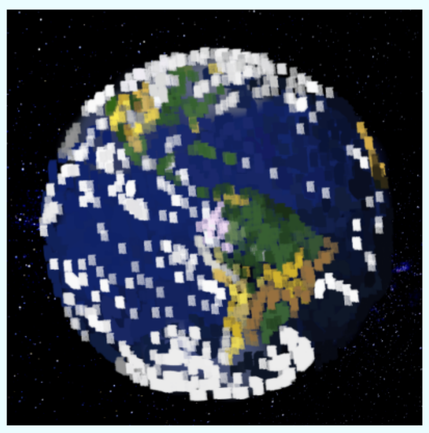


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CHERRIFIRE
CHERRIFIRELIVE





THIS IS NOT BAD BOY SAFE!!!


THE SLY VOID

BURN IT DOWN

GOOM

"Man, I'd love to burn that place to the ground."

A simple sentence from Scar as the group gazed out towards the manor in the distance was enough to set an idea into Cleo's head. She did have flint and iron on her, and as if to make-believe that she was actually there, she pulled them out and set them in front of her.

They contemplated it for a moment, and Cleo knew in her heart that it would be the most satisfying thing in the world. Sitting next to Scar and B-dubs with their feet dangling off the edge of the rock face, it would almost be like a comfortable fireplace with free entertainment, a relaxing respite from the stresses of the day.

That... Cleo needed that.

Even if the Mansion was to be reset, even if it'd make some enemies... it'd be fun, and who doesn't want to have a little fun?

She declared her intentions, the rest of the clockers cheering her on as she jogged off into the forest, newly-crafted flint and steel in hand. She made it there in only a few minutes' time, and in an even shorter amount of time the mansion had become engulfed in flame. Her work here was complete.

She returned to hear more voices than she remembered. Pearl and Bigb had joined them and reasonably assumed that this fire was Scar's handiwork. It was his style, and his idea, but Cleo was proud to admit that she had done the deed.

And now, it was time to sit back and enjoy the show.

—

Jimmy could smell it before he saw it, the scent of burning wood that sent a chill down his spine despite the air becoming warmer. He placed the bucket with the Pufferish of Peace gently down into the corner of a chest, looking back to see what was going on. Scott seemed oblivious, or at least as though he was faking calmness so as not to cause worry. He smiled and tilted his head when Jimmy turned to face him, the coral catching the light and shimmering slightly.

The light- the light from-

“O-oh my GOSH! Was that you?!” An entire corner of the mansion’s roof was ablaze, tendrils of flame reaching upwards and bringing light to the pitch-dark night sky. The bad boy mansion was *Burning*.

Scott tried to provide comfort, assuring Jimmy that it wasn’t him as he made futile attempts to douse the flames with buckets of water. Someone else was there too- in the back of Jimmy’s mind, he clocked it as Martyn. Their voices soon became dull static in his ears as he ran closer and closer to the inferno, the heat hitting him like a slap in the face and making him want to recoil back on instinct. Willing himself to brave the pain of fire licking at his skin, he descended the eaves of the roof, examining the forest and the parts of the mansion that he could see.

The entire wall was completely engulfed in flame. The eaves were crumbling, chunks of wooden roofing plummeting into an ocean of fire that consumed the entire nearby forest. The wooden walls had already been eaten up enough that Jimmy could see inside, and that didn’t look much better. Bucketfuls of water splashed down from a hole in the ceiling, presumably thrown by Scott.

Jimmy nearly lurched down into the flaming depths before grabbing hold of a piece of wood, still firmly attached to the roof, and pulling himself up with shaky arms. He couldn't bear losing more time on top of this. He flopped down- very gracefully, he can assure you, onto the mildly safer rooftop, where he could see Martyn and Scott attempting to douse the blaze, coughing a bit from the smoke.

“Martyn, was that you?” Jimmy knew how he was going to respond, but it was always safe to ask.

“I came over and it was already going!” Martyn yelled back as he refilled his bucket. Scott said something about the forest burning, but the dull roar of flames and mental panic meant that it wasn’t very comprehensible.

It was best to see what Scott was talking about anyway. Jimmy sighed as he turned back, mentally preparing himself to see flaming trees in front of him. The forest nearby had predictably gone up in flames, the fire slowly spreading outwards from the point he was at. However, what caught Jimmy’s eye was not the raging fire, but was instead five figures on the nearby mountain.

Bigb, Pearl, Bdubs, Cleo, and Scar. It had to be them! All they were doing was watching the trio, like some sick source of entertainment. For a moment, Jimmy felt thankful that he hadn’t been betrayed, and Grian and Joel weren’t among them. It was the little victories, he supposed.

“As long as the mansion itself survives the fire, it’s ok! I’m using buckets of water in an attempt to get some of it.” Scott moved towards Jimmy to attempt to comfort him, multiple buckets slung over his arms. In the back of his mind, Jimmy wondered if one of them was the one that contained the Pufferish of Peace.

He hoped not, because Scott was wasting his time with this. “No, but it’s all on fire. It’s all inside.” he gestured to the inferno that was once the inside of the mansion just as Scott pitched forward and tumbled down the wall with a shriek. Jimmy panicked for a moment, before the splash confirmed he was safe, having managed to land in one of the puddles their dousing attempts had created.

“Yep, I see what you mean!” He shouted back up, confirming his safety.

By the time Scott had climbed back up to the roof, they had managed to at least keep the platform safe. While an inferno raged below them, Jimmy

quickly sent off a message to the other bad boys, hoping that they would come in time to take all of their hard earned valuables to a place that wasn't on fire.

A few minutes later, he heard Joel's voice. "It looks fine from this side-"

"No, Joel!" Both Jimmy and Scott yelled in sync. Joel was not going to be happy once he saw the extent of the damage, Jimmy knew.

"It's bad, it's real bad! Moving day is here, boys!"

"Yeah, wait until you see the inside." Scott held up his empty buckets of water to punctuate his statement.

Grian and Joel heaved themselves up over the eaves, making their way towards the others. Through a burnt hole in the roof, Grian peered down to the destruction below, an annoyed groan escaping him once he saw the true extent of the damage.

"Which idiot burnt the mansion down?! Look at the blummin' forest!" Joel angrily pointed toward the flames that used to be a lively forest, his small body shaking with rage.

"Oh, it's Scar. Look at his face!" Grian's rage was much more subdued, and he watched Jimmy descend down the wall and throw buckets of water with very little expression in his eyes.

As they continued to talk, the quartet came to the agreement that this was definitely Scar's handiwork. Considering his track record, this type of chaos had his name written all over it. As the conversation slowly started to drift elsewhere, Jimmy began to hear people approach the mansion.

"Oh my gosh! Look at the destruction."

Every head turned towards the voice. The man of the hour had decided to show himself, and the bad boys were not ready to welcome him.

“Scar! Did you have something to do with this?!” Grian took the front of the group, instantly taking an assertive tone.

Scar did not seem phased. “I was not the perpetrator of this crime!” He paused for a moment, adding much more softly, “I may have sold tickets, but that’s-”

“He didn’t do it.” Cleo backed him up, her arm in front of Scar.

Jimmy peeked over the edge to look at them, just in time to witness Scar catch fire. He quickly hopped into a nearby pond, all whilst proclaiming that he was not the one who set the mansion on fire. While Jimmy instinctively wanted to doubt him, both he and Cleo sounded like they were being honest. That small voice at the back of his mind that Jimmy hadn’t even noticed was there since Grian had accused Scar was growing louder.

But even if he wasn’t at fault, someone in that group was. They had all merely stood there, watching them struggle to keep their home and their base from becoming nothing more than a pile of ash like some sort of sick movie. Scar wasn’t willing to tell the Bad Boys who it was, not for any price they could afford, at least, and they probably wouldn’t have much luck with anyone else that knew either. Even as they became distracted, the thought still burned in Jimmy’s mind.

They needed to get revenge.

—

The sun was now slowly rising over the horizon, bathing the three bad boys in an orange glow. Their fishing bobbers floated lazily on the water, the blue liquid seeming as if it sparkled in the morning sunlight. Joel felt a tug on the line- a fish had caught it, and he pulled it out, grabbing it before it flopped onto the wooden roof. Jimmy sat cross-legged on the edge of the haphazard stone pool, mumbling grumpily to himself after every catch made by his fellow bad boys without him having caught a single one.

Grian stared down into the water, the wind ruffling his hair. The bad boys exchanged lighthearted banter, laughing and smiling while the mansion continued to burn around them.

Just for now, even if they knew they had to deal with the aftermath later, they could have peace.

AN ILL-FATED EXECUTION

XAN

Bloodlust had always been such a strange and unnerving feeling. In another life, Martyn could remember falling prey to its temptation, allowing himself to indulge in his own madness and take another's life to save his own. He thought he'd learnt from that experience, that he'd never be enticed by his own bloodlust again, but the Boogeyman's Curse worked in very peculiar ways and he was nothing if not its underling.

In spite of his unease, Martyn had immediately started planning, wondering when, where, how and who he'd kill. Because as easily as he could take out his sword and eliminate one of the people beside him, where was the fun in that? He wanted his kill to be dramatic, pretentious and memorable in all of the worst ways. All he needed was for the opportunity to present itself, and in a game of death and chances, it didn't take very long for that to happen.

—

The first opportunity had come when Skizz had been alone and gearless in the caves. It has been overwhelmingly tempting to kill him, because it meant both a quick escape from the curse and a comedic continuation of Skizz's own apparent curse. But in that very moment, Skizz had done something unexpected, something that had saved his life without him being any the wiser. Because, as if in spite of the uncertainty and mistrust that had plagued the group, Skizz had decided to give Martyn a genuine and wholehearted compliment.

It had taken Martyn by surprise, and for a moment, he was unsure what to say or do. Part of him didn't have the heart to slaughter Skizz after such a kind and heartfelt gesture, and during that brief moment in which he'd faltered, the opportunity slipped away from him.

His second chance, albeit being more of an opportunity to cause chaos than to kill, came when Grian made the grave mistake of digging straight down. Quite a novice mistake in hindsight, and Martyn couldn't really be blamed for standing by and watching in amusement. However, Grian didn't die, and even if he had, the death wouldn't have been Martyn's to claim.

A more direct way of impacting an otherwise accidental death manifested not too long later, when atop a mountain that had yet to be given a name, a creeper was making its way towards Cleo. Martyn had debated pushing them into its path, a vague memory coming back to him in which he'd once similarly pushed her into death's clutches. However, Martyn could also remember how furious they'd been after that had happened, and decided against aggravating her this time.

Later on, he'd run into Grian whilst exploring an amethyst cave, who was seemingly alone and without much gear to defend himself. It would have been a perfect chance to get this whole 'curse' business over with, if Martyn hadn't discovered that Joel was with Grian and was welding an iron sword, which Martyn wasn't too keen on ending up on the wrong side of.

He'd quickly left the self proclaimed 'Bad Boys' behind, and found Etho in an underground room that he, Tango, Skizz and Impulse had apparently claimed as their base. Martyn made a brief attempt at digging Etho into a hole, perhaps using it as an opportunity to trap him there and secure an easy kill, but ironically had ended up falling into one of Etho's own traps.

Injured, impatient, and having just taken a substantial bruise to his pride, Martyn hoped to redeem himself when Skizz and Impulse arrived through a hole in the ceiling. In an attempt to drop a bucket of lava on the ground just as Skizz was coming down, Martyn had instead lit one of their ill-fated cows ablaze, leaving them with one less cow and almost certainly making Etho more suspicious than he'd already been.

So many perfect opportunities, yet none of them had worked out in

Martyn's favour. The timer kept ticking, always reminding Martyn that he had so much to lose yet only one chance to save himself. The pressure was driving him to the brink of insanity, his need for blood having grown so overwhelming that he knew he couldn't just *wait* for the time to strike, not anymore. He needed to take matters into his own hands, and he was going to force this kill to happen whether his victim liked it or not.

TNT was always a good way to force a kill, because it was very, very difficult to get wrong. The more TNT, the higher the success rates, and Martyn decided that three should surely do the job. Despite the aforementioned failure to kill Skizz, Martyn remained in the little hole that he, Impulse and Etho had dug out for themselves, hoping that more people nearby would further increase his chance of success.

When Scott and Tango had arrived moments later, Martyn knew that the time had come. He had less than half an hour to spare, and although Skizz's retelling to Scott of his third death that day sparked a glimmer of sympathy in the depths of Martyn's heart, it was swiftly overtaken by the merciless need to kill.

Scott was led down into the maze of doors and hallways that the T.I.E.S called their base, whilst Martyn made his way into one of the many passages that lay directly above the center room. Their eyes had briefly met, but even if Scott had his suspicions about what Martyn was doing, he never expressed them. A mistake on Scott's part, all things considered, it was a shame that he was likely about to die.

As Tango recounted the tragedy of their many lost cows, Martyn dug a new hole through the ceiling, holding his breath and hoping that nobody would notice him as they spoke amongst themselves. Five people, one room, half an hour and three TNT. There was no way he could get this wrong, as he simply couldn't afford the luxury of another mistake after the trainwreck of a day he'd had.

He lit the fuses in quick succession, letting them drop into the room below as he waited for the telltale screams that would make his kill all the more

satisfying. And surely enough, the screams came alongside the first deafening boom of the TNT.

"I CAN'T MOVE!" He heard Skizz yell, and although he certainly didn't deserve to be killed by the Boogeyman for the third time today, Skizz's words gave Martyn hope that he'd secured at least one kill with his TNT. The second explosion rang through the tiny cave, and at the same time, he heard Etho's voice next.

"Not the cows!"

Martyn froze. As the third explosion went off, he waited for the bloodlust to dissipate. He waited for satisfaction, relief, emptiness, *anything* but the insanity of the Curse, but it never came. And slowly it dawned on him, the shock and horror that he'd just wasted three TNT, outed himself as the Boogeyman to five people, and the only thing he'd killed was that godforsaken cow and its calf.

He didn't know what to do, his master plan had failed and he was now facing the very real risk of losing 6 hours of his precious time. What had been fear and anxiousness moments ago had devolved into pure terror, the screaming urge to kill consuming his every thought and leaving him lost and panicking.

"Who did this?!" Came Tango's furious voice, as Martyn scurried out of the hole and across the nearby river. Perhaps if he got away fast enough, they wouldn’t see him and he might get one last chance to save himself from the Curse's unforgiving consequences. He only had minutes left to spare, and at this point, he'd take whatever opportunity he could get.

"I think it was Martyn." He heard Scott reply, and Martyn groaned. Of course, Scott had watched him climb down the passageway to enact his plan, and he had been too caught up in the moment to realise how much of a risk it had been. If he'd just killed Scott there and then, all of this could have been avoided, but in the typical fashion of bad luck, he only came up with that brilliant idea after it was far too late to enact it.

"Martyn's got to be the Boogeyman!" Impulse called, only worsening the situation. He'd hit the nail on the head, and a simple message in chat altering the others would hit that same nail straight into Martyn's coffin. It would take them at least a few minutes to regather their things and tell the rest of the group, and he had to use those minutes wisely and to his advantage. It didn't matter if he had nothing but a lava bucket and no food to help him in a fight, the next person he saw was the one he'd kill and that was that.

It was unfortunate that the next two people he saw happened to have been his friends of many years, but Pearl and BigB had simply wound up in the wrong place at the wrong time. BigB was standing so close, blissfully unaware of who or what was coming, and as much as Martyn wanted to resist the temptation he knew he couldn’t. His clock was ticking, his time too limited and the bloodlust too overwhelming to ignore any longer.

The Boogeyman’s Curse told Martyn to kill, and after all, he’d always been such a good listener.


foxxology






BAD BOY





CURSES

ZERA

The curse looms over Impulse like storm clouds over the sky, and he thirsts for time like grass for rain. He catches his breath as the curse settles on him, choosing him as the boogeyman.

He releases the breath through his mouth, quietly forming the words *“not the boogeyman”* with his lips. It's not the truth, but it sounds enough like it for no one to suspect a thing. He's gotten good at lying, at deceiving and backstabbing, over the course of the life series. He and Skizz are different in that way. Where his friend remains honest and loyal, he weaves treachery and lies into his words.

Impulse isn't strong enough to be honest. That, in his opinion, is one of his greatest flaws. He's too weak to hold any true loyalty to his team– he supposes that's why the thought of just killing one of them crosses his mind instantly.

No, he rebukes instantly, *if I kill too quickly, they might want to do a reroll*. He thinks back to the first boogey, how Grian had claimed it wasn’t *“entertaining enough”*. How Skizz had died twice in quick succession, just because there hadn’t been enough suspense to make things *interesting*.

Impulse joins the bad boys and Tango in teasing Grian– he’s well and fully asleep, passed out on the llama– and pretends that he isn’t thinking of killing every single one of them. He *thirsts*, thirsts for time in a way he knows is just beginning. It will get worse over time, so he’s been told, and that is *not* something he’s looking forward to.

They have a brief conversation about the bread bridge and gold. Jimmy’s upset with Joel, Joel is flusteredly trying to explain, and Impulse somehow manages to keep a pleasant smile on his face the whole time. He ignores how his fingers twitch, itching to grab onto his sword and swing it right into one of the bad boys’ chests.

Impulse and Tango manage to leave without spilling any blood, leaving the two bickering bad (bread) boys behind. The trek back to their base is mostly silent– Impulse is trapped in his thoughts for the most of it. He wonders once more if he should just get an easy kill on his teammates, or if he should tell them about him being the boogey.

He almost does tell them. Instead, he innocently asks *“anyone the boogey?”* and feigns ignorance and joy when they all confirm that they aren’t. He supposes that’s one good thing about being the boogey; he doesn’t have to spend the entire session worrying about whether someone was lying to him or not, watching his back and fearing for his life.

Everything continues as normal. Skizz pulls Tango aside to talk while Etho begins placing red concrete in the water, watching it harden before mining it. And *oh*, it would be so easy to kill them– they’re not even looking! Their backs are turned! None of them even have their weapons drawn, so lulled into a false sense of security that–

No.

No.

He can’t do this. Not again. He won’t betray his teammates. He’ll just have to find someone better to kill.

There’s Scar, running over the hill and pulling Skizz aside. Impulse draws his sword but the other is too quick to disappear around the tower with Skizz in tow, claiming that it’s a *“private meeting.”* Impulse looks between Tango and Etho with a nervous chuckle that has no actual anxiety behind it. He *knows* Skizz is safe. Scar is green, after all, and the only one who could really put Skizz in any danger is Impulse himself.

“Scar could be the boogey for all we know,” he points out, the smile on his face a contrast to the more serious words he’s saying, “are we sure we want to leave them alone?”

They leave Skizz alone with Scar anyway. If he was in any real danger, they'd get him out of there. There's a team meeting ("Three quarters of a team meeting!" Tango jokes) and they begin to discuss skynet. Impulse makes his worry over falling off quite clear, and suggests that he goes and grabs some ender pearls.

He does exactly that– the monotony of mining and healing and trading does enough to take his mind off of the ever growing thirst in the back of his throat. His communicator buzzes in his back pocket when he finishes up, Tango sending an excited response when the notification goes out. The communicator buzzes again as he begins to trade, and he wonders why in the void's name did anyone ever think that achievements were a good idea. He gets what he needs, though, clutching eleven ender pearls in hand before returning to the surface.

And– oh boy, there's Bdubs and Scar on the opposite bank, yelling about something incomprehensible. Things usually are that way, with the clockers. Cockers? Whatever they were calling themselves. Upon noticing Impulse, they wade through the water to join him, bringing their dogs with them.

"How are you, Impulse?" Scar asks in his pleasant voice, a smile on his lips as Bdubs helps him out of the water while rambling about something "blasting him all over the place".

"I'm doing great, how are you–" Impulse begins, but is interrupted by Tango falling from the sky and crashing into the water with a demonic sort of squawking.

Bdubs is unphased by this, shouting out an excited "hi, Tango! That was cool!"

Tango clambers out of the water and immediately is staring at the small puppy shaking water out of its fur. "That dog's head is *way* too big for its body," he points out, and Bdubs shrugs and says something about the cuteness factor.

Impulse pulls out the ender pearls stashed away in his inventory. “Since you guys are friends...” He hands one to Bdubs before throwing one to Scar. “...do you want one of these?”

Bdubs’ eyes widen, and he takes his pearl with a grin. “Stasis chamber?” he asks enthusiastically, and Impulse smirks.

“You never know,” he says with a shrug, before turning and handing a pearl to Tango.

He takes out some of the building bloodlust on the zombies that spawned in the tower (flamboyant, Bdubs calls it, to which Tango exclaims disbelievingly through laughter that it’s *stone*, one of the most basic building blocks). Impulse makes some joke about how Tango and Etho are competing for best accidental mob farm, and tries to hide how he relishes in the zombies’ demise.

Monotonous work seems to help keep the murderous urges at bay, so Impulse volunteers to help Tango with the bubble elevator. Tango’s busy explaining to him what the plan is when Skizz drops into the water from above, splashing them both and spooking Tango. “Guy knows how to make an entrance!” Tango yelps, to Impulse and Skizz’s laughter.

“I hate to interrupt, but...!” Skizz makes his way over to Impulse, looking up at him with wide eyes. “Impulse! Do you have any ender pearls, buddy?”

“Oh yeah!” Impulse replies easily, and hands Skizz two ender pearls– the yellow name would need them.

...not like they help much anyway, because not that much long later, Skizz falls off a ladder and dies. Again. There’s a brief discussion with Tango– how did it happen? Why did he die?– and then Skizz returns, yelling about how he doesn’t even know what happened.

“Are you the boogey?!” he asks Impulse as they’re climbing back up the tower, and it takes everything Impulse has to keep moving up that ladder,

to not freeze at the realization that *Skizz thinks he did that on purpose*. And, if he had, if he claimed it as a boogey kill– it would count! He could take this and the curse would break and...

No. He wouldn't.

"I didn't boogeyman you!" he insists over Skizz's shouted accusations, "you fell on your own accord! Don't you be blamin' the boogey!"

"I'm gonna blame *somebody!*" Skizz spits, pulling himself up off the ladder. "What *happened?!* Why is this hole here?!"

"It's under *construction–!*" Impulse splutters– "I tried to tell you that!"

Skizz keeps yelling, and Tango's laughter echoes from above. "Oh, I love the bickering," he wheezes, and Impulse shoots him a glare. "Sorry, sorry, not helping."

"I lost *another hour*, man!" Skizz cries. "I keep dying so much!"

Impulse gives him a weak smile, chuckling softly. "Okay, okay, but let's talk. That was my fault, right? Because I'm the one that put the hole there?"

Skizz shakes his head instantly, dismissing Impulse's concerns. "Nah, dude. Not at all. Of course it's not your fault!"

Impulse frowns, tilting his head slightly to the side. "But you *just* said it was," he points out, and Skizz winces.

"Ehhh, heat of the moment sort of thing. Ya know?"

Impulse laughs. "So if I happened to be boogey..." He trails off for a moment, testing the waters, before continuing. "...would that have counted?"

Something registers in Skizz's brain, and he looks right into Impulse's eyes. "I would've counted it. I really would've." It's an offer, almost. Skizz is giving him a way out of this. A way that Impulse has decided already not to take, but a way out nonetheless. "Are you the boogey, then?" Another offer. This time, it's a chance to come clean and be honest with his teammates.

Impulse hardly doubts that Skizz knows he's boogey. They've been friends for decades now, and Skizz knows Impulse better than anyone else ever could. It's part of the reason why Impulse is so glad Skizz is on his team and not an enemy; Skizz would be able to see right through him were he to lie or try and deceive anyone.

"No," Impulse practically breathes out, and tries not to wince when he sees the disappointment shine so briefly in Skizz's eyes. "If I was boogey, I wouldn't be going after you guys." Relief swells in his chest when he sees Skizz relax and give him a slight smile. At least Skizz knows he can trust Impulse– the nice thing about knowing when someone is lying is that you know when they're telling the truth as well.

"I know," Skizz tells Impulse, before weaving a little lie of his own. "I didn't think you were boogey!"

Your 'secret' is safe. For now.

They're immediately distracted by Tango's noisy complaints about how he built something wrong, his distressed sounds making Skizz laugh. Impulse joins in as Tango laments his mistake with a long, drawn out wail. Skizz's laughter is infectious, and they quickly begin to tease Tango over the error. For the moment, things are fine, and Impulse almost forgets that he's cursed. Doomed to either kill or die.

Well, he's doomed to die no matter what he does, but the game is all about delaying the inevitable.

When Skizz is gone, Impulse whispers the truth to Tango. He's the

boogey, and Tango laughs a little nervously at that before muttering that *he'd figured, that question earlier had tipped him off*. They joke about it for a moment before Tango confesses that he's actually really nervous and Impulse is quick to reassure him that he has no plans of targeting Team T.I.E.S. Tango nods, lowering his shield, and begins to figure out a plan. It ends up being quite simple– get TNT from Etho, then drop it from the sky and kill someone.

They end up meeting Skizz on Skynet, high above the ground with a drop that would spell death for anyone unfortunate enough to fall. It's dizzying, looking down at the ground, players like ants below them. So small. So *fragile*.

Impulse wants to *kill*.

"Why don't you just do it?" he asks Skizz, voice quivering with barely held back excitement when his friend says he wants to blow someone up. Adrenaline is coursing through his veins, his blood turned to fire from the curse's rage.

Skizz can't kill any yellows– that's *fine*. Impulse will do it himself.

He lights the first block of TNT and watches it fall.

"...are you boogey, dude?"

Impulse is silent.

"You're boogey."

"You knew that," Impulse murmurs, and Tango and Skizz erupt into laughter.

"You are!" Skizz crows triumphantly, and Impulse can't help but grin, expression turned maniac from the bloodlust.

His eyes shine red.

The want becomes a *need*.

“You’ll help me, right?” Impulse breathlessly asks his teammates, ignoring how his hands won’t stop trembling as he peers over the edge, gazing down at the drop that would sate his thirst, that would give him what he needs. All he has to do...

Skizz smiles, and he would’ve wrapped an arm around Impulse’s shoulders were they not in constant danger of falling to their deaths. “‘course, dippledop. What are friends for, if not to help a guy kill someone?”

...is *kill*.

“Who do you want to kill?” Skizz asks, and Impulse considers his options. They’re allied with the clockers, and team T.I.E.S stays true to their allies.

The bad boys, however...

“How about Joel?”

It’s perfect. He’s right beneath them, too caught up in his own duty of protecting Grian to pay attention to the sky. Impulse can hear his own heart beating, can feel the sweat dripping down his neck, can taste the blood as he bites down too hard on his cheek, can–

Footsteps that don’t belong to any member of T.I.E.S are picked up by ears far more sensitive than anyone else’s, and Impulse looks up to see Pearl running over Skynet with her diamond hoe in hand. “Pearl’s coming,” he warns, “Etho’s behind her.”

Now this...

This is his target.

It’s not every day the universe presents him with the perfect opportunity and means for revenge.

(Deep down, Impulse doesn’t *really* blame her for what happened in Double Life. But the boogey curse changes a person down to their very core, at least until they kill.)

“Let me shoot her,” Skizz whispers, and Impulse has to bite back a cry of frustration when he shoots. He misses, thankfully. Impulse has to do it, has to be the one to kill her. Otherwise, and this he realizes with growing certainty, he’s going to die. And *soon*.

Pearl yelps as the arrow flies by her, wings fluttering behind her as she comes to a halt a few feet in front of them. “What’s going on here?” she demands, smiling, not taking her near death seriously whatsoever.

“It’s not safe here,” Impulse tells her, and he knows the softness in his voice is only because of the bond they shared in their home server, only because he still considers her family.

Family is not enough, and Impulse realizes this as bloodlust washes over him once more, the curse reaching its peak. He carefully steps forward, keeping an expression of concern on his face. Tango realizes what he’s doing and gives him the space to move around so that he’s face to face with Pearl. She still suspects nothing, her words lighthearted and posture relaxed as she banters with Tango and Skizz.

It’s perfect.

Impulse takes the ground out from under her feet, and Pearl falls.

Maniacal laughter erupts from him as he watches her fall, listens to her rapidly fading scream of terror, and *finally* sees her die. “Boogey!” he cries, to the laughter and cheers of his teammates. “Done!”

The curse recedes, Impulse taking a shaking breath as a weight is lifted off

his shoulders. His hands still shake slightly as he continues to laugh, more out of relief now than from excitement and glee.

And Impulse...

Impulse killed Pearl.

Maybe, in a world different from this one, he would've seen her fall and know she'd be caught on wings as strong as their owner's love for her. But not this time. Not in this world.

As he drinks in the time– *Pearl's* time, ripped from her dead hands, quenching his thirst and soothing his parched throat– the vice grip of the curse over his heart fully lifts, and Impulse realizes what he's done.

It's a necessary evil, he knows, and Pearl will forgive him eventually. She always does. But as he thinks back to the kill, back to Pearl's scream and broken, useless wings spreading in an attempt to catch her fall, Impulse feels... more than a little guilty.

He doesn't have time for guilt.

"Ohhh..." he breathes out, leaning against Skizz, "oh, that– I feel *so* much better. That feels so much better."

Skizz helps support him, keeping him steady. "You all good, dippledop? Is the curse gone?"

Tango and Etho step closer as Impulse nods. Now that the bloodlust and adrenaline have faded away, Impulse feels *tired*, exhaustion settling in fast. "We're all good," he gets out, smiling weakly. "Though I think I've made a new enemy today."

Tango waves him off with a grin. "Hey, whatever happens, team T.I.E.S will have your back."

Skizz lets out a cheer, Etho nodding along to Tango's words. "Yeah, man. Don't worry about it. You just did what you had to do. No harm in that," the masked man points out, and Impulse finally relents.

"All right, all right. Let's get down from here, though– I still don't trust myself up here."

Later, Impulse will apologize to Pearl and say that it wasn't really him. It was the crazed boogeyman version of himself, his mind driven mad by the ever growing bloodlust and need to kill. He won't truly mean it, and she won't ever accept his excuse for an apology.

In the end, that's not what matters. The betrayal, the lies, the deceit and the fake apologies– none of it will matter at all. In the end, they will both fall. Nothing they do can stop the ever flowing river of time.

Time keeps ticking. Sand continues to fall through the hourglasses that measure their lives.

Impulse lives today, but tomorrow he will die.

Sharky



CAUTERIZE

NOEL

A breath in.

Eleven minutes left.

A breath out.

A breath in, and then the air in Joel’s lungs vanishes as a harsh laugh tears its way out of his throat.

He does not stop running.

Young wheat crops are crushed beneath his feet as he races across the Bridge. Joel and Jimmy and Grian have dedicated precious time to its beauty, time they cannot earn back, but he does not hesitate. Grian is not present to object, and Tim himself is begging Joel to flee, as if he isn’t already doing the best he can.

Martyn is nearby as well, howling for blood as he struggles to navigate the water flowing beneath his feet. Joel laughs again, sounding a little crazed, and for a fleeting moment he wishes Ren would join the manhunt, if only for old times’ sake. But the Manor is already overcrowded; Cleo’s voice shakes the ground, and Tango and BigB pace the Bridge together, joining the pandemonium of desperate players vying to spill green blood.

Yet none of them can get close enough to land a hit. The crowd may be desperate, but Joel is fast, and it’s a difficult feat to keep up with a man who has one foot in the grave. He’s played the game enough that it takes something astonishing to throw him off his stride.

Something like a wink of an ender pearl, a flurry of particles. A laugh and a red eye and a flash of white.

Etho is hunting.

Joel knows what it's like to hunt. His pack, a few lifetimes ago, taught him well; he knows the art of the chase, working seamlessly in a group, finding a weakness and descending on prey together. He'd hunted with Etho, once. It was a relationship built on fear of mutual destruction, forced into existence by two hearts beating as one.

But Etho is not a wolf. He stalks the Bridge like a bobcat, somehow alone amidst the chaos. Joel can feel the pressure of his gaze as he waits for an opportunity to strike, weapon already in hand.

Ten minutes left.

Only ten minutes, and Joel's blood will lose its worth. Etho is not the strongest melee fighter. He carries a sword; despite everything, he has not mastered the skill of wielding an axe. Joel has overpowered him before, slain him before. None of the others are close enough to make the kill.

But still, Joel flees.

Etho is not the best fighter, but he is perhaps the craftiest, and echoes of a jukebox and a broken disc have haunted the game for lifetimes. He's forgone the sword, now, and his hand flickers through his inventory instead. He parses through slot after slot, until he finally settles on something long and thin.

Joel turns to look directly, to glimpse what the hunter may be planning, but it is a dangerous gamble to take. The Bridge is treacherous even for its creators. Though he divides his concentration for only an instant, Joel loses his footing.

He falters.

Fishing line wraps its way around his skin, and the hook digs into his arm, and he tries to free himself but his fingers don't work fast enough and

then he is staring into Etho's eyes and knows that it won't work anyway. They are attached by wire, and this has happened before, and Joel died then, just like he will now.

Etho stares back gleefully for a fleeting moment, and then the other players join the fray, all competing for the precious thirty minutes that Joel's death would grant them. He is cornered closer and closer to the edge of the Bridge, and then the fishing line retracts.

And then Joel is falling.

His body burns, where Etho pushed him and where the hook had buried in his arm and where the wind rushes by his open wounds. He burns like he did when he died amidst his pack, under a hot desert sun. He burns like a dark oak tree, a wool castle.

He is a ship. He is a trapped Nether portal. He is two hearts, beating as one, devoured by lava. Everything burned, including him, including Etho. Yet they are still aflame together, and they always will be.

So when Joel falls from the Bridge, Etho does too.

Mismatched eyes contort in shock, and for a second that lasts an eternity, they are suspended in the air together.

Then Joel's legs slam into a pool of water and the spell is broken– his body remembers the motions of saving himself even when his mind does not. The water is frigid through his clothes, yet it is scalding at the same time.

Etho hits the ground moments later.

Joel's thoughts scatter, desperately trying to put his legs in motion while also finding a weapon while also keeping an eye on the man before him.

"Thank you! You saved me!" Etho crows.

The water runs green.

“You saved me, Joel, so now I can kill you!”

The world comes to a halt. A sword, the one that Etho can barely hold correctly, is buried up to its hilt in Joel’s chest. Time stutters, a clock chiming louder and louder and louder until an hour slips away, grains of sand slipping through his fingers along with his blood.

Joel wakes up. His countdown blinks yellow.

The adrenaline of the chase is gone, erased by the total reset of his body. His mind is clear for the first time in hours. A small laugh escapes him, not the harsh crowing of the hunt but a wheeze that slowly builds until it releases all at once.

“My own water bucket,” he cries, stumbling to his feet.

He is atop the Manor once more. Etho dodges hunters below, now carrying the burden of expendable time. Martyn’s blade sinks into his arm, and Joel can almost feel the phantom pain himself. It burns.

The warmth feels *good*.

Beneath the Bridge, Etho flickers through the trees, but he is not a forest fire– and neither is Joel. No, they are a raging grease fire, one that’s just been doused in water.

He can’t wait to see what they destroy next.


forestgranted

13:35:37

IMPULSEEEEEEE

!!

Flavarr

?.

Kit
1/3/23
Dreamzing

TAKE YOUR TIME AND I'LL TAKE MINE

00FFFF

There's only one green left.

The last person time can be stolen from. Who everyone else is trying to steal time from. After the kill on Impulse, Scott's the only one left.

Etho knows he let himself get carried away. He's not red yet—nobody is—but he could already feel that familiar bloodlust creeping in. And the hunt. Feeling—being part of that sweet, sweet hunt. All of them together, chasing after their last chance at a few more minutes, it's... It's *something*.

It's not quite the same as the hunger that he felt in 3rd Life. This isn't hunger, no... Something more pressing. Something swirling in his mind, constantly aware of the deadline that signifies the end.

It's a *need*.

"Do we know where he respawns?"

He always needs more. Scott is the only one with hours to spare, now. It only makes sense to team with Grian to try and spawn-camp him. And *he* didn't get the kill on Impulse, of course. This is his only chance before he goes red. There's no way they'll catch him in the literal angry mob that's hunting him right now—they'll get him in no-time. Scott can't outrun a dozen people. Even Martyn will be tempted by his time, Etho's sure.

Still, it makes him tremble. He didn't expect to find himself so shaky. If he already feels like this now, what will it be like when he turns red?

"There's two beds here, this has gotta be it."

Rails. TNT minecarts ready to go, prepared for a situation just like this—more prepared than Etho feels. Fishing rod ready, plenty of durability left.

They have to be quick. There’s no real time for much of a plan. He’s still soaked from the swim over here, the rails nearly slip from his hands before he can place them.

One wrong move, and it all goes.

One right move, and it all goes.

He’s going to pull a Tango. Blood will be spilled here and there’s a good chance that it will be his own.

Can he trust Grian enough to not set it off too early? He can feel the man’s beady eyes burning in his back. Would he kill him as collateral? It’s not like Etho will turn green if he gains half an hour of time, he’s too far gone for that. No, Grian must be just as desperate as him. Just as shaky, just as nervous. They have to be ready. It *has* to be perfect because if it’s not, Scott’s time will simply slip away. A waste.

Yes. No. Scott should appear any moment, and they’ll kill him, and then they’ll all be at peace, for a little while.

Etho startles when Grian speaks up behind him, “He’ll respawn right here.”

It almost makes him miss his aim, but the fishing rod hooks onto the minecarts easily. Perhaps too easily? It’s all muscle-memory, at this point.

“It’s ready.” Etho grits his teeth.

Grian finishes the wooden wall, presumably to try and contain the blast. Because things are guaranteed to blow up, one way or another.

Then Grian joins him at his side. “Is that enough? Is that gonna work?”

Etho looks at the minecarts. It *has* to work. He needs the time. If he gets the kill, he’ll get full credit for it.

Does Grian know? He has his own fishing rod in hand. He can't be planning to steal the kill from right underneath him, can he? Did he think that far ahead? It was his idea to come here in the first place...

No. Yes. This is his only chance to catch Scott off guard.

"It's gonna go right for him when he respawns, I think," Etho says, his voice betraying how little confidence he has.

"...Hi."

Scott's here. Why is he *here* why isn't he in his bed? Why didn't he *die*? Etho didn't even hear him surface, or fall, or walk, or teleport in—'caught off guard' doesn't even begin to describe his current state. If their roles were reversed, he'd be dead by now for sure.

Etho turns. Scott grins, bursting out into laughter. His teeth are sharp, sharper than before. He swears Scott didn't have as many scales as he does now. He holds up two webbed hands placatingly. Etho's too stunned to do anything, fishing rod clasped tightly still in his hands.

He could have set the TNT off right then and there, and probably killed his accomplice in the process. But he didn't. He holds onto it like a lifeline. There might still be a chance. He feels frozen. If he appears calm and collected to the others, he'll take that.

Grian begins laughing too, and so does Martyn, who arrives silently as Scott did. How long have they been there? How long have they been watching? Why did he not *notice?*

Then Cleo appears, undoubtedly drawn here by Scott's time as well, and finally Etho's nerves come out in the form of laughter, too. The TNT minecarts shake with the tension on the line.

“You might want to redo this one,” Scott says through tears.

Grian jumps down from the wooden wall. Martyn climbs up. Scott begins to tell them about how he so heroically managed to escape everybody else’s bloodlust.

“There were *ten* people chasing you and they didn’t get you??”

“Yeah, no- They shot me at world-height…” But Etho doesn’t really listen. He follows Scott closely, eyes trained on his every move. It can’t be…

Scott just outran three-quarters of the server full of yellow names, he must be tired.

Scott is climbing right up onto the wooden wall Grian built.

Scott’s in range.

Etho reels in. Everything goes.

Martyn yells. Grian laughs. *Etho* laughs.

He barely registers the TNT setting off right next to him, keeping his eyes out for the mop of bright blue hair amidst the dissipating smoke.

He waits for the satisfying breath, the feeling of being given thirty more minutes to live.

But it never comes.

“Get him!!” Grian yells, sounding about as mad and desperate as Etho feels. “He’s gotta be hurt!”

He hears a splash. Followed by another, then another.

Etho can only watch as Scott, his prey, the last green name left, the man who escaped death at every corner since it all started, slips through his fingers once again. He and Martyn are swimming off like the aquatic creatures—like the *monsters* they're becoming.

Every part of his being is *screaming* at him to give into the chase, to chase down those precious few minutes while he still can.

Instead, he sighs.

He knows he can't beat Scott in his own element.

THRILL TO KILL (BUT WAS IT WORTH IT?) SAGE

Martyn's ears were still ringing from the explosion, his vision tilting and blurring. However, he could still clearly spot Scott diving into the water. Grian jumped in after, and Martyn scrambled to follow, shaking off the daze from the explosion. His cries for the others to leave Scott alone went unheard. He promised Scott he would protect him– he couldn't let him down.

(Although, Scott seemed to be doing pretty okay, considering he just let a pufferfish loose on Grian.)

Martyn broke the surface of the water, gasping and floundering. There had to be some way out of this– he could get more pufferfish to Scott, he would fight off every yellow on the server if he had to, rules be damned. Anything to ensure Scott's time wasn't stolen.

Scott surfaced beside him, with more grace than Martyn had. His eyes were wide as they flitted around the waters, watching the yellows closing in.

"Martyn just take it– just kill me–" Scott cut himself off, reaching out towards Martyn. He grabbed his wrist, guiding Martyn's sword towards his chest.

The sudden defeat in Scott's tone chilled Martyn to his core. He swallowed nervously before speaking. "Okay– okay, hold up–"

Arrows whizzed over their heads, and Scott let go of Martyn's wrist to dive into the water once more. Martyn hurried to follow him, but admittedly Scott was a much faster swimmer than he was.

"He's there, get him!" Joel's cry sounded, muffled by the water.

“I’m having him, I’m having him!” Jimmy shouted, diving towards Scott.

Jimmy managed to get a hit in, droplets of Scott’s blood floating up in the water before Scott managed to shove him away. Scott had a hand pressed to his side, and time seemed to freeze for a moment as his pleading gaze locked on Martyn. But time was set in motion once more as Scott abruptly kicked up towards the surface.

“Martyn!” Scott shouted, voice becoming clearer as Martyn surfaced as well.

“I’m trying to get to you– Scott, swim towards me!” Martyn cried, diving down again and twisting to evade Jimmy.

Scott followed Martyn, swimming into his arms– and into his sword. The blade slid between his ribs as Martyn pulled him closer, twisting the sword as he did so. Scott clung to him, and Martyn could *feel* more than hear as Scott choked, a flurry of bubbles and blood escaping his mouth and floating towards the surface. But Martyn’s gaze was locked on the way his sword jutted out from Scott’s back, red with blood.

It felt *wrong*, despite the new rules. He was only yellow, they shouldn’t be killing– that was for the reds. But all the same, it felt familiar. It wasn’t the first time Martyn had killed someone he had sworn to protect, before he was *meant* to be killing– and that the someone had *asked* him to do so.

Scott buried his face in Martyn’s shoulder, as if to say *“it’s okay, we did it”* before he dissipated into seafoam. Martyn lurched forward a bit, unbalanced by the sudden lack of his presence. Even though his body was gone, Scott’s blood still curled through the water. Martyn’s eyes were fixated on the sight, mesmerizing and horrible all at once.

There was a sudden surge of energy that shot through Martyn, a ferocious *hunger* that he hadn’t completely registered before now satiated. Martyn glanced at his wrist, seeing his time tick up. For a brief, sickening moment, Martyn was filled with *relief*. He had gotten more time. And it felt *good*.

“No!” Jimmy cried out from above the water, snapping Martyn back to the present.

Martyn kicked up to the surface, gasping. “This stops, this stops!” he cried as he flailed about in the water.

Martyn ignored the defeated cries and grumbles of the other yellows as he swam to shore. He clambered onto the sand on his hands and knees, breathing heavily. He did it, he kept them from killing Scott... but at what cost?

Martyn wiped his sword clean in the sand, trying to ignore the red that now clung to the grains. He rose to his feet with a grimace as the other yellows made it to the shore.

“So Martyn took it in the end? What a betrayal...” Grian simpered.

“It’s not betrayal when it’s requested,” Martyn shot back, hating the way his throat tightened at the words.

Martyn’s comment went largely ignored as the yellows devolved into manic glee, their focus turned to killing Tango now that Scott was no longer green. Part of Martyn wanted to join them, still craving more time even though he had just gained more– but at the same time, the thought of killing while still on yellow made Martyn sick to his stomach. It still felt wrong, even if the rules were different this time around.

“I’m looking forward to the peaceful times of yellow!” Martyn shouted over the din of violent intent.

Again, he was ignored, and with a shake of his head, Martyn ran off to find Scott.

—

The first sound that escaped Scott's lips was a cheer as he respawned. He stumbled back, giddy and relieved as he clutched at where Martyn's sword had run him through. Martyn had more time now, and none of their enemies took Scott's time.

But with elation came a sudden feeling of wrongness. His teeth felt too big for his mouth, and the air seemed *thinner* somehow as Scott struggled to get a complete breath. Scott's hand flew his throat– and that's when he noticed the scales scattered across his skin. He held his hand out in front of him, turning it back and forth as he observed how his nails were much more like claws now, and his fingers were slightly webbed.

Scott scrambled down the mountain to the river to get a better look at himself. Gleaming yellow eyes stared back at him from his watery reflection. Gills fluttered at his throat– that explained the shortness of breath– and of course, there were the gray-blue scales scattered all across his face and arms. The coral seemed to have made a more permanent home as well, growing from him rather than being purely decorative.

He cast one last look at his reflection with a resolute frown. This... transformation... was likely some sort of punishment. Too bad he could care less about the twisted sense of judgment that the... *whoever* it was that stuck everyone here had. Scott wouldn't give them the satisfaction, even if they turned him into a monster.

In fact, Scott quickly began to *relish* what he was becoming. It hadn't really clicked until he made his way back to the ocean shore, and saw Jimmy standing off to one side.

He made his way over to him, anger briefly clouding Scott's vision as he swiped at Jimmy with his claws. Jimmy yelped, stumbling back as he clutched at his arm.

"*You* sir," Scott said, crossing his arms, "are *mean*."

“I– jeez, what happened to your face?” Jimmy asked, sounding more concerned for Scott than himself.

A smile spread across Scott’s face, and Jimmy noticeably paled at his now sharper teeth. “Scales, water life– y’know,” he said nonchalantly.

“Oh my gosh,” Jimmy managed to get out, body tensed like he was ready to bolt at any opportunity.

Their conversation was cut off by Grian’s shriek of frustration of being unable to find Tango, and Scott watched with amusement. Soon there would be peace... but Scott would be sure to use his new form to his advantage when the time came.



MUTUALLY ASSURED DEMOLITION

APOORCONDUCTOR

TangoTek had left the realm in a million pieces, but—as he always did—he returned in one.

However, some part of him—as it always did—wished he hadn't come back. His reanimated flesh ached from the burns in his bones, like hot coals tightly wrapped in oxhide. His brain felt as though it'd been stitched back together with fishing line, then tossed like a carp into his chum-bucket skull.

In spite of it all, though, Tango smiled as he lay in bed, serenaded by a lullaby of high-pitched ringing. He was yellow. The hunt was over. Skizz had gotten his time.

Tango sat up in bed, patting his devil-horns and looking himself over. Haphazard combat supplies stuck out from the many pockets in his gray vest. His dented knee- and shoulder-pads gripped his body uncomfortably, glinting irregularly in the basement's dim light. The green utility watch on his left wrist had turned yellow since he'd last seen it, but its metallic shine and incessant ticking hadn't changed a bit.

Tango felt better after a bite of steak. Flicking his black speartail and flexing his limbs, he stood and crossed the room, passing the cluster of plank blocks that his team used as a dinner table. To one side, chests and barrels were stacked beside a small wheat farm; to the other, a two-meter-wide staircase plunged underground into a torchlit mineshaft.

After acquiring a fresh iron pickaxe and a quiver of arrows from one of the chests, Tango strode to the opposite corner of the room, where he began climbing the ladder that led up out of the basement. At the top rung, he pressed his ear against the ceiling, listening for intruders.

Satisfied that the coast was clear, he pushed up on the slab of stone and

clambered out, only letting it go once his feet had cleared the hole. The trapdoor fell back into its slot with a clang, once again flush with the ground.

He'd emerged into the base's main rotunda, whose outer walls formed the foundation of his alliance's tower. A one-block-wide bubblevator shot up through the chamber's center, disappearing through the roof to what Tango knew were dizzying heights.

There was nothing new for him to see there, so Tango pushed open the front door and emerged into the afternoon day. A pungent wind blew from the east, ruffling through his crazy blond mop—woodsmoke, gunpowder, and dark oak pollen all rolled into one airstream. Tango knew that westerly winds were bad luck for TIES, but he still wished that he could've respawned to the scent of seawater rather than the fragrance of frag grenades.

As though his tinnitus wasn't enough, a second sound joined the assault on Tango's eardrums. An uninformed listener might've thought it to be the wails of a demented bugle being pumped by a pair of bellows—and they would've been correct.

Groaning quietly, Tango peered into the wind, into the sun, towards the floating bridges high above. The heavenward calls of the brass goose only meant one thing.

Meet me at Windsor, Skizz had told him—just before strapping a bomb to Tango's chest and setting it off, apologizing all the while. *This is where the fun begins, dude.*

The ringing in Tango's ears was gone. Turning on his heel and reentering the TIES tower, he readjusted his armor pads, took a deep breath, and stepped briskly into the water elevator. The bubbling jets propelled him upward like a rocket, towards the floating conglomerate of narrow bridges, whistling gales, and blinding clouds that were enough to overwhelm any Trafficker. His friends called this conglomerate by a simple

name: Skynet.

—

“Hold on. Why is *he* here?”

Two other people had answered the summons to Windsor, but not the two Tango had expected. Aside from Skizzleman and Ethoslab, within the confines of the aerial outpost stood a short man kitted out in enchanted iron armor, a gray roundel, and a black sash sagging with goodies.

Realizing that he was the topic of conversation, BdoubleO grinned his missing-toothed grin and waved. “Hi, Tango!”

“Hey. Welcome back, buddy.” Skizz stood beside the comical bugle-and-bellows contraption that he’d used to summon his team. His red kite shield, emblazoned with a blue S, rested against the contraption’s support pole. “As you know, today we’ll be taking Bread Bridge. If Bdubs wants to prove his loyalty, he joins us on this mission.”

“That still doesn’t answer how—oh . . .” Tango covered his bloodred eyes with one hand. “You found out our code, didn’t you?”

“Yup!” Bdubs looked very proud of himself. “It wasn’t very hard. Nice place y’all got here.”

“FYI, Impulse is out on Skynet extending our reach to cover the rest of the bridge,” Etho intoned matter-of-factly, his eyes unfocused on the ground before him. “Once he comes back, I’ll be dropping down to ground zero and laying secondary detonators.”

“I—Thank you very much, now, if you would let me speak,” Skizz continued with authoritative rigor. “Bdubs, you said you wanted to go with Etho, yes?”

“That would be quite nice, yeah.” Bdubs hid his sonly pride about as well

as Grian could hide a sugarcane farm.

“Right. Well, once you both are done laying the chain TNT, Etho will give the signal, and Tango and I”—he grinned at his friend—“will go to work.”

Skizz tossed a bulging bundle of explosives to Tango, who caught it out of the air with both hands.

“Did we ever agree on what the signal’s going to be?” asked Etho. Now that he was looking up, Tango could see his pale, scarred countenance in the harsh stratospheric sunlight.

“Which—yes, I was going to ask you.” Skizz turned to him, rotating his clasped palms in a *pray tell* motion. “What do you have in mind?”

“This. I’ve been calling it Banana.” Etho produced a mid-length, bone-yellow warhorn from his inventory and held it for all to see. “Came through the mob grinder the other day, but I haven’t the slightest clue what kind of mob it would’ve popped off of. Anyway, once we’re done laying the groundwork, I’ll blow my, uh . . . Banana, here . . .”

No actual laughter escaped from any of the Traffickers, but Etho’s innuendo suffused the air like a smoke bomb. Even Skizz covered his mouth with his hands to prevent his shoulders from shaking, which worked well until he started coughing.

Bdubs clapped him on the back with one hand while wiping giggle-spit off his lips with the other. “Bring that one to the dinner table, dad, they’ll love it.”

ImpulseSV arrived at a jog, just in time to miss out on the context.

“Hey, Etho, you ready?” He stopped just beyond the threshold of Windsor, building blocks still clutched in his hand. “What? What’s so funny?”

Through tears of laughter, Tango could all but see Etho smiling maniacally

under his gray mask. “With that,” said the man, audibly simpering, “we’ll be going now. Peace.” Saluting with his left hand, he dove off of Skynet back-first like a graceful scuba diver, leaving a bewildered Impulse in his place.

“Alright, alright, joke’s over. We don’t have much time, so let’s get going.” Skizz tapped his shield against the wall. “Bdubs, to ground zero. Impulse, cover our backs. Tango”—he picked it up and slung it over his arm—“it’s time to have some fun.”

Tango equipped his own standard and clanged it against Skizz’s, like a wine glass toast with big metal shields. “For TIES!” he cheered.

“Errr . . . ?” Skizz gestured towards Bdubs, who’d already left the shelter and was searching for the skydiving Etho.

“BITES?” suggested Impulse.

“For BITES!” Skizz thrust his shield towards Impulse in his own fistbump—which was a mistake, in the same way that a fistbump is a punch if it isn’t reciprocated.

“Gah! Sorry!” Skizz leant over the collapsed Impulse, who clutched his tee-clad chest and insisted he was fine.

Bdubs still hadn’t jumped. A strange scorn came over Tango as he looked at the little man.

“BITES, huh?” He scowled at the backside of his shield, tail twitching irritably.

—

The weather on Skynet was calm, mirroring the quietude of the night before. (Of course, for TangoTek, the night before had been anything but calming, but that was a different story.)

Skizzleman led him out from Windsor, bringing him to an intersection that Tango hadn't seen before. Impulse had done his job; new one-block-wide spans of cobblestone bridge had been built to cover every part of the Bread Bridge below. Somewhere down there, Etho and Bdubs were laying ton upon metric ton of TNT in broad daylight, mere hours after the Yellow Peace had begun. The chaos of it all made Tango giddy.

"Alright, now that we're here, I gotta teach you how to use these." Skizz drew one of the explosives out of his sack. It was a football-sized TNT bundle stuffed into a rocket-shaped frame, with a fuse poking out between the fins. "See that white line? You're gonna want to wait until the spark gets there . . ."

The ground team didn't take as long as Tango thought. Skizz had barely finished lecturing him on how to use the missiles when the plaintive blare of a warhorn reached their ears.

Skizz leapt to attention. "That's our go! TANG-go!"

"Why I oughta—" Tango fake-threw the dynamite at him, causing Skizz to flinch in the second before realizing it was a joke. They both laughed.

"Wait. Actually . . ." Tango mused. He glanced at the bomb again, then his wristwatch, clicking the pieces together in his head.

"Hey Skizz. Watch this." He stuck his left wrist out to his side at waist height, the golden finish on his watch shining in the sun. His speartail, tipped with the phosphorus red of a matchstick, leapt up to meet it. In the time that it took Skizz to blink, Tango struck the end of his tail against the metal of the watch, setting it ablaze like a road flare.

Skizz smirked at him in mock disappointment, a regular lighter in his hand. "Show-off."

Turning to his right, Tango tapped the tip of his tail against the dynamite fuse. He held it before him as it fizzed to life, illuminating his red eyes like

a Roman candle at sunset.

There was an inexpressible presence in his mind, like a catchy song he couldn’t sing. It was a presence he knew quite well—because just yesterday, it had motivated him to rob twenty-four hours of life from one Martyn Littlewood. It was with him now as he positioned the missile over the void, waiting for the spark to reach its mark. It hummed in his head, entertained but dissatisfied. It wanted something more personal than teleportation damage or explosion collateral. It wanted a clean kill.

Tango forced it to the side of his mind. If there was anything he knew, he knew he was going to murder today. Demolishing the Bread Bridge might not fit the thing’s appetite, but for now, a good show was a good show.

The spark reached the white line, sizzling in its steady prowl. All that was left in its wake was a burning red.

Yellow peace my ass, thought Tango gleefully as he let the rocket fall.

—

“OIIII!”

Rushing walls of cold air tore SmallishBeans’ indignant cry from his throat as he plummeted past the Bad Boys base, leaving Grian’s panicked exclamations far above. With a tremendous splash, he landed on the roof of the flooded woodland mansion boots-first. Nothing broke, but the impact sent a shock through his hips and lungs.

Joel clambered out of the meter-deep pool, bow in hand, drenched from the waist down. Uncaring for his own safety, he nocked arrow after arrow in the string, firing full-drawn shots into the sky. All the while, scrambling human silhouettes dropped fizzing bundles of dynamite down from Skynet, raising smoky clouds of stone shrapnel and disintegrated farmland.

“You animals!” he hollered towards the sky, still gasping for air. “*Stop blowing up the bridge!*”

He was answered by an explosion that threw him head-over-heels into the open water. Now every part of him was soaked—including his flammable tail.

“Joel!” Jimmy’s voice called shrilly above the deafening bursts of TNT. “They’re blowing up Bread Bridge?”

“What d’you think?!” Joel glared at the forked tip of his tail, commanding it to start burning. Sparks flew fitfully on the branches of the red V but refused to catch.

“You need help with that?” Jimmy called again, wringing his sword hand in indecision.

Joel growled and sped down the bridge, spying a segment of minecart tracks that somehow hadn’t been destroyed yet. As he ran, he thrashed the tip of his tail against the iron rails to create showers of sparks, finally convincing it to burst aflame.

A particularly large explosion shook the bridge, sending a mushroom cloud roiling into Joel’s peripheral vision as he came to a stop. Setting a new arrow in the grip of his bow, he swiveled his tail around until its forked end was propped under the projectile’s point, lighting it. Joel drew back the now-flaming arrow—so far back that his left hand could feel the heat from its tip—took aim at the faltering figure high above, and loosed.

His aim was true. Seconds later, a flailing Trafficker sporting a comet trail of orange flame plummeted towards him from the graying evening sky.

“Make a wish!” laughed the still-delirious Jimmy from behind.

Meanwhile, a familiar voice shrieked from the falling meteor: “*aaaAAAI’m-on-fire-this-is-fine!*” It plunged into the pool with a wave of white spray,

extinguishing the fire and the scream. The figure broke his head through the muddy surface, revealing a blond mop, devil horns, and glowing red eyes.

“Tango?!” stammered Jimmy. “H . . . why—?”

Grian skidded to a halt at Joel’s side, soggy and out of breath. Both Bad Boys nocked arrows and pointed them at the floundering demon-child in the water.

“Anything to say for yourself, you maniac?” Joel shouted.

Tango drew his shield, brandishing its big blue *T* at them. “How’s that for putting my tail to good use, you *sheepish* imita—!” Before he could get his last word out, he was sucked belly-button-first into the teleportation vacuum, leaving a fine velvet mist behind.

“Goddammit.” Joel let his bow fire towards the ripple in the water where Tango had just been.

“So TIES are behind this?” Grian returned his arrow to its quiver, frowning determinedly. “Quickly. We’ll hunt them down before they cause any more __”

“Don’t bother,” moaned Jimmy from their left. His sword was on the floor. “It’s gone, guys, it’s all gone . . . ”

The explosions had stopped. The evening sun drew yellow-orange hazes around the rising smoke clouds, like nature spirits rising from their decimated ecosystem. Below them, blue cliffs of displaced water poured from the bridge’s skeletal remains like Niagara Falls, forming a horseshoe shape as it joined the body of the flooded woodland mansion that the Bad Boys called home.

“Oh that is *it*.” Joel swapped his bow for his trusty diamond axe, then—after a moment’s hesitation—hacked it between his legs, slicing it through

a railroad sleeper and planting its head in the soil underneath. “Grian, have you got TNT on you?”

Grian scoffed. “Is the sky blue?”

“Perfect. Come with me.”

—

Reaching the west coast of the island didn’t take long, without factoring in Jimmy. The little angel had said that he couldn’t bear to watch, that he wouldn’t be able to live it down—until his fellow Bad Boys had impatiently assured him that they weren’t going to kill anyone. After that, he was all aboard.

After fast-and-loosely lacing up a few bundles of TNT to the topside of the TIES insignia, Joel lit the master fuse and did a backflip off of his dirt-block pillar. Jimmy and Grian, who had been providing him cover from the base of the tower, ran for safety across the small wooden bridge that’d been built in the giant bowtie’s shadow.

Joel landed inelegantly in the salty river, blessedly cushioned by much deeper water from a much shorter fall than before. He reoriented himself and looked up just in time to see the split-second flash, followed by a viscous, jagged white rain of explosion detritus pitter-pattering into the water around him. Fish fled before the slow-moving hail, diving into prairies of seagrass that danced in the watery golden-green.

The sight was offputting, a scene with beauty that he couldn’t appreciate. His experience with most of the underwater realm was much the same: immobile, alienated, temporary . . . but he remembered knowing someone special who’d taught him to love it. Scratch that—taught him to love, period. That person, that emotion—she, they were sunk deep in the murk of his uncharted memory, shielded from the light by waving kelp tangles.

He’d need a map to get back there. From what cartographer? And a ship.

Crewed by whom?

Tsk, *tsk*, *tsk*, said his timer.

No point in lingering there now. He was needed on the surface.

Joel heard Grian and Jimmy cheering from the opposite bank as his head broke the surface of the river. Unfortunately, he'd lived up to the old adage: cool guys don't look at explosions.

His demolition attempt did more damage to the base itself than to the bowtie. The TNT had blown a gaping hole into the stone brick wall while leaving the tie's bottom half untouched. The tower groaned in protest as loose stones and debris clattered down its landward side, but it remained firmly upright.

Joel climbed out of the water, stopped at the end of the entry bridge, and spat on it. His forked tail had been doused, leaving nothing but the setting sun to bathe half of his face in mournful copper light.

"Hear this, Tango," he shouted across the way. "I guess we're now *tied*."

9/12/23



THE THINGS THAT COME AROUND, AND THE PEOPLE THAT DON'T

PvP is not Tango's specialty.

He's clumsy with swords and axes. His arrows hit people, but never in the right places. And forget about end crystals and lava buckets—he doesn't know how to time anything without redstone in it. Overall, he's atrocious at killing people.

Getting people killed, though... that's a little different than just stabbing them, or shooting them, or smashing a potion over their head. Getting a person killed has more nuance to it, and in his humble opinion, generally more fun.

Tango has quite the flair for getting people killed.

The first step to getting someone killed is convincing them that they might not die. People love a good game. Introduce rules, risks, and rewards. Make them feel special, like they're the only one that can do it right. Leave their fate in their hands, or at least act like it is.

The second step is to let them die. It's that easy. They'll run right into a lava trap, as long as it looks like it can be beaten. Tango's seen it happen. He's *made* it happen.

He watches Impulse start to make measurements for his ghast farm on the bedrock roof of the Nether. The boogeyman in his head whispers that he'd make a fine target. He'd hardly have to do anything—just wait for Impulse to build upward and *boop*. Shove him off the edge. Let gravity get him killed.

For a moment, Tango's normal self wrestles with the boogey, crying out at the idea of killing Impulse. It's not right, and he still has enough strength to tell the thing in his head *no*. The boogeyman hardly grumbles. Instead,

it comes up with a new solution—one that makes even Tango's rational mind pause for a second.

The second is all the boogeyman needs. His revulsion and fear of the curse vanish as it smoothly recovers control, forcing Tango to take a backseat in his own mind once again. He barely notices. The boogeyman in his head sounds just like his own voice.

By the portal, one of Bdubs' dogs scratches at its ear.

The rules are that Bdubs has to get his dogs himself, the boogeyman begins, *and that you have to kill him*.

TNT minecarts at the portal. Easy.

The risks are that the Nether is dangerous, it continues, *and your plan might not work*.

An axe isn't the best backup plan, but he thinks he can hack it.

The rewards are that he gets his dogs, the boogeyman tells him, *and you get revenge*.

Tango smiles.

He can't do it alone, though—he needs to trigger the explosion, which means he needs someone else to get Bdubs through the portal. His gaze shifts back toward Impulse. They're friends. And Tango isn't killing him, so he should be happy to help, right?

"So, uh, Impulse," he begins, running a careful finger along the edge of his axe. "We're up here. On the Nether. Probably the quietest spot on the entire server."

It's strange to speak as the boogeyman—what Tango means to say is that this is a safe place, somewhere they can speak freely. But the curse twists

his tone, and what he really says is that no one will hear Impulse if he tries to scream.

He doesn't seem to clue in, though, just chuckling. "Except for these barking dogs over here!"

"I know!" The mention of the dogs, a key part of his plan, sends adrenaline shooting through Tango's blood. "I know, I know, I know, I know, I know, alright, alright, but listen." He advances on Impulse, brandishing his axe with a smile that feels wicked on his lips. "Got a little secret for you, my friend."

Finally, Impulse looks uneasy. His gaze narrows at the axe in hands, and when Tango tips it toward him, he flinches.

"O-oh," Impulse stammers. "Okay."

He's afraid. Not of Tango, but of the boogey in his head, and the curse relishes the attention.

"Now that we're up here alone…"

Impulse's eyes go wide at the thinly veiled threat, and Tango just can't help it. Fueled by his fear, he takes a swing at Impulse. He's not going to hit him, he could never hurt Impulse (well, *he* wouldn't), but pretending that he might almost thrills him more than a real kill.

Impulse cries out, realizing the danger he's in, and raises his shield. Something about the shield puts a damper on Tango's bloodlust. Doesn't he know he wouldn't hurt him? He knows, right? Tango wouldn't hurt him.

"No, no, no!" Impulse exclaims. "Don't you tell me…"

"It is me, though, my friend," Tango tells him. "I got boogeyed."

"Wait, wait, wait!" Impulse is grasping at straws, wild with fear that Tango

swears he can smell (it smells like blood and salt and he wants to taste it and he *hates* it). “No, it was you last week.”

“Two weeks in a row!” Tango says, cursed with a hint of glee in his words. “I go three seasons with nothing, and now it’s twice in a row.”

“What?”

He resists the urge to roll his eyes. “Alright, so listen, that’s why I followed you up here, okay?” he tells him. “Because I think I have a plan, and I know what I wanna do, okay?”

“Okay…” Impulse mutters with unconvincing commitment.

“We’ve got this here, and now it makes perfect sense, right?” Tango says, pointing at the dogs sitting by the Nether portal. “We’ve got the dogs here. In fact, we gotta keep those dogs- okay, the dogs are here. Good. Here’s what we’re gonna do.”

Impulse takes a deep breath. “Yeah.”

He nods with some obvious trepidation, more as if he’s trying to calm himself than agree with anything, but Tango can see him already connecting the dots, and that’s good. That’s *good*, he’s smart. He’s already catching on to the plan. Tango won’t have to hurt him.

“You okay with being a little accomplice?” he asks, like there’s a choice (and oh, how he wishes either of them had a choice). “Little helping me out?”

Impulse nods one last time and then stands stock still, as if the boogeyman in Tango will pounce on the slightest movement. “Sure, as long as you’re- I mean- you could’ve killed me-”

“I know,” Tango says, because he could have, but he doesn’t even want to entertain that idea. “I know.”

But Impulse doesn't stop. No, he's running a hand through his hair, eyes wide, because Tango could've killed him. And Tango can't blame him.

"Like, we were gonna tower up on- and you could've gotten *me*, but-" Impulse looks up from the floor, and right into his eyes. "I would rather it be someone else."

At least he has that choice this season.

"Here's what we're gonna do, here's what we're gonna do." Tango takes a step toward the Nether portal, but at the same time reaches to place a hand on Impulse's shoulder, stopping himself. "We're gonna do this, right?"

Impulse gives him a clearly forced smile. "Uh-huh."

He places a reassuring hand atop his, Tango pulls away as if he's been burned.

"We're gonna do this, we're gonna do this," he says again, more to himself than to Impulse, rigging a rudimentary setup out of cobble around the portal. "I'm not gonna set it now because I'll probably blow myself up, right?" He tries to laugh as he pulls redstone out of his inventory and starts sprinkling a line of it away from the portal, ignoring how much it looks like blood. "But we do this, and then I give a little redstone skadoodle here, right, a little na-na-na-na-na, move that a little bit further... you go get Bdubs and we're like 'Bdubs, we found your dogs, they're on the roof of the Nether! Come!' and you bring him up here."

He glances over at Impulse to make sure he's following. To make sure he'll do it right. To make sure he'll still do it all, now that Tango has said Bdubs is his target out loud.

Impulse already knew, though. His gaze isn't broken, it's stubborn. Tango knows his history with Bdubs is complicated, but they *were* soulmates last time, and Impulse... well, he cares about his friends. Tango knows that

firsthand.

“Yeah,” he says hoarsely, and Tango knows that Impulse really has chosen him over Bdubs.

That’s a good thing for the boogeyman. They were soulmates last season, Bdubs will trust him.

Tango thinks briefly of tricking Jimmy into his death and his stomach starts to climb into his throat.

“Make sure you come through before him,” he instructs. “Okay?”

“Okay, okay.”

Tango gestures to the portal somewhat frantically, because the whole point of this is to keep Impulse *safe* from him, he *can’t* die in the crossfire. “You come through, there’s gonna be like, y’know, five TNT minecarts right here, you just jump over them or go out the other side, and the second I see him- KABLOOM!”

Impulse steps closer to the guts of the soon-to-be trap, inspecting it. “So, if I come through the portal, and I step where they are, then they slide over and I blow up,” he surmises. “Is that how that works?”

“Possibly.” Not him, Bdubs. *Not him*. “Possibly.”

“Great!” Impulse says, enthusiastic and wary all at once. “Okay!”

“Don’t do that! Don’t do that!” Tango implores with half a laugh. “And the second I see him…”

Impulse puts a healthy distance between himself and where the TNT minecarts will be. “And when Bdubs comes, I’m gonna run, actually, as far as I can go.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Tango agrees. “You should.”

Part of him—the part of him clinging to his sanity—wishes Impulse had run as far as he could go several minutes earlier.

“Okay.”

“And the *second* I see him, I’m popping it,” Tango reminds him.

“You might want Plan B just in case that fails, like-”

“Plan B is axe and get him in the face!” Tango tells him with a demonstration swing—not any more accurate than his swings usually are, but he surprises himself with its viciousness. “Yeah!”

“Yeah, lava, and-”

“I got lava, yeah, I got lava.”

“We’re in the Nether, it’ll flow fast…” Impulse trails off, gaze drifting toward the portal. “Yeah, okay.”

“Yep, yep,” Tango says breathlessly. “Oh, right, right.”

Lava does flow faster in the Nether. Why would Impulse even bring that up, when Tango could have it flowing over him in three seconds flat from where he’s standing? Why does he care?

“Oh, man.” Impulse smiles at him again, and this time, it’s surprisingly encouraging. “Okay.”

It hits Tango then that he doesn’t bring up a Plan B and lava and it all to remind Tango of the kill he needs—Impulse is trying to make sure he’s safe. To make sure that Tango, the boogeyman, is *safe*.

“I’m terrified right now,” he admits to Impulse, himself, and the

boogeyman that tries to tell him that this is what he's made for.

"I'll go tell him," Impulse reassures him. "And I'll tell him, like, 'hey, we found your dogs in the Nether, so we can't do the water trick, you're gonna have to come get 'em yourself.'"

"Yeah." It's the perfect plan for a murder, and Impulse says it so kindly.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

"Okay. I'll go find him." He inches toward the portal, not actually going through. "I'll go find him."

"Okay," Tango says, as if his okay makes any of this any better.

"Just, uh-" Impulse reaches a hand through the portal, but pulls it back out again. "Just hang tight!"

"Don't keep me waiting!" Tango pleads.

"Get yourself a coffee, or something," Impulse jokes. "You got this."

"Yep, yep, yep! We'll have a little self-chat. Okay," he says, ignoring the fact that one of the last things he'd like to do is chat with whatever is going on inside what used to be his mind. "We're armed," he announces as he places the button. "Alright."

"Oh, man." Impulse's words fade into garbled speech as he steps into the Nether portal. "Good luck."

And then Tango is alone.

Except he's not, really. The boogeyman is a foreign entity—its thoughts are not his own, and its whispers sound as if someone else is still with him. The curse eggs him on. It tells him this is all a game, and this is the winning move. It replays the moment of an axe digging into his back again and again, assuring him that this is justice. Retribution. Revenge.

That last word strikes a chord in Tango, and his finger twitches toward the button. The boogeyman can tell, and in his head, all he hears is *revenge*, *revenge*, *revenge*.

He waits. He stares at the button and he waits, letting the curse stoke the nasty things that are stirring in his gut. It'll all be over soon.

Impulse returns through the portal.

He doesn't say a word, he just sprints away from the portal. Tango doesn't move a muscle, staying poised over the button and forcing himself not to look after Impulse. He's got to be out of range, right? He's got to be safe, he won't-

The portal shimmers as Bdubs arrives, and it's as if the curse lights Tango's mind on fire.

Something in him snaps. He no longer remembers just the axe—he remembers blood pouring from his shoulder onto the stairs, the water filling his boots as he tried to run, the shouting behind him that he *had to*. Tango remembers waking up with the phantom feeling of a blade buried in his spine, wondering why it had to be *him*.

It all burns through him in half a second. Less, maybe. Tango doesn't even see the whites of Bdubs' eyes before he hits the button.

The trap works like a charm. When the smoke clears, Bdubs is nothing but a scorch mark, and relief begins to fill in the cracks in Tango's mind.

—

The boogeyman is gone instantly, but the curse is not. It's different for everyone, or so Tango's heard—there's a gray area between the kill and the cure. Sometimes a few seconds, sometimes a few minutes. Tango is fully in control of himself again, but the relief he feels is unnatural, more like a drug than an emotion. All he can do is wait for the curse to vanish

entirely.

It doesn’t take long, and its complete departure isn’t subtle. All semblance of the idea that his kill was a job well done dies, leaving Tango with nothing but the knowledge that he blew Bdubs sky high and that he liked it.

The idea that it was revenge stays. That satisfaction is entirely his own, although it does make him wonder how much of *all of it* was his own.

Bdubs shoots him the next time he sees him, and pushes him off the path the time after that. Tango isn’t surprised.

“Who was it!” Bdubs demands, fists clenched by his sides.

Now that *is* a little surprising. Tango’s admitted to it half a dozen times by now—in the chat, in front of Bdubs, in front of practically half the server. He should know.

“It was Tango,” Impulse says, but Bdubs is still staring down Tango. “It was Tango.”

“Was it Skizz?” Bdubs asks.

“No,” Impulse huffs. “It was Tango.”

Tango just stares back at Bdubs, uncomprehending. It’s like he doesn’t want to accept that Tango killed him. Like that’s somehow the worst case scenario.

“Tango.” Bdubs does his best to snarl as he says his name, but he’s no more intimidating than the sitting dogs that were his bait. “How dare you.”

“Hi, buddy,” Tango says evenly. “Remember that time we were in a cave… and it was something about…”

“Yeah!” Bdubs exclaims, and both of them ignore the way their audience of Impulse and Etho groans.

“Yeah, you remember that?” Tango asks. “Well…”

“Yeah, that was for my- that was for- to get me back!” Bdubs stammers weakly. “To green!”

His words take a knife to Tango’s gut, hollowing it out until his stomach and his lungs and his heart all sink into it.

Bdubs doesn’t even remember it.

He wasn’t green, he was yellow. He was yellow because of Tango—Tango, who gave him his own life and *saved* him—and Bdubs killed him in return. Some ally he was.

The memory of the axe drifts out of his mind, replaced by a much more recent one. Tango replays the moment Skizz struck the flint and steel at his request. And then he goes back to Last Life again, and he hears Bdubs screaming *I have to*. And not so long ago, saluting for TIES as the fuse burned up. *I have to. For TIES. I have to. For TIES.*
Tango grits his teeth. He could say *I would’ve found a way to help*. Or *you never said a word*. Or *you were only there because of me*. Instead, he meets Bdubs’ eyes with a silent rage and a cold smile.

“What goes around, comes around,” he tells him.

And Tango knows that’s a curse neither of them will ever be rid of.


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ACCIDENTS; CONSEQUENCES

SCRAMBLED

They arrive as a group.

There's a sort of safety found in numbers that Joel hasn’t experienced before, it's hard to say if he enjoys it yet.

The neighbour's base looms, silhouette stark on the horizon as night falls, its shadow stretches in inky tendrils that try to root him to the ground.

It’s suffocating.

Even though they’re a group Jimmy strides ahead, he’s tripping into creeper holes in the hazy dusk light.

He's on a mission to save the last of his dignity, because it wasn’t ever *really* just about a frog, was it?

A shooting pain rockets through his neck and Joel flinches. Each footstep is followed by him turning to check Grian is still behind them. The tongue-in-cheek comments are grating, it takes a lot not to completely lose it.

(If he’s honest, he’s not sure how much he has left to lose.)

Joel contemplates killing. There’s not much else to do as a red.

When every second counts you learn to revel in the chaos, thirst for bloodshed, and dream of the way each moment would slip through your fingers to silence the insatiable hunger known as desperation that eats and eats and eats until nothing is left but the desire to kill.

Then he shakes his head and pushes the thoughts to the darkest corners of his mind where they can do little more than keep him up at night.

They’re allies, they’re a team, it’s not quiet enough to silence them completely, but it will do for now.

Jimmy calls out to Pearl and Big B, its echo beckons them inside with low haunting tones as it ricochets off stone walls. As they enter warm amber of torch light spills onto their dark clothes and Jimmy gets straight to the point.

“We need to talk,” the two members of the opposing faction exchange confused looks and after a few seconds of deafening silence Jimmy reluctantly elaborates, “It’s about Judge Judy and Executioner-”

The rest of the conversation fades to white noise as Joel isn’t listening, instead, he spends the time utterly distracted by the fact that Pearl doesn’t seem quite herself today. Still familiar, but in the way his gut tells him they’ve met before, but of course they’ve met before because it's *Pearl*- even though it's also not.

She just seems…*different*.

There’s a nasty cold going around the server, it must just be that. He has better things to spend his time thinking about anyway.

“The main person in this C-plot doesn’t even remember it!” Grian groans from his stance in the doorway stepping closer inside to inspect the deceit-filled walls. If Jimmy hears the comment he doesn’t acknowledge it.

“Is this one person or three?” Pearl questions as Big B frantically tries to salvage the situation, whisper shouting that it was only one over the chaotic groans and snickers. Pearl responds with a nervous laugh that gets stuck in her throat, although the curiosity behind her previous question did seem genuine.

But when was anything ever as it seemed.

“It’s Judge Judy and Executioner,” Jimmy’s face falls a little, as he repeats

himself. He looks back at Joel for reassurance that he knows he can’t give, for at the end of the day it was just a frog.

Pearl steps forward to meet Jimmy on the gravel. Each step is filled with newfound confidence and all Joel can think is how nothing good can come of this.

“Actually,” Pearl begins, “ I know exactly where Judge Judy and Executioner is,”

Pearl doesn't know where Judge Judy and Executioner is.

She thought she killed that frog last week, but apparently whoever is puppeteering her body doesn't know that. She can’t blame them too much, that storyline never really did make it mainstream.

She's itching for control. Every minute is spent aching to have her fate back in her own hands, the last time it was bonded to another, she remembers how that ended far too well.

The ‘bad boys’ have been talking far too long for her liking. She wants to do something about it with her in two hands- maybe make back some time.

The conversation continues but Pearl isn’t listening, because suddenly she’s falling.

Falling fast and hard towards the ground, bile rises in her throat with the faux sensation of her stomach being left behind and she can't do anything.

She can only watch.

Watch as her body is moving without her, limbs that refuse to abide stuck in a stasis. She tries to fight it, it's not enough. She can’t feel the way the wind would have pushed against her skin, would have been roaring against her ears to drown out the fast-fading screams of delight and

despair. They’re all the same.

A blur of yellow, canary yellow, reminds Pearl she is not alone in her descent, and cements her fate. Through eyes that aren’t quite her own she spots arms that should belong to her desperately reaching out in the hopes a selfless hand will save her. Her own wings curl around her hollow body, they cradle her, in an attempt to soften a deadly fall, they gently wipe the tears streaming from her eyes.

Tomorrow Pearl will rise from the ashes as a red name. She will kill and gorge herself on the lives of friends, she will close her blood smeared eyelids, she will open them and see nothing but a world painted red.

But tonight, she falls.

Tonight, she dies.

Tonight, she curses those cruel beings above, she’s learnt better than to call them gods.

Gods, this wasn’t real, was it? Big B was frozen watching as Grian paced back and forth, his face switching between glee and something else he couldn’t make out. By now all shouts had come to a halt, silence fell over the room, a heavy blanket, a twisted source of comfort from the sickening sound of crunched bones.

Cautiously, he followed the others to where they stood at the edge of the pit, the pit that Pearl should have known about. She wasn’t herself today, from how she parted her hair to the way she approached everything with the body language of a feral cat, he’d blamed it on the boogeyman.

It wasn’t the Pearl he knew, the Pearl that he trusted but he’d kept his mouth shut and now he was looking down at nothing, nothing but a blood-stained floor, the only thing that proved that they were once there. He watches as Grian rushes out the door, Joel follows shortly after, frantically reminding everyone that Jimmy now only has seven hours left.

Big B isn’t alone for long, Pearl returns soaked red and seeking an explanation but in that time, however short it was, he wonders if he did something then maybe things could have gone differently.

“There were buttons on the floor Tim-”

“Why did you push them?”

“Because I’m me!" Jimmy was in front of him, the sight of those infamous yellow wings so rumpled was a clear sign of his distress, even if they weren't, the frustration was plainly written on his face.

Grian found himself being grabbed by the lapels of his jacket and braced himself for the shake that never came. Instead, he felt the grip relax but not completely let go.

He looked up from the ground and saw the white-knuckled fists that lay limp at Jimmy’s side that pitiful desperation in his eyes. He looked away just as quickly.

“I *need* my time back,” Jimmy paces, letting his grip go slack and Grian tears himself away, “You can’t just kill me!” but Grian knew that he *could* just kill him.

Heading towards the bread bridge Jimmy trails behind.

Grian wasn’t particularly sure why he pushed the buttons, it wasn’t like he had to do it, or it was some carefully crafted plan. It wasn’t like the entire base floor was covered in buttons to disguise the fact that one of them probably did do something. It wasn’t like he *wanted* to kill him.

But it still happened and Jimmy still died.

Another hour lost, another hour he couldn't get back.

But this time he *could*.

Grian couldn’t give up his own life- no it’s not that he couldn’t, he didn’t want to. Alliances in this game were never meant to last, he knew that better than most.

Jimmy was never particularly aggressive as a red name, usually found calming down others. Yes, he was frantic, yes he was desperate, but wasn’t everyone Grian searches his mind for a memory that shows true anger? But he can’t seem to recount a moment, except from right now.

Tim only wanted to survive, but this time to survive you needed to kill.

It was strange, he was almost proud really. He laughed to himself, shaking his head at the thought.

The thing that he finally decided to grow a spine over was that damn frog.

6 and a half hours.

Jimmy hears the smiles and tries to force one of his own. Joins the choked laughs that follow his pitiful announcement of pitiful amount of time he has left.

It had to be a joke. Every time game Jimmy curses himself for thinking he would ever live long enough to see another die a proper death, he doesn’t think that’s a lot to ask. The merciless hand of death, always that much colder than he expected, always coming far too soon whether it be at the end of a sword or his own naivety.

It would be so much easier to accept it. Everyone dies in the end, the cycle continues but he wants to live. He *is* going to live.

He runs to catch up.

390 minutes, he can work with that.

He’ll kill if he has to, and he’ll do it happily if he gets to live. If they want

him to, he’ll scratch and bite and live a little more with each drop of blood spilt.

23,400 seconds, it’s all he has left.

He steadies himself, they make a plan; they promise him more time.

(It's not enough.)

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MARTYN'S BIRTHDAY

ILEX

Today is Martyn's birthday, and he wants to get a kill.

He tells Scott as much, after a cheerful explanation of the pufferfish traps that Scott's laid out this morning while Martyn was busy oversleeping. Well, more specifically, he puts on his best puppy-dog (fish-fry?) eyes and tries to get a birthday half an hour off of Scott's timer, of which his teammate is having precisely none.

"You should be trying to get the hours off of everyone *else*, so you don't need them off of me!"

"Yeah, I guess so," Martyn pouts, and sets his sights to more ambitious plans instead.

Which is to say: murder party.

It takes him all day to piece together. There's a lot of distractions - something weird is going on with Cleo and the Clockers; Joel and Jimmy's deaths in quick succession pop up in chat right when he's entertaining the possibility of stealing their villager; a tree grows on his head and the branch knocks him flat on the floor, for which Scott is of course quick to mock him.

That's not even mentioning the part where, right as he's about to start setting out party decorations, all three Bad Boys come in swords a-blazing -

"YOU BETTER NOT BE STEALING OUR VILLAGERS, LAD!"

"What? *Ow!*" Martyn drops his sword, and a load of freshly crafted stairs, in his rush to get out of the line of fire. "Hold on a minute, whoa!"

“I’m joking, I’m joking -”

“He just threw his sword on the floor!” Grian cackles.

“Yeah, because I’m busy trying to make my birthday party, and you’re over here treating me like a piñata!”

Jimmy’s laughter cuts, replaced with earnestness - or, at least, whatever passes for an earnest look behind that pair of ridiculous sunglasses. “Oh, is it your birthday?”

“It’s my birthday today, yeah!”

They all come in cooing at that, swarming like the shoals of fish by the Coral shores when Scott chucks their leftovers into the sea. Martyn can’t help but find it a little condescending. “Guys, it’s his *birthday!*”

“Do you - oh, that means he gets birthday immunity, Tim, you can’t kill him.”

“What?”

The games have never run over his birthday before, so he’s not sure if that’s an actual rule, or if Grian’s just pulling things out of thin air. (Although, to be fair, as the admin, he *is* technically allowed.)

“That would be fantastic,” Martyn says anyway, as Joel grumbles about losing out on the chance to commit indiscriminate murder once again. “I’ve already given Scott the task of making the birthday cake - I was gonna ask you,” he gestures to Jimmy, whose crossbow is still loaded and aimed for whatever reason, “but you’ve had a bit of a ‘mare, so I don’t want you to have to do any more work.”

“True, true.”

“It’s my birthday too,” announces Grian out of nowhere. They all turn to

look at him. “No one kill me either.”

Martyn clocks the bit. Jimmy clearly doesn’t. “What? It’s your birthday too?”

“Yeah, it’s everyone’s birthday, don’t kill me!”

The arrow sticking out of Grian’s collar tells a very ironic story, and not one the Bad Boys seem interested in hanging around to tell. Actually, that might be more because of Martyn’s impending red life; they scarper about five minutes before the arrival of that. Instead it’s Tango and Etho, having popped by to see what he’s up to, who witness Martyn reach his final form.

Hey - at least he’s got his new outfit on standby.

With the heat of the red life newly simmering under his skin, he feels a lot more comfortable with his plans to blow up as many party guests as possible (not that he was particularly reserved about the whole idea before). Three TIES and two Clockers even try and throw him a little get-together of their own, and Cleo offers him a birthday present of a diamond to strengthen their alliance (has she done something different with her hair?), but Martyn shushes them to wait until the main event.

“I mean, you’re red,” says Tango.

“What’s wrong with that? Do reds not get birthdays, is that what you’re trying to say?”

“Well, I don’t know what you’re waitin’ for - you might be dead soon,” he points out.

As if ordained by fate, BigB’s death message pings in chat a second later. That seems like as good a sign as any to Martyn that he really ought to hurry up - *memento mori*, and all that.

“Okay, seeya!” says Bdubs as he’s walking away, and then, faint, in the distance: “Is it for real his birthday?”

Seems like this day is nothing but distractions, because it takes him *hours* to get around to finishing off the birthday party build. There’s an unsuccessful trap attempt by Pearl (does she have a cold or something?), a far more successful attempt to pretend he didn’t watch the Bad Boys’ villager burn to death this afternoon, and an admission that it *was* Grian who got him sashimi’d on that glass pane the week before. Finally, though, he plants the TNT and sets the scene for his actual birthday party.

And it’s a pretty good turnout, all things considered! The Clockers make it, the Nosy Neighbours make it, TIES make it, and Scott yells at everyone else in chat to get a move on if they want to make it too before the cake is gone. There are highs (the *three* diamonds that end up in the gift chest) and lows (the horde of pillagers that Scar comes barrelling in pursued by, because what Martyn *really* wanted was to get Bad Omen on his birthday), but nobody questions them when Scott asks everyone to crowd in and receive a healthy dose of Weakness ahead of the proper celebrations. Martyn’s not sure why - it’s the flimsiest excuse he’s heard all week - but he’s definitely not complaining.

And then, very quickly, the idea of the murder party gets a lot more broadly defined.

In the wake of it, he’ll identify no fewer than six separate major threats on the lives of party guests:

The first, of course, is his own. When that campfire went out under the impact of his “mistakenly fumbled” splash-pot (or, well, not-a-pot), it was supposed to trigger an explosion directly under all the people who’d so helpfully squished themselves together in one area, leaving Martyn to slip out of the blast radius before anybody realised and ideally get a solid half-dozen kills. Sure, he’d have been pretty firmly identified as the bad guy after that, but since when has Martyn shied away from a little antagonism?

That doesn’t happen, though. Instead, they’re interrupted by the second. TNT rains from on high, presumably launched off Skynet, and lands explosive just behind the gathered crowd. It’s close enough to singe but not to actually catch anybody - Pearl, the closest to the point of impact, stumbles away from it and into the scatter, pulling her hood low on her face as she does. The floor is thoroughly obliterated; grass and dirt go flying, thud ineffectually and leave skid marks against the hourglass-skeleton, which has thus far managed to remain untouched.

The third is not far behind, as that Bad Omen Martyn was worrying about a minute ago comes in like Chekhov's Gun to further complicate the crisis. Scar, having pitched a little too close to the nearest village in his panicked run away from where the bombs had dropped, alerts a warning system, and the curse that’s following in his footsteps finds a new, more easy target. The raid across the field is hardly *Martyn’s* problem, though. It’s just another bloody emergency he needs to start worrying about.

Never one to be outdone, Martyn figures he may as well exacerbate the issue, and chucks that water splash-bottle in the direction of his miraculously still-lit trigger campfire. Glass shards rain. The bottom half of the hourglass is finally splintered by *something*, unable to enforce its sheltering powers against a threat from underneath. Most of the crowd have dispersed in a wide berth away from where the Skynet bombs had fallen, though, so it *still* doesn’t hit a lot of victims; Pearl is, again, the most obviously affected, the edge of her red hoodie catching alight from proximity. She yelps, slaps over-sleeved hands around the flame to smother it, and follows a good half of the other party guests as they run in the direction of the river.

Martyn follows, but he’s slow, and he nearly gets caught out by number four. Whoever’s up there on Skynet - and there’s not a lot of options, given that the less impressive Bad Boys were the only two people who hadn’t made it to the party by the time Scott motioned for the splashing to begin - isn’t done yet. A second TNT minecart must have been sent down behind him, because he trips over his own feet and has to fight to keep his balance when the blast bursts fire and smoke and kinetic energy right into

the back of him. In front, he sees Pearl almost run headfirst into a random creeper to make disaster number five, hears the shouts of Skizz and Scott attempt to lead her somewhere safe. (She must be really dazed if she can't even pick out her own name in the clamour.)

Which brings it down, delayed, the moment Martyn starts to wonder if it might be really over, to problem number six. He inches back over to his birthday chest, hoping at least to grab those diamonds and... the singular egg that someone's left him... but of course it's never safe. A *third* air-strike is centred on the party grounds - this one blows the chest to splinters, and sends his precious presents sprawling on the grass beyond it. The rest of the hourglass finally takes the brunt of the explosion, the top half of their protective roof entirely shattered and left useless. Shards of its failed potential settle in a vaguely even circle on the floor like the world's worst fairy ring.

Come on, is all that Martyn can bring himself to think. As if his own plans weren't enough excitement, literally every other intervening force possible apparently had to come and liven up the place as well.

It seems, though, that that's really all there is to it, because things seem to quiet down for good with that. Martyn surveys the crowd and sees that, unsurprisingly, a good chunk of party guests have given up and gone (most likely) home. Grian's standing there, menacingly, the unmistakable smirk of having successfully plotted something worn proudly on his face. Scott is attempting to do damage control, rounding up the people he can manage, making sure there's no lingering scalds or scrapes that need addressing.

"Well, there we go," sighs Martyn, "that's my birthday, everyone."

And then, pearling down from the sky both sudden and annoying as the bombs they've just deployed -

"Eyy," greets Jimmy, innocent as any other time he's bold-faced lied. "Holy moly, what happened?"

“That was you guys!”

“Oh my gosh,” Joel continues, not interested in keeping up pretences, “was no one at the party?”

Scott, devoted teammate that he is, comes round to stand between the two of them and Martyn. “We were under the hourglass, there was a glass roof!”

“What?”

“No!”

For Martyn’s part, he’s not even really surprised. Of course it’s Joel and Jimmy who’d decide to bomb his birthday. (Ignore the fact that he rigged his birthday first.)

“Ah, Jim… Why is there a raid?”

“That was Scar,” both Mean Gills echo - and then, irritated, Martyn turns.

“No, don’t even talk to me right now, okay? You’ve *literally* ruined my birthday.”

“Yeah, no, I don’t -”

“You should feel bad,” Scott impresses, with that little smug look of his own, and chucks the wasted Weakness pot at Joel to boot.

Grian joins his teammates, pushing his sunglasses up on his head with what seems to be dejection. He’s probably just frustrated that he didn’t take the chance to stab somebody in the back while they were running from the blasts. “It’s already over.”

“But we saw it,” continues Jimmy, this time addressing their Nosy, Clocker, and be-TIEd onlookers, “he was gonna kill us all. He rigged it.”

The accusation leads to uproar. Scott is, of course, the first to jump to Martyn's defence. "He literally didn't!"

"He rigged the birthday party!"

"Jimmy, you were *with* him -"

"What do you mean?" Martyn protests, loud and performative, angling for the fight. "Literally nothing happened, it was just my birthday!"

"It was *all* your TNT falling from the sky," Scott backs him up.

Joel starts an equally loud offensive. "There was TNT underneath it all!"

"No, there wasn't!"

"There was, we *checked!*"

"Grian - Grian went down," adds Jimmy, "it was rigged underneath! The whole - guys, he was going to kill you all at the birthday party!"

Thank goodness, though, their audience don't seem to be convinced. Martyn emerges victorious from their (entirely correct) assertions of self-sabotage.

"*The* most intense explosion, and no one died," Grian ends up lamenting, "but yet if you *tickle* someone with just one single TNT minecart, that's it, you're dead."

"So, technically, guys, the Bad Boys just saved your life, thank you very much."

Martyn sends "one single TNT minecart" squarely in Grian's direction, just to show him. The instinct comes quickly to his fingers, the muscle memory of violence and of threat. It shakes, but doesn't blow.

“You lot have ruined my birthday, alright?” he repeats, giving his sword one last brandish as he backs off for real this time. “You’ve *ruined* my birthday.”

The Bad Boys do not show remorse - except for Joel, who’s promptly bogged off back unto whence he came, or something like that. Jimmy, though, is spoiling for a fight as ever. “Get him! Get him!”

“I didn’t ruin anything!”

“You wanna play?”

“Tango, Cleo, we should go,” Scott calls, distancing himself from the drama for once.

“Whatever, man,” says Martyn, pushing down the urge to meet the challenge, “whatever.”

Because, really, what kind of a birthday party was that?

Once he’s back home at the Coral Isles, Martyn puts those diamonds in his enderchest and takes a minute to breathe.

It’s fine that it didn’t work out, of course. Not every trap is going to. But he’d really hoped - and he’d been so reserved, to not let on - and he’s got *so* many ideas, the threads of possibilities expansive, crimson webbing strung across his mind, the deaths that he could cause if he only tried a little harder, precious seconds he could snatch -

Ugh. Something about it’s giving Martyn a bit of a twitch. Nobody even *died*, for goodness’ sake.

It’s fine. It’s fine. He just needs to get his kill another way.

He just needs a little more time.



LOOK IN THE MIRROR, WHAT DO YOU SEE?

WEN

Pearl has just finished digging out her trap when Bigb brings news of his unfortunate demise at the hands of the reds.

“They didn’t invite me to their team,” Pearl pouts.

Bigb jolts. “Why would they invite you?”

“I mean, I’m a red name too! I think *I* should be permitted to join in on murderous activities as well.” Pearl muses.

“That’s true, that’s true,” Bigb concedes, but he still looks hung up on his unfortunate death.

“I would’ve stopped them, if I were there,” Pearl assures her companion, patting him on his back. She doesn’t miss the way he tenses as her fingers graze the two dips between his shoulder blades, her own handiwork.

“Would you have really?” Bigb questions, tilting his head. Pearl hates the way his eyes bore into hers, forcing the truth out of her. She is unable to lie, and she hates it.

“It depends.”

She remembers the bang of a firework rocket. Berry bushes pricking at her fingers. Blood in her mouth, as she stumbles over her words– “*Bigb, you traitor, you coward–*”

But Bigb– the Bigb standing in front of her– is neither of those two things, so she swallows the metallic taste that still lingers in her mouth. Same body, different soul. “As your friend and *loyal* ally, no.” She casts her gaze around, making sure there are no eavesdroppers.

“As the Boogey…maybe.”

———

Grian shrieks, arms windmilling through the water. Behind him, the ravager is closing in.

Pearl watches. Like a cat watching its prey, she makes a split-second decision.

Grian had ridiculed her before her allies with that stunt he pulled with the button and the gravel. In her defense, she had no idea *she’d* put that trap there! Afterwards, when she confronted him in front of the Clockers, he had just shrugged. “Wasn’t my fault you put a button right in front of me and expected me to not push it.” He clapped Pearl on the back. “Seriously, Pearl. I thought you knew me better than that.”

That sentence— *I thought you knew me better than that*— hurt. Much more than Pearl was willing to let on. But it also gave her an idea.

So Pearl offers him a hand and helps him out of the water, pushing down the part of her that just wants him to drown. He looks quite like a sopping wet bird, with his hair plastered to his forehead and his red sweater clinging to his bony frame.

On the other side of the river, the ravager huffs in anger before charging into the water, scattering droplets everywhere.

“It can *swim*!” Grian yelps, scrambling for higher ground. Pearl hauls herself up the cliff after him, panting and laughing.

The curse coursing through her veins is yearning to break free as she watches Grian wring out his sweater, completely defenseless, his armour discarded on the grass. But her sword is heavy in her hands and made for someone of a larger stature. She’ll have to end him in a trap.

She feels Bigb's eyes on her back, silently encouraging her.

"Say, Grian," she starts, leaning forward. She already knows the answer, knows he cannot resist, but asks the question nonetheless for mere theatrics. "What do you say of a game?"

———

Grian knows he should not be following a red name into the woods alone, but as one could say, curiosity killed the cat. Plus, he's sorta indebted to her for helping him out of that river! It's just Pearl, after all. Pearl who is rational and reasonable and *totally* not an unhinged madwoman.

What a ridiculous proposal, that Pearl would be anything than reasonable.

He sneaks a closer look at her, but falters when he expects to see her face but he only sees the top of her head— mousy brown hair pinned back with a golden crescent hairclip. Two tiny space buns are perched on each side of her head, bound with dark elastics. There's something *off* about her hair, though— scratch that, there's something off about her whole *self*, something that Grian just can't quite pin down.

"Wait, Pearl, did you dye your hair?" He blurts out the question, immediately regretting it when Pearl stops dead in her tracks.

A hand flies up to her hair. "What?"

"No, it's just that— your roots are pink." Grian says. He tries to take a closer look, tries to figure out if it's just the silvery moonlight playing tricks on his eyes, but Pearl swiftly tugs her hood over her head. It's a very large hood, he notes. He doesn't remember it being this oversized on her— it hangs low, almost obscuring her eyes and draping her features in shadow.

"I may or may not have been experimenting with hairstyles," Pearl says evasively, regaining her composure. "Which is none of your business."

They start walking again.

———

Grian considers his odds.

His senses are tingling, warning him to not follow wherever Pearl takes him— it is most definitely a trap. Pearl said it was a game of chance, but he highly suspects it is rigged for him to lose. His precious belongings, or worse, his time.

But Grian is still coming off that high of killing Pearl and Timmy, and he is curious to see what Pearl concocted for him as payback. The possibility of her being the Boogeyman crosses his mind, but he brushes it off. After all, she had plenty of opportunities to kill someone and didn't.

A cold wind breezes through the trees, and Grian shudders. His clothes are still damp from his dip in the river, and the night air is not making it any better.

He dispatches a skeleton lurking under a tree with a few well-timed swipes of his sword. "Does this place have a monster infestation? There are so many mobs, and it's not even the new moon," he says, if only to break the awkward sheet of silence that fell over them. "I mean, where could they possibly be spawning from?"

"We're in a dark forest, there's bound to be monsters," Pearl replies, although she too seems perturbed. "Maybe we're just unlucky."

Grian wants to laugh, because he knows that there is no such thing as *luck* in this world. There is only the will of the—

He's lost his train of thought.

He settles for a "maybe," and they fall into silence once more.

When they come out into the clearing, they're met with a horde of zombies, just milling about the place.

"Oh," Pearl says, voice tinged with nervousness.

They make a run for it, zigzagging around the undead until they reach an oak door built into the cliffside. Pearl barrels into it with her full body and it swings open, sending her tumbling to the rough stone floor. Grian yelps as a rotting hand catches his side, and leaps towards the general direction of the door. It slams closed behind him.

The zombies pound at the flimsy oak, and Pearl swears. Cracks are already beginning to form in the door, so she blocks it off with dirt and turns to face Grian.

"There we go," she says, breathless. "That wasn't that hard, was it?"

Grian takes a moment to take in his surroundings. They're in a simple stone basement, lit only by two dim torches placed haphazardly on the wall. The ceiling is low, claustrophobic, and a set of cobblestone stairs lead deeper into the cave.

Grian peeks into a chest by the door, looking to see a hint of what would be in store for him, but it is mostly empty, just various types of stone and a bucket of lava and some rotten flesh. Pearl nudges him away and towards the stairs.

"After you, sir," she bows.

The staircase is surprisingly short, and at the bottom, there are a set of dark oak doors. He pushes them open, half expecting a TNT trap to be triggered, but there is only the usual creak of a door.

For what Pearl described as a 'gameshow setup', it is very rudimentary. It's a small room, for starters. The floors and walls are an uneven mix of cobble and smooth stone, and there is a large square pit in the middle,

deep and wide enough for four people. Dark oak buttons line one edge of the pit, and above it, a spruce sign reads in all caps *LET'S PLAY A GAME*. A frame in the corner of the pit holds a single piece of redstone.

"If you win the game, I have something to offer you," Pearl says, sidling up to him. Her voice has turned sugary sweet and persuasive, as if she were coaxing a dog to go outside.

"How do I play?" Grian asks. His fingertips are already tingling at the sight of the buttons, and he imagines pressing them, one by one, listening to their soft clicks.

"Here is the prize," Pearl says proudly, producing an enchanting table from her bag. "I bet you want it, I got it from..."

"An enchanting table?" Grian interrupts, recognizing the shiny thing in her hands. "But how do I play?" He's itching to push those buttons as soon as he can, but Pearl is still rambling on about the origins of the table. A flash of annoyance courses through him.

He loses patience. His fingers reach out, and he firmly presses the dark oak buttons,

one

at

a

time.

He's surprised by several things in brief succession.

First of all, the buttons cede almost immediately under his thumb— a sure sign of use, which surprises him, given that Pearl insinuated that he was the first to play the game.

Secondly, a hissing sound emanates from the corner covered by the item frame and it breaks. Lava begins to flow out almost immediately, slowly but steadily.

There is a brief but awkward pause, as both parties are too stunned to react.

Then, Pearl gasps, and the world starts moving again. “Oh— oh, you’re supposed to get in there—”

And last of all, Grian feels a kick in the small of his back and he tumbles forward, body twisting and flailing—

“No!” He lands knee-deep in the lava, fumbling for his sword. He swipes it in the direction of Pearl, but she leaps out of reach.

He laughs, incredulous, as he tries to jump out of the pit, but the lava drags down his feet and flames cloud his vision. His amusement fades when his health bar starts to decline rapidly, six hearts, five hearts, four hearts—

“Nono *no!*” He shrieks, hands desperately grabbing onto anything, nothing. His mind dissolves in a panic, all rational thoughts out of his mind. He can’t afford to die like this— he’s turning red in one minute and thirty-eight seconds— “I’ve actually got no blocks!”

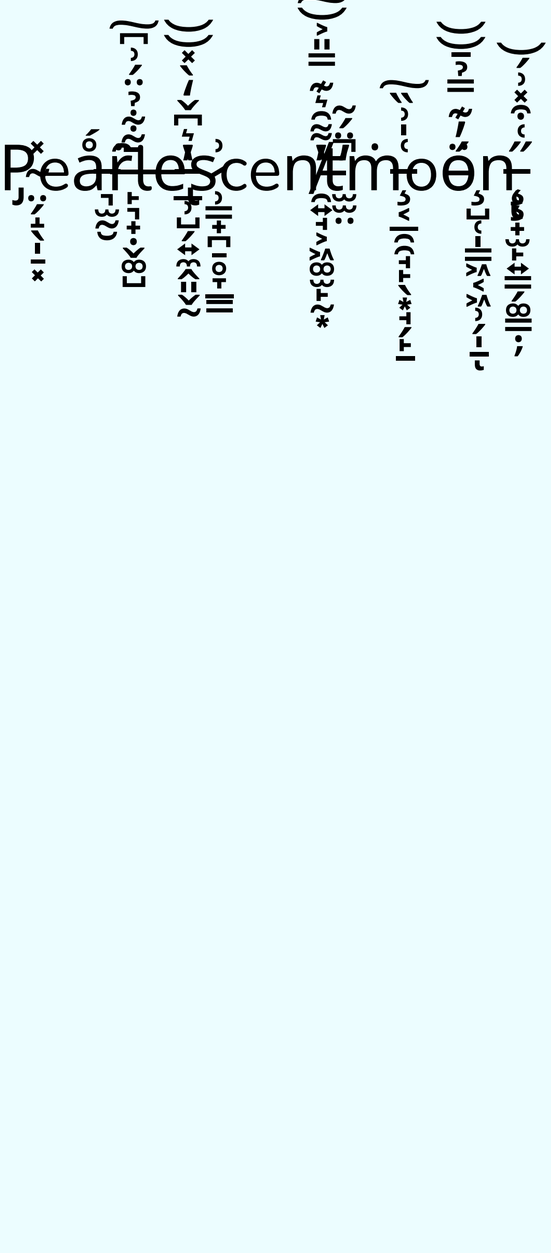
Three hearts.

His hands finally land on a couple of smooth orbs— Ender pearls, convenient for a quick getaway. He raises his head to look at Pearl again, aiming the pearls for the doorway, but for a single second, her face is someone else’s, someone unfamiliar yet haunting. He freezes.

Two hearts.

One heart.

Grian tried to swim in lava to escape Pearlescentmoon





GRIAN?







SILLY EUPHORIC GLOWING THING

ZIP ZAP

doom-doom

Grian's hands tremble as he grips the ladder leading up to SkyNet 2.0, calloused palms clinging to rough wood. His heartbeat thunders in his ribcage, rattling him to his core, his gut filled with rabbits burrowing tunnels through his intestines. He shuts his eyes and rests his head against the rung in front of him, taking a deep breath, the air feeling thick despite the altitude.

doom-doom

He exhales slowly, feeling his mind grow a little more still. He's been nervous and jumpy ever since the session began, like a cat when someone places a cucumber on the floor. It's not even the fact that he's already died on this ladder twice in the last half-hour that's getting to him. It's just— he and the bad boys are on *so little time*, and it's partially his fault. He had an obligation to fix it, he was *determined* to fix it, and what did he do?

He lost *two hours* falling off a ladder. He killed Jimmy by his *own hand*. They could have died *again* when Grian led them to the TIES base, all three of them on edge, the smallest movement making them twitch and stiffen and reach for their swords.

doom-doom

He takes another deep breath, eyes blinking open, and proceeds up the ladder.

He's gonna try and get Scott. For the bad boys.

It's not hard to spot the others, making their way across SkyNet 1.0 with crossbows and fireworks in hand. Waiting for an opportunity to kill.

doom-doom

There's Scott, Etho, Impulse, and Tango. They pause at a juncture. Grian's eyes widen. An opportunity? No. He can't believe his luck.

doom-doom

None of them look up.

doom-doom

"Oh, my heart's going."

doom-doom

Grian makes his way carefully along the thin dirt bridge, trying not to rush, trying not to trip over his own feet and plummet to the ground in his panic. (Not that he would ever do that. No, that's GoodTimesWithScar or Jimmy SolidarityGaming behaviour, that is.)

doom-doom

Oh, who is he kidding. He was the first one to fall off the ladder this morning.

The group beneath him still hasn't noticed him.

doom-doom

He sucks in a breath, trying to pinpoint their position. There's a giddiness beginning to cloud his mind, his heart racing. He peers over the edge, muttering to himself to keep himself from floating away, jitters turning his limbs to helium. And jelly. At the same time. He whispers to himself. "I think it's here. I think it's here!"

doom-doom

He closes his eyes and sucks in a breath. Long and slow and deliberate. Grounding himself. A cool breeze stirs in his hair as he lets it out, long and measured.

Time seems to slow.

He basks in the adrenaline of the morning.

“Right, can we— can we just do like, a little bit of meditation—“

“Calm! Calm—“

“Can we calm down, please? Can we just—“ Grian winces, feeling his stomach curling in on itself. Everything has gone so incredibly wrong. His heart feels like it might explode. “Ooough. Ooh dear. Oh Joel, I’m— I’m shaking.”

“I can’t believe we’ve— oh my gosh look at this,” Joel says, crouching over the bubble elevator and peering down at the arrow suspended at the top.

Grian sucks in a breath, the dread in his gut far too overwhelming to pay any mind to whatever Joel is saying. “Hold on, let’s just take stock here. We both fell, I fell off again, *then I killed Tim—“*

“You absolute fool!” Jimmy caterwauls as he emerges from the elevator, blonde hair absolutely plastered to his face, the picture of a pathetic wet puppy holding a very sharp sword. “I’m on 2 hours and 18 minutes!”

Grian sputters, unsure what else he can do. “I’m sorry—“

“And you lay that on me?!”

“I’m sorry!”

“That means we need to get some kills, ASAP,” Joel says, decisive.

“Wait—“ Jimmy starts, sounding nervous.

“Alright, listen listen listen listen listen,” Grian all but chants, bringing the boys in. “This isn’t how I wanted to start this session at all*—“*

“I was thinking about last session when you killed me like, twice, technically, so I thought— I’m just gonna shoot you off, I didn’t think you’d fall off the ladder, I’m not gonna lie, but I saw the particles and you did *die —” Jimmy rambles, eyebrows pulled together, frantic. He looks hopeless, and Grian feels it to his core.*

He runs a hand through his hair, his heart going. Oh, it’s going. “I need to get— I need to get a bucket of water in my inventory, this is ludicrous—”

“Are you— wait, so you’re telling me you both died at the start!?” Jimmy asks, almost accusatory.

Grian turns to face him, incredulous. “Yes!”

“Yes,” comes the slightly more solemn echo from Joel.

“No you didn’t, that was a jo— that was a joke, right?”

“We both died!” Grian hisses, the tension in his chest bubbling towards the surface. “I died again because of you, and then you died because you somehow had low hearts!” And if he neglects to mention that he did in fact stab Jimmy with a sword, well. Everyone present realises it anyway.

Timmy swallows, bringing his hands to the bridge of his nose. “Right, guys. I really don’t want to fall apart.”

“Okay, can we take a deep breath in?”

“Let’s get a bit of air, let’s breathe, we need to meditate—“

Grian swallows, leading the group as he sucks in a long inhale. His heart is

racing, his jitters not really going anywhere, to be honest.

Timmy's voice is low and flat as he exhales: "I'm panicking."

Joel swallows. "Ah, alright, well—"

"I think we just got a little bit flustered," Grian says tentatively, trying to calm himself as much as the others. He feels filled with bees. "We got a little bit out of sync."

"We'll be fine. Good guys at heart, good guys at heart."

"Can we? Okay, look— our hands are cold, we're a bit jittery—"

His mind races, and he closes his eyes as he allows himself to feel the intense anxiety that's taken root in his chest like a plant clinging to a harsh cliff face. He can feel every beat of his heart as his head swims with anxiety, past and present tied together through the frenetic flapping of butterfly wings and alarm bells still wreaking havoc in his stomach. Something about TNT and traps and nervous energy and he just can't let it go.

He continues releasing the breath, slowly.

"What's going on here?"

Grian is sweating. He looks Martyn dead in the eye, a baked potato in his hands. "Potatoes."

"I don't trust you— where did Etho go?" Martyn's head whips around to survey the rest of his and Ren's base. "He's the only one here I don't have eyes on right now and I saw him lurking."

"He's with Scar over here..."

Grian's heart thunders in his ribcage as Skizz inadvertently leads Martyn

away, and takes that as his cue to skedaddle. He slips out the front door, and quickly digs himself into a hole under the entrance, shaking. "Maybe I could trojan this thing. If I'm quick, I could set this up. I have to be really—"

He breaks off mid-sentence, sucking in a sharp breath, heart-rate spiking. Water. "Oh, of course there would be water right here?!"

He runs a hand through his hair, reaching for his materials. Enchanting table, observer, rails.

Everything is going smoothly. He hopes. His heart is going, faster than a hare. His hands shake, but they move quickly, as if they know exactly where they need to be. "Can I build this at top speed? I think I can."

His voice is tight, on the verge of a squeak, as he mutters to himself to stay calm. He needs to be fast, he needs to be careful, he— he hopes Scar is keeping the others busy. His heart rate spikes at the thought of something going wrong on Scar's end. This could already be a disaster for all he knows, he has no idea *what's going on inside Ren and Martyn's base. His lungs constrict. "This is so dangerous, quickly! Panicking, I'm panicking. I'm—"*

He steps back.

It's done.

"That's it. Okay, it's set up. If anyone touches this, it's game over."

He sets up the cart, his chest feeling tight, as if his heart has been pulled as taut as a bow being strung. He grits his teeth as he pushes down a wave of vertigo.

Their numbers are beginning to dwindle.

With each death, with each name that falls, Grian checks the list of players. Sees it get smaller and smaller.

His heart quivers.

“Right, who’s left?”

Bdubs rocks forward onto the balls of his feet, Impulse’s blood fresh on his hands. “So, BigB’s next, huh?”

Grian feels himself grow still. “Wait, Tango’s out as well?”

“Yes!” Bdubs sounds unperturbed.

“Er— that’s, er—“

“Oh wow,” Scar says softly.

“I’m—“ the word ‘scared’ gets caught in Grian’s throat. He is. He is scared. He can’t admit it, not to Bdubs. Possibly not even to Scar. He feels dizzy. “I’m starting to get a little sweaty,” he says quietly.

He doesn’t like where this is going. He’s the last yellow. He’s in trouble. He could win. His world is spinning.

“This great friendship that’s been soldered together with a clock can take down them all,” Scar is saying, all bravado.

“We can take down them all!” Bdubs echoes.

Grian swallows, his mouth dry. “And then each other,” he says faintly.

His hands shake as he adds TNT to the equation, barely trusting himself as he gently lowers it into the cart.

“Scar, I don’t really like this—“ Grian’s heart flutters in his chest as they walk back to the desert, breaching the ring of cactus around the edge. He hates this. He hates every part of this. He feels like a live wire.

“Dude, we’ve been through too much, I couldn’t betray you in the end, I hope you know that.” Scar glances back at him, sheepish in the midday sun. He outstretches a hand as Grian approaches the lava moat, guiding him over as he navigates the cobblestone path through on shaky legs.

“I was hoping you gonna say that, but I—” Grian says weakly, voice trembling. “A lot of the time, I was, er. I was thinking, ‘when are they gonna turn on me?’”

“Well I’ll tell you what,” Scar says, and his voice warm, reassuring. Grian feels something in his chest beginning to unravel.

And Scar goes on: “Where did all these dogs come from?”

Grian chokes on a laugh. “Joel,” is all he says.

doom-doom

He pulls his hand back. He takes another deep breath and holds it. The air is still.

“Let’s see.”

He lights the TNT.

And he pushes the cart off the edge.

The silence is chilling as he waits for it to fall. The minecart grows smaller and smaller, until it’s impossible to make out against the landscape below. He bites his lip, pulling another out of his inventory and rapidly sending it after the first, unable to stand *watching* and waiting for another second, murmuring to himself: “Let’s just chuck another one for prosperity.”

(And he thinks, the moment the word leaves his tongue, that he meant *posterity*, and chuckles quietly to himself. Oh, multiple seasons spent with Scar *may* have rubbed off on him.)

He bites his lip as he peers over the edge, watching the minecart sink lower and lower.

“What do we reckon? Anything—”

BOOM

Before he can finish his sentence, there’s a deafening *crash* that roars in his ears, his heart lurches as the precarious dirt bridge under his feet shakes with the impact. For a few moments he can’t hear anything but the thundering rumble of the impact before the smoke clears.

>ImpulseSV blew up
>Smajor1995 blew up
>Tango blew up
>Etho blew up

His eyes widen, and the nerves in his stomach *explode* outwards, adrenaline rushing to his head and sending goosebumps across his skin, head tingling with absolute elation. As smoke curls into the air, ash and debris settling on the ground, Grian *shrieks* with glee, pumping a fist in the air.

“AAHH-HAHAHAA-*YES*!”

“aHAHAHA!”

He screams so loud the universe seems to crunch and crackle around him, code distorting and peaking. He’s laughing so hard he expels all the air from his lungs, on the edge of woozy. He keels over, sucking in a breath, his next exhale as loud as the last:

“AH-HA-HA *YES*!”

“OH MY GOD.”

He claps in delight, feeling the tension that's wracked his limbs all morning dissipate. His cheeks hurt. His throat's going to hurt. He doesn't care. A voice echoes in his head: *oh, baby a quad!*

"WHAOOOOOOOH YES!"

"YES!"

"YOU DID NOT JUST DO THAT."

The chat is *flying*. He's flying. He grins madly, screeching. "*YES!* HA-HA-HAAA!!"

"HA!"

"You're a monster!"

He claps happily, giddy, swaying where he stands. His heart flutters in his chest. He closes his eyes and breathes in deeply, head tipped back to face the sun.

"You're a monster."

It glows on his skin, and he laughs, a silly, euphoric, glowing thing.

abinpup

KILL ME
KILL ME
L ME

Mayloony
23

When you reach half an hour, I'll let you kill me.

Deal.

DID YOUR POPPY EVER WILT (BECAUSE MINE ONLY BLOOMED) CACY

"What about... when you reach half an hour, you can kill me?"

—

Scott walked towards the end of the bridge in the distance, trying not to bend too many stalks of wheat. It wouldn't be very nice to ruin another person's primary food source, even if he was about to kill you. (The wheat brushed up against some exposed skin, ticklish and soft like Jimmy used to be.)

Jimmy walked just behind him, moving through the wheat effortlessly in a way that only came with experience. He made it look so easy, fluidly twisting around the stalks in a way that Scott was *not* thinking way too much about, thank you very much. *It's like a dance*, he thought. "It's like that scene in..." he said instead.

"Oh, Mario!" Joel said.

Scott blinked. Jimmy snorted. Despite that absolutely *awful* joke, Scott was a little grateful. The stupidity easily distracted him from his thoughts (which he was still claiming were not excessively of Jimmy. Even with his own adamant denial, Scott was not convincing himself). "No! Of Mice and Men! Like that one! He's taking me out to the barn!"

Jimmy grinned, and Scott struggled to not let his eyes stray again from the wheat (it was the same color as Jimmy's hair). Some part of him wanted to go back to a time when he didn't have to stop himself from staring until Jimmy's face turned pink and he had to turn away, flustered. Some part of him wanted to go back to a time when Jimmy wouldn't just not ask for Scott's death, he'd refuse it when offered unless Scott *begged* him.

Then Jimmy spoke. "I'm taking him out to the barn. Yeah. Look at the

flowers."

Scott trailed his hands over the top of the wheat, a movement too delicate for what was about to come. The wheat wasn't nearly as soft as the poppy he'd tucked behind Jimmy's ear oh so long ago, nor the grass they'd laid on and talked until the sun went down and they simply stargazed, content in each other's company.

"No, wait, look at the rabbits. That was it."

Scott felt like flowers would be more appropriate, Jimmy finally acknowledging what had happened between them. He didn't know whether to be relieved that Jimmy was so clearly moved on (a salve on the wound that was Third Life) or hurt that he thought it was nothing (a knife twisted straight back in). "Wow," Scott said, pushing down his thoughts and playing along. "Look at the rabbits."

The two of them walked on in a thick silence that Scott was desperate to break. He stayed quiet, though; Jimmy had put up a wall that didn't make "comfortably existing in each other's company" an easy feat to accomplish. That caused Scott more pain than he'd ever admit.

They slowed as they reached the platform where Scott knew would be killed. He went straight to the edge, then slipped off his boots to put them in his inventory. No use breaking them when he fell and wasting a perfectly good pair of boots. He looked over the edge, at the dizzying drop and the ground far below, then turned to face Jimmy.

Hesitation creased Jimmy's brow, something Scott never would have noticed if he hadn't spent weeks taking in every aspect of Jimmy he could (Scott could probably truthfully claim he knew more about Jimmy than the man himself, but he also wasn't looking to describe everywhere Jimmy had freckles). Jimmy swallowed, grip on his crossbow loose, and asked "Are you sure about this?", voice unsure with something unidentifiable softening the edges. Scott wanted to throw up, insides twisting themselves to cause him the most discomfort they possibly could.

Scott ignored it, and nodded. "Yup. Even though you didn't say 'love you', I'll still accept it." He tried to lessen the bite to his sour tone, but then again, he was known for being petty.

He stood at the edge of the dirt, watching as Jimmy raised his crossbow, grip no longer shaky, and pointed it directly below Scott's ribs.

He didn't know what to feel anymore.

Should he smile, be happy that his death would allow Jimmy to survive for just a little longer?

(It was only a half-hour, after all.)

Should he glare and frown, bitter that his time was being wasted on the canary in the coal mine?

(It wasn't wasted, *never* wasted, not when it came to Jimmy.)

Should he be nostalgic for the times they had together that Jimmy refused to acknowledge now?

(Did Jimmy forget? Was he afraid of what had happened between them?)

Scott didn't quite know what he felt for the man in front of him. It was sideways to the love he'd given before, upside-down to any sort of hatred that the red in his eyes dictated he must feel, to the left of anything that could be mistaken for friendship.

He had no choice, really, but to let the emotions he couldn't identify swirl around in his gut. It was kind of like a smoothie, individual feelings taken and forced into one, every individual sentiment indistinguishable from the others.

Then Jimmy said "Appreciate that," and his arrow pierced straight through to Scott's back. Pain flooded his senses, and he pitched over the edge of

the bridge.

It was a long fall. Two arrows cut through the air as he fell, whistling as they both missed him. If his head wasn't filled with the rushing of wind and his body wasn't focused on the horrendous sensation of having an arrow through his insides he would've had enough strength to think a bit more as his body rapidly approached the ground.

As it was, Scott was too close to death to have the ability to untangle the emotions that had knotted themselves together so tight he couldn't tell what was what.

The complicated mess of feelings bled out with his consciousness, and by the time Scott hit the ground he didn't have anything left to feel.

A CANARY'S FINAL FLIGHT

FANCYFENNEL

"Let Tim do it. He needs the time."

It's a simple statement from Grian, a kind offer; it's a teammate looking after another with the best in mind.

"Yes, Jim! Push it, push it!" Joel is cheering him on. Adrenaline rushes through Jimmy's veins as the prospect of more time, of staying in the game, fuels him forward.

The minecart is set. He nudges it forward and -

"I've got it!"

- and as the metal pushes against his hands, the smell of gunpowder from the TNT fresh in his senses, he grins...

and then he slips.

"I've fallen!"

It isn't fair. He's so close; almost there, he can still detect the grimy feel of redstone dust on his hands. But it was over.

Jimmy feels the sand slipping through his fingers as he falls. His time's running out rapidly. The seconds ticking by in his head are drowned out by the sound of screaming, but he can't pay attention to anything. He's a twisted Icarus with golden yellow wings in a comical mockery of birds that limply flutter behind him.

Birds symbolize freedom, so why is he still trapped after all this time? His wings have been clipped, and this feeling of the air through feathers is just a cruel mockery of flight where he can never gain altitude.

Is that his brain, or is it the wind whipping him as he falls, that sparks the idea of him soaring through open skies, free to be on his own?

Why is it taking so long?

Water hits his face, his tears flying upwards and he screams, twisting around in the air to look up. He sees laughter and grins from the sky; the Watchers are feasting off the torment in his face, and the thoughts his mind has made and keeps making as a fragile attempt to keep a shard of his sanity in his final seconds.

When children are young, there's a pit filled with creativity in their minds that only they have access to. Jimmy has a theory that the Watchers are just that: children. The twisted games he's found himself in four times now are products of reaching into the pit and pulling out a loose idea. The players in the games are just little toys; figurines, with all the bells and whistles to them. The bread bridge is just a line of bricks and Skynet is made of slabs of wood, a set piece in a backyard battle reenactment that somebody had knocked over. Whether that had been on purpose or not, it nudged the figure of him just a bit askew...

And that cost him his life.

He could lie to himself and say that it's all coincidence, how he always gets out first. He knew the truth, he was a canary in a coal mine; he sacrifices himself, albeit unwillingly, to warn others of danger that's already known and looming over them but that he cements into certainty.

It's been four times now. Surely they know. Surely he can stop the cycle, or at least last a moment longer, feeling the taste of desperation when reality sets in, when the first player falls and the metaphorical bag of crap hits the fan.

What would it be like to not be the warning? How would it feel to not be known as just the marker for when the endgame began?

… His mind’s making excuses again. For all the fear about time running out, he seems to have a grand supply of it at the exact moment where it doesn’t matter.

His focus shifts and he looks at Joel and Grian. His friends. The Bad Boys. (Such a stupid name.) His sunglasses must have fallen off in the fall; he’s able to see his friends without the tinted glass altering his final image of them. Not the final image, he has to remind himself again; this isn’t the end forever. This was a game at the end of the day and they’re all just goofing around, having fun. The rules and systems thrust on them messed with his brain so much that artificial fear was as real as it could be. Teaming with Joel and Grian, two of the fiercest competitors, somehow lightened the stress. They can at least make it a fun game, right? Why not call yourselves the Bad Boys? Why not break the basic rules of the world, tempting death in a game titled for life, like dangling a carrot in front of an eager pig?

He knows that this isn't the end of his story. Soon enough, he’ll be back again, the same people with different stories to spin, a different game to play with a different life.

Is it even fair to call it a life if his choices don’t change the outcome? Maybe that’s what the Bad Boys had been trying to say: that despite the odds, predictions, and anything the Watchers could ever foresee, their vehement passion to not abide by the rules, to not be inert in their own destiny was a giant ‘screw you’ to the universe, not just the Watchers but to the entire concept of life and death and the power that they hold.

The Watchers think they’ve won, that trapping people in games where the prize is to become them and is a great honor. They’re just a bunch of narcissistic oblivious children thinking that the greatest honor is to become just like them.

So this wasn’t him dying. Jimmy has a smirk on his face, he wasn’t ending things on a stupid error, he wasn’t just the warning. He just saw through the shabby, childish game enough to get himself out of it before friends

turned on each other.

Twisting his body, chest facing down, arms outstretched... Jimmy closes his eyes.

He hears the thud as he hits the ground, his mind almost instantly ejected from his body to watch the remainder of the game.

His soul aches, his head is spinning, but that all doesn't matter.

In his mind he’s soaring.

And it’s just a game, right?





carrotchipper


KAZE
HITA

SKIZZ...

YOURE A STAND-UP GUY I APPRECIATE YOU, I LOVE EVERYTHING ABOUT YOU BUT...

I WISH

YOU WERE BETTER

AT

THIS GAME.

21:53

Good bye!




Linktoo



+30 MINUTES

You killed mom!!!

- 1 HOUR









A MOMENT OF CLARITY

Tango fell to his death.

That was all you needed to know.

He was an *idiot*, running around with half a heart left chasing for a bit more extra time, not looking where he was going, and falling three whole blocks to his demise. A stupid, needless death for no higher cause. That was it.

...

Well, maybe there was a bit more to it.

There were 4 things that stuck out.

1- Tango was desperate

It was completely for his own gain, alright?

He spawned after having been killed by Scar and losing another hour—he had *14* minutes, ticking down second by second on that taunting little timer—and something else took over. A gnawing, mind-numbing desperation for life that coursed through his entire body, flooding his veins and permeating through his lungs and into every breath he let out. He wanted to live just a little longer, to make it a little further, and for that cause he set out to find a loose body to take some time from.

There were too many people on Entertainment Mountain—*oh how time was ticking*—and no one by the TIES tower. His searching grew more frantic and his mutterings more illegible until—there.

Scar. That was the perfect kind of retribution—taking back the half hour

Scar got from him. Gaining some sort of satisfying closure; revenge, as much as this server allowed it

But that was too nice for Tango, wasn't it?

He was desperate—so *badly* desperate—and desperate people do stupid things. Pure adrenaline takes over and things slip out of the mind. Like healing. Taking a bite of the steak that he kept in his inventory, visible in the periphery of his vision—noise to his driven mind that was best pushed away. A stupid oversight that cost him his life.

In the few seconds he was in the air, he knew he wasn't going to make it out alive. That this would be the end for him. A winding journey that ended with a last grasp for life, born of stupidity and selfishness.

But—

2- Tango felt guilty

There was an underlying desire throughout the chase to fulfil Skizz's last wish, to have a member of TIES make it to the final three. A need to gain a little more time, make it just a bit further to honour the wants of his dead friend.

A futile attempt, all things considered, with only 12 minutes and sup-par fighting skills to his name, but an attempt nonetheless.

Guilt replaced adrenaline now, unspoken apologies forming at his lips, made with a dying man's last breath. Apologies to Skizz, to Etho, to Impulse. Apologies for not being able to stay alive, for leaving, for going after Scar instead of finding one of them—maybe then his time could've gone to good use instead of being wasted, sands of life scattered across the pockmarked hills. If only his mind were a little clearer, his emotions not so strong.

But it was always what-ifs, wasn't it?

3- It was always going to end like this.

He was cursed. It wasn't nearly as noticeable as Jimmy's—always dying first—but, well, that was the point, right?

Tango died unnoticed. Irrelevant. People would grieve—of course they would—but his death wouldn't affect anything. It didn't *matter*. It wouldn't cause any sort of impassioned killing in his name. It wouldn't cause the beginning of the end. It wouldn't happen as the deciding moment in a tense battle, or in an emotional moment for another, or ever become some point of friction.

Never anything of importance.

He died alone, usually. Or no one was watching. He died to avoidable causes, or wasn't the most important to die. One of many killed during the battle for Dogwarts; exploding his own TnT minecart trap while trying to set it up; overshadowed by the death omen— and not even the one to be killed, just a victim of circumstances. And now a measly 3 block drop; the culmination of a run of desperation and a want to prove himself.

How pathetic.

4- Tango tried so hard

He made it to his inevitable end, here, a few inches from the ground, regrets piling up like deaths caused by Skynet, but, despite it all, he'd *tried*.

He'd loved so hard. Protected his friends and died for them. Given time and gained time. Built and gathered. He'd done *so much*, and that had to be worth something, right? The TIES tower was his creation— as crooked as it may be— and it gave them protection and a strategic position for a lot of the game, as well as a home to call their own.

All his efforts, all amounting to this.

Time slowed down as the ground came nearer— milliseconds going by at an eighth of their speed— and Tango was able to take one last breath, for his team.

His team, who stuck by him like he stuck by them.

Impulse, who stayed loyal to the group and denied boogey kills on them and delighted in blowing things up. Who laughed about crooked towers and missing blocks. Who joined in silly plans with the rest and made suggestions and put all his heart into it.

Etho, who built mob farms that were perfect for traps and brought his dysfunctional family drama to them. Who helped blow up bridges and argued about weaponry. Who always had your back even if he disappeared at odd hours and had silly opinions on code words.

And... Skizz. Skizz, the first of them to go. Who kept up a positive attitude even after having the first two deaths of the game, who complimented everyone even if they'd killed him. Who took Tango's yellow life when he asked, and gave up his last, *short*, minutes to allow Etho to have more time. Who rallied them to go blow up Bread Bridge and build up Skynet and start a wave of chaos and explosions.

This was his final resting place, at the base of Entertainment Mountain. He'd see his friends again once they died and joined him in the sky. But, for now, he let the wind rush through his ears and the smell of grass filter through— with an undertone of explosion— and closed his eyes.

A rumble of thunder sounded through the arena.

Tango ran out of time.



EIGHT MINUTES

ZEPHANIAH GRAINS

Cleo hits the ground. The ground hits Cleo. Their skin tears. Everything in their body shatters. The moment before the pain hits, shards of bone puncture already-dead flesh like broken glass.

They blink into respawn, livid, red. Nine minutes and twenty one seconds left to live.

The only thing left to do is kill.

Pearl is still up on the ladder where she pushed Cleo off, so Cleo ignores Scar and darts underneath, aims their crossbow up, fires. They don't climb back up, though. They've got that much common sense left.

The rocket scatters points of white light across the night sky as it explodes, completely off-target. Well, Cleo's never claimed to be a good shot. Their head is buzzing, familiar, red-limned laugher trying to shake loose from their throat, seconds ticking down. Scar says something. It doesn't really matter what.

Nine minutes seven seconds. Nine minutes six seconds.

Grian says something. It sounds like it's about a betrayal, but it doesn't really matter what. Cleo fires upward, and misses, and misses, and misses, scattering color across the sky in pinks and whites, as conversation buzzes behind them, shouting, explosions in the air, their feet on the ground, their bones in their body. It smells like gunpowder, and blood, but of course it does.

Cleo fires. Scar starts shouting, a long string of *no*'s, and maybe it does matter what, as Scott touches down with a frothy sort of splash in front of Cleo and gets a rocket skimming past his face for his troubles, exploding into bright magenta.

Scar. “You can’t shoot a man in the back!” Scar objects from around the hill, remarkably conversational for the subject matter, so Cleo ignores him and focuses on Scott, breathless, spitting water out of his mouth.

“*Cleo,*” Scott complains, soaking their right legwarmer as he steps up beside them, “why’re you shooting *me?*”

Eight minutes fifty six seconds.

Cleo apologizes, vaguely sincerely, then skips to the important part. “I have eight minutes.”

Scar is complaining about something in the distance, still. It doesn’t sound important. Cleo’s heart is red, unbeating, alive and not-alive. And seconds fall as sand.

Eight minutes fifty three seconds.

“Eight minutes?” says Scott, vaguely uninterested, then runs off after Grian.

That’s about when lightning strikes. It writes a white line in the sky, build limit to dirt, touching down nearby, blinding, and thunder peals a name with the force of a thousand-thousand rockets. Scar.

Cleo, feeling a little cliché about it, sees red.

“*Grian,*” scolds Scott, disappointed but entirely unsurprised. Cleo charges after him, haste sending them stumbling down the foothills of Entertainment Mountain, sword heavy in their hand, decayed flesh slipping against solid bone.

Grian has his shield up to meet them. He’s slightly singed, laughing red-limned, bloodied, eyes wild, fending off Scott in a desperate backstep. Cleo more crashes into him than attacks, then stumbles back to swap their sword for their crossbow when they lose track of themself in the melee.

Eight minutes forty seconds.

“Pearl!” Grian shouts. “Do something about this!”

Pearl shouts back “I’m coming!” and then she and Big B are both there, axe and sword gleaming blue in the twilight, advancing on Cleo. This is unfair, probably. If Cleo had a working heart, it would be beating fast, but instead all they have is falling sand, and frigid skin, and bone.

They load their crossbow.

The ground is solid beneath their feet. Rage colors their vision crimson, sweeps fire through still blood.

Eight minutes thirty seven seconds.

Pearl swings, and they shoot, the rocket’s close-range explosion lighting the battlefield with magenta sparks, filling the air with smoke. Grian cheers on his squad. Scott complains about the squad. Big B is on them as they backstep, sword slicing through rotten flesh, and they fire again, magenta, and Grian’s got a bow out, and who *knows* where Scott is.

Eight minutes thirty one seconds.

Pearl’s axe comes down. It cleaves through Cleo’s skull, scattering flecks of bone and carving through brain with an enchanted ease, tearing through an eye-socket. Cleo feels it distantly, a brutal absence, the brush of air against long-dead neurons, exposed bone, something that might have been pain if they weren’t already a corpse fifty times over.

Eight minutes thirty seconds.

The hourglass shatters.

Sensation thins to nothing. Cleo is Cleo, all of themself, liquid, beyond themself, dead in a thousand-thousand different ways but still around,

still Cleo, still not-alive.

They drift, for a moment. They float. They exist in the moment of their latest violent death, bone and scattered sand, and they exist as every other death, and as every other Cleo, as a laughing witch and a scheming sculptress, as Cleos-that-were and Cleos-yet-to-be, liquid, not-alive, beyond themself, within themself.

Then they draw back into themself, suspended without bones or flesh or glass above the battlefield, beside the clock tower. They exist, transparent, not red.

“Okay, that was cool,” they admit, then think about it a bit more and laugh. “That was cool. That was deserved.”

Someday they should probably learn not to run headfirst into fights they’re bound to lose. Or maybe not. It’s not like they play these games to win, and it’s always more fun to let the red-limned laughter bubble up from their throat and escape into the air. It’s always fun to let loose a little. Indulge the instinct to kill.

Scar’s laughter drifts towards them on the wind, pitch distorted by distance and death. After a moment Cleo can pick out Bdubs, too, and others more distantly. They grin, and laugh again, bright against the open sky.

Then they float upwards, not alive, not red, not anything but Cleo, and go find their friends in the audience.



OH

YOU CAN SHOOT THEM!

HERE'S THE THING ABOUT BEING BEYOND THE VEIL...

I WAS WRONG!

I WAS SO WRONG!

WE'RE ALREADY DEAD.

BEYOND THE VEIL

CL

The rules of the game can’t be broken, but they can be bent.

That’s what brings Pearl, Big B, and Grian to a barren hilltop in the middle of the night as Grian explains his trick for getting across the world border.

Pearl is exhausted after their many trips up to, down from, and across Skynet, and she can tell her allies feel the same. They’re all covered in dirt, blood, and scrapes. Big B is restless, constantly checking over his shoulder and shifting his weight from foot to foot. Seeing him so nervous only makes the pit in her own stomach worse.

Grian is better at hiding his anxiety, but it’s still there in the ways his hands twitch as he sets down a dispenser.

She’s hanging a lot of hope on Grian being able to pull this off, that there really is a way beyond the border.

Pearl reaches her hand out towards the barrier in question. There’s no surface there, nothing to actually touch, except maybe a slight buzz of magical energy. She still feels air under her fingertips, but it’s as unyielding as a solid slab of stone. Diagonal bands of teal light inch along the border, casting eerie shadows across her hand.

Cleo’s blood is under her fingernails. She wants more.

The click of the dispenser going off snaps her attention back to Grian’s contraption. A dark oak boat sits on a puddle of water, split in half by the border. Grian climbs in and rows through like it’s nothing.

Pearl gasps. “That’s so cheaty. I love it.”

Big B laughs, a look of slight confusion on his face. “So wait, what?”

Pearl guesses it’s her turn now.

She drops a boat in its condensed item form into the dispenser. She flicks the lever. Nothing happens. Did she already make a mistake? No, she flicks it again and the dispenser does its magic, conjuring a whole boat in front of her.

She lowers herself down into the boat and her left shoulder passes through the border without her even trying. She feels that slight current of energy again, a little stronger this time.

She pushes off the ground with one oar and pulls forward with the other, with the usual gracelessness of rowing a boat on dry land. The border is closer and closer and then with a shock of static electricity throughout her whole body, she’s on the other side.

Once out of her boat, she swings her axe down to break it back into an item. The diamond blade bounces off the wood without even leaving a mark.

Grian goes back to get Big B and the pair row through triumphantly.

Once they’re all on the other side, Grian lets them in on a wonderful secret. “Here’s the thing about being beyond the veil,” he says, “we’re already dead.” There’s a glint of mischief in his dark eyes.

Grian does always have a flair for the dramatic, but when he swings a sword at her to demonstrate, it hits her with about as much force as a feather. She attempts an axe swing back at him and then Big B. It similarly fails to connect. Her whole body feels a bit numb, now that she thinks about it.

Her time is still ticking away, but she feels like she can finally breathe instead of thinking how much she wants to rip someone’s throat out with her teeth.

As Grian demonstrates that they can still break blocks and damage mobs inside the border, she gives Big B a conspiratorial smile.

He grins back, his face lighting up under his war paint.

They’re here. They’re really here, where even her standing on this grass should be an impossibility.

Maybe being the last ones standing isn’t so impossible either.

Grian forges ahead. Pearl follows behind him, with Big B after her.

Grian swerves too far from the border and winces like he’s been punched, despite there being nothing around.

Pearl can’t blame him because she immediately makes the same mistake. There’s no way to know when you’ve gone too far, only the sudden phantom pain. Why would there be? They’ve already ignored the universe’s equivalent of a giant flashing sign that says “Don’t go here!”. If you die from going farther out, that’s just paying the price.

So Pearl hugs the border. She reaches her hand towards it and from this side her fingers pass through it as easily as if it really was just air.

She draws her hand back and slings her axe over her shoulder.

This might be one of the best ideas Grian has ever had.

It really does feel like cheating. The play is almost over and they’re sneaking around backstage instead of finishing their scene. It’s invigorating, the feeling of a trick well played, of breaking the world apart at the seams.

The trio keeps on walking. As they leave a spruce forest for a rocky plateau, Pearl watches two spiders climb the border, each of their eight legs waving as if they were swimming in mid air. There’s something

almost hypnotic to the motion.

“We obviously can’t spend the next few hours here, but-” Grian breaks off in surprise when he sees the spiders.

“I don't know about you, but I could spend the next few hours here.” Pearl replies.

Grian laughs at the spiders and Big B lets out an uncertain “oh”.

Grian runs ahead. Big B stays back with her. One hand grips the hilt of his sword.

His red eyes meet hers with a pained smile and he says “Well you know, Pearl, I can't- I can't.”

She can’t acknowledge the seriousness in his voice because that would mean breaking the spell. Big B can’t be almost out of time. They can’t be anything other than safe here.

So she laughs and runs on ahead.

“That’s true.” She admits quietly.

A little while later Pearl and her allies reach the ocean. She dives in, now leading the charge ahead of Grian. Big B still hangs towards the back with very reasonable caution.

Swimming in full plate armor is about as easy as rowing a boat on land, but Pearl makes do. She spots a school of tropical fish and kills one with her axe only for its body to drift out of reach in the current.

It probably would have tasted terrible anyway.

She pops her head back above the surface. Behind all the bamboo and sugarcane, the Mean Gills' base is deserted. The beach house has certainly seen better days. Half of the foundation is scarred and splintered from TNT blasts and the porch is littered with broken glass.

Scott and Martyn are probably still up on Skynet, which means their crops are free for the taking.

Stealing from them one more time can't hurt, right?

Pearl tears wheat and carrots from the soil. Most of them go flying out of reach farther inside the border, but she manages to keep hold of a few.

The group briefly discusses where the Mean Gills might be and then all get a good laugh when Grian drops his loaf of bread in the ocean.

As they approach the corner of the world, Grian points towards the TIES base. "Scott's clocked us."

The Mean Gills and what's left of TIES are spread out behind the squat base of the stone tower and its defaced bowtie. Etho sits on a horse, watching them from the path. Martyn and Impulse charge down the steps towards the beach while Scott cuts across the hill.

Pearl swims on ahead, watching as their enemies take position on top of dirt and stone eyesore of Etho's mob farm. She can't can't wait to see the look on Scott's face when he realizes they're invincible.

Scott stands right at the edge and peers down at them, his bow in hand. His clothes are tattered and a bit singed. There's grim determination in his eyes as he nocks an arrow and pulls back the bowstring.

"Hello!" Pearl smiles up at him as cheerfully as if they were meeting up for lunch rather than trying to kill each other.

"Hi!" Scott fires. The arrow misses as Big B echoes her hello.

“How’s it going?” Pearl says, just as brightly.

Scott responds with another arrow.

It hits, piercing her armor and lodging just above her heart.

The pain is even worse because it’s unexpected. Grian was wrong. You can try to bend the rules as much as you want, but they will snap back into place like a rubber band.

“Ow! What? They can get us!” She cries out.

They barely even had a plan, just a naive hope that they could hurt their enemies without getting hurt themselves.

The fight breaks out in earnest, arrows and shouts flying with abandon.

Pearl dives towards the seafloor and grabs fistfuls of the arrows that miss, barely noticing the ones that find purchase in her body.

“Oh no, I’m dead.” Big B says matter of factly.

Pearl lets out a horrified gasp as she sees his body dissolve into smoke.

Adrenaline propels her through the water. Scott and Impulse congratulate Martyn on his kill. If she could she’d strike them all down right then and there to avenge him.

But Scott and Impulse keep shooting at her and she has no way to fight back. She can barely pay attention to what’s going on through the pain.

Where did Etho go?

Where did Grian go?

If only she could just swim a little farther.

The seawater turns pink with her blood. The armor that failed to protect her is now dragging her towards the bottom. She tries to breathe but her lungs only fill with water and sand.

In the dark seconds before respawn she reminds herself that she still has time.

Before the light comes pouring back in she remembers that Big B doesn’t.


00:00:49



daemonishy

TO THE WIRE, TO TOUCH

YODELING RAM

Pearl yelped as she fell.

Six minutes.

“Shoulda killed him,” she muttered to herself. “Shoulda killed him.”

Now was not the time for regrets though, now was the time for desperation. She broke into a run. There had to be someone nearby, right?

<Sorry Pearl>, Etho typed in chat. *<I was desperate>*.

<That’s it. Im killing ya boy>, she typed back. Her teeth were gritted half in frustration and half in manic adrenaline. Excitement! Death! Betrayal! Being down to the wire!

Truly, this desperate thrill was why she kept coming back to these games.

“Etho!” She cried out to the wind. He definitely couldn’t hear her, but it was the thought that counted. “Imma getcha!”

As if in response, another message popped up in chat. *<1v1 me pearl? I feel kinda bad>*.

Oh *does* he? She snickered. *<Of course!>*

The run over took a whole two minutes of precious time. Pearl gripped her hoes in anticipation, scrambling over the many explosion-made holes and bits of half destroyed bases lying around as she sprinted.

The man, the myth, the legend himself stood waiting for her in a dipped field of land surrounded by hills, shield and ax at the ready. “Sorry about that.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” She took a couple long strides forward, twirling the hoes. “I don’t have time, Etho! Literally! Let’s get on with it.”

He nodded and bent his knees into a battle ready stance. Pearl crossed her blades in front of her. It was not terribly practical. Then again, these were not terribly practical weapons so she didn’t care. She had no stance to take. All she had to do was slash and block and press him into a corner.

Impulse stood on the sidelines, watching with a somewhat eager disposition. “I can call it.”

“Thanks Impulse.” Etho said.

“Thanks Impulse!” Pearl chirped.

“Three, two, one, go–!”

An arrow hit the ground by Etho’s feet. He instinctively took a step back and whipped his head around. Pearl snapped to attention right after.

“Martyn!” Impulse called. “This is between them. Don’t ruin their moment, man.”

“Oh. Sorry,” The blonde man drew back sheepishly. Pearl glared at him. He always had to show up with a bow at the most inopportune times, didn’t he?

Impulse shook his head. “Alright let’s try that again. Three, two, one, g–”

Pearl barely heard him finish. She launched herself at Etho and slashed at his torso. He blocked easily, and the hoe only left a faint cut through the wood on his shield. Her other arm sweeped up from the bottom and managed to graze his leg, causing Etho to flinch back.

Whoops and a loud “Ohhhhh!” came from the others as Pearl continued her assault. Etho deflected strike after strike in quick succession but was

still pushed back by the force of her blows. His back drew nearer and nearer to the sheer hillside. Etho was panting, but his feet were steady as he lept a step back from Pearl and bent into a low stance.

Too late Pearl realized her mistake. She'd made a cornered animal of him, and as that thought crossed her mind he leapt forward to bite back.

Pearl scrambled for her shield, trying to hook one of her hoes to her belt and swap it out quickly. She was a bit too late, however, and the side of her shield brushed the edge of Etho's sword, knocking it to the side and turning what was meant to be a swift stab into a slash across her chest.

She staggered backwards, clutching her wound and determined to put distance between her and Etho. One hoe would have to do. She held the shield up with one hand and braced herself as another strike from Etho came. Trying her trick from before again, she took her remaining hoe and swept it up.

This time, Etho caught it and deflected with a sharp blow of the sword's hilt to her wrist. She yelped and dropped her weapon. *Oh dear. Oh dearie dear.*

The only thing stopping her from clutching at her wrist in pain was the shield the other held. In a panic, Pearl used what was still in her hands and charged straight forward. To her own surprise, it worked. Somewhat. Etho was close enough and she bore down on him with sheer force and speed. Her breath was heavy now, chest aching with exhaustion and wounds from old fights. She didn't have *time* for this.

It needed to end now.

With a swift motion, she bent down to grab her fallen blade and unhook the other one from her belt, sprinting at a staggered Etho with savage urgency. The first slash struck his cheek, slicing a cut into his mask and making him flinch. The second aimed for his chest, being blocked cleanly while he didnt notice the third strike coming around and sinking into his

stomach. Pearl kicked out viciously at his shin, staggering him before she dove in.

A scream of triumph and adrenaline escaped her. She felt herself move forward, saw the movement of blades and particles before her. Then, a stark revelation. It was over.

+ 30

Pearl stood there, catching her breath for a minute. “Wahoo!” That was Impulse, with the clapping of Martyn accompanying him. “Great job Pearl!”

After a moment, a respawned Etho was hobbling over. He rubbed the back of his head, embarrassed.

“You held back,” she accused him. “You barely hit me at all!”

“I mean...I felt bad,” he replied. “And I like to think it wasn’t that easy.”

Her eyes darted between everyone nervously. Would Martyn or Impulse attack now that pretenses were gone? Martyn caught her eye and seemed to notice her tense body language. “Well lads! I think we all know that one way or another, we’re all dying today. No use in doing it ingloriously here. Let us go our separate ways for now and leave well enough alone.”

Etho and Impulse voiced their agreement and began to part, waving polite goodbyes and good lucks to each other. “Good game,” Etho said to her, but she wasn’t looking anymore. Her eyes were squarely fixed on Martyn.

Grudges were forgotten between seasons, but with blood rushing through her ears she couldn’t help but giggle and bare her teeth in a smile. She’d have to find a good old reliable ax for this final bout. “Looking forward to it, Martyn.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Mm. I’m sure you are.” He leaned a hand on the sword hilt at his side. “And I’ll be ready.”

Her giggling continued as she turned and crept back into the woods, bright red cloak disappearing into the darkness.


OFFIX

TIME FLIES WHEN YOU'RE HAVING FUN

CASTOR

"We lost our advantage. It's two v two- er- three v two, I guess," says Impulse, running down the hill to team TIES tower. Scott and Martyn had escaped to Skynet, and were probably on their way to the TIES tower. The group—Etho, Martyn, and himself—was travelling on the ground and just trying to not die.

"Two v two?" questions Pearl, then she begins to laugh at her own remark.

Impulse pulls out his bow in preparation for the unavoidable encounter with the Mean Gills in TIES tower. He's probably going to die again (How many times had Scott already killed him this session?), but he'll at least try.

"Well, I'm not much of a fighter—" Impulse glances at Etho, "—and Etho's washed up, so, y'know..." He walks down the bridge, stepping around the holes in the wood. The bridge creaks with each footstep, and the edges are charred from Scar constantly burning it.

"Yeah, it's all up to you Pearl," says Etho, his voice slightly muffled by his mask. The others are behind Impulse, so he can't see them as he enters the tower.

Is this the last time he'll get to be here? The last time he'll get to brush his fingers against the stone walls? Team TIES, they're called. How ironic that with a name that represents unity, they've all died alone.

"Oh, *wow*, okay, well-" stammers Pearl.

Once Impulse steps into the broken bubble elevator, the others' voices are muffled by the rushing water pulling him upwards. He can hear the sound of the water sloshing around a few metres below him—Pearl.

As he approaches the top of the elevator, under Skynet, he can see Martyn and Scott on Skynet. Sure, he expected them to be here, but he still instinctively ducked back into the water. Anticipating the inevitable fight, he pulls out a fireworks-loaded crossbow and aims it at Martyn.

“They’re there, they’re there, they’re there,” says Martyn, repeating himself to Scott.

Martyn spotted him. His heart jumps at the sound of Martyn’s voice, and he attempts to shoot the crossbow in Martyn’s direction. The fireworks rocket explodes in his face, erupting into little white sparks floating down to the ocean.

“Ow, ow, ow, oww,” cries Martyn, running towards TIES tower. Impulse pulls out his bow, and begins shooting at him—Martyn’s probably low on health, and this can be a quick kill. A quick way of getting time.

Martyn runs directly above him, and all the impossible shots Impulse takes land on the bottom of Skynet. Impulse begins to swim down the tower, using the water flooding from the roof. Scott—still up on Skynet—is an easier target, so Impulse aims at him instead.

“Oh no!” exclaims Pearl, her and Martyn falling like TNT minecarts from Skynet. Actually, they *were* dropping from Skynet.

Impulse shifts his focus to Martyn, and looking downward—still slowly swimming down the tower—he tries to fire at Martyn, but his arrows keep missing.

Impulse gets shot, and his health drops to five hearts. Startled, he slips, falling out of the water stream and plummeting to the balcony.

“Hello!” He lands in front of Pearl, only to be greeted by a punch to his face.

“Sorry- I didn’t see you. I thought you were Martyn, I thought you were

Martyn! Sorry!” says Pearl.

He eats a loaf of bread, regenerating his health. “That’s why I announced myself!” Impulse chuckles, then begins to circle around the tower on the lookout for the Mean Gills.

“Oh no—” screams Etho, his voice getting cut off. Impulse snaps his head to the source of the sound, but can’t see where Etho is.

“I just heard his scream and he’s *gone*!” laughs Pearl.

Impulse notices Scott swimming up TIES tower, and silently shoots at him. “Yeah, he’s gone,” says Scott, smugly. Did Scott knock Etho off?

“He ain't dead though, he’s alive,” retorts Pearl.

He tries to continue shooting at Scott, but Scott swims too far up the tower for Impulse’s arrows to reach. Following Pearl, Impulse walks into the tower. She dashes straight for the exit, but Impulse stops to collect his thoughts.

An arrow pierces him in the chest, seemingly out of nowhere. In a fraction of a second, another hits him again, dropping Impulse to two hearts. He blindly runs out of the tower, and hears Scott’s stupid, smug laugh from the distance. Clutching an ender pearl, he hurls it as far as he can, not even caring *where* it lands.

-1 hours

All Impulse feels is a dull, buzzing pain in his bones. Opening his eyes, he can see the blurry figure of the Clocker’s tower, and the painstakingly bright sun shining back at him.

Respawn?

He gets up at spawn, probably a few dozen metres from where he died.

He’s okay now, nothing hurts anymore. *Everything is fine*. Just a bit dizzy, Impulse gets back up, dusting himself off.

Three hours, twenty-four minutes, and eight seconds.

In a perfect world, that’s how long he has until he runs out of time. But he will get killed, he will lose time, and he will die today. With three hours, twenty-four minutes, and six seconds left, all he can do is just try.

Impulse begins to walk down the mountain, the canopy of dark oak much cooler than the heat of the sun. Taking slow steps, he tries to listen for others but all he hears is the static in his head. The lack of noise is *terrifying*. Nowhere is safe, there could be a TNT minecart above his head for all he knows. He could be seconds away from death. Impulse would rather *know* if he was about to die.

Walking closer to the mansion, he swears he can hear something- no, someone. The faint sound of screaming, of fighting. Impulse glances up at Skynet, but nothing.

Etho ran out of time!

He flinches, a bolt of lightning striking Bread Bridge. The all too familiar roar of thunder rings in the forest, and Impulse wants to open his eyes but he doesn’t want to see Etho dead. He doesn’t want to accept that *he’s the last member of TIES*.

They’re all gone. Skizz, Tango, and now Etho. What did Skizz say when he died? TIES gets to the final three. Here Impulse is, in the final three. He’s in the final three. He’s died and he’s killed more times than he can remember, and he’s in the final three.

He guesses everyone must be on Bread Bridge, where Etho died. Impulse jumps into the mansion, and swims to the surface. As his head breaks the water, he rubs his eyes, seeing the fuzzy yet unmistakable cyan outline of Scott.

Fumbling for his bow, Impulse quickly dives back into the water. He brings his shield up and slowly swims closer to the one-block-wide line on the remains of Bread Bridge. Grasping onto the cobblestone, Impulse pulls himself onto the bridge, water weighing his clothes down.

He pulls the bowstring, aiming for Scott's chest. Scott holds a shield up, and Impulse lets go, the arrow spinning and flying in the air. It lands in Scott's shield, silently vibrating.

Impulse shoots again, then grabs a fireworks-loaded crossbow. Launching it, he hears a *bang*, and the rocket burst into a show of tiny stars. As the sparks dissipated, Scott had his shield still up, smiling. The crossbow did nothing.

Scott moves towards Impulse, backing him up closer to the mansion. Impulse keeps shooting, most of his attempts missing entirely or hitting his shield.

It's quiet, *too* quiet. All Impulse hears is the sound of arrows being shot, hitting wood and cobble. The silence is deafening, so he breaks it.

"Hi Scott," says Impulse, using a voice too *normal* for a fight.

"Hi Impulse," replies Scott, imitating Impulse's uncannily cheerful voice.

"I dunno where Pearl went," Impulse says in between shots. It's funny, isn't it? Making small talk with the person after his life—no, after his time.

"Me neither," says Scott, an amused laugh blending with the near-nonsense sounds he spouts out.

Impulse continually shoots at Scott, and Scott's shield looks like a porcupine. Or a mediaeval torture method. "I don't need her right now," he says, slowly getting pushed back by Scott. They maintain a good five or six metres from each other, space being limited on the thin bridge.

Scott's shield breaks. The one thing protecting Scott from death *breaks*. Scott's defenceless. Metal and wood fall apart, disturbing the still water below. Impulse shoots, hitting Scott twice. One in the arm, one in the stomach.

Scott ran. What else could Scott have done? Impulse begins to shoot at Scott, but as Scott gets farther away all of his shots miss. He chases after Scott, arrow after arrow missing.

As Impulse takes a step forward, he can't move his other foot and stumbles onto the ground. Pushing himself back up to the ground, he sees the laces of his shoes untied. Stupid him. Kneeling down, he ties his shoes into a hasty knot and jumps back into a run.

Scott's nowhere to be seen. Impulse looks down into the dark oak forest, and can see Scott running away from Bread Bridge. He jumps down, the realisation that he forgot to look for water hitting him just a bit too late.

Luckily, he lands in a pool of water flowing off the edge of the mansion, and continues to run into the forest. He can hear Pearl, Scott, and Martyn. Sure, Pearl's on his side, but he feels utterly alone. TIES is dead. This is the final three.

Impulse takes cover behind a dark oak tree, stopping to catch his breath. Scott says his name—he's been found—so he runs into the heat of the fight, shooting at Scott (still shieldless.) He manages to get a shot in, but it starts to feel a whole lot warmer.

Scott holds an empty bucket, and in a heartbeat, a sword is being slashed at his face. Impulse blocks the swing with his shield, manoeuvring around a dark oak tree to buy a few seconds. He tries to swing at Scott, but the lava-wielding man is just so *fidgety*.

"I'm so jumpy," laughs Scott. Again with the small talk.

Impulse frantically dodges the lava that Scott keeps picking up and

placing. Scott's just *too damn fast*, too quick. Always a step ahead of him.

"You ever get like that?" Scott continues. "Where you're all jittery?"

A misstep- and Impulse is lit on fire. The flames lick at him and blister his skin, and it hurts. It *hurts*. How could he let Scott win again?

Impulse's sword clashes with Scott, the two of them jumping and spinning around, their swords against each other. He strikes Scott in the leg, and Scott stabs him back in the arm. A clumsy, awkward dance.

He stumbles down, landing in more water. The fire burning him alive is put out, but Scott's right at his face before he has the chance to even comprehend what's going on.

-1 hours

Impulse dies. Sitting in a pool of water, he watches the world blur. Of course Scott kills him again! He has eight minutes and twenty seconds left. Impulse doesn't even feel pain—just frustration.

Respawn?

SHE USED TO BE...

AN ALLY OF MINE.

TRAFFIC ZINE